



DARK
IMAGINARIUM
ACADEMY

MONSTERS ABOVE

THE CREATURES WE CRAVE  BOOK 3

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Monsters Above

THE CREATURES WE CRAVE

BOOK THREE

R.L. CAULDER

WHITE RABBIT PUBLISHING

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Chapter 1

“YOU’VE GOT TO BE FUCKING KIDDING ME.”

The swirling purple and gold eyes of my best friend were barely visible with the way she was glaring at me now that my monsters and I were back within the relative safety of our home with her. I’d caught her up on what just happened with the curse, as well as my plan to go on the offensive. To say she wasn’t a fan of that plan was an understatement.

I felt my monsters take a few steps back, the heat from their bodies fading as her ire increased. Couldn’t say I blamed them. Alora was usually a ball of light and energy, and this was a side of her I’d never seen before. She could be downright intimidating—I didn’t think she had it in her.

As soon as I told her our plan to go back to Ordinarius and hunt down these curses, a glint of fury sparked to life in her eyes. Immediately, I knew I wasn’t going to get a hug and a vote of confidence for my plan from her.

Nope—no blindly supportive bestie here. Alora was livid, and with the emotions displayed openly on her face, she was doing nothing to hide it.

At first, I thought her shock and anger might be overcome with a bit more discussion. But after her expression shifted, her brow furrowed and lips pinched tightly, and she started staring a hole into my face, I swallowed the explanation that had bubbled in my throat.

Just own up to your shit, Alexandra.

Clasping my hands in front of me, I slowly rocked back on my feet and grimaced. “Nope. Not kidding at all, Alora.”

I didn’t think it was possible, but her fury somehow increased with my refusal to back down beneath her withering glare. Black and gold wings ripped through her favorite black t-shirt dress to rest behind her, and I knew I would never hear the end of it for making her angry enough to ruin the dress once she realized the absolute casualty of her actions.

The sound of breaking glass meeting my ears made me wince, and my eyes widened when I noticed the loose feathers floating around Alora. They fell to the floor with the remnants of the cups from her countertop that took the brute force of the wind coming off of her wings’ sudden, infuriated appearance.

Currently, I was really questioning whether I actually wanted her and Alina to be friends anymore. If they teamed up together against me...nope. Absolutely not. I would never win a single argument.

But this plan? I couldn’t let Alora’s disapproval stop me. Otherwise, I would be placing the lives of all the students at DIA at risk.

“I won’t let you do this, Alexandra,” she argued, strands of her dark hair falling out of her loose, high ponytail as she shook her head. “I will tell Estrid. I will tell Potestas. I will tell anyone who will keep you from this suicide mission in Ordinarius. I don’t care if it makes you hate me, because at least you’ll be alive to hate me. I...” she trailed off before swallowing hard and nodding seemingly to herself. “I can live with that.”

My heart clenched at her quiet admission.

“Alora...” I breathed out, eyes roaming over her quickly morphing face. The hard, angry set to her face began to melt away with her words, replaced with a rocky, fake confidence. Like she was daring me to call her bluff.

We both knew she wouldn’t turn me in, but I wasn’t going to call her out on that right now.

I took a deep breath, blowing it out sharply as I attempted to gather my words. I could have left here without talking to her, but it felt wrong to just disappear on her when we lived together and someone just died a few houses away. That worry would eat away at her until she went crazy. It wasn't an option in my mind, despite it being the much easier choice to make.

I knew she would keep my secret, even if she didn't like it. I couldn't let her think I'd died or been taken if I just disappeared.

Taking a few steps toward her, I gave her a look that I hoped came across as pleading. I didn't *want* her understanding—I needed it. Lifting my hands to rest on the sides of her crossed arms, I squeezed gently. “Alora, I know it's not a bulletproof plan—.”

She scoffed, cutting me off as she flung her hands into the air, making mine fall back to my side as I sighed heavily.

Her eyes widened as she blinked at me, fury clear in the swirling purple and gold depths. “Not bulletproof is putting it mildly, Alex.” Her hands gestured around wildly, emphasizing her words as she continued to yell, “Your plan has massive gaping holes in it, without anyone even attacking it to begin with!”

I grimaced. She wasn't wrong, but hearing it definitely didn't feel good.

Shoving her pointer finger at my chest, she took on a nonsense tone that really reminded me that she was the daughter of the queen of Hell. “You are not going to Ordinarius until you have a better understanding of your powers, Alexandra. This plan is just asking for all four of you to be killed.”

Her eyes flicked over my shoulder, scanning my three monsters, and a lead weight like a rock sinking in my stomach hit me. Turning over my shoulder to glance at them, I saw that they each wore a look of confidence for me. Their trust was implicit. A shaky breath puffed over my lips as I turned back to face her. I knew that we weren't fully-powered yet, but after

seeing my spear and powers impact Elias' soul, I thought we really had a chance.

Was I forfeiting their lives with this plan?

My heart rate increased, rising in tandem with the anxiety churning in my gut.

“But,” she added, her brows rising as she nodded and met my eyes once more. My heart soared at that single word from her. “It’s clear that you don’t have a proper teacher here who can teach you everything you can possibly learn in as little time as possible. Not to mention, with Helen’s involvement and seeming knowledge of these curses, it’s time to consider another route that keeps her away from you.”

Her feathers ruffled, as if they hated the idea of Helen as much as we did. The honestly cute reaction made me want to reach out and pet them. The silly thought somehow had me taking a deep, calming breath to steady my racing thoughts and heart.

Kylo spoke up at her words, my monsters’ presence drawing closer again as Alora’s anger seemed to diffuse slightly. “Did you have someone in mind?”

A small smile tugged at her lips with his question, shocking me given the situation and how upset she just was. “I do,” she answered, cocking her head slightly to the side as she answered him, though her smile slipped away as she did. A look of concern morphed her features as she sighed and continued, “But if Helen is an enemy, then it means you might have more in Divinus.”

Helen was definitely an enemy. After meeting Elias and him confirming their names, the same exact ones Helen had said, and her knowledge of them coming here to kill students before it happened...There was no room for doubt or speculation anymore.

My brows knit together. Why was she even mentioning Divinus when our plan was to go to Ordinarius?

Alora snagged a strand of her hair that had fallen, twirling it around her finger as her brow furrowed.

I took the moment to glance back at my monsters with a searching look, wondering if they had any idea where she was going with this, because frankly I was lost. I was met with blank looks and shrugs.

At least I wasn't the only one in the dark.

"Alora," I started, startling her slightly from her thoughts as she dropped her hand to her side and snapped her eyes to me. "Why would it matter if I have more enemies in Divinus?"

Her shoulders pulled back as she lifted her chin, voice ringing out confidently as she answered, "Because that's exactly where you need to go. My aunt Zurie lives there with her mates. You can stay with them, and I know they'll protect you while you train."

My brain all but short circuited as my mouth dropped open.

One: How did her aunt live in Divinus if she was from Hell?

Two: What the fuck?

"Divinus? Why would we go there to train?" Kylo asked incredulously at the same time that Lucien barked out a laugh and stated, "Absolutely not."

Elwin's quietness had me craning my head to the right to glance at him. He seemed to be mulling over Alora's words, staring intently at her with a furrowed brow.

I really wanted to know what was swirling around inside that brain of his right now.

"Is it because of Zeus and the origin of Pandora's box?"

The pointed question had me sucking in a gasp, dots connecting and flying into place. How had I not come to this conclusion earlier?

In my countless hours of research, I found plenty of passages that contradicted one another, but the one fact they all had in common was that Zeus gave the box to Pandora, telling her it was a beautiful gift to her. The catch was that he told her that she could never open it. Eventually, as would

happen with any of us, curiosity got the better of her and she did open it, releasing the curses into the world.

Helen is Zeus' daughter.

My breath hitched as my heart rate increased. Elwin's green eyes locked onto mine, the look of horror on his face surely reflected on mine.

That...that would mean she's doing his bidding and that Zeus, the freaking God of the sky, was real. Not only real, but alive and apparently gunning for me if his daughter was here to keep an eye on me and torment me.

I blew out a heavy, shaky breath, drawing the gazes of my monsters to me.

That's where Alora wanted to send us?

She instantly turned sheepish as my aghast look turned her way. "That's why I said you might have more enemies in Divinus," she breathed out, eyes crinkling on the edges with her wince.

Crossing my arms across my chest, I raised a single eyebrow at her. "I'm waiting to hear how and why this is somehow a better plan than mine to go to Ordinarius. It seems there are gaping holes in both of our plans, bestie."

My voice dripped with sarcasm, considering she'd given me such a hard time about my plan not being perfect.

"Can someone please fill me the fuck in?" Lucien whined, not shocking me in the least.

Elwin was my consistent reading partner when pouring over the books we'd found. Lucien wasn't exactly the sit-in-one-spot-for-hours-to-research type of guy...more like the feast-on-my-pussy-while-I-read-a-romance-book-out-loud type of guy. I honestly couldn't say which I loved more—I needed both. I was greedy like that.

Elwin sighed before grabbing Lucien and shoving him behind me again. Kylo followed. I knew he'd catch them up on what we'd gathered ourselves while Alora and I continued to talk.

Alora's hands gently grabbed my own, letting them hang between us as she started her pitch. "I know this sounds risky—because it is—but it's the best bet you have of defeating the curses. A true fucking chance." Her hands tightened on my own. "What's the point of running into a battle with them in Ordinarius if it means likely dying? Wouldn't you at least want a fighting chance? Who's going to take them down if you die, Alex? Tell me that!"

Her voice slowly escalated throughout the entire speech, leaving her breathless by the end after barely taking a breath between her words. But what really came through in her words and tone was her desperation and fear for me.

I knew she wasn't raising her voice at me to be belittling or disrespectful. She was *terrified* for me.

And she had a point. If I was the one thing made to defeat them, I couldn't blow it. But did Divinus hold the answers for us?

All I could think to do was grab her, quickly pulling her in against me and wrapping my arms around her. A surprised huff of breath came from her at the quick move. I held her tightly, waiting just a few heartbeats before her own arms wrapped around me and her body sagged against mine.

I was truly so lucky to have befriended her.

Her voice quivered as her fingers pressed into my back. "I can't lose you. I just found you."

My eyes pricked at the way her voice cracked on her last word.

The truth was that I didn't want to lose her, either. I didn't want to lose any of these beautiful souls that I'd come to claim as mine. My family. The very people I'd longed to have at my side my entire life.

But they were the exact reason I knew I needed to take action. We couldn't sit back and just wait for the curses' next attack. Waiting only made us sitting ducks, and I'd had enough of that.

Chapter 2

GENTLY, I PULLED BACK ENOUGH TO LOOK INTO HER EYES AND wiped a stray tear from her cheek as she nibbled on her lip. “You won’t lose me, bestie boo. I’m too stubborn to be taken away from you so easily.”

She rolled her eyes, huffing out a laugh as she sniffled. “You’re right. If anyone took you, they might send you back instantly. They might even pay us to take you off their hands. Even a grim reaper like my grandpa.”

The grim reaper as her grandpa. Somehow I kept forgetting how interesting her family was, beyond her mother being the queen.

I shot her a wink. “Exactly.”

Lucien’s cedar scent wrapped around me a few seconds before his arms did, enclosing around both me and Alora. “Group hug, ladies.”

A smile stretched across my face at his warming presence. That was my guy, butting in with humor whenever the situation got too heavy.

We shared a laugh before I pressed back against him, forcing him to release us. “Let go, crazy. We still need to figure out where we’re going next.”

I managed to get his hands off Alora, but not me. My ass pressed snugly against his hips, but he refused to let go of me and put any distance between us. His lips swooped down to rest against the shell of my ear as his hot breath fanned across it. “I know exactly where I’d like to be, angel.”

“Gag,” Alora muttered with amusement tinting her tone. My cheeks flushed with embarrassment, and I elbowed Lucien in the gut.

I’d take his dirty talk all day long in private, but when we were around others, there were just some things that were better kept to ourselves. If Alora *ever* heard about these things, it would be from my lips and in private, with lots of wine.

The sound of a loud smack came from behind me, and Lucien released me with a yelp.

“Can you please behave and maybe act like we’re in the middle of making an important decision?” Kylo asked with indignation, staring at Lucien with annoyance as I turned around to take in the scene.

Lucien rubbed the back of his head, glaring at Kylo before swinging his gaze to me and pouting. He blinked rapidly, really laying on the puppy-dog eyes as he muttered, “Angel, are you just going to let him hurt me whenever he wants?” He lifted his hands to his heart, and I rolled my eyes at his theatrics. “If so, it really feels like you’re playing favorites here, and that wounds me.”

“When did I become the mom of the group who was supposed to keep her kids in line? I thought you called Elwin mommy,” I sassed back before blowing him a kiss and turning back to Alora.

I watched Lucien smirk out of the corner of my eye, to make sure he took my joke in stride. His deep chuckle that blended with the chorus of laughter from everyone else let me know that he did.

“So, tell me more about this aunt of yours in Divinus and how exactly she’s going to help us,” I said, pinning all of my attention back on my friend. “I’m very curious how your family is from Hell but you somehow have family in Divinus. Don’t skimp on the details,” I demanded, entirely enthralled with the mystery that was her family.

A smile tugged at her lips at the mention of her aunt, and I already knew that if Alora loved her this much, I would too.

My bestie was very selective with who she let bask in her love.

“My aunt Zurie is my mom’s best friend, and she’s mated to the archangels in Divinus. She moved up there after the war for control over Hell, which is when her mates came down and found her.”

My eyes widened. That was a hell of a lot to take in and process for two short statements. She said it in such a matter-of-fact way, though, like she was telling me the lunch menu for today.

I couldn’t help but laugh at that, scoffing a bit. “That’s the quickest and most confusing summary I’ve ever heard, but tell me next how going to visit them is the best move for us. How would anyone there know how to train me any better than the lessons I’m receiving here at DIA or me figuring it out more on my own in Ordinarius?”

She held her pointer finger up, determination making her eyes slant slightly as her brow knitted. “Well, for one, the archangels are rumored to be some of the most powerful beings of the realm. They will defend you as their family, because you are mine.”

Now that was the type of matter-of-fact statement I could get behind. My lips pulled into a smile as warmth spread through my chest.

A second finger popped up alongside the first. “Two, if the curses are following you, it gets them away from DIA, which I know is a big concern of yours.”

I offered her a single nod of concession. That was true.

“And my personal favorite reason,” she practically sang as she extended a third finger and smirked at me, “my aunt Zurie was an outsider her whole life growing up. Just like my mom. Just like you. Just like me. We’re all different, and that’s something she will love about you. She will fight for you and help find you a teacher there. I know it.”

Damnit, she knew I had a soft spot for outsiders. That was just playing dirty, making me love her Aunt preemptively.

A heavy sigh came from behind me in the seconds before Kylo spoke up, dragging our attention to him. “While I do understand the sentiment, why are you so sure someone in Divinus can teach Alexandra? And what’s to say that if Zurie did find someone, that they would actually help?”

I couldn’t stop myself nodding along to those questions as my brow rose. They were fair, bringing me back down to the logical headspace I needed to be in.

Alora’s voice was clear and confident in return as she turned to face him directly. “We know for a fact that no teacher here at DIA understands Alexandra’s powers. That’s because her gifts came from Divinus. Pandora’s box was created by a god, which most likely means that only the beings of Divinus understand the extent of her powers.”

“Fair assessment,” Elwin murmured.

“Also, you don’t stay alive for thousands upon thousands of years without hearing things. They gossip just like everyone here and in every other veil of existence. Someone up there knows more than a book in the library here at DIA, and I know my Aunt Zurie won’t stop until she sniffs them out.”

The conviction in her words moved me, and I found myself *actually* considering her plan for the first time. She made valid points about me being able to draw the curses away from DIA, while also buying myself more time to possibly train with a more powerful being.

“Sniff them out?” Lucien scoffed, humor lacing his tone. “What is she, a hellhound that somehow found her way into Divinus?”

A bellyaching laugh belted out of me at the look of utter offense on Alora’s face at that particular joke.

“No, she’s a hybrid mix of a reaper and a ghost, and quite proud of that as the only one of her kind, so I suggest not making that joke to her,” she warned. My mouth dropped open to ask the burning question that sprang to my mind, but she cut my line of thought off instantly. “And don’t ask me how it’s even possible to fuck a ghost—my mom told me when she

finally found the courage to ask Zurie's mom about the details, she wished she could bleach her mind."

Honestly, that was more than enough of an answer for me. I had to bite down on my bottom lip to keep from bursting into laughter. I felt the heat of Elwin's gaze on the side of my face, and I released my captured lip with a smirk.

How was this my life? And to think that I once thought I was going to live a mundane existence in Ordinarius.

The hilarity of the situation consumed me the more I thought of it, and tears streamed out of the corner of my eyes as I doubled over. My hands rested on my knees as my body shook with laughter. All eyes were on me, but slowly each of them joined me until the fear that saturated our home turned into an energy that felt more like hope to me.

I wasn't sure if it was my exhaustion, fear, or the thought of someone fucking a ghost making me absolutely lose it right now, but damn, it felt good to have a moment to not focus on my absolute dread at the reality facing us.

And suddenly, the obstacles in front of us didn't feel so insurmountable as I looked at each of them smiling. I could get through anything as long as I had my family.

With the promise to reconvene when Alora had an answer on how to get us to Divinus, we headed to our respective bedrooms. She didn't leave us waiting for long.

A shrill screech that echoed from Alora's bedroom across our small home and into my own had me giggling and holding up my hand for Kylo to slap from where he laid next to me. Guess she'd seen her ripped dress finally.

Glancing to the clock on my nightstand, I huffed out a smug sound of victory. We'd officially crossed ten minutes since she'd gone to her room.

Unsure of what the outcome of her call would be with her mom in regards to helping portal us to Divinus, we'd agreed to hold off on deciding anything until we got that answer. There was no sense in debating Divinus if we couldn't even get

there. That left us with some time to kill and a chance for my anxiety to begin to take hold of my heart again.

“Pay up, suckers,” I purred, smirking up at Lucien from where I laid between his legs. I turned my eyes on Elwin, who lounged in my hanging chair in the corner, rocking slowly back and forth with his feet.

His eyes were entirely trained on me, and as I took a short breath, my smirk faltered at the sight of the heat in them.

Lucien groaned, breaking the spell over me with his words, “I really thought she would freak out right after she walked into her room. She’s so obsessed with her wardrobe.”

“Same,” Elwin admitted, cocking a grin at me like he didn’t care in the slightest he’d lost the bet. His new favorite game seemed to be trying to fluster me with his looks.

I dragged my lip between my teeth, biting down into the soft flesh and loving the way he instantly stiffened as his gaze narrowed on me. I’d pay for that later, but only in the best way possible.

In reality it hadn’t taken Alora *that* long, but Lucien had bet under a minute, with Elwin betting two minutes.

Alora’s combat boots stomping against the wood floors alerted us to her oncoming arrival well before she appeared in my open doorway, lips pinched and fists curled at her side.

“My mom said she will take you to Divinus and introduce you to Zurie,” she huffed before shaking her hands out and crossing her arms across her chest.

As if that made her look any less upset.

I let out a massive mental breath I’d been holding while waiting for the answer from her mom. Now I was left with a real choice to make, and with so many lives on the line, it couldn’t be the wrong one. No pressure or anything.

“Why the long face then, Alora?” Lucien prodded, faux concern coating his words. “That’s great news.”

Elwin snorted from the corner, the hanging seat creaking slightly as he pushed back and forth. We all knew Lucien was

goaded her.

I smacked his leg hard, earning a yelp from him. Not a bit of me felt bad for it—he knew exactly what he was doing right now. Though I couldn't deny that I loved the way the two of them had created this funny brother-sister sort of banter recently.

“Ha, ha,” Alora snickered back in a mocking manner as her nose scrunched up. “Go suck a fart out of someone's ass, Lucien. You know exactly why I'm upset.”

I choked on my spit, causing Kylo to thump on my back a few times until I was breathing normally again. I had to clear my throat a few times and take a few breaths before I pushed myself to the edge of the bed, dropping my feet onto the floor to stand up.

“I promise we will not stop until we find the perfect replacement dress, bestie boo,” I cooed at my beautiful scowling friend as I approached her with my hands up.

Walking slowly, I knew it was like approaching a wounded animal. I wasn't sure how she was going to react.

Her doe eyes widened as she nodded at me and dramatically sniffled. “Yes. Once we get done kicking these curses' ass, I demand a shopping trip.”

“Done,” I quickly agreed, loving the thought of doing something so mundane with a friend without the threat of our lives hanging in the balance during it.

Maybe it was silly, but it honestly was a motivating thought. I could have a normal life—well, as normal as a life gets being part of the supernatural community—if we could just get through this. The life I'd always craved was just on the other side of my fear and uncertainty.

I was ready to take the next step and get this over with.

“Did you tell your mom the urgency of this matter?”

Before she could answer my question, a feeling like all the air was sucked out of the room for a few moments before slamming back into me hit me. I stood stock still, mouth

hanging open as a new voice called out, “Alora, honey, I’m here.”

Flies were going to collect in my mouth at how long I stood there gaping at my friend. There was only one person who would ever talk to Alora like that right now.

Chapter 3

SHE WAS HERE ALREADY?! WE STILL NEEDED TIME TO TALK this over, and I would have maybe made myself a little bit more presentable before meeting the freaking queen of Hell.

“Shit,” I breathed out, blinking furiously as my mind snapped quickly back into working order.

The queen of Hell was here to accompany us to Divinus, and we hadn’t even officially decided if that’s where we were going yet. Cool, super cool. Absolutely nothing to freak out over.

My mind whirled as I quickly brushed my hands over my shirt before running them through my hair. I heard my guys rustling around me at the same time, likely having the same thoughts as me.

Now it was Alora’s turn to have a nice chuckle at us as she watched us all freak out simultaneously. I couldn’t help but flip her off in my haste. She was enjoying this way too much.

How the heck did Queen Ama get here so quickly? From what I knew, all the heads of the sectors here in Praeditus, as well as the heads of Hell and Divinus, had access to a portal to travel between the veils. But there definitely wasn’t a portal in our house for her to come through.

“Be right out, Mom!” Alora called over her shoulder before glancing back to us and grabbing the door handle. “I’ll give you a few minutes to discuss what you’re going to do, but we all know this is the best plan. We’ll be out here when you’re ready.”

With that, she shot me a wink and closed the door softly, leaving us to scramble for an answer.

Whirling around to my three mates, I threw my hands in the air and hissed, “What are we going to do? The freaking queen of Hell is in our living room, ready to meet us and take us to Divinus right now. Once we get there, we’ll be meeting freaking archangels, and who knows what else!”

I couldn’t even believe those words were coming out of my mouth.

My chest heaved as I tried to take steadying breaths and failed. Kylo was quick to come forward and grab my face between his large palms as he stared down at me with a gentle smile.

Instantly, his blue eyes and the appearance of his dimples enraptured me and pulled my focus entirely to him.

“Darling, calm down.” My heart slowed at his command, and I tried to take deep, slow breaths. “Yes, it is a bit intimidating to think about going to a new realm and meeting such powerful creatures, but I could see on your face while talking with Alora that this is what you want to do now. Is it not?”

My eyes bounced around between the three of them. “Well...she made some good points,” I quickly agreed. “But this is a decision for all of us to make. Do we go to Divinus or to Ordinarius? Those are our only options, unless you guys see another one that I don’t.”

With a soft kiss to my forehead, Kylo tucked me against his side. “Let’s vote.”

Running a hand through his messy dark hair, Lucien rumbled, “Shit, I think life as we know it is going to change no matter what we do, but I can’t deny that I like the idea of you having more time to train, angel.”

Elwin tucked his hands into his back pockets and quickly piggybacked on Lucien’s words with a shrug, “I have to agree. If they’re going to protect us as much as Alora made it seem, I

think it's worth the risk of possibly being in a realm with unknown enemies.”

Glancing up at Kylo, I waited for his answer as he stared down at me. His hand came up to grip my chin lightly, rubbing his thumb across my skin. I had to actively try to not preen under his touch and gaze. I was such a sap for these monsters.

“I say we trust in Alora's plan. We need to start learning to accept the help offered to us by the people we trust. It's not just the four of us against the world anymore.”

My heart did a few somersaults at his wise words. He was right. They all were.

I'd already made my mind up deep down about what I wanted to do, but I wanted to make sure I wasn't being blind to something they saw that I didn't. What I knew was that I didn't want to go to Ordinarius just to lead us to our deaths. I'd only considered that particular plan when it seemed like the only option to keep people from being killed at DIA, but now that we had this alternate plan, it felt foolish not to take it.

The thought of going to a new realm that was littered with those who might possibly want me dead was incredibly overwhelming, but we could do this. Plus, it sounded like we would have a hell of a lot of protection between Zurie and her mates.

“Then let's go meet Queen Ama,” I announced, a flutter of excitement unfurling within my stomach at the words.

I could hardly believe those words were even coming out of my mouth.

As we crossed from my room to the living room, I had to school my features to hold back the look of awe that threatened to take over as I saw Queen Ama for the first time. Long dark waves of hair with soft red highlights fell down her back that was to us, and there were horns much bigger than Alora's sticking out of her head. A large scythe that glowed with dark pink energy rested in the palm of her hand, stretching from the floor to above her head.

As soon as Alora smiled at me, her mom turned around, gracing us with a smirk. “I can’t say I ever expected to be kept waiting by a bunch of academy students.”

Seeing her from the front, my breath was stolen from my lungs. I saw clearly where Alora got her love of fashion from. The crazy thing, though? She wasn’t dressed like she was a queen, and I kind of loved that. Black, ripped skinny jeans adorned her legs, leading down to Doc Martens platform ankle boots. Her upper half was clad simply with a black tank top and multiple silver necklaces hanging from her neck.

She was absolutely stunning, just like Alora, but she carried a quiet confidence about her that I could only hope to emulate one day.

Even if I hadn’t known she was the Queen of freaking Hell, I would have instantly known she wasn’t someone to fuck with, especially with the easy way she handled that scythe and looked so unbothered.

How the hell did she wield that thing? It had to be damn heavy.

Mortification burned within my chest as I realized she’d spoken to me and all I’d done was stand there and gape at her. I knew my cheeks were probably the exact color of the energy around her scythe at this moment.

I rushed forward, bowing my head slightly. “I’m so sorry, Queen Ama. We didn’t realize you would be here so quickly and we—”

“Excuses,” she spat, cutting me off. “Not only did you leave me waiting here for you after requesting my help, but you also just stared at me like some type of science experiment.”

Shame bloomed in my chest and sank to my stomach, and I lowered my head.

Well, it was official, I was never going to live down how rude Queen Ama thought I was. I would have to spend the foreseeable future proving I was worthy of being around her daughter now.

“Mom! Knock it off!” Alora exclaimed, cutting off the on-going tangent in my head.

Wait, what? Her words cut through my haze of embarrassment. Knock what off?

Raising my head back up slowly, I found Queen Ama holding a hand over her mouth, eyes dancing with mirth as if she was barely containing a laugh. “I’m so sorry, Alexandra. I was just kidding. I didn’t think you’d take me so seriously.”

My eyes grew wide as I glanced between her and Alora.

She...she was messing with me. Was I supposed to just... chat casually with her now? My chest felt tight with uncertainty, and my brain struggled to process the huge shift in her demeanor.

Nothing prepared me for meeting royalty, and I was floundering on expected decorum. She seemed to be as laid back as Alora was—apparently at least—but I didn’t want to disrespect her.

My questions were answered as she quickly reached out and pulled me in for a hug, her scent of roses wrapping around me. My shock quickly wore off as I wrapped my arms lightly around her as she squeezed and cooed, rocking us side to side gently. “I’m so happy to finally meet my daughter’s best friend. She’s said such amazing things about you. I’m so thrilled she’s met someone who accepts her without using her for her status.”

Aw, there was a mushy side to Queen Ama. I hadn’t expected that, but I was grateful that I wasn’t going to have to convince her of why I was a good friend to her daughter anymore. Despite being the queen, she couldn’t get rid of me. Alora and I were stuck like glue.

“Mom!” Alora snapped, and I couldn’t help the snicker that spilled from my lips. “Please stop. I don’t need you to thank people for being my friend. It makes me look so pathetic.”

I couldn’t help the small smile that pulled at my lips in response to their banter.

It wasn't that I enjoyed my friend's feeling of embarrassment over her mom's words, but I enjoyed seeing a family dynamic like this. I felt included, and a sense of warmth washed over me at seeing the inner workings of their relationship. It was clear they were very close—that there wasn't a lack of love between them.

They were everything I'd ever wanted in my own imaginary mother-daughter relationship.

With Alora's words, Queen Ama pulled away from me. I fought back a laugh as they began to bicker between themselves.

It truly was like watching the same person argue with themselves in a mirror.

"Honey, there is absolutely nothing wrong with what I said! It's hard to find people who don't treat you differently for being a princess," her mom argued back. As she placed her hands on her hips as she let go of her scythe, and it disappeared.

Alright, so scythes can come and go apparently. Good to know.

Alora let out a growl of annoyance and shook her head. "Mom, you don't—"

"Don't what? Don't understand being ostracized as a princess, and a hybrid one at that?"

I cringed and slowly took a few steps back until I ran into Elwin's chest, soaking in his warmth as his hands came up and rubbed my arms.

As soon as Alora's mouth popped open and a scowl pinched her lips and brows, her mom lifted a hand, preemptively cutting off whatever she was going to say next.

"Don't sass me, young lady. Do you want me to tell your dads about the security breach at the academy? You know at least three of them would drag you kicking and screaming back home. And don't get me started on how hard it's been to not tell them about your date!"

Oh, shit. I had a feeling more than just three of them would respond like that based on how protective Alora told me they all were. It made me wonder what deal she could have possibly struck with her mom to not only stay here but to keep the breach of DIA's ward from her dads too.

"You promised!" Alora shrieked.

I just continued to watch, my gaze volleying back and forth between them like I was watching a ping pong tournament.

Queen Ama laughed and let her hip pop out to the side. "Yeah, and I also promised your dads that I wouldn't keep any secrets from them when it came to you after we tried to prank Grandpa and you ended up breaking your arm in your fall. But here we are, once more with multiple secrets. I know that you're not having any more issues with control—"

Alora's gaze fell to the ground, and instantly, her mom stopped talking.

Queen Ama closed the distance between them and turned Alora around, exposing the rips in her poor dress.

"Honey, are you struggling to control your powers? You promised to tell me if this started happening again."

Again? The fact that this has happened before was news to me, though I knew it was only fair that everyone was entitled to their privacy. It felt wrong listening to this, and I let out a sigh of relief as her mom dropped the subject when Alora's shoulders sagged forward as she failed to respond.

Queen Ama's gaze flicked between Alora and us before she pressed a kiss to her daughter's forehead and brushed her loose strands of hair behind her ears.

"We'll talk about this when I get back, okay? Now, say your goodbyes before I take your friends to see Aunt Zurie."

I wasn't sure why I thought Alora would come with us to see her aunt, at least for a little bit. It hit me square in the chest as we locked eyes that I was going to have to say goodbye to her now. And I didn't know when we'd see each other again.

If we'd see each other again.

Chapter 4

WE CROSSED THE SHORT DISTANCE BETWEEN US AND wordlessly pulled each other in for a hug. My eyes closed as I squeezed her, trying to convey all of my love for her wordlessly.

“I’ll see you soon,” I whispered, hearing her snuffle ever so softly.

“I know that you have Lucien, Kylo, and Elwin to protect you. And I know that Aunt Zurie and my uncles will protect you as well, but I wish I could be there, too,” she admitted with a deep exhale. “I hate that you’re going somewhere I won’t be able to reach you. I hate even more that I won’t know what’s going on.”

A part of me wanted her there with us for comfort, but the bigger part of me didn’t want her anywhere near us in case the curses came after us in Divinus. My comfort of having her with us in this unknown realm wasn’t worth her safety.

“To end up where we need to be, some paths in life must be traveled without those we love at our side.”

Alora and I separated, turning to look at her mom as she spoke. Her eyes held so much compassion for us as she smiled and it took me by complete surprise at the authenticity and warmth.

“Fate never makes mistakes. A fact I was remiss to believe when I was your age...” she trailed off for a moment, like she was reminiscing on her memories before snapping back to the present. “I know that the future is full of unknowns, and that fact is scary. However, you are both powerful women who are

just beginning your own adventures. Do you want to know the best thing about that?”

We both nodded, waiting to see where this was heading. Alora grabbed my hand and squeezed as her mom’s hands came up, one resting over each of our hearts as she leaned in and whispered, “Powerful women can forge their own paths, and that means you will always find your way back to each other if you want it.”

For some reason, her words hit me square in the chest and I had to fight the tears that suddenly sprang to my eyes, misting them up. What was it about these women that just made me feel so loved and at home? I’d never been an emotional person growing up, but around them, emotion just poured out of me.

The answer dawned on me at that exact moment. Until now, I’d never been afraid to lose anything before. But now that I had my mates and Alora, fear seemed a prevalent thorn that was constantly in my mind and heart. The thought of losing them in one way or another—be it of their own accord and walking away from me—or someone hurting them was too intense a thought to contend with.

Removing her hands from us, Queen Ama reached down the front of her tank top and pulled out one of the necklaces that she wore. Two silver, gleaming wings dangled from the chain.

“This necklace has been blessed by someone within Divinus who is very powerful. My best friend Zurie had to go through a lot to get it for me, despite hitting many obstacles along the way. Because this necklace and pendant means that I can travel anywhere within any veil. She fought for this so I could visit her directly in her home without having to go through the extensive measures to access Divinus that everyone else who doesn’t live there faces.”

My face screwed up at the realization. I didn’t know Divinus was that hard to access, but I guess I’d never really been around someone from there. “Can she not come visit you?”

The question left my mouth before I had a chance to think through how I had no right to ask such personal questions about their lives. Zurie visiting Queen Ama just seemed like the obvious choice to make it easier for them to see each other.

Thankfully, Queen Ama didn't seem to mind my invasive question, shaking her head before responding, "A stipulation of her going to Divinus with her mates was that she could never leave. It broke many laws to have a demon from Hell up there to begin with, but the consensus that their council came to was that she was owed the right to choose to live there with her fated mates. However, that choice came with the stipulation that she cannot come and go, for fear of her being a spy for Hell."

My mouth opened slightly, shocked by the choice she'd been forced to make. She had to choose to leave her entire life behind for her mates with no guarantee she'd ever see her friends, her family, or her home again.

My heart deflated. No one should ever have to make a choice like that.

Fingers tipped my chin up, and only then did I realize that it had fallen toward the ground to begin with.

"Don't be sad for her, Alexandra. As corny as it sounds, home will always be where your heart is, and she found a way to be with her mates and still keep me and my family in their lives. The reason I shared this with you is so that you'll always remember your heart will always find a way to be with those you love, even when things seem dire, okay?"

I had to swallow a lump in my throat before being able to nod my understanding at her words. The story was incredibly moving, and I felt very honored to be allowed to know such an intimate part of their lives.

"Thank you for sharing that with me."

Removing her hand from my chin, she pulled me into her side while doing the same with Alora. Squeezing our heads toward her, we both giggled as she kissed the tops of our heads one after the other.

“I’ve always wanted another daughter,” Queen Ama admitted wistfully, “but my mates said they couldn’t handle the stress of having to protect another child. I guess they’re in for a rude awakening when they hear we have another now.”

Was she pregnant?! Oh my goodness, this was so exciting.

I pulled back from the embrace, eyes jumping from her stomach and back to her face, but what I saw took my breath away.

Alora and her mom shared a loving smile before turning their affectionate eyes on me pointedly.

“What...” I trailed off as my throat grew thick with emotion once more.

