



Cravings
of
Disguise

LOLA MALONE

CROWN OF DISGUISE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for picking up this book. Before you proceed, I would like to state that this is **not a standard romance**. This story is raw and has a decent number of unlikeable characters who have been created to show you who the Saint Laurent Boarding College for boys accepts and teaches.

They are prestigious, obnoxiously rich. And what's worse? They come in a group. Their behaviour is meant to shock, is meant to be depraved, and comes independently from my own opinions. It's merely portrayed to share what we are all capable of, when given the opportunity.

TRIGGER WARNINGS

Include, but are not limited to: dub con, use of alcohol, masks, hooded men, bondage, loss of a loved one, death, explicit scene with multiple members, prostitution, sharing sexual partners (main characters are not involved), mental health.

Please proceed with caution. If you need any clarification or have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me on lolamalnewrites@gmail.com

Bienvenue

You, our brother, who carries his heritage with dignity and pride, who walks this world with his head high, searching—not quite finding—to belong. And belong you shall, brother, because today is the day that your life will change.

You are invited to become part of the inevitable, the circle of gold that will keep your spine straight and your dignity intact. To melt into a group of people who are like you, brother, who were once searching but who found—found—what life really means.

Loyalty.

Respect.

Tradition.

Sacrifice.

And tonight your Initiations shall begin.

*“All suffering originates from craving, from attachment, from
desire.”*

Edgar, Allan Poe

This is for you, my three bright flames. You have my heart.

And to Charlotte. Thank you for believing in my words even before I believed in them myself. I couldn't have finished this story without you.

PART I

DEFERENCE

“Sacrifice.

We talk about the year 1789. We talk about the fourteenth of July. The storming of the Bastille became the symbolic start of the French Revolution. This is where, for us—children of royal blood, of the noble and privileged, our future altered.”

The man’s voice is low and stern, his spilled words surrounded by a circle of condensation that lands in the cool twilight of their surroundings. Their importance resonating onto the thick stone walls around them, where they bounce back toward the group of people that’s huddled together.

“Loyalty. Because when commoners destroyed the history and wealth of this country, plunged our glory and values through the mud of their kettle, our ancestors had to flee for their lives.”

His black, ceremonial cloak falls heavily over his shoulders, the hem pooled around his feet and a hoodie that covers his head. Black leather gloves are wrapped around his fingers. In his right hand, he carries a cane with a gaudy, golden sign on the handle, that he now uses for support. He sweeps his gaze around him, eyes piercing black in the faint light, to where the others are standing in a circle. Like him, they are wearing heavy cloaks to cover their bodies and heads, and a golden mask that covers most of their facial features.

“Respect.” The fire crackles at the same time as the word spews past his lips, and he flicks up his gaze, the golden-colored lace on his face glimmering through the fire. “Because our ancestors stood strong together. They knew what was happening, knew that they had to survive to bring the country back onto the right track.” The cane booms onto the wooden floor, and he raises his voice, now filled with hatred and contempt. “The poor wanted to kill our nation! They wanted to take what’s ours!” His cloak rustles when he spreads his arms. “But they can’t have what’s ours.”

Some shake their heads, their chins still dipped, eyes staring at the ground. A vague group in the darkness, their silhouettes only lighting up every now and then under the flicker of a torch.

“Traditions. Because our ancestors came here, to this very location, where they were granted a hiding place by monks who had been given this castle to use for their prayers. And did they pray. They had to wait for twenty years, until Napoleon emerged and restored the system of titles. He restored our honor.”

Somewhere in the background, an owl hoots.

“Our family was fierce, and loyal. They created our brotherhood, so they could live together in mutual values. They left us with their gift.”

The man tilts his head back, dark eyes peering down from behind the lace, to this year’s pupils. “They created this entity, this way of life, for you. Their offspring. To protect you against injustice, and make you strong. Together, we are strong. Brothers!”

“Brothers.” The pupils echo.

“Because we are loyal!”

“Loyal.”

“Because we will sacrifice!”

“Sacrifice.”

“Because we respect!”

“Respect.”

A figure emerges out of the darkness, dark cloak loose around his frame as he ambles toward the group, his fingers tracing the shoulders of those he passes as he makes his way inside the circle. Until he stops.

“You.” His voice is soft, but it’s enough for the circle to fall apart. Pupils walk back, slowly disappearing into the void, leaving only one individual. “There’s someone out there who doesn’t belong here.” He circles the pupil, whose spine has become rigid while his eyes bore a hole into the ground. “And that someone is putting the brotherhood in jeopardy. You are putting the brotherhood in jeopardy.”

“I can explain.” His soft objection being nothing more than a weak stammer.

“Kneel,” the soft voice orders.

The pupil looks up now, as if being awoken by a trance. For the briefest of seconds, he seems to search around, then visibility deflates. And kneels. The two figures surround him, the cane standing proud next to the kneeling man, its golden cross higher as if to taunt him.

“Tonight, you brought in a commoner. And you know what happens to commoners, right?”

“No, I didn’t—” the kneeled man looks up once more, eyes wide with panic.

“We stay true to our kind—our heritage. No intermingling. Tonight, you get to switch places. You’ll take his punishment, while we deal with the consequences. ”

“Please!”

“Show your respect, and learn from your sins.” The man with the soft voice opens his cloak around the waist, until his cock juts out. It’s hard, with a swollen head, and points straight ahead to where the man sits on his knees, his mouth agape in horror.

“Is this—happening?”

The other man places his cane against his neck, making him fall forward, to where his chin is being pulled up into a tender grip. And then his mouth is put onto the waiting cock.

“You have all been chosen to join the brotherhood, and just like your ancestors, your fathers, you will become a member,” the man with the cane continues.

Silence, apart from the spluttering man on his knees, and the soft groans from the other guy who’s holding him down.

“You will show your dignity. Your worth. Your loyalty. And Alpha Fraternalii will give you the world. And let me tell you, you’re about to live the best version of your life.”

The cloaked man grunts loudly, then spills inside the pupil's mouth.

Multiple hands grab the pupil tight and haul him back onto his feet. His knees are visibly shaking, wet lips puffy and eyes large with shock.

“You have done well. When you, my brothers, rewrite history, let's see how fast this one can run. Let the rituals begin!”

DOMINIQUE

2 years ago

Despair. Thick and melancholic, like a knitted blanket wrapped around our shoulders, heavy and unraveled. It's making us stumble and fall to our knees. And I don't know if we can get up, I don't know if we can ever get up.

Oh, Damien, what have they done to you?

Over the past sleepless nights, endless possibilities have drifted through my mind, trying to make sense of the events. Trying to rewrite the past.

But I don't know what to think anymore.

It's freezing inside the church, and circles of damp leave my mouth together with my rapid puffs of air. Despite the request not to wear anything formal, I'm still in a black suit, the material stiff and too close around my sensitive skin.

How many times did you tell me that I'd look good in a suit? Well, I'm proving you wrong, brother. I'm proving you wrong.

The church bells start ringing in a heavy, chaotic chime, and I suck in a deep breath. It's about to begin. People shuffle inside the church, their heads dipped.

We're sorry. Sorry. Sorry.

They are wearing suits and dresses, such different garments from our usual wear. Perhaps it helps us to detach ourselves from this moment, as if we're not really here. From this silence. It's nothing like you would have liked. You were—*are*—loud, a trouble-maker, a bit of a dickhead, a lot of a mess.

Footsteps drum in my head.

My brother. *Thump*.

My protector. *Thump*.

My example.

Damien, how can I face this world alone, without you? How can I wake up every morning only to be welcomed by your empty side of the bedroom, filled with memories but void of you? I'll leave those horrible posters of your stupid football heroes, won't fill your empty cupboard, because you didn't give a damn about studying. The only valuable thing in there—*your words*—is that ball that's signed by the national team after the iconic match between France and Spain. Out of thousands of contestants, *you* won that ball.

Just like you won that merit scholarship to attend boarding college. Merit for *what*—you were never the best student and we always wonder how you won. The scholarship had been my dream, though miracles don't exist. But secrets do, and you carried one by yourself, kept it away from me. Now I wish you would have told me. Because just maybe, it could have saved your life.

Tears cling to my lashes, and though I wipe them from my eyes with an annoyed huff, they won't leave me alone. They fall over my cheeks regardless of what I want, and the sensation of the cool moisture on my hot cheeks makes me feel even more puffy, more miserable. Makes this feel even more real.

But what if it's not?

No.

What if they're wrong?

No.

What if he's still out there, alive?

No.

It's a lie, *mon frère*, I know that. I've seen you laid out in your coffin, looking so peaceful, so relaxed. Looking happy as if you were at home. But you didn't smell like home, Damien, no. You were no longer carrying the sweet scent of marijuana. No longer smelling like oil just like you do when fixing your baby—a cherry-red 1982 Renault 9—or of sweat after you've had football practice. No, you smelled of cleaning material, of artificial perfume. Of fakery and shallow shit, just like the make-up they put on you to give your face some color.

I miss you so much it makes my bones rattle. I wish I told you how much I love you and appreciate you for always saving my ass from my bullies.

"Hold him down!"

I shiver at the memory, throat heavily swallowing to get rid of the bile. Of the shame when I recall those taunts and hoots when they held my face down in the bin.

Two horrifying minutes. That's how long it took for one of the teachers to come running and help me out. I know that, because the leaked video that had perfectly captured how three guys had me cornered and upside down in a bin, was called Two Minutes.

You were furious when you got hold of that footage. But I... I am sorry that I'm nothing like you. I'm not strong and mouthy and popular with lots of friends. Why not? Why can't I be like that?

You told me that you liked me just the way I was. When I called you and told you that some guys in my class had stolen my books and ripped them to shreds for the whole school to see, and I'd just taken it. I'd just stood there like the weak shit I am, and taken it. Because I didn't know what to do. But you reassured me.

You told me that it would pass, that life would get easier. That your friends—the boys—would look after me. And I

believed you, Damien. I did, because I always have. You've been my big brother for seventeen years, my saviour for them all.

My tongue laps up another flood of tears, and with the growing sounds of whispers around me, my back straightens impossibly tighter, my composure fighting my mind to get a fucking grip.

Don't move. Because if I do, I might just fall apart, like a house of cards.

There are soft murmurs behind me, their words lost under the heavy sound of the church bells. The place has filled up with people standing in the back. Mom and Dad wanted to be here before the others, didn't want them to see us grieving. Didn't want them to see us fall apart.

Because you were the glue of our family, *mon frère*, the backbone on which we all somehow relied.

My gaze flicks through the crowd—the boys sit together with the football team. They tilt their nods in my direction, their eyes dark with sorrow. I notice the group of navy-blue school uniforms in the corner of my eye, but decide to ignore them and their perfectly slicked hair.

Cause of death: death by drowning.

Case closed.

I remember the look on Mom's face. Impossible.

No one seems to find it strange that your body was found under a large oak tree, and not floating around some pond.

What happened that night, *mon frère*?

I will find out, I swear. I will—

Mom's fingers brush over my forearm, giving my wrist a little squeeze. "*Don't, chéri. Laisse le temps au temps. C'est souvent lui qui nous ouvre les yeux et apaise nos douleurs.*"

But how can I trust time to take away my grief? Mom eyes me, her lips tipped into a knowing look. "I know, my love. But

those are words of wisdom, so don't fight it. I wouldn't survive losing my other son as well."

Father Jean walks in, his white robe fluttering as he climbs the altar, a stern look on his face.

Look around, Damien. Everyone came here today for your last salute, for a last moment with you. My throat constricts at the thought.

Mon frère.

"We've gathered here all—" Father Jean begins, and my stomach plummets as panic rises. My mind is swimming, chest aching. My breath hitches and Mom's shivery digits lace around mine, searching to bring me comfort.

"Dominique—" Mom whispers, and when I turn our moist, sad eyes meet. Her lips tremble, despite the forced smile. She wants to be brave for me, wants to reach me—but nothing can reach me now. I'm taking shelter in my mind, the only place I can be safe when the emotions threaten to cause a flood.

Mom's sobs buzz in my ear.

Dad gives a speech. His tenor voice trembles, and the paper in his hand rustles through the microphone. Just like his breaking voice. But he continues, makes it until the end, where we all witness how Father Jean puts his hand on Dad's shoulder and guides him down the stairs, mumbling his condolences over and over as he does so.

By the time the ceremony is over, we've all crumbled into that black hole of grief, hanging onto one another as we stumble our way outside the church, following the coffin that carries my brother. We cling together as we head for the cemetery, where most people have already gathered. *They* have gathered. Fancy school uniforms appear in the corner of my eye, but I won't look. I am not ready to face those who found the lifeless body of my brother, too far away from home.

There's a heavy silence around us as we watch the coffin lower into the ground. As the boys dig with their spades and throw sand over the coffin. As we watch him disappear. As we

stand there watching the ground, our hearts empty, our eyes filled with tears.

Adieu, mon frère.

Mom sobs. Dad cries, and his baritone wails scar the insides of my soul.

They have taken him from us.

“I can’t—” I turn around, clumsily freeing myself from the crowd, before I practically flee away. It’s freezing cold here, January having brought a winter gift of rain and wind. Of storms.

I can’t believe that it’s only been weeks since we celebrated Christmas. That we all sat together at the round table in the dining room that’s only used for special occasions. Damien being home from college being one of them. Us all being together, uncles and aunts included, was another one.

It’s the last Christmas we’ll ever celebrate.

I pass the church, pass the parked cars, but don’t stop. I can’t. I need solitude, need the weeping trees. Right now, right here, I need to breathe. It comes out in ragged puffs of air that turn into sobs.

The wind picks up, and the oak trees bow under their weight, as if silently asking me to come over and face my past. I do, ambling forward over the sand path—*la ligne verte*—that leads through the forest, and toward the other side of town.

This is the place we used to come to, me, Damien and the boys. A lifetime of memories are hidden in that oak forest. As kids, we’d come here after school, eat our *goûter*, play hide and seek. When we were teenagers, we created cabins high in the trees. Gosh, the number of attempts we tried before we mastered our technique. But once we knew how to make them...let’s just say that we’ve had multiple cabins up in the oaks over the past years. When Damien began at Saint-Laurent last year, the boys would still take me up there—because they promised my brother they’d protect me. And they did, because they let me sit here with them, high in the sky.

Over the past months I even came here a few times alone, to find my peace. Alone, life is easier. Because I freeze when I'm around others, splutter and stammer, blush and then run away.

And the only one who's seen past all that, who saw me for *me*, who waited for me, joked with me, argued with me, had gone off to boarding school. And so I spent quite a few late summer evenings on my own, staring through the forest, pretending to see Saint-Laurent Boarding College.

Until that one evening...

My heart clenches at the thought of what I saw that night, and I roll my lips fiercely in an attempt to squeeze the irrational fear away.

It was *nothing*.

Still I peer through the trees toward the void of nature. The forest is dense, apart from the path. On both sides of the sand trail, thick shrubs contour the old trees that creak under its weight. The sound collides with my thoughts and makes me shiver involuntarily. Yet my eyes don't look away—*can't* look away. There, at the other side of the forest less than five kilometers away, is Monterrey Castle. Is Saint-Laurent Boarding College.

Oh, Damien, what have they done to you?

I inhale deeply while I let myself grind over that thought, still staring into the twilight, turning my back toward the late winter sun. I should head back, with everyone coming over to our place for a snack and a drink.

But I don't want to. I want to be alone to drown myself in my own sorrow and not see a single face. I don't want their pity, don't want to face my future. What will that be? Living with Mom and Dad until they kick me out on my 30th birthday because I can't face the world on my own?

That thought is depressing, but when I turn on my heel, ready to go and head back anyway, my gaze collides with an unfamiliar, emerald-green stare. My heart explodes on a boom,

my limbs freeze, and my eyes just stare, because that's the only thing they can do.

Another guy is leaning casually against one of the trees across from me, his body wrapped in a navy-blue, fancy school uniform. His hair is a mop of platinum blond tresses brushed in a side swept fringe that manages to catch the little remainder of the sun. His large, dark, painted eyes stare into mine. For the briefest of ridiculous seconds, I think he's some fantasy figure, someone I've made up in my pathetic, lonely mind. But when I blink, he's still there, looking at me from under those perfectly arched eyebrows. It makes me fidget on my spot.

"Hey, beautiful," he mumbles.

Walk away. But I can't.

"Are you—" I clear my throat, suddenly afraid that my tongue will be tied as usual. Afraid that this guy will react similarly to the guys in my class—mocking me, taunting me. He doesn't. Instead, he just stands there, watching me struggle, not a single fleck of humor in his eyes.

He called me beautiful.

It makes me feel a little strange inside. I lick my lips, fisting my hands in an attempt to force this feeling away. It's persistent though, this buzzing sensation in my stomach. "Are you wearing make-up?" I finally blurt, then flush.

He looks amused, lips curling up. They curve beautifully. His lower lip is a little fuller, dragging his upper lip with it into a grin. I find myself looking at it a little too long in wonder. When my eyes finally flick up, he throws a jut of his chin my way.

"You like it?" His voice is deep, yet smooth, making something stir in my body. Suddenly my pants feel a little tight.

He watches me intently, then raises two ringed fingers toward his eyes. "My make-up." He's painted his eyes in the shape of a cat, or maybe they always carry that shape. The

black color of the pencil contrasts perfectly with his green eyes and blond hair, making him look exotic, and handsome.

Handsome?

From the shadows of the trees, two other guys appear, wearing that same school uniform: navy pants and jacket, a crisp white shirt, and coffee colored shoes. Twins. I don't want them getting closer. Groups of guys are a *threat*. They will taunt me, and beat me. They will hurt me.

Suddenly my fingers itch to play the piano, to open the door to my mind and hide inside. But I can't, and I doubt that Mom will let me play today, with everyone over at our house to honor Damien.

When they're close enough, one of them asks with a droll, unimpressed raise of his brows. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" My cheeks flame even further—it's like he can read my thoughts, and what he finds is ridiculous.

I don't reply, thoughts balled up in a clot of words that are stuck in my throat. Fisting my hands, I try to squeeze them out, but when the other twin takes a step forward, my confidence breaks like a twig, leaving me limp and out of balance.

"M-my brother died," I stammer, the words forming an internal sob, its significance trembling through me in a reminder that will be carved into my existence. And then I take off. I hurry, fleeing from the scorching stare burning my back, my skull. I won't let it burn its way through my flesh and bone, won't let it get to look inside.

Heading toward Damien's Renault, someone hands me his prayer card.

I inhale greedily when I take my place in the backseat. The vague lingering scent of marihuana, of oil, of sweat. My eyes sting again. How long will it last before time will swallow this whole and take it away from us, replacing it with must and ash, just like it had taken *him* away?

Mom and Dad talk softly in the front, and then Mom turns over her shoulder, a soft look in her moist eyes. "*Laisse le*

temps au temps. We will trust that time will heal our wounds. For now, we'll go home, and cry, and eat, and drink."

"Mom—"

"*Non*, Dominique. I don't want to hear it. Damien is gone, and whatever trouble we get ourselves into by pulling out skeletons from closets, we won't get him back." Her eyes are leaking, but there's a firmness to her voice, to her lips, pressed tight together. "You hear me?"

"*Oui, maman.*"

Her hand finds mine, and she squeezes it softly, just like her voice when she says, "It won't bring our boy back. It *won't* bring him back. And I need peace—" her voice breaks and she breathes out a sob. "I need peace to get over this. Okay?"

Hot tears dribble down my cheeks when I nod. "*D'accord.*" My chest clenches impossibly tight.

Mom's body tenses up, before it starts shaking like a leaf. "Oh, God," she wheezes. Dad opens his arm and she lets herself be pulled in against his chest, her face hidden from the both of us. But we hear her heart breaking, again and again like it has done for the past days, ever since that phone call.

Despair. Thick and melancholic, like a knitted blanket wrapped around our shoulders, heavy and unraveled. It has made us fall to our knees. And I don't know if we can ever get up.

Hours later, after too many beers, I'll find myself sleeping in my brother's bed, searching for comfort and guidance. Searching for something—*anything*—to release the pain and this feeling of *trepidation*.

Because right then, right there, when I sit with Mom and Dad in the car, I open the prayer card, and a torn sheet of paper tumbles out. In black marker is written:

"*Alpha Fraternalii are responsible for Damien's death.*"

It makes something crack inside me, and flashes of blond hair and black eyes pass through my mind. My reaction to that

image ripples all the way down to my groin without my consent.

Alpha Fraternarii?

While Mom and Dad are still sobbing in the front of the car, I make myself a promise—

I will find out who did this to you, mon frère, and I'll make them pay.

DOMINIQUE

Present day

Saint-Laurent Boarding College for boys.

Welcome to history. Welcome to the frigid upper-class.
Welcome to *me*.

They say time heals all your wounds. But they never say how much time you'll need, how much time is given before the days bring light again, offering a break in everlasting murmurs of loss and sorrow.

I could use a break.

And I'm still lost in heartbreak. The days are dreadfully long, feeling like neverending moments of torture at times. The nights are too short, not enough to compensate for the hours to come. At school, or at home, I don't feel safe. I feel haunted. By my thoughts, my bullies, and by my parents, who live in a vicious circle of grief.

Our family is shattered, torn, lost. And now, by my determination to take his spot at Saint-Laurent Boarding College when it was offered by the board.

I *have* to. A Hobson's Choice. Because answers to my questions about Damien's death lie there.

I used to dream of attending Saint-Laurent when I was young. Well, here I am.

My parents leave me at the high metal gates that highlight an imposing green lane filled with flowers and trees, and a gravel driveway that leads up to college.

Monterrey Castle.

The sun is shining on my back, a pleasant late-summer breeze that tries, and fails, to calm my itching nerves as I make my way up to the main building. A car comes up behind me, the soft motor disturbing my attempt to create inner peace, only to halt next to me.

“Hi. You need a ride up?” A guy my age with slicked back hair and a curious look in his spectacled eyes asks.

“No, I’m fine.” My face flushes. Before he can insist, I look away, focusing on the building ahead of me. Nearly there.

“Okay, suit yourself.” The car drives off, leaving a cloud of dust as it rolls through the gravel, making me choke on filthy air.

Outside the large glass doors at the side of the building, groups of guys stand together, laughing and chatting. There are flags with different colors, and I scramble back in my memory as I recall the letter about this school year—

Informal beginning to the year.

Introduction week.

By students for students.

I halt. I can still go back. Accept Damien’s death, just like Mom wants me to do. Let time heal my wounds, and go to the local university. I could even do it by distance, and then I’d never have to be around other people. I could—

“Are you Jean-Luc?” A guy with a yellow flag suddenly catches up from behind, beaming at me when I turn my face in surprise. While my steps don’t falter, my heart does skip a beat, and I can’t help but wonder if he hears that too.

“Uhm, no.”

“Told you so,” another guy chortles, wiggling a blue flag. “Dominique Devallée?”

“Y-yes?” I stammer.

“Cool! Then you’re on my team.” The guy already wears his school uniform, the first two buttons of his shirt open, revealing a strip of pale skin. On his face he carries a grin. “Hi.” He reaches for my clammy hand and squeezes it. “I’m Pascal. It’s nice to meet you. Did you just come walking all the way from the gates?”

I did. And I have before, but he doesn’t need to know that.

The forest at this part of town is private, but it’s not difficult to cross the iron fence that marks the beginning, or the end depending on how you look at it, from the communal woods.

I turn over my left shoulder and peer across from the massive inner court that separates the iron fences from the building itself. Hundreds of different flowers grow here, their colors and scents a cacophony of impressions, representing a collection of paintings. From where we’re standing—right outside the reception, as is scribed onto an alloy sign with white handwriting—we have an immaculate view of the garden.

“Come on, blue team, let’s gather around. This afternoon there will be an official speech from our headmaster, but this morning is for us.”

By students, for students.

“So, welcome, new students, to Saint-Laurent Boarding College. My name is Pascal Duteuil, and I’ll be accompanying you, the blue group, throughout your first week at college. Today, I’ll be showing you around the school and introducing you to your dorms and roommates if you have any. There are four groups of ten students—” He does a quick headcount, then frowns. I look around our little group of preppy, rich kids, feeling somewhere between treacherously excited, angry and afraid. Confused. I don’t want to be here, yet the beauty and prestige sucks me right in, the promise of this opportunity to have an extraordinary education, weighing heavy in my gut.

Because I am betraying Damien by feeling this way. Because that's not the deal I made with myself when that letter reached our shitty doormat two weeks after Damien's funeral—a final apology from the board of directors of Saint-Laurent, accompanied by a scholarship for Damien's younger brother. Me.

I haven't felt like Damien's younger brother since he's passed. I don't know what I hoped for, but perhaps still something scarily close to compassion. From those who'd made my life hell when my brother was still alive, those who Damien chased away whenever he caught them bullying me.

“Hold him down!”

The boys were faithful to me, or most probably, to their dead friend. But they were more often than anything out for football practice, leaving me a perfect target for random beat-ups. No, the past two years have been awful.

Pulling Damien's coat tighter around my shoulders, I squeeze the duffle bag around my shoulder tight.

“Attendez, *attendez!*” Someone calls out, and all our faces turn to the ginger-haired guy who jumps out of the limo and comes running toward us, his suitcase dangling in the air as he sends us a grin from ear to ear. He's already in uniform, the navy-blue colors of his pants and jacket a strong contrast from the crispy white shirt and his pale face. When he approaches, I catch tens and tens of small freckles on his cheeks and nose. It makes him strangely human, despite the fancy car with its driver, who's now scowling at us, before he shakes his head and gets back into the car.

Freckle-boy is out of breath, though still smiling. “I'm so sorry! Our jet couldn't land because of delays at the airport in Bordeaux.” He glances around, pale-grey eyes lingering on mine ever so slightly, before he accepts Pascal's outstretched hand.

“Not to worry, brother. I'm Pascal, and these are your fellow students from the blue group. We'll stick together a little more this week, during the start of the school year.”

“Great.” Freckle-boy waves his hand. “I’m Maxime, Maxime Dupont. Which one of you is Dominique?”

My grimace freezes on my face, and I feel strangely caught, as if someone’s about to call me out on being here—*what the hell were you thinking in the first place?*—and too many bad memories of bullying. “Uhm, me?” I stammer.

Maxime beams at me, sweeps his bag behind him on the ground as he comes to stand next to me. I blink when he looks up to me. I’m very average with my height of 180 cm, but the freckle-faced boy is slightly smaller, and looks harmless the way he smiles.

“Hi, roomie.”

“How do you—” I look up at Pascal.

“Maxime requested to have a roomie,” he says quickly. But I can read between the lines. Maxime requested to be with the kid who’s here on scholarship. I mean, who wouldn’t be? Who on earth can afford a 100,000 euro yearly tuition fee?

“Now that we’re all complete, let’s begin.” Pascal ushers us forward with his blue flag, and I watch as the others follow him. I wait until they’ve all passed, giving them a quick glance as they do. No one looks too terrifying at first glance.

Squeezing my jacket close and the duffle tight, I take strength in the promise I made myself—never again.

“So, brief compulsory history class before we get to the good part,” Pascal winks. “Monterrey Castle was originally built in the 16th century, along the typical castle architecture. We all know what those look like, once you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all. Around the entire building are gardens, and around those is the forest. Few years ago the board agreed to cultivate some of it into our sports fields, and so we now have our own football field, field hockey and tennis. Cool, right?”

Around me, people converse. But I can only focus on my surroundings, and how they somehow need to intermingle with my turbulent thoughts.

The past two years feel like a struggle with only one, final goal—to make it to Saint-Laurent Boarding College. It has been tough, but here I am.

“Follow me.” We continue our walk, leaving the colorful, peaceful gardens to head inside, into the heart of the lion’s den.

My heart starts beating a little faster as my stomach tightens. I’m not sure what’s causing it—walking in the same steps as my dead brother took before he was taken from me? Or is it the lingering anticipation I feel, wondering if I’ll see the blond stranger I met during Damien’s funeral again?

Despite the horrible timing, he’d made me feel something instead of my all-consuming grief. I’ve jerked off countless times to his alabaster face with the glittering, green stare and the black ink around his eyes. To that sinful smile and smooth voice.

“So, this castle is composed of a central keep with four immense bastion towers at the corners. The keep also forms part of the front wall of a larger compound with two larger towers. We have 300 rooms, 140 fireplaces, and 60 staircases. So even if you haven’t signed up for any sports classes, you will have your daily workout.” He grins, then waves his blue flag. We leave the grand reception with its neverending ceilings and golden decorations, passing the red group as we head for the closest stairs.

“We call these the small stairs, because we entered the castle through the—what they used to call—maiden entrance. From the main entrance, you’ll see the impressive double spiral staircase that, according to history, was built especially for a visit of King Louis XVI. He never made it here, since he got imprisoned before. And we all know how that ended.”

We chuckle at those words as we keep on walking, listening to Pascal while he keeps on pointing random things out to us. “Head for the left tower if you want to go to the first-years dorms. Second year, the right tower, third and fourth years go up to the second floor.”

When Mom and Dad left me at the gate this morning, we just sat there for a moment. No words, just heavy, heavy silence. We took Damien's Renault—which has turned into an old barrel now that he's no longer working on it weekly, though we will never get rid of it—even though it no longer carries my brother's scent of oil, marijuana and sweat. His presence is fading away, despite our desperate efforts to keep it there. Like an echo in a tunnel, its presence blurring. One day we'll wonder if he truly ever was with us in the first place.

My fingers dig into his jacket, nails clashing with wool. Oh yeah, he existed, alright? He was my best friend, my *blood*, and we were meant to live this life together.

I want this tour to be over already, need people out of my space. The feeling of not being able to escape them suddenly grabs me by the neck and starts squeezing. At home, I've had my own bedroom for over two years now. When I could skip school, I did, and when I didn't, I couldn't wait to get home. Alone. I like to get caught up in my head, like to work on projects. Over the past years I have worked countless hours on Damien's death, have gathered all the evidence I need. It sits heavy in the backpack I'm still carrying. Together with Maxime, we are the only ones who still do. He because he was late, me because I didn't want to leave my stuff with a stranger.

“So, Dominique right?” Maxime whispers from my side, and when I turn, he smiles. He's so unguarded, so innocent, that I can't imagine him being a bully. *But you can never know for sure.* “And you're here on scholarship? *The* scholarship? That's so cool,” he adds in a hurry, as if brushing off his own words with his hand. He flushes. “I mean—”

“I know what you mean,” I whisper in return, the words leaving my mouth in one smooth sentence. I let out a soft chuckle when he sends me a sheepish grin. Maxime really seems nice, and I—yeah, I guess I would like him to be nice. I look away, a little bit startled by this revelation. “I was born and raised here in Saint-Laurent.” I mean to ask him where he's from, but Pascal uses that moment to speak.

“So this is quite an amazing place,” Pascal opens the double doors to a massive library. Endless ceilings, thickly decorated walls with golden and cream, and thousands of books lined up in wooden bookcases, welcome us. “The library. As some of you might know, Monterrey Castle sheltered monks during the Nine Years War in the 17th century. They stayed here. There’s a range of masterclasses on the history of this castle, for those of you who are interested?” I raise my hand before I can think it through. Apparently my love for history is bigger than my shy nature. “Great,” Pascal smiles my way. “I’ll make sure you’re signed up for that class, then.”

“Thank you,” I croak.

The day after Damien’s funeral I started my research on the Alpha Fraternarii. I needed proof that the note wasn’t a joke, and since I’d never heard of the term before, I needed information.

Google took me on a journey through time that I never thought would fascinate me as much as it does, but I find myself enthralled by the past. Perhaps because there’s a finality about the past, since they are things we can no longer change, or perhaps because it’s simply more convenient to look into other people’s lives, instead of my own.

Anyway, I did learn that despite a large scale of rumors, no one ever confirmed that the Alpha Fraternarii actually exist. I also read that this castle was turned into a boarding college roughly twenty years after the French Revolution in 1789 and has been ever since. That those decades have created an even bigger division between the castle with its lush forest, and the *other* part of town.

Growing up, we all knew about the college, but we left the place alone, never crossed the forest. On rare occasions we’d catch a few uniformed guys in a local store, or even in a restaurant. But we let them be, and they let us. Same place, different world.

“So this part of the library is mostly used by fourth year students.” Pascal presses a finger against his lips as we make

our way inside, then waves at the few uniforms who are seated in the large room. The place is filled with tables and chairs, the walls decorated with rows and rows of books. Computers, students in uniform, a coffee machine tucked away in a corner, and hushed voices speaking.

“Some of our most ambitious fourth-years have already started studying for their final year.”

We cross the room where Pascal opens a door. More high ceilings, ornaments engraved in walls, and rich wooden floors that creak under our weight. We keep on walking, and Pascal keeps on giving us the different uses of our surroundings.

“Canteen.” Tile flooring, and a waft of something delicious that makes me hungry instantly.

“Aaannd... back to square one. The dorms.” He clicks his heels like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, and spins on his heels. “I think that’s quite enough for right now. I hope you had a good first impression?”

While replying to some questions, he hands both me and Maxime an envelope. “You two, go on and find number twenty-three, that’s your room. For the others, let’s pick up your luggage at reception and head straight back here. I’ll give you some time to discover the place by yourself. The first classes will start tomorrow, but we’ll have some informal activities organized throughout the entire week to make you feel at home.”

After a short walk, we get to our room, which is much more spacious than I anticipated. Wine red carpet has been replaced by a pleasant cream color that matches well with the moss green curtains and the wooden bed, chest of drawers, and desk. Perfectly in balance with a similar sight on the other side of the room. The beds are made up, waiting for us.

“If you don’t mind—” Maxime tosses me a wicked grin and puts his suitcase onto the bed in the far corner, “I always like to sleep on the left.”

“Sure,” I mumble, and move toward the other bed. It’s conveniently located on the same wall as the door, which

means I can easily turn my desk toward the wall on the side. I don't want anyone knowing what I'm doing on my computer. Suddenly my research feels heavy in the backpack I carry on my shoulders. The thought's enough for my fingers to grow itchy, needing to work on the case.

"Let's go for lunch soon, yeah? I'm starving." Already digging into his stuff, Maxime looks over his shoulder, his ginger hair tousled, the messy strands teasing the side of his head. His eyes glitter as he looks at me, eagerness combined with something close to naïveté.

I should decline, should never forget why I'm here in the first place. I should stick to that truth, and find out who killed Damien. And then I should take off. Leave this school, go somewhere else. But here I am, already corrupted after one day, having signed-up for a history class, being asked to go to lunch...together.

All those years I wanted people in school to ask me to join them, and they never did.

What if I see him?

I clear my throat, unsure of what's expected.

Maxime turns around, a pile of clothes in his hand and a frown on his face. "Don't tell me that those spices coming from the kitchen didn't make your mouth water?"

I let out a strangled laugh. "No, I—they did." My cheeks heat while my hands fumble with the desk, and I turn it around to keep what I'll be working on private while I still look at Maxime. Our eyes both dip to the desk. "You don't mind if I—do you?"

Maxime smiles, then shakes his head. "If you go out for lunch with me. Come on, sunshine."

"Sure—I, sure."

"Cool! Let me grab a quick shower, we can leave in five."

When Maxime closes the bathroom door, I can finally breathe. Long, longing puffs of air accompanied by memories of a different life. Not this one, not here.

Within no time my brother's clothes are neatly arranged in my cupboard, his empty backpack tucked under my bed, my computer set up on the turned desk.

And then I get my drawings out. I've been waiting for this moment for nearly two years. Two fucking years since they killed my brother. I unroll the script of lines that has formed the map of the school. The *real* map of the school.

Because with every ancient building, there is much more than meets the eye. And with this particular building, there's an awful lot hidden from view.

I unravel the wrinkles in the inked paper.

The dungeons. More than fifteen hundred square feet of hidden rooms below ground filled with locked doors.

That's got to be it—where else would the headquarters of Alpha Fraternarii be?

Some may think they are a hoax, a farce. Well, I'm gonna prove they're *not*. Because I will find out what truly happened to my brother.

DOMINIQUE

We ended up spending most of the day together. Perhaps that's a good idea, because being here, on *campus*, as this castle seems to be ironically called by the students, is much harder than I'd anticipated.

I feel my brother everywhere, and it's making my eyes burn and my chest ache. With every corner we take, I wonder if he's been here before, and how he felt when he marched through these magnificent corridors.

When we finally head back to our dorms, Maxime plops onto his bed immediately.

"I might just put my head down and take a quick nap," he yawns. "My friends organized a farewell party last night in some club, and the lack of sleep's finally catching up with me." He turns to face me, a grin on his face. "Meet for dinner later?"

"Yeah, sure."

Not entirely sure what's expected from me, we exchange phone numbers, and then I make my way outside our dorm. I've put all my research neatly tucked together in one of the drawers of my desk, and though I can't close it by key, I don't think Maxime is the snooping kind. Not yet, at least. I have some time to prepare for that.

Outside, the late summer afternoon breeze welcomes me, still I squeeze my brother's hoodie a little closer. Soon we'll

be given our school uniforms and I will lose this comfort, but I'm happy with today.

I follow the path that leads me through the garden and toward the sports field, squinting my eyes at the freshly cut grass, but my mind can't hide from Damien—

“Man, their football field's so dope. In the middle of the woods, you feel like you're fucking alone in the world.”

He'd been so happy about being on the team here. Though he mentioned it only once, and wouldn't talk about it anymore after that. Had something happened?

Once I've made it to the other side of the field, toward the edge of the forest, it gets much quieter. Sports season hasn't started yet, and there are plenty of festivities inside. Turning back, I take a moment to admire the view. Monterrey Castle really is breathtaking, with its rich architecture and impressive towers. Part of me still doesn't believe that I'm really here, on the same spot where our lives were destroyed. Another part of me, secretly hidden somewhere in a corner of my heart, is excited to be here. I've always loved studying, and obtaining that one scholarship the town hands out yearly to the most promising student had always been a dream that felt out of reach.

“I'm from the *other* side of town,” I mumble, needing to remind myself, as I walk along, further and further, to where the sand path turns into a narrow line with overgrown shrubs. The air is more humid here, probably because of the dense nature. It should feel peaceful, but tension overshadows the buzzing sound of the insects, the singing of birds.

Still, I keep on walking, I don't know for how long. And then, all of a sudden, the shrubs part, giving way to an opening in the woods. It looks more cultivated, as if someone tried to start a garden, only to give up when they realized there wasn't enough sunlight. Is it possible that that's simply what this is? Or—I flick through the pages of my mind, where I have archived most parts of my research about the Alpha Fraternarii. Many images portray members surrounded by plants, flowers, and even trees. I remember wondering how

those would fit into a dungeon, but had forsaken the dilemma as one of many. Now it comes right back into mind in its full, mysterious glory.

Unexpected chilly air prickles against my skin as my breath escapes in harsh puffs. The air is stagnant, penetrating my body through my rigid spine. It's darker here, the shadows thick and ominous.

Crouching, my fingers feel the hoed earth. They trace the shapes that are marked into the dry sand—footsteps that come from behind me and advance straight ahead, to where the shrubs mark the end of this fertilized plot of land, and the green wild awaits.

The afternoon is quiet—until it is no longer. While my eyes follow the footsteps, a tremble works its way through my body, unease curling my spine, lifting my shoulders up by my ears.

I'm no longer alone.

I push myself up from the ground and spin on my heels, circling back as my eyes dart through the trees in search of the source of unease. They scan through the shrubs, lift to catch the sky, only to linger at something that looks eerily enough like a cabin in the woods.

Lights of torches, shapes of ghosts, as they dart around us through the forest. The sounds of howls, of cries, of slapping.

The memory is as sudden as it is fierce, and my heart stutters.

I need to get out of here. And then my eyes halt on the frame that's casually hanging against a tree, and my limbs freeze. Because it's *him*. The guy with platinum hair and an angelic smile.

His head is slightly turned, giving me just his profile. His gaze is downcast, his lashes fluttering. My heart rattles in my chest. The number of times I've secretly dreamt of him over the past few years is countless. No matter how much I've tried reasoning with my mind, I can't forget about him.

Maybe he knows. And maybe that's what this is, some kind of reckoning. He turns his face, and our eyes collide. He looks taller than I am, the way he's standing there, his sculpted limbs framed by his navy-blue school uniform. His blond hair shines in the scarce light, buzzed on one side—showing off a glistening jewel in his ear—long and thick on the other side. When he tugs a hand through his mane, I count three rings. One on his thumb, one on his index finger and one on his ring finger. They look sexy as hell. The thought brings me back to reality and my eyes shoot up to meet his piercing, emerald gaze. He's already staring at me, those lush curves of his lips curled into a grin.

“Hey, beautiful,” he rumbles with a smoothness that raises the hair on the back of my neck. Sensuality drips off of him, sweet and thick like honey.

My skin crawls with awareness, and a strange feeling settles in my chest. I'm definitely nervous, maybe a little frightened, but there's something else there too. Is it hope? I told myself countless times that he'd have graduated, that he wouldn't be here, that him calling me beautiful would be a one-off compliment that I'd probably never get again in life.

I was wrong.

Awkwardness battles with dazzlement, as my mind scrambles for something to say. “Are you wearing make-up?” I finally croak. Those same damn words as the first time we met.

He cocks his head, gaze leveling with mine. Still those same cat eyes. Still those same curvy lips that tease and tickle my senses, roaring my cock awake. It's embarrassing how fast my blood runs south, how utterly clueless my fucking hormones are. His face is smoothly shaven, drawing stark attention to a jawline that could cut diamonds. I can't help but stare at his face, swallowing heavily around the lump in my throat while my cock continues to fill.

We stand there for what feels like forever, looking, not speaking. He doesn't reply to my question, but he doesn't have to. And then my phone rings.

At first I don't realize it's mine. He looks amused when I don't react, and I mutter a swear word when my hands fumble for the damn thing that's in the pocket of Damien's hoodie. Half expecting him to be gone when I look up, my squeak sounds unreasonably high when my eyes catch sight of him again.

"H-hello?" It's Maxime. And he's hungry. "Oh, yes, I'm coming," I rush to say.

Maxime lets me know that he'll be waiting for me, then disconnects the call, leaving me with the phone by my ear and my eyes still trained on the blond stranger.

"I've got to go," I finally mutter. But I don't move. My cock is hard and begging behind my briefs, my body taut with desire. There's something about this guy I can't place, and I shouldn't...

He nods, then licks his lips slowly, my eyes clinging to every movement. When I catch myself, I clear my throat, cup my blazing cheeks and spin on my heel. I run back to the sand path, run past the wild shrubs, toward the football fields, back to the garden. I don't stop until I've closed the door and stand there, panting like a dog in the corridor that leads toward the canteen.

"Let me guess, you want to pick up jogging this school year?" Maxime chuckles as he pushes himself off the wall. I ignore him, too much out of breath anyway. "Come on, I'm starving."

I sluggishly accept the tray Maxime hands me when we make our way inside the canteen.

"We're a bit late, but they still have—oh, sweet, they still have *Boeuf Bourguignon*," Maxime says from in front of me, voice carrying over his shoulder. "Do I ask for two portions?"

"Sure."

Damien's favorite dish.

I shiver beneath his warm hoodie, the image of emerald eyes and a teasing smile carved into my memory.

Protect me, brother.

Maxime gets two big portions and grabs us each a piece of bread and a bottle of water, then juts his chin toward a free table at the window in the corner.

“Wow, this spot is like, the *best* spot,” Maxime beams. “Check out the garden.” The food’s good, though rich with nostalgia, leaving a bitter after taste. I sweep it away with my drink while we both stare outside through the glass, to the eerie vibes that float through the air. Soft lights give the countless flowers an ethereal glow.

We eat peacefully, and I listen to Maxime talking about himself, in his casual way I so admire. It’s not pretentious, he’s even a little shy, yet bubbly, and genuinely friendly. I haven’t spoken to anyone like this in a very long time, and it’s pleasant.

I learn that my roommate is originally from Paris, though his parents also own houses in Bretagne and in Italy. His entire family has been educated here, at Saint-Laurent. They own a business that holds a modest twentieth spot in the Quote 500, some multinational that has set up a rental car system in different cities throughout the world. Maxime also tells me that his father passed away four years ago, and judging by his wet eyes, time hasn’t healed his wounds either.

Will it ever?

It’s nice to listen to him speak, but the moment we fall back into a peaceful silence, my mind starts wondering again. To that place in the forest, and to what I already know about the Alpha Fraternarii and the woods. I’ll need to check that tonight. Luckily I have my stuff already set up, and I’m ready to dive in.

A flare of green eyes brush past me, and I blink my eyes, willing my mind to zoom in on Maxime. It does, but my body has a will of its own.

The fuck. I squirm in my seat to readjust my pants, hoping that Maxime won’t see. What the hell is wrong with me? That’s not...that’s *not* what this school year will be about. I

can't afford to think about things like that, I need to stay low-key and keep my head clear. I owe that to myself, to all my research, to my determination to understand what has happened to Damien.

But sometimes I wonder, will I ever be able to take off the blanket that is my brother's protection? Will I ever want to take it off?

No.

Yes.

No.

Yes. Yes. Shut up.

"*Merde,*" Maxime mutters.

"*What's wrong?*" I want to ask, but his gaze is no longer on mine. Instead his eyes have widened and he swears under his breath. Around us, the place has gone quiet. No more clattering tables and cutlery, no more chattering around us. Two guys have entered the canteen, their faces blank and their heads high. They don't speak, they don't even so much as look at anyone in the room. But all eyes are on them. Mine are, the flare of memory catching me off guard. *Merde*, indeed.

"Louis and Arthur," Maxime mumbles. "My cousin warned me about them. They're two brothers with a reputation. Their whole family are your worst nightmare from high school." He chuckles softly, the sound strained. It's nothing in comparison to the weight I feel in the pit of my stomach, clawing its weight around as panic settles. *Bullies*.

"We don't want any trouble with them," Maxime mutters.

I swallow. "We're no longer in high school, right?"

His eyes find mine, and he gives me a little nod. "Dominique—" He places a hand over mine. "This here, at Saint-Laurent? This is a different world. I don't mean to sound condescending, and I respect where you're from—but this here? This world? Is all about money, about status, about power. And they—" He nods his chin toward the canteen behind me, "Have all of that. Their family is relentless. I can't

—just, let’s lay low and we’ll be fine.” Maxime mutters something unintelligible, then stands abruptly. “Let’s go,” he hisses. “*Maintenant.*”

I get up, too dazed by his sense of urgency to care about him ordering me around. With his free hand, he tucks his glasses further onto the bridge of his nose, the other clutched around his tray. His cheeks are flushed, and he avoids my gaze. Avoids *anyone’s* gaze, I realize, because when I turn to leave, my eyes collide with a pair of dark brown ones.

It’s one of the brothers, with a full tray in his hand and a scowl on his face. He doesn’t greet me—nor do I him—but for a few seconds, we look at each other. Assessing, searching for God knows what, until his eyes dart to Maxime scurrying away. His lips curl into the tiniest of smirks, that makes me want to crawl away.

“What have we got here?” His brother taunts. Just like he did two years ago. I can’t help but flinch, loathing myself for it. “You’re a first year student, so you don’t know. But this here?” He juts his chin to the table behind me. “Is our spot. *Tu comprends?*”

“Yes.” The word rumbles past my dry throat, my usual armor sliding back in place on command. I feel eyes on me as the silence lingers. It makes me shrink even further. Surprisingly, this guy doesn’t smile, his gaze entirely void of any sense of humor. The mocking I’m used to missing, instead there’s disinterest when his gaze takes in my face, roaming over my features, before they collide with mine. Finally he nods.

“Good. Go then.”

I do, embarrassingly fast as I too scurry away. Once I am back next to Maxime, I exhale in a shudder.

“Are you all right?” He whispers, light eyes wide.

“Yeah.” I smile a little more self-assured than I’m feeling.

“Good. Then let’s get out of here.”

DOMINIQUE

My brother died in the early morning of Saturday the 30th of December, nearly two years ago, when the university was officially closed.

They say that he had no reason to be on school grounds because he should have been at home, like all his fellow students. But when the medical examiner performed an autopsy, they concluded that he had alcohol in his blood.

So my brother was on school grounds, drunk, when he shouldn't have been there in the first place.

Why.

And he drowned during that night.

Why.

His lifeless body was found Saturday morning around seven by the gardening team. He was laying on his back under a large oak that stands at least sixteen feet from the meager fountain with its white, stone mermaid that holds a beautiful necklace with a shape of some bird.

Why.

How does one even drown in a fucking fountain?

One doesn't, that's the cold, harsh truth.

Sitting at my desk now, a frustrated, guttural whimper climbs up my throat, breaching from my lips. "One doesn't." My eyes search over the screen in search of something.

Anything really, anything I might have missed over the past few years of research.

I broke into the police station and got my hands on the police report, which contains surprisingly little on this case. At first, when it just happened, me and my parents expected them to interview students at school, teachers, maybe even the president of the board. But that didn't happen. We expected them to interview the garden crew, which they did. Nothing came out of it, apart from them reconfirming where they found the body.

My eyes sting at the thought. I saw that tree today, saw it with my very own eyes. To imagine that my brother, my *brother...*

"You're not sleeping yet?" Maxime yawns from across the room. I blink, having forgotten that he's even here, and the time for that matter. It's a little past two in the morning.

"Shit, sorry, did I wake you?"

"Nah, it's okay man." He rolls in his bed and doesn't speak again. My eyes flick back to the computer screen, thoughts taking over again.

Police based their conclusion to close this case nearly entirely on the report of the medical examiner.

Damien drowned. And he was drunk.

The board of Saint-Laurent gave everyone a warning, because alcohol is prohibited on school grounds, even during holiday periods.

Holiday periods.

My eyes squint at the words, pencil ticking against the desk. I fumble with my notes, flicking through countless pages, already forgetting what it is I was searching in the first place. There's nothing there. Then what am I missing?

Why did you leave home?

