



DARK  
IMAGINARIUM  
ACADEMY

# LUNAR WITCH

PHASES OF THE MOON

1

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

M. SINCLAIR

# LUNAR WITCH

## PHASES OF THE MOON

M. SINCLAIR

# LOST & BOUND PUBLISHING

***Lunar Witch: Phases of the Moon #1***

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*The Union of Love & Madness*

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## DESCRIPTION

***No man would ever own me again.***

A simple promise I'd made to myself after escaping a brutal childhood of abuse and being trained to enact violence on unblessed witches. Since that moment, I had managed to survive on the streets by successfully pickpocketing.

Unfortunately, after years of hiding, the monster who starred in all of my nightmares was closer than ever and I was faced with only one option - seeking refuge at the Dark Imaginarium Academy.

Filled with the elite witches of our society, I should have expected to run into some of my previous targets and that normally wouldn't have been a problem. It wasn't like they'd known I'd stolen from them.

Except for my last hit.

What I stole from him was something I would never forget because it was literally embedded in my chest. Yeah, he was a bit upset about that one... as in acting absolutely psychotic. Except he's not the only one...

A blood witch who has an addiction to my taste.

A lunar witch who takes pleasure in trying to scare me into submission.

An unblessed that wants to dissect me, literally.

A shadow witch that relishes in marking up my body to show ownership.

These men want to claim me, own me, and the treasure that I now possess, but I would never break the promise I made to myself.

But when my past follows me right into the place I considered a safe haven, I find that these psychos may be the exact key to getting rid of my problem forever. The only problem? These men are convinced that I've never



experienced the type of horror that would be required for that to happen, that they have to protect me from it. What they don't realize?

*Killing left a stain on the soul and mine was pitch black.*

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***Lunar Witch*** features **characters that are all 18+**. This is not a high school academy book and the contents are intended for mature audiences. This book includes violence, mature content, PTSD, flashbacks of abuse, and sex. There is no bullying from the harem, just psychotic men trying to claim their girl.

***Lunar Witch*** is book one of three in the ***Phases of the Moon*** series, which is set within the shared universe of *Dark Imaginarium Academy*. All series can be read independently, but characters have crossovers and it is highly encouraged to read all within the universe to understand the world in its entirety.

**Series within the universe:**

*Phases of the Moon* by M. Sinclair

*The Creatures We Crave* by R.L. Caulder

*The Storm Dragons' Mate* by M. Sinclair

*Blood Oath* by R.L. Caulder

# PROLOGUE

# DEVA

*June*

Moonlight illuminated my line of sight, creating a bright silver glow that shone down and across the gothic monstrosity I was supposed to be breaking into. I easily tracked the guards that were walking the estate grounds, knowing that it would take little to no effort to get past them. Not only were they not expecting me, but even if they were—no one had ever successfully caught me, and that wouldn't change today.

Especially for such a small job. My *last* job, at that. My last job and my last night sleeping on the streets. Although, I suppose it wasn't really on the 'streets' as much as a fire exit above an alleyway. Something that was far more comfortable than it sounded...*sort of*. Not that comfort had ever mattered before, but maybe it would start to mean something. Maybe it would start to be a luxury I could afford.

For the second time in two years, I would be starting a new life. Starting over. That wasn't a pattern I wanted to consider too closely because honestly, I didn't have the best track record of finding long-lasting situations, something that was starting to wear on me. I was very much hoping that this new one would be more permanent.

After all, it had the potential to change the course of my entire future, and since I hadn't had one of those until I broke free from my captivity when I was sixteen, it wasn't an opportunity I planned to waste.

My fists tightened as I tried to shake off the simple reminder of how often

I'd had to run since escaping my past. How many nights I'd been terrified as a teenager, afraid to do anything, knowing that *he* had eyes everywhere.

A cold chill ran over my skin as a vibrant memory, more akin to a nightmare, slammed into my consciousness, nearly leaving me breathless.

*Darkness permeated my awareness as I lay trapped within a frozen state of paralysis, the silence of the void echoing through every part of my being, warning me of what was to come. Warning me of what had already happened and the potential danger that greeted me once I awoke from my icy slumber.*

*It had happened again, and like always, I had been helpless to stop it. Helpless to stop him. How many times had he killed me? How many times had he played Dr. Frankenstein by terminating me and reviving me, pulling my tarnished soul from the sludge-filled void that it was sentenced to for all of eternity?*

*I suppose no one had said that exactly, but I knew where I belonged. I didn't fear my damnation; I ran towards it with open arms, knowing it would be a reprieve from this.*

*At this point, he had to have performed this ritual over ten, maybe even twenty times. Truth be told, I had stopped counting after he'd done it three times within a year. No longer did I fear this state of being where I was technically dead but still conscious in a dream-like state; I knew it was only temporary. He needed me far too much to get rid of me permanently.*

*Unfortunately.*

*At least like this, I couldn't feel any of the pain associated with his treatment of me or the guilt of how I lived my life. No, everything was coated in a cold numbness where there was just...nothing.*

*Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, quiet chants reached my ears, the language both familiar and foreign. I knew what was coming next as dark magic infused the space, awakening every element of my being. The sensation was warm and almost languid, like I was being dipped in honey... Until it wasn't.*

*Searing, unbearable agony dragged me forward as a scream caught in my throat. My entire body shuddered to life, a strangled gasp pulling from my lips as I tried to take in as much oxygen as possible, my back landing hard on a cold marble surface. It rendered me momentarily breathless.*

*Feeling something slither up my throat, I rolled over and began to dry*

heave. I squeezed my eyes shut, knowing I didn't want to see what was leaving me, the scent of darkness, a magic composed completely of evil, filling the space like poison, mixing with the chants that now vibrated through my very bones.

My skin felt like it was on fire, something shifting underneath it, the sensation like worms slithering. Tears welled in my eyes, not out of pain, but out of frustration—I knew my show of weakness would only cause more pain in the end.

When a large hand gripped my hair and forced my face up, my gaze opened upon a pair of nearly white silver eyes filled with a sickening amount of pride. I felt a snarl build in my throat like a wild animal as he crouched down in front of me, his hand wrapping around my throat.

He never hid his emotions from me. No, he was very clear how he felt about me, and every moment of pain he put me through, even what could be construed as good in his mind, was bad—was evil.

I was well aware of my fate—I was going to die by this man's hands.

“There's my Ayla. Welcome back to the land of the living.”

My Ayla.

Those words radiated through me, making me realize he really did consider me his. His property. I shouldn't have been surprised—I had known subconsciously that he felt that way—but for some reason, this hit differently. Maybe it was because I had reached the end of my rope; maybe it was because I was so damn tired of dying.

Fury surged over me as I made a promise to myself in that moment—I was going to escape this hell, and no one would ever own me again.

I had a right to be terrified, even to this day. But I wasn't going to allow him that control—not anymore. I had been a different girl back then, a child rightfully terrified and desperate for escape, even if it meant true death. I wasn't a child anymore though, and I wasn't going to allow the memory of that bastard to tarnish my future.

Which is why I had taken it directly into my own hands.

It had been a slow process, breaking from that darkness, and after hiding for what felt like weeks, I'd ventured out because being hungry was a far greater motivator than most gave it credit for. Now, after almost two years of exploring this vast territory, I was ready to be done with it.

This place would always carry traces of lingering fear, the feeling that I had to watch behind each and every corner, and I couldn't live that way. I didn't 'do' fear as it was, but he had the direct power to summon it in me, and I was ready to break that spell. He had trained me to be like this, to fear him and nothing else, not even death. I was just glad he wasn't around to see how effective his tactics had been.

The sound of someone laughing in the distance broke me from my dark thoughts and drew my attention back to the task at hand. Immediately, I let my magic leave through my fingertips, the iridescent silvery light slithering along the surface of the roof ledge that I was positioned on. My magic, much like most powerful users, worked as an extension of myself, and even now it was scoping out potential threats I could come across.

The tactical mindset had a serene haze slipping over me as I assessed every inch of my body, making sure it was primed and ready for the mission ahead. As usual, silence greeted me, absent of even a pulse or heartbeat.

*Yeah*, that had been a bit of a shock. Apparently, being killed one too many times and infused with a shit-ton of dark magic meant that you could survive without a heartbeat or pulse. It made it a bit difficult to feel like I could be just your normal, everyday eighteen-year-old.

Closing my eyes, I opened my magic up to the full moon. Its natural power seeped into my skin and made my fingers shake with the overwhelming force that surged through and back out of me, luckily never staying for long. It was enough, though, that I knew my magic would be charged for weeks to come.

I should have felt far more alive, almost hyper, than I did right now because the phase of the full moon was one that fueled my magic—that fueled all lunar witch magic—but I felt far from that.

My mind cleared completely and my body stilled, the normal state of being far more comfortable to me after years of being forced into it. I didn't have to work through or think about anything. No, there was only one thing that I needed to work on, and it was the job ahead of me.

There had been a small part of me that had feared, when I'd run, that I'd been tainted with a darkness so permanent that I would never have a chance at normalcy. That any part of me that could survive or flourish within society was ruined after years and years of abuse, and nothing about that would ever change.

*I hadn't been wrong, in a sense.* After the first day of running,

experiencing what life was like for others, I had realized the darkness was tattooed underneath my skin, ingrained in my being and synonymous with my own name. Well, my *old* name.

With that realization, though, I had also realized how strong I'd become.

I was broken on the inside, marred by scars both visible and hidden, but no one had to see those. No one looked for those anyway. I could live with some semblance of normality, even if that included sleeping in alleyways and stealing. I was strong enough to deal with my trauma, and if I couldn't deal with it, I shut that shit off and shoved it into a 'better not risk opening that until you're alone' cabinet.

I was able to wake up every day and see the same person without fearing that I would turn into some bloodthirsty killing machine just because I'd been trained to do exactly that growing up. It wasn't a perfect existence, keeping that part of me locked away, but sometimes it was better to deal with the darkness that way. Sometimes it was better left unspoken, unheard, and ignored.

My body jolted just slightly upon the return of my magic, giving me the go-ahead. I released the tension in my legs from where I was crouched on the ledge and dove forward, off of the three-story roof and over the spelled wards that shimmered in the moonlight.

The cool, wet winds brushed over my skin as I reached out to grip a pipe that was posted between two large buildings of the main house. A grunt almost escaped my lips as I latched on, my grip nearly slipping because of how slick it was.

Only deterred for a moment, I used my momentum to swing down and land silently on a balcony on the west side of the house, my form completely hidden within the shadows. Something that was simple, considering my appearance.

With the exception of my eyes, everything was covered in black, making it fairly easy to avoid attention. I knelt down in front of the set of french doors, my magic slipping underneath and scoping the space out as I easily picked the lock and stepped back. I walked into the room once assured that there was no one present to witness my crime. Unfortunately, the object I sought wasn't so easily captured—although it would have been ideal if it had been in this room, waiting for me.

No, even for this small job, I would need to work a bit harder.

Making my way across the room, I opened the door and stepped into a

dark candle-lit hallway. The flames were a soothing cool blue that bounced off my magic, which slithered ahead of me. I listened to every sound in the vicinity around me, only hearing the slight shift of weight from someone a few rooms away—most likely a household servant.

The family who lived here, according to my intel, was traveling through a different territory of the realm, leaving this particular treasure here for the picking. This small item would provide more than enough coins for my upcoming venture. It wouldn't last forever, but it was a guaranteed opportunity. Not for the first time, I felt a stab of shame that I had to steal in order to live.

I suppose it was better than killing.

When I reached a juncture where the hallway split to go right and left, I crouched down and felt the stone underneath my fingers, my magic swirling around them in a hypnotic pattern, trying to sense a draft. Smiling in victory, I walked towards the left and let out a small exhale, the cold, drafty building, icy enough that my breath would have fogged if not for my mask.

My gaze darted towards the large windows that showcased an empty courtyard at the center of the estate. I fought the urge to let my gaze wander and appreciate the beauty of the peaceful garden. You didn't see that often in our territory. No, Carmina was only pleasant for those with the wealth to wall themselves off from the rest of the population.

My fingers traced along the stone wall, and when I met a warm stone, I paused and crouched down, feeling a draft seeping out from beneath a hidden door. Closing my eyes, I stepped back and allowed my lunar magic to sink back into my skin.

For as long as I could remember, I'd known I was a lunar witch. The orphanage I'd been raised in had first experienced me using lunar magic when I'd called forth a small glowing white orb during a storm because I'd been afraid of the dark. It had been unusual for a child to use practiced magic so early on... But even more odd was that now, it wasn't the only form of magic I had.

No, now I had magical abilities that I'd developed through training. Although 'developed' and 'training' was a rather misleading group of terms. The truth was far darker than that.

My surplus of magic, my wide range of powers, resided under my skin, carved in runes. The same runes that kept me alive while my heart didn't beat. I didn't say 'under my skin' hypothetically, either—if you peeled my



skin back, you would see them. The fucked-up tattoo had grown each and every time he'd killed me, placing spells under my skin before stitching me back up like some demented doll.

*Astaroth's Dead Doll.* That was the name he'd come up with, something almost as idiotic and demented as the man himself.

Unfortunately, I could call it idiotic all I wanted, but it had left me transformed, mutated from the inside. That was why my powers were a complete secret, because the response I'd be met with would... Well, it would be really bad.

I knew what it meant to be different and to be dangerous. But being a witch with more than one type of magic? Even if I didn't understand what type of magic it was, exactly, and to what extent it would go to? That would get me killed, even within my old line of work, especially now that I wasn't under *his* protection.

I nearly snorted at that thought. 'Protection.' *Right.*

Closing my eyes, I brought my hand up and gathered the darkness around me. There was no other way to explain it—I could feel the shadows shifting in cold, icy waves like silk scarves against my skin. The pressure around me built as my shadow circle grew, the abyss of potential darkness opening up as it tried to gather me in its grip. It was so different from lunar magic, yet underneath it, I could feel the same elemental current of raw power. A power that I had the ability to harness.

I didn't give in to it though—I couldn't ever give in to it.

Pushing my shadows towards the door in a swift movement, my eyes opened as I heard a quiet mechanism open before revealing a dark hallway. I pulled my magic back against me but didn't let the shadows dissolve, knowing they would probably be better for this particular situation. My steps were completely silent—a skill I had developed long ago—as I came to the end of a hallway.

Standing underneath the stone archway, my eyes widened at what could only be described as a treasure hoard. I frowned slightly—they weren't dragons, right? I hoped like hell they were witches, because I was not about to steal from dragons. I may have put myself in danger, often, but I wasn't suicidal. As I walked into the space, the sconces lit up with blue flames, welcoming a thief into its midst. My gaze didn't wander too long, looking only for the small piece of property I planned on stealing.

It was far easier than one would believe, especially because it was soaked

in dried blood. I nearly rolled my eyes as I walked through large shelves towards the back of the room. I could not only scent the copper-accented smell but could nearly taste it on my tongue. It sank into my pores and seemed to rest under my skin, the imprint of it like a flavor I would never forget. I had absolutely no doubt that if I ever came across the same blood again, I would be able to recognize it.

There was no damn reason—no damn *good* reason—for me to be able to do either of those things...but as mentioned, I wasn't exactly normal.

When I approached a large chest, I tilted my head at the fact that it was open. I suppose considering how well guarded this place was, they were probably confident that the things stored in this room were secure, but it didn't stop my shadows from circling around the chest to make sure there were no defensive spells in place. When I was comfortable approaching it, I crouched down and looked at the object in question.

The chest housed three items in total, and the one to the right was my intended target. It was a gorgeous blade, still crusted in the blood of a citrine bird. Supposedly. I didn't care if it was or not, truth be told. No, all I cared about was the profit it would turn.

Which was why it made so little sense that I couldn't look away from the center object... Although, to be fair, the sight was something to behold.

*Moonstone.*

I nearly blinked just to make sure it was actually there, the rare gem sitting within the chest as if it was nothing more than a discarded rock. Maybe it was because of my background, but I was extremely aware of just how powerful a moonstone could be in the wrong hands. How *dangerous* it could be in the wrong hands, especially for lunar witches.

I felt my back tingle with the remembrance of all the times it had been used against me, to drain me of power before I was beaten into submission. I felt the clinical veil of my thoughts slip back over, refusing to delve into those memories right now.

Reaching my hand forward, I picked up the cool stone and ran my fingers over it, feeling its magic buzzing against my skin. I tightened my hold on it as I looked at the dagger and realized that it was worthless in comparison... But if I took this, would I actually be able to get rid of it? No. I wouldn't be able to do that. It couldn't be destroyed, but the idea of selling it off and putting it into dangerous hands was far worse.

Deciding I couldn't trust what these idiots would do with it, I slipped it

into the top of my shirt, nestling it right between my breasts. It felt warm against my skin, and when I stood, I eyed the dagger before turning—

Shit.

It goes without saying that I was never caught off guard. *Ever.*

So I felt panic soar through me, for just a moment, as I found an extremely large man standing nearly toe-to-toe with me. How the hell had he managed that?

I didn't speak and didn't react. Instead, I moved my gaze across his large chest and up his jawline, pausing on a pair of full, masculine lips. I swallowed, feeling a weird sensation like heat pulse through me as I imagined what it would be like to touch those lips with my own.

*What was going on with me right now?*

Finally, I met a pair of dark eyes so inky, I was positive they were black. I inhaled sharply, feeling the darkness that surrounded him as cool shadows brushed against my skin, somehow seeping underneath my clothing. A shuddered breath left my lips as I felt a surge of both uncomfortable tension roll through me at his clear display of power, but more so...desire. I didn't want to consider that aspect because I was overwhelmed by the cold, almost painful electric sensation running over my skin, one that I knew was completely due to him.

His power grew thick through the room as the man examined my face, his shadows exploring my magic tentatively, almost as if trying to not spook me. The more I stared into his eyes, the more I realized what was unsettling about him. He exhibited no fear. Everyone, especially while dealing with me, felt the physical responses of fear and adrenaline—but this man had none, and it was clear as day why.

He was a shadow witch.

Which meant he was incredibly lethal. His gaze dipped to my covered mouth, then to my body, making me wish I could read his mind to hear what he thought.

I frowned at that.

Why did I care what he thought about me? I couldn't deny I did though. Surprise seemed to light up his features before he met my gaze once again, a flush working over my skin at the heat there. His shadows wrapped around my own tightly, nearly holding me hostage. It should have made me feel apprehensive, but instead a sickening sense of security worked through my chest.

I needed to get the hell out of here. Now.

“Who are you?” His voice was thick and rough, making me wish I could fully see him through the intoxicating spell of his magic. I opened my mouth, almost as if I was going to answer—

Searing pain exploded in my chest as I felt my breath catch. Out of habit, I didn’t react or cry out, but everything seemed to grow fuzzy around me at the white-hot pain. I blinked, trying to stay upright as my magic went haywire, blasting through the room in a whirlwind that shifted and threw objects. I pressed a hand to my chest, noticing that the moonstone seemed to burn under my touch, as I continued to hold his gaze. I couldn’t see him as clearly as before though, and I felt a weird sensation, almost a high, float through me as my knees turned weak.

I’d been through so much pain.

So much agony.

But this? This was far different.

When a sudden icy flash froze everything in the room, including my own magic, I realized the man in front of me had grasped my jaw and pressed his forehead to my own. Words were coming from his lips, words I should have recognized, but my hearing was full of static-like white noise and my limbs were hot. His magic, like a wave of winter, herded my magic back into my body until it felt like I was going to explode, the pressure growing.

The smallest noise left my mouth as everything shattered at once—

Everything went black as I felt my knees break, and pleasure coated every nerve ending down to my fingertips. I fell into a hard, warm body, the feeling of being touched like this almost inexplicable. Both pleasurable and so damn painful. *When was the last time anyone had touched me?* That wasn’t what really caught me off guard though.

No. It was the sound of blood rushing through my veins, the pulsing beat that seemed to shake my teeth. *My heartbeat.*

My heart was beating? When the fuck had that happened last?

What the hell was going on with me?

This was so bad.

Yet, for just the moment, I gave into his hard hold, realizing we were on the floor as he held me tightly against him.

It could have only been seconds before reality came crashing in and his hands on my body caused a very different feeling to spur through me—not one of pleasure, but panic. Memories of being held down on the floor sprang

forth, and my body reacted before I had a chance to think through it.

I snapped away from him, landing five feet away in a crouched position, his head snapping up in surprise, his arms still out as if holding me. The room was still dark, but I could see more of his gorgeous features, and the way he was dressed was what I would expect from someone living in an estate like this. Expensive. His hands were circled by shadows as I finally stood, knowing I needed to make my exit. Fast.

“Don’t think about it, little jaguar.” His tall, muscular frame was so much bigger than I even thought as he stood to his full size, my gaze darting down his body.

I wrinkled my nose at the nickname once I met his gaze again, feeling far more energized than before, the switch from searing pain to feeling like I had been shot full of adrenaline almost dizzying.

“My name is not ‘little jaguar.’” And now I was talking to the bastard. *Why was I talking to him?* Damnit, this was so bad.

Although it was a bit hard to focus on what I should be doing with this weird thumping in my chest, like my heart was moving double-time, echoing in my ears. When had my heart ever beat this fast? Maybe before I had been killed the first time?

“I asked who you were, a question you refused to answer, and then you nearly destroyed my estate.” His face flashed with a nearly amused look instead of displeasure. “Then you dug your little claws into me like a kitten while I tried to fix it. I would say that more than warrants the nickname.”

Well, I preferred ‘little jaguar’ to ‘kitten’ any day... And *why* did I care?

Instead of responding, I edged my way around him, managing to avoid his shadows nearly three times before a wall of them blocked me from going further. I let out a dissatisfied sound and narrowed my eyes. “I would rather not kill you, but I am leaving here.”

I had no idea *why* I didn’t want to kill him, but I would go with it.

He chuckled softly, a slightly unhinged light flashing in his gaze. “You think you could do that?”

“I know I can do that.” My heart slowed once again, just minimally, as I forced myself to slip into that state of being that could kill indiscriminately. I didn’t want to have to, but if it meant me getting out of here... I would do anything for my freedom.

Something in my voice had him tilting his head in thought before he switched topics on me, giving me whiplash—was this how witches normally

interacted? That couldn't be it, because this was... something else. I didn't know what to call this man and the intensity radiating off of him.

“What did you take?”

“A dagger,” I answered easily, his eyes flicking to the chest.

I gathered my power under my skin, not wanting to have to do this but knowing it was the only possible option for leaving without blood on my hands. Unfortunately, if he looked closely into the occurrences of tonight, he would realize the different types of magic I used—as in several types, which I had a feeling he wouldn't like.

A look of surprise flashed over the shadow man's face before he snapped his head over at me. Well, now he was pissed.

“Give it back.” His voice was smooth but edged in danger as the shadows grew heavier within the room. I had never been so damn glad I had shadow magic as I was tonight, especially with it being powered by the full moon.

The way this man moved was almost intoxicating as I tracked him, trying to not show the very small, tiny uneasiness he caused me.

“Can't do that.”

Mild amusement flashed through me as a predatory victory filled his gaze, his shadows surrounding me completely, almost suffocating as he closed in on me.

“You don't have an option,” he growled.

I stepped towards him, an unhinged energy wrapping around me, making me realize this man wasn't nearly as collected as I assumed. No, there was something here I was missing, and I wasn't staying around to find out. My head fell back as he leaned down so that we were nearly nose to nose.

“That's the thing,” I mused, my voice taking on a quality that was influenced by my magic. “I always have options, and all of them include my freedom.”

My shadow and lunar magic imploded within me, and I felt my body leave the physical presence it held within that room. In the blink of an eye, I landed in a beam of moonlight, back on a rooftop far outside of the estate grounds. *Free*. I tried to ignore the uncomfortable void in my chest at the idea of being away from that odd man.

I stepped back and shook my head. It must have been the pain and surge of magic. As I left the rooftop to head back to my alleyway, my heart began to slow, and I prayed to the fates that it would revert back to silence.

## DEVA

*Sunday, August 28th*

The sound of bells filled my ears as a groan broke from my throat, my head promptly burying further underneath my four pillows to protect from such things. These freakin’ bells had to stop being such a prominent part of my life.

Why were these still a thing?

I had tried everything, every spell I knew, to stop them from ringing in our room every morning, yet nothing I did ever worked. Instead, I continuously was woken up by the angry ring of alarms set by the cruel administrators at Garnet Hall—people who clearly hated all of us.

“You would think after two months she would have gotten used to it,” a familiar female voice mused.

“Clearly not a morning person,” a secondary voice agreed.

I narrowed my eyes, wanting to tell them that I had never been a morning, afternoon, or night person because I rarely had time for sleep in my past...but I’d been learning that the key to friendship was to keep things light and happy.

So no talking about my murder past.

Sticking my head up, I looked at Briar and Lavinia, who were both sitting on the first’s bed as they drank from two massive coffee mugs. Unlike myself, they looked perfectly awake and already ready for the day.

Then again, both of my new friends seemed to flawlessly execute looking

like a functioning individual every day—it was a skillset. Briar, already dressed in her trademark dark clothing, had her dark red hair piled on top of her head, a pair of gold-rimmed glasses pushed up on her freckled nose. Lavinia, despite being her cousin, was as polar opposite to her as possible. Her thick blonde curls were down and around her shoulders, and her oversized neon orange hoodie screamed for attention, something that Briar’s bubbly, outgoing counterpart absolutely loved.

I couldn’t even imagine how I looked next to the two of them, but that was something I tried to not overthink—no need to get down in the dumps about something you couldn’t control. You know, like permanent deep scars that drew attention every time I wasn’t completely covered up.

*Yeah*, those types of things.

“Where’s mine?” I asked, wanting to sound demanding but probably coming across as whiny. To be fair, I had been tossing and turning all night, so it wasn’t like I’d gotten the best sleep to begin with.

“You said you were giving up coffee,” Lavinia drew out, looking amused.

“I said no such thing.” I sat up, rolling my shoulders as my joints cracked. “Who told you that?”

“Odessa,” Briar said, looking completely confident.

I let out a curse. *What a bitch*. You tell a girl something in passing and she tells your two other friends. What the actual hell? Where was the loyalty?

“Well, Odessa is a liar,” I offered, despite her being completely correct in what I’d agreed to. I mean, did she actually think I would stick to that suggestion? She was a bit of a health nut, always pushing us to improve our habits, so I shouldn’t have been surprised.

“What time is it?” I asked before they could offer any sarcastic retort.

“Eight twenty-eight,” Lavinia chirped.

“Which means you have exactly thirty-two minutes to get packed and ready,” Briar added as if I wasn’t aware of the time constraint. Fates, why was I always running late?

I groaned, hopping out of bed and walking towards the attached bathroom the four of us shared, immediately throwing on the shower to boiling hot. *Just the way I liked it, thank you very much*. I had never had much of a preference for my shower temperature before, especially while living on the streets, when getting to have a shower at all was a luxury, but now? I totally had a preference.

Shrugging off my oversized clothes, I briefly looked at myself in the



mirror, trying to not focus on the marks on my body as the glass fogged up. Honestly, when I was running for my life, they had never been a thought in my head. I hadn't been self-conscious about them because I'd been so damn focused on survival. But in the past two months? Shit had changed.

I hadn't known what to expect when arriving at Garnet Hall. It was technically transitional housing for the academy and not even on DIA grounds, serving as a way for all incoming students within the witch sector to get acquainted with one another as well as the school and what we should expect going in.

I had been worried that I would stand out like a sore thumb, but I found pretty quickly that almost every witch powerful enough to attend the academy was a bit different. It was actually rather beautiful.

It still hadn't helped the unease I'd felt when I realized I would be rooming with three other girls though. I had completely expected them to hate me, especially since the only other women I'd ever met were okay with Astaroth killing me in his free time. But Briar, Lavinia, and Odessa were different and instantly welcoming. All of us came from completely different backgrounds, and yet we melded into this easy living situation that had become a constant for me.

I'd been scared to accept that type of situation, worried I would end up regretting putting a small amount of trust in these women with my emotions, but all I had received was unconditional support. I mean, of course they didn't know everything I'd been through...but it was enough that I felt some anchor to my humanity.

A side of me that had only been growing since coming off the streets.

Honestly, there were a lot of changes I was going through, and most of them made me uncomfortable as hell. First of all, I was far more in tune with my emotions than I had been before. Almost daily I found myself feeling empathy for my friends and getting upset or happy about the things they had emotional reactions to. It was something I was still getting used to.

There were some negative aspects as well to this new life. I was far more self-conscious and vulnerable than I had been before. It wasn't something I openly talked about—or hell, admitted to myself most days—but there were times that I wondered what it would be like to *not* have the past I did. To not have to strive every single damn day for a level of strength that shouldn't be required for normality. I just hoped that my past never caught up to me, because mixing who I was becoming and who I was before... Well, that

would just end horribly.

Especially now that I had people in my life that I cared about.

Stepping into the hot shower, I tried to rinse some of the sleep out of my eyes. Today we would be leaving for DIA, and I was both nervous and excited. I was ready to be within the walls of the academy. While Garnet Hall was tucked away in a wealthy section of Carmina and warded, I knew I wouldn't feel completely secure until I was officially on DIA grounds.

After all, I didn't have just one demon chasing after me.

My fingers ran down my neck to the center of my sternum, the cool touch of the moonstone there making me shudder with both pleasure and an uncomfortable amount of lunar magic. Yeah, apparently that burning sensation and agony two months ago during what could only be described as a failed job when I was dealing with the shadow witch? *It was because the moonstone had been burying itself right in the center of my damn chest.* Fun stuff, right?

I nibbled my lip, wondering how the hell I was supposed to fix that. I didn't ask for help because I wasn't in the business of owing people, but I didn't think having such a powerful gem wedged in your chest was a good thing. I could feel its energizing effects, and that had me feeling off my game, pulling me from the haze that I normally existed in.

No, that continued to be stripped away, again and again, making me almost dizzy with effort to keep it tugged over me. I knew that if I ever came across that bastard again, I wouldn't be able to stay nearly as unemotional. He had shifted something inside of me during that magical explosion, and it wasn't a good thing at all.

I could feel his shadows reaching out to me, looking for me, and I had absolutely no idea what he would do when he found out his treasure was embedded in my skin. Probably try to take it out, understanding that he could kill me—well, at least in his mind. That would be the reasonable course of action in that type of situation. *It was what I would do.*

I was just thankful that I was in this warded estate because if not I knew he would have found me...and not just because he appeared in my dreams and disrupted my sleep. Every single freakin' night. My eyes closed as last night's dream waltzed into my consciousness as if screaming to be noticed.

*“Little jaguar.”*

*That raspy voice had my eyes flinging open as a sound of annoyance broke from my throat. I was completely unsurprised to be back here—it was almost becoming a predictable event. I hated to admit that there was a small amount of me that enjoyed our meetings, although you could hardly call them that.*

*“This has to stop.” I sat up and looked around the black room, the smoke curling around the edges and hitting a mirrored surface in front of me, blocking me from him. Or blocking his magic from seeing me, from finding me.*

*So how the hell did he keep pulling me into this shit?*

*I had to assume my damn magic was playing a part, and not just because we enjoyed the frustration on the attractive witch’s face. Although, let me tell you—attractive was an understatement, and I did not want to examine why I was so into the bastard. I mean, he was clearly dangerous and hunting me down to kill me or something.*

*Little did he know that it seemed to be almost everyone’s favorite pastime.*

*“I told you, I’m not the one doing this.” Liar. “Besides, this can’t stop, not until you tell me where you are.”*

*His voice was laced with dominance as I stood and walked towards the mirror. His eyes focused on me, but I knew he couldn’t really see me. I knew that because one time he had asked me what I looked like and I found myself unable to answer him, not wanting this little fascination he seemed to have with finding me to end. It made no sense, but because it was a dream realm, I was able to rationalize it just a bit more.*

*“I can’t do that.” I sighed and ran my hand over the glass wall. “Besides, you only want to find the moonstone, and let me assure you, it’s perfectly safe.”*

*A growl came from his throat. “Little jaguar, when I get my hands on you, you’re going to wish you had made this easy—”*

That was when the dream had ended, the end of his vague threat left to my imagination. Honestly, I wasn’t very worried. I had been at first, but after two months of him not being able to find me, combined with the fact I was going to an even more secure location? I had a feeling that Mr. Shadow Witch was going to be frustrated for a long time to come.

*“Hurry up!”*

A loud knock on the bathroom door had me nearly rolling my eyes, Briar and Lavinia both laughing. I stepped out of the shower, turning off the water, knowing I'd been in there for at least fifteen minutes, before drying my hair with a towel. My 'getting ready' process wasn't extensive in the least, and after braiding my hair and brushing my teeth, I deemed myself acceptable for the day.

When I walked out of the bathroom, I was surprised to find the room empty. All three of my roommates' trunks were packed and at the foot of their beds, their sheets stripped from the small twins.

Shit. I really was running late.

I quickly got dressed, pulling on a pair of dark panties and a bra, both purchased along with my rather small but acceptable wardrobe I'd obtained with the stipend I'd received. It wasn't much, but between that and some of the extra clothes that Odessa had thrown my way, I had some semblance of a normal wardrobe. And for the record, no, I hadn't wanted her clothes, but she had insisted, saying that it was either going to one of us or out the window because the colors were bad on her... So now I had all of the dark clothes she hated. Convenient, right?

Tugging on a pair of jeans that were a bit loose on me, I put on my combat boots and a hoodie, loving how comfortable and covered up I felt. Luckily, Carmina was almost constantly in the 60s, so you never had to worry about it being too hot for long sleeves. I hoped the academy was similar because if it wasn't...well, I didn't want to consider how much attention that would attract on my end.

Packing up my trunk and stripping the bed, I locked my possessions securely, tucking the key in my jeans pocket before leaving the room. I could hear familiar voices echoing from the main hall, and despite the thunder and rain outside, everyone seemed in good spirits.

Although, what concerns did anyone really have here? Everyone was about to attend an elite academy and had spent the past two months bonding with their class of twenty-five. It was an extremely ideal way to transition to the next part of our lives, and I would have never expected to find myself here.

I'd learned long ago that your place in the world was predetermined, but not by a goddess or god. No, it was determined by wealth and the purity of your line. I had neither, unlike many of my classmates, which was why I had been taken from the orphanage and raised in such a unique way.

I nearly scoffed at that—yeah, *unique*.

I suppose it was unique to an extent. Not many children were nameless until the age of twelve. Instead I'd been only assigned a singular letter. *A*. That had been my letter when I was training to kill unblessed witches. That had been my letter when I was taken on my first job. When I had taken my first innocent soul, their death sentence signed merely because of how they were born.

My identity had been tied to that letter until I was remade. Until Astaroth had deemed me worthy of becoming more. At that turning point, I'd been named *Ayla* because of my affinity for lunar magic...but soon that name hadn't mattered, especially once Astaroth realized what a priceless 'treasure' he had in his hands.

Witches, by nature, rejected magic that wasn't of their affinity, so the little rituals he performed, killing his own and trying to infuse them with new magic by adding runes underneath their skin, normally resulted in death—but when I had gone through his ritual of 'rebirth,' an apparent honor—I'd risen from death.

He'd been so damn proud of me, and at twelve, I had thought that was everything. I'd thought that he wanted the best for me... Until it kept happening.

An individual could only suffer so much abuse before it broke them. Before it twisted them into a mutation of what they were supposed to be. A simple witch I was not, and because of that I would never have a true place in this plane of existence—which was why it was so surprising that I was being given the opportunity, by the fates alone if I had to assume, to change that.

To start fresh. To alter my future. To embrace the strength I knew I'd always had.

The first time I'd started afresh, it had required me to fight and claw my way from the depths of the void Astaroth controlled. This time, all it had required was a test. One I had passed easily while painting the image that I was a simple, poor, lunar witch who was interested in attending such a prestigious school on one of their few scholarships to better my future. And while that was indeed the reason, they didn't understand the danger they were inviting into their walls—and I hoped they never had to find out.

I hoped no one ever found out who I was, who I had been for so long. I had been *Deva* since escaping two years ago, and I would be her until the day I died. I was careful to keep right out of reach from my past, requiring me to

move around, but rumors of it creeping closer had pushed me into taking the exam this past spring right after turning eighteen. Clearly, they had bought my story during the interview, eating from the palm of my hand, and obviously, my physical and mental tests were high enough that I'd walked out on the third day of the exam with a sealed letter confirming my acceptance into Dark Imaginarium Academy.

Let's just hope I didn't screw it up.

## DEVA

For the past two months, my classmates and I had been instructed on our schedules and the rules of the academy upon entering. It had been rather routine information to be honest, but it did go a long way to not make the experience as overwhelming as it would be normally. It also helped that we all knew one another now, and any preconceived notions of social status because of wealth had been stripped away a bit because people were far more focused on comparing magical ability.

Which was probably the only reason, outside of my roommates, that people seemed to like me. I was powerful, and that was something valuable as a witch. It was actually the only thing of value that I had.

In Carmina, if you didn't have purity of your line, you had to have power to make it anywhere in life. Which is why unblessed witches, whose magic was based not on one of the blessed affinities but on nature itself, were considered so weak. Why they were killed for fucking sport because of ingrained bias and hatred. Then again, witches in general were a fairly cruel group, and it was something that became very obvious once you started looking at Carmina.

The witch's territory within Praeditus, our small plane of existence, was dirty. That was the only way I could describe it. If you had wealth or prestige, your feet never touched the stone grounds outside of your estate. But, if you were like the large majority of people—you lived in squalor. There was no middle class. There were the extremely rich, and everyone else struggled. Which was why it had made it so damn easy for me to fit in, knowing I would be far from the only person sleeping in an alleyway at night.

But when I had first arrived at Garnet Hall, I'd noticed the difference. It

was impossible not to when three of my roommates came from extremely wealthy families. Not that they ever brought it up to me—you could just tell.

My stomach tightened, remembering how hungry I'd been that first night and how long it had taken for that sensation to go away. I was still thankful that Dark Imaginarium Academy had been so damn serious about the full scholarship, because it literally included *everything*. Including the clothes that I now owned.

Thunder cracked in the afternoon sky as rain poured down, the large windows of the hallway I walked down showing off the lush countryside estate Garnet Hall was located on. When I had first been given directions to come here, I had been immediately cautious. I had been worried it was some sick game put on by the wealthy, but instead I'd been welcomed by the small number of transitional staff members here.

One of them made her way towards me as I went to go find my friends.

“Running a bit late, aren't we?” Ms. Arison offered me a knowing look.

“I have a feeling this habit is going to get me in trouble starting tomorrow.” I offered her a rare smile as she flashed a grin back. Her blonde hair was loose and hanging around her shoulders, her traditional witch garb a soft blue-green that seemed to spark with magic every time that she moved. I had found since arriving here that magic had a very playful, light, and rather beautiful side to it...especially when you weren't using it to kill others.

“Just say that you are perpetually lost. Especially if you have an older professor, they'll likely believe you.” She winked as I hurried past her, the large doors ahead closing. I completely believed her, for the record—DIA was a bit old school, so a woman acting like she was lost would probably be plausible to half the old male witches there. I just hoped I didn't have to rely on that too much.

“There she is!”

Several heads snapped my way as I slid into the large room, Lavinia offering me a large smile from where she stood next to a large table. Briar shook her head and went back to reading, clearly knowing that Lavinia was in one of her extremely outgoing moods. It drew attention away from me, which was something I always appreciated.

As I walked towards the table, my gaze was drawn out the window as always. The expansive estate was bordered by consecrated land for witches who couldn't afford their own graveyards on a family plot of land. I offered a small, barely noticeable nod of respect, knowing it was the least I could do



considering my past.

I swallowed, feeling a pang of sadness. It was one of the stronger emotions that I exhibited, sadness and guilt—I wouldn't allow myself to shut those down, but they were painful to sort through. Even during my first kill, I'd known what we were doing was wrong. But I'd been so young that I hadn't had the power or the bravery to stand up against it. No, it wasn't until almost one hundred kills later that I finally ran.

The room was crowded, but there were two faces noticeably absent, the first being my best friend Odessa. I had no doubt she was with one of the administrators—the woman was particularly good at getting her way, and that usually was accomplished through the relationships that she seemed to form extremely easily. It was one of the biggest differences between the two of us—I made almost no effort to make friends because I was convinced that I would screw it up if I tried too hard.

I had no doubt she would be joining us shortly though.

The other absent face? Well, I didn't expect him to show up. I had seen Aleksander exactly once, the very first day of our time here, and he had glared at me for nearly thirty minutes before disappearing.

Of course, I had immediately tried to find out as much as possible about him and alleviated my panic that he was from my past with the news that he was a standoff-ish, extremely wealthy son of an elite family. I could deal with some ass thinking he was better than me; it was much better than the alternative of him having a reason to hate me.

I wouldn't lie though, the man, who apparently went by Alek, had been rather memorable to say the least. His eyes were a gorgeous navy shade, and his hair had been so dark it almost looked like it had been dipped in ink. He'd been massive, his stature being the first thing I had noticed, but it was only followed by how intense and beautiful he was—a description that I did not use often.

It was probably why I hadn't been able to forget him, despite not having seen him since then. Well, that wasn't completely true—I felt like I continued to see him, I'd just yet to actually lay eyes on him. He seemed always to be right out of sight.

It was hard to explain without sounding crazy.

“What took you so long?” Lavinia asked curiously as I approached the two of them, ignoring the other students sitting around them. It wasn't that I didn't want to talk to them, it was more that I found it awkward how they

stared at me.

“Just thinking about stuff.” I shrugged, sliding onto the top of the table where Briar sat as well, Lavinia offering me a narrowed gaze as if she didn’t believe me. “Also tired because I didn’t get any coffee.”

“Are you nervous? You’re never nervous.” Lavinia ignored my statement about the coffee.

I opened my mouth to deny her words but then I shrugged. “I mean, sort of? Not nervous but just excited.”

I don’t think I’d ever admitted to being nervous before. It was an accurate analysis though—I was nervous I would mess all of this up.

Lavinia nodded as if that made sense and went back to talking to one of the girls next to her. I sighed, stretching my arms above my head, as I looked around the space. I was feeling rather calm today, outside of the normal nerves, and my magic was tucked inside, buried nice and deep so that I appeared as just a powerful lunar witch—not one that had several different types of magic.

I had to be careful, because I was finding I slipped up far more when it came to my magic when I was emotional, and since that was something I was embracing a bit more... *Yeah*, I could see this potentially going bad. Honestly, it was probably better for me to avoid most people. It was safer for everyone involved. But that didn’t fit my goal for ‘normality’—no, I would just need to figure my shit out.

My thoughts flashed to the explosion of power from that night with the shadow witch and how he had held me.

What had I been thinking, letting my guard down that much?

“What are you reading?” I asked Briar, pulling my thoughts from where they had strayed back to that night.

“I got my sister’s old textbooks, so I have been reviewing some of our basic classes already,” she explained, her cheeks turning pink.

I noticed that while she was confident about her words, she seemed to think it was embarrassing how motivated and smart she came across. I didn’t understand it. I envied her ability to focus like that.

“Blood witch ones or something different?” I knew her entire family was from a prestigious line of blood witches, so I wasn’t surprised she was the same.

“No, general curriculum.” She waved the blue, worn textbook, my eyes moving across the text and seeing something about runes.

*Fates*—talk about a topic that I was well acquainted with.

“Thank fates for those classes or else we would be separated.” Lavinia sighed and then flashed me a smile. “Well, not you and me, Deva—we are stuck at the hip.”

Because we were both lunar witches. *The same? No, not entirely.*

I offered her a smile, sharing in the enjoyment that we’d have some classes together. Honestly, I had never had friends before, not like this. I wasn’t used to caring about them, wanting to spend time together, and even feeling concerned about their safety. I just hated the constant reminder that if they knew who I was, they wouldn’t want to be my friend.