She...she couldn’t mean that she thought of *me* as a daughter. I wouldn’t let my mind go there. It was just a moment of wishful thinking.

Alora sheepishly smiled at me before explaining, “I hope you don’t mind, but I shared the story of your life with my mom, and how if you are from Pandora’s box like we think, that you don’t actually have any blood relatives.”

Queen Ama’s hand moved to cup my cheek. “We may not be blood, but I promise you the way our family loves and protects each other is thicker than blood, and you have a spot in it with us.”

Tears welled in my eyes. Okay, so it wasn’t just wishful thinking. She *was* talking about me.

Tears began to spill down my cheeks, despite trying my best to not sob like a baby. My voice was hoarse as I choked out my response, “I...I can’t put into words what it means to me to hear that someone wants *me* to be a part of their family.”

I sucked my bottom lip, that was quivering like crazy, between my teeth as I glanced back at my mates, barely able to see through the blur of liquid obscuring my vision. I could just make out all three of them nodding their approval.

They were my family, but Kylo was right when he said it didn’t have to be just us against the world anymore. It wasn’t

just me that needed a family, though. They did too, and I'd never accept being included in one if they weren't as well.

“Don't think I forgot about you three, boys,” Queen Ama called out, as if she read my mind. “You will always have a place in our family and home as well. Just know that all of my mates are going to grill you and make sure you're treating our girl here with the utmost respect and love for the rest of your lives. Can you handle that?”

This couldn't be real. This was too good to be true.

The thought of having anyone care so much about me and the three monsters who held my heart and soul...It was overwhelming. After being so damned alone throughout my life, I'd already felt beyond blessed to have my mates and to have met Alora. This addition to our family was more than I could have ever dreamed to have.

“They won't find us lacking,” Lucien answered, confidence in the way they treated me clear in his tone.

He was entirely right. There wasn't a single thing these monsters did that was wrong.

I swung my gaze back to Queen Ama as my tears began to slow and found her grinning and nodding at him. “That's what I like to hear. We'll have to do a family dinner when you're done with Aunt Zurie so we can introduce you all. I don't think I can wait for winter break to have you all home.”

Home...Something we'd always lacked. DIA was the first place to resemble it in the slightest. Was it possible that Hell could become our new, permanent home?

Alora scoffed at her words as my monsters moved closer to me. “You can't keep the secret of adopting four new kids from Dads for that long.”

Her mom pursed her lips before blowing a raspberry at her. “Maybe I'll let it slip at the same time I let it slip that you went on a date.”

She reached out to ruffle Alora's hair, but she quickly dodged mom's hand.

I took a moment to soak in each of the faces around me.

I was certain there had never been a point in my life when my heart felt as full as it did right now. Renewed determination to figure my powers out once and for all and end this battle with the curses filled me.

We deserved to feel this love.

We deserved to have a family.

My mates and I deserved to build a life together.

“Oh, and one thing, Alexandra. Stop calling me Queen Ama. I would never expect Alora to refer to me as that, and you won’t either.”

My heart hammered in my chest as my eyes widened in alarm. As much as I loved her sentiment of being my adoptive mom, there was no way we were at that level just yet, and I refused to rush into saying something like that. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings, though.

“What should we address you as?” I questioned softly, my fingers coming to twine together in front of me as I took a step closer to my mates.

Her head cocked to the side as she let out a little laugh, brows furrowing slightly like she was perplexed by my question. “Just Ama will do.”

That I could do.

The corners of my lips curved up as I smiled at her. “In return, you can call me Alex.”

She might not know exactly how much that meant, but one day she would. Alora and I shared a knowing look.

“Alright ladies and gents,” Ama clapped as she took us in, “time for proper goodbyes now. We’ve got to go before eight overly protective demons show up at the academy with more questions than any of us want to answer right now.”

A part of me wished they would show up, just so I could meet them finally, but I knew now wasn’t the time. We needed

to focus on our plan, and when we were done with these curses, we'd meet the rest of our new family.

With one more quick hug, we said our goodbyes to Alora. Ama instructed us to grab onto her arms. Nerves fluttered in my stomach, but as I held Alora's gaze, I let her determined energy ground me until I felt the gut-wrenching pull of traveling between the veils come over me and could no longer see her.

When my feet were finally on solid ground again, I bent at the waist, struggling to not wretch onto the white sparkling floors shining up at me.

"Fucking shit, I hate that," I breathed out, placing my hands on my knees as my stomach rolled once more.

A tinkling laugh floated through the air at my crass words.

"And what foul-mouthed delight do we have here, Ama?"

My brain knew that I should probably stand up and be polite, apologize for my vulgar swearing and all that. I knew I should express my gratitude for being allowed wherever the hell here was, but if I moved one inch, I really was going to hurl.

Elwin's hand was on my back, rubbing soothing circles as I closed my eyes and tried to focus on my breathing. I knew it was him just by the comforting, protective energy surrounding me.

"Would you believe me if I said I had another daughter and hid her away from you for twenty-one years?"

My guys chuckled at Ama's question, and while I'd usually appreciate such a joke, all my appreciation was currently focused on my ability to keep my mouth firmly sealed shut.

The new voice answered with a scoff, sass evident in her words as she spoke, "As if you of all people could hold onto a secret that long, Ama. However, that mouth of hers is very fitting of our family, and she does look like she could resemble Finias, so spill the details."

“Speaking of daughters,” Ama countered, deftly avoiding the demand for details on me, “where is my favorite niece?”

“She’s out with her dads for the day, but they should be home for dinner soon if you’re planning on sticking around that long.”

The worst part of the nausea began to fade, and I forced myself to stand up and take a deep breath as I opened my eyes once more.

My mouth dropped at the sight before me.

This was Divinus.

Chapter 5

I LET OUT A WHISTLE OF APPRECIATION AT THE SIGHT OF THE splendor around us.

“Beautiful home you have,” I complimented the woman I assumed was Zurie as she engulfed Ama with a hug.

Silver waves of hair streaked with lavender curled around her petite face, blending with her subtly glimmering fair skin. I quickly realized the glimmer was probably attributed to the half-ghost part of her. She shot a smile my way as Ama chatted her ear off, so I tuned their girl talk out and more fully inspected our new home base.

The first step was to assess any security risks and to identify the exits. Not that we knew where the hell we would go if we made it out of here, but I’d leave that little fact for future-Kylo to groan about.

When I thought of what this realm and home would look like before we arrived, the first words that came to mind were airy, bright, and ethereal. The black walls and massive golden chandeliers surrounding us were none of those things. Leaning down to look at the sparkling white floors, I realized there were tiny, shimmering flecks of gold throughout them.

This place was fancy as fuck...and completely different than what I was expecting, considering we were supposed to be in the realm of the gods and goddess.

I suppose the white pieces of furniture scattered throughout the expansive living room were airy, but that was about it. It felt like this home was as modern as something we might have seen in Ordinarius.

“Thank you for your compliment, I spent a long time turning it into something that felt like a blend of our two homes, seeing as the style here is drastically different in Hell.”

The response brought me back to my full height and directly in front of our host. Her hand was extended toward me in a handshake, and I couldn't help the curl of my lip at the thought of touching another woman's skin that wasn't *my* angel's.

While we were in Divinus and real angels existed here, my mate was more pure and full of light and beauty than any being in this realm. To lower myself to touch anything less than would leave me feeling dirty and in need of penance. Just the thought left my skin prickling with the feeling of a million needles beneath the surface. Even when requested by Ama to touch her to travel here, I'd ensured to touch a piece of her shirt and not her skin.

My angel appeared between us with an overly forced and tight smile on her beautiful face, seemingly through the worst of her nausea from traveling.

“I'm sorry about his reaction,” she murmured to Zurie before glancing back at me with an incredulous look. Wide eyes and a tight mouth easily showed me her annoyance.

My brow furrowed at her annoyance. Did she wish for me to shake Zurie's hand? It wasn't going to happen.

A growl passed through me as the new woman took my mate into her arms for a hug as they exchanged pleasantries.

“Lucien!” Kylo exclaimed from the other side of the room, where he stood with Elwin and Ama.

His stare would burn a hole into my head if he were capable. I rolled my eyes, scoffing—as if this wasn't how I acted all the time. My behavior was nothing new, and no one should be surprised or put off by it. This judgment from everyone was really starting to piss me off.

I tuned out his annoying scolding as I dragged Alexandra back against my chest as soon as Zurie ended their hug.

Dropping my head on top of hers, I flashed my brothers a smile as Alexandra let out a sigh.

They were just jealous she gave into my whims of holding her whenever my more bloody desires rose to the surface.

“He’s very possessive of me, I’m sorry. It’s worse when we’re in a new area and he’s concerned for my safety. Please don’t take it personally.”

Wait. Was she seriously apologizing for my behavior? There was nothing to be sorry about. She was ours and I was hers. This was absurd.

Honestly, I should get some fucking credit for not ripping her out of Zurie’s arms the second it happened. I let her get a damn hug with my mate. That’s what our therapist Victoria would call growth.

Zurie’s eery, faintly silver eyes turned up toward me as she answered, as if it was for me and not my angel, “It’s completely fine, Alexandra. Ama and I know exactly what it’s like to have over-the-top possessive mates. It doesn’t offend me.”

Narrowing my eyes on her, I tried to discern if she was just trying to butter me up by not making a big deal of a situation everyone else seemed offended by. She held my gaze until I gave her a slight nod, dismissing the situation for now. Maybe she really did understand where I was coming from.

I’d be lying if I said it wouldn’t be nice to have someone around who didn’t think I was being childish, selfish, or annoying due to the way I was hardwired. While I played it off like nothing bothered me and I frequently tried to lighten the mood around us, the way Kylo, and sometimes the others, acted like I was a nuisance just for the sake of it grinded my gears.

This was how I was designed to be by Alexandra, and there was nothing I could do to change it, just like Elwin and Kylo couldn’t change their ways either.

My chest constricted with the thought of Alexandra possibly being embarrassed by my mannerisms, and I loosened

my grip on her before taking a step back.

It fucking stung to think about.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I avoided her questioning gaze as she turned on me.

If she felt like she had to apologize for my behavior, it seemed like we needed to have a talk about how exactly I came to be this way, but that wouldn't be done in public. I'd never allow our issues to be aired out in front of others. We'd always present as a united front, especially in a new realm with potential unknown enemies. I would never let anyone think we had a weak spot to be used for exploitation.

As Ama made her rounds of goodbyes, I tuned it all out until she came to stand by me. Leaning onto her tiptoes, I made note of the way she tried to evade touching me as she whispered into my ear, "There's nothing wrong with loving someone as hard as you do, sweet boy. Don't let anything make you think there is. Protect that heart of yours as fiercely as you do your mate."

I felt a small pang in my chest as I watched her pull her winged necklace out and disappear, sucking the air out of the room for a moment as she went. When I watched her interaction with Alexandra in the dorm and saw the tenderness she pulled from my mate, I'd found myself feeling elated for them to have each other but didn't quite understand it. I didn't have the desire for a mother or a family outside of my mate and my brothers that Alexandra seemed to have.

But with just that one personal interaction with Ama, I suddenly felt the urge to spill my feelings about feeling like there was something wrong with me to her, and I knew deep down she would create a safe place for me to do so. I didn't even feel this way with Victoria. In fact, I'd evaded the fuck out of her questions and desire to learn more about my mind and emotions during our session.

How did Ama possess the ability to make us feel so at ease and welcomed?

I wasn't sure, but I did know that I was suddenly looking forward to the next time our paths crossed. Not just for myself, but for all of us. She seemed to pull things out of us that we suppressed and apparently had an innate ability to understand what she saw buried deep within each of us.

"Shall we sit and discuss your situation?" Zurie asked the room as she made her way past me, apparently expecting us to follow her.

I watched Alexandra's mouth fall open as she turned to do just that. I followed her line of sight to a massive window in the room behind me, curious about why she was gaping.

Damn...I mean seriously, *damn*.

"Now *that* is what I was expecting," I murmured to myself as I took a few steps into the kitchen.

There was something incredibly soothing about the view, somehow tempering my bubbling frustration and anger.

One long wall was simply a large, floor-to-ceiling window, showering the white, black, and gold accented kitchen and dining room in rays of warm, bright light.

While that sight on its own would have been really incredible, what truly would stick in my memory of this place was what lay outside the window.

A vast, purple sky illuminated by a golden sunset stretched from horizon to horizon as far as my eyes could see. Puffy, white clouds drifted across the purple expanse like ships on a vast ocean. Small buildings sitting atop some of the clouds dotted the landscape, their silhouettes barely visible against the fading light apart from the bright windows reflecting yellow and orange from the fading sun back at us.

"Do you ever get tired of seeing this?"

Alexandra's question was soft, her voice full of awe as she stood at my side gazing out. I couldn't help but glance over at her, softening already at the way she looked at that moment. Her eyes were wide, and her parted mouth let a faint sigh of adoration puff over her lips. The purple sky reflected beautifully across her creamy skin, helping me realize the

reason I loved this view so much was because it was the exact color of her eyes.

Every time I met her gaze, what I saw there reminded me I was home. So seeing a sky full of that very same color... Yeah, this might be my new favorite view.

Zurie's own response was full of reverence. "While I do miss being home in Hell at times, I never get tired of this being my new home. I never knew such a beautiful place could exist. It has served as a very peaceful atmosphere to raise our daughter and enjoy our lives."

Yeah, I could absolutely see that.

"I'm sorry to say that we might be bringing some trouble to your doorstep if we stay here," Elwin warned, dragging my gaze from Alexandra to Zurie to measure her reaction to his words. "We just need you to know what you're getting into before you agree to help us. The last thing we want to do is put your family at risk."

While I was usually only soft for my angel, the thought of Zurie and her mates having a kid here definitely complicated those feelings. I wasn't sure how old their daughter was, but there was something about little ones that made me feel a feral need to protect them too. Perhaps it was knowing how much Alexandra was bullied and teased while growing up—I didn't want anyone to ever feel that.

Zurie's brow knitted as she continued to glance out the window. "We won't ever turn our backs on family, and if Ama brought you to us, that is what you are now. No matter what it is, we will fight by your side and for your cause."

She was steadfast it seemed, like Alora told us she would be. Stubbornness was clearly a shared trait amongst the women gathering in our lives.

Her lack of hesitation earned her more grace in my books in terms of our safety here. I already peeked at her soul with my powers and found no anger or hate there, and I knew my brothers had likely done the same upon our arrival. With no warning coming from them, I had to assume she'd either

passed all of our checks or she somehow was able to shield us off. I highly doubted that latter option.

Turning from the window, she gestured toward the long dining room table with an equally long twinkling chandelier above it. “Please sit and we’ll discuss it. My husbands and our daughter will be home for dinner soon, and we have a strict rule to not talk about business or problems during family meal times.”

I almost wanted to take bets on whether there was a chandelier in the bathroom, but I was still feeling a bit conflicted on my feelings right now and joking didn’t quite feel right. I wordlessly slid into a chair first, allowing everyone else to choose their seats without fear of me pawing all over Alexandra since that suddenly seemed to be an issue.

Her gaze clashed with my own as she sat across from me, and I held it for a moment as she mouthed at me, “What’s wrong?”

I shook my head in dismissal. This still wasn’t the time or place.

Elwin and Alexandra slipped into an easy, almost practiced duo as they caught Zurie up on what we knew about Pandora’s box, all of our supposed connections to it, our powers, the curses, and our issue with Helen and likely Zeus.

After Alexandra and Elwin finally finished speaking, Zurie slumped back in her chair slightly, dropping her hands into her lap as she gazed at the table. “Wow, this is quite the situation. I’ve fought in a war for Hell, but unfortunately when it comes to matters of the gods here, my mates have fought to keep my daughter and I as secluded as possible from them.”

Her eyes lifted to each of ours, surveying us as she continued, “While there are truly kind and just beings in this realm, there are more that wish to dole out cruelty and violence for the sake of their own entertainment. Living as long as they do creates many problems, with life-long grudges and sides being taken in feuds many of us will never know exist until being sucked into the middle of one with no way out.”

Shit—I didn't like the sound of that.

Hearing how vicious it could be here made my mind whirl with questions. Whenever Alora and our fellow classmates spoke of Hell, it was with a fondness for the peace and tranquility there. One might think Hell would be the realm of chaos and violence, with Divinius being a peaceful realm. It appeared that was not entirely the case, despite the serene physical landscape here.

“Would any of them know we're here, just by simply coming to your home?” Alexandra asked.

She was doing her best to keep her tone even, but I could sense the underlying fear she felt from the slightest tremble in her tone. Though I didn't think it was fear for her or us. Knowing her soul, I knew she was suddenly terrified of the fight we could bring upon their home here.

Which was very valid given Zurie's words.

Thankfully, our host shook her head quickly. “No. Our home is warded to the highest levels for our safety. It was made known to the realm that no one could openly attack me or our daughter for having a connection to demons in Hell, but that doesn't mean someone won't one day try to secretly do it. My husbands just think it's a matter of time—that they'll play the long game with their eternal lifespans.”

With each word Zurie spoke, with each suspicion she shared, my skin prickled with unease just with the thought of being here. I really hoped we chose the right path to follow by coming here.

I guess only time would tell.

“The knowledge of you being here is safe for now, but the challenge of keeping your presence a secret comes with us needing to find an instructor for you, Alexandra. I'm not sure how to do that without putting feelers out there, and while we have those here who we trust, I'm not sure how far we'll have to search until we find an answer for you. With that comes the unknown of who will inevitably hear.”

“Well, I guess we need to prepare for the worst,” I murmured, feeling my blood beginning to boil all over again at the thought of Alexandra being in danger here.

I had to close my eyes as my heart began to race, and my breathing grew ragged. Scenarios ran unbidden through my head, of her being taken and hurt, until I had to close my eyes and clench my fists in my lap to try to block them out.

The beating of my heart was all consuming as it whooshed in my ears.

I needed to feel her. To know she was safe right now.

But for the first time, I didn't feel like I could do that without judgment.

Chapter 6

I KNEW LUCIEN WAS PEEVED, AND I HAD A FEELING I KNEW why. But as I stared at him, ignoring the questions Zurie directed my way, I ached for him to let me ease this pain he was feeling. The painful emotions he was feeling were written across his face and throughout his body language, a pinched look staining his face and the muscles along his face and arms straining tensely. I'd have to be a fool to not see it.

While he usually seemed like the most lighthearted and the jokester of our group, I knew he felt everything very deeply. I'd made a mistake in apologizing for his behavior, and I felt the shift between us the second I glanced back after doing so, seeing the way his face fell in a flash of hurt and confusion.

I needed to get him alone and confirm that this actually was the problem, so I could apologize and make things right between us. It didn't sit right with me to let this simmer any longer. I may have ended up looking rude to our host for this, but Lucien was more important.

"Zurie, I'm so sorry, but it's been a very, very long day, and I think it would be best if we maybe turn in for the night," I blurted out while keeping my gaze on Lucien.

I saw their gazes shift out of my peripheral line of sight toward him, and I felt the urge to jump over the table and cover him. I didn't want someone who wasn't our trusted family just yet to see him like this. While Zurie had proven to be kind so far, it would take more time together with her to form trust.

My chair screeched against the floor as I rushed to my feet and around the table to grab his arm. The second I touched him, I saw his brow smooth slightly as a breath of relief puffed from his lips.

Leaning down to his side, I whispered, "I know you're upset with me, and I'm so sorry, but let's get out of here for a moment so we can talk in private. Please."

My last word was a whispered plea.

"We'll stay here and help with dinner," Elwin murmured before turning his attention back toward our hostess, "if that's okay, Zurie?"

I sent him a quick look of thanks for his compassion and understanding of the situation.

"Yes, of course," she was quick to respond, forcing an upbeat attitude to her words as she stood. "Let me just show you how to get to the guest house, Alexandra. It stays stocked for Ama and her family in case they pop in for a visit."

I let out a sigh as relief coursed through me, unable to hide my joy that we would be in a separate house entirely. I didn't want anyone to hear us in case I got emotionally or physically heated with any of my mates. While beggars couldn't be choosers, and we would have graciously accepted a spare room in their house, the privacy this allowed us was invaluable.

"Great, thank you so much, Zurie," I answered while melding myself to Lucien's side as he stood and lifted his arm for me.

It felt like a peace offering I wasn't worthy of right now, but I was so thankful he was letting me soothe his discomfort with my touch and presence regardless.

His warmth seeped into me, and our eyes clashed as I glanced up at him. My lips parted at the adoration I saw pooling in his glowing red eyes. It took my breath away to see the way he continued to love me through any of my missteps that wounded him.

Sometimes I really wondered if I was deserving of each of their love. They were...perfect, and I would always just be me. Constantly making mistakes and trying to figure all of this out day by day.

“Let’s go, angel,” he murmured, lifting his hand to cup my face for a stolen moment between us. My heart leapt, and I could have sworn I fell for him all over again.

The sound of a door being opened shattered the moment, and I nodded to him. Crossing to where Zurie stood at the corner of the kitchen with the door open, my mouth dropped as we came to a halt at the threshold.

My eyes went from her face, to where we were apparently expected to drop down to, over and over in confusion. I must have blinked a hundred times before I finally got my brain to compute enough to ask, “Uhm, Zurie, where are we supposed to step? I’d rather not fall to my death.”

Alora would never forgive me if I died within the first hour of being here, especially if it was for something stupid like not being able to locate the steps. I was also pretty positive my monsters would follow me down to splat on the ground however far down it was from here, and that just wasn’t acceptable.

A whoop of laughter came from her, and my brow pinched in confusion. “I’m so sorry, I forget this isn’t normal for visitors.”

I looked back at the puffy white cloud waiting just outside the door and grimaced. No, not normal at all. Where I came from, we learned clouds were just a mass of water drops or ice crystals suspended in the atmosphere. Most definitely not solid masses for me to risk my life stepping on.

Zurie saw my trepidation, but all she did was chuckle before jumping.

My stomach lurched as I watched the scene unfold in what felt like slow-motion. I expected her to pass through the cloud and leave me explaining to the person who just adopted me

into her family how I stood here and watched her best friend die. What a conversation *that* would be.

When her feet landed and in fact did not fall through the cloud, she grinned at me from ear to ear. I simply stared at her in a mixture of disbelief and fascination.

“Well, okay then...” I breathed out before glancing up at Lucien, who still was not acting entirely like himself. “Ready to walk on some clouds for the first time, babe?”

His head snapped down to me, looking at me like I had three heads. After searching my face for who knows what, he nodded and stepped out, pulling me with him.

Weird, but okay.

Despite knowing that Zurie had just survived, my stomach still flip flopped until I felt the solid footing beneath me. Even then, it felt like I was taking a leap of faith with every step forward. What if it wasn't as solid in some areas as it was in others?

With her hand outstretched, Zurie pointed as she informed us, “The house is over there. Feel free to come back for dinner in an hour if you're hungry and feeling up to it. You're always welcome to come and go. Let us know if you need anything in the guest house.”

I wanted to follow where her hand was pointing, because I just knew it was going to be a gorgeous home, but I wasn't willing to look far enough away that it caused me to not be able to keep my eyes on the cloud beneath me.

“Thank you,” Lucien ground out, his voice rumbling deeply and reminding me that he was struggling with his control right now.

While he was holding me right now, this seemed to go deeper than his usual need to hold me. If I knew him as well as I thought I did, whatever was happening was compounding with his sudden feeling that we weren't okay or that I was ashamed of him.

With Zurie's goodbye and the reminder of Lucien's state, I forced my somewhat shaky legs to cross one in front of the

other as he guided us to our destination. With my absolute distrust of the clouds, I wasn't willing to prolong the trip.

Honestly, I wished more than anything that my fear would go away so I could soak in the beauty of this moment. I mean, we were walking on freaking clouds in the most beautiful realm I'd ever laid eyes on, and here I was walking like a newborn giraffe on unsteady legs.

"I would never let you fall, angel. If you don't trust Zurie or see that we are okay so far, trust in that."

In my panicked state, I hadn't realized how tightly my hands were fisted in his shirt. His words instantly brought me out of the haze in my brain that was convincing me of the quick and ugly demise that surely awaited me.

I would never let you fall.

He would never let anything bad happen to me. In that, I could absolutely trust.

Swallowing the anxiety bubbling up from my chest, I released my death-grip on his shirt and forced my eyes to slowly crawl up from the ground, inch by inch.

What awaited me was even more breathtaking than I could have ever imagined.

Nestled within a surreal expanse of billowing puffs of clouds sat the most ethereal structure I'd ever seen. The home itself seemed to be a blend of elegant, curving architecture and whimsical fantasy with vines growing around the white walls, seamlessly merging with the ever-shifting mist that enveloped it around its base.

The misting clouds surrounding the guest house caused it to glisten like a precious gem being inspected beneath a magnifying glass and beam of light, refracting in fleeting, small rainbows as we walked closer.

I was so enraptured by its appearance and soothed by Lucien's words that the distance that seemed so expansive moments ago was suddenly gone as we stepped onto the porch. He was quick to open the door and usher me inside, leaving my mouth gaping all over again.

A beautiful iron staircase spiraled upwards from the middle of the home, revealing intricate railings stretching along the open second floor. If I turned my head the right way, I could just glimpse a library and several closed doors up there. Giving the main space of the first floor a quick glance, I found that the interior somehow seamlessly matched the outside of the house. The interior was a mixture of pale, muted colors, mirroring the soft hues of the surrounding cloudscape. Gauzy white curtains billowed gently in the breeze from the two open windows that framed the massive television. The furniture was elegantly minimalist, like the inside of their main home, and it sat atop the same polished, reflective floors.

“I’m in absolute shock,” I breathed out, twirling around to take it all in. It was absolutely gorgeous and surreal.

The heart of the home was a central atrium, its ceiling a magnificent dome that you could follow the staircase up to see. Potted plants and hanging gardens seemed to flourish here, existing in every room I could easily see from here.

As I came to a stop, focusing on Lucien leaning in the doorway staring at me, I opened my mouth to begin our conversation. He cut me off as soon as I did.

He rushed over to me and gripped my face in his large, calloused palms, bending to gently touch our foreheads together as we breathed each other’s air for a moment.

“Angel, the way you look at this home is the way I look at you. I’m in constant awe of every little facet that makes you, you. I’m so utterly yours that sometimes it kills me to think that maybe it’s not the same for you when you’re embarrassed by my behavior.”

Suddenly, I felt wetness on my lashes from the tears that sprang up at his words. They fluttered over my cheeks as I closed them, sitting heavily against them. I was right—I’d hurt him deeply with my words to Zurie.

“I’m sorry, Lucien. So sorry. I shouldn’t have said that to her.”

It took me a few moments of soul searching to figure out why I even *did* say that. But when the realization hit me, it felt like a weight of bricks against my spine.

“I sometimes forget that we’re in realms where things such as soulmates, mate bonds, and multiple partners for one person exist—I didn’t think about the fact that she would understand your behavior. I was raised in a realm of humans, where everything was very traditional and anything *not* traditional was frowned upon. Women constantly apologized for every little thing, and while I always did my best to try to stay true to myself, the need to conform and please society engrained itself into my psyche.”

My words all came out in a rush, and I wasn’t sure if Lucien would even understand where I was coming from, having never experienced this for himself.

When I finally opened my eyes, it was to see him pulling back to take me in completely. His look was intense, as if he was trying to imprint every blemish on my skin to his memory.

My voice was soft as I asked, “Does that make sense? It’s not an excuse for my actions, and I promise to learn from this and be better for you.”

His hands slipped to wrap around my waist, firmly yanking me forward until my front rested against his. “I know everything from your life in Ordinarius, remember? It just comes to me, as if in creating us you shared your experiences and knowledge of the world. It makes sense, now that you’ve said it.”

I let out a heavy sigh, relief coursing through me and causing my body to slump heavily against his.

“Thank you for your promise, angel. That’s what means the most to me.”

I shook my head. “Don’t thank me. It’s what I owe you as your partner and mate.”

“Then do me a favor?” he countered, heat entering his eyes as he licked his lips at the end of his question.

“A...anything,” I returned, feeling my heart rate increase as my core tightened, a need blossoming there with just his simple look.

“Let me do something to you that you’re going to thank me for.”

Chapter 7

ON INSTINCT, I PULLED MY BOTTOM LIP BETWEEN MY TEETH, giving it a small squeeze with my teeth as I glanced up at Lucien coyly beneath my lashes. “What did you have in mind?”

I never knew what I was going to get with him, but the one guarantee of any situation he’d put me in was that it would definitely be pleasurable. I trusted him implicitly with my body, my heart, and my safety.

“Babe,” he retorted with an intensity that confused me. My brow scrunched up, eyes squinting slightly as I tried to decipher the random input. Upon seeing my confusion, he broke it down for me, a smirk pulling his lips up at the corner. “What did you have in mind, *babe*. This is the first time you’ve had a pet name for me, and I want to hear it more, angel.”

An answering smirk tugged at my lips. So that was why he looked at me so sharply earlier. I called him babe then. It was actually adorable, the way he clung to that small detail.

Had I really never had a pet name for him before? Had I for any of them? Shame entered my heart when I thought back and realized I’d only ever called him ‘crazy’ as a term of endearment. Clearly, I really needed to be more aware of what came out of my mouth.

I would only drive myself crazy if I harped on the mistakes I made along the way, though. All that mattered now was that he felt comfortable expressing his needs and that I could be better for him—all of them, even.

“I think I can manage to do that...” I trailed off as his fingers dug into my hips, stirring up my love for his possessiveness with a flutter deep in my stomach. With a wink, I added, “Babe.”

His eyes rolled back as his grip tightened with a groan. A moment later, he lifted me up to wrap my legs around his waist, and it suddenly felt like I needed to breathe him in as our lips met. I needed to feel him and be one with him.

I just needed *him*.

He moved us through the home, opening a door to a room behind me without breaking our kiss, before coaxing me back to my feet. A tiny moan of need bubbled up from me at the loss of our contact. I needed his touch, and I knew damn well that he needed mine.

“What color are your wings right now, angel?” he asked, hooking his hands in the waistband of his jeans, offering me a tantalizing view of his lower abdomen.

That was just playing dirty, asking me that while exposing a patch of his skin I couldn’t touch right now. But I knew that wouldn’t be the case for long. It was crazy how such a simple question could tie me up in knots with merely the knowledge of what comes with my answer.

My voice dipped into a husky tone as I pulled my shirt off and quickly tossed my bra to the ground. “Pitch black, babe.” A growl rumbled from his chest as his eyes glowed red with need. “What are you going to do about it?”

The challenge sparked him in the exact way I was hoping for. He surged toward me, erasing the distance between us in a second. His lips wrapped around my nipple as his hands found my jeans, knocking my own hands out of the way, apparently not satisfied with my speed of stripping for him.

My head fell back as his tongue flicked quickly across my nipple repeatedly before giving me a small bite. A moan fell from my lips as he pulled away from me to push my jeans completely to the floor, taking my thong with them in one fell swoop.

Suddenly, as the air hit my bare skin, I was starkly aware that I was the only naked one right now, and that wouldn't do at all. Holding a hand up as his head moved back to my breasts, ready to devour me, I shook my finger and danced backward a step. "You next, babe."

All's fair and all that.

A dark chuckle floated through the air as he reached for the back of his black shirt with one hand and pulled it up and over his head, ruffling his hair in a way that had me wetting my lips at the messy look. I wanted to run my fingers through it, tugging roughly as he fucked me.

When he was finally bare to me and stroking his hard cock, he tilted his head to the side as he smirked and asked, "Are you ready to do what I say in order to get my thanks, angel?"

Fuck, I would do anything he asked of me.

My answer was swift and unwavering. "Yes."

Nodding his head as he eyes moved over my shoulder, he instructed, "Go onto the balcony, grip the edge, and bend over for me. Wait for my touch."

I blinked in bewildered surprise in return to the command. I hadn't even had a moment to take in the room, let alone see that there was a balcony. The command shocked me, though it also enticed the hell out of me. Would anyone be able to see us, or were we far enough away that we were secluded?

My thighs rubbed together at the thought.

"Are you getting wet for me, angel?" he purred, eyes narrowing as his gaze tracked my shifting body. He took a single step closer to me, until there was barely any distance left between our bodies. Our heat emanated off of one another. His hair shifted, almost hiding his eyes from me as he stared down at me.

"Are you thinking of the possibility of someone watching my cock sink into your dripping pussy over and over again, until your walls are gripping me so tightly and you're begging for my seed to spill into you and mark you as mine?"

My throat was suddenly as dry as the Sahara, and all I could do was nod.

That's *exactly* what I was thinking, and he'd given me a glorious image that I absolutely craved to make my reality.

Feeling like I was going to combust if he didn't touch me again, I turned—briefly taking note of the massive canopy bed that had to be near two kings in one in size—and padded toward the sliding glass doors. The balcony seemed quite large, outfitted with an overhang that was covered in string lights. The lights were glowing dimly, as if they were set off by the setting sun.

Pushing the large doors open, I felt the wind drifting over me and caressing my skin. The sweet breeze lifted to float around my face and shoulders, tickling slightly. Despite knowing what awaited me out here, the scenery still took my breath away seeing it.

Wrapping my fingers around the railing, I bent at the waist, keeping my legs straight as my back lowered. I was putting myself on full display for Lucien, in the exact way I knew he wanted.

He left me waiting, the anticipation making me an even bigger puddle of need. I fought the desire to look back and see where he was, loving the building energy and friction that the anticipation was building for the moment.

“So beautiful, on display for me and ready for my touch.”

His words startled me, shocking me from the silence I'd grown comfortable with in waiting. Knowing he was so close but not yet touching me fueled the ache building painfully between my legs.

I was more than ready for his touch. My entire body yearned for him and the pleasure I knew he would bring me.

Then, the faintest touch from the pad of his finger trailed down my spine and toward my ass before coasting over my pussy in the lightest ghost of a touch. I couldn't help the full-body shudder that ran through me.

“Fuck, Lucien,” I moaned as my hips pushed back on instinct, trying to find relief. “Stop teasing me.”

A cry tore from my throat when his hands suddenly gripped my hips and his tongue entered me, stroking my desire higher with each thrust. My eyes fell shut as my grip on the railing tightened. A growl rumbled from him as he tugged my hips back further before snaking a hand around to brush his fingers over my clit.

“Lucien,” I moaned as euphoria flooded my brain.

His mouth disappeared, but the pressure and pace of his fingers on my clit increased. “That’s right, angel,” he growled, breath puffing against my lower back, “cry out for the heavens to hear you in this realm. Let them know that I’m your god as they listen.”

Oh. Oh my. I knew he had a sinful mouth and a wicked tongue, but there was something about those words that made my pussy clench as his fingers entered me from behind. Between his attention to my clit and the perfect pace and curl of his fingers, it was only a few minutes before I fell over the edge of pleasure.

“That’s my good girl,” he praised as I cried out.

My head was fuzzy with pleasure and felt heavy, but he didn’t give me a free moment to collect myself. Instead, his hands went back to my hips, and the squeeze he gave to them was the only warning I got before he slid into me with one long thrust that was made easy by the wetness coating me from my orgasm.

All it took was two thrusts to rev my desire up again, ready for everything he would give me with his cock.

Fingers threaded into my hair, lifting my head up as he commanded, “Look out there, angel. Look out at the sky that reminds me of your eyes, my favorite place to get lost in.”

His strokes grew fast and deep, making it hard as hell to keep my eyes open and do as he commanded. I wanted to close them and just feel this moment. His words were so sweet, such a contrast to the crass, dirty ones he uttered before

finger-fucking me into oblivion. I loved that I could have the sweet and spicy sides of Lucien simultaneously. He was such a dichotomy of parts.

“This might be my new favorite place to be—surrounded by the color that will always remind me of my home in you while I’m buried deep inside of you and pulling out the sweetest little breathy moans to fill the space around us.”