With my elbow planted against the desk and my hand keeping up my cheek, I stare at the screen.

What were you searching for on school grounds?

I scribble down useless words in my notebook, because really, there's nothing to argue about the way the report describes the events. Apart from the fact that everything here is wrong.

And then there was the obvious question that no one seemed to have an answer to either, or seemed to care. The hour of death was four in the morning.

What did you find there?

My chest aches at the thought that he was out there, in that garden, by that *fountain*, on his own, and that he'd needed help. And I hadn't been there for him. He, who was always there for me, needed help, and I hadn't been there.

Had he been alone?

Something heavy lands in the pit of my stomach, *awareness, denial*, because I don't want to consider it. Damien was *my* brother, *my* savior, he was from *our* side of town.

But he could have met someone. A friend? That's possible. Someone from town, or perhaps even from college? My thoughts stutter at that thought, like it usually does when my thoughts trail up that way. It always makes me feel a little bitter. Because that would imply that Damien had kept that a secret from me.

The thought stings. I always told him everything, all my secrets, fears and hopes. I'd always assumed that that was mutual—that we confided in one another. To even consider that maybe it wasn't...

I release the breath trapped in my throat, and it leaves on a ragged whoosh. I look back at my notes, but somehow, they don't carry the same importance right now. That phrase does.

Had he met someone?

He was supposed to pick me up from piano class that evening.

I look up, staring blankly at some unseen spot until my vision crosses, blurring. That night, he hadn't shown up. I'd

been afraid when I watched some of my bullies hanging out in the streets, and my music teacher had proposed to bring me home. I'd waited by the piano, playing *Für Elise* by Beethoven on a loop, while the sad melody rolled over me like a sweet buzz.

When Damien wasn't home by eleven that night, my parents had been worried. But he was an adult after all, an adult who perhaps had somewhere else to be than at home, with his parents and younger brother.

They had decided to give him one night.

It was all he had needed.

"Are you okay?" Maxime mumbles on a sleepy breath, and his bed dips when he rolls again, this time to face me.

"Yeah, I was just about to go to sleep," I lie. He mutters something at that, then lets out another yawn, followed by a satisfied groan. It doesn't take another minute for his breathing to even out, and my eyes to find that note that changed my entire, fucking life. It's been used so many times over the past years, crumpled, thrown away, taken out of the bin, doubted, used as a reason to carry on searching, that the paper looks creased, the words tired.

"Alpha Fraternarii are responsible for Damien's death."

The moment I found that note, I knew I couldn't take the risk. Because perhaps it was a cruel joke, but perhaps it wasn't.

I found plenty of information on fraternity organizations and their—frequently—notorious reputations. But getting more information on Alpha Fraternarii wasn't easy. In fact, it took me on a trip centuries back to the French Revolution, and surprisingly, or perhaps not so much, to this very location.

Chateau Monterrey.

My fingers trace the lines of the drawings of the castle, another victory during my years of research, next to the police report. I was granted a copy of the historic architectural drawings of this castle they keep in the communal archives after they believed that I was an engineering student with an

important internship. The historic communal files showed me that this castle was built around 1786 by some rich count to receive the king of France, Louis XVI, who never made it here before he was imprisoned.

History claims that the monks who lived in this castle offered shelter to the privileged families who fled Paris when the French Revolution was declared.

But what's really fascinating about the drawings?

The dungeons.

Not just because they're there—ancient buildings often offer a maze of chambers underground—but because it somehow all adds up. And at the same time I can't seem to fit the loose ends.

When I was searching the web for the Alpha Fraternarii, it seems that even Google hasn't figured out yet if they are real, or just another hoax. I didn't find any proof of their existence, but I did find plenty of images, mostly paintings, of obscure gatherings. Groups of cloaked people standing together, their faces obscured by masks. It looks deprived, and secretive, and it just feels... off. Beyond just the obvious.

But could it be murder?

My thoughts jump back to earlier today and the cultivated spot in the woods. I roll my lips forcefully when they threaten to go past that in a heartbeat, only to linger at the sight of a strong, blond guy with painted eyes and a playful smile, but—“No, not now,” I grumble. My burning gaze searches the net for anything about the brotherhood and the forest, but whatever it is I thought I'd discovered before, is invisible to me now.

Stretching my tired limbs above my head, I let out a long yawn. God, I'm exhausted, have been for the past two years.

Yet, here I am. In Saint-Laurent Boarding College. About to start my four year degree in international business amongst the elite, the privileged. The guy from the *other* side of town.

I promised myself that I'd hate them all.

But when my head finally hits my fluffy pillow, my body feels hot, and my mind is filled with flutters of blond, green eyes and soft smiles. It's a breathtaking view.

DOMINIQUE

Classes start with a ceremonial concert of the bells from one of the towers, and we're all standing in the large, light reception with its glassed walls looking out onto the garden.

It's quite the sight to have all the students packed together, their limbs wrapped in identical navy-blue clothes, and at their feet similar colored shoes. Coffee brown, just like the color of my eyes. For the occasion, I have slicked my dark hair to one side, and tucked it behind my ear on the other side. It has always been a bit longer, right at ear length, to keep it in front of my eyes like a curtain when I don't want the world to see. *Me.*

Maxime's gasping in excitement next to me. "Wow, do you hear that?" The sound of the bells is deafening. He turns to me, grinning sheepishly. "Sorry, I'm just really happy."

I've come to discover some things about my roommate over the past few days. He's lazy but smart, likes to dress fancy, is curious about people, absolutely clueless about the world, and enjoys being with me. I know the latter because he told me, though I still can't understand why. He says it's because I'm *pleasant*, though I haven't quite worked out if that's a compliment. It's not because I'm *present*, that's for sure. Yes, we spend a good portion of our day together, since I've also learned that he doesn't like to be alone. During one of our first conversations, he confessed that he's used to having a bodyguard, so yeah.

I—I like having him around. He’s not what I feared when I first got here. The prospect of having a roommate wasn’t something I was looking forward to, but Maxime seems genuine enough. And he sleeps like a baby at night, which is great for my research, even though I haven’t really found anything.

Admittedly, I’m stuck.

There’s nothing about the Alpha Fraternarii and the woods, so whatever it is I thought I found, is gone. I haven’t returned there either, some pathetic part of me fearing too greatly that I won’t see him again.

And I haven’t. Not inside this castle, nor outside in the gardens, which in itself is quite strange. There aren’t too many of us, about 150 students according to Pascal. Sure, you won’t bump into each other too frequently, but still... We haven’t seen those two brothers again either, for which I’m grateful.

The clocks finish their concerts, and the brief sigh of silence is enough to suck me back to reality, before—

Everyone gives a smashing applause, some students hoot and howl. Maxime gives me another one of those boyish grins.

“Welcome, students of the school year 2023!” Someone speaks through a microphone, and the applause, and the hooting, swell. This moment, those words, the enthusiasm, it brings a funny flutter through my stomach.

I want this. A small voice whispers, loud and clear for my own ears. I want to belong.

“We wish you a fantastic year, one where you will learn a lot, make new friends, and take a new direction on the path you call your life.”

Around us, people start walking. Maxime checks his timetable again, then sucks in his bottom lip when he gazes at mine. “That’s a shame, our first class, and we’re not together. I will see you later, yeah?”

I watch him leave, feeling somehow responsible for him, even though I am barely enough. I wasn’t in high school. But here, things will be different. My hand rubs Damien’s bracelet

and I swallow the sudden ache away. I gave it to him for his eighteenth birthday.

Never did I think that I'd wear it one day.

The group of students slowly disperses into smaller groups that melt into dots of people as they make their way to their classrooms, while the amplified voice continues cheering. In my nearing trepidation it feels as if the voice becomes distorted, and it makes me stumble. With strained hands I unfold my timetable again, only to triple-check what I already know.

"...so much to learn..." the voice continues. I take in a deep breath, but it still feels shallow, strained. "*Some things are not meant for your ears...*" I swallow, then blow out some more air while I look outside to the wood, suddenly longing to get some fresh air. "*...not for your eyes...*"

The voice is definitely distorted.

As if the words only now trickle down my brain, my face whips to the side, in search of the person with his microphone. I don't see him. But I can *hear* him. And he's making my hands clammy and my chest full of dread, fear crawling through my veins like the filthiest slime, only to halt in my chest, where my heart slams in a final bang.

"But my eyes are on you, Damien Devallée."

The first days pass without any issues. Maxime and I have some classes together, but where he's more focused on international business, I'm concentrating on the more scientific side of business. Classes are small, with roughly fifteen students per subject and, adding in the idyllic setting of our college into the picture, I'd be lying if I said it wasn't great.

Great. That's exactly the word. The teenager in me purrs, because he always wanted to go here. To study and develop his skills.

Atrocious. Because the atmosphere here is something I could get used to. I sleep better than I do at home, where Damien's scent still lingers in the cupboard of clothes we haven't washed for two years. Where his bed is still made up, waiting for someone to say that this was all one big mistake. Waiting for him to come home.

But he won't come home. And this here, the place where I sleep like a baby, is the place where he died.

I want to know which room he slept in, can't stand not knowing if it happens to be mine. Can't stand to accept it *could* be mine. My bed. His bed. I sleep in his shirt. Yeah, I know how that sounds. Pathetic. It's what I feel. But anyone who would have known us, knew we were like twins. Best friends. *Blood.*

Maxime gives me space in the evening. He must know I'm up to something, but so far, he hasn't asked about it. And I haven't been up to anything special, since I'm in a slump. I can't concentrate, not with our busy days and the pile of homework and assignments we're getting.

But I see the large oak tree every fucking, day. Fragments of photos from the police report flash through my mind every time I let it, the frame of my brother's lifeless body, sprawled out next to the thick roots of the tree.

"I'm gonna go for a run." I blurt, and stand up from my desk. Maxime looks up, his nose wrinkled in a question. We've been sitting at our desk for the past hour now, doing homework.

"What, now?" He gazes outside, to where heavy clouds drift by, leaking drizzle. The tops of the trees in the woods shake under the howling wind. The days are getting shorter as we make our way through November. "There's a gym downstairs, I'd go there if I were you."

"Nah, I need some fresh air." Opening the double doors of my wooden cupboard, I ignore my reflection in the mirror that's attached to the inside of the door, but grab Damien's sports gear instead. A pair of football shorts and a thin, long

sleeve should do. Ignoring Maxime's hot stare, I head for the door. "I won't be long."

Outside our dorm, the narrow corridor is empty. The wine-red carpet dampens my rapid footsteps as I make my way toward the heavy, wooden staircase with its massive ceiling. The arched, floor-to-ceiling windows take up the entirety of the wall across from me, showing the fierce weather outside. I shouldn't go outside now. Hell, I even expect Claude, the porter, who is stationed in the grand reception, to stop me when I make my way downstairs. He follows my movement, that's for sure, and when I stand in front of the door and turn over my shoulder, I catch him eyeing me with a wary gaze.

"Are you sure?" is all he says.

I open the door without an answer, where the howling wind and bleak rain are waiting for me, draping their heavy presence over my frame as I make my way outside. It's not that late, only about eight in the evening, but because of the dark clouds, there isn't much light out there. Not even the artificial ones can brighten the path enough when I reach them on a jog.

Passing the shuddering flowers and plants, I make my way toward the fountain, passing it, only to halt by the large, oak tree. My chest constricts, and I pant as I stare—two, three seconds—before I tear my gaze away.

Once outside the football fields, my breathing becomes more steady. Apart from the wind and the rain, which I'm already used to by now, it's peaceful in the forest. There are no birds out there, probably all taking shelter, and apart from my own, even puffs of air, I'm left with my own thoughts. And there are many.

I miss my parents. *Thud.*

And I wonder if they miss me. *Thud.*

They didn't want me to come here. *Thud.*

But I insisted, though I didn't tell them the truth. *Thud.*

She made me promise to bury the past. *Thud.*

My foot stumbles over a stray rock, and I realize that I'm in the pitch dark. I take a step forward, then another, eyes trained on the trees reaching for me, as blackness creeps in around my vision. Shit, I was so lost in my mind that I must have completely left the college grounds. There are no more lights here and, if I'm not mistaken, this is where I ended up the other day when I discovered that cultivated circle in the middle of the forest.

I tip my head back and stare up at the moonless sky bearing down on me, trying to ignore the way my heart beats fiercely in my ribcage. I listen to my own breathing as I struggle to get it back to the constant, even puffs of air.

Just as I turn around, determined to make my way back to the college, I hear a sound. *The* sound. It makes my breath hitch, as fear freely seeps through the cracks of my guard. The piano. It's vague, but clear enough for my fingers to itch, and I dig my nails into my clothed thighs as I keep my hands firmly squeezed into the pockets of Damien's long sleeve.

"This can't be—" I mumble to myself. But then...

Somewhere, a crow caws, followed by a loud howl. Human, it's a human. My body freezes as my mind remembers...

Torches. I blink. Is that a torch?

Without waiting for the answer, I spin on my heel and run. It's too fast and uncontrolled, and it makes my lungs pump air faster than my legs can make ground, but I don't slow down. Somewhere I think I can hear wings flapping in the wind, and my hands come out of my pockets, shaping them in a sharp line, as I force my feet to move—*move*—fucking move!

Once I flee out of the thick shrubs, I am back to where the lamps are. They shine their ominous lights on the quiet garden, and it does absolutely nothing to calm my mind, nor my panting state. Rounding the corner and into the maze that is the front garden, I swear I see a hint of a cloaked shape, drifting past me, out of my sight. My mouth opens in a silent cry of terror, and my feet stumble, throwing me off and onto the cold and wet ground. The bang hurts like a motherfucker,

but I have no time to contemplate, no time to check my body for injuries, because I can feel it in my entire core. I'm no longer alone, and whether it's my mind playing tricks on me, or there is really someone out there, the result is the same.

Claude opens the door right before I want to bang my hands against the wall, his gaze narrowed. "You are bleeding."

"What happened?" The question doesn't come from him, and we both whip our heads to the man who's standing at a little distance, unruffled and expensive, in a dark grey suit and his hair slicked back to the side. On his nose, an iron framed pair of glasses, and a permanent smile that looks more like a smirk.

"Mister Dupont," Claude greets our director with a small dip of his chin.

"Sir," I mumble, chest still heaving, and I need to swallow a hiss when I try to move past the porter to head back to my dorms.

"Wait, you're hurt." The director inspects me from close-up. "What on earth were you doing out there with this weather?"

"W-went for a run." My teeth clatter, as if they only now register that I'm freezing.

He clacks his tongue. "Go and take a shower. Take a paracetamol, I'll see if Gaël's available."

"Oh, I don't need a doctor, I'm fine."

The director shakes his head. "He isn't a doctor, but he performs miracles with his hands. I'll promise you that you'll feel better. Now, go."

"I don't need—" But he's already walked away, the soles of his shoes tapping against the wood as he marches from us.

DOMINIQUE

“What the hell happened to you?” Maxime’s gazing at me from his bed, eyes wide. Crossed legs, he’s sitting against the headboard, laptop on his lap. He tosses it to the side and pushes himself to stand, but I discard him with a flick of my hand.

“Nothing. I fell,” I hear myself mumble, then force myself to hobble toward the bathroom, muscles heaving. Fuck, this is going to hurt tomorrow. “When this guy comes, this Gaël something, you can tell him I’m fine.” And then I close the door behind me, needing the confinement of the small space. Of my own mind.

But even the hot jets can’t chase away the flutters of thoughts that haunt my mind. There had been something out there, someone, I’m sure of it.

Fear is a bad advisor, Dad used to say. Still, I know what I saw, right? Someone, a shade, wearing a large cloak that covered his entire body and head. Is this the proof I have been looking for for so long?

And those piano sounds... my soaped skin pebbles under the warm water, getting rid of the faint traces of blood, goosebumps rising at the thought.

It isn’t real. It’s all in your mind. And that there, makes me so fucking sad. Sometimes I wonder if I’m dreaming. If none of this ever happened. I’ll wake up one morning, with my brother hunched over me, his dirty sock against my nose. How many times did we do that when we were kids?

Please, let me wake up.

There's a soft knock on the door. "Gaël's here," Maxime's muffled voice.

"I don't need to be looked after, I'm good," I lie, because drying my aching body off is an unforeseen challenge. Still I manage to roll the legs of my pyjamas all the way up to my thighs, then over the curve of my ass. Fuck, there doesn't seem to be a single spot where it doesn't throb. Once my shaking biceps have managed to pull my shirt over my head, I hobble back to our bedroom, only to halt instantly.

A mobile treatment table stands in the middle of our room, with a pile of pink, plush towels on top of it. And I remember a time, and an innocent life, where Damien used to tease me when Mom gave me the pink towels to dry after our evening shower. God, our tiny bathroom would be filled with vapor, chuckles and a rigid Mom as she told us to tidy up quicker. And no, Damien, pink isn't just for girls. But every time she would give me that fucking towel, not my brother. And every time he'd laugh his ass off.

The thought brings a snort, but hushed voices a little further in the room yank me from my revelry, and the smile freezes on my face.

It's *him*.

"Oh no," the words tumble out of my mouth in a wave of panic that makes my body shudder once more. "I'm feeling fine, I don't need this."

Both guys turn back toward me. The blond guy—Gaël—is not wearing his uniform either, but a pair of trackpants and a dark tee. When he sees me, he tips up the corners of his lips. I suck in a breath, and another one, already feeling out of breath, as something close to trepidation ambushes my mind.

"The director summoned me," Gaël says, then turns back to Maxime. "Why don't you be a good boy and go watch Netflix next door?"

"That won't be needed," I rush to say, my gaze lingering just past Gaël, catching Maxime's eyes when he flits a look

my way. They clash with mine for no longer than a beat, before his darts back down to the ground. And then he shrugs, grabs his computer, and leaves.

“So you decided to take your brother’s scholarship.” Gaël finally speaks behind me, voice nothing more than a gentle murmur. “It was a pleasant surprise to see you again the other day.”

“Yeah, well—” I shrug, the gesture mostly to myself, as if I want to wipe myself clean of complicated thoughts I shouldn’t be having now. Such as this heavy prickle of awareness, this knowing that when I turn around, I’ll be face to face with the guy who’s been haunting my thoughts for two, shameful years.

God, will he see the sinful desire in my eyes? Will he know that I’ve jerked off countless times to the memory of his angelic face?

“Why won’t you lay down?” Gaël’s voice has that same smoothness to it as in my memories, and with my eyes still staring at the door Maxime just fled from, I swallow thickly. My throat clicks, and in reply follows a raspy chuckle behind me. “Or do you want to disobey the director on your first week at Saint-Laurent?”

Inhaling profoundly through my nose, I fist my hands, then grind my teeth. And then I turn around.

He’s even more handsome than I remembered, is the first thought that flashes by when our eyes collide. His blond hair hangs over his face like an open curtain, swept to one side for my eyes to feast on the other side of his face. Smooth, pale skin, a square jaw, straight nose and big eyes. He blinks them, and my gaze focuses on the long, blond lashes that frame those emeralds, elegant in their curve upward, leading to darker, perfectly arched brows.

When he rubs the towel on the mobile table, my gaze finally tears itself away from his face, only to stare at his long, elegant fingers. I remember him wearing rings, but right now he doesn’t have them on. Not during this—*whatever* this is.

“I’m glad to see you again,” Gaël continues. “Come, lay down. You look like your body could use some pampering.” My cheeks flame instantly, and I mumble something unintelligible, suddenly desperate to be alone and cover up against my own, shameful thoughts. What the hell is wrong with me?

Unlike his devilishly beautiful features, his tone is void of amusement. No, he actually sounds genuine. Still I linger, unsure of what to do. And so I watch him light a scented candle that he puts on the nightstand by my bed.

“It’s lavender and helps you to relax.” He ambles back to the bed, where he takes off the pile of towels that have a similar smell to them in the faint breeze of the wind. And then he places one, large towel on the table. “Come.” He pats on it with his palm, long fingers tracing the fluffy pink. It makes me feel funny inside. Rolling my lips, I think of some excuse, but my words get stuck in my throat, when our eyes crash. His ones are a little hooded as they pierce right through me, as if they’ve somehow found the backdoor of my mind, and want in.

We met during my brother’s funeral. He’ll want to talk about Damien. Maybe I should, maybe I should ask him if he knows.

No.

Yes.

No. Because I find myself tongue-tied. Always fucking tongue-tied.

With a tense shrug, I give in, and lay down onto the sweetly scented towel, face flat, on my stomach.

“Good,” he mumbles, and I can’t help exhaling the shaky breath I didn’t know I held in. The next one is ragged again, tense, too high in my chest, as I hold it there, waiting for *the* questions to hit me.

“How are you feeling now?”

“Do you still miss him?”

“Wasn’t his death unfortunate, right?”

“Drowning in a fountain...”

“Was he really drunk?”

“Why was he the one who died?”

“It should have been you.”

You.

You.

I squeeze my hands tighter as I fight against my aching chest. Nothing happens though, apart from Gaël humming some tune, as he putters around, rummaging through his bag.

What are you doing? I want to ask, but my mind is too busy remembering. All those times that I’ve been cornered, beaten, tricked. Is this a trick?

“Do you like classical music?” He suddenly asks. “I remember you playing that song in church.”

It had been my way of giving Damien’s spirit free passage to heaven. My brother was a typical jock, but he loved it when I played the piano. Countless times, he’d come home from football practice, and even once from a nightclub, feeling sad and lost. He’d always asked me to play him a song.

Moonlight Sonata by Beethoven.

I squeeze my eyes shut when I hear the gentle flicks of the piano through the amplifiers I didn’t know Gaël had brought with him. Oh God, that song.

My fingers itch, then curl themselves out of the tight fists when I catch myself using the side of the table as the instrument, floating over them in perfect harmony to the song.

“Did you know that Beethoven was growing deaf when he wrote this song?” I blurt. Gaël hums to that, not answering. “Sorry,” I whisper.

The humming stops, just like the rest of his rummaging around. “Why?” His voice is soft too, and it squeezes

something close to my heart. I shake my head, not wanting to take this direction. Not wanting to discuss the topic further.

He doesn't. He changes the subject instead.

“So, I'm here for anything from moral support to a good massage.”

I let those words sink in a little, before turning over my shoulder, searching for him, gaze narrowed. “But you're also a student?”

Gaël rolls his padded chair back to the table, a few bottles of cream in his hand. He smiles, and my chest flutters. How is he this gorgeous? “You can call me a bonus student. I'm just here for the ride.” His green wink is salacious and has my heart skipping a beat.

“D-do you—” Rolling my lips in regret as I swallow the rest of the phrase, mind rumbling with different thoughts. Though it's most likely that he's just fucking with me, and I'm too thick to see. That's a sobering thought, one that makes me purse my lips tight and cross my arms in front of my face. Gaël chuckles softly, the feeling that this is somehow one big joke, growing.

“Do I, what?” Gaël rolls his chair in front of me and gently pulls a lock of dark hair out of my face. My breath hitches at the gesture, and I pinch my lips even further. “You like playing puzzles, Dominique?” His voice has gone softer, lower, the tone rumbling gently against my sensitive skin. He's close, and if he's serious about giving me a massage, he's going to be even closer. A shiver runs through my core. “Handing me a piece, expecting me to find the correct fit?”

His hand is back at my face, and I flinch. It lingers in front of my eyes, the long digits straight, nails nicely manicured, as if they're about to touch me again. They don't. Instead, they wave in front of my eyes briefly, before Gaël retreats. It makes me think that perhaps he caught my cowardly reaction, and it makes me loathe myself a little more.

“I love skin,” Gaël breathes. “It's texture, firm and warm. Smooth, giving, and so incredibly soft between my hands.”

When a person lays down on this table, it's their surrender I crave, to use their flesh. I love how the muscles give in, relax when rubbed in the right spot. You know?"

His lolling tone has me fixated on his words while my mind gets a little mellow. Gaël speaks slowly, voice thick with that smooth rasp, and there's richness to his timbre that gushes through my walls like liquid gold. Until he uncaps a bottle of something right by my ear and I flinch.

His gold is solidifying inside my borders.

"Relax, beautiful," Gaël purrs. "You're on my table now. I'm gonna take really good care of that battered skin. You want me to look after you?"

"Yes," I hear myself breathe. Behind me, I can feel Gaël smile.

"That's right. Now, let me help you with this." He grabs the sides of my tee and starts sliding it up, toward my head.

"What?" I turn over my shoulder and my wild gaze crashes with his. His brows arch, but I stay frozen, chest tightening with fear. I fucking hate myself when I react like that, but it's a primal instinct that's so deep, I can't just click it away. I want him to get the hell out of my room, because I don't want him to see me like this.

No one. Ever.

"You d-don't—" I stammer, and I squeeze my eyes shut on a heavy inhale of breath, willing my nerves to settle.

"You know I can't work when you're still wearing your clothes. It's just your shirt, Dominique. Come on, let me take it off." His voice is soft, but there's something in there that makes me lift my upper body and lift the hem of my shirt over my head. I grunt while my muscles strain, and then it's over, and I'm back on the table, letting out another deep exhale.

I'm feeling naked, as if I'm entirely at his disposal. It makes me want to crawl into a ball and hide, wrap the covers over my head and sleep. And when I wake up, I want this whole thing to be a dream. I want to sit with my brother and the boys in one of our cabins in the woods and watch them

smoke a joint. They don't have to acknowledge me, as long as they let me in their space.

“Want to tell me what happened?” Gaël’s voice is soft, but his puffy breath is close to my ears. Too close. I shudder.

“I-I fell. Outside.” My gaze lifts, and my eyes collide with my own in the mirror of my wardrobe. I left it open earlier. They search Gaël’s frame, tall and lithe, as he hovers over me. I see him bowing his head, while he pinches the bridge of his nose and gives a shake of his head.

“Did you check the weather before going outside?”

“Yeah, yeah—I just needed to get out. Get some fresh air.” My fingers still trace the imaginary notes in my head, as the song continues.

“Where did you fall?”

I hesitate for a beat. “In the forest.”

“In the woods?” Gaël averts his gaze, but I don't miss the way his jaw tightens. It's enough for me to continue.

“Yeah, you know where they have this cultivated part? This circle? I was c-curious.” I bite my bottom lip.

“Were you now? Curious, beautiful boy falls and needs to be looked after?” He talks so softly, as if he's trying to keep his words a secret between us, even though we're alone in the room. It does nothing to the way my heart rate picks up at his words, the way they tease desire to flood south. “Let me start with your shoulders then.” When I catch his gaze through the mirror, a sluggish grin pulls at his handsome face. “Scared?”

“No,” I croak, but it's a lie, and we both know it. Truth? I'm fucking dreading this. This...this...*his* fingers on my skin. According to Mom, I never wanted people touching me. Which is perhaps why I haven't been successful with dates and all. The thought of someone touching me makes me break out into sweat, and has me running away, only to hide in a pathetic corner.

My brother knew. He respected that, and shut everyone up who would make fun of it.

Gaël's bare feet, moving around like a lithe cat as he searches for the creams he's got arranged in his bag, only to come back to me. I squeeze my eyes shut, limbs tensing, fear and anticipation fighting for dominance. Desire's there too, hot and unwanted, as it tantalizes my cock into filling further. Oh fuck, I'm getting hard. I want to wiggle my hips, willing my dick to go down, but with my ass in the air, I can't do that. Frigid sweat breaks out as I think of a way to escape this. It seems it's too late for any words though.

"I'm going to touch you now, okay?" Gaël purrs, hot breath fanning my ear. Fuck, I need to keep it together. I nod, without replying to him, unsure of my voice. And then two warm hands with cool cream cup my shoulder blades, gently touching the hot skin in circles as his soft murmur continues. "My mother taught me how to massage people. She runs a massage and spa facility in Landes-sur-Marnes, close to Montpellier, not too far from here."

I nod again, teeth firmly ground together as Gaël's fingers press into my aching skin, soothing it with the perfect pressure and coolness of the cream.

"You can look in the mirror if you like, see what I'm doing."

"That's okay," I croak, swallowing my panting breath. He chuckles hoarsely, hands going toward the dip between my neck and my shoulder, to where my muscles are most tense, and I need to fist my hands. Fuck, this guy's got me hard in no time, and now I don't know what to do.

"You like it?" He croons. I give him a little nod, with which he's not satisfied. Or he hasn't seen, or whatever. "Hmm?" He asks.

"Yeah," I rasp, and my cock jolts at the confession.

"Good." Another song finishes, and a new one begins, and my breathing becomes ragged and restrained as I try to puff them away. "You're still so tense," Gaël says after a few more minutes. I feel the need to laugh. My cock is rock hard, and I have no clue how to get the fuck out of here without him seeing.

“Try to relax, okay? Try to empty that big brain of yours.” He ticks with his finger against my skull, and I want to ask him why he thinks I am clever. “Like this, Dominique.” Gaël takes a deep breath, and I find myself copying him. “And out. Let it go.” His fingers squeeze my shoulders. “And in,” he drawls on a whisper, fingers now pressing against the vein in my neck. “And out. Good.”

My thoughts become more blurred, while others run through them, messing up my focus. I think of my piano at home, of Damien, of running on the sand path, faster and faster, turning my back on the school and heading toward the church. Toward *our* side of town.

Gaël’s knuckles are trailing south over the ridges of my spine, making my hips involuntarily buck. “Breathe in,” he encourages, and I do, taking more than a few seconds to scoop in as much air as possible, letting my lungs expand. His fingertips tease around the waistband of my shorts, and my eyes fly open. I catch his stare in the mirror—those intense cat eyes, painted in black, shining like emeralds. When I look at myself, I’m startled by what I find. My eyes are large, and dark, and wide with panic. Is that how Gaël sees me?

“Breathe out, Dominique. Relax.” Despite it all, I find myself doing just that, sagging back onto the bed as I do. Allowing his fingers to tease some more, groaning lowly as they dip inside, skimming over my heated skin. “You’re doing really well,” Gaël compliments. “Is this the first time someone has given you a massage?” His fingers trail lightly over the groove between my ass cheeks, and I find myself nodding again, fighting against my arousal. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I rasp.

“It’s very healthy for your body and mind, Dominique. It reduces the soreness in your muscles and improves the circulation of your blood.” His fingers reach further down until they reach my scrotum. I stifle another groan. “It gives energy, something that I like to dim a little by using lavender scented candles, and decreases stress.” His fingers fondle my balls, and heat boils in my veins. “And of course, it increases relaxation. Are you relaxed now, Dominique?”

I give him another nod, fingers no longer playing the piano notes of the song. Unsteady they are squeezed into trembling fists that hang by my side. Fuck, I'm about to explode without Gaël even as much as touching me. This is fucked up.

“Turn around for me, please.”

My eyes fly open and my body locks up. “I don't think—” Our eyes meet again through the mirror. His dance with mischief.

“Don't think. Turn around.”

I avert my gaze and bite my bottom lip, unsure of what to do.

“Dominique—” My eyes flicker up to meet his. His fingers caress my asscheeks. “*Now.*”

With clumsy movement, I manoeuvre my aching body onto my back, hands darting out to cover my crotch. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean for that to happen.” It sounds lame and he knows it. Gaël's lips curl into that seductive smile I've come to recognize, and with his gaze on mine, he pries my hands away from my bulge. I blink, and I blink again, because his fingers trail once more over the waistband of my football shorts. He's hard too, I suddenly realize. The delicate material of his pants clearly show the outline of a hard cock, and I stare, fanatical, at its shape.

“I'm not gay,” I blurt.

“No?” Gaël's fingers curl up and his fingers tease the tightness of my arousal, leaving me practically panting like a dog.

“The lights will go out in ten minutes,” I breathe, then falter, because he grips the waistband of my shorts, including my briefs, and tugs them down. My cocks springs out and hits my belly, leaving a wet smear against my hot skin. “We'll soon have to go to sleep.” It's a lie, and the moment it leaves my mouth, I wish that I'd said five minutes. One minute. *Now.*

“Look at that gorgeous cock, beautiful,” Gaël breathes. “How can I leave you unsatisfied like that? Hmm?” I have no

answer, and judging by the way he smoothly settles himself onto my legs as he straddles me, I don't need one.

“Maxime will be back soon,” I urge.

“Hm, I hope he will. Nothing beats a bit of voyeurism.” He flashes me a wicked smile, then eases himself between my thighs, splays his hands on both sides and spreads them. I don't know what that is, nor can I think straight when I watch him dip his head over my crotch. And then he laps at the wetness of my slit.

My moan is instant, filthy and long, as pleasure sparks inside me. I whip my head around, as if needing to get myself out of this haze, but it's too strong for me. Because I'm unable to look away from Gaël, eyes burning at the sight, mouth falling open. Judging from the smile that curves his lips, that's exactly what he intended. With a raspy hum he wraps his lips around my cock and sucks gently at my tip. And his eyes, oh, they look devious, sparkling and teasing while he lets his lips work as they squeeze around my crown, suckling it in bit by bit.

“Oh, fuck—” I gasp out a string of incoherent, breathless babble as pleasure grips me. My hips buck off the table, and my fingers tangle in his hair before I know what I'm doing. He simply holds my stare as he flicks his tongue over my crown, lapping up the drops of precum that have gathered there. Then he moves up my shaft, swirling over my length in long, wet caresses. A thick wave of liquified bliss rushes through me. My heart stutters. Goosebumps break out over my skin as I stare at his tongue working up and down my dick. My hips move of their own accord, thrusting forward and falling into a rhythm. I tighten my grip in his hair. He looks like pure sin now, platinum locks falling over his broad shoulders. And then he pulls off with a wet plop, emerald eyes shining with mischief as his tongue darts out, gathering spit and precum from his wet, swollen lips.

I grind my jaw, frustration thick and clashing with my need for control, and finally look away. I need to fucking get it together, but my body's burning with lust and shame, with confusion and this strange feeling of inferiority. Of not being

enough, not being the one Gaël really wants to touch. After all, if I'd been worthy, then why would I have been bullied so much?

The apology is already in my throat, ready to be catapulted by my mouth, when his serene hands cup my cheeks. They smell of lavender, their sweet floral scent sending shards of safety through my guards. And I can't get them up, not in time, my mind too fuzzy with arousal and just *him*. He's all over me, over my body, and under my skin.

“Do you want me to continue?” Gaël rasps.

My eyes wildly dart between his green eyes, searching for something—anything—that proves that he's just messing with me. He lifts one of his hands to the back of my head, and rubs my skull with firm, languid movement. A groan escapes from my lips, and my eyes flutter. “Do you?”

“I—” My gaze searches so hard, but can't find anything.

“Thinking so hard,” he mumbles, then he gives my cheek a playful slap. It's hard enough for the frail skin to burn and sting, and my eyes widen in surprise.

“What the—” My face burns with embarrassment, my thoughts scrambling to keep up with my body, because it leans in to search for his warmth.

“Will you let me do it again?”

I'm not sure what he means, but when he brushes a hand over my hot cheek, I nod.

“I need your words, beautiful,” he whispers. Still looming over me, his tall, well-developed body practically hugging me, our hard cocks lightly touch. He is still clothed, though barely.

“Yeah.”

He doesn't wait, but slaps my burning cheek again, smiling as he does so. My cock jolts, and I have no clue why. This shouldn't be turning me on, right? His warm hand cups my face lightly, brushing the pad of his finger over my searing skin.

“Good boy, beautiful,” he praises. My eyes flutter at the words. “Now, do you want me to continue? Do you want me to make you come?”

My cock throbs, begging for me to just say the words that never come easily. Gaël lets go of my cheek with a final brush of his thumb, then traces a line with his tongue as he arches his back, sliding his face further down until he is back at my cock. He sits back on his haunches, piercing eyes on mine. “Last time, do you want me to make you come?”

I swallow, feeling the sudden urge to hide. I don’t, I’ve got nowhere to go. So instead I nod, then whisper, “Yeah.”

“That’s it,” he whispers, his warm mouth already teasing my sensitive crown. His tongue licks at the spongy head, teasing it with his lips as he sucks it back in, and my nails dig back into the sides of the table. The music plays Beethoven now, a piece I’ve played countless times at home, and my body starts shaking. Gaël hums around my shaft, and opens wider, swallowing my dick, taking me all the way to the back of his throat.

“God!” I shout, my cry echoing inside the room. My body feels heavy, balls full and drawn. I’m going to come. “I’m—” I moan, my hips buck, frantically searching for friction, for more, in desperate need for release. “Your mouth is—fuck, I ___”

He hums, eagerly sucking harder, hollowing his cheeks as he does so, working his hands in tandem with the movement of his greedy mouth. And then I explode, filling him with my cum, and watching how his throat works as he swallows it all. My mouth keeps on spilling murmurs and sighs as my mind slowly comes back to the present. This is the best thing that’s ever happened to me.

No, it can’t be.

No.

Yes.

No.

“Come on, let’s get you to bed.”

My eyes flutter, and I realize that I must have drifted off. No matter how I try though, I can't get them to fully open. I'm so tired, my mind so peaceful, skin glimmering with lavender and sweet touch. And that music...

"There's a piano here, at college, waiting to be played. By you. Would you like that?" Gaël asks as he pulls me by my arms and tucks me into bed.

"Yeah," I sigh, the sound long and drawn out. I lay my head down onto my fluffy pillow, a purring sound escaping from my lips. "I miss it so much. And you, do you play?"

Gaël chuckles when he draws the blankets over me. "Oh yeah, I do."

"What instrument?" My eyes flutter.

"People. I play people like they are my instrument," he murmurs, and my mind scrambles to understand the meaning. Soft fingers trace the lines over my forehead. "Don't be afraid, I always play honest. Well, almost always." Another of those hoarse chuckles. When I don't reply, he continues. "And you just happen to be my favorite instrument."

"Favorite game?" My eyes flutter, then they open. Gaël's standing over me, his sparkling eyes meeting my tired ones.

"Oh yeah. You'll be perfect for me. Sweet, sensitive, submissive."

Swallowing thickly, I wet my lips and squeeze my hands in front of my chest. "Submissive?"

He traces another finger over my cheek, humming as he does so. "Very," he promises. "Sleep now."

But I can't, my heart hammering in my chest. "Were you out there, earlier? In the woods?" The moment I ask the question, something flickers in his eyes. It's gone when I blink my eyes. The curve of his mouth is back though, tipping those lush lips back into a smug grin. He doesn't reply, instead walks to the door.

"I'll see you soon." He opens it and gestures to a man in a black suit to come in. He gives me a curious look. Gaël's

hands tighten around the man's throat in less than a few seconds, twisting him so they're facing each other. "Don't look at him," he hisses.

"I apologize, sir," the man mutters, then moves to gather Gaël's stuff without another, single word.

"See you soon, beautiful."

"Why?" I lift my head forcefully up, flitting my gaze to his.

He snaps his gaze my way, searing me with his piercing green eyes. A slow, playful smile crawls across his face. "Because you're mine now."

PART II

CHAOS

“I told you not to come here.”

“... I wanted to see you.”

“Not tonight. Tonight’s—tonight’s complicated.”

“Why?”

“You know why...”

“Y-you don’t want this?”

“I do. I do. But they won’t let us, you know that. This is not your world, don’t ever forget that. You need to go home...”

“But, it’s not yours either.”

“You’re drunk. How did you manage to get here?”

“I missed you so much, I had to see you.” A giggle. “Though you’re looking all funny tonight.”

“You need to leave. Now.”

The peaceful forest is no longer at peace. Leaves rustle as footsteps whisper over the grass, the shrubs and onto the sand path. Coming closer.

“Go, I’ll meet you later.”

“Why won’t you tell me—”

Someone howls into the crisp air, a high-pitched taunt that gets swallowed by the openness. Cackles in the wind, then more howls follow.

“Go now.”

“Why—”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that, I didn’t mean to—Run!” But alcohol makes movements sluggish and slow. And disappointment makes the result pitiful. An easy target. “If they catch you, if they catch you.... No. I’ll catch you first.”

I have to.

“It has begun!” A voice rumbles, followed by hollers and shouts. “And there’s only one outcome.”

“You’re gonna love what we have in store for you.”

It's already too late.

GAËL

“*See you soon, beautiful.*”

I don't know why I said those words. I probably shouldn't have. Dominique is inexperienced, sweet and shy, and Damien's baby brother of all people.

Damien Devallée... the guy who caused an evolution to a brotherhood that has always survived on strict, traditional rules. The guy whose baby brother has me wrapped around his little finger, just from one meeting two years ago.

That day was loaded with a grief I'd never experienced before. I'm not ashamed to say that I'm lucky in that department, and in many others. We are the elite. The fortunate ones. The privileged. We are the fucking cherry on your cake, and our ancestors built history, wealth, and style that defines French finesse. The golden lace on which our country's sophisticated reputation is built. I have never known any different. Between my parents, uncles and aunts, we occupy a large, private beach close to Montpellier. It feels like owning a part of the Mediterranean Sea—the only part I care about. The rest of the town, I have no need for. People come to us. My mother has a large spa and wellness line that she runs from home, and her clients are welcome to use our facility for as long as they need. Although I've got plenty of ideas on how we can exploit her products through the internet, the real money comes from Dad, who runs a multimillion euro industry with his brother and sister, a large winery with branches that are extended in South Africa and Argentina. I have no interest in taking over the business, and fortunately,

my parents have accepted that. We have a great relationship. Together with my cousins, we have a great life. We come from money, from wealth, from love.

But the moment Dominique stumbled into my life, on that black, disastrous day, I realized that I was still yearning for something else.

Desire, thick and heady, seduction, heated and wicked, I've seen it all. Hell, I live for it, live for the sting, for the game. I'm a player. In the literal significance of the word. I love to hunt, to find my prey and chase them down. Love to hear them pretend how they don't want it, giggling and struggling as I haul them back to my den. But by the time they're laying here on my table, they're begging for it. I'll have them collared and make them crawl, then work their skin with my oils and hands.

They all wither in comparison to Dominique's untouched flesh. His skin is divine. Soft, yet firm, with a hint of a tan. He won't need a lot of sunshine for his flesh to color a glimmering gold. And his scent, sweet with a hint of sweat, invaded my nostrils effortlessly. I could sniff every inch of him and still want more, but that's the greedy fucker I am.

His trembling flesh under my hands felt like rippling caramel, his surrender natural. His indignancy nothing more than a smooth play, a logical path that leads us both to what I wanted. Him. His flushed skin, and his velvety, virgin cock in my mouth. Fucking bliss. Those whimpers and moans, his trembling legs, his hand in my hair when he didn't realize he was pulling it, and then to hear him beg... I've replayed that memory on a loop ever since I left his dorm.

Fucking sweet, is what he is. Trembling and stammering, but his cock hard and wet. For me. The sensual, square shape of his face and those full, pouty lips are nothing like the arrogant cockiness that described his brother. No, there's something else there, something that's far more enticing.

Still... going out for a jog when there's a storm outside, and accidentally ending up in *that* part of the forest?

He didn't mention the Atrium.

He's curious, my beautiful Dominique. And I can't blame him. If something happened to my family, I'd claw them all down.

But the mind is a tricky maze, and he is fragile. On one hand it nurtures us, soothes us, feeds us with knowledge and emotional awareness, and on the other hand it tricks us. Makes us remember things that may, or may never have happened.

In our core, we're all narcissists. We all want to be unique, want to be looked up to, want to be found special. And in a way, we are all special. Just not the way we imagine it.

So if the mind is treacherous, here's what fascinates me—once you calm a soul, then ask them the right questions, they will let—*like trickling water*—their minds open.

What will I find when I crack Dominique open and peek inside his?

To say that I'm surprised he actually entered this school year is an understatement. I could have asked my bodyguard to keep on tabs on him over the years. But I didn't. After all, people come to *me*, not the other way around.

So that leaves the question: Why is Dominique really here?

When I saw him in his dorm, there was something in his eyes. Horror. I recognize the look. It was when he realized that I was the masseur he didn't want to come over. Perhaps? But there was something else there too. Something that he'd tried, and failed, to hide that first time as well, in the woods.

Grief. Solitude.

Still, I've been good and stayed far away from Dominique. It's weeks later when I meet him again. A Saturday, to be precise, when I find myself puttering through my massage room, wearing nothing more than a pair of satin pants. This first week's courses were fine and, thanks to the understanding the board has with my family, I'm allowed to take mostly minor subjects, such as philosophy and history. But, we all know that's not the real reason why I'm here.

Earlier today, I gave a course of Hatha Yoga, and the slower pace, the focus on breath, controlled movements and

stretching always leaves my mind at peace. I have a solid number of followers who enjoy clearing their minds, and I'm proud of the little vibe we create together. A safe space.

But here, *this*, is my peace. My room, filled with scented candles and creams, where soft, soothing music echoes between the walls, a soft flute and trickling water. I have nothing else planned for the rest of the day, and looking at the windows that carry the evidence of heavy rainfall outside, I will probably have an easy day in.

One of my cousins left a delivery box on my chair, and without looking inside, I'd recognize that curly handwriting anywhere—Mom. Whenever she orders new creams, she sends me a few tubes for my college collection. Needless to say, that collection has expanded seriously over the past two years, ever since my little business here has gotten a bigger reputation.

Humming to the music, I check out all the contents she sent over, and press a kiss to the card that says "*Je t'aime mon fils.*" I love you too, Mom, and I miss you. But the truth is, life here is good. The location is extraordinary, and the seas might not be within walking distance, but we have the forest, and the gardens. A reputation to uphold...

Popularity is a strange phenomenon. It always goes together with a mixture of primal emotions—jealousy, admiration, hatred. We all want in, and we all declare that we want out. All the same, all unique. All our own directions, all fucking sheep.

People fascinate me. Their need for belonging, for expressing their emotions. So, so unstable. They need comfort, and it's something I give them. Every day. Perhaps that's my sense of affinity.

I'm putting my new creams into the glass cupboard, when there's a soft knock on the door. I have no appointments today, and my cousins, who are also my roommates, will soon get home for tonight's celebrations.

"It's open!" I shout toward the door, then empty the box entirely. Apart from creams, Mom added a lilac scented

candle, and a bottle of massage oil that carries the same odor. I open the cap and take a good sniff, revelling in the scent of sweetness.

Someone clears his throat as if to remind me that I actually invited someone in, and my face splits into a big grin. A flutter takes hold of the pit of my stomach, only to whirl down, toward my groin. I'd recognize that sound anywhere. I give myself a quick glance in the mirror—my naked torso shimmers in the flickering light, satin pants snug around my thighs and cock.

“In here!” I practically purr, then make a show of giving Dominique no attention. Instead, I offer him my back, as I fold the carton box in, humming to the music.

The glass bead curtain clinks when Dominique presses them aside, and then I can sense his presence in my small space. He doesn't speak, but my skin tingles with awareness, teasing my nerves, from my chest to my stomach, and lower, to where my dick is hardening.

“Yes?” I finally mumble and turn around.

Dominique's eyes land somewhere on my naked torso, before they slowly skim up, toward my lips, my nose and then my eyes. Our gazes collide, and desire rushes through me like a whirlwind. His eyes are wide, his flush adorable, and he licks his lips before he swallows. Then his mouth opens, and my brows rise, ready to hear it all, but then he closes it again.

My brows knit. “Yes?” I repeat.

“I—” he takes another inhale, one that makes his chest puff up while he balls his hands to fists. “Wanted to ask you about that piano.”

This time my gaze narrows. Piano? Of all the things I have already done to him, and all the things I've promised, he's here about that piano? If only he knew where that thing stands...

“I couldn't find it,” he rushes, then gestures with his hands in an uncoordinated move.

“Where did you search?” I feel the need to ask. This castle has many prohibited areas, after all.

He looks away, looking a little guilty when he shrugs. “Everywhere. I couldn’t find it.”

“And you need it, right?” I purr, teasing him with a raspy tone that makes him visibly quiver. Sweet. He blinks his long, dark lashes, and the crotch of satin strains a little more. Fuck yeah, I wish he’d look down, just to see how his presence effects me.

“Yeah,” he finally breathes, face flushing even more.

“And what else do you need?” The words come out in a whoosh of air, as I walk forward. He takes a few steps back, rolling his lips as he seems to consider my question. Then his back hits the wall, and he balks.

“I shouldn’t have come—”

“Oh, you did well.” My hand brushes his shoulder and he flinches. I’m only a little taller, but both our bodies carry well developed muscles that make us lean and fast. Only he’s not a competitor, I can see it in his eyes. I could take him down at any given moment.

“Let’s see how fast this one can run.”

The thought has my cock throb inside my pants.

Not now. Not when he made all this effort. *Not him.* I’d never put him out there.

“You came to the right person. Not only because I know everything that happens in this college, but also because you belong to me now. Remember?”

His front teeth peek out from between his lips, and he nibbles on the bottom one. The feeling is primal, the timing immaculate, when my hand lashes out and cups his chin before he can take in another breath of air.

“Don’t. You are mine now, I told you. So those lips—” My finger brushes past his wet bottom lip, and his teeth disappear back inside his mouth immediately, “are mine now.” This feeling is like a drug, one I’m accustomed to. Knowing that I’m getting inside someone’s head, that they see me, feel me, and listen to me. My finger crawls up to trace the curvy line of

his mouth and its sensitive corners, his shiver adorable. I add another and begin to slide them down, just below his chin, where I stroke the fragile skin with both my index and thumb. It seems that my beautiful Dominique is a virgin at nearly everything, his reaction to the slightest touch genuine and startled. Right now, his voice hitches, his cheeks flushing beautifully pink, but it's the uproar in his eyes that make me pause. I need him focused. On *me*.

“Dominique. I'm happy that you came over, and yes, I can show you where the piano is. But not today, tomorrow. Do you want that?”

His mouth tightens the faintest bit. Then he nods. “Yes, please.”

“Good. Then tomorrow I'll see you. How are you enjoying college so far? Making any friends?” Our chests practically touch. His is heaving, his eyes on me with a mixture of suspicion and something else. I'm not sure what it is, but I'm hungry to find out.

