



created

in

chaos

corrupt credence

book two

ALBANY WALKER

CREATED IN CHAOS

BY ALBANY WALKER

CORRUPT CREDCENCE

BOOK TWO



ALBANY WALKER



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Albany Walker

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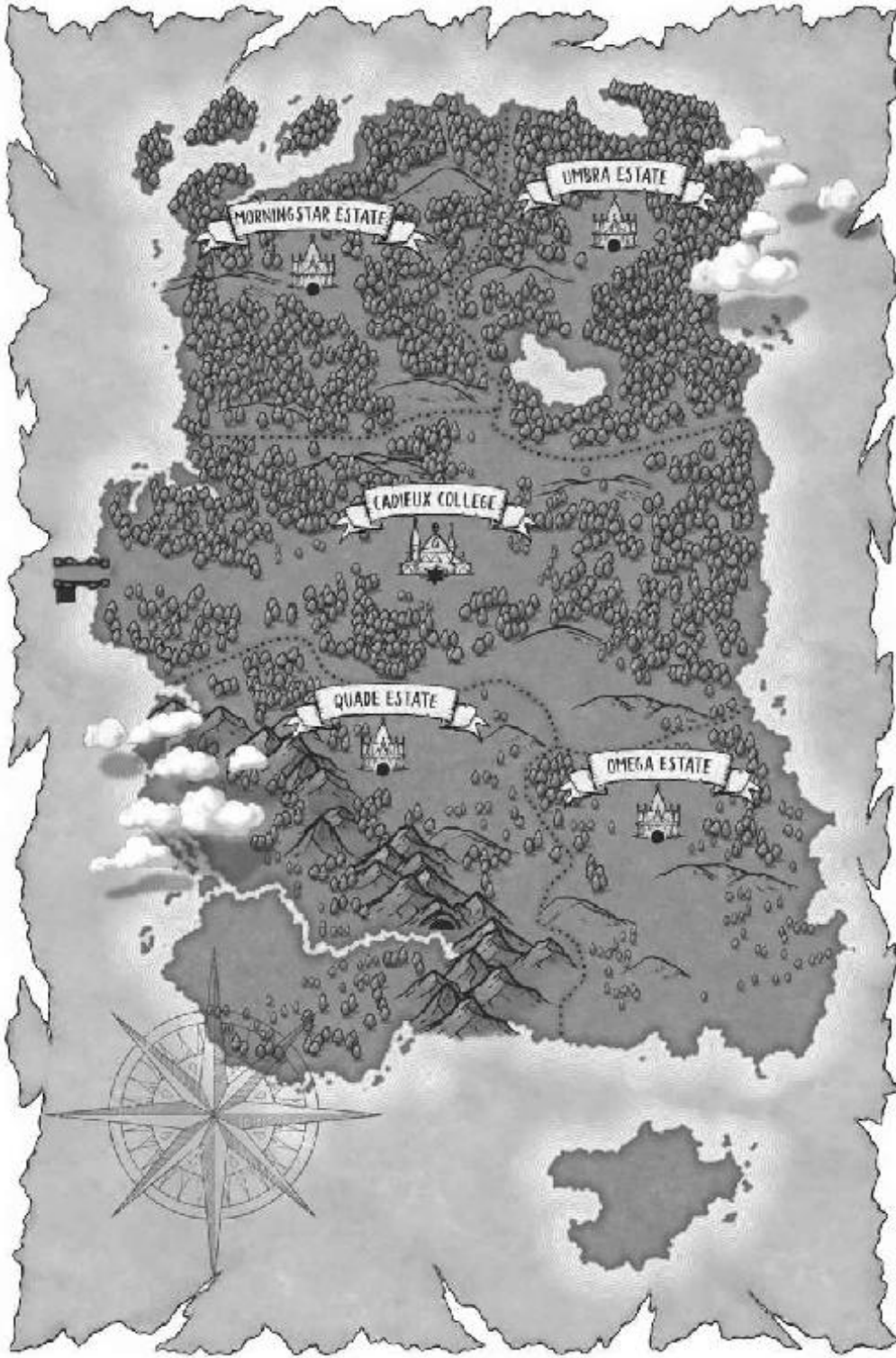
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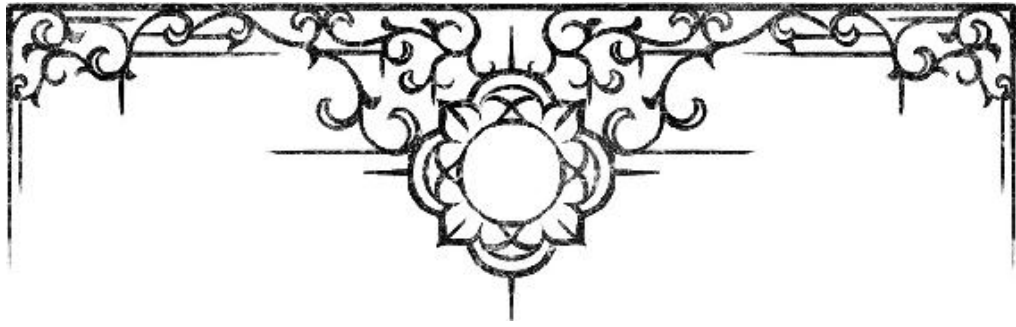
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NOX

I shove Lucian to get his ass moving, so we can make it out to the ambulance before they leave with Nova.

“This is your fault. I let her come, but you put the nail in her coffin,” Rory snarls.

“Fuck you.” Lucian lunges toward him, reaching for the current president. If he gets his hands on him, he’ll probably kill him and we’ll lose everything in the process, including Nova.

“We’re going to the hospital. She needs us,” I grit out through my teeth, trying to hold him back and talk some sense into him at the same time.

He goes rigid, but it’s a different kind of tension filling him now. He allows me to pull him out of the building, just as the doors to the ambulance close.

“Are you taking her to Trinity?” I question the driver.

“No, the trauma unit at Saint Joe’s is already on standby.” He doesn’t waste another minute before hustling around to climb into the vehicle.

Lucian and I both jog over to our car parked at the curb. We speed after the ambulance. The lights are flashing, but it still feels like we’re going too slow. “One of us should have rode with her,” he says, speaking for the first time since screaming at Rory. “Call Amboni. Make sure he’s in touch with the hospital so we’ll know what’s going on.”

At least he seems to be thinking clearly now. I do as he asks, but I have to leave a message when the doctor doesn’t answer.

“What the fuck do you think happened?” I voice my thoughts out loud, not really expecting an answer, since he knows as much as I do.

“I don’t know, but we’ll find out.” He takes his eyes off the ambulance for the first time to meet my gaze. “Then we’ll kill

whoever hurt her.”

I wouldn't need to see him to know he's deadly serious, but the ice in his eyes is more proof of his determination.

“They said she was unresponsive. What if she doesn't make it?” I can feel myself spiraling. I don't think I can handle losing someone else, especially when we haven't even gotten to know her yet and assumed that we would have all the time in the world for that.

“She's fine. I won't accept any other outcome.” I'm not going to be the one to tell him it doesn't work like that. I have a feeling he would lose his shit, especially after the garbage Rory said about it being our fault.

The doctor calls me back as we're pulling up to the hospital, and I'm tempted to ignore the call, but no one here will give us information, so I can't. I pick up and hurriedly tell him where we are and what we need from him while I'm climbing out of the car.

“I don't work out of St. Joe's,” he says, but I shut that shit down.

“I don't give a fuck. Find a way to get me what I need.” I hang up.

Lucian is standing near the rear doors of the ambulance as the EMTs and nurses from the hospital push Nova through a set of automatic doors.

“You can't park here. This is for emergency vehicles only,” a security guard says from the sidewalk.

“Then move it.” Lucian doesn't even spare the man a glance as he follows the stretcher.

“I'm not—” The guy begins to argue, but when he sees Lucian is serious about leaving the car, he tries to step in his way to block the entrance. Lucian looks down at the man. His face is icy cold, but that's nothing compared to his posture.

Not one word is spoken, but the guy steps to the side, allowing my brother into the building. Someone else yells

once he's inside, but the sound cuts off when the doors close behind him.

I pull a bill from my pocket and hand it to the security guard. "You can move it or call a valet." He examines the bills when I remove my hand from slapping the cash in his palm, but I don't stick around to see what he's going to do. He can have it towed for all I care.

Lucian is in a stare off with a bulldog of a nurse, who looks like she will have to be forcibly moved, and I'm surprised he hasn't done it yet. "You'll get an update when they have one to give you. Now go sit down before I have you removed from the hospital."

Lucian snarls down at the woman. "You could try, or you could keep your job and go get your fucking boss."

Her eyes narrow even more as her lips pinch in a pissed off scowl. "Listen, young man—"

"Don't do that," I interrupt her, and she drops her bottom jaw as she lets out a heavy sigh before even looking at me. "I promise you will regret it."

She doesn't gawk at us standing side by side like some people do, but she does plant her hands on her hips and tries to look down on us, even though we have several inches on her.

"I've been here twenty-three years and counting. You think you can get me fired? Then by all means..." She smirks condescendingly.

Lucian pulls his phone from his pocket and makes a call while she's watching. "Morozov, find out who runs St. Joe's hospital and get me their direct number," he states in a cold voice. The nurse looks over at the front desk as if to ask, *Can you believe this?* but no one offers her advice or help.

We don't have to wait long before Lucian dials another number. "This is Lucian Morningstar, I'm standing in your ER." There's a short pause before he continues. "You have someone on your staff who fucked with me on the wrong day. I've shown restraint, but my patience is gone. You can instruct her to personally provide me with updates about Nova

Devlin's condition every ten minutes, or you can fire her and have someone else do it. I'll let you decide which. You have five minutes." He hangs up the phone without a change in his demeanor.

The nurse widens her eyes and tilts her head back like she can't believe his arrogance. Even now, it seems she doesn't put much stock into his threats. I tried to warn her.

I wouldn't say I'm shocked about how Lucian handled this, but I don't know if I can remember another time when my brother used his name in such a manner. The people we're used to dealing with know who we are, so there isn't a need for it, and if they don't, I'm much more accustomed to him handling any issues that arise with actions, not words. It's further proof that something in him has changed, but I'm not certain when that happened.

The sealed double doors to the back open, and a woman exits, heading straight for us. She's not wearing scrubs or a nametag, but there's an air of authority around her. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Morningstar." She glances at us, then keeps her face trained in our direction so it's clear she's addressing both of us. "I wanted to get an update on your friend's condition before meeting with you. If you'll follow me, I've arranged for a room where you'll be able to wait more comfortably."

The nurse huffs as if she can't believe what's happening, but she continues to be ignored when I interject, "How is she?"

"Would you like to speak privately?" the woman offers.

"Answer him," Lucian demands.

"She's not out of the woods, but her heart rate and blood pressure are showing signs of improvement."

I don't know if I can trust this woman. Is Nova really improving, or is she looking for something positive to tell us? "Is she awake?"

"No. If you'll come with me, we can go over everything I know." She lifts her hand in a *get moving* gesture. The moment

we head toward the doors to the back, she turns toward Nurse Ratched. “Someone will be waiting for you in HR.” She hurries her steps to beat us to the door and waves a badge in front of a sensor.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” the nurse complains, but she’s already forgotten.



LUCIAN

“I NEED TO SEE HER,” I tell the woman leading us down a long hall and straight toward an elevator.

She breathes heavily through her nose but nods her head once as if she expected as much. “I haven’t seen her myself yet, but I want to warn you, the reports on her condition are pretty grim.” Wisely, she doesn’t ask if I’m sure or try to talk me out of it.

“Do you know what happened to her or the extent of her injuries?” I question, nervous now that we’ve changed directions and seem to be heading right where I asked—to see Nova.

She stops in her tracks and turns to assess me. “She was beaten.” Clearly, it caught her off guard that I didn’t know this.

“Were there weapons involved?”

“I could ask if you would like, but that information wasn’t provided to me,” she replies softly.

I nod my head in acceptance as we begin walking again, but I can’t look at her when I ask the final question. “Was she... She wasn’t... She was found in the bathroom,” I finally manage to say, because I can’t force out my real question.

“There was no mention of sexual assault, if that’s what you’re asking about,” she whispers, but the relief I feel allows me to take a deeper breath.

“Thank you,” Nox tells her when I don’t have the words to speak.

“Please don’t thank me. The only thing I can confirm is that it wasn’t noted in her report. Her treatment so far has been about stabilizing her.”

My chest constricts again, and I hear Rory’s words in my head about me putting the nail in her coffin. I insinuated she was a whore and made people think she propositioned me for

sex to degrade her. If someone took advantage of her because of me... I could throw up now at the thought.

The woman leading us comes to a stop in the middle of a hallway and turns to face the wall. I glance around, wondering why she stopped, but it becomes clear in the next moment. My lamb is on a bed in the middle of the ER with nurses at her side. The thin curtains that usually separate the beds are all pulled back, exposing her to the other empty cots and not offering a lick of privacy.

Her hair is a dark matted mess on one side, and there are streaks of blood on her face that look like someone hastily tried to wipe them away, but they didn't do a very good job. There's an oxygen mask on her face, an IV in her arm, and some other shit attached to the beeping monitors next to her head.

"Jesus Christ," Nox mutters.

"Make sure you check her kidneys. She sustained damage from a car accident a few years ago."

"I'll let the nurses know." The woman steps away from us and speaks quietly to the nurse near Nova's head. I don't want to look at the bruises forming on her jaw and eye, but I force myself to.

Nox's arm brushes mine as he moves to stand closer to me. I don't know if he's looking for support or giving it.

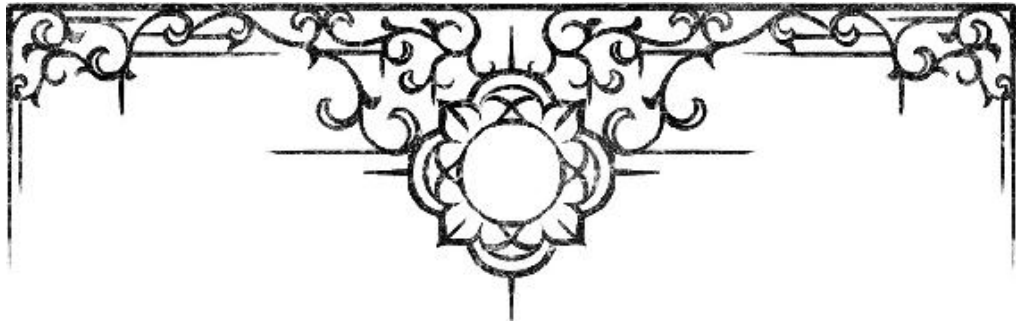
"Excuse me." The female voice jolts me from my stupor, and I drag my eyes away from the bed to see a girl angling a cart down the hall toward her bed. I hate the way they are all talking in hushed whispers and peeking at us like we won't notice their stares.

"I told the charge nurse about her history. She knew Nova had surgery from the scarring on her abdomen, but she'll make sure the doctor knows about the issue with her kidneys, so he can check her scan thoroughly."

The fact that I'm learning about scarring on her stomach from this woman pisses me off, but I don't say shit to let on that I didn't already know.

“Why isn’t she awake if she’s doing okay?” Nox questions.

The woman looks over her shoulder, back in Nova’s direction, and lets out a soft sigh before saying, “There are a lot of reasons. It could be as simple as her body went through a major trauma and it needs time to process and heal, or it could be the slight swelling in her brain. We won’t know until all the tests are back, but she’s stable right now, and that’s a good sign.” Her words are meant to be encouraging, but they don’t make me feel any better.



LUCIAN

The hours tick by so slowly, I'm convinced I'm losing my mind. I've been kicked out of the hallway in the ER twice, but the last time I tried to see her, they informed me they'd already moved her to a room, and as soon as she was settled, we could go up and be with her.

That was almost ninety minutes ago, and I still haven't heard shit. "Chill out." Nox thumps his head against the wall behind him.

"I'm not doing shit," I snap.

"But driving us both crazy."

"Hey, are you guys here for Nova Devlin?" a girl not much older than my lamb asks, leaning into the room.

"Yeah." I get to my feet, anticipating her telling us where to go.

"I can take you up to her room if you're ready."

"Finally." I don't bother hiding my frustration, which causes the girl to duck her head. Nox smacks me on the shoulder as he comes to my side, telling me to chill.

"Is she awake yet?" I ask as we step into an elevator.

"Sorry, I don't know. I'm just an aide. I was told to find you and take you up. Her nurses will be able to tell you what's going on."

We get off on the fourth floor and turn down a hall to see Rory and Astrid speaking to a doctor. I leave the girl in my wake as I get up close and personal with the doctor and, unavoidably, the Umbras. How the fuck did they get up here before us?

"Nice of you to finally show up," I grate out.

The doctor furrows his brows and gets defensive on behalf of the Umbras. "Are you the patient's family?"

“No,” Astrid answers.

My emphatic, “She’s with us,” is louder.

“You probably did this,” the Umbra matriarch accuses with disdain.

Her husband places his hand on her shoulder in what seems to be an effort to quiet her, then interjects, “Please finish what you were saying.”

I get a questioning side-eye from the doctor, but he takes the prompt. “As I was saying, your granddaughter sustained several injuries, the worst of which were several blows to the head and abdomen. We’re treating the slight swelling in her brain proactively because it can get worse before it gets better.”

Astrid lifts her hand up to her mouth. “Will she... How serious is that?”

“It’s my biggest concern right now.”

“Is that why she isn’t waking up?” I interrupt.

“Most likely. Her other injuries—the broken ribs, fingers, and heavy bruising we talked about—will heal with time.”

“What about her kidneys?” I ask, concerned this worsened her condition.

“I requested her records to compare them with the ultrasound we took today to see if the cysts and lesions are from her previous injury. I noticed the splint on her arm. How did that happen?”

“Splint?” Rory frowns.

“She fell. Our family physician X-rayed it and wrapped it for her,” I explain.

“Did you witness the fall? I would hate to think it was a precursor to this attack and she didn’t tell anyone.” The doctor is off base, but I can’t really blame him for his line of thinking.

“We were there. She tripped on the sand at the beach,” Nox informs him, leaving out my part in her fall.

Rory's eyebrows shoot up on his forehead as if the information surprises him. I'm tempted to rub in just how much he doesn't know about his granddaughter, but I keep my mouth shut.

"Well, that's good to hear. I was worried there was a pattern of abuse. I see it all the time in young girls."

"When will she wake up? Will there be any lasting effects?" Astrid dismisses his concern, and it rubs me wrong. It's like she doesn't even care what happened as long as her heir will heal.

"There's no telling. It could be an hour, or it could be two days from now. There's brain activity, and she's responsive to stimuli. We're doing all we can for her medically, so we have to wait and see."

Realizing I've learned everything I'm going to from him, I peer into the room they are standing in front of, finding my lamb in the bed of a private room walled off in glass, but I don't let that stop me from going in.



NOVA

I can't seem to wake up. Every time I try to open my eyes, I feel them roll back in my head, and then a heavy sleep pulls me under. The dreams are bad, filled with hooded figures, darkness, and pain, but fighting against it feels impossible, so I just sink lower, hoping to find the abyss that seems to consume me when I'm out of it.

Sometime later, my leg jerks, retreating from a sharp pain, then before I can register what's happening, a blinding light fills my vision. I try to squint and turn my head away, but the slight movement makes my stomach roll with nausea while my head pounds.

"You're hurting her," a deep voice snaps, and then the light is gone from my eyes, along with some pressure from my face. I try to move my tongue, but my mouth is so dry, I nearly gag.

"If you're not going to allow me to do what I need to, you'll have to leave." The female voice rings out too loudly, and the ache in my head returns. Scratch that, everything hurts, not just my head.

"Fuck off!" the deep voice says quietly, but it doesn't abate the harshness in his tone. Warm, gentle fingers brush along my forehead, and I try to blink my eyes open again. "That's it, open your eyes, lamb."

A jolt of awareness fills every fiber of my being. I know that voice, know that name, but I have no idea how or why. As my splintered mind tries to put jagged pieces together, I become mindful of a hand over mine, a thumb stroking my wrist soothingly.

Flashes of the accident, of the car flipping and rolling while glass breaks and metal crunches, flare in my mind. I try to call for my dad, but it comes out as a pathetic moan and nothing more.

"Give her something so she'll stop hurting," the voice says, their hand still touching my face.

“We need to see if she can wake up,” the woman responds, and the steady beeping I wasn’t even aware of until this moment grows faster.

“Lucian, chill out,” a guy orders calmly, and the name tugs at something, but so does the voice. My head hurts too badly when I try to think too hard, or maybe it just hurts all the time. I pray for the void to swallow me up again, even though I know I shouldn’t, because there’s something in that darkness that scares me more than the pain. “Nova, can you hear me, sweetheart? Squeeze my hand,” he instructs while patting my fingers to curl around his. It takes more effort than I can imagine, but my fingers twitch, and my arm is pulled up abruptly.

“Good job, baby, good job.” Something warm and wet brushes my knuckles. A full mouth flashes in my mind, but it’s too hard to hold onto the image.

“Nova, can you hear me?” the woman speaks again. She’s too loud, and I shrink back into the bed. “Can you open your eyes?” She’s talking to me like I’m deaf or stupid. I want to tell her to shush, but it’s just a puff of air that passes my lips instead.

“Stop talking to her like she’s fucking brain-dead,” the harsh voice speaks again. It sounds just like the other, but different. I try to blink again, and I get my first peek of something other than the back of my eyelids.

A face leans over me, and it’s too close to focus on, but he smells warm and rich, so different than the icy air around me. My teeth start to chatter, and I couldn’t stop it if I wanted to.

“She’s freezing,” he accuses, putting his face next to mine. I let my eyes fall closed when my nose is nestled into his neck, absorbing his warmth.



Nova

I WAKE FROM A NIGHTMARE, but my body refuses to move, as if I'm still caught in a dream where I'm trying to run but not getting anywhere. The room is dark, and unfamiliar sounds fill the emptiness around me. Is that me breathing so heavily? Why is my mind so foggy, and where the heck am I?

Memories slowly shift into place—driving home in the rain, Dad shouting Mom's name, then chaos—but as my mind catches up, other thoughts break in. I remember the long hospital stay, my apartment, and working—life *after* my parents' deaths.

I pull in a harsh breath, because the realization stings. They are dead and have been for a while. Why the hell am I back in the hospital?

Squinting my eyes makes my jaw ache. I try to lift my arm, but it's too heavy, so I just look down. There's a bandage on my wrist. I wiggle my fingers, then aim farther down for my toes. The blanket shifts just a little, and I drop my head back to the too flat pillow. The resulting ache throbs with my heartbeat, making it hard to think for a long moment.

How can everything be so exhausting? A soft snore has me turning my head in the direction of the sound, and I find two figures in the darkness, illuminated only by the soft glow coming from the large window across the room. One figure is sitting up on the couch, while the other is curled up in the remaining space. A wave of relief washes over me from knowing I'm not alone.

I blink a few times to make sure there are actually two people and I'm not imagining them, but the low light and my blurry vision nearly makes it impossible to tell. Could that be Mom and Dad? Was the accident and everything else I thought happened just a dream?

“Please stay awake this time.” His deep voice fills the empty room, resonating all the way down to my bones in a way I don't quite understand.

Heavy feelings and emotions tug at the edges of my mind, but I can't form a clear picture. “I'm...” *Tired*. I want to finish my sentence, but my throat is too dry.

He rises slowly, as if he's afraid to spook me. Once he reaches the soft ray of light, his handsome face comes into view, and the words *pretty boy* echo unbidden in my mind.

I must mumble something out loud, because one corner of his mouth curls up, and he brushes his fingers over my forehead, pushing my hair back. It feels so good, I almost let my eyes shut again, but then I remember what he said—*please stay awake this time*—and I force myself to stay present.

“I should have known you would keep me waiting.” He leans down, and his lips brush across my temple. Without pulling back, he adds, “You thrive on driving me insane.”

I try to lick my lips, but there's no moisture. The insane thought of having him this close to my face while my breath must smell like a grave pushes me to ask, “Water?”

He lingers for just a second longer, then moves to a table to grab a pink cup, bringing the straw to my lips. “The ice has probably melted. I'll get you more in a minute.”

The offer of kindness feels strange, but the moment I swallow the first drop of water, I forget all about it. I have to push the straw out of my mouth with my tongue when I'm done because my head is still against the pillow. “Thank... you.” I pant, feeling a little out of breath since I was barely breathing while sucking down the liquid.

Our eyes lock, and the intensity frightens me a little. Every second that passes allows time to knit itself back together in my mind—the lawyer at my door, Alden, Rory, Astrid, then school, and finally, the Morningstars, Lucian and Nox.

The past few weeks weave together, but I can't find a reason why he would be here with me, being nice to me, unless...*he* is the reason I'm here, but I can't believe that. Even knowing how cruel he can be, I still can't wrap my head around him putting me in the hospital.

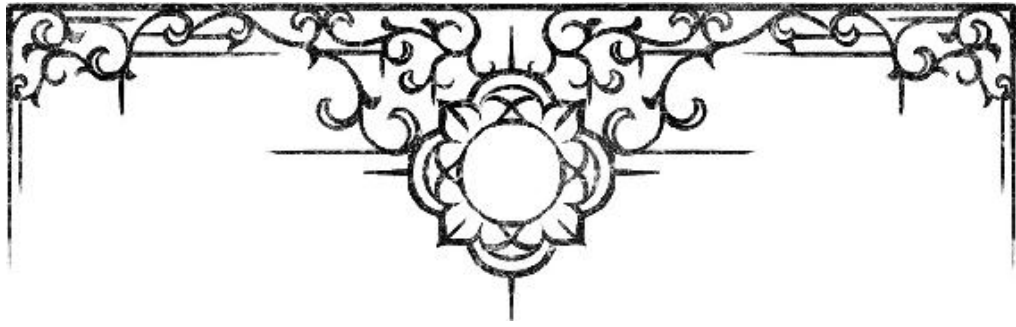
“What happened?” I finally ask while still searching his face.

His shoulders shift as he lets out a heavy breath, then strokes my face again. “You don't remember?”

I start to shake my head, but even the slightest movement makes it throb. “No.” My heart begins to pound, and I want to sit up, but I don’t think I can.

“It’s okay, lamb.” His lips land on my temple again. “Breathe with me. I won’t let anything else happen to you, just breathe.” I try to mimic his steady inhales, but the edge of panic is still clawing at my insides.

“Lucian, why are you being nice to me? Am I dying?” There’s a quiver in my voice that I hate.



NOX

“Do you think I would let you die? I’d drag your ass back here kicking and screaming if I had too,” Lucian tells her with vehemence in his husky whisper.

“That sounds more like you,” Nova replies. “So why are you being nice then?”

“Can’t you just accept it and pretend I wasn’t an asshole to you before?”

“No, it’s kind of scaring me.”

My brother huffs, but his words are soft and remorseful when he says, “I wanted to hate you, lamb. I tried hard because you get under my skin in a way that... I’m an asshole, I’ll always be an asshole, but not like before.”

“Why? Did you do this to me?” There’s real pain in Nova’s question, and I’m not the only one who hears it.

Lucian leans down so he’s curled over her. “No, lamb. I promise, but I’ll find out who did, and I’ll kill them.”

“You can’t do that,” she argues as if she thinks his words are empty threats. “You’ll go to jail, and you’re too pretty for jail. I’d have to send you a file in a cake and keep you flush with cigarettes so some guy named Bubba wouldn’t make you his B.”

Lucian snorts, then begins to chuckle. “That’s fucked up but also kind of sweet that you’d worry about me. I promise I would not be anyone’s bitch, nor would I go to jail.”

“You say that now, but I went to county lockup once. Those guys are...” She leaves the rest of the sentence hanging. I’m tempted to ask her why she would have been in county jail, but I don’t want to interrupt the moment.

“I’ll pry that story out of you later. Want another drink?” Lucian mirrors my thoughts.

“Yes, please.”

“Stay awake, I’ll only be a minute.”

“Will you tell me what happened? I don’t like not knowing.” Nova requests as Lucian reaches the door.

His back stiffens, but his head drops forward. “I don’t have all the details yet.”

“But you’ll tell me something,” she pushes.

“What I can.” Lucian steps out the door, and Nova blows out a long breath.

He’s telling the truth about not knowing much. We’ve been in this room for the better part of two days with our security team looking into what happened at school. Neither of us wanted to leave her, but I don’t think our team is as effective at getting answers as we would be.

“Nox.” She says my name softly, as if she doesn’t want to wake me if I’m still sleeping.

“Yeah?” My voice is gruff with exhaustion. It was only Lucian dislodging my head from his leg that woke me. I don’t sleep well, so when I crash, I really crash.

“Why don’t I remember what happened?”

“You have a concussion.” I sit up with a groan. This couch is hard as fuck and too small. The beeping of her monitors picks up a little, and there’s a noticeable shift in her breathing, like she’s starting to panic.

“It’s dark...in here.” Her voice is so soft.

“It’s okay. Do you want me to turn on the light?” I rise to walk over to the bed.

“No, that’s too bright, it hurts my eyes, but I feel fuzzy and everything...” She bites her bottom lip as if she doesn’t want to continue.

“Everything what?” I prompt.

“Hurts,” she whispers, almost like she’s ashamed.

“Do you want me to get the nurse?” I lift my hand to touch her, but I hesitate when I realize I don’t know if I’m going to

make her pain worse.

“No. I don’t want to be alone in here,” she says quickly through her accelerated breathing. She was okay speaking to Lucian just a few seconds ago, but she seems more upset now. “I don’t mean to be a chicken.”

“You’re not a chicken. It’s okay to be scared.” Damn, I wish I could hug her right now.

“Don’t tell him,” she says quickly, and I know she’s referring to my brother. “He’ll make fun of me.”

That answers why she seemed okay when she was talking with him. She’s worried about letting him see her vulnerable. “He wouldn’t make fun of you, Nova,” I tell her, but when the door opens and my brother returns, she peers up at me with wide, pleading eyes, and I drop it for now.

“You good?” Lucian asks her, wondering why I’m hovering over the bed.

“Yes.” Nova averts her eyes, causing Lucian to look over at me for insight into her reaction.

I shake my head, telling him not now, and he gives her a drink instead.

“Open up,” he instructs.

She tries to hide the wince when she lifts her head and opens her jaw, but we both see the skin around her eyes crinkle when she squints in pain. When she’s done, she licks her split lip and cautiously returns her head to the pillow. Her eyes close, and she looks utterly exhausted. I want to let her fall back asleep, but I don’t at the same time. She slept for two days, and there was a point when I wasn’t even sure she would wake up. What if she doesn’t next time?

Before I can say anything to make sure she stays awake, Nova jerks as if she already fell back asleep and woke herself up. Her eyes pop open, and she looks around as if she’s confused again. “Gosh,” she whispers roughly.

“You should rest.” Lucian doesn’t seem to have any problem touching her, because he strokes his fingers over the

side of her face without bruising.

“I don’t want to go back to sleep,” she says.

“Why not? You’re tired,” he reasons. I think it’s because he doesn’t want to tell her what happened, not that I blame him. I don’t want to talk about it either.

“It’s hard to wake up.” Under her breath, as if she’s speaking to herself, she adds, “No more dreams.”

“Did you have a bad dream?” I question.

“Every time I close my eyes,” she answers, blinking slowly, as if it’s hard to keep them open.

“Tell me about it, maybe it will help,” I encourage her, knowing dreams can seem scarier before you voice them.

“It’s dumb.” Nova sighs softly.

“Tell me anyway.”

There’s a brief pause, but she finally says, “It’s like I’m stuck in tar—everything is going so slow, and it’s so dark. I can’t move or run, and there’s...”

“There’s what?” I prompt when it seems like she’s not going to continue.

“People in hoods or whatever.”

Lucian and I make eye contact. “Like the grim reaper?” I question, hoping this is more symbolic than literal. It was touch and go there for a little while.

“Maybe, but it’s a bunch of them. See? It’s dumb,” she admits softly.

“What kind of hoods?” Lucian pulls a chair over and sits right next to her bed.

“It’s just a dream, it seems stupid saying it out loud.” She dismisses his question, but I’m curious about her response too.

“Any markings on the robes? A crest maybe?”

Nova’s eyes narrow on me with suspicion. “Are you making fun of me?”

“No, it’s a serious question,” Lucian answers before I can, and his tone gives away just how important he thinks the inquiry is.

“I...I don’t think so, but it’s all pretty fuzzy. It was just a dream,” she tells him, but it seems like she’s questioning her own statement.

“Close your eyes and think about it. Are you sure there wasn’t a crest?” Lucian places his hand over his heart, indicating where it might be.

Nova watches him for a long moment. I think she’s about to deny him or tell him he’s crazy, but instead, she does as he asks, squinting her eyes in an effort to keep them closed. After another long second, she opens them and flattens her lips in disappointment. “I just remember the dark hoods coming at me, nothing else. Why is that important?”

“We just want to be sure,” he tells her, leaving important information out. There’s more to his question than worrying about a bad dream. The founders conduct most of their meetings within the college, and outside, under the guise of secrecy, they wear robes which are a staple from long ago. Ours are embroidered with the Cadieux College crest, two Cs surrounded by laurel leaves and flames, but other factions wear other symbols, and it seems far too coincidental that she would be dreaming about hooded figures. Maybe she’s remembering what happened to her. If that’s the case, then knowing what was on the robes could give us insight into who did this to her.

“You’re lying,” she accuses, which makes Lucian smirk. He gets off on her challenging him.

“Care to prove that, lamb?” he teases.

“I care to punch you in your pretty face.” She shifts a little and winces, which causes Lucian to drop the smile.

“I might just let you when you get up out of this bed,” he offers softly under his breath.

“I wouldn’t do it,” she admits, equally as quiet. “I just like pissing you off.”

“And you do it so well. Now rest so you can get the hell out of here. Hospitals give me hives.”

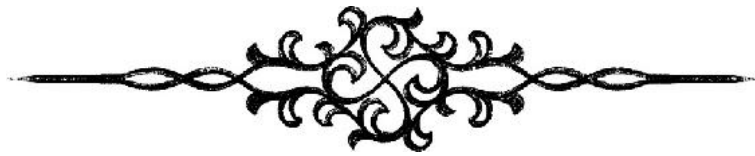
“You said you would tell me what happened,” she insists, ignoring his comment about hospitals.

“I didn’t say when I would tell you,” he counters, causing Nova to open her mouth in protest, but my brother silences her by pressing a gentle finger to her lips. “Besides, you need to sleep. Is that really what you want to be thinking about right now?”

“I don’t like not knowing what happened to me. I’m imagining all kinds of crazy things in my head. Just tell me, please.”

I watch Lucian crumble under her plea. His shoulders fall, and something inside him aches. He stands, looks at me for encouragement, then leans down and places his lips against the side of her face.

He’s going to tell her what we know.



NOVA

“You were found in the bathroom down the hall from the Union.” As Lucian speaks, I expect some recollection to accompany his words, but there’s still a yawning emptiness inside me.

“I was at school?” I assumed I was in a car wreck, since I kept thinking about the accident. “What happened?” My question is frantic as panic wells up inside me, causing a wave of tremors to rack my body.

“You’re safe, we won’t let anything else happen to you again.” Lucian strokes his hand over my head, but it doesn’t make me feel any better.

“What happened?” I ask again, more insistent this time.

“You were attacked.”

Even though I knew the words were coming, I’m still not prepared for them. The gaping hole inside me surrounding the event grows larger and threatens to swallow me up. Someone did this to me. It had to be more than one someone, because I refuse to think that I could have gotten in this shape any other way. I feel battered, like I did after the accident.

“I was in the bathroom?” I try to think back to my last memory, and the only thing that comes to mind is waking up between Lucian and Nox. It was still dark out, so I pretended I was still asleep for a while longer just so I could stay there with them on the couch and not feel alone.

I don’t even remember getting off the couch or leaving their house. It’s all blank after that, until my dreams and fuzzy memories of trying to wake up at the hospital.

“I can’t remember. Why can’t I remember?” I look between the two brothers, and a sick thought forms in my head without warning. Did they drug me or something, and that’s why I can’t remember anything after spending the morning with them?

“Don’t look at me like that, lamb. You’ve never once been afraid of me, so don’t start that shit now,” Lucian demands, then explains, “You got hit in the head and had some swelling in your brain. The doctors said you might not remember what happened.”

“Jesus,” I hiss as the seriousness of what happened begins to set in. Who the hell could hate me that much? My eyes lift to Lucian. He hates...hated me, but it feels off. He’s too arrogant to deny his involvement if he really were part of this. The tension in my muscles eases, and I settle deeper into the crappy mattress.

“Don’t doubt me again,” he grumbles dejectedly, as if he knows exactly what I was thinking and that I arrived at the conclusion that he most likely wasn’t involved.

“Or what?” I challenge, but it comes out weakly.

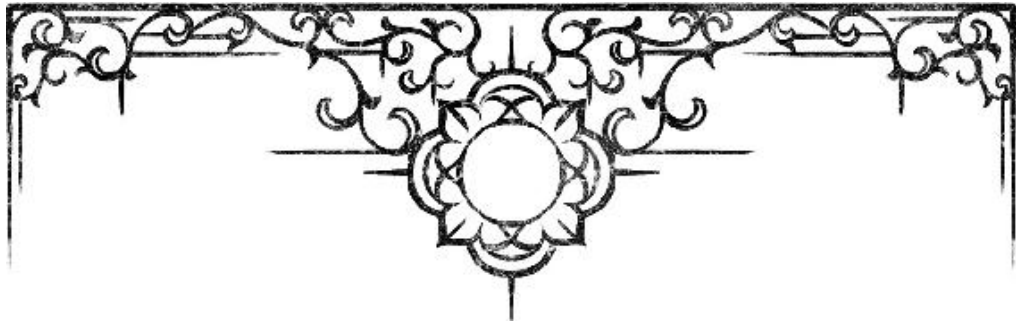
He lets out a soft chuckle, and I feel him lean over me before tender lips brush across my forehead. “Or I might make you stroke...” I blink my eyes open to glare up at his cruelly curled lips. “My ego,” he finishes around a smile.

“The only thing I’m going to be stroking is a knife over your throat.” It shouldn’t feel so comforting to threaten him, but it does, and we both know I wouldn’t really do it. Well, I think he knows I wouldn’t anyway.

I feel Lucian’s heavy huff of surprise against the side of my face before he nuzzles my ear. “Oh, lamb, I’m going to hold you to that, but you’ll be riding my cock at the same time.”

I gulp, pretending his comment isn’t slightly terrifying and exciting at the same time.

“Now rest so you can get out of this bed, and we can figure out who did this and make them regret touching you.”



NOX

*S*quint up at the sun when I exit the hospital. It's been three days since Nova officially woke up, and the doctors are finally releasing her today. She still can't remember what happened, and it might be better if she doesn't. She's anxious and moody, not that I blame her.

She has nightmares all the time, jerking awake with a scream poised on her lips that never seems to escape her parted mouth. I can't wait to get her the hell out of here, but Rory thinks she's returning to the Umbra estate, and that's not happening.

Lucian will never let her out of his sight. His obsession with her has grown to the point where it's dangerous for the nurses to even come into the room and disturb her. I know he feels responsible for the attack, and I'm not saying he's blameless, but I'm worried he's going to push Nova too far and fuck things up for us because he's trying to assure himself that she's safe.

I hand a small slip of paper to the valet standing near the curb, but I doubt he needs it. Our name has been whispered all over this hospital since our arrival. The generous donation we made greased the wheels of the upper management and kept everyone happy, even while my brother acted like a feral asshole ready to lash out at anyone who came close to us or Nova.

I turn my head to see an older man exit a glass door and give the valet a nod of acknowledgement before he tells me, "I'll take care of that, Mr. Morningstar."

When he returns with the SUV minutes later, I give my gratitude in the form of a fifty before getting behind the wheel and texting Lucian that we're good to go.

We only have a small window. Nova's grandparents know she's being released today, and despite Lucian's insistence that she would come home with us, Astrid isn't on board with the

plan, and she could arrive anytime to try to lure our girl away. I'm not sure who Nova would choose to go home with. Considering she's an adult, the option should be hers, but we're taking that choice out of her hands, and I don't feel bad about it.

We still don't know who attacked her. The bathroom she was assaulted in is just down the hall from the Union, yet no one is coming forward with any information, and all of the cameras were blacked out the night before, letting us know the incident was very much premeditated.

We have a long list of suspects, though, and the elder Umbras haven't been crossed off the bottom of that list yet, even if it's purely because we don't like them. They didn't stay with Nova. Hell, they barely came to see her the entire time she was in the hospital. We were the ones who were by her bedside every minute, making sure she was okay and that no one tried to fuck with her while she was helpless, which just confirms that they don't deserve her in their lives.

Lucian is pushing a sour-faced Nova out the door in a wheelchair. I can just imagine her mumbling about being able to walk on her own while he pretends to follow the hospital rules, when we all know he doesn't follow anyone's rules unless it suits his needs and having Nova in the chair, completely reliant on him, fits that to a tee.

I jump out of the driver's seat and open the rear passenger door for her to get in. She gives me a tiny, appreciative smile after pulling herself up and out of the chair, then climbs into the car gingerly. While some of her bruising has begun to fade, I know she's still hurting, especially her ribs. I've had cracked ribs a time or two, and they hurt like a motherfucker, so I get it, but I hate to see her in pain.

Lucian spins the chair around and gives it a little shove as if he can't be bothered with it anymore since Nova no longer needs it, then he acts as if he's going to scoot into the seat beside her. "I'm not moving." She meets his gaze squarely.

I watch the side of my brother's face, seeing him contemplate his next action. If she were just being stubborn,

there would be a battle of wills, but she's not, and he concedes without a fight, closing the door with a gentle shove, then moving to the front passenger seat.

I'm a little surprised that he didn't go around and sit next to her but also relieved. I know he means well, but his dogged attention can be overwhelming.

I keep an eye on Nova through the rearview mirror on the ride home and make sure to take the turns slowly so she doesn't get too jostled. By the time we approach the bridge to the island, she has her head back against the seat and her eyes closed. I know she's not sleeping, but I take the fact that she's relaxed as a good sign.

She shouldn't be surprised when I turn left and sequester her behind our property walls. Lucian has been vocal about her returning here with us, but I check on her anyway. She notices the security staff milling about right away. I watch her head turn to view two of the guards near the gate, which is a recent development.

The truth is, we've gotten a little lax with security in the past few years. We've come to take things for granted because we're isolated on the island and assumed that our name and the consequences of what would happen to anyone who fucked with us would be enough of a deterrent, but it wasn't. It doesn't matter that we hadn't officially claimed Nova. She's a founder, and that should have been enough to make sure she was safe, not to mention Lucian said she was off-limits, and someone had the nerve to leave her for dead in that bathroom, meaning they didn't heed his warning. There will be hell to pay for what they did to our girl.

"It would be easier if you took me to the Umbras' estate," Nova says, speaking for the first time since leaving the hospital.

"How so?" Lucian asks while exiting the car to open the rear door after I pull up near the side entrance.

"It would just be easier." She places her hand over his proffered palm and allows him to help her get out.

“I don’t agree. The Umbras and all their people are already on my nerves, and I’m not even looking at them. If I had to see their faces all the time, I don’t think I could hold back.”

“Why would you need to see their faces? And hold back from what?” she asks conversationally as he walks slowly beside her to the side door, giving her ample time on the steps. I don’t think I’ve ever seen my brother have this much patience with anyone.

“Come on now, do you think I’m going to let you out of my sight? I’d have to be there with you. We’ll be more comfortable here, and our house is better anyway. Everything here is better. Plus, every time I turn around, you’re getting harassed, and I’m so over that shit.”

“Usually, I’m being harassed by you,” she mutters under her breath.

Lucian ignores the jab and answers the other part of her question about holding back. “Killing them isn’t off the table.”

Nova stops short after entering the house. “That’s what you’re refraining from? Killing them?”

“Among other things,” he tells her without issue. I suppose it’s better if she understands from the beginning just how serious he is, so it doesn’t come as a surprise later.

“You should probably get some help.”

“No, I’m totally capable of handling them on my own.” He purposely misunderstands her, and she just shakes her head in response. “Come on, Gertrude had someone make up one of the rooms down here for us, so you don’t have to worry about the stairs.” He redirects her down the hall, as if he didn’t just tell her he’s actively restraining himself from killing her family.



NOVA

Sometimes, there are these moments in life that shake you to your core, and you know the world has shifted on its axis, but no one else around you seems to react to it. I've only experienced it a few times—the day I woke up in the hospital and found out my parents were both dead, the day I left our trailer and moved into the crummy apartment closer to the city so I could get a better paying job, and the day Mr. Haynsworth knocked on my door. I'm facing one of those moments again, and it's the first time I haven't been alone to deal with it.

