

HOW MANY SECRETS CAN YOU KEEP?



THE
ELYSEAN
ILLUSION

THE HOLY BLOODLINES - BOOK 3

D.N. HOXA

THE ELYSEAN ILLUSION

THE HOLY BLOODLINES

BOOK THREE

D.N. HOXA

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Acknowledgment of Sources:

Some of the names and the descriptions of the Greek gods and goddesses, and their history in this book are loosely based on the information found in www.theoi.com, and on the D'Aulaires Book of Greek Myths.

I

“...for I am a wise and good god, am I not? I’ve given you an infinite number of failures, whereas you only need to succeed once.

Try. Try again. Get it wrong as many times as you need. Then get it right—ONCE.”

—God of Thunder, 9th Edition, 257

By William Gendar, House Ruby

ARTEMIS

2010

CARS DROVE by fast in the wide road and I kept my eyes on them, searching. I don’t know why I bothered when I knew they were gone. I no longer sensed them, not any of them, but I was still here. This was the last place I felt them before they disappeared to wherever they went to hide from me, and I was waiting, even though I knew it was in vain. Those few times a century I felt them, I was never fast enough to catch them. Never. It did wonders for my bruised ego.

Eventually, I went back to the park at the roadside, more dogs in it than people. The sun had already prepared to retreat for the day. Summer hadn’t started yet, but I was actually

looking forward to warmer weather. This winter had been cold, colder than the last few.

Or maybe I was simply getting more impatient.

“I’ll be damned,” I whispered to Gaea when I sat down, looking at my hands as I fisted them as if to test my strength. The Ichor in my veins seemed to have turned to blood lately. The more power Mother Earth sucked out of me, the less of a god I felt.

God—what a ridiculous word. There hadn’t been a true god in existence for a very long time now.

Yet here I was, after so many centuries, still searching. Still hoping. Still *trying* to survive. Gaea didn’t answer me—not that I expected her to. She didn’t talk to us much, not anymore. Not since the wedding. But I’d have appreciated a little help, and it was difficult not to be angry. My twin brother was cast in adamantine chains in the Underworld, powerless, suffering for long enough that it felt like an eternity, long enough that I was on the brink of forgetting how it used to be when he was free. Not only that, but I felt his pain, felt it all the way under my skin to the Ichor that was supposed to give me power to make or break worlds but didn’t. *Couldn’t*.

At least I was still here while Apollo withered away in Tartarus. And the coward who put him there hid better than anyone else I’d ever come across.

I had never known before just how good Eos’s Bloodline was at hiding. It had come as such a surprise, especially in the beginning, but I’d been searching for her descendants for as long as I’d been here, and I was still empty-handed. Even though I felt them just a couple months ago, I was still sitting here at the roadside, with only Mors to keep me company.

“*Fuck*,” I told the ground when the reality of the situation dawned on me more every second—I’d *lost* them.

After decades, I felt the descendants of Eos, goddess of dawn, forgotten by time like most gods. I’d chased them around the country for almost a year, only to lose them again. They were gone for good. Even now when I closed my eyes and reached deep within me, forced the Ichor that gave me life and strength to search the world for a sign of them, I came up empty-handed.

Whatever they did to keep hidden from my radar, it worked. They’d made themselves invisible to me once more.

And my twin was still stuck in the Underworld.

How dare you even let yourself get chained, you good for nothing fucking weasel?! I almost called out loud.

It was just the frustration speaking, though. So easy to judge my brother now, but the truth was, he’d had no choice. He’d tried. He’d fought. In the end, he’d lost.

If only I could free him now. If only he wasn’t trapped in that place, buried under rocks...

“Oh, my gods, he’s such a handsome boy!”

My eyes opened before I realized I’d closed them to see a couple walking by my bench. The blonde girl was looking down near my feet, wide eyes sparkling with adoration, hands to her chest and cheeks flushed.

“Thank you,” I said with a smile, then looked down myself when they continued ahead. “Hear that, Mors? You’re a *handsome boy*,” I told my hound, and he barely raised one head to look at me. Impossible not to laugh.

If that woman had seen him for what he truly was, she wouldn't have called Mors handsome. She'd have run away screaming instead.

Or maybe not—one just couldn't be too sure with mortals anymore. They'd veered so far off track that I feared even Father wouldn't be able to right the wrongs they'd done to their world and to themselves—too much freedom, too many rights, not enough consequences, too much space given to opinions and ideas that should be squashed before they spread like plagues among the weak-minded.

But Mors here wasn't bothered with those things. He was a three-headed hellhound that I disguised as a dog when I was out in the mortal parts of the world. His fur was a dark grey with two small patches of white on either side of his hips, and a long tail that could cut through the thickest hide when needed. His paws were bigger than both my hands together, and he was possibly over four hundred pounds by now—an old fucker was Mors. We'd been together...

"How long exactly?" I asked, but he barely looked up at me with his three sets of eyes, then complained with a whine I knew well. He didn't like it when I talked to him or asked him questions. Maybe because I annoyed him or maybe because he had no way of answering me—I guessed I'd never know.

"Go back to sleep, handsome boy," I said with a grin, and if the Cerberus could roll their eyes, Mors just rolled his at me before he settled his heads on his paws and continued to nap in peace.

His pups would be around here somewhere—the three that remained, that is. They would all go make their own place in the world eventually, like most of the initial eleven had, but I got the feeling that the female would stick around for a long

time. Female Cerberus weren't very friendly, and they usually ended up alone, just like Mors's mate had been when he found her, Father knew where.

Lucky for him, she'd given birth to only one female, for which I was thankful. Easy to keep her true nature invisible to mortals. The panic she and her two brothers would cause when running around the park, chasing flies and bees and butterflies, wouldn't be worth it. I had no energy to deal with screaming mortals right now.

Or with people wanting to *take pictures*. That could very well happen in today's world, and frankly, I had no idea which was scarier. I'd rather just keep them looking like ordinary pups instead.

But even so, I was tired. I'd been tired for a long, *long* time.

Leaning my head back on the bench, I looked up at the blue sky, at the large clouds and the pale half-moon already revealing herself in the sky, waiting for her turn to shine. I thought about what it was like when the universe was as it should be, when I was home, and when I was free to come and go as I pleased. When the Seasons weren't stuck somewhere in the Underworld, too. When the path to Olympus was open. When the Ichor in my veins burned with raw power, and I could make my arrows fly without even thinking about it. When I didn't see cities with my eyes for decades, and instead lived in nature, as I was made to do, together with my huntresses.

When I was Artemis, goddess of the hunt and the wild, protector of the young—not *this* person who couldn't even force a magic to reveal what it hid. Not *this* person who

couldn't find the one family that could potentially save my brother. Save *me*.

I closed my eyes again and released a long breath, aimless now. Purposeless. The chase had been fun this past year. A failed hunt, but better than most days stuck on Earth.

Now, the endless days and nights began again, and the wish to be able to perish with the winds returned.

2

SERA SINCLAIR

Present day

MEMORIES SPUN in my head and I called myself a liar. No way any of it was real—*no way*.

Those monsters, and Ethan, and his blood on my hands, and that underground cave...

The light that had felt like *death* before coming out of me and the fear in Max's eyes as he'd looked at me...

The way Shade had held my hand and Carmine's voice had shook when she told me all those things—withered mortal souls, Tartarus, *they're the reason why we need you*...

Too many absurd words that made no sense to me whatsoever, especially that last memory before my mind had shut down, possibly to protect me from the insanity that had become the real world.

Goddess Artemis. An actual goddess coming through the fucking window in the infirmary, while everyone—even Shade—had bowed to her.

Dreams. All of them, dreams. They couldn't possibly be real.

My eyes opened to the high ceiling, and I felt myself breathing. I felt the cold January air going down my throat, and I felt the energy in the room, too—I was not alone. Slowly, I turned my head to the side, half hopeful to find Shade there, half terrified that he wasn't alone.

Both my hope and my fear came true.

Shade was sitting at the corner of the bed, watching me, concern written in the storms of his eyes that weren't as violent as usual just now. There was silver in them. I loved it when his eyes glistened silver like that.

But the reason why he was concerned was behind him, in the middle of the infirmary, where there were armchairs and a round table that hadn't been there before. Carmine, Professor Totaj, Novak and Petrov were all sitting together with the woman who'd come in through the window. They were having tea.

I blinked a few times, sure the view would change into something that actually made sense, except it didn't. As senseless as it was, they were all there, having tea while they looked at me, and that wasn't all—a three-headed dog was lying on the floor near the legs of the woman's armchair. A fucking Cerberus, with dark fur and big black eyes, all six of them watching me.

Yep. Still a dream.

Except...

"Sinclair, join us," Carmine said, her voice almost hushed, like she was afraid to speak out loud properly. She even waved

at the two empty armchairs across from her and the woman. The stranger. The one she'd called *goddess*.

I looked at Shade as he slowly stood up and offered me his hand. "Can you stand?"

Holy fuck, this was actually happening.

I could put everything into the *just-a-dream* box, but not Shade. When he looked serious like that, and when he squeezed my fingers as if to say, *I got you*, no way could I ignore it. No way could I think this was a game or a joke or a stupid fucking dream. It was real, and I had no choice but to sit up.

Goddess Artemis was in the infirmary, and apparently, she wanted to have tea with me.

How ridiculous. How *absurd*. Once again, I cursed whoever was in charge of deciding what my life was going to look like. They were very shitty at their jobs—be it the Fates or Zeus or whoever, I didn't care. They *sucked*.

"Easy," Shade said when he helped me up to my feet and I swung to the sides a little bit. His hands were on my arms and I looked up at him, just absorbed the sight of him for a moment to gather myself. He was my fuel. All it took was a little focus on those eyes, and those beautiful lips that were the object of all my fantasies, and the heat of his body that comforted me better than anything else.

It was *Shade*. No matter what happened, Shade was here. I was going to be just fine.

The trust I had in this man should have scared me. As it was, I released a deep breath and attempted to smile at him. He still looked concerned, like he expected me to fall unconscious again any second, like I did last time. It wasn't

too long ago because the sun wasn't done retreating behind the horizon yet, even though they'd lit up the small lamps on the bedside tables of the infirmary.

"I'm okay," I whispered, knowing how worried he got when he thought I wasn't well. And I wasn't—far from it. But I had to see what this was. I had to listen to everything these people had to tell me first. Just...*listen*.

"You sure? Because we can take the night off," Shade told me, like he couldn't see that that woman, the one he'd *bowed* to earlier, was still there, sitting with a massive three-headed dog by her feet, drinking tea and waiting.

"I'm sure," I insisted because no way could I wait until tomorrow. "Help me sit?"

The corners of his lips turned up a bit. Not quite a smile but it was something. Then he laced my arm to his and turned to the others.

They all kept their eyes on me as we made our way to the table, to the only two empty armchairs that had seemingly popped out of nowhere right in the middle of the room. The Cerberus watched me, too, all those curious eyes following my every movement. I tried to pretend he wasn't there at all, and it was easy to do once I locked eyes with the woman who was apparently a goddess.

"Feeling okay?" she said with a tight smile. "You're not gonna pass out again, are you?"

Was her voice supposed to be different? Like more...*godlike*?

Because it wasn't. It was an ordinary woman's voice, sharp and melodic.

“No, I’m fine,” I managed to say, while Professor Totaj offered me one of those white cups with steaming tea in it. I took it just to have something to do with my hands, but the chamomile scent that filled my nostrils was pleasant.

“Good,” the woman said, and I was struck by how ordinary she looked, too, as she sat there.

Not *ordinary* exactly—just Elysean-like. Her hair was so long it fell in thick, golden-brown waves on her lap. Her eyes were the same color, like the inside of them was made out of liquid—honey or whiskey or melted chocolate. She wore brown leathers, the pants hugging her legs tightly while the jacket was a bit looser, and the white shirt underneath wasn’t silk but soft-looking cotton. She wore no makeup that I could see, but who needed makeup when she looked *like that*? Like a fucking drawing, a painting, a statue, a sculpture—*art*, not a real person.

“Drink your tea, Sera. We’ve got a lot to talk about. It’ll help keep you calm,” she told me, that tight smile still on her peach-colored lips.

I turned to Shade again. He was holding his cup on his lap, too, his eyes on me. I loved him for it—there was a goddess in the room with us, and the rest of us could hardly tear our eyes from her face, but all his attention was reserved for me. It made me feel a bit lighter.

So, when I turned to the goddess again, I was somewhat in control of my body, at least enough to speak without my voice breaking: “Are you really—”

“Yes, I am.” She cut me off before I’d had the chance to even ask properly. “Artemis, daughter of Zeus and Leto, goddess of the hunt, among other things—and very much *real*.” She blinked her eyes at me innocently. I had no thought

to think, let alone speak, so she continued, “And now that we got that out of the way, we can move on to the important things.”

Important, she said, like the fact that I was having tea with a goddess was something trivial.

“Which...which are?” I said, and my voice was back to a whisper, but it was the best I could do right now.

“*You*, Sera. You are very important,” she said with a grin that transformed her face completely and sent ice-cold shivers down the back of my neck.

You’re mistaken, I wanted to say.

I’m not important, I wanted to say.

I’m just a godless orphan, nothing else, I wanted to say, but my voice failed me completely now.

“I’m going to tell you a story, and I just need you to do one thing for me,” she said, holding up a perfectly manicured finger, the color of her polish a light nude almost the same shade as her skin. “*Believe* it. Everything I’m about to tell you is true, so believe it. I do not like to repeat myself.” She laughed a little. It was cold, that laugh, and it raised every hair on my body at attention. It was all I could do not to flinch.

Instead, I looked at Shade again, as if to make sure that his eyes were still on me—they were. Something about having him sitting next to me gave me comfort. I even felt the darkness under his skin; his Void connected to me better than it ever had before. That, too, calmed me.

Swallowing hard, I looked at the professors and the headmistress. Only Totaj smiled at me and nodded at the cup in my hands—*drink*, she mouthed.

I did.

“Right, then,” said...*the goddess?* Artemis? Arti?

The chamomile slipped down my throat, hot enough to burn me.

“About a millennia ago—nobody’s sure of the exact date anymore, to be honest, but it must have been a thousand years, give or take a couple hundred,” she started, reaching her hand over the armrest to scratch the left head of the Cerberus that was lounging near her. The eyes of the head she was touching closed, while the others tried to push it away so Artemis could scratch them instead.

Surreal.

“But we were at a wedding. My brother Dionysus was to wed Ariadne, though one couldn’t even tell if it was a consensual matrimony or not. Ariadne wasn’t much of a talker, and if she ever heard of expressing one’s feelings through the face, she ignored it,” Artemis said.

Ariadne, the woman Dionysus had fallen in love with while watching her sleep—it must have been *that* Ariadne she was talking about.

“She was indeed beautiful, of course, as are all things gods obsess over, so I got why Dionysus lost his drunken mind over her. Anyway,” she said, waving her hand, and all three heads of the Cerberus whined—they wanted her to keep scratching. She did.

This is all happening, a voice whispered in my mind, as if to make sure that I was believing what my eyes were telling me. Not sure if it made a difference, though.

“So, we were at the wedding, and we were all drinking, and the Nectar was pretty sweet, and Dionysus made the best

wine he'd ever made, and we *were celebrating*, you know?" she said like she was genuinely trying to explain herself—to me. "So, then *he* comes out of nowhere, and he strikes at once. Nobody saw it coming."

Artemis shook her head and grabbed her tea and took a sip, while the Cerberus heads whined in complaint. She ignored them this time and just kept holding her cup halfway to her mouth as she spoke, her strange eyes on the floor but not really focused, as if she were looking at an image in her head instead of what was in front of her.

"*Nobody* saw it coming, I tell you. If we did, we'd have stopped it. But we were drunk and we were dancing, and when he struck, it was like, *what the fuck?* Nobody even really believed it. Do you have any idea how strong my brother made his wine when he really wanted us wasted?" Again, she blinked and focused on me for one second, and she was genuinely asking me.

I had no voice to speak with, so I only shook my head.

"*Very* strong," Artemis said. "Stronger than any Elixir. Stronger than anything we'd ever had before because he took pride in that shit and it was his godsdamn wedding." Closing her eyes for a second, she sighed. "The thief stole everything," she then continued. "Took Father's Lightning Bolt and Poseidon's Trident and Hades's Helm of Darkness, too."

Her voice turned lower now as she stared into nothing once more.

"Hades, who *never* even leaves the Underworld, but you know why he came?" she whispered. "The wine. The fucking *wine* that Dionysus promised would be the best thing he'd ever tasted—better than Nectar. It was. It really was." Then her eyes focused on me again. "It just wasn't worth *this*."

What is this? I wanted to say, but again, my voice failed me. The others made no sound, either, as we waited for her to continue. It was all so fascinating I could almost see it. I could almost see the entire thing in my mind—a wedding of gods, wine and Nectar and dancing and laughing...

And then in one fell swoop, it was all over.

“You know what those are, right?” Artemis then said. “The Lightning Bolt and the Trident and the Helm?”

I blinked—how could I say *yes*? How could I say that I’d read about them and had thought they were really nice stories, creative and fun, if a bit over the top? *Stories*, not real life. Just made-up stories.

“The Cyclopes forged them for the First War of Gods,” Artemis continued. “They had much more power than any of us realized, or maybe the brothers relied on them so much for so long that they no longer knew how to fight without them? Either way, without their weapons, the gods became weak, and when the Seasons were kidnapped, too...” Her voice trailed off as she shook her head slowly.

“The...the Seasons?” Like those statues in the Daedalus Palace in the Seasons Hall, holding up those shimmery curtains?

“Yes, the Seasons. All four of them, kidnapped, so there’s no way to or from Olympus. There’s a few of us stuck here, but most are up there, unable to come down. And *we* can’t get home, either.”

Home, she said.

Olympus was her home. The mountain of the gods.

“I don’t understand.” I didn’t understand how they wanted me to just accept this, *believe* that it was real, *live* like this all

had actually happened.

“Not done yet,” said Artemis, and she continued to scratch the middle head of the monstrous Cerberus whining for her attention. “So, anyway, the cowardly thief had to make sure that there would be no way for us to get our power back. He wanted to keep us busy, too, so he opened up three of the seven portals that connect Earth to the Underworld, unleashed the daemons onto the surface, and disappeared to let us deal with the aftermath.”

I shook my head—so many words strung together with so little sense. “*Who?*” Who in the world would dare steal from gods, open portals, and disappear?

Artemis blinked at me. “Pay attention, Sera,” she said. “He stole the Helm of Darkness, too.”

The Helm of Darkness, the Cyclopes’ gift to Hades for freeing them from Tartarus. When he wore it, Hades became...

“Invisible.” Wasn’t that what the stories said? *The Helm of Hades*, so powerful not even gods could see through its magic. So powerful no magic could find it or force it to reveal itself.

“Exactly,” Artemis said, flashing me a grin. “The Helm was the first thing he stole while the rest of us were still drinking. Nobody saw him. Nobody...except my twin brother. He tried to follow him into the Underworld, tried to stop him, but he still had that wine in his system, and he wasn’t at his best when they fought, so the thief bested him. The thief imprisoned him at the bottom of the portal right here in Idaea.” She pointed a finger at the floor. “I feel him, even now.”

Goose bumps rose on my flesh. Such an incredible story.

“Did he see?” I wondered because, if they fought, then Apollo would have had to *see* the cowardly thief Artemis

talked about.

“He did,” she said now, sipping on her tea slowly. “He saw. And once we get to him down there, we’ll know exactly who’s behind all of this. *I’ll* know exactly whom to hunt down.” The grin on her face was downright scary. Easy to see that she was a predator, even with a soft beauty like hers. So easy to see how she would rip you apart piece by piece—not only without hesitation or an ounce of guilt, but she would enjoy it, too.

“Why haven’t you gotten him out yet?” I wondered. If this had happened a thousand years ago—*give or take a couple hundred*, she said—why was Apollo not out of the portal yet?

At that, Artemis flinched, then put the cup down on the table. “Because we can’t get through the daemons,” she told me.

Out of everything she said until now, *that* seemed like the most ridiculous, wasn’t it?

“Aren’t you a goddess?” What could a monster with a lot of mouths do against a goddess?

“I am...in a way,” Artemis said, and it was apparent that this part she *didn’t* like to talk about. “In a sense, I suppose—still immortal, still have Ichor in my veins, and I still can call out to my magic. But with the ties between Olympus and Earth cut off, I’ve gotten weaker over the years. And though the daemons can’t kill me, I can’t kill them as fast as I need to, either.”

There must have been a clock somewhere close by because I could have sworn I heard it ticking. Almost like the dream weaver sang when he pulled me into the Dream realm—*tick tock, mortal. Tick tock.*

I looked to the side and I was almost surprised to find Shade still there, still looking at me, and the others as well. They had barely moved, hadn't made a single sound, and it was like I'd been here all alone with this woman and her three-headed hound for the past half hour.

“So now comes the fun part,” she said after a minute, rubbing her hands together as she leaned forward to rest her elbows on her knees. “Now comes *your* part—the mortals. See, when we were faced with the daemons at first, we didn't have these walls to keep them contained, and there weren't nearly as many Elyseans in existence to stop them. Those who were had no clue *how* to go about fighting them at all. We had no clue about godlight at first. In fact, I'm pretty convinced it didn't even exist at the time, but I could be mistaken. My memory's not what it used to be.” She tapped her finger to her temple playfully. “But, anyway, it took a couple centuries to figure out that mortals can produce godlight when exposed to Ichor, and that godlight is pretty much the only weapon we have that is effective enough to actually kill a daemon. So, we began to harness it.”

I blinked and blinked and blinked, yet her words still floated around in my head, refusing to stick and make sense.

“At first, mortals knew, but as the years went by, they revolted. They ran. They became so scared that they poisoned entire generations against us—and godlight can only be used *willingly*, you understand? It can't be forced into or out of any mortal,” she slowly explained.

“What...what exactly is godlight?” I asked, surprised to find I even had enough voice. I knew what she was talking about, but that hadn't felt like *light* to me—it had felt like death instead.

“It’s Divine Light, Sera.” She arched a brow as if to say that I was supposed to know this.

Yes, that was in the name of the damn Academy, I got that—but had she forgotten that I was mortal and nobody had told us anything about *anything* since we’d gotten here?

She must have realized that, too, because Artemis continued.

“It’s an outburst of magic, if you will. We don’t know for sure, but we think it’s a manifestation of magic in its truest form, uninterrupted and undefined by spells or an Elysean’s divine nature—it simply *is*. And something about the light in it disrupts the magic with which daemons are created. It *expels* darkness, that light, to a deeper level than anything else we’ve seen so far, maybe even as bright as Father’s Lightning. And once the Houses were created and mortals were selected to help in our fight against the Underworld, it became more manageable.”

She spoke fast now, like she was afraid I might stop her and ask questions.

“The Elyseans created their own spaces, their own cities, and they created a structure that works, that has been working for centuries now. They created a system which we can all rely on.”

I almost burst out laughing.

“The Elysean Trials.” *That* was their structure. That was their *system* that they could rely on—basically lie to the entire world and have every kid out there dream of becoming a *god* when the truth was so much different...so much uglier than even *I* had realized.

Tears welled in my eyes, though I didn't intend to let them slip. All this time I'd been *right*. My God, I'd been right to think these people were monsters. And Shade had been right to not want me to be here, too.

"The Elysean Trials," Artemis repeated. "It's the only way we can select the best candidates out there and teach them to develop godlight and give them—"

"*Lies*," I spit, looking up at her face. "You give them—us—*lies*. You trick us. You make us think—"

"We spend our whole lives stuck inside these walls to protect the world out there as you know it," Carmine said from her armchair next to Artemis's, her wide blue eyes full of disbelief.

"But you *lie*," I insisted. "People out there deserve to know the truth. They deserve to know that the trials and this Academy doesn't make you *a god!* You lie to their faces, fill their heads with dreams—you lie!" Look at Miles—the way that kid dreamed of being here with these people, of being *accepted* as one of them...

"We do what we must," Artemis said, not nearly as riled up as Carmine. She wasn't even looking at me like she wanted to murder me. "If you want to blame someone, blame us. Honestly, your opinion of this is of little matter, Sera."

Damn. At least she was honest about it.

"What you make of our sacrifice is of no importance. This is how things are. I am not requesting your input on the matter. I'm simply telling you that the importance of mortals in our constant fight against the monsters of the Underworld cannot be ignored." She dragged herself closer to the edge of the chair. "But we've been waiting for someone like you for a

very long time now, and there's a good chance that with you on our side, we can finally put an end to this for good."

Holy shit, she looked like she genuinely meant every word she said.

"How could I—" But she didn't even let me ask.

"Godlight," she told me. "The godlight you produced last night was blinding. If you weren't in the Vault, the entire city would have seen it. I *felt* it all the way to my bones—outside. It's not enough to get us through the portal tunnel and to the Underworld, not right now, but I believe that once you consume my Ichor, you will be able to harness enough power to do it."

Slowly, she stood up and came to me, and it was all I could do not to run. But she came and she squatted in front of me, looking at me like I was the answer to all her damn prayers. It made me want to be wearing someone else's skin so badly.

"All I need is to get to the other side. All I need is to find my brother and free him," she whispered. "All I need is your godlight, Sera, and I'll have those portals closed in no time."

Not enough air left to breathe in the room.

Artemis smiled at me. From so close up, it was easy to see that she was different. Her skin looked to be made of something else, not *skin*, and her eyes were like galaxies of their own, and even the hair on her head seemed to be *alive* on its own, every strand breathing and with a heart beating inside it.

"Think about it," she then said and stood up abruptly. The way my soul about left my body in one second was almost funny.

"I-I-I—"

“Come to the portal with me. Kill daemons with me and get me to the Underworld. Then, you can ask for anything you want. Anything at all—you name it. That is my offer,” she said, sitting down on her armchair again with a proud smile on her face.

Then...

“No.”

Every set of eyes in the room turned to Shade.

He was no longer looking at me, but at Artemis, and my heart skipped one too many beats when I realized what he told her—*no*.

“What’s that, midnight caster?” Artemis said, like she really didn’t hear him, not really bothered.

“Sedorah is not going into the portal. She has been training for four months only. She produced that godlight by accident, in a highly emotional situation—she has no idea how to call it forth at will. She is in no way prepared to fight a daemon, and she will not be trying for the sake of trying, just so she can die before your quest has even begun,” Shade said, and the look on Carmine’s face alone said that this fear I had in my chest wasn’t unreasonable at all. She, and the other professors as well, thought Shade should have kept his mouth shut.

“And who are you—her lawyer?” the goddess said, a tiny bit irritated, a tiny bit amused.

It made me a tiny bit pissed off, too. “He is when he wants to be,” I said despite my better judgment.

Now Carmine and the professors all turned to me. Yes, I got it—I was a mere mortal talking to a fucking *goddess*, but I couldn’t help it. When had I known to keep my tongue in check?

“Ah, young love,” Artemis said with a sigh, shaking her head. “Look, I’m not gonna force anybody to do anything. I realize that Sera isn’t trained and would die if faced with a daemon right now, and nobody wants that. Me least of all. But that can be fixed. I’ll train her myself—how about that?” she said, raising her arms to the sides as she looked at Shade.

“That’s her decision to make,” he told her, and her grin widened but also became more menacing.

“Okay—Sera, what do *you* say to that?”

Fuck. My mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, but no sound came out of me.

“You have the chance to save us all,” Carmine then whispered. “Did you not hear the goddess, Sinclair? How can you even hesitate?!”

Was she fucking kidding me? “I was forced into your damn trials,” I reminded her.

“You weren’t forced—” she started, but...

“Enough,” said Artemis, and the power that laced her voice just now was so absolute, I couldn’t have spoken if I tried.

I looked at her, really looked at her, and she was *fierce*. I couldn’t even put into words how the air about her felt just now or how her eyes *burned* without fire. “You might have been forced into the trials—or even the Academy—frankly, I couldn’t care less. That’s all in the past, useless to talk about. What matters now is that I will not force you into *this*. And nobody will force you to stay in this Academy. Should you choose to leave, right now, you’re very welcome to walk out those doors. Do not waste my time talking about it—walk out.”

Her voice was transformed, too, as she pointed behind me at the doors to the infirmary, and suddenly they both pulled open without anybody touching them. The magic spreading in the air had a different feel to it than what I was used to. It was heavier but lighter at the same time, like silk against my skin, cold and soft.

And the temptation was there. A part of me wanted nothing more than to get up and walk out those doors right now, forget everything and just leave, start over, start fresh, *away* from this madness, away from gods and monsters and magic.

Yes, a part of me *begged* me to move, but I was stuck in that armchair all the same. Because if there was even a small chance that everything this woman was telling me was true, that there really were open portals to the Underworld inside these very walls, and if there were monsters pouring out of it, and if there was a chance that I could help...yeah, there was no way I was going to turn my back on it right now. I wanted to, I really did, but I wouldn't because then how was I going to live with myself for the rest of my life?

Artemis smiled triumphantly, like she could see inside my head and she knew she'd already won the battle. The doors to the infirmary closed and the scent of her magic, the feel of it in the air faded away little by little.

"But how?" I whispered. "I don't understand—if you're real, and so is Zeus, and so is *Hera*—"

"We're all real, Sera," she said. "We're just weaker apart. When Zeus took over his reign as Lord of the Universe, he shared his power with the gods and goddesses, and it remained shared. Every severed link in the big chain of magic we command costs all of us equally."

“So that’s it? That’s...that’s all you’re going to tell me?” I said, suddenly sitting on needles. Suddenly starting to really *believe* everything she’d told me. Putting the cup on the table, I stood up on shaking legs. “Some guy just came to a wedding and stole your things and then opened portals and kidnapped a bunch of gods, and you don’t even know *who* he is?!”

“That’s right,” Artemis said. “See? You got all of it.”

My God, she was serious—and the Cerberus lying by her legs already had all three heads raised as he watched me.

“Don’t mind Mors, he’s a gentle giant,” Artemis added, then proceeded to scratch the hellhound’s middle head again.

Mors. She’d named it *death*, and she was telling me not to mind the monstrous creature?

“Look, think about the *good* parts of the story. You know, where we finally find my brother, and then we hunt down the thief, and we close the portals—think about *that*.”

“Except that hasn’t happened yet,” I said, and bile rose up my throat. They expected *me* to go into a portal to the Underworld and make that light and fight monsters like the one Shade had killed with Avery Johnson, and—holy shit, that was *it!*

That’s where Shade went off to when he disappeared. That’s what he did at the Academy—he fucking killed monsters!

“Not yet, but it could,” Artemis said.

“I just need...I need to...” I was somehow in front of the bed now and there were hands on my shoulders—Shade was behind me.

“Breathe,” he told me. “Just breathe, Snowflake.”

I breathed, except the air wasn't making any difference.

“You're overwhelmed.” Artemis was standing right next to me now, too—when had she even moved?

When had *I*?

“I get it. It can be too much for anyone. But there really isn't much time, Sera. I'll let you sleep on it, but tomorrow, I'll need your answer. Do you understand?”

I wanted to talk. I wanted to look her in those strange eyes and tell her to get the fuck away from me, and at the same time I wanted to ask her about a million detailed questions.

I wanted to *disappear* out of here and lie down on the bed so badly, too.

I wanted to think clearly, and I wanted to forget with the same intensity—and wanting so many opposite things at the same time made me dizzy.

All I could do was sit down when Shade guided me to the corner of the bed. Sit down and breathe and focus on the warmth of his hands on mine. Footsteps all around me, and I could have sworn the large three-headed beast passed by me at some point, too, but I was too shocked to even move away or be afraid.

Eventually, there was silence in the room.

Eventually, Shade's arms were wrapped around me and he pulled me to his chest. “What do you say we go sleep in my room, huh, Snowflake?”

The best I could do was nod as the tears slipped down my cheeks in silence.

The next second, the Void took away the world around us, and I let go.

3

Metis, goddess of prudence, was Zeus's first wife, and he was always in need of her good advice. But Gaea, Mother Earth, warned him that if Metis were to give him a son, he would dethrone Zeus just as he had his father, and just as Cronus had dethroned his father Uranus, too.

But the Lord of the Universe could not make do without Metis's wise council, so he decided to swallow her instead of banishing her out of Olympus.

To this day, Metis lives in Zeus's head and guides his every move from there.

—**Book of Creation, Volume III, 1st Edition, 501**

by Emilia Marvos, House Emerald

THOSE DREAMS CHASED ME AGAIN, even though I was aware I was in the Void, sleeping in Shade's arms.

"*You're glowing,*" his voice whispered in my ear, and it reached me with perfect clarity, even though sleep refused to let go of me. My body was exhausted. My mind even more tired still. All that information I'd acquired the last time I was awake was *consuming* me. It was consuming me while it tried to make sense to me.

And those dreams didn't help.

I was in a boat this time—how strange. I'd never been on a boat in my life, but in this dream, I felt it all. I saw it all, even experienced the nausea that hit me the more the boat rocked with the coming waves. It was twilight and the sky was an explosion of colors, purples and oranges, reds and burgundies, and I couldn't get enough of looking at it as I held onto the railing with both hands and tried to ignore the rising bile in my throat. Boats made me sick in this dream, though it felt like I *loved* traveling in them. I could even hear the thoughts in my head in the dream—*if I were able to create like a Muse descendant, I'd put an emerald into the sky and watch those colors come to life, paint the world differently*, I thought.

Or the person I was in that dream thought.

And then came that familiar ache, the one I still couldn't explain but always had across all those dreams, no matter who I was in them or in which timeline or which place I happened to be in. It was a throbbing pain right in my gut that came from missing something so much it almost made me physically sick—so much worse than the rocking boat. I missed *magic*. I missed feeling it vibrating in my fingers, and right now, in the dream, as I looked down at my hands, I imagined what it would feel like to just release it into the world, set it free, see what it did, see if it was as bright as the sun falling behind the horizon, drenched in all those colors.

But the voice in the back of my head, this time that of a man's, was there to warn me just like in all the other dreams—*no magic, not for any reason, ever*.

No magic.

Squeezing my fists around the railing once more, I continued to watch the sky in silence, until the ache in my gut faded away together with the light of the sun.

IT WAS ALMOST strange to open my eyes and find myself in the real world. Those dreams lately had such a good grip on my mind that it felt like they were my *real* life sometimes. Especially when they lasted longer.

That horizon had been so beautiful. Those colors were imprinted on the back of my lids still, but the more I blinked, the less of them I saw. The more I blinked, the more I realized where I was lying—in Shade’s arms, in his bed, in his room, looking at the picture of that house on his desk, the only one he had framed.

He was behind me, cocooning me in his arms like he knew exactly how much I needed his touch, and it was okay. I was overwhelmed and my train of thoughts kept crashing every few feet, but he was there and it was okay.

He must have realized I was awake because a moment later, he started kissing my hair slowly and rubbing my knuckles with his thumbs. Both my hands were in his.

“Is that where you go to?” I whispered, and in the complete silence of his room, my own voice startled me.

“It is,” Shade said, slowly raising his head up until his cheek was pressed to mine.

“You fight those things all by yourself?” That monster with all those mouths and the sharp teeth and the black tongue in the hallway...

“Not by myself, no. With my team. With the mortals who’re currently serving in the battlefield,” he said, like it was the most natural thing in the world to talk about.

Shivers ran down the length of me.

“That’s...that’s...” I had no word for it yet. *Insane? Ridiculous? Absurd?* All of that, but also more.

“It’s the way of our world, Snowflake,” said Shade in my ear, then kissed my cheek. “How are you feeling?”

I had no answer for that, either. I was feeling like I should have been dead or someone else or someplace else, but also like I was right where I belonged at the same time. Those contradictions were going to be the death of me.

“Why do you have the picture of that house on your desk?” I asked instead. “Is that where you grew up?”

“No, that’s a house I saw once when I was out there in the mortal world.”

“Whose house?”

“I don’t know,” Shade said.

“So, why do you keep it there?”

“Because it was perfect,” he said. “I saw it and I understood it. I understood everything it meant. Everything it represented. A simple, ordinary, beautiful life. Just...perfect. I like looking at it sometimes.”

I smiled before I realized it, then turned my head to the side until I reached his cheek. “Do you want to live in a house like that one day, and have a simple, ordinary, beautiful life?”

“Well, now I can’t. It’s become impossible,” he said, pressing his lips to mine gently.

“Why not?” We could make that house, couldn’t we? It didn’t look complicated.

But he said, “Because *you’d* have to be there, too. And there’s nothing ordinary about you, Snowflake.”

My toes curled and I held perfectly still as he kissed my face slowly. There were so many things I needed to understand still, but for that moment, I didn't care that it was still dark outside the windows, and I didn't care what time it was. I just cared about everywhere we connected, every ounce of his warmth that I soaked up until I felt a tiny bit better about myself.

“How does that work exactly? Is that really why the Elysean Trials exist?” I asked eventually because I still couldn't wrap my head around the fact, knowing how the world outside viewed these people and these challenges.

“It is, yes,” Shade said without hesitation. “Most students who graduates the Academy have to complete two years of service in the battlefield before they can continue with their lives. It's basically part of the program. Some choose to remain here, while others—*most*—move on in the City and never return. We all fight them, but we can't really do much without mortals and their godlight.”

Mortals and their godlight. As impossible as it sounded, when he said it, I understood—we *saved* them. We saved ourselves, too, but we saved Elyseans as well, just as much as they saved us.

God, so many things made so much more sense now. The talk with Ivy and Cyth, Liam and Bailey, Shade's team. The conversation between Shade and Carmine I spied on that night. Combat Training. The formations Professor Kovak insisted we keep, and how he was always telling us to stand back and let the Elyseans protect us...

“I saw it,” I whispered, turning over on my back so I could see the window and the balcony door in his room better. “That night I was in your room, I saw the light. I saw...*godlight*”

coming from out there.” I’d just had no idea what it was. I’d been so sure it was lightning, but it had been godlight. A mortal had been down there fighting while I’d been hiding in Shade’s room the night they continued their celebrations, even after Marie’s death.

“You can’t really see the battlefield from anywhere in the Arges. The mountain shields it from our view, but you can see some of it. The tents. And you probably saw Hob’s godlight,” Shade said.

I turned to face him. “*Beatrix* Hob?” She was one of the mortals who’d completed the trials about six years ago. We’d seen her in that video that Angel had showed us while we were still in the Palace. She was one of Miles’s favorite people in the world. He’d showed me pictures of her a couple hundred times and I’d judged her. I’d always judged her.

“Yes, that Hob,” said Shade, keeping his lips pressed to mine, and his hand on my neck and cheek. I loved the feel of it. “She has more godlight in her than most mortals in the past two centuries. You can see it when she uses it from very far away.”

I sighed. “She’s still here.” Six years. That was a long time...

“She chooses to be. She likes fighting, I think, more than most. She’s a very skilled soldier,” Shade said, and it was obvious that he respected her. I could tell just by the way he spoke.

“You chose to stay here, too, didn’t you.” That’s why he was still at the Academy.

“I did, yes. I extended my stay for another year,” Shade said.

I turned and wrapped my arms around him, too. “And you’re still here because of me.” I’d heard him and Carmine talking.

“I’m here because I wanted to keep fighting,” Shade said, and I knew it was because he didn’t want me to feel guilty about it. I loved him even more for it, but I was so done with secrets. I was done with lies. We were too closely connected now, Shade and I. There wasn’t any room left for secrets between us.

“I heard you and Carmine talking that day when you found me in your room,” I reluctantly said. “Accidentally, but I heard you.”

Shade froze for a second, then leaned back to look at my face. I refused to open my eyes, ashamed of what I just admitted to.

“Snowflake, look at me,” he said, and I shook my head.

“I didn’t mean to, but I heard your voice and I just...I stayed.” I should have come back inside his room that night, but I didn’t. I stayed in the hallway and listened deliberately. “I heard all of it.” I heard about how Carmine had convinced his uncle to give me an invitation to the Academy just to get Shade to stay, too. And if it was possible, I hated that man *more* already—he knew how Shade put himself in danger fighting monsters every day, and he wanted to keep him here?! What kind of an uncle does that?

“Okay,” Shade said, and he sounded...*amused*. “Look at me, beautiful. Open your eyes.”

So, I did, only a slit.

Shade was smiling.

“You’re not mad?”

“I could never be mad at you, Snowflake,” he said, kissing the tip of my nose.

“Do you regret it?” I whispered because even though I knew, I still wanted to hear it. I didn’t want any doubt haunting me over this at all.

“Regret staying here for you?” he said, shaking his head, kissing me harder. “Never, not for a second. I’d follow you beyond worlds, Snowflake.”

I about melted right there in his arms. “You seemed pretty pissed when I told you I was gonna come here that day at the tower, so just making sure,” I said, smiling.

“Can you blame me after seeing those things?”

“Not really. I don’t want you anywhere near them, either.” They were monsters—real life monsters that had him coming back covered in blood every time he left. Of course, I wanted him as far away from them as possible.

Shade chuckled that sound that warmed me to my bones. “I had a problem with you choosing to follow *me*, Snowflake. It wasn’t just because of the daemons, but because of the Academy, too.”

Shivers rushed down my back as the memory of Marie lying on the hallway floor took over my mind. “Is Ethan gonna be okay?” I whispered against his lips, tears stinging my eyes already. My hands felt so, so filthy. Covered in blood still, even though I couldn’t see it.

“He is. He’ll pull through,” Shade said, and I believed him. I always believed him about everything.

“I didn’t mean it.” If I’d known it was Ethan, I’d have never stabbed him. God, I’d have *never* fought back...

“You should have.” Shade leaned back to look into my eyes. “I was wrong to be so afraid of you coming here, Snowflake. You’re so much stronger than I realized at first. But strength means nothing if you don’t use it, if you don’t *mean* to use it, no matter who you’re up against.”

“But he’s like me.” Ethan, who just wanted to play ball, whose dad beat him with a tire iron. Ruined his life, and his mother’s life, too.

“And his actions are his responsibility. He makes his choices for himself. It’s his job to realize that he’s like you, too, but it’s *your* job to protect yourself, Snowflake. You can—but you have to *want* to,” Shade said.

I nodded because he was right. I understood—I’d want the same thing from him. I’d wanted the same thing from Maia, too, in the trials—*take care of yourself first*, I always told her.

But the guilt still suffocated me.

“I know this is a lot to swallow all at once. I wish I could have told you all of this differently,” Shade whispered, pulling me closer until I was almost lying on his chest.

“Yeah, I guess you could say that it’s a bit much,” I tried to joke.

“It is, but you’ll handle it. With that godlight coming out of you, you can handle anything.”

“Was it a lot?” I wondered.

“Oh, yes.”

“Like Beatrix Hob?”

Shade chuckled. “About a hundred times more, at least.”

I leaned back myself this time. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, Snowflake. Absolutely,” he said, running his fingers down the curve of my cheek as he looked at me, so in awe you’d think he beheld all the wonders of the world. “I’ve never seen anything like it. It was so pure. Almost like it *wasn’t* godlight.”

Goose bumps rose all over me. “It felt like...it felt like *death*.”

Shade kissed my forehead. “It feels like dying, yes. That’s how others explain it, too.”

Huh. So, just when I became *the biggest freak ever*, turns out I’m not the only one.

I wondered what it was like for Beatrix. And Avery, and Arthur, all the others...

“I still can’t believe you just *walked* into the Void, Snowflake. I still can’t wrap my head around it,” Shade said after a minute.

“*That’s* what surprises you?” I said with a laugh.

“It’s the only thing that does, yes. I’ve never seen anything like that, either. I don’t get how you’re able to...withstand it,” he said, and again, he looked down at me like he was in awe.

“I don’t think I *withstand* it. I’m just...there.” The Void was one of the safest places I’d ever been to. Nothing was more comfortable than its darkness.

“Of course, you do. When it becomes as destructive as it was last night, Snowflake, it destroys *everything*,” Shade said in a whisper. “It should have done to you exactly what it did to the hallway.”

“Oh,” I breathed, at a loss for words for a moment. After Shade’s darkness outburst, the hallway had been completely

ruined. The walls, the marble floor, the doors simply gone...

“Yes—*oh*,” Shade said. “It’s what the Void does. Consumes everything in its path.” With his nose, he nudged my face up until he reached my lips with his. “Yet somehow you conquer it.”

He kissed me, and I felt how *glad* he was for the fact in the way he held me to his chest, but this wasn’t a good thing. The Void felt so normal to me. So perfectly safe, and to know that it was one more thing on the list of *impossibilities* that followed me around like a dark fucking cloud every step I took made me want to break something. It terrified me.

“What’s the matter?” Shade said when he felt my hesitation.

“A lot,” I muttered, squeezing my eyes shut. “A lot is the matter, Shade. So much—*everything!*” And the panic kept on climbing. “You heard me in the Void, didn’t you? You...you remember what I told you?”

“Hey, look at me,” Shade said, grabbing my face in his hands and stopping me until I had no choice but to meet his eyes. “Breathe, Snowflake.”

“But—”

“I heard you. I remember all of it. *Breathe.*”

He remembered all of it.

Closing my eyes, I let go of a long breath. I supposed it was okay. If Shade heard me, and he still thought there was room to *stop and breathe*, then there was.

“Good girl,” he whispered, kissing the tip of my nose, spilling heat all over me—I had no idea what it was about

those words when he said them. My body loved to hear his praise.

“I can see godstones,” I said in a shaky voice.

“Mhmm,” Shade said.

“And I saw faces of gods in every trial. It’s how I knew how to get out.” I wasn’t supposed to see that. Nobody else had.

“I-I-I *feel* magic. I smell it. I *see* it. It’s so obvious.” That first time Professor Cavnic showed us in Introduction to Magic with his lizard familiar, it had been so easy to see it.

“And you were brought back from the dead when you were five years old,” Shade said.

My eyes closed again, and I focused on breathing. “I was there,” I whispered, and he never stopped touching me. Never stopped kissing me. “In the last trial, when I disappeared, I went to this place that could have been the Underworld and I was made to drink from the Mnemosyne to pay for the memories I took from the Sphinx with one of mine. The goddess chose the night my parents died, Shade. I saw all of it from the outside. All of it, in detail.”

And I told him about it.

I’d never dared to speak freely about everything that went on in my head with anyone before. I’d never even thought I could say those words out loud the way I was doing right now, but it was just as easy as spotting magic. The words didn’t get stuck in my throat. My tongue didn’t tie. I told Shade everything exactly as I knew it, about my parents, about Peter and Tobias and Max’s father, and with each new word I got lighter. My limbs moved easier. My mind wasn’t as chaotic, but there was some order to my thoughts now, too.

Shade was silent for a long time after, just playing with my hair, kissing my head, running his hands up and down my back while I rested on his shoulder. My eyes drifted shut slowly, the heat of his body lulling me to sleep. I thought for sure everything I talked about until now would be behind my closed lids, waiting to terrorize me as soon as I fell asleep. Instead, my mind was empty, like I'd taken every single thought inside of it out while I spoke. All I saw and all I felt was Shade.

“Sleep, Snowflake,” I thought he whispered in my ear.

I slept.

4

“The secret to life is that there is no secret: all suffer. All break. All experience some kind of happiness. All feel. That is all there is to it.”

—**God of Thunder, 9th Edition, 250**

By William Gendar, House Ruby

WHEN I WOKE UP, I was in my room, with a tulip on my desk that made my heart skip one too many beats.

It was the same tulip, the petals like velvet, the red of them so dark it looked almost completely black. It smelled like honey, but better.

Bringing it close to my nose, I breathed in its scent and tried to calm my already racing heart. So much was going on around me now, but there were no more secrets between Shade and me. I’d seen and I’d heard and I’d even *understood* so much more than I thought I was capable of yesterday, but most importantly, I’d shared. For the first time in my life, I’d trusted someone so much that I’d told them everything as it was in my head. Every truth as raw as I knew it.

It worried me.

While I showered and got dressed, it worried me because I hadn't woken up with Shade, and I hadn't seen his face and I didn't know what he thought of everything yet. I had no clue if he even believed me or if he thought I was crazy—I didn't know. My shoulder hurt a bit, and I had three raw red claw marks on my skin from where the beast Tiger Gilis had shifted into had slashed me, but the pain was manageable. The healer had really done an incredible job on me. I could move my arm just fine, and as soon as I went downstairs, I'd search for Shade. There was no reason anyone was going to stop me from seeing him now—they all knew.

I was a mess of nerves as I put on the only sweatsuit I had. Classes were over and I had two whole weeks off. Two weeks to figure all of this stuff out. To ask questions. To put pieces together.

Yes, it was scary, but I was excited, too. So damn excited to finally know the truth about what went on around me, so when I opened the door, I was ready to start running to go find Shade.

I did not expect to find *her* standing there with her pet hellhound, smiling at me instead.

The scream that wanted to rip from my throat almost knocked me out cold when I stopped it. None other than goddess Artemis was standing in my doorway, dressed in leathers, with her beautiful hair gathered in a high ponytail, her face a mask of perfection.

“Morning, Sera,” she told me, and all three heads of her Cerberus—Mors—turned to the sides as they analyzed me.

“Morning,” I choked, holding onto the door just to keep my balance as the shock of seeing her there faded away. But

then she stepped forward and into my room like she owned it, and Mors came in right behind her.

My legs moved on their own and I backed away fast. A thought occurred to me— *there's a goddess and a Cerberus in my room*. Somehow it seemed too ridiculous to believe, despite the fact that my eyes proved it, so I ignored it altogether.

“Nice place you got here. So...tiny,” Artemis said, slowly spinning around the middle of the room as she took everything in. “Not much space, but it’s clean,” she added, as if she were trying to convince herself that she didn’t hate my room.

Meanwhile two heads of her pet hellhound sniffed the bed and the marble floor a couple times, while the one in the middle growled at them—were they three different dogs stuck together or one dog with three heads? Because it seemed to me that the one in the middle was *reproaching* the others right now for sniffing the floor, and was trying to pull them toward the door.

I moved farther away from it, toward the corner, just in case.

Then Artemis met my eyes. “So, I let you sleep on it, and here I am. Have you come to a decision yet?”

Oh, God. My mouth opened and closed a million times. Her brows shot up slowly...

“Stay with me, mortal. You remember what I said yesterday, right? Work with me or walk out of the Academy. Nobody will force either choice on you—it’s all up to you, but I will need an answer. *Now*.” She pressed her lips into a tight smile. “So, Sedorah, tell me—will you stay and fight, or will you walk away?”

She said it like she really believed it was a choice. “Of course, I’ll fight.” How the hell would I live with myself if I walked away now?

I wouldn’t. Not in a million years. I’d already decided this yesterday when she was still explaining things to me. I’d just been too overwhelmed to tell her.

“Great, then,” Artemis said, rubbing her hands together, not surprised in the least. “We’ll be training first thing. Just grab something to eat real quick.” She then pointed at my sweatpants. “That’s not gonna work—you need your leathers. We’ll be training with real weapons.”

“Oh,” I breathed, unsure about anything at this point.

That was *it*? That’s all she was going to say—*great, then*?

Fuck, it was getting so hard to breathe, especially when Mors was looking at me with all three sets of eyes as he made his way toward the door slowly...

“Like I said yesterday, Sera, Mors won’t hurt you unless you provoke him, so *don’t* provoke him. Don’t try to touch him, don’t make eye contact, and you’ll be just fine,” Artemis said. “But I really need you to hurry up now because we need to train you, get you ready. We’ll be training two times a day, three if there’s enough time.”

“Excuse me?” I choked—did she say *three times*?

“Only until classes begin, of course,” she said, as if that made a difference. “C’mon, take your clothes off.”

Oh, God. My head was spinning.

“I will—as soon as you get out.” I nodded at the open door.

Artemis rolled her eyes—such a *human* thing to do, wasn't it? “What, you think I've never seen a woman's body before?” she said. “You mortals and your ridiculous ideas of *privacy*—it's your body, the same body everyone has. Everyone knows what hides behind your clothes.” But at least she was moving toward the door, watching me through the corner of her eye.

“I bet the midnight caster knows better than most, am I right?” She smiled, but it didn't really reach her eyes when she stopped in front of the door. I was still in the corner, trying to pretend I wasn't terrified of her being in my room... “You do know that light and darkness cancel each other out, right?”

I blinked. “What?”

“Light and darkness. They cannot coexist. It's the nature of things.” With that, she walked out of the room and closed the door behind her, leaving me staring at the wall in wonder.

They cannot coexist... what the hell did she even mean by that?

Closing my eyes, I decided I wasn't going to think about it at all right now. I was just going to put my damn uniform on, and I was going to go find Shade the first chance I got.

By the end of this day, I was going to learn how to handle the presence of the goddess and her three-headed pet even if it killed me.

THE HALLWAY LOOKED *BRAND NEW*.

I stopped at the top of the stairs while Artemis and Mors continued ahead, but I couldn't bring myself to move for a good minute. Every inch of the marble that had been ruined the night before, every piece of wallpaper and every door that had been in pieces or reduced to ashes was now brand new.

Fixed. A copy of what it had been before Shade lost control of the Void and ruined it.

My God, they'd made it look like it had never even happened. And as incredible as magic was, as fascinating to me, this was proof that *anything* could be achieved with it. Anything remade or erased—anything at all.

Eventually, I got myself together and continued to walk down the stairs. I could have sworn even the pattern of the black and grey and white marble on the floor was the same. Fuck, there really was no limit to what these people could do.

Artemis and Mors remained in the hallway while I went to the Caprae to grab a bite, so I literally had a few minutes only. My mind was still stuck on the way they'd fixed that hallway, so thoroughly, so fast, so when I opened the doors and I realized the Caprae Hall wasn't empty, I froze again.

Max and Mave hadn't left the Academy for the two-week break. They, together with Nick and only a handful of other Elysean students were sitting at the long table, eating.

Max had been sitting alone while Mave pretended to be listening to a Sapphire girl on the bench opposite her, but her attention must have been on him because the second he saw me, he jumped to his feet, and so did she.

"I can't stay," I told Max even before I made it to the bench, half my attention on Nick sitting a few seats to the side.

"What? What do you mean?" Max said, looking me up and down. "Are you okay? What the hell happened?!"

Mave was already rushing around the table to get to us.

"Nothing," I said, then flinched. "Well, a *lot of* things happened, but I can't stay. I have to train."

“It’s winter break,” Mave said when she was by my side, and she, too, looked me up and down while she pretended she wasn’t worried. “We don’t have training for two weeks, remember?”

“Actually, *I* do,” I reluctantly said.

“Sera, what the hell are you talking about?” Max said. “Just sit down for a second. C’mon, sit.”

“I can’t—”

“He won’t let me near him at all when you’re not around,” Mave said, pointing her thumb at Max. “So, how about you sit *with me* instead just to remind him how big of a prick he’s being?”

Oh, God.

“We both know you’d rather hang out with your friends,” Max spit at her, nodding across the bench.

He either really was blind, or he just didn’t get anything at all.

Mave’s jaw hit the floor. “I came to talk to you *twice* and you—”

“Guys, stop it!” I hissed, already feeling overwhelmed just standing between them. They really were an exhausting pair when they argued like that. “Just stop. I can’t talk right now. I gotta go. Can you stop bickering for one day while I’m gone?”

Max looked down at the floor, his soft golden-brown curls bouncing around his head like usual. He was wearing a white shirt with some light jeans and red sneakers, and it occurred to me that I’d never seen him without the uniform on before. He looked good. He looked really, really good.

Mave, too—she wore a dark red dress with golden buttons and a detailed V-neck, and a floral pattern to her pantyhose that looked sexy as hell on her.

It really was winter break, it seemed, and that reminded me. “Why in the world haven’t you left the Academy, anyway?” They were supposed to be out there like everyone else. Elyseans didn’t need to stay in the Arges like us mortals.

“I’m not just gonna leave you here alone,” Max said with a snort, like I’d offended him with my question.

“And *I would*, but my family’s gone skiing in the Swiss Alps, so I’m stuck here with the likes of you,” Mave said, pushing her hair behind her shoulder dramatically.

She was full of shit, though. She stayed because of Max—and maybe because of *me*, too. A tiny bit.

I sighed. “Here’s the deal. Hang out together or don’t, but I will come find you the second I’m done training, okay? And I need to borrow that sandwich for a sec, Max. Go get more at the buffet because I have to go.” I grabbed the sandwich he’d only started to eat from his plate without warning.

“Are you deaf or something?! We *don’t have* training!” Max insisted.

“I’ll explain everything later, I promise,” I said, then went a bit closer to the middle of the table, to Nick.

He, like the other five Elyseans, was watching me, and though there was a chance he’d lash out at me just for talking to him, I still wanted to say hi.

Dropping the fork on his plate, Nick turned to me with his whole body on the bench. He wore a red shirt and jeans, too, and he looked like a completely different person without his uniform. The scars on his face that the others in the Palace said

he'd gotten from underground cage fights had all but faded completely.

"You okay?"

Nick nodded. "You?"

"I'm fine," I muttered, just now remembering the side of my waist where Ethan had stabbed me. But the dagger hadn't been able to penetrate my vest deep enough to cause damage, and the healer had already erased every trace of the wound from my skin. Only my shoulder throbbed with pain, but it was still very manageable.

"You think he killed Marie?" Nick suddenly whispered, like he'd been waiting days to say those words out loud, and my heart tripped all over itself.

The thought had occurred to me that morning when I was showering, but I'd been about to lose it two minutes in because the truth was...

"I don't know." Neither of us knew and we'd have to wait for Ethan to wake up and question him before we found out for sure.

Nick nodded again, cheeks red and eyes suddenly glistening. It felt like there was more he wanted to say to me. And I had more I wanted to say to him, too—*let's stick together. Let's watch each other's back.*

But one thought of the truth, the actual truth and the real reason why we were here, what we'd already seen in the Vault...

"I'll see you later," I told Nick and stepped back.

"If he wakes up and they let you see him, I want to see him, too, before he leaves," he said. The best I could do was

nod.

If Ethan woke up, I was going to see him no matter what anyone had to say on the matter, and I'd try to make sure Nick could see him, too. I just prayed with all my heart that he *did* wake up. The rest we could figure out.

"Don't take long," Mave told me, arms crossed in front of her and chin raised as she looked down at me. I blew her a kiss so I could watch her pretend to be irritated.

"Pesky mortal," she told me, wrinkling her nose. Max grinned, satisfied.

"Elysean prick," I muttered, then bit into the sandwich. "See you later."

They both waved at me, half relieved and half glad to be left in each other's company.

When I walked out of the hall, Artemis and her pet hellhound were nowhere to be seen.

"WELCOME TO MY ARENA, MORTAL," she said the second I opened the doors to the Artemis Arena.

I'd had no idea if she would even be here, but I knew of no other place in the Arges meant for training, so it had been my first guess.

Artemis was indeed standing in the middle of the Arena with her arms spread to the sides, her leather jacket off her, resting on a bench, her silver bow and arrows strapped to her back still. Her hellhound was lying near the benches, all three heads raised, six big black eyes on me. Very hard not to feel exposed in front of that creature. I could have sworn those eyes saw under my skin and straight into my mind.

“I designed this myself,” Artemis told me as I approached her. “Neat, isn’t it? Look at Poseidon. He sure motivates you to keep going.” And she pointed up to the glass ceiling of the Arena.

From here, we could see all of the two-hundred-foot statues of the gods with crystal eyes that loomed over the Arges looking down upon us, but none was clearer than Poseidon’s face. It was twisted into a snarl that looked so real it was hard to imagine he wasn’t breathing. His teeth showed and his eyes made out of two large sapphires glistened under the morning sunlight, but they looked much scarier in the dark of the night. It definitely didn’t motivate me to keep going—it scared me shitless instead. The first time I saw it, I’d been sure it would stomp us to death any second.

“Who else?” I wondered as I looked around the Arena with a new eye now—the Artemis Arena, designed by Artemis herself. How strange. The mats, the walls, the benches, the weapons—it all looked a bit different to me now. Not better, per se, just *different*.

“Who else, what?”

“Who else is down here?” Which god had been stuck here on Earth when the Seasons were kidnapped?

Was that really real? the voice of reason whispered in my head. Very, very difficult to accept that the past two nights had really happened. That this person standing here in front of me was who she said she was.

But then again, a look at her face, at the quality of her skin that looked like plastic, at the way her ponytail moved around like it didn’t feel earth’s gravity at all, the way her eyes looked like they were made out of a million tiny crystals in every

shade of brown to have ever existed—it was also very difficult to believe that she was like me or like the rest of Elyseans.

“Not really sure. I know Ares is here somewhere. And Persephone, which means Hades is going nuts as we speak.” She grinned. “You won’t meet another guy as obsessed with his wife as he is.”

My mouth opened and closed a couple times, but I had no fucking clue what to even say.

“Nyx as well. Met her a couple times. She’s basically mortal by now. Her power is nonexistent. I could have sworn last time I saw a couple wrinkles around her eyes,” Artemis said, pointing at her face with a flinch, like that was a terrible thing to behold, wrinkles.

I struggled to imagine Nyx, goddess of the night, alive and among us mortals.

“When the wedding ended, most went home to meet and decide on the next step, but some stayed for their own reasons—like I did, hoping to find Apollo. The next day, the thief kidnapped the Seasons, so nobody could go back or come down here again.”

“Are they...are they *here*? At the Academy?”

Slowly, Artemis started walking backwards to the wall of weapons. “No, of course not. Ares is away wherever there are wars. He still tries. Persephone hides in forests and mountains, and if she’s ever seen a city in her life, I’ll be fucking surprised. And Nyx was never really interested in mingling with the rest of us.” She shrugged. “There are more, I’m certain of it. None who care, though. They’ve gotten used to this life. They’ve given up trying to change anything.”

She turned around and grabbed a dagger and a sword from the hooks on the wall, then turned to me again. The way she moved was different from me, too—like her feet didn't even touch the ground, and like the air was lighter around her, like it made way for her to move much more freely.

“But *you* haven't,” I said, when she stopped in front of me and analyzed my body, then looked down at the dagger and the sword in her hands as if she were measuring them.

“Never. The day I stop hunting is the day I cease to exist,” she told me, then dropped the dagger to the side on the mats and handed me the sword. “Your build benefits from long blades more, especially when fighting daemons. We'll start with this before we move on to archery. I hate it when their blood gets on my clothes.” And again, she made a face.

Shaking my head, I tested the handle of the sword in my hand. I'd used swords to fight before. Novak insisted on daggers, but Shade had taught me the basics of sword-wielding in our private lessons every day after CT.

God, I'd lived for those hours. Even as exhausted as I constantly was, I'd lived for those hours when it was just the two of us away from the world.

Back then, just a few days ago that felt like *months*, I'd thought things were so damn complicated.

I could sit and laugh at myself because *look at me now*.

“It's real, isn't it,” I whispered, not to Artemis or to myself or to anyone in particular. Just to the universe.

She answered anyway. “It is. I did a bit of research last night. I saw your famous video. I was also told about how you were saved by Elyseans when you were five years old.”

A bitter smile stretched my lips. Any time in the past someone had mentioned this to me, I'd lost it. I saw red. I wanted to spit fire and burn whoever dared to assume that such a thing had happened, when my memories told me that Elyseans had *killed* my parents instead.

But my memories had been half then. All I'd had were fragments because I'd died, too. And I was right, but not all the way. Elyseans—that boy Peter—had indeed killed my parents.

And Elyseans—Alan Roux, my best friend's father—had also saved me. He had literally brought me back from the dead.

“Correct. All of it, correct,” I said to Artemis now.

I wanted to tell her the truth. I wanted to tell the whole damn world, but I couldn't. Not yet, anyway. Not until I spoke to Alan Roux myself—and to Max. Not until I understood exactly what had happened, what he'd done to me. *How* he'd done it.

“You were absolutely right, Sera,” Artemis said with a grin. “Elyseans are not gods. They advertise themselves as such to seem more appealing to the outside world, but they're not us.” She looked up at the ceiling then, at Poseidon's face. “I guess right now, *we're* not us, either.” She sounded sad.

“I'm going to be honest with you, goddess Artemis. I don't know what I did that night in the cave, and I have no idea how to replicate it.” It seemed to me like she'd put all her hopes on me *saving* her or them or her brother, and I didn't want to let her down, but I really didn't think I was what she thought I was.

“Arti’s fine,” she said. “And that’s what training’s for. Once you get endowed, you’ll be able to train your magic as well as your body. Once you get endowed, you’ll have access to everything you’re made of.”

Endowed. What a strange word that seemed to me now.

“How?” I’d need to graduate the first year to get endowed, to get my *magic*, to eat and drink Ambrosia and Nectar, to *become Elysean*, didn’t I?

But Arti said, “Simple. The moment you think you’re ready, we unlock all that Divine Light within you with a simple process. You drink my Ichor, Sera, and the sky’s the limit. There is nothing you cannot do.”

Her words raised goose bumps all over my skin. What the hell did it say about me that a big part of me *loved* every word she said?

“Let’s get warmed up, shall we? We have time to think about that. Let’s get started with today,” Arti said after a minute, and she went to the wall of weapons to get herself a sword identical to mine.

I looked behind me at the doors again, but they were closed. I looked at the benches, too, at the one where Shade always sat to watch me training during CT, but he wasn’t there. Only the Cerberus, the hellhound named *death* was lying on the mats with all his eyes closed now, sleeping peacefully.

I turned to the goddess and raised my sword, certain of only one thing: I still had so much to understand, but it also felt right. This whole thing, the truth as they told it to me, as absurd as it seemed to me now, it felt right.

And I was not about to quit on whatever this was until I knew everything.

5

Zeus's favorite child of all was Athene, goddess of wisdom. Metis, who lives inside Zeus's head, was her mother. She hammered a helmet and weaved a robe for her coming daughter. While she did, Zeus suffered from terrible headaches, and the gods did not know how to help him until at last, Hephaestus took his tools and split Zeus's skull open, and Athene sprung out, fully grown, with her helmet and her robe, leaving all the gods in awe.

Athene was just and led armies who fought for the right causes. In times of peace, she taught the people the fine and useful arts, but if any mortal should fail to show her proper respect, they would all feel her wrath. For gods are indeed great, but only as long as they are properly worshipped.

—**Book of Creation, Volume IV, 1st Edition, 43**

by Emilia Marvos, House Emerald

TWO HOURS LATER, I fell on my back on the mats, lungs begging for air, sweat covering every inch of me. Novak was pretty strict when he taught us Combat Training. Shade was worse—he wanted every movement to be precise, every kick and hit exactly right.

But Arti?

She was a damn cruel goddess.

It had been two hours, two whole hours, and she hadn't once let me sit down to take a breather—or slow down a bit. Just a tiny bit. No—I had to keep going, even when my muscles were screaming and I was wounded in several places and I could literally barely get my lungs to fill with air.

Fuck. She was going to work me like this every single day?

“That’s enough for your morning session, Sera. Take a break. Rest a bit.” She came closer and looked down at me basically drowning in my own sweat right there on the floor. She even flinched again, like the sight of me disturbed her. Meanwhile, I couldn’t fucking breathe properly. “Right. I’ll find you later.”

And she moved away.

I wanted to sit up, tell her she could go join her brother in the Underworld for all I cared—I would *not* be training with her again today. No way. Just no way in any hell or heaven or Tartarus or Olympus. *No. Way.*

But my body refused to move. I was still breathing like I’d smoked a couple hundred years, *loudly*, and every muscle in my body throbbed with pain, and I didn’t even give a shit about Poseidon looking down on me with those sapphire eyes and his teeth bared right now.

Screw you, Mister Poseidon. I am barely alive here. He didn’t scare me more than the erratic beating of my heart—which, if it gave up on me right now and just stopped, I wouldn’t hold that against it at all. I had *never* been more exhausted in my life.

It took a long time after I heard the doors of the Arena closing for me to be able to even close my eyes and try to slow

down my breathing.

It was okay, just training. My shoulder hurt like hell, but I'd felt like I was about to die on these mats before and I never had. Instead, I'd gotten better. My body was stronger than I gave it credit for. It could handle all of this, and in a month's time, I wouldn't even sweat when Arti made me do a hundred jumping jacks at once, then sprint around the entire arena twice. I wouldn't even feel it at all.