His hips slapped against my ass as he increased his pace. The grip on my hair tightened, pulling on the roots ever so slightly, and it was just enough to awaken the fact that I loved being handled like this...Forced to look wherever he wanted me, arched out with my breasts exposed to the swirling wind around my nipples.

My core tightened, squeezing his cock with my pleasure.

He grunted in return. His voice was rough as he said, “Shit, angel. If you keep doing that, I’m a goner, and I need to hear you unravel for me at least one more time before I fill you up.”

There was something so primal at the thought of being filled by them, and I felt my power burning within my chest, needing to explode. I hadn’t even noticed the way it was building up, likely feeding off of Lucien’s reserves in a power share. The warmth from the power wasn’t painful, though. It somehow served to add to my own pleasure, and I felt the warmth through each of my extremities in a tingling sensation. It left me feeling like all of my nerve endings were working overtime.

The sensation was all-consuming.

“Come on my cock, angel. Show me you want my release to fill you up.”

Lucien’s command and the picture of his cum dripping out of me forced over my precipice, sending me tumbling over with a shudder.

I cried out his name at the same time that he cried out mine. My power rushed out of me, releasing some back into

him until I was left sated in my desires and content at the amount of power I was comfortably holding within me now.

With the way my mind and body felt like they were floating in the blissful aftermath of our love-making, I might as well have been one of the clouds out here.

Lucien trailed tender kisses along my back as he released his hold on my hair.

“I love you, Alexandra. All of you.”

His sweet words spurred me to release the railing and turn around to gaze up at him, and he straightened with my movement. Lifting a hand to caress his cheek, I smiled as he turned to kiss my palm.

“I love you, Lucien. All of you. I’m sorry if I made it seem for even a moment that you weren’t everything I adored and needed. I’m proud that you’re my mate, and I vow to never make it sound like anything else ever again.”

My heart squeezed with the knowledge I’d made him doubt my love for even a second. I was thankful he was being so gracious and understanding of my mistake and allowing us to move forward without holding it against me.

Each of my mates had taught me valuable lessons in grace, humility, and compassion since they’d come to life.

“And?” he hedged, mischief back in his eyes, which was exactly the way I loved to see him. “I told you I’d do something for you to thank me for.”

With a laugh and an eye roll, I smacked his chest playfully. “Thank you for the orgasms, babe.”

With a satisfied huff and nod from him, I finally felt like we were back and better than ever.

A clearing throat jolted me, and I glanced around his bulk. Kylo and Elwin were both sprawled on the bed, facing us with varied looks of amusement and heat in their gazes.

Lucien chuckled, and my gaze whipped back to him.

“Did you know they were here?”

His smirk told me everything I needed to know, but all I could do was laugh.

After a quick peck to Lucien's cheek, I crossed to the foot of the bed where my discarded clothes lay.

"What brings you both this way?" I asked as I picked my shirt up. "I thought you were going to help Zurie with dinner."

Elwin let out a heavy sigh as he rolled on his side to face me, propping his head up with his bent arm on the bed. "Well, you see, it turns out if you aren't born of this realm or don't have a certain tonic that's brewed for visitors, gazing upon an archangel can burn your eyes out. And that's like...the very least. At worst, it can burn your body up depending on their distance from you."

My jaw dropped as my eyes widened at the implication in his words. Forgetting my shirt, I let it fall to the ground and rushed to them, my gaze scouring every inch of their skin, clothes, and eyes for any sign of harm. "Did they hurt you?"

Just the thought of it left me breathing erratically.

Kylo swung his feet to hang over the edge of the bed, grabbing me by the hips and dragging me to stand between his spread thighs. "Darling, we're fine. Zurie realized the depths of the situation as she felt their energy drawing closer. She told us to come wait here. With being mated to them, she doesn't need the tonics, so she said she needed to send Remiel to go grab some."

His confident tone and explanation returned my heart to a normal rhythm, relief washing over me in a wave. They were fine.

Dragging one of my hands up to his lips, he pressed a kiss to my skin and murmured, "Put your mind at ease. She said she would bring us dinner here and we'd have the tonics by morning at the latest."

With that, I nodded and let it go. Without the distraction of freaking out to preoccupy, I noticed the wetness between my thighs from Lucien's cum and grimaced.

"I'm going to go shower if anyone wants to join."

Elwin took me up on it, gently washing my body and hair before we stood in each other's embrace under the hot water, soaking in the moment of peace.

Upon our exit, we found food waiting for us. Finding clothes was easier than expected. Ama and I were similar in size, and with the number of mates she has, we were able to easily find clothes for my own mates too.

The exhaustion from the day caught up to me as soon as I finished eating the delicious alfredo and caesar salad Zurie prepared.

With my heart full of hope, and my stomach full, sleep claimed me the second my head hit the pillow.

Chapter 8

A KNOCK ON OUR DOOR PULLED MY ATTENTION AWAY FROM the view from beyond the balcony where I'd been sipping my morning coffee with Alexandra. Kylo and Lucien bolted up from the bed at the sound, but I waved them off as I headed past them to get it.

“I've got it. Just go shower and get dressed for the day.”

I hoped Zurie was at our door with the tonic, so we could chat more about what our plan was moving forward. This morning, I'd had to repeatedly calm Alexandra down after finding her sitting on the balcony alone, lost in her thoughts and scared of all of the unknown still to come.

Upon opening the door, I indeed found Zurie beaming up at me. She held up four bottles of a pearlescent liquid that reminded me of the mist hanging around this home. “Morning! I've got the tonic. You each need to drink a full bottle, despite the taste. It's very important you don't miss a drop—it's a very precise measurement. No more and no less.”

Her high level of energy wasn't something I was accustomed to, but I tried to force a smile on my groggy face. She'd been a kind host so far, and very understanding when Lucien and Alexandra needed to leave suddenly last night. I didn't want her to think we were unappreciative just because I wasn't a morning person. Hell, none of us really were.

“Perfect,” I answered, grabbing the glass bottles from her carefully before holding them to my chest. “I promise I'll ensure they drink every drop. Do we need to wait a certain amount of time for it to work before we come over?”

Her wavy hair bounced around as she shook her head and chirped, “Nope! Just come on over when you’re ready for breakfast. The guys are wrapping up cooking now but take your time. We can always warm it back up for you guys.”

With a nod of acknowledgement from me, she waved and turned on her heel to skip across the clouds back to their house. The thought of Ama and Zurie growing up together pulled a smirk to my face. Despite her kind heart, I couldn’t imagine Ama skipping across clouds—she just didn’t give me those vibes.

“One of those for me?”

Alexandra’s soft voice had me kicking the door closed with my foot before holding one out for her. “Make sure you drink it all. Zurie warned that it tastes foul, but you can’t miss a single drop.”

With a shrug, she grabbed it and popped the cork off before tilting it to her lips and guzzling the full thing down. Her face screwed up in disgust as she shuddered. “Ugh! She was not kidding. That’s gross.”

Crossing to the kitchen on the right, I set down two on the counter before tossing my own down the proverbial hatch. I’d braced myself for a foul taste, but the preparation didn’t stop the instinctive curl of my lip and desire to scrape my tongue off after I finished it.

“I don’t even know how to describe that taste,” I murmured, shaking my head from side to side quickly, as if I could get rid of the taste that way, but to no avail.

Alexandra scoffed as she crossed to set her empty vial on the counter. “I’d say it’s a mix of soil, old sweat drops, and maybe some brussel sprouts.”

I grabbed her hand before dragging her to rest against my front. After dropping a kiss to the top of her head, I murmured, “I’m both alarmed and impressed that you could be so specific with pinpointing those tastes exactly.”

“What’s that?” Lucien inquired as he sauntered out of the room, water drops still falling from his damp hair and soaking

his black shirt. “The amazing taste of my c—”

“Oh my god, it is too early for this, Lucien,” Kylo groaned from inside the bedroom, loud enough for us all to hear and effectively cutting Lucien off.

He was absolutely going to say his cum. I thought it was hilarious, and so did Alexandra if her muffled giggles against my chest were an indicator.

After I’d instructed Lucien to drink the tonic, I actually contemplated whether he was a psychopath. He didn’t grimace or complain about the taste at all, as if it didn’t phase him one bit.

“Hey, Ky?” Lucien called out as he leaned against the counter next to me, crossing his arms. “Do you have splinters in your asshole from the wooden stick that’s constantly up there? I mean, really, that sounds really unpleasant.”

I felt tension growing between them in recent days, and at first I thought it was the stress of the situation impending on our lives. However, the more I sat back and observed them, the quicker I realized it was just the growing pains of us all living together and learning how to coexist.

Before we came to life, our memories of being together consisted of only time spent with Alexandra. We never had the chance to live together in a communal space and had plenty of alone time away from each other. What we were experiencing now was a massive adjustment, but we’d been so focused on building our relationships with Alexandra, it seemed we’d forgotten that we needed to build ours as well.

Kylo stomped out of the room as he pulled on a plain white tee and rolled his eyes. Ignoring Lucien’s question, he nodded toward the vial left next to him. “Is that what I need to drink?”

I saw the twitch in Lucien’s jaw at being ignored, and I decided I’d had enough of their weird spat. I typically wasn’t one to raise my voice or get involved in issues, but this was going to impact our family if they didn’t get their shit together.

We had way too much going on right now, and the last thing we needed was to be squabbling amongst ourselves.

“You two need to cut your shit out,” I snapped.

Alexandra’s head popped up, staring up at me for a quick moment before turning to look at Lucien and Kylo. We’d spoken briefly this morning about her conversation with Lucien, and when she mentioned that her words left him feeling as if he wasn’t okay just the way he was, I felt the urge on the tip of my tongue to tell her what I had observed. That the insecurity had probably been brewing inside of him for some time with the way Kylo was treating him. But I didn’t want to add to her mental plate of worries.

No, we’d air all of this shit out now, in front of us all, and squash it before leaving this house.

Kylo gave me a ‘what the fuck’ look, like he hadn’t the slightest clue what I was talking about. Meanwhile, Lucien glowered at the side of his face.

“I’ve sat back and watched you passively pick on each other, and it’s only getting worse every day. We need to figure it the hell out. We have too much going against us right now to not present a unified front out there.”

Pointing at Kylo, I started, “You used to just deal with his antics like it was a funny nuisance. Yeah, you said shit to him, but it always had an underlying tone of love and humor. Now you just sound like a patronizing dad who’s exhausted and done with his shit. It’s not cool.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lucien smirk, which only fueled the fire rising within my chest. “And you, Lucien—you want to be accepted for who you are, but you need to accept Kylo too. You’re the goofy, sometimes crazy one, and he’s the steadfast, calm, and collected leader of our family. You both need to learn how to coexist without bottling up and simmering on whatever the hell you’re annoyed about until it explodes and bleeds into the rest of our relationships.”

They at least had the decency to look ashamed as my rant ended.

Alexandra pushed away from my chest, crossing her arms over her chest. “Look, I feel extremely guilty for the situation we’re in right now. I think it’s been really hard for all of us to go from the relationship we had when I was creating our stories in my notebook to the relationships we have now. Not only that, but I wouldn’t blame you all if a small part of you resented the fact that I created you. While I lived a shitty life for twenty-one years, I still had all those years to experience the world around me. Somehow I trapped you all in a creative state, not quite alive but still sentient and waiting on me to return each day.”

I could say wholeheartedly that I didn’t feel that way, but I couldn’t speak for them.

She took a deep breath before continuing in a softer, more vulnerable tone as her eyes fell to the floor, “And part of me feels really awful that I formed you into my idea of perfection for each of you...and now you’re stuck in those molds. I want you all to feel comfortable and free to be who you are, but I feel like I’ve taken away that opportunity.”

Now *that* I could speak on. Snagging her hand, I gave it a squeeze. “Alexandra, I can tell you that’s not the truth. Maybe we were unable to deviate from the mold while you were writing our stories. The second we came to life, though, I found my true voice and had the freedom to try out new desires and mannerisms that came to me. We absolutely have our own free will here.”

Her beautiful eyes misted with tears, but I saw the instant the desire to fight them off and hide her emotions took over. The urge to hide her emotions was ingrained in her from her lonely, harsh upbringing. Tugging her to me, I wiped away the few that trailed down her cheeks. “Do not feel guilty for creating us, love. If you hadn’t, we’d never get to experience this beautiful life together, even if it has only just started.”

She sniffled while nodding at me, and I found myself hoping that she knew I wasn’t just saying that to ease her fears. I truly meant it.

Silence descended, and as I turned my gaze to glare at my brothers. I was ready to chew into them some more but held my tongue as Kylo swung his gaze to Lucien.

“I’m sorry, Lucien. I have been a prick to you recently, but it’s because I know I’m kind of our lead person. I’m feeling wildly out of control, like I can’t do anything to help prevent the war that’s coming for us. I can’t bear to think of anything happening to you three, and it’s been tearing me up inside to feel so useless.”

The hardened front Lucien put on since Kylo cut him off earlier melted away in an instant. Lifting a hand to run his fingers through his hair, as he always did when he was uncomfortable, he nodded for a moment before taking a deep breath and looking Kylo in the eyes.

“It has been very hard to feel like I’m a disappointment or that it’s embarrassing to be around me.” His gaze swung toward Alexandra before continuing, “You may have created us, but I am truly trying to embrace who I am, and that’s why I think it’s been hitting me so hard recently. I’ve started trying to temper my anger slightly, trying to lean more into making the people I love smile instead. I don’t feel stuck in any type of mold, angel. I’m trying to find myself, and I just want to be accepted for whoever that ends up being. You’re my family, and I’d have nothing without you all.”

Finally.

The hurt feelings and truths were surfacing. Relief crashed through me at the thought of all of this finally coming out so we could heal the wounds and fears they were hiding.

“I think the one thing we can all agree on is that we want to love and support each other through whatever is coming our way next, yes?” I asked. It was partially rhetoric—I knew that was the case, but I think everyone needed to hear us acknowledge our joint truth.

“Yes, absolutely,” Alexandra agreed, squeezing my hand as she looked between Lucien and Kylo.

A tense, quiet moment passed before Lucien cracked a smile and opened his arms, “Come here, brother.”

My shoulder sagged as Kylo let out a laugh and embraced him, clapping him on the back as he did.

I spared a glance at Alexandra as they hugged and found the light within her eyes more vibrant.

I knew things wouldn’t suddenly be perfect now that we’d had this talk, but it was a massive step in healing the cracks in our foundation. And for now—that felt like a huge blessing.

Snagging the tonic from the counter, I passed it to Kylo as they separated. “Drink all of this so we can head over to the main house and try to come up with a plan moving forward.”

Alexandra’s stomach growled loudly, and we all turned our eyes on her. The sound was so loud, it was almost like she had a fourth monster stuck in her stomach.

Her cheeks turned pink as she grinned sheepishly. “And get breakfast, hopefully.”

Damn, she was so adorable. And entirely ours.

Chapter 9

CROSSING TO THE MAIN HOUSE WAS A MUCH MORE ENJOYABLE experience this time. The clouds and I had come to an agreement that they weren't going to suddenly send me spiraling through the air to my death. Well, I made that agreement with them, but they didn't make it back with me. I convinced myself they would have if they were sentient, though, and that made me feel better.

I gave a quick knock to the side door of their kitchen before cracking it open. "Hello!" I called as cheerfully as I could. "Can we come in?"

A deep voice boomed from within, "If you drank the tonic, come on in!"

I'd be a liar if I said I wasn't nervous to meet all of Zurie's mates. They were literal archangels, and despite having drank the tonic, I was a little hesitant of this burning light situation of theirs still.

Upon entering their home, I realized that the energy filling it now made it feel vastly different from the last time we were here. The space really felt like a home now, with laughter and conversation flowing freely. From what I could see, five men were scattered between the kitchen and the living room, either cooking or playing with a young girl. Zurie was nowhere to be seen, but I was sure she'd show up soon.

The man nearest us sat down his spatula and wiped his hands on a towel hanging from his apron before spinning around to face us. A huge smile lit up his ethereal face, and I found myself feeling a bit gobsmacked at the sight of him. Not

because I was attracted to him but because I'd never met someone with his features before. It was almost as if he was refracting the light in the kitchen, his icy skin and pale hair making him look like some sort of diamond as random light patterns shimmered across his form. He was clothed completely in white beneath his soft blue apron. His eyes were dazzling, filled with a changing spectrum of colors. He reminded me of the clouds wafting around the guest house.

"I'm so thrilled to meet you all! You can call me Remi," he gushed, crossing over to shake each of our hands. He beamed with authenticity, and I instantly warmed to him.

"We're so thankful for your family's kindness and generosity for hosting us and helping us with the problem we're facing," I responded, giving him a small nod of gratitude as I smiled back at him.

He was the exact type of mate I could picture for Zurie, matching her graceful energy and kind demeanor perfectly.

Before he could respond to me, another voice cut in, seemingly coming from the man washing dishes with his back to us. "Ah, so you're the troublemakers Ama brought to us."

I gulped, unsure of how to respond. There was a stark difference in their tones. His words alone weren't off-putting. That same sentence could have come across as a joke if it had come from Remi, but this man definitely made the words sound like an insult.

"Oh, lighten up, Zer," Remi groaned before holding his hand up on the side of his mouth and whisper-yelling to us, "He's kind of a dick to everyone besides Zurie and Ris. Just ignore him."

A deep growl came from Zer, and the sound made me chuckle.

The sentiment from Remi did leave me wondering if Ris was their daughter. That would absolutely fit the whole dark and broody, but soft for his mate and daughter, vibe Zer gave. Something about the man left me feeling uncomfortable. Wispy shadows seemed to surround him as he stood in the

kitchen wearing dark clothes, with colorful tattoos covering every visible inch of his shoulders and arms, all the way up the back of his neck. His red hair was pulled back from his face into a short ponytail, and as he cocked his head over his shoulder to take us in, I fought to resist the urge to hide from his pure black eyes.

I could easily tell this guy was powerful, and I didn't want to get on his bad side. Were we sure he belonged in Divinus? He was giving some pretty strong Hell vibes.

My eyes fell to the man who was setting the dining room table when we came in. He wore his white hair that was streaked with a faint, almost blue shade, in a braid. The same faint blue color could be found in his cloudy eyes, and I couldn't help but wonder whether he could see. There was no iris at all, yet when he looked directly at us, I had the feeling he could see us. White smoke surrounded him, lending the space around him a dream-like quality.

The stark difference between Zurie's mates so far was very interesting. Their differences made me really curious about the other two in the living room.

The new man gave us a small bow from his waist. "Welcome to our home. I hope you feel comfortable here. You may call me Jeremiel or Jer."

He continued toward their cabinets and pulled out glasses as we parroted back hellos and our names.

He seemed polite and reserved, similar to Elwin in a way. Perhaps he was more of an observer in their group.

Remi shouted, "Ris, go tell mommy that breakfast is about to be served! Raph and Rag, come meet our guests!"

A high-pitched squeal came from a small girl as she jumped up from the floor, white and black, pin-straight hair bouncing as she bounced in place. "Ok, Daddy!"

Her little feet pounded against the floor as she ran down a hall the opposite way from us.

A smile pulled at my lips. So Ris *was* their daughter.

Grumbles came from the two large men lumbering to their feet in the living room, and I prepared myself for potentially uncomfortable greetings, just in case they were more like Zer than Remi and Jer. Instinctively, I took a step back and felt Kylo's energy wrapping around me as he rubbed my arms and rested his cheek on top of my head.

The knot of anxiety twisting in my chest instantly loosened, and I took a deep breath. They were just people at the end of the day. Souls within a shell of a body like the rest of us...right?

Remi held his hand out as the first of the two men stepped through the archway between the living room and kitchen. "This is Raph."

He was dressed in a simple linen shirt and pants, his golden skin and black hair seeming to radiate warmth and light. His appearance only emphasized the stark parallels between Zurie's mates as the second man came to lean in the doorway.

"And this is Rag."

This man was dressed similarly to Zer, with all black clothes that matched Rag's dark, jaw-length hair. While he didn't outwardly snarl at us or anything, choosing to give us a polite nod of his head in greeting instead, everything about the power around him radiated violence. I could practically sense the bloodlust under his skin, which made pressing against Kylo more.

Raph stepped forward, extending his hand in offering to me, which I hesitantly took even though Zer was glaring at Raph's back for his polite greeting to me. As I placed my hand in his, he brought his other up to cover my own on both sides, his golden eyes sparking with what appeared to be compassion. Or maybe pity—I wasn't sure yet.

"Zurie told us of all that you're facing, and what you've overcome so far," he began, swinging his gaze up to meet the eyes of my mates around me before settling back on me. "If there is anything we can do to assist you, we will, despite what

the two grumps behind me may look like. We all agreed to it last night.”

My eyes fluttered closed for a brief moment as a huge sigh escaped me. The relief I felt was palpable. I did not want to be the reason Zurie and her mates fought about how to proceed. They were a family, just like we were, and I knew how disheartening it was when you weren't all on the same page.

Raph's next words pulled my eyes back open.

“I found a teacher for you. She happened to be my own mentor many, many years ago.”

Hearing the news shifted the energy from me and my mates in an instant. I couldn't help but bounce on my toes a little bit as Kylo squeezed my arms. A large smile swept my face into what I'm sure looked like a kid on Christmas morning who got the exact present they'd wanted.

Based on what Zurie said yesterday, I had convinced myself we were going to face a long road trying to find someone to assist me. The possibility had weighed heavily on my heart. We didn't have endless amounts of time to wait around and see, but the entire situation was something entirely out of my control. I had to be patient.

“Who is she?” I rushed to ask, desperately wanting to know everything about the person who would be teaching me.

Zurie's voice floated through the air at the same time I heard the padding of tiny feet quickly running across the nearby floor. “So I take it you told them the good news, Raph?”

Raph dropped my hand as his mate and daughter came into the room, crossing to give Zurie a kiss on the forehead after she greeted the other four.

While they exchanged good mornings, Ris hesitantly crossed over to us, large blue eyes sparkling as she stared up at me. I dropped onto my knees, to come level with her and hopefully ease her hesitancy.

She was absolutely adorable, almost cherubic with large cheeks that were currently stained pink. Equal amounts of

white and black hair fell from her roots, contrasting her lightly shimmering and tanned skin in a beautiful way. It warmed my heart the way she seemed to equally represent both light and darkness physically. However, it was the smile that took over her face that showed me there was only light within her soul.

I offered her a warm smile. “Hi, Ris. My name is Alexandra. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

If I had to guess, she was probably around five or six years old, but I was uncertain if beings in Divinus aged differently. No matter her age, it was safe to say I was absolutely wrapped around her finger as soon as she launched herself at me, wrapping her small arms around my neck while burrowing her head into my chest.

“I like you,” she chirped, making my heart feel like it was melting into a puddle in my chest.

I didn’t have the best experiences with children growing up, so I wouldn’t say that I was good with them. Her immediate acceptance left me reeling. There was still a large part of my heart that expected every new person I met to dislike me and ignore me after all.

I wrapped my arms around her and gently squeezed her back. My voice came out a bit choked as I responded, “I like you too, Ris.”

To have this pure little soul expressing that she liked me and accepted me off the bat, without even knowing me...It just felt like it healed a small piece of the part of me that felt like I would always be rejected by new people.

My throat clogged with the heaviness of emotions I definitely wasn’t expecting to feel this morning. I tried to discreetly wipe away the wetness gathering in the corners of my eyes, but as I looked up and found her parents smiling down at us with a knowing look, I knew I was caught.

It was probably ridiculous that the approval of a small child meant so much to me, and my cheeks flushed with embarrassment at being caught.

“Don’t worry about it,” Zer grumbled from where he leaned against the counter with Zurie pulled against his front. “She pulls that out in all of us too.”

Considering the not-so-warm welcome he gave us, I was genuinely shocked that he was the one to tell me it was okay to feel these emotions right now.

The little bundle of love tapped my shoulder. “Up!”

I looked to Zurie to make sure it was okay to lift and hold her, and with her nod of permission, I lifted the child up, letting her settle on my hip as she let go of my neck.

“Hi,” she said, and I turned to see who she was talking to.

I found her looking at Kylo, and her eyes tracked all over his face as he said hello back. I wasn’t sure, but I got a feeling she was evaluating him in a deep, searching way. There was no magical surge around her like what happened with my monsters when they inspected souls, but there was still something about her intense scrutiny that reminded me of it.

“You’re good,” she said rather nonchalantly, making me choke on the laugh I attempted to swallow.

Poor Kylo actually looked offended as she moved on from him to Elwin at his left. After a few moments, she gave him a little nod. “You’re good too.”

I spun us a little bit so she could see Lucien easier now. He actually looked nervous, his brow pinched and his eyes searching Ris’ face to see what she thought of him. It was downright adorable that he cared what a small child thought. After all, this was the same man who regularly threatened to peel the skin off of people.

Her face instantly lit up when she saw him, and her feet kicked around as she wiggled in my hold. His face lit up at her excitement, and as she lifted her arms for him, he gingerly took her from my hold and settled her against his chest, having to hold her relatively high to be eye level with him.

Her hands came up to rest on his cheeks as she giggled, making my heart do a little somersault at the cute noise. “I like you the most.”

The whole room erupted in laughs, and I held a hand to my heart. Jokingly, I said, “I’m wounded, Ris.”

But for once, I really wasn’t. It was downright adorable seeing my blood-thirsty monster and this angel of a child bonding so quickly. I’d be a liar if I didn’t say it was actually making me contemplate whether we might have kids one day. It was clear to me that my monsters would be incredible fathers from the way they treated me, and now Ris, but I hadn’t really given it a ton of thought due to my own horrendous childhood.

Could we provide a stable, good life for a child if we got through the battle with the curses that were coming for us?

Elwin’s breath was hot on my ear, and his hand came to rest on my hip as he whispered, “I know exactly what you’re thinking about right now, love, and I want you to know the tally is up to twelve, with your current lip bite. I’d be more than willing to satisfy those desires of yours after I’m done providing your punishment.”

Small, white wings suddenly erupted from Ris’ back as she squealed and launched from Lucien’s hold, making my jaw drop and disrupting the heated moment Elwin had just created. I wasn’t sure why exactly I was shocked to see that she had wings, considering she was the daughter of archangels and we were in Divinus, but I was.

She flew straight to her mom’s arms before burrowing into her chest. She stole little glances back at Lucien, smiling at him before hiding again.

“Now that introductions are out of the way,” Zurie said with a small laugh, combing her fingers through Ris’ hair, “let’s sit down for breakfast and discuss your new teacher. She’ll be showing up soon.”

Between feeling like my mates and I had smoothed out the underlying tension between us, the boost of energy meeting Ris had given me, and knowing my new teacher would be here today, I mentally named our cloud we were on number nine—because I was floating on it.

Chapter 10

“SO, QUESTION FOR YOU IF YOU DON’T MIND...” I STARTED after swallowing a bite of eggs. I was unsure if it was rude to ask about this, but when Remi nodded at me to continue, I took a deep breath and questioned, “Why exactly would it burn us to be in your light?”

He placed his fork down before wiping his mouth. Resting his elbows on the table, he clasped his hands together as he seemed to consider the question, his lips pursed and brows pinched together. The light that poured in from the massive window behind me made his eyes look like a kaleidoscope of colors.

“I’m not sure how much you know, so I’ll try to start at the beginning and keep it simple.” With my nod, he took a deep breath and returned my nod as the others ate, content to listen as he spoke. “All archangels are said to be born of the pure light of God, or our creator, and through that, we were titled the *burning ones*. We shone so brightly that we appeared to have glowing white fire around us in the presence of non-divine beings.”

Wow. I suppose that made sense...having a divine energy not meant to be seen by others outside this realm.

I was fascinated as he continued, soaking up every bit of information that he provided. “There are different levels of beings within what we call spheres. There are three spheres. Within the first sphere, which is the highest level, there are Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones. Within the second sphere, there are Dominations, Virtues, and Powers. In the third and

final sphere, there are Principalities, Archangels, Angels, with personal guardian angels at the bottom.”

I couldn't hold back a small grimace at the mention of guardian angels being real. What wouldn't I have given to have one looking over me growing up? I briefly wondered what you had to do to qualify to get assigned one, but Remi's voice brought me back to the present.

“While we are all born of our creator's light, the lower you descend in the spheres, the less light each being has within them. Truly, the only light we have to be very careful about exposing the non-divine to is the archangels. While it's best to not stay in the presence of others within the first sphere for prolonged periods of time, there isn't an imminent danger in their light like there is in ours.”

I squinted a little, trying to see a light within or around them, but I couldn't. “I don't see the light now. Is that because of the tonic, or are you still suppressing it? And how quickly will we need to take another dose?”

From his spot a couple of seats down the long dining room table, Raph took over the conversation. “Actually, we're the only archangels who have taken strides to learn how to suppress our light. The rest, like your teacher, won't bother doing that. We had to learn to hold the light within ourselves for the first few years of Ris' life until we knew whether she had enough divine blood to actually be an angel. When her wings popped out, we no longer needed to.”

Because Zurie was a ghost and reaper...it was all adding up now. I wanted to ask if Ris had inherited any powers from her mom's side, but figured unless they offered, I should probably let that one go. With the way she studied us, my best guess was that she could see souls like a reaper.

But Zurie and her mates were already being generous enough with their hospitality and help. I didn't want to pry into private matters concerning their daughter, especially if her mixed heritage made her a target for the other beings in Divinus. Zurie and her mates needed their secrets, especially those surrounding Ris, to remain that way.

“And although we know how to suppress our light we’re a bit out of practice. So if a bit of it leaks out while you all are around, it’s better to be safe than sorry—hence the tonics,” Rag grumbled from the head of the table. “We didn’t know you all were here when we first arrived home, so that was why there was the initial fear of having Kylo and Elwin in our home. Zurie couldn’t warn us to contain our light ahead of time. You will need to take another dose each week.”

I was relieved to find out that the tonics were more of a precaution while we were here with them. However, the knowledge that my teacher wouldn’t be holding her light within herself made me slightly more fearful of her. We had all placed a lot of trust in the tonic.

“I have a question as well,” Kylo spoke up before clearing his throat. “If you don’t mind, that is.”

“Go for it,” Zurie chirped across from me as she cut up a small pancake for Ris, who sat at her side.

“I’m assuming a lot of your names we’ve heard are shortened nicknames. What are your full names?”

My interest was piqued again, because Jer *was* the only one who introduced himself using his full name, Jeremiel.

“Ah, yes, we’re gotten so used to shortening them for Ris as she grows up, despite her calling them all Daddy,” Zurie said with a smile and cheerful tone. As she passed the smaller plate back in front of Ris, she pointed to each man as she said their full names. “Raphael, Jeremiel, Raguel, Zerachiel, and Remiel.”

I was seeing the running trend here—all of their names ended with -el.

Zurie reached out to ruffle Ris’ hair as she chowed down on her pancakes like a little beast. “And this here is Serissa.”

The little angel in question smiled at us, showing off plenty of her partially chewed pancakes at the mention of her name. Somehow, she managed to make even gross things look cute.

It was Elwin who spoke up then, asking, “If we’re all allowed a question, I’d like to know where the beings from other belief systems reside? Is Divinus sectioned off based on those systems, and how is it decided who is in power here with so many different beliefs? I would assume there could be a large power struggle or an issue with keeping some beings in line if they wanted more control.”

And just like that, reality hit me square in the chest. The reminder was important—that despite the feeling of security here, this realm was not entirely safe for us. For all we knew, we had enemies lurking who knew where up here.

Remi chuckled. “That was way more than one question, but we don’t mind answering. At the end of the day, I think those are all great questions to ask, considering what you could be up against with Zeus.”

Leave it to Elwin to stay focused and understand the exact information we needed to move forward. I really was so impressed by his brain at times.

“We all reside within our own system’s area. We’re split up in that sense, but there is no territory name for each belief system like there is in Praeditus or Ordinarius.”

A million questions flew through my mind. Were there still territory lines to be respected? What happened if a system needed to grow in size geographically?

“Second, in terms of who helps control the balance, it was decided long ago that out of all the beings in each system, the Thrones from our first sphere would act as a neutral force to ensure laws were being followed. The conception of Thrones came out of the need to mete out divine justice and maintain the cosmic harmony of all universal laws.”

I was struggling to understand if the Thrones were like a police force in a human sense or if they were more like a judge in a courtroom. It truly didn’t matter, though, so I didn’t want to interrupt him as he continued to answer another of Elwin’s questions.

“In that same vein, to put it simply, no one is or has absolute power. At the end of the day, we all try to understand and accept that we are equal because we have people who believe in all of us, hence our ability to all be here at the same time. Power only wanes when our followers stop believing. So truly, it’s not in our hands who has the most power. That helps prevent battles for control, though that’s not to say some haven’t tried in the past. However, when that happens, it’s usually just fighting within one system, not against another.”

Power being dependent on their following and their beliefs was a really interesting concept. That system acted as a form of checks and balances all on its own, with the rise and fall of so many different empires and their gods and goddesses.

My train of thought had me opening my mouth and asking, “Does that mean you aren’t immortal?”

Jer spoke up softly from his spot at the end of the table near Rag. “We are only immortal as long as our belief system is intact. It’s what feeds our energy.”

My eyes dropped to my mostly empty plate as the information brought Zeus to the forefront of my mind. “Does anyone believe in the Greek gods and goddess anymore? I would’ve thought they would have fallen by now.”

Zer chuckled, the sound deep and resonating as he leaned back in his chair with his hands clasped behind him. “And it seems like you’ve figured out why he’s likely making his move with Helen. They *are* waning in power. While they do still have followers called Hellenists, their numbers have severely dwindled. My best guess is that Helen has teamed up with the curses released from Pandora’s box. My assumption is that they made a deal to help spread Hellenism, and Helen and Zeus agreed to handle you, their only adversary.”

Holy shit.

Elwin and I glanced at each other. “That tracks,” I murmured to him. “What do you think?”

He swayed his head side to side while contemplating. After a moment, he sighed and said, “I think it’s the first full

picture we've had of the situation that actually ties it all together. If this is what's happening, it's not just the curses we need to be afraid of. If we defeat them, Zeus and Helen will be out for our blood for getting rid of who they charged with ensuring their belief system spread."

Shit.

"So that means we need to defeat both the curses *and* Zeus and Helen," I countered with disbelief, but Raph cut me off.

"Can't do that. Immortal, remember? At least for the time being."

Well, damn.

We fell silent, likely all pondering what the long-term solution was with this situation, until Zurie piped up, "Hell!"

We all turned our attention on her as she began to speak very quickly and excitedly, her eyes going round with each word. "You need to hide in Hell until Zeus and Helen naturally lose their power. No being from Divinus can go to Hell unless they are from *our* system here. There are only two ways for those within our particular belief system to travel to hell. They either fall and forever call Hell their home, or they're blessed by the creator to go as a messenger, which is something that has only happened before with the archangels here. It was when we met, actually."

Well, we've seen every other realm at this point. It only made sense to check off the final one. And with Ama adopting us into her family, the ease of the solution lifted a weight from my shoulders and left me feeling almost...happy. The only downside was the question of whether we would have to live in Hell indefinitely.

Who knew how long it would take for Hellenism to fade in full. Coming from Pandora's box, we also didn't have the slightest idea of our own life spans. There wasn't really a guide book to it.

Before we could speak further on Zurie's idea and the implications of what would happen if we followed through with it, a massive ball of light appeared in the kitchen. I raised

my arm to protect my eyes on instinct, wincing and preparing for my skin to be burned away.

“Ariel!” Raph boomed, excitement filling his tone.

As I realized I seemed to be perfectly okay, I slowly cracked an eye open. Upon lowering my arm, I found that the light had dulled slightly but was still surrounding the woman who stood with her wings tucked against her back. She really did appear to glow white and because of that, I had no idea what her actual hair or skin color was. However, I could make out through the light that her eyes were a piercing gold color.