Tugging down my hood, I tried to not feel self-conscious about the eyes I could feel on me. There was a reason I usually kept myself covered up, but I couldn’t maintain that long-term, and there was no point in bullshitting about that. It would only get worse once I got on DIA grounds, most likely, so I had been slowly getting myself used to the staring. Instead of viewing it as a threat and being far too noticeable, I now found it a minor annoyance at best.

I had always been beautiful. There was no point in bullshitting about that. I knew the appeal I held for others, and I hated it. It also helped that I knew, unlike them, that my body was covered in scars, the worst of them on my torso, making my beauty rather exclusive to my face and what they imagined I would look like under my dark clothing.

I was average height, around 5’6”, and lean with proportional curves. Nothing that stood out too much, but something that normally appealed to everyone in some way. It was why I had been useful for gathering information as well. I nearly shuddered at that thought, not allowing myself to go into that particular avenue of thought.

It wasn’t my body or my face that normally caught others’ attention though. No, it was everything else.

My hair was a rich midnight blue that was intertwined with vibrant cerulean strands and indigo highlights. Silver streaks were there as well, but they only stood out in the moonlight. My skin, which was normally an ivory shade, had a silver glint to it like I’d embedded glitter under the surface. It wasn’t extremely obvious, but I could see it, just like I could see the faint trace of carvings under my skin that seemed to slither with power. I may have looked beautiful, even down to my mercury-colored gaze, but I knew the truth, and I knew the darkness that ran in my veins. Rotten to the core, no matter how beautiful the fruit.

“Absolute bullshit.”

My lips tweaked up slightly at the sound of Odessa’s voice. She seemingly appeared out of nowhere, slamming her bag onto the table, her brow furrowed with annoyance. I couldn’t help but offer her a small amused smile because she looked a bit out of sorts. Her curls were piled on top of her head, and her normally put-together appearance looked ruffled—I probably shouldn’t have found it funny, but Odessa was all about control, so this was a bit amusing.

“*Someone* woke up on the wrong side of the cauldron today,” Lavinia teased, making a laugh escape my lips that had Briar looking up in surprise.

Odessa’s continuous scowl had my smile fading as I demanded, “Fates, what the hell happened to put you in such a bad mood?”

In the short time I’d known Odessa, I had never seen her so out of sorts and upset. Instantly, I felt defensive over my friend’s well-being but managed to cap my reaction. Didn’t want to be the weirdo that overreacted.

I nearly sighed. I swear, one of these days I was going to get the hang of this damn friendship shit. Although, not to toot my own horn, but I had to admit that in the two months since arriving at Garnet Hall, I’d become essentially an expert at pretending like I knew what I was doing when it came to ‘people-ing.’

“Don’t even get me started,” she groaned, throwing her head down onto the table with a bit of dramatics, causing Briar to snort. Did she really mean that? Or did she want me to ask? I feel like she very much wanted me to ask.

I was unsurprised to feel that the other residents of Garnet Hall were staring at us. After all, we were a fairly small and somewhat exclusive friendship group, and in the short time I’d been here, I’d gained quite the reputation. The whole ‘powerful’ thing but also because I tended to not make the best impression with teachers...or at least not at first. Over time they seemed to like me, but off the bat, they didn’t.

Because of that, I’d had to showcase my magic rather intensely to prove that I belonged here. Which was probably why the other students were looking at me with caution and a tiny bit of fear. *It was like they were afraid I was going to curse them or something.*

Lavinia let out an authentic laugh. “That is exactly what they are afraid of.”

Had I said that outloud?

“But why? They’ve never done anything to me, so why be scared?” I

mused.

Odessa offered a small amused sound, which was already far better than the bad mood she'd arrived in.

"Because you're terrifying, Deva," Briar pointed out. "You've got that 'scary, quiet' vibe going on, and you're always so chill. Totally terrifying."

"None of those words made any sense together," Odessa pointed out.

"Whatever." I grinned, waving the statement off. "Now, you going to tell us what put you in such a foul mood or do I have to torture it out of you?"

A squeak sounded from nearby, making my lips twitch, Odessa casting me a dry look. *What?* Okay, it was possible that I was a bit more aware of my reputation than I let on. What can I say? It was hilarious. I swear, after I had cracked all the crystals in our basic lunar course at once, the other witches seemed to walk on glass around me...or crystals, whatever. I mean, fates, imagine if they knew what I could *actually* do.

Plus, if they gave me a chance, they would see that I was pretty damn chill. I mean, I had to be—it was either that or the other side of me, and we weren't going back to that.

"Deva!" Briar laughed as I shrugged, finding it a bit amusing. It was only a few of them, not even half my class—they would get used to me.

"I'm just confused on why they are so afraid," I murmured. "Unless they did something—" I snapped my head over, and three faces turned away at once, making me let out an authentic laugh. *Come on, this was ridiculous!*

Magical dominance could be such a killer on my social life. Not only did I have my general awkwardness and inexperience with socialization, working against me. No, unfortunately, my magic was causing problems as well. Everyone here was nearly as powerful as each other, but I stood out because they didn't radiate darkness. Don't get me wrong, there were some benefits to the aura I gave off. Like how everyone was mostly cool, a bit cautious, but respectful to me. One of the negatives, though? If they weren't scared or cautious about me...they wanted something else. Namely men who thought it was a good idea to try to mess with me.

Didn't they realize that they wanted nothing to do with any of that? And I wanted *nothing* to do with them. Although recently, much to my frustration, it seemed all I could think about was a shadow witch and my classmate who seemed to completely disappear after seeing me the first time. Two men who should not be on the top of mind to any extent and were so extremely different from the boys trying to grasp my attention here.

There had only been one or two of my classmates so far that had pushed any boundaries of mine, and I hoped that they understood now that there wasn't anything between us. Not now, and not in the future.

"Oh my fates," Odessa groaned. "Alright, focus for just a minute. I need to tell you guys what happened so you can be annoyed with me."

"Joint suffering." I nodded.

"Hold on!" Lavinia turned towards her bag and pulled out three bags of popcorn, tossing one to me and the other to Briar. I popped it open and offered her a nod of thanks, placing a kernel in my mouth.

"Popcorn?" Odessa scrutinized us. "Seriously?"

"Here I thought you would appreciate how healthy we were," Lavinia scoffed, putting a hand to her chest as if offended.

"You are the one who always says that queso dip and chips are not worthy of being a meal, something that the humans clearly disagree with," Briar agreed.

Odessa looked at me for help, and I shrugged. "You told them I gave up coffee so I haven't drank any... So popcorn it is, traitor."

"You said that!" Odessa let out a frustrated sound. "And you—" She looked right at Lavinia, whose mouth was full of popcorn. "You literally took that from my stuff! you're a food thief."

"I have *totally* been called worse than that," Lavinia chuckled.

I offered her a smile because...same. I tossed a few more pieces of popcorn into my mouth and was instantly disappointed. Why was nothing ever as good as queso? I sort of resented being introduced to the cheesy, spicy, wonderful dish that came from the human race. How was anything supposed to top that?

"We are losing daylight here," Briar pointed out.

"I do wanna hear the story," I agreed, trying to break off the glaring between Odessa and Lavinia.

"Fine!" Odessa groaned dramatically. "So, this morning I went to go meet with Mrs. Everson. Since she's the one opening the portal, I wanted to make sure we weren't unprepared at all." Because that was so completely Odessa.

"She's sort of a bitch," Lavinia mumbled, the popcorn she was stuffing in her mouth making her words garbled as Briar snorted.

"She wasn't the problem." Odessa shook her head, her bright green eyes shading with frustration.

"So? What's the issue?" Briar prompted.

Before she could answer, a set of doors opened, and Mrs. Everson strode in followed by three men. Instantly I was determining whether or not they were a threat but found myself unconcerned. They were powerful and clearly not in our class—for sure older than us—but had normal amounts of magic... or at least something I could handle if necessary. Odessa made a concerned noise in her throat, causing me to snap my eyes over to where Briar and Lavinia were staring at her in concern. *Oh man.* I had never seen my friend look so panicked. Her cheeks were bright pink and eyes wide, making me know that she wasn't exactly scared... I don't think she understood what she was, exactly.

“That. That is the fucking problem.”

# 3

## DEVA

I think our definition of ‘problems’ were vastly different, because while these guys seemed powerful, I honestly wouldn’t have noticed them if it wasn’t for her extreme reaction. I narrowed my eyes at her, trying to understand what the issue was exactly...and realized that she was totally into these guys.

I snorted as Lavinia gasped and leaned forward.

“That isn’t a problem! *That* is three hotties that you are totally into,” Lavinia whispered. Odessa offered her a frustrated look, her cheeks darkening in color.

“Students!” Mrs. Everson smiled. “We will be preparing to leave soon! I have a few student helpers that will be aiding us—boys, feel free to take a seat by Odessa over there. She can introduce you to everyone.”

Briar made a surprised sound as the two behind the ‘leader,’ if I had to assume, scanned the room, finally landing on Odessa and causing her to squeak. Fascinating. I had to admit that while these men were objectively attractive, they were not my type. But between their pressed uniforms, serious expressions, and seemingly perfect mannerisms...they were one-hundred percent Odessa’s type. It was as if someone had literally handcrafted her dream man—and there were three of them. Which was cool. They were also an unknown variable...

It was something I had to get used to, of course, considering the amount of new people I was about to meet at DIA. *Didn’t make it any easier though.*

“And who are these handsome men, Odessa?” Lavinia asked loudly.

“I will kill you, I swear it. They will never find your—”

“Of course,” the first man, the designated leader, voiced in response to Mrs. Everson, his tone making Odessa sink further against the table as he



kept his gaze on her. Damn. This was some insta-love going on with their magic. I could cut the sexual tension with a freakin' athame.

You know, I had always had a hard time believing that nonsense when it happened in Briar's romance books I sometimes borrowed, but this did seem pretty intense.

I sighed happily, extremely glad to not be getting caught up in all of this. I had been through enough issues in my life without adding on the further complication of 'romance.' Once again, a frustrating image of shadow witch and Alek flew past my vision, but I quickly shook it, chalking it up to the most impactful male interactions I'd had recently.

I couldn't lie though, there was a small part of me, now that I wasn't in survival mode, that wondered what any of that would be like. First dates that ended with a sweet kiss, getting butterflies in your stomach because you're nervous about getting to know one another... Normal stuff.

Not your first somewhat sexual experience being at the hands of one of Astaroth's men under threat of torture and suffering. Normal, normal, normal... I needed to find some normal experiences to clear out this long list of abnormal shit.

Would it be so wrong to entertain the interest of someone normal and somewhat boring, even? That way I could start to remove those darker memories. A weird shiver rolled over my skin, suddenly distressed at the prospect of someone touching me intimately. *But it didn't feel uncomfortable when the shadow witch held you.* Well, it did, but in a good way...

"So—" A masculine voice broke me from my trance as I watched all three men grab seats around us. Actually, it was around Odessa. I don't think they noticed us other three. "Odessa, that's your name. Pretty."

She scowled at the unofficial leader of their group. "That's cheating. She gave it to you."

Lavinia sat down right behind me, her hand coming over my shoulder to grab some of my popcorn as Briar laughed quietly, all three of us enjoying our friend acting so weird around these men.

How much did we want to bet that this messed up her plan for the day?

"No," the one behind her pointed out, "cheating is refusing to tell us your name." His twin, which I was now realizing after closer inspection, nodded in agreement.

"I don't know your names," she pointed out.

"Elijah and my brothers, Benjamin and William," the unofficial leader,

Elijah, explained before smiling. "See? That's not that hard, flower."

Odessa's eyes narrowed, and I felt her shadow magic spark. Despite their appearance, it was clear that Elijah, at least, was a shadow witch as well, meeting her power head-on. Impressive.

"Flower?" Lavinia mused.

Odessa offered her a dry look. "Don't you dare."

"I didn't say anything." She flashed a smile. "I'm just enjoying the show."

"Who are they?" William or Benjamin, I couldn't tell which, asked Odessa.

I watched my friend's eyes flash with insecurity that was gone before I even fully processed it, making me nearly grimace. *I didn't get it.* Odessa was literally gorgeous, but because she'd been told so many times that she wasn't, she had these massive walls up when it came to men. She always expected anyone she showed interest in to pick some other woman...which unfortunately had happened three times to her, and each time her mom had pointed out that she wasn't pretty enough.

Yeah, you could imagine why she'd been eager to get away from all that shit.

"Absolutely no one," I offered and turned back towards the room.

"Yep, completely unimportant," Briar agreed, clearly catching on.

"Unless you hurt her. Then we become a big problem." Lavinia sounded momentarily lethal before she offered a small giggle and turned back towards the rest of the room, leaving them to their conversation, which almost immediately resumed.

"Hey, Dylan is looking over here," Briar warned as a frustrated noise left me.

Dylan was one of the two that had been a problem. It had been only two days into my stay here when the lunar witch approached me, and in an effort to be friendly, I had agreed to grab dinner with him. I hadn't really believed his friendly act, but I also didn't want to be purposefully rude to someone I'd have to know for four years... Well, about five minutes into dinner he had spilled a glass of water on me. That alone hadn't been a big deal, but trying to get me out of my shirt to help? Continuing to pull on it when I said it was fine? Yeah, that had earned him a shock of magic through his system that had him passing out completely, his limp body laid out on the floor. It had been... a weird situation.

Honestly, I didn't do very well with touch, but especially not forceful touch. Not when I had the ability to stop it. That control and grasp on my freedom was something I would kill for, indiscriminately.

Briar's laugh at whatever Lavinia said broke me from my thoughts as I looked away from Dylan, who was still sneaking looks towards me. Luckily, I'd become a pro at ignoring him. I could feel the happiness surrounding my friends right now, and I felt like it was well deserved. While they hadn't had the same experience as me growing up, each had their own battles, and seeing them happy made me happy.

Swallowing down a small bubble of sadness, wondering if I would ever find my own happiness, I stood and offered a head nod towards the doors. I stepped out pretty often, so none of them seemed surprised. Plus, I was headed towards the side doors, which would lead out to the large garden-like maze in the back of the property—so I wasn't going far.

Once I pushed through them and inhaled the scent of rain, I felt better—glad that the sun was covered up. All the fun stuff happened under moonlight anyway.

My throat tightened at the flip side of that. Everyone thought bad shit happened at night, but they would be wrong. I had done some seriously horrible things in the light of day, and two fundamentally terrifying times in my life had been not only during the day but when it was sunny out...

I nearly trembled, the echoing sounds of screams against the autumn wind whipping through stone hallways coming alive in my consciousness. It was one of the only sounds that made me feel like I was crawling out of my skin.

I turned the corner away from the building and leaned against the brick wall, knowing I probably had only ten minutes or so before we left for DIA. It was a moment of solitude that I relished in, listening to the cool, refreshing raindrops that washed across my face whenever a slight breeze rolled over me.

Unfortunately, my peace didn't last long.

A hard body slammed against mine, flattening me in half a second as I felt my body jolt—*how the hell did I keep getting surprised like this?* I groaned as my back hit the grass, and magic coursed over my skin, breaking out of my temporary hold as my eyes snapped open, realizing that someone was very much touching me. My hands immediately shot out on instinct and pushed hard. They didn't budge though, and I glared at the chest, wondering how much trouble I would get in for killing—

No. Honestly, I knew I wasn't in life-threatening danger. My instincts were keyed into moments like this, and in the past two months, I realized people bumped into each other and did stupid shit all the time. I couldn't exactly kill everyone who touched me.

Although before this, I would have for sure.

My gaze moved up a thick tattooed neck to a face that had me stopping dead. *Oh. Oh*, well, this I could have not expected.

"Quiet," Alek hissed in an accented voice that nearly sounded Russian, his rough, masculine hand coming across my mouth as he looked to the side, seeming to wait for something.

His eyes jumped with electricity, like small lightning strikes within the navy depths. It had me tensing as my magic slowly and cautiously poked at his own a bit, realizing that he was more powerful than most of the witches I'd come across so far.

The most arresting element of this situation? My heart. After leaving the shadow witch, my heart had gone silent once again, and while sometimes I felt the phantom of it beating after I'd woken up from a dream, it hadn't made that solid thud since being around him. Which was why it was so damn alarming that it had started up once again, pounding in my ears, my skin burning at his touch in a pleasurable yet painful way.

"Remove your hand," I threatened, the demanding tone muffled by his hot skin. I tried to ignore the weird electric pulses going through my body as he shifted his muscular form between my legs. I should have felt threatened by this position, but instead I just felt...annoyed? I had no idea how to describe my reaction to Alek, because there was a comfortability and curiosity that I had towards him, almost a natural draw.

My biggest question: where had he been this summer?

Or, a better question: why did I care?

His dark hair, which was littered with rain, was stark against his pale skin, his massive body shielding me from the scattered showers that were moving through the area. I noticed that his rune tattoos seemed old, like he'd had them for some time, and it made me wonder at what age he had been able to get them. Most witches didn't get tattoos until they became powerful enough to use them to add power or to regulate their current magic. Plus, while I didn't have the best grasp on formal rune training, they weren't ones I recognized at all.

"*Nyet*," he hissed out before looking me dead in the eye. "Quiet, Deva."

Now, I really didn't have many pet peeves, but no matter how attracted to this man I was, there were a few things I didn't like. Number one: being ordered around. I didn't care that he smelled like expensive cologne and thunderstorms. No, his demands brought up a wave of emotions I was so not okay with, so much so that I was in action before he barely got his words out.

I rolled us in a sharp movement, straddling his large body and bringing my elbow into the hollow of his neck, my face blank of emotion. "Do *not* tell me to be quiet."

Alek's eyes flashed with surprise before he seemed to really look over me, his chest producing this dark almost rumble as his hands grasped my hips. I didn't let him get a firm grip before I was up and trying to walk away from him.

Almost immediately, my back hit the stone wall and Alek pinned me against it, his large hands pulling my wrists above my head as he examined my face, looking startled. "I thought I'd imagined you and your magic."

I didn't understand his words, but the way his blood magic flared to life in response to meeting my own magic reminded me just how powerful he was. Yeah, this was no good. My breathing halted as he leaned closer to me, almost with a predatory examination of my face, a dark sound leaving his throat as I realized how hard he was. The surge of lust that slammed into me was completely unacceptable, and not for the first time, I found myself confused by my reaction to this man.

Unfortunately, that only lasted a minute before I felt everything inside of me freeze, my body going stiff.

"Let go of me."

My voice was calm but void of any inflection, his eyes darkening in color, my switch of emotions seeming to only fuel his odd fascination.

"*Nyet.*" His answer was immediate as he continued to stare at me. Somehow that eased my panic, his blunt answer clear but filled with intensity.

"Why?" I hissed.

"Because I like looking at you." His voice ran like velvet against my skin. "I haven't been able to do it all summer."

I frowned. "What are you talking about? You were here for less than an hour and then disappeared after glaring at me—"

"Unfortunately my commitments were not optional," he grunted, looking to the side once again in search of something. "But now I am back and that

doesn't matter.”

“What doesn't matter?” I arched my brow.

“Aleksander!” A masculine voice boomed through the garden. Alek narrowed his eyes, emitting a frustrated sound. I couldn't help but notice, while he was momentarily distracted, how warm he was and how he seemed to invade all of my personal space at once. It caused my toes to curl as I repressed the shiver that threatened to break out.

“This way.” Alek tugged me further into the garden and I stupidly followed, not understanding what he wanted exactly but finding myself more curious than anything. What can I say? He had literally been on my mind since he glared at me that first time we met—something that said way more about me than him.

“Who are we avoiding?” I asked and then frowned. “Also, not positive if you are planning to go, but we may end up missing the portal—”

“We won't miss anything, *zaya*.”

*What did that mean?*

“Who are we avoiding?” I asked again, jolting to a stop as he turned another corner and wrapped an arm around me, his gaze attentive as he tilted his head as if listening.

“The very same people who are mad at me for not being here this summer.” He sighed before looking down at me, his eyes jumping with amusement. “I don't want to risk getting stopped from going to DIA in the first place.”

I tried to step back, but he tightened his grip on me, a growl ripping from his throat when the bush moved out of the way to reveal a man I had never seen before, followed by Mrs. Everson, both of their gazes going to how Alek was holding me.

“Father.” Alek's tone held no warmth.

The man in question looked at me, his gaze running over my worn clothes, as he offered a small sneer but schooled it in time for Mrs. Everson to walk forward.

“Deva, inside now. Aleksander—”

“I am going.” His tone was authoritative, and his father didn't argue it, his gaze still on me before slowly moving over to his son. Something about my presence seemed to be throwing him, and I was very curious what element it was.

It was probably because he very obviously thought I was below them.

“We will be speaking later,” he snarled and stalked away. Mrs. Everson shot Alek a look of sympathy, making me know there was far more to this story than I was understanding.

“Both of you, come on.” She motioned, and instead of letting me go, which I would have expected since I’d assumed he had been using me almost as a shield to stop his father, Alek tightened his fingers with mine and led me forward, his face void of emotion once again. I looked down at our hands in confusion, tempted to pull away, but when I looked up and saw the starkness of his expression...

I kept holding his hand.

## 4

### DEVA

“Alright, now that all twenty-five of you are accounted for, we can get on with the day!” Mrs. Everson shot Alek and I a look, my cheeks feeling hot as I felt everyone staring at us. To be fair, the intense, confusing, and a bit overwhelming man was holding onto my hand tightly as if it was normal... but tight enough that I had a suspicion he thought I was going to try to take it away. Oddly enough, that urge was completely absent. I didn’t dare look at my friends because I honestly had no idea how to explain what I was doing—I mean seriously, what the hell was I doing?

“When the headmaster arrives,” she explained in a calm voice, her gray eyes moving over the class in a maternal fashion, “the portal will have been opened, and as you know, she is the only one who can lead all of you through the veil onto DIA grounds.”

Honestly, her words grew a bit non-distinct to me as I looked around at the other classmates of mine, most of them turning away in time to avoid my gaze and Alek’s. I felt a flare of jealousy at their focused attention to him—which made no sense at all—as Alek squeezed my hand. I looked up at him, and he offered me a heated look before wrapping an arm around my waist.

*What in the fates was even happening right now?*

Instead of focusing on the way my body was heating up, I turned my attention back to the rest of my class. It had become pretty clear to me that there was a ratio the school kept, and whether that was because of actual interest in the school or just how the witching community was broken up I wasn’t sure, but both were plausible explanations. Out of the twenty-five of us, there were ten lunar and ten blood witches. While I wasn’t exactly a lunar witch, I knew I was classified as one—just like Alek, despite being a blood



witch, seemed to have an excess amount of power under his skin.

Outside of that, there were two shadow witches, both female, and one of whom was Odessa and the other a small quiet woman who seemed to always be in the background, never saying anything or drawing attention. I wanted to say her name was Dionne, but honestly I was finding I could remember almost everything about a person except for their name.

It was a bit frustrating now that I was trying to be part of society and all.

Finally, there were the three unblessed witches. Honestly, I had been a bit worried that they would be shunned, but within a day everyone seemed to have intermingled, and I was starting to realize that unblessed were far more accepted outside of the cult I'd grown up in. I hadn't talked to any of them, guilt hitting me whenever I looked them in the eye, but they seemed nice enough.

*Everyone is nice compared to you.*

I frowned slightly at the thought because it was stupid. I was perfectly friendly...but sometimes I wondered if I was trying too hard. Was it worth it if I had to work so hard to be normal? Plus, being around unblessed, hell any of these people, was a constant reminder of my past—all of these students were either extremely talented or from wealthy and powerful lines. Families I no doubt stole from, or even worse...stole a life from. I swallowed, keeping my eyes on Mrs. Everson, not wanting to betray how uncomfortable I suddenly felt, or worse, the need to run.

I knew running wasn't an option. Despite the daunting nature of facing all of this, DIA was the solution to getting out of the constant state of fear and running. Already, in the two months of being in this transitional period, my life had changed. I wanted to continue that, and DIA was extremely secure. I mean, literally the only way to get onto the grounds was through a portal the headmaster herself controlled, so once I was inside the grounds, there was nothing that could touch me.

It was the safe haven of my dreams.

"Deva."

I nearly jolted, not realizing that someone had pulled up next to me. I turned my gaze, looking up at Dylan, a sound of frustration almost escaping my throat. Immediately, as if sensing my mood, Alek's hand tightened around my waist as he pulled me further against him. *Yes, because this shit wasn't already confusing as it was.*

Dylan was somewhat objectively handsome, but I got a queasy feeling

from him, and the way he looked at Alek with malice had me worried. Not for Alek—no, I had felt his magic and what he was possibly capable of—but I had a feeling that Dylan wasn't clued into that fact.

"Dylan," I greeted, trying to not feel awkward. I also didn't want to piss off Mrs. Everson more than she already was—my gaze darted back to her where she was explaining something, not looking in our direction.

"I meant to talk to you before we got on campus," he hedged and looked at Alek before adding, "Alone."

Alek's voice was harsh. "*Nyet.*"

Dylan jumped as I looked up at Alek, trying to not find that amusing. This version of 'no' was far different than when he was talking to me.

"It isn't your decision." Dylan narrowed his eyes.

"No, it's mine," I pointed out before Alek had a chance to argue. "And I don't want to talk, Dylan. Haven't wanted to all summer since our rather awkward date—"

"You dated?" Alek produced a low noise, but his gaze was on Dylan. "You dared to take her on a date?"

"Date' may be a bit extreme," I pointed out, smiling softly at the fierce protectiveness on his face. Fates, I really didn't know what to make of this man. All of my natural defenses seemed down when it came to him. I knew part of it came from his blunt nature—I didn't think Alek wanted to play games with me, at least not manipulative ones.

"It was a date—" Dylan's words were cut off by Mrs. Everson.

"Dylan, I highly suggest you stop bothering the two of them," Mrs. Everson announced, causing Lavinia to break out into laughter, his face turning bright red.

"This isn't over," Dylan spit out towards Alek.

"Oh, but it is," he replied smoothly, his confidence extremely attractive.

Dylan stomped away like an immature child as I turned towards Alek, feeling weird about the fact that I was so comfortable with his touch. I didn't know how it was possible, but it felt like our magic was connected, like there was some prominent force drawing us together. I wanted to question it, but I couldn't. Instead I brought up the rather extreme change in reaction Alek had to me today in comparison to day one.

"So this"—I motioned towards him and the way he was holding me—"you don't seem nearly as angry at me as you did that first day."

Alek's lips tilted up. "I wasn't angry with you."

“Yes you were,” I whispered. “You were glaring at me.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I was staring at you, but I wasn’t angry.”

“So what were you?”

“Trying to restrain myself.” He hummed in amusement.

“Restrain yourself?”

“From pinning your little ass against the table you were sitting at so you would keep your attention on me,” he explained, my skin breaking out into chills.

Oh.

“You like pinning me a lot.” I swallowed, feeling my cheeks flush.

“There is a lot I’d like to do to you, but I very much want to pin you down. I have a feeling if I don’t, *zaya*, you will run from me. Maybe not now, but eventually.”

“I’m not running right now,” I murmured. Even though I should be, for the record.

He flashed me a gorgeous smile. “That’s true. But I would be a fool to believe that I wouldn’t have to work to keep a woman like you.”

My mouth opened, feeling speechless as I felt myself become somewhat timid. I wasn’t positive what it was about this man, but he made me feel... soft. Like I wanted to curl up against him. “And you want to keep me?”

Alek grasped my chin lightly and examined my face. “I would love to own you, *zaya*, but more than anything, I think you want to be owned by a man worthy of that honor.”

I inhaled sharply, my breathing uneven as I didn’t offer a response.

I wasn’t positive he was right...but I also wasn’t positive he was wrong.

Before things could become too intense, there was a rumble underneath our feet. My gaze snapped forward as the room vibrated with magic, not moving from Alek’s arms though. I watched in surprise as Mrs. Everson pulled back a decorative screen that had always covered the far wall. A massive stone archway stood there, the space between empty...until a silvery, almost water-like surface began growing between the pillars. I’d heard of portals before, but seeing it come together out of absolutely nothing was an experience.

“First time seeing a portal?” Alek asked in my ear.

“Yes actually,” I murmured. “It’s beautiful.”

He let out a hum of agreement, his lips brushing against my ear causing me to shiver. The move was distracting enough that I nearly missed a woman

walking through the portal and into the room, a bit of envy immediately hitting me and chilling my body.

Not because of her—not exactly—but because of the very clear peace she seemed to be at with herself. Her face was serene as she looked over all of us with a smile before looking towards Mrs. Everson.

“Headmaster Estrid,” Mrs. Everson greeted, bowing her head slightly. Estrid placed a hand on her shoulder and squeezed lightly before looking over all of us again, her eyes snagging on me momentarily before continuing on.

She spoke, her voice radiating a soothing effect. “I am happy to see all of our new students are present, especially after hearing so many great things from the administrators here.” Well, that was good, right? I mean, seriously...I wasn’t exactly sure what she would have been told after all the stuff I’d done. I guess I had hoped she wouldn’t be told anything at all, but ‘many great things’ was a good thing.

She continued, “We will be traveling onto the academy grounds through a portal. Please go two by two, and once you land, please head straight forward towards the building there. I promise you won’t be able to miss it.”

Everyone nodded and stood, and I wasn’t surprised at all as Lavinia appeared in front of me, her eyes wide as she offered me a bewildered look.

“What?” I asked, as if I wasn’t in some strange man’s arms.

“*What?*” she asked with shock. “You are literally in the arms of a guy I have never seen before, and you are letting him touch you. I mean, don’t get me wrong, he’s all scary and hot, but this is so not like you. Do you know one another or something?” She looked up at him and narrowed her eyes. “What’s your deal? Where have you been? I don’t like that you just appeared out of fucking nowhere.”

Alek squeezed my waist as I offered, “We don’t know one another... Well, not well. It’s hard to explain. He’s part of our class but he’s been busy all summer.”

“Oh.” Lavinia nodded. “The missing student.” Glad I wasn’t the only one who had noticed his sudden departure despite the administrators saying nothing on the topic.

“I’m here now.” Alek’s tone had me looking up at him as he offered me an affectionate hot look.

“Wow.” Lavinia looked at the two of us and nodded, putting her hands up, smirking. “I see it now. Briar, come check out this sexual tension! You

could cut it with an athame.”

Hadn't I literally just been saying that earlier about Odessa?

Briar appeared next to her and frowned at Alek. “Missing student?”

“Missing student,” Lavinia confirmed. “But seriously, don't they have a vibe going on.”

A vibe? Did we have a vibe?

“We need to go.” Alek pointed to the line that was shortening.

“Yes, please join us!” Odessa called out as we looked over to see her three...fan club members, surrounding her.

“Stop trying to distract from our questions,” one of the twins growled.

“Come on.” I tried to move from Alek, but he intertwined our fingers and led us forward without another word.

As pairs moved ahead of us, my friends followed, and we finally reached the portal. Headmaster Estrid was staring at me, moving her gaze to Alek in surprise.

“Aleksander, what a pleasant surprise. I was worried you had decided against attending.”

“Yes.” Alek nodded sharply. “I don't break commitments or promises.”

Her eyes filled with warmth before looking down at me. “And you, Deva. I'm very glad you decided to join us. I heard you have a lot of...raw talent.”

I smirked, knowing she was referring to the many mishaps I'd had this summer. I spoke honestly. “I'm glad you invited me.”

*I'm glad you gave me the chance to change everything.*

Her nod was polished as she motioned to the archway. Alek grasped my hand firmly, and we stepped through, my eyes closing in preparation to control my magic.

# 5

## DEVA

Portals, when opened by the correct person and traveling through them the correct way, were fairly simple. The entire experience should have been a piece of cake, especially since rumors had it that Headmaster Estrid was a literal portal goddess. Unfortunately, I was well aware of a potential problem... *Me*. Me and my magic.

My eyes were squeezed shut as I felt everything in my body tense, my magic trying to burst out from underneath my skin as I sent up a small prayer that I wouldn't destroy the school when I landed on the grounds. That I wouldn't bust my cover the moment that I made it to the place where I was supposed to be starting fresh.

The pull on my magic was extremely intense though, so much so that my eyes were nearly watering with frustration at the tight control I had on my body. I couldn't even feel Alek's hand for a moment, and I worried that I'd lost myself completely. I didn't even know that was possible in portals—

I gasped, the sound strangled and choked, as I was finally released from the grasp of the portal. I stumbled forward, catching myself against the stone-paved pavilion. Two large hands immediately smoothed over my waist, a massive warm body seeming to shield me from the rest of the world. For just a moment, I was completely vulnerable, the world spinning, but I didn't worry—Alek's scent surrounded me, reminding me that he was there.

Then he was speaking in my ear. "Breathe, *zaya*. Focus on drawing your magic in, all of it at once, like a vacuum." His words were soft and knowing. I squeezed my eyes shut and began gathering each layer of my magic, feeling like I was taking too much time. "Get all of it, even the parts you're hiding."

That snapped me out of it. I jolted and tried to look up at him but he just

held me against himself and kept speaking. “Just focus, Deva.”

After a moment, I could see and breathe again, voices around me making me realize it was my friends. I was focused on Alek though, and when I looked up at him, I felt like he could see into the depths of my soul.

“There you are.” He exhaled, looking relieved. “I promise I will be back by the end of the day, *zaya*. Until then, I need you to promise me to be careful with your magic. We need to talk later.”

“How do you...”

He shook his head, a warning look letting me know we weren’t alone enough to talk about what had just happened. “Promise me.”

“I promise you,” I murmured.

When he stood, he offered me one more look and then was gone. I blinked, wondering if I was the only one who literally just felt like he’d disappeared. It was like he was a goddamn shadow.

“You okay?” Odessa was crouched down next to me. I straightened up with the help of her hand and nodded.

“Just a lot at once.” I exhaled. I hoped that was a good enough explanation.

“You good, girl?” Lavinia asked, and I felt slightly relieved that not a ton of people were looking at me. Odessa was already talking with her men again, and Briar was watching me with a look of concern. It was a bit odd having people care about my well-being. I wasn’t positive if I would ever get used to it.

“Portal travel can sometimes make people sick.” *No shit*. The masculine voice instantly had my skin breaking out into uncomfortable chills as it filled the space around us. Unfortunately, I knew whose voice that was, and it was problematic classmate number two.

Unlike Dylan, though, Kazimir wasn’t nearly as obvious about his hurt ego. Although we hadn’t had nearly as much of a clash as Dylan and me. No, Kazimir had been a problem because instead of trying to approach me like a normal individual—ironic, coming from me—he had been a pompous asshole, attempting to embarrass me for being obviously not wealthy, and assuming—correctly, unfortunately—that I didn’t have formal education and training through an elite school. No, I hadn’t had much of an education at all—hell, I was just happy I knew how to read and write. The rest came from me being damn powerful. It wasn’t something I was embarrassed about.

*So the entire thing hadn’t gone very well for him.* Instead, when he

offered to show me some of his ‘training,’ I’d told him that I would rather fail out of the academy than learn one thing from him. He’d been embarrassed and since then was always finding ways to make passive-aggressive asshole comments. So of course, he would choose now to approach me after days of not speaking to me at all.

With a sigh, I turned to find his imposing frame in my space, his blood magic trying to brush against my own in a move that felt almost violating. I instantly pushed it off, his eyes flaring with annoyance at my raw power.

Well that solidified it. There seemed to be only two men whose magic I enjoyed touching me... And I really needed to stop thinking that way about the shadow witch guy, and especially Alek. The second was becoming far too real.

“I’ve never heard that it can make people sick.” Lavinia sounded bored, offering him an annoyed expression.

I was still focused on Kazimir though. I kept his gaze, noticing that it was dark with hints of green in it, something that would be rather beautiful if it wasn’t for the darkness I could sense right underneath the surface of his skin. He reminded me just a bit too much of the men that surrounded Astaroth for me to be comfortable. Not that this was the first time I’d come across someone like him, but unlike normal, I couldn’t just escape through a back alleyway—I would have to see him almost every day.

“Lunar witches aren’t taught shit like that.” He offered a smirk as he responded to Lavinia, my gaze running over his expensive clothes and cocky stance. His black hair was messy, but in a way that was extremely purposeful, and he held himself with an authority that I had to assume was all related to his birth line. My gaze darted behind him to where two other guys stood, seemingly amused with their friend talking to us.

“Neither are blood witches,” Briar mumbled under her breath, not bothering to waste her time. I doubted he had even heard her response.

“And blood witches are taught that?” I fished, hating how he was talking to my friend. I swear, if this guy wasn’t careful, he was going to land himself in a very painful position.

Seemingly unsurprised with my analysis, he looked down at me, offering a smile. “Blood witches are everything that lunar witches aren’t, Deva.”

“Fates,” I groaned, finally hitting my limit. Someone needed to put him in his place. “You wonder why no one likes you. I mean, seriously, you are such a pompous ass. *You* seem like every single *boy* I’ve ever met. Unimpressive



and a bigger ego than anything else on his body.”

Yeah, when I got annoyed enough, I got a bit mean. Honestly though, Kazimir was the only one that pushed me to that extreme. There was just something about him that rubbed me the wrong way.

He turned pink in the face, his attempt at a smile ruined by how pissed he looked at his fragile ego being hit even just the slightest bit. “I am offering you a chance to become better than what you were born as.”

I actually laughed out loud. “Kazimir, believe me when I say I am more than perfectly fine with how I was born. You should really stop assuming everyone wants to be like you. I think you will find that except for the two assholes behind you, your fan club includes no one else.”

Also, was that how it was going to be at DIA? A constant separation between types of witches? I thought that had ended, but it seemed like some people hung onto their shit. *This type of thing was going to get exhausting.*

He looked over me with a clinical interest before he shook his head. “I refuse to believe that. You’ll see, once you realize how important it is to have the right people by your side. I’m trying to offer you a chance at success— isn’t that why you’re going here? To change your future? Don’t waste it because you’re prideful.”

Now *that* angered me. I stepped closer to him and spoke in a hard tone that I rarely used. “I don’t know what you think you understand about me, but if you continue to do this, if you continue to push me, you’re going to find out just how much raw power I have. Don’t make me embarrass you.”

His eyes darkened. “Deva, I know you’re worth this bullshit. You’ll see what I mean when we get into the witch sector. I’ll be waiting for you to come to me.” The cockiness was gone. Something different filled his expression, a thoughtfulness that made me feel a surge of anxiety that I had never felt before. I exhaled in relief as he walked away towards the large building ahead without another word.

“Damn, he’s such a jerk,” Lavinia growled.

“He comes from an extremely powerful line.” Briar sighed. “He is the type that preys on people’s insecurities just to get what he wants...which is you.”

“Well, wait till he figures out that I would be more likely to kill him than fuck him,” I murmured, more to myself than anything.

Lavinia barked out a laugh. “Damn, Deva.”

Oops.

I flashed her a smile, hoping to play it off as a joke, but before we could say anything else, the headmaster's voice echoed through the space. My gaze moved to the archway she had just walked through, the rippling water-like material completely disappearing.

“Come on, please make your way to the administration building, lots to do. I expect all of you to take an active measure to ensure your success here. Don't just wait on directives, create the future you want.”

That got me moving.

As we walked forward, my gaze moved over the circular pavilion, the dome-like sky covered in a hazy fog. I couldn't see much, but the climate was comfortable, warm enough that I wanted to shrug off my jacket but chose not to do so, knowing it would expose the scars I had on my body. I was drawing enough attention as it was—no need for more. So far my friends hadn't seen most of them, and the few they had seen I had chalked up to my upbringing. One that they hadn't delved too far into besides me being poor—which worked for me because I didn't like to lie to them.

Maybe they could tell how uncomfortable I was about it.

“Are those the gates they talked about?” Odessa asked curiously. I noticed her men were gone for now, leaving just the three of us. I followed her gaze towards the right, where there were five large gates. We couldn't see past the large stone walls and gates, but from what we'd been told, each led into a sector of the academy—a clever way to keep the different types of students separated.

Honestly, it was a bit disappointing to know I wouldn't interact with anyone outside of witches, but it didn't surprise me—that was how our entire plane of existence was set up. It was the way of life. I guess I had hoped it would be different here, that I could find people that weren't assholes like most witches.

*Wait.* Hadn't there been a sixth? In my head, I ran over the different sectors that I knew existed in our plane of existence and at the academy: witches, vampires, shifters, fae, demi-gods. What was I—

Demons.

My head snapped to the left, realizing that there was a large gate that was on that side as well, seemingly separated from the rest. How odd... Why weren't they grouped with the others? I had a feeling this place was going to be far different than I ever imagined or what they had attempted to explain to us.

“It’s beautiful,” Lavinia said in awe.

When I followed her line of sight, I realized she was talking about the large three-story academic building that was the main feature of the pavilion. The stone gothic structure was covered in ivy and had a large set of stairs which led up to a pair of black doors that were currently open in a welcoming fashion. I felt excitement string through me, an unfamiliar sensation, as I tried to control myself. It was thrilling and uncomfortable, all of this, but I was loving it so far... Despite the oddity of my situation with Alek, almost passing out from portal travel, and Kazimir being an asshole.

My eyes widened as we were greeted by a gathering area at the top of the stairs, the marble floors glinting underneath the lighting and gleaming as if newly polished. There were banners for the different sectors hanging up, and I followed our group towards a navy and silver one. Several student workers were stationed beneath it, handing out packets of information.

I was taken off guard by how friendly they seemed, their relaxed disposition making it very obvious that they weren’t pretending to be happy, but were actually experiencing it. It gave me more hope than you could imagine.

“Deva?” one of the girls asked, her blue eyes meeting mine.

“That would be me,” I offered, not bothering to ask how she knew that. She flashed me a smile and passed me a navy packet of information. “This contains your housing information, schedule, and any other information you’ll need. Your uniform will already be in your living quarters based on the sizes provided to us at the exam. Any questions?”

“Nope,” I responded, not wanting to ask any dumb questions until I could read through everything. Lavinia was chatting up a storm next to me, so I am sure I could ask her, Briar, or Odessa anything I didn’t understand about the witch sector. Suddenly I was a bit concerned about how little I felt like I knew about witch culture.

“Fantastic, feel free to wait over there.” She pointed her manicured nail off towards the side as I followed her directions, feeling a bit weird about doing so. When was the last time I listened to anyone?

My gaze moved down to my completely unpolished nails, feeling a surge of insecurity. Not because of how I looked, although I suppose that was part of it, more so about what the ‘norm’ was here. Despite the two months of being around others, I still was different from my friends, something that was incredibly clear every morning we got up.

Then again, what would I do with nail polish? What was the point of that? Maybe I needed to stop thinking so utilitarian, but it was ingrained in me. At the same time... It was enough that my magic was so clearly different in strength level, something people were able to sense, but I also *looked* different. Every single one of these students, or at least most of them, seemed as if they were hand-dipped in expensive clothing. Despite my clothes being somewhat new, I was finding myself eager to get into a uniform already so there could stop being so many obvious differences between me and them.

Deciding to not open up my packet yet, I offered Briar a small smile as she joined me, practically bouncing on the tips of her toes, which was an unusual amount of energy for her. “Isn’t this so exciting? I can’t believe we are finally here after so many weeks.”

I offered her a smile. “It is exciting. I feel like there was so damn much they told us, but already this feels different than I would have expected.”

“Alright, time to go into your sector!” a voice belonging to one of the student workers interrupted. My friends and I followed the crowd, and when we stepped back outside, nearing the witch sector gates—I froze.

I felt a weird surge of pain through my chest, causing me to go breathless for a minute. I tried to shake the sensation as I kept walking, hoping no one noticed. I frowned, feeling like my heart beat for a singular time, before going silent again. Immediately I looked around for Alek, but didn’t see him or feel his magic. The incident had me feeling slightly on edge, especially considering the only other person who made my heart beat actively was hunting me.

I pushed it from my mind. Maybe I’d imagined it. That was possible, right?

“It is storming inside of the sector,” the student worker announced, “so make sure to put on your jacket if you have taken it off.”