So fucking hungry. Splaying my fingers over his heart, I find it rattling in his ribcage as it scrambles to keep up. He's nervous. That's...cute.

I follow the white fabric of his shirt, only to linger when I locate a nipple that I squeeze between two fingers. Dominique hisses at the touch, pupils widening when they swivel back to mine. He nods, but says, “My roommate's cool.”

Internally making a note on who this roommate is, my fingers skitter further down, tracing a line over his stomach, where I can feel his muscles flex as his body closes up with tension.

Dominique Devallée is like a soft breeze, but something about him also begs for chaos. I can see the same look in his eyes as I did back then, outside the church. He's still lost and deprived of touch. Still, his features are striking, yet gentle, with his dark hair swept out of his face, and those large, coffee-colored eyes. They're trained on me.

And he's on to something.

“Don’t go for a war you can’t win,” I want to tell him. “Even justice is partisan.”

I don’t. Instead I rest my hand right against his stomach, to where I can feel the wet spot of his hardened cock. His flickering gaze turns into a plea and he bites his lip, but I’m not sure he knows what he wants.

I do. “This is mine, isn’t it, beautiful?” My flat hand traces further over his stomach, teasing, but not touching. I trace the humid spot with my finger, and both our breaths hitch. “Mm, look. This hungry, wet cock, you’re just waiting to be sucked into my mouth. Aren’t you?”

Dominique lets out a breathy whine.

“Tomorrow, *mon trésor*. Tomorrow you can bring me down onto my knees and fuck my face. Would you like that?”

He shivers, lips rolling, cock jumping against my fingertips. Voices in the hallway make Dominique’s head swivel, but I haven’t missed the look of relief through his stormy, dilated pupils. “I should go.”

Then he rushes past the bead curtain and crosses the room in only a few, big, determined steps. Once more, I’m on him before he sees me coming, turning him flat against the wall, right beside the door.

“I need your answer first.” My fingers grab his cock like a vice, and Dominique lets out an uncontrolled moan. “Would you like to put me down on my knees, beautiful, and use my mouth for your pleasure?”

He looks anywhere but at me, throat clicking when he swallows. The glistening on his forehead shows me what I thought—he’s afraid.

Then someone knocks on the door, and Dominique practically jumps out of his skin.

“Two minutes!” I bark, then push him tighter against the wall. “No need to panic,” I drawl. “I’ve got you. Now, tell me, *mon trésor*, whose is this?” This time I squeeze his balls lightly, yanking him out of his stupor.

He catches my eyes again, swallows thickly, then murmurs, “yours.”

“That’s right.” Moving forward, I drape myself around his firm shoulders, to where our lips can meet. I half expect him to look away, to reject my advances, but he’s waiting for me. His lips feel soft, all the while quivering when they connect with mine.

Our kiss is gentle, and entirely too short when there are more voices in the corridor, followed by shouts. It’s enough for liquid desire to run through my veins. He tastes divine, sweet and shy, and fresh like grass.

“*T’es là, Gaël?*” Another bang at the door.

“Meet me tomorrow, ten in the morning, outside the football field,” I urge on a whisper, then lean in for a last peck.

Arthur doesn’t wait, but throws open the door, practically pushing us from the wall, his forehead scrunched with worry. When he catches us, glued together and to the wall, his brows furrow even further.

“Is that who I think it is?” Louis sneers from behind him.

“Uhm—” Arthur begins, but Dominique has already pushed him and Louis aside, as he makes his way out of the room.

A stunned Julien follows behind, eyes the size of saucers, as they watch Dominique run. Then he wheels his head back to mine, brows hitting his hairline.

“Seriously?” When I don’t react, he flips me off with a theatrical flick of his hand, then pulls me in for an embrace and plants two kisses on my cheeks. “Anyway, excited for tonight?” He giggles when he cups my face between his elegant hands. “Of course you are, you little devil.”

“Let go of him, you snake,” Louis grumbles, giving my little friend a shoulder-check as he makes his way in. It’s no secret that my cousins don’t like Julien, although I wonder why. Louis is soaking wet, football shirt and shorts sticking to his body, his hair plastered to his skull. “I’m gonna grab a quick shower.”

“They let you practise in that kind of weather?” I bristle.

Louis sends me a grin from over his shoulder. “They do. And no, thanks for the offer, but you won’t get me on that table of yours even if you’d give me a bag filled with money.”

Like a puppy, Julien follows me through the bead curtain and into my private space. Once he’s sure we’re alone, he mouths, “Was that who I think it was?”

“Yeah?” My question is both an invitation and a warning, and he knows it, but it does bring my devilish mind into action. Ignoring his silence, I continue organizing my creams, while I think this through. The color of their labels go well with my powder-colored blankets, and they looked great on Dominique’s body the other night.

“This is mine, isn’t it, beautiful?”

“Yours.”

“Sooo?” Julien insists. “What is Damien’s younger brother doing here in the lion’s den?” I whirl around on my feet, just in time to catch his stare. It’s an odd one, one I can’t place. Without breaking eye contact, I say in a challenging tone, “I want to fuck him, Julien. And you know what that means, don’t you, *chéri*?” He blinks his stare away, and it’s replaced with something that looks like annoyance. Before he can reply, I purr, “That you stay away from him. Isn’t that right?”

“Come on, Gaël, you know he’s not my type.” Julien lets out a nervous cough, that somehow makes me wonder what his type is. It’s obvious that my little friend is into guys, but I don’t remember him being with someone. “Besides, you know I’d die to have one of your cousins.”

I snort at that, picking up the box with creams from my mom. Julien is fairly attractive, with blond curls and soapy green eyes. But still... “Come on, *mon chat*, they’d eat you alive,” I murmur. He swallows thickly at that, but doesn’t reply. We both know that I’m right. “Though you make me curious,” I look up from the box. “What’s your taste in men? Are you more of a nerdy fuckboy type, or a brooding narcissist?”

There's that funny look again, together with that heavy swallow of his throat. His eyes dart around my face, searching for something, as he visibly hesitates. I wonder what he's thinking now—is he contemplating sharing something private with me, his so-called friend? He knows I'd kill for my cousins. Would he consider me an actual friend?

I slowly drop the box onto the table, fragments of Dominique's earlier presence still lingering in the room. Then my hand reaches for Julien, and I curl a brow as one hand snakes around his neck. I've given him plenty of time to leave, but Julien's still here, allowing me to transform into my wicked self. His face turns red as I close off his lungs, but my words still lead the way to curiosity and greed to step up on the ladder of reputation. Like a good foot soldier, he tries to become a knight. Both emotions battle for dominance, and I lap it up, enjoying every filthy second of it.

“Did you hear my question?”

Julien nods rigorously. “Y-yes,” he gurgles.

“Then tell me *mon chat*, if I was to give my friend a gift for being such a good friend, who would I offer? By which one would you like to get fucked?” I instantly let go of his throat, and he stumbles backward, hitting the wall. His cheeks burn and his tongue darts out, licking the seam of his bottom lip as he tries hard not to cough. He's not sure of what to say, it's clear as day.

This is not the same Gaël Deveraux most people see. The peaceful yoga instructor and masseur is thoughtful and skilled, has a great ear and a soft voice to ask questions and reassure people. I love that Gaël. We all love that Gaël.

This version of myself is cruel. Maybe even a little unhinged. Part of me likes things gentle, careful, even sweet. But another part of me craves turbulence.

It's the power I search for. It's what I've always done. The entire day I give mine freely away—my body and soul in service to those who come to me. By working their skin and muscle, I volunteer my skills as my hands knead and soothe along with my ears as they listen and notice.

But right now, seeing Julien blink, feeling his body tense and practically hearing the radars turn, my inner devil comes out. This is where *I* rule.

My fingertips skim down over his forearm, until they reach his wrist. Then I squeeze. Tight. Julien clenches his jaws, a genuine look of surprise in his eyes. And pain, because I tighten my grip, enjoying how his face scrunches into a grimace and his lips press firmly closed.

“Louis,” he sputters a little too fast, cheeks now scorching pink with shame or anticipation. Maybe both. He just gave up valuable information that can be used against him at any given moment, and he knows it.

“Fuck, Julien,” I *tsk*. My other hand reaches up, and I trace the ticking nerve in his neck. “Did you really have to choose the craziest of them?”

He shrugs at that and gives me a grimace. “Yeah, well...” he huffs through the pain.

“I really appreciate our friendship, *mon chat*.” My hands grab his shoulders and my lips linger on his hot cheeks. “You’ll need to practise some more, you know?” I release my hand on his wrist. “Louis likes it rough.” He opens his mouth, cheeks and neck bright red again, but I flip him off with a wave. “Let’s get ready for tonight, shall we?”

“Y-yeah.” Stepping over our little incident as if it didn’t happen, he rubs his painful joints. “I appreciate our friendship too.”

“Good. Now,” I clap my hands, then open the glass bead curtain with my fingers. My twinkling gaze lands on Louis, who has stepped outside the bathroom, his dark hair damp as it sticks to his tanned skin, the towel wrapped around his torso barely containing the muscle and smooth skin. His scowl darts between me and Julien. “What was all that whispering about?”

“Nothing for our ears,” Arthur mutters from behind his desk, earbuds plugged in but apparently not working. Oops.

“Now, let’s get a little hyped up for tonight, *mes frères*,” I sing-song, then hop to our small kitchen and open the fridge.

“I love the non-alcohol policy Saint-Laurent has,” and pull out a bottle of champagne. “For the *others*, that is.”

GAËL

Tonight is announced with twelve separate sounds of the bell from the tower. Students are informed that the yearly bell practice takes place, but we know better.

This is our call.

With muted footsteps we take the south wing, the only side where no dorms are found, where no classes are given and no libraries are situated. In fact, the south wing is the only part where today rooms are mostly closed and kept for private use.

This is the part where the French elite were hiding back in 1789, after the commoners had stormed the Bastille and had taken down the French aristocracy. After they'd kidnapped King Louis XVI. They'd sing along the lines of a song created by an army officer on the revolutionary side, a song that we still have today as our national hymn.

“Allons enfants de la Patrie, le jour de gloire est arrivé!”

Did the commoners really believe that they could wipe out the privileged?

“Aux armes, citoyens. Formez vos bataillons...”

Did they really believe our ancestors would be backed in a corner, ready to die?

No. They came here, to Monterrey, and were kept secret, were kept safe, by the monks. They, our ancestors, lived here, in these chambers, for years to come. Here, in the south wing,

is where they forged new strength, defined their ideology, and put their values onto paper.

I have never been in any of those chambers. But I do, in fact, know this part of the basement.

“Marchons, Marchons.”

Just like the commoners did back on the fourteenth of July 1789, we walk in lines of two, but instead of filling the streets with self-made weapons, we tiptoe down the stairs of the castle, heavy cloaks fluttering around our limbs, grinning at each other in silence. We are second, third, and fourth year brothers. We’ve all been through similar rituals, have donated money, have run for our lives, and have sacrificed parts of ourselves to become a brother.

The night is here, and so are our new pupils.

Let the rituals begin.

We put up our masks, and the atmosphere changes. Gone are the smirks and silent grins. Gone is the boyish innocence some of us still radiate.

Our true identity is now hidden, and what’s worse, we have an entire world of privilege to cover us up. This is the power of group behavior. It keeps us safe behind the veil, should things go wrong.

Oh, and things have gone wrong.

Dominique’s innocent face with those large eyes flutter through the shadows of my mind, but I blink it away. *I can’t think of him right now.*

What’s worse than someone without a dime in the world? That’s right, someone with wealth. Because they stake their claim in the name of power. They stake their claim and get away with it.

Every. Time.

Someone hushes something through the cool air, and then we all hear the woosh of matching sticks, followed by the yellow-gold shimmer of fire. Torches are set alight, revealing

the black, unequal walls that carry a few small windows with metal barriers.

The dungeons.

There are flapping noises from the glass, and even without looking, I know what I'll find—fluttering wings, followed by a scratching sound. Squeaks, into the night, as the bats fly away from their dark spots against the outside wall. They like this part of the building, for some reason. Maybe they too like to watch what goes on in here.

Someone chuckles, as if hearing my thoughts, the noise sounding more like a rattling, breathy wheeze. And then we find ourselves in utter silence apart from the crackling fire. Apart from the torches, the fireplace is now lit as well, and with every passing second we wait, take our place in the open circle, hands in the large pockets of our hooded robes, eyes cast down.

A second group of cloaks walk into the room, but unlike our black, velvet garment, theirs are blood-red. Our entertainment has arrived for those who will make it through tonight. They line themselves up against the wall, six in total, and dip their faces toward the ground, their veils forming one, large shape in the jumpy shadow as they wait.

“Bienvenue, mes frères.” The man who goes by the name of Elder Jacques swiftly enters the circle my brothers and I have formed.

“Bienvenue, Monsieur,” we hum in unison. He sweeps past us, his cane firmly planted into the ground with every step, the sound dull and loud on the stone flooring. When he halts, he's standing right in the heart of the circle, the front of his cloak tilted a little back to expose his white mask, his cane close—the golden crow stares me in the eye when he stops right in front of me. My breath hitches, as thoughts from two years ago peek through the darkness of memories. From when I had my initiation.

Elder Jacques raises his arm, and the heavy cloak rumbles my way like an unrolled rug, prying fingers close to my face.

It lingers in front of my gold and silver decorated mask that covers the entire upper part of my face. But not my mouth.

“Respect,” he mutters, and the others echo the word. Not me, no. I stay put, my earlier excitement frozen to a shriveled quiver of hope, that he won’t—his finger traces the shape of my lip, and when I dare look up, just the tiniest bit, I swear I can feel him smile behind his mask.

This is not my initiation year.

“Respect,” I finally mumble, with his fingers still brushing my mouth. He hums under his veil, then steps back into the circle.

My breath rushes out on a shudder.

“A new year, a new group of young pupils that are waiting to be groomed.” Elder Jacques booms. “They are waiting to be part of this journey that will mean—” He raises his hand and points out his index finger. “One, a safety net, two—” He puts up a second finger, “A brotherhood on which they can build their dreams and fears. Three, people who are the same.” He looks around the group, dark eyes piercing from behind his white mask. “We are *the same*. The Alpha Fraternarii don’t judge on skin color, nor on sexual preference—” he lets out a snort and allows us to do the same thing. Yeah, we know that, judging by our rituals. “...but we all are *privileged*. Wealthy. We are no commoners.”

“No commoners.” We echo.

“Live by our rules and you shall be happy.”

“Live by our rules and you shall be happy.”

“Live by our rules and you shall be wealthy.”

“Live by our rules and you shall be wealthy.”

Our words turn into a chant of telling and repeating, faster and faster, the phrases intermingling with our echoes. A brush of air tickles the fire and wood cracks as we continue our official words. They are long, almost like the Bible, and we follow into a trance of listen, repeat, listen, repeat.

“We honor our new brothers.” Elder Jacques belts, and a chill skitters almost painfully down my spine. This is it, the moment we’re waiting for.

“Honor our new brothers.”

Momentarily, the door opens and a new group of cloaked guys amble into the room. Unlike us, they haven’t been masked yet, and their gazes flick around the twilight space as they search to understand the meaning of this.

This year’s group is significantly smaller, with only five new pupils. Elder Jacques slowly leaves the circle and makes his way towards the new joiners. Stopping, he spreads his arm toward us.

“Our dear pupils, we have been waiting for you. Please, join.”

Following the instructions, their feet start to shuffle as their gazes continue to flit around, showing a palette of emotions ranging from nerves to excitement. “Now, some of you may be surprised when you received your invitation, where others were already prepared by your fathers. Because it is them who sent you here, their love for a son greater than anything in the world. Tonight, you will be tested to see if you are worthy to be a brother of the honorable Alpha Fraternarii. We will find out if you too, have what it takes.” With those words, his cane booms on the ground when the last pupil has made his way inside our circle. Then he points it toward the pupils, the infamous golden crow that symbolizes the brotherhood, snarling forward.

I follow his gaze, and find my eyes freeze when they collide with ginger-haired locks that fall from a velvet hoodie. Eyes jump frantically from the cane to Elder Jacques, back to my brothers who flank him from all sides.

Dominique’s roommate Maxime.

Fuck, how can I be so lucky? Without a single thought, I clear my throat, and Elder Jacques’s head whips my way, his dark eyes piercing from beneath his mask. I lick my lips and send him a faint nod, momentarily forgetting that this is not

how it works. But this is Dominique's only friend, and I want to know. What does this guy have to merit Dominique's affection?

Sure, I've seen him a few times around college, his face permanently split in an affectionate smile. One that he's not carrying tonight. No, right now, he looks fucking scared. I hum inwardly. *He should be.*

Elder Jacques' gaze slides back to Maxime, and then he elegantly taps his quivering, cloaked frame with his cane. "What's your name, son?"

Maxime snatches his gaze up, turning around as if he really thinks that the question isn't aimed at him. "Uh, do I give my real name, sir?" He all but mumbles. Aah, the poor kid was not informed by his daddy dearest.

Elder Jacques presses his cane a little tighter against Maxime's stomach. "Our initiations stand for respect and traditions. But maybe, just for you, I should add the word honesty. Do you know what that means, son?"

Maxime licks his lips again, dipping his head. "Yes, sir. Maxime."

"Maxime...is that how you introduce yourself to others?"

"Maxime Dupont...Sir," Dominique's roommate hurries to add. "My name is Maxime Dupont, sir."

"Dupont," Elder Jacques seems to contemplate those words, as if he hasn't done extensive research on all our pupils. But that's not what this first round is about. This must be done first, before they are able to be picked back up.

"Yes, uhm—"

"Elder Jacques. You may call me Elder Jacques." The cane is lifted, its golden head sliding over Maxime's chest toward his chin. He tilts it up, making the younger man look at him. "I'm sure you have many questions."

"I didn't—" Maxime blinks. "I didn't know about this until I received the invitation. My father passed away. I don't know

—” his eyes jump wildly, “if I am suitable for this fraternity.” He shivers.

Fuck, he’s too easy, he’s panicking already...perfect. This means we’ll get to the good part in no time.

Elder Jacques’s cane continues to slowly brush under his chin. “Well, let’s see if you are. Tell me Maxime, what is it you fear most in life?”

Maxime hesitates. “S-solitude?” He quakes.

“Hmm, solitude. Tell me brothers, are we lonely down here?”

“No,” we echo.

The cane brushes some more skin, skitting up toward Maxime’s mouth. There’s a change in the atmosphere. The air becomes heady and thick with anticipation. The brotherhood’s good at this.

“What else?” Elder Jacques croons.

Maxime falters, his eyes rolling down to catch the side of the cane. “I’m afraid now,” he admits in a whisper. Elder Jacques’s mask cracks a little, and I know he’s reveling himself. He loves fear, he feeds off it like a leech.

“Don’t be afraid, son,” he soothes. “Tonight we will take your fear, take your hunger for power and, in return, feed you with ours. We will raise our hands, and you won’t be lonely anymore.” Maxime lets out a shuddering breath, and I wonder if that’s from relief or from agony. “You give us your loyalty, we give you friendship. You give us your hunger, we will feed your appetite. You give us your solitude, and we will offer you brothers. Brothers who are like you, Maxime, privileged, wealthy, France’s future. Brothers who are children of those who fled, the shadows of bloody axes hot in their neck.”

“Yes, sir,” Maxime mumbles when Elder Jacques brings his dramatic silence.

Silence before the storms.

“We are France’s finest,” Elder Jacques whispers, and his cane points toward one of my brothers. If I’m not mistaken,

it's Arthur, but then again, we switched places too often to be sure. My brother takes a few languid steps forward, and the tension crackles along with the fire. It's static, erotic, and even the blood-red cloaks seem to quiver in anticipation.

Flesh meets flesh.

“Our rituals are designed to challenge our pupils. You, Maxime, come from one of the wealthiest families of the country. Within the next month, you will be required to make a generous donation to a cause you support.” Elder Jacques looks over Maxime to the other four students, and so do I. It's the first time I look at them, Dominique's roommate having taken all my attention. I don't recognize the others, but when they are requested to take off their hood with a slight nod, one familiar face lingers a bit longer. I may have come across that guy once or twice.

“As part of your loyalty,” Elder Jacques continues, his obsidian stare taking in the nodding heads. When he's sure that everyone agrees with this trial, he adds, “and as part of your status, once you've graduated and step outside into the big, bad world.” He holds up his cane with the large, golden crow. “You will be rewarded the sign of the Alpha Fraternalii. Once you carry this, unnamed brothers will recognize you. They will be aware that you too, are a part of the same lifestyle.”

“... lifestyle?” One of the pupils parrots on a squeal.

Elder Jacques's mouth ticks up, and by now, my brother has joined him in the middle of the circle. “Yes. Tell me boys, what are the rituals about?” He keeps his head straight ahead, his eyes focused on Maxime, while we draw the words around him. Some pupils join in, the fast learners, that is.

“Tradition. Respect.”

“Exactly,” he lengthens, a satisfied grin on his thin lips that match the shiver of trepidation that runs through me.

The first is the worst.

“It's all for one, and one for all, right?” He extends his hand to grab Maxime's covered head. The other guy visibly shivers, stance unstable as he practically falls forward.

“Yes,” I hear him mumble. *Wrong answer, Maxime.*

A hooded figure walks around with a torch, creating dancing spots on pitch-dark walls as they start padding around the circle, languid and careful. It’s practically a ceremony, the way that the flickering light shifts as it momentarily falls over us all, before he rounds the corner of the room.

“Good,” Elder Jacques croons, then takes Maxime’s chin between two fingers. Judging from the guy’s grinded jaws, I think he’s squeezing it up to the point that it’s a little painful, and my blood floods south at the soft whine that leaves Dominique’s roommate’s mouth. He gives in, sinking down onto the ground guided by the fingers of Elder Jacques, until he is on his knees in front of my brother, who dips his head to eye him. Even through the thick cloak I can see that his chest is heaving. Mine is too, air now thick with arousal.

“It’s time. Brothers, you may all choose from our red-cloaked entertainment. Ladies and gentleman—” he clicks the fingers of his free hand nonchalantly, “you may reveal yourself. We wouldn’t be the Alpha Fraternarii if we didn’t know how to enjoy ourselves, after all, would we?”

The blood-red cloaks are shrugged off in a single smooth movement, revealing silky, glistening skin. There are four girls and a guy, who’s enjoying himself as much as we are, judging from his semi-hard cock. The group of entertainers move forward in one solid flow as they approach us, making sure that they head for the pupils first. Apart from the beautifully decorated masks that cover the upper half of their face, and the golden pumps they wear on their feet, they are naked.

Elder Jacques turns back to Maxime, whose wide gaze is already on him. His lips quiver as his head is tipped up, his hands wrapped together in his lap, like some docile pet.

Perfect.

“You, my dear Maxime, are the one who takes it all tonight, sweetheart. Show us, your future brothers, how loyal you can be.” He moves his fingers from Maxime’s face, only to brush them over the covered waist of my brother, who takes in a sharp breath of air. “Show how you value our traditions,”

he mumbles, his hands slipping between the curtain where the two sides of the cloak meet. My brother lets out a soft groan, so my guess is that Elder Jacques has found his gift immediately, and it is ready to be unwrapped. Maxime shivers, but doesn't stir. Nor does he back away. Instead, those large eyes look at the spectacle both men give him, and judging by the way he nibbles on his bottom lip, I'd even say he secretly enjoys it.

“Please—” It takes me a few seconds to realize that Elder Jacques is talking to the male escort. The guy moves forward in one smooth motion on his golden shoes, and tilts his head for Elder Jacques to pat his cheek lightly. “If you may?”

Without a word, the guy drops gracefully to his knees next to Maxime, whose darting eyes land on his when they come level.

“What's happening?” He whispers.

“Power and privilege,” Elder Jacques whispers. “You will soon have both, my dear pupil, once you show these brothers that you are loyal.” He lifts the cane to let the golden crow rest on the head of the male escort. “Unlike this beautiful commoner here,” he murmurs, “so much devotion, but just not the right descent.”

For the briefest of seconds, it looks like the escort's shoulders slump at those words, but then he turns his face and pushes Maxime's head slightly forward.

“Remember, things are never as they seem.” Elder Jacques has now opened the cloak of my brother from the waist, revealing a thick, uncut cock. The exposed crown is already glistening with pre-cum. “But with every initiation phase you pass, more will be revealed. Until you officially make your pledge to the brotherhood in a little over a month.” Maxime lets out the tiniest of whines, before the escort slowly puts his mouth on the waiting cock. “The only thing you have to do tonight, is show you're willing to belong. No longer alone. No longer afraid.” Maxime willingly wraps his lips further around the tip, and a strangled moan escapes his mouth. Eyes jumping

open, the escort shakes his head, soothing, “It’s okay to like it.”

That seems to do the trick, because Maxime groans some more, then his eyes flutter closed.

“Good boy,” Elder Jacques croons. “That’s respect.” He brushes the flat of his hand against Maxime’s cheek. “That’s it.”

I take that moment to let my gaze sweep around, observing my surroundings. The normally dark dungeon is set on fire tonight, and that’s not just because of the torches. The air is thick with moans and gasps, with slapping and slobbering. In front of me, one of the girls is on her knees, bringing two cocks together as she licks them clean, and when I make my way to the corner, to where Arthur usually waits for me, I see the guy grinding on the lap of one of my brothers, his round, firm ass rocking with every thrust as his head tilts back and he unabashedly moans.

This isn’t just an orgy, this is power. This is Alpha Fraternarii at its best.

It’s obscene. It’s dark. It’s our secret.

And I fucking love it.

Someone comes in with a musket rifle, banging the wrought iron on the ground, instantly dragging everyone’s attention to him. Our brothers sure love a bit of theatre. Some of the pupils flinch, just like Maxime, whose eyes I can see light up from across the room, bright with panic while his head continues to bob.

“We. Rewrite. History.” He moves the rifle, pulling the butt snug against his shoulder as he aims randomly around him. The sound of cackles fills the air, intermingling with the enduring moans from skin slapping skin. Sex and sweat, fire and fear, and the never faltering excitement that goes hand in hand with a secret fraternity. It’s fucking thrilling.

Unlike us, the man with the rifle is not wearing a cloak. Instead, he’s wrapped in a pair of silk stockings, a jabot, a

linen shirt with decorative cuffs, a coat, waistcoat and breeches. On his face, he wears a similar, golden mask.

He takes a few steps inside the room, then lowers the gun.

“In exactly three weeks, Saint-Laurent closes its doors for all students, and you’re all expected to return home to your mansions. That means—” he extends the rifle to point toward the small window. His arm is surprisingly steady, and I know from experience that he’s got a great shot. “*They* are. Your fellow students. We, the brothers of Alpha Fraternarii, and friends, will stay here.” He moves the musket toward the nearest prostitute, and tilts it under her chin. Her nostrils flare as she tilts her head up, gaze meeting his. “Are you ready to be hunted down?”

“*Oui.*” Is all she mumbles. Someone lets out a suggestive hiss, followed by more moans. When I turn my head to the side, I see one of the girls on all fours, with a brother holding her down by her thighs, dick buried between her folds, while her mouth is put on another cock. The three of them unabashedly enjoy themselves, and it’s making my cock, already rock hard behind the heavy garment, throb with need.

The man with the rifle takes off once the carnal scenes start to fade out, and brothers have had their fill. I’m still hungry, but it’s something else I truly want.

Someone, I should say.

Soon, mon trésor.

DOMINIQUE

I didn't go out to meet Gaël behind the football fields. I—I wanted to. I wanted it so badly that even a single thought makes my chest dull with weight. Instead, I spent the rest of the weekend inside my dorm. The weather has been awful as well—short, rainy days with a howling wind keeps my mind up at night.

And while I peeked through my window on Sunday morning at ten in the hope of catching a breathtaking Gaël outside in the garden, I have become more certain of it with every day that has passed—he didn't show up either. And you know why? There's no piano in the building, I'm sure of it. He's just messing with me.

Monday comes and goes, and I find myself spending the entire week doing what I do best—research, classes and homework.

Saint-Laurent doesn't seem to have bullies, *thankfully*, but my ingrained fear hasn't gotten that message yet. I tend to stay to myself, in the back, and pretend to be too busy whenever I even have the slightest feeling that someone might come up to me. It's easier this way. Still Gaël has managed to put something strange in motion. Something that makes me think of things I shouldn't think of, shouldn't want.

And so I keep on spending my evenings in search of something, frantically so. Not ready to accept that I might not find the missing puzzle piece. I have gotten into the rhythm of pulling on Damien's hoodie when I do so, like an invisible

glove wrapped around my core, making me hold on tight. But no matter my discipline, I can't find anything new. The only thing that seems to be out there, in the garden, is that large oak tree where his lifeless body was found. Even the cultivated part in the forest, the one that looked so suspicious when I saw it at first, feels like it has become a deformed idea that I have created.

The thought sometimes creeps over me, that perhaps Damien did, in fact, die of drowning. That perhaps he had met someone and they were drunk on school grounds, when they didn't have the right to and he drowned.

That perhaps the only person not wanting to accept the truth, is me. As for the person who wrote that note... That is another question I haven't found an answer to yet. I don't know what I expected, but no one has come forward to claim ownership since I joined college. No ally or friend on a similar mission to mine. But then, maybe I have simply created this cobweb to keep things together that have no business of being kept together.

Is that what this could be? A lie?

"Fuck that." Pushing myself from my desk, I look at the neatly made-up bed from Maxime. It's still early, but he's finding himself plenty of things to do. He seems to be settling in nicely, and already has some friends. Being the loyal roomie he is, he always asks if I want to join him. I decline every time.

I don't need anyone.

A strange tug pulls at my heart.

Being with Gaël was special. *He's* special. It's like he's got this ethereal glow around him, making everything shiny and beautiful. His hair, blond and soft, his face, chiseled with smooth skin and sensual features, and his hands...God, those hands.

I have dreamt about him again. Of him waiting for me in the garden, pulling me in for a hug when he smiles his gorgeous smile. Those lips, all for me as he kisses me. In my

dreams, we spend our time together, chatting and laughing as we do so.

Piano sounds tumble in the background of my mind, begging to come through.

Viens, viens, je veux oublier. I want to forget.

After staring for another minute at my empty screen, I blow out a long puff of air, and give up. Getting changed in Damien's football clothes only takes me a minute, and then I'm off. There are already some other students walking through the halls, some of them making their way to the breakfast buffet.

I have every intention of going on for my morning run, despite the miserable drizzle outside. But for some reason I take a different direction and walk toward the south wing. There's nothing out here but corridors and rooms where personnel sleep, and still. When I walk through the silence, I immediately see that something's *off*. There's no other way of describing the way the stone statue of a knight in shining armour stands a little more forward, practically saluting me as I approach it. Behind it, I notice a door. Old and wooden, and hidden in the wall, only it has been left ajar. I spin on my heel while I keep walking, trying to play it cool. But when I still see no one, I don't hesitate and creep through the door. I would have expected darkness to surround me, but instead a light has been switched on, showing a narrow wall that leads down stairs.

Swiveling my head back one more time to be sure that no one's lurking through the unlatched door, I stare at the empty space and nibble my bottom lip, before I make my decision. A decision I'd already made, two years ago.

The wooden stairs still creak even despite my efforts to take them on my tiptoes. I hold my breath when I get to the bottom, halting only to make sure that the squeaking sounds have faded by the time I'm facing the dungeon of Monterrey Castle for the very first time. Too bad I didn't bring my map with me.

I scan my surroundings, surprised to see that this place is actually well maintained. Or perhaps that shouldn't surprise me, if my theory is correct and the Alpha Fraternarii keep their headquarters below the ground. The thought has my rib cage rattling with a mixture of excitement and fear. After weeks of being stuck, my research is finally taking a step forward. Down here, the walls of the corridors don't carry pictures, but paintings. No doubt students of Saint-Laurent, as I catch a glimpse of their uniforms, and the superior, smug look on their faces. The smiles of the rich.

I snort, then walk on, fingertips trailing the stones on my side, as if I need to remind myself that this is not a dream. No, this is me. Finally walking through the dungeons.

I think of the images the internet has shown me, of the hooded figure I swear I saw in the gardens a few weeks earlier.

Down here, everything looks normal. A few doors reveal small rooms with fireplaces, mostly empty or used as a storage room, judging by the boxes.

I take a few steps inside a random room, then freeze when I hear muffled voices. My instinct tells me to run, but my brain needs me to stay. I might not be given an opportunity like this one again. Turning around, I leave the room as it was, then head down the corridor, toward the voices. They're becoming clearer with every step I take, tightening the strings to the bass that's currently pounding like crazy in my ribcage.

Visions of cloaks fill my mind, becoming wilder as I get closer, until they wear Dracula teeth and carry a sledgehammer.

"*Bonjour?*" Someone asks me from behind, and I jump. A student my age gives me a meager wave and a hesitant smile. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. Are you here to help with the Christmas decorations?"

"Christmas..." I frown, eyeing the guy who managed to creep up behind me. Similar to me, he's wearing track pants and a loosely fitted tee. "Already?"

He smiles. “Yeah, well, we don’t have to hang them up yet. As part of the Christmas commission, we wanted to check and see what’s left of last year’s festivities.”

“I—yeah, sure.”

The guy’s smile widens. “Thanks, man. Lead the way. I’m Julien by the way.”

“Uhm, yeah. I’m Dominique.” We keep on going until we are facing a wall that’s used as a dead end and has a large painting on it of a golden crow. That’s weird, I don’t recall those drawings showing a dead end in the dungeons.

“Oh, I know who you are,” he quips. Before I can comment on that, he tilts his chin. “On your left here.”

Inside the room, there are boxes with Christmas decorations. I deflate a little, disappointment washing over me like a cold shower. I don’t know what I’d expected, but not this. Now I definitely need that run.

I help Julien bring one box up, then make myself scarce before he can ask me down again. Instead, I rush toward the reception, where I give Claude, the porter, a clipped greeting, then leave for the gardens. Most flowers have died, making the trees stand out even more. Some still carry some morning haze on their leaves, making them glisten in the twilight.

The forest greets me with its cacophony of chirping birds, chilly breeze and weeping trees as I hit the sand path and take off for my usual morning jog. It’s quiet and peaceful, and free of voices that fill my brain too much.

For nineteen years, the days of my life have been knitted together with certainties.

Nasty bullies at school, always out there to get me.

Hopeful parents at home, always believing in change.

Damien’s soothing shadow that used to keep me sane.

I listen to my own steady breathing as I continue on the path, while I try to work out why things feel so much more complicated now. Perhaps because I need my piano, I haven’t

played ever since I started college, which is well over two weeks now.

Yeah, that's got to be it.

"Tu veux jouer pour moi, mon frère?"

"Why are you crying?"

"Just...can you play me something? You play so beautifully."

"Of course."

My parents enrolled me in piano classes because they said I needed to leave my room more often. I hated it the first time, the second time, even the third time. Hated getting out of my comfort zone, hated that I'd stutter when I felt afraid.

Fear. It's what I fear most.

The bitter taste on your lips, the dry throat, the increasing drum of your heart.

I feel it now, at this very moment, because to my right, the rustle of leaves and the breaking of twigs only means one thing. I'm no longer alone. A crow caws, then flaps his wings as he flies away, creating another crescendo in my ribcage.

I run faster, the crow's croaks transforming into piano sounds in my mind.

"Tu veux jouer pour moi, mon frère?"

The melodramatic notes of *Moonlight Sonata* soothe me, despite my ragged breaths.

"Hey! Wait up!" Someone calls behind me, but I won't. Panic's keeping me in a tight vice and has my feet flying over sand and grass. "Hey!" He sounds out of breath, and softer. He can't keep up with me.

I run for another minute as if the devil himself is on my heels, before I finally slow down. I've reached the horizontal trunk that serves as the end of college territory, and is my cue to head back. If I continue instead, I'd end up at the cemetery.

Are you still there, mon frère?

“Ah, there you are.” I spin around at the sound, chest heaving as the piano sounds in my mind distort with the echo of his voice. “You left without a word before. I just wanted to make sure that you were alright?” Julien, the guy from the dungeon, points behind me with his phone. “Were you heading that way?”

I turn my head to follow the direction of his finger like some stupid puppet, then whip it back to face him. “No, no. I was thinking of going back.” It’s not a complete lie. Now that I’ve stopped running, I realize that the ache from the other day, when I fell in the rain, is creeping back into my system. “Yeah, I should be going back.” Plus, this guy gives me the creeps, despite his wide, soapy green eyes and blond baby curls.

“You’re limping a bit, sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah. I need to go.” And then I run. This time he doesn’t call out for me, nor do I hear the piano sounds. This time my mind is blank, except for my fragmented puffs of air, and an ache that tingles through my feet up to my thighs, up to my chest, toward my head. It turns into an all consuming throb of pain that follows me all the way down to past the football fields and into the gardens. Only when I close the back door and greet the porter, do I know what I’m about to do. I’m about to willingly allow my defences to crack before crumbling down. Fire licks through my veins, rattling me to my core until I fear I might explode with the need to see him.

It doesn’t stop me.

Instead, I’m clambering one of the double spiral staircases, and only allow myself to look up at the neverending ceiling, with its impressive chandelier. Then I’m upstairs, where I follow directions to the third year’s dorms. The narrow hall is similarly decorated to ours with plush, dark carpets and numerous paintings and framed pictures on the wall. The light is faint here too since only few of the sconces, once used for torches, have actual bulbs in them.

My aching feet keep on walking until I stop in front of the last door at the end of the hall. I give the door four raps and ignore the piano that starts its song in my head. Then the door

opens, and everything fades away, my defences fleeing like the pathetic cowards they are.

Louis leans against the door, his developed chest naked, and long legs wearing a pair of sweats. His dark hair's a mess, but his eyes are sharp as a razor as they eye me.

“Yes?”

Licking my lips, my gaze falls over his shoulder, to where the arched floor-to-ceiling windows take up the entirety of the wall.

“I—I” *Christ, not now*, “I need to see Gaël.”

His brows knit in confusion, but his drawl is a taunt. “You need to see Gaël? Bro, do you know how many guys come knocking on this door because they need to see my cousin? I’d say, draw a number and wait your turn. Ouch!” He spins around when a pillow hits his back, then ducks for the second one that lands right against my face. It comes with such force, and it’s so unexpected, that it makes me stumble and hit the wall behind me. I barely miss the metal, empty sconce that sticks out right next to my head.

“Arthur, you dickhead,” Louis grumbles, then picks up the pillow to throw it back. “Give me that.” I scramble to give him the other pillow, that he launches right back inside, muscles rippling as he uses his entire body to throw it out. Inside the room there are loud cackles, the sound making my lips tick up, even though my level of insecurity peaks.

“You coming or what?” Louis still holds the door, and I realize that he’s waiting for me.

“Uhm, yes.” *No*. But my mind has lost this round, feet already moving forward and inside the dorm. It isn’t until Louis closes the door behind me, and *stays* there, plastered to the wall, trapping me inside, that I wonder what the hell I’m doing. Especially when I see Gaël lying in bed, covered in a thick, mint-colored blanket.

“You’ve got yourself an early customer,” Louis teases, and I find myself shrinking even more.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you were still in bed. I’ll come back later, or maybe even better, I won’t come back,” I practically whisper the last words, feeling stupid and begging for the songs to come back into my head.

Gaël watches me from his pillows, his gaze a blend of curiosity and amusement. “Were you on your morning jog?” He asks. When I nod, he clicks his tongue. “Words, please.” He’s watching me fumbling with my hands as heat creeps into my face. *Everyone’s* watching me fumbling with my hands. I shouldn’t have come here. The place falls silent, except for my swallow, heavy on a click.

“Yes, I was,” I finally breath.

His green eyes take their time roaming over my face, taking in my features. A small smile plays on the corners of his lips, making me wonder what he sees. A sweaty, trembling, pathetic—

“You needed to see me, Dominique?” He murmurs, using the same words as he did the other day. My eyes blink when his gaze travels south, toward my heating groin. My heart leaps in my chest, and I mumble something unintelligible as I wait for him to finish his thorough once-over. I hope he won’t notice how weak my knees already are.

His gaze travels back up, skimming and probing, and they linger on my lips a little longer, before colliding with my brown eyes. He juts his chin toward the side. “You see those bead curtains?”

“I—yes.”

“That’s where I perform my treatments.” He throws the plush, green duvet off himself, exposing his well-defined, lithe legs. Unlike mine, they aren’t covered. No, Gaël’s only wearing a pair of navy-blue silk shorts that show off his thick thighs and trim waist. I can’t look away, the image alone leaves my mouth starting to water, inside I feel a sensation so fierce and unexpected, that I need to clear my throat, before I find the courage to drag my eyes away. Gaël is...perfect. Strong and defined, sensual and smooth.

“I want you to go there, get undressed, and climb on the treatment table and I want you to wait there for me. Can you do that?”

No. Leave, now. My mind screams frantically. But all I can do is nod, my eyes burning fiercely. “Yes.”

I expect someone to hoot, to laugh, to call me names. But it doesn't happen. Instead, I hear Gaël talk quietly to his cousins, a soft murmur I turn my back to, albeit reluctantly, as I make my way toward the other side of the room. My mind is filled with dread, with regret, with nerves...and then there's this sliver of something else.

Inside the room, soft piano plays from a record.

When I bashfully pull my tee over my head and slide my sweats down, I know what it is. I'm horny, balls heavy, cock hard. My stomach flutters, and my patience is thin when I lie there, feeling stupid, and wait on my stomach for Gaël to come. He doesn't let me wait too long, longer fingers clawing the bead curtain to the side as he hops in with two steaming mugs of tea in his hands. Placing them onto the table next to where I'm lying, and watching, he says, “I figured you could use some hot tea.” He dries his hands with a white towel that he places next to the small sink behind his chair. And then he sits down and rolls closer.

I swallow and follow him approaching with my gaze.

“I'm happy you're here,” he says, his voice carrying over my shoulder. “Dominique, *mon trésor*. Tell me, beautiful, have you dreamt of me?”

His fingers connect with my body, cool and soothing, and my body jerks, before leaning into the touch. The tips of his fingers are coated in something wet and cold, a cream that he now rubs over my back. But his question... I won't reply, wouldn't even know what to say. But my mind knows, and embarrassment crawls up toward my neck, leaving streams of pink behind. How could I not dream of someone so breathtaking?

I hear him chuckling behind me, low and raspy, as if his own question is hilarious.

“Look at that...” his silky fingers trace the lines of my colored insecurity, tracing it from my nape to the dip toward my collar bone, flush against his table. And then he reaches my neck, sliding upward toward my chin, and turning one side of my face to him. His green irises are nothing but a thin, glittering layer, swallowed by black desire, his lips curled into a wicked smile. But his voice is soft, and tender. “Don’t hide from me, beautiful. And don’t swallow your words. I want to hear them.”

Brushing his thumb over my bottom lip, he cups the back of my head with his free hand, keeping my face to the side. “Why did you come here?”

I lower my eyes, but they catch sight of Gaël’s fingers, and their sight causes my breath to hitch. But then, isn’t this why I came here?

“I wanted to talk,” I confess, wincing inwardly at the weight of those words. I expect them to smother me, making me stumble and fall, but they don’t. I actually feel a little lighter. His fingers are still brushing my lower lip, creating a sweet tingle in my gut.

Gaël doesn’t speak, instead lets me fumble with the words I’m trying to get past my dry throat.

“I’ve been so sad.” The words leave my mouth on a hush, altogether with a puff of solitude. Gaël’s hand rubs my scalp with firm, languid circles, and I lean into the touch, tipping my head slowly back, feeling as if it weighs a ton. “I’m not used to being away from home.”

I miss my brother.

Gaël hums, but doesn’t comment, letting me sink further into his touch and my own mind.

“I miss my music. I’m not used to being away from my piano either.” A sob escapes from my mouth, and I cringe.

“Ssh,” he murmurs, and I listen to the sound of his chair as he rolls it a little further, dragging his hands with him. He

uncaps a bottle of something, then taps with his feet to lower the table a little.

“I’ve been so lonely. I—I” *They used to bully me.* The words won’t leave my mouth. “You said that I am yours.” I stumble, my own words surprising me. But I can’t stop myself from asking, “W-what did you mean?”

Gaël’s hands grab me by my shoulders and he guides me up, surprisingly firmly, until my back is completely arched and my neck is straight, face up and body leaning on my hands. “This is the Cobra Pose, beautiful, in yoga terms this is a salute to the sun. This position has a lot of benefits. For now, for you, it opens your lungs and will reduce your stress. Are you comfortable?”

“Yes.”

“Good, stay like this, lean on your hands and keep your neck straight and your shoulders relaxed.”

“Like this?” I’m a little surprised that the position comes so easily, but stretched out on Gaël’s table makes me feel strangely relaxed.

“Hmm,” he hums. “Like that. Good boy.” His fingers brush the tender skin under my chin and I shiver when I look up to where he has moved to stand right in front of me, his groin on the same height as my mouth. And then he lowers his waistband.

“Wh-wh—” I splutter, but I shut my mouth when his thick, veiny cock falls out from its restraints. The spongy head is moist with his arousal, and while I hang in my cobra position, I watch as he swipes off some of the pre-cum with his thumb, before sliding it between my lips. It’s salty, and delicious, and I find myself following his retreating finger, much to his delight and my own embarrassment.

“This is how you are mine, Dominique.”

“I have never done this before.” I tilt my head to find his gaze, but he simply places a hand around my head and tilts it up further.

“I know you haven’t. Here, let me show you, beautiful.” He brings my lips to his rigid length. “Open your mouth, don’t be afraid.” I do, letting his wet crown slide past my parted lips as it heads for my tongue. His hand on my head gives me a playful pat. “That’s it. Now, lick at it, baby. Like it’s your favorite toy. Discover it with your tongue, with your mouth. Nip on it, suck on it. Hmm—” Gaël sucks in a deep breath when I do what he says. “That’s it, beautiful. That feels good.”

I love the texture, the smell, the feeling it gives me having his dick in my mouth. Love feeling the weight of his hands on my head, under my chin, sensitive and teasing, grounding at the same time.

It makes me feel less lonely.

“Open your mouth a little more for me.” He rocks his hips, and more of his cock enters my mouth. “Focus on my hand.” The hand that pushes me forward, little by little, until my mouth is filled with most of his length. *It’s too much*, I think. “Relax your throat, Dominique, you can take it.”

I try, but it’s a lot, and it’s a little scary at the same time.

And then his hands leave my head and chin, only to connect with my shoulder blades, fingertips once more wet with cream. “This is a new lotion, and I fell in love with the smell. I’m sure it will be divine on your skin. Rose petals with eucalyptus to make it a little less sweet.” He grinds his hips slowly, while he applies the cream onto my skin.

“You smell that?” He bends forward and I practically choke when his cock hits the back of my throat, spit and tears rolling down my mouth. Still hanging in my yoga position, my arms start to burn and shake. “Yeah,” he mumbles, “it smells fucking perfect on your smooth skin.” He gets up and I feel his hot gaze on my mouth when one, sweet finger swipes away the saliva from my chin. “You’re making a sweet mess here, beautiful. So good.” One of his hands grabs my dark strands and pulls on it, making my head tilt back and our eyes collide. I can see him, see how he watches me, smouldering eyes pitch-dark and large, as his hips pick up speed.

“Show me how you are mine, Dominique.”

I try to keep up with his pace, the friction of his cock in my mouth intoxicating, just like the combination of my straining muscles, my tired body, and him, this perfect angel, using my mouth for his own pleasure. My own arousal feels hot and stiff in my boxers, but I have no free hands to help myself.

“Sshh,” he mumbles, when he tries to pull his cock out of my mouth. I don’t want to let go, I want him to fill me. When it finally plops free, my lips feel swollen and wet with spit. My throat is a little tight, not accustomed to being used. “Turn around, beautiful.”

I do as told, moving onto my back, laying there listening to the soft piano song with my head held up by him, eyes cast down, body on fire. I can feel his gaze on me, brooding, searching, wondering why I’m so tense. And I want to believe it’s because of my self-proclaimed mission, the real reason why I’m here in this castle in the first place. But I know it isn’t.

“I will teach you pleasure,” he whispers, and then he crawls over me onto the treatment table, his hands moving past my sides on their way down, his beautiful, thick cock landing once again, right in front of my mouth.

“Can I...”

Gaël chuckles. “It’s yours to play with, beautiful.”

I don’t hesitate, suckling his length back in with embarrassing speed while gingerly feeling his scrotum. The skin is velvet there, soft and delicate, just like the moan that spills past his lips. My cock jumps, then lands between his parted lips, and I gasp in surprise, hips bucking frantically.

“Oh, fuck—” He swipes his tongue around my fragile slit, nips at it with his lips, making me whine and roll my hips. “More, please,” I beg. My own hands press on Gaël’s clothed ass, that feels round and firm when I push his groin closer to my mouth, needing his cock deeper and deeper into my mouth.

He chuckles softly as he toys with my arousal, suckling on it without giving enough friction to make me come.

“Come on,” I growl, desperation growing when he presses my hips flat against the table, preventing them from bucking, from searching for more. “Please, Gaël, please. I need it.” As if to prove my point, my mouth sucks hard, cheeks hollowing to make the suction tight, to make him groan and grunt when he rocks his hips into my mouth. He’s the one in control, bent over me, his legs firmly pressed into the ground on either side of the table, grinding against my body in exactly the spot where he needs it most. And I lay there, balls drawing up achingly slowly, as I try to beg with my mouth full. My tongue sweeps up a fresh wave of pre-cum, followed by a guttural grunt. Gaël pops free from my cock, his fist tightening around my shaft immediately, his eyes dark and fierce when he peers at me from between our sweaty, tight bodies.

“I’m gonna come, beautiful. Gonna claim that mouth of yours.”