She turned her attention from Raph to me, golden eyes blazing in my direction as she asked, “Is this her?”

Her voice sounded...different. The sound was hard to place, but it was almost as if her words were carried on a wind to me, giving her a soft, almost whimsical tone.

I pushed up from my chair to greet her, and my monsters followed me.

“Yes, this is Alexandra, Elwin, Kylo, and Lucien,” Raph answered, introducing us each as we approached.

I wasn’t sure of the formal greetings here, but I placed my palms flat on my thighs and gave her a quick bow at the waist. “I’m so honored to be able to learn from you, Archangel Ariel. Thank you for taking the time to come here to teach me.”

“Is she always this formal?” Ariel asked, making me straighten and scowl as she looked at Raph with something akin to displeasure as her light faded enough to see her facial features. “You know I can’t handle that shit for long.”

Seeing her personality versus the soft-spoken sound of her voice was like having a bucket of ice cold water dumped over me. The difference didn’t jive to my brain, and I wouldn’t stand to be disrespected when all I did was show her my appreciation and manners.

My mouth opened, and I took a step forward before I even thought it through. My voice was tight as I said, “Excuse me, I’m right here. If you want to ask something about me, you can address me.”

Her golden gaze turned on me once more, running the length from my face, down to my feet, and back up. As our gazes clashed, I lifted my chin higher. I sensed her challenge, and I wouldn't back down. I hadn't come all this way just to be found lacking by my new teacher.

“Alright, maybe there is enough bite to you to do what needs to be done,” she surmised with a raised eyebrow. “Hold out your hand so I can take you where we'll be training for the next few weeks.”

A lot happened all at once as she spoke.

Zurie exploded suddenly, yelling at Raph about how that's not what they discussed. Meanwhile, Lucien grabbed my arm and yanked me firmly against his chest with a growl.

Ariel rolled her eyes and was suddenly in front of me, wrapping slender fingers around my wrist as she announced, “Calm down, I'll have her back each night, per Raph's instruction.”

Less than two seconds later, my vision was completely obscured by a bright white light. Lucien's grip on me disappeared as Zurie's voice faded away.

Chapter 11

AS WE LANDED, I REALIZED THAT WHATEVER PORTAL OR MAGIC Ariel used to travel didn't give me the same type of nausea and sickness that traveling between realms did. Relief washed over me when she dropped my wrist as I found my feet and managed to stay standing.

"Follow me," she demanded before taking off straight into a mass of clouds.

I began to quickly lose sight of her, so I took off after her, trying to not overthink the fact that the ground behind me felt solid. The last thing I needed was to get lost here and fall straight off the edge as I tried to escape.

"Keep up, Alexandra," she drawled, her apparent annoyance with me not at all veiled.

Thankfully, her voice led me to pivot slightly to the right as I tried to find her. Unfortunately, with her bright appearance, she blended in a little too well with the clouds engulfing us. Unlike a normal person, there was no shadow or darkness present in her figure to help track her movement. If the cloudscape wasn't already so bright with the sun refracting light amongst the clouds surrounding us, her light would have made it easy to follow along behind her.

Huffing out a breath as I slowed my pace behind her, I snarked back, "Trying my best."

She didn't miss a beat. "Try harder."

I couldn't decide if her tone annoyed me or if it made me want to prove whatever her opinion of me was wrong. Maybe

a little bit of both. I wasn't sure why the hell she seemed so set against me already. Why even offer to help me then?

Soft billows of clouds began to part in front of us, revealing an awe-inspiring sight. An arena, of course suspended on a cloud, appeared in the space before us. Its curved walls were made of bright white marble stones, and it glittered brightly in the light of the sun beaming down upon it.

“This is the Cloudborne Coliseum. It's the furthest spot away from anyone's home that you can get within our system's area. I wasn't sure what you could manifest with your powers, so figured it was best to give us a wide berth for safety purposes.”

The coliseum's entrance was framed by two towers that seemed to extend straight into the heavens as we drew closer, and the sheer size of this place became apparent. I was the size of an ant in comparison to it. The coliseum was a testament to both architectural mastery and the enchantment that somehow held something this heavy aloft on clouds.

Lost in my inspection of the coliseum, I didn't pay close attention where we were heading, following blindly behind Ariel instead. When a sensation like mist caressed my ankles, I startled and glanced down and suddenly stopped dead in my tracks. My mouth dropped when I realized we were on top of a shimmering, opalescent bridge that traversed the divide between the current cloud we were on and the one the arena was suspended by.

“If you're afraid of clouds and rainbows, there really is no hope for you,” Ariel called out, not bothering to look over her shoulder as she stepped onto our destination cloud.

Seriously, what the hell did I ever do to her? If she didn't want to train me, I wasn't sure why she told Raph that she would. Maybe she owed him some kind of life debt. It had to be something lofty, if her displeasure with me was any indication.

Her words spurred me on, and I ran the short distance, trying not to overthink the sensation beneath my feet that left me feeling like I was walking on air itself. Each step was

cushioned by the gentle embrace of mist. I never thought I'd feel this way, but the second my foot touched the cloud, relief washed over me.

Colossal gates were spread wide open before me, and I had to wonder if they stayed open or if there was some system in place to open and close them when needed. Truthfully, I was just happy we didn't have to figure that out, otherwise I had a sinking suspicion that Ariel's solution would be to pick me up and fly us over the top before dropping me to my death.

The walls felt smooth and cool to the touch as I brushed against them, running my fingers along the white surface as we passed through the shadowed entryway.

"What do you know of me?" she asked as we came to a sudden halt at the arena floor.

As she turned to face me, I shrugged my shoulders. "Absolutely nothing. Care to fill in the blanks for me?"

She deadpanned, voice beyond unamused as she replied, "Insinuating that there are blanks to be filled would mean that there weren't blanks on the other side of your knowledge, yet what you have is one giant blank space."

My head pounded at her words, but I managed to refrain from letting out the groan that wanted to spill out of me. This was going to be a really long few weeks.

It felt like she was waiting for me to make some smart-ass comeback. When I crossed my arms across my chest and clenched my jaw tightly shut, she seemed to get the picture that I wasn't willing to keep this little debate of hers going.

Gesturing to the mat that rested to the side of the arena floor, she instructed, "Sit there and stretch the best you can in those clothes. Tomorrow you need to wear more flexible clothing."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her if she would have given me just a few minutes, I could have changed to the proper attire. When I'd gotten dressed for the day, I wasn't even privy to the fact that they'd somehow found me a teacher. Training hadn't even been on my mind in the slightest.

Deciding it would get us nowhere if I argued that point, I swallowed my rebuttal down and headed for the mat, plopping down and beginning to stretch my legs. She walked to the railing close by and leaned against it, watching me closely.

“I’m the archangel of nature. If you were to read a synopsis of me in your realm, it would go something like: Archangel Ariel will assist in reminding you that you possess imaginative power of influence over your destiny and that by using your thoughts, feelings, beliefs, intentions, and emotions, you can shape your life. She will assist in honing your intentions and aligning your vibrations with your conscious desires to manifest in your life.”

That wasn’t the type of nature that I initially thought of, but I suppose it could be inferred as the nature of our psyche. Still, I really wasn’t sure how Zurie and her mates thought Ariel was going to be a good teacher for me. Did she even have any powers to work with that were similar to my own?

“Those texts make me out to be some fucking saint with all the patience in the world who will help you achieve your dreams. Every single one of those texts is wrong.”

Ariel not having patience? No, it couldn’t be so.

“Do I help those who call upon me?” she mused as I bent over, reaching for my feet. “Sometimes. But I wait until someone has learned all the lessons they can before hitting a wall in their journey. I’m not going to help someone who cannot help themselves, animals and plants aside.”

My mind spun. Maybe she *did* have some power over nature itself. It seemed bigger than that, though. If humans also fell under her jurisdiction, perhaps she just had power over living beings, period. Didn’t really feel like she would welcome any questions I had, though, so I kept my mouth firmly shut.

“Tell me, Alexandra, have you learned all of the lessons you can? Have you hit a wall in your journey after exhausting all of your resources?”

Immediately, I thought to say yes, that the roadblock was why we were here in the first place—to find someone who could help me get past this block. She lifted her hand, though, stopping me before I could get a word out.

Her eyes narrowed on me. “Be honest with yourself for a minute. Your mates aren’t here for you to impress. Your new family isn’t either. None of them are here to coddle your emotions and fears. It’s just you and me here, and clearly, you’re not going to impress me. You might as well be honest with yourself.”

How dare she insinuate that I hadn’t tried. Why would I even be here if I hadn’t?

“I have!” I yelled as I jumped to my feet, feeling defensive as hell at the implication that I had done less than everything in my power. “I have spent countless hours pouring over old texts. I’ve spent extra hours after all of my scheduled classes with an instructor for extra training. I’ve trained until I was nothing but a heap of sweat and tears.”

She stalked over to me and shoved a finger into my chest, hard. “You are so good at lying to yourself that I truly think you’ve convinced yourself of that rhetoric. Well guess what? I’m the exact being that can see through your facade. I don’t have the slightest inclination in my soul to help you, and that means you have not given this journey your all.”

With each word she spoke, my chest began to heave with short, shaky breaths that were fueled by the anger roaring within me.

Her words hit something deep within my heart, but I shoved it to the side. I wouldn’t let her get to me.

She lowered her body until she was eye to eye with me, the scent of honeysuckle and fire emanating off of her in a scent that was somehow comforting.

“The second I stepped foot into that home, I saw through you. Everyone else thinks you need help from someone else to figure this all the hell out. You want to know what I saw? I

saw someone who's half-assing everything just enough to keep the people around her from realizing she's given up."

My anger shifted as my own thoughts became clearer to me. I was furious with her for saying that I hadn't tried, but now...now I was angry at the way she so easily saw through me. She ripped down the lies I'd wrapped so deeply within my mind. What was worse was that I *did* believe the lies...until she blew them all to shit.

Yes, I'd gone to my classes and training, and I'd researched the books I could find in the library. But I'd also attended a party and hung out with my monsters, focusing on deepening our connections, rather than training every waking moment. Even after the first interaction we'd had with a curse at DIA's barrier the night of the party, I still hadn't shifted all of my energy to training.

I told myself we still needed to enjoy life alongside training. That we *deserved* it after not having the past twenty-one years together in reality. I felt like I was owed that piece of happiness, after living a life without it.

"Dig harder into that thought," Ariel instructed in a much softer tone than she used with me previously, and my own seething anger fell to a low simmer. "You're going in the right direction. Push through the discomfort and find your answer."

I closed my eyes and did as she said. Forcing the fear away, I took a deep breath and thought of why I didn't want to give up the small amount of time my mates and I had to experience the joys of this new life together.

My lips pinched as images flew unbidden through my mind. The ones I saw almost every night in my dreams.

Images of my monsters and I dead at the end of this. Their lifeless eyes staring up at me and the knowledge that it would be my fault haunting me. Those dreams told me that I couldn't save us all.

When I opened my eyes, my lashes were wet with tears, serving to completely wash out the fire that was roaring in my chest just minutes ago. I swallowed the emotion enough to

speak and said, “No, I haven’t tried my hardest. Because deep down, I don’t think I will ever be good enough to win this battle. I feel like no matter what I do, we’re doomed.”

Saying it out loud hurt like hell. In a matter of minutes, Ariel had cracked open my chest and yanked out the part of me that never felt like I was enough.

Despite being given access to DIA and the instructors there, a core piece of me had accepted that there was no one who could make me into this powerful and important person who was fated to such an important role—a role that would have lasting impacts on all of the realms if I failed.

It was too much for me to carry.

“Alexandra,” she snapped, though without malice in her voice this time. Her tone demanded my attention, and I listened to her, truly listened to her, as she continued, “Fate is something that no one can truly understand. Even to those of us divine beings that seemingly have it all, there are moments of doubt in our roles. It is a heavy role to carry, with the implications of failure affecting an entire realm of humans.”

Yet she hadn’t caved to the pressure. She’d sucked it up and done her job.

A sob wrenched from my throat as my head fell forward. I was weak. My tears soaked into the ground beneath us, and I barely heard her over my cries as she asked, “Do you know what else you could read within those books about me that *is* true?”

She didn’t wait for me to answer the question, her entire demeanor shifting to one of compassion and nurture as her hand found my chin and gently tipped it up to gaze into my eyes once more. “The books say that in some situations, the best solution is to move out of your comfort zone and seek Archangel Ariel to assist you in finding courage. The courage we seek is the courage to have faith in yourself, because you don’t need anything other than that to succeed.”

Her kindness only served to increase my tears, and in a turn of events that I could have never pictured, she took me

into her arms and held me until my tears ran dry.

As my sobs quieted, she pulled back and wiped a few lingering tears from my cheeks.

“Are you ready to find your courage, child?”

Could I do that? Would I be able to somehow turn off the piece of me that continued to hold me back because of my insecurities?

“I...I want to,” my voice cracked, and I took a moment to draw a few deep breaths before trying again. “I want to, but I don’t know how. I don’t know where to go from here to become the person everyone needs me to be.”

She lifted her hand to rest over my heart, and a slow, thrumming heat began to pulse from her palm and through my skin. It grew until it wrapped around the organ.

“You are now worthy of my help.”

Chapter 12

ARIEL'S VOICE WAS TENDER AS SHE SPOKE DIRECTLY TO MY mind. "I'm going to guide you to lay down on the mat, Alexandra. Try to stay connected to this place mentally as I shift you. I've used my powers to alleviate your fears so that we can focus elsewhere for now."

I barely felt the soft touch of her hands as my body flowed with ease to where she needed me to be. I barely noted the feeling of something plush beneath my back and head, instead focusing on the utter feeling of weightlessness this position allowed me to experience.

My mind had already drifted toward whatever this warmth was that pulsed through me, and it felt like my body was catching up to it now.

"We're going to run through a few mental exercises while you are in this relaxed state now, Alexandra. This could be uncomfortable as we begin to push past your fears. At any point if you feel overwhelmed or need to stop, please alert me."

I hummed my agreement, not quite understanding how I could ever want to potentially leave this moment of quiet and comfort.

"First, I'm going to have you start by taking a few deep breaths to calm your mind and body."

Despite this weightlessness I was experiencing, I still felt a direct connection to my body's system, and I easily did as she said.

“Inhale slowly through your nose, allowing your abdomen to expand, and then exhale gently through your mouth.”

My chest rose slowly as I inhaled, tingles spreading through me pleasantly as I parted my lips to exhale.

“Repeat this a few more times. With each breath, feel yourself becoming more relaxed and present with me. Focus on how your body is feeling as you take each breath. You should begin to feel lighter as we continue.”

I felt the warmth traveling through my body in a gentle embrace, quickly wrapping me in a blanket of peace and tranquility. I felt as if I was enveloped in a soft cocoon, protecting me from the world and all its worries for just a moment. Closing my eyes, I soaked up the sensation for as long as I could.

The warmth moved through me like a gentle river, caressing each fiber of my being as it continued to spread from my core outward. All of my concerns and fears were dismissed from my mind, and it was almost as if I could feel them being ripped away from my subconscious as they faded away. With each passing moment, I felt more and more relaxed, until finally, I was at ease.

“Next, I want you to pull all of the light you feel within your body right now to where your power resides within you. Picture the two morphing into one.”

I gently pulled the light to fuse with the faint glowing purple ball in my mind’s eye. The violet energy pulsed steadily in time with my breathing.

“Good, now I want you to use that energy and imagine your dream home being built with it in as little or great detail as you desire. This will be where you return to in your mind when you need to ground yourself, so ensure you feel safe and warm within the home.”

That was easy. I’d always been a dreamer, and as I pictured the home I’d always imagined for myself and my monsters, my heart began to soar at how real it felt. The house itself was actually one on a street I had passed after leaving my

childhood home. At the time, I'd just graduated high school and was going to my new dorm at college. The moment had always stuck with me since I stopped in front of the house and admired it.

I told myself that one day I would live in a home like that, no matter what life threw at me next. Even if I lived in it alone, a place like that would be my refuge.

The modern cottage-style home was a beautiful sight. Its white stone walls and black roof were in elegant contrast to one another, while the black-framed windows around the house gave the building a sharp, sophisticated edge. A white, brick chimney on the roof completed the look, giving the house a timeless look. A small porch extended off of the front with a few steps descending down.

I swore I heard a soft gasp from Ariel, but I ignored it, too happy to be mentally with this home.

“Now...” she started to instruct, but paused. After a long, quiet moment, she continued, “Now, I want you to picture the inside.”

Shifting my focus, I was suddenly transported inside of the home and was met with a blank space to work with.

Within moments, it came to life with a cool, neutral palette of white, gray, and beige covering the living room. Exposed wooden beams ran the distance of the cathedral-style ceiling, making the entire room feel massive. Next was a fireplace that connected to the chimney I pictured on the roof. Flames roared to life in the hearth, giving off comforting heat instantly. A large, leather couch sitting on a woven, beige area rug came next, flanked by two cream armchairs.

I continued through the home, giving the kitchen vintage fixtures and a farmhouse sink but leaving the shelves open on the walls. When I reached the bedroom, heading through an arched doorway, white-washed wood paneling adorned the large wall opposite of me. Next, I placed a massive bed with a rough, exposed-wood headboard and a white down comforter. I mixed in a burnt orange throw to the bottom corner and

matching throw pillows, scattered with cream ones, to the head of the bed.

Satisfied with the details, I murmured, “I’m done,” while falling back onto the bed and imagining myself bouncing slightly.

“Very good, Alexandra,” Ariel praised. “I can see how detailed you made your space. That’s great. The details will make it much easier for you to connect to the safe space next time. Now I want you to feel the joy being in this safe place gives you.”

My chest exploded with gratitude in abundance.

“Next, I want you to repeat these affirmations after me, but to yourself in your mind. Let your mind be open to any thoughts that come along with these. Do not force them away or suppress them. They just are. Throughout this process, I will slowly allow your emotions to return to you.”

After clearing her throat, she began. Her voice was soft and comforting as she said, “I deserve to feel the peace this home provides me, not just when I am inside of it, but everywhere.”

I deserve to feel the peace this home provides me, not just when I am inside of it, but everywhere.

It would be a dream to feel this centered and whole all of the time.

“I am surrounded by loving and supportive relationships.”

I am surrounded by loving and supportive relationships.

My three monsters flashed through my mind first, making me smile in an instant. Next came Alora, Alina. My gratitude only multiplied as I thought of Ama, Zurie, her mates, and Ris. Their unwavering support and the way Zurie came to my defense when Ariel announced she was taking me from her home, like a mother bear protecting her cub.

“I am powerful and capable all on my own.”

I am powerful and capable all on my own.

Goosebumps covered my body as we continued.

“No one can stop me from achieving my dreams. They are mine to control.”

No one can stop me from achieving my dreams. They are mine to control.

“Alexandra, with the knowledge that all of those affirmations are true, tell me what you want to manifest.”

My answer came to me instantly. I’d never had outrageous goals, just simple ones from the heart. “I want to be in this home, surrounded by my mates, friends, and family at the end of this, celebrating the new life ahead of us that is ours to build.”

Her next instruction was short, but I immediately felt the power in it. “Now change the wording from want to will and remember how strong and capable you are when you say it.”

Just the thought of changing the sentiment tightened my throat with an explosion of clashing emotions. Desire. Fear. Guilt. Joy. Determination.

Dig deep, Alexandra. The emotions are yours to control.

Letting go of the emotions that clogged my throat from claiming this manifestation, I focused on the positive only and allowed my voice to ring out loud, clear and unwavering.

“I *will* be in this home, surrounded by my mates, friends, and family at the end of this, celebrating the new life ahead of us that is ours to build.”

The warmth within me rose to the heat of a blazing fire, and suddenly I was standing in the center of the home, watching the fireplace crackle and pop with higher intensity. I basked in the power the dancing flames fed to my soul. After a moment of connecting with them, the flames turned to a mixture of white and purple, reminding me of my power and the peace I’d pooled together at the beginning of the exercise.

Now my power alone fed my thoughts and determination.

The world suddenly felt limitless. There was nothing I couldn’t achieve. No foe would stop me from achieving my

goal.

“Now I want you to release and surrender, Alexandra. This will be the hardest part, but hold tight to this power burning within your soul now.”

I did as she said, holding on tightly to the feeling in my chest, determined to never lose it. This power was mine.

“Trust that the universe is working to manifest your intention. Surrender to the need to control the process. Repeat after me one more time: My intention has been heard and received, and so it will be.”

I wasn't sure why, but the heat of tears burned at the corners of my closed eyes.

“My intention has been heard and received, and so it will be,” I repeated, opening myself to the power of fate.

And so it will be.

It suddenly felt like dozens of electrical currents were buzzing beneath my skin, exploding to remove shackles I'd felt holding me down.

A true weightlessness came over me as Ariel instructed me. “Take a few deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth. When you feel ready to come back to the present, bringing your new affirmations and intentions with you, open your eyes. Remember this is your safe place to return to whenever you need it.”

I thought I would feel scared to lose this new warmth and tranquility that Ariel brought to my mind, but despite needing to return to reality, I was still left with the fire of determination burning within me.

I was ready.

As I opened my eyes, Ariel's face was the first thing I saw, and she smiled down at me as she helped me sit up. My head felt a little fuzzy as I tried to reorientate myself back to the present. Exhaustion hit me hard, making my limbs feel heavy and unmovable. My brow pinched together as my hands

pressed into a plush surface that definitely wasn't the same mat as before as Ariel gently held me up.

Glancing around, I wondered if I was still lost in my mind. The rough headboard I imagined in my safe place sat behind me and the rust-colored blanket I'd pictured lay beneath my feet.

I was in the very same bedroom that I'd dreamed up, even though I opened my eyes and came back to reality.

"I...am I," I tried to question, while glancing around in disbelief. I shook my head in disbelief before asking, "Am I still stuck in that mental space with you?"

A low whistle came from my teacher as she stared around. "I wouldn't believe it if I didn't see it with my own eyes, but no, Alexandra. We're very much in real life. Your magic brought your home to life as you imagined it. You stood up and entered the home on your own, almost as if you were sleep-walking."

Glancing outside of the large window to my left, I gasped when I saw the seats of the coliseum rising before me. I created this house within it, smack dab on the arena floor.

I quickly remembered back to times when I brought physical items to life such as weapons and shields. In those instances, all I had to do was release my hold on the magic for the items to disappear. Taking a deep breath, I released the hold on my magic and forced it to retreat back into the ball within me. A small screech pushed through my lips as I fell through the air.

My ass hit the hard arena ground, and I groaned at the vibration of pain radiating from my tailbone and up my spine.

"I was wondering how I was going to explain a home appearing in the middle of the arena, but I guess I don't have to anymore," Ariel mused as she stood to my side with a hand on her hip and smirk pulling her lips up.

Feeling entirely zapped, I let my head fall back on the ground as I stared up at her. "I've never been able to pull

something of that size to life. The most I've done before is a weapon or shield, and it took considerable effort."

She crouched to sit next to me. "Light purple runes appeared under your eyes and in the center of your forehead, Alexandra. Your eyes were pure white as you opened them and your hair began to float around you, tinged with a purple energy. Has this happened before?"

My time in the library with the guys came back to me in a rush of memories. "I've only ever connected to my runes when I tried to write something to life. I failed when I tried at DIA, but my mates and I guessed that I somehow tapped into the power of Pandora's box to create *them* and pull them to life. I wrote about them in my notebooks countless times as I created a second life within that dream world, then one night they came to life."

She looked up at the sky, letting silence descend around us for a few minutes.

"Raph told me a little about you being able to use a form of creation magic, as well as the theory that you're the hope that was released from Pandora's box. Here, we're all well versed in the happenings of the systems around us, so we know of Pandora's box and what it contained. No curse is supposed to hold any magic outside of their ability to feed on emotions."

"Clearly that isn't true," I countered before waving a hand around. "You just saw what I'm capable of."

"That I did." A small laugh came from her as she shook her head and met my eyes. "I wasn't sure how deep your connection to Pandora's box ran, but after seeing the runes on your skin, I am more certain. The same runes can be found on the outside of the box, and they're rumored to glow when something is released from within it."

That...that had to be a coincidence.

"I believe that you somehow hold Pandora's box within you, Alexandra. It was rumored that Pandora was naive when she opened the box—doing so took her life and embedded her

essence within the box, releasing the curses into the world. But what if she knew exactly what she was doing?"

My brain was spinning to keep up with Ariel's train of thought. That would mean Pandora's essence resided within me.

"You truly are the hope the world needs, and I am quite certain you hold the power within you to achieve this."

Ariel's sentiments were kind, but I was too stuck on the idea of Pandora's essence, or soul or whatever, being within me.

When the thought came to my mind, I didn't immediately know that it would change *everything*.

Pandora? Are you there?

Chapter 13

A SOFT, DELICATE VOICE JUST ON THE EDGE OF MY MIND answered. It was so faint I thought I was imagining it at first.

Come to me.

The world faded away in a bright whirl of colors and lights. My surroundings seemed to swirl and stretch like elastic as my consciousness was yanked somewhere else entirely. I could feel the dream-like environment taking shape around me, the strange shapes becoming real as I felt myself pulled further and further away from the real world.

“Finally, you’ve figured it out. I’ve spent twenty-one years here alone, waiting for you.”

My vision sharpened and my mind cleared as the same faint voice from before met my ears.

Before me stood a beautiful woman with skin as white as snow and hair as black as night. Her eyes were deep blue, shimmering like the ocean under the sun. She wore a flowing white dress that moved in the air like gossamer as she stepped closer to me.

“Pandora?” I asked, though my soul somehow already knew the answer.

This was her, and just the sight of her left me with an overwhelming desire to envelop her in my arms. The feeling poured from my heart as an ache settled in my chest that I couldn’t quite understand.

The sound of the world around us caught my attention then. I heard the chirping of crickets in the background as well

as the sound of birds singing at a distance. A breeze rustled through the trees, creating a soft whooshing sound as I sat in a clearing, waiting for her to approach.

The night air was thick with a musky aroma, hints of lavender and roses lingered in the breeze.

Wordlessly, she offered me a hand. Placing my own in hers, I was struck with an immediate sense of familiarity. As I climbed to my feet, she didn't release my hand, instead guiding me through the clearing. I found comfort in the small touch, and it eased the ache in my chest.

The night sky was a blanket of stars, the moon a beacon of silver light that illuminated a sprawling manor. The columns, pillars, and marble steps were a stark white contrast to the darkness of the night, and the ivy-covered terrace walls curved and twisted around the home like an embrace from nature itself.

“Are your memories of this place and the pact we made coming back to you?” she asked, startling me from my wide-eyed inspection of her world.

What did she just say? Surely, I couldn't have heard her correctly.

My feet stalled, dragging her to a stop with me. Pulling my grip from hers, I dragged my gaze over her and then around us before answering, “I don't know what you're talking about. I've never been here, and I have definitely never met you.”

She nodded in return, a look of acceptance flashing through her blue eyes as her smile fell into a flat line. “We both knew this might happen. There was no guarantee that your memories from your time at our home would remain with you.”

My head recoiled as shock crashed into me like a tidal wave. “My home? What? No, that can't be true.”

She closed the small distance between us, placing her hands on my cheeks and leaning forward until our foreheads touched. My eyes drifted closed, soaking in her energy in a way that left confusion swirling around in my mind.

Why did I feel so at ease here with her? Had we...met before?

“Oh, sweet girl. We lived here together for many years, waiting for the time you would be called to fulfill your duty.”

My voice was hoarse as I whispered, “I...I don’t understand.” Panic swelled to life within me, and my hands shook, voice growing louder as I struggled to wrap my head around her words. “This place feels familiar, and I feel at peace with you, but that’s it. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Shh,” she soothed, pulling back and taking my hand once more. “Let’s go inside, and I’ll explain it all.”

A breath of relief puffed over my lips—I didn’t understand what was happening, but at least I’d get answers. I was so freaking done with more questions and confusion entering my life. I couldn’t handle it anymore.

We passed through the beautifully kept garden and toward the manor that lay just beyond. After climbing the steps, I reached out to run my fingers along the marble. The walls were cool to the touch, smooth and slick with dew from the chilly night air.

I was struck by the opulent beauty that surrounded me as we moved inside. The interior was adorned with lavish white and gold accents that exuded an aura of divine elegance. The walls were covered in intricate patterns of gold leaf, which caught the light and cast a warm glow throughout the space.

The furniture, crafted with meticulous detail, showcased a harmonious blend of white marble and ornate golden carvings. Plush silk cushions stitched with golden embroidery adorned the seating areas. The floors, made of gleaming white marble, bore delicate gold inlays of scenes that I could only imagine were from Greek history, further adding to my sense of being in a space touched by the gods.

After settling in a seating area near the center of the room, I asked, “Where are we?”

Elaborate statues of Greek deities graced the corners of the rooms, their forms sculpted with an almost lifelike realism. Every detail in the home seemed to radiate a sense of timeless elegance and power, capturing the essence of ancient Greek aesthetics I remembered seeing in my history lessons.

“We reside in a mirror image of the home I once resided upon in Divinus, alongside the gods and goddesses. When I entered Pandora’s box as its owner, the space shifted to what I knew and loved once the curses besides yourself were released.”

There was a lot to unpack with her matter-of-fact statement, but she continued before I could start asking questions.

“I will start at the beginning,” she explained with a soft smile. “Please suspend your disbelief, as the world and its history isn’t always as the tales would have you believe.”

With my nod of understanding, she began to weave a story that I quickly began to lose myself in.

“I was a mere mortal living amongst gods, created out of spite by Zeus in response to Prometheus stealing fire from our heavens to give to man. The gods gave me many traits as the first mortal woman including beauty, curiosity, charm, and cleverness. For a long time, I lived in peace, until one day Zeus gifted me a box and told me to never open it. Little did I know this was a box that he created with the touch and powers of many of the gods. Creation magic laid within its confines, and with his final touch, he filled it before sealing it, ensuring the box could only be opened by a mortal.”

She scoffed then, rolling her eyes. “He preyed upon the gift of curiosity that was bestowed upon me, though he was quick to forget that I was also gifted with cleverness. I knew something was afoot and sought help from two people who I knew would assist me—the goddess Psyche and the god Prometheus.”

It was obvious why Prometheus would help her, wanting to thwart Zeus and any plans he might have made, but I didn’t know anything about Psyche.

“Why did you know Psyche would help you?”

Pandora nibbled on her bottom lip, just like I did when I was lost in thought, before answering in a much softer, solemn tone. “She was sent to the underworld with an impossible task as punishment for loving the man she did. Persephone gave Psyche a golden box, said to contain some of her beauty. Psyche looked inside the box and found that she had been tricked with an everlasting slumber.”

The parallel between the two boxes that tricked two mortal women was insane. Zeus wasn't very creative with his idea, it seemed.

“Thankfully, Eros found her and saved her, and Zeus approved their marriage. She became the goddess of the soul.”

I thought I was following along, but she lost me at the mere mention of Zeus helping them.

“If Zeus helped them, why would she want to help you?”

She gave me a pointed look, arching a brow as her head tilted slightly to the side. “No god does anything out of the kindness of their soul. There is always a catch. When Psyche and Eros had a child, Zeus came and took her, claiming he was owed the child as a debt.”

Anger coiled deep within my core.

“So after meeting with Prometheus and Psyche, we quickly determined there would be something dastardly inside of the box. Leaving it somewhere wasn't an option—we were scared it would be opened by some unknowing soul. After using his fire on the box, Prometheus deemed it unbreakable, so we couldn't dispose of it either.”

That bastard Zeus really thought of everything.

“As the goddess of souls, Psyche offered the solution of placing my soul within the box. Through this action, I found the curses inside, including you, without opening the box. The inside of the box was a wasteland of dark souls consuming each other for more power—the only exception was the smallest speck of light cowering in a corner.”

The look she gave me then was full of soft affection. She smiled softly, eyes shimmering in the dim light of the room. “After Psyche removed me from the box, I begged her to lift your soul from the box and let you be free, but she refused, saying we couldn’t be sure that seeing you wasn’t a trick and that doing so could trigger everything else to be released. Psyche was only comfortable touching my soul.”

I didn’t remember any of this. Could this really be true? I had an entire life in the box alongside the curses?

Her eyes fell to the floor, and I just caught a subtle hitch in her voice when she continued, “The day finally came when Zeus heard that I figured out the contents of the box. He brought Psyche with him, holding a bolt of lightning to her chest and saying he would kill her for helping me if I didn’t open it then. I wasn’t clever enough to quickly think of a plan, so I opened the box, praying your light alone would be enough to cancel out the darkness of the curses that escaped.”

I grabbed her hand, sensing the agony rolling off of her in palpable waves. She squeezed it, and took a deep, wavering breath.

“Little did any of us know that the person who opened the box would be damned. My life was forfeit. Taking my life to release such power into the world was nothing more than a balance of power. In a last ditch effort to save me, Psyche bound my soul to the box before it could be swept to the River Styxx for judgment.”

“Pandora,” I breathed out, appalled at her friendship being used against her in a life or death situation.

The stories we all learned growing up were so wrong. Pandora didn’t carelessly open the box, unleashing darkness upon Ordinarius, because of her curiosity. She tried to prevent the curses from being released into the world and ended up giving her life because of it.

She grabbed my other hand, bringing both of ours together as she dragged her gaze up to meet mine. The mist of tears in her eyes made the blue of her irises shine even brighter.

“Do not be sad. It is because of you that I exist here now. Upon my soul’s reentry to the box, you found me. After learning what happened, you offered to merge our souls together and take me with you beyond the confines of the box.” My heart soared at that, but she quickly squandered the hope swelling within me. “In the brief time it took for us to decide that, Zeus closed the box, trapping us within it and allowing just the darkness to escape. Psyche was able to speak to our souls, merging us as her final gift to me before Zeus hid the box away. He shrouded it with magic, not knowing that I also existed within the box still.”

“I...” I stammered, pulling my hands away and lifting one to my forehead as I tried to process everything she was telling me. “Why couldn’t she just put your soul into a new body?”

That would have allowed me to exit the box and for her to circumvent Zeus’ death plan for her.

“That’s not how it works. My soul was owed to the underworld—I lived a life, and it had come to a close. Your soul, however, still had a path predetermined by fate to be carried out. You couldn’t be claimed by the underworld until you completed your life cycle. By merging our souls, mine would be hidden upon release.”

Some things still weren’t adding up for me, though.

“If our souls were merged and we escaped the box, how do I still have the creation magic from it? Also, why have I never been able to sense you or access this place until now?”

She leaned back in the corner of the couch, draping her arm along the top of it. Pandora chewed the inside of her cheek while she seemed to ponder the question. After a moment, she explained, “Well, no one could have anticipated what happened by merging our souls when I was also bound to the box and its magic. We were finally released twenty-one years ago—and before you ask, no I’m still not sure by whom.

“When we were released, you became the conscious state around me, and I remained here. I’ve felt your connection to this place, drawing upon its magic over the years, and I willingly fed it to you. Losing your memories of your time

here...Well, I think that was a matter of not remembering this place existed within your soul. Something renewed the connection today, and a window between our souls opened. I could call to you for the first time and actually be heard.”

A voice, distant and far away, called out my name, and we both looked around in alarm. At first, it seemed to be a whisper in the wind, but as it persisted, the sound became sharper and more distinct.

“Alexandra!”

Ariel. She was calling out for me.

I wasn't ready to leave, though. There was so much I needed to learn still. So much still to ask her.

“Fret not, Alexandra. You can access this place within your mind now. Come to me while you sleep, so that we may be undisturbed.”

I grabbed her hand, needing to ask the question that had been eating away at me ever since I found out I was a curse from the box was burning in my mind.

“If hope is light and a way to combat darkness, why was it considered a curse?”