I felt my brows rise at the surety in his voice but tugged up my hood as the ominous creak of the gates sounded through the pavilion, revealing a fog-covered path. I felt a momentary almost primal urge to walk back and away from the unknown, but I kept steady, knowing that change was hard. Somehow though, I knew that something was waiting for me there—I just didn’t know what.

The fog was almost silky against my skin, and it was a mere second before we walked right into the middle of a thunderstorm. Odessa let out a surprised sound as everyone jogged towards the main building ahead, clearly

not having expected the downpour despite the student helper's words.

I walked a bit slower, not minding the rain, but reached the steps right as everyone was filing past a pair of heavy doors. I couldn't see much of the sector at all, just felt that it was cold and rainy. I could feel the magic though, and when I stepped inside, my entire body froze up again, that painful sensation once again slamming into me.

What was going on with me?

My chest squeezed, the moonstone seeming to burn and pulse in tandem with my...heart? *Why the hell was that beating again?* I swallowed, feeling eyes on me, and not the ones from the students I'd arrived with.

Tugging my hood down, I looked right, barely moving my head, before turning to the left where the pull was almost impossible to ignore. My eyes widened, feeling legitimate panic slam into me.

Despite not getting the best look at his face, I completely recognized the man standing frozen twenty feet away, his dark eyes solely focused on me as shadows began to swirl around his wrists. I recognized him because I'd seen him only last night in my dreams...

How much did we want to bet he knew who I was?

# 6

## DEVA

How unlucky could one person be?

My back slammed against the wall of the entrance as the shadow witch I'd stolen from appeared in front of me in the blink of an eye. I inhaled sharply as I felt the true effect of his powers and experienced him, fully, all at once. I swallowed down the fear of being trapped and instead focused on holding his swirling black eyes that were tinged with hints of navy.

Crap, he was even better looking in person than my dreams.

His hair was pushed back away from his beautiful ivory face, the hard edge of his jaw somehow still making him look impossibly masculine. His full lips were so close I could have gone up on my toes and smoothed my fingers over them, but instead I kept my hands to myself, not allowing myself to shift closer. He already had me pinned to the stone wall, others' eyes no doubt turning to watch the spectacle—but I couldn't focus on any of that. Although what I should be focusing on was the odd fascination with wanting to pin me to surfaces—maybe I was a pinnable woman.

Instead, all my attention was on being completely surrounded by the leather and smoke scent that seemed to crawl over my skin, his shadows swirling between my ankles and causing a sound to slip from my throat. My heart began to beat rapidly, pounding in quick succession, the stone growing hot in my chest as I realized that my beating heart seemed to come in response to both Alek and the shadow witch...

How was that possible?

Whatever I had tried to chalk it up to before paled in comparison to the effect they seemed to have on me. Right now it was like I was no longer in reality, my feet both off the ground, in the place and time he determined it.

His confidence and darkness seemed overwhelming, and his large body somehow seemed even more intimidating in the light of day. It didn't help that the button-down shirt he wore, loosened at the collar, seemed to mold to his every muscle. My throat grew thick and lust rolled through my system as his hand came off the wall to grip my jaw, my head falling back fully as I fought the urge to snap his wrist.

Don't get me wrong, there was a large part of me that wanted to, that craved to get away from him. But that part wasn't in charge. No, rather the opposite—I was finding that I liked being trapped here against him. It created a heated flush and live wire experience against my skin; I felt completely surrounded by a smoky haziness of possible pleasure. I knew he had the possibility to give it to me. It would have been so easy to give into it.

*Maybe Alek wasn't too far off base about what I wanted.*

"Grimshaw."

The haze I was trapped in shattered, as I leaned back, out of his touch, but the man in question didn't move. If anything he stepped closer, as if worried I would try to slip away, while turning his gaze on the student helper that was standing in front of my other classmates, all of them staring wide-eyed at the two of us.

Crap. What had I said about staying under the radar? Clearly I was failing at that marvelously already.

"Yes, Ingram?" His voice was a low growl that caused me to shiver, a sensation I tried to repress.

*Grimshaw.* I wanted to say his name out loud, but I managed to contain myself, knowing that would be weird. Although, he was literally pinning me against the wall of my new school in front of a large crowd, so I wasn't exactly the weirdo here.

"New student. Let her go." Ingram was attempting to be firm, his voice hard, but it only caused Grimshaw to smile, the cocky expression somewhat attractive.

"Can't do that." He looked back down at me, his eyes flaring with heat. "This little witch and I have something to attend to."

Ah yes, the fact that I stole from him. I probably needed to get away from this man before he realized his priceless treasure was embedded in my chest.

"We really don't," I argued, deciding to finally speak up, my voice clearer than it had been all day. "In fact, you should probably get out of my space."

I heard gasps and nervous chatter around us as Ingram offered me a headshake, panic flashing through his gaze. I raised my brow and looked back at Grimshaw, who was offering me an even larger smile as if what I was saying was hilarious.

“You don’t want that, little jaguar.” He brought his hand back to my jaw before his touch moved down my throat. His possessive touch calmed a part of me I didn’t want to examine, and I had to fight down the urge to lean into him more. I couldn’t use my magic, not here, and I didn’t want to confirm any suspicions he could have about me from that night.

My experience with Grimshaw, my reaction to him, was different than with Alek. The latter seemed to have almost a natural connection to me that simmered between us. It was like being dipped in honey, or spending a lazy morning curled up in bed. It felt so damn natural, like it was meant to be. He heated my skin in a warm growing sensation; it was fucking wonderful... And this man was the exact opposite of that.

So I grabbed him by the wrist and tugged his hold off me, my magic pulsing through him. He stilled, black beginning to bleed into the whites of his eyes. I wasn’t scared of him, despite the room being filled with the scent of fear. No, I should have been scared of him, but instead I found myself wanting to mess with him... *Oh, that wasn’t good at all.* As if seeing it, his magic snapped back in control, seemingly not wanting to play a game with my own. Somewhat disappointing.

“Don’t do that again,” he warned.

I couldn’t help but smirk. “Do what?”

I wanted him to admit that I had forced him to let go.

“Grimshaw, if you could please allow Deva—”

“Deva?” He tilted his head, ignoring Ingram. His eyes turned relaxed and almost indifferent, which didn’t match the hold he had on my waist. “Beautiful name.”

“I know,” I answered, feeling a surge of mirth at the excitement that seemed to flash across his gaze. Yeah, I shouldn’t encourage this guy. In fact, I really needed to get away from him. At the same time, I appreciated the compliment about my chosen name.

“I should get back to the school stuff.” I nodded towards the group.

His eyes narrowed, as if angry that I was trying to get away from him. “Two months, Deva. Two fucking months. You aren’t going anywhere, not until we talk.”



Before I could argue, I was flying through the air, shadows wrapping around me in a cocoon that matched his muscular arms. I hissed at how hard he held me, and I jolted when we were flung back out of his shadows, my back hitting a large comfortable surface.

Immediately, I rolled to the side and landed off the bed, catching him off guard as he straightened himself on the other side. I didn't have a chance to look around, assuming this was his room as I watched him with more caution than before.

"I never agreed to talk to you." I leaned over the bed slightly.

"You'll find you don't have a lot of choices about shit when it comes to me," he offered, his eyes glinting with danger.

"Is that why we are in your bedroom?" I mused, my lips pressing into a smile I didn't feel. I was really hoping this guy wasn't like that, but it wouldn't be surprising. He was a powerful male witch—they usually did whatever the hell they wanted.

His eyes bled black for a minute as his face went serious. "No, Deva. I brought you here because I knew it was the only place to get away from those idiots trying to occupy your time."

A piece of me I hadn't realized had been tense relaxed. I jolted as he appeared behind me, one arm wrapping around my waist and the other sliding around my throat. His voice was soft in my ear. "Besides, when you finally are in my bed, you'll be begging for me."

"Right," I hissed, turning sharply into his arms, not liking the vulnerable position I was in and feeling a surge of anger. "It must be fun to have that active of an imagination."

Grimshaw chuckled softly, pressing his body further against mine, backing my legs up against the bed as I inhaled sharply at how hard he was. I should have felt more anger than I did—hell, I should have felt fear. After all, my only sexual experience, if you can call it that, was tainted with... Well, I didn't want to go there.

Clearly, I didn't push the thoughts from my head fast enough, though, because instantly, Grimshaw's aggression disappeared, his grip loosening just slightly. My hearing was static before he finally broke through it, tugging my chin up and examining my expression. "Little jaguar."

"It's Deva," I murmured and then narrowed my eyes. "You need to let go of me."

"You'll leave," he stated, any sense of joking or antagonism disappearing

and replaced with something I couldn't quite read. I almost wanted to believe it was concern, but that didn't make any fucking sense at all.

"As I should," I murmured, leaning back and slipping out of his arms to sit on the bed. His gaze narrowed on me, clearly trying to determine if I was going to run, but I didn't really want to. Instead, I leaned back slightly and watched him with interest as he stepped back, moving towards the windows. My gaze ran around his room, realizing it was far nicer than anything I'd imagined.

The ceilings were two stories tall, and the stone walls with dark floors created a cozy atmosphere that was only enhanced by the fireplace roaring nearby. Grimshaw almost looked tense as he paced back towards me after popping open the window so I could hear the rain falling.

"Where is it?" he demanded softly.

"The moonstone?" No point in playing dumb. "Not sure what happened to it."

Seriously, how did it get into my chest? I very much wanted to know.

"You sold it." His statement wasn't angry; it was as if he was analyzing my words and finding them lacking. Probably because I sucked at lying. I just didn't speak when I had to lie—you can't imagine how quickly people let shit go when they were uncomfortable, and silence *always* made people uncomfortable.

Except it didn't seem to bother him, his head tilting. "I don't believe you."

"I didn't ask you to, Grimshaw," I leveled. "Why does it matter to you?"

I knew why moonstones were important, what they could be used to do, but I was beyond curious what he had planned to use it for. Also, keeping void of emotion was far more difficult than it used to be, not only after this summer but the shock of everything that was him.

"You're not stupid, Deva," he growled softly. "You know how important moonstones are, and if that gets into the wrong hands—"

"I am well aware of what happens when it's in the wrong hands," I bit out, unable to help myself.

His eyes narrowed on mine, seeming to evaluate my statement. "So why did you sell it?"

"I didn't."

"Where is it?" he demanded, walking forward and putting his hands on either side of me. I exhaled slowly, knowing that if I needed to, I could get

the hell away from him. I didn't think Grimshaw would kill me though.

As much as I wanted to paint him in a bad light, right now he just seemed concerned about the stone being in the wrong hands—something I understood more than anyone. I still didn't trust him though. There was something underneath his attempted cool manner that had to do with more than just his magic; it was something wild and uncontrollable. It was the part of him that I truly wanted out to play; it was the part of him that others seemed to fear—I should have ignored it, but I didn't.

“I wasn't lying—I'm not sure what happened to it.” I eased off my jacket, keeping his gaze. He immediately looked over my pale skin, and more importantly, the scars that covered my body. I was wearing a simple tank top, and his eyes bled completely black as he eyed the injuries. I saw him open his mouth to say something, but he managed to restrain himself when meeting my gaze again.

Disappointment hit me, knowing I wouldn't see heat in his gaze anymore. Something I shouldn't have cared about to begin with. My heart began to slow for the first time of being in his presence, the normal calm that infused my behavior chilling and frosting me over.

I continued, “When I first took it, I slipped it into my shirt to hold it there. When you touched me, or when we first interacted—I'm not sure when exactly, but when the pain hit me I couldn't figure out why. Once I left your estate I realized what had caused it.”

His eyes darted down as I shimmied off one of the straps of my tank and pulled down the center of my shirt to reveal a dark bra that was absolutely nothing fancy, covering my breasts but exposing the small stone in the center of my chest. Grimshaw went completely still upon noticing it, his entire body locking up as his gaze ran across the sparkling white gem that made my complexion glow with a silvery sheen. It was extremely light, but in the darkness of the room, it was far more obvious.

I felt my pulse pick up just a bit, realizing that I had taken my clothes off around him without a second thought. His large fingers, marked with runes I hadn't noticed before, came up hesitantly to press against the stone.

I inhaled sharply as desire slammed into me, lighting up the stone more, his eyes widening before they met mine. His voice was rough and uneven as he asked, “How is this possible?”

“I don't know,” I murmured, my entire body tightening. My center clenched as heat seemed to infuse my body, my nipples hardening against my

bra as a whimper nearly broke from my throat. A growl seemed to catch in his throat, and his hand shot out to grip my jaw gently, causing my breath to catch.

Something about this man made me lose all sense of myself, and when he leaned forward, I found myself meeting his lips in a hesitant kiss. A growl vibrated from his chest as the brush of our lips made my power surge even more—it was barely a kiss, but it was enough that I felt something break loose inside of me.

A moan slipped through my lips and he snapped, as if he had been this worked up for the months we had been apart. I was pressed against the large bed, his hand tightening on my throat as his other slipped into my hair. His kiss was deep and intrusive. My legs tightened around him, and I could feel how hard he was against me, causing me to feel the same level of need as I dug my hands into his hair.

I whimpered as he groaned against my mouth, his shadows running across my own as they slipped out. He ripped his mouth away from my lips and looked at the shadows coming off me. “I thought I had been imagining it,” he whispered before looking back at me, nervousness hitting my chest. “You have both—”

I slammed my lips against his once again, not wanting him to ruin the moment. He growled, and when his grip loosened on my hair, he began to kiss down my jaw, leaving my lips as a whimper slipped from them. I hissed as he nipped my throat, but he wasn’t done, and I moaned as he sucked hard on the skin, causing me to jolt with pleasure as he no doubt left a mark.

“Fuck,” he hissed, “I can feel how close you are.”

I realized with the startling awareness that he was right, and when he continued to work his way down my throat, I found myself rocking against his length, hating that there were clothes separating us. Somehow though, my body was so keyed up that it didn’t matter. I hissed as he tugged down my bra and began to tease my breasts with his mouth.

My voice was choked as I moaned his name—then he tugged my nipple with his teeth, and it was all I needed. I exploded, the center of my chest heating so hot I felt like I was going to break out into a sweat, a small cry of his name escaping my lips as Grimshaw let out a dangerous noise that caused my skin to break out into a violent shiver.

My eyes closed, trying to gather myself—what the hell had I just done?  
I’d let him kidnap me.

I'd told him about the stone.

I'd let him see the other part of my magic.

I'd let him make me come...let him give me my first climax.

I was so fucked. I needed to get out of here. When he pulled back, his gaze ran over my throat with satisfaction and possessiveness.

Oh no. Absolutely not.

"Grimshaw..."

"Don't," he warned, his gaze snapping up to mine. "Don't try to leave, Deva. Not right now. I don't know what's going on here, but if you leave, I will hunt you back down."

My breathing was uneven as I stared up at him in shock, his gaze almost predatory. I watched mutely as he adjusted my clothes, covering the moonstone, and my emotions began to rise up as he ran a finger over a large scar on my shoulder, his brow dipping. I tried to not tense up, but when he looked me in the eye, I knew he could see it, his gaze filled with fury that wasn't towards me.

"Deva." His voice was soft, but I shook my head.

"Don't. Don't ask me to tell you."

Because I would. I was finding I had absolutely no control around this man. I didn't think I had a submissive bone in my body, but under his touch and his command, my body was lighting up. I wasn't even thinking; my magic was just acting on its own accord, insisting that we could trust him...

I never trusted anyone. That wasn't possible.

A door banged open as Grimshaw's gaze narrowed.

A deep voice echoed through the space. "Why did Ingram come to me—"

The words were cut off as the person realized the situation at hand.

I felt my body tense up. This would be why I didn't trust most people—they never did anything alone, there were always other factors. As if snapping out of my lust-induced haze, I pressed a hand to his chest and tried to sit up. When his hand gently wrapped around my throat and he leaned forward, making me lay back down, his eyes flashing with a darkness I had never seen before, I knew we would have problems.

# 7

## GRIMSHAW

*Don't let her go. Don't let her leave your fucking sight.*

My magic was loud and obnoxious, growling inside my head while banging on the walls of my consciousness, demanding to take over. I couldn't do that though, because I was still staring down at the gorgeous woman underneath me, completely captivated by her. I found I couldn't disagree with my magic, not in the least—it was much better for Deva to stay right here.

Especially after managing to evade me for the longest two months of my existence. My gaze moved down to the mark I'd left on her elegant throat, a purple, almost bruised hickey that had me feeling a wave of possessiveness I'd never experienced before. I could feel my icy magic wrapped around her own, exploring it with a dangerous level of curiosity. I knew instinctively that my lunar witch was so much more than just a thief, and I looked forward to uncovering every secret of hers, wanting to savor every inch of her.

It may have made me a bastard, but I could see the effect my touch had on her. I could see how attracted she was to me, and I didn't feel bad in the least about using that to keep her here, underneath me. Right within grasp and unable to run.

I had thought that the initial pull I'd felt towards my little jaguar was imagined. When she had all but disappeared with the moonstone, I had assumed that I'd crafted the intensity between us in my head and created the illusion that my shadows wrapped around her in a claiming manner. *I hadn't imagined it though.*

Even more so, I knew she felt our connection the same as I did, because she had continuously summoned me to her dreams. I hadn't been able to see her, only a faint shadow separated by a glass warded barrier that I now

suspected was because of Garnet Hall...but I'd been able to hear her delicate voice. I'd been able to fall increasingly more obsessed with her as we talked for almost eight weeks straight every single night.

Now though? She was here. *Underneath me.*

Deva's scent surrounded me. Her moonlit gaze was completely focused on me as her dark hair spread out around her, the woman looking so much more ethereal and almost unreal than I had ever imagined... And I'd imagined a lot over the past two months. The rest of her body was covered in dark clothes, hiding her beauty from me and making me want to strip it away, to examine every single inch of her. Solidify who Deva was in my head to ensure that she never escaped my grasp again.

In a way, I felt stupid. I had spent all summer searching every alley and abandoned building for this woman, and I had never considered that the wards protecting her were ones crafted by DIA. I had never considered that she would be attending this fall, especially considering her occupation. I deserved the purgatory I'd been stuck in for being such an ass and assuming shit. The fates were clearly set on us being in one another's lives, though, because my little jaguar was now stuck with me in an academy that she was unable to leave.

I didn't feel guilty about loving the concept of trapping her. I was elated.

When Deva had walked into the building with the other students and met my gaze, I immediately recognized her unusual eyes. It didn't matter that I hadn't seen very much of her, I could smell the intoxicating mix of magic and night air that seemed to swirl around her. Fuck, she was so much more beautiful than I had even assumed, so much so that I was finding it hard to concentrate on anything but her being underneath me.

I still had the taste of her lips against mine, and despite marking her, I wanted more. I wanted to claim her, and a rumble caught in my throat as I looked up at a man I considered nearly my brother, feeling possessive over her even though he was just looking at her.

And he was very much looking at her, for the record.

"Lazaro," I snapped. His gaze moved from her dark head of hair to where I was over her, his eyes filling with confusion before a darker, more defensive reaction appeared that I felt far more comfortable with. I knew it was a bullshit feeling on my end, but at the moment, feeling overwhelmed by my magic, it was very much preferred. I wanted to claim this woman, and I didn't want anyone else to look at her...Not until I recovered from losing

track of her, at least.

“Let me up.”

I moved my gaze back down to find Deva both flushed and looking pissed. There was a fire there, and I knew that it wouldn't take long until it became her go-to. I preferred that over the cold clinical look I saw slip into her eyes occasionally, or far worse, the way her eyes seemed to turn dark gray with shadows that seemed to weigh heavily on her shoulders.

I examined this singular piece of perfection formed by the fates themselves, realizing there was no way in hell that she was real. Maybe... maybe I was imagining shit. It wouldn't be the first time. I saw stuff in the shadows constantly. Maybe she was just that—a figment of my own insanity.

In which case, I never wanted my delusion to end.

I pulled back slightly, trying to gather myself, realizing I was about to fall over the edge as she sat up, immediately turning to position herself with her back to the headboard, eyeing both of us cautiously. I watched Lazaro take her in, his eyes going to her scars before returning to her face. I could see the surprise and the intensity of his reaction, making me know I wasn't crazy—there was something very different about this woman. Something I'd never experienced before.

“Deva, this is Lazaro.”

Deva's gaze moved towards him, seeming to look over him, her magic tightening around her defensively before she offered a small nod. “I would say it's good to meet you...but if you're friends with him, it's probably not.”

“Says the woman who just got off by rubbing against him,” Lazaro bit out almost immediately, looking jealous. I don't think she recognized the second part, and I had to assume she just thought he was being an ass—which to be fair, he was.

I also was trying to not smile in pride because she *had* come while rubbing her hot little pussy against me. It made me feel like a fucking king, and I had to control my smile so that she didn't see it—that would no doubt get me back to square one with my little jaguar. Plus, I had bigger things to focus on than being absolutely entrapped by her reaction as her ears turned pink and she let out a small growl that sounded like it was meant to be threatening but was instead adorable.

“And you're a jerk. Completely surprising for a male witch,” she hissed.

I think I was in love.

Seriously, I think I was falling in love with this woman. I had been



obsessed before through the dream connection, but in person, witnessing her fully? It was an experience. Deva had snapped something in me, and I think it was going to remain broken forever, because if it meant having her in my life, I didn't want to fix it. I also had the completely unreasonable urge to hurt Lazaro for making her upset at all. I loved seeing emotion crawl across her face, but I didn't want it to be a negative one.

He offered her a dismissive look before turning his attention towards me. "Why did Ingram come crying to all of us?"

I think he knew why. It wasn't exactly common for me to kidnap women, let alone bring one to my room. I nearly grimaced, realizing that meant the other two would know about her as well. So much for keeping Deva a secret. I shouldn't be surprised though—the group of us were always together. If one did something, everyone was bound to know. Especially since that something was usually rather violent.

*Or kidnapping a sexy little witch.*

"Because I took her from the new student tour." I shrugged as if it was no big deal.

Lazaro muttered a curse, running a hand over his face. "This is a problem. Now everyone is going to want to know who she is—"

Deva made a panicked noise, standing up, eliciting a growl from my throat at her clear intention to leave. I tried to fix her obvious concern at people paying attention to her. "No they won't."

"Yes, they will," Lazaro argued, looking annoyed with me. "It's not like she's exactly unnoticeable."

I had no idea if he saw it, but Deva flinched just slightly, her face blanking of emotions before she gripped her jacket and slipped it over her body, my eyes running over her lean, perfect curves. I could see the relief on her face once she secured it back around her, and she crossed her arms, fixing Lazaro with a look that spelled out her dislike of his commentary, before moving her gaze towards me.

"Do we have anything else to talk about right now?"

I knew I needed to let her go, because I had to talk to the others. We not only had our little jaguar to deal with, but the very dangerous moonstone that was lodged into the center of her chest, something that would put a target on her—literally. I didn't want to let her go, though. That was the last thing I wanted right now.

So I would have to make it clear that this wasn't over.

I approached her, grasping her jaw as she tried to tug back from me, nearly making me smile. “For now. Don’t get too comfortable in your room though.”

“Why?” she demanded, her eyes filling with panic that I don’t think she meant for me to see. Yeah, Deva had some serious walls up and a past that I could assume wasn’t pretty. Most people had emotional scars, and she had some of those for sure, but the physical ones had me feeling a level of fury I’d never experienced.

I wanted to hunt the person who put those on her and burn them alive.

“Because you won’t be sleeping in your bed, you’ll be here.” I brushed her nose as she seemed to relax at the soft, persuasive tone I used, pressing into me on instinct, listening to her body’s response to our connection.

When she processed my words, she jolted back and offered a dark, narrowed look. “Like I said, very active imagination you have, Grimshaw.”

I chuckled softly. “Go on, little jaguar. You have a few hours—if that.”

Deva tore away from me and ignored my comment, refusing to address it, as I watched her pert ass storm towards the door. When she reached Lazaro, her glare intensified, and it seemed to only amp up his magic despite the attempted indifferent expression he offered her.

Then she was gone.

That filled me with far more anxiety than I had ever experienced before.

There was an instinctual, primal part of me that demanded we get her back, and I had to ground myself in an effort to not chase her. I heard the main door of our dorm slam shut, and instantly Lazaro’s expression changed.

He offered me an angry look. “What are you doing, Grim?”

“No idea what you’re talking about.” I sat down on one of the chairs in front of the fireplace, wishing I had Deva on my lap. I knew she would hate that at first, but I had a feeling if you held her the right way she would turn into a kitten and curl up, allowing me to give her the pleasure she very much deserved.

“Tell me that you can’t see there is something different about her,” I added as he sat down across from me.

Lazaro ran a hand through his hair, crossing his arms on his knees as he looked down on the floor. “Of course there is something different about her—she’s broken.”

Instantly a growl broke from my chest. “What the fuck are you talking about?” Deva wasn’t broken, not in the way he was implying. She was so

vibrant and strong. If she was broken, it wasn't in a way that I wanted to be fixed. She was a perfect mixture of darkness and vibrancy. *She was perfect.*

He continued though, "Not only that, but she looks like she's been through hell. Even putting aside the scars, she looks exhausted. Not the type that comes from a few nights of shitty sleep—no, this is different."

"You're wrong. She's not broken, she's strong."

"I'm not arguing that, you can be both," he spoke harshly before offering me a hard look. "You need to leave her alone."

A rumble broke from my chest. "I don't need to do shit."

I could see the sympathy in Lazaro's eyes, and I knew it wasn't for me but her. "I know you won't. But just remember when I fucking said this. Remember that when you realize that you are only going to end up hurting her more. She's not for you...for any of us." The fact that he was willing to admit that made me know he was serious.

"You feel it also," I growled, referring to the connection there.

"Doesn't really matter." Lazaro shrugged before sitting back. "I don't fuck with broken toys."

He didn't fuck with anything or anyone. Lazaro stayed away from people completely.

"She's not a toy," I snapped out.

It was, however, becoming increasingly obvious that Lazaro was concerned about her well-being, which was why he was insistent on leaving her alone. Good. If there was something Lazaro couldn't refuse, it was the urge to protect something he cared about. Considering he cared about almost nothing, this worked in my favor.

"Besides..." I drew my words out. "We can't leave her alone."

"Why?" He frowned at my tone.

"She was the one we were searching for all summer."

Silence filled the room.

"The one with the fucking moonstone? Why didn't you take it from her?"

I swallowed, feeling on edge. "It's embedded in her chest."

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"You're being a stalker."

"Then you are as well," I bit back.

I watched Deva from where I sat on a large ledge looking over the covered courtyard. Most students were inside unpacking their dorm rooms, but our new class of students were eating lunch together. Which meant my Deva was right in sight, just the way I liked it.

I couldn't help but be riveted by the graceful way she seemed to even sit, her back against the trunk of a large tree as she ate. There were eyes on her, not just ours, but she seemed more interested in what her friends were saying. From what I could gather, there were three of them, and everyone seemed to give them somewhat a wide berth, which I greatly preferred. There were a few too many male classmates in my opinion.

"I'm just making sure you don't fuck up any of the new students before the first day of class," Lazaro explained dismissively, but I didn't believe him. His gaze was on Deva as well, and he made a concerned noise as she began to pick at her lunch, seemingly disinterested with it.

"What?" I questioned, wondering what he was noticing.

"She's hungry but not eating," he explained quietly. "I don't know why."

"How can you tell she's hungry?" I asked, my brow dipping, jealous that he seemed far more clued into her than I was.

I wasn't okay with that in the least. I wanted to know her better than she knew herself. I was also starting to think that I had a serious goddamn problem because these thoughts were ones I'd never had before—it was almost overwhelming.

Lazaro frowned. "I don't know, to be honest."

I nodded, understanding him to an extent. The connection between us and her was only growing despite the physical distance apart. I tilted my head to the side as I noticed a weird wave of exhaustion pass over her face, her hand tightening on the ground in a fist. If I wasn't paying so close attention to her I wouldn't have noticed it. Hell, if I wasn't such a damn stalker, as Lazaro had mentioned, I probably wouldn't have noticed half of the tiny expressions that crossed her gorgeous face. The woman was a master at controlled reactions, and that type of ability usually didn't form from positive experiences.

"She has two types of magic," I murmured.

Lazaro snapped his head towards me. "What?"

"I thought I was imagining shit,"—my jaw clenched—"but she used both lunar and shadow magic that night, and today I saw the shadow magic again."

He shook his head. "I can't believe that's her, that she's the little thief that managed to break into the fortress you call a house."

“She’s good,” I agreed and then smiled, shaking my head. “Really fucking powerful, too. I didn’t tell any of you because we were looking anyway, but for the past two months, assumingly when she was in Garnet Hall, she was connecting to me through dreams. I couldn’t get any information out of her, of course, but the ability to do that—”

“Means her lunar magic is insanely well developed.” Lazaro shook his head, seeming to be frustrated at not getting a grasp on Deva as a person. I didn’t blame him in the least—the woman was overwhelming.

“I have a feeling Deva is far more than any of us could have imagined.” I didn’t mind admitting that, but it did make me feel another surge of possessiveness, wanting to keep our new treasure to ourselves.

“You left a mark on her,” Lazaro pointed out suddenly.

“I did,” I murmured.

“Should have left a bigger one,” Lazaro muttered under his breath, and I grinned. I didn’t disagree, but I was surprised by his words. His eyes were narrowed on the courtyard, and when I turned my head I let out a growl, noticing that an asshole from her class was approaching her.

In a flash, I gripped Lazaro’s shoulder and transported us onto ground level with my shadows. He said something to me that almost sounded like a warning, but I was far too focused on intercepting the piece of shit who was going to talk to my Deva.

I didn’t need to know anything about the bastard more than he thought it was acceptable to talk to her. Deva’s eyes widened, moving from her friends, her gaze going from annoyed at the approaching pest, to slight concern. Before he could reach her, I appeared in front of her, blocking his view, and narrowed my eyes down at the shorter bastard. Not that much shorter, but short enough that he stumbled back.

“What the fuck?” he demanded, his eyes flashing as I felt his lunar magic fill the space. Lazaro crossed his arms and continued to glare at the kid.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I asked, stepping into his space.

“Grimshaw,” Deva cursed, standing up and breaking away from her friends. “Stop—”

I looked back at her, flashed her an amused look, and then glanced back at the kid. “I just want to know what he thinks he’s doing, little jaguar.”

“Little jaguar?” Her red-haired friend asked in confusion.

“Doesn’t matter,” Deva murmured, making my smile grow at her cheeks turning pink. “Seriously—”

“Not worth it,” Lazaro drew as I felt Deva roll her eyes despite him not seeing it. I also knew Lazaro would hate that—honestly, the dynamic would have been ten times funnier if I wasn’t dealing with this other idiot.

“You’re the bastard who took her from the group earlier,” the pest spit out.

I looked him over with genuine amusement. “And you’re a privileged asshole who has no idea who I am.”

His fake confidence faltered slightly. “Yeah, and who are you?”

I was going to take a ton of enjoyment out of this.

Stepping into his space, my shadows pressed in on him in a suffocating force. “Grimshaw Nyx.”

The horror on his face filled me with authentic joy as he began to sweat and his breathing became ragged. “I had no idea, I figured you had graduated —”

My shadows formed into sharp edges, like thorns, as they closed in on him, causing a scream to rip from his throat. The scent of blood filled the space, his magic seeping into my own and fueling it as I drained him. His pain distracted me enough that when I found Deva tugging on my arm, I was authentically surprised.

“Stop,” she hissed, looking furious.

I frowned in confusion. “Deva, he was coming to talk to you.”

“I don’t care,” she growled. “Stop it now, Grimshaw.”

Lazaro chuckled, and she looked at him with actual anger. “Say something to him, tell him this is ridiculous!”

“Ridiculous is the least we’ve been called.” He shrugged, looking indifferent. I knew he was far from it, but he put on a good act.

I sighed, knowing I needed to pull back my magic or else she probably wouldn’t let me kiss her again, and this pest wasn’t worth that type of sacrifice.

Snapping around, I picked Deva up and pinned her against the tree as the pest fell to the ground behind us, whimpering. Lazaro joined us, casually leaning against the tree as people hesitantly approached their fallen classmate. I didn’t care about that anymore—all I cared about was the anger on my Deva’s face and how flushed she was in contrast, her pupils blown out in desire. She may have been pissed at me, but she sure as fuck didn’t mind me holding her like this.

“What the hell was that?” she hissed.

“I felt like it was fairly obvious.” I looked at Lazaro, who nodded, his gaze running over Deva’s face as she pushed against me, her small form sheltered between us and the tree.

“The whole point of me coming here is to start over—” she bit out, her voice catching in a harsh whisper. “You are ruining that.”

I frowned, not liking her thinking that I was doing anything but improving her life.

“You are running?” Lazaro asked, his concern growing.

Her face blanked of emotions and I tilted my head, noticing that the way she did that was beyond practiced. Her gaze turned bored. “Not running. Starting over. Now get out of here, I want to have a normal first day.”

“Normal?” I chuckled softly. “This is your new normal. I told you that you had maybe hours at most.”

Her eyes melted into dark gray, streaked with black. “We aren’t doing this. I am not going to be steamrolled by you. We will figure out a way to get your *precious treasure* back”—her jaw clenched, her attempt to reason with me somewhat adorable—“but I am not doing what you say, and I sure as hell am not living with you.”

“Now Deva, you have to have realized my attention isn’t just about the stone.” I smirked as horror filled her gaze at my implication. It was refreshing for it to not be because of just my name.

Although my name really did carry a heavy and terrifying weight to it.

When the wind shifted, a familiar power signature filled the space. I smirked, stepping back and looking towards the pest, where a clearing had formed. Well, less of a clearing than people running. Deva made a concerned noise as I nodded in greeting at Cage. He was crouched down at the pest’s side and ran his finger through his blood, examining it with interest before flashing us an amused look.

“Not even the first day and you’re having fun without—” His words came to a stop as his gaze fell on Deva. I had never seen Cage so serious in his life—that wasn’t exactly his thing. Rather the opposite, because the blood witch was psychotic.

“Cage, good of you to join us,” Lazaro drew out in amusement.

“Who is this?” he asked, walking over towards Deva.

“No one,” Deva hissed, looking panicked. “I’m literally no one.”

I don’t think he believed her since he stepped into her, rubbing his fingers over her cheek and leaving a crimson print there, a shiver wracking her body.

The thing that stuck out to me? Her pulse, which had been unmoving in her neck the night of her heist, was now working double time. Especially when one of us, even Cage, was touching her. An individual's pulse was something I normally noticed, as it was such a good gauge to see how terrified someone was. There was only one other person I knew who didn't have a pulse... I prayed to the fates, for the sake of everyone at this school, that it wasn't for the same damn reason.

I could tell we were overwhelming her, but I didn't think that was a completely bad thing. I could tell Deva felt like she was falling head-first into the unknown, but she had to know that we would catch her. If this became too much, we would make sure she was safe until she came to terms with the reality of this situation.

A reality where the three of us, most likely the four of us, had the same connection to her that I'd been experiencing all summer.

"Well, that's not true, Deva." Osborn's voice filled the pavilion and my smile grew, figuring this was a better time than any to have my last two friends, more brothers than anything, meet Deva. Except the reaction that Deva had to Osborn's approach was different than even Cage, who stepped to the side slightly, now running his fingers through her hair. I had to admit our friend was a bit odd, but none of us were very normal.

"Oz?" Deva's voice was choked as her fingers gripped the closest surface in a white-knuckled hold. That surface just happened to be my arm. Lucky, right?

"You two know one another?" Lazaro asked, surprise tinting his words. It was indeed surprising because most people Osborn knew were dead...by his hands, of course. It was also surprising that she called him by a nickname.

Osborn didn't offer a response and instead approached, completing our cage around our little jaguar. She paled even further, completely stuck on Osborn and not the million other things going on around us.

"Yes. Deva and I have known each other for years."

Based on her expression, I had a feeling that wasn't a good thing.



## 8

### DEVA

I'd been terrified before.

It hadn't happened often or recently, but it sure as hell had happened. This wasn't terror, though. No, that wasn't what I was feeling—although I had no doubt my expression of horror implied otherwise. I suppose it was better than the truth.

The truth? All I felt surging through me, the strongest and most intense emotion, was simply...heartbreak.

I felt heartbroken looking upon Oz.

It had been almost two years now since I'd last seen him, and everything—literally everything—about him had changed. To the point that I couldn't help but feel shocked, looking him over with greedy attention to each detail.

The last time I'd seen the unblessed witch, he'd been shorter than his nearly 6'5" height and far skinnier. That lanky teenager was nowhere in sight, and heat exploded in my center, making my entire body freeze up, overwhelmed by feeling so many emotions at once. This was why I preferred not feeling anything.

I leaned back against the tree, trying to distance myself from a man that had the power to bring all of this to the ground in one sweep.

"Osborn," I whispered, testing his real name on my lips.

There was so much that was different about the man in front of me, so much so that the full name seemed as if it was distinguishing him as a different man altogether. He was still gorgeous, but he was so much larger than before. Like so large.

His black hair was cut short on the sides and messy on top, drawing attention to his violet eyes. There was still a clinical nature to the way he

examined me, but underneath it I could see anger and heat. The air around him was lethal, and unlike the others, he was wearing a tight shirt against his chest, showing off extensive tattoos that covered every inch of his upper body from his fingers up to his jawline—seemingly his chest as well.

Oh man, I was so screwed.

No, seriously, when I had first met Oz, I'd known he was different... I mean, it was extremely obvious that there was something off about him. There was a void in his emotional spectrum, and it had only grown... Except once again I was caught off guard by the emotions he displayed towards me. The way he seemed to devour me with his gaze alone. That look hadn't affected me as much before when I'd been terrified and on the run, but now... Well, now it did all types of things to my body.

Things that weren't good.

"Starlight." He caught my jaw, and my breathing stuttered. I could hear Cage chuckle from next to me, but Oz filled up so much of the space in front of me that I couldn't see Lazaro or Grimshaw. Not that they would help me.

My heartbeat was pounding in my ears, and I felt a surge of magic when Oz touched me that was similar to both the effect Grimshaw, Cage, and Alek had on me... There was a large temptation to see if Lazaro would cause my heart to beat out of my chest, but I knew the man wanted nothing to do with me. He'd made that very obvious. I blinked, trying to calm my heart, not understanding why they affected me so much, the moonstone warming and pulsating along with it.

Something big was going on here.

"I've missed you."

His words caught me off guard, and my eyes grew heavy as I tried to contain the strong emotion that seemed to saturate the air around these men. I had no idea how to handle his words. I *had* missed Oz. Of course I had missed him—he'd been there for me when I was terrified. The last time I'd been terrified.

But I also had known that being around anyone for a long period of time, let alone an unblest witch, would have made him a direct target. I had loved him enough to never do that. Hell, I still loved him. It wasn't an emotion I knew how to deal with anymore, but sixteen-year-old me fully believed that. The night of when I left him would play in my mind for years to come...

*I didn't want to leave him.*

*A tremble went through me as a sob caught in my throat. I was a mess, and I knew it was because of him. I had been so exhausted when he'd found me, hanging out in an alleyway days after running. I'd been vulnerable. He'd taken me in, and a month later I was so attached and dependent on Oz that I knew losing him would kill me in a way that felt so much worse than the times I'd been actually killed.*

*I couldn't lose him...so I had to leave.*

*Sitting up, I looked down at Osborn who had passed out, his handsome nearly nineteen-year-old face completely relaxed. Tears welled in my eyes as I pressed a soft kiss to his lips, our first kiss, before I got up, knowing he would hate me in the morning. He would also be far safer than he'd be with my tarnished soul attached to his.*

*The man was dangerous—extremely so. I knew what he did at night wasn't different from how I had been raised, but the difference between who we killed or had killed changed everything. He slaughtered those who deserved it, while I had killed unblessed like him on the orders of someone who was the embodiment of pure evil.*

*We were not the same, and that reality was enough to level me.*

*I stepped back from where I stood in the upper balcony of his home. A sob bubbled from my throat, knowing this was the right move. I just hated the idea of never seeing him again, because I knew the truth.*

*I loved him. I would probably always love him.*

“Deva.”

Oz's voice was hard as his hands tightened on my arms. I blinked, realizing that I'd zoned out staring into his vibrant eyes that were now filled with a darkness that I didn't understand. It should have been anger. He should have been furious with me. I'd broken my promise. He made me promise I would never leave, and now I was so tense it was painful, my chest seizing up as I realized my cheeks were soaked with tears.

“Hey!” Odessa's voice echoed through the space, and I saw the others look towards her, Lavinia, and Briar out of the corner of my eye. I couldn't stop staring at Oz, who was completely focused on my expression, his gaze darting to the embarrassing tears on my cheeks.

“Let her go, you assholes,” Lavinia growled, her voice closer as if she

was moving towards us. That wasn't good—they needed to stay out of this for their own safety.

“Never,” Oz murmured.

I turned to look at my friends, everyone else having backed away, but I spoke honestly. “I’m fine, seriously—”

“I would stay out of this,” Lazaro suggested casually to them, but I could hear the threat under his words.

My gaze moved to Lazaro’s lips before realizing that he was also staring at my wet cheeks. I didn’t let my eyes linger on him too long, knowing that he hated me. I could see it in his gaze, and I didn’t blame him. We were exact opposites. I was a rat compared to him.

Lazaro was beautiful in that way you knew came from a long line of witches that were far more powerful than everyone else. His skin was golden brown, and his hair was a rich chocolate shade with golden highlights. He looked like he was glowing, despite the completely black outfit he was wearing, his dark button-down rolled at the sleeves to show off moon symbols that covered his forearms. What stood out to me though? His eyes, much like my own, were a nickel color, hard and cold, and I found them strikingly beautiful. It was also unnerving to have him turn them on me and watch me with what almost felt like criticism.

Actually, there was no ‘almost’ about it. It was completely critical. The man had an aloof and indifferent air to him, and every time I thought that there was an intensity to him that I was missing, he seemed to quickly hide it. I felt a confusing mixture of curiosity and the need to run as fast as possible in the opposite direction. Despite his relaxed mannerisms, my instincts told me he was extremely dangerous.

“N-no,” Briar spoke up and offered me a meaningful look. “She’s crying. Let her go. Now.”

If I hadn’t been so overwhelmed, I would have been shocked by the protectiveness from my friends—I’d never experienced that before.

Oz made a frustrated noise and I looked up at him, finding his eyes darkening with frustration as if willing me to explain the situation to my friends. But he didn’t truly mean that—that would require me to reveal both of our backgrounds... Even though he didn’t know mine fully, he knew I’d killed others. A lot of others.

“You’re not wrong, she is crying...” A hand wrapped around my hair and tugged slightly, a growl slipping from my throat as I looked up into the fourth

man's gaze. The one that had smeared blood on my face and throat, his eyes dancing with an almost manic light in comparison to Oz. They were two different sides of the same coin, and I was starting to realize that maybe I was in over my head, something that had never happened before. "...And now she is not."

"Let go of me."

Something about his words and the challenge there had me realizing this needed to end. *All of this*. My voice was hard, and Cage's gaze jumped with interest that I didn't look into. With a firm push to Oz's chest, I tugged from Cage's grip and walked past the four of them, their aggression seeming to dip in intensity, replaced by something more cautious...as if realizing they couldn't actually keep me there. I mean, it was true—they couldn't.

I turned to face them after distancing myself a few feet, enough to breathe, turning around to see them in their full glory. My attention was snagged by Cage. *A blood witch*. His face was filled with amusement and entertainment, his olive skin tone practically shimmering with power and his eyes a sparkling crimson, which was obviously attached to his magic. Magic that didn't feel normal or natural.

The entire basis of magic was its connection to life. It was why dark magic so drastically contrasted it, being powered by death. It was why blessed affinities, like shadow, blood, and lunar, were all fueled by elements of nature and could manipulate aspects of an individual's magic, body, and mind respectively. It was even why the unblessed still had a strong affinity for nature, despite not having a blessed affinity. Because of this, I was very well aware of what 'normal or natural' felt like, and Cage wasn't it. No, there was something very different about the man.