Patience. I had to have patience.

And hopefully someone would come get me because no way was I going to be able to get up on my own right now.

I fell in and out of sleep, too, for what must have been at least half an hour, before I heard footsteps slowly approaching me. *Finally*. It was either Max or Shade, and I would be glad for either of them, for *anyone* to help me get the hell up and out of here before the crazy goddess came back.

But I waited and waited some more, and when I finally opened my eyes, I saw the face that was looking down at me.

It wasn't Max.

It wasn't Shade, either.

It wasn't even fucking human—it was a dog. A cute little puppy face with big brown eyes and grey, almost completely white fur, and big fluffy ears on the top of his head. His pink tongue hung out as he breathed, probably just as fast as I was breathing up until a few minutes ago, and his small button of a nose sniffed the air every few breaths.

A puppy in the Arges. How strange.

“Hey, there, pup,” I said, and by some miracle, I had voice. It was dry and it was just a whisper, but I had voice. “Where'd

you come from?” I asked the pup, and his answer was to bring his black nose extra close to my mouth and sniff hard.

Laughter bubbled out of me, and when he heard it, he licked me. He licked the side of my face, from my cheek up to my temple, and I laughed harder.

“Ugh—I’m sweaty, pup! I’m so sweaty. Stop licking me,” I told him, and then the strangest thing happened. When I opened my eyes again, his fur was no longer white, but a dark grey, almost completely black.

I blinked fast as my laughter died down slowly, shoulders still shaking.

I blinked and blinked, sure that I was seeing things—his fur had been white. I was sure of it—it had been a greyish white, but now it was dark. Now it was almost black, and I could see it perfectly fine under the light of the sun shining over the glass ceiling of the Arena.

“What the...” I breathed, and the next second, the white pup came into view, licking my chin a little bit.

The white pup—right next to the black pup.

And right next to the *other* black pup, too.

The shock caught the scream in my throat and held it there. I sat up—forget breathing now—and I didn’t dare blink for fear I’d miss what was in front of me. A Cerberus, a new Cerberus, not Mors. A different Cerberus.

A *small* Cerberus.

A *puppy* Cerberus.

“No, no, no, no,” I breathed, hands raised as they shook, and the pup sat down.

He sat down on his hind legs and looked up at me, all three sets of those wide, round eyes on me, all three pink tongues hanging out.

“Good doggie,” I whispered, trying to get my body to move, but it wouldn’t. “G-g-good doggie...”

All three heads moved to the sides as they analyzed me for a second, then two of them barked.

They barked, and it sounded just like two dogs barking, and my soul left my body, went all the way to the stars before it returned to me again.

But the Cerberus pup didn’t attack.

Easy, I told myself in my mind. *Take it easy*. The pup was barely a quarter of Mors’s size. His heads weren’t bigger than both my fists together—the two to the sides covered in dark grey fur, while the one in the middle was white, just like an Oreo cookie. Most of his body was dark grey, but there were streaks of silver and white here and there, and on the tip of the long tail, too.

A three-headed dog. Just a three-headed dog come out of the Underworld, offspring of Typhon and Echidna, sibling of the Sphinx and the Nemean Lion and the Hydra and the Chimera...

“Stay,” I breathed, finally gathering up some courage to move back.

But once I did, the Cerberus moved, too. He came closer to me and continued to sniff my lap and my hands and my chest, a head licking the dry blood of the wounds on my arms, the other sniffing under my jaw, and the last scratching the side of his face to my thigh as if it was *caressing* me.

His teeth were small but none of the heads was biting me. On the contrary—they were warm and they were *careful* as they put their two front paws on my lap, then continued to sniff and lick my face a little here and a little there, as if they were testing me. Or maybe *tasting* me.

And it was ticklish as all hell.

“Stop it,” I said, *laughing*, though I was terrified of ending up as hellhound food.

And I moved. Fuck, I was moving, standing up and moving back while the pup came at me playfully, rising on two legs and trying to reach my face to lick me again.

The pup was most definitely playing with me.

And I must have gone out of my damn mind because I wasn't even afraid. As I picked up the sword from the mats and went to put it back in place, barely walking from my sore quads and hamstrings, I attempted to run with him and spin around and pretend to move left, then right, until it hurt so much the pain cut my breath off.

Me, Sera Sinclair, laughing and playing with a Cerberus pup—*after* having trained with the goddess of the hunt in the Arges.

I would think *stranger things have happened*, but I honestly doubted it.

The Cerberus definitely was friendly. It didn't bite me or scratch me, not a single time, and when I finally made it to the door—probably fifteen minutes later, after running and playing with him all around the Arena—he sat down and watched me with those wide brown, curious eyes as I walked out the door.

I was the one feeling bad, feeling *guilty* for leaving him like that, all alone in that huge place. I had to remind myself a billion times of what he was, then wave and smile and even blow a kiss at the creature before I could bring myself to close the door.

Fuck, I was weird.

But I made it all the way to the stairs and to my room in one piece somehow. I made it into the shower and let the warm water wash away the blood and sweat—and Cerberus saliva—off me for a good long while. The steam helped in calming me down, too, and if there'd been a bed inside the bathroom, I'd have crashed there without bothering to even dry first.

As it was, I dried and I got dressed in the sweatsuit, and I planned to go back to my room just to drop off the towels, then go eat. I was fucking starving already.

So, when I opened the door to my room, I was perfectly unsuspecting, until I saw inside.

The scream that left my lips pierced right through my ears. I froze with the handle in hand still, unable to move or breathe or think, just look at the three sets of eyes watching me curiously. Calmly.

The Cerberus pup was in my room, lying on the floor next to my bed's legs, perfectly at ease.

THE KNOCK on my door startled me. I'd been so focused on the hellhound pup—who'd licked and sniffed every corner of my room, then my sheets, before finally settling down at the legs of the bed again—watching me watch him. My life had made little sense to me this past year, but this day was promising to

beat every other strange thing I'd gone through since that Iriade found me.

Slowly, I walked to the door and opened it, my eyes never leaving the pup, and he followed my every step, too.

"You said you'd come find me," Max accused the second he saw my face, but I didn't see his because I was still looking at the Cerberus.

"Yeah..." I breathed.

"Are you serious? You won't even look at me?" Max said.

Then he walked into my room.

The pup was instantly on his feet, like he'd felt it the second Max crossed the threshold. His heads were raised high now, ears perked up, tail no longer swooshing to the sides...

"Holy Lightning Bolt—what *the fuck!*"

When Max says *fuck*, you know shit is serious.

"Calm down," I said, either to Max or to the pup—no idea. "Just...just calm down! He's a pup, he's just a pup!" Then... "That's...that's Max. He's my best friend, okay? Just calm down."

What the hell was going on with my life?

"Sera, there's a Cerberus in your room," Max so generously pointed out—and with his index fingers, too. Both of them were pointed at the pup, who now didn't seem as alert as a second ago, but curious. Very curious.

He took a step closer to Max, all three tongues hanging out.

Max screamed and ran out of the room.

Not exactly the right time to be laughing, but I couldn't help myself. Max ran all the way to the other end of the hallway, the look on his face priceless. And the pup was still curious, so he trotted closer to my feet and watched him, heads turning to the sides like he just couldn't figure him out yet.

"It's just a pup," I told Max. "C'mon, don't be such a chicken. He's not gonna hurt you!"

Was he, though?

I looked at the pup again—so damn cute I was gonna die. Those faces, those wide brown puppy eyes, those tongues—*ugh*. What the hell kind of magic had he put on me?

"Stay here, okay? Just...just stay," I told him as if I was certain he could understand me, then slipped out of the room. Keeping my eyes on him, I slowly pulled the door closed while he sat on his hind legs and watched me.

When the door clicked in place, I let go of a long breath.

"Sera, there's a—"

"Cerberus in my room. Yes, Max, I have eyes. I can see him," I said as I turned around to face my friend, who still refused to come closer. "Just get over here, will you?"

"Nope. I'm good right here," he said, resting his hand against the wall, the other on his hip, as he pretended to be relaxed. "Perfectly fine."

"The door is closed," I pointed out, even though my door had been closed earlier, too, and...

"That's a *hellhound*. They can get in and out of any door," Max said, and I flinched.

"Are you serious?" Not that it was such a shock—I'd closed and locked the door when I was showering, and the pup

had somehow gotten in anyway, but still.

“Yes, I’m serious. They’re Underworld creatures, Sera. What in Hades are you doing with a Cerberus in your room?!”

I rolled my eyes, grabbing my hips. “Nobody says *Hades* anymore, Max,” I muttered.

“Oh, *you’re* the expert on how Elyseans talk and what they say,” he said, his panic climbing.

“For fuck’s sake, I *found* him there, okay? I didn’t bring him to my room on purpose.” I strode over to him—this was ridiculous. “He’s *sweet!* He found me in the Arena and we played for a bit and then when I got out of the shower, he was just there. Not my damn fault!”

Max blinked at me. “You *played* for a bit,” he repeated.

I rolled my eyes. “Can we just get over this, please? I’m tired. Everything hurts. *Everything* hurts, Max. And I need food and coffee and I need to sit down, either outside or in the Library, and I need to just tell you stuff before I lose my damn mind, okay?” I exploded, needing to let the words out before they suffocated me for real, but...

Max wasn’t even looking at me. He was looking somewhere behind me—at the three-headed pup sitting right outside my door, watching me with his tail swooshing to the sides happily.

“I can’t...I can’t...” Max was saying, shaking his head.

I sighed, lowering mine for a second. I really meant what I said—*everything* hurt. Even my neck, it seemed, hurt to be stretched in this position.

“Go downstairs and wait for me in the Caprae, okay? I’ll be right down,” I said to Max, then turned to the hellhound

pup, feeling like I might start crying any second.

How in the world was I going to tell *those* faces to leave me alone and stop following me?

ELYSEAN FOOD WAS HEAVEN. I could talk trash about them all I wanted, but the way they cooked? It was heavenly for real. Fucking *divine*. It was even easy to ignore the way Max was staring at me while I ate like I was in a race, and then when Mave found us, and he told her about the hellhound pup, it was easy to ignore *her* stares, too.

“So, let me get this clear—you did send it away,” Max said when we finally left the Hall and I was full of food up to my throat.

“I did, yes,” I lied. “I sent him away.”

The truth was much uglier than that, though. I’d *meant* to send the pup away, but then I’d looked into those wide eyes and I couldn’t bring myself to say the words, so instead I’d told him: *stay here until I get back*.

I’d be gone a long time, I knew that, so the pup was going to get bored and leave on his own in no time.

So *technically* speaking, I did send him away.

“You don’t just send a Cerberus away,” Mave chimed in. “If it’s following you for any reason at all, you’re stuck with it forever.”

I flinched. “No, it’s not like that. We just played a bit in the Arena, that’s all.”

“*Played*,” Mave said with a snort, repeating my words just like Max had, and it irritated the hell out of me.

“Will you two just give me a break? I’m trying to wrap my head around everything that happened the past two days, and I’m sore everywhere, and there’s a good chance the goddess is going to make me train with her again before the day is even over,” I said with a sigh, eyeing the main hall suspiciously. The way it looked like Shade’s outburst had never happened unnerved me still.

“Wait—*goddess?*” Max said, and he and Mave both looked like I’d suddenly slapped them across the face.

“Yes, goddess.” I grinned. “Goddess Artemis is my new trainer, and you’re not going to believe everything she told me.”

To my disappointment, they actually did believe everything fairly quickly—they apparently knew the story already. We chose the library to go hide and talk in our usual spot at the round table behind the shelves. As much as I’d have loved some fresh air, it was way too cold outside, and right now I just wanted to feel comfort, at least while I told them the whole story.

I still planned to go see Shade, hopefully find him in his room before the day was over and I could hide from Arti, just in case she *really* meant it when she said she’d want to train me two and three times a day.

By the time I told them everything, my jaw was hurting, too.

“You know, I meant what I said in the infirmary—you’re batshit, mortal,” Mave eventually said.

“I can’t believe you went into the Void,” Max said.

“I can’t believe you knocked us all on our asses with your godlight,” said Mave.

“I can’t believe that idiot almost killed you.” Max.

“I can’t believe you got to actually meet her...” Mave seemed in awe. “My mother swears she saw her once when she was studying at the Academy. She says she has long golden hair that reaches her heels, and red lips and fair skin, and her bow is with her at all times. Is it true?”

“Well, I mean, yes—she does have her bow with her, and her skin’s pretty fair, I guess. Except her lips are more like a peachy pink, you know? And her hair is golden brown, but it doesn’t fall to her heels. More like the small of her back maybe?”

“*You’re* idiots, both of you,” Max muttered. “She’s a goddess! She can change her appearance any time she pleases—who cares what color her lips are?” And he turned to me with his whole body. “Goddess Artemis is training you personally, Sera. Don’t you realize what that means?”

No—and I was pretty sure I didn’t want to know.

“It means you’re a big deal,” Mave said from my other side. “A *very* big deal, which I get with all that godlight that came out of you, but to actually go into the portal?” She shook her head as she looked at me like she was *sorry* for me. Like she knew for a fact that I was going to die soon.

“That’s insane,” Max whispered, falling back on the sofa. “That’s plain insane, Sera. Nobody survives the portal or the daemons. There’s way too many of them. Nobody can get through no matter how much godlight you make all at once.”

“They say it tires you. Zaps your energy completely,” Mave said with a nod. “It knocked you out cold, didn’t it?”

“Well, yeah...” It had. It absolutely had.

“You should decline,” Max said, leaning closer to me again. “You should say no.”

“I’m not gonna say—”

“You’re mortal, Sera. Godlight or not, you’re mortal, and you can’t compete with those creatures. They’re forged in the Underworld by the sins of their lives—you can’t beat that. They’ve been trying for centuries in all three cities. Don’t you think if there was a way through the portals, somebody would have found it by now?”

“He has a point,” Mave said. “Our cities have been around a long time.”

“And a lot of people have worked the battlefields near the portals. A lot of great people. Powerful people. My dad told me a lot about it—the strongest Elyseans in existence spend their whole lives at the battlefields. It’s an honor to serve there, he said, but it’s also a deathtrap.”

Deathtrap. That’s exactly what Shade called the Academy. He really meant it literally, and I still hadn’t even seen the full image.

I looked away from Max, afraid he’d somehow read the thoughts in my head if I kept my eyes on him for longer. Afraid he’d know what I felt at the thought of his father—the man who’d brought me back to life. Nothing I wanted more than to tell him about *that* part, too, but I couldn’t. Not yet. Not until I made up my mind that I wanted him to know about it. The way he talked about his dad and how he kept his picture in his wallet...I couldn’t tell him anything until I knew exactly what I was doing.

But the thought reminded me of another. “What about Tiger Gilis and his sister?”

At that Mave looked away at the table while Max threw me a pointed look. “They’re fine. Both alive. Ursula almost didn’t make it. And while we’re at it, *what the hell* were you thinking, Sera? I had it under control!”

Yeah, except he didn’t. Tiger was twice his size—and mine—and there was no way I was going to sit back and just watch him bully Max.

“Oh, yes. You had it perfectly under control when you threw your *magic* at him in front of everyone,” I said instead. “I imagine *Aunt Jules* didn’t punish you for that, did she. After all, she’s *your aunt*.” Then I turned to Mave. “Hear that? The headmistress is his fucking aunt, and he didn’t even tell me.” Crossing my arms in front of my chest, I leaned back on the sofa. “Think about *that* the next time you want to judge me.”

Max’s cheeks were already on fire. “Whatever. I would have told you if I’d known it was such a big deal.”

“He never tells anyone,” Mave said, as if he hadn’t even spoken. “He’s kind of embarrassed and too proud of it at the same time, so he prefers not to talk about it at all. Nothing personal.”

I expected Max to lash out at her—every time Mave revealed just how perfectly she knew Max and each one of his little quirks and habits, he tended to get pissed off. Not today, though. Today, he just shrugged. Maybe that talk we had on the stairs, when he’d confessed his love for Mave to me, had gotten through to him. Maybe he could see past Mave’s hot and cold attitude and understand how much it meant that she knew *everything* about Max better than probably anybody else in the world.

“Favors, though,” Mave said after a minute. “She’s his aunt, so he can ask for favors. Like, I don’t know—to let you

come out to the city *with us* now that you know everything?”

She eyed Max for a second, waiting for his reaction.

And Max was thinking about it...

“Well, I mean, she already knows everything. Not like we need to hide anymore.”

Holy shit, he was right. They were both right.

I sat up straighter. “You mean she’d let me actually see Ideaea?”

“Mhmm. The parts of the city other mortals never get the chance to see. The actual city where all Elyseans live,” Mave said with a wicked grin. “Where we can buy stuff and eat and drink coffee and wine and anything we want.”

“I could even drop by my house to grab a couple things,” said Max in wonder.

“And I could take you to the biggest mall in Ideaea. Everything’s on sale for New Years’ still,” Mave said, wiggling her brows at me.

“Well, damn.” Now I *really* wanted to go.

“So, what do you say, Max?” Mave said.

“I guess I could go talk to her about it,” he reluctantly said.

“Right now,” Mave told him, waving him off. “There’s still time. We’ll be back by nightfall. Go!”

I couldn’t even believe it, but I was *smiling*. “Yeah, yeah, I’m going,” Max said, dragging his feet as he moved away from the table. “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

Holy shit. “I need to find Shade,” I said when he disappeared behind the shelf.

“He’s not your dad, mortal,” Mave muttered. “He’s your boyfriend. There’s no need to ask for permission.”

My heart could have burst right out of my chest at that word—*boyfriend*. Was that what Shade was?

I felt the heat on my cheeks right away. “I’m not *asking* for permission. Just want to see that he’s okay.” I hadn’t seen him the whole day and I worried. I worried about him all the time, and now it was worse because I knew exactly what he was fighting against. The memory of the monster with the many mouths was still very vivid in my mind.

“You’re joking,” Mave said, like she really couldn’t believe I just said that. “Did you not see what he did to the hallway? It’s *Shade*. People don’t tell you to stay away from him for no reason. Trust me, sweetie, he’s not the kind of guy you worry about being *okay*.”

Except she hadn’t seen what Shade was like inside the Void that night. The way even his skin had turned dark like it was painted all around his fingers, and his eyes up to his temples...

“And by the way, we’re kind of friends now, so I gotta say it—you’re fucking crazy to get involved with that guy. He’s hot, I get it, but you’re fucking crazy.”

I rolled my eyes. “I—” But she wouldn’t even let me speak.

“*Not* saying you should dump him or anything, but it’s a moral obligation to warn you now. Plus, if it comes to it, I’m gonna love to tell you *I told you so*.” Then she came closer and said, “But you gotta tell me how good he is in bed. How big his dick is. If he moans or growls or bites—that sort of thing. You *gotta* tell me.”

Oh, God. Squeezing my eyes shut, I slipped around the table, trying not to die of the heat burning me from the inside. “You’re worse than Layla. You’re so much worse than Layla,” I mumbled, but for some unknown reason, I was also smiling. Because I already had all the answers—*he’s an eleven out of ten in bed, and his dick is huge, the tip slightly curved up, and he moans and growls and bites—while he fucks me senseless for hours at a time.*

Yes, I was very much hopeless.

Mave was grinning ear to ear. “Go find your boyfriend, then meet us by the front doors. It’s time to get you some proper clothes, pesky mortal. You can’t go around wearing sweatsuits all day.”

“Nothing wrong with my sweatsuit,” I said as I walked away, eager to be by myself for a second.

“Wait till you see Atlantis!” she called after me, but she didn’t follow, and she didn’t see the sneer in Miss Lenora’s face as she practically burned me alive with her eyes all the way out of the library doors.

6

“The wise ones do not sacrifice much for comfort.

Comfort kills you slowly and you never even find out.”

—**Moirai: The Great Fates, 213**

by G. T. Vessinger, House Sapphire

I FOUND Shade just coming out the third doors right of the main hallway, the ones that led to the courtyard around the back of the Arges.

My heart tripped all over itself at the sight of his face just like always. He'd showered, his skin clean and his hair combed back, the black shirt on him a bit loose. It suited him, together with those leather pants that hid everything my fantasies were made of. And while I waited for him to come closer, I forgot about everything that had happened in the past two days.

Just like that, I either forgot or those events became irrelevant. Nothing was as important as when he had his eyes on me and he was coming closer, like a predator stalking a willing prey.

“There you are,” he said.

“There *you* are,” I said, resisting the urge to jump in his arms. “I was looking for you.”

“I was looking for you, too. You weren’t in your room,” he said, one hand in his pocket, the other pushing a string of my hair behind my shoulder as he looked down at me, analyzing my face.

“I was in the library with Max and Mave,” I said. “You weren’t there when I woke up.”

“I had a meeting downstairs,” he said. “I figured I’d find you when I got back. How are you feeling, Snowflake?” He threw a look to the side when two students, some of the few who’d remained at the Academy during winter break, rushed up the main stairway, pretending they couldn’t see us.

“I’m fine. Sore. Arti took me to the Arena and we trained—she’s fucking *nuts*,” I muttered, leaning closer to him without even realizing it.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be there,” Shade said. “But she *is* the best at this.”

“I’d much rather train with you.” Which I’d proved time and again when I showed up for training every single day right *after training*.

“I’d much rather steal you away from this place altogether,” Shade said, making me smile.

“I’d much rather that, too.” Stolen away by Shade? *Yes, sign me the hell up.*

“Just say the word and we’ll be gone,” he said, and he was only half joking.

I sighed. “I wish we could.” To be away from everything with him sounded like a dream. “But right now, Mave

convinced Max to go ask Carmine to let me go to the city with them, and I kind of want to.” Or maybe it was a better idea to stay in and read. Or train. Or do something else with my time that was more productive, no matter that I desperately needed a damn break.

“Good—you should. Idaeia is very beautiful,” Shade said without hesitation, touching my cheek again like he just couldn’t keep his hands off me.

I leaned into his hand instantly. “Can you come, too?” I wondered, though I wasn’t exactly sure how Max and Mave would feel about it.

“No, you should go with your friends,” Shade said, and when I pouted, he growled. Just a little bit, but it was a growl, and it made my toes curl instantly. “Don’t you worry, Snowflake. I’ll be right there if you need me.”

“I don’t know,” I whispered, as another two girls came out of the Caprae Hall and went for the stairway—except these two openly watched us, and they even stopped by the railing as they whispered to one another. “There’s so much going on, I feel like there’s no time to go out right now.”

Shade chuckled and the sound melted all the ice in my bones. “There’s time to think. We’ll talk when you get back. Take the day off—you need it.”

Well, I needed *him* more, but... “Yeah, okay. I’ll go.”

“And I’ll see you when you get back,” Shade said, then gave me a quick peck on my forehead. I would have preferred it to be on my lips, but it was better than nothing.

“One more thing,” I said, then regretted it—this really wasn’t the time.

And I also really wanted to die of embarrassment just to think about it.

But Shade raised a brow. “What?”

“Nothing, nothing. Just...nothing.” Something stupid Mave said that got stuck in my head.

“Snowflake,” Shade warned, and the pressure of his gaze alone was enough to make me cave.

“Really—it’s nothing. Really, I—”

“Tell me what it is,” he insisted, grabbing my hand in his like he knew I was about to make a run for it.

“Nothing!” I sighed, cursing myself for even bringing it up. “Just something Mave said. She—she called you *my boyfriend*, and I was just thinking if, you know...” Oh, God. *Kill me now*. “If that’s...that’s what you were. You know.”

I was going to kill Mave thrice for getting that stupid idea into my head.

Shade smiled, lowering his head for a moment, then pulled his lips inside his mouth as if to stop himself from laughing.

Great. My cheeks were burning already.

“Yes, like I said, it’s s—”

“I’ll be your boyfriend, Snowflake. I’ll be your friend, or your lover, or your anything at all, as long as I’m that first—*yours*.”

I’ll be damned...

Now my cheeks were flushed for a whole different reason, and I didn’t even regret bringing this up anymore. How could I when I loved the sound of everything he said?

“Okay,” I breathed, looking at his lips as I imagined devouring them the way I did when we were alone. “What do you want *me* to be then?” Because I could be his friend and his lover and his girlfriend and his anything at all, too.

But Shade smiled, coming closer until we were but an inch away from one another. “Mine.”

I wanted to speak, to tell him I already was. That I had been since the day he first kissed me, but I couldn’t bring myself to move at all.

Good thing Shade leaned back and gave me enough room to breathe properly again. “Go. Have fun. Just be careful.”

“I will,” I said. The way I reacted to him should have been fucking illegal.

With one last lingering look at my face, he turned around and went for the stairs, passing by the girls who were *still* there, still watching me, pretending they couldn’t even see Shade walking right by them.

I mean, I was used to being bullied my whole life, this was nothing new. I was used to people staring at me and whispering behind my back, especially since the Trials.

But some things just got too much sometimes, and I found I could no longer ignore the way they watched me like I usually did.

“What?!” I snapped, ready to give them a piece of my mind if they had something to say about me being godless or if they were going to make a comment about me and Shade.

Instead, something even stranger happened.

“Um...hi,” the blonde girl on the right said. I thought Alice was her name, and she was House Emerald, though she

wasn't wearing her uniform right now. She was a first-year and sat two seats away from Mave in PA, but we'd never actually talked to one another before.

"Hello," said the other girl, a gorgeous brunette with dark skin and eyes as green as grass. She was Emerald, too. I didn't remember her name, though.

"Uh...hi," I muttered—why in the world were they smiling?

This is weird...

"I'm Alice. This is Taryn," the blonde said, waving at her friend.

"Oh. I'm Sera," I said with an awkward raise of my hand. Why were these girls talking to me still?

"Yes, we know," Taryn said. "We never got the chance to say thanks for...you know, saving us all in the Vault."

Holy shit.

"Yep. And just in case you need anything—" said Alice.

"You know, with classes or lessons or notes or anything—" Taryn.

"We're here to help. Just ask, okay?" Alice again.

"Yep. Just ask." Taryn smiled brightly at me.

And when the minute was over, neither of them burst out laughing.

"Anyway, we'll catch ya later!" Alice said, and they both waved at me before turning around and finally walking up the stairs.

I looked at the marble floor beneath my feet—shiny and polished and still there.

I looked up at the ceiling, too—the gorgeous colors and the round structure, just like it had always been since I first set foot in the Arges. Still there.

Those girls had actually *thanked* me and had offered me their help, but the world wasn't ending yet. Huh.

“*Curiouser and curiouser,*” I whispered to myself as I made my way to the doors to wait for Max and Mave.

It was much colder outside than I had realized. It was January, and there was even a bit of snow holding onto the edges of the rocks, and the sight of Idaea beyond the small mountain at the front of the Arges took my breath away just like it did the first time.

“There you are,” Max said when he came out, rubbing his hands together. “She said yes. It took a bit of persuasion, by which I mean I had to *nag* her about it, but she said—wait, where’s your coat?”

I rubbed my arms at the reminder. “I don’t—” *have one*, I was going to say, just as Mave slipped out the open door, too, and...Shade was right behind her.

Holding a leather jacket in his hands.

“Thought you might need this,” he said with a grin, then came and put the jacket over my shoulders.

It was heavy. It was warm. It was *big*—and it smelled like raindrops and his skin. Definitely Shade’s.

“Thank you,” I said, holding onto the leather. Curly black wool on the inside, and thick black leather on the outside. It looked exactly like something Shade would wear.

“Just until yours gets here,” he said, helping me put my arms in.

“It’s so warm,” I said, surprised myself as he pulled the zipper up. Even though it was at least two sizes too big for me, it was *perfect*.

“Looks good on you,” Shade said, raising a thick brow.

I rolled my eyes. “You’re only saying that because it’s yours,” I teased.

But he came closer and closer until his mouth was right next to my ear. “So are you,” he whispered, leaving me more breathless than the view did.

Then he stepped back and walked to the door. “Have fun,” he told us and pulled it closed.

Mave jammed her elbow into Max’s side. “I told you he smiles. I *told* you so.”

“I *know* he smiles—who doesn’t?” Max said, stepping to the side.

But Mave put her hand on the side of her mouth, then whispered at me, “*He had no idea*,” while pointing her other finger at Max.

“You guys know he’s just a guy, right? He smiles and he laughs and he even snores a bit sometimes. He’s just a guy,” I said, kind of amused at their reaction, actually.

“*Hah!*” Mave said, clapping her hands together. “He snores. Best thing I’ve heard all year.”

“It’s January *fourth*,” Max told her, rolling his eyes, but we were finally moving toward the steep stairs down the mountain.

“Yep. Best thing I’ve heard in the past four days,” Mave insisted. “And that jacket looks expensive.”

“It’s really warm,” I muttered, trying to pull the sleeves up a bit so I could stuff my hands in the pockets. They were big and warm, too, and I felt *safe* wrapped up in all that wool and leather.

“Good. Winters get cold around here,” Max said. “Brons will take us to the city.”

“Perfect,” Mave said. “Let’s get going. I’m dying for some real coffee.”

Real coffee did sound nice.

In fact, *everything* sounded nice right now, and even my muscles had warmed up enough that I didn’t even feel the pain of them that much.

Shade was right, I definitely needed some time away from the Academy. And I could pretend I didn’t care all I wanted, but the truth was that I couldn’t wait to see the real *Idaea*.



THE ATLANTIS WAS A MALL, one of two in *Idaea*, and it was *huge*. Half of it had a round rooftop that looked like frozen glass, almost the same as the *Daedalus Dome*, and the other half was wide open. They had shops there, all kinds of shops, just like the shopping district on the edges of the city, where we mortals were allowed to shop once every four years for the trials.

But this was also different. The shops here weren’t tailored to impress mortals—they were simply shops, designed to appeal to *Elyseans*. Here, goddess *Philyra* scents were the norm, and moving, humming plants extending through each doorway was just something that most shops had, and

peacocks still roamed around the streets freely, and snakes still slithered upside walls. There weren't nearly as many statues with godstones here, though. *So many* Elyseans coming and going and buying and eating and having a drink that it took me a good ten minutes just to adjust to my surroundings. To understand that this was real.

This was normal in Ideaea. It was what these people knew, and nobody even looked my way twice.

Elyseans of all ages: kids, teenagers, and elderly ones, too. Most wore godstones where everyone could see, and they were all dressed like they just didn't make bad—or even *ordinary*—clothes in this place. Here, they didn't give me the impression that they were trying to tell me they were better than me—on the contrary. Nobody even cared as I walked among them, perfectly content to ignore me the same way they ignored Max and Mave at my sides as they went about their own business.

“Wow,” I kept whispering, in awe at how *normal* normal things were here—the signs and the shops and the beautiful restaurants and bars, and also at the incredible artwork surrounding me. The walls were either engraved or painted with beautiful landscapes and gods—some with wings and some with crowns, some with flowers and some in flames. There were vases locked up in glass boxes here, too, and the statues were just as magnificent, though they were few and far apart.

“Safe to say you're enjoying this,” Max said, smiling at the look on my face.

“Well, yes. I mean, it's-it's beautiful here...” Not just Atlantis, but what I'd seen of the city on our way here in the van, too. The roads were wide, so perfectly clean it was kind

of scary, so shiny and polished—the buildings and the people. It was winter and the sky was a mess of semi-dark clouds, but even they looked *alive* from in here. Not as gloomy as they used to be back home.

Or maybe it was just me.

“It is, right?” Mave said. “And now I’m gonna take you to my favorite cafe to get the best caramel latte you’ve ever had in your life.”

“It is. It really is,” Max said with a nod.

“C’mon, let’s go!” Mave grabbed me by the jacket, and before I knew it, she was running and dragging me with, and Max was running right behind me, too.

I was running through an Elysean mall with two Elyseans I adored and would trade my life for in an instant, laughing my heart out as other Elyseans watched us pass them by and smiled, shaking their heads.

As much as I hated to admit it, I *loved* the feeling of being here. I loved the smells and the polished marble and the colorful drawings. Even the faces of the gods didn’t bother me—on the contrary. I could stop and analyze each one in detail.

When we reached the second floor of the mall, I was fascinated all over again. In the middle of it was a golden trident among large waves made of marble that looked like they’d broken the concrete as they raised around the gold. It was possibly over a hundred feet tall, the color of it so rich it glistened even without sunlight falling directly on it. A ruby, an emerald and a sapphire decorated each tip of the trident pointing at the sky, and an opal shone at the base of them.

For a second, I imagined the statue of Poseidon at the Arges grabbing this in his hands and using it to fight against

the Kraken or the Hydra or the Chimera. Goose bumps rose on my skin and my imagination ran away with me, bringing to life images that I'd never seen before but somehow knew in detail...

"Well? What of you think?" Max asked, nudging me in the shoulder as I stood in front of the trident, completely mesmerized.

"Magnificent," I breathed, unable to look away still. It was magnificent, and whoever had created it deserved a standing ovation.

"The trident is the weapon of choice of Atlanteans. They say when Zeus sunk it beneath the ocean, his heart wasn't really into it," Mave explained. "And that's why Atlantis never truly perished. It continues to exist to this day, its location unknown, and very possibly invisible to our eyes."

"You're joking." I'd heard about Atlantis, the sunken island, as much as the next guy, but I'd never actually entertained the idea that it had ever been *real*, let alone that it continued to exist.

"Yep. Dad said Atlanteans could command water better than any Elysean no matter their House. Poseidon basically created them himself," Max continued. "Not that there are any records of any Atlanteans around here, of course."

"If we Elyseans survived Dionysus's wedding, the Atlanteans definitely survived their island sinking under the ocean," Mave said. "Think about it—they all knew how to swim. They all had power over water. Do you really think they all died just because they were stuck—*underwater*—for a little while?"

We all looked at the trident again, at the waves of marble so masterfully rising all around it.

Yes, I'd believe it. I'd definitely believe that Atlanteans had survived, at least some of them. If I could come back from the dead after being almost completely consumed by fire, then some ancient people with magic powers could definitely withstand the challenges of time the same way Elyseans had.

"C'mon, let's go. I'm dying for my caramel latte," said Mave.

Again, we ran together, all around the trident and to the other side of the mall, and to Mave's favorite cafe. I didn't feel strange for a second, and I didn't mind at all that I was surrounded by Elyseans. In fact, while we sat at the cafe, and Max and Mave proceeded to tell me about Atlanteans and Elyseans and the other times she'd been here with Max, I felt more at ease than I ever had before in the mortal world.

For once, I took it. For once, I didn't focus on the guilt that came with that realization.

And despite the storms that were slowly crawling toward me in my life, in those moments I felt like I was right where I was always supposed to be.

When Athene claimed her first city in the old Greece, her uncle Poseidon claimed the same. Their quarrel lasted decades, until at last, they decided to each give the city a gift. Whoever gave the best, most useful gift to its people would win.

Thus Poseidon and Athene climbed the highest rock that crowned the city, the Acropolis, and the god of the sea struck the cliff with his mighty Trident. A spring welled up and the people were in awe, only to realize that the water was useless—salty, from the seas that Poseidon ruled.

But when it was Athene's turn, she planted an olive tree for the first time in a crevice. With it, she gave the people food, oil and wood.

Her gift was judged the best of the two, and so the goddess named the city Athens, and ruled over it for centuries from her temple on the Acropolis, with her wise owl on her shoulder.

—Book of Creation, Volume IV, 1st Edition, 90

by Emilia Marvos, House Emerald

WHEN WE LEFT ATLANTIS, the sun was about to start setting, and Max was suddenly unusually quiet. Mave told me all about their favorite foods and restaurants, the elementary school they'd all attended, and the few clubs that were on the other side of the mall, in what they called the Adventure District. No houses or apartment buildings were close because

Elyseans liked to celebrate until the wee hours of the morning with loud music and dancing and chatter, uninterrupted. Since they had the space to separate everything, why the hell not?

But before ten minutes were over, Max said, “Why don’t you guys go ahead? I’ll meet you down at the park. Just want to say hi to my family.” He pointed his thumb back to a narrower street on our left with identical one-story houses on either side—all white, and all the railings and the handles and the mailboxes golden.

“Oh, yeah, sure,” I said, pretending I couldn’t see just how pale Max had become. “Of course, we’ll wait. Go ahead.”

“Yeah, kid. Catch you at the Oracle, okay?” Mave said. She pretended not to notice, too.

“Okay. See you in a bit,” he said with a strained smile, then turned around with his hands in his pockets and sped down the street.

“That’s his house right over there. Fifth left,” Mave said. “My parents live another two houses down.”

“Are they really skiing in the Swiss Alps?” I wondered.

“Nah, they’re probably home,” Mave said with a wave of her hand. “I’d have loved for you to meet Max’s mom, though. She’s a real sweetheart. Makes the best crepes I’ve ever had. If you so much as *mention* them, she’s already up and making them even if it’s one in the morning. True story.”

It didn’t escape my attention how fast she changed the subject from the fact that she’d lied through her teeth about her family not being here.

“Sounds like an amazing woman. And his dad?” I dared to ask.

“His dad is...” Mave’s voice trailed off as Max reached the fence gate of his house, then turned to wave at us before going in. We both waved and smiled, too. “His dad is not there. It’s just him and his mom, and sometimes her sister,” Mave finally said, then laced her arm to mine. “C’mon, let me show you the Oracle. It’s this huge tree with the thickest roots you’ve ever seen, about nine hundred years old...”

She kept on talking and talking all the way to the park at the bottom of the street and to the old tree that indeed had roots thicker than the width of my shoulders coming out of the ground. My mind remained on Max, though. Max and his mom and his dad.

Why wasn’t he there, too? Were they divorced? Did he live in Idaeia at all?

I wanted to ask Mave, but I didn’t dare.

And when Max came back an hour later, looking sad and miserable like I’d never seen him before, I didn’t dare ask him, either.

Not tonight, I figured. Just not tonight.

GOODBYE, mortals. Goodbye, mortals. Goodbye, mortals.

The sound of that robot singing, and the way it clapped those metal hands, chased me in dream after dream after dream until sleep left me and my eyes opened a slit.

I was in my room, in my bed, all alone, even though Shade had been lying with me when I came back. He’d asked me how our trip was, and I’d told him a little bit of where we’d gone, I thought. But I’d been so much more exhausted than I’d realized. I must have fallen asleep within minutes. Fuck, I didn’t even remember falling asleep, just remembered feeling

awful about Max and his dad, and about the pain in my body. Every single muscle in me had hurt, and now as I moved—*yep*. Every muscle in my body was still hurting just like yesterday.

Blinking my eyes fast to clear the blur, I instinctively checked the pillow where Shade had been lying, and sure enough, another one of those black tulips was right there, smelling better than honey, almost as good as raindrops and Shade's skin. I brought it to my lips, then sniffed the petals a couple times.

I wondered where he'd gone off to this morning—another meeting maybe? *Downstairs*. Below the mountain, right where the battlefield was. Where an actual portal to the Underworld was, spilling out monsters every...day? Hour? *Minute*?

Fuck, I had to see it. I had to get down there and see it for myself. Just as soon as the smell of the tulip chased away the fading sound of that robot from my mind—*goodbye, mortals*. Fucking prick. The dream weaver couldn't get to me, not through the Void, and I suspected Shade had kept me there most of the night until he left. Even so, the sound of the stupid robot came through while I dreamed of other things, of oceans and Atlanteans wielding tridents at my face, jumping out of the water and onto land. And my usual dreams of different times, too, so detailed I almost believed they were real memories.

But eventually, I looked at the small clock on the nightstand—almost eight a.m. Max would probably be downstairs eating breakfast, and I couldn't afford to be a coward anymore. Less than two weeks was all the time I had to figure out what the hell had happened to me, what his father

had done to me when he saved my life. I couldn't afford to waste another second.

So, I sat up, planning to run to the bathroom and get dressed quickly.

Instead, I screamed when I looked around the room, and every inch of my skin rose in goose bumps.

The Cerberus pup who'd been sleeping by the bed's leg jumped to his feet and all three heads bared their teeth, turning to the door with a growl.

Oh, God, he was here. He was right here in my room, sleeping in the same spot—and he hadn't been here last night. Fuck, I'd forgotten to tell Shade about him, too.

“Calm down,” I told myself, breathing in deeply. “Just calm down, it's okay...”

It was just the cute little pup with three heads, nothing else. The cute little pup who looked confused as hell now as he sniffed the corners of the door and didn't find anything wrong with it.

Then he turned to me, all six eyes wide and curious as if *asking* me a question.

I smiled though I was still shaking—impossible not to. “It was *you*,” I told him. “I screamed because of you. You scared me.”

The white head in the middle and the black one to the right turned to the door once more, while the other just stared at me blankly for a moment.

Then, with a loud huff, the pup lay down right there in front of the door again and rested his heads on his paws as best as he could, eyes half closed already.

“*Fuck me,*” I whispered to myself, and I finally stood up. Who in the world was I going to talk to about this pup? Maybe Arti? She had a Cerberus pet. She probably knew what the hell to do about this or where to take him.

And since the pup was still there, still half sleeping when I came back from the bathroom, that’s exactly what I planned to do.

I left him lying there on the bedroom floor. He obviously had no trouble going through closed doors, and if I had time today, I was going to do some reading on the Cerberus as well—but first, Max.

No more running from this. No more feeling guilty for asking a damn question—he was my friend. He knew more about me than most people in the world. It was perfectly fine to ask him about his father, just as it was fine for him to ask me about mine, if he ever wanted to.

So, the moment I stepped into the Caprae Hall, I searched for him with my eyes, but he wasn’t there. Only Mave with another girl from House Ruby were sitting at the long table, nobody else.

“Hey there, pesky mortal. Sit down. I got croissants for everyone. And here’s your strawberry syrup,” she said, pushing the plates and the dishes toward me before I even made it to sit across from them on the bench.

And she was right—she’d filled a large metal bowl full of croissants, another plate full of waffles and donuts, too. My mouth watered—I was hungrier than I realized. And I counted it as a blessing that Arti hadn’t come to find me yet, to drag me to the Arena and force me train like yesterday.

Fuck, I still couldn't believe that that was part of my life now.

I sat across from the girls, and Mave's friend, Brianne, who'd never spoken to me before, said *good morning* with a huge smile on her face. She suddenly didn't look like she hated me at all. Not one bit.

"I'm just gonna go grab some milk," I muttered, feeling a bit awkward, but then she jumped to her feet right away.

"I'll get you milk. I was gonna get some for myself, anyway," Brianne said, pushing her light brown hair behind her shoulder as she stood up.

"Oh. Thanks, I guess."

What. The. Fuck.

Then...

"This is fucking *nuts*," I told Mave when Brianne was far enough. "Yesterday, before we went out, two Emerald girls *thanked* me, Mave. It's nuts!" And if I wasn't so hungry, my appetite would probably be gone, too.

"So what? Own it, woman. You saved our asses," Mave said with a wave of her hand. "And for the record, I'm using you."

I blinked at her. "What?"

"I'm using you. You're now very valuable to Elyseans. Word has spread and my father wants me to hang out with you, and I absolutely will. He's advised me to do my best to separate you from Max, lie and cheat until you hate his guts, which I am *not* going to do, but he won't ever know. What's important is that Max can be anywhere I am without trouble now—even in public," she told me, putting some plum jam on

her waffle. “So, I’m using you while I can, mortal. Don’t say I didn’t tell you.”

Mave looked me dead in the eye and didn’t even blink for a long second.

She was using me to hang out with Max without her dad making her miserable about it, and I honestly would hug the hell out of her if she wasn’t all the way across the table.

“Elysean prick,” I muttered, smiling so big my cheeks hurt.

“Thank you,” she said, recognizing the compliment. “And you’re a rockstar now. You’ve earned it. Keep saving our asses and you’ll be treated like royalty around here. I promise to reap *all* the juicy benefits personally until you’re completely dry.” She grinned.

I flipped her off just as Brianne brought us three glasses of milk. “There you go,” she sang, taking her seat again. “Anything else? Are we good?”

“Yep, we’re good,” I said and pulled a waffle on my plate.

I ate the first one like I was racing before I even considered asking Mave where Max was. But as soon as I opened my mouth, the door opened, and the two Emerald girls came in—Alice and Taryn—followed by a swollen-eyed Max.

“I overslept,” he informed us when he fell onto the bench next to me. “Gimme that.” He shamelessly took the waffle I’d spent the last two minutes filling up with Nutella and decorating each square with raspberries and diced strawberries. I didn’t even have the heart to grab it from his hands, and not because I’d stolen his sandwich the day before. But because of the talk I was going to force myself to have with him just as soon as breakfast was over.

One look at Mave and her eyes were wide and bright, and she was *melting* while she analyzed Max's face for a few seconds, like he was the best thing she'd ever seen in her whole entire life.

It was so sweet to watch—and then she got her shit together and threw a blackberry at his face. “We were gonna meet here at eight. You're twenty-seven minutes late,” she told him.

“I *overslept!*” he muttered, mouth so full we barely heard him.

Mave flinched. “Ew, Max. *Ew*. Do I really need to remind you to keep your mouth closed when you're eating?” she chided him, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

Maveline Andros would make for one hell of an actress. She would put all of Hollywood to shame. I'd never seen anyone play every single role or persona as well as she did. Every single one of them.

After they bickered for a bit, Mave and Brianne decided to go to the Parlor to do their hair and makeup. Since the Emerald girls, who'd all said hi and smiled genuinely at me all through breakfast, were sitting far enough away, I decided now was the best time to ask Max.

“So, what are you doing today? You going to visit your mom again?”

I kept my eyes on the plate, trying not to feel so damn guilty.

“Nope. I'm gonna stay in and read until you finish training. Then we can go to the city again if you want. Maybe Mave'll join us,” Max said.

“Okay,” I said with a nod. “Okay, yeah...” My voice trailed off. *Get it together!* I shouted at myself in my head. “So, uh...is your dad home, too?” I choked the words out as casually as I could.

“My dad’s not home,” Max said. “Didn’t Mave tell you where he is?”

I looked at him. “No. Why, where is he?”

Suddenly, Max leaned closer and whispered, “He’s not far, just down the street in an institution.”

My brows shot up. “Institution?”

“Yep. He’s, uh...my dad is...” He smiled so sadly it broke my heart to pieces. “Well, he’s not well. He’s kind of sick.”

“Oh,” I breathed, not really sure how to even react. Here I’d been, preparing what to say when he told me his parents were fucking divorced.

It made sense, though. From what I’d learned here, it made sense how everyone else treated Max—Elyseans looked at diseases of any kind as weaknesses. It explained why Mave’s father had wanted her to stay away from him, too. So damn twisted.

“Yeah. Happened a long time ago. I was about six or seven when he kind of...*lost* it,” Max continued to whisper. I could tell it cost him to say those words, but it would help. I knew it would help him to tell me—after all, I was his friend.

Never mind that I had ulterior motives for asking that damn question in the first place.

“How’d that happen?” I said in half a voice.

Max shrugged. I expected him to change the subject already or just tell me to mind my own business, but he didn’t.

“I don’t remember much, to be honest. But one morning he woke up screaming, saying that *they’re* coming and accusing Houses of being corrupt and accusing our neighbors—Mave’s dad even—of working against Elyseans. It got worse within the month, and then he hardly even recognized us anymore,” Max said, and tears pricked the back of my eyes with every new word he spoke. “He’s best when he’s in isolation. He’s very calm when he doesn’t have to talk to anyone or see anyone.”

“I’m so sorry, Max,” I choked, feeling a thousand times worse already.

“Hey, it’s okay. It happens,” Max said, then continued with his food.

He didn’t look like he regretted talking to me. He didn’t look paler than before, and that’s why I kept going.

“How, though? Don’t you have healers for that? Is he...is he not a healer himself?” Max was supposed to be one, too. He wore his snake on his vest—a descendant of Apollo, who are mainly healers. And I knew for a fact that his father was that—he’d brought me back that night himself.

“He is. And healers can do a great deal with magic, but they can’t mend a broken mind. Nobody can do that,” Max said. “Whatever triggered it, they say it was powerful. Too powerful. Maybe even a spell, I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, *triggered* it?”

“Something did. Something sort of made him lose it, and Aunt Jules is convinced someone did something to him. Put a spell on him that we can’t find or something like that. There was a cause for his mind to shut down on itself like that. We just don’t know what it is.”

A cause.

A trigger.

Like...like doing a spell that could cost you all your energy. All your magic.

Like doing a *forbidden* spell that would bring a dead person back to life.

My God, I couldn't breathe...

"He's doing well, though. I saw him yesterday. He's calm. He enjoys all the books I bring him. He loves to read, too," Max continued, unaware that I was about to fucking choke on thin air.

"I'm...I'm glad," I barely managed to spit out, then stuffed my mouth full of food so I didn't have to talk. So I didn't have to look at him, so that he wouldn't notice the tears pooled in my eyes.

It was *me*. I felt it in my bones—I'd done it. I'd made Alan Roux lose his mind when he brought me back that night. There was no doubt about it—every instinct in my body knew it. I had no idea how, but I knew it.

I was responsible for the madness of Max's dad.

And I had no idea how I was going to live with myself knowing that.



"*FOCUS!*" Arti told me for probably the tenth time. "You're not listening to me—*focus, mortal!*"

I couldn't fucking focus.

It had taken me a good long while to even breathe properly after breakfast, when I came looking for her in the Arena. Apparently, I was supposed to meet her here at eight-thirty to start training, and I'd been almost twenty minutes late, which meant she made me run laps around the Arena for forty.

I had no complaint about that—I'd needed something to do. I'd been desperate for something to do, to put my body in pain, to give myself a distraction from what Max told me about his dad.

But now I was too tired, my muscles too sore, and I couldn't block any of her hits if I tried.

"Here, take this," she finally said, pulling something out of her pocket. It was a tiny glass bottle with a wooden lid and what looked like water inside. "Drink it. All at once. It'll relax your muscles, take away the pain."

I didn't think. I pulled the lid off and drank.

It tasted like dirt going down my throat, but there wasn't much of it, and it's not like I cared anyway.

"What's gotten you so distracted, mortal?" she said, and as hard as she'd tried to mask her irritation when I first came in here, it was written all over her face now. She was no longer trying, wouldn't even call me by my name. I was *mortal* now, not Sera.

"Nothing," I muttered, resting my hands on my knees to catch my breath for a second.

"If it's nothing, how dare you waste my time by not bringing your best when you come through those doors?!"

I straightened up immediately.

Fuck, her voice sounded different just now. It sounded so much different than usual, and when I met her eyes, I could have sworn they weren't the same, either. They were lighter somehow, and her shoulders seemed a tad bit larger, too. Everything else about her looked the same as yesterday, but with every passing second, I could have sworn she was changing. Slightly, but changing.

"I'm trying," I said through gritted teeth anyway. "And I didn't ask for this, Arti. Every inch of my body is in pain, but I still showed up. I'm trying." It was the best I could give her right now, and if she couldn't accept it, I had nothing more left to offer.

With a sigh, she lowered her head and took a step back.

"Again." Raising her sword, she took her position again.

Having no other choice, so did I.

She hadn't let me talk at all, pissed that I hadn't been here at eight-thirty when she hadn't even told me that that's when we started. She just assumed I'd know because we'd started at eight-thirty yesterday. She was a bit of a bitch when she was pissed, it seemed, not that I'd ever tell that to her face without being ready to die a gruesome death. But I was going to pay close attention not to piss her off from now on.

Whenever I could help it, of course.

She sparred with me for another half hour, and I actually managed to duck and dodge most of her blows within the first few minutes. My muscles were indeed relaxed, the pain faded away. Not completely but it didn't hurt to breathe as much as in the beginning.

What the hell kind of potion had been in that bottle—and where could I get more?

It was still hard as hell to keep her back—she was incredibly strong, even though she assured me that she was using *only a quarter of one tenth of her full strength*. I didn't even want to imagine what a hundred percent of it looked like.

Eventually, training ended, and she let me drop the damn sword. It got so heavy by the end I wondered how I had carried it in my hand for a full hour. So fucking glad to be done and get the hell out of there, but Arti wasn't done with me yet.

She went to grab her jacket where she'd left it on the benches near Mors, then came back to me. I could barely stand, but I was sure she wouldn't appreciate it if I collapsed on the mats to catch my breath for a second, so I held as still as I could while she reached for something in the pocket of her leather jacket.

It was a weapon unlike any I'd seen so far—like a hook made out of a strange kind of matte metal that was neither grey nor gold, with squares and circles and straight lines carved on either side, and a small handle at the bottom.

“What's that?” I whispered, mesmerized by that piece of work already.

“This is a scythe,” Arti said and handed it to me. “It's made out of adamantine—the god killer, if you know what that is.”

Oh, I did. Adamantine was the only metal that could actually harm a god, the stories said. Zeus held Prometheus back with chains made out of this very metal. I'd seen something like it at the top of the tower in the second trial, too, right before a dragon had almost killed me.

“Wow,” I breathed because I didn’t expect it to be so light in my hand or the small metal handle to fit so well in my palm, like it was made for it.

“It’s yours,” Arti said, and though she wasn’t calm all the way yet, she looked much better than half an hour ago. “I was wrong—you’re not built for swords or daggers. This is going to be perfect for you. This—and bows, which I can’t teach you about while your muscles are still recovering. They shake a lot and it’s impossible to hit your mark with those arms. I keep forgetting you’re only mortal right now.”

Something about the way she said that...

“It’s...small,” I said in wonder. The blade of the scythe was indeed sharp, but it was small, not even as big as the daggers we trained with.

“That’s because it needs magic to be the weapon that it is,” Arti said, coming closer to me. “Magic, which you will have once you get endowed, Sera. Magic that you will need when going down the portal. And this weapon is special. Once it feels your magic, it will feed off it, and it will grow exactly as big as you need it to grow. Do you understand me?”

Fuck, no, I didn’t. “So, why are you giving it to me?” She seemed much better equipped to handle a weapon that could *feed* off magic.

“Because you need it, and it needs you. It recognizes godlight better than all other magics,” Arti said without hesitation, then put both her hands on my shoulders. It took all I had not to flinch at the contact.

“We can do great things together, Sera. I’ll train you to be the best fighter you can possibly be, but even that won’t be enough without awakening the magic that is inside of you.”

“There is no magic inside of me. I’m mortal, remember?” I said, feeling the weight of her gaze on my face like heat from the sun.

“There’s magic in everything and everyone,” she told me. “But you have to be endowed to feel it. *Now*, before the rest of your class. You don’t have to wait to finish the first year, you can get endowed as soon as you’re ready—just say the word.”

I shook my head and looked down at the scythe in my hand once more. “I thought we had time to think about that.” Wasn’t that what she said just the morning before? Because I really didn’t know. I’d never even thought about having *my magic unlocked*—I had no fucking magic!

“We do, just giving you a reminder,” Arti said and finally let go of me. “And don’t be late again, Sera. Don’t come here distracted. Do as I say, and we will be just fine.” I opened my mouth to speak, but... “I promise to give you my best, but you have to promise the same to me, too.”

Shit. She made it really difficult to argue with that.

But even if I’d wanted to, right now I couldn’t bring myself to say a single thing. That word kept swimming around in my head—*endowed*. She really wanted me to get endowed before everyone else—even before Max. Before Nick and before Ethan—who was still unconscious, Max had told me. Unconscious, but alive.

And if I did that, if I got endowed, I’d be able to do actual magic, to bring that godlight into the world willingly and with my own efforts. *Control* it even.

What an absurd thought.

“What the...” Arti suddenly said, and I turned to look at where she’d stopped halfway to the doors, watching none

other than the pup trotting toward me from the other side—right from Professor Novak’s office, it seemed. I hadn’t heard a door opening or closing, though—could he go through *all* doors just like that?

“Hey, you,” I said to the pup as he came, then turned to Arti again. “I was meaning to ask you about him, actually.” But she’d been pissed and I thought I’d leave the questions for next time. “He’s been coming to my room for two days now. Any idea why and how I can tell him to leave or something? Should I take him somewhere where they care for the Cerberus?”

The pup put a paw on my foot, and I leaned down to scratch his heads like he liked, one then the other. Such a pretty doggy, he was. All three heads were indeed gorgeous.

Then Artemis burst out laughing.

I straightened up again, confused. Why in the world was she laughing, when her own Cerberus was right there by her feet, watching us, too?

“Oh, boy,” Arti said, shaking her head. “I wondered where she’d gone off to.”

My brows shot up. “*She?*” I don’t know why that surprised me so much.

“That’s Mors’s offspring,” she told me.

“Oh!” Holy shit, that made perfect sense. Now *I* was laughing, too. “Right, of course, of course. I should have figured she’s yours.” It had been right there in my face.

But...

“Oh, no, no, no—she’s not mine,” Artemis said, her smile suddenly vanished as she took a step back and shook her head.

“Definitely not mine—*nooooo*.”

“So wha—?”

“She’s yours now.”

I blinked. “What?”

“She’s yours. She’s apparently chosen you.”

What the fuck. “No, she hasn’t.” How would she even know—did she speak fucking Cerberus?

Arti’s brows shot up like she couldn’t believe those words just came out of my mouth. “You can *touch* her, Sera. Believe me, it doesn’t get any more obvious than that.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand.”

“Try touching Mors.” She grinned. “I dare you.” And she touched Mors’s middle head, scratching it lightly while he closed all his eyes and groaned in pleasure.

“No, thank you.” I really didn’t want to touch Mors.

“You’d die if you tried. The Cerberus are very selective. They’ll only let their chosen masters touch them, and *very* few others if they connect to them at a deep enough level.”

She made no sense to me whatsoever. “But...but—”

“I should have known. I haven’t seen her at all since we came here. She was probably sniffing you out.” Arti nodded at herself as if it all made perfect sense to her now. “Be careful with that one. Females are very aggressive. Very powerful. And *do not* freak out when she shows you her true size. She’ll get tired of maintaining a puppy image eventually. They all do.”

My mouth opened and closed about a million times, but I still couldn’t speak.

“Cheer up, Sera. She’ll kill for you. She’ll die for you.” Arti raised her fists at me. “It’s a testament of your strong character.” And just like that, she turned around to leave.

Just like that.

“But *wait!* I have no clue what to do with a Cerberus! Are you kidding me? What...what...*how?*” I’d never had a pet in my life, not even a normal one-headed dog. How the hell was I going to take care of one with three?!

“Don’t worry, you’ll figure it out. Just don’t let anyone touch her, and they’ll be fine, too.” Arti opened the door.

“Wait—just wait one second!” I called, but she didn’t.

“Finally, I got rid of that one,” she muttered to herself as she went. “*Finally...*” She let the door close behind her without a care in the world—on the contrary, her mood seemed to have improved.

“Arti!” I called, knowing she wasn’t going to come back, but I had to try anyway.

And when the minute was over, my legs finally gave up on me and I sat on the mats.

The pup was right there still, sitting on her hind legs, watching me, pink tongues hanging out, those wide eyes focused on me.

“Are you serious right now? You *chose me?*” I shrieked. “Can you and robot birds and Elyseans in general just *stop choosing me* for one second?!”

I didn’t want to be chosen! I just wanted to live a normal boring life, damn it.

With Shade.

And...and maybe possibly with a three-headed pup who looked at me like I was the love of her life.

Shit.

I grabbed my head in my heads. “Oh, God. I’m gonna keep you, aren’t I,” I told her, terrified of the idea already. But there was no way in any hell I was ever going to look into those eyes, then spell out words like *leave me alone* or *go away* or *I don’t want you to stay with me every second of every day for the rest of my life*.

And the pup must have understood my words because suddenly she put both paws on my lap. One head licked my chin, while the other two bit my hands slowly, *lightly*, to tell me to touch them. To scratch them between the ears.

So, I did.

Fuck, I did, and before two minutes were over, I found myself smiling.

“Fine, whatever,” I told her with a sigh. “But I’m not going to take you out to pee and poop—you’ll do that yourself, right? I can get you food, I guess. Wait, what do you eat?” It seemed I needed to find a book on the Cerberus for real before the day was over. “And you need a name, don’t you?”

The pup suddenly leaned back to look at me, all three heads, two almost completely black, the middle one white. “Any idea what you want to be called?” The head on the right barked. “I don’t understand what that means, buddy. I don’t speak Cerberus.”

She blinked at me, confused.

I sighed, shaking my head as I scratched their chins next. “You do look like an Oreo,” I muttered to myself, and all three heads barked at the same time.

“*Oreo*? You like *Oreo*?”

Another bark, then two and three from each. It sounded like a crowd of twenty dogs was barking in the Arena while I fucking laughed my heart out—I liked the sound of those barks.

And the hellhound pup with three heads liked the name. “*Oreo* it is,” I said with a nod. “We’ll figure this out, yeah? Just don’t eat me.” They all tried to lick my face, but I pushed them back. “No—I mean it. *Do not* eat me—or anyone else that’s with me, okay? Not my friends and not *anyone*. You can’t bite anyone at all.”

They all barked in unison and I could’ve sworn they all agreed.

My God, I had lost my fucking mind because I genuinely believe I could understand what a Cerberus bark meant. That’s why I was lying on the floor and laughing like a damn lunatic.

Yeah, Mave was absolutely right about what I’d become—*completely batshit crazy*.

8

“Unfaithfulness is many things, never just an act. It is a mirror that sees deep into one’s soul; it is a statement, plain and simple, of how one truly feels about you. Unfaithfulness is the highest form of humiliation.”

—Metis the Wise, 470

by Elh Pordier, House Ruby

WE DECIDED to stay in and rest that day.

In fact, Max decided he was going to need a whole day to process the fact that I, Sera Sinclair, the pesky mortal, his best friend, had a pet Cerberus now.

I had no problem with it—with the way my whole body ached and the shitty sleep I’d gotten last night, I wanted to go to my room and lie down after dinner. Mave had no problem with it, either—she didn’t particularly like the Cerberus. Said she had an allergy.

Max then told me she was full of shit, that Elyseans didn’t get allergies because *our immune systems are too sophisticated to react to any kind of foreign proteins or to allow histamine build up*, he explained. Mave was just scared, and she needed some time to convince herself that she wasn’t. *It’s a whole*

process when she's convincing herself of something, Max said, and I was glad for that, too. I really needed to rest.

It was a damn miracle Miss Lenora allowed me to bring a book on the Cerberus to my room from the library. At first, I thought I'd be too tired to read it tonight, but eventually, curiosity got the best of me, so I sat cross-legged in the middle of my bed and read.

“Look at that,” I told Oreo, and all three heads rose from the floor to look up at me curiously. “It says here you're basically three little doggies in one body. Is that right?” They all barked together. This time, I had no clue what that meant. “Hey, I'm no expert on hellhounds, okay? That's just what it says here.” I pointed at the book and kept reading. “Hop on here, c'mon. Let me see your paws.” I patted the bed so she knew what I was saying, but I got the feeling she could understand my words perfectly fine.

Oreo didn't hesitate. She jumped on the bed and nearly knocked the book over, eager to get on my lap and start licking my face.

“No, no, back off. Sit. Just sit down,” I said laughing, and she immediately did. It was actually kind of incredible how she listened to everything I said right away. “Good girl. Now lie down. I need to see the inside of your paws,” I said, and like an idiot, I showed her the inside of my palms.

But again, Oreo understood. She immediately tried to mimic what I was doing with her front feet and failed miserably. The faces she made when I grabbed her left paw and turned it over were hilarious. The book said that there were two Cerberus breeds known to Elyseans. Those with grey paws shaped almost like upside down hearts were called *Lucce*, the light breed, and those were generally more

agreeable hounds, had a longer lifespan of about eighty years, and were much more willing to mate.

“Nope. That’s not you,” I told Oreo because the inside of her paw was rounder, the color of it as dark as her fur, just like in the picture on the next page of the book—the paws of the other Cerberus breed called the *Inferis*, the dark breed. “Oh...” I whispered as I read the paragraph quickly—less agreeable, very aggressive, especially females, had a lifespan of sixty to seventy years, and most died without ever mating.

“Well, whoever wrote this book didn’t know you,” I told Oreo because *look at those faces*. No way in hell was she aggressive—those big eyes and those tongues hanging out and just the way she couldn’t wait to jump on my lap and lick the hell out of me...yeah, whoever had written that book had never met Oreo before.

“We’ll be fine,” I said, closing the book. “Right? We’ll be fine. You won’t even need me to bring you food. The book says you’ll hunt your own when you need to eat, right?”

Bark, bark. I took that as a yes.

“And you won’t need to be potty-trained and you won’t need me to take you out on walks. Not that I don’t want to, but I just won’t have the time when the second half of the year starts. Add the extra training with Arti, and...yeah...” I muttered, rubbing the back of my neck. Safe to say this place was going to require every second of my time and attention. “I do need to wash you, though.” That would certainly be an interesting experience.

Grabbing the book Mave had given me next, I put my pillow against the wall and sat in the middle of the bed again to read it. Oreo didn’t get off the bed at all, instead settling next to my legs and laying all three heads on them. The

warmth of her body on mine felt mighty good. I began to play with her ears and her soft fur as I read.

I read the same tale Mave had highlighted—of Hera and Jason—again, even though I’d read it a million times already. How Hera had disguised herself as an old woman and had asked handsome Jason to help her cross the wide river. How he’d grabbed her in his arms without hesitation and had carried her over. How she’d gotten heavier with each new step he took, until he risked sinking together with her—but he kept going. He didn’t give up. He even lost a sandal to the riverbed, but he got Hera to the other side, and then she revealed herself to him, and Jason earned her favor.

That same *insane* thought as last time I read this took over my mind—had Eeda been Hera in disguise?

Shivers washed all over me—no, it couldn’t be. Why would a goddess like Hera disguise herself as a laundry woman? And *for me*?! It made no sense, plus Arti didn’t say that Hera had been on Earth when the Seasons were kidnapped, did she?

Suddenly, Oreo raised all three heads and turned toward the door, not even breathing.

A second later, someone knocked.

“Come in,” I said, knowing it was either Max or Shade, and I really didn’t want to get up and open it.

By the time Shade entered my room, Oreo was standing right next to me on the bed, ears perked up, teeth bared, growling.

Shade didn’t seem surprised at the three-headed hellhound at all. Instead, he smiled like he was *proud* to find her there as he slowly closed the door behind him.

I let go of a long breath, putting the book aside. Shade was here, and whatever the fuck that fact did to me, I loved it. I loved how *easy* I felt when I saw his face. How safe and free his presence made me.

“Yep. I have a hellhound from the Underworld now—and she’s the Inferis breed, too. Very aggressive,” I said, patting Oreo on the back. “Stay. No biting,” I reminded her.

But Shade shook his head, smiling still as he approached the bed and...

Oreo moved back.

She was wary of Shade, growling still as she came closer and closer to the wall, her body rigid.

“It’s a she,” Shade said in a whisper, slowly lowering to a squat, eyes on Oreo.

“Yep. It’s a she. Did Arti tell you?”

“She did,” Shade said with a nod, then slowly raised his hand toward Oreo, but...

Each of Oreo’s heads barked twice, then whined as she pressed herself to the wall.

I laughed.

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s Shade. Don’t be afraid of Shade. It’s fine, I promise,” I told her, patting her heads, but she wouldn’t hear. And Shade laughed, too, but he stood up and moved to the other side of the bed anyway.

“She can sense my magic. It scares animals,” he said, and I could have sworn he even sounded sad about it. “It’s okay, she’ll get used to me eventually.”

“Oh, I remember,” I said, as Oreo—*very cautiously*—moved to the edge of the bed and jumped off, at least two sets of eyes on Shade at any given second. “I remember how the leopards ran from you that night when I stumbled into the library.” When the asshole Jasper had unleashed them on me at the Palace that first time. “I can’t believe she’s scared of you.” Oreo had moved all the way to the door before she sat and watched us curiously.

“Snowflake, you have a hellhound,” Shade whispered, coming to sit with me against the wall. I melted onto his chest even before he properly wrapped his arm around me.

The sound of him, the heat of him, the smell of raindrops that invaded my nostrils when I sniffed the side of his neck—*yes*, I was weird like that—made life infinitely better within seconds.

