



BRUTAL BOYS OF EVERLAKE PREP BOOK 2

KINGS OF LOCKDOWN

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KINGS OF LOCKDOWN

Brutal Boys of Everlake Prep

Book 2

Caroline Peckham & Susanne Valenti

This book is dedicated to toilet paper.

May we never take you for granted again...

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Welcome to Everlake Preparatory School.

This series is set in the fictional U.S. state of Sequoia and centres around a pandemic similar, but more extreme than the coronavirus.

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We hope to see you there :)

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I didn't know if the stench of bleach or smoke was worse, but both clung to me in equal parts as we stood in the woods, watching the bonfire burn down to embers in the grave I'd dug for Tatum.

The memory of spending hours out here digging this hole seemed separate to me somehow. Yeah, I could remember the way my muscles had bunched and burned and trembled with fatigue as I'd driven the shovel into the soil over and over. I could remember the way my shirt had clung to my body as I was coated with sweat and how dirt had clogged beneath my fingernails. The way the damp soil had smelled and how the sky had gone from dark to light as I worked. The pain of blisters that formed and burst and bled along my palms while I tried to make the agony in my body match what was in my heart. All of that was clear as day. But the rage I'd felt towards Tatum? The sense of betrayal, the hurt, the hatred? If there was one thing killing this asshole had taught me, it was that blaming her for my mother's death wouldn't help me deal with my grief. Saint had told me to find an outlet for my rage, but if killing this scumbag hadn't made me feel any better, then I knew hurting Tatum wouldn't either.

After the students had gotten over the excitement of putting those thieving

scumbags back in their places, Monroe had sent them all back to their dorms and told them to isolate themselves for forty eight hours. Everyone had been exposed to outsiders now and Tatum wasn't the only one who had come into contact with someone who was possibly infected. He'd set the rest of the staff the task of delivering enough food for the duration to each dorm and then told them to isolate themselves too. The added bonus was that none of them would be out and about to see what we were up to.

While he'd organised that, the three of us had brought Tatum back to The Temple and Saint had surprised all of us by giving her the use of his room so that she could isolate herself from us. We'd all stripped, showered and smothered ourselves in hand sanitiser until it made our eyes burn and then the bleaching had begun.

Saint's OCD had never come in so handy. He picked out any and every little thing that the intruders had left behind and we tossed it all in a trash bag before he moved on to cataloguing everything they'd touched from memory alone.

We'd lost two hundred and seventeen rolls of toilet paper. But he'd counted one hundred and eighty four amongst the stuff that we'd recovered up by the main gates. Twenty six had been ruined beyond use which left seven unaccounted for. And I honestly thought Saint was going to crack a tooth with how hard he ground his teeth about that. There was food and cash missing too, alongside a few other random things that the intruders had clearly thought held value. We'd recovered most of it before they could escape, including our Xbox and a few expensive watches. Luckily, most of the stuff with real value had been in the safe anyway so we hadn't taken much of a hit all in all.

Tatum sat up in Saint's room, her legs hanging between the railings which fronted the balcony as she looked down at us while we worked.

I wasn't going to think about the fact that she might be contaminated. I wasn't going to give it a moment's thought. Because I'd seen what the Hades Virus could do. I knew too well. And I wasn't going to watch it happen to anyone I cared about ever again.

Saint had cleaned his room while Tatum showered in the en-suite and he even stripped the bed and made it up fresh for her. Someone else might have mistaken his thoroughness for caring, but I doubted that came into it much if at all. He just couldn't stand the idea of anyone other than us being in his private space and he needed to scrub the entire place clean before he'd satisfy his need to feel that he was in control of it again.

Kyan had set the TV playing episode one of The Walking Dead and angled it so that Tatum could watch from the seat she'd made herself at the top of the stairs where she'd curled up with Saint's comforter around her. That asshole had hit her head hard enough to give her a concussion so we'd left her with strict instructions not to go to sleep and Kyan had been messaging back and forth with her ever since we'd left her there alone to make sure she hadn't dozed off.

Monroe had appeared around two am and together the four of us had headed down to the catacombs, wrapped the body in a tarp, mopped up the blood with towels he'd stolen from the laundry room and then carried everything out via the beach exit and up through the woods to this grave.

Saint and Kyan had exchanged a dark look when I showed them it which made me think I was in for a tongue lashing at some point, but the more urgent task of disposing of our problem had taken precedent for now.

Saint had returned to the catacombs to bleach everything again. He was such a clean freak that he even had a blacklight which he usually used to double check his cleaner had done a thorough job, but had come in really fucking handy for tracking down blood splatter.

The rest of us had doused the body in lighter fluid and Monroe was the one to strike the match. And then we spent the next few hours making sure we stayed upwind of the rancid smoke and kept feeding the fire until we were sure that as much of the evidence as possible had burned away.

So now, as the embers burned low and all that was left was the charred remains of bones which wouldn't burn down, the four of us sat together and waited for the fire to go out.

"I never realised how easy it was to kill someone," I muttered, breaking the silence we'd maintained for most of the night.

"I was well aware," Saint deadpanned.

"Never thought I'd do it, though," Monroe muttered.

"We did it for her," Kyan growled. "There's beauty in that."

We all looked at each other for a long moment. *Her*. Tatum Rivers. The girl who'd changed everything. There were a lot of unspoken words hanging between the four of us about her. Because no matter what had passed between all of us and the girl we'd claimed for our own, it had led us all to a place where we were willing to kill for her. And there weren't many people in this world who I could claim to care about like that.

None of us said anything else on the subject, leaving it there for later.

Aside from Saint barking orders and the odd question, the whole night had been a pretty quiet affair.

But as far as I could tell, we held our silence for different reasons. Saint was in OCD heaven. Never had control and compulsive cleaning been so important. I could practically see him creating an impossibly long list of things required to destroy all the evidence and the light in his dark eyes said he relished the challenge. I didn't think he had particularly enjoyed killing the asshole, but I didn't think he was affected much by it either. It wasn't that he was a straight up psychopath – though I guessed a lot of people would beg to

differ with me there – but with Saint it was more that he found it hard to care about people. He struggled with empathy to the point where I was fairly sure he didn't have any. He struggled with sympathy because he tended to believe that the world dished things out to people who deserved them for not being strong enough to force another destiny. And he struggled with grief because he hadn't had many people he cared about enough to grieve them. And he certainly didn't think many people were worth grieving. Saint cared about himself first of all and then me and Kyan. That was it. Although I had to admit that Tatum seemed to be getting under his skin. And the way he'd instantly stepped in to stab this guy in solidarity with her made me wonder how much he was beginning to care for her.

Kyan was in his element here. He was violence embodied and was the most emotional about this whole thing out of us. Not emotional in the way you might expect someone to be – regret, panic, guilt – no, Kyan was amped up. He was a ball of energy. He'd spent most of the night pacing around the fire, collecting all the wood needed to stoke the flames almost single handedly with this crazy smile playing around his lips.

He was waiting for his next part in this with so much energy coiled in his muscles that I expected him to spring forward at any moment. Monroe had gotten a sledgehammer from the maintenance building to deal with the last of the bones and Kyan laid claim to it instantly. He'd wedged it against the dirt with the handle sticking up and was crouched with his chin resting on the top of it, looking to all intents and purposes like a mountain lion waiting to pounce.

I, on the other hand seemed to be the only one of us who was borderline freaking out about this whole thing. Was I wracked with guilt and regret over killing some deadbeat wannabe rapist when he'd been trying to hurt our girl? No. But was I envisioning some version of the future where police came,

evidence was discovered and somehow we found ourselves locked up in a supermax for the rest of our miserable lives? Yeah. That thought had occurred. Repeatedly.

When I'd dragged Tatum up here with thoughts of killing her, I'd been out of my fucking mind with grief and heartache and so much fucking rage that it had consumed me. I'd cracked. I knew that now. It was the culmination of all the helpless, useless agony I'd been bottling up until it festered into something so much more potent. So much more dangerous.

I couldn't even remember planning it. Something in me just broke and I lost it. But I knew exactly what had dragged me back, what had reached me through all the layers of pain and suffering and misery.

Tatum Rivers had called my name in the dark and I'd come crawling up out of it to worship at her feet. She might not have realised it yet, but she owned me now even more thoroughly than I owned her.

I'd killed for her. Fought for her. And now I wanted to be free for her too.

Monroe was the only one of our group who I couldn't entirely figure out. He certainly didn't look to be grieving or losing his shit, or appear really present here at all. Since we'd started to let the fire burn down, he'd taken a seat in the dirt and cast his eyes out over the trees and stayed in silence as he was lost to his own thoughts.

Whatever was spinning through his mind, he didn't seem to be happy about it. His mouth was set in a savage slash across his face and his eyes narrowed to slits. But whatever was haunting him, he clearly had no intention of voicing it.

There was that saying about secrets. *Two can keep a secret if one of them is dead.* So how were five of us supposed to keep this hidden? Me, Saint and Kyan weren't the ones I was concerned about. But Monroe? Tatum? We were bound together in brutality and death and I supposed I could only assume that

the blood on our hands was enough to keep us all silent. But we needed to keep them close, stoke the flames of our bond as much as possible.

Indoctrinate them into our group so deeply that they'd never want to leave.

When Tatum had made her vow to us, we'd told her it was for life but I hadn't given much thought to that. Now I could see that it had to be the case. She was ours forever and we were hers too. There was only one way out of this circle of five. And I didn't relish the idea of more death.

"Go get a rowing boat, Blake," Saint commanded. "Bring it around to the shore by the catacombs entrance."

I stood wordlessly, glancing at Kyan as he got to his feet too, hefting the sledgehammer into his grasp with a wicked smile on his face. I wondered if anyone else could see it was a mask. Not that I thought he was panicking on the inside. More like he was never really sure what to feel about anything anyway. His emotional range was limited at best. And sometimes I wondered if he'd ever fully recover from the horrors his family had subjected him to as he grew.

Saint was ready to clean this place with sulphuric acid and bleach just as soon as Kyan was finished his part. I just hoped that the janitors didn't notice the sudden dent in their cleaning supplies.

I strode away through the trees, taking a deep breath of the fresh, morning air as I caught sight of the sun rising over the lake between the thick boughs.

It didn't take me long to reach the Willow Boathouse and commandeer one of the rowing boats. The lapping of the deep blue water against the oars was soothing as I began to row and I fell into the rhythm of the movements with ease.

It was peaceful out on the water and each tug and pull of the oars worked like a balm on my racing heart.

Saint had thought of everything. We'd followed his instructions to the

letter. Monroe had ensured that all of the staff and students were safely locked up tight in their rooms on the far side of campus so there was no chance of witnesses. We were on the home run.

The boat bumped up onto the sandy beach as I came ashore and Kyan strode from the trees to meet me. He had a battered-looking potato sack swinging from his fist and a dark grin on his face which said that everything was still going well.

He strode straight out into the water, wading towards me before tossing the sack inside and pushing the boat back out.

“Did everything go to plan?” I asked.

“Saint and Monroe are just washing down the last embers with the bleach and acid. Once they’re sure that’s done, they’ll fill in the hole and meet us back at the dock,” Kyan replied before hopping up into the boat with me.

I rowed us out towards the centre of the lake and Kyan pulled his shirt off as he leaned back and let the sun kiss his tattooed flesh.

“My heart hasn’t stopped racing since last night,” he said with a lazy smile on his face as he closed his eyes like we were just out on some leisurely boat trip. He sounded pretty damn thrilled about that statement.

“Do you think anyone will come looking for him?” I asked. Because really, that was the one hole in our plan.

“Naw. Merl was a nasty drunk and a fearsome asshole. He lived alone in a trailer out the other side of town and didn’t have a job. There were plenty of rumours about him breaking into homes all over town and stealing from the hardworking folk to keep himself funded. Other than that, he’d show up for fight nights and either get shit faced or stay sober and fight for cash. He was a mean bastard when sober too. He’d come close to beating me in a fight once or twice. Ain’t no one gonna miss that sack of shit. My guess is they’ll assume he got a good haul from us here and took off with it. It could even be

worth starting a rumour that a wedge of cash went missing so that the townsfolk assume he stole it and split. Either way, they won't mourn him. Good riddance to bad rubbish and all that." Kyan draped a hand over the side of the boat and let his fingers skim along in the water, looking so fucking relaxed it was untrue.

The knot in my chest loosened at his words. Kyan wasn't one to bullshit me. If he thought someone gave a shit about the guy we'd killed, he'd say it. No point hiding from the truth of things. But it turned out piece of shit rapists didn't end up with a whole lot of friends. And I couldn't say I was too sad about that.

"This will do," I said as I stopped rowing near the centre of the lake and looked out over the pristine water.

Kyan sat up and lifted the potato sack into his grasp. He shook the fine dust out of it which was all that was left of the man we'd killed. It scattered over the water and was soon swallowed by the gentle lapping of the waves.

I watched as Kyan pulled a lighter from his pocket and set the sack alight for good measure, the dry material flaring up instantly as he held it out over the water.

Kyan cursed as the flames licked his fingers, but gritted his teeth against the pain for another few moments before releasing his hold on the tiny corner he still held. The flames consumed that before it hit the water and Kyan dunked his burnt fingers into the lake to soothe them.

"It's done," he announced with a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Just like that," I agreed.

I started rowing back towards the Willow Boathouse where I could see Saint waiting on the pier with yet another bottle of bleach to clean the boat down. I had to wonder if I'd ever be able to smell that chemical odour again without thinking of this day. But maybe it was okay if I couldn't. Because

today was the start of something new.

Our bond was stronger than ever and we had new blood in our ranks.

I couldn't say for sure what tomorrow held, but the way my heart pounded let me know I was excited to find out. Because this might have been the end of one man's life, but it felt like it was just the beginning of ours.



My head hurt like a bitch as I gazed down at the television on the floor below, my fingers wrapped around the railings at the edge of the balcony. I couldn't even concentrate on the TV show, zombies blurring out of focus as I yawned. *What am I watching again?*

I was dog tired, but I couldn't sleep until I was sure I wasn't concussed. And beyond that, I wasn't sure I could sleep no matter how exhausted I was. Last night was starting to haunt me. Every time my eyelids drooped, I felt Merl's hands on my flesh. I felt that knife sinking between his ribs. I relived the relief, then the fear.

I killed someone.

Then my mind shifted to the next part of the night when that man with the rash had reared over me, coughing his lungs up.

I lifted a hand to my throat, checking my glands, hunting for signs that the Hades Virus was eating its way into my body.

I'd used my phone to look up all the symptoms and how they developed.

The fever came first, then the cough and finally the rash. A shiver darted down my spine and I didn't know if the room was cold or if I was getting sick, but all I could do was wrap Saint's comforter tighter around me.

God, please don't let me get sick.

There was a sixty percent chance of death if I had it. Sixty fucking percent. Those odds weren't at all comforting and I clung tighter to the balcony railings as my heart beat of tune.

"Not asleep are you, baby?" Kyan's voice carried to me and I leaned forward as he, Saint and Blake walked in downstairs.

"No," I answered.

"Strip down," Saint commanded them as he headed to the kitchen, grabbing out a garbage bag and pulling off his clothes as he tossed them into it. "Both of you. Now," he demanded and they didn't need to be told again as they all got naked before me and dumped their clothes in the bag.

My throat tightened and I inhaled sharply in fear, holding my hand to my neck only to realise it wasn't a symptom of the damn virus, I was just reacting to the godlike men down below me with their sharply cut abs, broad shoulders and bulging biceps. I wasn't getting a sore throat or a cough. I cursed myself, forcing my gaze back to the television and whatever the hell I'd been watching for the past five hours. It was ridiculous to think I could focus on the guys' bodies right now. A part of me wished we could all curl up in a bed together and the press of all those muscles just might soothe me from the shock of last night. Pathetic as it was, I wanted to be held. I needed the reassurance that I wasn't some stone cold killer. But I hated myself for thinking that I could seek it from them.

"Where's Monroe?" I asked, unable to believe what Nash had done for me last night.

Though his actions were possibly the most believable of them all. As far

as I'd been aware, I was a plaything to Kyan, a crutch to Blake and a chew toy to Saint. But it turned out, I wasn't. Though I didn't know what that did make me to them now. Or maybe I was still all of those things. Maybe they'd seen their precious pet about to be destroyed and none of them could stand the thought of another man tarnishing their property.

That thought sullied my mood as they headed away into Blake's room together down the hall. The shower sounded from far away and I had the most vivid image of them all in it together before I shook my head at myself. *Of course they're not showering together. They're not in a porno shoot. They just helped me kill a guy and disposed of his body. Real fucking sexy, Tatum.*

The scariest thing that I really didn't want to admit to myself, was that there *was* something sexy about it. Though maybe sexy wasn't the word. Astonishing, startling, galvanising. They hadn't just bathed their hands in blood for me tonight, they'd offered up a piece of their souls to me. So what did that mean? That the hatred would stop? The cruelty? The endless bullying that hurt me harder than a knife slicing into my chest?

I was their slave turned equal. Or that was how it felt. Like I'd been welcomed into the fold with each strike of that blade. Like the blood they'd spilled had painted out our fates and intertwined us irrevocably. But I didn't think I liked that idea. I didn't want to be bound to those three boys. Monroe, I could accept. But the Night Keepers? It was like the legend of the Night People had really come true. Like they really did possess me now.

I waited for them all to return, my thoughts turning inward to my body as I tried to assess myself for any signs of a change in temperature. I clung to Saint's comforter, wishing there was a fire in the grate downstairs to battle this chill. The Temple was old and not made to be comfortable. It was meant to be a place for worship, and nothing made you feel unsettled like doming roofs and flagstones that were icily cold to kneel on.

Kyan was the first to appear from the shower, dressing in low-riding navy sweatpants and nothing else. His bare feet padded across the carpet as I watched like a hawk in a nest, scouring his tattoos and the golden flesh that housed them.

“Cold baby?” he asked and I nodded as he looked up at me. “I’ll get you warm.”

He moved to the fireplace, kneeling down and giving me a view of the muscles that tapered down his lower back and the huge tattoo of a blood soaked warrior that spread across his shoulder blades and over his back in artful strokes. He was a machine wearing skin, his body built for power and violent efficiency. The fact that he was knelt there building me a fire seemed like an absolute contradiction to his nature. Not that I was planning on pointing that out.

He soon had a pyre in place, stuffing newspaper beneath it and lighting it with the strike of a match.

“Could you start a fire without those if you were lost in the wild, Kyan?” I asked curiously and he smirked as he stood up, moving to the couch directly below me and throwing himself down on it.

He cupped his head in his hands and I didn’t let my gaze budge an inch from his eyes as he laid himself out. “Nope,” he admitted. “Can you?”

“Yep,” I echoed his tone, making his smile grow. “Why are you so happy?”

“I think this lifestyle suits me,” he said thoughtfully.

“What? Murdering people and burying their bodies?” I asked and he considered it.

“Naw, it’s not that exactly. I like the thrill, I like being bad. I like having secrets.”

“How many secrets do you have?” I asked, my voice lowering

instinctively as I pressed my forehead to the railings and gazed between them.

“More than you have toes on your feet,” he said and I wiggled my toes as they dangled above him.

“That’s a lot of secrets to carry around. Aren’t they heavy?” I asked and he shrugged, a darkness entering his eyes for a second that was all the answer I needed. Kyan might have looked like the big bad wolf, and maybe he’d eaten his fair share of Red Riding Hoods too, but there was more to him than met the eye. And sometimes, I was determined to find out what it was.

“How’s your head?” he smoothly changed the subject and I rubbed the back of it in response, feeling the bump Merl had left on it when he cracked it against the stone. Aiming to knock me out so he could get my pants down, his dick out...*ergh*. I shuddered, shutting my eyes as I tried to fight the image away. But I was sure it was going to be with me forever, burned into the backs of my eyes like it had been branded there with hot pokers. The worst part of it all was the shame that I’d almost been overwhelmed by him. I was supposed to be prepared. But now I knew that training for something and living it weren’t the same. And he’d been strong...so fucking strong.

“Merl was a mean motherfucker, you know,” Kyan said in a gravelly tone and my eyes cracked open. It was like he could read my thoughts. “The night we met him at the pit, he was blind drunk which was why I put him down so easy, but when he was sober he gave me a run for my money from time to time. He won almost as many fights in the ring as I did.”

I chewed on my lower lip as emotion swelled inside me. I fought it back, not wanting Kyan to see me weak. But he already had. He’d seen me beneath that guy, he’d almost seen me ruined. And it left me feeling so exposed, so small. Like he’d witnessed all of my failings and vulnerabilities. My dad had been hard on me in my training. He wanted me to be the best, I’d actually

thought I was for a while. I hadn't been beaten by an opponent in a long time. But the first time it counted...I'd nearly been defeated.

The fire was finally blazing and the warmth was sailing up to me enough to start chasing away the numbness in my skin.

I realised my cheeks were wet and I jerked backwards out of sight, wiping my eyes and swearing under my breath. The last thing I needed was to expose more of my weaknesses to Kyan.

"It kills me that I can't come up there and wrap you in my arms," his voice carried to me.

"I don't need to be taken care of," I said, adding extra bite to my voice to counter the fact that he'd probably seen me crying. But deep down, I knew I was lying to myself. I quietly wanted to be taken care of today. Just this once. But I'd never admit it.

"I know," he growled. "But I wanna do it because you're mine and I look after my things."

My heart quickened at his words. There was something achingly sweet about them, yet entirely possessive and obnoxious too. "I'm not yours."

"I disagree," he said, deadly seriously.

I opened my mouth to retort, heat seeping through my flesh-

"Barbie," Saint's voice snapped through the air as sharp as a knife.

I leaned forwards and found him looking up at me in a white T-shirt and grey sweatpants. "Are you dizzy?" he asked and I shook my head, a frown pinching my brow. "Nauseous?"

"No."

"Blurry vision?"

"No."

"Any ringing in your ears?" he asked and I shook my head.

He nodded satisfactorily. "Then you're not concussed. Go to bed."

“I don’t think I can-”

“Go to bed,” he commanded. “It’s not a request.”

I sighed, rising to my feet and moving over to his bed before falling down onto it with the comforter over me. I was surrounded by the scent of fresh laundry detergent. The smell was almost homely, inviting and I crawled further up the bed, nestling into his pillows, finding everything about it impossibly comfortable. He must have paid a fortune for this bed, it felt like an actual cloud hugging my body. And somehow, despite all the worry and fear that had hounded me since the moment we’d returned here last night, the darkness took me away and the blissful lull of sleep claimed me.

I woke to a repetitive shhhhck shhhck shhhck noise and folded the comforter back, yawning as I gazed across at the huge stained glass window on the opposite side of The Temple. Rain was cascading against the roof, the sound pulling at the chords of memories in my chest. Me and my dad camping in Virginia. The restroom was legit a hole in the ground in an outhouse thirty feet from the small campsite. It had rained one night and I’d run to it with my hood pulled up then listened to the rain tinkling on the tin roof while I peed. It was a stupid, weird kind of memory. And yet it was real and brought warmth to my bones. It reminded me of Dad and those days when I’d had someone to rely on constantly. I’d never realised that wouldn’t last.

I headed across the room to the balcony railing, my eyes falling on Kyan below who’d passed out on the couch, his arm slung over his eyes and the Xbox control balancing on his stomach.

Saint was on his knees, scrubbing the floor of the kitchenette, a bucket beside him as he laboured to clean every inch of it, his back muscles flexing

with every push and pull of his arms. I'd never seen him so focused, his gaze fixed on his work, he almost looked like he was in a trance.

"Put that pizza back where you found it or I'll beat your head in with a jar of marmalade," Kyan slurred in his sleep and I released a breath of laughter.

"Does it please you to see me on my knees, Barbie?" Saint looked up with his features cast in shadow and my heart ticked faster.

"A little," I admitted. "Though it looks like you're enjoying it."

"I take pleasure in jobs done thoroughly," he said, getting to his feet and dropping the brush into the bucket. He rinsed his hands in the sink then set to work emptying out the bucket and cleaning that too.

The scent of bleach hit the back of my throat and a cough erupted from me. Saint fell statue still as he gazed up at me and I held my throat, sure it had just been the bleach. At least, I was fairly sure. I wasn't overheated. Or was I?

I pressed a hand to my forehead, my breathing coming raggedly as I tried to work it out.

Stay calm. Deep breaths. Think this through logically.

Saint strode purposefully across the room to a low cupboard beneath a window. He crouched down and yanked it open, thumbing methodically through the contents before producing something from within it. Then he moved to the bottom of the steps and tossed it up to me. A thermometer skittered across the floor and I picked it up with my heart thundering in my ears.

"Hold it under your tongue for one minute," he instructed.

I didn't know if the tension in his voice was anger or concern. But it simply had to be the former. Saint didn't get concerned about anyone or anything. He probably wanted to figure out if I was infected so he could plot his next move. Maybe I'd be the next body that ended up burned and buried

in this school. Or whatever the hell they'd done with it. I hadn't asked, but I'd smelled the smoke on them. Part of me didn't want to know the gritty details. Because then it was real and I'd have to accept that they'd reduced that man to a pile of ash like he never even existed. And somehow that was worse than killing him. Making him nothing was disturbing. Not that I would have wanted anything different. I just didn't know how to handle all of these conflicting emotions about his death. He was bad, depraved, evil. I couldn't forget that.

I placed the thermometer under my tongue and the metallic taste of it filled my senses, drawing my thoughts away from Merl again. I was going to need a thousand distractions to keep him from my mind. The strangest thing was, despite all the emotions I felt towards his death, guilt didn't once come into it. I felt responsible though. I felt the weight of his death like a ten ton truck on my shoulders. But he'd been hurting me. He would have hurt me far worse too. So in the end, all I'd done was survive.

The thermometer beeped and I took it out, gazing down at the number.

"Well?" Saint demanded, still at the bottom of the stairs.

"Normal," I told him with a breath of relief and I could have imagined it, but I swear his shoulders dropped a fraction.

He walked away, moving around the room as if assessing whether everything was in its rightful place. When he reached Kyan, he tidied the pillows around him and placed the Xbox controller back on top of the console with the other two, perfectly aligned. Then he got out a handheld hoover and used it to collect the crumbs from the bag of chips Kyan had apparently devoured before passing out, even running it over his chest and not stirring him at all. He slept like the dead.

When Saint was done cleaning he stood by the refrigerator, seeming out of place as he stared at nothing in particular.

I settled myself back down on the edge of the balcony, poking my legs through the holes between the railings as I surveyed him. There was something fascinating about him and I took the opportunity to observe him like I'd been tempted to a thousand times before. His features were so perfectly symmetrical that you couldn't help but stare and study them. He was beautiful in a cruel sort of way. Like the devil had painted him pretty just to make this twisted creature even more lethal. His allure was a deadly trap. And I somehow couldn't imagine him being intimate with a girl unless they were down on their knees, worshipping his cock like it was the spear of fucking destiny.

He suddenly threw his fist into the fridge, leaving a sizeable dent in it and I sat upright in alarm.

"What the hell?" I asked as he shook out his hand, eyeing the mark he'd left on the refrigerator. He took hold of a magnetic reminders board and slid it smoothly over the dent.

"Great, now we need a new refrigerator," he muttered like that was the worst thing that had happened tonight.

"Are you alright?" I asked, kind of hating myself for it. He didn't deserve for me to care, but a twitch in my heart said I did.

"My routine is fucked, Barbie. All of it is fucked. What am I supposed to do with myself?" He turned his gaze to the clock on the wall with a growl, muttering something about it being twelve forty three and that being an insult to the whole of humanity.

"Maybe you should get some rest," I suggested, noticing the dark circles under his eyes.

"I suppose," he said in growl. "But if I don't sleep until tomorrow morning and start again fresh I'm going to kill myself."

Woah, grumps alert.

His gaze moved from the couch where Kyan was sleeping to the chair beyond him, his lips tightly pressed together. Finally, he strode up to the fire and lay down on the rug on his back, shutting his eyes. I half expected him to fold his arms across his chest like Count Dracula, but after a while, his head lolled and a peacefulness fell over his expression that I'd never seen in his waking life. It was captivating. Almost angelic. Which was entirely paradoxical.

I cocked my head, unable to look away, especially when he rolled onto his side and curled up like a child. It made him seem almost human.

With the boys out for the count, I got to my feet, heading back to bed and checking my phone. I had a couple of messages from Mila making sure I was okay and I shot her one back confirming it and asking how she was doing in quarantine.

Mila:

All good, girl. I've been texting Danny pics of my kooch to study – totally diagrammed that shit too. Next time I see him, maybe he'll be a better lay.

Pray for me!

I laughed, replying with a row of prayer hands then I brought up my dad's number and pressed call, hoping upon hope that he'd answer at last.

The line was dead. And I finally accepted he must have ditched his phone. What I would have given to hear his voice now and fall into the familiar rise and fall of it. He'd know exactly what to do in this situation. He'd tell me what I needed to hear so I could be okay again. But I didn't have him here. I only had myself to rely on.

I laid back down on Saint's pillows and my mind arrowed in on my body

again. I didn't feel right, but maybe that didn't mean I was sick. Or maybe it did. And the virus was coming for me like a silent storm. At least my other enemies in this house were in plain sight, made of flesh and blood and bone. This one was invisible and it didn't care who I was or what I was made of. Weak or strong. Young or old. If it was in me, there was already a sixty percent chance I was going to die. And so help me, I wasn't ready for that.



I startled awake in the silence, my fingers flexing then clenching into a fist as my heart pounded in alarm. Something was wrong. Seriously fucking wrong.

My eyes snapped open and I found myself staring at the fireplace which lay cold and empty, so clean that it was hard to believe we ever burned anything in it.

Where the fuck am I?

I pushed myself upright and frowned around at the open living space in the centre of The Temple as the memories flooded back in on me and my heart leapt right up into my throat.

This couldn't be happening. I refused to believe it.

Panic welled up in me and my ears began to ring as I clawed my hands into my hair and tried to force myself to breathe.

My muscles were trembling, violent energy dancing beneath my skin with a desperate cry for an outlet as I tried to focus on anything other than the terrifying truth of what had happened.

I bowed my head and gripped my hair so tightly that my scalp screamed in pain as I tried to deal with the reality of having my routine so thoroughly sabotaged.

I focused on the memories of how I'd scrubbed every fucking thing in The Temple from the grey brick walls to the flagstones, to the stained glass windows and the font. There had been beauty in that work. So pure and real that just remembering the way I'd traced the lines of the mortar with the scrubbing brush helped my heart rate to settle. The Temple had never been so clean. So pure. It had been tainted beyond recognition by those fucking looters who ransacked it, but now it was free of sin. Innocent. Virginal.

A shaky breath escaped me as the voices clawed at the back of my skull. They whispered dark threats in my ears and promised failure on all sides.

My mind was drawn to the walk I'd taken down into the catacombs to deal with the body. How the cold of that place had crept over my skin. How silent it had been when the wind dropped and how loud when it howled through the cavernous system.

My memories zeroed in on the look on that fucking rapist's face as it was frozen in pain and death. His glassy eyes had stared at me with the accusation that I was the devil incarnate. And there, in the memory of that look in his dead eyes, I found an inch of peace to settle me.

The cold hilt of the blade in my hand and the surge of power that had charged through my muscles as I'd driven it into him. That was true control. The power over life and death. Real, honest, justice which made my soul sing with purity. *And so, the sinners shall be punished.*

And better than that. I hadn't been alone in my moment of salvation. I'd been surrounded by my brothers. United in the purest of acts to protect the girl who we'd taken for our own.

I wondered if she knew she owned me now too? If she understood how that act had bound me to her even more thoroughly. That death had been a sacrifice we'd lain at her altar as we professed our unending devotion to our idol.

Tatum Rivers. My temptation, my sweet torture, my endless agony and now maybe she would be my salvation too. Not that she knew it yet. But she'd bought herself a band of demons and paid for them in blood. Until last night I'd believed there were only two people I'd kill for in this world, but I hadn't hesitated for a moment when the time had come for me to prove my devotion to her. Our Night Bound beauty.

I focused on the work it had taken to dispose of the body. To clean up the blood. The purity left in its wake. And I slowly began to relax. I could get through this. I could survive the disruption to my ritual if I just focused on that. I could face the fact that I'd been awake all night and slept during the day-

My muscles began to tremble again as I let myself wonder what time it was. I didn't even know how I was to going to survive this day with everything off schedule. I'd just woken up and now what? Was I going to eat dinner like a fucking animal? *Maybe I should just forgo food rather than eat it out of sequence...*

A sound like a pure drop of heaven reached me as the first note of Clair de Lune by Claude Debussy spilled from the speakers and I fell still as the music reached out and brushed its fingers along my aching soul.

A warm body came to sit beside me, a muscular arm pressing against mine and I exhaled slowly as the music built around us and the tension in my posture slowly slackened.

I released my grip on my hair, my scalp tingling from the rough treatment as I tried to keep my mind on the beauty of what we'd done last night and away from the chaos of today. Of my ritual burning down and falling apart and the demon in me taking the excuse to have free rein and-

I leaned against my brother as he stayed beside me and the music surrounded me in its sweet embrace. I didn't know which brother it was.

Only that he was here. That both of them were always here.

I cracked my eyes open and found myself looking at Kyan's tattooed forearm, my gaze catching on one particular piece of ink as the stalking wolf seemed to look me dead in the eye. At its back, two more wolves lingered in the shadows beneath a full moon and my fractured soul knitted over a little as I fought to hold the worst of me back.

"It's just like any other day," Kyan said in a low voice. "So get the fuck up because it's time for your work out."

I narrowed my eyes as I turned to look at him and he levelled me with a dark look which said he saw my demon and raised me his devil. If I wanted to vent my inner turmoil on him, he was willing. But he was also willing to help me shackle myself to my routine again.

"I need to lock it down," I rasped, my throat raw and parched as the taste of smoke lingered on my tongue and the acrid stench of bleach hung thickly in the air.

My gaze shifted from his and I hunted out the clock on the wall even though I knew it would be my undoing. If it was nineteen minutes past something, or even just anything other than six am, I was going to lose my shit. And I knew it wasn't six am. The light beyond the stained glass window was bright and the sun hung low in the sky like it was mid afternoon. I'd probably only slept for a few hours. I never managed more than that. I was always half expecting someone to burst in on me the moment I let my guard down, toss me in the closet, or the trunk of a car, or the pool.

That hasn't happened in years.

Never say never though.

He can't find me here.

He can reach me anywhere.

I blew a breath out through my nose, expelling the voices and focusing on

the task at hand. The clock. Except there was no clock. No incessant *tick tick tick*. The wall where it should hang was bare even though I knew I'd cleaned it and re-hung it last night.

My gaze slid to the kitchenette where the time should have flashed on the oven display, but there was a roughly cut square of duct tape concealing it.

"It's six am," Kyan growled. "And you're going to be late for your workout if you don't move your ass."

My lips parted as a lick of anger danced along my spine. It wasn't six am, it was more like four pm, or four thirty seven, or fucking four seventeen, or-

Kyan turned to face me, catching my gaze in his dark brown eyes as he gripped my head between his hands. "It's *six am*," he snarled, glaring at me as he demanded I agree.

My muscles coiled with tension and my upper lip peeled back as I tried to recoil from him, but his grip only tightened and his gaze only darkened.

"What time is it, Saint?" Kyan demanded.

My lips parted on a string of insults and demands of my own where I was going to tell him to stop trying to treat me like a fucking infant and let me handle my own shit as my day went to hell. But there was a small piece of me that wanted to just relent, to stop fighting the gift he was trying to give me and allow him to paint this pretty fantasy for me where I could descend into the peace of my routine and just...be.

It was a heap of shit, it was a pretty lie, it was downright insulting that he thought I needed it and yet...I *really* fucking needed it. I needed the soothing balm of my ritual to strip away the chaos that had reigned yesterday. I needed time to process the mountainous changes that carnage had brought upon my world. And I needed to allow my control to slip in this one small instance so that I might have even the slightest chance in regaining it over everything else.

“It’s six am,” I breathed and Kyan’s eyes lit with triumph.

“Then let’s go work out until you bust a fucking lung.” He stood and offered me a hand which I took, allowing him to heave me to my feet.

My gaze trailed to the balcony above us where the lights were out and there was no sign of Tatum. I guessed she’d taken to my bed to recover and the thought of her christening my sheets with her presence sent an ache through me.

I wanted to see how she looked in there. Tangled in my bed like a temptress with all of that blonde hair, loose and wild. I’d never had a girl in my bed before. I’d never really spent any time in a bed with a girl. Obviously I never stayed the night with anyone and risked fucking up my routine. But once I’d started fucking girls, I’d soon figured out that I didn’t like tangling myself up in someone else’s body, being spontaneous, letting them trail their hands all over me without warning. No. By the fourth time I’d fucked a girl, I’d done away with that. I liked them either on their knees where I could grip their hair and control their movements, or bent over something so that I could blow their mind and take what I wanted without them touching me at random intervals and throwing off my pleasure with fucking *impulses*.

But when I thought about taking Tatum like that, it didn’t appeal. If she ever decided to let me into her panties, I wanted to see the look in her blue eyes as I pushed inside her, bathe in the moment when I claimed her and watch as I drove her to ruin. Maybe Kyan was onto something when he spoke about tying girls up. That would definitely make it easier for me to achieve both desires.

Not that there was a lot of point in me indulging in any kind of fantasy about the girl in my bed. There was no way she’d want anything to do with me any time soon. But she made it fucking difficult not to think about it.

Kyan led the way down to the gym in the crypt and I followed him in

silence as I tried to slip into the routine I'd practiced so many times. I just had to forget that in reality it wasn't morning.

I fell still in the middle of the room, closing my eyes as I fought against the need to crumble. To split apart and rip into the world and drown my chaos in fury and-

Mozart spilled from the speakers and surrounded me in pure, dulcet tones which made the itch beneath my skin settle a little and I released a slow breath as I let the music permeate my soul.

"Do you think you can match me on the bench?" Kyan taunted as the sound of him racking weights reached me and I cracked my eyes open.

He was smirking in a way that said he didn't believe I could and my lip curled back at the dare in his eyes.

"Do you think you can match *me*?" I countered as I moved to join him.

There were no windows down here so it was easier to believe his lies and pretend it was morning. With a deep breath, I forced myself to accept them and moved to join him on the bench.

We pushed ourselves like the demons of hell would come and drag us down to join with them unless we surpassed every physical protest our bodies had to offer.

We moved between machines and ended up at the punching bag where I followed Kyan's lead and beat the living shit out of the thing without wearing gloves. My knuckles were rubbed raw and cracked open and the sting of my wounds lit a fire in me. But I needed the outlet. I need the pain in punishment for my failure. I needed to dive into it and find bliss in the knowledge that it was mine and mine alone.

When we finally fell still, panting, sweating and bleeding, Kyan pulled me into his arms and gripped a fist full of my hair as he crushed me against him.

"The devil won't win today, Saint," he growled fiercely, determined to

make it so, even when I felt doubt creeping over my skin.

“Let’s hope not,” I agreed, embracing him and hoping he knew how much I appreciated what he was doing for me with this farce.

We headed upstairs and I hesitated as I realised I couldn’t go to my ensuite for my shower, my jaw ticking as I looked towards Kyan and Blake’s rooms instead.

“Hot water is hot water,” Kyan said, clapping a hand on my shoulder and steering me towards his room without giving me the chance to complain about it.

The music shifted to Bach’s Cello Suite No. 1 in G and Kyan set the water running for me before stepping back into his room.

My posture was tight as I stripped off and stepped beneath the flow of the shower, cranking the dial until it was scalding me.

I pressed my palms to the tiles and let the water beat down over me as I closed my eyes and concentrated on breathing in and out.

My whole body ached from the intensity of our workout and my darkest nature had retreated as fatigue plagued me. But my mind was firing on all cylinders, thoughts of every new issue we were facing scrolling through my brain one after the other.

I followed the line of each thread of thought as I came up with ways to deal with all of our issues.

There could be no stone left unturned. The Hades Virus had reared its ugly head at our gates and I refused to be beaten back by it.

This school had every reason to be a safe haven for us to ride out the storm while we awaited the inevitable vaccination. All I had to do was make sure it was secured, locked down and impenetrable.

I finally shut off the water, drying myself quickly and dressing in the black sweatpants Kyan had left out for me. They were mine. Perfectly folded,

clean. He must have slipped up to my closet to retrieve them and I should have chewed him out for risking getting so close to Tatum while she might be incubating, but the idea of borrowing clothes had been making me anxious all over again and the simple gesture sent relief flooding right through me.

I passed Kyan as he headed in for his own shower and he clapped me on the shoulder before he closed the door between us. I hated that he could see how close I was to cracking, but loved that he knew what I needed to hold it together.

Tomorrow, I'd reclaim full control of myself and no doubt he'd go right back to fucking with my ritual. But today, he stood by me and helped me contain the beast which my flesh housed. And if that wasn't love then I'd never grasp the concept of it. If he could look into the eyes of the monster inside me and help me to feed it, contain it and even accept it as who I was, then what more could I ever ask of him?

As I made it back into the central room of The Temple, the scent of eggs made my stomach growl and I found Blake sitting at the table in his usual spot, devouring a stack of pancakes with my usual breakfast of eggs, toast and avocado waiting for me beside him.

It was so...*routine*, my heart ached for it.

Just like any other morning.

"Morning," he said, his lips twitching around a mouthful of syrup coated, carb loaded, sugar.

My gaze fell on the window for a moment and the sun which was clearly on its descent towards the horizon before I dismissed it and took my place beside him.

I glanced up and found Tatum watching us with interest, her long, blonde hair trailing over one shoulder as her legs dangled between the railings on the balcony.

There was a question in her big, blue eyes but her lips remained sealed on it.

As the first bite of my food graced my tastebuds, everything just slipped right into place. The echoes of chaos faded from my mind and I was able to fully focus on what mattered, what we needed to do.

I devoured my meal in silence and Kyan appeared with a towel wrapped around his waist as I was finishing up, grabbing his plate of heavily fried heart attack out of the oven where Blake had left it to keep warm.

He fell on his breakfast like a savage, using a combination of his fork and a slice of toast which he held in his goddamn hand to shovel the food into his mouth as fast as possible.

“Monroe is in,” I said firmly, setting my knife and fork down. “But I’m not forcing his hand as far as joining us goes, he needs to choose that for himself. I’ll put in the necessary phone calls with Mother today and get her to smooth over the transition into his new role as headmaster. She’s got half of the other school board members terrified of her and the rest can be bought if needs be. Brown’s reputation can burn along with his job. That asshole left us all to fight for this place while he hid away from the violence like a fucking coward. I’ll make sure he never teaches again. Hell, I’ll make sure he never *works* again. Not anywhere that matters anyway. He’ll be lucky to get a job serving fries in a diner when I’m through with him.”

“I’d like to see that,” Blake joked.

“Monroe isn’t like one of your usual stooges,” Kyan said around a mouthful of food which half fell out of his mouth, back onto his plate. I sneered at him and he smirked, swallowing before he went on. “He won’t just fall into line because you demand it. You’ll have to work *with* him if you want him to dance to your tune. And I guarantee he won’t just fall in and move to your beat.”

My gaze slid to Tatum and the way her eyes lit said she relished the idea of me not having it easy with Monroe. No doubt she'd take pleasure in any little bit of difficulty I came up against after the things I'd done to her.

"I know," I agreed. "But we're bound in blood now. He may have objections but he's not a fool. I'm sure I can negotiate a middle ground with him that will satisfy us all. But first I need to secure his position in the school. Then he needs to decide if he really is all in with us or not."

"What does that mean?" Blake asked.

"I haven't decided yet. But there's an idea curling through my mind which wants my attention...I'll let you know once I've made my decision on it."

Kyan huffed irritably as I refused to continue along that line of the conversation, but he knew better than to push me on an idea before I'd had time to consider every outcome of it. I wasn't the kind of predator to dive in with teeth bared and claws drawn, ready to battle in blood for what I wanted. I was the snake in the grass who lay waiting for prey to walk into my trap. No one ever saw me coming until I struck and once my venom was in them, there was no anti-venom unless I saw fit to dole it out.

"The more pressing issue is securing the school," I went on. "I'll have a full sweep done. Any and every person within these walls will need to isolate until the forty eight hours is up. Anyone who turns out to be infected will be escorted beyond the wall to seek treatment in a hospital. We need to make sure this place is clean and free of infection. Then we make sure those fucking gates stay locked. I'll get Father to make a donation to the school so that they can hire more guards. A fucking army of them, armed with guns to keep people the fuck out of here."

"Then what?" Kyan asked. "Are we just gonna stay locked down in here until they get an antidote?"

"Yes," I replied crisply. "No matter how long it takes. Once this school is

secured, we keep it that way. No one comes in. No one goes out.”

“And what about Tatum?” Blake asked in a low voice, his gaze flicking up to her where she sat watching, listening, waiting.

“What about her?” I asked.

“What if she turns out to be sick?”

“She’s not sick,” Kyan snarled, thumping his fist down on the table so that the cutlery clattered on the plates.

I raised my eyes to the girl we owned and she looked back at me steadily as she waited for my verdict.

“Tatum belongs to us,” I said simply and her eyes flared with a fierce denial at my words, but she didn’t voice her protests. “So she stays with us. No matter what. Until the end.”

Kyan chuckled darkly at my words, leaning back and slinging an arm over the empty chair beside him.

“How are you feeling, baby?” he called.

“Fine,” she replied, but the beat of hesitation she’d offered up first revealed her doubts.

“Check your temperature again,” I commanded.

The petulant look she offered me said she didn’t appreciate that, but she scooped up the thermometer all the same and stuck it in her mouth.

The three of us waited in silence for her to reveal the result and the moment the thermometer beeped, she drew it from her lips and looked down at the display.

“Still normal,” she said, her shoulders sagging in relief and the three of us expelled breaths at the same time.

I glanced at the other Night Keepers and Kyan laughed darkly, getting to his feet.

“I look forward to getting you back in my bed again soon, then,” he said,

tossing her a wink before pulling the towel from around his waist, using it to dry his hair as he stalked from the room and giving all of us an eyeful of his junk.

Blake swore at him half-heartedly as he laughed, but my attention stayed on our girl.

I didn't miss the way Tatum's gaze trailed him, clinging to his muscular frame like she wouldn't mind getting a closer look at what he had to offer.

My heart pounded at the look in her eyes, my grip tightening on the edge of the table as I took in the hunger in her and a dark part of me ached to make her look at me that way too.

Kyan headed into his room and as the door snapped closed behind him, her gaze flicked back to meet mine. I expected her to balk or blush under my scrutiny as she realised that she'd been caught out, but she just raised an eyebrow at me as if challenging me to comment.

I held my tongue and she got to her feet, moving away from the balcony and out of sight as she retreated further into my room.

I grunted in frustration. Ignoring the little tendrils of jealousy which were coiling beneath my flesh as I got to my feet and gathered the plates to clean them in the sink.

Once I was finished, I intended to play out the rest of my usual day as if the timings weren't all off and as a bonus, I doubted there would be time for me to sleep for any more than a few hours before my alarm would announce another day had begun.

In the meantime, I had plans to consolidate and work to do to ensure my grip on this school stayed firm.

The moment we could be sure that the Hades Virus wasn't lurking within our walls, we needed to get back to classes, to normalcy, to our lives. And I intended to make sure that happened as soon as humanly possible.



I'm not fucking sick!

I laid in the exquisitely soft sheets of Saint's bed, gazing up at the arching wooden roof with relief spilling into every corner of my body. The quarantine period was over. And I'd made it. Somehow, impossibly, despite the odds stacked against me, I hadn't caught the virus.

These forty eight hours in quarantine had given me a lot of time to think. About the Night Keepers, about the vow, about the murder. I had so many thoughts whirling in my brain and no one to share them with. I considered messaging Mila, but when I went to do it, I hesitated. This was *my* fight. Me against them. And I had to decide how them helping me down in the tunnels had changed things. Or if it had at all.

How were they even going to behave now? What they'd done for me...did that mean they didn't hate me anymore? Did it mean I was free to go the second this was over?

No...somehow, in my gut I knew I wasn't getting out of here that easily.

But maybe they would treat me with respect at last. Or was that too much to hope for?

The incredible rush of relief I got at knowing I wasn't ill was muddied by the knowledge that I was still a prisoner. But at least I wasn't a sick one. In fact, I was the opposite of sick, I was humming with life, energy buzzing through my veins like a swarm of bees in search of pollen. But I had no idea where to direct all of it.

"Maybe I should wake her," Blake's voice reached me from downstairs and I held my breath as I listened.

"No," Saint growled. "She can have a morning off from her chores, then later things can return to normal."

My skin prickled with heat and my upper lip curled back. Heat flared along my spine as rage dipped me in a pit of lava. Of course Saint expected things to return to normal. I didn't get a say. But I wasn't prepared to let that lie. Whether he wanted to admit to it or not, things had changed. Irreversibly. I just wasn't sure how yet. Had they killed for me because they cared, or done it because they'd seen another way to bind me to them?

"You think she's going to fall back into line just like that?" Blake scoffed.

"Yes," Saint clipped. "Just like that. And I'm not going to waste another second speaking about it."

They fell quiet and I took a slow breath as I tried to calm my angry heart. I guessed I had my answer.

I fumed in bed for a while longer before pushing the covers back and heading to the shower. I'd spent plenty of time rummaging through Saint's room, hunting for who knew what. Maybe I was just curious about what the devil kept in his drawers. Turned out, not a lot. But anything he did keep was neatly displayed, perfectly aligned. There was a small metal security box in his closet which I guessed he kept cash in, that was about as exciting as his

storage places got. If Saint had secrets, they weren't hidden in drawers or cupboards. No, they were locked up tight inside his head and only a miracle would get me the key to that box. And I wasn't sure it was a place I wanted to ever venture anyway.

Saint's bathroom was pristine. White tiles covered the walls and floor and everything gleamed. His apple shower gel was lined up neatly beside his shampoo and conditioner while my shower products stood at the foot of the unit, half of them fallen over. Tarnishing his perfection brought a smile to my lips. I'd spent a fair bit of time yesterday evening adjusting things around his room. I'd swapped the lampshades on his nightstands then pointed each one at a slightly off-centre angle, swapped the contents of both bedside drawers, though mimicking exactly how he'd kept the things in each, and spent a decent amount of time fucking up the order of his records in the rack beneath his fancy ass record player. I could have just wrecked the whole room, but Saint would have just had his maid tidy it. This way, he'd have to seek out each change I'd made as it drove him to insanity, gnawing directly at the heart of his insecurities. He needed things in order. So I would be chaos.

When I was washed, I headed to his closet, tossing my damp towel in the direction of the laundry basket – and missing – before pulling on some grey silk underwear, a white crop top and a pair of high waisted jeans.

Then I headed to the balcony, about to call out to them to say my quarantine period was up when I spotted them all standing at the foot of the stairs. Blake rested his shoulder against Kyan's while Saint clutched the railing, his knuckles turning white with how tight he gripped it.

My heart juddered and my lips parted, but I quickly schooled my expression before they read my emotions from my face. They looked worried, hopeful, desperate. And the craziest part of me wanted to rush down into their arms. For an eternal moment, I ached to be surrounded by their

flesh and muscles, like a wolf re-joining its pack after getting lost in the forest.

I shook off that lucid fantasy and folded my arms, gazing coolly between them, recalling each of their crimes and ignoring the one, hugely redeeming thing they'd done for me. One good deed didn't cancel out a thousand bad ones. These men were wicked to the bone. And their reasons for helping me could only be born of sin.

"You want me to stay here," I stated, because it was obvious from their possessive expressions even if I hadn't overheard Saint and Blake talking. I tried to keep the anger from my voice, but it slid into it like poison.

"All I want right now is for you to come the fuck downstairs, baby," Kyan growled, his eyes hungry and demanding.

My throat tightened as my gaze trailed down to his bare, inked chest before sliding onto Blake and the way his muscles flexed against his tight T-shirt, then to Saint whose short-sleeved button down and black jeans made him look like hell's version of an Abercrombie and Fitch model.

"Don't keep us waiting, Cinders," Blake said, his voice rough, his gaze penetrating.

My teeth dug into my bottom lip as I hung suspended in the aching tension building between all four of us. I found a piece of my soul longing for the fifth member of our blood-bound party. I hadn't seen Monroe since the night it had happened, but he'd texted every day to check I wasn't sick. Beyond that, I had no idea what he was thinking. And I desperately needed to know. He'd answered my questions with simple responses which meant nothing at all. *I'm fine. I'm good. Just rest and let me know if anything changes.*

I took a step down the stairs and they all shifted, muscles bunching, fingers flexing like they were trying to restrain themselves from coming closer. Though they could have. They knew I wasn't sick. But they were

letting me call the shots for some reason. Which meant one thing and one thing only: the power levels between us all had altered. Though I wasn't quite sure how yet. So I had to tread lightly. But I was sure as hell going to work it to my advantage. However long this may last.

"So I suppose you all want things to just go back to the way they were?" I asked, letting a healthy measure of ice slide into my tone as I remained above them on the stairs.

"What did you expect?" Saint asked frostily.

"She knows things have changed," Blake growled. "Don't you, Tatum? You can feel it."

My throat thickened as the hairs rose on the back of my neck. For a second, I couldn't tear my eyes away from the golden boy with his darkest green eyes like two lakes of liquid emeralds.

I can feel it alright.

But what I was feeling exactly, I couldn't be sure. It felt like my soul was floating from my body and I wondered whether it was about to be accepted into heaven or hell.

Maybe I underestimated them. Maybe they do care for me. Maybe things really will change...

"Yeah," I confirmed and Saint's spine straightened.

"You're still ours," he said in a voice that was powerful and rang right through to the core of my being.

I let that fact settle over me and one simple answer shone clearly in my mind. Something I was entirely sure was true and yet seemed impossible at the same time.

"I know," I said, lifting my chin. "But you're all mine now, too."

None of them denied it and I let a twisted smile spread across my lips at confirming it.

“Come down here,” Kyan demanded, his expression telling me he was about to come and get me himself if I didn’t move.

I tried to quiet my rampant heartbeat as I padded downstairs barefoot, the kiss of the cool wood against my feet sending a shiver through me.

I reached the ground floor and was surprised when Saint stepped towards me. His arm wrapped around my waist and he tugged me into his hard body, his mouth falling against my ear and making every part of my flesh tingle with fear and pulse with excitement.

“Welcome back, Barbie.” There was something of a threat in those words that made my heart clench and my knees feel unsteady as I remembered all that this beast had done to me. Things I wasn’t going to forget. Things I wanted justice for.

Blake yanked me out of his arms, crushing me to his chest and I was lost to the familiarity of his muscles folding around me, his spiced cologne dragging me back to that incredible night we’d spent together. I was practically panting as my hands slid over his powerful frame, brushing along his broad shoulders and grazing against the tattoo on the back of his neck. My heart thrummed in time with his, my pulse skipping everywhere under my skin with the memory of the pleasure he’d delivered me, how right it had felt to be in his arms that night. But then I recalled staring down the barrel of a gun, that same beautiful face twisted into hate behind it, and a dagger of fear sliced through me.

I pulled away and my eyes fell on Kyan who was watching me like a bird of prey. He cocked his head to one side, his eyes drawing me in, but he made no move to pull me close. I could tell he wanted me to go to him so I did, lured by the devilish glint in his eyes and the smile that quirked up the corner of his mouth. He was toxic and dangerous, lethal and twisted. And he was mine. Just like the others.

I moved into his personal space and his hands snared me, crushing me to his bare chest, the heat of his body like a furnace against my skin. He smelled of gasoline and the promise of danger. It spoke to me on a base level that reminded me of the times I'd spent out in the woods fending for myself. There was something so simple about survival, and yet something so enticingly exciting about it too. Kyan was that feeling embodied.

He buried his nose in my hair, his hands clutching me tight enough to almost pull me off of the floor, forcing me to move onto the very tips of my toes.

He released me at last and I backed away from them all, needing some space to collect my thoughts.

“So what now?” I asked, surveying their expressions closely, but I couldn't read anything from them.

A prickling sensation ran up my spine. A warning.

My grasp on the inch of control I held was slipping away as they moved toward me shoulder to shoulder, and I forced myself to remain rooted in place.

Something's wrong.

“Now...you're not going to let that pretty little brain of yours get carried away with ideas of things changing, Barbie doll,” Saint said in a tone that made my heart clench in my chest. He moved forward, reaching out to pinch my chin between his finger and thumb and I glared up at him with a heaviness weighing down my entire body. It was decided; I was going to hell. My soul had been claimed by these three demons and no good deed would ever make them grow wings. “I can see defiance in your eyes as blindingly bright as the sun,” he growled.

I slapped his hand away from my chin, baring my teeth in anger and confirming his words.

“Did you just hit me, Plague?” His eyes narrowed sharply, looking like arrow slits, my death awaiting me beyond them.

“Yes,” I said, my voice stronger than I felt. “Don’t touch me.”

“It looks like you’ve spent forty eight hours in quarantine growing a backbone. But every spine breaks, some just need to be kicked harder,” Saint said, making a chill rush through every inch of my body.

I pressed my lips together, my hands balling into fists as I tried to keep them from shaking. Saint snatched my arm, dragging me across the room and I sensed Kyan and Blake following like shadows. Saint glanced at my face, a hopeful glint in his eyes like he was waiting for the moment I started begging for mercy, but I clamped my lips tightly together. I wasn’t going to cower. I was going to take whatever he had to give and show him my backbone was made of iron.

A swelling flame roared in my chest and I gilded myself in its strength. I would not be broken. I would gaze into the eyes of my monsters and I would *not* blink.

Saint led me down into the crypt and my heart started to pound like crazy as he kept walking through the gym and under the arch that led further underground. He kept glancing at me, hunting my face for fear and I refused to let an inch of it show despite the wave of terror crashing through my chest. He guided me past the mass of food stores and further into the tunnels as my skin tingled with the memories of being chased down here by Merl. I tried to crush those thoughts away, but they held onto me with sharp claws. I was never going to be free of them.

Saint finally pulled me in front of a large coffin, the huge rectangular stone box standing as high as my chest. He released me, nodding to Kyan and Blake who moved forward wordlessly like they’d planned this, gripping the edge of the thick stone lid and shoving it aside.

Saint never let go of my arm and my throat became too tight as I stood there, trying not to shake.

“Get in,” he growled when there was enough room between the edge of the tomb and the lid for me to squeeze inside.

I bit back a plea, my lungs compressing with fear as I looked to Kyan and Blake, finding their faces hard, their expressions unreadable.

Saint opened his mouth to order me again, but I wasn’t going to flinch at this. I was never going to let him see me afraid again. And I certainly wasn’t going to be forced in there kicking and screaming.

I yanked out of his grip, climbing up onto the edge and squeezing my way inside. The moment I lowered into it, my heart slammed into my ribcage, the scent of death enveloping me.

No no no no.

My weight pressed down on bones and they crunched beneath me like twigs.

I clamped my teeth into my lip as I held back a scream.

“All the way, Barbie,” Saint purred, his eyes alight as he watched me.

I stared back at him, my jaw locked and my muscles bunching as I forced myself to lie down.

Breathe. Just breathe.

Saint was all I could see with the lid half covering the top and as he nodded his head, utter fear encased me. A grinding of stone on stone sounded as Kyan and Blake started pushing the lid back over and Saint observed me like a hawk. He wanted to see my fear. He wanted to feast on it and devour a piece of my soul along with it. But fuck that. Fuck him. Fuck all of them.

Don’t scream.

Don’t cry.

Don’t flinch.

When there was just a three inch gap left, I lifted my hand and flipped my middle finger at Saint, his lips parting in surprise before the coffin closed.

Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck fuck.

My breathing became ragged.

There wasn't enough air. There couldn't be. How long did I have? How long would they leave me here?

Panic sank into my bones and I started drowning in it. As I began to hyperventilate, dust stuck in the back of my throat and I coughed heavily.

I'm going to choke.

I'm going to die.

I don't want to die!

My entire body started shaking and I shut my eyes, hunting for that safe space inside me my dad had taught me to cultivate. It was deeper than ever, lost in a sea of darkness, but finally I reached it. I let my mind drift into the utter peace of that place where no one or nothing in the world could touch me.

I'm safe. I'm okay. I can handle this.

I fell into a pit of calm, willing my body to fall still, the shaking easing from my limbs. The air was becoming thinner, trying to force my body into panic mode again. But I wouldn't let it. I would not be afraid.

Time ticked by and I held my hand over my mouth and nose as I fought to keep the dust out. I was inhaling death itself. I couldn't take this much longer.

The lid eventually shoved open and the glare of an iPhone flashlight made me wince. I didn't know how long I'd been down here, it could have been seconds, minutes or hours. My thoughts were too hazy to figure it out. Strong hands gripped me, tugging me out and planting me on my feet.

My breathing came heavily as I leaned forward, resting my hands on my knees as I tried to get the oxygen into my body that I needed.

“Fuck me, baby. That was badass,” Kyan laughed and I ignored him.

They may have killed for me, but these boys were as twisted as they’d first seemed. And I wasn’t going to stand for it. I was done being their pet. Done rolling over and taking their shit lying down. Being compliant hadn’t helped me get closer to them. So screw that. I was going to fight them with everything I had. I’d face whatever punishment they wanted to throw at me. And I would push myself to the ends of the earth to ensure they never saw me break.

A hand landed on my arm and I shrugged it off, standing upright with a snarl. I found them standing close to me, unsure which one had touched me.

I turned away from them, marching out of the crypt, rage seeping through my skin and bleeding from my pores.

Their footsteps hounded after me as I made it back to the lounge, striding towards the kitchen and feeling them hounding me like predators as my breaths evened out.

Sadistic, psychotic assholes!

My mouth was overly dry as I headed to the sink and poured myself a glass of water, drinking it down to dislodge the dust from my throat before turning around and finding them watching me expectantly.

My gaze worked over their faces as I measured and weighed them. Their cruelty knew no bounds, and yet in my most desperate moment of need they’d come to my aid. Now there was an undeniable connection between us which I couldn’t ignore. But blood wasn’t the price I wanted in penance for their crimes. My heart was blackened with anger and hate for what they’d put me through. And I was never going to forgive them. So there was only one choice I could make. I was going to make them suffer. Hurt the way I’d hurt. Break as I had broken. I didn’t want an eye for an eye. I wanted a shattered soul for a shattered soul. I wanted their hearts butchered in my hands in the

same way they'd butchered mine.

"Things will go back to normal as of this moment," Saint announced sharply, moving to perch against the dining table and examining his nails like he hadn't just ordered me to be put in a fucking sarcophagus. Any warmth I'd imagined in his eyes when he'd seen me standing on the stairs had frozen over like frost in the night. He was evil through and through. No force on earth would ever change that. "You will return to your chores from the moment the clock strikes midday. As of tonight, you will rotate which of us you sleep with and will adhere to the rules of whichever Night Keeper possesses you that day. Understood?"

I released a derisive breath. "Actually no, that's not fucking okay. I'm not sleeping in a bed with any of you. You can fight me into your beds every night if you want, but prepare for the most restless sleep of your lives."

Kyan's brows arched and Blake snorted an amused laugh like this was all some joke. Saint's expression became calculating, assessing, like he was thinking through every word I'd just spoken and running it through some algorithm in his head.

"Alright," Saint agreed and I would have fallen off my chair if I'd been sitting down.

What does he mean 'alright'?

He strode across the room, taking a notepad and a pen from a drawer before walking back to the table, placing it down and pulling out the chair in front of it.

"Sit," he commanded and I frowned, not moving an inch. "Sit down, Barbie," he snarled. "Or would you rather I left you in that coffin for the rest of the afternoon?"

I weighed my options, figuring I didn't want to die today. I walked over to the seat, eyeing him suspiciously as I dropped down into it. He picked up the

pen, holding it out for me and I took it with a frown.

“You may make rules which will ensure you feel comfortable enough to stick to *our* rules.”

“How generous,” I spat, slamming the pen down on the notepad in refusal.

“That is the most compromising I will be, Plague. So either take the opportunity or don’t, but I will not have you waste another minute of my morning,” he growled.

I stared at Saint, looking from him to Blake whose dark green eyes seemed almost black as he watched me, then to Kyan who was observing this all with vague disinterest.

I turned back to face the notepad, my mind working over this situation. “So if I make rules...what happens if you all break them?” I narrowed my eyes at Saint, knowing he would be the one to enforce my rules if this was allowed.

He considered me for a moment, running his tongue over his teeth and I noticed his canines were sharper than most people’s. Even his genetics had forged him into a predator. “You may punish us as you see fit.”

My eyes widened and Blake and Kyan exchanged a loaded look.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Blake challenged Saint, squaring his shoulders at him.

“Yes,” Saint said immediately. “If you don’t want to be punished, Blake, then don’t break her fucking rules. It’s as simple as that.”

“I can make whatever rules I like?” I narrowed my eyes at Saint.

“So long as they fit with our previous rules, yes,” Saint agreed.

Okay...welcome to mindfuck city, Tatum Rivers. One second you’re in a coffin, the next you’re being given a gift. Although maybe this was more about the fact that Saint didn’t want me rebelling against his rules too forcefully. Of course, I’d never agreed to that. So that was just his

assumption. Not my problem.

I lifted the pen and felt the three of them crowding in behind me, their combined breaths on my skin making my skin tingle.

I gazed down at the blank paper before me, poising the pen above it as I wet my lips. This page was an olive branch extended to me by the devil himself. Was it safe to even assume that whatever rules I made up they'd really abide by?

"Why would you let me do this?" I asked, hesitating again as I looked up at Saint on my right. Even if I did fight them all the way to their bedrooms, I didn't really think the threat was enough to make him give in. So what was his angle?

He laid his palm on the table, making a cage with his body as he leaned in closer. Blake's hands moved to rest on my shoulders and he shifted my hair aside, making a shiver tumble down my spine. I sensed Kyan boxing me on the other side, suddenly drowning in their shadows as they surrounded me.

"It seems only fair," Saint said with something of a smile on his face. Only it wasn't full of light, it was endlessly dark.

Something about writing these rules felt like signing a contract with them. I was agreeing to stay here. And sure, now I wanted to do that for my own reasons. To rain hell down on them for what they'd done to me, but what was that really going to cost me?

I let my eyes fall to the starkly white page again, my heart thumping to a wild beat.

What am I willing to give for my revenge?

My breathing became unsteady and I let my eyes fall closed, reminded of that moment back on Sycamore Beach, penned in by these three dark gods who sought to smite me. Who pushed and bit at me until I bled for them, then they lapped at my wounds, savouring my pain in the same moment they

healed me. Things between us were messy and unclear. But the one shining truth I could hold onto was that I would give almost anything to make them suffer the way I had suffered.

I laid pen to paper and opened my eyes, sinking into a dark and disturbingly peaceful place inside me, a plan swirling through my mind and lighting me up like a firework.

Blake leaned forward, resting his mouth to my ear. I couldn't breathe for a long moment, my thighs squeezing together as electricity danced under my skin. I hated the way my body reacted to him. To all of them. "Let's see the rules then, Cinders."

I nodded as he drew away, inhaling deeply as I started writing, a thrill crashing through my body. Because if any of them broke my rules, I would punish them as harshly as they'd punished me, make them face the wrath of a scorned queen and see how they liked the taste of their own vile medicine. This list would be a weapon I could wield against them any time they sought to bend or break my rules.

- 1. No kissing*
- 2. No foreplay*
- 3. No sex*
- 4. No touching while we share a bed*
- 5. No entering the bathroom while I'm naked or on the toilet*
- 6. I am allowed two hours of undisturbed study time at the library on every weekday*
- 7. I am allowed one friend who you cannot be a dick to*
- 8. Once a week we will ALL eat pizza for dinner without cutlery*

I shot a glance at Saint who looked more horrified at that last one than

anything else. But he said nothing and I smirked as I wrote my final rule.

9. I am allowed to sit wherever I want in classes

I rested back in my chair, folding my arms and they all leaned over me to read the list. Their skin brushed against mine and I was getting entirely too hot as they continued to close in around me. I could hardly breathe for all the testosterone in the air.

“Is the pizza really necessary?” Saint grumbled and my malicious grin widened.

“It is,” I said firmly and Kyan and Blake laughed.

“Looks good to me,” Blake said, stepping back and relieving me from his stifling heat.

Kyan moved away next then Saint dropped into the chair beside me, his arm brushing mine and sending a small earthquake scattering through my body as he took the pen and paper, positioning it squarely in front of him and added to the bottom of the rules. I hated him with all my heart, but craved him with all my soul. It was the most wicked kind of punishment he could ever inflict on me.

1. You will sleep in a Night Keeper’s bed every night on rotation and they will have priority over you for 24 hours (6pm – 6pm the next day).

2. You must cook breakfast every day.

4. You will wear whatever we decide on the day you are in our possession.

5. You will do as we say without complaint unless it conflicts with your rules.

He lifted his head, pushing it toward me so I could read it then he signed

the bottom and passed the pen to Blake. He moved forward, scribbling his signature on it before Kyan swiped it from him and added his name in a messy scrawl. Then he held out the pen for me, his eyes glittering hungrily as I took it.

My throat was too tight as I pressed the nub of the pen to the bottom of the page, a moment of hesitation staying my hand. I was already bound to them in more ways than I'd ever wanted to be. But I knew what I was doing by signing this. I wasn't agreeing to *their* terms, I was agreeing to mine. And that was a far scarier prospect because who knew how much of myself I was going to sacrifice in the pursuit of revenge? But as I glanced between their smug faces and thought of the destruction they'd caused me, my hand started moving and I painted my name in perfect, curling strokes.

Saint took the piece of paper, walking to the new refrigerator he'd had installed after the three of them had gone and swapped it for the one in the teacher's lounge yesterday. He pinned it in place with two black magnets, one at the top and one at the bottom. The finality of the act was simple yet powerful, the weight of those rules binding us all.

Saint's maid came and cleaned The Temple from top to bottom even though it was already spotless. He had insisted we all go for a walk around the entire lake after dinner and after we got back, I only realised she'd been because Kyan had made a joke about her being 'Lady Rebecca, the ghost of the crypt'. I wouldn't even have put it past Saint to have the ability to employ the dead.

I was sitting in an armchair polishing the freaking silverware like an eighteen hundreds' servant while Blake and Kyan played video games. Saint

was sitting at the dining table on his laptop, tapping out some assignment with a single crease in his brow. My gaze kept drifting to him, observing the angles of his face while he didn't know I was watching, captivated by the way the tightness of his jaw loosened every time he fell into a pit of concentration.

I hated that he fascinated me, but had given up trying to stop my eyes from straying his way. He never noticed me observing him even once. When he was invested in something, he gave it his full, undivided intention. And there was something admirable about that. Not that he had many fine qualities. But I supposed his precision and thoroughness couldn't really be ignored. The problem was, he tended to use both for evil.

Saint closed his laptop suddenly, making my heart jolt. "It's eleven forty five, Barbie. Bedtime."

"Who says you get her first?" Kyan complained, looking over at me long enough for his Xbox character to get burned alive by a flamethrower. He didn't even seem to notice as the avatar screamed and went up in a fiery blaze. His eyes were too busy devouring me while I was too busy glaring back at him.

"I do," Saint snarled. "You had her when you took her to that fucking fight pit and Blake had her the night of the initiation party."

"Doesn't count," Blake said, his eyes pinned on the screen as he continued to play the game, but the tightness of his lips said he had more feelings on the subject which he wasn't airing.

I didn't want to be fought over like a bone amongst hungry dogs so I got to my feet, tossing the last of the silverware down on the coffee table and heading to the stairs.

"Night, assholes," I called lightly, walking up into Saint's room and sensing him following.

The second I reached the top, my heart went from zero to a thousand. Sleeping in a bed with Saint was like stumbling across a bear's cave and deciding it was a good place to take a nap. I was not gonna come out of it unscathed. Especially as I'd messed with his room and he was about to see exactly what I'd-

Oh for fuck's sake.

Every little change I'd made had been rectified. No doubt by his damn ghost maid. *Gah.*

"Brush your teeth, I'll bring you your nightwear," Saint commanded and a tremor rolled through me at his tone. I didn't want to like his commands, but sometimes they had a sinful effect on me which was purely chemical. I couldn't stop it even if I tried. It made the most depraved part of me sink to her knees and part her lips like a freaking whore who loved her job.

I headed to the bathroom, finding that my products had been tidied neatly into order beside Saint's. I rolled my eyes as I grabbed my toothbrush and squeezed a line of toothpaste onto the bristles. When I was done, I washed my face then caught my gaze in the mirror. I never thought I'd see a killer staring back at me from the glass. But there she was. Perfectly innocent looking and yet her soul was painted black.

A ragged breath snagged in my lungs as I remembered the weight of Merl's body on top of me, the sharp pain in the back of my skull as he'd cracked my head against the ground. Panic bloomed in my chest and I shut my eyes as I tried to force the memories away. I'd barely let my mind stray to it all day. But now it was quiet and late at night and there was nowhere else for my mind to go but there-

A cool hand pressed against my back and I jumped, realising I was clutching onto the sink in an iron grip.

"Routine can calm the mind," Saint's voice cast a gentle breeze against

my ear and I despised that it actually helped to draw me out of the dark pit I'd been sinking into.

He pulled me away from the sink and I opened my eyes, finding him before me with a blue silk nightdress in his grip. He was stripped down to a pair of black boxers that clung to his hips and drew my eyes down to the rigidly firm muscles of his abs. My gaze snagged on the tattoo that ran over his chest and I had to fight the instinct to reach out and trace the words with my fingertips, *the days are long, but the nights are dark*.

"Get changed," he growled. "Then come to bed." He placed the nightdress in my hand then left the room, swinging the door shut behind him.

I took a steadying breath and changed into it, the silk clinging to my figure and showing off my curves, my breasts partially exposed and my thighs kissed by lace. *Asshole. Dressing me up in pretty shit that I annoyingly like.*

I headed out of the room and found Saint turning back the covers and sliding into the right side of the bed. His gaze fell on me as I moved around to the other side of the bed, our eyes locked as I gripped the sheets, pulling them back as I moved beneath them.

The bed seemed far colder than when I'd slept in it alone and I stole a look at the man who was the reason for that, a chill seeming to emanate from his body permanently. He was like the Night King in Game of Thrones. I was surprised he didn't get frostbite from his own heart.

He picked up a book from his nightstand – one I'd looked through myself during my time in quarantine. It was a book of the darkest poems I'd ever read by Edgar Allan Poe.

Saint started reading out loud and my heart ceased to beat as his velvet soft voice spun a web of hypnosis I couldn't escape from. "From the same source I have not taken... My sorrow - I could not awaken...my heart to joy at the same tone...and all I loved, I loved alone."

He glanced at me for comment, but my voice was locked deep down in a box in my chest.

“There’s beauty in pain. Poe knew that,” he said, his voice contemplative as he reached out and brushed a lock of hair behind my ear, leaving a freezing trail against my flesh. “That’s why you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, Tatum Rivers.”

I said nothing, my heart wounded by his words.

The clock ticked onto midnight and he placed the book on his nightstand as the lamp switched off automatically and he dropped down into the sheets. He closed his eyes, his arms resting rigidly either side of him and I stared at him at a loss.

I slid deeper beneath the covers, resting my head on the pillow and watching him in the soft light of the moon that filtered in through the stained glass window above his bed, casting us in tones of deepest green.

I was unable to pull my eyes away as I traced every detail of my vicious captor, my cruel saviour, my lonely beast.

“Goodnight, Saint,” I whispered, but he didn’t reply. His routine was iron. But so was my will. And I was going to find a way to destroy him if it was the last thing I did.



I stood before the students in the assembly hall on Monday morning, casually reminding them about after school activities and telling them not to try and leave campus. It was as if we hadn't just survived an insurgence from the outside world and weren't currently holing up within this school like a bunch of rats clinging to a life raft in a stormy sea.

I was officially Headmaster Monroe. Saint Memphis had clicked his perfectly manicured fingers and it was so. Headmaster Brown was nothing but a faded memory. The fact that I was amongst the youngest staff members wasn't mentioned. Nobody seemed to mind that I was seriously under-qualified for the job. I'd stood up and fought for the safety of our school when it counted and the reverence in the eyes of the students and staff alike told me that that was more than enough for them. And I supposed in these times of danger and turmoil while we fought to survive the Hades Virus, that made a twisted kind of sense.

We were more than just a school for the elite now. We were a band of survivors pulling together to weather this storm.

I'd outlined the additional security which was now in place surrounding

the school at all times. Governor Memphis had bankrolled a small army of private security guards complete with dogs and guns to patrol the outer wall and keep us safe. He'd even had a series of trailers brought in and set up beyond the wall for them to live in so that they didn't have to leave the safety of this area and wouldn't risk contracting the virus and bringing it to our door.

As much as I wanted to sneer at the casual display of wealth, I had to admit that in this instance, it was well warranted. There were still almost a thousand students in attendance at Everlake Prep and their parents expected them to be kept safe while receiving the education they'd paid for.

We'd implemented some additional attempts to impose social distancing. Every other seat on the bleachers in front of me remained empty so that the students could keep their distance from each other. All aside from the four students who sat in the centre of the very back row.

The Night Keepers and their prize. The four of them flouted my rules with the casual obnoxiousness of the elite. Tatum sat between Kyan and Blake, her back straight, blue eyes focused on me as I spoke, like everything I said was truly important to her.

Kyan's arm was slung around the back of her chair. Blake's legs were spread wide so that his thigh was pressed to hers and as he shifted his position, her skirt was tugged up a few inches, revealing the bronzed skin of her thigh above the top of her socks. I watched the way they touched her with a hungry kind of jealousy which made my skin prickle and my jaw tick. Not that I had any right to feel anything like that towards her. But since the night of the break in, my thoughts had landed on her more and more often, my concern for her safety bordering on obsessive. It was hard to keep my emotions detached from her when I'd killed for her as easily as breathing and knew I'd do it again in a heartbeat. That act had felt like claiming her in some

small way. But if I believed that about myself then I had to believe it about the Night Keepers too. And the idea of them feeling that way about her made my blood boil.

I forced my gaze back to the rest of the students in the room as I continued my speech, putting emphasis on hand washing and social distancing.

I'd decided to return the school to the normal timetable now that we were starting classes again. Sixteen students and two members of staff had shown signs of the virus during their quarantine and they'd left the premises to go to hospital. The cleaning staff had worked tirelessly to decontaminate the entire campus and I was secure in the knowledge that the Hades Virus had been expelled just as thoroughly as the looters who'd come to steal from us.

I finished up with my speech and the students clapped a little more enthusiastically than I'd expected. I guessed they were still riding the high of surviving the looters and I wasn't going to snub their enthusiasm. I still wasn't convinced I was the best man for this job, but I was as certain as herpes on a whore that I'd work to make sure I exceeded everyone's expectations with it.

The students began to file out of the hall to head for their first class and I waited until the Night Keepers drew close before calling out to them.

“Roscoe, Bowman, Memphis – a word.”

They turned away from the flood of students and approached me with all the casual arrogance of the elite. Kyan still had his arm slung around Tatum and he guided her over to me with them as if I'd asked for her too.

I watched as she walked between the three of them, her gaze seeking mine out with a question in the deep, blue depths of her eyes.

“We have a training session tonight at seven, Rivers,” I said as they moved to stand before me and the rest of the staff and students filed out. “I'll see you then.”

Saint's jaw tightened as I dismissed her and for a moment it seemed as though Kyan wasn't going to release her. He pulled her closer, the stubble on his jaw scratching against her ear as he leaned down to speak with her.

"Catch you later, baby," he murmured and she looked up into his dark eyes for long moment with colour rising in her cheeks before stepping out of his hold and walking away without a word.

The four of us watched her go in silence and my muscles tightened at the attention they were lavishing her with. When she moved, they reacted. Even Saint's eyes burned as he gave his focus to her.

She glanced back as she pulled the door open, that waterfall of blonde hair skimming over the arch of her back as she looked my way. Her gaze met mine and she gave me the barest hint of a smile which made my throat tighten. If she was surprised to find the four of us watching her go, she didn't let it show, she just accepted the attention like she was owed it and turned away from it like it meant nothing to her.

The door fell closed behind her and silence reigned as we all drew our focus back to each other. None of us mentioned the siren's spell that girl had just cast on us. There was something intangible about Tatum Rivers which sent my heart pounding and I was getting the distinct impression that all four of us were falling prey to the same feelings whenever we were around her.

"Have there been any issues?" I asked in a low voice, folding my arms over my chest as I scrutinised the three of them.

Saint tutted lightly like the question was insulting and Blake yawned like I was boring him.

"Everything is dealt with," Kyan said, the only one of them who seemed to be willing to offer me an answer, not that that was exactly much detail to go on.

"How?" I asked, my voice a low growl which demanded they cut the shit.

We'd dealt with the body, but we needed to make sure no one was looking for the son of a bitch. We didn't need a police investigation heading our way.

"I've been wondering," Saint said casually, picking an imaginary piece of lint off of his sleeve so that his platinum cufflinks caught the light. "Would you kill for *any* of your students?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked tersely, irritated that they weren't answering my questions.

"It just occurred to me that there was no one forcing your hand down in the catacombs. The rest of us had already done a thorough job in finishing the fucker. No one held a gun to your head. But the way you looked at our girl... well, it just seemed like you did it for *her* in particular."

"What's your issue, Memphis?" I snarled. "Do you think I didn't see the way you looked at her that night? We all did it for her. I'm failing to see what the point of this-"

"The *point* is that *we* all did it for her because she ours. Bound to us, mind, body and soul. So I guess what I'm asking, is what makes you think you've got a claim on her too? Have you been fantasising about fucking a student? Are you hoping that those sweaty little kickboxing session of yours will end up with the two of you in the showers and her screaming your name?"

"That's enough, Memphis," I snapped. "I'm your teacher, you'll speak to me with respect, or-"

"Or *what*?" Saint hissed, moving into my personal space until we were practically nose to nose. Blake and Kyan were right behind him, closing in on me like a wolf pack scenting blood in the air. "Seems to me like you don't have anything to threaten me with, Monroe. And if you want the answers you're looking for then you're going to have to do a lot more than just wet your fingers in the blood of some scumbag."

"Like?" I demanded, wondering what the fuck he'd want from me if

killing someone and disposing of their body with him wasn't enough.

Saint backed up a few inches, smirking like I'd just stumbled right into his trap. "*Like*, becoming one of us for real. A Night Keeper. Swearing it in blood and bone, mind, body and soul. Forever."

"You want me to join your little boys club?" I scoffed. "How is that more meaningful than helping you kill that bastard?"

"Because if you become a Night Keeper then you're bound to us for life. You're one of us permanently. It's a tie stronger than any family bond and it gives you the right to question me. It will also give you the protection of our brotherhood. We will never see you fall, never see you hurt, your life will be tied to ours irrevocably. You've seen how far our reach can go in the space of a few days with your new position as leader of this school. You can't imagine how much life could have to offer you as one of us."

"What if I don't want to join your little gang?" I scoffed.

"There's no blurred lines. You're in or you're out. You want our secrets? Our protection? Our devotion? Our *girl*? Then you're going to become the fourth Night Keeper. All or nothing." Saint shrugged like he wasn't asking me to sell my soul to the devil and I glanced at the other two to see what they made of this.

Blake's interest was definitely piqued now and he was eyeing me like I was a competitor, a rival, someone worthy of his attention. Kyan's dark eyes flared with a hunger I hadn't often seen in him outside of the ring. The intense way they were all looking at me said they wanted this. And not only that, but they believed in it wholeheartedly. They truly thought that if they initiated me into their gang, I'd belong to them for life. That my loyalty would be unfaltering and my trust in them implicit.

"And what exactly does becoming a Night Keeper entail?" I asked in a bored tone, not letting them see my interest in it. But if they truly believed in

the bond of their brotherhood the way they were claiming to, perhaps it would be the golden ticket for me to gain access to all of their deepest, darkest secrets. They could be offering up the chance I'd been waiting for to strike at Saint and his family in a way that could truly damage them.

"For starters, you'd need to be initiated in front of the school," Blake said.

"And you'll be needing some new ink," Kyan added, reaching out to tap the back of my neck.

A tingle ran along my skin at that suggestion. Of course I'd noticed the matching tattoos the three of them had in that exact spot on the backs of their necks. Each of them slightly different but clearly linked. An arrow in flight. Violence waiting to happen. There was beauty in the art of those designs, but there was danger in it too. Would I really let them mark me out as one of them in such a permanent, obvious way?

"I doubt there are any tattoo parlours open," I said dismissively.

"Luckily for you, I have my own gun," Kyan said. "I can do it for you."

"You expect me to let you near me with a tattoo gun?" I scoffed.

"He did ours," Blake said. "And half of his own tattoos too. It's one of his many hidden talents."

"Like sucking your dick to get you singing his praises?" I drawled, mostly because I felt like I was being backed into a corner here and I needed time to think. This offer could be the answer to my dreams or the start of a serious fucking nightmare.

I'd seen and heard all about the way they treated Tatum since they'd gotten her to agree to be theirs and even though I had zero intention of agreeing to any terms like that, I had to think this came with a catch. If I tied myself to them this way, it would be a lasting bond. One they wouldn't let me back out of easily. Although I was willing to bet that tearing Saint's family apart and burning them to the ground might be enough to get me cast out.

“Yeah, I suck dick real good,” Kyan teased. “But only for my brothers. You can find out for yourself when you swear in.”

Blake snorted a laugh and Saint’s lips twitched with amusement, but none of them took their attention from me.

“How do you expect me to get away with joining up to your little gang while I’m the headmaster of this school?” I scoffed, buying time as I tried to figure out what to do. “I’m just supposed to go through with your initiation, get a tattoo everyone can see all the damn time and come hang out in The Temple with you and no one will care? The parents and teachers won’t have an issue with it? Come on-”

“I really don’t think you have any grasp on the power we hold,” Saint tutted. “If we say it’s acceptable, you can bet your ass every fucker in this school will agree it’s the best fucking thing that ever happened to them. You’re too used to living life amongst the masses. This isn’t even about being the elite. We’re beyond the elite, above all of them. They bow down to our desires and thank us for any molecule of attention we give them. What we decide supersedes any *rules* you may believe bind you. Because I can assure you, they don’t. This world is governed by two things. Money and power. We have more of both than you can even imagine.”

“What about love?” I asked, because he may have had a point, but I knew for a fact that love was just as powerful. My love for my family was what had driven me down this path, it made people do all kinds of insane things and motivated like nothing else.

Saint rolled his eyes at me. “*Love* is something that most people can put a value on. I guarantee you I could buy a night with most married women if I cared to find the right price. But I will concede that real, *pure* love like I have with my brothers is a force of its own. If you join with us then we would be inviting you into that bond too.”

I blew out a breath as I looked between the three of them. I could see what he meant about their bond, but no matter what position he gave me, I wasn't just going to slot in amongst them. We all knew that, and I had more than a few questions about *why* they would offer this to me. They didn't know me, not really. And killing some asshole together might have bonded us, but it certainly didn't make us love each other. There was something more here, but I couldn't figure it out and not knowing was like having an itch I couldn't scratch.

"What's the real reason you're offering me this?" I asked, raising my chin. "No bullshit. Just the facts. What is it that makes you want me?"

Saint glanced at the other two and Kyan laughed darkly like they'd exchanged some joke.

"The three of us have darkness in us," Saint breathed, his eyes lighting like he didn't see that as a bad thing. "We're all our own specific kinds of monster. And when we look at you, we can see that darkness too. We recognise one of our own. And the legend clearly states that there was always meant to be four Night Keepers-"

"You seriously believe in that Night Keeper shit?" I asked, arching a brow at them.

"You tell me," Saint said with a shrug. "Do we inspire fear? Are we brutal beasts who thrive in the dark? Did we come and protect our people when they needed us?"

"It's just some old legend," I muttered, ignoring the ring of truth his words held.

"Maybe. Maybe not," Blake purred.

"You have to admit, we make the myths seem pretty damn real," Kyan added with a smirk. "And who gives a shit if it's magic, legend, a curse or just some assholes telling the world that this is how it is? Point is that we

inspire the fear and respect of the Night Keepers, we stick to their oaths and protect our people. We still embody what the people want the Night Keepers to be. So doesn't that make it the truth even if there is no fate or destiny involved?"

"You seem a little overwhelmed, *Nash*," Saint said with a shrug. "How about we leave you to think about it and you let us know tomorrow? But I'm warning you... once you accept, you're all in. No backing out. You live by the rules of the Night Keepers. You're one of us for life. Blood in, blood out. That means if you're ever in need, you have us to back you 'til death. But we'll expect the same in return from you. I won't promise it will be clean, or honest. In fact, I can guarantee that the other night won't be the only time we get our hands bloody. We're not nice people, we will never claim to be. But our family is pure and our bond unbreakable. Monsters thrive in the company of their kind and I know that we can help nurture yours."

He turned and headed away from me before I could respond to that insanity with Blake on his heels. Kyan smiled broadly and clapped me on the back as he leaned close to speak to me.

"There's no turning back now, brother," he said. "You've made your bed with the devil. Time to come lie in it with us."

My jaw ticked as they strode away from me and I blew out a breath as the door swung closed behind them. Was I really going to go through with this insanity? Bind myself to those fucked up boys and their cruel existence? It could certainly help me to further my plans. And I didn't want to admit it, but the idea of having what they had tempted me too. It must have been nice to live a life where nothing you ever did could be seen as wrong, where no one could hold you accountable. At least not yet. But I was determined to make Saint Memphis's family pay for their crimes. So maybe taking them up on their offer was the right move.

Before I could give it any more thought, the door swung open again and Kyan stuck his head back through, the look in his eyes promising bloodshed as he grinned.

“Do you wanna come on a trial run with us, Nash?” he asked, dangling a key from his finger like I was a horse and it was a carrot.