There was a lot I wanted to say, but I looked back at my friends, finding them closer than I had thought. "I'm going to get out of here for a bit. Want to meet for dinner—"

"Not a smart idea," Grimshaw interrupted, his light tone not matched by the frustration in his gaze.

Ignoring him, I kept my focus on them and nodded towards the large set of doors our classmates had fled to. "You guys should go inside."

"Not without you," Odessa argued.

"I promise I'm fine, I'm about to leave," I said sincerely as Lavinia looked between the four men and myself before seeming to come to a decision.

“Dinner,” she agreed. Briar looked frustrated as Lavinia urged both of them out of the pavilion, leaving me with the nut jobs that had ruined my lunch.

I turned back towards the men, not liking how everyone had stared at them in objective fear. “I’m pretty sure it’s more than a smart idea, Grimshaw. I don’t want anything to do with this. Stay away from my friends and leave my classmates alone. This is your only warning.”

It was all the energy I had left. I left the pavilion, slipping out the opposite way my friends had gone, hoping the men wouldn’t follow as I gathered my shadow magic in a small burst and used it to transport myself. Luckily, no one was there to witness it, because trying to explain my ability to do so would have been difficult. Almost immediately, once away from the intensity of those men, I felt relief soar through my body as I let my magic guide me to a new location.

My back hit the hard ground as I landed on a cold hard surface, a sound catching in my throat as I rolled over onto my stomach and pushed back, looking around. I was in an empty hallway. The open arches looked down on the back of the grounds, making me exhale in relief. I slid down against the rough stones of the walls and put my head down, stringing my hands through my hair.

I was so fucked. Not only with Oz, but all of them. I had no idea how to handle men like this...well, besides kill them. Of course my magic was completely against that concept.

I wasn't positive how long I sat there, the wave of emotional exhaustion threatening to topple me over, but when my stomach literally growled, I realized it was most likely dinner time. As it was, I had barely eaten at our late lunch after touring campus, all worked up over Grimshaw, so now I was ridiculously hungry. It was odd because I still wasn’t used to eating as much food as I did, but it had made a marked difference on me. I was still thin, but the places where I’d been able to see bone before were filled out, and I was far healthier-looking than before.

Standing with a groan, I began walking down the hall towards a large staircase. Apparently I’d been in an observation space of some kind. I looked around, noticing there were large pieces of framed parchment hanging near the stairs, and I paused to look them over.

*Interesting.*

I wasn’t positive, but it almost looked like old spells. They weren’t in any

language that I recognized; it almost looked ancient. I brought my hand up to touch one of the framed pieces of paper, but a sound caught my attention, drawing my gaze downwards. *Students, and lots of them.*

They seemed relatively upbeat and were all headed to the left as they passed underneath the staircase. I thought back to the tour we had received today and realized they were heading towards the dining hall, which was perfect. I bounded down the stairs easily, passing almost four floors. I was fantastic with directions, but even I felt a bit overwhelmed by everything on this campus.

I looked forward to exploring it tomorrow though.

As I reached the large doors of the dining hall, I felt eyes turn towards me. I didn't move to put my hood up and instead looked around for my friends. For a minute I wondered if they weren't here yet, but then I caught sight of a table towards the front of the room and to the side. I smiled, realizing that all three of them were there, and walked towards them eagerly...until I realized who was sitting nearby.

Now, it didn't surprise me that people feared the four men who had disrupted my lunch today. I mean, they were objectively intimidating. But the table they sat at, which happened to be only two away from mine, was completely cleared to about ten feet on each side. Almost immediately upon entering, Oz's violet gaze found mine, and a shiver broke out on my skin at the heat there. I didn't understand if the man was mad at me or something else, but he had my skin lighting up and my center clenching.

I could have expected a lot from this school, but not that. Not him.

"Deva!" Lavinia called with a big smile, not taking note of the guys. I did briefly notice Odessa's new...friends? They were sitting a few tables away as well, not seemingly intimidated by the four psychos that were now all staring at me.

I walked towards my friends, refusing to give the guys any attention. I needed to eat before dealing with them. Grabbing the fourth chair, I sat down as all my friends offered me various looks of amusement and concern.

I exhaled and ran a hand over my face. "Before you ask, *no*, I have no idea who they are, and more so...I have no idea what is going on today."

"I know," Lavinia whispered. "Girl, you literally ignored Dylan and Kazimir. And now hotties one through...well, five if you include Alek, are literally invading your life. It's sort of awesome."

I narrowed my eyes at her, and Odessa scoffed.

“No, it’s not—” she began to argue, clearly on edge about her own situation.

“Nope.” Briar wagged her finger at our friend. “You just spent hours with your three lover boys, so don’t even bother denying the awesome-ness of your harem.”

Harem? Was that what we were calling it? Somehow I didn’t think I was the right person for a harem of men. I could barely keep control of myself in an attempt of normality most days, let alone five *more than* unhinged individuals.

“I’m hungry,” I lamented with a sigh, wanting to change course. The last thing I needed to talk about was the insanity that these men had brought into my life.

“Oh, you’ll love this then, no need to wait for them to come around.” Odessa grinned and looked down at her plate of food. “Pineapple.”

“Is that a safe word—*holy shit*.” Lavinia’s mouth dropped open as pineapple appeared in front of her, cut into perfect cubes for consumption.

“You can make food appear out of nowhere, and you pick *fruit*?” I questioned, offering her an amused brow.

“Queso!” Lavinia chirped, and my eyes widened as a bowl of steaming hot amazing-ness appeared in front of her.

“I’m going to get so fat,” Briar mumbled, looking on in awe.

I couldn’t help but smile at their lighthearted nature, and after speaking my own meal into existence, I began to eat. Of course, I didn’t forget the others were in the dining hall—how could I when I could feel their eyes and charged energy filling the space at all times? Lucky for them, they left me to my food, and when I finished, I sat back with a small groan and closed my eyes.

“Why is everyone staring at us?” Briar asked softly.

I snapped my gaze open to find the entire room’s eyes on us, and when I felt a pair of hands smooth over my shoulders, I fought the urge to react defensively. Instead I looked up to find Cage standing there, looking far too amused.

“Cage,” I sighed. “It’s like you want to lose your hands.”

“I love you saying my name,” he admitted, flashing me a smile. “Although my full name is Micajah. I usually hate it, but I have no doubt I would love it on your lips.”

“Fates,” I swore, turning in my seat to look up at him fully. “What do you



want?”

“Me?” He offered me an innocent look while crouching down. “I was just voted the least likely to piss you off, so I am here to make sure you’re okay.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, seeing the truth on his face, and I began to wonder what I was getting myself into with this guy. I didn’t buy his entire lighthearted psycho act. I mean, I think he was psychotic. Dangerous, also. I knew this man was far from harmless, but there was also something comforting about him. A depth and soothing energy that wrapped around me like a trap I would never see coming. I didn’t think he wanted to hurt me or even to insist on some deep intense moment right now... No, he seemed pretty damn content to just sit here talking to me.

Which was far more dangerous to me.

“But because of you, people are staring,” I pointed out. “Which doesn’t make me happy.”

His eyes flashed as he looked around before moving his head closer to mine, something that was fairly easy because despite being crouched, we were eye level.

“No, they are waiting to see if I decide to kill you.” He chuckled softly, catching my chin as I tried to pull away. “No worries, Deva, I have no intention of killing you. But if the staring bothers you, we can go back to my dorm and cuddle.”

Oh man, this guy was so over the top.

“I am not getting in bed with you. Ever.” Probably.

“Why not?” He frowned. “I’m a fantastic cuddler.”

I fought back the weird surge of jealousy and offered him a dry look. “Yeah? Lots of girls tell you that?”

His smile grew. “Nah, baby, just my cat.”

“You have a cat?” I asked curiously, taken off guard by his words as my jealousy cooled completely.

I’d never owned a pet before. I wasn’t fantastic at keeping things ‘not dead,’ but I loved cats, and I’m sure one day I could try to own a pet of my own. Coming home to someone everyday who was thrilled to see you sounded amazing. I felt my thoughts pause on that—*fates*, I sounded so desperate.

“Magus? Oh yeah, he’s my familiar and a total piece of work, but he loves cuddling.”

I nibbled my lip, glad my friends were talking instead of listening in,

feeling a bit more vulnerable around him than normal. “I’ve never had a pet before. Does everyone get a familiar?”

His gaze ran over my face with interest. “How much do you know about the academy?”

I swallowed, feeling a bit embarrassed. “Not much. I didn’t think I would get in.”

He nodded and let go of my jaw, grasping my fingers and lightly brushing his lips against them. “Here is what we will do—tomorrow, after class, I will give you one of my famous campus tours—”

“Famous?”

“Yes, famously horrible. Killed several people on them.” He chuckled and then continued, “That way we will make sure you know your way around here perfectly, and I promise I won’t let any of those assholes bother you.”

“Aren’t those ‘assholes’ your friends?”

“Oh yes.” He nodded seriously and then smirked. “Still assholes, and I can tell you were about one minute away from killing them today, so here I am making sure that neither they nor you end up dead. I feel like being such a good peacekeeper should earn me brownie points...” He offered me a teasing look as if I would agree with him.

I rolled my eyes and sat back in my chair. “I *may* have overreacted, just running like that. They didn’t do anything wrong... Well, I mean, Grim did hurt that one jerk, but he was an ass earlier.”

I wasn’t positive I actually believed I overreacted, but my insecurity with the norm of social interactions had me feeling a bit unsure. Maybe I had been silly. Maybe it was normal for witches to be so...overbearing?

“See? It’s like he knew,” Cage murmured before his crimson gaze turned serious. “Listen, I know they are a lot. I won’t lie to you—that won’t stop. But I’ll be here if you need to get away from them. I promise.”

I examined his face and saw the truth there. I didn’t think he was lying, but the man was far from innocent—he had drawn on me with blood. Blood that was still on me...and that made sense why everyone was staring at me.  
*Fates.*

Against my better judgment, and maybe because I was tired, I nodded and squeezed his hand, making a deal in my head to give him a small chance.

I should have known that was a bad idea.

# 9

## ALEKSANDER

*How much longer did I wait?*

I paced, feeling hyper-attentive to every sound outside of Deva's dorm room as I awaited her arrival. It had been eight hours and six minutes since seeing her last, and it felt far longer than that—it felt nearly as extensive as the time I'd been forced to wait this previous summer. That had been torture in its own right, and all I'd experienced at that point was meeting the gaze of moonlit eyes from across the room.

Now it was different. Now I had felt her touch. Felt the experience of having her in my arms...and I wanted more.

Unfortunately, some things couldn't be put off, even if my heart strongly disagreed. In fact, the only part of me that was still focused on the mission at hand was my head. My soul, my heart, my body—they all wanted Deva. Only Deva.

Despite the wealth I'd been born into, my life had been filled with darkness and depravity, hidden behind silk screens. Something I'd accepted. Something I'd kept away from even those of moderate importance in my life. I had no expectations for my life—after all, it had ended several times over at this point, so was it even mine? No, it wasn't.

Because of that, the last thing I had ever expected, the last thing I could have ever hoped for, was the gorgeous being of a woman to meet my gaze from across the room this past June. I'd been struck, hard, unable to breathe and unable to focus on anything but the unbending need to touch her.

To claim her.

My magic had never connected to anyone, and I knew almost instantly that Deva was special. I just hadn't realized how special until I crashed into

her while trying to avoid my father. The minute I'd touched her, everything snapped together at once, and it became startlingly clear why we felt a connection. My heart, for the first time in years, had beat loud and solidly in my chest. With both horror and anguish, I realized the two of us were ripped from the same cloth, made of the same dark, disgusting magic that should have never been thrust upon us. But you didn't get to pick your fate, you just had to accept it and survive.

Maybe there could be more than that.

I shook my head at that concept—men like me didn't get anything else. Which is why I shouldn't have been here in the first place. I should have kept watch from the shadows—it would have been the smart thing to do. The *right* thing to do, especially for her. But I couldn't resist her siren call, and I knew now that she felt a similar connection. I didn't think the softness she stared at me with was one that was normal for her, and it only encouraged the part of me that hoped for something more. For her.

Deva was such a complex and beautiful creature. She was made of wild dark magic and a passion that vibrated under her skin that told me there was dangerous energy waiting to be unleashed. But something had severed her ability to harness it at will, and she had to be the one to find it and revive it within her. I wanted to show her how to do that; I wanted to show her how to live again. But how could I do that when I dealt with the exact same damn problem?

It didn't help that I knew I wouldn't be able to explain why I'd disappeared today, let alone why I'd disappeared all summer. I had never felt bad about keeping my life a secret, but now I felt a surge of guilt. I wanted to explain everything to Deva and promise her that I would protect her from the darkness in this world. I knew she probably didn't want that, but it wouldn't stop me from doing it. It wouldn't stop me from making sure that she got to have the new start she was desperately looking for.

Suddenly, a sound drew my attention to the door, excited to not only see Deva but to see her reaction to her new home.

I knew Deva hadn't been back to her dorm yet. Her trunk sat unpacked, and her bed was untouched. It wasn't a bad room, but she deserved more, and I had already locked the door to the common area that she would be sharing with her three new friends—when she came back, I wanted her completely to myself. I would never have enough time with her, and I just needed to be in her presence. My body tensed as I felt magic surge against the door,

recognizing Deva's magic signature, before allowing her to open the door. I was hoping she wouldn't think too much about how I had managed to gain entrance into her private quarters.

Almost immediately her eyes met mine, a softness invading her gaze... but no surprise, making me realize she had sensed me in here. I had no idea how, but it confirmed my suspicion that she was far more powerful than she let on, and she made it very clear as it was that she wasn't someone to be fucked with.

"Zaya," I breathed out as she closed the door and leaned against it. There was a faint trace of familiar magic on her skin, but it wasn't strong enough for me to focus on it. Instead I was completely entranced by how she seemed to fill the space with her sweet scent.

"Hey," she whispered softly, her eyes darting around the room while walking towards me. "I didn't expect you to be waiting here for me."

I knew she was looking around the stone-covered walls and dark wooden floors, the arched slanted ceiling focusing on a large fireplace that each room featured. I had lit the fire for her before she got back, the violet flames radiating a heat that pushed away the chill that filled the ancient building.

"I never planned to go the full day without seeing you," I admitted easily, watching her cheeks warm with a faint pink against her pale skin. "I didn't like leaving you earlier, especially while not feeling well."

Her gaze met mine as she drew her bottom lip in, standing only a foot away from me, if that. "About that... How did you know what I was going through? About my magic?"

I traced her features with my gaze, not liking the distance between us, as I tugged her forward against me. She let out a surprised noise but wrapped her arms around my waist, allowing me to bury my nose in her sweet-smelling hair. I knew she wanted an answer, but I honestly wasn't sure it was an answer that she'd be happy with.

"Alek?"

Her lips producing my name did something to me, and I found my cock hardening further as if personally summoned by her. I'd already been hard—just being in her presence did that to me—but the way she said my name... Hell, the way she did anything, was layered in seduction. Something she wasn't aware of.

Deva was a lot of things—completely confident in her lethal nature, for one—but I don't think the woman registered just how appealing she was. Just

how much her energy and magic begged to be pinned down.

I wanted to be the one to do that.

“Do you want the truth, *zaya*?”

“Always.”

Her voice was firm as I pulled back, cupping her jaw and seeing that she truly believed that. It didn't change that I didn't want to tell her. It didn't change that I knew I would freak her out because she was so desperately trying to push away from that part of her life, to bury it. With resignation, I stepped back, grabbing the back of my shirt and pulling it over my head.

“Oh—” Her voice sounded almost choked at me taking off my clothes, a small smile almost coasting my lips. I may have hated the scars on my body, but I loved how I could feel her looking at it. I tossed the shirt to the side and stepped closer to her, her elegant hands resting on my chest as if unsure of whether to pull me closer or push me away. I watched as her gaze moved across my scars, and her eyes began to widen.

I figured it wouldn't take long.

“I know because you and I are the same, Deva.” My voice grew thicker.

Her eyes flashed up to mine as her brow furrowed. “That's impossible.”

“It's not,” I murmured as I tapped into my magic, the accumulation of the torture I'd undergone lighting up my skin and revealing the ancient runes carved underneath. It wasn't something that happened naturally; it was a power you had to practice to tap into—just one more thing I wanted to show her.

Deva inhaled sharply as a tremble went over her, her entire body tense as she stared at my skin in what I knew was horror. Not at what she was seeing, but at the realization that I had undergone what she had.

“How?” She tried to pull back, her breathing uneven as she stared at me with panic. “How did that happen—have you known this entire time?”

“I knew my magic recognized something special in yours.” I kept my grip tight on her. “And when we touched, it was confirmed. My heart started beating for the first time in years, like your own. You and I are the same, Deva. It's a connection that wasn't supposed to occur, but it seems their experiments had a lot of unexpected side effects.”

My words seemed to freeze her as the panic seeped out just slightly, her hand moving over to the center of my chest where she laid it flat, feeling the thump of my heartbeat against her fingertips. Awe seemed to fill her before a darker emotion took over, making me worry she would pull away.

“Who did this to you?” Her eyes were filled with tears as she traced her fingers over the scars, looking furious and tormented, not pulling away.

“My father,” I responded immediately, blocking the abusive memories that tried to crowd my thoughts. “Not the same monster who hurt you, *zaya*, but one that lives by the same principles. One that believes that the end justifies the means, even if it means hurting your own son, to make a weapon that would purge this plane of all unblest witches.”

She met my gaze, swallowing hard. “Alek—”

“I won’t tell anyone,” I promised softly, her body shaking. “I would never put you in danger, *zaya*. I just need you to know you are not alone, that I can help you handle everything you are holding back.”

“I don’t want anything to do with it.” She swallowed hard.

“I know.” I exhaled and put my forehead to hers. “But it’s the biggest defensive measure you have, and the darkness will always be trailing behind you, Deva. You need to be able to protect yourself.”

Tears tracked down her cheeks. “This was supposed to be my fresh start.”

I closed my eyes in pain. “We have restarted our lives so many times, Deva. People like us don’t get normal. We just have to...live. That is the best we can hope for.”

Her knees broke at my words, and I cradled her against me as I carried her towards her large four-poster bed. I didn’t let her go as I kicked off my boots and laid her down, her gaze tormented, looking like she was going to completely phase out.

“*Nyet*.” My growled tone as I came over her had her jolting as she looked at me with anguish.

“No, what?”

“No, you don’t get to phase out on me,” I whispered. “This changes nothing about you being here. Nothing except that I will be here for you, for whatever you need, Deva.” It was a vow and promise.

Her fingers ran over my heart, and pleasure coated her features, able to feel the heartbeat far better than when we’d been standing. My own hand pressed gently against her chest, mimicking the movement. The steady beat had me feeling a surge of happiness. Her heart would always beat in my presence. It was a badge of honor to have such an effect on a woman like her.

“Your heart,” she whispered. “I thought...”

“Yours beats for me as well,” I reminded her.

“What does this mean?” Her voice was laced with uncertainty.

I cupped her face and examined it. “I think you know what it means.”

My gaze moved down to her lips, and when they parted, I met her gaze, seeing the need there. I didn't hesitate to surge forward and meet them in a hard, searing kiss. Her taste exploded against my lips, and I let out a deep growl that vibrated against her soft skin. Her touch tightened against my bare chest, and I felt everything go searing hot between us. Damn this woman—I had a feeling nothing would ever be a ‘simple kiss’ between us.

I ground against her, my cock pressing against her jean-covered center as a needy whine left her throat. Groaning at the way her nails bit into my skin as her legs wrapped around my waist, I tried to control the almost animalistic need I had to dominate this woman, to have all of her at once.

I pulled back after a second, the two of us out of breath as she stared at me with so much vulnerability I felt my heart shatter. I could see every emotion across her face, and it was beautiful. It was raw. Painful. But so damn real. This woman was going to destroy me, and I was going to willingly rip out my heart for her.





## DEVA

*“Deva.”*

*My name was whispered in a soft, almost prayer-like tone, making me feel instantly relaxed, a soft, soothing breeze running over my skin. I felt weightless, suspended completely, as a small smile slipped onto my lips. I knew—or at least I thought—I was in a dream, but I couldn’t completely tell. I just knew this felt different than my experiences with Grimshaw.*

*I didn’t feel in control in this situation, and instead of feeling fearful, I relaxed into it completely, wondering what it would bring.*

*“Deva.”*

*I frowned, the masculine tone harder this time as I tried to shift, realizing that there was nothing around me, nothing to anchor myself to. The odd sensation turned from peaceful to uncomfortable as my stomach tightened and my eyes flashed open—*

*Holy fuck.*

*As I said before, fear and I weren’t exactly acquaintances, but I could honestly admit that this made me far more than uneasy. I kept silent, despite wanting to let out a whimper, as I realized I was hanging in the air, suspended over a cavern. The rock was black and sharp, the skies a deep twilight as the cool breeze turned almost bitter. My breathing turned rough as the skin on the back of my neck prickled.*

*“There she is.” The voice was smooth and familiar, but something about it caused that primal part of me to tense in fear. No, there was something very wrong here.*

*“Where am I?” I demanded. I didn’t ask who was talking because there was a reason they hadn’t shown their face.*

*“Why?” The man chuckled.*

*Instead of responding, my eyes scanned across the cavern below. If I fell... I wouldn't be injured right? It was a dream, there was no way—*

*“Oh, it would hurt, Deva,” the man mused, a hot, large frame pressing against me from behind as my breath caught. I could feel magic surging through the space, and in the distance, lightning cracked in the sky, causing me to jolt. “But I bet you know all about traversing dreamscapes. It's a talent I heard you've been using a lot.”*

*I tried to turn, wanting to see who was talking to me, but my body didn't budge, the man chuckling again as a large hand slid over my throat, tightening his grip in a threatening manner. Heat exploded in my center, causing me to inhale sharply. My heart began to beat hard and rapidly, a weird surge going through my center as if a string snapped into place violently. I looked down, finding a golden forearm with lit up tattoos of a faint circular shape—*

I was flung out of the dream, the displacement instantly making me feel off. Not only because my dreams had been empty of Grimshaw for the first time in months, but because they had been filled with someone else. I felt fuzzy as I tried to recall the details of the dream, but the more I tried to pull at them, the more my head hurt.

I let out a groan as I finally gave up, relaxing back into the bed...and quickly realizing that there was a heavy shirtless body wrapped around me. What the hell?

My eyes opened and immediately my body tensed, unsure how to feel about someone holding me so possessively. Not only that, but my heart was beating so damn loud. It wasn't something I was used to yet, and I predicted I would never be used to it. It wasn't a bad feeling, not exactly...just unfamiliar and made me want to proceed with extreme caution.

My eyes moved around the space that was now my home, to distract from the hot shiver rolling across my skin. My dorm was beautiful and far different than the four-bedroom space I'd shared in Garnet Hall. Apparently, although I'd yet to see it, there was a common space that connected my friends and I—allowing us both privacy and still the ability to hang out easily. I wouldn't lie, the friendship, the connection to others outside of the insanity going on, made me feel grounded.

I closed my eyes and focused on the rainstorm battering against the window and thunder rumbling in the distance in the early morning instead of freaking out immediately, knowing my brain was just slow-moving and that I would have never gotten into bed with someone I didn't trust.

When I opened my eyes again, I noticed the fire had gone out, and while the sheets underneath were warm because of...Alek, the tops were cold to the touch.

Alek. He had slept over. I instantly relaxed further, recognizing that it was him in bed with me. I think I also realized at that moment that I trusted him, even if only a small amount.

Damn. I couldn't even take the moment to analyze how that happened.

I knew I needed to get up, and I really needed to untangle myself from the man that knew far too much about me, but that concept seemed... unappealing. Despite the fear aligned with him knowing so much, there was also comfort in it. I didn't have to hide who I was from him and what I'd gone through. Sure, I hadn't confirmed that he was aware of everything I'd done, but if he knew about the monster that had trained me, then he could have probably assumed.

My stomach turned, and I tried to sit up—only to be tugged back against a hard chest and an even harder cock. My eyes widened as desire flared in my stomach, my skin sparking with heat. I suddenly felt both overwhelmed and so extremely hot to the touch.

I didn't understand the surge of need that I felt with these men, I didn't understand how I could feel so much want and need for men I barely knew... five of them, at that.

Crap. When had I decided I was attracted to all five of them? This was very much a problem.

"Zaya." Alek's voice was rough. "I can hear you thinking."

"I can't help it," I whispered. "Everything feels different right now."

"The only thing that is different is that you aren't alone," he murmured, and my chest relaxed at his words, the tightness disappearing. I wanted to reject the idea...but exhaustion hit me hard at that thought. I was so damn tired of being alone. Would it be the worst thing in the world to have someone be there for me? For someone to be supportive?

Turning into the large man, I smoothed my hands over his scarred chest and let out a small exhale, looking up into his thickly lashed gaze that was filled with a sleepy heat. I drew my bottom lip into my mouth before

releasing it. “I’ve always been alone, Alek. I’m not sure that’s meant to change now.”

His gaze darkened while examining my expression, seeming to not like what he found there. “You can deny me from your bed, Deva. You can reject my touch. But you will never be alone again, even if it means I have to watch from the shadows.”

I didn’t want him to watch from the shadows though.

Before I could respond, there was a loud voice in the hallway—and my dorm door flew open. Almost immediately, magic filled the space and Alek cursed, my frame being rolled and placed behind him in a move that was so damn fast it shocked me. Not nearly as much as when Grimshaw strolled in with Cage...and Lazaro and Oz. *Oh wow*. Just talk about an invasion of privacy.

“See!” Cage offered me a rogue grin. “Told you she was in her room.”

“Alek,” I warned, but he didn’t seem concerned in the least as I tried to move around him. He stopped me easily, wrapping an arm around me and tugging me close. I watched Grimshaw observe the move with amusement before meeting my gaze.

“Well I’m hurt,” Grimshaw offered playfully, his eyes narrowed on me. He was being far too lax about this situation. Alek was as well, which meant shit was probably about to get worse.

“Why is that?” Lazaro mused by the fireplace.

Oz was staring at me, but I was doing my damn best to ignore him.

“I told her she would be in my bed by the end of last night, and instead she has another man in her bed,” he explained as Cage walked over, leaning next to me against the bed, looking far too chipper for this early in the morning.

“Maybe it’s because you suggested your bed instead of her own,” Alek offered, his eyes flashing with amusement. I watched him with wide eyes because there was a literal ghost of a smile on his lips. What the actual hell?

“Possible,” Grimshaw agreed and then sighed, offering me a look. “Just be glad it’s him and not anyone else—you would have one hell of a clean-up in here. DIA can be forgiving, but slaughtering another student? In the dorms? That may be a stretch.”

My mouth opened as I looked between both of them and then towards Oz. “Do... Do you guys know one another?”

Alek squeezed my waist and looked at my surprised expression.

“Unfortunately very well.”

“Oh,” I whispered and then sat back, moving out of Alek’s grasp as I looked at all five of them. Despite their easygoing attitudes this morning, I could tell they were watching me like a hawk, and I honestly had no idea what to make of the information I’d just received.

“Well...” I drew out, “I really don’t know what to make of all this, and I need to get ready for class...”

“Which is why we are here,” Lazaro said as he sat down in front of the fireplace.

“You didn’t think you would be going to class alone, did you?” Cage chuckled.

“I did,” I murmured and then shook my head, sliding out of bed and narrowing my gaze at Alek. “I can’t be mad at you for not telling me you knew them—”

Alek was in my space almost immediately, slamming his lips against me, causing my knees to nearly break as I gripped onto him. When he pulled back, he offered me a smile. “Don’t be upset, *zaya*. I hadn’t realized you knew them either. Although I shouldn’t be surprised—you attract all kinds of trouble.”

He said it in such a sweet tone I couldn’t even be mad... But he wasn’t wrong.

“I lied, I may kill him,” Grimshaw growled.

“No you won’t,” Lazaro countered.

“Yeah, that wouldn’t be okay.” Cage laid back on my bed. “Damn, I am seeing the appeal of Deva’s bed. It smells amazing.”

“Are you...” I shook my head as he pulled the pillow I’d been laying on, hugged it to him, and offered me a wide-eyed innocent look that had me retreating slightly. “This is so damn weird.”

“Go get ready, starlight,” Oz finally spoke, his voice rough. “Or else you’re going to find yourself back in bed and not in class—”

I slammed the bathroom door shut as I cursed, irritated with myself for running like a little mouse. But how was I supposed to react when Oz’s threat literally made my body break out into shivers?

Deciding I didn’t have the mental capacity to deal with them yet, I turned on the shower that filled the entire corner of the bathroom suite. The rain shower head immediately produced hot water, and after locking the door, I stripped off the clothes I’d fallen asleep in last night, glad that our closet was

attached inside of the bathroom through a small hallway instead of in the bedroom. Else I would be sitting in here all day, because I was not going out there in a towel.

I was not going to even go near that can of worms, let alone open it. *Right. Says the girl that has already kissed two of them and came because of rubbing against Grimshaw.* Nope. No can of worms being opened here.

I didn't wash my hair after having done so yesterday and instead scrubbed my face and body, breathing in the warm steam and attempting to relax. When I finally felt like I'd spent just a bit too much time in the shower, I got out and dried off, trying not to think about the men in the other room. I couldn't help but look at my scarred body in the mirror, feeling emotion catch in my throat. *What would they see?* I had never cared about the male eye and opinion—in fact, I avoided it at all costs—but I found myself wishing I knew what they would think, and that was absolutely unacceptable.

Walking into the closet where my trunk was now, I realized all my clothes had been hung and my uniform arranged out for me. Hadn't it been in my room last night? Had Alek...had he put away my clothes for me? I didn't know if I found that sweet or a bit weird. Maybe both. More the first and less the latter, if we were being honest.

I easily slid on a pair of dark blue panties and a matching bra, trying to not think about him putting those away, before eyeing the piece of clothing I was supposed to wear for class. Unfortunately, it did not include a pair of pants, which broke so many of my 'rules' for myself. Pants were the shit, and anyone who wore anything differently, voluntarily, had problems. Just a humble opinion.

I suppose one positive thing was that outside of the mandatory wool school skirt that was a plaid navy, black, and silver, we could wear whatever arrangement of coats, sweaters, tights, and shoes we wanted. I sighed, pulling on the skirt, and then grabbed a black turtleneck that hung a bit loose around my waist until I tucked it in the front. Finding a pair of black thigh-high socks, I covered my legs as much as possible and paired them with black ankle boots. Finally, I slipped on an oversized gray wool jacket and turned towards the mirror.

Tilting my head in curiosity, I realized that I didn't look half bad. I undid my braids and brushed out my hair with my fingers, allowing it to fall around my waist and highlight my bare but flushed face. I felt a weird twinge of nervousness and excitement, mostly associated with the men in the next

room. Which was why I just needed to get out there and not focus on whatever nonsense and trouble my emotions were getting me into.

Walking back through the bathroom, I checked my reflection one more time and opened the door. I was surprised to find that I hadn't noticed the uniforms the boys were wearing, but the way they were standing around talking drew my attention to them completely. It also highlighted that Alek not only knew these men but was friends with them.

With the exception of him, the rest of the guys were in dark dress pants and dress shirts with expensive leather shoes. I tilted my head, taking note that Grimshaw, once again, seemed to have an aversion to ties, the material hanging loose around his neck. Cage's tie was nowhere in sight—completely unsurprising—and Lazaro's was fitted normally. Oz though... My gaze moved over to the man who was staring at me, his large frame fitted with a suit coat. I felt heat flash over me as he curled a finger as if summoning me.

I was crossing the room before I could stop myself, much to my dismay, hating that it took that little. When I appeared in front of him, he leaned forward, and my pulse jumped, pounding loud in my ears as he adjusted my sock slightly, his fingers sliding against my thigh. His eyes moved up my body before tugging me forward so that I was on his lap, pressed into his frame.

"You look beautiful." He pressed a kiss to my shoulder, my cheeks turning bright pink. I had never hated being so pale in my life as I did around these men.

"Fuck," Grimshaw cursed, pulling my attention as he looked over my outfit.

"What?" I asked softly, feeling defensive at wondering about his opinion.

Cage chuckled. "Ignore him—he's just pissed you are wearing a skirt."

"It's the uniform..." I drew out as Lazaro chuckled, but the sound was strained. When I looked over at him, his gaze was on the floor, refusing to meet my own. I really felt like the man didn't like me. It was beyond confusing, truth be told. At the same time, that chuckle... It was so familiar. Had I heard him laugh before? I must have. Right?

"Shit, I need to get ready," Alek muttered, approaching me and leaning down to press a kiss to my forehead. "I'll see you after breakfast, *zaya*. Be good."

"Don't leave me with them!" I squeaked out as he grabbed his shirt and tugged it over his head, hiding his amazing muscles as he left, not feeling bad



for me in the least.

“Wait...” I looked at all of them. “Did he say breakfast?”

“Yep.” Lazaro stood, still not meeting my gaze. “You’re coming to breakfast with us.”

Why did I find it so frustrating that he wouldn’t look at me?

“How about not?” I offered.

“Somewhat necessary,” Oz mused, making me stand from where I’d been rather relaxed on his lap.

I walked over to the large window seat and grabbed the leather satchel I’d purchased, the leather-bound notebooks inside making it heavy over my shoulder as I met their gazes. I couldn’t ignore the heat there, as much as I wanted to. I had no idea what was going on, not just with Alek and me, but all of them...and I wasn’t positive why I was allowing this to continue. But I was, and instead of telling them to fuck off, I asked the next question.

“Why?” I demanded.

“You’re hungry, aren’t you?” Lazaro asked, his nickel-shaded gaze finally meeting mine. I was left breathless for just a moment, seeing an intensity of emotions that hadn’t been there yesterday...before they were just gone.

“I meant more about going to breakfast with—”

“Us,” Grimshaw finished for me, offering me a wicked grin as Cage chuckled. I loved and hated his laugh. I loved it because the sound was almost intoxicating, but I hated it because I could practically hear his intention.

They weren’t going to let this day go by without making a point. A large one, at that.

“That’s the point, Deva. We want everyone to know you are with us.”

With his statement, any chance of a normal first day was completely extinguished.



## DEVA

“Everyone is staring at us,” I murmured, staring down at my breakfast plate which was barely touched. I kept hoping that my friends would show up and ease the tension I felt in the room. Not that anyone else noticed it—no, the four men around me seemed completely relaxed and were joking around as if it was any other Monday morning in a crowded academy cafeteria.

I thought I’d been used to the attention at Garnet Hall... but with these men? It was on a different level.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it,” Cage assured, squeezing my shoulder from where he had his large arm wrapped around the back of my chair. I scowled at the offending hand, which just had Grimshaw making an amused sound.

“It’s probably because you are touching me,” I warned the blood witch.

“Something they should get used to,” Oz pointed out, making me narrow my eyes.

What did that mean? That Cage would be touching me more? Or that he planned to as well? I really needed to be alone with Oz to straighten out my feelings for him, but I also felt like that was a horrible idea.

Once the man touched me, I was putty in his hands.

“You have five minutes left. Ignore them and eat,” Lazaro demanded softly.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I bit out, not liking his tone. His eyes flashed with something before turning almost liquid and relaxed. I swallowed as he turned in his seat, his large frame blocking out pretty much anything else as he dipped his head and examined my expression.

There was a part of me, much like how I felt about Grimshaw’s lethal and

almost uncontrollable side, that wanted to pull at Lazaro. I could feel there was more that he wasn't showing me. Unfortunately, I felt like if I kept pushing at it, he would find me more annoying than he already did. It was something I should crave since he was such a bossy bastard, but instead the idea bothered me. I wasn't caffeinated enough to examine why.

"I wasn't set on telling you what to do, little thief," Lazaro spoke easily, but his voice held a thread of dominance that sparked my own magic. "But if you're going to be a brat about it, I'll tie your ass to this chair until you eat your breakfast."

My mouth dropped open. "I'm sorry, what did you just—"

His finger slid against my lips, causing me to jerk back. The electricity the small touch caused had my heart beating hard, Lazaro's eyes flashing with humor. "Don't make me tell you again."

"Screw you," I hissed.

He chuckled softly, turning back in his chair. "You don't want that, Deva."

*I hadn't meant literally.*

My skin flushed hotly as I looked back down at my food, feeling a weird flash of embarrassment. Not only because of the strong reaction to him, but also because...well, he literally called me a 'thief.' While his tone hadn't exactly been accusatory, I felt shame for what my life had included before this. It was clear, while they hadn't talked about it, that they knew I'd been the one to take the moonstone. Of course they knew—it was what they were really after, at the end of the day.

Why did that concept bother me so much?

Also, if Lazaro looked down on stealing, I couldn't imagine what he would think about me stealing lives. I zoned out, staring at the plate in front of me as I realized that Alek could tell them, if he hadn't already, and that wasn't something I could afford.

Alek may be an exception to my normal... Hell, all of these men were. My heart only beat for them, and while I didn't know what it meant, I could tell it meant something important. But that didn't change that their soft affection would change all too fast once they realized who I was and what I was capable of.

"Deva."

My head snapped up as I realized that Oz was calling my name. My gaze moved towards where he sat across from me, his eyes running over my

expression with concern.

“I need to go.” I grabbed my bag and stood up, catching Cage off guard as he grunted, his arm being flung back to him. I slipped away from the table and kept my head down, knowing that I needed to avoid these men at all costs. Nothing good would come from entertaining whatever shit they thought this was between us. At the end of the day, it didn’t really matter.

“Little jaguar—”

I swung around, students filling the space around us, as Grimshaw stopped behind me, looking concerned. “What the hell is going on?”

I stepped closer to him and spoke quietly. “I need you to leave me alone. Please.”

My voice at the end was tipped with almost a plea, and I could see it surprised him because, for just a moment, he simply stared at me. I took a step back, and his gaze darted down to it in a predatory moment before looking back up at me with what could only be described as heat and possession.

“No.”

I swallowed and turned away, walking towards my first class. I didn’t know the way perfectly, but I knew the general direction, and at this point I just needed to escape this confusion. The students seemed to part for me, and by the time I had reached a heavy wooden door I recognized from the tour, I felt relief filter through me. I could hide in here. I could completely hide away in here—

“Watch it, Deva.” Kazimir’s voice sounded from behind me. I stepped to the side, not wanting to deal with his shit. He scoffed and walked past me into the room, my entire class year filtering in. As eyes turned towards me, I realized there was a large downside to this place. I would never, ever, be alone.

“Deva!” Lavinia called out. I snapped my head to the top of the room, breathing out a sigh of relief to find my three friends sitting at the top of the class section. I walked up the stairs slowly, noticing that the room had a rather warm and comforting feeling that floated through it, making me want to curl up. Which was probably going to get me in trouble, because the exhaustion from yesterday was catching up to me despite the coffee I’d sipped on while sitting with the boys.

“Morning.” I sat down, and immediately Odessa was offering me a searching look.

“You weren’t in your room,” she commented.

I sighed. “I left early for breakfast.”

“And who was in your room last night?” Briar offered a knowing smile.

Wonderful. Literally zero privacy. I didn’t even want to ask how she knew that.

“Alek. It was totally Alek,” Lavinia decided.

“Why do you think that?” I offered, finding her assumption amusing.

Her eyes sparkled and nodded towards the front of the room. I turned to find the man in question staring up at me as his eyes heated. He walked up the stairs slowly, his shirt unbuttoned at the top without a tie, showing off his tattoos that peeked out. He had no bag with him, and it felt like he was only here for me despite that clearly not being true.

“That,” Lavinia pointed out. “That’s why.”

The look he was giving me made it very obvious that there was something between us, and instead of fighting it or possibly rejecting him, I sat there staring at him.

I couldn’t explain the softness I felt for the dangerous man, but I wanted to curl up on his lap. I wanted to feel his hands on me. I very much wanted that from the other four, but I also was resisting that connection because of the heavy secrets I carried. I couldn’t do that with Alek—he already knew. He at least partly knew the monster that I was.

Without asking, he took the desk to my right and intertwined our fingers on top of my desk, my friends all staring at me and waiting for an explanation. I turned my head and offered a shrug.

“You can’t just shrug about that,” Odessa hissed. “What is going on?”

“We are...” I swallowed, not knowing how to phrase it.

“She’s mine,” Alek said easily. “*Zaya* is mine, and I’m hers.”

“Oh.” Briar’s eyes went wide.

“Fates,” Odessa groaned.

“*Zaya*?” Lavinia tilted her head and smiled. “Bunny? I would never picture you as a bunny—”

“Is that what that means?” I asked him sincerely.

Alek offered a hum of agreement, and I tilted my head, ignoring my friends talking behind me, wanting to know more. “Why do you call me that?”

“Because you are fast to run when you’re scared.” He said it like it wasn’t a bad thing. “Your survival instincts demand it after everything you’ve been

through.”

He turned and brought his lips close, the two of us nearly curled up together. I shivered at the way I could feel his minty breath run over me as he continued, “But more than that, *zaya*, it’s because I want to sweep in like a predator and take a bite out of you. I want to pin you to the ground and take everything you have to give. I want to devour you like a wolf would devour a rabbit.”

*Shit.* I whimpered and felt my legs press together. I tried to focus on keeping my reaction as neutral as possible, but when he brushed his lips against my cheekbone, I felt my skin break out into shivers and my nipples harden, sending a rush of desire over me.

“Alek.” My voice was barely a whisper.

He pulled back slightly, but before he could respond, a door slammed shut and jolted me away, my head snapping to the front of the room. Alek let out a low rumble but sat back, his hand sliding possessively over my thigh as I exhaled shakily, trying not to overthink how close I had been to forgetting there were others here.

“Welcome to day one at Dark Imaginarium Academy!” I blinked, trying to not be overwhelmed by the explosion of colors that was the woman at the front of the room. I wasn’t positive what I’d expected our professors to be like, but this woman was the exact opposite. I loved it.

“I am Mrs. Moonscar,” she announced as she began handing packets to the students in the front row, who each took one before passing the stack back.

The lecture hall was five rows of five desks, clearly suited to singular class size, and the desks were old and wooden, creaking under my weight. Mrs. Moonscar’s desk up front was worn, matching the state of the chalkboard behind her. This place had probably been here since the start of the academy, and the arched stone ceiling and cathedral windows only solidified that concept.

This was why the small curvy woman with bright pink hair and a lime green dress with purple leggings and sneakers seemed to stand out so extremely. Her friendly smile told me that she didn’t give a fuck about that though, and the confident manner in which she held herself made me wonder just how long this woman had been around. She had an ease to everything she did, and despite Dylan clearly making snide comments with his friends, she seemed to barely notice them.

Then again, Dylan didn't exactly have a right to be making fun of anyone since he was sporting cuts on his body from yesterday. I found myself withholding a smile as he caught my gaze and glared, clearly still pissed about Grimshaw's actions. I'd thought I would feel guilty after seeing him, but somehow I'd justified it in my head. Not because of Grimshaw's reasoning—no, the man was clearly insane—but because in my mind, Dylan was the perfect example of 'the problem'. The problem? Male witches not understanding that the world didn't revolve around them.

Although, I was starting to think that not all male witches were like that...

"As you know, this is *Dark Imaginarium Academy History & Basics*," Mrs. Moonscar continued, looking around at all of us with a genuine smile. "We will spend the semester, two times a week, talking about the basics of how the academy functions within our plane of existence and where this institution came from as a whole."

Something that I had felt like we had covered extensively over the summer...but apparently not? Honestly, it didn't surprise me that there was more to know, and I looked forward to that because, after a while, the structure of our plane of existence grew to be rather boring to learn about. At the end of the day, it seemed to come down to separation—everyone stayed to their own people and their own kind.