“Seems so,” I said, kissing the tender skin behind his ear. He immediately pressed onto my lips harder, then pulled me to sit on his lap. *Heaven*.

“Have you named her?”

“Mhmm...” I trailed kisses up to his jaw, searching for his lip. “Her name’s Oreo.” I kissed his lips, and...he froze.

Leaning back, I looked at Shade’s face. “What?”

He arched a brow. “You named a *hellhound* Oreo,” he said, like he was trying to make sure he heard right.

Moving off his chest, I crossed my arms. “Yes, well, she looks like an Oreo, doesn’t she?” He could see her just fine. “Besides—she likes it.”

The asshole wanted to laugh, and it was worse that he was stopping himself. “Does she now?”

I jammed my elbow in his gut and when his breath cut off, it was incredibly satisfying. “She does. Right, Oreo?”

Bark, bark, bark—yes, that confirmed it.

I turned to Shade again. “See?”

At that, he laughed. Pulling me in his arms again and onto his lap, Shade laughed his heart out, and I’d be damned if I’d ever been so *purely happy* as I was while he did. Having good, even *great* things happen to me was definitely amazing, but making Shade laugh? Yeah, that was a whole other monster, it seemed.

“She definitely likes it. I could just tell when she barked,” the asshole teased, and I didn’t even care because he was also kissing me now.

“She does. I apparently speak Cerberus, and she just said *yes, I like it*. So...” My voice trailed off as he kissed the tip of my nose, then moved to my closed lids.

“Mhm, mhm,” Shade said, shoulders shaking as he held onto me. “You have a pet hellhound named Oreo, Snowflake.” He leaned away for a bit to look at my face. “I keep thinking I’ll stop being in awe of you any day now, but you make it impossible.”

My cheeks flushed instantly. “Well, it’s not like I did something. She just came to me. Arti says *she* chose *me*, so it wasn’t my doing.”

Fuck, why did any kind of compliment make me squirm like that still? I hid my face under his chin immediately.

“But it was. The Cerberus are very smart and very selective beasts. Nobody really knows how they choose their masters when they do, but all of them are incredibly strong. All of them are extraordinary.”

“They are?” The book didn’t really talk about that part, not as far as I’d read. I would have to read the rest of it tomorrow.

“What does it tell you that goddess Artemis has a Cerberus?” Shade whispered in my ear.

I flinched. “Tells me they really like women?”

Shade chuckled, kissing my forehead. “They see beyond gender. Way beyond the surface.”

“I’ll take it if you’re so impressed.” Though I didn’t feel like I *earned* it—I really hadn’t done anything out of the ordinary. I’d been about to fucking die from training, had been wallowing in self-pity all over the Arena floor when Oreo first found me. It *wasn’t me*.

“Impressed is a small word,” Shade said, pushing up my chin with his fingertips before he claimed my lips. I didn’t even try to say anything else or check to see if Oreo was watching. Was it weird to a hellhound when people made out?

If it was, she’d have to close all her eyes because I wasn’t about to stop kissing this guy until I passed out.

Moving away for a second, I put my leg on the other side of his and straddled him because I needed better access to all of him. My muscles ached—fuck, how they ached—but it was easy enough to ignore them when his tongue was in my mouth again, and he kissed me like it was his life’s mission to know every inch of space inside it. His hands were all over me, too, down my back and squeezing my ass, slamming me against his hips—and against his cock that was hard already.

Fire spilled all over me, burning my skin. My body moved on its own now, my instincts taking over, and I ground against his cock faster by the second. So much pent-up energy and so many shocks these past few days had made me desperate for a

sense of normalcy. Had made me desperate to feel Shade, to detach myself from the rest of the world. To take a break from the madness.

Shade did exactly that so easily.

Wrapping his arms around me tightly, he held me to his chest and bit my lips, sucked them into his mouth until I moaned, and when I did, he growled louder than Oreos. The sounds he made were my fuel, and I kept moving my hips faster, so ready to come it was almost ridiculous.

But Shade said, “Don’t come yet,” and I cried out in complaint.

“I need to,” I breathed against his mouth, and the next second, he moved us. He put me on the bed and lay on top of me, his full weight falling onto me. I moaned louder.

“I need to taste you first,” Shade whispered. “Don’t you want to come on my tongue?”

Oh, he was the fucking devil. My hips stopped grinding instantly.

“Yes,” I breathed, already delirious with pleasure. “Yes, fuck, yes.”

He grinned, kissing my lips one more time. “Good girl.”

When he said those words together, they were different. They must’ve had magical power over me because he got me to submit to him *like that*. I unlocked my limbs from around him when he started trailing kisses down my neck as he took his jacket off, then slowly unzipped my hoodie. I was only wearing my bra underneath, and his hands were suddenly under it, cupping my breasts hard while he kissed my chest. My back arched, body yearning for him, my skin desperate for his lips.

He whispered praise under his breath after each kiss until he reached my breast and sucked my nipple into his mouth. Impossible to stop my hips from moving up and down, trying to grind against him, but he was too far away. He must have known exactly what I needed, just like always, because he massaged my breast that was in his mouth with one hand, and he moved the other lower, between my legs, pressing over my clothes right onto my clit.

It was all I could do to stop myself from coming right away, but I wanted that tongue in my pussy first. I wanted to feel his breath on my folds, and I wanted to be reminded of how much he loved the taste of me.

He rubbed me for a little while, then let go of my breast and pushed my sweatpants and my underwear down in one movement. The cool air of the room against my soaked folds was enough pressure to get me undone, but I resisted still, fisting the sheets tightly, keeping my eyes closed as Shade kissed down my stomach and to my pelvis, then finally kneeled between my legs.

He gripped my thighs, just as desperate as I was, and spread my legs to the sides as far as they'd go.

“Look at you,” he whispered as he ran his hands all over my skin, then lightly touched my pussy with his fingertips, growling. And when I heard the sound of him taking his shirt off, I had no chance of keeping my eyes closed. Something about the look in his eyes, just as wild as I was feeling to be the object of his desire, that fulfilled me in a different way.

“Keep moving, baby,” he whispered, one hand on the bulge of his pants, rubbing himself, the other slipping down my clit and to my wet folds. I rose on my heels to take his fingers inside of me.

Shade growled again, rubbing his cock more urgently. Fuck, I wanted it in my hands, too. In my mouth and in my pussy—everywhere all at once.

“Shade,” I breathed, barely managing to sit up so I could see him better.

He positioned two fingers right in front of my entrance, then said, “Take them in, Snowflake. Let me see you fucking my fingers.”

I didn’t need to be told twice.

My arms and legs shook, but I moved up on my heels and I lowered myself onto his fingers slowly, shuddering with every new inch I took in. God, he felt incredible. Every bit of him on me felt fucking incredible, and I couldn’t stop if I tried. I took them inside me all the way, and then I rose up again, slow at first. I couldn’t look away from his face, from his reaction of watching his fingers disappearing inside of me, and I began to move faster. I jumped on his hand and he rubbed himself harder with each new thrust.

“I want to see you, too,” I whispered, and Shade grinned, his eyes dark storms that were about to spill all over me. Keeping his fingers stiff against the bed while I still fucked them, he slowly undid the zipper of his pants, taunting me, teasing me, until his cock was finally in his hand.

Fuck, he was huge. He was *perfect*. Every inch of smooth pink skin, and every vein on him was damn perfect. I was dying for a taste, especially when he wrapped his hand around it and began to jerk himself off.

His eyes were half closed, still on his fingers where they disappeared inside me while I slowly moved up and down. He looked so fucking beautiful it was a different kind of pain just

to be looking at him like that, cock in his hands and his breathing heavy, whispering my name every few seconds.

It didn't take long for my body to lock down, the taste of the orgasm just within my reach, like it was on the tip of my tongue.

But Shade pulled his fingers out of me and replaced them with his mouth within a second.

I fell back on the bed with a loud moan as his tongue circled my clit, then hungrily thrust inside me while he pushed my legs to the sides as far as they would go. My hands were in his hair, holding him to my pussy while I moved against his face barely a few times. Fireworks exploded behind my closed lids and I was exactly where I needed to be—away from the Academy, from the world, the whole damn universe. It was just me and Shade here, and with him between my legs, I saw all the gods to have ever existed.

My body let go and I fell back, not an ounce of energy left in my limbs. The state of pure bliss lasted a long time while Shade licked every inch and every drop on my folds, until he was fully satiated as well.

Then he slowly moved over me, kissing my stomach, my breasts, my chest, then my lips.

A wicked grin was on his. "Ready?" he whispered, and I came alive.

"Fuck, yeah."

He fell on top of me, taking my breath away one more time.

9

Poseidon, son of Cronus, brother of Zeus, was the god of the sea, and he was a very violent god. The mortals called him Earthshaker, for every time he struck the ground with his mighty Trident, the earth would tremble and split open; every time he struck the sea with his mighty Trident, waves would rise as high as mountains and wreck ships and drown those who lived near shores.

But when he wasn't moody, and when he felt peaceful, Poseidon was a good god. He would calm the seas and raise new lands out of water for the people to explore. His palace was made out of pale gold at the bottom of the sea, surrounded by corals and shiny pearls, where he lived with his wife Amphitrite. With her, he only had one son, Triton, who had a fishtail instead of legs, and rode mighty sea beasts.

Poseidon was a restless god, too, and raced sea waves with his white horses every day. He took many more wives and had many more children as he ruled the seas of the world.

—Book of Creation, Volume IV, 1st Edition, 112

by Emilia Marvos, House Emerald

SHADE MOVED SLOWLY, running his lips down my jaw but never kissing me, moving his hands down my body, squeezing me as he went. He took his cock in his hand and slowly guided it to my burning center. I was already turned on even though I'd come just a minute ago, and I couldn't wait to feel him all the way inside me, buried to the hilt.

My hips pushed up and I didn't even realize it, and Shade moved himself back a bit.

"So greedy," he whispered, chuckling. "Don't move, Snowflake." And he brought his tip to my folds again.

I moaned in complaint when he slipped it between my folds, down to my entrance, then up to my clit again. It was torture, a kind I could develop an addiction to fairly quickly if he kept going.

"Do you have any idea how you look when you come?" Shade whispered, teasing me with the tip of his cock. My hips started moving again on their own, only slightly. Another moan was the best response I could give him.

"It's the best thing I've ever seen in my life. You're completely peaceful, Snowflake," he said. Kissing my parted lips, before he moved the tip of him in a circle over my clit. "So fucking beautiful..."

"Then let me show you again," I breathed, raising my hips to meet his cock, now right at my entrance.

But Shade moved away. "You will. Over and over and over again..." he whispered, pulling my earlobe in his mouth with his tongue. The way my body writhed underneath him could have been a dream. We fit and moved so perfectly together.

"Shade, please," I said, pulling at him with all my strength. I wanted him too much. I couldn't take it anymore.

"I love the way you look when you're begging for me, too," he said, biting my jaw with a growl. "So completely, undeniably *mine*."

He thrust inside me with all his strength, all at once, until I felt him to my very core.

My eyes rolled in my skull and my muscles locked down for a moment. *Fuck*. How was it that he still felt like the world began and ended right here with him?

The moans coming out of him as he slowly eased himself even deeper inside me were the best music in the world to my ears. I held onto his shoulders, dug my fingers into his skin, but if it hurt him, he didn't complain.

"Scream for me, baby," Shade said as he slowly grabbed my legs by the backs of my knees and pulled them up and to the sides, spreading me so, so tight... "Scream for me as loud as you can."

Darkness exploded all around us, taking away the room, the entire world. And Shade began to move.

I couldn't stop screaming if I tried. He fucked me mercilessly, without an ounce of control, pounding into me faster by the second. He held my legs up under his arms, stretching me all the way, and he kept going for a long time, until his cock was all I could feel, all I could see in my mind's eye. He kissed me and bit me, drawing out blood on my lips, so desperate now that he'd given up control, just as desperate as me. Every time he buried himself deep inside me, he took my pleasure up a level, until I was made of it completely.

I came a second time with his name on my lips, falling apart and getting back together right there underneath him.

That's it, my beautiful Snowflake, Shade kept whispering, holding himself deep inside me while I rode the high.

Keep going...

The way your pussy clenches around me is fucking magnificent....

You fucking own all of me...

I fell back with my eyes closed, so perfectly safe in the Void and in his arms. Nothing and nobody could get to me here and knowing that made it all the better.

Eventually, Shade began to move again, fucking me slowly now, chasing his own high until he came with my lip between his teeth, his cock as deep inside me as it could get. He let go of himself and fell on me, and I wrapped my arms around him, holding him to my chest tightly.

There would never come a time when being with him wouldn't feel like this. I knew that beyond a shadow of a doubt now, and that thought lulled me to sleep within minutes.



MY EYES POPPED OPEN, and I was alone in my bed. I was in my room, too, the darkness of the Void no longer wrapped around me. The panic climbed insanely fast—was it morning already?

But it was still dark outside my window, and it didn't feel like I'd slept all night, not even close. So, where was Shade?

And where was Oreo? She wasn't sleeping anywhere on the floor.

Oh, God...

My eyes closed at the realization. Had she been here while we'd had sex earlier?

“Shit...” I whispered, shaking my head at myself, embarrassed, my cheeks already flushed. Shade had fucked me in front of a three-headed hellhound puppy.

“Shit, shit, shit!”

But he fucked me so well...

The memories poured all over my body like lava. I was burning within the minute, especially when I realized that I was completely naked underneath the black satin cover. Not only that, but my clothes were all over the place, and Shade's shirt was hanging onto the edge of the desk, too.

No, he wasn't gone. He was probably in the bathroom or something, and I already couldn't wait for him to be back because the small clock on my makeshift nightstand said it was barely midnight.

Should I go look for him? I wondered, pushing the cover off me—it was way too hot in the room now that those memories, the feel of him all over my body, of his cock inside me, had taken over my mind. I was tired and my muscles screamed in protest, but I ignored them perfectly fine. No amount of pain was going to stop me from jumping his bones the second I saw him again—it had been too long since I'd had him. Way too long, and I needed more.

I looked down at my body, a bit surprised to find that even the color of my skin looked better now that he'd touched me everywhere. My nipples were still pink, still a bit raw where he'd kissed and sucked and bit me...*how long ago?*

Probably a couple hours, but it didn't really matter.

Slowly, I reached out my hands to touch them. They were warm and a bit sore and so, so sensitive...

Fuck, it felt incredible just to run my fingers over the hard buds. Shivers ran down my back and my legs spread to the sides on their own. Image after image of Shade consumed me within seconds—him over me, his weight on my body, his

cock inside me, the way he moaned that sexy sound, his tongue pressing on my clit...

God, I was so turned on I could hardly think. All I could do was remember how he'd looked with his cock in his hands, jerking himself off while he watched me fuck his fingers. That image was imprinted on the back of my lids, it seemed, and there was no way to stop thinking about it. No way to stop my hand from traveling down south, toward my stomach and between my spread legs, just to touch myself a little bit. Just until Shade got here...

My eyes closed and my head fell back as I moaned, my fingers moving into a perfect circle over my clit while my hips shot up. So fucking hot in here...

"Shade," I whispered to the room, so lost to the feeling already, I was going to come within seconds.

It was okay, though. Just until Shade was back. Just until he could continue to make me feel like I was the only thing in the world that mattered...

Yes, yes, yes...

"Snowflake."

The world stopped spinning.

I sat up, eyes wide open, breathing like I'd been running a thousand years. Shade was by the door wearing nothing but his leather pants low on his hips and a look in his eyes that could pick me apart just as easily as an orgasm.

"I-I-I—" I stuttered, when realization hit me—he'd *seen* me.

My God, Shade had come into my room and I hadn't heard a single thing, and he'd seen me touching myself.

Mortified, I closed my legs and tried to stand from the bed, turn my back on him, just go be somewhere, *anywhere* in the world where he wasn't for a second, but...

“Stop,” Shade said, pushing the door closed behind him, but he didn't come into the room. He stayed right there while he watched me, no sign of his mischievous grin anywhere on his lips, his eyes darker than the midnight sky, his chest covered in scars rising and falling as fast as mine.

“Stand up,” Shade said and slowly pointed a finger toward my desk. “Grab that chair and turn it to me.”

“Shade—”

“Do it. Grab the chair.”

Fuck.

I wanted to argue.

I wanted to tell him to get out, to give me a second, to stop looking at me like he was so fucking hungry—but that was *it*. That look on his face reminded my body just how hot and turned on I had been a minute ago, and the heat came back to me with a vengeance.

Exactly what was going on in his mind?

I wanted to know so desperately...

Before I even realized I'd moved, I stood up and grabbed the chair in front of my desk and turned it toward him.

“Sit,” he ordered, and my knees shook at the sound of him, so dark and alluring, exactly like his shadows.

I sat on the chair, every inch of my skin covered in goose bumps, but I didn't look away from him for a second.

Slowly, his tongue came out to wet his lips, then he pulled the bottom one between his teeth and bit while his eyes scrolled down my naked body. A moan ripped right out of me—how was it that he wasn't even touching me, and he had *this* effect on me still?

“Spread those legs, baby,” Shade said, and the sound of him caressed my skin like his magic did.

Fuck, I was so shy. So fucking mortified, not only to be caught touching myself, but to spread my legs to the sides the way I was doing, slowly but surely, until I was wide open.

Yes, absolutely mortified, but I wasn't going to stop.

Shade muttered curses under his breath as he watched me, running his hands through his hair that was all over the place since he'd been eating my pussy and I'd all but pulled it out of his head. And the memory of that poured more liquid heat right to my throbbing clit.

“You're gonna fucking kill me,” Shade said, leaning back against the wall, the bulge in his pants so painfully obvious to me now.

“Come closer,” I whispered, feeling more *powerful* by the second, probably because I knew I put that look on his face.

But Shade shook his head. “Touch yourself, Snowflake. I want to see,” he whispered. “Bring your fingers to your mouth.”

My lips parted and my first instinct was to say *no*. Hell, no—fuck that. I wasn't going to touch myself in front of Shade. Was he insane?!

Except he had touched himself in front of me earlier, and I'd fucking loved every second. I'd loved it so much the memory had made me touch myself as soon as I woke up.

Maybe he would feel the same way.

That was all it took to convince me to bring my hand up slowly.

“Put your middle finger in your mouth,” Shade instructed, and I could have sworn the skin around his eyes had started to get black, too. I did as he asked, put my finger inside my mouth, and...

“Suck, baby.”

I did.

My eyes closed and my mind got away from me instantly, imagining it was his cock against my tongue. I moaned again, impossible to control it.

“That’s right. Run your tongue over it,” Shade said, and I did, like he was my maker and his wish was my command. “Now another...”

Never in a million years would I have thought I could be so damn turned on by sucking on my own fingers.

“Stop,” Shade said, and I almost complained. But I was so lost in the moment already, my hips moving onto the wood of the chair, grinding against it, my orgasm climbing as fast as always.

“Bring those wet fingers to your pussy, baby,” he said, and I did so eagerly. “Grab your nipple...yes, like that...”

He looked and sounded completely intoxicated as he watched me rub circles on my clit with one hand and play with my nipple with the other while I sat on my chair, spread wide open for him.

My God, I’d never done anything sexier in my life.

My eyes were open only a slit because of the incredible need to see his face, to see him rubbing himself, too, over those pants. His bloodshot eyes analyzed every inch of me, and his hand moved faster and faster, in rhythm with my hips.

“Thrust your fingers inside,” Shade said after a minute and he finally undid the zipper of his pants, and pulled his cock out, too.

At the sight of it, my mouth watered, and my hips picked up the rhythm, and I pinched my nipple even harder until my back arched all the way. The cold wood of the chair against my wet pussy was enough to get me off, but I wanted to see more of Shade. I wanted to see the look on his face, and the way his hands moved up and down on his hard cock as he watched me, too. Fuck, he was so damn sexy. With those black eyes and that hair all over the place, his ripped chest full of scars and his hand fisting his cock at exactly the same speed as I moved my hips...

“Shade,” I cried out, and he finally caved. He finally came closer, looking at me like I was the prey he was about to devour, and I couldn’t stand from that chair if I tried. I could do nothing but keep finger fucking myself and looking up at him, crying out with every thrust, until his free hand wrapped around my chin.

His magic was against my skin the next second, his shadows like ribbons of satin slipping down my jaw, to my neck, then slowly wrapping all around it...

I’d worn Shade’s darkness twice before—once while I’d been riding him. He’d connected to me like that, had felt what I felt, and he was doing it again. He could see my pleasure written all over me, and now that his magic was on me like a

necklace—the tight choker kind—he would feel it, too, just as clearly as I did.

“Don’t stop,” Shade whispered, and pulled my chin lower while his magic slipped under my skin, tightening a bit more around my throat.

Then he brought his cock to my parted lips and thrust it into my mouth all at once.

The tip of him touched the back of my throat and I gagged, surprised and excited and about to fall apart into fireworks at the same time. My thoughts raced and my hips moved faster, and I thrust my own fingers deeper inside me while Shade pulled out of my mouth just a bit, then filled it again until I gagged once more.

Tears in my eyes, slipping down my cheeks. Shade grabbed a fistful of my hair and guided my head back and forth as he fucked my mouth, moaning and whispering my name. It had been easy to come just at the thought of him, at the memory of him, but now that he was here and I could suck on his cock while I touched myself at the same time, I came before the minute was over.

Fuck, the way he filled me, the way his smooth cock slid on my tongue, and the way the tip of him blocked my throat every time he thrust deep. It was so damn perfect, but nothing compared to the feel of his magic wrapped around my neck, the warmth of it, the way it connected to me. When I came, I cried out with his cock in my mouth. He held my head in place with both hands as he thrust deep, rising on his tiptoes, nearly choking me for real—and I had no complaints.

The tears kept coming and I looked up as the orgasm slowly let go, to see his skin had indeed turned completely black around his eyes. My name was on his lips, and he looked

like a god of death as he held himself there, blocking my airway, feeling exactly how much I loved it through his magic...

Then, he whispered, "*Swallow, baby,*" and moved out of me one more time before he came.

His cum filled my mouth, warm and salty, and I couldn't get enough. Darkness exploded from below his bare feet, unwrapping itself from my neck now and taking away the world around us while Shade held my head in place and pumped in and out of me, slower and slower and slower...

I sucked every drop out of him and fell back on the chair, breathing heavily, so completely satiated and satisfied it felt like I didn't have a body at all. Like I was just floating in the complete darkness Shade had wrapped us in. He fell to his knees in front of my spread legs and kissed every inch of me he could reach for a little while. Then he wrapped his arms around me, pulled me to his chest and claimed my lips.

It was perfect, that moment. We were both exhausted, both our bodies covered in sweat, both our tongues coated with each other's juices, and we made out slowly and gently for a long time.

Eventually, Shade grabbed me and put me on the bed.

"You're glowing so bright, Snowflake," he told me, and I smiled lazily, kissing the side of his neck.

"That was the best orgasm I've ever had," I admitted, and he chuckled.

"*Yet,*" he whispered against my ear.

That's how I knew we weren't done yet, not even for the night—and I was aching between my thighs all over again.

“DID ARTEMIS GIVE YOU THAT SCYTHE?” Shade asked after a while, when his shadows retreated and revealed the room underneath again. My eyes were half closed, but I was still wide awake.

“She did,” I said, eyeing the desk, though I couldn’t see where I’d put the scythe on the other side of it. “Said I wasn’t *built for swords or daggers*, that this would serve me better. This and bows and arrows, which she plans to teach me how to use soon.” When my muscles stopped aching so much.

“Good,” Shade said, kissing my head. “That’s adamantine. It’s stronger than anything else we have here.”

“Yeah, she said so, too.” The *god killer*, she’d called it. And she’d also said that once I fueled that thing with magic, it would *grow* as big as I needed it to be, but for some reason I didn’t think Shade would like that, so I didn’t mention it right now. Instead, I said, “Max told me about his father today. He told me how Alan basically lost his mind.”

There it went, that familiar knife of guilt in my gut, twisting and turning...

Shade knew. That’s why he tightened his arms around me, but he said nothing.

“It was me. It was because he brought me back from the dead that he’s like this.” The statement was so powerful it nearly broke me in half because I said it out loud. It was always so different to speak those words than to think them. So, so different.

“You don’t know that,” he whispered, but he knew it was true. He probably knew since the first time I told him.

“Yes, I do. I know. Whatever he did to me caused him to lose his mind like that, Shade.” And I wished it didn’t hurt as much as it did. I wished it didn’t make me feel as guilty to be breathing right now.

“I’ve searched as much as I could but there are no records available to me about bringing people back from the dead, so I don’t know for sure, Snowflake. And neither do you—but we will figure it out, you hear me?” He kissed me harder. “Whatever happened, it was *not* your fault. You know that.”

I could have laughed. “I know.” And I did. It wasn’t my fault that Peter had happened to play with fire in the middle of the street and hit my parents’ car. It wasn’t my fault that he killed them—*and* me. It wasn’t my fault that Alan couldn’t stand to look at my burning body, that I’d reminded him of his own son, that he’d decided to use his magic to bring me back.

It wasn’t, in theory. But in reality, the weight of that guilt squashed my soul like nothing else.

But before I could start crying and feeling like I might run all out of air soon, I forced my mind elsewhere again.

“Where were you today?” I asked Shade instead. Hearing him speaking always made everything better. Tonight would be no different.

“Downstairs,” Shade said, and my stomach did a flip.

“To the portal?”

“Yep. We’re constantly trying to come up with new strategies, to create better shields and wards, to up our defenses, even while we fight them off. January is historically the worst month—daemons tend to come out in constant flocks at this time of year for some reason. Nobody really knows why.”

I had heard Carmine say something like that when I spied on their conversation that day.

“I want to see it,” I told Shade, even though my skin broke out in goose bumps at the thought of laying eyes on another one of those monsters.

“You sure that’s a good idea? It’s not a pretty place,” Shade said.

“Yes, I’m sure. I think I need to.” I was way too deep in this already.

“Then we’ll go. I’ll take you tomorrow,” Shade said.

I snuggled closer to him. “Is it bad?”

Shade was silent for a long time while he played with my hair and ran his fingertip up and down my naked back, like feeling my skin was the best thing in the world for him, too.

“Depends on the day, to be honest,” he finally said. “On the days when I see them, it’s pretty bad. But on the days I see *us*, our fight and our dedication...it’s *good*, too. We’re doing something. We’re doing the best we can against them.”

I nodded as if I understood—and I did, a little bit. “Is that why you chose to stay after the mandatory two years?”

“It is,” Shade said without hesitation.

“So, why did you want to leave?”

“Honestly? I had no idea at first. I just wanted to...be elsewhere,” he said, kissing the top of my head. “Before the trials, we had an outburst at the battlefield. Five flocks came out and I was alone with my team down there, but we had three mortals at our disposal, and we went in. Even though protocol says to wait for backup and to let the wards keep the daemons back, I made the call and we went in anyway. The

risk was much bigger if they actually managed to break the wards, and I know what my team is capable of. What *I'm* capable of. So, I ignored the orders, and I went in with all three mortals." He paused for a moment. "We almost died. They were very vicious flocks, and we killed them, but we almost died in the process."

"Fuck, Shade." Goose bumps covered every inch of my skin.

"They punished me for it. Brought me to the trials, to the Palace to meet new mortals and *relearn* how valuable all of them are to us so that I wouldn't put them in danger unnecessarily in the future." I could practically hear the grin in his voice. "I thought it was the stupidest punishment in the world. I was even considering running away the night you came." He kept trailing kisses on my head and slowly caressing my back. I hung onto every touch and word that came out of his mouth.

"But then you talked to me about *purpose* that night, and I think that was it. For a while there, I lost it. I lost my purpose, and nothing tied me to this place anymore." I understood that better than he knew. "Worse yet—I was left with no reason to want to fight the daemons. No reason to want them to stay where they belonged, to keep this world safe." I pressed my lips to his collarbone, breathing in the scent of his skin. "Then came *you*."

I laughed a bit, shaking my head. "Well, then I'm glad that bird picked me." And it didn't even terrify me much to realize I meant that.

"Me, too. I'm thankful for everything that brought me here. All of it," Shade whispered without missing a beat. My

toes curled and my heart developed wings and was soaring in the night sky all of a sudden.

“What about you? Have you ever lost your purpose, Snowflake? Or did you always know exactly where you stand and exactly where you want to go?”

I looked up at his face. “*That’s* what you think of me?” He thought I was sure of *anything* ever?

“That’s what you are,” he said, like he knew it to be an undeniable fact. “It’s what I’ve always admired about you. You’re always moving, even when you’re terrified.” He chuckled, pushing my chin up so he could kiss my lips. “Nothing stops you, Snowflake. Do you have any idea how rare that it is?”

I closed my eyes, soaking up the warmth of his lips on mine. I had no idea how rare that was, but to me, it had never seemed that way—I’d simply had no choice. Giving up was not an option, and yeah, my life had been pretty shitty, but I had no choice other than to keep going because what else was there to do?

“I didn’t really lose my purpose so much as it changed,” I whispered. “It changed completely. Before the trials, I’d planned to stay as far away as possible from anything Elysean for the rest of my life. I’d planned to start fresh somewhere new, and sort of teach myself how to live on my own terms.”

It had been a good dream to have back when I didn’t know so much still.

I kissed his lips again. “Then came you.”

His stretched below mine instantly. “I would run away from anything Elysean, too, for the rest of my life with you, if you let me.”

I laughed. “I might...if you’re a good boy.”

The second I said those words, Shade pushed me down on the bed and was on top of me, settling between my legs.

“Then I’ll just have to get to work right away to convince you that I am,” he teased, tickling me with kisses all over my neck.

“Probably. I’m warning you, though—it’s very hard work,” I said, and his hands closed tightly around my hips, fingers digging into my skin.

My laughter turned to a moan as if by magic.

“That’s okay. I’m a very hard-working guy, Snowflake,” he said.

“Show me,” I said, pressing my hips onto his cock—naked. Fuck, I loved it when we were naked. No clothes in the way, nothing to stop us at all. And he was already getting hard...

“Oh, I will,” Shade said, pulling my lip between his teeth.

“You need any motivation?” I teased, and he grinned mischievously, his eyes more silver than black now, the color of his skin without an ounce of black in it.

“I still can’t get the memory of you touching yourself and whispering my name out of my head. That alone will motivate me for years to come,” he told me.

“Oh, fuck,” I said, only half embarrassed now, but I squeezed my eyes shut anyway. I couldn’t believe he’d seen that. I couldn’t believe I’d been stupid enough to think I’d hear Shade coming, when he moved like a damn shadow. “That was a moment of weakness. That was...*oh, God,*” I choked

when his cock, now hard, pressed against my throbbing clit deliciously.

“I wish you could see how you looked from my eyes,” Shade whispered with a growl. “I wish I could show you that memory of you in your bed, naked, with your legs spread, your pussy dripping for me, your nipples hard, your eyes closed as you begged for me...”

Shit, here I went again, losing control like I’d never even had it to begin with. I thrust my hips up, desperate to feel his cock inside me, even though my body still ached.

“Shade, please,” I whispered between kisses.

“I’ve got a question for you first,” he said, pressing his hips down on me once more. “How do you want to be fucked next, Snowflake? Ask for anything you want because your wish is my fucking command.”

My eyes rolled in my skull. He could make me come with words alone, but...

I made my choice, and before the minute was over, I was on the edge of the bed on all fours, while Shade stood behind me and thrust his cock inside me all the way to the hilt.

Like this, he went the deepest, and when he rose on his tiptoes, he nearly split me wide open.

“Such a beautiful view,” he whispered as he slapped my ass hard. My shaking arms gave up on me and I fell on my face on the mattress, while Shade held my hips up.

“Gods, Snowflake,” he said, gripping my ass with one hand as he pounded into me. “*Fuck*, the way your ass looks... don’t fucking move, baby, or I’ll lose it.”

I did the best I could, and he picked up the pace, our skins slapping, his cock somehow reaching newer depths inside me until I forgot my own damn name.

True to his word, Shade worked hard to make me come another time, then another, until he, too, let go. Every inch of me was marked with his fingers and his teeth, and when we finally lay down on the bed again, he slipped those same fingers inside of me while his cum spilled down my thighs.

“*Mine,*” he growled, spreading it all over my soaked folds.

“One hundred fucking percent, Shadow Boy,” I breathed, eyes half closed already.

“Good girl,” he whispered, and I felt the darkness of his Void spreading all around us while he took me up in his arms and stood up.

“What are you doing?” I asked, a bit panicked because I couldn’t take another orgasm. I was exhausted—I was going to pass out for sure.

But Shade said, “Close your eyes, Snowflake. I’m just going to clean you up in the bathroom real quick and put you back in bed. Sleep.” And he kissed my forehead.

I’ll be damned if I didn’t.

IO

“Each note arrives prepared. Each melody, each shape, each color; each word—they all come to you when they are ready. Do not question it—let it out. Art becomes whatever it wants to be anyway.”

—**The Magic of Music, 127**

by Naska Totaj, House Emerald

YESTERDAY MORNING when I woke up, I’d thought there was no way in hell my body could hurt *more* than it was already hurting then.

I was dead wrong.

Every inch of me, every muscle in my body ached, but contrary to last morning, I was also smiling like an idiot now, and my pussy felt really tender, too. With everything that Shade had done to me the night before, it didn’t surprise me, but I still blushed bright scarlet at the memories—and the black tulip on my pillow. I’d almost squashed this one while I was sleeping, but it had survived, and it smelled just as divine as the others I kept in my drawer.

But that wasn’t the only thing Shade had left for me on my pillow this time. A small note was next to it, too:

I'll be back after training, he'd said, his handwriting small and neat. Absolutely perfect.

And then she moved.

The scream tore from my throat just as I remembered the reality of my life now—I was the chosen master of a three-headed hellhound named Oreo, who could come and go through doors as she pleased, and it would be *her* sleeping somewhere near the bed's legs, even though she hadn't been there last night. She probably hadn't wanted to witness Shade fucking my brains out, for which I was thankful. It was so damn awkward just to imagine her being there, watching me.

“You scared the hell out of me,” I told her when she raised all three heads, her wide puppy eyes so warm and inviting and glossy I could see my reflection in them like a mirror. “Ugh—why are you so cute?!” Was she serious? She was a beast from the Underworld! Who made beasts from the Underworld *cute*?

She let out a strange noise as her heads turned to the sides, as if she were trying to understand what I was saying but she didn't get those particular words.

With a groan, I lay back on the bed for another second, then finally sat up. It was a quarter past seven, so I had time to shower and eat breakfast before I met with Arti—if I moved really, really fast.

Easier said than done when everything hurt so much, but once my muscles warmed up, it became easier to ignore the pain. Oreo followed me all the way to the bathroom and back. She stayed by my feet as I got dressed, then made that strange sound again when I told her to remind me to go to Laundry tonight. She even looked at me like I was a damn lunatic when I asked her, *do I look too flushed?* before walking out the door, but of course, she didn't reply. The mirror said I was redder in

the face than usual, but it was going to take me a while to stop thinking about Shade's hands and mouth and cock all over me, so nothing could be done about it.

My head finally cleared while I ate breakfast with Max and Mave, and I told them I'd be going downstairs later to see the portal with Shade.

They were both terrified.

"Just be careful, okay? All it takes is a little magic for the wards to fail, and then nothing holds them back anymore," Max said, a bit panicked two minutes in.

"They say they go extra crazy and violent when they smell mortal meat, so just...just stay close to your boyfriend," said Mave, and again, when she called him that, I had this urge to giggle like a damn schoolgirl.

*Boyfriend. Lover. Friend. **Mine.***

"I will. I'll be careful. I can handle myself, okay? I've got my dagger and Shade will be with me at all times." I didn't tell them that he wouldn't have let me even *ask* if he didn't know for a fact that it was completely safe to be out there, because they'd forever tease me about it.

"In that case, try to see everything you can so that we can gossip about it later. Not a lot of first-years know what it's like down there. It's good information to have," Mave said, making Max and me roll our eyes. "What?!" she then said, like she really didn't get it.

"By the way, Aunt Jules said I can let you use my phone, Sera," Max said as they walked with me outside the Caprae Hall.

I turned to him. "What?!"

“Yep. I can give you my phone any time. You can FaceTime Miles and your friends if you want.”

My mouth opened and closed a million times. *If I want?*

I jumped in his arms like a savage and hugged the shit out of him like I’d never done before. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“Hey, it was *my* idea to even ask the headmistress, but whatever,” Mave muttered, arms crossed in front of her chest.

She turned her head to the side, and when I kissed her cheek, she jumped back like I’d assaulted her.

“Keep those lips off my face, pesky mortal! How the hell do I know what you’ve been kissing with them last night?!”

Oh, God.

I blushed so hard it felt like my cheeks fell off my face.

“I showered and brushed my teeth this morning,” I said, forcing myself to roll my eyes—but she was right. I’d been kissing every inch of Shade—especially his cock—with those lips all night last night. “Gotta go. See you later. I’ll be coming for that phone!” I called as I rushed to the other side of the hallway, toward the second door left that led to the Artemis Arena.

“So long, sucker!” Mave called with a wave of her hand, while Max shook his head at her, but he was also trying to stifle a smile.

I opened the door to the Arena, sweating even though I had no idea if I was on time or not. I was going to need a damn watch on my wrist, but when I saw Arti’s face, I was a bit relieved. She didn’t look *happy* to see me, per se, but she didn’t look as pissed off as she had been yesterday either.

“I’m not late,” I told her when I closed the door and went deeper into the Arena.

“No, you’re not. Which is fortunate,” she said, then nodded for me to go closer. “Come over here. I’m gonna start you off on archery today, then we’ll train with blades later.”

“Oh, I—wait, *later*?” I stopped in my tracks.

“Yes, *later*, at around six pm. Got a problem with that?” she said, moving closer to the weapons wall before she waved a hand at the black and white dummies we trained with in CT. “Step forward and give me targets.”

The next second, two dummies stepped out of the line with big red dots on their foreheads and chests.

“Stand right over there,” Arti told them as she scanned the bows hanging on hooks on the weapons wall before she picked one she liked.

“Arti, I can hardly feel my body,” I said, and as I went closer, I noticed Mors was lying near the benches just like always, but this time he wasn’t sleeping. This time, all his eyes were somewhere behind me—on Oreo sitting on her hind legs right by the door, ears perked up and tongues hanging out while she watched me.

Impossible not to smile at the sight of those faces.

“Come here,” I told her, tapping my thigh. If she was going to watch Arti hand me my ass, she might as well do it from closer up.

Oreo happily trotted to me, and when I turned to Arti to complain about her wanting me to train later, too, she was already throwing the bow at me.

A miracle I caught it before it smacked me in the face. “Like I said, Arti, I can’t feel my body at all. I won’t be able to train twice in a day.”

“And like *I* said, we’ll just be shooting arrows at those two right now. I’ve got someplace to be, so we have to make it quick. Then we can properly train in the evening.”

“But—”

“This isn’t a request, Sera. Focus,” she told me, and I hated that she didn’t even bother to pretend not to be irritated by a simple question. It made me want to remind her again that I didn’t choose any of this, but I bit my tongue and sighed instead.

“I’ve never used a bow before,” I said, trying to figure out the one she gave me.

“It’s fairly simple. The bow is a superior weapon,” said Artemis, and though her own wasn’t strapped to her back, but lay with Mors and her jacket on the other side of the Arena, she grabbed another from the weapons wall and came to stand right next to me. “Hold it like this.” And she showed me.

I did my best to imitate her movements, though my arms were killing me.

“That’s good. Elbow straight,” she said, pushing my arms to where she needed them. Then she noticed Oreo was curiously sniffing the legs of the first dummy with the targets on it. “You’re getting to know each other better, I assume.”

“We are,” I said with a nod. “She’s pretty quiet. Doesn’t really give me any trouble. She understands most of what I say, too.”

Arti raised a brow. “Did you name her?”

“I did.” Was *she* going to laugh at my choice of name, too?

“Good. A name is a very important part in your relationship. It’s something you both have to agree on, and it sets the tone for future decisions,” she said. “Chin tucked in...” She stepped to the side and analyzed my form for a second, and she seemed happy with what she saw. “That’s how you hold a bow. Now, the arrows.”

She gave me an arrow from the weapons wall and demonstrated what she wanted me to do with another.

For a second there, while she held the bow in place, her hand next to her cheek, her eyes two bottomless pits of every shade of brown focused on the tip of that arrow...*wow*. She looked exactly like the paintings and the engravings of her all over the Palace and the Arges and the entire city that I’d seen. *Exactly* like them.

Did that mean that every other god looked the same as they were presented in Elysean artwork? Zeus and Athena and Hephaestus, even Poseidon...

I copied every movement Arti made as well as I knew how, even though two minutes in my arms were shaking from the pain.

“I’ll give you some more muscle relaxer when we’re done. Should help you get ready for our evening session,” she said when she noticed.

And *I* noticed that she was a bit distracted today. Made me wonder what *someplace to be* was. Maybe the portal downstairs, at the back of the mountain?

“Tell her to get out the way, will you?”

I looked at Oreo, sitting by the dummy’s legs, watching me curiously.

“Sure,” I said, pointing to the side. “Oreo, go sit over there.”

The pup listened like she could speak human just as well as me. I don’t know why it made me so damn *proud* when she immediately moved and settled a few feet away from the dummy.

“Okay, ready.” I turned to Artemis only to realize that she was staring at me with wide, unblinking eyes. “What?”

“Did you name your hellhound *Oreo*, Sera?”

Ah, shit.

I raised my chin. “Yes.”

“A son of Echidna and Typhon. A beast. A monster from the Underworld—*Oreo*?”

I rolled my eyes. “She looks like a damn Oreo, okay? And she likes it! We both like it.” What was such a big deal about a damn *name* anyway?

“Her father’s name is Mors,” Arti said. “You do know what that means, right?”

“Yes, Arti, I know.” It meant *death* in Latin—I’d passed the exam in Linguistics just a couple weeks ago.

“And that didn’t give you a sense of how a hellhound should be named?” she asked, and she seemed genuinely curious to know the answer.

I felt like a damn idiot—for a second.

“Look, it’s *my* hellhound, okay? *Mine*. I name her whatever I want. I don’t care what her father’s name is—if she likes a name, she’d going to keep it. Okay? It’s that simple.” I

couldn't believe I had to even defend my choice of a *name* to a goddess. Seriously.

Arti was silent for a moment.

“You have so much to learn still, Sera,” she then said, and her face broke into a smile that wasn't exactly sweet, but not full-on bitter, either. “But I can admire your persistence. It's going to serve you in battle.” And she turned to the dummies. “Now, arms up. Point the arrow and let me show you how to shoot it.”

We didn't talk about Oreo or my choice in names again.

WHEN I WENT BACK to my room, I was no longer in pain. Not that archery was easy, or that my arms and wrists and fucking *fingers* weren't hurting like hell, but then Arti gave me that potion that looked like water and tasted like dirt, and by the time I made it upstairs, most of the pain in my body had faded to a dull, almost pleasant throb.

But when I opened the door and walked in with Oreo in tow, I was shocked yet again.

Two black paper bags were on the bed and a coat was hanging on the handle of the wardrobe—a black coat made out of leather and wool, like a different version of the one Shade had given me two days ago to wear to the city. This one was longer, but the design was almost exactly the same—same buttons, same shine to the thick leather, same cut. It looked like it would fit me to a T, just like everything else Shade had ever gotten me.

I was almost embarrassed. I hadn't gone shopping with Max and Mave like I'd meant to, and I was hoping to be able to go today, but Shade had beat me to it because there were

more clothes in the paper bags, too. Two brand new uniform silk shirts with a silver shimmer were in there—probably because Ethan had ruined one of mine when he'd stabbed me, and the other had a few cuts around the arms from training. Socks and three pairs of jeans and five sweaters in silver and grey and black, gorgeous leather gloves with bows over the wrists, and a black hat, too. Every little thing was perfect, though I suspected I loved them so much because I knew Shade had picked them for me. He'd even delivered them to my room himself—I had no more doubts about who did me favors anymore.

I took a quick shower—with Oreo, who didn't seem to want to leave me alone for a second, and I unfortunately *loved* it—before I put on my new clothes. The dark wash jeans paired with the silver sweater looked and felt incredible on me, and the coat, the hat and the gloves fit me as if someone had taken my exact measurements and made them specifically for me. I stepped in front of the oval mirror at the corner of my room and looked at my reflection as Oreo sniffed my new coat and the jeans, not bothering with my boots at that point—they were already familiar to her. I was pretty sure she'd licked the soles about a hundred times and she even knew the *taste* of them in her sleep.

“What do you think, huh?” I said as I admired my reflection—that was definitely a first.

I looked so different from the Sera I was a year ago. Even *a few months* ago. My eyes were brighter, my skin glowing, though I still had dark under-eyes. I hadn't exactly slept much last night, and with everything that had happened last week, it was safe to say my body was still exhausted. But my hair was shiny, and my smile was genuine now. My lips didn't have a Cupid's bow and the corners were turned up naturally so that I

always looked like I was smiling even when I was pissed off. I'd always hated that, but maybe it wasn't so bad. It didn't look bad at all right now—it suited me.

And the clothes, every color Shade had gotten for me suited me just as well.

I took off the coat and the hat and gloves, then quickly went to Laundry—both my uniforms were in need of a good wash. I could leave them in the washing machine and pick them up when I came back, after I called Miles and my friends from Max's phone.

Nobody was in the hallways or in Laundry—the entire Arges seemed deserted at this time of day. Not going to lie, it scared me to be walking the hallways alone at first. But then I turned to look at Oreo happily following my every step, tongues hanging out and ears perked up. The smile was automatic—I *wasn't* alone. Oreo was with me, and I doubted anybody was going to want to come near me when a hellhound, puppy or not, was right there.

When I finally made it back to my room, Shade was waiting by the door. I stopped dead in my tracks at the sight of him. How unfair was it that he still took my breath away any time I saw him even now?

His eyes scrolled down my body, to my sweater and jeans, and he bit his bottom lip a little, which had my knees going weak instantly. *Damn it.*

“Like it?” I said, and Shade came to me without making a single sound. I stood perfectly still as he ran his hands down my arms and my back, then gripped my ass with both hands, slamming me to him hard.

I laughed. “Is that a *yes?*”

“It’s definitely a yes, but I still have to see how well they fit,” he muttered, squeezing my ass before he kissed me. His tongue in my mouth brought back memories of the night before, and I was flushed all over again. It was even better now that Arti’s potion was in my system and I hardly felt the pain of my muscles. I could definitely get used to doing this all day every day.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I rose on my tiptoes and kissed him back with my everything. Nothing tasted better than Shade. Nothing felt better than him, either.

“Easy, Snowflake,” he whispered as he moved us toward the door and pressed my back to it. “If we take this inside, we’re not going to leave your room all day.”

It was both a promise and a warning.

My insides were already a hot liquid mess. Taking his lip between my teeth, I bit until he moaned, and my control about flew out the window right away. I wanted more. I wanted so much more of him, to explore him thoroughly, every inch and every position, in every possible way.

He growled deep in his throat and leaned away a little. “You sure about this?”

Yes, I’m sure! I wanted to say, panting already, desperate for his mouth on mine.

But the truth was that I wanted to see first. I really, *really* wanted to see the downstairs, and I wanted to talk to Miles, and Layla and James, too.

We had the whole night ahead of us, didn’t we? We could be back in this room by evening, and we didn’t have to even sleep at all.

With a sigh, I closed my eyes and tapped the back of my head against the door lightly a couple times, just to call to my senses.

“Yeah, okay. Fine,” I muttered. “But we’re coming back here right away, right?”

He grinned and his face transformed, those beautiful eyes of his silver storms that raged as he looked at my lips and ran his thumb over them. “Depends. Are you gonna glow for me like that again?”

“I’m pretty sure I don’t glow,” I said, holding still while he touched the rest of my face. Not just because I loved his hands on me, but because of how fascinated he was to analyze me—I loved that even more.

“Oh, but you do,” Shade said. “You really, really do. The more I please you, the brighter you are.”

“Then light me up, Shadow Boy. I’ll glow for you all night.” That was a promise, too.

Shade kissed me again, but when I jumped in his arms—because screw what I’d thought about just a minute ago—he pushed me back.

“It’s daylight still. We have time. We have time,” he repeated, as if he was trying to convince himself just as much as he was trying to convince me.

“We have time,” I said with a nod. “Yes, we do. And we need to leave. Let’s just...let’s just go.”

Turning around before I jumped him again, I opened the door to my room to grab my things.

“Good girl,” Shade whispered, and for both our sakes, I pretended I didn’t hear him.

“How do you even get in here, by the way? I lock the door every time I leave. And didn’t you say that the wards protect each one of our rooms and nobody can get in?” I wondered. Not that I minded, but I was curious.

“The Void. It connects to you easily because of how familiar you are to it. It gives me access to any place you are or have been without too much trouble,” Shade said, leaning against the door frame with his arms crossed as he watched me put my coat on. He’d taken his back, it seemed, because it wasn’t on the back of my chair like I’d left it that morning.

“And is that normal?” I wondered, putting on the hat next—I liked how he was looking at me so far. Very impressed.

“Not really, but then *normal* is a relative concept when it comes to the Void,” Shade said and came into the room while I put a glove on. He grabbed the second one and held it up for me while I put my hand in.

“Is it really alive, like Max said?”

Shade took my face in his hands and pushed my hair away from my face under the hat. Then he kissed the tip of my nose. “Sometimes it does feel like it, but I can never be too sure,” he said. “Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?”

Blood rushed to my cheeks instantly. “A couple times,” I mumbled.

“Then I should tell you a couple times more. You are simply stunning, Snowflake,” he whispered against my lips. “I breathe for you.”

I kissed him gently, soaking up his warmth and his words until I was so full I risked bursting.

“Just keep breathing,” I said and held onto his arms that wrapped around me.

We stayed like that for a minute, eyes closed and hearts beating steady, just living in each other's embrace. It was as beautiful as everything else I'd experienced with Shade. He hadn't told me that he loved me yet, never said those words, but I knew he felt it. He felt it so clearly, it radiated off him any time he looked at me.

I still wanted to hear it, though. I still wanted him to say it in plain English, and I'd patiently wait until he did.

When Oreo, sitting by the door and watching us, complained with a whine, we reluctantly let go of each other and walked out. With every new step we took toward the other end of the hallway, to the third floor and House Opal's private chambers, the reality of where I was headed sunk in deeper—I was going to see the portal.

There was an actual portal to the Underworld right behind the mountain of the Argos, and I was about to witness it with my own eyes.

I was finally going to *prove* to myself that all of this madness was indeed real.

When we entered the private Opal chambers, the sound of the TV surprised me a bit until I remembered that Shade was not the only one who lived here. Bailey and Liam, Ivy and Cyth were sitting on the black leather furniture, eyes on the large screen mounted on the right wall showing an episode of *Jackass*. God, I hadn't seen those faces in ages, since the last time James forced us to watch it, probably when we were like sixteen.

The room hadn't changed one bit—lush black carpets underneath my feet, the coat of arms of House Opal sewn with silver threads on black fabric hanging on the wall opposite the door. The large windows to the sides gave the place a different

feel, though, because it was daylight outside. It even made the dark grey cabinets of the kitchen to the left look more inviting than last time.

“There she is!” Shade’s team cheered when they saw us coming through, and Ivy jumped to her feet with the remote in her hand, turning the volume down.

“Hey, I’m watching that!” Liam complained, but she didn’t even acknowledge him. She was looking at me with a wide grin on her face, and—wait, no. She wasn’t looking at *me*.

She was looking at Oreo coming after me, sniffing the marble floor as she went, ears perked up and eyes darker than usual, curious.

“It’s true,” Ivy said, throwing the remote on the sofa and coming around it together with Cyth. “Holy Tartarus, it’s true—she’s *yours*.”

Yeah, she’d definitely heard about Oreo.

“Hey, guys,” I said with a smile, feeling a bit awkward to be holding Shade’s hand like that, our fingers intertwined.

“Hey, yourself. The mortal beacon—I knew there was a reason I liked you,” Cyth said, shaking his index finger at me.

“What about those punches? How’s that going for ya?” said Bailey, throwing punches in the air like he used to that day at the Arena.

I laughed. “I’m getting better,” I said with a nod. “How are you guys doing?”

“We’re bored to death is what we are,” Ivy said, smoothing her hair—which looked even more violet in daylight—behind her ears, before she squatted down. “Here, pretty girl. Come here...” And she wiggled her fingers toward Oreo, who sat on

her hind legs right next to my feet. The white head was watching Ivy curiously, while the other two were looking around, sniffing and licking the air, trying to get a better feel of the entire room.

“Actually, it’s important you don’t touch her,” I said reluctantly. That’s what Arti had said, and the book I’d read had reinforced it. The Cerberus didn’t like to be touched unless it was by their master; otherwise, they could lose it and bite off hands. Their instincts made them react quickly, before they had the chance to think or see who it was they were attacking.

“Oh, I know,” Ivy said with a grin, and Cyth sat on the floor next to her, too.

“She’s magnificent,” he whispered.

“A true beast,” said Ivy in wonder.

“If you want to get out of our way now,” said Shade, and he sounded bored, but it was just pretend. I knew that look in his eyes. He was amused, too. “We’re headed downstairs.”

“*Oooh*,” Liam said, only looking at us every few seconds because his focus was on the TV screen still. “Think she’s ready for that?”

“A fucking hellhound picked her, you tool. She’s readier than you,” Bailey told him, rolling his eyes.

It made me laugh again. “I’m just going to look, that’s all. I’m curious to see it.”

Ivy looked up at me. “If you wanna get your hands dirty, just say the word and we’ll come with.” She waggled her brows at me, her eyes glistening.

“It’s our day off,” Bailey reminded her, but she waved him off.

“I’m bored,” she muttered, then looked at Shade. “What do you say, Grump? Wanna go kill some daemons?”

“As much fun as that sounds—no. I’m only taking Sedorah to see it. There will be no getting our hands dirty today,” Shade said, then turned to me. “I’m going to grab my jacket. Be right back.” And he kissed my forehead.

“*Ooooh!*” the others cheered and laughed and *clapped* their hands, and though Shade wasn’t fazed at all as he made his way toward the corridor that led to their bedrooms, I flushed bright scarlet the next second.

“You get the Grump *and* the hellhound?” Ivy said, making herself comfortable on the floor. “There must be something very wrong with you.” Her grin was huge. “I *love* it!”

And she continued to try to convince Oreo to go closer to her.

I lowered my head, squatting down, too, just so I didn’t have to look at them. I could look at Oreo, pet her just to give myself something to do until Shade came back.

“Thanks, I guess,” I muttered, stifling a smile. She had a weird sense of humor. Mave would definitely like her. “Not as wrong as *you*, though. Who gets excited to see those monsters?” I shot back.

She pointed both thumbs at her chest. “*Me*. I do. It turns me on to spill their blood.”

“You’re wicked,” Cyth told her, and he looked proud.

“She’s *disturbed*,” Liam informed me. “And you’re no better.”

“Thank—”

“Not a compliment, mortal. And if your hellhound poops in our chambers, you’re cleaning it up.” Though he was smiling, I had no clue if he actually meant what he said or not.

“Don’t mind him,” Cyth told me. “We like the pup. She’s beautiful. What’s her name?”

“Oreo,” I said—and you know what? I didn’t even care if they’d laugh at me about it.

“Are you kidding me? I *love* Oreos!” Ivy said with a laugh.

“Good call, good call,” said Cyth with a nod.

“Has she bitten you yet?” Bailey asked, unimpressed by my choice in names. It made me want to like these people even more than before.

“No, but she does lick me a lot.” Oreo’s right head was licking my hand that second as I scratched the chin of the white head in the middle.

“Does—”

“Sedorah,” Shade said, and I jumped to my feet to find him by the corner of the room, waiting.

Fuck, I was right—his coat was almost identical to mine. The male version of it, if I was seeing right, and it looked perfect on him.

I tried not to stare. I failed.

“Yep. Coming. Bye, guys,” I said with a wave and moved around them. They all kept their eyes on Oreo, who wasn’t as carefree here as she was in the hallways or my room.

But she didn’t have to be wary of Shade’s team. I liked them. They were crazy, but they were pretty awesome, too.

I went to take Shade's hand in mine as he waited for me in front of the half-hidden corridor.

"Hey, we still haven't caught that dream weaver kid!" Liam called before we turned away.

"But we will. Promise, we will," Cyth said.

"And we'll have our fun with him," Ivy said, waggling those brows again as she grinned mischievously.

"If you do, let me know," I said, as the memory of Cyth in that circle of light that held his limbs down like a rope came back to me. They'd been right in front of my door doing a ritual to try to catch the dream weaver. It hadn't worked then, but maybe it would eventually.

Because even though I hadn't felt him at all last night and hadn't even heard the song of the stupid robot in my sleep, I knew he'd be back. I knew he'd wait for the moment my shields were down, or Shade's Void wasn't around me, and he'd strike again.

Not to mention Nick was still here. Still very vulnerable to that asshole, whoever he was.

And Ethan...

"Hey, any news about Ethan?" I asked Shade when he took us through the first door of the narrow corridor, that led to another with nothing in it but white walls and a set of black doors on the other end.

"Not yet. The healer is keeping him under on purpose until the wound heals, but he's out of danger. He'll definitely survive," Shade said, and though he didn't sound particularly happy about that, I was.

I was so fucking relieved I could fly because I hadn't killed Ethan. This place hadn't made a murderer out of me, after all.

At least not yet.

“Good. I want to talk to him when he wakes up.”

“And you will,” he said.

“I want to talk to Carmine about it, too. I don't want him convicted for this or anything.” It wasn't his fault that he'd attacked me—the dream weaver had gotten to his head.

“Oh, I was going to serve him my own punishment for it,” Shade said when we reached the other end and he put his hand on the wood of the doors. Darkness slipped out his palm, just a few tendrils licking the surface, and the lock clicked in place. That's exactly how *his* bedroom door had opened for me, too, that day.

How strange because I couldn't do magic.

How was I so well connected to the Void that it let me into his room and let him into mine so easily?

“Turns out, his mind has been tampered with,” Shade said as he led me to the other side. “He was exposed to a powerful confusion spell earlier that day. Althea, the healer, thinks he either ingested it with food or a ritual was done on him.”

Shivers ran down my back, chasing away every other thought from my mind. “You're joking.”

“No. They've gotten very ballsy. Not that they haven't done something similar in the past, but so close to Marie's death? They must be getting pretty desperate.”

“Fucking pricks,” I hissed, going down a wide set of stairs without really looking. We must have been walking for a long

time without my even realizing it because my legs were already a bit sore, but Shade's hand was on mine, so I knew I was safe from walking straight into a wall. That's all I really cared about as the anger infused the blood in my veins—*how dare they?*

“We'll find them eventually, Snowflake,” Shade said in a whisper, taking us through the sharp turn left of the stairway landing.

On the other side of it was a vast room, almost as big as the main hall of the Argos. It was round and marble pillars held up the high ceiling over us, and big windows made up the entire wall ahead, while people dressed in leathers went from one side to the other, to the large glass doors on either side of the stairway.

“Holy shit,” I breathed—definitely not what I was expecting.

“Welcome to the first level of Ideia's portal,” Shade said. “We're still halfway up the mountain, but we can see a lot from here.”

“Wow,” I whispered as we continued to move down the last of the stairs. The blue sky behind those windows looked so peaceful, and I even found it beautiful—until I was close enough to the middle of the room, and I saw a little bit of what was below us. Until I saw the *darkness*.

“There's another level below this, before the battlefield at the bottom of the mountain,” Shade explained, and I couldn't tear my eyes off the darkness, so much like his shadows, that was sort of *reaching* for the sky from what little I could see. “If you want to turn back, Snowflake, we can.”

I looked at Shade. “No, of course not.” I didn’t want to turn back. I wanted to see *all* of it.

And Shade nodded. “This way.”

He took us to the glass doors on our left, behind which was a different world altogether. We walked out, Oreo and I, into the cold January air as small snowflakes blew to the side with the biting wind. The wooden platform we were on was built upon the grayish rocks of the mountain, and there was a railing to the far right, too, from where we could see that darkness that was reaching up to the sky like black smoke.

Letting go of Shade’s hand, I went to the railing with my heart in my throat, knowing full well that what I was about to see here today was going to change my life forever.

II

Hera was a very jealous wife.

When Zeus married the goddess Leto, and Hera found out that she was expecting twins, she was furious. In a jealousy fit, she ordered all the lands in the world to refuse Leto shelter so she would not have a place to give birth to her twins. All land obeyed and poor Leto was left wandering, unable to rest, until she came onto Delos, a new island that Poseidon had raised from the sea, so new that it was still floating, and so it could not be considered land. Hera's order did not affect it, and so Delos welcomed Leto. There, under the shade of a palm tree, Leto gave birth to her first daughter, Artemis, who was to be the goddess of the hunt.

Her twin brother Apollo came into the world right after, and he was to be the god of music, fire, and reason.

—Book of Creation, Volume IV, 1st Edition, 144

by Emilia Marvos, House Emerald

I GRIPPED the metal so hard I thought it might break. The view that stretched before me took my breath away, and not in a good way. We were still halfway up the mountain, just like Shade said, and the bottom of it was at least another two hundred feet down.

At the edge of the mountain began the structures that looked like cabins made out of stone and marble dotting the black soil. In front of them were two rows of tents—exactly

like what I'd seen from the balcony of Shade's room that night.

Half a mile of dry, completely *black* land in front of the tents, and that's where the hole began.

My brain struggled to make sense of it. Such a huge hole in the ground shouldn't have existed, or if it really did, how come the world hadn't crumbled to pieces already? Darkness, raw and alive, spilled out of it on all sides, like black steam or smoke that kept trying to reach the sky but couldn't get quite high enough. There were large godstones—rubies and emeralds, sapphires and opals, as big as *me*—placed all around the hole that spit out the darkness constantly. Pointed rocks came out the sides of it, spilling lava at the tips, which dripped inside where I couldn't see. Where I *didn't want* to fucking see at all.

The large wall of Ideaea was maybe three miles away on the other side, with more tents and square cabins on the black soil in between, and twice as many godstones. Maybe I was seeing wrong, but they didn't seem to be as bright and as colorful as usual ones. Almost like the blackness of that hole was sucking the light out of them.

Oreo whined by my feet, and I could have sworn her body was *shaking* as she pressed against my calf. I understood. The sight of it, the *feel* of it, even the quality of the thin air here made all the hairs on my body stand at attention, too.

“That's the Well of the Damned,” Shade said from my side, almost startling me. I'd forgotten a world existed at all around me. A world that somehow hadn't been sucked in by that black hole already. “It goes down for miles before it leads to the portal.”

Slowly squatting down to pet Oreo, who was still shaking and whining, I shook my head again.

“That’s *not* the portal then?” Because it looked *exactly* like a doorway to hell. A worse hell than I could have ever imagined.

“No, the portal is deeper. Much deeper under the ground. This Well leads to it,” Shade said. “We’ve only been able to make it down about a hundred and fifty feet before swarms of daemons drive us out. There’s too many of them.”

Shivers ran down my back. “*How* many exactly?” Was it a hundred? Three hundred? Over a thousand?

“Countless of them,” Shade whispered, squatting down on my other side while I scratched Oreo’s heads. She wasn’t shaking anymore, but she was far from relaxed, all her eyes alert as they took in the darkness beneath us, ears perked up and tail tucked between her legs.

“Countless,” I repeated, as the image of the monsters I’d seen at the front doors of the Arges just a few nights ago came in front of my eyes.

“Imagine how many people have died since the creation of the world,” Shade said. “Most are withered, Snowflake. Most people are *bad*.”

I turned to look at him, about to tell him that he was wrong. Most people weren’t bad. Most souls weren’t withered, weren’t *monsters* coming from the depths of the earth to devour us. He was *wrong!*

Except...he wasn’t. And unfortunately for me, I knew it. I’d seen it my whole life. I’d witnessed it so many times it was impossible to trick myself into thinking Shade wasn’t right.

He knew it, too. That's why he looked like that, sad and desperate and enraged at the same time as he held my eyes. As he said *sorry* with them, like he knew exactly what it was like to admit that truth to myself. Like he'd gone through this very thing once, too.

"It's contained," Shade whispered. "They can't get up here. See those godstones?" And he pointed out at the large ones around the hole, but also at the smaller ones planted on the black soil among the tents and the cabins. "They hold up a thousand wards. Very strong magic. They can't break through."

"Except *you* did," I said reluctantly. "The Void consumed them that night, remember?" When Shade had burst into darkness that was just as deep as the one leaking from that hole, the wards had come down and the daemons had come up all the way to the Academy, had even gotten inside.

Shade swallowed hard, fisting his hands so tightly his knuckles turned completely white.

Shit. "I didn't mean—"

"It's fine," he said, shaking his head. "It's fine, Snowflake. Yes, the Void is capable of consuming everything, magic or not, but right now it is contained within me. It's actually calmer than it has ever been before. There's no need to fear it."

"I honestly never did." The Void was still the safest place I'd ever been to in my whole life.

Shade smiled a bit. "I know. And *it* knows, too. I don't know how you managed to calm it down that night, but at times like that I think the Void might be alive and aware for real—because it knows."

“I think I just calmed *you* down, actually. It had nothing to do with the Void,” I said, and he raised his brows as if the thought had never occurred to him. But it made perfect sense from where I was standing. “The Void responds to you. When you lose control, so does *it*. When you’re calm, the Void is calm, too.”

His eyes lowered as he thought about it for a second. “I *did* lose control...” he finally muttered.

“Oh, I remember. You also almost killed that girl.” Ursula Gilis, Tiger’s sister, who’d been about to attack me with those winged spider metal thingies.

“Could be,” Shade finally said, shaking his head as if to clear it. “Have you seen enough, Snowflake? Do you want to leave?”

As if I’d just remembered where we were, I rose to my feet again. Oreo was sniffing the air, sticking her heads through the wide railing bars, no longer whining or shaking. I wasn’t sure if *I* calmed her down or if she just got used to being here, but her courage gave me courage, too.

“Actually, I want to get closer,” I said, despite my better judgment.

Shade smiled like that was exactly what he’d both expected and feared.

“This way,” he said, and led us to the other side of the wooden platform.

I thought we were going to go inside again—and I was glad for it. The cold had much more bite here, and though the coat was thick and the hat did wonders keeping my ears shielded, my cheeks were burning a bit still.

But Shade didn't take us back inside. Instead, there were stairs carved out of rocks on the other side of it, and they were just as steep as the ones that led to the Academy. He held my hand as we descended together, and there must have been over a hundred steps going all around the side of the mountain, before we finally saw what Shade called the second level.

And there were a lot of people there.

The platform here was three times the size of the one we left behind, and it had an actual ceiling over it, like someone had taken out a good chunk of the mountain's side and set it with wood. Whatever room was inside the mountain, the walls were made out of glass that reflected the light of the sun so I couldn't see anything inside. There were tables here, chairs, vending machines and a bar at the other end serving coffee in plastic cups, and I even saw a few people with hotdogs in their hands as well.

“A bit crowded in January. That's when daemons come up here the most, not to mention the incident that night. We're keeping extra manpower around just in case,” Shade explained, and the second we stepped onto the wooden platform, it was like *everyone* suddenly realized we were here, and they all turned to look at us.

So many people, at least fifty of them, and most were staring at us openly. They all wore leathers, all in their House's colors, just like the uniforms at the Academy. Most wore their godstones around their necks, too, and theirs were bigger than my damn fist and pulsating with light like they were about to burst with it any second. Impossible not to stare, even though I wasn't supposed to see them at all.

I squeezed Shade's hand as we went, and the people all followed us with their eyes—me and Shade and Oreo, too.

Some were even squatting and calling her to them, and she seemed curious enough to slowly step to the side, like she really meant to go greet them.

“Stay close, Oreo,” I said, just in case.