Lucian Morningstar is kneeling at my feet, untying my scuffed sneakers as if I'm as fragile as glass and as treasured as a precious stone, or whatever rich people value. He tips his face up, and those mesmerizing blue eyes I've only ever thought of as beautifully cruel catch me watching him.

His features are relaxed, but there's no hiding the rawness of Lucian. It fills every fragment of his being, and the fact that he embraces it and doesn't hide who he is from anyone means there's no fooling yourself when it comes to him. You can't pretend he's a good guy under his gruff exterior. The fact that he's not and never will be is in your face, just like his unrefined appeal, forcing you to swallow it down and accept him for who he is.

I want to touch him, even though I know it's dumb, and I'm just as likely to pull back a bloody stump as I am to be granted a kiss from his perfect lips. That alone should make me reconsider, but it doesn't.

My heart beats faster just from being around him. I feel more alive when he's near me, and everything feels amplified by his presence. I forget how dangerous he is when he's looking at me like this, like I'm the answer to the question he didn't ask, or the enigma he can't walk away from without turning it inside out to see why it's so intriguing.

Knowing all this, and the fact that Lucian Morningstar will probably leave me irrevocably broken, I still can't make

myself put any real effort into pushing him away.

My head spins with the sudden realization of how badly I want him to want me and accept me as I am. I also recognize my willingness to accept him, thorns and all. A wave of dizziness has me swaying to the left, and he reaches up to steady me with a look of concern. “Do you need to lie down?”

I shake my head because words seem too complex for me at the moment, and I’m afraid if I open my mouth, he’ll know exactly what I’m thinking and use it against me.

His tattooed hand lifts to cradle my cheek, and I’m helpless not to lean into his touch. I shield my eyes by lowering my lids, knowing I’m conveying just how desperate I am for the affection, but at least now I might not have to see his triumph reflected back at me. How could I fall for the lion? It’s stupid and risky. I know how badly this will end, and yet here I am, breathless because he’s looking at me, and if I’m honest, there’s a part of me that’s thrilled he vowed to protect me. How could I not be awed by that?

“Everything good?” Nox questions, giving me a chance to pull away from Lucian and pretend like I didn’t just expose my soft underbelly to the king of the jungle.

“Just tired of being tired,” I respond noncommittally while pretending to examine the room. It’s another gothic dream. The walls are gray stone, like that of a castle, but the windows are the real showstopper—five floor to ceiling pointed arches intersected with more stonework and lead glass panes dominate the room. The glass is distorted with small bubbles and waves, giving it an ancient feel. The bed mimics the window arches, but in lieu of glass, there are mirrors, blackened with age, reflecting back at me.

“Whose room is this?” I question. I can’t help but think about those mirrors. The image of Lucian looking into the reflective glass while he was with someone else leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

“No one’s.” Nox drops onto the bed casually. I let my eyes bounce over the rest of the medieval-looking furniture, including the tufted chaise lounge positioned at the end of the

bed. It's draped with silvery velvet blankets and smoke gray pillows.

"Why?" Lucian asks while rising to his full height after tucking my shoes under the bed. The power dynamic between us is always strung tight, but with him above me, looking down on me the way he is, it plucks at the tension, making it sing through my body with awareness.

"It's softer than the other rooms," I respond without outright asking if this is where he brings his hookups, but that feels wrong the moment I think it. There's nothing soft about Lucian.

I glance over at Nox, who's comfortably leaning against the massive headboard, and I wonder if maybe this isn't his room for meeting his girlfriends. I don't like that thought either, especially not the girlfriend part.

Being here with them isn't smart. Lines made in permanent marker have already been crossed. At some point in the hospital—heck, maybe it was even before that—I became reliant on their attention and presence. I told myself it was okay because I was in a weakened state, but it was and still is an excuse.

"Are you sure there's no other reason you're asking, lamb? Like maybe you want it to be *your* room?" Lucian proves he can see through my lies, but there's a little solace in the fact that he can't read me completely. I give him a droll stare, neither confirming nor denying his claim, but trying to convey that his assumption is wrong all the same. "Well, it won't be. As soon as your beautiful body is all healed up, you'll be in our bed."

I don't know what catches me more off guard—the compliment, or the assumption that I would sleep with him. Actually, I know which is more surprising. I just don't know if I can trust his flattery.

"You think very highly of yourself, pretty boy."

He leers at me without shame. "So do you, but you can pretend you don't. I'll very much enjoy winning you over."

“Ignore his need for attention, Nova, and relax. I’m sure this bed has to be more comfortable than that noisy blue mattress,” Nox cajoles, patting the bed next to him with his palm.

“I’ve slept on much worse. It’s you guys I feel bad for. That couch must have sucked.”

“It was better than the alternative.” He fluffs the pillows, and I crawl forward.

“Which was?” I question, slightly confused.

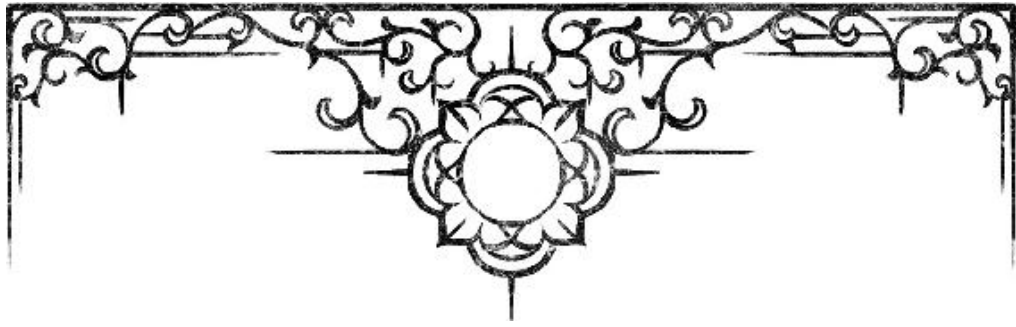
“Leaving you there alone.”

Nox’s comment makes me blush almost as much as Lucian’s crudeness, but the feeling of butterflies in my stomach is certainly more intense. “Thank you for staying with me,” I say softly, feeling vulnerable and grateful.

“Anytime.” He meets my eyes with his softer, cool blue gaze.

“Let’s just not make it a habit. I don’t ever want to see you in the hospital again,” Lucian grumbles before tossing a television remote on the bed near his brother’s hand. “I’m going to take an hour-long shower. I would invite you, lamb, but I’m not sure you could resist me, and I would be powerless to deny you.” He spreads his arms in a helpless gesture, and I actually burst out laughing and have to grab my ribs at the sharp pain.

Nox chuckles with me, burying his face in my neck. Goose bumps erupt all over my skin from his nearness, and the feeling of his warm breath steals the humor of the moment, dulling the pain in my side, which doesn’t go unnoticed by Lucian. I don’t utter a word when it’s his turn to laugh as he turns away, tugging his shirt over his head to toss onto the floor on his way to the shower. The huge skull on his back with gaping dark eyes seems to watch me just as keenly as he does.



NOX

“*I*f you don’t let me up, Lucian, I swear to God I’m going to punch you in the junk.” Frankly, I’m surprised she let him baby her—her words, not mine—this long.

“Are we ready for foreplay, lamb?” The fool actually reaches down and grabs his dick to adjust it. Nova lets out a little growl, then shoulder checks him when she gets up from the chair.

“The only foreplay you’re getting is a bag of ice dropped down your pants to help with the swelling.”

“Awe, it’s not *that* big. I promise it will fit.” He continues to harass her, but she keeps walking away, flipping him off behind her back.

“I’ve jacked off so much, I think I’m desensitizing my dick,” he tells me conversationally once she’s out of the room. “I can’t seem to come unless I’m standing over her while she’s asleep or perving on the pictures I took of her.”

“Fucking hell, Lucian.” I laugh, even though it shouldn’t be funny. “You better aim that shit somewhere else, bro.” A disturbed smile distorts his features, and I’m not brave enough to ask why.

“The Umbras are demanding a meeting,” he grouses seconds later.

“And yesterday, and the day before that.” I shrug.

He looks over at the doorway to make sure Nova isn’t around to overhear him before saying, “This one came with an invitation we can’t ignore.” He produces a crimson envelope, sealed with the CC crest in black wax.

I lift my brows. “Is Nova’s name on the summons?” I pluck the heavy package out of his fingers.

“Nope.” He pops the P. “Why do you think they are excluding her?”

“I don’t know. You’d think they would have brought her into the fold from the get-go.” I break the seal, and small chunks of wax fall into my lap.

The weighty paper unfolds with a scratching sound, revealing flowing cursive penmanship scrawled across the page.

Morningstar,

*Your presence is required this
Saturday at 12am.*

*Refusal will mean forfeiting your
founder’s duty and is punishable by
the creed.*

Rory Umbra

“THEY CERTAINLY MEAN BUSINESS.” I toss the letter into Lucian’s lap, unimpressed with their summons. I’ve never cared about the Cadieux Creed the way my brother has, but they are doing a damn fine job of dragging me into the politics of it all and making me want to wipe the rest of the families from the island just like Lucian planned.

He snorts in amusement, then crumples the thick paper up in his fist.

“Are we going?” I question.

“Oh, we’ll be there,” he replies.

“What about Nova?”

Lucian strokes his hand over his jaw, thinking. “We should take her with us,” he says.

“What if they try to take her from us?”

“By force? It wouldn’t happen.” He’s so sure of himself, he answers almost before I’m done speaking.

“What if she chooses to go with them?”

“We’ll have to make sure she won’t.” Our eyes lock, and the thing that passes between us is dark. Both of us are willing to do whatever it takes to keep Nova Devlin, and that should be alarming, but it’s not.



NOVA

The days blur into a lazy haze of food, television, and flirting...not necessarily in that order. I've almost gotten used to the casual touches, but it's kind of hard not to when you're surrounded by two of the most tactile people I've ever met, and that's not just with me. It's like the brothers are in perfect sync with each other, moving in harmony and finishing each other's tasks. Calling them close would be an understatement of epic proportions. It makes me wonder if Lucian's thorny edges would have been a little less lethal if Nox had been with him the first time we met.

I don't know how many times I've gotten caught staring at both of them, my mind going a hundred miles an hour as I try to reconcile how I could want to be here at all, let alone indulge in their banter.

Lucian is still bossy and crass, but seeing him interact with Nox in a similar fashion has proven it's not always coming from a bad place. Nox, however, is charming and thoughtful, the kind of guy who's dangerous to a girl's heart because you know how easy it would be to fall for him just before you catch a glimpse of something lurking underneath all that charisma that makes you think twice, only to realize you've already fallen. At least that's how it is in movies and books anyway.

Sometimes, when his guard is completely down, I think I might see a glimmer of Nox's secrets behind his sweet veneer. It's like a void, an emptiness that flattens his gaze with apathy, but then he snaps out of it just as quickly, and I'm left wondering if I just imagined it altogether.

The one constant, however, is Lucian. He's still a jackass, albeit a little less of a hostile jackass, but I'm not sure how I would handle him any other way. Our battle of wills over the last few days has given me a strange sense of normalcy, which I'm craving, since it feels like everything in my life is in shambles.

I'm waiting for him to return now so I can press him to finally tell me everything he knows about what happened that day in the bathroom. I'm tired of being in the dark, being sheltered from my own life, and if he doesn't confess today, I'll probably lose what's left of my sanity.

The repeated calls and texts from Astrid are only serving to confuse me more. She acts like she cares about me, but I'm having a hard time believing her, especially when I know she's keeping so many secrets from me.

Nox told me about the meeting this evening. It all seems so ridiculous and overdone, like some made for television movie I'd catch on Lifetime about secret societies and people with too much time on their hands.

I can't ignore the chill I felt when he showed me the robes they are expected to wear, and if I accompany them as they've asked—or demanded, really, in Lucian's case—I'll have to wear one too. The heavy black fabric gave me a flash of a memory, but I don't know if it's real or if my dreams are morphing my perception of reality. I do know that the fear that threatened to swallow me when I saw the cloak was very real. I made Nox take them out of the room as soon as Lucian went to the bathroom, and it wasn't until then that I felt like I could breathe. I don't know how I'm going to put that thing on without suffocating, or how I'll be able to look at everyone else wearing them, but I'm going to force myself, because I'm tired of not knowing what the heck is going on around me.

A door slams somewhere in the house, and I jolt. My ribs ache, causing me to hold my breath for a long second. I listen for the *pat-pat* sound of Gertrude's boots on the wooden floor, but it's the heavier footfalls of Lucian approaching, so I pretend to relax into the couch. My eyes are already glued to the doorway, waiting like an eager puppy, before he breaches the entryway.

"Hello, lamb." His deep, rich voice coils around the words in a familiar yet honeyed greeting.

"Pretty boy," I reply in kind. The edge to my tone has long since left the words, likening them to a term of near

endearment.

One side of Lucian's lips curls, just enough to be noticeable, but then his features shift back to his placid expression and he lowers himself onto the sofa right next to me, all sinew and grace, filling my senses with the warmth of his skin and the smell of sunshine dampened slightly by the scent of his expensive cologne.

"Were you at the beach?" Do I sound sad? I shouldn't be, but the thought stings a little.

"What makes you ask that?" he questions without giving me an answer.

"You stink," I lie, which makes him really smile.

"You lie," he counters knowingly, then decides to bring his face closer to mine, as if he may try to kiss me, but I know he's only teasing. He hasn't done more than a sweet brush of his lips against my forehead since the hospital.

I can actually feel the heat of his skin imploring me to touch him and risk getting burned. I don't know how I resist. I watch, entranced, as he lingers mere millimeters away from me, but he displaces all the oxygen, making my heart thud. The desire to drag in a deeper breath so I can catch his scent again nearly overwhelms me.

"You smell delicious," he rumbles, then licks his lips as if to prove his point. The answering flutter in my stomach has me letting out a shaky breath that he notices, and I'm rewarded with the brush of his nose along mine in a sweet nuzzle right before he takes a hold of my bottom lip with his teeth and nibbles.

The flutter shifts lower, and my nipples actually tingle with arousal. I like this so much, something has to be wrong with me, but I don't really think I care.

He releases me too quickly, and I sway forward, caught up in his allure and presence. "Want more, lamb?" His eyes roam over my face. In the past, I would have assumed he was looking for a weakness, a soft spot to strike, but I can't deny the heat in Lucian's gaze and touch any longer. "Come and get

it.” He leans back a little more, making sure I would have to put effort into seeking him out.

I almost lean away, putting that ever present space between us, but then I think about everything he’s done for me, about the meeting tonight, and how much could go wrong, and I decide *fuck it*.

Lucian’s eyes widen as I almost throw myself at him, pinning him to the couch with my body. I start to drop my mouth to his with the same urgency, but I pull back at the last second, ghosting my nose over his and just barely allowing our lips to brush.

Lucian inhales sharply, making our chests meet, and that’s the only warning I get before he reaches up, clamps his hand over the back of my neck roughly, and says, “Don’t stop now, lamb.” Then, he yanks me down so our mouths crash together.

Our kiss, if you can call it something as simple as that, is raw and completely unrefined. I swear I taste blood more than once, and I don’t know if it’s mine or his. When he jerks me into his lap, I let out a sharp cry from the ache in my chest.

“Fuck,” he whispers, stopping the kiss and lowering his entire face so I couldn’t reach his lips again if I tried, but his fingers knead into my ass over my hips as if he didn’t want to stop any more than I did.

“Sorry,” I tell him, because I don’t know what else to say, but that causes him to glare up at me, and the narrowing of his eyes makes me think he’s pissed.

“Don’t,” he warns. I start to lean back to put a little more distance between us, because I can’t tell exactly what irritated him, but he slides his hand up my back and applies a scant amount of pressure, making sure I can’t escape. “Don’t apologize for being hurt. It’s not your fucking fault.”

“Fine, I didn’t mean it anyway.”

One of Lucian’s dark eyebrows lifts. “Then why say it?”

I shrug, not wanting to admit the real reason I said it—I was sorry it interrupted the kiss.

“Not good enough.” He applies a little more pressure to my back while watching my face intently. I don’t resist lowering myself, and I end up plastered against him, chest to chest and nose to nose. The desire to bite his lip fills me, and I find myself staring at his mouth. When his tongue makes an appearance, I strike, sinking my teeth into his bottom lip and sucking.

Lucian’s chest rumbles with a groan that could almost be confused with a growl. I expect him to retaliate in some way, but he actually relaxes his body, which I take as his acceptance and continue kissing and nibbling him.

His hands stay locked on my hips and ass, even when he lifts his hips off the couch to grind up. The feeling of him pressing against me, as if he can’t get enough, sends a jolt of awareness through my mind and *other* places. I want him, all of him.

I slide my fingers into his dark hair, angling his head a little to better fit my mouth, then I slip my tongue deeper to twirl with his. When my nails graze his scalp, he bands his arm around my back and takes over the kiss in a bid for dominance, but I hate making anything easy for him, so I grab a fistful of his hair and jerk his head back.

His ice-blue eyes are wild as he glares up at me, causing a triumphant smile to curl my lips. I brush my mouth over his sweetly in an open-mouthed peck. He stills as if he’s afraid to move, and even his breathing has slowed. I take my time kissing him, exploring him, but it’s not the tenderness that has my heart pumping, it’s the thought of being in control of Lucian Morningstar and having him at my mercy.

“What are you doing?” he demands as he tilts his head back for me to kiss and nibble his neck.

“Do you need me to explain it to you? I thought you would know, but I can see I was wrong.” I slide my tongue up his throat, and I swear he shivers, to my utter delight.

He chuckles, maybe to cover how much I’m affecting him, or maybe because he actually found the comment funny, but I shouldn’t have gotten so cocky.

The swift crack on my rump comes as a complete shock, and my entire body jolts in surprise. Before I have time to recover, Lucian's hand is on the nape of my neck, locking me in place. "When I find out who hurt you, I'm going to kill them slowly." He pulls me down a little more, so his lips brush provocatively against my ear. "Do you know why, lamb?"

I manage to shake my head just enough to provide an answer.

"Because I can't fuck you like I need to. I can't be inside you, shoving myself so deep, you'll beg me to stop because you're afraid you'll never get me out of you."

I swallow thickly. I'm already afraid he's sunk his claws too deeply into me, yet what frightens me more than my unhealthy obsession of wanting him is thinking about if he doesn't.

"I told you that you can't do that." I muster up a response to his threat since I can't seem to come up with a denial about what he wants to do to me.

"I can and I will. Will you pretend to hate me for it, lamb? Will you fight me when I come to you, smelling of death and needing to prove I got to them before they could hurt you again?" His words are spoken so softly, it's almost hard to believe that he's talking about killing someone. I don't doubt the truth in his words, but it's hard to wrap my head around the situation. There's a big part of me that wants whoever did this to me to pay, but then I feel guilty for wanting that and what it really means.

Still, I answer his question. "No, I won't fight with you."

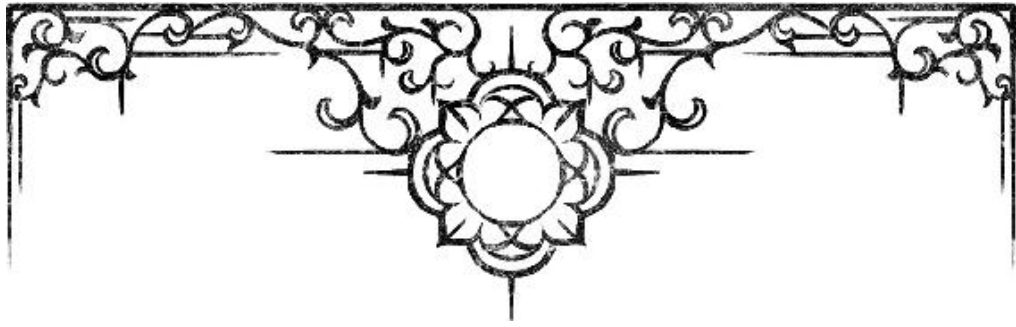
"Not even when I need to touch you after?"

"No," I whisper, then I feel a shift of acceptance inside me. By allowing him this confession, I'm admitting that I'm an accessory and giving him power over me, but I don't regret it. I have to acknowledge that I'll be just as responsible for the person's death as Lucian if it actually comes to that. Have they already changed me, or have I been this person all along?

I feel Lucian's smile curl against the side of my face, but I choose to ignore it for my own sanity. "And here I thought I wanted you to say yes." He slides his big palm down my back and cups my butt with both hands to pull me forward ever so gently, yet the hardness beneath me is anything but yielding. "It seems I like it just as much when you give me what I want, lamb."

"Don't worry, the newness will wear off, plus I like being difficult."

He laughs freely, and it feels like a win for some reason.



NOX

“Do I really need to wear this?” Nova grumbles dejectedly.

“You won’t be allowed into the chamber without it,” I remind her.

“But why? It’s dumb.”

It’s not like her to be petulant. “They say it’s for anonymity or some shit, but mostly, it’s because these old assholes like to cling to tradition. If you don’t want to go, you don’t have to.”

“She’s going,” Lucian pipes up.

“Only because I want to,” Nova retorts. These two could argue over the color of the sky, but I’ve never seen my brother more content. That could have something to do with the hickey on the side of his neck too though. I haven’t gotten a chance to ask him what they got up to this afternoon while I was out. “The fabric is so heavy, I bet it’s hot as heck under that thing.”

“It won’t be hot where we’re going.” Lucian rises to get his own robe off the chaise.

“What’s really bothering you?” I question before this devolves into a real battle of wills.

“What if I don’t want to join your cult?” She plants a hand on her curvy hip.

“Too late, you’re already indoctrinated, and we have to sacrifice your virginity to my cock,” Lucian sneers with way too much enjoyment.

Nova flips him off without even looking at him, then sets her doe eyes on me, asking for help.

“It’s not a cult,” I defend.

“Yes, it is, but they like to think of it as a secret society, makes the old pricks feel important.”

“You’re not helping,” I tell Lucian as he picks up his robe.

“Do I ever?”

“No,” Nova and I say at the same time. Our eyes connect, and she gives me a sweet smile. The thought of her virginity filters through my mind unbidden. At least I know Lucian didn’t take it without me. I think I would strangle him if he did. I glance past Nova to my brother, and a silent exchange happens between us.

We need to talk.

Later, he replies.

“What if I freak out?” Nova questions softly, looking down at a spare robe we had to dig out of the closet for her.

“Why would you freak out?” I move a little closer to her.

She turns, putting her back to Lucian, seeming to shut him out of the conversation. “They remind me of the dreams,” she whispers.

Damn it, why didn’t I think of that? My feet eat up the remaining space between us, and I wrap my arm around her back, drawing her to my chest.

“It’s dumb, but I get this feeling of panic when I see them.”

“It’s not dumb,” I tell her while watching Lucian, whose face has gone emotionless.

“I just know if I put it on, I’ll suffocate.”

“Nova!” Lucian barks, and I’m positive it’s the first time he’s used her name and not some nickname he made up for her.

She turns away from me as if she were caught doing something wrong and faces him.

“Will we let anything happen to you?” He leads her into the question, but his tone is still too harsh.

“No,” she replies softly without conviction.

Lucian narrows his eyes on her, and she lets out a huff before snapping, “No,” loudly. “You’d kill me yourself before you gave someone else the pleasure.”

“Oh, lamb, you know that’s not true.” He continues to watch her, and I see Nova soften under his gaze, accepting his words without argument. After a long pause, he continues. “This is a piece of cloth.” He shakes out the cloak. “It can’t hurt you, and we would never allow anyone wearing one to hurt you.”

“I know that up here.” She jabs her finger at the side of her head.

“But you’re still worried,” I interject.

“What if I freak out?” She pivots to ask me again. “They give me the creeps. I can’t even explain it.”

“Do you want us to put ours on so you can see how you feel?” I offer.

“No, but you probably should,” she answers tersely. I know she’s not mad at me, but I hate to do it if it really will bother her.

“Get over here. I’m not going to be the only bad guy,” Lucian mutters, calling me over before shrugging into the black fabric.

I watch Nova out of the corner of my eye as she crosses her arms over her chest and leans backward, as if she doesn’t want to be near us. When she just stands there, looking at us, I glance over at my brother, and we both flip the hoods up at the same time, concealing our faces. She sucks in a breath but doesn’t freak out, as she put it.

“Jesus, this is stupid. Why the heck are grown people traipsing around in robes like some Harry Potter rejects?”

Lucian swipes his hood back, revealing his face. “Because they are all chicken shits who don’t want to own up to their choices and they think it hides their identity.”

“You seem okay,” I comment, sliding my own hood back.

Nova shrugs and averts her eyes. “I’ll deal.”

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her she shouldn't have to deal, but I don't really have another option for her at the moment.

"If something changes and you need to leave, tell me and we'll go."

"How am I supposed to even know it's you?" She tosses up her hands in frustration.

"Oh come on, you can tell the difference between us with your eyes closed. Don't act like this shit is going to change that," Lucian counters.

"Well, you do smell." She scrunches up her nose cutely.

"You're going to be smelling my balls in about thirty seconds if you don't quit."

"Ugh, for a pretty boy, you sure do have an ugly mouth."

"That's not what you were saying an hour ago," he taunts, which shuts Nova right up, but it doesn't conceal her death glare. "Come try yours on, lamb, or would you rather get naked first?"

"I am not getting naked under that thing!" Her eyes are wide as she looks at me.

"Those are the rules, sorry." Lucian shrugs his shoulders helplessly.

I shake my head and mouth, "He's lying," causing Lucian to reach over and punch me in the arm.

"Damn it, this might have been endurable if I knew she was bare under that robe and I had some place to keep my hands warm." He ducks deftly when a pillow from the bed goes sailing toward his face.

"My body is not your pocket."

Lucian tosses his head back and laughs so hard, he has to grab hold of his stomach. I can't remember the last time he seemed so carefree. "My pocket pussy." He continues to chuckle.

“I swear to God, Lucian, if you start calling me your pocket...I will strangle you with a pink ribbon and shove a fluffy tail up your butt after you’re dead, then post pictures on the internet for everyone and their momma to see.”

Lucian abruptly stops laughing and eyes Nova. “That was oddly specific. You’ve put far too much thought into that, but thank you for the idea. I’ll go shopping as soon as we get home. I won’t be sharing the photos of you—alive and well, mind you—with the ribbon and fluffy little tail up your ass, but I will have a book printed so I can look at it often, lamb.”

Another pillow hits the wall behind his head, this one with a louder thump. “I’m going to smother you tonight while you’re sleeping.”

“Already up to sitting on my face. I’m impressed.”

She lets out a growling huff and spins to stomp toward the bathroom with the robe in hand. Once the door slams, my brother looks over at me. “She’s too mad to be scared now.”

“I think we could have found a better way to distract her,” I reply.

“Nah. Did you see the way her eyes lit up and notice the shift in her breathing? She’s in there right now, thinking about what my tongue will feel like inside her.”

“I think she’s thinking about all the ways she could murder you, but whatever you want to tell yourself.”



NOVA

I'm reluctantly grateful for the stupid robe when I walk behind Lucian and in front of Nox as we make our way into the school. Our hoods have been up since we were driven off Morningstar grounds by one of their security officers. I'm only feeling slightly claustrophobic, and considering I have to keep rebreathing my own warm air and I'm not hyperventilating, I'll call it a win for the time being. Thankfully, the lighter mesh falling from the hood allows me to see and get a scant amount of fresh air.

Our footsteps are nearly silent on the stone floor as we file into the school. I look to the right and left without being too obvious, because strictly speaking, I'm not supposed to be here, but I haven't been in the school in a couple weeks, and I'm wondering if being here will trigger a memory of some sort.

The place is as empty as a tomb and just as quiet. I spy the coffee shop and Union but feel nothing. There's no pull of a memory or even the fear I was worried would seize me. Nox puts a little pressure on my back, urging me forward with his palm, causing me to hasten my steps to keep up with Lucian.

Nox informed me that speaking isn't permitted until we reach the chamber, but even then, it's uncommon for anyone other than the current president to speak unless they all recite the Cadieux Creed...or the corrupt credence, as the brothers call it. I reminded them this is cult crap, and neither of them argued.

My breathing begins to deepen when we file into a line with other robed individuals and are fed into a dark hall. The light scuffing of soft-soled shoes turns into a chorus of sound, helping to detract from the eerie silence. I'm close enough to Lucian's back that I could reach out and touch him, but I don't dare. It would admit a weakness to him and break expectations.

As we continue forward, I notice the group ahead of us curve down a hall, then step through a door I know to be marked as closed. Now my breathing picks up. For some strange reason, going underground seems daunting when I wouldn't have balked at it before.

I lower my head to watch my feet, but instead, I see the black cloth swaying with every step. My throat feels too tight, like I need to force myself to swallow but my body isn't cooperating.

Nox eases closer to me so with every step, some part of our bodies brush. It keeps me focused on my next movement and making sure we don't trip each other instead of thinking about the rapidly approaching descent.

The curving stairway is lit with actual torches and has a rope handhold secured to the wall through large iron rings every few feet, but no one reaches for it, including me. I'm not sure what good it would do anyway, considering if I fell right now, it would create a domino effect and take out everyone below me.

I keep my eyes trained on Lucian's wide shoulders so I'm not tempted to look over to the right, where there's a yawning abyss of darkness spotted with twinkling firelight far below. I'm already worried about walking back up these stairs. I really hope I won't be expected to keep up this pace.

By the time we reach the stone floor far beneath the school, I'm too relieved to allow myself to be afraid of what awaits us. The line up ahead has disbursed into smaller groups. Clearly, they recognize each other some way or have a meeting place planned out. I follow Lucian through the huddled figures, past several large pillars, and into an expansive chamber. The walls are adorned with more torches that reflect off the walls of golden tiles, which shimmer like the inside of an oyster. Heavy wooden chandeliers hang from the impressively high ceiling with even more flickering flames. I have no idea whose job it is to light everything, but they deserve some kind of medal.

Huge tables are placed in the spacious area like some sort of weird dining hall with fancy high-back chairs. Most of them are empty, but some have figures already seated in them. Lucian leads us up toward the front, where there's an elevated throne showcasing the only individual not wearing a hood—my grandfather. I would bet my Porsche the petite figure at his side is Astrid, my grandmother, but she's covered from head to toe just like the rest of us.

Lucian is convinced Rory is president in name only, and that Astrid, the true Umbra, is running the show. I can't discredit the idea. I don't know either of them well enough to judge. I was a little surprised to find the Umbra blood comes from my grandmother and Rory took her name to continue the family line. Had my mother been here, he never would have risen to power. She would have been the leader, but in her absence, Rory took the seat.

I glance up, looking at Lucian after he pulls out a chair for me to sit in, but I can't read a response behind the cloak, so I just lower myself slowly, half wondering if he's going to yank it out and laugh when I fall.

The soft murmurings in the chamber are impossible to make out, but the sound hums through the entire expanse. Ordinarily, I would try to look around more and familiarize myself with my surroundings, but I don't want to stand out, especially before we know why everyone was called here.

Sitting silently and pretending I'm calm is harder than it should be. I find myself wishing I could speak to the brothers, ask questions, and even aggravate Lucian so I could pretend like I'm not freaking out on the inside. Nox shifts next to me, and I'm disappointed he doesn't touch me in some small way, proving I've gotten too used to how familiar our relationship has become.

Finally, after some unseen, unheard cue, the rest of the figures start filing into the room and filling up the chairs around us. Our table seems to be popular, because all the remaining seats are quickly taken.

Not a single word is spoken, making it all seem bizarre. Lucian shifts his head toward the dais, and I feel comfortable enough to do the same. Rory is already standing, looking strange in the dark robe, since I'm used to seeing him in button-up shirts and slacks. Everything about this feels surreal. He makes a hand gesture, lifting his palm, and everyone around me, including the Morningstars, rise, and I follow suit, just like I was directed.

After a brief pause, voices fill the chamber, reciting the Cadieux Creed.

We are the founders, eternally bound to those who came before us and forsaken by those who would command us.

Our purpose is to rule the compliant and guide the meek.

We heed our brethren, protect, and provide.

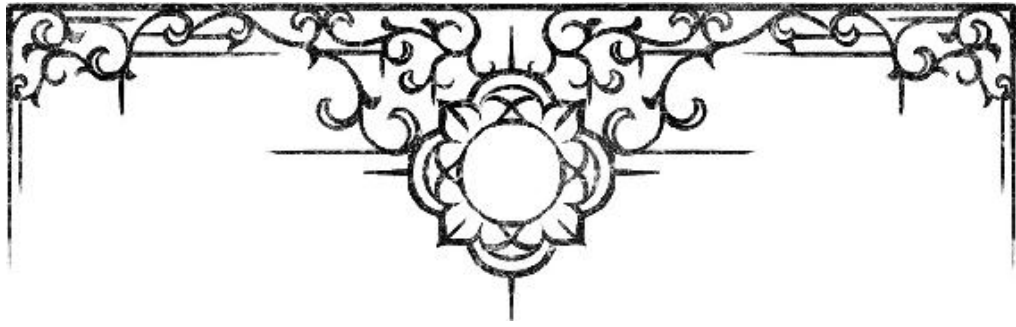
All things are ours to take and conquer.

We are but one of many, we bear the burden.

Trust only in ourselves, and seek approval from no one.

AS THE WORDS ARE SPOKEN, a chill skates down my spine. I'm grateful that my face is covered and no one knows that I didn't participate in the eerie tradition. The final words echo in my head, and I understand why Lucian calls it the corrupt credence. Besides it being completely self-indulgent mumbo jumbo, it's a bunch of crap. I know from experience, and from the Morningstars, that these founding families all hate each other. They don't heed, provide, or protect anyone but themselves and their own interests.

I lower myself back into my seat along with everyone else, besides Rory, and wait to hear why we were all summoned.



NOX

*N*ova is a little slow to take her seat, but I doubt anyone notices. It just goes to show how compliant we've all become. How many times has there been one among us who shouldn't have been? Not that she fits into that category. She is, after all, a rightful heir, but I doubt Rory knows she's here.

My eyes are glued to the president, waiting to see what he has to say and wondering what, if any, damage control I'll have to manage with Lucian.

"As many of you know, a student was attacked at the school—my granddaughter." His eyes scan the chamber as if he might glean some information, but not even a gasp of air disrupts the silence.

"The motive for this attack seems to be unknown, but many of us have speculations." Rory's head turns to the left, and he stares at our table. As much as people like to pretend these robes offer anonymity, it only goes so far, especially when Lucian has always made it clear that he doesn't need to hide behind a cloth for any decision he's made.

My brother pushes back his hood, revealing his hard jaw and razor-sharp gaze. "Something you need to say, Umbra?"

Rory's nostrils flare at the break in decorum, or it could just be the sight of my twin. "You are not permitted to speak, Morningstar."

There's no doubt he knows he's addressing Lucian, but he still uses his founder title in the same way my brother did to address him.

"You worried you won't stand up to the challenge?" Lucian sounds bored, but it causes a ripple through the room. This was not part of the plan, but we didn't anticipate Rory calling us out either. Clearly, we should have.

I remain rooted in my seat but poised to attack if the need arises. It wouldn't be the first time. After my parents' death, it

took five men to restrain Lucian when he went after Astrid. He would have killed her if he could have gotten his hands on her, but unsurprisingly, they were prepared for his outburst and he didn't even get close.

Eventually, we had to reach an agreement through mediation involving all four families to hold the traditional meetings again, with reassurance that Lucian wouldn't try to kill Astrid the next time he saw her. In the end, he agreed, but only because he knows it won't be long before he takes over as president, and when that happens, hell help them all, because my twin will decimate every person on this island and use the corrupt credence to do it.

"You will abide by the rules or be removed. You decide," Rory says through his teeth, but it just doesn't evoke the same apprehension coming from the older man.

"I was merely answering your insinuation, President Umbra. Please proceed." I wouldn't even need to see Lucian to hear the disdain and disregard my brother holds for Nova's grandfather, and neither does anyone else.

There's a pregnant pause where it's clear everyone is waiting to see how this plays out, but Rory eventually calls the room back to attention. "As I was saying, this threat cannot be ignored. When we find out who perpetrated this attack, the assailants will be held accountable, no matter who they are." Rory doesn't look right at Lucian again, but he doesn't need to at this point. His insinuation is clear.

Lucian's shoulders roll back as if he's anticipating the added weight of everyone's suspicion, but his face remains cold and indifferent.

"To that end, my granddaughter, Nova Umbra, will be formally recognized as our heir. The Quades have reviewed the request to have her documented as such and have witnessed our proof of her lineage. I only regret that we did not expedite this sooner and prevent this tragedy."

"What of the ceremony?" Lucian asks. "The rules are clear on anyone being inducted into the founding families. Are you planning on ignoring them for your own means?"

“There are exceptions to every rule, as you are well aware, Morningstar.”

“Are you implying I’m exceptional, or that I don’t follow the rules? I’m not sure I understand.” My brother pretends to be obtuse.

Rory’s jaw ticks. “Only pointing out the fact that there are allowances, and I feel I am well within my right to utilize them. If you speak out again, I’m afraid I’ll have to hold you in contempt.” He averts his eyes too quickly, assuming the matter is over.

“To ensure I don’t become one of the sheep who follows blindly, I will always take the risk and accept the consequences. I thought that was what we stood for.” Lucian belittles Rory with a few well-placed words, guaranteeing everyone heard him. There’s a low rumble of sound as people make noises of approval.

“One acre of the Morningstar estate shall be absorbed by the common grounds at the cost of the family.” Rory’s eyes are damn near bugging out of his head with the decree, but he keeps his voice calm.

Lucian gives a lazy shrug as he covers his head with his hood. It’s far too late for the act to be seen as anything but a mockery, which I’m sure was intended.

“If anyone here has any information on the attack, please come forward. You may do so with anonymity and rest assured your identity will be protected from any retaliation.” Rory tries to continue after the disruption, but Lucian’s dissent is too fresh, too effective to be ignored. My brother’s intent wasn’t to keep our involvement a secret, it was to ensure that those who really are involved know he doesn’t trust anyone, let alone the president, because we have every intention of finding who really left Nova for dead.

“Meeting adjourned,” Rory snaps and steps off the dais.

Now that the meeting is over and no votes were cast, the secrecy hoods get pushed back, revealing suspicious glances and scheming gazes. I leave my cloak in place in solidarity

with Nova. She was nervous to wear the thing in the first place but did it all the same. She's as tough as Lucian accused her of being, but I knew that the first time I met her.

I hate not being able to reach out and touch her, but as we head toward the elevators to ascend back to the surface, I make sure to brush against her several times. We're some of the first to exit the chamber, so there's virtually no wait for the lift, but we do have a few others in our group. None of them speak to us, but I see them trading glances in the small space, as if they think my twin is going to lose it and start killing people for the fun of it. Normally, I would get a kick out of it, but now it feels as if Lucian knew something I didn't all this time and I've just been fucking around while he knew the rules.

I think it's high time I take this shit more seriously and join my brother in his war.



NOVA

I gulp down a breath as soon as we step out of the elevator, relieved to be out from under the school and happy I didn't have to hoof it back up the stairs. I keep my hood up as we exit the dark halls to the waiting row of cars. Lucian leads us to a black car that looks like all the others. Once we're seated inside, I tap his thigh to get his attention and motion taking the hood off.

"You may speak, lamb," he says around a smile, enjoying my acquiescence a little too much.

"Can I take this off then?" My hands are already poised to remove the fabric.

"Not just yet, Nova. If they didn't know it was you with us, then there's no need for us to tell them now," Nox answers reasonably. "You did really well, no freak-outs." He bumps his shoulder into mine.

"I didn't want to get outed as an intruder and end up being sacrificed to the devil," I snark, feeling strange about the entire ordeal. They have to realize none of this is normal. Not everyone attends meetings in secret and thinks they rule the world.

"We've already established that the only sacrifice you'll be offering is your virginity," Lucian adds conversationally.

I jab my elbow into his ribs. "Sorry."

He grunts softly, then throws his arm over my shoulders and pulls me in close so his mouth is near my ear. "You're going to kiss it better when we get home."

My insides blaze with awareness at the demand, because it certainly wasn't a request. "In your dreams," I retort, unable to let it go so easily.

A chuckle rumbles up his chest, allowing his warm breath to cascade down my neck. "In my dreams, we do much more

than kiss, lamb. Would you like a demonstration? Or I could tell you all about it.”

I click my tongue and try to pull away from him as I grow increasingly uncomfortable with how I react to him, but he refuses to release me. Instead, he gathers the material of my hood in his hand and inches it away from my face, allowing air to brush my cheeks in what feels like the first time in forever.

“You’re all flushed. I told you that you should have gotten naked first.” His free hand skims up my leg, and I don’t shove his wandering fingers away like I should. “Or is there another reason you’re all pink?” I don’t answer him, but I do hold my breath when his palm lands dangerously close to my crotch. If it weren’t for my thick thighs stopping him, I’m sure he would have gone all the way, and even worse, I don’t know if I would have stopped him.

When the car makes a sudden stop, Lucian grips my inner thigh, but he turns to look out the front windshield. “What the fuck?”

“Sorry, sir,” the driver says quickly. I notice the brake lights of the car in front of us are glowing brightly in the darkness of the night, but considering we aren’t even out of the parking lot, I’m a little surprised by the sudden halt. Lucian’s eyes narrow, but he doesn’t berate the man like I worried he would.

Not another word is spoken until we roll to a slow stop at the side entrance of the Morningstar home, and even then, it’s only Nox coaxing, “Come on, Nova,” with a hand extended in my direction to help me from the car.

I gather the black fabric of the cloak, then climb out, making sure not to trip. Nox keeps my hand in his as we head up the short stairs to the porch. It’s not until we reach the door that I realize Lucian isn’t with us. When I glance back over my shoulder, I notice Lucian, his arms loose at his sides as he glares at the driver, who is now standing just outside the car.

I allow Nox to tug me into the house, but I’m curious about what’s going down outside. “Need anything?” he asks as we head toward *our* room.

“No, thank you,” I answer without really thinking about the question. I’m too preoccupied with everything that’s happened in the last two hours.

“How about I take this?” Nox faces me and lifts his hands to unbutton the robe. Our eyes meet, and it’s strangely intimate, considering it’s just like removing a coat. When he moves to push the material off my shoulders, he steps closer to me, invading my space and filling my senses with his scent and the heat of his nearness.

I’m not as embarrassed by the catch in my breath as I would be if he were Lucian. It’s peculiar how the brothers can be similar yet so different.

“What are you thinking about, Nova?” Nox asks in a husky whisper.

“What are you thinking about?” I counter, afraid to admit he and his twin dominate my thoughts.

“Kissing you,” he replies, looking down at my mouth. I lick my lips in response, which doesn’t go unnoticed. “Would you let me?” Somehow, his deep voice is even softer as he brings his face closer to mine, allowing our cheeks to brush.

“Yes,” I agree with a small nod, but his lips are on mine before the word is fully out of my mouth.

Nox kisses like he’s tempting me to steal a taste of the forbidden fruit. It’s teasing and sweet, just long enough to lull me into complacency, and then he slides his hands into my hair and turns into a savage, taking deep swipes with his tongue and sucking on my lips. Before I know it, I’m pinned between his hard body and the wall, panting as he pushes my chin up with his lips and kisses his way down my throat.

My heart thunders in my chest, but the last thing I want him to do is stop. He steals every thought in my head and makes me focus only on him and where his hands and lips might venture next.

Heat licks at my lower stomach and between my legs, while an actual moan leaves my lips when he pinches my nipple through my shirt and bra. The teasing touches over the

last few days have left me needy for a release, but I've been too worried about there being cameras in the bathroom or getting caught by one of the guys to get myself off, even in the shower. It would be just like Lucian to have surveillance equipment.

The entry door slams, and my eyes snap open to find my pretty boy staring right at me. The hard look on his face melts away as he takes in the scene of Nox bent over me, kissing my collarbones.

A thrill of excitement quickens my already rapid heartbeat. I can't help but imagine what it would be like to have both of them touching me, four hands covering my body and working as one.

My mouth drops open on a whimper when Nox pinches my nipple again, harder this time, as if to punish me for not giving him enough of my attention.

"Damn, brother, did you hear the sound she made?"

"I did. Want to hear it again?" Nox slams his knee against the wall between my legs, putting pressure on my center and making my clit throb. I let out another mewl and allow my eyes to close. Damn, I wasn't expecting that or for it to feel so good.

A dark chuckle fills my ears, and it isn't coming from the man pressing me up against the wall. "But can you make her come?" Lucian taunts.