“What kind of run?” I asked.

“The kind where you get to see how the Night Keepers deal with our enemies.”

“I’m not interested in your stupid bully games,” I replied as I strode towards him. I had a video meeting in an hour with the school governors and I needed to go over a few things before it.

“Not even when the target is Bait?”

“Jeremiah Cocker?” I asked with a frown, realising I hadn’t seen the little asswipe who’d let those fucking looters into the school at assembly. “Where is he anyway?”

“When you were rounding all the students up that night, I escorted him to his own personal quarantine quarters. Now that we know he’s not infected, we’re ready to let him out for his punishment.” Kyan’s eyes were hard and dark, a glimmer of excitement in them as he geared up for a fight. Not that I imagined that kid would pose any kind of challenge to him.

“I’ve got a lot going on,” I began as I tried to move around him, but Kyan stepped into my way.

I could see Saint and Blake waiting for us down the hall, watching with interest to see how this would play out. Whether they could bend me to their bullshit or not.

“Maybe we misjudged you then,” Kyan growled, rolling his shoulders back like he was willing to go to bat with me over this. “Because I assumed that the man I saw slide a knife into that fucker in the catacombs was

standing before me now. The man who was willing to kill for Tatum Rivers. The same girl who only got attacked in the first place because that cowardly shit eater Bait let those motherfuckers into our school. The same girl who was exposed to the Hades Virus during that attack and could have fucking *died?*”

I wasn't surprised by the violence in his posture, but the utter rage in his voice as he spoke about what had almost happened to Tatum took me by surprise. I'd known Kyan for a long time and I'd never known him to care about anything enough to get this riled up over it. Sure, he flipped out and attacked people all the time, using them as an outlet for his rage. But he *never* gave a shit like this.

And to make it worse, he'd landed on the one fucking thing I cared about in this place too. I'd been so busy being pissed at the residents of Murkwell for showing up here and causing all of that destruction that I'd totally forgotten we had a traitor in our midst.

So if the Night Keepers wanted to draw me into one of their cruel games, they'd chosen the perfect fucking one to tempt me with. In fact, he'd landed on my kryptonite. Tatum Rivers. I'd sworn to help her and protect her at all costs in the mission to bring down Saint and the Night Keepers. So if I had the opportunity to take out someone else who had hurt her then I was more than okay with that. In fact, I was quite looking forward to seeing him suffer.

“Lead the way,” I commanded and the smile that lit Kyan's face was all beast. But I didn't mind that at all.

Blake grinned like a kid on a Christmas Day as I approached him and even Saint cracked a smile. It was strange to see anything that warm on his ice cold features, especially directed at someone outside of his little boys' club. Although I guessed if I took him up on his offer of joining them then I'd be privy to more of that kind of thing. He'd be letting me in, offering me

friendship, which was really just a step away from trust. And as much as I found it hard to believe that these three heartless men were capable of many real, honest emotions, I did believe in their bond. It was impossible to miss. They'd built a family out of broken misfits who thrived in the torment of others and there was something kind of beautiful in the savagery of that. Not that Saint deserved to have any kind of family after what his father had cost me. But maybe accepting his invitation into this club of broken monsters was the ticket I needed to get close enough to start righting those wrongs. It was my key into Saint's life, joining his inner circle through a fluke of coincidence and a girl who had cast a spell on all of us.

"Coming to play with the big boys then, Coach?" Blake joked, throwing an arm around my neck like we were old buddies, trying to pin me in a head lock.

I jabbed him in the ribs with my elbow and I barked a laugh as he released me with a curse.

"Onwards horsey!" Kyan yelled, leaping onto Saint's back and shouting. "Yah!"

I couldn't help but laugh as Saint cursed him colourfully, shoving through the doors which led outside and spinning around several times until Kyan fell off.

The second his ass hit the ground, Blake leapt on him and started whaling on him, punching him in the chest as he tried to pin him down and Kyan called him a shit eating pretty boy.

Saint dove back into the fray too, helping Blake to pin Kyan down and he started yelling at me for help while he laughed. They were playing but they weren't going easy on each other, though I noticed they didn't aim for the face.

I hesitated for a moment, wondering if I was seriously going to start

wrestling in the dirt with a bunch of my students.

“What’s the matter, Monroe?” Saint asked, grunting as Kyan swung a fist into his side. “Are you a pussy?”

No fucking way is a Memphis talking to me like that and getting away with it.

I dipped my shoulder low and sprinted at them, using a football tackle to knock both Blake and Saint off of Kyan in one move.

A triumphant laugh tore from Kyan’s lips as I held out a hand to heave him to his feet and to my surprise, I grinned at him too.

“Alright, fuckwits, let’s save some of that aggression for Bait,” Saint said. He had a wild look in his eyes which said that had barely even been the warm up for whatever cruelty he had planned. I found myself wanting to be on the front row of this shit show for better or worse. I wanted to see him in action. Work out what made him tick and how to use it to my advantage.

“Last one there has to suck my dick!” Blake yelled before tearing away from us with a whoop of laughter.

The others instantly broke into a run and I found myself sprinting too, caught up in the excitement of this game and beyond giving a shit that I was supposed to be their teacher. There was something about these boys. Something that really did put them beyond the rules that everyone else lived by. And though I never would have done something like this with any of my other students, I knew that no one would question anything I did with them. That was true power. The kind that was bought and traded for in ways so much more valuable than money. And sure, they were super rich, totally fucking entitled shitbags, but that wasn’t what set them apart. There was just something *more* to them which lured everyone in like moths to a flame. But right now I felt like I had wings of steel, and getting close to them didn’t burn one bit. Yet.

I chased after Blake, outstripping Kyan and then Saint before breaking into a sprint as I spotted Aspen Halls up ahead.

Blake cast me a glance from the corner of his eye as I came up on him and pushed into his own burst of speed, pumping his arms as he gave everything to hold me off.

He beat me to the building by an inch and I cursed as he whooped and fist pumped like he'd just won a marathon instead of a fucking sprint up a hill that no one gave a shit about.

I snorted a laugh at him as Saint came to a halt followed by Kyan.

"Where do you want me then?" Kyan asked, dropping to his knees and opening his mouth as Blake strode forward and rolled his fly down.

"You know I don't care where you are so long as you swallow and tell me it tastes like strawberries when I come," Blake replied seriously and my brows inched up a moment before the two of them looked at my face and started howling with laughter.

"Did you seriously think he was gonna suck my cock in the middle of the path?" Blake asked, slapping my arm as he continued to laugh.

"We only do brother blowies back at The Temple on Thursdays," Kyan added with a smirk as he got to his feet again. "It's at eight sharp so don't be late or you'll be last to get sucked off."

"You guys are a bunch of fucking idiots," I commented, rolling my eyes at them, though I had to admit that hanging out with them wasn't actually *all* awful. So far, anyway.

I looked around to find that Saint had already fixed his uniform so that it hung perfectly on his frame once more and he dusted down his pants again. "Animals, not idiots," he corrected. "We don't try and dampen our primal instincts, but I can assure you we execute our prey with cunning and precision."

“Fair enough,” I agreed.

I fell into step with Saint, trying not to think about how fucking surreal this moment was as he led the way into the building and down the corridor until we reached the door to a janitor’s closet.

There was a rank smell in the air as we closed in on it and I scrunched my face up as I tried to figure out what it was.

“We gave him a bucket to piss and shit in,” Kyan explained with a wild grin.

My lips parted as I realised what he was implying. Bait was in that closet. He’d been in there for more than two days. *Christ.*

“What about food and water?” I asked, wondering if the poor kid might have already suffered enough before reminding myself of what he’d done to earn his place in there.

“Of course I gave him food and water,” Kyan said with a wicked look in his eyes.

“Yeah, a bucket of warm water, some raw potatoes, a bottle of hot sauce and a bag of frozen peas which would have defrosted before the first night was over,” Blake snorted. “It was a fucking feast.”

“No one hurts my girl and gets away with it,” Kyan shrugged and my skin prickled at his casual claiming of Tatum, but I held my tongue on the subject.

Saint ignored the conversation and moved to unlock the door, sneering as he pulled it open and we all fell silent.

Inside, all was dark but the stench was overwhelming. Bait sobbed as he crawled out of the tiny cupboard and I almost felt bad as I realised he wouldn’t have even been able to lay down flat in there. A half eaten raw potato rolled out after him and I guessed that really had been all Kyan had given him for food.

“Come on,” Saint snapped, striding away at a fast pace. “I’m not standing

here with the stench of shit washing over us, we can do this outside.”

“I’m sorry,” Bait murmured, staying on the floor between me, Kyan and Blake and looking up at us like he was searching for a sympathetic face.

But there wasn’t an ounce of pity being directed his way. Blake was looking at him like he was something unpleasant on the bottom of his shoe and Kyan seemed half inclined to rip him limb from limb. My upper lip peeled back as his focus fixed on me and I backed up a few steps as he scrambled forward, reaching for my legs with filthy fingers.

“Sir, you have to help me,” Bait begged and some part of me knew that was the way this was supposed to go. But all I could see as I looked down at him was the person responsible for sending all of those students to hospital after they contracted the Hades Virus. For putting the lives of everyone here in danger. For letting that fucking animal into our home so that he could attack Tatum. For making sure my hands were stained red with blood and that I was bound to these ruthless creatures I now stood with.

“Why should I help you after what you did?” I snarled.

“Come on!” Saint shouted from the door at the end of the corridor. “If I’m waiting more than five seconds out here, I’ll get Kyan to cut your fucking nipple off!”

Kyan casually drew a hunting knife from the inside pocket of his blazer and unsheathed it with a calm look in his eyes like a psychopath.

Bait scrambled to his feet and ran after Saint in his black boxers and stained white T-shirt. I was guessing it had been hot as fuck in that little cupboard for two days straight which explained his missing pants.

As I followed him towards the exit, Blake and Kyan flanked me, the three of us prowling forward like hungry wolves intent on a kill and my blood rose in anticipation of doling out some justice.

When we made it outside, we found Bait standing before Saint in the

centre of the courtyard beneath the tall flagpole which held a forest green flag flitting in the wind above us with the academy crest stamped on it.

“This is very simple,” Saint said lazily as the rest of us moved to create a circle surrounding our prey. “You do exactly what I ask when I ask it, or Kyan here will punch you every time you hesitate.”

“Can I kick him instead?” Kyan asked, tossing me the hunting knife so suddenly that I barely had time to catch it before he shrugged out of his blazer and dumped it on the ground behind him. “He’s fucking filthy and I’m willing to bet at least some of that mess on him is shit.”

“Good point,” Saint conceded as Blake chuckled. “Kyan will kick you every time you hesitate. Is that clear?”

Bait stared around at the four of us as a tremble of fear shuddered through his body, his butchered copper hair lank and sweaty on his scalp.

Kyan swung his foot straight into the side of his knee and he screamed as he crumpled to the floor.

“Is. That. Clear?” Saint asked, enunciating each word as if Bait was failing to understand him.

“Yes,” Bait gasped as Kyan swung his foot back again.

“Good,” Saint replied, his eyes lighting. “Now, strip.”

“What?” Bait asked in a panic and Kyan kicked him again, catching him in the ribs this time and sending him sprawling to the bricks as Blake leapt aside so he didn’t touch him.

“The longer it takes you to remove your clothes, the more times Kyan will kick you,” Saint said lazily, like this was boring him, but the hunger in his gaze revealed that lie.

Kyan strode forward once more and Bait ripped his T-shirt off, the material getting caught on his head and one arm as he scrambled to yank it off and dark laughter poured from the lips of the Night Keepers surrounding

me. I almost didn't realise I was laughing too.

These boys bring out the darkness in me.

Bait finally managed to wrench his T-shirt off, tossing it away haphazardly so that the filthy material fell on Saint's pristine shoes.

He sneered as he kicked it away and Kyan booted Bait again as he hesitated in fear.

"All of your clothes," Saint snapped as Bait whimpered from his wounds.

"I'm sorry," Bait begged as he scrambled upright again, backing away from Kyan towards me. "I only wanted to escape this place. I just wanted to leave. Why wouldn't you let me leave?"

"Have you forgotten why we made you an Unspeakable in the first place?" Blake taunted. "We own you now, and you don't just get to run away from your punishment."

Bait almost backed into me so I shoved him forward, right into the centre of the circle again as Kyan smirked with glee.

"You got our girl hurt," Kyan snarled. "Do you really think we'd just allow that to go unpunished?"

"If you thought being an Unspeakable was bad, you haven't seen anything yet," Blake added in a devilish tone.

"Strip!" Saint roared, his patience snapping.

Bait dropped his boxers and quickly grabbed his junk to shield himself as he stood naked before us.

Saint bent down and opened up his book bag, pulling a coil of rope from it and slowly winding it around his fist.

"Stand against the flagpole with your arms behind it," he commanded, taking a step forward with deadly intent.

Bait backed up, then again, his eyes darting around wildly as his body coiled with tension. I knew he was going to bolt before he even moved and

when he darted away with a shriek of fear, I had to wonder how far he'd get, running naked from a wolf pack.

Blake whooped with excitement, ripping his blazer off and throwing it aside as he let Bait get a head start before tearing after him. I almost felt sorry for the kid as he tossed a terrified look over his shoulder, eyes wide, lips parted. Blake slammed into him with his best football tackle, taking him to the floor with a cheer of triumph as Bait crashed into the brick pathway and I had to cringe at the thought of it. *Dicks and bricks should never mix.*

Blake leapt up, grabbing his arm and hauling him back towards us as he crowed with laughter. Bait hadn't won in his collision with the brick path and blood spilled down his chin as well as a huge graze on his hip and another on his elbow.

He sobbed as Blake shoved him back against the flagpole and Saint tied his hands firmly behind his back around it.

Blake grinned at me as he grabbed his cellphone from his pocket and trained it on Bait as he started up a live stream. No doubt all over campus, students were currently whipping out their phones and watching the carnage unfold.

"You are officially less than an Unspeakable," Saint purred, circling to stand before Bait again as the others closed in at his back. I found myself moving to join them too, my shoulder brushing Kyan's in an act of solidarity. "You will only eat if someone gives you scraps from their plate. You're not allowed a single square of toilet paper. You won't speak to anyone and they certainly won't speak to you – *unless* they're giving you an order. Because you are now officially the bitch of every single student at this school. As you endangered all of their lives, we're giving them control over yours. If *anyone* gives you an order you now have to do as they say, not just the Night Keepers. Because you're nothing anymore. Nothing but a ghost with no

voice, no name, and no *face*.”

Bait whimpered as Saint retrieved a plain white mask from his book bag and a tube of superglue.

“It is your responsibility to make sure you wear this mask at all times to remind everyone that you are nothing and no one,” Saint said in a dangerous voice. “But to help you out, I’ll stick it in place for now. Once it falls off in a week or so, feel free to secure it however you like. But if any of us ever catch you not wearing it, there will be hell to pay.”

“I’ll wear it,” Bait whimpered, tears spilling down his face. “I swear. You don’t have to use the glue. I promise I’ll never take it off, I-”

“Maybe I should castrate you to stop you talking back?” Kyan suggested, plucking his hunting knife from my grip and moving forward until the blade kissed Bait’s balls.

A sound of pure terror escaped his lips and he froze entirely, staring up at Kyan like he was the devil incarnate. But I had a feeling the Night Keepers were far worse than the devil.

Saint chuckled appreciatively and proceeded to line the white mask with glue.

I watched as he prepared it and suddenly, his gaze lifted to me. He held the mask out in a silent offering, not a threat or a demand, just asking if I wanted to do the honours.

And as I thought of Tatum pinned beneath that piece of shit who’d been trying to hurt her because of this kid, it wasn’t a difficult choice to make.

I took the mask from him, careful not to touch the inside where the superglue sat before stepping forward to seal Bait’s fate.

Kyan backed up with a throaty laugh and Bait sagged with relief as the knife moved away from his balls. But it was short lived as his gaze fell on me instead, the mask ready and waiting in my hand.

There was a bitter acceptance in his eyes as I pushed the mask onto his skin, concealing the top half of his face with the white material so that only his eyes showed through, tears brimming in them as I pushed down firmly to make sure it wouldn't move.

There was something profoundly final about covering him like that. A blank manikin looking back at us now which meant he could have been anyone at all. Or no one.

Blake cut the recording and laughter tumbled from his lips, quickly echoed by the others.

Kyan wrapped an arm around my shoulders and we all turned and walked away together, leaving Bait tied to the flagpole, naked aside from that ice white mask.

“So how about it, brother?” Kyan growled in my ear as I was jostled between them, a dark smile on my face for doling out justice. “You can't say that didn't get your blood pumping. Don't you want to join us so that you can do that again?”

I laughed him off without giving an answer and I could feel Saint watching me like he was waiting on it too.

I held my tongue as we walked further down the path, but I had to admit, becoming one of them might not have been quite as bad as I'd assumed.

I paced back and forth in the gym as I waited for Tatum to show up. It was five past seven and I was filled with restless energy. I'd barely spoken to her since the night of the break in and the few messages we'd exchanged had been brief and to the point. I wasn't going to put it past Saint or the others to check her phone and I was still hoping they hadn't picked up on just how

close I'd been getting to the girl they thought was theirs.

But that hope was a fickle thing. They'd seen me the night she'd been attacked. I'd been desperately trying to get to her. I'd plunged that knife into that scumbag. There wasn't much chance they'd missed the way I'd panicked at the thought of her being hurt. Saint had already tried to call me out on it.

I just had to hope they didn't realise how much I'd started to care about her. Although, if they really were inviting me into their fold, then maybe it didn't matter that much if they figured it out. I'd certainly seen just how much *they* cared about her. And if that wasn't a mindfuck in itself then I didn't know what was. I hadn't believed the Night Keepers were capable of caring about anything aside from themselves. But Tatum Rivers was a force to be reckoned with.

The door finally opened at I quit my pacing and Tatum strode in. I spotted Blake walking away after dropping her off and bit my tongue until the door swung shut behind her. She was wearing a matching sports bra and leggings set in a deep navy colour which really brought out the blue in her eyes. My gaze raked over every inch of exposed skin and curve of her flesh before I could stop myself. I cursed the fact that she was my damn student before ripping my attention away from her again.

"How were classes today?" I asked as she crossed the room and pulled on her gloves to start our bout.

"I don't want to talk about classes with you," she muttered, her back to me as she gave her attention to the gloves.

"Did you have something else in mind?" I asked, moving towards the ring and lifting the rope for her so that she could climb in.

Tatum huffed out a breath and moved to stand before me, but she didn't raise her fists, glaring down at her gloves before tearing them off again.

"Were you the kind of guy who got into a lot of fights at my age?" she

asked, her lips curling into something that was dangerously close to a little rich girl pout.

“What makes you think that?” I asked, my defences rising at the slightest sign of the class divide. “Because I clearly have such low breeding?”

Her eyes snapped up to meet mine and a frown tugged at her brow. “No. Of course not. I’m not assuming you did, I’m asking *if* you did...just forget about it. I’m not really in the mood to spar today anyway.”

She made a move to walk away from me and I reached out to place an arm in front of her so that she couldn’t go. “Spit it out, princess, or I’m going to have to assume that you think I’m a common street rat.”

Her gaze flicked up to meet mine and the hint of a smile tugged at the corner of her lips before it died away again just as fast.

“I’m asking because...I want to practice brawling. I want to be ready the next time someone comes at me and I know I have to put them down if I want them to stop. I don’t ever want to hesitate to kill again. I ran from him when I should have stood and fought. Not wanting to stab that asshole almost cost me-”

“Okay,” I said, tossing my gloves aside too. “But don’t kick me in the balls, even if that is your most effective tactic.”

A snort of laughter escaped her and a dark smile tugged at my lips as I launched myself at her.

Tatum gasped in surprise a moment before I locked my arms around her and took her to the floor. We hit the mats hard and my grip was jarred loose, giving her the room she needed to throw her elbow into my gut.

I grunted as the wind was driven from my lungs and she pressed her advantage, rolling us with a sharp thrust and locking her hand around my throat as she shoved me down onto the mat beneath her.

Her grip tightened and I threw my fist into the inside of her elbow, forcing

her to buckle forward before catching her waist, flipping us over and locking her beneath me with my hips.

She fought like a wild animal, her fists pounding into my ribs and sending pain scattering through my body.

I grunted as I scrambled to catch hold of her wrists and the moment I did, I used pure force to pin them to the mat above her head.

She wriggled wildly beneath me, but with my hold on her wrists and my weight driving her down into the mat, she was immobilised.

"Fuck," she spat, panting heavily and I offered her a smile.

"You're not done yet," I pointed out. "At this point you'd want to headbutt me hard enough to break my nose. I'd rear away from you, you strike at my balls and then a solid throat punch the moment I flinch enough for you to get a hand free. Besides, if you'd been holding a knife like you were that night, all of those punches you dealt me could have been stabs."

"But they weren't," she hissed, her blue eyes blazing with shame for a moment before she blinked it away. "When he caught me, even when he got me on the ground, there was a part of me which didn't want to use that knife. To strike a deadly blow-"

"Don't beat yourself up because you hesitated to kill someone," I growled. "That just means you're a good person. Not that you're weak."

"But what if it happens again? What if I'm overpowered like I am now and I hesitate to make the killing blow, and-"

"You won't hesitate," I promised, knowing she needed to hear this over pretty reassurances that it wouldn't happen again. "You know what it takes to survive now. If there's a next time, you'll be ready."

"I can't sleep at night, worrying that I'm not really as strong as I think I am. That even my training isn't enough to-"

"It's not your skills that need any help. It's your bloodlust, you need to

trust in that darkness inside of you to keep you alive. That's what makes you a survivor. How much sleep have you lost feeling guilty for killing that asshole?" I demanded.

Tatum hesitated, like she was afraid to voice the truth to me. "None," she breathed. "I think about it and I try to feel guilt, remorse, pity...but whenever I remember the way it felt to drive that blade into him I just feel...*relieved*."

My lips curled into a smile as she admitted that and I couldn't deny the twisted part of me which loved that answer. She was as ruthless as me, maybe even as bloodthirsty too...

"Tell me how much you want to make the Night Keepers pay," I urged in a low voice, wanting to know if she planned on honing that merciless part of her into a weapon she could use to strike at them or not.

She shifted beneath me and my heart pounded as I kept her pinned there, liking the view way too much but unable to pull back.

"I'm going to make them beg for mercy before the end," she hissed. "I'm going to make a list of each and every way they've hurt me and make them pay the price for all of it. And I'll use every weapon I've got at my disposal to bring them down."

The venom in her tone sent desire rushing through me and as she shifted beneath me again I was sure she could feel just how hard I was for her, but I still couldn't force myself back. It might as well have been me who was pinned to the mat, my deceitful body aching with need as I kept her there at my mercy.

All this talk of revenge was better than any dirty talk I could imagine, her words making direct contact with my libido and making me want her more than ever.

"They want me to become the fourth Night Keeper," I admitted. "They want me all in with them. But-"

“Do it,” she growled, the rise and fall of her chest coming faster as her eyes lit at the idea. “We can take them down together from the inside out.”

There had been a thousand objections, protests and sound reasons for me to reject their offer up until that moment. But as I looked into the eyes of the girl they’d wronged and saw that familiar thirst for vengeance dancing within them, I realised that none of them mattered. All that mattered was taking those boys down, serving their heads up on a silver platter for her and bowing at her feet as she bathed in their blood. If she wanted to achieve that goal with my help then I was willing. She could have me, to help, use or abuse. I found I didn’t even mind which. If she wanted me then I was all in. I’d already killed for her once, so there was no denying the lengths I’d go to to protect her.

“Alright,” I agreed. “I’ll accept their offer. And I look forward to spilling more blood at your side.”

The smile she gave me was bright and filled with her desire for vengeance; it was beautiful in a damaged, twisted, fucked up kind of way. And in that moment, I knew that she had me in her grasp. I couldn’t deny the pull I felt to claim her, even if I knew I couldn’t act on it. But I could do this for her. I could walk into hell at her side and mark three demons in my crosshairs. I just hoped we’d still be smiling on the other side.



My dreams were filled with the ghosts of my past. Memories echoed through me, but it was a blur, like watching it all through a rain smattered pane of glass and I was reaching toward whoever lay on the other side of it. My sister's laughter called to me and my father's gruff voice sounded in the distance. But I couldn't get close to them no matter how hard I tried. I needed to surround myself with their love, their words of comfort. Dad would tell me I did the right thing, Jessica would say I wasn't a killer, I was a survivor. And they'd both tell me to face my demons down no matter what it took.

My body shook and a murmur of longing escaped me just before burning hot arms closed around me and I was pulled back into a hard chest.

My breathing immediately slowed and I took comfort in being held like that. But as my mind drifted closer towards consciousness, my thoughts sharpened and I blinked awake, glancing down at the tanned arms of one of my captors. For the longest moment, I let myself drown in the feeling of him so close, my heart drumming out a hungry rhythm as I breathed in his spicy

scent. I'd ached for comfort in my dreams and found a monster holding me when I woke. I was surprised by the power I'd somehow wielded over this man who hated me with the force of a hurricane. And yet now, he was holding me against him like he wanted to heal every wound he found in me. And I was selfishly letting him, taking what I needed as my dreams ebbed away and I clung to the comfort of his embrace.

My tongue was wet and heavy in my mouth, my breathing becoming shallow as I recalled being pinned beneath the might of this cruel creature. It seemed like a lifetime ago now. Sometimes, I wasn't sure there was anything left of the Blake Bowman I'd met on my first day at Everlake, but other times it seemed like he was lurking beneath the surface, peering out at me from behind his hate-filled eyes, begging to be released. Especially since he'd driven that blade into Merl. A part of me wanted to keep luring that smiling golden boy out from the depths of his flesh and never let him fade away again. But another, more vicious, scorned part of me wanted to see him burn up in the heat of the sun.

I clutched his arms, forcing them apart and getting out of bed as he grunted something incoherent, rolling face down into my spot.

"You broke a rule, douchebag." I planted my hands on my hips and he groaned into my pillow. I bent down, shoving his side and forcing him to roll onto his back in the centre of the bed.

He cracked his eyes open, smirking at me through a haze of sleepiness and amusement. My heart thrashed at the sight of him spread out like that, looking so temptingly delicious that the most depraved part of me wanted to crawl back into bed, knot my fingers in that unruly dark hair and wake him up fully. But he'd already broken a rule. And I didn't need any more excuse than that to execute my first punishment. So I stuffed my wild libido down into a box and padlocked her up tight.

“Well, what are you gonna do about it?” he growled, his deep tone sending tremors down to my toes. He slung an arm over his eyes, clearly intending to go back to sleep, but fuck that.

I headed out of the room in the black nightdress Blake had chosen for me to wear last night. And by chosen, I mean he fished out the first thing he found in Saint’s closet and tossed it at me.

I strode into the kitchenette, the eerie rise and lull of Saint’s music filling The Temple.

The crypt door was ajar and the sound of Saint cursing and grunting carried to me from beyond it. Last night, I’d made a mental note of each and every one of the Night Keepers’ crimes against me and I intended on serving them justice equally whenever they broke any of my rules. So I knew exactly how Blake was going to be punished this morning.

I grabbed a large, plastic jug from a cupboard then opened the freezer, taking out a bag of ice and pouring the whole lot into it. Then I tossed the bag in the trash with a vicious smile on my face as I kicked the freezer door closed and headed back to Blake’s room.

Let’s see how he likes it...

Adrenaline sang in my veins as I entered, finding him in the same position I’d left him in, his chest slowly rising and falling as if he’d fallen back asleep.

Oh poor sleepy baby, what a pity I’m going to ruin your morning before it’s even begun.

I held the jug in one hand as I crawled onto the bed, moving carefully over him before straddling his hips and pressing my weight down. His hand slid onto my bare leg and heat burned between my thighs as he grew rock hard beneath me.

Gah, why does he always get me so hot? It was impossible not to be turned on when I remembered how good we’d been together. Especially when I felt

him swelling against my panties, reminding me just how big he was. I needed to keep my libido locked down because the Night Keepers were my own brand of heroin. Addictive and so terribly damn bad for me, I was going to end up permanently damaged by the time this was all done.

Blake was still freaking asleep with his arm slung over his eyes, but his fingers slid beneath the hem of my nightdress as he murmured something about how soft my skin was.

I trailed my palm down the hard muscles of his chest in a slow descent and felt him beginning to stir more as I reached his underwear. I sat back on his thighs, tugging his waistband wide to give me room then tipped the entire jug of ice into his boxers.

“Motherfucker!” he roared, shooting upright and I slammed a hand to his shoulder to stop him from accidentally headbutting me, a laugh tumbling from the depths of my body.

I dropped the jug and released his waistband so it snapped back against his skin, his boxers bulging with ice cubes.

“Tatum!” he roared in my face, grabbing hold of my hips about to throw me off as his dark green eyes flared with fury.

“Take your punishment,” I demanded, my heartbeat thumping in my ears with excitement. “You break the rules, then you pay for it, Bowman. Just like I have to.”

His eyes widened as his hand landed on the ice packing out his underwear between us and his face pinched in pain.

“You iced my balls,” he rasped. “And my fucking morning glory.”

“Not so glorious now, I bet,” I purred, drinking in my victory and gripping his waistband in the hopes of getting a look at his chilled junk for more laughs.

He slapped my hand away with a snarl and I smiled darkly at him, leaning

in close to his face. “Lie down and stay here until it melts.”

His jaw pulsed with anger and his lips tightened into a thin line. “You’re asking for trouble, Cinders,” he said in a deadly tone, his body rigid with tension like he was about to refuse me.

I pushed his shoulders and he resisted a second longer before falling down beneath me, giving in with a growl of anger. I smirked as I enjoyed the view for a moment then swung my leg over him, slipping out of bed and heading into the bathroom. “You’d better be here when I come back.”

I glanced over my shoulder, finding him watching me with narrowed eyes and a heaving chest as he fought to keep his hands away from his crotch, his fists balled up at his sides. It gave me a thrill to see him complying, suffering, and another laugh escaped me as I nudged the door shut and headed to the shower.

When I returned to the room wrapped in a towel, he was lying in a wet patch that spread around him on the mattress. He was pissed as hell. Legit fuming. But he hadn’t moved. He’d taken his punishment like a good boy and that made me feel all kinds of things. Mostly excited at knowing they really were going to abide by my rules, punishments and all. And that was just the *ice-ing* on this deliciously vengeful cake.

“Happy now?” he hissed.

“Ecstatic.” I beamed and he got out of bed, stalking towards me like a raging tiger and my back hit the wall in alarm. Blake was the most unpredictable of the Night Keepers. And since he’d dragged me into the woods, I couldn’t forget just how far he was willing to go. His hate for me was almost understandable. But it made him even more dangerous than Saint. *How close had he really come to pulling that trigger?*

He pressed a hand to the bricks above my head, leaning down with his upper lip peeling back. “Be afraid, Cinderella, be very fucking afraid.”

A shiver ran through me as he leaned in close to my face and my toes curled against the carpet, my breathing becoming ragged.

“I’m not afraid of you,” I whispered, though that wasn’t entirely true. When I recalled standing in that grave beneath him, I knew how capable he was of terrifying me. And I wasn’t going to underestimate him ever again.

“You are, actually,” his voice dropped an octave and I clamped my thighs together as his dominating aura wrapped around me.

It was obvious why Blake Bowman was a king at this school. It wasn’t even his unjustly beautiful looks, his steel clad muscles or the way his tongue could make a girl come apart with words alone. It was an innate quality. Something I couldn’t put my finger on exactly, yet could feel in every pulsing inch of my flesh. He was a god capable of creation or destruction, it just depended what he turned his mind to.

He pushed away from me, marching into the bathroom and slamming the door so hard that the whole Temple rattled and my heart rattled along with it.

I knew I was playing a deadly game, but I’d come out of this one victorious. I’d poked a beast. And I planned on poking a few more.

Don’t blink, Tatum.

While he was showering, I grabbed my satchel from the side of the bed and hooked out my school diary, flipping it open on the blank back page. I grabbed a pen and pulled the cap off with my teeth, my heart pounding out a powerful beat as I wrote the list of the Night Keepers’ crimes against me which had been swirling in my head for the last day.

The sex tape

The fish stew

The Unspeakables

The storm

The font
The bathtub
The ice
The gun
The clothes
The humiliation
The shower
The letters
THE VOW

I'd paid Blake back for the ice he'd shoved into my panties so I took my pen and struck out that crime. But I had a long way to go in getting revenge for all of their cruelty. I would though. I swore it on everything I was. The Night Keepers were going to suffer.

I walked back from the library in a leggings and white sweater combo Saint had picked out for me, glad of the two hours I'd bargained for in the evenings for my studies. It gave me time to breathe, to think. And not just that, but I could hang out with other people. The Unspeakables happened to study there most evenings too so I'd spent the past couple of nights sitting with them and trying to get them to open up. It was difficult when they were scared shitless all the time. But if I could just break down their defences and build up their confidence, I'd have a mini army at my back.

With each step I took along the dark and winding path through the trees towards The Temple, I felt strangely drawn back to it. I'd taken the longer route around the west side of the lake to buy myself more time alone, but I

kind of wished I hadn't now. There was a thick atmosphere in the air tonight, the clouds eerily still in the sky and the moon gazing down at me like it was waiting for something to happen.

A drumming started up somewhere far behind me on campus and my heart jolted at the noise. It sounded like a war beat, the heavy thumping raising the hairs on the back of my neck. A cheer called up in the distance far away and I guessed there was a party breaking out on campus somewhere. One which I doubted followed any social distancing rules...

I made it back to The Temple as a breeze picked up, chilling me through and I wished I'd brought a jacket. I pushed the door open and gasped as hands seized me, pulling me inside, my heart lurching in fear. Kyan had hold of me, his chest bare and marked with red and white handprints and symbols, a long, black cloak hanging around his shoulders. His hair was loose and hung in messy tresses down to his shoulders, giving him a wild look that made my legs feel unsteady.

I tried to pull away, my heart thrashing at the memory of him wearing this very same thing the night they'd carried me down to the beach and bound me to them.

"Let go," I demanded, my voice thankfully not betraying my unease as one of Saint's dramatic orchestral songs hit a crescendo around us.

"Don't be scared, baby," Kyan purred, reeling me closer rather than obeying my command. "Tonight's a special night."

"What do you-" I started, but my words fell dead on my tongue as he stepped aside and I found Saint and Blake standing either side of Monroe in their Night Keeper regalia, the two of them painted up just like Kyan was. Monroe's eyes were dark and his mouth was fixed into a harsh line. His chest was bare above his jeans and my heart pounded as my gaze raked over the beautiful tattoos on his chest, pausing on the hunting tigress.

Kyan pressed a hand to my back, pushing me toward him and I spotted two trays of red and white paint at his feet. “Mark him as ours, baby,” he murmured in my ear. “Seems only right that our queen should make a new king.”

My throat thickened as Monroe met my gaze, his eyes searing into me as he silently asked me to go along with this. It was what I wanted anyway. Having him amongst us was the best way possible to target the Night Keepers. He’d be a sheep in wolf’s clothing. But why did it suddenly feel like doing this was akin to offering up a piece of his soul?

The Night Keeper legend that the three of them embodied was just a story. And yet...I could feel the weight of it in the air, sense a prickling in my skin that had nothing to do with old legends. It was real and tangible and I could practically see Monroe’s decision to join them hanging over him like the sword of Damocles.

As I reached him and the Night Keepers circled around us, I questioned Monroe with my eyes and he inclined his head just enough to let me know that this was happening. There was no backing out. He was going to become a Night Keeper. And I would be bound to him as I was to the others.

Breathe, Tatum, just freaking breathe.

Kyan took my bag from me and tossed it on the couch before directing me forward. “Wet your hands in the paint.”

I released a ragged breath, relief winding around my heart as my body caught up with the knowledge that they weren’t about to do something terrible to me. I was on high alert around them at all times since the coffin incident; it was like living with a shot of adrenaline forever circling in my veins.

I knelt down and rolled up my sleeves, pressing my hands into the paint and gazing up at Monroe as Saint’s music built in my ears to an ever

quickenning beat.

I reached up, pressing my right hand to the warmth of Monroe's stomach and his muscles flexed beneath my palm as my hand print was branded on him in white. Then I stood, pressing my left hand in red to the tigress over his chest. The heat of his flesh sent a rampant energy crashing through me and I tasted my lips as I glanced up at him, finding him watching me like he couldn't look away. I couldn't either.

"Good girl. Here..." Saint moved forward, taking hold of my wrist in a surprisingly gentle grip and guiding my finger to paint strange symbols onto Monroe's body. When he was done, I painted Monroe's cheeks, half in red, half in white and my gaze hooked on his mouth, an ache of temptation capturing me whole. He didn't seem like a teacher in that moment, he felt far more powerful. Like an ascending deity.

"Your turn, Cinders," Blake caught my waist, tugging me away from Monroe who still hadn't voiced a word about all of this.

"Go shower," Saint commanded, pointing me towards his room upstairs and Blake nudged me in that direction.

"Okay." I turned to walk away when Saint's hand clamped around my wrist, tugging me back to face him.

"Okay what?" he growled, danger flickering in his eyes.

I felt Monroe's gaze on me and hated that he was watching me be rebuked by this asshole. He'd never witnessed my abuse up close, even though he'd heard all about it.

I knew what Saint wanted, but I also refused to make life easy on him these days. "Okay, Lord Fuckwit?" I guessed innocently, my voice as sweet as sugar and the others started laughing. Saint did not. His eyes were swirling like a hurricane and my heart thundered in my ears as I waited for him to chew me out.

“Do you think your filthy tongue is amusing, Plague?” Saint asked icily and everyone’s laughter fell dead.

“It was just a joke, wasn’t it Tatum?” Monroe offered, but I didn’t acknowledge him, my eyes glued to Saint in a dare. It wasn’t a joke. It was a threat to his little regime. And I was going to face his wrath and deny him the dose of fear he wanted from me.

“Answer my question,” Saint snapped, his voice cutting the air to ribbons.

“Yes, I think my filthy tongue is amusing,” I deadpanned, my eyes burning from how few times I’d blinked in the past minute.

Saint strode forward suddenly, his grip on my arm iron clad as he tugged me toward the stairs.

“Saint,” Monroe called. “We need to finish getting ready.”

I knew he was doing it for me, but if he really thought Saint would stop once he had an idea in his head, he was fast going to learn he was wrong.

I kept pace with Saint as he jogged up the stairs, refusing to be dragged the whole way and lifting my chin as if I wasn’t in the least bit bothered by where this was leading. But inside, everything twisted and knotted, making me sick with worry. I stole a glance at the others down below as Blake pinned a cloak around Monroe’s neck. He looked kingly...dark...like one of them. And I wasn’t sure I liked it.

Saint led me into his bathroom, slamming the door shut and releasing me at last. He pointed to the shower. “In. Clothes on. Kneel down.”

I choked back the question in my throat - *what are you going to do to me??* - and walked confidently into the shower. I turned to face him, dropping to my knees and gazing evenly up at him as if I wasn’t rattled to my core.

He surveyed me like that for a long moment, looking like the king of darkness in his cloak and painted flesh. He stepped forward, leaning over me

to turn the shower on and I winced as freezing water washed over my head, chilling me in an instant.

He turned to the sink, opening the cupboard beneath it and taking out something I couldn't see as I started to shiver. He tossed a packet in the trash then turned to me with something concealed in his palm.

"Eyes shut, tongue out," he commanded and panic splintered across my spine.

Tongue out?!

I wanted to refuse, but knew it would get me nowhere. So I needed to front this out.

Face it like you'll make him face it when it's your time to punish him.

A wave of calm washed over me at that thought and I met his gaze with a cool determination. "One day, it's going to be you on your knees and me striking the whip," I told him, a dark smile pulling at my mouth.

He moved forward so I fell into his shadow and all the brightness of the room seemed to fade. "Oh I don't think so, Barbie. I was made to follow rules. So I'll break yours approximately the same time as a halo appears above my head and I receive my acceptance letter from heaven."

I glowered a challenge at that and he smiled his victory like he'd already won. I wasn't going to give up, but he was going to be nearly impossible to break. As soon as I found a crack though, I'd tear into it with tooth and claw and never let go. *I will defeat you Saint Memphis.*

Saint crouched before me but was somehow still taller, his chin cocked down to gaze into my eyes. "Obey me."

I hesitated for one endless second, my inner rebel not liking being told what to do. But I wasn't going to balk.

I closed my eyes and stuck my tongue out, fighting the urge to flinch as I sensed him moving even closer. He took a handful of my hair, yanking my

head back and the water cascaded over me, wetting my face and running down my cheeks in streams. Something hard and apple scented pressed to my tongue and I fought the urge to jerk away as Saint scrubbed the bar of soap over my mouth in firm strokes. *Gah!*

“Let’s see if you curse at me after your tongue has been washed clean, Plague,” Saint purred and I squeezed my eyes tighter as the water washed away the suds on my tongue only to be replaced by more and more as he continued to rub the soap up into a lather.

It tasted vile and I battled the urge to gag as he continued.

This was cruel and humiliating, just like everything else he did to me. It made me feel ill and I had to hold myself back from trying to scratch his eyes out for it.

“Spit,” he said at last, removing the soap from my tongue.

I did, wiping my tongue on the back of my arm, wincing as the bitter taste remained there to torment me.

Saint tossed the soap at my feet, moving to stand and casually wiping his hands off on a towel beside the sink. “Your outfit will be waiting for you on the bed when you’re done.”

With that, he swept from the room, shutting the door behind him and leaving me soaking wet and shivering beneath the icy flow. I immediately switched the tap to warm water, wondering when I’d ever get the scent of apple from my nose. Saint’s scent. He’d branded me again. That son of a bitch.

I stripped off and used my vanilla honey blossom shower gel to scrub away the lasting smell of him whilst warming myself up in the heated water.

That power-hoarding, soap-wielding, dickzilla. One day I’ll ram a bar of soap down his throat and see if it can clean his filthy, wicked innards.

I finally exited the shower, towel drying my hair and combing my fingers

through it so it would dry in soft waves.

My heart stammered as I thought over what the hell was going to happen tonight. I wanted Monroe to join them, so why did it terrify me too?

It's just some old myth, it doesn't mean anything.

But it did in one sense. The whole school respected it. If Monroe had held power before, it was nothing to what he'd have after tonight.

By the time I exited the bathroom with a towel wrapped around me, my heart was pounding out a merciless beat. My gaze fell on a black bikini laid out perfectly on the bed with white feathers hanging from the hips of the bottoms and the base of the top. I took a moment to mentally prepare myself for this night. I had to play the part of the Night Bound. I had to ensure they never suspected that Monroe and I had a plan, a pact to bring them to their knees. So I had to behave from now on.

I dropped my towel, letting it pool at my feet as I grabbed the bottoms and pulled them on before tying the bikini top into place. The feathers tickled my flesh and goosebumps rushed across my arms as the cool air kissed my skin. It wasn't exactly a great time of year to wear a bikini, but I didn't want to rock the Saint boat again tonight by refusing. I'd be the obedient little servant and play their games, all while secretly slipping Monroe under their defences to join me in battle.

Once I'd done my makeup, I lifted my chin, tossing my long hair over my shoulders as I walked downstairs and concealed the nerves warring through my body as I descended.

The four of them stood waiting for me in the lounge, their hands wet with paint. On top of their heads were simple crowns, dark enough that they looked like iron, the metal twisted and imperfect like they'd been shaped by strength alone. Their eyes ate into my flesh hungrily, even Monroe looked like a starving creature amongst them as they closed in on me.

“Hold your hair up, Barbie,” Saint instructed and I did as he asked, my breathing growing shallow as they formed a ring around me. Standing between them felt intoxicating, their scents combining until their purely deadly concoction nearly overwhelmed me.

Monroe stood in front of me, his chest heaving, his throat moving up and down as he swallowed. There was a question in his eyes that said he needed to know what Saint had done to me, but the rest of his features were a mask that made him look as frightening as the rest of them. If I hadn't known he was my teacher, I would have assumed he'd been one of them for a long time. And that was kind of terrifying.

As one, they laid their hands on my body, branding me with their palms and I couldn't help my reaction as I inhaled sharply at the kiss of the cold paint, a chill running down my spine like a shard of ice.

Kyan gripped my right arm, curling his fingers around the crook of my elbow and leaving a red print there. Saint pressed his hands to my shoulder blades, sending a shiver racing through me. His flesh against mine after what he'd done to me felt like something I should reject with all my soul, but my body had other ideas, my back arching into him instinctively. Goddammit, why did I crave my tormentors? What sick part of me was responsible for that? And why couldn't I smother her with a pillow until she stopped kicking?

My lips parted as Blake dropped down to his knees, pressing his palm against my left thigh while Monroe followed suit, kneeling and wrapping his hand around my right calf. My breaths were coming too heavily and I couldn't conceal it in the skimpy bikini, my chest heaving as they worked around me, Saint's music assaulting my ears.

They finally finished and Kyan slapped a hand to my ass with a smirk. “All done.”

I shoved his chest in retaliation and he grinned devilishly like he enjoyed that.

“Now for the finishing touches,” Saint purred from behind me and my skin tingled as he wrapped a silken cloak over my shoulders and Blake moved forward with a silver pin in the shape of an arrow, clasping it in place at my throat. Kyan caught my eye as he spun a silver crown around his finger, the item far more delicate than theirs, encrusted with a line of gemstones that surely couldn’t be diamonds?

Kyan took the spot in front of me, reaching up to place it on my head and a bolt of adrenaline ran deep into my veins.

“No...too perfect,” he said with a frown, running his thumb over my lips and smearing my red lipstick. “Better.”

“For fuck’s sake, Kyan,” Saint growled, but he didn’t make a move to fix it. I imagined him sharing me with the others went entirely against his nature, but he somehow seemed to be managing it.

My jaw tightened and I gazed coolly at Kyan, ignoring the blazing heat travelling down into the pit of my belly as he drank me in. I was dressed up for them tonight, but for once they’d dressed me as a dark queen. And royalty bowed to no one. Not even each other. It made me feel quietly powerful, because when I was through with them, I’d be a true queen and they would be dethroned, cast at my feet and begging for mercy.

“Let’s go,” Blake growled, leading the way out.

Saint had a pair of strappy flat sandals waiting for me by the door and I tugged the cloak tighter around me as I put them on and the cold air swept in from outside.

“I’ll keep you warm, baby,” Kyan said, wrapping his arm around me. I didn’t even care to remove it, happy to take his warmth. It was the least he owed me.

Saint and Blake moved either side of Monroe ahead of us, flanking him possessively, their arms occasionally brushing his like they'd accepted him into the fold already.

The sound of the drums grew louder from the beach and as we drew closer, a huge bonfire caught my eye between the trees. The scent of smoke carried on the breeze and laughter danced in the air.

My heart thumped in time with the building beat of the drums as we veered off of the lamp-lit pathway down the track that led onto Sycamore Beach. The ground softened to sand beneath my feet and I could feel the blazing heat of the flames already, the huge fire roaring at the centre of the beach.

A cheer sounded that echoed right up to the sky and it took me a second to realise the entirety of the school were here, hollering for us. Though maybe it was stupid not to have realised it sooner. The Night Keepers were practically gods around here. And after they'd driven the looters out of the gates, I guessed it seemed like they really were deities. But they weren't the sweet, forgiving kind of all-powerful beings. They were wrathful, vengeful gods who demanded sacrifices in blood.

I spotted Mila amongst the crowd in a cute red dress, waving to me with a slight look of concern on her face as she took in my attire. I gave her a smile which told her I was okay and she offered me one in return that said *fuck those pricks*. Danny caught her attention from behind, wrapping his arms around her and placing a kiss on her cheek. She leaned back into him with a laugh as he whispered in her ear and my heart tugged as I wondered what it would be like to have a normal relationship like that. With a normal boy. Probably very different to being bound to three assholes and my headmaster in what could only be described as a five-way *relationshit*. Although, if I was being completely honest, I didn't want to be treated like a princess. I wanted

to be treated like a fearsome queen from a barbaric land who enjoyed being roughed up a bit. Like, just a bit.

Beyond Mila, the football team were crowing and pumping their fists. Toby Rosner - formerly Punch – was amongst them, grinning from ear to ear as he was accepted back into the fold, though a bunch of the footballers were clearly still ignoring him. It made me kind of sad for him. He'd been through enough. But I guessed at least he wasn't an outcast anymore.

Several of the Unspeakables rushed forward wearing black clothes which singled them out from the party, their foreheads marked with a white U. Squits and Freeloader hurried to plant drinks in our hands and I was surprised when I was given a dark and stormy, my favourite. I opened my mouth to thank them but Kyan yanked me closer to his side, glaring at them as they scurried away to the shadows at the back of the beach. *Asshole*.

My lungs constricted as I spotted Bait there wearing a faceless white mask. The Night Keepers had demanded he wear it at all times, not allowing him to speak with anyone after what he'd done by letting the looters into the school. Some of the footballers spotted him and Chad McCormack led a group of them over to him with Toby in their ranks. They lined up in front of Bait then turned to give him their backs, bending down and throwing sand at him between their legs. He yelped as they half buried him and my heart hardened at the sight. I couldn't find it in me to forgive him for what he'd done. People had caught the Hades Virus from the looters. Students we rubbed shoulders with every day were now in hospital because of him. They might die. How dare he endanger us all like that?

“Chug your drink,” Kyan dared and I glanced at him as he tossed his own Jack Daniels down his throat with a smirk.

The atmosphere was infectious and I needed the buzz to get through this night anyway so I swallowed my drink in a few gulps and Kyan snatched my

glass, tossing it into the sand with his own for the Unspeakables to pick up. I didn't like being waited on by my friends, but it wasn't like I had much of a choice. And raising a petition for the Unspeakables' rights wasn't exactly possible. Especially when they wouldn't even vouch for themselves.

"Time to shine, Cinders." Blake turned back and Saint rested a hand on Monroe's shoulder, glancing at us with a wicked glint in his eyes that made my heart jolt.

Blake moved to my other side and he and Kyan suddenly bent down, grabbing one of my legs each and launching me up into the air. I cried out in surprise as their shoulders locked together and they sat me between them, their hands remaining tight around my ankles. I braced myself on the backs of their necks as they walked forward and another wild cheer filled the air, making my toes curl with nerves.

Blake painted circles on my ankle bone with his finger and a carnal heat spread between my thighs. I shifted my hands and knotted them in their hair instead, pulling tight enough that I knew it would hurt. If they were going to carry me like royalty, then royalty I would be.

They followed Monroe and Saint over to the fire and the crowd parted to make a path for us, the students crying out in excitement and pumping their fists in the air. The drums stopped beating and someone started playing Monsters by Ruelle, my heart ticking as the music fell over me.

The Sacred Stone was illuminated in the glow of the fire on the verge of the water, the paintings on it seeming to move and ripple in the light. Though I knew it held no real power, seeing it again made my skin feel too tight. It was a solid reminder of the invisible chains which bound me to the Night Keepers. And I didn't want to look at it for too long.

The crowd quietened down as Freeloader rushed forward and planted an overturned apple crate in front of Saint. He stepped up onto it, ushering her

away before straightening his crown, his mouth twisting down at the corners. His cloak billowed around him in the breeze and my heart beat wildly at the sight of him, framed by the fire, looking like a creature of purest sin.

“Tonight, Nash Monroe will take the place of the fourth Night Keeper!” Saint called out and everyone started screaming and clapping. “It’s time to initiate your new king!”

Monroe glanced at me, his eyes glittering with darkness, determination and if I wasn’t mistaken....devotion. I didn’t know what I’d done to earn this secret guardian angel. But if he was my protector, I’d be his in return. We were entangled so deeply with the Night Keepers now, there was no going back. Either we’d fail and pay dearly, or we’d win and destroy these three beasts. It was clear we were both willing to offer up whatever price was necessary. But I wasn’t going to let him lose himself in the destruction of these monsters. When it came down to it, I was willing to bleed for our victory so he didn’t have to.



Because Saint was an overachiever and a perfectionist, he'd planned out the entire coronation ritual down to every fucking detail and he took the lead as he drew Monroe to stand before the Sacred Stone.

With a strike of his hand, the drums and the crowd fell deathly silent and the silence was only broken by the crackle of the bonfire and the lapping of the waves against the shore.

Tatum was still balanced on mine and Blake's shoulders, watching the show with her hands fisted in our hair and I didn't mind being beneath her like that one bit. There were eyes on all of us as the rest of the school looked on in reverent silence and I noticed more than a few jealous gazes landing on her from some of the girls in the crowd. And a few lust filled looks from guys too. I took note of who was salivating over our girl so I knew who to beat up later.

"The legend says that there were *four* Night Keepers," Saint called, as he reached into a pocket concealed in his cape and drew a human skull from it, holding it out for all to see.

There were more than a few gasps of shock and terror and that made the sadist in me perk up his little bastard ears hungrily.

I'd totally helped Saint pillage the crypts for that thing and he'd sanitised it especially for this. Assuming a skull could be sanitised. I mean, who fucking knew? A brain had definitely rotted away in there at some point, so I was willing to bet some of that lingered. But fuck it, I wasn't the one who was going to have to deal with that anyway.

"Myself, Kyan and Blake rose to our positions years ago," Saint went on. "But we ached for the final position in our circle to be filled. Even finding our Night Bound tribute wasn't enough to fill the void. But now, we've finally found someone worthy of our title. Who here thinks Nash Monroe stands as a god among men awaiting his ascension?"

The crowd roared their agreement, their gratitude for him defending them from the looters coupled with a healthy dose of booze and a splash of Saint's dramatics driving them into a frenzy. They knew Nash had what it took to be one of us. They could see in him that thing they all lacked. A demon, ready to fight and feast and fuck until his blackened soul had had enough. And if he was anything like me then that time would never come. The four of us were kindred spirits. And after tonight, we'd be bound together as brothers until death came to claim our tarnished souls.

While everyone was screaming, Saint moved to the lakeshore and dunked the skull into it, filling the top half with water before stalking towards Monroe and placing it in his hands.

"By the water of the lake which our kind have guarded for all of time!" Saint bellowed, pulling a knife from his pocket and pressing the tip of it to his finger until blood welled. "And by the blood of your brothers, you will be reborn as one of us." He held his finger over the skull full of water and let a drop of blood fall into it.

Saint used the knife to prick my finger then Blake's as the crowd held their breath and we added our blood to the water too.

Monroe eyed the concoction like it was poison and I smirked to myself, glad I didn't have to drink that bloody lake piss as Saint went on.

“Do you pledge yourself to the dark, Nash Monroe?” Saint demanded. “To a life ruled by night as you take up the mantel of Night Keeper and protect our people with the wrath of monsters?”

“I do,” Monroe snarled, his jaw set with determination.

“Then drink! And bind yourself to us for all of time. Even in death our souls will be linked and in life our brotherhood will never be broken!” Saint roared hungrily and I cheered along with him as everyone else took up the cry too.

My heart pounded as Nash lifted the skull above his head, refusing to balk as he tipped it up and water poured from the empty eye sockets and cascaded into his open mouth, running over his jaw and down his bare chest.

Tatum's grip in my hair tightened as she watched and as I looked up at her, I found her blue eyes blazing with excitement, making me wonder if she didn't mind having a new owner quite so much after all.

The crowd of students surrounding us on the beach went wild, whooping and cheering to the beat of the drums as they started up again to a deep and ominous rhythm.

They were chanting his name, our names, yelling out for the spirits of the night to bless us even though I was willing to bet they'd be more inclined to curse us. But whatever way, they were screaming our names like we were gods and I could admit that the pampered, privileged sonofabitch in me didn't mind that at all.

My attention was locked on the eyes of our newest brother and the hunger in his steely gaze made my heart pound with excitement. This was right. I felt it down to my bones. He'd been born to be one of us, destined to complete our circle. The darkness in him ached for it just as mine did, as Blake's and

Saint's did. And even as Tatum's did.

I held Tatum's foot in my left hand, supporting her so she didn't fall and I smirked as I reached up to clasp her knee with my other hand.

Tatum's grip in my hair tightened enough to send a shiver of pain along my scalp and I growled as she forced me to look up at her, a warning and a dare in her big blues.

I shifted my hand again so that I was clasping her thigh half way between her knee and hip, my fingers digging in almost enough to grant her that bite of pain which I yearned for so much.

Her eyes blazed and I could tell she was contemplating telling me off even though her body was begging for more and that was just where I wanted her. In fact, I fully intended to push her into begging before this night was through.

As if she could read my mind, Tatum yanked on my hair hard enough to tilt my head right back so that I was looking up at the crescent moon in the sky above. She leaned a little closer to me as she spoke and my gaze fell captive to her lips.

"That look in your eyes says you'll be earning yourself a punishment before tonight is through," she warned and my breath caught as her eyes flashed at that idea. She wanted it, yearned for it. Her own monster was salivating for vengeance just as keenly as mine always hungered for bloodshed. And I was struck with the desire to offer myself up for her to do her worst, a willing sacrifice for a hungry goddess.

"That's a promise, baby," I purred just as Monroe stepped away from the Sacred Stone and Saint beckoned me forward.

We approached them and Saint lifted his arms towards Tatum in offering. I could see his control slipping a little as he gave in to the excitement of this night. Just enough to let his demon show. Just enough to make him the kind

of unpredictable which often led to violence. My heart was pounding at the mere thought of it.

Tatum only hesitated a moment before releasing her grip on us and dropping into Saint's arms.

Her hands lingered on his shoulders as she balanced herself, but he only allowed his own hands to remain around her waist to set her on her feet before he withdrew.

I beckoned Monroe to follow me and led him closer to the fire as everyone started dancing to the heavy beat of the music that blasted over the lake.

There were two chairs set up on the sand right beside the enormous Sacred Stone which was painted with the ancient markings of our kind.

"Are you ready to make it official, brother?" I asked, wrapping my arm around Monroe's shoulders as a dark laugh escaped me.

There was a heavy kind of energy in the air tonight, like the whole world was on tenterhooks until this happened. Waiting for us to complete the legend, embody every aspect of the myth. And I had no doubt that once we'd done it, we would be truly unstoppable. Even once we left this place, this bond would keep the five of us together until death ripped us apart.

"This is fucking insane," Monroe muttered, looking around at the half naked bodies of all of the other students as they danced around the fire.

"Yeah. In the best possible way," I agreed, directing him to straddle one of the chairs with his back to me as I dropped into the other.

I reached down to the floor where my tattoo gun sat waiting in its case. I'd already set it up earlier so all I had to do was pull on the latex gloves and use the antibacterial swab to cleanse Monroe's neck where he was about to get his new ink.

Tatum lingered close, watching with interest as I set up and I beckoned her nearer as an idea came to me.

“Dance for us, baby,” I commanded, pointing to a spot before the fire which was right in Monroe’s line of sight. “Give our newest Night Keeper something to watch while I work.”

“Seriously?” she huffed, clearly unimpressed with being told what to do as usual.

“What’s the matter? Do you disapprove of your newest master?” I teased.

“I’m not exactly thrilled to have three assholes who boss me about and now I’ve got four,” she replied icily, giving me a death glare.

“Well get used to it, baby,” I said with a shrug. “Besides, I’m only asking you to dance for us, it’s not that much of a hardship. Don’t you wanna see if you can make him look at you the way the rest of us do?”

“What way is that?” Nash asked, his gaze locked on our girl.

“Like we’re all dying men in desperate need of a drink and she’s a cool, blue lagoon in the centre of a desert.”

“You’re so full of shit, Kyan,” Tatum huffed. “If that was how you felt about me, you wouldn’t be such fucking dickheads.” She folded her arms as if she meant to refuse me, but the smile she was trying to hide said she didn’t mind the idea of Monroe looking at her that way so much.

“Don’t make me go all asshole on you,” I begged. “Because you know I’ll have to punish you if you don’t follow my commands. Besides, I’m pretty sure a distraction like watching you dance in that particularly fuckable outfit will keep him still while I work. Won’t it Nash?” I slapped Monroe on the arm and he grunted as his gaze raked over Tatum in that eenie weeny bikini.

“She’s my student,” he muttered as Tatum scowled at me, her shoulders slumping in defeat.

I barked a laugh and directed her away to start dancing. “Whatever you wanna tell yourself, brother. There’s no rules against looking though.”

“I’m pretty sure there is,” Monroe replied, but his eyes remained glued to

her all the same.

Mila pushed her way through the crowd, greeting Tatum with a bottle of tequila and a hug as they began to dance together. I watched Tatum drinking from the neck of the bottle with desire shifting beneath my flesh like hungry ants.

“I bet that tequila would go down real smooth right about now,” I murmured and Monroe turned his head slightly to glance at me like he wasn’t sure if he should speak freely or not. But he was our brother now. He could tell me anything and I’d stand by him. Admitting Tatum Rivers was hot enough to set a forest fire blazing in his dick at all times really wouldn’t shock me. And the monster in me quite liked the idea of him vying for her attention just like the rest of us were. It felt right. Like she should possess each of us equally. Torment us equally. Drive us to insanity with desire in all the right ways.

“Tequila’s too bitter for her,” Monroe said slowly, like he was choosing his words with care. “She’s sweeter than that.”

“Naw,” I laughed darkly. “She’s really not. That girl might look sweet, but she’s got as much poison as sugar in her.”

“You think she’s lethal?” he asked.

“Yeah. In the best possible way. I’d die with a smile on my face if I overdosed on her.”

“I can think of worse ways to go,” Monroe agreed as she started dancing.

The tattoo gun hung limply in my hand as I watched her moving her body in time with Mila’s. Every flex and thrust of her hips to the powerful beat of the drums sent an earthquake of need pulsing through me until I was sure that my heartbeat had fallen in line with the bass that surrounded us.

She was captivating in the most deadly way and I knew I was falling prey to her. I just didn’t have a single urge to stop it from happening. And if I

ended up bleeding out at her feet in the end, I doubted I'd have any regrets about it. That girl was mine. And she'd claimed me right back. Perhaps she didn't fully grasp the gravity of those words yet, but I'd imprinted them on my soul.

The feeling of eyes on my skin made me turn and I found Deepthroat watching me from the centre of the group who had clustered close to watch me tattoo our latest Night Keeper.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" I snarled at her, her dark eyes widening as she managed to gain my attention. "Get the fuck away from me before I drown you in the lake like the mutt you are."

"Kyan," she breathed and I bared my teeth at her as she dared address me.

"If you don't fuck off, I'll pin you down and tattoo the word deepthroat to your fucking forehead," I threatened and I fully meant it too.

Her eyes blossomed with tears and she darted away before I could follow through on that threat.

"What the fuck was that about?" Nash asked.

"She's a dead girl walking," I muttered. "She just doesn't realise it yet."

"I don't-"

A whoop of excitement rose above the sound of the music half a second before Saint leapt over the bonfire with Blake right on his heels. The crowd of students cheered and roared their names as the tips of their cloaks caught alight and they ran through the packed bodies, laughing their asses off as they raced towards the lake to douse the flames.

Someone started up a game of dares and more and more people joined the throng of dancers as the party really got underway.

Nash looked like he still wanted to ask me about that fucking whore, Deepthroat, but I ignored his probing look. I'd give him the story later, I wouldn't lie to my brother, but I didn't want to ruin tonight by thinking about

her for a single second.

I switched on my tattoo gun and Monroe sat still obligingly as I pressed the needle to his skin and a sigh escaped me. There was something so pure in art. Especially when I could use the human body as my canvas. When I was focused on a creation, I could physically feel all of the pain, anger, rage, and violence in my blood fading away until I was at peace with my design. I always worked freehand, letting the art be as I created it, feeling out the natural strokes and curves of the piece rather than forcing it to bow to some predetermined pattern. I knew I was creating an arrow dressed with feathers but I liked the details to come naturally, each piece of it building on the last until I was completely satisfied with the final result.

The world around me faded away as I worked, my sole desire fixed on creating Monroe's mark and making him one of us for all of time.

When I finally finished, I sighed, resting back in my chair as I dragged my eyes over my work, making sure I was completely satisfied with it before I finally announced it was done. For his arrow, I'd decided to hang three feathers from it, shading the tips so much they were almost black. The point of the arrowhead looked sharp enough to pierce his skin, deadly, lethal, just like us.

"It's beautiful," Tatum breathed, leaning over my shoulder to get a closer look so that her hair brushed against my skin. I almost flinched, wondering how long she'd been standing there watching me work and I turned to her with a wry smile.

"Do you want one, baby?" I asked, as I leaned down and took a dressing from the box at my feet, carefully covering Monroe's new ink for him.

"Would you like that?" she purred, the alcohol giving her voice a seductive edge which I liked a whole lot. "To mark me out as yours permanently?"

“You are ours permanently,” I pointed out as I turned towards her and yanked her into my lap.

She gasped as she was forced to steady herself on my chest but her eyes lit with mischief for a moment before she stomped it down.

“Are you going to command me to get a tattoo then?” she asked with an arched eyebrow which promised she’d kick and scream and fight to the death if I even attempted it.

“No, he’s fucking not,” Monroe growled as he got to his feet and turned to look down at us, offering me a glare which I guessed was meant to be threatening. But threats didn’t make much difference to me. I was more than willing to spill blood at the slightest provocation, so threatening to hurt me was actually more likely to make me do something than stop me. But in this instance, I had no reason to argue.

“Keep your panties on, Nash,” I said. “Tatum’s body is all hers. I won’t do a thing to it unless she asks me to.”

“Why do you say that like you seriously believe I’ll ask you to?” she asked, rolling her eyes at me as she shifted in my lap.

“I don’t think you’ll *ask* me to do things to your body, baby,” I said, reaching out to lay my hand over the painted handprint I’d left on her stomach earlier. “I think you’ll *beg*.”

She bit her lip as she looked down at me and I leaned forward so that there was next to nothing dividing our lips. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d given a girl a real kiss. And I definitely couldn’t remember the last time I’d been as tempted to as I was with Tatum Rivers.

“In your dreams,” she breathed, but the heat in her eyes gave a different answer.

“Every night, baby,” I agreed. “But if you want proof, I’m willing to bet I can have you begging for me before this night is done too.”

Monroe scoffed like I was bragging that I had platinum balls and couldn't back it up. But I didn't make bets I wasn't confident I could win and if I told him my balls were platinum, I'd be dipping them in molten metal just to make sure I was right about that.

"What's the matter, Nash? You wish that you could make a play for our girl too?" I teased him. "Maybe she'd let us share her."

"Don't be ridiculous," Monroe muttered.

"Why do you always make jokes like that?" Tatum hissed, smacking my shoulder to tell me off, but that really just encouraged me. "Like you think you can just have me at the drop of the hat and pass me between your psycho buddies when you know I'm not interested in a single one of you."

"Why do you always think I'm joking?" I growled, my grip on her tightening as she wriggled on my lap again. I swear she was trying to get me hard just so that I'd have to walk around this party with a rager for her. Little did she know, I'd happily give everyone a look at the huge swell in my pants in payment for her grinding against me.

Tatum's eyes widened as she realised I really did mean it and her gaze flicked to Nash again.

I leaned forward until my lips were brushing against her ear and ran my fingers down her spine as I spoke to her in a low voice. "Tell me you don't like the idea of having both of us worship your body at once."

She didn't reply, but the way her breaths came heavier made me think she wasn't as outraged by my suggestion as she was trying to make out.

Nash looked between the two of us before huffing out a breath and rolling his eyes. "I'm still your fucking teacher. Don't make comments like that about me again."

I chuckled darkly as he stalked away to find a drink and watched Tatum closely as she fought against a pout.

“You know, I’m sure I could get Blake to come play with us if you want-”

“I haven’t even ridden your dick yet, Kyan,” she scoffed, her attention fixing on me again as I continued to paint lines up and down her spine with my fingertips. “So stop trying to convince me to take two at once.” A big ass smile filled my lips and she frowned as she took it in. “What?”

“You said *yet*,” I teased. “Which means you’re fully hoping that I’ll fuck you until you can’t think straight one of these days.”

“No I didn’t,” she snapped. “And I can assure you, I’m not planning on any such thing. I wouldn’t screw you if my life depended on it. You’re a monster through and through-”

“Yeah,” I agreed in a rough voice, my grip on her hips tightening. “But I’m *your* monster. You said it yourself. And I happen to have no objections to that. So if you want to use me to bring your body to ruin then I’m sure I could be convinced.”

“I thought you didn’t fuck rich girls?” she asked frostily and a chuckle rumbled through my chest as I was certain I detected a hint of bitterness in her tone.

“Naw. Rich girl pussy is too sweet to handle all of me,” I agreed like a cocky asshole and the way her eyes lit at the challenge had my dick straining against my fly. She wanted to prove me wrong and she hated that she wanted it. Our girl might just have been as dirty and depraved as the rest of us and something about the idea of that got me going like nothing else I’d ever known. “But I wouldn’t mind having a taste of all that sweetness,” I added.

“A taste?” she asked with a frown.

I caught her hand in my grasp, placing two of her fingers over my mouth before driving my tongue straight through the centre of them with one firm stroke.

She snatched her hand out of my grip and slapped me hard enough to

make my face wheel sideways before wrapping a hand around my throat and snarling as she glared down at me.

“Don’t forget my rules, Kyan,” she hissed, her eyes flaring with rage as she tightened her grip just a little.

A growl which was all sex escaped my lips as I looked up at her and she shifted in my lap, her crotch grinding against mine like she just couldn’t help herself despite her fury. My dick was so hard beneath her that there was no way she was missing it and the way she bit down on her bottom lip as she tightened her grip on my throat made me think she was just as hot for this as I was.

“You wanna punish me, baby?” I breathed, enjoying the pinch of her fingernails as they dug into my neck. “You wanna pin me beneath you and make me face the wrath of my queen?”

“Yes,” she panted, her other hand pressing down on my chest like she wanted to feel my heart pounding beneath her palm and feel the effect she had on me first hand.

“Tell me,” I begged.

“I want you bloody and broken at my feet,” she hissed. “I want you to bend to my will, take the punishment for the things you’ve done to me and beg for me to stop as I tear your heart in two. And then I want to refuse you and laugh while I watch you break over and over again until there’s nothing left.”

That shit is dark. And so fucking hot.

My heart was racing now and I was pretty sure that if she ground up against my dick one more time then I was going to explode right inside my pants. The way she was looking at me was so full of hate, fury and passion that I wanted to drown in it for the rest of time. I wanted to worship her as she destroyed me and call out her name as she cast me to ruin. I deserved all

the ire she aimed my way and far more besides. I'd been a bad man held to no standard and punished by no one for a hell of a long time. And if she wanted to take on the job of making me pay for my crimes then so be it. I'd gladly suffer beneath this vengeful goddess.

"That sounds like heaven to me," I breathed, wrapping my hand over hers where she gripped my throat and encouraging her to squeeze even harder until her nails cut into my flesh and I struggled to draw breath.

For a moment her eyes lit with a brighter fire, her hips shifting against me in a way that made me ache. But then she frowned, snatching her hand away and making me drop mine.

"There's no point in me hurting you if you're enjoying it," she snarled.

I sat forward, my lips almost touching hers as her breath caught in her throat. "There is if you're enjoying it too."

We looked into each other's eyes for a long moment, so close to kissing that only a breath separated our lips and I was more tempted to close that distance between us than I'd been with any girl I'd ever known.

"What happened to you?" she whispered. "What happened to make you this way?"

I drew back like she'd slapped me again, memories pouring in unbidden which I refused to acknowledge in any way. The things I'd grown up surrounded by. The things I'd been forced to do last summer... She had no right to go rooting about beneath my skin like that. No right to smash down my walls and make me bear my soul to her. I pursed my lips in a clear refusal to answer, fighting off the desire to see her punished for breaking down my barriers as if they were made of nothing but smoke. But I wasn't going to let her know how close she'd just gotten to me either.

I stood up suddenly, gripping her ass and lifting her in my arms as I moved to the middle of the writhing bodies who were dancing around the

fire.

“What are you doing?” she demanded as I placed her on her feet, waving a hand at Punch to get me a drink before remembering he wasn’t an Unspeakable anymore.

“You set me a challenge, baby,” I reminded her, banishing all of my dark thoughts with the full intention of drowning them in whiskey and the feel of her body against mine. “And if I want you begging for me by the end of the night, I need to start grafting.”

“Fat chance of that, douchebag,” she sniped, but I was more than up for the challenge she presented. Tonight, Tatum Rivers was dressed up like a dark queen, a goddess, a demon demanding worship and I planned on doing just that. I wasn’t going to let her escape my clutches until her body bowed to mine and she was screaming my name.

“Dance with me, baby. That’s an order,” I purred.

I caught her hand and twirled her beneath my arm, making her cape whirl out around her as she laughed in surprise before she could help it. I stopped spinning her and yanked her back to my front as I started moving to the music, guiding her body to stay with mine as our hips locked together and she ground her ass back against my dick as she gave in.

Raise Hell by Dorothy blasted out of the speakers and I ran my mouth down the side of her neck as she reached over her shoulder and gripped the back of my head to pull me closer. I was hard as stone as she rubbed her ass against me and I knew she’d decided to play a game of her own, wanting me to be the one to beg instead, probably planning to turn me away at the end of the party with my balls aching. But that little black bikini was thin enough for me to see her hardened nipples pressing through it and the rise and fall of her breaths as she panted with more and more need the longer we danced. We might have both been playing a game, but it was clear that nothing between

our flesh was faked.

Blake appeared among the bodies, his heated gaze lighting as he spotted us together and I jerked my chin at him to beckon him closer.

He moved in front of us and I pressed forward until Tatum was caged between our bodies, one hand still fisted in my hair over her shoulder while she rested the other on Blake's chest like she meant to push him away while I drew him in. And though her fingers curled against his skin so that she was digging her nails into his flesh, she made no real attempt to push him back.

"See, baby?" I murmured as we pressed even closer together and Blake's hands wound around her narrow waist as he ground against her too. "You can handle two of us."

"You're deluded," she breathed, but it sounded like she liked that idea despite her best efforts to hide it. "Fucking crazy if you seriously think I'd want the two of you after everything."

"All the best people are at least a little crazy," I replied, ignoring the rest because I would have bet my grandmother's soul that she was as wet for us as I was hard for her right now. Although as my grandmother was a fucking dick who most definitely resided in hell, I guessed that didn't count for much.

Punch appeared with a bottle of Jack Daniels for me even though he didn't have to anymore and I smirked at him in thanks as I accepted it.

"I forgot," I explained to him but he waved off my words with a smile, seeming happy enough to be allowed to party without worrying about taking offence at fetching me a drink.

"Where's mine?" Blake asked irritably, looking around for an Unspeakable.

"Here," I pressed my bottle to his lips while keeping Tatum crushed between us as we continued to move to the music. Watch Me by The Phantoms was playing now and we ground together to the heavy beat.

She watched him swallow again and again with her own tongue sweeping out to wet her lips. I moved the bottle to her mouth next and she leaned back against my chest, looking up at me as she drank. When she'd had enough, I lifted the bottle to my own lips and finished the rest.

“See, baby? Things are better when you share them,” I purred, tossing the bottle to Bait as he walked by. It thumped into his chest hard enough to bruise and his eyes flashed with rage for a moment within that white mask before he scooped the bottle up out of the sand and scurried away. If he didn't watch himself, I'd be beating that defiant look out of his eyes by the end of the night. Lucky for him, the girl in my arms was more tempting right now.

“Are you ever going to drop this sordid fantasy?” Tatum asked breathlessly, aiming for a pissed off tone and landing on a seductive one instead.

“We could head back to The Temple and try it out for real. If you don't like it then I'll drop the idea,” I said and Blake laughed. He wasn't pushing for it, but it didn't seem like he was against it either.

“Not gonna happen,” she muttered.

“Your loss, baby.”

The music abruptly cut off and Saint climbed back up onto his apple crate with a savage smile in place on his lips which I knew spelled trouble.

I turned Tatum to face him and Blake moved to stand beside us as we waited to see what new game was afoot. I kept her back pressed to my front with a possessive arm around her waist and she didn't even try and shove away from me, drawing a smirk to my lips. I wondered if she could feel herself caving to my desires or if she was still in denial over them.

“I've heard there's something of a toilet paper shortage!” Saint called in a strong voice which carried over the crackle of the bonfire and the lap of

waves against the shore. “And luckily, I managed to stock up, so I thought I’d be generous and let you all have the opportunity to earn a few rolls.”

“How?” I shouted, wondering what cruel and wonderful torture he’d concocted for the masses.

“Simple,” Saint said and that evil little asshole look in his eyes was more than enough to let me know it would be anything but. “All you have to do is survive the Wiping Trials!”

I burst out laughing as several other people did too, while even more of them frowned in confusion.

“What’s that supposed to be?” Pearl Devickers shouted out, her hungry gaze raking over the crate of toilet paper like it was a box of dildos and she was hornier than a cobbler with a foot fetish.

“I’ve created an obstacle course, all you have to do is complete it and you get a roll. But I warn you - it’s difficult as fuck.” Saint smiled like a serpent and Blake started bouncing on the tips of his toes like the idea of this challenge might just make him come in his pants. “So who thinks they’ve got what it takes to make it?”

“I’m gonna fucking smash this,” Blake announced and I rolled my eyes at him.

A cheer went up from the crowd and Saint beckoned them closer, drawing their attention to a sprawl of flaming branches he’d pulled from the fire and laid out across the pebbles as the first obstacle.

I strode through the crowd and drew Tatum to take up position by Saint’s side as a queue began to form.

“You’ve got to run across burning branches – bare foot of course,” Saint began. “Then a swim out to that buoy a few hundred meters into the lake. There’s a tree climb, a mud crawl, a wall vault and more hellish fuckery besides. The Unspeakables are waiting along the course to point you in the

right direction and it's basically one big circle of hell which will deliver you back here. The only catch is you've gotta make it back within half an hour if you wanna win a roll of TP. So who thinks they can do it?"

I laughed darkly. No doubt the course would be damn near impossible to finish in that time, but there was already a crowd of assholes surging forward to give it a try.

Unsurprisingly, Blake shoved his way through the crowd to take part too. We were drowning in fucking toilet paper back at The Temple, but he couldn't give up the opportunity to win at something. Especially when there were this many people to cheer him on. Hell, if he won, which I'd bet good money he would, he'd probably display that fucking roll of toilet paper alongside his trophies in pride of place.

To my amusement, Monroe stepped forward too, tossing his cape off as he gave Blake a challenging smirk. If he beat him, Blake would pout like a little bitch for at least a week. And I would really fucking enjoy that.

The crowd of students gathered around, cheering excitedly as Saint slipped between them, ready to start the race.

Tatum made a move to follow him but I caught her hand, tugging her back instead.

She turned to look up at me with a confused frown and I smirked at her as I backed up, pulling her along as we skirted the blazing bonfire and made it to the towering Sacred Stone.

"What are you doing?" she asked, glancing back over her shoulder just as Saint cried out for the race to begin.

"Everyone's busy over there," I explained, drawing her behind the stone and pressing her back against it as I leaned in so close that her sweet scent of vanilla honey blossom overwhelmed me for a moment. No one had ever touched this stone before her. No one even thought about trying it. The

legend that went with it was too terrifying. And something about that made the lump of rock hum with a power so potent that I could almost feel it in the air. It really was sacred. And I wanted to defile it real good.

“So you thought you’d just take the opportunity to get me alone?” She arched an eyebrow at me like I was kidding myself with my confidence, but I was pretty fucking sure I wasn’t.

“Yeah.”

“I’m leaving,” she snapped, shoving me so that she could get past, but I just caught her and pressed her back against the stone once more.

“Just give me a moment to explain,” I growled. “And I promise if you’re not interested in what I’ve got to say then you can punish me for wasting your time. Hit me again, choke me out – you can even wrap your thighs around my face to do it-”

“*Stop that!*” she insisted.

“I will if you hear me out.” I gave her the puppy dog eyes but in all honesty I doubted I could pull them off. Innocent was never going to sit right on my features.

“Fine,” she huffed.

“I just want you to understand what this bond between us means for me,” I said slowly, leaning in until I was surrounding her with the breadth of my body and she was pressing her palms to the stone behind her like she was fighting the urge to touch me. Or punch me. And I was cool with either option.

“And that is?”

“It means that you’re mine. That you belong to me and I’m responsible for you. I’ll come running if you’re in danger and kill a hundred assholes if they ever seek to hurt you. I’d paint myself in blood for you and carve my soul apart just to lay it at your feet. This crown you’re wearing means something

to me.”

“What?” she breathed as some of the tension eased from her limbs and her gaze focused on mine like she was hungry for my answer. Like she was desperate to understand why I’d wanted this bond between us when she so clearly hadn’t. And I was happy enough to give her my answer.

“It means that you’re my queen, my goddess, my idol. It means I want to be your sword, your fists, your darkness. I want to kneel at your feet and worship you. I want to take your body and fill it with pleasure so blinding you can’t even breathe through it. I want to make you call out my name in the dark and know that no matter how bad things get, I’ll always come for you.”

“Kyan...” She frowned at me like she didn’t know what to make of my declarations and I reached out with my free hand to grasp her waist, my thumb circling her hip bone and drawing a breathy sigh from her.

“Let me worship you, baby,” I growled, licking my bottom lip slowly and revelling in the way her eyes chased the movement.

“It’s against the rules,” she pointed out, but she wasn’t trying to escape anymore.

“Mmm...I need to ask you a few questions about your rules,” I said, shifting closer to her as my thumb continued to circle her hip bone and her back arched into the movement just a little, betraying her body’s reaction to me.

“I think they’re pretty clear,” Tatum breathed, her gaze slipping to my mouth for the briefest of moments and I smirked at her knowingly.

“Not really. The no kissing rule for example...” I said in a low voice, moving so close that my lips almost brushed hers as I spoke. “I understand that means I can’t have your lips. But what if I’m the only one doing the kissing?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, her chest rising and falling deeply

between us.

I leaned in but tilted my head so that my mouth landed on her jaw instead of her lips, my stubble grazing against her silky skin and making her shiver.

“Is this breaking the rules?” I breathed.

I skimmed my mouth along her jaw, finding the achingly soft patch of skin just beneath her ear and running my tongue over it. She arched her back, inhaling sharply as her breasts brushed my chest and I growled beneath my breath before biting down on that same place, drawing a moan of surprise and excitement from her.

“You didn’t answer me, baby,” I pushed.

“No,” she panted. “That doesn’t break the rules.”

“Mmm,” I groaned as I moved my mouth down her neck, tasting her skin as my cock swelled within my jeans with a desperate need for her.

She’d gone far beyond being my temptation and had become my obsession. I couldn’t even lie to myself about it anymore and I didn’t want to. She was sin embodied and I wanted to pledge my blackened soul to her and let her burn it if she wished. I didn’t really care. So long as I was close to her like this. So long as I could claim some piece of her as mine.

“And you said I can’t touch you while we’re sharing a bed, but I’m guessing I *can* touch you right now...” I traced my fingertips down her sides and she arched into me again, panting even more heavily as her hands landed on my biceps. But instead of pushing me off, she was pulling me closer.

“Yes,” she replied, giving up any pretence of trying to send me away.

“You can touch me now.”

The sound of the rest of the party goes cheering on the race was muted beyond the huge stone and the bonfire and it almost seemed like we were all alone out here. But not quite. There was still a good chance we could be caught, but the thought of that only turned me on more.

My hands made it to the strings securing her black bikini bottoms in place and I slowly threaded my fingers beneath them, sliding them over her hips and closer to the centre of her with each passing second.

She moaned hungrily as I moved my hands down slowly, delving beneath the material until I was almost touching her clit before pulling back out again.

“But no foreplay, right?” I murmured, leaning back so that I could look into her blue eyes in the moonlight.

“I...no,” she agreed, but she didn’t sound so sure and she was definitely panting.

“And what exactly counts as foreplay?” I asked, my fingers slipping back and forth just beneath the top edge of her bikini bottoms.

“You can’t touch me beneath my underwear,” she said, trying to sound firm, but the wanton look in her eyes was seriously undermining her point.

“And I can’t touch you beneath yours.”

“At least not unless we decide to break the rules,” I added, lifting my hand so that I could clasp the swell of her breast in my grip, rolling my thumb over her hardened nipple with the thin barrier of her bikini still in place. “I’ll do it if you beg,” I added. “And I’ll take whatever punishment you see fit tomorrow.”

“You’re the one who will be begging,” she growled, her hand shifting between us until she was gripping my dick through my jeans.

I grunted as she curled her fingers around the solid length of me and began to rub me through the rough material.

“*Christ*, your dick is as big as your ego. No wonder you think so much of yourself,” she muttered and I laughed before dipping my head and licking along the line of her bikini top, tasting her skin.

“I told you I could fuck you until you couldn’t think straight,” I purred. “And I don’t make promises I can’t keep.”

“I thought you didn’t screw girls from school?” she teased.

“I don’t. I’m not offering to fuck you, just telling you what would happen if I did.”

“Asshole,” she gritted out, squeezing my dick and making me grunt.

“I am,” I agreed. “That’s why you hate me. And why you want me. Because you’re just a fucked up little thing like me.”

I dropped to my knees before her and she gasped in surprise as she looked down at me.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Making you beg,” I replied cockily, lifting her foot from the ground and slipping her sandal off before pressing my lips to the delicate skin beneath her ankle bone.

I knew every pressure point on her body where the nerve endings delivered the most delicious sensations and the most brutal slices of pain and exactly how to manipulate them into delivering either.

“No chance,” she replied, but she was practically moaning already. I had her and she knew it, she just didn’t want to admit it yet.

The cheers of the crowd were growing more distant as they followed the race, but I could still hear plenty of students partying right on the other side of the Sacred Stone. A dark piece of me wanted them to catch us, wanted them to see what I could do to her, and the excitement that thrummed through my body at the idea of it was making the darkness in me stir with need.

Tatum moaned as my mouth made it to the underside of her knee and the moment that noise escaped her, I bit down hard enough to mark her skin with my teeth.

She hissed like a cat, trying to yank her leg away but I was already kissing the sting better, making her moan even louder as the mixture of pain and pleasure built her lust like I’d hoped it would.

“I wanna hear you curse my name, baby,” I purred, running my tongue up the inside of her thigh until the white feathers hanging from her bikini bottoms tickled my face.

She tried to shift forward, but I caught her other hip in my hand and pressed her back against the stone firmly.

“Kyan, I don’t think we should do this,” she breathed, but her hand landed on my head and she tugged me closer to her in contrast to her words. “You’ll only hurt me again tomorrow.”

“I’m never going to be a good man,” I said between kisses as I moved further up her thigh, the feathers parting over my head to let me through. “I hurt people and destroy pretty things, I’m not going to pretend that you wouldn’t be better off without me. But I’m too selfish to keep away from something I want. Especially when I hunger for it the way I do for you. You’ve already got me on my knees, so if you want to use me then use me. You can chew me up and spit me right back out if you want to. I just want a taste of heaven before I’m cast back into hell.” I pressed my mouth down on her clit over her bikini bottoms with a groan of longing and she moaned too.

“Okay,” she panted, her grip in my hair tightening as she kept me where I was.

“That’s doesn’t sound like begging to me,” I reminded her with a dark laugh.

“Fuck you,” she hissed and I ran my tongue over her bikini bottoms this time, pressing down hard and slowly dragging it all the way up the centre of her.

“C’mon, baby,” I growled, aching to taste her and claim her pleasure for myself.

“*Please*,” she ground out. “Please, Kyan, I’m begging you, just- ah!”

I yanked her bikini bottoms aside and pushed two fingers inside her with a

groan of need as I felt how perfectly wet and tight she was. She moaned as I pumped them in and out, her gaze locking with mine as fire burned in the blue depths of her eyes. Her grip on my hair tightened and she drove my face between her legs and I was more than willing to oblige her as I sucked her clit between my teeth, tugging hard enough to make her cry out. I lapped my tongue over the small hurt to soothe it, groaning at the perfect fucking taste of her as I pressed forward with my feast.

My dick was fit to fucking burst within my jeans and I reached down with my free hand to loosen my fly. Tatum gasped in surprise as my dick sprung free but she was so fucking hot that I was going to come in my pants if I didn't do something about it.

"You fucking savage," she groaned in a voice that said she definitely liked it as I worked my cock in my hand in time with the pumps of my fingers deep inside her.

Her grip in my hair was so tight that it hurt, but that only turned me on more as I devoured her and her hips rocked against my mouth with a desperate need.

A crunch sounded on the rocks behind us, but if someone was there I couldn't give a single shit about it.

I circled my tongue once more and she cried out as I brought her to ruin, the taste of her ecstasy lining my tongue as I continued to move my fingers inside her until she stopped convulsing around them.

"Stop," she commanded me as I pumped my dick faster, my own release just a few strokes away.

"Why?" I grunted, but she caught my arm and dragged me upright, pausing my movement as she spun me around so my back was to the Sacred Stone instead.

She unwrapped my fingers from my cock, looking me right in the eyes as

she teased the throbbing length of me in her hand and a groan escaped me as I tipped my head back against the Sacred Stone.

“Because I’m going to make you beg for me too,” she promised, dropping to her knees before me.

My breath grew ragged as I looked down at her and she slowly ran her tongue around the head of my dick, moaning lustily as she tasted the bead of moisture which had already appeared for her.

“Shit, baby, you’re so fucking hot,” I growled, watching as she licked me again, this time placing her tongue at the base of my shaft and dragging it all the way to the tip.

I groaned with need, my balls aching as she teased me, her blue eyes flashing with the thrill of the power she was holding over my head.

“Do you like that, baby?” she mocked, knowing full well she owned me in every fucking way in that moment. “Do you want to see if I can fit every last inch of you in my mouth?”