She smiled as the world around me shifted once more, signaling that I was about to be tugged from it.

“Because to hope means you are allowing yourself the space to have your dreams crushed. To hope means meeting the reality of what happens when you do not achieve what you wish. Facing those realities, learning that hope does not make you infallible, can feed all of the bad curses. In that instance, it can become a breeding ground for envy, greed, pride, pain, hate, anger, wrath, and every other curse that eventually merged into the three that remain.”

I let out a growl of frustration as darkness finally descended.

Hope is neither inherently good or inherently bad; it simply is. It is up to us to do something bigger with our hope, Alexandra.

Chapter 14

THE MOMENT HER EYES OPENED, DISPLAYING THAT BEAUTIFUL purple I knew I would never grow tired of seeing, Ariel backed off, giving us the space to rush in and be with her. I was thankful she had the foresight to back away, because for as polite as I considered myself, I wasn't above shoving her out of the way to get to my mate after sitting here for hours watching her unconscious body.

Knowing there was nothing we could do was agony unlike any I'd ever experienced before. We'd tried everything with our powers to connect to her or feel her soul, but there was an impenetrable shield around her, preventing us from reaching her.

Lucien reached her first and laid his hand on her cheek before lowering his forehead to rest on hers. "Angel, don't you ever scare me like that again. I thought I was going to have to wage war against the heavens themselves."

He wasn't kidding. I was pretty sure we were only a few short hours away from Lucien losing his absolute mind and trying to fight anyone he came across to get answers.

A coy smile tugged at Alexandra's lips as she murmured, grogginess making her words sound a bit rough, "Always so bloodthirsty."

Hearing her joke lightened the energy of the room. It felt like a vacuum had been released. It was as if every breath we took was stolen and condensed into one single bubble as we waited to see if she would wake up and be okay. As it popped

with her words, the relief flowing between us was both immense and palpable.

My shoulders sagged as Elwin clapped his hand on my back and rubbed lightly. As my eyes fell closed, I forced myself to take deep, steady breaths to try to calm my erratic pulse. I'd tried so hard to keep my cool during the tense period of waiting, to show that I had unwavering faith that everything would be okay. But inside, I was a ticking time bomb. Now that I could see that she really was okay, all of my fears that I was suppressing rushed through me in a churning current.

Fuck, she was really okay. She was back with us.

“Ky?”

My eyes snapped back open at the sound of her soft question, and I watched as Lucien helped her sit up. I reached for her back too, helping hold her up as she reached for me. As the warmth from her palms settled against my chest and we gazed into each other's eyes, I allowed my vulnerability a moment out in the open.

“You scared me, darling,” I whispered, searching her face and eyes for any sign of a lingering problem or pain. “I have never felt so helpless and weak as I did over the past few hours.”

Her eyes widened as a soft breath escaped her in a rush. “I was out for hours? It only felt like maybe thirty minutes to me. Shit, I'm sorry, Ky. I'm sure that was really concerning.”

Confusion blanketed my mind. She was aware that she wasn't conscious?

She seemed to lose herself in her thoughts, so I simply pressed a kiss to her forehead, not wanting to rush her into giving us all the answers just now. I knew she would tell what had happened with time. All that mattered now was that she was here and she seemed okay.

She shifted from my hold after a few moments before moving to Elwin and nuzzling into his chest, allowing him to hold her with him on the floor.

“You’re never going to believe what I found out,” she murmured as she turned her head to gaze up at him. “I think your brain may actually explode when you hear just how wrong the countless books that we read on Pandora were.”

Well, consider my curiosity about what the hell happened while she was out doubled.

The sound of a loudly clearing throat pulled our attention out of our little bubble. We turned to see Ariel hovering a few feet away. “Alexandra, do you feel well enough to get back to training tomorrow?”

Her arms were crossed against her chest, and she gazed at Alexandra with a furrowed brow. Something had shifted between them, but I wasn’t sure what it was just yet. I saw her genuine concern for our girl when she brought her back here with the thought that the three of us could help access Alexandra with our powers.

But it was because I’d seen that fear for our girl’s safety that Ariel’s question caused my hackles to raise. She was there with us and saw how drained Alexandra was. How could she possibly think that Alexandra was good to go back to training the next day?

Lucien growled, and for once, I was right there with him, feeling fury rising within me. Clearly, something massive just happened to Alexandra. She didn’t need to push herself to commit to training so soon again.

“Yes. I’ll see you in the morning.” She answered without hesitation, making the three of us look at each other in confusion.

“Alexandra,” I started to say, but Ariel cut me off before I could remind Alexandra that it was okay to take the time to take care of herself.

“Stop that,” she demanded, turning her ire upon me before swinging her gaze to my two brothers in turn. Her eyes narrowed as she spat, “You must stop coddling her. What you are up against is nothing short of a massive struggle, but the outcome of this rests upon her shoulders. Alexandra is tougher

than anyone here gives her credit for. She won't be able to realize and feel that for herself until she pushes herself outside of the self-imposed boundaries she has placed on top of the ones you all have created for her."

My blood simmered beneath my skin, enraged at her implication that we coddled Alexandra and thought her weak. That was so far from the truth it wasn't even humorous.

Lucien jumped to his feet, red eyes burning as he defended us through clenched teeth. "We know better than anyone just how strong she is. We know *everything* she faced growing up—how she refused to bend and give up despite it all. She has taught herself how to be her own pillar of strength, and that is what we all admire the most about her."

Alexandra released a small gasp at his words, and it made me realize maybe we needed to be more vocal about those feelings to her. It shouldn't be a surprise to her.

Ariel let out a wicked laugh before shaking her head at Lucien. "Then I suggest you reflect on that a bit more and internalize it. Will you be able to go to the afterlife with peace in your soul at the end of this when you lose, knowing you held her back and caused all of your deaths?"

I'd had enough of her, and just as I was about to give her an earful, Elwin cut in, drawing my focus down to him as he cradled Alexandra. "She's right. If Alexandra says she's okay enough to train, then we need to respect that. We can't force her to take breaks or slack off, nor should we. Our situation is only going to grow more dire each day. Every hour we have is precious."

I could feel my brow furrowing in response to his words.

"It seems like one of you has a brain," Ariel huffed before turning to Alexandra. "You deserve to rest tonight. Don't try to access your powers, despite me saying you need to train every moment. Recuperate your strength now so we can push tomorrow."

She disappeared in a flash of light, and I lifted my hand on instinct to shield my eyes.

“Well, I can see why you chose her, Raph,” Zurie murmured from the kitchen before taking a few sips of wine from her glass. “She’s a hardass, but a fair one it seems.”

As Raph gave her an ‘I told you so’ speech, Elwin and Alexandra pushed to their feet. Following their motion, I straightened up to my full height before reaching for her hand.

“Hey,” she said, shooting me a look full of compassion before swinging her gaze to Lucien and doing the same. “I love you both so much, and I know you’re only trying to protect me. However, it’s time I forced myself out of my comfort zone. I finally got some concrete answers today, and now is the time I need to lean into training more than ever.”

I offered her a nod, knowing I was unable to deny her anything she insisted on. The truth was, I wanted her to be as strong as she could be, but when she left us to train today, it hit me that there was a possibility she might not come back to us one day. I wasn’t coping well with that epiphany.

I didn’t understand why Ariel didn’t take us to train alongside Alexandra. We all needed the instruction to ensure we were at our very best for her. Plus, we needed to be able to hold our own in a battle. If we could just go with them, maybe some of this anxiety clawing at my chest and up my throat would go away.

“I love you too,” Lucien answered after a long moment of silence passed between us all. “I trust you to know your limits, but don’t you dare push yourself into a dangerous situation with your power. You can’t even stand without Elwin’s support right now. What if that happened in a battle?”

I saw the very moment his words pissed her off, and heat emanated from her eyes as they narrowed in his direction. He wasn’t wrong, though. She was susceptible right now, and pushing herself this hard during a battle potentially meant death.

Zurie intervened, coming over to look Alexandra over as she rested her hands on her arms. “Oh, sweet girl, we were so worried about you. I’m sorry that we didn’t prepare you mentally to go through training before Ariel swept you away.

I'm sure it was jarring and unsettling to be in an unknown place with a new person like that."

Alexandra took a deep breath, seeming to swallow some of her anger at Lucien as she forced a smile to her face for Zurie's sake. "It worked out the way it needed to," she reassured her. "Ariel really knew what I needed, even if it may have been nothing like I was expecting. I'm excited to continue training with her and see what I can achieve."

Her eyes turned to Raph in the kitchen, and she gave him a small nod. "Thank you for thinking of her and reaching out. At first, I doubted that she was a good fit for me, but it turns out she was exactly what I needed."

He gave her a nod back before looking at his mate, who was still checking Alexandra for marks. "Honey, give the girl some room to breathe. I'm going to go get the guys and Ris from the safe house now that we know everything is okay and we're not facing an unknown attack. Let's get dinner going and give our guests some room to freshen up and rest, yeah?"

Zurie's lips pinched as she nodded and dropped her hands to her side. "Sorry, Alexandra. It's just the mom in me. You're in my care now, and I don't want to see a single hair on your head hurt."

Her words softened my mate up as she took a shaky step forward. Shocking me, she pulled Zurie in for a hug, squeezing her lightly before stepping back into Elwin's waiting arms to support her.

"Thank you, Zurie, but you don't need to be sorry about a single thing. We're in your debt for everything you've done for us so far."

As we split up with the promise to return for dinner if Alexandra was feeling up to coming, I swept her up into my arms as she tried to walk to the side door.

She huffed and turned an adorable scowl my way. "I can walk, Ky."

I wasn't even going to dignify that with a response. We all knew she couldn't, and I'd be a liar if I said it wasn't nice to

feel like I could be of use to her right now. Selfishly, I was beginning to see why Lucien was so quick to always grab her when his emotions were frazzled. Just feeling her soft body and warmth curling into me slowly as she relaxed in my grip soothed my soul.

For demanding that she could walk, she sure did give up that fight quickly.

By the time we entered the guesthouse, she was asleep in my arms, and I softly gave orders for Lucien to prepare the bath for her. Elwin went to the kitchen without me needing to tell him to, already understanding that we needed to get some water and a snack for her in case she needed it. Restoring her energy levels and ensuring her body was able to rest properly were our top priorities right now.

After laying her gently on the bed, I began to undress her, trying to not disturb her as I heard the water from the bath running. Gathering her in my arms after undressing myself, a smile tugged at my lips at the thought of how far we'd come since the last time I had to get in a bathroom with her.

By the time I padded into the bathroom, it was to see Lucien was pouring bubble bath into the steaming bath. The tub was filled about three quarters of the way up, and I gave him a nod, indicating that level was good. Although it was a massive square bath—mirroring more of what I would think a hot tub looked like—I didn't want to risk overflowing the tub with both of us in it. And I hadn't ignored the possibility that Lucien might join us, with his need to hold her in high-emotion situations.

I couldn't be selfish in this. I had to respect all of our needs.

After testing the heat, he pulled his hand out and stood, wiping the water away on a nearby towel. I made quick work of settling us into one of the corner seats, shocked at how steady Alexandra's breath remained. For a moment, I was terrified she might have slipped back to wherever she'd gone to in the past few hours. However, as she seemed to sigh with

contentment and turn on her side to rest her head into the crook of my neck, my fears ebbed.

When she was in that unconscious state, she hadn't uttered a sound or moved an inch.

As Lucien started for the door, my brows slammed together in confusion. Trying not to wake her, I whispered, "Are you not staying? I assumed you'd want to hold her now."

I glanced down to make sure I hadn't woken her up, but her eyes were still closed and her steady breath puffed across my neck.

As I looked back at Lucien, he leaned in the doorway for a moment, glancing at her and smiling before meeting my gaze. He shook his head as he responded, "I think I need to learn how to share, and you seem to need it more than I do right now. Just call for me if you need anything."

I was shocked into silence, unable to respond before he turned and left.

This was the same monster who needed to hold her at the slightest irritation.

The man who screamed into the sky outside of the house to get his fury out before coming back into the house to monitor her with us just hours ago.

Maybe Elwin was right... We really could change.

Chapter 15

THE SOUND OF SOMEONE HUMMING ROUSED ME FROM MY dreamless sleep, and my groggy brain questioned where I was. Even more so when I registered the warmth surrounding me and the soft sweeping of a loofah over my arms.

The soft scratch of the loofah against my skin felt amazing, and the pressure being applied with it was perfect, massaging my muscle as it went.

Wherever I was, this was definitely heaven within Divinus.

Then it hit me. The last thing I remembered was adamantly telling Kylo I could walk after he'd lifted me up like a sack of potatoes. Then...then it all went fuzzy.

My eyes flew open as my heart jumped into my throat.

Where was I? Was I back with Pandora? Who was touching me?

Water sloshed around me as I surged forward to give myself enough room to turn around and see whose arms were wrapped around me. Water splashed out of the large tub and slapped onto the floor.

“Darling, are you okay?”

Upon seeing familiar blue eyes and dimples on full display as Kylo grimaced at my alarmed look, I let out a shaky breath. My head hung low for a second as I processed that I was safe and okay.

“Holy shit, sorry,” I murmured, forcing myself to take a few breaths to calm the adrenaline that coursed through my

veins. “Things have been so confusing recently. I’m constantly wondering where the hell I am now apparently.”

Kylo’s perplexed expression was adorable, and I crossed back to his open arms, cuddling against him again. A sigh fell across my lips at the heat soaking into me.

Strands of my hair fluttered around me as he let out a large puff of breath that fanned across my head. “I have so many questions, darling.”

“I promise I’ll fill you in when I can tell all three of you at once. It’s...” I trailed off as I stared at the bubbles surrounding us in the tub, trying to find the words. “It’s a lot, to say the least.”

How did one explain that they had a being inside of them who was thousands of years old? How did I even begin to explain that I apparently shared a life with her inside of Pandora’s box for gods only know how long? Things were only getting more complicated, despite having some solid answers now.

He grunted before chuckling, vibrations from his chest rolling through me as he did. “I don’t doubt that at all.”

Fatigue still lingered through my limbs, so I stopped trying to keep my head up, leaning it back against his shoulder instead. The air was thick with calming aromas, a mixture of fresh lavender and sharp mint. The scent was refreshing and seemed to clear my mind and ease my worries as I breathed it in.

I still hadn’t taken the time to wrap my brain around what all of this meant for me.

Did this mean that Pandora could see and hear everything going on around me? Was she...living through my eyes, or was she stuck within the home I’d visited her in?

Pandora?

Silence answered me, and I felt a little bit of relief that she wasn’t going to be a constant presence in my head now. If we didn’t share a conscious, then I doubted she could watch or hear the world around me.

A bout of loneliness smacked me square in the chest with that realization, though. Pandora had been alone ever since I left, abandoning her with no one to talk to and nothing to do. Honestly, that sounded worse than going to the River Styxx for judgment. That was no way to live.

Kylo's ministrations resumed, pulling me from my thoughts as he spoke in a quiet, soothing voice, "Sorry I woke you up, darling. We've just been in here for a while as you slept, and I just wanted to make sure you were clean before I pulled us out. You've been out since I walked us over to this house."

I wasn't really surprised that I fell asleep as soon as he picked me up and cradled me to his chest. While I wasn't usually one to fall asleep so easily, the way my body struggled to support me after coming back from the dreamscape with Pandora, sleep felt imminent. Even if I had tried to insist that I could walk on my own. I was just trying to put on a good front after telling both Ariel and them that I'd be perfectly fine to train tomorrow morning.

Lifting my fingers in front of me, I noted the pruny appearance of my skin there. Kylo really had just sat in here with me as I slept, likely knowing this would feel amazing to my body after my episode.

"It's okay," I murmured, letting my eyes close again with a sigh. "Thank you for bringing me over here and taking care of me. I love you, Ky."

I felt a kiss to the top of my head, making me smile at the sweet gesture. "Always, darling. I love you too."

After a few more quiet moments, he announced I was clean and arms wrapped around me once more, lifting me from the bath. "Do you feel like you can stand, or do you need to sit? I just need to grab us some towels to dry off quickly."

Knowing there was no point in putting on a front of strength I definitely didn't have, I grumbled, "Sit, please."

After depositing me onto the wide ledge of the tub and making sure I wasn't going to fall over and potentially smack

my head on something, he grabbed our towels. After wrapping one around his waist, and me pouting about his beautiful body being shielded from my eyes, he dropped to his knees before me.

I gasped as a sense of *déjà vu* hit me. Kylo held me while drying me off after we were in the shower together for the first time. That was the first time someone had shown me such tender affection, ensuring every inch of my skin was dried off by his own hands.

My heart throbbed in time with my core, sending a signal to my pussy that we were fully awake now.

Kylo was always here for me, and all of our family, taking care of us and ensuring our safety in any way that he could. After hearing his words to Lucien about how out of control he felt in our current situation, my heart ached for him. There was no way for him, or any of us, to feel any kind of stability right now, and I knew that must be a huge hit to his mind. He really couldn't prepare us for or protect us from what was coming next because none of us knew what it was.

As he worked the towel up my thighs, I parted them on instinct. My tongue darted out to wet my lips as his heated gaze narrowed on my center before he looked up to me with a questioning gaze.

“Alexandra,” he started, forcing his eyes away as he stood to wrap the towel around me and pull me to my feet, “you need to rest. I’d feel wrong indulging in your body right now.”

I was so relieved Ariel told me I deserved to rest tonight. Because there was no way I would otherwise be able to fully indulge in this moment without guilt.

Kylo seemed to forget one key component of our relationship, but I was more than happy to remind him of it.

“Feeding off of your power could give me more energy, Ky,” I argued as he tried his best to brush the towel across my breasts without lingering. With a groan of need, I grabbed the towel from his hands and let it drop to the floor into a puddle of water I’d sloshed from the tub.

In his moment of confusion, I grabbed his hands and placed them back on my breasts. His own needs seemed to roar to life at the contact, closing his hands around my flesh as his mouth descended to meet mine hungrily.

Victory.

Our tongues tangled as one of his hands snaked around my body to press against the small of my back, melding our fronts together. He helped support my weight as my legs shook slightly.

“You make it so hard to resist you and do the right thing,” he murmured against my lips as he pulled back for a moment.

Our heavy breaths mingled together as desire coursed through the air around us.

I couldn't help but smile against his lips before retorting, “I'd like to argue that doing me is absolutely the right thing at the moment. As I said, this could benefit me greatly.”

With a chuckle, he shook his head and lifted me, carrying me to the bedroom where Elwin and Lucien were sprawled on the bed.

Oh, this just kept getting better and better. With some cajoling, I could have each of them inside of me tonight.

“No one said I was going to fuck you, Alexandra,” Kylo grunted, making my eyes whip around to him as indignation worked its way upward from my flipping stomach. “To exchange power, all we have to do is make you orgasm. As you're well aware, we have plenty methods of doing that without fucking.”

I fought the urge to pout, but kept the knowledge that I was sure I could convince one of them to give me what I wanted in the recesses of my mind. Not only did I know that they loved to be inside of me, but there was no way they could deny my pleas in the heat of the moment. After all, they've never been able to in the past—why start now?

I felt the weight of three pairs of hungry eyes on me as Kylo settled me onto the bed between Elwin and Lucien. A light heat stained my cheeks at their attention. I knew just how

well they could make me orgasm without their cocks involved, but I more than enjoyed giving them the same pleasure in return.

Laying here and allowing them to give me that without returning the favor seemed so selfish.

So it seemed there was only one option...teasing.

Turning my gaze to Elwin as his mouth descended toward my exposed breast, I asked in a husky tone, "Am I going to get my punishment now, sir?"

Surely, he was aching for a moment to get me back for all of my lip bites.

His breath fanned across my nipple as he breathed on it, letting the hot air from his mouth tease me and make me squirm for more. His green eyes clashed with mine as he smirked. "You get those when I'm ready to dole them out, not when you ask for them. I think I'm going to save your punishments for a time when you least expect them. Waiting will only make the anticipation that much better."

My eyes narrowed on him before swinging my gaze to the other side of my body where Lucien hovered, simply watching as Kylo's spread my legs and dropped to his knees on the floor.

Had Lucien told Elwin how much I loved the teasing anticipation of his touch on the balcony? Or were the guys in the room that early in the exchange to see me squirming? Either way, his knowledge that I loved it was going to make this harder to get him to fold.

All thoughts fled my mind as Kylo's rough hands grabbed the side of my hips and yanked me down to the edge of the bed, where his mouth lay in wait for me.

As his tongue descended upon my clit, my eyes rolled back in pleasure. My back arched seconds later as two hot, wet mouths closed around my raised nipples, lavishing them with licks and soft bites.

"Holy hell," I breathed out as they worked my body in tandem.

My hands moved in tempo to the rhythm of pleasure coursing through me, the sheets beneath my fingertips wrinkling and shifting with each movement of Kylo's tongue.

Having all of their mouths on me at once was a pleasure unlike any other. They were pure fucking magic. The way they teased my body had my core tightening already.

A moan escaped me as a heavy arm moved to rest across my lower stomach, holding my hips down as I tried to move them against Kylo's mouth.

"You get what we give you," Elwin growled against the swollen bud of my nipple. His hot demand, coupled with a quick glance, was all I needed to know that he was the one holding me down. The realization filled my mind with even more lust.

Lying my head down on the bed, all thoughts of my grand plans to get them to fuck me floated far, far away from me. All I could focus on was how damn good they made me feel, despite the utter depletion of my energy.

Fingers entered my pussy, making me cry out as they curled up and hit the perfect spot inside of me. I tried to buck my hips once more to set the pace I wanted, but I cried out in frustration as Elwin's arm tightened down on me.

"Does our little angel want to come?" Lucien growled around my nipple before returning to sucking on it, hard.

"Yes!" I cried out, almost hitting the point where it hurt to be so close to my release but not able to quite get there. "You know I do."

"Beg for it, love," Elwin purred, lifting his mouth and replacing it with his fingers, pinching and rolling my nipple until I cried out again. "Beg for us to let you come, and we'll let you. We'll fill you to the brim with our energy until your body is tingling from the sweet mixture of euphoria, power, and pleasure."

Kylo slipped a second finger in me then but removed his mouth. I glanced down, bereft that he would stop as his eyes met mine.

“You can have it all darling,” he murmured, eyes full of hunger. “Just tell us you need us. Tell us how no one else can make you feel this way.”

A traitorous tear rolled from the corner of my eye in response to the ache inside of me, to the dizzying amount of pleasure pooling in my core. I had to release it. I needed this so damn badly.

“Please,” I begged, arching my back despite knowing my attempts to move were senseless at best. And useless at worst. “I need what only you three can give me. Please.”

Instantly, Elwin’s arms lifted from my hips and Kylo’s mouth descended back on my clit. The three of them hit a harmonious moment where their fingers and tongues were moving at the same speed and pressure, sending me flying after a mere minute.

Nothing seemed more vivid or alive than the moment when pleasure hit. Colors heightened, my vision blurred, and the world seemed to dim around me for a brief moment.

My power demanded its own completion, and in a brilliant flash of light that momentarily illuminated everything around us with a mixture of red, blue, and green energy, their power twined into a single ball. I let go, giving my body the reins to do what it needed. Moments later, I could have sworn I damn near orgasmed all over again as their energy entered me, filling every fiber of my being.

Everything tingled and my head was a mess of a heady type of high, pleasure rolling through me in cresting waves.

Hands caressed my skin, and I was pulled between two warm bodies. Tender words were uttered as I relished in this love that filled me to the brim.

My stomach growled, but I ignored it, wanting to enjoy this for as long as I could.

Chapter 16

MY EYES WERE HAZY AND MY VISION BLURRED FROM THE strain of the hot sun on my skin. I could feel beads of sweat rolling down my face and neck, pooling in the cracks of my skin as I bent over.

“Keep going, Alexandra!”

While Ariel and I had formed an alliance of sorts, she absolutely was not going easy on me. As she yelled for me to continue my lap around the arena floor, I had flashbacks to Potestas being a total hard ass in class. My thoughts drifted to campus, and I found myself wondering if everyone was okay.

I had to believe that Alora would find a way to contact me here, probably through Ama and Zurie, if something bad happened.

I felt a soft slap to my ass before Lucien ran past me, turning around and trotting backward on his toes with a grin of encouragement on his face. “Come on, angel!”

I took a deep breath, shoving down the pain burning through my lungs at this absolute torture. I took off again, relieved as Lucien slowed his pace to keep pace with me. Kylo and Elwin were on the other side of the arena, and I was relieved to have Ariel’s gaze off me as she turned to yell at them to pick up the pace instead.

Chuckling, I recalled their excitement this morning when Ariel invited them to come to training with us. I highly doubted they were still feeling that same excitement now. But...there were no take backs now, a lesson they were surely

yelling as my teacher shouted at them to get it together and pick up their knees.

According to Ariel, my stamina was way below subpar, and every morning, we were going to work to fix that. For once, I hadn't balked at the thought of rigorous physical training, and I wasn't offended by her observation. She was right, and so were my monsters yesterday when they said I couldn't afford to be so tired after using my powers to the degree I had.

When I woke up this morning, a new sense of peace and determination coursed through me. My energy was restored, and I had more of an understanding of exactly who I was and what I was capable of after my session with Ariel yesterday and meeting Pandora.

It was time to stop feeling sorry for myself and give this a real shot.

I felt Lucien's eyes on me, but as I turned to meet his gaze, he shifted his eyes to look at the space in front of us. It wasn't the first time I caught someone staring at me since I explained everything I heard from Pandora. While my mates took everything in stride and put on a positive front about it being a good thing to finally have more information, I could tell they were feeling uneasy about the little tidbit of information I dropped at the end about our souls being bound together.

Once Elwin voiced his fear about her soul being overdue to the afterlife and how we had no idea how that might impact my own soul, they'd been keeping a constant watch on me. It was as if they expected me to be ferried away by Chiron himself any moment now. It didn't matter that I kept reminding them of what Pandora said about her soul purposefully being obscured by my own.

"I'm not going anywhere," I gritted out to Lucien through strained breaths. Furrowing my brows, I drew a deep breath and puffed out a short exhale before continuing, "You guys don't need to be so concerned about it. Being connected to Pandora is a good thing—it's where I get my creation magic from."

He didn't answer, so I shook my head and returned my focus to our run. My soles felt the impact of each step, reverberating through my legs and into my chest. The hard surface of the pavement was unforgiving, yet I was determined to keep going. Ariel and my mates might have to peel me off the ground at the end of this, but it would be well worth it.

Finally, after a few minutes of silence, Lucien spoke up, and I mentally cursed him out when I realized how even and steady his breathing was. How was it that he didn't seem winded at all by this? We had to be a few miles into our run at this point. It was unfair the way they seemed so freaking unaffected in comparison to me.

"You don't know her, Alexandra. Maybe you did in the past, but all we have to go on now is her word of what she told you being what happened in the past. What if she isn't the good person she makes herself out to be?"

I mulled over that for a moment. I supposed he wasn't wrong. There was no true way for me to confirm or deny her explanation of my past, but in my heart and soul, her words rang true. That was enough for me.

"I've spent my whole life following my gut instincts, and I won't stop doing that now," I answered, standing firm in my own belief of the situation. "I'll visit her again soon to get more information and to fill in the important holes we're missing in the plan."

He let out a heavy sigh, seemingly not swayed at all to my side.

"That's enough for the morning!" Ariel shouted, and I had to really rein in my desire to collapse right where we were.

Instead, we continued to jog at a slow, steady pace until coming to a stop in front of her on the mats, where Elwin and Kylo were already doing a cool down stretch per her instruction. After a few blissful minutes of catching my breath and stretching, she instructed us to line up on the arena floor.

"While I have a simple understanding of your magic from your explanation, we cannot risk drawing someone into

training who has a tainted soul for you three to feed on simply for me to see how it works exactly,” she surmised as she paced in front of my three monsters. “So what we are going to focus on for now is Alexandra’s creation magic and how we can use that to enhance all of your positions in a fight. If you three are unable to use your inherent powers, you’ll need to work on your battle skills with weapons. One must not be fully dependent on their magic in the scenario that it falters.”

There was a flutter of nerves in my chest with the realization that this was all on me for now.

As she came to stand in front of me, I held my head high, ready for whatever she threw at me.

“Today, we’re going to work on forming multiple weapons at a time for all four of you to use—*without* them vanishing,” she explained before dropping her head slightly to the side and studying me.

I was nervous, knowing I had only managed once to keep a small dagger solidified after leaving my hand. The act was fueled by my absolute fury at Helen as she tried to mentally tear me down in our training facility at DIA.

Lowering her voice, Ariel murmured, “You conjured an entire house yesterday, in incredible detail, without struggling for even a moment. The key there was that you didn’t force the creation, not aware you were even doing it. You merely let it flow from your core. That’s what we are going to focus on you tapping into today.”

She was entirely right. Weapons were child’s play compared to a whole freaking house.

With a nod, I squared my shoulders, ready for her instruction. “I’ll give it my all,” I promised.

A fierce look of admiration shone on her face as she saw my unwavering commitment and will to succeed today shining through.

“Since you are limited to what you have seen before,” she began to say as she walked over to a table covered with a

heavy cloth, “we’re going to introduce you all to an entire range of weapons today.”

Flinging the cover off, my mouth dropped at the sheer number of weapons gleaming at us under the sunlight.

Lucien let out a low whistle. “Damn, that’s what I’m talking about.”

Ignoring our collective shock and awe of the assortment, she continued while pointing at the four targets that were here when we arrived this morning. “We will not be leaving here today until Alexandra can conjure a different weapon for each of you and you’re all able to hit the center of a target without the weapon disappearing.”

All three pairs of my mates eyes turned to me, probably recalling how difficult it was for me to achieve that feat for myself at DIA. Now I had to do it for four people. I gave them what I hoped was a reassuring smile and nod. “We’ve got this.”

Apparently, my confidence was contagious, because all of their faces shifted from concern and apprehension to ones of equal determination with fire in their eyes. The energy was exactly what I needed to feel around me.

After we each tested a weapon to find what we worked best with, I settled into my spot at the table and grabbed each of their chosen items. I felt the shape and weight of them each as I ran my eyes over every single inch of detail to memorize it.

Ariel reminded me how easy the house came to me, and with the amount of details I had imagined, and insisted that I try to apply that same tactic here. It made sense—the idea that the more in-tune I was with an item, the easier it would be to imagine and require less strain and effort for me to create and hold in place.

Satisfied with my memory of the weapons as I pictured them in my mind, I covered the table per Ariel’s instruction and got to work.

First up was Elwin's elegant, yet dangerous, bow. Supposedly, this bow was only given to the soldiers of their system, but Ariel claimed it was the best one in all of the realms. For now, we were allowed to recreate it for our needs. The bow was made from a tree surrounding their creator's home and was said to hold the power of divine will within it, allowing the archers who wielded it to have wickedly accurate aim...as long as it was used for the right reasons.

Closing my eyes, I first thought of the light weight of the rare white wood and how easy it was to hold in my hands. Thrusting my palms in front of my body, I imagined that same weight settling in as I began to imagine the details of the bow from top to bottom.

The bow's elegance was enhanced by its careful balance between form and function. Whoever crafted it initially hadn't focused on ornate details for this weapon, instead opting for a look of refined elegance with a long swooping arch that ended in a small circular loop of the wood at the top and bottom of it. Next I imagined the soft and pliable grip, forming to its specific user's hand upon them holding it. Last was the bowstring that seemed to glow with the same light that surrounded Ariel at all times. That was easiest for me to imagine after being around her so much recently. Upon drawing the bowstring, an arrow would appear, forever giving the user an unlimited supply of ammunition without needing to store them on their person.

I gave the weapon a mental once over, and once satisfied, opened my eyes and smiled at the sight of the exact design resting in my hands. The first time I conjured a weapon was always the hardest, so I knew it wouldn't take me as long to create moving forward. I just hoped its functionality remained intact with my recreation. Otherwise the bow would be useless.

Ariel gave me a nod and instructed Elwin in a firm tone, "Take the bow and try to shoot an arrow into your assigned target, please."

I tried to hold back my squeal of excitement when a glimmering arrow appeared as he drew his elbow back. As

soon as he let the arrow fly and it smacked directly into the target, I let the squeal out, unable to contain myself.

Elwin grinned at me as Lucien and Kylo whooped with excitement.

I could have sworn I saw a small smile tug at Ariel's lips, but it was gone the second I focused on her.

“Alright, now that you've accomplished that one, let the form go as you work on materializing Kylo's and Lucien's weapons individually. Once you've mastered their creation, we will work on holding all of their forms at the same time.”

Sweat began to bead on my brow again as I turned my thoughts to what was next.

I had to choose between Lucien's crescent-shaped ax or Kylo's longsword. The sheer size of the longsword was daunting to me, so I decided on the ax next.

After constructing it in my mind, I was pleased to see the gleaming silver ax adorned with its bright purple gems that matched the sky around us appear before us. The sharp, crescent shaped blade of the weapon looked deadly as it glinted in the sun. Unfortunately, when he attempted to throw it, the balance of the weapon was off, so I went back to the drawing board. After two more test throws, I had the balance perfected.

The next test of its power was to cut through normal weapons that weren't blessed. The blade of the ax was supposed to be able to slice cleanly through them, and I held my breath in anticipation as Lucien drew his arm back before bringing the ax down on a plain broadsword Ariel produced for us to test the power with.

The smallest clanging sound of metal met my ears before the ax passed through the sword like butter.

Lucien smirked at me as he straightened. “Were you hesitating at first? For a fraction of a moment, it wasn't going through, but then it gave way.”

I winced before nodding. “Yeah, I was nervous.”

Ariel's voice cut through the air, sharp and demanding, "You mustn't alter the weapons with your mind after conjuring them for use. Doing so could leave your compatriots exposed to attacks if they're expecting the full function of their weapon but it falters mid battle. Believe in your creation upon formation and lock it down in your head. It is no longer yours at that point."

She was entirely right, and I gave her a nod of understanding.

"On to the longsword next. It might be useful to start with it in its simplest form."

Ariel's words made my uneasiness at my ability to conjure the massive weapon fade. It was much less daunting to imagine the shortened version I willed it to become. The user of this weapon could extend and shorten the blade at will, and the length Kylo had settled upon was...unreal. I didn't have the strength in my upper body to wield it at all.

"You can do it, darling," Kylo murmured from his spot in front of me as I closed my eyes.

The massive, black hilt remained the same no matter the length of the blade, so I started there, remembering the feel of the supple leather wrapped around it to help grip it. Holding my hand out, I closed my fist, imagining the feel of it in my palm, though I strained slightly with the addition of the leather, having not worked with the material in my creations before.

My wrist dipped slightly as I slowly pulled the blade out from the hilt with my mind. I stretched it until it was the width of both my forearms combined, and the length of my shoulder to my wrist. I had to bring my second hand up to grip it as I did, struggling with its sudden weight.

"I've got it, darling," Kylo whispered as I opened my eyes to inspect the sword.

As I passed it over to him, the single blue gem buried in the top of the hilt glowed. My arms sagged to my sides in relief after passing it off, but I whipped my eyes to Ariel after

Kylo lifted it and extended its reach by about six feet, not struggling in the slightest with its weight.

“How is it possible that he’s not struggling at all?” I asked, completely bewildered.

While I knew he was undoubtedly stronger than me, it couldn’t be *that* vast of an amount.

A knowing smirk lifted a corner of her lips up. “Because you aren’t meant to wield it. Each of you gravitated toward the weapon that called to you for a reason. Every weapon in our system has been imbued with an ounce of our creator’s light. It allows the weapon’s powers to only be used by those who are a match to it.”

My mouth hung open, and I thought of the beautiful kunai I’d been pulled to on the table.

“If our creator didn’t find you worthy, none of you would be able to wield the weapons to their full capabilities.”