I whimper at those foreign words that sound so fantastic. And then Gaël lets out one last, greedy groan and empties himself in me. My throat constricts, working around the head to try and swallow everything down. The texture of his cum is strange, and a little bitter, but his rocking hips and last, unhinged groans sizzle through my core. So hot to realize that *I* did that, *I* made him come. I’m really, fucking proud of myself.

Gaël has collapsed his groin onto my face, while his mouth works around my thick shaft. One hand is curled around the base, massaging my balls while he sucks and teases. He’s driving me crazy, and I keep on moaning for him, until finally, my eyes flutter closed, body giving in to the bliss.

“I’m gonna come,” I wheeze. “I—” Oh, fuck, this feels so good.

Gaël smiles around my heat, humming and squeezing until I explode, my entire body shaking with the weight of my climax. Waves and waves of pleasure tremble through me, and I lose myself in their intensity.

When I finally open my eyes, I realize that I’m still licking him clean. When I give his head a last, bashful peck, he

chuckles softly. Then Gaël crawls backward, until he's no longer blanketing my chest and face. He pulls up his pants and stretches like a cat, arms high above his blond hair, then grins. "How was that?"

"Amazing," I whisper, as I rummage a hand through my hair. Suddenly I'm feeling more than a little self-aware.

"God bless shy, beautiful guys like you." Gaël leans in and wraps a hand around my nape, brushing his lips against mine. "I feel like asking you to stay here, naked, inside my practice room the entire day, on your sweet, shy knees." He groans against my mouth, before sweeping his tongue inside, hot and wet, as it twists and turns, playing to win. Oh, he'd always win from me. The wish that he won't discard me, but wants to keep me, is as hot as it is confusing. A tickle skitters down my spine, bringing a light surge of arousal. He's got me enthralled, his mouth on mine, his tongue pressing mine, his overwhelming presence capturing me, grounding me here, in his room.

"Yeah, you'd love that." Pulling back a little, he eyes me, his blond hair swept to the side, his green gaze turned to slits, black decoration around his eyes. "I'd have you crawl around the entire day, warming my cock with your sweet, hot mouth whenever I want to." He lifts two fingers, and places them against my lips.

"Open your mouth, beautiful. Show me who you belong to."

The command is spoken on a breeze, and my first reaction is to balk, to shove him away and run away to hide.

My lips part.

"Good boy," Gaël purrs, and he slides in two fingers. My tongue meets them immediately, and my body sags at its contact while my head bends lower, seeking more touch. More warmth. My mind is swimming, clawing for thoughts, clawing for memories. Gaël caresses my cheek with his free hand. "That's good, Dominique. Keep on licking them. That's how you'll play with my dick when I have you here on your knees."

I nod my head, tasting a little more. It actually does taste good, but it's the shape of his fingers on my tongue, gentle and cautious as they let me lead, that makes my hips roll onto the bed, fresh arousal turning into desperation.

“Again huh? Are you that hot for me, Dominique?”

No. No. No.

I shake my head, and he removes his fingers with one solid movement, making my head practically thud back onto the bed. Only, it doesn't. Because he grabs me by the back of my hair and pulls me up, forcing me to look at him.

“Next weekend, beautiful.”

“Next weekend?” I repeat sheepishly.

He grins, looking smug. “I'll get you your piano. Since you didn't come to meet me at the football field last week?”

“I...yes—” Was he there, at the football field? He can't have been. “I'm sorry. Yes. Thank you.” The thought of having the extension of my hands right at my tips, of sitting and playing, of forgetting and remembering at the same time, is enough for my eyes to burn.

“Tu veux jouer pour moi, mon frère?”

Somehow I find the piles of clothes that are mine, the memory suddenly enough to want to leave. Alone, I need to be alone.

My research. My truth.

Me. I need to regather in the shadows, the place which I am most at ease, because this thing with Gaël is terrifying.

Damien, please shield me.

DOMINIQUE

I'm still in bed when Maxime comes back from breakfast. Vaguely remembering that he asked if I wanted to join, I must have flipped him off because I felt too drained.

I used to be a morning person, but that has changed ever since I use the late hours on my research, often staring at my computer screen with an empty mind. Perhaps it's not that empty, but it isn't focused on solving what happened to Damien.

It's Gaël who's truly haunting my mind, but my pride won't allow me to acknowledge that. It's been a week since I laid on his treatment table, but I have relived that moment plenty of times. I should put a stop to this trail of thoughts, because they feel like I'm caught into the same loop as some miniature train—round and round—and it's not getting me anywhere. Plus, it's Saturday morning, so technically I'm allowed to sleep in.

Last week was busy, since most of the classes I'm attending have now introduced their year programs, and I have signed up for a good number of assignments. Apart from being prestigious, this college has a meticulous educational reputation, and I've got to admit that they live up to their name. The level is as equally high as the expectations, and between going to class and doing homework, I find myself having very little time to be bored. Perhaps that also has to do with the fact that I've taken on every single class I find interesting. That, in combination with my daily morning jogs, fills life up easily. Evenings are spent on research, and in all

honesty, I have spent a fair amount of time pining for my piano. And pining for the man who promised it to me.

When it comes to Gaël, I'm left feeling a little ridiculous. This...whatever this is, is so fresh, yet he makes me feel things I've never felt, *ever*. Never thought I'd ever experience, even. When he touches me, I feel alive. My skin becomes hot and pliant under his rubbing hands and approving hums, and I let him coax desire through my veins like hot liquid. His mouth is divine—firm but soft, warm but cool, the moist, plush texture glueing perfectly to mine.

Gaël is sweet, but I know there's another side to him that is demanding, maybe even a little cruel. I can see it in his eyes, the way his green irises can turn into glimmering emeralds that flash with mischief.

He is sexy, with his tall, elegantly sculpted muscles that are well-defined, without being overly bulky. He's lithe, and moves like a panther. And if that doesn't turn me on.

I grunt to myself, pulling the blankets up and rolling with my back to my roomie, who's chatting happily on the phone. I mean to pretend I'm still asleep, but when he finishes his conversation and whispers my name, I give up and sit back against the headboard. He seems happy here, though perhaps that shouldn't surprise me. This is his world, after all. I'm from the *other* side of town.

“Morning sunshine, I brought you something to eat, since they were closing the buffet.” He pads over, a napkin with some *viennoiseries* in his hand, and a mug of coffee. I stretch out my hand.

“Thanks man, I appreciate that.”

Maxime sends me a smile, hesitates, then sits down on my bed. Right when I stuff my mouth with pastry, he asks, “So, how are you doing?”

I nod on a chew, hoping that he will understand that I'm doing just fine. Always just fine. He juts his chin toward the back of my desk. “Are you working today?”

It's a nerve he hits, and I feel myself deflate as my chest tightens. There have been no developments. I have checked that police report again, and even called the gardening company pretending to be some journalist doing an article on the death that took place on school grounds. They didn't want to talk. What's worse, I have contacted another bunch of lawyers known for their pro bono cases, but none of them have replied.

And the dungeons...perhaps that has been my biggest disappointment. Stupid Christmas decorations and some nosy fucker who followed me into the woods. Where are the cloaks and masks? They've got to be somewhere.

So yeah, I'm feeling a little tired. Listless, and perhaps a little beaten. Because I don't know what else to do to find Damien justice, and I don't want to like this place either.

"Dominique—" Maxime gulps, and I feel something twist tight in my chest at what he's saying. "You know you can talk to me, right? I mean, if you're in trouble or something?"

My eyes narrow. "Trouble?"

"Those guys—the twins we met in the canteen during our first evening, are they giving you shit?"

"What do you mean?" I swallow, and Maxime goes very, very still.

"You'd tell me, right?" He snorts at his own words, and my chest tightens with regret when he mutters, "No, of course you wouldn't."

Rolling my lips together, I nod, knowing exactly what he means.

A sudden howl of the wind rattles against the window, making us both look up, causing the tension to break a little. Crappy weather. It's still dry outside, but judging by the dark clouds and the stormy breeze, that can change at any moment.

Maxime gets up from my bed, and I watch him walk back to his side of the room, where he picks up something from his bed, before making his way back to me. "One of them gave this to me. It's for you."

He puts a brown envelope in my hand, and when I see how the curly handwriting has formed my name on it, a thrum of anticipation skitters up my spine.

It's from Gaël.

"I know about your brother." Maxime's words are nothing more than a careful breath, still they whoosh through my thoughts and threaten to make me fall. "I'm so sorry. I knew when I came."

"Yeah, well..."

"You need to be careful, Dominique." There's something there, something in his voice, that has my chest heave with deep, unfulfilling breaths. Our gazes meet.

"Careful? For what?" I ask, but he doesn't reply.

He shakes his head slowly, thoughtfully. Unconvincingly. "I don't know." His jaw ticks, eyes blazing with turmoil. "But as I told you before, this is a very different world. And that family is powerful. Stay out of this." He throws a finger at the envelope. "*This*, whatever this is. Lay low, and focus on your studies."

"Why are you so worried about me?"

Maxime's throat clicks when he swallows heavily, as if working around a lump. For the briefest of seconds I imagine him pulling me out of my misery and telling me about the brotherhood, but he doesn't. He says nothing. But I know right then, that he won't stop me. So with my gaze on his, I tear the envelope open, then pull out its content. Flashes of cloaks and masks pass by in those few seconds, and then our gazes dip at the same time, curiosity stronger than vigilance.

It's piano music.

Moonlight Sonata.

My eyes burn with unshed tears, trembling fingers delicately tracing the notes on the sheet. I try to smother the clenching of my chest, try to take in a deep breath through my narrow airways. Needing to smell the paper, needing to remember.

“Mon frère...”

“What’s that?” Maxime narrows his gaze. “There’s something written on there.”

I turn the sheet around, only to find more curly handwriting.

“Meet me in the woods at four.”

“What does it say?”

“Nothing. It’s from a teacher, I asked him for a copy,” I lie. Maxime’s shifting gaze lingers a little longer on mine, but then he nods. “You play the piano?”

“I do. What time is it?”

“A little after ten.” Maxime eyes the sheet of music suspiciously. “Why?”

“For no reason, silly.” Christ, suddenly I’m feeling giddy as hell. Gone is the heavy thumping of my heart, replaced by light flutters deep in my stomach. The week was intensive, and I haven’t seen Gaël for too long, and...will he finally show me a piano?

I shouldn’t go out there, the voice of reason booms.

Shouldn’t, shouldn’t.

Does being his mean that he’s mine too? I inwardly sigh at the question that has been dominating my entire week. Truth is, I don’t know.

I look at Maxime in his fancy pair of jeans and a navy-blue button-up and think of those twins. He’s right, this isn’t my world. They scared me. But then last time, when I came ‘round their dorm, they were sort of okay. Still...what if they know about that piano sound in my head?

“I’m going to take a shower,” I say, putting my finished mug on the nightstand and pushing myself to stand.

“Uhm, if you’d like to, we’re playing chess this afternoon, downstairs in the canteen. If you want to join? There’s five of us, we’re one man short. Three boards, just a bit of fun.”

“That sounds nice.” Another sharp howl of the wind slaps against our window, making me shiver.

I won't go.

But my mind's already lost the battle with my heart. Perhaps ever since I saw him in those woods a few years ago. Because he has been on my mind ever since, only to shape from some protector who'd appear in my dream to a solid person who has claimed me as his. Who wants to meet me in the woods. Who may have brought the piano I have been searching for weeks.

It's close to four when I make my way outside, Damien's jacket pulled close to my cool limbs. The weather's savage, with the wind shrieking through the trees, chasing the animals away. Yet it's not cold, and despite the dark clouds, it still hasn't rained.

When I reach the end of the football field and inevitably the end of the artificial lights, I realize he never told me where we'd actually meet.

It isn't nightfall yet, when I go further into the woods, and I know these paths now, since I use them every morning, right up until the end of school's territory. That doesn't stop the air from being thick and expectant. There's an active silence, like the trees are listening to every word I think. Or perhaps it's not the trees themselves, but those who are lurking behind them.

I huff those thoughts away, and demonstratively continue walking now, though I can't escape this ominous feeling from landing over me as my feet guide me slower toward the heart of my fear.

It's the fear I fear.

My brain's distorted, unsure of where the real threat is, and what it is again. It's definitely dread, that this entire thing is a filthy set-up, and that Gaël's cousins will ambush me, and hurt me.

Perhaps it's the fear that I crave.

It's definitely easier than admitting that my heart's begging me not to be disappointed, begging me not to be hurt. Still, I

want it so desperately. Someone special, for *me*.

I'm so deeply lost in this debate with myself, that I only see what's ahead of me when I've already breached the circle they have formed. Candles.

Right there, stands a grand piano, sheltered from the bad weather by a pergola that's coated heavily with plants.

How did I... I spin on my heel and check my surroundings. Everything looks similar in the dim light. I guess I haven't been here before—I would never have missed such beautiful sight. Some plants have grown so savagely that they cover parts of the polished wood, like some work of art. The lid glimmers by candlelight.

I don't know how this is done, but the mere sight of the instrument with its interconnected green, looks like a masterpiece.

“Ready, *mon trésor*?” Gaël says deeply, his tongue curling tantalizingly around his little pet name for me, as he makes his way from the forest. Even from this distance, I can see the shiny emerald tilt of his painted eyes. Unlike me, he's not wearing a jacket, but instead is wearing a pair of expensive looking sweatpants and a tight shirt with long sleeves. His blond hair is styled perfectly, the strands teasing one side of his chin.

He pads closer, holding another piece of music paper in his hand.

“I—” Am I dreaming? I ask myself. Gaël's mouth kicks up into a knowing, feral grin, and I wonder if I've spoken them out loud.

“The other part of the partiture,” he explains, placing his sheet on the stand, and waits for me to come forward. “Did you bring yours?”

I should ask him if he came here alone, or if this is some joke. But Gaël looks like he's glowing, like some ethereal light floats around him. It's...

Long fingers guide me down onto the stool, and I willingly go, testing the soft, leather pad as I sit down. Nothing like the

plastic version in my bedroom. Surprisingly, the pergola and plants shelter me from the wind and I can place the music on the music stand without it blowing away. I wiggle a little, finding my position, before I can finally inhale deeply through my nose. And out. And in. It feels like there isn't enough air in the sky to take in and transform into relief. Thick and soft, like coming home. Gaël puts a hand on my shoulder and I deflate, relaxing into his touch. I've waited for this for so long.

“Mon frère...”

“Oui,” I say out loud. *“Je jouerai pour toi.”* I'll always play for you. And I do. Because my fingers start to move automatically, plucking strings as I'm pulling on memories, drifting on the sound just like I'm floating in time. And I remember. Everything.

How you used to joke and laugh around. Your messy side of the room. Your lively, happy presence. How we used to chat until late. You'd assure me, make me feel worthy.

The music lingers in my ears, notes echoing through time. This song is so nostalgic and nostalgic is how I feel. If I could, I'd turn back time and do it all over again.

Damien...Damien...

“I miss you so much.” The words are nothing more than a soft breeze, but they kill me inside, tackle my determination and destroy my guards. I haven't spoken them out loud for so long. Bringing me back from my memories, I feel long, strong limbs pull me in from behind as firm arms move around my shoulders, squeezing me tight. Gaël stands behind me, then leans over my shoulder and kisses my moving fingers, one by one, his hair tickling against my wrist. I don't stop playing, can't stop playing, but a soft gasp leaves my mouth when he finishes, only to sit down behind me on the stool, pressing his firm chest against my back. His lips trail across my cheek, thumb feathering over my arms. “I've got you, *mon trésor.*”

I should ask him if he knows about Damien, if he knows what happened to my brother. But I can't. The selfish, pathetic part of me wants this man for myself. This man, who's

wrapped around me like a butterfly, his long arms curled in a shield like wings. I want to define my own future with him.

“Why me?” I sob, burning eyes finally leaking. It’s a loaded question, and I don’t miss its multiple significance.

Why did I have to lose my brother?

Why did I have to be bullied?

“Why are you doing this for me?”

It’s the fear I crave.

His fingers dig into the skin of my cheek, turning my head to face him. From up front, Gaël is glorious. Flawless, with his painted eyes and plush lips. I want to kiss them again, want to feel them everywhere on my body. *I need to.*

I shiver, and feel his arms press me closer to his body while his eyes shift to mine, not only pleading with me to understand, but pleading with me to see that he understands.

“You’re so special, Dominique...to me,” he muses. “Complex, stunning, and creative. But you’re also tormented.” Those fingers now stroke my cheek. “You can get so lost in the maze of your own thoughts.” I nod, eyes burning, and I chew the corner of my lip so hard, I taste iron. He’s right. Gaël’s tongue flicks out and he laps at the sting, suckling at the flesh before diving in once more, brushing his mouth with mine, and nudging my lips to part for him. Our kiss interlaces passion and gentle affection, and my fingers pause when I press forward, needing him even closer, releasing a whine when his thumbs stroke over the ridges of my cheekbones with such tenderness that it feels like I’ll fall forward.

“You wanna play me some more, beautiful?”

I do, tension slowly rolling off my shoulders as he kneads them gently, his chin placed against my nape. His breath circles warm puffs of air through my brother’s jacket, and when I play a slow version of Franz Liszt’s *Liebestraum*, he softly hums against the back of my neck.

“You know this song?” I pant, because having him so close makes my body tingle in all places.

“Hmm.” The sound brings goosebumps on my neck and forearms. “My grandfather was a pianist.”

“Really?” My fingers falter, insecurity clawing up on instinct, but Gaël chooses that moment to snake his left hand under my armpit and onto the piano.

“Give me the high ones,” he whispers. “*Moonlight Sonata*. Come on.”

I let him begin the song with those low, familiar notes. His long, ringed fingers are slow, and he chuckles breathily against my neck when he gets them wrong and needs to adjust. Finally we fall into a rhythm while our hands move over the keys. We finish the song together, sit in a peaceful silence for some more, before he plays another song.

“You know this one? It’s not a classical one, but my mom loves this movie, *Amélie Poulain*.”

“Yes,” I mumble, while my fingers search for the rapid, light notes. “*Comptine d’un autre été, l’après-midi*. It used to remind me of a waterfall.”

We play the song once, then twice, and each time I feel more breezy, more confident in my improvisation. It’s what I used to love most, creating my own melody on the given scales.

“You play so beautifully,” Gaël croons when my right hand flies over the instrument in rapid, full notes.

“I can dream this song,” I admit, but that’s not why I play this well, and I get a feeling he knows it too. It’s him who makes me fly. It’s him who makes me feel. It’s him who searches for me, finds me, and challenges me.

I watch how his fingers slowly climb up the piano, not missing a single tone, as they seek for mine. He waits until I’ve finished the song, then his hand grabs mine, and he pulls it up to his mouth. Once more, his warm breath makes goosebumps scatter all around my arms, and when his mouth places a soft kiss against my knuckles, I exhale a whoosh of air.

“So much talent,” he mumbles. My skin flushes hot at his words of praise, but instead of taking cover, I let them shield me. They feel warm, and comforting, just like his arms around my waist. “Are you cold?” I shake my head, and he gestures to me to stand, then zips Damien’s coat open, wiggles it off my arms and drops it to the ground. With one smooth sweep of his legs, he leaves the stool, and I shiver.

“Who’s your grandfather?” I let him take my shirt over my head, and drop it onto the grass. There’s another violent howl of the wind, and the glassed candles flicker, despite their protection. He looks up at me through his lashes as he crouches down in front of me. I swallow nerves away when he grabs hold of my pants, unbuttons them and drags them down my feet, altogether with my briefs.

“Don’t,” he orders when my hands rush to hide my thickening cock.

“Gaël—” I beg, but let him pull them away and against my bare ass cheeks. His hands stay there too, kneading the skin as he flicks his tongue over his bottom lip, giving me a slow, thorough once-over.

“My grandfather was Pierre Deveraux,” he mutters when he gets up. He blinks his curly lashes, his blank ink glimmering in the twilight. “Now, against the piano, your beautiful ass facing me,” he growls suddenly, already positioning me the way he wants to, flush against the instrument, like I’m some ragged doll. Peeking ahead, I’m facing the darkening woods with its jumpy shadows.

Gaël kicks out my legs, and my knees buckle, palms landing on the piano to keep myself from tumbling forward. I’m a little bent, and my balls make a chaotic sound on the piano. We both let out a breathless chuckle.

“Look at that gorgeous ass,” he croons. “Spread those cheeks apart for me.” I swivel my head around in panic.

“Wh—what do you mean—”

“Like this, *mon trésor*.” He grabs both my ass cheeks and firmly spreads them wide. I bend forward even further,

embarrassment and awkwardness meeting in my mind. Still, I grab my own cheeks and spread them like he wants me to.

“That’s good, beautiful. Keep them there.” Gaël blows onto my hole, then gives my cheek a firm slap. I jolt, startled by the wave of arousal that floods my body. He does it again, hitting that same spot, and it stings, but my cock throbs at the sensation.

“F-fuck—” I mumble.

“Yeah? Feels good?” He groans in my ear, then slaps my other cheek. My forehead drops onto the polished wood and I arch my back, pushing out my ass as if begging for more. And maybe I am, because this rush of arousal is pulling me under, is making my mind void of anything else. Gaël delivers more slaps, followed by soothing words, gentle hands caressing my bruised skin before he lands another stinging whack. It’s intoxicating, this rhythm he’s building, between pain and praise, and my cock is filled to the brim, hard and begging for attention, while I take everything he gives. Somewhere in my mind, I know that he’s still dressed, while I’m hanging here, naked and vulnerable, but I’m too far gone to mind. And maybe I’m just tired of caring.

Always caring.

I only notice that he’s no longer slapping me, when he grabs my cheeks and spreads them even wider apart again. I hiss against the stinging sensations. And then there is his tongue.

“Are you touching me down there?” I want to ask, but it ends up leaving my mouth in a shivering whine. God, this feels good, his tongue licking the soft line between my cheeks, and then his tongue dips in and my muscles clench. My knees buck and my ass pushes back.

“Oh fuck, oh God, please—” I babble, balls playing a horrible tune when I wriggle into Gaël’s grip. “I can’t, oh yeah, more, I need more.”

“You want more?” Gaël teases from behind. In reply I shove my ass against his face, and he chuckles while he gives

me another lick. Then I hear him uncapping a bottle, and I look up, turning over my shoulder.

“What’s that?”

He holds up the bottle. “It’s lube, beautiful. It will make it easier for me to enter you.”

“Enter me? As in—” I roll my lips, feeling hot and stupid at the same time. Gaël just tilts his head, unmoving, waiting for me to continue. “F-fucking me?” I end my phrase gracelessly.

His lips tip up, eyes shining. “Will you let me?”

“Will you hurt me?” I can’t help but ask.

He pushes himself to his full length, hovering just a little over me, while he lets his hands fall next to mine on the piano. “Here, open.” He squishes a little bit of the liquid onto my hand. “Have you ever tried lube? It’s okay if you haven’t.” I feel the texture warming on my skin, and apply it on both hands. “This one is special,” Gaël winks. “Because it’s edible, but still smells amazing. With this on my hands, I can eat out your ass while playing with your cock, and swallow you down when you beg me for it.”

I laugh, a little out of breath by his words, but relieved at the same time. “Thank you,” I whisper. “For not making this more awkward than this already is.”

A beat passes, then he nods. Blowing out a breath, he flits his gaze up to mine and says, “Just relax for me, beautiful. There’s nothing more natural than what we’re doing.” And then I feel his fingers probing at my entrance.

His mouth meets mine in a haze of longing and I turn half my body, draping a hand over his shoulder as his tongue licks inside my mouth. Our cocks lightly brush against each other, the touch sending shivers down my spine. And then his finger dips inside my hole, gliding through the ring of muscles that is now clenching and protesting at the foreign sensation. It burns, and my body locks up, but Gaël pulls back his mouth and whispers against my lips, “It’s okay, *mon trésor*. Let it happen. You’re okay.”

He pushes further, and a second finger joins in, and right when I want to tell him that it's too much, that I can't deal with it, I jolt with uncontrollable pleasure.

"F-fuck, what's that? Please..." My hips search for more friction, desperately grinding against his hip when every stroke inside hits that sensitive spot. "I want more. Please, I need more." I beg, clawing into his shirt, hating that it's not his skin, only to shiver when I notice my own nakedness.

"Gotta make sure you're ready for me, beautiful," Gaël breathes against my ear, and the sensation has my skin tingle and my ass pushing against his fingers. My hand goes down toward his clothed cock, and I grumble when my fumbling hand can't get to opening his pants.

I thought I'd be nervous as hell, with this being my first time. But this is so much more than that. This is Gaël, who's now chuckling against my lips as he gently pats my hand away from his crotch.

"Let me do it, *mon trésor*." His tongue wraps around mine again, swallowing my moans, and I feel him lowering his pants. There's another sound of a wrapper, but I'm too pent-up to care. My hands slide back onto the piano, back arched, ass pushed out for him to use. Wet fingers brush past my ass cheeks once more, and I moan. They spread them, croon soft words, and then I can feel the head of his cock at my entrance. I lock up on instinct, hands squeezed into fists. His mouth caresses my naked flesh, from my back up to my nape, while he mumbles sweet words.

"Relax for me, beautiful, let me see your gorgeous skin, let me feel you..." I take in deep breaths of air, and then I feel him pushing forward, and passing my first ring of muscle. I want to tense, but his soothing tickles on my naked chest make me relax once more. And all the while he pushes forward, gently yet firm, until he is fully seated.

"That's it," he whispers. "Well done, you've let me in."

My knees start to tremble at the realization, and when he pulls himself nearly completely out, I reach back, frantically grab him by his clothed ass and squeeze. Gaël chuckles.

“Ssh, it’s okay. I’m here.” And then he moves back inside, making me full again. The feeling is overwhelming, very tight, and I still have the impression that this won’t fit, that my hole is too narrow. But then he picks up the rhythm, creating a whole different friction. And then he—

“Fuck,” I whisper. “Oh...fuck.” My voice cracks at the end. Gaël bends me further onto the piano, while the back of my head never parts from his warm skin.

“That’s your prostate, Dominique. Feels good, right?”

My back arches even further, ass clenching around him, mouth agape as my throat tries to keep up with the guttural rumbles that leave past my lips. My hands are fisted again, but for a whole different reason. This feels amazing. I turn over my shoulder, and find him with glassy eyes, lips parted, breathing as heavily as I am. His features light up in the dark, the tiny line of glimmering emerald that is left in combination with the dark pupils and traced lines, make him look like some ancient king.

Footsteps around us make me swivel my head back in surprise, only to startle when I see dark shades behind the lit up areas of the forest.

“Gaël, there’s someone out there—”

“Sshh...” Grabbing a fist full of hair from my nape, Gaël tilts my head back, exposing my neck. He traces the vein with his tongue as his cheek brushes past mine, our eyes staring into the darkness ahead of us. “Let them see.”

He pulls his cock back again, until only the tip is left buried inside, and then he slams back all the way, pounding me forward and against the piano. His grip on my hair tightens, and he keeps my head cradled against the curve between his shoulder and his chest. And our pants intermingle with the stale air, puffs blowing into the void to where torches have appeared from between the trees.

“Who...” My heart hammers inside my chest, beating the same rhythm as our rocking hips as they slam against the piano notes, shutting up the silence with false notes. My ass is

on fire, my cock rock hard and leaking onto the instrument and into Gaël's palm when he snakes his fingers around it and strokes me at an intensively slow pace. "Too much," I whine. All these sensations are spurring me further and short circuiting my brain. My skin tingles, and I'm fighting to keep up with Gaël's rhythm as he pounds into me, while his soothing murmurs trickle through my walls like sweet liquid. My self-control is slowly dissolving, causing me to stumble, though he keeps me up as he keeps on going. "I need—" My eyes trace the moving lights between the trees, but my moan spills cruelly from my lips. Once liberated, another one follows, its echo vibrating through my entire core while my cock jolts into Gaël's casual grip. My hips gyrate on their own will, pushing into his hands in a desperate search for more.

"And I'll give it to you, *mon trésor*," Gaël mumbles. His hot breath fans my ear, causing my skin to pucker. He lets out a soft chuckle when I let out another desperate mewl, but his grip on my cock tightens. "Look up, beautiful. Look at the woods."

An owl hoots somewhere around me, and wings flap from the trees, causing a rustle through the leaves. And I look.

Shapes in cloaks holding torches in their hands, stand between the trees like lonely creatures of the night.

Watching.

My body locks up when the first wave of fear hits me. "Gaël...look, *look*. There are people out there." And not just people...is this...? "Are they wearing cloaks?" The whispered, private words rush to leave my mouth, while my slugging mind tries to understand. But Gaël doesn't seem bothered, simply wraps a hand loosely around my neck, thumb and forefinger pressing at the bottom ends of my jaw so my head tips upward slightly. And then he tilts his own head so our mouths brush.

"Are you afraid, beautiful?"

"Yes." Terrified.

"Of what?"

Of you.

“Of me?” He asks silkily. He pounds into me with a wicked grin.

Of them.

“Of them?” He moves my head back forward on another thrust. He hits my prostate and I moan, while his tongue traces the vein on my neck.

“Who are they?” I manage. I need to hear it spoken out loud, need to finally receive that reassurance that I’m not crazy.

Alpha Fraternarii.

Gaël brings his mouth to the curve of my ear. He nips at my ear lobe and starts giving my cock fast, tight strokes that match his plundering thrusts. “Tell me,” I want to order, but the only sound that comes out is a breathy sob.

I’m going to come.

“I’ll protect you, *mon trésor*,” Gaël simply mumbles huskily, then licks the arch of my ear. “Just obey.” And just like that, he pushes me forward and against the piano, my chin flat onto the instrument, hair still clutched into his fist.

I work people like an instrument, he told me. He was right. My mouth opens on a silent cry as pleasure ripples through me.

Alarm bells go off, but I’m caught on a train that has no stop. “I’m going to...” And we derail, flying down the sky and onto the trees, where I see them, our cabin and the boys, torches and cloaks. I collapse onto the cool gloss lacquer on the piano, cheek crushed under Gaël’s weight. Because he crashes with me, grunting as he does so, and together with the way he fills my ass with his release, is the sexiest thing in the entire, fucking world.

GAËL

He is a mystery, Dominique. A dark, brooding, stammering mystery, who claws onto the shadow that is his brother like a lifeline.

I tell myself that it doesn't matter, that I have time. Time to uncurl every single, slender digit from the illusion he defines as his protection, and wrap them around my core. Where they can feel the beating of my heart, for him.

Dominique Devallée is mine.

The forest is pitch black once more, the torches having moved on toward the Atrium, from where I took the piano in the first place. Elder Jacques won't be pleased to find that the instrument has temporarily disappeared, but having seen Dominique playing it, is worth every single chime. Besides, the Elder should know how to hold his tongue since he doesn't want to annoy my cousins. Nor any other member of my family, for that matter.

Slowly and carefully, I peel myself off Dominique's naked body and pull out of the tight heat of his hole. He shivers at the retreat, though I'm not sure if it's because he's sore, or because he's cold. Or afraid. Perhaps a little of each.

"Hold still." Grabbing the lavender cream from my bag, I then squirt a generous amount onto my palm and squeeze to make the texture warm and smooth. Slowly moving my hands towards Dominique's skin, I feel his body shiver again, elbows on the piano still supporting his full weight and his gaze firmly locked with his haunted past. He doesn't speak, though that

doesn't surprise me. If I want to know something, I'll have to coax it out of his mind.

Working his puckered rim, I slip a finger inside to massage his stretched walls, clacking my tongue when he clenches his muscles. "Relax, beautiful, this will make your body feel less sore."

He grumbles something and unclenches his muscle, only to shiver at the next gust of wind. I should really do this inside his room, preferably when he's sprawled out on his bed, his handsome face hugged by his pillow. But knowing him, he'd never let me. And knowing me, I can't leave him, the one I have claimed as mine, to retreat after having taken his virginity, without making sure that he's well looked after and safe.

With my nose brushed against his spine, I inhale his unique scent while my fingers keep on massaging his sensitive spots. Between my weight and the reassurance of the piano, Dominique slowly relaxes, his breath becoming steady and his body deflating.

"That's it," I soothe and my fingers gingerly leave his hole, the flat of my hand brushing over his round, firm butt. "How are you feeling?"

"Good," he mumbles, sounding sleepy.

"Let's get you dressed, and head back to the dorms. Get you back into the warmth."

He doesn't fight me, instead he grabs the garment I hold up for him and gets dressed. I look away, giving him some privacy, which is ridiculous considering what we just shared. But it also allows me to check our surroundings.

Dominique is aware of something, I'm sure of it. I try to look into his eyes to find the answers I'm searching for but I'm unable to. We're standing in the forest, at the cultivated circle he told me about. It's ironic how he picked up on that detail, but didn't ask me the right questions. Perhaps I'm wrong, and he isn't onto much after all.

"I like coming here," I share, gauging his reaction.

“Why?” It’s instant, like a dog sniffing his bone. He has pulled up his black sweatpants and slips on his sneakers.

“These clothes you wear... are they yours?” I ask instead, making him look down as if he sees them for the first time.

“Uhm—” He looks back up and gives me a sheepish look that’s filled with embarrassment. That’s all I need to know. They look better on him than they did on his brother, but he would never believe me if I told him so. Not wanting him to tune out again, I jut my chin toward behind him and say, “We grow a small herb garden there.”

Dominique swivels his head back and follows my trail of sight. “Oh, really?”

I hum. “I come here pretty often, and cultivate flowers and plants. Use them for my own oils. And over there—”

The Atrium.

“Is an old glass house where we celebrate our end of year parties.”

And rituals.

Dominique turns his entire body now, and blinks into the void. “I’ve never been that way. I thought it was a bit spooky.” He gives me another sheepish smile. It’s sweet. Because there’s no way that he’s lying now.

If only he knew.

“And right at the end of college territory, we have the stables.”

Dominique jerks his head, eyes colliding with mine. “There are horses here?”

And a carriage.

“Some students have horses they wish to keep during their studies.” It’s the truth. Well, at least partially. Now that I’ve given all that precious information away, I’m not sure what to think. They are no official secrets, yet the board doesn’t share that information with all the students. Judging by the startled look on Dominique’s face, he didn’t know. I don’t know why

I'm telling him this, why I give him this ammunition. Perhaps because I want to give him something.

I want him to trust me, because I want him. All of him. Ever since I first laid eyes on him. So fucking badly.

Even though Dominique is shy, sweet, innocent and insecure, he is also clever. And most importantly, a fierce lover of his dead sibling. So when—because that really is the question—*when* he finds out, will he hate me? Will he throw away everything we've built so far and will continue to build upon over the next months, because of what happened? What's the price of vengeance? Is it throwing everything away that you hold dear?

“Will the piano stay here?” His question pierces through my inner turmoil, making me effectively return to the present. To where we are still standing in the forest, around the elegant instrument, Dominique in Damien's clothes, looking to go to bed, and me running late for another evening with my brothers.

“That depends on you,” I admit. “Do you want it to stay here?”

He sends me another tentative smile. It's soft, and careful, and it makes my chest tighten with desire. There's this need, so raw, to get to know everything about Dominique, to turn him inside out.

Because I want it all. Everything that Dominique breathes, that he longs for, that makes him tick. I want to know it all.

Because I want to give it all to him all.

“Well, it might not be good for the instrument to stay out here in the forest.”

“That's not what I asked.” His eyes stutter when they find mine. “Do you want it to be here? So you can come whenever you want to and play?”

He seems to overthink my question, gaze glassy as if he's once more somewhere else. His fingers trail the notes, but he doesn't press them, and we both watch as he rakes his way over every piano key, without missing a single one.

“I’d like that.” His eyes dart up. “I like you.” The sweet confession slides off his tongue and floats into the air, warming me like a draped blanket.

“Okay, then I’ll have the instrument covered against the rain. You can come here anytime you want to play it.” Dominique clears his throat and turns on his heel.

As we make our way back to the dorms, I realize that I still have so many questions left unanswered. How is it that this was his first time? Why is he not wearing his own clothes?

The questions go on. It feels like we have, and we haven’t, passed that phase. It’s like we were meant to start with the heady, intensive topics, before we can slide into the rest.

Can I kiss you? I want to ask, but I don’t. Dominique might be walking next to me, but with every step we move closer toward the building, we’re sliding into an increasing distance. Our lives, our commitments, our devotions. And yet...

“Will you walk me back to my room?” He practically breathes, and it makes my insides twirl. I turn my head when he passes through the door, our eyes flitting since we’re about the same height, but so different in practically everything else.

“Always.”

We walk the corridors in silence. It’s evening now, well past dinner time. My cousins better have brought me some food from the canteen, and the thought makes me worry for Dominique.

I don’t ask him though, I don’t ask him anything. His guard is up, and yet his hand finds mine. Hesitantly his fingers curl around mine, and I hear him clear his throat in unease as he does so. Still, the movement is daring, especially since other students could catch us out here. I squeeze a little tighter, then tilt my face to look at him, sending him a smile. His cheeks are pink, but his eyes flash, glimmering with pride. And fuck me, does he make me proud.

And if that doesn’t make me resentful.

The first year dorms have the same narrow corridors as we have, and identical old-fashioned images hanging on the cream-colored walls. Wine-red carpet that leads us to room number nineteen. Dominique's dorm.

"I wonder which room my brother slept in," he mutters when we hold still in front of his door. "It's—" He looks away, but I don't miss the grief in his coffee-colored gaze. That cloudy stare right before it gives in, similar to the one our new brothers have right before they go down on their knees.

Surrender.

"Do you want me to find out where your brother slept?" I ask.

"Would you do that for me?" I hate the hope in his beautiful eyes, still I give him one, single nod. "*Merci.*"

"De rien, mon trésor."

Despite this far from being the first time that I've used these words on him, Dominique looks up, his gaze soft and volatile. His hands are on the doorknob, but he hesitates. I know what he wants, and I won't make this harder than it has to be, because he has done so well. It only takes me two steps to reach for him, pressing my chest flush against his, until his back hits the door behind him. My hand reaches up and curls around his throat, not to hurt him, but to make a statement.

"You are mine."

And then my lips find his in a soft kiss, that turns demanding rapidly. I press harder, nipping at his bottom lip until his mouth opens for me, allowing me in. With a growl I do just that, diving in while licking and nibbling at his tongue until I hear his soft moans, the sound low and raspy in his throat. There's so much I want to do at that very moment, and honestly, for the very first time I feel like I'd rather stay here, in Dominique's room, under the blankets of his bed, than go out with my brothers, but I can't.

Respect.

Devotion.

Alpha Fraternarii is my life.

So I pull back with one last kiss on Dominique's wet lips, appreciating how they have become puffy under my treatment, then push open his door. He stumbles, a scowl on that gorgeously flushed face, as he rushes to get back onto his feet.

"Get some rest, beautiful. I'll come round tomorrow at ten in the morning to add some more cream if it's sore."

"You don't have to," he grumbles on a clipped tone. No surprises there, since I already expected him to deny my offer. But the way he purses his lips in rebellion, eyes flashing, makes it clear that the atmosphere has changed yet again, and I have missed the signs. "I'm fine anyway," he continues, and he takes hold of the door, ready to close it in my face, "and I need to do a lot of homework."

"Oh, fuck that," I snap. My hand squeezes onto his, pushing the door wider open instead. Whatever this is that has gotten into me, hits me like an internal lightning. With one hand still trapped at the knob, my free hand shoots out before he can even flinch, and I have him locked against the wall inside his room as I squeeze. This time I want to hurt him, want to show him who he belongs to, want to show him who he answers to.

Fucking *me*.

"This is not how we're doing this, beautiful." His eyes are ablaze, coffee color mingled with a pitch-dark that radiates both heat and hatred, though I don't know what it is he loathes more right now. Himself, for letting this happen? Or me, for doing this to him? Whatever the option, I don't fucking care. "You need to rest now, and I'll be here tomorrow morning at ten. If you won't open the door, Maxime will. And if Maxime won't, the director himself will." He shakes his head, disbelief and something else carved into his features. But he doesn't object. It's not enough though. Not now. Right now, I want it all. So I add, "You can be stubborn and test my theory, though I doubt that Mister Dupont will appreciate me having to wake him up early during the weekend, just so that I can have what I want." I wait a beat, then give his elegant neck another

squeeze, eyes following my movement just to watch his vein pop. “And what is it that I want?” I murmur.

Dominique blinks, then licks his lips. “Me,” he whispers.

“That’s right, *mon trésor*.” I relieve some of the pressure, then press a kiss to his wet mouth. “I’m going to come over tomorrow morning and make you feel good. And you’re gonna wait for me, on your bed, naked, and let me have my way.” Dominique looks undignified and opens his mouth to speak, but I’m not giving him any chance. “Chamomile or lavender?”

This time his answer is rapid and clipped. “You don’t have to come. I’m busy.” His eyes shoot daggers, and I still don’t know what the hell got into him. But right now, I don’t care.

Kicking his legs apart, I wiggle my thigh between them, pressing against his crotch. He lets out a scornful huff that turns into a moan when I rub against his hardening length.

“That’s right. Tomorrow, naked, you on your bed. Now, what scent do you want?” I tip my head and our gazes meet. “Chamomile or lavender?”

“Lavender.” The word spills past his pursed lips, that I tease with the tip of my tongue. Just because I can. His cock jolts against my thigh and he squeezes his eyes, cheeks flaming a little brighter.

“Well done, beautiful, lavender it is.” Fuck, I love this other side of him, this feisty side.

Fight me, mon trésor, and I’ll show you where you belong. Again and again.

I don’t tell him though, just as I don’t ask him all the questions that are growing in my mind, because I’m running out of time. Elder Jacques doesn’t like us being late for rituals, especially those that are held before the official pledge that takes place at the end of December. So I do the only thing that’s left to do—I drop a soft kiss on his lips and brush a strand of dark hair behind his ear.

“Sleep well.” And then I turn, and walk away.

DOMINIQUE

Gaël turns up the next day at ten, just like he promised me, wearing another pair of dark sweats and a matching shirt. He's barefoot, the tender skin from his ankle down to his toes decorated with fleeting, golden stars. They are tiny, and teasing my sight. I find myself unable to look away, wondering if there are more towards his calves. Does he carry the entire solar system in his glittering skin?

His hair is a platinum mess, mussed and sticky, making his emerald eyes larger. Or perhaps it's because of that steady gaze he has trained on me as he eats up my searching glances. It makes me feel caught and my cheeks burn, but apart from his usual, sensual smirk he doesn't supply any information. If anything, he seems to be satisfied about hiding something from me. Perhaps he wants me to ask, but I won't. I'd never do it.

Besides, I'm feeling on edge myself, and some pathetic part of me feels satisfied when he mutters that he can't get my body to relax under his rubbing hands. His touch is divine, his fingers strong and skilled as they work my muscles and flesh.

But I'm feeling restless and cold—a feeling I've had since I woke up at four this morning.

Guilt is eating away at me, intermingling with this utter confusion. Over the course of a few weeks, my life seems to have completely fallen off the rails.

Never did I think that I'd find a special person in my life, let alone at Saint-Laurent. And a *guy*, at that. A guy who is not

here on scholarship like myself, meaning that he comes from a family with money. Meaning that he is one of *them*—right? The memory of those cloaked shapes between the trees taunts me. Yes, he has to be part of Alpha Fraternarii.

I should just ask him. And trust me, a few times I nearly did. But despite all this research, all this determination, fear of the unknown now keeps me captive, makes me weak.

I take in a deep breath through my nose, face pinched in a solid frown. Because then, there is Gaël. Being surrounded by him feels like being cherished. It's nothing like I've ever felt. He is handsome, sexy, passionate, patient, but also kinky and romantic. Fun. And so damn determined to be with me.

Not only did Gaël take my virginity, he is also offering me a chance to let go of all this passion I feel inside me. All this affection I need to share.

So yes, I am feeling guilty, *mon frère*, because I should be finding you justice.

Instead I have been unfocused.

I'm sorry. Because part of me is begging for this illusion to last until it becomes my truth. Because part of me wants to continue studying and finish my four years like I've always intended to do.

Like Damien intended.

“I don't know what's going through that mind of yours, but it's causing you to tense up, beautiful. You're gonna need some meditation to loosen up.” Gaël crouches down next to my head that's placed onto the pillow of my bed, and I inhale greedily, searching for his unique scent of lavender and spice.

He brought the lavender one today, the cream already skillfully smoothed onto my skin. Maxime is not here, my roommate left early this morning for breakfast, and he hasn't returned yet. He's probably still downstairs playing chess, something I have seen him doing lately with a group of newly found friends.

Gaël traces a slender digit over my naked shoulder, and my eye catches the sight, breath stuttering when he lifts it up to

my lips. “Your mouth is beautiful,” he croons, green eyes focused on his probing finger. “Soft, and wet. Sweet.” He flicks his gaze up to mine and stands up. “Have you got anything planned for the day?” Tubes of cream disappear back into his bag, and knowing that he’s about to leave creates a strange, tight feeling in my chest.

I don’t want him to go.

“Not sure yet,” I lie, shrugging my shoulders. When I try to get up, he gently pushes me back onto the bed.

“Stay. Let the creams do their magic. It’s still early.”

I imagine asking him to stay. Telling him that I want us to spend the rest of the day together. Begging him to work the guilt out of my system.

Instead I watch him get his stuff together. When he’s about to blow out the scented candle, he flicks his gaze up, lips curled into a small smile. “I’ll keep this one here. As a little reminder.”

Oh, Gaël, I don’t need a reminder from you. You’ve found a way past my walls, and you’re slowly but steadily making your way in.

It’s a marching army—*left, right, left*—much like the days that intermingle with one another. And much to my regret, I am finding myself not hating this new routine.

It’s...nice.

This year’s late autumn weather has been stormy, and with the heavy influence of the Atlantic Ocean, this part of the country has been suffering from numerous windstorms and rain. Plus, the days are getting shorter, although that doesn’t stop me from my morning jog and my play.

Gaël keeps his promise.

The piano still sits outside, under the pergola, protected by plants and a solid layer of plastic, where it waits for me to show up for my daily practice. Oh, how my mind plays tricks on me as soon as my fingers hit the keys. The past has become

my blanket, and I hold it tight, clutched together around my frame as I face today's world.

Gaël also teaches me how to meditate. And despite my initial skepticism, I want to learn. Want to understand this mindfulness that he calls his way of life, need to be even closer to him.

We begin in the first week of December, together with a small group of students and nothing more than a bare work-out room and fifteen mats. I haven't seen him the entire week, instead focused on my studies and my research. But now that I'm here, I'm feeling vulnerable. The others are chatting in agitated, hushed voices, but not me. No, I can only focus on trying to keep my inner turmoil under control.

Hanging on, is what I do. To my research and to my lack of new developments.

It's useless, because the moment Gaël walks into the room, my heart stutters at the sight of him. At his lithe, solid frame with those elegant limbs.

"Welcome," he croons as he comes inside, barefoot again, and drops his bag onto the small, wooden bench. Within no time he has lit up a scented candle and put on soft, relaxing music. I watch the muscles in his neck when he takes off his sweater, leaving himself in a white tee and a pair of tight, black trackpants. The sight has me practically salivating, and it takes all my self control and a few firm blinks of my eyes to get myself out of it. When I do, I tip my chin down and lean on my pulled-up knees, unable to face the others right now.

Meditation opens my eyes. And my mind. Still, his session leaves me tired in my soul, makes tears roll down my cheeks and regret tremble through me.

Why? He asks me.

I don't know anymore, I want to say. My dreams are made from what if's. I have spent an eternity regretting Damien, his football, his scholarship, his unconditional love. Sometimes I fear that I was never even worth it in the first place.

You're afraid. He says.

He's right, it's the fear that I fear most. But there's something else there too, as I come to realize when the next days roll into weeks of a pleasant rhythm created by morning jogs, piano play, school and homework.

I feel that the recent meditation classes have brought out an additional fear from the shadows in my mind, rapidly bringing it into the hesitant light. Something I'm not ready to face, because if I do, then all my research will have been for nothing.

And so I play. Whenever homework is finished and dinner's not yet served, I pad into the woods to where peace is waiting for me, like a comforting friend. It's there, never faltering, never a deception for my restless mind. Every day I hope Gaël will be there, but he never is. I wonder why he doesn't come over anymore.

I want to ask him when I join his classes, but I don't. I can't. Gaël is so far out of my league, that the only logical thought is that he is no longer interested in me.

It shouldn't be a big deal. This is what I wanted in the first place, it's better. But my fingers stutter and my heart leaps at the mere thought that this was just a fling, and he's over it now.

Stupid Dominique. You thought he really liked you?

With a frustrated growl I get up from behind the piano, letting the stool tumble backward and onto the grass. I'm fucking restless, and right now, even the instrument can't soothe my spiraling thoughts. So I decide to go for a walk, despite wearing my school uniform, despite my phone not having much battery left.

It takes me about fifteen minutes of stubborn stomping over sand, of pouting over unreasonable thoughts, to look up and truly take in my surroundings, only to realize that I've now left that cultivated part behind me and took a different path. One I have never taken before. My feet languidly continue between the large trees.

One hundred fifty-one, one hundred fifty-two...

Those large oak trees where...this is where those shapes were standing before, when me and Gaël were making love. I turn over my shoulder to see the piano standing in the center of that circle like some lonesome object.

My fingers trace the shape of the nearest tree trunk while I watch from this side of the forest. And I wonder how we looked, Gaël and I, our bodies intermingled, our breaths as one. I look and I wonder, until my thoughts realize what my fingers are doing. They are following the shape of carved wood in the nearest tree trunk. I frown as I turn to look at the shape, heart rate speeding up. It's a crow.

I've seen this before.

A chilly breeze catches me off guard, and my skin turns into a smattering of goosebumps. It is getting darker out here, and I should return to my dorm. Get ready for dinner, perhaps accept Maxime's invitation to play some chess with him and his friends after all.

The dungeon. My eyes stay focused on the carved out wood, gaze narrowing while my memory searches. That closed corridor, that door...the golden crow. It's the very same image.