The supernatural community, magic users and beings, existed on Praeditus. It was a not-so-small plane of existence that not only held Dark Imaginarium Academy at its center, but was surrounded by territories for every type of magical being we knew to exist: demigods, shifters, vampires, demons, fae, and witches. Like I said, from what I could tell from Carmina—and maybe it was different from other places—it seemed that it was only a nice place to live if you had money. Then again, maybe witches were just snobs who enjoyed keeping wealth in the purity of their lines... *Yeah*, actually that sounded about right.

We weren't the only plane of existence though. No, above us existed Divinus, the home to the gods and goddesses that the fates seemed to have destined to rule above us. Not much was known about it, and honestly, I think I preferred it that way. I'd never met a god or goddess, but from what I heard, they were dicks. The thing that separated us from them? Veils. This in-between energy source was only accessed through portals, and because they were such exclusive things, only the powerful had access to use them, like



our headmaster.

As I was handed a packet that was passed up the rows, I was instantly met with a graphic that showed the layers of planes of existence. My finger traced Hell at the very bottom. It was a place I'd always wanted to visit, home to demons and some of the most feared rulers within our universe. While humans had a large misconception of Hell because of their self-created faith systems, it was actually a really nice place. It just happened to be placed lower physically in our universe than where they were, which somehow made it bad?

I frowned, bringing my finger over the blank space of the 'veil' between the two to land on Ordinarius. *The humans*. The non-magic users. I shook my head, wondering how they functioned without magic when it felt like such an ingrained part of my being. Then again, I bet shifters often thought that of those of us who couldn't shift, especially when they had such a close connection with their animal forms.

"Have you ever been?" Alek asked easily, his voice smooth. I looked up to see him watching me with interest. I smiled, shaking my head.

"No, have you?"

He seemed to hesitate for a minute before sighing. "Yes, I spent four years in Moscow from the age of eleven... My father had needed to leave here for some time to lay low."

I nodded in understanding as pain flashed across his face, knowing without him saying a word the heavy burden that memories could cause.

I could hear Mrs. Moonscar talking, but I was still focused on Alek and the way his eyes seemed to intensify the longer he stared at me. There was something I needed to say to him. I needed to express to him, right this moment, this intensity between us...but I just didn't know how. I didn't know how to tell him what I felt for him because, after such a short amount of time, it made no damn sense.

"Alright! Now that those are passed out, I need each of you to come to grab a textbook and begin reading chapter one. At the end of the class period, we will have a quiz..."

Her words became muffled as a slip of panic hit me. A quiz? Already? That nervous insecurity about being good enough to be here slammed into me, but before I could get too worked up, Alek grabbed my jaw lightly.

"Deva." I met his gaze as he offered me a knowing look. "Let's go get your book. You're going to be perfectly fine. You got into the academy and

far exceeded any academic standards expected of your level.”

“How do you know that?” I murmured.

His ears turned pink. “The summer was very long... I may have hacked into the academy’s system to look in your files.”

My smile grew as I stood up and squeezed his hand so he would follow me towards the front of the room. His words should have bothered me—especially his stalker-ish tendencies—but instead they just made me smile.

Was it the worst thing in the world to have a stalker like Alek?

Definitely not.



## DEVA

*I felt him before I saw him.*

That wasn't particularly unusual though; it had been that way from the start with Oz. It had been almost a magnetic connection, and as I stood in the door of the classroom, I remembered being startled when I first met him—because my heart had beat. It didn't last, of course—it was only once, but it had caught me off guard and had given me hope that maybe the hold my past had was fading.

Now, though... Now I knew it was something different that had to do with these men. They were the largest factor at play here. I just didn't understand the game we were in.

I stood completely still, my gaze moving over the large room in front of me, as my memories took me to a very different place. Not one where I was walking into my *Deadly Potions* class that was for seniors. A class I'd only tested into because of everything I'd been trained to make as a child. A class I'd been dropped at by Alek after he had held my hand throughout our first class and then left a kiss in the middle of my forehead.

No, instead I was somewhere far different, somewhere far darker...

*My stomach clenched in pain as I looked around the dark alleyway I'd slipped into. There was trash littered throughout, and I knew it was the only possible place I would be able to get a meal from. I didn't even feel ashamed anymore.*

*I moved quietly through the space, into the depth of darkness, the cold*

winds of winter hitting me harshly across the face. It was because of the wind tunnel I was in that I didn't hear that someone was in the alley with me until I turned slightly, finding a large frame crouched over...a body.

Suddenly, the scent of blood was thick in the air, and a muffled cry was cut off as the sound of a knife slicing through skin rang in my ears. I should have run, but instead I stared at the man crouched over the very dead individual, wondering why he had killed them. Maybe it was because I was exhausted, or maybe it was because I was hungry—I wasn't positive why, but I knew I was interested.

Before I could convince myself to hide, the large man straightened himself and turned to look at me, his gaze dark and resigned as if he knew he would have to kill me as well. My chest squeezed, both hating and loving that concept. I had a feeling that I would never have true death.

I could have never expected the reaction that the young man, maybe eighteen if not slightly older, had upon seeing me. Instead of looking angry or even surprised, he went completely still. His eyes flared, and I could scent his natural magic in the air, wrapping around me, making me know almost instantly that he was an unblest. He tilted his head, looking over me, his gaze mixing between clinical and something far darker. I wasn't positive how it was possible, but I knew that this man was a predator.

There was blood on him, literally, but his soul was dark. He was also beautiful, which I saw in very direct clarity as he stepped into the sliver of moonlight that shone into the alley. Something about seeing him fully, highlighted by the light above, had my own magic acting up, and I nearly jolted as I felt a foreign thud in my chest.

...Had my heart just beat? Before I could question it, it was silent again.

"What are you doing here?" he bit out, looking pissed, his eyes moving across my threadbare clothes.

"Looking for food," I leveled and looked at the body. "Why did you kill him?"

"He deserved it." His answer was instant, and I didn't ask him why, I had no room to judge.

"I believe you," I murmured.

"I have food."

His words had me looking at him in confusion as I tried to gauge why he would say that. Despite his hard exterior, there was an energy to him that almost felt coaxing, like he was trying to act as un-threatening as possible.

*Something that was impossible for a man covered in blood.*

*“So?”*

*“I will share with you.”*

*My eyes widened in surprise. “Why would you do that?”*

*“Does it really matter? I don’t want anything from you, if that’s what you’re thinking. You can take the offer or leave it.” He growled out the last part as if he didn’t want to say it.*

*I nodded slowly, trying to understand his thought process before wrapping my arms tightly around myself.*

*“Okay.”*

In retrospect, it had probably been really dumb of me. I had seen Oz kill someone, yet instead of running away from him, I’d followed him to the small abandoned loft he had taken up residence in. It had been an instant source of comfort, and when I’d woken up the next morning, unharmed, I’d been covered in blankets with coffee sitting to my right. He hadn’t been home, and I’d found myself disappointed.

For nearly three days he continued to leave food for me but disappeared before I could see him... But when he finally did come home, I realized that there was something really unique about him. Something I could feel without even seeing him. Which was how I knew he was approaching me from behind as I stood in the doorway of the classroom.

When his large fingers curled around my hip, I leaned back into him. His lips pressed to the shell of my ear, making my breath shudder. “Starlight, what a pleasant surprise.” The way he said ‘pleasant’ felt a lot more like ‘pleasure.’

Turning into him, trying to ignore the eyes on us, I met his heated gaze. “Isn’t this a senior class?”

His eyes flashed with amusement at my words as he made a hum of agreement. “It is, but like yourself, it seems the normal classes aren’t a fit.” He pressed a hand to my back and turned me towards the space. “Come on, I need you sitting next to me.”

*Need.* Oz made everything sound so damn intense.

“We are drawing a lot of attention,” I murmured.

“That’s because you’re a freshman in a class for seniors,” Oz explained easily before adding, “And because you’re so damn beautiful it’s impossible

to not stare at you.”

“Oz,” I whispered, feeling my cheeks heat.

When he sat me down at the paired lab table, I noticed he put himself towards the center of the room, angling his large frame so that no one could see me. It made me feel... Well, I am not positive how it made me feel. Protected. Oz had always made me feel safe and protected.

“Why?” he asked, his eyes flashing with frustration. “Why did you leave, Deva?”

I’d been wondering when this conversation was going to happen. I felt a knot in my throat like I couldn’t speak, trying to figure out a way to explain it to him. His fingers slid up to my cheek, forcing me to meet his gaze. I tried to form words that would at least somewhat give me an adequate response.

“I don’t have an answer for that, not one you will believe or accept... I was trying to protect you,” I whispered. “I didn’t know what else to do, and I knew you were in danger around me.”

“I believe you,” Oz murmured. “I think it’s stupid, but I believe you.”

My eyes watered as I tried to force back the immediate defensive reaction I had to his analysis. “Screw you. It’s not stupid, Oz. I was sixteen—I didn’t have any other options.”

His violet gaze shaded darker into amethyst. “Yeah? I’m not sure that’s what you want, Deva. I think you have no idea what you want—” I knew he was referencing the ‘screw you’ part, but I winced because he wasn’t wrong in general.

“If you were smart, you would leave DIA. The others won’t leave you alone, and not just because of the moonstone. I would love to say I’m better than them, but unless you’re off school grounds where I can’t reach you, it would be a lie.”

Why did that make me happy? I sank against my chair and let out a small exhale of what felt like defeat as I kept his gaze. “I can’t, Oz. I can’t leave. This is supposed to be a fresh start.”

“From what you’ve been running from for years now.” He leaned forward towards me as his thumb ran over my lip. “Starlight, you seem more exhausted than all those years ago. Where have you been? What or who offered you more than I did?”

Is that really how he viewed it?

“No one,” I whispered, my voice steeped in the pain I felt, remembering how hard it was to leave him. “You know that’s not why I left.”

“Yes, you left to protect me from a past you still won’t trust me with,” he murmured, his brain practically turning at a rapid-fire pace.

“It’s not about trust,” I promised. My skin broke out into shivers as his nose brushed against mine, causing me to grip onto his suit coat. I could hear people talking around us, but all I could focus on, all I felt completely entrapped by, was his gorgeous, compelling gaze.

“I don’t believe you.” His voice was filled with pain, and I felt a surge of panic. It was ridiculous, but I wanted to prove to him that it wasn’t about that.

So I surged forward to meet his lips, to feel them pressed against mine. Immediately his natural scent and magic constricted around me, making me whimper as I felt my grip tighten on him, afraid I’d fall right out of my chair.

Despite being an unblessed witch, Oz was extremely powerful. His connection to natural magic was absolutely lethal, and I could feel it running against my skin like a deadly predator circling its prey.

I didn’t even bother stopping myself from stringing my fingers through his hair as his tongue traced my lips, demanding entrance. When he stood, covering my body completely and cupping my jaw, I felt my neck fall back as his kiss became demanding and all-consuming. Finally, after what felt like minutes of the devouring kiss, he pulled back, allowing me to breathe, victory flashing in his gaze.

“I—” My voice choked. “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“That’s okay, Deva. I promise I won’t let anything hurt you.”

My eyes widened as I nodded, unable to accept his promise because after everything I’d been through, I knew it wasn’t possible. *I should run.* Fast.

As if knowing, he continued, “You’re not leaving. Any chance you had to escape is gone now, starlight.”

I believed him.

“I hate to interrupt what appears to be a touching moment, although I couldn’t hear you, thankfully,” a charming masculine voice suddenly filled the space as my cheeks heated to a bright red, “but I would like to start class if the two of you are alright with that.”

Osborn stared into my eyes for another moment before casually sitting down, keeping his arm around my chair and tugging it toward him, the loud screech filling the room. I met the professor’s gaze at the front of the room and tried to not find myself a bit embarrassed. Although, to be fair, he was staring at both of us with a mixture of disappointment and a lack of surprise.

“You can start,” Oz said, completely unbothered by the attention.



The professor looked like he was about to smile for just a moment before turning towards the rest of the class. “Welcome to *Deadly Potions*—I’m Mr. Boneclaw, and I will be your professor. Feel free to come to me with questions, but please understand that if it isn’t at the dedicated time, I will ignore you.”

At least he was to the point.

Our professor kept talking, but I was distracted by his completely dark outfit as I tried to determine his age. Much like this room, he seemed both old and filled with magically complex elements. His long silver hair that hung to his shoulders matched the shade of his skin, his clothing nearly as much of a dark contrast as his eyes. I couldn’t tell what type of witch he was from here, so I had to assume unblest.

My head tilted as I looked around the room with interest. It was a simple square classroom with almost twenty workbenches, the walls lined with shelves filled with vials as well as skulls. There were so many bottles and artifacts that it was a bit overwhelming, and that was even before I focused on the magic that emanated from all of them. The place looked like the picture-perfect description of occult elements.

“Deva.” Oz saying my name brought me back from my thoughts. I took the book he offered me, the worn leather feeling good under my fingers.

As I opened it, I couldn’t help but smile in excitement. Despite all of the confusion filling my head, there was one thing I couldn’t deny: DIA was nothing like I expected.



“I am telling you, it’s going to be amazing,” Lavinia insisted. I nodded in agreement, not really paying attention to what she was saying. “Even Deva agreed to come tonight.”

Had I? I knew she was talking about some party in the demon sector, but I’d only agreed because I knew Lavinia wouldn’t let it go. *Shit*. Well, at least it would be something to distract me from my thoughts tonight.

I stared out the window of the classroom we now sat in. I could still feel my cheeks were hot from when Oz had dropped me off here, kissing the hell out of me. Although that part hadn’t really bothered me. No, what had bothered me was the upperclassman who had approached me outside of the

classroom. Of course I had no idea what her name was, but she was undeniably beautiful and pissed off. I thought back to her exact words.

*“You’re new, right? A first year?” The feminine voice pulled me from where I’d been staring in a daze at Oz’s retreating figure.*

*“Yes,” I murmured and turned back to the woman in question.*

*“Right.” She nodded, and I noticed there were two other girls behind her. “I’m Emily. A word of advice? Don’t take his attention or the other three too seriously. They do this to someone in each new class—it’s practically their MO.”*

*I blinked, trying to understand what she was saying.*

*“This little obsession they have over you? Warning everyone off from you?”*

*They did what now?*

*“It won’t last,” she bit out, looking angry.*

*I held back a smile. I mean, I was pissed at what she was insinuating, but at the same time...I didn’t believe it. There was way too much anger in her gaze. After a moment of analysis, I decided to tell her that.*

*“I’m going to take a guess here.” I exhaled, wishing it didn’t have to be like this. “I don’t think the four of them have ever given a shit about anyone, least of all you, and you’re pissed that they are paying attention to me. Have I got that right?”*

*Her cheeks immediately turned pink, and I let out an internal sigh. I really wasn’t about that. I didn’t do ‘mean girl’ crap. Not only that, but most of the women in my life lately had been amazing, so this shit was just proving to me that some people just sucked.*

*“Fuck you,” she spit out.*

*When the signal for the next class rang out, a series of different tones and bells like at Garnet Hall, I just offered her a small smile and turned back. I could feel how furious she was, and I made note of her magical trace. I had a feeling I hadn’t seen the last of her.*

I really didn’t believe her when it came down to it, but it did have me questioning how little I knew about these men and their life here. I was so

quickly allowing them to invade my life without any thought or protection to my well-being. Mainly my heart.

My thoughts continued to dwell as my last class of the day began—*Crystals & Gemstones Magic*, apparently. There were only ten of us, and outside of Lavinia, no one that I really enjoyed talking to. Honestly, I was glad that this was the last of my classes today, because not only was I distracted, but my brain was drained from the class before. It was very obvious this class was going to be nothing of the sort.

First of all, it was a cozy small classroom, only suited for about twelve in total and completely filled with windows and lights. The crystals that hung from the ceiling refracted the rainy light outside, and mixed with the candles lit everywhere, it was extremely peaceful. It also helped that our seats were large cushy pillows. Honestly, I was hoping there would be some form of meditation where I could fall asleep.

Although, as my gaze moved over to Dylan, who was staring at me, I realized that I would probably never risk that. He was just a bit too creepy to feel comfortable doing so.

As the teacher began to write on the board, I realized how long I'd zoned out. I hadn't seen her come in or heard her name, but as she wrote I noticed she was dressed appropriately to match the atmosphere of the classroom. Her soft brown hair was braided, and she wore a long green dress tied at the waist. She was beautiful and young, but I didn't think it was real youth. No, I had a feeling that this was the ageless youth that came from magic.

I could say with complete honesty that I had no idea what was going on in the class by the end of the period. Luckily, Lavinia seemed distracted by our classmates so I was able to pack up in peace before standing...and nearly knocking right into Dylan. *Fates, damnit.*

“Deva.” His voice was edged in what almost sounded like concern.

“Yes?” I took a step back, not liking that he was in my space.

“How do you feel about getting dinner tonight?”

“Do you not realize that I don't like you?” I asked point-blank. I hated to be rude, but I'd already hit my bullshit limit for the day. I mean, seriously—a girl only had so much energy in her, and considering I was running on only a cup of coffee on my first day of formal schooling ever... I felt like it was understandable.

He blinked, and his eyes darkened with anger. “I'm a nice guy if you would just give me a chance. Not like those psychopaths.”

Speaking of which, I hadn't even realized the classroom had cleared until Lazaro appeared right behind Dylan. My eyes widened, holding his bright gaze as he spoke in a dark, lethal tone. "You're going to have a problem with those psychopaths if you don't fuck off, Dylan."

Dylan's face turned white as he snapped his head around, stumbling back. I couldn't fight the small smile on my lips as he shot me a look and ran off with his tail between his legs.

I focused fully on Lazaro, who looked far too pleased.

"I didn't need you to do that," I pointed out.

His indifferent gaze filtered back in as he shrugged, offering a small smile. "Didn't do it for you, just enjoy scaring the shit out of kids like that."

I examined his face and tilted my head. "Yeah? I don't know if I believe you, Lazaro." Something about saying his name seemed to spark something in his magic, and he stepped closer, the faint trace of intensity reminding me of...something.

"And why is that, little thief?" he questioned softly.

Suddenly, with that nickname, I felt unsure of myself. I didn't know what to say to the man, so instead I just held his gaze, coming to the realization that I was totally not imagining the darkness underneath the surface of his formal aloofness.

Luckily, we were interrupted.

"Come on, you two. We need to get Deva some food."

I snapped my head over to find Grimshaw standing there, looking far too handsome this time of day.

Ignoring Lazaro's sound of agreement, I walked towards Grimshaw. Cage was there as well, talking about something with Oz, both of them looking far too happy. I felt a surge through my chest, loving the fact that they were all here.

Well, almost all...

"Zaya." Alek appeared behind me, offering me a kiss on my shoulder.

"Hey you." I smiled up at him.

"Are we good?" Lazaro asked, a note of frustration in his tone I didn't understand. I did my best to ignore it, realizing I would probably never figure this man out.

My smile grew as I felt an uncharacteristic sense of excitement fill me. For once, I didn't fight it, and I walked between the group of them, feeling comfortably sheltered by their magic.



## DEVA

“We better not get caught,” Briar warned.

It was a reasonable fear, especially since we were attempting to sneak out of the witch sector itself and not just our dorms. No, that part had been easy. The entire sector was laid out rather logically with the main building, the one we entered originally, holding different classrooms, a large center pavilion and dining hall available for students throughout the day.

Behind that there were paths leading to four different dorm buildings, each for separate years. Ours was the furthest back and rested right against the forest’s edge. Despite being gorgeous, it created almost an eerie feel to the landscape as the fog began to grow thicker and a very light drizzle of rain fell on top of our heads. I tugged my hood up further as we finally reached the large gate, all of us tensing as we expected some kind of barrier to appear.

I hesitantly pressed against the metal and it opened easily, silently allowing us entrance into the central pavilion we’d arrived in. Damn, that was a bit too easy.

“Okay, I have no idea how we managed that,” Lavinia whispered, her voice tinted with excitement as we let the gate fall closed. My gaze immediately went to the demon sector gate across the way, and we made our way there easily, slipping past the administration building silently. It was really late in the night, but it felt like there was life to the space—like someone was watching us. Briar made a concerned noise as if she could feel it as well.

“See? We are absolutely fine,” Odessa said brightly. I could tell it was a forced emotion and that she was nervous as well. This wasn’t exactly any of our ‘scenes’ except maybe Lavinia, but I think all of us had different reasons

for wanting to go. Briar because she was paranoid she wasn't social enough like her cousin. Odessa to prove to the three witches that followed her around that she could do whatever she wanted when she wanted. Somehow I had a feeling they would show up at some point...

And then me. I was doing this to not only support my friends but prove to myself that I could do something as normal as attending a party. I had no idea how I'd managed it, but I'd slipped away from my own set of stalkers, and so far they'd yet to catch up to me. To be honest, I felt a bit bad about it, especially because once they did realize I was gone, it would have been for some time. I mean, how could they have expected me to jump out of the bathroom window three stories down?

Plus, it really was their fault I had to sneak out in the first place. They had come back to my room to do homework and invaded my space, filling it with their amazing magic—I couldn't stay in there all night, I would have gone absolutely crazy.

The only part that sucked about my plan? The fact that I'd had to get ready for it literally in record time. I hoped the jeans, hoodie, and tank I was wearing were acceptable because I hadn't been able to spend a lot of time getting ready without the boys asking questions. I looked down at my worn combat boots and tried to not feel insecure about their state. It was a stupid thing to focus on, but I couldn't help it.

"Why the demon sector?" Briar whispered as we reached the gate. I wish I had an answer for her, but instead I just shrugged as we pushed through the entrance. I tensed, expecting some form of magic to be required, but instead we slipped through like it was absolutely nothing. The creak of the gate closing had me wincing before realizing that there was no way the academy didn't know about this party.

Seriously, there were students everywhere! All of them were walking in the same direction—towards the large-scale mountain range with a forest edging the perimeter. I felt sweat prickle the back of my neck as I realized the heat was so much more extreme than I had assumed. Unfortunately, there was no chance that I was taking off my sweatshirt. I didn't want to explain the scars or have people stare at me all night. For once, I didn't want to think about anything but enjoying some time with my friends.

As we neared the large group of students, everything hit me in an overwhelming wave. The music. The voices. The different types of magic: shifters, demigods, vampires, demons, fae, and witches. All of them in one

place together while celebrating... Holy hell, this was something completely different than I'd ever experienced.

"Yes! This is what I'm talking about!" Lavinia clapped her hands.

I couldn't help but smile further, her excitement addicting. As we walked through the crowd, I felt heads turn towards us, and I had to tamp down my immediate defensive reaction to attention. I knew they weren't looking at us in a threatening way... It was actually the opposite—blatant heat on the expressions of both women and men. I felt my cheeks light up because I was so not used to this type of thing.

Tugging the material of my hoodie over my palm, we eased through the crowd. I had no idea where they wanted to go, but Lavinia made a beeline to the bar that was between two massive trees, lit up with small hovering lights that seemed to blink in and out of existence. It was beautiful.

"Drink time!" Lavinia grabbed my hand as we walked up easily, her voice shouting over a lot of others as she ordered for us. When I looked at Briar, she just offered me a shrug, looking completely overwhelmed. Odessa looked on edge but took a drink from the bartender, immediately downing it as Lavinia cheered. It completely set the tone for the night, and twenty minutes later...

I somehow ended up on the dance floor with a drink in my hand.

I had assumed I would feel claustrophobic or overwhelmed by both the bodies and magic of everyone here, but instead there was a lightness, almost freedom, to the sensation moving through me. I sipped on the drink, the taste of berries exploding in my mouth as I let out a happy hum.

"What is this?!" I yelled out to Odessa, who had a drink in each hand.

"Fae wine." She wiggled her brow and did a little dance, making me grin further.

I took another sip and let out a hum, realizing that it would be far too easy to down several of these and not think twice about it. Before long, my drink was more than half empty and I was swaying to the music, my head falling back as I let go of the tight control I maintained, just slightly.

I had never been one for dancing—hell, I had never been one for any type of enjoyment—but before I knew it, I was feeling a buzz as I flowed to the beat. My body felt loose, and without a thought, I tugged off my hoodie, tying it around my waist and thanking the fates I'd put on a tank top to hide the moonstone. My hair was a bit sweaty at the back of my neck, but I couldn't help but love the feeling of being free, so when Lavinia brought



Briar and me another drink, I didn't think twice.

I was going to regret this in the morning, I completely predicted it, but at the moment I couldn't. At the moment I could only savor it.

When a pair of rough hands slid over my waist, I jolted and looked up into an unfamiliar handsome face. The magic I sensed coming from him was shifter-oriented, and while he was attractive, my silent non-beating heart only enhanced my magic's complete rejection of his touch. I pulled away—or attempted to—but his eyes darkened, and he only pulled me further against him.

*Then he was gone.*

“Holy shit.”

My eyes widened as the man crashed through the bar, and a cheer went up as drinks exploded everywhere. A giggle escaped my lips as I looked up to my would-be savior...and nearly felt my knees break. *Cage.*

The happy-go-lucky psycho who did *not* look happy right now—in fact, he looked livid, and his anger was completely directed towards the shifter he had just tossed away from me. His hand was wrapped gently around my wrist, and I had a feeling it was the only thing keeping him here.

“Cage?” I whispered.

The party continued to rage around us as he looked down at me, his eyes darkening. “Hey, baby.”

My nose wrinkled. “I don't like that nickname.”

His eyes jumped with amusement. “That's your problem with me? Not that I probably broke that asshole's neck?”

I looked over at the man in question, seeing him getting up slowly. He didn't look injured outside of his pride. I shrugged. “Seems fine with me.”

Cage chuckled softly before tugging me against him, the front of his body hot under my touch as I gripped the shirt he was wearing. My body broke into shivers as my breathing hitched, my heart now doing double-time as I felt his cock grow harder between us. I tilted my neck back, and his nose brushed against mine.

“I should punish you, Deva, for letting another man put his hands on you. If I couldn't tell that your heart didn't beat for him, he would be dead.”

My eyes widened. “You can... You can tell that?”

Knowledge flashed in his gaze. “I'm not a normal blood witch. I can hear every single beat of that heart and tell when it is absolutely silent.”

Shit.

“Cage...”

“It’s okay, princess. I won’t tell anyone.”

*Princess?* I scoffed. “I am *not* a princess.”

His smile grew. “No you’re not. What about ‘doll’? You’re as perfect—”

“No.”

My voice was hard, seeped in unescapable pain, and Cage’s eyes flared with both curiosity and realization that something larger bothered me about the name. I swear I was going to have no secrets left by the end of this week.

Cage nodded, leaning forward and brushing my nose again. “Never again then.”

This was why it was difficult to stay away from him.

I drew in my lip, ignoring the memories banging at my consciousness. “We can figure out something else if you really insist.”

“I do.” He flashed an authentic smile, seeming relieved that I wasn’t completely shutting down. Something that I would have done if it wasn’t for how incredibly tipsy I was. Instead I leaned into him and offered a small smile into his chest.

“You know, Deva,” he rumbled, stringing his hand through my hair and keeping my head pressed there, “the others won’t be far behind me. I’m only here sooner because I could no longer hear your heartbeat.”

“Because it only beats around you guys,” I whispered knowingly.

His fingers grasped my chin as he examined my face with a seriousness I didn’t expect. “And why is that?”

My eyes widened, realizing that he hadn’t been clued into that fact, only that my heart sometimes beat and that sometimes it didn’t. I shied away, but he didn’t let me go far, his lips brushing my nose again as if it was stopping him from kissing me in other places.

“I can’t say,” I murmured.

“Why?”

“Because you will stop looking at me like that,” I whispered. His eyes turned almost black at my words.

“There is absolutely no chance of that, Deva. You will have all of my attention, always,” he murmured, his hands tightening on me as if he thought his words would have me running... Which they absolutely should have. Clearly I wasn’t in the right state of mind because instead it left me feeling warm inside.

Before I could respond, something caught my attention, and I looked to

see the woman from before, the one in the hallway named Emily, slamming into another student's shoulder. I should have left it alone—it wasn't my business—but instead I found myself leaving Cage and walking towards her, not liking that she felt entitled to treat people like crap.

It only fueled me that the girl she'd slammed into looked pissed as Emily talked down to her, a sneer covering her face. I briefly categorized that the girl was wearing a simple hoodie, jeans, and sneakers much like myself. Her white-blond hair stood out in comparison to the dark forest, and there was something about her that read differently than the rest of the magic around here. I found it amusing as Emily seemed to get more pissed at her, the woman looking almost bored despite the annoyance I could feel radiating off of her. I had a feeling she could handle Emily if she wanted to, but I was glad that I'd have the opportunity to do so first.

"Apologize for being in my way," Emily sneered.

The woman smirked, opening her mouth to say something, but before she could, I was there and placed a hand against Emily's chest, shoving her back. I stepped up into her, finding myself disgusted with the raw malice I saw covering her expression. It was like the woman fed off of anger.

"How about you fuck off, Emily?"

She narrowed her eyes. "You, again? You shouldn't even be here, first year. Don't you have someone to fuck? Slut." Her friends nodded in agreement, both staying out of it and supporting Emily at the same time.

"Jealous?" I arched my brow.

"Five men? I'm not jealous. There is no way you can keep them satisfied. They'll all be in other beds by the end of the week."

The blonde girl next to me snorted. "Yeah, jealousy is an understatement."

I tossed her a grin. "That's what I thought, like she's clearly just pissed she's not getting dick."

"Five dicks," the girl pointed out. "I'm in a similar position with my monsters, or should I say *several* positions?"

I laughed, unable to contain my amusement.

"And now the sluts are bonding," Emily hissed, not liking the attention off her.

"Hey!" The girl next to me grinned. "Slut squad activated! It's kinda catchy, don't you think?"

"Exactly!" I nodded before looking at her and offering my hand up.

“High five for orgasms—*someone* has to have them.”

She met my hand. “High five for *five* orgasms.”

I really wanted to talk more about our...what had my friends called it? A harem? I wanted to talk to her more about that and ask how many men she had...but when I felt someone jerk my shirt, I acted on instinct. I turned towards Emily and brought my elbow into her stomach. Hard.

With a cry, she fell to the ground, and I felt panic hit my chest. Shit. I really hope that it hadn't caused internal bleeding or some shit.

It was an actual concern! I hit hard.

The girl behind me broke into a laugh as I looked back at her, her glowing purple eyes filled with a ton of mirth and making me relax. Okay, maybe it hadn't been that bad. I could hear Emily yelling as her friends helped her up and tried to drag her away, but I didn't pay attention to that, because the edges of the room were growing a bit more blurry than normal. I had a feeling it was time for me to go home soon.

“Damn, she's awful.” The girl sighed before offering a hand I met. “Alexandra, by the way.”

“Deva.” I let our handshake fall and then shrugged. “She's a bitch, hoping that will have her staying away from me.”

“Sort of made my night.” She shrugged. “I needed some space and a distraction.”

I completely understood that!

“Well you should come dance with my friends and me—”

“Not going to happen.” Cage appeared behind me, his voice filled with a casual amusement. I had a feeling the man had been watching all of this.

“Why—*oh shit.*” I yelped as I was pulled back and tossed over a hard, firm shoulder. I threw my head up and waved to Alexandra before starting to struggle. “Bye slut-squad buddy!”

“What the hell did you just say?” A rough voice had me groaning, realizing pretty quickly who it was holding me.

“Grimshaw?” I asked, completely ignoring his question.

“Little jaguar, good to know that you like to sneak out as well as disappear and run. Maybe a collar would be a good investment,” he growled.

“You're in trouble,” Cage sang. He seemed to find this hilarious.

“Screw you,” I muttered.

“She says that a lot,” Oz pointed out.

“Oh, hey you,” I teased, turning my head to look at him upside down.

“Is she drunk?” Lazaro asked. I couldn’t see the man, but I knew he was there. I could feel his energy coasting against my skin.

“Yes,” Alek mused. “I kept eyes on her, and she only had three drinks—”

“You were here the entire time?!” I asked. Well, why hadn’t he come over? I would have loved to dance with him. “Also, Grimshaw, you have a very nice butt.”

“Thanks.” He chuckled softly.

“Yes, I was watching you. I always will be,” Alek responded seriously.

“Wait, have other girls said you have a nice butt?” I demanded, my voice echoing loud in the center pavilion as the weather changed, signaling that we’d left the demon sector. I hated that I hadn’t said goodbye to my friends, but I was going to hope that they would understand I’d been taken from the party under the threat of five very sexy psychos.

Before they could answer, a light voice filled the space, seemingly frustrated. I couldn’t hear the words, but I knew that tone. I straightened up and wiggled out of Grimshaw’s hold as we both turned towards the shifter sector gate, a girl walking through it followed by a truly massive man.

My eyes widened because *damn*, the size difference between the two of them was no joke. She clearly hadn’t seen us and turned back to look at the man. “Breaker, there is no reason to follow me. I already told Gage where I’d be at. I really don’t need a babysitter.” The end of her words sounded sad, and I got the distinct feeling that she thought he was following her out of some duty. My eyes moved to Breaker and how he was looking at her... I was going to call bullshit on that one.

Before the man I had to assume was Breaker could answer, he noticed us, tugging the girl to a stop. Her eyes went wide, going from frustrated to friendly. “Oh, hey!”

“Breaker.” Grimshaw nodded, wrapping an arm around my waist.

“Grim,” he replied and then offered the others a nod of greeting. “You guys coming back from the party?”

“Yes.” I nodded and then looked at her. “It’s super fun, and I wish I could go back.”

“See!” She let out what could only be described as an adorable growl while looking up at Breaker. “I have to go, she said it was ‘super fun.’”

“Bexley...”

“Bex.” She scowled, which he seemed to find amusing. She looked back at me. “It was wonderful to meet you, but I am going to that party—”

She was gone then, and all of us watched as she seemed to flash across the pavilion, leaving Breaker to curse before jogging after her. I blinked, wondering what the heck type of shifters they were.

“Breaker is a dragon,” Oz said as if reading my mind. Fascinating.

Before I could say anything, I was lifted into a cradle hold as we walked towards the witch sector. I groaned, the space spinning as I put my face against Grimshaw’s chest, realizing that I’d gone from tipsy to uncomfortably drunk. That wasn’t good. Stupid fae wine....

“Deva, what were you talking about? About other girls?” he demanded softly.

I muttered something under my breath before burying my face further against his neck.

“What did she drink?” Lazaro demanded, sounding concerned.

“Fae wine,” I mumbled. “And Emily told me you get this obsessive over every girl that you focus on each year.” I sounded sad and whiny to even me, but a large part of that was how the alcohol was sitting in my stomach.

“Emily is a bitch.”

I giggled but then sighed. “That’s not nice.”

“None of us have dated anyone,” Lazaro spoke up.

“You don’t have to date anyone to fuck someone,” I sang.

“Nothing like that has happened,” Oz said in a low growl.

I tilted my head back, realizing we were nearly back near the dorms. “Yeah? None of you slept with anyone while here?” Hard to believe, considering how gorgeous they were.

“Or ever,” Alek added easily.

Oh.

“We’ve been busy,” Cage mused, not sounding bothered. In fact, he was supremely confident. “Shit to do, people to kill.”

Reasonable.

“I like that.” I sighed happily and closed my eyes.

Their voices were like a lullaby in my ear, and before I knew it I was half asleep and completely warm. I didn’t wake up until I was placed on a plush surface that smelled like Cage, and then I was completely unconscious, letting the dark surround me.



# MICAJAH

My obsession.

Deva wanted a nickname, but I had a feeling if I called her that she would be running for the hills. It wasn't inaccurate though.

Since painting her in the blood of the bastard trying to bother her, she was all I'd been able to think about. Even when she didn't realize it, I was there watching her, paying attention to the way her heart stopped and started in response to us. When she'd admitted to that tonight, it had me feeling a surge of pride that I'd caused such an intense reaction in someone like Deva.

I wanted to hear that beat of her heart every single second of the day. I wanted proof of our connection that no one seemed to fully understand. I wanted to know that she felt me as much as I felt her. She was buried in my heart, gripping onto the muscle until blood soaked her hands.

Deva had no idea the effect she had on me. Absolutely no idea.

My fingers brushed through her richly colored midnight blue hair that contrasted my dark crimson bedding. I had slipped off her boots already, the others talking in the living room as I watched over my sleepy obsession. I knew I needed to be part of their conversation, but I could only focus on the even breathing that left her lips. I could only focus on the perfection that was her existence, down to the scars that marked her body.

The scars that marked her as a survivor.

I stepped away, trying to get a hold of my emotions as I walked towards the window of my bedroom. The storm was back, having only cleared for a few hours, as if allowing Deva to go to the party without any possible obstacles.

I smiled, finding it hilarious that she thought she could escape us. I'd



known the minute she'd left the building. Hell, I'd realized why Alek was leaving when he went to 'grab something' minutes before she departed. I knew everything that went through my obsession's head. I had no idea how our bond was so intense, but I wouldn't have traded it for the world.

Although, I did want to know how it was possible. We weren't shifters. We didn't have mates, right?

"Where are the scars from?" I asked as I felt Osborn come to the door of my room. I turned to find him staring at her with a soft look I'd never seen cross his face.

Osborn was all kinds of fucked up. Like the type that could clinically break apart a body before using it for whatever purpose he deemed necessary. The kind of fucked up that had almost no emotional capacity, far past sociopathic, unless it seemed to have to do with Deva.

Then again, did that surprise me? Not really. The woman pulled extreme reactions from everyone around her.

"I don't know," he confessed. "I found her in an alleyway—well, she found me, I suppose—and she already had all of them. She was exhausted and obviously suffering from starvation, so it didn't seem like the right time to ask."

"Alek knows," Grimshaw said as he appeared by the fireplace out of the shadows, as if he'd been there the entire time. Osborn stepped to the side as Alek walked in, looking completely unconcerned. Lazaro followed after.

I nearly rolled my eyes at the last bastard. His emotions for her were so extremely transparent, but I knew she didn't see it. I worried that instead of her seeing his asshole behavior for what it was... she thought he hated her.

I really didn't want to kill someone who I considered a brother, but I also wouldn't hesitate if he hurt Deva.

Finally, Grimshaw's words registered. Alek knew about her scars? I wasn't sure how I felt about that. I'd somewhat come to terms with Alek being part of our team now, especially because in the last year the five of us had been working together. The guy had some insane connections, so it was an ideal partnership for handling all this bullshit, and somewhere along the way we had become friends to an extent.

Although it was up in the air if Alek could even have a friendship to begin with. My eyes ran over Deva, thinking about how that was just one more person she affected, pulling Alek from his isolated island into our group on a larger scale.

“You do?” Lazaro demanded of him, his gaze purposefully avoiding Deva’s sleeping form as he leaned against the far wall.

“I do,” Alek confirmed.

I watched as Lazaro looked towards Deva when he thought none of us were looking, something dark flashing across his face before he schooled it. Yeah, Lazaro sure as fuck felt something about Deva—whether it was a healthy emotion or not was up for debate. Then again, could I really talk? I arched my brow as he caught my gaze and held it, almost daring me to say something. I had to fight the urge to call him on his shit, but I knew Alek’s words were more important than messing with the bastard.

“Talk,” I motioned to Alek.

“She went through the same thing as me,” he stated simply. “Someone peeled back her skin and embedded dark magic that doesn’t belong there into her system. By all intents and purposes, Deva is dead, being fueled purely by dark magic... And the moonstone, if I had to guess. Although how the two are both residing in her at the same time is a goddamn wonder.”

“Which is why her heart doesn’t beat normally,” I put together quietly.

“What do you mean?” Lazaro demanded.

“Her heart only beats around us,” I answered.

Grimshaw ran a hand through his hair. “It’s also why she exhibits all the affinities instead of just one.”

Osborn directed his next question to Alek. “Did your father do this to her?”

Alek shook his head. “No, this was done by a far larger monster. In fact, it’s the monster we have been chasing this entire time.”

My eyes widened, realizing that he was talking about the star of this entire show: Astaroth. The name was burned into my brain. The Nyx family was not only powerful because of their bloodline but because they, and now by extension us, were the monsters that sought out and killed people like Astaroth. Killed bastards who wanted to disturb the peace by doing something like killing unblessed simply because.

Of course, I was aware there was bias against them, but the Nyx family believed in balance. They had been part of Carmina for centuries, and for centuries they’d been focused on maintaining that balance.

Which was why we were here at Dark Imaginarium Academy to begin with—or at least why Grim was here. The rest of us had joined Grim’s effort, once the bastard finally opened up to us and we became friends. Now we

were as part of this as Grim himself. Our mission was simple. We were supposed to keep an ear to the ground about any whispers regarding Astaroth's group.

It wasn't just his tightly knit group that was part of this though. No, there were people who worshiped and shared his same bias.

In fact, much like Alek, there was a kid in Deva's class whose father was extremely close to Astaroth, and Alek had spent all summer attempting to turn the tides in favor of him coming here so we could find out what we could. Our end goal? To draw Astaroth out of hiding and finally end this shit.

I would give the bastard this—he was surrounded by deadly individuals. Although, rumor had it that his best assassin had been killed years ago, which had spurred him to go into hiding.

It explained a lot if he was right, if my little obsession had fallen into the hands of Astaroth. The bastard killed thousands of unblessed witches and conducted experiments on others. It was our goal to take him and people like him down. Even more importantly, to guard precious objects embedded with magic, like the moonstone, from someone that could use it for harm. I looked down at Deva and realized in that moment just how much danger she was truly in.

"She didn't want to tell us who did this to her," Grimshaw murmured and frowned. "Do you think she knows? About our mission?"

"If she did, she would have said something." Osborn sighed. "Or run."

"I think there is more to this than we are seeing," Alek admitted. "I don't know to what extent she was involved, but it was long enough for him to hurt her. Bad. I told her that I knew about the scars, and she looked like she was about to pass out."

"When she finds out that we are connected to him as well, she's going to run." I knew that in my bones, and I absolutely hated it.

Didn't she know that we would keep her safe?

"She's not going anywhere," Grimshaw bit out.

"We can't tell her," Alek said evenly. "not yet."

"Not ever." Lazaro stood straight and narrowed his eyes on Grimshaw. "We need to get that moonstone out and leave her alone. We are dragging her back into a life that she clearly fought tooth and nail to escape. I am not going to be part of bringing her back into that."

Then he was gone.

I looked down at the floor, realizing that to some extent he was right...

But unlike Lazaro, I believed in our ability to protect my little obsession.

Osborn spoke quietly. "He's not wrong."

"What are you saying?" Alek demanded.

"We are putting her in danger," Osborn answered. "I am not letting her go though."

"None of us are," Grimshaw growled.

"And what do you expect us to do, Grimshaw?" I asked. "Keep our mission from her? What happens when we have to leave for the weekend? Or have to eventually leave the academy when our cover is blown? She just started here. Would we ask her to come with us? To give up her future for us? To what end? How do we explain to her that we all feel an obsessive and possessive pull to her when we haven't even talked about the concept of being with her? Do we share her? Is that how this is going to work?"

I felt like all my questions were extremely valid.

"She's not a toy to be passed around," Alek bit out.

"I agree." I smirked, not feeling amused in the least. "But before we tell her anything, we need to decide where we stand on this—especially when the three of you have already kissed her."

And I didn't plan on waiting long to do so myself.

Before any of them could answer, Deva shifted, and Grimshaw jolted as if forgetting she was there. After a long moment of staring at her, he headed towards the door and Alek followed, saying something to his retreating form. I walked towards the bed, and Osborn met my gaze.

"I'm not giving her up. I already lost her once," he bit out.

"No one is asking you to." I leaned against the bedpost and examined her exhausted features. "I think everyone—including Lazaro, despite being an ass—is going to come to the same conclusion. We will have to share her and take what she will give. Earn her trust so that when we do tell her the truth, she realizes that we can protect her."

Osborn seemed to relax at my words before standing up, fixing his suit jacket, and walking towards the door. He turned back and offered me a narrowed look. "Call me if she wakes up. Immediately."