I grunted as her tongue circled the head again, that moan of delight leaving her lips as she tasted me and I fought the urge to beg, but we both knew I was going to sooner or later. This sweet torture wouldn’t end unless I did and she had me so worked up that I was likely to come all over her face any second anyway.

“You’re killing me,” I snarled.

“That doesn’t sound like begging to me,” she said, shifting back an inch and licking her lips seductively.

I opened my mouth to say they words, but they jammed in my throat. I couldn’t do it. I’d learned a long time ago that begging never got me anything good. So I tried a different tactic instead.

“Tatum,” I growled, my fingers twisting into her blonde hair. “You once told me you could suck cock so good that dirty boys like me forgot their own

names. Was that just bullshit or can you prove that claim?”

Her eyes narrowed at the challenge and I cursed as she wrapped her full lips around my cock, groaning as she drew me all the way in with a moan of pleasure that said she was enjoying it almost as much as I was.

Holy fuck, she wasn't lying.

Her tongue swirled around the head of my dick and I gritted my teeth to stop myself from coming right away, determined to enjoy this for as long as I could hold out.

She took me in again, her lips driving right down to the base as I lost my fucking mind over her.

My head tipped back and she gripped my ass, driving her fingernails in hard enough to draw blood as she took me in again and again, but I couldn't keep holding off.

I fisted my hands in her blonde hair as my dick swelled within her and I cursed as I exploded in her mouth and pleasure raced through my body far faster than I'd have liked.

I sagged back against the stone with my heart racing and my entire fucking body humming with the perfection of that release.

She drew back slowly, biting her swollen bottom lip as she swallowed and my heart pounded out of fucking rhythm.

“What's your name, baby?” she mocked.

“No fucking idea,” I muttered, a smirk tugging at the corner of my mouth and I hid it beneath my thumb.

A slow smile spread across her lips too but it wasn't hearts and roses, it was savage and triumphant. Like she knew full well she'd conquered me and we'd barely even begun.

“Fuck the party,” I panted as I fastened my fly and drew her to her feet. “You're sleeping in with me tonight, I say we go back and do that again. And

again. I don't wanna sleep until I've made you come so many times you lose count."

I wanted to kiss those swollen lips so bad that I almost gave in and did it. I satisfied the urge by burying my mouth against her neck instead and she shivered in my arms as she wrapped herself around me.

"That's a pretty big challenge," she said, moaning as I continued my work on her neck. "But I'm willing to let you try and fail."

I laughed darkly and swept her into my arms, gripping her ass as her thighs locked around my waist, not wanting her flesh to be an inch from mine.

"I won't fail, baby," I promised and she bit her lip again as I carried her back to The Temple. We probably had a few hours before the others would quit the party and come home too. But if she was still screaming my name by then, I didn't mind them listening in.



I woke with a heavy arm weighing down my chest, a muscular leg curled around mine and a solid dick pressing into my hip. *Kyan.*

A smile pulled at my mouth as I hung between sleep and waking, that blissful moment where I forgot that everything wasn't okay in the world. I chewed on my lip as I thought of last night and turned to look at Kyan as my mind sharpened. His dark features were lightened by sleep, his face too beautiful for words.

My gaze travelled from his sinful mouth which had tortured, teased and ravished me last night, to the hollow of his collar bone and the ink which coiled across it. My eyes kept dipping further down to the dusting of hair travelling beneath his boxers and the impressive bulge filling them out. I couldn't help but fantasise about what it would be like to give myself to him completely, to experience the full, unrestrained might of this twisted creature and watch him fall apart for me. But Kyan clung to his rules. He didn't screw girls on campus. Apparently he just fondled them, touched them until their

souls splintered and gave out orgasms with his hands and tongue like free candy.

A frown pulled at my brow as I realised I wasn't special to him. He'd probably been with countless girls on campus even if he hadn't stuck his dick in any of them. It made my insides twist as I pictured someone like Pearl Devickers being touched by him, pawing at his flesh. Flesh which I was currently wrapped in and wanted to own every inch of. The mere thought of it made jealousy rise in me like a rabid animal.

Shit, I knew I was getting in deep here. I wanted to sever the nerves that connected me to my emotions so that I could conduct this plan without things getting messy. But as Kyan ground himself into me and heat pooled between my thighs all over again, I knew I was in trouble. I never planned to end up back here and I was ashamed of myself for giving in to temptation at the first real test. But Kyan was a drug pure and simple. One taste led to a second, and a second led to a third. Pretty soon I'd be in rehab telling a circle of strangers, *Hi I'm Tatum Rivers and I'm addicted to cruel boys with black hearts.*

The longer I lay there, the more my veins began to burn as I thought of how foolish I'd been last night. Kyan wouldn't even kiss me. And any attention he did give my body was all on his terms. He'd even gotten me to say *please*.

At first, I'd thought I was in control, thinking if I just took what I needed then it wouldn't be so bad. But the more I tasted of him, the more I craved. I could have let him please me and held onto an inch of power over him, but no. I'd gone down on him too and hell, I couldn't even find it in myself to be mad at that. I'd ached to make Kyan fall apart in the way he'd done to me. But when I looked back on last night as a whole, it was clear he'd been the one pulling the strings. And not just the ones securing my bikini in place.

You idiot, Tatum.

What he withheld from me was a twisted kind of power play. Like I wasn't good enough for his lips on mine or the full extent of his desire. I was still just his toy. One he liked to take out of the box and mess with from time to time. And maybe that shouldn't have cut into me as deeply as it did. Kyan's reputation preceded him and I was a fool to think the side of him I saw was anything but a seductive lie. I had no doubt he devoured women like he devoured his breakfasts. Messily, ferociously and when he was done he left someone else to clean up the plate. If I didn't tread more carefully, I was going to end up with more than my pride bruised.

I tried to slide out from under his tree trunk of an arm with a growl of irritation, but in true Kyan fashion, he didn't budge an inch.

"I'll dig your eyes out with a spoon and shove them up your Aunt Consuela's ass," he murmured in his sleep.

"For god's sake Kyan." I turned, pinching his nipple and twisting hard, rage making me forget how dangerous it was to wake this sleeping wolf.

He growled like he liked it, grabbing hold of me and yanking me on top of him. I gasped in surprise and his eyes opened, a sleepy smirk on his face as he gripped my hips and ground me against his hard length.

I tried to ignore how good that felt and how my heart fluttered at the sight of this man beneath me. I wanted to conquer him like an empress invading a savage land. I wanted to tame the people, build roads and hospitals and provide food to the-

Jesus fucking Christ, Tatum, stop trying to civilise the country of Kyan.

"Morning, baby," he purred.

"Let go of me," I snarled, surprising myself with how sharp my voice came out. And that was when I realised the true extent of my fury. I was hot and bothered and sick of his shit. I deserved a man who gave me all of himself, not bits and pieces. Like I should be so grateful for the crumbs he

tossed me when I got hungry.

Why do I care anyway? It's not like I want him to be my boyfriend. That label could never be put on Kyan Roscoe. He was a manenemy. Simple as that.

His eyes widened in surprise. "Whasup?" he slurred.

"Let. Go," I growled and he did, frowning at me as I climbed out of bed and threw the door open. I was angry to the core, my dad's temper surfacing in me. It always took longer to raise its head in me, but here it was and it wanted a fight.

I stormed out of the room, my skin too warm in Kyan's large black and white Yamaha T-shirt which hung down to my knees, my mind on overdrive. I heard him following me and pursed my lips as he hounded me like a dog.

I whipped around, glaring at him to try and warn him to stay back. "Fuck you for being you," I tossed at him, unsure if that even made sense, but I was too blindingly mad to care.

"Woah, way to cut my heart out, baby," he laughed and that sound just got me even angrier.

I stalked away again, needing to put some distance between me and him. That was the whole problem in the first place. He was always too close. His scent was intoxicating, it shouldn't have been legal. But if he just kept his distance then I wouldn't have this problem.

I snatched a cushion off the couch, launching it at him the same moment Saint's music hit a powerful, choir-wailing crescendo. Kyan caught it out of the air, tossing it away with a smirk on his face as he continued to chase after me at a steady pace.

I grabbed up another cushion, throwing it, then another and another. He either caught or deflected them all and I snarled my fury as he tried to catch me and I leapt over the side of the couch to escape him. He was still laughing

and the more he did that, the more furious I became.

I went for something precious to him next, marching straight for the Xbox and grabbing a control before launching it at his head. He barely caught that one, but he still did.

“Goddammit!” I snapped, throwing another one before turning, about to wrench the whole console out from the cabinet under the TV.

His arms closed around me, his chin rubbing against my head. “Why are you so angry? Are you trying to get my dick hard again? Because it’s working.”

I shoved out of his arms with an honest-to-shit snarl and he let me go as I stalked across the room towards the kitchenette. “You’re just so...so-”

“Handsome?” he offered and I grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl on the kitchen counter, throwing it at him with a huff.

He caught it, taking a savage bite out of it so juices ran down his chin. “Irresistible?”

I grabbed up another apple, readying my aim.

The other Night Keepers may have infuriated me, but they didn’t get me raging like Kyan did. I ached to destroy Saint with a cold, vicious kind of hate, with Blake I wanted to make his heart bleed, but Kyan? Fucking Kyan. I wanted to claw his pretty face off and burn it in the fireplace!

“Good at making you come?”

I threw the apple with hopes of death by fruit, but he caught that one too, tossing it up and down in his hand then bouncing it off his elbow and catching it again. “Irritating, antagonising, *insufferable!*”

Deep down, I knew I wasn’t even angry at him. I was angry at myself. I was supposed to be luring Kyan in and capturing his heart according to mine and Monroe’s plan. At least a piece of it anyway. But that wasn’t what was happening, he was playing me like every girl he’d ever played. And the only

heart that was getting damaged was mine.

“Jeez baby, just suck my dick again already. You’re obviously gagging for it.”

Nope, scrap that, I was mad at him. Really fucking mad.

I was about to start screeching in ultrasonic tones when I spotted the list of rules on the fridge. Victory sailed through my veins like a summer breeze and I strode forward, slamming my finger against *no touching in bed* then pointed at *no foreplay*.

“You broke the rules,” I announced, my heart lifting as I realised I could punish him for this. Really punish him. Even if I had made the decision to be with him last night, that didn’t make my rules void. This was the perfect way to get even for all the shit he’d dragged me through and for the emotions he invoked in me which I was decidedly blaming him for even though I knew that was illogical. But right then, I didn’t care one bit. He’d done plenty to earn my wrath besides this. Now I just had the perfect excuse to unleash it.

“Psh.” He nudged me aside, tossing the apples down on the side and wrenching the fridge open. He took out the milk, twisting the cap off, proceeding to drink right from the bottle and my nose wrinkled. My dad always did that and I hated it.

“Other people drink that milk,” I hissed. “And you broke two rules, dipshit.”

“Did I hear you correctly?” Saint appeared from the gym, his chest gleaming and his muscles taut, taking me by surprise for a second as he approached.

I pointed out the rules Kyan had broken again, heat surfacing in my cheeks and Saint’s eyes turned to pitch.

“Fuck you, Kyan,” he snarled, snatching the milk from him and launching it into the sink so it splashed everywhere.

“She wanted it,” Kyan laughed, entirely unaffected by Saint’s outburst.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said at the same time Saint did and I shared a look with him where his eyes burned directly into my soul. *Holy shit, we actually agree on something for once.*

Kyan rolled his eyes, marching away and throwing himself down on the couch. “So punish me, baby. I don’t give a flying saucer of a fuck.”

I clenched my jaw, glaring at the back of his head and mentally going through the list of their crimes. My mind latched onto one in particular and I suddenly knew exactly what I was going to do to him.

I strode forward, intending to head to the bathroom, but Saint caught my arm, his grip cool even though he’d been working out for an hour and a half.

“You want him?” he asked, his voice lacking any emotion, but I could see a shadow behind his eyes that made my heart skip a beat and disarmed me all at once.

I nodded, not wanting Kyan to hear my admission - while unable to deny it despite my rage - and Saint’s grip tightened. He reeled me closer, inhaling the air around me and seeming to suck every drop of oxygen out of it. “*Just him?*”

My lips parted at the question and I scrambled to hold onto my plan. I needed to work at dismantling their little empire. And getting close to Saint was key to that. Was jealousy my way in?

“No,” I said loud enough for Kyan to hear and he cocked his head toward us.

I wanted that to be a lie, but it wasn’t. I felt things for the Night Keepers, all of them. They each awoke a different part of me. And I secretly wanted to explore them all. Or maybe not so secretly now.

Saint’s adam’s apple bobbed and his grip continued to tighten, like he didn’t want to let me walk away from him.

“Make him pay,” he said at last, releasing me and I strode in the direction of Kyan’s room with a breath rushing from my lungs.

My fingers traced the skin where Saint had held me, his touch lingering beneath my flesh.

I finally released my anger and found a dark and determined place to settle into within me, burying any attachment I felt to Kyan deep down inside me where I’d never seek for it again.

I needed to focus on the positives. I may have sacrificed more of myself than I’d planned to last night, but I’d gotten my wish to punish them all the same. Another rule broken by Kyan, meant another slice of vengeance pie for me. And I was ravenous.

I messaged Mila in the early hours of the evening and she came to meet me at the kitchens out the back of the Redwood Dining Hall. I was so glad that I was able to spend time with her again and as she jogged up to me under the shade of a huge pine tree, I rushed forward and hugged her. I knew we were supposed to be keeping six feet apart, but the school was locked down and everyone who remained here had passed the forty eight hour quarantine period, so I didn’t think we had to worry.

“Girl, you’d better explain that cryptic message. I feel like you’re up to something bad.” She stepped away, giving me a narrowed eye look of mock judgement as she whipped out her phone, flashing me the message I’d sent and I laughed.

<3 Tatum <3:

Get your ass to the kitchens, I need your help with something fishy.

I laughed conspiratorially, grabbing her hand and tugging her through the back door into the storage room that connected to the kitchens. “We’re gonna make fish stew. And by stew, I mean we’re gonna throw every fishy thing possible together with mayonnaise until we can’t breathe because screw actually cooking stew.”

“Errr yuck. Why?” she asked, her petite nose wrinkling as she started helping me gather cans of tuna, mackerel and sardines from one of the back shelves. It was pretty bare in here since the Night Keepers had taken most of the good food. Apparently fish was not to Saint’s taste though. *It wasn’t to mine when you threw it in my face either, King Asswipe.*

“Because, I’m going to give a Night Keeper a bath,” I said brightly, my heart shining with anticipation. How had I gone from being the angriest person alive earlier today to floating on a cloud and sparkling like a damn rainbow?

Mila ran around to block my way back as I moved to head into the kitchen with the stack of cans clutched to my chest. Her eyes were frantic with fear and I felt her concern right down to the pit of my stomach.

“Are you crazy?” she hissed like she was worried someone was listening. “They’ll kill you.”

“They won’t. We have a new arrangement.” I side-stepped her. “And don’t worry, I won’t tell them you helped me, I promise. Even if I did, I’ve bought you Night Keeper immunity anyway.”

“What?”

She trailed after me into the kitchen and I placed the cans down on a metal work surface beside a large, industrial sized sink. Mila planted down the few she’d carried in, looking to me for further explanation.

I turned to her, placing my hands on her shoulders. “Relax, Mila. I

wouldn't ask you to help me if there was even the slightest chance you'd get in trouble for this. The guys let me make a few rules of my own. And I can punish them any way I like when they break them."

"What rules?" she asked, her manicured brows pulling together. "And who broke one? What did they do to you?"

Her eyes gleamed and I dropped my arms to my sides, my heart squeezing at having a friend who cared for me like she did. I could see it blazing from the depths of her gaze. No girl had ever looked at me like that, not since...*Jess*.

Emotion burned the back of my throat and I glanced away at the piles of fish cans. I didn't want to lie to her, even though I knew voicing the truth was probably going to cost me a healthy dose of my dignity. "The rules state that they can't do anything sexual with me."

"And they did?" she gasped, horror lacing her tone.

"Yeah but consensually obviously." I smiled awkwardly, rolling a can across the counter as I avoided checking her expression for utter judgement.

"Which one?" she breathed, her voice softening enough that I guessed she wasn't going to start shouting at me for being a top notch moron. Nope, that pleasure was reserved for my internal voice who was suddenly making a comeback and sounded a lot like Mr T having a rant. *Damn, where did my sparkly rainbow cloud go?*

"Kyan." I forced myself to look back at her.

"What?" she gasped, somehow looking absolutely thrilled and completely appalled at the same time. "But he doesn't get with girls at school."

"No, he doesn't screw girls at school, doesn't mean he isn't licking, touching and biting every one he can get his hands on otherwise." I tried to hide my bitterness at those words, but wasn't sure I managed it.

"Nah, I don't think he has. Bitches at this school talk and believe me,

they'd be screaming from the rooftops if one of them managed to bag a night with Kyan."

"Maybe they're just not screaming from a rooftop near you," I said dismissively.

"Yeah maybe," she conceded. "But I've seen the way he looks at you. If his dick was a compass, the girls in this school would be due fucking south... and apparently you're north." She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively and I waved a hand dismissively.

"I am not north."

"You are! You're the freaking north pole girl and Kyan wants to point his arrow right at you. And dip it into you."

A laugh exploded from my chest and I started to blush. *What if she's right? What if he really doesn't touch other girls on campus? And why does that make me feel like I'm made of butterflies and all of them are about to take off at once and scatter me to the wind?*

I had to be logical here though, I mean, Mila could have been right...but I still had my doubts.

She gasped suddenly, pointing an accusing finger at me. "You like him!" she announced at the top of her voice.

I hushed her, my heart pounding madly in my chest. "I do not *like* him. I *hate* him. He's just...hard to resist sometimes."

"Sometimes?" she balked. "So this has happened before?"

Dammit.

"Like, one time before," I admitted guilty. "But it's not like it means anything," I rushed on, ignoring the tug in my gut that told me I'd just lied. To her. To myself. To the universe. *Shit, I can't let my revenge cost me my heart. I have to lock this down.*

Mila stared at me for a long moment then burst out laughing. "Girl, for a

second there I thought you were falling for one of those assholes.”

“No chance,” I laughed, but it came out kind of choked, not that Mila seemed to notice thankfully. *I am not falling for one of those assholes, right? Right??*

Mr T started laying into me again in my head and I tried to drown him out, but the guy had a point. I was a fool. Wasn't sure why he'd shown up in my mind to tell me that personally though.

“So ohmagod, tell me everything. Are the rumours true? Has Kyan got a monster dick?”

“*Mila,*” I snorted, turning my attention to the fish cans and starting to open them.

“Do not hold out on me girl, I've been trying to train Danny's dick to do tricks for weeks. I heard Kyan Roscoe's dick is talented enough to start its own circus.”

I fell apart laughing, grabbing a huge bowl from under the sink, then tossed Mila a spoon as we started scraping the contents of the cans into the bowl.

“Technically, I wouldn't know how talented it is,” I said, a blush crawling deeper into my cheeks.

I wasn't the type of girl to get all flustered over guys like this. I could have summed up my sexual experiences with any boys previous to the Night Keepers with a straight face and without my blood rising a single degree in temperature. But when I thought of my night with Blake or fooling around with Kyan, my body went into overdrive like it thought I was on the cusp of an impending heart attack. Even thinking of the way Saint had spanked me in the past made me want to start fanning myself. The three of them were just...*gah*. It wasn't fair how much they affected me. Then throw Monroe into the mix and it was basically a miracle that I managed to keep my body

from turning to liquid form around all of them.

“What do you mean you wouldn’t know?” I felt her narrowing her eyes at me and I sighed.

“Me and Kyan haven’t screwed. Just fooled around a bit. He really doesn’t sleep with girls on campus, or kiss them apparently.”

“He doesn’t kiss you?” Mila asked in disbelief. “Well fuck me, you’ll never get under his skin.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, glancing at her as she scooped a pile of tuna into the amassing bowl of fish.

“Well, my mom always said the way to a man’s heart isn’t his love stick – my mom’s term not mine, dear god she’s an embarrassment sometimes – or through his stomach, it’s through a kiss. And not just any kiss. It has to be one of those happens-to-be-raining-and-you-bump-into-each-other-through-fate sort of kisses. The all-consuming, heart stealing, lung combusting kiss of all kisses. That’s how you make a guy fall for you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Bullshit. And anyway I don’t want him to love me. I don’t want any of them to. I wanna torture them until they can’t take it anymore then pluck their hearts from their chests and eat them raw – if it turns out they even have hearts that is. I’m still not convinced Saint has anything in his chest but extra storage space for all the toilet paper he’s hoarding.”

“Woah, you’re dark.” She smirked, a twinkle in her eyes. “I like it. Those boys have had it coming for a long time. But please be careful, Tatum. You’re taking on three guys whose families could ruin your entire life. You’re not just targeting them, don’t forget that.”

I pressed my lips together, nodding though not really meaning that agreement. I was done being careful. I wasn’t going to let them get away with humiliating and hurting me no matter who I pissed off in the process. And it

kind of frightened me how much that *didn't* frighten me. I should have been running for my life from these guys. Instead, I was leaning toward the danger, hunting it out like a wild animal taking on prey with sharper claws than me. The only way I could win was by being smart. And even then, I wouldn't come out the other end of this unscathed. *It'll be worth it when they fall from grace.*

When we were done with the fish and I'd caught Mila up on everything we'd missed out on talking about since the Night Keepers had banned me from having friends, I grabbed three jars of mayonnaise and we turned the fish into a thick, gloopy paste that smelled bad enough to make me gag. The scent brought me back to the day they'd covered me in stew and made the entirety of the school join in. It was one of the worst days of my life in all honesty. Discovering that my father was on the run for leaking the Hades Virus into the world had been enough to crush me, let alone the whole school turning on me too.

As my mind hooked on Dad, my heart weighed a thousand tons. Knowing I couldn't call him held a finality to it that I had to try and come to terms with.

What if he never reaches out to me? What if I never speak to him and find out the truth? What if I never see him again?

Those thoughts undid me and I found solace in the only way I could: focusing on punishing Kyan. I pictured his face the day he'd thrown his stew at me, his eyes cold, hard, *dead*. That person didn't marry with the one I'd been with last night, the one who made me laugh and brought out such a wildness in me that I never wanted that part of me to fade. But I couldn't fall for that pretty mirage. Kyan may have had *some* good in him, but it was nothing in comparison to the bad. He'd stolen my life, he'd forced me to the bottom of the food chain. He hadn't spoken up against his friends when

they'd hurt me. He was my enemy. And I could never forget that.

I washed my hands in the sink and texted Kyan, my heart feeling as cool and as impenetrable as iron.

Tatum:

Come to the Redwood Dining Hall. Now.

Kyan:

Bossy, aren't you, baby?

Tatum:

Just come.

Kyan:

Okay, but I'm gonna do it into a pair of your panties.

Tatum:

Why are you making this so hard?

Kyan:

Why are you making THIS so hard?

I gasped as he sent a picture of his dick bulging against his sweatpants and heat washed up and down my spine. *Jesus fucking Christ.*

Tatum:

You're gonna wanna deflate that for what I have in mind, douche lord.

Kyan:

Deal. Now call me a douche lord again...

I growled beneath my breath, texting Monroe instead and hoping Kyan wasn't going to be a prick and not do as I asked.

Tatum:

Come to the Redwood Dining Hall, you won't wanna miss this.

"I'm gonna go fetch the football team and spread the word," Mila said with a grin.

"Hell yes, post it online too, make sure everyone comes," I said excitedly.

"Will do." She laughed as she headed out the door and I was about to follow when my phone started ringing.

I took it out, finding Kyan calling and pressed my tongue into my cheek as I answered.

"Hey, asshole, are you coming or what?"

"Fuck, baby, say that again," he said, his breathing heavy and my cheeks blazed as I realised he hadn't been lying about dealing with his hard on.

"Please tell me you're not jerking off right now," I hissed, leaning back against the counter.

"I'm not gonna lie to you, Tatum Rivers. Now do me a favour and call me a fuck-up or an overpriced escort."

"You can't be serious?"

"As serious as the news of my grandma in a road traffic accident."

"Kyan," I hissed and he growled with desire. "You'd better get your ass down here. You play by my rules too now, understand?"

"I play by no one's rules. And you're not sad about me breaking them

anyway, you're just sad I didn't fuck you like you were begging me to."

My jaw fell slack and utter fury burst through my veins like liquid fire. My grip tightened on the phone as I tried to stop my body from shaking. "Fuck you," I snarled. "You think you're so irresistible Kyan Roscoe, but I only fooled around with you to pass the time. Contrary to what you believe, your dick isn't one of the seven wonders of the world."

I hated that I was curious about how wonderous his dick really was. But screw him for trying to make out I was the desperate one. He'd been panting for me yesterday, he'd been the one to drag me behind the Sacred Stone. He'd been the one to-

"God you're mouthy," he groaned and I growled in annoyance, about to hang up. "You would look so good beneath me, baby. I can't wait until you're desperate enough to beg for it."

"Get your head out of your ass, fuckboy. I wouldn't beg for it if you were the only guy on Earth with a dick and one good screw would make me immune to the Hades Virus."

He groaned heavily, cursing and breathing my name. I hung up in an instant, shoving my phone into my pocket and trying to collect my thoughts as I stood there in a flustered mess.

Did he just...?

Oh my god, he totally played me.

Kyan:

Thanks for the dirty talk. You need a new panty collection ;)

My lips popped open. He'd better have been kidding or I was going to strangle him with his school tie until he turned blue. I *may* have grown pretty precious about all the beautiful underwear Saint had provided me, even if it

had been wrong for him to buy it in the first place.

Dammit, if Kyan's jizzed on that little red Victoria Secret thong I'm going to be livid.

I headed outside and was surprised when I found over half the school had already gathered out on the lawn beyond the dining hall. Plenty of people looked my way, but none of them addressed me, averting their eyes or even bowing their heads. It was weird as hell.

I lifted my chin, folding my arms as I gazed down the pathway, not wanting to bring the fish out until Kyan was in front of me awaiting his punishment. I played out exactly how it was gonna go in my head until a vicious smile twisted up my lips.

It was a while longer before the Night Keepers appeared, the dusky light hanging over them on the path and shrouding their faces in shadow. Of course they arrived together, but I was extra surprised to find Monroe strolling along beside Blake as one of the gang. I didn't know why it shocked me. Maybe it was because last night felt like a crazy dream and that I'd never really considered the fact that now he was one of them, they were going to include him in everything.

Monroe pushed a hand into his dirty blonde hair, tucking it behind his ears as his eyes swung towards me and made my heart pound. I let him see my grin and his eyes flashed hungrily, solidifying his bond with me. He was ready for the show. And I couldn't wait to get started.

"Kyan?" I called and he broke away from the pack as the other three stopped walking, creating a crescent as they looked to me with curious expressions.

Kyan had his hair up in a top-knot and wore a fitted grey T-shirt which clung to his muscles and a pair of black jeans and a leather belt with a motorcycle engraved into the buckle. Apparently he'd changed out of his

grey sweats for this occasion. How gracious.

He had a cocky assuredness as he approached, tilting his head to one side like this was all some game he was the master of. But there was no way I was going to let that last.

“Are you going to do as I say?” I asked and he smirked like he was enjoying this far too much.

“Yes, baby. Anything you want,” he purred.

“Strip down to your boxers and kneel over there by the lake.” I pointed and his lips parted in surprise. He hadn’t expected that. But I wasn’t just going to give him a fish stew shower, I was going to work on the humiliation part of his crimes too.

He promptly slapped on another smirk, shrugging and heading across the pathway to stand on the shaded lawn that sloped down towards the shore of the lake. He tugged his shirt off one handed, his eyes on me the whole time as people started whistling in the crowd. I realised I wasn’t breathing as he gripped his belt, unbuckling it and ripping it out of the rungs so hard it cracked in the air. *Unnecessary but hella hot.*

I worked hard to keep my expression neutral as he dropped his jeans, but he whipped off his boxers with them too, grinning at me with a dare in his eyes as he cupped his junk with both hands.

Students grabbed their phones and started filming and heat blazed along the back of my neck as he stood there staring at me in all his muscular glory like he was winning this game.

No chance, asshole.

I turned sharply, heading back inside and grabbing the bowl of fish from the counter, taking a moment to collect myself. If he was going to try and smirk his way through this then I needed to up my game. I needed to wipe that look off of his face hard. But how..?

An idea came to mind as I recalled the few times I'd ever seen vulnerability in him. He would never admit it, but something had happened to him in his past which had changed him. Built him into the man he was. And there was a tender spot beneath all his bullshit which I was going to have a go at digging a knife into.

I fixed a dark expression onto my features like a mask then strode out of the kitchens, rounding the building to where the crowd was waiting. Kyan was on his knees, both hands firmly clasped around his package as I approached, feeling the Night Keepers watching me closely. Blake was laughing his ass off and a twinge of happiness filled me at the noise. I quickly pushed it away, knowing I shouldn't want anything but pain for Blake. But he was so broken sometimes, it was hard not to want to see him smile again. Especially when I remembered him aiming that pearly white, panty-melting smile at me all those weeks ago.

I moved behind Kyan, placing the bowl down behind him so he couldn't see what was in it then tugged his top knot free with a hard yank.

"If you're trying to turn me on again, it's working," he murmured.

"Did you really ruin all of my nice panties?" I pouted and he chuckled.

"Naw, I wouldn't ruin those. You think I don't love seeing you in all that skimpy shit? I might have to wash the pillow you slept on last night though."

I shook my head at him and leaned down, scooping two large handfuls of fish into my hands and slapping it over his head. He flinched as I smeared the cold gloop into his hair, making sure he was going to need ten showers before he got it all out, a triumphant smile on my lips as he fell quiet for once.

"You're a pig, Kyan," I said lightly, moving around in front of him with the bowl and dropping into a crouch. "And I'm going to make you squeal."

I smeared another handful over his chest, rubbing it in while his eyes narrowed on me, a hunter behind his gaze which he was clearly struggling to

restrain.

“Good luck with that,” he chided and I pushed away any guilt I had that was holding me back from saying the words in my head. He deserved to hear what I had to say. He deserved to hurt for hurting me.

I levelled my gaze on him and he stared at me without a care in the world. “You can’t own up to anything you do, Kyan,” I said, dipping my voice in venom. “You smirk your way through life, knocking people to the ground beneath you as you go. You couldn’t give a damn about the consequences of your actions. You damage people beyond repair and leave them in the mud.”

His smirk remained hitched in place, but his eyes darkened. “And?” he drawled.

“And I thought that was because you were an egotistical prick with a superiority complex at first.”

The crowd *ooohed* as I slapped on another layer of fish and Kyan yawned provocatively.

“But it isn’t that,” I continued, ignoring his lack of reaction because I had a feeling I knew how to get under his skin. And my hunches were usually worth betting on. “It’s the opposite actually. You value yourself so little that you have to push other people down to feel important. So why is that, Kyan? Did your mommy never tuck you in at night? Did your daddy never tell you he loved you?”

Kyan’s eyes flickered, giving me a glimpse of the broken boy beneath all his bullshit. My heart twisted, but I ignored the feeling, barrelling on because he deserved every slice of pain I could deliver him. He’d never flinched when hurting me. “You don’t talk about them,” I pointed out. “Even Blake and Saint mention their parents from time to time. But you?” I shook my head as I rubbed more of the fish down his arms. His muscles were rigid beneath my touch and he was no longer smirking. “You don’t mention them at all. So I’m

guessing they've either cut you off..." I paused as I eyed his expression, sensing that guess wasn't correct before continuing. "Or you cut *them* off."

His lips twitched, confirming it and I smiled victoriously.

I grabbed some more fish from the bowl then dropped down to eye level with him, my words low enough so they were just for us. The crowd was for the humiliation, but my words weren't for them. They were for this man who played with me like a wolf with an old bone. I was convenient, mildly interesting but not delicious enough to give his full attention to. Yesterday's meal. Already digested and forgotten.

"I guess you hoped cutting them off would empower you then, and make whatever they did to you go away. But you can't fill the void a lack of love leaves behind with hate. The only thing that would heal your empty heart is love itself. But who would ever love you, Kyan? When you hate the world so fully that everything you touches falls to ruin."

His lips tightened and emotion danced behind his eyes that made guilt squeeze my chest. I tried to drink in his pain like he and his friends always drank in mine, but this revenge didn't taste so sweet. It was bitter on my tongue, but necessary all the same. He'd watched me break before, now I wanted the same in return. Even if I bled along with him.

"And you know that, don't you?" I asked coldly, but he didn't respond, his jaw locked and his brow pinched. "That's why you don't kiss girls. You're quietly waiting for the right girl, the one who cares enough about you to make it worth it. But that's just a sad dream that will never be fulfilled. Because no one will ever meet the standards of King Kyan with his hollow heart. You may think you're worthless, but you still hold onto the hope that someone could maybe want you as you are. A monster with a black soul who takes bites out of people and expects them to love him in return." I inched closer so my breath danced against his cheeks and I was all he could see.

“That hope is as foolish as you look right now.”

His throat bobbed and hurt twisted his features just long enough for me to know my work was done. I'd driven pins into his flesh with my words and finally hit a nerve.

I continued to pack the sickly smelling mixture against his body, running my hand down his stomach before rubbing it over his hands which were holding his dick. He grunted as I continued lower, wiping it over his thighs before moving around to his back and making sure every inch of him was covered, butt crack included.

“You satisfied yet?” he gritted out and I scooped the last handful out of the bowl, trying not to heave as the smell nearly overwhelmed me.

I fisted his sticky hair in my free hand, yanking his head back to look up at me as I grinned down at him. Then I clapped the final handful to his mouth, rubbing it all over his face as he winced against the powerful odour.

My heart was singing, my veins buzzing. Deep down, I knew I didn't mean the words I'd spoken. But Kyan never felt bad for what he did to me, so why should I feel bad for what I did to him? And as my guilt gave way to relief at getting back at him, a sense of pride filled me. This felt like true power. Another blade cast deep into my enemy's gut.

Revenge is a bitch and I am her.

I stepped away from him, bending down to wipe my hands off on the grass before taking out my phone and snapping a picture for me to look at a thousand times in the future.

The crowd were laughing their asses off, but I could barely hear them as I focused on the beast kneeling before me, paying for his crimes, his face fixed into a scowl.

“You can get up now,” I said at last and he rose to his feet, striding towards me and releasing his junk, earning a collective gasp from the crowd

and me. I tried to leap away, seeing the danger in his eyes far too late as he whipped me up into his arms, tossed my phone on the ground and started striding toward the lake.

“Kyan!” I screamed as he strode into the water and dove under the surface with me locked in his arms.

The freezing water enveloped me and I spluttered as he released me, coming up for air.

He stayed under for several seconds before breaking the surface, scrubbing the fish out of his hair and fixing me with an intense look.

He grabbed me by the waist, yanking me against his hard body and my heart jolted in alarm. His eyes danced with shadows and a chill took hold of me as I surveyed the droplets racing down his chiselled features. His lips were wet and enticing and I tried not to think of what Mila had said about an all-consuming kiss winning someone’s heart. I imagined a kiss from Kyan would consume me for sure. Like flames, charring everything black on my insides and making me hurt so good. But I wasn’t up to par for him. I was just a way to entertain him from time to time. I would never be able to fill the void in Kyan Roscoe even if I wanted to. It was an eternal space that grew bigger every day.

His eyes scored over my features and his upper lip pulled back in a snarl. “You see a heartless monster when you look at me,” he stated, his voice lacking any emotion and making my breathing stutter.

“What else is there to see?” I asked icily, part of me wanting him to contradict it and prove everything I’d just said was wrong. But if there was a girl out there who could save Kyan, give him what he so deeply craved, then it wasn’t me. Even if maybe, deep down in the most deplorable part of my being, I wanted it to be.

He glanced away across the lake as he released a derisive breath through

his nose, his grip on my waist becoming too tight. “I guess you’re right, baby. So it’s time you found out how monstrous I can really be.” He shoved me away from him, diving under the water and resurfacing closer to the shore.

“Get your asses out here!” Saint called and I tried to swallow down the fear Kyan’s parting words had left me with. Had I just awoken an even darker part of him? The thought was enough to send goosebumps rushing across my skin. I hadn’t considered the possibility that my revenge might push these boys to new heights. But I guessed that meant my plan had worked. I’d gotten under his skin. Now I just had to face the consequences. And I didn’t think I was going to like them.

The crowd was dispersing as Blake directed them to leave, the show officially over. The Night Keepers clearly weren’t going to let me hold onto my power any longer.

I waded back out to the shore where Kyan was tugging his jeans on. When he was done, he slung his shirt over his shoulder and raked his hand through his hair to squeeze out the water, his smirk firmly back in place. *Fake bastard.*

“I hope you enjoyed the power trip, Barbie, because you’re mine tonight. And I expect you to be obedient,” Saint said coolly, his eyes eating into my flesh.

My throat thickened and my eyes skipped to Monroe beside him, a realisation suddenly flashing through my mind and brightening up all the dark spaces inside me. “But there’s four Night Keepers now. And the rules state I have to rotate between them. So it’s Monroe’s turn to have me.”

Monroe legit looked like I’d just grabbed his nuts and given them a good squeeze and Saint looked ready to murder the nearest victim. He opened and closed his mouth then growled something incoherent.

“You’re right. Those are the rules,” Saint said at last, but I didn’t miss the

hint of disappointment in his eyes.

Torturing me will have to wait another day Saintykins. Tonight, I belong to Monroe.



Being the headmaster of the school came with certain perks. The best of those being that instead of having an apartment in Maple Lodge with all the rest of the staff, I had my own private bungalow further up the same paved track, hidden in the thick trees at the top of the hill.

It was far enough from the rest of the staff quarters to genuinely be private and was lavish enough to feel luxurious compared to what I'd been used to growing up.

The space consisted of three rooms – my bedroom, a bathroom and one wide space which served as living area, dining room and kitchen in one.

I'd cleared all of Brown's stuff out on my first day here and lugged my own things down from my apartment to fill the space. Although fill was a bit too extreme for my meagre supplies. I'd never really been one to accumulate useless crap. I had all my workout gear at the gym and I didn't really have any other hobbies. But I'd moved my clothes in and the three things of my mother's which I still owned were in a box which now sat on the mantelpiece. They had no value other than sentiment but as that was all I had left of her, I kept them safe.

There was a faded photograph of her with me and my brother Michael when we were kids which she used to keep in her wallet. Her old cellphone which I'd only kept because I could charge it up and listen to her voice on the voicemail when the shadows drew too close. And her mother's wedding ring which was inlaid with sapphires and hung from a thick silver chain. She'd always worn that necklace, I couldn't remember a single moment when I'd seen her without it. I'd placed the necklace Tatum had asked me to look after in amongst those things, knowing it was as precious to her as my mementoes were to me.

I'd been pacing for the last ten minutes. Tatum was late. She'd text to tell me she'd be here at nine and I'd replied reminding her that this idea was fucking insane and that I was her headmaster and if she got caught here I'd end up hung from the main gate by my balls. She replied with a squid emoji. A fucking squid. What the hell did that even mean?

The front door swung open suddenly and a spike of rage swept through me as Saint Memphis strolled into my house like he thought he owned the fucking place.

Kyan, Blake and Tatum followed him in, the guys nodding at me in greeting while continuing an argument they must have been having before they arrived. It took me less than thirty seconds to realise they were arguing over the merits of wielding a flamethrower or an axe in some Xbox game and I quickly tuned them out.

"She should be yours from six pm onwards," Saint said, pinching the bridge of his nose like he was currently enduring some kind of crisis. "But as we were unprepared, I didn't have everything in place to deliver her on time."

"Deliver her?" I asked, arching a brow. "I didn't realise it was like ordering a pizza. Do I get extra sides because you're late then?"

Tatum smirked behind him but Saint didn't seem to find that funny. "I can

only apologise and assure you it won't happen again."

"Whatever." I shrugged. "A nine is an upside down six anyway so it's basically the same thing."

Saint's right eye started twitching and his hands curled into fists as he turned away from me, muttering something about me being worse than Kyan as Tatum giggled.

I couldn't help but smirk at her as I fought against the urge to keep pushing Saint's buttons and gave him a moment to calm down.

He started looking around the neutrally decorated room like it had taken a shit on his shoes. I arched a brow at him as he moved to the bathroom door and ran a finger along the top of the door frame.

"For the love of hell," he muttered, visibly shuddering before heading into the bathroom to wash his hands.

Kyan dumped an overnight bag on the coffee table before dropping onto a seat at the end of the couch and Blake quickly joined him, leaving me to stare across the empty space in the room at Tatum.

"Hey," she said hesitantly, tucking a lock of golden blonde hair behind her ear. She was wearing a black wrap around dress which was just low cut enough to draw my gaze.

"Hey," I replied, huffing out a breath as I glanced at the others before heading to the fridge to grab out a six pack of beers.

I tossed one each into the laps of Kyan and Blake before passing one to Tatum. Her fingers brushed mine as she accepted it and my gut tightened as I imagined being left alone here with her all night. We'd done it before on lockdown in the pool house, but this felt different. There was a bed and four walls surrounding us with a door that locked and curtains that closed. Whatever we did in here would remain a secret so long as we both kept it that way. Not that I had any intention of doing anything that required secrecy.

Aside from plotting the downfall of the Night Keepers of course.

“Rebecca is going to come and deal with this place in the morning while you’re out,” Saint announced as he emerged from the bathroom, tucking his cellphone into his pocket. “I told her it needs a deep clean so she will probably be here for a few hours, but in future she’ll just come and go daily to keep on top of this situation.

“Who the fuck is Rebecca?” I asked in confusion.

“The ghost who cleans The Temple,” Tatum supplied. “She’s never been seen, but rumour has it, if you leave a saucer of bleach out at night, by the morning it’ll be gone and your bathroom will be clean enough to eat off of every surface.”

Saint smiled at that, his gaze raking over her appreciatively in her dress and I had to wonder if he’d picked it. If he had then he had good taste which was pretty damn infuriating. “Good help are quiet and thorough in their work. They do the job you needed doing before you had time to request it and are seen even less frequently than they are heard. And Rebecca is the best.”

“I don’t need a cleaner,” I began but Saint waved me off, rolling his eyes.

“The fact that you believe you don’t only emphasises the dire state you’re in. But don’t worry, it’s done, you won’t even know she’s been. Aside from the cleanliness of the place.”

My lips parted on another argument as this entitled little prick just clicked his fingers and made a decision about how I was supposed to keep my own home clean, but Tatum reached out to touch my arm, a short shake of her head telling me to drop this.

“Just let him send Rebecca in,” she urged. “Otherwise he’ll end up coming up here on his own and scrubbing it clean himself.”

“Yeah, Barbie liked the sight of me doing that in The Temple,” Saint agreed. “I just haven’t decided if that’s because she enjoyed me being on my

hands and knees scrubbing or if she just wanted to see me beneath her.”

“Both,” Tatum replied easily and I smirked at her as I pulled another beer from the pack and tossed it to Saint. It made bile rise in my throat to act like we were friends after everything his family had done to mine but I needed to win his trust, his dependence, his secrets.

I needn't have worried about sharing my beer with the devil though. The can hit him in the chest as he made no attempt to catch it and fell to the carpet with a solid thump as his jaw ticked.

“I only drink from a glass,” he said, eyeing the fallen beer like it had personally offended him. “I'll take vodka if you have it, any other spirit if you don't. Either way I'll have it neat.”

“I've got rum,” I said, trying not to snarl as I hooked the can from the floor and set it on the counter.

Saint shuddered. “On second thought, I'm not thirsty. Besides, we really shouldn't be staying. We just came to drop off Barbie and I've got a workout to fit in before bed.”

“Look, I get that it's the rules or whatever, but I really don't think she should sleep here,” I began on the speech I'd been practicing in my head all day. “She's my student and if-”

“So don't fuck her then,” Saint drawled. “But the sleepover is non negotiable. The rules bend for no man. They are forged in dragon fire and kept strong by the heat of the sun.”

“They're just some things you scribbled on a bit of paper,” Tatum pointed out.

“I assure you Barbie, they are the bars on my cage. You should be glad to have them, because they offer you some assurances that I am muzzled. Who knows what I might do without rules to keep me in check?” Saint smiled like a predator and I shifted an inch to my left so that I was between him and

Tatum.

Kyan barked a laugh as he looked over at us from his position on the couch.

“She sleeps in a different bed on rotation,” Saint went on. “Tonight is your night so she’s in with you. She has to sleep in your bed.”

“Or else what?” I asked, fully intending to break his fucking rules and tell him where to stick them. This whole thing was insanity. But as his gaze darkened, I realised it wouldn’t be as simple as that.

“Or else, she gets punished for breaking the rule. And I have several things in mind - I’m just waiting for her to give me an excuse.”

My gut twisted at his words and I glanced at Tatum beside me. She didn’t even seem shocked, just resigned to what he was saying. It was so fucked up. I didn’t know where they all got off claiming ownership of her, but I was going to make it my mission to set her free.

“Fine,” I ground out. “But I’ve had a long day and I wanna turn in soon.”

“Perfect, we won’t hold you up then,” Saint agreed.

“Are we going already?” Blake pouted like a petulant child.

“I packed a bag for her,” Saint said, ignoring Blake and pointing at the bag Kyan had dropped on the coffee table. “You have to choose what she wears to bed, so I gave you options. If there’s nothing to your taste you can always come to The Temple and select an alternative or put up with it for tonight then send me some ideas of what you like and I’ll order it in for next time.”

I opened my mouth to tell him I wouldn’t be picking her fucking clothes for her like a controlling psychopath, but she caught my eye and gave me a warning look that asked me not to comment.

“Alright, fine,” I muttered.

There were far bigger reasons for me to want to see Saint suffer but right now, I was hungering for his blood on behalf of the girl beside me and my

fingers were twitching with the desire to wrap them around his throat.

The smirk he offered me said he could see that desire in me even though I knew for a fact that my poker face was second to none.

“C’mon, assholes, we’re going,” Saint announced and the other two got up, grumbling complaints about walking all the way over here for nothing as they closed in on us.

Kyan crushed his empty beer can in his fist and tossed it at the trash can where it bounced off onto the floor. Saint gritted his jaw, taking Blake’s can and throwing it away as he moved to pick Kyan’s up too. I couldn’t say I hated to see him cleaning up my house like that either.

“See you tomorrow, Cinders,” Blake said, leaning in to press a kiss to Tatum’s cheek.

Kyan knocked him aside with his shoulder and pulled her into his arms, squeezing her ass with both hands as he murmured something in her ear which included something along the lines of him tasting her again and taking his punishment for it with a smile on his face.

She cursed him out, shoving him back a step and he laughed loudly as he released her.

Saint tutted irritably as he stepped forward to say goodbye to her last, but he didn’t try and hug or kiss her. Instead, he trailed his fingers through her long hair, positioning it carefully and straightening her dress with a critical eye. She pouted through it but he didn’t seem to care, he even tugged the tie holding her dress together open before knotting it again carefully so that it hung perfectly.

When he was finished, he stepped back, his eyes lighting hungrily as he took her in.

“Beautiful,” he announced and though I agreed with him, I didn’t like the tone of his voice. Like he was claiming some responsibility for her looking

that way.

“Look after our girl tonight, Nash,” Blake warned as he swept towards the door.

“We’re trusting you,” Saint added, making it sound like a threat.

“Nothing will happen to her while she’s with me,” I said darkly. If there was one thing we could all agree on, it was that. Tatum Rivers was worth killing for. She was definitely worth protecting. I just intended on protecting her from *them* too.

The Night Keepers left and I moved to lock the door behind them for good measure. It was already dark out so I’d drawn the blinds before they arrived and I was suddenly very alone with Tatum in a very quiet house.

“This is weird,” she admitted, breaking the silence.

“You’ve got that right,” I muttered, running a hand over the back of my neck. The tattoo Kyan had given me was still sore, but I’d looked at it in the mirror and most of the redness had gone down. I didn’t even hate it. I had to admit he knew how to create art even though he was generally more suited to destroying things.

I moved towards Tatum slowly and reached out to grab a can of beer from the counter beside her. The moment I lifted the ring pull, the whole thing exploded and I cursed as I was drenched, tossing it into the sink as Tatum laughed, scrambling away from me to avoid the worst of it.

Fucking Saint!

I yanked my saturated shirt off and used the back of it to wipe the drink from my face as the beer continued to bubble out of the can and down the drain in the sink.

“Well, at least it’s not awkward now,” Tatum joked. “I’m in my teacher’s house and he’s just started stripping for me.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I cursed, turning to look at her with a snort of laughter.

“This whole thing is so fucked up.”

“At least we have an excuse to hang out alone regularly and talk cunning plans,” she said.

“We already had that with kickboxing,” I pointed out.

“Well, this way I can focus more on my training then and save our diabolical schemes for our sleepovers.”

“Great, now I’m a thirteen year old girl.” I rolled my eyes at the situation and glanced towards the bathroom. “I need to have a shower and wash this beer off of me. You can just make yourself comfortable. You can have the bed tonight anyway so if you just wanna sleep you can. I’ll take the couch.”

“Do you wanna pick out my sleeping stuff so I can get changed?” she asked, fiddling with the knot on her dress.

“I don’t give a fuck, just pick whatever.”

“Great.” She grinned at me like she really appreciated being left to make her own clothing choices and I fought the urge to start ranting about Saint Memphis and his crazy control issues. “But...Saint will ask about it and it’s technically a rule break on my part if *you* haven’t picked it. You should probably at least look at the options so you can tell him what you thought of them.”

“Fine.” I gave in, deciding to just give the stuff a cursory glance as I strode over to the coffee table and opened her bag, tugging out a fistful of silk and lace.

I swallowed thickly. They were all skimpy, clearly very expensive bits of lingerie. I guessed technically they were night dresses, but they were seriously lacking substance. Half of them were transparent. Scratch that, *all* of them were transparent, particularly over the breasts.

“I...you can’t wear one of these,” I forced out. My dick could not cope with her in that. I’d fucking combust. Nope. No. No fucking way.

Tatum laughed like she'd read my mind and I really hoped she hadn't. "Kyan prefers me to sleep in his shirts," she suggested.

"Yes," I agreed instantly. "That. I'll get one."

I dropped the lacy shit and tried not to think about Saint sleeping in a bed with her dressed that way as I headed into my bedroom, finding a plaid button down that I never wore. It was big on me so it would swamp her. Not attractive at all. Perfect.

I tossed her the shirt and she smiled as she caught it.

I headed to the bathroom and quickly showered, washing the beer off of my skin and out of my hair before dressing in grey sweatpants and a white wifebeater.

When I returned to the front room, I found her waiting for me, dressed in my shirt with her long hair tied in a messy knot on top of her head while she sat on the couch before the fire. Her bronzed legs were bare and her pedicured toes balanced on the edge of the table, I stared at the exposed flesh for too long, wondering if grabbing her a pair of sweatpants would be too obvious. But it probably was, so I couldn't say anything about it.

Her attention was on her school diary in her lap, but she glanced up with a slight smile as I entered before looking back down at it.

I grabbed a couple of cans of coke from the fridge and tossed a pizza into the oven while she scribbled something in her diary. I knew she must have had dinner already, but I also knew Saint had been denying her access to junk food. So the first thing I'd done when I'd accepted that she'd probably be staying here tonight despite my protests was stock up.

I grabbed a bag of maltesers from the cupboard and pack of strawberry laces and moved to sit beside her with them.

She looked up from her diary, setting it aside as I tossed the snacks down beside her and her eyes lit up as I opened them.

“No fucking way,” she groaned.

“I’ve got access to the school stores. Plus I sign off on the food orders before they get placed now. You can eat as much junk food as you like whenever you come here, princess.” I grinned at her as she practically drooled.

“*Fuck*, you just made my goddamn life,” she announced, reaching out to open the strawberry laces and wrapping one around her finger as she started eating it.

“So, do you wanna tell me exactly what Kyan did to earn himself a fish face pack earlier?” I asked as I opened the maltesers and scooped a handful out. “Saint just said he’d broken some of your rules. But I didn’t get a chance to ask which one before he was herding us all down to the lake.”

“Oh. Well, yeah, he crossed a line. So...” Her cheeks heated and her jaw ticked as she looked into the fire which really just made me want to know more.

“Come on, princess, don’t hold me in suspense,” I pushed.

“Well...” Her blue eyes flicked up to meet mine and she bit down on her bottom lip guiltily. “We just fooled around a bit. And the rules say no foreplay, so...”

My heart lurched and my fist curled tightly around the maltesers I hadn’t managed to eat yet and I crushed them without meaning to.

“I thought you hated them?” I growled, wondering why the fuck this bothered me so much. I certainly wasn’t allowed to be bothered by it. And I’d been the one encouraging her to make Kyan fall for her, but I hadn’t really expected her to do anything physical with him. Or maybe I had but I hadn’t wanted to think about it. But that shouldn’t have mattered. I shouldn’t have cared.

“I do,” she snarled, her eyes flaring. “I hate all of them. But...sometimes

they make me feel things that I can't just explain away..." She looked into the fire for a long moment then shrugged in a nonchalant way. "Besides, why isn't it okay for me to fool around with them if I want to? If I was a guy and they were girls, people would slap me on the back and high five me for making all of them want me or getting in their pants. But just because I'm a girl I'm supposed to dampen my sexuality? I can't take satisfaction from a guy for no other reason than they're hot and I like the way their body feels against mine? I don't see why I should have to justify-"

"Alright, alright, get off your soapbox. I'm worried about you getting hurt, not trying to stand in the way of your feminine right to fuck as many guys as you like. I was just taken off guard is all. First Blake, now Kyan, what are they going to say when they realise you've played them both?"

I forced myself to smirk at her like I was impressed and in a way, I was. She was doing what we'd said, weaving a web around them, drawing them in and making them ache for her so bad that they wouldn't even see it coming when she ripped the rug right out from under them and made them bleed. But on the other hand, I now had a fistful of crushed maltesers which were melting into a blob as liquid hot as my rage over the thought of them putting their hands on her after what they'd done.

"You don't need to protect me," she said slowly, like she was trying to figure out what I was thinking and if she did then I wouldn't mind a pointer too. There was only one real reason for me to feel this way and I didn't want to admit it. Because I couldn't be jealous. I had no right to be. And I certainly couldn't hold her accountable for any stupid fucking feelings like that which I might have. She didn't owe me anything when I couldn't offer her anything.

"We're in this together," I reminded her. "And I will protect you whether you want me to or not. In whatever ways I can."

"Okay," she said, giving me a real smile which took my breath away.

“So, what’s the next part of your plan?” I asked.

“So far, they’re playing right into my hands, giving me the excuse to strike at them with punishments which they can’t even fight back against. The rules I set mean they can’t touch me, but they keep doing it anyway – well, Blake and Kyan do, I haven’t had an excuse to punish Saint yet.”

I tried not to sag in relief as she admitted she hadn’t done anything with Saint. The other two I could cope with. She’d chosen to be with Blake before all of this had started and I knew Kyan well enough to understand where a lot of his pain came from. In fact, it made me feel kinda shitty to stand back while she worked her way beneath his skin, knowing that he was in such need of something real while she was only playing him. But I understood why she had to do it. I knew what he’d done to her. And I could also allow the sacrifice in the name of bringing me closer to Saint Memphis. I’d just feel like an asshole about it on my own time.

“So you’re managing to get your revenge without them even retaliating because they agreed to it when you set the rules?” I grinned at the genius of that plan.

“Yep. And I made a list.” She popped a malteser between her lips and grabbed her school diary, flipping it over to the back page and raising a pen as she scored out ‘the fish stew’ and my gaze skimmed over the crimes she’d mapped out. “I’m not gonna stop until I’ve gotten even for every last thing on this list and then some,” she added fiercely.

The sex tape

The fish stew

The Unspeakables

The storm

The font

The bathtub
The ice
The gun
The clothes
The humiliation
The shower
The letters
THE VOW

“You’re an evil genius,” I teased, though I kinda meant it too. She’d been knocked down hard by that pack of assholes and instead of breaking or even bowing, she was starting her own private rebellion right under their noses. And I was her first recruit.

“I’ve barely even started,” she promised me and the passion in her voice made me want to do things I really shouldn’t have been considering.

“So what’s next?” I asked.

“The Unspeakables need to rise up,” she said determinedly. “I already started working on them but since the night of the break in, it’s been hard to get them thinking in the right way again. I can’t be seen talking to them either so getting in their ears about it is hard. But the Night Keepers have given me two hours of quiet study a night in the library and I see some of them there. They need to realise that all of them together are strong enough to stand against three monstrous boys. Once they do and they cast off the chains of that awful fucking title of *Unspeakables* they’ve been given, I think we stand a good shot of overthrowing the whole school. And then we’ll see how kingly those assholes are without their crowns.”

I snorted a laugh just as the timer on the oven sounded. “You don’t do things by halves, do you princess?”

“My father raised me to be a fighter,” she said, packing her diary back into her bag and giving me the chance to dispose of the melted, crushed, malteser fist I had going on.

I quickly washed the chocolate off of my hand and drew the pizza out of the oven, slicing it up before carrying the plate back over to her.

Tatum’s eyes widened and she moaned with desire as I set the plate of cheesy, doughy goodness down on the coffee table and I grinned like the cat who got the fucking cream. It was totally idiotic for me to be looking at her the way I was, but it was damn hard not to sometimes. Especially when we were alone like this.

“You’re determined to corrupt me tonight, Nash,” she commented as I lifted a slice of pizza from the plate and held it out to her.

“Only a little,” I joked, trying not to grin like an idiot at the sound of my name on her lips. I could almost pretend that we were just a girl and a guy when we were alone like this. Imagine that there weren’t solid walls between us that forbid us from being anything more. It was intoxicating and dangerous at once.

Instead of taking the food from my hand, she parted her lips and I instantly pressed the food into her mouth, my pulse racing as she closed her eyes and moaned in a way that really had to be sexual. My dick definitely thought it was. And the rest of me did too until I forced myself to look away.

We fell into silence as we demolished the pizza and I leaned back against the couch with a sigh of satisfaction, letting my gaze remain on the fire as it crackled.

“So...you can tell me to fuck off if you like,” Tatum began, inching closer to me until her knee pressed against my thigh and I was forced to look around at her. “But, do you wanna tell me why you hate Saint and his family so much?”

My heart leapt then pounded then shrivelled away into the deep darkness that had been left in the wake of what Saint's family had done to mine.

I didn't want to tell her. But I also hadn't talked about it with anyone in a hell of a long time. And I felt like she would understand. At least in some part. She'd told me about losing her sister. She knew enough about pain, betrayal, heartache, grief...

"It's not a pretty story," I warned her.

"I promise you can trust me with it," she breathed, reaching out to take my hand. And I let her. Because I already had a student locked up in my house with me alone at night and that went against so many rules that I couldn't even count them. Holding her hand was the least of my problems.

I curled my fingers around her small hand and ran my thumb back and forth across her soft skin.

"When I was growing up, we never had much. My dad wasn't around and my kid brother Michael didn't remember him at all. To be honest, I don't either really. I know he was tall and shouted a lot. And that my mom said *good riddance to bad rubbish* whenever his name was mentioned after he left. We had a small house but a nice one. Mom worked as a nurse and picked up extra shifts a lot so I used to have to help out with babysitting Michael pretty often..."

I frowned as I thought back over those happy days. I didn't do it nearly enough. It was like my grief and anger coloured all of that black and made me forget. I kept the raw heartache close, but maybe I was losing some of what I'd had by focusing on the way it had been stolen from me all the time. But until I got even for what had been done to them, I couldn't see any other way to move on from my pain.

"Anyway, when I was eleven I managed to secure a partial scholarship to this fancy ass high school – not quite as elite as Everlake, but the education I

could have gotten there was way superior to anything I could manage at the local high school.”

“What did you want to be?” she asked me and it took me a moment to remember the dreams of that foolish kid.

“I wanted to go to med school,” I admitted, knowing it was a million miles from where I’d ended up and feeling like an idiot for saying it. “My mom always used to come home with tales about the surgeons she worked with who earned six times her wages and were labelled as heroes for their work. I guess it sounded like an impossible dream. But I wanted to have that life, look after my mom, meet a nice girl and have three perfect kids.” I sighed and forced myself to continue. That man I’d imagined myself becoming was so far away from my reality that I couldn’t even picture him now. He hadn’t had any darkness in him. No grief, no burden of revenge. “Anyway, Mom started working even more shifts so that she could pay the rest of my fees and I picked up a paper round and a job in a hardware store on the weekends. Even Michael started helping with my paper round so that he could pitch in and he was only nine.”

“Your family sound amazing,” Tatum murmured, but the way her eyes glimmered as I turned to look at her said she already knew this didn’t have a happy ending.

“They were,” I agreed. “They were *everything* to me. It was the three of us against the world and then... One night, Mom got back late from a shift, it was gone nine and there hadn’t been anything in the fridge for dinner so me and Michael had eaten cereal on the couch while watching TV. But when she got back, she was smiling so much that we couldn’t stay mad at her for it. It turned out she’d been offered a promotion with a pay rise which meant more to us than I can even really explain. She’d been struggling to make up the difference in my school fees and that money was like an answer to all of our

prayers. To celebrate, she took us out to a twenty four hour diner on the other side of town and we all ate pancakes and drank coke floats and talked about going on a holiday to California when I had my doctorate and a fancy surgeon's job. It was like, this perfect fucking evening. We were all just happy. I used to dream about that night a lot..." I trailed off as half a smile tugged at my lips while a frown drove into my brow. These memories were precious, but they cut me open and left me bleeding too.

"You don't have to tell me the rest if you don't want to," Tatum said, shifting closer again as she leaned her head on my shoulder.

I took comfort in the warmth of her body and the sweet scent of her skin and before I could overthink it, I curled my arm around her and pulled her into my lap.

She didn't gasp or flinch or do anything to say she didn't want me to hold her like that. She just curled her body against mine and laid her head down on my chest like she was listening to my heartbeat through my shirt.

I wrapped my arms around her and rested my cheek against her forehead, knowing she had her own grief too. That she knew this feeling, she'd lived it, survived it, learned the battle of coping with it every day. And knowing that she understood made it that bit easier to tell her the rest of it.

"We got back in our car and started to drive home. We'd been having so much fun that it was past midnight and Michael was practically asleep on his feet. I remember him crawling across the back seat and lying down with his head on his arms. Mom laughed and kissed his forehead, promising to drive slow because he didn't have his seat belt on." A lump rose in my throat and Tatum brushed her fingers across my ribs, back and forth again and again in a soothing motion that gave me the strength I needed to go on. "I got in the front with Mom and we began our journey home. We were crossing a crossroads when the car hit us. The lights were green, I can remember it clear

as day. The lights were green and Mom was driving slow because of Michael, but the other car ran the red light and...”

I was momentarily overwhelmed by the memory of that crash. Of the world flipping over and over, pain driving through me, Mom screaming, me screaming and Michael-

“By the time our car stopped rolling, I could hardly see straight, let alone think straight. It landed on its roof and I was hanging upside down in my seatbelt with blood dripping down my face from a cut on my neck. I’ve still got that scar. Mom was screaming and screaming and at first I didn’t even realise it was my brother’s name she was saying until I managed to focus on the view beyond the windshield, of the little broken body laying in the road. There was so much blood, so much fucking blood. And then I was screaming too and suddenly someone was ripping me out of the car. I didn’t know it then but that was Saint’s father. Troy Memphis, our fine upstanding Governor. All I knew at the time was that he reeked of whiskey and was calling my mother a stupid bitch over and over. He dropped me in the middle of the road and I crawled away from him, ignoring the pain in my body as I fought to get to Michael. I knew it was too late, but I had to try, I had to see.”

The memory of his broken body, his eyes staring lifelessly at the starry sky above would never leave me. Sometimes all I had to do was blink and I was looking at him lying there again, clutching onto his hand and begging him not to leave me. That night tore me apart, ripped me open and stole everything from me in one fell swoop.

“Troy Memphis was on his phone and some other people arrived, calling for ambulances and the police. But when they came, they didn’t arrest him. The police chief greeted him like an old friend, wrapping an arm around him, comforting him. I didn’t realise what that meant at the time but when they took my Mom away it began to sink in... My memories of the rest of that

night aren't that clear. An ambulance took Michael's body away and another brought me to the hospital to get patched up. When I was released, I was put in emergency foster care. My mom was charged with drunk driving and running a red light even though she hadn't done any of it. Even though it was *him*. Troy Memphis in his top of the range bullet proof car that smashed through ours like cannon fire. We used all of the money she'd worked for to pay my school fees on a top lawyer but of course, all of our money was nothing at all to *him*. He had even better lawyers prosecuting, no one would listen to our side of the story, he'd paid off officials and the chief of police, hell he probably paid off the judge too. In the end they upped her sentence to eighteen years because they claimed she'd caused Michael's death by dangerous driving as well as being under the influence. It was a fucking farce. All of it. She never drank. We'd had *coke floats*. And when she was sent to jail, I was given a permanent place in a group foster home. But I didn't give up. I wrote to newspapers, posted online, created petitions, even managed to find some security footage from that night which showed his car swerving all over the road a couple of blocks away from the site of the crash. Mom sold the house, we got a new lawyer and we were working on an appeal."

"Did he stop that from going through too?" Tatum asked as I paused, her fingers still stroking back and forth along my ribs. It was soothing in the most instinctive way. Like that touch against my flesh was her way of letting her soul connect to mine. Of saying she could feel my pain and she understood it. That it hurt her too.

"Of course," I scoffed bitterly. "But not in the way I'd expected. One afternoon I was leaving the lawyer's office downtown and this van pulled up beside me in the street. These huge guys yanked me inside it before I even knew what was happening. We drove for fucking ages with me rattling

around in the back and these fucking psychos just sitting there glaring at me, as we headed right out of town and up into the mountains. We came to a stop and they shoved me out again in this clearing in the woods. There was another car parked up, some stupidly expensive thing with blacked out windows. Troy Memphis got out of the car and a boy followed him. Saint must have only been about seven but the way his upper lip curled back as he looked at me told me he was already well on his way to becoming a monster just like his father. Troy told me that it was over, that I needed to stop dwelling in the past and move on with my life. He said he was *sorry* that it had had to come to this, but that it was my fault for not just letting the past stay there. I didn't know what he was talking about at the time and I remember asking him why. Why had he done this to my mother after what he'd done to Michael. And he said *because we live in a world where most people are ants and a few of us are giants. And sometimes the ants must get squashed so the giants can rise.* Then he shoved me into the dirt and told me I'd be next if I didn't leave it alone. I looked up as he stalked away and found Saint staring down back at me. And he was smiling."

My grip on Tatum tightened until I was sure I must have been hurting her, but she didn't flinch or wriggle away from me. She just held me, her hand stroking back and forth on my side, the material of my wifebeater the only thing parting our skin and for a moment I let myself forget what she was and just enjoyed holding her in my arms. I couldn't remember the last time I'd done that. I wasn't even sure if I'd done it at all since my family was destroyed.

"They drove off and left me up there. I managed to make it back to the road and walked for hours before a passing car pulled over and offered me a ride. By the time I got back to the foster home, I found the police waiting for me, those falsely sad faces they give as they offer up condolences about

someone they never even knew. The said my mom got into a fight in prison and had been killed. That woman would never even raise her hand against a fly. She was stabbed sixteen times. And I know for a fact that Troy Memphis was responsible.”

“Nash-” Tatum began but I cut her off, needing to finish this now that I’d started.

“I also knew that there was no point in me coming at him the way I’d been trying to. No point in me using the legal route with its corruption and lack of morals. Money and power were the only things that mattered to all of the people who should have helped my family and I didn’t have either of those. So instead I came up with a plan. I worked tirelessly to get the qualifications I needed to teach and made all the connections I had to to get this job. I changed my name, bided my time and made sure that I would be here when Saint came to this school. He’s my way in. And now, thanks to you, I’m closer than ever before. Troy Memphis took my family from me and I intend to take that and so much more from him in return. His money, his power, his reputation, *all* of it. I’ll give my life to take him down. And if Saint wants to stand in my way then I’ll gladly make him burn too.”

Tatum didn’t say anything, but I could feel her tears soaking through my shirt as she stayed locked in my arms.

I wasn’t sure how long we sat there, our grief hanging in the air around us and bonding us together as we wallowed in it. But for once, I didn’t find I was consumed by all the bad things. I was actually able to remember the good times too. I could almost hear their laughter, see their smiles. And as we stayed there together, I let my eyes fall closed as I soaked it in. And I wondered if there might just be something good in this world for me after all.



I woke for the third time this week nestled in the arms of a beautiful man. I was wedged between the back of the couch and his side, his arm locked around me as my cheek rested against his chest. His breathing was slow and steady, matching my own. I didn't want to move in case I disturbed this moment. It was as fragile as glass and as temporary as a thunder storm.

Everything he'd told me about his family last night had broken my heart and made my hate for Saint Memphis solidify. His father was a villainous bastard and Saint clearly took after him.

My soul ached for Monroe. To have gone through so much pain at the hands of one man made me want to tear through time and space to reach the perpetrator and throttle him in his sleep. I hadn't known what a vengeful person I could be until I'd met the Night Keepers. But what was one more person to add to the list of my enemies now?

Monroe stood at my side through anything, a fierce protector with a dark heart. And I would be his protector too. His knight. His ride or die. We were

in this together, more deeply than I'd ever realised. Despite knowing he had his own pursuit of revenge, nothing could have prepared me for the intense bond I'd feel toward him when hearing his reasons for seeking it. I'd help in any way I could to bring him justice. But I knew with a heavy grief that weighed down my entire body, nothing would ever heal the wounds of losing his family. I may have lost Jessica, but no one had taken her from me, ripped her life away. She'd died because of an illness. There was no one to hate for it. Just a cavity in my chest which she'd once filled and no one ever would again. Having someone to blame would have eaten me alive. But in a way, maybe holding onto that blame gave Monroe purpose. I'd spent so long after losing Jess feeling utterly helpless. Better to hate than to drown in despair. And as I thought that, my mind turned to Blake and my gut knotted as I suddenly understood him far too well for my liking. What he did would never be okay, but maybe it made a twisted kind of sense at last.

Birdsong carried to me beyond the patio doors and peace enveloped me like a cloud as my worries ebbed away. Nash Monroe was safety embodied. I could have laid in his arms forever and never wanted for anything more than his comforting touch. But darkness called to me beyond this haven. There were too many harsh truths I couldn't ignore. Like the fact that he was my teacher. Or that we'd aligned ourselves as allies against the Night Keepers and I didn't need the complication of crushing on him. Sometimes, I was sure he felt it too, this crackling, electric energy between us. But I couldn't see him ever giving into that urge. We may have been fighting the same war, but there was plenty standing between us too. He was on a mission to destroy Saint Memphis's dad and nothing or no one was going to draw his eye away from that target. And I didn't want to distract him from it either. But sometimes...

Better get out of here before I do something stupid.

I brushed my hand down his chest as I moved to get up and he caught my wrist before I could try and make my escape. His eyes opened and I gazed down at him, half propped up as I leaned over him, caught red-handed.

“Princess,” he said in surprise, his voice gruff from sleep and making me ache for him.

“Hi,” I breathed and a frown pulled at his brow. His dark blonde hair was messy and fell into his ocean blue eyes. He looked so tempting, I wanted to graze my nails across his stubble and ravish him. *Probably not the best plan though, huh Tate?*

He released me, pushing himself up to stand and I swung my legs over the edge of the couch with a yawn. My eyes travelled to the Night Keeper tattoo on the back of his neck with my gut twisting. *He’s one of them.*

“I didn’t mean to fall asleep there,” he muttered, his hand slipping into his sweatpants and rearranging his junk as he strode away into the bathroom at a brisk pace.

I was left with my throat dry and my nails biting into the couch either side of my legs. He was pissed. At me? Maybe. Maybe not. It wasn’t my fault we’d passed out together and I couldn’t say I regretted it either. Coach Monroe clearly felt differently.

When he returned from the bathroom, the air between us grew thick, neither of us saying a word. He strode into the kitchenette and I watched his back muscles flex beneath his wifebeater as he silently made coffee.

“Milk? Sugar?” he grunted eventually and I replied yes to both.

When he planted my coffee down on the table before me and sat on the furthest chair away from me, I knew I needed to say something.

“It’s no big deal, you know?” I said, picking up my coffee and blowing gently on the surface to cool it down.

He watched me with his throat bobbing. “It can’t happen again.”

I rolled my eyes and his jaw pulsed.

“I mean it, princess,” he growled and the deep tenor of his voice made my toes curl up against the carpet.

Ooh, I like when he means stuff.

I nodded, but he didn't seem convinced, surveying me like I was a fire on his couch about to burn his house to the ground.

“I'd better go.” I stood up, grabbing my phone from the table and hunting for my bag.

Monroe was on his feet in the same moment, placing his coffee down and staring at me like he had a thousand things he wanted to say.

I found my bag on the floor, overturned with the contents spilling out of it and I huffed, dropping down and gathering everything up. The silence was making my ears hurt and I just wanted to get out of here before this got any more awkward. I snatched some leggings from the landslide of stuff and tugged them on under Monroe's shirt.

I finally stood up, stuffing my phone into the chaos of my bag and turning to the door, finding Monroe standing in front of it. My heart juddered and I clutched the strap of my bag tighter.

His jaw was tight and his eyes hauntingly dark. “I broke a rule,” he ground out.

My lips parted and a laugh suddenly escaped me, breaking the tension. “Well, I'll let you off this time.”

I moved toward the door, but he didn't get out of my way, his eyes travelling down me and making my skin come alive with energy.

“I'm a Night Keeper now,” he said in a low tone and my eyebrows rose as I realised he was being serious. “Punish me, princess.”

Fuck me, those words from his lips were like an aphrodisiac, making my pulse sky rocket and everything south of my waistband clench deliciously.

Before I knew it, I'd let my bag slide from my shoulder and it hit the floor with a thud, following my instincts which were driving me toward him like a missile. There was only one way forward. Only one way that made sense.

"Alright." I grinned tauntingly and pointed to the couch. "Sit down."

He stepped past me, his arm brushing mine and making goosebumps tumble across my body as he obliged, lowering down onto the couch.

I chewed on my lower lip, wondering what I was going to do to him, coming up with a million filthy thoughts which I definitely couldn't act on. I wasn't going to hurt him. He'd done nothing wrong in my eyes. But if he wanted to play this game, then I was ready to indulge him.

I grabbed my scarf from where it was hanging with my coat beside the door, walking up behind him. My throat constricted as I leaned forward and wrapped it around his eyes. I tied the soft black and red scarf behind the back of his head, my heart drumming as I relished having power over this heavenly man.

My thumb fell to trace over the tattoo on the back of his neck and he shivered visibly like my touch was a live wire against his flesh.

I headed away to the kitchen, hunting the fridge and smirking as I found a can of whipped cream, walking back to him with it at a steady pace. He sat up straighter as he heard me approaching, his chest rising and falling as he waited for me to pounce.

"Are you scared, Nash?" I teased, moving to perch on the coffee table in front of him.

"Not of you," he growled.

"But of something?" I questioned, my brows tugging together as I leaned towards him, my breath feathering over his cheeks.

He nodded in admission, but said no more.

"What?" I whispered, desperate to climb inside his head and read his

secrets.

“Of making bad decisions,” he said in a low tone.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose to attention and I leaned in even closer, breathing in his scent of fresh pine until I was heady. “You should have more faith in yourself.”

He said nothing and I doubted I’d get any more out of him so I gripped his chin, tilting his head back.

“Open your mouth,” I instructed.

He hesitated for only a moment before he did as I said. I tipped the can up, squirting it into his mouth until it was full and he choked it down through a laugh.

“Consider yourself punished,” I joked, moving to get up when he suddenly lunged at me, grabbing my waist and throwing me down on the couch beneath him.

“Nash!” I gasped as he ripped his blindfold off, snatched the can from my grip and gazed down at me menacingly.

I tried to launch myself from the seat, but he caught my arm and wrestled me down into the cushions again, making my heart thunder with adrenaline. His hands on me were the sweetest form of sin. I wanted to commit it again and again.

He tipped the can up, squirting it over my mouth and I laughed, kicking and punching him, but with no real power behind the blows. I licked the cream from my lips, lunging up and grabbing his wrist as I tried to tear the can out of his hand.

He pressed his knee between my thighs and caught one of my wrists, slamming it down onto the cushion above my head and releasing a victorious laugh. But no way was I going to let him win.

I locked my legs around his waist and yanked his hand to my mouth,

sinking my teeth into his skin. He released the can with a growl and I snatched hold of it, aiming it back at him and squirting it everywhere.

He grabbed my hips, flipping me over beneath him and I gasped in surprise as he crushed me down into the cushions with his chest pressing against my back, taking hold of the can and prising it from my fingers.

I panted beneath him as he pressed his hand to my back, his hips lifting so his dick wasn't grinding into my ass.

"You're not even trying to win," he scolded and I laughed.

"It's just a game," I said to cover myself, but I knew exactly why I hadn't tried that hard to fight back. It felt seriously good being thrown around by him.

He stood up suddenly and I rolled over, covered in cream and grinning my head off. He smiled back at me, a genuine no-holding-back smile which lit me up from the inside. Catching my hand, he pulled me to my feet, nose to nose with him. "Don't ever pull punches with me."

He leaned in slow and tempting and my heart nearly combusted at the change in his mood. *Holy shit. Is he going to kiss me??*

I froze on the spot, my heart a wild horse galloping through my chest. I'd dreamed of his mouth against mine so many times. I'd fantasised about what it would be like to fall apart in the solid strength of his arms. He made me feel powerful, unstoppable. He was the kindling to my fire, stoking the very flames of my soul.

He ran the pad of his tongue up the side of my face, licking away the cream and smacking his lips. I felt the heat of his tongue like it was rolling between my thighs and I stared at him in shock.

"Better go back to The Temple, princess." He backed up, wiping a line of cream from the corner of his mouth and sucking it from his finger.

Did I just get dismissed? The guy was infuriating. One moment he was

angry at me, looking like he wanted to put a ten foot pole between us, the next he was begging to be punished then wrestling me down into his couch all before punctuating the morning by licking my damn face like a savage and casually sending me away.

I tutted, hooking up my bag from the floor. I abandoned my scarf, not wanting to turn back and grabbed my coat by the door as I kicked my shoes on.

Before he could say another word, I was out the door and throwing it shut behind me as I veered off into the woods so I didn't have to pass by the other teacher's housing.

Super hot, face-licking asshole.

I was soon striding back into The Temple covered in cream with heat flaring between my thighs which had everything to do with my beautiful P.E. teacher. I knew in that moment he'd never cross the lines between us. He'd dance on it though, toying with my feelings until I wanted to yank him close and cross the line myself. Maybe I just imagined the connection between us, wanted to feel it so badly because I loved sharing an enemy with him. But why would he risk his career, his whole reputation for a student? He wasn't an idiot. And I shouldn't have flirted with him, but sometimes it was impossible to stop.

"Where the fuck have you been?!" Saint bellowed and I slammed to a halt in the entranceway, finding him rising from his usual seat at the dining table.

Kyan and Blake were nowhere in sight and it frightened me being alone with him. Not that either of them had ever done much to hold Saint back against me. But I had the feeling this Night Keeper was the most dangerous when he was solitary. Like a vampire out for its next taste of blood.

"I was at Monroe's," I said, rolling my eyes to try and diffuse the situation and Saint didn't like that at all.

“I don’t give a fuck. You have rules to abide to. You are meant to have our breakfast on the table by eight o’clock, Plague.”

The coldness in his eyes said he was letting the cruel creature inside him take over. And it was terrifying. I was Plague and he was Master. That was how he liked it best, when things were clear cut between us. But they never felt that clear to me. My relationship with Saint was like rooting through muddy water, you never knew when you were going to cut yourself on something sharp.

Saint kicked his chair aside, sending it crashing to the floor and I stood like a rabbit in the headlights of an oncoming truck as he strode towards me.

“Bend over the couch,” he snarled and my mind took two seconds too long to compute those words. He was upon me in an instant, dragging me over to the couch. His hand pressed to my back as he pushed me forward to bend over the back of it and I gasped as he yanked my leggings down to expose my silky pink frenchies. A tremor of alarm rushed through me, but the treacherous kick of excitement chasing it stopped me from fighting back.

His hand remained firm against my back as he smacked my ass with the fullness of his other palm, making a clap ring out through the air. The spike of pain followed a tingling flow of bliss which made me suck on my lower lip as I swallowed the moan in my throat.

Oh holy fuck, why does that feel so good?

His hand collided with my ass again and my hips shifted unbidden. His hand snaked into my hair and yanked tight.

“Hold still,” he warned. “Take your punishment and think about what you did.”

I bit down on the inside of my cheek at those words. God this was hot. Did he even realise it? I didn’t want to feel this way towards this brutish man, but I’d lost all control of myself, practically panting for him.

He's a vile human being with more poison in his body than blood.

He spanked me hard enough to make me flinch, but it was sweetened by the spreading warmth between my thighs in response. *Oh my god.*

Saint was so unshakeable, but he adored having this power over people. Over me in particular. Was he getting off on it, or was this just his twisted way of asserting dominance? He never put Blake or Kyan over his knee when they were bad. But then again, I wouldn't have put it past him either.

When his hand clapped against my ass for a fourth time, I couldn't hide my reaction. A moan rolled from my lips and my legs spread wider, my ass lifting with an obvious desire for more. *God what am I doing?*

I felt him fall still, his hand loosening in my hair, but he didn't pull away.

"Saint," I said breathily, but he didn't respond.

He released me suddenly, yanking up my leggings and I swallowed back the ball in my throat as I turned to him, my cheeks flushed and my lips parted.

He stared at me like he'd never seen me before and I took a step forward, unsure what I was seeking, but needing to be close to him. He didn't move a muscle as I slipped into his personal space, drowning in his dangerous scent.

I was courting the devil, but I didn't care. I wanted to get past his defences, I ached to see the endless darkness in his eyes split apart and let me in. I wanted this. He wanted this. Did it need to mean anything more than that?

"Do it again," I whispered, a plea in my voice which didn't sound like me at all. I wasn't used to being submissive, but I was starting to get the idea that I might enjoy it if I tried. And with him somehow, it felt right. I didn't feel like I was giving anything up, just releasing all responsibilities, all of the heaviness weighing on me to him and just being...free.

"You like it," he stated, no emotion in his voice but there was a hint of

surprise in his gaze which said he was caught off guard and didn't know how to react. But surely he must have had girls bent to his desires like that before? He could have had every girl in this school down on their knees for him or bent over a table while he gave them hell and indulged in his darkest fantasies. So why did he look almost...nervous?

"You want to, don't you?" I asked, reaching out to rest my hand on his chest and feel his heart pounding wildly beneath it. The confirmation that he was excited made my own heartbeat quicken. I wanted this far more than I should have. I ached to know what it would be like to surrender myself to this man and hand him the power he so desperately craved.

Shit, am I really tempted to relinquish my control to this monster?

"Go," he snapped. "Shower. Dress. Get to class." He pointed in the direction of Kyan and Blake's bathroom and my heart juddered at being dismissed for the second time this morning.

I stepped back, fearing the rage in his eyes and I headed away to do as he said, my ass still stinging from the impact of his hand.

My heart didn't slow for a long time and I expected to feel shame for offering myself to him when it did. But the shame didn't come. Maybe some fundamental part of me needed to be freed from the chains that bound me to this world occasionally. Maybe I didn't have to be embarrassed about that either. It was all so new to me, this craving. And I hated that Saint was the one who awoke it in me.

I'd seen the starving creature in his eyes. I was sure he wanted this. But maybe the lines would become too blurry for him to act on those feelings. He would never break the rules. It was just a shame that I yearned for the touch of that particular monster, because even if I got the chance to get revenge on him for the terrible things he'd done to me, I couldn't see any way to forgiving him. He would always be my cruellest nightmare, especially

because he was now my most twisted desire.

I sat in my last lesson of the day beside Mila near the back of the class. The Night Keepers had - so very graciously – allowed me to pick where I sat now instead of forcing me to be alone at the front of the class. Although, that gift was somewhat ruined by the fact that any classes I shared with them, they all sat around me like lions guarding a carcass. Which was fitting because it felt like they were tearing pieces of my flesh off with their teeth half the time.

I'd made sure Mila sat with me, but I didn't think she enjoyed being within their circle. She lowered her voice every time she spoke to me and shot them glances whenever we laughed. I, on the other hand, laughed my ass off and pretended they didn't exist. Not even when Blake had prodded me in the back to get my attention for fifteen minutes straight. I was probably going to pay for my rudeness at some point, but I didn't care. I wasn't going to bow my head to them anymore and I was going to enjoy the time I spent with my friend whether they were breathing down the back of my neck or not. Kyan hadn't spoken to me all day. He looked at me though. I could feel his gaze burning into me at all times and I tried not to let it affect me, but it was impossible.

When the bell rang to sound the end of the day, I got up and headed out of the classroom with Mila, sensing the three dickwits following.

“Will you be at the library tonight?” I asked Mila hopefully. I only had to spend a few hours back at The Temple before I could slip away to the solace of the library for study time. It had become my haven. A place where I could be entirely free of my binds, spend time with Mila and the Unspeakables and just *be*.

“Yep, six o’clock sharp,” she said and I smiled.

Someone shoved their way past me in the corridor and my bag was knocked to the floor, everything falling out of it because apparently life was a bitch and it couldn’t have fallen the right way up. I crouched down in annoyance, starting to pick up my shit as Pearl Devickers muttered *virus-spreading slut* and hurried on.

“Hey!” Blake barked like a guard dog and I flinched at the sound, looking up at Pearl as she halted. “Get back here and pick up Tatum’s stuff,” he growled as Mila dropped down to help me gather everything.

People were crowding past to try and get out of the way and some of my things were getting kicked further down the hall. Punch – gah, I mean Toby-appeared, hurrying to help pick up my things too.

“You don’t have to,” I told him.

“I want to.” He smiled genuinely and I smiled back.

Pearl rushed back to help with her lips pursed and her pale cheeks touched with an angry red colour.

“Plague, get up!” Saint snapped and I glanced over my shoulder at him with a frown.

“I can do it-”

“Get. Up,” he commanded and I noticed Kyan and Blake had formed a wall of muscle behind him to stop any more students from running by. Not that anyone was trying to now, they were all shrinking away from the Night Keepers like mice before hungry cats.

I stood up and grabbed Mila’s hand to pull her to her feet too as Pearl scrambled to pick up all of my things. She *had* been the one to knock my bag out of my hands after all.

Saint snapped his fingers impatiently and Deepthroat, Squits and Freeloader ran to help her, carefully putting everything back into my bag as

Pearl and Toby handed it to them.

Freeloader passed it back to me when the job was done, bowing her head before scampering away. Pearl planted a hand on her hip, glaring at me as I felt the Night Keepers drawing closer behind me like a shadow.

“Punish her, Plague,” Saint breathed in my ear.

“Show her what she’s worth, baby,” Kyan whispered in my other, the two of them sending a violent shiver through me.

“It’s fine. She’s sorry, aren’t you Pearl?” I asked, recalling the time they’d made me punch her. I wasn’t going to be forced into anything like that again. Even if Pearl deserved it slightly more this time.

She surveyed me coldly, tucking a long strand of black hair behind her ear. Her eyes shifted to the Night Keepers behind me and her resting bitch face vanished. “Yeah, I’m sorry.”

“Not good enough,” Blake growled, stepping around me and beckoning me forward. “Make her pay.”

“No.” I planted my feet. “She said sorry and picked up my shit. That’s good enough.”

“It’s not,” Kyan said dangerously, prodding me in the back. “I order you to punish her, baby. She needs to remember her place.”

“I said *no*.” I whipped around to face him and Mila stepped back in the corner of my eye as Blake waved her away. Toby hurried to join the rest of the crowd with a fearful glance at the Night Keepers as they let him pass.

Kyan’s upper lip peeled back and fear gripped my heart. He looked more animal than man right now.

“You have to follow the rules,” Saint hissed, but he didn’t interfere, allowing Kyan to face off with me for refusing.

Kyan stepped past me, his shoulders rigid as he approached Pearl, cracking his neck like he was readying for a fight. She cowered before him,

her knees visibly shaking like a cartoon character.

“I said sorry, Kyan, what else do you want me to do?” she asked, her voice quavering.

He surveyed the area as if hunting for a weapon then pointed at a piece of gum sticking to the floor by her feet. “You dropped your gum, Devickers. Better pick it up.”

Her face paled as she looked down to the gloopy pink blob by her shoe which was blackened in places by grime. It clearly wasn't hers and it made my stomach churn just to look at it, let alone touch it.

“Kyan,” I snapped and he shot a glare back over his shoulder at me that made my heart lurch.

He turned back to Pearl, lazily circling a finger in the air to hurry her up. “You're wasting precious seconds of my life right now. Pick. It. Up.”

Pearl dropped down with a whimper, scraping it off the floor between her finger and thumb with her nose wrinkling. She stood back up, looking to Kyan with an expression that begged for mercy.

“In your mouth,” he encouraged and a ripple of laughter carried from the onlooking students.

Pearl's lower lip trembled as she lifted the gum to her lips, her eyes watering as she pushed it onto her mouth with a grimace.

“Now chew,” Kyan growled and Saint released a dark chuckle beside me. I shot a glance at him, finding his eyes alight with cruelty as he watched them. On my other side, Blake was cracking his knuckles and watching Pearl with a smirk.

Pearl started chewing, her whole face screwing up in disgust and my throat constricted at the thought.

“What flavour is it?” Kyan asked casually.

“Strawberry,” she said through a mouth of saliva, clearly trying not to

swallow.

“They say gum stays in your stomach for seven years after you swallow it. I wonder if that’s true...” Kyan mused and Pearl’s eyes widened in horror.

“Do it,” he commanded.