"What do you think, Nova? Can I make you come?" Nox jerks my hips forward so I'm straddling his thigh with only my shoulders touching the cool wall behind me. "How about if I slipped my hand right here? Would I find you wet and aching for us?"

I grit my teeth, because there's no way I'm going to answer that question, but I also don't have any desire to stop him.

"I'll give you three minutes, or I get a turn," Lucian says, causing me to open my eyes, because I know he's much closer than he was only moments ago.

“Challenge accepted.” Nox places his mouth over mine again while using one hand to drag me higher on his leg and the other to play with my nipple. Three minutes doesn’t seem like enough time, but as the seconds tick by, I find myself grinding on his leg a little harder and chasing the feeling of euphoria that’s just out of reach.

Nox tugs his mouth from mine. “I know you’re close, Nova. Let go. You’re safe with us,” he says almost harshly, but his touch is gentle, even while being demanding.

“Am I, or is this something else you two want to hold over me?”

The hand on my hip tightens for just a moment, then Nox releases his grip to reach for my hand and guide it over to the bulge in his pants. “Does this feel like something I want to hold over you, Nova?” he rumbles.

If I thought I was turned on before, it’s nothing compared to knowing he wants me just as badly.

“Does it?” he prompts, coaxing me to shake my head in denial.

“One more minute.” Lucian is even closer. I can see the wild look in his light blue eyes when I peer past Nox. The thought of punishing him, of making him watch his brother make me come undone, is what pushes me over the edge, coupled with Nox’s mouth on my neck, kissing and sucking like he can’t get enough of me, and I tumble through an orgasm.

When my legs spasm with an aftershock, Nox finally yanks himself away from me, leaving me on unsteady feet and breathing like I just ran a quarter mile. I watch him push his dark hair away from his face as he peers down at me with a look that promises there’s more to come.

“My turn. I think you owe me a kiss, lamb.” Lucian doesn’t give me any time to recover before taking my hand and pulling me off the wall, then urging me to walk in front of him on wobbly legs.

My heart and head have had time to sort through what just happened by the time we reach the gray room—our makeshift space since the incident at school. I contemplate rushing into the bathroom and hiding for the next hour, or until they both forget I exist, but my stubborn pride keeps me moving forward as if allowing a man to give me an orgasm while someone else watches is an everyday thing for me.

As I spin to peer over my shoulder, I see Lucian stripping off his shirt. His dark pants are belted but still slung low on his hips, allowing me to see far below his navel. There's a line of short, dark hair disappearing beneath his waistband, but it almost gets lost in all the tattoos covering his torso.

It's not the first time I've seen him without his shirt, but it's the first time there's been clear intent as to why his shirt is gone. I swallow, contemplating how, just seconds ago, I was thinking I wasn't even horny anymore, and now the swelling of my clit almost feels erotic.

“Was this the spot right here, lamb?” Lucian strolls over to me, pointing distractedly at his side and referring to where I elbowed him in the car. My eyes trail over the inky swirls on his torso, but I don't answer him. “Maybe it was here.” He moves his finger a little more to the center and lower. “No, I remember, it was right here.” His long fingers graze the button of his pants as he lies.

I slit my eyes. “Do you have a short-term memory issue?”

His cruel mouth curls in a mocking smile. “Maybe, but you could show me where it was,” he offers, bringing all that tan skin within touching distance.

“If I have to show you, you probably don't need me to kiss it better.”

“Trust me, I do,” Lucian retorts. “What are you afraid of, lamb? That you'll like it too much?”

It's the challenge in his tone that pushes me to reach up and place my hand on his side while maintaining eye contact. His chest rises sharply, as if my touch surprises him. “It was

here, pretty boy.” My voice is soft and husky, belying my refusal.

“Whatever you say.”

His comment about knocks me off my feet. Lucian is never agreeable to anything, yet here he is, acquiescing to me. Leaning forward, I brush my lips over his upper chest while maintaining eye contact with him. I watch his jaw tighten as he clenches his back teeth, then I move my mouth lower, focusing on the spot I elbowed and dropping my gaze to see all those tattoos up close.

“Is that better?” I question with my lips still moving over his warm skin.

His fingers thread into my hair as if to stop me from pulling away before he answers, “It’s getting there.”

I lick my way across his skin, marveling at the taste and feel of him, while enamored that I’m touching him at all. Who would have thought I’d want to do anything but slap him upside the head after our first meeting?

His fingers tighten in my hair, tugging a fistful, but it doesn’t hurt. He pulls me away from his chest and up to his mouth. Our kiss is rough and messy, just like our relationship. He bites more than he nibbles, but I crave the sting of his teeth on my lips and the hard press of his mouth on mine.

I take the first step toward him, bringing our bodies together, but he surprises me by stepping backward and towing me along with him. He doesn’t stop until his legs hit the bed, then he pulls me over him to straddle his hips.

I break the kiss long enough to look down at him. Being in this position, above Lucian, does funny things to my head. I want to shove him down against the bed and prove something to him. I don’t even know how to explain it, but the desire is there nonetheless.

He dips his dark head to kiss my neck while skimming his hands under my shirt. Goose bumps erupt on my arms at the feeling of his strong fingers trailing gently up my sides. Before

I know it, the thin material of my T-shirt is passing my face, and I'm lifting my arms to get out of the shirt.

He grabs the sides of my bra covered boobs, pushing them together and sliding his tongue over the exposed mounds. I reach down in an effort to cover my abdomen, concealing the scars from the accident and the resulting surgery without thought, but without even looking down, Lucian shoves my hand away and makes a warning growl in the back of his throat. "Don't you dare try to hide from me, lamb."

Warning bells go off in my head at his dark tone. This man is dangerous. I've known it from the first moment I laid eyes on him. He doesn't care what anyone thinks and gives even less attention to social formalities. If there's something Lucian wants, he takes it, and damn anything that gets in his way. I still don't know if I'm the thing in his way or if I'm the thing he truly wants.

His fingers bite into my skin possessively, and I allow myself to think he wants me and not just revenge on my grandparents. Using his teeth, Lucian slides my bra strap off my shoulder and continues kissing my sensitive skin. Fireworks erupt in my stomach, making every inch of my body tingle with awareness.

When his hands shift to tug down my bra, the underwire digs into my ribs for a breath as he flips the cups, exposing me. My nipples are already hard, but the air in the room feels so much cooler, heightening the sensation. With greedy touches, he palms my tits, taking the weight as he lowers his head to place his mouth over my nipple.

The heat of his mouth is welcome, but the hard pull as he sucks sends a surprisingly intense spark right to my clit, and my body responds by arching and shoving my chest even closer to his mouth. The sensation is almost too much, paired with the fact that he's the one doing it to me, and I snap, pushing his shoulder and pulling away from his mouth to stand up. The sting on my nipple when his lips pop free doesn't last nearly long enough.

“What the fuck?” He looks slightly dazed and a lot pissed as he rises with me.

I don't know what to say. That felt too good, I wanted even more, and it scared me, so I settle on telling him, “Shut up.”

“Make me,” he grates through clenched teeth. I think about shoving him down on the bed and using him the way I know he wants to use me, but I have no damn clue what I'm doing. Sure, I've messed around with boys a little, but Nox already blew all my other experiences out of the water and Lucian is trying to cleave his way into my soul.

I watch as the facial features of the savage man in front of me soften to a near tranquil mien in a few heartbeats. It unnerves me to not only witness it, but to not understand why. Is he masking how he feels now? Is he truly that good at erasing his emotions, or was there never any there to begin with?

“Oh, lamb, whatever you're thinking, please.” He opens his arms in an invitation, as if he can read the thoughts in my head, but there's no way he could know how badly I want to make him beg for me and admit I'm not garbage. I want to make him suffer, even if it's only just a little bit for the way he treated me.

I snap into action, accepting his offer. It's not my fault if he misread my intention. Lucian stumbles back as I place both of my palms on his chest and shove. The backs of his legs hit the bed, and he goes down—either by surprise or sheer luck, I don't know which or care. I climb over him and mount his waist, then gaze down at him past my heaving chest.

His full lips are parted as he drags in air, and he's breathing nearly as hard as I am, but when I softly trail my nails over his chest, scratching over his nipples, he stops breathing altogether. “Look at you, pretty boy.” There's a dark note in my voice that sounds unfamiliar to me. “All worked up for the charity case.” I circle my hips just enough to rub over the hardness between my thighs.

He licks his bottom lip, and his eyelids lower until he's the perfect picture of sultry sex appeal. “How badly do you want

to wrap your hand around my throat and sink onto my cock?" he challenges.

I lean over him, bringing my bare chest to his, and whisper, "Not nearly as much as you want me to, which makes it so worth it."

Lucian hisses through his teeth as he drags in a breath. "I can feel how wet you are for me," he taunts.

I cover his mouth with my hand, keeping his words locked away, then say, "No, that's from your brother making me come while you just watched."

His eyes go from a lazy gaze to a glint of defiant steel, but he doesn't try to dislodge my hand. I'm poking at him, and I know it, but there is something about Lucian that sets my teeth on edge. Maybe it's from the fact that I wanted him to like me from the first moment I laid eyes on him, even after he was a jerk to me, or maybe it's because he thinks he can do whatever his black heart desires...if he even has one. Either way, he drives me insane.

"I can feel how hard you are, though, for a dirty little gutter slut like me."

His hands land on my hips, and he squeezes until it's just shy of painful. I make no move to show the slight ache. I'm tired of being treated like I'm defective and broken. When he swipes his tongue across my palm, I remove my hand from his mouth and rub it down my thigh in a knee-jerk reaction.

"Lamb, we both know you never belonged in the gutter, and as for the slut part... Let me see what I can do." Without warning, he rolls me over until I'm flat on my back and he's leaning over me while still being pressed between my thighs. The gasp I release is understandable, but the soft moan feels like a betrayal to myself.

"I should have smothered you while I had the chance." I try to sound like I'm not affected, but it's an utter failure.

I feel the bed shift as Nox comes over to sit near my head. I could look to him for help, but I doubt he would offer much

in the way of aid right now, plus I don't want to give his evil twin the satisfaction.

"We need to set ground rules first, pet," he continues as if he didn't just turn the tables on me with barely any effort. "You will not touch or even think about anyone else. You will only ever be our little whore."

I want to be incensed at the word, but it creates a completely different emotion. A wave of desire floods my system, but I do everything I can to hide it. This isn't normal. Why the heck would I like him calling me names and degrading me?

"While you can mess around with anyone you like? I think not, pretty boy."

A dark chuckle rumbles up from Lucian's chest as he presses me farther into the mattress. "You don't like that thought, do you? Thinking about us fucking someone else, sliding inside them, and making them beg for more? Letting them touch us...please us?"

I start to struggle to get out from under him, but Lucian just grabs my hands and pins me to the bed with his weight and strength. Apparently, I found my line. Calling me a whore is perfectly okay, but making me listen to him talk about being with someone else is a hard no.

"Lucian," Nox warns.

"Settle, lamb, you're worrying my brother." His lips graze my earlobe, and I get goose bumps from his heated words.

My entire body is tight with tension, but I stop trying to escape, since there's no point. Lucian could and probably will do anything he wants to me. Maybe I'll hate him then. It's sad that I'm still not sure.

"What if we promise to only slide inside your pretty little cunt, lamb? Would that make you feel better?"

"Pfff," I scoff to hide just how much I like the sound of that, even if I don't necessarily trust him. "You haven't even seen my... It could be hideous," I deflect.

Lucian buries his face in my neck and chuffs with laughter. When he finally stops snickering, he says, “In that case, I think an inspection is in order. Don’t you, Nox?”

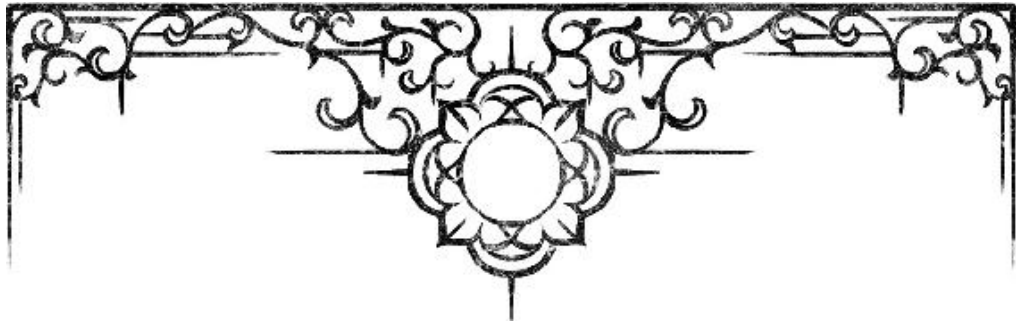
“I don’t give a fuck what it looks like. I’m more of a tactile person, and I bet she feels divine.” The brother I’ve always thought of as sweet makes me second-guess his nature.

“Yes, I think a hands-on approach is a good idea. Mind getting her pants off? I’m a little preoccupied.” Lucian begins kissing his way down my neck as he moves to straddle my waist, never once releasing his grip on my wrists.

My eyes close as I tip my head back to give him better access. There’s something to be said for his attention to detail. I feel every inch of his lips and teeth pressing into my skin. I know my throat will be a map of bites and bruises, but these are so much better than the others I’ve recently gotten.

When I feel fingers at my waistband, I suck in my stomach. I don’t think I really expected Nox to remove my pants, but I should have. Lucian leans forward a little more to give his brother room.

I have this niggling urge to stop them, but then Lucian bites the side of my neck and all thoughts of resisting shatter with my willpower.



LUCIAN

*H*er pulse flutters like butterfly wings, while mine pounds with the steady ache of my cock in my pants. I haven't had to work for sex, physically or verbally, in a long fucking time, and I have to admit I love the chase and getting her all worked up, so she can't hide the soft little sounds she makes or the arch of her body begging for more. Nothing about her is faked or exaggerated to make me want her. I just fucking want her more than I've ever wanted anyone.

After leaving my mark all over her neck, I move down to her tits, which means I have to slide my hands down her arms a little, but she doesn't try to move, even as I lighten my grip. When I wrap my lips around her nipple and suck, her back comes clear off the bed. She's fucking gorgeous, with her face all flushed pink and her hair wild against my sheets.

I feel her shift to the left and right, helping Nox get her pants off. The moment I know he's done, I put my knee back between her legs, but I don't cover her body with mine yet. I need to see her, and no matter what she said, there's no way she would be anything less than perfect to me.

My lamb tries to close her thighs when I look down, but I stop her with a quick hand on her thigh.

"Well, shit," I mumble, getting my first look at her pussy. It's puffy, creating the perfect cleft between her legs, but that's not what has me running my mouth. She has a little patch of hair over her pubic bone. It's trimmed short and a shade or two lighter than the hair on her head. My dick aches with the need to be inside her and feel her against me. I've never fucked a girl who wasn't bare, not even my first lay. She was a good five years older than me, a student at the college, and she didn't care that I was a hell of a lot younger. My name and looks got me between her eager thighs.

Nova pushes my shoulder and tries to crawl up the bed to get away from me, but I grip her thigh to keep her in place.

When I finally pull my gaze away from the part of her body currently mesmerizing me, I notice her pinched features.

“You are such a bastard,” she grates out, looking like she might try to kill me or cry. I’d much prefer the former. There’s real emotion behind the insult, not her usual banter, and I realize it’s one of the very few times she’s cursed.

I put my weight back on her body, preventing her from escaping me. “I don’t know why you’re pissed right now, but you already knew I was a bastard.”

Her eyes, seemingly darker now, narrow on me. “Well, shit,” she mocks, and realization dawns—my comment bothered her.

“Would you have preferred I said some flowery bullshit?”

“No,” she snaps.

“Good, because I wouldn’t. Words rarely mean shit anyway.” I slide one hand down her body, watching her chest heave as she takes in a shallow breath before I palm her cunt, feeling that little patch of hair brush against my fingers and the heat of her body begging me to slip a finger inside her. “I was a little surprised by this.” I tug gently at the little tuft of hair, and she reaches out and wallops my arm in return.

“I’m not an infant, and I’m not shaving it off. If you don’t like it, then too darn bad. You don’t need to look at it or touch it.”

“Did I say I didn’t like it?” I cup her pussy again, loving the way she’s railing against me, even while her body is practically imploring me to touch her.

“You didn’t need to say it,” she gripes, proving she misread my comment, or at least the sentiment behind it.

“Apparently, you need me to say something,” I goad. She wants my approval, even if she can’t admit it to herself.

“The only thing I need you to do, pretty boy, is shut up.”

I grin as I lower myself down her body, taking little nips of her skin as I do. There are a few spots where her skin is a little tougher from scarring, but that just proves she’s a survivor.

When my head is nearly between her legs, she sucks in a breath as if she's only now realizing my destination. As her lips begin to form a word, I grip the tops of her thighs tightly and roll onto my back, taking her right along with me so my face is buried in her slit with her over me.

She makes a startled sound and tries to lift up onto her knees, but there's no way I'm releasing her. She smells dark and sweet, and I know she's going to taste just the same. She exhales roughly when I take my first lap of her, but I want more. I want her writhing over me, fisting my hair, and moaning my name.

I lift my head and slip my tongue inside her. "Lucian." My name is a warning plea on her lips. I hum my response, and she allows her head to fall back as a soft sound of surrender escapes her mouth. In that moment, I know as much as I want to own her, she already owns me. Never in my life would I give anyone this power over me. I never wanted anyone badly enough until her. I fucked because I could, because it was easy, and there were never any expectations, but this is something else completely.

I reach up for her hand and guide her fingers to my hair, and then she takes over, gripping just like I imagined. My balls are so tight, I have to divert my thoughts from her pussy and the sounds she's making or risk coming in my pants. *Not yet, not yet*, is on repeat in my head, but when she says, "Lucian, I'm going to come," my hips actually jerk in response.

I roll us so she's flat on her back and I'm between her thighs, then I suck her clit into my mouth while I grind against the mattress. Her back snaps off the bed, and she pushes my face deeper into her cunt as she moans even louder for me.

When her legs start twitching, I still don't stop licking and sucking. It takes her pulling me back with a fistful of hair for me to come up. Our eyes lock, and there's awe in her gaze. I don't have to worry about recovery time from humping the bed, I'm getting hard again just from the way she's looking at me.



NOX

The room smells like sex, and my brother's eyes are glazed over as if he just smoked a blunt. It's not something he does often, because he's a control freak, but it's one of the few times when he can actually relax. It looks like he found another way to unwind.

Nova is panting out shallow little breaths with her eyes locked on Lucian. "How can your mouth do that?" She tries to sound flippant, but the reverence in her tone is just as clear.

He leans down and wipes his lips along the inside of her thigh, leaving a trail of wetness in his wake. "Only for my lamb," he tells her, skimming his lips up her body until he's poised over her face.

She lets out an exaggerated puff, as if she doesn't believe him, but I know for a fact that Lucian's not into eating pussy. He's never cared enough about the women he's been with to give a fuck about their pleasure when he's not getting anything out of it, but that's not the case with Nova. I'm pretty sure he busted in his pants while his face was buried between her legs. That, or he came damn close.

My brother ignores her remark, which surprises me because I'm used to him arguing with her all the time, and instead, he leans down and kisses her slowly. It's a little fucking strange to see how different he is with her, but it's such a relief. I thought the only thing that would ever consume Lucian was revenge. If I'd known six months ago that he was actually capable of caring for someone, I might not even be here, but I couldn't leave him alone, not even if I know he'll hate me if he ever realizes who's truly to blame for our parents' deaths.

The dark thoughts I've been keeping at bay threaten to pull me back under and remind me that I was the one who encouraged Dad to take Mom with him to the meeting because I knew we were having a party. If it weren't for me, she would still be alive. I don't deserve to be here.

Lucian turns his head away from Nova, breaking the kiss, and I realize I've gotten sloppy with my emotions, so I plaster a smirk on my face and crawl on the bed. "Are you finally ready to share?" The deflection is weak but effective, and my twin makes a little room for me. I seal my mouth to Nova's, smelling her pussy more than I can taste it on her tongue, but it's a welcome distraction.

She bucks under me, and I slit my eyes open to see Lucian spreading her legs with his hands. "I think it's time for your sacrifice, lamb."

Nova abruptly ends our kiss and lifts her head up to try to see around me. "My sacrifice? You're joking, right?" She doesn't get the reaction or response she's looking for from Lucian fast enough, so she looks up at me. "Tell me he's joking. I'm not going to be a part of some weird ritual," she pleads softly.

I can't help but smile at the apprehension in her gaze. At some point, she's going to realize she's probably the safest person in the room when Lucian is around. He may have been cavalier with her before she was injured, but after seeing what he was like when she was in the hospital and wouldn't wake up, I have no doubt that he will do anything in his power to make sure she doesn't get hurt again, even by him.

"Why are you smiling? You know what he's going to do, don't you?" She frowns with a real look of unease.

Before I can tell her that he won't hurt her, my twin speaks up, obliterating the peace I was going to instill. "Might as well give it up now, lamb. There's no point holding onto what's mine."

"What the hell are you talking about? What's yours?" She scoots her torso to the side a little to see him.

"Your innocence, lamb. We're dying to be inside you." At least he included me too.

"My innocence?" She makes a face. "I thought you were joking about all that virgin nonsense."

Lucian tilts his head to the side, and the serene look that was on his face is replaced with one of restrained rage in the blink of an eye. “What?” he questions deceptively softly.

“I’m not a virgin,” she scoffs.

“Fuck,” I groan under my breath.



NOVA

Lucian goes eerily still at my lie. I don't know why I'm embarrassed to tell him that I am, in fact, a virgin, but the untruth just slides off my tongue with ease. Most of the crap I've read online says guys can't even usually tell if a girl hasn't had sex yet, and not all girls bleed or whatever, so I thought I could get away with it. Plus, there's some part of me that's worried about Lucian knowing how much pull he might have over me if he really knew how much I've come to like him and his moody, protective butt, and I feel like it would be worse if he knew he was my first.

Nox sitting back on his heels and looking up at the ceiling should have been my second warning that crap was about to hit the fan, but it's not until Lucian crawls up my naked body to cage me in that I get the memo. "Who was he?"

"What?" I blink, at a loss for words.

"Tell me his name and where I can find him, or I will kill every boy who's ever been close to you," he seethes.

"You're joking." I search his eyes, but I don't see an ounce of humor in his light gaze.

"Go get her phone and take it to Morozov," Lucian demands of Nox.

"You are not going through my phone. Besides, it's new." I try to sound airy and unaffected while coming up with an excuse as to why there's not a single number in my phone other than his, Nox's, and the Umbras'.

His eyes narrow, and that cruel glint I remember from the first time we met returns. "Do you really want me digging through your past, lamb? Because I won't leave a stone unturned. I will find out who you ate lunch with, what girls you talked to..." He puts more of his weight on me, pinning me to the bed. "And I will use them to get every secret you thought to keep from me."

“There he is,” I state softly. “The petulant pretty boy that has to hurt people when he doesn’t get his way.” Lucian visibly reacts to my words, his jaw tightening. I lean my face up closer to his, daring him to do something, because I knew deep down this was all an act, and that the real him would come back and I would get caught in the crossfire. “Am I damaged goods now, pretty boy? Too sullied for you without that innocence you crave?”

His lip curls in a wicked mockery of a smile. “I don’t care how many dicks you’ve had inside you, lamb. You’ll only remember ours once we’ve had you. You’ll crave us and how only we can make you feel.”

I furrow my brow in confusion. That comment hits too close to home. I can feel the truth to his words, which means he already knows how much they affect me, and I swear he’s telling the truth about not caring who I’ve slept with. “Then why do you want to know?” I ask softly, unsure if I’m going to be comfortable with the answer.

He lifts a single dark eyebrow, seemingly surprised by my question. “Do you think I would allow someone who knows what you feel like on the inside live? You belong to us, Nova, every piece of your past, present, and future. Nobody touches what’s mine.” He says the last part slowly, and it’s not lost on me that *we* or *ours* doesn’t make it into that statement. He owns every word of the vow.

I’m not sure how I feel about what he just said, and my head is spinning too much to analyze why it almost seems sweet. There’s something very wrong with me, but I know I’m not going to let him go on a fool’s errand to find someone who doesn’t exist, and I’m not going to let some stranger I may have talked to a few times get hurt over my lie to save face, because I believe he would hunt them down just to prove a point.

“There’s no one,” I admit, feeling like an idiot.

“What?” Nox is the one to ask the question, and he doesn’t hide his skepticism.

“Don’t try to cover for them, lamb.” Lucian leans in so his lips almost touch mine when he continues speaking. “If I think you care about them, I’ll make it painful.” He bites my lip as if to prove the point.

I run my tongue over the sting he left behind. “I’m not. I lied. I am... I haven’t been with anyone.” I shake my head with my denial.



LUCIAN

The absolute fury raging inside me dulls to a nagging urge to hurt someone at her insistence she lied. My certainty that she was a virgin and her easy dismissal of my assumption about knocked me on my ass. I was confident knowing no one had touched her the way I would—*we would*, I amend in my thoughts before I become even more possessive of her.

My head is telling me to believe her now, that she is and only ever will be ours, while my body is convinced someone needs to die. I want to hunt down anyone who might have touched her, held her, and heard the sounds she makes and slit their throats before they can even think about her again, but what do I believe?

Is she protecting someone? The thought alone infuriates me. A wave of previously unrecognized regret washes through me. How many girls at school have I fucked that she's already met and been around? The memory of Grace and her lapdogs cornering her on the third floor enters my mind. I know what I would have done and would still do if faced with the same situation. There would have been bodies for someone else to clean up, but she just stood there, showing them how little they meant to her, completely unthreatened by their presence.

I start to question if she would care now. There's a dark part of me that wants to test her and see how she would respond, but as I open my mouth to say something undoubtedly stupid, the words die on my tongue when I see her looking up at me completely open. There's no spite or anger in her gaze. If anything, she looks embarrassed, and that, more than anything, allows me to claw back a fraction more of my composure.

"It's not a big deal." Her lashes flutter as if she's having a hard time looking at me. "I missed a lot of school after the accident." The explanation is needless and unwanted. I don't want to hear that the only reason she hasn't fucked anyone is because of timing. I want to bask in the idea that she was

waiting for me, even though it's archaic and a double standard she would never put up with if I voiced it.

"Stop talking," I blurt out.

"You shut up," she retorts with a furrowed brow.

I slam my mouth against hers, stealing her breath and all that fight she loves to give me. My hand is already snaking down her body. There is no way I'm not branding her tonight.

Her tongue lashes with mine, giving as good as I'm giving, until I sink my teeth into her lip and her entire body stills with an exhale. Her hips roll up to meet my fingers, driving me even closer to her pussy. I use two fingers to spread her and the middle to tease her slit. She's still soaked, so I coat my finger and push inside her.

Her entire body tenses, while mine relaxes. "My sweet little lamb *is* a liar," I murmur against her skin, feeling how tight she is. A groan works its way up my throat at the thought of her strangling my cock.

I remove the tip of my finger and circle her clit instead, and her body relaxes into my touch. It's only minutes before she's rocking her hips and moving with me. When her back arches off the bed, I line my dick up with her opening and surge forward.

My lamb lets out a strangled sound, and those stormy eyes widen in surprise as she stares up at me. "Lucian," she chastises sharply in a delayed response. It takes every ounce of my willpower not to come as her body tries to dislodge me.

"If you say my name again while I'm inside you, lamb, I'm going to come, and I'm not wearing a condom." I lick up the side of her neck, tasting her skin and loving how she feels wrapped around me.

She wallops my arm, then wraps her fingers around my bicep, scoring her nails into my flesh. "If you give me anything, I will cut your dick off," she snarls while her sweet little cunt convulses around my invasion.

I groan, jerking my hips back, then explode on the sheets between her legs, but there's no doubt the string of cum

coming from her pussy means I wasn't fast enough when I pulled out. The visual of my cum dripping out of her tightens my balls, and an aftershock of pleasure has my cock jerking again, desperate to be back inside her.

"I'm actually going to murder you." She glares at me after leaning up on her elbows to look at the mess I made of her and the sheets.

"I can't wait until you try, lamb." I don't resist the urge to swipe my fingers over her puffy pussy, spreading my cum all over her.

She shoves my hand away with a look of outrage on her pretty face. "You're demented."

"I know," I agree. "Your turn, brother, unless you need me to finish the job."

Nova lunges for me, probably ready to rip my balls off, but I just laugh as Nox gets in her way. She settles down immediately when she's wrapped in his arms, but her eyes are still glued to me, promising payback that makes my dick throb with anticipation.



NOVA

My chest slams into Nox when he stops me from going after his brother. He doesn't deserve my irritation, so I stop fighting while he wraps me in his arms. "He's crazy about you, Nova, we both are," Nox mutters softly while stroking his fingers over my back and sides, reminding me I'm naked and no longer a virgin. The sting between my legs was so abrupt, I'm not even sure the memory of it is even real. I definitely feel sore, but surprisingly, I'm not in pain like I anticipated.

"He's got a funny way of showing it," I mumble, even though my words don't feel truthful. While I know Lucian is probably certifiable, there's some deep-rooted part of me that knows he cares about me. He wouldn't waste his time trying to make me believe it if it weren't true. He just doesn't have it in him.

"Are you okay? He didn't hurt you too much, did he?" Nox continues, brushing his lips along my skin in the process. I get goose bumps in response and nuzzle my face into his neck while I shake my head in denial.

"You can relax. We don't need to do anything. I just want to be close to you," he tells me sweetly. When a wave of disappointment rattles me, I realize I may be the one who's messed up in the head, because I want him, even after what I just did with his twin.

I drag my lips over his neck and hear the way his breath changes, feel the way his grip on me tightens, and I know he wants me the same way I want him, he's just being considerate of my feelings. I don't know how the two brothers can be so different, yet I crave them both, and I could never choose between them.

"I want you, Nox," I confess, confident he's not going to turn me down or judge me for how I feel about both of them.

He bands his arm around my back and shifts us so he's sitting with his back against the pillows and headboard and

I'm over his lap. Our eyes lock, and that dark loneliness I've glimpsed once or twice is there, peering back at me. I stroke his cheek, desperate to make it disappear. He leans into my touch, slowly closing his eyes, as if he's trying to hide from me. "You're safe with me," I whisper just loud enough for only him to hear, then I kiss his upturned lips.

Nox's hands slide up my back and delve into my hair, pulling me closer to him. Our kiss is deep, yet sweet. He never demands or gets rough, but that same passion Lucian has is just as present in every brush of his fingers and lips.

I get tired of holding myself up, so I settle deeper into his lap, which allows me to feel how badly he wants me. It makes me forget about the achiness between my thighs and in my muscles, until all I can think about is him. When he pushes the waistband of his pants down and fists himself, the fleeting worry about the pain returns. I remind myself that I've been through much worse and this is something I want. The anxiousness doesn't disappear, but it's not consuming.

"Are you sure, Nova?" he questions between kisses.

"I'm positive." It's the truth. There's no going back from this, not that I would if I could. Will I regret it tomorrow? Maybe, but that seems like a long time from now.

Nox kisses me deeper, drawing me even closer to the heat of his chest. When I feel another set of hands on my hips, urging me up, I glance over my shoulder to see Lucian right behind me. I was so engrossed with his brother, it was easy to forget we're not alone.

Nox kisses my neck and chest, seemingly unbothered by my distraction. My heart thuds heavily with a mixture of excitement and anxiety. I don't think Lucian will ever be able to touch me without causing some form of physical reaction. He holds me in place above his brother with a firm grip on my hips, then leans in to kiss my shoulder.

An exhale that could be called a sigh escapes from me. It's not fair how easily he can elicit responses, but I don't fight it. Without any words exchanged between the brothers, Nox guides himself between my legs, still holding the base of his

dick. The pressure in Lucian's hands shifts as he begins urging me down with Nox beneath me.

"What about a condom?" I ask as I feel the first touch of his soft skin against mine.

"Shhh," Lucian whispers behind my ear. "Take it, lamb."

I think about arguing, but then I feel the slight burn of Nox already inside me. Lucian lowers me painstakingly slowly, making me feel every inch, until my legs shake as I fight the downward pressure.

"Fuck." Nox drops his head back against the headboard, groaning. Teeth sink into my shoulder from behind, and the tension in my body subsides enough so Nox slips inside another inch or so. His chin goes even higher, and I let out a soft sound I will never admit to being a whimper. My body is as overwhelmed as I am. I don't know if I want to get Nox out of me or to make him go deeper, but I already feel so full.

"Just a little more." Lucian's grip tightens as if he knows I'm close to losing it. The moment I feel Nox's groin against mine, I exhale shakily, thinking that's it, but I jumped the gun, because I swear he goes even deeper when Lucian gives one final push down.

Nox's chest jumps as he jerks. "Are you okay?" He pants with lazy eyes.

"I want to punch your brother, but I'm afraid to move," I tell him truthfully, which causes him to chuckle, and I feel every exhale as he laughs.

"I know the feeling," Nox agrees. "He was trying to make sure I won't last longer than him, since he's a one-pump chump."

Even through the burning ache, that makes me smile. "He is, isn't he?"

"Keep it up, lamb, and I will slip my cock inside right next to his and make you take us both right now instead of waiting until you're ready." It's my turn to twitch as Lucian nips me again. Even the thought is sobering. There is no way they would both fit.

“I would die.”

“You will love it,” he insists.

I turn to look over my shoulder, ready to run if he even tries it. “I will claw your eyes out.”

“I fucking love it when you threaten me.” Lucian strokes himself.

“You aren’t normal.”

He tilts his head to the side, examining me. “And what does that say about you, since you like it so much, lamb?”

I don’t have a response to that, because it’s the truth—I like him, crazy and all.

“That’s what I thought. Now, fuck my brother before I make good on my promise.”

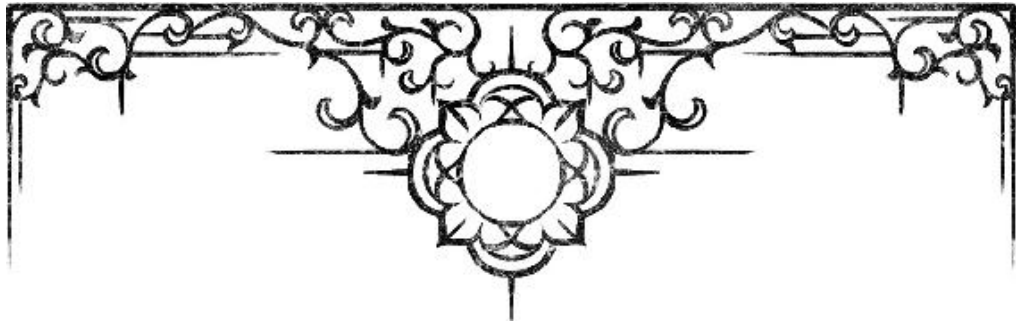
“Ignore him,” Nox coaxes with a gentle palm on my cheek to divert my attention back to him. With a small shift, he leans forward for a kiss, and I curl toward him in response, sealing our lips together.

As the seconds tick by, my body finally relaxes, and the burn subsides. I’m not going to say the overfilled feeling is pleasant, but it’s not painful either.

Lucian drops onto the bed next to us, causing the mattress to bounce, and us as a result. I gasp at the unexpected pinch when Nox goes even deeper, but Nox groans, letting me know how much he liked it. That, more than anything, makes me move my hips back a little. It takes me a second to get the nerve to move again, but it’s worth it when I do. His hands mold to my hips, gripping and releasing with every movement, until he’s biting his bottom lip and staring up at me like I’m the center of his universe.

When he wraps his arms around my back and buries his head in my neck while letting out soft moans, a feeling of satisfaction warms me, knowing I gave him that pleasure. Just those sounds alone and the way he’s clinging to me could be addicting.

Damn, I’m in a heap of trouble.



NOX

“*W*hen are we going to talk about last night?” Nova asks after taking a nibble of a cracker. Gertrude has been putting cheese trays out every day for lunch after realizing Nova liked them, even though if I asked the old woman, she would deny it. I don’t know why she’s so standoffish with Nova, since it’s clear she likes her.

“Any time you’d like, or we could have an encore. Hop up on the table, lamb. I’m hungry.”

“Not what I was talking about. Eat your food if you’re hungry,” she replies.

“Why? Is your tight little cunt sore?”

She snaps her head around to glare at Lucian, her face flushed red when she says, “Yes, but if you don’t shut up about my anything, especially when other people can hear you, you’ll never have to worry about that again.”

Instead of responding to her warning, he just licks the knife he just used to cut his food suggestively, which makes Nova roll her eyes.

“So...back to stuff that matters from last night—your cultish island.”

“That isn’t what matters from last night,” Lucian disagrees. I do too, but I’m smart enough not to voice it.

“Why did we have to walk down seventeen hundred stairs if there were elevators?” She makes a disgruntled face.

“Tradition,” I answer. “It’s bullshit.”

“Yeah, my knees hurt.”

“Are you sure you can blame the stairs?” Lucian remarks.

Nova ignores Lucian. “What do you think the whole point of that meeting was? It’s not like anything was accomplished.”

“They claimed you,” I remind her.

“While also casting unveiled suspicion on us, as if we were behind the attack,” Lucian adds.

“Can you really blame them for thinking that?” Nova sends a droll stare in my brother’s direction.

He shrugs indifferently. “No, they are idiots.”

Nova lets out a heavy sigh. “It’s not like you gave them reason or anything by treating me like the scum of the earth when I first arrived.”

Lucian leans forward so he’s closer to Nova. “Did you run back and tell them I was a meanie who hurt your feelings, lamb?”

“No, but it’s not like you were only a jerk when no one was around. I’m sure Alden told them everything. Speaking of him, is he really your cousin or not?”

We answer in unison.

“Yes.”

“No.”

“His entire family was disowned years ago,” Lucian explains.

“He is still our blood,” I argue.

“Why was he disowned?” Nova’s voice is just above a whisper, as if she’s not sure she should be asking.

“His father was caught fucking an Umbra.” Lucian loves to go for shock value.

I watch Nova’s eyes widen as the implications of his words sink in, and she realizes what could happen to her if anyone finds out what happened between the three of us.

“You—”

I cut her off. “It was more than them fucking.” I give my twin a warning look. “He broke the covenant of his marriage and divulged family secrets. You don’t need to worry about being disowned, Nova. There’s nothing you could do that

would get the Umbras to renounce you. You're their last hope."

"I wasn't worried about me. I don't care about being *disowned*. It's you two who could get in trouble." She dismisses my assumption with a little rancor.

"There's my sweet little lamb with the barbed tongue," Lucian purrs with adoration. Nova averts her eyes, as if she just admitted a weakness and is ashamed of it. "Don't worry, pet." He palms her cheek and urges her to look at him. "I love how soft you are on the inside." Lucian slips his thumb into her mouth suggestively.

It's my twin's version of a tender declaration, even if the words and visual seem debasing. Nova's lids lower, and I see her jaw move slightly. My cock takes notice too. When Lucian hisses then grins like a madman, I figure she probably showed him more than her barbed tongue and bit him. He's never been one for pain, but I see the way his eyes darken with lust when she promises retribution. I have no idea how they can be at such odds but fit together so perfectly at the same time.

It gives me hope that she can embrace my dual nature too. Last night, when she seemed to see right inside me and not care about the void that threatens to consume me, I didn't know if I was grateful or terrified, but I do now. She accepts our flaws and faults.

She has no chance of ever escaping us.



NOVA

I use my tongue to circle Lucian's thumb, then shift it to the left so I can sink my molars into his flesh. He hisses but makes no move to remove it. When he smiles at me like I just pleased him, I release my bite and suck him deeper into my mouth just long enough for him to make a rumbling sound of satisfaction in the back of his throat, then I pull my head back, leaving only my teeth marks on his skin.

He shifts as if he might lunge for me, but the sound of Gertrude's soft-soled boots warns us of her approach. "Later," he promises darkly as the older woman enters the room with her nose in the air, as if she can snort out if we're up to no good.

I make myself busy eating more crackers and cheese to hopefully go unnoticed. Lucian doesn't have the same compunction. "What do you want, old woman?"

"To die peacefully, but I bet you'll find some way to ruin that." She huffs, but there doesn't seem to be any real heat behind her words.

"Don't talk like that," Lucian snaps, casting a quick glance at his brother, who seems to be pretending everything is normal. A strange feeling of foreboding twists in my stomach that I don't understand and like even less.

"Oh, leave me alone, I'm teasing," she grumbles. "I plan to haunt your children."

"Children?" I mouth in outrage to Nox, including him because it feels important. He rolls his eyes and shrugs.

"Our children won't be frightened of you any more than we were," Lucian crows.

"Uh-huh," she replies placatingly, as if she disagrees with his claim. "Your men are lumbering around in the anterior room. Deal with them before I put them to work," Gertrude rebukes, then leaves the room as abruptly as she arrived.

Lucian places his phone on the table and examines the screen. “See what you do? You drive me to distraction. I missed these texts.” He waves his hand at his phone as if I’m really to blame.

“I can’t help that you’re obsessed with me. That sounds like a you problem.”

“Well, that’s where you’re wrong. It is most definitely a we problem.” He rises from the table, taking his phone with him. “Let’s go see what they want.”

I glance over at Nox, wondering why I let myself get distracted by Lucian. We should have been talking about the secret meeting instead of mucking about, and now they are both leaving.

When my chair gets yanked back, my arms flail around as my balance shifts. “What the heck?”

“You didn’t think I would leave you here all alone to miss us, did you?”

I look up to see Lucian looming over me with a smirk.

He grabs my throat, pulling my head back even farther. “I can’t let you out of my sight. Obsessed isn’t a big enough word to describe the way I need to possess you.” He presses his lips against mine, the kiss hard and punishing, and I wonder if it’s because of what he just admitted.

I feel slightly off-kilter as we make our way to the front foyer. The floors are marbled with red, black, and white, creating a macabre scene, but it’s beautiful nonetheless. There are four men filling the vast space dressed in black pants and shirts, but that’s where the mundane ends.

They are older than us by ten years at least and grizzled in a way that makes me think they are soldiers of some sort, but that could just be their rigid stance and features making me think that. I instantly feel out of my depth. Are these the same men I’ve seen patrolling the grounds? I don’t know if that makes me feel safer or not.

“You have something to report?” Lucian asks, seeming completely comfortable in front of the men.

“The Umbras have sent a steward to the gate, requesting to speak with Miss Devlin.”

“Have they now?” Lucian questions softly.

“He said he’s been authorized to negotiate for her release,” the same man continues. Nox drapes his arm around my shoulders, tucking me into his side.

“Who did they grant such authority?” Lucian seems more than mildly interested.

“The traitor.”

I glance up at Nox, not really needing the confirmation of who I think it is but wanting it anyway. He gives me a tiny nod, as if he assumed my unasked question about Alden.

“Go tell him that I might come out when I tire of fucking his charge.”

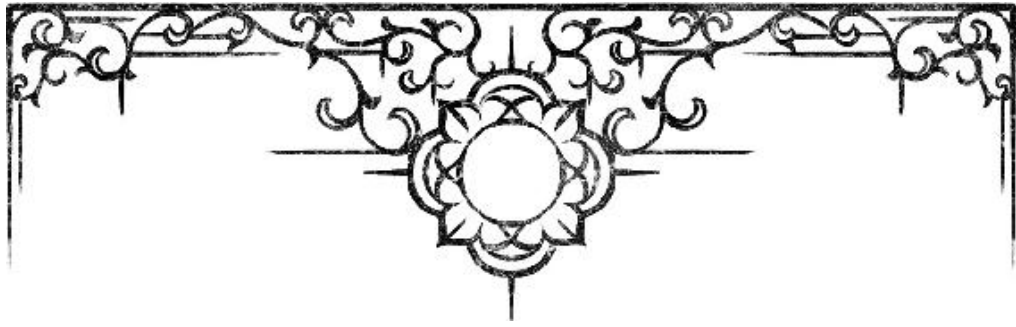
I shove Lucian’s side, but he doesn’t budge. “*Do not* tell him that,” I implore, though I have no reason to believe this guy will listen to anything I say.

“You don’t have to worry, lamb. It would never happen.”

I turn my furious gaze on Lucian, unable to even form words, but he must see something in my eyes, because he lifts his hands in a small move of surrender and says, “There will be no negotiations. They couldn’t take care of her, but we will.”

“I’ll relay your message. If he tries to press the issue?”

“Then press right back.” Lucian bares his teeth in a mockery of a smile.



NOVA

When we return to the kitchen, our lunch is already cleaned up and Gertrude is nowhere to be seen. I break away from the guys and head back toward the room we've been using. Their scent envelops me when I push through the door, but I don't allow it to distract me. My eyes scan the space, looking for the phone I had last night, and I find it on the bedside table.