"Fuck me," I mutter to myself. The dry air makes my eyes sting, or perhaps it is the feeling of raw, uncensored fear that clambers its way through my spine.

It's them. Alpha Fratnerarii. I just know it.

Or am I holding on to nothing but threads of hope and illusions?

I should head back.

But my feet keep moving, hands searching the trunks as I stumble forward—deeper and deeper into the forest—until I halt and stare.

There.

The stables Gaël mentioned. I snort at myself, trying to ease the tension. Because it's horses we're talking about. *So why am I so fucking afraid?* I place a hand over my heart,

where it beats furiously against my ribcage, then cross my arms in front of my chest to squeeze my forearms.

The barn is entirely made of wood, and on the outside, under the porch, saddles, bridles and brushes are kept. I slowly approach the place, silently berating myself that this is the first time I've ever seen this building. Storage spaces are filled to the brim with hay. I peek through the open space, only to jolt in agony when a soft cloth flutters against my cheek. For the briefest of seconds, I expect it to be a horse, but it's not.

“What the—” What is that? I narrow my gaze at the banner that carries a flag of a blue shield with three golden fleurs-de-lis. “Hello?” The only reply I get is another gust of wind, harsher than the first one. They announced a storm, which is probably the explanation for the state of the barn.

Because there are no horses here.

The first raindrops start falling down, a soft pitter patter dimmed by the softness of the leaves. I give my clothes a once-over, then sigh. As much as I want to investigate, I should really head back. I can't afford to pay for another uniform, and it soon will be pitch dark in here.

During the entire walk back home, I think about that flag I saw. It's familiar, yet I can't place it for some reason. But I can feel deep inside my gut that I have found important information. That golden crow *has* to be their sign. And that only means one thing— I've got to head back to the dungeon.

That night, I awake with a startle. Similar to how I wake after having a bad dream, my eyes are fluttering as I look around the room, leaving me feeling dazed and my mind feeling like cotton. I've had them for years now, reverberations of daily events that somehow need digestion when my defenses are low.

“Maxime?” I whisper into the twilight. The usual snoring of my roomie is missing, I realize with a frown. When I click on the bedside lamp, I realize why. He's not here.

Grabbing my phone, I check the time. 1:10

Lights go out at midnight during the weekend, but it's possible, though unlikely, that he wandered off for another hour.

“Maxime?” I repeat stupidly. Climbing out of bed, my legs feel a little wobbly, though adrenaline pumping through my veins makes me move forward, toward the middle of the room. A familiar pull flutters inside my stomach as I look around the room. And then I rip open the curtains. For a brief, ridiculous moment I expect to see something off. *No lights of torches, shapes of ghosts, as they dart around us through the forest. The sounds of howls, of cries, of slapping.*

It's all in your head.

I'm dressed in Damien's sweatpants and a black shirt in no time, the folded plan of the castle in my hand, and my phone in the other.

The flick of the main light makes me squint my eyes, despite the hand I've placed above them. There's too much of it, its truth a sting to reality. And yet...perhaps this is exactly what I needed. Perhaps this is exactly what I have been avoiding over the past weeks, when I got too comfortable with my newly found rhythm and bully-free life. This is a slap to my face, and a wake up call.

I groan and rub my forehead, clench and unclench my fists as I'm buying time. But I can't escape the inevitable. I'm still not 100% sure, but after I came back from the woods earlier, I searched my saved files for any traces of that golden crow. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't to find it on every fucking single image. Mostly hidden, or imprinted in a cloak or furniture, but once my gaze got used to scouting for that bird, I knew for sure. I wish I could say that obtaining more solid proof that Alpha Fraternarii exists makes me feel determined and stronger, but the contrary is the truth. It makes their presence more pressing, heaving, and more dangerous. Because they seem to be all over this college. Outside in the woods, inside in the building.

My gaze flicks to the empty bed. Just how far are they incorporated within the student body?

Damien would never have been a member, that's impossible. My brother was not the curious type, he would never even have known of their existence. Or did he, perhaps, get in their way?

I toe my sneakers on and make my way toward the dungeons.

The corridor is dimmed vaguely at this time of night, with quietness surrounding me. Everything, from the plush, red carpets to the old paintings on the wall, puts my senses on edge. My flutters summersault when I make it to the double spiral staircases. There's no one here, yet my skin is tight with nerves. My ears prick up when I make my way down, careful to be on the tip of my toes. Still, the stairs creak here and there, despite the soft stair runner.

And then I'm downstairs, and in the large reception of the building. To my left is the canteen, and I follow that way, heading to the south wing, remembering where I found that door to the basement. It's eerily quiet here, this wing barely used by students.

There. A little further down the hall stands the metal statue of a knight in shiny armour. My breath hitches—it has been set aside completely, the old, wooden door completely visible from where I'm standing. Not even meant to be hidden, not even meant to be kept a secret. Swallowing frantically in an attempt to get rid of that ominous premonition, I push gently against the dark wood, half hoping for it to be locked. My stomach drops when it gives way, opening on a tired groan.

Still, for a full five seconds I wait, expecting some monster to run up the stairs and devour me.

No one comes.

Using the flashlight on my phone to guide me through and down the stairs, I focus on climbing down the deep, wooden stairs. Apart from a single bulb that indicates two different directions, there's hardly any light. Still it's hard to miss the

golden decorations draped across the wall. They were definitely not there last time, when I bumped into that guy Julien with his Christmas decorations. Still haven't seen those around in school.

No, the place definitely looks different. Like it's been adorned for some special occasion. Like a party.

Like a ceremony.

Pricking my ears, I try to decide which way to go, when a slammed door makes me jump. For a brief, panicked second I fear it's the one behind me, the one I just came through, but then I hear footsteps.

And my panic becomes real.

Someone's heading my way. Apart from the stairs behind me, I have nowhere to go. My feet feel slow and steadfast when I head up, taking the first step behind me and climbing a few steps up, my eyes never leaving the sight in front of me. I barely have time to switch my flashlight off when light flickers through the corridor.

It's a torch, the licks of fire causing creepy, floating shades of light across the wall even before whoever is out there, has reached me. Fisting my hands, I press my lips tight, inwardly counting to ten at the increase of each sound of the footsteps, that create a dim echo that makes my throat clench in agony.

Three, two, one...

Clothes rustle by in a tumultuous cloud—a dark, velvet cloak, a gloved hand carrying the torch. And then...I squeeze my lips even further shut, preventing myself from screaming. They stop. Right by the stairs, the cloaked figure stills. My hand squeezes my phone uncontrollably, fear clamming around me and tugging at my chest.

We are no more than a few meters apart, close enough for me to catch the white fur that is knitted at the sides of the cloak, forming a strong contrast to the pitch-dark material of the rest of the cape. It shimmers in the twilight. Just like the golden mask that covers their face as they turn their head and face my way. My heart beats wildly in my ribcage, and my

hands clench even tighter, the nails digging into my skin. We stand there for a beat of a moment, and I swear that we are eyeing one another, that those golden globes stare right through me, but then the cloaked shape turns back and picks up their pace, walking away and slowly disappearing inside the other corridor.

I take in a deep, ragged breath that strains my lungs even further as my shoulders tense. I need to give myself a full minute to recover and get my breathing back to normal, before I finally click the flashlight back on. Then I start walking in the direction in which the cloaked person disappeared. Fuck, that was...terrifying. That was...

Sounds.

There are more of them. I try to listen carefully, try to pick up on what they are. With each step, the muffled sounds become a little clearer, and my fear a little more extreme.

I can't believe it. Those words go on repeat through my mind. Those paintings, those stories I found while researching online... all those times I wasn't sure. I think of the shred of paper that I still carry with me after two years.

Why did you leave me a warning, when you haven't come forward? I'm here now. Who are you?

Are they the reason my brother is dead? And if they were, would they do the same to me? My step stutters as panic bubbles to the surface.

There's no time for my swiveling thoughts, because noises bring me back to reality. It's the sound of a chortle, or is it a cry? Glancing at my side, I notice a door is open, and I hurry to switch off my flashlight before plastering myself against the wall, slowly creeping forward one hesitant step at a time. I shouldn't be doing this, I should head back. But my feet move forward instead, this necessity to *know* the fuel to my determination. I shuffle closer, careful not to make a sound, until I reach for the open door. With my back still plastered against the wall, I swallow thickly, then turn my head and peek inside.

It's... Holy fuck... I can't believe it.

Five guys are standing in a circle, heavy cloaks framing their build. Their hoods cover their heads and similar, silver masks cover their faces. Unlike the one who just passed, these hoods don't have the fur decoration, but are plain dark. Still beautiful, still ominous.

"The first ritual is one to teach you respect," a voice orders, followed by the thud of a cane. I can't be certain from this far away, but I fear that the head is made of a golden crow. Of course. I don't recognize his tone, but he sounds older than a student. He's smaller than most other cloaked frames, but authority radiates off his slender shoulders and cloaked head. The group takes a few steps back at the same time, revealing four guys sitting on chairs, the backs of their chairs together in a circle.

"Our core values." That same voice booms.

"Alliance, privilege and secrecy," the five guys hum at the same time.

"That's right. How many rituals are there?"

"Three."

"Why do we perform rituals?"

"To teach us how to respect our elders, and our traditions."

"Good." He floats through the group like a ghost, his black garment fluttering around the four...what are they, novices? "I want to thank you for your generous donations." His voice has become softer, more genuine. "You and your family have shown once more how important the elite of this country is. How important *we* are." He stops, stretching out his arms as if he's God himself. "Dare I say, congratulations?" He crooks his fingers and someone approaches the group of seated pupils. Trepidation crawls up my spine when I watch how he opens his cloak at the waist. Someone gasps, and I shut my mouth on a click, afraid that it was me. The speaker continues as if nothing's about to happen. "It's a little early, but you have all passed nearly all the rituals. Tell me," he tilts up the face of

one of the seated guys. “Do you feel welcome by your brotherhood?”

“Yes, Elder Jacques,” the guy mumbles.

“We don’t waste our time on drink, drugs and stupid games,” the speaker continues, and he plants his cane firmly against the nape of the seated guy. “Show your respect.” The seated guy groans when he’s being pushed forward, and I squint my eyes, unable to keep on looking.

What the hell?

As if nothing happens, the speaker continues. A second brother steps forward, facing another seated guy in the circle. “Show your respect.”

The same ritual repeats itself, and I find myself staring, mouth agape, mind swimming.

“There’s only one more ritual, *mes frères*,” the speaker roars. “One more ritual and you’ll be coming home. We will give you your best life, we will give you even more wealth, more than you could have ever dreamt of!”

I need to go.

“Next time, we’ll meet in style. Cloaked, masked, during a fine dinner. You’ll receive an invitation soon. Until then, take care of each other.”

Need to go. *Now*.

“Until next time.” Too soon, the door opens further. *Shit!* The speaker’s already at the threshold by the time I manage to peel myself off the wall, and I run.

“Hey!” He calls after me. My phone’s squeezed to death in my hand, and I use the rolled up plan as a guidance stick as I make my way through the twilight hall.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Flashes of cloaks running after me torment me as I run, my chest heaving with shallow breaths and terror.

They are just students, I tell myself. They’re your classmates.

Is that what Damien thought?

I miss the stairs, run past them, only to stop in my tracks, panting, sides stinging and feet moving slowly. Too slow, because the dark shade of garment is close.

“Hey!” He calls out again. And then I climb the stairs—*up, up!*—slamming the door open as if it weighs a thousand pounds. And then I run.

There’s more light in the hall, and my bare feet don’t make a sound. I should stop and hide, should check out who the face is behind the mask, should do all that. But I’m so afraid that I might collapse, and climbing those stairs and getting back to my dorm is the only thing that’s clear right now. As for the rest...I can’t think. Everything happens in a haze, my fear causing my brain to balk, refusing to acknowledge what’s really happening here. There’s no hiding possible, not even after I reach my dorm and lay on my bed, waiting for the inferno in my head to pass. I end up laying there for hours, just staring at the ceiling, lost in tumbling thoughts. Perhaps I wait for Maxime, as the fear consumes me. It waits for me to surrender, to realize that if it hasn’t happened yet, it will happen eventually. Gaël will tire of me.

And I’ll be alone again.

GAËL

Rapid beats on the door make me instantly jolt out of sleep. Blinking my tired eyes, I flick them around the room, up to the large clock that hangs on the wall of our tiny kitchen corner. It's a little before four in the morning. The cloak is still wrapped around the back of my desk chair, a tangle of black and fur, the mask discarded on the keyboard of my computer.

There's another rap on the door, followed by a slap of a palm that slides down on the wood.

"Gaël?" It sounds muffled, but my sleep evaporates like water under a burning sun, and I rush to climb out of my bed. Flinging my gear back into the closet, I rush to the door, heartbeat ruffling wildly in my chest. It's a mixture of excitement and desire to protect, to claim, to fucking own.

That's right, I want to own Dominique Devallée.

Though the first glimpse I catch in Dominique's pool of large, dark eyes, is fear. That makes my lips curl into a sneer and my fist clench. "What happened?"

One turn over my shoulder shows that my cousins are still sleeping. When I look back at Dominique, I see that he's shivering. "Come."

He doesn't reply, but lets me guide him inside my room and bed, where I make sure he's well placed between a few plush cushions, the sheets curled up to his chin. He carries a dimple there, I notice, an elusive trail up to his plush lips, that are now pressed into a firm line. His freckles light up in the

dim light, and for a moment I amuse myself counting them, enchanted by the golden spots, until Dominique starts speaking. I hadn't thought he'd actually come here to talk, and at the first stammer that leaves his mouth, my eyes fly up to meet his. His are dark, the narrow circle of bronze around his pupils radiating as they collide with mine. It's a beautiful sight.

"I was afraid," he confesses on a murmur, the words making the weight on my chest grow. I turn onto my side and lean on my elbow while I wait for Dominique to collect his thoughts. The soft snores of my cousins fill the silence, lifting the heaviness and turning the atmosphere into something I always cherish when I am with them—home.

It's where I'm safe, and loved. It's where I belong.

"I—I don't even...I shouldn't be telling you this," he breathes, clearly struggling, though snuggling against the closest pillow. *My pillow*. "You can't know, no one can know, but—" he sighs heavily, then flicks his gaze up to meet mine. "I'm so tired of keeping this a secret. I can't do it anymore. And I hope that you won't grow tired of me, I really do, but I need—" he swallows the next words, though they spill partly past his lips and disappear into the air in a whoosh of a whisper. "...to talk about it." He hugs the pillow a little closer, but flinches when I let my fingers trail over his hand. I don't move them, instead I wait for him to take in another breath before dipping them lower, following the veins on the inside of his arm up to the material of his tee.

"*Dis-moi tout.*" I mean it. I want to know everything there is about Dominique, want to be given a way into his meandering thoughts.

"I've been looking for signs. Earlier today, I was in the woods, and I found the stables, and then it started to rain," he trails off, then pokes his tongue out, flicking it over his lips. "It's real, it's—I've been searching for it for two years. Ever since it happened." My breath hitches at his words, chest tightening uncomfortably now. I knew he was onto things, knew better than to underestimate him, but this...

“What happened after it started to rain?” My voice sounds a little hoarse, and I’m not sure if that’s the reason for his dark eyes to search my face, seemingly looking for something I can’t even begin to name. Leaning forward, he ducks his head, and says, “I shouldn’t talk about this. Forget that I even mentioned it. I was—” He doesn’t finish his phrase.

I brush a hair from his forehead, then rub my thumb over the crease that has formed there. “You worry so much, beautiful,” I whisper. “Did you see the horses?”

He looks up, and his brown eyes flicker between mine. “No?”

My digit traces his nose, chasing those delectable freckles once more. I caress the golden sprinkles on his cheek and murmur, “There are two horses in there.”

Soon there will be, that is.

Dominique seems to contemplate my lie, and his shoulders depress a little while he sinks deeper into the pillows. “I didn’t see them. But then, it was dark, and it started raining, and then I saw what I saw and I just needed to get the hell out of there.”

“Hmm.” My other hand scoots under the blankets, tracing the fine fabric down toward his crotch. I need to redirect this conversation to safer grounds, need to give myself time to prepare for answers I will need to give some day if I want to keep Dominique.

When my fingers tease the waistband of his sweats, he lets out a shuddering breath and dips his head.

“Eyes here, beautiful. I want to see you, want to hear you. Come on, ask me what you really want to know.” His eyes stutter when they crash into mine, and despite the dim light I catch how his pupils dilate when my fingers crawl into his briefs and wrap themselves around his cock. He’s already half hard and soon he’ll be dripping for me. But he’s got character, despite his shy demeanor, and he certainly is on a mission.

“Were you there when my brother died?” The words leave his mouth on a whisper followed by tension so palpable that I can practically grab it from the air and crush it in my fist. He

looks away, mouth pressed into a firm line, nostrils flared when I start stroking him.

“Eyes,” I mumble. He looks up, cheeks flush, pupils dilated. “My beautiful, sad *trésor*. The school was closed when your brother died, you know that, right?”

He gives me a sharp nod of the head, lips still tightly sealed, though I don't miss the whine at the back of his throat. This may be a little cruel, me jacking him off while we're discussing his brother's death, but that's the sadistic fuck I can also be. Because I want to evaporate his brother, don't want Dominique to walk around in his clothes, don't want him to mourn him anymore as much as he does. He has suffered enough.

I want Dominique wrapped in *my* clothes, writhing and crawling on *my* bed, at *my* touch, at *my* fucking mercy. And I'll show him just how gracious I can be, when I'm in the right mood.

“I know,” he sniffs. “But please, Gaël, if you know something, anything. Please tell me. This is, it's—killing me.” His mouth parts into a silent gasp when I pick up speed, rubbing and stroking his cock with experienced hands, only to stop suddenly. He blinks at me, lips still open, confusion intermingling with arousal.

“Take off your clothes,” I practically growl.

“But your cousins...”

“Take them off.”

His movements are sloppy and a little stiff, and while I enjoy watching him squirm, I roll over onto my back to grab the bottle of oil that always stands on my bedside table. When I pour a generous amount onto my palm and rub until it warms, I turn back to Dominique.

“Now, your brother wasn't very popular in this school, Dominique.” Without as much as a warning, I climb onto his lap, right below where his fat cock is eagerly waiting for some more attention. Dominique hisses when I start massaging his

smooth pecs, but doesn't look away. Something fierce has replaced every previous trace of timidity. Annoyance.

Game on.

"What do you mean?" He purses his lips as my hands keep working his solid chest.

"What I mean is, we all see people through our own perspective." I try to play it cool, but inside I'm trembling. I need to be really careful here. "You looked up to your big brother, and I get that, I really do. But over here, in this world, our vision of him wasn't similar to yours. Over here, he was a bit of a loner."

Dominique blinks as my words land inside his beautiful mind. "That's why..." his eyes scrunch, and mine take in every single emotion that lingers in those glimmering globes. "He was acting a little different," he finally admits. "Those last weeks, he became more volatile, more... I don't know, sad? Insecure?"

"That's possible." My fingers have reached his beautiful, filled cock and I tease his crown with my thumb and forefinger, our gazes still locked. Dominique shudders under my touch, but won't give in.

"You still haven't answered my question," he mumbles.

"And you still haven't replied to mine," I counter, giving his slit a flick that must sting like a bitch. He hisses at the sudden touch, but his cock jolts in my grip. Ah, interesting... "And to be honest, right now, at this moment, I don't intend to."

"Why not?" His eyes flutter frantically. "Have you got something to hide?" I wiggle myself further up his torso, making sure that my weight doesn't crush him. He's becoming too loud, and I can't risk my cousins waking up now and ruining this moment. Dominique, on the other hand, seems oblivious as he's glaring at me from beneath me, upset. Well, guess what, that makes two of us. I knew these questions would be slung my way, and I fucking hate it. Hate that his brother always needs to stand right between us like some

stuck-up, important chess piece, hate that our pasts complicate this situation even more.

“I *knew* it,” he tells himself, confirming the thoughts that create my inner turmoil. “I knew that people here have plenty of things to hide. You have things to hide, Maxime has things to hide. I mean, you were there when my brother died. You were *there*. Did he drown, as the police said? Or is that also a lie? Was he killed?”

“That’s enough talking now, beautiful.” I have moved up to his shoulders, my ass firmly planted onto his chest. My hand snakes down to the back of his head, and I tilt him up, making sure to place two pillows under it. “You have asked more questions than you have over the past weeks.”

“Because you haven’t given me any answers,” he growls in frustration. “Why do I get the idea that we’re going in circles here?” His eyes become wide when I make a show of lowering my pyjama pants, allowing my cock to plop free. I’m already wet for him, the tip covered with a layer of precum.

“Because there’s a time for everything, *mon trésor*. Now, lick, beautiful. It’s yours.”

He gives his head a clipped shake, but his eyes dart from my veiny arousal to my eyes and back. “It’s because you—” I don’t give him time to finish his phrase, instead pull his delectable mouth onto my cock.

“Suck it, baby. Suck it good for me. And I might give you some answers.”

It’s a nasty thing to say, and by the sound of his undignified protest, he agrees. Still, he lets me guide him further onto my cock, the back of his head solidly supported by my palm. He lets me, because he feels it too, this undeniable attraction we feel toward each other. Ember and emerald, regret and hope, sadness and love.

I can’t tell him what happened to his brother, I can’t...and I know Dominique deserves the truth, of course I do. But this is complicated, it really is. And the only way I can buy time is by shutting him up. Quite literally.

Fuck...

I trace the lines of his lips as they stretch around me, the first drops of saliva dripping from the corner of his mouth toward his chin. This feeling is... “Ah, fuck,” I grunt at the sight. “You are perfection, beautiful, keep on going.”

His brows furrow, eyes scorching with desire and exasperation as he does exactly what I say. It makes me feel like the king of the world. Heat coils in my belly when he swirls his tongue around the head, sucking it in like a popsicle before sucking it harder. With one hand in his dark mane and the other on his nape, I tip my head back and rock my hips gently, deliberately. This feeling drives me slowly crazy, engulfs me from my curling toes all the way up to my beating heart.

“You looked so fucking lost,” I murmur, eyes on the sculpted ceiling as my hips grind onto his face. “When I first met you. And it wasn’t just because of your grief. No, your shoulders were slumped like that was their natural position—as if you were perpetually beat down.” I dip my head and watch him closely, grinding a little faster. A chuckle escapes my lips at the sight of his widening eyes, and though he tries to keep up, more saliva spills past his lips.

That day outside the church, I’d mistakenly assumed that he was simply staring at the sliver of dark sky that was uncovered by the large oak trees. That was before I saw those wooden cabins, *again*.

I have wondered over the years if he built them. Perhaps together with his brother? We’ve used those cabins a few times, though at very different occasions.

Very different occasions.

“When you first looked at me, stared at my make-up with your large, innocent eyes, my entire body buzzed with need. I couldn’t shake it off.” I’d declared him precious on the spot, somehow knowing that he’d be my perfect match, though our circumstances have always been ultimately bad. And at this very moment, despite him lying on his back, taking my dick like a pro, I know that this situation will get delicate.

“There are horses in those stables,” I breathe in the air, “and your brother enjoyed tending them.” I let that comment sink in, though I can imagine Dominique’s surprised gaze even without looking down. At least it’s not a lie. I don’t like lies. “He’d go after class, sometimes even in the morning, so I’ve been told,” I say, feeling the need to give him a little more. When I look down, Dominique’s eyes are wet, drool dripping down from his mouth while I merciless fuck him for my pleasure. Wicked desire slowly transforms into an orb that’s on a roll. Fuck, yeah, I’m speeding toward my climax.

This will tear us apart if I don’t play it cool. Dominique will always come back with questions, and will never be satisfied by my answers. Unfortunately the answers he seeks will destroy him either way. They will most likely destroy us.

My eyes burn into his face, his flawless skin, his meaty lips wrapped tight as his blown pupils stare up and into the void. Blazing with desire, raw with determination. This man is too good to be true, and he’s all mine. Those thoughts are toe curling, and I gasp for air as I roll my hips again. And again.

“*Putain, c’est bon—je vais venir.*” I explode with a muffled roar that has the veins in my neck popping, jaw stinging from keeping my mouth shut. Thick desire clutters my insides, causing sparks and making me pant for more. Fuck, I’ll always want more. His throat works around my spasming length as he drinks me down.

It takes me a moment to get down from my high, to finally lift my weight off of him and turn onto my side. “I like it when you’re all naked and I’m fully clothed,” I confess, then take off my satin pyjama shirt and hand him the garment. “But I like it even more when I see you wrapped up in my clothes. Here, put this on.” Dominique lets out a huff, but puts on the satin shirt, hiding his sculpted chest as he does so. “Now, lay back.”

I wrap my arm around his waist and my leg over his and prop my front up against his back. He lets out a shudder when his cheek touches the fluffy pillow, and I cover our entwined bodies with the silken duvet. Once he’s settled back as my little spoon, wrapped in my clothes, I inhale deeply, feeling

satisfied. Even more so, when my hand drops onto his crotch, only to feel that his cock is hard. He hasn't gotten off yet, and as our earlier conversation comes back to mind, I decide I won't let him.

“I—” He swallows.

“Tell me about him.” My hand wraps around his girth and I start giving him firm, but teasingly slow strokes. “Tell me about your brother.”

He is quiet, but I have learned something about my beautiful. He's thinking, or perhaps choosing the right words, silent as he does so, until finally, after what feels like forever, he speaks.

“Damien was the cooler one of the two of us.”

“I used to hide in our room and wait for him to come home.”

“He'd make everything better.”

“He protected me against the world.”

The words leave his mouth in a gentle sigh filled with so much grief that my chest tightens.

“He—” Dominique quivers in my hold and rocks his hips frantically. Then he turns around in his search for me. His cheeks are flushed and he nibbles on his puffy lower lip as he throws that stuttering gaze at me. They are pitch dark. My thumb swirls over his moist crown and his lips part in a hitched breath. “H-he was the better one.” His mouth ticks up, his eyes watering once more. Before he can hide away, I capture his swollen lips into a kiss. It's airy and delicate, meant to soothe his leaking heart. When we part, he swipes his tongue over his lower lip, and his eyes glow with vulnerability.

“What do you want from me?”

“Everything, beautiful,” I admit. “I want everything, Dominique. You've captured me.”

He pulls back just enough to say, “But how?” His gaze searches around the room, to where my cousins are sleeping in the other beds. But the arguments he finds are not strong

enough to keep me away. “Damien was the tough one, the one with friends,” he mumbles unsurprisingly. “He was the future of our family.”

Oh, Dominique. Compassion and malice rumble through my core when my hand fondles the silky skin around his nut sack. I keep on stroking him while I fondle his balls, and he shudders. “I already have all of that.” My lip curls up. “I don’t look for someone to bring all those things to the table.” My lips capture his again and I take my time savoring the wet, plush treats, enjoying the rapid flicks of his tongue as he tries to battle mine, a weak defence to my utter destruction. My mouth owns him in no time, and Dominique melts to a puddle of moans as he writhes in my hold. I could kiss him like this forever, taste his forthrightness, that’s somehow so perfectly intermingled with ferociousness and sweet, sweet passion. He’s addictive.

“But I have nothing to offer,” Dominique finally exhales when we part to inhale a much needed breath of air. He sounds exasperated, but I think that mostly has to do with my hand pressing the base of his sack while the other flies over his cock. There’s nothing sweeter than edging my lover into bliss.

His words make me tsk. “You have plenty to offer and we have even more to discover.”

“Yeah?” His dark eyes become pleading, as if needing me to believe.

“Yeah. Now, are you going to tell me why you really came here tonight? Why you really were afraid?” His gaze flicks over mine, stuttering as if unsure what to look for. Trust? Could Dominique ever trust me, despite us both having complicated pasts? “Tell me what you found.”

“It was nothing,” he replies, but the words tumble out too fast. I release the pressure on his sack for a split second, letting pleasure trickle through, and it makes his eyes practically bulge. “Oh my God, I’m—”

“Uh uh. Not yet.” I press again and he lets out a sweet, desperate whine. “Not until you tell me what scared you. What

signs were you looking for?” He opens his mouth again, and I realize that my own heart is beating fast as well.

I've been looking for it for two years.

My grip loosens once more, and Dominique bucks his hips uncontrollably. “Please.”

“Tell me.” It feels like both a curse and a blessing to get off on being the stronger one, and right now, with my own cock roared to life and proudly pressing between Dominique’s ass cheeks, this all feels damn ambiguous. And real. Because I can’t ignore my upbringing, my fate. And I can’t ignore his loss, his grief.

His determination is faltering by my hand, as his hips continue to hump against my hand. His whispers have become more urgent. “Please, Gaël, please...”

“What were you afraid of?”

What do you know?

I release the pressure once more and his entire body jerks. Like a tap, I squeeze my fist around him once more, and he growls desperately.

Then he finally breaks.

“It’s the fear that I fear, Gaël, okay? I don’t want to be afraid anymore. Don’t want to search anymore. I want to feel safe. When I’m with you—” He lets out a guttural sound, a combination of a moan and a sob, “I’m not afraid.”

I pull his face closer and my forehead touches the back of his head. “When you need to find something, come to me,” I croon. “I know everything in this place.”

“M—my brother...”

“You already know.” I nuzzle his ear, lick his shell, then release the pressure. My heart is beating wildly. “And when the time comes, I will tell you. Right now, you’re too fragile. Trust me, *mon trésor*, please.” I give his cock a few fast, firm strokes. “Now, wake my cousins, beautiful. Show them who’s mine. Come for me.”

His entire being trembles, and he roars when he explodes, unable to hear my raspy chuckles as I kiss his clothed, satin back. That's my boy. My sweet, wild creature.

"Oh my God," he mumbles in the pillow that he has found only after his release. "That was so embarrassing." He sounds drained and relaxed at the same time. Much like myself, I guess.

Because I won the first round.

More questions will follow, but not tonight. "Nah, not really. Those bastards are still asleep."

He lifts his gaze, and I'm not surprised to find his eyes are reddened with unshed tears. Still he crooks his lips into a smile. "Too bad."

"You don't mean that."

His smile widens, turning into mischief. "You're right."

It's late by the time he falls asleep, his steady breathing falling into the same rhythm as my cousins, bringing a fluttery sense of belonging into the room. Just like he was meant to be here. I fall asleep alongside him, holding tightly onto this memory, scared to let it go... as I'm afraid that's all it will be, when Dominique finds out the truth of this illusion.

DOMINIQUE

I wake up laying on my stomach, arm clutched around a soft, velvet pillow while my cheek is hugging another. I'm feeling... strangely well-rested.

Because of Gaël.

He's everywhere, like some fog that has infiltrated every single part of me, slowly making its way up to capture my very core.

"You've captivated me."

Fuck, this bed is heaven. Letting out a satisfied hum, I roll on my side, enjoying the material of the soft blanket on my naked legs. The next second, my limbs freeze. It's not because of the smell of coffee invading my nostrils, nor the realization that I am effectively half naked. No, it's the hushed voices around me.

Blinking my eyes rigorously, I search my memories, only to...

No, no, no.

I turn around with the speed of light, legs tangled in the blankets, and I practically roll out of bed. Snaking my hands out for balance, they keep the rest of my flushed self from crashing to the ground. Christ, the embarrassment.

"Good morning, sleepy head." His rumble is smooth as always, the morning rasp making it sound even sexier. I open my eyes to search for the sound, squinting as they flick toward

the light. Gaël's sitting on the windowsill with a steaming mug, his amused gaze flicking between me and the outside view. "Looks like we're going to have a white Christmas."

"Oh?" I say sheepishly, as I readjust the blankets and pull myself back so I can lean against the headboard.

"Hmm." Gaël gazes back outside, his platinum mane an unruly collection of slickness as it falls around the exposed side of his face.

Someone coughs and I swivel my head back, feeling instantly caught when my gaze meets with one of the twins. I still can't tell them apart, but he looks like the one who gave me that envelope a few weeks ago. The nicer one of the two, I'm inclined to say.

He's sitting in his bed in a similar position to mine, coffee in his hand as he unabashedly takes me in. His dark hair matches his dark eyes and brows, but unlike Gaël, his lips are curled into a smug grin. "You need to learn to be more quiet," he throws at me, and my face flushes crimson.

"Told you Gaël, this dude is no match for you," his brother adds, his smile carrying a private secret that makes my skin tingle with awareness.

"Stop teasing him." Gaël hops off the sill, and his white sleeping tee falls over one carved shoulder, the material rustling as he moves around the room. My gaze instantly drops to the ink on his bare feet, the fleeting golden stars that somehow look so good on him. There's only one more engraved in the skin of his calf, so no galaxy like I'd somehow assumed.

And then thoughts of last night come back to me, invading my mind, making me clutch the sheets and pull them up all the way to my chin.

The stables, the flag, the rain. *No horses.*

The dungeon. I swallow thickly. *The cloaks.*

The... whatever that was.

Still, it might make them atypical in how they spend their free time, but it doesn't make them murderers. I have nothing.

Nothing.

“So have you finally decided to keep this one, couz?” One of the cousins comments, a grin on his face. “Aah, he’s cute,” he chuckles when he catches my glower, his grin turning into a feral smile.

“Louis!” His brother—Arthur—makes a show of climbing out of bed and giving his brother a flick to his head. “You can’t say those kinds of things, *petit con*. Coffee?” He raises his mug in my direction.

No. “You have your own kitchen in this room?”

Louis follows my gaze toward the small kitchen corner, his brows curled into mockery. He opens his mouth, but before he can say anything nasty, I quickly add, “Yes, please.”

“And so polite,” he mutters between his teeth, but I ignore him.

Arthur hops out of bed. “Yeah, well, money buys everything,” he quips. “Milk and sugar?”

“Just black,” I breathe, then swallow, throat working around the lump that has formed there. I haven’t felt this uncomfortable since that day I peed in my pants because the teacher told me I couldn’t use the restrooms. Granted, that happened in primary school, but I remember it as if it were yesterday.

I’m still naked, and still in Gaël’s bed, with two predators around me. How did I even end up in this situation?

Keep your head down, is what Maxime told me. Well, guess what roomie, I failed. The thought isn’t amusing.

“So, you’re from around here then, Dominique.” Arthur states when he hands me my coffee. It’s not a question, because he knows. He and Louis saw me two years ago, caught me in the woods by the church—*la voie verte*—know who I am. But I don’t have the courage to remind them of that, remind them of him, and he doesn’t mention it.

Sweeping a hand through my hair, I nod. The mug is hot to my fingers. “Yeah, I’m from Saint-Laurent.”

“Celebrating Christmas with your family then?”

My eyes stutter in harmony with the clenching in my chest as I wonder what he’s trying to ask. “Christmas? Uhm, yes.” It’s technically not a lie, though I wouldn’t call the collection of family members sitting at home on the night of the 24th of December a celebration.

It’s a homage. Like every other day we spend together.

Time should heal wounds, but ours don’t seem to fade. It’s red and swollen, the memories scarred into our minds.

“What about you?” I look up, forcing myself to continue this dread of a conversation. Gaël walks back from the window, then blatantly settles on the bed and pulls the sheet away. I flinch, and his eyes flick up, meeting mine. His green stare carries something close to amusement, but it’s laced with reassurance. That doesn’t stop him from shuffling his lithe body next to my practically naked one, and snaking his hand under the silky blanket. I flinch, shake my head in earnest, then shudder when he grabs hold of my flaccid cock. If the others have picked up on it, they don’t show.

“We’ll go home for Christmas,” Arthur supplies, eyes snapping to Gaël before they land back on me. Winter break will start this weekend, and it’s the first, and only time, that school will be closed for two weeks. *How could I forget?* “We own a private beach and all live there. We’re basically neighbors—annoying neighbors—” he sticks out his tongue to Gaël— “since we all live next to each other. Three villas—one for our family, one for Gaël’s, and one for our aunt and uncle. Every year we celebrate in a different home. This year it’s in ours, where Dad’s new wife will join us with our freshly acquired *stepbrother*,” he snorts in disdain. “The little shit.”

“You mean your biggest competitor,” Louis corrects, then looks my way. “My brother’s being a pain to that little bitch, because he wants to win the *Prix d’Honneur*. That’s why.”

“*Espèce de—*”

“*Prix d’Honneur?*” I squeak, before Arthur can finish his insult. Gaël’s grip around my shaft tightens, my cock hardening with embarrassing speed. His cool hand starts toying with it, making my insides squirm.

Louis grins. “Yup, every year one student can win the most prestigious prize of Saint-Laurent. It’s similar to the prize you must have won, the one that got you your scholarship.” His eyes glimmer wickedly, a silent challenge. There’s also something else there, something I can’t quite grasp. We lock gazes for a moment and I search for that flicker, for that flame of something, something that isn’t nasty or bad, something that isn’t meant to hurt me. Something that my bullies at school definitely didn’t have.

Louis is more human than he wants me to know, the realization startling.

“Eyes here,” Gaël mumbles hoarsely. It’s a private request that my body eagerly reacts to. I turn to face him and see how his lips curl into a victorious smile when he pats my swatting hand away. I don’t stand a fucking chance, and he knows it. Every single part of me craves this man. “In case you were wondering, our family comes from the Herault. Montpellier?”

“What’s—what’s your family name?” I ask. Something flickers in those green eyes of his.

“Deveraux.” His throat clicks when he swallows. “Our family owns the largest wine business in France. Perhaps you’re familiar with *Clos Saint-Marie*?”

“Or *Saint-Hortus*?” Louis adds sweetly.

“I am,” I say relieved, at the same moment as Arthur’s “You’re a dick.”

“Told you he would know the cheap stuff.” Louis snorts, and I clasp my lips together.

Gaël’s eyes shoot daggers when he looks at his cousin, his fist around my girth tightening even further. When his gaze finds mine once more, they are dark and wicked, his lips agape with concentration. He gives me a salacious wink when he squeezes my crown, and judging from the easy way he swipes

his thumb around it, I must have gotten wet embarrassingly soon. Damn it.

Forbidden pleasure ripples through me.

“Anyway,” he continues, “As Arthur already mentioned, we own land by the Mediterranean Sea and have built three villas on it. One for each member of the family. And stop complaining, because we’re very happy to see your stepmother again. *And* your stepbrother. Will he start Saint-Laurent next year?”

“Oh, fuck off,” Arthur sulks, his cheeks a little flushed, while Louis howls and hoots. He places his mug onto the small kitchen counter. “Anyway, some of us have work to do on this last day before Christmas break, so I better get to it.”

So should I, but with Gaël stroking my hard dick I have nowhere to go. My tongue darts out to lick my dry lips, while I form the words in my head.

“I should go too,” I want to say, but they won’t leave my throat.

“I’ll miss you when you’re gone.” They form in my heart.

Gaël chooses that moment to show how much of him already owns me, as he juts his chin toward the bed pillar. When I follow his gaze, I see a dark woollen bathrobe. “Why won’t you put that on and get me an apple from the kitchen, beautiful?”

“You want—” My eyes widen in panic while my jaw clenches at the next stroke. “I can’t—”

“Come on, *trésor*,” he hushes, his dark eyes filled with sin. “I’m so hungry.” The words drip out of his mouth, thick and creamy. He chuckles when my cock jolts in his fist.

Clearing my throat, I scan my surroundings carefully. Arthur is fiddling with the backpack that sits on his knees, flicking his fingers through his books while he softly murmurs to himself. His dark hair has fallen into his eyes, but he seems so into it that he doesn’t even notice. Ironically, I can relate to that. Damien always told me that I looked like a confused

professor when I was concentrating, that I got all wrinkled and scrunched up when I tried to solve the mysteries of my mind.

I wonder what kind of life these guys live when they're not in college. The Mediterranean Sea is a popular holiday destination, known for both history and wealth. For water that always has the perfect temperature.

To have a house by those waters? I can't even start to imagine what that would be like, not even in my wildest dreams.

Arthur looks up, unaware of my inner unrest, and offers me a vacant, small smile. It's the friendliest thing he has done so far, and I find myself sending him a grin. I find myself wanting to like him, and moreover, wanting him to like *me*.

I grab the bathrobe from the pole and pull it stiffly around my shoulders, making sure to tie it firmly before I pull the sheets away. Fuck, my arousal is so obvious it's making my cheeks flame instantly. But the kitchen is not too far, so forcing all thoughts away, I climb out of bed and stride toward the fruit bowl. Louis watches me like a hawk, his following gaze burning holes in my side. I won't let him intimidate me though, I won't let him come between this—whatever this game is—that Gaël so clearly enjoys.

That scorching feeling of shame stays away. Walking around this room that isn't mine, where I can be seen in my current state by someone else, but knowing that the guy who brought me there is leering at my every move, makes me feel heady. It makes me feel a little victorious. And strangely safe. When I make it back from the kitchen and hold up the piece of fruit for Gaël, his emerald gaze slides over my body, taking me languidly in from head to toe, before meeting my own. He nods, the corner of his lips turning up in approval. As if the possibility that he won't just decide one day that he has had enough of me, is a valid one.

It shouldn't be. Because I can't afford to believe that there can actually be anything more between us than physical attraction. No, I am just the dead guy's baby brother, a *sensation*. I inhale sharply through my nose. That thought has

me remain standing in place for a few seconds, despite Gaël's scorching eyes. Because Gaël's playing a game, and I'm already on the losing side.

Because I want the flame, want it to consume me with all its splendour that is this man. With cracked defenses, I walk back to the bed, apple in one hand, the other one carefully keeping the sides of the robe together.

"Well done, beautiful," Gaël croons when I settle next to him against the pillows. His fingers crawl between the opening of the robe where he immediately grabs hold of my raging hard-on. I stifle a groan and watch him bite into the apple, my stomach fluttery because of his words of praise.

"Alright guys, I'm off to the library. See you some other time, Dominique." Arthur doesn't wait for me to answer. With his backpack already settled and his fingers around the door knob, he has moved on to the next moment of the day.

"Well, I'd better make a move too. Wait up, bro, let's grab breakfast together, then I'll head to the football fields. Last practice before Christmas." Louis swings a duffel bag over his solid shoulder, then without a second glance, exits the room.

After the door closes shut behind them, their voices fade away, the air slowly fills with arousal. And we sit there, in silence, just the two of us, Gaël's hand wrapped around my cock. He strokes too slowly for me to come, but the firm touch is more than enough for my mind to slowly lose it. Panting through my parted lips, I stare through the opened curtains, through the foggy weather, where the large trees are decorated with a winter coat of snow. If I had to guess, I'd say it's late morning, a lot later than I usually get up, but then I don't usually spend my evenings searching in the woods for signs of the truth about what happened to my brother.

Investigating through the internet was safer.

Now, with the sky as white as a sheet, and the promise of even more snowfall, I can really feel the pressure building. I'm onto something.

Gaël softly hums as his grip tightens around my shaft, and when his fingers tease my sensitive balls, I tilt my head back and let out a desperate moan.

“Let’s do our morning meditation,” he rasps. “Here, take off the robe and come sit on my face, beautiful.”

“What?” I gasp, too far gone to object further when he lets out a tsk and manhandles me exactly how he wants me to. And so I end up kneeling in front of him, with my ass practically plastered against his lips. My core shivers when I feel the puffs of air against my crack.

“You can lean on me, I’m not going to break,” he mumbles. I groan when he puts my thighs on each side of his cheek. “Are you comfortable like this?” He asks, his lips moving against my skin. I tremble. I fucking tremble so hard, and when I look down I catch my cock jolting with arousal, the tip moist with precum.

“F-fuck...” His slender, long fingers sneak from under my taint, and when they cup my balls I catch the glimmer of his rings.

“Breathe in, *mon trésor*, and out. That’s it. In...and out.”

I hesitantly follow his instructions, and with each intake of air feel my body relax a little and my hips lower some more, until I am fully leaning onto his hands and his face.

Gaël lets out a satisfied hum. “That’s it, you’re doing so well. Clear your mind.” Avoiding my weeping cock, his fingers dig into the soft flesh of my hip bones instead, tracing the fine line of my abdomen as they do so. “Do you like this?” His fingers knead the muscles there, fingertips nearly brushing past my leaking arousal, making me wriggle in a plea. And then I feel his tongue flicking against my hole. It’s wet and soft, a tender, rapid touch followed by a more thorough lick that lingers on my puckered skin.

“I...yeah.” It makes my body feel heavy with desire. I lean forward, feeling weightless, as if I’m floating between the solid grip of his hands and the airy touch of his mouth. My nails dig into the surface, and it takes me a moment to realize

it's not the blanket, but Gaël's thighs. I drop my face even further, forehead practically planted onto the soft blanket, ass high in the air. Hanging on for dear life as Gaël spreads my cheeks wider and lashes his tongue inside my hole, sucking and licking, until he can freely swirl inside. He hums languidly, the sound making me moan and pant, my face now fully leaning against his satin sheets.

"Oh my God," I gasp. He's so good at this.

"No, beautiful, not God." He squeezes my cheeks even further, then spits onto my crack. His tongue laps it up, face buried between my cheeks, and my hands slide further and further onto the bed. "Hmm," his tongue licks around messily, over my cheeks, only to dip back inside before teasing its way to my other cheek. "Look at me toying with my favorite ass. Your skin is divine, *mon trésor*. Sweet and firm." He digs his teeth into my flesh and my limbs jolt together with my cock. It's embarrassing how turned on I am by everything he does. "Now let's see how clever you are. What do you do when you can't sleep because you're afraid?"

I blink a few times, the questions catching me off guard. "Uhm—"

The sting of a sudden slap on my ass cheek makes me squeak. "What the hell?" A soft hand rubs around the sore spot, slowly, gently.

"What do you do, beautiful?"

"I—" I lick my lips. The question has me thinking of last night, of the dungeon and that, *whatever* that was, that was taking place. I let out a whine when his strong hand finds my other cheek. It's a short, nasty slap, followed by a soothing stroke of those same fingers.

"Look at that beautiful ass of yours. All red and puffy. And you still haven't answered me."

"I—" I howl when he spanks me again, the flat of his hand slicing through my already aching skin. He does it again, and again, the sting warm and heavy as tears prickle in my eyes. "I come to you!" I finally yell.

“Good,” he mumbles sweetly, and my body jerks on a deep tremble when his tongue laps my crack with firm, soft licks. “Oh my God, I—please, please Gaël, please—” I let out a hiss when he massages the large and heavy muscle on my lower back, despite my inflamed ass. The feeling is confusing, the reaction to his touch doubtful. I’m shivering, nostrils flaring as the sweet, flowery scent from oil invades my nostrils.

“I know, beautiful, I know. And I’m going to give my sweet hole what it needs, shh.” Two fingers pass my pliant ring of muscles without restraints, while his free hand rubs more oil over my back and ass. “This is jasmine, it has a healing effect. Look at those red marks on your flawless skin. I did that, beautiful. I marked you.” He leans forward and drops a kiss onto a particular sore spot. “I claimed you,” he mumbles against the sensitive skin, making my insides quiver. “My beautiful, innocent Dominique.”

His fingers hit my prostate, my reaction instant and feral. The sound that escapes my throat is a combination of a mewl and a hiss, and I can’t control my body as my muscles flex and I blindly hump the bed. I’m feeling desperate.

“Look at you, begging for it.” His mouth crooks up wickedly. “You let me tease you, let me edge you, even parade you in front of strangers. You’re a true treasure. And oh so sweet.”

Slowly, he removes his fingers, chuckling hoarsely at the needy whine that escapes from my mouth. I hear him pour more oil on his palms, the scent making me feel at home. The thought alone makes my stomach flutter.

When I turn over my shoulder, my eyes feel large and heavy at the same time. And there Gaël is, staring right back at me with those intense green eyes, perfectly wild hair and devilishly beautiful features. I’m left feeling instantly compelled to do nothing other than take him in.

He’s aware of me watching and traces a finger over my back. “Come on, don’t stop begging, beautiful.” He squeezes my ass cheek and I let out a squeak that quickly melts into a moan at the sensation of that touch on my battered skin. My

grinding picks up without me realizing, and Gaël sounds satisfied. “That’s it. Show me how desperate you are for my cock. Show me how badly you want this.”

“*S’il te plait,*” I whisper, “*Maintenant.*”

The sounds pouring from my lips are unfamiliar, desperate, and needy. He’s doing this to me, making me into someone I’m sure I won’t even recognize. Someone sexy, someone worthy of earth shattering touches.

“Gonna give you my cock now, precious. Gonna make you delirious.” He presses the tip of his cock against my hole and breaches my loosened muscles, purring when he can push further easily. “Look at you and your rapturous body, sucking me in all the way.”

“Please,” I beg. When I feel that he’s fully seated, in tandem, we let out a shudder. His reply is instant, and primal. Gripping my thighs firmly between his hands I am pushed further down onto my stomach, face pressing flat against the bed. Pulling myself back up slightly and turning my head to the side, I notice the snow falling beyond the window and let out a relieved sigh. Never did I think that I’d end up here. It doesn’t take long before I’m a sobbing mess. My nails claw into anything I can find while he pounds into me with firm, short thrusts. I have no doubt that his grasp around my waist will leave marks when he drags me up and against his chest, all the while making sure to never leave my body.

“Oh, God.” His cock is making me delirious.

“Ride me, *mon trésor*. Ride me like my good boy.” I gasp at those filthy words, eyes fluttering closed while I firmly press my lips together. Because I want to give him what he needs, I want to be his good boy and so much more. Eager to please, I gyrate my hips as they roll around his cock, and my head tips back and finds a solid chest.

“Oh my fucking God,” I choke. I have never felt like this.

“No more searching for signs,” Gaël hushes. “No more fear at night, *d’accord?* No more wearing your brother’s clothes. I’ll give you everything you need.” Those are big

words, covering even bigger topics, making fear drip inside my heart like an automatic defense. My movements falter, and his grip tightens. “Come on, keep on riding this big, fat cock. It’s all for you, beautiful.” His hands on my hip set the pace and I sluggishly follow, because this is too much to process in my lethargic brain. “Take off your crown of disguise, *trésor*, take it off. Show yourself in all your full glory.”