She winced and I strode forward. This had gone far enough. But as I approached to try and intervene, Kyan threw out an arm to stop me. “I’ll deal with you when I’m finished dealing with Devickers.”

“Kyan,” I snarled. “Stop it.” He ignored me, surveying Pearl and her whole face screwed up as she forced the gum down, her throat bobbing as she swallowed.

“Open your mouth,” Kyan instructed and Pearl did so as he peered inside to check she’d really done it, nodding his approval before grabbing my arm and stalking past her.

I stumbled as he pulled me along at a ferocious pace, my heart pounding madly at his hardened features. There was none of the light I usually saw in him. He was sticking to his vow, becoming the monster I’d accused him of being. And now I was going to pay the price of those words. But I wasn’t going to beg. If he was going to prove how black his heart really was then he was only confirming my accusation. Beneath all the bullshit pretence that he liked me, he really just wanted to own and hurt me like the others.

He kicked the doors open and half carried me down the steps into the courtyard beyond Aspen Halls, hauling me along onto the path in the direction of The Temple.

I glanced over my shoulder, finding Saint and Blake following. Blake was laughing at something on his phone like he didn’t have a care in the world and Saint was floating along the pavement like a malevolent spirit with unfinished business.

We soon arrived at The Temple and Kyan directed me inside just as rain

started to fall from the sky and pepper my cheeks. “Get a bucket of soapy water and a cloth.”

I pressed my lips tightly together, heading inside with a huff as Saint and Blake followed and Kyan walked away. I glanced curiously over my shoulder, spotting him heading into the trees and wondering what the hell he had planned for me. Was he gonna go roll in the mud and make me wash him down with a rag? *Wouldn't put it past him.*

I tossed my bag onto the couch and was about to walk away when I noticed a piece of paper sticking out the top of it. I took it out, frowning at the typed words in the centre of the page. It definitely wasn't mine.

*Sinful lips I want to taste,
In the night, you're mine to chase.
Ever lonely, ever breaking,
You'll soon be mine for the taking.*

I frowned, glancing over at Blake as he looked through the fridge for a snack and Saint headed upstairs to shower and change in his usual routine. I folded up the note and stuffed it back in my bag. It must have gotten amongst my things by mistake when I'd dropped everything. Though I wouldn't have put it past Saint to write a creepy ass poem like that. Maybe he'd risen to strange new heights of fucking with me.

I headed into the kitchenette and took out a bucket and cloth from under the sink as Blake gave up on his fridge hunt, his gaze slipping to me instead like I might just be what he needed to sate his appetite.

“Someone's in trouble,” Blake sang, grinning at me as he opened a cupboard and took out a bag of peanut M&Ms. He tossed one in the air and caught it in his mouth, crunching it between his teeth. I snorted a laugh as I

placed the bucket in the sink, squirted some soap into it and started filling it with warm water.

“Kyan’s just trying to prove a point that he’s a big scary asshole,” I said lightly, ignoring the tug in my chest that said he *was* a big scary asshole and he was about to do something terrifying.

“That’s the thing about us, Cinders...” Blake threw another M&M and caught it in his mouth again with a smirk. “Underestimate us and we’ll prove you wrong. Really fucking wrong.”

I turned off the water and hefted the bucket out of the sink. “So why didn’t you pull the trigger on me Blake?” I arched an eyebrow and his jaw tightened, his eyes darkening by ten shades.

“Maybe because you knew I could. I didn’t need to prove it,” he said in a strained voice and I walked closer to him, my heart thrashing wildly.

“Or maybe because you knew I wasn’t to blame,” I said, fixing him in my gaze, a shattered part of me begging for that to be the case.

He released a heavy breath then reached up and pushed an M&M between my lips. “Don’t flatter yourself, Cinderella.” He smiled, light dancing in his eyes again as he put his mask back in place. “But maybe I do like having you around. Sometimes.”

“To torture?” I guessed, biting down on the M&M and savouring the nutty sweetness.

He shrugged then reached out, taking the bucket from me without a word and marching outside. I jogged after him in confusion as he placed it down on the porch, the rain crashing down beyond it and flooding the path.

“I didn’t need your help,” I said and he gave me a slanted smile, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he walked back towards me, looking annoyingly cute. It was kind of disarming.

“I know, sweetheart. You’re trained to survive, to thrive on your own. But

that doesn't mean you should, right?"

He walked back inside without another word and I stood there waiting for Kyan to return, wondering why Blake was being nice and mentally adding it to the list of headfucks these guys gave me on a regular basis.

A droning noise carried from somewhere out in the woods and I frowned as I strained my ears to listen over the downpour.

A dirt bike tore out of the trees covered in mud and my brows arched at the sight. Kyan wore a helmet that was designed to look like a skull, the visor shaped like the open, fanged mouth of it. Mud was splattered up his uniform and my heart lurched as he veered down onto the grass to the right of the path ahead of me, kicked the stand down and dismounted. He strode toward me at a fierce pace, his helmet making him look like a hellish, muscular version of Jack Skellington. *Holy shit.*

He pulled the helmet off as he made it beneath the porch, tucking it under one arm, his dark hair loose and wild around his shoulders.

Damn, he looked hot. I didn't know how they even made uniforms to fit his powerful frame but if I had to take a guess, that shit was tailored. All of theirs were.

"What are you staring at, baby?" He smirked a deadly smirk. "Start cleaning." He jerked his chin towards the filthy dirt bike out in the rain and I scowled.

I shed my blazer, shoving it into Kyan's chest then rolled up my shirt sleeves, grabbed the bucket and strolled over to it. There was no point in arguing against this. Cleaning his shit-stained bike was a punishment I could stomach. There were far worse things he could think up I was sure.

I dropped the bucket with a growl of annoyance, taking out the wet cloth and starting to scrub at the mud coating it. Beneath the dirt, the bike was jet black with an electric blue lightning bolt down either side of it.

I was soon soaked through, my white shirt plastered to my skin and totally transparent, revealing my pink bra beneath. I threw a glance at Kyan and realised he'd carried a whole fucking armchair out onto the porch to sit on and watch me. His foot rested on his knee and his elbow perched on the arm of the seat so his hand could prop up his head. There was a dangerous kind of energy rolling from him today that had my heart going haywire. Every look I threw in his direction made my stomach knot and fray. He was out for blood. My blood. And I was sure he was far from done with this game yet. He wanted revenge for me belittling him during my punishment. But how the hell did he think all of this made *me* feel? Every day was a damn punishment for me. But I'd clearly touched a nerve with him and he was lashing out. So I was going to have to ride out the storm and ensure he didn't see the way he was getting to me.

When the bike was gleaming and my uniform was flecked with mud, I grabbed the bucket, walking towards Kyan and dropping it at his feet. It splashed over the biker boots he was wearing and he stood up with a growl, stepping towards me with intention.

I tried to dart past him, but he caught my arm, making me kick over the bucket and sending the dirty water spilling everywhere over the porch. *Saint's gonna have a fit when he sees this mess.*

He snatched his helmet, pushing my hair back and dropping it straight over my head. "We're going for a ride," he purred and I didn't think it was going to be like the last time I'd ridden on a motorcycle with him.

"No thanks, asshat." I moved to take the helmet off, but he caught my hands, twirling me around and dragging me towards the bike.

"It wasn't a request, it was an order," he snarled.

"Now you're starting to sound like Saint."

He turned, snapping the visor down to shut me up and swung his leg over

the bike. He patted his knee and I pursed my lips in refusal even though he couldn't see it.

“On,” he snapped and the fire in his eyes told me he wasn't going to let me out of this.

I sighed, moving forward to sit in front of him but he spun me around so I was facing him instead.

I clenched my teeth as I swung my leg over him, sitting right across his lap so my legs were spread and my skirt was riding up.

He took a moment to admire the view with a deadly craving in his eyes before kicking up the stand and starting the bike in the next motion. It roared beneath me as he took off, spinning us around so fast that I wrapped my whole body around him to hold on, leaning against his right shoulder so he could see past my head.

He took off up a path into the trees at high speed, climbing the hill and veering off of the track onto the muddy ground as the rain washed over us. My heart beat like crazy and my stomach swirled with butterflies as we crested the hill then raced down the other side of it full throttle.

“Kyan!” I yelled in fear, surprise, excitement. I was still angry at him, but hell this was exhilarating.

He tore along the bumpy ground, weaving through the trees down a narrow track which looked regularly used and I wondered how I hadn't known he owned this bike. But then again, there were a thousand things I didn't know about Kyan Roscoe when I really thought about it. Outside of this school, I had no idea who he was. Who his family were. He'd never shared anything with me apart from his desire to fight and fuck. That was all he wanted me to see. I wasn't special enough to him to be shown anything deeper.

We climbed another hill, reaching the top with a bump and Kyan slowed

to a halt. I was shaking with the thrill of the ride and I was aware of every place our bodies connected, the heat of him blazing through his sodden blazer. I didn't even feel the cold. Every part of me was alive with raging, spiralling heat.

He kicked the stand down and pulled the helmet off of my head, hanging it on the handlebars behind me. The rain rushed down on my face once more and Kyan's eyes followed the movements of the droplets rolling along my cheeks. I could taste him on the air, his lips so close, so inviting. But at the same time, his eyes warned me off like I was getting too close to a wild animal.

"Get off the bike," he growled and I frowned, starting to hate this monster act he'd committed himself to since I'd punished him.

"You don't have to be a dick, you know? You've made your point," I said, raising my voice over the howling wind.

"Get off!" he barked, making my heart leap and I slammed up my walls against him.

"Asshole." I dismounted and turned around, my breath catching in my throat as I gazed down the hill to a large clearing in the woods below. The earth had been carved into a track with man-made mounds rising up around it, spiralling towards a large wooden jump at the heart of it.

"You see that plank of wood?" He pointed to where it was laying on the ground ten feet in front of the jump.

"Yeah?" I asked, sensing I didn't wanna know why he was pointing it out.

"Go lie down on it and don't move an inch," he growled, giving me a push toward the edge of the hill.

I balled my hands into fists, hesitating for a second as he started revving the engine behind me.

"Scared yet, baby?" he called and my jaw locked tight. He wanted me to

flinch, but it wasn't going to happen.

He continued to rev the engine and I looked back at him, my hair plastered to my cheeks, victory seeping into his expression.

I had a feeling he was going to let me refuse this if I really wanted to, but that look on his face said he was hoping for me to chicken out. And I wasn't going to do it.

I flipped him the finger then jogged down the hill like an eager beaver and laid down on the plank at the bottom of it which was half sinking into the mud. My throat was tight and my pulse was elevating with true fear. *What the fuck am I doing?*

Kyan gazed down at me from the top of the hill, smoke pluming from the exhaust of his bike as he stared, his brow pinched in confusion. He suddenly grabbed the helmet, shoving it on so he looked like a true demon, spinning the bike around and racing down the hill onto the track. He veered away from me and I choked against the fumes that billowed my way as he tore up and down the huge humps, jumping and doing tricks like it was second nature to him.

My heart thundered in my ears as he made his way around the track, spiralling ever closer to the central jump that would lead him right over me. Or onto me. *Shit, why am I doing this? And why don't I want to stop?*

The buzz of adrenaline in my veins made my head spin and a quietly wild part of me was enjoying this. The anticipation was making my veins hum and my heart thump against the base of my throat. I was terrified and ecstatic, bordering on diving into insanity as Kyan turned towards the jump, speeding up it with the growl of the engine burrowing into my skull.

Oh my god, this is insane!

He raced over the edge, soaring towards me through the air, the front wheel higher than the back, his head cocked down to look at me. My

breathing halted all together as he sailed over me, my eyes wide and my pulse slamming against my ear drums.

He missed me by several feet, the bike thudding onto the ground and skidding in the mud as he came to a halt.

He turned his head, flipping up the visor as he gazed at me with lust and hate and awe written into what little I could see of his features. The engine idled as we locked eyes, the rain rushing down to soak me, feeling like kisses against my flesh. I was heady, high on the thrill and aching for him because of it. It was fucked up, but Kyan didn't treat me like I was some fragile thing, he saw the strength in me and built more around me like armour. Together, we could take on the world. Be utterly unstoppable.

“Do you know what the difference between us is, Tatum Rivers?” he shouted to me over the wind and the rain and I pushed myself up to sit.

I shook my head, my body too numb for me to stand yet as I drank in the ferocity in his eyes.

“You're everything and I'm nothing. And the worst thing about that is... you know it.”

He revved the engine, but locked his hand over the brake and mud spewed out from under the back wheel. It splattered over me and I screamed in alarm, holding my hands out to try and stop it. He kept revving until I was covered, filthy, frozen, then released the throttle and tore away up the hill, leaving me in the mud to rot.



I yawned widely as Mr Helix talked us through some epically boring speech on micro climates in our geography class and I tried to marry up the world's dullest teacher with the guy I'd seen swinging a textbook with the intention to brain people during the break in. There he sat in his tweed suit with the elbow patches like some douchebag wearing a professor costume from the nineties looking as innocent as fuck. In fact, give him a pipe and a flat cap and we'd have ourselves a regular Sherlock Holmes. It was certainly a choice. And not one I would have made.

I zoned him out and let my attention wander around the rest of the class as I searched for something to take my attention. Of course, my gaze lingered on Tatum more than once. She was sitting in front of me with Mila at her side as they not-so-subtly whispered to each other and giggled.

There was something in her laughter that was so real and pure that it set an ache raging in my soul.

My eyes fell closed for a moment as I thought of my mom. She used to text me every day about some asinine thing or another. I'd ignore her as often as not. No, I didn't have an opinion on the colour she had the dining room redecorated. No, I didn't watch whatever show she'd been bingeing. No, I

didn't listen to any of the music she'd added to our family playlist... I listened to it now though. I listened to it and wished I could have told her that I loved it. That I shouldn't have assumed our tastes would be so different just because I was older now and didn't need her help in finding music to listen to. I wished I could have sat and listened to some of it with her while we lounged out on the patio behind our house in the summer and let the sun set around us like we used to. I wished growing up didn't make me think I had to grow so far away from her that I'd wasted the time I hadn't realised was precious.

I swiped a hand down my face and tried not to wallow. But some days it was harder than others.

As I opened my eyes again, I found Squits looking at me with a soft frown and I bared my teeth at him like a beast.

I couldn't say for sure if he shit himself again, but I was pretty fucking hopeful. My heart spiked with the little hit of power I got as he hurriedly dropped my gaze and turned away from me.

I was in need of a distraction, and he'd just given me a damn good idea.

I lifted my pen to my mouth as I thought about it with a smirk curling up the corners of my lips, the plastic clacking against my teeth.

"Stop," Saint snarled, his hand slamming down on my desk and drawing the focus of the entire class.

My smile widened and I clacked the pen across my teeth again, my gaze meeting Saint's with a challenge.

"Do you want to explain why you just interrupted my class, Mr Memphis?" Mr Helix called out, but Saint didn't so much as shoot him a glance.

He lunged for me suddenly, ripping the pen from my fingers before snapping it in half and striding to the front of the room where he could throw

it in the trash.

But in his haste to shut me up, he hadn't noticed the ink which splattered up the front of his pristine shirt as he broke the pen and as he turned back towards us and everyone spotted it, the class gave a collective inhale of anticipation.

Saint's gaze fell to the ink, his hand curled into a fist, his jaw locked and he suddenly turned and stalked toward the door.

As he passed Freeloader's desk, he upended her pencil case then snatched Bait's workbook from his desk before ripping it cleanly in two. He smacked him around the side of his head with one half, making the white mask covering the top of his face shift and Bait cried out in pain as it tugged at his skin where the glue still secured it.

"Mr Memphis!" Helix shouted in shock, pushing himself to his feet like he intended to do something further to reprimand Saint. But before he could even finish that sentence, Saint strode from the room with one half of Bait's workbook clutched in his fist while dropping the other to the floor like it meant nothing to him.

The door slammed behind him and Kyan snorted a laugh as Helix tried to get the tittering class under control again.

Squits shot a nervous look over his shoulder at me like he could tell I was on the hunt today and I smiled to myself.

The bell rang to mark the end of class and I pushed to my feet without bothering to grab any of my crap. Squits was shovelling his books and pens back into his bag as fast as he could, but it wasn't quick enough to stop me from reaching him before he could leave.

I clamped a hand on his shoulder and he whimpered as he looked up at me. And I knew it made me a total fucking asshole, but it felt so fucking good to know I wielded power like that. Especially over the Unspeakables.

Their crimes had bought them this treatment, so I didn't even have to feel a modicum of guilt over my actions when I needed an outlet for my inner vindictive asshole.

I looked over at Tatum, catching her eye. "Be a lamb, Cinders, and grab mine and Saint's stuff to take back to The Temple," I asked sweetly.

"Seriously?" she huffed, though she knew that commands from any of us were always serious.

I hadn't really been doling out commands since the night we'd all killed for her. Or if I was being totally honest, I hadn't been doing it much since I'd dragged her out to an unmarked grave and pointed a gun at her.

My chest tightened up into a knot as I thought of that night, of the fear in her eyes and the awful feeling of being entirely out of control which had consumed me. I'd fucked up. Seriously, utterly, beyond all reason of a doubt, fucked up. And I wanted to use the excuse that I'd been out of my mind with grief, that I'd been drowning in it, lost and hurting so much that I'd barely even realised what I was doing until I was out there, standing over her with that fucking gun in my hand. But it was no excuse. I was just glad that suddenly it had become so clear. Looking into her eyes and seeing the fear I'd caused her had been this insane wake up call. And thank fuck it had been. I just wished I'd come to my senses sooner. Before I'd put her through that shit. So now, there wasn't any way I was planning on putting her through any more.

"I'm sure Kyan will help you carry it. He likes to play the knight in shining armour," I teased, wondering if she'd notice I'd just pretty much given her an out for the job I'd set.

"Sure thing, baby," Kyan agreed. "I'll carry all of your shit for you, so long as you suck my dick to thank me for it."

"I'd sooner choke on my own vomit," she hissed back at him and he

laughed darkly.

“How’s this then? I’ll carry all of this shit back to The Temple, but tonight, you have to give me one, genuine compliment.”

Tatum’s face twisted like the idea of doing that caused her actual pain, but she glanced at Mila then agreed with a huff. “Fine. I’m going for my study time in the library now. I’ll be back in time for pizza night.”

“Looking forward to it,” Kyan replied with a smirk which said he thought he’d won a point against her.

“Perfect,” Tatum agreed before sweeping everything from mine and Saint’s desks onto the floor and striding out of the room with a shocked Mila at her side. “Have fun picking that up,” she called, her laughter sailing back to us from the corridor as most of the class disappeared.

Mr Helix cast a look my way as I still sat immobilising Squits but as our eyes met, I arched a questioning brow at him and he left too, offering Squits an apologetic look before abandoning him to the sinner in me.

“Pick all of that shit up,” I commanded him as Kyan lazed in his chair without a care in the world. I guessed Tatum hadn’t really thought her cunning plan through – obviously Kyan wouldn’t get down on the floor grabbing all that crap himself.

Squits rushed to obey, crawling around on the floor as he scrambled to collect everything.

I stood and moved to Helix’s desk, retrieving the remains of his coffee which had gone cold in his mug, instant coffee granules still floating in it.

A few of the football team were lingering to watch the show and Deepthroat was hesitating by the door, watching Squits with fearful eyes as he hurried to stack all of mine and Saint’s stuff together before placing them in our bags and handing them to Kyan.

“Drop your pants, Squits,” I instructed lazily.

The little dude with his lanky black hair only hesitated a moment before unbuckling his belt and dropping his trousers to his ankles. I could actually see him shaking and I sighed in disappointment. This was too easy. Like shooting fish in a barrel. It was so much less satisfying goading someone with no backbone.

Luckily for me, he had a pair of crisp, tighy whites on so at least my plan wouldn't be thwarted by dark underwear.

I strode towards him, circling around until I stood behind him where I yanked the waistband of his underwear wide and was gifted a view of his pasty ass crack before I dumped the cold coffee down the back of them.

Squits whimpered as the brown liquid soaked through his white underwear and ran down the backs of his legs, staining them with a wide, brown mark.

The footballers whooped and laughed at the sight of him, but even this prank didn't really do anything to lessen the emptiness in me. I mean, yeah, it was fucking hilarious, but it just didn't matter somehow.

I sighed again and decided to give up on this route of medicine.

"You're going to walk back to your dorm with your pants around your ankles," I commanded as I circled around to look him in the eye again. "And if anyone asks what happened to you, what will you say?"

Squits started to say something then stopped himself as he seemed to realise what answer I was looking for. "That I...I did it again. I shit my pants..."

Kyan roared with laughter along with the footballers and I smirked for effect too.

"Run along then," I encouraged and Kyan shoved himself to his feet as well.

"I'm gonna get a video of this shit for Saint," he announced.

Depththroat moved to Squits' side as he shuffled from the room with his

pants around his ankles and a look on his face that said he might cry. It should have made my fucking day but I just kinda felt...nothing. Even when he stumbled and fell to the floor with his ass in the air and Danny Harper made a perfectly timed farting noise which was all caught on camera.

Yeah, that shit was funny, but it didn't touch me. I huffed irritably as Deepthroat helped Squits up, shooting a doe eyed look at Kyan which said she still had the hots for him even after all the shit he'd put her through. That girl was fucking twisted. And though I knew Kyan wanted her dealt with his way, sometimes I wished he'd just reported the bitch to the police and had her carted off to juvie.

"Don't fucking look at me, you herpes riddled gash," Kyan snarled at her and she quickly looked away again.

I followed the others out as Squits made his walk of shame across campus, the laughter of all the students who caught sight of him bringing a smile to my face even if it wasn't enough to banish my grief today.

Kyan took off back to The Temple when he'd had enough of the show, but I lingered, wanting some other kind of escape while not knowing what.

"Hey, man," Danny said, moving to stand before me and casting a look at the three other members of the football team who were standing with him. I noticed Punch - *Toby* – lingering at the back of the group as he worked to fit back in too.

"Hey," I replied, wondering what he wanted and whether or not I gave a shit.

"So, err, toilet paper supplies are still pretty low in the dorms and I was wondering if there was anything we could trade or maybe do to earn a roll or two..."

The world really has gone to shit, millionaire kids with trust funds big enough to keep them in luxury for life are begging for scraps of fucking toilet

paper. Who ever could have predicted this was the way the world would end? Not with a bang but with a hoard of dirty asses...

“Maybe,” I said thoughtfully. Technically Saint was in charge of TP distribution, but if I could make them jump through enough hoops I was sure he’d agree to paying them with a square or two.

“Brilliant,” Danny said, way too enthusiastically for some fucking toilet paper but that was okay. “What do we need to do?”

I glanced between him and the others, wondering how far I could push them for this. “Something...dangerous,” I said slowly, the idea appealing to the reckless side of me as I wondered if there might be something in this offer that could help banish my grief for a while too.

The four of them looked between each other as they tried to come up with something that would fit the bill.

“We could go on a run down to Murkwell and fuck with the people living there?” Chad McCormack suggested and I huffed irritably.

“I said dangerous not fucking stupid. I don’t want to put everyone here at risk from the Hades Virus for some stupid prank,” I snapped and he quickly dropped his head as he apologised.

“We could steal some of the school golf carts and race them?” Punch suggested tentatively. *Not Punch, dammit, Toby now.* That was going to take some adjusting to.

“Maybe...”

“Or we could go cliff diving?” Danny said, pointing out towards the lake, though from here the trees hid it from view.

“We have a winner,” I declared as my heart beat faster at that suggestion.

Cliff diving over on the east side of the lake was banned because it was dumb as fuck. There were as many rocks as deep pockets of water beneath them and within the shadow of the cliff, it was pretty much impossible to

figure out where they were. Rumour was that a kid had died jumping there once. But I liked my chances well enough to give it a shot. I'd always been a winner.

I turned towards the path and set a fast pace as the sheep fell in behind me, flocking after the wolf they feared rather than risk invoking my wrath.

The guys following me were excitable, joking around and making bets on who would pussy out once we got up there. I didn't really care either way. I just wanted something to drag me away from this pit of emptiness and longing which I could feel closing in on me. Days like this were the worst. When it was hard to even get out of bed and face the world. When the smile on my face felt like a mask that I was desperately fighting to keep pinned in place. And I didn't even know why. Why did I give a shit if everyone saw how deeply this wound had cut me? The answer was, I didn't. I didn't give a single shit if all of these fuckers saw me curled up in a ball sobbing. I'd still be their king when I pulled myself together again.

No, it wasn't about that. It was about *me*. About the way I didn't want to give in to that despair. I didn't want to feel the full weight of what I'd lost. I didn't want to face the crushing pressure of it meaning the end of so many things. And maybe that was a betrayal to my mom and the love I held for her. Or maybe it was an acknowledgement of the fact that this grief had cut too deeply and I knew the wound was fatal.

Surviving it would take a miracle. And those weren't usually offered out to rich boys with black hearts and empty souls.

We took the winding path through the thick woodland right up onto the cliff and headed out towards the edge just as the sun drew low in the sky and gilded the waves with the onset of sunset.

"Why doesn't this seem like a good idea anymore?" Punch muttered and I tossed a scathing look his way as I shrugged out of my blazer.

“Because being an Unspeakable basically castrated you,” I deadpanned. “And now you’re such a pussy that I can probably make you shit yourself with a raised eyebrow.”

The other guys all fell about laughing, shifting towards me and putting distance between them and Toby as his neck flushed red and he fought to hold my eye. I half wondered if I’d be able to goad him into punching me again. There would be something really fucking poetic in that.

“I’m not a pussy,” he grunted.

“No?” I lunged towards him, clapping my hands right in his face and he flinched backwards, tripping on a branch hidden in the grass and falling on his butt as the rest of the guys howled with laughter.

Still didn’t really make me feel any better but it made my point.

I turned away from him dismissively and continued to shed my clothes until I was wearing nothing but my boxers.

I rolled my shoulders back as I approached the edge, looking down at the enormous drop below and the way the water lapped around the huge rocks which jutted up out of the lake.

As I looked down at what could very well be my death, I had to wonder if that was even the worst thing in the world? It would at least mean an end to all this heartache. Not that I’d ever really considered ending it all, but what if that was the only solution? What if living with this grief didn’t get any easier? It just got harder. What if more people I loved caught that fucking virus that Tatum’s father had released and were stolen from me? There was real fear in that. In living in a world where something so unpredictable could take away the few people who really made my life worth living in the blink of an eye.

And as I thought of them. Of my family and of Saint and Kyan, I knew I wasn’t really considering leaving them. But sometimes it almost felt like I

already had. Like I was living a life wrapped in cotton wool with the sound deadened and everything muted. So maybe doing something reckless would jolt me back into feeling like myself again.

I backed away from the edge with determined strides, but before I could jump, Punch hurtled past me, fully dressed and screaming defiantly as he charged for the cliff yelling, “I’m not a pussy!” as he leapt over the edge.

I scrambled forward between the others, a laugh falling from my lips as we watched him hit the water far below with an enormous splash.

I held my breath as he disappeared beneath the surface, the waves hiding him from view as he sank out of sight. And we waited. And waited. And waited.

“Holy shit, I think he’s dead,” Danny murmured.

“How the fuck do we explain that to the teachers?” Chad gasped.

“Shut the fuck up,” I growled, staring at the surface of the lake as the ripples spread away and the spot where Punch had disappeared became glassy again, until-

“I’m not a pussy!” he roared as his head broke the surface and he punched the air with a howl of triumph.

Everyone cheered him and a dark grin pulled at my lips as I backed up again. I wasn’t best pleased that he’d beaten me to being the first one in, but I was pretty fucking certain that Toby Rosner had just been reborn and no one would even mention his previous life as an Unspeakable again.

Once I was far enough back, I broke into a sprint, my bare feet pounding across the mud as I raced for the edge and propelled myself over it with all of my strength. A whoop of excitement spilled from my lungs and my arms and legs whirled as I plummeted through the air, falling, falling, falling, until my feet crashed through the water.

I barely even slowed as I shot beneath the surface, sinking at speed, my

arm catching on a rock with enough force to split the skin open.

But the pain was nothing to the adrenaline coursing through my body. To the pure, undeniable thrill of surviving that insanity. And if anything, knowing I'd barely missed a collision with the rocks only made the thrill more intense.

When my descent finally ceased and my lungs were burning, I kicked for the surface, my gaze fixed on the golden light far above my head as I fought for a way back to fresh air.

My muscles bunched and flexed, my chest heaving with the desire to inhale and I finally breached the surface, sucking down a breath before whooping in triumph.

"Any more takers?" I bellowed, squinting up at the figures on the cliff high above, but none of them seemed inclined to risk their necks anymore. "Bring my shit back to The Temple for me then!"

I exchanged an excited grin with Toby and we both turned and started swimming for shore. The water was icy cold and the sun was sinking lower as we remained in its chilling embrace.

Eventually we made it to the beach where the cave which led into the catacombs was hidden and I scrubbed the water from my face and hair as I strode up the sand.

My heart was pounding with victory and my limbs were trembling with a mixture of exhaustion and adrenaline and maybe a little bit of hypothermia too. But fuck it. I gave no shits. Because the smile on my face wasn't going anywhere any time soon and my grief had fucked all the way off.

Even the huge slash on my left bicep wasn't enough to dampen my mood. That was exactly what I'd needed and I was more than ready to face the rest of the night now.

I gave Toby a genuine grin and turned away towards The Temple, setting

a fast pace as I shivered in the cool evening air. I swear I could actually feel my balls trying to crawl up inside me and my dick shrivelling to a way less impressive standard than I was used to as the cold bit at me.

The glow of orange light spilling through the enormous stained glass window on the front of The Temple called me home and I hammered on the door as I arrived, hoping one of those douchebags had already brought my stuff back.

The door swung open and I was gifted a look at Tatum pouting in a deep blue halter neck skater dress before her eyes widened and she quickly stepped back to admit me as my damn teeth started chattering.

“What the hell happened to you?” she gasped, her eyes widening in what really did look like concern.

“Are you worried about me, Cinders?” I teased, but through the shivers my usual panty-dropping tone fell flat.

“Tell me about it while you shower,” she insisted, catching my arm and tugging me away from the living area where I could see the other guys and Monroe chatting on the couch, though they didn’t look my way. We carried on through my room and finally moved into the bathroom.

Tatum set the shower running, checked the temperature and gently pushed me in.

“Your arm is a fucking mess,” she tutted, eyeing the jagged cut the rocks had given me. I really was lucky to be alive.

“Tell it to me straight why don’t you?” I joked.

“I can hardly understand you while you’re shivering like that,” she replied, narrowing her eyes on me like I was offending her by being cold. “But my dad taught me a lot of survival shit, including first aid for wound care. So I can stitch that for you if you wanna avoid a hospital visit?”

“No way am I going near a fucking hospital,” I growled and she nodded in

agreement. Everyone knew that hospitals meant the Hades Virus. Doctors and nurses who were wearing entire biohazard suits were still managing to catch that fucking illness way too fucking often. And it was damn clear to anyone with two brain cells to rub together that going and sitting in a hospital waiting room was akin to suicide these days.

“I agree. I’ll go find what I need then.” Tatum turned and headed out of the room.

It occurred to me that I hadn’t ordered her to take care of me or help with my arm. She’d chosen to offer. And that made me feel all sorts of uncomfortable. I’d treated her with nothing but ire at the very best since I’d found out about who her father was and it was more like pure venom most of the time. I didn’t deserve any kindness from her.

I dropped my soaking boxers and cranked the heat a bit more as I thawed out and the shivering quit. Thankfully, my dick had stopped playing turtle too and I ran my hand over it slowly as I thought about the way Tatum had looked at me when she found me bleeding on the doorstep.

It made me wonder if I hadn’t totally screwed everything up with her. Because surely if she still gave a shit about me after everything, then there was hope. Just the tiniest, almost invisible thread of it. But maybe, she didn’t entirely hate me. Maybe there was a chance that I could fix some of the mess I’d made between us.

I thought about the way she’d looked at me that night we’d spent together before everything. I remembered how much my body had reacted to hers. And how much hers had seemed to ache for mine.

I hadn’t gone near another girl since that night. I couldn’t summon the enthusiasm to even try. Because I knew that none of them would come close to her.

I stroked my cock again as I remembered the way I’d claimed her. How

tight she'd been, how wet. And the way she'd called my name when-

“Jesus!” Tatum cursed and my eyes snapped open to find her standing in the doorway with a needle and thread and some antiseptic wipes.

“Shit,” I cursed, my hand still wrapped around my rock hard dick. I didn't really know at this point if releasing it was better or worse. I didn't want her to think I was carrying on while she was still here, but if I dropped it she'd just be looking my hard on in the eye. “I assumed you weren't coming back in here...”

“Seriously? That's the line you're going with?” she asked, arching a brow at me which said she clearly thought I was full of shit.

“I swear,” I said innocently, raising both hands in surrender and her gaze instantly fell on my cock which really just encouraged it.

“Fine,” she huffed. “I'll just wait in your room for you to...finish I guess.” She hesitated and the corner of my mouth twitched as her gaze raked over my naked body.

“Finish?” I asked with a filthy smile. She'd literally caught me with my dick in my hand so there wasn't a lot of point in trying to pretend I hadn't been doing what I'd been doing.

“Gah! I didn't mean that!” A blush lined her cheeks which was so fucking cute and innocent that it made me ache to corrupt her. She spun towards the door and I called after her before I could stop myself.

“You're welcome to stay, if you want to.”

“Why would I do that?” she asked, glancing over her shoulder and narrowing her eyes with hatred, though she definitely checked out my dick again.

“To watch...or join me...anything you want.” I tossed her a cocky wink and she blushed even harder.

“As if I'd want to watch you...do...*that*.” She waved a hand at me

vaguely like she had no words. “I hate you, Blake Bowman. I hate your face and your abs and peachy ass and I especially hate your dick. So have fun jerking off alone because hell would freeze over before I’d touch it again.”

“I will,” I promised her as she slammed the door in my face, but I didn’t actually do it.

My wood was sinking hard after her outburst and it was for a stupid fucking reason. I didn’t like her saying she hated me. Even though after everything we’d done to her, it was more than obvious why. I just...wished it had sounded more like a lie on her lips.

I shut the water off and vaguely scrubbed a towel over my hair and body, avoiding the cut on my arm which was still steadily bleeding, before wrapping it around my waist and heading back into my room.

I stilled in the doorway as I spotted her on my bed, legs crossed, needle and thread ready and waiting.

“You still want to patch me up?” I asked in surprise.

“Not *everyone* in this house is a monster,” she quipped. “I’m not going to leave you bleeding just because you’re a total dickwad. I am however going to enjoy it each and every time I stab you with this needle.”

I snorted at that, and in a twisted way I was okay with it too. I’d hurt her enough times to have earned a little payback.

She pointed at the spot beside her on the bed and I dropped into it like a good patient, refusing to balk as she wiped the wound with antiseptic and it stung like a bitch.

“Are you going to tell me how this happened?” she asked half a second before driving the needle into my flesh.

I grunted in discomfort and she smiled like a psycho as she got to work patching me up.

“I jumped off the east cliff into the lake and hit a rock a little bit,” I said

and I would have shrugged if she hadn't stabbed me with the needle again.

"There were rocks in the water?" she asked, looking at me like she thought I was insane.

"Yeah. I guess I could have done you a favour by jumping a meter to the left and ridding you of me," I joked.

"Don't say stupid shit like that," she growled, her gaze snapping up from her work to meet mine.

My lips parted at the ferocity in her tone, but I wasn't really sure how to face it so I just brushed it off. I doubted it was real concern for me anyway. More like a moral objection to some asshole throwing his life away when I had it as good as I did on paper.

"What's the matter, Cinders? You're not starting to feel something for your tormentor are you? Was your favourite Disney movie Beauty and the Beast by any chance?"

"You wish," she scoffed. "Besides, the Beast had redeeming qualities. You don't. None of you do."

"I'm pretty sure that Beauty didn't think the Beast did either in the beginning. Maybe you just have to look harder?" I gave her my winning smile and her ice queen mask cracked a little.

"I'll be sure to get my magnifying glass out," she teased.

"If you do manage to find an ounce of good in any of us, I'll give you a trophy from my collection," I offered. "But I imagine it'll be a hard won thing."

Her gaze slid to the trophy filled shelves on the far wall and she rolled her eyes like they weren't impressive. But I'd never met anyone who won first place as often as me in life so fuck that.

"I can't believe you put that roll of toilet paper up there," she muttered, looking back at my arm as I smiled at my latest trophy.

“I don’t choose the prizes, I just win them all,” I said cockily.

“Sure thing, champ,” she replied, cutting the end of the thread as she finished up her work on my stitches and swabbed it with another wipe.

“If you insist on feeding us this shit at least get it out of the oven when the timer sounds, Barbie!” Saint’s voice echoed through The Temple and Tatum huffed irritably.

“If you didn’t have to dance to our tune tonight, what would you be doing instead?” I asked her curiously.

“I wanna say literally *anything* else,” she replied, getting to her feet. “But I guess pizza night would be a good option anyway - I’d just spend it with people I actually liked.”

She moved into the bathroom to dump the bloody wipes and wash her hands and I pulled on a pair of sweatpants as I waited for her to come back.

She stepped back into my room and headed for the door which led to the living area and I moved to grab the handle, leaning in close to her for a moment as she was forced to pause.

“You liked me once, Tate,” I breathed. “For at least one night and maybe for a little while before then. We can always pretend we’re still those people tonight? If you want a...friend?”

She looked up at me with her lips tight and I was sure she was going to refuse me, but as her gaze caught mine, something in the depths of her eyes softened and she released a sigh.

“Sure,” she replied with a shrug. “Why the hell not? I’ll pretend to be the real Cinderella for the night and you can play at being Prince Charming. And then at midnight I’ll go right back to my rags and you’ll be a mean little pumpkin all over again. But if I catch you sniffing my shoes in the morning, we’re gonna have trouble, Blake Bowman.”

I grinned at her, pulling the door wide as my heart pounded solidly in my

chest. I had to admit, there was something about that stern look she got in her eyes when she called me by my full name which I really quite liked.

“Your carriage awaits,” I teased, offering her my arm and after a beat of hesitation, she took it. Her small hand slid around the crook of my elbow and lightly gripped my bicep and I walked her through to the kitchenette.

Saint, Kyan and Monroe were already sitting around the dining table, a few drinks in and looking like the buzz was kicking in. Monroe was sinking beers and he wasn't looking much different than usual aside from being here in our home instead of shouting at us on the field. Saint had a tumbler of insanely expensive vodka over ice sitting before him and Kyan was drinking Jack right out of the bottle.

One glance was enough to let me know that Kyan was already a third of the bottle down and the dark look in his eyes said we were going to be treated to him in his most douchey, angry asshole state tonight.

“Finally,” Saint growled, his gaze taking in the freshly stitched wound on my arm with a frown. “You wanna explain that, Blake?”

“I fell and sliced it on a rock,” I explained with a shrug. No need to mention quite how far I fell. “Cinders kindly patched me up and now I'm good as new.”

“You're a girl of many talents,” Monroe said, his gaze trailing over Tatum though his features remained neutral, closed off. Our newest brother still didn't fully trust us, but that was okay. He was a dog thrown into the wolf pack, but I was convinced he'd manage to prove his wild nature to us soon enough.

“You have no idea,” Tatum replied casually, batting her lashes at him.

“You should let her suck your cock some time if you wanna know about her talents,” Kyan said in a low voice.

Saint outwardly sneered and Monroe didn't look too happy either. I could

only really admit that he had a fucking good point. But maybe it was a dick move to bring it up at the dining table.

“Kyan came within about thirty seconds,” Tatum quipped back, barely missing a beat. “Which I’m guessing is the real reason he doesn’t fuck girls on campus. He doesn’t want everyone knowing how fast he blows his load. He must be a real disappointment to those poor Murkwell girls. Maybe that’s why he likes tying them up? So they can’t punch him in retaliation for the shit sex?”

Kyan laughed loudly, but it was a cruel thing. “I dunno why you’re so obsessed with my cock, baby. But you need to stop pining for me to put it in you because this bitter stuff isn’t a good look on you. It’s giving you crow’s feet.”

“You know what-” she began but Kyan cut her off.

“I’ll take that compliment now, baby,” he purred, grinning as she simmered with rage.

“What?”

“The one you owe me for carrying that shit back here for you earlier,” he reminded her with a dark grin.

Tatum opened and closed her mouth like a fish out of water, seeming to be hunting for a way out but there wasn’t one.

“Come on, I really wanna hear a genuine compliment from you. What is it about me that makes you so hot for me?” he taunted and Monroe clucked his tongue like this whole thing was dumb. Which it was, but none of us were gonna say a word to stop it.

“Fine,” she said, offering him a sweet smile while her eyes were filled with loathing. “You’re hot, Kyan. Like, seriously hot. You’ve got everything going on to look at you. Your muscles are stacked and your ink is so beautiful that I want to get lost tracing my hands all over it. You look like

something sculpted by the gods for the sole purpose of melting panties.”

Kyan smiled like he was enjoying watch her squirm and she laid her hands on the table as she leaned towards him.

“*But*, that’s the only thing you’ve got going for you. Which makes you great for looking at and fooling around with, but you’ll never be good for anything else. And seeing as looks fade, I think you can look forward to a real lonely existence in the not so distant future.”

Monroe released a low whistle as Kyan snarled at her.

“Well at least I know I’m a monster, baby. I don’t try and pretend I’m anything else. But you’re the one who keeps lowering yourself to my level because as much as you hate the dirt I wallow in, you can’t help but love it when it makes you all filthy.”

Tatum’s cheeks reddened with rage and she parted her lips to respond, but I caught her arm and tugged her away so that she could concentrate on the food. I didn’t know why I was bothering to try and protect her from Kyan’s anger, but I’d promised to be her prince tonight so I guessed it was my duty.

She muttered beneath her breath about fat-headed overly shredded, tattoo-covered twat waffles as she pulled the pizzas out of the oven and put them on plates. I smirked as I took them from her and made quick work of slicing them.

I helped her gather all the plates and deliver them to the table where we placed them all in the middle and Saint actually flinched as he realised he wasn’t getting his own plate.

“I’m not eating with my hands like a dog,” he snarled, shoving away from the table to gather a plate and looking wistfully into the cutlery drawer at the knives and forks.

Tatum followed him, chewing him out about having to stick to her rules tonight and I grabbed myself a beer before mixing her a dark and stormy and

taking my seat at the table.

“You said we had to eat it, not that I couldn’t use a fucking plate,” Saint growled as Tatum grabbed the other side of the plate he’d retrieved and tried to tug it out of his hands.

“This is my night and my rules,” she insisted. “And we eat pizza with our goddamn hands like normal people, you don’t need a plate for that!”

Monroe chuckled but Kyan just continued to glower as he grabbed himself a slice and started eating without waiting for them to finish their spat, tearing into his food like a beast.

“Barbie, if I’m forced to eat like a savage, I can’t be responsible for the way I get. My rules and routines are the only things that-”

“Keep the monster inside you chained up, blah, blah, blah,” Tatum interrupted, rolling her eyes. “You know, I think you just hide behind that crap because you’re a coward and you can’t bear to try something new. Any little change to the status quo and you lose your shit. You need to grow up and eat the pizza, Saint.”

She yanked on the plate so hard that it flew out of both of their hands and smashed on the flagstones. Silence followed the sound of it shattering and Saint’s nostrils flared as he stared her down.

“*You’re* new,” he pointed out in a low voice just for her. “And I’ve adjusted just fine to having you here.”

“No. You’re only making my point more thoroughly. How many times have you let your monster loose on me?” she demanded.

“Not as many as you think,” he hissed. “Because the real darkness in me can’t be sated by these petty games we play. It needs to feast on blood to satisfy it.”

“Well, *tonight*, it’s feasting on pizza,” she replied, grabbing his hand and dragging him back to the table and to my surprise, he gave in, not even

making her clean up the broken plate.

She pushed down on his shoulders to make him sit and he complied before she dropped into her spot beside him. Monroe watched the entire thing play out with hungry attention in his eyes and I was willing to bet he was surprised to see Tatum wielding that power. But I wasn't. That girl was fast becoming Saint's weakness. Hell, she was becoming all of our weaknesses. And sometimes it showed.

I decided to be a real prince and cleared up the broken plate, winking at her as she looked my way before depositing the shards in the trash and joining the rest of them at the table to eat.

We tucked in to our food and the conversation turned to football as Tatum zoned out. Saint joined in the discussion just fine, but I noticed he hadn't taken a single slice of pizza. And the longer the conversation went on, the more certain I became that he'd decided not to eat at all.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Tatum huffed, snatching a slice from a plate and holding it out to Saint in offering.

Strings of gooey cheese hung off the sides of it, making my mouth water, but Saint looked more inclined to puke.

"There's fucking pineapple on that," he growled. "Who the hell thinks cooking fruit is a good-"

Tatum shoved the end of the pizza into his mouth while it was open and we all fell still in shock as we waited for Saint to explode.

Instead, he ripped the bite off with his teeth and slowly started chewing. Tatum reached out with her free hand and wiped a speck of food from the corner of his lips and I swear my mouth fell open in surprise as he just let her touch him like that.

"Good?" she asked brightly.

Saint looked at her like what he really wanted to devour was the girl

before him then nodded once and she smirked in triumph as she offered him another bite. Which he took.

The table fell silent all around them, but the way they were looking at each other said that no one was invited to interrupt this game.

She lifted the slice to her own lips and took a bite before offering it to him for the third time. He didn't even hesitate at the idea of sharing food with her. Nothing. His gaze was riveted to her like he didn't know what to do with her, but was desperate to figure it out. My heart pounded as I wondered if she'd ever given me her undivided attention like that in a room full of people.

We slowly fell back into conversation as she continued to eat with him, alternating between feeding him and taking her own bites of food as we lamented the fact that all broadcasted sports had been suspended in light of the Hades Virus.

When we finished eating, we all sat around the table, discussing everything from football to classes, to the other students. Saint gloated about the way Bait had been since he'd had the mask glued to his face and we all laughed about how fucking broken he seemed while Tatum frowned. She didn't say anything in his defence though, the way she normally spoke up for the Unspeakables. She clearly didn't like the way we ran this school, but as far as I was concerned, Bait fully deserved every shitty thing that had happened to him. Not least the fucking mask. Especially after he'd put her life at risk the way he had.

The more beers Monroe sank, the more he joined in with us, laughing and joking and tossing warm smiles Tatum's way. Kyan was most definitely taking the angry drunk route tonight and the way his hands kept balling into fists told me he'd be out for blood later.

He tossed provocative comments and insults Tatum's way repeatedly and she met each and every one with a blow of her own, scowling at him like she

hated his fucking guts while her eyes flared with passion at the words she hurled his way. It might have been uncomfortable if it wasn't so damn funny to watch them rile each other up.

When we finally got fed up of sitting around the dining table, the other guys headed over to the couch and left Tatum to clear the plates, though the frown on Monroe's face said he wasn't too happy about doing that to her.

I took the opportunity to fall back into my Prince Charming role and gathered plates for her, carrying them across the room and earning myself a cocked eyebrow.

"You're still playing nice then?" she mocked as she set the water running in the sink and added a dollop of detergent which got it all bubbling.

"It's not midnight yet." I pointed at the clock across the room which said it was half eleven and she grinned at me as she tossed me a cloth.

"You can dry then, my handsome prince."

I gave her my most heartbreaking smile as I shifted closer to her and her gaze dipped to my bare chest, making me wonder if she was remembering our night together too. Had I entirely spoiled the memory of that night for her by doing everything I had since then, or could she smile at the memory of me playing her body like a fiddle and making her come so hard she saw stars?

She started washing and I diligently accepted the first wet plate, our fingers brushing for a moment and making my dick twitch. I dried it with the cloth, wiping the suds away and shifting behind her so that I could reach up to put it back in the cupboard on her other side. The kitchenette technically had everything we needed, but it was pretty damn small.

I brushed against her lightly as I moved back to accept the next plate and she looked up at me beneath her lashes.

"You're kinda cute when you're playing house," she teased. "I could almost forget you're a fucking psychopath."

“Do you wanna domesticate me, Tate?” I asked, making sure our fingers touched again as I accepted the next plate.

“Well, every dog needs house training,” she agreed and I chuckled.

“Good luck breaking me in.” This time as I moved behind her to put the plate away, I leaned forward an inch so that my chest brushed against her back.

She stilled for a moment, but before I could move away again, she pushed her ass back against me so that it pressed across my hips and more blood flowed to my dick.

I took the next plate, brushing fingers and drying it fast so that I could lean around her once more. She pushed back into me again and I leaned down to speak into her ear as I prolonged the contact between our bodies.

“Are you trying to tempt the beast in me, Cinders?”

“I thought you were my prince tonight? It’s not midnight yet.”

I grinned and moved back to accept the next plate. “The clock’s ticking. I can feel the darkness in me preparing to break through the spell.”

She rolled her eyes then pressed her ass against my crotch again, inhaling sharply as I ground my hips forward, letting her feel how hard I was.

The next plate was the last and as I put it away, I stayed behind her, placing my hands either side of her hips as I curled my fingers around the edge of the sink.

“A real Prince Charming would make sure you finish the night with a smile on your face,” I murmured suggestively as she rocked her hips against me.

“Well, a real princess would wait for her wedding night,” she quipped, turning in my arms so that she was looking up at me.

Before I could reply, she blew a hand full of bubbles into my face and I barked a laugh as I stumbled back.

“Watch it, Cinders,” I warned. “If you start a fight with me then you know I’ll win.”

“Is that so?” she asked, dipping her hand back into the suds and raising it between us.

“*Don’t*,” I warned, my heart pounding at the dare in her eyes.

She smiled wickedly before blowing the bubbles straight in my face again and I pounced forward with a growl.

She squealed as I wrapped her in my arms, twisting her around and lowering her face towards the bubbly water as she flailed against me.

“Blake!” she yelled through a laugh and I laughed too as she wriggled to get away from me, grinding right up against my boner.

The smile on my face didn’t have an inch of falseness to it as we play wrestled and I let her get away from me before snatching up the dishcloth and whipping it against her ass as she tried to run.

“Ah! You’re gonna pay for that!” she swore, darting back to the sink and splashing me with some of the water so that my chest was flecked with soapy droplets.

I stalked towards her with a laugh tumbling from my throat but Saint suddenly appeared, stepping between us and ending our game.

“Time for bed, Barbie,” he commanded, his jaw ticking as he glanced at me accusingly. But we’d never said we couldn’t have fun with her so he could fuck off if he was going to try and get pissed at me over it.

He held out his hand to her and she took it without question, the smile from our game lingering on her lips.

She didn’t even say anything to me before walking away with him, teasing him about eating the pizza after all of his complaints and he made a joke about only doing it because she was feeding him like a temptress.

My smile slipped off of my face as I watched her head up to his room with

him, my pounding heart sinking like a stone in my gut. She didn't even look back. I was probably a fucking idiot for thinking she'd really been enjoying herself anyway. She'd made it clear she hated all of us, for good reason too. She was just making the best of a bad situation.

"I'm going out," Kyan snapped, slamming the near empty bottle of Jack down on the table before grabbing his leather jacket and striding out of The Temple with no further explanation. He didn't need to explain anyway. He was obviously hungry for a fight, needing to wet his fists in blood before his rage would settle enough to let him sleep tonight. I almost felt bad for whichever unlucky fucker ended up on the receiving end of his temper. I doubted they'd be in great shape come morning. If he left them breathing at all.

Monroe was looking up at the balcony where we could just hear Saint and Tatum talking and as her tinkling laughter rang out, he got to his feet abruptly too.

"Thanks for the pizza," he muttered. "I'm gonna head to bed."

"Night," I agreed, leaning back against the sink as the cold chill of my grief crept in on me again.

I was an idiot if I thought Tatum Rivers would ever want to be any kind of balm to that pain in me. She was only here because we'd caught her, chained her and forced her into submission. But one day she'd leave us. I knew it. She'd run as far and as fast as she could and if she was lucky she'd manage to hide beyond our reaches for the rest of her days. Because being bound to us would only ever be a curse. But I was too selfish to give her up now. So all I could do was hope that she never managed to escape. Or even better, that one day she'd decide she didn't even want to.



Winter started to take a grip in Everlake and it rained more often than not as November arrived. My routine with the Night Keepers had become a habit and though I pushed back at them as often as I could, I knew I needed to do more. It had been a couple of weeks since Kyan had broken the last rule and there hadn't been one infraction from any of them since. It was infuriating. He didn't even sleep in a bed with me anymore when it was my time to share with him; he just left me alone while he slept on the couch in the lounge. It hurt me in a way I couldn't explain and didn't want to explore. Curled up in his sheets with the scent of him everywhere made me long for him and hate him in equal measures. My revenge on him had obviously broken the fragile relationship we'd formed and I had to accept that. It certainly wasn't going to stop me from seeking the blood I was owed for everything they'd done to me. They'd probably all despise me in the end, hypocrites that they were.

I got back at the three of them in small ways whenever I could, but there was nothing like the juicy excuse of a full punishment to make them pay. I

even left the door open to the bathroom a couple of times as I showered, hoping one of them might wander in and earn themselves a dose of revenge. But no. Blake and Kyan were being as diligent as Saint. And Saint was living up to his name for once.

Since Kyan was still hating on me and Blake didn't seem interested in provoking my wrath, I wasn't sure how to get to them next. So as I sat watching the two of them play Xbox, keeping a tally of how many of each of their players the other killed – upon request – I shot a text to Monroe who was currently sitting in the armchair opposite me watching them play.

Tatum:

I need more excuses to punish these assholes.

Monroe's phone buzzed and he took it out of his pocket, his eyes flicking to me as a smile pulled at his mouth.

Monroe:

Maybe we can cause a few 'accidents' around the house.

I rolled my eyes, sinking lower in my chair. It wasn't good enough. We had to strike at them where it hurt most. I was getting the sneaking the feeling that Monroe was trying to stop me from doing anything too reckless. He never had any great ideas about how I should fight them and I had a strong inkling that that was because he didn't want me facing the punishment I'd get for it in return. The harder I hit them, the harder they'd hit back. But I didn't care about that. We were supposed to be bringing them to their knees, but so far all I'd achieved was icing Blake's balls and turning Kyan into an insufferable asshole. I couldn't exactly call it a win.

I sighed, pushing out of my seat. "I'm going to the library."

Blake gave me a thumbs up while Kyan ignored my existence. Monroe got up too, yawning broadly. "I'm gonna call it a night so I'll walk you to the library, princess."

"I don't need an escort," I said sharply, though it was just a show for the others.

"Well I'm not asking, I'm telling," Monroe growled and despite it being an act, I kinda liked his bossy tone. *Tingles*. "Let's go."

I huffed, heading to the door and pulling on a coat over my cream sweater, kicking on my boots before heading outside.

Monroe followed me and we didn't speak a word to each other until we were a hundred feet away from The Temple.

"We need to up our game," I said in frustration.

He sighed, clawing a hand through his hair and I couldn't help but perve over his muscular bicep as I glanced his way.

"It's not that simple, I didn't realise how bad things were. I didn't know they treated you so..." He grunted in anger, kicking a rock on the path and sending it shooting away into the bushes like it had offended his manhood.

"I can take it," I said firmly. "I was always going to get punished for fighting back, I knew that when I started down this road."

"Well, maybe I don't want you to deal with that," he muttered, unable to look at me as my gaze burned into the side of his head.

"Nash, please," I breathed, my voice full of desperation.

He still didn't look at me, his fingers still knotted in his hair and I reached out to touch him. He finally looked at me as he dropped his arm, the two of us falling still on the quiet path as darkness cloaked the world beyond the single lantern illuminating us. His features pinched in anger, but softened as I frowned.

“No,” he rasped. “I want to hurt them, but I won’t let you sacrifice yourself for revenge.”

“It’s not up to you,” I hissed, stepping closer to him and breathing in his scent of pine and safety. What I wouldn’t give to run away with him tonight, to slip out of the chains binding me and fall into the promise in his eyes that said he would always protect me. But I couldn’t do that. And neither could he. We were bound by the Night Keepers, joined in our ache for vengeance. Neither of us would ever be content until we got it. So we had to keep marching down this dangerous trail and face the consequences of that choice.

Monroe reached out, grazing a thumb over my cheek, a V forming between his eyes. “It’s not in my nature to let you.”

“It’s not a request.” I batted his hand away. “You’re supposed to be helping me destroy them. Don’t you want that?”

“Of course I do,” he said fiercely and I knew I shouldn’t have questioned him. He had more reason to hate Saint than I did. “But I didn’t realise I’d have to watch them hurt you every time you step a toe out of line. It’s torture.”

He ripped his eyes away from me and my heart clenched in my chest. Monroe cared about me, maybe more than I gave him credit for. And I could understand it. It would have been torture for me to watch him hurt too. But this was the only way we were going to destroy them.

“I’m going to do what I have to, Nash,” I said, starting to walk again and he followed like my shadow. “If you can’t stomach it then I’ll do it alone.”

“If it was *my* blood they drew in punishment, I wouldn’t give a fuck,” he snarled. “But it’s not, it’s yours. And you’re far more precious than me Tatum. They’ve already taken enough from you, I won’t see them take more.”

“And what if I want to give myself to this?” I tossed at him, ignoring the

squeeze in my belly at his sweet words. “Did you ever consider that I’m as willing as you to suffer for my revenge? I would give anything for it. And I’m insulted that you think I’m not strong enough to weather their punishments.”

“Of course you’re strong enough, princess,” he said, his voice dipped in velvet and making my anger rush away as quickly as it had arrived. “But I can’t stand to see you tormented by them.”

We reached the library and I turned to him, the two of us halting under the stone archway that led into the courtyard before the huge, gothic building. “Then don’t watch.”

Emotion flared in his eyes but I didn’t stay to absorb it, spinning around and heading away from him along the path. I pushed through the huge wooden door, glancing back and finding him still standing beneath the arch in darkness. My guardian angel cast in shadow.

I swallowed the sharp lump in my throat, slipping inside, the warm amber glow of the place making my shoulders relax. I loved it here. My demons couldn’t follow me into this space with its endless wooden bookshelves, low oak beams, hidden corners and winding aisles that made me feel like I was lost in a beautiful maze, never to be found by my captors again.

I wound through the stacks, taking my time as I breathed in the scent of old books and leather bindings. At the far end of the building was a large window which overlooked the lake with a circular table before it. This was where I came daily to study and a few of the Unspeakables were there already.

“Hey,” I said as I approached and Deepthroat smiled while Squits, Freeloader and Pigs waved shyly. Pigs was the latest member to show up regularly to our daily meetings. None of them would talk about what they’d done, but I always liked to try and guess. Although Pigs was kind of chubby,

I couldn't imagine that was a reason for the Night Keepers to cast him out of society. He had a German accent and had transferred here as an exchange student, now unable to leave since the lockdown. Poor guy. He was only meant to be here for six weeks and his whole life had gone to hell since pissing off the Night Keepers somehow.

"How are you?" Freeloader asked, tucking a lock of mousy brown hair behind her ear. Her features were all small apart from her large eyes, giving her the look of a rabbit in the headlights.

"I'm fine," I said though it wasn't entirely true, but I didn't want to expand.

I wanted to get close to the Unspeakables, but it was tricky to trust them with my specific plans against the Night Keepers when I knew they'd spill the truth in a heartbeat if any of the guys caught wind of it. For all I knew they could be reporting back to the Night Keepers every time I met with them. But I liked to hope not. Especially considering I was trying to reinstate their backbones every time I came here and make them rise up. But that was a risk I had to take, because if I could get the Unspeakables to go against them, the power balance would shift in this school and together we could dethrone them for good.

"So, we've been thinking about what you said the other day about us reclaiming our real names," Deepthroat said, exchanging a nervous glance with the others who nodded in encouragement. She'd worn her auburn hair loose for once, the beautiful waves falling around her shoulders in a waterfall. "And well...basically we thought...we'd like you to know ours."

My lips parted in surprise and I nodded in encouragement. "So what are they?"

Deepthroat cleared her throat. "I'm Ashlynn," she whispered, her eyes sparkling as she said the word and I grinned, looking to Freeloader.

She cleared her throat a couple of times, glancing over at the quiet aisles that led away from our table, but there was no one around. “Kristen,” she breathed, then smothered a laugh of relief as the world didn’t come to an end.

“Pigs?” I asked and he wet his pale lips.

“My name is Bergen,” he said then smiled broadly, the sight making my heart lift.

“And Squits?” I asked, the boy starting to shake from head to toe. He was so small, he looked like a child sitting in an adult sized chair.

“I-I’m R-R-R-” He shook his head, throwing terrified looks at the others.

“You can do it,” I said firmly and he nodded, his shaking starting to ease as he looked to me.

“R-Roger,” he forced out, his whole face screwing up as he said it.

“Nice to meet you Roger.” I beamed and he stopped shaking entirely, his eyes practically shining with hope.

I reached into my bag, taking out a few rolls of toilet paper I’d stashed there earlier while the boys had been busy. I got a surge of adrenaline every time I stole them and brought them here. God only knew what they’d do to me if they found out I’d been supplying the Unspeakables with TP. But it was worth the risk. I wanted them as allies and there was nothing more valuable than toilet paper on campus right now.

We set to work on our assignments and the two hours I was given each evening slipped away too fast. I was soon saying my goodbyes and telling them to encourage the rest of the Unspeakables to say their names out loud before I waved and headed off through the stacks.

I walked towards the librarian as she spoke with a student in front of her desk, handing over a school tie. “I found this down by the lake,” she said and the librarian grabbed a box from under the desk with *Lost & Found* printed on the side. A glint within it caught my eye as the girl placed the tie into it

and I recognised Blake's watch. The one Saint had smashed in class because he was a megadouche sandwich with a side of fuckhead fries.

"Hey, can I see that?" I asked as I jogged closer and the librarian shrugged, pushing the box towards me. The girl who'd dropped off the tie threw me a look of awe before darting out of the door and into the night.

I took the watch from the box and as I turned it over, I found an engraving on the back that said *time waits for no man, my love*.

I looked up at the librarian. "Can I take this? It belongs to my-" *Captor? Monster? Mortal enemy?* "Friend," I finished with an innocent smile.

"Sure," she said. "Looks like your friend might need a new one though."

"This one's special." My heart clenched as I put it in my pocket, thinking of Blake's mom. Of all the pain he must have been through. And as I waved goodbye to the librarian and headed out the door, I had the sudden urge to go and be with him.

The air was freezing outside and I hugged my coat tighter around me as I hurried down the path, half jogging back in the direction of The Temple. I wasn't sure why I'd taken the watch exactly. It was broken, but from what Mila had told me about Saint destroying it, it had been a gift from Blake's mother. Which made it incredibly precious.

The trees stirred around me in the wind, the sound of their rustling leaves sending a tingle up my spine.

A cracking twig to my right made me fall still and I gazed into the shadows between the trees which lined the hill beside the path. My breath was fogging before me in the cool air and every part of my honed instincts told me I was in danger.

Another twig cracked and a flash of white caught my attention up in the dark woodland. A face? I couldn't tell. But I wasn't going to hang around to find out. Especially as I could feel eyes on me, a creeping sensation telling

me I was being watched.

I ran, racing down the path in the direction of The Temple, pulling my phone from my pocket. I thought of the looters, of Merl breathing down my neck and my throat constricted as the sound of footsteps followed me through the trees. Maybe I should have suspected the Night Keepers, but somehow I didn't think it was them.

I fumbled onto Monroe's contact, blinded by the brightness of the screen as I hurried to press call.

Maybe I'm just being paranoid but-

I crashed into someone full speed and a yell of fright escaped me. Strong hands grabbed me and I threw my fist out in a burst of fear, throat punching my attacker as hard as I could.

Blake wheezed, stumbling back as he let me go, clutching his throat with both hands.

"Oh shit," I gasped.

"Why?" he choked and a heavy breath fell from my lungs.

"I thought you were attacking me," I said, a laugh suddenly leaving me as the relief of his company made me relax. All was quiet in the woods, so I guessed whoever it was had gone. Or they were still watching...

I shuddered, moving close to Blake, craving more of the comfort his presence bought me.

He coughed a few times then straightened his spine and yanked me against him, making my heart pound for a whole different reason.

"You wanna explain why you were charging down the path like a gazelle with its tail on fire?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but the truth felt stupid now. My imagination must have been getting carried away. Since Merl, I was always seeing shadows where there were none, expecting wraiths to descend on me in the

night.

“Huh Cinders? Because we’re not leaving this spot until you answer me,” Blake growled, the threat in his eyes clear.

I rested my hand on his bicep, shifting closer and his arms softened around me. “I thought there was someone following me up in the trees,” I admitted, a blush sliding into my cheeks. It sounded even more stupid when I said it out loud.

Blake didn’t laugh at me though, his gaze shifted to the woods, his eyes narrowing like a hunter’s. “Did you get a look at them?”

“No...just footsteps. And a white face, maybe.”

“A mask?” he snarled and my heart juddered.

I frowned, trying to think. But Bait wouldn’t have been out there following me, why would he? He was scared of his own shadow these days. “Maybe, I’m not sure.” I tugged his arm. “Let’s just go back to The Temple.”

“No, Cinders, I can’t do that.” His eyes were still fixed on the trees, his jaw pulsing like an aggravated beast. If there really was someone watching us right now, I was a hundred percent sure they were shitting themselves, not planning an attack. “Wait here.” He slipped past me and the heat of his body went with him as he marched up into the pines.

I hugged my arms around myself against the cold and a tinny voice reached me from somewhere. It was like someone was shouting but really, really far away.

I gasped as I realised I’d called Monroe and held my phone to my ear.

“-I’m coming this second just hold on!” he cried.

“Nash, no - sorry,” I blurted.

“Oh thank fuck. Are you alright?” he demanded, sounding out of breath like he was running. “I heard you scream...I, *fuck*, tell me you’re alright.”

“I’m alright. False alarm. Sorry to scare you. Blake’s with me now.”

“What happened?” he pressed.

“I thought someone was following me,” I said, chewing on my lower lip as guilt trickled through me for making him worry.

“Following you?” he questioned, a note of concern in his voice.

“Blake’s gone to check it out.”

“He left you on your own?” he snarled.

“I’m fine, Nash, I don’t think anyone would come at me while Blake Bowman is prowling through the woods hunting them. Besides, if it was just a student, I could floor them easy enough. I just...got a fright I guess.”

“Of course you did.” He sighed. “That fucker who chased you into the crypt is always gonna haunt you if you let him, princess. But he’s gone. No one’s ever going to hurt you again,” he promised, though it was a promise we both knew he couldn’t keep. “Not physically anyway,” he muttered, hate filling his voice.

Blake’s broad form reappeared amongst the trees as he headed back this way.

“Thanks...I’ll see you soon,” I said.

“Be careful.”

“Always.” I hung up, tucking my phone away as Blake stepped onto the path then cupped his hands around his mouth and howled like a fucking wolf.

“If any one is out here hunting my girl, I will rip your fucking intestines out with my bare hands if I find you!” he roared and I gasped at the loudness of his voice echoing all over campus and bouncing back from the mountain.

He strode towards me with intent, his arm locking around my shoulders as he started walking me along the path in the direction of The Temple. There was a formidable energy rolling off of him and I wondered if he really would follow through on that threat if he found the perpetrator.

“So, why were you out here anyway?” I asked.

“I was coming to get you,” he said gruffly.

I was about to spurt my usual line that I didn’t need an escort, but tonight it didn’t seem like the worst thing in the world so I buttoned my lip.

“Thank you,” I said. “For checking the woods.”

“I’ve got your back. Always,” he said easily, like there was absolutely no questioning those words. “My mom used to say-”

He stopped dead, shutting his mouth tight and my heart squeezed.

“What did she say?” I asked gently, thinking of the watch in my pocket.

He cleared his throat. “She used to say *find your tribe*. Only let people into your life who make it better, who understand you on a soul-deep level. And once you find them, never let them go.”

There was beauty in those words. The only tribe I’d ever known was me, my sister and my dad. We’d been inseparable for so many years, it was heart-breaking to think we’d all been ripped apart. By death, by life. I’d never expected to find a tribe outside of them. People I could rely on who weren’t blood. But Monroe was that to me. And though the three boys who held me were my captors, they were also my keepers. They would destroy anyone who hurt me. It was just a shame they didn’t realise it was themselves they needed to punish.

“I’m not your tribe, Blake,” I said. “I’m your captive.”

“Doesn’t matter. I let you in, Tate. I’ve made you mine. I’m yours too, whether you want me or not. If you don’t like it that’s fine, but it doesn’t make it any less true.”

I glanced at him, trying to pull free of his hold but he didn’t let go. “What’s in it for you?” I narrowed my eyes, my voice hard. “You haven’t done anything to me for weeks. I thought this was about revenge.”

“It was,” he grunted. “It is,” he corrected a beat later.

“So what’s your plan, Blake? You’re gonna keep me forever? Why?” I

demanded. “You must know it’s not going to make anything better. I’m not responsible for the virus. And even if my father is – which he isn’t – what gives you the right to hurt me for his crimes?”

“You’d wanna hurt whoever you could if you lost someone the way I did,” he growled and I elbowed him hard in the ribs, forcing him to let go of me. I moved into his path to block his way, pointing a finger at him as rage crawled up my throat.

“I *did* lose someone. And yeah, maybe I don’t have a culprit to blame for it, but do you know how hard it is to have no one to blame?” My voice had risen and heat was scorching my veins. “I know you’re suffering, Blake, but I’m suffering too. And you know what I don’t need in my life?” I shoved him in the chest and he let me push him back a step, his eyes wide with surprise. “Three fucking assholes making my life hell. I didn’t want to come to Everlake in the first place. I didn’t want to be here.” I shoved him in the chest again and his eyes darkened.

I could tell I was luring the beast in him to the surface of his flesh. He could punish me for this, but he wasn’t. And I didn’t know why, but I was sure as hell going to keep pushing my boundaries because one day my invisible cage might just shatter.

“I know you’re hurting,” he said in a gravelly tone. “I see it in your eyes. I can taste it on you. If I’m really honest, maybe I knew all along and didn’t want to believe it. If you’ve looked grief dead in the eye, you can recognise that in others. And after Saint read out your letters-”

“*Don’t*,” I cut him off, emotion making my throat tight. “Don’t talk about that.”

“Tatum,” he croaked.

“Don’t fucking talk about that!” I yelled, shoving him in the chest again. “They were the most precious thing in the world to me and they’re gone.

Gone. And you did nothing to stop him, you held me down, watched while he destroyed me. How could you do that if you knew? How could you?" I threw my weight at him again and he took another step back as I pushed him. The watch was burning a hole in my pocket. It was probably precious to him in the way those letters were precious to me, but why should I give it back when I would never get my letters in return?

He shook his head, his eyes blazing with words, but he didn't utter a single one of them. "I'm sorry about your sister."

"You're not sorry!" I shouted, tears blurring my vision. "None of you are sorry for anything. You storm through life trampling everyone in your way. I'm just another victim being dragged under your heels. Why won't you leave me in the dirt? When are you going to be satisfied?" I shoved him again, but he caught my wrists this time, dragging me closer with his teeth bared.

"That's enough," he warned and my tears spilled over, leaving burning hot trails down my cheeks. "I share your pain, it's raw and blinding. But it made you strong and some part of me wanted to break you because *I* was broken. I'm weak. I won't get through this, but you will. You already have." He sounded so angry and hateful, but the hurt in his voice made me ache everywhere. He released my wrists, his eyes brimming with pain.

I swallowed hard, shaking my head as more tears raced down my cheeks. "It took me years to deal with my pain, I'm still dealing with it now. You have to let yourself be weak so that you can get strong again. You're fighting it too hard."

"What else am I supposed to do?!" he bellowed, grabbing the lapels of my coat and pulling me forward so he was staring right into my eyes, searching desperately for something. His spiced cologne tangled with the carnal scent of man on him and part of me wanted to wrap him in my arms and soothe away his pain. But that wasn't my place. I should have been glad that he was

hurting, but it was impossible. How could I when I'd faced it myself? Knew how desperately lonely it felt, how it made the whole world seem hostile and crushed away your sense of safety for good. To lose someone so dear was to lose an entire piece of yourself. And it was a suffocating, heart-crushing agony like no other. All worn on the inside so no one could even see the gaping wound that lived in you, never to be healed.

"You have to look for the light in the dark," I breathed. "It's all there is. There might not be much at all right now, but there's something. Hold onto the good, don't let the bad destroy you."

His eyes bored into me, a churning sea of dark jade hypnotising me. He tugged my lapels hard and my mouth crashed against his, a fire bursting to life along my spine as his hands snared me and his tongue pushed between my lips. His pain washed through me, connecting to mine and suddenly I was falling apart, forgetting my shock and devouring this moment as my lips parted further to encourage him. I felt him everywhere, his hands crushing me to him and his powerful body encasing me like a wall moulding around my flesh.

I gasped as he bit my lower lip in his passion, his anger, his hate. And I clawed at the back of his neck, wanting to draw blood across the tattoo that bound him as a Night Keeper. I despised him, understood him, wanted him. I was lost and confused yet there was nowhere in the world I wanted to be right now but here, sharing that ache inside me with someone who truly knew what it felt like to suffer the way I had suffered over the loss of my sister.

His tongue moved in hungry strokes against mine and warmth spread between my thighs, a moan escaping me as my body came to life for him. Then his lips broke away from mine, kissing my tears away until I was trembling in his arms. His mouth pressed to my forehead last and I was folded into the most comforting embrace of my life as he rested his chin on

top of my head.

His heartbeat thundered in my ear as I rested my cheek to his chest and I drew in a shaky breath as I found myself totally consumed by him. We were two broken creatures in desperate need of each other. And I didn't dare let myself overthink that as I held him and he held me too.

"Here," I said, dipping my hand into my pocket and pressing the watch into his palm. He looked down at it, his brows lifting and his face morphing into shock. "It was in the lost and found."

"You...why would you give this back to me?" he rasped, his thumb brushing the precious metal as his brows pulled together.

Good question. Why did I give it back?

Before we'd kissed, I'd wanted to hold onto it, but now I'd tasted his pain, how could I not give it to him? I didn't want to play games with something so cherished, even if he had played a part in taking the same from me. I guessed my heart wasn't black enough to keep it from him.

He placed it into his pocket, tugging me back against him as he sighed a thank you, the tension running out of his limbs.

"I broke a rule," he breathed eventually. "You should punish me."

"Shh." I shut my eyes tight. "It never happened."

I knew I should have taken the chance to hurt him, but he was already hurting deeper than I could ever cut him. And for tonight, that was enough.

He remained quiet for a while, his breath stirring my hair. "I'm never going to let you go," he said, his voice holding a vow in it that made a shiver of fear run through me.

"Maybe not," I breathed. "But I will run away the moment I get the chance. And I *will* get the chance, Blake."

He clutched me tighter, a growl in his throat. "Then you'd better run fast, sweetheart, because I've never lost a race in my life."

The boys were in their rooms dressing for football practice the next evening and they'd decided to let me stay here while they were out. I couldn't believe it. I mean yeah, Saint had left me fifty chores to do upon pain of death, but so what? I'd race through them in thirty minutes then have a whole hour and a half to myself to raid the food stores, put on a movie and chill the fuck out. I was so excitable about this that it had been almost impossible to keep a straight face around them when Saint had told me ten minutes ago.

Now, I was in the kitchen doing the washing up, shaking my ass to Hips Don't Lie by Shakira in my head and biting my lip on a grin as the skirt of my long white dress danced around my ankles. It was kind of pathetic that my life had come to this. But I wasn't going to dwell on the fact that I was over the moon about something which should have been entirely within my control. Instead, I was just going to enjoy my evening and spend the time plotting ways to bring about the Night Keepers' demise. *Bliss.*

I placed the last of the plates in the rack and dried my hands, heading to the dining table where my gaze fell on Saint's laptop. Just sitting there, abandoned. I glanced up at the balcony, noticing the door to the bathroom was open and light was spilling out.

It wasn't like I cared who he bothered to email (most likely Cruella de Vil about his new fur coat), but Monroe had been vying to get his hands on Saint's laptop for a while to get information on his father. And it was sitting right there in front of me. Monroe had done so much for me. A quick peek wouldn't do any harm...

I hurried forward, opening it up and cursed as I realised it had a password. *Obviously.*

I quickly typed *Night Keepers, Night People, Kotari* and *King of the Fuckwits* to no avail. Alright, so maybe I didn't try that last one, but still.

Dammit, what else did Saint care enough about to use as a password??

Kyan Roscoe

Blake Bowman

Saint Memphis

SaintKyanBlake

Ironed shirts

Folded underpants

SKB

Satan

“What the fuck are you doing?” Saint's voice made me jerk around and accidentally swipe the whole laptop onto the floor with a loud crack.

Oh shit shit shit.

“I er-” I came up short, gaping at him with my heart thrashing and my mind on overdrive.

He strode toward me in his dark green and white football uniform, his eyes two furious pits of hell.

“Wait, I just-“

“You just what? Tried to go through my personal things?” he snarled, snatching the laptop from the floor. He flipped it over and I stopped breathing as I spotted the jagged crack running through the screen.

Oh fuck no.

He tossed it down on the table with a bang that made me jump, then I turned, doing the only thing sensible as I fled, racing god only knew where as he took chase.

I made a beeline for the crypt, fear tangling with my veins, but Saint caught a fistful of my hair before I made it and I yelped in pain as he dragged

me backwards towards the couch.

I twisted around in anger, throwing a fist into his side as I refused to bow to his demands.

He grunted as he shoved me down onto the seat and I stared at him in horror as Kyan and Blake appeared from their rooms, staring between us in confusion. Saint's eyes glittered like oil as he gazed at me, looking like he was enjoying this far too much. *Not good.*

"What's going on?" Blake demanded, his eyes on me, but I couldn't draw my gaze from Saint.

"Get me some rope," Saint snapped, moving forward and reaching for my wrists.

I leaned backwards, kicking out at him and he snatched my ankle with a demonic smile. "Are you going to fight me all the way, Plague?"

Was I?

I knew my punishment would be worse, but I didn't care. So hell yes I was going to fight him.

I lunged at him with a cry of defiance, throwing my shoulder into his chest and forcing him back a step as I landed punches in his sides. He shoved me away from him with a huff of effort and I stumbled into Kyan who immediately locked an arm around me from behind. I sank my teeth into his flesh, stamping my bare feet down on his shoes as I tasted blood.

"Little viper," Kyan laughed, not releasing me even a little bit.

Blake appeared with the rope, passing it to Saint who threaded it through his fingers as he approached.

"Hold her wrists behind her back," he instructed Kyan and he wrestled with me as he tried to snatch them into his grip. I wriggled and fought, throwing elbows that made him wheeze, but his strength was incapacitating. The more I hit him, the more he seemed to like it too. And I hated that I

couldn't get free. It made me feel weak. Like when I'd been pinned beneath Merl, defeated by brute strength. It was the one thing I could never learn or train for. Men like Kyan were not only trained, but they were bigger and stronger than me pure and simple.

He finally clamped my wrists together behind my back, twisting me around and holding them out for Saint as his arms locked around my shoulders and my face was pressed into his chest.

I leaned back as far as I could then threw my head forward, catching him in the chin with my forehead and he roared another laugh as Saint moved to bind my wrists.

"Why were you trying to get on my laptop?" Saint asked in a deadly tone.

"To send dick pics to your grandma!" I spat and Kyan and Blake laughed as Saint's eyes grew darker.

"Well unfortunately for you, she's long dead. You may send them to my mother though, god knows she needs the stimulation," Saint deadpanned, sliding the rope around my wrists. *Did he just make a freaking joke??*

He tightened the knot enough to make me wince then nodded to Kyan. "Get her on the coffee table, face down."

"Wait!" I yelled, kicking at Saint as Kyan whipped me off my feet and planted me down on the table.

"We're going to be late for practice," Blake complained, his harsh tone revealing that he wasn't thrilled about this. But not being thrilled wasn't the equivalent of telling them to fucking stop, was it??

"Assholes! All of you!" I screamed as Kyan forced me down, gripping the rope around my wrists to subdue me.

Saint moved in front of me, smiling darkly as I craned my neck to stare up at him with my teeth bared.

"Let me go," I demanded. "You'll pay for this." I meant it. I would get

him back for this, for everything.

I glared at his beautiful, unaffected face as he wound another coil of rope into an intricate knot. Saint moved around me as Kyan restrained my legs and he slipped the rope over my ankles. The skirt of the floaty white dress he'd put me in rode up to my thighs as he tightened it then drew my ankles back to meet my wrists, tethering them firmly together.

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" I yelled, tugging desperately at my wrists, which caused me to yank my ankles higher and push my dress up even more. This was degrading as hell. And I was *not* gonna stand for it. "Let me go this second!"

"Have a good evening, baby," Kyan called and I turned my head to see them walking towards the door. Saint smirked like the cat who got the cream, staring at me with undeniable thirst before he stepped outside.

"Fuck you!" I screamed after them as the door slammed and the lock clicked.

I lay panting, totally restrained, unable to believe they'd done this to me. Although I didn't know why I was surprised. They were the Night Keepers after all.

I tugged at my binds again, but they wouldn't give. Saint was probably the king of the knots. He wouldn't have left any weakness in my binds. So I had to find a way to sever them.

I lifted my head, blowing a lock of hair from my face as I hunted for anything around me that could help. My gaze hooked on the washing up drying in the rack in the kitchenette and the sharp knife amongst it I'd used to chop vegetables.

I clenched my jaw, determination filling me as I rolled myself over and dropped off of the coffee table onto my side. I winced as I crushed my arm and rocked my hips so I fell onto my stomach again. It wasn't easy, or fast, or

fucking dignified but I managed to move along inch by inch using my thighs and shoulders, rocking from side to side and making my way around the couch and in the direction of the kitchen.

“You’re dead Saint Memphis,” I wheezed, my boobs crushed as I continued along the carpet like some sort of demented snake. “You and your little asshole of a bodyguard Kyan and your cowardly dog Blake. Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead.”

It was a long and humiliating path toward the kitchenette and I made a noise like a dying T-Rex with every awkward rock of my body, forcing too much pressure down on my chest as I went. My knees were chafing against the carpet and my dress had ridden up over my hips so my ass was now bare just to make sure I was absolutely scarred for life by this experience.

At least those bastards aren’t here to see this. But please tell me there are no secret cameras in this place.

I finally made it onto the flagstone floor of the kitchenette and found I could glide across them with the grace of a slug as I made my journey towards the sink. Finally, I gazed up at the knife in the rack above my head and started straining and writhing on the ground as I tried to figure out a way to reach it. But there was just no damn way.

I growled in frustration, my shoulders beginning to ache as they were pulled back in their sockets. I rolled onto my side, gripping the nearest cupboard door handle between my teeth and pulling it open, rolling back to get out of the way as it swung wide. I had to use my head like a goddamn walrus to shove stuff aside and look through it, but it was worth it because there amongst all the cleaning products was a pair of scissors.

My heart soared and I shuffled as far forward as I could, taking them between my teeth before moving back again and dropping them on the ground. I managed to get them open with my mouth then rolled over, taking

them into my hand and pressing one of the sharp edges against the rope.

I gritted my teeth as I strained to cut through it, the motion painful as I bent my fingers at an awkward angle. I dropped them three times before I managed to cut them and one of my binds snapped. I gasped as I got a hand free, wriggling around and using the scissors to sever the rest.

“Yes!” I cried to no one but myself, getting up and smiling from ear to ear.

I glanced at the clock. It had taken me close to an hour, but I’d done it. I was free. And now Saint was going to pay.

I ran up into his room with fury making me hot and wild. I needed vengeance like I needed to breathe. I was so done with his shit. His cruel fucking *shit*. I wanted to hurt him. Drive a knife into his chest and twist it until he begged me to stop.

But what did he even care about? What could I take from him?

I gazed around the room until my eyes fell on his record collection, my heart thundering at the sight. *Yes*.

I strode into his closet, grabbing a sports bag and marching over to the records, stuffing all of them in until it was bursting. Then I marched downstairs, slinging it over my shoulder and heading to the kitchen, grabbing a box of matches and some lighter fluid.

You burn my letters, I burn your records.

I stuffed my phone into the bag too and headed to the door, kicking on some sneakers and leaving my coat. I wasn’t going to be cold outside for long. I was about to warm myself by a nice toastie fire.



I stood in the locker room showers with Blake on one side of me and Kyan on the other as I scrubbed mud from my skin and relished the exhaustion in my muscles. That was what I loved most about football. The way it wrung every bit of energy from my body and left me with an ache of fatigue hanging in my limbs. I always slept better after practice. Even my gym workouts couldn't compare. Though I'd still do one later to round off the day.

"Is it weird that I like it when we all shower together like this?" Blake joked and I cracked an eye to glance at him through the water cascading over my face. "Just three dudes, balls out, best friends-"

"If you're looking for one of us to suck your dick then try again when I get on the Jack later," Kyan interrupted.

"Why are you always making jokes about sucking each other off?" I snapped. "If you're curious then just have at it."

Kyan laughed darkly and Blake smirked like he didn't hate the idea, but I knew for a fact that the two of them liked girls too much to really mean it. One girl in particular at the moment, actually.

Our girl.

The last few weeks had been a major adjustment for me, first binding her

to us and then bringing Nash into the fold. So much had changed and yet some things, like post practice showers with these two idiots, were still the same as always. And despite my usual dislike for change and disruption to my routine, I had to admit that I rather liked the new additions to my life.

“Hurry up, assholes, we’ve got somewhere to be,” Monroe said as he walked into the room, leaning against the lockers with his arms folded.

“Come and have a shower with us, Coach,” Blake said excitedly. “Then it’ll be all four of us having our bonding moment.”

“I have absolutely no desire to do that,” Monroe deadpanned and I barked a laugh as I moved out of the shower and grabbed a towel. “Tatum’s sent us a group message to meet her on the beach.”

I fell still with the towel limp in my hands. “When?” I growled. Because there was no way. No fucking way that she’d slipped those ropes. Those knots were infallible. There wasn’t a single chance that I hadn’t tied them correctly. I’d checked them twice. Like I did with everything.

“Did she say why?” Kyan asked him as he dried off quickly, cutting me a look that said he had no fucking idea how this had happened either, but he could tell I was freaking out over it. “That girl has never willingly spent time with us before now.”

“She just said she has something special going on,” Monroe replied with a shrug, but I didn’t miss that glimmer in his eyes which he got whenever he was around her.

Tatum Rivers was a special kind of girl, the type to capture the attention of brutal boys and keep it. The type to know exactly the right ways to rile us up too.

I clenched my teeth so suddenly that my teeth snapped together.

Blake swore beneath his breath as he made a beeline for his locker, knowing full well I was likely to storm out of here naked any second to deal

with this fucking situation.

“Saint,” he snapped. “Clothes, *now*. Then let’s go see what she’s up to.”

“Up to?” I asked and the razor sharp claws of chaos dug into my brain as I realised he was fucking right. Of course she was up to something. She’d escaped and then sent us a message to meet her. And that girl’s spirit only ever seemed to strengthen when I tried to force her into submission.

“Problem?” Monroe asked, arching an eyebrow as he pushed off of the lockers.

“There won’t be for long,” I snarled. Because if Tatum Rivers thought I’d punished her harshly before this moment then she had no idea. No. Fucking. Idea.

Defying me like this, refusing to take her punishment like she’d sworn to do when she pledged to be ours cut through all leniency I’d been affording her. It burned through any *affection* I may have imagined I felt. Because now I was going to have to show her exactly who she was messing with when she fucked with me. And exactly what the consequences were for stepping out of line.

I managed to yank some sweatpants and a pair of sneakers on before I charged for the door.

The other Night Keepers were right on my heels, muttering between themselves about me. About *her*. About exactly what level of hell I was about to unleash and whether or not they should try and hold me back. But fuck that. I refused to be restrained today.

Tatum Rivers needed to *learn*.

I threw open the doors and stormed out into the dark with fury blazing through my veins.

I set the fastest pace I could manage without actually running, my teeth grinding to dust in my mouth while I was blinded by rage.

“What are you going to do to her?” Monroe demanded, a protective bite to his tone which wasn’t welcome at all.

“Whatever the fuck I want,” I snarled. “She broke my fucking laptop then she was afforded the luxury of a punishment to absolve her of her crime and yet she broke her word, betrayed her oath, went against everything we’ve agreed on. That she *swore* on. And for what? What the fuck is she up to?”

“I don’t know. But if you lay a hand on her, I’ll-”

“You’ll *what?*” I whirled on him, grabbing the front of his shirt and yanking him so close that his nose brushed mine and he shoved me off again with enough force that I almost fell.

“Whatever the fuck it takes to protect her from you,” he growled, his muscles bunching with tension as he stared me down.

I barked a merciless laugh at him and whirled away again. I didn’t have time for his fucking puppy dog eyes and theatrics. I had a Night Bound to put back in her fucking box.

It wasn’t hard to figure out exactly where she was on the beach. There was only one bonfire burning after all. And only one figure lit up before it with her long hair billowing in the wind and that white dress whipping around her legs.

She was nothing more than a blacked out silhouette before the flames and yet my whole body ached as I spotted her.

My blood burned with the need to punish her. My heart thundered with the desire to tame her. My flesh shivered with an insatiable hunger which craved her consumption. This woman. This devil. This angel. She was everything in that moment. The entirety of my being was so connected to hers that I was certain if she dropped dead my own heart would cease to beat too. I needed to capture her in every way imaginable. I needed it more that I needed air to breathe or water to drink. She was all that it would take to forever quiet the

monster in me and all that it would take to ignite it to levels far worse than I'd ever experienced before.

"You're late," she called, her voice mocking as she raised her arms above her head and danced around the bonfire like some kind of mythical creature born of lust and temptation.