Something about being found worthy enough by their creator was healing balm to my soul that still struggled with knowing I was a curse.

Pandora’s words about hope being neither good or bad until we chose what we did with it filled my mind.

Right now, I was choosing to believe in the power of hope for the first time ever, and it felt damn good.

Chapter 17

“YOU’RE NOT FOCUSING, ALEXANDRA!”

Ariel’s constant hounding was driving me crazy, I snapped, swinging my narrowed gaze to her as I seethed, “Maybe if you stopped yapping in my ear, I could focus a little bit more!”

Her lips thinned before she crossed her arms across her chest. I let out a huff of relief to hear silence around me, with the exception of our heavy breathing from training with our weapons.

We’d been at it for five days now, and I found myself incapable of holding all four of our weapons in a solid state, as well as fully functioning in their abilities, for longer than five minutes. It felt impossible to keep a mental picture of all four of them fully intact as we also battled through a ridiculous training course she set up.

Keeping all of the weapons solid as we stood and practiced on our first targets? No problem. Running through a course and getting smacked to the ground while we all had to focus on different, moving targets? Not so much.

Ariel apparently had some friends assist her design this dangerous course. Not only did it have daggers that were thrown at us, there were machines with constantly rotating platforms and spinning pieces whirling around at our heads and ankles too. Meanwhile, the course was entirely suspended in the air, and while the arena floor had a slight cushion to it, my ribs were tender as hell from falling on it over and over again. Each night, I nursed quite a few cuts from the tips of daggers that kissed my skin along my legs and arms. Zurie

went into a spiral of anger at the sight of us every night when we came home.

According to Ariel, the course needed to be lifelike and actually hold enough of a challenge to strike a bit of fear for our lives into us as we tried to complete it. According to Zurie, she was, and I quote, “going to bring the power of Hell upon Ariel to strike fear into her heart if she sends you all home this beat up one more time.”

It was adorable, honestly. I’d never had someone fawn all over me like a mother hen before, and with each passing day we spent with their family, the dynamic really began to feel so easy and natural.

Thankfully, Raph had healing powers and he mended us up every night. What no one besides him knew was that I asked him to leave a bit of the ache in my ribs. The dull pain served as a constant reminder of my failure in a way that motivated me to get better and stop needing constant healing.

In the real world, we weren’t going to have someone around to heal us, and I didn’t want to rely on it.

I would personally love to thank Ariel’s friends who helped her concoct this fresh hell with a handshake...to the face. The glee I saw on Ariel’s face every time I ate shit only served to convince me that maybe her and Potestas were actually soulmates. In my imagination, they would go home to each other at night and get each other off to the stories from their day of torturing people.

Each night, we left the arena drained both emotionally and physically, but I slept damn good at night knowing I was truly giving this my all this time. I continued to fight through the pain and exhaustion, keeping our end goal in mind. My mates were steady pillars of encouragement and support, never failing to renew my own faith in myself with their words when, every morning, returning to the arena after the previous day’s failure felt daunting and insurmountable.

Today, I was hitting a limit, though. And that limit was with the frustration I felt at myself that I was struggling to contain.

While I felt like I was giving it my all, my effort clearly wasn't good enough, and that was bringing a new level of fury to the surface for me. I refused to be less than ever again. I wouldn't let this moment box me back into the Alexandra who had already given up on the notion of winning the battle at the end of this.

I had allowed myself to hope and dream of our future after we won, and I was fiercely protective of those moments to come. Each night before I went to bed, I imagined the home I conjured and the peace it had given me. It was a reminder that this *was* going to be our future.

I held the image of our weapons in four different boxes in my mind and mentally willed a lock to close on a latch, holding them and not allowing anything to happen to them.

Elwin needed to hit ten swinging targets with his bow, within an extremely precise location Ariel had marked for him.

Lucien had to land ten blows to either the neck or chest of mock opponents that came out at random times, alternating constantly so he couldn't fall into a pattern.

Kylo had to pierce the heart of ten dolls, some extremely far away from any platform we could even access, to force him to lengthen his sword and be able to use it precisely.

I had to slice into at least one artery with my kunai on each doll, which was proving to be extremely difficult with moving targets that rotated constantly around.

"Let's go," I growled to my monsters, who were waiting for me at the beginning of the course. "We're finishing this shit right now."

I swung one of my kunai from the thin white rope it was connected to in my hand, letting out a roar as I willed the weapon to release at my first target. I swung it around toward me, slicing deeply into the carotid artery. This kunai would continually reappear and attach itself to this side of my rope. Shifting my weight at the last minute as a second doll came out of nowhere, I slid on my knees to glide beneath it, using

the other end of the rope with an indestructible kunai permanently attached to it to nick the femoral artery as I passed.

Having the two opposing options with these kunai and rope allowed me the ability to not only fight up close but from a distance as well. I had to say, I was a big fan of the versatility of the weapon, appreciating the way each weapon felt like an extension of my arm.

Launching to my feet, my eyes darted around for my next purple-marked target. I heard the thud of a broadhead arrow sinking into its mark to my left as material was shredded behind me by either an ax or the sword. We fell into a practiced movement, having learned to dance around each other as we found our targets and avoiding each other's weapons as we went.

My next target required me to land the hit as I leapt across a massive opening, suspended momentarily in air. For the first time, I didn't doubt my ability to land the hit. I didn't fear the idea of falling. I pumped my arms as the end of the platform approached quickly, running full speed as I launched myself off of it, launching my kunai at the target to the side of the wide gap before I rolled forward, tucking my head down as my body made contact with the other side.

Quickly wiping my hair out of my eyes as I rolled to my feet, I glanced around, heart pounding at both the thrill of that leap and my desire to finish the damn course for the first time. This was where I normally began to lose my focus on holding our weapons in full capacity.

I could do this.

We could do this.

My body froze as a blood-curdling scream tore through the air, dragging my focus away from the course. A second later, I grunted at the impact of a part of the course swinging around to hit me square in the solar plexus, knocking me off of the platform. The ground rushed up to meet me, and I did my best to tuck and roll to absorb the impact, but I still grunted as I hit.

What the fuck was going on? My heart pounded in my chest, and the sound was so loud I was positive anyone could find me just from hearing it alone.

Where were my mates?

Ariel flew toward me, blood pouring from somewhere I couldn't see. The trail of it following behind her caused my stomach to churn. What, or who, had been able to catch her unaware and wound her like this? Whatever it was, this wasn't good.

“Lucien!”

“Kylo!”

“Elwin!”

I screamed for my mates as I rushed to my feet, knowing there were times that we had to separate to different areas for our individual targets. Their voices echoed back to me as they ran toward me. Relief poured through me when we put our backs to each other, looking around for the unseen threat.

A screech tore through the air, and my head snapped up as Ariel landed near us, staggering. The wing on her left side was stained crimson at the tips. The injury must be on her back. We had to get her to a healer.

“Run for cover!” she yelled at us, eyes wide with fear. “Get to the coliseum doors that lead beneath the arena!”

I struggled to understand her words as a haze of panic tried to set in, and my heart raced as I asked, “What—”

I was quickly cut off by the sound of another screech that was soon followed by dozens more. My blood ran cold at the sight of the creatures I could now see swirling in the air above us.

With the torsos and head of a woman but the talons, wings, and tail of a bird, there was no mistaking what we were about to fight. Harpies.

Holy shit. Harpies were real here. I ground my teeth together—of course they were real here.

Trepidation filled me as the harpies grouped up into a massive ball, like a flock of birds, and dove toward us. Their piercing cries made me want to cover my ears and fall on the ground until it stopped.

Ariel turned, shielding us from sight with her wings as she screamed at us, “Run! I will hold them off.”

I could now see that one of her wings was bleeding profusely from where it attached to her shoulder blade, and deep gouge marks were raked from the back of her neck down to the bottom of her left ribs. Yet she still stood firm, even with the knowledge that she would have to fight off dozens of these harpies so we could run.

I let my true power unfurl within me as the creatures got closer. I felt my hair lifting around me as goosebumps ran along my arms.

“No, we’re fighting by your side. We will not leave you.”

I didn’t have to ask my monsters if they were okay with this, because I knew this was a front we would always be unified on. We would never turn our back on an ally, no matter how dire the situation. If we did, we were no better than the evil in the world, looking out only for their own selfish intentions.

She glowered at us over her shoulder and spat, “You are being foolish! Do not sacrifice yourself here. I can’t portal you back to Zurie’s because they’ll follow our scent there.”

I averted my gaze from her, keeping an eye on the distance between us and our enemies in the air. “I’m sorry, Ariel, but when it comes to this, we will not bow to your instructions.”

Glancing at my mates, they each gave me a nod, confirming my thoughts.

“We’re *all* getting out of here alive,” Kylo growled out.

Elwin began to let arrows fly at the same time that I spread out from them. I need enough space to swing my kunai to have enough speed and force to fling them into the sky at our oncoming enemies.

“Aim for the soft spot beneath their collarbone on the left side!” Ariel cried out, and I adjusted my aim. “Their skin is as hard as armor everywhere except that one spot.”

Lovely. Semi-indestructible harpies. Just what I had on my bucket list of sights to see during our trip to Divinus.

Over and over again, my kunai reappeared and I let another off, helping Elwin as much as I could with ranged attacks.

Four harpies were hit with Ariel’s quick correction of our aim, losing their flight trajectory and falling into the arena as the ones still in the air above us began their descent upon us.

I locked eyes with one as it came directly down the middle of their grouping and snarled.

“Let’s fucking go.”

Grabbing the hilt of my kunai, I shoved it into the upper chest of the creature as it crashed into me, knocking me to the ground. I used my momentum to roll on top of the harpy, shoving my knife deeper with a scream until it finally stopped moving. Being this close to the creature, I felt something open within me, reacting to them.

They were evil. I felt like a sticky oil covered my body just by touching one, their energy wrapping around me as long as I maintained contact.

“Feed on them!” I cried out, sensing the darkness within them. Without souls around to feed us, my mates and I had all been running on low energy reserves for our powers, and feeding on all of these souls at once would be a huge boost for us. There had to be nearly fifty of them in total.

Instantly, my mates shifted into their monstrous forms, maintaining their grips on their weapons with one of their multiple hands as they used the others to defend against and grab the harpies.

I jumped to my feet, letting my other kunai fly off my rope as I swung it at the harpy flying directly with its massive talons extended toward Elwin’s glowing green core.

While I preferred my monsters to be in this form for our fight—because they would be harder to physically harm being mostly made out of shadows—their colorful hearts were a beacon practically begging for the harpies to pluck them out of their chests.

The beast dropped to the ground, and I ran toward Elwin as I called forth a new weapon for him. I let go of my mental hold on his bow, feeling my mind almost at its limit for what I could hold in a solidified state. Instantly, a broadsword appeared in my hand as I yelled for him. “Catch!”

Without hesitating, one of his arms reached out to snatch the hilt just in time to drop to the ground, avoiding another harpy as his hand lunged backward to stab a harpy coming up behind him.

My breath was knocked from my lungs, and my eardrum felt like it shattered as a screech sounded right next to my ear. I hit the arena floor hard, unable to move my arms with the sudden weight of one of the creatures bearing down on me.

White feathers appeared above us, and with a battle cry that had to be heard for miles away, Ariel grabbed the harpy by its wings and yanked it off me. She kicked her foot into its back, cracking the harpy’s wings as she pulled back on them.

I didn’t have a second to soak in her brutality as a new set of claws dug into my arm, yanking me up harshly. My shoulder felt like it was being torn from its socket as my feet left the ground. A scream tore from my lungs as I watched the ground move away with each beat of the beast’s massive wingspan. My kunai’s rope was tangled around me, so I let go of my hold on it when I failed to get a grip on one end.

Pain overwhelmed me at the agony searing through my shoulder as I hung limply from the harpy’s taloned grip, but I forced the hand that was ensnared in the harpy’s grasp to call forth my power. I pictured purple flames in my palm before pushing the energy into the harpy until the flames consumed the beast in a roaring inferno.

My own power was fed as it tore through the harpy’s vile darkness, draining the beast completely.

Its grip on me loosened, and then I was falling through the air, feeling the wind whipping at my face as the ground quickly approached.

“Alexandra!” Kylo roared, drawing my eyes to his form breaking free from the beasts surrounding him to run after me, as if he could fly and grab me in time.

Closing my eyes, I imagined the foam pits gymnasts fell into and willed one to appear beneath me to break my fall. A smile stretched across my face as I opened my eyes and saw it waiting for me on the arena floor beneath my flight path.

But talons ripped into my skin as I was snatched from my free fall, the tips digging into my ankle so hard I was pretty sure they were going to pierce the bone as I was jerked back into the air. This time, when I looked at my mates, it was to see that all of the harpies were leaving the battle below and flying toward me, like they now had their prize.

Ariel tried to launch off the ground after me, but it looked as if only one of her wings was able to move. With a cry, she fell back to the ground, agony on her face as she watched me being carried further away from them.

I could easily see the despair and the pain she was experiencing as she fell to her knees and screamed for me. The sound of her scream spurred me into action, reminding me that she had taught me so damn much in the short amount of time we had trained together. I had to believe in myself to get out of this.

I called forth my powers with my good arm once more, but just as I was about to chuck it at the harpy holding me, a blow was dealt to my head. My head swam, and I felt my consciousness begin to fade.

Damnit! No!

As my eyes began to close, the last thing I saw was all three of my monsters running after me, but it was useless. They couldn't fly, and the clouds wouldn't extend forever for them to run on. In my heart, I took comfort from the

knowledge that they wouldn't let that stop them from finding me.

Nothing in this world could keep us apart. I dared anyone to try.

Chapter 18

“ALEXANDRA! YOU HAVE TO OPEN YOUR EYES AND TELL ME what’s going on.”

Pandora’s frantic voice snapped my focus to attention, and I gasped a huge lungful of air as I sat up and looked around for any sign of the harpies. My chest deflated when I took in the sight of the garden surrounding the manor, remembering that this place wasn’t my reality.

Reality was the fact that I’d been taken by those damn birds and knocked out to prevent me from fighting back again.

“Fuck!” I screamed, hitting my fists in the dirt beneath me. “I have to wake up. I have to get back to my body!”

Fingers gripped my chin, forcing me to look into Pandora’s blue eyes as her lips thinned. Her chest heaved as she took a deep breath before calmly demanding, “Tell me what happened. Now.”

Something about her ability to remain calm and focused helped calm me, my heart slowing down as I sharpened my focus alongside hers. I swallowed past the anger at my situation clogging my throat and nodded at her.

“We were training with an archangel when, all of a sudden, harpies attacked us.” She let out a hiss, but I pushed on. “They ruined her wings so she couldn’t fly and then separated me from the group, carrying me off after knocking me out so I couldn’t use my powers on them.”

Saying it out loud made the fact click for me that this absolutely was not a random attack. The harpies clearly knew

exactly what to do going into their aerial assault. They targeted Ariel off the bat, knowing she was the only one who could fly amongst us. Then, after noticing my power and how it took out the first of them to attempt to take me, they knocked me out. They'd come to take me to whoever controlled them.

"Zeus," we breathed out at the same time.

"That piece of shit," Pandora seethed before straightening to her feet.

Her fists curled at her side as she closed her eyes and drew a few more deep breaths. When her eyes opened once more, she held out a hand for me. I took it, climbing to my feet alongside her as my stomach churned.

"Do you think the curses will be with them?"

Her eyes seemed unfocused as she glanced around, pondering my question.

"They absolutely could be, but there's something that has been on a constant wheel in my brain ever since we were released from the box."

When she paused, I had to refrain from shaking her and demanding she continue. She was quiet for a breath too long, but relief washed through me as she continued finally. The tension building within me with each moment of her silence faded as she spoke, "The only being who knew where the box was was Zeus. So who found the box and opened it? It had to be someone he forced to open it, right?"

My brow wrinkled as I tried to follow her train of thought. I could feel a tight frown forming on my face before I asked, "But why would Zeus want to release me from the box? Better yet, why did Zeus even create me as a curse to begin with if I could be used for good to combat evil?"

I began to pace, thinking about how the curses, Zeus, and Helen were working together. When I broke it down into what their deal might be, and the reasons they might all need each other, things began to become a bit more clear to me.

Without me being released, Zeus and Helen wouldn't have had any sway over the curses to spread Hellenism for them.

The curses likely would have told them to get fucked. But with me being released, suddenly there was a problem that Zeus and Helen could offer to help solve.

If that assumption was correct, why would the curses continue to visit us at DIA, taunting us almost? They hadn't harmed us, yet. Why wouldn't they just kill me and get it over with?

Pandora's words upon leaving her last time came back to me.

"Hope isn't inherently good or bad. It's what you do with it," I murmured, more puzzle pieces coming together. My eyes snapped to Pandora. "Do you think the curses wanted to sway me to their side, maybe to use hope to feed their bad emotions? They had an opportunity to kill me but didn't."

She shook her head, strands of her dark hair shifting around her face. "If they wanted you on their side, why would they even take the deal with Zeus and Helen in the first place? Why would they need their assistance to kill you?"

The words fell from my mouth before I could even process them myself. "As a fail safe in case I didn't turn to their side."

A deranged laugh fell from her lips with the revelation, her eyes wide as she shook her head in seeming disbelief. "If that's the case, there's a dangerous game of cat and mouse going on between the curses and the gods. Because with how often Helen was around you at the academy, she had the opportunity to kill you as well but all she did was act intimidating."

That was the truth, and it made me suddenly feel a hell of a lot better at the thought of being taken to Zeus and Helen right now. She hadn't made a move because without me alive, they had no sway over the curses. Without the curses to spread Hellenism as they warped people's emotions, the gods would slowly die.

Shit. I was apparently caught between two sides trying to double cross each other. Knowing each side's motivation and end game gave me the true power in the end.

I could either turn them against each other by exposing that Zeus released me to use the curses with no actual intention of killing me to hold up his end of their agreement. Or I could tell Zeus that in my twenty-one years on earth, I'd never heard even the faintest whisper of Hellenism. The curses absolutely weren't holding up that side of the agreement either.

If I was lucky and smart, I could turn their focus away from me and instead to a war with each other.

Pandora grabbed my hands suddenly, voice frantic as she demanded, "Do not let Zeus know that you know all of this. All that will is show him that your life isn't worth anything to him, especially if he thinks you can't be used as a pawn in his plans any longer. He could kill you out of anger and spite, especially if he discovers that the curses' intention is to flip you to give them more power."

My previous, short-lived glee at figuring out how to pit them against each other was murdered without forethought.

Frustration coiled through me, made worse by the tell-tale signal that I was waking up with the world around me going fuzzy. I let out a scream, letting loose all my anger before Pandora grabbed my face with her palms, placing our foreheads together.

"Alexandra, listen to me! You were born to do this. If anyone can figure it out, it's you. Trust in yourself."

Her words rang through my head over and over again as pain began to set in and the dream-like world she inhabited rushed away.

Ariel's and Pandora's messages were one in the same. Finally, after hearing it from multiple sources time and again, it had finally gotten through my thick skull and jaded heart.

They were right. I could do this.

As I gradually regained consciousness, the world around me began to take shape. My senses slowly awakened, and I became aware of a soft, diffused light filtering through my closed eyelids. With a gentle flutter, I opened my eyes, blinking against the newfound brightness. As my vision

adjusted, I found myself in an opulent white room, faced with a surreal blend of luxury and elegance.

The room seemed to stretch endlessly, its walls adorned with intricate moldings that exuded a sense of grandeur. The white color scheme dominated everything, from the walls to the furniture, creating an atmosphere of purity and tranquility. The pristine marble floor beneath me was cool to the touch as I pushed from the bed I laid in and let my feet touch the ground.

All of my aches returned in a rush, and I had to sit back down on the edge of the bed to catch my breath, coaching myself through the pain. Using my right arm to push off of the bed was an awful idea, but I'd briefly forgotten that the damn harpy had used my arm to drag me around.

As I inhaled deeply, my ribs twinged with both old and new pain. For the first time, I found myself wishing I had just let Raph heal me completely. At least then I wouldn't feel quite as beat up as I currently did in the home of our enemy.

Glancing briefly around, I noticed that there wasn't even the slightest accent of gold present. I was the only source of color in this cold, stifling white room. Without a doubt, this room served as what I was sure was my new prison cell. Give it some padded walls, though, and it would feel much closer to fitting the whole solitary confinement vibe.

The air carried a faint aroma, a delicate blend of floral notes that seemed to emanate from unseen sources. As I used my left arm to push myself back to my feet, I realized that my footsteps were muffled by a luxurious and fluffy, white rug that covered parts of the floor. The soft rug offered a sense of false comfort with each step I took. Ignoring the throbbing pain in my ankle and refusing to look at the damage I knew I would find there from the claws, I limped around the room.

In one corner, I found an intricately designed writing desk adorned with antique items like a quill, an inkwell, and parchment. A part of my soul longed to use them, to fall back into my world with my monsters before our lives were all on the line.

Dragging my gaze away from the desk, I continued my inspection of the room to see if there was anything else that could be of use to me in here. I hadn't successfully used ink to create a world since pulling my monsters to real life, but I would absolutely try to use those items to pull them back into that theoretical world if it meant communicating with them and letting them know where I was. I was sure it was obvious who took me, but if I could give them details of what I saw around this prison, maybe the information could help pinpoint my location.

Speaking of, I spun around with a frown, noticing the lack of windows. I would have to pay careful attention to my surroundings if I had the chance to get out of this room.

A large mirror framed with intricate silver leaves caught my attention, reflecting back a disheveled version of myself still dressed in the clothes I wore for training. A nasty bruise was beginning to take shape on my temple toward my left eye, serving as a lovely reminder that I failed to fight back in time and was knocked out. My hair was an absolute mess of tangles, having been blown through the wind for who knows how long.

While I was still absorbing the state of my body, a soft creaking sound drew my attention toward the entrance. The door opened slowly, revealing a young woman I'd definitely never met before. She entered with a tentative step, her posture slightly hunched, as if she carried a blend of shyness and uncertainty around with her.

Her attire mirrored the elegance of the room, a uniform that blended seamlessly with the theme here. She wore a pristine white dress with delicate lace accents, and her hair was neatly pulled back into a simple bun. Her eyes, downcast and hesitant, held a gentle warmth within them as they darted up for a second to meet mine before falling back to the floor.

"I've come with refreshments while your bath is prepared."

With a tray laden with a porcelain teapot and cups in her hands, she moved softly across the room. Her footsteps were

light on the plush carpet, as if she aimed to be as unobtrusive as possible. Each movement was careful and deliberate, an apparent portrayal of her reserved nature, but I wouldn't let down my guard because she seemed meek.

This could be the perfect ploy, tricking me into trusting a kind person who was likely forced into servitude here. My bleeding heart would want to take any person forced into servitude away from this place when I got out of here. And I was certain I would be rewarded with a knife in my back for my sympathy.

Upon reaching a small table, she gently sat the tray down, her fingers gliding gracefully over the delicate china. She spared a quick, furtive glance in my direction before lowering her gaze as my eyes narrowed on her.

As she began to pour the tea, her hands trembled slightly. Finally, I spoke up. "Why are you shaking? Here to poison me with tea? Don't have the heart to kill me, but you haven't been given a choice in the matter?"

The maid froze mid-pour, her delicate hand trembling even more as she held the teapot above the cup. Her eyes widened, and a mixture of shock and hurt flashed across her face. The accusation had clearly caught her off guard, and her shy demeanor seemed to crumble, replaced instead with a profound vulnerability.

"I...I would never..." Her voice quivered as she stammered, her gaze now fixed on the tea she was pouring. Her eyes welled with tears, her distress palpable.

I let out a soft growl of annoyance as doubt clogged my mind. What the hell was her angle here?

Was she just doing her job so she wasn't punished, and here I was making it harder on the poor soul?

A familiar voice filled the air, making my hackles rise. I knew her intentions, and I wanted absolutely nothing to do with her.

"Well, well, well," Helen purred as she leaned against the open doorway. "Leave it to the girl who came from nothing to

traumatize the poor help, who was sent to simply alleviate your hunger pangs. Maybe you aren't as pure and kind as you thought you were, Alexandra."

I pasted on a fake grin, as if I was greeting an old friend, as I noted the way terror filled the maid's face. She froze in place at the sound of Helen's voice. Taking a few steps forward and attempting to hide my pain, I put myself between the maid and our new guest.

"Can you really blame me for thinking you have a plan to kill me, Helen?" I asked nonchalantly, as if I wasn't perturbed by her presence one bit. Holding my hand up to inspect my dirty nails, I sighed before continuing, "I mean really, you've hated me from the moment you saw me at DIA. Is it my beauty you're jealous of or just the fact that I have three mates who would rather die than be touched by you?"

The maid gasped, most likely from shock, and I smiled. Clearly, no one here ever gave Helen shit, but I was more than happy to be the first guest to do so.

Chapter 19

I HAD EXPECTED MY WORDS TO GOAD HELEN, POTENTIALLY forcing her to lose her composure, but she simply let out a huff and turned on her heel. With one more glance over her shoulder, she raised a single brow at me and smirked. “That sure is a lot of bite coming from a girl whose life will be over tomorrow. Enjoy your last night in the living world. Maria here will get you everything you need.”

I didn’t allow an ounce of the panic that was pooling within me to show on my face, choosing to keep my head held high and my shoulders pulled back as she watched me. I wouldn’t give her the damn satisfaction of seeing my fear.

As soon as she turned and closed the door behind her, a soft click of a latch being put in place sounded. Oddly enough, it made me feel a hell of a lot safer to have whoever else was in this house locked out of this room.

All of my false bravado seeped out of me as I slunk into one of the large arm chairs, not caring that Maria was still in the room with me. The only thing on my mind was that Helen said my life would be forfeit the next day.

Could this be them finally making good on their promise to the curses to get rid of me? Or was this exactly what Pandora was worried about? Could Zeus be planning to dispose of me just to spite the curses?

“Fuck,” I breathed out, my head pounding as my own questions and ponderings confused me.

It seemed like every time I thought I was getting answers and finally understanding the situation, everything fell apart

beneath me.

“I...I’ve never seen anyone stand up to her before.”

I huffed out a breath and shook my head as I stared at the door. My hopes of being let out of here with enough time to find a way to relay the information on my surroundings to my guys were suddenly doused. “It doesn’t matter,” I muttered.

“It does. It matters to me.”

Her voice was louder and stronger now, surprising me. I turned to face her as she held out a cup of steaming tea for me. I took it, still unsure if I was going to drink it, but she seemed to sense my trepidation and poured one for herself before taking a seat near me.

She took a sip, and I decided to wait to see if she had any adverse effects from that. I opted to question her for the time being. “Why does it matter to you, Maria?”

Her brown eyes held kindness within them as she smiled softly at me, faint wrinkle lines appearing as she did. “I have been a captive here for the last five years. After seeing the amount of bodies that piled up around us with orders to clean them up and dispose of them, I had lost faith that someone could free those of us held captive here.”

A cold chuckle escaped me as I rebutted, “Did you not hear that I’m to join that pile of bodies tomorrow?”

A strength and confidence seemed to fill Maria’s body then, and she straightened her back as she stared me down. “You have a fire within you that no one else I’ve seen here has had. Not once has someone tried to fight back. I’m ashamed to admit that I don’t even dare *dreaming* about fighting them to escape out of fear of any lurking, meddling gods who might give me away.”

I found myself wanting to know how she came to be here, whether or not she was a mortal. I wanted to know how many people there were here in a similar position to her own. But what did it matter if I wouldn’t be around long enough to help them? Even if I wanted to try to help them tonight, I would

probably just get them all killed in some half-assed attempt at escape.

No. I wouldn't do that to them.

Sorrow filled my chest as my eyes fell to the floor, unable to meet her eyes as I admitted, "I can't help you. I can't help any of you. I'm sorry."

A heavy sigh fell from her lips, and a guilt unlike anything else I've ever experienced overcame me as she whispered, "I should have known better than to hope. That's my fault—you have nothing to be sorry for. I'm going to the attached bathing chamber to prepare it for you. Please enjoy the tea."

She quickly placed her own cup back on the table and hustled off to a partially hidden panel in the corner of the room that I hadn't noticed. With a gentle press on it, a door clicked open for her to pass through.

With her gone, I let out a groan in my solitude, smothering my face with my palms.

Hope...I'd inspired hope within her. And then just as quickly as I'd done that, I snatched it back away from her.

Fuck, I was a mess. Placing my hands in my lap, I forced myself to close my eyes and take a deep breath.

After a few minutes, I followed Maria into another space equally as lavish and grand. The transition was like stepping into a different world, though. The room was a Greek bathing chamber, adorned with intricate marble carvings, elegant columns, and an air of serene tranquility.

A large, sunken pool dominated the center of the chamber, its waters shimmering invitingly under the soft illumination of the lit candles placed all around the room.

Maria had clearly been very busy lighting all of these and getting the water ready. Perfumed oils floated on the water's surface, carrying with it the faint scent of delicate flowers. A small table stood nearby, holding an array of fragrant soaps and towels.

She turned toward me with a hesitant yet gentle expression, her eyes reflecting an empathy and understanding of whatever mental state I'd found myself in. "Would you like me to help you bathe?" she offered softly.

I looked at her, feeling a mixture of gratitude for her kindness and a deep-seated desire to be alone right now as I tried to work through my feelings about this situation I found myself in. The weight of my circumstances pressed down on me, and the opulence of my surroundings suddenly felt suffocating. I wanted to break free from the gilded cage I was held in, but I didn't know how.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I managed a faint smile and declined her offer. "Thank you, but I'll do this on my own."

She inclined her head. "Of course. If you need anything, just call out for me. Before you get in, I wanted to let you know that I left a healing tonic for you on the table. When they first brought you in and assigned me to your room, I noted your injuries and had one prepared. Just please pretend to still be in a bit of pain if any of the gods are around you—they would punish me for finding a way to subvert their orders and ease your suffering."

As she left the room, a heavy silence settled around me, punctuated only by the sound of water gently lapping against the sides of the pool. Alone in the solitude I'd just craved, my vulnerability washed over me like a tidal wave.

Maria had risked much by having the tonic prepared for me before even meeting me. All she'd known was that I was hurt and a prisoner to be looked over, and yet she'd still done that for me.

After crossing the room and drinking the tonic, I undressed and stepped into the warm water. I sank into its depths, the fragrant oils enveloping me in their embrace. With each passing moment, the water offered a momentary respite, a brief escape from the overwhelming emotions that threatened to consume me as my aches and pains slowly receded.

How could I turn my back on helping Maria and the others imprisoned here? If she was willing to risk the ire of the gods by giving me that tonic, perhaps she was willing to risk it all for the chance at an escape.

My heart settled on the desire to not only free myself, but free all those held captive here too. As if getting myself out of this mess wasn't going to be hard enough, who knows how many other lives I was vowing to help now.

I closed my eyes, allowing myself to fully submerge in the warmth around me, if only for a moment. Being beneath the water allowed me to feel like I was in a cocoon of safety, where only myself and the water existed together in harmony.

I thought of all the women I had met who would never falter in the face of their possible death.

Alora.

Alina.

Ama.

Ariel.

A smile tugged at my lips as I realized we all had 'A' names. Maybe there was something that came with that letter—a streak of stubbornness and the gift of never giving up.

Each woman had taught me so much about myself, inspiring me to be better. To be more vulnerable, to believe in myself. If any of them were here right now, they'd be breathing down my neck to stand up and fight. To never bow or risk being broken.

Strong women forge their own paths.

Ama's words left me searching deep within myself for the fire I needed to get through this, and it led me back to my core power coiling within me. I was faced with the purple and white ball Ariel helped me mix together while completing my initial grounding work with her.

I sat with my memories for a bit longer before finally emerging from the depths.

A renewed sense of determination coursed through my veins. The warm waters had not only washed away the physical residue but some of the emotional weight that had been pressing down on me as well. As I stepped out of the chamber with a towel wrapped around me, I realized that the marble beneath my feet felt cool and refreshing, a stark juxtaposition of the heat and steam I'd just been enveloped in. I was pleased to find the pain in my ankle already fading and the throbbing, constant ache in my shoulder lessening.

Upon stepping back into the main room, I was met with a smile from Maria.

She stood near the same table that held our tea, which now also held a selection of sandwiches, fruits, and a delicate assortment of pastries.

“I thought you might be hungry,” she said softly, her voice a gentle reminder of the kindness that resided within her. “If you want me to sample anything before you eat it to ensure it’s not poisoned, I can do that.”

I nodded gratefully, appreciating her effort to make me feel at ease despite being stuck in a place where I was set to die. The sandwiches looked inviting, like a promise of sustenance in both physical and emotional senses.

As I began to eat, not asking her to sample anything after deciding I did trust her, I thought of how to connect to my mates. Could I use the paper and pull them into the place we used to create stories together within Pandora’s box? It was the only option that came to mind, and I knew I had to give it a shot.

Finishing my meal, I looked at Maria, my heart filled with a renewed determination. I chewed my lip for a short moment before finally asking, “Would you be willing to help me with something?”

She met my gaze, her expression a mix between curiosity and a readiness to assist. “Of course, if I can.”

I took a deep breath, the moment feeling both surreal and crucial. “I have a connection with someone—a soulmate. I

believe I can use my powers to reach out to them to communicate, but I'll need your help to keep watch while I'm trapped within that world. I don't want to leave myself exposed."

She nodded, her understanding evident. "I'll do whatever I can to assist."

I watched as hope began to fill her again, and I saw an overwhelming sense of warmth and light emanating from her now that I knew what to look for.

With her calming presence in the room, I settled at the desk. After dipping the quill in the ink, I closed my eyes like I would when I wrote in my journal and focused my thoughts on the three souls who had always been a beacon of strength for me. I let the memories of our shared moments fill my mind, the bond between us growing stronger with each heartbeat.

"Please," I whispered, almost like a prayer, unsure of who was listening.

My hand began to move, writing out a scene in which I pulled all three of them into my room here. As I reached out with my powers, a sense of connection enveloped me. It was as if a thread of energy extended beyond the confines of the walls around me, and I felt myself falling fully into the alternate world.

"Alexandra!"

Elwin's voice made me want to cry in elation, but as I looked around and noticed Kylo and Lucien missing, I asked, "Where are they? Are they okay?"

Fear roared up from my stomach to latch around my heart like a vice grip.

He pulled me to him, holding me tightly and murmuring over and over, "They're okay. Breathe."

It took a few moments of hearing those words repeatedly to calm the voices in my head telling me the harpies had killed them.

“Okay,” I breathed out as I pulled back to look up at him. “Is this really you? How did I manage to bridge the connection between us? I couldn’t do it in the library when we tried before.”

He grinned before pressing a long kiss to my forehead.

“I’ve been thinking about that ever since we tried it. Initially, we thought you couldn’t do it because we are physical beings now. While that is true, what I realize now is that you can’t pull the physical bodies in, but we can still connect our consciousness this way. I took a sleeping potion that Zer flew to get for me when we got back to the house and told them what happened.”

A lead weight sank in my stomach at the mention of an archangel.

“Ariel,” I rushed to say, “is she okay? She looked like she was in bad shape.”

“Yes. Raph healed her to the best of his abilities, but her wing will need a bit of time to regain its full function. Apparently, the archangels’ healing is the most effective on non-divine beings. But enough about us. Where are you, Alexandra?”

I let out a heavy sigh and gestured at the room around us. “This is the only bit of the place I’m being kept that I’ve seen. Helen already paid me a visit, so I’m definitely with her, and I assume Zeus is lurking somewhere nearby.”

His face contorted to one of confusion. “Why are they keeping you in such a nice room? Have you been able to sense the curses at all?”