When I pick it up, I expect to see missed calls or texts, but the screen is empty. I unlock it and check my logs, but there's nothing to find.

"What's wrong?" Nox asks, entering the room.

"If they wanted to speak to me, why didn't they try to call me? Have they tried calling you?" I face the door.

"Several times," Lucian confirms.

"You didn't tell me?" That bothers me for some reason, like he's keeping me in the dark.

"I didn't think it was important. Did you want to speak with them? You could have at any time. You've had your phone," he reminds me.

What he said is true, but it still feels manipulative, though I can't explain why. "They haven't called me in a while." I sound defensive, but the truth is, I haven't called them. I've been content within my little Morningstar bubble. It's easier than dealing with all the crap going on.

"They probably think we're holding you hostage." Nox tugs on me as he walks by, pulling me to sit on the bed next to him. "We're not, right? You want to be here?"

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to be," I reply, but the truth is if they wanted to keep me here against my will, there's not much I would be able to do to stop them, other than throw a fit.

“I know, but it’s good to hear you say it.” He kisses my temple before leaning back on his palms. “Sending Alden over here is just the first step. They aren’t going to give up.”

“I’m surprised it took them this long to get off their asses.” Lucian snorts with irritation.

“Should I go talk to them?”

“No!” they chorus in unison.

“Why? What are you afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid of anything,” Lucian supplies quickly.

“Seems like it to me.”

“What if they won’t let you leave?” Nox offers. “You’re the only option for the Umbras to have a future.”

“They could and would do anything to keep their name alive,” Lucian finishes.

“How do you know?”

“Because I would do the same,” he answers honestly.

The sinister forewarning turns my stomach, but I don’t know if it’s because I’m worried about what the Umbras *might* be capable of, or if it’s because I know exactly what the Morningstars are.

“We won’t let them use you, Nova,” Nox states, as if sensing my unease, but the feeling doesn’t abate.

“What should I do then? I can’t stay holed up here forever.”

“Sure you could. Just think of how wonderful it would be if all you did was live to please us.” I think Lucian’s comment is made in jest, but with him, I can never really tell. I don’t think his mind works like mine.

“Why don’t you call them and see what they have to say?” Nox reasons before curling on his side to stare at me.

“Put it on speaker.”

“And if I don’t want to?” I challenge Lucian. He slips his heavily tattooed hands into his pockets as if he’s completely at

ease.

“I enjoy indulging you, lamb, but don’t push me on this, not when it comes to them. Pick another battle.”

I almost don’t want to call now—heck, I didn’t want to call in the first place—but his insistence only hardens my stance. “Indulging me,” I mock. “When have you indulged me?”

“The list is endless. I allowed you to work in that hellhole with everyone treating you like a maid.” He takes a step closer. “I let you walk away from me more times than I can count.” Another step. “I spent days lying next to you, smelling your skin and feeling your warmth and not touching you.” He’s standing right in front of me now, and I have to tip my head back to see him. The air feels charged, and I’m hanging onto his every corrupt word. “But most importantly” —his palm cradles my cheek gently, while his thumb caresses my lip— “I let you breathe.”

That snaps me out of my lusty stupor. “I’m supposed to be grateful you didn’t kill me?” I seethe quietly.

“If you knew what I planned before I met you, you would be.” He has the nerve to place a chaste kiss on my lips, but I bite him when he tries to pull away, which only makes him smile and lick the smear of blood off his lip.

“I don’t know who is more insane—you, or me for putting up with you.”

“Don’t fret, lamb, it will always be me. We’re both just lucky you find me irresistible.”

“Irresistible, my butt.” I tut, but there must be some truth to his statement. I can’t even stay mad at him, and he just admitted to wanting me dead. It’s not like I wasn’t aware of his feelings toward me, I just don’t think I ever really believed he would take it that far.

“Are we changing topics again? I can go into detail about how I find your ass irresistible.”

“Would you shut up?” I roll my eyes, even though on the inside, I’m flattered. I just don’t handle compliments well.

“Fine, we can discuss all the points of your anatomy later while you’re naked. Call the Umbras and leave it on speaker.” Lucian makes the final decree before dropping lazily into a black leather club chair just off the side of the bed.

“What should I say?” I glance over at Nox. He’s much more levelheaded when it comes to actually needing advice.

“I bet they will have plenty to say as soon as they know you’re calling them,” he replies.

I open up the small list of contacts on my phone and see both Rory and Astrid’s names. Before I have a chance to decide whom to call, Lucian chimes in, as if knowing my thoughts. “Astrid is the one running the show. Your grandfather is only the figurehead.”

I send a glare at the far too perceptive twin but listen to his suggestion, even though I’d much rather speak with Rory. The phone rings three times before she finally picks up. Her voice is stiff and cold when she says, “Hello.”

“Hello, Astrid. It’s Nova.” I wince at how stupid I sound.

“Nova! We’ve been worried sick about you.” Her statement somehow comes out as chastising and caring, but it’s easier to focus on the former.

“You didn’t call,” I prompt, expecting an explanation.

“I wasn’t sure you’d have your phone or that you would be permitted to speak with us. We want you to come home, Nova. How can we help you get home?” She dismisses my reminder easily. “I can have Alden at the gate in a matter of minutes.”

Lucian shakes his head slowly, but he doesn’t speak. “Have you learned anything about what happened to me or who is responsible?” I avoid her question just like she did mine.

She exhales a sigh and clicks her tongue before announcing, “Not yet. Your grandfather hasn’t slept in days. It’s worrying him so, especially with you being...*there*. Please help me get you home, Nova. We can ensure nothing like that ever happens again.”

“I feel like there’s so much you’re not telling me about my mom and the island,” I hedge, hoping it will loosen her lips. I don’t want to believe that the only reason she cares about me is because she wants my future.

“And there is so much I want to tell you, but not when you’re there with them. The men you are with attacked me, Nova, and they would have killed me if given the chance. They are not just misguided young men. They are dangerous. When their parents died, they needed someone to blame. Somehow, we became the focus of their ire, and now you’re caught in the crossfire. They don’t care about you, dear. They only seek to hurt us, and they are using you to do that. You must see the truth. You’re our granddaughter, our family. We love you.”

A chasm of need opens in my chest at her last words. I can’t remember the last time someone told me they loved me, and the resulting ache tells me just how much I’ve longed for those three simple words, even if I know they may not be true.

I look down at the shiny ebony floor as pinpricks of tears well in my eyes. I hate feeling desperate and needy. It only takes a moment to regain my composure, but I’m sure a nanosecond would be long enough for Lucian to suss out the weakness in me for her approval.

“They aren’t forcing me to stay here,” I reply, because it’s not like I have an argument against anything else she said.

“Whatever lies they are feeding you, Nova, they are not true.”

I look up to see Lucian roll his eyes and mouth the word, “Clever.”

“They told me about the meeting last night.” I keep my eyes locked on the volatile twin to see his reaction, but he remains calmly seated.

“Did they tell you the reason for the meeting? That we wanted to make sure everyone knew you were one of us?” she questions quickly, making me think she assumed I knew about the assembly.

“Something like that,” I agree without real confirmation. “Why didn’t you *claim* me as part of your family before, if it is such an issue?”

“There are rules and traditions that must be followed, but we should have expedited the process. Please believe me when I say we had no idea someone would actually hurt you.”

“Then why make Alden my protector?”

I don’t think she expected me to question her, or maybe she’s just used to not having to explain herself, but either way, she’s quiet for a moment before answering. “He was more of a deterrent than anything else, Nova, something to remind the Morningstars you were off-limits, but I don’t suppose it was enough.” It’s clear she’s blaming them for the attack without coming right out and saying it.

Nox’s palm rubs over my back, as if he’s reminding me that he’s here and she’s not telling the truth. I turn to give him a small smile, but it’s forced, and I’m sure he knows it.

“Did you make my mom choose between my dad and staying on the island and being part of your family?”

“I thought we already addressed this, Nova.” There’s a note of impatience in her tone.

“I want to make sure I understand.”

“Your mother knew about the sacrifices that must be made for the larger picture. She was loose with her heart and made a choice I know she regretted. As a matter of fact, I’d spoken with your mother just a few days before the accident. She asked to return home.”

The information about bowls me over, but I try not to give any outward signs. “When did you speak with her?”

“Several times. In fact, she was planning on bringing you home to us.”

Lucian sits forward at Astrid’s claim, as if he needs to be closer to hear her clearly.

“Really?” I sound skeptical, but I can’t help it. “What about my dad?”

“We can talk about this more at length when you are home. Family matters are private.” She shuts down that line of questioning, but I can’t take her word as gospel. My mom loved my dad. She put up with him losing countless jobs, which resulted in us moving around a lot, but she never wavered in her support of him. Looking back, I wonder if there were times when things would have been different if she expected more from him, or if she was so tolerant of his behavior because she felt guilty about how much she was drinking.

“Why not just come out and tell me he wasn’t welcome and that he wasn’t good enough to be a founder? That’s what you think, right?”

“I don’t expect you to understand the responsibilities foisted upon us yet, Nova, but I hope you can acknowledge your mother did a disservice to you by indulging in her whims.”

“Her whims? That’s what you think of my dad?”

“Your mother was engaged to be married when she fled with your father. Most days, I think she did it to spite me. There’s no way she could have actually loved him.” Astrid’s irritation with me and my questions seems to have hit a boiling point, considering her biting tone.

“I appreciate your honesty, but you can rest comfortably knowing the world doesn’t revolve around you, Grandmother. I doubt she was thinking of you at all when she was with him.”

Nox makes a snorting noise to cover his laugh, but I don’t find anything funny. Lucian, on the other hand, is looking at me like a proud father.

“Nova.” Her pitch is condescending yet pleading in the same breath. “I’ll admit my flaw. Your father is a sore subject. He took my only daughter from me, something I hope you never have to deal with. Please excuse my harsh judgment. I didn’t mean it.”

“Oh, I’m quite certain you meant every word. At least I know how easy it is to be disowned by you, and hey, you’re a

pro at dealing with the consequences. It should be easier this time around.” I hit the red phone icon to end the call, but the anger filling me doesn’t die so easily.

I tighten my fingers around the device in my hand, ready to chuck it to the floor, but I’m not wasteful enough to actually do it. “Need something to take out all that frustration on, lamb?” Lucian widens his arms in offering.

I glare at him, thinking about how good it would feel to hit something, but I’m not that person and I don’t want to be. Giving her that much control over me would only mean I let her win.

“I’m not going to hit you.”

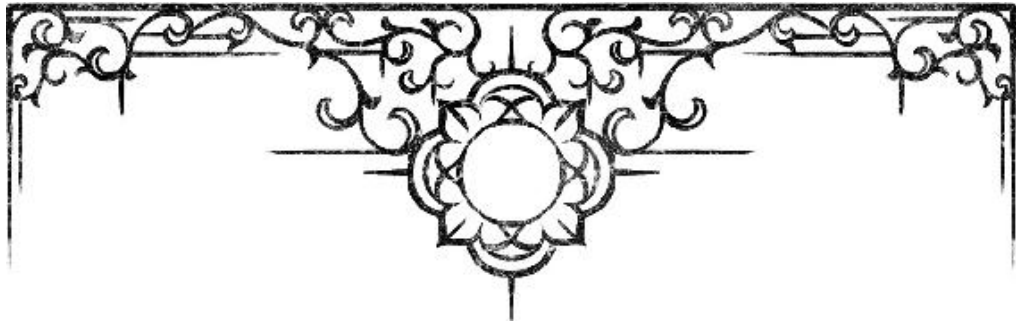
“I wouldn’t mind if you did, but there are other ways to alleviate all that annoyance if violence isn’t what you’re up for.”

“I’m worried that you would even offer,” I confess, wondering if someone else hurt him in the past.

“Don’t give me those doe eyes. I’m not that fucked up. I would never allow anyone else the privilege of touching, let alone hitting me. Besides, I never thought it was hot before you started threatening me, so it’s kind of your fault.”

“You realize this is like the definition of red flag, right?” I wave my finger between the three of us, making sure to include sweet Nox in the equation, because there is no way what’s happening between all three of us is healthy.

Surprising me, Nox wraps his arms around me from behind and pulls me down onto the bed to lie next to him. “You realize neither of us care, right?”



LUCIAN

Nox deftly reassures Nova in a way she might not trust from me while wrapping her in his arms. It's a smooth move, and one I approve of. She needs to get out of her head and stop worrying about what everyone else thinks or finds normal. We have never been like the sheep and never will be.

Listening to her get her heart broken on the phone wasn't easy, but it's a necessary evil. I was worried Astrid would play nice and my lamb would want to go to her to at least hear her out, but the old bitch got sloppy and desperate. She let her true feelings show, and it backfired on her.

The phone, now lying forgotten on the bed, blinks to life as a call comes in. I know the moment she feels the silent vibration and decides to ignore it, which reassures me that our girl isn't going anywhere.

"What should I do?" Nova questions, sounding unsure. It's a double-edged sword. I like that she's looking to us for answers, but I hate that she feels the need to.

"What do you want to do?" I lead her into answering for herself.

"I'm not sure, but I know what I don't want. I'm not going to let her use me as some baby factory to keep her stupid name alive."

"It's not just their name, it's yours too," I remind her.

"My name is Nova Devlin," she retorts defiantly.

"That doesn't change the fact that you're also an Umbra," Nox reasons.

She pouts on a sigh. "I never should have answered the door."

Her comment stings a little, which is strange, considering words don't usually affect me. It forces me to acknowledge, and not for the first time, that she is a weakness to me. "It could always be worse. We could still want you dead." I regret

the words the moment they leave my mouth, and even more so when I see the injured look on my lamb's face. She pulls out of Nox's arms to sit up and create distance between them.

"Yeah, there's always that." Her tone is flat, lacking any emotion, but I don't need to hear it when I can see it on her face.

I open my mouth twice to say something, anything, like an apology, an admission that I wasn't thinking, or even the truth—I spoke out of hurt because she said she would be happier never having met us—but I don't spit a syllable out of my tongue-tied mouth.

"Do you have my keys?" She changes the subject fast enough to give me whiplash, triggering my obsessive need to keep her with us.

"Why? Are you going to try to escape us, lamb? It's far too late for that." I have no problem forming words now, even ones that seem vaguely threatening.

"I can't stay here forever, pretty boy, but I was going to pick up my final check from Hooker's." Her stormy eyes are locked on mine, expecting me to deny her. She wants a fight, whether she's willing to admit it or not.

"We can take you," I offer.

"I can go myself."

"You haven't been cleared to drive yet." The thrill of arguing with her excites me. It's like I'm feeding off her reaction.

"I was never told I couldn't." Her tone is growing more and more clipped. She can't feign indifference.

"An oversight on the doctor's part. I can call him right now so you can hear it straight from him."

"He will say anything you tell him to." Her little hands are curled into fists, and I bet her palms have score marks from her nails. I want to feel them on me.

"Exactly, lamb," I tell her with a sharp smile, which I'm sure will piss her off more. Her body actually jolts forward as

if she's going to snap into action. I lean back in the chair, ready to accept all of her, but she stops short of hurling herself at me. "Such a tease," I mutter. My cock is hard, and I don't hide how turned on I am.

Surprising me, she doesn't shy away from watching me adjust myself, not even when I give my length an extra squeeze. Her chin tilts to the side the tiniest amount, but the shift in her gaze tells me so much more. My lamb may not have gone to the most expensive schools or had the best tutors money could buy, but she's smarter than any of the assholes who did. Her full lips part, and I see the very tip of her tongue snake across her top one. I can practically hear the *I got you*.

I played my hand, and she called me. She knows just how much she affects me. Now the only question is, how is she going to use that info?

Seconds tick by with us in a silent stare off—me waiting for her next move, and her planning it. Finally, she says, "I'm going to go for a walk alone." Holding up her hand to stop my immediate refusal, she adds, "I will stay within the Morningstar boundaries. When I get back, will you take me to Hooker's?"

The air I was holding to mount an argument fizzles out of my chest. She knew she could get away with a great deal if she wanted to and use the knowledge of how much she affects me against me, but she didn't. The skeptical part of me thinks she's waiting for a better time, when it will benefit her more, but the side of me I didn't know existed until I met her says I'm wrong. She's not like everyone else, and I need to trust her as much as I demand she trust us.

"Okay, lamb. Take your phone and stay away from the shoreline." The sea can be brutal, especially when you don't know it well, and I don't want her getting into trouble when she's alone.

She leans to the side and gives Nox a sweet little kiss before rising and facing me, tugging the hem of her shirt as if she's unsure of her next move. "Thank you." Her words are spoken so quietly, they are barely audible. When she moves to

walk away, I circle her wrist in a gentle hold, then point to my face, needing the same affection she freely gave my brother.

When she leans down to brush her lips against the corner of my mouth, I hold her in place and admit, “I’ll never hurt you,” in a sorry attempt at an apology.

I watch her eyelids lower and her lips curl into a mien of doubtful skepticism. “Sure, pretty boy.” She shucks my light grip and strolls from the room.

I’m not even sure she clears the door before Nox is bitching at me. “God, you’re such a dick, Lucian. I have no clue why she puts up with you most of the time.”

The comment makes me defensive and sends a spark of panic through me. “She puts up with me for the same reason everyone else does.”

“Don’t,” he warns. “Don’t lump her in with everyone else, because we both know she’s not.” He’s pissed, which pisses me off.

“Why else would she put up with *us*?” I make sure he hears the inflection that includes him. “It’s certainly not because we’re good guys.”

“She doesn’t need you to be a good guy. I thought she already proved that to you, since she didn’t run for the hills any of the times you pushed her and forced yourself down her throat without an ounce of reservation. *Here I am, take me...or take me because you certainly don’t have any other option, unless you want to die,*” he mocks with his arms spread wide.

“Fuck you. I showed her the real me, unlike you. I knew she could handle it.”

“She saw the real you from the beginning, Lucian, whether you want to admit it or not. And just because I haven’t introduced her to my demons the way you have doesn’t mean she doesn’t see me for who I am. I just don’t feel the need to challenge her at every fucking turn to make sure she’s not going to leave, then punish her for my insecurities,” he spits out.

“I don’t fucking punish her.”

“Bullshit.” He calls me out before I’m even done speaking. “One day, you’re going to go too far if you don’t straighten the hell up.”

“I told her I wouldn’t hurt her,” I defend, hating his insinuation.

“After you rubbed it in her face that you wanted her dead not long ago *and* reminded her that she has no goddamn control over her own life. How is she supposed to see you any differently than her grandmother if you treat her like a tool? Like a piece of property?”

“She’s not a tool for anything.” I can’t deny the fact that I already see her as mine, because he would see and hear it for the lie it is.

“It sure seems like you’re using her to get back at the Umbras,” he sneers disgustedly.

“I’m not. I don’t give a fuck if the old bitch lives to the ripe old age of a hundred, as long as she doesn’t try to fuck with Nova.”

“Maybe try to show her that, because that’s not what I’m seeing, so I doubt she can see into that fucked-up head of yours.” He shoves off the bed and heads to the bathroom, slamming the door and cutting off the conversation.

I hate when Nox is mad at me. It makes me feel like my insides are all turned the wrong way, but I know he’s not going to let me off the hook for my shitty attitude like he usually would, so I leave him be and head up to my room to give him the break he clearly needs.



NOVA

I've looked over my shoulder at least twenty times, expecting to see Lucian storming up behind me with some stupid demand on his lips I'll cave to, but I'm blessedly alone. I can hear the waves lapping at the shore and feel the cool breeze coming in from the water, and it helps drown out the noise in my head enough so I can focus on Astrid and the recent family developments.

I can't believe her claim about my mom returning home and bringing me with her, but there's this niggling doubt that won't allow me to dismiss it completely. I think back to the days and weeks before the accident. Was she acting differently? Did she say anything that might have hinted that something was changing? It's a blur of normalcy though, well, our normalcy anyway—her drinking too much, and Dad pretending not to notice all the trips she made into the garage or whatever room she stashed her liquor in at the time, while he sat on the couch, staring at the TV as if it held all the answers in the world.

It pains me to say it, but I can't even remember the last time they told me they loved me or me them. We weren't miserable, but none of us were particularly happy either, and it hurts to think about how much time we wasted.

I look up and brush a wayward tear from my cheek. I don't even know why I'm crying, other than I just feel too full of emotions I don't want to own and barely understand. The cheery yellow house in the distance becomes a beacon, with its bright white outdoor furniture and sandy surroundings. It has to be hard to feel lost in a place like that, or that's what I tell myself anyway as I change directions and head toward the structure.

My legs are tired by the time I step foot on the wide, pale steps. Sand sucks to walk in, it's exhausting. My heart is beating fast from the exertion, but now that I've made it here, I don't feel the sense of peace I was hoping for. When I turn to

look at the ocean, my hair blows around my neck and face with the breeze, and as I hook my finger to drag it away, the vastness before me registers. I don't feel any more at ease than before, but I do feel infinitely smaller, which somehow takes a little weight off my shoulders.

I sink onto the steps and let the ebb and flow of the waves help wash away some of the hurt and abandonment that took hold while I was on the phone with Astrid. I didn't think her rejection of my father, and ultimately me, would affect me so much, because in the back of my mind, I knew he was the reason my mom left, even if it was denied, but the truth does hurt.

You don't realize how much you crave family until it's ripped away from you. I thought I was fine alone, but the moment the idea was presented to me, I clung to it, only to find out it's not me they want, it's a scion to continue their legacy.

The door opens behind me, and I nearly fall down the steps as I jump up and spin around. Before the thought even registers, I assume it's going to be Lucian, but I'm surprised again when I see Alden in the entryway.

"What the heck?" I mutter, knowing there's no way he should be here. I scan the area behind him, thinking this is some sort of joke and Nox is going to jump out, but Alden is alone. "What are you doing here?"

"I used to live around here in a house right up the road, believe it or not." He leans his shoulder against the doorframe, looking entirely relaxed.

"You don't live here anymore. I don't think you're even allowed on the grounds." A pit opens in my stomach, making me feel queasy. Lucian will surely see this as treachery, I just don't know if he'll think I betrayed him too.

"I'm not." He looks out over my head and lets out a heavy breath. "The coastline isn't quite the same from any other spot on the island though, and I wanted to see if it was as beautiful as I remembered." In the short time I've known Alden, or been acquainted with him, because I don't actually know him, he's

never been a talker, so the statement seems like a big revelation.

“Geez, that seems risky for a little look at the water, but I’m actually kind of relieved. I thought you might be here to take me back to the Umbras.”

“There is that too.” He shifts his gaze back to me. “I was pretty surprised to find you alone so soon.”

“So soon? You mean after the call?”

He nods slowly.

“Your plan was just to hide out here to see if I happened to walk by?” I’m sure he can hear my skepticism.

He lowers his chin and gives me a disappointed glower. My mind starts reeling at what the expression could mean. “You couldn’t have known I would come here. I’ve never been here before,” I challenge.

“The Morningstars aren’t the only ones with trackers on you, Nova.” He sounds like a chastising teacher, like I’m some rogue kid who can never make it to school on time or answer the question when called upon.

“What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t know they put a tracker on your car?” he divulges as if he assumed I already knew, but I don’t trust him. He wouldn’t have told me if it wasn’t in his best interests to do so, or should I say the Umbras’ interests, since he works for them.

“Are you saying they slipped a microchip in my arm like a stray dog, and I didn’t notice?” I’ll deal with the car thing and Lucian later. This feels more intrusive because it’s a shock. Finding out Lucian put a tracker on me seems to be par for the strange course.

“This isn’t a sci-fi movie, Nova. They have an app on your phone.” He motions toward me.

I reach for the offending device, feeling betrayed by the dang thing. “What app?” I question, looking up at him, but then I remember when I thought he was on my side and

realized he wasn't, so the desire for him to answer fades with the knowledge that he will always be in the Umbras' pocket. He'll only tell me what they allow him to tell me, or what he thinks will help their cause.

"Forget it." I turn around and chuck my phone. It flies like a Frisbee, soaring in an arc until it splashes down near the edge of the water. I'm sure it's not dead, but it will be soon enough, and the important part is it's no longer on me.

"Now they may go for a more permanent solution." He crosses his meaty arms over his chest.

"That should be fun for all parties involved," I snark. We engage in a long stare off, where I wonder when or if he's going to make a move. He didn't just come here to talk to me, so what does he really want? As my patience starts to die, I think about just asking him, but it feels like I would be giving up power if I did that. Why should he be the one deciding?

"How did you get in here?" I take one step down the porch, hoping he won't notice, but it's Alden and he sees everything. His dark eyes track my movement, but he doesn't make an effort to stop my retreat.

"I told you, I used to live here. I know all the Morningstars' secrets. You should remind them of that."

"So you want me to tell them you were here?" I take another step down.

"You would have either way." He shrugs like he knows me, but he doesn't, and I don't like the implication. Now's not the time to argue though, not when it seems like he's going to let me leave.

"Why did you really come here?" I'm in the sand now. It's not much of a head start if he comes after me, but it's something.

"I already told you." He levels his eyes on the sea again, and my heels dig into the sand as I backpedal to take advantage of his distraction.

"I don't believe you."

“You should. I’ve been the only one without a motive who’s trying to help you.”

I snort. “I would say you have plenty of motives. You work for the people who want to turn me into a substitute for their will. They don’t care about me, only that I can make their name live on.”

“Yet instead of seeing it as a gift and using them right back, you want to play the victim. I expected more from you, Nova.” The disappointment in his tone stings a little, and I can’t even explain why.

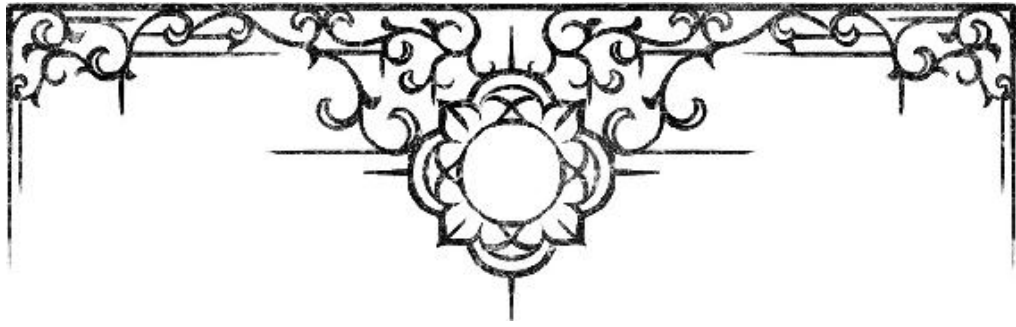
“You think it’s a gift to be turned into a baby factory? How long before they would expect me to pump out babies for them?”

“So you have a few kids. You probably would have had one eventually anyway. You wouldn’t even have to raise them if you didn’t want to, and then you’d be set for the rest of your life, a goddess among mortals, making laws and deciding futures. You would be the matriarch,” he implores with real passion.

“I don’t care about being the matriarch or deciding futures. I’ll admit I was a little smitten with the house and car at first, but none of it is worth giving up my life and my choices.”

“None of those choices were yours to begin with, Nova. The sooner you realize that, the sooner you can help yourself.”

Dread settles in my stomach like a lead ball. He’s speaking with so much conviction, I can’t help but believe him, and it terrifies me. I don’t bother mounting an argument or refusal, and instead, I turn and run as fast as I can, trudging through the sand until I have a stitch in my side and I can’t see the yellow house or Alden anymore...though I can’t shake the weight of his presence quite so easily.



NOX

The door slams, and I jump up, ready to give Lucian some more shit, but when I poke my head into the hall, I see Nova with her back against the door as if she just beat the devil across the threshold.

She's breathing heavily, and her cheeks are all red. "What happened?" I demand, ready to kick my brother's ass for whatever he did this time.

Her eyes snap open, and she stares at me owlshly. I start to approach her, but she pushes off the wall and heads straight for me instead. I reach out to her, but she speaks, causing me to freeze in my tracks. "Alden was just here."

"What?" I look past her, imagining her near the gate and him harassing her to come out.

"At the yellow house. I was sitting on the porch, and he came out of the front door." She's speaking so fast, there's no way I heard her correctly.

"Slow down and say that again."

"He was in the yellow house." She grabs my sleeve and shakes it.

"Lu!" I turn my head enough so I'm not hollering in her face. When I don't get an immediate response, I grab her hand and tug her toward the stairs with me. There's one place Lucian goes to sulk—his room.

The door is uncharacteristically unlocked when I turn the knob. Lucian is just coming out of the shower. He's naked and doesn't bother to cover up, but when he sees my face, he actually rocks back on his heels, as if he's expecting me to yell at him some more.

I push Nova in front of me, only now realizing she's holding her side. There's no time to give her a real apology for dragging her up the stairs, but I do say, "Sorry if I rushed you. Tell him."

“Tell me what?” Lucian’s brow is furrowed, but I don’t think that’s what Nova is looking at.

I give her another little nudge, and she spews, “Alden was at the yellow house.”

“The yellow house?” He looks at me with confusion.

“The beach house.”

“It’s yellow?”

“Did you hear what she said?” I try to rein in his errant thoughts.

“He said they have been tracking me with an app on my phone.” Nova didn’t tell me that, but I guess I didn’t give her much of a chance.

“Is that why your phone stopped pinging?” He’s completely calm, which is worrisome. Lucian is his most dangerous when he’s calm.

“I threw it in the ocean,” she admits, seemingly unbothered that he admitted to tracking her as well.

“I just realized when I got out of the shower. I was coming to find you,” he tells her.

“Alden was there,” she says again, slower this time.

“Did he touch or hurt you?” His eyes roam over her, looking for a hair out of place.

“No, he scared the crap out of me though. I didn’t think anyone else was allowed on the grounds.”

“They aren’t,” I confirm.

“Well, he was. He wouldn’t tell me how he got there, but he said he knows all your secrets and I should remind you of that.”

“Did he now?” Lucian asks softly. “What else did he say?”

“He told me you had a tracker on my car.”

Lucian nods in agreement. “That doesn’t surprise you?”

“No, you’re insane.”

“Good. And?” he prompts, urging her to continue.

“And he told me I should just suck it up and go home, push out a few babies, and be happy with what I get. It’ll be worth it in the end.”

“Christ!” I bark.

“And what did you tell him, lamb?”

“I told him they can shove their money and power up their butts. I make my own choices.”

He smiles with real menace. If I didn’t know what he was capable of, it might not be frightening, but I do. “I’ll deal with Alden. He won’t bother you again.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Kill him. Your grandparents signed his death warrant when they sent him here. There is no other punishment for invading another founder’s property.”

“You can’t kill him. He’s your cousin.” She shakes her head with denial, but Lucian’s right. The die has already been cast. Alden is dead. He knew the consequences of coming here.

“Do you see how desperate they are for you now? They will stop at nothing to get you and turn you into a broodmare that they can control. This entire system is fucked up.” Lucian rips a pair of black slacks off the end of the bed and jerkily pulls them up his legs.

“I know it is, which is why I want nothing to do with it. I don’t want to control people’s lives and make rules. I just wanted a fucking family,” Nova yells in response.

“Well, you’ve got one now, lamb, and you best believe we’ll do anything necessary to protect that.” With his pants still unfastened, he stalks over to Nova, who holds her ground with her jaw set as he gets all up in her space. “And watch your goddamn mouth.”

Her eyes flare just as she opens her lips, probably to put him in his place, but my ballsy brother smashes his mouth to

hers, kissing her and stealing any argument she might have had.

When he pulls back, his lip is bloody, but the smile on his face speaks volumes.

And I thought I was the one with a death wish.



LUCIAN

If I didn't need to deliver a declaration, I would hand her a chain to loop around my neck so she could tug it while I fucked her until she couldn't move. My dick is so hard, I'm not sure I'm going to be able to walk straight.

I watch her lick her teeth, wiping away the red smear of my blood. She may think she doesn't like to punish me, but it's always her first response, and I fucking love knowing I drive her insane like no one else can and she still can't resist me.

Toxic doesn't even begin to describe how I feel about her, and I need to know she feels the same. I reach for her hand and place it over my cock, letting her feel how badly I need her. The fire in her eyes shifts to pooled embers of desire, causing her to soften her stance, as if she's just as ready for me. The buzzing under my skin that drives me to push her transforms into a low hum I can manage with her compliance—a small reminder that I can never really get her out of my system no matter what.

It's terrifying and exhilarating to feel so untethered yet so attached. Never in my life did I think anything would control me the way she does, yet she managed it without even trying. My chest constricts at the thought of losing even a piece of her. I'm tempted to tell her how she scorches my insides and I love the burn, but as I roll my tongue around my mouth, the words evade me. I can't describe how I feel, let alone voice it.

“What if I asked you not to kill him?”

The bubble of sentiment pops, replaced by a low, simmering emotion that's just as potent—rage. She would save him, a traitor. “Don't,” I warn, turning my back on her and any reproach I might have seen in her eyes if I dared look.

I swipe my phone off the bed and dial my head of security, Lev. “Alden was on the property. I want every tunnel sealed. Start with the ones leading to the beach house. Have someone

scour the security feeds for an image of him so I can provide evidence of his treason, then bring me the person responsible for allowing him into our territory.” I end the call without any verification that my orders will be followed, but I know they will be.

Lev is Gertrude’s son and as loyal as they come. Too bad my uncle and his son don’t know the meaning of the word.

My next call will be delivered to the head of each founding family. The line is only to be used for emergencies and official founders’ business. A single beep sounds after the ring, allowing me to record my message.

“This is Lucian Morningstar, head of the Morningstar family. Today, our property was breached by Alden Black, who lost his founding title along with all the other members of his family when his father betrayed his name. Alden is currently employed by the Umbras, and I have to assume he was following their orders when he violated the island treaty. I’m calling a meeting in forty-two hours to provide proof of his treachery and to punish him for his treason, as is my right. I’m also requesting the Umbras be held responsible for their charge’s action and be castigated for their complacency in this matter. I will leave their penance to a majority vote.”

I hit the star key before hanging up, and my phone vibrates with an incoming call to repeat my message in the next heartbeat. My voice is smooth and unaffected, but it’s an act. I’d like to kill Astrid and Alden with my bare hands while Rory watched.

I hit end after only a few seconds, not needing to hear the entire message repeated. Leaving the Umbras’ punishment up to a vote could backfire and mean they get off without any repercussions, but in doing so, I’m showing I’m willing to play by the rules—for now anyway. I’m also planting the seeds of subversion from the Umbras for all the other founders to see and judge for themselves.

“Are you just going to execute your cousin?” Nova questions the moment I turn to face her again.

“He’s doing what has to be done, Nova. We can’t let the challenge go unanswered,” Nox replies, defending me with the truth.

“He didn’t break a window with his baseball. He sneaked onto our protected property with knowledge he only possessed because he used to be one of us.” I slap my fist against my chest as my ability to rein in my temper fails. I should have had those tunnels sealed up years ago, but I foolishly believed my father when he said it wouldn’t be an issue, and that Uncle Albert, and Alden by association, would never return after they disgraced themselves and their family.

“Letting it go would be a sure sign of weakness that others would try to exploit,” Nox reasons, but it wouldn’t matter. I would want him dead either way. He came here and threatened what’s mine. If something would have happened to Nova, it would have been my fault, and I won’t live with that. She’s been through enough because of me.

“What if they forced him?” she pleads.

“Why do you care what happens to him?” I question, hating that she’s fighting for him.

“I don’t think anyone should die for something so stupid as violating your walls, but someone else might actually care about him. I’m sure there’s someone he’s important to who doesn’t want him dead.”

“As if he’s some innocent bystander in this. How do you think they knew he could get in here, lamb? That he would be able to breach our security?” I let her mull over the question for a few moments, allowing her to come to the same realization I have—he must have told them about the underground tunnels and secret entrances. Who knows how long they have known. “He understood the consequences of his actions.”

“Unlike you, he grew up in this world.”

Nova flinches at Nox’s words and the reminder that she’s different, but it wasn’t delivered as an insult.

“He knows the rules,” I remind her.

“So do you, but you never follow them. Nox came with me to the Umbras the day we went to the beach. He hid in the car.” She focuses on my brother, who is having a very hard fucking time meeting my gaze.

“That was his choice. He also knew the consequences.” I let him hear how pissed I am. It was reckless and something I would totally do, but that didn’t used to be his style, not before my parents died.

Nova’s eyes harden, and she plants her hand on her curvy hip. “Are you kidding me? You didn’t tell me you could get in that kind of trouble. I never would have allowed you to come with me.”

Nox has the decency to look down at his feet before finally meeting her incensed stare. “I wasn’t there to infiltrate their compound or lure anyone away. I was just along for the ride,” he defends lamely.

“And Alden was just here to talk to me, yet it will cost him his life.”

“I didn’t get caught.”

Nova’s lips thin, and she shakes her head. “I shouldn’t have told you. It’s my fault he’ll die.”

“Bullshit!” I snap before carefully wrapping my fingers around her upper arm to get her to look at me. “You are not responsible for his choice or what happens to him because of it.” There’s a sheen of tears in her aqua eyes that makes my knees feel soft, like they might not hold me up anymore.

I can’t understand why it bothers her so much. He should mean nothing to her. “Do you care about him?” I search her face, needing answers.

“Not like that.” Her voice is tight and nasally. “I just don’t want to be responsible for his death. I don’t want you responsible either.”

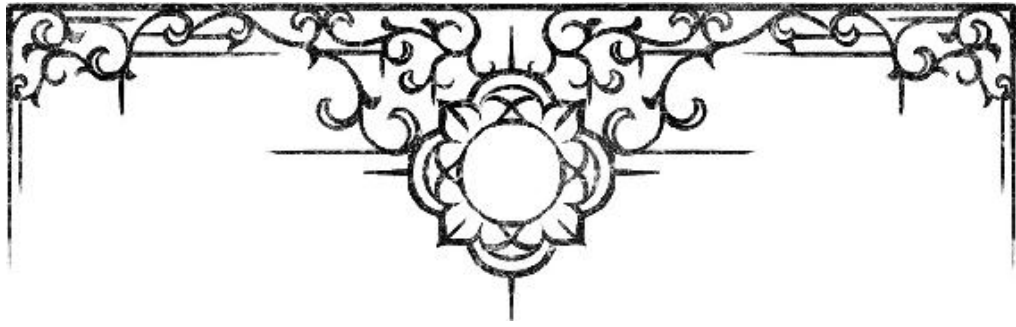
“He’s the only one responsible, Nova,” Nox offers, but I know it falls on deaf ears.

I release her arm and take a step back from her. It's the first time I haven't wanted her wrath. "We can't let this go, lamb. It's not possible."

I watch her take a deep breath and tip her chin up. Even with her eyes still glassy, she nods in acceptance, taking the blame but not complaining about it. I want her to yell at me, to push me, blame me, but she doesn't. She silently accepts she has no voice. My chest constricts, and I open my mouth to say something, to demand she not be mad at us for Alden's stupidity, but she surprises me yet again by grabbing my brother's shirt and pulling him with her as she eats up the two steps between us and drops her head onto my chest, looking for comfort.

I'm so stunned, I don't move for a full second. When I feel her spine straighten like she might back away, I finally pull my head out of my ass and wrap my arms around her neck, leaving room for Nox lined up against her back. Our eyes meet over her head with the same mirrored astonishment.

Even mad and hurting, she still reached for us. I'm in awe of her benevolence, and I will do anything in my power to keep it.



NOVA

The trip into the underground hall is just as frightening and stifling as my first venture. I'm decked out in one of the brothers' old robes, while Nox and Lucian have me squeezed between them as if they think someone is going to try to abduct me out from under their noses. It's making me even more nervous on top of already freaking out about what the heck I'm walking into.

The last two days have been difficult, to say the least. Lucian tried everything to distract me from the upcoming event. He even tried to get me to stay home tonight, but I told him if they left me out, his balls would never be safe. I think that excited him, so I also said I would ask Mickey for my job back at Hooker's—not that I think I would get it—but it did the trick. I'm here with them now, wondering why the heck I thought it was a good idea to come.

I blow the mesh of the hood away from my face, trying to steal a breath of fresh air, but it's useless. I feel trapped—no, it's more than that. I feel smothered. Thinking about the tons of stone above my head and what would happen if it collapsed has me sweating bullets, even in the cold air.

When we finally reach the bottom of the winding staircase, Lucian leads us to a completely different table than the last time we were here. It's much farther back from the dais and conveniently closer to the elevator for a speedy escape.

The feeling in the room is more alive and electric, if that makes sense. There's a hum of sound accompanying the excitement filling the tomb-like space. It makes me wonder if everyone was so somber last time because they didn't know the reason behind the meeting, or if they are so eager this time because they are enthusiastic about the prospect of someone getting punished.

Nox pulls out the high-back chair for me, urging me to sit between him and Lucian. I'm grateful for the extra space he allows, giving me a little more breathing room. As the

moments tick by, our table fills with others, who all remain silent through the low din. I wonder if they have a reason for a quick escape as well, or if they just don't want to be close to the promised action.

I jolt when I feel Nox's palm on my thigh under the table but try to cover the movement by adjusting in my seat. His fingers tighten reassuringly over my thigh. I concentrate on not drawing attention to myself, so I can blend in like everyone else, but everyone else doesn't have a big, warm hand inching slowly up their leg and driving them to distraction.

The loud sound of a door bouncing off a wall draws nearly everyone's attention to the front of the room. Rory, still the only uncovered face, also looks to where the sound originated from. A robed figure is rushing toward the dais so quickly, it's easy to see it's a woman because the thin cloak is plastered to her front. She bends at the waist, getting close to my grandfather's ear. His eyes widen right before his lips thin and he shoots to his feet.

"Lock the chambers," he bellows, causing figures near the stairs and elevators to shift into protective positions. Nox's hand remains firmly on my leg, while Lucian sits completely still. My breath is sawing in and out of me as a spike of adrenaline turns my heartbeat into a frantic tempo.

"I've just been informed Alden has escaped." Rory scans the crowd as whispers erupt in the expanse. I have the urge to look over my shoulder to see if the big man is behind me, but I manage to sit still.

Lucian shoves his chair back, toppling it as he comes to his feet. "How convenient." He pushes the hood back, revealing his beautifully cruel face.

Rory's eyes snap to Lucian, and I don't think the fury in his gaze is for show when he grates out, "I promise there is nothing convenient about this, Morningstar."

"Really? Seems strange to me that your man—"

"He's not my man," Rory interrupts.

“The man who worked for you and did your bidding has gone missing before he could meet his punishment. Correct me if I’m wrong, but we’ve never had an issue keeping a detainee held before, so it seems *convenient* to me,” Lucian finishes, undaunted.

“He is from your family, Morningstar. It wouldn’t surprise me if you didn’t orchestrate this entire occasion.”

“Let me make sure I have your accusation correct, because it sure as shit seems like an accusation. You think I somehow convinced my uncle to betray his wife and family name, disgracing him and his kid, so that ten years later, I could somehow coax you into hiring his son, then years after that, I could use him in a plot that would get him killed, all so I could embarrass you. Did I get all that correct?”

Rory’s face turns red with restrained rage. “You probably helped him escape,” the older man seethes.

“Why don’t you pull up the camera feeds so we can all see what really happened?” Lucian challenges calmly.

The person who ran into the room to speak with Rory leans toward him again to talk. Whatever news she’s delivering doesn’t seem to make my grandfather any happier. “It would seem the entire security system has been hacked. My people are working on restoring the feed to the dungeons now.”

Dungeons? Why is that surprising? I should have known they would have something of the like.

“Your people,” Lucian scoffs. “I know you enjoy making me your scapegoat for every single fucking thing that happens, but isn’t it more likely it was one of *your people* who really aided in his escape? The only founding family with access to the school’s security is the seated president.”

“The security must have been breached.”

“Just like my boundaries were, by your man.”

I finally hear a little anger seep into Lucian’s calm tone.

“If I was involved, why would I lock the place down and make every effort to find him?”

“Because you know he’s not here, and you know no one will find him,” Lucian retorts.

“He will be found,” Rory insists.

Lucian lowers himself slowly into his righted seat without even glancing back, trusting that the guards behind him fixed it. “Doubtful, but that shouldn’t stop us from moving forward with our other business.”

I swear if my grandfather’s eyes could pop out of his head, they would. There’s a thick, purple vein at the side of his temple that looks like it might explode too. He takes a moment before speaking, but his gaze never wavers from our table. “It would seem we do have further business to discuss. As stated, Morningstar contends that Alden, previously of the same name, now known as Black, breached a founder’s boundaries. The complainant must produce evidence of this duplicity if he wishes to proceed with additional accusations and punishments. However, since the accused cannot stand in his own defense, I propose we hold off on any evidentiary findings until the matter of finding Alden Black can be resolved.”