We could still only see her silhouette, but I knew for a fact that all four of us were entirely mesmerised by the movements of her flesh before the flames.

"Why do you insist on defying me at every turn?" I demanded, my voice cracking with rage or grief and I wasn't sure which.

"Why do you insist on being such a fucking sadist asshole?" she yelled back with zero respect. But I'd teach her some fucking respect before the night was out.

I finally got close enough to make out her features in the orange light of the flames and she stopped dancing, about to face off with me, a beautiful, triumphant smile lighting her face. She really thought she'd won something here. But the only thing she'd earned herself was more punishment. Again and again and again until the message sank in. Until she learned the proper way to behave.

"You might wanna get on your fucking knees and start begging right now, Barbie, or-"

Every muscle in my body locked up as my gaze flicked to the fire and I caught sight of something that was enough to stop every single thought in my head from coming to fruition. I couldn't move, couldn't blink, couldn't say a single fucking word as my gaze was hooked on the things which were burning in the flames.

"I hope you don't mind, Saint, but I needed a bit of kindling for my fire," she taunted, her words ringing in my ears as I stared at the flames, refusing to

admit what I was seeing.

They couldn't be my records, they couldn't. I refused to accept it, because if they were-

My gaze fell on a familiar vinyl, the sleeve still almost intact as the fire ate into it and a roar of static noise spilled through my brain.

"What the fuck have you done?!" I bellowed so loud that my voice echoed around the cove.

Tatum screamed in fright as I lunged for her, but I didn't make it more than a step before a hard body collided with me and I slammed to the sand which lined the beach as my attacker kept me pinned beneath him.

"Get out of here!" Kyan commanded and Tatum's face paled, that taunting smile slipping from her features as she stumbled away from me. From the monster I was sure she could see glaring back at her as I fought tooth and claw to escape Kyan's hold.

Monroe snatched her hand and tried to drag her away but she hesitated, glaring down at me as I felt Blake's weight crushing me to the sand too.

"How do you like it, motherfucker?" she hissed, but I could barely even hear her.

Gone. Gone. Gone.

Chaos reins.

Carnage follows no man's rules.

Stupid boy, did you really think you could control everything? Life is chaos and it's time you learned to accept it or you'll never grow into the man you were born to be.

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuuuuuuuuuuuuck!

I threw my elbow back and managed to hit Kyan in the face, making him rear away so that I could scramble out of his hold.

Tatum was long fucking gone and if she was smart she'd keep running and

never look back. Because when I saw her again I was going to tear her limb from limb.

I dove towards the flames, my flesh burning as I tried to save my collection. Some of it. Any of it. A single record would have sufficed. My hand met with molten plastic and I roared in grief without feeling any of the agony in my flesh before the other Night Keepers dragged me back again.

I swung my fists, kicked and cursed and even bit as I fought to escape them.

My gaze caught on *her* for a moment, watching from the edge of the beach, full lips parted, blue eyes wide, like she was shocked to see what she'd done to me. But if she hadn't figured out what kind of fractured, volatile creature I was yet then she'd been seriously deluding herself.

Freezing water enveloped me suddenly and I choked as I inhaled a mouthful of lake water and my head was forced beneath the surface.

Strong hands gripped me, holding me down as I fought and convulsed until I was sure I'd drown. And the agony of that would have been such bliss compared to the utter fucking torture and torment of my reality.

Before I could die and leave this plain of anarchy for those who could survive it unscathed, unscarred, unbroken, I was yanked back out of the water and dumped on the beach.

Blake slammed his palm against my back and I coughed and heaved and retched and forced water back up out of my lungs. Bile seared the back of my throat and I vomited over the sand as my entire body shook from the shock of almost drowning.

"Have you got it locked down yet?" Kyan demanded, his grip on my arm tight enough to be unpleasant, like he thought I might leap to my feet and chase after her even while my lungs were still clogged with water.

"She has to *pay*," I hissed between coughing fits.

“Not today,” Blake said firmly.

“Not today,” Kyan agreed. Like I couldn’t be trusted. Like they valued that fucking girl over me despite the years we’d spent together.

I snarled at them as I rolled over and threw Kyan’s arm off of me through pure force of will as I scrambled to my feet.

The burn on my hand had been eased by my dip in the lake, but it was still angry and red like the wound she’d carved into my soul.

I hunted the beach for Tatum Rivers and her fucking bodyguard, Monroe, who’d chosen to shield her from me alongside the others but they were nowhere to be seen. Though there were only so many places that they could be and all I had to do was pick which destination to begin my hunt. I’d find them eventually. And when I did, my vengeance would be beyond sweet, but it wouldn’t soothe the pain of what she’d taken from me.

“We’re going back to The Temple,” Blake said fiercely as he moved to stand at my side.

“You’re not in control right now,” Kyan said as he stepped up on my other side, his eyes dark with intent and promising violence. “You need to go back and reclaim yourself, brother.”

“Fuck you,” I spat, storming away from the two of them. They always acted like they knew what it was to be haunted by my demons, but they didn’t. They had no fucking idea. Not even the slightest clue about the things I’d survived. About what it had taken to form the kind of strength I could claim. I’d been sculpted and grown into the monster I was. I was ruthless and callous and vicious in all the right ways and all it had cost me was my soul. But who needed a fucking soul anyway? Who needed to want and hurt and *care*? Not me. And certainly not my demon.

I strode up the beach, coughing again as more water forced its way up out of my lungs and the sopping wet material of my sweatpants clung to my

thighs.

“When I find her, I’m going to give her a real lesson,” I hissed. “Just like the ones I was given by my father. And then she’ll realise exactly how easy I’ve been on her. Then she’ll see how kind I’ve been up until now. Then she’ll find out exactly what it takes to break someone and carve something new, better, stronger out of the dregs that remain.”

“No you won’t,” Blake snapped. “Because I won’t fucking let you.”

“Neither will I,” Kyan added in a deadly tone.

I twisted toward them in my rage, wanting to make them bleed for their betrayal. “So that’s it? You’re siding with her after what she’s done? You’re breaking our bond for the sake of a girl who didn’t take our oath seriously, who fights against the bond she agreed to time and again?”

“When she made that oath, I agreed to make her mine,” Kyan snarled. “And that means I’ll protect her from anything that threatens to hurt her. Even if that thing is you.”

I started laughing, this insane, maniacal cackle that tore from my aching lungs and wouldn’t fucking quit.

“Where are your fucking lines, asshole?” I gasped. “Tying her up and leaving her there while we go to practice is okay, but unleashing my wrath on her crosses some kind of fucking barrier for you?”

“She knew she was making her bed with monsters when she chose to lie in it,” he replied steadily. “And the punishments we give her might be fucked up, but they never really hurt her. The mood you’re in now, I’m not convinced you can control yourself and I won’t let you do something you can’t come back from.”

“Hurt her?” I scoffed. They fucking knew I’d never raise a hand to that girl in violence. “What do you think I’m going to do? Take her out and flog her?”

“Worse,” Blake growled. “You’re threatening to punish her the way you used to be punished. And we’re not going to let you do that to her. Or yourself. When you come to your senses again, you’d hate yourself even more thoroughly than you already do.”

I turned away from them and their fucking accusations and roared my rage to the wind which howled around us. It whipped the tortured fragments of my soul away on a heavy breeze and I wasn’t sure I’d ever really reclaim them again.

I took off through the trees and the others followed me like predators tracking the scent of blood on the air.

It’s too late.

It’s never too late.

Hunt her down.

Leave her.

Make her pay.

I’m the one who deserves to pay.

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck.

They were right. I was losing my shit. Peeling apart at the seams. Those wounds which I stitched together so carefully were breaking open and bleeding all over my soul.

I had to find a way to get them to scab over again before I bled out, and hurting Tatum Rivers would only make my death come swifter.

I didn’t bother with the paths, carving through the trees regardless of the thorny bushes which caught and bit at my skin, scratching my flesh and making real blood spill. I didn’t care. I just needed to get back. To do something to smother this rage. To dampen it enough for my thoughts to come together cohesively so that I could deal with this rationally.

We reached The Temple and I threw the door open so hard that the heavy

wood slammed against the brick wall and a tremendous bang echoed through the space.

“We stick to the schedule,” I said firmly, glaring at Blake and Kyan in turn. Tonight, Tatum was due to sleep in with me and I refused to let that routine get fucked up too.

“If you get yourself under control,” Blake agreed while Kyan just glowered.

“Consider it done.” Though I had no fucking idea if I could even manage that aside from knowing that if something else went wrong tonight, I was fairly sure my brain would self combust.

I turned and headed straight for the crypt, needing to lose myself in exercise, exhaust the beast in me so that it didn’t have enough energy left for rage and I could regain control over my own thoughts.

I managed to raise my trembling fingers to the control panel on the wall and set a playlist running, the angry tones of the classical music reaching out and stroking the beast in me in a desperate attempt to calm it.

I cranked the volume, higher and higher and higher until the voices in my head were drowned out by the power of it. I was going to work out until I was bleeding and everyone in the entire school died from hearing too much goddamn Beethoven.

My sweatpants were still cold and wet from the lake and drops of ice cold water ran down my back from my hair, but the physical discomfort was a good thing. It was a welcome distraction from the mental discomfort which threatened to consume me. And as I fell into the rhythm of the exercise, I tried to let my body take over and my mind fall still.

Of course it made no difference yet, but I wouldn’t stop until it had. Until there was nothing in my mind but silence and the venom in my blood had washed away.

Four and a half hours of abusing my body was what it took to still my rage, though the chaos of my mind still ruled.

My limbs were trembling and I could barely stand, but I forced my spine to straighten through pure will before quieting the music which still crashed from the speakers.

Silence fell so heavily that it made the air easier to breathe. My ears were ringing from so many symphonies that I was almost certain I wouldn't have been able to name all of the ones I'd listened to. Sweat coated my skin and my mouth was so dry that my tongue felt swollen.

I took the stairs slowly, rising up out of the crypt like the demon I was and pausing before the door at the top as I spotted a plate of food and a tall glass of water waiting for me.

My fists clenched as I realised I'd missed dinner. My ritual was so beyond fucked that I couldn't even bear to think about it.

But one of my brothers had known. Had left this secret solution here for me so that I didn't have to face the dilemma of cooking and eating at the wrong time on top of everything else. I demolished the sandwiches and drained the water, soothing the growl of hunger in my stomach which had been vying for my attention for hours.

I continued my ascent as soon as I was done, opening the door and heading into the living area.

My heart stilled in my chest as I spotted her sitting on the couch, wedged between Kyan and Blake like they were two muscular book ends.

Monroe wasn't here. And I guessed her presence meant they'd trusted my word that I could contain myself.

“Bed,” I commanded, dragging my gaze away from her as I headed for the stairs.

I couldn't bear to look at her. I didn't want to see that defiance in her gaze and know that she'd enjoyed cutting me open and laying me to ruin. I didn't want to face the fact that she held enough power to do that to me.

My feet pounded up the wooden stairs and I ignored the whispers passing between the three of them behind me.

I headed into my closet and dropped my sodden sweatpants at last, throwing them in the laundry basket before stalking through the perfectly hung clothes to the drawers at the back of the space. I retrieved a pair of white boxers for myself and reached out to grab the closest nightdress I could for Tatum without looking at it.

I don't give a shit what she wears anyway...

I turned away from the sight of the other options, clenched my jaw, closed my eyes and tried to convince myself to keep walking.

No. Can't do it.

Fuck my life.

I took a step back, glanced at the pink silk in my fist and huffed out a breath before hanging it back away carefully. I thumbed through the options as quickly as I could, settling on a matching set of black silk shorts and a cami with a lace trim.

I stalked back into my room butt naked, placing her clothes down on the end of the bed without looking at her where she lingered by the top of the stairs.

“Saint...” she breathed.

A low growl sounded in the base of my throat and I kept walking until I was in my bathroom where I tossed the door closed behind me.

Rage was prickling beneath my skin again and I needed to sink further

into my ritual to banish it. I doubted I'd be able to offer her anything other than silence at best, but I only had to make it until midnight. A single hour.

Then the lights would go off and I'd...well, I wouldn't sleep at first. I'd lay down and close my eyes and try to force myself to sleep. And once she drifted off and her breathing grew steady, I'd open my eyes and roll onto my side so that I could watch her. Study her. Envy her for the hours she spent in slumber while my demons whispered in my ears to keep me awake.

But then I would find sleep. Easier than on the nights when she wasn't with me. My mind slowed when I looked at her. The echoes of fear which I tried to forget didn't creep so close. I still didn't sleep a lot. But I did manage considerably more while she was close and though I didn't understand why, I appreciated that gift she gave me without her even realising she did it.

I scrubbed my flesh clean beneath the flow of hot water while listening to Piano Sonata No.14 in C Sharp Minor performed by the Berlin Symphonic Orchestra. It was a melancholy and self-pitying thing to do, but I could accept that I was a tad over dramatic in my musical decisions at times. My fingers twitched with the urge to play the song myself. It had been too long since I'd indulged in creating my own music. I used to use the music rooms in Ash Chambers every day to play, but recently I'd been going there less and less. The piano always felt like it had a direct lifeline to my heart and sometimes I didn't like to face the darkness of the music I was compelled to create.

But tomorrow I was going to go back to the instrument I loved and face my demons. And if it was self indulgent to do it then so be it. I could admit I was a selfish, petty creature at times. Probably more often than not if I was honest.

I got out of the shower and dried myself carefully, brushing my teeth before swiping a hand over the mirror to clear the condensation from it so that I could hunt my eyes for the darkness which still stirred beneath my skin.

Not that it ever truly left. I thought of it as an endless sea. Sometimes I found myself drowning in the depths of it and other times I was wading along the shore, only my toes dipped beneath the waves. Today I was caught in a whirlpool which threatened to drag me down to the bottom.

I sighed as I allowed the sorrowful playlist to continue, tapping the console on the wall to lower the volume and send it out to the speakers in my room so that I could latch onto it when I saw her.

I would prove that I was the master of my own evil.

She could sleep in my bed and I'd save her punishment for tomorrow when my blood wasn't running so cold. Or maybe the next day. I wouldn't think on it now either way.

I pulled the bathroom door open and fell still as I found her kneeling outside it waiting for me. Just like I asked her to do in the mornings outside the crypt. She'd changed into the black shorts and camisole I'd selected for her and her golden hair had been brushed until it shone, cascading down around her face as she kept her head down.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my throat raw as I looked at her and my heart pounded to a deliciously slow beat.

How did she know exactly how to disarm me? How did she see so much of me when I made sure to keep everything in me locked down at all times? I hadn't even considered asking her to do this for me and yet she'd realised that it was what I needed. But why? Why would she care what I needed when she'd been the architect of my demise?

"Making peace," she replied without raising her head. "For tonight."

I swallowed thickly, my skin tingling as I looked down at her, curled in submission by her own choice.

"Why?" I murmured. I couldn't understand it. She'd brought me to ruin and I thought that was what she'd wanted to do.

“Because...I’m tired, Saint. I’m tired of all of you hurting me and me hurting you and I just want to pretend for a little while that we’re even. You burned my letters so I burned your records.” She shrugged her shoulders and her hair shifted where she remained kneeling before me.

The truth lodged in my throat for a moment, but I didn’t speak it. I was still too raw after what she’d taken from me.

“I guess on this one thing we’re even then,” I conceded. “Those records were the only thing I had left of my grandmother, so...”

She inhaled sharply and looked up at me, her hair splitting apart to reveal her blue eyes.

“I didn’t know that,” she said, frowning slightly like that might have changed what she’d done. But I didn’t see why it would. “Did you love her?”

I grunted noncommittally, offering her a hand to pull her up.

She gazed at me like she was deciding whether or not to accept it before slipping her hand into mine.

I pulled her upright and she stood before me with her breath feathering past her parted lips, a thin lock of golden hair fluttering between us.

She still held my hand and my skin burned where it met hers, like I was ice and she was fire and we were destined to collide like this again and again until one of us was destroyed. And as I looked into her eyes, I was almost certain that it would be me. That the fire in her would never go out and I was bound to be consumed by it. But in that moment, it didn’t seem like the worst of fates.

I reached out with my free hand and gently tucked the loose lock of hair behind her ear, the silken strands brushing against my skin as I lingered in that touch.

“Why do you always have to do that?” she asked softly, her fingers shifting against mine.

“Do what?”

“Fix me. Tidy me up. Dress me like some perfect little dolly and correct every small imperfection.” The tightness in her lips said she didn’t like that and I frowned as I tried to figure out why.

“Because...I see how beautiful you are and I want the world to see it too. I want you to shine like the brightest star in the sky and for the world to know that this perfect creature belongs to me.”

“But I’m not perfect,” she insisted. “And I know for a fact that you don’t really think I am either. Or you wouldn’t keep trying to change me all the time.”

“I don’t want to change a single thing about you,” I objected, though maybe that was a lie. “At least...I only want to maintain control of you. But that doesn’t mean I don’t like it when you fight back against me – most of the time.”

“That’s...not the impression you give me,” she replied, her eyes narrowing like she was searching for a lie.

“And what impression do I give you?” I asked, running my hand down her spine slowly and enjoying the way her back arched at the contact.

“That I’m...a project or something to work on. A doll with a malfunctioning personality which you’re aiming to stamp out. Sometimes I think you won’t stop until I’m nothing but an empty vessel awaiting your permission to so much as blink.”

My lips pursed at that assessment and I splayed my hand over the base of her spine, revelling in the warmth of her skin beneath the silk.

“I don’t want that,” I growled. “I just want...” I didn’t even think I had an answer to that so I only sighed.

She shifted closer to me, her grip on my fingers tightening as she looked up at me. “If I could understand why it matters so much to you then maybe it

wouldn't hurt me so much," she murmured. "Or is that what you want - to hurt me?"

I shook my head at that assessment. Pain might have been a tool I wielded in my mission to gain control, but I only wielded it as a means to an end with her. It wasn't my goal to wound her. "You want to know why I need to control the things that matter to me?" I asked, arching an eyebrow at her. "That's...a complicated issue."

Tatum rolled her eyes at me and I was struck with the urge to spank her for it. But I hadn't done that in weeks. Not since she'd admitted she liked it. Because that changed it immeasurably and I wasn't sure if I could handle the way I felt about that.

"Will you tell me?" she pushed and I found myself wanting to. At least in part.

"I had an...unsettling upbringing," I said slowly. I wasn't really going to go into it now, but I could give her enough of the truth to satisfy that need for knowledge I could see burning in her eyes. "Chaos was a constant. I moved between my family's properties a lot with...not a lot of notice." Or no notice, like being woken in the middle of the night and getting bundled onto a private plane without being given a destination. "It was very disconcerting to say the least. I wasn't allowed much that was constant. My father believes in being prepared for anything so he wanted me to be used to thinking on my feet, adapting to unexpected changes. I could never be sure I'd eat my breakfast and dinner in the same house let alone choose what I'd eat..."

"I moved around a lot too growing up," she said in a low voice. "I get how unsettling it can be. But for you, your routines, control, they just seem so vital-"

"I imagine you had some warning about the moves you made," I replied with a shrug. "And were allowed to bring things with you. I remember when

I was five I had this action man who I called Clive and I fucking loved that thing. He had a gun and a car and... well, it's foolish to place sentiment on inanimate objects." I shrugged off the memory of Father making me push that stupid doll in the garbage disposal because it was *making me soft*. I hadn't really played with toys after that.

"What happened to Clive?" Tatum asked me gently and it was so fucking ridiculous that she gave a shit about some damn lump of plastic that I barked a laugh.

"He got left behind, I suppose," I replied vaguely. "My grandmother was the one who'd bought him for me. She was the only one in my family who seemed to think that having something constant in my life was important. And after he – *it* – was gone, she came up with something better. Something permanent that she could give me which could never be left behind. Music."

"The records?" Tatum chewed on her lip guiltily and my gaze fixed on the way her teeth sank into the plump flesh.

"They were from her. But she gave it to me in a more permanent way than that. She was the one who bought me my first grand piano and all the lessons to go with it."

"I didn't know you played," Tatum gasped, her eyes lighting hungrily as she drank in that knowledge like she was starving for it.

"I imagine there's a lot of things you don't know about me, Tatum," I replied in a low voice.

"Are you any good?" she asked.

"I'm proficient," I replied.

"For fuck's sake, you might as well just say you're a pro. It's obvious anyway. No way you'd have a hobby like that and not be the best at it," she groaned and a real laugh escaped me.

"Is that so?"

“Yeah. You’re a damn perfectionist. I bet you could perform for money if you needed any.”

“Music is all about control,” I said.

“And passion. You have to feel it in your heart.”

My lips parted on an objection to that, but I couldn’t make it pass my lips. Because as much as I may have liked to deny it, that was exactly the truth of it. It was why I needed it so much. Music spoke to my soul and calmed my heartache. It was the crutch I used to heal my wounds and rein in my moods.

“How is it you see things about me so clearly when I don’t even see them myself?” I asked, my thumb shifting over the back of her hand.

“Maybe you’re not as complicated as you want to believe,” she teased.

“I doubt that.”

“So...music gave you an ounce of control. Something you could own which couldn’t be taken from you. And then you just started laying claim to other things you could control?” she asked, clearly still trying to figure me out and for some reason I was still indulging her curiosity.

“I suppose so. Over the years I made routines I could stick to no matter where I was. Things that couldn’t be controlled by circumstance, like the times I do certain things. I may have had to bend to changes in time zones on occasion but barring that, I could always eat at the same times, workout at the same times, sleep...”

“So when did you realise you liked having control over other people?”

“It’s more about them *not* having control over me,” I replied. “The people I care for most in this world certainly don’t bow to my every whim. Kyan in particular goes out of his way to defy me. And don’t get me started on you.”

She tilted her head like something I’d just said had captured her attention but I wasn’t sure what part of it.

“And how do you feel when they *do* give you control?” she asked slowly.

“When Kyan beats the shit out of someone because you demanded it for example.”

“Free,” I replied instantly. “I feel elevated beyond the chaos which is constantly surrounding me, trying to rip me apart.”

“And with...girls?” she asked, a blush colouring the skin beneath her freckles.

“What girls?”

“The err, girls you have. Do you get them to submit to you in the bedroom, or...”

“Are you asking me if I like to dominate women during sex?” I asked, my lips twitching with amusement.

She bit that bottom lip again and I released her hand to tug it free, keeping hold of her chin so she was forced to maintain eye contact with me.

“Yes,” she breathed.

I thought about that for a moment and shrugged because clearly I did. Though probably not in the way she was imagining. Not that it hadn't crossed my mind before, but there hadn't been a girl who held my attention for long enough for me to consider experimenting with it until now.

“Obviously I get off on being in charge. But in the past that's just meant I bend girls over to fuck them so they can't touch me when I don't want them to.”

“Charming.”

“You asked,” I pointed out and she smirked.

“Fair point. But let's say you had someone willing to let you be in charge of the whole thing, would you still just want to bend them over? Or would you want them to submit in other ways?” Her gaze lit with curiosity as she asked me that and a shiver ran through my flesh.

“I don't know,” I admitted. “If I was supposed to have control, I'd need to

be sure it was absolute-”

“Total submission?”

“Yes,” I growled.

“That doesn’t sound so bad...in that situation.”

My heart pounded fiercely at those words on her full lips and I could feel myself getting hard at the mere suggestion of it.

“I wouldn’t have pegged you for a submissive,” I breathed.

“Maybe I’d like to surrender control occasionally,” she replied, her voice husky. “I think I thrive in chaos. I need it sometimes. And letting someone else take ownership of my flesh sounds kinda...hot.”

She licked her lips and I grunted before stepping back suddenly and moving away from her.

“Get into bed,” I said, needing some distance from her to think.

Her gaze dropped to my crotch where the outline of my rock hard dick was showing clearly through my white boxers. It didn’t matter that she could tell how much I desired her though. It only mattered if I acted on it and broke the rules. Which I wouldn’t. Rules were what stopped my world from caving in.

Tatum only hesitated a moment before doing as I’d said and getting into the bed. But instead of moving around to her side, she knelt in mine.

The lace top of the pyjamas she was wearing was just transparent enough for me to see the pink flesh of her hardened nipples through it and a lump lodged in my throat as I drank in the sight of her.

“I wouldn’t have burned your records if I’d known what your grandmother meant to you,” she breathed and I frowned at the guilt in her expression.

“I’d imagine after the letters that would only make you more inclined to do it.”

“No. That just means I know exactly how much it hurts to lose something

that special. And I wouldn't want to do that to you or anyone else," she replied resolutely.

My brow furrowed and I glanced away from her over the balcony to the church below, wondering how long I should let this farce go on.

"Saint?" she asked, drawing my gaze back to her. "I don't want to talk about any of that right now. I...want you to tell me what to do."

My pulse pounded in my ears at the thought of that and it only hammered harder at the wild look in her eyes which said she really did want it.

"I'm not going to break your rules, Tatum," I growled, forcing myself to remain where I was despite the desire coursing through my blood.

"I don't want you to...but why don't you work around them? Just to see if you like it."

"What about you?" I asked, taking a step towards her despite myself.

"I want to see if I like it too," she admitted and the last of my resistance shattered.

I prowled towards her and she bit her lip once more as I closed in on her. "Lower your eyes."

She did so instantly, still sitting in my usual spot, dominating my space like I was aching to dominate her. A rush of exhilaration ran through me as I moved to stand over her. I wondered if there was a chance she was truly enjoying this like I was. But if she wasn't then why would she pretend? She didn't owe me anything. And she must have known by now the hold she had over me. So she didn't need to work for my attention.

I swallowed thickly as I observed her waiting for me in my bed, but that wouldn't work at all. I couldn't touch her if we were in bed – it was against the rules.

"Get up, stand by the wall," I commanded and she slipped off of the bed instantly, biting her lip as she scurried over to the wall.

I released a slow breath, marvelling at the way even that little act of obedience made me feel. It was exhilarating to have her at my command. I felt the closest to calm that I had all day, the power she was lending me over her body making the tension seep out of my limbs and lighting a new kind of fire in my flesh.

I took the blankets from the bed and folded them carefully, stacking them on the floor alongside the pillows. My gaze shifted to Tatum again as she waited in quiet anticipation, watching me with her fingers twisting into the fabric of the silk shorts she wore like she was aching to run them over something else.

I gripped the edge of the mattress and tugged it off of the bed frame and onto the floor in the space before her. No more bed. No more rules to worry about breaking.

“Lie on your back,” I growled, pointing at the mattress and she quickly moved to follow my command, blinking up at me as I stood over her, enjoying the way all of that long, blonde hair spilled across the sheets. “Part your legs.”

Her eyes widened at that one but she did it, drawing her knees up as her thighs parted for me and her hands knotted in the sheets at her sides.

“Don’t touch me,” I warned and she nodded, her chest heaving as I moved onto the mattress too.

I knelt before her, looking down at her as she waited for me, spread out like a feast at my complete and utter mercy. My dick was straining with the desperate urge to take her but I wouldn’t give in. My will was iron and her rules were law.

I moved onto my hands and knees and crawled between her thighs and over her body, making sure I didn’t touch her at all as I placed my hands either side of her head.

I leaned down, my muscles bunching as I did a press up over her, dropping so low that my skin prickled with the nearness of her body to mine and I tasted her breath as she exhaled shakily.

“What’s wrong?” I teased as I pushed myself back up away from her again.

“You really are the devil,” she groaned and I smirked at her.

“You have no idea,” I promised, lowering myself over her again.

That time I let my chest brush against hers the smallest amount and she shifted beneath me like she wanted to maintain the contact.

“Saint,” she pleaded, her voice all hot and breathy in a way that ignited a fire in my veins.

“Stay still,” I warned. “And say my name like that again.”

I dipped down again, brushing my mouth over the hollow of her neck and she moaned my name as if she was imagining me inside her.

“You’re wriggling,” I breathed, lifting myself off of her again and she arched her back like she was trying to prolong the contact.

“Don’t move,” I snarled, my heart leaping as she broke my rule and she fell back against the mattress with a groan of frustration.

“Or what?” she asked breathlessly. “What will you do to me if I break your rules, Saint?”

I growled beneath my breath at the thought of it, looking down at her hands where they fisted my sheets and loving how hard she was fighting her desire to touch me.

“You want consequences?” I asked, lowering myself over her again and brushing my chest over hers so that her nipples pressed against my skin through her top and she moaned a yes into my ear.

I raised myself off of her again and held myself there, looking down into her blue eyes which were so full of lust that it made me ache. I’d seen her

look at Kyan like that and I'd been trying to convince myself ever since that I didn't care, but having her focus on me in the same way lit me up and set me blazing like nothing I'd ever known.

"I thought you didn't like me punishing you," I said, keeping my body an inch from hers as she writhed in the sheets beneath me.

"I liked some of your punishments," she said seductively and my gaze darkened as I remembered the way she'd moaned as I spanked her.

"Is that what you want?" I asked. "You want me to spank you if you break the rules?"

"Yes," she replied without a moment of hesitation and my fingers flexed against the sheet beside her head.

Fuck, this girl just doesn't stop surprising me. Why the hell do I like that so much? She's chaos bottled and I should be running as far from her as I can get, but she just keeps drawing me in.

I lowered myself down over her carefully again, this time running my tongue up the side of her neck and she moaned in encouragement, bucking her hips so that she ground herself against my dick.

I fell still instantly, my gaze narrowing on her as I snatched her hands into my grip and pinned them above her head.

"What did I say about touching me?" I snarled, my eyes blazing as she looked up at me, completely at my mercy and panting with need.

"What did I say about punishing me?" she replied, grinding her hips against me again and making my balls swell with desire.

I growled at her and pressed my weight down hard, pinning her hips beneath me and her legs instantly curled around my back as she tried to pull me closer still.

"Does this feel like I'm not touching you, Tatum?" I demanded, rocking my hips so that my dick ground against her and she moaned at the friction,

her thighs tightening in a plea for more. “*Answer me.* Can you feel that?”

“Yes,” she gasped. “Jesus, Saint, don’t stop, just-”

I shoved myself off of her, forcing her legs to part as I moved to sit on the edge of the mattress beyond her feet. I pushed myself upright and stalked away from her before dropping into the brown, leather armchair beside the desk in the corner of the room.

Tatum rolled over onto her front, watching me with confusion in her gaze as I placed my hands on the arms of the chair and waited.

“What are you-”

“Come here,” I demanded, levelling her with a dark look. “And bend over.”

Her eyes widened with a mixture of fear and excitement and she pushed herself off of the mattress before moving towards me.

“Do you want me to go easy on you?” I asked, eyeing the way her golden hair was all messed up and enjoying the fact that I’d been responsible for it.

“No,” she whispered and I almost groaned as I held out a hand for her.

She took it tentatively and I yanked her forward so that she fell across my knees with a squeal of surprise. I grasped a fistful of her hair in my left hand to make her arch her back as she propped her forearms on the edge of the chair to support herself, her fingers curling around the leather as she gripped it tight.

“I’m going to hit you three times,” I told her. “This is your last chance to back out.”

“I don’t want to back out,” she panted and I was certain she could feel how hard my dick was beneath her because I was pretty sure I’d never been as turned on as this in my entire life and it was driving into her forcefully enough to bruise.

I slid my right hand down her spine, enjoying the way she shivered at my

touch as I palmed the round curve of her ass. I lined my hand up right at the apex of her thighs where only the thin silk of her shorts divided the hot heat of her from my flesh and I groaned as she lifted her ass into my hand.

I swung my hand back and clapped it down hard, a moan of pure lust spilling from her lips as she arched her neck back against the grip I held on her hair.

My heart was pounding to a blinding rhythm as the demon in me did a fucking backflip in excitement and I could only stare at her as I tried to drink in the fact that she wanted this too. That she seemed to be enjoying it as much as I was and that I'd found something to please the darkness in me which didn't involve damaging someone else for once.

I circled my palm against the sting I'd placed on her flesh for a few seconds, drawing more moans from her lips and soothing it before swinging my hand back again.

The second sound to leave her lips had my chest heaving as she cried out in pleasure at the strike of my hand and as I circled my palm against the tender flesh, she ground back against me wantonly, demanding more.

The third clap of my palm against her made her call out my name. The word sounding like a blessing and a curse as I circled my hand over the sting and slowly released her golden locks from my other hand, my fingers massaging her scalp for a few moments before I slid them from her hair.

"You really like that?" I asked her roughly, her answer meaning more to me than I wanted to let on.

"Do you really need to ask that question?" she panted.

I drew her upright again and she moved to straddle me in the wide chair, her hands landing on my chest as she traced the words of my tattoo with her fingertips.

The days are long, but the nights are dark.

Our eyes connected as she read the words and a quiet kind of understanding seemed to pass between us.

She ground her hips against my dick in a silent plea and I was seriously fucking tempted to give in and finish this, but the rules she'd set might as well have been shackles around my limbs. Hell, there may as well have been one around my dick too. Rules were the only thing that kept me sane. I'd never break one.

"Are you still going to punish me for the records tomorrow?" she asked softly, her eyes guarded even as she ground herself against my cock and I wrapped my hands around her hips to take control of her movements.

"Consider yourself punished," I said, surprising myself with the sincerity of my words.

Earlier, I hadn't been able to think up a punishment severe enough to equal the pain she'd caused me by destroying the only valuable thing my grandmother had left me when she died. She'd gifted me thirteen properties and a considerable fortune too, but the records were the only thing that had really mattered to me. A few minutes of Tatum surrendering control to me was enough to quiet that rage in me. Snuffing it out like it had never existed at all. And I was struggling to get my mind around that.

She ground against me again and I grunted, tightening my grip on her hips so that she couldn't move at all without me guiding her. Then I looked into her eyes and slowly rocked her hips so that the solid length of my cock rode over her clit through our thin clothes.

She moaned as I did it again and I began to wonder what exactly counted as foreplay. Kyan said that she'd specified it meant touching each other beneath our underwear, but I had to think that rubbing her up and down the length of my dick until she came would count too. Though it was certainly tempting to overlook that as she moaned for me again.

It's definitely bending the rules.

I groaned in frustration and flipped her around, tossing her down into the chair and pinning her beneath me. I lingered between her thighs for a moment as she looked up at me in surprise.

The burn on my hand was nothing compared to the heat in my blood as I took in the way she was looking at me. The lust, the desire, the *need*.

Fuck. I was in over my head with this girl and I was pretty certain she was beginning to figure that out.

I turned away suddenly and heaved the mattress back onto the bed, rearranging the covers and pillows before turning back to find her watching me like she had a thousand things to say, but couldn't pick one.

I moved back over to her, offering her my hand again and curling my fingers tight around hers as she took it.

I pulled her to her feet then dropped my hands to her hips, pressing my body flush with hers so that she could feel how much I wanted her as my aching cock pressed against her warm flesh.

I started walking, backing her over to the bed until I was pushing her into her usual spot. I pressed her down until she was laying there, her thighs parting and chest rising and falling as she looked at me like she wanted me to corrupt her as thoroughly as I could manage. And if it wasn't for the rules that bound me, I'd have done it a hundred times over.

"Thanks for the enlightenment, Barbie," I breathed, moving away from her again just as quickly.

She gaped at me as I drew the covers up over her and tucked her in.

I placed a pillow in the centre of the bed to make sure my dick didn't draw me across it to touch her in the night then moved around the bed and flopped down into my spot with a huff of frustration as my cock strained with the most desperate need to finish what we'd started.

“Seriously?” Tatum growled, turning her big blues on me just before the lights flicked out as midnight came around.

“I’m not the one who made the rules, Barbie,” I replied, chuckling darkly as she cursed me.

I released a slow breath and closed my eyes, trying to make myself forget that she was just a few feet from me, her body aching in the dark just as much as mine. But that wasn’t the point.

There was a lightness in my chest as I thought about what we’d just done and for the first time in my life, I wondered if I’d been right to believe there was no real way for me to quiet the demon in me. Perhaps there were things that I could do to satisfy that ache in my blood and my desperate need for control which weren’t as destructive as everything I’d always relied on.

When Tatum’s breathing grew steady, I shifted onto my side, leaning on the pillow I’d put in place to keep me away from her and watched her in the moonlight which was filtering in through the stained glass window above my bed.

I’d known there was something special about this girl from the first moment I’d laid my eyes on her. And now I was just more determined to make her accept her place amongst us. Because if this wasn’t fate then I didn’t know what was. Tatum Rivers was mine. And I was never going to let her go.



My alarm called to me at a quarter to six, the buzz of it vibrating through my pillow. I had to be downstairs kneeling outside the crypt by six and I groaned groggily as I tried to force my body awake.

I wanna stay here in this comfy ass bed forever. It was totally worth the spanking, but now Saint knew I liked it, I doubted he was going to punish me seriously that way anymore. Damn, why'd I have to go and spoil a good thing? Not that I was particularly miffed since Saint had toyed with his need for control.

I'd been pacing his room last night, ready for him to destroy me while he was in the bathroom. I was going to be dead. Deader than a dead fly in a windowsill and I would've had a far less peaceful demise unless I acted fast. It had struck me with the force of a lightning bolt what I had to do. What in that moment had seemed so obvious to do. I needed to relent to him completely, show total submission, then how could he punish me?

I'd almost laughed when it had worked, quietly smug, but when he'd told

me about the records being his grandmother's, I'd somehow found it in me to pity him too. To feel guilt over what I'd done. I knew Saint had taken my letters and yet I would never mindfully have done the same to him, destroying something so personal. Irreplaceable. I guessed that meant I wasn't a monster like he was. Though sometimes I wished I was, so I could be as cruel and as callous to him in my revenge as he had been to me.

My phone buzzed again and I pushed the covers aside, my eyes cracking open the smallest amount as I foolishly tried to cling to sleep.

I had one foot on the cool floorboards when Saint's voice reached me. "No more kneeling outside the crypt."

I turned to him, wondering if he'd just spoken in his sleep or if someone else was doing a perfect impression of his voice because why the hell would he say that? "Um, what?"

"You heard me, Barbie." His eyes were still closed, like he couldn't bear to open them a moment before six am. "I only wish for you to kneel from now on when you want to kneel," he said, his voice gaining a seductive edge which made my body quiver.

When I want to kneel? Holy shit.

"Why?" I demanded, still not trusting him.

"Because I said so," he growled. "Now come back to bed."

Well hell if I'm gonna question that order. I slid back under the covers, a moan escaping me as I rolled over, hugging the pillow that Saint had placed between us. He had rolled towards me too, his hand resting on the pillow almost like he'd been reaching for me in the night. But even wholly unconscious, I knew Saint wouldn't break my rules. Although...he had come pretty close last night. I bit my lip as I thought about the press of his hard length between my thighs. I kind of hated myself for how good that had felt, how much I'd ached for him. If there was a soul in the world who was the

least deserving of my body, it was him. So why had I yearned for his touch yesterday? Why had I started to think it might be okay to forget our hate for one night and just indulge in the darkest fantasies our minds could conjure?

Not gonna think about it.

My eyes fell closed and I smiled as I realised I had a whole hour and a half longer to sleep. That was until six am ticked around and Clair de Lune by Debussy poured through the speakers all around his room. It was way louder up here than anywhere else in The Temple and that was saying something.

I groaned, shoving my head under my pillow and pressing it down against my ear.

I felt Saint's weight shift from the bed and the music dimmed in the room as if he'd turned off the speakers in here. I pushed the pillow back and watched as he got ready for his workout then jogged downstairs out of sight. I was left speechless. Did he just do something nice for me?

Do not think into it. Saint Memphis doesn't do nice for anyone unless it benefits himself.

I couldn't sleep after that though. My mind was firing off thoughts which had no business being in my head. *Does Saint actually have a conscience deep under all those layers of ice? Impossible.*

I finally got up, having wasted my extra time in bed, then I headed downstairs and started making breakfast for everyone.

When Saint appeared from the crypt, I tried my best not to eye-fuck him in all his sweaty, hardened muscle glory, focusing on serving up the food I'd made instead as he walked upstairs.

Blake appeared next, strolling toward me as he stretched his arms above his head, his bare torso rippling with endless muscle. The world was testing me today.

I held out his plate of pancakes and he leaned forward, pressing a kiss to

my cheek, leaving a burning mark there as he thanked me and walked away. *Um, did I travel into an alternate reality in my sleep last night?* Saint being nice, then Blake kissing me like a prince. I thought we'd stopped playing that game?

Kyan appeared from the direction of his room, his face a heavy scowl, his eyes two hollow pits of death.

Nope, still in the same world.

I hated that we still weren't talking. Despite the fact that he was a douchebag who I'd officially called out on his douchbaggery, I actually missed the old Kyan. The playful, fun Kyan who brought out a wild side in me that made me feel alive.

I put his plate down on the counter and planted myself in front of it as he stalked forward to take it. He tried to reach past me and I held my arms out as a barrier.

"Morning, Kyan," I said brightly.

He grunted, surveying me like I was a mild irritation to his day. It cut deep. I didn't want Kyan to look at me like that even though I'd wanted to hurt him. But he'd hurt me first and had never felt an ounce of guilt over it. So why should I?

"Did you sleep okay?" I asked.

He pushed me aside, grabbing his breakfast and turning his back on me as he headed over to the table and dropped into his usual spot.

Anger pooled inside me, masking the ache he'd left too. I might have been forced to clean and cook for them, but a bit of gratitude didn't go amiss.

Saint appeared at eight on the dot and I placed his food in front of him as required.

It wasn't in the rules for me to sit and eat with them and as I glanced at the stony look of indifference on Kyan's face, I realised I didn't want to stay

there a moment longer.

“Enjoy your food,” I said bitterly, my gaze set on Kyan who didn’t even look up.

I strode away, jogging upstairs into Saint’s room, feeling eyes on me, but I didn’t know whose. Certainly not Kyan’s. He didn’t spare me a glance anymore. Didn’t even sleep in his bed with me when it was our turn to share. He continued to leave me in his room and sleep on the couch. And maybe I should have been thrilled about that. I’d turned a Night Keeper off of me. Made him hate me for good this time. Enough so that he didn’t want anything to do with me even as his servant. And that was fine. Just fine. Except it made me want to scream.

I showered and found my uniform waiting for me on Saint’s perfectly made bed, dressing for the day. I was about to head downstairs when footfalls marched up the steps and I held my breath as a part of me hoped Kyan had sought me out. *Stupid. I should be glad of his silent treatment.*

Blake appeared, looking delicious in his forest green uniform, his blazer fitting perfectly to his sculpted shoulders. He gave me a sideways smile as he approached.

“I thought I could walk you to class today?” he offered me his arm and I frowned.

“What’s with the chivalry? The game’s over, Bowman.”

He smirked his darkest smirk and shivers crashed up and down my spine. “I know, sweetheart. But maybe I’ve taken a liking to treating you like a princess. There’s no harm in that, is there?”

“There’s harm in everything you and your friends do,” I said suspiciously, not taking his arm. “But if you want to walk in my direction at the same pace, feel free. Doesn’t mean I’m walking *with* you.” I headed downstairs, discovering that Kyan and Saint had left already. I moved forward to clean

their plates, but Blake caught my arm, whirling me towards the door.

“Leave it,” he commanded. “That’s a Night Keeper order.”

I blew out a derisive breath. “So I can do double the washing up later on? No thanks.”

“I’ll send Rebecca a text,” he said conspiratorially and I couldn’t help but fall into the seductive playfulness about him today. I could see the old Blake shining out of his eyes. The one I’d met on my first day on campus.

“She’s Saint’s maid,” I said, narrowing my eyes. “You don’t have that power.”

“Cinders, I have more power than you can ever imagine,” he said in a growl that set my pulse racing. “Me and Becky have a little agreement, see? Saint treats her like a ghost, offering her precise instructions, but what happens when there’s a mistake made? Life isn’t as hunky dory as Saint would like to believe. There are always hiccups. So when Becky runs into one, she has *me* to confide in. Me to seek advice from. Because Saint would blame her if things didn’t run smoothly every single day. Which is completely impossible. He fired six maids before I realised I had to step in and make one of them seem perfect.”

My brows arched. “You do that for him?”

“I do it for Becky,” he laughed. “The poor woman can’t be blamed if Saint’s whites all turns pink in the wash because of a rogue red sock.”

I laughed. “Has that happened?”

“Yeah,” he chuckled, offering me his arm again and I took it this time, letting him lead me outside and along the path. “It was the first road bump she met. I gave her my number as soon as Saint hired her with the message that if she ever had a problem, even a small one, she needed to call me. Not Saint. Never Saint.”

I smiled at that. “You really do fancy yourself as Prince Charming.”

“Nah.” He grinned darkly again and I leaned closer, addicted to this side of him. “I’m just a better problem solver than most people. So when Becky called – in a right fucking panic I tell you – about Saint’s ruined whites, I skipped class, headed to the laundromat off the back of the dining hall and took note of every single item amongst the destroyed clothes, sizes, brands, all of it. Then I had a guy send them to me express. I had them by the end of the day, folded and ready to be placed back in Saint’s closet.”

“Holy shit, that’s ridiculous,” I laughed. “I need this guy in my life.”

“I have a lot of guys to do a lot of things. So the only one you really need in your life is me.” He glanced at me with a glint of hope in his gaze and I bit my lip as a tug in my chest made me want him. Not just his body for once, I wanted *him*. *Gah*.

“So let’s say I had a problem…” I glanced away into the trees. “Do you reckon you could solve it? Even if it was a big one?”

“If your problem is belonging to us Night Keepers then no, if it’s something else, then yes.”

I gave him a grim smile. “I’ll figure that one out on my own, thanks.”

“I’m afraid there’s no solution,” he smirked and I rolled my eyes. *Just watch me, Bowman*. He nudged me. “So? What is it?”

I hesitated a moment longer, wondering if I should really ask his advice on this. But I really didn’t know what to do. I also probably shouldn’t have been looking to solve it at all. Then again, I could argue that it was necessary for my plans to progress. So I would just pretend that was the reason why.

“Kyan hates me,” I said heavily. “He won’t talk to me, he won’t look at me, he can hardly bear to be around me anymore.”

I expected Blake to laugh, but he didn’t. He frowned heavily, pulling me closer. “You cut him deep, Cinders. Real fucking deep.”

“He hurt me first,” I tossed back sharply, glad to be able to say it out loud

for once.

“I know,” Blake sighed, giving me a taut frown. “You might not like the truth, but I can tell you it if you wanna hear it.”

“I do,” I said immediately, my heart pounding harder.

Blake nodded, running a thumb along his stubble in thought. “Kyan has feelings for you, feelings he can’t even understand himself. It’s not that he’s told me that, it’s that I know him inside out. He’s my brother. Has been for most of my life. There’s nothing he can hide from me. Nothing either of them can. And he wouldn’t anyway, we’d stand by each other no matter what.”

I let that sink in, wondering if I believed him and hating that my heart was suddenly backflipping like it had just been given the best news of its life. *Bad heart. Not cool.*

Blake went on, “He doesn’t think he’s good enough for you. He doesn’t think he’s good enough for much in life to be honest. Which is total fucking bullshit, but try telling him that and you’ll get nowhere. The more I’ve tried to prove he’s worth something, the harder he acts out to prove he’s not. So when you told him he’s nothing...you confirmed everything he’s ever thought about himself. He won’t come near you now because he figures he’s doing you a favour.”

“Oh,” I breathed, my insides twisting up into a tight ball. “I thought he was just using me as a plaything. I thought he felt nothing for me, that he was laughing at me the whole time...”

“That’s doubtful,” he said. “He doesn’t fuck around with people’s hearts, that shit’s sadistic. He doesn’t normally go anywhere near people’s hearts if I’m honest. But with you, it’s different. I don’t wanna talk for him, but I don’t want you to think of my friend like that either. Because it’s not true. Kyan has one of the biggest hearts I know, he just doesn’t let that many people into it. He let you in, sweetheart. And then you carved him up. That’s

why he's hurting so bad."

Ouch.

Dammit, I should have been happy I'd touched a nerve with Kyan, so why did it make me feel like utter shit? But I couldn't apologise when he'd never offered me a sorry for all the hell he'd put me through. This was probably the least pain he deserved. So why did this news make me wanna run to him, wrap my arms around him and swear he was worth more than every diamond in the world? He wasn't nothing. I just thought this was all part of his master plan to destroy me.

Why was this all getting so complicated? No *confusing*, that was the word. This was a headfuck of mass proportions. The fact that I was strolling along with my arm linked through Blake's like he was some nineteenth century bachelor come to court me was a joke.

When did things stop being so black and white?

I tugged my arm free of his, combing my fingers through my hair instead while I felt his eyes on me.

I couldn't let this new knowledge upset my plans. I needed them to stop all of this shit. This *niceness*. They weren't good people with big hearts. They were monsters with barren souls.

I couldn't stop punishing them just because they'd done the odd kind thing or because Kyan was experiencing the occasional decent feeling. That didn't make this *right*. They still owned me. Had still tried to ruin me.

Saint had half drowned me.

Blake had put a gun to my head.

Kyan had disregarded my privacy, stood by and watched while Saint tortured me, then flirted with me like I was fair game. No matter what he may have felt towards me, I couldn't let this change things.

My breathing evened out as I realised what I wanted. What I needed. They

had to be humiliated like I had been. They had to be laughed at and shamed. And I couldn't blink while I did it. I knew I was in deep, I'd always known it was going to be hard. But letting them get away with their crimes because I felt one percent sorry, or saw a glimmer of decency in them wasn't good enough. So it was onto the next phase of my plan.

Humiliation.

I stood in a cubicle in the women's toilets in Aspen Halls, refilling the toilet paper dispenser. I'd become a TP vigilante – not exactly what I'd hoped to be during the apocalypse, but there it was. The unit I'd unlocked to fill with toilet paper was being fiddly to shut, the catch not locking as I tried to close it. *But nothing can stop the TP bandit.*

A bang sounded out in the restroom and I frowned, turning my head as another bang made my heart judder. It sounded like someone was kicking the cubicle doors open, but why?

“Hello?” I called, slamming the dispenser shut with enough force to make it click into place at last.

No reply.

Another bang made my throat tighten then the sound of running water filled my ears. *What the hell is going on?*

I grabbed my bag from where I'd hung it on the back of the door and cursed as my lipstick came loose from a side pocket, hitting the floor and rolling out into the restroom.

I was about to open the door when someone started hammering on it and I stepped back on instinct. Their shadow fell beneath the door and I bent down to try and get a look at their feet.

“Who is that?” I demanded, refusing to be shaken. Maybe it was Pearl Devickers trying to wind me up. She threw insults at me and laughed about me with her friends whenever the Night Keepers weren’t around to get a rise out of me. She just loved pushing my buttons.

The shadow drew away and I grabbed the door handle, twisting the lock and yanking it open. *I’m not going to be scared of shadows in toilets.*

I stepped out, my foot slipping in something wet and I gasped as I skidded on the tiles and my back impacted with the hard floor. *Shit.*

I twisted my head toward the door just as it swung shut, the culprit gone. One of the sinks had been blocked, the water washing over the top of it and soaking the floor.

I got up with a curse, rubbing my bruised elbows where I’d caught myself on the tiles and moved to turn the water off. My heart constricted in my chest as the words *Night Whore* glared back at me, written across the length of the long mirror in red lipstick. *My lipstick.*

I looked around for it, but it was gone.

My heart pounded harder and I gritted my teeth, refusing to let this rattle me. If Pearl and her friends wanted to freak me out, then I wasn’t going to give them the satisfaction.

I shed my blazer, tying the sleeves around my waist to cover up my soaking wet skirt and marched out of the bathroom with my chin held high.

There was no one in the corridor. It was the end of the school day after all. And something about the empty hallway made an eerie sensation creep through my skin.

I hurried to exit the building, the sound of chatter in the courtyard outside making me relax as I took out my phone and shot Mila a message.

Tatum:

Did you get them?

I had the mother of all humiliations planned for tonight and Mila had been helping me prepare for it the past few days.

Mila:

Girl, I got four whole boxes.

I laughed, my heart beginning to pound for a whole different reason.

Tatum:

Great! See you soon.

“Hey, Tatum!” someone called and I looked up, spotting a group of some of the footballers on one of the picnic benches with Toby amongst them, waving me over.

I hesitated for half a second before jogging toward them and Chad McCormack gave Toby a look of surprise for addressing me. The Night Keepers would probably drown them if they stepped past the invisible walls my captors had built around me. The message from the three of them was clear: *stay the hell away from our girl*. But they were nowhere in sight, and I was in the mood to push against the barriers of my cage.

“Wanna hang out for a bit?” Toby offered, his eyes bright with hope. He looked like a changed man since he’d been welcomed back into society, but there was still a nervousness about him that I could sense beneath the surface of his smile.

“Oh, I can’t, me and Mila are meeting up to study.” *And the Night Keepers would literally destroy me if they found me here talking to you guys as I am*

only allowed one friend.

Hell, what has my life come to?

Danny carved a hand through his blonde hair. “Are you hanging out with her all night, or...?” he trailed off.

“I’ll only keep her for a couple of hours,” I said with a grin and he smiled stupidly.

Chad punched his arm. “You are so pussy whipped, bro. What happened to our pact of dicking ten girls per semester? You dip it in one and practically put a ring on it.” He was the typical jock with his bulky muscles and dude-bro vibe about him, his dark hair messy in that way girls liked.

“Shut up, man.” Danny punched him back. “Mila’s not just *any* girl.”

My heart lifted as he earned himself a lot of bestie brownie points.

“How far along are you with that pact, Chad?” I asked airily and he puffed out his chest.

“I get my Chad-stick in a tight hole every fucking day.” He smirked.

His Chad-stick??? I’m gonna vom.

“Oh, is that what I saw you doing this morning?” I asked innocently and the footballers all looked to Chad for explanation.

“What?” Chad’s dark brows pulled together.

“You remember. You had your *Chad-stick* in that hole in the willow tree near the boathouse. I hope there isn’t a family of traumatised squirrels living in there.” I tossed my hair with a smirk and Toby roared a laugh just as the rest of Chad’s friends lost it.

“I don’t fuck trees,” Chad balked, his face starting to turn beetroot red.

“I dunno what else you could really call it when you push your boner into a tree hole,” I said thoughtfully. “Is it just willows that get you off or do the pine trees do it for you too? You must be constantly hard around here.”

“I don’t fuck trees!” Chad repeated as his friends laughed and shoved him.

“It’s alright, bro, no one’s judging,” Toby snorted. “Did you part her branches and tickle her mossy patch?”

I snorted as the others went crazy, clapping Toby on the shoulder.

“Shut up, man,” Chad huffed, his ears bright red now.

“Did you lick her sap and make her blossom?” Danny threw in and Chad started throwing punches to try and make them stop.

“You’re funny, Night Girl,” Zayne Jackson called from the back of the group and I shrugged.

Movement in my periphery made me turn and the footballers followed my gaze to Bait who was trying to creep past them down the path, his eyes wide beneath his mask.

Chad suddenly cupped his hands around his mouth and made a noise like a war horn. “To the hunt!”

“To the hunt!” the footballers all echoed and they jumped off of the picnic bench they were occupying, tearing after Bait who high-tailed it down the path. Toby ran with them and it was kinda sad how quickly he’d turned on his old friend just to be welcomed back into the pack again. My stomach clenched as I watched them go. Bullying Bait just didn’t sit right with me even though he’d done a terrible thing. I just couldn’t get onboard with it.

I sighed as I took the path that led to the eastern side of the lake and my back prickled with bruises from my fall in the bathroom. It crossed my mind that I should tell the Night Keepers what had happened. The instant it flickered through my thoughts though, I shoved it away. I didn’t need them to fight my battles. And whoever was trying to freak me out was not going to win. They weren’t even brave enough to face me head on. But why was someone targeting me at all?

It was kind of obvious as soon as I thought it. There were plenty of people in this school who resented me - foolishly – for being the Night Keepers’ pet.

Pearl was a pretty likely candidate. Most girls at Everlake looked at me like I'd ascended to heaven, but did they even realise the abuse I faced at their hands? Or maybe some of them would have taken the abuse just to get their lips around their kings' cocks. I could certainly think of a few girls who would. Then again, a guy could have followed me into the restroom too...

I shook my head, forcing the thoughts away, figuring I'd deal with it if it happened again. There wasn't much I could do anyway but watch out for someone strutting around school wearing a *dare me red* shade of lipstick.

Better start carrying around a colour chart.

I shot a group message to the Night Keepers and a grin pulled at my mouth.

Tatum:

*I'm taking my library time now. *squid emoji**

I snorted a laugh as their replies poured in.

Blake:

What does the squid mean??

Saint:

Was that a mistake, Barbie? Because emojis are for simpletons who are unable to use the English language to effectively express their emotions.

P.S. A squid is not even an emotion or an idea and, therefore, it offends me that it is included in the emoji collection. Most emojis offend me in a similar fashion. The crustaceans are not quite as offensive as the clocks however, of which there are 24, showing times at half past the hour or on the hour, essentially stating that quarter past or quarter to the hour is irrelevant.

It's quite disturbing.

Kyan:

Octopus Emoji

Blake:

Whhhhhyyy?

Side note to Saint: who puts a P.S. in a text, dude?

Saint:

Someone with good breeding.

I swallowed down my laughter as I upped my pace to the library, reading waaaay too much into that octopus emoji from Kyan which had felt awfully like he was playing along with me.

I hated when they made me smile, it felt like my own body betraying me. But at least I was about to make up for that treachery tenfold. Scrap that, make it fiftyfold. Because very soon, those boys were going to be tasting their own medicine.

I headed into the library, walking to the back of the building to my usual table that was hidden beyond the stacks, finding Mila already there with four boxes of tampons lined up on the desk in front of her. I took out the two I'd managed to steal from the Night Keepers' stores and placed them down beside the others. We could still receive supplies to the school, but these were a precious enough commodity that we didn't want to go overkill. Six boxes could be spared for the name of revenge though.

"I'm freaking out and totally excited, is that normal?" Mila asked, laughing as I dropped down beside her and she poured a box out in front of

us.

“Totally normal.” I smiled, then filled her in on my creepy experience in the restroom.

She frowned, taking it way more seriously than I’d expected. “You should report it to Headmaster Monroe.” She clutched my arm. It sounded hella weird hearing him called that. I knew it was true, but it was strange to think he held so much power in this school now.

I shook my head. “What could he do? There’s no CCTV anywhere near that restroom and if he made some announcement to the school about it then whoever it is would know they’d gotten to me.”

Mila sighed, picking up a tampon and pulling off the cardboard casing, laying the soft middle in the pile with the rest. “I guess...I just don’t like the idea of Pearl getting away with that.”

“You think it’s her then?” I asked.

“Who else?” She leaned in closer. “Last year, Pearl almost got suspended because she ripped a girl’s skirt off in one of the restrooms. The poor bitch had to walk all the way back to her dorm in her panties, which happened to be a freaking G-string. And that same girl transferred to a different school not long after, so I’m guessing it was an ongoing thing.”

“Well, I can handle Pearl Devickers. She might be a bully, but she can’t fight me. And if she does anything public, the Night Keepers will destroy her.”

Mila nodded keenly. “So why not tell them?” she laughed. “Imagine her face when they put her back in her box.”

“Because I want to be the one to do it.” I smirked and Mila grinned darkly.

When we had the last of the tampons out of their casings, I gathered them all into a paper bag and tucked them away while Mila gathered up the shells in another one, scrunched it up and headed off to throw it in the trash.

I took out my phone, shooting a text to Monroe.

Tatum:

Ready to take one for the team?

Monroe:

I'm ready. We'll be there in twenty minutes sharp.

“Blake says they’re going for their run,” I told Mila, not liking lying to her, but it was difficult to explain about Monroe and me being on the same team. I knew I could trust her, but I didn’t think it was my place to tell her about Monroe’s revenge against Saint.

I took a moment to change into the sneakers I’d brought with me, stowing my school shoes in my bag. Then I rose from my seat, patting the ass of my skirt to check it had dried out before I pulled a black hoodie out of my bag and put it on – I’d borrowed it from Blake’s room as Saint would rather gouge an eye out than see me in something like this. I tucked my hair into the back of it and shoved my blazer into my bag in its place.

When Mila returned and pulled on her own hoodie and sneakers, we headed out of the library and my pulse elevated as we hurried along the path in the direction of Tahoma Mountain. The path was cast in the low light of the moon as we hurried up into the forest rising.

As the path curved back down to the side of the lake, we reached the stone bridge which crossed over the main path. I walked straight up to the thick bushes at the base of it and pushed the foliage aside, revealing the large drum of corn syrup we’d stashed there yesterday. It had been a bitch to steal it from the kitchen stores and carry it all the way out here. But we’d taken the quieter paths in the dark during my library time, not meeting a single soul along the

way. Fate was on my side for once and it was turning me against the Night Keepers with a powerful wind at my back.

I rolled the drum onto its side and Mila moved forward to help lift the other end and we carried it up onto the bridge. There was no lamp up here, but the path below us was lit in an orange glow while we remained hidden in the dark. I pulled up my hood to be sure I was well hidden and Mila did the same.

“You don’t have to stay,” I told her.

The idea of me getting caught was bad enough, but I didn’t know they’d do to Mila. I was pretty sure I was the only one who’d get punished considering my rules, but I couldn’t be certain. This was going to piss them off hard. And I didn’t want her risking her neck for it.

“No way, I’m staying right here.” She stepped closer. “They might scare the shit out of me, Tatum, but they’ve fucked with you for too long.”

“Thank you,” I breathed just as my phone buzzed in my pocket it. I took it out, my heart thumping madly at the message waiting for me.

Monroe:

Two minutes.

Mila took a little tripod from her bag and set up my phone in it, angling it down ready to record the whole thing. Then she helped me heft the drum of corn syrup up onto the wall.

“Pour then throw,” I said with a smirk, placing the paper bag of tampons ready on the wall. “Then run for your damn life. I’ll make them chase me east, you go west. Get inside somewhere as soon as you can.”

“Is your escape plan really solid? They’re gonna suspect you straight away,” she said, supporting the drum while I opened the top.

“I know, it’s solid.” *I hope.*

Adrenaline dripped through me as we crouched down behind the wall, watching the path in silence as we waited.

Four shadows soon appeared up ahead and we both ducked our heads, taking hold of the barrel on either side. I bit my lip, anticipation making my muscles coil. This was going to be epic if we could pull it off. I just had to make sure they didn’t find out it was me. Because I had a feeling kneeling down to Saint was not going to save me a second time.

The four Night Keepers jogged side by side on the wide path, growing closer and closer as we readied to pour.

Twenty feet...

Ten...

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

We tipped the barrel up just as they made it beneath us and the amber gloop cascaded over them as we swivelled it side to side to splash it over them all.

“Argh!” Saint roared as the others swore and Mila turned on the flashlight on her phone, blinding them as they all looked up.

They were covered from head to toe in the sticky mixture, their faces twisted in fury. Monroe was fighting a smile and I had to swallow back a laugh as hard as possible as I grabbed the bag of tampons, upending it and shaking it all over them. One got stuck right to Saint’s forehead, and another one stuck to Kyan’s lips before he spat it away. Blake yelled as he tried to get them off and that was it. No more time.

“You’re dead!” Kyan bellowed and my heart tumbled into panic.

“Go,” I hissed at Mila and she took off in the opposite direction to me, sprinting down the bridge and darting into the trees to the right of it.

I snatched my phone, flashing the screen back towards them a couple of times so they followed me instead of her. Then I stuffed it in my pocket as I reached the end of the bridge, taking the dangerously exposed route along the eastern path beside the lake.

I could still hear them shouting and footfalls thundered this way, but I had a plan. And I was fast. I could do this.

My hood covered my gold hair as I ran, rounding a bend and following the edge of the lake, sprinting towards the Willow Boathouse ahead.

“If that’s you Tatum Rivers, be fucking prepared!” Saint cried.

“I’ll get her,” I heard Blake growl as the footsteps drew closer.

No no no.

I pushed myself to my absolute limits, rounding towards the boathouse and practically skidding to a halt at its side. I hurried along the edge of it then lifted an overturned rowing boat on the ground and scrambled under it. It fell over me half a second before they arrived.

“I’ll check in here, you go ahead,” Kyan demanded and a sliver of dread ran down my spine as heavy footsteps pounded into the boathouse.

I’m not in there, asscheeks.

The sound of things being roughly turned over made my heart jolt and skip, but he finally gave up, storming out of the house and starting to run again.

“Keep going!” he shouted to his friends. “She’s out here somewhere!”

Not for long.

I pushed the boat up, slipping out from under it and running around into the boathouse. My heart pounded madly as I grabbed a kayak and an oar,

heaving it out to the pier and dropping it into the lake. I lowered myself down into it, readying the oar and pushing it into the water.

I rowed hard, my eyes on The Temple far across the lake, a light illuminating the stained glass window so it reflected in the water in a rippling blur of red. I couldn't go directly back there. I had to hide the kayak first. So I gritted my teeth and rowed hard and fast, heading for the Oak Common House where a few kayaks were usually docked.

Sweat beaded on my brow as I tried to mentally calculate how long it had been. I just had to hope they weren't racing back to The Temple right this second.

I finally pulled up at the small stony beach beside the Oak Common House, my heart soaring at the sight of the kayaks stacked up to one side of it. I jumped out onto the shore, carrying it up the pebbles as quietly as possible, the sound of voices reaching me from the house. I held my breath as I placed it with the others then I ran like there was a zombie about to bite my ass.

I tore down the path toward The Temple, my chest heaving as I dragged down lungfuls of air.

I finally rounded onto the path that led to the church, my heart hammering as I slowed for a moment at the door, listening for them.

Nothing.

I turned the handle, pushing inside and finding it empty. But I wasn't in the clear yet.

I hurriedly sent the video to Monroe, deleting it from my phone straight away. He said he knew a way to send it to every student in the school anonymously so it would never get back to us. That man was a complete god sometimes.

I kicked my sneakers off, placing them back in their usual spot before

taking my school shoes from my bag and putting them down neatly too. Then I raced through the living room, down the hall and through into Kyan and Blake's bathroom. I pushed the door shut, tore off my clothes and jumped into the shower.

I scrubbed myself in my vanilla honey blossom shower gel in record time, stepped out, grabbed a towel and wrapped it around me before dumping my uniform into the laundry. Then I took the hoodie, hanging it back in Blake's closet.

At last, I hurried into the kitchenette, pulling the fridge open just as the door flew wide.

I turned to the guys, my brows raising in mock alarm. "Holy shit, what happened?" I burst out laughing, figuring I could get away with that considering it was seriously hilarious. Tampons were stuck all over them plus they'd picked up a fair bit of debris from the woods too. Saint even had an entire bramble stuck to his arm.

They stopped dead, finding me wrapped in a towel, totally fucking innocently grabbing myself a snack and nowhere near the scene of the crime.

"*You.*" Saint pointed, his tone accusing, but his scary ass voice was lessened by the fact that he had a tampon glued to his forehead. "You did this."

"What?" I gasped, acting for my life.

"How could she have? She's right here," Monroe said with a grimace. It was superb acting. Gold star effort.

All of their eyes narrowed in suspicion then Blake huffed.

"Must have been some other fucking prick. We'll hunt them down. As soon as that video goes live, we'll know who it was anyway. And we'll destroy them."

"I want blood," Kyan said in a dark tone, pulling a tampon from his hair

while I snorted, burying my head in the refrigerator as I came completely apart.

“I’ll get them expelled,” Monroe said fiercely and I roared with laughter, forcing my head deeper into the fridge to share my mirth with a block of cheese.

Oh my god. So funny. I’m gonna die.

“Barbie!” Saint snapped. “Get your head out of the fridge and wash this shit off of us. Now!”

I stepped back, wiping tears from under my eyes as I nodded.

“Me first,” Saint growled. “Upstairs. Go.” He turned, marching upstairs and showing me his ass which had a tampon hanging perfectly between his butt cheeks, the string swinging left and right as he walked.

I couldn’t stop laughing all the way upstairs, even when Saint shot me glares that said I was going to pay for every laugh that escaped me. But I couldn’t stop. It was too fucking funny.

I headed into his closet while he marched into the shower and I tugged on a pink bikini before following him into the bathroom. He stripped down to his boxers, marching into the shower and glaring at me, waiting for me to wash him off. It was mainly in his hair now that his clothes were off, but there was still a determined tampon or two clinging to the back of his head.

I didn’t even care about having to wash them all off. It was worth every second.

I can’t wait to see the video.

I ran my hands over Saint’s chiselled chest, biting my lip as his eyes burned into me.

“If I find out this was you, you will severely regret it,” he warned and I looked up at him innocently while my heart fluttered.

“How could I have done it? I was right here.”

His gaze became razor sharp. “Because no one else would dare.”

“Clearly someone would,” I said with a shrug.

He stepped out of the shower with a grunt, marching out of the room in a towel and Blake appeared a second later in his boxers.

“Hey trouble,” he purred. His hair was all stuck to his forehead and I chuckled as he stepped into the shower and I picked a tampon out of it.

My heart beat wildly as I cleaned his tempting body, losing myself to the sculpted muscles on his frame, tracing them with my fingers long after I’d washed the syrup away.

“Wanna barricade the door and fuck me silly?” he asked casually and I slapped his chest.

“Get out, asshole. And send Kyan in.”

“He’s gone to use our shower,” Blake said as he exited, dropping his boxers so my eyes fell to his muscular ass before he wrapped a towel around his waist.

“Oh,” I breathed, my stomach twisting. *Of course he did. He can’t stand me these days. I just wish that didn’t bother me so much.*

When Blake left, Monroe arrived, kicking the door shut and smirking at me like a fucking wolf.

“You brilliant, glorious, perfect girl,” he growled as he stripped off and yep I was watching. His body was a work of art I wanted to admire for hours on end without judgement. He stripped down to his boxers and my throat thickened as he stepped into the shower with me. He’d already picked the tampons out of his hair and to be fair, we hadn’t been aiming at him as much, so he’d received less of them than the others.

“Woman,” I corrected with a smirk.

“Yeah,” he purred in agreement, the sound setting my veins alight. I reached up to scrub the syrup from his hair and he watched me with an

intensity that brought a deep blush to my cheeks. “I’ve never met anyone like you, princess.” He stepped closer so my hands slid around the back of his head and my breathing hitched as the water cascaded over us.

I gazed up at him from under my lashes, no longer washing him as his eyes dipped to my mouth. His muscles were tight and the tattoos on his chest and arms made me ache to explore his flesh.

“Did you see their faces?” I asked, another laugh escaping me and a low one left him as he fought to keep his voice down.

“Yeah, I can’t wait to show the whole school their disgrace,” he murmured, inching closer again, my thoughts growing fuzzy.

My hands curled against his flesh, no longer washing him, but he didn’t draw away. He crowded me in against the back wall of the shower and my pulse thundered. *What are we doing?*

This was so wrong in the best, most twisted way possible. His chest brushed mine and I inhaled sharply, looking up at him in surprise.

“You make me want to break every rule I’ve ever vowed to abide by and destroy every contract I’ve ever signed, Tatum Rivers.”

Oh shit.

“Then why don’t you?” I dared, my tongue too heavy and my eyes unable to blink. If I looked away for even a millisecond, I was sure this moment wouldn’t last. That he’d walk away and never look back.

He pushed me back against the cool tiles and I sucked on my lower lip, desperate to taste him. He was the most delicious, off-limits thing I’d ever seen. And I needed to explore this urge in me to claim him.

“Or are you too afraid?” I whispered.

“I’m no coward,” he growled and I gasped as he caught my chin and pressed his lips to mine with a groan of need, his mouth moving slow and gentle like he wanted to soothe away every hurt inside me forever. I moaned,

digging my nails into the back of his neck and he stopped being precious with me, forcing my lips apart with his tongue and grinding his body into mine so I could feel every inch of his solid shaft. Another moan escaped me but he swallowed it whole, his tongue chasing mine like he'd been starving for this kiss for as long as I had.

His fingers dug into my arms, almost bruising, but I sensed he was holding back. I imagined he'd mark me everywhere if it wasn't for the world beyond this room that would destroy him for it. He was the perfect combination of ecstasy and bad decisions. But it didn't feel wrong like it should have, it felt like my soul was meant for his and his for mine. It felt like my knight in shining armour was meant to fight a war for me and win. We were willing to bleed for one another and I could almost taste his vengeance on his tongue, melding with mine until it became such a powerful energy that the Night Keepers should fear for the formidable force coming their way.

I'd ached for him in my dreams, imagined this kiss a thousand times, never sure if it would be too rough or too sweet. But it turned out, it was both. He was a weapon and a blanket of safety. A king, a god, a leviathan. I wanted the good and the bad, the harsh and the soft. I wanted him and no one else in that moment. Just the one man in this world who stood unshakably at my side and never faltered. I could rely on him for anything, even giving him my heart seemed possible. Something I'd never considered giving any man.

His fingers pushed into my damp hair as he pulled me closer, his hands never straying too far down my body as if there were still barriers between us. I wanted to tear them down, force him to admit to this rampant fire between us and bow to it. But he pulled away as my hands roamed over his muscles and he reached up to touch his swollen lips.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that." His throat bobbed and he stepped back, the distance parting us suddenly feeling like a wall as his eyes grew

distant.

“Wait,” I rasped, but it was too late. He stepped out of the shower, grabbing a towel and bundling up his things as he strode from the room without a backwards glance.

I sank down to the base of the shower, the heated water cascading over me. And I wished it could take the pain of my loss with it. Because in my heart, I was sure Monroe would never cross that line again.



Killing zombies on the Xbox was a lot less fun these days. Now that I'd wielded a real life bat against real life assholes determined to infect me, the make-believe shit just fell flat. So while Blake and Saint destroyed the undead, I sat by the fire and sketched.

I had my thumb wedged into a page where I'd mapped out a design for a new tattoo which I was considering inking on my thigh so that I could flip it over if anyone got close enough to look over my shoulder. It was a broken compass with the initials of the Night Keepers in place of the directions, but there was something off about it, something that didn't fit right and was making me hesitate to place it on my flesh.

That wasn't what I was drawing now anyway. No. Once again I was sketching the girl who'd looked into my soul and spoken my greatest fears about myself like they were facts.

I never usually bothered drawing anything other than tattoo designs, but since she'd arrived, I'd found images burned into my skull with such intensity that I had to get them out. And the only way I had to do that was in the form of charcoal on paper.

I didn't often draw around other people. Not that I had any real reason not

to, but I preferred to get out of my own head when I was working on a piece and not have the distractions of people talking or moving around to fuck with my concentration.

At the moment, I was torturing myself by drawing Tatum as she'd pressed her hands flat to the dining table and leaned towards me, telling me straight to my face that the only thing I was good for was fooling around with and that no girl would ever love me. Which I had already been aware of, but there's nothing like someone reaching into your chest and ripping your pathetic excuse for a heart out in front of your only friends in the world to make something stick in your fucking head on repeat.

So as I sketched the deadly look in her eyes and the way her upper lip had pulled back in a sneer of disgust as she looked at me, I couldn't help but feel my blood heating with my own anger. Because fuck her. Fuck her and her holier than thou bullshit and her fucking honesty and her fucking big blue eyes which glanced my way once and saw me way too clearly.

I'd drawn this fucking thing more times than I could count, trying to banish it, but it wouldn't go. So fuck her for getting into my head too.

It was tempting to add a speech bubble with the words *you're useless and no one will ever love you* in it, but I was pretty sure that superior expression in her eyes and the thinly veiled disgust on her face said it all.

I traced some shadow into her long hair, my jaw grinding as I looked into the eyes which haunted me and I pressed down too hard, snapping the charcoal and ruining the sketch in the process.

I snarled at it, ripping the whole page out of the book, screwing it up in my fist and throwing it at the fire with a curse.

Even though I was sitting right next to the fucking thing, I managed to hit the mantelpiece and the crumpled page bounced back across the floor instead, knocking into Blake's foot.

He stooped to grab it and I snarled a warning at him which he ignored as he unfolded the paper.

Saint leaned in to get a look too as Blake whistled out a breath.

“You got it bad, huh?” Blake teased.

“Her nose is wrong,” Saint added.

“Thanks for the input I didn’t ask for,” I muttered. “And no, I don’t *got it bad*. I’m just bored as fuck and you two assholes don’t have tits so you’re not as interesting to draw.”

They clearly didn’t buy that shit for a single second, but they didn’t have time to call me out on it either as the door opened and Tatum walked in. Saint checked the clock like a douchebag and I tucked my sketchbook between my thigh and the side of the couch, wiping the worst of the charcoal from my fingers on my black sweatpants.

“Hey,” Tatum called unenthusiastically from the doorway and none of us replied as we looked between each other in a Mexican standoff while she removed her coat and shoes.

Blake smirked at me as he held my sketch hostage and the way Saint’s eyes slid to Tatum told me exactly what they were going to do.

“Show her then,” I growled, shoving myself to my feet. “Why should I give a shit anyway? I’ll die alone whatever happens, right?”

I grabbed my sketchbook and stalked away from them and their stupid fucking game. I had somewhere else to be tonight anyway.

Tatum looked at me with wide eyes as I closed in on her, but I only spared her a glance long enough to glower at her before striding past and heading into my room, throwing the door closed behind me with a bang.

It was petulant and kinda pointless but I’d been in a foul mood for weeks now and the last thing I needed was my brothers poking fun at my wounds.

I gripped the edge of my mattress and shoved the sketchbook beneath it

with the others. It was a habit I'd gotten into as a child. One time when I was a kid, I'd told my family I wanted to be an artist at this big BBQ my parents were hosting. My grandpa had choked on his whiskey, my uncles had sneered in disgust and my cousins had howled with laughter before my ma told them all I was joking. Later that night she'd thrown my sketches in the trash and told me if I wanted to grow up to be an artist then I could learn to use the walls as my canvas and use blood to paint them. The family trade was the only one I'd be entering and I'd agreed because there was no point in arguing.

Now I guessed I didn't actually have to hide them. I could do whatever the fuck I wanted. But I kinda liked knowing I was sleeping on top of a hoard of my deepest thoughts and desires. Even when one of them was a grade A bitch who thought I was worse than the shit on her shoe.

I yanked my shirt off with one hand and dropped my pants before heading into the bathroom for a shower.

I scrubbed the charcoal from my hands and washed my hair before getting out and tying it again.

I was still on the hunt for whoever had pulled that corn syrup and tampon prank on us. It had taken me ages to scrub that shit out of my hair and I was happily using the existence of that video to beat the shit out of anyone caught with a copy of it.

If I was being totally honest, I was pretty sure there was only one girl in the school with the balls to do that to us, but I was happy to pretend that wasn't the case while I used the excuse to terrorise people.

And I didn't want to be thinking about her anyway.

I had plans tonight. Plans that involved getting wasted on Jack Daniels, beating the shit out of a bunch of assholes and forgetting all about Tatum fucking Rivers.

I dressed in a pair of black jeans and a white wifebeater then sat alone in my room, vaguely doing a bit of math homework as I waited out the evening and avoided the trap waiting for me in the front room. I didn't really give a fuck about her seeing the sketch, I just didn't want her thinking that meant I gave a shit about her. I didn't want her assuming more crap about me. Like she knew every fucking thought in my head with a single cursory glance.

When I heard her laying the dinner out on the table, I headed back out of the room, trying to ignore the fact that I was acting like a moody little bitch. I'd be fine after tonight though. I just needed the rush of the fight to bring me back to myself. To make me get over my shit. It wasn't like her words had been some great shock to me anyway. It was just unpleasant to hear someone throw your own insecurities your face.

The smell of some fancy Italian crap filled the room and I dropped into my chair as Tatum began passing out plates. Mine last. Obviously. I grunted a thanks at her because my ma might have been a ruthless bitch who was just as deep into the family business as my uncles, but she'd also taught me to thank someone when they fed you. Under threat of a lashing, sure. But the sentiment of respect was there and it was ingrained deeply enough that not doing it made me uncomfortable. So after a few days of silently taking food from her without a word, it had bothered me enough that I'd started grunting out thanks for it instead. Not that Tatum seemed to have noticed. Her opinion of me at this point was clearly so low that it couldn't exactly get any lower anyway.

I started shovelling food into my mouth with my fork, long lines of tagliatelle hanging from my lips as I chewed and making Saint curse me. I smirked at him as cream sauce ran over my chin and refused to admit how good the food tasted as I demolished it.

One meal and I was out of here for the night. Tatum was sleeping in with

me again later, but that made no difference because as usual, I wouldn't be there. The couch would suit me just fine. Especially with a nice numbing layer of alcohol to knock me out and a splattering of someone else's blood on my skin to give me peaceful dreams.

"Father says there's been an interesting development with the vaccine for the Hades Virus," Saint announced, taking a sip of his juice as he waited for all of us to look his way.

"Oh yeah?" I asked. A vaccine was exactly what I needed. It would cut my tethers to this place and set me free to ride out and fuck people up in some real fights again. Maybe I'd find myself a nice, dirty Murkwell girl to fuck too and then I could forget all about Tatum Rivers and her platinum pussy which would never be mine.

My gaze shifted to the girl in question and my heart leapt as the look she gave me was filled with sadness instead of venom. Her brow furrowed as if there was something she wanted to say to me, but I turned away again before I could give it too much thought.

"Yeah. It seems like Dr Rivers might have been doing work on a vaccine before he ran. The FBI managed to hack into his laptop even though he tried to destroy it and there's some evidence that he even manufactured a vaccine which came close to working," Saint said, watching Tatum carefully to monitor her reaction to this news. She looked utterly fucking shocked so I was willing to bet she had just as little idea about this as she'd had about the rest of Daddy's illegal hobbies. I guess it would suck to think you had a great parent only to find out he was the world's biggest psychopath. Over eight hundred thousand people had died from the Hades Virus worldwide now and those numbers were only growing daily.

At least I'd always been fully aware of what my family were. No shocking revelations for me. Just pure, honest, psychopaths to rear me in their image.

And I guessed they'd done a good enough job of that.

"If he was working on a vaccine, then maybe he was never planning for people to get sick like this," Tatum said hopefully.

"Maybe he should have gotten a vaccine that worked before infecting the entire world and letting thousands of innocent people die then," Blake snarled.

"Point is," Saint interrupted before Tatum and Blake went for each other's throats. "It seems like he was at least onto something. The pharmacists in Father's pockets are all in a race to use this information to formulate a vaccine and it's looking promising."

"Well, text me when Daddy Warbucks comes up with the cure," I said, finishing my food and pushing myself to my feet. "I'm good for the money." I wasn't, but fuck it, I'd figure that out later.

"Where are you going?" Saint asked, narrowing his eyes on me.

"Out. I won't be back until late."

"It's your night with Tatum," Saint insisted. "So you can't go out."

"Yeah? And who's gonna stop me?" I didn't look at her, but I could feel her gaze digging into my flesh.

"You can do whatever the fuck you want," Saint said. "But if you're going out, she's going with you."

"She's not welcome," I growled.

"Good. I don't want to go anyway," she added and I tossed her a sneer before looking back at Saint to finish this showdown.

"It doesn't matter what the two of you *want*," Saint hissed. "It's your night so she's going with you. And you'd better look after her or there'll be hell to pay."

One look in his soulless eyes told me he wasn't letting this fucking battle go and I cursed as I gave in. It wasn't worth the Saint headache anyway.

“Fine,” I snapped, turning my pissed off gaze on Tatum. “We’ll be outside so dress up warm. I’m not finishing up early because you’re feeling chilly.”

She huffed dramatically and stood, heading towards the stairs that led up to Saint’s room to get her clothes.

“You should pick what she wears,” Saint added.

“I don’t give a shit what she wears,” I snarled. “I have no intention of looking at her any more than I absolutely have to to make sure she’s not getting into any fucking trouble.”

“Fine. I’ll do it then, but you owe me one.” Saint stood and stalked after her to pick her fucking outfit and I flipped him off for his nonsense before glancing at Blake who was smirking like this whole thing had been a show put on for his entertainment.

“Here,” he said, handing over the crumpled sketch which he’d folded carefully.

I snatched it with a grunt which might have been thanks for him not passing it about or might have been me calling him an asshole for taking it in the first place.

“You want a night alone with her or do you want me to come and help you keep an eye on her?” he offered.

“There’s a fight night taking place in the woods,” I explained. “So if you wanna come, you should probably be prepared for a brawl.”

“Sure thing, brother. I’ll get my coat.” Blake strode away from me and I headed back to my room to grab my leather jacket.

It was cold enough out that I needed something thicker really but I intended to warm myself in the blood of my opponents, so I wasn’t going to worry about it.

By the time I made it back to the door, Saint had returned, a happy little smirk on his face which said he’d been up to something. I didn’t even have to

ask what as Tatum appeared at the top of the stairs beyond him.

She was wearing a pair of leather pants and a transparent black body suit which hugged her figure, covering her flesh from her neck to her wrists while showing the silhouette of her bra beneath it. Her hair was loose and messed up the way I liked it and her lips were painted blood red to set off the dark eye makeup she'd put on. In short, he'd dressed his dolly up for me. And it pissed me off how much I liked it considering how much she *disliked* me.

"If I'd wanted to get a girl dressed up like a sex toy for me, I could have just hired a hooker," I deadpanned, refusing to admit how much I was enjoying the view.

"Drop the bullshit, Kyan," Tatum said lightly as she descended the stairs to join us. "Bitter isn't a good look on you."

"Yeah? Is that what I am?"

"Isn't it?" she arched an eyebrow at me and I glowered in return.

"Naw. I'm not bitter. I'm just horny. Stuck in this fucking school with a bunch of rich girls who don't know how to fuck properly. It's already starting to make my balls ache. And fuck knows how long it will be before I can go and find a woman who knows how to be rough enough for me."

"How exactly do you know that the rich girls can't give you what you want?" she asked, striding towards me with her hips swaying and her long hair spilling over her shoulders. "When you claim not to screw any of them to find out? Or is that just some new rule? Did you actually sleep with all of them and come up with that when you realised the truth?"

My lips twitched and I almost fucking smiled because that look in her eyes wasn't blind hatred. I had enough practice studying her expressions to understand that much. No. It was jealousy. Pretty little Tatum Rivers thought I'd had my wicked way with half the girls she sat next to in class and it was eating her up inside.

“Naw,” I replied in a low voice, moving a step closer so I could look down at her as relief spilled through her gaze before she could lock her expression down. “Not *all* of the girls. I still haven’t had you.”

Jealousy, rage, maybe even a little flash of hurt shone in her eyes before she forced herself to snort derisively and roll her eyes. And after the emotional wringer she’d dragged me through, I was happy at the thought of wounding her, even just a little.

“Well, sorry to be a disappointment. But I’m not going to let you complete the school set.”

“That’s okay, baby, because I wasn’t asking to.”

I turned away from her and pulled the door wide before heading out into the light drizzle that had been persisting all day.

I strode away down the path and Tatum cursed behind me as she struggled to get her boots on.

Three sets of footsteps followed me out and I glanced over my shoulder to find Saint joining us too.

“I didn’t think you liked my hobbies?” I teased him as he buttoned his tailored coat and smoothed out an imaginary crease.

“I don’t. I’m heading to Ash Chambers tonight.” He gave no further explanation, but that was fine. If he wanted to go all Phantom of the Opera over there and play piano in the dark to freak people out as they passed the building then he could have at it.

When we reached the main path, Saint peeled away from us and I led the others up the track and into the woods.

The sound of the crowd spilled through the trees as we headed up the hill and the light of several bonfires soon joined it.

“What is this, a party?” Tatum asked.

“Better,” I replied.

We stepped through a thick patch of trees and suddenly found ourselves in a wide, rocky clearing up on the side of the cliff. There was a stunning view of the lake to our left if you could be bothered to make the trek up here during the day, but I was more interested in the nocturnal activities which were regularly held here.

I hadn't actually attended a fight night on campus this year at all. They lost their appeal midway through junior year when I realised that the kids here couldn't offer me a real challenge in a fight. Sure, I liked winning a lot and beating the shit out of people to do it. But I needed it to be difficult. Whaling on a kid half my size who couldn't even punch as well as my mom got boring fast.

But with no chance of leaving campus any time soon, I was going to have to return to the school fights to get my fix of bloodshed.

Although I'd come up with a few ideas to make it more challenging for me.

A hush fell over the crowd of gathered students as eyes fell on me from all around the clearing and the guys who had come here to fight realised they were in for an ass kicking.

I noticed several Unspeakables lurking in the shadows too. These kinds of informal gatherings were the only places they could go and have some semblance of a normal social life without having to wait on me and the other Night Keepers as we didn't tend to show our faces. Tough shit for them tonight though. It seemed like a good opportunity to remind them all who ruled them too. Since the corn syrup and tampon attack, we needed to lock down any rebels and fast. We still hadn't found out who'd done it, but when we squeezed a name from the right throat, that fucker was going to rue the day they were born. And if I could prove it was Tatum then all the better.

I clicked my fingers and three of them rushed forward to serve us.

“We want drinks,” I growled, sneering at Deepthroat as her gaze flicked towards me. “Not from you, though,” I added. If I even saw that girl standing in the vicinity of a drink intended for me, I’d toss her over the cliff myself.

Freeloader and Pigs hurried off to get our alcohol but Deepthroat lingered. “I love your coat, Tatum,” she said, offering my girl a smile.

“Fuck. Off,” I snapped, throwing my arm around Tatum before she could respond and tugging her away from that vile skank.

“Gah, why are you such a fucking, *dick*, Kyan?” Tatum grouched as I tugged her through the crowd. “Just because the poor girl used to have a crush on you, doesn’t mean you get to slut shame her for the rest of her fucking life!”

I barked a merciless laugh and Blake shot me a dark look which reeked of sympathy. But fuck that.

“Is that what I’m doing?” I asked. “Glad to know your low opinion of me is so infallible.”

Of course she didn’t know what Deepthroat had done to me. Had tried to do. But why ask when she could just judge me for herself?

“It’s well earned,” she pointed out.