"Sure thing." I wouldn't. I wanted time alone with her.

I had come from a rather large family with nine brothers, all of whom were more insane than the next. Luckily, they were all out in the country, away from this bullshit with the killing of the unblessed and the riots that were sure to take place once the reality of the situation came to life. When

political upheaval truly began in Carmina. Yeah, I didn't want my mom or dad to be part of that shit. But because of my upbringing, I was used to sharing and not being selfish. I didn't want that right now. I knew in the long term that the situation with Deva would be one that included all of us, but right now I just wanted to hold her and love that she was in my arms.

Slipping into my bed, already having kicked off my shoes, I slid under the covers and wrapped an arm around her. Her tight curvy body pressed against my own as she buried her nose against my throat, mumbling my name. I couldn't help but feel a surge of affection and warmth for this woman as my fingers ran up and down her skin, shivers breaking out across it.

I had no idea how long I traversed through my thoughts about everything that had happened tonight and everything that had been revealed about our connection to Deva's past, but eventually the soft call of my name had my eyes opening to find her looking up at me with sleep-heavy eyes.

"Hey you," I said, realizing that it must have been a few hours. She was very clearly hungover, her body trembling slightly as it rejected the fae wine. Shit gave you a fantastic drunk, but long term it was absolutely horrible for us.

"I feel horrible," she groaned.

I nodded and smoothed my fingers through her hair. "Do you want to eat something or maybe get some—*shit*."

Deva moved so damn fast, out of bed and sprinting across to the bathroom. I followed quickly behind and stood over her, pulling back her hair as she threw up into the toilet, her body shaking as she let out a pathetic wheeze. I rubbed her shoulder as she puked a few more times and finally fell back on her little ass, putting her head between her knees and letting out a groan.

"It's okay," I murmured, pressing my lips to the top of her head.

"It is so not okay. I am never drinking again."

"Come on." I lifted her up, and she curled around me as I set her on the bathroom counter. I found a toothbrush and some toothpaste, handing it to her as she offered me a thankful look. I was glad she didn't ask about the toothbrush, because then I would have to admit to buying stuff for her on the off chance she stayed over. *Yeah*, I had done all of that this morning before she'd even woke up.

Like I said...my obsession.

When she was done and she had washed her face, I led her into my closet.

She stumbled, looking exhausted. I pulled down an oversized shirt and turned back to her, my throat producing a rumble at how she easily stripped out of her clothes. She stood only in a bra and panties, her gorgeous body distracting me from handing her the shirt. But when I did, I noticed that she was offering me a small embarrassed smile, her eyes filled with subdued heat. My gaze moved to the center of the chest as she tugged the shirt on, the sports bra she wore covering the moonstone. The amazing reason that she was in our life to begin with.

Slowly, I led her back into the room. I couldn't help but smile, finding a large glass of water and toast on the side table, something that was one hundred percent Lazaro—fucking softie. She didn't question it and sat in the middle of the bed, slowly eating the toast while staring at the fire, before her eyes finally fell shut and she fell back into the pillows where she belonged.

I just hoped I could keep her there.



## DEVA

*Lips traced against my neck as heat prickled across my skin, causing me to let out a soft sound that was nearly a moan. I kept my eyes closed, allowing a large rough hand to slide across my stomach, pushing up the oversized shirt I was wearing. Arching back, I could feel a hard length wedged against my ass, and I found myself fumbling through my thoughts, trying to figure out whose arms I was in.*

*I wasn't positive it completely mattered with the way they were touching me, their other hand slipping around my throat as I let out a small moan. My nipples hardened, and rough fingers came up to tease them, causing my entire body to jolt. Heat seemed to saturate every element of my body as I felt my center clench, desire growing between my legs at the feeling of the cock so nearby. I wanted to bend over and feel it inside of me, to feel them inside of me.*

*"Deva." A rough voice played across my skin. "You don't deserve the pleasure I'm giving you right now—"*

*"What?" I snapped my gaze open, trying to turn around, but the grip tightened on me, the man chuckling softly and making me realize that I wasn't in bed with Cage anymore. No, I was back in that damn dreamscape I'd forgotten about the moment I woke. I should have felt fear or concern, but instead I just felt needy.*

*"I said..." His voice came right to my ear as I was suddenly bent forward. A hand wrapped around the back of my neck, a soft yet firm surface appearing out of nowhere. I should have felt panicked at his controlling hold, but instead I found I liked it. A lot.*

*I arched back against him as he let out a low rumble before continuing,*



*“You don’t deserve the pleasure I want to give you.”*

*“Why is that?” I whimpered as his fingers that were gripping my ass cheek moved further down and brushed against my panty-covered center, causing me to let out a small whimper.*

*“Because you put yourself in danger tonight.” His growl was accusatory, and I tensed, frowning as I tried to figure out what he meant.*

*“No I didn’t—holy shit.” I let out a moan as a firm hand came across my ass, my breath catching.*

*“Yes you did. You snuck out to a party and were intoxicated,” he snarled softly.*

*I felt anger surge through me as I tried to turn. “Listen, I have no idea who you are—and did you just spank me again?”*

*My moan was pathetic this time as he chuckled and tugged the material of my panties to the side, sliding his rough fingers against my wet heat. I hissed as I felt my pussy clench, wanting him to fix my frustration despite being a complete jerk.*

*“Yes, and I will continue to do so until you get it through your head how fucking dangerous tonight was.” His voice was filled with heat and concern. “You have no idea how appealing you are, Deva. How many people would try to take you.”*

*“And who are you to worry about that?” I demanded, my breath catching as he teased my clit, causing my entire body to lock up. My body broke out into a sweat, and I felt like I was about to go into goddamn heat. I moaned as he continued to key up my body and refused to answer. I thought he would leave me like that, his rough breathing and how hard he was the only clue that this wasn’t one-way, that he wanted this as well.*

*“Please,” I whimpered as he slowed down.*

*Lips brushed against my ear. “Beg me, little thief.”*

*Shock permeated my system, and my head snapped up right as he slid a finger inside of me, causing me to absolutely detonate. I exploded on his fingers as I stared into a pair of nickel-shaded eyes, my knees breaking in relief... Before everything went dark.*

The slow, even heartbeat under my ear was the sound that finally pulled me from a night of peaceful sleep. My own heart was rhythmically beating, and the sensation threw me off, making me wonder why it was doing so. I stilled,

realizing that I was so damn hot that my skin was prickling with a feverish flush.

Why was I so hot? That question was answered very quickly when two large, muscular arms tightened around my waist, causing my eyes to snap open to the picturesque view of a large set of windows.

Where was I? Whose arms were around me?

For just a moment, before the panic set in, I completely forgot how dangerous this could be. What a horrible situation I may have landed myself in, especially considering last night. Instead I just allowed myself to feel. I felt the magic wrapping around me, the possessive grip on my body, the soft brush of lips against my shoulder, the way my legs were intertwined with the body behind me. Everything about this felt amazing—felt right.

Which could only mean one thing, something that aligned with my heart beating so steadily—I was wrapped up in the arms of one of my psychotic witches.

*My?* When had I started calling them that? More so, why was the thought of them tugging at something else...almost a memory or dream, something important that I couldn't remember.

I frowned, my head pounding as I tried to recall what had happened last night, and embarrassment slammed into me hard. Memories of getting drunk on fae wine, being carried out of the party, and then throwing up in the toilet while Cage held my hair played like a cinematic reel through my head. I remembered crawling into bed as he held me, allowing me to drift off into a peaceful sleep... But despite those memories being tinted with a soft affection, I could feel my cheeks turning red.

I was never out of control, and last night had been exactly that.

Deciding I needed to get out of presumably Cage's arms, I extracted myself. The minute I sat up, I looked down at the large muscular form spread across the dark red bed we were in. Well, now I really didn't want to get up.

"Good morning," Cage groaned, opening one eye before stretching his arms above his head, flashing me his abs as I slowly drew my gaze up his body. He looked completely relaxed, his hand coming to run up my leg as I realized I was in an oversized shirt, my clothes from before completely gone. My breathing heightened, feeling completely out of my depth.

"Morning?" My voice was raspy as I looked around the room. "Is this your room?"

"It is." He sat up on his elbows, and his gaze slid over my pulse. "Why do

you seem so nervous?”

“Not nervous.” I blinked. “I just have never woken up in someone’s bed before,” I admitted softly.

Cage made a happy sound before he spoke again. “You slept like the dead last night.”

If he only knew.

Although, according to his comments about my heartbeat last night at the party...it seemed he did know, at least to a small extent.

“I need to get back to my room...”

“No you don’t,” he mused. “You need to go to class. Wouldn’t it be easy to just move in with us?”

I stared at him, bewildered. “What?”

“Move in with us like Grim suggested,” he pressed.

I ignored him, instead running a hand over my chest, realizing how rapidly my heart was beating compared to when I’d been laying on him. It was as if it was trying to pump as much blood through my system as possible. Holy shit. Cage’s effect on my heart was violently fast compared to the others.

Something occurred to me as I looked at him with narrowed eyes. “Did you use your magic to slow my pulse down?” Because there was no way I would have been able to sleep while touching him if he hadn’t.

“Yes.” He was completely unrepentant. “I figured since you weren’t used to it beating, it wouldn’t be a problem.”

My eyes widened in panic, and I turned away from him, slipping off the bed... Well, not fully. He caught me up against him almost immediately, locking my hips against him and pressing my ass right against his hard length. His other hand slid up between my breasts and pet my pulse.

“I won’t force you to tell me, Deva. You are entitled to your secrets.”

“For now.” Lazaro’s voice filled the space as I snapped my gaze to the door, where the man in question was watching me with a look I couldn’t fully understand. I frowned, holding his gaze, as I felt like there was something significantly important about my last interaction with him.

I searched my brain, not understanding where that thought had come from. Nothing had happened at the party last night... Right?

“How are we feeling?”

“Do you actually care?” I arched my brow, feeling a bit more snappy and defensive than normal. I wasn’t positive why, but the man elicited a

confusing reaction within me.

His jaw tightened as he spoke evenly. "Breakfast is ready."

Then he was gone, and I was left staring at the door, feeling at odds with Lazaro and who he was as a man. I just didn't understand him at all.

"Don't mind him, he doesn't like change." Cage chuckled.

"I wasn't," I murmured and tugged from his arms so I could look back at him. "I don't know how I feel about this. I feel like you used my state to do what Grimshaw wanted, which was to bring me back here."

"What we all want," he countered with a smirk.

I wasn't going to look into his words too much; I knew it was a dangerous thing to do when it came to someone like him. Deciding that I wanted breakfast more than I trusted myself in a room alone with Cage, I left and walked down the long hallway where each of their bedrooms was located. I couldn't help but feel comfortable in their dorm, and like last time, I was left wondering why it was so different from the dorms we had been put into.

"It's because we are special," he mused. I jumped, his large frame appearing next to me, now in a fresh shirt as he offered me a charming smile. "And we're third-years. The first year dorms are the worst."

Before I could ask him what he meant about the 'special' part, we walked into their common room that even had a damn kitchen, along with a roaring fireplace. A fireplace Grimshaw was sitting near in a large arm chair, looking over a book. The minute I appeared, his gaze snapped up and ran over me, a smile tilting his lips.

"Good morning."

I narrowed my eyes and walked up to him as he set down his book. I placed my hands on either side of the chair and examined his face, which was filled with possessive heat and a bit of mirth.

"You could have taken me back to my room," I said evenly.

His smile grew. "I am not going to bullshit you, Deva. I wanted you here, so this is where you ended up." He said it like it was that simple.

I considered surging some magic through him, but I had a feeling he would like that too much. When his hand wrapped around my thigh, I stilled, my gaze darting down, absolutely loving how he seemed to completely encompass it. His thumb brushed over it, and a spike of desire soared through my system.

I stumbled back and away from him. "Next time you want me here, don't do it when I'm drunk. It's cheating," I growled.

*Oh man, Deva, why were you making this a game with the crazy bastard?*

His eyes flared. “No problem, little jaguar. No personal space coming right up. You won’t even have a chance to get drunk because you won’t leave my sight.”

Fuck.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I grumbled before sighing. “You know what, I’m not even going to argue with you about this anymore.”

His laughter followed me as I walked towards the kitchen, where Cage offered me a coffee mug. I slid onto the barstool, wondering if I needed to get out of here. I didn’t want to overstay my welcome, and *why was that even important to me?* I seriously needed to get away from these men. It was bullshit.

A plate was placed in front of me with toast that seemed to be surrounding an over-easy egg. A happy sound came from my throat as I looked up at Lazaro, who was staring at me, completely uncaring if it would bother me or not.

“Eat.”

“Trying to poison me?” I demanded. It was mostly a joke.

He smiled tightly before tilting his head. “I think we both know that I wouldn’t need to do that if I wanted you dead.”

I didn’t doubt it. That same spark of intensity had me feeling a faint memory pulling at my consciousness, before it was gone again.

Focusing back on my food, I tore the toast apart, happily dipping a piece in the now oozing egg and letting out a content hum as I took a bite. I could hear Cage and Grimshaw talking in the other room, and I briefly wondered where Oz was, but when I looked up, I was caught off guard by Lazaro staring at me still.

“Are you done staring?” I asked self-consciously, putting the piece of toast down.

“You done being in my dorm?”

I flinched before I could stop myself. I spoke in a low hiss, “I don’t want to be here, Lazaro. You guys brought me here.”

I pushed the plate away, no longer hungry, but he immediately pushed it back. “Keep eating, little thief.”

“Why do you call me that?” I narrowed my eyes at the nickname. Call me crazy, but I didn’t think it was just because of the moonstone incident.

“You think I believe stealing the moonstone was your first time?” His

gaze flashed with a darkness that almost looked like anger, but it didn't feel directed at me. "I bet you've been stealing for years, living on the streets."

His words hurt and caused me more shame than I would have expected.

I stood up from the chair and spoke with a relaxed tone. "Is that why you don't want me here? Afraid I'm going to steal from you, Lazaro?"

"No, Deva." His tone was serious and indifferent, but his expression was far from it, and I didn't understand it.

I looked around the room and then directly at him, my gaze running over his face. "It's a nice place, but there's nothing worth touching here."

A low sound escaped his throat, and when I tried to walk away, he appeared right in front of me, backing me up against the island. I slammed my palm against his chest but he pinned me there, dipping his head so we were nearly nose to nose.

"I didn't say you could leave, little thief."

"I don't really give a fuck what you do or don't say," I growled.

A whimper left my throat as his hand suddenly snuck out and slid up the back of my head, fisting my hair as my neck relaxed so that I was completely at his mercy. My nipples hardened, and heat flooded my system as I saw a darkness slip over his normal controlled indifference.

"Sit down and finish your breakfast. Now."

"Screw you, Lazaro," I bit out, sounding a bit more breathy than I would have liked. His gaze darted down to my lips, and for just a moment I thought he would kiss me. When he stepped back suddenly, I felt a shuddered breath leave me as he stormed away towards the bedrooms, leaving me to sag against the island.

The sound of someone sitting next to me had my head turning to find Cage looking amused as he ate some of my eggs. "He's in a mood."

No shit. I stole my plate back and sat down to finish now that he was gone. I absolutely hated how good it was.



## DEVA

“I need to change classes,” I murmured in realization, immediately meeting Lazaro’s gaze while standing in the doorway of my next class.

It had only been two hours since our standoff that Cage and Grimshaw walked me back to my dorm to get ready. Now that I was freshly showered and changed, I felt far better and more ready to handle him if he tried to tell me what to do again.

I just hadn’t worked out what exactly I’d do.

“*Nyet*. You’ll be fine, *zaya*,” Alek promised.

Despite not living with the guys, he had shown up at my dorm as if knowing where we were already. It had been a peaceful walk to class between the three of them before Cage and Grimshaw had parted ways, leaving me with Alek, who had immediately intertwined our fingers in a tight handhold. The man hadn’t kissed me again since Sunday night, a disappointment for sure, but the way he touched me was both protective and possessive, assuring me that he felt the connection between us.

“I’m not worried about me, I’m worried you guys are going to lose a friend.”

*Wow, Deva, a bit violent today?*

His eyes lit up. “No loss to me.”

I smiled, nearly rolling my eyes at that as I looked back at the classroom, my chest squeezing as I saw a girl, probably Lazaro’s age if not a year older, approaching him. This was a senior-level lunar class, *Complex Lunar Rituals* to be specific, so I didn’t know anyone he seemed to. I wondered how long he’d been testing out of his own year’s classes or if this was a special circumstance. I nearly sighed at that.



Wonderful. He was also smart. That was literally all I needed right now.

My heart staggered, tightening as she laughed at something he said. I turned looking up at Alek, who was watching my expression with interest. After an unspoken moment, he brushed his lips against my forehead before leaning back and cupping my jaw. “Go into class, *zaya*. I will see you later, okay?”

Deciding to be bold in my goodbye, I went up on my toes and slammed my lips against his. He let out a growl and pressed into me, his hands turning bruising on my waist. When he pulled his face away, he offered me a heated look before relaxing his hold and storming off, a small smile pulling at my lips. *Damn*, Alek was something else.

I also may have loved the reactions I inspired in him just a little bit too much.

“You’re putting on quite the show.” Lazaro’s voice was gruff and annoyed as I turned back to him, finding him directly in my space. His sleeves were pushed up today, and he wasn’t wearing a tie, showing off an expanse of golden skin that I found myself wanting to touch.

Fates. What was it with my attraction to this guy? It literally made no sense since he so clearly disliked me.

“Didn’t think you even realized I was here.” I eased past him into the classroom. When his hand snapped out to grab my wrist, I turned to him with an arched brow.

Lazaro dipped his head again, and I was starting to learn that the sure way to get a reaction from him was to either ignore him, dismiss him, or to not listen to him. Healthy, right?

“I always know if you’re in the room, little thief.”

Then he was walking into the space, leaving me to amble behind, letting out a frustrated sound from the back of my throat. I swear to the fates, I was going to end up killing him.

Luckily, the classroom was fairly large and seemed to hold about fifteen students, all of whom were staring at me, but it still provided ample space to avoid him. There were twelve desks formed in a circle, the center of the dusty wooden floor a large chalk circle that was obviously used for ritual magic.

I took a desk away from everyone, ignoring Lazaro who was three chairs away on his own as well, and sat down. I pulled the sleeves of my sweater over my palms and stared down at the desk, examining the names people had carved into it.

About thirty seconds later, someone sat down next to me.

I looked up to see that it was a larger guy, his messy black hair shaggy as he offered me what I think he meant to be a charming smile. “Hey.”

“Hi?” I offered a small smile, really hoping that he wasn’t a creep and was authentically just trying to be nice. Although, I recognized that was highly unlikely.

“I’m—”

“No one,” Lazaro bit out, standing in front of my desk. “Get up, that’s my seat.”

“I’m Deva,” I said, ignoring Lazaro.

His smile grew. “I’m—”

“Up. Now,” Lazaro snapped. “Don’t make me tell you again.”

“Later.” The guy chuckled, standing up and walking over to where his bag was set, as if he knew that would happen. Lazaro sat down next to me and grabbed the edge of my seat, pulling it towards him as a large grating sound filled the air. I glared at him, knowing he was drawing attention to us.

“Why?” I demanded softly.

“Because I don’t want you involved with any of these dumbasses.” He tried to sound distant and indifferent, but he didn’t maintain it nearly as well as normal, his jaw tight and eyes lit up with frustration.

“You sound jealous,” I observed, trying to mess with him.

His eyes flashed as he looked away towards the door, his lack of a rebuttal causing my eyes to widen. “Lazaro?”

That couldn’t be the case, right? There was no way.

“Please open up to the first page of your text and begin reading.”

The firm masculine voice had my eyes flicking up to a man who’d appeared out of seemingly nowhere. I watched a door close behind him and realized that his office was clearly behind him. I was a bit distracted at first because the man seemed like such an odd array of features. His face was well defined with wrinkles, and his short white hair seemed to match it, but his tan vibrant skin and the tattoos covering his hyper-muscular arms in his all black outfit were the complete opposite of the look. *Interesting.*

“Do we have an issue?” I jumped, realizing that he was looking at me. Lazaro opened up my book and I ducked my head, feeling embarrassed.

“Mr. Vevau is always an ass,” Lazaro grunted.

Was he trying to comfort me? I swear, I did not understand this man at fucking all.

I nodded and began reading. I was surprised I'd been placed in this level class, not because I wasn't good at rituals, but because my craft was completely unformed. In fact, during most of the rituals, I hadn't been allowed to take part unless I was being sacrificed. My throat closed up as I tried to not look at the ritual circle in that light. I would never get anything done if I started to.

"Deva," Lazaro demanded my attention. I snapped my gaze to him, my eyes wide.

"What?" I mumbled.

"You're shaking," he explained, his eyes darkening to a stormy gray.

I swallowed, looking down at my trembling fingers. I guess I was, wasn't I? I heard the professor talking in the background, and I didn't answer Lazaro as everyone around us began to stand up. What now?

Lazaro gently clasped my arm and led me towards a large space in the back of the classroom, everyone seeming to pair up and spread out. Class activities or something? Fates, maybe I should have thought this school plan out more. I wasn't positive I was cut out for this level of focus.

"We have to make a ritual circle, are you good to do that?" Lazaro asked.

"Yeah," I murmured, trying to snap out of it as I looked up at his gaze. "Do you have chalk?"

After a moment of evaluating my expression, he nodded and walked over to a supply cabinet and brought over two pieces. He handed me one, and I looked down at the floor before going to work on drawing the basic structure. I could feel him watching me as he drew runes along the inside of it, following my path. Within only a few minutes, the two of us had created a perfect ritual circle. I stepped back and realized that we would have to use our magic to activate it... I wasn't positive that was the best idea.

"Are you okay to do this?" he asked again, his voice filled with a softness that had me turning into him.

I nodded, avoiding his gaze as I looked at the teacher watching us. "Of course, why wouldn't I be?"

"Deva."

"Lazaro," I snapped, "I'm fine."

I went to the other side of the circle and crouched down, pressing my finger against one of the activation runes. Lazaro mimicked me, and with a nod, I closed my eyes and allowed my lunar magic to flow naturally through my fingers and out along the lines of the circle. I knew it wouldn't be

physically apparent to anyone, but I could feel how it slithered along each rune, lighting them up in my head. Everything was going according to plan, and I found myself relaxing...until my magic met Lazaro's magic in the center.

Everything exploded into action at once. The moonstone felt like it sank further into my chest as I let out a choked cry and fell forward onto my hands in the circle, and in the distance something shattered like a window breaking open, the magic that filled the space an intoxicating spell of all three venues of dark magic. I felt my body sway before I was falling to the side, and hit the ground hard.

The world seemed to move slowly at that moment, everything coming to a halt.

All I could hear through the windows was the sound of wind rustling and racing through the branches outside, creating a high-pitched whistling noise that had my throat closing up. Images raced past my gaze, through my memories, as panic began to cause my body to shake and tremor.

That damn sound reminded me of each and every time I laid outside on that stone altar, being cut open, staring up into the eyes of the man I'd wanted to make proud for so damn long. Tears leaked from my eyes, and a sob bubbled up as I felt pain rock through my body, remembering each and every carving despite being in a cationic state. Agony bubbled up from my gut, demanding attention as I cried out, words flowing from my lips that I didn't even recognize—

A pair of soft lips pressed against my own, halting everything as a hand pressed to the center of my chest, causing me to focus in on my heartbeat. The thud stabilized me as I felt my body sag, hitting the ground but at a far gentler place as whoever had kissed me pulled away, my hands too tired to shoot out to grab them.

The kiss had been soft, almost a grazing touch, but it had centered me enough to pull me back into the land of the living. My eyes snapped open to find Lazaro over me, but not just him. No, I could feel others staring at me and I exhaled sharply, trying to figure out how to react or explain myself.

*Sorry about that, you see, I have horrible PTSD from being tortured and killed again and again... So this simple ritualistic spell caused my magic to go haywire because of the connection I have with Lazaro. Simple enough, right?*

“What is the problem here?” Mr. Vevau demanded, appearing over me.

“If you can’t manage a basic spell without passing out—”

“She hasn’t been feeling well,” Lazaro bit out defensively. “I overwhelmed the circle and it hurt her. This is on me.”

It was so not on him, but that seemed to still the teacher, and he examined Lazaro’s fierce expression before grunting.

“Take her to the healer.”

I was lifted almost immediately, and I curled against Lazaro’s chest, my breath coming out in a small shaky exhale as I clung onto him. Lazaro carried me from the room, and for a time only his footsteps filled the space, until I was suddenly put down, being sat on the staircase. Lazaro crouched down in front of me, his eyes filled with confusion and what almost looked like panic.

“What the hell was that?” he asked—no, demanded.

“Nothing,” I bit out.

“It doesn’t seem like nothing,” he growled.

“It has to be nothing.” My eyes filled with tears.

“I could have done it if it was a problem—”

“I just want to be normal,” I whispered. It was so painful admitting that out loud. Lazaro didn’t say anything to that, and I knew why—‘normal’ would never happen for me.



## DEVA

I could never imagine how fast I'd snap back to acting 'normal' with the pressure of everyone staring at me like I was going to explode. I had no doubt that the events in my previous class had traveled around fast. I mean, the witch sector only had one hundred students total, so when someone passes out after having a near seizure—people were bound to take note.

Unfortunately. But because of their attention, I was doing my best to keep calm, which was difficult considering the frustration growing inside of me. I knew I needed to go to class, but a large part of me just wanted to go home. Home? Was that my dorm? If so, why was the boys' dorm the image that came to mind?

To say the least, I wasn't in a good mood and it didn't help that Lazaro walked next to me as we approached my next class, his hand grazing my lower back as if he was worried I would fall over or something. It was ridiculous.

When we reached the door, I turned to say goodbye or maybe offer a snarky comment, but immediately I was backed against the wall outside of the door and he was holding my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. I was positive none of my emotions were being hidden, so I just let him see the true force of emotions and frustration I felt. He didn't react like I'd thought he would, nor did he question it.

Instead he simply said, "Behave, little thief."

"Screw you," I muttered, with little heat.

He chuckled and instead of fighting back, he just walked away. Somehow I found that way more frustrating, and I think he knew it. My eyes narrowed on him before I let out a sigh and turned towards the door of the classroom,

only to be met with a hard, familiar chest.

My head fell back as I offered Grimshaw an amused look. "I really can't get away from you guys, can I?"

His lips tilted in a smile before grasping my waist. "I have to assume you would have a far easier time with it if you hadn't tested into all upper classes."

I tilted my head. "Somehow I doubt that would have stopped you."

His smile turned wicked. "You would be right, little jaguar."

"Let's get in there," I mumbled.

"Don't think you are getting out of talking about what happened in your ritual class," he warned softly.

I felt my cheeks heat. "I would really rather not."

"And I would rather have you in my bed every night, but we don't all get what we want, Deva."

I turned towards him in exasperation. "You can't just say shit like that, Grim."

His eyes flared as he looked around the room. "Why not? Everyone knows."

"Know what?" I demanded.

"That you belong to us." He smirked.

I both loved and hated his words. There was a sick part of me that wanted that... The other part of me, though, fought against anyone having ownership over me. After everything I'd been through, that was the last thing I should want, right? I must have stared into his gaze for too long because his amusement faded and his hand came up to cup my jaw.

"You know that, don't you?" he asked.

"I don't know anything," I answered honestly.

Not able to handle the seriousness of the situation anymore, I snapped around and walked into what appeared to be a gym. I looked down at the skirt I was wearing, and as if he read my mind, Grimshaw came up next to me and answered my unspoken question. "They have uniforms waiting in the locker rooms."

Uniforms? Somehow I was imagining the worst possible scenario. Then again, if I was wearing a plaid skirt all day, it couldn't get much worse than it already was.

He wasn't wrong about the uniforms though. The class of twenty only had to wait moments before a thin, lethal looking woman named Ms. Shade



appeared in the gym. The three-story tall walls were lined with blunt training weapons, and there were mats everywhere. It could have easily fit two hundred people, so it almost felt overwhelming. After a few minutes of instructions, I walked towards the female locker room, following behind the other girls. Grimshaw's gaze tracked me the entire way and made me want to look back at him so badly. *Somehow I resisted.*

When we entered the locker room, I found a metal locker that had my name on it, and upon touching the handle it immediately opened. I began to look through the expensive material of the uniform before putting it on a bench. Honestly, I wasn't positive what I'd been expecting, but it wasn't this. I put my bag in the locker, then slowly stripped off my clothes to change. The other girls were talking loudly, but I kept to myself, unable to muster the energy to be friendly.

I knew that was horrible of me... Maybe Thursday I'd engage? That sounded like a solid idea.

As I stood in my bra and underwear, I could feel eyes on my scars, and instead of shying away or feeling anxious, I focused on pulling on a pair of tight leathery pants, the material completely form fitting. I laced up the lightweight combat boots and then reached for the top. It was a small piece of material, and I realized pretty quickly that because of how it laced in the back and front, it would show off a lot of my back. I had a moment of hesitation, but I let it go and just put it on, before pulling up my hair. The moonstone was covered, and that was the important part.

When I was done, I turned back to see the other women staring at me. I didn't bother asking why; I knew what my back looked like. Instead I offered a small head nod and walked towards the door. There was a small shift that had occurred today, and I knew it was a mixture of being around the guys, who were as far from normal as possible, and what had happened in class. It seemed the more I restrained myself, the more I struggled. I wasn't fooling anyone—I was clearly very different from them.

Maybe being normal, even superficially, wasn't in the cards for me.

"Deva," Grimshaw called as he stood in the middle of the room, his large arms crossed and showing off his muscular arms in the sleeveless top they were assigned. Well, at least the clothing options were equal.

I walked past the professor and other students, keeping my gaze on Grim as his dark eyes ran over my body. There was heat there, and anger when he reached my scars. I nearly sighed at that—wait until he saw my back.

“And you wonder why I spent all summer looking for you when you were dressed so similar the night I met you,” he mused, running his fingers over my hips and to my ass, resting on the top in a possessive grip. I smirked at his words, and instead of answering, I took a moment to let my head fall forward as I absorbed everything about him in that moment.

Grim and I had problems—hell, he had problems, I had problems, and we had a ton of problems together—but there was something more, like with all these men, something that I couldn’t deny even if I wanted to. And it was becoming exhausting to do so.

“Alright!” Ms. Shade called our attention. I turned to lean against Grimshaw, knowing that we probably looked pretty scary together, the girl covered in scars and the massive guy covered in tattoos... I wouldn’t lie, I sort of loved it.

“We are going to start today with the basics of sparring. Everyone needs to pair up with someone similar in size, so come line up.”

I turned and offered Grim an amused look. “Looks like we can’t work together.”

His gaze was on my back though, darkness radiating out of him like a glow. His fury filled the space, almost making me breathless... Before it was just gone.

Grimshaw met my gaze and offered me a genuine smile, his fingers tracing the marks on my back gently. “You’re out of your mind if you think I am letting anyone else spar with you.”

Were we going to talk about the way his fingers were brushing over my skin?

“Mr. Nyx,” Ms. Shade called out, “you will be paired with—”

“I’m paired with Deva.”

Ms. Shade arched her brow and looked at me, then shook her head. “I’m not letting her get off easy just because you two are dating. Deva, you will be paired with Cloud.”

*What a name...* My gaze moved to the man she pointed to, who was the opposite of a cloud. He was short and stocky, all muscle and a blood witch, his eyes lighting up happily when meeting mine. I realized at that moment that I was actually rather small compared to even the other women in my class.

Wait, had she just said we were dating? I mean...I hadn’t denied it, and Grimshaw seemed far more focused on us not working together than that

label.

“Absolutely not,” Grimshaw growled. “Shade, I am serious—”

“I don’t care,” she snapped back, “and I don’t care who you think you are, Grimshaw. This is my classroom, not yours.”

My eyes widened as I looked back at him. I could see anger filling his gaze, and magic seemed to seep off of him.

I pressed forward and ran a hand up and along his chest in a soothing motion. “Come on, let’s not start class like this,” I said softly. “Please.”

He examined my face before letting out a low rumble. “We are switching once we start officially.”

After about five minutes, once we spread out, he attempted to do just that. Cloud kept trying to hit me with a blunt training sword, but I easily evaded him. I was somewhat bored, if we were being honest, and hadn’t even tried to use my sword, far too entertained with his mounting frustration and waiting to see what Grimshaw would do.

“Switch with me, dumbass,” Grimshaw bit out.

I looked at him with a pointed look. “Don’t call names.”

“She’s my partner,” Cloud said in a firm voice as my brows rose. *Well, someone had a death wish.* I nearly shook my head at that. How was I getting used to his insanity?

Grim appeared in front of him, overpowering his space easily. “Do it or else this will be your last day at DIA.”

“Grimshaw,” I sang his name, “come here.”

He turned his head and offered me a heated look. “Not yet.”

“Hey, seriously.” I approached him. “I don’t want to fight you. It’s not personal, but I won’t be able to concentrate.”

He frowned. “I am not letting you fight another man, especially one this incompetent. We can view it as training instead. Well, less training than keeping up your skill set. You obviously are already amazing at everything you do.”

Oh.

I couldn’t help but blush. “Alright, that was a bit sweet—fuck.”

In that moment, Cloud tried to turn and dart forward to hit Grim with his sword—which was quickly snapped in half.

Grimshaw knocked him on his ass and put his foot at his throat, offering me a curious look as if he wasn’t standing on a man. “What was that about me being sweet?”

I looked down at Cloud, whose face was turning purple. I had a feeling what would work with Grim, so I stepped back. “I mean, you’re being sort of sweet, but then again, now I feel like you don’t want to fight me—”

My body was slammed up against the mats on the wall as I let out a laugh, his large arms on either side of my head.

“Why fight when we can do this?” Grimshaw pressed a hard kiss against my lips. I could feel my face flushing, and I was faintly aware of chatter breaking out as I let my fingers dig into his hair, my heart beating loud and uneven. I moaned as I felt him get hard against me before he suddenly broke away, his gaze filled with so much affection it had my entire body melting.

“Fuck, it has been way too long since I’ve kissed you.”

“Grimshaw!” Ms. Shade’s voice was shrill.

“Fuck this shit,” he hissed, keeping me behind him as he turned towards her. Unfortunately, at that moment, Cloud appeared next to me and tried to grab my arm. I cringed, pulling away my hand, but before he could even really make contact, magic collapsed over him and he screamed. Shadows seemed to tear at his skin, and then they were gone as he fell onto the ground, unconscious.

Holy shit.

I looked up at Grim, who ignored the chaos and Shade screaming to get a medic. He bent down to nip my lip, causing me to let out a small whimper. “I don’t want any other men touching you outside of us.”

I went to go say something back to the psycho, but then he was kissing me, and he didn’t stop there. No, his lips came to my neck, holding my jaw still and body captive as he sucked hard on the skin there, causing me to jolt. The mark he left had my knees breaking as his shadows wrapped around me.

*Holy hell*, this man was absolutely something else.

I loved it. I think these men were unintentionally breaking me, weathering my resistance, and I had been positive I’d already been broken.



## DEVA

“You are making waves, and only on your second day,” Lazaro mused, seemingly far more relaxed than earlier. Something had changed between us when he’d kissed me, when he’d pulled me from that darkness. Now we were sitting cozy in *Advanced Lunar Magic*, the teacher having left us to get settled and talk to our partners for the semester.

And yes, Lazaro had made sure that he and I were paired up in the junior-level class. Although, to be fair, everyone else was somewhat just staring at me, so I was thrilled to have him here.

“I didn’t make any waves, Grimshaw was the one mauling me in class,” I murmured as he chuckled.

When the bell signaling the end of class rang, I stood up, stretching my arms above my head. Lazaro let out a groan. I snapped my head to him, catching his eyes running over my frame.

“What?”

“Nothing, little thief,” he grunted.

*Wasn’t positive I believe that one bit.*

As we left the room we fell into easy conversation, the tension between us drained for now. I didn’t completely understand what was changing between us, but it was fundamental enough that the defenses I had up before were quickly falling. As we stepped outside, I realized we were walking towards my room, and I felt a small surge of sadness.

Was it odd that I had hoped he would insist I come back to their place? I found the place comforting, partly because they were there... Okay, largely because of that, but also because it was peaceful and quiet.

I frowned, realizing that I would miss my friends a lot if I spent more

time with my psychos. Already I felt a bit distant from my roommates, and it had only been a couple days of us not spending time together. Was this how the rest of my time would be here? Couldn't I have both?

"I'm only taking you back to change," Lazaro murmured as if knowing where my thoughts went. "You're coming over for dinner."

I tried to offer him an annoyed look, but then I shrugged. "Fine, but then you have to answer my question."

"And what's that?" he asked curiously, opening a door for me.

"Cage said your dorm was special. What did he mean, and why is it special?"

Lazaro chuckled softly. "It's special because we had it gutted and completely redone on the inside to fit what we wanted. As for the other part... Do you really not know who any of us are?"

I cursed mentally, hating that I was unaware of something. But I also knew this wasn't a war I could win—I was extremely out of touch with witch culture.

I pinned him with a look and rolled my eyes. "No, Lazaro, I literally have no idea who any of you are. Happy?" Well, besides sexy as sin witches who had no business being so intense and toxically hot... Also psychotic, but somehow I was growing to love that. Sorry, like that—not love.

I wasn't crazy, obviously.

A small pang hit me at those lighthearted thoughts because as much as I felt for these men, I knew it could never work. They clearly had their secrets, and I sure as shit had mine. Even if they knew where I came from, they could never know what I'd done, because if they did... If they knew my real identity, they would probably kill me.

"It doesn't really matter," he admitted. "Just know that it's better for us to be on your side rather than the opposite."

I examined his gaze as we reached the dorms, stopping at the door. I could see that he meant that, and something tugged on my subconscious, telling me to examine the darkness under Lazaro's skin. His cool, aloof attitude was the mere surface level of the man, and I knew that if I made the choice to crack that mirrored surface, I would need to expect trouble. No one that controlled was hiding something good.

I would know.

When he opened the door for me and we began walking up the stairs, I realized that this couldn't keep going on. It had only been a few days, and

already they were all I thought about... No, this had to end. I was accepting them as a reality into my life, and that wasn't possible. When we reached the top of the stairs, I paused and looked up at him, examining his expression and finding curiosity there.

"I should leave here," I murmured, frowning. "You know that, right?"

Lazaro's face flashed with darkness as he looked out the window over my shoulder. "Yes, you should, Deva."

I felt pain slam into my chest as I nodded and turned towards the long hallway. I was only a few steps towards my dorm when his large rough hand gripped my hand and tugged me against him. My emotions were obviously clear on my face because I saw something shifting and coming out to play under his facade.

"But I'm not sure that would stop any of this." His voice was rough and filled with almost pain. "We would just find you, Deva. This is your new reality."

"What about it is real?" I demanded softly. "You four want the moonstone, and then... Well, I'm not sure what will happen then." I wanted him to tell me it was more than that, desperately. "None of this is going to work, Lazaro—"

My back hit the stone wall of the hallway as Lazaro crowded me, his forehead pressing against my own, his hands gripping my waist. A tremble worked through me, not having expected such intensity from him, as his gaze moved down to my lips.

"Deva, don't play stupid—you know this isn't just about the moonstone. We haven't done shit to get the moonstone out of you. If that's all this was about..." His words trailed as I blinked, realizing he was right.

"This isn't just about the moonstone," I mumbled in realization.

"Now you've got it," he murmured as I inhaled his expensive scent. I didn't want to say what came into my head next, but I knew I needed to.

"I don't want to be steamrolled. I *won't* be steamrolled. I have worked too damn hard to be pushed around, Lazaro. I won't lie—I know that there is something between the five of us, but I have no idea what it is. I have no idea what it means, and if I have to pick between myself and an unsure future, I will always pick my future and my freedom."

Lazaro didn't seem surprised by my words, his eyes turning into a melted mercury shade as he spoke softly. "I think you would have less fight on your hands if you stopped trying to run."



“I do not run,” I growled.

“Sure, not yet, but you have before.” His voice was rough. “The urge is there, I can feel it. It’s your go-to now. If something gets fucked up, you’re going to run.”

“Well don’t let shit get fucked up.” I pressed a hand to his chest. His eyes sparkled as he slipped a hand into my hair, fisting it tighter before stepping into me fully.

“I can promise you that you are under our protection, Deva, even if you deny wanting it, but I can’t promise you shit won’t get fucked up. Shit is always fucked up around us. If you want to stay at this school, then you can’t escape us, and you need to accept that. You have an out—you could leave and just tell the headmaster it isn’t the right fit, but you won’t, which means that you need to embrace this new reality.”

“A reality where four men are what? What are they to me?”

Lazaro’s jaw clenched. “Five, Deva.”

“Five?” I mimicked, realizing that he was including himself.

“Yes, five,” he hissed softly. “Now tell me that you won’t run, even when shit hits the fan. That you will trust them... Trust me.”

“Maybe,” I grit out, unable to accept his words or even get past the shock of him admitting that he liked me.

Lazaro didn’t like my hesitancy, so he slammed his lips against mine, hard. I moaned, loving the taste of him and the feel of our magic combining. I didn’t expect the rough primal attraction that railed into me, something he clearly felt as well, because in a blink of a second, I was on the ledge of the open arch window in the hall that stood four stories above the hard ground. Lazaro’s hands squeezed my ass as he dove back in to kiss me, the freedom of possibly falling backwards making my skin prickle with awareness as I tightened my hands on him.

“Say you won’t run,” he growled against my lips.

“No.” I tried to sound firm, but instead I just came across as breathy. Something was different about Lazaro, and I could feel him wanting to push the limits. I kept his gaze as he tightened his hold to nearly bruising, causing my center to melt with desire and need.

“You want this,” he growled, “I can feel it. So promise you won’t leave.”

“It doesn’t matter what I want,” I expressed with a bite to my tone. “If my past comes looking, I have to leave, Lazaro. I don’t have an option.”

“Deva,” Lazaro said softly, his eyes like electricity in the darkness of the

hall as storm clouds rolled in behind us. “Don’t you see how big this is? Bigger than even your past. I tried so hard to ignore it, but I can’t. I can’t ignore you. I wish I could.”

I winced at that, and he let out a frustrated sound at my reaction. “You don’t want me to be part of your life, Deva. Trust me. I am going to fuck all of this up. If I’m in your life, I will try to control everything. You just said how important your freedom is so I am trying to keep my distance, trying to restrain myself. I don’t know how long I can do that for... but I do know that running isn’t an option. Tell me that you won’t run.”

“I can’t promise you that,” I whispered softly.

“Damnit, Deva...” His gaze burned into mine. “I can’t let this go, because now I’m fucking paranoid you will leave tonight or some shit. So tell me that you won’t.”

“Or what?”

His gaze grew darker. “You don’t want the answer to that.”

I brushed his lips before saying, “You don’t scare me, Lazaro.”

“I should,” he growled.

“Better get scarier—*fuck.*”

In a stunningly fast movement, Lazaro lifted me onto the edge of the large window arch as he stood behind me, balancing both of us on the stone surface. I inhaled sharply, his arm wrapped around my waist and the other around my throat as his magic coated my skin. *How the hell were we balancing here?*

“You have no idea the things I can do, Deva. The things I want to do to you.”

I swallowed as I looked at the four-story fall. My throat grew thick with emotion as my body prickled with the awareness of how hard he was against me.

“Show me,” I whispered, not knowing where my bravery came from.

Lazaro didn’t hesitate, his magic gripping me possessively as his hand slid down from my throat to cup my breast. I let out a soft moan as he teased my nipple through my shirt, his other sliding under my skirt as my center clenched with pleasure at his tortuous touch. When he tugged my panties to the side, his fingers met my wet pussy as I whimpered, nearly coming at the way he spread the wetness over my clit. When his lips brushed my neck again, I tilted my head and exposed my throat.

“You are so wet,” he rumbled in approval. “Is that because of me or the

fear?”