What will I find? I want to ask, but Gaël takes that moment to push me flat against the bed, ass still connected to his cock, completely filling me. He places his elbows around my head, and starts fucking me hard.

“I want to,” I hear myself admit, lips pressed into the soft blanket. “I want to discover what it’s really like to be me.”

He hums at that, and his thrusts become more powerful, shaking the bed as he plunders my ass and steals my soul. “Then discover yourself. You are not your brother.”

“I need to know...” I moan, long and frenzied, when he continues his series of hitting my prostate at every single touch. When his fist closes around my cock, I shudder and buck, toes curling with need.

“Fuck, beautiful,” he drawls deeply, kicking my legs further apart so he can increase his speed even more. Every white-hot thrust sends sparks down my spine and fire through my veins. “That’s it...” He lets out a harsh grunt as his entire body quivers, and I feel his cock pulsing as he empties himself inside me. “Fucking perfection,” he mumbles against my ear. Then, with one swift moment, he pulls out and rolls me onto my back. “Show me my plump cock,” he croons. “Fuck, yeah.” He presses wet, open-mouthed kisses over my stomach, his tongue flicking out at my belly button, while his teeth follow, dragging a path down and across my hip bone, snagging on the thin scrap of lace blanket that’s covering me. His breath is hot through the barely-there material and I curl my toes, rubbing my feet into his ass as I spread my thighs as wide as I can, silently begging him for more.

“Does that feel good?” He smiles, knowing full well the effect he has on me. “Let me take care of you.”

My eyes flutter, but I don't miss a thing when his perfectly plush lips wrap around my weeping cock and he sucks. Fuck, he sucks it so well. It's perfection, the intense combination of suction and his tight, wet mouth send me into a lucid state of bliss.

"I'm gonna come," I gasp, fueled by desire. I've been waiting for so long. For too long. "I can't—"

Gaël pulls off with a lewd pop, saliva and precum coating his glorious lips. "Come for me, precious." Then, with one last wicked smile, he sucks me back in.

I explode, feeling light-headed from the intensity as it crumbles through my core. Fireworks of pleasure leave my body and mind shattered, and I let myself drift off, taken care of by a strong pair of arms that pull me close and back under the blanket. By a smooth voice that croons and soothes sweet words in my ear, until I finally fall into oblivion.

No torches.

No what if's.

No regrets.

And it feels fucking amazing.

"Merry Christmas, beautiful." The sound is warm and soft against my ear. Or perhaps it's just in my mind.

DOMINIQUE

I wake up with a startle.

“I can’t believe I fell asleep,” I mutter hoarsely, feeling drowsy, yet crisp at the same time. Awareness weaves through my mind in threads, from the unfamiliar bustle outside which forms a stark contrast to the quiet inside the room. Slowly opening my eyes, I am reacquainted with endless pillows around me, soft and plush combined with the numerous lace sheets covering my naked skin. Both in turn, create a shelter against solitude. My eyes slowly start to readjust as the unfamiliar room rapidly swims into focus. The fragmented, golden light of winter sweeps across it. There’s a feeling of panic, but as soon as it bubbles up, I catch it, keep it from flaring up, and put it down.

The windows have been opened, cold air blowing inside. Sounds from students laughing and chatting, from cars with running engines and just an overall tumult, invading the silence.

Christmas break has arrived.

I envelop myself with the soft sheets and wriggle toward the headboard, sit up and rub my eyes and temple.

“I can’t believe this,” I mutter.

They’re all gone, the beds of the cousins made, the room left behind in a pristine state. Squeezing my eyes shut, I fist my hands under the sheets. Gone to their perfect, rich and

happy family. Gone to their fancy villas at the beach and their exquisite wines and oils and creams.

I should have known.

I'm from the *other* side of town. Even Maxime told me as much that first day, in the canteen, when those cousins were already marking their territory like a pack of dogs.

Maxime... My head swivels back to the window and I hop out simultaneously. Shit, I hope he hasn't left yet.

I put on my clothes—*his clothes*—that lie in a neat pile on the chair next to me, grinding my teeth as I try to ignore how he's gotten rid of my brother's stuff. How he's left me to wake up by myself.

Gaël.

His name slides off my tongue like jelly, wraps itself around my heart like a velvet ribbon. Squeezing, patting, seducing. Owning. I have never felt something like this before, but right now, right here, all alone, I dare to admit it in a secretive whisper to myself.

"I'm falling in love with you."

I don't say the words out loud, don't want to hear myself break.

Not now.

Not at this part of the year, where Damien's death has plastered the remainders of the family together and moulded us into a farce. My aunt and uncle will be there, together with my grandma, sitting at the round dining table we only use for special occasions, like ceramic dolls. Pull the string and we will move, pull it again and we will eat, pull it down all the way and we will fucking laugh.

We. Will. Laugh.

Mon frère, tu me manques tellement.

After I'm assured that I'm leaving the room in a good state, I run back to my own dorm, ignoring the laughter around me. Maxime's still there when I get inside, his messy, ginger

head shifting my way at the sound of the door, and an instant smile on his face.

“Sunshine! Where the hell were you? I thought—His mouth falls shut, and I know what he’s thinking, but I won’t have any of it. Not now, because I may have missed him a little bit as well.

“I appreciate you,” I blurt, and I practically jog toward him, wrapping my hands around him in a clumsy hug. “And I’d love to join your chess club after our holidays if you’ll have me?” I mutter against his soft hair.

He chuckles, then pulls away a little, eyes widened, cheeks flushed. “Absolutely! We’d love to have you.”

“Yeah, will we hang out more?”

“I’d love to.” He swings a large, leather bag over his shoulder and pushes a suitcase to stand. “You’re sure you’re alright?”

“Yeah.” I push a hand through my messy hair. I haven’t combed it in two days. “I’m good.”

His gaze softens as he purses his lips, swallowing the question I’m sure he wanted to ask.

Will you be alright? Always.

Will you remember him? Always.

There’s a crack in the wall, flitting images of desire and piano sounds trickling through. Of blond strands and wicked smiles, of strong hands and soothing words.

But I can’t give in, guilt consuming me all at once.

“You are leaving, right?” Maxime asks to my surprise. “I mean—” There’s a knock on our door, followed by a, “*Monsieur* Maxime, I have the car waiting for you, sir.” Maxime lets out an exasperated sigh. “I’ve asked him to just call me Maxime for the past year.”

I snort out a laugh, because yeah, I wouldn’t know what that feels like. Does Gaël have personnel that call him “sir”? Do I want to call him—*no*.

Maxime approaches me and offers his cheek for a quick kiss, but before I can pull back, he wraps his hands around me, holding me firmly. “I can’t imagine what you and your family must go through, but please know that you have a friend here. You can always call me.”

“A friend.” I don’t mean to say the word out loud, but I do. It sounds a little awkward, but...nice. “I like it,” I blurt. Maxime grins, his freckles lighting up. I grin too, sheepishly, but suddenly so damn happy.

“I like it too,” he says. “So you’ll promise me that you’ll go home and celebrate Christmas? And that you’ll call me when you need to?”

“I—yeah.”

“Good.” He pats my shoulder again, the movement a little sluggish, but oh so nice. “Merry Christmas, sunshine.” And then he’s gone. Leaving me feeling great.

Leaving me feeling fucking awesome. I’m even feeling so fantastic that, for the very first time in forever, I don’t want to grab Damien’s bag and fill it with his clothes. I haven’t worn my own stuff for too long, but something tells me that they’d look differently, should I wear them now. Ripped jeans, leather boots, woolen shirts...

A smile tugs at my lips as I continue packing. They are nice thoughts, and Gaël’s clothes feel snug against my skin. I’ll probably have it draped around me every night, his solid reassurance.

After I’ve prepared my bags, I look at my computer. My studies. My research. The top drawer carries all the evidence of my thorough work—police reports, images, plans and that envelope. My hand hovers over my work of devotion, but I don’t touch. It stays there for four, five seconds, before I move my fingers and pull the drawer closed.

I’ve been here at Saint-Laurent for over three months, and the writer of that note has not come forward. “I won’t take you with me this time.” I mumble definitely.

By the time I scurry down the hall with my bag bouncing against my back, the narrow halls are pretty much deserted. Most people have already left. Outside, there are only two limo's left. I run over the driveway like my life depends on it, somehow managing to escape every single hole despite the shimmery light.

When I get to the fence, the first thing I see is the cherry-red 1982 Renault 9 that carries my parents. They are already waiting for me. I turn around one last time to eye Monterrey Castle—and my heart drops.

The building is lit up with lights. I know that it has been lit up ever since the days got shorter. But from here, right at the fence, right at the entrance of the property, I can see that the lights form the shape of a...

“A golden crow,” I murmur into the stale air. Fuck me.

“*Coucou, mon coeur,*” my mom gets out of the car and hurries toward me. I want to grab her by the shoulders and tell her to look—*look!*—but instead my eyes catch her frail shoulders and sunk-in eyes. She used to be so much more, with smiles and wit, but grief hasn't only stolen her son, but also her soul. Her hands clasp around me, cold and delicate, but the warm look in her gaze is genuine. It's soft, and loving, and so fucking *home*.

“Let me take a good look at you, *mon coeur*. Yes, you have changed, you have grown.” Dad peeks his way outside the window and grumbles, “Come on, get in the car, it's freezing out there.”

And just like that, I'm sitting in the back of your car again, *mon frère*. Like the past fifteen weeks didn't happen.

We sit in silence as we drive through the dark and ominous woods back toward the asphalted crossroad. Where all the big, fancy cars turn left to head for some fancy place, we turn right, toward the heart of Saint-Laurent. We're a mining town, complete with small houses, and cheap shops. At least we have a hospital, but its reputation is not great.

“How’s school?” Mom asks when we stop in front of our terraced house with its brown front door and peeled off paint, the small windows and broken stones that form the pavement. Some drunken driver crashed into the closest street lamp a few months ago, and the thing crushed and destroyed the stones it fell on.

“School’s good,” I mutter. “They still haven’t come to repair this?”

“You know what the mayor is like, that useless—”

“François,” Mom objects, then turns to me, a forced smile on her lips. “Come on in, *mon coeur*, you’re finally home.”

When she opens the door toward the living room, I halt, baffled, before I turn over my shoulder to eye Mom. “Decorations?” We didn’t have Christmas decorations last year, and I hadn’t expected them to be here this year. Now I’m feeling guilty that I’ve assumed.

Mom clears her throat, her eyes are shiny with tears. “Yes, I felt it was time to celebrate.”

“To celebrate what?” Dad grumbles, tearing at one of the silver garlands that hang in front of the window. “That our son is not with us?” He turns my way and I shiver.

Should have been you.

I lick my lips, the bag suddenly feeling heavy in my hand. “I, uhm, I’m going to go upstairs.” Practically jogging for the door, I already hold the knob in my hand when my mother calls out for me. I don’t turn around.

“I’m happy that you’re here,” she sobs. I flee upstairs.

Our bedroom hasn’t changed. My chest clenches when my eyes stare at Damien’s bed. It’s been made with the same baby blue sheets that have been on there ever since the funeral. He never used those, my brother, no. He had ridiculous sheets with football teams and action movies. It was a thing between him and the boys, to gift each other with the most ridiculous sheets.

No, these sheets are the ones from a grieving mama who lost her son.

My bed has also been made, but I recognize the navy blue sheets as my own, ratty ones. Around me the walls, the closets—his side, my side—nothing has changed. His stupid posters are peeled off on the sides, but it is as if someone has glued them back. Clung the past back into this space.

And yet, for the very first time after nearly two years, this room feels different. Less cosy, less home. I sit down on my bed and look across from me, the same way as I have done a million times, but no matter how I stare, the other side stays empty. My eyes sting and I need to swallow the bile away.

“Mon frère...”

“Oui,” I mumble, shifting my gaze to the piano that sits against the only empty wall. *“Je jouerai pour toi.”*

I shuffle forward, turning my back to the window, to the beds, to my entire history and face the only thing that has ever mattered in the past two years. It is a little dusty, but with a single blow most of the grime twirls away, giving space for my fingers. Inhaling deeply, I place them on the keys.

And then my phone rings.

I’m so surprised that I nearly jolt out of my chair. The only person to ever call me is sitting downstairs. I pat my pockets, and reach for it.

Your man.

My hand starts trembling and my stomach gives a treacherous flutter, but being here in this room, back to where it all began, where I am one with my past and my past is one with me, makes me feel on-edge.

“H-hello?”

“Are you home yet?” His smoothness rumbles. Yeah, it’s definitely fluttering in my stomach. They chase away the fear when I take in another deep breath and close my eyes, envisioning Gaël in his full glory. “Hmm?” He prompts when I don’t reply.

“Yeah,” I croak. I hesitate, then add, “You?”

“Nearly, beautiful, nearly at the sea. I’m sorry about the way I left you before, but our driver got there earlier than anticipated and you were sleeping so peacefully. So I exchanged numbers instead, wanna be your favorite stalker.”

“It’s okay,” I mutter, my free hand wiping at the now invisible dust on the keynotes. When I accidentally press one, Gaël’s voice halts.

“Are you in your room?”

“Yeah.”

“Alone?”

“Yeah.”

“Let me guess, you were going to play *Moonlight Sonata* by Beethoven.” His voice has gotten a little sharper, and if I wouldn’t know any better, I’d say that he sounds annoyed.

“I’m sorry,” I automatically say.

Gaël rasps out a chuckle. “No, you’re not. Tell me, beautiful, did you bring your bag upstairs, in your room?” I automatically look behind me, to the backpack that’s sitting on my navy-blue bed.

“Yes?”

“Open the zip at the back.”

“The back?”

“Yeah. Go on.”

I languidly get out of the chair and do what he says. To my surprise, there actually is a zip, since it’s a part of my bag I never use. When I slide it open, I find a sheet of music.

“*Gymnopédie No.1* by Erik Satie,” I read out loud.

“Yeah, *mon trésor*. My favorite piece. Will you play it for me?”

My throat becomes thick with emotion.

“*Mon frère...*”

“*S’il te plait?*” Gaël’s voice is soft, but there’s a persistence in it that I’ve come to recognize. That I’ve come to...fuck, I’m so gone for him.

“Yeah,” I breathe. Putting Gaël on speaker, I place the sheets in front of the piano. “It may be a little bit rusty since it’s the first time.” And because my heart’s profusely beating in my ribcage. But once my hands connect to my instrument, they live a life of their own. Butterflies, everywhere, the flapping of their wings in perfect harmony to the beat in my mind.

For Gaël.

The song is slow, elegant, a challenge in its simplicity. As I hear him breathe, I pretend to see him right here with me, his chest against my back. The song finishes but my fingers linger, my heart stuttering when the words escape my mouth. “I already miss you.” Gaël lets out a soft, breathy chuckle, and even if he can’t see me, my cheeks flame. “I didn’t mean—”

“I miss you too, beautiful. Your playing is divine.” There’s a noise in the back, followed by happy voices.

He’s home.

“I’ve got to go,” Gaël says. “Will you play for me again when I ask you to?”

“You know I will.”

“*Merci,*” he whispers. Then he’s gone.

*J*end up playing Erik Satie every night, together with Beethoven and some other of my favorites. Most of the time, Gaël’s on the other end of the phone. Sometimes he even stays on the phone when I am laying in bed, and helps me to sleep more peacefully. Though not even he can help me escape my nightmares fully. Being here, in this place that’s so connected to everything that is the core of my existence, is stronger.

My parents are still broken.

Damien's bed is still empty.

I still don't know how he died.

And with every day that passes, that fatal night comes closer. December 29.

We spend Christmas evening together with my aunt, uncle, and grandma. We sit at the round table and eat *foie gras*, and langoustines and lots of ice cream. I even end up having a few glasses of wine. My mother used to be a divine cook, and she really has tried her best this year. The others compliment her over her food, over the decorations, while my dad sits in a corner and grumbles his distaste. But the highlight of Christmas Eve is Gaël's soft voice in my ear when I'm finally lying in bed.

"...and then we took off all our clothes and dove into the sea. It has become our tradition, and afterwards you feel great. But the weather is so cold!"

It's late, the house silent, and I'm warmly tucked into bed, my back towards the rest of the room. It's just me and Gaël.

"Did the others see you naked too?"

He halts. "Does that bother you?"

"I—" *Yes.* "No, of course not." But it lacks conviction. Gaël's chuckle becomes more hoarse, and goosebumps cover my neck and arms.

"You know what I think?" He drawls. "I think that you want my naked body all to yourself." I want to protest, but my throat suddenly feels dry. "I think you want me to use you as my personal slave. Isn't that right, *mon trésor*?"

"I—" The rest of that phrase doesn't make it past my throat.

"Oh, and how I'd use you, beautiful. Make you kneel and wait, blindfolded and chained. Until I'm out of the water, naked and wet, being looked at by everyone, only to come back to you. I'd pull your mouth onto my cock and let you play with it while I dry off." Christ, my cock is pulsing in my

briefs, and a trembling hand creeps down to grab it tight. I have every intention to keep it down, but when Gaël continues talking, I'm not strong enough.

"I'd walk you back into the house like my favorite pet, Dominique. On all fours, a beautiful chain wrapped around your neck. Then I'd put you on my bed and fuck you slowly, and tenderly. Would you like that?"

"I don't know," I whimper. "Oh, fuck."

Gaël chortles. "That's what I thought, beautiful. Do you have your hand tightly wrapped around that gorgeous cock of yours?" I do, and it's furiously stroking, while I try to swallow my quivers away. His words...they are too much. They're intoxicating.

"The doors are open, Dominique, the doors of my room. Anyone can come in and see how I'm fucking you, gorgeous. They see how I've claimed you, my beautiful man, how I'm marking you with my hands, my teeth, my cock. I'd fist your hair and pull up your head, make you see how beautiful people think you are, how sexy you are when you're being taken."

My moans come out in dry puffs, because there are too many to absorb. Desire, thick and heavy, coils in the pit of my stomach while I wait for his next words.

"And then I'd let you come," he whispers. I mewl, getting out of breath, gripped by arousal. "Come for me, Dominique. Spill my name and your release."

"Oh," I choke. "Fuck, Gaël, I—" I unload in my hand as pleasure swallows me whole. My entire body is trembling, my throat catching up with the words that are formed out of desire. It's a whirlwind of emotions, until all is said and I'm left a messy, empty shell. With a stupid grin on my face. Because this was fucking amazing. And exhausting.

"I need to sleep," I mumble, "I'm so tired. Again." And it feels amazing.

"Then sleep," Gaël croons. "Sleep, *mon trésor*."

I close my eyes, the phone still tucked to my hand. My belly is sticky from my cum, but I don't care. Tomorrow I'll

clean up. Tomorrow I'll remember my past again, but right now...right here, is only the present. And perhaps the future. I listen to our mingled breaths while I drift off.

“Sleep, *mon trésor*.”

DOMINIQUE

It's funny how your mind can alter things so easily, turning them into untruths that form monstrous anchors in your life.

In *my* life.

The cabin in the woods I once made with Damien and the boys hasn't changed a bit over the past months. In my memory it was at least twenty meters high, and spacious, but in reality it isn't. Though, thanks to the steps we carved inside the tree, it sits a little over five meters in the air.

Inside the cabin everything still looks the same, and different at the same time. The blankets, drinks, marijuana, even the porn magazines, have all disappeared. But the carved messages are still here, a memory of a long gone life. There are lots of them, from stupid comments to drunken poems. And then there's the one we made together, a few months before he started at Saint-Laurent: "*Damien et Dominique.*"

I trace the names with my fingers. The wood feels raw, just like the wound in my heart. Before I can shed more tears, I look outside. The view from up here is different. Smaller, everything looks smaller from up here. Down there, the sand path we used to take with our bikes as we headed home, way past curfew. The thought brings a crooked smile to my lips. It was a shortcut that would take us straight through the woods past the church, behind Main Street and directly down by the stream. That last part of the ride always turned into a race Damien always won.

Straight back home.

I was so happy back then. I've often wondered when I fell through the rabbit hole. When did the bullying start? Was it when we noticed that I had a slight stutter when asked to talk in public, or when I entered the lycée without all my friends from the previous years?

I peer through the wooden groove and toward the other side of the sand path. Toward Saint-Laurent. I don't really know. What I do know, is that I used to think of that place, used to dream of obtaining a scholarship. Used to believe that if you tried really hard, you could truly change your destiny. *Le Prix d'Honneur* is what Arthur called it. He's wrong—on the *other* side of town, we simply call it a game of luck. Because there are plenty of talented students, but only one gets to win that ticket to a second chance. A better future.

Death.

Mom has tried really hard over these past days to make me feel at home. The food was great, the rest of the family was there, all pretending like we didn't see her emaciated shape and the dead stare in her eyes. Even the house looked like we were throwing a real party. Just like we used to, you know? Before, when we had a big Christmas tree that we'd decorate with my dad. When we exchanged gifts and candy. When we ate roasted chestnuts and drank hot chocolate.

That was before you died.

"*Desolé*," I breathe. "I don't mean to put this on you, *mon frère*, don't mean to search for you every time I'm sad and lost, too scared for this life. I don't want to call upon you just to grieve."

I need to find myself.

The phone shakes in my hands. I tried calling Gaël earlier, but for the first time since we have started our Christmas break, he hasn't picked up. I wonder what he's doing right now. It's dark over here, with the layer of fine snow making the woods look eerily bright. Black and white. Life and death.

Today it has been exactly two years since my brother died. Exactly two years that I sat up here in this wooden cabin, by

myself and a little bored.

Lights of torches, shapes of ghosts, as they dart around us through the forest. The sounds of howls, of cries, of slapping.

I've always wondered. Together with that dubious note and the writer of that message, I've always wondered if I involuntarily witnessed my brother's death. That thought is preposterous, since I didn't really witness anything, but after two years, it's still there.

What did I witness?

Those woods are school territory, and like the police told me, and Gaël confirmed, school was closed.

Still...fear had gripped me like a claw so tight that my body had gone rigid with agony. *Run, boy, run.* And I had, as if the devil was on my heels.

Shaking myself out of my murmurs, I dial Gaël's number once more. It rings, but like before, he doesn't pick up. He did mention that he was going out and wouldn't take his phone, but...I don't know. I guess I'd hoped that he would have taken it with him? That he would miss me as much as I miss him right now?

Annoyed with my own spiraling thoughts, I tuck the phone back into my pocket, promising myself that I won't call him again.

Besides, Gaël has been nothing but a distraction. I should have paid so much more attention to...*what?* To find that person who wrote me that note, and turned my entire world upside down?

"It was just a fling." I whisper into the cool air of our cabin. Suddenly I'm annoyed by the emptiness around me. "And what about you, have you forgotten about him yet?" My voice shrieks, sharp with pain. "Have you taken all your crap with you and cleaned up this place? Cleaned up your past and tossed Damien into the bin altogether?" The words leave my throat hoarse and my chest heaving. It's not fair, but still. Tears clutter at my eyes. "You were his friends, yet you have moved on, *all* of you. And you have left me here." A heavy sob

escapes from my throat. “You have left me here,” I weep. “You know what, you can all go and fuck yourselves.” I look outside the cabin and scream, “All of you! All of—”

There’s a cracking sound below me, followed by the sound of a hooting owl. My voice dries out immediately while my spine tenses on instinct. “I won’t let you scare me,” I whisper with a trembling voice and courage I most certainly don’t feel. “Not anymore.”

Until it does. Because the church bells choose that moment to start ringing, the booming vibration making me flinch.

One, two... *mon frère*, what happened to you?

Three, four... were you in those woods when I was in here?

Five, six...who killed you?

Torches in the woods. My moist eyes flicker, heart drumming in my chest as I look outside the cabin toward the flickering light.

Seven, eight... Who wrote me that note?

Nine, ten... Do they want me to find them?

Eleven... Are they telling the truth?

Torches...

Twelve... “I won’t let you fucking scare me, not tonight.”

I climb out of the cabin, and the frozen shrubs crunch under my feet as I make my way toward the light.

Two years ago, you were here, I know it now. *You were here.* Why?

My breathing follows a steady rhythm that matches my running legs as I pick up speed. I’m a good runner, and moreover, I’m on a mission. They won’t even see me coming.

Around here, the forest is dense, an unruly ensemble of fallen tree trunks, shrubs and plants. Still, I keep on running, somehow getting a grip on my fear as my physical conditioning takes over, propelling me toward the light. And

then, suddenly, the air is choked out of me, followed by a sting in my lower abdomen. I nearly fall over, nausea gripping me from the pain, and it takes me a few seconds to realize that I've hit a wooden fence that separates public land from the college territory.

And the torches are definitely on the *other* side of the fence.

"Fuck me," I mutter. I knew it.

With one solid swing I'm on the other side, breathing the sting away and picking up the pace. Still, my self-assuredness starts wavering, and with every step I'm more conscious of what is happening at this very moment. I'm on school territory during Christmas break, just like my brother was two years ago.

Is this what happened? Had he been in the cabin and seen the lights of the torches? Had he followed it through the woods just like I am right now?

Slowly but steadily, the denseness of the forest is becoming less, until finally, I hit an open space.

"What the hell?"

In front of me, rising from the shadows, stands a large glass building.

"There's an old glass house where we celebrate our end of year parties."

Gaël mentioned this building, but I hadn't paid any attention to his words. I'd been too focused on that fucking dungeon.

Still hidden between the trees, I stare ahead, mouth falling agape when I watch my surroundings. There are people here, walking around in cloaks, their bodies covered, their faces hidden behind masks. A few of them are carrying torches, while the other ones are standing around a...

"Horses," I whisper in awe. So Gaël was speaking the truth. I count two of them, beautifully dressed up in garments with blue and red colors. The cloaked figures are talking in

hushed voices, their appearance obscure, and for the slightest of moments I feel like I've somehow entered the scene of a film, before the seriousness of the situation hits me. Is this what my brother stumbled across? Is this...

"Hey!" Someone calls out. I'm not sure if he's talking to me, but I instantly duck my head and take a few steps back into obscurity. But I won't hide in the shadows anymore. Rather than running back into the woods, I walk toward the glass building.

It's magnificent, an old Atrium with high ceilings and lead decorations carved into the windows. I don't take the time to decipher their shapes and significance. I already know what I'll find.

I need closure.

The words echo through my core, its signification making me tremble. But I have waited for this moment for two years, and now's the time to understand the past.

And to change the future.

I slide into the open door without anyone seeing me, immediately welcomed by a sweet and delicate smell, mixed with a touch of evergreen wood at the same time—lavender. I'd recognize it anywhere.

Antique benches decorate the walls of the corridors of the Atrium, their wooden frames curled up toward the edges. Thick, purple cushions, matching the color of the lavender flower. On one of them lays a venetian mask, a golden one with moss green features, and I don't hesitate. I've snatched it off and caught it into my hand before I can change my mind. It slides perfectly on my face, the material soft and smooth.

Pots with plants stand everywhere, and when I dare peek toward the large dome of the building, I see the same—hundreds and hundreds of plants, both against the wall and hitting the ceiling, creating a wild bubble of flora. A wild bubble of...

The sounds of howls, of cries, of slapping.

"Oh my God," I whisper.

My feet start moving on their own accord, taking me further through the corridor and toward the opulent heart of the building. There are more people here, so many more people, all masked and cloaked.

My heart is beating frantically, but now's not the time to step down. Is this it, *mon frère*? Is this what you saw?

I halt on the invisible threshold, afraid that I won't find a way out once I'm in too deep. Around me, between the plants and onto the ceramic floors, are cushions and sofas. They are colorful, with thick and soft garments, clearly used for pleasure. Some people are kneeled, others are being used as furniture. My eyes sweep around, and freeze when they catch the sight of the piano—*my piano*—and I let out a soft whimper. Soft notes of some piece from Bach resonate through the room.

Gaël's here. He's got to be here.

My eyes burn as they flicker, as they try to understand, and then they search for the middle, for the stage. It stands high, carrying three people. Much like myself, two of them supervise the scene in front of them. Golden masks and black cloaks that are decorated with white fur.

Fuck me.

Bile forms a lump in my throat at the memory in the dungeon, and I swallow, but the thick feeling of dread won't go away. I feel a hot stare on my face and know instantly that I've overstayed. But it's too late to leave, because the one in the middle has his scorching gaze already on mine.

I need to get the hell out of here, but when he raises his cane...everything freezes. Including my thoughts.

"*Nous avons un invité,*" he booms, eyes still on mine.

I turn around, ready to bolt, but that won't save me. Not anymore. Surrounding me in a perfect circle, are cloaked people, their eyes dead behind their masks that seem to mock me with disdain.

I'm from the *other* side of town. The other side of the scale.

When I swivel my head back to the stage, I see three people approaching me, languidly and threatening, the man with the cane still in the middle. His mask doesn't cover his entire face. His lips, meaty and derisive, curl into an unpleasant smile and his eyes turn calculating.

“Well, if this isn't a pleasant surprise.” His voice is soft, lilting, yet somehow carries over the music still playing. A crow caws from somewhere above, before swooping low across the room, disappearing into the shadows. “I don't recall having any new joiners tonight?”

“How—” I shut my mouth on a click, but don't miss how his smile widens, turning wicked. I fell for his stupid question, and now people might recognize me by my voice. The thought startles me.

Do I know these people?

“We don't have any new joiners tonight,” someone else says. Following the sound that's softer, lighter, like there's a joke to be found in this drawled declaration, my eyes stumble across a tall frame with a mask that carries both silver and red features. His mouth is visible, and when he smiles, he shows perfect white teeth.

I recognize that tone...but this metamorphosis makes it impossible for me to think clearly. My thoughts are all foggy and wrong, past and present once more intermingled in some twisted play.

Another cloak pulls him off to the side, his dark eyes flitting to mine with a silent warning as he speaks too quietly for my ears to pick up. Then he makes a motion toward the door behind me. The circle breaks behind me, allowing me to leave. Their hot stares burn my back when I follow my unknown savior through the hall, but I block it out, focusing on listening to the soothing sound of his rustling robe instead. We leave the Atrium, and pass the horses as we make our way toward the treelines. I don't miss how they are now dressed in a blue colored caparison that matches the plumes on their head.

When my protector takes me into the woods, I hesitate. I look around, but no one is following us. No torches, no stirring between the shrubs. Is this how...

“You shouldn’t have come here.”

His smooth rumble makes my heart leap in my throat at the same time as butterflies flutter my stomach. “Gaël?” I practically pant, sounding out of breath. Maybe I am. Maybe the fear of what’s about to happen, how I may have been more distracted by him than I thought, is slowly gripping me into unconsciousness. “Are you—do you—” *Did you kill my brother?* “Are you a member of Alpha Fraternarii?”

He lifts his mask of luscious golden and blue and even in the darkness, I see his glimmering cat eyes and that black paint. “This—” he spreads his hands around him. “Is not meant for your eyes. Alpha Fraternarii is a *secret* brotherhood.”

“Who killed my brother? *You* killed my brother!” I don’t know who’s more surprised by the rawness in my voice. My heart breaks again, and again, and again. I’m spiraling, clenching my fists as I puff my way through the hurt.

“We’re a brotherhood created by our ancestors who formed the upper class in this country,” he goes on quietly, shifting his gaze downcast, “we’re—” He clasps his hands together, then spreads them apart, at a loss for words.

“Those masks, those cloaks. The s-sex,” I bite out, tears stinging in the corner of my eyes. “Gosh, I’ve been such an idiot.”

“I haven’t been with anyone else since you’ve been back in my life.”

“Back?”

Gaël shares a secretive, sheepish grin. “Back, yeah. Two years after we met at the church. It’s still kinda engraved in my memory.”

“No.” Taking a step back, I vigorously shake my head. “No, you don’t get to do this. You’ve done enough, distracting

me, s-seducing me.” The word doesn’t carry the same venom as I feel in my heart.

“That’s not true—”

“I don’t want to hear it.” My hands tremble viciously when I reach for the envelope in my pocket. The note is creased and stained with coffee. But the message is still as clear as day. Gaël doesn’t take the note, but simply reads the words. Or perhaps he looks at my trembling hands.

“You never told me if you were there when my brother died. No, the only thing you did was seduce me.” Anger rises at the memory, frustration colliding with the way we’re degrading that precious moment to something cheap and treacherous. “You did that. Telling me that I was talking too much, that I wasn’t ready. Ready for what?”

Gaël looks up, lifting the tips of his lips hesitantly, then leans forward to lift my mask. I hadn’t realized that I was still carrying it. He pushes a strand of hair behind my ear and wipes the tears off my cheeks. I hate him for being so gentle, for being so caring, for being such a fucking liar.

“Always your brother,” he mumbles absentmindedly. “Has this ever not been about him?” His fingertips trace the skin of my cheeks. “How can I ever compete against a ghost?”

I snort. “You make it sound like he was your lover.”

“He was worse,” he murmurs, his eyes darting between my eyes and lips. “He was your everything. Your shield and armour, your savior.” His fingers fall from my face and he looks away. “This is not your world, beautiful. This here, this school, these people...this place is a playground for the rich. This is where multi-million euro deals are made, even amongst students. This is where you won’t survive on your own.”

“You mean like a prison, but for the wealthy?”

“Yeah,” his emerald gaze is unblinking when he stares me right in the eye. “That’s exactly what I mean. Your brother... he had secrets.” He shrugs. “Perhaps that was his way of surviving Saint-Laurent, who can tell?”

“Did you know him?” I ask before he can continue.

Gaël's gaze goes from my eyes to my lips, then back up, as he visibly overthinks my question. "Not really. He hung out with the other scholarship kids. Played on the team."

"With Louis?" My mind is racing, claws reaching out to grab ahold of any piece of information I can get.

"With Louis."

"Why didn't you tell me?" More people are leaving the Atrium now, and excitement crackles through the air. My voice sounds hushed. "You talk of my brother and secrets, but you're the one keeping secrets from me. And why? You know that I'm hurting. If what you say is true, and you really care for me, then why would you keep me in the dark?"

"Because of this," Gaël answers without hesitation. "Because you and I come from different backgrounds and I had to think this through. Of how to tell you."

"How to tell me what?" I can't ask the obvious question, chest painfully clenching. I'm vulnerable, a blade in the wind, afraid of what he will say next. Of what he might admit. I don't think...I don't think that I could cope with that.

"It's not easy, beautiful." The cloak has fallen from his head, and Gaël brushes an impatient hand through his blond strands. "This is who I am. It's what I am. I wish there had been another way of sharing this with you, of making you see."

"See what? How you kill people?"

"That's not—" His face becomes a mask of exasperation, slowly morphing into anger. "Alright," he finally growls. "Your brother wins. Of course he fucking would. You wanna know how he died, beautiful?" His eyes shimmer ferociously. "You'd rather hide in your past than accept your future? With *me*?"

"That's not true," I want to say. But anger and pride prevent the words from being spilled. Because even if he is right, who the fuck does he think he is to take my truth away from me?

“I can show you,” Gaël continues, unaware of the internal battle in my mind that stills at his words.

My gaze narrows, brows scrunching up. “You can?”

“But you’ll be on your own, *mon trésor*. And I don’t want that, but if you choose your past, the words won’t soothe your bleeding heart. You’re here now, exactly two years after he died.” His throat clicks when he swallows. Then he whispers, “I wish you weren’t, I wish I could keep you on this side of the forest. But if you go... I won’t be able to save you, beautiful.”

“Save me?” I echo.

He nods. “From your fate.”

I look over my shoulder, eyes meeting the chilly darkness that’s eerily lit up with snowflakes. “Will my brother’s fate await me?”

There’s more tumult now, hoots and hollers reverberating through the forest. They give me goosebumps. Someone screams. A woman, judging by the high pitched sound. “*What’s going on over there?*” I ask myself.

“I can explain, if you let me. If you stay here, then I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

He’s right, it won’t be the same. It will never be the same. Like some pathetic martyr, I need to know what it was like. What it was like that night when my brother died. What it was like to be him.

“Choose, *mon trésor*.” Gaël’s voice is barely a whisper. Behind us, a horse prances and neighs. “Do you choose your past, or your present?”

“I need to know,” I whisper to myself, then roll my lips. Then, more firmly, I repeat, “I need to know.”

His beautiful eyes turn sober for a hint of a second, then he nods, and places both our masks back onto our faces.

“Then run. And don’t stop for anyone.” His voice is nothing but a whisper. Behind us, people are approaching. Someone holds a musket rifle, a helmet on his head. He’s still wearing his mask, but he’s gotten rid of his cloak.

Gaël shakes off the silky black material, revealing clothes identical to the ones around us. In front of the Atrium there's a chaos of people, white coats shimmering in the darkness.

It's...an army.

The horses are put in front of a chariot, and someone fires a musket. I hear them cheer.

"Tonight, we rewrite history!"

"Tonight's a battle," Gaël whispers. There's another scream, and this time, I clearly see someone in a red cloak running.

"Vive la France!"

"This is the French Revolution."

Oh my God. It's an army. The flags, the uniforms, the guns.

"We'll save what's ours!"

With a different outcome.

Gaël gives me one last, longing look. "You don't have to..."

But I do. I take in a deep breath. And then I run.

PART III

CRUSADE

Snow crunches below my feet as I break through the dense shrubs, heading toward the quiet of the night, the sound of craze following me on my heels. My breath starts to quicken, and I begin to wheeze when I hear the rustles behind me—people, *soldiers*—ready to hunt me down.

This is ridiculous, I want to say. Ridiculous. Stop!

“Please, stop!” His vision was hazy, and he blinked his eyes once, twice, but couldn’t see clearly. He shouldn’t have had so much to drink before, but this raw battle of confusion and need had brought him to doing it. It had tricked him into buying cans of beer at the grocery shop and heading for the wooden cabin.

It wasn’t enough. And now he ran for his life with a bunch of lunatics following him. He didn’t know where he was going, had lost track a long time ago. The only thing that mattered was him. His lover. The one he needed to see. And now he was lost, even more so than before. And he was about to lose some more.

Lay off the road, I tell myself. Lay off the—a horse gallops over the sand path, the white coat of his rider floating in the breeze of their speed, melted as one. The horse is decorated in blue and yellow, the colors of the French flag before the Revolution took place. Who knows it would have been the color of our flag today, had history turned out differently

We. Rewrite. History.

Stupid rich fucks.

The rider doesn’t see me, but he swings his head around, the piercing eyes behind that mask no doubt catching all movement. Someone screams from the other side of the track, a cutting sound, and my heart stutters in my chest.

“Whoa,” the rider grates, and pulls on the reining animal’s leash, moving it into a sliding stop. And then they stand still in the middle of the path like some dark ghost, while the rider searches around in a frenzy, obliging me to do the same thing.

And so the frosty woods waits, and the stale air lets out a long sigh. Leaves creak, tiredly, under the weight of the snow.

I wait, but the scream doesn't reappear.

He wondered how long he'd been running, clothes and skin torn from the sharp thorns around him. If he hadn't been so drunk, it would probably hurt like a motherfucker. In his current state though, it didn't do anything to take him out of his numbness, his stupor. At least these bushes provided some shelter from the craze around him, the hoots and hollers and running people in ridiculous outfits. They provided him shelter from this danger zone.

God, he was so lost. Had been for the past months.

Danger zone.

He tried to laugh it away, this lunacy. After all, there was no real danger, and they all fucking knew this. This wasn't more than some sick game, a fraternity taking their new members to town before they'd do their final pledge.

The rumble in his mouth felt forced though. This wasn't funny. He should have stayed at home.

Home... thoughts of before, of dinner, swirled through his head. His brother had played for him, like he always did. The piano soothed him, their dynamics a reassurance. He was his baby brother's hero. The one who'd slay his demons and make his parents proud. He was loved.

"I'm going home," he muttered through his drunken haze, tears clotting in his eyes. "I'm going to sober up, and forget all about you." He came out of the bushes, hands in the air, and barked, "Whatever this is, I'm out. I'm giving up." The thought made him chuckle, the irony of the situation peaking its way through toward the surface. Stupid fraternity houses with their ridiculous group behavior. Thought they ruled the world. "I'm—fuck!"

He heard them before he saw them.

Lights of torches, shapes of ghosts, as they dart around him through the forest. The sounds of howls, of cries, of slapping.

The galloping horse. And his rider who held a musket rifle high in the air. They were coming right at him.

I'm the first one to break the silence of our wait, teeth clattering fiercely and limbs locking up. I need to move.

The rider's still focused on the other side of the path, and I take my chances.

Quiet is the night.

To those who remember. To those who elicit those moments and carry them like inscriptions in their hearts, their minds, their souls.

To those who despair.

He meandered over the path, too tired to think. Alcohol poisoned his mind, and made his movements sluggish. His love...

The rider clucked at his horse, chasing his speed further, and he winced at the sound, knowing that they'd close in on him. They'd catch him.

And then what?

"This is not real," his hazy mind begged. "It's just a game."

But he could feel the hot breath of the horse in his neck, could feel his silky nose against his nape. Right?

The sand path came to an abrupt end, followed by a sudden decline, hidden behind bushes. He stumbled, felt himself float for a moment as his feet could no longer keep up with his increased speed. He was tumbling, faster and faster, the horse long forgotten as more thorns carved into his skin.

It stung, and bled, and then he fell forward, at the end of the decline, and into the water of a lake.

"It's so beautiful," he wondered for just a second, before his head fell under the freezing water. And it froze his limbs so fast, as tears intermingled with the ice cold. It surrounded his face and shoulders, crept up around his torso and stomach. And he fell deeper, sucked in by gravity, his body heavy and lethargic, unable to make the water stop.

Stuck, he was stuck.

Thoughts spiralled around him, like fresh snowfall, scattering and elusive. All around him. His breathing stopped, and the panic came. And then there was peace.

His arms no longer fought, and his mind grabbed hold of its thoughts.

“Joue pour moi, mon frère.”

DOMINIQUE

Around me, people are hooting and cheering, but I try to shut it out. My mask itches and my body is frozen. But this is far from over.

Is this what Gaël wanted me to see? What people are capable of when operating in a group?

“*You’ll be on your own.*” He said.

I can do that. I’m good on my own.

Suddenly the horse passes me on a gallop, the rider clearly searching for someone as he encourages his horse to go faster—until he suddenly drives off the path and into the shrubs. He shouts something, and then a woman screams. The sound morphs into laughter, and he clearly finds what he’s looking for when I see him throw a woman onto the back of his horse. Facing him, she takes off her red cape, and her blond curls bounce across her cheeks when she leans in and kisses him.

“It’s a game,” I tell myself. But my feet pick up, needing to leave this scene, this *world*. I’m from the *other* side of town, I remind myself, and it’s time to go home.

The problem is that I’m completely lost. I am sure that I haven’t come this way, but there’s no way that I’m turning back and risking participating in their game.

The vegetation changes a little here. There are more bushes with thorns, and when the shrubs become too dense, I decide to head back to the sand path. Carefully, I keep on

walking, head dipped but ears pricked, until the path abruptly stops.

Scrunching my brows, I look up, right ahead of me, toward the ominous shapes of plants. My skin prickles, awareness slowly crawling through me like a hissing snake. There's the unmistakable, croaking sound of a frog, and when I listen carefully, I hear a soft crackling sound.

Water.

My hands blindly work their way through the shrubs, feet catching up rapidly with the sudden decline. I walk and walk, heart slamming frantically against my chest. And then it's there—the lake.

And I just *know*. This is it, this is the place...where...

Stumbling forward, I approach the frozen water, eyes blindly searching for something—*anything*—that I know I won't find.

“Oh, Damien.” His name leaves my mouth before I can inhale another puff of air. “What have they done to you?”

I reach the shore when my knees buckle, and I fall forward, hands catching the layer of ice. The water is frozen, a shimmery shape of misery surrounded by trees. A crow caws high above me, its appearance visible in the reflection of the water, his dark shape stretched out as it splays itself into the midnight sky.

Inside me, I feel this intense need to claw at the ice, to break its frozen layer and to fight the water. Fight the strength and atrocity the same way as it took Damien into a chokehold, kill that strength that has brought him down.

Somewhere deep inside me, I know that this isn't enough. It will never be enough. There are still too many riddles. But at least it's something.

My eyes burn, matching the scorching heat of my grief, and I blink them, letting the tears roll down my cheeks, only to be caught by the corners of my lips. I lick them away, mouth trembling, and a sob breaks free. It must be the cracking of my heart.

And it's the cracking of something else. I flinch, turning around, and catch a glimpse of a cloaked figure wearing a mask.

This is no soldier.

He's standing at less than ten meters, watching me in silence.

"Who are you?" I ask, voice surprisingly firm. He doesn't reply, but just stares right at me. In the background we can both hear the rest of the group, and I fiercely try not to think what Gaël is doing right now. "Did you know my brother? Wait!" I call out in desperation when he starts walking, and doesn't stop. "Wait up, please. I need to—" My voice breaks, but I'm too wound up to follow him. Too scared to be caught in their game.

When I turn back to the lake, I realize that I never want to leave this place again. Ever. I want to stay here, with the shadow of my brother, because the rest of the world is too much for me. Too much to handle.

"I'm afraid," I confess on a breeze. "And I hate myself for it." The lake cracks a little. "If I give him my heart... I can't break my heart again, I won't survive." I take in a deep, shivering breath, then let it out in one solid, frozen sigh. "I want to stay here, with you, but—"

The sounds of the battle are getting closer, bringing me back to reality. Their play isn't over yet, and who knows, maybe they've only just begun? I need to be out of here.

"Mon frère, je reviens. I'll come back for you."

When I make my way back through the shrubs, nasty thorns scratch me numerous times, tearing at my brother's cheap winter coat. But I won't stop, won't become prey to their filthy games. After quickly retreating back on the sand path, I blink my eyes, trying to understand the scene that's unfolding in front of me. The woman with the red cloak is laying on her back, with three guys around her, taking their turns as they fuck wildly into her. They're teasing her,

laughing with her, and, to my surprise, she seems to be enjoying every part of it.

“Hey! There’s another one!” Someone calls out. It’s enough for my feet to start moving rapidly, a fresh wave of panic hitting me square in the face. But somewhere, something deep inside me dies. And maybe something else is being born. Because I’m trapped. I’m trapped inside my head, and inside this forest. And it’s time to break free.

They won’t have me.

Around me, I now hear it clearly. *Lights of torches, shapes of ghosts, as they dart around us through the forest. The sounds of howls, of cries, of slapping.*

Not ghosts, but people. Members of Alpha Fraternarii, students of Saint-Laurent, hunting people down for their own pleasure. Is this their final pledge?

Someone moans, and I catch sight of another red-cloaked woman kneeling while someone fucks her from behind.

Is this what Gaël meant with my fate? I won’t have someone rape me like this.

I stumble and nearly fall, hissing as my hand gets caught by thorns. But I won’t stop. I need to get back to *my* part of town.

Another crow caws, followed by the sound of hoots, and I hear it from the river cawing once again, toward the silence, sweeping up my scattered thoughts as I fight my way out of this game of theirs.

It seems that I have lost track of the path that I carved out.

Until I recognize the path. *There.* Taking in a deep breath, I run toward the wooden fence that will mark the end of school territory. It’s not far now, roughly twenty meters, but still I startle when two cloaks appear from the bushes, one carrying a rifle musket.

“It’s fake!” I yell at myself, but his grin sure isn’t. They are fast runners, chasing me, making my heart swell with dread.

“Wanna find out?” One of them sneers. They’re blocking my path now, and my brain stutters when I run out of solutions. “Kneel, bitch, let me take care of you.”

A loud neighing sound of a horse catches us all off guard. Not one, but two horses come galloping, carrying their riders on a cloud of black cloth. One of my attackers laughs, the sound morphing from elation to...consternation? We all watch as the horses come closer, not losing speed as they do, and for the strangest of moments I fear that they will overrun me.

Wake up.

When they finally stop, they’re on either side of me, leaving me a panting mess.

“I just want to go home,” I hear myself beg, hating every word. Loving every word at the same time. *Home.*

One of the riders reaches out his gloved hand. When I don’t take it immediately, he lets out a low growl, then shakes it in the air. *Take it.*

I do, not really having a choice at this point. The fence is out of reach, and I’m surrounded by the four of them. What would Gaël think when he sees me again, being consumed by my own fate? I can’t imagine that my brother was used for pleasure.

The rider gestures to me to get up, and with his help I hop onto the horse. Sort of. I’ve never sat on a horse before, so I’m feeling a little funny when we start moving. He presses his front against my back, his hands on the reins.

“Ready?” He asks with a low voice. And when I’m still figuring out where on earth I heard that voice before, we start moving, faster and faster. The horse’s feet are off the ground during the suspension phase, and it’s thrilling to feel like we’re flying.

The rider snakes a hand around my waist, and then the horse jumps. Oh my God, definitely flying. It’s only afterward, when I start recognizing my surroundings, that I realize he crossed the wooden fence. We’re riding in public territory

now, and with every step we take, we're nearing the church a little more.

"Who are you?" I ask, knowing that my time's soon up. "What *is* this, this play?"

Unsurprisingly, he doesn't answer. Instead, he encourages his horse to pick up speed. Judging by the sounds, the other horse follows us closely. We ride, reaching *la voie verte* and follow it all the way to the church.

The first thing I see are the lights that shimmer out of our tree. For the briefest of seconds, I think that the place is on fire, but when the horse stops at the wooden cabin and the rider points in the air, I know it isn't that.

We both look up toward the light, then back at one another. Behind us, the second horse arrives with a loud neigh, the rider making a show of sliding through the loose sand.

Now I know.

The rider smiles at me, full lips crooked into an arrogant smirk.

"Gaël?" My eyes fly up to the sky again, heart beating faster as treacherous impatience forms a ball in the pit of my stomach. To see him, my Gaël, to be with him, to talk to him. Then I turn back to the two riders. "I know who you guys are. There are not many guys out there as arrogant as you two are." His smile widens. "I thought you hated my guts."