“Damn straight it is. I’m the big bad wolf - maybe you should call the wood cutter to see if he can come rid you of me.”

“Maybe I should,” she agreed.

“Well, just remember, little red riding hood was a twat. She was so willing to believe in lies and bullshit that she didn’t even notice that her beloved grandmother was a fucking wolf in a dress. So maybe she deserved to get eaten up.”

“Wow,” Tatum replied. “Your evil really knows no bounds, does it? Going after childrens’ bedtime stories now?”

I snorted a laugh before I could stop myself and she smirked at me. And

for a moment it didn't seem like she hated me quite so much.

“Why don't you guys just call a truce for tonight?” Blake suggested, snatching the bottles of beer Pigs had found and handing them out to us. “We can just have a night off, no drama, just nice honest, bloody fun?”

He held his beer out in offering and I looked down at Tatum as she considered his words.

“To a night with no drama,” she agreed, clinking her beer bottle against his.

“I can't promise not to be an asshole,” I warned. “But I guess I can promise to be an asshole to other people tonight instead of you.”

Tatum gave me a withering look which said that was barely acceptable. But I'd take barely over not at all.

I clinked my bottle against theirs and sank the entire drink in one go before tossing the bottle into the nearest bonfire.

Pearl Devickers and Georgie Penfield were manning the fight sign up list, both wearing tiny little designer dresses and stilettos which sank into the muddy ground. They looked fucking ridiculous and damn freezing, but I guessed they'd decided that was the trade they wanted to make for fashion. *Fuckwits.*

“Oh, hey, Kyan,” Georgie said brightly, batting her fake eyelashes so hard that I was surprised they didn't take flight and head away to make a nest in the nearest tree. “Are you going to be fighting tonight?”

“Yeah,” I agreed, frowning at the tiny pink dress she was squeezed into. She really did look like an idiot dressed like that out here. “But the assholes at this school can't fight for shit. So I want a real challenge. I'll take three on one. Let's see if they can beat me with numbers on their side.”

Georgie's lips popped open in surprise and she glanced at Pearl nervously.

“Maybe we can get Eric, Greg and-”

“I didn’t say I want to fight three pussies at once,” I growled. “Get the three guys who won the last three fights.”

“But, what if they hurt you?” Georgie gasped. “Those odds are seriously stacked against-”

“What are you, my fucking mother?” I growled.

“Kyan will put those three boys in the dirt before you finish taking bets anyway,” Tatum added dismissively. “He’d win against six of them, so why don’t you just get it organised so we can enjoy the show?”

Pearl outwardly glared at my girl, but it seemed like she was beyond giving a shit about befriending that particular brand of mean girl.

We headed over to the makeshift fighting ring which was just a patch of flat ground lined with slate where the rest of the students formed a circle to watch the show. The crowd parted for us like hot butter and I moved to the edge of the ring as Georgie and Pearl found my opponents.

“This should be interesting,” Blake said with a smirk.

“I’m offended you don’t have as much faith in me as our girl,” I joked, shrugging out of my leather jacket and handing it to him. “Do you really think I could take on six, baby?”

“I just wanted to get you away from Georgie before you eye fucked her so hard your tongue fell out of your mouth. That’s an embarrassing look on you,” she replied.

I barked a laugh and glanced across the ring at Georgie as she staggered along in her sinking stilettos like a giraffe high on crack. “I don’t think so,” I said dismissively. “If you wanna know what it looks like when I eye fuck someone, maybe pay more attention to the way I look at you. Not some rich girl idiot who wears high heels to a fucking brawl in the woods.”

Her lips popped open at that comment and I smirked at her before heading out into the ring, rolling my shoulders back to loosen some of the tension in

them.

I faced off against my three opponents with a cutthroat smile on my face and was pleased when they shared an uneasy glance.

Someone yelled *fight* and I roared a challenge as I charged at them. Chad McCormack was in the centre of the pack and I collided with him before he had a chance to do any more than back up a step.

He hit the ground hard with me on top of him and I threw my fists into his face as fast as I could. Grant Hutchins eventually remembered that this was supposed to be three on one and aimed a solid kick at the side of my head, knocking me off of Chad, his boot drawing blood which spilled from somewhere in my hairline down over my temple.

I rolled away with a grunt of pain and managed to scramble to my feet before they could come at me again. Travis Smith launched himself at me next, swinging a fist into my face before I could block it and then the two of them were on me at once. Chad seemed to be out for the count, groaning on the ground already.

I fought savagely, the cheers of the crowd fuelling the monster in me as blood spilled and pain blossomed and I swung my fists as hard and as fast as I could.

Finally, Travis stumbled and I managed to aim a solid punch to his face, flooring him instantly.

Grant paled as he realised it was down to me and him and I snarled like a beast as I ran at him, taking him to the floor and punching, punching, punching until someone was dragging me off of him.

I smirked up at Blake through the blood coating my face and he released a laugh.

“You look like a fucking butcher,” he joked. “And half the girls here look like they wanna jump you for it. You could probably start an orgy if you’re in

the mood.”

I laughed as I moved away from my opponents who were groaning and calling me an animal beneath their breath and found Tatum waiting at the side of the ring with a beer in her hand for me.

“Maybe you should fight them with your hands tied behind your back,” she teased as I accepted the beer from her and poured it between my lips. “Then they might stand a chance.”

“Alright,” I agreed.

“What?”

“Who’s got a rope or something I can tie my wrists with?” I yelled loud enough for the people surrounding us to hear.

The Unspeakables scattered to hunt down what I needed and Tatum looked at me like I’d lost my damn mind.

“I was joking,” she said.

“I never joke about fighting,” I promised her.

“Do you ever fight for something you care about?” she asked and I paused as I considered that.

“Well, I don’t care about anything, so I’ve never had the opportunity.”

“That might just be the saddest thing I’ve ever heard,” she murmured and I frowned at her as I swiped some blood from the side of my face.

“You’re the one who called it, baby, I’m all empty inside.” I shrugged off her pitying look and turned my back on her as Pigs raced towards me with a bit of old rope.

Blake snatched it from him with a wild grin and bound my wrists tightly behind my back as I moved to stand in the centre of the ring again.

All of a sudden there were way more volunteers to take me on and I grinned challengingly as the crowd booed and cheered for the contenders they wanted to see fight me.

I wasn't surprised when they picked the biggest fucker out of the lot and Gerald Holt strutted forward to take me on.

Blake laughed as he moved back out of the ring, slinging an arm around Tatum's shoulders as she looked at me like I was a fucking dipshit and I gave her a taunting grin just to rile her up more.

Gerald pranced up to me with his chest puffed out like an idiot. He was pretty stacked but I'd heard more than a few rumours that he was hooked on steroids, so I was guessing his punch didn't pack much force.

"Are you sure you want me to kick your ass while you're all tied up like that, Roscoe?" he asked, moving to stand before me as we waited for the signal to start.

"I want you to try and then take a kicking like a good girl and live with the shame of knowing I beat you without even using my hands," I replied evenly.

"Fight!" Pearl yelled and his fist slammed into my face a moment later.

I'd been expecting it and I rolled with it, stumbling away with the motion and managing to stay upright as he came at me again and again. Besides, my guess about his strength had been spot on and I was willing to bet his knuckles ached from the impact of that blow more than my jaw did.

I ducked and weaved, avoiding a lot of his punches purely because he didn't know what the fuck he was doing and was swinging his arms so damn wide that I saw his attacks coming a mile off.

Eventually, he managed to catch me with an uppercut that unbalanced me enough to knock me off of my feet and the crowd cheered as I hit the ground and he leapt on top of me.

I grunted as my wrists were crushed beneath my spine and his solid weight only added to the discomfort. But this was what I'd been waiting for and the moment he leaned in close to strike at me, I slammed my forehead into the bridge of his nose. The crack that followed sounded like a gunshot and the

crowd screamed and howled in excitement as he fell back, clutching his face as blood pissed from his nose.

I leapt upright in seconds, swinging my boot straight into his side and knocking him over as he cried out in pain.

I kicked him again and again and again as my ears rang with the sound of my pulse pounding and my blood heated with the thrill of bloodshed.

Gerald cursed and cried out as he was forced to curl in on himself, unable to rise as I kicked him back down every time he tried.

A manic kind of laughter spilled from my lips and Pearl shouted out to announce my victory before I was even close to done.

I kicked him once more for luck and grinned as I strode away from him to join Blake and our girl.

“You fucking savage,” Blake laughed. “I’m going to hunt us down some more drinks.”

I smirked at him as he headed away then gave Tatum my full attention as I felt her eyes on me.

“Why do you always hit them again after you’ve won?” Tatum asked, her lips pursing like she didn’t approve, even though the heat in her eyes said she really fucking did.

“Because that last hit is the one that guarantees they don’t come back looking for more. It’s the strike that lets them know I could keep kicking until they were dead if the notion took me and they wouldn’t be able to do a fucking thing to stop me. It’s really the only one that counts in the whole fight.”

“Wow, Kyan, that’s so beautiful, it’s like poetry. Maybe you should have gotten me a bunch of flowers to go with it,” she mocked.

“Oh yeah? And what flowers would the pampered little rich girl want? Some fancy endangered orchid that would cost more than some cars no

doubt.”

“Pfft, hardly. But if you’re buying me flowers I’ll take forget-me-nots.”

I laughed right in her face and turned my back on her so that she could untie the rope binding my wrists. “If you’re looking for a guy who will buy you flowers then you’re seriously off base with me, baby. I’ll take you out to illegal fight pits and drink you under the table on dirty whiskey. I’ll play your body like a fucking instrument and make you feel the kind of pleasure that blinds you. And I’ll make your heart beat so fast that you’re breathless all the damn time.” The knot came loose and I turned to face her with the rope in my hand. “But hearts and flowers? Naw. That’s never going to be me.”

“Don’t knock it ‘til you’ve tried it,” she said airily.

“You wanna take your own advice some time,” I replied casually.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That I know what game you’re playing with me and the other Night Keepers.” I twisted the rope between my hands in well practiced movements as she arched an eyebrow at me while I tied a handcuff knot with deft precision.

“What game is that?” she asked, her gaze falling on the rope as I created the two loops with it.

“This perfectly crafted seduction you’ve got going on for each of us.”

She scoffed in mock outrage, narrowing her eyes at me. “I don’t want to seduce you. Any of you,” she growled. “You’re all monsters who have made it your mission to make me miserable for something I’m not even responsible for.”

I looked at her for a long moment, taking in the raw honesty in her before nodding in agreement. “Okay then.”

“That’s it?”

“What more do you want? You don’t want me. You don’t want to be a

part of our family. So what is it you *do* want?" I finished the knot and she eyed the loops as she gave some consideration to exactly why I was so good at tying that particular kind of knot.

"Honesty," she breathed. "You want me to see the real you? Then give me something real. Give me the things that make you, *you*. Not this monster bullshit you show everyone else."

I looked into her blue eyes for several seconds, the anger I'd been harbouring towards her softening as I considered that. I was angry about the truth she'd seen in me without my permission. But maybe offering her some of it on my own terms wouldn't be so bad.

"You wanna trade truths with me, baby?" I asked her in a low voice.

"Why would I trust anything you have to say?" she asked, but the look in her eyes said she wanted to.

I glanced at the crowd surrounding us and jerked my chin towards the trees before stalking away into them. I didn't know if she'd follow me, but I wasn't offering up anything with an audience. If she had questions she wanted to ask me then she could follow me into the dark to ask them.

I stepped into the forest and soft footsteps told me she was following.

I headed on until the light of the bonfires barely reached us and turned to wait for her beside a towering oak.

She moved to lean against it as she waited to hear what I was going to say and I was struck with the desire to dominate her space. I couldn't help it. Something about her just drew me in like that and didn't want me to leave. And with the rope still twisted between my fingers, it was hard to stop my mind from conjuring images of the ways I'd like to bend her body to mine.

"Do you just do things like this to try and scare me?" she asked, looking around at the trees.

"What's the matter, baby? You don't like being out here in the dark with

the big bad asshole?”

“It’s not that. I just think, you do things like this because it’s part of the act you put on.”

“Act?” I scoffed. “Baby, if you’re trying to kid yourself into thinking that I’m not as bad as I seem then think again. I’m a product of design guaranteed by DNA.”

“Because of your family?” she asked and I fell still as I twisted the knotted rope between my busted knuckles.

“Yeah. Are we really swapping truths here, or are you just looking for a peek beneath the hood of my brain?”

“What do you want to know?” Tatum asked with a slight frown that said she wasn’t sure she wanted me to know anything.

“Right now? I think I’d rather tie you up and do bad things to you than ask you about why you don’t want to believe your daddy is as bad as the whole world thinks he is.”

Her lips popped open at that request and she stared at me like my words had shocked her. But I’d said far worse to her before and had her body at my mercy more than once too. And with my blood heated from the fight and her standing there looking at me like that, there was a whole lot of it rushing south.

“Alright then,” she breathed, shrugging out of her puffy coat so that I could get easier access to her wrists and my eyebrows rose as I realised she meant it. “You can...tie me up in exchange for the truth from your lips.”

I only considered it for a moment before I was closing the distance between us, holding out the loops in the knot I’d tied so that she could slip her wrists through them.

I looked her dead in the eye as I gripped the end of the rope and yanked it hard, the nooses tightening around her wrists and a gasp escaping those full

lips as I restrained her.

“Come on then, baby,” I purred, moving so close to her that I could taste her breath on the air dividing us. “Ask away.”

I kept the rope gripped in my fist and raised her hands above her head until her arms were straight and I could lean my forearm to the tree above her head to keep her there. She was panting as I restrained her, her eyes hunting mine in the dark as I drank in the sight of her.

“Do you hate your family?” she asked finally, the space between us filling up with her question.

“Yes,” I replied simply and the scathing look she gave me said that wasn’t enough of a truth. “My family are not nice people.”

“In what way?”

“In all the ways that count. But I suppose the bit that matters is that they expected me to be like them. To join the family business and carve my way through life leaving a trail of blood in my wake.”

“And you seriously think you *don’t* do that?” she asked, arching an eyebrow at me and I was sure we were both thinking about what I’d done to that fucker in the crypt.

“The point is that I don’t do it for *them*.” I refused to let myself think about the shit I’d done this summer. Royaume D’élite and the fucked up things that had happened there. The final straw which had forced my hand into deciding to cut myself off from my family for good. If she knew about what I’d done then she’d think even less of me than she already did. Hell, I hadn’t even shared that truth with Blake and Saint yet, though what we’d been through in the catacombs with Merl made me wonder if they wouldn’t judge me as harshly as I’d feared. But I was already judging myself enough that I hadn’t wanted to find out for sure.

My gaze trailed down her body as she arched her back against the trunk of

the tree, her chest rising and falling heavily as I kept her restrained. But despite the fact that having her tied up this way was like one of my fantasies crawling right out of my brain and into reality, I didn't touch her.

“Are your family criminals then? I thought you came from old money-”

“My father is old money alright. Slit his wrists and he'd bleed blue all over the floor. But his family were also close to bankrupt when he was my age and he was sent out on the hunt for an advantageous marriage. New money. New blood. That's how he ended up with my mom. The O'Briens are the richest mob family in the state, probably in the entire country. And they wanted a nice, legitimate front to some of their business dealings which the Roscoes could give them. They sealed the deal with marriage and an heir. So here I am.”

“So you hate what your family is?” she guessed. But I didn't really give a shit about being born of monsters. It made sense. What I didn't like was the expectation that came with that.

“No. I hate what they want me to be. A pawn in their big game. A figurehead, a mouthpiece, a lump of muscle. And sure, maybe a leader one day, but all under their terms. I have a lot of uncles with a lot of ideas for me. I take exception to being told how to live my life.”

“And yet you bound me into a life with you and the other Night Keepers knowing that it went against what I wanted?” she growled in outrage and I had to admit she had a valid point.

Suddenly, having her tied up at my mercy didn't really hold the appeal it had a few minutes ago and I shifted closer to her as I raised my other hand to the rope too.

“Well, I've never lied to you about being a sonofabitch,” I pointed out in a rough voice. I yanked on the rope and the knot fell apart, releasing her wrists before I turned and walked away from her.

“Kyan, wait-” She snatched my hand before I could get more than a few steps and I looked around at her in the moonlight as our breaths rose between us. “I have one more question.”

I didn’t reply, but I didn’t leave so I guessed that was permission enough for her to go on.

“I want to know why you need violence in your life so much.” Her thumb skimmed over my busted knuckles and the flicker of pain raced through me in a wave that felt like waking up.

I tried to think of a way to put words to the burning need for the fight which warred in me. I knew she felt it too. But maybe she understood her own demons well enough to know why she craved it. For me, it was just primal, instinctual, *necessary*.

“I’m a bad person who’s done bad things, baby,” I said roughly, reaching out with my free hand to tuck a lock of her blonde hair behind her ear. “And something in me stops me from feeling guilt over that. Something in me thrives on bloodshed and bringing about pain in others. So if you’re hoping to save me, then I suggest you give up now. There is no redemption for me. Hell, I don’t even *want* redemption. I’m okay with my sins and I’m okay with my depravity. So if you’re looking for someone to save, then you’re looking in the wrong place with me.”

“I’m not looking for someone to save, Kyan,” she said darkly, lifting my hand to her lips and touching them to my bloody knuckles.

My heart thundered as she pressed kisses to each of my knuckles in turn, the sight of my blood smearing over her mouth making my whole body ache with a raw and brutal desire to lay claim to her flesh and cast her to ruin.

“Then what do you want from me?” I demanded, because not knowing was driving me to fucking insanity.

She looked up at me, her tongue slowing licking her lower lip as she tasted

some of my blood. “I don’t know,” she breathed.

My gaze fixed on her mouth and I caught her neck in my grasp, my fingers locking around her throat as I tilted her chin up and leaned in so close that our lips were almost touching. I wanted to taste my blood on her tongue so badly that I ached for it. It was fucked up and twisted and dark, but I’d never denied being all of those things. I just didn’t want to drag her down to my level when I knew she deserved better.

“You should learn to stay away from me, Tatum Rivers,” I said in a low voice as my grip on her throat tightened a little. It wasn’t a threat, just the truth. “I’m no good for you. And I’m also not good enough to keep warning you. One of these days I’m not going to hold back. I’ll take you up on that offer in your eyes and abuse your flesh in all the dark ways you hunger for. And once I’ve made you mine, I’ll never let go again. And then I’ll never forgive myself for corrupting you.”

I used my grip on her her throat to shove her away from me just hard enough to put some distance between us then turned and stalked back towards the light of the bonfires.

But before I could get three steps, a branch hit me square in the back.

“You don’t get to just keep doing that shit to me, Kyan Roscoe,” Tatum shouted and I turned back to find her glaring at me, with eyes full of fire once more and a rock clutched in her fist.

“Do what?” I asked, my skin prickling with anger over the fucking branch.

“Reel me in and then shove me away. Lean in like you’re going to kiss me, then reject me as if I was the one who wanted it in the first place,” she snapped.

“Weren’t you?” I asked cockily. “Because from where I was standing, it looked like you would have let me tie you to that tree and fuck you until you couldn’t walk straight.”

She threw the rock so suddenly that I didn't even have time to duck aside before it struck me in the shoulder, hitting me hard enough with the sharp edge that it split my skin open and spilled blood.

"Don't do that," I warned in a low growl.

"Or what?" she taunted, stooping to retrieve two more rocks from the ground by her feet.

"You don't want to find out."

"Maybe I do," she hissed. "Maybe I want to go up against the great Kyan Roscoe and prove that I could put you on your back and leave you bleeding in the dirt."

"Don't make threats you can't follow through on," I snarled and she threw another rock.

I managed to twist aside to avoid it, but the third smacked me in the chest, rage blossoming through my blood from the place where it hit.

I stalked towards her, meaning to restrain her, toss her over my shoulder and drag her back to The Temple for some kind of punishment, but she swung at me the moment I got close.

I tasted blood as my head wheeled sideways and something snapped in my brain as she swung at me again.

I let her land the blow, catching me with an uppercut that made my head ring before I shoved her back against the huge oak tree, hard enough to hurt.

"Don't," I warned in a low growl but she just lunged at me again, her knuckles slamming into my ribs and sending pain flaring through my body.

I fought to deflect her blows, glaring at her as she shoved me back with a snarl of fury.

"Fuck, baby, you're so hot when you're angry," I purred and the rage in her eyes told me she didn't fucking like that at all.

"You're such a prick, Kyan. You act like you think your dick is the Holy

Grail and everyone should just line up for a taste of its magical waters.”

“Well we both know you’d be at the front of the queue if I started offering out tickets,” I taunted.

Her palm swung for my face and she slapped me as hard as she could, making my head wheel sideways.

I slapped her back instantly and her lips parted in surprise as the pink print of my hand glowed on her cheek.

“What’s the matter, baby?” I asked. “You can hand it out, but you can’t take it in return? You slap me like a little bitch and you’d better believe I’ll slap you right back.”

“Call me a little bitch again and I’ll fucking destroy you,” she hissed.

“You wanna carry this on with less clothes on?” I asked, licking the blood from my busted lip. “The hate sex between us would be hot enough to start a forest fire.”

“I thought you didn’t fuck girls from school?” she growled and I could tell just how much that little rule of mine fucked her off.

“I can just bend you over and pretend you’re someone else,” I replied with a taunting smirk which I was hoping she’d smack right off of my face.

“Fuck you.”

“Yes please.”

“I wouldn’t touch your dick if it was the elder wand and Voldemort was stalking us through the fucking trees.”

“Again,” I said.

“What?”

“You mean, you wouldn’t touch my dick *again* if it was the elder wand and-”

Tatum’s fist slammed straight into my jaw and I laughed as pain rocketed through the bone. The girl seriously knew how to throw a punch and if it

wasn't the hottest fucking thing I'd ever seen then I didn't know what was.

She tried to advance but I shoved her back, using brute strength to keep her backed up against the oak.

"I didn't mean to offend you, baby," I teased as she snarled at me. "And I wouldn't really pretend you were someone else while I fucked you. I'll happily break all of your rules and mine just to see the look in your eyes as I fill you up and make you scream my-"

"You'd be the one screaming *my* name, asshole. And once I'd taken what I wanted from your body, I'd leave you to your lonely little existence and forget all about you."

Ouch.

She swung at me again and I caught her fist in my grip, baring my teeth at her as I snatched her other hand too.

She let me catch it, then threw her forehead into my nose. I cursed as the blow took me by surprise, staggering back a step and giving her the space she needed to tackle me.

My back hit the dirt hard and I swore at her as she ripped her hands from my grip and started whaling on me. She wasn't holding back and her punches were fucking brutal as they slammed into my ribs. I was totally fucking enraged, hard as stone, at her mercy and unable to allow her to win.

With a grunt of effort, I threw my weight forward and rolled us over. Her teeth sank into my shoulder like a fucking animal and I cursed as I got her on her back and fought to try and catch her thrashing limbs.

She tried to headbutt me again but I reared back to avoid it, snatching her wrist into my grasp and taking another savage punch to the side before I caught that wrist too.

She continued to buck and thrash beneath me as I pinned her down with her hands clasped in my grip, and locked against the dirt either side of her

head.

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that?” she growled as she finally fell still, glaring up at me in the dim light.

“I think that’s what you like about me,” I tossed back.

“I don’t like a single thing about you.”

I rolled my hips between her thighs and a moan escaped her as the solid length of my dick teased her clit.

“You’ve got a funny way of showing it,” I teased. “If you wanted me to dominate you then you only had to ask, baby. You didn’t have to go through the whole farce of fighting me. Although I will say that fighting with you is probably some of the best foreplay I’ve ever had, so I’m not complaining.”

“You’re seriously deluded,” she snapped, her chest rising and falling heavily between us as she tried to catch her breath.

“Sure thing. But when you’re ready to stop pretending, just say please and I’ll have you moaning in no time. You know I can be real generous with you when you beg.”

A snarl of pure fury escaped her and she snatched a hand free of my grip, punching me straight in the throat so that I reared back in surprise. The moment my weight lifted from her hips, she slammed her knee right into my balls and I wheezed in pain as I fell off of her and she scrambled away.

“I’m not begging you for anything, Kyan,” she growled as I cupped my junk and growled in agony and rage. “And you need to seriously get over yourself.”

She stormed away into the forest and by the time I’d shoved myself to my feet again, she was long gone.

“Wow,” Blake said, stepping out of the trees like some fucking stalker as I got to my feet, starting up a slow clap like an asshole. “Great job at fixing your shit with her.”

“Were you just watching us fight?” I asked irritably.

“Yeah. For a minute there I thought you were gonna start fucking and give me a real show,” he joked.

“Pfft. I think she’d sooner castrate me right now. She certainly gave it a good shot.” We turned away from the remains of the party and started off downhill towards home without even having to discuss it.

“You gonna sleep in with her tonight?” he asked.

“No,” I muttered.

“And there was me thinking a night of drinking and brawling would bring you two together again,” he said, shaking his head in disappointment.

“Well, no one could ever claim a date with me wasn’t interesting,” I said bitterly.

“There is that,” he agreed with a laugh and I rolled my eyes at him as we kept walking in silence.

Tatum Rivers was the most infuriating, intoxicating girl I’d ever met. I should have been glad to have pushed her away again, but of course I wasn’t. She was fast becoming my addiction. And I had to wonder how much longer I could go without getting my fix.



Kyan Roscoe was the most stubborn asshole I'd ever met. But he wasn't more stubborn than me. And after my attempt to talk to him last night, I was done feeling bad for hurting his feelings when all he'd done since we'd met was prod and poke me, abuse me alongside his friends, and treat me like an old chew toy he liked to drag out of a box occasionally yet would never, ever cast me aside completely. Fuck that. And fuck him.

I'd set an alarm for five thirty am and I got out of his bed without a single snooze, flinging his comforter across the room before making a beeline for his closet. I threw his shit everywhere before marching out the door, walking straight past him where he slept on the couch like he was trying to spread his body over the entirety of it. His leg was hooked over the back of it while his other one dangled down off of the cushions and his hand was shoved firmly into his boxers. He was covered in bruises and cuts from his fights yesterday and I smiled darkly as I opened the freezer, took out Saint's chilled bottle of vodka and strode toward him, standing behind the couch so I could avoid his

swinging fists when he woke.

“Wakey wakey asshole,” I sang, twisting the cap off and pouring the vodka directly onto the biggest cut on his chest.

Kyan roared in anger as he woke and I splashed more of it on him so his cuts burned before turning and running to put the dining table between us. He leapt over the back of the couch with rage written into his features and I laughed as I placed the bottle down, a dare in my eyes. My pulse beat solidly against my throat as my breathing grew heavier.

“You’re gonna pay for that,” he growled.

“What are you going to do, Kyan?” I asked airily as he strode to the other side of the table, surveying me across it with a deadly scowl. My heart pounded out of rhythm, but I didn’t care anymore. I wasn’t frightened of him. I wanted to see how far I could push him before he snapped. “Leave me out in a thunderstorm in nothing but my uniform? Invade my privacy? Chain and collar me like a dog?”

“The last one sounds about right,” he snarled, then threw himself across the table, his arm outstretched to grab me as he knocked the vodka flying. It smashed into a thousand shards and I shrieked in alarm, just managing to miss being caught by him as I raced for the door.

I shoved my feet into my sneakers, making it outside a second before Kyan came charging after me barefoot.

I fled into the trees, a wild laugh escaping me as I put some distance between us.

I made it to a tall pine with low hanging branches and clambered up onto the nearest one. Kyan’s fingers grazed my ankle as he tried to get hold of me and I kicked out, my foot impacting with soft flesh and making him grunt as I pulled myself higher and higher. I could climb trees like a damn monkey. I’d been doing it since I was a kid and Dad had actively encouraged it.

I glanced down to find Kyan heaving himself up after me, moving at a frightening speed. *Dammit, I guess I'm not the only good tree climber around here.*

Adrenaline slid through my limbs as I climbed, sensing him gaining on me below.

When I was closing in on the top of the tree and my breathing was growing ragged, I chanced another look down, finding him pulling himself onto the branch I'd just vacated. But they were getting thinner and weaker. He couldn't chase me forever. He wasn't light enough to make it into the top of the canopy.

I pulled myself up three more branches before I knew it was getting unsafe to carry on even for me. But I climbed up onto another branch which probably wasn't strong enough to hold me anyway. That meant it definitely wasn't strong enough to hold Kyan if he dared to follow.

He growled as he dragged himself onto the branch beneath me, gazing up at me like I was a bird in a net he wanted to eat for breakfast.

"I can stay up here all day," I taunted.

"That so, baby?" He smirked then dropped down to sit on the branch, resting his back to the tree trunk. "Well I can stay up here for a whole week."

A cracking noise sounded and I glanced down at the branch supporting my weight with my throat thickening. *Oh shit.*

I looked around for another one to move onto, but the only way was down.

Kyan frowned up at me. "Come down here."

"No," I snapped, another crack sounding. *Shit shit shit.*

I gritted my teeth, looking to the next tree over. It wasn't that far. I could make the jump, then I could race down the branches and reach the ground before Kyan did.

"Don't you dare," he warned and I glanced down as he shifted back

upright like he was about to try and grab me.

I tiptoed to the edge of the branch as another splintering crack ripped through the air.

I can totally make it.

“Tatum!” he roared, a note of actual concern in his voice as I leapt forward, throwing caution to the wind as I aimed for a wide branch a few feet down on the neighbouring pine.

I fell through the air, my heart soaring into my throat, my veins humming with life. A laugh exploded from my chest as I landed on the thick branch, stumbling only once before turning back to look up at Kyan, bracing myself on a branch above my head. His eyes were wide and his muscles tense. He’d moved right to the edge of the branch as if he’d been about to jump after me.

“Oh dear, *baby*. Were you scared for wittle old me?” I taunted, then I ducked down, dropping at speed onto a lower branch.

“If falling doesn’t kill you, I will!” he shouted and I laughed again, my heart beating madly as I dropped down, down, down. But he was already following, crashing through the tree to my left, sounding like a damn animal ripping through the foliage as he tried to make it down before me. He might have had the muscle to follow me up there fast, but I was smaller and quicker. I could make it to the bottom first. I had to.

A smile seared into my cheeks as I did what I loved best and became one with the wild spirit living in me. I knew if Kyan caught me I was screwed, but I didn’t care right now. This was the most fun I’d had in ages.

When I was five feet from the ground, I jumped, my sneakers hitting the soft layer of pine needles below. I looked up into the other tree, finding Kyan fifteen feet above me, his upper lip peeled back like a beast, his arms nicked with cuts from his violent descent.

“You’d better run,” he growled, then leapt from the branch, landing with a

thud only ten feet away.

I screamed as I raced back towards The Temple, powering across the path and throwing the door open. Debussy poured over me and I gasped, trying to skid to a halt before I slammed into Saint in his workout gear, but I couldn't stop. I crashed into him full speed and he stumbled back, gripping my arms hard to brace me. His eyes were wide in alarm and I giggled as I ran around him, gripping his shirt and using him as a shield as Kyan stalked after me. I peered over Saint's shoulder, figuring hiding behind the devil might not be the best plan. I was probably about to have another enemy in this game, but in that second, it seemed like the right thing to do.

"Stop!" Saint bellowed, holding up a hand to slow Kyan down as he came for me. "What the fuck is going on?"

Kyan peered over Saint's shoulder with narrowed eyes. "She's in trouble. Hand her over."

"Kyan just can't take a joke," I shot back, surprised that Saint hadn't peeled me off of him yet and handed me to the wolf hunting me.

"I can take a joke, baby, just come here and let me play one on you too," Kyan said through his teeth, his shoulders heaving.

"Who broke the four hundred dollar bottle of Belvedere vodka?" Saint asked icily.

Kyan pointed at me and I pointed at him.

"He knocked it over!" I exclaimed.

"She poured it on me first," Kyan snarled, stepping forward again with intent but Saint backed up, allowing me to use him as a shield.

"But you did the breaking?" Saint asked him and Kyan looked like he was grinding his teeth to dust.

"Yeah, so what? You practically piss gold, just get a new one," Kyan said.

"That's hardly the point." Saint turned, wrapping his arm around my

shoulders. “Work out with me today. I have precisely three minutes before I need to be in the gym so we’d better hurry up and get you dressed.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Sure,” I said with a smile, letting him guide me back upstairs to pick out some clothes. I glanced over my shoulder at Kyan and poked my tongue out at him. His eyebrows arched in surprise, his anger lifting from his expression for a moment to be replaced by a hunger so fierce, I was sure I’d be consumed if I looked at him a second longer.

“Saint can’t protect you forever,” he warned, fighting a smirk.

“He won’t have to, I’ll just kick you in the balls again if you come at me.” I grinned and he marched away, rubbing the back of his neck like he was confused as fuck.

One point to me, zero to Kyan treedouche Roscoe.

I changed in the locker rooms in the Acacia Sports Hall beside Mila, figuring this class was going to be hella awkward considering the last time I’d seen Monroe was in Saint’s shower...touching him...grinding on him...kissing him. He hadn’t replied to my texts and I was getting the awful feeling this was going to seriously affect our plans to destroy the Night Keepers if we didn’t resolve it soon. Not to mention the fact that losing him would break me. He was my rock. But surely he wouldn’t bail because of a stupid kiss? Albeit a mind-blowing, hurricane of a kiss. That still wouldn’t make him take his eye off the prize. He wanted to get to Saint’s father and he needed my help to do that. So he couldn’t ignore me forever.

“Are you okay? You’re looking a little pale,” Mila asked, bumping her hip against mine. She pulled her long, dark hair up into a ponytail, her head tilted to one side.

“I’m good,” I said, smiling vaguely. “Just you know...the Night Keepers.”

It wasn’t a lie technically, but I was afraid of telling Mila the exact truth about me and Monroe. If there even *was* a me and Monroe. I guessed I could tell her we were working together, but then that would lead to questions and questions would lead to answers and I wasn’t even sure what those answers were. Were me and a him a thing? I mean, I sure as hell had enjoyed that kiss. It had felt so good, I wanted to do it again a thousand times, half of them while I was on top of him making him groan my name. Sadly, that didn’t seem to be in my future.

I could be a good girl for him if that was what he really wanted. But that kiss said he didn’t. And I certainly didn’t want that. I wanted to be as bad as a sinner in a church with him.

“What’s the matter, Plague?” Pearl called and I glanced over my shoulder, finding her openly eavesdropping, standing there in her purple bra and panties, shimmying her shorts up her legs. “I guess they’re getting bored of you at last.” She turned to her friend Georgie who sniggered. “Do you need some chapstick for your lips, sweetie? They’re clearly getting real chapped from being an on tap cock hole.”

Rage licked up my spine and I stepped toward her with my P.E. shirt clasped in my hand. “Thanks, *sweetie*. But I’ve got your kooch on speed dial for if I ever need advice about over-used, dried out cock holes.”

And *oooh* filled the room as the rest of the girls in our class turned to watch us.

Pearl lifted her chin, flicking her raven hair as she bought time to come up with a response. “Well, at least my mouth isn’t plagued, *Plague*.”

“I guess it is now since you stole my lipstick like a total creeper,” I shot back, calling her out.

She frowned, snorting a laugh. “What?”

“Ladies! That’s quite enough time! Put your tits and asses away and get out to class!” Monroe roared beyond the door and I turned my back on Pearl, pulling on my shirt and heading out of the locker room with Mila.

Monroe was waiting for us in the sports hall, his face stern as we all poured into the room and the male half of the class glanced over at us with interest. I tried to catch Monroe’s eye but he acted like I was invisible, his gaze skimming over me like I was just another number in the masses.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. This was ridiculous. And it made me worry like hell. Losing him was unthinkable. But *he’d* kissed *me*. What was I supposed to do at the time, knee him in the balls and scream for help? Yah, no thanks. Not when I’d been craving that kiss for weeks. It had been torture being so close to him, sleeping in his house every few days, sparring with him, laughing and plotting with him and not being allowed to want him. And he’d finally shown me he wanted me too only to act like I no longer existed afterwards. Why? What was the point in it? I wasn’t going to tell anyone about us. I didn’t want him getting in trouble, but he didn’t have to shut me out completely.

Monroe split us into teams for doing a relay around the hall and I drifted towards him, trying to catch his eye while everyone stretched to warm up.

“Sir?” I asked sweetly and he finally had to acknowledge me.

“Problem, Rivers?” he asked sharply and my lips popped open at his tone.

“You just seem to be in a bad mood today, is something wrong?” I batted my lashes and his eyes narrowed.

“There will be something wrong if you don’t get your ass back into your group,” he growled, making my heart trip over itself.

I stepped closer still, not backing down, figuring there was only one way I was going to make him talk to me. “Nope, I’m good here.” I dropped down and sat on the floor at his feet and he looked at me, barely veiling his

surprise. *Go on, make me stay behind after class.*

“Get up,” he snapped and I noticed people looking our way. The other Night Keepers were frowning at me like they couldn’t figure out why I was goading Monroe.

“Or what?” I asked, falling down onto my back and pretending to make a snow angel.

“Rivers!” he barked. “Stand up this second.”

I tapped my lips in mock thought then shook my head. “No, I’m good here, thanks. Are you going to punish me, sir?”

People started laughing and Mila snorted as she looked my way. Kyan, Blake and Saint were drifting closer, ready to step in, so I knew I needed to up my game or they were going to haul me away from Monroe before he could demand I stay after class. Or at least give me a detention where I’d have a chance at talking to him later.

“Rivers, I’m going to count to three,” Monroe warned and I smirked up at him. “One.”

I rolled onto my front.

“Two.”

I thrust my ass into the air.

“Three!”

I mentally said fuck it and tugged my shorts down to expose my bare butt right beneath him.

“That’s it!” he roared as the whole class burst out laughing. “See me after class.”

I was about to tug up my shorts when hands seized me and I was dragged upright by Blake from behind while Kyan yanked up my shorts, standing in front of me with a sneer on his face.

“Do that again and you’ll regret it,” he snapped.

“Do what again?” I asked innocently as I pulled my arms free of Blake’s grip. Saint stood to one side, surveying us all closely as Monroe strode away to start barking orders at the teams.

“Take your clothes off in front of an audience,” Kyan snarled.

“Unless the audience is you lot, right?” I strode away, tossing my hair over my shoulder and glancing back at them. Their eyes burned into me and I laughed as I joined Mila, not giving them any more of my attention.

“What the fuck are you on, girl?” Mila laughed. “Because I wanna buy some.”

I fell into giggles with her before we carried on with the lesson.

By the time everyone was marching out of the hall after class, I was actually growing a little nervous about talking to Monroe. My stomach was swirling and just thinking about bringing up our kiss made me want to hurl. But we couldn’t go on like this.

Mila whispered good luck before she headed out of the hall and the door finally closed behind the last students. Monroe folded his arms, glaring at me across the room.

“What’s your problem?” he demanded.

“My problem?” I gasped in offence. “What’s *your* problem?”

He glanced nervously at the door, his jaw pulsing. “I’m not discussing this here.”

“Then where? Because you won’t answer my texts or calls. Is that it now? You’re done helping me because you couldn’t keep your hands off-”

“Quiet!” he boomed and I swear my hair swept back with the fierceness of his voice. “I will not discuss this here,” he repeated in a hiss.

“Well, I’m not giving you the option.” I strode toward him, lowering my voice to match his. “Drop the shit, *sir*.”

“Things will continue as normal,” he said in a low growl. “That’s all I

have to say.”

“Oh is it?” I folded my arms to mirror him. “Well that’s not all *I* have to say. Do you think it’s okay to be all over me one second then drop me like a sack of shit the next? Maybe that mark on the back of your neck is starting to have some influence over you after all. Do you like being a Night Keeper, Nash, is that it?”

“Don’t you take that tone with me,” he snapped and I stepped forward into his personal space, leaning closer until all I could smell was pine and muscle.

“I’ve got the hint. I’m a big girl. You made a mistake. Clearly I made one too. So let’s forget about it and focus on what’s really important.” I hated saying that. I didn’t want to forget about it. I wanted to do it all over again but this time with even less clothes on and with about eight inches less space between us judging by the hard on he’d pressed against me. But I could see he was freaking out and I wasn’t going to push him on this. If he didn’t want to go there again, then fine. I could handle that. I’d handled far worse at this point.

“So?” I pushed and his eyes dipped to my mouth. My heart beat harder as his gaze lingered there, the desire in his dark blue eyes burning right into me.

“Back up,” he breathed, like he didn’t know what he might do if I remained there a moment longer. I wasn’t sure either, but I wanted to know.

I swallowed to try and dislodge the lump in my throat, but it only swelled. I was tempted by him in the most excruciating way. This off limits thing was getting old. Especially now we’d crossed that line. Couldn’t we just...cross it again?

Dammit, Tatum. No.

“Just text me when you’re ready to move on from this. I know you can’t risk your position here and jeopardise everything you’ve worked for. And I don’t want you to,” I whispered, claws gripping my heart as I accepted the

weight of those words. We were doomed to fail before we'd even begun. Lusting for him had to stop. It was just so damn hard sometimes. It wasn't even that he looked like a Viking warrior with muscles which made me pant and eyes that looked directly into my soul. It was that he'd become a true companion to me, someone I could rely on in my darkest moments. I didn't want to lose that for anything. But I couldn't deny how attractive that made him to me too.

He said nothing in response and my hope started to fracture. As hard as it was for me, I let my guard down and gave him the only thing I had left. My truth. "Please don't leave me to face them alone." I dropped my gaze to my feet, my heart squeezing like a fist in my chest. "I need you."

"Tatum..." he sighed and I glanced up at him, finding an intensity in his eyes that cut through flesh and bone. "You're not alone."

Tears pinched my eyes as I held onto those words, needing them to be true. He said nothing more and neither did I. I hung in that parting moment between us for far too long, the energy crackling through the air making my skin tingle and my pulse race so fast I was about to lose my mind. Then I turned away and headed from the hall, my heart bloody and raw in my chest as I walked into the girls' locker room and started stripping off for a shower.

I realised my crush on Monroe had grown roots that spread so far inside me that pulling them out would leave gaping wounds in the deepest recesses of my being. But I had to let him go. For his sake. For mine. We weren't meant to be together as a couple. We were meant to fight this war side by side against the Night Keepers as warriors. And that's how it had to stay.

"Did he whoop your ass?" Mila taunted as we dressed after our showers. "Spank it red?" She laughed and I summoned a breath of laughter, but my heart weighed too heavy to allow any more than that. "Oh shit, did he go full savage?"

“Yeah, he ripped some vital organs out and stomped on them,” I said through a vague smile.

We headed outside and said our goodbyes. It was the end of the school day and I envied Mila as she headed off with the football crowd, their light-hearted chatter calling back to me and making me crave the normalcy of their lives.

I sighed, walking back towards The Temple in the shade of the huge pines flanking the path. The lake lapped gently against the shore nearby and birds chirped and chattered in the trees. There weren't many students heading this way as it was the opposite side of the lake to the accommodation. I sank into the quiet, wondering what it would have been like to live out my time here at Everlake without a pandemic, or the world hating me for it. Maybe I could have been happy.

I lay in an armchair, gazing up at the ceiling while pining for Monroe. I'd done all of my chores and was completely up to date on my assignments, which was a pity because I really needed something to distract me right now. The guys were all watching a football game which had been allowed to go on behind closed doors in one of the stadiums. Blake, Saint and Kyan were whooping and cheering as they sank beers until there was a whole pile of bottles stacked on the table. Every time their team scored a touchdown, they went crazy, dog piling on each other and throwing celebratory punches into each other's sides. I might have found it amusing if they weren't a bunch of dickwads. And I would have watched if it was the Redwood Rattlesnakes playing, but I was too zoned out tonight to even remember which teams were facing off.

As ten pm ticked around, I wondered if I could sneak off to Saint's room early to have some alone time. My library hours hadn't cut it today. Especially as the Unspeakables hadn't made any progress and were refusing to let me call them by their real names again. Saint had been pulling rank on them this week and they were scared out of their minds. I didn't see how I was ever going to make an army out of them. Especially after Saint had gotten Blake to string Bait up in a tree in front of them and blindfolded Kyan who'd then beaten him with a stick like he was a pinata which released screams instead of candy. Saint had warned the Unspeakables that they'd end up just like Bait if they didn't behave. He'd held onto me, making me watch the whole show while my gut churned and I started to really pity Bait. And now my army were quaking in their boots again, I didn't see how I was ever going to end the Night Keepers' reign of terror.

I slipped out of my chair, looking to Saint as the others were too engrossed in the game to notice I was up. "I'm gonna have a shower then go to bed. I have a headache."

He considered that for a moment then nodded and I breathed a sigh of relief as I hurried upstairs, walking into the bathroom and shutting the door behind me.

I showered, trying to scrub away the disquiet in my chest, but it wouldn't budge. I felt alone today. I missed Jess and Dad with all my heart, wishing I could just slip away into one of my memories and disappear. I knew exactly which one I'd pick. The time Dad had rented a cabin on a beach in Georgia and we'd had a BBQ in the sand every night. We'd stayed there for a whole month; it was the most beautiful place I'd ever been. The water used to come right up to the front door when the tide was in and I used to sit on the porch with Jess and we'd dip our toes into the foamy tide. It was a bay so the waves never got too rough and we'd spend hours building sand castles and surfing

during the day.

I missed the sea. The way the air was so fresh you could taste it in the depths of your lungs, the cry of gulls in the morning and the utter peace of waking to the sound of waves lapping outside your door.

I finally left the warmth of the shower behind, wrapping myself in a towel. My phone started ringing and I frowned as I grabbed it from my blazer pocket, surprised when I found an unknown number calling.

I considered not answering but then a terrifying, thrilling, heart-pounding possibility entered my mind and a breath got trapped in my lungs.

I lifted it to my ear and answered it as hope made me unable to move. “Hello?”

“Hey, kiddo,” Dad said heavily and I dropped to my knees on the tiles, his voice wrapping around me like a balm and drawing a heavy sob from my chest.

“Dad?” I choked out, needing him to confirm it just so I knew I wasn’t losing my mind.

“It’s me, baby girl. How are you?”

How am I? How am I?? How could I answer that? I was distraught, lost, abandoned. I’d been waiting for this call for so long and now it was here and I didn’t know what to say.

“Where are you?” I demanded, ignoring his question. “Are you safe? Please tell me they haven’t caught you.” The fear of that thought bound my limbs and made it hard to breathe.

“No one’s caught me. Look Tatum, I need you to listen real closely.”

“Okay,” I whispered, my heart beating a mile a minute.

“I’m so sorry I left you behind, I didn’t know this was going to happen. I had to lay low for a while.”

I nodded though he couldn’t see it, tears streaming down my cheeks as I

waited for him to go on and explain everything. I had so many questions, but there was an anxious undercurrent to his voice that I knew all too well. I had to stay quiet and hear what he had to say.

“I don’t want you to be scared, okay? I’ve been working with the Hades Virus for years. You’re immune, Tatty. You hear me? I gave you a vaccine, do you remember the week we lost Jess?” His voice cracked and another sob racked through my chest as I tried to absorb everything at once.

“Yes, I...I think I remember, but how can I be immune? There isn’t a vaccine. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“There was meant to be a vaccine. It was tested, I just didn’t realise it wasn’t ready. I...I’m so sorry. I thought it was ready, Tatum, do you hear me? But Jess...the virus attacked her body, she wasn’t supposed to get sick...”

A shaky breath staggered from my lungs as I realised what he was saying. “That’s why she died?”

“Yes,” he croaked, his grief clear and it unravelled me, making me fall apart. “But you didn’t...it worked for you. That scar on your arm, that’s what it’s from. I never wanted to remind you because after we loss Jess, oh sweetheart you were so broken and I just...I-”

“Dad, where are you?” I begged, cutting him off as more tears washed over my skin. “It’s hell here. Why did you leave me?”

“I’m sorry, I had to protect you. But we’ll be together soon. I can’t talk much longer, they’ll trace this call.”

“Who will?” I begged, clutching the phone so tight it was bruising my palm.

“I can’t say any more. I have to go. But do you remember the place with the fairies? Remember where you loved to catch them?”

“Y-yes,” I stuttered. “That’s where you are?”

“Not yet, can you make it there next month on the day we always went camping? You need to come alone. Can you do that for me, kiddo?”

I took a shaky breath, wondering how I would manage it, but I would. I just had to. “Yes, I’ll be there.”

“I can’t wait to see you.”

“You too,” I breathed. “But wait, just please tell me. Did you do it? Is what they’re saying about you true?”

“I have to go sweetie, I love you. I’ll explain everything soon. Don’t tell *anyone* that you’re immune.”

“Wait-” I gasped but he hung up, the words *I love you too* sticking in my throat. I placed the phone down on the floor, resting my hands on the tiles as I came apart. This virus had killed Jess. Dad had been responsible, even if he hadn’t meant it. And was I really immune? I ran my fingers over the rose-shaped scar on my arm, my throat constricting like a python was wrapped around it. The memory was a blur, distorted by the loss of Jess not long after. But I could almost remember the needle if I really focused...

My head started to throb.

It was too much. I couldn’t process it all at once. I longed for my dad’s embrace; I needed him to tell me this would all be okay. To explain all of this until it made sense. But he was gone. And reaching him was going to be hard, but not impossible. I could do it. I would find a way.

I rested my head against my hands, falling apart completely as I tried to understand everything he’d said. *Jess, oh Jess...*

The truth was crushing, debilitating. I came apart at the seams, crying as I mourned the loss of my sister all over again. This news was too much to bear on top of everything else that had happened. Just when I thought things couldn’t get worse, then this. This crippling knowledge that my sister had died because of that virus. Because my father had tried to protect her and

failed.

I curled in on myself, shaking and crying as the world fell away and I was lost to a sea of grief. I didn't know how long I lay there, only that I was sinking deeper and deeper into a pit of despair that I didn't think I'd ever surface from.

Hands were suddenly on me and I blinked up at Saint through a haze of tears. My heart jolted and I tried to push him away, but he pulled me closer. He surveyed me with fear and confusion in his eyes like he was out of his depth, swimming upriver in a deluge.

I pushed him away again, curling in on myself, but he wouldn't leave. My towel started slipping, but I didn't care to grab hold of it and as I looked up to tell Saint to go away, he pulled his long-sleeved button down off and pushed it over my head. Gently, he guided my arms into the sleeves, pushing it down to fall over my thighs as he pulled the towel away.

I gazed at him in surprise as he knelt before me, looking through strands of hair which had fallen over my face.

"You should go," I said, my voice hoarse.

A moment of silence hung between us where he didn't leave then I lunged toward him, wrapping my arms around his neck, desperate for the comfort, even if he wasn't the right place to seek it. I just didn't know what else to do and he was the only one here right now. There was no one else to turn to. He stiffened in surprise then his arms slowly closed around me and he held me as I sobbed, his hand starting to move up and down my back in soothing strokes.

"I can...get one of the others," he said, his voice tight.

"No, don't leave," I begged, burying my face into his neck. His cool skin felt like a dream against my burning flesh. I just needed to stay here in his arms. It was making my racing heart begin to slow and I didn't know why I kept clinging to him, but I couldn't stop.

He gently scooped me into his arms and cradled me to his chest. I didn't have the energy to struggle as he strode out of the bathroom, walking straight across his bedroom and striding into his closet.

He kicked the door shut and carried me to the far end of it, lowering to sit down in front of the mirror and laying me across his lap.

He hooked a metal box off of the lowest shelf, resting it against my bare knees and I gasped at the cold bite of it, managing to stop crying long enough to look at it.

"What's that?" I croaked.

He pushed my hair out of my face, his mouth turned down at the corners and his eyes scrunched. He looked so out of his comfort zone, he might as well have been a bird in a bees' nest.

He tapped a code onto the keypad on the box, flipping it open and I stopped breathing. Stopped blinking.

There, inside it were my letters to Jess and the worn edges of those she'd sent me in return.

"What?" I breathed in complete confusion. They couldn't be there. I'd seen them burn, char, turn to ash.

"I forged the ones I burned," Saint muttered, those words making a wave crash against my heart. "When we first brought you here, I found them in your bag. I borrowed them one at a time and made replicas."

"Why?" My lower lip quivered, my heart thrashing as I reached into the box with trembling fingers, taking out the most precious things in the world to me. The letters I'd seen burn, lost forever. I gently thumbed through them, confirming they were mine. They were all mine. Pieces of me and my sister tangled up together in words. Parts of my heart which had been cast to the flames the same day I'd watched him destroy them. Or so I'd thought.

His hand rested on my knee, curling gently against my flesh and I turned

to him in complete shock. There were no words, not a single one in the English dictionary that could encompass how this made me feel.

“I always planned to hurt you with them,” he said in a dark voice, his eyes dancing with shadows. “But I never would have truly destroyed them.”

Tears tracked silently down my cheeks and I didn’t know whether I was happy or sad, whole or broken. Saint lifted a hand to brush my tears away, observing me with what I could almost have mistaken for pain in his eyes.

I fell against him, wrapping my arms around him and squeezing tight. This changed something between us, something vital. But I didn’t want to face what that was. He’d still wanted to hurt me, still let me believe my letters were gone. But he hadn’t really done it. What did that mean? What did that make him?

My tears washed over his bare chest, running across his dark skin in tiny rivers. He never pushed me away or gave any signs he was disgusted by my display even though that was exactly what I would have expected from him.

I leaned back again and cupped his cheek, making him look at me so I could study every inch of his handsome, too-perfect face, and I realised I didn’t know much about him at all. And as cruel and as black hearted as he was, there must have been something good lurking inside him for him to save those letters. For him to spend all that time forging them to hurt me, but not nearly as deeply as he could have hurt me by taking them away eternally.

“You always intended to give them back?” I asked in a whisper and he inhaled my breath like it was a drug in the air.

“I honestly...don’t know,” he said earnestly, unblinking as he absorbed the sight of my tears. He should have been bottling them in a jar, adding them to his collection of the broken pieces of my soul he kept. But instead he continued to wipe them away like he was willing them to stop. Like he took no pleasure in watching them fall.

I leaned in close, kissing the corner of his mouth as I found myself unsure of where to plant it. His cheek or his lips. So apparently I decided on somewhere between the two. His eyes blazed, his muscles hardening beneath my touch like he was restraining himself from pulling me in for a different kind of kiss. One that would change my entire world.

I released a breath, breaking his gaze, sure I wasn't in any state of mind to make a reckless decision like that. Then I curled up against him and he held me tight, his thumb tracking up and down my spine in an endlessly fluid motion that made me want to sleep. After a minute or two, he started humming a song I knew. Baby Mine, a lullaby my dad had sung to me and Jess when we were kids. It was the most soothing song in the world to me and somehow Saint knew it too.

I lay in the arms of the devil, wondering if I'd been wrong to think of him as inherently evil. Cruel maybe. But perhaps he really had been an angel once and sometime long ago, he'd lost his wings.



Sleep hadn't come easy to me in as long as I could remember. It was a problem born of the conditioning my father had subjected me to when I was growing up. He said he did it to make me strong. But in some ways I knew it had made me weak. Not being able to sleep properly was one of those ways. And being perpetually tired impacted on the rest of my day too. I knew it affected my moods, shortened my fuse – basically, it kept my demon angry and its appetite insatiable, because the one thing it needed most was often illusive and sometimes impossible.

Insomnia was a medical condition. I knew it. And I could have sought all kinds of help for it. But that would have meant admitting that it was a problem. Medical records. Pills, counselling sessions, whatever. Father wouldn't stand for that and the possible scandal it could cause if it was revealed. Not to mention the fact that I'd never stand for him to know that he'd damaged me that way.

So, night after night, I closed my eyes at midnight and refused to open them until six am. Sometimes I slept for a few hours. Others none at all.

Even though it had been years since I'd been rudely and loudly awakened in the night to face some upheaval or challenge meant to strengthen me, I still

couldn't switch off the part of my brain that expected it to happen.

At least, I hadn't, until now.

The scent of vanilla honey blossom caressed my senses as the warm heat of a soft body pressed against mine. Her head lay on my chest, one leg curved over my hips so the weight of it pressed down on me in the most delicious way. Her arm wound around my body and her fingertips were woven into the tight curls of my dark hair.

But the most surprising thing of all was the way I was holding her too, my right arm beneath her, hooked around her body with my hand resting on her hip. And my left hand cupping the back of her head, her blonde hair tangled around my fingers like I'd been holding her that way all night.

I almost didn't dare to open my eyes as the utter peace of that moment washed over me, afraid of breaking the spell I'd woken in and realising it had really just been an impossible kind of dream.

I cracked my eyes open slowly, frowning as I found us laying on the floor in the dark, only the dim light spilling beneath the door at the far end of the closet giving me anything to see by.

I took a second to process how we'd ended up here. The strange moment we'd shared, locked away in my closet where the world couldn't see us and I could be honest about some of the secrets I'd been hiding from her. I didn't know what had caused her tears and I didn't feel it was my place to ask her about them. I hadn't earned the right to question her sadness when I'd caused so much of it myself.

I could only imagine how hopeless she'd been feeling to take comfort in my ungodly arms, but I was also strangely honoured by the fact that she'd done just that.

We were destined to be together always now, after the oaths we'd sworn on the sacred stone. But sometimes it felt like more than just an obligation.

Like fate had guided us together. Five lost souls in need of each other more than any of us would ever be willing to admit.

I breathed in deeply, inhaling that sinfully sweet smell which clung to her skin, wondering if she tasted as delectable as she smelled.

She murmured something, wriggling even closer to me, her thigh tightening over my hips for a moment and making me groan in the back of my throat. I'd never woken up with a woman like this. Never had the slightest inclination to do so. But now that I was holding onto her, I had the strongest desire to hold on tight. To lose myself in this moment and never again come back to reality.

"Saint?" she murmured, her voice husky from sleep and laced with confusion like she couldn't figure out how she'd ended up here.

"We slept on the floor," I replied, because apparently stating the obvious was the only thing my brain could muster.

Her fingers flexed in my hair and she slowly slid her hand down my neck until her palm landed on my chest, right above my heart which was thumping solidly as I watched her.

"Are you surprised to find I have one?" I asked as she lingered there, feeling the beat of my heart beneath her palm.

"A little," she replied. "Though less so after last night. My letters..."

She pushed herself up, using my chest as leverage and I was surprised as she slid over my lap, straddling me as she looked down into my eyes with a frown.

I rested my hands around her waist, my touch loose and gentle, just wanting to reassure myself that she was actually there. Last night seemed like some strange illusion. But this moment here said it had been real.

"I felt sure I knew the only things that mattered about you, Saint," she said slowly. "And now I've woken up with a new perspective on everything you

do and I don't know how to process it.”

“Perhaps its best you don't,” I said. “Because I certainly can't help you to figure my psyche out. I've had no luck at doing so myself in eighteen years.”

She bit into her full bottom lip and I frowned at the wild mane of blonde hair that fell around her shoulders. She was still wearing my shirt and I had my pants from yesterday on too. The mere thought of sleeping dressed in old clothes, missing out on my nighttime ritual and curling up on the fucking floor of a closet should have freaked me the fuck out, but, for the moment at least...I just felt eerily calm. And the only thing I could attribute that to was her. Tatum Rivers. Master of my agony.

“You look kinda cute when you're all sleepy, you know?” she teased, reaching forward to ruffle my short hair.

I caught her wrist to stop her, a grunt of protest passing my lips and she laughed at me.

“I've never been called cute a damn day in my life,” I growled.

“Well, I'm willing to bet that there aren't many people who have seen you all sleepy and well rested. You look like a lion cub whose been snoozing the day away in the sunshine.”

She smirked at me and I huffed as she caught hold of the hand that had been restraining her and twisted it so that she could look at the watch on my wrist. Knowing I'd slept wearing it made my jaw tick and I suddenly wondered what time it was too. I was willing to bet it was the middle of the night, or my music would have been playing in the bedroom beside us.

“Shit, it's eleven thirty,” Tatum said with a laugh. “We slept for like, fourteen hours!”

My heart leapt. No – it stopped. Ceased to beat. Forgot to pump blood around my body or oxygen to my brain. My ears rang and my breath caught in my throat with enough force to drown me. Here was the panic I should

have been feeling from the moment I woke up in this fucking closet. Here was the thing that would drown me in suffering for the rest of the fucking day and beyond.

“No,” I growled.

Tatum looked down at me with wide eyes as she seemed to catch on to my mood.

“It’s not that big of a deal,” she began, but I sat up so quickly that she cut herself off with a gasp of fright as she suddenly found me in her face.

“*Not that big of a deal?*” I hissed, wrenching my wrist out of her grip and turning the watch to face me.

She was right. Eleven thirty. Thirty minutes past *eleven*.

It’s gone to shit.

There’s no fixing this.

There’s nowhere to hide from it.

No, no, no, nononononono...

I gripped her waist and dumped her out of my lap onto her ass with a thud before standing and striding to the drawer which held my watches.

I pulled out the closest box and glared at the time on it before checking the next one. And the next.

“If four of them say it’s eleven thirty then it must be true,” Tatum pointed out. “But it’s really not so bad, it could be wor-”

“If the word *worse* leaves your lips, I swear to Christ, I won’t be held responsible for my actions,” I snarled, whirling on her.

Her.

The girl with the blonde hair and blue eyes and a smile that could cut right through me. The girl with a body I couldn’t stop thinking about and the balls to go toe to toe with me again and again and again. The girl who came to me last night with her tears and her sorrow and her fucking mind games, who’d

managed to trap me in this closet and allowed me to wake up in hell.

“Did you plan this?” I demanded, rounding on her and my breaths came in harsh pants as a vice seemed to tighten around my chest.

“Plan for you to find me sobbing with grief so that I could get you to sleep in a fucking closet with me?” she asked incredulously. “How the hell do you figure that out?”

I stared her down for a long moment. Every second I wasted threw my day off more. Each beat of my heart brought more chaos into my existence.

I clenched and unclenched my fists, grinding my jaw before twisting away from her and ripping my pants off without taking the time to release the button, just popping it right off with brute force and kicking them off as fast as I could. I threw them into the laundry basket in disgust as my hands started to shake with fury.

“Take it off,” I demanded, refusing to look her way while she was still wearing clothes intended for yesterday. “Right now.”

I threw my boxers into the laundry basket next, keeping my back to her as I quickly selected a new pair from my drawer along with clean sweatpants before pulling them on. I felt marginally better once that was dealt with, but it wasn't enough.

She stayed silent behind me but movement in the corner of my eye told me she'd dropped my old shirt like I'd requested.

I refused to think about the fact that she was now naked behind me as I stalked towards her clothes, selecting a matching red silk bra and panties for her and tossing them over my shoulder.

This was her fault, she'd lured me in here. Intentionally or not. Without her I wouldn't have ended up sleeping in a fucking closet. I wouldn't have slept through my music and I wouldn't have...slept...

I looked over my shoulder at her with wild eyes and she tilted her her head

like she could fucking *see* me.

“I should have slept in your bed last night,” she said slowly. “And I didn’t.”

I swallowed a lump in my throat as I turned to face her fully. She’d pulled my shirt back on over the bra and panties, only hooking a few buttons back up and it looked so...perfectly imperfect on her.

“I feel like the demon in me will burn me alive from the inside out sometimes,” I rasped, wondering why I was even telling her that.

“It won’t,” she disagreed. “You just feel like that because your ritual has been sabotaged. By me. I broke your rule about sleeping in your bed. You just need to take back control.”

“Control?” I asked slowly, trying to make my brain function around this cloud of rage and chaos which was threatening to fucking consume me if I didn’t do something. If I didn’t-

“Punish me,” she said breathily and every part of me fell still. Even the darkness in me stopped and took note. Because I wanted that. I wanted that so fucking much it hurt.

“I...” I stepped back and pushed a hand through my hair as I tried to figure out if this was a good idea. I was so fucking angry that I didn’t know if I could control myself, yet I was tempted, seriously fucking tempted because the voices in my skull were screaming that this could be the answer I craved.

“You need a safe word.”

Her eyes lit up. Honest to fucking God, *lit up* as I suggested that.

“Can it be utterly ridiculous?” she asked, biting her bottom lip.

“No,” I growled.

“Can it be cock-munching-honey-badger?”

“No.”

“Super-dicks-unite?”

“No.”

“Hail-Saint-Lord-of-spanking?”

“How many times do you want to end up being punished?” I demanded as her eyes danced with amusement.

“As many times as you think I deserve,” she replied hungrily.

How was that possible? That she would want this like I did? That she’d receive something a hidden part of her needed from it too?

“Give me a minute,” I growled as I tried to get my rampant thoughts in order. “Go and wait in my room and think up a suitable safe word before I get there.”

Her eyes flashed with excitement and she took a step towards the door before pausing and reaching into one of my drawers. She pulled a black, leather belt out and handed it to me with a heated look in her eyes.

My throat tightened as my fingers curled around the supple leather and she licked her lips before turning and heading out of the closet like I’d asked.

I glanced at my watch again, cursing as it drew closer to midday. But some of the panic was easing in me. Some of the demon’s worst impulses were calming and as I ran the belt between my fingers, I knew what I needed to do to sate it.

All I needed was control. Complete and utter dominion. I needed her to submit to me entirely, give her body over into my keeping and let me decide when enough was enough.

I released a slow breath, revelling in the cold sense of calm which filled me at the thought of what she was offering. I didn’t know how she’d figured out what I needed. And I couldn’t even begin to fathom why she needed it too. But I knew she did. In the same way that I craved control, power, domination, she wanted to release those things into my care. Give her body over to the chaotic rule of another. Submit to my desires and let them fulfil

hers. So why the fuck was I still standing in a closet?

I strode to the door and opened it slowly, my skin prickling with a rush of pleasure as I found her kneeling at the foot of my bed, head down, long blonde hair spilling around her face and concealing it from my view.

“Tell me,” I commanded, knocking the closet door shut with a harsh snap. She flinched at the sound and a wicked smile graced my lips as my demon purred.

“Mercy,” she said in a firm voice and I nodded.

“You say that word and I’ll stop instantly,” I swore.

“Okay.”

I moved towards her, admiring the view as she stayed there, kneeling on the carpet for me and awaiting my instructions. It didn’t seem possible that we’d found this strange place of peace between us. This perfect balance of violence and release, but I was starting to believe it was real. Especially as my grip tightened on the belt she’d handed me.

I moved beyond her and stood looking down into the main body of the church which was thankfully empty. Kyan and Blake would be in class, probably wondering where the fuck we were. But I didn’t care. Because the only thing that mattered right now was that we had the place to ourselves.

“Stand up,” I commanded, turning to look at her as she rose to her feet. “Hold on to the railing and bend over.”

She instantly moved to do as I said and I sighed at the complete and utter control I had over her in that moment.

She gripped the railing and I watched hungrily as she bent forward, spreading her legs just enough to balance her as my shirt rode up over her ass and revealed that scrap of red lingerie beneath. I moved to stand right behind her, leaning over her so that my dick ground into her ass as I slightly repositioned her grip, making her fingers line up perfectly.

“Next time, do it like this,” I growled in her ear and she nodded as I ran my fingers down her spine, appreciating the perfect arch of her back before I stepped aside.

I folded the belt in half, gripping the buckle in my fist before trailing the supple leather over the round curve of her ass and placing my other hand on the base of her spine.

“Ready?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she breathed.

“I’ll strike you three times, just like last time. Do you understand why I’m doing this?”

“Because I broke the rules and made you oversleep,” she replied instantly, her grip on the railing tightening in anticipation.

My dick was throbbing with need and for a moment I wondered what it would be like to take this fantasy to the next level. To pleasure her after punishing her and own her body in that way too. But that fantasy was destined to remain idle. Her own rules forbid it. Though that only made my imagination more vivid.

I raised the belt slowly, my heart pounding with anticipation then I cracked it down against her ass, being careful not to be too rough. A groan of satisfaction escaped me as she gasped, rocking forward to escape the sting of it.

“Again?” I asked, my muscles bunching as I forced myself to hold back, waiting for her to confirm she still wanted this as much as I did.

“Yes,” she moaned, her back arching in anticipation once more.

The second strike hit her a little lower and she moaned so loudly that the sound echoed off of the vaulted ceiling in a way that had my entire body begging for hers.

The third strike clapped against her ass and she cried out again, sagging

forward so that she was leaning over the railing, panting in what seemed a hell of a lot like relief. And that was definitely what I felt too. Like the angst and havoc and carnage of the world had been calmed by that single act. As if all of the shattered, fucked up pieces of my soul had found harmony in it and I'd been remade in the aftermath of it.

I dropped the belt and moved forward to rub my hands over her pink flesh, soothing the sting of the strikes and fighting against every impulse in my body as I ached to take this further.

My dick was straining with a hungry, carnal need and as she pushed her ass back into my hands, I was sure she was craving the same thing.

My fingers slid over the red silk which covered her pussy and she ground back against me with a needy moan. I continued to stroke her flesh to sooth the bite of the belt, devouring the feeling of the heat beneath my fingers and the sounds pouring from her lips which said she wanted more from me. All of me.

"Fuck, Barbie, where the hell did you come from?" I groaned, forcing myself to pull back.

She turned to face me and I met her eye as she stepped closer.

"The bigger question, is why haven't I left yet?" she breathed.

Her gaze dropped to the serious bulge in my pants and she looked up at me again with mischief in her gaze.

She stepped closer and I let her, wondering what she was going to do. What I'd let her do. If I was even capable of stopping her right now-

"We need to get to class," she said, her breath washing over my lips as she looked up at me.

"You go," I said, balling my fists to ensure I kept my hands off of her. "I have somewhere else to be."

There was no fucking way I was doing a *half* day of classes. It was

absolutely unthinkable. But there was something I could do to pass the time, and if I let myself believe that I'd always planned for the day to run this way, then maybe I could cope with the rest of the repercussions of my routine going to absolute shit.

Tatum looked at me in surprise for a moment, like she'd expected me to let my dick overrule my brain and beg for her to stay instead. And maybe I would have if it wasn't for the rules. Because they were law. And if I broke them then I wouldn't be able to calm the anarchy by spanking her or fucking her or doing anything at all. Breaking them would be like breaking myself. It was unthinkable. And if the price for that was a day spent imagining what might have happened if I didn't have to stick to them so rigidly then so be it.

I placed my hands on the railing exactly where hers had been as she headed away to get dressed and I looked out through the enormous stained glass window in the shape of a cross at the front of the building as I tried to settle my mind.

Tatum came and went. I felt her eyes on me as she headed for the stairs but I couldn't let myself look at her, my gaze fixed on the moving orange light of the stained glass as I worked to rid myself of the sexual tension she'd filled me with in place of my demon.

My gaze flitted to the clock and I released a shaky breath. One, eighteen.
What the fuck?

I shoved away from the railing and headed downstairs, leaving my phone behind as I moved to grab a bottle of water from the fridge and kicked on a pair of sneakers by the door.

As I stepped outside, the cold winter air bit my bare chest but I welcomed the distraction of the discomfort as I took off up the path towards Ash Chambers.

I ran the whole way, pushing my body as hard as I could and revelling in

the oblivion of exercise until I made it inside the building and found my way to Music Room C.

The sound of the piano being played reached me as I approached the door, but I didn't give a damn. I wrenched it open and found the sub-standard music teacher, Mr Plotts, giving a lesson to some freshman asshole who was currently getting his Mozart and Bach mixed up and sounded like utter shit.

"Get the fuck out," I commanded as they looked around in alarm and found me standing in the doorway like a half-naked heathen but I gave no shits.

"Mr Memphis! This is a pre-booked lesson," Plotts began nervously, trying to pull off outrage while landing on terror.

"Am I about to make a new Unspeakable?" I asked, my gaze fixing on the freshman. "I'll call you Eunuch and make sure that the name is accurate myself."

"I'm actually feeling unwell," the kid said, leaping up and grabbing his bag before Plotts could do a damn thing about it.

I smirked triumphantly as he scampered away and Plotts followed with a huff of frustration before I slammed the door behind them.

I released a long breath as I took my seat before the grand piano and cracked my neck as I laid my fingers down on the keys.

There was something about this room which set my mind at peace. The high ceiling and tall windows with their view over the lake beyond and the rich wood of the floorboards eased a sigh from my lips. There used to be a harp in the far corner of the room, but I'd had that removed in my freshman year and they'd placed a blood red chez lounge there instead.

Coming here the other night had reminded me of why I needed it so much, but it had also proven that I'd let myself get sloppy. I'd made too many mistakes. And that seriously fucked with my frame of mind. So I intended to

sit here and play until my fingers were cramping and sweat poured down my spine and every piece I attempted was perfect.

And if I managed that, then, and only *then*, would I let myself think about Tatum Rivers moaning for me as I punished her and let myself escape into fantasies about our Night Bound beauty and the possibilities she presented us with.



Last night kept replaying in my mind over and over again. I picked through everything my dad had said with a fine tooth comb, trying to figure out if I'd missed something. I kept examining the rose-shaped scar on my arm as if it held the answers for me I needed. But only my dad could give me those. The truth was hard to accept and though I should have been relieved to know I was safe from the Hades Virus, I was just anxious about what other truths my dad was hiding.

My entire afternoon at school was spent in a daze and by the time I was in P.E. and Monroe sent the whole class running laps around the football field, I was kind of glad of the solitary exercise.

The repetitive pounding of my footfalls beneath me helped my mind relax at last. I was finally starting to accept everything Dad had told me, even though it was a shock. The reason Jess had died made me feel all kinds of things. Anger, regret, hurt. I had no doubt Dad had carried the burden of guilt over her death for years, the shame of being responsible eating him up from

the inside. He hadn't been the same since she'd passed, a light had gone out in his eyes even though he always still smiled for me. Was always strong. A knife twisted in my chest as I thought of it. I didn't know whether to hate him or pity him. I knew he wouldn't have hurt her intentionally, but it was so hard not to be resentful toward him for stealing my sister away from me. *He didn't know. He wouldn't have given it to her if he'd thought there was a risk.*

Monroe blew his whistle and I blinked out of my stupor, turning to look over at him on the other side of the field. Everyone had stopped running while I did another lap. Everyone except me, Blake and Kyan who were both right behind me. I frowned at them as I slowed to a halt, surprised to find them so close without having realised.

I instinctively looked around for Saint, but he wasn't there. Last night had been surreal, made more so by the fact that I'd ended up in his arms. Him of all people. Him of all beasts. It made me feel uncomfortable things. Like, how was I supposed to keep hating him so fiercely when he'd not only returned my letters to me, but I'd destroyed something so valuable of his in return for something he never even did?

It struck me that he'd never even asked why I was crying last night. He'd seemed so uncertain of how to comfort me, yet had provided what I needed without even realising. I didn't want to see him as something less than a monster though. If I did that, I'd be on a slippery slope. And I needed to hate Saint Memphis with all my heart. He'd done more to me than just the letters, I wouldn't forget that.

"What's the plan, baby?" Kyan panted. "We running another few laps or are you done?" There wasn't any sweetness in his words, it was just a firm question. Did he need to keep following me or not? But why the hell were they following me in the first place?

I frowned, looking between them both just as Monroe blew his whistle

once more, beckoning us off the field. “Any time today fuckers!” he called, cupping his hands around his mouth.

“I’m done,” I said, offering them a tight smile before walking through the middle of them and marching across the field towards the sports hall. Monroe headed inside before I made it there, ensuring he didn’t have to speak to me. Which was great. Just fucking great.

It started to rain as I made it inside and I headed through to the girls’ locker room with numb fingers and ice cold cheeks. I soon warmed up under the flow of a warm shower beside Mila though.

“You were going for gold out there,” she chided and I offered her a smile.

“Yeah, I didn’t realise I had two wolves snapping at my heels though.” I wished I could tell Mila about last night, but I feared getting anyone involved where my dad was concerned. He was the most wanted man in the world right now. It would put Mila in an awkward position if she found out I was in contact with him. Not that I thought she’d give me up, but still.

“They’ll eat you alive, girl.” She winked. “Although, can’t say that would be the worst thing in the world. Danny eats *me* like my pussy is an ear of corn and he’s a chipmunk with an insatiable appetite. I have to worry about what kind of porn that boy watches.”

I burst out laughing and she fell apart with me. It made me feel lighter at last, the weight of yesterday lifting just a little.

“You really need to tell him,” I pointed out as we headed out of the showers, wrapping ourselves in towels.

“I have, but then he starts motorboating somewhere thirty miles south of my clit and I use the time to catch up on my insta. It’s kind of therapeutic.”

“*Mila*,” I snorted.

“I know, girl, I should be training him up harder, but the guy will spend up to an hour between my thighs without complaint. How can I pass up all that

me time?”

I chuckled as I opened my locker, but my laugh fell dead as I found a bunch of beautiful blue forget-me-nots sitting inside. *What the hell?*

I took them out and Mila’s eyes widened. “Woah, tell me they’re from a Night Keeper whose heart you’re going to rip out?” she whispered so no one else could hear.

I frowned, figuring there was no chance one of them would have got me flowers. Then again, who the hell else would know I liked these except Kyan? *Would he..?*

I supposed it *could* be a peace offering and the thought of that made my heart skip a little. *Is this his way of saying sorry for being a prime douchenozzle?*

I grabbed my phone from my blazer pocket, tapping out a message to him with a photo of the flowers.

Tatum:

I got your gift.

His reply came in almost instantly.

Kyan:

HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHAHAHAHA!

I don't buy flowers or pick flowers or look at flowers.

Flowers & Me = NEVER

I gawped at the rude-ass message, my cheeks warming, but my embarrassment fast gave way to fury as I shot him back a reply.

Tatum:

Me & My hate for you and your snark = FOREVER

“Well?” Mila asked.

“He didn’t send them. How can someone get in my locker anyway?” I tossed the flowers down on the bench and pulled my sports bag out, placing it down beside them. *Idiot, of course Kyan didn’t get them.*

I was pretty mortified for even assuming he would have been responsible for them. And okay, maybe I was one percent disappointed too.

“Umm, janitor’s key? I guess Coach Monroe would have one too...” Mila said thoughtfully and my ears pricked up. Were they from him? Surely not. How could he know they were my favourite? And he was still acting like a moody bitch since we’d kissed anyway. Couldn’t be him...could it?

I unzipped my bag and my heart leapt as I found a folded piece of paper sitting on top of my clothes. I grabbed it out, unfolding it, hoping this would give me my answer to the mystery flower giver.

*As blue as your eyes,
As bright as the sea.
I watch you always,
Do you watch me?*

A tremor ran through me as I read those words and I instinctively looked over my shoulder. My gaze fell on Pearl as she dressed, seemingly oblivious to my gifts. Maybe I’d been wrong to suspect her. But this shit was getting creepy now and I was starting to think I had a real problem. Perhaps it was a guy who had a crush on me. But then what about the time in the restroom? That hadn’t been an attempt at being sweet. It was creepy as fuck.

Mila took the note, reading it as I rooted through my bag for my underwear. “What the fuck? Who did this?”

“I dunno, but I don’t think it’s who we thought.”

“Shit, girl, tell Monroe.”

“Yeah...maybe,” I murmured. “Goddammit, where is my underwear?” I turned the whole bag out but it wasn’t there. My lacy bra and panties...gone. I rounded on the room, my veins burning with anger. “Who the fuck messed with my stuff?”

Silence fell as everyone looked my way. I grabbed the flowers and the note, waving them. “Who put this shit in my locker?” I surveyed Pearl closely, but she just wrinkled her nose like the idea was abhorrent to her.

“Who would bother giving *you* flowers, Plague? Did you put them there yourself to try and convince everyone that boys actually like you?” Pearl laughed, turning away and heading out of the locker room with Georgie. I ground my teeth, turning back to my bag and huffing as I had to put my uniform back on without underwear. It made me feel exposed and I quickly buttoned up my blazer to cover my breasts even though I looked like a complete jackass.

When I was done, I headed out of the locker room with my bag over my shoulder and Mila beside me. No way did Monroe leave those. And I had the feeling the Night Keepers weren’t fucking with me either. Someone else was targeting me. But why?

Toby strode out of the boys’ locker room across the hall, jogging to catch up with a few of the football crew who’d left him behind.

“Hey!” he called, but they didn’t look back. He slowed his pursuit, his lips pressing into a tight line. He looked our way and his eyes brightened as he hurried over. “Hey guys, how you doing? Great running out there today, Tatum. Looked like you were good for another few laps.”

I shrugged. "I guess I went full Roadrunner today."

He laughed enthusiastically. "Are you going to hang out in the courtyard tonight, Mila?" he asked her, smiling so hard it was obvious he was desperate for friends. I guessed fitting back into society since exiting the Unspeakables was a bitch. I thought he'd been blending in better lately, but apparently not. And I kinda pitied him for it.

"Sure thing," she said, offering him a kind smile.

"And you Tatum?" Toby asked hopefully. "Maybe you and the Night Keepers?"

"Um..." I bit my lip, hating that I didn't have a choice about that. "Maybe. Depends what *they* wanna do," I said with an eyeroll.

"Oh yeah, I totally get that," he laughed a little nervously, opening the doors for us as we headed outside.

Bait was sitting on the wall, trying to undo a knot someone had tied between his two sets of shoelaces, his shiny shoes resting on his lap as he struggled with it. His mask was sitting beside him on the wall and as we stepped outside he scrambled to pick it up and put it on, accidentally sending it skittering across the ground and bouncing off Toby's feet.

"Oh, sorry man, do you mind?" Bait asked and Toby ran a hand down the back of his neck, looking from the mask, to us, then back to Bait.

He cleared his throat, turning to us again and waving goodbye. "Catch you later guys." He side stepped the mask then practically ran away down the path, not sparing another look at Bait.

I frowned, my gut twisting as I bent down and picked up Bait's mask, walking over to him. I didn't like to feel sorry for the guy, but I was starting to think he'd suffered enough for letting the looters in. He wasn't just outcasted, he was actively ridiculed, bullied and pushed around on a daily basis. And I knew all too well what that felt like.

“Here.” I held out his mask and he took it with a sad sort of smile.

“Thanks...you should go. You shouldn’t be seen talking to me.”

“There’s no one around,” I said gently.

“Not the point,” he murmured, not meeting my gaze. His copper hair was starting to grow back in the strip I’d shaved down the middle of his head and my heart dipped at the memory.

“This won’t last forever,” I breathed, unsure why I suddenly felt the need to comfort him. But he looked so alone and I knew exactly how that felt.

“I suppose not,” he said in a tight voice, the knot coming free in his laces at last.

Mila cleared her throat. “You coming, Tatum?”

“Yeah,” I said, saying goodbye to Bait and moving to join Mila as she walked down the path. I glanced back over my shoulder as he put his mask back on, shouldered his bag and started walking down the hill with his head hanging low. It made me think about the warning Mila had given me all those weeks ago when I’d first joined this school. *Play to their rules, keep out of their hair and you’ll have a sweet life at Everlake.*

I’d said hell to the Night Keepers’ rules, royally fucking ruffled up their perfectly styled hair and now I was facing the not-so-sweet life she’d predicted. And so was Bait. We were just two rebels crushed beneath the same heels, and I guessed I had to count my lucky stars that I wasn’t as broken as him.

I was kinda dreading my kickboxing session with Monroe. And as I strode along the path in the direction of the gym at ten to seven, I knew I was dragging my heels. Not only did I have an hour of one-on-one time booked

with him while getting hot and sweaty, it was also his night to have me stay over at his place. *Awkward city, here I come.*

I pushed through the door into the gym, drifting towards the boxing room as I tried to mentally prepare myself for this. Was he just going to be a tight-lipped, grumpy asshole all evening? Was I going to have to put up with his teacher bullshit just because he couldn't own up to what had happened and go back to treating me like a friend? That was what was most important. I could ignore the rest of my feelings. *Right? Right??*

I shoved the door open, striding in with my chin held high and dumping my sleepover bag by the door. As uncomfortable as it was, it was time to fix shit between us. If he was too ashamed to deal with it, then I'd just have to make him face his demons. Because I missed my knight in shining armour. And I wanted him back.

"Hey," I said brightly, hoping to break the ice, but he just gave me a cold, dead glare from across the room. His black T-shirt clung to his heavenly frame and I tried to stop my eyes from doing a sweep over his bulging arms and broad chest before my gaze settled on his face -tried and failed obviously.

"Fifty press ups, thirty burpies, high knees for one minute. Go." His eyes darkened and I clenched my jaw, moving onto the mats and falling into the warmup routine he'd set without a word. I would play by his rules today, be the best student he'd ever worked with until he just had to praise me. And hug me. Maybe kiss me again...*no dammit!*

I was panting by the time I was done and Monroe circled his finger through the air. "Again."

Motherfucker.

I dropped down, my arms burning as I forced out another fifty press ups and started on my least favourite exercise ever. The burpy. *Who even*

invented this shit? They need to be hung, drawn and quartered. No trial, straight up put to death.

I finished my second round, my heart racing as I jogged over to drink from the water fountain.

“Did I say you could rest?” Monroe barked. “Again!”

“Oh come on-” I started, turning to face him and I swear his eyes flashed with the fires of hell. Holy shit, he was giving Saint a run for his money with that expression.

I growled under my breath, striding back to the centre of the mat and dropping down again.

Fifty more agonising, arm-trembling push-ups later, I got up, clutching my side as a stitch set in.

“Burpies,” he demanded. “Down. Now.”

I fell down with a groan as pain rolled through my whole body and I somehow pushed out another thirty before starting on the high knees.

I was about ready to collapse when he finally called time on my warm up (AKA the burning-tornado-of-death up) and directed me into the ring. “Wrap your hands, I’m not going easy on you today.”

“I noticed,” I muttered as I grabbed the wraps, strapping them on before climbing into the ring.

Monroe came at me like a runaway train and I ducked his first punch fast, wheeling around and slamming my fist into his kidney. We didn’t hold back anymore. We fought hard and dirty. I’d seriously enjoyed trying out the street fighting techniques he’d taught me on Kyan the other night, but now he was being a moody asshole, I was more than happy to try them out on him too.

I aimed a kick for his leg as he swung at me, trying to get a hold of my arm. My speed was always my advantage against big men like him and Kyan. I had to be fast, get my punches in and escape quickly before they could grab

me. I was starting to realise that I didn't have to be the strongest person in the room to win a fight against someone who was just as well trained as me. I just had to be the one with the most resilience. The one who would keep getting back up. Keep landing hits, keep evading attacks.

I'd been working seriously hard on my stamina, going for long runs whenever I could and pushing myself to my absolute limits. I also worked on my mindset. Keeping calm and collected was essential in a real life situation. If I was ever attacked by someone like Merl again, I had to stop myself from panicking. I had to be ready to put all of my hard work to good use and go totally psycho, no pulling punches. Because what was the point of being able to win medals and trophies? I didn't care for any of that. I wanted to be invincible.

Monroe caught my arm and I snatched his hand in the same moment, using a technique he'd showed me last week as I twisted it sharply, pinching my fingers down on a pressure point. He released me with a hiss and I danced away, throwing another jab into his side.

He came at me again, a wall of pure muscle and fury and my heart hammered as I got cornered against the side of the ring.

His fist swung forward and I ducked it, rushing to meet him and throwing my shoulder into his gut, having no other move to play. I wasn't strong enough to get him off his feet without a run up, but I could force him back a few inches, enough for me to slip past him.

His hands locked around my neck and he tangled his legs with mine, flinging me around and throwing me onto the mat so hard I almost got whiplash. He was on top of me in the next breath, his legs forcing mine apart and his hands grabbing both sides of my head.

Panic reared up in me so fast that I wasn't remotely ready for it. I was in the same position I'd been in beneath Merl, a heavy body crushing me down,

his hands gripping my head seconds before he smashed my skull against the ground.

I started punching, a shriek of fear leaving me as I hit and hit and hit, writhing madly beneath him as I tried to escape. I threw a punch at his face and he jerked sideways, releasing my head and I shoved him off of me with a yell of determination.

I crawled backwards away from him, my fists raised to defend myself as I brought my knees to my chest, my breaths falling heavily from my lungs.

Monroe stood up and wiped a line of blood from his mouth. His brows pulled together as he took in the sight of me huddled on the floor and he jogged forward to pull me up. I was suddenly tugged against his body and he hugged me tight to him, his chest heaving in time with mine.

“Breathe,” he commanded.

I did so, my forehead falling to rest against his pounding heart as I shut my eyes and drowned in the safety of his arms.

“You got away,” he growled and I nodded, my throat thick. *I got away, I got away, I got away.*

He released me at last, pointing to the fountain and I followed his silent order, taking off my hand wraps as I went to get a drink.

When I was done, I joined Monroe on the mat to do some stretches, glancing at him from the corner of my eye. I cleared my throat when the silence spread far and wide, deciding we really needed to broach this issue between us or things were going to be forever weird.

“Look...Nash,” I started, wondering how I was going to phrase this. What I really wanted to say was, *I like you. Like really like you. That kiss blew my mind and I'd really, really like to do it again, so can we, like, get down to it?* There were way too many likes in that declaration. And anyway, I couldn't say that. I was supposed to be swearing us off, getting us back on friend

terms. But suddenly, I didn't really want that. I'd nearly drowned in that fire between us and I so desperately wanted to fall into the flames again. Would it really be so bad? If I admitted how I felt...would it change things?

"Let's just pretend it didn't happen," Monroe said sharply, turning to give me a stern look and my heart crushed to dust. "We don't need to talk about it. So far as I'm concerned, it didn't happen."

"Right," I said a little bitterly, reaching for my toes as I bent over and curled my fingers around them. *And let's be dicks to each other while we're at it, because apparently we can't go back to being friends now either.*

"We both know where this leads otherwise," he muttered and I stood up straight, narrowing my eyes at him.

"No I don't actually, you'd better enlighten me. Where does it lead?" I placed my hands on my hips and his jaw ticked.