“No I haven’t been able to sense the curses,” I began before pausing to figure out how to drop the bomb about the plans Helen had for me here. “Things have escalated a bit here, though. Pandora and I were able to discuss the curses and the gods for a while. While we thought we had an idea of how I could ensure I lived by revealing that I knew my value to both parties, it turns out Helen and Zeus have already made up their mind on what to do with me.”

Oddly enough, I said the last bit with a little too much enthusiasm as I tried to soften the blow, making Elwin stare at me like I was happy about what I had learned. And maybe that I suddenly had five heads too.

He deadpanned, brow arched. “And what’s that?”

I grimaced before murmuring, “Kill me tomorrow.”

Chapter 20

ELWIN'S BRIGHT GREEN EYES HELD A CAPTIVATING INTENSITY that could light up even the darkest of moments. However, the storm of emotions brewing within their depths only added to the ominous energy of our situation.

His brow furrowed as disbelief and anger contended for dominance on his expressive face. The corners of his lips tightened, revealing the depth of his distress as I watched him attempt to process my words. A clenched jaw was the only warning I got before he yelled, "Why the hell didn't you tell me that to begin with, Alexandra? Asking about all of our well-being is a waste of the precious little time we have to fix this!"

I flinched, feeling his ire for the very first time leaving me somewhere between shocked and alarmed. In my heart, I knew he was reacting to his fear for me and wasn't truly mad at me. He was mad that he didn't have any solutions. The man who always had an idea, who could put all the pieces together of a situation before anyone else, didn't have a foot to stand on this time, and he was furious.

"Elwin..." I started, lifting to a hand to rest on his chest, but he yanked away from me, choosing to pace back and forth.

He'd never retreated from my touch before, and it stung.

His fists clenched and unclenched, a mixture of frustration and helplessness radiating from him. Each step he took echoed the rhythm of his racing thoughts, mirroring the thunderous storm that raged both within and around us.

Though his anger wasn't directed at me, I couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness for causing him this pain. His love for me was evident in the way he struggled to find a solution, his mind racing through possibilities as his green eyes desperately searched the ground as he tried to puzzle out an escape from the cruel fate that Zeus had ordered.

Finally, he came to a halt. As he lifted his head, my heart shattered as I watched the pools of tears reflecting back at me in his eyes begin to stream down his face.

His voice was thick with heavy emotion, breaking as he said, "Alexandra...I-I don't know what to do. We need more time. The archangels know where these gods reside, but they have to wait for clearance from the Thrones to enter that domain without starting a war. If we fly into there tonight before getting clearance, anyone there is allowed to kill us on the spot. Rag said he expects the clearance to come in the morning."

The unspoken words hung in the air between us: we didn't know how much time I had tomorrow.

I closed the gulf between our bodies, wrapping my arms around him as I pressed my face against his chest. "Don't risk that, Elwin," I whispered against his shirt. "I'll work on buying as much time for myself as I can tomorrow. Promise me none of you will come tonight."

His voice deepened as he growled. "You can't ask that of us, love. You can't expect us to wait around and do nothing. We have to come to you tonight."

I pulled back, steel filling my spine as I stared into his eyes. His own determination reflected back at me, leaving me feeling like we were in a battle for dominance right now.

"I have nothing to live for if you three are killed!" I yelled, throwing my hands in the air. "If you die tonight, what stops me from just handing myself to Zeus on a silver platter tomorrow? My life was worthless before I had you three, and I can't go back to that! I can't!"

His voice rose to match my own as he loomed over me, biting back, “And what the hell do you think our lives would be like without you, Alexandra? Sunshine and rainbows as we happily think of the few memories we were able to make together in the short time we got?”

My lip curled in a quiet snarl at the sound of the sarcasm dripping from his tone. I wasn’t joking around.

His hands were on my face suddenly, gripping me tightly as he swooped down.

Amidst the turmoil of impending doom, his lips met mine with a fervor that spoke of urgency and love beyond measure. As our mouths came together, it felt as if time froze. The world around us faded into insignificance. His kiss was a bittersweet fusion of desperation and tenderness, a passionate embrace that conveyed our unwavering commitment to see each other on the other side of this.

The thought that this could be our last kiss left me feeling like someone had punched me in the chest, cracking the cavity wide open. The thought that this could be the last time we held each other flitted through my mind.

No. It couldn’t be.

“I won’t give up,” I bit out between kisses, my eyes burning from the tears welling in them now. “I will give them hell, Elwin, as long as you don’t come tonight.”

The taste of salt on our lips mirrored the bitter reality of our circumstances, though the fervent press of his mouth against mine spoke of a love that defied the constraints of time and fate. In this life and the next, what remained true, was that all of our souls were fated to be one.

As his lips moved against mine, every brush, every press, carried the weight of his love, his longing, and his heartache.

“I love you, Alexandra.”

His fingers moved to tangle into my hair as all the breath was stolen from my lungs with his deepening kiss.

I don't know how long we lost ourselves in each other's embrace or when the tears had finally dried. However, when I heard Maria calling my name very forcefully, with a note of fear in her tone, I knew our time together in this ink and paper world had to come to an end.

ALEXANDRA! WAKE UP, NOW!

I broke our kiss, quickly explaining, "I'm going to be pulled from this world any second. The person keeping an eye on me while I called for you is demanding that I wake up, and she wouldn't do that if it wasn't dire."

His eyes flashed with fear once more before leaning forward to rest his forehead against mine. "We will come for you tomorrow, Alexandra. Give them absolute hell until then, love."

My whispered promise to do exactly that was ripped from me as I slammed back into my full consciousness, staring at the parchment full of smeared ink beneath me.

All at once, the sickening feeling in my stomach that a curse was nearby pressed into me. I rushed to my feet, whirling around and shoving a wide-eyed Maria behind me as I took in what I knew to be the final curse I'd yet to meet. Casus.

A shiver immediately coursed through my spine, signaling the presence of something downright sinister in my presence. While Zora and Elias had given off an eerie and disturbing aura, there was just something...different about Casus.

His entire being emanated an aura of malevolence that seemed to permeate the very air I breathed.

I felt Maria shaking behind me as she grabbed my hand and squeezed.

His long white hair cascaded over his shoulders like a frozen waterfall, offering an eerie contrast against the shadows that clung to the corners of the room around him. Those pure black eyes, devoid of any discernible emotion, fixed upon me with an intensity that sent a chill down my spine. His face, both delicate in features and sharp with angles that defied

human beauty, was like a masterpiece carved from ice and darkness.

“So,” his deep voice echoed as he took steps toward us, “you are hope personified.”

I didn’t let my voice shake as I answered, “That would be me.”

I could feel his gaze dissecting my every thought as he prowled closer, his full black suit standing out starkly amongst all the white of this room.

“It seems we have much to talk about and not a lot of time to do so,” he surmised as he took a seat in one of the chairs in the middle of the room. Gesturing to the other, he demanded, “Sit.”

“I’ll sit,” I countered, tugging Maria behind me as I got closer before pushing her away and toward the door, “but you won’t touch her. She leaves here unharmed.”

His eyes settled on Maria for a brief moment as she shook, barely able to pull the key for the door from wherever she kept it in her dress.

“She is of no use to me. She lacks all of the traits I seek out. She may go,” he agreed, dismissing her easily.

If he was the opposite of Kylo, he fed upon greed, envy and pride. If I had to place a bet on it, I’d wager my life he out-powered the other two curses by a substantial amount.

I felt Maria’s gaze on me as I sat, lingering heavily on me as she pulled the door open. There was no sense in me making a run for it with her. It would only get us in a fight and draw attention from the gods, putting all of our lives in further jeopardy.

I refused to meet her heavy stare as I said, “Goodnight, Maria. I’ll see you bright and early in the morning.”

Casus’ eyes met mine as she shut the door behind her, turning the lock into place.

There went my idea of trying to get out of here and searching for an escape route tonight. Just fucking great.

“I’ve come here to offer you a solution to your problems,” he began, crossing one leg over the other before continuing. “It seems the idiot Zeus has finally deduced after twenty-one years that we have no desire to spread the ideology of Hellenism through Ordinarius. The power in this system is waning to dangerously low levels, and soon enough, we won’t have to fear them at all.”

I already knew all of this, so I kept my mouth shut, wanting to see what else he had to say. I didn’t want him to have even an iota of an idea of just how much I knew.

“Smart girl,” he praised my silence, coldly chuckling in a way that made my skin crawl. “Never let your enemy know your cards.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him to get fucked and never call me a girl again. I was a woman, and I was the one thing in our world that could take him down. But to show him that he angered me would show him exactly what buttons to press moving forward, so I kept my lips shut. I leaned back in my chair, like I wasn’t concerned by him in the slightest.

“Tomorrow, Zeus has called for our appearance in front of him, to let us know the new terms of our agreement since we haven’t exactly followed through on our end of the deal. We knew you fled to this realm, making it easy to deduce that he’d finally gotten you in his grasp.”

My eyes narrowed as Casus smirked. “We also know he’s going to use you, likely threatening to keep you as a weapon against us unless we truly begin to serve their needs. We just arrived tonight, and I cannot shroud my presence from anyone watching this room for much longer, so we need to make this quick. I know he has guards and underlings watching us all like hawks.”

Well that was an interesting take. Did I pop his bubble and let him know Zeus actually planned to kill me according to Helen? Or did I keep that tidbit to myself?

Deciding to test the waters, I asked, “And what is the solution to that problem for me?”

He uncrossed his legs then, leaning forward with his hands clasped between them. “Tomorrow, we will invoke an ancient spell that will bind the four of our powers together. You should be able to use our power of transporting through the shadows in all of the different realms then. Zeus would never be able to hold you hostage again. The four of us could rise in power, wealth, and status back in Ordinarius, bending the humans to our will.”

I was under no misguided notion that his words actually held any truth to them. He was only presenting this to me with the guise that it all worked out in my favor alone. There was something in it for him. With the power disparity I sensed between the three of them and Pandora’s words about the curses consuming each other in the box the first time she entered it, I had a feeling such a binding would allow him the opportunity to consume all of us.

Feigning slight interest, but not enough to appear desperate, I countered with a question, “Would I be able to bring my mates with me? They would not be allowed to be harmed.”

His eyes sparked at my question, and I immediately knew he would promise me the moon from the night sky itself to get me to agree with his plan.

“Of course. You’d be allowed to live and create a life wherever you wanted in Ordinarius. None of us need to intervene in each other’s lives once we’re back.”

He’d literally just offered for us to subjugate the humans together, so how exactly would we not need to intervene in each other’s lives? He really must have thought I wasn’t very bright.

I pinched my brow together as I gave a false performance of mulling it over.

“Well, I was already considering joining you all after I graduated from Dark Imaginarium Academy and went back to Ordinarius, but Zora and Elias pissed me the hell off with our encounters. Would they really leave me and mine be?”

Gods, he was eating the shit up that I was delivering to him on a silver platter. He was truly blinded by his own curse of greed and power.

He eagerly nodded his head. “Yes, they obey me, and I will keep them in line for you.”

My lips pinched into a tight line as I nodded. “Okay, let’s do it, but let’s make Zeus pay for thinking that he could control any of us to begin with.”

Casus gasped sharply at the bloodlust I was allowing myself to display, and I knew I had him.

My skin pebbled in response to the laugh tore from him then.

“You know, I think I might like you after all, hope,” he announced as he pushed from the chair and ambled to his feet. “Zora is finishing the preparations now, but a key factor of the spell is the blood of a sacrifice. I suppose we can use Zeus, then?”

Holy shit. They really thought they could take down a god.

“While I really do love that idea,” I purred, standing to my feet in front of him, “and forgive me for my lack of knowledge as I’m not as seasoned as you, but isn’t he immortal? How will we sacrifice him without being able to kill him?”

With a roll of his eyes, he summoned shadows around him, allowing them to curl around his form. “You really think I would come to this realm without a way to kill a god? I’m wounded, baby curse. I’ll see you at the meeting tomorrow.”

And just like that, he was gone, leaving me wondering what the fuck I’d just agreed to do in order to buy myself more time tomorrow.

I sent a plea to the universe.

Please let my mates get here in time tomorrow.

I crawled into the bed, fear and uncertainty warring with my mind for hours, unable to sleep as I thought of all the countless ways this could go wrong. Not once did I come up

with a scenario in which this went well for me if my monsters didn't show up before I sealed my fate to the other curses.

I tried summoning every weapon I could think of to break through the walls of my room in my time of desperation. They all just bounced off of them, like the magic imbued in the weapons was nullified here.

I tried to blast my raw power through the room and was met with the sight of it simply dissipating as it passed over everything around me.

My energy reserves dwindled quickly, and I made the tough decision to stop making escape attempts, knowing I needed to keep some of my energy if I hoped to fight tomorrow morning.

When I finally closed my eyes, my thoughts turned to my monsters. I pleaded with them mentally, as if they could actually hear me.

Please don't come for me tonight. Trust me to handle this until you can get here safely.

What I said to Elwin had been the complete truth: if they were killed, there would be nothing left for me to fight for.

Chapter 21

A GENTLE SHAKE HAD MY EYES FLYING OPEN. MY BODY instinctively jerked away from whoever was touching me.

“Ms. Alexandra, it’s just me!” Maria gently cooed, and I blinked rapidly until my eyes focused on her.

She held her hands up, backing away from the edge of the bed. I let out a heavy sigh as my adrenaline continued to surge, remembering that today was the day I needed to take my destiny in both of my hands and say fuck the odds.

I was going to figure this the hell out.

I hadn’t heard the sounds of war breaking out from outside of the home overnight. Unless it was soundproof, I was going to take the small victory—the knowledge that my mates and the archangels had waited as I instructed—and use it to boost me to fight today.

“Did anything happen last night, Maria? Were there any unexpected visitors?”

She confirmed my suspicions with a shake of her head. “No, but I came very early this morning to see if there was anything else you needed from me today. You aren’t expected to be at the meeting for another two hours.”

The fire in her eyes fed my own, and I decided to ask her something that had been on my mind and would decide my next move.

“Maria, how many here in your position are willing to take a risk to escape this place, even if it means possibly being caught?”

Her eyes widened. She shook her head once more, stammering, “I...I...there are a lot. Hundreds of us are just waiting for our chance to leave.”

I felt my own eyes widening as I stared at her in quiet shock. Holy shit. Hundreds of people were being held captive and forced to work for the gods.

My thoughts turned to how I could utilize their desire to escape without actively risking their lives in the process.

“Maria, how quickly can you get word out to all of those willing to risk it? I have something in mind, but it will have to be timed perfectly, and you will be very close to a battle that’s going to take place.”

She took a deep breath and nodded her head, a deep determination emanating from her eyes. “I will get it done, whatever it is.”

* * *

As I was led through the opulent corridors of the Greek palace by a guard assigned to me, a sense of trepidation gripped me. The grandeur of my surroundings seemed to amplify the weight of the impending encounter. I was in the home of Greek gods, and I was about to go head to head with them in a battle with my own enemies at my side.

The marble floors gleamed with an otherworldly radiance, and intricate tapestries adorned the walls, depicting scenes of ancient power and conquest. Now that I knew the truth of Pandora’s story, I had to wonder which other stories in the history books had also been warped to paint the villain in the light of a hero and savior.

The air was thick with an aura of both reverence and fear, as if the very walls whispered tales of the ruler I was about to face.

I had a few glances outside of windows along the way, but whichever way this building faced gave nothing away. I was

met with clear purple skies, without even the slightest hint of a wispy cloud in sight.

Finally, the imposing doors of the throne room swung open, revealing a breathtaking sight. The space was vast, walls seemingly touching the heavens with an open ceiling that allowed fresh air to waft around me. Pillars lined the room on either side of the hall, with intricate artwork carved into each of the marble support beams that extended from the floor to the slight overhang of the ceiling that provided shade along the edges of the room.

Upon a towering dais covered by the shade sat Zeus himself.

A deep sense of wariness settled within me despite my desire to maintain a confident facade at all times in front of him. I was in the company of a being whose power was matched only by his malevolence.

As I was ushered forward, my steps felt heavy and deliberate, a stark contrast to the adrenaline pulsing through my veins. Before I knew it, I was thrown prostrate before the tyrannical deity, my knees taking the brunt force of the impact and sending shooting pain up my thighs. Refusing to bow before him, I climbed to my feet quickly and lifted my head to meet his eyes.

I would not cower before him.

His bright blue eyes were almost white in their lightness, his gaze piercing through me like a bolt of lightning. His throne, a twisted masterpiece of gold and black, loomed around him in stark contrast to his white hair and light eyes. His frame was massive, quite similar to the depiction of him in history books. He had to be near six foot seven and well over three hundred pounds of pure muscle.

I had already doubted Casus' ability to kill a god before seeing Zeus, and now that I had...My doubt was multiplying rapidly. How were we supposed to take him down?

Zeus, his expression a blend of smug arrogance and calculated cruelty, regarded me with a mixture of amusement

and disdain as he stepped off his throne and walked toward me. His voice rumbled like distant thunder as he spoke, each word dripping with chilling authority. “Well, well, what do we have here? Someone who was supposed to be the perfect pawn in my plans who turned out to be the biggest disappointment of them all.”

I met his gaze with a facade of composure, my heart pounding in my chest as blood whooshed in my ears in time with the beat of the organ. Fear was ever-present within me, gnawing at the edges of my resolve. I fought like hell to conceal it.

“Honestly, I told you as soon as I saw her how useless she would be to us.”

Helen’s sniveling high-pitched voice echoed through the room as she entered from the door behind me. I fought the urge to roll my eyes with Zeus’ gaze still on my face.

I heard the clicking of her heels against the marble floor as she sauntered toward us, coming to stand next to Zeus. Her hand rested on her hip that was covered by a short, form-hugging white dress. I wanted to hate how poised she always looked with perfectly tanned skin and her soft waves of golden hair, but I couldn’t. Her makeup was always tasteful, with a golden glow to her eyelids that made her hazel eyes pop. If she was literally anyone else, I’d be asking her for tips.

What was truly disgusting about Helen was the inside of her—the core of what made her who she was in her heart.

“It’s so lovely to see you, Helen,” I cooed, slapping a saccharine sweet smile on my face that I knew would piss her off. “You look exquisite today. It’s a shame not every part of you is that beautiful. What a waste.”

Despite Zeus being the god of the sky, I swore that thunderstorms rolled in her eyes as she glared daggers at me. With a sneer, she snapped, “Where are the other curses? Let’s get this over with. I have more important matters to attend to.”

“Guards!” Zeus’ voice boomed out, the impact of it shaking my body slightly. “Bring the last guests in and close

the doors.”

I fought the urge to fidget under the weight of both god’s gazes, instead turning my eyes to the sky and wondering where my monsters were and whether they’d received clearance.

Footsteps sounded behind us, but still, I refused to turn away from the gods standing before me. My spine straightened at the sound of Casus’ voice ringing out, “Zeus! Thank you for the lovely accommodations last night. You have a beautiful home.”

A rumbling growl sounded from Zeus as the curses joined me at my side. The serene beauty of the sky that had just held my attention was swiftly replaced by an ominous and foreboding transformation—a reflection of the tumultuous emotions coursing through the god of the sky.

As if responding to his silent command, the delicate hues of violet and lavender that had adorned the sky began to blend and swirl, giving way to an increasingly darker and more sinister palette. Clouds gathered with an almost palpable urgency, their form quickly growing thicker and more menacing by the second. The sun’s fading glow, which had once cast a warm and comforting light, was swallowed by the encroaching darkness.

My heart rate must have tripled at the show of his power. While Casus told me how weak they were becoming here, the display sure didn’t reflect that notion.

Zeus shifted then, moving to stand toe to toe with Casus on my right, and I watched out of the corner of my eye as the curse smirked, completely unfazed by the force standing in front of him. I didn’t know whether he was stupid or really did believe he could kill him. Either way, he had balls of steel.

“Do not talk to me like we are allies, Casus,” the thunder god boomed, making me flinch as he got in the curse’s face. “It has become apparent that your word means absolutely nothing. You are not gathering followers for Hellenism in Ordinarius to raise our powers here to what they once were.”

When the curse remained quiet, Zeus chuckled.

“At least you don’t take me for an idiot,” he boomed, an ugly sneer on his golden face. “It would be foolish of you to try to lie to my face now about the situation. I take your silence as acknowledgement of the truth in my words.”

We all stood in silence, and my anticipation and anxiety for what was to come grew as Zeus continued on, murmuring, “You thought yourselves better than a god. You really thought that you could outsmart me, taking me as a fool. Today, that changes. Today, you will learn your place.”

A low rumble echoed in the distance, gradually growing into a deafening roar that reverberated through the very core of the atmosphere. The angry grumble of thunder seemed to emanate directly from the heart of Zeus himself, as if his rage had taken on a tangible form. Flashes of lightning illuminated the sky with blinding brilliance, casting shadows that danced with an eerie energy across the landscape.

The shift from tranquility to tempest was sudden and stark. The wind picked up, carrying with it a sense of tension and unease that seemed to radiate from the very air.

I could only hope that Maria was in a place where she was able to see the gathering tempest. After all, it was the signal that began our plan. If she failed, there was no way I would escape this room.

“No, Zeus,” Casus roared, his voice deafened slightly by the windstorm around us, “today you learn that we are no one’s pets.”

Raindrops, initially sparse and gentle, transformed into a torrential downpour, drenching the earth below in a deluge that mirrored the intensity of Zeus’ wrath toward Casus and his words.

My head turned fully as I saw shadows form from Casus’ raised hand. My eyes widened slightly, watching as it seemed as if he plucked a dagger out of the air, utilizing the shadowed portal in a move that happened so fast I barely had time to react.

Helen screamed and leapt, holding her hand out as if she could stop Casus, but Zeus had made the attack too easy with his closeness. He assumed himself invincible, and as I watched in what felt like slow-motion, the tip of the black dagger sank into Zeus' chest. I turned and ran back toward the door to put space between myself and whatever Zeus was about to do in return.

“Kill the guards!” Zora shouted. Seconds later, Elias appeared in front of me in a whirl of shadows, a smirk on his face as his hands closed around my arms.

“They can't hurt you, baby curse.”

I watched, my jaw going slack as he poofed around the room in a swirl of shadows, snapping necks with his bare hands. My heart panged at the proof of the guards' mortality. He didn't need a special weapon to take their lives, and my eyes pooled with tears at the realization that the guards were likely in the same position as Maria. After all, they hadn't made a move to intervene when Casus drew the dagger on Zeus.

The rain stopped falling as the wind ceased to blow, leaving the vast space above us full of an eerie silence.

Elias appeared in front of me, and I had to push down the profound sadness I felt at the loss of the lives around me. He shoved me back to the center of the room, and I turned to take in the aftermath of the chaos, gasping at the sight that met my eyes. Zeus' mouth hung open, eyes fully focused on Casus as the latter pulled the dagger slowly out of him.

Helen lay on the ground next to them, tears falling from her eyes as Zora pinned her to the ground. “Father!” she cried as the towering god careened forward.

Casus stepped to the side as the god fell, crashing into the marble that broke beneath his weight.

I held my breath, waiting to see if he would get up again. When Casus gave the fallen god his back to walk toward Helen, I realized he'd been telling the truth this whole time. He somehow found a weapon powerful enough to kill a god.

Elias' hot breath fanned over my ear as he whispered, "It's black iron that was forged by Hephaestus on Mount Olympus. The dagger was created by Zeus' own son to protect his mother, Hera, from the god. He was cast out of Olympus for his ability to create a god-killing weapon after Zeus bested him, taking the dagger for himself."

I didn't feel any remorse over Zeus being slain if he truly was gone for good. He was a tyrant over this world and the inhabitants of Olympus.

"Where did you get that?" Helen cried out as Zora climbed off of her, though not before shoving her knee into Helen's back one last time. "It was locked away. *No one* knew where it was."

Casus dropped to a crouch in front of her, letting the tip of the dagger sit beneath her chin and using it to drag her gaze up until their eyes met. "We are the masters of the shadows. Nothing is hidden from us in their depths."

Agony was etched all over her blotchy, red face. "Are you going to kill me next, then?"

His eerie black gaze swung to me then. "It seems you were the baby curses' tormentor. It's up to her."

Despite Helen being an absolute shithead to me at pretty much *all times*, I had yet to hear one actual horrendous thing she'd done to someone like her father had. I didn't actively think she deserved death. Did she need a reality check about how she treated people? Without a doubt. I wanted justice to be dealt out for her plan to kill me, but I wasn't the judge, jury, and executioner who needed to decide how that happened.

But this was a test of my commitment to the other curses. It was so easy to see.

How did I keep that dagger from turning my way and keep it from finding its way into Helen's chest as well?

I let my voice grow cold, acting on instinct as I crossed to them. "I want her to be my new pet," I seethed, putting as much bitterness into my words as I could muster on the spot. "I want her to do my bidding until I'm done having my fun

with her. She continually made it her mission to make me feel like I was worthless, and I am determined to return that favor.”

Helen’s face turned into a scowl, just as I needed it to, to pass this off as genuine hatred between us. She spat out, “I would rather die.”

Chapter 22

DAMNIT, HELEN.

Casus moved quickly, grabbing her hair to pull her head back and exposing her chest as he shifted the dagger to rest over her heart. “I don’t think you’ll be able to control her, baby curse. It’s best for us all to end her now.”

Her eyes met mine in a final glare, hating me until her very last moments. I couldn’t help but shake my head at her. I owed her nothing, yet I tried to find a way to save her life and she continued to spit in my face.

His move was quick, plunging the knife into her in one swift go. As the light faded from her eyes, I could have sworn I saw something within her gaze I never expected to see.

Remorse. I didn’t know what the remorse was for, but seeing that very human emotion from her as her life was snuffed out startled me.

“Casus! Incoming!”

Zora’s words had my heart soaring as I glanced into the sky. Sure enough, I spotted at least ten figures in the air racing toward us.

“Start the spell, Zora!” he yelled, pushing me to the very center of the room.

I briefly noticed Elias spreading something along the ground as Zora began to chant and dipped her fingers in the blood pooling around Zeus.

Red.

Green.

Blue.

After what felt like an eternity of separation, a moment of disbelief and overwhelming joy enveloped me as I saw them emerge. My monsters were here, and on the back of what looked to be archangels if I had to guess. My own hope soared, and I clung to it like a lifeline.

Zora began to draw symbols on her arms with the blood before moving quickly to do the same to Elias as he came to stand by us. Next up was Casus, but I knew they wouldn't have time to get to me as familiar faces swooped into view, close enough now for me to make out all of their details.

Casus let out a growl, grabbing my arm in a bruising grip as my loved ones all quickly landed in a circle around the four of us. I didn't care, focusing instead of the beautiful faces of the people I loved around me.

Not only were my monsters here, but so were all of Zurie's mates, as well as Ama.

All of their faces were etched with determination and unwavering resolve as I took them in, bringing tears of gratitude to my eyes.

My eyes fell to a final figure I'd never seen before, and I gasped. The figure dropped their black hood, and a face devoid of any features other than multiple eyes of varying sizes and colors appeared. A voice boomed from them, despite not having a mouth to speak with. It seemed to echo around us all, full of authority and strength.

"Release the woman. You are under arrest for crimes against Ordinarius, Praeditus, and now also Divinus."

Casus' grip on me tightened, and I winced, unable to hold back the pain I was feeling. It felt as if he was trying to snap my bone beneath his grip.

Lucien floated forward, a snarl ripping from him as his eyes tracked the movement.

With Casus' firm grip on the knife in his hand, I didn't want anyone to make a move forward. I shook my head fervently at Lucien.

"No, I won't release her, and you will all stay back unless you want to be killed just like the mighty gods here."

Zer stepped forward, and for once I was so glad to have his unnerving power flowing around us. "All we have to do is let our light out, and you will be obliterated."

My heart was beating frantically. Yes! Their divine light.

"If you were going to do that, you would have already," Casus drawled before shoving me into Zora's arms. "Clearly, doing so will harm our precious baby curse as well."

My brow furrowed. I drank the tonic and I was immune to their divine light for... The truth dawned on me then. I needed to take a dose each week/ After taking the first dose, we trained with Ariel for five days. Today would be day seven post dose... I needed to take another serum to be safe from their light. I wasn't sure if the dose just suddenly stopped working entirely. Maybe it was a slow trickle that would still protect me a little bit.

As Zora's hand rose to trace the marks onto me, I shoved her away with a snarl. Elias grabbed me from behind, holding my arms. I kicked out each time Zora approached.

"I won't do the binding!" I screamed.

A hell of a lot happened then. Casus and Elias disappeared and reappeared, but I watched as my monster's shadows morphed right alongside theirs, as if they could track them in their own shadows. Their colors flashed all around the room as Zora narrowed her eyes on me and took a step forward.

My nostrils flared as I blew out a breath and called my kunai to me, loving the familiar weight of the rope and knives in my hands. "Let's go," I muttered, swinging one side around to build momentum.

She dropped to the ground then, slamming her hand into the marble floor. Spiderwebs of black sickness, reminiscent of the ones she'd infected the ground around her at DIA with,

rushed toward me through the marble. They surged up from the ground to wrap around my feet and ankles.

She smirked as I cried out, feeling the impact of her power coursing through my body in an instant. She was pumping some type of infection throughout my being, zapping my energy on contact.

“Alexandra!” Ama screamed, and I watched as her wings snapped out and her scythe appeared, streaking through the air as she darted directly toward us, fearless and ready to battle for me.

She swung her scythe back with her eyes locked on Zora, but Casus appeared on her right in a swirl of shadows. He grabbed her by the throat and pulled her back to his chest, poisoning the tip of the dagger over her heart.

Kylo appeared right behind him, tracking the curse he could hold his own against with his power being to feed off of the same emotions, at the same moment that Elwin appeared at my side.

“Ama!” I screamed, stumbling toward her as my limbs began to feel heavy. I tried to call on my power, but it’d seemed to have retreated far within me in response to the invasive sickness Zora pumped into me.

Gentle hands pulled me against his chest, and I felt Elwin’s power pushing in a wave of warmth. The power spread through me in soothing waves, eradicating Zora’s power pulsing within me.

The archangels rushed at Casus’ back, but he swung Ama around like a shield with the dagger to her chest. She growled her frustration, and everyone backed off, waiting for an opening. Elias appeared next to Zora as Lucien appeared by me.

I felt the moment Maria was able to fulfill her end of the deal, the light pooling nearby. Tears sprang to my eyes as I called out, “Casus. Stop. Let her go, and I’ll let Zora finish the spell.”

My monster's words echoed around me in a booming cacophony, telling me that absolutely was not going to happen. I tuned them out, entirely focused on getting Ama the hell out of this situation. Alive.

His eyes narrowed on me before he spat, "Complete it, Zora."

She approached me once more, and I growled out to Elwin and Lucien, "Get back. You have to trust me, now more than ever."

My plan was absolutely insane, but it was the only one I could think of when I'd spoken with Maria this morning. It was my worst case scenario after reflecting on Pandora's words.

They hesitated for a moment before retreating, and I lifted my arms willingly for Zora as I met Ama's gaze over her shoulder. Her jaw was clenched as a single tear fell down her cheek. "Don't," she mouthed silently to me, but I shook my head.

This had to happen. Everyone here was willing to risk their lives to save me, and it was my turn to risk my life to save all of them.

Warm liquid smeared along my skin, and not a single sound echoed through the room until Zora closed her eyes and began to chant. Heat seared beneath her marks on my skin. As it increased in intensity, I watched Zora falter slightly as all of our marks began to glow.

She pushed on, I cried out in anguish as I watched Elias fall to his knee, stabilizing himself with his hand on the ground. Her words came to a stop and tears fell from her eyes as she seemed to fight through the pain we were all feeling.

The only person who looked unaffected, with the exception of a slight tightness to his jaw, was Casus. The fucking bastard.

I'd have him on his knees soon, begging for mercy.

As the pain faded, something clicked into place. Suddenly, I felt a line connecting me to the other curses.

A chilling sensation began to spread through my body, as if an invisible current of malevolent energy was seeping into my very being. It was a dark magic, an unnatural force that defied all that was pure and good. As it coursed through my veins, my muscles tensed, my senses overwhelmed by a feeling of impending doom.

It was so much worse than I anticipated, knowing my own power levels were nowhere near full in comparison to theirs. There was an overwhelming larger amount of darkness compared to my own light, threatening to snuff it out quickly.

The magic's tendrils wrapped around my heart, constricting it with a cold grip that sent shivers down my spine. Waves of greed and envy washed over me, drowning my thoughts in a sea of insatiable desires and bitter resentments. My mind, once a haven of clarity, was now clouded by a murky haze of maleficent intentions.

Pain, both physical and emotional, surged through me in pulsating waves. It felt as if the dark magic reveled in my suffering, amplifying every ache and hurt until they became nearly unbearable.

I fell to my knees, the weight of the dark magic dragging me down like an anchor in a stormy sea. My breath came out in ragged gasps as I struggled against the overwhelming tide of emotions that threatened to drown me.

I had to fight it. I had to remember the light that prevailed within the box against all the other curses. I had held that within me, and I wouldn't fall to the darkness now.

Hatred, a venomous emotion I rarely experienced, bubbled up from the depths of my soul. It consumed me, turning my thoughts into a maelstrom of malice directed at everyone I loved around me. It was a poison that eroded any semblance of compassion or understanding within me, leaving behind only a seething sense of fury.

I glanced around at all the faces staring back at me, and I bit out, "Why are you all staring at me! Avert your gazes. You are not worthy!"

In that moment, I was nothing more than a vessel for the sinister forces that had ensnared me. My body trembled, a mixture of fear and helplessness coursing through me as I fought against the power that sought to claim my very essence. The battle that was waged was not just in the physical realm, but within the depths of my own soul as well.

Ama's voice carried through the air to me, breaking through the haze surrounding my mind, "Forge your own path, daughter. Burn so brightly that you can't be contained."

Her words were a reminder of the plan I had placed in motion and the precious little time I had to enact it.

I struggled to maintain a grip on the light within me.

Gritting my teeth, I summoned as many memories of love, joy, and compassion to the forefront of my mind as I could. I clung to them desperately, using their warmth as a shield against the cold embrace of hatred and envy. With each recollection, the light within me grew stronger, pushing back against the darkness that sought to control me.

I thought of the affirmations Ariel had me repeat on day one and held to them tightly as I pictured the home I created that provided me so much grounding and peace within my soul.

I am surrounded by loving and supportive relationships.

I am powerful and capable all on my own.

No one can stop me from achieving my dreams. They are mine to control.

"Impossible!" Casus screeched, the disbelief in his tone spurring me on.

As if in response to my defiance, the dark magic intensified its assault, attempting to drown out my attempts at resistance. But I was determined to not let it consume me entirely. With each labored breath I drew, I gathered my inner strength and focused on the value that defined who I truly was.

I was Hope.

“Lucien! Elwin! Kylo!” I called out, hoping they were in places to be able to do as I asked. “Feed off my soul, now!”

Instantly, I felt a war within me as the darkness forced into me by the curses being drawn out by my monsters, drawing the power away. My soul felt lighter, and I knew this was my one shot for success as I felt the other curses’ strength waning.

I closed my eyes and reached out with my power, searching for the pure souls waiting outside of the doors for me. As promised, Maria had gathered hundreds. I reached out with the core of my being to connect with their pure souls. Their hope and optimism resonated within me, and I drew that energy into myself like a lifeline.

As I absorbed their hope, the last remnants of the dark magic within me began to wither. I stopped fighting the connection between myself and the curses, instead opening the connection and welcoming it. The hope of those gathered outside of the door became my armor, their unwavering belief that we were going to all leave this damned place at the end of the fight and begin our lives again fought off the lingering remnants of the darkness swirling within me.

With the energy of the brave souls outside those doors flowing through me, I felt a renewed surge of strength and clarity. Forcing my eyes open, I saw Elias and Zora on the ground, gripping their heads as the sound of the world around me filtered back into my own head.