"Oh, we will if you hurt our cousin," the second rider grumbles. *Louis*. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to hunt down my piece of ass." He clacks at his horse, leaning forward and rides off into the darkness.

Arthur hesitates. I feel he wants to ask something, but finally he just helps me hop off the horse. When I'm back on both feet, he dips his head and our eyes meet. Despite the mask, I feel his unease.

"If you need something," he finally mutters, "all you have to do is call."

"Call?" I frown.

He smiles, his usual cockiness replacing the earlier awkwardness sleekly. “Gaël put in both numbers. He always does.”

“You always come in a package?” I dare to say, surprising us both. Arthur tilts his head back and lets out a laugh, the raspy sound pleasant and open. “Wouldn’t you like that?” It’s not a question, but this is...fun. This innocent banter during this heavy night. “Go and see him,” he finally says, jutting his chin up toward the cabin. “He was worried sick about you.” When I don’t make an instant move to leave, I get a glimpse of his twinkling eyes. “Yeah, I see it now,” he murmurs, “Why he likes you. Go now and I’ll finish off my night.”

I listen to his sounds fading away, until I’m left alone with my thoughts. But not for long, because my body’s caught the sweetest anticipation there is. The smell of lavender and smoothness, the sound of sweet words wrapped in hoarseness, and the touch of sculpted dips and valleys. The sight of white teeth and green eyes, of platinum hair, casually swept aside, of the flames.

Tiny candles have been put inside the cabin, giving the place an intimacy only Gaël can give.

“Hey,” he mumbles when I make my way inside. He’s still wearing his uniform, the fur coat tightly wrapped around his luscious body. His teeth clatter a little, making his smile even more beautiful.

“Hey.” I plop down across from him, suddenly feeling self-aware of the state of the cabin. “This place isn’t—” Gaël gestures to me to come and sit next to him. I do with an awkward clearing of my throat, feeling shy and content at the same time when he pats the empty, wooden spot next to him.

I sit down, but he doesn’t let me finish my apology. Instead he turns to me, cupping my chin with his thumb and forefinger. His eyes roam over my face, searching for something he can’t seem to find. Because his smile becomes a little wider, a little more wicked, as he becomes the man I’ve come to know over the past months.

The man I’ve fallen so hard for.

“So you got out.” It’s nothing more than a low whisper.

“Your cousins saved me,” I admit. I bite my lip, not missing the way his eyes catch the movement, irises widening while his stare definitely turns predatory. “And I found the lake.”

The words linger in the cool air, wrapped up in silence. He doesn’t speak, just looks at me. His cold fingers leave hot traces on my skin, and I want him close —*closer*—every moment of the day. Always. It’s a...startling thought.

“The lake,” he finally mutters, and I hold my breath.

“Yeah.” His fingers trace the lines of my bottom lip and I shiver, because his touch is perfection. It always is perfection. It’s sweet and soft, firm and solid. He claims me, every time, and it makes me feel delirious.

Gaël takes in a deep breath, eyes never leaving mine. And then he starts talking. “Alpha Fraternarii was created as a reaction to the French Revolution. It was a way to protect the elite who hadn’t left the country, but who had come here, to Monterrey Castle. Our ancestors. A way to form a brotherhood based on mutual values. There’s nothing malicious about our intentions even though our initiations might suggest differently.”

“Nothing malicious...” I snort. “And what about the cloaks? The masks? And tonight, you were hunting people! I mean, what do you do to those you catch? No—” I discard my own comment with a wave of my hand. “I *know* what you do to them.”

“They are professionals, if that makes you feel any better. Sex workers who have signed an NDA in which they have agreed to our terms and conditions.”

My head jumps up. “And you? Did you—” Oh my God, I don’t want to know.

“No.” He supplies with a single shake of his head. “I told you before, I haven’t been with anyone since you walked back into my life.”

I let those words slump inside my brain, try not too hard to fall even deeper for him. I need the rest of my answers.

“The lake. It’s where my brother died.” It’s not a question, those softly spoken words, it’s a conclusion. I look up and catch his gaze. He looks sad. “How?”

He hesitates only briefly, before he cracks. “Your brother,” Gaël draws, “came here on this night, exactly two years ago. We call this night the *Réinvention*, it’s where we change the past and rewrite history. In our altered version, the revolution gets struck down by the elite. Tonight we also officially welcome our new brothers, who have passed their rituals and have just made their pledge. In the Atrium,” he adds softly. He clears his throat. “Much like yourself, your brother appeared onto the scene when we were about to go to battle. He was so drunk I wonder how he even got here, how he even made it from this place all the way to where we were. He seemed... lost. Like he was searching for someone.”

My ears perk up at those words. “Someone? For who?”

Gaël sighs. “I don’t know.”

“I don’t believe you,” I snap. His hesitant silence fuels my frustration. “You’re lying.”

“Never.”

I open my mouth to protest, but he places his palm in front of it. “I found him in the lake.” All air gets sucked out of me. An animalistic whine fills the air, and it takes me a moment to realize that it came out of my throat. I’m crying. “I found him, *mon trésor*, floating on his stomach. I was too late, he’d already drowned.”

“No.” I shake my head vigorously, ignoring the hot tears that roll down my cheek. “That’s not enough. You don’t get to say it like that, you don’t. It’s not enough—How the hell did he end up from the Atrium by the lake? Did you make him run, like you made me run tonight?”

Gaël’s eyes are red rimmed, his make-up smeared. It should make him look ridiculous, yet somehow it makes him even more alluring. He opens his mouth to speak, then closes

it again. When he finally talks, his voice is nothing more than a whisper. “I don’t know who he came to see, beautiful. But there must have been someone. After his...death...no one ever spoke about it again. It was a horrible accident, an embarrassment to the brotherhood.”

I let out a broken sniff. “Because you made him run, didn’t you? You made him run even though his body was intoxicated?”

“I didn’t—I don’t know. Not me, I would never have done such a thing.”

“But someone did. And he ran.” Remembering my own chase from before, we must have crossed paths in time, I’m sure of it. We must have taken the same trail, gotten stung by the same thorns, as we attempted to hide.

“I found him,” Gaël repeats softly. “Together with two other brothers, we got him out of the water, where I performed CPR.” He looks up at me, green, smeared eyes wet with tears. “I tried to bring him back to you, beautiful, I did. But he was gone. I left him under the large oak tree in the front garden to be found.”

I swallow, heartbreak clawing into my deepest core. Choking, my hands reach out to where Gaël is waiting for me. His arms find my shoulders and he pulls me in, brings me close, holds me tight. His warm breath in my neck is soothing, comforting as it consumes me, slowly, bit by bit. Until I’m left intermingled with everything Gaël resonates.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I blurt, my lips still connected to his neck. My voice carries louder than I expected, silencing the room, leaving nothing but the crackling of flames and distant roar of wind to fill the space.

“They say that time heals all wounds,” Gaël mutters. “You weren’t there yet. You were hurting too much, caught in your own, personally created, hell. You would never have believed me.” He pulls back just enough for me to catch his hot, burning stare. “And perhaps because some narcissistic part of me wanted you to see tonight. The hunt. Alpha Fraternalii. I need you to understand that what happened to your brother is

not how we operate. It's not who we are." He lets out a deep, rattling sigh. "God, I know that sounds fucked up. I just—" He swallows, looking vulnerable with his glittering skin and smeared make-up. "I decided back in September that you were going to be mine. When I met you two years ago, there was something so pure, so innocent about you. That must come across as strange, but it's the way I function. And there might be many things for us to discover and I'm sure you have many questions to ask. But you were meant to be mine, meant to be taken care of by me. I'll be good to you, beautiful. I'll give you what you need."

"I—" I'm at a complete loss of words. My eyes flutter and more tears roll down while my mind's trying to keep up with his words. My body's hurting, chest heaving as I breathe through the horror that is my loss. But my body's humming with need, throbbing with the possibility to be soothed by the most fascinating man I've ever met.

"Will you please forgive me, my love?" Gaël breathes.

"I want to," I confess. "So badly. I'm so tired."

"I know, beautiful." His hands press my mouth even closer to his nape. "I know you are."

We stay like this for a long time, our bodies clasped together, while we watch the flickering candles. Outside, the sounds fade until the quietness of the night takes over.

The battle has finished. The brothers have pledged, the revolution has been lost.

The elite will live on.

"I beg you to forgive what's done," Gaël whispers into the stale air. "You can't change your past. Don't let it torment you anymore."

My limbs hurt. My head hurts. "I'm so cold," I whine. His lips against my skin curl into the tiniest of smiles. But he won't move, my sweet, wicked Gaël. Because he first needs me to crack and bend a little closer to him. The corners of my mouth lift at the thought. He's not the only one who knows. "Will you help me forgive?"

This time he lets out a smile, and his arms give me a squeeze. He's won yet another round, and he knows it. The difference though? This time, I wanted him to win.

"Toujours."

GAËL

It's peaceful here, in this place high in the trees. Quiet now that the festivities have finished at the other side of the forest.

The afterparty is always so good.

Elder Jacques and our nameless brothers will wonder where I am, but thankfully I know Arthur and Louis will cover for me.

We always protect one another.

We've been sitting here for a while now, after checking the time. I blink through the darkness, and watch yet another flame die out. Outside the darkness has reached its peak way back, and early rays of sunrise trickle through the trees, gingerly replacing the golden flickers inside the cabin.

Scrunched up against my shoulder, Dominique lets out a soft purr, rubbing his forehead against my collarbone. A deep sigh of contentment settles in my core, and I squeeze the blanket even closer around him.

I'd rather bring him back to school, to my dorm to be precise. Sprawl him onto my bed and rub my oils into his delectable skin, massage the worry and hurt right out of his core and replace it with something sweeter, something hopeful. Something like our future together.

But he'll refuse, I know he will. And then this precious moment will be gone. I don't want it gone. And so I close my eyes and relish in this given moment, this given flash of time.

“I’d show you his headstone,” Dominique mumbles a little while later, surprising me. I’d somehow assumed that he’d fallen asleep, but judging by the way his breathing doesn’t change, he never was asleep to begin with. He was probably caught up in his maze of thoughts, like he often is. “But I don’t want to.” Slowly, he peers up, coffee-colored eyes searching mine, together with a hesitant smile. “I mean, maybe I will, one day. But not now. There’s something I need to tell you. I... I’m in love with you.” The words tumble out of his mouth, laying himself bare to me. His eyes turn wide and I stop his panic with my soothing mouth when I press soft kisses onto his.

“Me too,” I breathe against his lips, needing to reassure him before he can retreat. “I feel sorry for those who don’t believe in love at first sight, because I can honestly say that it’s the best thing in the world. The bewilderment—” I drop another sweet kiss onto his lips, “the feeling of euphoria—” another kiss, this one a little longer and more demanding, while he grabs me tighter until I’m practically sitting on his lap. Outside the birds chirp their morning song, the snow creaks and stretches as the sun reaches the horizon. “I seriously didn’t think I was going to see you again,” I mumble. “And here you are. Feisty, mysterious Dominique. You made it through the night...tell me what it is you want to do to the guy you’re in love with.” I gently tilt his head back and his eyes collide with mine. “Hm? What is it you desire most?”

His cheeks flush, and he swallows thickly. But he doesn’t back down. “I want to make love to you,” he whispers.

“Make love to me, huh?” My voice takes that raspy tone I know he likes. He does, eyes fluttering when his cheeks flame a little more. He’s gorgeous like this, but my greedy, malicious self wants more. I want to play my beautiful Dominique like the precious instrument he is.

“You were my first,” he tells me.

“And I’ll be your last,” I growl. The idea that someone else...no. “Let’s go.”

“Go, where?” He asks. Still he helps me put back everything I brought up here in my bag.

“To my bed.” We climb down the cabin and into the crisp morning sky, to where the woods look peaceful.

“Gaël—”

“No, Dominique. You can’t just say things like that and then take off. If you need to text your parents and tell them you won’t come home, be my guest. But you’re coming back with me, and I’ll let you play.” His eyes widen and he licks his bottom lip. *Gotcha*. Moving forward, I brush a strand of hair behind his ear and whisper against his flush skin, “That’s what you want to do, beautiful? Want me to lie down on my table for you?” He clears his throat, but no words come out. I push him forward, to where the car is waiting by the church. “I’ll let you, *mon trésor*. I’ll let you nibble and suck every inch of my skin. Is that what you want?” His breath hitches, and he lets me manhandle him into the car, the door being held open by our butler. Dressed like always in an impeccable black suit, he dips his head when he sees me, followed by a, “Sir.”

Once we’re inside the car, I don’t waste any precious time, straddling Dominique’s thick thighs immediately. Moving forward to catch his bottom lip between my teeth, I make sure to grind into him, hitting the perfect spot. He lets out a desperate whine that sends sparks straight through my cock, that’s filling impatiently. “Tell me, beautiful, tell me what you’re going to do to me,” I mumble against his lips. He moans when I keep on rocking into him, and I sweep my tongue once more inside his mouth, eating his whimpers as if they are my favorite meal.

“I want you to ride me,” he confesses. His pupils are dilated, and his voice sounds low with desire.

“Then that’s what we’ll do.” Fuck, yeah. That sounds like the best way to spend our free time together.

By the time we make it through the woods back to Monterrey Castle, it’s nearing six in the morning, and most brothers have already left. Some may do the same thing as I, stay here for an extra day for full recovery, before heading

back home for the rest of the Christmas break. Louis already texted me before to say that they went back home, and that this year's "*Réinvention*" was a great success. No doubt, that means that both my cousins had their fair share of the prize.

One male escort sure as hell wasn't enough.

A few limos linger in front of the prestigious entrance, and when our butler parks the car in one of the designated parking spots, we sit and wait. Dominique's still on his phone, shoulders hunched, nibbling on his lower lip as he types away. When he finally looks up and catches us staring, his cheeks flame.

"Sorry, I didn't—"

"You ready?" Blocking his apology, I hop out of the car as soon as he's sent me a little nod.

"She was worried," Dominique mutters when we walk through the crunching gravel toward the large reception hall. Claude, the porter, sends us a clipped nod when he keeps the door open for us. "My mother," Dominique clarifies. We walk side by side through the narrow corridors, and I silently take his hand. "She was worried," he continues. "She'd been waiting for me all night."

"I can imagine." Taking the stairs, my excitement increases. Here I am, during Christmas break, in school, with Dominique. He has experienced the "*Réinvention*", albeit as a Commoner, but still. We spent most of the night together in his wooden cabin, and we've actually *talked* about some things.

I am carefully positive.

Opening the door to my dorm, he walks through it and, inside the room, his eyes hone in on my bed. The place he woke up when I was already gone. I shove that part of my thought away, preferring to point out that the last time he was at school, he awoke here, in my room.

When I close the door behind me, he turns around, facing me. His coffee-colored eyes glance at me, laced with worry. Then he lets out an uncomfortable chuckle.

“I’m a real disaster, I’m afraid. I—I...it’s not too late to change your mind, you know?”

I take a step forward, slow and measured. “Why would I do that?” He gives me a sluggish shrug of his shoulders, then looks at his feet. “Why would I want anyone else, after we have declared just how much we are in love with one another? Hm?”

He looks up, eyes wide. “Because I’m such a hot mess, Gaël. I’m afraid, all the time. And I fucking hate myself for it.”

“You’re not always afraid.” I take one last step and watch how the back of his knees hit the bed. He tumbles down with a yelp. I expect him to jump off and out of my room, but he doesn’t. Instead he leans onto his elbows and into my words, head cocking as he soaks up their meaning. “You were not afraid when you ran through the forest last night, though as a total outsider that shit must have been terrifying. You were not afraid when you faced that lake, nor when you were put onto a horse and brought to me.” I take my time taking off the fur coat, then peel off the layers of my traditional, French uniform, until I’m standing in nothing more than my lace briefs. Dominique watches me, throat bobbing. “You were not afraid to hear the truth of what happened to your brother.” Opening the top drawer of my bedside table, I take out the bottle of lube and the ribbon of pink silk. “And you certainly weren’t afraid to choose your future, with me.”

Crawling onto the bed and atop his large frame, I dangle the narrow strip of material right into his sight. He eyes it suspiciously, his deep brown eyes a shade darker when he licks his lips. I chuckle, then start unrolling the fabric. “I wouldn’t call this fear, this jibbery sensation that’s floating through your core. But you’re definitely shaking. So I think this might work to calm your nerves. You trust me, beautiful?”

“What?” His gaze flicks up. “I mean, yeah.” He sighs. “Yeah.”

Sitting down by his feet, I lift the ribbon. “I am going to clear your mind by tying up your hands, your legs. The only

thing you have to do is lay here in your full, breathtaking glory, and tell me how you're feeling. How does that sound?"

His eyes reflect his inner turmoil, teeth grinding, jaw ticking, gaze darting. And then he nods. No words, just a single nod of the head. It's thrilling, this small victory that comes from his desire to trust me, to give in. *To submit.*

"I need your words, Dominique." In my world, no communication is no consent, and I want him to understand what we're about to do. He falters, eyes blinking a few times. Then he nods again.

"Yes." It comes out on a rasp.

"Thank you," I breathe, and I mean it. "I want you to understand something, beautiful. If you want to stop, or if you are feeling any kind of discomfort, you need to tell me. You tell me to stop. Do you understand?" He nods, and I tilt his chin with my index finger. "Words, please."

"I—understand."

"What do you understand?"

"I can say stop," he rushes.

"Exactly, when you say stop, I untie you, and everything stops."

"Alright." He gives me a timid smile, and something stirs inside my stomach, making my cock jolt. "And no one can come in?" He swallows, eyeing the door. Dominique is sweet, really sweet. And shy.

"No one can come in. Look." I take a few languid steps until I reach the door, then try the door handle. "You see? It's locked."

I use the occasion to light up some more incense and put up some soft music, giving him time to get used to the idea of getting tied up by me. Or perhaps I'm getting used to the idea myself, since I need my cock to behave. But the thought of what I'm about to get is enough for my slit to spread some more pre-cum on the delicate lace.

Dominique's lying on his back, his breathing going fast, chest pumping air in tense puffs when he eyes me. He's suspicious again, his earlier courage clearly disappeared.

"Let's clear your mind, beautiful," I croon, then rub my hands over his limbs, making him feel the material of the silk ribbon. The pink glow shines softly against his smooth skin. "Right now, there's nothing you *have* to do. You can just lay there, and relax. Can you do that for me?" My fingers pry at the material, unravelling the ribbon until it falls open like a soft ripple of pink colors.

Dominique swallows, throat bobbing as he watches my every movement. "Yes."

"Good."

I take my time knotting his ankles, tying them to the table, then begin to rub my hands over his legs, up to his thighs. His cock is straining, hard and leaking, but I ignore it for now. "Not too tight?"

"No." He experiments with his tied feet, wiggling them a little. I haven't tied them too tight, because the real pleasure doesn't come from immobilizing him. No, my real pleasure comes from him giving in to me. Him obeying my command, whether it's to be restrained or to suck my dick. I will have both, but right now, I need him in the right space of mind. To get him there will be the biggest kick of them all.

Straddling him, I take a moment to admire my work and his tied up hands, sprawled above his head and tied against the pillars of my bed. "Did you play a lot when you were back home?"

He nods, eyes fluttering. "Yeah. I loved the piece you gave me."

"Satie. My grandfather used to play it during family events."

"Did your grandparents also live by the sea?"

"Yes. My grandmother still does, she lives with my uncle and aunt. I'll show you one day." I lower my lace briefs and let

my cock fall out against my stomach. Dominique's throat clicks as he swallows.

"I always wanted to be a student at Saint-Laurent," he admits, watching how I uncap the bottle of lube, then pour some onto my palms. The flowery scent of jasmine drifts into the air, intermingling with the heady promise of sex. Lots of it. "I guess I always knew I was smart." He gives me a sheepish smile, eyes darting back to my hands before they disappear behind my balls. I slowly open my ass for Dominique, rubbing and massaging my inner walls with one, then two fingers, while I let him talk. His voice becomes more enigmatic the more he elaborates about the subjects he loves doing most in college.

"So what do you want to do with this hefty brain of yours once you've graduated?" My cock bobs when I pump my ass with two fingers, and Dominique watches me in awe. "What's your dream?" I rasp. He licks his lips, thick eyelashes fluttering when he lifts his gaze to meet my eyes. His are dark and stormy, as if in trance.

"To make love to you," he breathes.

Fuckkk. "Oh, beautiful, we'll do that anyway. But you, and the world, where do you see yourself?" I slowly pull my fingers out, then squirt some more lube onto my palm. When I start working his long, and thick cock, making it all slick and slippery for my hole, Dominique's hips buck and he writhes in his restraints. "That's it, *mon trésor*," I whisper. "Fight them. Do you really think that you can win against me?" He opens his mouth when I stop stroking his flushed dick, but no words come out.

"No," he finally breathes. "I—" He shuts his mouth, lips fiercely pursed. I wait for a beat, then decide to move forward.

"Why's that? Why can't you win against me?" He hesitates, and his lips quiver, but there's this look in his eyes that brings me euphoria. It's like he's seeking me, reaching out in a way he hasn't done before. "Because you're giving in to me," I say, answering my own question. "Because you allow me to dominate."

Lifting my hips, I lead the head of his cock toward my slick entrance, then press further. It slips in without any resistance, though I take my time, going achingly slowly as I want my body to gingerly adjust to the intrusion of his gorgeous dick. It's long, and thick, and caresses my tunnel with perfect pressure.

"Is this what you wanted?" I whisper, while I continue leading his cock until it's been fully sucked in by my greedy ass. Dominique whimpers, mouth agape as he takes in rapid puffs of air. "For me to ride your gorgeous dick while you are wrapped up like my most precious gift?" Lifting my hips until only his crown is still buried inside, I cock my brow. "Hm?"

Dominique pants as he rigorously nods. "Y—yes," he finally splutters. "Please, please." He fights with his restraints, squirming on the bed, looking absolutely, fucking delectable. His dark hair's a mess, eyes fluttering wildly, the lashes touching his flushed cheeks.

"This what you wanted?" I pull my hips down, impaling myself onto his cock. He writhes even more, moaning as he does so.

"Oh, fucckk..." He bucks his hips, moving up to meet my thrusts that become faster, more demanding. Usually I'm a patient man, but not today. No, today I'm famished. Ravishing, skin to skin, as I bounce up and down, desperate to dig my claws into everything Dominique holds dear. Desperate to scratch away his grief and carve my mark into his flesh.

Mine mine mine.

Pushing his hips down, preventing him from thrusting up, I lean forward, muscles clenching in my lower abdomen when my mouth reaches the slope of his neck. My tongue darts out, lapping at Dominique's skin. He tastes divine, salty and sweet, his flavor already engraved into my most primitive instincts.

My teeth nip at the softness of his skin, loving every whimper and mewl which escapes through Dominique's parted lips. And all the while my hips roll into his, his cock deeply buried inside my ass as I give him the pleasure he so sought.

“Look at you, *trésor*. Tied up in my bed, like my favorite, sweetest toy. You’re so good for me, aren’t you?” I dip my head and flicker my tongue over a puckered nipple. Dragging my teeth over the sensitive spot, I groan when Dominique wriggles desperately on my bed, and I revel in the control I have over him. “That’s right,” I croon. “Submit to me, beautiful. And I’ll take good care of you.” I punctuate my words with a roll of my hips, and Dominique whimpers.

“Please,” he begs again. “Please—”

“You need to come, beautiful? Want to shoot your load right inside my tightness?”

Dominique moans, long and dirty, and his lashes flutter in response. He moves his fingers as if he searches to escape, but his eyes glow with a fire that shows me that he is more than happy to be here, under my weight and in my clutches.

Brushing my lips against his, I whisper, “Look at you. Fucking gorgeous. Show me, *mon trésor*. Show me how you come. Tied up and in my bed, sweet toy. Come for me.”

For a brief moment, he tugs his lips into a frown, as if he can’t quite believe what’s happening to him right now. Then his cheeks flush a little brighter, and his lips part. I can feel his cock throb merciless, and I tilt my head as I rock my hips, slowly, seductively, as I ride his glorious cock to exhilaration.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” he mutters, his voice laced with reverence. His eyes are fixated on my long, throbbing cock, that’s leaking for him. It bobs along the rhythm of my hips, bouncing up and down as I go for the finish.

“Yeah? Do you think so? It’s all yours, my love, all for you.”

Those words are enough for him to explode. Dominique lets out a cry, his body frantically shivering as he shudders in his restraints, filling up my ass with his cum. It feels sensational. I’m not usually a switch, but riding my beautiful Dominique means that I’m still in control.

He whispers my name as he comes off his high, eyes fluttering.

“I’m here, beautiful.” I wiggle myself further onto his torso, straddling his chest. And then I tap my flushed, leaking cock against his lips. “Here, *trésor*, for you. For my sweetest toy. Open up, baby.” Arching my back, I tilt my head back while he sucks me like no one can, hot and sweet, his hollowing cheeks giving the perfect suction. I don’t need much after such a mind-blowing experience, not much at all, to burst into a thousand pieces.

“Fuck, you’re so good,” I mutter when I dip my head, watching how he slurps around my pulsating dick. Brushing a finger past the corner of his lips, to dip in a slither of cum, I send him a blinding smile, then suckle it in my mouth. His eyes flash with a smile.

I take my time to untie his limbs, brushing his wrists and ankles to get his circulation back, before applying some lavender oil.

Dominique gives me a soft smile, eyes already closed. He’s asleep before I roll onto his chest and curl his arm around my waist. His skin against mine feels heavenly, and satisfied. Because I followed my gut and it led me straight into the arms of the love of my life. And if you think that I can’t feel that after only knowing him for barely four months, I can promise you that you’re wrong.

DOMINIQUE

“O h ooh, damn... you didn’t tell us that you actually know how to play chess. That move? That’s a classic, man. And you fell for it with open eyes!” Pascal snickers as he squeezes my competitor, a guy whose name I’ve already forgotten, playfully on the shoulder. Seated next to the window in the canteen, I look up to find Maxime smirking at me.

“Well, Dominique is the most clever guy in our year, I’m telling you all. And he so happens to be my best friend. Go and kick his ass, sunshine.”

That comment makes me glow inside.

My competitor, clearly oblivious to my inner purring, rubs his temple while he lets out a sigh. His eyes roam thoughtfully over the board. Finally he takes his horse and takes my tower, a move I’d anticipated. Pascal clacks his tongue.

“No no no, don’t fall for it again. He’s a trickster, our quiet Dominique here.” The others snicker quietly, but I ignore them. I’m on a roll now. When I go for my competitor’s horse, Pascal puts his arms around my chest from behind and mumbles, “Damn, where did you learn how to play that well?” His unwanted touch catches me off guard, and I scramble for an answer.

This is the first week back in college after the Christmas break, and the first time that I’ve joined Maxime during his chess night. I look up at my friend and he throws me a playful wink. Yeah, I’ve missed his sparkling presence. And perhaps

because after weeks of being caught in a surreal world, I needed something...real?

Since surviving the most dreamlike night of my life in the woods, and finding that lake where Damien drowned, Gaël and I have become inseparable. Sure, after the night we spent here, in a practically empty Monterrey Castle, he needed to go back to his family by the sea. But we have been in touch pretty much non-stop, with me playing for him and him lulling me to sleep with the most filthy, yet comforting promises.

“I need you to crawl through my room, beautiful, all the way to my bed. Come here, my darling, and sit on my face. Use my mouth for your pleasure. Hmm, let me suck it good for you.”

“Oh, trésor, you fuck me so good. You’re gonna make me come, beautiful, all over your piano.” He did, Tuesday night, come all over my piano when we met up in the woods. Is it bad to wonder when he’ll make me crawl around his room?

My cheeks heat at the thought, but before I can embarrass myself any further, my competitor makes another move.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” someone comments, and the familiar drawl makes us all turn in surprise. Arthur’s standing a little from our table, dark, hooded eyes focused on the chess game. His tall frame wrapped in a pair of sweats, well-developed chest covered in a tee. As he trudges closer in his slides, he runs a hand through his thick hair that falls gracefully around his square face. He’s definitely handsome, much like his twin, and he knows it. Jutting his chin toward my competitor, he mutters disapprovingly, “Chess is all about strategy. You can’t play this game without having one crystallized in your mind. Look at the board—*truly* look at it. What do you think his next move will be if you move your runner?”

“Uhm—” The guy is visibly shaken, and I wonder why that is. It’s no secret that Gaël’s family is powerful and that they are equally admired and feared here at Saint-Laurent. It’s not something that we have much discussed over the past weeks, and for which I’m grateful. It has been so nice to spend

our time differently, discussing different topics. He's an enigmatic talker, and when he elaborates about his creams and oils, he does it with such passion that I can't get enough of the way his smooth rumble fills the creaks of my solitude. The way his eyes glimmer and his mouth curls up is mesmerizing, and it has made my world a little bit bigger.

"I don't know?" My competitor sputters. Gone is the cocky guy I sat down across from barely half an hour ago.

"Ask Dominique." Arthur's command is clipped, tone low. I can feel Arthur's gaze searching mine, I dip my head, avoiding his. It's a habit that's so deeply carved into my system that I wonder if I'll ever get it out. No one talks, but I can feel Pascal's hands digging deeper into my shoulders. I don't want them there, and if it's meant to be reassuring, it has the opposite effect. Fear claws up my spine.

"Okay," my competitor says after a while, clearing his throat. "Dominique, what will your next move be?"

Arthur clicks his tongue disapprovingly, but in an attempt to make this situation less awkward, I answer, "Your queen." I point toward the piece. "I wanted you to take my runner with that pawn, because now your queen is free for me to take." I show him my move and take away his queen. "Because you already moved your king to the left, you can't overtake me. But you can't get out either." I drop his king. "It would have been a checkmate."

Maxime whistles. "Way to go, sunshine." It sounds playful, but the tension in his eyes shows me a different story. He only got back to Monterrey Castle this morning due to illness, and I have missed him. Missed his kind, perhaps a little, tentative friendship and his dazzling smiles.

I want to ask how he spent his Christmas break. I know their family isn't complete either, because his father passed away a few years ago. I want to talk to him about Alpha Fraternarii, want to know if he's a member. I want him to know that *I* know, and that me and Gaël are...what, boyfriends? Is that what we are now? The thought brings a gentle ache inside my chest, fluttery and delicate. We are in

love with each other, that's for sure. And we still have an entire wall standing in between us, that much is certain as well.

I still have questions. I still need answers. And to retrieve those, I need to talk to my best friend and roomie.

"Shall we go?" We ask each other at the same time, and Maxime sends me a sheepish grin that makes his freckles dance on his pink cheeks. "Yeah," I add.

Arthur has also risen to his feet, our eyes finally meeting. He's a little taller than I am, but that's not why I am intimidated by him tonight. There's something about the way he holds himself, about the way he represents that metaphorical wall that divides me and Gaël.

"Play with me," he rumbles and his eyes flicker.

"Dude, let's just go back to our dorm," Maxime hisses. Gaël's cousin turns his head in his direction and narrows his gaze. All the air seems to be pressed away. I wonder if that has anything to do with the way Arthur keeps on staring at him. Or with the way Maxime clears his throat. I mostly wonder what the hell I am missing now, but since I'm not missing how uncomfortable he is, I crack.

"One game." I gently push my roomie toward the exit, to where the others are waiting. "I'll be right there." He wants to protest, his lips parting as he fails to find the right words. Finally, he just nods, flashes a sneer behind me, no doubt to where Arthur is waiting, and leaves.

"Well, that was interesting," Arthur begins, voice thick with amusement. "Between the creep who had his hand on your shoulders and a roomie operating as an overprotective lapdog, I'd say that you have yourself nicely covered?" He snickers at himself, then adds, "Sorry, don't mind me. I'm not known for being the nicest guy around here." He hasn't looked up, simply quietly reorganizes the chess pieces from the previous game.

"No." I lick my dry lips and clear my throat. Though that's not true either. Arthur is a nice guy, I know that by now. He's

right though, there's something about him and the rest of his family. They are overconfident, and perhaps that's not the right term either. But they don't easily make friends. They stick very close together, radiate indifference, yet still people swarm around them like they are France's next talent. No—I cough my secretive chuckle away. They are worse. They are tomorrow's next powerful Alpha Fraternarii members. Secretive and sinful, and slightly narcissistic.

And still I wonder. I sit down across from him and pick up my pieces. “How does it feel—” A group of rowdy guys walk through the canteen, their duffle bags carried over their shoulders. The football team, by the looks of it, who just finished practice. They all pass as they make their way toward their dorms, though one of them stays behind, pushing himself against the wall. It's Louis, and his dark eyes are fixated on us. I can't help but gulp, because there's something about the two of them together that's just... ominous, and makes me think of before. Of when I was a target to the birds of prey. “How does it feel to be feared like that by other students?” I mumble.

“Feared?” Arthur finally looks up. He blinks his dark eyes, thick lashes fluttering, looking stupidly sincere. “Do you fear me, Dominique?”

“Well, no...” I fidget in my chair, feeling stupid. “Well, maybe a little.” We both chortle at that, our eyes meeting in laughter. The tension evaporates, even when Arthur nods toward the board and opens the game. The silence is calm when he makes his move. But then he speaks again. “You know, Saint-Laurent is very much like fighting a modern battle.” I know he makes the link on purpose, and I appreciate him for that. No more secrets. “The students here come from extreme wealth. And I'm talking on a multimillion level, some are billionaires. Their families have power, because they've got the cash, and their offspring is here to learn the ropes on how to position themselves into tomorrow's reality. For when they are the head of the family.” He patiently waits for me to make a move on my army, then puts another piece forward. This is going to be a slow march.

“I realize that we’re fighting those wars on a daily basis regardless of our position in society,” he adds quietly, and when he looks up at me, his dark eyes are laced with empathy. I can’t help but wonder if he’s referring to my history with bullies or to my more modest upbringing. Pursing my lips together, I make a move with my runner, bringing some juice into the game.

“I know a lot about you,” he continues. “It shouldn’t come as a surprise that we had our team do some digging into Dominique Devallée,” Arthur supplies. His tone is soft and my throat locks with dread. He knows. *They* know. And now—“My cousin is smitten with you.” He lets out a soft chuckle. “And with normal people, that infatuation would have been brushed off as a fling, but Gaël is different. Ever since he laid eyes on you two years ago.” My eyes jump into his direction and Arthur sends me a soft smile. “But don’t be fooled. Despite it all, Gaël’s a player, Dominique. A man who loves men, who loves a good, sensual game and who is out there to win.” He takes one of my pawns with his own. An innocent move, had I not recognized his strategy. I block his path with my horse and he clacks his tongue. “But he has spoken to his parents, and has declared that it is you he wants. How sweet, right?” I don’t have time to react, because his tone becomes cooler, more calculated. “Now, *we* want to know—” He juts his chin toward the wall behind us, to where undoubtedly Louis is still waiting, “if you are serious with him too.”

“You mean...” I inhale deeply through my nose as a string of thoughts and words dazzle through my mind. Arthur’s words linger there too, making me cautious. “What do you mean exactly?” Is this a game too?

“You look really conflicted there,” Arthur’s brows carefully knit together. “Tell us what you’re thinking.”

“Uhm, I’m thinking that I’m not sure what to say?” I fidget in my seat. “I mean, is this just you asking me as his cousin, or is there something else I’m missing?”

Arthur tilts his head and barks out a laugh. “I like you Dominique, I really do. You’re clever...damn, I’d love for you to meet my stepbrother, Régis. I bet you could wipe that smart

ass in no time. “The point is,” he takes one of my pawns with his runner, making me grumble inwardly. The fucker. I did *not* see that one coming. Sending me a wicked smile, like he knows, he continues, “Gaël is an exceptionally good catch. He is gorgeous, and clever. There’s something unique about him. But he’s also extremely wealthy and a member of the Alpha Fraternarii. Which means that he’ll always come highly protected.”

“And that also means that he can’t date an outsider?” I clip, annoyed by the way he so easily sums up all the equitable reasons why I will never truly be with this man who told me that he’s in love with me. Because of my past. And because of that damn wall. I move my tower with a heavy thud, regretting it as soon as my fingers leave the piece. And...that’s exactly why chess is such a fucking mindgame.

“He can, he can,” Arthur rushes to counter. “But only because our family is one of the founding families of the brotherhood. And only because Gaël has made an official request that he wishes to be with you. In a normal situation, the brotherhood wouldn’t abandon class difference. Still, my family wants to ask you to sign an NDA, which is basically an agreement that summarizes a few obligations from both sides. Notably a discretion clause.”

“An NDA?” My hand leaves the piece I was about to move, and I gape up at him. “I thought those contracts were only used when you have something to hide?”

Arthur gives me a toothy grin. “Yeah, well, they happen in real life too.”

“What sort of obligations are we talking about?”

His grin transforms into another of those small smiles. The kind of smile that I’d normally hate, but with him they sort of...work. “We obviously haven’t worked out the details yet, but you can expect arrangements about the amount of your monthly allowance, and your discretion will be requested when it comes to our brotherhood.”

My throat suddenly feels paper dry. “Allowance?” I finally croak. And the brotherhood...that’s got to go against

everything I stand for, it has to. I have done everything I can over the past years to find information about them. To *blame* them.

Arthur's eyes soften, even as he moves his horse further upward, flanked by his runner and tower. The guy's a genius in chess. "You'd be welcomed into our family, Dominique. And that means that you'll be protected and cherished by those who love Gaël. We would be your new home, together with your family of course."

Mon frère... I swallow heavily, but the sand scrubs inside my throat and chest. My heart throbs.

"I don't know—" I try to get up and out of my chair, but my movements have become sluggish. I have been on this crusade for the past two years, and have created a marching army I can't just stop. Caught in between galloping horses, I hang on, and have even become comfortable with the eternal discomfort. I don't even know if I can stop this everlasting torture, despite my feelings for this man who has completely entangled me into his silken ribbons of admiration and fascination. "Yes, I am in love with Gaël, but I have my own family, I have my own—"

Mon frère.

Let me go, Dominique.

Jamais.

Let me go.

Non!

Tears clutter in the corners of my eyes and I stumble, holding onto the table where the chess pieces tumble over and onto the ground.

"I know you do," Arthur startles.

"You don't know *shit!*" I shout out, my body nearly bending over from the sudden rumble of agony. I can't see clearly, tears clouding my vision, but I don't care. "You don't know—I need to go," I mumble. "I need to go." But before I

can turn and run away, strong hands grab me by my shoulders, directing me toward the dorms.

“Let me take you.”

Shaking myself out of his grip, I hiss, “I can walk by myself.”

Louis doesn't budge, of course not, instead squeezes a little tighter as we start walking. “I know you can. But I'm taking you.”

Silence falls over us as we walk through the large reception, pass the porter then take the double spiral staircase up to the first floor. I wonder if he's going to take me to Gaël, to his warm bed and soothing words, his warm hands and his wondrous oils, and I hate myself for wanting it so badly. For even considering signing this goddamn NDA if that means that I can be with my love, *mon amour*. I'm so torn between my past and my future, that I don't even realize we've made it back to our dorm until Louis halts and lets go of my arm.

“Dominique—” He makes a strange, scraping sound with his throat. His ember eyes find mine, and when I take in his features from up close, I realize that he and Arthur definitely carry differences. Sure, they both have dark eyes and equally dark hair, swept into a slick side-cut to carry those gorgeous, muscular features with an arrogance that seems to come with money and power. But where Arthur's gaze is usually softer and his words well-chosen, Louis is more primal.

Right now, he pinches his nose, eyes stuck somewhere between me and the door behind me. “Just so you know, if you'd decide to sign that NDA, I'd be looking forward to having you in the family.”

My eyes widen, pretty much like my mouth, as I'm scraping for an answer. “You would?” I finally settle with.

Louis huffs out a small smile. “Yeah. He's crazy about you, man. You should be punching heaven, you're one hell of a lucky fucker.” He taps his knuckle against the wall, then turns on his heels. “Well, I guess I'll be seeing you around. But remember, if you need something...”

“There was something I noticed about you. You were on the team with my brother,” I blurt.

Louis halts, then turns over his shoulder. Mine deflate. I’d hoped for some emotion, some recognition, perhaps hurt or... *anything*, that would make Damien special to him. Special enough to love? To kill? But Louis just blinks, then turns his entire frame around to face me. “I’m sorry for what happened to him, D. I really am. But he and I weren’t close. He was a little too cocky for my taste.”

Annoyance builds in the pit of my stomach. It’s mingled with desperation, the feeling that I’ll never fucking find out why my brother was found on school grounds. “You mean he was too similar to yourself?” I snap. But rather than being offended, Louis lets out a full blown laugh. When he finally smoothes his mouth with his sleeve, he mutters,

“Yeah, I guess you could say that.” His eyes glitter with amusement. “But like your brother, there’s more that meets the eye. I might be a cocky fucker, but I operate in style. You just haven’t seen me in my full glory yet. But if you sign that NDA and become part of our family? You’ll see exactly why we’re full of surprises.” Then he turns and walks away, leaving me a little baffled.

DOMINIQUE

Walking into our room, I notice Maxime sitting on his bed playing with his phone, legs crossed and earbuds in. When he sees me, he quickly pulls them out, eyes widening. I expect him to attack me with a thousand questions, but instead he just stays put, his “*sunshine*” lingering in the silence. *Waiting.*

I love his little pet name for me, ironic as it might be. I’m no sunshine, never have been. But Maxime is my friend, and has been ever since he jogged into my life on that first day here in Saint-Laurent.

He wanted to be my roommate. Chose me.

“What was that about?” He asks when I clearly take too long to speak. His light eyes search for mine, expression thick with worry.

“I’m with Gaël,” I finally blurt.

“You are...*what?*” His mouth falls a little open, and I’m sure the rest of that phrase gets caught somewhere between his throat and his lips.

“Yeah,” I add sheepishly. “I mean, I guess so?”

That makes him tilt his head, eyes lighting up when he chortles. “Oh my, that is so you.” Gone is the tension, and we are back at being two friends who haven’t seen each other for too long. “Off he goes seducing one of the most powerful guys in college...I mean, sunshine, how the hell did you manage that?” Uncrossing his legs, he kicks himself off the bed,

throwing his phone onto his pillow. “I knew we’d have an occasion to celebrate.”

“I thought you’d tell me all about how I should stay away from that family,” I notice pettily. Then, when I watch him pick up his suitcase and take out a bottle of wine, I mutter weakly, “we’re not allowed to drink alcohol in the school.”

Maxime flips me off with a flick of his hand, then does it again. “For both your comments. Trust me, I will take full responsibility as your friend to make sure you’re happy and treated well. I mean—” He shakes his head on a small smile. “We’re talking about Gaël Deveraux right?”

“Uhm, yeah.” Maxime unscrews the cork and waits for me to pick up my brain and fetch us two glasses. They’re soda glasses, but we don’t care when Maxime pours our glasses and I take a careful sip. I’m not much of a drinker. We take a seat at our desks and roll the chairs closer together.

“So, how did you both meet?” Maxime takes a careful sip, gives the glass a satisfied nod, then wipes his mouth off with his hand.

I shrug, trying to play it cool while trying to keep the bitter drink in my mouth as well. “Here, on school grounds. During his meditation class,” I mutter, then swallow thickly. Ugh.

“You went to one of his meditation classes?” Maxime grins. “I didn’t take you for one of those mindfulness types.”

“I’m not,” I rush, fidgeting and my cheeks heat at the little slip.

“So you went there because you knew he gave them?”

“I mean, maybe?” I confess.

Maxime gives me a soft smile. “He’s handsome, right? But...and here comes the ‘friend part,’ you’ll be careful, won’t you? You don’t want to get caught up in forbidden things.”

Fear. He’s afraid. It’s an emotion I can blindly pick up on. And I know that this is it...this is the moment. This—

“How did your initiation go?” I blurt, feeling my cheeks heat. Maxime’s glass halts in the air, and it stays there for a

little longer, before he finally brings it to his lips. His hands are shaking now, all previous humor gone, and his wide eyes are on mine.

“Initiation?” He finally asks.

“Yeah. Of the brotherhood?” My heart is beating fast now, trepidation building in my spine. Christ, if I’m wrong about this, I’m going to be in so much trouble.

Maxime stutters for an answer, and he licks his lips before he gives me a careful answer. “H—how—do you know? Did he tell you?”

I inhale deeply through my nose and the air leaves my mouth in a long, slow whoosh. Relief washes over me like fresh rainfall. *Finally*. I won’t linger too long on the fact that my best friend, my only friend, is a brother of Alpha Fraternarii, instead I need to push through and focus on the next level. I decide to trust Maxime.

“My brother died here, on school territory, two years ago. But I guess you already know that.” Maxime doesn’t reply, simply takes a sip, allowing me to continue. “He drowned, and I have spent the last two years searching for the truth. The truth—” I swallow thickly, then flick my eyes to his, “About Alpha Fraternarii.”

Maxime bites his lower lip and looks at his lap, his right hand squeezed around his glass. When he finally sways his head back to mine, his eyes give away his discomfort. He’s such an open book, and right now it’s embarrassment that flickers brightly through his grey gaze. “I—I didn’t know about the brotherhood,” he finally cracks, offering me a hesitant smile. “When I received the invitation for the first initiation, I had no idea what I was walking into. Most brothers are informed in advance by their dads, but mine had passed away...”

“That must have been hard, to be overwhelmed like that.” Remembering those orgies a little too well, I wonder if Maxime participated. Hell, I wonder if Gaël participated.

Don’t go there.

“Yeah, well... they sure were nothing like the pledge of a normal frat house,” Maxime chuckles, cheeks coloring a darker shade of pink. “But, sunshine, you’re probably already aware I can’t talk to you about this. It’s secretive, and I agreed to keep it away from daylight. I’m so sorry for your brother, and I feel like I’m failing you as a friend but this—” He takes in a long, deep breath. “This is larger than we are. I can’t—”

“I get that, really.” The NDA agreement flutters through my mind. “I saw things. I mean—” This is awkward. “I was there that night. With the horses.”

He doesn’t reply immediately, but I see the utter shock carved into his flushed face, the widening of his eyes. “You were? Fuck.” He mutters something unintelligible, then takes another sip. I do too. The tannic, fruity taste is somehow growing on me.

“Yeah.” I won’t tell him about the lake, can’t bring myself to do it. Not tonight. I can’t go through that heartbreak again. Besides, it’s nice just to sit and talk with my friend, to share a glass of wine like I saw Damien do so often with the boys. Perhaps we can find some lighter topics and actually share a few jokes together as well. “Anyway, as I was running for my life, I ended up being saved by two riders on a horse, who took me to Gaël.”

“Took you to Gaël?” Maxime lets out a playful snort. “Unharmed?”

“Unharmed,” I grin.

“Well, you sure have taste. Gaël is fucking gorgeous.” Maxime chuckles, shaking his head in something that looks awfully close to disbelief.

“Hey!” I hit his shoulder playfully. “That’s because I’m irresistible. Now I know why you wanted to be my roommate.”

“Look at you, dating the most handsome guy in college and having a big mouth immediately, huh?” He nudges me in my side, then stands up to grab the bottle of wine and refill our glasses. “But you’re right. Guilty. I wanted you to be my

roommate because you are gorgeous.” He cackles loudly. “No, seriously, want to know? Because I needed to remind myself of what life looks like outside these walls. You are here on a scholarship, you represent the normal world to me. And I’m happy to be your friend.” He gives me a grin, a mixture of playfulness and shyness. “Anyway, here’s to blossoming love. To your man.” He clinks his glass with mine. “Don’t tell me I didn’t warn you.”

“Come on man, apart from Gaël’s cousins acting like cocky brats, what’s your beef with them?”

“Other than that they are one of the most powerful families in France?”

I roll my eyes at him. “Takes one to know one.”

“Touché,” he smirks, but then he pinches his nose, gaze turning a little more serious. “My cousin warned me about them.”

“You know, your *cousin* could have warned you about this secret brotherhood your family dragged you into,” I quip, to which we both bark out a laugh. “You crazy, rich people. It doesn’t happen often that I’m happy for being just a random guy. A *commoner*.”

“Well, I don’t want to know what your boyfriend did to his little commoner during that night in the woods.” Maxime makes an obscene gesture with his arms and I throw a book at him. He catches it on a yelp, surprisingly managing to do so without spilling his drink all over his desk. “Seriously though, those sex workers were the best.”

I pretend to throw him another book and he lifts his hands in defeat, a sheepish grin on his face. “That’s gross man, I don’t want to hear a thing.”

Maxime tilts his glass back, downing the rest of his wine in one, big sip. “You make me feel happy to be back here and in our room. This school surely has a way of sucking you in.”

I get that. I really do. “So, are you a brother now as well?”

Maxime nods. “I am. I signed the agreements and completed my pledge. The *Réinvention* marked an end to the

initiations.”

“And you...agree with this way of taunting our history?”

This caricature of the French Revolution is as disturbing as it is forbidden, a twisted, half-baked truth. *Of their fantasies.* Not of the way history writes, or the way thousands of innocent people died. It's a disgrace, to say the least.

Maxime can obviously read the expression on my face, because he grabs my hand and squeezes. “I've told you that life here is different. I'm sorry if that hurts you, because that isn't my intention. It's just...” he swallows, searching for his words. “Compare it to different worlds. We all live in a different one, with different rules and habits, you know?”

I nod slowly, remembering Arthur's words. “Yeah, I get that, though I've never realized it was that extreme. I mean, you read about it or watch a documentary on Netflix about how rich people live.” Maxime offers me a goofy smile, but his eyes glimmer with understanding. “And to know that that's reality for so many people, is just staggering.”

We sit in silence, but it doesn't feel wrong. Despite the immorality of it all, despite the helplessness that's laced around us, tying it all together, we just sit here. Two friends. And that feels good too.

Right now? This feels like the best fucking thing in the world.