“Bullshit!” Lucian stands again, but the calm façade is gone. His fists are balled on the table, and he looks like he’s about to leap over it to get to Rory.

“Those in favor of halting the proceedings, stand to be counted,” Rory sneers over Lucian’s outburst.

Several hooded heads turn to assess the room, and a few even stand, albeit slowly, but it’s clear the majority remains seated.

“Very well. Produce your evidence, Morningstar, if you wish to proceed with these outlandish claims.”

Lucian stalks away from the table, and I sit up straighter, uncomfortable with him moving away from us. Nox tightens his hold on my leg, keeping me in place as his brother walks unabashedly toward the dais and produces a flash drive from under his cloak.

The figure he hands it to plugs it into a white box with a large lens. In the next breath, the wall to the left of Rory lights up momentarily, and then an image of Alden emerging out of a door plays like a movie against the stone wall.

The video is crisp, leaving no doubt who the person is, yet I don't see any proof as of yet that Alden is on Morningstar property. The image freezes on Alden's face, then cuts to another image of him moving about a house, which I'm assuming is the beach house, as if he's very comfortable. The image pauses again, and Lucian speaks up. "This is our beach house on the coast. There were tunnels Alden knew of, since he was once a Morningstar, that led directly to this home. They have since been sealed."

The image rolls again, showing Alden stepping out of the house and onto the porch. I expect to see myself projected on the wall, but I'm not visible from the shot, or it's been edited to remove me, which is a relief. The image suspends for the final time, and Lucian addresses the room again. "I don't think there is any question that this is Alden Black, security advisor for the Umbras."

"While that does indeed look like Alden, how can we be sure this hasn't been edited, or that it's even your property in the video?"

"I have a witness," Lucian replies with an indifferent shrug. "I think you'll know who that witness is. Would you like me to produce them?"

I suck in a gasp as I realize Lucian is offering me up. He didn't mention it to me at all. There's a brief standoff between the two men. Lucian is relaxed and confident, while Rory is fuming. "That won't be necessary," my grandfather finally mutters through pinched lips. "I'm sure there are many among us who could attest to the validity of your claims. Even I've heard how that house was used."

Lucian's lips curl in a mocking smile at Rory's contrived insult, and I realize he knew that Rory would never call me as a witness. The last thing he would want is for everyone here to

know I'm with the Morningstars. Well played, pretty boy, but I will be getting him back for not warning me later.

“Since we've established who the intruder is and who he works for...” Lucian gestures toward the older man on the dais. “The only thing left for us to do is put the penalties due to the Umbras up to a majority vote.”

“You will hold your tongue, young man. I am still the President of Cadieux. As such, I am the only one who proposes votes or anything of the like. You'd do well to remember that. Now, take your seat,” Rory blusters like an angry neighbor who's had his lawn trampled one too many times. It makes him look even weaker. I almost feel sorry for him. If I didn't know what he expected of me, I still might.



LUCIAN

If I knew I could keep my temper under wraps, I'd say something back to the old bastard, but as it is, I'm on a razor's edge, close to snapping forward and breaking his goddamn neck, so I give him my back and return to my table.

I can feel my lamb's eyes on me, even though I can't see them. They slice right through all this pageantry and cut right to my bones. When I lower myself into the chair, she lets out a heavy exhale. I bet if we were alone, she would claw into me.

The sentries posted at the exits stay put, but several other custodians pass out parchments. Each vote will be read and destroyed tonight, so no one can try to discern who cast which vote. The penalties are not nearly as severe as I'd like, but any rebuke on the current first family will besmirch their legacy and name. I'll have to accept that for now. Once I'm in the seat of power, I plan to dismantle the other families piece by piece, starting with the Umbras.

I glance at the thick paper and read the short script.



The Morningstar family has requested that the Umbra family be cited and punished for their complacency in the matter of their employee.

Please mark below which penance you deem appropriate.

- Forfeiture of property—1 acre.*
- Financial restitution to the Morningstar family in the amount of one million dollars.*
- No penance deemed necessary.*

MY X through the first box is damn near deep enough to score the page, and five minutes later, when the custodian comes around to collect the sheet, I stare right into their covered face. I don't need ambiguity, and I never will.

Once all the papers are collected, they are handed over to a figure at a small podium, who counts each vote, while a member of the last two families in power, the Quades and the Omegas, audit each ballot for accuracy. Once the final vote is tallied, the figure then makes the decree. "The Umbras are to pay one million dollars restitution to the Morningstar family."

I'm not surprised by the punishment. These sheep bleat just like the herd they pretend to lead. They made the easy choice, but hearing Astrid's voice read the announcement was a nice revelation. I bet the words tasted like ash and rot in her mouth.

Rory dismisses the group hastily. "Business is concluded."

"What of Alden? We're owed an explanation, along with his head." I don't bother rising. I have everyone's attention.

“The underground has been searched. He has truly escaped. Rest assured, he won’t make it off the island.”

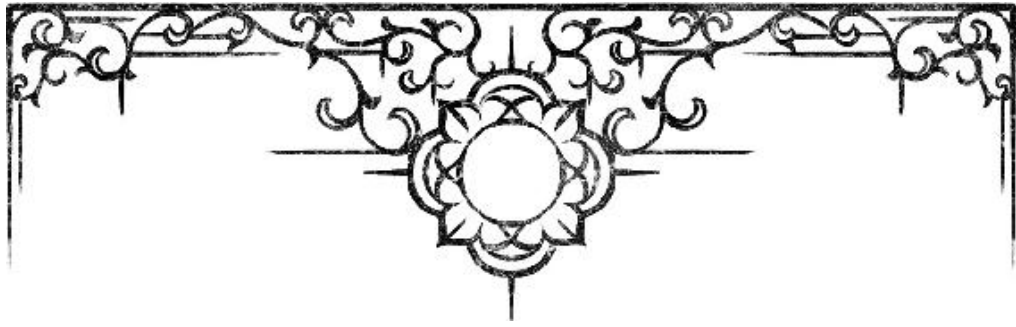
“That’s not good enough. How do we know you’re not protecting him?” I challenge.

“You have no option but to take me at my word.” The old man smiles faintly. “Punishment has already been tendered. There are no further actions here tonight.”

Nova’s hand curls around my wrist as I begin to rise, and it’s the only thing keeping me from ending his tenuous rule tonight with an untimely death. I don’t have protections in place for her, and I can’t risk her getting caught in the crossfire of an all-out war.

“You’re all free to go.” Rory waves his hand toward the exit before his men flank his back as he leaves the chambers through his personal egress beyond the door. I want to run after him and break the back of his head open, but I remain seated until many of the tables around us have emptied.

“Come on,” Nox encourages, helping Nova to her feet and leading us toward the lift.



NOX

Unsurprisingly, no one joins us when we get into the elevator. Lucian is silently fuming, but there's no denying his fury. Once the doors slide shut, he practically pounces on Nova, who seems to be prepared for his rage when she meets him head-on and accuses, "You didn't warn me that you were going to try to use me," while he has her pinned to the wall.

"There is never a time when I don't want to use you, lamb." He nuzzles her affectionately through the cloak, though it's at odds with his vicious words. "But we both know you were never in any danger of being outed. He wouldn't risk anyone knowing that I know what you taste like on the inside."

She gives him a half-hearted shove that doesn't deter my brother. In fact, he just moves a little closer and lines his entire body up against hers. As soon as the elevator bounces with our arrival, he steps back and pretends he wasn't just about to maul her. I know the façade will only last until we're alone again, but we have shit to deal with, so he'll need to wait. We need to find out if the Umbras really did let Alden escape, or if there's more going on here than we know.

The short ride to our compound is tense, and none of us speak until the heavy gates close behind us. Even then, it's only to deliver brief instructions to Lev to double the perimeter guards. It's a sure sign my brother is not ignoring the threat Alden poses.

"Already done. I also hired a trusted team from the mainland to patrol the exterior fence line. Matvey is taking point on water patrols," Lev responds.

"Good." Lucian nods, then exits the car.

Nova scoots along the seat, following him after mumbling, "Thank you," in response.

Lev meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. It's hard to read his cool stare, but knowing him as well as I do, I'd guess he doesn't fully trust Nova, if at all. It's not a shocker. He doesn't know her, and it's his job to be suspicious. I'm sure the only reason he hasn't voiced any concerns to me or Lucian is because he trusts us and our judgment. It's either that, or he doesn't want to deal with my twin's wrath for expressing his thoughts about her. He's a smart man.

As I walk into the house, the silence is broken by Nova's terse question. "What would you like me to do then?"

"Don't ask questions you're not ready to hear the answers to," Lucian retorts. I don't think he's capable of going ten minutes without starting a fight at this point.

"Oh, look at you, pretty boy, being all cryptic and mysterious," Nova coos, then deadpans, "I think I've had enough of the cult crap for the day."

"The cult shit has nothing to do with it, *lamb*, but since you asked so sweetly, I'll give you an answer that won't have your pretty mind spinning. Forget they exist. Let me handle them." He must be referring to the Umbras. I was worried that he said something to her about the "thank you" remark to Lev.

"You're so full of yourself," she scoffs, not backing down, even though I know she can sense the warning signs that Lucian is close to losing it. His calm demeanor is only a front. The fact that Alden got away, and we have no idea where he is or what his next move could be, has us both on edge.

"You're going to be full of me too, in about thirty seconds." His chin lowers as he pins her with a stare that promises follow through.

"If you ever touch me out of anger, I promise you won't like what happens," Nova vows, and the tension in the room amps up, making it hard to breathe. I don't doubt her for a second. I don't think Lucian would either if he were thinking clearly, but he's not, so I do it for him.

I reach for Nova's hand, lacing our fingers together. She doesn't resist me, but she doesn't look away from my brother

either. “It’s not anger, Nova. It’s fear,” I tell her, and I hope she can understand.

She turns her inquisitive blue eyes toward me, looking for clarification.

“He’s not mad at you,” I explain, wanting her to acknowledge the truth. She doesn’t show any outward signs of agreement, but she doesn’t dismiss my claim either. “He’s afraid of losing you, and he doesn’t know how to deal with it.”

Her fingers tighten around mine before she turns her attention back to Lucian. I watch him as well, unsure how he’s going to react to my disclosure.

“I would never let it happen.” He scowls in response to the idea of losing her. “The devil himself couldn’t take you from me.”

“And here I thought you were the devil himself, *Morningstar*.”

Nova’s comment makes Lucian bare his teeth in what I assume should be a smile, but it’s far too sinister for that. “Then hell must be empty, *Miss Devlin*.”

Nova’s inhale is audible, as if she’s never made the association between her own name and the ruler of the underworld. I doubt she realizes all the founding names have dark associations, including the Umbras, but she will never be one of them anyway. She will, however, be a Morningstar, one way or another.

I tug on her hand a little, pulling her closer, then whisper to the top of her head. “Don’t worry, Nova. You’d have to be at least half angel to put up with us.”

That causes her to let out a soft chuckle. “Or half crazy. Take your pick. I know which I think it is.”

“You *were* sweet and pure up until the other night. I know where I’d put my money. Let us corrupt you a little more, lamb. I need to know you’re safe between us, where nothing can touch you.” The confession is uncharacteristic for Lucian, but I’m beginning to understand he accepts that Nova lives outside of his usual boundaries, and he’s embraced how he

feels about her with the same appetite he does everything—absolutely.

“Are you sore, Nova? Can you still feel how deep we were inside you?” I mutter the words softly near her ear, and she reacts by leaning into my touch.

“A little, but I’m okay,” is her equally soft reply.

My dick thickens at the idea of her having physical reminders of how we took her virginity. I swear, every time she brushes against my skin, I remember how she felt wrapped around me. I’ve been dying to touch her again, but I wanted her to heal and not feel too pressured.

Lucian lifts his hand, expecting her to come to him, and she does, towing me right along with her by our joined hands. The minute she’s near enough, he takes her fingers and brings them up to his mouth to kiss. The set of her shoulders softens at the show of affection.

Instead of taking her to the room on the main floor, he guides her up the stairs to his room. I shut the door behind us, even though I know we won’t be disturbed. No one comes up to our floor other than Gertrude to clean, and it would never be when we are home.

Without wasting a second, I untangle our fingers and go right for the hem of her shirt. I want to see her nearly as badly as I want to feel her. Lucian seems to be on board, because his hands go to her pants, pushing them down her hips from behind.

Her eyes flash toward me, as if she’s looking to see what I think, or she’s bothered about wearing just a pair of faded black panties and a beige bra. I lean forward and kiss her softly, showing her the only thing I would like better is for her to be naked.

Her mouth meets mine, willing and eager, as she opens for me. “Tell me now if you’re too sore,” Lucian says, interrupting the moment and causing Nova to pull back from me to answer.

“I’m okay. I want to get lost for a little while,” she tells him, and her panties get jerked down her legs in the next

heartbeat. If she's surprised, she doesn't show it when she tilts her head to meet my lips again.

I trail my fingers up her bare sides, knowing exactly what she means. She makes it easy to forget about everything, and I love that we can make her feel the same way. She sighs as I wrap my arms around her, pulling her into my body so I can feel her pressed up against me. My dick throbs with the need to be inside her bare again.

I was a little shocked when Lucian didn't use a condom the first time, but after seeing his face and knowing the damage was already done, there was no way I was passing up the experience. I figured we'd get her something to take the next day, but when I asked him about it, he told me her medical records show she gets some kind of shot every three months that helps stop her periods and also works as a contraceptive.

She's the only person I haven't used protection with, so I know I'm not in danger of giving her anything, which is fucking perfect because I never want to touch a condom again after knowing what it feels like to have sex without one.

I cup her ass, grinding against her. My fingers dip a little lower to feel how warm she is. If she were taller, I would hike her leg up and slip right inside her, but the angle doesn't work with her standing. Still, that doesn't stop me from hooking her knee up by my hip so I can slip my finger inside her.

Her gasp is the only encouragement I need to keep going. Her response and how wet she is drives me to sink my finger as deep as I can go, the knuckles of my other fingers pushing against her lips while I finger fuck her. Nova's hips rock forward a little, but there's not much she can do with the way I'm holding her. As if to prove me wrong, she clamps down on my finger, drawing a groan from me. I lower her leg and walk her backward to the bed.

Once the backs of her legs hit the bed, I tear my mouth from hers and she drops on the mattress as if she were waiting for that exact moment. Her hands are on my belt before I manage it myself. Seeing her eager to touch me is even more of a turn-on.

The moment she reaches into my pants, my body freezes, and only my lungs and heart seem to keep working as she gently takes my dick in her hand and frees me from my pants. When she slides off the bed and onto her knees and takes my tip in her mouth, my eyes roll back in my head, and I have to grip the bedpost to keep myself standing.



NOVA

Nox threads his fingers into my hair and guides my head back and forth over him, filling my mouth so full, my throat spasms a few times, but I don't let that stop me from sliding my lips over him.

I know Lucian is watching. I can feel his presence right behind me as if he's lying in wait, but he doesn't make himself known any other way. He gives me time with his brother, but I relish the idea of both of them wanting me, which is something I never dreamed of before them, and I doubt I ever would after if something came between us.

I don't know if it's right or wrong, but Nox and Lucian are two halves of the same whole to me—incomplete without the other, but still perfect on their own.

“Fuck,” Nox groans, pushing deeper into my mouth so his tip hits the back of my throat with every thrust. I curl my fingers around the back of his thigh and feel drool slipping off my lip. My breathing is nearly as rough as his, interrupted by his plunges so I'm never able to take a full breath, but that's not why my heart is thundering in my chest. His fingers have tightened in my hair, and the slippery feeling of him pounding in and out of my mouth in a way that's completely out of my control has me squirming.

The only warning I get that Nox is about to come is the jerk of his hips. In the next second, warm, salty liquid hits the back of my tongue and throat. My esophagus constricts on instinct, and I force myself to swallow so I can steal a breath of air.

“Damn it, Nova,” Nox curses softly while easing out of my mouth and bending down so his lips are near my temple. I'm too busy catching my breath to wonder what I did wrong, because he sure seemed to like it. I swipe my arm under my messy mouth, getting rid of some of the drool and cum that leaked from my lips.

“I don’t think you have any right to complain, brother. You can barely stand.”

“I’m not complaining,” Nox amends. “I just wasn’t expecting her to swallow my soul before I had a chance to be inside her.”

“That was your soul she swallowed? No wonder you’re fading so fast,” Lucian teases.

“Yeah, you know who else was fading? You, Mr. One Pump.” Nox kisses the side of my face before leaning back.

I take a second to look down, seeing how wet the top of my thighs are, and I wipe at my mouth again. I really don’t think it’s supposed to be that messy, but I can’t say I regret it. My insides are on fire.

“Don’t bother trying to clean up yet, lamb, it’s my turn.” Lucian steps in front of me and grabs my jaw. I expect him to get closer and slide his dick into my slightly abused mouth, but he tips my head back, making sure my lips are parted from the pressure of his touch, and leans over me. His lips purse, and a string of spit falls directly into my mouth. My stomach does an honest to God flip, and my insides clench with a pang of need so intense, I’m not sure how to describe it.

“Oh, lamb, I don’t know how I’m ever going to repay the devil for sending me such a sweet little slut, but I’ll find a way.”

I run my tongue along my lips, careful to catch every drop, then make sure he watches me swallow. With a quickness I wasn’t expecting, Lucian leans forward and kisses me hard and deep while sliding his hands under my arms and hauling me up.

I get tossed on the bed, and then he’s over me, spreading my legs and surging inside me in a single stroke. My back bows off the bed, and I make a sound that shocks me. It’s part moan, part whimper.

When our hips are fully joined, he leans down and whispers, “If you make me come too fast again, I’ll keep you in this bed until both of us can control ourselves. Understand?”

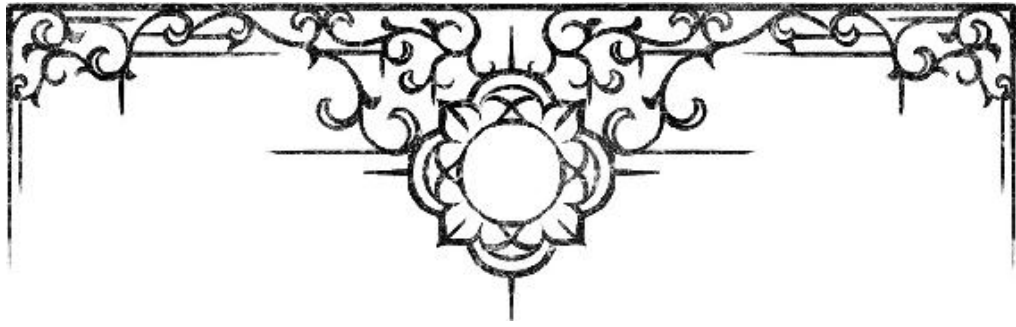
I squeeze my inner muscles, causing Lucian to hiss a breath through his teeth then chuckle darkly at my disobedience. “It’s not my fault you can’t control yourself, pretty boy,” I reply, unable to submit.

His warm breath against my neck sends a shiver of goose bumps along my back, proving I’m just as weak as he implied, but I won’t admit that now. I’m too stubborn when it comes to him.

Instead of saying anything, he reaches between our bodies and slowly circles my clit. “You’re not the only one with tricks, lamb. Play nice, and I’ll let you come. Keep it up, and I won’t stop until you give me three. You’ll be sore for days and begging for more anyway.” He pulls his hips back, then pushes in while still putting pressure on my clit. I don’t argue this time because I’m pretty sure he would follow through.

After a few more slow thrusts, Lucian props himself up on his hands, giving his hips more room to move while pinning me to the bed.

I decide to keep my mouth shut because the threat of three orgasms doesn’t seem so worrisome anymore, no matter the consequences.



LUCIAN

“*W*hat do you have for me?” I ask the few trusted men seated at the table in the security room. I haven’t had much occasion to actually use it with real purpose before Nova, but I’ve recently realized that despite my plans to take over Cadieux, I’ve been way too lax.

“There haven’t been any attempts to breach the walls, however, we continue to get calls from the Umbra estate requesting to speak with Nova.”

“Any word on Alden?”

“Nothing. I’m trying to contact a female staff member to see what she can tell me, but she’s a little reluctant,” Lev answers.

“Who?” I question, even though I doubt I will know who he’s speaking of.

“Bridget. I’m told she and Alden had a personal relationship in the past.”

“Interesting. How did you find that out?”

“Morozov’s girlfriend.” Lev nods to the tech specialist across the table.

When I look at Morozov, he supplies an explanation. “Vera and the girl went to school together. I thought the girl might be useful because she works in the Umbra home, but I didn’t know she and Alden were once an item. Apparently, things were hot and heavy between them, but he suddenly stopped returning her calls a few months ago, right around the same time Nova moved into the household.” One of his eyebrows arches up with the explanation, as if he finds the information interesting, and I can’t blame him. I find it very fucking interesting myself.

I sit back in my chair instead of slamming my fist on the table and demanding they bring me the fucker’s head, because

I know it will be of no use. If Alden wasn't a coward in hiding, he would already be dead.

"Offer her whatever she wants if she talks," I say.

"She's expressed fear of losing her job. Are you willing to hire her?" Lev questions.

"No. I don't reward disloyalty with access, but I will pay her. Make sure she gets set up elsewhere. Let her know I will get the answers I'm looking for, and whether she's willing or not makes no difference to me."

"I'll make sure she's aware," Lev replies.

I'm already leaning forward, my hands on the table as I prepare to stand, when I ask, "Is there anything else?" I may not be able to speak with Alden or Bridget yet, but there is someone sleeping in my bed upstairs I can question.

"Nothing that can't wait," Lev answers, reading my demeanor, and I stalk out of the room.



NOVA

I jerk awake when the covers are ripped from the bed and a cool draft of air chills my overheated skin. I lift my head to find Lucian looming over me with a look of fury in his impossibly light eyes.

The fear that should be present eludes me, and I drop my head back onto the downy pillow and snuggle closer to Nox's naked body.

"Tell me about Alden," the volatile man demands, kneeling on the bed to get closer to me.

It's the first time I notice he's dressed. When did he leave?

"Nova," he warns darkly. It's only then, when he uses my real name, that I know he means business.

"Tell you what, Lucian?" I ask. It's like the link in my brain to recognize him for any kind of threat has been broken. He's given me too much pleasure.

"Tell me why that cocksucker stopped fucking his bitch when you showed up."

"Huh?" I think I'm still half asleep. Maybe I'm dreaming, because this doesn't make sense.

Lucian drops to his knees and puts his face near mine. "Was Alden trying to fuck you?" he seethes through clenched teeth.

"No, he didn't even like me," I deny vehemently.

"You're fucking impossible to resist, whether he liked you or not. Did he touch you?" His fervent eyes scan me, as if he's going to find proof of the other man on my skin.

"No. Why are you freaking out? Did he say something to you?"

"Would he have something to say to me, lamb?"

“No.” I scoot back until I’m able to sit up and not bump noses with him. I blink a few times, trying to dispel the sleep fog clouding my brain, but I’m still confused. “Where is this coming from?”

“He stopped fucking his girl when you showed up, stopped returning her calls. Why do you think that is?”

“I have no fucking clue. He didn’t even tell me he had a girlfriend.”

“You asked him?” He raises his voice for the first time.

“No, we didn’t talk about stuff like that,” I reply.

“What the fuck, Lu?” Nox grumbles. I’ve noticed he doesn’t sleep as much as his brother, but when he does, he sleeps deeply. Lucian must have gotten pretty loud to wake him up.

“I want to know every time you saw him and everything he ever said,” Lucian demands unreasonably.

“Are you joking? I don’t remember any of that stuff.”

“When was the first time you met him?” He crawls even closer to me.

“At my apartment.”

“Your apartment in Michigan?”

“Yes, he brought me luggage and flew here with me.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing really.”

“He didn’t speak to you?” Lucian pushes.

“He talked when he had to, but it wasn’t like he was all cuddly or anything. He made it clear he worked for my grandparents and I was his job.” I’m getting aggravated by his questions and the fact that he clearly doesn’t trust me now that I’m more awake.

“That’s not what it sounds like to me,” he accuses.

“Oh yeah, let me guess, to you, it sounds like I was sucking his—”

His hand flies up and covers my mouth, not allowing me to finish my sentence. “Don’t,” he warns darkly.

I pry his fingers off my face. “Dick!”

Nox rolls over and squints at us.

“Watch your mouth,” Lucian snarls.

“What the hell is going on?” Nox sits up and rubs his eyes with his palms. “This better be fucking important, Lucian. You know how fucked up my sleep has been. And why are you all up in her face?”

“Alden stopped fucking his girl when she showed up, and I want to know why.”

“Why the hell are you acting like Nova has the answer? Or am I missing something?” Nox trades glances with me and his brother.

I ignore Nox’s question and tell Lucian, “You are so dumb.”

“What?” He has the nerve to look perplexed. I reach down and grab the blanket to cover myself up.

“You. Are. An. Idiot!” I say each word slowly. “You tear in here, accusing me of what? Sleeping with him? But it can’t be that, because you know I hadn’t been with anyone before you, you jerk. Maybe you think I was leading him on or teasing him. Is that it?” I struggle to get more blankets to wrap around myself. Both of them move around to help me, but I’m so mad, I don’t even care. “Well, you got me. All of this was an elaborate scheme to get close to you. I let you treat me like crap and push me around and finally have sex with me because that’s all a piece of gutter trash like me has to offer. I’m really just here for Alden, a guy who couldn’t be bothered to even eat a meal with me when I didn’t have a single person in the world who wanted me around!”

I’m standing on the bed, and I don’t even remember getting up or when I started yelling. They are both staring at me like I have a loaded gun pointed at them, and they don’t know what to do.

I give the blanket one final jerk to pull it out from under Nox, then spin to jump off the bed. “Wait.” He leans forward, trying to catch me, but I have anger on my side, so I’m much quicker. I slam the door to the bathroom and turn the lock, my heart racing and tears threatening to spill from my eyes.

“Shit,” Lucian curses flatly, but I hear it clearly through the door.

“Shit? That’s what you have to say? Christ, Lucian, do you really want her to hate you?”

I rush over to the tap and turn the water on full blast. I don’t want to hear what they are going to say about me or any of Lucian’s excuses. Why the heck couldn’t he just ask me about Alden instead of accusing me of... Did he actually accuse me of anything? I’m already questioning if I should be this mad.

As I glance around the room, I quickly realize what a dumb move it was to storm off. I have no clothes and nowhere to go, and I probably wouldn’t leave even if I did. Even pissed off, I know there’s no other place I’d rather be. When I get a look at myself in the mirror, I think I hate myself just a little for the weakness.

The light tapping on the door only a few moments later interrupts my loathing, giving me something else to focus on. “What?”

“Can I come in?” I can just imagine Lucian on the other side of the door, his jaw set and shoulders slumped. We really aren’t healthy for each other.

“No, I’m pooping.”

“You’re lying. You always turn on the shower when you’re shitting,” he challenges.

“Ugh, you are so nosy.” I groan in frustration. I thought I was slick, pretending I was just taking a longer shower.

“You’re the one who brought it up.”

“Go away. I’m mad at you.” *And myself.*

“No, I like it when you’re mad, and this isn’t mad,” he argues.

“Now you’re going to tell me how I feel?”

“If you try to lie to me, I will.”

“I am mad.” I sulk under my breath.

“I am an idiot,” he replies with the same tenor.

“I know!”

“Good, we agree on something, now open the door.”

“I’m not ready to see your stupid face.”

There’s a thud on the door, then the sound of something sliding down. “You mean pretty face.”

“No, I said what I meant.” I turn the water off. It’s not doing any good anyway, since he’s practically on top of the door.

“You make me crazy,” he says, “irrational, unreasonable, and fucking homicidal. I can’t stand the thought of losing you or how you make me feel. I don’t always deal with that the way I should.”

“Always? How about never.”

“Give me a little credit, lamb. I haven’t moved you into a secret bunker in the middle of nowhere.”

I unlock the door and pull it open quickly. Lucian ends up lying at my feet, half in the bathroom and half out. I peer down at his admittedly gorgeous face. “Please tell me you haven’t really entertained that idea?”

“It would be a lie.” He stays on the ground, and I examine him. He looks tired, and if I’m honest, a little defeated. I lower myself, the blanket still wrapped around me near his head. He doesn’t waste any time scooting back so his head is cradled in my lap.

My fingers delve into his dark hair, and I let out a weighty sigh. “You could have just asked me, not acted like I was scheming with the enemy.”

“I never thought you were scheming with him. I think he wanted what’s mine, and it pissed me off.” His words are clipped with irritation again.

“He didn’t,” I deny.

“He did. A man doesn’t give up free pussy unless he has more lined up.”

I yank his hair, but not enough to hurt him. His lids lower to a lazy gaze that can’t be called anything but sexy. “That’s gross.”

“That’s a fact.” He turns and bites my inner thigh through the blanket. “There’s a reason he was no longer interested in Bridget, and that reason was you.”

“Wait, Bridget was his girlfriend?” I’m skeptical, but once the thought takes root, it’s not that surprising. She was so prim and proper, with a hefty side of uptight attitude.

“You know her?” He’s watching me again, but his gaze has shifted to shrewd.

“Not really, we only talked a few times. She came to my room to get me for dinner once or twice, that kind of stuff. I tried talking to her, asked her about the college, and she shut me down really quickly. That was pretty much it.”

“She probably didn’t like you because her man did.”

“He didn’t,” I deadpan. “Alden treated me like an... inconvenience. I tried being his friend, and he made it clear he was there to work and that was all. Bridget probably got mad at him when he didn’t have as much time to be around. They wanted him to babysit me all the time.”

“Maybe he’s the one who wanted to babysit you,” Lucian offers.

“Nah, he wasn’t even friendly really. You saw how he treated me,” I point out, reminding him of the time in the cafeteria.

“You think I could pay attention to him when you were there? He barely registered.”

“Now you’re just trying to be slick,” I accuse, feeling flattered anyway.

Lucian lets out a soft groan and buries his head farther between my legs. “Did you really have to say *slick* when I’m supposed to be good? Now all I can think about is how long it would take for me to make you all slick and ready for me.”

“You’re not going to get out of this conversation by trying to use sex to distract me.”

“You started it.” He uses his nose to try to push the blanket away from me.

“Because I said slick?” I’m incredulous.

“Yes, and the way you smell is driving me insane.”

“We’ve established you’re already there. You didn’t need my help, and I don’t smell.” I try to close my legs a little, but it’s impossible with him there.

“Yes, you do. You smell sweet and warm. Объедение.”

“And that means?” I sound a little breathy, but it’s not my fault. He got most of the blanket moved, and he’s inching closer to my center.

“Delicious. I could taste you over and over.” He slides his tongue up my now exposed slit, as if to prove the point, and I forget why this isn’t a good idea.



NOVA

“How AM I going to catch up with the work?”

“You don’t need to catch up. Hell, you wouldn’t even have to show up if you didn’t insist on going,” Lucian grumbles dejectedly.

It’s the truth. I’m the one who insisted on returning to some kind of normalcy, and that means going to school. “You’re grumpy. You didn’t have to come.”

“Like I’m going to leave you here alone. I’d have to burn the fucking place down and kill everyone on the island if you got hurt again. Then I’d have to pay to rebuild this monstrosity, and that sounds like a goddamn headache.”

“That sounds like a headache? That’s what you’re worried about? Not killing a couple hundred innocent people?”

He gives me a droll stare, wondering why I even asked a question I already know the answer to. “No one here is innocent, except maybe you.”

I snort at his response. “You have a funny way of seeing things, pretty boy.”

“Uh-huh, get your ass in there before I change my mind and torch this place just so you don’t insist on crawling out from under me in the morning.”

“Are you going to wait here?” I ignore all the looks of the other students. I doubt they are concerned with my health and why I was gone for so long. I’m pretty sure it’s Lucian, who’s looming over me, that has their attention.

“I’ll be around for a little while. My brother will be here to meet you for your next class. If someone fucks with you, call me.” He announces the last part loud enough that the people milling around can hear his instructions.

“Morningstar, are you escorting an Umbra to class? I never thought I’d see the day.”

“My name is Nova Devlin,” I correct, but the older man never takes his eyes off Lucian. “Hey!” I snap my fingers in his face. “Don’t act like I’m not standing here.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Lucian’s lips curl up in a smirk. “It seems you’ve forgotten your place. Quade, isn’t it?”

“Omega,” the man says through clenched teeth. I bet Lucian knew that and just wanted to insult the guy.

“Your place, Omega, is far beneath hers. Now, run along and let the grown-ups talk before I decide you might be worth my time.”

I wince a little. The man is much older than both of us, yet Lucian is pointing out that he will never have the kind of power he enjoys. To his credit, the Omega walks away with his chin up, but not uttering a single word in rebuttal. Even though he’s kind of a jerk, I still feel a little bad for him.

“Is everyone here on a power trip or what?” My question is rhetorical, but Lucian answers it anyway.

“Yes, but don’t fret, little lamb, you hold your own just fine.” He grins down at me, and the difference between the smile I get and the sharp one he gives to others is more than evident. Even his eyes light up when he looks at me like this.

I sigh softly. “Gosh, you’re pretty.”

“Do you have any idea what I would do to anyone else who dared to call me pretty?” He leans against the wall outside my classroom, maintaining a little distance between us. I really should go inside, but I don’t want to pull myself away from him.

“I’m sure it would involve maiming and possible bloodshed,” I concede with a shrug.

Lucian nods. “Are you sure you need to get to class?”

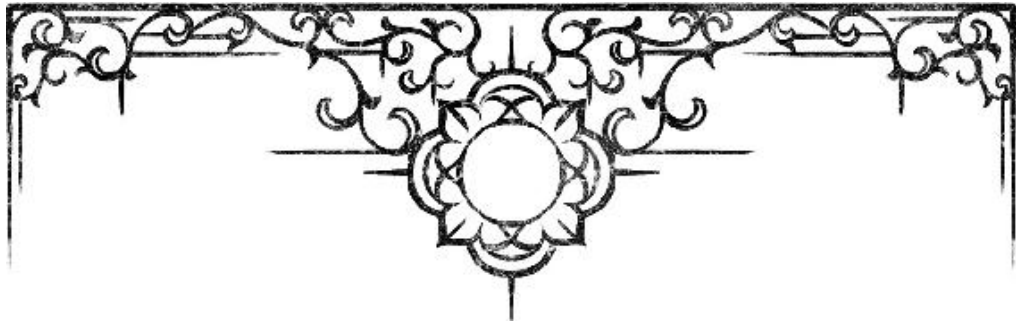
“Yes, I’m going to be late.”

“We could go to the library and...study,” he offers, which makes me laugh. I’m confident Lucian has never studied, let alone in the library. “What’s so funny?” He has the nerve to look offended.

“You studying in the library. Besides, it’s not like I want to hang out in the first place I was...whatevered.” I’ve been avoiding that place since my arm got scratched up, and now there are two places I’m going to need to steer clear of. I’ve already been thinking about finding a single bathroom, some place where I could lock the door behind me if I need to pee. I just don’t think I’ll feel comfortable in the community restrooms for a while.

Lucian’s face shifts, his smile dropping as if it were never there. He pushes off the wall, and I’m not quick enough to tell him that I was only messing around before he says, “I’ll see you after school. Call if you need me.” He stalks away, heading in the opposite direction we came from.

I feel utterly alone before he even disappears, so I pivot and head into the classroom, taking a seat in the far back. I really should have just stayed in bed.



LUCIAN

“Hey, I have an idea,” I say when Nox answers his phone.

“Please don’t tell me you’re going to call in a gas leak just to get Nova to leave school.”

“I didn’t even think of that.” I’m really off my game.

“Then what?”

“Remember when she had some problems in the library? What if it was the same person who attacked her?” I pose the question as I head toward the security office. I should have asked for the video feeds a long time ago, but my brain was scrambled.

“I thought you didn’t know who it was?”

“I don’t. I’m going to ask for any surveillance from that day.”

“And you think they’ll give it to you?” Nox scoffs. “You’d be better off having Morozov hack into the feeds. The second the Umbras get wind of you wanting something, they’ll either destroy it or try to use it as a bargaining chip.”

“Shit!” I stop in my tracks. He’s right. Thank fuck I called him first. I turn on my heel and head right back in the direction I came from, noting the empty space where my lamb was only a few minutes ago. I should have waited for her to go into class instead of leaving her in the hall, but I was hyper focused on getting that footage.

“Call Morozov and have him meet us in the office. I’m going to make sure she made it to class, then I’ll be there.”

“You didn’t take her to class?” He’s pissed.

“I left her right outside the door. I just want to be sure.” The teacher stops speaking when I haul the door open and look around the room. Every head turns to the back of the class, but

only one person groans—Nova. “She’s good,” I say into the phone, then let the door close.

“Good. Call Morozov, I need to finish getting dressed,” Nox snaps, then hangs up on me. I look down at the phone with a wry grin. My brother is coming back to me.



LUCIAN

I PASS a few people on the main floor as I make my way toward the offices at the back of the house. I don't know many of them by name, but their faces are familiar. Gertrude and her family are the only people my parents permitted in the house alone, but things have changed a bit in their absence. Gertrude now handles hiring staff and when they come and go. They pretty much ignore me, which is exactly what I want.

Nox and Morozov are already in the room when I enter. The tech specialist stands to greet me. "So we're busting into the school and hacking into their security?" He gets right to the point.

"Do we need to bust into the school? It's not something you can do remotely?"

He shakes his head. "No, I need to patch directly in, or they will know someone is trying to get in and lock it down."

"How do you know?" Nox asks, voicing the same question I was going to ask.

"It's my job to know." Morozov shrugs. "I gave them a gentle nudge after the shitshow the other night. I figured their security would be easy enough to hack, since they said someone interrupted their feeds to let the предатель escape, but it was tight."

"Do you think they locked it down after he escaped?" I question.

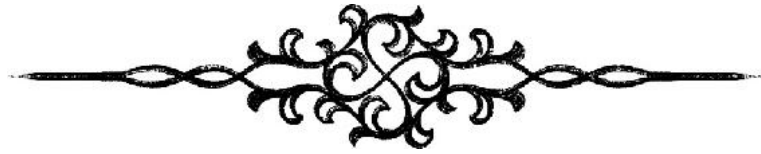
"No, there wasn't enough time for a full overhaul," Morozov states confidently.

"Alden's getaway was an inside job for sure," Nox chimes in.

"It would certainly seem so to me," Morozov agrees.

"What kind of access do you need to get into their system?"

Morozov smiles, showing a gold canine tooth. “I just need to slip in their backdoor.”



NOX

Nervous isn't the right word to describe how I'm feeling, but anxious could sum it up pretty nicely. I want to know what we'll find, if anything, on those tapes, and there's a sense of urgency pushing me to make sure it gets done as quickly as possible.

Lucian and I took care to make sure it would be nearly impossible to distinguish between the two of us, not that anyone usually can other than Nova, and the only explanation she can give as to how she does it is a feeling she gets.

I check my watch again as impatience tugs at me. Nova's class should be out any minute. The plan is to get her out of the school quickly so Lucian can handle his task. I wasn't on board with his plan, but I couldn't come up with anything better, so his way it is.

The low hum of voices emanating behind the closed door causes me to push off the wall with expectation of her arrival. Unexpectedly, Nova is one of the first people to exit the class.

"Hey," I call, grabbing her attention when it seems like she was just going to walk right past me. She pivots and comes straight toward me, angling through the other students hurriedly. "What's wrong?" I move to meet her.

"Thank God you're here. I have to pee so badly."

"You needed me for that?" I chuckle softly.

Her gaze falls to my chest before she whispers, "Not really excited about the bathroom."

Fuck. It didn't even cross my mind about her having to revisit the room she was attacked in. How shitty is that? "Good thing we live close," I offer, wishing I could reach out and touch her, but we don't need to put any more garbage on our plate. The Umbras can't do shit about Nova being with us, even if they know we're together, because she's their only hope. That offers us some insulation, but the same can't be

said for the Omegas and Quades. If they find out just how deeply we are involved with each other, there will be a mess I'm not sure even Lucian can fix.

"I've been holding it for the past hour." She shifts on her feet. "Will you stand by the door?" She peers up at me with pleading blue eyes.

"Anything you need, Nova," I agree without reservation.

"Can we go upstairs? The ones down here..." She doesn't need to finish.

"I'll follow you."

The relief on her face says everything. She pushes forward, almost as if she might plant a kiss on my lips, but she catches herself before getting too close and turns away from me, saving us both.

She avoids the main hall near the Union and rushes down toward the end to a set of service stairs. When she opens the door, she checks behind her, making sure I'm still there, then disappears behind the heavy wood. It only takes me a second to catch up, and then I'm right behind her all the way up to the third floor.

"Don't ever let me get a large coffee." She winces while squeezing her knees and thighs together as she turns to open the door. Once she's in the open area of the third floor, she damn near runs to the bathroom. I follow right behind her as she pushes the door open and calls, "Anyone in here?" as she enters the stall. Her little squeal before the sound of her peeing seconds later is the only response.

"I'll stay right here."

"Sorry you have to hear me pee, Nox." She sighs with relief.

I lean against the open door, so I can make sure no one else is going to try to enter the bathroom. "I think it's weird that you think you need to apologize for that," I tell her. "I stand next to strangers and piss all the time. You think me hearing you pee is a hardship?"

“It’s TMI.” The toilet flushes, and she exits the stall at a much slower pace. “I really thought I was going to pee my pants there at the last second.”

“Is that what that little squeal was about?” I chuckle.

“Stupid buttons.” She shoves her hands under the water after turning on the tap and washes up.

“All better?” I ask as she passes me, stepping through the door. It’s so hard not to touch her, and even more so because no one’s around.

“Yes, thank you.” She smiles up at me.

“Gertrude was making lunch when I left. Are you hungry?”

“I could definitely eat,” she agrees.

“Let’s get out of here. I get to have you all to myself for a little while.”

“I’m ready whenever you are.”

My first inclination that something is very wrong comes when Nova stops dead in her tracks on the stairs, and I nearly bump into her. I don’t need to ask her what the holdup is, because anyone with eyes can see the problem. A foul curse leaves my lips when I see my twin with his forearms against the wall, leaning over Grace in a pose that speaks of familiarity. Even worse, the girl reaches up and coyly toys with Lucian’s shirt over his chest, and he doesn’t push her away.

My throat and body get tighter and tighter as her fingers continue to inch up, reaching his neck, where she curls her fingers as if she might pull him down for a kiss, or she’s hoping he will take the invitation.

Finally, I let out a breath when Lucian captures her hand and takes it from his neck. I think he’s about to put some distance between them, but instead, he keeps her hand in his and pulls her off the wall and hauls her behind him as he disappears down a long, dim corridor.

Nova laughs, but it's devoid of humor. The utter devastation accompanying the chuckles is what snaps me back to reality.

"It's not what you think." I wince at the words coming from my mouth.

"Sure it isn't. I'm certain he was just helping her study. Looks like they are headed to the library." The innocent way she says "study" triggers a warning, but I'm not sure why.

Nova turns on the stairs to face me. She's wearing the mask of a stranger—a blank expression and hard eyes. I immediately reach out for her, damn the cost, but she takes a deft step backward, putting more distance between us and lowering herself even more on the steps.

"I can't tell you what that was right now, but I'm asking you to trust me," I say quickly, sensing her departure.

"No can do, Nox." She shakes her head. "I'm tired of trusting people. Tired of always getting hurt. You people can have your war without me. I never belonged here."

"Nova." I jump down two steps, getting up in her face. "I promise you that wasn't what you think." I'm about two seconds away from grabbing hold of her arm and dragging her with me to make her see reason.

"I don't care. I don't. I'm sure you'll both have a pretty excuse, but it doesn't change anything. You both kept something from me, deceived me, even if it isn't the fact that Lucian is going to be with her. I can't pretend it's okay just because you're good at pretending I mean something to you."

"You do mean something, you mean everything," I whisper, looking out behind her to make sure no one else is watching us.

"I've never been that delusional." She snorts. "I'm going to leave now, and you're going to let me."

"No, I'm not." I move even closer, ready to grab her.

"Yes, you will, because despite that emptiness inside you, you're not mean or cruel."