As if she just realized she’d moved away from me, she immediately came closer again and stayed there while we went almost to the middle of the platform. Nobody was looking away from us yet, and I got that she made people curious, but fuck, it made me so damn uncomfortable.

Right until we were close to the railing and we saw the hole—the *Well of the Damned* Shade called it—and I forgot about everything else all over again.

We could see so much more from here. The structures, the tents, even the godstones were so much bigger from closer up, shining with a lot more light. The darkness was thicker here, too, and the lava that dripped from those pointy rocks coming out the sides of the hole almost burned me just to look at it.

That wasn’t all.

My eyes were stuck on the creatures that were *climbing* those sharp rocks, ignoring the lava completely like it didn’t affect them at all. It didn’t burn their black skin and it didn’t cause them any pain whatsoever. No, they just kept on climbing, and though they looked pretty small from up here, I knew they were as big as us.

My God, I hadn’t made them up at all. They were really real.

All of this, the whole thing—it was *real*.

“You okay?” Shade whispered when I let go of his hand and held onto the railing, just in case my legs decided to let go of me.

“Just...just talk to me,” I said because I needed to be focused on something else, too, not just those monsters.

God, the way they moved. I couldn't see them in detail from here, and I was glad for it. So fucking glad I couldn't make out all the mouths on their bodies, and all their teeth, their claws...

“*Incoming!* Who wants to watch?!” someone called from behind us, and everyone who'd been sitting or standing near the walls of glass was suddenly rushing toward the railing.

“That's them,” Shade said, turning my focus back on the monsters as they slowly climbed out of the hole, sniffing the soil, standing on all fours like animals, not coming any closer to the tents right now... “They usually move in groups of ten to fifteen, which we call *flocks*. They never come any closer until all of them have made it out of the Well, and when they attack, they do so together.”

“Are they going to attack now?” I asked in half a voice.

“*Woo-hoo!*” a woman standing to our side called, and everyone suddenly threw their fists in the air.

I couldn't understand what the hell was happening—why were these people smiling? Why were they laughing and cheering when they could see the fucking *monsters* right over there?!

“They won't get the chance,” Shade told me. “Watch, Snowflake.” He pointed his finger toward the tents, toward the one right across from where the flock of daemons was coming out of the Well.

And I saw the group of people dressed in leathers, with weapons in their hands, slowly approaching them.

“We’re called *sentinels*. We train during the second year of the Academy, and every day of service here as well, and then we make sure that every daemon that crawls out of that hole dies and goes back to the Underworld,” Shade explained. “Elysean and mortal alike, we all fight. You see that formation over there? Does it look familiar?”

It was. There were twelve people down there with the daemons on the black soil, and six of them had already stopped and assumed their places in the same formation that Novak had been teaching us to fight in for the past four months.

“The one in the middle is mortal. Mason Rogers,” Shade explained, and my stomach did a flip. “His godlight is very strong. He has chosen to remain here indefinitely.”

Just then, as if he heard his name being called, Mason and the others in formation around him turned to the screaming group standing not ten feet to my side on the platform. They all raised their fists and their weapons to the sky, and the people cheered louder.

Go get ‘em!

Knock ‘em dead!

Kill ‘em slowly! they screamed.

I couldn’t stop shaking.

“When you’re in your second year, most of your CT lessons will be held down here. There’s a dedicated training area back there,” Shade continued, knowing I needed to be distracted still, and he pointed his thumb back toward the glass wall. I didn’t even turn to see. I couldn’t look away from the monsters if I tried.

They'd all come out of the hole now, fourteen of them, and they could see the Elyseans and the mortals coming closer. The other six stopped just in front of the first formation, and they created a wall in front of them before they all raised their weapons. Most held swords, but some had bows and arrows and maces and long chains on them, too.

"Now, they fight the daemons before Mason releases his godlight to cleanse them from the face of the earth," Shade said. "Sentinels work in groups of fives, with one or two mortals added to whichever group is on duty the day or the night, depending on how many flocks come up at once."

"But shouldn't *more* people be down there?" I asked, my voice shaking. "Shouldn't *more* people help them?!"

"They're more than enough," said Shade. "Sentinels are well trained, Snowflake. You don't have to worry. Watch..."

And so I did.

My heart leaped when the monsters charged forward all at once and slammed onto the wall of Elyseans waiting for them with their weapons at the ready. I couldn't see much detail from the fight, for which I was also thankful, but I could see enough of the blood being shed and could see the glistening of blades while the Elyseans fought the first monsters just fine. Then they broke formation and stepped to the sides, still fighting, but the second group joined in, too. And so did Mason Rogers.

Miles loved that guy. And I'd always *hated* him whenever I saw his pictures. I'd always looked at him and thought he was an uptight prick with an ego the size of the damn sun, yet here he was, engaging in the fight just like Professor Novak told me to *never* do, fighting those monsters just to make sure

they never made it out of this place or out those large walls that surrounded the city, either.

Needless to say, I hadn't felt a worse person in my life.

I was speechless. I was in awe. I couldn't look away for a single second as they fought. The monsters were vicious, jumping so high so fast, trying their damned best to *eat* the sentinels fighting them, but the sentinels were indeed well trained, just like Shade said. The way they moved and jumped and swung their weapons was almost hypnotizing, like they were in a dance they'd rehearsed a million times already.

"That's the battlefield," Shade said. "We make it our mission to not let the daemons get out of that battlefield no matter what. It's marked by the black soil. The ground has withered from the energy of the Well. Nothing grows on it. It's all dead. And those big godstones we put up there is where the sentinels get extra supplies of magic when they need it. Not right now, they don't—it's only one flock by the looks of it. But when there's more, we all turn to our magic."

"Wow," I breathed, at a loss for any other word, when...

"Here it comes!"

The crowd around us screamed, just as a sentinel slammed her sword on the last standing daemon, and it hit the ground.

It all happened so fast, and it was so perfectly orchestrated, it was easy to see they'd all done this a hundred times before. Every sentinel stepped to the sides at the same time, creating a pyramid all around Mason, while he spread his arms to the sides and shouted at the top of his lungs.

A second later, a blinding bright light flashed right from his chest, taking away my vision completely.

It was gone too fast, just like the flash of a camera, and it took me a good few blinks to get the stars in my vision to fade away before I could see again. Before I could see the sentinels, all alive and well, going back to the tents, cheering with their friends on the platform with us.

I looked at Shade for a second, and he was smiling, too. He looked *proud*, though he wasn't cheering.

"You might want to not look directly into godlight next time, Snowflake," he told me. "Our eyes never get quite used to it."

Closing my eyes for a second, I took in a deep breath and smiled myself—this was it. This was the secret Elyseans went to such great lengths to hide from us.

Now I knew it. I'd seen it with my own eyes. And even though a part of me wished I'd never come close to this place, or the trials, or even to fucking Boston, *most* of me was glad and thankful to be standing here today.

THEY ALL LOOKED AT ME. They stared openly, at me and Oreo and Shade, and it unnerved me. I was still standing by the railing, resting my elbows on it, no longer cold. No longer so afraid that my knees were shaking.

The daemons were gone not five minutes later.

Apparently, godlight sort of wiped their minds and sucked out their strength completely so that the sentinels then simply cut them to pieces without meeting resistance. The energy of the godlight stuck to what remained of their bodies like radiation and didn't let them regenerate for a long time, and the black soil swallowed them within minutes and took them back into the Well of the Damned.

But the Elysean sentinels—including Mason Rogers—hadn't come up here because it was *their shift*, Shade said. They'd be there all day and night, staying in one of those tents or cabins, waiting for more daemons to crawl out of the hole.

In January, they kept ten teams at the ready at any given time, but the rest of the year it was about five or six. More always hung out around here, though—they had living quarters inside the mountain here, too, Shade said.

Some chose to live here permanently for real, even those who were once mortal, like Mason Rogers. They not only accepted that they'd been lied to when they first entered the trials, but they chose to spend their whole lives here, even though the mandatory duty lasted for four years for mortals. After that, they were free to live anywhere in Idaeia, or any Elysean city, just like promised—if they survived the four years, and the two at the Academy, *and* the initial trials.

They were free to go, but they chose to stay.

“Let me get you something to drink,” Shade said after a minute. “Coffee or tea?”

I looked at his face, at his wide silver eyes, at the small smile that touched those lips any time he was looking at me. *He* did this, too. He was a sentinel, and he fought those monsters right there on the battlefield just like the rest of these people, most times for two, three days at once.

“Sure,” I said, even more in awe of him than before, if that was even possible. “Some coffee would be nice.”

“I'll be right back,” he said with a wink, then turned for the bar at the other end.

People watched him as he went, most already returned to their tables and to their own small groups, but some remained

by the railing, too. Some still stared at me so much it made my skin crawl. I tried to ignore them. I tried to pretend I couldn't tell at all, and I squatted down in front of Oreo again.

“You okay?” I asked her, and the white head barked just a bit as if to say *yes*. She wasn't shaking anymore, but she was still curious about the people staring, about the hole leaking lava and darkness beneath us, about everything that surrounded us.

I didn't really blame her, but now that there was no battle of monsters to watch, I was feeling more self-conscious by the second. As soon as Shade came back, I'd ask him to get us out of here. The pressure was already too much, but...

“Hey, there. Sera, was it?”

I looked up as I scratched Oreo's left head to find none other than Avery Johnson looking down at me, resting her hip against the railing, legs and arms crossed, perfectly at ease.

She wore those same leathers she had that first night I saw her at the Arges, when she'd come to the infirmary for Shade. Her vest was dark red, darker than the Academy uniforms of House Ruby, and the godstone around her neck was the same, bigger than the one she'd had on that day they let us into Idaeia the first time. Her hair was pulled back, her brown eyes full of life, her skin flawless...

“Avery Johnson,” I said, standing up to face her.

“The one and only,” she said, just as someone else came right to her side.

I knew his face, too.

“Sedorah Sinclair. Good to finally meet you. I'm Arthur,” Arthur O'Brien said, offering me his hand to shake, looking me over like I was a fascinating exotic animal on display for

his eyes to feast upon. It made me feel so damn uncomfortable, and when I reached out to shake his hand, Oreo growled at him.

“Whoa, easy there, hellhound!” he said, falling back a step but still smiling brightly.

“See? Dogs can sense a person, and of course it doesn’t like *you*, shithead. You’re an awful human being,” Avery told him.

“She says that out of love,” Arthur said, and again, his wide eyes scrolled down the length of me slowly. The leathers he wore were a deep green in color and they made him look like a completely different person from the guy who’d grown that beautiful flower from the ground the day they demonstrated their magic for us.

“How does it work exactly?” I asked before I could help myself, as Oreo pressed her body against my leg, watching Arthur warily still. “Do they just...put nice clothes on you and get you to take pictures, come out in front of the whole world and lie through your teeth to all of us?” I couldn’t keep the bite out of my voice if I tried.

But if either of them was offended, they didn’t show it.

Avery shrugged. “Pretty much. They get everything settled, then give us a couple days off, tell us what to do. Pretty straightforward,” she said. “So, how’d *that* happen? Hellhounds don’t usually pick mortals as their masters. How’d you get her to come to you? Any special tricks?” She grinned sneakily. “Because I’d love one for myself, to be honest. I’ve had pets since I was like three. It’s lonely here without a doggy or a kitty.”

“There are no special tricks. I didn’t get her to come to me—she just did,” I said, turning to look at where Shade was again. He was by the bar, talking to two men who weren’t wearing leathers like everyone else. He was probably just waiting for the coffee, and I needed to stop being such a chicken.

“Oh, well. Good thing I have *him* then. Sucks at taking orders, but it’s better than nothing, I guess,” Avery said, pointing her thumb at Arthur.

Arthur, who was making love-eyes at me still. “Again, she’s only saying that out of love.” And he slammed his hand on Avery’s shoulder like he meant to pat her and almost knocked her down instead. She threw him a dirty look but didn’t comment.

“So, they told me about your godlight,” Arthur then said. “Was it really as intense as she says?”

“I wasn’t even there, and I saw it from the hallway. It was more than *intense*,” said Avery, but the look she gave me was a bit confusing—she wasn’t impressed or proud or *sorry* for me for the fact, but maybe somewhere in between?

I said nothing.

“Yes, well, everybody heard. And about the hellhound, too. Must be really special. Is it true that the goddess is training you personally?” Arthur said next.

I sighed. “Yes, it is. You’ve heard about everything, haven’t you.” It wasn’t a question.

“Of course, we have,” Avery answered anyway, while Arthur nodded.

“That’s why everyone keeps staring at me? I mean, seriously. I’m just like you,” I muttered, shaking my head at

every person who was looking at me shamelessly from twenty feet away. It was all I could do not to flip them all off, too.

If only Shade could get back here quicker so we could leave...

“Oh, they’re not looking at you because of that,” Avery said, laughing.

“No offense, but we all have godlight,” Arthur said.

“So then...” The question died on my lips when the two of them threw a look back toward the bar.

Toward Shade.

They were looking at me like that because I was with Shade.

“Me and him are kind of buddies, in fact,” said Avery, nodding her head at Shade, while Arthur rolled his eyes—*slowly*. “Of course, as much as my kind can be friends with his kind.”

“Oh, Ave,” Arthur breathed, looking at her like he felt *sorry* for her.

“What?! It’s true. If our magic didn’t hurt each other every time we worked together, we would be,” Avery said.

Heat spilled down the length of me—the bad kind. “What do you mean?”

“Just that. His shadows hurt me, and my godlight hurts him. Not *hurt* hurt, but...you know. Very unpleasant,” she said, and words Arti said to me that day we first trained came to my mind. But it must have been much, *much* different for them than it was for me because Shade’s shadows never hurt me. His darkness was my safe place.

“You kind of look exactly the same. He’s *branded* you,” Arthur said under his breath, eyeing the coat I wore, then stepped back. I realized why when I saw Shade was coming to us with two cups of steaming coffee in his hands. “Anyway, good to meet ya, Sera Sinclair. Guess I’ll see you around.” And he turned around to leave.

“Chickenshit,” Avery called, but she straightened up, too, when Shade stopped next to me.

“Johnson,” he said, and she nodded.

“Shade,” she said with a sneaky grin. “Just keeping your girl entertained here.”

“That so,” Shade said, offering me one of the paper cups that smelled like fucking heaven.

“Mhmm,” Avery continued. “She has a hellhound, too. Guess it makes sense that she’s not a brunette.” Shade raised a brow at her. “Just saying, I thought brunettes were your type.”

“You thought wrong,” I said before I could help myself. She’d been talking about fucking *brunettes* since that first night I met her at the Academy. There was something about this girl, something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Whatever it was, it didn’t let me either hate her completely or like her all the way.

“My bad,” she said, wiping imaginary dust off her leather vest. “Anyway, will you be training with us down here soon?”

I looked at Shade. “The goddess is still training her. I don’t imagine she’ll bring her down here until the second year.”

I bit my lip and looked away at the Well, at the battlefield and the tents. No more daemons crawling out of the darkness right now, but I felt so damn guilty. I hadn’t told Shade about

what Artemis said yet, about my magic and about being endowed.

But while I'd watched those people fighting those daemons today, my mind had already been half made up—I was going to do it. Screw waiting for graduation—I was going to get endowed right away so I could be down there and help them fight those monsters. So that I could give them a chance at trying to shut that thing down completely, so that nobody here ever had to risk their lives like this again.

But now that it was over, and knowing how Shade would feel about it, I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure about a lot of things, and I couldn't wait to be by myself for a while, just to put my thoughts in order.

“Well, that's a shame. We have good fun in training here. Spill a lot of blood,” Avery said. “But, anyway, if you do want to hang out down here, let me know, ‘kay?’”

“Sure,” I forced myself to say, then gave her a smile.

“See you around, mortal,” she told me, then waved her fingers at Oreo, who watched her curiously but didn't growl at her, at least.

“She's harmless. Only wants to befriend you because she wants to be appointed to my team permanently. I wouldn't trust her if I were you,” Shade said, coming to stand next to me by the railing. It was easier to turn my back to all the people who watched me, especially now that I knew why.

Why would they be so fucking curious about me just because I was here with Shade?!

“Oh, I don't. I don't know why she seems like she's always hiding something. I can't even explain it properly,” I

said, shaking my head. My instincts warned me just like he did, and I planned to listen.

“How are you feeling?” said Shade after a minute, sipping his coffee. I did, too, and though it warmed me on the way down wonderfully, I didn’t really feel the taste of it.

“I’m okay. Just...processing.”

“She seems fine, too,” Shade said, looking to my other side, to where Oreo sat on her hind legs and looked out at the hole of darkness below us.

“She was shaking earlier. That thing really scared her.” And it scared me about a million times more. “I never imagined it would be like this.” When they said *portal to the Underworld*, I don’t know why I imagined these big gates at the bottom of the mountain somewhere, being guarded by those monsters or something—not *this*.

“It takes some getting used to,” Shade said, and he always noticed *everything* about what went on around us, so the fact that he was ignoring the stares of everyone here told me that he was already used to it.

I was dying to ask him why.

“The first time I saw this, I was with my uncle. He brought me here when I was fourteen. They were in the process of charging the opals we keep on the battlefield, and he brought me to show me that the monsters were really real.”

“*Fourteen?* Are you serious?” Fuck, he’d been just a kid!

“I wanted to come, too. I was always curious. You never really believe it when they tell you about daemons. Never know what to expect, not even when you see pictures. You have to see them for yourself.”

“That’s true.” Even if somebody had explained them to me before I saw the first, it wouldn’t have made a difference. It wouldn’t have changed how I felt when I first laid eyes on it.

“It becomes normal eventually, though,” Shade told me, looking down at me with that small smile again. “It becomes ordinary—and *that’s* the stuff that always baffled me. How much we can take. How easily we get used to any circumstance. Any situation.” He took my hand in his and kissed my knuckles.

I rested my cheek on his shoulder. “For what it’s worth, you and every person here who fights against those things are heroes. Real, true heroes.”

Shade chuckled. “Some have no choice but to be here, actually. My team, for example, are all ex-convicts who chose fighting here over a lifetime in prison. Others are here because of their mandatory two-year service after graduation from the Academy. Very few choose this life, Snowflake.”

I sighed. “Either way, in my book, you’re all fucking heroes.”

“I’ll take it,” Shade said. “Whenever you’re ready to leave, we can.”

“Just...a second longer.” I wanted to commit the details of that darkness to my memory because I was sure I’d want to revisit later. Part of me wanted me to start running out of this place already, while the other wanted to go see the battlefield from up close, go all the way down the mountain and to the tents, have that darkness twirling up to the sky right in front of me.

But eventually, my cup was empty, and my cheeks began to burn with the cold again. I let Shade take me back upstairs,

all the way around the mountain from the outside, which was another way to the battlefield from the front of the Arges. Maybe he sensed how uneasy people's stares made me, and that's why we took that path, though it was bumpy and steep and very cold to be walking up the side of the mountain like that. That's why it was just us, and the peace and quiet was definitely worth the hassle.

Finally, we made it to the front doors of the Arges, right where I'd seen Shade that night in September when I first came to this place. Now, he told me how he'd been coming back with his team, all bloody and dirty, having fought five flocks of daemons that had come up to the battlefield at once.

Shivers washed down my back over and over at the memories, at what my imagination made those fights to be now that I'd seen so much.

And when Shade dropped me off at my room with the promise to be back tonight, I fell on the bed, exhausted. Oreo lay on the floor by the bed's leg, but I asked her to hop on, too, just so I could feel the heat of her body against my feet.

I wanted to be alone with my thoughts right now, definitely, but I also didn't want to be lonely. And Oreo's presence somehow made things better. She slept soundly right by my feet, while I stared at the ceiling for a long time, as silent tears slipped from my eyes every now and then.

I didn't get up until the sun began to set.

I2

“...you want to know the only thing mankind will go to such great lengths to avoid?

The answer might surprise you.

It is the truth.”

—Her Highness Hera, 129

By C. M. Gelbert, House Emerald

MILES’S FACE on the screen made my heart jump.

“Sera?!” he called, looking both surprised and ecstatic to see me on his phone.

“Hey, kid. What are you up to?” I said, just as excited as him.

Max had finally given me his phone after dinner to call Miles, and now here he was, right there on the screen. It felt like we were standing in front of one another, and even though I couldn’t hug the hell out of him like I wanted, it was so, so good to actually see that face.

“What? *How?! How are you FaceTiming me?!*” he said, laughing.

“Turns out I can do that now, kid. I can borrow Max’s phone and FaceTime you all the time.” He knew very well who Max was. I’d told them all about him and Mave on our monthly phone calls in the waiting room in front of Carmine’s office.

This, though. This was infinitely better than just hearing his voice.

“That’s amazing! Can you show me around? I want to see the Academy so bad. C’mon, show me!” Miles said, so excited he was jumping up and down with his phone in his hands, making me laugh and want to cry at the same time.

So, with a finger to my lips to remind Oreo again to keep quiet and stay at the side of the bed, I got up and showed him around my room, then outside my window, too.

We talked for almost half an hour before we hung up, and Miles told me all about these new guys he’d met at school. He’d kept his end of the deal we’d made before I came to this place very well. He didn’t spend as much time inside as he used to, and he even had friends now. Friends from school with whom he hung out regularly. I was so proud of him for keeping his word.

And he was proud of me for keeping mine, too. I was still alive.

I didn’t tell him that I’d seen Mason Rogers because then he’d have asked me a million questions, and I had no idea how to respond. I hadn’t had the time to think up a lie, either, so for now, I just kept it to myself. And I didn’t mention anything to Layla and James, either. It was so good to see their faces, to have what I’d considered a *normal* conversation then, about ordinary, mortal things. About the diner and about milkshakes, and about Layla’s classes—she’d ended up going to college

after all, and she was studying business at Boston University while helping her mother run her diner. I was so proud of her I could burst.

When I finally returned Max's phone to him, the battery was at four percent.

"Sorry," I said, with my best smile. "I'll buy you a cup of coffee tomorrow if we go to the city?"

"Deal," he said. "Let me go put this on the charger."

Mave was waiting for us at the bottom of the stairs in the main hallway, eyes big and sparkly, so full of curiosity I could see it *shimmering* in the air about her like a damn aura.

They walked with me—though *crawled* would be a better word—all the way to the Arena where Artemis was waiting for me to train. Oreo stayed close behind while they asked me at least fifty questions each about the battlefield. Though I was exhausted and my jaw hurt a bit from all that talking *fast* so I wouldn't be late, it was actually kind of refreshing to share something with someone so completely, to not hold back on any detail. And Max and Mave absorbed my every word, looking both terrified and fascinated at the same time.

By the time training was over and I was in bed waiting for Shade to show up, I was exhausted. Oreo lay on the bed by my feet again and her warmth gave me some comfort, but it wasn't enough to calm me down.

A storm was brewing inside me, and even though I wanted to stay awake and wait for Shade, I couldn't. My eyes closed and I was *attacked* by dreams of different lives and different people, by the sound of that robot and the masks of the Soters who infiltrated my mind when I wasn't strong enough to shut them out.

But through it all, the Well of the Damned remained at the center of my mind.

Every time I woke up before sleep pulled me under again, I felt Shade lying on my bed next to me, my back to his chest. He was there, sleeping with me, but this time, even that wasn't enough. Because every time I woke up—which seemed to be once every hour—I was realizing that my mind was more made up.

I was going to do it. I was going to get endowed, and I was going to train to fight those monsters, and I was going to go into that darkness—all of my own free will. *God help me.*

SHADE WASN'T there when I woke up in the morning, but he'd left a tulip on my pillow. I hated that I hadn't had the chance to even kiss him goodnight, but a part of me was glad we hadn't talked. What went on inside my head right now was chaotic, and it would drain me completely to even try to explain it.

I tried to give myself time. I tried to think about every possible scenario while I trained with the bow, then during meals, and during breaks with Max and Mave. I tried, but when six p.m. rolled in and I was in the Arena all alone with Arti again, I knew.

No amount of thinking about death was going to change my mind about being endowed. About properly training with my everything to get into the Well. Not now. Not ever.

“I'll do it.”

My voice seemed to echo in the large space of the Arena. Even Mors, who was lying on the floor, watching me, was curious enough to raise all his heads. Oreo barked, too, as if to give me her approval.

And Artemis smiled the biggest smile I had ever seen on her since we met.

“*Atta girl,*” she whispered, throwing me the sword that almost cut off my arm before I managed to grab the handle. “Before school starts?”

The idea raised goose bumps on my forearms. I shrugged, not really sure what to tell her about that yet. Not sure I had a clue what the hell I was doing still.

Then she proceeded to kick my ass in training for over an hour before she let me go. Turns out, when she was in a *good* mood, she was even worse to spar with. Completely merciless—and she enjoyed every second.

It felt good, though. I hurt in a lot of places and I was tired, so damn tired, but it felt good to know I’d actually taken the first step. I’d *decided*.

Now, all I had to do was see it through. Now, all I had to do was make sure I had what it took and gave it my everything.

That night, I had no trouble waiting up for Shade. I couldn’t sleep if I tried, but at least my body rested for over an hour while I lay down with Oreo.

When he came in, she was no longer as wary of him, I noticed. She even watched him curiously, didn’t growl at all, and sniffed him from afar. It was a good sign, I decided. He was starting to grow on her.

“Hey, Snowflake,” he said with a chuckle when I jumped in his arms.

“Hey, Shadow Boy. I missed you,” I mumbled against his lips before I kissed him.

“I was here last night,” he said, slowly moving us toward the bed.

“I know. I felt you. I just couldn’t wake up.” Not even to turn around and hug him, so worn down by those images that seemed to change every few seconds in my dreams.

“You were exhausted,” he said and lay me down.

Oreo continued to analyze him when he sat down next to my legs, and she still hadn’t jumped off or backed away toward the door. Definitely not afraid of Shade anymore.

“It’s okay. Come here,” I told her, patting my other side.

By some miracle, she did. The way Shade was trying to stifle a smile as he looked at her made me want to jump in his arms and kiss him again until he ran out of air. He looked *cute* just now, too.

Oreo lay down next to my hip, the two black heads watching Shade while the white one stared at me.

“It’s fine, I promise. He just *looks* scary, but he’s a teddy bear at heart,” I told her.

Shade laughed, throwing his head back, and Oreo was even more curious. The sound of him warmed me like nothing else in the world. Fuck, I loved everything about this guy. It was almost ridiculous.

Leaning closer, Shade whispered, “True. I’m all soft and squishy on the inside.”

“Mhmm. Soft and squishy.” Hooking my arm around his neck, I held him closer and kissed him for a little bit. “Were you downstairs?”

“Yep. Just in case,” he said. Because it was January, and they never knew how many daemons were going to spill out of

the Well at any given minute. “Did you train?”

“Yep. She really refuses to take it easy with me. I know she’s a goddess, but I swear...” I muttered against his lips.

Oreo stood up and slowly moved from the bed. I didn’t think it was because she was afraid of Shade, but maybe the way we spoke—in whispers and with the tips of our noses touching—made her uncomfortable?

Couldn’t say I was sad when Shade lay down next to me and I got to feel all of his body pressed to mine.

“You shouldn’t trust Artemis, Snowflake,” he whispered in my ear, and it surprised me.

I leaned back to look into his eyes. “Are you serious? She’s *a goddess*.”

“Exactly,” Shade said without hesitation. “Don’t forget that the gods made us in *their* image. They’re just the same as we are. Don’t think for a second that they’re not capable of following their own personal agendas or that the greater good is their only concern.”

My mouth opened and closed a couple times, but I found nothing to say. Shit, he was absolutely right.

Shaking my head, I hugged him tighter, wondering what he’d say when I told him that I’d already decided to get endowed, possibly before classes even began. I’d already told Arti about it, too.

Double shit. He was going to tell me to wait until I graduated. He was going to insist I train first.

Biting my tongue, I took in a deep breath and decided to let it go for now. I’d figure out how to tell him properly. It didn’t have to be right away—I could tell him tomorrow or the

day after that. Just not right now because I needed him more than I needed to fucking breathe. He made this whole thing bearable just by being here. And I was too selfish to give that up tonight.

“Kiss me,” I whispered against his neck, and Shade didn’t have to be told twice. His lips were on mine and his body on top of me, and he kissed me like it was his life’s mission to make me feel like I was the only thing that mattered in the entire universe.

His hands roamed down my body, squeezing and touching everywhere he could, burning me with the invisible fire only he owned. Yes, I was exhausted, but that wasn’t about to stop me from taking all his clothes off and riding him until I fucking collapsed.

I pulled his jacket and shirt off before the minute was over, and I ran my hands up and down his back, touching his godstone that was buried halfway into his skin right between his shoulder blades. Right now I wasn’t even curious to know *why* he kept his on his body. I was just racing to have him naked, and he was no better.

Sitting up between my legs, he pulled me up by the arms, too, then took off my vest, my shirt and my bra, growling when his hands finally cupped my breasts. My hardened nipples were almost painful between his fingers, and it worked in intensifying the pleasure that spilled heat between my legs perfectly. I rose on my knees, too, and while he played with my breasts, I played with his cock, rubbing him over his pants first. His moans were music to my ear.

“You taste like the sweetest sin, Snowflake. I can never get enough of you,” he whispered in my ear while I undid his zipper and pulled out his cock. I fisted it tightly just to hear

that sound coming out of him again. He threw his head back as I jerked him off, my own hips moving in perfect rhythm. Nothing in the world was like pleasing him. It was a different high to see him so consumed by the touch of my hands, to know I *owned* his pleasure completely.

“Move back, baby,” I whispered because I needed more space to lower myself down all the way, until the tip of his cock was right in front of my lips.

I kissed it, licked it, burning with anticipation already. Shade’s hands were in my hair, and my ass was jutting out for his pleasure. I took him inside my mouth all the way until I gagged, just like he liked.

He tasted exactly like the sweetest sin, too. Like something forbidden you can’t keep yourself from, and I couldn’t fucking get enough of the taste of him, either.

I licked and grazed the length of him with my teeth as I went. The taste of him was in my mouth and I sucked harder each new time, needing more. Shade hissed and growled, pulling my head toward him while he thrust his hips harder and harder, going deeper down my throat until my face was completely wet with tears.

But a minute later, he stopped me.

“I need your pussy in my mouth, too,” he said in an almost robotic voice, and he moved us.

A moment later, Shade was lying on my pillow, guiding me back until I had my knees on either side of his head, and I took his cock in my hands again.

“Sit on my face, baby,” he whispered, and I felt the tip of his tongue teasing my entrance.

That was all the convincing I needed. I lowered my hips onto his face, and he dove in furiously, eating my pussy like he'd been waiting years to do just that. I froze for a minute, unable to think or do or feel anything else other than his tongue thrusting inside me while he gripped my ass with both hands hard enough to leave bruises.

Fuck, the way he felt was otherworldly. When he pressed his tongue flat against my clit for a second, my hips started moving, grinding against that skilled mouth faster, and I took his cock in mine again.

I never thought Shade going down on me could possibly get any better, but I was wrong. Having him in my mouth, touching the back of my throat while I rode his face was infinitely better than anything we'd done so far. And I didn't want to fucking stop.

We stayed like that for as long as we could hold back, but soon, every new thrust of Shade's cock in my mouth became more desperate, and every movement of my hips more violent. I fisted the base of him and sucked on his tip while he flicked his tongue on my clit relentlessly, then slipped two fingers inside me at the same time.

His cum spilled down my throat when he came, keeping his fingers deep inside me, frozen by the pleasure bursting in his body from the orgasm. I pushed my hips back and squeezed his fingers at the same moment, letting go myself. Nothing in the world existed except me and him, with each other in our mouths, surrendering to the pleasure completely.



“LAST NIGHT,” he said, kissing up my neck slowly, “your ass was pressed to my cock, and it was all I could do not to wake you up and take you until you fucking collapsed.”

Goose bumps all over my arms. “I wish you had,” I whispered, moaning when he reached that soft spot behind my ear that still made my knees weak.

“I don’t think you realize how fucking perfect you are,” Shade said, lowering his hand to my breasts. “The way your ass looks, and the way your tits look...” He squeezed hard, making me moan in pain and more pleasure. “It’s really, *really* hard to resist you, Snowflake. It’s worse because I don’t want to.”

Coming up to my face, he thrust his tongue in my mouth the way he did in my pussy just a few minutes before. I moved, turning on my other side, and pressed my ass to his cock that was already getting hard, just like I was already dripping between my legs.

“Like this?” I breathed, taking his cock and pressing it between my ass cheeks while I rubbed it. “You wanted me like this last night?”

He growled, looking down between our bodies, and I arched my back even more to give him a better view. “Exactly like this,” he said, gripping my hip as he thrust forward and onto my ass, hard as a rock now.

“Fuck, Shade. I don’t know how you do this to me, but I never want to stop,” I breathed, grabbing his hand with my free one, and guiding it between my legs. I wanted his hands on me forever, every second of every day.

And he complied so perfectly.

“Raise your knee, beautiful,” he whispered in my ear, slipping his arm under my waist, easily reaching my clit with his fingertips. With the other, he grabbed my leg by the back of my knee and pulled it up.

I held onto his arm that was rubbing me while he adjusted his cock lower, down to my entrance. I arched my back as far as I could, desperate to take him in already. Coming on his mouth was fucking mind-blowing, but coming on his cock was the whole universe wrapped up in a feeling. I held perfectly still as his tip slipped down my folds.

“Easy,” Shade whispered next to my ear, resting his cheek to mine.

And he brought his cock inside me slower than ever before.

I felt every second, every little inch that slid inside me so easily, so comfortably, like it belonged there. Like two pieces of a puzzle coming together. I didn't breathe, didn't look, didn't think at all until he was buried inside me to the hilt, then brought his arm around my waist and squeezed me to him, keeping us there for a moment.

He whispered praise in my ear while he kissed my cheek, and my body was completely at his mercy.

“Give me your lips, Snowflake,” he said, and I turned my head to him eagerly. We started to make out and to move together, in a slow rhythm this time, like we had all the time in the world.

Darkness spread all around us, the Void swallowing up every inch of the room, taking us in its embrace.

“Don't stop,” I begged him, climbing higher to the sky with each new gentle thrust. “Please, don't stop...”

“Keep begging, baby,” he whispered, kissing every inch of my face he could reach, holding me tightly to his chest while he fucked me from behind, and his fingers rubbed perfect, slow circles on my clit.

We stayed like that for a long time, slowing down a bit when we were close because we wanted to make it last. God, I was desperate to make it last, and I kept begging, and he kept going, never once missing a beat. The Void was filled with the sound of our heavy breathing, and our skins slapping against one another, and our moans. Fire burned under my skin and we moved in such a perfect rhythm, I *felt* the pleasure like a living thing climbing inside of me like never before.

“Gods, you’re glowing, baby,” Shade whispered, resting his cheek to mine. “You’re glowing so brightly, Snowflake.”

I loved that he saw me the way he did. I loved that I glowed for him. I always would.

With one more thrust deep inside me, and with his fingers pressing on my clit, I came, crying out his name, completely delirious. Our bodies slick with sweat slid onto one another, and we kept moving until Shade let go, too, holding my hips tightly while he kept himself buried deep and came inside me.

There was no better feeling in the world than being connected to him like this, than giving and taking and *being* his so completely.

I love you, Shade, I thought I whispered, but I was too far gone already to tell if I’d said it out loud.

I3

“Yes, people do change. But only when it is convenient.”

—**Chronicles of Athene, Book III, 9**

by Barbara Boise, House Emerald

“YOU SEEM DISTRACTED AGAIN.”

Arti looked at me from under her lashes, more curious by the minute.

“I’m fine,” I said, raising the bow again.

I wasn’t fine, in fact. And *distracted* was a small word for what it was like inside my head.

Too many things going on at once had me overwhelmed, and *that* paralyzed me. It kept me stuck in this place of limitless confusion—*what would endowing even mean? Was I really going to become Elysean, just like that? What had Alan Roux done to me that night my parents died? Why was I so damn terrified to tell Shade that I was going to do it? Did I seriously hope to fight a daemon one day and survive, let alone climb into the Well of the Damned?*

...and many, many more things spun around my head in any given minute.

“Stop for a second,” Arti said, and I was almost glad to lower that bow. My muscles were aching a bit, and it had been one hour of missing that damn target now for fifty percent of the time.

With a sigh, Arti stepped in front of me, and when we were this close, I could always tell how different she was. Her skin had a different quality, and her eyes were so much *more* than normal eyes, and her hair looked like it was made of a different fabric, not *hair*.

Once more, I was struck by the fact that she was *a goddess*. And actual fucking goddess of Olympus.

“I know you’re stressed,” she told me. “I’m stressed, too. We’re all stressed, I assure you.”

“I don’t think you understand what *stressed* means for me.” She had no fucking clue.

“And you don’t understand what *stressed* means for me, either.” She shrugged. “That’s perfectly fine. We don’t need to walk in each other’s shoes, but we do need to be walking the same road.” Slowly leaning closer to me, she said, “That means I need to know when something changes, Sera. I need to know if you change your mind.”

Closing my eyes, I took in a deep breath. “I haven’t.” At least not yet. “You’ll know when I do. I’m a terrible liar, anyway.”

She laughed a bit. “Carmine says you’re a very straight arrow.” She raised a brow at the bow and arrow in my hands. “I wonder if life will wear you down like it does most who start out the way you do. It strips away the best of people like you wouldn’t believe, and it never misses. Not once.”

“Life is full of unfair things, yes.” I knew that better than most.

“It is for everyone. Some start out better equipped to handle it, by which I mean they’re already corrupt to some degree. But some, like you, start out pretty pure. And then by their thirties, they’re full of bitterness and fighting it the best way they know how. By their forties, they just don’t give a shit anymore. You know? They stop pretending completely. They stop trying.” Her head leaned to the side. “I wonder if you will, too.”

“If I ever celebrate my fortieth birthday, I’ll be sure to let you know,” I said with a nod. “And I’m not *pure*, Artemis. I have my secrets. I have my dark side, too. Just like everyone else.”

“You do have a darker side than most, I’ll admit,” she said with a wicked grin. “A certain midnight caster who has made a habit out of sleeping in your bed, it seems.”

My cheeks flushed instantly. “Not that it’s anybody’s business, but yes.”

“Oh, I see,” she said. “Is *he* the one that got you like this? I heard his shift started today.”

She was absolutely right. Right after breakfast, Shade came to tell me that he was going to be downstairs for the next three days this week. I hated it, and I hated that I hadn’t told him about deciding to be endowed, either, but we’d been in the hallway, with Max and Mave on one side and his team on the other, so I’d figured I’d just take these days to think through the best way to tell him, then break it to him when he got back.

“It does, yes. He can handle himself,” I said, more to myself than to Arti. And I was right—Shade *could* handle

himself. I just wished knowing that would take some of the worry away now that I'd actually seen the battlefield and how they all fought.

“That, he can,” Arti said. “And I have an idea I think you’ll like.” She smiled brightly.

My brow arched. “What?”

“How would you like to go downstairs and watch him slay some monsters, mortal?”

My mouth opened and closed a couple of times, and in those few seconds, I racked my brain for *any* reason at all why I should say no.

I found none.

“Let me grab my coat.”

EVERYONE WAS by the railing when we descended the stone stairs to the second level platform down the mountain. The day was colder, my cheeks were burning, and I held onto the coat Shade got me tightly with both hands. The people dressed in leathers stood in a big group, some cheering and some whispering right alongside the railing.

Until Avery Johnson saw me, and she told a guy standing next to her by nudging him in the arm, and he told the girl next to him the same way—and so on until all of them had turned our way.

Their eyes were wide and on Artemis for a change, and the sudden silence that reigned on the entire platform made me even more uncomfortable. Nobody was screaming or whispering anymore. They were all just watching Artemis, analyzing every inch of her as she held her head high. She

only wore her thin brown leather jacket, claiming the cold couldn't touch her—and indeed, her cheeks weren't red at all. She'd let her hair loose, too, after the training, and it looked like she'd just walked out of a fucking salon—meanwhile I was thankful to have a hat to hide the awful frizz of mine. Impossible that she looked like that as she kept her eyes to the sky, completely unbothered by the stares, like the people weren't even there to begin with.

I followed her lead deeper into the opening and all the way to the other side of the railing, at least fifteen feet away from everyone else. Behind us, Mors and Oreo walked with their heads high, their curious eyes taking in every little detail. When I saw them walking like that together for the first time, it made perfect sense that she was his offspring. Though they were different, Mors and Oreo were very much the same, too—their tongues, their ears, and the grey shade of their fur was identical, not to mention the way they walked and held their heads. Oreo was a miniature version of Mors with a bit different coloring.

“Goddess Artemis, it is an honor,” someone from the group said, and before I even looked their way, they were all kneeling with their heads down and their hands to their chests.

“Please carry on,” she said with a wave of her hand, a fake smile on her face before she turned to the battlefield again. I felt uncomfortable enough for the both of us because she really didn't seem to care that those people were still kneeling there for her.

“I'm gonna g—” *go look for Shade*, I was going to say, because he wasn't anywhere with that group, and I thought maybe he was inside the room in the mountain separated by that glass wall that still didn't let me see inside. He was

probably meeting with someone or something—but the moment I laid eyes on the Well of the Damned, I stopped speaking.

Shade was not inside the mountain at all. He was down there, on the battlefield together with his team and three more like them—while daemons *poured* out of the darkness of the Well like fucking ants.

I gripped the railing with all my strength. Every drop of blood in my body turned to stone. Shade was right there, his black leathers like a beacon to my eyes as he swung his sword, and my heart was about to break my ribcage any second.

“Breathe, Sera,” Artemis said. “He’s doing his job over there. Just watch.”

Just watch.

I couldn’t close my eyes if I tried.

At least fifty of those things were out of the hole, though I couldn’t really count all that well when they kept moving so fast, jumping and spinning and *crawling* on the blackened soil like goddamn insects. There were eighteen Elyseans down there, and all of them kept the same formation as we were taught in Novak’s class, protecting the mortals behind the wall of sentinels that was quickly coming apart because even more daemons were crawling out the hole as they fought.

“Oh, my God,” I breathed, unable to help myself, wanting to sprout fucking wings and get down there, go to Shade and help him. I saw nobody else, and the more daemons came closer to him, the faster he moved, until he was a damn blur to my eyes.

“Oh, I like this maneuver. Look!” said Artemis, *excited* as she pointed her finger toward the battlefield, as if she really

thought I was capable of prying my eyes away for a single second.

Then the sentinels moved.

They moved in a perfect rhythm, all their legs hitting the ground at the same time, or so it seemed from up here. They created half a circle all around the coming daemons, with Shade right in the middle behind them, and another three sentinels a couple feet behind him with their arms raised to the sides.

“*Readyyyyy...*” Artemis whispered, and I didn’t even breathe at all.

It happened so fast that I was tempted to think it was all in my imagination. Shade raised his hands and darkness exploded from his fingers, spreading all around the back of the sentinels standing in front of him.

A second later, the three behind him *flashed* bright white light from their chests.

Too late to close my eyes—I didn’t really see it coming.

The crowd to our right cheered again at the top of their voices. As the dots in front of my eyes began to fade away, I could make out the battlefield again—Shade’s darkness was gone, and the wall of sentinels that had been in front of him were now cutting daemon bodies like they were goddamn butter.

More cheering. The mortals who’d flashed the godlight turned to us and raised their fists—two men and one woman. Shade had engaged in the fight, too, swinging his sword like his body was made out of thin air, not flesh and bones.

“I taught them that,” Artemis said with a proud smile as she watched. “The team has to be perfectly synchronized for it

to work, but when it does, it always delivers. Look at them, falling apart like puppets.” And she laughed.

“Fuck, that was...that was...” I had no idea what to even call it. Just to look at that whole thing from up here was terrifying. How in the world was I ever going to get down there and *be* in the battle myself?

“Of course, that only works when the midnight caster is strong enough,” Artemis said. “The Ravenar boy definitely is. Look at the other...right over there, three o’clock.” And she pointed at the battlefield again. I tore my eyes from Shade for just one second to see another guy fighting with a black vest on. “That’s an Opal midnight caster, too.” As if on cue, the guy raised his hands and produced shadows from his palm as a daemon, walking like a drunk, came at him. Another sentinel nearby wearing red leathers cut its head clean off the second the shadows wrapped around it.

Shadows, not darkness. You could see through them just fine, and they were so...*thin*. Like he didn’t have enough of it to make them thick and sturdy like Shade’s.

“Is he weaker?” I wondered because that was the first time I was seeing another midnight caster. The Opal students at the Academy hadn’t been endowed yet, so I’d never seen anyone else produce shadows with their hands.

“Oh, no, sweetie. He’s considered strong among their kind. It’s just Ravenar that is...abnormally well connected to the Void,” Artemis said. “He’s one of the best we have. It’s important he stays here and fights, you understand? It’s important he helps keep these souls from slipping out of this place.”

Important, she said. And unfortunately, I fucking believed her.

“Unless they stay where they belong, down there in the Underworld.” And those monsters no longer threatened Shade or any of the sentinels who fought here every single day to keep all of us safe.

Shit.

“Exactly. And when the portals are closed, Sera, they will. They can’t get through those no matter what,” Artemis said, slowly, each word enunciated clearly—and that’s when I knew exactly why she’d brought me here to see Shade fighting.

It had been very impactful to watch those sentinels the other day. They’d made half my mind up on their own—but to see Shade putting his life at risk like this? To see him with that sword, covered in daemon blood, and to know he’d have to stay there all day, for three days, then come back again next week again—all his life?

Never. I would never allow it.

And Artemis knew exactly what she was doing when she so helpfully suggested we come down here to watch.

“I told you I haven’t changed my mind,” I said through gritted teeth, unable to look away from the battlefield. All daemons were now on the ground, and all the sentinels had their fists raised as they retreated to the tents, waving at the cheering audience—except Shade.

He simply walked with his sword in his hand, and when he looked up for a second, our eyes connected instantly like damn magnets. His step faltered but I doubted anybody noticed. Even though we were far away, I still saw his face with perfect clarity in my mind’s eye. Shade didn’t smile at me. He didn’t wave. He didn’t mouth anything, but I heard him inside my

mind all the same. I felt his lips on mine and the heat of his body pressed to me.

Then he and the rest of the sentinels disappeared into one of the tents.

“I know that,” Arti said, unconcerned by my tone of voice. “I’m just showing you all the reasons why it’s the right call to close the portal.”

I knew that, too. I knew very well how important it was—I could fucking see with my own eyes.

But before I could say anything, someone stopped behind us.

“Arti, good to see you down here,” the man said, and Oreo was already at it, growling at him as she came closer to my feet, though Mors seemed perfectly unbothered by the guy.

Probably because he knew Arti, and they’d definitely spoken before.

“Hello, Hector. Just showing Sera around,” Artemis said, turning to the side to look at the man. “Sera, this is Hector.”

Since Shade wasn’t coming out of that tent still, I turned and smiled automatically. “Good to meet you.”

“Wow,” the guy said. “Sera Sinclair. It’s an honor.” And he reached out to shake my hand.

It was definitely a surprise. This guy was Elysean, it was plain to see. His beauty alone was the best indicator—curly brown hair that was almost blond, big eyes a blue so intense one would think he was wearing contacts if they didn’t know what he was. His big smile made the dimples on his cheeks even more pronounced, and the golden undertone to his skin made his lips look almost orange.

“Oh,” I said, caught off guard a bit. “Um, hi...” I shook his hand, feeling awkward as all hell. An Elysean telling *me* that it was an honor to meet me?

“They told me about you, but I didn’t really believe you were real, to be honest.” He laughed a bit, looking at Arti. “The one who’s gonna save us all, right?”

Oh, God. My nose wrinkled, but if any of them saw it, they didn’t comment.

Save us all? Seriously...

“Hector here is a sentinel, too. One of the very, *very* few houseless Elyseans to serve in the battlefield. Don’t let the looks of him fool you, though,” Arti said. “Nobody can control immortal steeds like him. Not even his father before him.”

I raised my brows. “The *what?*” Did she say *immortal steeds?*

“They’re like horses, except they’re on fire. Their light is not as bright as godlight, but it’s pretty strong,” Hector eagerly explained.

“He’s of Phaethon’s descent,” Arti explained. “I plan to ride into the Well on his carriage.”

Damn. I’d read about Phaethon—son of Helios, god of the sun, who one day asked his father to let him carry the sun across the sky, and then he lost control of Helios’s steeds and fell. I’d had no idea that they were called that—*immortal steeds*.

Or that they were...you know, *real*.

Hector beamed. “It will be the honor of my life,” he said with a deep nod.

“That’s amazing,” I muttered, turning back to the battlefield.

Hector said something else, but I missed it, too focused on the darkness that was slipping out of that hole, the lava hanging onto those pointy rocks...

The daemons that were using them to crawl out of there, even though body parts of the last flocks were still all over the battlefield.

And Shade and his team were back outside the tents.

People screamed. People cheered. More daemons were coming, except this time only one team—Shade’s—engaged because there was only one flock. Ten daemons were already charging for the sentinels, and Shade, who had his sword at the ready, looked up my way once. I had no idea if he could even see me clearly, but then the daemons were close, and he charged. He swung his sword and attacked them with so much precision it was like watching a movie behind a fucking screen. And then his darkness climbed up out of nowhere when about half the daemons were down, before the girl who was behind him wearing red leathers flashed her godlight.

This time, I saw it coming. This time, the second she spread her arms to the sides, I closed my eyes.

The flashing light was visible behind my lids, too, but there were no bright spots in my vision. I saw it perfectly fine when the darkness retreated into Shade’s hand, and the remaining daemons barely stood while his team cut through them quickly.

Shade and the woman were already going back to the tent, his eyes on me the whole time.

I love you, I said to him in my mind.

And I'd be damned if I let him fight those things for the rest of his life, no matter what I needed to do.

SHADE DIDN'T COME BACK that night.

When I tossed and turned, haunted by nightmares and robots every hour, he wasn't there holding me to his chest. Instead, the memory of him fighting the daemons together with all those people kept me feeling like I was on the verge of tears every second.

I was actually glad when my eyes opened and I saw the sunlight streaming through my window. No need to try to fall back to sleep again—it would only traumatize me more.

Max and Mave insisted we go out to the city today—they'd been trying to get me out there for the past few days, but I always seemed to have something to do. Since Shade was going to be at the battlefield all day, I said yes. It was better than trying to rest with those thoughts in my head spinning all the damn time, anyway. A distraction was exactly what I needed.

Oreo decided to stay back at the Academy. She refused to get in the back of the van with us no matter how many times I called her, and Max and Mave seemed incredibly relieved, even though I reminded them a million times that she wasn't going to hurt them. Guess I should have been more wary of a three-headed hellhound, too—and I was. I was very wary of Mors still, but not Oreo. It was *Oreo!* I felt her differently. Call it instinct, call it whatever—I could trust her with my life.

Max and Mave didn't care, though. And I didn't bug them about it too much.

We even ate dinner in one of their favorite restaurants, which was abnormally expensive according to me, and *priced very reasonably* according to them. Maybe it was just the fact that I couldn't even taste the delicious meats and rice and sauces I couldn't even name—or the chocolate cake at the end. Maybe it was just my shitty mood that didn't let me even appreciate the architecture of the city, the beauty of the Elyseans, the incredibly detailed statues and the open sky over me.

Until...

“Hey, I wanna go say hi to my dad real quick. Do you guys mind?” Max said just when we were about to head to the van and the Bron who would drive us back to the Academy. It was almost five p.m., and I had training at six.

Every inch of me froze in place.

“Not at all. Want us to come with?” Mave said, and it was still strange to me how different she was toward Max every day, like she was *allowing* herself to not be hostile toward him all the time. She was most definitely using me, true to her word. And I loved her every day more for it, especially when Max seemed to be *thriving* on her attention like it was goddamn sunlight.

“I mean, I don't want to keep you,” Max said, scratching the back of his neck.

“You won't. It's fine. I'm tired, anyway,” I said when I finally found my voice.

“Of course, we don't mind, Max. C'mon,” Mave said, and then she was dragging us both by the arms to cross the wide street as fancy cars drove by.

Before ten minutes had passed, we were in front of the building down the street from his house, which Max had called *the institution* that time he told me about his father. It was a white building, same design as most things in the city, and the golden plaque on the wall of the gates said, *House of Care*. It was two stories high, and it had statues of angels all around the corners of the square rooftop. The golden gates gave easily when Max pushed them open, and the red door at the top of the three stairs opened before we closed it behind us.

A big man almost as tall as the door itself smiled at us.

“Max, welcome! So good to see you,” he said, spreading his arms wide to the sides.

“Thanks, Jake. It’s good to see you, too. Is he up?”

“Oh, yes, he is. Come in, come in! You brought friends?”

Jake was the caretaker of the people who lived at the institution, all seven of them. He led us inside the wide foyer, then a beautiful corridor decorated with paintings and pictures of quotes in pretty golden frames.

Max looked uncomfortable as all hell, and I was actually surprised he’d let us come inside with him all the way, but I suspected Mave’s comments and her sense of humor kept him distracted. I suspected he loved having her around, even when he wasn’t exactly comfortable.

Maybe he was even starting to trust me all the way, too—who knew?

And I couldn’t fucking believe that I was about to see the man who brought me back from the dead, when...

“I will take your friends to the waiting room for tea. Don’t worry—I’ve got the best cookies in the city to serve them,

too,” Jake said with a wink when we reached the first set of double doors at the other end of the corridor.

“I’ll see you guys in a minute?” Max said with a small smile, a *sorry* smile—like he really thought he was bothering us because he’d brought us with to see his dad.

I didn’t have the heart to even ask if we could go with him—what if I made him even more uncomfortable?

I bit my tongue and nodded.

“Sure thing, kid. We’ll be right here,” Mave said, and the way *she* smiled at him confirmed that she knew exactly how tense Max was as well.

It didn’t matter. Next time, I could ask him. Next time he took us to see his dad, I could tell Max that I wanted to meet him, too.

Maybe he’d be more comfortable. Maybe he wouldn’t mind then.

When Max went through the double doors, Jake took us through another set to our side and into a waiting room full of gorgeous pale greens and peachy pinks that made me feel like we’d stepped into a different world altogether. It was obvious Mave had been here before—she knew the place, and Jake knew her.

“I haven’t seen you around for a while. Max was pretty lonely,” he told her, and I suspected he knew exactly what he was doing.

Mave’s face turned as red as the color on the ends of her hair. “I’ve been busy,” was all she said.

True to his word, Jake brought us tea and cookies to die for, and I ate way too many. Maybe it was the taste, or maybe

it was nervousness, but I ate probably ten, and when we finally got up to leave twenty minutes later, I almost threw up with every step we took.

“How was he?” Mave asked Max as we waved at Jake while we walked out of the gates.

“Good.” Max shrugged, looking three times paler than he had been going in. “Same.”

I didn’t dare ask him a single thing despite the curiosity monster growing inside of me.

And it was a damn miracle I didn’t throw up in the van on our way back to the Academy.

IT WAS a damn miracle I didn’t throw up when I opened the door to the Arena, either. It was two minutes to six p.m., and Artemis wasn’t alone. Carmine and Cavnice were talking to her, while Novak was a few feet to their side, talking to Shade.

I had to fist my hands tightly until my palms hurt because the urge to run and jump in his arms took my breath away.

He was here. Shade was here, alive and well and looking just as good as always. Just as perfect, with his face clean and his eyes dark and his hair combed back, wearing a dark grey sweatshirt that made him look even more like the shadows he commanded with such ease.

Fuck, I loved that guy so much it was unfair.

And the way he smiled at me when our eyes met—a *barely-there* smile—made my heart trip all over itself.

“Sera, glad you joined us. Come in,” Arti said, her smile as wide as ever since the day I told her that I was going to get endowed before I graduated.

“Where were you, Sinclair?” Carmine demanded, not as friendly as Arti toward me. She even flinched when Oreo, who’d been lying near the benches next to Mors, trotted toward me with all her tongues hanging out.

“In the city,” I said, for a second considering Max hadn’t told her we were leaving, but...

“Yes, I know—but why are you late? You should have returned at five,” she said. “I told Maxim that.”

“Yes, well, we made one last stop. He wanted to see his dad,” I said, seeing no harm in telling her about it. After all, Alan was her brother.

Shade stepped to my other side while Oreo sniffed the sole of my boots and my knees and my thigh at the same time—all heads had their noses pressed to me, analyzing me. Shade’s hand slipped into mine and it was all I could do not to just lean into him for a second. He was *life*. He was energy, and I desperately needed a boost right now, especially since I’d seen him at the battlefield today.

“Alan Roux, right?” Artemis said, and it was like a stab to my gut. I squeezed Shade’s hand tightly.

“Yes—my brother,” Carmine said, her voice just as ice-cold.

“Didn’t he lose his mind?” said Arti, and I looked at Carmine just in time to see her become ten shades paler than usual.

“He didn’t *lose* his mind,” she said carefully, slowly, no bite in her voice like usual. That’s because she was talking to a goddess. “Something was done to him. I just don’t know what.”

Oh, God...

My stomach turned and turned a million more times. *He brought me back from the dead*, I thought, and Shade, as if he could read my damn mind, squeezed my fingers.

“Remind me again why you can’t undo it?” Artemis asked, like they’d talked about this before, but she’d forgotten the details.

“Because it is most likely a spell that’s taken root in his mind, has merged with it. It would take finding the person responsible to reverse it,” Carmine said.

“Well, that is rather unfortunate,” said the goddess.

Carmine straightened her shoulders with a small smile that wasn’t a smile at all but made her look exactly like the lioness that hid behind that face. “Oh, not to worry. I will find them eventually. And I will make them pay.”

The lump in my throat was the size of a tennis ball. I turned to look at Shade, terrified I’d find him thinking the same thing I was thinking, which was that I had to tell her.

I had to tell Carmine the truth—she looked so *torn*. How could I keep this to myself when I knew the reason why her bother had ended up in an institution? Or, at least, I *suspected*.

But Shade was definitely not thinking that. Instead, he widened his eyes at me the way I’d never seen him do before, and he squeezed my fingers so tightly it was a surprise my bones didn’t break.

He wanted me to keep my mouth shut.

It’s not fucking fair, I thought to myself, but I didn’t say a single thing.

“Anyway, Sera’s training starts now. And I’ve given you all the input I can about the program, so unless you want to sit

here and watch, I suggest all of you get back to work,” Artemis said the next second.

“Of course,” said Carmine, and for the first time since I’d met her, I heard her voice shake. “Goddess,” she said with a deep nod, which Novak and Cavnic mirrored. Then, they both smiled at me—*actual* smiles like they genuinely liked me now—before leaving.

Shade leaned closer, kissed my temple and whispered in my ear, “I have an hour. I’ll be sitting over there.”

“Okay,” I said, a bit relieved. Even though I wasn’t sure if Artemis would give me ten minutes to spend with him before he had to leave, I would rather he was here, where I could see him, than downstairs slaying monsters crawling out from the Underworld.

When the newborn goddess Artemis went to her father, she asked him to grant her one wish—to remain forever a maiden hunting through the woods, and to never have to marry. Zeus, adoring his new twin, consented, and gave her nymphs as companions so she would never be alone, and mighty hounds to hunt with.

Her father gave her all she asked for, and her life was the hunt, but she was a very pitiless goddess. Once, when a mortal accidentally saw her naked, bathing in the river, she turned him to a stag and let his fellow humans hunt him down, for no mortal should see Artemis bathing and live to tell the tale.

—**Book of Creation, Volume IV, 1st Edition, 169**

by Emilia Marvos, House Emerald

ARTEMIS DIDN'T DISMISS me sooner, but the second training was over, she immediately went for her jacket. "You're getting better. Here, drink this," she told me, throwing me one of those tiny vials with the clear liquid inside.

Even though it tasted awful—literally like dirt—I had come to *love* that potion for how well it numbed the pain in my body.

Then, without another look at Shade, she walked out with Mors in tow.

Meanwhile Shade was sitting on the mats, barely a foot away from Oreo. He'd gone to sit near where she was lying since the beginning, and at first she'd moved far away, to Mors's other side. But as the minutes passed, Oreo had slowly gone closer and closer to him until they were almost touching now.

And Shade did nothing, didn't talk to her, didn't try to pet her, only looked at her sometimes and smiled.

"She likes you," I said when Artemis closed the doors behind her. "And you're *late!*"

Dragging my feet to them, I opened the potion and drank it in one swig. Disgusting, yes, but totally worth it.

"I'm not worried. They won't be firing me anytime soon," Shade said with a mischievous grin. "And I wouldn't go so far as to say she *likes* me yet, but she's definitely not afraid of me anymore."

"Yeah, I think she likes you. Can't really blame her," I muttered, kissing his lips while he held my face in his hands. "Don't touch me. I'm sweaty."

I really was—Artemis did know how to work me an inch to my death from exhaustion.

"I happen to like you sweaty," Shade said, pulling my bottom lip between his teeth. "I just wanted to give you a kiss before I left. I won't back tonight, either. We're having a lot more flocks than usual downstairs."

Ugh. Every hair on my body stood at attention. "I saw you fighting yesterday."

"I know. I saw you fighting, too," he said, nodding to the side. "You've gotten so much better, indeed. The goddess was the best choice for you."

“I can even shoot arrows. Go figure,” I mumbled, just to hear him chuckling. It was my favorite sound in the world. “I also went with Max to see his dad today. For real. And fuck, Shade, I feel *awful*.” Squeezing my eyes shut, I held onto him tightly when he hugged me to his chest.

“You shouldn’t. None of this is your doing, Snowflake. You shouldn’t feel bad about anybody’s choices,” he said, kissing my head.

“I should have told them. I should have told Carmine—God, she thinks someone spelled him!” And I felt despicable for not telling her the truth already.

“No,” Shade said without missing a beat.

“Yes, Shade. I have to.” I sighed. “You should have just let me tell her today. It would have been easier, right?” Artemis had been there, too. It would have felt great to just come clean about it once and for all. And they’d probably know what to do about this better than I ever would.

But Shade leaned back to look at my face. “No, Snowflake. You can’t tell anyone. Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“She *will* hurt you. She’s dedicated her life to trying to heal her brother and finding the person responsible for his condition. I know Carmine. She *will* hurt you, will do whatever it takes if she finds out.” He sounded so sure of his every word, it was impossible not to believe him.

I pressed my forehead to his chest. “I almost told them earlier. *Almost*.” If he hadn’t looked at me like that, hadn’t squeezed my fingers, I would have definitely caved.

“I know. I’m glad you didn’t.”

“You don’t have to save me all the time, you know,” I teased.

But Shade said, “I wasn’t saving *you*. I was saving *them*.”

I sat back. “You wouldn’t dare.” Was he insane? Carmine was extremely powerful—he just said that he knew her, and he knew *that* better than me.

“No—I wouldn’t *hesitate*,” Shade said instead, and my God, he meant it.

“Shade, don’t you dare attack Carmine or anyone else on my account, okay? You’ll go to jail. Worse—you could *die!*” Carmine was very well someone who could kill. Who *would* kill.

“Jail and death don’t bother me. If someone ever thinks about attacking you for whatever reason, I will stop them.” He said it simply. There wasn’t an ounce of doubt in his voice. *Silly Elysean.*

“They’ll *kill* you! This is not like Ursula Gilis. It’s Carmine—she’s the goddamn headmistress.”

But the asshole grinned, and he could have been the devil himself. “She can certainly try.”

“If anybody hurts you because of me, I’m going do something stupid,” I warned him.

“Nobody can hurt me, baby.” He brought his lips to mine, kissing me slowly. “Nobody that isn’t you.”

My poor heart.

I sighed, already surrendered.

“Stay.”

I wanted him to stay, to keep kissing me, keep arguing with me about everything and anything—I didn't care what. Just stay and come with me to my room and lie down and do everything that we did when we were together. I wanted all of it, the whole package.

"I can't," Shade said. "I wish I could, but I have to go."

"I know, I know," I said reluctantly and kissed him another five times before I let go, and we stood up.

"You'll keep her safe, won't you?" Shade said, and he was looking at Oreo, who was sitting on her hind legs, all her heads up as she watched us making out.

She barked, all three heads at once. That was most definitely a positive.

I laughed. "Yes, I think she definitely likes you."

"That's a good hound," he told her, without smiling or even leaning over to try to touch her at all—and her tail began to waggle instantly.

I could hardly believe my eyes.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Snowflake. Try to rest. Keep your mind locked," Shade said as he went.

"I will. Kill 'em dead," I said, waving at him, not even considering telling him how my nights looked like when he wasn't there. How easily I lost control of the locks I put on my mind and how fast the sound of that robot reached me... *goodbye, mortals. Goodbye, mortals. Goodbye, mortals*—ugh. Even now that I was awake, the thought of it raised my flesh in goose bumps.

But I smiled for Shade until I couldn't see him anymore, then sat on the floor with a sigh.

Oreo came to lie on my lap immediately, and it was like therapy to pet her, to scratch her heads the way she liked.

“*Good hound,*” I teased, and she barked again while I laughed. She liked Shade, and I don’t know why the hell that made me so damn giddy.

I just knew that all these secrets were going to come down on my head one day, and I prayed to any god who listened that I was strong enough to handle it.

ETHAN HAD WOKEN UP.

I found Max waiting by my door to give me the news, and it was both the best and the worst feeling in the world at the same time. I was so relieved I could fly, and I also wanted to crawl right out of my skin because I had to talk to him. I had to look him in the eye, and I had to talk to him, but not only that. I had to *decide* how things were going to play out for us at the end of it, too.

I didn’t even change into my sweatsuit or something more comfortable. I only took my vest off and I went with Max straight for the infirmary. The hallways were deserted still—classes didn’t start for another three days—and even though Max and Oreo were with me, I was still wary about walking around the Arges at night since Marie’s death.

But when we entered the waiting room, I found Althea, the healer, sitting with Carmine on the same chairs I’d been sitting on once while I waited for Shade to wake up that day. Across from them, the glass box full of snakes was still there, mounted on the wall, and they all seemed to turn their eyes on me at the same time, like they knew I was here now, and they

knew I was terrified of them, so they followed my every step while I pretended I didn't notice.

"You asked to speak to him when he woke up," Carmine said as she slowly stood up, her gorgeous grey dress floating around her legs as she moved. "And the goddess has made it clear that you should get your way, Sinclair."

It cost her to say those words. It cost her to look down at me right now and to tell me that she *couldn't* stop me from doing what I wanted—for once—even if she tried.

"Thank you, Headmistress. I'll just be a minute," I said with a nod, even though a small part of me would have loved to rub it in her face. Just grin or wink at her or something, show her that I knew.

But that would be plain cruel. Neither of us had chosen this.

"C'mon this way, Sera," Althea said, showing me toward the door.

I'd never spoken to her before, but I had seen her. She had gorgeous red hair, almost as red as the rubies on her necklace, two of them on either side of the golden chain, one on her chest, one against her back. I'd never seen a stranger piece of jewelry before. Her wide green eyes were kind, and her smile was genuine enough. She wasn't old, possibly younger than Carmine, but she did give me that grandmotherly vibe, almost like Eeda had—especially when she looked at Oreo silently coming behind me.

"He's a bit out of it at times. I kept him under on purpose until I extracted all the magic from his body," she explained, barely glancing at me, her attention on the hellhound still. I didn't mind one bit.

I turned and waved at Max, hoping he'd wait for me until I came out. He must have seen the question in my eyes because he pointed at the chairs to say that he would.

“What exactly has been done to him? Shade told me his mind has been tampered with by a confusion spell.”

“Correct, yes,” the healer said, leading us into the room I'd woken up in just over a week ago. The same place where I'd learned the biggest secret Elyseans kept from the world. Where I'd met a goddess for the first time. “I suspect he either ate or drank a potion that gave the caster easy access to his mind. Forbidden magic. Dangerous magic, but not irreversible,” Althea whispered now as she led us toward the bed at the end of the infirmary. Ethan was lying on it, his eyes on me.

My heart skipped a million beats.