"It leads to the little rich girl using me for fun for as long as she deems me interesting. Then I end up in prison for it while she swans off and marries some rich fucker with a collection of super cars which try to make up for his tiny dick and beer belly, and she lives happily ever after burning cash and attending galas or who knows fucking what with the ladies who lunch."

"The ladies who lunch?" I echoed. "What the fuck are you even talking about right now?"

"You know what I'm saying," he growled, turning his back on me as he headed over to drink from the water fountain.

"Well, it's not true," I insisted. "I'm not a lady and I don't *lunch*. And the day I marry a guy with a small dick and a beer gut will be a cold day in hell."

"Money is worth more to people like you than love."

"People like me?" I snarled, my temper burning a line of fire up my spine as I strode towards him.

"Yeah." He rounded on me, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Entitled girls who’ve only ever known the easy life, girls who barely lift a finger to wipe their own asses. You think you’re different? Bullshit. You’re all the same. I’ve seen it too many times. Girls at this school preaching about building hospitals for the sick and schools for the poor when they get access to their daddy’s money, but the second they graduate, they’re straight off to their Ivy League colleges where they get their oh so fucking honourable degrees, only to be married off to the highest bidder before graduation. Their careers are just a scam to make them seem like they have actual dreams outside of their golden walls and a bunch of just-as-entitled brats to raise in their image and grow more fat cats like them. It makes me sick.” He was in my face now, glaring down his nose, practically spitting venom.

“I guess you’ve got me all figured out, haven’t you Nash?” I said in an arctic tone, trembling with rage. “But maybe you should wake up in the twenty first century, you bigoted, pig-headed, idiot. I have never dreamed of marriage or any kind of fucking walls. I have dreams which have nothing to do with any man I might come to love, hate or fuck in my lifetime. You could take away my trust fund this very second and I would still climb to the top of the mountain of life with bloody fingernails, because I *want* to. Not because I need to impress some prick with a fleet of yachts or an armada of fucking golf clubs. I’d rather live in a shack by the ocean and spend my days kickboxing for small change than marry some big-headed douchebag who wants to own the whole world and doesn’t give a damn about anyone but himself. I’d die first.” I turned my back on him, marching across the room and snatching up my bag.

“You’re staying at mine tonight,” he growled, striding forward to make it to the door before I could.

“I’m aware,” I snapped.

He stared at me with a searing intensity as I strode towards him, ducking

under his arm as he held the door wide.

I headed outside into the fresh night air, marching in the direction of Maple Lodge as Monroe jogged to catch me.

“You can’t be seen walking to my house,” he hissed.

I flipped him the finger, turning off the path and heading up the track that led around the main staff quarters to the back of his house while he continued along the main path.

Arrogant dickface.

I was practically spitting lava by the time I made it around to his house and knocked on the back door. He opened it and I shouldered past him into the lounge, tossing my bag down and making my way directly to the kitchen. I yanked a cupboard open, taking out a huge bar of chocolate before heading to the couch and flinging myself down on it. I tore the wrapper off and took a savage bite of it, the sweetness making me moan despite the situation and I shut my eyes to savour it.

The bathroom door clicked shut and the shower turned on as Monroe left me to it. I made my way through more of the chocolate, trying not to picture him butt naked with the water streaming over his muscular ass. Except that was exactly what I was doing while I placed more chocolate in my mouth and let it melt on my tongue.

When he finally stepped out with nothing but a towel around his waist, I forced my eyes away from his bare chest and those abs which made me want to bite down on my knuckles until they bled. *Screw his stupid body.*

He strode off into his room and I grabbed my bag, heading into the bathroom to shower. When I was done, I dressed in a silky pyjama combo made up of a pair of pale pink shorts and a camisole top.

I headed back into the lounge and found Monroe dominating the couch in nothing but a pair of navy boxers. There was an empty plate on the coffee

table and he silently pointed me towards the microwave where I found a steaming plate of greasy Chinese noodles waiting for me. My mouth watered as I grabbed a fork, dropped into a chair and wolfed down every last bite.

I felt Monroe's eyes drifting to me from the TV show he was watching about truckers in Canada from time to time, but gave him zero acknowledgement as I devoured my food. When I was finished, I grabbed his plate and headed to the kitchen.

"Leave them," he said.

"It's fine," I shot back, washing them in the sink and stacking them beside it. I drummed my fingers on the counter when I was done, then gasped as Monroe brushed past me as he headed to the fridge. A river of butterflies rushed into my belly as he grabbed a beer and offered me one.

I took it with a murmur of thanks and he cracked his open, his eyes locked on me as he took a long swig. I watched his throat as he swallowed, the tension in the air growing so thick that I couldn't breathe. Why was that so mesmerising?

His mouth twitched before he clinked his beer can to mine and strode back to drape himself all over the couch again. He looked like the most appetising thing ever. I would have swapped the chocolate and the Chinese food for him in a heartbeat. I could just picture myself straddling his thighs, pulling his boxers down and taking his huge-

"You gonna stand there staring at me all night or are you gonna sit down?" Monroe asked casually, arching a brow at me.

My skin heated and I ripped the ring pull of my beer open and took an angry sip before moving to the armchair and dropping into it, putting my feet up on the table and firmly ignoring him.

I actually started to get into the trucker show after a while and I almost missed the sound of my phone buzzing in my bag while I was engrossed in it.

I reached over the chair, opening the zip and taking it out, finding Blake calling.

“Hey Cinders,” he purred as I connected the call and my heart juddered at his gruff voice. “How was your training session?”

“Good...” I said suspiciously. “What’s up?”

“Just calling to check in. Is Monroe treating you nice?” He chuckled like he didn’t expect that to be the case.

“He mostly ignores me,” I answered honestly and Monroe shot me a look in the corner of my eye. “I think he’s got a thing for trucks. He starts panting whenever there’s an exhaust pipe on screen in this weird ass show he’s watching.”

“Very funny,” Monroe muttered.

Blake roared a laugh. “Tell him not to put his dick in one of those unless the engine’s been off for a while. Frightful fucking burns otherwise.”

“I’ll make sure he knows,” I laughed too, twisting around in my seat to give Monroe my back as I dangled my legs over the arm of the chair. It was kinda nice to talk to someone who wasn’t being a prick for once. “He’s gone to jerk off now, I can hear him grunting out the word *freightliner* in his bedroom.”

“Oh he’s into the big girls, is he?” Blake chuckled.

“Yeah, he likes them carrying a heavy load,” I snorted.

“Is he going in for a long haul or a short haul?” Blake asked.

A shadow suddenly fell over me and Monroe plucked the phone right out of my hand and I dropped my head back to look up at him as he held it to his ear. “Hey!”

“It’s my night with her, asshole, so fuck off.” He hung up and promptly shoved the phone directly into his boxers.

“What the hell!” I jumped up, my eyes locked on the bulge in his

underwear as my phone sat right on top of his dick. “Give it back, asshole.”

I lunged at him, but he caught my waist, dragging me against him and taking me by surprise as I felt my phone and his dick pressing into my thigh. He fixed me with a stare that made my blood ripple and chill. “You were being rude.”

“How was I being rude?” I demanded. “You’re the one who’s been ignoring me all night.”

He tsked, stepping back so I was saved from the delicious press of his body. “Don’t talk to other guys while you’re in my home.”

“You sound awfully like a Night Keeper right now, Nash. And if I’m not mistaken, is that an undertone of jealousy in your voice?” I raised my brows, not backing down from his penetrating gaze despite my jack-hammering heart.

He growled low in his throat, about to walk away but I stepped forward and pushed my hand directly into his boxers. He stiffened in alarm – in both senses of the word - and I couldn’t help but smile as I grabbed my phone, my fingers skimming up the smooth, hard length of him as I retrieved it. My thighs squeezed together as I got seriously hot for him, but I managed to compose myself enough to retreat with my phone in my hand, giving him an innocent look.

Don’t ever underestimate me, Nash Monroe.

His lips parted as he gaped at me and I headed back to my seat, dropping down with a smirk as I turned my attention back to the TV.

He cleared his throat several times before disappearing into his bedroom and I swear he punched something. He soon returned wearing a pair of sweatpants as he sat back on the couch with a scowl.

I leaned over to put my phone back in my bag, wondering why it didn’t bother me that his dick had been rubbed all over it, and noticed the note left

by my stalker had fallen out of the bag.

“What’s that?” Monroe asked as I picked up the piece of paper.

I glanced over at him, figuring I would have told him about this straight away before we’d kissed. But now...I didn’t know anymore. Why should I confide in him when he was being a prick all the time?

“Nothing.” I pushed it back into my bag and he sat upright, his eyes raking over my face.

“It’s not nothing. What is it?”

“It doesn’t matter, okay? We’re not *pals* anymore so you don’t need to act like you give a shit.”

His brow creased and he moved to sit on the edge of the couch, his elbows resting on his knees and making his biceps flex. “I’m always here for you, princess.”

His soft voice broke through my walls like a knife sliding through hot butter and my heart pounded faster.

“Do you mean that?” I asked, trying not to pout as he nodded.

“I mean that.” He rested a hand against his heart for a moment and I breathed a sigh of relief. *There’s hope for us as friends yet.*

I didn’t like that I was keeping so many things from him lately. Since my dad’s call, I’d toyed with the idea of telling Monroe about it, but I was scared of doing so too. Things weren’t the same between us anymore. But I supposed I could talk to him about this...

“Well...I got a couple of weird poems put in my bag. And today someone left me flowers too. I thought it was Pearl Devickers at first, but I don’t think it can be her.”

“You think you’ve got an admirer?” he asked, his hands clenching into fists whether he noticed it or not.

“No,” I whispered, a shiver running up my spine. “Someone wrote Night

Whore on the restroom mirror the other day. And there was one time where I thought maybe...”

“What?” he pressed, his tone urgent.

“That someone was following me,” I breathed, fear stirring in my chest.

“Show me.” He held out his hand for the note and I moved over to him, dropping down at his side and passing it over.

His brows lowered as he read it and I studied his face from the side as his jaw tightened and a shadow entered his eyes that I’d never seen in him before, even at his most furious.

“Leave it with me,” he said dangerously. “Whoever it is just wrote their fate in blood.”

“You don’t need to protect me, Nash,” I said, glancing at him and his gaze locked with mine. There was a furious storm swirling in the depths of his eyes and I knew if he ever found who had left this poem, they would fall prey to the monster in him.

“You should go to bed,” he breathed and I tasted him on my lips.

I didn’t move. I couldn’t. I was locked in his eyes, a prisoner to him and the darkness rising to the surface of his skin.

“Go,” he snapped and I jumped in alarm, rising to my feet as I was released from the snare of his gaze.

I grabbed my bag and marched into his room, shoving the door closed and pressing my back to it. I shut my eyes as I fell to pieces internally, every broken shard aching for the man who’d sent me away. The one I could never have.



I ran down the path which circled the entire campus, looking at my watch to check I was still making good time and I upped my pace a little as I veered off of my usual route.

I'd already added in an extra loop to make up for the distance I'd miss without completing my normal circuit and as I turned off the main path and raced up to The Temple, I broke into a sprint.

An excited whoop came from the trees to the right of the path and I almost collided with Blake as he leapt at me.

A surprised laugh escaped me as I dodged him and ran on, leaving him behind as he righted himself, but as Kyan jumped out of the trees ahead of me, I couldn't slow in time to avoid a collision.

His solid weight drove me into the wall of the church and I grunted in frustration as I tried to fight him off.

Blake leapt on both of us a moment later and I found myself in the middle of a scuffle as Kyan tried to get me in a headlock and Blake pulled a lipstick from his pocket.

I wrestled against them, throwing a few halfhearted punches before they

managed to hold me still long enough to smear the lipstick over my mouth.

“Get off of me, you fuckwits,” I choked through a laugh and they let me shove them away while they roared with laughter.

I couldn't help but laugh with them as we headed into The Temple where the low hum of classical music rang around the open space. In some ways, I didn't hate being a Night Keeper. I liked being a part of a group and their jokes and games resonated with me in a way that I'd missed out on too much in my life.

Kyan wrapped an arm around my shoulders as we stepped inside and leaned close to my ear to speak in a low voice. “I dare you to give Saint a kiss and smear that pretty pink lipstick all over his face.”

“Seriously?”

“C'mon, man, fucking with Saint is like half of what makes being a Night Keeper fun. Don't you wanna help me bait him?”

When he put it that way, I couldn't really resist.

Saint was sitting in his wing backed chair by the roaring fire, reading a book and acting like he hadn't noticed all of us arriving despite all the noise we were making.

I kicked my sneakers off and strode towards him quickly. Tatum perked up in her spot on the couch, looking at me with interest as I passed her by and headed straight for Saint.

He looked up as my shadow fell over him and I grinned widely as I looked into the dead eyes of the devil. “Hey, sweetheart,” I said. “Did you miss me?”

“What the fuck is on your-”

I swooped down and planted a kiss right on his mouth, smearing the lipstick over his face as much as I could before he shoved me off.

“Don't tell me we've initiated another fucking Kyan,” he growled irritably as he swiped the lipstick off of his cheeks with the back of his hand and stood

so suddenly that I found myself nose to nose with him.

The look of rage in his eyes brought another laugh to my lips and Kyan fell about himself laughing as Saint made a move to walk away.

“Wait,” Tatum said and I turned to look at her as she glanced between the two of us with mischief in her blue eyes. “Do that again. Sloooooowly. And let me record it.”

I scoffed at her dismissively but Saint actually paused.

“Did you like that, Barbie?” he purred in a deadly tone.

“Erm, yeah,” she said with a suggestive grin. “Who’d have thought Coach Monroe would go around kissing his students?”

My skin prickled with hot energy at her words and her eyes sparkled with amusement as Blake and Kyan laughed along.

“It was a joke,” I muttered, moving away from Saint in case he got any ideas about a repeat performance. Because the way he was watching her said he quite liked grabbing her attention like that and I wouldn’t put anything past him.

“Here you go, Cinders,” Blake called, tossing her the lipstick he’d used to defile me and the grin fell from her lips as she caught it.

She quickly pulled the lid off and looked at the pale pink colour inside before closing it again. “Is this the only one of my lipsticks you’ve stolen?” she asked suspiciously.

“Why? Do you think I’d look better in red?” he teased, dropping down beside her on the couch and throwing his arm around the back of it.

I didn’t like how casual the three of them were about being close to her. It rubbed me up the wrong way. Especially as she’d made her rules clear about hooking up with them. Not that she was complaining. In fact, she seemed perfectly comfortable sitting so close to him. Maybe even *too* comfortable.

“I just...lost another one, that’s all,” she said, glancing my way before

shrugging it off.

“She means, some creep tried to freak her out then stole it and wrote Night Whore with it across the mirrors in the girls’ restroom the other week,” I said, folding my arms as I looked her right in the eye.

The Night Keepers all burst into speech at once and Tatum gave me a death glare just as Saint yelled for silence.

“Nice work, traitor,” she growled at me, cutting me a scowl half a second before Saint made it to her and caught her chin, forcing her to look up at him.

“*Explain,*” he demanded. Even with pink lipstick smeared across his face, he managed to look like a fucking psychopath.

Blake shifted closer to Tatum on the couch, his arm dropping to encircle her waist and Kyan prowled forward to stand behind her as they waited. This was why I’d told them. They may have been fuck ups who were holding her captive and revelled in antagonising her, but if there was one thing I’d learned about them the night we’d all murdered a man together, it was that all of us would kill for Tatum Rivers. We’d protect her to our dying breaths, whatever our individual motivations for that were.

“Someone just tried to freak me out,” she explained, playing it down. But the way she’d looked at me when she’d told me about the things that had been going on last night let me know exactly how worried she was about this. And maybe if I hadn’t been pushing her away so much during the last few weeks, I would have been able to help her sooner and she wouldn’t have hidden it for so long.

“By calling you a whore?” Kyan growled.

“And sending her weird ass letters,” I added.

“I know who *not* to trust with my secrets from now on,” she shot at me icily.

“You don’t have secrets,” Saint hissed. “Not from us. Not ever.”

“Sorry, but that wasn’t in the rules. I didn’t realise I had to trust you assholes with every little thing that bothers me.”

“Do you seriously think you can’t trust us?” Blake asked, looking wounded by her words. “After what we all did the night of the break in?”

Tatum huffed irritably and rolled her eyes at him.

“Maybe I don’t *want* to trust you guys with everything,” she clarified. “I’ve been dealing with my own problems for a hell of a long time.”

“That’s not how this family works,” Saint replied darkly.

“Family?” I asked, but they all ignored me.

“Tell us *everything*,” Saint demanded and they all leaned close, dominating her space and giving her no choice but to answer.

She shot me another death glare as she began to explain all of the creepy shit that had been going on and I ducked away from her pissed off vibes as I headed down the short corridor towards Kyan and Blake’s rooms at the end of the hallway which led off the back of the church. I pushed open the heavy wooden door into Kyan’s room so that I could cross through to the bathroom and wash the lipstick from my face.

I moved straight to the sink and splashed water over my jaw, rubbing at it to remove the pink marks before looking up at myself in the mirror. There was a smile playing around my lips and it took me a moment to realise it shouldn’t be there. I shouldn’t be enjoying fooling around with the Night Keepers. I shouldn’t be enjoying spending time with Tatum Rivers.

Although as I thought that, I wondered if I was being too harsh on myself. I’d dedicated so much of my life to tearing down Troy Memphis and his family that I’d never really been able to enjoy anything much. At least not in the years that had passed since the car crash. So why shouldn’t I enjoy myself now? Why should I have to suffer through my revenge? Everything I was doing was working towards my end goal. So if some of my smiles weren’t

faked then why the fuck should I care?

A knock sounded at the door and I looked around in surprise, calling out to whoever it was to come in.

As the door swung open and I found Tatum there, I frowned. The two of us being alone in a bathroom was not a good idea. We'd already thoroughly proven that point. And of course the moment I thought about that kiss, I couldn't fucking stop. Of the way her full lips had moved against mine, how she'd pulled me closer, my body rubbing up against hers and making me feel-

"What do you want?" I asked more sharply than I'd intended.

"I thought we were past the grumpy asshole stage?" she teased. "And shouldn't *I* be the one who's mad after you dropped me in it with the three assketeers? They're freaking out in there now, by the way. And plotting another murder too."

"I'm sorry for that," I said honestly as she lingered in the doorway. "But I did it for you, even if you can't see it. I'm not around you all the time like they are. And if there's someone after you, stalking you, thinking about hurting you, then you need people to watch your back. And despite anything else either of us might feel about them, the Night Keepers will protect you with their lives."

She cocked her head, pouting slightly before sighing. "Fine, I forgive you. This time."

"Was there something else?" I asked as she failed to leave and I refused to move so much as an inch closer to her in case cold tiles and running water really were our kryptonite and I ended up dry humping her over the toilet like a savage.

"Saint said to give you these," she tossed me a clean pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt with the tags still on them. "He said he's sick of you running over here and then hanging around all evening like an animal who doesn't

bathe after exercising.”

“I shower when I get home,” I protested.

“Don’t shoot the messenger. I’m just telling you what he said.”

“That I stink?”

“Not that I’ve ever noticed,” she replied with a smirk. “But you keep so far away from me that maybe I just haven’t gotten close enough to get a whiff yet.”

She sniffed the air dramatically and I rolled my eyes at her as I tossed the new clothes down on the side of the sink.

“I don’t smell,” I muttered.

“Hmmm, hang on, I think I’m getting something.” She moved into the room, sniffing like a dog on the scent of a fox and I couldn’t help but laugh as she slinked towards me.

She moved close enough to sniff me and the moment she wrinkled her nose, I grabbed her and tried to wrestle her into my armpit.

“You need to get closer than that, princess,” I teased as she squirmed and laughed, trying to fight me off as I reeled her in.

My heart was pounding with the closeness of her and I knew I should have been letting go but I was lost in the game for a moment, trapping her between my body and the sink as I tried to force her to get up close and personal with the sweat from my run.

“Nash!” she cried, slamming her palms into my chest as I continued to wrestle her and I finally fell still, laughing at the grin on her face.

“What’s the verdict then?”

“I’m not repulsed,” she admitted and I forced myself to take a step back as I nodded.

“Good. I guess I’ll be taking that shower anyway though. Can’t let the evil lord down now, can I?” I’d already learned that with Saint it was all about

picking your battles and it wasn't going to be worth the headache involved in trying to argue against taking a damn shower.

"Heaven forbid. He might spank you if you do." Her eyes danced with amusement at that idea and I arched an eyebrow at her.

"You'd better not be having BDSM fantasies about me and him," I growled.

"Well, I am *now*," she said, her smile darkening suggestively and I rolled my eyes at her as I backed up again.

"Best if you don't have *any* kind of fantasies about me," I warned and she sighed dramatically.

"Who, me? I'm a good girl, Nash. I've never had a dirty thought in my life." She gave me that innocent look which would have gotten her out of a speeding ticket even if she'd been going a hundred miles an hour in a school zone and I fought the urge to tease her back. It was so fucking frustrating, biting my tongue and pretending I didn't want her. Watching the other Night Keepers move in on her and knowing she'd been tempted by two of them already. It was pure torture.

I didn't want to see her cosying up to them or turning those flirtatious looks their way. I wanted to see them on their knees, begging for her forgiveness for all the crap they'd put her through while she told them to go fuck themselves.

"We should screw with them tonight," I suggested in a low voice, glancing at the open door in case any of them were close.

"How?" she breathed excitedly.

"I dunno. They're gonna be drinking, I'll try and get them to do some stupid stuff and maybe we can make another video. I'm sure that we can find a way to get at them if we're both focused on the mission."

"Sure thing, boss." She tossed me a salute and headed out of the room so

that I could shower.

I watched her go with an ache in my chest, my gaze hooking on the way her green dress swung around her golden thighs before I forced myself to close the door.

I scrubbed a hand over my face and set the shower running, dialling the water down to a touch above icy as I stepped beneath it, banishing all inappropriate thoughts from my mind and washing quickly. Once I was done, I dressed in the new clothes Saint had bought me like that wasn't a weird fucking thing to do for another guy and then stole a bit of Blake's hair product so that I could style my blonde hair back away from my face.

When I returned to the front room, I found them all tucking into pizza while Tatum hand fed Saint.

I dropped into my seat and arched an eyebrow at him across the table. "Is it really necessary to treat her like that?" I asked as I grabbed a slice for myself.

"Like what?" Saint asked.

"Making her feed you like a baby," I said, refusing to back down to his arched eyebrow of doom.

"He didn't tell her to do that shit," Kyan said around a mouthful of food. "She chooses to do it because he's more uptight than a duck's asshole and eating food with his hands would give him the twitches."

"Yeah," Blake agreed. "Like the full body, all over his face, I'm-gonna-stab-a-bitch *twitches*."

"I just refuse to let him waste his food because he's afraid to ruin his manicure," Tatum joked and I relaxed a little as I realised she really didn't mind her feeding duties.

"What if I dared you to pick it up and eat it yourself?" I asked Saint and his gaze slowly slid to me from the girl beside him.

“If you wanna play a game like that, you’d better know we don’t fuck around,” he replied, fixing me with a dark look.

“Do it,” I said just as darkly and Kyan laughed like me taunting the big bad dictator was the best thing that had happened to him all week.

With a look which suggested I’d just asked him to shove his arm down a toilet filled with festering shit, Saint reached out and selected the smallest slice of pizza he could find, pinching the crust between his thumb and forefinger with a shudder of unease.

We all paused eating our own food as he lifted it to his lips, his brow furrowing in disgust a moment before he took a large bite. The second it was in his mouth, he dropped the rest of it back onto the plate, chewing quickly and swallowing before getting to his feet, crossing the room and washing his hands in the sink.

“There,” he declared like he’d just won something.

We all laughed as he glowered at us, though I noticed Tatum had a small frown pulling at her brow as she watched him, like she wasn’t sure if that had been funny or not.

Saint headed to the fridge and snatched a bottle of premium vodka out of it before grabbing a glass and heading back to join us. He poured himself a more than healthy measure and sank the lot in one go.

“If I’m going to be subjected to this shit all night then I’m not going to be sober for it,” he muttered, pouring himself another drink as we continued to laugh at him.

“Why are you so uptight anyway?” I asked him as he drank another shot before letting Tatum feed him once more.

Blake released a long whistle and Kyan pushed his tongue into his cheek, his laughter fading away like I’d just put my foot right in it.

“Maybe I was just born this way,” Saint replied, though I could tell there

was more to it than that.

“Oh come on, there’s gotta be something else. Something that made you hate eating food by hand. What do you do with a sandwich anyway?”

“Lunch abides by different rules,” he said simply like that wasn’t an utterly ridiculous point to make. “Not that I choose to eat hand held meals very often even if they do fall at appropriate times of the day.”

“That’s not an answer to my first question,’ I pushed.

“I’m not nearly drunk enough to recant those stories,” Saint said in a low voice.

“Besides,” Kyan cut in. “None of us really wants to sit around discussing all the reasons for us being a fucked up pack of monsters, do we? I, for one, am just glad I found a tribe of my own making and don’t have to bow to the whims of any other fucker for the rest of my days.”

“You see being a Night Keeper as freedom?” I asked him.

“Yeah,” he replied with a smirk. “We’re untouchable. Unbreakable and irredeemable. Just the way I like it.”

“And what about Tatum?” I asked.

All of them looked her way and Blake shifted in his seat like he was uncomfortable.

“She’s Night Bound,” Saint said simply. “She chose to pledge her life to us, to serve us and satisfy us. That choice was an act of the ultimate freedom.”

“Seriously?” she scoffed, leaning back in her chair. “I’m not even allowed to pick out my own clothes half of the time, let alone choose where I go or who I hang out with. I’m the least free person I know. I can’t even go and get laid.”

The three of them practically growled at the implication that she might want to hook up with someone outside of this room and I had to admit, I

didn't like the idea of that either.

"You're just too angry to appreciate the beauty of your position," Saint replied evenly.

"And what's that?" she demanded.

"That being owned by monsters raises you up to a position of ultimate power. We might torment you and rile you up and punish you when you step out of line, but we protect you too. We've killed for you, we'd die for you. And we all worship you as well, if you hadn't noticed." He said that so calmly, so seriously that it was hard to even deny it. And all I could really do was look at her as she tried to come up with a way to bite back at him for his words.

"It's hard to feel worshipped when I'm a prisoner," she muttered eventually.

"Prisoners don't volunteer for their position," Saint replied. "You touched the Sacred Stone. You spoke an oath to us. You gave yourself to us."

"Under duress," she growled.

"We might have taken you down there, baby, but none of us forced your hand onto that stone," Kyan added.

"You threatened me if I didn't do it."

"All's fair in love and war," Saint said with a shrug. "We wanted you. We wanted you badly enough to try and force your hand. But ultimately, you were the one who chose this life."

"You're all deluded," she scoffed.

"Well, we never claimed to be sane," Blake added with a grin.

"One day you'll realise that this was fate," Saint purred, reaching out to tuck a lock of her long hair behind her ear. "And you'll wonder why you ever wanted to escape it."

Tatum tutted dramatically, pushing to her feet and gathering the dirty

plates from the table.

I stood and helped her grab them and was surprised when Blake did too.

Between us, we carted them to the sink and I set the water running, planting myself before it to wash them for her.

Blake started drying and she eyed us suspiciously before heading off to take a seat on the couch. It pissed me off that she was made to clean up after them and cook for them all the time like some kind of live-in cleaner.

Kyan headed off down to the crypt and by the time we were done with the dishes, he'd returned with a crate of beer, a bottle of Jack and some rum to mix a drink for Tatum.

Blake headed across the room and changed the music so that Believer by Imagine Dragons washed over us as he cranked the volume, ending the classical playlist Saint had been listening to. To my surprise, Saint didn't seem to mind at all and he just moved to take his seat on the wing backed chair beside the fire, leaving the rest of us to join Tatum on the couch.

I chose a spot at the opposite end to her and Kyan dropped down between us, taking up most of the additional room.

Blake didn't even hesitate before moving to sit on the floor before her, turning sideways so that she could place her bare feet in his lap. He took one of them into his grip and slowly began to rub it for her, his thumb circling against the arch of her foot and she bit her lip as she looked down at him, like she was torn between pulling away and letting him continue.

My hands balled into fists as I watched them and I had to bite my tongue against the desire to tell him to get the fuck off of her. The lines between protective and possessive were blurring in my mind when it came to her and that wasn't a good thing. That girl wasn't mine. Never could be, never would be. So she could get a foot rub from any fucker she wanted to. Even if it made my blood boil and my jaw grind.

I pulled my eyes away from them and grabbed a beer, finding Saint smirking at me like he'd taken a peek into my head and had pulled out every thought I'd just had. I gave him a flat look, mentally directing him to eat shit. If he really could read minds then maybe he'd do it and give us all a laugh.

"Maybe we should head out tonight," Kyan suggested. "We could tell the Unspeakables that we wanna play hide and seek and hunt them down like animals."

"And then what?" Saint asked.

"String them up by their ankles and leave them outside all night," he replied with a dark smirk.

"No," Tatum snapped. "You're not using them for sport."

Kyan sighed dramatically like she was being unreasonable and Blake chuckled.

"We could call Bait down here if you want someone to beat up, Kyan?" he suggested.

"Leave Bait alone," Tatum said firmly. "I think he's suffered enough."

"For putting your life at risk and letting that fucking rapist in here to lay his hands on you?" Kyan snarled. "Bait could suffer in agony every day for the rest of his miserable life and he'd never come close to paying for that."

"Agreed," I said and Tatum looked at me in surprise.

"It's raining now regardless," Saint interrupted lazily. "I don't wanna go out in that and there's no way that cretin is stepping a foot over my threshold."

"I can't be fucked to beat him up anyway," Kyan added. "There's no point to it with someone like him. I might as well be pounding on a corpse for all the resistance he'd put up. I can't get my kicks out of fighting someone who can't match me."

"You wanna take me on then, Roscoe?" I offered and he straightened in

his chair instantly.

“Or you could take me on and I could leave you groaning in pain on the ground again,” Tatum mocked and Kyan looked at her hungrily.

“Only because you took the cheap shot,” he grunted.

“Oh, so you using your weight and strength advantage to overpower me is fair game, but me going for your weak spot is crossing some arbitrary line?” she asked.

“Fine. If it means that much to you, then you can say you beat me,” Kyan said, rolling his eyes. “But if you’re going to be touching my dick again tonight, I’d rather you didn’t use your knee.”

“Keep dreaming, asshole,” she muttered.

“She’s not going to be touching any part of you,” I said as I swigged my beer. “That’s why she made those fucking rules. To remind you that you don’t just get to do whatever the fuck you want with her whenever you get the urge to.”

“What crawled up your ass tonight, Nash?” Blake asked, still rubbing Tatum’s foot like he couldn’t think of a single thing he’d rather be doing than that and the looks she kept shooting him said she liked it way too much.

“He’s jealous,” Saint taunted.

“Of what?” I asked, my blood heating at the implication.

“Of Barbie giving herself to the rest of us.”

Kyan laughed darkly and Blake cocked his head as he looked at me like he was noticing something for the first time.

“She’s my student, I don’t care what she does with any of you or anyone else,” I said dismissively, refusing to so much as look her way as I drained my beer and reached for another one, sinking that one too.

“That’s it?” Saint asked with a knowing smirk on his face.

“I’m not some fucking predator,” I snapped.

“We’re all predators here of one nature or another,” Blake taunted with a laugh.

“Besides, she’s not that much younger than you,” Saint added. “And she’s beautiful, captivating, *tempting*.”

“None of that matters,” I said firmly.

“So kiss her and prove it,” Blake dared. “Prove you don’t like it.”

“No.”

“He’s a good boy,” Tatum added, batting her eyelashes at me. “He wouldn’t cross that line. No touching. Just looking.”

I tutted irritably and reached for another beer. I didn’t like the way this conversation was going, but losing my shit would only encourage them.

“If you like looking so much you should watch the tape Blake made of the two of them,” Kyan suggested with a dirty grin. “That shit is hot.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I demanded. “She didn’t give permission for him to make that fucking tape. Showing it to other people is breaking the fucking law. Not to mention disrespectful and-”

“Not if she gives her permission,” Blake interjected. “I’ve never shown it to anyone except Kyan and she was the one who said I could.”

“I’m not interested,” I insisted.

“Why?” Tatum taunted and it just pissed me off more that she was playing along with this shit. “Are you afraid you’ll like it?”

“No,” I said through gritted teeth. This was getting beyond a fucking joke now. And I was about five minutes away from walking out on their childish shit.

“What’s the problem then?” Tatum asked. “I don’t care if you guys watch it. I’m not ashamed of my body.”

“That’s because your body is fucking extraordinary,” Kyan said and Tatum flushed at the compliment, her eyes trailing over him as he covered his

smirk by pressing his thumb to the corner of his mouth.

“This isn’t funny anymore,” I growled, but apparently I was the only one who didn’t think so.

Tatum leaned forward and dipped her fingers into Blake’s pocket and he smirked at her as she took her time rooting around for his phone.

“What are you doing?” I asked as she lifted the phone into her grip and Blake unlocked it for her.

“Taking control of my own destiny,” she said, her eyes twinkling in that way that always spelled trouble. She hadn’t even finished her second drink so I knew this wasn’t some drunken stupidity. She was the master of her own insanity. “And this tape can only hurt me if I’m ashamed of it. Which I’m not. Why should I be? I mean, I don’t exactly want it broadcasted to the entire world, but on my own terms, why shouldn’t I be able to enjoy it?”

“Our wild girl,” Kyan murmured appreciatively and the way he said *our* made my skin prickle. What did he mean by that? I knew they’d claimed some kind of ownership over her and I was supposed to have that hold on her too, but I didn’t really know what that meant to them. I knew they wanted control of her, but there was something almost tender in the way he’d said that word which didn’t sound like he was playing a game.

Before I could even consider questioning it though, the TV flashed to life as Tatum shared the file from Blake’s phone to it and my throat tightened as I found myself looking at her and Blake completely naked and fucking like they’d never get enough of each other.

My muscles tightened as my gaze stayed locked on the screen for way too long and her moans of pleasure washed over me as I drank in the mind blowing sight of her body bending to his.

I should have been getting up, walking out, closing my fucking eyes or *something*. But I was just staring at her, captivated by the movements of her

body as I watched how much she was enjoying it.

My blood was getting hotter and I had to fight the urge to tug at the neck of my shirt. Or rearrange my fucking dick which was liking this way too much.

Christ, what the hell is happening right now?

My gaze stayed fixed to the screen as she cried out in pleasure and I shoved myself from my seat suddenly, striding for the door with my jaw locked in fury.

I didn't give a shit about being rude or falling into the fucking trap they'd just set me. None of it mattered. I just needed to get the fuck away from that house, that *girl*.

I kicked on my sneakers and strode out into the rain without looking back. I got half way down the path before a hand caught my elbow and I twisted around to find her standing there with the rain pouring down over her blonde hair, her feet bare on the cold path and her blue eyes full of some emotion I couldn't pinpoint.

"What?" I snarled.

"I didn't mean to upset you," she said, biting her lip. But all that really did was remind me of the way she'd been biting it in that video as Blake slammed his dick into her and she fought to meet his thrusts with the rocking of her hips.

"I'm not upset," I snapped.

"I didn't mean to make you angry then," she tried.

"I'm not angry either," I snarled. Though I was. But not at her. Not at the Night Keepers either really. I was angry at this whole fucking situation. At the fact that I'd had her pressed against me in that shower, her lips parting for mine, her heart pounding for *me* and I'd had to break away from her. I was angry that Blake fucking Bowman could have her even when he didn't

deserve her and no one in the world would give a shit. But if I took her, even for a single second, even after everything I'd done to prove how much I cared about her, I'd still be the monster who abused his position. Who took something that never should have been offered. Who wanted something I had no fucking right to want.

"Are you angry because you liked it?" she breathed, her grip tightening on my arm as the rain crashed down on us and neither of us gave a shit. Because the storm didn't even exist in that moment. It was just me and her.

"This is so fucked," I breathed because I couldn't fucking lie to her. My clothes were clinging to my body as the rain weighed them down. She only had to glance down to see how fucking much I'd liked it as my dick stayed solid for her despite the cold. "I'm not allowed to like it."

"Says who?" she asked, raindrops clinging to her lashes.

"Says the world."

"Fuck the world," she growled. "The world wasn't there for me when I was at my lowest. The world didn't give a shit when I was cut open and left bleeding. The world didn't hold me when I shattered and remind me how to be strong when I needed someone to believe in me. But *you* did. So I don't give a shit about the world. I don't *want* the world. But I do want you."

My pulse was thundering in my ears at her words and every bit of restraint I had was threatening to cave in, fall apart, come crashing down and crush both of us with the force of it.

I moved towards her before I could stop myself, my body making the decision that my head wanted to fight.

She tipped her chin up so that the rain washed over her face and the moment my lips met hers, I was lost.

I was weak, cast adrift, forgotten, broken and alone with her.

A hungry moan escaped her as her hands curled around my neck and she

dragged me down to deepen the kiss. Everything about it was raw, brutal, dirty and desperate and I felt like I might drown in it if I didn't pull back soon.

Her lips moved with mine in a frenzied rhythm that made me ache as I pushed my tongue into her mouth. She tightened her arms round my neck, tugging me closer as the rain soaked us and our heartbeats found their own perfect rhythm together. She tasted like the sweetest kind of relief, like the sun breaking through the clouds and washing over my skin, warming me through in a way I hadn't even known I'd been craving. This felt so right that it was impossible to believe it was wrong and as she moaned into my mouth, I knew that I wasn't just going to be able to forget about this. Us. This tangible, undeniable force which was urging us together and making me ache with the need to claim her as my own.

Her body pressed to mine and I was sure that I'd never wanted anything like I wanted her right now. But having her could ruin everything. If we were discovered, I would be ripped out of her world and away from the revenge I'd given my life to. I'd lose my chance to exact vengeance on Saint's father for what he'd stolen from me. For Michael, Mom.

I broke our kiss as suddenly as I'd initiated it and forced myself to step back as the rain thundered over us.

"It's okay," she said, looking at me with sadness and understanding in her eyes. "I know why we can't. I just wanted you to know...I wish we could."

"I wish we could too," I said, my voice raw with the emotion of denying her. Denying *us*.

In any other circumstance I would have caught hold of her and never fucking let her go again. I would have taken every risk, every chance to be with her, but how could I do that knowing what it might cost? I owed my family justice. They deserved that much, even if there was nothing else I'd

ever be able to offer them. Troy Memphis had taken their lives from them. Had taken *everything* from me. And I had to see this through. I had to finish what I'd started or I knew I'd never be able to find peace. What good would I be to her if I didn't achieve that? If I was just this broken, aching shell forever more. It wasn't fair to my family. It wasn't fair to me. And it wasn't fair to her.

We gazed at each other for an eternal moment before I turned away and took off down the path.

Tatum Rivers was just another thing on this Earth that I couldn't have because of Troy Memphis. And I'd make him pay for that along with the rest. Even if it took everything I had to do it.



I headed back into The Temple soaking wet with my lips tingling and my mind buzzing. Letting go of Nash was going to be nearly impossible to do, but I knew I had to for his sake. It just hurt like hell.

The Night Keepers looked up as I kicked my shoes off and strode straight to the fridge, grabbing a bottle of rum and taking a swig from the bottle. Then a few more until the ice in my veins thawed out and a deep burn ran all the way to my core, chasing away the pain inside me. I wanted to forget everything that plagued me tonight. Monroe, my dad, Jess, the vow. I wanted to have fun. I wanted to remember what it felt like to be free, wild and uncontrollable.

I turned around with another mouthful of rum sliding down my throat and found the Night Keepers all on their feet staring at me. The sex tape was no longer playing, but the heat in their eyes said it was all they were thinking about and that knowledge made my breath hitch.

Lightning flashed beyond the window, lighting the room in blood red

tones for the duration of a heartbeat as it spilled through the stained glass. I walked barefoot over to them, my head starting to buzz and my worries spilling away through my flesh, forgotten for now. But not forever.

I climbed over the back of the couch, standing on the cushions so I was taller than them for once and I smirked down at Kyan who was closest. “Dare or double dare?” I purred, offering the rum to his lips and he tipped his chin back, letting me pour a measure into his mouth.

He swallowed, his eyes a swirling storm that rivalled the one beyond the church walls. “Triple dare.”

Saint dropped back into his seat, swilling his vodka in his glass as he surveyed us with keen interest. He didn’t even seem to mind I was soaking wet and my dress was dripping water onto his couch. Blake sat down beside me and Kyan stood waiting for my command.

I chewed on my lip as I thought up what I wanted him to do. What I *really* wanted him to do.

“Bow to me.” I smiled darkly as thunder boomed directly above us. “And apologise for everything you’ve done to me.”

He wet his lips as Saint and Blake laughed and I waited for him to chicken out.

“I guess you forfeit?” I asked, batting my lashes.

Kyan chuckled low in his throat then dropped to his knees on the carpet beneath me. He caught my ankle, forcing me to balance on one leg as he placed my foot on his right shoulder and gripped it tightly.

“Sorry for everything I do to you, baby.” He grinned wickedly then turned his head, dragging his tongue around the sensitive flesh of my ankle. “Sorry I make you ache for me in the dark.” He carved his teeth along the bone and I gasped, heat skittering between my thighs. “Sorry I make you touch yourself as you dream of my hard cock driving in and out of you every night. Sorry I

make you so wet you give Niagara falls a run for its money.” He released me and I pressed my foot down on his shoulder with anger rolling along my spine, my thighs parted just enough that he could probably see right up my dress. “I mean that from the bottom of my heart.”

“That wasn’t what I meant,” I growled.

“Oh really? You’ll have to be more specific next time.” Kyan smirked, knocking my foot off of his shoulder and shoving me down into my seat as he stood up. My wet skirt landed high up my thighs and I tugged it down as he dropped into the seat on my other side so him and Blake penned me in between their muscular arms. My ankle still prickled from where his mouth had been and I could feel my nipples hardening and my breaths growing a little shallow. *Asshole.*

“Dare or double dare, Saint?” Kyan asked and Saint sat back in his chair, looking like the Grim Reaper as his face was cast in shadow.

“If we’re playing a game of dares, do we really need to define the level of dare? All of them should push boundaries or I’m not interested,” he mused.

“Fine, double dare or double dare?” Kyan asked with a low laugh.

“Dare,” Saint said with half an eye roll.

“Down your drink, don’t swig it like a Russian tsar planning world domination,” Kyan said and Saint shrugged, tilting his head back and swallowing the entirety of his glass of vodka as smoothly as if it were water. *Jesus Christ.*

Saint shook the glass at me to refill it and I got up, stalking towards him and hooking the vodka bottle off of the table. He watched me as I poured it into the glass in his hand and my mouth dried out at the intensity of his gaze.

“I dare you to change into something of my choosing,” he said with a devilish smile.

“That’s a pretty standard command, Saint,” I taunted.

“Not when you see what I have in mind,” he purred. “Do you agree?”

My heart pounded out of rhythm and excitement trickled through my veins. “Sure.”

He pushed himself out of his seat, sipping his vodka before placing the glass down on the mantelpiece above the roaring fire and pressing a hand to the small of my back as he guided me towards the stairs.

His hand slid an inch lower, his fingers almost brushing against my ass but not quite. Drinking or otherwise, Saint still didn't cross lines with me. Not that I wanted him to or anything.

He left me in his bedroom before heading into his closet and returning a moment later. “It's hanging in there. Come downstairs when you're dressed.” He stepped closer and the scent of vodka and fresh apples surrounded me. “Don't keep us waiting.”

My throat tightened as another crash of thunder made my heart leap and he walked away, descending to the lounge. I bit my lip as I pushed through into the closet and found a set of black lace lingerie waiting for me with a pair of silk stockings and suspenders. On the carpet was a pair of silver Louboutins I'd been admiring for weeks but never had a reason to wear. Not that this was the sort of occasion I'd been imagining. Although...flaunting myself in front of the guys might be.

I headed to the bathroom, stripping out of my wet dress and underwear before drying myself with a towel and heading back to the closet. I pulled on the beautiful items and pushed my feet into the heels then admired myself in the mirror, my heart thumping powerfully against my chest. I felt like a goddess in this lingerie. Sex was power and they were going to fall at my mercy when they saw me like this.

My hair was tousled, drying in soft waves around my face and I grabbed a red lipstick, painting my mouth in the colour of blood. When I accepted a

dare, I went all in on it. So if Saint wanted me dressed like this then I could add the finishing touches. I used the lipstick to write across my chest, a laugh escaping me as I finished. The words *Off Limits* stood out over my pushed up breasts and I put the lipstick back before heading out of the room.

The light had dimmed downstairs and the sound of the rain hammering against the windows sent a shiver down my spine. Trouble by Valerie Broussard was playing, making my heart thump in time with the heavy beat as I walked downstairs and strode towards them without a care in the world.

Saint stilled in his chair and Blake and Kyan twisted around to look at me so fast, they probably got whiplash.

“Fuck me,” Blake breathed.

“Me first.” Kyan grinned before his eyes fell to the words scrawled on my chest and his lips tightened.

I grabbed my rum, dropping down between them and taking a long sip, my mind alight with the buzz of the alcohol.

I turned to Blake, reaching out to take hold of his chin and pull his gaze up from my breasts and he gave me a crooked smile that made my toes curl.

“Your turn, Prince Charming,” I announced and he nodded eagerly like I was about to offer him something good. But there was no chance of that. “I dare you to do a body shot off of Kyan.” I grinned and he barked a laugh, clapping a hand to my knee as he got up and the lasting heat of his touch made me bite down on my lip. *Oh god, that man.*

“Down on the coffee table, big boy,” Blake commanded and Kyan stood up, pulling his shirt off one handed and glancing at me for my reaction. A reaction I did not give, despite him looking so edible I was kinda jealous of Blake getting this dare and not me. *Still hate the bastard though. But I would lick him tonight. Just a little.*

Saint watched with an amused smirk as Kyan laid down on his back,

raising his hands and cupping them behind his head. “Give my dick some attention while you’re down there, brother, it’s been seriously lacking in it for weeks.”

“Shame you don’t screw girls on campus,” I said lightly. “Does that rule apply to the boys too? Maybe Blake will bend you over the dining table and rock your world.”

Saint laughed but the other two glared at me as if I was solely responsible for their blue balls. Totally wasn’t though. They could get with whoever they wanted. They just...didn’t. But why? And why did I not want them to?

Blake poured a measure of rum into Kyan’s belly button, kneeling between his thighs and leaning down to suck it out. It was annoyingly hot and I laughed as Kyan fisted his hand in Blake’s hair, shoving his head lower.

“Take me all in, baby,” Kyan demanded while Blake mimed sucking him off, making me burst out laughing.

“Stop fucking around.” Saint booted Kyan’s head from his chair and Blake took the moment of distraction to leap onto Kyan and start punching him.

“You rogue!” Blake cried as he tried to put on a feminine voice and failed.

Kyan threw him off, landing on top of him on the floor and they wrestled like animals.

“Not my breasts, you uncomely beast!” Blake lamented and Kyan roared a laugh as he continued throwing his fists into his chest.

“You love it when I’m rough, honeypie.” Kyan started choking him and Blake threw a punch to his gut that made him wheeze like a broken dog toy.

They eventually stood up, their hair ruffled as they shoved and pushed their way toward the couch, trying to be the first one back. Blake managed it by leaping over the coffee table and diving into the seat beside me, slinging his arm over the back of my chair.

“Sweet, sweet victory,” he sighed as Kyan fell down on my other side

with a note of laughter, his thigh butting up against mine.

They were both seriously up in my space and the animal inside me was purring happily. The alcohol was dulling my voice of reason as I eyed their muscles and bad thoughts slipped into my mind.

“My turn.” Blake pushed his fingers into my hair and goosebumps tumbled across my flesh. “I dare you to make Saint get into your favourite sexual position with you.”

I snorted a laugh, looking over at Saint who narrowed his eyes.

“It’s not breaking the rules.” Blake tossed a cushion at him which he deflected with his forearm before moving to stand and gesturing for me to get up with his chin. *How does he manage being bossy without saying a single word?*

I got to my feet, moving toward him while his eyes slid down my body appreciatively then I leaned up and whispered my favourite position in his ear. His arm slid casually around me, pulling me closer and my heart hammered at his touch.

He grabbed my hips suddenly, shoving me down on the table and I gasped as he caught my ankle and hooked it over his shoulder, grinding me down onto the surface as he fell over me.

“Like this, Barbie?” He smiled hungrily and my pulse elevated as his breath skated over my lips. *What would it be like to kiss Lucifer? Would he stop me...?*

“Are you two gonna start fucking right there or are we continuing with the game?” Kyan asked coolly. “I’m open to either, but I’d like to fetch the popcorn if you’re about to go at it.”

“Don’t be fucking ridiculous, Kyan.” Saint stood up, pulling me up by the hand and carefully arranging my hair over my shoulders before releasing me. It didn’t feel controlling for once, it felt kind of doting. But I didn’t know

where that feeling came from because there was no way Saint Memphis did stuff like that because he cared about me.

He returned to his seat and I looked between the three of them before fixing my gaze on Kyan. “I dare you to undo Saint’s pants with your teeth.”

Kyan blew out a laugh and Saint groaned.

“Is this really necessary?” Saint muttered as Kyan got up, limbering up like he was about to go to town on Saint and I couldn’t fight a laugh as he headed past me and shoved Saint’s legs wide as he knelt between them.

“For fuck’s sake asshole.” Saint grabbed hold of Kyan’s top knot, forcing him to look him in the eye. “If you ruin these eight hundred dollar chinos, I will fucking destroy you.”

“I’ll be gentle, baby. Just relax.” Kyan smirked and Saint released his hair with an eye roll as his friend lowered his head between his thighs and made surprisingly short work of his button and zipper.

Kyan stood up, rounding on me and gnashing his teeth in my face. “Anything else you want me to do with my mouth while I’m here?”

“No thanks,” I said scathingly as he grabbed his beer and finished it in two gulps, tossing the bottle onto the floor. His muscles tightened as he flexed his arms, his eyes pinned on me.

“I dare you to break one of your rules,” Kyan said, his eyes shadowed as a crooked grin pulled at his mouth and my heart fluttered.

“Kyan,” Saint warned.

“What? She can say no.” Kyan shrugged. “She just has to do a shot or two as forfeit. So what will it be, baby?” He arched a brow and the look on his face brought the wild girl in me to life. There was a raw challenge in his eyes that told me he was sure I was going to back out. But I was woman enough to accept what my body wanted from these boys sometimes. And tonight felt like one of those nights when I was going to give in to my desires. But that

didn't mean it had to be on their terms...

I walked slowly towards Kyan, giving him a seductive smile which made his throat bob as I reached out and ran a finger down his bare chest, following the lines of his tattoos as I admired him. I reached his waistband, keeping my eyes on his as he held his breath and I let my palm roam lower of the impressive bulge in his jeans. He smirked in triumph and I smiled right back, turning my back on him and walking straight over to Blake. I dropped down to straddle him in his seat and his eyes widened a moment before my lips landed on his. He growled with desire, grabbing my ass and shoving me down onto his crotch as I slid my tongue into his mouth.

His tongue matched mine for every stroke and I forgot the game or that we had an audience. I knotted my fingers in his unruly dark hair and kissed him like there were no rules, no barriers, no lines. I just wanted to taste him until I drowned in his flesh against mine. His spicy scent made me heady and my hips rolled as I ground against him, feeling him growing between my thighs and I was just starting to figure *fuck the game* when strong hands pulled me off of him.

Kyan yanked me against his body and I laughed as I knocked my head back against his chest, twisting my neck to look up at him. "Maybe you should be sweeter to me, Kyan, and I might play nice with you like I play nice with Blake sometimes."

"You've kissed since her rules came in?" Saint snapped.

"Just once," Blake admitted, his smug expression making me kick him in the leg. He laughed, standing up and taking hold of my hips so I was wedged between two walls of muscle. "No point in lying about it. We've been caught out, sweetheart." His eyes were two pools of jade that lured me in and made me want to kiss him again. I still felt the lingering scrape of his stubble against my jaw and I wanted to feel it everywhere. *Anywhere.*

Bad Things by Machine Gun Kelly and Camila Cabello started playing and I took hold of Blake's shirt, yanking him forward while lifting my other hand to lock around the back of Kyan's neck as I started to dance to the tune. The heat of their flesh against mine felt so good it was unholy. I shut my eyes as they rocked in time with my movements and I lost myself to the sensation of their hands on my body. I wanted more. There was a starved void in my soul that was desperate to be filled.

Kyan's mouth brushed my ear and I shivered with pleasure, everywhere feeling too sensitive all of a sudden as he dragged me back against him so I could feel how hard he was. Blake wrapped his fingers in my hair, pulling hard enough to make me gasp as he tugged my head to one side and dragged his lips across my neck. I slid my hands around his broad shoulders, my fingers digging in as he sucked and nipped my flesh with a desperate kind of hunger. I tugged at his shirt and pulled it off of him, needing more of his skin against mine.

"You must really like this song," Kyan murmured in my ear, his fingers trailing up and down my sides as Blake lifted his head and grinned at me.

"I think it just became my favourite," I said breathily, wondering how far exactly I was gonna let this go. I was hot all over and my body craved attention and right now I didn't see the point in fighting these urges I was a slave to. I scraped my nails down the side of Kyan's neck and he growled like he liked that.

Blake stepped back, pushing a hand into his hair and surveying me with a burning need in his expression. His gaze fell to the words written across my chest and a question entered his eyes. My heart stuttered and my breaths came more heavily as I made the decision. What I wanted, thirsted for. These boys had made me suffer and hurt, so why not take a little pleasure from them to fulfil this unyielding desire in me?

Kyan's grip loosened on me and I knew I had to make my intentions clear if I wanted to take things further. Break the rules. Cast all my fears aside and act on my base instincts alone.

I took Blake's hand, guiding it to my mouth and running my tongue across the pad of his thumb, making his pupils dilate as he watched. I lowered it to my chest, using his thumb to smear the words painted on my body.

"Aren't you going to finish what you started?" I asked huskily, placing his hand against my breast.

His thumb skimmed over my nipple through the thin material and I shuddered feverishly at his touch. I'd ached for him for so long. And ever since the night we'd claimed each other, I wanted to experience it again. I knew he was capable of so much more, we both were. I'd had the smallest of tastes and now my appetite for him was insatiable.

Blake's hand slid higher once more and his eyes darkened to pitch as he closed his fingers around my throat, squeezing enough to make my pulse race.

"Just say the word, Cinders," he whispered and I felt Kyan stepping back with a grunt of jealousy.

I reached behind me, catching his hand before he could leave, placing it on my waist.

"I dare you," I spoke directly to Blake and his mouth curved into a wicked smile. I turned my head to look at Kyan, his eyes flashing hot with jealousy and I drew him even closer until his mouth brushed my temple. "Both of you."

My gaze darted to Saint, my heart thrumming like the wings of a hummingbird as his eyes seared into us.

"You're breaking the rules," he snarled, but he didn't make a move to stop us, instead sitting back in his seat, his legs spreading as he got more

comfortable.

“Are you going to punish us for this?” Kyan jerked me hard back against him and I inhaled sharply.

“I guess you’ll have to find out,” I teased and he growled low in his throat, skimming his rough palm down the centre of my stomach towards my panties. Blake watched with a fervent hunger and I reached for him, needing his touch as much as I needed Kyan’s. He crushed his body to mine and his mouth landed on my jaw, his stubble grazing my flesh as he painted a trail of kisses up to my ear.

Kyan’s hand slinked into my panties and I moaned before he even touched me, my back arching against him. He reached lower, dipping his fingers into my wetness and I bit down on my lip as heat flushed up my spine. He laughed victoriously and I reached behind me, gripping his rock hard length through his jeans and squeezing to prove I wasn’t the only one desperate for this.

“You’re as depraved as we are,” Kyan spoke in my ear and my whole body trembled in his arms.

Blake dragged his tongue down my throat and I dropped my head back onto Kyan’s shoulder again to give him more access, clawing my hands into Kyan’s hair and freeing it from his topknot. I loved when he looked like this. Like he was a wild man about to eat me alive.

Kyan’s hand circled tauntingly between my thighs, not touching me nearly enough, making my hips rock with urgency as he held me still with his other hand.

Blake’s mouth reached my breasts and I moaned as he pulled the material aside and claimed one of my nipples, making another moan tumble from my throat. His tongue was made of pure sin, circling and teasing, and I panted as he worked my body with expert skill.

I turned my head to look at Kyan, reaching up to cup his rough jaw. His gaze fell to my mouth as his hand continued to torment me, not giving me what I craved. A breath snagged in my throat as he stared deeply into my eyes and for an impossible moment, I thought he might kiss me. I craned my neck, tip-toeing to try and initiate it, but he turned his head fast to avoid it. My heart twisted with the rejection, but I forgot everything as he drove two fingers inside me and pleasure danced through my body. Flames licked across my flesh as they built an inferno in me, waiting to be unleashed. Blake teased my nipple between his teeth as Kyan slowly pumped his hand, keeping me in a state of desperation as he didn't give me nearly enough of what I wanted.

Kyan's free hand wound into my hair and he turned my head with a sharp yank, forcing me to lock eyes with Saint across the room. His jaw was clamped tight, his gaze swirling with greed, lust and anger like he wanted to rip me from their arms as much as he wanted to join in. But he found himself frozen between those two decisions, instead watching me, devouring me with his gaze alone. Blake's thumb caressed my other nipple in slow circles as they continued to corrupt me beyond return and I bucked my hips in a fervent need for more.

"More," I demanded, unable to stand this torture.

"I'm waiting for you to beg, baby," Kyan laughed, his breath hot against my neck as he kept my face angled towards Saint. "Just one little word and we'll give you more, won't we brother?"

Goddammit, why did he always want me pleading?

Blake lifted his head with a smirk that made my insides knot. He gripped my chin, dragging my eyes away from Saint and onto him. "Say it, Cinderella. And we'll give you what you need."

"I'm not going to beg," I growled, though I knew my resolve was

weakening as Kyan pulled his hand free of my panties and I was shamefully devastated.

“That’s a pity,” Kyan sighed, lifting his hand to Blake’s mouth. Blake took his fingers between his lips, sucking my taste from them and my cheeks blazed, my thighs clenching together as the sight of that did ungodly things to my body.

Holy shit, why is that so hot?

Kyan barked a laugh and Blake chuckled as he dropped his friend’s hand, moving up closer and pressing a wet kiss to my mouth. “You’re delicious, sweetheart, just ask nicely and I’ll devour you like my favourite dessert. Which is chocolate cheesecake by the way, but I think you might be a contender.”

I bit down on my lip to stop the words from escaping and Kyan pinched my chin, yanking my lip out from the grip of my teeth.

“Say it,” he demanded, his dick grinding into my ass as he pressed against me. Shit, I wanted them so bad, I couldn’t hold out any longer.

“Please,” I panted and Blake dropped to his knees before me. He brushed his nose up the centre of my panties, making me squirm with need, but just as he took hold of them, Saint spoke.

“Stop,” he growled and we all looked to him. He took a long sip of vodka before leaning forward so his face was illuminated by the firelight. I was ready to tell him to go to hell if he really thought we were going to stop at this point when he went on, “Kyan, sit her on your lap in the armchair.” He pointed and my brows lifted in surprise, my heart thundering out of tune.

Kyan laughed darkly then pulled me over to the chair, dropping down and planting me on his lap. His hands rested on my waist and I couldn’t help but circle my hips against his hard on, making him groan heavily.

“Blake take her panties off,” Saint commanded and his powerful voice

sent a violent tremor through me as Blake moved to obey.

He unhooked the suspenders before pulling down the lacy underwear which were soaked with my desire. My gaze moved to Saint again, my chest rising and falling as we all waited for his next order.

“Kyan, place your legs between hers and force them apart. Don’t let her close them.”

My throat tightened as Kyan did as he said, spreading my legs either side of his so I was totally exposed. I wriggled my hips, trying to adjust to the uncomfortable feeling. I wasn’t ashamed of my body, but being held like that made me totally vulnerable to these men who’d captured and persecuted me. But something about that was so deeply erotic that it made my toes curl and my belly squeeze with need.

Kyan pulled me back against him so his mouth was by my ear and he pushed my bra down to reveal my breasts, his calloused thumbs circling and pinching them roughly, making electricity and pain dagger across my flesh. My hips writhed again as part of me fought against being restrained, but Kyan only forced my legs wider the second I did.

“Make her scream,” Saint ordered, his eyes glinting as they caught the light of the fire.

Blake dropped down between my thighs, his broad shoulders pushing them wider and making me writhe against Kyan’s firm grip.

Saint observed us, his elbows perched on his knees as he sipped his vodka, savouring it on his lips. He didn’t give any more orders so I guessed he was satisfied for his friends to take the lead now, and I started to pant as Blake’s mouth brushed against my inner thigh.

Kyan released me with his right hand, lifting his hips to create a space between our bodies and pushing his hand down under my ass. I wriggled wildly as his fingers skimmed between my ass cheeks then landed on my wet

centre, curling backwards to enter me.

My head fell back against his shoulder and Blake laughed against my thigh as he worked his way ever higher, the sound vibrating through my body. Kyan's fingers massaged and rubbed inside me in a way I had never felt in my life. My whole body was shaking as I tried to close my legs, but his thighs kept me trapped in place. Blake's tongue suddenly ran up the middle of me and I shuddered full bodily, crying out so my voice echoed off of the high roof.

"Fuck," Kyan growled, his cock throbbing beneath me as my ass ground against him.

Blake's mouth closed over my clit the same time Kyan started pushing his fingers into me harder and faster. I was already so close to losing my mind. Blake's tongue circled and flicked until I was practically blacking out, my widened legs making it all so intense.

Kyan chewed on my ear, tugging it savagely between his teeth as his fingers worked hard to bring me to ruin. Blake brought his hand up to my hot core and my whole back arched as he pushed two fingers into me too, stretching me until I screamed with pleasure like Saint wanted. Their hands worked in perfect synchronicity with Blake's tongue, which lapped over me again and again.

I was about to fall apart, the combined sensations driving me crazy. I started shaking, falling, tumbling into oblivion as they shook the very foundations of my being. Fireworks sparked in my head and pleasure washed through my body so hard, I couldn't even hear my own screams as they ripped from my lungs. I was saying all of their names, praising them, cursing them. I wanted to destroy them for giving me so much pleasure, and adore them in equal measures as the orgasm tore through my flesh like an earthquake.

Blake stood up between my legs and Kyan eased his fingers out of me as he breathed heavily in my ear. Blake started unbuckling his belt as my eyelids drooped and a stupid smile pulled at my lips.

“Well, that escalated quickly,” Saint muttered and a laugh tumbled from the depths of my chest.

“Do you think you can handle two of us, baby?” Kyan asked, his dick rock hard and about to explode beneath me. I didn’t immediately know the answer to that question, but as I regained my senses I remembered how little they deserved anything from me. One orgasm didn’t make up for all of their shit, no matter how mind-blowing it was.

Kyan released my legs and I staggered to my feet, reaching out to graze my hand over the huge bulge in Blake’s pants. He smirked at me and I tiptoed up to press a feather light kiss to his lips. Then I dropped down, hooking up my panties and pulling them on, then fixing my bra before stretching my arms above my head with a long yawn.

“Nah, I’m good. Time for bed isn’t it, Saint?” I arched a brow and Saint jumped up, glancing at the clock and nodding firmly.

“Wait a second,” Blake looked to me with a flare of desperation in his eyes.

“I’m sure you can finish each other off, right Kyan?” I tossed him a wink and Kyan glowered at me from his chair, his dick looking like it was about to bust out of his jeans and blast off like a rocket to the moon. His hands curled tightly over the ends of the chair arms as his eyes turned to a deadly shade of midnight.

Saint coiled an arm possessively around my waist, guiding me away from them and I snorted a laugh as we headed upstairs. I stared down at the two beautiful men below me now sporting the bluest balls in the history of the world.

Saint walked me directly into the bathroom, pointing at the shower. “Wash. I don’t want you smelling like them by the time you come back to my room. And be prepared to face the consequences of your actions when you do.”

My heart jolted as he shut the door in my face and I headed into the shower with a pout. I spent way too long washing, running my fingers across every part of my body Blake and Kyan had touched like they’d marked me permanently. There was something primal about this feeling, like I’d just been claimed in a whole other way I’d never known existed.

I couldn’t help a laugh when I finally exited the shower, recalling their horrified faces as I’d left them hanging. *Serves them right for being dipshits ninety nine percent of the time.*

I may have enjoyed delighting in their flesh tonight, but I wasn’t going to forget what they were. And I wasn’t going to stop delivering my revenge either. So they’d better get used to it.

I opened the bathroom door, finding a navy blue night dress folded at my feet. Saint’s back was to me, shirtless and his muscles flexing as he waited. I dropped my towel, pulling on the nightdress and pushing the bathroom door closed behind me as I stepped out.

Nerves warred in my belly as I waited for Saint to speak, padding silently closer to him as I walked toward the bed.

“You will punish Kyan and Blake in your own time and as you see fit,” Saint instructed sharply.

“Okay,” I said slowly, about to pull back the covers and slide into bed, but he whipped around and I noticed two zip ties in his hand. *Oh shit.*

“And you’ll sleep bound and gagged for tormenting me tonight and for breaking your own rules,” he said sternly. “If I don’t hold you accountable then no one will.”

“Tormenting you?” I scoffed. “You didn’t seem that *tormented*.”

“Well thank you for your inaccurate assessment of my feelings, but I am aware of exactly how your little act was intended to torture me.”

“You gave them orders!” I planted my hands on my hips. “You’re just jealous.”

“Jealous?” he spat, storming towards me and I couldn’t help but back up a couple of steps in alarm.

He caught my wrists, sliding a zip tie around them and yanking it tight until I winced. “I am the only one in this house abiding by the rules!” he boomed. “It is perfectly rational for me to be angry.”

Saint grabbed my waist and threw me on the bed, making me gasp in alarm. He caught my ankles and I fought the urge to start kicking, suddenly recognising the crazed look in his eyes that reminded me he needed this to calm down. He had to take back control of the situation by dominating me and punishing me for how uncertain the rule breaking made him feel.

I sighed, going limp and the tension ran out of his body too as he slid the tie over my ankles and tightened it. He lifted me into his arms, flipping the covers back and laying me down in my usual spot, arranging my hair around me on the pillow as a veil of calm fell over him.

“Good girl,” he sighed before heading back to his closet and returning with one of his school ties. He sat on the bed beside me, holding it up to my mouth. “Open.”

I did so somewhat resentfully, but swallowing down the rebel in me to give him peace of mind. I shouldn’t have done it for him, but some part of me wanted to soothe that barbaric creature in him. I opened my mouth and he slid the tie between my teeth before tying it around my head, placing the knot to one side so it didn’t dig into me.

He pulled the covers over me then moved to get into his own side, sliding

under the sheets with a breath of relief. He picked up the book of Poe's poetry and read one to me while I lay bound and gagged beside him like this was totally normal.

“So lovely was the loneliness of a wild lake, with black rock bound...and the tall pines that towered around. But when the night had thrown her pall. Upon that spot, as upon all. And the mystic wind went by, murmuring in melody. Then- ah then I would awake...to the terror of the lone lake.”

His voice crept over me as the light went off and I sensed those words hanging in the air like an echo. I rolled towards him, curling my legs to my chest and my hands rested on a pillow he'd placed between us. I felt the coolness of his body reaching toward the heat of mine like he ached to dive into the fire and never be cold again. And a part of me wanted to invite him right in.

I realised I'd desired all four of the Night Keepers tonight. Nash, Blake, Kyan, Saint. I didn't understand the part of me who craved so many men at once. It wasn't something I'd ever imagined for myself. But the idea of choosing one of them meant refusing another. And somehow, I didn't want to do that. This whole thing was abnormal, I was well aware of that. I was their captive and their queen. And while it lasted, maybe it was okay to lean into my urges and explore the darkest parts of myself. Because as all-consuming as this seemed now, it wasn't going to last forever. One day soon, this kingdom would fall.



Football practice wasn't as much fun in a storm, but Monroe was still a fucking dictator even when the season had officially been put on hold indefinitely. Practice games were about all this was ever going to amount to this year and as we were seniors, I didn't really see the point in practicing in all weathers. We'd never play a real game as a team again. Although, I didn't mind the winning part of the practice sessions so much. Which my team had done. Again. As standard.

We'd skipped the showers in the sports hall for once, choosing to run back to The Temple as it was raining so damn hard. We would just end up freezing cold, dripping wet and splattered in mud again on the way back anyway and even Saint's ritual had to bend to accommodate that. Luckily, he'd conceded that a shower at home was less of an upheaval to his routine than having to shower and change twice.

Monroe turned down our offer of hanging out with us tonight and headed back to his own place as the three of us ran home. He hadn't hung out with all of us together since we'd baited him with that sex tape and his Moody Mandy routine was getting old fast. We'd be calling him out on it soon if he didn't quit bitching, but tonight wasn't the night.

We made it to the path which led up to The Temple and the pounding beat of music reached my ears from inside, loud enough to be heard over the storm.

Kyan strode right up to the door and jammed his key into it. We'd made Tatum promise to keep it locked while we weren't here, letting her stay behind instead of coming down to stand in the rain and watch our practice. But it made me uneasy to leave her alone while we still hadn't figured out which fucker in this school had been stalking her.

Saint had gone full psycho, pouncing on anyone who so much as glanced her way since finding out about it and Kyan had already beat up five different guys this week. But so far, we weren't having any luck in figuring out who the hell was taking such an interest in our girl. And to make it worse, she'd had her fucking panties stolen in P.E. again and had received another creepy ass note.

So all in all, I'd be glad to get back to her and even more so because tonight she was going to be sleeping in my bed. And I was fully prepared to take whatever punishment she wanted to give me so that I could hold her safe in my arms for the night.

Kyan grunted in frustration as he shoved the door and I frowned as it barely opened an inch before jamming. He dropped his football helmet to the ground and tried pushing it again.

"What the fuck is going on?" Saint demanded.

"It's jammed," Kyan replied. "I think there's something on the other side of it."

"What?" My heart pounded as I dropped my helmet too and moved forward to help shove the door but like he'd said, the thing wouldn't move an inch. "You don't think the stalker-"

I didn't even finish my sentence before Saint sprinted away from me,

roaring Tatum's name as he headed around the building and started looking in windows.

I exchanged a worried look with Kyan and we ran the other way, circling the church and finding the blinds closed over every fucking window.

"Tatum!" I bellowed, real fear carving into me as I imagined her trapped in there with some psychopath.

Kyan stopped at the stained glass window which fronted the building and tried to get a look through it, but it was fucking pointless. The glass was too blurry and the only light inside seemed to be coming from the fireplace.

Thunder crashed overhead and the freezing rain pounded down on me. I finally found the single window in the building where the blinds hadn't been drawn and I dashed towards it to see inside. I cupped my hands around my eyes as I leaned close to the glass which looked over the kitchenette towards the main living area and fell still as the sound of No Scrubs by TLC washed over me from the sound system inside.

Tatum was in there. Alone. Dancing in the middle of the room and singing at the top of her lungs.

I banged my fist against the window and she looked around with a wicked smile, staring straight into my eyes as she mouthed the lyrics and laughed her fucking head off.

"I found her!" I yelled before one of the others started smashing windows to get inside.

Saint appeared first, his eyes flashing with fear and I moved aside to let him look through the window too.

"What the fuck is she doing?" he demanded.

"Dancing," I replied, pointing out the obvious.

Kyan rounded the corner next, his teeth bared with rage as he spotted her. "What the hell?" he snarled.

“She’s knocked the dining table over in front of the fucking door,” Saint said, craning his neck to get a look.

He banged his fist on the window and Tatum looked around again, flipping us off before tossing her hair and getting back to her dance.

Kyan burst out laughing and I smirked too, but Saint looked ready to murder her.

“She’s getting out of hand,” he growled.

“I think it’s hot,” Kyan replied.

“We can’t let this stand,” Saint insisted. “Let’s go and teach her exactly what happens when she’s defiant.”

“What’s that then?” I asked.

“I’m working on it,” he grunted, peeling away from the window and leading the way back to the front door.

Saint picked up Kyan’s helmet from where he’d dropped it by the door and shoved it into his chest. “Break down the door if you have to,” he snarled and Kyan grinned wickedly as he yanked the helmet down over his head.

Saint tossed me my helmet too and I laughed darkly as I pulled it on.

Kyan backed up several paces then charged at the door with a yell, aiming his shoulder for the heavy wood.

He slammed into it with a tremendous bang and the door shifted a few inches.

Tatum shouted something from inside but between the roar of the storm and the volume of the music she’d set playing, it was impossible to tell what.

Kyan launched himself at the door again. And again.

The fourth time he struck it, the whole thing shifted a foot forward and he instantly forced his way through the gap that had been created.

Saint was right behind him and I followed last, locking the door behind me quickly to make sure she couldn’t escape us.

The Temple was dark and we stalked into the open living area where Tatum had backed up to stand before the fire, biting down on her bottom lip.

“Oh, hey guys,” she called over the music. “I didn’t know you were back.”

“There was a table blocking the door,” Saint growled, moving closer to her and I moved to the left as Kyan circled right, making sure she was surrounded.

There was something equally exhilarating and antagonising about us surrounding her like that. Like we were hunters and she was our prey. I loved that she was at our mercy. That we held her next move in the palm of our hands and she could only wait to see what way the axe fell.

“That was to stop the stalker if they showed up,” she said.

“You looked me in the eye and flipped me off,” he added in a dangerous voice.

“Was that you? I thought there was an angry looking ghost out there...”

“Give it up, baby, we know what you’re playing at,” Kyan said.

“Is this because we left you out in that storm that time?” I asked. I was actually pretty impressed that she was still willing to stand up to us like this. Even after all the fucked up punishments and cruel pranks we’d subjected her to.

“Oh, I’d almost forgotten about that,” she said, backing up a step as we closed in.

We were leaving huge muddy footprints on the carpet and the fact that Saint wasn’t currently freaking out and whispering sweet nothings to the Vax machine should have been warning enough about just how mad he was.

“I’m gonna warn you once not to touch me,” Tatum said, holding a hand out before her like that might stop us.

She was wearing a pair of sweatpants and a black shirt with a knot tied in it. It definitely wasn’t what Saint had told her to wear this evening and I was

willing to bet that that was the bit of this which was pissing him off the most.

Saint lunged at her and she whipped her other hand out from behind her back, slamming her thumb down on the top of the canister of pepper spray she had gripped in her fist and blasting him right in the face.

He bellowed in pain and rage and I leapt back as she swung the spray around in an arc, managing to blast Kyan with it too as he dove at her.

Kyan didn't slow despite the curses that sprung from his lips as he caught a face full of the burning spray and his arms locked around her before she could escape.

They hit the ground and the pepper spray fell from her grip, rolling towards me. I leapt forward to snatch it as she fought to escape Kyan.

She hadn't managed to get me with a shot to the face, but the air was thick with the fucking spray and I battled a cough as my eyes began to burn.

Saint ripped his helmet off, snarling and cursing as he scrubbed at his eyes, momentarily blinded by her attack.

I tossed the pepper spray into the fire and Kyan grunted as Tatum managed to kick him in the balls and scramble out of his grip.

She darted around Saint, her wild eyes falling on me as she found me blocking her path and I let her go with a dark smile.

"Three..." I called after her, reaching out to the control panel to shut the music up. "Two..."

She shrieked as she darted towards my room, leaping over the legs of the dining table where it still laid beside the door.

"One!" I leapt into motion, head down, shoulders braced for impact and my helmet still firmly on my head.

Tatum screamed again as I chased her down, vaulting the table legs just as she slammed the door to my bedroom shut behind her.

I ripped it open and found her standing on my bed, two of my trophies in

her hands as she ripped them from my shelf.

“Stay back!” she warned, her hair wild around her shoulders as she panted, holding my trophies hostage.

“Have you got her?” Saint bellowed from the front room.

“Yeah,” I called back.

“Keep hold of her until I’ve had a shower and washed this shit out of my eyes!”

“You’ve really done it now, Cinders,” I purred, taking a slow step towards her.

“What are you going to do to me?” she demanded, raising my trophy higher as I took another step.

“I’ll make the others go easier on you if you give yourself up quietly now,” I promised.

She eyed me in my full football uniform and I held my hand out for the trophies.

“I haven’t done anything to you guys that you haven’t done to me,” she growled, like I was a judge and she was pleading her defence.

“I don’t remember pepper spraying you.”

“Saint almost drowned me in the fucking font.”

I barked a laugh as she reminded me of that. “Oh come on, you were only under for about ten seconds.”

“You try having a psychopath force your head under water and tell me you’re not pissed afterwards,” she hissed.

“Alright, I’ll do you a trade. You give me a kiss and I’ll make sure your punishment isn’t too bad.”

The sound of the shower starting up came from the bathroom beside us and we could hear Kyan cursing as he washed his eyes out too.

“One kiss?” she asked suspiciously.

“Yeah,” I agreed, tugging my helmet off and dropping it.

Tatum narrowed her eyes then tossed the trophies back onto the shelf before moving towards me. Her movements were tentative, but her eyes shone with victory and it looked fucking hot on her.

She dropped down before me and I leaned in, my eyes on her mouth as she tiptoed up to kiss me.

But before I could grab hold of her and push my tongue into her mouth, she tipped her head and pressed the briefest kiss I’d ever experienced to my cheek. Like, honestly, my great aunt Ava used to offer up more tongue in her kisses than that.

“Are you gonna stick to your word, Bowman?” she demanded, her gaze fierce and I realised this was a test. I’d promised to help her out if she gave me a kiss and it was my own damn fault if I hadn’t specified that I was after ten full minutes, a filthy amount of tongue and the opportunity to slip my fingers into her panties while we went at it.

“You’re the worst monster out of all of us, Tatum Rivers,” I purred, eyeing her appreciatively.

She had the fucking nerve to smirk at me and I snorted a laugh.

My gaze fell on my helmet on the floor and it gave me an idea.

“I think I can get you out of a bad punishment,” I said slowly. “But you’re gonna have to be willing to put on a show for us.”

“What kind of show?” she asked suspiciously.

“Well, you already proved how much you like dancing,” I pointed out.

“So how about you climb up on the altar and do it for us. While taking your clothes off.”

Her lips popped open and I grinned.

“I’m not stripping for all of you,” she said, folding her arms.

“Sure you are. We’ve all seen what you’ve got going on anyway so it’s

not like we're asking you to show us something new. And you don't have to take your underwear off if you don't want to. Just, play the part and I promise Kyan will have forgotten to be mad at you by the time you take the shoulder pads off and you'll win Saint over once you're down to your panties."

"Shoulder pads?" she asked and I grinned as I hooked my muddy jersey off before removing my shoulder pads too and holding them out for her. "This isn't sexy," she protested and I laughed.

"It will be when you're peeling it off. Plus, I plan on filming it so if it's embarrassing as fuck I can always release the tape as a future punishment."

"You're twisted."

"Hurry up, Cinders, if Saint appears before you're ready, he'll take over with a punishment of his own and you'd better believe that sticking you in that coffin in the crypt isn't the worst thing he could do to you down there."

That seemed to motivate her and she quickly yanked off her sweatpants and shirt and dragged my filthy uniform on over her lacy blue underwear.

I heard Kyan leaving the bathroom and quickly ducked in to wash myself off in the shower while she finished putting her look together.

I returned to find her wearing the shoulder pads, jersey and helmet, her golden legs bare and a look on her face that said she didn't believe this would work.

"Looking hot, Cinders," I teased, dropping my towel as I pulled on some sweatpants and a wifebeater.

"You really think this will satisfy Saint?" she asked doubtfully. "I just pepper sprayed him in the face."

I couldn't help but laugh at that and I snatched her hand in mine as I dragged her towards the door. "Only one way to find out."

Saint was descending the stairs from his room as we made it to the lounge and the way his reddened eyes narrowed dangerously told me he was out for

blood.

“I’ve already picked her punishment,” I said loudly before he could start. “And as you’re always the one picking them and it’s my night with her, I think that’s fair.”

“Well, I don’t agree,” Saint snarled.

“What have you picked?” Kyan asked from the couch, eyeing Tatum with interest. His eyes were red and puffy too, but it didn’t seem to have affected his mood too much. In fact, he looked like he was buzzing.

“As she loves dancing so much, I thought she could dance for us. On the altar. While taking her clothes off,” I explained.

Silence fell for a long moment and Kyan grinned hungrily. “Fuck yes. You have my vote.”

“Fine,” Saint snarled. He was outvoted anyway, but it was definitely easier if he agreed. I wondered for a moment if I wasn’t the only one of us starting to feel like a piece of shit for how far we’d taken things with her in the past, but it was hard to say. And with their eyes all red and puffy from the pepper spray, I was willing to bet tonight wasn’t the time to ask.

I guided Tatum over to the altar, knocking the pile of books Saint had neatly stacked on it to the floor as I gave her a hand up to stand on it.

Kyan grabbed the couch and turned it to face her as she bit her lip nervously and Saint fell down into the spot in the very centre of it the moment Kyan set it down.

I grabbed some beers and a glass of douchebag vodka for Saint then moved to the panel on the wall to select some music for her.

“You got anything in mind, Tate?” I asked casually as she adjusted the large helmet on her head.

“U + Ur Hand by Pink,” she replied instantly and I barked a laugh as I obliged her by setting it playing.

She started dancing to the music, clearly not going for sexy initially, making a big show of taking the helmet off and swinging her blonde hair all around her head. But I was willing to bet she'd forgotten the fact that the more she jumped about, the more the jersey rode up and gave us a glimpse of those little blue panties cupping her round ass.

She danced with the helmet for a while then launched it at Kyan with enough force to smack him in the chest as he caught it, but he only laughed.

She teased the jersey up and down over her thighs for a long time before peeling that off too and Saint leaned forward in his seat as he watched her hungrily. She tossed the jersey at me, quickly followed by the shoulder pads which almost smacked Saint in the face.

My heart pounded furiously as I watched her, the three of us totally enraptured by this beautiful creature who had stumbled into our lives and changed everything.

As Tatum turned back to look our way in nothing but her underwear, she suddenly screamed, pointing over our heads at something behind us as she threw her arms around her chest to cover herself.

“There’s someone out there!” she shouted.

I leapt out of my seat and whirled around to look out of the window above the kitchenette with my heart pounding.

I thought I caught a glimpse of movement and I snarled with fury as I bolted for the door. Kyan and Saint were right beside me, but we still hadn’t moved the fucking dining table and it slowed us down as Kyan dragged it away from the door.

I didn’t even bother with shoes as I raced out into the storm, ready to kill whoever the hell had been peeping in our fucking windows at our girl.

Saint shoved me aside but I was faster than him and I made it around to the window first.

There was no one there, but fresh boot prints marked the muddy ground.
“Come out now and we might not kill you!” Kyan roared.

Rage, white hot and utterly blinding consumed me as I tried to follow the tracks left by whoever the fuck had been here. But after we’d run all around the outside of The Temple earlier and with the combination of the dark night and the storm hammering down on us, it was impossible to tell where they led.

“Head back to the path,” Saint commanded Kyan. “I’ll loop around the building and call Monroe to get his ass down by the dorms to look out for anyone heading back there. Blake, stay with Barbie and make sure no one gets near her.”

My gut plummeted at his words and I whipped around, realising we’d just left her inside alone with the fucking door open.

I charged back around the building and flung the door wide, coming face to face with Tatum as she wielded a goddamn meat cleaver at me, looking like she was more than ready to use it.

“Did you catch him?” she demanded, lowering the weapon as she spotted me.

I shook my head as I threw the door closed behind us and locked it again. She’d pulled my jersey back on over her underwear, the mud stains splattered all over it contrasting with her clean skin.

“No. But the others are still out there. They won’t stop hunting until they find him and tear him limb from limb.”

“I want to cut his fucking balls off myself for scaring me like this,” she hissed.

“You will, sweetheart,” I promised. “And you can make a tasteful necklace out of them too.”

She released a noise that was half laugh, half sob and she moved into me

as I reached out to wrap her in my arms.

“Don’t even give him a minute of your fear,” I growled. “The Night Keepers were made to protect people from guys like this. And we were made to protect *you* most of all.”

“I can look after myself,” she protested in a ferocious growl.

“So can I,” I replied. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t like knowing my family have got my back. Always. And we’ve got yours too, Tate. Don’t think for a second that we don’t.”

She looked up at me with fire in her eyes and I fucking loved that look on her. She wasn’t afraid. She was fucking angry. She wanted blood as much as I did and if that wasn’t the hottest damn thing about her then I didn’t know what was.

I leaned down and captured her lips with mine before I could overthink it and she melted into my kiss with a hungry moan.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured against her lips. “For all the fucked up shit we’ve done. For it being my fault. For blaming you even though it wasn’t you. And for the gun...the fucking gun-”

“That’s not good enough,” she growled, kissing me again and tugging me towards my room.

“I know,” I replied, shoving her up against the door and palming her breasts through the filthy material that covered her. “Let me try and make it up to you.”

“It still won’t be enough.”

“I know.”

She caught the door handle behind her and twisted it so that we stumbled inside. Her lips were hot and needy against mine, her hands pushing into my hair and her nails biting into my skin as she gripped me roughly.

All of the passion that we’d had the first time we’d been together was still

there between us, but it was lined with something rougher now. A wall that she'd erected between us which I knew I had no chance of breaching any time soon. The emotions she'd felt for me before were locked down now. Maybe gone altogether. And I didn't know if I stood any chance of reclaiming them.

But if she wanted any part of me then I was willing to let her have it. Because sometimes she felt like one of the only things keeping me afloat in the maelstrom of my fucked up life and I just wanted to cling to her until I drowned.

I kicked my bedroom door closed behind me and walked her back to the bed, devouring her kisses as she dug her fingernails in harder.

“Do you like hurting me?” I asked her, not really minding it, but wanting to know if there was any chance of redemption for me. “Do you feel anything for me other than hatred now?”

“I don't know,” she panted. “I hate seeing you suffer. And I want you to suffer more at my hands.”

I hooked my fingers under the hem of my football jersey and caught the edge of her panties, dragging them down her thighs before dropping them to the floor.

“Punish me then,” I agreed. “Do your worst. As much and as often as you want. Until you decide I've paid enough.”

“I don't know if that's possible.”

I pushed her back so her ass hit the bed and kept her sitting on the edge of it as I dropped to my knees before her.

Her hands fisted in the blankets either side of her ass as I pushed her thighs apart, making the jersey ride up so that I could see everything that was waiting for me.

I dragged my gaze back up to her blue eyes as I slid my hand between her

legs, groaning as I found her hot and wet for me. A gasp escaped her lips and I continued to watch her as I slid my fingers back and forth, teasing her opening and circling her clit until she was panting for me.

I kept going as she began to moan, biting my lip as she ground her hips forward in a silent demand for more.

When she growled my name in frustration, I gave in, pushing two fingers inside her and savouring that delicious moan as it left her lips.

I curled my fingers inside of her as I began to pump them in and out, reaching out with my other hand to rub my thumb over her hardened nipple beneath my filthy jersey.

I pushed my fingers in harder and she gasped as I curled them again, driving them in as deep as they'd go and pulling more pleasure from her body.

My cellphone buzzed on the nightstand and we fell still for a moment.

"It might be important," I said and she nodded in agreement.

With a grunt of frustration, I leaned forward to hook it into my grasp, keeping the fingers of my left hand buried deep inside her and making her cry out as the movement made the heel of my palm grind against her clit.

I glanced at the message and grunted in frustration as I opened up the group chat where Saint had messaged to say he'd had no luck in his hunt.

"Nothing," I explained as Tatum looked at me.

"Okay. Don't stop what you were doing."

I smirked as I looked up at her and was about to toss my cell aside as it vibrated in my palm and another message came through from Monroe suggesting they loop around again.

I could see the notification at the top which said both Saint and Kyan were typing and as I drove my fingers inside her again, I moved my phone to rest against her clit in my other hand.

Tatum frowned down at the phone, panting as I kept moving my fingers deep within her. “What are you-”

A message came through and the phone vibrated violently for three long seconds. She sucked in a breath and tipped her head back, a moan escaping her as the vibrations cut off again.

I gave the message enough attention to know that they were just figuring out where else to search and I paused in my torture of her body just long enough to message them back.

“What are you writing?” she asked breathily as I pumped my fingers again, loving how wet she was for me as I tried to concentrate on what I was writing for five seconds.

“Just telling them I’m taking good care of you,” I replied with a dirty grin.

“Asshole,” she gasped as another message came through and I pushed the phone against her clit again.

I forgot about reading the messages as she rocked her hips against my fingers and I lost myself in that fucking look in her eyes. Neither of us knew when another message was going to arrive but each time one did, she cried out, bucking against my hand and the cellphone as her orgasm drew nearer.

It was like riding a rollercoaster in the dark, never knowing when the drops were coming and every time she cried out, I could feel that noise resonating right through my body and making my dick ache with need.

I kept pumping my fingers deep inside her, rocking the phone against her clit even when it wasn’t vibrating.

She started begging for more, needing the release as much as I was aching to give it to her while the short bursts of vibrations were never quite enough to send her over the edge.

When neither of us could take it anymore, I managed to send a single message to the group. Two words. *Call me.*

Kyan's name flashed up on the caller ID less than two seconds later and the phone vibrated constantly as I ground it against her clit, pumping my fingers inside her as I felt her tightening around them in the most delicious way.

She yelled my name as she came and I answered the call as she cried out in bliss, panting and moaning in the sweetest way as I pulled the phone back and circled my thumb over her clit to drag out the ecstasy. She fell back onto the bed and I couldn't tear my eyes away from her as she caught her breath, lying there in my filthy shirt, her chest heaving, her golden hair spilling out around her and her pussy clamped tight around my fingers.