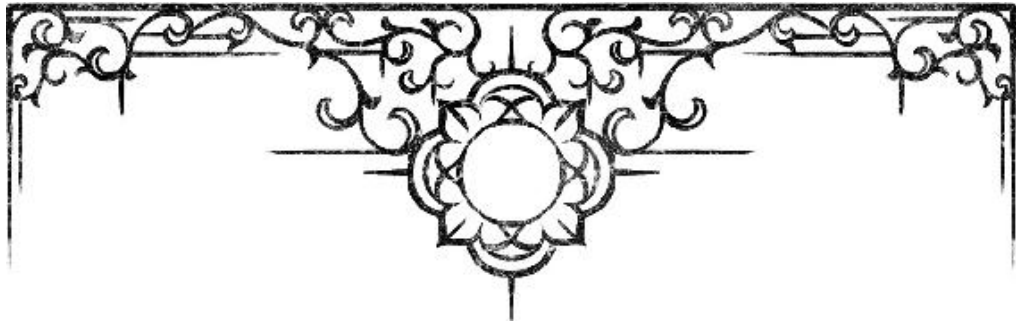
I swallow thickly at her words.

Nova reaches up and touches my cheek gently, then adds, “But most importantly, if you don’t, I will tell everyone standing down there that I love you, that you made me love you, and it will ruin both of your futures. No more next in line for Lucian. No more domination of Cadieux. Your name will forever be sullied, and you would never do that to him.” Her hand drops away while I still reel from her confession of loving me. It doesn’t matter that she said it to hurt me, because her confession rings true, and I can barely breathe because of it. It’s not the threat of her outing me that has me frozen, it’s the pain in her eyes, deep in her soul.

When I blink, she’s halfway down the stairs, another blink, and she’s escaping out the side door. The second it shuts behind her, I inhale, trying to get the tightness in my chest to loosen, but it doesn’t. Everything feels wrong.

My phone buzzes, and I’m surprised I have the dexterity to pull it from my pocket and put it to my ear. “What the fuck is wrong?” Lucian snarls through the line, sensing my distress.

“She’s gone,” I say, telling him the only thing that matters.



NOX

“*W*hat the fuck do you mean, she’s gone?”

“She saw you with Grace.”

“What?”

“I tried to explain.”

“Apparently not fucking hard enough, since she’s not there. How could you let her leave?”

“You didn’t see her face,” I defend.

“And yours is about to be bloody. Where the fuck is she?”

“I don’t know. I’ll find her.” I hop down the stairs. I don’t care about his threat to me, but my concern for Nova and the thought of actually losing her finally gets me moving.

“You fucking better, and I don’t care what she says or how she looks. Strap her ass to a goddamn chair if you need to and make her listen. Call me as soon as you have her. I need to finish this shit.” He ends the call without another word.

I push out the same exit door she did and scan the side of the school, coming up empty. She doesn’t have a car here, but I head to the parking lot anyway, because I don’t think she would just hang around campus. She’s probably looking for a way off the island, and Nova has to know we would come after her.

When I turn the corner of the building, I catch a glimpse of Nova as she bends down to climb into the backseat of a black car. I don’t know the driver behind the wheel, but I know he’s not one of ours. “Nova!” I call, already running. She pauses just long enough to let me know she heard me, but then moves even faster as she shuts the door, and the car starts to speed off.

Without thinking of the consequences, I step directly into the path of the car. Everything slows down until it feels like the entire world is moving in slow motion. I see the driver’s

shocked expression, and Nova's wide-eyed look of pure terror, but I still don't make a move to get out of the way of the car. I don't think it's going fast enough to kill me, but I'm not looking forward to the pain.

I watch as Nova's mouth opens to yell, "Stop," and then her hand comes up to hit the back of the seat in front of her. The screech of tires warns me the car might have been going faster than I thought, but it's too late now. She's not leaving this parking lot, and Lucian will take care of her if I can't.

Her mouth opens again, and she breaks eye contact with me to look at the driver. His head is pushed back against the headrest, giving me the impression he's hitting the brakes, but I don't think any of us is confident that he's going to stop before he hits me.

A scream splits the air and reality snaps back into place. The car is still hurtling toward me. I think about taking a step back, but something keeps me rooted to the spot, something dark and ugly I don't want to acknowledge, but I have to—thoughts that everyone would be better off without me, that I ruin everything anyway, and finally, acceptance that I'm the person responsible for my parents' deaths.

Shouldn't I die too?

The Mercedes jerks to a halt inches from my legs. Belatedly, I reach forward and plant my hands on the hood. "Get out of the car, Nova," I croak out, stunned I can even form words.

The backdoor flies open, and she storms out screaming, "What is wrong with you? Didn't you see the car?"

Of course I saw the car. "I knew he would stop," I lie. I know the moment she recognizes the falsehood and what it means, so I admit it out loud. "You're more important. Besides, I belong to you, and you were leaving me."

She shakes her head with tears brimming in her eyes which, thankfully, don't fall before she grabs my shirt and hauls me up on the curb. "Stupid Morningstar, thinks he's invincible and the world stops for him," she grates out,

releasing my arm. Her words are angry and voiced for everyone standing about watching the debacle unfold, but I don't care what she says, because I can see what she's really thinking in her eyes, which haven't left my face since she got out of the car. She's relieved I'm okay, more than relieved, and maybe a little mad at me too, but I can deal with that.

“Move along, nothing to see but a Morningstar making sure everyone knows he's the top dog.” Nova tries to dispel the crowd of onlookers, but no one moves.

“Leave now!” I bark, not taking my eyes off her either.

“Miss,” the driver starts.

“Take a step closer, and I will break your fucking legs. She's not going anywhere with you.”

Nova sighs. “You better go before I'm responsible for another person's death.”

“Miss, your grandmother...”

“Will make your death much quicker than I will,” I warn him, then continue, “Lunch is waiting,” gesturing for Nova to walk ahead of me to the car.

I open the door for her and close it securely once she's seated inside, then run around to the driver's side on slightly shaky legs. She doesn't speak or even look over at me, but the heavy tension in the car is enough to have me squirming.

“I have to call Lu so he doesn't plot my death longer than he needs to,” I tell her to break the silence, but she doesn't respond.

My Bluetooth picks up, making his voice ring through the car speakers. “Do you have her?” He's breathing heavily, as if he's been running.

I glance over at Nova and answer, “Yes. We're—”

“You'll be lucky if I ever let you out of my—” I hit the end button, bringing his diatribe to a close.

“He was worried too,” I tell her while my phone begins ringing. I ignore it.

“Worried he would lose control of his game piece,” she grumbles.

“That’s not true. He’s not using you, Nova. Neither of us are. I need you to know that.”

“It’s always what you two need and want. How about what I need?”

“What do you need?” I question sincerely, wanting the answer. If she feels like we’re ignoring her wishes, we need to know.

She snaps her mouth closed so fast, I start to wonder if I screwed up again by asking the question. Is this something I should already know? Eventually, she changes the subject, leaving me to wonder but distracting me all the same. “What the heck was that out there, Nox? You can’t do stuff like that! You could have been killed!” she chastises.

“I will do whatever it takes to make sure you’re safe. Whatever it takes,” I reply, defending my choice, because I would do it again.

“Ugh, you don’t even fight fair! How am I supposed to deal with that? You make taking over my life and dictating what I do and where I go sound chivalrous and sweet, but really, I only think that because I’m just as nuts as you two are. And don’t think I didn’t see the resolve in your eyes, Nox, because I did. I will throttle you myself if I see even a hint of that crap again. Do you hear me?”

“Yes,” I whisper, hoping I can keep that promise to her.

“Good, because I’m serious.” She sulks, and we fall into silence again until I park the car at the side of the house.

“Do you want to wait until Lucian is home to hear his explanation, or do you want me to tell you why he was talking to Grace now?”

“Talking my butt. He was doing more than talking.”

I keep my mouth shut, waiting for her to answer instead of defending him. Somehow, I think that would piss her off more, and that’s the last thing I want to do, even though the urge to

tell her she was wrong to leave and get into the car with whomever that was weighs heavily on me.

“I want to hear it from him. He was the one doing it, so he should explain why the heck he was giving face to her.”

“Giving face?” I question.

“Working his pretty boy magic. You do it too, it’s just not as intentional or blatant, but Lucian knows exactly what he’s doing. The jerk.” She opens her door and climbs out of the car, shutting it a little harder than necessary. I meet her on the steps and open the door for her to enter the house ahead of me.

She heads straight for the kitchen, but asks, “When will he be home?”

I bet she doesn’t even realize she refers to this place as home, but I do. Her presence makes this house feel less empty, and it’s not the fact that she takes up space or is an extra body. She fills it with life and energy that isn’t chaotic and angry all the time, despite the fact that she’s pissed now. “I’m not sure. More than likely as soon as possible after that phone call.”

“He’s lucky you hung up. It’s a lot nicer than what I would have said,” she grumbles while jerkily turning on the water to wash her hands.

I move to stand beside her, closer than necessary, but the desire to make sure I can, that she’s not going to shy away from me, presses me to prove she’s really here and not planning on ditching me again.

“Did you mean it?” The words fly from my mouth without thought, because I want to hear her confirm she loves me, even if I already saw the truth in her eyes. You can’t fake that kind of pain.

She stiffens next to me. “What?”

Her soft reply tells me she already knows what I’m asking, but I tell her anyway. “When you said you love me?”

Her shoulders round a little, and she scrubs her hands long after the lather is gone. “Isn’t it pretty obvious?” She tries to sound placid, like it’s not a big deal.

“I’m sorry.” My mouth works again before I can think about how it will sound.

“You’re sorry?” She shifts, lifting her eyes to mine in a clear sign she’s bewildered by my response, but in the next breath, I see sad acceptance on her face. She thinks I’m apologizing for not feeling the same way.

I reach for her hands before she can pull away and hold them in mine, forcing her to listen to what I’m about to say. “I’m sorry because I know we’re not easy to love and never will be. I’m sorry that we make everything more difficult and our lives will never be simple, but I’m too selfish to wish you never answered that door, Nova, because I love you too. I think I loved you the moment I saw your beautiful face on the screen, trying to help my idiot brother when you had every right to let him get run over on that road.”

The way her face softens as she looks up at me proves she heard every word I said, and the smile she breaks into when I tell her Lucian deserved to get run over is contagious.

I drop my forehead to hers and breathe her in. “Thank you for putting up with us. I promise we will always take care of you.”

“Nova!” Lucian barks, disrupting the moment as a door slams. Her fingers tighten around mine in a clear sign of emotion, but I can’t tell if she’s irritated or worried by his cross tone.

“Don’t be sorry, Nox. I would answer that door every time if I knew it led me to you.”

I lean down and kiss her, even though I know my brother is going to be stomping through the door any second. I’m going to enjoy her ripping into him after his interruption.

“Where are you?” my impatient twin demands, and his heavy footfalls pound up the stairs. I feel her smile against my lips, relishing making him wait.

By the time he makes it to the kitchen, I have Nova’s ass up on the counter, and we’ve both enjoyed the vibrations from the phone in my front pocket as I ignored his calls.

She breaks the kiss but doesn't remove her roving hands from my neck and back. "Oh, you're back." She feigns surprise.

"You knew damn well I was home."

Nova shrugs, disinterested in Lucian's scowl, causing him to turn his eyes toward me.

"You could have answered."

"I was busy."

"So was I, yet I was still there for you when you told me she was gone."

"Oh yes, let's talk about how busy you were, Lucian. Did you get a lot of studying done?" Nova slips away from me and hops down to the floor, putting herself at a serious height disadvantage, but she doesn't recognize it as she advances on my brother.

He snorts. "I don't study."

"But you offered to help me. I guess when I turned you down, you decided to run off with Grace."

"Is that what you think we were doing?" Lucian has no self-preservation. He's actually smiling as he begins circling her. If she were anyone else, I would say she's done for and he's looking for the right place to strike, but Nova gives just as good as she gets. I think Lucian might be the one in trouble here.

"Tell me, pretty boy, did she like the taste of my pussy?"

I don't even know what to call the sound that erupts from my chest, but it's from absolute shock and wonder.

Lucian isn't quite as taken with disbelief, or he just hides it better than me. "I find it amusing that you think I would ever give anyone the chance to find out, lamb."

"I saw you with her." Nova loses a little of her cool, snapping at him.

"You saw what I wanted everyone to see, including her, but I love your possessiveness."

“Why were you with her?” It’s Nova’s turn to move around Lucian, examining him for any weak spots.

“I needed her to do something for me, and she did.”

Nova slows until she’s completely still, and she looks poised to attack. “Did she get on her knees for you?”

“No, but you will soon.” He’s full of confidence.

“I’m up for a little dismemberment.” She tilts her head to the side, daring him.

“He needed someone to get into the security office so we could tap into their system,” I tell her when it’s clear he’s not in any rush to assuage her mistrust.

Nova’s eyes shift to take me in, but she continues to keep my brother in her sights. Smart, because I can feel his tension, even though he’s masking it. He’s ready to strike too. “Why her?”

“Because she’s easy, and I knew she could and would do what I asked.”

“If she could do it, so could countless others, so why her?” she prods.

“If you’re looking for an ulterior motive, you’re not going to find it. I didn’t choose her to piss you off or to make her happy. I used her because it was a simple solution to my problem.”

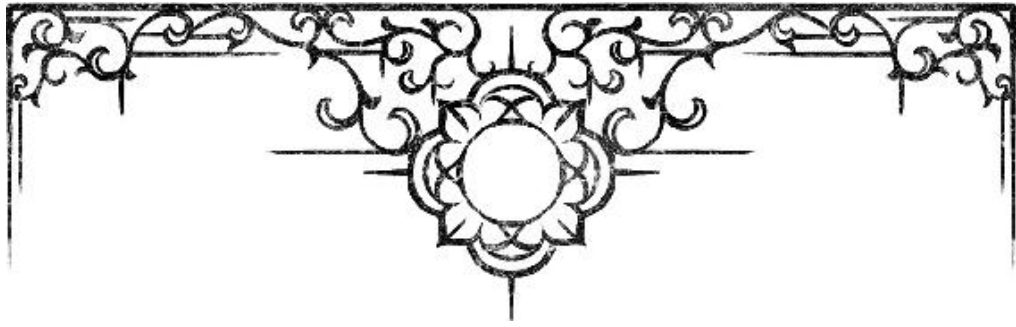
“And what problem was that? You wanted to get some?” Nova snarks.

Lucian steps forward, impeding her movement. His expression has darkened, making me think he’s no longer enjoying the banter as much. “Seeing you all pissed and jealous was cute at first, but I’m starting to think you actually believe that I touched her.”

“You let her touch you. You held her hand. That’s enough and makes you just as culpable.”

Lucian’s lips peel back from his teeth in a snarl, but he says nothing. I don’t know what he could say to save himself,

because it's true. *Shit.*



LUCIAN

The short-lived relief I felt at finding Nox and Nova in the kitchen and seeing her possessive side ruptures when she points out a fact I didn't even acknowledge—I did allow Grace to touch me. I even remember pulling her hand off my neck and hauling her down the hallway.

“It wasn't like that,” I defend.

“It wasn't? So it's cool if I let some random rub all over my chest” —she emulates stroking herself— “and take him down the hall for some alone time?”

“If you want him dead, but don't kid yourself, pet, that would happen the moment he laid a finger on you anyway.” I bend to get in her face, angry at just the thought.

“Don't like that idea, do you, pretty boy?”

“I don't know, it might be nice to wrap my fingers around someone's throat right now and squeeze the life out of them.”

“Is that a threat?” Nova slits her eyes at me.

“Not to you, but make no mistake, lamb, I don't make empty threats. Don't test me.”

“But I'm supposed to just accept that you can do anything you want and touch anyone you want?”

“No.” I stand up straight and take in a deep breath. “I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking about what she was doing or even you in the moment. I was thinking that I needed her to get the USB into the security system. It didn't register how the way I went about it might bother you.”

She takes a step back, suspicion lining her brows as she assesses me. “Pardon, did you just apologize?”

“Yes.” I sound like a bratty kid who got caught doing something he shouldn't and is pissed.

“And you admitted what you did was wrong?” She's still wary, probably trying to discern my motive.

“I know.”

“Did she drug you?”

“No,” I scoff. “You witnessed the only time she touched me.” I wish I could tell her I didn’t even speak to her again, but I needed to make sure Grace got the job done, and if I didn’t play it up a little, she might have told someone what she did for me just to piss me off. I doubt she would, though, because she knows I would end her if she did, but I don’t have time to deal with messes right now, and it was easier to pretend to tolerate her for a few minutes.

“I’m supposed to just believe you?” She shifts her stance again, crossing her arms.

“I haven’t lied to you.”

“You’ve held things back, omitted truths,” she counters.

“But I haven’t lied, and I’m not now. You can trust me with your life, so trust me in this.”

“I’m not worried about my life,” she mumbles dejectedly.

“Then what?”

“It doesn’t matter, but I’m telling you now, Lucian Morningstar, if you mess around on me, I won’t go after the girl. I’m coming after you, and I will gut you.”

How can a death threat be so adorable? I have no doubt she would try...maybe not physically, but she would find a way to get me back, and it only makes me want her more.

“Quit smiling like that. It’s disturbing.”

“I can’t help the way I look.” I feign innocence.

“You’re about to be unable to help the black eye I give you.”

Her eyes widen as I surge forward, snag her around her waist, and squeeze her to me. “Stop teasing me. We have things to discuss, and I’m having a hard time keeping my thoughts straight as it is.”

“Well then, get talking or go take a shower. You’re not touching me until every trace of her is gone.” She pushes my chest, leaving no doubt she’s still pissed. I release her and strip my shirt off, letting it fall to the kitchen floor. My lamb examines every inch of my chest and neck as if to prove she can’t see any traces of anyone else, then nods once in approval. “I’m waiting.”

Nox chuckles. “That went better than I expected. You’re not bleeding, and she’s not trying to break out of the house.”

“Speaking of, don’t ever try to run off again, and I mean it. I will put a collar on you.” Once the words are out of my mouth, the image of her in a diamond choker, fitted with a tracker and a proximity alarm that would go off if she got more than twenty feet away from me, sounds perfect. I’m sure I can have someone make it.

“Keep your hands to yourself and your dick in your pants and it won’t be a problem.”

“Watch your mouth,” I snarl.

“Did Morozov get into the system?” Nox interrupts before we get off track again.

“He was working on it when I left him. We should hear back soon.”

“What are you hoping to find? Who helped Alden escape?” Nova questions skeptically.

“It’s a possibility, but I very much doubt they would have left evidence that could be found. We’re focusing on the library.”

“The library?” Her lips twist.

“I’m hoping there will be footage of who scratched your arm. Maybe it will give us a lead on who attacked you in the bathroom.”

“Oh.” Her sweet full lips fall into a pout. “You think it’s connected. There’s no way there could have been that many people in the study room.”

“That many people? You remember how many people were there?”

“I...I guess I do.” Her eyes move from left to right, scanning the floor for some unseen vision. “There were at least four—no, five, I think, and they did wear the stupid cloaks.” She gets surer with every word.

“The study rooms aren’t that big,” I confirm. I remember opening the door to look for her and finding the couple fucking. It would be impossible to cram that many people in there with the desk and chairs.

“Maybe they brought more the second time because she fought back,” Nox offers.

“I didn’t fight anything. I reacted and got lucky, that’s all,” Nova replies, diminishing getting away.

“Do you remember the date? It would be helpful.” I don’t think Morozov would enjoy countless hours of watching a bunch of kids sneaking off to fuck, but I could be wrong.

“It was a few days before I started class. I could figure it out easily enough.” Nova seems confident.

“I’ll let him know.”

“Him who?”

“Morozov. He’s been around.”

“He’s our tech guy,” Nox adds.

“Do you think they’ll actually still have footage from that long ago? It’s been a while.” Nova rubs her thumbnail across her lip as she thinks.

“We’ll know soon enough. Let’s see if we can pin down the date within a day or two.”

“Okay.” Nova nods with purpose and pulls the phone we gave her out of her back pocket. She had to create a completely new user ID, since the old one could have been compromised, so I’m thinking she’s just looking at the calendar for reference.

“Between the seventeenth and the twenty-first, but probably toward the end of that week.” She looks up at me. “Sorry, I don’t remember what day it was.”

“That’s more than I had to go on.”

“What is this? You’re not eating my food?” Gertrude slinks into the room like a phantom.

“No, we are.” Nox moves to keep her from clearing the table.

“This has been out for too long. Why’d you not tell me you’d be late? Wasteful мальчики.” Gertrude’s accent always gets thicker when she’s aggravated.

“We had business.” I thwart her interference with a simple explanation I know she will understand.

“Fine, eat. Get sick.” She throws her hands in the air and floats out of the room in her long-ass dress.

“It’s still good, Gertie, we won’t get sick,” Nox tells her disappearing back.

“I would be dead if eating food that’s been out an hour went bad.” Nova huffs. “My mom would leave stuff out all the time and pass out. I still ate it.”

It’s one of the first times she’s mentioned her mom casually, and the “pass out” comment doesn’t seem encouraging. I had Morozov dig up what he could about Nova and her family’s past, and it was a total shitshow—several evictions, a horrible job history for her dad, and two DUIs for her mom. Thinking about what she had to deal with while we were here having our every whim catered to makes me want to rip her grandmother’s fingernails out and shove them down her fucking throat.

“She made that soup you like,” Nox says, pulling the lid off the pot in the center of the table.

“With the potatoes?” That draws her closer.

“And mushrooms,” Nox adds enticingly as our eyes meet over her head, and there’s a silent exchange between us. He didn’t like the comment about her mother either. We both

already assumed she was a drunk, since the news articles about the accident stated alcohol played a role in the crash, but it seems like her mom might have been smashed most of the time. It makes me wonder if her dad was a drinker too. Why else did he lose so many jobs? I don't know how to bring it up though, or if there's even a reason to. It's not like we can do anything about it now by dragging up ancient history.

"It's still warm," Nova comments, ladling the soup into a bowl to set in front of Nox. "Want me to put it in the microwave?" Her hand is still on his bowl.

"You can do yours first."

"This is fine for me," she replies, looking at me and holding the second bowl she just filled. "Want it warmed?"

"Eat, I'll get mine. You don't need to serve us."

Her eyes drop, but she still places the bowl in front of me. "Don't tell me what to do, pretty boy," she rebukes, doing whatever the hell she wants like usual. I wish we didn't have twenty other things that need to be dealt with so I could show her how much she likes it when I tell her exactly what to do and how to take me.

She must sense the shift of tension in the room, or her thoughts align with mine, because when she peers up at me again, it's with a heated gaze and her lip is pinched between her teeth.

"What are you thinking about, lamb?" My voice is thick with the need to touch her.

She opens her mouth to answer, but the sound of heavy footsteps storming up the hall has her clamming up and squirming in her seat. When I drag my eyes off her, I find Lev marching up the hall. I'm sure he can read the unhappy expression on my face, but he continues toward us nonetheless.

"You've got something?"

"Morozov asked me to get you. He said you'd want to see what he found."

I stand, food forgotten, and prepare to leave. Nox and Nova rise right along with me. My first instinct is to tell her to stay, but she must read the intent on my face, because she speaks before I do. “Don’t even try it, pretty boy. If there’s something to see involving me, then I’m seeing it.” Her little pointed chin is tipped up defiantly, daring me to argue.

I want to, just because I like her claws, but that’s for another time. She has every right to see who’s on that video, even if I’d rather protect her from it. Instead, I say, “Lev, have you met my lamb? She’s the sweetest little pet, but she can be a little prickly.”

Nova’s face goes slightly pink, but she doesn’t deny my claim.

“We’ve met. Miss Devlin.” Lev gives her an acknowledging nod.

As we begin following Lev down the hall, I get a little pinch on my lower back, just above my ass, that prompts me to laugh. Prickly, just like I said. Lev looks over his shoulder at me as if he’s never heard that sound come from me, but he doesn’t make a comment.

As we enter Morozov’s office, the large screen on the wall displays a familiar image—the upstairs hall of the library. Nova’s profile is visible, frozen in the same shot. If this is the correct day, I should be coming up the stairs behind her in a few moments.

“Let it play,” I announce.

Morozov looks at Nova, seeming to question my instructions, but ultimately does as I asked. The recording plays in real time as Nova continues down the hall, placing her hand on the knob, then looking back down the corridor as if she’s watching for someone.

“I had a feeling someone was following me,” she admits without prompting.

“I was.”

Her face snaps to the left to look at me. “I thought it was too big of a coincidence for you to be there. I thought you

orchestrated the whole thing to scare me.”

“Pause it,” I instruct so we can have this conversation. “I don’t use other people to do my dirty work.”

“*I’m* dirty work?” Her eyebrows rise sharply as she says each word slowly.

“The phrase applies, just not in the traditional sense.” I give her a leering smile.

“Such a flatterer.”

“What can I say? You bring out the gentleman in me.”

Nova laughs in my face, which was the intended response. I hate that she has to relive this. I’m also a little nervous about seeing myself interact with her. I know why I was following her, and it wasn’t to make nice.

Morozov coughs to cover his own chuckle. At least he has the good sense to make sure it’s short-lived. “Ready?” He clears his throat again.

“Play it.” I give my entire attention to the screen. I watch Nova reach into the room, then in the next heartbeat, her head whips back as she’s jerked into the darkened area. My knuckles crack as I ball my fists, feeling helpless as I see a small struggle, but most of what happened wasn’t visible to the camera.

My heart starts thundering again when Nova flees the room, looking completely panicked. In the video, I see her wave her hand in a shooing gesture and her mouth moving, trying to get me out of the way, but I know from experience no sound would emerge.

I can only see the back of my body, but I see my chest bow when she hits me, sending her sprawling on the ground while I absorb the blow. I could have caught her, it would have been easy. Hell, I had to stop myself from reaching for her at the time, which is clearly visible as the video plays out.

“Jesus!” Nox barks, glaring over at me.

“Play it back, I didn’t see who left,” I instruct Morozov, since there’s no way I can defend my actions to my brother.

The tape rewinds in slow motion, making sure we all witness Nova running toward me, then me bucking her off my chest and letting her fall in reverse. It's hard to pull my attention away from us, even though I know I need to watch the door. Two figures reverse into the room almost immediately before Nova herself backs in. "Now slow."

The fear on her face I didn't acknowledge that day batters me now in some sick form of karma, but I have a good excuse to look away so I can see who was responsible for hurting her, while also making sure I didn't follow through with my plans that day. It's strange to think I should be grateful to them. What I could have done would have been so much worse than what they accomplished that day.

I wanted Nova gone, out of my head and my life, and I was there to make sure it happened, even if it meant hurting her.

"Pause it." I move as if I might be able to stop it myself, but Morozov was ready. The image is frozen on a face that makes me want to puke.

Nova exhales with a splutter. "I bet she wouldn't have been so eager to help you if you told her why you wanted into the security system." I can feel her looking at the side of my face, gauging how I'll deal with the fact that the person I went to so I could get answers is the same person who tried to corner her in a dark room.

"She's too fucking stupid to ask questions. She bleats just like the rest of them."

"What are you doing?" Nova asks when I pull out my phone.

"I'm going to thank her for her help," I deadpan, because I feel like I'm on a very slippery slope. If I let my emotions get the better of me, I might kill Grace before I find out if she was behind the attack in the bathroom.

"You have her number saved in your phone?" Indignant rage simmers in her accusatory tone, and I can't blame her.

"A useful oversight on my part, which I'm handling now." My thumbs shake as I type out the message on my phone.

Morningstar: Party at ours.

Grace: Password?

Morningstar: You won't need one.

Nova reads over my arm. "Password? What is that? Some kinky game you played with her?"

"No, it was how they got in the gate."

"A password? You really do love this secret society garbage, don't you?"

"It was more about exclusivity," Nox clarifies.

"It was my idea. It was also dumb, pretentious bullshit, but we haven't fucked around like that in a long time. Give us a little credit for growing up."

Nova actually rolls her eyes before planting her hands on her hips and questioning, "How long do we have to wait for your little girlfriend to show up?"

"She's not my anything and never was." I turn my attention to Lev. "Have someone meet her at the gate and take her to the beach house. Let me know when she arrives." I place my hand on Nova's back, trying to lead her from Morozov's office.

"I'm coming with you," she starts, already sensing my intent.

I lean down so only she will hear my next words. "We'll discuss terms in private."

"We don't need terms. I'm going with you."

I wrap my fingers around the nape of her neck and tilt her head, bringing her closer to my mouth so when I speak, it's into her ear. "We will discuss this in private, lamb, or I can strap your ass to the bed until this shit is done. You decide."

"We *will* be discussing it," she concedes after a long moment of hesitation. God, I'm fucked up. I love and hate that she doesn't just bow to me at the same damn time.

I bite the bottom of her ear before kissing her in the same spot, then I release her while I have the strength to do it.

I'm scheming and plotting all the way up to the room, trying to figure out how I can keep Nova far away from Grace and what needs to happen. I'm not used to bargaining. I'm used to what I say goes, in most instances, and I don't even know what to offer her to keep her here, insulated from harsh realities.

Money won't work, and the offer of power is useless. Maybe if I tell her the truth, she will see reason. I glance briefly at Nox, trying to gain his attention, but he won't look at me, and I know it's on purpose, I just don't know why. There's no way he wants to be there, since he hates this kind of stuff, so what is it?

Nova spins to face me the second we're in the bedroom. "Why don't you want me there?" She's suspicious for all the wrong reasons. At some point, I'm going to have to sit her down, or maybe lay her down, and make her understand she has absolutely no reason to question my loyalty to her. I've had enough pussy to know hers is the only one I want. Still, her possessiveness makes me want to strip her bare and mark every inch of her with my teeth and cum.

"Lucian." My name is a warning on her lips, a threat to answer her or else. I bet our children will scatter when she says their name like that.

I slip down a rabbit hole where shit I've never once thought about flashes in my head. Nova with a round, pregnant belly, her pussy ripe and always needy. Nova holding two bundles, then her sitting on the floor, playing games and smiling while the sound of chaos surrounds her.

I want it.

There's a renewed desire to keep her safe and not let her see how ugly our world can truly be. "Tell me what you think is going to happen," I encourage, hopefully leading her to the right outcome.

She crosses her arms over her chest and leans back. It's a defiant, defensive position. "You're going to talk to her and find out what she knows about what happened in the bathroom." She never calls it an attack, which is what it was, but she doesn't want to think of herself as a victim.

"How do you think I'm going to do that, lamb? I'm not going to trick her into spilling her guts or coax her into confessing everything she knows. I don't have the desire or the time to tempt her."

"What are you going to do? Beat it out of her?" She snorts as if that's a ridiculous conclusion.

"If she doesn't talk or tries to lie to me." It wouldn't take much. Grace is weak. She's probably going to piss her pants the second I raise my voice. Nova's mouth falls open in shock at my response. "How did you see this going? I told you I would kill anyone who was involved. Do you think that changes because she's female?"

"I..." She hesitates. "I don't know. I figured you'd make her tell you by sweet-talking her into it, then get her kicked out of school or force her to leave."

"I don't do second chances, lamb. If I would have dealt with this shit in the library sooner, maybe none of this would have happened. I won't make that mistake again."

"You can't kill her, Lucian," she says, as if she still doesn't believe I'll do it. She sounds like she's trying to convince me the sky is blue and there's no way I could argue with her point.

"I can and will, which is why you're staying here with Nox."

My brother surprises the hell out of me. "I'm coming with you."

"What?" There's no way I heard him correctly.

"I'm going to be there," he confirms with his face set, as if he's already made up his mind.

"You hate this shit," I remind him. I made a promise to him a long time ago—I'll deal with the dirty shit so he doesn't

have to. It never bothered me the way it does him.

“This isn’t for power or money. It’s for Nova.” It’s an explanation I can understand. Nox has never been motivated by the need to lead the way like I have, but he possesses the same fierce loyalty I do and he cares about Nova.

“Whoa, whoa, just hold up. I want answers too, and she deserves to pay for her involvement, but you guys are talking about killing her,” she explains as if we don’t understand the concept.

“She wouldn’t be the first,” I tell her, exposing a truth I thought she already understood, but maybe I was wrong. “I don’t need you to have a war of conscience with me, lamb. This part of my life doesn’t ever need to touch you.” I gesture to Nox, who up until now has wanted it that way too. “But my hands will never be clean. I will always do what needs to be done, and you need to accept that. You don’t have any other option at this point.”

“Don’t go telling me what I’m going to do, pretty boy. I’m not scared of you.” She bucks right up against my will, even after I confessed my sins. I can’t help the dark smile that curls my lips.

“I know, lamb, and that’s probably how you got yourself into this situation.”

“It sounds like you’re saying you’ll become obsessed with anyone who stands up to you,” she challenges with a narrow-eyed glare.

“Nah, you’re not the first person who tried to tell me no. You’re just the only one I didn’t want to end for it. It’s a you thing, pet, I assure you.”

“It better stay that way too, pretty boy.”

“Or what?” I’m helpless not to challenge her.

“I don’t think either one of us wants to know the answer to that question,” Nova confesses.

“Oh, he wants to know. He’ll probably pry it out of you later, but he can indulge in his fantasies at another time.” Nox

reels the conversation back in. “I think you should let her come if she wants to be there. It involves her.”

Now I want to smack him upside the head. “You’re really going to team up against me?”

“It’s not against you. It’s for her. If you want her in our life, then she should at least know what we’re dragging her into.”

“And if she hates us for it?”

Nox assesses Nova for a long moment, taking in every feature. “She won’t, but she will understand the lengths we will go to so we can take care of her.”

“And it will make her an accessory, meaning I have one more reason to make sure she can never escape us.” I voice the thought in my head, not really thinking about how it might sound to her.

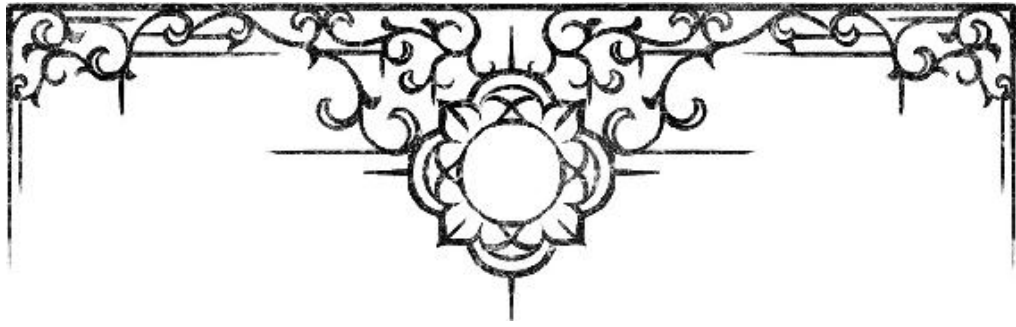
“You really are quite mad,” she mutters in awe.

“It’ll stop surprising you at some point.”

“I really think you’re underestimating your ability to unnerve me.”

“Nah, I’m just confident you can handle me.”

“We shall see.”



NOVA

Despite my insistence that I accompany the guys to meet with Grace, my gut has been in knots since they agreed. If I'm honest, the sick feeling came much earlier than that. Seeing myself on the screen and having to watch what happened from an outside perspective wasn't fun, not to mention observing the way Lucian looked at me back then, as if he really did hate me, wasn't easy either.

In the moment, I didn't know that he actually bumped me off his chest. Sure, I considered it, but seeing it is different. I also noticed when he shifted like he might grab me, or even stop me from falling, but decided not to. My feelings were hurt for the version of myself in that video, the one who didn't have a soul to talk to or confide in, but that sadness evaporated when I watched Grace and a guy I don't know slink out of Room 106 while I booked it down the hall.

I should have suspected she had a part in it. It was only a few days later when she and her buddies cornered me up on the third floor, warning me to stay away from the Morningstars. She must have decided to use a direct approach when she couldn't get me alone, or maybe it surprised her that I fought back and didn't just crumple when she tried to pull me into the room. It could be why she brought backup with her when she came at me again for not staying away from the guys.

Assuming it was her behind the bathroom thing is a leap, but not a far one. I don't think the Umbras were behind it, like Lucian floated once or twice. If they wanted me to give them heirs, it would be a pretty dumb move to leave me for dead, so that leaves her, unless I've made even more enemies in this place than I thought.

We load up in a small vehicle Nox calls a side-by-side to drive over to the yellow house. It's like some souped-up golf cart with big tires and a roll cage. Instead of taking the path

behind the house near the beach, Nox takes a road that turns off before we reach the main house.

The fancy streetlights dotted along the narrow road illuminate several houses farther back off the lane. I wonder which home was Alden's and if someone else lives in it now.

"Are all these people your family?" I raise my voice to be heard over the engine.

"Albert was my father's only brother," Lucian informs me. "Trusted members of our team and staff live here, but many of these homes are empty." His eyes scan the darkened houses.

A pang of sadness hits me in my chest. They are alone, just like me, and I know it affects them. Maybe that's part of the reason why we're all drawn to each other.

It only takes a few minutes before the houses along the lane disappear and the yellow house comes into view. I've never seen it from this angle, but there's no mistaking the cheery house with it lit up the way it is.

There's a car in the massive driveway, parked near the garage. I have no doubt it's from whoever brought Grace here. My stomach hollows out when the engine of the side-by-side cuts off, leaving us in the dark with only the sounds of the waves lapping at the shore. It's eerie.

"It's not too late to change your mind. You can wait here or drive back to the house," Lucian offers, gripping the metal bar above my head after exiting.

"I want to know why she did it," I confess.

"I can tell you that—she's jealous," he replies simply.

"Because she didn't want me around you two." I trade glances with the twins, who are both out of the vehicle now. It's the easy conclusion, but it's hard for me to wrap my head around someone being willing to kill me because of it.

"She probably thought she could scare you away, and when it didn't work, she got stupid." Nox shoves his hands into his pockets, but it doesn't hide the way his shoulders bunch up by his ears.

“Did she have a reason to be that mad at me? Were you guys with her?”

“No,” they both answer emphatically at the same time.

“We’ve never been with anyone the way you’re suggesting,” Nox adds, glancing briefly at Lucian.

“Did they know that?” I press.

“They knew what they were getting with us. We didn’t bullshit any of them to get them to sleep with us.”

I scowl at the mention of them being with other girls. It’s not something I want to think about.

“Wait out here,” Lucian says. “I’ll get whatever answers you need.”

I have to admit that it’s tempting to let them handle her. I could console myself by pretending I didn’t have a choice if she lived or died, but that wouldn’t absolve my conscience. When they promised to kill the person who put me in the hospital, it was appealing. I don’t think I understood how serious they were, and I wanted the person who hurt me to hurt too, but now I feel conflicted. There’s part of me that wants her to pay for what she did, since she left me to die on a dirty bathroom floor after God only knows what they did to me—I still can’t remember the whole thing, and I don’t think I even want to at this point—but there’s another part of me that thinks I’m wrong for feeling that way. Maybe her living with the knowledge that she will never have the Morningstar brothers would be enough to torture her.

“I think you should come and see what she has to say, then if you want to leave, leave,” Nox suggests. The role reversal in this situation is disturbing. I would expect Lucian to be the one urging me to be here, but the fact that it’s Nox has thrown me for a loop.

“I don’t think I could watch if you...” I can’t bring myself to finish the sentence.

“Good.” Lucian lets out a heavy exhale, as if he dodged a bullet.

I pull on the door handle, finally exiting, and tell them, “But I want you to know, I don’t need this, not from either of you. It’s not your job to make her pay, and I’d rather not have her death on your conscience because of me.”

Lucian steps back, allowing me room to close the door, but it’s short-lived because he hauls me toward his chest with a hand on the back of my head. “My sweet lamb, I don’t have a conscience, not when it comes to her or anyone else who tries to hurt you.”

“You may grow one someday, Pinocchio, and I don’t want either of you to hate me for it.”

I feel him snort against my ear. “That is the last thing you have to worry about.”

I reach out, seeking Nox and his touch for the same confirmation. Without hesitation, he grasps my fingers and places them over his heart. “It will never weigh on me, Nova. She deserves everything she has coming.”

After a short reprieve, I pull back from both men and meet their eyes. “Let’s go see if all the drama was for nothing. Maybe we’re wrong, and she wasn’t involved at all.”



NOX

Lucian leads the way into the beach house. It's the first time I've walked through the door since we found out our parents died. The smell hits me first. It's briny, like the ocean, with an undercurrent of cleaning supplies, like the floor was freshly mopped or something.

I glance around, expecting to see some evidence that this place was abandoned, but the walls aren't crumbling. There aren't even any cobwebs in the corners. It doesn't make me hate it any less though. There should be some kind of proof that this house is forever tainted, but it's still just the same party house—a place we could hang out with our friends, since our parents never wanted anyone at the house, which we didn't mind. Hell, I plan to keep it that way forever. Our house is our sanctuary.

“Did you tell them I was here? They invited me, you know.” Grace's voice cuts through the thoughts clouding my mind.

“They know you're here,” a disinterested voice replies.

“I have other things I could be doing, you know.”

Lucian faces Nova and puts his finger to his lips, instructing her to be quiet, then mouths, “Stay here.”

Nova crosses her arms over her chest defiantly, prompting Lucian to place his lips near her ear and mutter, “If she sees you, she'll know this is a trap. Maybe we can be quick about this.”

Nova's arms fall to her sides, and she lets out a long sigh. It's a sure sign she's not happy about being sidelined, but she's also not going to argue.

Lucian kisses the top of her head before strolling toward the voices. I linger in the hall for a moment or two longer, but trail dutifully after my brother.

“There you are!” Grace purrs in a tone completely different from the one she just used moments ago while speaking to the guard.

“Eager to see us?” Lucian stalks a little closer to the girl who doesn’t seem to recognize the danger she’s in, despite my brother’s chilly tone.

“It was pretty lonely. You could have told me this was a private party.” There’s way too much excitement in her tone. Was she always like this and I didn’t notice? Lucian calls them all sheep, and I’m starting to understand why.

My brother nods to the security guard who brought Grace to the house, dismissing him before turning his attention back to her. “I wanted to repay you for everything you’ve done.” He doesn’t have to fake the authenticity in his tone. There’s no question he thinks she’s getting what she deserves.

“You know I’m always happy to help.”

“Good to know, because there is something we need.” Lucian settles on the back of the sofa, ready to move at a moment’s notice, but it’s not like Grace poses any kind of threat.

“Anything for a Morningstar,” she replies breathily. My stomach actually turns at the thought of her, or someone like her, becoming part of our lives. I don’t know if I would have seen through her bullshit before, and that’s a sobering fucking thought, because now I’m certain Grace would stab us in the back the second a better opportunity came her way.

“We’re glad to hear you feel that way. That should make things much easier.”

Grace’s gaze swings between us, waiting for instruction.

“You can start by telling us why you cornered Nova in the library.”

“W-What?” she stammers, completely caught off guard by the question.

Lucian scowls. “I’m not going to repeat myself.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“There’s no point in trying to lie to us. You made sure we have video evidence today when you helped us hack into the school’s security,” I tell her.

Her lips purse in a sneer as the feigned innocence in her eyes withers to a hard glint. “I was just going to mess with her a bit. You made it clear she was fair game.”

I didn’t know that. I want to examine Lucian to see his reaction to her words, but I don’t want her to see the questioning glance between us. Clearly this was before I met Nova, when he was still dead set on getting rid of her.

“Just because she’s fair game to me doesn’t mean you have carte blanche.”

“Nothing happened.” Grace shrugs a slim shoulder.

“Her arm got all clawed up. Was that you or the pussy you were with?”

“I didn’t even do it on purpose. She kicked me.” Her response is indignant, as if she were the one who was wronged, proving she truly doesn’t understand what’s going on here or how much trouble she’s in.

“Is that why you brought so many people with you the next time you attacked her?” I accuse, pissed that all of this can be traced back to Lucian and his fucked-up need to run Nova off the island.

“What?” she asks too softly with wide, guileless eyes, but her phony act is useless at this point. “I didn’t attack her.”

“There’s no point in lying. We know you were involved. The only way to help yourself is by telling us exactly what happened and who orchestrated it.” Lucian is bluffing about knowing Grace is involved, but he’s much better at it than she is.

“Are you talking about what happened at school? You can’t think I had anything to do with that.” She does a fair job of pretending to be outraged at the suggestion.

“Cut the shit, Grace. I don’t have the patience for it. Tell me what I want to know, and I’ll send you home.” I know his

version of sending her home is not the same as hers, but if it gets her talking, I'm all for it.

“That’s really why you called me here? To talk about *her*?”

You’d think she would have already come to that conclusion, but it appears Grace is delusional.

Lucian stands up to his full height and looks down at Grace with nothing but pure malice in his eyes. “I don’t want to break you, Grace, but not because I don’t want to hurt you. I’m confident I would enjoy doing what was done to Nova to you, but my lamb is sweet and I don’t want to upset her, so I need you to tell me what I want to know, or you’ll force my hand, and that will piss me off.”

Grace’s chin wobbles a little, hinting that she might cry. “I don’t know what you want me to tell you.”

“We want you to tell us the truth. Did you really think everyone would keep quiet? That people wouldn’t start to talk, especially after it was announced that Nova is an Umbra?” It’s my turn to bluff about what we know.