It was dark in the room this time. All those large windows were hidden behind thick dark-red drapes, and only the small golden lamps on the nightstands by each bed were on. Shadows played with my vision as I went closer, or maybe it was just my mind. Just the memory of that night, of the cave under the Arges, of Ethan wearing that white hood and coming up behind me...

“He's all himself now. Please don't take longer than five minutes. He still needs his rest,” Althea said when we were still a few feet away from Ethan's bed.

With a smile and a wave at Oreo, she turned around and left.

For a long moment, I didn't move at all, just stood there and watched him.

Awake. Ethan was wide awake, pale as the white sheets he lay on. I hadn't killed him. I'd stabbed him right in the chest, but I hadn't killed him.

Tears pricked the back of my eyes. The door clicked closed behind me, and we were all alone in the big room.

I moved.

Slowly, I approached his bed and sat on one of the two chairs next to it, just for a second to catch my breath because my knees were shaking. The following minute stretched to an eternity, and I could hear my heart beating like a drum in my ears. *Breathe*, I reminded myself. *Just breathe.*

"How...how are you feeling?" I asked, and by some miracle, my voice worked. It was dry and it was small, but it worked.

Ethan heard me and he flinched. "Are you here to finish me off?"

I almost choked on my own spit. "What? No, of course not." Even if he hadn't been spelled at all, I'd have never attacked him first, let alone while he was in the damn infirmary.

"I tried to kill you," Ethan said, his wide eyes glistening with unshed tears.

God, he looked awful. I had no idea how Althea had kept him alive without food for over a week, and without the meredines to maintain his skin, he looked so...*ordinary*. His hair had grown, now more dark than the bleached yellow. I hated myself that it even occurred to me, but he looked so *mortal*, and I'd had no idea the difference would be so obvious. I'd had no idea how used I was to Elyseans, to this new life here.

“You were spelled,” I said, digging my fingers into my thighs until it hurt.

“And you believe that?” Ethan said, raising his brows.

“Well, I—” But he didn’t even let me speak.

“I’ve been against you since day one, remember? I made a point of picking on you because, if everyone started to pick on the godless bitch, nobody would think to pick on *me*, right? Nobody was going to think I was weak. I called you names since day one. I turned all the other candidates against you at the Palace. But you’re going to believe that I was *spelled* when I almost killed you?” he said without ever stopping to catch his breath, like the words had been waiting at the tip of his tongue for ages now and he couldn’t wait to spit them out.

Tears slipped from my eyes, but I didn’t really care at that point.

Everything he said hurt. It cut me wide open. It was useless to claim otherwise, to pretend I didn’t care—I did. I had every day since I was forced into the Palace.

“Teenagers are mean. We’re *teenagers*,” I said because what was the point of holding that against him now? “Besides, you were competing for their favor. I was trying to get away with everything I did. We weren’t exactly on the same page.”

“But you never tried to kill me,” Ethan said.

“Except that one time.” I looked down at his chest, but he was wearing one of those white nightgowns that covered him up to the neck. If he had a wound there—or bandages—I didn’t see it.

“Right after I tried to kill *you*,” he said, looking down at his own body, fisting his hands then releasing them again as if

he was surprised to find he could do that. “This place...this fucking place...”

“Brings out the worst in you if you let it,” I finished for him.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” he said, shaking his head, tears sliding down his cheeks. “I *wasn’t* thinking. I remember all of it, but it’s very blurry. I knew just where to go in that cave to find the robe and the dagger. I knew exactly where *you* were, too. And then...and then...”

“It’s fine, Ethan,” I said because the way he was fisting the sheets showed me exactly how it felt to remember all of that. But Ethan kept on going.

“Then I was moving. I was watching you, and you were all alone, without your friends, and I was moving. I was supposed to swing my arm as hard as I could, and I panicked at the last second. I *tried* to stop it, but I couldn’t.” His eyes squeezed shut. His fists turned completely white. “I-I-I stabbed you.”

He had. Except the leather of the vest Shade had made for me hadn’t let the blade penetrate deep enough to kill me.

The vest—and Ethan’s attempt at controlling his body.

I don’t know why that made such a huge difference for me, but it did. It absolutely did.

“Then you turned, and you...and there was pain,” he said, raising his hand toward his chest, but never touching it.

“Yet they still didn’t win,” I said, forcing myself to laugh as I cried. “We’re both still here. They lost.” And that was more satisfying than even hitting the dummy targets with an arrow in the Arena.

“They’re dangerous,” Ethan whispered.

“So are we.” We were more dangerous than I could have ever imagined. We were the reason they were still here. Yes, they fought with us, but without godlight, none of them would have had a chance at stopping the daemons for all these centuries.

“Is this...is this a joke?” Ethan then said. “Are you trying to get me to believe that you’re not mad so you can take me by surprise when you kill me?”

“Oh, I’m mad! I’m so mad I can’t see straight,” I said, finally standing up. Finally wiping my wet cheeks because I saw what I came here to see. I saw the remorse in his eyes, the way his hands shook when he wasn’t fisting the sheets. I saw that he’d *tried* to stop it.

And call it instinct, call it whatever, but I knew that Ethan Moore would never willingly try to kill me, even if he hated my guts.

“But we’re in a den of monsters here, Ethan.” That’s what Shade had told me once. “If we let them, they’ll break us. But if we stand together, there just might be a chance for us after all.”

He looked up at me like I suddenly turned green.

“So...so what happens now?” he asked, so confused you’d think I put a spell on him, too.

“Now I have one question for you, and I hope for your sake that you don’t try to lie to me,” I said. “Did you kill Marie, Ethan?”

The way his eyes widened and he basically jumped in place was definitely a good sign.

“No. I’ve never killed anyone in my life. I’ve never attacked anyone, either—I swear, I didn’t kill Marie. They

only wanted me to kill *you*, nobody else.”

I could be mistaken, but I was willing to bet a limb that he meant every word.

A fresh wave of tears wanted to spill right out of me, but I bit my tongue and kept my smile on. He hadn’t killed Marie. They had yet to make any of us into murderers.

“How? How do you know what they wanted? Did you see any of them?”

“Dreams,” Ethan said, shaking his head. “He pulled me into the Dream realm alone a few times. They were the same as always with the robes and the masks and the robot. I didn’t see any of their faces.”

That’s what I’d thought, too.

“In that case, now you’ll be punished for trying to kill me. Then you’ll get back to class. You’ll graduate. And after that, well...how much do you remember about what happened in the Vault?”

“They told me,” Ethan said, his eyes wide and dark, full of fear as he looked up at me. “I remember some things, but the headmistress told me the whole truth earlier. About the...about the monsters.”

Great. Nick had seen, and now Ethan knew, too. We all did.

I nodded. “Then you can decide for yourself what you’ll do after you graduate.”

The second of silence that followed seemed to fill the air with tension.

“Are you...are you serious?” Ethan finally whispered.

“Dead serious. A word of advice, though? I am not the girl I used to be at the Palace or when we first started this Academy. Don’t try to call me names or sneak up behind my back again, Ethan. I might be forgiving, but I have a little pup who’ll eat you if you come near me,” I said. “Not to mention Shade, whom you will most probably be talking to, too.”

Ethan flinched, leaning back on the pillow, even more scared than before. “It wasn’t me, I swear. Just...just tell him it wasn’t me, okay?”

“Tell him yourself,” I said and turned to leave, surprised to see that Oreo wasn’t there with me. Strange—she had been when we came in here, hadn’t she? Where was she now?

My question was answered when I finally opened the door and found her with her two front paws on the wall below the box of snakes, looking up at them as her tail moved to the sides so fast it was a blur.

“Look at her,” Althea said when I closed the door behind me, hands to her chest as she looked at Oreo, eyes glistening like she was about to burst into tears any second. “So *cute!* I’ve never seen such beauty before...” I could have sworn Carmine, who was sitting next to her, rolled her eyes. “I wonder how old she is. Has she told you yet?”

I shook my head, not really sure what she even meant. “No idea,” I said, and Max was suddenly in front of me while Carmine somehow managed to *look down* at me, even though she was sitting.

“So? Did you kill him?” Max asked.

“Yes, of course. He’s on the bed choking on his own blood as we speak.”

To see how fast Althea's smile dropped and she shot for the infirmary was almost hilarious.

"She's joking," Max told her, but she still ran in, panicked. "She's just joking—he's fine!"

"Oreo, come on," I said, patting my thigh. I had no idea when I'd decided that that mean *come closer*, but she understood. She was indeed a good doggie because she instantly came to stand next to my feet, even though all her heads were turned to the snakes still.

I stopped in front of Carmine, who did her best to pretend Oreo didn't scare her. "What's going to happen to him now?"

And she arched a perfect brow. "That's up to *you*, I'm afraid. You can press charges against him and have him convicted. Or you can request he gets taken back to the mortal world—you have plenty of witnesses. The law is in your favor."

I nodded. "In that case, punish him as you see fit until school starts. Then, he'll go back to class as usual."

She stood up slowly to face me, just as Althea came back out of the infirmary.

"Oh, you got me! You got me there, I'll admit!" she said, laughing.

"Sorry—I was just teasing Max," I said with a smile.

She looked incredibly relieved. "Good one. Good one, indeed..."

"Are you certain about that, Sinclair?" Carmine asked me, ignoring Althea completely.

"Yes, I am."

“Moore is susceptible to mind spells. You know this now. And the Soters are still here somewhere,” she reminded me, as if to say that there was a chance he could do it again. There was a chance Ethan could be spelled again and then try to kill me a second time.

“Don’t you worry about that, Headmistress. I already have a plan.” I just needed to find Artemis and talk to her about it. “He’s mortal. I have a feeling he has very strong godlight inside of him. You know better than me that that’s what this place needs.” Just in case we didn’t make it when we went into that portal.

Because we would. There was no doubt left in my mind now—we absolutely would.

For a moment, Carmine was caught so off guard that her mask slipped, and she forgot to pretend she was irritated and disgusted with me.

“It is,” she finally breathed.

“So, punish him and then let him get back to class. We’re both gonna be just fine.”

With Max on one side and Oreo on the other, I left the waiting room feeling better than I had since that night in the cave.

“That was badass, mortal,” Max whispered when we slipped out the door.

“Thanks, Elysean. I just have one more stop, and then we can find Mave and we can play cards in the library until dawn if you want.”

The way the brightness in his eyes turned up you’d think I just promised him the whole world. God, he was hopeless.

“In that case, lead the way,” Max said, and he didn’t once complain about Oreo walking with us all the way down to the main hallway.

I DIDN’T FIND Artemis in the Arena, or the Caprae Hall, or in any of the other halls or classrooms where I thought she might be.

Finally, Max suggested we check out the courtyard, and sure enough, I found Mors lying on the stairs of the temple.

The building was huge—the tip of it almost reached the tip of the mountain at its back—and of course, it was white. Students and professors spent a lot of time in there worshipping the gods, so it made perfect sense that that place would appeal to a goddess.

“I’ll go get Mave. We’ll wait for you right inside, okay?” Max said.

“Yeah, sure. Go ahead.”

“Don’t go to the library alone,” he warned, making me roll my eyes.

“I am *not* alone, Max. Just go! I’ll be fine,” I said, laughing when he flinched at the sight of Oreo standing beside me.

“She looks pretty harmless,” he muttered.

“Wanna find out what she can do?” I asked, and Oreo most definitely understood *everything* we said because all three of her heads gave a sharp bark at the same time, which made Max jump in place.

He walked away as fast as possible without it being considered *running*.

“You scare him shitless,” I told Oreo with a grin, and she took that as a compliment by the way she raised her heads and walked proudly.

Mors was alert now, too, and watched us curiously as we approached the temple. I’d been in there only once before—when I’d sacrificed the strawberry syrup I’d won from Mave in a game of cards, to pray that Shade made it back in one piece.

I’d never given it much thought, but he had. Not that I was insinuating that he had because of my sacrifice or prayer, but *he had* come back to me.

“Hey there, Mors,” I said as I stepped up the stairs, and Oreo went to greet him, too—licking the nose of his middle head while he growled in irritation. If she cared, she didn’t show it. Instead, she lay down next to him on the stair and looked up at me as if to say she’d be waiting right there, too.

My stomach did a flip at the sight of those faces. How was it possible that I *loved* her so much already when I’d met her just days ago?

Damn. This place really did mess with me more than I could have ever imagined.

Just like I suspected, Artemis was inside the temple, sitting on the marble leg of Hera, whose statue was at the head of the room on a throne alongside Zeus, while the other Olympians sat around them. Once again, the incredible artwork, every line and every curve of the marble took my breath away. I had to give it to them—Elyseans knew how to create art out of marble and pencil lead and even robots better than anyone else in the world.

“Why aren’t you in bed yet, mortal?” Artemis said without ever raising her head from the book she was reading. It was such a strange view, but beautiful nonetheless. A small fire burned in the hearth in front of the feet of Zeus and Hera, and the golden lanterns on the walls cast a dim orange light, too. Artemis wore only a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and her brown leather pants, her hair done into a gorgeous thick braid that fell on her shoulder and reached all the way to her lap. She had her knees up as she leaned back on the marble, on the curve of Hera’s ankle—a goddess reading in a temple. I itched to immortalize this view with a picture more than ever before. If I’d had a phone with me, I would have.

“I wanted to talk to you for a second,” I said, going deeper into the temple, trying not to let the lifeless eyes of the statues intimidate me.

“Well, come on in, then. Tell me what’s on your mind,” she said and finally put the book down.

To see her in this lighting, with the flames dancing nearby and the lanterns all around us, she seemed even more otherworldly than usual. Her eyes were slightly bigger and those lips smoother. Like the colors that made her were different from the colors that made everything else. She looked almost *animated*, and I didn’t want to even blink and waste a single second of seeing her face.

Then she smiled. My knees damn near gave up on me.

“Sorry about that,” she said, and closing her eyes for one second, she let go of a long breath and the air heated up instantly. I knew what it was—magic. That’s what magic felt like, like heat and pressure, different from anything else out there.

And when Artemis opened her eyes, she looked like *her* again. The version of her I'd seen since I met her. Still superior to every other being I'd laid eyes on, but *her*.

"I let go sometimes when I'm alone. I let some of the shields of my divinity drop," she said with a smile.

"You...you do that all the time?" I had never noticed that she *shielded her divinity* before.

My God, she looked like *that* without shields—or even *better*?

"Yep. It doesn't cost me much energy, but it is a nuisance."

"So why bother?"

She raised her brows at me. "If you saw my true form, mortal, you wouldn't be able to look away. You would lose your mind completely. It has happened before. No mortal—or Elysean for that matter—can see a god for what they truly are. Your minds could never handle it."

With a sigh, I went and sat near her, between Zeus's feet. "Well, damn. I'm glad you keep your shields up all the time then."

"Yep. So, what is it? What are you here for? I'm a little busy," she told me, looking down at the book by her side. It was a novel—a fantasy novel, no less.

"That's what you read?" I said, meaning to tease her.

"Nobody writes a better story than mortals," she told me. "Their imagination never ceases to amaze me. They have no limits whatsoever."

"That's true," I said with a nod. "It's been a while since I've read anything for fun."

“You should. Stories are food for the soul.” I believed that wholeheartedly.

“I will. Ethan is up,” I said reluctantly, part of me still unsure whether I wanted to do this *now*. Part of me still terrified that I was making the wrong choice.

“I heard,” Arti said. “And?”

“I talked to him. He was spelled. He didn’t really mean to try to kill me,” I said. “And I told Carmine to give him some kind of a punishment, then let him get back to class.”

“That’s awfully generous of you,” she said, not exactly impressed.

“The thing is, the people who spelled him the first time are still out there. They can still get to him.” And I couldn’t stop them. I was still vulnerable myself, still unable to shut them out of my head completely when I slept. Not when I wasn’t in Shade’s Void.

“Then he should learn to better defend himself,” was what Arti said.

“Except *he can’t*. We’re mortals. We can’t do magic. You really need me to remind you of that?”

“I really need you to get to your point, Sera.” She was most definitely running out of patience.

“My point is that if you find the Soters and stop them from messing with the boys’ minds, from spelling them and infiltrating their dreams, then I’ll do it. I’ll get endowed before school starts, Arti. Any time you want.”

The words left my mouth in a rush, as if I was afraid myself that I might keep them on the inside and never spit them out. It was the right thing to do. I knew in my heart that it

was, but I wished Shade was here to just *be here* while I talked to Arti. I wished I wasn't such a coward and I wished I'd just told him all about it the very night I made this decision.

Arti immediately sat up straighter on the statue. She no longer looked irritated or bored—instead she was perfectly alert as she analyzed me.

“They have no means to defend themselves against magic,” I continued because she refused to say anything for the longest moment. If she said *no*, I had no clue what I was going to do, no other way of making sure the Soters couldn't get to Ethan again—or even Nick this time. Marie was already dead. I refused to see another dead body on the marble floor no matter what. “They're *mortal*,” I said, a bit more desperate now. “They—”

“Deal.”

I looked up, every hair on my body standing at attention.

“Deal?” Had she really spoken or was that just my imagination?

Slowly, Arti's lips curled up into a wide smile. “Deal,” she told me. “I'll lock yours minds up, make you all immune to spells and charms and potions. Immune to any kind of play, even for dream weavers.”

“Yes, that's exactly it,” I said, sitting up straighter myself.

Arti downright grinned, and she looked fucking *scary* with the shadows cast by the flames to our side moving on her face.

“And you're getting endowed tomorrow night.”

My stomach twisted and turned. “*Tomorrow?*” Was she serious?

“Yep. Tomorrow night. You’re ready, Sera.” She said it like she knew it for a fact.

My mouth opened and closed about a million times. “But...it’s too soon.” Wasn’t it? Fuck, I couldn’t even think straight because one part of me was terrified, my instincts warning me to *abort mission now!* while the other part of me, the *bigger* part, was so excited it made me sick.

“It really isn’t. The more time you have to train your magic, the stronger you’ll be. It’s not too soon,” Arti said, just as certain of every word that came out of her lips as ever. And I believed her.

Not only that, but every inch of my skin rose in goose bumps at the mere idea...

Since when was I excited to *have magic*? Since when had I forgotten everything I was, everything I knew and where I came from, and became *okay* with being one of them?!

Since I learned the truth, a voice whispered in my ear. *Since I learned the truth and saw it with my own eyes how Alan Roux saved my life.*

“It’s good to have you fully on board, Sera,” Arti said with a relieved sigh and offered me her hand.

Yes, now I knew the truth. The whole truth, which I’d agreed to come to this very place to find. And that is why, despite the different emotions wreaking havoc inside my mind, I shook Arti’s hand.

That is why, when I went back into the Arges with Oreo in tow and found Max and Mave waiting for me just like he promised, I was calm.

“What the hell happened? What did she say?” Max said, analyzing my face. I wasn’t sure what he saw there, but I

shook my head anyway.

“Nothing,” I said. “I’m just getting endowed tomorrow night.”

There was no fear in my voice. There was no doubt, no second thoughts, no regrets. I sounded sure despite the fear coursing in my veins. I sounded *ready*.

Max and Mave were shocked out of words for a long second, and even Oreo seemed to be surprised as she looked up at me from the floor. I don’t know why I smiled—because of their reaction or because of the thought that took over my mind and spread all over me like heat from the sun, warming me to my bones.

By this time tomorrow, I was going to be endowed.

By this time tomorrow, I was going to have *magic*.

I5

“The best gift you can give to yourself is hard work.

Most no longer recognize it. They conveniently mistake it for talent, because it’s easier to say, *‘I could never do what he is doing; he has talent!’* than to put in the work.”

—Moirai: *The Great Fates*, 230

by G. T. Vessinger, *House Sapphire*

I ASKED Arti to take me downstairs to see Shade after archery. I wanted to see if I could talk to him for a minute, if I could maybe pull him aside and tell him that I was going to do it tonight. Ask him if he could come see me. It would be easier if he was there.

Fifteen minutes later, I was standing on the platform of the second level with Oreo, watching Shade and his team together with another fight the three flocks of daemons that had come out five minutes ago. I watched, holding onto the railing tightly while Artemis went God knew where, and I kept my eyes on Shade as the crowd around me cheered. There were fewer of them here than there had been last time. I couldn’t see Avery anywhere, and I could have sworn the guy with the emerald around his neck down at the battlefield fighting together with Shade was Arthur O’Brien.

Shade hadn't seen me yet. He was too busy fighting those monsters, which seemed to be even more violent than they had been the last two times I'd been here. They jumped higher than normal and were faster and more vicious...but then again, maybe it was just me. Maybe it was the fact that the others on the platform all watched me through the corners of their eyes, when I just wanted to stand here and watch Shade fighting for his life, for the whole world, in peace. Was that too much to ask?

Minutes passed, and despite Arthur and another guy on the battlefield flashing their godlight twice, another new flock was already climbing out like fucking insects. The darkness that slipped from the edges of the Well looked more alive than ever to my eyes, too. And Shade hadn't put his sword down once.

Worse yet, the crowd of people on the platform wasn't cheering like usual, either, and I took that to mean something bad. Fuck, it was all I could do not to jump down there myself and just do something. Do *anything* other than stay here and watch.

I hated it. I hated not being able to help. And what if Shade got hurt?

"You look stressed."

I jumped, almost screamed my guts out when I noticed someone was standing on my other side barely two feet away near the railing, and I hadn't even heard her approaching.

"Oh, God," I choked, fisting my hands to try to get my heartbeat under control faster. "I was—" I met her eyes and the words died on my lips.

Holy shit, it was Beatrix Hob.

“I’m Beatrix. It’s good to meet you, Sera,” she said, never offering me her hand or even a smile. Instead, she turned to the battlefield again as I stared at her profile for a couple more seconds, still speechless.

How many times had I seen her picture around the city since Gary took me in? How many times had I judged her, *despised* her, sure she thought of herself as *better* than the rest of us because of what she had become?

When the reality was that *she was*. She was better than most people in the world because she’d chosen to stay here and fight every day instead of living a normal *Elysean* life in the city after her mandatory four-year service.

“Why did you stay?”

The words slipped out of me before I had the chance to even think clearly. I was just so curious—what made these people stay here when they saw *this*? When they saw those monsters, what they were capable of. When they knew the battle was literally never-ending.

Beatrix arched a brow. “Do you take your truths raw or sugarcoated?”

“Raw,” I said without missing a beat.

The corners of her lips turned up slightly. “Because I was tricked here with the pretense of a better life, a more *fulfilling* destiny. Then, they showed me the monsters, and they showed me what *I* could do against them. Basically took my life and owned it because I could never live out there again knowing how big a difference I make here. Not only that, but do you have any idea what it’s like out there in the city for us? They treat us worse than scum. You technically have no choice but to live here forever, where at least these people regard you as a

hero, not a waste of space,” Beatrix Hob said without ever stopping to take a breath.

“Fuck.” Again, the word slipped from me.

And I wanted to say, *how dare they*. I wanted to say, *that wasn't fair!*

But how could I when I was Sera Sinclair, possibly the only mortal in the world who'd hated Elyseans, had truly believed that they were capable of awful things long before the trials even began?

“Yeah, *fuck's* about right,” she said with a nod.

“They're even worse than I thought.” And I'd already believed that they were *the worst* my whole life.

“They're bigger monsters than those things coming out of the Well.”

“Oh, I know. I was even forced into their trials. I never wanted to be part of this.”

“But here you are anyway,” she said, and for the first time in my existence, it felt like I wasn't all alone in the universe, not the only mortal who *saw* past the perfect faces of Elyseans.

“Well, I was kind of tricked here, too.” I was tricked by the goddess herself, when she thought I was going to change my mind about going with her into the Well. She'd brought me here so I could watch Shade fighting. She'd raised the stakes for me all the way, just like that.

“That's their game. It's how they play. They've gotten very good at it through the years,” Beatrix whispered. “Everything they do, Sera—” She turned to look at me. “*Everything* is planned. Nothing is an accident with these people.”

“Sometimes it really feels like it.”

Was my drinking from the river of memories in the trial planned, too? I couldn't see how. I couldn't see how any of them would know what I remembered or what had happened that night thirteen years ago. I couldn't see Carmine not killing me with her own hands until now if she'd seen, too. If she knew...

I couldn't see how, but I did wonder.

"There. Last one down," Beatrix said, just as a blinding bright light made me close my eyes tightly.

She was absolutely right. The last of the daemons were gone, and the sentinels were already returning to the tents.

I kept my eyes on Shade, hoping he'd look up, hoping he'd see me there, but he didn't. He had someone by the arm—I thought it was Liam, holding onto Shade's shoulders as he limped his way to the tents.

"That was...intense," I breathed, shaking my head, finally loosening my grip on the railing. Fuck, it was worse than intense. It was *insanity*. And my hands were hurting like hell.

"I heard about you and Shade," she said, and I met her eyes, sure that I knew what she was going to say next, but... "I can imagine what people must tell you about him."

I laughed coldly. "Oh, they have a lot to say about Shade." Everybody had something to say about Shade.

"Don't listen to them. In my experience? He's the most honorable Elysean in Idaea," she whispered, taking me off guard once more.

I looked at her again, really looked at her—at her flawless skin and the bags under her brown eyes that were just there, at the messy bun on the top of her head tied with black leather.

Her uniform was blue, though, and the sapphire was sewn to her jacket right over her heart.

“Are you part of the game, too, Beatrix?” Had she been sent by them—Arti or Carmine or whoever—to try to convince me of something? Which made no sense—I was already convinced. Not because of *them* but because of those monsters that I could see with my own eyes. These monsters that made a bloody mess out of Shade every time he came down here.

But Beatrix smiled. “I think you’ll be just fine, Sera,” she whispered, then turned around so fast I barely saw it.

“Goddess Artemis,” she said with a deep curtsy, when I hadn’t even noticed that Arti was on her way to us together with Hector.

She didn’t pay any attention to Beatrix as she approached us, and the sentinel gave me a quick wink before she moved away, to the side and toward the glass walls deeper into the mountain.

“Did I miss the good part?” Arti said, looking out at the empty battlefield with a frown on her face.

“Sera, it’s so good to see you again. You grow more beautiful every day,” Hector said, and I flinched. But when I did, Oreo growled at him and snapped all her teeth at his legs, too, so he didn’t see it.

It was all I could do not to laugh when he jumped back.

“Easy, Cerberus,” he said, raising his hands in surrender.

“She doesn’t like strangers.” I turned to the battlefield again. “Is there any chance I can get down there and talk to Shade?”

“No, it’s too dangerous,” Arti said. “This is the best we can do.”

I knew that, and I knew that even if she let me go, Shade would be furious. And I did see him fighting again, when another flock of daemons crawled out of the hole a few minutes later. He saw me when all the daemons were dead, and I liked to think he even smiled at me before he returned to the tent.

By the time I made it back to the Arges, my resolve was stronger than ever. This whole thing was fucking ridiculous—to live like this every day for the rest of one’s life? It would drive a person mad! To fight off monsters, to always be on the lookout, to never know when a new flock was coming out—it drove *me* mad just to think about it. Just to watch from afar.

And what if it happened again? What if the wards failed for any reason, and all those monsters made it out of the Academy, into the city—outside the walls, too? What could mortals do about them even if they fucking tried?

Yes, my resolve was stronger than ever. I was doing the right thing. If there was even a small chance that I could help put a stop to this madness, I would go to the edges of the world without question.



THEY DIDN’T LET Max and Mave join me for the endowment. I don’t know why, but they said it was important that I did it alone, since they weren’t going to do the usual graduation ceremony first like they did with everyone else. So even if Shade had been at the Academy, he wouldn’t have been able to be here with me, either.

I somehow still hoped he'd just pop up in front of me out of thin air. I even *expected* it because when had my thoughts ever made sense when it came to Shade?

Arti was going to do the whole thing herself, she said, just to make sure everything went right. She told me the basics of what to expect, of what to do once I drank and ate what they gave me, and how to *channel it all* in my godstone at the end. She promised the whole thing would be painless, too. I had no reason not to believe her.

Carmine, Professor Totaj, Novak and Satis would be there. I understood Carmine—she was the headmistress. And I understood Novak and Satis, too—they were both House Opal, but I had no idea why they invited Totaj when she was Emerald.

I found out soon.

I was entering the temple at nightfall, feeling like I weighed a thousand pounds, but also light as a feather at the same time. They'd lit up twice as many lanterns as last night when Arti had been here reading her book, and Satis and Novak stood on either side of the hearth, with Carmine a little to the side, wearing red lipstick that I had never seen on her before, hands folded in front of her as she watched me with curious eyes.

Then, as soon as I passed the middle of the room, Professor Totaj, who'd been standing near the statue of Demeter and I hadn't even noticed her there, stepped somewhere behind me and raised her arms to the sides.

There were statues, smaller ones, decorating the edges of the rooftop of the temple that I had never really paid much attention to. Birds and gargoyles, bats and tiny dragons—and now, as Professor Totaj whispered something under her breath,

the air charged with magic and all those statues were suddenly *alive*.

I stopped dead in my tracks and watched them flying in and out of the temple, between the god statues and through the open walls behind them, each with a green godstone shining in their bodies. They were all white, some chipped here and there, but they still looked so real somehow as they flew soundlessly with wings of fucking *marble* and watched us. Even Oreo was uncomfortable, letting out a whine as she came closer to my legs.

“It’s okay,” I whispered, looking back at Professor Totaj for a second, at the incredible green light that pulsed from the emerald around her neck. She still had her eyes closed and arms raised, and she wasn’t moving a single inch.

“Sera, if you will,” Professor Satis said with a smile on her gorgeous face, and I noticed she was holding something in her hands, too—a robe of some kind. A black robe with silver ties.

I had no idea how I made it all the way to them and stopped in front of the hearth. When I did, she stepped behind me and slowly took my coat off, before she put the heavy robe over my shoulders.

“House Opal salutes you,” she whispered near my ear, sending shivers down my back.

“Your godstone,” said Professor Novak, reaching out his hand. I immediately handed him the golden box that Ravenar had given me when he invited me to the Academy. I wasn’t supposed to see the opal inside it at all, so I reminded myself of that fact when Novak closed his hand over the glass lid and released a bit of magic—which I wasn’t supposed to feel, either. I kept my mouth shut as I watched the lid click open a second later. He then took the rectangular opal out of the box

and took my hand in his, gently placing it right in the middle of my palm.

It felt *wrong* somehow. This was exactly the same kind of a godstone that Shade had in his back, and it felt wrong to be doing this without him.

This was all so very different from what I expected. I didn't think there'd be a damn ceremony. They said I'd only have to drink and eat the Nectar and Ambrosia, not *this*.

"Arti," I breathed, wanting to run the hell away from here now as Novak closed my fingers around the godstone and said, "*Don't let go.*"

Then Arti was in front of me, her hair in a beautiful, thick braid, her dress made out of deep browns and grass greens. I hadn't even noticed how different she looked tonight because of the panic.

"I-I-I..." I stuttered, but I couldn't get the words out.

"It's okay," she told me, putting her hands on my shoulders. "Remember why you're doing this. It'll all be over very quickly." Her voice sounded like it was coming from a dream.

"No, I know," I said. "I know, just..." Shade wasn't here, and I hated that. He gave me strength, and I needed that strength right now when I was about to change my life forever.

But then... "He's the reason you're here, isn't he?" Arti whispered, and my heart jumped. "You're doing this so he doesn't have to risk his life forever, Sera. Take strength from that."

Fuck, could she read minds, or was I really so easy to figure out?

It felt like she fucking *invaded* my privacy by knowing what I was thinking so well, but I also knew that she was right. She was absolutely right—I was doing this for Shade. I was doing this for Miles and Layla and James and Max and Mave...

I was also doing this for *me*.

Behind me, Professor Totaj had begun to hum a melody I knew well—the hymn of the gods. Even though her voice was truly angelic, I couldn't find it in me to appreciate it right now.

“We're here now, Sera. It's as good as over,” Artemis said, as Satis and Novak stepped away from me and to the sides, and Carmine came closer, holding a golden cup in one hand and a golden box in the other.

“I know it's difficult to hold onto something you can't see or feel, but I need you to pay close attention to your left hand and do not open your fingers until I tell you to. Do you understand?” Arti said, taking the golden cup from Carmine's hand.

Oh God...

I can see and feel and touch the stupid godstone! I can feel it in my fist just fine! I wanted to shout, but I bit my tongue until I tasted blood instead.

Shit, I should have told them the truth. I should have just told them the whole truth...

“This will not hurt,” she reminded me. “The magic will come alive as soon as Ichor is in your system, do you understand? You'll feel a bit of heat in your stomach when you drink this.” She then brought her index finger to her teeth and bit.

She bit her own finger and a big drop of silver liquid slipped out of her broken skin—Ichor. Her veins were full of Ichor, the blood of gods, and she slipped that finger into the golden cup, then mixed the Ichor into whatever liquid was inside it.

“Here, Sera,” she said then, licking her finger clean. “Drink this, and all your dreams shall come true.” Every inch of my skin rose in goose bumps. “Drink this and become the strongest version of you to have ever existed in any timeline,” Artemis whispered. “Drink—and be godlike.”

I could have sworn someone else was in charge of my body because I wasn’t even thinking about moving, yet somehow I brought that cup to my lips. Somehow, I closed my eyes, and I drank, reminding myself of why I was here again and again. Reminding myself that this was the right choice for me.

Then the liquid was in my mouth, and it was the most disgusting thing I’d ever tasted, worse than the smell of sewers and garbage cans and the toilets in Roderick High. There wasn’t much of it, barely a sip, but it was *disastrous*, and my stomach lurched, wanting to throw it all up even before I’d fully swallowed.

But then the liquid fell inside of me like a sack of rocks, and...it wasn’t so bad.

In fact, the aftermath of the taste on my tongue was turning sweeter, and my gut was no longer twisting. There was a heat in the pit of my stomach, burning low still, but it was... *pleasant*.

The sound of foreign words being whispered somewhere close to me made me open my eyes to find Carmine with that golden box in her hand chanting. She spoke in Latin, and even

though we'd studied an aspect of that language in Linguistics for the past four months, I couldn't even begin to understand a single word she was saying.

I understood the ruby burning on the collar of her dress, though. Just as red as the lipstick she was wearing tonight. I looked at it, stared at the beautiful red light, and I could have sworn Carmine noticed.

She'd noticed me staring at her ruby before, too, but what was she going to believe—that I could actually *see* it when nobody else could?

“Now, your Ambrosia,” Carmine said, pulling open the lid of the golden box to reveal to me something that looked like a blueberry, but different. Same size, the color of it more purple than blue, and it almost looked like it was made out of glass. “Do not chew, Sinclair. Simply swallow.”

With her razor-sharp nails painted a deep red that looked almost black, she brought the berry to my mouth and I opened wide. It was weightless on my tongue.

“*Swallow,*” Arti whispered in my ear from my side.

I did.

The world exploded into colors the same second.

A scream tore from my throat when the heat inside of me that had been pleasant until now suddenly burned with the intensity of a thousand suns, scorching me from the inside, burning my flesh and blood and bones—yet somehow, my skin contained it.

“*Look at me!*” someone was shouting, and I tried to open my eyes, but fuck, it hurt too much. It *burned* so fucking much I couldn't breathe. “Sera, look at me! Open your hand!”

My hand, my left hand with the opal between my fingers that she was holding in both of hers now. Arti was kneeling in front of me—*kneeling* because my legs had let go of me. My legs let go, and the more my eyes opened, the more I saw how much I was *glowing*.

Fuck, without the leathers on me, I could see all of it, could see the light that burned under my skin, that I *felt* perfectly like it was a living thing—and it was spreading.

“*Get Althea, now!*” someone shouted—it could have been Carmine.

“Open it. Open your fingers...”

It was like trying to move a damn mountain, but I focused on my shaking hand that was glowing more by the second, and I finally managed to pry my fingers open just a little.

“Do you see it?” Artemis asked me, no longer smiling, her hair all over the place, *floating* around her like she was a damn mermaid underwater. “Focus, Sera—do you see the godstone?!”

“*Yes!*” I barely managed to say through gritted teeth. “Something’s...something’s...” *wrong*, I was going to say, but the heat kept turning up and up in my body, and it was melting me. It was fucking tearing me apart.

How in the world had I not collapsed yet?

“Use it!” Artemis told me, putting her hands on my face to make me look at her. In those moments, she must have let her shields down because she looked like that again—like an animation with her hair floating all around her head, and her eyes so clear, too clear to be real, and those lips...those teeth, sharp as fucking razors...

“Use the godstone, Sera. Channel your magic into it. *Use it!*” she ordered.

I screamed again.

With every ounce of energy in my body, I screamed, and I tried to push the magic into the godstone, just like I’d read. Just like Arti had told me to do earlier. She had promised me it wouldn’t hurt, and she was a fucking liar, but I *pushed* all that light toward my hand mentally, and for a second there, I felt a little bit of relief. Just a tiny bit.

“That’s right—keep going,” Arti said, and I’d stopped screaming, focused on the stone...

On the godstone that was pulsating with all the lights of the rainbow now, *alive* in my hand like I’d never seen an opal do before. It was *breathing*, or so it felt to me until...

It broke.

The world stopped spinning for a long second. The rectangular opal in the palm of my hand that had been shining in a million different colors just now was reduced to shimmery *dust* that was slipping between my fingers.

I looked up at Arti’s face, at her eyes that were wide, too wide for her face, and too brown, too deep, too clear. At those lips—too long, and those teeth—too sharp...

No, she was *not* like us, I realized. Not even close. She was a monster in disguise, too.

And then the suns that had been hiding under my skin exploded.

Another scream tore from my throat. My body let go of me all at once. I didn’t feel where I fell or if they caught me or if

they called my name again. I didn't want to. I just wanted this to end.

There. I tasted magic, I thought to myself. I'd had actual magic for a second there.

And if I somehow survived this, I never wanted to have anything to do with it ever again.

I6

When Apollo grew into a strong, young god, Zeus gave him a chariot and white swans, and sent him to win over the Oracle of Delphi.

Delphi was a sacred place like no other, and the Oracle, who heard Mother Earth speaking to her from the depths of the world to reveal the future nobody else knew, was guarded by an old and ill-tempered dragon named Python.

The Oracle had warned her dragon guardian that a son of Leto would be his undoing, and when he saw the mighty Apollo coming down upon him, he knew his hour had come. Still he fought bravely and did not admit defeat until Apollo shot him with a thousand silver shafts.

Thus the Oracle of Delphi now belonged to the great young god.

Apollo took many wives and had many children since, just as most gods did, but Artemis was never given to a partner, just as Zeus promised.

—**Book of Creation, Volume IV, 1st Edition, 198**

by Emilia Marvos, House Emerald

THE NIGHTMARES HAUNTED me worse than the dream weaver. So many of them, so many different times, different people, different voices—but they all told me the same thing: *do not use your magic. Do not ever use your magic, child. Whatever you do, stay as far away from them as you can.*

It must have been the anxiety, that voice of fear in my head that never seemed to want to leave me alone.

Eventually, my eyes opened, and I sighed in relief. *Over*. I was awake. Those dreams couldn't chase me into the real world. They had no power here.

But Arti sure did.

She was sitting in a recliner near the bed I was in, in the infirmary. It was just the two of us in here—the bed where Ethan had been lying was now empty. Daylight outside, the sun shone brightly, though it was probably cold as hell. All the windows were closed, so I was warm enough. I was comfortable.

Most importantly, I was in one piece.

The memories from the night before came back slowly as I studied the goddess reading her book. It was different from the one she'd been reading in the temple that night. She never raised her head, but I knew she knew I was awake. Of course, she did—she was a goddess. And though it had been so easy to trick myself into ignoring that part when I saw her and interacted with her every single day, she'd showed me last night. Whether on purpose or by accident, I'd seen her face, her *true* face. I'd seen the beautiful monster with those eyes too big and her canines as sharp as Oreos when her shields had dropped. When she'd been so panicked about the light shining inside me, she hadn't thought to check herself at all.

I'd seen. And I was *never* going to forget.

“Why did it break?”

My voice was a bit dry, but considering what had happened the night before, I just felt lucky to be alive.

Finally, Arti sighed and closed her book. “No clue, actually. Maybe it was too much pressure?” She finally looked up at me. “How are you feeling?”

“Well, let’s see—I should have died last night. It felt like I had the sun under my skin melting every inch of me, but somehow I’m alive. I’m not even in pain so...yeah, I’d say I’m feeling pretty damn *okay*.”

She smiled. “Good to see near death experiences don’t diminish your bad sense of humor, at least.”

“Oh, I’ve been dealing with those a lifetime. They can’t get to me if they tried,” I said, though my eyes were full of tears.

“It’s good to see your face, Sera. You’re okay,” Arti said, coming closer to the bed.

“Am I though?” I wondered. “Because it seems to me that what happened last night wasn’t supposed to happen at all, right? I mean, you were scared.” She had been terrified. “So, tell me, Arti, what can get a *goddess* so scared like that?”

“A lot of things, actually. You’d be surprised,” Arti muttered. “Mors scared me shitless that first month he chose me. I’d been alone so long that to have him there every time I turned around had me jumping at every small noise. No lie.”

I propped up to see the floor where she was looking, and sure enough, Mors was napping near the recliner, while Oreo sat near him on her hind legs, all her eyes on me.

“Hey, there, pup,” I said with a smile, and she barked—a friendly bark this time.

“You did so much better with her than I ever could with him,” Arti said. “And then there’s the light that almost blinded

me that was coming straight out of your body. That tends to scare a god, too.”

I flinched, falling back on the bed. “What the hell happened?”

“I don’t really know. You have a lot of magic in you. Too much for that stone to handle, which is why I think it broke. But it’s okay. It’s a good sign that it didn’t kill you. It’s not too much for *your body* to handle,” she said. “Yet.”

I blinked. “Are you serious?”

“Right now, I’m just trying to focus on the bright side here. Magic is strange when it leaves a god and enters a mortal or an immortal—you’re all pretty much the same up until endowment. And you drank Nectar, and you swallowed the Ambrosia, and your magic responded exactly as it should. That part went well,” she told me. “But your godlight couldn’t be contained by the godstone as it should have been. It was too much. Way too much.” At that, she smiled. “Which I guess I should have expected. *That’s* the reason I’m even here—that godlight that burst out of you? I’ve never seen anything brighter, mortal.”

“So, what does that mean for me now? I’m not glowing, am I?” I looked at my hands, but my skin looked just like skin, nothing different.

“No, you’re not. Your magic has settled, and it will take its time. It needs time until it sort of makes its place inside of you, until the Ichor infiltrates all of your blood cells. It just needs time to get to know you,” she explained, and that did not sit well with me at all. She spoke of magic like it was a conscious being, when it wasn’t. I’d felt it. Just last night, I’d felt it in every single inch of my body. It wasn’t conscious by any means, but it was *hungry*. That’s the impression it gave me—

hungry to consume more and more and more. Just like Shade talked about his Void.

“Where’s Shade?” I whispered, squeezing my eyes shut at the thought that I’d gone through all of that, and he hadn’t even known.

On the one side, I was glad—there was no need to worry. I was just fine. But on the other...

“He’ll be off duty this evening. You’ll see him then. Althea wants to check on you once more before she lets you go to your room. She thinks you’re okay. Your body handled the magic very well. You’re not crazy, your brain waves weren’t altered, your organs are all functioning as they should, and like I said—you didn’t die.”

“Thanks. That makes me feel better.”

It wasn’t a joke, but Arti laughed a bit as she stood up. “I’ve gotta go, Sera. Classes have started, and we’re going to need a new schedule, you and I. We’ll have to start teaching you how to control that godlight, too, while we train together.” Her eyes glistened as she held her hips, looking down at me with a curious expression on her face. “You know, I thought about what you would be like many times over the centuries, but I got it wrong every time.”

“*Me?*” How the hell could she have thought about *me*?

“Not you specifically, but the person who was going to help me get to my brother.”

“Oh,” I breathed, relieved. Right now, I did not need her to tell me that she could predict the future, too.

“A lot of work awaits you, Sera. Things are going to be very different for you from now on.”

“You sure know how to take the pressure off.” It was only half a joke, this one.

“We’re not going to rush things. I will not be forcing you to do anything you don’t want to. We’ll go into the Well whenever you’re ready. Whenever you choose to. Do you understand that?”

Fuck. I was more thankful that she said that in plain English than she knew. “I understand.”

“Good. Now rest. Get back to studying. I’ll find you,” Arti said, and with Mors in tow and her book in her hand, she made for the door.

“Hey, Arti,” I said before she walked out. “Can I ask you something?”

“Might as well,” she said, half entertained, half irritated.

“Is there a chance Hera is here, too?” I wondered. “On Earth, I mean.”

Her smile dropped and she shook her head. “None. Hera is up there with Father.” And she pointed at the ceiling.

It was different when Carmine and everyone else referred to Zeus as *Our Father*—they meant it like *the creator*, but Artemis? She actually literally meant *her dad*, which was spooky as all hell.

“Are you sure about that?”

“I am. Why? Why the question?” she said, full-on curious now.

“Because I met a woman at the Palace, and I kept thinking...” *she’s the goddess Hera.*

What a ridiculous thought. What a ridiculous statement, too. Hera, working as a laundry woman at the Daedalus Palace?

I shook my head. “Never mind, actually. It’s nothing,” I said with a wave.

Artemis arched a brow. “Trust me, Sera, we would all know if Hera was here. *All* of us.”

The goddess left the infirmary, and Oreo and me alone, watching after her in silence.

But barely a minute later, I’d just put the pillow against the headboard of the bed to sit up when the door opened again, and Althea walked in with a huge smile on her face and a tray full of food in her hands.

“Look who’s up,” she sang, pushing the door closed with her hip behind her. “Good morning, Sera. How are you feeling? And how’s the little pup doing? I brought you something, too. Oh, yes, I did. Wanna see? You do, don’t you?”

My mouth opened and closed as I watched her make love-eyes toward Oreo, who was wagging her tail in excitement as Althea put the tray on the bedside table then grabbed the smallest plate with half a dozen brown cookies on it.

“Can you guess what this is? You can, can’t you? Come here, girl. Come on, don’t be shy...” She’d forgotten about me completely as she sat on the floor a bit farther away from the bed to give Oreo space. Oreo, who was barking happily now, too, because she sniffed the air and could probably tell exactly what was in those cookies.

“*Cinnamon!*” Althea called with a laugh. “That’s right, it’s cinnamon. You love cinnamon, don’t you? Come and get

them, pretty girl. Come on, they're all yours." And she put the plate full of cookies on the floor in front of her legs.

I couldn't help the smile on my face, either—Althea's bubbly personality was kind of contagious.

But Oreó's middle head was looking up at me, and I could have sworn she was *asking* me with her wide eyes and that tongue hanging out. Asking me for...*permission*?

"Go ahead, Oreó. Go get the cookies. It's okay," I said, and the pup eagerly started moving.

Yep. She'd definitely waited for my permission—which was hilarious.

But she kept moving closer cautiously while Althea encouraged her with every step. Meanwhile I was starving, and it was going to be a while until the healer even looked at me again, so I just grabbed the tray from the bedside table and brought it on my lap. All my favorite foods were on there—waffles, Nutella, diced strawberries, strawberry syrup, and a large glass of milk.

Fuck, I felt like a little girl when I dove in, or at least like I imagined little girls felt when they were being pampered by their parents. I didn't have that memory, but I had my imagination, and I decided this came very close.

So, while Althea hung out with Oreó, who devoured all the cookies like she couldn't get enough, I ate kind of like the same way. Nearly dying always increased my appetite.

When I was done, so was Oreó, and she lay by the bed again, eyes already half closed. Althea finally got up from the floor and came to check on me.

"Sorry about that. I get carried away. She's so, so cute. And I love her name," she said, her rich red hair shining in the

sunlight streaming in through the windows. Fuck, she was gorgeous. With the sun on her face like that, she was even more beautiful than I'd realized.

"Thanks. It fits her and we both loved it," I said, proud. "And don't worry about it. She definitely is cute." Though most would disagree with us on that.

"You're looking well," Althea said and touched my face with the back of her fingers. "How's your vision? Any dots or dizziness?"

"None," I said, and she continued to pull up my lids to look at my eyes, just like Marcus had done once in the Palace. She made me show her my tongue, my mouth, my throat, and then she pressed onto my torso and asked me to tell her if it hurt.

Since it didn't hurt anywhere, it was a fairly quick process.

"Your appetite is good," she said when she sat on the bed next to my legs, eyeing the empty plate on the tray.

"Those were delicious. Thank you," I said, and she beamed.

"You're welcome. Maxim helped me prepare that for you," she said, and now *I* beamed. That was my best friend.

"Yeah, he's very helpful like that," I said, smiling.

"He definitely is," Althea said. "But you've lost a lot of energy, Sera. You lost *all* your energy when you collapsed last night. I didn't even have to keep you under because you were out of it yourself." She didn't seem all too happy about that. "After endowment, the magic takes its time to settle, and your body takes time to adjust to it—about a month, give or take. That's why students get endowed five weeks before the first year ends, so that we can keep a closer eye on them in the

beginning,” she explained. “You will burn more calories than usual, which means it’s important to eat more than usual, too, just until this initial phase is over. Do not try to use your magic right away—it won’t work. I’m sure goddess Artemis has a plan for you, but for at least the first week...” She leaned closer to me and whispered, “*do not* use magic. Say you can’t. Say you don’t feel it. Say it doesn’t work—say anything you need to say, just don’t use it. Okay?”

I definitely liked Althea.

“Deal,” I said with a nod. “No need to worry. I won’t.”

“Good,” she said. “Class has started, and Maxim is in the waiting room. He’ll help you get to your room and rest—you’ve been excused from classes for today. You go back tomorrow morning, though.”

“Yay. Can’t wait,” I deadpanned, and Althea laughed. Her cheeks turned red and her shoulders shook, and she looked so *happy* when she laughed like that that I couldn’t stop smiling. Maybe her magic healed bodies, but that laugh of hers was good for the soul.

“Careful with Oreo, though. The second-years get into all kinds of bets. Make sure she doesn’t kill anyone by accident because you’ll be responsible for it,” she told me—and she wasn’t kidding. She was dead serious. “Other than that, you’re good to go, sweetie.”

“She couldn’t kill anyone if she tried,” I said, looking down at Oreo napping by the bed. She was so tiny—a pup. Maybe a bigger pup than usual, but a pup, nonetheless. “Right?”

Althea smiled at me like she was *sorry* for me. “Of course, she can, Sera. Have you read on the Cerberus?”

“I did. I started—I have the book in my room, but I haven’t finished it yet.”

“Then you should. Today, preferably. Read that whole book before class tomorrow, okay?”

Oh, no... “Why? What am I going to read? C’mon, just tell me.”

And she wanted to, but she must have seen something in my eyes that made her change her mind. “You’ll see for yourself.” And she stood up. “Here are your clothes. A bit dirty but nothing the washing machine can’t handle. Try to rest until evening, okay? Try to stay in bed.”

“I will,” I promised, and I indeed planned to stay in and read that book. Althea was right—Oreo was no joke. Just because she was so loving and cute with me didn’t mean she would be for other people. She was a *hellhound*—the name alone made me want to be extra cautious with her and other people.

“And come by to visit me sometimes, sweetie. I’m here every day,” Althea said when she made for the door.

“I’ll do my best.” The way the professors kept us on our toes with classes and homework and training and more assignments, I doubted I’d have the time to even *breathe* slowly, but I’d try to come see Althea.

I sat up from the bed, reaching for the clothes she’d folded on a nearby chair. I wasn’t dizzy or lightheaded at all. Could be because I’d eaten so much.

I thought Althea had already left, but then I found her by the door still, looking at me, smiling. Even her cheeks were flushed.

“If I may, Sera,” she said slowly. “I know you’re young. I know you don’t have parents or a lot of family. But it’s so brave what you’re doing. It’s so brave that you’re choosing to help us with the portal.”

Oh, shit. Blood rushed to my cheeks already. I had no clue what to do when people talked to me like that, but I tried for the best smile I could muster.

“Thanks...I guess. It’s nothing. No big deal,” I muttered, wishing I could hide my face behind those clothes.

“But it is. It’s a very big deal. We’re all lucky to have you,” she said, then slipped out the door as if she could tell exactly how embarrassed I was in situations like this, and she wanted to give me some privacy.

When I got dressed and walked out of the infirmary, though, Max and Mave were there, waiting for me with smiles on their faces that tried to mask their fear but couldn’t.

“Max?” I whispered, raising a brow—why was Mave here? I’d told them both about the endowment, but when Arti said they couldn’t be there with me, I’d told Mave that we’d postponed the ceremony because Arti was busy. I just hadn’t wanted her to worry.

Or force Max to sneak into the temple last night.

“I had to, okay? I was losing my mind! And she knows how to get secrets out of me,” he said, pointing both fingers at Mave’s face, flushed and breathing heavily like she’d been running until now.

“Thanks for the fucking vote of confidence, you disgusting human being. How dare you lie to me. *The goddess is busy?* Really?!” She strode over to me and grabbed my face in her hands, then looked me over. “If you’d have died without my

knowing about it, I would have haunted your ass. Do you hear me?”

“That’s not how it works exactly,” I muttered.

“Then I’ll *make* it work,” she said, and I was tempted to believe her.

Shit, now I felt awful. Especially when Mave actually kissed my cheek.

Just a quick peck, then she jumped away like I was on fire, but I felt it. It warmed me to my bones.

“Thanks, dickhead. I’m *never* telling you anything again,” I said to Max, but if he cared, he didn’t show it. Instead, he just grabbed me into a bear-hug and told me that he was glad I was okay about a billion times before finally letting me breathe properly. It was amazing that they weren’t even afraid of Oreo right now, and they insisted on walking me to my room, even though they would be late for their next class.

They wanted to walk with me and learn as much as they could all the way there. Again, my jaw hurt from talking too much too fast until we finally reached my door, and I’d told them everything that had happened last night, right until I’d collapsed.

“Two things,” Mave said. “I’ve never heard of a godstone breaking.”

“And how was goddess Artemis *a monster*?” Max finished.

“What the hell are you looking at *me* for? I’m mortal, remember? *You* should know these things, not me.”

But then Mave grinned mischievously, and she said the words that were going to change my life yet again, and

forever: “Not anymore, you’re not. There’s Ichor in your veins, Sedorah Sinclair. From this day on, you’re Elysean.”

THREE TRUE FACES was an incredible book. Really, it was. It kept me so well distracted the whole day while I read about Oreo, and I figured out exactly what Althea had meant.

And what Arti probably meant that first time she informed me that Oreo had *chosen* me—*she’s not going to want to stay a pup forever*, she’d said.

What they meant was that the Cerberus, apparently, could change their size at will since basically the first month of their lives. They chose to remain pups for years, sometimes decades, because it was easier to handle the world like that while they learned, and easier to get used to their bodies, too. But eventually, they took on their full-grown form and stayed like that until they died, but they could go back and forth any time they pleased. A pup, for example—they were considered pups for the first twenty years of their lives—could change their size at any time, especially when they felt threatened and the power slipped out of their control. That’s why it was important to never touch a Cerberus—they could become a large version of themselves and eat you raw at any given moment.

Not that the book said that word per word, but it implied it.

And now I was definitely going to make extra sure that nobody came even close to touching Oreo, not even by accident. Another talk with her was in order, and I was going to do that, too, before the night was done.

I was calm. I felt great. Very hungry, but Max and Mave brought me lunch and dinner to my room—they said they had

clearance for that, probably thanks to Artemis, because Carmine would hate breaking even more of her precious rules for me.

Well, I'd broken *all* my rules here, too, so I wasn't going to feel bad about it. I was just going to relax until Shade came to find me.

I'd decided not to tell him yet. I'd decided to keep it to myself for a little while longer, just so he didn't worry. Just so I had more time to think it through, to come to terms with it myself—I was Elysean now. God blood was in my veins, and I was not the Sera I used to be twenty-four hours ago.

But then nine p.m. rolled in, and I was still reading the last chapter of the book on my bed when he knocked on my door.

“Shade!” I called, without even standing up from the bed, and he opened the door and walked in right away.

It was him, all right. And there was a cut on his left cheek, and his eyes were dark, the bags under them more pronounced than I remembered. He looked tired, and though it suited him, that look, it also did something to me.

It *snapped* something in me, and I caved. I caved so fast so fully it could have been comical.

I sat up on the bed, and...“I did it.”

The words slipped from my mouth and I wasn't even sure if I'd meant to say them or not.

Shade stopped in the middle of the room.

Tears stung my eyes, though I refused to let them fall.

“I...I did it. I got endowed last night.” And even though I'd thought I could handle it, I couldn't. Even though I thought

I would be able to look him in the eye and not tell him, it was fucking impossible.

Shade didn't say anything for a long moment that for me lasted hours.

Then, he whispered, "Come here."

I'd never moved faster in my life.

Shade was shocked, could barely move, but when I jumped in his arms, he held me to his chest as tightly as always.

"I'm so sorry," I kept whispering. "I should have waited for you first. I should have told you first. I'm sorry..."

It had felt wrong to do it without him there. I didn't regret it at all, not the actual process. Not the magic. Not any of it—I only regretted that he wasn't there. That he'd had no idea what I was doing.

"It's okay," Shade told me. "It's fine, Snowflake. Calm down. You're okay. Just calm down, please."

Only after he said that did I realize that I was *shaking*. Maybe it was the guilt. Maybe it was the panic. Maybe it was how hard I was trying to keep those tears inside—I had no idea. But I was shaking, and Shade took me to the bed again, sat with me at the very edge, and held me to his chest for a little while.

"I feel awful," I said because it was better that than to let myself cry. I hated crying in general, but crying in front of him was even worse. I didn't want him to think I was weak.

"Don't," Shade said, slowly lifting my chin. "I wish you'd told me, but it's still your decision to make. You don't owe anybody any explanation about that, Snowflake. Not even me."

And that somehow just made it worse. “Can you...can you just take us to the Void?”

The words hadn't even left my mouth properly when darkness exploded from underneath him, taking away the world around us completely within two seconds. Shade grabbed me in his arms and moved us, sat on the floor to rest his back against the bed, and put me on his lap.

A sigh escaped me as my very soul settled. I don't know what it was about this man and this timeless place, but they made everything better. Nothing at all was as bad in here as it was out there.

Shade chuckled. “Better?”

“Much better.” I hid my face under his chin and kissed his neck. “I'm awful. I should have waited.”

“And I should have known you *wouldn't* when she brought you to see me on the battlefield that first time,” Shade whispered.

“You couldn't have known.” How was he going to know that I was the most impatient person probably in the entire world?

“I could because I'd have done the same thing. In fact, I wouldn't have waited a single day if I'd seen *you* on that battlefield, Snowflake. Artemis knew this very well,” Shade said.

“It wasn't just you, though,” I whispered, then sighed again. “Yeah, it was.” Everything else I could have taken my time with, but when it came to Shade, I realized just how fucked up in the head I truly was. “But I wasn't going to do it right away until I spoke to Ethan. I told Arti if she kept the Soters away from all of us, I'd do it whenever she wanted. I

figured if I was going to do it no matter what, might as well get something out of it.”

“Damn it, Snowflake. You shouldn’t keep sacrificing so much for people who have thrown you under the bus countless times in the past and will probably do it again if they get the chance,” Shade said.

I leaned back to look at him. “But it wasn’t their fault. We were conditioned to think of each other as competition since day one. And Ethan didn’t really mean to kill me. It wasn’t just your vest that held him back, it was *him*, too! He tried to stop it at the last second.”

Shade framed my face with his warm hands. “Do you really believe that, baby?”

I flinched. “Yes, I do. He asked me that, too, but why would he lie?” He wouldn’t lie to me about that, would he?

Shade raised his brows. “To save himself. That’s what people do. They do *everything* to save themselves, first and foremost—*all* of them.” He brought my face closer to his until our lips touched. “And then there’s you.”

Closing my eyes, I fell against his chest again. “I really don’t think he was lying.” My instincts were good on that, at least. I trusted them. They hadn’t led me *too* far astray until now, had they?

“I’ll find out soon,” he told me.

“Don’t terrorize him, okay? Not too much.” No way was I going to ask him to *not* talk to Ethan at all—if the roles were reversed, he couldn’t have stopped me no matter what. So, I didn’t bother, but I still felt bad for Ethan. Shade was scarier to other people than even Carmine.

“Don’t worry about that, Snowflake. Tell me what happened,” he said, and I did. I told him everything in detail and I held nothing back—even the part where I saw the godstone, which I hadn’t told Max and Mave.

I talked slowly this time, though, and my jaw didn’t hurt by the end of it. I was just tired—and a bit hungry, too. But I was pretty calm now that we were here, alone in the Void, and I was sitting on his lap, resting my head on his chest.

Shade thought about what I said for a long time. I closed my eyes while he processed the information, playing with his fingers on my lap, breathing in his scent of raindrops and Shade that couldn’t be found anywhere else in the world.

“I’ve never heard of an opal breaking. Out of all godstones, they’re the strongest,” he said eventually. “I’m going to need to do some research on that.”

“Mave said something like that, too. Arti thinks it wasn’t strong enough for my magic, but that my body could handle it fine right now, so that’s what’s important.”

“It is, but channeling magic or maintaining it in raw form inside your body permanently destroys you completely. It’s why we have godstones in the first place. Without them our magic is unpredictable. Unreliable. Deadly to everyone around us.” And he seemed very serious about it.

“I’m going to train. As soon as the magic settles properly in a couple weeks, Arti will teach me how to use godlight. She said she wouldn’t rush me. She said she wouldn’t force anything on me, and that we’ll do everything whenever I choose.”

“Good,” Shade said. “I believe it because she needs you. Without you we have no chance of getting past the first

hundred feet of the Well. You can always count on people's need."

"Except she's a goddess," I reminded him. "And the way she looked...fuck, Shade. You should have seen her." I leaned away to look at him again. "Her canines were pointy, pointier than Oreos, and her eyes were so big! They were huge on her face." I showed him exactly how big with my fingers. "And her hair was floating all around her head, too, like she was underwater, and—"

Shade slammed me to his chest and kissed all the breath out of me.

I wrapped my arms around his neck the second the surprise faded—kissing Shade was the only thing better than *sniffing* him, no matter how fucking weird that made me. It was just how it was.

"There's nothing in the world like you, Snowflake," he whispered against my lips.

My toes curled in my boots and I grinned. "So that means you're definitely not mad at me?"

"I could never be mad at you," he said, pushing my hair away from my face as he kissed me.

"Oh, that's too bad. Because I was going to make it up to you," I teased, and he stopped immediately, leaning back a bit.

"Make it up to me how?"

"Well, it would involve you lying down on your back, completely naked, while I had my way with you," I whispered, cheeks so flushed they *burned*, but fuck if I was going to let embarrassment stop me.

"Snowflake," Shade warned.

“But since you’re not mad, I—”

He moved. One second, he was sitting on the floor with me on his lap, and the next, he lay down on the bed with me on top of him. I felt the mattress underneath the darkness of the Void just fine, and I couldn’t stop laughing.

“I’ve changed my mind. I might be a little mad,” Shade said.

“Is that so?” I whispered, running my tongue over his delicious lips.

“Mhmm. More than a little, in fact. I’m very, *very* mad,” Shade said, running his hands down my body, squeezing my waist as he went.

That’s pretty much all it took to get me fired up.

Pushing myself up to sit on his hips, I looked down at him, at the storms in his eyes, at the perfect way that black shirt hugged his torso. Too bad it had to go now. Everything that stood in my way of touching his skin had to go, and I was going to undress him slowly, kissing every new inch as I went. It was a fantasy of mine since summer, and we were always in a rush to fuck, Shade and I. And he was always in a rush to devour me, but not tonight.

Tonight, it was *my* turn.

When he raised his hips, I felt all of his hard cock right between my legs, pressing against the seam of my pants deliciously.

“Don’t move, Shadow Boy. I’m going to take your clothes off now, and I’m going to kiss every inch of you,” I said, lowering myself between his legs as I pulled up his shirt to reveal a sliver of skin. Then I leaned in and pressed my lips right on his hipbone.

Fuck, I loved how low he wore his pants, and how warm his skin was against my lips. And I loved how he shot his hips up again before he could control himself, then moaned that sound that made heat spill between my legs.

“You’re fucking delicious, you know that?” I pushed his shirt up a little more and proceeded to kiss and lick my way to the other side, then up to his belly button. “I can’t wait to taste you everywhere...” I bit his skin a little just to hear him moaning again. “And when I do, I’m going to ride you slowly. I know you love the sight of me like that. You’ll get to watch without touching me, without moving at all.”

“Fuck, Snowflake. I can’t...” he said, and when I kissed near his bellybutton, he raised himself up against my lips.

“Lie still,” I said with a grin, and he looked so desperate from down here. So ready for me to jump on his dick already that I almost caved. “Don’t move again, Shade. Just watch.”

Then I dove in again.

He was tired, and he loved to watch me worship him like that, so he only moved when he lost control of his body, especially when I took all his clothes off then took his dick in my mouth for a bit.

I pleased him slowly, didn’t rush even when I wanted to. My hips moved in rhythm with my head, and every time I took him in all the way to my throat and gagged, my pleasure turned up. Tears in my eyes and Shade’s hands were in my hair, pushing and pulling but never breaking my rhythm. Eventually, I slipped a hand between my legs and touched myself as I sucked his cock, but even that wasn’t enough.

Climbing up his body, I stopped over his hips, running my hands down his chest, tracing every curve and edge of his

ripped muscles, every scar on his skin. God, he really was a sight to see, even as frustrated and as impatient as he was right now because I refused to let him touch me.

“*Watch,*” I reminded him in a whisper, my face still wet with tears as I slowly took his cock in my hands and held it up. The tip slid inside me so perfectly, it had every hair on my body standing at attention, every instinct begging for more.

Shade whispered praise to me, his eyes on where we connected, while I slowly lowered myself on his cock. The more of him I felt, the lighter my body, my heart, my soul, until I sat on him all the way and threw my head back with a moan, letting my body adjust to him. Shade gripped the sheets as tightly as he’d grip me if I let him, but I wanted him to focus only on the way I looked this time. His eyes were two dark spheres, his lips parted, his skin glistening with sweat as he lifted his hips while I rode him, especially when I came the first time.

Nothing like coming on his cock, especially in this position. He was so deep inside me and I held him there, squeezed him as my muscles contracted with the orgasm, and I cried out his name at the top of my lungs just like he liked.

When I started moving again, the look on his face was that of a rabid beast about to fucking devour me, and it was honestly impressive that he hadn’t grabbed me yet. I suspected he enjoyed the sweet torture because I wouldn’t have asked him to stop if he tried—and he knew it.

I came another two times as I rode him, until he finally let go, too, holding me by the hips hard enough to bruise me as he thrust like he meant to tear me apart completely. My name on his lips when he was delirious with pleasure like that might be the best thing I’d ever witness in my life.

And after, while I lay in his arms, him fast asleep already,
everything was suddenly right with the world again.

“...it is doubt, the dream killer, that whispers in your ear. I implore you, do not believe it. It is the world’s greatest liar.”

—Metis the Wise, 482

by Elh Pordier, House Ruby

“AM I in the wrong Academy or something?” I wondered as I looked around at both sides of the table in the Caprae Hall at breakfast. People were looking at me—which was nothing new.

But people were *smiling* at me now. People were *waving* at me, saying *good morning* to me when they passed me by. Even Nick nodded at me when he first came in.

“Nope,” Max said as he ate his croissant.

“But...but...” It was like a different *world* here altogether. Even the energy was different. Or was it *me*?

Because last night with Shade had been amazing. He’d been shocked initially to hear that I’d been endowed, but he really wasn’t mad at me. He’d even waited for me to wake up this morning, had kissed me breathless, had told me how much

he'd loved last night—and that it was *his* turn tonight—before leaving.

And I'd slept so well. Not sure if it was Arti's doing or the Void or my exhaustion—though, it was probably just Shade—but I'd slept so well with no dreams at all, no sound of that robot in the back of my mind, no sign of the masked Elyseans haunting me in my sleep.