Their screams echoed through the air, and I narrowed my eyes on the sight of Casus struggling to maintain his position as his legs began to shake.

“Now, Ama!” I yelled, waiting until I saw her break free of his grasp before slamming every ounce of light within me through our bond.

I reached for the hope within my mates and our family around us, giving me another boost to infuse into our battle. Their belief in me was *everything*.

The weight that had once dragged me down was lifted, replaced by a sensation of buoyancy and empowerment

instead. The presence of hope in the souls just outside of the room transformed the battlefield within me into a sanctuary of light, a place where the shadows of greed, envy, pain, and hatred could not survive.

The battle wasn't just mine anymore; it was a shared endeavor, a united front against the forces that sought to use and control us all. The hope of the many bolstered my resolve, and together, we pushed against the darkness with an unyielding force. The malevolent energy could not withstand the power of pure souls united by a common purpose: finding freedom.

I will be in this home, surrounded by my mates, friends, and family at the end of this, celebrating the new life ahead of us that is ours to build.

Casus fell to his knees as Zora and Elias' screams ceased. In an instant, Lucien and Elwin dropped to their knees by the curses' bodies, checking for pulses.

My gaze clashed with Casus as I crossed toward him, eyeing the dagger in his shaking hand as I continued to pump light into him. Kicking out with my foot, the dagger was knocked from his grip, and it slid across the marbled floor. It was picked up by the being I'd come to deduce was a Throne, due to being here to capture those in breach of the law of the realms.

I crouched before Casus as he fell to his hands and knees, his head hung low. His entire body shook as I put my finger beneath his chin, just like he'd done to Helen with the dagger, and tilted it up. When I could see that his once black eyes were now a hazy gray color from the milky white power Kylo now held in his, I smirked at the curse.

"How do you like the feeling of hope, Casus?" I purred, loving the way he tried to snarl. The sound fell flat as I felt the small bit of darkness that remained within our bond growing smaller and smaller. "You wanted to have hope for yourself—to control and twist my power to suit your needs. Now you have it, but guess what?"

"What?" he gritted out.

“It’s more powerful than anything you possess. Hope is infinite, Casus. It can overcome every sliver of evil emotion. The possibilities and dreams that are born from it are a weapon unlike any other.”

I let his head drop back down as I pushed to my feet, staring at his crumpled form as his arms and knees finally gave out.

Glancing between the five fallen forms scattered throughout the room, I felt a sense of peace as the last bit of darkness in my connection to their souls was snuffed out. However, grief consumed me once more at the sight of the fallen soldiers around the perimeter of the room. “My hope for you *all* is that if you’re given another chance to live again, you have the opportunity to experience every bit of love, light, and hope the world has to offer you,” I whispered as tears fell over my cheeks in a deluge.

“Alexandra.”

Lucien’s deep, raspy voice was filled with concern, pulling my gaze to all three of my monsters. They were in their human forms once more as they approached me. My body sagged with exhaustion as the weight of channeling all of that power hit me.

I fell into their arms as my tears flowed harder. At least this time I could say they were tears of relief. I felt as if the weight of the world had finally been lifted from us.

“It’s over,” I sobbed into them as their warmth surrounded me.

Our future was ours to do with as we wanted now, and it was looking very bright.

Epilogue 1

Two years later

Hesitation filled Psyche's golden eyes as I repeated Pandora's request to her.

"Are you sure this is what she wants?" she asked. "We can't go back once it's done."

While I didn't personally have a connection to Psyche, it was clear from the way she was looking so deeply into my eyes that she was searching for any way to see her friend's soul reflected back in them.

I swallowed a lump of emotion in my throat with the realization that this really was the end of my journey with Pandora. I'd visited her countless times in the past two years, telling her all about our classes at DIA, Alora's engagement to Carter as well as Alina's to her three mates. She was actually livid when I told her Psyche requested Alina's wedding date as the day we did this, wanting to hear all about the wedding after I'd experienced it myself.

Pandora had become a constant and steady support system for me, and I hoped I had become that for her as well. I listened with rapt attention to the stories of her life and the adventures she'd been on, which included everything from flying on a pegasus to living in her own manor on Mount Olympus, surrounded by magical beings and close friends. Knowing that she had led a truly beautiful life before Zeus used her as a pawn brought warmth to my heart.

I'd grown to love her deeply as we shared the stories of our lives.

My eyes pooled with tears as I thought back to our conversation when I met her in my dreams mere hours ago for our final goodbye.

We laid under the glittering night sky in our favorite spot in the garden, right next to the blooming lavender. We often tried to count all the stars hanging above us as we chatted, but somehow we never managed to accomplish it from the sheer amount of them alone.

“Do you feel confident that their souls remain pure after keeping the connection to them this whole time?”

I sighed, contemplating the question that had plagued me for years, ever since our battle with the curses. Everyone wanted me to instantly cut the other curses’ souls away from mine, but I couldn’t.

“You know I wouldn’t cut them free if I sensed anything dark still lingering within their souls. I want them to be able to move onto their next lives, but I needed to be sure I wouldn’t be repeating this cycle again by letting them go without being sure. I truly believe my light has been able to purify their souls completely.”

She was quiet for a bit, which wasn’t unusual. As she grabbed my hand, I turned to look over at her as she continued to stare up at the sky. A single tear fell from her eye, rolling down her temple before slipping into her dark hair that lay scattered across the grass beneath us.

“Pan?” I murmured, a heavy weight settling over my chest, as if the entirety of the sky was suddenly falling squarely onto me.

As her glittering blue eyes turned to meet mine, I knew what she was going to say. There was a finality and sorrow to her eyes I’d never seen before.

“I think I’m ready to go now, Alex.”

Tears sprang to my eyes, but I nodded, knowing I needed to support her. Selfishly, I didn’t want to be separated from my friend for the rest of this life.

“Okay,” I croaked out, not turning my head to look back up at the sky until after she did. Pandora squeezed my hand tightly, never loosening her grip on me.

We laid there, silently soaking in this last night together.

As the hours passed, the stars began to lose their intensity, their brilliance gradually fading against the encroaching light on the horizon. The deep blue of the night sky started to soften, giving way to hues of indigo and violet.

“It’s 4,513 stars,” she whispered, and a knowing smile lifted my lips in response.

“I definitely counted 4,512,” I rebutted as I always did, just shy of whatever she counted that night. I had given up on my own count long before her.

A delicate, rosy hue painted the eastern horizon, gradually intensifying into shades of orange and gold. The stars, one by one, yielded to the approaching dawn, their light surrendering to the ever-growing radiance.

My throat grew thick with emotion as she asked the simple phrase that had become part of our ritual. “Recount another time?”

My voice wavered, breaking as I answered, “Definitely. In our next life together.”

And true to our ritual, we climbed to our feet and enveloped each other in a goodbye hug.

I inhaled the world around us one more time as my lips quivered, trying to hold back the sob that wanted to rip out of me. I would never return to this special place that was just ours. I would never hear her voice again.

“You know I love you,” she whispered, her voice cracking as she continued, “it’s...it’s why I can’t keep living on borrowed time within the shadow of your own soul. I would never be able to forgive myself if one day they came for me and took you too.”

I wanted to argue with her, to tell her if they hadn’t come for her yet, we had no way of knowing if they ever would.

Pandora knew me well, and smiled sadly at me in return.

“Don’t try to convince me to change my mind,” she pleaded, her own voice heavy with emotion. I couldn’t hold back my sob as I nodded, warm tears flowing down my face as I squeezed her to me. “You gave me so many more years than I was fated to have, Alex. I will forever be grateful for the selfless gift you gave me when you agreed to bind our souls as one. I am even more grateful for the beautiful memories our friendship has allowed me to have.”

“I love you, Pan. In this life and the next.”

As I said the words that had become the phrase my monsters and I used with each other, I was hit with the realization that our friends could also be our soulmates. I had to believe that one day we’d meet again.

“I love you, Alex.”

Two warm hands rubbed my back as I came back to the present, my cheeks just as wet with tears as they’d been during our goodbye.

“It’s okay, sweet girl,” Ama murmured before dropping a kiss to my temple. “A soul as pure as hers will find happiness on the other side of this. I know it.”

“Besides, no one can take these sweet memories away from you,” Zurie whispered from my other side as she leaned her head to rest on my shoulder.

They were right. I’d been blessed to have the time I had with her, and I would cherish it forever. When she went to the River Styxx, I knew in my heart whoever was in charge of judging her soul would forgive her for being a little late.

“Yes, this is what she wants,” I answered Psyche finally, looking at her as the flow of my tears began to ebb. “She is at peace with this decision.”

Psyche tried to discreetly brush away a few of her own tears before sniffing and nodding. “Okay. Let’s begin.”

She stretched her hands across the table between us, and I set mine in hers gently. Warmth flowed into me through my

hands before trailing a path toward the center of my chest.

I closed my eyes as I felt a small snap deep within me. I gasp as a weight lifted, several connections slowly being cut off one by one in my senses.

First was Elias, then Zora, and finally Casus.

Relief flooded my being. They were finally gone and that chapter of my life closed. As Psyche dug deeper, her warmth traveling toward the magic in my core, I winced.

“Pandora’s magic from the box is deeply entwined within you,” she murmured. “When I release her soul, the magic will go with her. It was never meant to be yours, but she shared it freely with you. It might hurt a little bit to remove this from your own energy, okay?”

I nodded, already expecting that to be the case. It made sense why it was often hard for me to access and use the power of creation. It was never mine to control in full.

I gritted my teeth as she began to unravel the ball, the purple magic I’d grown so accustomed to seeing slowly trailing toward the center of my chest and leaving a pure white ball of light in its wake.

The purple energy disintegrated completely in the moment before I felt the connection to Pandora cut off forever.

Goodbye, Pan.

Epilogue 2

Five years later

The venue for our wedding was everything I had ever dreamed of. Every inch was adorned with an abundance of white flowers and lush green foliage, creating an ethereal and romantic atmosphere, only made better by the hundreds of white candles flickering softly in gold lanterns. The fragrance of the flowers filled the air, mingling with the chatter of our friends and family around us.

I was feeling quite tipsy as I glanced around and soaked it all in, a result of all the toasts and celebrations that had taken place so far. Not to mention the damn tequila shot tradition that had started at Lo's wedding and continued at Alina's had made its way to my own. A bit of fatigue settled in from the whirlwind of activities and emotions, but it was the delightful sort of exhaustion that came with the knowledge that the day was nothing short of magical.

As I swayed on the dance floor with my friends, laughter and music enveloped us. The beats pulsed through the air, and the dance floor seemed like a world of its own. But then Lucien appeared, his eyes brimming with affection as he came over and gently tugged at my hand. With a playful smile and a knowing look, he pulled me away from the dance floor, leading me to a much quieter corner.

I quickly blew kisses at my friends as they teased me.

"Get it!" Alina yelled with a wink.

Lo blew me a kiss back as Bex hung on Deva's arm and stared at me with so freaking much love in her eyes. The

sentiment was a stark contrast to the colder witch who made me laugh at her tough exterior when I knew how gooey her heart actually was now.

Bex, Alina, Deva, Alora, and I had grown closer over the past several years, bonding over our time at Dark Imaginarium Academy. Between their friendship, and the ones I'd gained with Lo and Jade through Alina, my life wasn't lacking for an abundance of love and support.

We were missing Zurie, all of the archangels and Ris, but understood why they wouldn't be able to come since the wedding was in Hell. The only other person missing was Pan, but I knew deep down that she was watching over us and smiling.

"Treat my sister well, or else!" Alora yelled, making everyone around us chuckle.

My friends and family knew just how well my monsters treated me, but I loved the way Alora was still fiercely protective of me nonetheless.

As Lucien guided me toward the path that led us to the exit, his thumb brushed over my hand gently. "Have I told you that you are the most stunning person I've ever laid eyes on, wife?" he asked, making a warmth crawl up my cheeks.

Our eyes met, and I smiled widely in return. "Only about one-hundred times today, husband."

I wasn't sure if I would ever tire of calling the three of them my husbands now.

Speaking of, I asked, "Where did Kylo and Elwin go?"

A coy smile tugged his lips up, and I instantly knew the three of them were up to something. I'd let them have their secrets for now, knowing they wouldn't cause any real mayhem on our wedding day, so I didn't push the subject as he remained quiet.

When we reached the end of the brick path, Ama and her mates Drayven, Finias, Adrien, Colt, Damien, Nico, Luce, and Jace waited for us beside a white carriage.

A huge smile pulled my lips up at the sight of the people who had initially taken us into their home and given us the opportunity to be a part of a true family. They never made us feel like add-ons, simply accepting us into their lives from the very first family dinner we'd gone to. After spending a couple years with them on breaks from DIA, Hell truly had come to feel like home every time we came back.

When we felt fully settled in that fact, we asked to build our home on their land, and both Ama and Adrien cried a little. I was still pretty sure Finias shed a few tears, but he'd never admit to it no matter how hard Alora and I teased him about it.

The dark elf stepped forward, his calm exterior cracking as he pulled me into his arms, murmuring, "You looked absolutely beautiful today, princess."

It was funny the way Alora hated being called princess, claiming that it reminded her of her duties to the realm. Apparently Ama had been the same way. But for me? I loved it. I remained in a state of shock pretty much every day since they announced to the realm that I was now a crowned princess alongside Alora, officially adopting me and my monsters into the family in every way they could.

The term was a reminder of their love for us, and I would never, ever take that for granted.

"Hand her over, asshole," Drayven grumbled, making me laugh at their love-hate relationship that apparently never ended.

Each of my adopted dads made their rounds giving us all hugs, offering congratulations and words of love for us all. I was left with the feeling of a heart overflowing with more love than I ever thought possible for one person to feel.

Ama waited for me at the end of the line, opening up the carriage door as I approached. Her smile was warm as I wrapped my arms around her, breathing in her sweet rose scent that brought me so much peace and comfort. In every way that mattered to my heart, she had truly become my mother. As she pulled back to press a kiss to my forehead, the

overwhelming feeling of needing to make sure Ama knew exactly how I felt about her pressed against the front of my mind.

“Enjoy your time tonight, sweet girl. We’ll see you after your honeymoon in Divinus.”

I shoved down the nerves that bubbled up as I opened my mouth, knowing this was absolutely the right moment.

“Thanks, Mom.”

A gasp fell from her lips as tears welled quickly in her eyes. We didn’t need to exchange more words, just hugging one more time as she sniffled and nodded before Lucien helped me into the carriage.

It was a short ride to our home, and before I knew it, Lucien was nudging me out of the comfortable spot I’d found in the crook of his arm. “Come on, angel, we’re home. Elwin and Kylo are waiting for us.”

Excitement fluttered in my core with the knowledge that my mates were a bunch of romantics.

As we walked through the door of our home, a sight of enchanting beauty greeted me. The interior was adorned with a lavish display of white roses and flickering candles, creating the same atmosphere that our wedding had provided to us. It was as if they’d brought a little part of the wedding back home with us.

Every corner of our home seemed to be touched by this transformation. White roses cascaded from vases on tables, countertops, and even the windowsills, their pristine petals catching the gentle light. The candles were strategically placed throughout our home, their warm glow casting dancing shadows on the walls and giving the room an intimate, cozy ambiance.

The soft fragrance of the roses perfumed the air, wrapping the space in an air of elegance and romance.

Elwin and Kylo emerged together from the kitchen, with a bottle of champagne and glasses in hand.

Their eyes fell on me, heating with hunger as their gazes roamed my body. Throughout the day, they had all been very vocal about what this dress did to them every time they looked at me.

I'd settled on a mix between a mermaid and trumpet fit gown, loving the way the soft, white satin settled over my body in a gentle caress. The off-the-shoulder sleeves laid gently against my upper arms, and the train fell from my hips down to the floor where it was currently bustled and pinned up.

Lucien left me to greet them before moving to start the fire in the living room. My eyes roamed the space, stomach fluttering pleasantly at the sight of the room transformed into a nest of blankets and pillows with the couch and armchairs pushed completely back against the walls.

"Hey, darling," Kylo murmured, sweeping me into his arms after depositing the glasses on the ground for Elwin to fill.

"Hey there, husband," I whispered back before he dipped me back into a mind-blowing kiss. When he stood me back up, passing me off into Elwin's waiting arms, I was hit with a delightful feeling of lightheadedness.

The desire to feel their cocks within me blossomed further within me as his tongue swept into my mouth, teasing me with the promise of what I knew it could accomplish elsewhere.

Soft hands ran down my exposed back, making me shiver as the zipper on my gown was slowly dragged down.

My thighs shifted together as the soft material was dragged down my arms before I felt the shifting of it being gathered at my feet and pulled up. Elwin and I broke apart as the dress was lifted off of me completely, leaving me bare.

"Isn't our wife exquisite?" Elwin purred as he stepped back to look at all of me.

Our wife.

Fuck, that did things to me. My body grew hot from my own desire and the light heat emanating from the fireplace.

“Make love to me,” I whispered, my soul and body yearning for the connection I knew it would bring me to my mates.

They didn’t leave me waiting long, quickly undressing from their black tuxedos before their hands were roaming everywhere along my body they could reach.

We made our way to the floor as I kissed Lucien, loving the small bites he left on my bottom lip and pulling a soft moan from me.

Normally, I’d love to let them lavish my body, bringing me to an orgasm before they even thought of penetrating me. I couldn’t wait tonight—my need was too urgent.

With more dominance than I normally took, I pushed Kylo to the ground as I broke my kiss with Lucien. Crawling on top of him, I grabbed his face with my hands and kissed him before reaching back to line him up with my entrance. I sank down, loving the way my moan and his groan mixed together with our shared breath as I enveloped his cock within me.

I sat up, shifting my weight into my hips as I began to move. Pleasure sparked deep within me, but it wasn’t enough right now. I glanced over my shoulder and smiled up at Lucien from beneath my long lashes.

He knew what I needed. This wasn’t the first time I’d shared my body with all of them at once. It was the way I preferred our time to be, ensuring no one was left out when we were all together.

Moving my gaze to Elwin, I saw that his eyes were hooded with desire as he watched us, stroking his cock.

“You know, I saw you bite your lip nearly twenty times today, love.”

My pussy clenched around Kylo at the thought of my waiting punishment. This game of ours had come to be one of my favorite things, the anticipation of never knowing when or where he’d deal the punishment out. He’d surprised me a few times, dragging me into a room randomly when we were at functions or on our way to classes when we still attended DIA.

Sometimes, Kylo or Lucien would be with him. The ever-changing variables made the punishments feel different and exciting every single time.

I licked my lips at him. “I can’t wait for my punishment, Sir.”

Opening my mouth, I moaned at the salty taste of his precum as he pushed his cock all the way back in my throat.

My pace slowed on Kylo as I felt Lucien’s heat settle at my back before his cock burrowed between my ass, the thick tip pressing at my entrance.

My eyes rolled back in my head as he filled me, the tightness between him and Kylo taking me at once making me see stars. We all let out sounds of the pleasure that was overcoming us as they all began to move in tandem with one another.

Kylo’s fingers moved to expertly play with my nipples, pinching and tugging lightly as Lucien’s hot mouth descended on my neck. His tongue licked at my skin, biting and sucking a trail down the sensitive flesh as his hand snaked around my front to find my swollen clit.

There was something incredibly intoxicating at the feeling of Lucien licking my throat as Elwin’s cock filled it, pumping into me over and over.

“So fucking perfect,” he growled as his pace increased, encouraging Kylo and Elwin to do the same.

My eyes fell closed as I cried out around Elwin’s cock, feeling the tightening of my core as my orgasm flew toward me unhindered.

“And all ours, forever,” Kylo murmured.

Elwin’s hand tangled into my hair, pushing my head back slightly as he hit a deeper angle, forcing my eyes to fly open as our gazes met.

“Come for us, wife,” he demanded. “Cry out for us and let the world know exactly how satisfied your husbands make you feel.”

Who was I to deny them? As if I could. They knew both my body and my mind, stroking both areas in perfect tandem that left me unraveling. My moans were muffled around Elwin's cock as sparks tingled throughout my body, and I loved the way they continued to stroke my pleasure in the aftermath of my orgasm, prolonging the mind-numbing feeling.

Their own releases followed quickly, and we fell into a messy pile on the scattered nest on the floor. The flames crackled softly in the background as they each settled in, preferring me to lay in the middle so they could each find a spot to touch me as we soaked in the glow of the aftermath of our lovemaking.

As we laid there, my tiredness began to mingle with my contentment. The day had been long, but it was all worth it. With my husbands' limbs wrapped around me, my fatigue seemed to melt away, replaced instead with a sense of completeness and belonging.

I once thought myself forever doomed to live a life of solitude, outcast from all of those around me in Ordinarius. Instead, I'd found a life abundant with love from my mates, new friends, and our found family.

The life I'd dreamed of us having the day I'd done my affirmations and grounding with Ariel was here now, and it was better than I ever could have imagined.

I gazed at my mates cuddling into me, and in that intimate moment, I knew that our journey together was just beginning. In my heart and mind, I knew our love story would continue to flourish amidst the beauty of life's little moments.

In both this life and the next.

Turn to the end for chapter one of Bite of Loyalty, which is Alina's story.

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About R.L. Caulder

R.L. Caulder is a USA Today bestselling author who lives in her writing cave away from the intense heat of the Florida sun with her husband and furry writing assistants, MeowMeow and Winrey. Life is never boring for R.L., who has hundreds of imaginary friends constantly vying for her attention and begging for their stories to be told.

If you're looking for ways to interact with R.L., you can find her on Facebook in her group:

[The Cauldron: R.L. Caulder Reader Group](#)

Bite of Loyalty

ALINA

LETTING MY HIPS GYRATE TO THE PULSING BASS OF THE MUSIC, my head tipped back as I closed my eyes and soaked in the moment. My body was buzzing with the steady flow of alcohol, making it easy to numb the unwelcome thoughts swirling in my head. I felt as close to the freedom I so desperately wanted as I'd probably ever get right now.

At this moment, I wasn't the sole Van Helsing heir.

I wasn't expected to take over the head of house position to govern all slayers.

I wasn't expected to find a suitable slayer to marry to continue our family legacy.

I was just a twenty-one-year-old girl, celebrating her birthday with friends. I would probably regret taking all those shots tomorrow morning, but that was for future Alina to worry about.

Right now I would focus on enjoying this time with my girls.

There weren't many places in Sanguis to celebrate my birthday at, with slayers owning only a small section of the vampire territory, but when you were a few drinks deep, anywhere could be a party with the right people at your side.

It was easy to sway the bartender to hook up my phone to their speakers so that my favorite playlist boomed through the empty establishment. I was more than thankful that all the slayers our age who were typically out this late were seemingly at home resting, saving their livers for the "real" birthday party my parents were hosting at our estate tomorrow.

It was a little odd, seeing as slayers were typically the epitome of the human saying "YOLO"—you only live once. They lived each day like it was their last because it very well could be in our line of work. It came with the territory of being the supernatural police of the blood-suckers who couldn't

seem to keep their fangs to themselves and procreated like bunnies in heat.

But I supposed when they were all expected to be in the Van Helsing estate and in front of the leaders of our society, being presented to their daughter, they cared a little bit more about being in tip-top shape. Wouldn't want to turn up to the "real" party looking disheveled because you partied too late the night before.

Blairily glancing at the clock on the wall, I rolled my eyes. Scratch that—the real party was today, seeing as it was near two a.m. now.

Another hour closer to being tied to a fate I didn't want. *Yippie.*

An arm slid around my waist, and one of my best friend's signature cherry blossom perfume wrapped around me. "I love you, Skye," I mumbled as I enclosed her slight frame in a hug, making her sway to the music in time with me. She let me guide her as she giggled with her face in my chest.

She was fun-sized, and if I could fit her in my pocket and carry around her sunny disposition with me at all times, I totally would. She balanced my more bleak and reserved outlook on life.

"I love tipsy you, babe," she yelled up at me, face squashed in my tits. "You're so sweet when you're like this, and you know I love your face times a million."

Dropping my cheek to rest on the top of her head, I murmured, "I love you too," as I squeezed her a little tighter.

I wasn't one to be openly affectionate, either physically or with my words, so she was really getting the best version of me.

"I can't wait for the three of us to be spinster slayers who disappoint our parents for refusing a match."

Her words were a minor buzzkill, but I tried to hold back the groan at the reminder of all of our fates. *If only being a spinster were a viable option.* I would take it in a heartbeat and even adopt a bunch of cats to complete the lifestyle.

It felt like such an archaic tradition for slayers to be married by twenty-one to ensure our kind lived on. Our population, while not large in comparison to the vampires' ever-expanding one, was a highly skilled and trained group that was nowhere close to extinction.

And the thought that marriage equaled babies was ridiculous for multiple reasons. One being that not everyone wanted children and shouldn't be pressured to have them, and two, people can fuck and have kids without marriage.

Complete shocker, I know.

While we were all gifted with the blood running through our veins, the minor drawback was that it was harder to get pregnant for slayer women than typical humans. So the logic of the elders who established our laws was that if they ensured a union at a young age, it would encourage the couple to start trying at a younger age, giving them many fertile years together.

It honestly disgusted me if I thought about it long enough. I was never one of those women who saw myself as a mother. Hell, I couldn't even picture myself as a girlfriend to anyone right now. When I thought of the future, I imagined myself running point on missions and assisting my parents in leading the slayers. And in my down time, I'd be the really cool aunt to my best friends' kids if they wanted them. That was enough for me.

Despite my best efforts, a frustrated groan bubbled out of me as I lifted my cheek off of her head. "Don't remind me."

I hoped I could bring some change to the archaic slayer traditions once I was head of our house. It was the only positive part of taking on the role, in my opinion. I didn't care about the reverence or the power, but if it was going to be forced on me, I was going to use it for change.

The only part of the forced matching ceremony that I was thankful for was that we didn't follow the human tradition of the woman being taken in by the man's family and taking his last name. The slayer who was the most powerful would take their new partner into their House, no matter their gender.

I would, at the very least, be able to stay in my home and remain Alina Van Helsing. Nothing could take that from me. It was who I would remain until the day death came to hold me in its gnarled, cold grasp.

“I’m sorry, Alina. You know if I could change this for you, I would in a heartbeat,” she answered. Her somber tone matched how my heart felt at its core, despite being in the best company a girl could ask for.

It felt like the end of my freedom was drawing nearer with what the party entailed. Eligible men from each of the Houses would present their hand in marriage to me. If any of them had a fucking spine and didn’t bow to my every whim or desire because of who I was, perhaps that would be a welcome idea. If I was to be tied to someone for the rest of my life, I wanted a man who would challenge me if I was wrong. Who would help me grow as a person and bring out the best in me. I knew I was a handful, but as my grandmother once told me, “Never dim your shine for someone who thinks they’re going to be burned by your greatness. The right person for you will put on sunglasses and bask in your glow.”

Skye pulled back from my arms, her big silver eyes swirling with compassion. “You’re going to have to choose one of the potential matches tomorrow, Alina. I know we joke about it, but if you don’t decide, your parents will.”

And therein lay the true problem. Tomorrow wasn’t optional, no matter how many tears I shed. My parents tried to reassure me, saying there had to be at least one slayer I would get along with, and that perhaps it would be a whirlwind romance like their match had been.

My father was quite the bachelor and hadn’t wanted to be tied down, but from the moment my mom approached him on his match day, he had eyes for only her. If I didn’t see the love they held for each other every day, I would’ve said that shit only happened in fairy tales or romance books. But still, I was under no misguided notion that everyone could have that same dream ending.

“I think I need another shot,” I announced, shaking my head to clear away the depressing thoughts, feeling my buzz beginning to wear off.

Jade sashayed toward us from the bar, returning after having announced she was paying our tab a few minutes ago. She threw her arms around both of our shoulders. “I think it’s time to get her royal pain in the ass home.”

Narrowing my eyes at my other best friend and letting out a menacing growl, I snapped my teeth at her as if I had vampire fangs, drawing laughs from both of them. Then I sighed heavily, letting some of my resentment bleed into my tone. “But that means I’m closer to going to sleep and waking up to the worst day of my life.”

“Okay, Chomper,” Jade relented, her bright blue eyes full of sadness. “A couple more songs but no more drinks. Fair?”

They both understood my position, seeing as their own matches were only a few months away. It had been us against the world for so long, and sure we’d had some passing flings here and there, but no one had held our attention for long.

“Fine,” I huffed, disentangling myself from the girls who’d been by my side since we were first introduced at school.

Thankfully, slayers started training from a young age. As the only child in the Van Helsing home, I probably would’ve remained isolated and alone for far too much of my life otherwise. My parents were the youngest couple in our family, and I was doted on subsequently. While I loved my family, I still needed time away with friends.

There were numerous slayer family lines, but the Van Helsing House was the original and therefore ruling House. With that came a wide berth from the other Houses, supposedly out of respect, but it always felt more like a mixture of fear and resentment to me.

Skye and Jade were the only kids who hadn’t kept their distance or whispered about me behind my back on that first day, and we’d been inseparable ever since. I called them my best friends, but at this point, they were more like sisters.

Crossing over to the speakers, I grabbed my phone with the intention of finding one of my favorite songs, to end this night with a bang. But as the screen lit up, dozens of missed calls and text messages greeted me. Jade, Skye, and I had agreed to put our phones on “Do Not Disturb” so that our last hoorah before my doomsday would be uninterrupted.

Alarm bells went off in my head, and I called out sharply, “Guys! Check your phones!”

My mind was foggy from alcohol, struggling to understand the extent of what was happening, but two words stuck out that made all the blood in my body turn ice cold: *vampire attack*.

That sobered me up quickly, a rush of adrenaline replacing any remaining intoxication. Ripping the aux cord out of my phone, I ran toward the exit, heart pounding loudly in my ears. Skye and Jade called my name behind me, begging me to wait, to formulate a plan and meet up with other slayers, but I didn’t stop. I couldn’t. I had to get home. I had to do something.

How had the vampires broken through our wards? The witches from Carmina had put them up, and my parents paid an exorbitant amount of money each year to have them strengthened and maintained. It should’ve been tighter than a virgin asshole to get through. Like the veils between the planes of existence, it was set to only allow certain beings through it—with this one tied to slayer DNA.

Tears blurred my vision as I tried to call every family member in my home, screaming into the eerie silence of the night when no one picked up.

“Answer me!” I yelled, sobs choking me as the last ring sounded and my mom’s voicemail picked up again. Throwing my useless fucking phone to the ground, I sliced my nail into the palm of my hand, letting a tiny drop of blood spill as I called my soul sword to me. “*Devorare.*”

As slayers, our soul weapons were the only magic we were able to tap into. The weapons weren’t something we chose—they chose us. We received them in a coming-of-age ceremony where we spilled our blood and recited the ancient slayer code,

swearing our fealty to the cause. The magic didn't find everyone worthy of wielding a soul weapon, though those not chosen remained slayers nonetheless.

Those blessed with a weapon were revered for their skill in battle, with their history recorded for all future holders of their soul weapons to read and learn from. Each weapon could be wielded by only one slayer at a time, but when their life came to an end, it disappeared until it found the next worthy master.

My eyes flicked down to the flaming red sword. It burned brightly in the dark of night, and I worried about my lack of understanding of her. There was no recorded history of a sword with the name *Devour*, so I was flying blind trying to understand what exactly I wielded. I'd only had her for a week, and to say it wasn't going well was an understatement.

I called to the piece of us that was tethered intrinsically, hoping she would hear my plea.

Please, lend me your strength, Devorare. I need you now more than ever.

The wrought iron fence surrounding my home came into view, and the sight of decapitated bodies displayed on it, spikes protruding from their chests and bellies, nearly brought me to my knees. A strangled cry tore from my throat as I passed through the open gate and toward the marble stairs leading into my home. Wrapping my hand around my hilt tightly, my mind cleared a fraction as I let myself fall into the slayer mindset that had been drilled into me since birth.

Calm yourself. Tumultuous emotions can lead to your death and the deaths of those around you.

Focus. You cannot afford to become distracted for even one second, lest you give your enemy the opening they need.

Trust in your comrades to handle their part of the mission.

I slowed as I passed through the once-white front doors, now splattered with blood, scanning the foyer and keeping my breathing light in an effort to calm my racing heart. If any vampires remained, the organ beating loudly in my chest would practically offer them a meal on a silver platter.

The creak of a door sounded on the second floor, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as a chill crept through my body. Slowly ascending the steps, my body tensed in preparation of an attack, but none came as I reached the top. I swiveled my head around, scanning for any indication of where the sound came from.

“A—Alina...” my mother’s voice called, shattering my focus. I rushed toward the end of the hall, in the direction where the strangled word came from.

“Mom!” I cried as I dropped my sword to the ground, shoving away the splintered door that covered her body. Falling to my knees, I clutched her hand as I bit my bottom lip harshly. My eyes burned as tears fell, unable to hold them at bay as I took in the blood pouring from the gaping wound in her neck. A large chunk had been torn away by fangs, a death sentence for any slayer. We had some enhanced physical ability, with strength and sight topping that list, but we didn’t possess rapid healing capabilities.

My lips trembled as reality sunk in. My mother was seconds away from death, and there was nothing I could do about it.

I couldn’t wrap my brain around how this had happened. Never in the centuries that slayers had occupied Sanguis had an attack like this been successful. How had they been caught off guard? How many vampires had been here? How had we not seen any as they passed through the streets near where we were drinking to reach the houses?

While I had been drinking and feeling sorry for myself, they had been fighting for their lives.

Her inhale of breath was strangled and wet, squelching with the liquid filling her lungs. A deep rattling rose from her chest as she focused on the ceiling and rasped out, “Infected.”

My breathing stopped. Infected with poison or with vampire venom?

I was already shaking my head, trying to deny the second possibility, before she confirmed it with her next words. “Kill

me.”

Part of our vow as slayers was that we would never allow one of our kind to be turned. It was a fate worse than death.

“I can’t, Mom,” I choked out. My body shook, and tears dropped onto her face as I leaned over her body, cradling her to my chest. I couldn’t picture a world without her in it.

“You...” she breathed out, her lips next to my ear, “must.”

My sobs of agony were no longer something I could contain as they ripped out of me, echoing through our home.

Her body convulsed in my arms. This was the last chance I had before her heart stopped and the venom changed her. I couldn’t fail her in her last moments—I couldn’t live with that guilt for the rest of my life. Slayers believed if we were changed through vampire venom, our souls would no longer be welcomed into our ancestral resting place.

With a scream of heartbreak, I laid her down and picked up my sword. I stood, placing the tip of my blade between her ribs and lining it up perfectly with her heart. “I love you, Mom,” I said between choked sobs. “I’m sorry.”

Sliding the sword into her chest, I saw the relief fill her eyes before they dulled, life leeching out of them completely.

My mother was dead.

I had driven my sword into her heart.

It was like switching into a cold trance and operating on autopilot. I checked out mentally, incapable of handling the emotions crashing through me after losing her and all of those I’d seen slain outside.

Pulling my sword from her chest, I realized that if she had been infected, it was likely that more of my family had been as well. I stood no chance against them if they turned and I had to fight them alone.

I had to search our home for any survivors or victims, though. As the new head of the Van Helsing House, this was my duty. If any of them were on the edge, as my mother had been, I had to grant their souls peace in death.

As I looked over my shoulder to begin my search, my mouth opened to scream as three hooded figures stood before me. The closest figure gripped my face harshly enough to make me wince, my teeth drawing blood as they pressed into the insides of my cheeks. The other two figures grabbed my wrists, snapping them and making me cry out in pain as I dropped my sword.

“Dracula sends his regards,” a raspy voice announced before yanking my head to the side and sinking his fangs into my neck.

Searing, white-hot pain blossomed through me for a few agonizing moments until the world went dark.

[Amazon link: mybook.to/bite1](https://mybook.to/bite1)