“Whatever they said isn’t true.” She shakes her head in denial.

“Really? I find that very hard to believe,” Lucian drawls.

“We know for certain you went after her once—there’s proof—so why should we believe that you didn’t put her in the hospital?” I’m already tired of asking her stupid questions.

“Because I didn’t do it. You have to believe me,” she implores, as if her word is convincing enough.

“We don’t believe you. I should have suspected you from the beginning, but I thought the motive went deeper than a jealous bitch filled with delusions of grandeur.” Lucian pauses and moves a little closer to the girl. “I know you, Grace. You like to think you’re the head bitch. You think you’re important, but you’re not. You’re expendable, just like the rest of these fucking idiots.”

Grace’s mask slips as her lips tighten in a scowl, so I push a little more in the same direction. “You probably thought she

was getting what she deserved. A girl like her, coming here and making waves. I bet it pissed you off when you realized she didn't even have to try to reach the levels you'd always dreamed of and thought you earned."

Grace doesn't take the bait as I hoped, but Lucian continues for us. "I bet you didn't think it would go that far. You probably just wanted to teach her a lesson and show Nova her place. It's understandable. She is an outsider, so she never belonged here."

"She's a gutter slut," Grace snaps.

Lucian flinches, but it's such a small movement, I doubt she would recognize it as more than a blink.

"I've prepared my entire life for this place, this world, and she thinks she can just sashay her fat ass in here with her Walmart clothes and ragged hair to take what's mine. Fuck that, I wasn't giving up without a fight, and you wouldn't either."

"A true sign of a leader," I acknowledge, giving her what she wants to hear, even though if she were a true leader, she would recognize it for the ploy it is.

"Tell us how you planned it and who else was involved," Lucian encourages as he takes a seat across from her.

"I..." She trails off, looking between the two of us as if she's uncertain she should admit to it.

"Go on... Unless it was someone else's idea and you just went along with it." I add an edge of disappointment in my tone.

"No, we were talking, you know, about her showing up with such an attitude, and we just started throwing ideas around, and that one kind of stuck. We weren't trying to kill her." She dismisses the beating as if the fact that Nova almost died was her own weakness. "It just happened really fast. One second, we were standing around, and the next, she was running right at us and..." She does this shrug thing, failing to put what they did to her into words.

“How many?” Lucian’s voice is tight, but Grace doesn’t notice.

“There were five of us that day,” she admits.

“Five that day?” I question, picking up that there might be more to it than she’s confessing.

“I’d been watching her for a little bit, and I noticed she used that bathroom after class, but I couldn’t be sure if she would that day or not. Astor shut down the cameras for us the night before, just in case, and when she went in, all five of us followed.”

I take note of Astor’s name before asking, “Did more people know than the five of you?”

“There were eight of us in the chat.”

“What happened to the other three? Did they chicken out?” Lucian questions.

“Astor wasn’t down for anything but the cameras.” She rolls her eyes. “Meg and Hannah were in class at the time, and there wasn’t enough notice for them to get out.”

“All girls?” I feign interest.

“No, Vincent and Caleb were with us.”

“No founders were involved?” Lucian rises slowly to his feet, moving closer to Grace.

“No, I know they are all a bunch of punks from you.” She watches him take the seat beside her. There’s something in her gaze. It’s not quite panic, but I don’t think she’s as dumb as I assumed. I think she knows this isn’t going to go her way but is playing along in the event it might.

“I need you to do one more thing for me, Grace. I want to see this chat and know the names of the people who were in it with you. Then we can move forward.” Lucian is surprisingly calm. Maybe it’s because we finally have some answers, or maybe it’s because he knows he’ll be able to get rid of her in a few minutes, but he doesn’t look like a man who is about to commit murder.

“I don’t have the chat anymore. I deleted the thread.” She fidgets with her purse in her lap.

“That was smart, getting rid of evidence.” I probably should have kept my mouth shut, because Grace looks over at me with uncertainty, and I’m sure it has something to do with my pissed off tone.

“Are you sure you deleted it?” Lucian asks, drawing her attention.

“Uh...” She hesitates.

“You don’t have anything to hide, do you, Grace?” I’ve noticed he’s used her name more this evening than any of the other times he’s spoken to her combined...probably to make her feel important or some shit.

“No, I told you the truth. I really wasn’t trying to kill her. I simply wanted her to leave, just like you wanted. I did it for you guys.” She trades glances between the two of us.

She’s self-serving, even now. Lucian stares her dead in the face like he can’t believe she said that before blinking slowly then focusing on his phone.

“Put everyone’s name down.” He hands her his phone with a note app open.

“Why do you need me to write it down? It’s not like I’m going to forget.” She’s trying to get reassurance, or at the very least get him to admit she’ll be around to tell him the names again if necessary.

“Are you worried their stories won’t match yours?”

“No.” She shakes her head.

“Write the names down. I need to be sure.” He motions toward the phone.

After a brief pause, she finally begins thumbing the screen, then hands his phone back.

“You’re sure no one else put you up to this?” he prods somewhat gently.

“No, I mean Lucy said I shouldn’t let her get away with coming here, but I was already thinking that. Should I have checked with you? Did I mess with your plans to do something to her? I promise I’ll always check with you in the future.” She’s prattling, which means she senses this isn’t going to end well for her.

Lucian takes his eyes off Grace and looks at me. “Take Nova outside,” he instructs, not worried about how Grace will react at all. He’s gotten what he needs from her.

“Take Nova outside?” Grace repeats, as if she doesn’t understand.

“I want to be here,” I tell my brother.

“No, you don’t, and I don’t want either of you here. Please,” he replies with raised eyebrows. Lucian rarely pleads for anything, so I’m torn on whether or not I should indulge him.

“Nox.” Nova says my name softly, but the room is otherwise silent, so everyone hears her.

“She’s here. You really brought her with you?” Grace has the nerve to look betrayed.

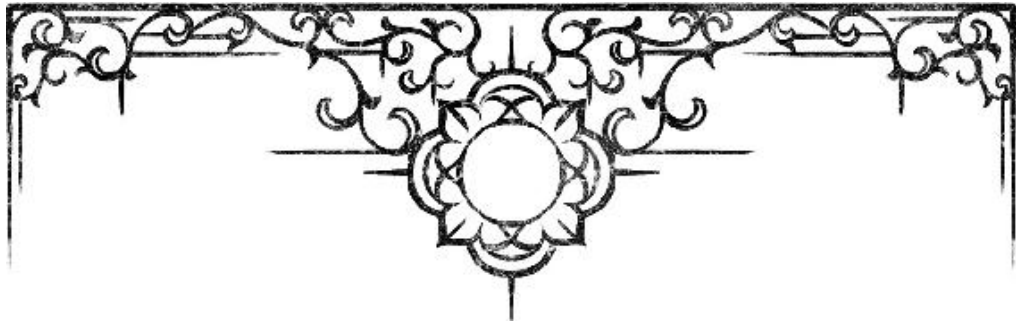
“Don’t speak.” Lucian barely gives her a glance, but it’s enough to have her sealing her lips.

“Take her home. I’ll be along in a few minutes,” he assures me.

I begin a silent conversation, using only our eyes. *I should be with you to deal with this.*

You should be with her, making sure she’s okay.

I can’t argue with him, so after a short standoff, I spin and walk out of the room, leaving Lucian to clean up the mess like usual, but it’s the first time I haven’t felt relieved about it.



NOVA

Nox enters the hall and heads straight for me at a brisk pace. “Let’s go,” he states flatly. I allow him to push me along with an arm around my back. I want to shuffle my feet and tell him this isn’t necessary, but words fail me.

Once we reach the porch and the screen door snaps shut behind us, my feet stop moving. Nox notices immediately and looks down at me in question.

“I don’t want him to do this. Will you tell him not to?” I implore. He’ll listen, he has to. Nox is always the more reasonable twin.

“He’s going to do it, Nova. Did you hear her in there? She doesn’t care about you, only that she thought you were in her way. You want to save *her*? What if the next person isn’t as strong as you?”

“I don’t care about her either. It has nothing to do with her. I don’t want you guys to hate me. If I let you do this, then I’m just as selfish as she is,” I confess.

Nox turns to face me, bringing both hands up to cup my face. “Will it change how you look at him or me for letting it happen?”

“No.”

He drops his forehead to mine and inhales deeply. “He would hate himself if he let her live. Neither of us will hate you for this.”

“What if he gets caught?”

“People like us don’t get caught, Nova. I can promise you that. We know too many secrets and could ruin too many lives for anyone to ever come after us. Even if they did, we have enough money to ensure any outcome we wanted—whether that’s fixing a jury, buying a judge or prosecutor, or even finding someone else to take the fall. There are plenty of people out there desperate enough to go to jail for something

they didn't do just for a little money and stability for their family. You don't need to worry about us, and that includes you too. We will never let anything else happen to you."

His promises feel unreal and out of the realm of comprehension, but I still don't doubt them. I've seen proof of what they can and are willing to do. I know the way they live and have witnessed their lifestyle, even benefited from it. Normal people can't make a massive donation to a hospital then get an all access pass or have a personal physician at their beck and call.

A creak behind us has Nox lifting his head to look over the top of mine. "He asked me to make sure you were gone."

"We're leaving now," Nox tells whoever is at the door and then urges me down the stairs. We head back to the side-by-side, where I take the passenger seat. I watch the silhouette of the man in the door as we back away, knowing he will tell Lucian when we are gone, and then Grace will be dead.

There's no feeling of dread in my stomach or concern if I'm going to be able to sleep at night because of it. I only feel calm understanding. I do wonder, however, if I've always been this cold or if something changed in me. Maybe it was the attack that did it. The trauma to my head could have rewired my brain. The excuse seems valid, but I very much doubt it. The real truth is, I don't know the answer, and I don't plan on wasting much time looking for it.



LUCIAN

“Give them two minutes, then make sure they leave,” I tell the security agent. He’s the only one within view, and I know he’s not the only one around, but Grace doesn’t. Hicks returns a short time later. The fact that he’s back tells me everything I need to know—Nox and my lamb are gone.

“Let’s go for a walk,” I tell Grace. There’s no point in making a mess in the house if I don’t need to, not that it matters much, since I’m going to burn this place to the ground soon anyway. There aren’t any good memories here, and Alden sullied the place further.

“Where are we going?” I don’t blame her for being suspicious, but I don’t plan on indulging her curiosity.

“Get up and walk.” I let her see the threat in my gaze.

She rises slowly, and it’s the first time I notice what she’s wearing. She really did expect to come here and party. Her dress is short, revealing most of her thighs, and there’s a cutout over her stomach, baring her midriff.

She shifts her stance, pushing out her tits and ass and wrongfully assuming she caught me admiring her. I could tell her she disgusts me, but that wouldn’t get her ass moving any faster, and I have several more people I need to get rid of.

An idea strikes. A drunken car crash could be the perfect solution to my problem. It would take them all out in one go, but I wonder if that would bring back bad memories for Nova. I dismiss the thought quickly. Grace isn’t living past midnight, and that doesn’t give me enough time to get the others here and plan the entire thing. Besides, I think I’ll let them squirm when Grace goes missing.

Will it make their deaths a little more complicated? Yes. Is it worth it? Yes. They’ll spend a few days wondering what happened and worrying if they are next.

“Don’t make me ask you again.” I open the door leading to the beach and exit, fully expecting her to follow behind me. Her shoes make ridiculous clicking sounds with each step she takes, proving I’m correct.

I continue down the stairs until I’m on the boardwalk that leads to the beach. When she finally reaches me near the hard-packed sand by the water, she has her arms wrapped around her body to fight off the chill coming from the ocean. In a few months, the cool air will be a distant memory.

“Have you told me every person who was involved or knew about your plan?” I ask, looking out at the waves and seeing the mainland in the distance. It’s risky bringing her here, considering what I’m going to do, but what is life without risks?

“Yes.” The quiver in her voice makes me acknowledge her. She must know what’s coming.

“Why the robes?” Grace isn’t part of the Cadieux Creed. She shouldn’t even know about it, but whispers are hard to kill, so there are always rumors about the island and what happens here.

“Other than to disguise our identity” —she lifts one boney shoulder— “we thought it would be a good way to show her she didn’t belong.”

“We? Were the robes your idea?” The robes are what made me think that this had founding family written all over it, but the names she gave me are not from any of the founders.

“I can’t recall whose idea the robes were, but everyone agreed it was smart.” She rubs her hands up and down her arms again. I need to dig into the names a little more, because I believe her.

“Did you think I wouldn’t find out, or did you truly believe I wouldn’t care?” I don’t know why I even bother asking the question. Maybe it’s to make myself feel better, since she more than admitted that the way I treated Nova in the beginning was what allowed Grace to think she could get away with hurting my lamb.

“I...I wanted to show you how weak she was,” she admits, but I’m not sure if her stammer means she’s telling the truth or if it’s just what she thinks will grant her mercy.

“That didn’t go as planned, but I’ve underestimated her a time or two myself. The truth is, she’s stronger than all of us and has survived things you can’t imagine.” I feel the need to defend Nova, even though she would never care what Grace thinks of her and it won’t matter in a few seconds anyway.

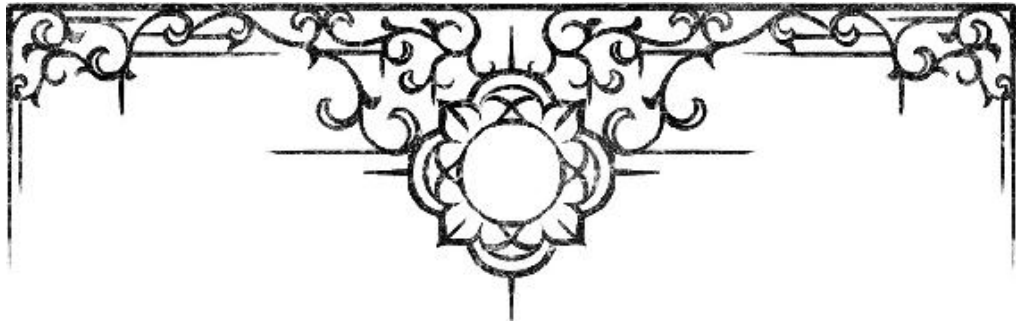
“Because she’s poor?” Grace makes sure I hear the rancor in her scoff.

I didn’t know how I was going to kill her until this moment. I thought of five ways to get rid of her, but she just proved I’m only wasting my time and breath by speaking to her. It’s too dark for her to see me reach around my back and pull out the Glock holstered there.

When the muzzle lands on her forehead, she opens her mouth to scream, but if she releases any sound, the report of gunfire conceals it. My ears ring from the explosion before she even crumples to the sand. Too bad silencers are so bulky.

Nova was worried about my conscience, but I wasn’t joking when I said I didn’t have one. I feel no regret or concern for the thing at my feet, only relief that she is out of the way.

When I walk past the security guard still on the boardwalk, I hand him the gun. “I don’t want her to be found. Let her parents lie awake at night, wondering what happened to her.”



NOVA

That night, when Lucian got home, we didn't talk about what happened after Nox and I left. He walked straight to the shower, then joined us in bed. I didn't know if I should ask him if he was okay or act like everything was normal, so I pretended to be asleep. Lucian, however, didn't need to pretend. He was out cold minutes after his head hit the pillow.

The next day was surprisingly normal. I went to school, and Lucian complained about me going, but he drove me then walked me to class anyway, and Nox was there to pick me up after.

It was the following day when the whispers started. Everyone seemed to be talking about Grace and where she could be, since no one had seen her in a couple days.

The suspicious glances started soon after, or at least it felt that way to me, but it might be my culpability in her disappearance that had me looking over my shoulder and wondering what everyone knew.

When the campus security—who are really employed by the Umbras—started poking around and asking questions in the middle of the day, it really sank in that this was happening, along with a defiant indignation. Grace tried to kill me, then left me on a dirty bathroom floor to die. She brought whatever happened to her on herself.

She was dead. I didn't feel bad for her. I only worried how it would affect me and the guys.

Things got a little easier then, because if I know anything, it's that Lucian Morningstar will always come out on top, no matter the circumstance, and I'm choosing to trust that I will as well because of him and Nox.

The next morning, as I'm stepping out of the shower, my phone buzzes.

Cadieux Alert System: Classes and all extracurricular activities are canceled today. Please check your student portal for further updates. Students and staff will not be permitted on the island. All traffic is restricted. Have a great day.

I poke my head out the door to see if either of the guys received the same message. Nox is absently toying with the black ring in his nostril while holding his phone with his other hand.

“Did you get the message?”

“Yeah.” His voice is thick with sleep as he tosses his cell onto the bed. I’m not sure where Lucian is. He wanted to shower with me, but I shut him down because I knew he would make me late, yet he’s nowhere in sight now.

“What do you think it’s about?” I already have an idea, but I still ask.

“A waste of time. Come back to bed, since you don’t have class.” He tosses the covers back, revealing his naked, toned body. I could stare at him for hours, and I bet I’d still find new tattoos and enticing skin to explore.

I flip the bathroom light off and head straight for bed.

“Lose the towel, baby,” he instructs, placing his hands behind his head to watch my approach. I don’t have the confidence he exudes, but he makes it easy to strip myself bare and expose every inch of skin to him, scars and all.

His eyes trail down my body the second I untuck the towel from over my chest and let it hit the floor. My skin is probably all red and flushed from the heat of the shower, but at least I’m freshly shaved and my skin is soft.

Nox turns on his side, reaching for me as if he can’t wait to touch me as I kneel on the bed. His gaze is heated, but his touch is cool against my overly warm skin. A small hiss makes its way past my parted lips as I shrink away from his touch.

“Damn, Nova, how hot was the water?” He leans up to grab my arms and pull me down against him.

“A little warm,” I admit, adjusting to his chilly touch.

“I bet I know a place where you’ll be even warmer.” He brushes his lips over mine as I sink into the mattress beside him. Using only a slight pressure on the back of my thigh, Nox hooks my knee over his hip and slides his fingers up the sensitive skin of my inner thigh before placing his palm over my center. He’s definitely not wrong. I’m hot, and the idea of losing myself in him for a little while is more than appealing. I no longer feel the need to shy away from his icy touch as he adds a little pressure to his palm. I think about grinding against him, but he distracts me with a soft kiss.

He flicks my lip with his tongue, and I open my mouth, allowing him to deepen the kiss. I brush my hand through his messy hair, marveling at the way he feels against me, yet still needing him closer.

Seeming to read my thoughts, Nox slides his arm between the bed and my waist and hauls me even nearer. My chest is smashed against his, and every breath has my nipples rubbing against his skin. It’s just enough to make me want more but not enough to provide relief. Even his hand between my legs is too teasing.

My heart skips a beat when he shifts a little, and I think he’s going to slip a finger inside me or find my clit, but he leans over me instead, pushing me onto my back. I keep my knee high on his waist, but he doesn’t line our bodies up. He peppers my chin with kisses before moving down to my neck and chest instead.

My back arches off the mattress when he takes my nipple in his mouth and sucks hard, sending a wave of need through me and making my lower stomach clench. With his torso now between my legs, one of his hands comes up to toy with my other nipple, mirroring the same tugging action of his mouth, and I swear I feel myself get wetter.

Finally, when my hips start to lift to grind against him, he moves lower, kissing a path down my belly and between my legs. I groan at the first touch of his tongue against my clit. My fingers slide back into his hair, fisting his locks while he grips

my ass to haul me even closer to his mouth. I never last long when they lick me, but I already feel like I'm on the edge when he pushes his tongue inside me, fucking me with his mouth.

When one hand slides up over my side and he squeezes my nipple, I release another sound of yearning I didn't know I was capable of making before him. A quiver starts in my thighs, urging my legs to tighten around his head, but he doesn't let up. Instead, he slides his mouth up, circling my clit before sucking on it.

The orgasm hits me hard, crashing over me and causing me to cry out his name while I palm my other breast. He doesn't stop licking and sucking until I push his forehead away to catch my breath, and only then does he climb up my body and let me feel his hardness nestled between my thighs.

I reach between us, wrapping my fingers around him, and his eyelids lower even more. I've heard girls talk about controlling a guy with sex, but this isn't what I imagined. I thought they meant how much they would give up, but I feel like I could ask Nox for anything right now and he would freely give it as long as I didn't stop touching him, but there's nothing I want other than him.

"I love you," comes from my mouth before the thought to speak even registers. He falls against me a little more, nuzzling my neck with his nose and lips.

"Are you trying to get me to come before I get inside you?" He rocks into my grip.

"No, it just came out. I'm sorry." I flex my fingers, causing his breath to catch on a shudder.

"You're not sorry, Nova, and I don't want you to be." He leans back to palm my cheek and stare into my eyes. "Never be sorry." He kisses me again, and I guide him to my entrance, but then he takes over and pushes inside me, inch by slow inch. They always feel bigger after I have an orgasm, so it takes my body several deep strokes to adjust, but the pressure is more than welcome. Every time they touch me, it's like I'm learning something new about my body, and if I didn't like it

so much, it would be frightening, but it just makes me crave them more.

He lifts up again, hooking my knee with his elbow so my ankle is up near his ear, and his pace grows quicker as he pounds into me with deep strokes. It almost feels like it's too much, but the second he pulls his hips back to retreat, I want the feeling of fullness back.

Our eyes are locked, and I have no idea what he sees, but I know what I see...or what I don't. There's no darkness in Nox's gaze, no abyss I'm worried he's going to get lost in. It's just him and his savage beauty.

His head tilts back, and he groans. "Fuck, Nova, you have to quit looking at me like you'd let me wreck you."

I don't tell him it's too late for that, even though I recognize it as the truth. Nox and Lucian ruined me the first night they invited me here, let me into their dark world, and made me feel wanted. I was just too stubborn—or maybe dumb—to acknowledge it then, but I can't ignore it now. I let my eyes close to hide the emotion that must be visible in my gaze.

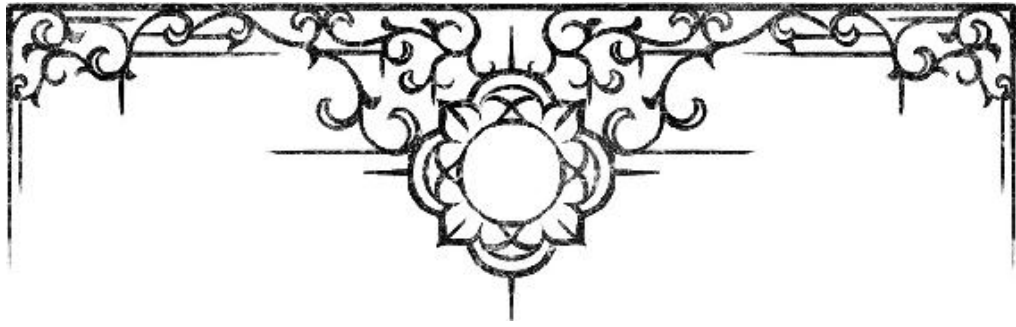
When he thrusts inside me again, just as deep as the other times, he grinds his hips against me, going even deeper and adding pressure on my clit.

An honest to God whimper falls from my lips, and I can't decide if I love or hate what he's doing to me, but my body knows. Nox's movements trigger an orgasm deep inside me that's more intense than the last, but thankfully, it's shorter. I don't think I even breathed through it. My head feels all fuzzy, and I don't remember the room being this dark when I left the bathroom.

His thrusts are slow and shallow, but it doesn't stop him from kissing my jaw and ear as he huffs warm, steady breaths against my skin. I was so lost in my own pleasure, I didn't feel him come, but I'm fairly certain he did since I can feel him slipping out of me with every movement.

“You’re lucky you love me, Nova, because you could never get rid of me. The sounds you make when you come could call a demon to heel,” he confesses. It’s as good as him telling me he loves me. I would hug him if I thought I could lift my arms, but just making sure I don’t drool or fall asleep while he’s still inside me feels like a chore.

“Lucky,” I reply, but it’s definitely not for the reason he stated.



LUCIAN

“Speak of the devil,” I mutter from the doorway. Nox turns his head so fast, I know he had no clue I was here, watching for the last few minutes. It’s proof of how she consumes us. There’s nothing else that can distract either of us from the other’s presence the way she can.

“You’re a demon now?” Nova questions lazily, understanding my reference.

“I think in this instance, lamb, it would speak more to your power to call one than to what I am,” I answer.

A satisfied smile graces her full lips, and she curls up on her side when my brother finally climbs off her. “Was I loud? I’ll work on that,” she remarks with no intention of keeping her word.

“Liar,” I tease. “If I didn’t know you better, I’d say you did that just to drive me insane, since you told me you didn’t have time to share a shower with me.” I sit on the edge of the bed, and her hand reaches for me as if she’s just as helpless as I am when it comes to touching her.

She lifts her head off the pillow, staring deep into my eyes. “School was canceled. I swear.” This promise has meaning.

“I know.” I bring her fingers to my lips and kiss her knuckles. “I was downstairs speaking with Lev and Morozov about it.”

“Do you know why they canceled?”

“To search the school and the island,” I tell her, but I’m sure she already suspected as much.

“Will they come here?” She sits up, looking worried for the first time in a few days. I kept waiting for her to panic and ask all kinds of questions, but Nova took it like she does everything—in stride.

“There’s no need. I already supplied the Umbras’ security with the gate log and the camera footage for the past few days,

willingly. I also gave them permission to share the information with the mainland police as a sign of my cooperation.”

“Will that work?” she questions softly.

“Yes, but it does make me regret not fucking you on the ride home the other night. That would have been a beautiful visual for them—you riding me while Nox drove, barely keeping his eyes on the road.”

She snatches her hand away from me in outrage. “I would move off-grid if a video of me doing that got on the internet.”

“Better erase the cameras in here then, brother.” I lean around her to look at Nox.

“He’s joking.” Nox puts his arms up to defend against the pillow suddenly in Nova’s hands. I think she planned on smothering him by the looks of her.

“Do you have cameras in here?” She gazes skeptically around the room.

It’s my turn to make a promise. “Not in here or in the main house at all. Any cameras we do have on the grounds are on a completely isolated system that would never reach the internet.”

Her eyes narrow with uncertainty as she levels me with a glare. “You better be telling the truth, pretty boy.”

“So I take it you wouldn’t be up for a home movie? Maybe in the future.” I shrug, sure she’ll come around at some point.

“Yes, that’s exactly how you can take it. No home movies or sex tapes for me, thank you very much.”

“Did Lev or Morozov have any news?” Nox relaxes into the bed. I can’t say I’m not a little jealous. It’s not because he was with Nova, I just wish I was in his position and just got done fucking her.

“Vera was supposed to have lunch with Bridget today, but she canceled early this morning. Morozov thinks it’s because the island is shut down or because she’s worried the Umbras are watching everything too closely.”

I trail my fingers up Nova's thigh. It's hard not to climb on the bed and take her, but it would be to prove to myself that I could, that she wants me too, and I won't give into the weakness to make her prove herself to me. Besides, I have never been insecure, and I don't plan on starting that shit now.

"Did she reschedule?" Nox questions. I'm certain he's just as curious about Bridget and Alden's relationship as I am.

"Not yet, but Vera knows it's important, so she won't give up."

"I'm assuming there have been no sightings of Alden then either?"

"No, and any video from the lower levels of the school from that night were completely wiped—unlike the night before the attack, when those cameras were just disabled—and it makes me think someone had to be aware of what was going to happen. If we lost the feed to any of our cameras, Morozov wouldn't just ignore it."

"Tell me exactly what you're thinking." Nox scoots back to lean against the headboard. He's assessing me like he already knows how my wheels are turning and just wants confirmation. I haven't shared the names Grace wrote down on the list with Nova, since I wasn't sure they would mean anything to her, and I didn't want her seeing one of them in school and kicking their ass or confronting them, drawing attention to any relationship between them, not when they are going to end up dead very soon. However, since school has been canceled, most likely for the rest of the week, and they won't make it through the weekend, I don't see any problem now.

"Do the names Meg Rogers, Hannah Tilly, Vincent Kensington, or Caleb Davenport mean anything to you?" I ask Nova before answering Nox's question.

"No, I don't think so. Why?"

"How about Mia Lancaster or Lucy Gibbs?"

"No, why?"

“They were the names Grace wrote down,” my brother answers correctly.

“Yes, and William Astor, but you already said you don’t know him, right?” I ask.

“They brought guys? Why am I not surprised?” She looks up toward the ceiling before answering my question. “I don’t know those names, but it’s not like any of those jerks introduced themselves before harassing me. Do you have pictures I can look at?”

“I’ll get Morozov to get them for you,” I reply. “When I asked Grace about the robes, she couldn’t tell me whose idea they were, just that everyone agreed it was a good idea. She admitted it was an easy way to conceal their identity, and I’m sure she’s heard the rumors.”

“Rumors?” Nova questions, pulling the covers over her body.

“About the founders,” Nox supplies.

“Huh, I guess I always figured the people in the bathroom were connected to the cult crap, but I must not have connected all the dots. I know only founders go to the meetings, and she isn’t one.”

“Wasn’t one,” I correct, since Grace isn’t anything anymore. “I think it’s too coincidental though. The robes were more than a convenient way to hide their faces, which is why I’ve had Morozov looking into everyone involved. I want to know if any of them are connected to the founding families. Maybe I wasn’t the only one trying to cut the Umbras off at the knees. I’m certain they have made more enemies than us.”

“You think someone else was pulling the strings?” Nova nibbles on her inner lip, staring into the middle of the room, her eyes unfocused.

“It could be. Grace was fairly confident she was the one running the show, but it would be easy to make her think that. She always thought she was more important than she was.”

“How can we be sure about any of it then?” Nova looks to me for answers.

“I’ll get to the bottom of it, even if I have to kill everyone on this island to do it.”

Nova sighs. “Yeah, I’d rather you avoid mass murder on any scale please.”

“In my experience, people take dead bodies seriously. A little bloodshed goes a long way to loosen lips.”

“Has Morozov found any connections between the names and the families?” Nox changes the subject, and I don’t think it was an accident. Brutal honesty isn’t always the best policy because not everyone has the stomach for it.

“One of the girls dated an Omega at one point, but it was pretty short-lived. He’s still digging,” I admit, hating that we don’t have anything more solid to go on yet.

“Are you going to *talk* to them?” Nova asks, probably wondering if I’m going to talk to them the same way I talked to Grace before I killed her.

“I have something different planned for them, lamb. You don’t need to worry about it.” I lean forward and kiss her forehead, hoping she understands I’m ending the conversation to protect her. Despite her strength, Nova is softer than this life, and I plan to keep it that way at all costs. If this didn’t involve her, she wouldn’t know anything about it.

“Please be careful,” she murmurs softly with her eyes closed.

“I’ll be better than careful. I’ll be smart.”



NOVA

“What is this?” I ask Nox when I see several bags lined up on the floor of the bedroom.

“More shit for you,” he informs me.

“Like what?” I peek into one of the bags, seeing tissue wrapped fabric.

“Clothes and things you need.”

“You already got me clothes,” I remind him. If they hadn’t gotten me a new wardrobe after I got out of the hospital, I wouldn’t have anything at all. I mentioned going to get my things from the Umbras when we first returned here, but they put a stop to that since they are convinced the Umbras will lock me away in a tower if they ever get me on their grounds again.

“We got you a few things. You needed more.” He doesn’t even look away from the TV he’s playing a game on.

I huff like it’s an inconvenience to be bought new things, but it kind of feels that way. I’ll never be able to repay them, especially when they spend so much money. My five grand would be gone, but let’s be realistic, it probably already is. It was in my room under the mattress of my bed. It’s not that ingenious of a hiding spot, but I didn’t know what else to do with it. It wasn’t like I was going to walk around with it all the time.

He briefly glances at me. “Pick out some stuff yourself if you don’t like it.”

“It’s not that, I just hate owing people things.” I sound like a brat, and I know it.

“Hey.” He tosses his remote, game forgotten. “You don’t owe us anything, Nova, and don’t let my brother tell you that you do to try to get sexual favors out of you.” His lips curl up in a smile. “But if you’re feeling thankful...” He leaves the sentence dangling, teasing me.

“I don’t think I would be able to walk if I repaid you in sexual favors,” I deadpan, but there’s some truth to my words. I didn’t know people had this much sex, but it’s not just them. I’m just as insatiable as they seem to be.

“Don’t tell Lu that, it would give him more reason to keep you in bed.”

“I don’t doubt it. Are we ever going to leave the house?” I set one of the bags into my lap after sitting on one of the club chairs.

“We are. Tonight, in fact. You should pick something new to wear.” He motions to the bag.

“Where are we going?” I’m instantly on alert. Neither of the brothers have wanted to leave the house in days.

“There’s a party tonight.”

I scrunch up my nose in disgust. Why would I want to go to a party with a bunch of people who hate me for some reason or another?

“Don’t look at me like that, it will be fun,” he chastises.

“I doubt that. Parties are never fun.”

“They can be, if you have the right company.” He moves closer while sweetening his words to get me to agree, but it’s not necessary. I would have agreed anyway because I’m a pushover when it comes to the Morningstar brothers. Nox places both hands on the chair I’m sitting in and leans closer, tempting me into a brief kiss. “I promise it will be fun.”

“If you say so,” I agree too easily.

“I do, now pick out something to wear. It could get chilly.” He backs away. “But bring a swimsuit too.”

“Is it on the beach?” I question, intrigued.

“Not necessarily.” His answer is cryptic, but I think that’s all I’m going to get because Nox turns on his heel with a grin on his lips and resumes playing his game, knowing he’s victorious.

I reach into the bag and pull out the first thing my hand lands on. Once I pull back the tissue, it reveals a soft, icy blue sweater that's close to the color of the twins' eyes. I like it more than I should, so I hold it up to my chest.

When I look up, Nox is watching me with a grin still on his lips. "That's a good color on you." I was already planning on wearing it, but his words confirm my decision.

I lay it gently over my thigh and sort through the rest of the things. Even the swimsuits are cute. There's a black one-piece with a mesh midsection and ruffled shoulders, and a couple of two-piece suits that seem to have a good amount of coverage. The one with the halter top is out without me even trying it on though. I can't wear anything like that around my neck, not even bras. They give me a headache and make my neck hurt.

"Did you guys pick this stuff out?" My doubt is clear in my tone.

"I'd like to take the credit, but we just sent your pictures over to a shopper and gave her parameters to follow and some colors we liked. Is it okay?"

"It's surprisingly good," I admit. The things they got me last time seemed to be more for comfort, but this is stuff I might pick out myself—if I had the money and wasn't worried about spending it, that is.

"Good to know. We'll keep her."

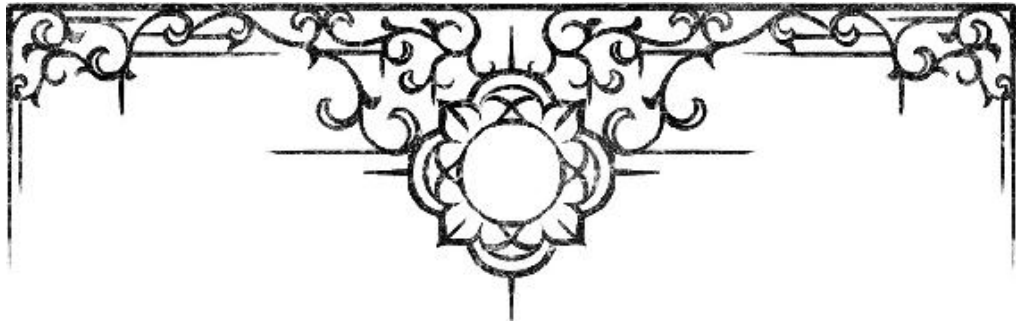
"I don't think I'll need anything else for a while," I reply, trying to discourage him from buying anything more.

"Bullshit." He snorts like he knows exactly what I'm thinking. "Now, go get ready, we're leaving in an hour."

"Don't you have to get ready?" I question.

"I can change my shorts in two minutes. You haven't tried any of that on, and you take twenty minutes to find the most comfortable leggings," he replies.

"Whatever." I head into the closet with my stash, leaving him to his game, since he's right.



LUCIAN

The plan to get everyone out on the water this weekend was almost too easy. I sent a few texts to the right people, asking who was planning the yacht party near one of the other islands, and before I knew it, I was getting message after message, asking if I was going to the party.

I didn't respond to most people, and when I did, I kept my answer vague, but it's all part of my plan. We've done things like this a few other times. People would jump from boat to boat, drinking, dancing, and fucking before moving on or finding a boat to crash on. Our boat will be off-limits as usual except for those we invite, and this time, that will only be one person, but I want to make an appearance. It's never too early to establish an alibi.

"Where is she?" I ask Nox the moment I walk into the room and find her absent.

"In there." Nox motions to the closet.

"What's she doing?"

"Trying shit on, I think."

"And you're sitting here playing a game while she's naked?"

"We have to leave by six, and that's in less than twenty minutes. Plus, I don't want her to think she owes us for the clothes." He mutters the last part softly.

"Did she like them?" I sit in a chair next to him.

"She seemed to, but she's been in there for a while."

"I'll go check on her." I start to push up from the chair.

"Nova, baby, are you almost ready?" Nox yells before I have the chance to rise fully to my feet. "Yeah right. You would check on her to see if you could get her clothes off and your dick inside her." He chuckles at his cockblock.

“I think so, is this okay?” She’s looking down and tugging at her shirt, so she doesn’t notice me, but I eat up her appearance. She’s in white cargo pants that have ties at her ankles and her feet are bare, but her toenails are painted a robin’s egg blue that matches the oversized sweater hanging off one shoulder.

“More than okay, lamb. You look good enough to devour.” Her eyes snap up to mine.

The soft expression on her face remains in place when she mouths, “Thank you.”

“Gorgeous. She’s not allowed to leave the boat, right?” Nox asks me.

“Nope, she’s confined to the Leviathan.”

“We’re going on a boat?” Her eyes are wide in wonder, or maybe fear. “I’ve never been on anything but a canoe, and it tipped twenty times.” She crosses her arms over her chest, and she doesn’t look excited.

“This is a little bigger than a canoe, sweetheart, I promise,” Nox assures her.

“On the ocean?” she exclaims as if she just realized where the boat would be. “I’m not a great swimmer. Maybe I should just stay here.” She drops her arms but pulls the sleeves of her shirt over her hands.

“You want us to go to a party without you?” I goad her.

“No,” she answers quickly. “You two would probably do something that would make me want to strangle you with piano wire.”

“How often do you think about maiming me, lamb?” I’m pretty sure the drop in my voice tells her how much I like it.

“Too often to be healthy,” she admits.

“Then you better get your ass on that boat, because I’m certain I will do something stupid, if only to make sure you follow through with that threat.”

“Are you blackmailing me to do what you want?”

“I think this would fall more under coercion or extortion than blackmail,” I correct, but I don’t really care how she defines it.

Nova makes sure I see her eye roll before she speaks to Nox. “I won’t really need a suit then, right? I’m not getting in the ocean.”

“Pack it just in case. You might want it, even if you don’t go in the water. Pretty much everyone will be wearing them.”

“Whatever.” She spins, making her long, dirty blonde hair fan out behind her.

“I thought the boat was going to be a surprise?” I don’t take my eyes off the door she disappeared through.

“Yeah, I fucked up,” he admits, tossing his remote on the table, finally giving up his game. “I need to change.”

“Whoa, not in there.” I put my hand on his chest when he moves as if he’s going to follow Nova into the closet. “You wouldn’t let me in there with her, so you can wait too.” I grin at the payback.

He pushes my hand away and shakes his head. “I was actually planning on changing, not creeping on Nova.”

“Bullshit,” I scoff. “You would have been creeping.”

Nova exits the closet with a small bundle of fabric in her arms seconds after I get done speaking. “Are you taking a bag I could put this in? Should I grab a towel from the bathroom?” She’s so damn adorable. She wouldn’t be asking about a towel if she understood the Leviathan isn’t just a boat.

“I’m sure we can find something. Mom probably has a shit-ton of bags.” Nox looks over at me, about knocking my fucking feet out from under me. He hasn’t entertained stepping foot near our parents’ wing of the house since they died.

“A plastic grocery bag would be fine,” Nova offers quickly, as if she understands just how big of a deal this is.

“Yeah, she does. Do you want to take her to look for something, or do you want me to go get it?”

“We could all go,” Nox suggests. “She would want us to use them, right?” I love that he’s thinking and talking about Mom, but I hate his lack of confidence.

“She would,” I agree.

“I can just carry it, it’s not a big deal.” Nova is looking between us, as if she regrets even asking.

“We’ll change, then head over. There’s plenty of time. It’s not like the boat will leave without us,” I tell her while slapping Nox on the upper arm to get him moving into the closet.

It takes me two seconds to find a pair of swim shorts and pull them on after stripping. It wouldn’t even be necessary if it hadn’t been so long since we’ve been on the boat, but I’m sure there will be some pants in one of the rooms I can throw on later if it gets cool this evening.

“I can take her if you want,” I offer again after we’re both dressed.

“It’s fine. I’m the one who brought it up.”

“She would think it was cool.” I have trouble meeting Nox’s eyes when I say it, but I’m telling the truth. Mom would have loved Nova, Umbra or not, and not just because we like her. She would have admired Nova’s strength and the way she stands up to me in particular. She always told me I would need a challenge to be happy. I didn’t quite understand what she meant at the time, but I get it now.

Mom would also love that Nova sees us as individuals, but also understands we’re each half of the same puzzle. I think she would be most grateful for the peace that Nova seems to bring to Nox as well. I don’t worry about him slipping away any more like I used to. She gave him back a part of himself that I didn’t think we would ever see again.

“She would be appalled by the thought of anyone carrying a plastic grocery bag.” Nox snorts. I take a second to examine him, expecting to find the usual pain and darkness in his gaze that has been present since they died, but it’s absent. The tightness in my chest eases out of me slowly with my exhale.

It's only then that I realize I feel different too. I don't have to tamp down the rage simmering inside me so I can pretend to be unaffected.

There is an ache in my chest, but it's not from anger or fury. It's loss, a feeling of emptiness I doubt will ever go away completely, but I can breathe through it and it's not consuming my every thought.

"Let's go see what we can find." I urge him to leave the closet since we're both just standing around like we don't know what to do with ourselves anymore.



NOVA

Nox is the first to emerge from the closet with Lucian right on his heels. They are both wearing black trunks that reveal a good portion of thigh and a hell of a lot of ink. I get distracted from my concerns about their mom getting brought up when I run my eyes over them.

When I look up from the visible outline in Nox's shorts, I know I've been caught staring. There's a sly grin curling his sweet lips. Heat works its way up my neck, but it's not embarrassment I feel. It's desire combined with a little annoyance that everyone will see what's mine, but no one can know they belong to me, the one sleeping between them.

"Look at her, eyeing you like she doesn't know if she wants to eat you up or shove you back in the closet," Lucian remarks, easily summing up my emotions.

I lift my chin in the air, bothered that I'm so transparent. "I thought we needed to go."

"We do, but that doesn't mean we can't enjoy your discomfort, lamb." Lucian hooks his arm around my neck and pulls me with him out of the bedroom. He releases his hold once we reach the hall just long enough to capture my hand instead.

He guides us through the house to an area I've never been, and we eventually wind up at a set of ornately carved double doors made of black wood with large iron rivets. Lucian looks over his shoulder, finding Nox, then pushes his thumb down on the door handle.

The door swings open soundlessly, revealing a large chamber much like my room at the Umbras' mansion, but way bigger. I'm sure it's a full apartment. Heck, maybe it's what people would call a penthouse, and I can only see a fraction of the place from where I'm standing.

Like the rest of the house, it's done in shades of black with traces of other colors to highlight the darkness. Deep, rich

greens and the occasional gray intersect with the different textures, softening the stone walls and floor.

Lucian takes a deep breath before releasing my hand and entering the room. I hang back, not wanting to invade their space. Something about the way he's taking in the area leads me to believe he hasn't come here often, or maybe not at all.

Nox is a little slow to follow his brother. His mouth is curled down in a full frown when he passes me. It makes me wish I had never asked for a bag, but I had no idea that question would lead us here. He trails his fingers over a large, circular dining table, complete with eight chairs around it.

"This is where we ate dinner most nights," Nox divulges, looking around. I watch as his chest expands when he pulls in a deep breath, prompting me to do the same.

I don't catch any scents in particular, but it's clear someone has been caring for the place, as there isn't a speck of dust on any surface.

Nox turns away from the table quickly. "It's been a while since I've been in here." He acts as if he needs to explain.

I walk over to him, making my intention and destination clear, then grab his hand. "I'm glad you had that time with them." It's the only thing I can think to say that wouldn't sound contrived.