“Things are different now,” Mave said, sitting on my other side. She'd sat across from us through the whole first part of year one, but now, it seemed, she'd switched. Now, it seemed, she wasn't going to pretend she had other plans and wanted to hang out with other people. She was sticking with us.

And Max was over the fucking moon about it. The way his face had brightened up made me want to squeeze him or something. It made me want to kiss Mave, too. I didn't care if she was still using me or not, or if she still needed the courage to stand up to her family about Max—we were all here now and that was what mattered.

“Very different. And I don't just mean *her*,” Max said, pointing his thumb back. He meant Oreo, who had laid down on the floor right under the bench where I sat, and was napping.

“Don't you remember what I told you that morning? We were all there,” Mave said, raising her voice even higher so that everyone around us heard. “That night when we were in the Vault and we almost died, your mortal ass saved us all.” She grinned when I flinched. Yes, she'd told me to *own* it a few mornings ago, but back then it had been way easier because very few students had been in the Arges.

“That was actually an accident.” I'd thought I'd killed Ethan, and I'd just lost it. Definitely not on purpose.

“Either way, we were all there, pesky Elysean. And we all remember,” she told me, and I flinched even harder.

“*Don’t* call me that.” I wasn’t Elysean. At least I didn’t *feel* Elysean at all—I felt just like me. Nothing different about who I was two days ago at all, no matter if I had Ichor in my veins now or not.

God, when Miles found out...

And then James and Layla—fuck, they were going to tease me about this forever. Every single day for the rest of my life.

“Or what? What are you gonna do?”

“Plenty of things she could do—throw godlight at you, throw Oreos at you,” Max said, then leaned closer. “Not to mention *any kind of spell* now that she’s been endowed.”

“Oh, please.” Mave waved him off.

“Or—or—check this out,” I said with a mischievous grin. “I’ll get Max here to ignore you for the next month. Never talk to you, never even look your way a single time.”

The look on her face was *priceless*.

“Hey—leave me out of it!” Max said from the other side, panicked, like he actually really thought I would ask him for something like that.

But Mave didn’t know for sure, did she? She didn’t know me that well still, so her smile faltered for all to see.

“I dare you,” she then said, but her heart wasn’t into it.

“If I were that cruel, I absolutely would,” I said, turning to my food. “Elysean prick.”

“Pesky human—*not* a mortal anymore,” she muttered, eyes sharp as she looked around us in case someone had heard or

seen what she didn't want them to see.

But then the second-years came through the doors, all of them at once, as if they gathered in their common room first before coming in for breakfast.

Not only that, but *they* were talking to me, too, now.

Fuck, everybody was talking to me. How the hell was I going to live like this?

“Gods, I want her. I want her so bad!” a Sapphire second-year squealed.

“I will literally do anything you ask if she lets me pet her. Anything at all. Name it—I will do it,” an Emerald second-year said, both of them on the floor, looking at Oreo under my bench.

“No, please don't. Please don't touch her. She doesn't know you and she might lose it.” After everything I read in that book yesterday, I really didn't want anyone near her.

But the students didn't care.

“Holy Tartarus, I had no idea one could even produce that much godlight,” said a Ruby second-year as he nodded at me, perfectly impressed.

“What was that like?”

“Can you do it at will?”

“Did it hurt? It was really bright.”

“Was it like fire?”

“Are you going to be fighting daemons now?”

“Are you going to skip classes?” And so many more questions...

They wouldn't stop, not even long enough for me to think up any answer at all. And they kept coming closer and closer to Oreo, too, and I could tell she was on edge by how she tried to hide behind my legs. Just to make sure we all remained safe, I told Max to give me some space on the side of the bench, then asked her to hop on my lap. Nobody was going to get close enough to touch her like that—I'd make sure of it.

When Oreo settled on my lap, though, the people acted like I'd done a fucking magic trick. My God, I was sweating. I didn't want this attention on me—I was fucking sweating like a pig, but they wouldn't back off. Max and Mave kept telling them we were eating, but nobody cared.

And then even Kyra came in front of me, squatting down to look at Oreo while her own raven rested on her shoulder just like that first time I saw her.

“Not bad, Sinclair,” she told me with a nod. “Not bad at all.” And she raised her hand toward me.

“*Don't*,” I said, raising my own, ready to push her away if need be. Oreo growled, her ears perked up, her entire body tense as she showed her teeth to Kyra.

She immediately stood up and moved back “Whoa, easy, girl.” But she was grinning ear-to-ear.

Then... “You saved us.”

All eyes turned toward the door, to where none other than Amelia Verdelle was standing with her sketchbook in her hand, watching me with a small smile on her face. Around her were all the others, too—David and Jasper, Denis and Blair, even Lorenzo.

“Isn't that funny? You *saved* all our lives,” said Amelia as she slowly came closer to me. The other students all made way

for her like always. “Which means now we all owe you—and *you* owe something to me, too.”

Yes, I did—she’d helped me set up Shade’s birthday in December. All she’d asked in return was for a favor.

“Since we no longer have to be so secretive in front of you mortals about daemons, tell me, sweetie, are you going to fight? Because I will. I can’t wait to get down there and shed blood.” She meant every word. “Will you be joining me?”

“Yes, just not yet,” I muttered.

Amelia beamed. “Good. I look forward to fighting with you, mortal,” she said. “Cute pup.”

“*Not a mortal anymore,*” Mave whispered from my side when Amelia walked away, and I jammed my foot to hers with all my strength because Jasper and Denis and David were in front of me now.

“Sera Sinclair. The godless mortal is actually our damn *savior*—who woulda thunk?” said David, and people laughed. “But a Cerberus, too? My, my. Makes me want to make you my wife.”

I cringed so hard there was no way to hide it.

Now *everybody* laughed.

“Oh, come on! I’m a handsome fella, aren’t I?” he said, showing me his profile while he dusted off his shoulders.

I didn’t get the chance to even reply.

“I bet I can turn her against you,” Jasper then said, looking down at Oreo. And I remembered that he was from Dionysus’s bloodline and he could control animals.

“Don’t you—”

“But I won’t,” he cut me off, then gave me a deep nod. “You saved us down there. I won’t forget it.”

“Even though we wouldn’t have even been in danger if it wasn’t for your boyfriend,” Lorenzo said in a whisper.

“Oh, what was that?” Mave said with an arched brow, pushing her hair away as she leaned her ear closer. “Wanna say that again? Because we didn’t catch it.”

Lorenzo pressed his lips together and didn’t say a single word.

David pushed him on the shoulder and sent him forward. “Nothing at all. He’s just being funny. Ladies,” he told us, and with a nod, he went to get his food on the other side of the Hall.

“He’s right, kind of,” Max said when they finally moved away from us.

“Yes, but *he* doesn’t get to say that,” Mave said.

“Well, if you want to fucking point fingers, why not go to the source? To that asshole Tiger Gilis who started the whole thing. Shade only lost it because Ursula was trying to attack me. And it wasn’t his fault—it’s the Void. Do you guys have any idea how powerful it is?!”

A second of silence.

Then both of them burst out laughing.

“Right. Right. Shade can do no wrong,” Mave said.

“We get it. He’s totally innocent.”

Rolling my eyes, I turned to the other side of the table again with Oreo still on my lap. She wasn’t all that big, but it

was a hassle to eat with her there. Unfortunately, now that she'd gotten comfortable, she didn't want to get off me at all.

But when breakfast was over and we had to get to class, she was happy to trot after me with her ears up and her curious eyes on everyone passing us by. She wasn't as spooked by seeing so many people here all of a sudden. Everyone was there, all of them, except Tiger and Ursula, who hadn't arrived at the Academy yet for whatever reason—and Ethan. He was still serving his punishment, Max said, though he swore Carmine only told him that he'd be getting back to classes very soon.

In Constellations, Oreo came and sat right underneath the table by my feet while we waited for the professor. Mave had gone to her room to get something, so Max and I had only a second to talk.

“Okay, spill it—and do it quick before she gets here. What's going on?”

His cheeks immediately flushed. “Nothing,” he muttered, making me fist him on the shoulder, and I didn't hold back. “Okay, okay, fine! Nothing, we're just...she's just...I don't know, we're just hanging out!” he whispered.

“Good. Good,” I said with a nod. “Has she said something? Has she insinuated something...you know?” I waggled my brows.

“No, but when we're not together, she's always watching me,” Max said.

It was really difficult not to roll my eyes right now. “She was *always* watching you, man. C'mon.”

“Well, I didn't know that! Now that I'm paying attention, I see it. And you were right when you said about her knowing

all those things about me. She has a weird sense of humor, I get that. And she really does know me better than anyone else, so..." He shrugged, unable to hold back a smile.

"Have you ever thought about telling her how you feel? You know, just confront her about it." Because we both knew by now that she felt the same.

But Max's eyes widened with panic. "*No!*" he said, shaking his head a million times. "No, no, of course not."

"Why not?" In my opinion, when it came to these things, honesty was the best policy. It had been with Shade and me. Despite who he was and how we started, I'd always been honest about wanting him.

"*Because, Sera,*" Max said with a sigh, rubbing his face. "Because she could very well *destroy* me." My mouth opened and closed a few times, but I found nothing to say. My poor heart. "She almost did it once simply by not talking to me at all. But if she actually *says* words that she can't take back? It will be done. She'll ruin me completely. She has way too much power still."

I squeezed his hand with a smile, even though he pushed me off right away. "Don't squeeze my hand, pesky human. Let's not get all sentimental here, can we?"

"Suck it up and deal with it, Elysean," I spit and grabbed his hand again. "I saved your ass. The least you can do is let me hold your hand when I want to."

He rolled his eyes but didn't jerk away. "Are you going to hold that over my head all the time now?"

"Absolutely—every single day. I should have started the second I woke up, but I had no clue everyone was going to be so caught up on that." Not really, only when joking, but still.

Max sighed, letting me squeeze his hand—*very hard* on purpose, before I let go.

“Look at that,” he said, showing me how his skin had turned completely white where I’d grabbed him. “Damn, you’ve gotten strong. Plus, now you’re E—”

“*Don’t* you dare,” I spit.

“Okay, okay, fine. I won’t say it,” he said. “*Yet.*”

“Seriously, though. Just try to talk to her. Try to get her to tell you why you guys broke apart in the first place. Maybe that talk will lead to another, and then...”

“I will,” Max said with a nod. “Honestly, though? I don’t care why. I don’t care about any of it as long as she just sticks around and doesn’t do it again. I thought I could never forgive it, but I can. I have. I couldn’t care less when she’s here, you know? It just doesn’t matter.”

Oh, I knew exactly what he meant. “The truth, Max,” I said, just as the professor entered the classroom, and Mave was running right behind him. “*The truth shall set you free,*” I whispered dramatically. He rolled his eyes again at my terrible imitation of a deep male voice, but by the time Mave sat with us at the table, we were both perfectly composed.



SOMETHING FELT...STRANGE. Not good or bad, just strange. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but as the days went by and I adjusted to the routine, and I ate twice as much as normal and still lost a few pounds, and I trained in CT and with Artemis after hours, I felt it more and more. Just there in the middle of

my stomach, like a pressure but not quite. Like...a *feeling*, like something trying to let me know that it was there.

I was released of most assignments now because I had to train twice, even though Combat Training had gotten so much easier now. We all knew what we were doing, and even Professor Novak was much more enthusiastic about teaching us new moves now that he could actually talk about daemons in front of the whole class. It had happened before, they said. Mortals had learned about daemons before graduating first year, and it was so much better when everybody didn't have to watch what they were saying the whole time—which I'd had no idea they had to do, but still. We'd seen the monsters with our own eyes, Nick and I, and Ethan already knew.

He still hadn't started classes a week later, still serving his punishment, which was to clean and rearrange things, Carmine told Max, in rooms we didn't use, so we didn't get the chance to run into him accidentally. He wasn't allowed to eat with us or spend time with anyone else for as long as his punishment lasted, but she didn't say *when* that would be.

I was fine with it, though. As long as he was okay and he was coming back, I didn't care how long it took.

By the middle of the next week, my body was used to the routine—to the massive amounts of energy spent, especially with Shade most nights. He brought his things to my room, among them his laptop and his clothes, and we watched movies together some nights—by which I mean I slept on his shoulder ten minutes in—or we played online games he liked, and did other, way more fun things that made me blush every time I thought about them. I could handle it only because, true to her words, Arti somehow kept us out of the dream weaver's reach. I still had to battle my own dreams, but they weren't

nearly as intense or as scary as those masked Elyseans, only senseless things and people, senseless scenes that couldn't chase me into the real world.

All in all, it was a pretty good first couple of weeks. I was feeling more in control of myself than ever, like I actually had a say in what my life looked like now. I made all my choices. I only spent time with the people I cared about. Even Oreo hadn't lashed out at anyone at all, which was a miracle considering she had *fans* all over the Arges now, coming after her to talk to her in silly baby voices and take a million pictures of her from every angle. She was a rock star, and that saved me from everyone's attention being only on *me*. I could hardly believe it myself, but I'd preferred it when nobody gave a shit about my existence. I really did. This was too much. People smiling and waving, making way for me when I passed, coming to bring me milk and drinks and food in the hall for each meal, stealing cake from the professors' eating room for me, and telling me that I didn't need to bother taking notes in class or doing homework—they would do it all for me if I let them. I mean, *come on*. It was me. I was still just me, same old same Sera Sinclair, the godless child who Miss Aldentach had tried so hard to convert—I was still just me!

Except...that wasn't entirely true.

And I found out Friday, the last day Shade would be here before he had to go downstairs to fight daemons for three whole days, if not more.

We'd spent the past two hours in the Void, without our clothes on and covered in sweat as we whispered and moaned and cried out each other's names. I had stamina now, so much more than before, and we went at it for hours at a time without stop—except tonight.

Tonight, even though the pleasure was mind-blowing just like always, there was something inside my head, something that distracted me. It didn't let me focus on Shade completely like I wanted, even though I knew I wasn't going to see him for at least three days—and I hated it.

“What is it, baby?” he said when I settled on his arm and sighed deeply. We were both still breathing heavily, our hearts beating at the same erratic pace, but we were calm.

At least Shade was. He was extremely calm since my endowment, too, and he'd pulled strings to stay up here for almost two full weeks just so he wouldn't leave me alone a single night. I appreciated it more than he knew.

“I don't know. Just...something,” I whispered, kissing his neck. “Probably just tired.”

“I'm tired, too. Worth it,” he said, chuckling.

“One hundred percent,” I agreed. “How are you feeling? How's the Void?”

“Calmer than ever before,” he said, raising his hand in the darkness, and as he waved his fingers, I could have sworn the shadows around us moved. I could only make them out through the corner of my eye, though. As soon as I turned to look, everything settled, as motionless as always. “I have no idea what you did that night, Snowflake. But it has never felt calmer than this. No sign of an outburst.”

“There are signs?”

“Absolutely. Like storms drawing in. It's more a feeling than anything else, but I've been having these outbursts since I was eight years old, and I can always tell. I can tell easily.”

“Wow.” Eight years old—he'd been just a boy. “What was that like?”

“A disaster,” Shade breathed. “I had no idea what was happening. People were screaming at me to control it. The outbursts happen to everyone tied to the Void, to most of Hades’s Bloodline, but never before endowment, so nobody was prepared for me.”

“Poor baby,” I whispered, kissing his collarbone. “Did it hurt?”

“I don’t really remember much of it, to be honest. But, yes, it does hurt. It hurts a lot.”

Just like it had hurt *me* that night. It really had.

Just like it was starting to throb in the back of my neck right now.

I squeezed my eyes shut just to make sure it wasn’t the memories.

“What is it, Snowflake? Why are you restless?” said Shade, sitting up in the dark to look at me. “Gods, you’re glowing so brightly...”

My eyes popped open—no, that throbbing in the back of my neck was not from my memories. It was fucking *real*, and it was spreading down my back and up into my skull, too.

“Something...something’s wrong, Shade. H-h-help me up,” I said because I couldn’t be lying down. My back hurt so, so much... “My backbone, it’s like...it’s like it’s on fire.”

Shade’s hands were on my back instantly. “You’re ice-cold,” he whispered, and he sounded terrified suddenly. “Look at me.” His hands were on my face, and they did feel so fucking hot on my skin. “We need to get you to Althea, now.”

The fear made the blood in my veins rush even faster. “No, I’m fine,” I said, but the words came out slurred together. “I

just...it just burns, Shade. It burns.” It suddenly burned so much on my back.

How was my skin not melting off me?

“Can you get up?” Shade said, and he was already on his feet, looking at me like he was on the brink of a panic attack. I hated to put that look on him right now, but I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t pretend I was okay—I was *burning!*

“Shade...” I whispered, more terrified than him now because it wasn’t stopping. Fuck, it wasn’t stopping or slowing down—it was getting worse with every breath I took.

“C’mon, baby. Let’s get—”

A scream tore from my throat when he pulled me to my feet, and the pain on my back suffocated me. It felt like I was being stabbed with the biggest, sharpest knife to have ever existed—repeatedly. My skin tore, and I *heard* it, felt the heat *spilling out* of me from the inside, coming from deep within my bones.

Snowflake! I thought Shade called, but he sounded so far away so suddenly.

I opened my eyes to try to see him, try to tell him to go get Althea or Artemis or Carmine, or anyone at all who could make the burning go away.

Too late.

I was barely able to make out Shade’s pale face in the dark before it exploded out of me.

One of Zeus's other secret wives was Maia. She lived in a cave so deep that Hera never knew she existed, and unlike Leto, she bore Zeus a son in peace. His name was Hermes, and he was the god of shepherds, travelers and thieves, of all who lived by their wits.

When he was still an infant, he stole from Apollo. He stole his beautiful white cows which he sacrificed to the Olympian gods—and counted himself among them, too. From their remains he created the first lyre, so when Apollo caught him stealing, Hermes used the new instrument to bargain. Apollo, being the god of music, had to have something that sounded so beautiful. Not only did he forgive Hermes for the theft, but he also traded him his magic wand for the lyre.

Zeus was so proud of his son for his wits and his abilities, that he gifted him a hat with wings, winged sandals and a cape, so that he could move fast and hide his magic tricks. He never again stole, and never spoke a single lie, but though Hermes was a popular and loving god among his own kind and the mortals, he rarely spoke a truth whole.

—**Book of Creation, Volume IV, 1st Edition, 219**

by Emilia Marvos, House Emerald

BLINDING light was coming from me, but this one didn't hurt my eyes. This one wasn't as white as the other in the Vault. This one didn't burn every inch of my body, either, only my back. It was *gnawing* at my backbone as it moved, and it was

eating me from the outside, too, like a fucking monster had sunk its teeth into my skin.

So, I turned to look, sure that a daemon had somehow made their way into the Void and was consuming my flesh and bones with its many mouths and razor-sharp teeth.

Instead, I saw my back with no daemon in sight.

I saw the wings made out of icy blue light coming out of me.

Me. My back. They were coming out of *me*.

“Shade,” I choked, turning away again, sure it was just my imagination, sure that it wasn’t real—but then I saw him.

I saw his eyes, wide and dark, reflecting the blue light coming from my back. From the wings attached to it. I saw the way his lips were parted, and his body glistened blue, too. He came closer, slowly, reaching out both hands to me, unable to say a single word.

“Make it stop,” I breathed as the burning on my back intensified. “Please, make it stop. Make it stop...”

Shade was two feet away from me, his eyes two black orbs with no other color in them. I saw my reflection perfectly fine. I saw myself, naked, with wings of blue light right at my back.

“*Stop!*” I shouted at the top of my voice, as the heat became unbearable.

Stop, stop, stop, my instincts screamed, and I just wanted to get away. I wanted it out of me, that heat. I wanted it out of me *now*.

The next second, it slipped out of me in a blinding flash of blue light.

This time, I was awake. This time, I was fully conscious when the light *consumed* the darkness of the Void, the same way the Void took away the world around us every time. It crumbled, the darkness, like it had been liquid and then in the heat of that blue light, it dried up and broke and was reduced to ashes as it slowly revealed my room underneath it...

And Shade.

Shade was on the floor, choking on thin air, eyes black and the skin around his eyes the same color.

The world could have ended for all I cared. The Academy could have crumbled to the ground completely for all I heard. I just fell to my knees in front of him and took his face in my hands.

“Please, please, please,” I chanted, willing that heat back inside me, where it couldn’t hurt Shade. Where it couldn’t hurt the Void. Where it would keep burning only *me* instead.

But the fire was no longer there. My body had cooled down and my back no longer felt like it was being melted, but Shade was still shaking, still choking, unable to breathe.

I sealed his lips with mine and gave him CPR, thankful they taught us that in school. I blew into his open mouth for what felt like *hours* before he was no longer gasping for air but breathing semi easily.

His eyes were open and the black of them faded, leaving way for the storms that were always there. He was focused on me, could see my face while I towered over him, crying and shaking, a bigger mess than I’d ever been before.

“You’re okay, you’re okay, you’re okay,” I kept whispering, more for my benefit than his. He was okay. Awake

and conscious, and his hand was on my face now, too. I grabbed it with both mine and held it there.

“Don’t...don’t...” Shade whispered, struggling to speak still. “Don’t say a word.”

“Shade,” I breathed, kissing his dry lips.

“Not a word,” he told me. “To anyone.”

I had no idea how he knew, but the next second, the door burst open, and Artemis stormed in with Mors in tow, looking like she was ready to set the whole damn world on fire.

Shade let go of a deep breath and closed his eyes.

I LOOKED AT HIS FACE, digging my fingers into my own arms. I was wearing my robe, and Shade was on the bed now, courtesy of Artemis. The covers were over him, and he was awake. Pale, but breathing. Easily.

Carmine was there, too, and so was Althea. Oreo couldn’t sit still for a second as she lay down near Shade’s feet. She was touching them with her body, too, but she didn’t seem to mind. None of us had even noticed, and by the time I did, it was obvious she wasn’t going to suddenly grow up and eat Shade—she just wanted to touch him, feel that he was okay.

And I wanted that, too, except I didn’t dare even get close to the bed.

“He’s okay, just exposed to a lot of godlight. That will hurt, but he’ll recover in a couple days,” Althea said.

Artemis nodded. “How are you feeling, midnight caster?”

“Peachy,” Shade deadpanned.

Then she turned to me. “I think it’s safe to say you two should keep away from one another for a while.”

No. “Yes.”

“Your powers are natural enemies, if you will. Your light hurts him, and his darkness hurts you.”

“Except it doesn’t,” Shade said through gritted teeth, sitting up on the bed. I knew it cost him to move—his hands were shaking, even though he tried to hide it by fisting them. “My darkness doesn’t hurt her—on the contrary.”

“That’s true,” I said. “The Void has never hurt me. Not once.”

Artemis sighed. “Well, then your light hurts him,” she said. “And that’s enough to be concerning. You’re not capable of controlling yourself, Sera, which is no surprise. And until you learn, you will stay away from the midnight caster. I can’t afford to lose either of you—do you understand that? If either of you dies, all of this would have been for nothing. I need both to get to my brother. So, tell me, do you understand?”

I couldn’t care less about getting her to her brother—I cared about Shade. I cared about the way my light, those *wings*—oh, God, I’d had wings on my back!—had destroyed the darkness of the Void, the way they’d left Shade on the floor, unable to breathe...

“Don’t worry. I won’t be going near him again anytime soon.” My voice broke, and a billion tears slipped out of my eyes all at once, but at that point I didn’t give a shit. All of them were in the room and they could all see me crying, but I didn’t care.

This was too much. This was my own personal hell.

“Snowflake,” Shade whispered, but even he had nothing to say because he knew there was no other choice. He, out of everyone here, had seen me. He’d seen those wings. I’d seen *my* wings in his eyes, too—he’d seen me just fine. And he couldn’t fucking deny what I’d done to him or the Void if he tried.

“It’s just until I learn to control it,” I told him—and myself. “Arti will teach me. I’ll control it.”

“Whenever you want,” Artemis said, and I got why she was doing this, and that she was so eager to work with me on everything for her own personal benefit, but I was still thankful. So fucking thankful to have her here.

“Tomorrow. We’ll start tomorrow,” I whispered, and she nodded.

“Then we will.”

“What about Adryan? Will he be able to get back to work?” Carmine said. “Will he be completely okay?”

I wanted to hate her in those moments, but a look at her pale face and I saw the concern written in the blue of her eyes. She cared about Shade, I thought. She cared about him, though she had a funny way of showing it.

“He will be. He just needs rest and good food. He’ll be just fine, so long as he’s not exposed to godlight of that caliber again in the next couple weeks,” Althea said, looking at me with that sorry smile on her face.

Right now, her spirit wasn’t contagious. It didn’t *mend my soul* at all. I was far too broken.

“Since that’s settled, we’ll leave you to get dressed, midnight caster. Then go sleep in your own damn room,”

Artemis said, and without another look my way, she slipped out the door with Mors in tow.

“If you’ll give us a minute,” I told Carmine and Althea, and though the healer slipped out immediately, smiling sheepishly as she went, Carmine looked like I’d slapped her across the face. I thought she was going to say no, tell me that she would stay to make sure Shade was okay or that I wouldn’t attack him again, but one look at Shade’s face and she changed her mind.

“Don’t take long. I’ll wait outside.” She finally walked out, closing the door behind her.

The silence suffocated me. I looked at the floor for a moment, unable to meet his eyes.

“Snowflake, come here,” Shade said, and the tears came again, just like that.

“I’m good,” I choked, taking another step back.

“I’m fine, I promise. I’m okay. Look at me,” he said, except I knew exactly how he sounded when he was okay, and this wasn’t it. His voice was weaker, barely a whisper. His skin was far too pale to be normal, too.

And I’d seen him—God, I’d seen him like that, on the floor and barely breathing...

No. I was most definitely not going near him at all.

But Oreo did.

Through the corner of my eye, I saw her moving slowly on the bed until she reached Shade’s thigh. Then she cautiously put her front paws on his leg and reached up her heads to sniff his face.

I laughed among the tears. “I think she wants you to touch her,” I said, and Shade slowly put his hand over the first head, and I didn’t even hold my breath. I wasn’t afraid, not even a little bit. Oreo was not going to eat Shade—she really did want him to touch her.

“Snowflake, we can learn to control it together. We don’t have to keep away—forget what she says,” Shade said as he scratched the middle head next, and Oreo licked his chin, tail wagging so fast it was a blur.

“You saw me, Shade,” I choked, hating that I was so fucking weak right now. “You s-s-saw me. You saw those *things*—you saw me.” And I saw him. I saw him like that on the floor, half dead.

“It was an accident,” he said, but he knew that didn’t mean much.

“I *consumed* the Void,” I said in a whisper. “I...I saw it. I consumed it. That light—it just ruined it. Destroyed it completely.”

“I know. I felt it,” Shade said. “Please, just look at me.”

I did.

I looked at him and my heart broke all over again. He was so pale, his eyes dark, his hair all over the place...but he was alive. That’s all I cared about. He was alive.

“We can—”

“No,” I cut him off. “No, we can’t. I won’t allow it.”

“We’ll find a way,” he whispered.

“We will. I’ll learn to control it. And when I do, you’ll come back. Right? You’ll...you’ll...”

“I’ll never leave, Snowflake. I’ll always be right here,” Shade said. “You don’t have to keep me away.”

But I did. If he saw himself the way I saw him...

“Would *you*?” I asked instead. “Tell me the truth, Shade. If you had almost killed me with your Void, would you keep *me* away?”

His mouth opened and closed a million times, but not a single sound left him. That’s because he couldn’t lie to me, and the truth was that he would. He’d kept me away at the Palace when he thought he was bad for me without ever hurting a hair on my body.

A cold laughter burst out of me. “You’d move to the end of the fucking world if you knew you could hurt me.” And I wanted to do that, too.

“I would,” he said.

“But *I* won’t. Because I’m selfish. Remember when I told you that I was selfish, Shade? I meant it.”

“Good,” he said. “Because if you try to leave, I’ll be right behind you.”

I didn’t doubt that for a second. The tears rushed out of me fast. “You’re fucking hopeless, Shadow Boy.”

“I’m only hopeless when I’m without you,” he said, slowly standing up to face me, but he didn’t try to touch me, at least.

I smiled even among the tears. “We’ll be fine.”

“We will.”

“We’ll figure it out. I’ll learn to control it. It shouldn’t be hard.”

“Even if it is, you’ll handle it. Hardship doesn’t scare you, remember?” he said, words I’d said to him back when we were at the Palace still.

I laughed again, that awful sound. “No, it does not.”

“And then I’m taking you away. For days and weeks and months—I’m taking you away, Snowflake. I promise you, it will be just the two of us.”

“Yes,” I choked, just as a bark made us both look down at the floor, at Oreo who was standing right between us, all heads looking up at him expectantly.

Shade’s face broke into a wide smile. “The *three* of us,” he corrected.

“Yes, the three of us. We’ll go far away from here,” I said, and Oreo settled on her back legs, tail wagging happily.

“And we’ll be okay,” Shade said. Calm. Peaceful. Not even close to the way he had looked when we were still in the Void. “But promise me something first, Snowflake. You will never talk about what happened to anyone until you feel you absolutely have to. Do you understand?”

“I-I-I...” My tongue tied, the words not wanting to come out. “*Wings*, Shade,” I finally breathed. “Why...why did I have wings?”

I reached out my hands to touch my back and Shade moved so fast it was impossible to stop him. He was in front of me, his hands on my wet face, and he kissed me.

God, how I wanted to stay in that moment, frozen in time, forever. Right there I’d stay, never moving a single inch.

But I had to. Because the image of him on the floor like that, gasping for air, was imprinted on the inside of my lids,

and I couldn't get it out of my head if I wanted to.

Shade must have sensed it because he let go of my lips and rested his forehead to mine the next second.

“I don't know why, Snowflake, but we will figure it out. Just don't let anybody else know.”

I believed him. I believed him with all my heart, even if it was only because I needed to.

“I promise,” I whispered. “I won't say a word.”

“Good girl,” he said, and with another kiss on my forehead, he stepped away, looking at me like I'd just ripped his soul out of his body the same way he did mine.

“We'll be okay,” I repeated, and I'd say it as many times as it took for me to believe it. Because if I didn't believe *that*, my life was already over.

“We'll be okay.”

Then I had to watch him put his clothes on, get his things, everything he'd brought to my room the past couple weeks, and walk out that door.

I had to watch him take my heart with him, too, and leave me an empty mess. I stayed there in the middle of the room, hugging myself, crying until my head felt like it would crack open, and the only thing that kept me conscious was that—*we'll be okay*, just like Shade said.

In my mind, I made him another promise: I would do everything in my power, anything it took, to make sure that we really would.



SLEEPING WAS out of the question. It was midnight when I walked out of my room. Not that I wasn't afraid—I was. I was fucking terrified, but maybe I had a death wish. Maybe I hoped one of the Soters would find me and put an end to my miserable fucking existence already.

Seriously, it was like the second I had a tiny amount of peace, a week went by where I actually enjoyed my life and *liked* what it looked like, something happened. Something always happened to send it all down the drain within minutes.

Or maybe I left my room because Oreo was right behind me. The whole school knew exactly what would happen if she lost control—Mave had told everyone countless times, so the Soters, whoever they were, wouldn't miss it, either. They'd want to stay away from me permanently now, in real life, too, just like they stayed away in my dreams.

But the second I walked out the door, I found him in the hallway, closing his.

Nick jumped at the sound and turned to me with his arms half raised, prepared to attack. His eyes were wide, his hair all over the place, and he wore a pair of old-looking sweatpants and a shirt that had seen better days. Not at all like *him*.

“What are you doing out of your room this late?” I asked in a whisper, though my voice still echoed in the empty hallway. And my head still hurt from all that crying. I'd cried nonstop for over an hour, and I was exhausted by that alone.

“Nothing,” Nick muttered. “What are *you* doing outside your room?”

I crossed my arms in front of my chest. “I'm sure you noticed that I have a three-headed hellhound with me.” He

could see Oreo by my feet just fine. “How are *you* going to defend yourself if they come for you?”

Nick sighed. “Nobody’s going to come for me.”

“They are if you’re walking the Arges all alone in the middle of the night.”

“Well, I won’t be alone,” Nick said.

I arched a brow. “A lady friend?”

“Ugh—no,” he muttered. “It’s...it’s...” With a sigh, he closed his eyes and shook his head for a moment. “Actually, do you wanna see for yourself?”

Curiosity spiked the blood in my veins instantly. “See what?”

Nick looked at Oreo reluctantly, then headed for the stairs, keeping a good distance from us. “This way.” He basically walked alongside the wall until he reached the stairway, eyes on Oreo.

“You have permission to eat all of him at once if he tries anything funny,” I said to Oreo, and Nick heard it just fine.

Oreo barked in confirmation—which worried me a bit. She did know I was just joking to scare him, right?

“I’m not going to try anything,” Nick said as we moved down the stairs. “And why is your face so swollen? Did somebody die? I heard the screams.”

Oh, God. Every inch of me rose in goose bumps. “No. Nobody died.” But it had been so, so close...

Fuck, the image of Shade on the floor barely breathing...it twisted everything inside of me in a nasty way.

“Was it the dream weaver? Is he back?”

“No. He won’t ever be back,” I said.

“How would you know?” Nick asked, looking up at me when we reached the main hallway.

Because I made a deal with a goddess, I wanted to say, but then shrugged. “Someone said they don’t come around the second part of the year anymore.”

“*Who* said that?” Nick said.

“Doesn’t matter. Where are you taking me?” The hallway was deserted, the lamps on the walls burning low.

But all he said was, “You’ll see.”

He turned around and led us straight to the other side, through the third door left, and into the Caprae Hall. At first, I thought he was hungry and wanted a snack or something, but they didn’t serve food at the Hall at this time of night. And when I saw that all the lights were on, I stopped dead in my tracks.

Ethan was at the other end of the room, standing on a set of wooden stairs with a broom in his hand, collecting spider webs from the ceiling corners.

He froze when he saw me, and I could hardly believe it was *him*. No more yellow on his hair—he’d cut it all off. His clothes were torn and dirty, too, worse than Nick’s. His eyes were wide and alert, though, and the color of his skin like usual. He seemed...okay.

“What the...”

“He’s been cleaning the Arges at night for his punishment. Tonight’s the last night. I’m helping him get done sooner,” Nick said, and he went around the table and the benches, all the way to Ethan, and to the main tables and fridges where all

our food was served fresh every single day. I watched in awe as he grabbed a bucket and a rag, and he came to the first window on the right of the room.

I looked down at Oreo, who seemed much more excited to be here than I was, her tail wagging, her tongues hanging out.

“It’s a good distraction,” I told her. “It’s going to make falling asleep easier.”

She barked—it was a positive. So, pulling the sleeves of my sweatshirt up to my elbows, I dragged my feet to the other end of the room, to where Ethan was just coming off the stairs, watching me and Oreo like we were green aliens.

I grabbed the other bucket on the floor near the main table, when...

“Are you okay?” Ethan asked, and that question simply shocked me. Did he just ask me if I was *okay*?

“Your face. It’s all red,” he said, waving his finger at his.

“Oh,” I said, having forgotten for a moment how hard I’d cried—which was exactly what I needed. “I cried for like an hour or so. It’ll go down soon.”

I grabbed the bucket, but...

“You don’t have to do this, Sera,” Ethan said.

“I know. I want to.”

I made my way to Nick where he was already cleaning the frames of the windows, and started on the second right. Oreo lay on the floor a few feet behind me, watching me with her eyes half closed already. And Ethan came to join us with his own bucket and rags, and he brought the wooden stairs with. We were going to have to clean the frames all the way up, too, it seemed.

We worked in silence, cleaning like it was the most natural thing in the world to do. We never said anything, never asked questions or made comments. We just cleaned and cleaned and cleaned, kept our thoughts to ourselves as we moved from one window to the other, while Oreo slept peacefully on the floor.

“Falling out of love is indeed disastrous. Such a sad, sad thing...

But when love loses meaning, it is worse. When you love someone, when the feeling is there, but it no longer has any worth, that is the true tragedy of the world.”

—Eros: the Burden of Love, 411

by Sherida Marquise, House Opal

DAYS TURNED TO A BLUR, and the months went by like they were trying to sneak up on me. Before I knew it, it was March. Spring was just around the corner, and the sky was blue, the Arges’s courtyard more beautiful than ever, and I *hurt, hurt, hurt* everywhere all the fucking time.

Less than two months until the first year was over. Less than two months when I’d be allowed the entire summer out of Idaeia, to go anywhere I pleased and do whatever I wanted—yet I was going to remain here to train. I was going to remain right here to make sure that I wouldn’t accidentally blind mortals by flashing them my godlight that refused to be controlled all the way.

That’s all I could think about as I sat outside on the foot of Zeus’s statue by the main entrance of the Arges. That was still

the best hiding spot here—people rarely came out the front. The back, the courtyard and the temple, were much more interesting for students. A lot more places to hide, smoke weed and drink alcohol, or just for a good ole make-out session. I was part of the groups that hung out there now, with Max and Mave, when we were bored out of our minds and had nothing else to do. Other than the occasional glass of wine, I never drank anything else, but I was tempted. So fucking tempted to get wasted and forget everything: that I still couldn't control my godlight. That I still couldn't do magic properly. That I still had no idea how long it was going to take. That I couldn't go see Miles and Layla and James come summer. That I couldn't hide in the Void.

And most importantly, that I couldn't be with Shade.

“It's not so bad, is it?” I said to Oreo, who was resting one of her heads on my boot, the others on the cold ground. She looked up at me lazily because she knew I was full of shit.

“You could be more encouraging,” I muttered, but she was absolutely right. It was bad. As long as I couldn't be with Shade, everything was just *bad*.

The days had gotten longer, but the sun had set for today. I would be starting training with Arti in a minute, and I'd come out here just to get some air. Just to try to talk myself into trying harder—but wasn't I already?

“I don't know what else to do...” I whispered the thought out loud.

At that, Oreo raised her heads with a whine. She understood English perfectly, and she knew my emotions like she could see inside my mind. She'd grown, even though she looked exactly the same as the first time I saw her. But she'd grown on the inside, was much calmer around other people,

didn't bark or growl at anyone anymore. She knew exactly what I was feeling at any given time and she always slept with me on the bed now, even though sometimes I thought she was uncomfortable. She never left me alone, not for a second. When I showered, she stayed in the bathroom by the stall. When I ate, she lay under the bench. When I trained, she stayed close and watched me, as curious as ever, never even slightly bored of my pathetic, boring life.

Well, boring *for her*. Definitely not boring for me.

Now, she licked my chin, one head then the other, while the third nipped at my fingers—something she did to try to calm me. I kept telling her it didn't work, but she kept at it.

And it did kind of calm me, now that I thought about it. It distracted me, at least.

“Any ideas? You're a hellhound. You should know what to do when godstones can't handle your magic, right?” She turned her heads to the sides in confusion. “You must have heard something in the Underworld. Wait—*have you ever* been to the Underworld?”

She barked a couple times, and I had no idea what the hell that meant.

With a sigh, I scratched all her heads and stood up. “It's fine, Oreo. I'm just in a shitty mood, that's all. I'll be fine. Shade's downstairs tonight so he won't be watching. I'll be fine.”

Together, we made our way back to the Arena where we had been just a few minutes ago for Combat Training. We were still training to fight, and I'd gotten even better than before. I still needed a lot of work—turns out you can't just train to be an incredible fighter within months or even a year

—but according to Arti, I'd done better than most she'd ever trained with.

I did try my best. I stole movements not only from her and Professor Novak, but from the sentinels in the battlefield as well. Artemis had given me permission to go down to the second level any time I wanted, which was any time Shade was on duty. I spent every spare minute there, and it really did help me in trying to visualize actually being down there with those monsters and fighting them.

If only I could get myself under control first...

When we went into the Arena, Mors was sitting near the benches, watching Artemis curiously as she pointed her arrow at the twenty dummies that had surrounded her.

“Attack,” she said, and all of them charged her at the same time.

She moved.

To watch Artemis fighting was unlike anything I'd ever seen before. Her body must have been made out of liquid in those seconds, and the speed with which she moved was incomprehensible for my brain. By the time the dummies had made it close enough to her, she'd put down eleven of them with her arrows—*eleven*. And the last nine went down within the next minute while she fought them with only her silver bow and her bare hands.

Pieces of whatever material the dummies were made of were all over the floor. They would get back together—someone of Hephaestus's Bloodline always fixed them, or maybe Professor Novak himself.

He'd served in the battlefield for eight years before leaving, I found out, until he'd been near death for the third

time, and had decided to retire. Carmine had wanted him here to teach us since, but he'd only accepted a couple years later.

A good thing, too—he did know what he was doing. He was no Artemis, but he was very good at his job, as Arti pointed out a couple times when I showed her movements he taught us.

“Show-off,” I muttered when she flashed me a grin. “Here’s what I don’t get...” I went closer to her while Oreo sat near Mors. Some days they stayed as far away from one another as possible. And others, they lay down side by side—I had no idea how the hell their relationship even worked.

“How can you move *like that* and still need me to come with you to the portal? I don’t see how you wouldn’t kill *all* daemons who came for you literally within two minutes.”

Arti, who hadn’t even broken a sweat as she pushed the pieces of the dummies to the sides with her foot, shrugged. “Daemons are not dummies, and there’s way too many of them. They’ll keep coming indefinitely, and they’re fast, too. I’d have to spend days just to get to the middle of the Well of the Damned if all I could do was cut them to pieces, and they can always come back from that.” She stepped in front of me then. “Godlight, on the other hand, can take them out much faster, much more effectively, and they’ll need a lot of time to get themselves together from it. Not only that, but it will confuse them, keep them motionless, give us *time* to get through—do you understand?” Putting her hands on my shoulders, she smiled. “*Time*, Sera. Time will be our best ally if we can get it to work in our favor.”

“Except I still can’t control my godlight for shit,” I reminded her.

“*Yet*,” she added, then reached for the pocket of her brown leather pants. I could have sworn there was nothing there—leather revealed everything in pockets—but even so, she pulled out a large ruby she couldn’t wrap her fist around, and she brought it up between our faces. “Look at that.”

“It’s gorgeous.” The way the crystal caught the light of the lamps around us and reflected it everywhere else was indeed beautiful. “And it’s not going to work.”

“Don’t be negative,” Arti said. “We’ll try.”

“Sure, sure, if you’re so keen on breaking another perfectly functional gemstone—sure, we’ll try.”

Arti, who no longer was as quick to be irritated by me as in the beginning, grinned. “I really am. Come on, let’s move over there. The mess distracts me.” *The mess* being the dummy parts she left all over the floor.

“Did you *have* to do that?” I asked because she once told me that her body was different from ours. Her muscles didn’t need to be trained and she didn’t need to keep in shape at all. She just was.

“Not really,” Arti said. “Stand over there.” She pointed in front of the weapons wall, completely unbothered. “Out of all stones, rubies are the sturdiest when it comes to holding magic. They—”

“Have the right density and the right reaction to magical energy—yes, Arti, I know this. I knew it since the first hundred times you told me.” I batted my lashes at her. “Just give me the ruby so I can break it and then we can get to the actual training.”

Arti grinned like she was *proud*. “Hold it tight and focus on my voice,” she said, putting the ruby in my hand. It was

cold to the touch and heavy, just like some of the bigger gemstones Arti kept bringing for me to try to contain my magic. It would be infinitely better to store my magic in a godstone and use the godstone to channel it. So much easier to control—if a godstone would actually agree to *hold my load*, the way Arti called it.

“I’m ready,” I said, holding the ruby in both my hands in front of my chest. Really, it was a shame to ruin that gorgeous piece. Arti seemed to have an infinite supply of them, but I still felt guilty for each one I’d destroyed.

“Eyes closed,” Arti said, and I squeezed them shut. “Try to feel it first. Feel the magic, feel the shape of it. See it. Connect to it.”

I did.

I’d done it so many times before it was second nature to me now. I felt the magic inside of me, a blinding blue light that spread around my torso, or maybe that’s how I’d imagined it to help me feel like I was more in control of it at first, and it had stuck. Either way, I saw it now, saw it *firing up* at my request, and it spread all around my limbs and my neck, up to my head, too, until I was completely made out of light in my mind’s eye.

Until I had those damn wings I couldn’t *unsee* on my back—whether it was my imagination painting that picture of my magic or if it was real didn’t really matter. The wings were always there, and that secret kept holding me under every time we did this.

But Shade still didn’t want me to say a word about it, not yet. And I trusted his judgment more than I trusted my own. After all, I’d made the decision to get endowed on my own, and if I’d just waited for a little while first, we probably

wouldn't have ended up here, with me almost killing him, consuming his Void. We wouldn't be apart for the third month in a row now.

Pushing away the bad thoughts from clouding my mind and keeping my focus hostage, I felt the ruby, the crystal warm in the palms of my hands.

“Your magic *is you*. It serves you. It protects you. It follows your lead,” Artemis said, her voice soft and strong at the same time. “Guide it into the ruby gently. Push it slowly. Give it time to settle.”

I did. I gave it all the time in the world to settle into the ruby—that wasn't the problem. The magic listened and it moved. I felt it *crawling* under my skin, that light, going toward my hands. It slipped into the ruby, too, easily, slowly, gently...

But then there was something else, something I had no clue how to even name. I couldn't see it, couldn't isolate it from the light. It could very well be part of it, part of the magic, but it sort of *pushed back*. It tried to stop the magic from slipping out of me—like a damn disease or a block or something.

Before the tenth second was over, the sound of it filled my ears and my eyes popped open.

The ruby was in pieces right there in the palms of my hands—and now came the worst part.

Taking the magic back was a bit more problematic than letting it out, even though that *block* or whatever it was disappeared the moment my intent changed—to take the magic back in. But now the magic didn't want to settle back inside me, and I had to force it. It wasn't impossible, but it did

take a lot of energy, like pulling something incredibly heavy by a rope all by myself.

Eventually, though, it settled into my body and I felt I could breathe easy without it breaking out of me. It had happened three times before in training with Arti. Though she and Mors and Oreo were perfectly unaffected by the bright light, other people would be. Shade would be. Professor Novak, too. He sometimes stayed at his desk to work while we trained, and he'd been there once when I lost control of the light and it exploded out of me. I'd knocked him out cold for several seconds, and he'd needed a good few minutes to come around after.

My light hurt people, even though it wasn't supposed to. Arti wouldn't say it, but I knew. I'd been watching made Elyseans in the battlefield—not just Beatrix and Avery and Arthur—but many more of them who were on duty. I'd been watching them, and some had brighter lights than others, but none of those lights hurt anyone. None of the other sentinels standing next to them passed out or were out of it in any way—it was just me.

I was a walking light-bomb, and even though everyone—Novak and Arti and even Carmine—was *happy* that I could explode into so much light all at once, it scared me. I was putting everyone close to me in danger until I could control this thing, and what if I couldn't? What if I always lost control like this?

“Such a shame,” I said, letting the pieces of the ruby fall to the mats when I was done containing the magic. Some pieces scratched my skin as they went, but nothing that wouldn't heal by tomorrow. I was so used to this whole process it was a bit funny.

Arti looked concerned, even though she'd probably expected it. "We'll find it," she said, hands on her hips as she looked at the pieces of the ruby reflecting the light even better now. "We'll find a stone strong enough. We just have to keep trying."

I sighed, wishing Shade wasn't downstairs but sitting on the benches, watching me. His presence distracted me some days, but most of the time it gave me strength. Kept me grounded. Like I could get through anything as long as he was there.

"You look more tired than usual," said Arti as she stepped away to the other side again. "No—leave that. We don't have time. Somebody else will take care of it," she told me when I bent over to pick up the ruby pieces on the mat.

"It's really no bother," I muttered, but I straightened up anyway because I knew she'd never let me. "And I'm not tired. I've been sleeping fine."

It wasn't entirely a lie—my body was so exhausted that I did sleep soundly most nights. Without the Soters and the dream weaver coming for me in my dreams, it was actually a peaceful sleep, too. It was hard to even imagine there'd been a time when I hadn't slept for *days*—how in the world had I functioned properly without randomly collapsing every few minutes? But whatever Arti had done, it had kept the Soters away from me—and the boys. Nobody had attacked me even when I was about the hallways at night—I was with Oreo now. And the boys had both promised me they wouldn't come out of their rooms after hours.

So far, it was working. We were still alive. We just had to keep it that way.

“As you should. This is important, Sera,” Artemis said. “Bring out your scythe.”

“I know it is,” I muttered, taking out the scythe she’d given me when we first started training. Now that I had magic, she was training me to fight with it some days. Others, it was bows and arrows and swords and daggers—there was no rhyme or reason to the way she taught me, but it worked. I could wield every kind of weapon now with only a few minutes of practice.

“Chin up. Nothing’s over yet. We’ll figure it out,” she said, taking her stance in front of me.

“Can you just kick my ass already so I can get to bed?”

She absolutely did.

IT HAD BEEN three months and I still wasn’t used to the way people treated me around here. I still wasn’t used to them smiling at me and waving, and coming to hang out with me randomly, to tell me stories and to ask me questions. Word had spread during February that goddess Artemis and I were best friends, that we had slumber parties in my room, and I was her favorite mortal in the world. They even claimed that she had *gifted* me Oreo herself.

I tried to tell the truth at first. I really tried—Arti and I were *not* best friends and we definitely didn’t have slumber fucking parties in my room, and I was *not* her favorite mortal in the world at all. I was just the only mortal she needed right now. And she hadn’t gifted me Oreo, either—Oreo had chosen me herself.

But nobody listened to me. People didn’t want the truth—they wanted to hear what *they* liked, so my words fell on deaf

ears. They found it incredibly exciting that I was a goddess's favorite mortal, and now I was *their* favorite mortal, too, never mind that Mave reminded me at every chance she got that I wasn't. Not anymore. Not mortal—Elysean. And a dysfunctional Elysean at that.

Something was wrong with me, I knew this. Whatever it was that didn't let me fully access that godlight or make good use of my magic the way I should have after being endowed for three months, it wasn't normal. Story of my fucking life—*nothing* about me could just be normal. Not like every other mortal who'd done this a million times before. Avery and Beatrix and Mason and countless others—*normal*.

But, no, because that was way too much to ask for me. Always too much to ask.

It all went back to that night thirteen years ago. That night when a drunken Elysean had set my parents' car—and all three of us—on fire, Max's dad had saved me. He'd done the most illegal thing in Elysean books, but he'd bright me back. That had to be the reason why I was so fucked up with everything—the godstones, those signs in the trials, the magic—*everything*. It was because of what Alan Roux did, and until I found out what that was, and what to do about it, I was never going to be truly free.

“What? Why do you keep staring at me—what's up?” Max said, bringing me back to the present.

I blinked my eyes and lowered my head immediately. Shit, I'd been staring at him for real without even realizing it.

We were in the library, sitting on the sofa, trying to read, but I couldn't bring myself to focus. I'd gotten lazy with lessons these past few months. Since I wasn't required to bring in homework and do assignments, I'd stopped trying

altogether. There was only so much energy I had left after classes and two training sessions within the same day (one of them with Arti).

“I’m not, just thinking,” I muttered, turning the page of the book I was supposed to read for Introduction to Magic, as if I knew what the hell I was reading in the first place.

“About what?” Max asked. I looked around us for a second just to confirm that nobody else was here, just the two of us and Oreo sleeping on the floor.

Mave couldn’t make it because she had been assigned with some other students for a group project for Botany. Max and his group had already finished theirs—growing a plant called *deridan* within four days, which was possible, but required excellent conditions, exactly the right soil and the right *everything*. If it was done right, it was a miracle remedy for dry coughs. If it was done wrong, it was going to keep anyone taking it in the bathroom for a couple days. So, Professor Atheron had decided that each group would drink the tea made of the *deridan* they grew themselves, just to make sure they’d give their best to this assignment. I was excused, of course, but it was going to be fun to be in that class tomorrow.

I chewed on my lip and decided to go for it, just ask the question I’d been meaning to ask Max for weeks now...

“Something I read in that album I found—remember? The one with your dad’s picture in it? And the headmistress?” I said, my palms already sweaty. But if I let myself think about it for another day longer, I was *never* going to do it. Not ever.

“Okay?” Max said, raising a brow at me.

“There was this guy—*Tobias* was his name, I think. I’m not sure, but he had this huge godstone around his neck. The

picture was black and white, so I didn't see the color, but..."
Oh God, why was it so hot in here so suddenly?

"What does that matter?" Max said, suspicion clear in his wide brown eyes.

I almost chickened out. *Almost.*

"The godstone," I said instead, trying to sound as casual as possible. "I feel like I need a godstone *that* size to make it work with my magic. You know?"

It was a fucking lie. I hadn't seen Tobias's picture anywhere, and I'd never seen anybody with a huge godstone around their neck like I was describing to Max now.

But finally he raised his brows and nodded as if what I was saying made perfect sense. "Oh. Well, if they can find a stone that big, I'm sure it will work. But you're wrong about Tobias having it. He's actually my uncle. Mom's brother. I remember his ruby—it was even smaller than the one my dad carried around most times."

Stabs in my guts. "Really? Must have been someone else," I muttered, hoping he couldn't see the beads of sweat on my forehead. "Could you ask him, though? Just in case? Are you...are you close? With your uncle, I mean."

"Not really," Max said. "He moved out of Ideaea a decade ago. Mom rarely hears from him on the phone. I think last time they spoke he was living in Lyra."

Lyra—that was one of the other two Elysean cities located at the edges of London. Fucking London—a continent away.

"That sucks," I made myself say as the letters on the pages swam before my eyes. *A break would be fucking nice*, I thought to whoever cared to hear.

“Can’t blame him. His godson died in an accident when he was twenty years old. He was never really the same after that. And with my father...*not* himself anymore, he said he wanted to take some time off, travel, see the world. He just never got around to coming back,” Max said, and it was obvious to see that it hurt him. “Mom misses him.”

Shit. I felt awful already. “I’m sorry. And about his godson, too. How did that happen?” I asked, even though I wished I could drop this already. I wished I could *never* talk about this with Max again. I hated to ruin his mood like this. It made me feel like such an awful person.

“Peter was already causing trouble since he was a kid. His father, my uncle’s best friend since childhood, died at a very young age and basically left him in charge of the kid. He crashed his car into a statue one night because he was high and drunk when driving. He died on the spot.”

I couldn’t breathe.

Peter.

“It tore him apart that he wasn’t there, you know? He was just never the same. Felt like he’d failed his best friend—I don’t know. Stuff like that tends to change people,” Max continued, and I had no more voice in me left to say a single thing, not for a long while.

Peter.

Peter was Tobias’s godson.

Peter, who’d been playing with fire in the middle of the street, drunk, and had burned my parents’ car. Peter, who’d killed them, and *me*, too. Peter, who was no longer alive and hadn’t been for a long time now.

Tears in my eyes—and Max could see them.

“Hey, you okay?”

Closing my eyes, I rubbed my face. “Yeah, yeah, just a sad story,” I muttered, hiding behind my hands for a minute until I could bear to look him in the eyes again.

“You’ve gone through worse,” he told me, and I was suddenly terrified that he could see right through me, that he could see the truth inside my head, that it was going to break his heart and he was *never* going to talk to me again. He was going to *hate* me forever!

So, I said, “I’m PMSing, if you must know,” and he cringed instantly.

“Ew—why, Sera, *why* do you keep telling me that?!”

It was actually hilarious how much women’s periods scared him.

“I wouldn’t have to if you weren’t so insensitive. And like Mave said—it’s a period. It’s healthy. If you have a problem with it, go complain to your mother.”

He shook his head but it got a smile out of him—Mave’s name was a magic spell for Max. And my heart had yet to slow down that fast beating.

“Whatever. I won’t ask again,” Max said. “Let’s just get to bed. I’m exhausted.”

“Yeah, me, too,” I lied, eager to get away from here and be by myself to panic over what the hell I was going to do when the answers kept slipping from my fingers, and I was running all out of questions to ask.

The god of the dead was Hades, and he was a gloomy god of a few words. Mortals never spoke his name from fear he would find them or send for them, and drag them down to his Kingdom before their time.

But he was also called the Rich One, for he was a rich god. All the riches under the Earth belonged to him, and sooner or later, all mortals came to Hades.

He never cared for promiscuity, and never planned to marry, until he laid eyes on Persephone and fell in love. Unfortunately, Persephone would never agree to wed the god of the dead, and so with Zeus's permission, Hades kidnapped her and brought her to his gloomy palace in the Underworld. And she, the beautiful, once cheerful goddess, became as silent and somber as her husband, but never again was she happy.

—Book of Creation, Volume IV, 1st Edition, 247

by Emilia Marvos, House Emerald

WATCHING Shade fighting daemons never got old.

I skipped Elysean History—the professors didn't even hesitate to let me leave if I said I needed to, no explanation required—and I came downstairs to watch him, hoping he was up on the platform so we could hang out for a bit. Talk. Just... hang out.

It was difficult to do when I couldn't touch him, couldn't kiss him, couldn't *beg* him to just hold me in his arms and take us to the Void where nothing and no one could reach us and we were safe from the entire world...

Fuck, missing him had turned into my very own personal disease. And the worst part was that there was no cure.

Shade was fighting two flocks with his team and with Arthur. Once more, I witnessed with my own eyes how Arthur's godlight flashed out of him, basically shut down the daemons, and the other sentinels cut through them with ease before the soil swallowed what was left of them.

Nobody was even *dizzy* from that godlight. Nobody stumbled, nobody even leaned away from it for a second. Normal—not *this* thing that was inside of me.

Shade saw me. On his way back to the tent, he always looked up now because I came to watch him any chance I got. I could swear I saw the storms in his eyes as clearly as if he were standing right in front of me. I knew him so well, knew every line and every shape and every color on him so perfectly that I could imagine the exact expression on his face right now—and he looked just as torn apart as I was.

It killed me that we couldn't be together, that every time he was near me, all I saw was that image of him on the floor, barely breathing. That was the reason why I had been able to keep away from him in the first place. Why I never opened the door when he was in front of it and his shadows slipped under and into my room. I only watched them licking the floor, testing the air, sometimes playing with Oreo like they really were part of a conscious being.

That's why I never went looking for him even when it got bad, when I couldn't stand my own self, when I needed to hide

from the world more than I needed to breathe.

“Look who came to see us!”

For a second, I feared it was Hector. Since Arti introduced me to him, he constantly came to talk to me whenever he saw me. Not that he was a bad guy—he wasn’t. But he had this nasty habit of shamelessly hitting on me every chance he got, and it made me extremely uncomfortable.

Luckily, it wasn’t Hector this time. It was Bailey coming toward me with his arms raised, and my heart skipped a long beat as I smiled. Behind him was Cyth and Ivy and Liam. No Shade, but he wouldn’t be too far behind.

“Shouldn’t you be down there risking your lives some more to keep us safe?” I said, crossing my arms in front of me.

“We would, but then Ivy can’t pass up the opportunity to see Oreo, so here we are,” Cyth said, and Ivy had already sat on the floor, trying to get Oreo to go to her, calling her all kinds of cute names—*pumpkin*, *princess* and *cupcake* were among her favorites.

I laughed. “She’s not going to let you touch her, Ivy.”

“Oh, she will. She lets the Grump pet her. She’ll warm up to me eventually,” she insisted, pushing back her violet-colored hair before she dragged herself closer. Oreo watched her curiously, sitting by my feet still.

“That’s my girl,” Cyth said. “She wants something, she’s not gonna just quit.”

“It ain’t over till I win,” Ivy confirmed, making us all laugh.

They came to join me by the railing. Others were there, too, but they generally kept away from me now. I hung out

with Beatrix gladly and listened to her stories about the daemons any time I caught her up here, but that was it. Even Avery had given up on trying to talk to me—we didn't get along. We were way too different, and she'd realized it after that first month. Now, it was peaceful when I came to the platform, but when Shade's team joined me, it could be all kinds of fun, too.

“That's an attitude to have,” Liam told us. “About everything—not just when you're trying to get a hellhound to let you touch her.”

“It's important when you're taking one of those shits that just won't come out, too—you gotta give it your everything and not give up until it's out because it'll come back when you least expect it—like when a daemon is trying to bite your face off, for example,” Bailey said, and all of us cringed. Cyth fisted him on the shoulder.

“Disgusting fucking prick,” he told him, but Bailey couldn't care less. He really had no filter to that mouth of his.

“Say whatever you want but you know it's true,” he insisted.

“You're hopeless,” Liam muttered, shaking his head, then turned to me. “So, what is up with your godlight? You ready with that yet?”

I flinched. “No, not yet.”

“I don't get why you have to stay away from the Grump while you're training, though,” he said. They were all resting against the railing now, watching the Well, while Ivy told Oreo a story about a pet she had back home when she was a little girl.

“Seriously—he’s unbearable. I thought he was bad before, but now it’s just insane,” said Bailey, turning to look toward the stairs to make sure Shade wasn’t coming up the stairs.

“He won’t talk. Won’t smile. Won’t do anything other than eat and train and work and sleep. That’s it—that’s everything,” Cyth said.

“I know, guys.” And *this* guilt was heavy, but the other was so much worse. I’d rather Shade be miserable than hurt like that, barely breathing, or even *dead*.

“So do something about it,” he said, nudging my shoulder with his. “C’mon, we know he fucked up somehow. We’re not stupid. Just forgive him and move on. Seriously, we can’t fucking stand him.”

“He didn’t fuck—”

“Oh, come on! We know how relationships work. Did he cheat or something, is that it?” said Cyth.

Heat crawled up to my cheeks instantly, taking my breath away. “*No!*”

“Then whatever he did, just forgive him already. It’s been, what—three months?” Liam again.

I closed my eyes and forced myself to breathe. It wasn’t their fault that they thought Shade had done something, and that we weren’t really apart because of my godlight. They hadn’t been there. They hadn’t seen, and I couldn’t hold that against them.

“There’s nothing to forgive, guys. He didn’t do anything, but my godlight is very unstable. I flash it randomly and it hurts Shade. I told you this—it *hurts* him,” I reminded them.

“Well, *this* Shade hurts *us*,” Liam said.

“He hurts us a great deal,” Cyth confirmed. He was usually the more reasonable of the bunch, and that he was complaining, too, was a bit surprising. “He’s been working us three times as hard as usual. All he wants to do is train. We have three sessions a day now. *Three.*” And he showed me three fingers.

“At least talk to him,” said Bailey. “Tell him to give us a break or something. Seriously, we’re exhausted.”

“Yes, they’re talking about you, Shade.”

We all jumped around like we were suddenly under attack at the sound of Ivy’s voice.

Then she burst out laughing because Shade wasn’t there. She’d only scared us.

Though Cyth laughed, Liam and Bailey were still cursing under their breath.

“You should have seen your faces!” she said, laughing her heart out.

It was kind of funny, I’ll admit. The guys had really been afraid.

I’d jumped for an entirely different reason, though. I hadn’t seen him for two days now, and I was really, really hoping he’d come up here so I could say hi. Maybe see him smile. Hear his voice. Just...see him.

But he didn’t come up at all.

The others stayed with me for another fifteen minutes, talking about the daemons they killed and their best tactics, each trying to convince the other that this movement or that weapon was better than the other. Then, a guy dressed in green leathers came from the stone stairs to the side of the platform

to get them—a flock was coming up, it seemed, and they needed to be on the battlefield.

I watched them leave, then waited until they were out on the battlefield, led by Shade. He looked up at me again, but he didn't wave. Didn't smile. Didn't do anything as the daemons crawled out of the Well, and the others on the platform cheered. He simply took out his sword and fought with his team like always, and he didn't look up again.

SPRING ROLLED in and it was warmer than last year.

Last year, when my life was so much less complicated. When I wasn't trying to control magic inside of me, when I wasn't breaking godstones, when I wasn't drowning in secrets, when I wasn't missing Shade the way I imagined one would miss *living*.

God, I just wanted to be with him in the Void. Screw everything—I just wanted to be with Shade.

And that was exactly what I couldn't do.

No idea why I kept finding myself in the damn temple more and more lately, whenever I was feeling especially hopeless. Whenever I wanted to be away from everyone else, too. The weather was nice, the courtyard garden flourishing, and the temple had no walls, just the marble pillars holding up the ceiling, so it kind of made me feel like I was out there, but also inside. Also alone. Looking at statues of gods I'd never believed in. Gods I'd hated. Gods I never understood.

Not that I was understanding them more now—I wasn't. But now I was curious about them. Curious to know if they were all like Arti. Curious to know what they all really looked like, if they were up there in Olympus right now, watching us

praying, doing...*what?* What the hell were they doing stuck up there on their golden thrones? Were they even trying to get to us, to help put this madness to an end?

“Well, are you?” I asked the statues of Zeus and Hera, the biggest of the bunch in the temple. My voice echoed, seemingly bouncing off the marble as if to tell me that my words wouldn’t stick. They would not be heard by anyone.

It was Monday, and it was lunch break, but I couldn’t bring myself to eat. That’s why I’d come out here after class, hoping to sneak downstairs for the next one, just to see if Shade was there somewhere. He wasn’t on duty these past three days that I knew, but he was never around the Arges anymore. He didn’t come to see me practice, either, and I was dying to see his face. To know why. To talk to him.

Somehow, though, I kept stopping myself. Something whispered in the back of my mind that maybe this was for the best. It was more difficult every time we hung out, wasn’t it? Every time we talked for a couple minutes, just to ask each other how we were, then lie when we said we were fine, it was worse.

Maybe he knew what he was doing by not even coming to see me fighting anymore, but I would still be going to see him. Any time he was on duty, I’d be there. I was going to go searching for him as soon as the next class started, but...

“Sera, fancy seeing you here!”

The loud, cheerful voice made me jump around, the scream about to tear me wide open. Luckily, I stopped it in time when I saw Althea’s beautiful face as she came into the temple, wearing a gorgeous golden tunic over white leggings that complemented the red of her hair perfectly.

“Didn’t mean to startle you. Sorry,” she said with a mischievous grin.

I sighed, shaking my head. “You didn’t. I was just lost in my thoughts. How are you, Althea?”

“I’m good. I’m good,” she said, coming to stand next to me in front of the hearth. No fire burned in it right now—it was still morning. They tended to light it up when night fell and people came to pray on the altar and make their sacrifices. “I was just coming down here to check on my flowers when I saw you all alone. Well, with Oreo, of course.” And she leaned down. “How are you, pretty hound? Oh, I’m sorry I didn’t bring you cinnamon cookies. I didn’t know you’d be here! Don’t be mad, okay? I’ll keep some in my pocket for next time.”

And Oreo was absolutely over the moon. He loved Althea, was always interacting with her, barking and whining and wagging her tail happily, but even so, she didn’t let her touch her. Only Shade could pet her.

I don’t know why thinking about that broke my heart.

“It’s fine. She understands. Besides, she’s eating plenty of cinnamon every day at meals. The students keep bringing her things,” I told Althea.

“But nobody makes them as well as I do,” she insisted.

“You’re right, they don’t.” Oreo adored her cookies more than anything anybody else brought her.

“So, how are you? And why aren’t you in class, sweetie? Is something wrong? Are you having headaches again?”

“No, it’s not that. I just took some time off to rest. Just tired,” I said, and it was half the truth. I’d been suffering from terrible headaches right after Shade and I decided to take this

—*never-ending*—break, and she'd helped with a pale pink potion every time I'd gone to her. It had been just the pain. The emotional pain. And though it was still the same inside me, I'd gotten used to it.

“I keep telling them, they work you too hard,” Althea said, pushing my hair away from my face. “Let me see you.”

She analyzed my eyes and my cheeks, then asked me to open my mouth for her, then searched the palms of my hands, too.

“You're fine physically speaking. But sometimes the mind gets too heavy for us,” she said. “That's why therapy exists. That's why it's good to talk about what bothers us—the load lessens and we breathe easier.”

“It's nothing,” I said, shaking my head, because how was I going to tell her everything that made *the load* of my mind? Yeah, it was heavy, so heavy it was breaking my fucking back, but I couldn't just put that weight down. It was impossible.