We end up finishing the entire bottle of wine, and I'm definitely feeling tipsy. Maxime giggles when I tell him how much I appreciate him, tears clinging to my eyes, and in return, he shares photos of his childhood, and his home.

“That's not a home, that's a castle!”

“No, *this* is a castle, sunshine.” And we end up once more in an incoherent, intoxicated cackle.

It feels *good*.

Unfortunately, I can't say the same thing the next morning, when I wake up with a thrumming head and a bitter aftertaste in my mouth. Dragging myself out of bed, I get myself ready

for class. Luckily, it's Friday, so I'll only have to drag myself through this one day.

Together with Maxime, I go for breakfast in a buzzing canteen. Flavors of fried sausage and crispy bacon make me nearly puke out the croissant and coffee I managed to polish off, but I stand strong, though already counting the hours until I can retreat back into my room, much to Maxime's delight.

"We really should get you more familiar with wine, sunshine," he grins, eyes shining with amusement as he takes a sip from his coffee. His *second* cup of coffee.

"No, thank you," I groan.

The door opens and in walks Gaël with Louis and Arthur, the three of them looking as cool and well-put as always. Sexy, dangerous, arrogant. My breath hitches when Gaël's emerald eyes land on mine, and he blows me a hot kiss all the way from the buffet to where we are sitting. I try to keep my blush in check, but judging by the way Maxime grins, I'm failing miserably.

My heart rate picks up when I see them approach, their trays filled with fruit, pastry and coffee, heading toward their usual spot by the window. It might be my impression, but everyone seems to look at that. At him. At those smooth, long, sculpted limbs, that shiny blond hair that stands in such stark contrast to the two dark-haired guys who walk by his side, perpetually flanking him. At that square, handsome face with those lush lips, straight nose and cat eyes. Oh, those eyes. Black and green, almond and wickedness. He's a walking sin, my Gaël. And he's all mine.

People are watching now, I know they are. *At my man.*

"Okay, this is crazy. The way he's got the hots for you?" Maxime mutters from across the small table. He whistles lowly. "Hot damn, keep it in check, sunshine. Don't drool all over your plate, please."

That has me turning to face him. When I do, he lets out a loud cackle. "I knew you'd react to that! Just kidding, man. Though it's clear he's into you. I'm happy, you deserve only

the best.” He bites into a sausage, snickering when I growl at the sight. “But really, did they ask you to sign an NDA?”

I watch as the three cousins sit down at their own table, and the buzz picks up again. Groups of guys chatter around coffee and breakfast, some arriving late, while others already are making their way to class. But I don’t miss the way their eyes linger on the most popular guys in college.

“Yes,” I hear myself reply, eyes equally still glued at the three cousins. “And I will.”

For him, I fucking will. The clouds dissipate, and I can clearly see. Because I choose you, Gaël, if you’ll have me.

“You know why I call you sunshine, Dominique?” Maxime’s eyes are also on the three popular guys, but I can hear his words crystal clear. “Because you are a ray of integrity. You’re kind, and humble, and I needed that here in college, needed to keep my own sanity. And you don’t disappoint.” He stands, then ruffles my hair. “Although, you could do with some exercise in the booze department.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I stick out my tongue. “That’s enough for this morning. Let’s head to class.”

“You don’t want to greet your loverboy?” Maxime glances over my shoulder. “He’s looking like he wants you to.”

“I—” *I’m scared.* “Maybe he doesn’t want me to,” I settle with. My heart pounds heavily in my chest, nerves fluttering through my stomach. I’m scared that despite this show he puts on, despite our words, I’ve misunderstood his intentions. Scared that he’ll make fun of me, just like they used to do. But mostly, I’m scared that this will actually *happen*. Him and I, a happy couple, who maybe even love each other.

Then I’ll have to let go of my past and can’t lean on my fear anymore. And if I can’t live on fear, but am too insecure to lean on love, then what *will* hold me together?

“Oh, he wants you to,” Maxime smirks. Then, softer, “I’ll be waiting for you right here.”

Right. “Okay.” I watch my friend step aside, lifting the barrier. And then I’m right in the line of fire of Gaël’s

smoldering gaze. His green eyes narrow when I slowly approach, each step sounding like a drum in my chest. What if I was wrong, I can't help but think.

When I reach their table, Louis looks up, crooking a brow.

"I—" I lick my lips, tearing my gaze to Gaël, heart beating frantically. "Good morning." And then...fuck it. I walk around the table and grab hold of my man. He easily lets himself be lifted up by his nape, wrapping his hands possessively around my shoulders before I can even lift my head and smile at him.

"Perfection," he mutters against my lips. And then he drags his teeth across my bottom lip, suckling it in his hot mouth. I whimper, but the sound is smothered by our proximity, because he presses me closer, eating my mewls as he connects our mouths together. His tongue slips inside, licking a trail of desire that heats my loins but lasts way too short. Because he pulls back, that sly grin carved onto his lips, and tucks a lock of hair behind my ear.

"*Bonjour, mon trésor,*" he murmurs.

I'm drunk once more, thirst insatiable while I drink him in, every inch of his glorious self, every second of time we spend together. Even if it is in a busy canteen with people—I look around me as I hold onto Gaël. I quickly notice the silence in the room as though time stops and everyone is left gazing upon us. My eyes fall on Julien, the guy I met in the dungeons and who caught up with me during my morning jog, then dart all the way to the exit, to where Maxime is beaming. Then he lifts his wrist, showing his watch.

"I need to go." Turning back to Gaël, I don't think, instead just press one single kiss on his lips. "I'll catch you later, *mon amour.*"

He grabs me by the shoulder before I can leave. "*Mon amour?* Hm, I like that."

Needless to say, I leave the canteen with a stupid grin on my face.

GAËL

To say that I'm enjoying this flourishing love with Dominique is an understatement. The way he's slowly opening up to me is featherlight, gentle, like a touch of sparkle that is quickly turning into a flame. Because my sweet, innocent man is scorching hot, and his appetite for me never falters. He's perfect.

I let him fuck me against the piano in the woods, the one that I've claimed as his since we replaced the missing one in the Atrium, his thrusts needy and desperate as he wrecks me so sweetly.

I love it when he takes the space I offer, when he pins me against his instrument and claims his pleasure. Love it when he pulls me down on my knees to worship that big, flush, pink cock of his while I suck him dry. But nothing beats the satisfaction he gives me when he spreads his long, stretched body on my treatment table, exposing himself like the tastiest buffet I've ever been offered, rich with vulnerability and desire.

When he gives himself up to me freely.

I spank his firm, round ass until he begs me to make him come. Too bad for him, when it comes to playing my favorite instrument, I'm pretty much merciless. Instead of giving him what he pleads for, I spit on his hole and rub him open, slowly and deeply, and tease his prostate with languid strokes. God, I love the way his body trembles with need as I let him wait

before I finally give him what he so desperately wants. My cock, buried deep inside him.

We make love in the frozen forest, lit up by torches I prepare in advance. Tease each other with naughty looks in the narrow corridors when we cross each other between classes. I absolutely revel myself in the blush on his cheeks when I mouth filthy promises into his ear.

Promises I always keep.

Dominique also talks to me. Reluctantly so, at first, as he takes me on a ride through his life. How he was bullied, my lover, because of his timid character and helpless stutters. Because some guys were bored and started looking for trouble, and found in him the perfect victim. His demeanour, too gentle and not mouthy enough, put him on the radar to those birds of prey.

How I would know.

Today it's Friday and we're heading toward another finished week of studies. I haven't seen Dominique for the past few days, and it's dragging this need-turned-to-painful-desire to a capstone that I need him to fill. Thankfully, we're supposed to see each other tonight. And boy, do I hope that this surprise he has for me is a good one. When we are apart, I miss him with all my heart and soul. Because with every unlocked feeling he exposes to me, I fall a little deeper for him. And with every word of reassurance I return, his spine straightens a little further.

He's a bright one, my beautiful. Even the director mentioned him during one of our network dinners. Arthur should worry about Dominique taking his place in winning the *Prix d'Honneur*. But no, my cousin's a stubborn ass who would rather point his poisonous arrows toward their new stepbrother, Régis.

I mean, I understand why. The guy's a presumptuous, spoiled fucker, to use the precise words Arthur used. But then, aren't we all?

Right now, said guy's also glaring from across the couch to where my cousin's getting head from a sexy escort who's wrapped in nothing more but a thong that shows off his perfectly shaped, round globes as he's sprawled onto his knees and in Arthur's lap.

Their dad, my uncle, insisted that Régis visit Saint-Laurent a few times before commencing his studies in September. The guy's barely 19, probably about Dominique's age, but unlike my beautiful, he carries that same bored face we all do over here. The face of money. The three times I've met him so far, he was so wrapped up in the role he's used to playing that he hardly spoke at all. Instead, he'd just share a nod at the right time while he kept his poker face free of cracks.

Not right now.

I'm sure he's not happy with how his mom left him here, alone, with *us*, for an entire evening. He's not the only one. Normally, during nighttime, Arthur studies, but not tonight. No, tonight my cousin seems adamant to perform, judging from the way his hand brushes the guy's tousled hair while he toys with his head. Tilting it back as far as he can get, he watches with hooded eyes at how his dick is fucking that gorgeous mouth, lips curled into a wicked grin when he gazes up to watch his stepbrother.

"You were saying?" He rasps, then lets out a soft gasp.

Okayyy. Sure, we all love sex, and we've all been involved in the same orgies multiple times, but to see him getting his rocks off by our favorite escort, is something else. It's actually kind of hot. Arthur's a good looking guy, and judging by the sneer on Régis's face, he thinks so too. *Interesting.*

Despite that, he keeps his head high as he snarls, "I said I don't want to bunk with you guys. I want to have my own room."

The escort slurps at Arthur's cock and my cousin caresses his cheek gently, eyes staying glued to his stepbrother. Then he slowly starts rolling his hips, stuffing our boy's mouth even further with his cock. He chokes in surprise, then smoothly adjusts his throat.

And the slurping continues. Fuck, if I had my Dominique here with me, I'd make sure that he too was on his knees and between my legs. I'd make him feel safe, while he'd make me feel good.

“So I don't care how you do it,” Régis continues, “But I don't want *that*.” He flicks his hand toward the escort.

“What? You don't want your dick being taken care of?” Arthur drawls, then chuckles hoarsely. Yep, definitely a side to my cousin I haven't yet discovered.

The door opens and Louis comes walking in with a chatty Julien. My so-called friend seems even more agitated tonight, eyes shimmering with something I can't quite decipher. For a beat, I wonder if it's because my cousin has finally had his way with him, but judging by Louis' grim features, it can't be that.

Placing his duffle onto the floor, he gives his stepbrother a quick once-over. “Régis,” he mutters. “Dad told me that he brought you here.” Then his eyes flicker to Arthur, and they widen. “Holy shit, bro, you brought the real deal.”

“I did. My treat. You can have him when I've finished.” Judging by his rasp and ragged breath, he's nearly there. His eyes stay focused on Régis and that small smile seems to taunt him, seems to be looking out for a challenge.

Come and get me.

“Régis here doesn't want to bunk with us next year, bro. Says he's not into gays.”

“I didn't—” Régis blushes with annoyance, jaw pinched. “Don't tell Dad.”

“No?” Louis murmurs, just as Arthur lets out a string of curses and bucks his hips frantically. His head falls back and he opens his mouth in a silent cry. And then he looks back at Régis with a nasty smile.

“I'm not going to tell Dad shit, stepbro. If you don't want to bunk with us, then all you gotta do is stay away.”

The escort makes a show of licking his lips, then gingerly puts Arthur's cock back into his sweats, before slowly standing up.

"Come here, baby," Louis purrs, spreading his hand for the guy to take it. "Let me take you to bed."

Julien's eyes dart from me to my cousin like he wants me to say something, and I scrunch my brow from where I'm more or less hanging in my armchair, legs crossed, the creams I was sorting out on my lap, clearly on the front row of some sex show. I'm loving it.

"You are a son of a bitch," Régis snarls, cheeks and neck pink with anger and something else.

"Am I?" Arthur stands, readjusts his pants, then guides the escort to Louis's bed with a single hand on his left ass cheek. The other one is covered by Louis's hand, large and solid, while he helps him get comfortable onto the sheets.

"Louis—" Julien stammers, but my cousin doesn't stop from leisurely positioning himself onto his back on the bed, before he lets the escort straddle his thighs. Our boy knows what he's doing since he assists during all the gatherings that are organized by the brotherhood.

Dipping his fingers in Louis's sweats to pull out his cock, he rolls the rigid length between both his hands. And all the while Louis keeps staring at Julien.

"Boo, now's not the time," I intervene. "Let's save yourself from a shitshow, shall we?"

"I agree," Arthur quips and turns to Régis. "Let's go downstairs and play some chess. See if you win the next round."

Julien takes one last, longing look at Louis, who is now groaning in pleasure as our boy starts bouncing on his cock. Raw. His shoulders deflate, and if I liked the guy a little more, I would feel sorry for him, I would. But Julien is...different. He tries too hard. His blond curls are always a little too styled, his giggles too loud, and his skin too soft.

It bruises easily. Fuck, do I love a good bruise.

“Need me to walk you out, sweet friend?” I turn to stand, and he bites the inside of his cheek, then shakes his head. “No, I’ve got plans for tonight anyway.”

“Really? With who?” I’ve never seen him with a guy, and if he didn’t look so obviously gay, I’d probably think he’d made it up.

“With his right hand,” Arthur snorts, and Régis shoves him in his side.

“You’re such a prick.”

“A prick who’s about to beat your little ass at chess.”

“You think so?”

“I *know* so, *stepbro*.” On his way out, he drags Julien by his arm to make sure that he leaves as well.

“Bye, baby boy,” I croon right before the door closes, and when I’m back with the familiar sounds of sweet fucking, I hum contently. Mom sent me some new creams today, and I can’t wait to test them on Dominique’s smooth skin. To have him all naked and collared in my bed...fuckkk...

Louis comes with a raspy growl. Keeping our boy firmly speared on his cock, I can’t help but watch in fascination how he encourages him to stroke himself to climax. What can I say? I can’t stop myself from watching. I enjoy every moment. The way two bodies join together, the movements, the sounds. Hmm. Almost like a harmony.

But I’ll only fuck one.

Just as I try one of my creams on my finger, spread it out and inhale the eucalyptus scent, someone raps on our door.

“What?” Louis barks annoyed, his usual way of greeting someone else.

“Come in,” I sing-song, sending my cousin a pointed look. The door peaks open and a distressed Maxime peers through the cracks.

“H-hi. Gaël?”

“No, it’s the goddamn Exorcist. What the hell do you want?” Louis groans, as he gently helps the escort get dressed.

Rolling my eyes, I put my creams aside, then stand to my full height. “Come in, what’s up?”

Maxime walks through the door, eyes flicking around, lingering a little on the escort before they turn back to mine. “It’s Dominique,” he finally mutters.

It’s enough for my stomach to drop.

“What about him?”

“He’s been—” he pinches the bridge of his nose. “He’s been acting weird this week. And now I can’t find him.”

“He’s been acting...you can’t find him?” Running an irritated hand through my hair, I sweep my frown from Louis back to Maxime, grinding my teeth. I should have checked in on him sooner. I always make sure that he’s fine, even have our butler check his location frequently. But we were doing so well, the two of us together, that I believed that he was feeling happy, satisfied.

“Gaël, we’ll find him,” Louis mutters, sharing my feeling of concern. That’s my family—to the outside world, they appear like a bunch of sex bulls, but to their loved ones they are so much more. They know I want him, and they’ve accepted him.

“I called his mom,” Maxime says, holding up his phone in the air as if to prove its truth. “She told me he wasn’t at home, but when I asked, she said that today’s exactly two years since his brother was buried.”

“Since his brother was buried? Call her again.” *Why didn’t he tell me?* I want to shout. I watch how Maxime calls his mom, who gives him the phone numbers of Damien’s high school friends. And while he tries them all, my thoughts flutter through my mind.

Louis walks the escort out, but by the time he comes back, I’m still simultaneously listening to Maxime speaking to guys I don’t know and my own trail of thoughts.

“Perhaps he went to the graveyard,” my cousin suggests.

“His parents were there earlier, but didn’t see Dominique,” Maxime replies.

“Why didn’t he go with them?” No one answers that obvious question.

Arthur and Régis make it through the door, and if I wasn’t so worried, I’d actually have taken pleasure in the way they both sort of look defeated. Those two...

“What’s going on?” Arthur asks, eyes darting between the three of us. Creams set aside, I’m now trudging down our room, body nagging with nerves. There’s nothing left of our earlier, playful atmosphere. Surprisingly, all rivalry has disappeared as well.

“He was supposed to surprise me with something tonight,” I mutter. Over the past days, I’ve given tonight numerous thoughts and ideas. But right now, none of them make sense.

None of this makes sense.

“Who are we searching for?” Régis asks.

“My best friend,” Maxime replies before one of my cousins can give a snarky retort. “It’s been exactly two years since his brother was buried after he died here on school grounds.”

“He died here, in the woods?”

My head perks up at those words, awareness crawling through my spine. “No.” I face Maxime. “He didn’t. I know where he is.” Grabbing my winter coat, I jut my chin toward the others. “The lake, that’s where he is. Come on!”

DOMINIQUE

It's peaceful here. With every sweeping breeze from the sighing trees, more ice flakes tumble down from above and fall delicately to the soft ground. We haven't had a winter this severe for years, but snowfall has always been one of our delights.

Tu te souviens, mon frère?

I remember. Everything.

But yet...something has changed over the past months. The pain has lost a layer of its destructive rawness. At home, my mom is gathering up the scattered pieces of our family, determined to put them back together.

“And I'll do everything I can to help her,” I mutter at the frozen lake ahead of me. Never thought I'd lose my blanket of detrimental grief.

She called me earlier this week. It felt good to talk—about Damien, about my studies here, about life in general. I haven't mentioned Gaël, but then it might be too soon. Perhaps he'd like to come home with me one day to meet them. The thought warms my chest. Yeah, I would like that.

She called me again tonight, most likely before they headed to the graveyard. But I—I needed only myself tonight. I'll call her back soon, I promised myself, but not right now. No, right now I'm standing at your place of death, and need to face this by myself. Need to face *you* by myself.

“So much,” I mutter into the cold. “I have grown up so much since you died, *mon frère*.” Since I have been left to face the world alone.

Though I’m no longer alone. My lips tip up at its corners. “And would you believe that? I have a friend now. A friend! He plays chess with me and shares his wine, he laughs and jokes with me, someone who chose *me*. I think you would have liked him.”

Said friend also tried to reach me earlier, and though I’m feeling a little guilty for not picking up and telling Maxime where I was heading to, *this* moment, right now, is ours.

Laisse le temps au temps. C’est souvent lui qui nous ouvre les yeux et apaise nos douleurs.

My hands clench into fists at those words Mom spoke during your funeral. Back then, each syllable punched me right in the gut. But right now...

I don’t know if there’s ever a fixed moment for sorrow to leave your heart, but I do believe that my future is waiting for me to come back into reality. And still...being here, so close to you, makes my decision falter. The *what if’s* clawing at my insides. But then, that might go hand in hand with grief, and I allowed for it to become an addiction, an insidious addiction. Fear is a liar. It’s a trickster. But I won’t be fooled anymore.

Still I inhale deeply at the thought of what’s about to happen. Of the real reason why I’m here, alone, and not with my parents at your memorial stone. “I’m going to sign that agreement, *mon frère*. I need to...let you go.” My voice breaks into the freezing silence, but the only answer I’m getting is the creaking of the ice. The lake looks eerily beautiful like this, with its serene glow and the white trees surrounding it like some fluffy blanket.

I wonder if the forest has forgiven the horror that took place here.

“I will never forget you. Never stop loving you. Will you —” My eyes burn as tears form in their corners, and when I look up at the stars in the inky sky, they roll down. Thick,

warm drops on my frozen cheeks. “Thank you for your shield. Thank you for having been at my side.”

A guttural sound rumbles through the quiet night, deep and raw, and it has me swivelling my head around in a flash, hackles rising instantly.

I’m not alone.

“Who is there?” I take a step toward the thorn bushes, somehow half expecting a rider and horse and a battle to be won.

Run!

Still, I keep walking, my back turned toward the lake and facing the woods, and the sniffing sound. The closer I get, the faster my heart hammers in my chest, and the louder the sound gets. Its tone is thick with distress, and oh, would I recognize that desperation, that heartbreak, anywhere.

Someone’s crying.

“Damien?” I can’t help but ask, stomach churning as that goddamn voice of reason keeps badgering me.

Not Damien. He is gone. *Gone.*

I’ve let you go, mon frère.

I push the high shrubs out of my face while I keep walking, movements fed by the increasing sobs. And then, all of a sudden, I’ve reached some sort of open space. No more shrubs, just grass. And in the middle, like some statue, stands an evergreen tree, large and thick. It’s also lit up with candles that hang from its thick and proud branches. It would be a beautiful sight, but all I can stare at is the person huddled in front of it, lying on his knees, back arched in defeat. His body, covered in a black cloak, vibrates with every agonizing sob, and it dims my own fear of being tricked by the Alpha Fraternarii. No one can fake this kind of grief. But when I take another step, leaves scrunch under my foot and I freeze in dreadful anticipation of what’s to come now.

The black cloak slowly sweeps itself up, until it’s standing tall, still facing the tree. My eyes fall on the small candles that

are also lit right by his feet, and suddenly, I know what this is. It's a memorial.

"Who are you?" But I know who he is before he slowly turns around, his face obscured by a golden mask. He doesn't speak, just stands there, with his frame shivering in ice-cold grief. Clearing my throat, I ask, "You are the one who wrote me that note, aren't you?" He doesn't reply. "Are you also the one I met here, during that night with the horses?" He gazes silently at me from a distance. "Please, show yourself."

Was he the reason you snuck out of our room at night and went to school grounds?

Damien? Dis-moi.

Fragments of events slowly start to tumble down into my mind, pressing against my core, tighter and tighter, until they threaten to smother me.

"You were here, that night. But...why was he drunk? My brother never drank alcohol." I eye the mask again, then whisper, "Why won't you show yourself?"

He hesitates, hands lingering in the air. The woods let out a tired groan. I gingerly take a few steps forward. He lifts the mask, until he's revealed his face entirely.

I suck in a deep breath. Light eyes peer back at me, eyes that I recognize. When he takes down his hood, blond curls bounce against his wet cheeks.

"Julien?" I gasp. Flashes of carrying Christmas decorations from the dungeon rattle my memory. "You were here, in the woods, with me?" That morning run. He had been friendly. "Why—"

"I wanted to get to know you," he mumbles, the accusation thickly wrapped in the air. "Damien's baby brother, the one he always talked about." Behind us, ice cracks on a creak. "He was fiercely protective over you, his baby brother. When I got him into this school—" His voice falters.

"What? You got Damien into this school?"

Julien sends me a timid smile. “I met him before, during a football match. He was gorgeous, nothing like the guys here. We talked a little, and I...I wanted him. That might sound stupid, but I wanted him for myself. So I bribed the commission with a nice check until they finally agreed to grant him that scholarship.”

“A check...” I can’t swallow away the surprised chuckle. “We always wondered how on earth he’d gotten into this college.”

Julien’s smile widens a little. “Well, he wasn’t the studious type, that’s for sure.”

“No, he wasn’t. So...you were like a couple? He never told me.” And it stings. But Julien wobbles his head tightly in something between a shake and a nod.

“I mean, yeah, we wanted to be. But it was complicated. Damien was considered a commoner, and my family and the brotherhood would never let me be with a person who isn’t born into the upper class.”

“Is that why he was drunk that night?” My heart starts pounding painfully. “Because it was complicated?”

“I thought that if I left you that note, you would want to find out the truth.” Julien’s eyes glimmer with unshed tears. “I was so in love with him,” he murmurs to himself. “But he and I were not meant to be. He knew it before I did. He knew it the moment he stumbled into a ceremony and s-saw me.”

Fisting my hands, my eyes quiver at the thought of what Damien saw, and how that must have made him feel. *He had drunk himself into oblivion.*

“He was searching for me that night,” Julien whispers, and licks away the tears from his lip. “I had told him to come. But I couldn’t...they were there before me. He was so drunk, so sad, I...took the blame for him. I went down on my knees to show my respect. I even went out and ran for him. But then I realized they’d also made him run. Into the woods, chased by horses, pretending to be some filthy plaything. He was so

much more than that.” Finally he looks up at me, tears rolling down his eyes. “Gaël doesn’t love you, you know that, right?”

I blink, unease crawling up my spine. Julien snorts and sniffs. “That family is not capable of love. They have tortured me for years, and now they’ll dig their claws into you. You and I, we should have been on the same team, but instead you fell for that predator.” His voice picks up in timbre and volume. With his mask pulled up over his head and his hands spread like an eagle, he looks like a villain. A villain who spews venom over me like a rain of hatred. And it gets to me, their drops sharp and stinging as they reach for my walls.

They won’t pass.

“What would Damien think of you if he saw you right now? A whore to the most popular, most powerful guy in college?” He lets out a dirty smirk, soapy-green eyes flashing with hatred. “I thought you loved him, that you *loved* your brother!”

His words are ugly, and they slice into my skin like a blade, making my throat constrict as my chest clenches.

“I—” Fear brings my stutter back, and I lose the fight as I try to form the words in my mouth. They all taste foul. “I don’t —”

“No, that’s right,” Julien ejects. “You don’t—”

“That’s enough.” We both turn our gazes toward the high, thorny shrubs. Gaël stands tall between his cousins, wearing identical fur coats, as his smooth rumble vibrates through the chilly atmosphere. Behind them I catch vision of a stranger, and there’s—

“Maxime?”

My best friend gives me a little wave, ginger locks falling free from under his hoodie. “I was worried about you, so I asked Gaël to come and search with me.”

My man’s gaze is narrowed when he strides forward with large, confident steps, platinum hair sweeping up in the wind, like some sensual aura. Julien takes a step back, looking defeated. God, he looks so sad. “So you and Damien, huh?”

You have good taste, boo, I'll give you that. And I'm sorry for your loss."

Julien's lips quiver. "Gaël, I—"

"Let's go, beautiful. There's nothing out here for you tonight." Gaël lifts his arm, silently asking for me to take shelter against his broad chest.

"Damien loved you fiercely," Julien breathes, the words tumbling out in urgency. "He wasn't supposed to be here that night. But suddenly, he was here, drunk."

And I had been in our tree cabin.

"He told our brothers that he wanted to see me." Julien's gaze turns glassy, as if he relives that exact moment, voice turning softer. "He just appeared out of the bushes. We were all wearing our masks, and then Elder Jacques—"

"*Arrêt.*" Gaël lifts his hand, shutting him up, then takes mine and curls me up against him. My limbs instantly relax. Pinching my chin between two fingers, he tilts my head. "You already know this part, *mon trésor.*"

Swallowing, I nod. "Yeah." My voice sounds hoarse, but the clipped word slides right through the freezing cold.

I've let you go, mon frère.

I take in a deep breath while my eyes roam over those who have come out to search for me tonight. Those who were worried about me. There's Maxime, my best friend, Gaël, my love, and his two cousins, whose motives are questionable per usual. Yet they have come out here, at night, in the cold, to look out for me. That includes the stranger I don't know yet and have never seen at school before. He's smaller than the three cousins, more of Maxime's size, his frame huddled in a thick winter coat. His chestnut hair waves around his face, matching the color of his large, wide set eyes. He looks a little shocked too, but then, I think that we're all feeling a little shaken tonight.

"Julien," I mumble, searching Julien's eyes. "I want you to know... when you left me that note, you gave me something to hang on to. And I leaned against it, heavily, for two years. It

helped me to keep my sanity. Because no one would give us any answers.”

“That’s because the brotherhood fucked up,” Louis growls, his pitch-dark glare turned to Julien, who blanches.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, my family and I, we knew.” My gaze flicks up, forcing Gaël’s cousin to look at me. “Get off your high horse, all of you, we weren’t stupid. None of us were. We knew that something had happened, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t find any lawyer to take on this case.” My feet start walking in frustrated circles as fragments of the past two years break into my mind. “No one would represent us, no one. It seems like everyone here is involved with the brotherhood one way or another. Especially those from whom we least expected it. Can you imagine how broken we felt?” And yet, when those words tumble out of my mouth, it’s like the past months have smoothed in a layer of comfort. This layer of infatuation that Gaël has eased on top of it, sleek like silk, has made me stronger.

I don’t know when it started, but it has somehow crept into my system. That time heals all wounds. And mine are far from being healed, but a start has been made. A reason to live on, to love, to be loved. It’s there.

I am worthy of it.

“So...thank you Julien.” Judging by the way his eyes stutter, he is surprised by my words. I am too, yet at the same time they bring comfort. Yes, I *am* grateful. “You somehow gave me direction these past two years. Somehow gave me a reason to continue.”

And led me to Gaël. He must think the same, because my love takes that moment to come closer until he’s standing face to face with me. Black and green cat eyes watch me carefully as he leans in, sharing his warmth with me. He smells of jasmine and lavender, of delicious wickedness, of power. He smells divine.

But he doesn’t speak. Arthur does. “I thought you wanted my brother.” The softly spoken accusation cuts through the air, and I’ve come to realize that the twin is good at that. He

appears more gentle and certainly more ambitious, yet Arthur has a sinfulness to him that makes him dangerous. He sees everything, hears everything, and is fiercely proud of what he stands for. Right now, Julien is a foe, representing the *other* army on his chess board.

Julien lets out a nervous chuckle. “I gave you the behaviour you expected from me, Deveraux cousins. You come here and pretend to be everyone’s Gods. You are destructive, nasty. You think you run this fucking school!”

“That’s because we do,” Arthur rasps.

Julien’s eyes flutter and he takes a step back. “Well, you don’t own me,” he spits.

“Believe what you wish, but you and I both know that you’re wrong,” Louis mutters, and he takes a step forward. When he takes another one, effectively pushing Julien backward and against the tree, I intervene.

“Wait, Louis, everything’s okay. I understand Julien’s motives, I know he’s hurting too.” Gaël puts his arms around my waist and pulls me close to his chest.

“That may well be, but his words are an insult to our family. Come on, let’s go back inside and let Louis deal with it. It’s freezing,” he mumbles against my ear.

“What do you mean, what’s he going to do?”

“Nothing for you to worry about, beautiful. Come, bring your memories with you and let’s go inside.”

Louis has now backed Julien up against the tree, his larger body hovering over him. “Time to bring you back to the present,” I hear him say, and then Gaël pulls me away and through the shrubs.

“*Allons-y, trésor.*”

GAËL

Time moves like floating water, and we flounder along. Like a blooming flower, Dominique opens up to me, surprising me a little more every day with his intermingling colors. He's sweet and shy, but also fun and laid-back, curious about other things, though persistent in liking what he does.

While I continue my shortcut through college, he takes on every additional subject that's proposed. He's buried under homework and assignments, yet never misses a single morning jog. It's that devotion that ties us together, I'm sure of it. Just like our passion does. For creams and oils and mindfulness, for classical music, for *each other*.

I let him watch when I massage other students, revelling in the knowledge that he's hiding behind the curtains, watching my every move. Yes, my gorgeous *trésor* has developed a few kinky sides that fit mine perfectly. By the time I've walked the student in question out the door and head back for my comfy treatment room, my cock already feels heavy in my pants. Because I know that Dominique will wait for me on his knees—naked, his back straight and his hands clasped behind his back like the good boy he wants to be for me. Eager for me to ask him to get up and onto my table, where he will display himself fully, every inch of delicate flesh with its dips and slopes. All of him. From his long, engraved limbs and chiselled chest and stomach, down to those v-shaped abs and that flush, hard cock.

No matter how many times we play this game, Dominique still carries that sweet blush on his cut cheeks. Still looks at me

in awe with those large, coffee-colored eyes. Still licks his lips nervously when I straddle his shoulders and feed him my cock. Still fluttering those thick eyelashes when I slowly fuck his face, moaning filthily as I do so.

He loves it when I'm loud for him. Loves it when I compliment him for his skills, especially when he slobbers around my crown, spit and tears teasing the corners of his lips.

"You're mine," I always whisper, because he is. He shudders at those words, his body tensing and relaxing at the same time. It's fascinatingly submissive and one of the things that is so alluring about him. He's like a wild animal that has been tamed, and I hold his leash.

He loves it when I press his tall body onto his stomach and play with his ass, spanking those perfectly shaped, plump globes, until pinkness is splattered all onto his alabaster skin.

And he begs, oh yeah he does. Fuck, it's the most beautiful sounds I have ever heard. So I give him what he wants—long, firm lips combined with nips and kisses—as I eat him out.

But I still can't give him everything he needs.

Yes, I'll meet him every night in the woods and listen to him play. Like a bird chirping a concert, he flaunts his talent, shining a glittering light onto the trees.

He plays Satie, Beethoven and Saint-Saëns, he plays Chopin, Liszt and Schumann. And after that, he plays my body like the virtuoso he is—with slow, deep and sensual thrusts as he has me pinned against the piano. I love it, fucking love every second of it, but like the greedy fucker I am, I want more. More of my beautiful treasure, who never fails to surprise me.

Like when he forgave Julien and welcomed him into his life.

Like when he forgave me and chose our relationship above his heartbreaking past.

Like right now.

Winter has transformed into the primaeval spring, and snow has been replaced by soft green. Flower buds are dotted all around the woods, decorated between shrubs and trees, and our brotherhood has also flown into a different phase. For the brotherhood, spring and summer are all about spending time together, discussing world topics under the enjoyment of entertainment. We kick that period off with a weekend in which we invite brothers from the outside world to talk to those students who will graduate this year and will head into the wide world that's flanked by Alpha Fraternarii.

Today is the first day of that weekend, the school being closed for regular students, and the busy day has transformed into a grandiose evening. Earlier today, the board organized meetings with members for those concerned, and offered master classes from other Elders, while we spent the day discussing the necessity of the brotherhood in our future lives.

Louis and I are pretty neutral in the whole debate, unlike Arthur, who seemed pretty caught up by it. I would too, if I was to be the next CEO of a multi-million euro business on which your entire family depends. But then again, Arthur seems pretty lost in his own, private dispute. The one he has going with his stepbrother, Régis, who has once more shown up for the occasion. The guy gets on well with Dominique, so he definitely has some points earned, despite him transforming into a nasty bitch every time Arthur enters the room. All in all, I'd say their bickering is pretty entertaining, if I didn't notice how much their tension is distressing my cousin.

The thing is though, whether Arthur likes it or not, Régis is not going anywhere. He's already been enrolled for next school year, and it's very possible that he'll share a dorm with us.

Bring on those Initiations, innocent lamb.

Our family has put in a request for a larger apartment to accommodate all five of us, and that includes Régis, and Dominique. Who, to no one's surprise I guess, has been spluttering and stammering that he won't be sharing a dorm with us. With *me*.

He's wrong there, and I'm sure that deep down he knows it too. Still, I can be a patient man, especially when it comes to my *trésor*, even if the rules of the game change along the way. Because eventually, I will win. Even if I have to chain him to my bed.

The thought sends a warm glow toward my loins and a smile to my face.

Tonight, the Atrium's on fucking fire. Our brothers, plus those we came all the way to this place to teach, have gathered together, entertainment included. The immense, glass building with its dome-like ceilings and swivelling colonnades, vibrates with growing plants and blooming flowers. The ceiling has been opened, allowing bats to row through the air with their webbed hands. Black and red cloaks drift around me, their faces obscured by shining masks. They look absolutely gorgeous, their debauchery hot and arousing as they use the plush pillows, couches and armchairs for their diversion of pleasure. But my burning eyes stay focused on the piano by the window, on the blindfolded man playing *Moonlight Sonata*.

Dominique can't be a brother of Alpha Fraternarii because he is not part of the French elite. But the Elders did allow him to join as our pianist after I convinced them that he belongs to me.

After begging him on my knees, my beautiful man finally agreed to come out tonight in a black cloak. He's not allowed to watch the scene, and since I don't want our brothers to recognize him, I gave him one of my masks.

Serene, draped in ember and gold.

Mon trésor.

Earlier today, I snuck out of our class to meet up with him in the woods, and listened to him play. And, as always, we make love against his most beloved possession, letting him use me as he rutted himself in a frenzy to get off. Listened to his unhinged groans as he dug his nails deeply in my skin, and thrust inside my clenched hole again and again, until he shattered into pieces and cracked me right along with him.

Right now, his fingers fly elegantly over the instrument, somehow knowing exactly which note to hit despite his eyes gazing into the pitch dark of the silken cloth. As I slowly make my way toward him, I pass different people, who regardless of their cloaks and masks, can't hide from being unravelled in front of my very eyes. I live for this kind of debauchery, after all.

I notice Maxime at the corner of my eyes, wrapped in gold and black, elegantly sitting upon his knees as he's playing with two cocks, alternating their rigid flesh in his mouth as if he's licking his favorite ice cream. A little further along, I catch sight of Arthur, and even his mask can't hide the scornful glare that escapes from his charcoal eyes. I can't see what he's looking at, but I don't think I need to in order to understand.

And all the while, the piano plays.

Someone moans, and when I pass a few more groups of cloaked brothers, I see how one of them has been displayed on his stomach on top of a table, his hair fisted back.

Julien.

His cloak is pulled up above his ass, pants shimmied down, and a large cock impales himself on him. People turn to watch, visibly satisfied with the way this entertainment has escalated. Sex workers are great, but when the brothers get off on one another? Yeah, that's just deliciously sinful. It's divine. Perhaps Julien was right. Perhaps our family is the most powerful one in this school.

When I finally reach the piano, everything else blackens out. Instead, I see my beautiful man, caught in his soft bubble of reminiscence. His dark hair is tousled, loose strands teasing his forehead and blindfold, and he gently rocks his body along with the tune of the song, blissfully unaware of my presence.

Something within me thrums at the sight, shakes like a leaf when I press my mouth on the curve of his neck. Dominique's breath hitches.

I could easily forget about the woods—the hunt is within us.

Engraved in our bones.

Absorbed in his melody.

For as long as I live, I'll live as I love—as his.

“*C’est moi, mon trésor,*” I croon. Visibly relieved, he leans into my touch, his nimble fingers never leaving his instrument. “I wish you could see how the Atrium is alive tonight. There are so many people here. So, so many people.” Tracing a path toward his lips with my mouth, I whisper against the corner of his lips, “They can’t wait to see this new musician. This man, who has captured their brother, and who was crazy enough to sign an NDA to become part of him.” It’s not an entire lie. I didn’t know Arthur had proposed to him to sign one, but I’m more than elated that Dominique signed, that he wanted to be with me.

He chose me.

Dominique lets out a soft whine at the touch of my tongue against the seam of his lips, and lets me enter, slowly and coaxing, different from other times but no less claiming. Swirling my tongue around, I suck on his, kissing him until his lips are raw. He sounds almost dizzy from being out of breath and has finally given up playing. He then turns to face me, pressing his gorgeous, tight body closer against mine.

“They are all waiting, beautiful.” My fingers trace the blackness of his blindfold, teasing his lack of sight. “To see how I fuck you, my gorgeous Dominique. Wanna show them a good time?” He lets out a raspy mewl, already desperately sucking on the fingers I slide between his lips. “You’re so good to me, *trésor*. So sweet for me. Let me show you.”

I help him stand up, the outline of his beautiful, rigid cock visible through his pants. I wriggle them down his thighs together with his boxer briefs, until they fall in a puddle at his feet. He steps out of them, but I don’t miss the way he nibbles at his lip nervously.

“So fucking gorgeous,” I purr, rubbing my greedy hands all over his naked ass. “And for everyone to see. Stay like this, *trésor*, while I eat you out.” Dominique slumps forward and

holds on to the piano while I sit down on his stool, his plump ass right in front of my face. “Hmm, you smell so fucking good.” I give his perfectly round cheeks a long lick, then pull them apart, squeeze even further, until I see his pink hole. “There you are, gorgeous. Are you ready to be wrecked, *mon trésor*?” Dominique grunts, mouth pressed against the music desk. I chuckle, making sure that my breath fans his heated, sensitive pucker, loving the way how he instantly shivers. With my fingers dug into the skin of his thighs, I pull him in and onto my face, making sure that I can bury myself in the heart of his sensuality. My tongue flicks out, tracing a line, and another one, sucking and humming as I do so, taking Dominique apart little by little. Fuck, I love eating his ass, love to watch him break for me.

He writhes and moans, muscle clenching and unclenching while his legs shake.

“Hmm, fuck, I love how my brothers are watching,” I fantasize against the skin of his rim. “All watching how I tame my beautiful toy.” Without having to watch, my fingers uncap the lid of a bottle of oil, squirting a generous amount on my palms.

“First I cover you in rose scent,” I mumble against his quivering hole. I massage it onto his body with languid, skilled precision, feeling how his core hums under the weight of my hands. “Wrap you up and fuck you deep.” My tongue digs back into his narrow tunnel, massaging his tender flesh in search for that button of pleasure. When I reach it, he cries out, startling.

Around us, the atmosphere changes, the air becoming heady with anticipation. Yeah, people are watching, we’ve gotten their attention. Let them watch how I treat my man, how he lets me play him like the fucking king I am, how I hold him on my leash and control the dynamics in public. In private, it’s a different story.

“Can you stand up a little for me, beautiful?” He does what I say without hesitation, instantly grabbing the fallboard tight as he moves his ass away from my greedy mouth. I give him one last lick, then pour some more of the rose scented oil onto

my palm. It smells divine, sweet and mystical. I have pulled my cloak to the side and pull my cock out of my pants, coating it generously before my slippery hands are back on Dominique's naked thighs. "Let me pull you onto my cock, *trésor*." He looks over his shoulder, allowing me to catch his lips as they lift into a secret smirk. Yeah, he fucking loves this side of me. This filthy, narcissistic part of me.

"There you go," I purr, when the head of my cock slowly fills his hole, allowed by his muscles to slip a little deeper. My girth follows, gentle yet persistent, while Dominique sinks deeper and deeper onto my lap. "That's it, my good boy." When he's fully seated, I pet his head, and stroke the unruly hair from his forehead. "My favorite toy." He lifts his hips, nearly pulling entirely off, before he slides down, rolling his lower body as he does so. My head falls back with the wave of pleasure. "Fuck, yesss."

The air is filled with stars tonight, as if they're staring down on us, on our secret brotherhood and our secret sins. And in between this world of rich charlatans, this world of depraved wealth, floats this innocent angel. My hands wrap around Dominique's waist as I start thrusting up, meeting his rocking hips. We're both panting, sweating in our intermingling rhythm that feels so good, like we were meant to be together. And even if we weren't, I don't care. If I have to, I'll rewrite history again. And again. Until my perfect version becomes my reality—Dominique, the beauty I finally found, in my arms.

"*Je t'aime*," I breathe, my heart singing.

Around us, the Atrium is on fire. But inside our connected minds, there's a peaceful quiet. A mutual surrender. No more crowns of disguise. There's only a buried past, and a chosen future.

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My three bright flames. My pride and love. You carry everything I have to give. And lastly, my readers. Thanks for sticking by me on this winding road.

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(TW: murder)

PROLOGUE

The sound of heavy rainfall dripping onto the antique windows of the abandoned church created an ominous atmosphere that was as dark as the night outside at this hour. In this part of Manhattan, the streets were filthy, despite the fresh smell of the rain that had wiped out the usual stink of rubbish coming from the huge dumpsters. Trash bags were discarded freely by careless business owners and residents.

No, it was not the weather to be outside in. But there were always those who were in need of their fix. In need of their cash. In need of their lay.

The woman in his arms should have been out now, selling her cocaine, doing her duty, and providing for her family. But she was a fallen angel, a beauty in disgrace. Ripe for the taking.

Saint George's Church let out a long chime that shook him out of his reverie and back to the task at hand.

They were on their second date and Carol had never been more in love, nor more enchanted by this man, who was so different from the American guys she'd dated before. He was well-mannered and soft-spoken, his foreign accent a constant reminder of all the things she'd wished to discover in life one day, and she was determined to exorcize whatever coldness haunted him, replacing it with her growing love. If only he would let her.

She was so intoxicated by him—this charmer, who'd literally just walked into her life—that she failed to see the red

flags that were slowly but steadily smothering her. The ones that were indicating that something entirely different was about to happen.

His hand on her shoulder was warm and familiar. It shouldn't bring her such comfort, yet it did. She leaned into it, consumed by his smell, and that voice that was now leading her deeper into her own mind, bringing her back to moments lived that she had forgotten about.

He'd brought her to one of the few abandoned churches in Manhattan tonight. It had been easy to get in, surprisingly so. They'd climbed all the way up to the gallery above the narthex, where a pipe organ had once stood. Over the last few hours, they'd shared a bottle of wine, had some snacks, and had made out. Carol was ready for more, but instead, they'd once again talked about her life. With him, she felt no shame, no fear. Where her lips were usually sealed, she found them open in his presence, sharing her deepest secrets. Especially like this, when his enchanting voice made her drowsy and compliant.

"Carol, can you hear me?" he purred. She soothed even further into its smooth melody, only vaguely registering the rope that was being loosely pulled around her neck.

"Yesss," she slurred, nuzzling her face onto his chest. God, he felt so good, so warm and reassuring. She raised a hand to touch his dark curls, loving how they slid through her fingers like loose sand.

Ever since she'd come to Manhattan, her life had taken her on a wild ride, but joining the Business was probably the best thing she could have done. Dealing C was easy for a crime organization that already had a marked territory. Being the family business that they were, they provided full protection if she performed well. Which she hadn't done recently, since she'd fallen into that common trap of becoming her own best client.

"Your family must miss you," her French lover mused, and in the fog that was Carol's mind, she briefly wondered which family he was referring to. The one that had abandoned her

when she was sentenced to prison, or the one that had prevented her from going in the first place? She wanted to ask him, but he continued, “My family wants what your family has. You know that?”

“No,” Carol mumbled sleepily.

“I know.” His finger trailed along her cheek, and Carol couldn’t prevent the sigh from spilling from her lips. “I’m here to take what your family has.”

“Take,” Carol stammered lazily in reply, then blinked her eyes with heavily dilated pupils.

His fingertips teased her chin, then dipped further down to the rope on her neck as he murmured, “*C’est ça.*” That’s it.

He leaned in for her willing lips while his other hand took out the phone that was safely tucked away in the pocket of her coat.

“Now the fun begins,” he murmured to himself, and then pressed play on the voice recorder on his phone. With his free hand, he tucked Carol’s sand-colored hair behind the ears of her narrow face. Before, it had been full and thick, but too much cocaine had gotten rid of the fine strands like a lawn mower, leaving some parts of her skull practically uncovered.

“*Viens.*” Come.

Leaning heavily on him for support, Carol scrambled to her feet, cherishing that grounding grip on her shoulder. She eyed him with a glassy stare, her lips slightly parted.

Barely an hour ago, she’d been looking at him with lust and heat, wanting him to touch her. He smirked into the darkness. That was what they always wanted, his perfect victims.

He’d tried before and had failed to set foot on American soil by infiltrating American companies. The promised land where they’d be free from all those who were no longer part of their family. Because they’d forged a new one. Though all of them, including his own family, underestimated him and his mission. He’d show them his true devotion and the tables would turn. Both organizations he’d targeted for the cause

hated each other's guts. And it was kind of funny to see how they ran around each other in circles, avoiding contact. Both organizations were full of weak lackeys, making it easy to reach his objective, and unless they wanted to negotiate, he'd continue his murderous path until he hit his destination.

"Tonight, you're going to make me so happy, Carol. You know why, don't you?" She gave him a sweet, confused smile in return.

He nudged her gently to take a step forward until she was standing on the edge of the platform above the empty nave of the church. From here they had a perfect view of all the rows of pews that hadn't been taken out, despite the church being out of service for a long time. Even the altar was still there, with its beautiful statues and paintings portraying a suffering Jesus Christ.

Without removing his hand from Carol's shoulder, he stroked her hair once more before he started tightening the noose around her neck. She sighed into the warmth of his soft touch and he even went as far as moaning gently in her ear as he rubbed his growing erection into the crack of her ass. She was face to face with doom, and she hadn't even realized. Just the thought of it made him horny.

Aware of the fact that they'd be listening, he decided to continue the charade and mumbled into the voice recorder, "We're here at Saint George's church, me and Carol. Aren't we, baby?"

Carol moaned something that vaguely resembled a yes, and he let out a soft chuckle and pinched her ass. If only she had a dick, he would have started their closing scene with a quick fuck. But women didn't do it for him. And his love was waiting back home.

"We'll come to America and take what you have. Until you let us in and give us what we want, no one will be safe from us." His voice dropped to a whisper and he pulled the noose tight around Carol's neck, then tilted her head to drop a soft, last kiss on her cheek. After he'd reassured himself that

the other side of the rope had been firmly knotted around the connecting pillar, he gave Carol the subtle push she needed.

The woman let out a surprised gasp as she plummeted down into a free fall, grasping at the emptiness, plunging toward death. The sound filled the quiet of the church and brought him out of his own trance, and he gave himself a moment to revel in the usual rush of adrenaline. Below him, dangling in the open air, he felt Carol coming back to her senses, but it was too late. Too late to change her destiny.

“*Adieu,*” he whisper-mumbled into the phone recorder. “*Notre famille arrive. Soyez prêts.*”

With that, he placed the phone on the floor, ready to be found by the Business.

“Our family’s coming. Be ready.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nothing with Lola Malone is what it seems. Although it's true that she loves writing romantic suspense and good wine, when you read her books, don't be fooled... her men are naughty and hot, shy and determined, and her plots twist and turn. But just when you think you've seen it all? You haven't. Lola creates stories in a unique world that's filled with culture, art, fashion and gorgeous men.

Below are my socials. I love to connect with readers! Join my FB readers group, my IG, or just drop me a message.



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