"Me too," he agrees.

Lucian emerges from a long hall with a large straw bag. "How's this?" He extends the handles to me, and I feel a wave of relief. I was worried it was going to be something fancy and expensive.

"It's perfect, thank you. I'll return it just as it is." I hook the sizable handles over my shoulder, and the soft straw of the bag sits comfortably at my side.

"You can keep it. That way, you'll have it for next time," Nox informs me while already moving us toward the door. I don't argue for now. I can tell he's ready to leave, but I'm not keeping it.

Leaving the room, we take yet another route to exit the house, where we climb into the side-by-side. From there, it's a short drive to the water's edge. There's a large building on the coastline, almost like a big pole barn, but that's not what has my attention. It's the boat docked at the shore that has my focus. It's a lot bigger than a canoe, but to be honest, it's smaller than what I was expecting. There's an open front with seating for a few people, including the seat behind the steering wheel as well as a few others. It looks like most of the boats you'd see pulling a tube on a local lake back home, not what I was expecting to ride on the ocean.

I try not to let my nerves show as we board the small boat, but I'm not sure how successful I am when Nox has to steady me the moment both of my feet are on the vessel, which is rocking with the waves.

I also wish I would have brought a hat or some sunscreen, because I'm probably going to burn. My skin hasn't gotten the memo we're no longer in Michigan, dealing with winter. "Let's sit," Nox says, tipping his chin toward the front of the boat.

"Are you sure this is big enough to go on the ocean?" I ask under my breath as Lucian and another man climb onto the boat as well.

"It's safe, I promise. Besides, do you think Lucian would let you on if he didn't deem it safe?"

"He'd probably get a kick out of me peeing my pants," I scoff, making Nox chuckle.

"You never know with him," he agrees.

"What's so funny?" the man in question asks as he takes the seat across from us in the front.

"Your strange proclivities," Nox answers.

"Can't stop thinking about me for even a moment, can you, lamb? What odd appetites are you referring to?"

"I was just joking," I say dismissively and change the subject. "I wish I would have just worn my suit under my

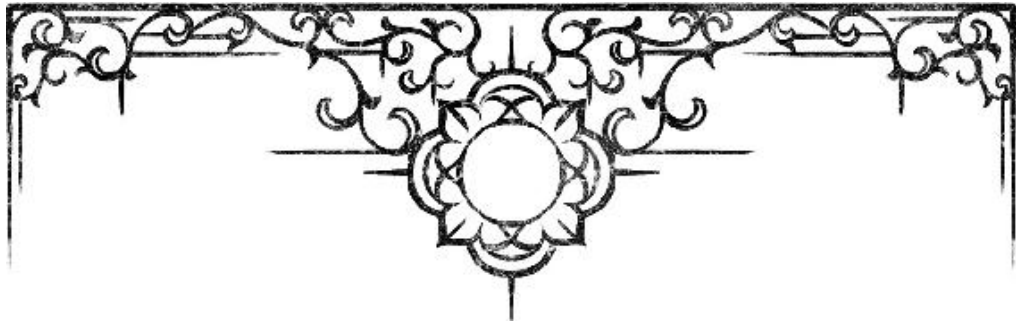
clothes. I was thinking we'd be near the beach and there'd be places to change."

Nox looks down at me. "You can change on the boat."

"I'm not changing out in the open." I look at the guy behind the wheel, a little surprised he would even suggest it.

"Not this boat." Nox shakes his head and points out to the water. "The Leviathan."

I follow his finger to a massive white yacht floating a few hundred yards out. "Holy crap," I mumble.



LUCIAN

I watch Nova's profile as she turns to look out at the water. Her eyes go wide before she gives it a double take. "That's the boat?"

I love the awe in her tone and the fact that she doesn't take any of this for granted. "It's the one we will be using today." I want to tell her we have other, larger yachts, but this one can get closer to the island and is docked locally, but I keep my mouth shut. I don't need to try to impress Nova. She probably doesn't even care beyond the fact that she'll have some place to feel safe and change her clothes. It's almost funny she thought we would let her strip out in the open.

"The Leviathan can't dock at the island. The water is too shallow," Nox explains.

"Do you just keep it floating out there all the time?"

"No, it's kept at a nearby marina when we're not using it."

"It's huge." She looks back at it again.

I chuckle under my breath, but I don't deliver the obvious joke.

The wind picks up as we get into deeper waters, and the captain speeds up, making quick work of getting us onboard the Leviathan. The full crew is there to greet us. "Sirs, will anyone else be joining us, or are we clear to get underway?"

"It will just be us," I answer, then dismiss the captain with a nod, leaving the rest of the crew behind as we guide Nova over the decks for a short tour before heading inside.

"I should have known." She lays the bag on one of the couches with care.

"Known what?" Nox plops down.

"That wasn't the boat. You guys don't do anything small."

"Not where it counts." Nox grins, causing Nova to roll her eyes.

I lean down to give her a kiss on the top of her head but stop short when I realize where we are and who could be watching. “I need to speak with the crew, don’t let him get you into trouble while I’m gone,” I mutter instead.

“What kind of trouble could Nox get me into?” She peers up at me, all sweet curiosity.

“How do you usually get in trouble?” I run my fingers along her jaw, even though I know I shouldn’t. Fuck the rules. She leans into my touch, confirming I made the right move.

“With you, it could be anything.”

“Not true.” I step away from her temptation. “This place isn’t like the house. The crew will come and go, so there’s no privacy here.”

“Oh, you think I’ll be in *that* kind of trouble.” Her eyelids lower, and she averts her gaze.

“I just happen to be very aware of how enticing you are, pet, but I did say Nox would be the one who would get you in trouble.”

She peeks at me again. There’s a little suspicion in her sharp gaze, but she’s not upset, so I can live with that.

“Be back soon.” I walk away from her before I do the very thing I accused my brother of and try to strip her bare.

I head straight to the security room to meet with the members of our team who are already on board, including Lev and Morozov. “Do we have everything in place for tonight?”

“We’re green,” Lev answers, telling me everything I need to know.

“Good. I’ll meet you when it’s time to go.”

“Vera is meeting with Bridget tomorrow afternoon. She says she has information you’ll want. She’s asking for a million and help disappearing.”

That piques my interest. “What could she have that would be worth that much, other than his location?”

“I don’t know, but she’s not offering it up without the payout.”

“We could make her.”

Lev nods at my statement with a look of indifference. He would kill her without issue to get what I need.

“Does she understand what will happen to her if she’s bluffing?”

“She’s been with the Umbras for the last eight years, so she should,” he answers.

“Give Vera the go-ahead to set it up. I’ll want to speak with her in person, in case she’s full of shit.”

Lev nods, which is all I need.



NOVA

I DIDN'T REALLY KNOW what to expect when they said party, but hanging out with just the three of us, besides the occasional crew member checking in to see if we need anything, wasn't it, not that I'm complaining.

We lounge on the deck for hours, taking in the sun as several other boats began mooring around us. None of the boats are as big as the Morningstars' yacht, but that isn't unexpected. We keep a respectable distance between us while we are in sight of the other partygoers, but the looks we share and the longing in our gazes are private.

I watch unfamiliar faces go from boat to boat, drinking and partying most of the day, and it only gets more intense as the sun starts to get lower on the horizon. It becomes my own personal form of entertainment. I laugh at how stupid people look and wonder if any of them will remember this tomorrow while sipping my freshly squeezed lemonade.

I keep expecting people to try to come aboard our boat, and they wave as if waiting for a cue, but then they move on when they don't get an invite. We have dinner on the deck, served by the crew in white polo shirts and crisp white pants. I find myself asking if this is real more than once, but fairly quickly, I decide I like the ocean. Well, I like the ocean when I am with the Morningstars anyway. It's easy to forget I am even on a boat. I'm certainly not worried about tipping or taking on water in this thing.

The music starts just before sunset, or maybe that's when I can finally hear it after all the speedboat and jet ski traffic dies down. It only gets rowdier from here. There are squeals of delight, followed by splashes and whoops. I can still see some of the partying, with many of the boats lit up, unlike ours, which is shrouded in low lights emanating from the floor.

Around eleven, when I am close to getting up and going inside because it's getting downright chilly, Lucian gets up from his chair and approaches me, crouching next to my seat.

“I’ll be back in a few hours. If you’re cold, go inside. Nox will take you to our room.” His words are spoken softly so no one else overhears us.

“Where are you going?” I keep my voice just as low as his.

Instead of responding, Lucian gives me an indulgent grin. I know without him saying anything that he’s not going to answer. Unease rolls in my stomach, but I don’t press him any further. I’m certain he’s not leaving me to go hook up with someone, but that’s where my confidence ends.

He rises, barely brushing his fingers along my thigh as he does, then disappears into the boat. I glance over at Nox for reassurance and find he’s already looking at me. The next ten minutes are filled with tense silence. I’m not sure what to do with myself, but I want to ask questions.

Eventually, Nox says, “Ready to head in?”

“Yeah,” I answer too quickly. “It’s getting cold.” I doubt anyone is around to hear my attempt to cover how eager I am to get him alone so I can ask where Lucian is.

When we enter the sliding glass door, there’s a girl behind the bar. It’s probably better stocked than Hooker’s, or at least as well as. “Can I get you anything, Mr. Morningstar?” She stands at the ready.

“I’ll take a bourbon sour, but I need to show her to her room first.”

“I’ll have that ready for your return.” She grabs a short glass and a few bottles as we exit. I take the hint and keep my mouth shut until Nox pushes the door to a room open, waiting for me to enter. I look behind us and see we’re alone, so I grab his hand, pull him into the room, and shut the door behind us before he can leave.

“Where did he go?”

“He’s not fucking around, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Nox replies, evading my question.

“I’m not, but I still want to know.”

“He’s making sure you’ll be safe at school.” He reaches for me, pulling me to his chest for a hug.

“What does that even mean?”

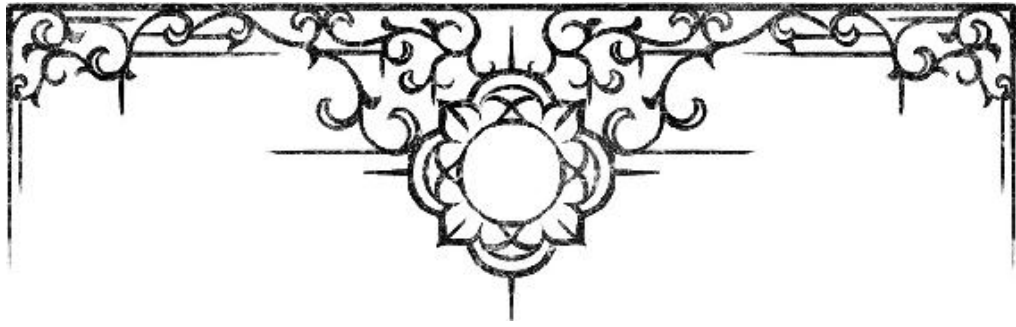
“Exactly what I said. It’s nothing for you to worry about, but I can’t stay in here, Nova, as much as I wish I could. These people are just hired staff. We can’t trust them to keep their mouths shut.” He drops his hand and steps around me to open the door. I spin to watch him, prepared to demand answers, but there’s a guy in the hall. Our eyes meet, and he averts his gaze quickly enough to let me know he feels like he got caught doing something he shouldn’t, namely watching us.

“Thank you, I think it’s just the sun. I’m not used to it like you guys are.” I pretend I’m not feeling well to cover why I’m going to my room so early and why Nox is with me.

“No problem. If you need anything, I’m sure this place is stocked. Just find someone from the crew.”

“Thanks,” I tell him, even though I hate the lack of familiarity between us. Nox makes a face that mirrors my emotions, but it slips away before he turns around and walks back down the hall. I shut the door and put my back against the wood.

That certainly wasn’t worth coming to bed. I would have sat out there with him all night, freezing, if I knew I wouldn’t get any real answers.



NOX

I knock on Nova's door once the boat is moored. Lucian returned about thirty minutes ago, along with Lev and a couple other security guards. It wouldn't have been unusual for us to have them with us if we went to another boat, so the crew aboard shouldn't have a reason to think it's out of place.

When I don't get a response, I knock a little harder. "Nova, we're heading back to the island. You can stay here if you want." That's a fucking lie, but it's something I would say to someone I don't care about.

The door opens from the inside, and it's too dark to see her face tucked mostly behind the wood, but if I could, I bet she would be scowling at me. "Give me a second," she bites out, then closes the door in my face. I might be in trouble. I don't know why Lucian likes the feeling of her being pissed at him, because it fills me with dread.

I lean against the wall, pretending to be bored. Within two minutes, the door opens again, and out walks a slightly disheveled Nova. She barely even acknowledges me as she walks down the hall, but I sure as shit notice she's not wearing a bra, which is kind of a dickish thing to be thinking about when she's clearly not happy with me. Maybe I woke her up. That could explain why she seems pissed. I know I hate getting woken up.

She finds her way to the back of the yacht without any prompting from me and descends the ladder to the waiting boat. The driver—one of our guards—looks up at me with wide eyes, trying to decide if he should touch her to help her down or risk her falling.

Nova drops the last few feet before either of us decide, sticking the landing, then takes one of the only seats by itself, making sure neither of us could sit near her, though Lucian still isn't in sight. I send a text to Lucian, telling him we're already on the small boat and to get a move on.

The boat ferrying us back is full for the return trip. The guards who were already on the Leviathan when we arrived earlier have climbed aboard with us, leaving some who have to stand. No one speaks for the duration of the ride back to the island.

I wish I would have told Nova to pack better. It's clear from her wrinkled clothes that she slept in them, or at least tried. By the time we disembark, I can see her shivering while she tries to tame her long hair, and I feel worse for not thinking ahead or at least telling her to check the drawers in the room for more comfortable clothes.

"Does anyone have a jacket?" I look around but come up empty. It doesn't matter much, though, because Nova doesn't waste any time hightailing it off the dock and to the side-by-side still parked near the storage building. I think about calling for a car, something that would have heat, but it would be a waste of time.

Instead of getting in the passenger seat, I climb in the back with Nova and put my arm around her. It's not much, but I can block some wind. She tenses for a moment, then sinks into my embrace, burying her cold nose against my neck.

Lucian gets us home in record time, and we all hurry into the house, then up to our room. Nova doesn't even let the door close before she demands, "Why didn't you tell me the plan?"

"What plan?" Lucian plays dumb ineffectively.

"Don't you even try it, pretty boy." She narrows her eyes on my brother, who looks altogether too serene. "There was a reason we went out on that boat, and you didn't tell me."

"I'm still not going to."

"What?" she splutters with utter outrage. I don't blame her, he's being cocky.

"Do you trust me, Nova?" Lucian rarely uses her name, and it's usually very effective when he pulls it out, noting the seriousness of the situation.

Nova takes her time answering, letting her eyes roam over every inch of my twin then me with a shrewd stare. "Yes," she

finally bites out through clenched teeth. “But that doesn’t mean I’ll put up with your shit, Lucian Morningstar.”

“Watch your goddamn mouth, lamb.”

“You better watch your step, pretty boy. I lived off scraps for a long time, but I won’t do it again. If *you* don’t trust *me* enough to let me in, then there’s no point in me being here.”

“Not telling you has nothing to do with trust and everything to do with protecting you.” Lucian either misses the part about living on scraps or chooses to ignore it, but that’s all I can think about. I know she’s not talking about being poor.

“You could say that about anything.” She tosses her arms up in the air.

“I could, but I’m not,” he replies.

“I thought the whole point of me going was so you didn’t do anything stupid.”

“I didn’t do anything stupid. Go put some fucking warmer clothes on or take that shit off and get in bed.” He acts affronted at the fact that she’s still clearly cold.

“No,” she states slowly, her eyebrows raised, daring him to do something about it.

Lucian actually laughs, but it’s a dark, slightly unhinged sound. “I will rip those clothes off you if you don’t, and when I’m done, I will fuck you on the floor, against the wall, or wherever the hell else I want, and it won’t be gentle because I don’t do scraps, lamb, not with you. You will always get all of me, and I don’t think you would be very happy with all of me right now, so I’m giving you a choice—go change, or get in bed.”

Nova slits her eyes, and I have to admit I’m not sure how this is going to play out. Just as I’m about to put myself between them, she pivots and disappears into the closet, slamming the door behind her.

“Maybe you should have just told her,” I offer in a hushed tone.

“Why, so she can have a war of conscience? She makes excuses for everyone’s shitty behavior. How long do you think it would be before she started asking me to forget about the whole thing and to just let it go?”

I don’t doubt that Lucian is right. She even did it with Grace when we pretty much knew she was the ringleader in the attack. “I just hate that she’s so upset,” I admit.

“If she’s upset, she’s feeling something. The only time I’ll worry about Nova is when she’s not pissed off.” I get what he’s saying, but it doesn’t make me feel any better.

Lucian strips out of his shirt. I notice it’s different than the one he left the house in, so are his shorts, but I don’t need to ask why or why his hair was wet when he found me on the deck, nursing the same drink I ordered hours earlier. “I have a meeting tomorrow afternoon. I need you to cover for me again.”

“Jesus, you can’t give it a day or so?” I pull the covers back, anticipating Nova coming out of the closet soon...or hoping she will, maybe.

“If I could, I would. It’s with Bridget, and she says she has information worth a million dollars.”

“You think she’s going to tell you where Alden is?” I whisper, looking toward the door.

“She knows what wasting my time will cost, and it’s a hell of a lot more than a mil, so I fucking hope so.” Lucian climbs into bed naked. I leave my boxers on so I don’t make Nova uncomfortable, but it takes her so long to finally emerge from the closet, I’m nearly asleep anyway.



NOVA

The sound of a helicopter zooming over the house disturbs the quiet afternoon. I've been soaking up the sun and enjoying the cool breeze coming off the water near the pool. You could call it sulking. Last night was a mess. Lucian was gone when I finally woke up this morning, and I'm torn between being pissed at him and worrying he's now mad at me.

I shield my eyes while looking up to see a bright red helicopter flying over the water in the distance. The main house isn't nearly as close to the shoreline as it is at the Umbras' estate. "Doesn't it seem like they are flying awfully low?" I ask Nox, who's sitting next to me, playing a game on his phone. He's been putting up with me all day, and I feel bad.

Belatedly, he looks up, not seeming at all concerned with the helicopter. "It's the coast guard," he answers.

I try to see where they are going, but the chopper is already too far away for me to see much other than a red blip in the sky. "Do you think it's a rescue or something?"

The sound of a boat speeding by interrupts his answer, but it's not really necessary anymore, because several boats float over the water, leaving big waves in their wake.

"Where's Lucian?" I question, getting a funny feeling in my stomach.

"Not out there, if that's what you're worried about." Nox lays his hand on my leg when I would have gotten up to get closer to the water.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive he wouldn't be near anything going on out there today." His eyes are wide, imploring me to understand without words.

"Do you know what's going on out there?" My question is slow and hesitant.

Nox gives me a small nod.

“Does it have anything to do with last night?” I whisper.

Another nod.

“Can you tell me?”

Nox looks conflicted for a few seconds, but then he drops his bare feet to the patio and leans forward. “Let’s go inside.”

I follow him up to the room, where he shuts the door and motions for me to sit in one of the chairs while he takes the one across from me. “It’ll be on the news soon, so there’s no point in keeping it from you. There was an accident last night on one of the boats, probably a small fire or something like that, that killed everyone on board.”

My mind starts racing. “Whose boat? When did it happen?”

“A few hours after we left.” He doesn’t answer the first part of my question.

“Nox, whose boat?”

“Vincent Kensington’s.”

I know that name. Vincent is one of the people Grace identified as being involved in what happened to me. “How many people were on the boat?” My throat feels tight.

“At least six, but I’m not sure.” Nox leans back in the chair as if he’s prepared for me to start screaming or freak out.

“That’s where Lucian went last night?” It’s not really a question, but I’m still asking for confirmation.

“Yes.”

“Where is he now?”

“Meeting with Bridget.”

“Is he going to kill her too?” I snap flippantly.

“That wasn’t part of the plan,” he says, but it’s almost like he’s leaving the option on the table with the way he pitches his voice.

“Jesus.” I put my head in my hands. That’s at least eight people who are dead because of me, if you include Alden, because I have no doubt he will be dead as soon as Lucian can find him. Even worse, Lucian has their blood on his hands. “There’s no way he’ll get away with this.”

“I promise you he will,” Nox replies with complete conviction.

“You say that, but rich people go to jail all the time. And what about in two years, when he’s bored with me and moves on to his next fixation? He’ll hate me and himself for what he’s done.”

“Nova.” Nox says my name softly, as if I’m some naïve child. “He’s not going to get bored with you in two years. You’ll be lucky if he gets a little less obsessed in ten, but I wouldn’t count on it. Lucian doesn’t do anything by halves, not love or even killing. The only reason your grandparents are even still alive is because he decided it would hurt them more to lose everything they have, to watch their money and power slip away slowly and know there isn’t a damn thing they can do about it.”

“It’s not worth the risk it poses to you guys.”

“You will always be worth the risk.” Damn, why couldn’t this be about something simpler? Those words fill a missing piece inside me that I didn’t even know was absent. How can that sentiment still give me butterflies when I know what it cost others?

“I must be sick in the head.” I let out a wild laugh without any mirth.

“Why would you say that?”

“Because I want to believe you.”

“That’s not sick, Nova,” Nox argues, but should I really be trusting his judgment? We all must be insane. Maybe it’s this island, and it’s changed me. I don’t think I would have accepted any of this a few months ago. “We will do whatever it takes to protect you.”

I nod slowly and mimic the sentiment. “I will always do the same for you guys. Whatever it takes.”



NOX

Nova's acceptance surprises me. I figured she would be pissed, or at least demand more of an explanation, but the core of her worry seemed to be focused on us and how she will deal with Lucian's actions. Maybe she's in shock.

"I think I'm going to go for a walk." She grips the arms of the chair, watching me expectantly. She's probably waiting to see if I'll tell her she can't, like Lucian might.

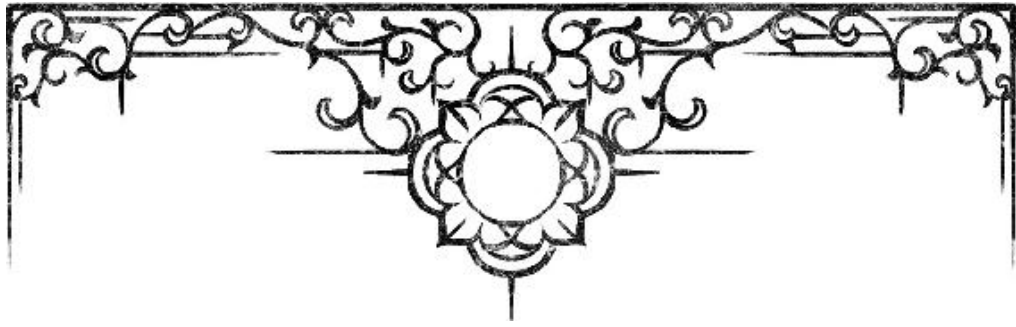
"Do you want me to come with you?" I ask, hoping she will say yes.

"No, I'll stay on the grounds, and I have my phone. I just need a little time to think and clear my head, if that's okay?" She's still watching me. I know if I push her, she will accept me tagging along, but she just told me that's not what she wants.

"Don't go too far, and call if you need anything." There's a slight warning tone in my voice. I'm starting to sound like my brother.

"I will." She sighs with relief before pushing up from the chair and leaning down to place a soft kiss on the corner of my mouth. "See you soon."

I track her as she leaves the room, wondering why I feel like I should follow her anyway.



NOX

When my phone vibrates about an hour later, a wave of relief has me tossing the remote to the side. I've been going a little crazy sitting here, and nothing I'm doing is distracting me. Instead of the text being from Nova, though, it's from Lucian.

Lucian: I'm on my way home.

Lucian: We got a fucking problem.

Me: ?

Lucian: Talk when I get there.

I debate whether or not I should tell him Nova went for a walk but decide against it. He would probably insist I go get her, and I don't think we need to put more garbage on her plate at the moment. I'm sure I'll catch shit for it later, but I can deal with him.

I hear him on the stairs twenty minutes later, and I'm a little anxious about Nova being gone so long myself.

His eyes scan the room the moment he enters the door. "Where is she?"

"She went for a walk a little over an hour ago. She saw the coast guard helicopter."

"How'd she take it?" He drops down into a chair. If I'm not mistaken, there's a little relief in his tone.

"Better than I thought she would," I answer. "She's worried you won't get away with it."

He waves his hand dismissively. "I was worried she would feel guilty or some shit."

"I think she's more concerned about us blaming her in the long run. I'm not sure she will tell us if she feels guilty."

“I don’t know how she could. All those fucks got off easy, if you ask me,” Lucian comments, proving killing someone isn’t always the worst thing that can happen.

“What’s the problem?” I question before Nova comes back. It would be our luck that she would walk into some shit she doesn’t need to know about.

“Alden,” Lucian snarls.

“Care to elaborate? Did he flee the country or something?”

“No, that old bitch has been harboring him from the beginning.”

“We already assumed that.” I shrug. He’ll have to leave at some point. We can get him then or use the fact that they protected him against the Umbras.

“But we didn’t fucking know that Dad never went through with disowning that traitor. He only made it official with Albert.”

“What?” To say I’m shocked is an understatement. “Have you confirmed this, or is this just what that chick told you?”

“Lev is digging into it now, but she swears she’s seen evidence. He still has his robes and family crest.”

“But that would mean...”

“We can’t ask for death since he was technically still a Morningstar, if in name only.”

“If they knew this, then why not present the evidence that night instead of pretending he escaped?”

“Maybe Rory didn’t know. Maybe Astrid was trying to cover her ass or cover the fact that they knowingly had a member of a different family working for them, which would be a problem.” Lucian gets up and begins pacing the room.

“Have you talked to Hershel? Someone at the firm would know,” I ask, bringing up the lawyers.

“Hershel confirmed he created the documents, but it wouldn’t matter if Dad didn’t submit them. Our best source would be to go straight to the record keeper, which is currently

a fucking Quade since this is Cadieux bullshit, but I don't want to alert anyone to the fact that we know and send up any red flags."

"Why would they even hire him if he was still a Morningstar? We would never let an Umbra in our house."

Lucian looks at me dead in the face and shakes his head like I'm an idiot. "Except when we did."

"Christ, I don't even think of her as one of them." I scrub the top of my head, ruffling my hair.

"They have a reason, just like we did. Maybe they were playing the long game all along, planning on using him against us in some way," Lucian speculates. "I told Hershel to draw up the original documents of everything he has on Albert and his family. Once I know for certain Alden is still a Morningstar, I will submit them so he can officially be blacklisted. I doubt it will be effective retroactively, but it won't stop me from killing him."

"Should we tell her?" I know it's not the best idea to keep things from Nova, especially after last night, but there's no way her knowing could help anything, and she's already dealing with enough.

"Let's figure out what we know before we tell her." He almost sounds reasonable, or maybe I just think that since he gave me an excuse not to tell her.

"Did that Bridget chick say anything else?" I press.

"Other than she's convinced there was something going on with Nova and Alden? No."

"Did she see anything?" I ask doubtfully. I trust Nova, and she said there was nothing between them.

"She saw him going to her room a hell of a lot, letting himself in with a key." Lucian's eyebrows are high, challenging.

"She didn't mention that." I don't like the idea of him having that kind of access to Nova. Did she give it to him, or did someone else?

“She sure as fuck didn’t, but you can bet I’m going to ask her about it.” Lucian seems calm, but I know he isn’t capable of keeping a level head when it comes to Nova.

“Don’t accuse her of anything,” I warn. “That chick could be lying for all you know.”

“She was too fucking bitter to be lying.” He snorts.

A few seconds pass in silence, and Lucian looks around the room. It’s easy to read what he’s thinking and feeling, like something is missing. This place feels empty without Nova. “How long has she been gone?”

I tap the screen of my phone on my thigh. “A while, nearly two hours.” Unease unfurls in my stomach. I should have gone with her. Maybe being alone wasn’t what she needed, or maybe I’m just nervous about Lucian being a dick when he asks her about Alden.

“That seems like a long enough walk to me.” He checks his phone, and his brow furrows almost immediately. “What the fuck would she be doing over there?”

“Over where?” I stand up to look over his shoulder, even though I could check her location on my phone just as easily.

“Near the docks and dry storage.”

“The coast guard is probably still out on the water. Maybe she wanted to see what was going on,” I suggest.

He huffs and pockets his phone. “Let’s go get her.”



NOVA

An hour into my walk, I don't feel any different than I did when I left. My thoughts are still muddled and chaotic. I thought gaining a little space from Nox would give me some perspective and help me wrap my head around the fact that I'm not running for the hills after everything I know about this island and what the people here are capable of, but it hasn't.

He doesn't have some magical power over me, and there's no Kool-Aid I'm sipping that has made any of this more tolerable. It's just me and my willingness to accept them as they are, and the knowledge that I would do whatever it takes to protect them.

It's frightening, but also the tiniest bit freeing too. Maybe next time—because I'm certain there will be a next time—my world gets turned upside down, I won't feel the need to examine the reasons behind how I feel.

When my phone rings a short time later, I don't even bother looking at it before answering it. "Hello?"

"Nova, I'm glad you answered. Don't hang up. You're going to want to hear what I have to say."

"How did you get this number?"

"I thought you would understand by now the lengths people will go to when they are backed into a corner," Astrid answers, and my blood ices over. Does she know what Lucian did?

"What do you want?" I manage not to sound as worried as I am.

"We're past wants, my dear girl. It's time to talk about needs. I hoped it wouldn't come to this, but the Morningstars have forced my hand."

"What are you talking about? They haven't forced anything." It's as natural as breathing to defend them.

“That’s where you’re wrong, and in turn, I must now force you.”

I scoff into the phone, but I can’t really mount a response at the moment because I don’t even know what she’s talking about yet.

“If you do not return home and take your place in the family, I will ruin the Morningstars.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?” My tone is cocky.

“You’ve already done it for me, Nova.” The confidence in her words rekindles the fear I felt moments ago. “I’m not sure how much they have told you, but even we have rules. You have broken the most sacred rule of the island.”

“What is that?” I ask softly. I don’t really want to know the answer, but I think I already do.

“You have formed an alliance within the families, created a united front, and weakened the others by doing so. It’s grounds for banishment. They would lose everything, my dear—their home, their money, and their power, which is the one thing they crave more than anything else.”

Her words ring with truth. Lucian warned me about what could happen if the families joined, creating a stronger front. It’s exactly what I used to threaten Nox when I thought I wanted to leave. God, I’m dumb.

Lucian also made me believe Astrid would never pursue that avenue because she wouldn’t risk losing her heir. “You can’t prove anything,” I reply, though it already feels like a lost cause.

She lets out a tinkling laugh. “Why do you think I’ve allowed you to carry on so long? All I had to do was wait, and I knew you’d give me everything I needed, but don’t worry, they didn’t help themselves either. Too arrogant for their own good.” She nearly mutters the last part.

“What proof?” I’m not doing anything she says just because she states she has something on me.

“Well, would you like to hear everything or just the most damning evidence?” she asks conversationally.

I roll my lips in and bite down to keep from saying something I might regret.

After a moment of silence, she says, “The juicy bits will do, I’m sure. After you were attacked, we made sure to tighten security on campus, which is how I was able to witness your little tête-à-tête on the stairs. You freely admitted to everything.”

My stomach drops. I can’t even argue. I need to go to Nox and Lucian. They will have an idea.

“Just imagine how hard it would be for them to defend themselves against their transgressions without all that money and power they are used to, and really, dear, how appealing do you think you would be to them when they know you are the cause of their downfall? How soon before they hate you just like they hate me?”

I can’t say that the thought of them hating me isn’t a concern, but it’s small compared to the other fear. Lucian could go to jail for the rest of his life for what he did last night. He told me that money and power buy his ability to get away with anything. I can’t let that happen.

Resignation sours my stomach. I want to vomit on the spot. Hot saliva pools in my mouth, but I don’t allow myself to cry. It takes a few times of opening my mouth to finally get a single word past my tight throat. “Fine.”

“Where are you?” she asks too quickly with an eager tension that’s been absent the entire conversation.

“Where do you think I am?” It seems when I’m being nasty to her, I have no problem speaking.

“Can you get to the gate?” she inquires impatiently.

“I’d never make it out. They have too many guards.” I sound like I’m bragging.

“I suggest you figure out a way to get past them, unless you’d like me to make a call for an emergency meeting.”

Damn it, I was hoping I could at least see them again, try to explain, or...or nothing. I don't know if I would have the strength to leave if I did see them. "Can you send a boat?" I look at the dock in the distance, the same one we left from yesterday. God, that almost feels like a lifetime ago.

"Where?"

"The Morningstar dock. There's a big building near the water, like an airplane hangar."

"Leave your phone and anything else they can use to monitor you behind, and, Nova, I'm so happy you've finally seen things my way."

The line goes dead before I can tell her to fuck off, but I say it anyway.

As the seconds tick by, nervousness fills my stomach. If they find me now, I know I'll tell them everything, and their lives will be ruined. I have to make sure that doesn't happen. I wait until I hear the boat before placing my phone on a nearby rock. It's so tempting to take it with me and hide it somewhere so I could try to explain once I'm gone, but I can't risk it.

I start to run toward the boat, but I skid to a halt on the pebbly water's edge. Alden is behind the steering wheel with a grim expression on his face. "Get in the boat." He doesn't need to raise his voice, even though he's at least ten feet away from the dock.

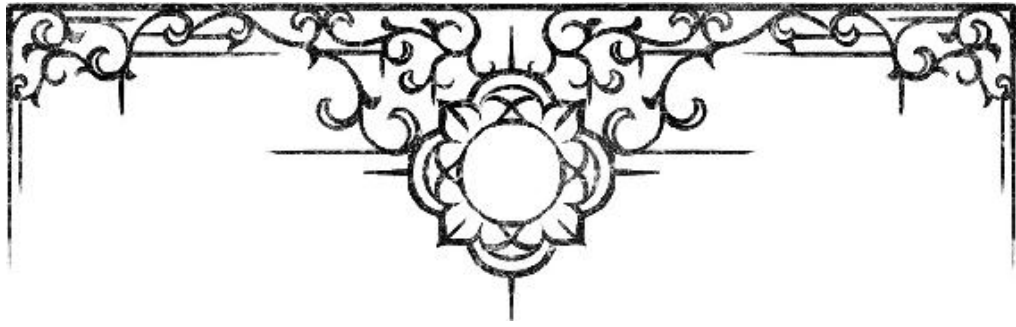
I look down at the water, knowing what he expects, then jump in. I'm not a good swimmer, though I make it to the back of the small craft easily enough, but climbing the silver ladder hanging off the back is a different matter. I feel like I weigh three hundred pounds with my clothes dripping wet, but that's better than being naked.

When he reaches out a hand to offer his assistance, I snarl, "Don't fucking touch me," then shove his hand away.

"I see they taught you well." He shakes his head and gives me his back, allowing me to struggle to pull myself up.

"We'll see how well," I mumble under my breath. Astrid may think she trapped me, but Lucian and Nox made sure I

know my worth. If she thinks ruling me will be easy, she's dead wrong.



LUCIAN

Nova is nowhere to be seen when we reach the dock. I check my phone again just to make sure she's not on her way back to the house, but her little red dot hasn't moved.

"Where is she?" Nox steps out of the UTV and looks around. "Nova!" There's an edge of panic in his voice I try not to pay attention to.

I call her phone, willing her to answer the damn thing. "Pick up." When the automated voicemail instructs me to leave a message, I hang up and use the Find My Phone app. It leads me to the tree line, where I find her abandoned phone sitting on a rock.

"What is this?" Nox looks down but doesn't touch the thing.

"I don't fucking know. What did she say when she left?"

"I told you, she said she was going for a walk. Do you think she got hurt or something?" Nox continues to look around before shouting her name again.

"This looks intentional. Why the hell would she leave her phone here? There's no way she went swimming, right? The water is too deep here, and she said she isn't a strong swimmer."

"No way," Nox replies.

I bring my phone back up to my ear and call Lev. "I need someone on the cameras now. Get eyes on the dock. Nova's phone is here, but she's not."

"I'm on it. How far back should I go?"

"No more than two hours." I finally pick up her phone. Her screen is the generic swirls and shit, asking me to give the passcode. I type in the numbers I memorized after watching her do it over her shoulder several times, and a note app is up with a brief message.

I'm sorry.



“WHAT THE FUCK DOES THIS MEAN?” I shove the phone in Nox’s face.

He scans the tiny message at least twice before he runs right into the water and starts yelling again.

“Here she is. Roll that back. She’s on the phone,” Lev tells me between talking to someone else.

“How long and who? I want her phone records.”

“Five minutes maybe. She looks...devastated,” he says softly. “I’ll have to sign into the cell carrier. It would be faster for you to check the call log.” I should have known that. I’m not thinking clearly. “Motherfucker,” he curses.

“What?” The pit in my stomach drops to my balls.

“Alden. He was in a boat.”

“She went with him willingly?”

“He made her swim over. She... Shit, she slapped his hand away when he tried to help her up, but he didn’t force her.”

I don’t bother hanging up before I chuck my phone at the rocky beach. “Nox, get your ass over here. She’s not in the fucking water.”

“Where is she?” He jogs over, soaked from the waist down from his jaunt into the ocean.

“She left with Alden.” If it were possible for me to spit venom, I would have when I snarled his name.

“No way, she wouldn’t do that,” he denies.

“If you need proof, we’re about to see it on video.” I stomp over to the UTV and climb in, barely waiting for Nox to get in his seat before speeding away.

Lev is waiting in the security room with the footage already on the big screen when I walk in. “Let’s see it,” I demand, half convinced he must be mistaken but unable to voice my doubt.

“I found some earlier footage,” he says, and I see Nova walking along a path. A smile lights up her face before she puts her phone up to her ear. The grin slips within a heartbeat.

“Is there audio on this?”

“No, the only cameras we have with audio are near the house and the gate,” Lev answers.

“Do we have anyone who can tell me what she’s saying?”

“I’m already working on that, but it’s not foolproof, and she’s moving around a lot, so we may not catch everything.”

“I want your best guess.”

“You two would probably be the best to judge since you know her. Roll it back to sixteen thirty-two,” he tells someone seated at the desk. “I’m pretty sure she’s asking for proof here. See that? *What proof?*” Lev looks at me for verification.

I can read the same words, but without the sound, I can’t be positive.

“Yes,” Nox says eagerly. “Look at the way her lips purse, just like when she calls you pretty. I want to see the rest.”

I think I pick up a few more words, but she does a lot of listening, and like Lev said, she moved around the entire time, almost like she was pacing, but I can clearly read her final words. “Fuck off,” the three of us say in unison as Nova jerks the phone down to her side.

“She must have been mad. She only curses when you really piss her off,” Nox chimes in.

“Maybe you don’t know her as well as you think you do,” I snap back.

“That’s bullshit and you know it. *We* know her. If she left, it was because she didn’t think she had any other choice.” It pisses me off to hear Nox defend her so easily, even though I

want to do the same, but I don't have the balls to do it, because it looks like she fucking played us.

“Was it Alden who called her?” Lev asks, reminding me that I haven't checked her call log yet.

I make quick work of unlocking her phone again and reciting the number on the screen, prompting Lev to jot the number down on a pad. “I'll have Morozov put a reverse search on this.”

While he's talking, I scan through the tiny list of recent calls, not seeing the number or any number other than ours, but that doesn't mean she couldn't have deleted it, except then I think about how she hasn't been away from me or Nox much. I don't think she would have even had the opportunity to have secret conversations with anyone. Her texts show a little more activity, but again, they are mostly from us bugging her with stupid shit while she was in class the last few days, and then the message from the school about classes being canceled.

“There's no way to hear the call?” I ask, even though I know the answer.

“No, we didn't have a tap on her phone or the line that called her,” Lev indulges me while looking down at his phone. “The number is registered to Umbra Holdings. Morozov says there's more than twenty numbers on the account, and none are assigned names.”

“There's one way to find out.” I extend my hand to Nox, asking for his phone, since I destroyed mine. He places it in my open palm without hesitation.

I don't bother trying to block my number before dialing the number now ingrained in my head.

“That took you longer than I expected. You gave her too long of a leash. We made that mistake too.” Astrid speaks as if we're old friends. If she were in front of me, I would strangle her with my bare hands while she thrashed around like the dying snake she is.

The calmness I usually have no problem exuding fails me, so my voice is tight when I finally manage to speak. “Let me speak to her.”

“Sorry, but *my granddaughter* isn’t accepting calls from you.” She puts way too much ownership on my lamb. I find myself squeezing the phone, wishing it were Astrid. “In fact, I thought she made it very clear that she didn’t want to speak to or see either of you again when she left.”

“Then let her tell me that herself,” I demand, knowing I have no power to make her obey.

“She’s not available at the moment. I think she mentioned showering the scum off her.”

“Your head games won’t work with me, old woman.”

The Umbra matriarch laughs softly. “No? Too bad. I was actually doing you a service. It would have been easier for you if you hated her, but you soon will. You can only watch the person you love with someone else for so long before that adoration turns to loathing.” The malice in her tone makes me think she has personal experience in the matter.

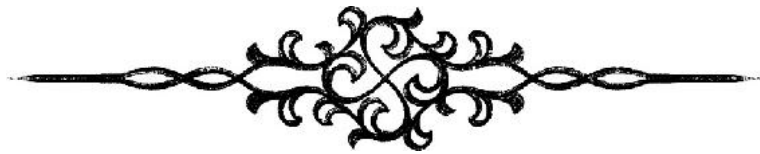
“Do you really want to make an enemy of me, Astrid?”

“You, child, are the one who made an enemy of me when you tried to turn my heir against me.”

“You did that yourself. I just showed her the truth. Do you honestly believe you can control her?”

“Well, since we’re giving credit where it’s due, I have you to thank for that, Morningstar. Loyalty is in the blood, you see, and you earned hers. Nova will do anything to protect you and what you hold dear, so I will have no problem controlling her. You, however, will have to watch it all unfold, knowing she sacrifices herself for you every day, and you will still grow to hate her for it.” My stomach twists, making me feel sick, as if I’m on the verge of throwing up, and my only response is to keep breathing into the phone while she continues her spiel. “I should have recognized how desperately she wanted a family. If I had, she never would have been swayed by you, but I assumed she would be more like her mother.” She sighs.

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her I will make her pay for taking Nova from me, even if it's just for a short time, because there is no fucking way I won't get her back, but for the first time in my life, I'm afraid of the consequences of my words and actions. I have no way to protect Nova when she's there, and I'm sure Astrid knows that. It's precisely why she's telling me all this, so she can try to use it to control me. I can't let her know how right she is.



NOVA

“PARDON? I think we have a bad connection.” Astrid puts the call on speaker, allowing me to hear Lucian’s voice.

“You’re wrong about me hating her, Umbra. I’d have to feel something for her to hate her, and that will never happen. I used her just like everyone else has. That’s all she’s good for. I almost feel sorry for the next person who has to deal with her. Maybe she won’t get so attached to them.”

Astrid’s response gets drowned out by buzzing in my ears. I don’t want to believe what Lucian said, but it still hurts to hear it. I work to keep my face emotionless as Alden stares at my profile, examining me for a response. I pretend he’s not there and fantasize that I’m alone, back in my crappy apartment in Michigan, and the only thing I need to worry about is when rent is due.

“Take her to her room.” Astrid’s flat tone pulls me from my musings, but I have no idea how much time has passed or how the call ended. “I’ll have Rory call an emergency meeting in a few days to sort out your business.”

“It’s not my *business*,” Alden grates out. “It’s a death warrant you promised would never get that far.”

My grandmother waves her manicured fingers dismissively. “The cost doesn’t matter nearly as much as the result. Both of us have what we want. The rest will sort itself out.”

Alden pulls me up from the chair by my upper arm, pinching my skin. I try to jerk away, but he just grips me harder. “It doesn’t matter what he said. They will come for you. The only way to get rid of them is to put them both down.”

“After I take everything from them the way they tried to take everything from me, we will, but they will pay for fucking with me first.”

I let Alden haul me out of the room with my eyes glued to the hatred in Astrid's stare. Her promise wasn't just directed at Nox and Lucian. I'm dead the moment I'm no longer useful, unless I get rid of her first.

To be continued in [Honed in Havoc](#),

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Albany lives in Michigan where she's happily married to her high school sweetheart. She spends most of her time juggling her four children's extracurricular activities, with her nose stuck in a book. When not reading you can find her writing her very own book boyfriends. Albany's passion is writing romance with real characters that are far from perfect, but always seem to find their own happily ever afters

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