“You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but there are others you can talk to, sweetie,” Althea said. The concern in her green eyes was genuine, and her smile warmed me a little bit.

“If there was anyone I'd want to talk to around here, it would be you,” I promised her.

She beamed. “Then let's go sit over there and enjoy the breeze.”

Taking my hand in hers, she led us around the hearth and to the altar and sat us on the cold marble floor. She was right. The breeze felt heavenly here even though it wasn't too warm outside. Even Oreo came and sat with us, watching the statues curiously.

“Spring is my favorite season,” Althea told me. “It’s the season of beginnings. Everything starts anew in spring.”

“It is lovely, indeed. I love how alive the world looks in spring.” And I loved that she didn’t try to push me to tell her anything, but...

There was something I’d thought about asking her awhile back. I’d wanted to ask Marcus, the healer at the Daedalus Palace, first, but I hadn’t dared. I hadn’t trusted him. And maybe I didn’t know Althea well enough to trust her with the truth, but I could still ask her, couldn’t I? She was a healer. If anyone in the world knew, it would be her.

“It is to remind us that nothing lasts forever. Even the longest winters end eventually, and life can always sprout anew,” Althea said. “I read that somewhere a while back.” And she laughed, her cheeks flushing a little.

“I believe it,” I said, gathering up the courage. “I’ve been reading a lot lately, too. Something that caught my attention the other day was *revival*,” I started, petting Oreo so I didn’t have to hold Althea’s eyes when I spoke. “Bringing people back from the dead.”

“Where did you read that?” she said, and I immediately tensed.

“No idea,” I blurted. “But it just made me curious. Surely there’s no such thing, right?” I turned to look at her casually. “You can’t just bring people back from the dead. Once they die, they die.”

Althea thought about it for a second. “Actually, it is quite possible. It’s been done before. You *can* bring an Elysean back with the right amount of power. It’s illegal for obvious reasons, but before, when it wasn’t, healers used to do it.”

“Wow,” I forced myself to say. “That’s insane.”

“It is. Absolutely barbaric to meddle in the affairs of the gods,” she said.

“How did they do it? How did they bring people back?”

“Those texts have been long destroyed, sweetie. I wouldn’t know. But the ritual involves a lot of magic, a sacrifice willingly given from the healer, and an Elysean—that’s it,” Althea said.

“But what about with mortals? Would that—”

“No, no—*Elyseans*. You can’t bring back mortals,” she cut me off.

My mouth was suddenly dry. “I’m pretty sure the book referred to mortals...”

She arched a brow. “The book was wrong. Only Elysean souls are immortal and can come back to life,” she told me. “Remind me, which book was that again?” Her voice was suddenly pitched high.

Fire under my skin. “I don’t remember, but I’ll tell you when I find it.”

“Bring me a copy, will you? I’d love to read it myself,” she said, and the suspicion in her eyes grew by the second.

I stood up on shaking legs, everything blurry around me. “Sure thing, but I have to go now. I have to...I need to...”

“Sera,” she said, stopping me in my tracks. “You know you can come to me with anything, right?”

Except the way she was looking at me right now, no smile in sight, eyes dark and lips pressed...

“Of course. I will. If another one of those headaches comes back, you’ll find me at your door,” I said as casually as I could. I tried to smile at her, too, but there was only so much I could fake when I felt like I was falling apart piece by piece.

“You know you’re always welcome,” Althea called after me, but I didn’t turn back. I just kept walking as fast as my shaking legs allowed me. “Bye, Oreo! See you soon!” she sang, and her voice raised goose bumps all over my skin.

Safe to say I was *never* asking the healer for painkillers—or even another question—ever again.

“Go out there. Put in the effort. Give it everything you have.

The world is no place for the lazy—move, I command you!”

—Her Highness Hera, 150

By C. M. Gelbert, House Emerald

I HID in the middle of the steep stairway that connected the front of the Arges with the second-level platform above the battlefield. I hid shamelessly, and if Oreo judged me or thought I was a coward, she was absolutely right.

Going back upstairs was out of the question and going down to the second level to see Shade or his team or anyone else at all was a big *no*. Nowhere to go, nowhere else that I wouldn't be found by anyone looking—like Max and Mave—so the stairs it was.

I was way too shocked to cry, so I just stared ahead at the mountains surrounding us, and the cityscape I could barely see from here, at the water that went all around the bottom of the mountain—at anything that I could see, anything that could get my mind off those words.

Only Elyseans can come back to life.

She was wrong, of course. She was *wrong, wrong, wrong*, but until I found out for sure, I couldn't prove it. Until I found out for sure, I couldn't fucking breathe properly.

Minutes or hours must have passed. I wasn't sure I could tell the difference anymore. I couldn't really hear anything either, my mind too caught up in the chaos that went on inside of me—but Oreo did. She heard, and when she jumped to her feet, all heads and eyes turned downward, I knew someone was coming, and I hated that I was going to have to move until they left.

Cursing under my breath, I dragged myself to the side, closer to the wall, though the stairs were pretty narrow so there wasn't much space. I would have to get up to let them pass, too, which just pissed me off more.

Until he turned the natural curvature of the mountain the stairs followed, and I saw his face: Hector of Phaethon's bloodline, whose eyes brightened up like Christmas trees when he saw me.

"Sera," he said, like he couldn't believe his damn luck.

Ah, shit. I couldn't believe mine, either, but I forced a smile anyway. "Hector, hey. Don't mind me, go ahead. Just taking a break," I said, waving my hand up, hoping he'd just pass by.

Of course, he didn't. "I haven't seen you in a while," he said. "You're right to take a break here. The sun feels amazing."

He was right—the sun was shining right on my face and the sky looked absolutely gorgeous from here. I just wished I had the patience and the will to appreciate it.

I sighed. “It really does.” The warmth of the sun on my face, not too hot and not too cold, had helped a great deal, even if I hadn’t noticed it.

“How are you, Sera? How’s training going?” Hector said, and he slowly sat down on the stairs a few feet away from me and Oreo. She no longer bared her teeth at him and didn’t even seem interested in him too much before she lay down again and continued to stare at the sky.

“I’m okay. Training’s good,” I said, wondering if there was a polite way to tell him to just leave. I didn’t want company—I was here to hide. I wanted to be alone, damn it.

“Glad to hear it. We’re all preparing,” he said, making my stomach twist and turn. “I’ve been making some modifications to the carriage, and I was just on my way to look for goddess Artemis to show her before I leave.”

“Sounds like a lot of work.” And I was indeed curious—a carriage pulled by immortal steeds?

“It is, but it’s also fun. I have help. Elyseans don’t generally like me, but since the goddess brought me here, things have been different.” The smile didn’t quite reach his eyes, and it made me stop for a second.

I’d judged this guy since day one because he said things that made me uncomfortable—like I was their savior, or I was so beautiful, or that he’d never seen a kinder smile in his life. I was really bad at taking compliments, so of course, I’d wanted to stay away from him automatically.

But now I remembered he was houseless, and Elyseans treated the houseless worse than they did mortals. Now that I thought about it, I’d never really seen Hector hanging out with anyone. He was always either by himself or with Arti.

“They do know how to make you miserable,” I said. “You should have seen how they treated me before the godlight. Not that I’m complaining—I preferred it, actually. It was just very different.”

“Yes, I heard. I heard a lot about you,” Hector said, his curls shining golden under the sun. His skin seemed to be shimmering, too, like it came alive with sunlight. Like he was wearing a damn highlighter. “These people here saw you save them. Don’t get me wrong, it was awful, but if they hadn’t been in danger, they wouldn’t have cared about your godlight. They don’t care out there.” And he nodded his head toward the mountains.

“So I’m told,” I said, shaking my head to myself. Beatrix had told me so herself.

“Anyway, I have to get going. I’m only allowed to go buy what I need during the day. I have to make it back by nightfall. Otherwise, they won’t let me through,” Hector said as he stood up. “I wish I could stay, though.”

There it was—that smile, the reason why he’d always made me uncomfortable. It meant he *liked* me. I knew it, could feel it, and it made my skin crawl.

But couldn’t I just be a normal human being for once and just *tell* him I wasn’t interested?

Because what he just said...

What he just said had potential to end this suffering of mine that was making my stomach twist and turn for hours now.

“Oh,” I said, suddenly perfectly aware of where we were—at the edge of the fucking mountain. Literally. A step to the side and I could be falling into that water. Right into my death.

Shit—what the hell was I thinking, stopping here?!

“You’re, um...you’re going out there? Out of the Academy?” I asked Hector as he tried to move around Oreo slowly as to not aggravate her.

“Yes. I need to buy some parts for the carriage’s wheels,” he said. “Why? Do you want to join me?” He grinned because he was joking, but...

“*Yes*,” I breathed, like I’d been waiting for that very thing all day. And maybe I had—I just didn’t know it. “Yes, actually. I really, really need to go out there, Hector. Just for a little while. I need to go see a friend really quickly. Can you take me with?”

The words left my mouth in a rush, and *fuck*, I couldn’t believe I actually said that.

Surprised, Hector raised his brows. “Well, yes. Sure, why not? I mean, the goddess wouldn’t mind, would she?”

“Of course not,” I lied. “She doesn’t mind me going anywhere—I have classes right now, but I’m excused! I’d go myself, but I can’t drive yet, and the headmistress won’t let a Bron drive me there during the school year. Nobody else I know who has the time, so...” *So, I’m going to use you to take me to see Alan Roux myself.*

Shit.

“Oh, I see, I see,” Hector said. “In that case, we can get going right away. I’ll just show the goddess the carriage when I get back.”

Music to my fucking ears. I smiled so big my cheeks hurt.

“Lead the way.”



IT OCCURRED to me that I was a despicable human being.

Not only was I using Hector, but I was going to see my best friend's father behind his back. I'd left the Academy grounds without anybody even knowing about it, and I had no phone with me, no way to be reached at all if someone needed me.

If Shade needed me and he couldn't find me...

Stop thinking!

"So, tell me about yourself, Sera. Where did you grow up?" said Hector as he drove one of the silver vans of the Academy. I was riding shotgun and Oreo had already laid in the backseat, curiously looking out the window as we went. It had surprised me—she'd refused to come to the city with Max and Mave in January, but now she didn't seem to have a problem with the van anymore.

The Brons by the tunnel hadn't stopped us. For a second, I'd considered hiding in the back until we left, but then I realized they wouldn't know whether I was allowed out here or not.

Luckily, I'd been right.

Now I was in Idaeia with Hector, about to see the man who'd brought me back to life. About to finally meet him, finally talk to him, finally ask him *how* he'd done what he'd done to me that night.

I knew he wasn't well. I knew he was in that institution for a reason, but I had faith that he would recognize me as soon as

he saw me. I had faith that he would know exactly who I was as soon as I told him.

Max was going to hate me, and Shade was probably going to be pissed, and Carmine was going to have my fucking head if she found out, but how could I *not* go see him? How could I sit there at the Academy, knowing what I knew, with that information Althea gave me just that morning, and do *nothing*?!

No, I refused to sit by. I refused to not know—not anymore. It had been seven months since I came to this place, and I was so close to finally learning all my secrets. If I stopped now, I'd never forgive myself.

In the end, that was all that mattered.

So, while I told Hector about the foster homes I grew up in, being as vague as possible, a part of me still thought about that—*I needed to know*. No matter what happened by the end of this day, I was going to see Alan Roux, and I was going to rightfully demand my answers. If the world ended tomorrow, I'd have the truth.

And I really, truly hoped it would set me free exactly like I expected.

“So, where are you headed again?” Hector asked while we were already driving in the city, Elyseans giving us the stink eye—was it the car? Probably—how else were they going to know that Hector was houseless? They hadn't known I was mortal at all when I'd come out here with Max and Mave before. I'd never even been looked at twice.

“House of Care—that's all I have. It's an institution where they attend to sick Elyseans,” I said. “Don't ask me for the street name because I don't have it.” I hadn't looked because I

hadn't really thought I'd be crazy enough to come to this place all by myself at any point in my life or try to talk to Alan Roux.

Hector laughed. "Don't worry, we'll find it. And then I'll come pick you up when I'm done with my things, okay?"

Fuck, I could kiss the guy right now. "That sounds perfect."

We found the House of Care within fifteen minutes. We drove in rounds for a bit while he searched with his phone and with the little information I could give him, but the moment I saw the beginning of the street where Max and Mave had grown up, I knew we were already there.

Sure enough, at the end of it was the institution exactly as I'd left it.

And suddenly, everything was *real*.

"Don't go anywhere else—wait for me here, okay? I don't know how to find you if you leave," Hector said, eyeing Oreo sitting in the back suspiciously.

"I'll be right here."

My voice was light as a breeze, my eyes stuck on the golden gates of the one-story building, on that sign that said *House of Care*, and I was hit with a strong sense of *deja vu*.

I was here.

Fuck, I was here. I'd found the man who'd brought me back from the dead, and I was about to be face-to-face with him any minute—just like I'd been fighting to do since the moment I saw that memory.

I actually did it. I did exactly what I came here to do.

Hector drove away in his silver van and I pushed open the gates of the House of Care, feeling as if I was walking in a dream. The mowed lawn, the beautiful building, every inch of it engraved to perfection, the big red door at the top of the entrance stairs—it all looked like it wasn't there, just a hologram, a figment of my imagination. Even when the door opened and that man came out—Jake with the warm smile—it still felt like I wasn't really here.

“You're Max's friend,” Jake said as I slowly made my way toward the stairs. Fuck, I'd never felt quite so *lightweight* before. I seriously couldn't feel my body.

“Yes, I am. Hi, Jake,” I said with the best smile I could muster.

“Sedorah, was it?” he said, eyeing the coat I wore, and the white leather pants underneath, and my boots. My face, and my hair...he analyzed every inch of me, then he looked at Oreo walking beside me, but he wasn't surprised. He didn't wrinkle his nose or flinch at the sight of me—on the contrary. He seemed...*impressed*.

That's when it struck me—I looked like them.

To the outside world, I looked Elysean. My face, my hair was *glowing* thanks to Professor Satis's meredine regime. I was wearing the best of Elysean-made leathers, and I had a Cerberus pup following my every step.

To Jake here, I looked exactly like *him*...and the truth went further, and it got way uglier because *I was*.

My God, I was actually Elysean for real.

“Yes, that's right. It's good to see you again,” I forced myself to say, my voice sounding smaller by the second.

Just that when I woke up that morning, I never even imagined that I was going to leave the Academy grounds, and that I was going to find myself in front of Jake, and that I was going to have to face what I had been running from for months—I was Elysean. And I could never again change back to who I used to be.

“It’s good to see you, too. You’ve brought a new friend,” Jake said, looking at Oreo, who watched him curiously as she sat by my feet with her tail wagging.

“Yep. That’s Oreo. She found me a few months ago,” I told him, and his smile widened.

I was already sweating. I had to do something about that—just pretend to be somebody else. Somebody like Mave, who wouldn’t be bothered by having to look this man in the eye and lie through her teeth.

“You know, they say hellhounds only choose those with the most noble souls,” he said in a whisper, like he was letting me in on a secret.

“So I’ve been told,” I said, looking down at the pup for a second just to get myself together. “I’m here to see Max’s father, Jake. He can’t leave the Academy now that classes have started, so he asked me to drop by and check up on him when I got the chance.”

“Oh, is that so?” Jake said, scratching his cheek. “He’s never sent anybody else to check on Mr. Roux before.”

“Yes, well, he didn’t have anybody else to ask before,” I said, strangely not really bothered by the lies for the first time in my life. This was bigger than my morals. This was bigger than anything I’d ever done before. It was Alan Roux, and I’d do anything at all to get to him right now. Anything.

“We actually have a very strict code about visitors, Sedorah,” Jake told me.

“And I understand that. But Carmine is not going to be happy if I go back there and tell her you didn’t let me see her brother.”

Jake’s eyes widened, his surprise probably matching mine. I had never sounded more convincing in my life, not even when I was telling truths.

“I understand, I understand, just that...” Jake’s voice trailed off as he rubbed his hands together, looking from me to Oreo then back again, indecisive.

I took a step closer. “Listen, Jake. My team is going to be back to get me any second. I really don’t have much time, but I promised Max I’d be here, so here I am. Just make up your mind so I can either keep the word I gave him or get back to my life.”

He raised a brow. “You’re a sentinel?”

“Well, you said it yourself. Hellhounds only choose the noblest of souls. Who can possibly be more noble than sentinels who fight monsters every day so you and everyone else here can live your lives happy and safe?”

I thought I nailed it. Or at least that was exactly what Mave would have said. I even tried to channel her as I looked into his eyes, never blinking mine, slightly raising my chin the way Elyseans used to do all the time before the Vault incident.

“I guess we can make an exception today, since it’s Mr. Roux. We have great respect for Madam Carmine and for your work there at the Academy,” Jake said, and it was like he’d handed me the entire world on a silver platter with his own hands.

Nodding my head once, I made sure to not let the excitement show on my face.

“That’s good news. She’ll be pleased.” I looked at the door behind him. “Shall we?”

It was Jake who was sweating now, but he led me up the entrance stairs and through the door anyway. Whether he regretted it or not didn’t matter. Whether he felt guilty or panicked over breaking his rules made no difference at all anymore. He took me down the wide hallway and through the door at the end, and reality still felt like a dream to me, so I didn’t really feel the ground underneath my feet as I followed.

I didn’t really feel anything at all until doors opened and closed, and then Jake was stepping to the side, saying, “Mr. Roux, you have a visitor today...I know, I know, I was surprised, too! Please sit up...”

I blinked the bright stars in front of my vision away as fast as I could.

“Please don’t take long, Miss Sedorah. It’s his nap time soon,” Jake said, and with a curt nod, he finally closed the door behind him, leaving me, Oreo, and Alan Roux alone.

Persephone was daughter of Demeter, goddess of the harvest, dearly loved by her mother. She always carried her daughter on her lap when she sat in her golden throne in Olympus. When she grew up, her mother would take her to Earth to watch the tress and fields, and where Persephone stepped, flowers bloomed. She was so lovely indeed, that the god of the dead could not resist her, and so one day when she was in a meadow gathering flowers, he split the ground open and came out with his dark chariot drawn by black horses, and seized her.

The ground closed again when he pulled her down, and so her cries for help were never heard. A herd of pigs had fallen into the hole, too, by accident, and now the swineherd wept for his lost pigs as Demeter searched for her daughter in vain. For weeping Persephone was already in the Kingdom of the Dead, seated on a throne made of black marble beside Hades, decked with gold and precious stones that never brought her any joy.

—**Book of Creation, Volume IV, 1st Edition, 271**

by Emilia Marvos, House Emerald

SURREAL.

The windows let in enough sunlight to blind you. They were to the left of the spacious room, just as fancy as everything else Elysean-made. Cream-colored furniture mixed in with red, a fresh batch of red flowers over the small round dining table, a TV screen mounted on the wall, and a big shelf

full of books to its side. Across from them was a twin bed with red sheets and a recliner by the foot of it.

A recliner in which sat Alan Roux, looking nothing at all like he had in my memories or in that picture of his I found.

My knees shook. This was it. I was really here.

“Stranger,” Alan muttered, gripping the book he’d been reading tightly.

His hair was more grey than brown, combed back, so long it touched his shoulders. His beard, completely silver, was long enough that I couldn’t see his lips at all from his mustache. He wore a white robe with red threads, his initials sewn on the breast pockets, fluffy loafers and dark red pajama bottoms, and he looked so normal. His eyes were wide and brown, so perfectly alert that for a second I considered that everyone had lied to me. No way this man wasn’t *okay*—he looked perfectly fine to me.

“Hello, Mr. Roux,” I said, and my voice shook, and my entire body was vibrating as I made my way deeper into the room, closer to him. “My name is Sedorah Sinclair. You might not know me now, but you’ve met me before.” Big warm tears streamed from my eyes and I hardly felt them as I stopped in front of him. “You actually saved my life.”

Alan Roux raised both brows as he looked at me, never blinking those brown eyes that were a copy of Max’s, never even breathing as he took me in—because he understood. He fucking understood everything I was saying, and he remembered me. I was sure he remembered me. I was sure he’d get up any second now and tell me that he knew exactly who I was.

And I cried, my shoulders shaking, but I never let out a single sound because a part of me still had trouble believing that I was here. That I'd made it all the way to him somehow.

But...

"Stranger," Alan repeated, his voice stronger now, his brows narrowed, the brown of his eyes darker.

It was like he'd slapped me across the face.

"No, Mr. Roux, I—" I stopped talking.

Closing my eyes, I took in a deep breath and I forced myself to calm down. Stop shaking. Stop crying. Just...*stop*.

Oreo, who was walking around the room sniffing the corners, looked calm, too. She didn't seem alarmed in the least, and Alan was still looking at me, like he hadn't noticed her there at all.

I tried to smile for him—this man had saved my life. For the longest time, I thought I would *hate* him when I saw him. I thought I'd demand he undo whatever he did to me that night—and how *dare* he touch me with his magic?!

But now that I was here, now that I looked him in the eye, it was different. It was nothing at all like I'd imagined.

I wanted to hug him and kiss his hands. I wanted to thank him for giving me another chance at life. I wanted to thank him every single day for the rest of my life, too, and to think he couldn't even understand me...

"Are you...are you like this because of me?" I whispered, falling to my knees in front of his recliner. The tears wouldn't stop, but I was calmer. It was the best I could do. "Don't you remember me, Alan? I'm the girl—the little girl who burned in

the car thirteen years ago. I'm the little girl Peter killed. Don't you remember how you pulled me out of the flames?"

His eyes widened again, and my heart tripped all over itself—*he did*. He fucking remembered. He *had* to!

"Yes, that's right. You pulled me out and you b-b-brought me back," I choked, reaching out to hold onto the armrest of the recliner, afraid I would collapse. "You brought me back from the dead, Alan. I saw it. You saved me," I whispered, and I broke and came back together again in the seconds that followed as I kneeled in front of the man I owed my life to.

And...

"*Stranger*," Alan Roux whispered to me, leaning back in the recliner. "Have they sent you to trick me? Have they sent you to mess with my head?" he demanded, and when he raised his finger to point at my face, he was shaking, too. Just as badly as I was.

"No, Alan, no. Of course not, I—"

"Stranger!" he shouted, eyes wide and bloodshot, hands fisted tightly.

Stranger, stranger, stranger... he wouldn't stop.

"No, please. You have to remember, Alan! You have to remember what you did to me because you brought me back! The goddess Mnemosyne showed me what happened that night—I saw you. You brought me back, and I have to know how. *How* did you do it when I'm mortal? What did you do that did *this* to you in return?!"

"I will not be silenced! I will not be silenced! They know and they will not silence me by sending their heretics to manipulate me!" he kept shouting, and I was dying inside every time he did.

But I tried again anyway.

“You have to tell me what you did. Something’s wrong with me and I need to know how to fix it. I need to know, Alan!”

Please, please, please...

It will help you, too!

Please, remember how you brought me back. Please...

*I **need** to know!*

But he didn’t.

I’d finally found him, and not only did he not know who I was, but he was screaming his guts out at me, trying to get me away, *terrified* of me. Fuck, I was terrorizing him just by kneeling there.

I don’t know how I moved. Oreo was whining near my feet, nudging my leg, and I somehow got up. I somehow found my way to the door and I walked out as the calls of Alan Roux, a man I’d possibly turned mad, haunted me like fucking ghosts.

I saw nothing, heard nothing for a long time, only focused on putting one foot in front of the other, on getting the hell out of there as fast as I could.

Eventually, I could make out Jake’s smiling face, and he asked me something, I thought. He said something, but his words were lost in the chaos of my mind and I just wanted to get out. I just needed air. So, I moved right past him and toward the door.

I ran out into the front yard where the open sky was over me, and there was enough air for my failing lungs. *Breathe, breath, breathe, Sera*, I had to remind myself, as Oreo barked

and whined after me, and Jake was calling, saying something from the front door, too.

I didn't turn. I didn't say a single thing. I just walked out those gates and onto the street, and kept going until my legs gave up on me.

WHEN HECTOR FOUND me sitting in the street, he was his usual cheerful self. But one look at my face, which must have been swollen still even though I'd stopped crying some time ago, and his smile dropped.

I hated to ruin his good mood. I hated to ruin everything I touched, but here we were. And even though part of me wished to wander aimlessly around the city until the world fell out of existence, I had to climb in the van and let Hector drive me back to the Academy with my mouth clamped shut.

He tried to get me to talk. He tried to get me to laugh by telling me silly jokes.

He gave up halfway back.

"If someone hurt you, you can tell me, you know," Hector said before I stepped out of the van in front of the arched bridge that led to the mountain's edge.

It was almost funny. "Thank you, Hector. I appreciate this. I won't forget it," I said, and with my head high and Oreo in tow, I returned to the Arges a completely different person.

I didn't go to class. I didn't open the door when Max and Mave came to check up on me. I didn't go downstairs to eat, either.

I just sat on the floor in my room and stared at the door until every inch of me was numb.



IT MUST HAVE BEEN SOMETIME after midnight when I heard the footsteps.

I'd moved a while ago, had traded the floor of my room for the floor of the hallway, right in front of the door to the Opal private chambers. It wouldn't let me through to go look for Shade, and I'd had no energy to return to my room, so I'd just sat there to rest against the wall while Oreo whined instead.

Minutes turned to hours, and I wasn't even sure if Shade would come back tonight, though his three days of service for the week were over. He stayed a couple extra days downstairs all the time, and sometimes he came in through the door on their side of the Arges, but sometimes he came from the front, too.

I must have been lucky tonight—or *unlucky*, rather—because I looked up from where I'd rested my head on my knees to find Shade and his team walking toward me slowly, looking like angels of death come to curse my soul and condemn me to an eternity of suffering.

God knew I deserved it. I knew exactly how dangerous I could be, that I could hurt Shade, that I could leave him on the floor breathless, yet here I was, desperate for him. Here I was, ignoring everything else just to give myself a little break because it had been too much too long.

Good ole selfish Sera.

When our eyes locked, Shade stopped walking, and so did his team. For once Ivy wasn't on the floor already, trying to get Oreo to let her touch her. They all looked a bit shocked and a lot *concerned* as they looked at me—had I been crying?

Because I couldn't tell. Everything was just the same at this point.

But then Shade moved.

He moved, took step after step toward me, and each time his foot hit the floor, darkness burst out, spreading to the sides fast and taking away the hallway and the doors, his team, and even Oreo within seconds.

I don't know how I managed to stand up, but I jumped in his arms like there was no reason in the world not to, and he caught me. He always caught me, and he held me to his chest, like he, too, couldn't think of a reason why he shouldn't. Why it was so important that he didn't, that I stayed as far away from him as possible.

"What's the matter, Snowflake? Tell me who did this. Tell me," Shade whispered, and my heart broke into a million pieces. "Just give me a name. Please, just tell me."

He was *shaking*.

"Nobody," I choked. "Nobody, just *me*." I did this. I did all of it.

"Look at me," Shade whispered, leaning his head back. That's when I realized how swollen my eyes were—I could hardly move my lids.

"Nobody," I whispered. "Nobody did anything."

The storms in his eyes raged. Shade leaned down and put his arm under my knees and pulled me up like I weighed nothing. I held onto his neck tightly as he moved, and I didn't care where he took us. We were in the Void now, and I couldn't care less where I ended up as long as I was surrounded by darkness and Shade's hands were on me.

Because I had lost my fucking mind.

When he lay us down on something soft, I imagined it was my bed, in my room. He held me to his chest still and lay with me, never letting go for a single second. I'd run all out of tears now, so I just closed my eyes and breathed in his scent, and I reminded myself that this was my safe place. Shade and the Void were *mine*, and nothing and nobody could get to me here, no matter what it meant that I'd allowed myself to get close to him again.

A sigh escaped my parted lips and my heart finally slowed down the beating. My soul was resting.

Sleep escaped me no matter how hard I tried to cling to it, though. Each time it pulled me under halfway, the memory of Alan's face, his grey beard and brown eyes, the way his hands shook while he fisted them tightly, his initials sewn on the breast pocket of his robe...so many small details spun around in my mind and had me wide awake within seconds.

Shade never said anything. He never asked me what the matter was again or assumed someone had hurt me. He just held me to his chest and played with my hair, caressed my neck and kissed my head softly.

I had no idea how much time passed or if it was morning yet, but eventually, I spoke.

"I went to see Alan Roux today," I started, and Shade kept going. He kept running his fingers through my hair and kissing me gently, slowly. He didn't comment, didn't lean back to look at me, didn't laugh at how utterly stupid I was.

So, I kept going.

I told him everything—about seeing Hector on the stairs, and then going with him to the city, and I told him how I'd lied

to Jake, how it had been easy once I pretended to be Mave, and how he let me in and I finally—*finally*—was face-to-face with the man who'd brought me back from the dead.

And he hadn't even recognized me.

More tears sprung from my eyes as I spoke, but these were tired tears. The last of them that dried quickly when Shade caught them with his thumb.

"Something's wrong with me, Shade. I know it," I ended up whispering at last.

"Nothing's wrong with you, Snowflake," he said without hesitation. "And I'm glad you went to see Roux. I wish you'd have asked me to take you, but I'm glad you saw him."

A terrible laugh burst out of me then. "Except I'm staying away from you, remember? I'm supposed to not go anywhere near you or the Void, but here I am." I laughed some more. "I told you that night at the Palace that I was selfish, Shadow Boy. I told you, but you didn't believe me." Now I had proof.

"You're the least selfish person I know," Shade told me. "Sometimes I *wish* you were more selfish, but then I think you're absolutely perfect exactly like this, so never mind."

"You're a hopeless man."

"I'm an honest man. I've never sugarcoated anything a day in my life."

"Then you're a blind man, too."

"And I still see you." He kissed my forehead, then my nose, slowly teasing me until I raised my head to meet his lips with mine.

Then, I kissed Shade.

After three months, I kissed those lips I burned for, and it was like we'd been like this just last night. Like no time at all had passed since the last time I lay in his arms.

The last time I burst into wings and almost killed him.

That alone made me lower my head and hide my face under his chin again, but it wasn't enough to get me to leave. It wasn't enough to make me get up as I should have and ask him to take us out of the Void.

"Something's very, *very* wrong with me," I whispered instead. "I have wings of light—you saw them. I have this thing inside me that no godstone can withstand. I keep breaking them. I broke a ruby the size of my fist last time—nothing works. There's just something there, something in that magic that doesn't let me get through."

It felt so fucking incredible to say those words out loud, to know that we were perfectly safe from prying ears.

"Something is not right. I'm telling you—I feel it. Something's wrong with me." And I'd say it as many times as I needed for him to believe me.

"Not a single thing is wrong with you," he insisted once again.

"Then *why*?" I demanded. "Why am I so strange? Why did I always see godstones and those god signs at the trials, and why could I always feel magic, and why did those wings of light come out of me that night? If that's not *wrong*, then tell me why!"

I thought for sure he was going to come up with bullshit reasons to try to convince me, but something even more terrifying happened: Shade didn't say a single thing.

Not only that but his entire body froze, and because mine was flush against his, I noticed. I couldn't miss it if I tried.

Leaning back a bit, I looked up at his face. At the storms in his eyes. My heart skipped a little beat because it was almost like...

"You know." He *knew* what it was about me?

Shade closed his eyes, jaws clenching so hard I heard the sound of it clearly. "I suspect."

Those two words held me prisoner for an eternity.

"Suspect what?"

"I'm not sure yet, Snowflake. I—"

"Suspect *what?*"

We were both frozen as we looked at each other, muscles locked tightly, breathing cut off as I waited and waited and waited...

Then Shade said, "That you were always Elysean."

Those words didn't hold me prisoner. My body refused to accept them. They hung in the air between us, in the complete darkness of the Void for what must have been hours because I couldn't make sense of them yet.

"Like I said, I only suspect," Shade eventually said. "Because of the Void, first and foremost. Look at it, Snowflake. It has never been calmer since it first opened up to me. It connects to you almost as well as it connects to me."

"No." Because he'd lost his mind, too, apparently, and what he was saying was utterly absurd. That's the right word: *absurd*.

“Oreo makes it very difficult to believe you were ever mortal, too,” Shade continued, like he couldn’t see that I was breaking, yet again, right there in his arms. “The Cerberus have never once chosen mortals before, Snowflake. I’ve been reading on this so much—they *never* have. Not a single case of it was ever recorded.”

“That doesn’t mean it *can’t* happen. I read, too—no book specifies the species of Cerberus masters.”

“True,” Shade said. “But their behavior, their choices through the centuries tell us much more than theory can.”

“Shade...” I whispered because now that I was aware of myself, aware of this conversation, things were starting to click and I couldn’t let that happen. What Althea said was coming back to me, too, and I didn’t want to fucking hear it.

“Everything else is irrelevant, though, compared to what happened to you thirteen years ago.”

There it was...

“The fact that you were able to even come back... Snowflake, mortals cannot. I’ve talked to people, have read texts in the forbidden library—only Elyseans are able to come back to life.”

My ears rang. I held on to the back of his shirt so tightly my hands hurt. I just squeezed my eyes shut and willed this day to be a dream with all my strength. I wished I’d never spoken to Althea, that I’d never gotten Hector to take me to Alan, that I’d never lied to Jake, that I’d never gone out of my room to find Shade.

I wished and I wished and I wished...

“Snowflake, I—”

“Kiss me.” I raised my head and slammed my lips to his the next second.

It was wrong, I knew it. This whole thing, this whole day and month and year were wrong, but that didn't stop me from needing a break. That didn't stop me from throwing caution to the wind and kissing the hell out of Shade, just so I could forget for a moment. Just so it would stop hurting.

And he didn't hesitate. I loved him for it, that he never hesitated no matter the situation. No matter that he knew exactly how much I could hurt him, he still kissed me and moved on top of me, hands running everywhere, igniting me like he used to, like I'd been yearning to burn for such a long time. Locking my limbs around him, I took and took and took, sucking on his tongue and biting his lips until I forgot for real.

Shade was magic. He was the most powerful spell in the world designed only for me, and the more I kissed him, the more I wanted. The more he touched me the more I was grinding against his hips, his cock hard and ready for me pressing against my center, and way too many clothes between us.

My hands were under his shirt and his under mine, and we touched each other with a desperation that had built up through days and weeks and months. We kissed like we'd been starving for real, and before the minute was over, our shirts were off, disappeared somewhere in the darkness. To feel his naked skin on mine again was everything, and suddenly none of it mattered anymore. All those nights where I'd lain awake dreaming about this, they didn't matter because I was here now. Shade was here and I didn't need anything else in the world.

I let go.

My hands shook as I reached for the zipper of his pants and finally grabbed his cock in my hands. The sounds he let out added more fuel to my fire, and I was dying to feel him against my throbbing clit. I was dying to have him fill me, make me whole again, make the world right like he used to.

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve fantasized about being here again? This room, your bed, your body is my whole world, Snowflake,” Shade whispered as he massaged my breast and played with my nipple with one hand, and he ran his thumb over my parted lip with the other while I jerked him off.

“I need you, Shade,” I said breathlessly.

“I’ve been dreaming of claiming you again, baby,” he said, biting my jaw almost violently as he thrust his hips harder against my hands. “I’ve been dreaming of your beautiful pussy every night.” His hand was suddenly under my pants, and he didn’t bother to undo the button or the zipper. He just slipped his fingers down my soaked folds and my head fell back, my muscles instantly locked. I squeezed his cock harder.

For a second, all we could do was moan and feel what we made each other feel. Be in the dream we’d both shared for such a long fucking time now.

“Tell me, baby. Tell me you thought about me when you were touching yourself,” he whispered against my mouth as he pumped two fingers inside me. My hips raised to meet him, and I kept playing with his cock, *dying* to feel it inside me, too.

“Every time. I thought about you every fucking time,” I breathed. “I called out your name every time I came for you...” He growled, biting my bottom lip hard. “I imagined your hands on my body and your cock in my mouth for *hours*

at a time..." It was the truth, and I wasn't even embarrassed to admit it. "But none of it came even close to this."

"Never," he said without missing a beat, then growled again, pressing himself onto me harder, thrusting his fingers inside me faster and faster. "Good girl. That's my good girl," he kept whispering. My hips moved in perfect rhythm with him and when his tongue was in my mouth like that, too, it was impossible to hold back the orgasm for much longer.

"Look at me, baby. I want to see it when you come for me. Open your eyes," he said, and I did.

I opened my eyes and I saw his perfect face, his hair all over the place, his skin glistening with sweat. I loved how heavily he breathed, and how every time I squeezed his cock harder, he hissed, throwing his head back for a moment. His fingers dug deep inside me, curving up as he went, and I was so, so close...

So close to exploding into a blinding blue light, too.

I felt it inside me, *saw* it in my mind's eye the same way I did in training with Arti.

The light was spreading, pulsating inside of me together with my pleasure.

And I knew that once it was strong enough and it built momentum, I would not be able to stop it. I would not be able to hold it back, especially not when the pleasure was threatening to wipe my mind away completely.

The image of Shade lying on my bedroom floor, barely breathing, was suddenly in front of me.

"Stop!" I cried, and I moved so fast you'd think I was burning for real.

I pushed Shade off me, and I crawled away from him on all fours in the darkness, as far away as my body allowed, until I had no choice but to stop. No choice but to sit there with my head between my arms, shaking.

“Snowflake,” Shade whispered reaching out his hands to me, though he was five feet away. Funny, I could have sworn I’d moved much farther.

“Don’t! Please, just don’t come near me,” I said, my voice shaking though I wasn’t crying. Not that I could tell, anyway.

“Okay,” Shade whispered, sitting down himself. “Okay, I won’t. Please, just calm down.”

“I-I-I feel it. The light, it’s everywhere. Just stay away.”
Before I burst into wings and kill you...

“I will. I’ll stay right here,” he said, elbows resting on his knees, suddenly looking tormented. “Please don’t cry, Snowflake. It makes me want to break the fucking world in half. Whatever you need, tell me, just don’t cry.”

Shit, I was crying. He was right, my face was wet. The tears had been slipping from me and I hadn’t even realized it.

“I’m not crying,” I told Shade, wiping my face as I hugged my knees to my chest. “I’m not crying, Shadow Boy, I promise. I’m okay as long as you sit over there.” As long as I didn’t hurt him.

“Then I won’t move,” he promised.

And that’s how we stayed in perfect silence, sitting in the dark across from one another, until I was completely calmed down.

“...she is one true force of nature, but she does not want to be alone, either. It is you who needs to show her that you can complete her, not tear her apart. You can make her stronger, not peel off her strength.

Show her that you are worth the fear and the potential pain. And have patience, kind soul, for if she begins to believe in you, truly believe in you, you will be one lucky man.”

—Aphrodite’s Book of Beauty, 2nd Edition, 181

By Adorra Neros, House Opal

“YOU KNOW, I was going to sit out there in the hallway after I showered,” Shade eventually said.

“I see your shadows when you’re there.” I always saw his shadows slipping under the door, calling my name, and it was always a struggle to keep myself from going to him.

“I keep hoping you’ll open up,” he said with a wicked grin.

“I remember a time when you were constantly trying to keep me away,” I teased. “Remember that, Shadow boy?”

He grinned wider. “I did try to warn you. You’re a stubborn little Snowflake.”

“You thought you would hurt *me*,” I said with a sad smile. “Neither of us imagined it would be the other way around.”

“No, I’ll admit, I never even considered that you could make my darkness submit to you so easily. Not at first.”

“Is it too naive of me to hope that that light will submit to *you* the same way?”

“Of course not. Just as soon as you learn to control it.”

“I’ve been trying, Shade. I’ve been trying—I can’t. It’s too powerful. I’ve broken over thirty godstones so far—*thirty*.”

“So, you’ll try the thirty-first. It’s not over until you do it,” said Shade, like he really believed that wholeheartedly.

“But what if I can’t?” What if I tried the thirty-first, and the fiftieth, and the hundredth, and it still didn’t work?

“Then we’ll keep trying until you can,” he calmly said.

I smiled, shaking my head. “Do you wish I’d listened to you when we talked at the Stargazing tower?” He’d tried so hard to keep me from coming here, from learning their secrets that I now lived with.

“Never,” he said without missing a beat. His skin was still glistening with sweat, though we weren’t breathing heavily anymore. Our hormones had calmed down somewhat, except that light...that light was right there. Right under my skin.

And the more I calmed down, the more afraid it made me.

“Really?”

“Really. Sometimes I want to, but I can’t. You’re here. You’ve given me purpose, Snowflake. You’ve given meaning to my life. I can’t wish that away no matter what happens.”

“Not even if I accidentally hurt you again?”

“Never,” he repeated the same way.

God, how I wished I could be close to him right now, just to kiss those lips.

“You’re glowing, Snowflake,” Shade said. I looked down at myself, but I didn’t see anything different about my body. I was only wearing my bra and I could see most of my torso just fine, but Shade could see me far better.

“That’s another reason why it occurred to me you might be one of us,” Shade said, making every hair on my body stand at attention. “Since the first day I saw you, you *glowed*. Never as brightly as you do right now but you always glowed. Just like snow in the dark.”

I closed my eyes, breathing in deeply for a moment.

“But I realize now that it was never my imagination. I thought I saw you like that because of how I feel about you, but I think I just see your magic better because of mine. Because my darkness makes the light that is inside you much brighter. It has been growing and growing every day for months, now that I think about it,” Shade continued. “And I think it was always there, Snowflake. I think you always had it.”

I released my breath, felt the warmth of the Void on my skin for another moment, then said, “Take us out.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m okay now. Take us out.” Before I ruined the Void, too. Irrevocably.

Shade pulled the darkness toward himself little by little, and before ten seconds were over, my room came into view, the lamp on, and Oreo raising her heads lazily as sleep left her.

The second she realized that we were here, she jumped to her feet, ignored me like she couldn’t even see me resting

against the wardrobe door, and ran to Shade, who had his back against the bed's leg.

Shade laughed. The sound of it brought a smile to my face. The sight of Oreo half lying on his lap while they wrestled—her barking and biting his hands playfully, as Shade pretended to want to close her jaws together—broke me into a million pieces. I wanted to be over there with them so badly.

“When I was a boy, I used to dream about having a pup like Oreo,” Shade said. “And most of Hades's Bloodline get chosen when they come into contact with the Cerberus—the original hellhound is his chosen pet. So, everyone would tell me, *it's just a matter of time, Adryan. You'll get one, you'll see. Just a matter of time.*” He shook his head, and it caught me a bit off guard. Shade had never talked to me about his childhood before. “So, I would make my mom take me to menageries all around the city to see the Cerberus, hoping one would come home with me. They never did.”

“Well, I'm pretty sure Oreo would love to go home with you,” I said, imagining a young Shade grabbing his mother by the hand and dragging her to go see hellhounds. “Traitorous pup,” I teased, and Oreo barked. She knew it was a joke, but she still got off Shade's lap for a second, ran to me with her mouths wide open and her tongues hanging out, and basically jumped on my face. She licked the hell out of me as fast as she could as if to say, *there, I'm giving you some love, too.*

Then she ran back to Shade and continued to play with him.

Shade's and my laughter mended me a little bit.

“Won't you come closer?” he said.

“I’d rather just watch you two from here,” I whispered. “What else did you want when you were a kid?”

“Lots of things. I loved bikes. Then I loved fast cars. Then I loved poetry. Then came guitars, I think.” The idea of Shade with a guitar in his hands did something to my insides. Suddenly they felt all mushy and soft.

“I want to hear you playing.”

He grinned. “I haven’t played in a few years. I’m a bit rusty.”

“I don’t care.”

“Then you will. As soon as I get my hands on a guitar, I’ll come play for you.”

I nodded. “Deal.”

“I couldn’t do much more with other people, though. With other kids. I was always on my own,” he continued. “So, I only ever had hobbies you do by yourself.”

“Why’s that?” I asked, even though I didn’t mean to pry. I’d never asked him questions that I thought would make him uncomfortable before, but I wanted to know him so badly. If I couldn’t have his body, I could still have his stories. I could still have more pieces of him that would help me complete the image of him in my mind.

“Because of what I did,” Shade said. “Because of the Void.” He looked so completely torn just now.

“You don’t have to tell me anything,” I said because I didn’t want him to hurt. Memories had a way of bringing up the pain with them. I knew that firsthand. And I hated it when he hurt.

“I want to,” Shade said. “It’s not a happy story, though.”

“Happy stories are boring,” I said, and he chuckled.

“That, they are.” Looking down at Oreo sitting on his lap, biting his fingers while he scratched her heads with the others, he spoke.

“I was eight years old when the Void first opened up to me. I had no way of controlling it. I had no clue what was even happening. We were all at home—my parents and my uncle and me, and I felt it coming right after I went to bed for the night, so I got up again. I got up and tried to run down the stairs, call for my parents, terrified, because I knew. My instincts knew what was coming. But I only made it to the middle of the stairway before the shadows exploded.”

My heart beat a mile a minute. I looked at Shade, tried to imagine everything he said, but it was impossible still.

“The Void came out of me all at once, finding me weak, unable to even connect to it properly, and it just spiraled more and more out of control. I ruined my entire house within forty seconds. My parents barely managed to shield themselves, but nothing else survived. I basically did to the entire neighborhood what I did to the main hallway that night. You saw.”

“Oh, my God, Shade...” I choked on my own words.

“I killed twenty people in their homes in my neighborhood, three of them teenagers. They had no way of knowing what was coming, and no time to shield themselves with magic, even if they could have. My parents tried to stop me, but they couldn’t. I couldn’t even hear them.” He smiled sadly. “The Void doesn’t tend to just let people in, especially when it’s manifesting, Snowflake. It usually just destroys them completely.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I took in a deep breath and I tried to *not* see what he was talking about now.

“Eventually, the darkness began to sort of pulsate in and out of me. I still couldn’t hear them at all, so my uncle stabbed me on the back at the first chance he got.” Every inch of my body raised in goose bumps. “I don’t really blame him—nobody does. If he hadn’t, even more people would have died. Some think the Void would have swallowed the entire city if it only had the time to do so that night.”

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head, because *no*. That was not the Void. I’d felt it. I’d been inside it. That was *not* the Void!

“Yes, Snowflake. He stabbed me, and then my father tried to save me, so he put his godstone in my back. Right on the knife wound, as deep inside me as he could push it. Then I passed out, and the opal on my back absorbed my magic, stored it inside it. My father was in a coma for three months. He never really recovered. He died two years later.”

I was no longer in control of my own body, so I wasn’t even surprised when I found myself crawling to him now. I wrapped my arms around his torso and rested my head on his shoulder while he chuckled.

“It’s okay, Snowflake. That was a long time ago,” he said, but I knew it wasn’t true. God, I understood him so much more now—why he always thought he wasn’t worthy when we first met. Why he kept everyone at arm’s length—he was afraid. Fuck, he was so afraid.

And I understood other people, too. Why they warned me about him, told me to stay away from him. I understood so much more. He lived with this every day.

Shade lived with this the same way I lived with my story. The same way every person lives with theirs, I imagined.

“I’m so sorry,” I choked, kissing his cheek.

“It’s okay, I promise,” he said. “I learned to control it. It still slips away once every year, usually close to February, which is when it happened that first time. But I have means to control it—a magic shield as well as a vault designed to contain the outburst. It’s manageable. Or, at least, it was. Now, I’m not so sure anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the Void has always felt different to me. I was always afraid of it in a way, always waiting for it to slip out of my control because that’s how it behaved, if that makes sense. But that night you came through, it changed it. I swear, Snowflake, it’s the strongest and calmest I’ve ever felt it in my life.”

“That’s good then.” I hated to even think about him being locked up in a vault while he went through all of that alone.

“It is. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“I don’t, Shadow Boy. I never did.” And I really believed that the Void was a direct response to him and his emotions. Just like that light was connected to mine. *He* controlled it—nobody else.

He laughed again. “Liar,” he whispered. “You always do. That’s why you come to watch me fight.”

“You come to watch me fight, too.”

“I never said I didn’t worry. I always do, too.”

I smiled, shaking my head. “It wasn’t your fault, Shade,” I forced myself to say because I could practically *see* the weight

he held on his shoulders now. I could see it so clearly it blinded me.

“Snowflake, don’t,” he said, turning his head away, but I wasn’t going to.

“I know you don’t want to hear this, but it wasn’t your fault.”

“I killed them. Twenty people—I killed them. Three kids. My own father, I—”

“The Void did. You were eight years old—how could you even dream of containing such power then? That you control it so well now is a goddamn miracle! I should know. I have something similar inside of me that I can’t fucking get the hang of no matter what I do.”

But he wasn’t listening to me. “If I hadn’t been there, the Void would have never come out of me. If I’d just been a bit stronger, I could have stopped it.”

“I see,” I said, wiping my face. “So that night I almost killed you, that was *my* fault.”

“No, of course not,” he said without hesitation. “That was different—that wasn’t your fault at all.”

“How? How was it different? Tell me, cuz I’m curious, Shadow Boy. I lost control of the new magic inside my body and I couldn’t stop it soon enough. I ruined the Void, *consumed* it, then left you on the floor unable to breathe. Tell me how was that different from your case?”

Narrowing his brows, Shade opened and closed his mouth a few times, but he didn’t make a single sound.

“Exactly,” I said, though I really did believe it was my fault because I hadn’t been eight years old. I’d been an adult

that night, and I knew that my light could hurt him. I'd taken the risk anyway—just like I was doing right now.

Slowly, I sat up straighter and let go of him, focusing on Oreo for a second. All three of her heads were resting on Shade's thigh, and she was already asleep.

“You did your best. I'm so fucking glad that you are here, and I'm pretty sure Oreo is, too.”

Closing his eyes, he smiled a bit. “I'm glad I'm here, too, Snowflake. I promise you, I am.” And he was. All the pain and all his guilt—God, I couldn't even imagine the burden he had to carry—were still there. They'd always be part of him, just like my past would be part of me. But he really was glad to be here right now, and so was I. I wouldn't change a single thing of my fucked-up journey because it got me here. It got us both here.

“I'm gonna do it,” I told him. “I'm gonna go with Arti into the Well and we're going to shut that portal down. I'm gonna do it.”

For a second, his eyes darkened, and I imagined he'd try to change my mind. I imagined he'd try to talk me out of it, to give me all the reasons why it was a bad idea. And I was prepared to remind him that I needed only *one* reason why it was a good idea instead, and I had it, but...

“Then we do it together,” Shade said. “We go in there and we do it together, just like Artemis hopes.”

Taking his face in my hands, I gave him a quick peck on the lips as the light inside of me began to pulsate. Excitement, it seemed, got it fired up better than anything else so far.

“We do it together. I promise you I'll figure out how to control it. I won't hurt you forever. I won't be afraid forever. I

promise you, I'll get the hang of it." And I would.

"I know you will," he said, and he framed my face with his hands, too. I was going to complain when he pulled me close, but then... "I've never told you this before because I know you know it, but I love you, my beautiful Snowflake. I love your light and your dark. I love your glow and your tears. I'll bring the whole world to their knees for you."

My poor heart.

I kissed him with my everything because even though I always knew he loved me, it made all the difference to hear him say it.

"Then you should tell me that like all the time. It's important that you tell me," I said. "And also you need to let me go now—*asap*, before I eat your dark with my light."

He laughed, but he did let go of me. "Then I will tell you every day."

"Good, good," I muttered, sitting down on the floor again, feeling brand new. "See? See how you make everything better? Just like that." I shook my head in wonder. "You're *magic*, Shadow Boy."

"I just told you that I'm a mass murderer since the age of eight, and I'm magic?" he said, but it was a joke. I could see it in his eyes that were silver just now. I loved that shade of silver in them most.

"Exactly. You just made my troubles seem trivial. I'm not even gonna complain anymore," I said with a grin, and he mirrored it.

"Then I'm glad I could help," he said, and I was laughing still.

I laughed harder when Oreo was spooked by the sudden movement and woke up, the white head barking ten times in a row, completely panicked. When she saw it was just us, she licked our hands then went to sit by the corner, fast asleep within the minute.

And the pressure inside me was building.

“Shade, I’m gonna call it a night,” I said reluctantly. It was strange how every time he was near, that light seemed brighter. Maybe it was my emotions only, or maybe it was his darkness. Maybe it was both.

But it wasn’t a good idea to be so close to him for so long yet.

“I want to stay,” he said, and it felt like a punch to my face.

“Please, Shade. Please, go,” I whispered because with every passing second now, my stomach keep getting warmer and warmer. I dragged myself back to the wardrobe, arms tightly around my knees.

It’d be over in no time, I knew it. It would be over very soon.

“Are you okay, Snowflake?” Shade said, on his feet already, putting on his shirt.

“Not really. I just really, really need you to leave,” I forced myself to say. “Just *please*, okay?”

Shade looked terrified again, and when he reached out a hand for me, I panicked.

When I panicked the light inside me pulsated harder.

“*No!*” I shouted, feeling it slipping under my skin. Fuck, it was so sudden. So strong. “Leave, Shade! Go! Just get out!”

The fear only gave it power. The more I panicked, the less control of my body I had, and the more control *it* took. I felt it coming and I gritted my teeth and I fisted my hands, giving every ounce of energy I had to keeping it locked inside me.

I would not hurt Shade again. I wouldn't. Even if I died keeping a lid on this light right now, I *wasn't* going to hurt Shade.

And he must have seen it. He must have seen the struggle, the pain in my eyes, because even though he wanted nothing more than to come to me, he went for the door instead.

He walked out.

He closed it behind him.

The scream that tore from me felt like it shook the entire Arges. Oreo was up with her heads to the ceiling, howling like a wolf. The light was coming from inside me, from my torso, and I was still trying to stop it.

I'm in control of my body, I'm in control of my body, I'm in control of my body...

The heat of it burned me. It was a miracle I wasn't a pile of goo on the floor still. But the light stayed inside. It was so strong, so ready to unleash onto the world, but I was focused now. I couldn't hurt Shade anymore—he was gone. I couldn't hurt him. I was all alone. Oreo was probably gone, too—I could no longer hear her howling.

I was alone. I was safe.

The light snapped back into me like a rubber band, shocking my system all at once, filling it with so much raw energy my organs felt like they might burst.

I passed out.

The Kingdom of the Dead was a dark and gloomy realm.

The new queen of the dead, Persephone, sat on her throne and watched the new souls coming across the Styx. They drank from a spring among black poplars—the spring of Lethe, goddess of forgetfulness and oblivion. Those who drank from her forgot who they were and what they had done on Earth as they entered the Underworld.

From there, the judge of the dead dealt out the punishment of the sinners in the Hall of Judgement, and they were sentenced to suffer forever; while heroes and immortal souls crossed over the the Elysium Fields to live happily until the end of time.

The Kingdom had many trees and many scapes, but not a flower or a fruit or a bird to sing Persephone songs. Hades had but a pomegranate that she refused to go near of, for she knew that to eat the food of Hades was to become his.

—Book of Creation, Volume IV, 1st Edition, 301

by Emilia Marvos, House Emerald

THE CEILING WAS different from the one in my room, but this one I'd come to recognize as well.

Great. I was in the infirmary again.

I could hear the voice of the woman somewhere near me but couldn't quite make out what she was saying. Probably

Althea, the healer.

I'd liked her at first. I'd liked her a lot until she told me that only Elyseans could come back from the dead.

Now, I didn't like her so much anymore. Especially not after that conversation I'd had with Shade.

Fuck, the thought that I'd always been Elysean...

What did it mean that a part of me thought so, too? That a part of me had believed Althea before I even spoke to Shade, that a part of me had secretly known since I'd had that talk with Maia in the Stargazing tower about godstones during the trials?

Did it mean that it was true for real?

Most importantly, what the hell was I going to do with that knowledge now? How was I going to ever face life knowing what Shade believed and knowing that I believed in *him* more than I did in myself?

No, no, no, I would never accept it. There had to be another explanation. I wasn't Elysean, damn it. Not now, not then, not ever. I was just me.

And Althea kept on talking.

Maybe she was singing?

Sometimes it even sounded like waves crashing against the shore, and leaves rustling with the wind, and birds singing in the wild...how strange.

Her voice was coming from so far away, and I was calm. I gave myself time to come around. Last night, or whenever that light had burst inside of me, was fresh in my mind—Shade had walked out. He'd walked out of my room and I hadn't hurt him, even if I'd flashed the world with my godlight. He hadn't

been close. He was okay—and honestly, that’s all I really cared about.

Oreo, too—she’d been howling before she left the room. My godlight didn’t really hurt her, never had at the Arena when I’d slipped before, but it was safer that she’d walked out. Right now, I could have sworn I felt the warmth of her little body pressed to my thigh. She was on the infirmary bed with me, which was at least a million times better than the one in my room, and her warmth gave me all the comfort in the world.

So, I tried to push my eyes open more and more with each blink, to see better, to be more aware of what was going on around me, of what Althea was saying or what song she was singing—and why did it still sound like chirping birds and ocean waves and howling wind and rustling leaves?

So strange...

The sun was shining outside the large windows, so it was probably morning. I tried to move, to raise my hand, but it was impossible. My body was so heavy. I was barely awake, and I had no idea why. Had that burst of light depleted me of my energy completely? Because I had to get back to class. I had to get back to training. I had to—

“There you are.”

Even the blood in my veins froze when the face of the woman loomed over mine, her smile genuine, her warm brown eyes just the same as I remembered.

I’d have screamed if I could. I’d have jumped off the bed if I could. I’d have done anything other than be paralyzed here, unblinking eyes on that face that I knew so well but didn’t, trying to make sense of my own thoughts.

“*Breathe*, dear,” Eeda said, and I did.

Drawing in air had never been more difficult, but I somehow managed. My lungs expanded, my eyes blinked, and my body began to shake, though I couldn’t quite move still. Oreo was up, too, all three sets of wide puppy eyes on me as she waited to see if I was okay.

“That’s more like it. I hope you don’t mind me singing for you. I’m no Muse, but music feeds me, and I like to think the sound of nature calms even the most troubled seas, if you know what I mean...”

My mouth opened and closed and opened and closed, but no sound left me. My vocal cords weren’t working, and it was a damn miracle I hadn’t passed out yet.

Eeda.

It was *Eeda*. Eeda was standing right near my bed in the infirmary at the Arges, looking exactly like she had the last time I saw her at the Daedalus Palace—a grey dress that covered her figure completely and a white shawl around her head, over the golden-brown waves of her hair...

“I-I-I...” *I searched for you*, I wanted to say, but the words escaped me. *I searched for you and they told me you don’t exist!*

“Calm down, dear. You’re okay,” she said with that same smile as she sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at me, a loving grandmother, same as always. Every instinct in my body calmed down at once—it was Eeda. She was safe. She was good. She was my friend.

Tears stung my eyes. I wanted to smile, but I really was having trouble getting my body to cooperate still.

“There now,” she said. “I think you’re ready, Sera. I think you are.”

I barely shook my head. “Ready for...*what?*” I choked, and the words were slurred together, but she understood.

“To evolve,” she told me, and she reached for the pocket of her grey dress—that *same grey dress!* The same woman, the same warmth in her eyes and those wrinkles around her mouth and those soft hands on mine...

“This will help you, dear.” And she showed me what she was holding between her index finger and thumb—a gemstone, except this one had no color. It was completely clear, and it was shaped like a...

“Diamond.” It looked exactly like a diamond.

“Oreo will keep it safe for you while you heal,” Eeda said and offered the gem to Oreo. *Touched* Oreo’s head like they were old friends. And Oreo didn’t mind it one bit. Instead, she sniffed the gemstone in Eeda’s hand for a second then... swallowed it. The middle head grabbed the diamond between her teeth and simply swallowed it.

Oh, my God...

“I don’t really have much time, dear, but I know you will be just fine. So much to remember still, but dig deep. Keep fighting—you will be fine,” she said, patting my thigh.

“W-w-wait,” I said, trying to sit up on the bed but failing. “Wait, Eeda, wait...”

“Yes, dear?”

“I don’t...I don’t understand,” I whispered, and though it didn’t really get any easier to speak, *not* saying what was on

my mind seemed impossible, so I somehow made it work. “I searched for you, and then they told me you...you...”

“People only see with their eyes, dear. Don’t be fooled by words. They have no true substance. Believe in what you know in here instead,” she said, pressing a finger to her chest. “That’s a compass that will never steer you wrong.”

“Why?” I breathed, and there were so many things I wanted to say to her, so many questions to ask her, if only my jaws weren’t locked so tightly. If only my body was able to move... “Why are you...why were you always nice to me?” *And why did you give me that transmitter stone? And why did you save me from the animals Jasper had unleashed on me that second time? And why...*

“Because I know your heart, dear. You’re kind. That’s much rarer nowadays than you’d think,” she said, and her smile was a touch saddened just now.

Tears in my eyes again. “I hated your kind. I’ve always... always—”

“Oh, nonsense,” she said, waving me off. “You never hated Elyseans. You hated what they represented. You hated that they took away your choices—you’re a strong spirit, dear. You like to make your choices yourself, as you have. Look at you.”

Her words rang in my ears, taking a moment to make sense. And when they did, I realized, she was *right*.

My God, she was absolutely right.

I’d always hated Elyseans because they’d been dictating my life since I was five—by killing my parents, by making up those ridiculous stories that I truly believed were just that—*stories*—and making Miss Aldentach try to get me to live by them.

I hated them even more when their Iriade picked me for the trials, and they didn't let me leave the Palace, but...

But once it was *my* choice, I still chose to be here, among them.

Once it was *my* choice, I still chose to be endowed.

Once it was *my* choice, I still chose to fight, to go into the Well of the Damned and to try to close the portal to the Underworld.

“You know, I've been keeping a close eye on the trials for as long as they've existed,” Eeda said after a moment. “And I always do my tests long before the first trial begins, dear. You were tested when you chose to help me carry that cart up the stairs. I'm not talking about that first time you saw me—I'm talking about you showing up every day after. Even when you were about to go into a trial, you came to help me first. Always,” she said. “And when you didn't steal from me when you had the chance—remember that, when I dropped that stone? It was a very, *very* precious stone, dear. And you held it with you in your pocket, weren't even curious to see what it was or how much it cost, then returned it to me like it was nothing—*that's* something to be proud of. But more than anything, that small gift I gave you...” She shook her head, taking my hand in hers and squeezing it, sending a jolt of electricity up my arm.

“You only had *one*, dear. They didn't even let you into the library. You had no true friends. You had so little help compared to the others. All you had was that small stone, and do you remember how you used it?”

“I-I-I...” I couldn't fucking speak yet.

“On Maia. You used it on Maia. You used it to help another. Not yourself—another.” The way Eeda looked at me right now, she was *proud*.

“There are others, so many others who have so many great qualities.” She stood up from the bed, straightening the wrinkles of her dress. “Smart people. Strong people. Courageous people,” Eeda said, then leaned a bit closer to my face like she was about to tell me a secret.

“And it is quite true that fortune favors the bold, my dear. But the Fates have always favored the kind,” she whispered with a wink, then stood up straight again. “I should know—they’re good friends of mine.” But her smile dropped. “At least they used to be.”

“Eeda,” I whispered because there was so much more I needed to talk to her about. *Everything* that went on in my life—all of it. I needed to talk to her about everything.

“I’m afraid my time is up, dear. I have to get going now. Be strong, Sera. There is nothing in the world that cannot be done. There is no such thing as *impossible*.” And patting Oreo’s left head, she started for the door.

“Wait,” I said, trying my damned best to sit up, and I still failed. “Wait, Eeda, wait...” Fuck, why was it so hard to speak?

She stopped by the door, brows raised as she looked at me. “Yes, dear?”

But how could I tell her *everything* with just one sentence? How could I ask everything I wanted to ask when her hand was already on the handle, and I had no doubt she would be leaving within the minute?

No, I only had *one* question to ask her before she disappeared.

So, I asked her the most important one.

“Who are you?”

Her smile stretched slowly, and it kind of made me think of a rainbow climbing up to the sky after warm summer rain.

“I am your mother,” Eeda said. “I am the mother of all.”

She opened the door and sort of *floated* out of it as if we were underwater. I fell back on the pillow like all my strings had been cut off, and in a way, they had. The room began to spin as Oreo, perfectly calm still, settled against my thigh again, curling up on herself, resting her heads on my stomach and leg before her eyes drifted shut.

Mine did, too, though not on purpose. I just couldn’t keep them open if I tried.

Everything was spinning so fast inside and outside of me. No sense left in the world and I was falling. I didn’t know where, but I was falling down a dark hole and I had no idea how to stop.

My mind gave up and I fell unconscious seconds later.



THE NEXT TIME I woke up, there was no singing going on around me. No sound of leaves rustling or waves crashing against rocks, which was a shame.

Nothing was weighing my body down, either, and when I was aware of myself, I opened my eyes without trouble.

When I realized that there were people in the room with me, I sat up on the bed without trouble, too. My body felt like mine, and the sunlight streaming in through the windows looked *real* and the feel of the air, the weight of Oreo resting against my body, the quality of my thoughts...

That's when I realized that I'd been in a dream the last time I was awake.

This was reality—I'd just forgotten that the sun didn't look like liquid gold coming in through the window, and the air didn't smell like the ocean here. I'd forgotten what it was like in the real world, but now I remembered.

"Morning, sleepyhead," Artemis said with a grin.

She was sitting in the recliner near my bed, the recliner that *hadn't* been there when Eeda was. The entire room was *different* somehow, like the rest of the beds, the rest of everything surrounding me had been blurry then, and now I saw it all in HD again, just like normal.

A dream.

Relief and disappointment crashed inside me at the same time.

"Hey, look at me," Arti said, clapping her hands, and I had no choice but to turn to her. "How are you feeling?"

"Like shit," I muttered, turning to Carmine standing at the edge of the bed with her arms crossed, looking both concerned and disappointed at the same time. Nobody pulled looking two things at once quite like her.

Althea was there, too, and she didn't look disappointed, but her smile didn't quite reach her eyes, either.

“She’s honest, at least,” Arti muttered. “You had an outburst last night. Tried to stop it. It knocked you out.”

“Not just that,” Althea said, like she was sorry to tell her that and terrified that she’d spoken, too. “I mean, it almost fried your brain because your magic sort of...*imploded*.” She made a gesture with her hands. “It nearly killed you, Sera.”

I flinched. “Oh.”

“You and the midnight caster should be living in different parts of the world,” Arti said. “Really, Sera, you know better than that.”

I couldn't help it, I wanted to say.

I was desperate, I wanted to say.

There's a chance I was always Elysean even before endowment, and Alan Roux has no clue who I am or what he did to me, and I can't take any of this back, and it's too much, too much, too much...

Instead, I kept my mouth shut and closed my eyes.

“You can’t afford to die, Sera. Don’t try to hold it in again, okay? Just because your body currently handles your magic doesn’t mean that it can’t hurt you, especially if you try to hold it in.”

“Except I hurt people when they’re close and I let it out like that,” I reminded her. No trouble speaking at all now. Definitely no longer dreaming.

“*People* are not going to get us to the portal, Sera. *You* are,” Arti said.

At that point it wasn’t worth it to even be surprised anymore. “Well, I will *not* be hurting people in the meantime,

Arti. Sorry to disappoint.” Especially not Shade. I would choose hurting myself over doing that to him again any day.

“Don’t be rude, Sinclair. We’re trying to look after you here,” Carmine reminded me bitterly.

“You’re trying to get to the portal. This has nothing to do with *me*.” They wouldn’t have cared if this godlight had been in anybody else. They didn’t treat me like this now because of *me*. They treated me like this because of what they were getting out of me.

“Let’s just calm down for a second,” Arti said. “You agreed to help us. That agreement binds you to take care of yourself. You can’t take us to my brother if you’re dead.”

There it was—*my brother*. She always said that—always *to my brother*. Made me wonder if she’d even bother to do any of this if Apollo hadn’t been a prisoner down there.

Made me wonder if maybe that’s why the other gods who were on Earth weren’t here to help—because they had nothing personal to gain from this.