I blinked, realizing that in some ways he was right—it was the exhilaration of being in danger paired with the way he touched me in a demanding way, as if he had to be connected to me somehow.

“Both.”

“Good girl.”

I moaned out his name as he sank a finger inside of me, my pussy contracting around him. He began to pump in and out of me hard while teasing my nipple, frustration mounting in my center. Then he was against my ear, whispering, “I can feel that you need to come for me, Deva. Do it. Do it now.”

As if giving the command to my body, a sudden orgasm slammed into me and I nearly collapsed, falling over the edge at the collision of his magic. I would have fallen willingly, but he held onto me and pulled his fingers from me before sucking on them. The complex man that was Lazaro made my head whirl, especially when he tugged me back off the ledge.

A weird sense of déjà vu worked through my head, making me feel like I’d been in a very similar position with Lazaro before... But that was impossible, right?

“Lazaro,” I murmured, wanting to tell him just that.

“Promise me,” he whispered against my ear, “Promise me that no matter what, you won’t run, Deva. We can’t protect you if you run.”

I turned into him and rested my head on his chest as I let out an exhale. “I won’t run.” I couldn’t promise anything else, but I could promise that.

Lazaro’s frame instantly relaxed before letting out a low rumble. “Come on, little thief. Let’s get your shit and head home.”

I nodded, feeling a bit dazed as I stared at the lunar witch. There was such power under his skin, but how he managed to control it blew my mind. I wanted to see him let loose. I didn’t know why... I mean, that couldn’t be healthy, right? When he nodded towards the door, I blinked and approached my room, opening the door with shaky hands.

The door swung open, and ice poured over me as I examined my room. “Well, Grimshaw may get his wish.” My voice sounded raw as I stepped into the chaos of a completely destroyed room.

Other students? Possibly. As I looked around, I was happy to see that almost none of it was personal stuff, my things locked away in my chest in the closet. A spray-painted message was scrawled on my bedding, which now

hung up by the windows. *Whore.*

I swallowed down any emotion, my heartbeat slowing to an almost non-existent pace despite Lazaro being there. Walking towards the bathroom, I looked into my closet and breathed out a sigh of relief, finding it completely untouched. I just prayed to the fates that whoever had been targeting me had left my friends alone.

When I turned back around, Lazaro was standing there, staring over the chaos.

“Clearly someone doesn’t want me here,” I offered.

“Pack. Now.”

Lazaro stepped back into the room without another word and began to search the space, his silence making me feel on edge. I grabbed my uniform from inside the closet and a few other things for staying over at their place. I could tell that it wasn’t the time to argue, and more so, I didn’t have many options on where to go. It wasn’t until a minute later that Lazaro appeared in front of me. The item he dropped on my bathroom counter had my blood running cold.

I stepped back immediately, my eyes narrowing on the item as I looked back into the room. “Where did you find that?”

Lazaro eyed me with concern. “The doll? I assumed it was yours.”

The small cloth doll was roughly stitched together, the plush material from inside falling out. There was a moon on the center of its chest, and the magic coming off of it was familiar enough that my knees broke, leaving me breathless. My entire body went cold, and the sensation of panic had me wanting to flee.

*This* was what I’d been afraid of. I was caught here. I couldn’t leave, not without telling the headmaster why I needed a portal. Holy fuck. I was trapped. My throat grew tight as I felt myself double over to grip the floor.

Every scar on my body seemed to come alive all at once, and I could feel a wave of nausea roll through me as I almost puked. Warm hands slid over my arms, but I couldn’t focus on that. No, all I could focus on was the wind that seemed to batter my insides, warning me of the storm to come.

“Deva.” Lazaro’s voice was hard, and I snapped my gaze up to where he was kneeling in front of me. “Fucking breathe.”

I drew in a ragged breath as I gripped his arms and put my head down, unable to sort through what I could even say to him. How did I make this seem not as drastic as it clearly was?

“Please get me out of here, do not bring the doll,” I whispered.

Lazaro picked me up so fast I barely registered it at first, and as he carried me out, my eyes went to the windows of my bedroom. Everything revolted inside of me as I momentarily saw a dark shadow pass the glass—

The door fell shut as Lazaro carried me down the hallway, leaving my past trapped in a room that I knew it would eventually escape. There was only one person that would leave a doll like that, and I had been running from him for years.

“I know you want an explanation,” I whispered as we got out into the cold.

“Later,” he murmured against my temple. “First let’s go home.”  
*There was that word again. Home.*



## DEVA

“Let me out. Now.”

Cage’s eyes filled with a dark light that he tried to hide behind a charming smile. He was spread out across his bed, his long muscular body looking far too tempting. I had no idea what it was about the man, but I wanted to lay wrapped up in his arms and surrender to the crazy I could practically feel under his skin. It was such a drastic contrast to the control and tight rein I kept on myself.

I tugged on the door again, even tried throwing my magic at it, but it just bounced off in a white light that had me letting out a frustrated noise that probably sounded like a kitten growling—despite wanting it to sound way more deadly than that.

Cage chuckled softly. “Why don’t you just take a seat for a minute? You look stressed, and considering how you arrived at our dorm... I would much prefer you relaxed.”

Yeah... I wasn’t going to talk about that. In fact, my momentary lapse of judgment had landed me in this position, where I was trapped in his room. Literally trapped, even though I could hear the harsh whispers of the others discussing me beyond the door. Of course I hadn’t thought through their reactions to what had occurred in my room, and I was now greatly regretting that.

Who the hell knew what they would do—which was why I needed to get out there.

I turned on Cage and narrowed my eyes. “Open it, Cage. I’m not messing around.”

He tilted his head. “Why?”

“For one, I don’t like being locked away. Secondly, I can practically hear Grimshaw losing his shit from here—”

Cage barked out a laugh. “No, Grimshaw isn’t the one you need to worry about right now.”

“Third,” I hissed, “you are psychotic. You are seriously off your rocker, locking me in a room, so let me out of here. Now.”

His eyes flashed with dark amusement. “I suppose that’s a possible reality.”

Oh, it was possible alright. It was the only way to describe someone that would lock me in a room for nearly an hour.

And what did he mean about Grimshaw not being the one I needed to worry about? His words made me even more motivated to break out.

“Why won’t you let me out?”

“Because you’re going to ruin their attempt at calming down certain members of our team,” he responded seriously before offering me another charming smile. “Plus, how can I prove how good we are together if you keep running away?”

“I never said we weren’t good together!” I growled, realizing my mistake.

“But you haven’t kissed me, and you’ve kissed all four of them.”

My cheeks flamed. “Who I kiss is none of your business, and *this* is not how you date someone.”

“I wouldn’t know.” He shrugged. “Now come sit down, Deva.”

“No.” Although his words inferring that he hadn’t dated someone before made me far too happy.

I turned back to the door and pulled as hard as I could, throwing magic into it. I hissed as I jolted back and fell onto the floor, making me realize the magic they had on this door was way past the norm. It was both impressive and horrible because I did not like feeling trapped. I hissed, realizing that the door had cut my palm. The scent of blood filled the space as I lifted it up to look at.

Immediately I felt the entire space turn dark.

When Cage’s magic wrapped around me, not allowing me to move, I swore and looked up to where he was standing above me. “What are you doing?”

His large hands wrapped around my waist while picking me up from the ground and carrying me towards the bed. I cursed, trying to struggle, but he didn’t allow it.



“Just stay still.” His voice was light and amused, not matching his energy in the least. He sat me down and slid behind me, his much larger legs going on either side of mine. I jumped as I felt him move my hair to the side and brush his nose against the length of my neck. His magic released me, and when I tried to surge forward, he kept me there, tight against him.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

“Just checking to make sure you’re okay,” he promised, his voice rough. “Looking at every part of this gorgeous body, don’t want you damaging yourself.”

“Cage.” My voice was rough as he lifted my hand, and I tilted my head up to see him staring at my blood, his eyes shading to darker as he looked back down at me.

“If I can’t kiss you,” he murmured, “can I taste you?”

My breath caught as I felt my skin break out into dangerous shivers. Why couldn’t he do both? I found myself answering before I could stop it, wanting to see what his lips would feel like on me.

“Yes.”

I let out a small gasp as his mouth came down on my palm. He drew his tongue across the cut, causing fire to explode in my center. My head fell back, watching as he sucked on the skin there. Electricity went through every nerve, and I arched against him, wanting more of his touch against my skin. Wanting him to taste all of me. I didn’t understand the intensity of my reaction, but I couldn’t deny it.

When he pulled back, I could see something had snapped in his gaze, and he let out a low groan. “Fuck, you taste so good—”

“Is it normal for blood witches to drink blood?” I asked softly.

His eyes flashed with something almost vulnerable. “No, little siren, it’s not.”

“And if I liked it?” *What was I even saying?*

“Then I would keep doing it,” he murmured, seeming to relax, as if he’d been concerned about my reaction. I didn’t know what to make of that, exactly.

“Also, ‘little siren’?” I asked curiously.

I was flipped onto my back almost immediately, and I realized that my action, allowing him to taste me, may have released something in him, because his intensity seemed to be ramped up tenfold, any humor gone. “That’s exactly what you are. Your blood is like a goddamn siren call.”

My blood was still on his lips.

I licked my own lips and met his gaze. "Kiss me, Cage."

He didn't wait to be told twice.

Cage's kiss was so much more toxic than I could have expected. The way he seemed to collide with my magic was absolutely deadly...and amazing. The taste of my blood between us was intense and overwhelming. It had everything inside of me lighting up, and instead of melting, I felt like I'd been injected with adrenaline. My hand slipped into his hair, my fingers tightening to the point that he growled.

I hissed as he ground down into me, and I slid my tongue against his, our passion seemingly rough and angry. I rolled us so that I was over his large body and grinding against his cock, Cage groaning as his hands slid over my ass. I felt his magic driving something inside of me, and the taste of my blood on his lips had me wanting...to taste his own. I nipped his lip, hard, and he growled, a savage sound, as he flipped us again, his breath wild and eyes black as he pulled back.

My gaze went over his bleeding lip.

"Did you just bite me, little siren?"

"Yes," I murmured. "I wanted to see what you would taste like."

The smile that filled his face was absolutely wicked. I could tell he wanted to say something, but when the door was wrenched open, his eyes flashed with humor, making me realize he had known someone was there. I nearly scowled at that, but when I turned my head and found it was Oz, all I felt was heat at his violet gaze.

Oz stalked over to the bed and Cage rolled to the side, allowing him to grab me. His voice was rough. "We said to keep her in here, not to maul her."

"She asked me." Cage grinned obnoxiously.

Oz growled and then sniffed, looking down at my hand. "Why are you bleeding?"

"I tried to get out," I murmured.

His gaze narrowed as it moved to Cage. "Really?"

"What?" I pulled away.

"That isn't part of the warding spell, he just wanted to see your blood."

"And taste it." Cage winked at me. "Although I didn't expect you to fall back."

Oz shook his head and carried me out of the room and towards...his?

"Where are we going?"

“Main room, but I need to clean this first.”

A second later I was in his room, and I was so caught off guard by the massive amounts of bottles and skulls in his room that I didn't realize he'd tied down my wrists until I looked down at the chair I was sitting in.

I frowned. “Oz, untie me.”

“I will, I need to fix this.” His voice was oddly relaxed, but I didn't buy it.

The candlelight of the room as he sat down in front of me, examining the deep gash on my palm, had my center tightening. His unusual eyes were focused on the cut, and I hissed as he ran his finger along it, staring at the torn flesh. He watched a drop of blood drip down my pale skin.

“I've always wanted to know what you looked like on the inside,” he murmured. “You're beautiful.”

I inhaled sharply. “Oz.”

“Did you know that? You used to sleep under my protection, and I imagined cutting you open. I didn't—still don't—want to kill you, but I have always had a fascination with how you would look on the inside.”

Oh, fates.

“That—” My voice stuttered.

“When I first met you, I just couldn't understand how someone so incredibly perfect could exist. I figured that you couldn't be made of what the rest of us are,” he whispered and then looked up at me. “But you are. You're just an extraordinarily perfect specimen.”

“I really don't know how to feel about that,” I whispered. “I should be really freaked out.”

His brow dipped. “I would never hurt you, starlight. I may be fucked in the head, but I would never hurt you—there is only one thing I fear, and it's losing you. It happened once; I couldn't handle it happening again.”

Oh.

I nibbled my lip. “I missed you.”

His smile was small but genuine as he gripped my chin, stroking a finger over my lip. “Good, because I will never let you go.”

“Never?”

“Ever,” he confirmed and then he kissed me. It was softer than I expected, but my breath caught as I completely relaxed into him, allowing his magic to run over me before he pulled back. Then he looked down on the cut and brought a bone-like needle up to the light. It had no string attached to it

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“Shit!” I hissed as he began to weave it back and forth, sewing up the cut. I had no idea what magic it was because there was nothing to stitch it up with, but the wound began to heal flawlessly as we both watched the flesh tug and pull. When he was finally done, he brushed his lips against it and then unwrapped my wrist.

“Alright.” He flashed me a small amused look. “Now you are really needed in the other room.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Lazaro has lost it.”

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“He’s in there?” I nodded towards the door. Alek had his arm wrapped around my waist as he glared at Grimshaw. It was obvious he was in complete disagreement with Grim on how to handle this. Although, to be fair, even Grimshaw appeared uneasy.

“Yes,” Grimshaw said. “I wouldn’t suggest this if I didn’t think it would work—”

“Because he’s crazy,” Alek snarled. “*Nyet*. She’s not going in.”

“I don’t understand,” I whispered.

Grimshaw crossed his arms and leaned against the island. “Lazaro is powerful enough that he has a segmented part of himself that is powered purely by magic. Most of his family is the same way.”

“Okay...”

“When he experiences high emotions, it sometimes takes over. It’s like a completely different person,” Grimshaw explained, “one that doesn’t give a fuck about anything but magic and violence.”

“Lately they have been more together than apart,” Oz admitted. “The separation isn’t nearly as clear.”

“What caused this?” I asked quietly. “Why now?”

Cage chuckled from the kitchen. “That would be you, little siren.”

“Me?” I looked back towards the large wooden door that stood off to the side of the space. I had no idea what this place used to be, but it was very clearly not a normal part of the dorm.

“It doesn’t exist. It’s a doorway into a shadow-scape,” Grimshaw said. “It

was his idea. After last time.”

I wasn't even going to ask about the last time, whatever that was. “Why do you think me going in there is going to fix this?”

Grim hesitated. “He will see you're okay.”

“And then who knows what he'll do.” Alek sounded panicked, which was so unlike him.

I turned into him and looked up at the dangerous, soft-spoken man. “I'm not scared of Lazaro. I promise I'll be fine.” I needed to fix it if he was like this because of me.

Alek's jaw clenched, and he hesitantly let me go. I walked up to the door as Grim said, “Just press your hand against it—”

Immediately I fell forward into darkness and absolute silence.

The surge of lunar magic that surrounded me was all-consuming. I felt the darkness of the space wrap around me like a heavy weighted blanket as my heart beat loudly, clearly responding to Lazaro despite not being able to see him. I was going to call out to him, but I didn't need to—I could feel him.

“Deva.”

His voice was rougher than normal and shiver-inducing. I inhaled his magic, loving how it felt against my skin. He wasn't wrong earlier today—where the fear should have been sat pure, unadulterated desire. More than that realization though... I found that this space, this energy was familiar.

“Where are you?” I asked softly.

When two hands came across my hips, I almost relaxed back into him... but then the entire space shuddered and transformed. I let out a groan as his grip tightened on my waist, holding me up as the rest of my body felt heavier and weighted, a cold ocean wind coming over me. I hung over a cliff, my hands grasping at his arms so that he didn't let go. I wasn't scared, but I was a bit surprised, and when I looked up into his gaze, I realized just how far gone the man was. His chocolate hair was streaked with silver, and his tattoos were all lit up, his eyes focused fully on me.

Then it hit me, all at once.

“The dreams... You've been visiting my dreams,” I whispered, wide-eyed.

His jaw clenched as his eyes darkened. “What of it, little thief?”

I felt frustration soar through me. “*What of it?* You act like an ass all day long, and then at night you come into my dreams and—”

“And do what?” he challenged, arching a brow. “What have I done to

you, Deva?”

I knew he wanted me to admit to how he'd touched me, but I wouldn't.

“And as for being an ass... Today when I pulled you out of a magically induced seizure, was I an ass then? Or when we went to your room and found that doll that sent you spiraling, was I an ass then? If I'm so much of an ass, then why did you let me touch you, little thief?”

I knew I was hanging over a cliff, but I couldn't help but answer truthfully.

“No, you weren't being an ass then,” I admitted, “but you have acted like you've disliked me from the start, Lazaro.”

“You know that's not true,” he growled softly.

“Then what is this?” I motioned down below with my chin. “If you don't hate me, or even dislike me, why the theatrics?”

His eyes darkened. “Because I shouldn't like you.”

“Why, because I'm a thief?” I asked. I didn't think it was that. In fact, the more I recalled our conversation earlier, specifically about his controlling nature, the more I realized that Lazaro thought he was protecting me... from himself.

“No.”

“Then why? And why the hell hold me over a cliffside?” I growled.

“To scare you. To see if you can experience fear.”

I knew that below there were waves crashing, and I had no idea how dangerous his illusions were, but I just grasped onto him. “This doesn't scare me, Lazaro.”

There was only one person who could scare me.

His smile grew as he pulled me forward so that I was level with his lips. “I didn't think it would, little thief. In fact, I suspect there isn't much that you fear, unfortunately.”

“So why are you doing this?” I demanded. “Why do you want me to be scared?”

His eyes flashed with darkness, and suddenly I was slammed against the cliffside with him over me. “Maybe it's because you won't touch me without being scared.”

“That's not true.”

“You were terrified two times today, and I am going to assume for the same reason.” He fisted my hair, allowing my feet to touch the cliff we stood on, and examined my lips. “What is the thing that terrifies you, Deva? Since

fear turns you on and I can't seem to scare you into submission even if I wanted to—”

“Lazaro, that isn't something we should talk about right now,” I whispered, feeling pain slam into me.

He chuckled softly, the space transforming as I found myself against a wall, in a space that resembled his bedroom, though I knew it wasn't. I groaned as he got close to me, his hand tightening on my throat as he looked over me, anger filling his gaze.

“You would talk to Alek about it,” he snarled.

I inhaled sharply. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that he knows you better than me,” he bit out.

“Lazaro.” I exhaled, feeling slightly relieved. “All of this is hurting my head, and I have no idea what to make of it. You seemed to hate me until today—”

“Hate you?!” he barked, letting me relax into him slightly. “That would be far easier, Deva. No, little thief, I do not hate you. Not in the least.”

“What do you feel for me then?” This man was giving me whiplash.

“Too much,” he bit out.

I flinched. “No one asked you to.”

“You don't think I've tried to not?” he growled. “Love can't survive if both people are broken.”

Ouch. I frowned. “Who said I'm broken?”

“I did, Deva.”

“Fuck you.” I shoved him away as my magic flared out. He stumbled back, frustration filling his face. “I'm not broken, Lazaro. You have no idea what I've survived”—or didn't survive—“so don't you dare say I'm broken.”

Lazaro's tone was crushed. “I don't mean it—”

“Like a bad thing?” I offered a shake of my head. “You know what, Lazaro? You don't get to do this. I can excuse some shit. I can forgive Grimshaw for steamrolling into my life. I can overlook Oz's serial killer tendencies. I can ignore that Cage is one hundred percent crazy. I can even move past Alek having some serious problems—but this? I can't do this with you. I won't be with someone who thinks I'm weak, thinks I'm broken.”

“I never said you were weak, Deva.” His tone was calm but didn't match his expression.

“You said I was broken!” I felt my voice raise.

Lazaro was on me at that moment, his lips were seared to mine before he

ripped them away, his magic dulling. “I did, and it’s fucking beautiful, Deva.”

*Oh.* Okay then.

This man was so...lost. That was the only word for it. It was like he was unraveling in front of me, and I had no idea how to handle it. My voice was unsteady. “Have you ever been in love, Lazaro?”

“No.” He barked out a sad laugh. “I’ve never experienced any type of love.”

“So don’t talk about how love works. Love isn’t perfect, and it sure as hell doesn’t have set standards.”

His eyes were shaded with shadows. “And do you believe your own words, Deva? Or are you going to keep denying your own feelings because you’re scared to trust five people that are going out of their way to prove to you that they are serious about this connection?”

I sighed in resignation. “No, I’m done denying it... But don’t pressure me to tell you everything yet, Lazaro. Please?”

Lazaro held my gaze before nodding. “Alright, little thief.”

Suddenly we were yanked out of the space, and I groaned as both of us landed on the kitchen floors.

“Well, that did work,” Alek sighed. “I owe you an apology.”

“More than worked.” Grimshaw grinned at me.

“Why is that?” Oz raised a brow.

“Because Deva agreed to date us.”





## DEVA

“I already agreed to stay for dinner, I am going back to the dorms after this,” I pointed out, relaxing into the armchair I was curled up on, looking over the five men who seemed very upset by my announcement. “I don’t even need to ask to go to my dorm, technically; I am simply just giving you the courtesy of knowing so you don’t slaughter half of the academy looking for me.” I didn’t think they would... probably.

Of course, I didn’t want to go back—hell, I would probably come back here right afterwards... But after calming down from the situation at hand—the one that was making their argument about my safety and going back somewhat logical—I realized that I needed to get in there and look around before anything was disturbed. Maybe I hadn’t seen that doll. Maybe I’d imagined it because I felt startled, overwhelmed, and tired. I had to pray that was the case, because if not... Well, I didn’t want to consider that. Plus, I really wasn’t in the place to answer questions that I knew they would demand.

“I wouldn’t predict half,” Lazaro murmured, his gaze far more calm and back to normal. But the way he was looking at me was different and more open as I arched an amused brow at him. I honestly didn’t understand our dynamic, but I had decided I would just roll with it, not denying the obvious attraction to one another.

“Well, considering you’re the one I am worried about doing it...” I teased. A dark glint filled his gaze as he offered me a small shrug and leaned back into his chair.

“I’m going.” I looked back at the rest of them. “I understand your point about my safety, I really do, but I can handle myself. I don’t need to be

babysat. Plus, everything I own is in that room—no, you cannot move it.”

The last part was directed at Grimshaw, who offered me a heated look. “I will not be the girl that moves into the dorm of some guys she barely knows. I’m not adding whatever drama that would cause to my life.”

Because call me crazy, but I felt like Emily was just one example of the trouble coming my way.

“But it’s not *some guys’ dorm*, it’s ours,” Grimshaw pointed out, his smirk lazy.

“Better only be ours,” Oz growled.

“I don’t think anyone will consider getting close to her after the past few days,” Lazaro added, causing me to scowl at him.

I crossed my arms. “I think you were the one who told me that you didn’t want me here this morning, or am I crazy?”

I saw frustration flare in his gaze. Had he thought I would forget that?

“The fuck?” Cage demanded.

Lazaro narrowed his eyes. “Deva...”

“Nope.” I cut him off. “He also calls me ‘little thief.’ I think he’s worried I may steal his stuff.”

Lazaro caught me around the waist and tugged me onto his lap, burying his nose buried against my throat as I grumbled a complaint. I couldn’t lie, I loved the subtle shift in his personality, and despite being frustrating, there was a warmth there.

“Unsurprising,” Oz muttered, looking annoyed.

Lazaro growled, grabbing my chin and speaking directly to me. “I didn’t mean it like that. You asked if I was done staring, to which I responded ‘are you done being in my dorm,’ implying that neither was going to happen since we weren’t letting you leave.”

I couldn’t help but feel relief and hope that he really meant that. I had been hurt by his words, which I really shouldn’t examine too deeply because it couldn’t be healthy how badly I wanted these men to need me. Maybe their crazy was infecting me... You know, that was actually completely possible. So why wasn’t I stopping it?

“And the thief part?” I asked curiously.

“I’m angry about you having to steal,” he answered with a bite to his tone, “but not because I think you’re going to steal from us.”

Oh. Well, how angry would he be if he realized how many people I’d killed? Honestly, his words did quell a bit of the embarrassment I’d been

feeling about my most recent occupation. It wasn't like I stole because I enjoyed it; it was a matter of survival.

"I still can't move in," I said firmly.

"You are though," Grimshaw leveled as if I hadn't spoken. "If you want to go to grab your stuff tonight, fine, but you are staying with us. Someone broke in and trashed your room; it's not even fit for you to be in right now."

He had a point, I just wasn't going to let on that I agreed with him.

I shook my head. I would go back after dinner whether he wanted me to or not. "Listen, if the insistence on my safety is because of the moonstone, I get it. I'll be careful. But just because we are into each other doesn't mean I am going to move in with you."

"It's not about the moonstone," Oz responded as they all stared at me in confusion.

Lazaro chuckled and despite him telling me the exact same thing earlier... part of me had wondered if they really felt that way.

"'Into each other' is a very casual way to explain what's happening here," Alek murmured.

"What would you call it?" I questioned, feeling nervous.

"Would it make you feel better if we said it was about the moonstone?" Cage seemed amused.

"Yes?" I offered cautiously. It wouldn't, but I was curious what he would say.

"Then yes, it's completely about the moonstone and not the possessive, obsessive feelings we have towards you." Cage tilted his head. "Does that work?"

Nope. No, it did not.

"That's another thing," I drew out. "I don't do possessive."

Right? I didn't do 'possessive.'

Well, I thought I didn't do possessive...but maybe I just didn't do it with people who weren't these men? Astaroth controlled everything about my life, literally everything, and because of that I suffered, so my brain told me that possessive behavior was bad.

So what was the difference here?

*They wanted you safe.*

I blinked, realizing that was the key. Astaroth didn't care about my safety, almost the exact opposite, whereas they seemed hyper-attentive towards it. I swallowed, not knowing how to deal with the realization that I was okay with

their behavior.

“It’s our magic,” Cage argued.

“Well that isn’t my problem,” I mused, unable to help myself from smiling.

“It is since you’ve kissed all of us,” he countered as my cheeks heated.

“But she’s only slept with me,” Alek growled as I looked at him.

“In the same bed,” I pointed out. “We slept in the same bed.”

“I’ve slept with her also,” Cage argued. I escaped Lazaro’s hold and stood up.

“Rephrase, please?” I put my hands on my hips as Grimshaw chuckled, Lazaro running a hand along his face. Oz... Well, he was still staring at me.

As they continued to argue, I sighed. “Okay, the point is that I don’t do possessive, even if it’s magic.”

“Mine isn’t just my magic, I’m a possessive bastard when it comes to you,” Oz pointed out.

“Yeah, as much as my magic loves you, little siren, it’s not nearly as much as I—”

I flashed across the room, slapping my hand across his mouth. “What are you freakin’ doing? Literally, what are you saying?”

He stared up at me with a cheerful expression as I slowly removed my hand, watching his lips cautiously. Seriously, I was a bit terrified of what would come out of his mouth next. I mean... Was I crazy, or was he about to say what I thought he was? There was no way, right?

“Love.”

My eyes widened in shock before he smirked.

“As much as I love you touching me.”

I narrowed my eyes because he absolutely had not meant that, but I wasn’t able to force the conversation because it meant confronting the absolute nonsense he’d actually been saying.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen Cage this happy,” Lazaro pointed out.

“He’s happier than when he kills,” Oz agreed.

I eyed Cage before stepping back and exhaling, running a hand through my hair. “Okay, here is the deal—if you really want me here...”

Was I about to do this? What were my reasons for not living here? Freedom. That was a solid one, but like I had said, I enjoyed their possessive behavior. I also knew logistically that my dorm probably wasn’t safe to stay in. I could have stayed with my friends, but I didn’t want to mess up their

lives...which left me with this option. One that I found far too appealing.

All of them stared at me expectantly as my chest squeezed, realizing they really did want me here. I continued, "Then I will bring my stuff here—"

"And sleep here," Oz demanded.

I crossed my arms. "I don't even have a bedroom."

"You can have mine," Alek said easily.

My eyes widened. "You have a room here?"

He shrugged. "I have a room just in case."

In case what? It was a question that I would have to ask him later. I also had to wonder what his other room was like, and I found myself hoping that he would sleep here instead, even if it meant being in the same bed together. Especially if it meant that.

"Plus, the point is that we want you to move in, so sleeping is part of that," Grimshaw pointed out.

"Okay." I nibbled my lip. "Then we can figure out something about me sleeping here, but we aren't telling anyone, okay? For all they know, I live in the dorms with my friends." I would have to let my friends know so they didn't think something horrible had happened. That would be fun, explaining this shit.

"And the rest of the day, I am going to go anywhere I want," I added.

"With one of us," Cage agreed.

I ran a hand across my face. "You know what, think whatever will make this as easy as possible. I just want to blend in, and I am already drawing attention—"

"Something we need to talk about, first with class and then your room." Lazaro's words brought the elephant in the room front and center.

"Later," I mumbled. "Does that work? Can we keep this low-key?"

Cage barked out a laugh. "Little siren, we don't do low-key."

"Plus, it's impossible for you to blend in," Oz said seriously.

"It's true, you glow." Alek's voice was soft and filled with affection.

"I do not glow," I argued.

"You do," Grimshaw disagreed. "But we will do our best to keep it as relaxed as possible—just don't fight us on keeping you safe."

"And understand that the conversation about what's going on with you is coming. Not tonight, but soon," Lazaro added. I made a concerned noise in the back of my throat.

Before I could respond to that, there was a knock on the door that caused

all of us to still. It wasn't a normal knock, either—it was a soft thud like someone was hitting their head against the wood. I felt my magic rise in a surge of warmth, and Alek stood, offering me a confused look as he rubbed his chest.

Did he feel the same weird surge of power that I did?

“What the hell?” Lazaro muttered, walking over to the door.

The minute he opened it, I let out a startled noise as a small, dark, shadowy figure surged forward, literally bouncing against my chest and knocking me to the ground, causing me to let out a pathetic groan. I distinctly heard an odd almost screeching noise, but all I could focus on was the wisps of shadows that almost seemed to be licking my face. What the heck was going on right now?

“What in the fates...” I opened my eyes to find a massive pair of purple eyes peering down at me.

I would have said I was looking up at a cat, but it wasn't a simple cat. No, this creature was the size of a kitten, but with large ears that went back like horns, and its body, while shaped like a cat's, was completely covered by—or maybe made of—shadows that seemed to crawl off of it. A large tail wrapped around the creature, fluffy on the end, the furry texture looking almost sparkly. I raised a hand, feeling a soft affection towards the creature as it let out a purr and leaned into me.

“You are so...” I paused because I was going to say *beautiful*, but that didn't do it justice. “You are so unique.” The creature let out a happy purr and curled up on my chest as I sat up slightly, its figure unperturbed as it crawled up onto my shoulder and rested there.

I looked up, and my entire body stilled. Alek was the only one not looking at me, a gorgeous blood-red fox rubbing against his hand as he offered it a very similar affectionate look. The others were staring at me in surprise and a bit of shock as I cupped the creature defensively, its tiny body fitting into my hand. How the heck had it packed such a punch when it ran into me?

“What?” I asked softly.

“You received your familiar.” Grimshaw smiled.

My eyes widened as I looked at her, somehow knowing it was a girl, before smiling, feeling almost a maternal affection for her.

“You both got your familiars far sooner than normal,” Oz said.

“Usually happens closer to Christmas. They have to come to you,” Cage

agreed.

I met their gaze. “What is she?”

“I don’t know,” Oz answered seriously.

“Alek’s is a fox, but I have never seen one like—”

“Boo,” I explained, not knowing where the name came from.

“Boo?” Lazaro asked amused.

The purring grew louder as I tucked her tighter against me. “Boo.”

“Well, there is only one thing to do if we are all going to be living together.” Grimshaw grinned, standing up. “We need all of our familiars to meet.”

*Why did that seem like a bad idea?*





## LAZARO

“Boo!” Deva’s angelic voice sounded panicked as she raced across the room, trying to catch her unique familiar that was boomeranging itself across the shelves hanging high on the walls to avoid Cage’s familiar, Magus. The cat, while beautiful, with red and white fur, was truly a piece of work. It had been ten minutes and he was already trying to go after Boo.

Although, to be fair, even Fozy seemed a bit out of sorts, his large owl eyes trained on the small smoky creature. His feathers ruffled against my face as I tried to soothe him, my fingers running across his charcoal feathers. Fingers that I would rather be touching Deva with as I watched her lethal curvy frame sprinting through the room, an expression of concern painted across her gorgeous face.

“Get down right now,” she demanded sternly.

Alek made a concerned noise as his fox, a sleek blood-red creature, tried approaching Magus from the back, clearly trying to help. That pissed me off a bit—not because of Alek, but more that his familiar, Chistov, was being helpful, and I was stuck doing nothing because Fozy thought he was above other familiars.

I winced, knowing that was how I came off far too often. I didn’t mind if others thought that, but I didn’t want Deva to have that impression of me, ever. That sense of indifference and aloofness had practically been drilled into me since I was very young, so it was almost my default setting. I didn’t want it to be like that anymore though.

“Cage!” Deva turned to my teammate who was sitting next to me, smiling good-naturedly. “Tell him to back off. He’s scaring Boo.”

“He’s just making friends,” Cage said sincerely. I grunted, shaking my

head at his ridiculous viewpoint on everything. Deva thought he was joking a lot of the time when he acted crazy, but I knew for a fact that it was one hundred percent authentic. He was just an insane bastard.

“Cage,” Grimshaw warned, his familiar sleeping in his lap. I had no idea how someone as terrifying as Grimshaw had a familiar that was a tiny white-colored rabbit. It made no sense. Then again, familiars weren’t a symbolic showing of your power; they just helped you use your power effectively and stored some of it in case you ever needed to heal. They were guidance and comfort measures.

So in a way, Orix actually made a lot of sense.

“Magus, come here,” Cage sighed. The cat immediately turned its tail and walked back, Boo watching it with wide eyes before jumping down into Deva’s arms. I looked towards the kitchen, thankful we had about five minutes until dinner because there was no way this was doing anything to help convince her to stay.

Probably the opposite.

Not that she had a choice. Now that she’d agreed to stay, her ass was locked into the situation like a contract. The others began to talk around me as I watched Deva sit on the rug in front of the fireplace, her hair glinting in the warm light and showing off the faint sparkles that highlighted her skin, turning her into a nearly ethereal being.

I swallowed, feeling inadequate to be around her, especially after how I’d been acting. I knew why I’d been a bastard, feeling insecure about the way she looked at my classmates in comparison to me, but I also knew that my inability to communicate my emotions had landed me in a position where I was pining after a woman that thought I hated her.

She knew I didn’t now, though. She knew the truth about how I felt.

*Truth.* There wasn’t a lot of that in my life, and even now, despite the relaxed nature between the six of us, there were secrets. Deva was holding tight to her past, understandably cautious to open up, and we were keeping our mission from her, knowing that if she found out she would run. That wasn’t an option.

I hadn’t been lying to her—Deva was broken, and it was beautiful. Her soul was made of fragmented pieces that showed off the glowing lunar light that came from within her. I would know—I’d been broken down more times than I could count. While I didn’t have physical scars of it...the mental and emotional ones were there.

Everyone thought my family was powerful and that's why we had to segment our powers, but that wasn't the case. No, that was forced. My family had figured out how to take young members of our family and load us up with more lunar magic than our younger bodies could handle. It was goddamn experimentation, and because of that I was so messed up it wasn't even funny. Even now I could feel that aggressive, violent side of me wanting to come forward.

So I knew what it was like to be broken down and built back up into something different. Deva did as well, and that was why I had done my best to avoid her...until I realized it was impossible for me to not care about her.

The timer for the oven went off as my familiar flew off my shoulder and upstairs. Oz still hadn't come from my room, and I was honestly hoping he didn't bring out his familiar. I nearly shuddered, thinking about Springer and his eight legs that he used to do just that—a jumping goddamn spider. That shit was fucked up.

Pulling out the casserole I'd put together, I felt a small exhale leave me. I had no idea what it was about feeding Deva, but the idea of making sure that she was okay in all regards made me feel helpful for the first time in my life. Serving up plates, I looked over to Deva who immediately stood and waltzed over, her familiar nuzzled up and sleeping on her shoulder. It was an adorable creature, but I was a bit hesitant to trust it yet because the chances of it being deadly were fairly high.

“So I am assuming they don't come to class with us?” She asked curiously.

“Not unless the teacher tells you to bring them. They usually just hang out here. We can make sure she is put in a room and left alone until she adjusts,” I assured her. Deva nodded and began to eat happily, letting out a small hum. I grabbed a plate and sat back, absorbing the relaxed nature of our family and how easily this all pieced together.

Oz even joined us, usually not one to eat meals with the rest of the dorm, and Deva's reaction to Springer was complete adoration. It honestly made me question if she was hand-built for us, because who the hell liked a jumping spider? Yet despite that, I couldn't help the small smile on my lips at the relaxed atmosphere in our dorm. Nothing was ever that easy, right? I was hesitant to trust it.

After everyone ate, I began to do the dishes, only for Deva to join me.

“What are you doing, little thief?” I asked in amusement as she grabbed a

sponge and tried to motion me out of the way.

“Helping,” she explained, offering me a challenging look as if I was going to somehow object.

“How about I wash and you dry?” I bargained. She nodded and stepped to the side. The two of us worked in peaceful silence, and I found myself trying to figure out the words to describe what happened today in Grimshaw’s shadow portal. I wasn’t positive I had a good explanation. Hell, I still felt confused about my emotions.

I think it was better to keep my goddamn mouth shut until I figured it out so I didn’t continue to screw up.

“Hey, Lazaro?” Her voice was almost cautious.

I looked at her, noticing she seemed a bit lost, staring down at the plate as she swallowed nervously. “I didn’t imagine you finding that doll, right?”

Pain hit me in the chest, because despite my attempts at scaring her, hoping to gain some control over my little thief, nothing had worked like that moment. Her face had drained of color, and horror had filled every part of her expression. It made me want to go back in time and stop myself from showing it to her.

More importantly...I wanted to know why. Why did it have such an intense effect on her? From what I’d gathered from Alek, I understood why the ritual circle could have caused her to take an unpleasant trip down memory lane, which is why I’d nearly insisted on doing it. But a doll? What was the significance of that?

“You didn’t imagine it,” I murmured.

Her entire body froze as her eyes darkened. “You left it there?”

“No.” I wouldn’t lie to her. “It’s in my room.”

“Okay.” She nodded and exhaled. “I need to see it, Lazaro.”

I nodded, turning off the sink and drying my hands before nodding towards the stairs. Everyone else seemed absorbed in conversation, so it was easy for us to slip away.

When I opened the door to my room, she seemed to hesitate in the doorway, as if nervous.

“You don’t have to look at it again,” I spoke honestly. “If you don’t want to—”

She stepped into the room and looked around briefly before coming to a stop, her eyes on the doll laying on my desk. I watched in fascination as she seemed to steel herself before approaching it. Her hands were shaking as she

picked it up.

“What is it?” I asked quietly, causing her to jolt slightly.

“It’s a gift.” She snorted, her voice hollow. “To remind me of...just my past.”

I put down the doll and turned her towards me, examining her face. “Is your past, or someone from your past, the reason your room was destroyed?”

“Maybe.” She seemed a bit dazed while leaning into me. “It’s also possible that they used it as an excuse to leave it there amongst the chaos.”

“So you are in danger,” I murmured, assuming her past had to do with Astaroth.

“It’s fine.” She shook her head. “Maybe it’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. You’re not going back to your dorm until tomorrow,” I decided. Instead of arguing with me, she held my gaze before nodding and deflating against me. I pulled her closer, practically seeing the weight of the world on her shoulders, wanting to ease that burden desperately. I wanted to destroy whoever it was that had the power to put fear into her eyes like that.

After a few minutes of holding her, I took a chance, fully prepared to be rejected as I lifted her into my arms. Instead, much to my pleasure, she wrapped her legs around me and her arms around my neck as I carried her to the bed, feeling her nose brush against my neck. My cock was too hard to be appropriate for this situation, and it didn’t help that my hands had slid down to grip her perfect ass.

I laid her down and joined her, pulling blankets over her, expecting her to curl up. When she threw a leg over mine and curled against me, I felt a surge of emotions that I was completely unused to. I pulled her tighter to me and inhaled her scent, hoping that this hesitant show of physicality outside of sexual shit was her trusting me. I wanted her trust so damn bad, and I knew I was a million miles from getting it... But that was my new goal. My new passion. My new ultimate focus.

My eyes felt heavy as well, and for the first time in a few nights I didn’t craft a dreamscape. Instead, I held my little thief close. And she *was* mine. My little thief, who had ripped my heart right out from the middle of my chest, forcing me to look at the broken thing. I just hoped she realized I planned on stealing her.



## DEVA

“So you are moving in with them?” Odessa stared at me as if I had lost my goddamn mind. I sighed, running a hand over my face, not knowing how to explain this when I didn’t fully understand it myself. It didn’t help that Alek was next to me, sliding a hand over my thigh in a possessive manner that had my entire body lighting up. Whenever I looked up at him, he was staring down at me, and I could feel him watching my every expression and reaction.

“Yes,” I admitted softly. “I...it just makes sense.”

“Girl, you can just stay with one of us.” Briar frowned. “It’s terrifying that your room got broken into, but you don’t need to move in with some guys just because of that.”

Lavinia offered me a knowing grin. “She wants to.”

“You do?” Odessa demanded.

*Did I?*

“I do.” It was whispered, but I knew they all heard it.

“Well, shit,” Odessa mumbled. “Okay then.”

“I don’t know what any of this is.” I swallowed, trying to accept being vulnerable. “I just know that there is something here—”

“Don’t need to explain to me,” Lavinia promised, “And Odessa hasn’t been to her room in three days, so don’t let her make you feel bad.”

“It’s true.” Briar nodded.

“I was kidnapped!” Odessa growled, but I didn’t really think that was the case.

“But you will get ready for the Black Moon Ball this Friday with us.” Lavinia stated. It wasn’t a question. “It is going to be so fun! More fun than that party.”



“The what?” The last time I’d been part of a celebration for the Black Moon... Well, I didn’t want to mentally go there.

“Celebratory ball for the Black Moon and the start of the year,” Briar explained.

“I don’t have a dress or anything remotely—”

“Got it covered,” Lavinia said, “for all of us. Don’t worry about a thing.”

“Okay.” I offered her a small smile. “I can do that.”

“You are going to the ball with us,” Alek announced, drawing my attention. I arched a brow at his tone and how stubborn he looked.

“Won’t that make all of this a bit obvious?” I teased.

“Yes.” Alek’s firm answer had my heart squeezing as I leaned back into his side. Honestly, it was getting a bit hard to resist them since they were so open about wanting me and wanting others to know I was ‘claimed.’

When Mrs. Moonscar began talking, I was only half-listening, thinking about this morning. Last night, after seeing the doll and confronting the reality that it existed, I didn’t argue with Lazaro about going back to the dorms. Hell, I hadn’t even argued about falling asleep together, and truth be told, it had been some of the best sleep I’d ever gotten. When I woke up this morning, there was something amazing about having him right there, his gorgeous face relaxed and not tense like normal. I should have pressed to get my stuff, but I could do that today. Plus, I had yet to see where Alek slept in the dorm, so I didn’t even know how much space I would have.

When *DIA History & Basics* came to a close, I looked up at him. “Are you going to be living there also, now that I am?” I really hoped I didn’t sound as desperate as I felt.

“Yes. I go where you go, *zaya*.”

Oh, thank the fates.

When I said goodbye to my friends and walked the halls with Alek, I could feel people looking at us, but I didn’t pay them any mind, completely focused on the way his warm, rough hand felt against my skin. I didn’t even realize Alek was growling until I looked up at him, his face intense and dark.

“What?”

“I don’t like others looking at you.”

“Yeah?” I blushed. “Why?”