“Here’s the thing, though—I can’t take anyone anywhere if I’m going to be forced to hurt people doing it. Do you understand *that*? It’s just who I am.” And if she didn’t get that, then it really wasn’t my problem.

She turned her head to the side and watched me for a moment. I was still reeling from that dream, trying to figure out whether I was glad or disappointed that I hadn’t seen Eeda for real, wondering if I’d maybe lost my damn mind because if I closed my eyes and focused right now, I could swear I heard the sound of the ocean and even the seagulls flying over it. It had been *that* vivid, the dream.

Or maybe that godlight had indeed fried my brain, and they just didn't know it yet.

“Naive, Sinclair,” Carmine said, giving Arti a look like she meant to say, *I told you so*. But then when she turned to me, I could have sworn she didn't look as disgusted and irritated by me as usual.

“This is bigger than you and the midnight caster and anyone else—that's what you should understand, Sera. You have great power, and I don't think you need me to tell you what else comes with that.”

Responsibility, she meant. “I'm not trying to run away from my responsibilities,” I spit. “You see me every day. You see me fighting to get better, to get this thing under control. I show up every single day and I do the work!”

Arti flinched like my words actually affected her. “You do,” she finally said.

“It's just not working. It's...it's *not* working.” Whatever it was that stopped me from fully controlling that light was too strong. I couldn't even store it in a godstone, which would have been fucking ideal. Shade had done it at the age of *eight*. His father had put that stone in his back, and he'd finally managed to control the Void, so why couldn't I?

“It will. Give it time,” Arti said. “We'll try harder. We'll find a stone that's strong enough. We just have to be patient.” She said it like she was talking more to herself than to me.

“Except we—” *won't*, I was going to say, but then Oreo suddenly moved.

She rose to her feet right there next to me, and her middle head began to dry heave.

My heart jumped. “Oreo?” I said, sitting up straighter, trying to see her middle head better—how in the world was she *sick*? And how was only one of the heads dry heaving while the other two just looked at me with their tongues out, *excited*, like they couldn’t even tell what was going on with the rest of their body?

But then...

“What is that?” Arti whispered, leaning closer and closer to Oreo’s middle head—just as she spit out whatever had her choking and gagging like that, making my heart beat a mile a minute.

The next second, it stopped completely.

A diamond covered in hellhound saliva was on my lap on the soft white cover, and it was the exact same size, same shape, and same color as the one Eeda had given to Oreo in my dream.

IT WASN’T A DREAM.

I reached out my shaking hands for the diamond, not caring that it was covered in sticky looking saliva. It was maybe half the size of my fist, shaped like those diamonds you see in commercials or movies, perfectly cut, every side sucking in the light and reflecting it in perfect precision. It was cold to the touch, *smooth* against my skin, and I held it up to my face between my fingers, and I just stared at it for a long moment.

A long moment of complete silence because nobody else in the room made a single sound, either.

A diamond I was given in a dream, that wasn’t really a dream, turns out. It was crystal clear, but the way it caught the

light, it became every color in the world just like opals, except these colors were pale and pure, not intense. These colors were...*peaceful*.

Like Eeda.

“Why is your Cerberus spitting diamonds out of her mouth, Sera?”

My ears rang. I blinked, and my focus shifted to Arti’s face on the other side of the diamond, looking at it just as curiously as I was.

“I...I don’t know,” I whispered.

But that was a lie, wasn’t it?

“Have you ever heard of it happening before?” Carmine was saying. “I’ve never read of anything like it.”

“Not really. The Cerberus are notorious for being picky about what they put in their bodies, actually. I doubt she’d have swallowed that willingly,” said Althea.

But she had, hadn’t she? Oreo had swallowed that diamond willingly, without a single whine or complaint.

“A dream,” I said, and Artemis tore her wide eyes from the diamond and met mine. Just know, they were bigger than usual, which told me that her mask was slipping. Which told me that she really spent a lot of energy maintaining that appearance to not freak us out with her true face—a monster that both scared you, repelled you, and lured you in with her breathtaking beauty. Such a deadly combination.

“What dream?” she asked, and slowly, her eyes began to shrink to their normal size.

“Of Eeda.” The lovely Eeda whom I’d been friends with at one point. “The laundry woman I used to help at the Daedalus

Palace during the trials.”

My voice sounded funny to my own ears, too.

“What?” Carmine said. “*Eeda?* I never hired anyone named Eeda at the Palace. Are you feeling well, Sinclair?”

I had the urge to both cry and laugh at the same time—of course, she hadn’t hired Eeda.

“She came to me just now, before you did,” I told Artemis. “She said I was ready to evolve. She gave this to Oreo for safekeeping. I thought it was a dream.”

The way Artemis’s lips stretched to the sides and curled upwards, it was like watching a snake moving.

“Oh, it was not a dream, Sera. It was most definitely not a dream,” she whispered, leaning back on the recliner with a deep sigh, like suddenly *everything* made sense to her. Like suddenly all her questions were answered.

Which confused me even more.

“What does that mean?”

“Why diamond?” Carmine wondered. “We’ve tried to work with it before—it doesn’t hold magic. Why would anybody give her that?” And she was looking at Arti for answers, too, but the goddess’s eyes were stuck on the diamond in my hand still.

Couldn’t blame her—it really was a sight to see. The way it was cut so perfectly, the way the colors hid and revealed themselves with every movement was truly mesmerizing.

“What more did the laundry woman tell you?” Artemis asked instead of answering us.

“Nothing,” I muttered. “That...that she’d been testing me since before the first trial began. That-that-that she knew my heart.” I only realized I was crying when Oreo put her paws on my lap and leaned up to lick the tears on my cheeks. “She said she was my mother.”

Even Arti held her breath in that moment, thought I wasn’t even sure if she needed air to survive.

“She said she was the...” My voice dried as if the words didn’t want to come out, but I said it anyway, “...the mother of all.”

Artemis jumped to her feet and raised her hands toward the windows, and they disappeared. Two large ass windows right next to the headboard of my bed that had been there just one second ago *disappeared* into thin air, and a warm wind blew into the room instantly.

Carmine and Althea gasped. Oreo barked. I could do nothing but stare at the goddess as she opened the palms of her hands and blew on them. Tiny, colorful flowers rose from her skin and floated in the air, right out the window.

“*Gratea tebe, Gaea,*” she whispered, and my stomach twisted and turned because I understood it. I’d spent almost a whole year studying Latin now, and those words meant, *thank you, Gaea.*

Gaea, as in Mother Earth.

Gaea, as in *the true mother of us all.*

Carmine and Althea were both on their knees with their heads bowed, and Oreo continued to lick my tears as the flowers floated out into the sky from Artemis’s hands, and I continued to not have a fucking clue what the hell was going on.

“I don’t...I don’t get it,” I kept whispering to myself. “I don’t understand.” How was Eeda *Gaea*?

Never mind that—how was Gaea *real*?

“I don’t...I don’t...” And no amount of trying to make sense of it was working.

“I do,” Artemis said, hands lowered, though the windows were still missing on the wall. It wasn’t cold out by any means, and she looked *alive* under that sunlight. She looked bigger than I’d ever seen her as she smiled, her skin and eyes brighter, her hair almost floating around her at the ends, just like they’d done the night of my endowment.

“I understand just fine. And I finally know who you truly are, Sera,” she said.

“Who?” I choked, not breathing or blinking or thinking at all.

Arti slowly took the diamond from my hand and raised it up to the ceiling. “You are Sedorah Sinclair, the first of House Diamond.”

“Do not trust fear. It is the second greatest liar of all, and when paired with the first—that awful, awful doubt—it is a terrible force to behold, indeed.”

—Metis the Wise, 498

by Elh Pordier, House Ruby

EVERY INCH of me was covered in sweat.

I looked up at Shade standing by the benches with Carmine, Althea and Novak, watching me. Waiting.

Waiting for me to use *a fucking diamond* that wasn't even a godstone, and try to put my magic in it.

All because a woman who called herself *the mother of all* had come to my dream and then somehow my hellhound had had this inside her and then she'd spit it out.

Suddenly, I was a new fucking House.

No, no—I was a new fucking *Elysean* House.

Really, had the Fates no mercy? When were they going to stop using me for the most absurd life ideas they'd ever come up with? I could almost picture them, three sisters coming together for tea, talking about how they could fuck up my life

a little more each day, and also make it so that it made *no sense whatsoever* so that nobody would ever see it coming. They probably wrote a damn book about it, too.

It was silly, though. What Arti said wasn't true. She claimed Gaea gave the Elyseans the original gemstones, too, before the Houses were even made, but the books said otherwise. They said the Houses were made by Elyseans themselves. They had figured out how to make godstones themselves because they had magic since they were born.

Not me, right?

Because I wasn't Elysean.

Because I wasn't a new House.

Because my magic was going to break this diamond to pieces the moment I let it out, just like it had done all the others at least thirty times in the past few months.

Silly.

None of this would stand. These ridiculous theories would remain just that—*ridiculous theories*.

And I was going to prove it just as soon as I could get my heart to slow down a bit.

“Take your time. Breathe,” Artemis said, standing in front of me, because my eyes kept going back to Shade. What would I give to be away from everyone right now? I'd sell my fucking soul to have him sweep me off my feet with his shadows and hide us in the Void for the rest of eternity.

And I was willing to bet anything that he felt the same way.

Shade looked miserable. He hadn't slept, I could tell. Though he was clean and his dark hair combed back, his shirt

pressed and his face shaved, he looked on the brink of losing it, especially since he wouldn't even come close to me at that point. Not just because Artemis said so, but because *he* refused to come near me for fear he'd trigger my magic and I'd end up like I did two nights ago.

It hurt. It hurt to just look at him from afar like this, and if I'd had just the smallest chance to reverse this endowment, to give Arti her Ichor back, I'd do it in the blink of an eye. I didn't want this. I didn't want any of this if Shade couldn't be here with me.

"Ready?" Arti said, and I closed my eyes for a moment, as if to see if I was.

I was ready to show them that they were all delusional—yes, definitely.

But then again, I was also terrified. Yesterday they'd kept me in the infirmary all day just to make sure I rested well. Then today, I'd been dismissed from classes and had spent most of the day with Max and Mave, who'd willingly chosen to get punished for skipping class rather than let me spend the day on my own.

I was eternally grateful to them for it, but it still didn't change anything. It still didn't make any of this easier.

"Ready," I said because I needed to get this over with.

"Let it go slowly," Arti started. "Feel the magic inside you. See it."

We'd been here so many times before that I knew what to do without her guidance just fine, but it was easier to just rely on her words. It was easier to not have to even think about what came next.

“Let it expand all the way to your hands, and hold that diamond tightly,” she continued, and I did. I was holding the fucking diamond so tightly my finger bones were going to break soon.

And I felt the magic, saw it, let it expand just like she asked. I felt the warmth of it, the weight of it, and I watched it moving down my arms in my mind’s eye. It wasn’t going to work, I knew it, so I didn’t hesitate to push it into that diamond, to let it loose, try to *fill it up* the way Elyseans did with their godstones.

It started to spill in at first. It started to make its place in that gemstone, just like always. And I felt that *other* thing inside me, too—the rougher texture of my magic, if you will, that always ruined the godstones as soon as it touched them. Now, it was merging with the light spilling into the diamond, and it was close, about to break it into a million pieces...

My breath was held. I waited for that sound with my eyes squeezed shut.

It never came.

The light of the magic was filling up that diamond like it had never done with any other gemstone, and the diamond wasn’t breaking. It was holding up, cold still against my hands, when it felt like it should be burning. Melting. *Breaking*. All that energy, all that light was flowing right in the heart of that tiny thing, somehow taking its place even when there shouldn’t have been any space to begin with.

And it kept going and going and going...

“At last,” Arti whispered from way too close to me, and I finally opened my eyes to see the diamond pulsating with white light.

Pulsating just like rubies and emeralds did when Elyseans were using their magic.

“It worked, Sera,” Arti told me, the light of the diamond making her eyes look colorless. “It worked. You’re indeed ready.”

I stepped back, shaking my head, unable to let go of the stupid diamond, like it was glued to my skin by that magic. I searched for Shade, who was in the middle of the Arena now with Oreo by his feet, watching me, looking just as terrified as I was feeling.

No, I wanted to tell him.

Just take me away. Hide me from these people!

But he couldn’t. There was nowhere to go now.

Everything was already done.

THE KNOCK on my door startled me. I hadn’t slept all night. I tossed and turned for hours, and then I sat up on the edge of my bed, staring at the floor, at the swirls of colors of the marble, the patterns they created. Oreo slept soundly on the bed behind me. When I’d gotten up, she’d immediately come closer until her back was against my butt, then curled up on herself and went right back to sleep. She liked to be touching me now at all times when she slept, or maybe I’d *made* her get used to it when I basically forced her to sleep with me since that night I almost killed Shade.

I looked at the door as the second knock came—did I really want to bother with opening it?

It wouldn’t be Shade. We’d spoken last night after the Arena, him out there in the hallway, me in my room, the door

only half open. His magic triggered mine and he already knew I'd rather die than hurt him. I'd keep my magic locked inside me no matter what, so now he refused to come within ten feet of me, but at least we'd talked. At least I'd told him what had happened myself. It was always different when I told *him* things. I felt lighter, like the burden was no longer only mine to carry. He carried everything with me.

But he'd made it very clear that he wasn't going to come near me again, and I didn't really want to see anyone else...

What if it was Max, though?

Very possible, so in the end, I forced myself to my feet and opened the door, expecting to find a friendly face behind it. Instead, a guy I was pretty sure I'd seen around the Arges but never spoke to before was in front of me.

“Good morning. So sorry to bother you, Sera,” he said with a forced smile on his beautiful face. His longish blond hair was all over the place and his eyes were slightly bloodshot—he looked exhausted.

The leather of his vest was a deep blue. He was House Sapphire, of Hephaestus's Bloodline judging by the horse made out of golden pieces on his chest.

“Do I know you?” I said, squinting my eyes at him. I was pretty sure he was a second-year, and though they no longer bullied me, we weren't exactly friendly.

“Not really. We've never met before. I'm Ezra,” he said.

“Okay, Ezra. Why are you at my door at six-thirty in the morning?” Was he here for a prank or something? Because I wouldn't like that one bit, and I would not hesitate to let Oreo chase him down the stairs and give him the scare of his life for disturbing my self-loathing session.

Except...

“I was told to bring you this. I just finished it,” he said and showed me what he had in his hands—a black velvet box as big as a book.

“What the—”

He opened it. The words died on my tongue.

It was a silver necklace made to look like three different chains intertwined, spiraling around one another, linked together every couple inches. It ended with a pretty large flower, the outline of the petals made out of that same metal, and it was huge, as big as my open hand.

My mouth opened and closed a couple times, but I had nothing to say.

“Shade designed it. I made it last night,” the boy said, and my stomach fell. “It’s white gold. He, uh...he said to tell you that you can wear it around your neck if you want, but you can also wear it around your waist as a belt, too.”

“Oh.” Tears pricked the back of my eyes as I reached out my hand to touch the gold.

“I just, uh...I need the diamond, Sera. Just to close it in. Then it’ll be ready.”

“Right, right,” I said, as if I knew what the hell I was talking about. What the hell I was doing. Thinking.

I was on autopilot as I turned back to my desk to grab the diamond while Oreo stayed there by the door curiously watching Ezra.

He’d seen her, too, so he’d already stepped back a few feet.

“She won’t attack,” I said, and my voice came out dry and scratchy. “What do I do with this?” And I showed him the diamond that was no longer pulsating with that light. It looked so fucking ordinary—just like a gemstone should.

Swallowing hard, Ezra came closer to me again.

“Just put it in here. In the very middle,” he said, pointing at the outline of the flower. And I did. I put the diamond right in the middle, and the pointy bottom of it fit exactly right in the small circle between the petals that was supposed to be the flowerbed.

Then Ezra brought his hand over it, closed his eyes, and whispered a couple words I was too distracted to even hear. Magic charged the air, so much less intense than what I was used to, what I’d put into that diamond.

And when he took his hand back, the flower had closed. The petals made out of white gold had closed perfectly all around the diamond, like they were now holding it prisoner there.

“Ready,” Ezra said and handed me the box.

“Thank you,” I thought I said, and when he walked away, I stayed there on the threshold, just looking at the diamond, at the gold, at the box. Thinking about Shade.

Eventually, though, Oreo’s bark got me out of my own head, and I went back into the room. I tried it on as a necklace first, in front of the mirror that seemed to be showing me only the ghost of my past self now. The chains were too thick. The diamond fell almost to my bellybutton. So I tried it as a belt next, wrapped it around my waist like Shade said, and it fucking worked. It fit me perfectly, the flower holding the diamond falling over my hip, and the chain was exactly as big

as it needed to be—not too loose and not too tight. Typical Shade to know every measurement of my body.

So, I laughed in front of the mirror, and that chain gave me some courage somehow. It gave me some hope.

Not all was lost. Yes, I somehow had a diamond full of white light now, which Oreo had spit out of her mouth, but that could be a good thing. I could ignore the fact that I was a freak, and instead focus on the fact that with this diamond, controlling my magic was actually possible.

Maybe I could go close to Shade without being triggered again. Maybe I could talk to him, even touch him and sleep in his arms soon.

With this diamond, I could.

The smile remained on my face for a long time because I realized that what Eeda said to me in that dream was right: there was no such thing as *impossible*. I was going to make this work one way or the other, simply because there was no other option.

Persephone's heart slowly turned to ice in the Underworld

So did the Earth, while her mother Demeter ran searching for her lost daughter, and all the nature grieved with her. Flowers and trees wither and fields became barren and cold. Nothing could sprout or grow while the goddess of the harvest wept. People and animals starved, but Demeter refused to let anything grow until she had found her daughter.

She asked the sun if he'd seen where Persephone had disappeared in the meadow, but his view had been blocked by dark clouds. She asked nature and the winds, but none gave her an answer—until she met a young man, a swineherd, who still mourned his pigs that had disappeared under the ground. He told the goddess that he'd heard the screams of a woman that very day.

Demeter immediately knew that it was Hades who'd taken her daughter, and her grief turned to anger. She went to Zeus and promised him that she would never again make the earth green if her daughter was not returned. Mighty Zeus loved his creation dearly, and could not bear to see mankind perished. Thus he gave Hades an order he could not disobey.

And so the king of the dead bode farewell to his queen with a heavy heart.

—Book of Creation, Volume IV, 1st Edition 340

by Emilia Marvos, House Emerald

THE WEEKS WENT by so incredibly fast. My days were full—classes, training my body, training my magic, and by the time Oreo barked to let me know the day wasn't over yet, I was about ready to collapse.

She had started to disappear on me for hours at a time, going somewhere while I was in class or in training. I'd been worried at first, but she always came back. By the end of the day, wherever she went, she always came back with her request that I somehow forgot every single day. I forgot that she now *insisted* I go with her to the courtyard behind the Arges every night while she ran in the garden and in the temple and got herself tired before bed. No idea why—she could do that by herself just fine, but she was a determined little pup and my attempts at declining her *invitations* had gone to waste each time. Now I didn't bother anymore. As soon as I saw her standing by the door after I took my uniform off, I didn't even comment, just followed her outside.

“When I'm old and wrinkly, you'll pay me back for this, just so you know,” I muttered as I locked the door to my room, then went to the other side of the hallway, to House Ruby's dorm to get Max and Mave.

I didn't bother them at all in the beginning, just walked Oreo by myself. Nobody attacked us anymore, not since Artemis had given me her word, and the backyard was always half full at this time of night. Now that people didn't hate me anymore, I was pretty safe. They wouldn't just turn their heads and keep walking if they saw me getting attacked. They'd scream or call for someone, at least.

But then I was telling Mave about it one day during break while Max was talking to someone else on the other side, and

she *subtly* hinted that it might be a good idea to ask them to join me, too.

Here's how she said it: "You know, you're awfully dumb for an Elysean, but you started out mortal so I'll forgive that you still haven't figured out how much your best friend there, Max Roux, would appreciate it if you gave him an extra hour every night to be around *me*."

And she turned to the open book on her desk without another word.

Like I said—subtle.

Now, I knew Mave. She was my best friend, too—though I'd never *ever* be caught saying it out loud in front of her—and I knew exactly what she meant. *She* wanted to be around Max for an extra hour every night, so from then on I'd been getting them to come with me to the courtyard, and giving them as much alone time as possible while we were down there.

Meanwhile Shade spent a lot of time downstairs lately, and I thought I knew why. Not being able to come to me every night hurt him. I knew because it fucking killed *me*, too, and he would rather be doing something else other than sitting in his room trying to sleep. He'd rather exhaust himself—like I was doing—before he went to bed.

I understood, I really did. But it had been almost a month since my last outburst that had taken me to the infirmary. A month since I'd finally been able to store my light in the diamond that was still chained around my waist. I was in control of myself most of the time, and he didn't trigger me as much as he used to. Yes, I felt his Void clearly when he was close, but I didn't want to spontaneously burst into light and wings and *consume* his darkness now. I'd been training every damn day for that reason alone.

“Hi, Sera!”

I blinked, leaning back like the sound of her voice had pushed me physically. But I’d been so lost in my own mind that I hadn’t even noticed the dorm door had opened until Gina Tearland was in front of me.

“Hey, Gina, sorry to bother ya,” I said, forcing a smile. It had been almost half a year and I still had no clue how to *be* in front of people who smiled at me the way the other first-years did.

“Oh, it’s no bother. I imagine you’re here for Max and Mave?” she said, as cheerful as ever.

“Yes, I—”

“I will get them for you in a second. Don’t you move!” And she slipped back inside, her short hair bouncing around her head as she went.

She left the door open and I almost wished I could go inside. The Ruby first-years had a common room, small but it looked comfortable as hell, with loveseats and recliners and those large cushions in the corners that looked so damn fluffy. I wasn’t Ruby, though, so I wasn’t allowed through the door. The wards wouldn’t let me—they were tied to the bloodlines.

My bloodline?

Way, *way* too complicated even for me to understand. And I still tried, despite knowing how it would end. I still fucking tried to think it through any time that little question popped into my head: *Shade thinks I was always Elysean. I think I was mortal, then I turned Elysean, but there was something wrong with me because Max’s father had brought me back from the dead when I was little. But then Max’s father couldn’t have brought me back if I really was mortal, and I didn’t really*

belong to any of the Holy Bloodlines, but I was...a new House?

House Diamond—how ridiculous.

I wasn't a damn House. House Diamond didn't even exist! And Arti refused to give me a straight answer when we trained. All she was willing to say was that I was the first of it, that new Houses could be created the same way the originals were, and that it wasn't up to any of us to decide which House we belonged to—the stones decided for us. And since my magic only connected to the diamond resting inside that golden flower around my waist...

Ugh.

See? So fucking easy to get lost in my train of thoughts—it was a ridiculous train with no rhyme or reason, no beginning or end.

At least Arti and I agreed on one thing. My House or the diamond didn't really matter right now. All that mattered was that I be ready to take us all into the Well of the Damned this summer, rescue Apollo, and shut down the portals to the Underworld once and for all.

Yes, yes—perfectly aware how absurd it all sounded, but wasn't that my life wrapped up in a single word? *Absurd* was made for me, so nothing much really surprised me at this point.

“You're lucky I like you. Otherwise, I'd have set your hair on fire if you dared to come drag me out of my room every night,” Mave muttered as she came out their common room with Max, pretending to be pissed.

And it was all I could do not to remind her—in front of Max—that she was the one who wanted me to always invite

them and that we all knew she was bluffing and pretending she didn't fucking *live* for this part of the day.

But she was my friend, despite her weird ass, and I was also pretty sure that Max did, in fact, know she was bluffing. Of course, he did—he knew her better than anyone else. So when he smiled at me, I smiled back, and we followed an impatient Oreo down the stairs and out the back of the building.

Students, first- and second-year, smoked and drank and made out in every corner where it was especially dark. We sat by one of the benches closest to the temple—Oreo, for some reason, loved to run around the statues, sniffing and licking as he went. The night was warm and the sky clear, a million stars winking at us, though the moon was hidden by the tip of the mountain at our back. The smell of flowers from the garden that Althea herself tended gave it a very summery feel, and it was perfect. The place at this time of night, and this time of year was absolutely perfect.

I *breathed* when I was out here, despite how exhausted my body was.

“Any luck today?” Max asked when we settled on the bench. I always let them sit next to one another now. They still liked to pretend they were irritated by each other's presence, but it was getting rarer with each week.

“Plenty. I actually made a ball of light the size of a football.” I showed them the size with my hands—and I had. “It was pretty cool. And intense.”

“*Pfft*, that's nothing,” Mave said. “Show me *more!* When are you going to start doing real magic? Light balls are boring.”

“May a thousand spiders crawl all over you when you sleep tonight,” I told her, just because insects freaked her out. And the face she made was totally worth it.

“Whatever. When *I* get endowed two nights from now, I’ll do something much cooler. Something actually exciting,” she teased, and I rolled my eyes.

“It wasn’t boring, mind you. And I need to focus on just producing as much godlight as possible at will right now. That’s what I’ll need in the Well.”

“What’s the goddess saying?” Max said.

“Nothing. She says I’m doing okay.” Arti was very impressed, in fact. She said I’d exceeded her expectations, that she’d thought my control would be this good by mid-summer, not April.

“Do you have a date? When are you going in?” Mave said.

“No, but any summer month seems like a good bet. She said she wouldn’t be rushing me, so whenever I’m ready.” And I would be. A couple months and I would be very ready.

“I still can’t believe it,” Max said, wide eyes terrified as he looked at me. “You’re literally going to get into the Well of the Damned?”

“Well, yes. That’s the whole point of this thing.” And I pretended, just like them, that I didn’t care, that it wasn’t a big deal, that my stomach wasn’t twisting and turning at the mere thought of it.

“Artemis will be there with her. So will Shade,” Mave said.

“Well, if that meant anything, they wouldn’t have waited for Sera for a thousand years, would they?” Max said, making

the twists in my stomach even more violent.

For a moment, none of us had anything to say.

“I’ll be fine, Max,” I finally said. “Mave’s right. I’m not alone. And I will be testing my godlight with the daemons first, just as soon as graduation ends.”

That thought made me want to throw up for real. To go downstairs, onto the battlefield, and be face-to-face with those *mortal-eating* monsters? Fuck...

“I can’t believe they won’t let us down there still,” Max said. “I mean, we all know. Everyone knows, even the mortals. What’s the point of keeping us away?”

“Oh, I don’t know. They probably don’t want to fucking traumatize you by letting you watch exactly what you’ll be up against? Maybe that?” Sarcasm dripped from my voice. I wasn’t trying to be a bitch, but I spent a lot of time downstairs on the second level, with Shade’s team and with Beatrix, with Hector and a bunch of other sentinels that hung out there regularly. Watching those bloody battles wasn’t easy—they haunted you. In your sleep and in your reality, they always haunted you. It was better that they didn’t let first-years see anything yet. They would get endowed, graduate a month later, have the entire summer to let their magic settle and get to know it better—and then they’d be exposed to everything in year two.

“Technically speaking, if you do go in there, say, by summer’s end, there will be no more need for sentinels. There will be no more need for Combat Training at all,” Mave said as we all watched Oreo sniffing the roses at the left edge of the garden across from us. Those seemed to be her favorite.

“Assuming they make it,” Max said in a slow whisper. “Assuming she doesn’t die in there.”

Goose bumps rose on my forearms.

Again, the silence stretched between us because there really wasn’t much to say to that. There was a very good chance that I was going to die in the Well. I had known that since I first saw the battlefield.

So, we just watched as Oreo ran to the temple next and disappeared behind the statues, lost in our own thoughts.

“You can say no,” Max said eventually. “You can tell them you need another year to prepare. We can go with you then. We can help.”

Except I would rather die a thousand deaths than take him and Mave in the Well with me.

Lucky for me, Oreo was barking somewhere in the temple, and it was the perfect excuse for me to give them a few minutes alone. I jumped to my feet. “I’ll be right back.”

Temples made my skin crawl even more now than they used to. Because I’d been endowed in this very place that night, and I’d seen Arti’s face, the one that would never let me trust her completely again, and I’d felt that pain, that magic coursing through my veins. I’d felt all of it. And now any time I walked in there was a reminder of it, until...

“She’s becoming feistier by the week,” Shade said, and my heart almost broke right out of my ribcage.

There he was, sitting behind the foot of Hades’s statue, back resting against its ankle. He was playing with a neon-green ball he’d gotten for Oreo a couple months ago, a ball that she fucking *adored*. He threw it all the way to the other side of the temple, beyond the hearth and the altar, behind

Zeus and Hera sitting at their thrones, and she ran after it so fast she turned to a blur.

“She just really likes you,” I muttered, resisting my every instinct to run to his arms and sit by his side and touch his face and kiss his lips...

No.

Not yet. Not as long as my light was triggered by his darkness—but we could be in the temple at the same time. If I went and sat on the other side by Demeter’s legs, we could talk without risking hurting one another at all.

So that’s what I did.

Oreo brought him back her green ball, and he threw it again and again and again...

Shade looked good. He wore a short-sleeved grey shirt, my favorite color on him. His hair was cut a bit shorter than a couple days ago, his face clean-shaven. He looked so perfectly relaxed sitting there on the floor, one leg over the other as he played with the hellhound, but I knew better. I knew the storms in his eyes just fine.

“When did you get back?” I asked. He wasn’t on duty today, but he never seemed to be up here anymore.

“About an hour ago,” he said. “How are you, Snowflake?”

“I’m okay.” Now, I was. Wide awake and okay, never mind that I *wasn’t* any of that two minutes ago. “You?”

“Same as always,” Shade said, throwing the ball for Oreo once more. “I didn’t want to interrupt you with your friends, but Oreo seemed determined to get you here.”

I smiled, looking behind the statue, at Max and Mave still sitting on that bench. The way they were looking at each other,

smiling at each other as Mave said something, it was so easy to see they were in love. So fucking easy for everyone to see—except the two of them.

“Believe me, they’ll be okay,” I whispered, then turned to him with my whole body. “I’ve been practicing something,” I said, cheeks heated up a bit already as I rubbed my hands together. “Want to see? It’s just a little something.”

Shade was suddenly alert, sitting up straighter. “Yes. What is it?” he said without hesitation, and even Oreo dropped the ball for a moment.

“Here it goes,” I said, feeling a bit pathetic to think this was even a big deal, but to me, it was. I’d been practicing the shape of my godlight when I was alone in my room sometimes, and I finally got it to look at least half of what I wanted—which was a blue butterfly, just like the librarians at the Daedalus Palace.

My magic hummed in my veins as well as in the diamond over my hip, rushing with my blood, heated up by the friction of my palms for a moment, before I gave it permission to slip out of me.

The light was small, which was another testament of how much control I had now as opposed to when I first began. I could keep it minimal, shape the godlight into a butterfly no bigger than a couple inches, and have it fly right off my hands and into the air as if it had real wings.

There were still details missing to it, a lot of details—which was why I hadn’t showed it to Mave yet—and it was a very basic outline of a butterfly, but it was mine. I made that. My magic made that, and it burned in the dark of the night just like those stars in the sky.

With my mind, I guided it outside, all the way to Max and Mave, just to mess with them. She was going to tease me about not knowing what a butterfly looked like, but it was okay. I'd get better eventually.

And as soon as Oreo saw it, she chased after it, just like she did when we were alone in my room. I laughed as I watched her barking at it, scaring the hell out of Max and Mave.

Then I turned to see Shade wasn't looking at it at all, but his eyes were on me, a wondrous smile on his face that made me flush even more. He used to look at me like that when we were together, too. Naked and in each other's arms.

Fuck, how my heart ached to be there again.

"You look alive, Snowflake," he finally whispered, and I rested my head against the statue. "You look exactly like who you were always meant to be right now. Magic becomes you."

Tears pricked the back of my eyes. I knew that. I'd spent so much time just coming to terms with this, but I loved it. I loved *this* me. I loved the struggle and the feel of it, the warmth and the power, that light and those wings on my back that only I saw, but...

"Well, I don't want it. If I could give it back, I would," I said, and it was a miracle my voice didn't break.

"Never," Shade said, shaking his head. But I would. It was the thing that didn't let me be with him, this light, and Shade mattered more than anything in the world to me. Magic was great, but his arms were the only place in the world where I'd ever belonged. He was my home.

And I couldn't even get close to him without fearing I'd burst into godlight and take his breath away—in a bad way.

I said nothing, just let my eyes wander around his perfect face. Sometimes, when I didn't see him for days at a time, I almost forgot it. I almost forgot the lines of his lips, and the colors of his eyes because I missed him so much and there was no way my imagination knew how to make him properly.

“Do you remember where you were a year ago?” Shade whispered.

I nodded slowly—yes, I'd probably been in my room at Gary's house, dreading having to spend another month in there, staring at my old calendar marked with Xs, waiting for my eighteenth birthday. Now the nineteenth was just around the corner...

“They awakened the Iriades last April, right here in the Arges. They say the birds pick their candidates the second they're self-conscious, but that they need to watch them for a little while, sometimes for weeks, before they're sure of their selection. So, a year ago tonight, your Iriade probably knew it would be you. It just hadn't made itself known yet.”

Shivers ran down my back. “I'm not sure why it even picked me,” I muttered. “I hated everything Elysean-related with a passion then. Truly, truly *hated*.”

“Or maybe you were just uncomfortable with where you were, and you needed change, and you didn't know it,” Shade said. “People have no idea how unaware of their own lives they are most of the time. They don't live—they just let life happen to them.”

I smiled. “Maybe.” Maybe he was right. I had no true direction just one year ago and now... “Here I was, thinking I wanted nothing more than a peaceful, quiet, *boring* life, and now I can make butterflies out of light and I have a three-

headed hellhound who follows me around and wants me to take her on walks every night.”

Shade laughed. “Not to mention you’re studying magic and training with an actual goddess.”

“Oh, yes. That, too. And I aced the Introduction to Magic exam yesterday, by the way.” True—I got one hundred points, and Mave only got ninety-nine, and I couldn’t wait to rub that in her face for the rest of my life. “Also, I can shoot arrows and wield scythes now, and my boyfriend makes shadows with his hands and fights monsters for a living.”

I said the words and only after I finished speaking did I understand them. I flinched, cheeks heated up anew as Shade grinned. “Not to say that we’re together or anything. I know, we—” I muttered, but Shade cut me off.

“What else would we be?” he said, arching a brow. “Not that we need a label, Snowflake—we don’t. We’re one and the same.” *Yes, we were...* “And I never thought I’d actually say this, but I like that word.”

My heart skipped a beat. “What word? The *boyfriend* word?”

Shade grinned. “Yep. That one—but only when you say it.”

I laughed—how could I not? “I’m kissing you in my head right now. You’re cute enough to eat, Shadow Boy.”

He made a face like he just tasted the worst thing in the world. “*Cute?* Honestly, Snowflake?”

“Well, yes. You like it when I call you *my boyfriend.*” That was pretty damn cute in my book.

But Shade didn't agree. "Say that word again and I will punish you."

Oh, boy... I swallowed hard. "Punish me how?"

"I'll put you over my knee and slap that gorgeous ass raw, for starters," he said, and heat spilled all over me as if it had fallen from the ceiling. "Then I'll fuck that word right out of your mouth for a long time." In my mind, his cock was already sliding against my tongue, and I was fucking *dripping*.

"Shade," I warned because touching myself never did much for me anymore. Not even close to how *he* felt, and it wasn't fair. But he kept going.

"Then I'll tie you to my bed and worship every inch of your body the way I do in my mind," he whispered, and good thing I wasn't standing because my legs were so weak. "I'll keep going until you forget that word for good."

"Not fair," I choked, my skin burning, my panties soaked.

"Don't talk to me about fair, baby. I get to watch you from afar every day. I get to watch you wear my colors and my perfume, I get to watch your ass when you swing those hips the way you do, but I can never touch you. I get to watch you training, stretching and twisting, but I can't bend you over the way you need," he said, his voice heavier and darker with each word. "I get to watch you smiling and laughing and never know what you're saying because I can't get close enough."

"There," I choked. "That's a very good list of reasons why I would give all of this magic back if I could." All of it, without hesitation.

"You wouldn't. You're not weak, Snowflake. Giving up would never challenge you, but mastering it the way you

have?” And he pointed a thumb back toward where my butterfly had gone. “That sounds more like you. You’ll get it.”

“I will,” I said with a nod. “You’ll see. I’ll control it so well it’ll have no chance of slipping from me.”

“I know,” Shade said, beaming. “You’re already doing incredibly well.”

“Sera!” Max called from outside the temple.

I leaned to the side of the statue to tell him to go on without me, but...

“Go,” Shade whispered. “I have to leave, too.”

“I don’t want to go.” I would rather just stay here with him forever.

“I know, baby, but we have to rest. I left you something in your room. Won’t you tell me if you like it tomorrow?”

“I already do,” I said, smiling. Whatever he left me, I’d *love* it.

Shade smiled. “Goodnight, Snowflake. I’ll be thinking about you.”

I nodded, standing up on shaking legs. “Every day?”

“Every second,” Shade promised.

WHEN I RETURNED to my room, I found what he’d left me right away—a dress. A gorgeous dress made out of satin that was neither silver nor baby blue but somewhere in between, with silver straps and a dipping back, and a long slit up my left leg. On the floor next to it were black sandals sparkling with silver stones, and when I brought them closer to inspect them, I realized the stones were shaped like snowflakes. The straps

of the dress, too—the stones in them were made of a million tiny snowflakes.

But the most beautiful item of all was hidden inside a black box on my desk right next to a gorgeous silver purse. It was a snowflake hairpiece that sparkled with the same stones as the dress and the shoes.

I was right—I loved all of it, and I had never before wanted to wear something so badly in my life.

Fortunately, I got to wear it for the endowment ceremony of the first-years two days later.

Persephone was so joyful to be leaving the Underworld. Zeus had sent Hermes to deliver the order to Hades and to bring her back to Olympus.

Her laughter was heard all throughout the garden of Hades's palace as they went. The gardener, who wanted his queen to remain in the Underworld, offered her seeds from Hades's pomegranate while she, distracted by Hermes's charm and funny jokes, ate them absentmindedly.

Hades now smiled as he watched Hermes lead his queen up to the world above.

For he knew that no matter where she went now, she would always returned to him, for she had tasted the food of the dead.

—Book of Creation, Volume IV, 1st Edition 399

by Emilia Marvos, House Emerald

I LOOKED at myself in the mirror and smiled.

Wasn't that strange? It was the first time I'd actually dressed up and had done my hair and makeup mostly myself—with Layla's help on camera, of course—and I loved it. Even though the silver eyeshadow shimmered, and my eyeliner was as sharp as Carmine's fingernails, and my lips were painted a *cold red*, Mave said, I still loved it. The way the dress hugged my body was insane. Comparing this one to the fancy dress I'd

worn at the Museum during the trials, and the one I had on for the New Year's celebration here at the Academy, I saw how much different my body looked. I wasn't muscled or bulky by any means, but I was *lean*. My arms looked a million times better, and my back—*wow*, how was that my back?!—and my thighs, even my ass. All that exercising, every time I'd collapsed on the mats at the Arena during training, it had made more difference than I ever imagined.

But the reason why I was smiling was because of the dress that fit me like it was made for me—because it probably was. The shoes, too, and the purse fit my diamond exactly right. Most of all, it was the snowflake holding my hair up only on my right side, shining like it was made out of magic, not metal and silver stones. It was perfect. It was *me*, exactly who I was—Shade's Snowflake.

And I was going to go show him how perfectly it all fit together right now.

Oreo was in a great mood, too, having just come back from wherever she disappeared to for hours at a time. She was barking and jumping as we rushed down the hallway to go knocking on the last door, through which were the private chambers of the sentinels. I had no idea if they'd even hear me, but I'd wait. Somebody would have to come out that door eventually—everybody was coming out of every door all the damn time.

So many beautiful dresses and suits and glitter and faces—*wow*. I stopped in the middle of the hallway and just spun around slowly, watching the other students, smiling and waving and saying, *hi, you look so good!* to all of them, as they said the same to me. It was endowment day—*night*, technically—and we were all unofficially done with year one,

even though we wouldn't officially graduate for another month. That's because they wanted to keep an eye on the students the first month after endowment before they let everyone go home for summer break.

This day next month marked a whole year since the day I first stepped into Ideaa. The first day I was among Elyseans.

It was my birthday soon, too, and I actually *wanted* to celebrate it this time—with Max and Mave and Shade. Even Miles and James and Layla were going to be here in Ideaa to celebrate with me. Just one more month.

It was a night like no other.

“You look proper Elysean, Sinclair!”

I turned around to find Ethan standing in front of the open door to his room, with Nick right in front of him, trying to fix a green handkerchief on the breast pocket of his crème-colored suit.

“Likewise, Moore. And Reed,” I said with a nod as I went to them. Nick looked incredibly handsome, too, with his red suit and black tie, hair sleeked back and face clean-shaven.

“Thank you, *milady*,” they said, and they both bowed to me.

I laughed. “That's awfully kind of you, gentlemen.” And when the boys came up, they each had a red rose in their hands, the same as the ones that grew in the garden in the courtyard.

“For you,” they said and handed them to me.

“A little birdie told us about the deal you made with the goddess,” Nick said with a grin. He looked so different from

the boy he had been a year ago. They both did—I wasn't the only one who'd changed so completely.

"We wouldn't have made it without you," Ethan told me, and it was all I could do not to burst into tears when I took the flowers.

"It was nothing," I said, lowering my eyes to Oreo, who was barking and jumping and trying to get to the flowers. "Mine!" I told her, holding my hand up.

"It was *everything*, actually," said Nick. I had no idea how they'd found out about my deal with Artemis, but I was kind of glad they had. "But now we'll be second-years. We'll have magic."

"We'll be stronger. Able to protect ourselves better. You won't have to look out for us for once," Ethan said.

I'd noticed how much more often they hung out together lately, but I never knew they were so *in-tune* with each-other before. Had they really become friends? Because it sure looked like it from where I was standing.

"Instead, maybe we'll look out for you now," Nick said with a grin. "Not that you need it with that pup."

"It'll be a pleasure," Ethan solemnly said, and I could hardly believe my ears, even though we'd been *friendly* since that night. "But, seriously, does she ever grow? She looks the same as that first time I saw her."

"The books say she'll become an adult whenever she wants to. I can hardly wait to see it myself," I said, laughing. "You guys are okay though, right? You look great but—"

"We are," they said in unison. "Thanks to you."

My heart about melted.

“In that case, I’ll see you downstairs,” I said with a curtsy. “Gentlemen.”

“Milady,” they said, bowing to me again.

I was still laughing when I knocked on the door at the end of the hallway, still unable to fully believe that I’d just had that talk with the boys. Ethan and Nick—*wow!* When we first met, we hated each other’s guts. Maybe them more than me, but we did. Look at us now.

It honestly scared me a little bit—the thought that one could come such a long way in less than one year...

But when the door opened and I saw Shade, every other thought in my head disappeared.

He was wearing a grey suit.

He was wearing a *grey suit*, which not only looked heaven-made for him, but his tie was the exact same color and material as my dress—we fucking *matched!*—and the dark grey, almost black shirt underneath was made for me to tear off his body. Like *right now*.

I sighed. What the hell was he doing, looking like *that?!*

Crossing my arms in front of my chest, I raised a brow. “Oh, I see. You want every girl in the room swooning over you, is that it?” I muttered, unable to look away from his eyes that just now seemed to be made out of grey smoke, like they were trying to mimic the fabric of his suit.

Shade smiled like the fucking devil. “Only you, actually.” He showed me a small box in his hands that seemed familiar... “Help me with these, Snowflake?” And when he opened the lid, two cuffs shaped like snowflakes, miniature versions of the hair piece I was currently wearing, winked at me from the black velvet cushion.

They were absolutely perfect.

“Hold these for me.” I gave him my purse and the red roses to hold for a moment.

“Who?” he asked, sniffing the flowers while Oreo raised her front paws to his thigh and tried to get to them. Luckily, he didn’t let her—she’d definitely eat them the first chance she got.

“The boys. Ethan and Nick,” I said, and I barely managed to put the cuffs on his shirt from how badly my hands were shaking.

“Maybe I should have another talk with that boy,” Shade muttered under his breath.

“Please don’t. He’s terrified of you.” Ethan literally feared Shade more than Oreo, especially since he’d *talked* to him after he woke up from my stabbing him in the chest.

Shade neither confirmed nor denied it.

“You know, technically speaking, I’m not invited to these things at all. And even when I am, I never attend,” he said instead. “But no way am I going to miss this.” His eyes scrolled down my body slowly.

“Thank you for the dress. It’s gorgeous,” I whispered, taking my flowers and purse back, cheeks flushed as he leaned his head to the side and continued to look at me like that.

“I keep thinking, *there’s no way she can become even more beautiful than this* every single day, and you prove me wrong each morning. It’s become my favorite game to play with myself.”

I shook my head, breathless still. “Grey is my favorite color on you.” Had I ever told him that? I didn’t think so,

but...

“I know, baby. I see how you look at me when I’m wearing it,” he said, and I’d be damned if I didn’t want to hear him call me *baby* once every fucking minute.

“Is there anything you *don’t* see, Shadow Boy?” I said with a roll of my eyes, just for show.

He chuckled. “Not when it comes to you.”

Heat spilled all over me. Not only the good kind, but the *bad* kind, too. It had been barely five minutes, and my godlight was already firing up. I even felt it in the purse where my diamond was.

Casually, I took a step back. “We should get going,” I said, hating that I had to ruin this perfect moment. Hating that I couldn’t stay right here in front of his door forever, and that I couldn’t walk down those stairs with my arm in his.

“Just one more thing,” said Shade, reaching for something else in his pocket—another one of those velvet boxes.

And when he opened it, I almost screamed.

“You’re joking,” I breathed.

“She approved of the drawing,” said Shade, squatting in front of Oreo, who sat right by my legs, waiting. Then he took out three collars made out of black leather, with a single silver snowflake pendant hanging on each.

Tears in my eyes.

“What do you mean, *she approved*? When did you show her?” I asked, squatting down, too, as he put the collars around each head slowly, and Oreo let him. She *loved* it when Shade touched her, and she even licked his face while he did.

“Just a couple weeks ago,” Shade muttered.

I gasped when it all clicked together. “She was with *you*! She came to you when she disappeared, didn’t she!” And it wasn’t even a question.

Fuck, it made perfect sense. Of course she went to Shade, and I should have known. She still didn’t let anybody even touch her except him. Here I’d been worried sick, the little brat!

“We’ve been hanging out a couple times,” Shade said, smiling at the collars on Oreo. She seemed to like them—all three heads were trying to sniff and lick the other’s snowflake pendant, and they all seemed happy with what they sensed.

“Why? Are you planning to get in trouble or something?” Which wouldn’t even surprise me.

“No, just to protect you,” Shade said when he stood up again, and Oreo went to stand by his side, proudly raising her heads to show me her collars. “We’re at your service, Snowflake.” He nodded deeply, and Oreo’s heads bobbed as she tried to imitate him.

I laughed. “Don’t you dare attack anyone on my account,” I reminded them both.

“Unless someone dares to look at you,” Shade said, eyes scrolling down my body once more. “If they do, I pity their poor souls.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m not supposed to like that,” I said with a sigh. “But if I catch anybody staring at you, I’m making use of Oreo’s teeth for once.” Not really, but I’d be very tempted.

Shade suddenly came closer, kissed my cheek lightning fast, and whispered, “I bet that red lipstick will look great wrapped around my cock. I can’t wait to see it.”

Heat, heat, heat, the good kind and the bad, spilled all over me.

I stepped back, breathing a bit faster.

“Fuck, Shade...”

“Yes—that’s on your to-do list as soon as you’re in control of that magic,” he told me.

I smiled so big my cheeks hurt as I slowly stepped back. “Naughty, naughty Shadow Boy.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” he said, leaning against the doorframe, a hand in his pocket as he watched me, those eyes leaving trails of fire everywhere he looked at me.

Shade watched me walk away from him, his bloodshot eyes on my ass as I went, and he waved at me until he couldn’t see me anymore.

Max and Mave were waiting for me by the stairway, both of them looking better than ever before. Mave wore a blood red halter dress that fell just over her thighs, revealing her gorgeous long legs. The curls of her hair glistened and her makeup was perfect, her lips the exact same shade of red as her dress.

The exact same shade of red as Max’s suit, too. He looked absolutely impeccable with the white shirt and red tie, but his hair made the biggest difference—he’d straightened his wild curls and had styled his hair back, reveling his beautiful face completely. Like that, he was even more breathtaking than usual.

I couldn’t stop telling them how great they looked—especially standing next to each other—and they loved my dress, too, but they loved Oreo’s collars even more.

The ceremony began in ten minutes. We all seemed to be in a great mood. Mave and I laced our arms to Max's as we went down the stairs with everyone else. And as we stepped into Ariadne's Chamber together, with Oreo proudly leading the way, I knew that this would be a night I would never, *ever* forget.



THEY'D FIXED up a large wooden platform at the heart of Ariadne's Chamber, with a podium and a microphone, and a small stand made out of glass in the middle.

Shade sat about fifty feet to my right, at the professors' table on the other side of the platform, but we both chose seats that would have us looking right at each other. I drank a full glass of wine two hours in, but I wasn't so much as *dizzy* from the excitement of being here. Of actually enjoying something like this for once.

I even danced for a bit. When Max and Mave said they were going to the dance floor, I thought, *why the hell not?* I didn't go so far as to assume Shade would join us, though. He wasn't the type to want to dance in front of people, but I had the feeling that if I asked him, he'd dance with me. He'd dance with me in my room or his, and better yet—in the Void. He'd dance for hours and hold me to his chest, and whisper things in my ear that only he knew how to say perfectly...

But as I danced, I didn't mind that there were hundreds of others around me. I just watched him watching me, and I pretended I was in the Void right now, dancing for his eyes only. It was easy when he reacted to every movement of my hips like that. When he kept drinking and drinking and loosening his tie and the buttons of his shirt, too. I was dying

to be in his head right now just to see what he was thinking about doing to me. Just to see how he would *punish* me for teasing him like this in front of everyone.

Maybe after this was over, he would tell me.

Maybe after this was over, he would *show* me.

We ate dinner, but dessert was going to be served after the endowment ceremony. Carmine would be hosting it, and they'd already put the big white wooden boxes right in front of the large screen across from the doors, where the coat of arms of each House took over for a minute, before it switched to the next.

The band stopped playing their instruments, and the hymn of the gods played at low volume through the speakers mounted at the corners of the ceiling. Tonight, the melody didn't bother me. That was a first, too.

I was perfectly at ease, surrounded by my friends, Shade's eyes on me, Oreo sitting under my chair as I scratched her heads and sipped my wine.

Carmine, Totaj, and Professor Cavnic all stood in front of the screen near those boxes, while the waiters, ten of them, were at the ready by the wall. Each had a golden tray in their hands, with a golden cup and box with the Ambrosia in it—that strange berry that had tasted awful to me at first. Had Artemis put her blood in all those cups? Was it going to be the same for every one of my classmates as it had been for me?

Because it had hurt. It had burned pleasantly at first, but then there had been so much pain...

Mave, who sat to my left, kept throwing glances at Max, who sat to my right. She looked at him like she was hoping

he'd somehow magically pop up right next to her—because she was excited, yes—they all were. But she was also afraid.

“Hey, Max. I can't see Shade from here so well. Can we switch places, pretty please?” I said, batting my lashes at him, while Mave pretended she hadn't heard me and focused on Carmine and the others preparing themselves to start the ceremony.

“What do you mean? You can see—” Max started because of course he didn't suspect shit.

I sank my nails in his forearms and widened my eyes, speaking through gritted teeth. “Switch places with me, *now*.”

He didn't comment again. I sat in his chair and he sat in mine, and Oreo didn't hesitate to come closer so I could continue to scratch her heads. She looked so pretty with those snowflakes around her necks that I wanted to eat her.

And I wanted to eat the guy who'd had them made even more.

I could still see Shade perfectly. He raised his glass at me slightly when he saw what I did—Max and Mave were a mess of nerves, and right now they needed each other.

It wasn't long before I noticed them holding hands between the chairs, hiding underneath the white tablecloth that shimmered a beautiful golden I no longer hated. It really was a pretty color. They were holding hands, and they were breathing slower, and they both seemed more relaxed before ten minutes had passed.

The ceremony for the other students was identical to mine. Cavnic was behind Carmine with a golden jug in his hand, filling the golden cup of each student when the waiter brought

it up, while Professor Totaj picked up the strange berries and put them in the golden box alongside him.

Carmine said the same words to them as Arti had said to me:

Drink this, and all your dreams shall come true.

Drink this and become the strongest version of you to have ever existed in any timeline.

Drink and be godlike...

And then they drank the Nectar and ate the Ambrosia while Carmine chanted a few words in Latin—but that’s where the similarities ended.

This was where my pain had begun, and I’d almost died from the intensity of the magic inside me, and I’d collapsed right after. Nobody else here did that. They just bowed in front of Carmine, thanked her and the professors, then ran back to their seats with huge smiles on their faces, most with their fists raised in the air, screaming, *I did it, I did it!*

But maybe it was just because they were all Elysean to begin with, so when Nick’s name was called, I held on tightly to the edge of the table and waited. Was he going to react to magic the same way I had? Was he going to scream in pain and collapse in front of everyone?

Fuck. Now that I thought about it, I should have warned them. I should have warned them in the hallway before we even came in here, but...

Nick drank the Nectar.

Nick swallowed the Ambrosia—and Carmine reminded him to not chew, just like she did with everyone else.

And Nick turned to us with a big smile on his face, jumping in the air, shouting, *I got it! I got it, bitches!*

He did not scream in pain. He did not collapse to the floor, either. He looked perfectly fine as he went to take his seat beside Ethan, who patted his back just like every other person at the table was doing.

I looked at Shade, trying to keep my smile on. After all, I was really glad that Nick was okay. But what the hell did it mean that everything had been different for me?

Shade could see the fight going on in my head, and he nodded as if to say it was okay, that we'd talk about it later. That there was a perfectly good explanation why my endowment had been different, but right now I was not going to solve any of my life's mysteries, so I nodded back—we'd talk about this after. We'd figure it out.

And then it was Mave's turn.

When Carmine called her name, she froze. Mave was usually the *go-getter* type of girl, never hesitating to jump to her feet and to be the first to demonstrate something in class, but right now, she froze, and she turned to look at Max like he had all the answers of the universe. They were no longer even hiding their hands, and Max had turned toward her with his whole body, too.

He was smiling brightly at her like he was proud. "You got this, Firecracker. Go fire 'em up," he told her.

The next second, Mave let go of his hands, grabbed his face and kissed him.

She kissed him on the lips right there in front of everyone, and when she moved away again, she was smiling. She looked *okay*. Perfectly fine to take over the world, just like that.

And it was fucking *painful* how much I understood that.

Every person in the hall was cheering and clapping, including me—and Shade, too, which really was a big deal. The guy didn't clap. Seriously, it was like he was allergic to applauding, but he was clapping now, smiling as he looked at Mave making her way to the professors in her gorgeous red dress.

Yes, everyone—except for Max, who still wasn't breathing, and I actually had to remind him to draw in air a couple times.

He was in shock, but he was also smiling. His eyes were brighter than I'd ever seen before.

“I love you, you Elysean prick,” I muttered, hugging his side for a second.

“I love you, too, pesky mortal,” he said, taking his eyes off Mave for only a second, and then he was back to being completely absorbed by her.

Mave was equally entranced by him when it was Max's turn to get endowed, and when it was over and the excitement halfway faded, I asked them how it was.

They said it was the most delicious juice they'd ever tasted, and the most delicious berry they'd ever eaten, and they said it felt like heat going down their bodies—like drinking tea outside in winter, Max described it.

But that was it.

Mine had definitely not felt like drinking tea outside in winter. Mine had felt like I'd been standing too close to the sun suddenly.

But the night continued, and once every single one of a hundred and eighteen students was endowed, Carmine stepped in front of the podium with a microphone in her hand. Behind her the big screen showed the four coats of arms of the Houses. We all sat back and listened, all with smiles on our faces, all satisfied and just happy to be here.

And she said, “Congratulations, students. You have been endowed. Each one of you has successfully attended the first year of studies at the Elysean Academy of Divine Light and Beauty, and from this moment on, your magic is unlocked.”

Everyone clapped (except Shade) and I did, too.

Carmine looked regal with her dark red dress that covered her from her neck down to her ankles, just like always. But this one was made out of a stretchy fabric, and it fell a bit looser down her legs. The hem of it was shorter in some places and longer in others, revealing her gorgeous black sandals with six-inch heels that could very well be considered weapons in their own right—just like the boots she usually wore.

Her ruby shone, sewn to the collar of her dress, especially when she said, “*Now*, we begin the real fight. Now, we begin to really learn the way of Elyseans. Our culture and our ways, our—”

“*Don’t you remember me?*”

Every single person in Ariadne’s Chamber stopped breathing, stopped moving, stop *thinking*, their unblinking eyes on the screen that had been showing the Houses’ coats of arms until now, but...not anymore.

Now it was showing footage of *me*.

It was showing footage of me through what looked like a window, the white curtain pulled to the side enough to reveal my face perfectly well.

And to reveal the face of Alan Roux, too, sitting in his recliner, wearing his robe with his initials sewn on the breast pocket, his hair grey, his beard long...*exactly* like he'd looked that day I'd gone to see him.

Exactly that day.

Are you...are you like this because of me? Sera in the video said, and I could only see my own profile, but I looked so fucking terrified.

“No, no, no,” I breathed, shaking my head, determined to *not* accept this reality, where everyone in the room—*everyone* could see that large screen and hear my voice.

Unfortunately for me, the video didn't stop.

DON'T YOU REMEMBER ME, Alan? I'm the girl—the little girl who burned in the car thirteen years ago. I'm the little girl Peter killed. Don't you remember how you pulled me out of those flames...

Yes, that's right. You pulled me out and you b-b-brought me back...

You brought me back from the dead, Alan. I saw it. You saved me...

OH MY GOD...

“Sera?” Max whispered, looking at me now, sitting right next to me. Right there, close enough to touch, watching the

footage of me and his father...

Stranger, stranger, stranger! Alan Roux shouted.

And I kept going, begging, *No, please. You have to remember, Alan! You have to remember what you did to me because you brought me back! The goddess Mnemosyne showed me what happened that night—I saw you. You brought me back, and I—*

The screen went dark, black smoke and ribbons of darkness coming out of it as it fried from the inside.

Max was already on his feet, looking at me like he didn't want to even believe what the hell he'd just seen, and I stood up, too. I couldn't really feel my body, but I stood up because this couldn't be real.

Every single person in the room was watching me now, and the ruby around Carmine's neck was about to fucking blind us with that blinking red light. She raised her finger toward me from the podium, looking more an animal, a lioness, than human.

"Grab her!" she hissed, and a second later, Brons were entering the open double doors like they'd materialized out of thin fucking air.

But...

A sharp whistle shocked everyone, making them jump. Making them look away from me for a second, and turn to Shade, to where he stood by the professors' table. The professors who were surely going to launch themselves at me together with the Brons...

But Shade had whistled, and now the table in front of me was moving.

He whistled, and something came out from underneath it and jumped on the tabletop, ruining every glass and every plate and every flower in the process.

People screamed.

A fully grown, three-headed hellhound almost twice the size of Mors, wearing snowflake collars around her necks was standing on the table with her back turned to me. She snapped her jaws and growled at *everyone* around the table until they, including Max, had no other choice but to step away.

“Oreo, no,” I breathed because I knew what this was already. I knew what this was, and I should have known that she’d listen to Shade, and I should have known that she spent all that time she was away from me with him!

I knew it and I couldn’t let this happen. I would never let them hurt Shade.

But...

“What are you waiting for—*attack!*” Carmine shouted.

Oreo roared worse than a dragon.

I only had two seconds to meet Shade’s eyes, completely motionless where I stood. He was smiling ear-to-ear, the devil in his eyes, his hair all over the place, and his shirt unbuttoned, jacket and tie gone.

Shade winked at me.

“*No!*” I called at the top of my lungs.

He knew very well where this could lead. He’d get a death sentence if he attacked. He’d turn himself into an enemy of his own kind if he did this, but...

Shade's arms rose without hesitation before anyone had the chance to get to me. Darkness, raw and unforgiving, spread out from under his feet, taking over the room within seconds.

People screamed. People ran for the doors, but nobody was fast enough for the Void. Nobody could keep out of it. *Nobody.*

I looked at Max as he was being dragged toward the doors by Mave, and his eyes were on me, too. So many questions in them, but the betrayal that reflected back to me was like a knife through my heart.

I'm so, so sorry, Max...

My voice didn't work.

The next second, everything went dark.

—THE END

*Thank you for reading **The Elysean Illusions!***

It has been such an incredible experience to write this story, and I'm keeping my fingers crossed that you enjoyed it.

If you did, will you take a moment to leave a review on [Amazon?](#) Reviews are an incredible help to authors, and just a few words should do it (or a simple rating). I'd appreciate it very much.

***The 4th and final book in this series is coming soon!** To be notified, make sure to sign up to my [Mailing List](#) or follow me on:*

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Fore more incredible stories, turn the page!

Sincerely,

Dori Hoxa

MORE BY D.N. HOXA: THE REIGN OF DRAGONS SERIES



Being stuck in a time loop sucks, especially when I die on the same day, at the hands of the same man, over and over again.

But in Life Number Seven, I'm determined to change my fate.

To do that, I have to run away from my father, the dragon king of all shifters, and the most paranoid man I know. He and his men are near impossible to fool, but I switch places with my lady's maid and manage to make it all the way into the woods—right before I get knocked out cold.

When I wake up, I find myself a prisoner, and my captor is the son of my father's worst enemy. Just my luck.

Lucien Di Laurier is a cocky bastard who thinks I'm an object to be owned. It doesn't help that he's dangerously sexy, and can literally control the air in my lungs with a wave of his hand. He wants to get his revenge on my father for killing his, and that's why he's after the dragoness...never realizing that I'm right there, in his home. Thinking I'm just the maid, he vows to *break* me until I tell him everything he wants to know.

But things don't go as planned for either of us. Secrets have a way of coming to light, and his just might be worse than mine. And when we both finally learn the truth about one another, will we be able to stand together against the sickness that has plagued the world and created this time loop?

Or will I have to go back home, and wait to die for the seventh time?

MORE BY D.N. HOXA: THE HIDDEN REALM SERIES



Savage Ax (The Hidden Realm, Book 1)

I heard the stories about Savage Ax. They're whispered among vampires everywhere in the Hidden Realm.

He's dangerous, merciless, a predator even among monsters...but nobody told me that he was dangerously sexy, too.

Now, on top of having to go searching for a vampire out there in the human world infested with sorcerers, I have to do it with *him* by my side.

Handling Savage Ax didn't seem like a big deal—despite his looks, our covens are sworn enemies. Despite his reputation, I have the green light to get rid of him if needed. And it's all fun and games, empty threats and dirty words at first...

But there's a spark of madness in his eyes that draws me in. Something about the way he takes what he wants, even from me, and gives no explanation in return. Something about the rough touch of his hand that melts all the ice I've spent years layering around me.

The farther away from home we go, the easier it gets to forget who he is. Who I am. Where we are.

And that's exactly where my real troubles will begin...

****Savage Ax is the first book in The Hidden Realm series, written in 2 POVs, packed with magic, mayhem, and explicit romantic scenes intended for mature audiences.****

MORE BY D.N. HOXA: PIXIE PINK SERIES



Werewolves Like Pink Too (Pixie Pink, Book 1)

What's worse than a pink pixie living all alone in the Big City, eight thousand miles away from home?

A pink pixie who's stuck behind a desk all day, taking calls and managing monster-fighting crews without ever seeing the light of day herself. *That's* what.

For two years, I worked my ass off to prove myself to my boss, and prayed for a chance to do the work I left my family behind for.

And I'm finally about to catch my break. I've got an undercover mission with my name on it, and it's everything I've been dreaming of since I got here.

Until I find out that Dominic Dane will be my partner. That self-absorbed, narcissistic werewolf who humiliated me in front of all my coworkers on day one, and loves to pretend that I don't even exist.

It's bad enough that he tried to kick me out of my mission. It's even worse that he's sinfully hot and fries braincells with a single look of those gorgeous green eyes.

Now, on top of having to kick ass on my first mission, I have to pretend to be his *girlfriend* for three days, and keep my ridiculous attraction to him under control, too. So much for catching a break.

Lucky for me, I've got a secret weapon that's going to help me handle Dominic Dane, and it's God's best gift to mankind: chocolate. Armed with as many bars as my purse can fit, and with my wits about me, I'm going to survive the gorgeous wolf-ass one way or the other—and *win*.

MORE BY D.N. HOXA: THE DARK SHADE SERIES



Shadow Born (The Dark Shade, Book 1)

They call me Kallista Nix, but that is not my real name. My past was taken from me, and though I search for it every day for the past five years, all I find are dead ends.

Though I search for the Dark Shade, everyone keeps telling me that it doesn't exist.

The darkness, the monsters, the fear—they're all in my head. I'm tempted to believe them. The Shades are magical safe havens where everyone can be who they truly are without having to hide. Supernaturals of all kinds love them. They're not supposed to be *dark*. But how can I argue with my own memories? Everything changes when I steal a magical artifact...

MORE BY D.N. HOXA: SMOKE & ASHES SERIES



Firestorm (Smoke & Ashes, Book 1)

Having no soul definitely has its perks.

After all, I can kill as many magical beasts as I want and not have to worry about the blood on my hands. But no matter how hard I try to run, I can never escape where I came from: the pits of Hell. Now Hell's elite have a job for me, a job I can't refuse. A nocturnal witch is on the loose and those are never up to anything good.

She's hiding in my city, so they've decided I'm the best person for the job— together with Lexar Dagon'an. He's Hell's very own Golden Boy, my archnemesis, and he's sexy as the sins he makes me want to commit when I look at him. Like *murder*, obviously...

MORE BY D.N. HOXA: THE NEW ORLEANS SHADE SERIES



Pain Seeker (The New Orleans Shade, Book 1)

Betrayed. Defeated. Chained.

I used to be a sister, a friend, a ruler of the elflands that belonged to my family's House. Now, I am a prisoner of the fae, my kind's sworn enemy since the beginning of time.

They put chains around me, thinking they can keep me from breaking free and taking their lives. They can't.

The only reason I stay is because I no longer need a life. My home, my family, my dignity were all taken away from me.

But I have the fae. My captor. He is every bit the man I was taught to hate long before I knew how to love...

MORE BY D.N. HOXA: THE NEW YORK SHADE SERIES



Magic Thief (The New York Shade, Book 1)

Welcome to the New York Shade!

My name is Sin Montero—hellbeast mercenary, professional liar, and I’ll happily be your guide.

Supernaturals are free to be who they are in the Shade. That’s the point of its existence—just not for me. I’ve spent my whole life lying about what I am, until it all comes crashing down on me with a single bite. Turns out, my blood can’t tell lies, not to a vampire.

Damian Reed is achingly beautiful the way a lion is breathtaking—right until he rips your throat out. He claims my baby brother is in trouble...

ALSO BY D.N. HOXA

[The Marked Series \(Completed\)](#)

Blood and Fire

Deadly Secrets

Death Marked

[Winter Wayne Series \(Completed\)](#)

Bone Witch

Bone Coven

Bone Magic

Bone Spell

Bone Prison

Bone Fairy

[Scarlet Jones Series \(Completed\)](#)

Storm Witch

Storm Power

Storm Legacy

Storm Secrets

Storm Vengeance

Storm Dragon

[Victoria Brigham Series \(Completed\)](#)

Wolf Witch

Wolf Uncovered

Wolf Unleashed

Wolf's Rise

[Starlight Series \(Completed\)](#)

Assassin

Villain

Sinner

Savior

[Morta Fox Series \(Completed\)](#)

Heartbeat

Reclaimed

Unchanged