“Because I already share your attention. I don’t want anyone to look at you who doesn’t deserve it,” he admitted roughly as we came to the door for *Deadly Potions*. I expected a lot from Alek, but not for him to sear his lips to

mine, gripping my jaw and letting out a growl before pulling away, leaving me feeling nearly winded. He'd barely taken a step down the hall when I felt Oz's rough hand slide over my hips.

Man, I wasn't positive when I was going to get used to all this physical affection, but I was finding that I loved it instead of it making me feel panicked. It was still a bit overwhelming, but the more they touched me, the more I got used to it.

"Morning." He pressed a kiss to the top of my ear.

"Hey you." I tilted my head up at him. "Where were you at breakfast?"

His gaze filled with authentic pleasure. "Making you something. Come here."

I followed him into the classroom, loving how excited he was. As I sat down on the chair and he went into his bag, I noticed that there was a smile on his face. Oz didn't smile often, but when he did it was damn gorgeous.

My lips opened in surprise when he pulled out what could only be described as a delicate necklace...made out of bones. Nope, not fake bones either. Legitimate, very small animal bones, all pulled together and painted with runes. Instead of looking obnoxious, it looked like a delicate piece of art, and when he met my gaze, I couldn't disguise my surprise or the pleasure I felt at him making it.

"It's warded," he said softly. "It will act as a defense if you are ever caught off guard."

My chest squeezed as my eyes prickled. Not only had no one ever given me a gift...but one that protected me? I nearly toppled over with the pressure of the emotions that I was feeling.

He whispered, "Turn around for me, starlight."

I lifted my hair and did so, meeting the gaze of several very wide-eyed students. I straightened, feeling proud of the choker-like necklace that he wrapped around the front of my neck before locking it.

I let out a sound of pleasure as I looked up at him, his eyes flashing with a dark possession. My thighs pressed together at how hot that look was.

"Fucking perfect," he growled, nipping my ear.

"Once again we seem to be interrupting some large romantic gesture," Mr. Boneclaw announced, making me smile slightly. "If you are done..."

"We're done," I promised.

"Wonderful," he said sarcastically. "Please open to chapter two. We will be doing a simple experiment today, practicing the mixing of herbs so that I

can watch your skillset and sloppiness. I don't want to hand you deadly herbs if you are going to end up killing yourself."

"I would never allow that to happen." Oz kissed my temple.

I looked up at him with a goofy smile. "You're sort of sweet, Oz."

His eyes flared with amusement. "Sweet. Haven't heard that before, starlight."

My eyes narrowed playfully. "You hear a lot of other stuff from women?" I swear, I had no idea I had a bit of a jealous streak, but holy fates did they bring it out in me. Not that they were any better.

Oz chuckled. "I didn't have time for women before you, and I sure as fuck didn't want anyone else after meeting you. You're it, Deva."

"It?" I murmured.

"That's it!" Mr. Boneclaw snapped. "Deva, switch with Danielle."

Oz stood and let out a frustrated sound. "Absolutely not."

"For today you switch. Hopefully you won't make the mistake again," the teacher leveled. I looked up at Oz and stood up, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

"I'm right there, don't worry."

"He's the one who should be worried."

He?

I turned towards my new table partner as Danielle offered me a small smile, relief in her eyes as I realized she didn't want to be with the guy sitting there like he owned the world. I sat down and offered him an arched brow as he continued to stare at me as if analyzing me. When Oz produced a low growl, his face went from cocky to a bit uneasy as he sat himself up fully.

"Ren," he said, introducing himself.

"Deva."

His smile grew. "Oh, I am aware—everyone knows who you are."

I offered him a look. "Cool. Are we good to start?"

That moment began the longest hour of my life. I became aware of two things in the sixty minutes: first, Ren was a complete loser. Like actually sucked. He kept making creepy remarks that had Oz nearly storming across the way, only stopped by the looks I kept shooting him.

Secondly, I sort of got off on how jealous Oz was being. Well, more possessive, but I still loved it. Of course, I hated that I had to work with Ren, but it sort of made it worth it with how worked up Oz was getting, his calm demeanor breaking. I think he knew I felt that way too, because I could practically see the frustration growing under his skin.

*I may end up in trouble for finding this amusing.*

We were near the end of the experiment when I turned and almost ran right into Ren. His eyes narrowed on my neck, his hand moving up. “So, what exactly is this creepy shit—”

The moment his fingers touched my necklace, I was pulled back, hard, against a large frame as a primal sound left Oz’s throat. “Do not.”

“Calm down, man.”

“No,” Oz spit. “You do not fucking touch her. Ever.”

My dark heart squeezed at his words as I turned into him, seeing his anger boiling over. Ren didn’t like his words, his own turning ugly. “Don’t tell me what to do, you unblessed piece of—”

I couldn’t control myself. I knew I shouldn’t have shown my power, but I moved in a blink and knocked Ren to his ass, my fingers pressed right against the hollow of his throat as I pressed my knee into the space between his lungs, causing him to gasp for air. I let my power filter around him as I bent down, my eyes narrowing on his reddening face.

“Do not *ever* talk to him like that,” I growled through clenched teeth. “You are the only piece of shit here.”

“Deva.” Oz’s voice was smooth as I looked around to see everyone staring at me in shock. “Come here, starlight.”

I released Ren and stepped back as he gasped, turned onto his side, and began coughing. I narrowed my eyes, not feeling bad in the least.

“Psycho bitch,” he spewed. Oz let out a dangerous noise, pulling me against him and kissing the top of my head protectively, making me melt at the sweet gesture.

“Hardly.” Mr. Boneclaw seemed amused. “Next time you want to call names, Ren, I would suggest you gauge the power of those around you.” He then looked up at us, seeming far more pleased than before. “You may both go, I think enough has been done today.”

That was all Oz needed. He tugged me from the room, my feet scrambling to keep up with him. “Where are we—oh!”

I was suddenly tugged into a room as he threw open the door and quickly shut it, crowding my body against the cool surface. His pulse was beating rapidly as he pressed his forehead to my own, making me want to soothe him. I knew he was upset about class for several reasons, but I would rather he be worked up and possessive than angry. Anger wasn’t good, and Ren wasn’t worth it.

“Oz,” I spoke softly.

“I need to calm down, starlight. Give me a moment.”

His command lit up my skin, and I had a feeling what would take his mind off that asshole. I brought my hands up and cupped his face, examining his nearly amethyst gaze.

“I don’t want you to,” I murmured, going up on my toes to brush my lips against his. He groaned, the vibration from his chest like a low rumble as his hands tightened on me. When I deepened the kiss, my tongue brushing over his, something snapped. I was suddenly sitting on a large desk, the lighting from the windows and rainy sky outside just enough to show off a very heated Oz.

My thighs squeezed together as he shed his suit jacket, exposing his muscular body that was molded to his shirt. I let out a small needy sound as he stepped between my legs and slid his hands up my thighs until my skirt was pushed up.

“And what do you want, starlight?”

“You,” I murmured.

His eyes flared. “And do you think you deserve that after today in class?”

“Oz.” My voice came out breathy as he walked around the desk, appearing behind me, rough hands sliding over my shoulders as my pulse picked up with both anticipation and nervous energy.

I could feel how worked up he was, and despite being unblessed, his magic felt so much darker, more primal, more base than anyone I’d ever met before. When I tilted my head back, I found him looking down at me with undisguised heat and darkness that had my own monster wanting to come out to play.

“Deva,” he murmured as his fingers slowly unbuttoned my shirt, my nipples tightening against the sheer material of my bra. His other hand tilted my jaw as his nose ran against the soft skin of my neck, inhaling like an actual predator scenting its prey.

“You knew exactly what you were doing in class today, didn’t you?”

I had; he wasn’t wrong.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I gasped as he slipped my shirt off completely, leaving my skin to prickle in the cooler air mixed with the heat coming off his body.

“Yeah? So if I reach between your pretty thighs you won’t be soaked at the idea of making me jealous?”

I was. I was also worked up at the high emotions I felt from everything that had happened in the last half hour.

“Nope.” I tried to ignore the electricity racing over my skin.

Oz rounded me and fully consumed my space, his height causing me to tilt my head back and completely expose my neck. Something he took advantage of as his hand wrapped around it.

“Liar.” His hiss was low and dangerous. “You know what happens to liars, right? They get punished. If you want to walk around talking to other men, then it better be with my cum between your legs.”

Holy fates.

“Lay back like a good girl,” he demanded, his voice rough and commanding. I let out a surprised sound as he grabbed my ass and tugged me forward, causing me to fall back on the desk. I moaned as his fingers tugged off my panties and he knelt in front of me, pushing up my skirt as he gripped my thighs and looked me over.

For just a moment I felt insecure, but then his words echoed through the space, causing me to let out a small moan.

“Fuck, you are so perfect, Deva.”

I felt my body soar as his mouth met my pussy, and I whimpered as he began to devour my center. My fingers sank into his hair, and I couldn't help but pull him closer, wanting to feel his mouth everywhere. I moaned his name, and all too soon I was climaxing, his growl against my clit causing me to absolutely shatter.

“Oz,” I whimpered, out of breath and coming down from the ocean of pleasure my body was coasting on, “I need you.”

“I know, starlight.” He stood over me, caging me against the desk. His hair was messy, and his eyes were filled with an unraveled light that I loved. “I want to take you so fucking bad.”

“Please,” I whispered, pushing up on my hands to be near his lips, my forehead pressed against his. “I want to feel you inside of me, I want to be fully connected.”

I'd never wanted that outside of these men, and I craved that connection with them despite trying to deny it. There was no denying what I was feeling, though—not anymore. Oz examined my face with an intensity that made me feel like he was seeing right through me. I had never told him my lack of experience, or about the one traumatic experience that had still left me a virgin...but I didn't think that was important. Not to Oz.

I arched into his touch as he pinned me against the desk again, making me lay back, and spoke quietly, “I can’t take you, Deva. Not here. This won’t be only your first time, starlight, and I want to do it right.”

Oh. My eyes went wide as my heart beat rapidly at the realization of what he was saying.

I nodded slowly. Of course I wanted Oz, really fucking bad, but the idea of him controlling himself enough to make the moment special between us stripped me bare.

“I love you,” I murmured.

His eyes flared. “What?”

I swallowed and steeled myself. “I love you, Oz. I did when I was sixteen, and I do now. I may have no idea what is going on, but I know that I love you—”

I moaned into the kiss that he seared to my lips, and I tightened my legs around him, his voice gruff against my lips. “Fuck, I love you, Deva. You have no idea how long I spent looking for you, starlight.”

“You did?” I pulled back slightly.

“For over six months,” he admitted and then offered me a gorgeous sexy smile. “And now that I have you, I’m never letting you go.”

His name left my lips as he slid two fingers inside of me, his gaze riveted to my expression as I clung onto him. I clenched around his fingers and whimpered as he pulled out and sucked his fingers clean, going for his belt.

“What are you doing?” I asked breathlessly.

“I may not be able to fuck you here, but I told you what happens to little liars, Deva,” he growled before taking out and gripping his hard cock. I felt everything inside of me still, because holy fates he was big. He gripped my jaw with one hand while stroking his cock, my gaze unable to move away from it.

“Oz, you’re huge.”

“What did I say would happen?” he demanded softly.

I met his gaze as his hand moved down to tease my clit, causing my pussy to clench around nothing, a noise of frustration leaving my lips. I hissed as his cock pressed against my folds, sliding between them before coming to my opening, his tip barely inside of me. I tried to adjust my hips, but his body weight held me there, my breathing fast as he nipped my lip in punishment.

“Answer me, Deva.”

“That I would have your cum between my legs.” I moaned as he kissed

me deeply, his thumb rolling my clit fast enough I was nearly shaking with need as pressure built inside of me. I could feel his cock sliding further into me, the head completely inside as my muscles contracted around him, his chest producing a deep rumble.

“Damn right,” he snarled. “Now come for me, starlight.”

His pinch to my clit caused me to jolt as my center exploded, and I felt him surge forward another inch, his hot seed spilling inside of me. My breathing was uneven as he held me against him possessively, his cock, which was still inside of me, still hard despite coming. When I pulled back, I offered him a wide-eyed look as he pressed his forehead to mine and groaned.

“You ruin any semblance of control,” he grumbled.

“Good,” I whispered.

He tilted my jaw up and spoke seriously. “The next time we are alone like this, I’m going to claim you, Deva. I am going to slide between those pretty thighs and fuck you so hard you will feel it for days, understand?”

I felt excitement tighten my center as I nodded. “Yes, Oz.”

I was counting down the seconds.





## DEVA

“You defended Osborn?” Cage asked curiously, his fingers trapping mine against the large table we sat at. The classroom around us was quiet and peaceful, around ten circular tables spread out through the well lit room.

It could almost be considered clinical in nature, but it was also peaceful, like a high-end spa or something similar. I hadn’t ever had formal rune training, but as one could assume, I had a good grasp on them considering the ones underneath my skin.

Before us were beautiful ink wells along with other tools for our *Advanced Runes* class on the table, and I found myself a bit excited. I was glad that Cage was in this class—I very much needed his lighthearted nature to calm me after my exhilarating morning with Oz.

My body still tingled, and I could still feel him between my thighs, his cum reminding me where he’d marked me. And that’s what it was—he’d completely marked me. I felt warmth and happiness spread throughout me, knowing that what I’d always felt for Oz was very real. Maybe I needed to trust my emotions more...

My eyes widened in realization that while Oz and I hadn’t had sex exactly, his cum was inside of me, and we’d never talked about protection of any kind. Crap. Thank the fates that part of the medical physical at Garnet Hall included optional birth control spells. Children weren’t something I’d ever given thought to before, but I knew instantly how I felt about them. I didn’t want to have any until Astaroth was dead, until I knew I could keep my family safe no matter what. I did have a question though...

Had Oz thought of the protection element? The question buzzed around my head.

“Ren is an ass,” I pointed out.

Cage’s eyes flared with heat. “And you, my little siren, are so much more dangerous than you let on, aren’t you?”

I blinked before answering honestly. “Yes, Cage. Yes, I am.”

The smile he offered at my honesty made it worth it. “You know you’re never leaving us, right?”

I rolled my eyes at that, knowing he was being ridiculous. “Has that ever been an option?” I teased. “You guys keep saying stuff like that.”

“No.” His face was completely serious before he smirked. “And we say it because it’s true. Just waiting for you to realize it.”

And I think I had.

Before I could respond, the air shifted just slightly and I tensed, not liking that someone was interrupting us.

“Cage?”

I snapped my head up to find a female standing in front of our table, her pretty eyes completely focused on him. Instantly I felt defensive, and okay, I’ll admit it, a bit possessive. Which I needed to examine, but you know what? It didn’t matter.

I knew Cage was still staring at me. Plus, if he liked me, he wouldn’t be attracted to her. She was the exact opposite of me—tan, blonde, gorgeous, free of scars... Okay, yeah, there was a bit of insecurity there. I offered him a look, and he kept staring at me, his smile growing.

“Um, Cage?” Persistent.

I smiled. “Someone’s talking to you.”

“Is there?” He slid a hand onto my thigh and looked at her, appearing completely unenthused. “What’s up?”

“I was just wondering if you had a date for the Black Moon Ball Friday?”

Oh wow, that was rather bold. My eyes widened as I looked back at him, wondering what he would say.

Cage chuckled at my expression before sighing and looking back at her. “Yes, I have a date for the foreseeable future. I’m going with my girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend? Her?” The girl looked over at me with a small sneer. I nearly rolled my eyes at that. I hadn’t even done anything to this lady.

“The one and only—my beautiful little siren.” He sighed happily before his face went void of expression. “I would suggest never looking at her like that again, understand?”

The girl paled and then scampered away, leaving me looking at him with

a surprised look. “Girlfriend?”

Cage slammed his hand on the desk with a big smile, drawing all eyes to him. “Since this seems to still be unknown... Classmates, this is my girlfriend, Deva. And Deva, these are our classmates.”

I couldn’t help but snort as all of them stared in shock before I realized what he’d just said. I slapped his chest playfully. “Cage! What the heck?”

“What’s wrong, little siren?” he asked, taking my hand, kissing it, and looking at it with concern, like he was worried I’d hurt it.

“I said low key!”

“We don’t do low key,” he mused. “Besides, I want everyone to know you’re ours.” He looked thoughtful. “Everyone keeps marking you. Grim on your neck, Oz with that necklace and his c—”

I covered his mouth and narrowed my eyes. “I don’t know how you know that, but don’t you dare.”

He chuckled before pulling away and kissing my fingers again. “I didn’t, but I am happy to hear it confirmed.” Cage winked as I made a sound of frustration. “I could tell you were a bit out of it and flushed.”

I didn’t have a response to that, and luckily he didn’t seem to need one. “I want to taste you again.” He stared at my finger. “Tell me I can, whenever I want.”

“Cage...”

“Please?” He looked suddenly worried, and it was such an authentic expression.

“Not whenever you want,” I hedged, “but right now—”

I whimpered as he used a small blade to slice the tip of my finger before sucking it into his mouth.

I inhaled sharply as he groaned, pulling away and offering me a wink, my breath stalling completely. My eyelids were heavy as he held my gaze, his eyes flashing red before offering me an affectionate smile.

Fates. What did I do with this man?

“So fucking sweet.”

“Good afternoon, class!” A feminine voice filled the space. “As many of you know, I am Mrs. Slithe! I will be your *Advanced Runes* professor for this semester, and it appears that you have already paired up, which is good...”

I zoned out a bit, taking note of how unique this woman was. First of all, her hair was fiery red, and her curls were nearly down to her knees. The feminine, soft feature contrasted all the leather she wore and the runes that

covered her bare arms. She was possibly the most bad-ass woman I'd ever seen.

"Little siren." Cage kissed my shoulder as I turned to him, realizing that he was right there, in my space.

"What's up?" I asked, realizing that everyone around us was already working on something.

"She wants us to practice small runes on one another," he explained, running his fingers along the underneath of my arm, "I personally love the opportunity to mark you."

I blushed. "What does the rune need to be of?"

"Anything we want." He shrugged, a glimmer of excitement in his gaze. "Want to go first?"

"Sure." I reached over to grab an ink well and sharp pen-like object with a needle on the end. I opened the well, noticing that it was clear in nature before being infused with magic, and looked over the large sheets of runes spread out around us. Of course I knew some myself, but I didn't want to put any of those on him. All of the ones I knew were dark and related to death.

"What are you going to draw?" he asked softly.

Grabbing the inside of his wrist, I dipped the pen into the ink, murmuring a series of soft words as the ink pot lit up with a silver texture. I looked up at him to see him watching me with soft affection as I brought the ink to his skin, gently drawing two long lines that arched as if creating a horizon. I pulled back as it seemed to seal and set into his skin, the faint silver lines obvious under the light but essentially invisible.

When I looked up, he was frowning. "I wish I could see your mark."

I smiled softly. "It's better to have it as a secret. It's a lunar rune; it will allow you to take in a minor amount of power from the full moon. Won't be a ton, but it's a little boost. We used to do it—"

I stopped myself, realizing I was about to admit to doing it to other people on the team before going out to kill the unblest. *What the hell was wrong with me?*

"Are you okay?" he asked sincerely.

"Totally good," I promised and then put out my wrist. "Do your worst."

He smirked and chose an ink well before pushing up the edge of my skirt, right on my right thigh.

Despite having runes covering the inside of me, I had none on the outside. I liked that he would be the one to change that. Except when his magic

darkened the ink to a black and he pressed it to my skin, everything exploded in pain.

I gasped, grasping my chest as I felt my heart nearly stutter to a stop. Holy fuck. My skin began to sear in agony, and my vision went spotty. I watched as Cage cursed, catching my body before I fell against him. The last thing I saw was my leg, which was lit up with runes... The ones from underneath my skin.

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The copper tinge of blood filled my senses upon waking up. It was faint but most definitely there. My stomach turned, which had never happened before, as I muttered a curse and slowly peeled open my eyes.

I tried to gather my bearings, a shivering rolling over me as I realized that I was in a bed, possibly Grimshaw's since his scent was wrapped around me. Rain was blowing through the open window, causing a chill to set in. I whimpered, feeling significantly off as I curled further into the sheets.

Then I felt it—my hands were wet.

I looked down at them and froze. Blood. There was blood on my hands.

I felt my breathing go ragged as I pulled the sheets back, finding myself covered in blood, absolutely soaked. I started trembling as I looked back towards the window, and the moonlight that broke through the rainy clouds revealed footprints. Bloody footprints.

What the actual hell was going on?

Tears began to well in my eyes as I tried to make a sound, anything, call out to—

Suddenly, the room filled with light, and I met Grimshaw's gaze. His eyes widened, and I was shaking as he came over, cupping my jaw. His thumbs moved against my cheeks as he spoke roughly and softly. "What is wrong?"

I lifted my fingers to show him the blood...only to find it gone. My chest squeezed as I looked towards the floor, which was now perfectly clean, the windows open as the rainy night continued on. "I... There was blood on me."

"What?" He looked over me in panic.

"It was on my hands." I let out a strangled noise.

"I was just in here. You've been asleep for hours, but I've been checking

on you every fifteen minutes and laying in here for a large part,” he promised. Grimshaw looked towards the window and stalked over, closing them and shaking his head.

“What?” I demanded.

“They keep coming loose.”

*But did they?*

“Something is wrong,” I whispered, my voice wobbly.

“What do you mean?”

A door opened, and in walked Lazaro. Immediately, I could tell that I’d been right. Something was very wrong. “We have a fucking problem.”

“What?” Grimshaw growled.

Lazaro looked at me with concern, walking over to look at my face before speaking honestly. “There was an incident on campus.”

“An incident?” I questioned, feeling a weird numbness set over me.

“An unblest. They were injured. Found cut up and tied to a post outside of the dorms,” he said softly, and I felt the blood drain from my face.

I stared at him, unable to comprehend what he was saying.

“On fucking campus?” Grim demanded. “I knew that the hatred for the unblest was still strong outside of these walls, but to bring it here...”

His words went fuzzy to me as I continued to stare at Lazaro. When I finally spoke, I asked the question I knew I would regret.

“How was he tied up?”

Lazaro frowned. “With rope.”

“Which way?” I whispered. “Upside down or right-side up?”

“How do you know that?” Lazaro’s tone wasn’t accusatory but I could tell he was confused. Well, good thing I was about to clear it up for him.

“It was upside down, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, but—”

“And the cuts were on the torso?”

“How do you know that?” he asked, his eyes darkening.

I looked down at my shaking hands, knowing that the blood hadn’t been fake. There had been only one person who had tortured unblest, leaving them like that to make a point, to leave a message...

...and he’d trained me to do the exact same.





## DEVA

I knew the exact moment when it became too much. When I just hit the wall of being able to emotionally deal with everything that had happened in the past week. I didn't enjoy admitting defeat. I considered myself a strong person, but when questions began coming my way, mixed with their own conversation about the unblessed on campus... I sort of zoned out. I began to phase out completely, allowing a numbness to slide over my skin that almost felt pleasurable.

I sat on the bed, staring down at my hands as I considered the implications of both my room break-in and now this.

Maybe my magic, both times it had flipped out, had called to *him*.

Maybe he still had some level of actual control over me that I didn't understand. After all, he was the one who put the runes under my skin. I'm sure our magic was intertwined. I felt the room get a bit fuzzy as I put my head on my knees, someone calling to me and demanding my attention.

When Grimshaw finally appeared by my side and forced me to look him in the eye, I saw confusion fill his gaze. Confusion was better than the hatred I'd see once they found out the truth.

My heart began to beat rapidly at the possibilities. Someone had hurt an unblessed student in a very specific way. It was either me, or it was my past catching up to me, literally.

"What is going on?" he demanded.

How did I even explain that?

"How did you know about the details of the unblessed?" Lazaro seconded.

"Stop asking her so many damn questions," Alek snapped. "I told you

that her background was like mine, I'm sure she saw it a million times."

"You told them?" I whispered, feeling a sense of betrayal. Alek's jaw tightened as he nodded sharply, looking both guilty and tormented by that fact. I wasn't positive if I was mad at him or relieved.

He spoke quietly, "They asked about the scars... As for this, no one marks unblessed like that except Astaroth. Not even his own men."

I knew that though. It was a specific marking, a ritualistic death rune that was a pattern of deep cuts that allowed him to draw out their remaining magic. I knew that rune by heart by now.

"He's not the only person," I murmured.

"Explain, little siren," Cage demanded.

"There was someone else who killed for him like that," I continued softly, "someone who helped him kill most of the unblessed."

"Who?" Grimshaw frowned. "We've been after Astaroth for years now and have only ever heard of one person killing for the psychotic bastard. He usually likes to do his own work."

Yes, he did.

"You're after him?" I asked softly, wishing desperately that meant he was dead, but I knew I wasn't that lucky. Hell, with my luck, he was unable to die.

"Yes, but we can talk about that later," Alek answered from where he sat behind me now. I didn't know if I was mad at him or how I felt at this point. I continued to stare into Grimshaw's face, wishing I didn't have to tell the truth. I didn't want to stop seeing the way they looked at me.

"Who?" Lazaro demanded softly.

"Astaroth's Dead Doll," I murmured, the nickname almost sounding fake to me despite the number of times I'd heard him sing it out in that manic tone of his. How had I not seen the obvious ownership?

Alek went still behind me, and I knew he had probably put it together. I didn't know if I felt relieved or scared that he didn't stop touching me.

"Didn't she die years ago?" Lazaro asked, looking confused.

"Two years ago," Oz murmured. I had no doubt he had figured it out, so I didn't meet his gaze. The man was far too smart.

I hated how much I was falling for these men because I knew there was no stopping any of this. Maybe it was better they knew. I wish I had known about them being 'after him' because I felt like we could have aligned to some extent, but that didn't matter anymore. This wasn't a matter of logistics,

it was a matter of the heart.

Standing up from bed, I intertwined my fingers and grabbed a sweater, pulling it over me as I leaned against the back of the couch, meeting all of their gazes. I shut off my emotions at that moment. I wasn't going to allow myself to feel this pain. Not in front of them.

"She didn't die."

Silence filled the space as Grimshaw arched his brow. "How do you know that?"

I closed my eyes and then stared at the ground, preparing myself for all of this to end at once. "Because I'm *her*. I'm Astaroth's Dead Doll. I've killed hundreds of unblessed for him."

The silence was enough that it actually shattered what was left of my heart. I froze for a minute, hoping somehow they would say something to fix the moment, or even admit that they'd figured it out. But there was nothing.

I walked from the room, not able to actually meet their gazes. Luckily, they seemed stunned enough that no one followed. I didn't know where I was going, so I decided on the only place I had left—my dorm.

When no one came to stop me from leaving, tears gathered in my eyes, and I used my shadow magic to disappear and reappear closer to my own dorm, not even opening their door to alert them to my departure.

I let out a small sob once I was away from them, sliding down the stone wall as I started to realize that I had not only broken whatever was there with them but possibly put any of this 'fresh start' in a direct pathway to being ruined. No fresh starts. No future. I needed to leave or maybe hide... I could be taken back to Carmina for what I'd done. I would be sentenced to death, without a fucking doubt.

The grounds were silent, thick with fog as voices from the dorms poured into the evening air. There was a slight drizzle, but nothing like the downpour earlier. When I reached my room, I walked inside and locked both sets of doors, sliding down the wood and trying to control my breathing. I knew my roommates wouldn't know I was home, or at least I hoped they wouldn't.

Then again, maybe I should do a clean cut. Maybe I should lose them as well.

Crawling into bed, hot tears streamed down my face as my entire frame trembled. A ragged breath came out of my lips, and for the first time since escaping Astaroth's grip, I felt defeat. I couldn't do this. My past and my soul were heavy, and everything was coming back up from the locked and sealed

vaults I thought it would rot away in. My eyes squeezed shut as pain hit me in the chest.

This was all too much.

The memories.

The fear that monster was coming for me.

These men's overwhelming intensity. They were too much. I felt anger hit me, misplaced but there, because damn them, they had brought this all back. They had pulled it out of me. They had caused this.

I knew that wasn't true, but it didn't change that I felt it. I felt anger. So much anger and so much sadness. For the first time in my life, I had thought I had someone, several someones, who I could rely on, who wouldn't hurt me. I'd ruined that with my past. My past and my sins had ruined that. My feeble attempts at denying the connection hadn't actually meant anything; I'd known the truth between us this entire time.

The sound of the wind rustling through the trees outside was loud enough that it came through my closed windows and forced vivid memories to play across my consciousness. I gripped my throat as I curled further into myself, my knees hitting my chest as I felt my breathing constrict. This was too damn painful.

When my dorm door banged open, I knew who it was. I could feel his magic wrapping around me as his large muscular body slid into bed behind me after closing the door once again. I surrendered to his touch, not bothering to fight it. To fight him. To fight my connection to him. I didn't bother hiding my tears, either. Let him see them.

These men did what they wanted, when they wanted, and there was nothing any of us could do to stop them, so why try? The chaos of their nature called to me in a way that I knew was dangerous to everyone around us. Realization hit me. I didn't want to stop them. I loved that about them. I loved that they bulldozed and overwhelmed me, because I would have never opened up willingly.

But what was the point now? I'd lost them.

Although, why was Cage in my bed, then? Maybe it was a dream. The numb coating over my emotions agreed with that concept sounding reasonable.

"I've got you, little siren." His voice was a rumbled whisper, any remnant of his lighthearted nature completely gone. "No one is going to hurt you, Deva. I'll protect you. We'll protect you."

“But who is going to protect me from all of you?” I barely got out, my voice strangled. Who was going to protect me from them breaking my heart? Because even now, that was what they were doing. His fingers grasped my chin as he rolled us so I was caged under him.

His eyes were filled with a possessive intensity that had everything in me melting. “Absolutely no one.”

I believed him, and that was terrifying.

“I don’t know what you want, Cage,” I whispered, my eyes stinging as I offered him an empty look. “You know the truth now. You either hate me, and that’s that, or...you’ll tell the school and I’ll be fucked. It doesn’t matter anymore. So why are you here?”

Cage examined my face before he spoke in a soft, demanding tone. “How about neither of those options.”

“What?” I whispered.

“How about none of those fucking options.” He brushed his nose against mine. “How about we figure out how Astaroth is either gaining access to you or campus. How about we keep you safe. How about we sort through why you think we would be mad at you about this. You were under sixteen and forced to kill. If Alek is right, you were killed several times. How the hell is that your fault, Deva?”

My mouth opened as I blinked, not knowing what to say. I swallowed. “I killed those people. Innocent people, Cage—”

“And what if you hadn’t?”

“At the time, it was all I knew. I wanted to,” I growled and then paled. “And when I finally knew it was wrong, his threat was—”

My throat tightened, not wanting to go there.

Cage’s eyes flashed with violence. “We have been hunting Astaroth down from the start. Oz’s family was killed by the bastard directly—he watched it happen almost eighteen years ago. Not only that, but Grim’s family is a direct contact for the organization trying to get rid of him. This isn’t a problem, Deva. It’s a solution. We kill Astaroth and your problem is solved as well.”

I exhaled sharply, not wanting to believe his words. Why couldn’t he understand what a problem this was? Why couldn’t he understand that I would always be messed up? Always abnormal? I hit my limit. “Cage, that doesn’t work. None of this works. A simple solution doesn’t work because I’m not normal, everything gets fucked up around me—”

“No shit, none of us are,” he growled. “You’re perfect, everything about

you, Deva...is fucking perfect.”

I blinked, tears streaking down my face, and his expression softened.

He grasped my jaw gently. “I am falling in love with you Deva. Nothing is going to stop that, and I know you feel the same—whether its rational or not doesn’t matter. If you think a past filled with killing is going to scare me off—scare any of us off—you have no idea who you’re dealing with. You think we haven’t killed before? Every single one of us has killed, and I am the first to admit I’ve enjoyed it. You may have stained hands, but we are all soaked in the blood of our pasts. This does not change anything.”

I examined his words as I tried to gather myself. “You’re... You’re falling in love with me?”

“Don’t even bother acting surprised.” He brushed my nose. “And I know you feel the same.”

“Maybe,” I whispered, not ready to say it out loud or admit to myself whether that was what I was feeling or not. It was. I fucking knew it was, but it felt...insane. But fuck, this entire thing was insane.

“You are not walking away from this.” Grim’s voice suddenly filled the space. Cage rolled to the side as the man appeared in my bedroom, looking intense and frustrated. “You are done running from this bastard.”

“If he’s alive, I have to run from him,” I protested.

“Then we kill him,” Cage growled.

Running my hands over my face, I nodded. “I need to know if he’s on campus or not first.”

“How?” Grim demanded.

“You’ll see.” I stood up, not believing that I was about to do this.

If they didn’t know about my powers before, they were about to.



## OSBORN

Leaning against the wall outside of Deva's dorm, we listened quietly to the conversation going on inside and the heartbreak in her voice. My heart—the thing I swore had been absolutely destroyed years ago—squeezed painfully, knowing our Deva, *our mate*, was upset. More than upset.

While I knew witches didn't technically have mates...that's what Deva was to me. She was my everything. The beam of starlight in the dark icy existence I lived every day. The woman that I would be devoted to with an obsessive focus for the rest of our lives. I still hadn't processed fully that she was here, that she was within reach.

I had been like this about Deva from the start. When I'd first turned around from slaughtering my intended victim, I had thought I'd possibly died because of the vision of light, like a star itself, standing in front of me. Then I had felt a surge of concern about the blood on me, not wanting to scare her off before having a chance to study her closer, to examine her.

But Deva hadn't been scared of the blood on me, nor the body at my feet. In fact, if anything, she seemed curious. She'd also appeared exhausted, and her state of being stirred a reaction inside of me. One I hadn't understood at first because it was grossly protective. I didn't have a protective bone in my body, or so I thought.

After a moment of staring down at her, I not only questioned why she was in the alley but offered her food, finding the need to take her to my place almost compulsive. I didn't want her lips to be blue anymore, and I knew those dark circles under her eyes would disappear after a few nights' sleep. The emotion had been so strong that I hadn't been able to focus until she agreed, her hunger winning out over self-preservation.



The relief I'd felt when she walked into my place had been like nothing else.

But I quickly left after making sure she was secure for the night, my demons creeping in as I began to question myself. Questioning whether I trusted myself with her since my instinct was almost to always kill anyone near me. More than that, I'd experienced a sick fascination in what was underneath that pearlized skin. I wanted to see what she was made of, if starlight would explode out from her... But that wasn't an option. The idea of causing her any physical harm wasn't an option.

For the first time in my life, violence repulsed me.

Because of that, I kept my distance for a few days, never allowing her to see me, keeping to the shadows and continuously leaving her food to make sure she was provided for. Eventually, though, after a night of watching her toss and turn with nightmares, it had become too much. I'd come 'back' home, and upon entering the abandoned loft, her face had instantly lit up with curiosity as well as a rightful amount of caution.

I hadn't known where Deva had come from, but it was clear she'd taken her demons with her. That night I'd been so damn scared of pushing her to run that I'd barely talked until she had forced me to, finally getting me to give her my name. After that, things had changed, and we'd fallen into an easy pattern of communication while she recovered from something that had left mental and physical scars.

Until she left.

I had thought my heart had ceased to exist after that. I'd felt a level of agony at our separation that hadn't been natural, and I'd searched for months, trying to find her. So when I saw her standing in the courtyard of DIA, I thought it was a delusion.

The fates had clearly had other plans than us being separated because Deva was here, right within reach. Wearing my necklace that I'd hand-crafted for her. It was a possessive and branding claim, wearing an object made of someone else's magic, and I think she may have recognized that. If she didn't... Well, everyone else had.

Then she went and defended me. At that point, I hadn't been able to do anything but drag her to a different room and mark her, coming inside of her like an animal wanting to claim its mate. The satisfaction I'd felt watching my cum drip out of her was something I wanted to experience again and again.

Which is why I was worried that today could lead to her wanting to leave us. Leave me. Something I wouldn't allow—even if I needed to tie her to me. I blinked away that thought, not wanting to delve into where that could lead.

*Especially* since I'd come inside her today. Fuck. I hadn't even asked her if she was on protection. While I hadn't taken her completely, I should have asked. Or maybe I had purposefully not asked. Maybe there was a part of me that knew what I was doing and hoped she didn't stop me.

I looked towards the windows where the rain was falling and tried to not let the possibilities take root. Not right now, when my girl was in so much danger. If I'd known that was who she'd been running from back then, I would have taken her far out of the city to stay safe. Far away from his reach that seemed to only be growing each day.

Although, he had gone into hiding once his 'Dead Doll' had been officially killed. I shook my head, realizing that his dangerous assassin had been a sixteen-year-old girl. If I hadn't hated the bastard before, I more than hated him now. What an absolute motherfucker.

Before I could get too deep into all the pain I wanted to cause him, Deva's door opened, and she blinked at all of us as if surprised we were there.

That was how I knew she was out of it—Deva noticed everything, and she hadn't even recognized that we'd been right outside the door. That shit was terrifying.

She wrapped her sweater tighter around herself and mumbled, "Let's talk outside."

There was so much I wanted to say, and I had to hold myself back from going to her as we cleared the space where someone could potentially be listening.

When we stepped outside, underneath a rooftop behind the building, she turned towards us. There were tears drying on her cheeks, but there was also a determined light in her eyes, and I knew the conversation she and Cage had just had did her some good. It was so much better than that empty expression she'd had while leaving our dorm.

One moment of hesitation, and she was gone. That scared the hell out of me.

"You said you wouldn't run." Lazaro's voice was filled with more pain than I'd ever heard from him. I almost snapped at him to not talk to her like that, but instead I watched Deva's face contort with pain before she

approached him and wrapped her arms around his center.

Honestly, if it wasn't for the serious nature of the conversation, his reaction would have been somewhat amusing. His eyes went wide, and any anger seemed to just disappear.

Deva was already doing the bastard some good.

She squeezed her eyes shut, her words even and almost relaxed. "I'm guessing you guys heard the conversation in my room?"

"Yes," Alek said, his brow dipped as he stared at her with concern.

I knew he was worried she was pissed at him, but what he didn't realize is that she was probably more relieved than anything. Deva wasn't great with emotions—none of us were—so someone already having explained the traumatic parts of her life, to an extent, was a massive weight off her shoulders, no doubt.

"Okay," she whispered and then nodded, almost to herself. "If you guys are okay with it and actually want to be part of this..." She hesitated, meeting our unwavering gazes before she let out an exhale. "Alright, then we need to find a body of water—"

"Lake." Cage nodded towards the forest.

"Oh, awesome." She nodded, looking a bit dazed. "Lead the way, tour guide."

Cage barked out a laugh at that, and her cheeks flushed. I intertwined our fingers, not letting her move as the others walked ahead. Once we were alone, she immediately tensed, looking up at me with large, worried eyes.

I cupped her jaw, examining her concerned expression. "Did you really think this would change something, starlight?"

She sniffed and closed her eyes, tears welling down her cheeks again before she stared up at me with so much vulnerability, it almost broke me. "Of course I did. I killed unblest, and a lot of them. I mean, fuck, Cage literally just told me your own family—"

"Knew what they were doing when they went against him," I murmured gently, bringing her against my chest and running my fingers through her soft hair. "You are not the person to blame, Deva. He is. He always fucking is. You were just a tool to him."

When she pulled back, she nodded slowly. "I don't know if I will ever believe that, but if you believe it...that's enough for me."

"Plus, you said you love me," I spoke softly before tightening my grip. "You can't take that back."

And fuck, did I love her. I mean, seriously, the depth of emotion I had for this woman was the central focus of my life.

“I love you,” she murmured and then mumbled a small curse. “I hope you still love me after you see my magic.”

“I have been wanting to watch you use your magic for a long time,” I admitted easily.

She nodded and then tugged my hand, leading me through the forest path that the others were traveling. The witch sector had an eerie feel to it that ran across my skin, setting my magic on edge. It was always like this, stormy and dark, and if not raining then foggy... But something felt different about the air tonight. It felt charged.

“You weren’t lying, it is a lake,” Deva said, curiosity in her voice as we entered a large clearing where the lake sat. The surface was still, and the clouds had cleared almost for Deva herself, the moon shining down on her and lighting her up.

“I would never lie to you.” Cage winked at her before adding, “Plus, you never let me give you a tour...”

“You are not giving her a tour,” I rumbled. The bastard was almost always in some type of danger, and Deva didn’t need that. Cage chuckled but ignored me, leaning against the tree as I watched my starlight approach the surface of the water.

“What are you doing?” Grimshaw asked, looking concerned.

She turned towards us before shedding her sweater and putting it to the side. “A locator spell, but he won’t be found by a normal one. If you are okay with it, I need you to help me.”

“You know we will, *zaya*,” Alek said, and none of us disagreed. I didn’t feel like I needed to give a response—Deva knew I would do anything for her.

Nodding, she looked down at her feet, marking the spot by digging the toe of her boot in before stepping back. Crouching down, she spoke quietly. “I am going to have to use all of my magic for this. I will light up each part of the circle with an orb, just pick it up and take its place once you do.”

Without prelude, she whispered something under her breath, clasping her hands together and gently bringing them apart to reveal a glowing orb of moonlight that seemed to flawlessly materialize. She placed it down, the one that would be closest to the lake, and almost instantly my magic cued into how the forested region around us quieted in anticipation. Alek went first to

the orb as Deva worked her way around, creating five markers in a spell circle. Grimshaw, Cage, and Lazaro stepped up without hesitation, and I took the last place, my magic simmering under my skin and warning me of everything to come.

I picked up the orb, and it warmed my fingers as my gaze moved to Deva, who was pulling her hair back before looking at Cage. “Do you have a blade?”

I nearly rolled my eyes at the elation on his face—of course the fucker had a blade. He procured one with his other hand and she took it, walking towards the center of the circle before looking up at the moon. “Not full, but it should work. Hang tight.”

I didn’t fully understand what she meant... Until she sliced her palm with the athame.

All at once, it felt like the orb in my hands was searing and had melded to my skin so I couldn’t let go. I let out a low rumble as the ground rose up and surrounded our feet, wind rushing through the space as shadows cloaked us in a dome. My eyes were darting everywhere so damn fast that I didn’t realize Deva was on her knees, chanting, her voice lost in the wind.

Holy fuck.

Almost like a set of holiday lights, her skin began to light up, showcasing runes that seemed to appear from beneath her skin... Actually, they were literally under her skin. It was both beautiful and terrifying as her head snapped back and they crawled up her neck, causing her to tremble. There was a glow coming from the center of her chest, and I realized that it was the moonstone. It was fueling the spell. A spell that contained far more power and skill than I had ever believed was possible.

Deva was not only skilled, but a goddamn master of the craft. The way she worked was intoxicating, a masterpiece, and the wind whipped her hair around as she began to chant louder. I was so mesmerized that I didn’t see it coming—the moment where everything went wrong.

Almost as if in a picture, everything froze. Deva’s entire body contorted and her back arched, her eyes falling closed. I thought that maybe this was the moment the spell worked... Until she let out a blood-curdling scream.

It was filled with so much agony, it had me darting forward.

But it was too late.

The spell lashed out. All of the magic she had been controlling broke loose, and I felt a surge of it slam into me, hard. I fell back, nearly knocking

myself out cold as a burning in my chest erupted.

Fuck.

I went to sit up, or yell something, anything, to see if Deva was alright, but then the darkness closed in on me, grasping at me with unyielding force. I had no choice but to let it drown me as I listened to my starlight scream in torment.

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M. Sinclair is a Chicago native, parent to 3 cats, and can be found writing almost every moment of the day. Despite being new to publishing, M. Sinclair has been writing for nearly 10 years now. Currently in love with the Reverse Harem genre, she plans to publish an array of works that are considered romance, suspense, and horror within the year. M. Sinclair lives by the notion that there is enough room for all types of heroines in this world, and being saved is as important as saving others. If you love fantasy romance, obsessive possessive alpha males, and tough FMCs, then M. Sinclair is for you!





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