"You fucking asshole," Kyan's tinny voice came from the ear piece of my cellphone and I managed to raise it to my ear for a second.

"Just wanted to wish you happy hunting. And to tell you we've gone to bed," I said. "So don't disturb us when you get back."

He started cursing me colourfully and I hung up, tossing the phone away as I slowly pulled my fingers out of her and moved on top of her.

"Blake," she panted as I settled between her thighs, the throbbing length of my dick driving into her with need.

"Yeah?" I murmured, my lips moving to her neck as I rolled my football jersey up her body and she allowed me to tug it off of her.

"I need you," she moaned, rocking her hips against me so that I could feel the heat of her pussy through my sweatpants as it ground against my cock.

I was fucking shaking with need, my dick pulsing and rock hard. I'd spent the last five days reliving what me and Kyan had done to her last week and cursing her for leaving me begging for more and starving without it. But now she was finally here beneath me, moaning my name and grinding her bare pussy on me.

I was probably going to come within a few minutes. I'd been aching for

this for too fucking long. But that was alright because then I was going to lick the taste of me out of her pussy and fuck her all over again once I'd brought her to ruin with my tongue. I hoped she wasn't tired because I intended to spend as much of the night as possible buried inside her in one way or another.

"I need you, Blake," she begged again, rubbing herself against me shamelessly and I was so fucking relieved that I wasn't the only one of us feeling this need.

I reached for my waistband, growling her name as I continued to kiss her neck and I started shoving the material down so that I could free my dick.

"I need you to turn the lights off," Tatum panted and I paused with my shaft grinding against her thigh just as I was about to yank my sweatpants down.

"What?" I asked.

"Turn the lights off," she insisted, her palms landing on my chest as she pushed me back.

I frowned as I had to concentrate on her words instead of the incessant demands of my dick which needed to slide inside her in the next thirty seconds or it was going to fucking explode from pent up pressure.

I growled a curse as I shoved myself upright, crossing the room to the light switch as fast as I could with my sweatpants tenting over my raging hard on.

I glanced back at Tatum just as I reached the switch and found her with her panties back in place as she grabbed a fresh T-shirt from my drawer and yanked it on.

"What's happening?" I asked, my voice coming out like a kind of begging whine.

"That was nice," she said with a bright smile. "Thanks."

“Nice?”

Tatum hopped into my bed, scooted right over to the far side of it and turned her back on me as she pulled the covers up around her chin.

“I...are you...are we...”

“Night, night,” she sang, her eyes closing as I just stood there gaping at her.

“You’re going to do it again, aren’t you?” I groaned, looking down at my boner as a way too familiar sense of frustration washed through me.

“Do what again?”

“Use me to get you off and leave me with my balls aching,” I groaned.

“Duh,” she replied with a laugh and I knocked my head back against the wall, closing my eyes as my dick continued to throb, still not getting the message.

I slid my hand into my sweatpants without even really deciding to do it, rubbing my thick shaft in way too familiar movements which could never begin to compare to how it would have felt to bury myself in-

“Get your hand out of your pants and get into bed, Blake,” Tatum demanded.

“Can’t I just-”

“Get in now and you can spoon me,” she said. “You never know, I might get horny in the night and make use of you after all.”

I groaned loudly as I knocked the light off, dropping my sweats and wifebeater so that I was left in my boxers and slipping beneath the covers with her.

I moved closer, wrapping my arms around her and inhaling her sweet scent as she pushed her ass back against my dick and I growled in frustration as it throbbed hopelessly.

“You’re not going to make use of me in the night, are you?” I muttered

and a breath of laughter escaped her which let me know all too well how much she was enjoying this agony she'd caused me.

“No fucking chance,” she agreed, wriggling her ass again and wrapping her arm around mine where it encircled her waist.

“Don't blame me if I have a wet dream like a fucking twelve year old,” I growled.

Her only answer was an evil little laugh and I was left in the dark with my dick driving into her ass and my hope dying way faster than my boner and the prospect of a long fucking night ahead of me.

But as she shifted in my arms and I nuzzled into her, I had to admit it wasn't *all* bad. Even though my cock most certainly didn't agree.



I woke early, slipping out of Blake's arms. Apparently he liked earning himself punishments because he just kept breaking rules again and again. And I *totally* didn't encourage it. Except when he made me come like a damn freight train careering off a cliff. It should have been illegal how good that boy was with his hands. And tongue and...*fuck, I am so screwed if I don't keep a level head.*

I grabbed my bag and headed into the bathroom, shutting the door gently behind me so as not to wake him. Then I sat on the lid of the toilet, pulled out my school diary and flipped it open at the back. I crossed a few items off of my list, figuring I'd gotten enough revenge for them in the past couple of days. I'd left them all stuck out in a storm in payment for the time they'd done it to me, and the pepper spray had probably been agony enough to pay for Kyan walking in on me in the shower. I decided to cross off the font too as I'd gotten Saint with the spray and I still felt a little guilty about burning his grandmother's records. He'd suffered plenty over that.

The sex tape
~~The fish stew~~
The Unspeakables
~~The storm~~
~~The font~~
The bathtub
The ice
The gun
The clothes
~~The humiliation~~
~~The shower~~
~~The letters~~
THE VOW

I smiled at how many I'd struck off and picked out two more I was going to try and tackle right now. Stuffing my school diary away, I headed back into Blake's room, putting my bag down and creeping out into the hall. Saint's music filled my ears and I hurried along to catch him as he headed downstairs in his workout gear.

"Hey," I called and he frowned in surprise as I approached.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Except...Blake broke another rule. Three actually. And I wondered if you'd maybe let me have something to punish him with..." I batted my lashes innocently and his eyes narrowed.

"What do you want?"

"My gun," I said, giving him the big eyes. "Not loaded or anything. I just

wanna scare him a bit.”

Saint’s brows arched then he laughed darkly. “You have an evil little streak in you, Barbie. It’s delightful.” He turned and strode across the room to the safe which was concealed beneath one of the flagstones and I drifted closer as he took the gun out, checking it wasn’t loaded before standing and holding it out to me.

I reached for it, but he held it above my head. “What do you say?”

“Thank you.” *Better lay it on thick.* “Master.”

He smiled keenly then handed it to me, catching my hand before I could run away. He licked his thumb, wiping away what I guessed was a smudge of mascara on my face then nodded to say I could go.

I rolled my eyes as I jogged away, pushing back into Blake’s room with my heart hammering as I entered the darkened space, flicking the light on and keeping the gun behind my back in case I woke him. He remained still, stretched out in my space with his hands clutching my pillow.

I double checked the gun wasn’t loaded even though I was sure Saint had done so, but my dad always said you could never be too careful with weapons and I definitely didn’t want to risk this going horribly wrong.

I climbed onto the bed, walking over him until I was standing with my feet on either side of his waist then I lifted the gun and aimed it at his head.

I took a breath, readying to scare the living hell out of him. “Blake wake up!” I screamed and he jerked awake, a shout of alarm escaping him as he found himself staring down the barrel of a gun. I pulled the trigger and he flinched full bodily as the click resounded through the air.

“What the fuck!?” he roared at me.

The bathroom door suddenly flew open and Kyan leapt through the air, tackling me so I slammed onto the bed under his full weight.

“Kyan!” I yelled as he looked at me through half open eyes, still almost

freaking asleep. His hands locked around my throat, but as he realised it was me, his whole body relaxed.

“Jesus *fuck*.” He snatched the gun from my grip with a growl then threw it at the wall. “Are you out of your fucking mind?!” he bellowed in my face, shifting off of me and pulling me to sit up.

Blake sat looking at me like a wounded animal, his eyes wild and pulse hammering visibly at his throat.

“It wasn’t loaded,” I hissed and Kyan opened his mouth to retort, but Blake punched his arm.

“Get out of here, man. I deserved it anyway.”

Kyan’s gaze shifted to him and some sort of silent communication passed between them where he finally nodded and slid off the bed.

“How’d you even wake up anyway? You sleep like the freaking dead,” I muttered and Kyan paused by the door.

“Heard you scream.” He shrugged. “I guess even the dead would wake for you, baby. Better check the crypt for zombies.” He stalked back into the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind him and then we had to listen to him peeing for several long seconds. I didn’t know whether to be offended or flattered by what he’d said.

Blake caught my hand and dragged me into his lap, making me gasp in surprise. I knew we were breaking another rule, but I didn’t pull away, confused as to why he suddenly wanted me close. He reached out to run his thumb across my cheek with emotion warring in his eyes. “I am so fucking, deeply sorry for taking you out to that grave. I don’t think I ever would have done it...I hope not anyway...I really fucking hope not.” He looked away from me, his brow creasing and I could see how much he was beating himself up over this.

“You didn’t do it, Blake. So I guess that’s your answer. But I know a part

of you wanted to,” I said, my throat too tight.

I didn't know if it was right to have this conversation while sat in his lap with his arms folded around me, but somehow when I looked into his eyes these days, all I could see was the goodness of his soul. The man he truly was, not the broken creature who'd wanted to steal my life away. It didn't make it okay. Maybe nothing would ever make it okay. But understanding his pain was the only way I could find a way to make peace with it. That and pointing a gun at his head so he knew how I had felt. It admittedly did make me feel a bit better. Not that I would have done it if it was loaded, but still...

“I hate myself for the thought even crossing my mind that day. I'm not who I thought I was,” he said, his tone rough and full of pain.

I skimmed my knuckles down the side of his face and he looked up at me with a sigh. There was a darkness in his eyes that scared me, a hollowness that he rarely showed lately, but was still ever-present, lurking beneath the mask he wore.

He gripped me more firmly. “Sometimes I think that we're in hell already, doomed to live a life of suffering as we lose those we love one by one. Where every time something good comes along, the world is ripped out from under our feet and we're cast into a storm of despair. Hope is the cruellest gift of life. Without it, we're nothing but lost souls in a frozen sea. But with it, we want for more, dream of something better. But what if it's never coming?”

“Don't say that.” I angled his face up to meet my gaze and looked directly into the wound inside him that bled as freshly as if I *had* planted a bullet in him.

“It's the truth, Tate,” he said with a sad smile. “It's all fucked in the end. I dunno if I wanna stay around that long to see it.”

I leaned down with a tug in my chest, touching my lips to his and he reared up to meet me, his hands gripping my waist and making the T-shirt I

was wearing ride up over my thighs. “I want your torture,” he growled against my mouth. “I want to be made to suffer for what I’ve done to you.”

I clutched the back of his neck, my legs slipping around his waist as I turned towards him. Part of me wanted to refuse, but his fervent, angry kiss said he meant it. He wanted to burn at the stake for his crimes. And I still had a lot to get back at him for.

“I want to destroy you the way you destroyed me,” I admitted between kisses and he pushed me down onto the bed, pressing me into the sheets as he nudged my thighs apart. Our kiss became more feral as I clawed at him and he crushed me in place beneath him.

“I can taste your hate.” He pulled away, rocking his hips so I could feel him swelling between my thighs. “It’s like hellfire, Cinders, and I want to burn up in it. Cast me into the fucking flames. Don’t you dare hold back.”

I clawed at his shoulders, trying not to lose myself to his furious kisses and the feel of his tempting body moving over mine. I moaned as his hard length rubbed against my clit through my thin panties and I quickly latched onto the plans of revenge I had.

“I want you to pay for the sex tape,” I said breathlessly and he lifted his head, his brow furrowed.

“How?” he asked.

“I want to make one of you. Just you,” I said, looking him dead in the eye. He dipped his head to kiss me once more. “Deal.”

“At least you can get off this time,” I taunted and he groaned, burying his face in my neck.

“Fuck you. It’s not the same,” he muttered, then slid back off of me and planted his ass near the top of the bed.

He looked so tempting, his hair falling forward into his dark green eyes, his mouth pulled down at the corners. When Blake Bowman was serious, he

looked like a Greek god cast in stone. I wanted to capture his pain, bottle it and keep it as mine forever. But mostly so he'd never have to feel it himself again.

I grabbed my cellphone from my bag and moved to his desk, sitting up on it and resting my feet on the chair.

"I'm gonna need some inspiration." He tilted his head to one side and my heart fluttered at the idea of what he was asking me to do.

I placed my phone down, pulling off the shirt he'd given me to sleep in, baring my breasts to him and sending my hair tumbling around me. "How's this?"

He groaned, nodding as he leaned back against the headboard and pushed his hand into his boxers.

"It's not much of a show if you hide the main character," I teased and he rolled his eyes before shoving his boxers off and revealing his thick length. I almost forgot to pick up my phone and start recording as I watched him take his cock into his grip and slowly start running his hand up and down, squeezing tighter as he reached the base.

I angled my phone at him, pressing record as I bit down on my lip, leaning back against the desk as I drank in the sight of him, wondering if it would really be the worst thing in the world if I spent some time taking pleasure from him before he finished up the show. *Bad Tatum. Focus.*

"Do you like watching me, sweetheart?" he asked, his voice gravelly and sending tingles rushing along my skin.

"Yeah," I admitted, tipping my head back and using my free hand to palm my breasts as he watched. "Are you desperate for me, Blake? Do you wish you'd been nicer to me?"

"Yes," he breathed as he rubbed himself harder, his thumb sweeping over the head of his dick as he grunted in pleasure. "I should have treated you like

the goddess you are, Tatum Rivers. I'd worship you daily. Every part of you."

I slid my hand lower, my hips bucking as I fought to keep the phone aimed at him while pushing a hand into my panties.

"Take them off," he demanded. "Show me."

I didn't know why I complied, but this was just too hot to ignore. And I didn't see the harm in having a little fun while I got my revenge. A video like this going viral would be seriously harmful to him and his reputation. Not that I'd send it out unless he sent out my tape. But it was good to be even.

I shifted my ass onto his calculus book and he smirked as I parted my legs and slid my hand between them, my eyes following the movement of his hand up and down his long shaft. He looked close to finishing already and I wasn't really surprised with the treatment I'd given him the last few days. It got me hot knowing he was so turned on by me and I moaned as my gaze scraped over his hardened abs and his flexing bicep as he pumped his hand along his length.

"God you're a fucking tease," he growled. "What I'm gonna do to you when you let me inside you again."

"Never going to happen, Bowman," I panted, circling my fingers against my clit as his eyes drilled into my own like he was seeking out my damn soul. I wasn't sure my words were true, especially as he groaned and my toes scrunched up at the sound. I wanted to make him curse and beg for me first hand. I wanted to have him lost to my body, pounding in and out of me as he fell apart, a slave to my flesh.

I dug my toes into his chair, moaning as I came and Blake swore, coming at the same moment and coating his stomach in ribbons of white.

I turned the camera off, placing my phone down and moving to his nightstand as I caught my breath. I tossed him a box of tissues, smirking as he

bashed his head back against the headboard with a huff of frustration. I headed away into the bathroom for a shower, laughing as I swung the door shut behind me. He may have been a broken man, but he was still deserving of my punishments. I was getting closer and closer to striking all of his crimes off of the list though and I was afraid to think what that meant. When this was done...what then? Did I run away? Break my vow and leave this place forever? What was the alternative? Stay here...forgive them?

I forced the thoughts away, unable to face the twisting maelstrom of emotions they brought up in me.

By the time I returned to the room, Blake was gone and he'd left my uniform for me on the bed. I grabbed my school diary out of my bag and struck off two more of Blake's crimes, a weight lifting from me as I did so.

~~The sex tape~~

~~The fish stew~~

The Unspeakables

~~The storm~~

~~The font~~

The bathtub

~~The ice~~

~~The gun~~

The clothes

~~The humiliation~~

~~The shower~~

~~The letters~~

THE VOW

I had to focus on dealing with the rest of the list, then I'd figure out what

to do after that.

I dressed quickly, doing my hair and makeup in the mirror before heading out to make breakfast.

I cooked their usual meals and sat across from them with a bowl of yoghurt and muesli as they devoured their food. Blake kept looking up from his pancakes and smirking knowingly at me and I couldn't fight a mischievous grin in response as I thought over our morning together. His foot suddenly hooked mine under the table and a blush rolled into my cheeks.

Kyan slammed his cutlery down on his empty plate and I jolted at the sound, looking to him in surprise.

"It's not going to clean itself, baby." He sat back in his chair with a sneer and I pushed out of my seat, glaring at him as I snatched his plate up and knocked the remains of his coffee into his lap in the same movement.

"Oops."

Saint continued to slice apart his toast with vicious precision, throwing an idle glance between us before placing a forkful in his mouth. "Clean that up," he growled at me in warning as Kyan stood, the coffee soaking into his crotch.

I walked away with my hips swinging, heading to the kitchen to clean Kyan's plate and sensing him hounding after me.

As I placed the washing up in the rack, he swung me around by my waist, grabbing a dishcloth from the side and holding it out to me. "Get the stain out."

"Just change your pants, asshole," I hissed.

He shrugged, reaching down to unzip them and pull them off in front of me so he was standing in his black boxers. I rolled my eyes as he balled them up and handed them to me. "Are you gonna get me another pair or what?" He arched an eyebrow and I clenched my teeth. *Why is he testing me today?*

I shoved past him, heading to his room and tossing his trousers into the laundry as I walked into his closet. *You want clean pants, asshole? Fine. But I can't promise the rest of your pants will stay clean.*

His stuff had all been neatly put back by Rebecca within hours after I'd ripped everything out of here the other week, so there was no point doing that again. It was infuriating.

I snatched out a pair of his smart school pants and smirked as I had a stupid idea. When Kyan was being a dick, I wanted to out-dick him as much as I could. And sometimes that called for being ridiculous.

I pulled on his trousers, tucking my skirt into them and grabbing out a belt so I could keep them in place on my small frame. I tightened it around my waist then rolled up the bottoms of the pants with a snort of laughter. I grabbed the other four pairs of school pants he had, opened his window and tossed them out onto the muddy ground below with a light laugh. Then I turned to grab the rest of his jeans and pants, throwing them outside too so the only clean ones he had were now on me. When I was done, I took one of his elastics and tied my hair up into a topknot.

I grabbed the baseball bat standing by his bed and swaggered out of his room, heading through to the lounge and resting it against my shoulder like a total douche in a *perfect* impression of Kyan.

“Hey dude-bros, guess where Kyan's only clean pants in the house are?” I rounded to face them and Saint's jaw dropped, Blake burst out laughing and Kyan looked like he was caught between jumping me and laughing his head off. I shook my hips tauntingly. “Hmm, I think I'm gonna go roll in the mud with the rest of your pants.” I raced for the door and Kyan tore after me like a charging rhino.

“Oh no you don't!” He snatched me around the waist, lifting me into the air and the bat dropped from my hand with a clatter as it hit the floor. I

shrieked as he carried me back to the lounge and threw me down on the couch ungracefully. I laughed as he fell over me and I punched him square in the chest, but wasn't really putting any strength into it. He grinned wickedly as he grabbed the belt and started unbuckling it as I wriggled beneath his weight.

"Fuck, you've never looked so hot, baby. Do I look this good all the time?" He got the belt free and yanked the pants down, exposing my panties to him as my skirt was all bunched up over my thighs. He ripped them down my legs, but before he could get them off fully, Blake dove over the couch and knocked him off of me onto the floor.

"Run Cinders!" he called as he fought to keep Kyan down and I laughed.

I scrambled over the back of the couch, hoisting Kyan's pants up around my waist with both hands as I ran for the front door, only to find Saint blocking my way. He folded his arms, his mouth twisted up into an amused smile and I stuck my tongue out at him before skirting him and sprinting in the direction of Kyan and Blake's rooms.

"Guess I'll follow the rest of your pants out the window, Ky!" I shouted and the sound of heavy footfalls pounded after me.

I made it into his room, shoving the window open, swinging one leg out when firm hands dragged me back. I found Kyan holding me, whipping me around to face Blake across the room who had the baseball bat in his grip.

"Stop or I'll kill the hostage," Kyan taunted, sliding a hand around my throat. "I could snap her neck in one movement."

I knew he was joking, but it still sent a tremor up my spine because I had the feeling he was entirely capable of doing that.

Blake lifted the bat like it was a gun, shutting one eye as if he was aiming down the barrel. "I've never missed a target in my life, motherfucker."

Saint pushed through the door, silently slinking in behind Blake and

holding two fingers to his temple like a gun. “Drop it, asshole.”

I snorted a laugh as Blake dropped the bat and lifted his hands in surrender.

“Kill the hostage,” Saint commanded Kyan and I screamed as he threw me on the bed, falling over me and starting to tickle me. Blake dived on me too, both of them tickling me everywhere and making me scream for mercy as pained laughs racked through my body.

“St-stop n-not funny!” I choked out through my laughter.

“Then why are you laughing, baby?” Kyan asked, his eyes glittering with amusement.

He ripped my pants off, getting off the bed as Blake caught my wrists and pinned me down beneath his chest. I gasped as he suddenly pressed his mouth to mine, my legs automatically wrapping around his waist as he crushed me into Kyan’s bed. My tongue met his and a moan left me as he clawed the elastic out of my hair and ran his fingers through it like he couldn’t get enough of me. He tasted sweet like my golden boy, the one I’d nearly fallen for all those weeks ago. But I could taste the darkness in him too, lacing my tongue with bitterness as well and I drowned in the space between it all.

When he pulled back, I was flustered and overly aware of Saint and Kyan watching us, both of them looking ready to kill someone.

I pushed Blake’s chest to make him get off of me and tugged my skirt down to cover my thighs.

“Punish him, then,” Saint snapped and I frowned, looking to Blake. I was tired of punishing him for kisses I wanted. Craved on a daily basis. So maybe it was time for a change...

I got to my feet, feeling Kyan’s scowl burning into my head as I walked past Saint and felt the three of them trailing after me to the kitchenette. I

picked up a pen on my way there, pausing in front of the fridge and chewing my lip as I prepared to do something I never would have considered in a thousand years until now. I lifted my hand and struck off the rule *No Kissing*, then I tossed the pen on the counter and spun around to find the three of them caging me in as they stared at what I'd done.

I cleared my throat, pushing through the middle of Blake and Kyan before grabbing my school bag and heading for the door. "See you later."

I took one more glance over my shoulder at them as Blake scraped a hand through his hair, smirking while Kyan continued to glower. *Shame you don't kiss school girls, huh asshole? Not that I'd kiss you anyway.*

Saint suddenly bitch slapped Blake in the face. "That's for the kiss. You did it before she struck out the rule."

"Worth it," Blake laughed and Saint scowled.

I kicked my shoes on and hurried outside, unable to wipe the grin off my face as I went. Those boys were a world of trouble, but sometimes...they were a world of fun too.

As the day I was due to meet my dad drew closer, I started to grow anxious about how I was going to get off campus. And if I could manage it, was I really going to come back here afterwards? Maybe my dad didn't want me following him, and if he really refused then I knew I wouldn't be able to go with him. But that didn't mean I had to come back to Everlake. Once I was outside of these walls, I could go anywhere. Was I prepared to do that though? Up and leave this place forever? Leave Monroe? And the others... what would they think?

I didn't want to explore the ache in my chest at the thought of making that

decision. I didn't know what it meant and I didn't want to. Mostly, I was avoiding thinking about it altogether. *I'll know when I'm out of here. Things will be clearer once I see Dad.*

I walked into English class, my stomach growling for lunch already. Just one more lesson and I could eat. Not that my meals were whole lot of fun when Saint allowed me salads or soups for lunch still. I had to admit though, I was getting some pretty nice ab definition since I'd been forced onto his no fun diet and spent several evenings a week training. It wasn't all bad. Especially now I got pizza once a week and junk food when staying with Monroe.

Mila sat beside me and the Night Keepers filled the row behind us like guard dogs. If they were X-Men, Saint would be Cyclops with laser eyes that melted people's brains from fifty yards away, Kyan would be an angrier, more lethal Wolverine, Blake would be Pyro, capable of setting panties on fire at any distance and Monroe would be Angel because *duh*.

I glanced over my shoulder at the three boys behind me, chewing on the end of my pen as I watched them play rock, paper, scissors. Whoever won got to punch the loser and I rolled my eyes as Kyan gave Blake a dead arm, then I turned back to face the front of class again.

Miss Pontus walked in, trying to hush everyone even though no one was paying her any attention and she strode to her desk with a frown creasing her forehead. She picked up a note on it and looked to me with a raised brow. "Miss Rivers, Headmaster Monroe wishes to see you in his office."

My heart lurched and I rose out of my seat, hearing three chairs pull back behind me.

I turned to the Night Keepers who clearly intended on following me and shook my head. "I'm just going upstairs to see another Night Keeper, assholes. You don't have to follow me like hungry strays."

Saint narrowed his eyes and the three of them shared a look where some silent agreement passed between them before they slowly lowered back into their seats.

“Good boys.” I reached forward to scruff Blake’s hair and he barked like a dog, making me laugh.

I reached for Saint’s hair next, but his eyes warned me off. “People have been executed by me for far less, Barbie,” he warned and I smirked as I side-stepped towards Kyan, reaching out to him as he gave me a bored expression before turning my hand at the last second and holding my middle finger up in front of his face. He caught my wrist with lightning quick reactions, closing his mouth over my finger and sinking his teeth into it.

“Ah!” I smacked him across the head with my free hand and he released me with a smirk, leaning back in his seat and gazing at the teeth marks he’d left on my flesh.

“Thanks for the snack, baby. Hurry along. If you’re not back soon, we’ll come hunting.” He gnashed his teeth together like he meant that in the violent sense of the word and I walked away with a scowl, feeling eyes on me from all around the room as I exited.

I headed along the empty corridor, taking the large stairway that curved up onto the second level and drifting along the hall. Headmaster Brown’s old office had been boarded up and abandoned since the toilet paper fire considering no one could get any workman in because of the pandemic. So the new headmaster’s office was upstairs, but it wasn’t a room I’d ever been in before.

Monroe was still avoiding me as much as he could. I knew why now, but that knowledge also made me unbearably sad. My mind was always drifting to the two kisses we’d shared and my heart broke every time I remembered him walking away from me. We were still allies, friends I guessed, but now I

put my walls up around him, trying to keep my mind on neutral topics. Whenever we sparred, we spent minimal time pinning each other down. We basically acted like each other's bodies were made of liquid hot magma, so I was surprised he'd called me out to speak to him one on one.

I headed to the door at the end of the corridor and knocked, my heart quickening as I waited for him to call me in. When he didn't answer, I knocked again, frowning when there was no response. I took hold of the handle, twisting it but it was locked.

Taking out my phone, I shot him a message asking where he was, moving to rest my back against the wall as I waited for his reply.

And waited.

And waited.

My gaze drifted to the door across the hall. It was ajar and there was a note stuck to it with three words printed across it in bold that made my heart jolt.

*In
Here
Tatum*

I frowned as I headed across the hall, realising this was the photography darkroom and wondered why Monroe was lurking in there. My mind conjured up thoughts of him grabbing me and kissing me as I tip-toed into the gloom.

Oh my god, what if he's changed his mind?

"Monroe?" I called innocently, moving past a screen someone had put up to block the light spilling in from the doorway.

The space was lit in a low red light and as my eyes adjusted to it, I could

see there was no one in here.

What the hell?

I fell entirely still as I took in the photographs developing on a line running across the back of the room. Fear crept along my spine and made me choke on the breath in my lungs. They were all of me, taken while I wasn't looking. And worse than that, there were photos of me and Kyan behind the Sacred Stone with me down on my knees for him or my head tipped back in pleasure while Kyan touched me. Sweat began to bead on my brow as I forced myself to move closer and take them all in. There were photos taken through the windows of The Temple. Of the night I'd stripped for the guys, but worse than that, far fucking worse. Of the night we'd all been drinking, me held in Kyan's lap while Blake's head dipped between my thighs, my lips parted in ecstasy.

Fuck fuck fuck!

I started snatching them all from the pegs that held them on the line, gathering them in my arms. I took each and every one of them, my hands trembling, my mouth horribly dry.

Who did this?

Who's watching me?

What do they want?

As I grabbed the final photo, I realised it wasn't of me. It was of two distorted eyes, the face murky and unclear in the thick darkness this photograph had been taken in. But there, in the depths of their irises was a reflection of me on a woodland path. I shuddered, dropping it in surprise and it fell to the floor face down, revealing a message on the back of it in thick black letters.

I see you.

I gasped, terror gripping me as I turned over some of the other

photographs, finding more and more messages for me.

I feel you.

I know you.

I want you.

I listen.

I watch.

I wait.

I hunger.

Soon.

Soon.

Soon.

Soon.

SOON.

The door slammed and my heart nearly burst as I ran towards it, needing to get the hell out of here. I grabbed the handle, twisting hard but it was locked.

“Hey!” I yelled. “Who’s out there?!” I demanded, my voice full of fury as I disguised my fear. “Let me out and face me yourself, you coward!”

They must have planned this, left that note on Miss Pontus’s desk. *Who is this asshole??*

I hammered my fist against the wood harder, panic warring in my chest. I didn’t want to be in here. I needed to get out. To find who did this. To destroy them for terrorising me.

“Let me out!” I cried then the door swung open and I stumbled forward into a hard chest.

Punch – I mean Toby - steadied me, his eyebrows arched in surprise. “What’s wrong?”

I lurched away from him in alarm. “Did you do this?”

“What?” he asked, looking confused enough that I believed him. “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

“Yes, no, I don’t know. I need to see the Night Keepers.”

He drew me away from the door, not letting go. “You look pale, what happened?”

He glanced down at the photos in my grip and I quickly turned them out of his sight.

“Tate!” Blake called and I spotted him, Kyan and Saint striding towards me. “What the fuck’s going on?”

I moved away from Toby toward Blake, holding out the photos as Kyan and Saint flanked him. “I found these in there. Someone locked me in,” I breathed, sensing Toby still standing close and not sure if I wanted to share my secrets with him.

“And what are *you* doing at the scene of the crime?” Saint pinned his malevolent gaze on Toby and I shook my head.

“He let me out,” I answered before he could.

“I was in the restroom down the hall. I heard her shouting. Shall I get a teacher?” Toby asked, sweat beading on his brow.

“Just go,” Kyan snapped and he bowed his head, hurrying away.

Saint reached forward, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear as Kyan and Blake sifted through the photographs, their faces growing more and more furious.

Saint’s eyes promised cruelty of unspeakable kinds as he whispered a vow to me that made my heart feel strong. “We will find them and we will *end* them. You have our word.”



I sat on the jutting rockface three quarters of the way up Tahoma Mountain with my back to the hard stone and my left boot sticking out over the sheer drop below while my right leg remained bent in front of me.

My cellphone was ringing in my pocket, but I was ignoring it. Not that that would help for long. I had to answer. Today. Or someone would come in person. And that wouldn't end well for anyone.

The view over the lake was picturesque and despite the biting cold in the air, the sky was blue and the sun was shining. From way up here you could hardly even see all of the buildings around campus. I could practically pretend they didn't exist at all.

A bald eagle was riding the wind ahead of me and my eyes trailed its movements hungrily as I sketched out a tattoo design based on it. There was something about the majestic bird which called to the hungriest part of my soul. He was above it all. His only desires hunger or carnal. He didn't feel hate or hurt or guilt. That was true freedom.

My dirt bike was parked up a little way down the trail I'd used to ride up to this place. No one else ever came up here. The paths were too steep and the drops too treacherous. There were mountain lions too. Not that I'd ever

gotten too close to one. But I trusted the knife on my belt to get me out of that fight if I ever had to have it.

I pulled a packet of cigarettes from the inner pocket of my leather jacket and placed one between my lips. Saint would freak the fuck out if he realised I'd been smoking. Which he would. Because even if I destroyed all the clothes I was wearing, showered in bleach and washed my mouth out with an entire bottle of mouthwash, he'd *still* smell it somehow. And he'd know why. But I couldn't deal with that knowledge right now.

I'd taken the pack from a freshman dickhead who thought he looked cool coughing his guts up as he tried to give himself a new, cancer-inducing habit. I'd really done him a favour by knocking his tooth out and taking them from him. Maybe I'd get a thank you card from him when I got back.

I hadn't really smoked in over two years. But in my family, if you weren't doing an impression of a chimney at all times with a cigarette barely clinging to its spot in the corner of your mouth, then people thought there was something up with you. I couldn't even say for sure how old I'd been when I'd started smoking. Back when I'd given a shit about gaining my family's approval. Either way, it was pretty fucking weird to be an eighteen year old who had already taken up the habit, gotten addicted and quit. Seemed like I shouldn't have had time to do all of that shit. Seemed like I shouldn't have had time to do a lot of the fucked up things I'd done. But then I guessed I'd never really spent much time being a kid. I'd witnessed my first hit when I was eight. I remembered wondering how many buckets all of that blood could fill...

I flipped open the zippo lighter and took a long drag on the cigarette as I lit it before picking up my charcoal again and trying to capture the curve of the eagle's wings as he soared overhead. There was a patch of skin to the right of my abs which wanted filling and I was convinced that I was on to the

right design here.

If I kept adding to my ink at the rate I was going, I was pretty sure I'd run out of skin to decorate by the time I was thirty. But as I didn't expect to live much beyond then, I guessed it didn't really matter. In fact, as my phone started ringing again, I had to wonder if thirty was a pipe dream.

I should have known my family wouldn't just let me go as easily as they had. But I guessed I'd been a hopeful idiot, caught up in the dream of freedom.

Smoke billowed between my lips as I continued to sketch the eagle but as my phone started up again, I had to accept that I couldn't keep putting it off.

I flipped my sketchbook closed and pulled my cellphone out. Unknown number of course. I wondered who it would be. Dougal with his softly spoken words and deadly intentions? Dermot with his hot temper and threats? Connor with his long stories and roundabout murderous implications? It wouldn't be Ma, she never disciplined me herself these days. Always a brother to call in for the job. One perfectly suited to whatever crime I'd committed against the family with my existence and opinions and *Roscoe attitude*. Which basically meant I wasn't a willing pawn for the O'Brien empire and they didn't like that one bit.

Whichever one of my uncles it turned out to be, I was pretty sure they were about to pull rank, make threats, let me know exactly how much attention they'd been paying to me during the last few months since I'd cut myself off from them and demand I come back.

For a moment there I'd let myself think I was free.

What a pretty fucking idea that had been. Had I ever really believed they'd just let me go? Or was I just a fool who'd wanted to try and build a life inside a dream?

"Yeah?" I answered, taking another long pull on the cigarette.

“You’ve made your poor mammy quite distraught, lad.” I fell utterly still at the lilting Irish accent of my grandfather’s voice. Liam O’Brien, the head of our entire family. He was the only close member of my family with a full accent like that, though more than a few of my uncles and cousins had a touch of it from their time spent back in the homeland. But the man who headed our criminal empire was born and bred in Killarney with the rich sense of patriotism for his homeland. In fact, I was pretty sure he loved Ireland far more than any of his nine children or subsequent grandchildren. He certainly didn’t pay attention to me all that often.

“I’m surprised she noticed I left,” I said in a rough voice. I wasn’t just going to bow to him, but I wasn’t a fucking idiot. He could have me killed in whatever heinous way he desired before the sun set tonight if the notion took him. But I was the polished front they wanted for their crime ring. The name that opened doors. My Dad did all of that for now, but I knew they wanted me to take over from him soon enough. To get someone with O’Brien blood *and* the Roscoe name doing their dirty work instead of trusting it to the in-law.

But they hadn’t really counted on me being my own man. On me wanting out of their plans and away from that life. But of course it wasn’t going to be that easy. They wouldn’t just let me *choose*.

“Connor says he took you to Royaume D’élite and you threw a fit over your initiation like a wet little babe,” Liam said in his unhurried tone. I had to call him Grandpa to his face, but that name always seemed too doting for the cold man I knew. “I told him that my golden boy wasn’t afraid of nothin’. That there was no way the things you’d seen and done there could have shocked you into runnin’ off like a little pussy. So I wanna hear it from your mouth. In your words. Why are ya breakin’ ya ma’s heart?”

“She doesn’t have a heart and we both know it,” I deadpanned, taking

another long drag of my cigarette.

It was so beautiful up here that I could almost pretend the man on the other end of the line was in a whole other world. Somewhere he couldn't hunt me down and gut me like a pig for choosing my words poorly.

He laughed darkly but there was no real humour in it. "C'mon boy, I don't have all day. I'll have the truth from your lips now or I'll send Niall to come get you for a more personal chat."

Another lungful of nicotine gave me the strength not to curse him. Niall was arguably the worst of my uncles. Certainly the most unpredictable. He might come down here and cut one of my balls off just for causing him to make the journey. Or he might gut one of the other students out of boredom. He could just as easily do nothing at all and come at me with jokes and smiles. And there was no real way of knowing with him until the blood started running.

"Naw, don't waste his time chasing after me. I'm only at school. The same school you sent me to to get my posh boy education so I can play my part one day," I said easily.

"That almost sounds like you intend to fill the role that's been assigned to you," Liam replied. "But I know you cut your ties to us as thoroughly as you could before you went back to that fancy school of yours. Lucky for you your tuition for the year was already paid up, wasn't it? Or else you'd have had nowhere to go."

"Yeah. You know I appreciate that... I just wanna be my own man, Grandpa," I said, using the affectionate term to try and butter him up. But his heart was so black it made mine look rosy so I was doubtful it would help. "I wanna carve my own path. Prove myself and make my own choices."

"And you want to abandon your family to do that? Are you sure Royaume D'élite didn't break something in you? I'd hate to think of you as soft, boy."

I blew out a breath laced with smoke and stubbed out my cigarette before jamming another between my lips and lighting that too. Because he was right. Royaume D'élite had been the final straw for me. I'd known my family was a bunch of cutthroats and criminals, but that place crossed lines I hadn't even realised needed to be drawn. It was the ultimate abuse of money and power. People were bought and sold like chattel. Men fought to the death for the vague promise of a better life that was never coming. Girls younger than some of my classmates were auctioned off to men older than my grandpa and more depraved than all of my uncles combined for nothing more than the chance of being selected for the higher tier, and the oblivion of the drugs they were given to make them forget what had been done to them. Assuming they survived the night at all.

And the things they'd made me do as part of my initiation...I shuddered in disgust at myself as I refused to even think about it. I'd been in firm denial about it ever since but if I was being honest with myself, I knew those memories were haunting me. I'd been forced to find out just how fucked up I was and I'd been more than a little horrified to realise just how fucking low I would fall in the name of survival.

"Soft?" I scoffed, making sure none of the horror and disgust I felt made it into my tone. "I'm not *soft*. I'm all for death and glory with a worthy opponent. That place was just a scam. No one in there had an ounce of grit to them. They were posturing assholes who bought their power. Most of them used fucking proxies to make it through the initiation. How does that prove they've got anything to them? How does that show their strength, power and superiority like they spout? If I'm going to be claiming that my balls are the biggest in the room then I'll prove my power for myself, earn it honestly, on my *own*."

Though I wished I hadn't been forced to prove it in that fucking place. To

do the things it had taken to win...

“I’m glad to hear it, lad, you’re an O’Brien through and through, each of us earned our own spot there, but the world is the way it is. You must have learned that in your fancy school. More men have inherited their money than earned it these days and we can’t be so picky about our friends as to alienate them for some unsavoury tendencies. Besides, who cares about a few whores and addicts being carved up for fun? You passed the initiation already. You don’t wanna take part in the games on offer when you go back there, then don’t. Any man tries to call you a pussy for it, you fuck him up good and I’ll get a cleaner in for you to dispose of the pieces. But it’s time for you to stop sulking and come back to the fold.”

“I don’t want anything to do with Royaume D’élite,” I grunted. *Or any of you*, I added in my head. “There’s having no mercy and there’s having no morals. I don’t want to be a man without either.”

“We all have dreams of the kinds of men we want to be, but there are very few of us who have the privilege of getting to make that choice for ourselves in this world. My patience is wearing thin, Kyan. Your birth came with a purpose and you *will* fulfil it. Unfortunately for you, your ma couldn’t stomach your father lingering between her thighs often enough to make a backup so you’re the one and only.”

“If I’m that important then let me come back on my own terms,” I growled, plucking the cigarette from between my lips and stubbing it out aggressively.

“Don’t go mistaking importance with power,” Liam murmured in a low tone which had the hairs standing up along the back of my neck. “We need *you* alive. But your pretty little girlfriend is a different matter. And so are those fancy friends of yours. The Governor’s son might be hard to cover up, but no one gives a shit about the teacher. And even the footballer’s boy could

disappear without too many questions being asked. Those celebrity type kids are always getting mixed up in drugs. One bad batch is all it would take.”

I didn't bother to point out that Blake's dad wasn't a footballer and that he actually owned the fucking team. He was probably getting it wrong just to piss me off.

“You're threatening my family, old man,” I snarled, my mind whirling as I tried to figure out which spineless cretin in this school was reporting back to my relatives. I was sure we'd chased the spies out last year, but if he knew about Tatum then he still had someone watching me. Maybe more than one person.

“No,” Liam replied calmly. “You're an O'Brien. The only family you've got shares blood with *me*. And if you don't remember that soon, I'll happily relieve you of the distractions. I wonder what price your pretty little piece of ass would fetch at Royaume D'élite? It's a shame you've broken her in really, virgins always sell better.”

I bit my tongue to stop myself from screaming and the line hung silent between us.

The eagle shrieked and took a dive out of the sky, plummeting towards the ground far below and taking the remains of my blackened heart with it.

“How soon?” I demanded eventually. He was nothing if not precise and I knew this threat would come with a deadline.

“Christmas. I'll have you home for dinner with your family. You can bring the girlfriend too.”

“I don't have a girlfriend,” I ground out. “I have girls to fuck when the mood suits me, I've got no interest in anything more than that.”

“I'll be sure to tell sweet Tatum you said that when I see her at Christmas. I'm sure she'll be glad of the invite. Seeing as the last member of her family is on the run and all, I doubt she has any other plans.”

The line went dead before I could respond and I pushed to my feet with a roar of rage.

I swung around and threw my fist into the rock wall I'd been sitting against, my knuckles crunching as blood flew and agony exploded through them.

I damn near launched my phone over the cliff face for good measure, but if he tried to call me again and didn't get through, I had no doubt he'd follow through on those threats and send someone up here.

I balled my fists and paced up and down as the rage in me turned deadly and my thirst for blood made my skin itch. I needed to do something to counter the utter fucking injustice of this and turn my mind from fantasies of hopping on my bike and riding down to Liam's house with my fucking bat to cave his skull in along with those of all of my uncles. Some days I was certain that that was what this would come to in the end. If I wanted to live my own life, the cost of it was theirs. But the size and scope of their organisation meant that getting them all in one place for anything aside from a funeral or a wedding was practically impossible. But the next time they were going to gather I might just be tempted to host a fucking massacre.

Fuck my filthy blood and depraved family.

I ground my jaw as I tried to figure out what to do. Maybe it was time I faced my lies, my secrets. Did I really believe that Saint and Blake would turn their backs on me for what I'd done in that place? But if they did then I'd be left with nothing and no one and my fate would be sealed either way.

I cursed loudly and strode towards my dirt bike at a fast pace, leaping onto it and slamming my boot down on the kick start so that it roared to life. I ripped the throttle back and tore down the steep mountain paths way faster than was safe, enjoying the way the cold wind stung my skin and my heart leapt every time I came close to losing control of the machine beneath me.

I weaved around more and more thick tree trunks the further I descended, the bright midday sun lighting the forest all around me as the bike churned up mud and I dropped off of ledges and jumped fallen trunks.

By the time I reached the base of the mountain, adrenaline was coursing through my veins and my bad mood was almost lightening. But all it took was a single thought of that phone call to kill any enjoyment I might have been able to glean from the ride.

I tore up the paths that circled the lake and students screamed as they were forced to dive out of my way. I spotted Deepthroat falling on her ass as I nearly flattened her and laughed darkly to myself. Maybe a bit of Unspeakable hunting was what I needed. I was definitely starving for something to satisfy the monster in me.

I spun the bike off of the path as I neared The Temple then raced around the building towards the trees behind the church where there was an old outbuilding which Saint had gotten fixed up for me to store my bike. I'd make one of the Unspeakables come by and wash it later.

I rolled the bike inside and left it there before stalking back out and leaning against the stone wall of the little outbuilding.

I sighed heavily as I tried to decide what to do, pulling the pack of cigarettes from my pocket again and sparking one up as I kicked my foot back against the wall.

I closed my eyes as I inhaled the smoke and tried to fight against the desire to go and kick the shit out of anyone and everyone I could find. I wanted to feel the thump and thwack of my fists pounding flesh, feel the ache and burn of receiving blows myself and bathe in the blood of some deserving fucker who could put up a damn good fight.

I found myself thinking about the night we'd killed that asshole for Tatum. Trying to bury my rage in the memory of violence, but all it really did was

increase my appetite. I really was a fucked up creature.

“I didn’t know you enjoyed a slow and lingering form of suicide as a pastime,” Tatum’s voice reached me and I cracked my eyes open to find her looking up at me.

She was wearing her running gear, headphones dangling around her neck and the tight clothes clinging to her body. Blake had gone out with her as none of us were willing to leave her on her own until this stalker shit had been dealt with, but I guessed they were back already. Fuck knows how long I’d been up the mountain pouting on my own.

“You want one?” I asked, offering up the pack of cigarettes as I took a drag on my own again.

“Ew, no. You do realise this makes you like ten points less attractive, right? What’s the deal anyway? Do you just enjoy playing chicken with cancer or do you think you’re so fucking tough that there’s just no way you’ll ever get sick?”

I leaned towards her and blew my smoke in her face, making her scrunch her nose up in disgust. “Naw, baby,” I taunted. “I don’t think I’m too tough for cancer. I just think a more violent death is in my future so it doesn’t seem like there’s much point in me worrying about it.”

“Is...something wrong?” she asked, her brow creasing with concern and I let the cigarette hang out of the corner of my mouth as my gaze slid over her.

“Yeah. Have you come to bask in my pain?”

“No,” she snapped, having the nerve to sound offended. “It is possible for one person to care about seeing another in pain.”

I snorted derisively. “So you wanna help me banish my demons, do you?”

“Maybe.”

For a moment the truth actually came to the tip of my tongue and I took a long drag on my cigarette as I considered giving it to her. It wasn’t like her

opinion of me could get much lower anyway and today this truth was weighing on me more heavily than usual. Maybe offloading it would help.

“Or maybe I should just leave you here smoking and having a pity party for one,” she added as the silence stretched. “After everything you’ve done to me, it’s not like I owe you anything anyway.”

“If you really wanna help me out, baby, then why don’t you get on your knees and suck my dick for me like you did at Monroe’s initiation?” I snapped, the anger in me rising to the surface as I wondered why I’d even considered trusting her when I hadn’t trusted my brothers with this and my heart pounded with fury.

“Fuck you, Kyan,” she snarled, turning and stalking away from me but now that my gaze had fallen on my prey, I wasn’t willing to let her go.

“Alright, I’m feeling generous,” I called as I moved after her, catching her arm, whipping her around to look up at me and drowning my fears in the hatred I found in her blue eyes. “I’ll give you what you’ve been aching for and fuck you until you can’t think straight. Fair warning though, I’m in a foul mood and I’m rough as fuck, so you might wanna prepare yourself.”

“I don’t know why I even bothered,” she hissed, yanking her arm out of my grip. “Serves me right for trying to help you. But don’t worry, I’ve learned my lesson and I won’t ever attempt it again.”

Something shattered and fell apart in my chest as she glared at me with her eyes full of hatred, but all I did was glare right back at her.

“What the fuck is going on out here?” Saint’s voice interrupted us and Tatum looked at him as he stalked around The Temple towards us, but my eyes were glued on her.

I was gripping her arm too tightly, but the idea of her walking off on me right now was too fucking much along with everything else. But all I seemed to be able to do well with her recently was rile her up and drive her away, and

I was so self-destructive that I couldn't fucking stop it.

Saint stormed straight up to us and shoved me in the chest, forcing me to release her as I stumbled back a step.

"You knew what I'd fucking do if I ever caught you smoking again," he snarled at me and I sucked in a final drag a moment before he snatched the cigarette from my mouth.

He spun it in his fingers and drove the cherry straight against my chest with a snarl of rage, stubbing it out as it burned right through my shirt and the pain of it cut into my flesh.

I stood my ground and glared at him as he held it there, his eyes flaring with fury as he burned me and I just fucking took it. Because why the hell not? I'd known exactly what he'd do when he caught me and some fucked up piece of me had wanted it so that at least one single part of my body would feel an inch of the pain my soul was drowning in right now.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Tatum yelled, her fist slamming into Saint's jaw as she knocked him away from me with a snarl of rage and the cigarette went flying into the mud.

She looked up at me with real pain her eyes like she was trying to figure out what the hell was wrong with me and like she actually gave a crap too.

Saint snarled in fury as he wheeled on her and I snatched her hand, yanking her behind me as I squared off against him.

"Back off," I warned, my muscles bunching as I prepared to fight him if he tried to lay a finger on her.

"If you think for a single second that I'm going to let her get away with punching me without a punishment--"

"No," I snarled. "You wanna punish someone then come for me."

Saint rubbed his jaw where she'd hit him and my grip on her hand tightened as I kept her behind me and she tried to move to face him. But there

was no way I was letting her out from my protection until I knew she didn't need it anymore.

“The two of you don't need to get into a dick measuring contest,” Tatum growled behind me. “But I'm going inside with Kyan, *right now* to see what the fuck you've just done to his chest and patch him up.”

I frowned at the note of concern in her voice and Saint glowered at me for a long moment before grunting his agreement.

“Fine. But I'll be dealing with both of you later. If you can't get to the bottom of his shit, Barbie, then I'll be doing it my way. And you'd better be ready to pay for striking me.” He snatched the packet of cigarettes from my pocket and scrunched them up until they crumbled and tobacco sprinkled all over the floor. “And if your family is causing shit, then I want the full explanation, not some watered down bullshit,” he warned me before turning and stalking away.

Tatum tugged on my hand and I frowned at her as she drew me towards The Temple, letting her pull me along as I wondered what the hell she even wanted from me. A minute ago she'd been glaring at me with hatred and now she was acting like some little burn on my flesh actually hurt her more than it did me.

I stayed silent as she drew me around to the door, watching as Saint headed off up the path towards Ash Chambers.

I was surprised he was willing to leave us to it. But I guessed he'd figured out that if he'd stayed, we'd be brawling in the mud by now. He wouldn't wanna mess up his fancy clothes. And maybe it was that. Or maybe it was the way Tatum had looked at him like she wanted to skin him alive for stubbing that cigarette out on my skin.

She pulled me into the church and left me standing by the dining table as she moved away to start rummaging in one of the cupboards in the

kitchenette.

“Take your jacket off,” she commanded as she pulled a first aid kit out and headed to the freezer. “And your shirt if the material isn’t burned to your skin. And sit up on the table.”

I shrugged out of my jacket and yanked my ruined shirt off too. I was pretty sure the sharp tug and explosion of pain that came from the burn told me it *had* been melted to my skin but it wasn’t anymore.

I looked down at the round mark and was pleased to find he’d missed my tattoos, the burn sitting on a small patch of bare skin just above my heart. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’d aimed carefully to hit that exact spot too. Saint was nothing if not exact.

“Christ,” Tatum hissed as she approached me with the first aid kit in one hand and a bowl of ice cubes in the other. “What the hell was he thinking doing that to you?”

“When I quit smoking, I asked him to do that if he ever caught me lighting up again,” I supplied. There were a few things my family had given me which I couldn’t really help, my craving for nicotine was one that I could leave behind and I intended to strip myself of as much of them as I physically could.

Tatum frowned at me as she took that in then shook her head. “I don’t know if that request is more fucked up or him actually doing it is,” she muttered.

“If you hadn’t realised how twisted we are yet then you can’t have been paying attention,” I said in a low voice. “You bound yourself to a group of broken creatures when you joined us, baby.”

“Don’t I know it,” she huffed.

I leaned back to sit on the dining table like she’d told me and she moved to stand between my thighs as she placed her supplies down beside me and

inspected the wound.

“My dad taught me a bunch of first aid, but it was more wound care in case I got injured while we were out in the woods or something than things like burns...” she muttered, biting into her bottom lip as she inspected the inflamed skin on my chest and I inspected her. She really was beautiful. Captivating. The kind of girl who didn’t really exist, like a fantasy given flesh.

I watched as she lifted an ice cube and pressed it to the burn, the contrast in temperature almost made me flinch and the pain intensified as she looked back up into my eyes.

“Do you get off on hurting me?” I asked her and I wasn’t even sure if I was talking about the burn or...something else.

“I’m literally standing here trying to patch you up right now and you’re asking me that?”

“It’s just...ice make burns worse, not better. I wasn’t sure if that was the point, or-”

She snatched the ice cube away from my skin and frowned between it and me. “Cold makes burns better,” she disagreed and I was a little surprised to see that she really had been meaning to help me and not just revel in my pain. There weren’t many people who I could say cared about me enough to look after me in that way in my life.

“Ice is too cold,” I said with a shrug. I didn’t mention the fact that I knew that because my uncle Connor had once tortured a man to death using fire and ice right in front of me. I was twelve at the time. In fact, it was my birthday. Kinda hard to forget a gift like that. His weapons of choice had been a little more powerful than a cigarette and an ice cube though so I wasn’t too concerned for my life.

“Then why did you let me put it on the burn?” Tatum demanded as she

whipped out her phone and googled it.

“Because I figure if you’re aching to hurt me then I probably deserve at least some of what you want to dish out.”

“You do,” she agreed fiercely. “But, I don’t *want* to hurt you. I just feel like I have to. Because of everything you’ve all done to me.”

“Liar,” I growled and she looked up at me sharply.

“I wasn’t like this before I met you assholes.”

“That’s called growth, baby,” I said in a low voice. “Just because you hadn’t explored this part of yourself before doesn’t mean it wasn’t there. You can’t tell me you don’t like it. I’ve seen the way your eyes light up in a fight. You’ve got the bloodlust in you, just like me.”

“I’m nothing like you,” she denied, but her voice was a whisper and there wasn’t much conviction in her eyes.

“You’ve had a taste of the devil now,” I countered, reaching out to wrap my hands around her waist and pull her closer to me. She didn’t resist and her hands curled around my biceps as she looked into my eyes. “And you like the way he feels inside you.”

“Why do you always have to make everything sound dirty?” she complained, but her grip on my arms said she didn’t mind it so much.

“Because life is dirty. *I’m* dirty. I couldn’t change it if I wanted to and I see no point in denying it.”

“You want the world to think you’re so tough, Kyan Roscoe, but I think it’s just armour. So many layers of it that you don’t even know how to take it off anymore. But deep down inside, you’re not so dirty. Right where it counts, you’re not so broken.”

“Do you wanna save me, baby?” I teased, drawing her in as my gaze lingered on her lips for too long.

“Do you *want* me to save you, Kyan?” she breathed in return.

“It’s too late for that,” I replied slowly. “Even if some deluded part of me hungers for it, I know in my heart that there’s no redemption for me. I wasn’t born broken, but I’ve lived enough to get fucked up every which way until there’s so little light left in me it’s a wonder I can even see through the dark.”

“I don’t believe that. I think we all get a choice in the people we want to be and you’re making yours by choosing not to be that man too.”

“What a pretty little world you must have grown up in, baby. Your daddy really did love you, didn’t he?”

“Don’t do that,” she said, frowning at me like I was disappointing her.

“Do what?”

“Push your issues onto me. You don’t have to bullshit me all the damn time.”

I barked a laugh and stood up suddenly so that my chest brushed against hers.

“You already called it - I’m so broken I’m un-fucking-lovable. So the least I can do if I’m gonna be living alone my whole life is fight until I can’t fight no more and fuck until I can’t feel all of that pain which festers inside of me and take as much pleasure as I can get in whatever way I derive it until I end up dead and forgotten.”

I pushed past her as I hunted for some Jack to take the edge off of my pain, physical or otherwise.

“Why don’t you just tell me what’s going on with you today?” she asked, stalking after me with a tube of burn cream grasped in her hand like a weapon.

Fucking Saint had stashed all of the booze away down in the crypt again and I knocked the cupboard closed as I headed to the door which led down to the gym without answering her question.

The worst thing was some stupid, aching little part of me wanted to do as

she'd asked. To turn to her and tell her about my family, about the shitty life they'd planned out for me and the fucked up things they'd subjected me to in their attempts to mould me into the perfect pawn as I grew up. I was tempted to try and explain myself and make her understand why I was the way I was and convince her that despite all that, I was still my own man. At least in part. At least with her.

But I couldn't. And I wouldn't. She might have told me once that I belonged to her, but no one deserved the burden of taking on responsibility for me. And no one in their right mind would want to anyway. Certainly not someone like her.

I jogged down into the crypt, passing through the gym and into the old prayer room we used for storage now. Just as I'd thought, my whiskey was waiting for me there and I snatched it quickly, ripping the top off and drinking down way more than a healthy measure.

"What would it take to get you to tell me the truth?" Tatum asked as she came to stand behind me.

"The truth?" I scoffed, looking at her as I drank more whiskey, enjoying a different kind of burn as it rolled down my throat. "There's so much truth in me that I wouldn't even know where to begin. And once I started telling it, you'd wish I never had anyway. There are some things that you're better off never knowing about me. Some secrets which would cut too deep."

I made a move to walk past her, but her palm landed on my chest, carefully avoiding the cigarette burn, as she moved into my way and I fell still as that point of contact between us took up all of my attention.

"Start with something small then," she said in a low voice. It was dark back here away from the lights in the gym, but her blue eyes still shone with intensity.

My mind whirled with all of the fucked up, world altering, impossibly

devastating truths I could offer her and I landed on the smallest one I could think of.

“I kept the knife,” I breathed.

“What?” she asked, her palm hot against my chest as she kept it there, her body so close to mine in the dark that I was aching to move even closer.

I unclasped the hunting knife which was strapped to my belt, pulling it free of its sheath and offering it to her.

Her hand trembled a little as she took it and I watched her hungrily as recognition spilled into her gaze.

“You’re fucking crazy,” she whispered as if she thought the walls might be listening in on us. “This...we *killed* someone with this. Why the hell would you have kept it? It’s *evidence!*”

I ignored her concerns, Saint had cleaned the thing meticulously so I knew there was no DNA evidence on it and the body was long gone so I wasn’t worried about getting caught with it.

“Tell me baby, how good did it feel when you drove this blade into him?” I growled, leaning down to brush my mouth against her collar bone and making her shiver as my stubble grazed her skin.

“I didn’t *enjoy* killing him,” she protested, her breath catching as I moved my lips up her neck, laying the softest of kisses against her skin.

“It’s not about the killing,” I murmured. “It’s about survival. Knowing you’ve got what it takes.”

“I...” The cold blade in her hand pressed against my stomach as she touched me while still maintaining her grip on it and I growled with desire for her as I skated my lips up to her jaw.

“When you stabbed him, it broke those shackles in your mind which had painted the world in black and white,” I said. “And you realised that sometimes an act of evil is what it takes to destroy evil. Sometimes the

darkest of creatures can be fighting things that are even darker. And that just maybe, the construct of good and bad, the lines drawn in the sand between one and the other aren't as clear cut as you used to believe.”

Her back arched as I curled my hands around her waist, loving how delicate she felt in my arms while knowing just how strong she really was.

“So what does that make me?” she asked breathlessly. “If sometimes, I think I like the dark?”

“Powerful,” I said, my mouth moving along her jaw as I drew ever closer to her full lips and my heart pounded feverishly with the desire to taste them. “Beautiful,” I added, grazing my teeth along her skin and making her gasp. “And free.”

My mouth brushed the corner of hers and a soft moan escaped her as I fell still there, every piece of me aching to make that final move, to feel the press of those full lips against mine, to taste the desire on her tongue and open myself up to all the things I shouldn't have been wishing she might be to me.

“Kyan...” she murmured, her voice husky, her chest pressing against mine as the sound of our heavy breaths filled the small prayer room and echoed off of the cold stone walls.

“Every good thing that's ever gotten close to me has ended up destroyed,” I said slowly, my lips brushing against her skin as I stayed locked in place, desperate to claim that kiss from her and terrified of what it would mean for her if I did.

Liam already knew about her, had already guessed what she might mean to me. If I crossed this line, I was only dragging her in deeper, making sure I'd pull her under with me when the weight of my secrets finally drowned me.

“If this is about the things I said to you in anger, I-”

“Everything you said to me was true,” I said, my grip on her waist

tightening as I battled with my own selfish desires and with what I knew was best for her.

“Kyan,” she breathed again and I fucking loved the way my name sounded coming from her. She turned her head so that her lips brushed against mine for the briefest of seconds, but I pulled back before it could even resemble a kiss.

“The darkness in me is the type that breeds,” I said roughly, gazing into her eyes as I fought off the desires of my flesh in favour of what I knew was right. “And when it touches something good, it infects it. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll keep far away from me.”

I took a step back but she hounded forward, dropping the burn cream and catching my cheek in her grasp as she forced me to stop again.

“You just told me that the lines between good and bad aren’t clear cut, Kyan,” she said fiercely. “So maybe you should let me decide how much I want to blur them.”

“There’s dipping your toe in the water and then there’s drowning in an ocean of darkness,” I replied roughly, ignoring the ache in my chest as I used my grip on her waist to push her back. “And I’m not going to drag you under the surface with me.”

I prised my knife from her grip before she could try and argue anymore and snatched the bottle of Jack before striding away from her.

There weren’t many good things that I’d done in my life, but I could do this. I could shield her from the worst of me and try to keep my family’s attention away from her. I’d convince them that she was nothing to me and I’d do whatever they fucking wanted to keep them away from her and the other Night Keepers.

I’d been kidding myself to believe that I could really cut myself off from them and never go back there anyway. They had their hooks in me too deep.

And it was time to admit that my life had never been destined to be my own.



Rain hammered against the window as I sat in the library with the Unspeakables in our usual spot. My gaze lingered on the dark lake under the heavy clouds, the water rippling and stirring beneath the onslaught. I loved the beaches of SoCal, but I couldn't deny Everlake was growing on me. There was something so wild about this place, the way the weather changed ten times a day. Sunny one moment, then stormy the next. It mirrored the way I felt about the Night Keepers. I hated them with all the force of a hurricane, only to be caught off guard, laughing with them like the sun had broken through the clouds a beat later. It was a stressful way to live, but it made me feel wide awake too. Like I was living with every single ounce of my being, not just drifting along on autopilot.

My gaze fell on the rose-shaped scar on the inside of my forearm and my heart began to beat out of rhythm as I thought over everything my dad had told me again. *Immune...how can I be immune?* But it made sense. That looter had coughed right in my face and I hadn't gotten sick. I'd thought I'd

just been lucky, but no...there was a reason after all.

“So, I’ve been thinking,” Deepthroat said – shit *Ashlynn*. I had to start thinking of them with their real names, but it was hard. Especially when they cringed every time I said their true names out loud.

Squits and Pigs exchanged a nervous glance, but Freeloader gave her an encouraging look.

Deepthroat sat up straighter and I noticed she was wearing a little more makeup than usual, like her confidence was slowly but surely seeping back into her. It made my heart swell to see it.

“What if we started a protest?” she suggested. “We could make signs and banners, chain ourselves to the tables in the courtyard at Aspen Halls and refuse to move until the Night Keepers give us our rights back.” She looked to me for approval and I chewed my lip.

“It could work,” I said thoughtfully, but Squits was already sinking lower in his chair and Pigs shook his head vigorously.

“What about wearing brighter clothes first?” Freeloader suggested, knotting her hand anxiously in her hair.

Deepthroat rolled her eyes. “Brighter clothes? What’s the point in that?”

“It’s a step in the right direction,” Freeloader pushed. “Not an all out protest where we’ll most likely end up outcast like Bait.”

“*Shh.*” Squits waved a hand frantically to hush her, his eyes darting to the aisles leading away from our spot. “Don’t mention Bait.”

“He used to be your friend,” I pointed out. “And I think he’s suffered enough.”

“Well, that’s not for you to say, is it?” Deepthroat said with a sigh. “Unless the Night Keepers are giving you extra privileges now?” Her eyes sparkled with hope for a moment, but I shook my head.

“No,” I huffed, sitting back in my seat. “What about the others? We need

all of you together if we're going to make a stand."

"Pirate said he's going to join us tonight," Pigs said, sitting up taller in his seat and checking his watch. "He should be here any minute."

I smiled genuinely, glad there was *some* progress being made at least. There were a bunch of Unspeakables who'd I'd barely spoken to before. I figured they were too afraid of the Night Keepers, so was happy at least one more felt brave enough to join us.

Pirate finally arrived and I took in the slim, dark skinned boy whose eyes flitted left and right anxiously.

"Hey," I said gently, pointing to an empty chair across the table. "Come join us."

He nodded, dropping into it, but not getting anything out of his bag like he was considering leaving already.

"So, what's your name?" I asked and he shot a look at Pigs who nodded in encouragement.

He cleared his throat several times, his fingers flexing. "Quentin," he whispered and I held out my hand across the table.

"Nice to meet you properly, Quentin." He took my hand briefly and I squeezed before sitting back in my seat.

"We were just talking about-" I started, but a cold voice cut me off.

"So, this is where you lurk." I jumped in alarm, but it was nothing to how the Unspeakables reacted to seeing Kyan emerging from the shadows.

Squits looked like he'd just lived up to his name, every drop of blood had abandoned Freeloader's face, Pirate was on his feet looking for the nearest exit, Deepthroat let out a small scream and Pigs legit toppled off of his chair and hit the floor on his ass.

My heart beat unsteadily in my chest as I rose from my seat, stepping forward to put myself between Kyan and the Unspeakables.

“We study together, what’s the problem?” I asked rudely, folding my arms.

Kyan’s eyes roamed over the people behind me with abject hate in his expression before his gaze returned to mine. Danger hung in the air like an oncoming storm and I moved another step closer in an effort to get his attention off of the others.

“The problem,” he spat. “Is that you’re only allowed one friend and not only are you breaking that rule, you’re breaking it with the scum of the fucking earth.”

My jaw clenched as rage made my blood pound fast through my veins. “We’re studying together, that’s all. And this is my haven, I didn’t invite you into it.” I reached out to shove him back a step and everyone gasped in horror behind me.

Kyan looked down his nose at me, water dripping from his damp hair which was loose and chaotic. “Nowhere is safe from me, baby.”

He shoved me aside, prowling toward the Unspeakables and jumping up onto the table (a free-standing fucking jump). His muddy boots left prints all over their work as he strode around the table in a circle, eyeing them all like prey.

“Stop being an asshole,” I demanded, glaring up at him with fury in my heart.

“No can do, sugartits. That’s like asking the wind not to blow or the wolf not to howl.” He threw me a wink and I planted my hands on my hips.

“Stop it,” I growled. “I’ll go if that’s what you want, just leave them alone.”

“Alright,” Kyan sighed and my shoulders relaxed a little. “As soon as I’ve relieved myself.” He unzipped his fly, tugging out his dick and started pissing on Depththroat’s work, the urine splashing onto her clothes as she gazed up at

him unblinkingly.

“Oh my god,” I gasped, unsure what to do as I watched this actually happen. “You fucking bastard! Get away from her!”

Kyan growled in satisfaction, tucking himself away and tugging up his fly before his gaze shot to me. “You wouldn’t defend her if you knew what she did.”

“She just had a crush on you and tried to give you a blowjob, is that really deserving of all this assfuckery?” I was burning up with how mad I was. I couldn’t believe what I’d just seen, or the fact that the Unspeakables were staring at him like this wasn’t even the worst of what they usually faced.

Kyan tsked, sneering at Deepthroat. “Is that what she said?” He jumped off of the table, striding towards me, leering. “And you believe her just like that, do you? Sweet, innocent Tatum, standing up for the poor little victims of the Night Keepers. How fucking noble of you.”

He grabbed my wrist in a vice-like grip, dragging me down the aisle and I dug my heels in furiously.

“Let go of me,” I demanded, throwing a punch into his side, but he didn’t slow, hauling me along until we reached the front door and dragging me out into the storm. I didn’t even have my blazer or my bag and I was instantly soaked as he pulled me up the path, the rain tumbling down on us like bullets.

“Kyan!” I shouted over the raging wind. “Let go of me!”

His grip was so tight, it was bruising, but he didn’t relent, his jaw set as he pulled me along with intention, and wherever we were going, I feared arriving there more than the journey.

I spotted Kyan’s dirt bike leaning against a tree out of the storm and he pulled me over to it, shoving his helmet onto my head before getting on the bike and glaring at me in an order to get on.

I turned, about to run away, when he grabbed my wrist again and threw

me over his lap so I was gazing down at the ground.

“Kyan!” I screamed as he took off down the path, veering in the opposite direction to The Temple and the wind blew up my skirt so my ass was completely fucking exposed to him. I heard him laugh as the rain crashed over my bare skin and I growled in fury, unable to do anything as I clung onto his leg for dear life. Nothing but curse him anyway.

“You fucking dickbag, good-for-nothing son of a bitch!” I screamed as he did a wheelie, one hand slamming down on my ass to keep me in place. When the front wheel landed again, we sailed downhill and the wind had mercy and blew my skirt back down to cover my panties, but fuck if it did anything to lessen my fury. My hate.

This bastard, this absolute piece of shit bastard!

He pulled off of the path and the rain stopped drenching me as he parked the bike under a tree. I got up, ripping the helmet off and smacking him around the head with it. He snatched it from my hands, tossing it to the ground as he swung his leg over the seat and came after me. There was a demon living in his eyes and I didn't want anything to do with it. I turned and ran, racing for the path as I realised we'd arrived at the Willow Boathouse.

His heavy footfalls pounded after me, but I was quicker, I just had to put some distance between us. *Fuck him and his stupid fucking face.*

My foot slipped on the wet grass and I cried out as my ankle twisted at an awkward angle and I hit the ground on my knees.

“Fuck,” I hissed and Kyan plucked me up like I weighed as much as a feather, tossing me over his shoulder as he carried me into the boathouse.

It was a state of the art place with gleaming white walls and three ports where rowing boats and jet skis sat bobbing in the water. Lined up on one wall were kayaks and oars, all perfectly aligned as if Saint had personally overseen the job. Kyan took an iron spiral staircase up to the second level

while I pounded my fists into his back, his footsteps ringing off of the metal as he made it to the top and pushed through a glass door.

He carried me to one of the rattan pouffes that filled a corner of the room, gently placing me down on it and dropping onto the floor in front of me on his knees. He took my foot into his lap, peeling off my shoe then sliding his fingers up my calf to grip the top of my knee-high sock. He refused to meet my eye and as much as I wanted to kick him for what he'd done back in the library, my ankle was still throbbing and I didn't think it would do it any good. I still had the other foot though...

He peeled off my sock, his rough fingers trailing against my skin and making my heart race as he skimmed his thumb along the arch of my foot.

"It's fine," I said throatily, lifting my head to look around the room.

It was an incredible lounge with a boat theme, a life ring hanging on the wall between incredible artwork of the lake. The far end of the room was full of shelves with boating equipment filling every space in neat piles, and there was a huge table with a model of the Everlake campus on it.

I winced as Kyan ran his thumb over my ankle, putting pressure on my Achilles' tendon.

"What are you doing?" I asked irritably despite the fire in my veins which told me how much I liked his touch, even if it did come with a pinch of pain. But everything about Kyan always hurt me, so I wasn't surprised.

"I'm tending your wounds, like you tended mine." He lifted his eyes and I forgot to hate him for a full heartbeat. *Jesus fucking Christ how does he always get so deep under my skin?* "Where does it hurt?"

"Everywhere," I whispered before I realised I'd said it out loud.

He frowned, rubbing his thumb into the tendon and I winced again.

"There," I agreed, wanting to move on from what I'd just said. Because it was horrifyingly true. He made me hurt in every corner of my body, from the

tips of my toes to the deepest regions of my soul. Kyan Roscoe made each piece of me feel bruised.

As he massaged my ankle, it started to feel better and I sighed, dropping my head so my soaking hair fell forward to frame my face. “You shouldn’t do that, Kyan, not if you don’t want me to run again.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” he taunted. “Prey is no fun caught. I like it alive and fucking kicking.”

I shifted my other foot, kicking him in the leg with a smirk. “That so?”

“That’s so,” he agreed, continuing his surprisingly gentle work with my ankle.

“I feel like the most typical blonde bitch in the world right now,” I huffed. “Running away from a psycho only to fall and twist my ankle.”

“Lucky I didn’t have my *Scream* mask and butcher’s knife.”

“You like old school movies?” I asked with a note of laughter at his joke, not admitting that I liked them too.

“Nineties horror is fucking hilarious,” he mused. “Doesn’t rival the gore of today though.”

“I don’t like gore.” I wrinkled my nose.

His thumb pushed a little harder into my tendon and it didn’t hurt this time. “You can avoid stuff like that all you like, but I prefer to look life in the eye and show it that it doesn’t scare me.”

“That’s not real life,” I tutted.

“Blood and gore and death are as real as it comes, baby. No one wants to look behind the walls of a slaughter house, but they all queue up to buy their freshly packaged meat at the market. If people faced the truth, do you think they’d eat it?”

“Well I *don’t* eat it.” I kicked him again. “Because knowing the truth is the same as seeing it.”

“Not for most people,” he said, his eyes burrowing into mine like he wanted to crawl inside my head. “What makes you different?”

“Who knows? Maybe I’m a fairy from a faraway land.” I leaned back, my hair dripping onto the rattan either side of me.

“Well you’re a bit late picking up this lost boy, Tinkerbell. Wish you’d taken me to Neverland long before I had to grow the fuck up.”

Those words cut into my soul and I reached out to cup his cheek. I knew he’d never tell me about his life outside of Everlake, but it was clear how affected he was by whatever life had thrown at him. I couldn’t even picture him as a young boy. I could more clearly imagine him crawling directly out of hell as a fully grown man, tattoos, muscles and all.

My mind drifted back to what he’d done to Deepthroat and I pulled my hand away from his face, my stomach knotting.

“Why do you torture them?” I asked coolly as he placed my foot down on the floor. I pressed my weight into it and it felt good enough to walk on. Probably run too if I had to.

He stood up, holding out a hand to me. “I’ll tell you, but I wanna show you something first.”

I frowned, eyeing the same hand which had just healed my ankle, reluctantly sliding my palm into it. He tugged me upright, waiting as I tested my foot until I nodded to say it was alright. I leaned down, taking off my other shoe and peeling off my soaked sock before he led me toward a sliding glass door across the room. He unlocked it, pushing it wide and guided me onto a covered balcony that looked out over the lake.

The rain was still pouring, rushing down over the edge of the overhanging roof which sheltered half of the balcony. There was a large, white net hammock strung up to one side of it and Kyan guided me to it, falling down into it and pulling me with him. I was forced to press against his side and lay

my leg over his. He kept one foot out of it, using it to push off the floor and make us swing back and forth.

His arm was locked around my shoulders and he took hold of my hair, tugging to make me look up. Above us on the ceiling was a collection of wooden arrows, hundreds of them, all decorated with beautiful coloured feathers as they pointed in varying directions, crammed together across the roof. At the heart of them were words in curling lettering.

*May your arrow fly to the ends of the earth,
May it taste all the colours of the sky.
May it lead you to your wildest adventures.
And may it always point you home.*

“It’s beautiful,” I breathed. “Who made it?”

“The quote is by Cedric Forsythe, the founder of the school. The arrows have been added for years by students who graduate from Everlake. It’s a tradition.”

“I love it,” I whispered, curling closer to him as the cool air swirled around us.

Silence fell between us and it became heavy as both of us were too stubborn to break it.

I sighed eventually, prodding him. “So? Are you going to explain yourself?”

He kicked the floor again so we swung faster in the hammock, refusing to look at me.

When he didn’t speak, I used his chest to push myself up, a huff of annoyance leaving me. “Forget it.”

He dragged me back down, forcing me under his arm again as he refused

to let me leave. “Here’s the truth then, but remember what I said about that. It’s going to change everything.”

“Show me the slaughter house, Kyan,” I insisted and he caught my chin, angling my face up to look at him so I couldn’t escape the sincerity in his gaze as he spoke his next words.

“Deepthroat used to be one of the popular girls. She hung out with Pearl and Georgie and the rest of the mindless rich girls who think their shit don’t stink. She had a thing for me, always did. She used to run around after me at parties, always getting too handsy even when I told her point blank I wasn’t interested. Then one night she slipped something in my drink. I was fucked already, but I’m never too wasted to know what I’m putting my dick in.”

My heart stopped working as his words fell over me like a ton of bricks. *She roofied him??*

He took a breath as he went on, releasing his grip on my chin, but I kept looking up at him all the same. “She managed to get me back to her room and Blake and Saint didn’t know where I was. I never hang around parties all that long, so they probably thought I’d gone off to seek a fight. But not this night. I have no fucking memory of lying down on her bed, but if you haven’t noticed, I have a truckload of willpower, so when my brain kicked back into gear for half a second, I focused on what the fuck was happening.”

“What was happening?” I whispered, knowing I wouldn’t like the next words that came out of his mouth.

“She had my jeans pulled down and my boxers too,” he gritted out. “Her hand was wrapped around my fucking cock as she opened her mouth to suck me off. I wasn’t even hard, I was practically in a coma.”

“Fuck, *what?*” I gasped, my mind spinning as I dropped eye contact with him, going from shocked to furious in half a second. *That bitch, that fucking bitch!*

Kyan grabbed my chin again, making me look at him. “I managed to get her off of me and pull up my fucking boxers, but she kept trying to seduce me, combing her fingers through my hair as I tried to hold onto the inch of clarity I had left in my brain. I was going to pass out, I could feel it. I was about a minute away from losing all fucking consciousness, but I couldn’t let that whore do whatever she was gonna do to me. I tried to get up but she straddled me and all I could smell was her expensive perfume and the scent of strawberry daiquiris on her breath.” His upper lip curled back and a tear slipped from my eye. I was so angry, I was shaking and Kyan held me closer as he felt my reaction. “I managed to shove her off of me, I think I slammed her into the wall but I dunno if I just want to think I did or if that’s a real memory. Either way, I made it to my feet, ripped open her door and stumbled away before she could drag me back inside. Thankfully, I made it back to The Temple before I passed out for good.”

Darkness ebbed and flowed through my veins as I hungered for the end of this story.

“The next day, I told Blake and Saint what had happened and Saint was ready to get her ass expelled and the cops hauling her off to juvie. But I didn’t want that. I wanted her here where I could torture her daily. So we went to her room and frightened the hell out of her, cast her into the Unspeakables and have put in place very careful plans to ruin her reputation and her life the moment she graduates.”

“Like what?” I asked, a sick satisfaction filling me at the idea.

“Like us anonymously buying up half the shares in her family’s company so before she tries to step in as Little Miss CEO after graduation, we can sell them to her competitors and rip out her future from under her feet. We’ve planned out a bunch of shit to systematically destroy her life after she leaves this place. Within a year she’ll be broke, homeless, have her reputation in

tatters, and if I get my way, her family will disown her too.”

I rested my hand on Kyan’s pounding heart, leaning up to press a kiss to his cheek as another fat tear rolled down my skin to collect in my hair.

“Don’t cry, baby,” he said in a hoarse voice. “She’s not worth your tears.”

I’m crying for you, idiot. But I didn’t manage to say the words out loud. They were too raw, too real. And maybe Kyan was right. Maybe I didn’t like the truth after all. But that didn’t mean I didn’t need to hear it.

“Ask me,” he said, his voice gruff.

I took a steadying breath, knowing exactly what he meant. “Squits?” I whispered.

“That piece of shit was going around sneaking laxatives into the meals of anyone he took a dislike to. People all over the school would randomly fall so ill, they nearly shit a lung. The dosages were high. Too fucking high. It wasn’t just some joke. A guy even ended up in hospital for it. He targeted the popular kids, jealous I guess. He snuck into a party at the Oak Common House one night, put laxatives in a bowl of punch that Pearl and her friends had made. Blake saw him thankfully. And holy fuck, did he give him hell. He made him drink every last drop of that punch and exposed him for the scumbag he was. Squits didn’t make it to the bathroom by the time he was about to blow, diving into the cloakroom instead. Suffice to say, Saint still has not forgiven him for ruining his coat, or for any of the other awful shit he did.”

I didn’t feel cold anymore. I felt too hot with this knowledge that I’d been befriending Deepthroat and Squits for weeks, felt sorry for them, defended them. “What about the others?” I whispered, fearing what he was going to say, but needing to know too.

It turned out Pigs had bought a couple of piglets onto campus to scare some girl who’d rejected his advances and planned to leave their mutilated

bodies outside her door. By the time he got to the girls' dorms, one of the cheerleaders had tipped off the Night Keepers after spotting Pigs sneaking into their accommodation. Kyan had beat him within an inch of his life and the piglets had been taken to a sanctuary in Saint's fucking car no less.

Pirate had been bullying a scholarship student into giving him her work, forcing her to try and redo the essays before each of her deadlines. She ended up losing her spot at the school for being unable to get her own work in on time. And all the while Pirate got straight As on every paper he took from her, essentially ruining her life for the sake of his fucking laziness.

Freeloader had apparently ridden through this school on a scholarship even though her parents were wealthy doctors. She'd given her auntie's name as her guardian in her application, making out she couldn't afford the fees and fiddled the system, costing someone else their place at this school who actually needed the help to pay for it. Being on the school board, Saint's mom had gotten wind of the truth, but had told her son there wasn't much they could do about it now she was here. He had obviously disagreed. Freeloader was apparently coming to the end of her term as an Unspeakable though. For smaller crimes, the Night Keepers let them pay their dues then welcomed them back into society.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" I snapped, fisting my hand in Kyan's shirt as anger welled up in me. "Why didn't you tell me!"

More tears ran down my cheeks and Kyan lifted a hand to wipe them away but I smacked it aside, climbing out of the hammock and walking straight out into the rain.

It chilled me to the bone, but it didn't come close to cooling the fiery rage in me. I clutched the railing at the end of the balcony and screamed out at the lake, releasing my hate and pain into the storm. The people I'd fought for, sat with every day, encouraged and looked out for...they'd been nothing but

monsters. Un-fucking-*speakable* monsters.

My mind hooked on Bait and I turned around as I realised Kyan had never mentioned him, finding him right behind me, his shoulders slumped.

“What about Bait?” I asked, my lower lip quivering. “What did he do?”

Shadows coiled through his eyes. “It stands for jail bait,” he growled. “He pressured a fourteen year old girl into having sex with him last year. He groomed her, got her to send him photographs of her body then told her he was considering giving them to a teacher because he was going to get into trouble if they were found. He manipulated her into thinking everything would be alright so long as she gave him what he needed and said he would get rid of the pictures for her if she just did as he asked. After she let him take her virginity, she realised he wasn’t going to stop harassing her. She finally came to us for help, I just wished she’d come fucking sooner. But she’d already asked to transfer schools. She said she was too afraid to go to the police and press charges, but she knew we’d take care of it. Those photos have now been destroyed and Bait will be punished always and fucking forever for what he did. We took our Night Keeper vow to protect everyone in this school, that wasn’t a lie, Tatum,” he said fiercely, his voice loud enough to battle the wind. “We don’t bully people who don’t deserve it. Not until...” He sighed, running a hand over his face to wipe the water away.

“Not until me,” I finished for him and he nodded, hanging his head.

My tears mixed with the rain, hot and cold, icy and burning. My heart crushed in my chest as I tried to take this all in. What it meant. How it changed things. Changed *everything*.

“I’d say I’m sorry but that’s not really good enough, is it?” he growled, his eyebrows knitting together, his pain written into his rain-smattered face.

“No,” I spat, stepping toward him. “It isn’t good enough, Kyan. None of it is good enough.” I slapped him, making his head wheel sideways.

He looked back at me with dead eyes, his chin tilted down. “Better?”

I shook my head, turning away from him again and staring out at the turbulent world which felt exactly like my heart. Nothing would make it right. Nothing could. Even getting my revenge wouldn't take back what they did to me. How they'd treated me as badly as the Unspeakables. Worse maybe. Like I was deserving of all their hate in the same way they were. “You banded me in with them. Is that how you feel about me, Kyan? Are you as disgusted with me as you are with them? Do you think I'm as despicable as they are?”

“Tatum,” he rasped, a plea in his voice that I'd never heard from him before. “You're not like them.”

“Then why did you do it?” I whirled around to face him, ready to hit, fight, claw, but my breathing stuttered as I found him on his knees. Just a boy in the rain with his heart bleeding.

“Because I may punish the villains of this world, baby, but I'm the most heartless villain of them all. Saint, Blake and I were the first Unspeakables, we've all done things that would make you fear us more than death itself. And you may not be guilty, my sweet fucking wild girl, but you're not innocent either. At least half your heart is black, and that half will always call for *us*. I dare you to deny it.”

I walked forward, my bare toes curling against the wet wood as I stood in front of him. I pushed my fingers into his sopping hair and blinked the droplets from my lashes.

“I don't,” I whispered, then I walked past him, heading inside and realising I'd gotten a king to kneel for me as I'd always hoped. And it didn't feel quite as good as I'd imagined.

I thought of my list of revenge and mentally crossed the Unspeakables off it. I wouldn't be seeking vengeance in their names, not now that I knew what

they truly were. It made me sick.

Kyan followed me inside and his arms closed around me from behind as I lingered in the room, not knowing what to do. It didn't feel like an embrace, it felt like a reminder of who I belonged to. "I think I know something that will cheer you up."

"Is it your dick? Because I'm really not in the mood, Ky," I sighed, a headache starting to work its way behind my eyes.

He chuckled wickedly, placing his mouth to my ear, his heated breath sending warmth skittering across my flesh. "Not unless you want it to be."

I shrugged out of his hold, turning to him with narrowed eyes, finding nothing but mischief there. It disarmed me. And I could feel myself giving into it, *wanting* to give into it. After everything he'd told me, I didn't want to be angry at him. At least not for now.

"Let's go then," I said with a casual ass shrug and it was his turn to narrow his eyes at me.

"Just like that?" he questioned like I was a deadly bomb he needed to defuse.

"Just like that." I headed away from him, grabbing my socks and stuffing them in my pocket before pushing on my shoes. Then I jogged downstairs and out through the boathouse. By the time Kyan appeared, I was sitting on his motorbike with his helmet on, patiently waiting to go. He was right, the truth did change things. It changed the whole damn world. And I wasn't ready to face up to what that meant.

I shifted back on the seat as Kyan approached and he sat in front of me, making me wind my arms around his stomach as he kicked the bike into gear. He spun us around and took off down the path, my heart whizzing through my chest as exhilaration took hold of me. The rain was starting to ease and a glimmer of silver light shone beyond the clouds as the moon tried to break

through. We stopped off at the library to grab my things and I was glad to find the Unspeakables had left – and cleaned up Kyan’s piss. I didn’t even feel bad about that now. When I saw Deepthroat again, I was pretty sure I was going to beat the living shit out of her for touching my man.

By the time we reached The Temple, moonlight was filtering down on us and the cold air made me shiver as I waited for Kyan to lock up his bike and return to where I stood under the shelter of the church porch.

“What now?” I asked and he caught my hand, opening the door and towing me inside.

“Now, we shower and get changed out of this wet shit,” he said, smirking as he pushed me in the direction of Saint’s room while he headed away toward his.

The place was quiet and I wondered where the other two were as I ran upstairs and was soon warming up under the flow of the shower. I got to choose my own clothes for once and pulled on a pair of yoga pants with criss-crossing cut outs down the thighs and calves and a fitted pale blue sweater.

When I stepped out of the closet, my heart lurched at the sight of Kyan standing there in nothing but a pair of dark red sweatpants, his hair damp and curling slightly around his cheeks. He looked young and playful and I wanted to dive into that look in his eyes and never return.

“Saint and Blake are out for a run,” he revealed as his eyes trailed over my body.

“And?” I cocked a brow.

“*And* I haven’t fucked with Saint for a while, wanna join?”

I laughed. “Hell yes.”

I moved forward and he grabbed my hand, his fingers threading through mine as he pulled me towards Saint’s console on the wall. I tried to ignore how heady his touch made me feel, but it was impossible.

“Pick a song, baby. I’ll upload it to his playlist for the morning.”

I snorted, taking out my phone and scrolling through some music as I tried to pick one. But then an idea came to me that was so brilliant, it made me burst out laughing.

Kyan squeezed my hand. “What?”

“So, I took a video of Blake a couple of weeks ago...any chance you can use the sound?” I scrolled through it, pressing play on the ending as Blake groaned and my breathy moans tangled with the sound from off camera.

Kyan snatched the phone to look at it, barking a laugh. “Yeah, I can do that. Just give me a minute.” He moved to Saint’s bed with my cellphone, throwing himself down on it and creasing the covers. Saint’s console made a jingling sound as Kyan connected my phone to it.

I watched him work, chewing my lip as my eyes roamed over his tattooed flesh, the trail of hair leading beneath his low waistband, the perfect V which tapered down to direct me right to his-

“All done,” he said brightly, sitting up just as the front door slammed downstairs.

My eyes widened and Kyan swore under his breath, jogging across the room to me.

“Barbie?” Saint called, his voice sharp and my heart thrashed with adrenaline.

Kyan picked me up, throwing me down in the place he’d just been in on the bed. Then he winked at me and moved to the far end of the balcony as Saint’s footsteps pounded up the stairs. Kyan swung his leg over the railing and I fought a laugh as he dropped down to hang from the other side just as Saint appeared upstairs.

Saint looked to me and I smiled innocently, rolling across his bed to capture more of his attention. A thump sounded as Kyan let go and hit the

floor below and Blake started laughing. Saint glanced over his shoulder suspiciously, but I caught his hand, drawing his eyes back to me.

“Did you have a good run?” I asked sweetly. He wasn’t buying my act for one second, his gaze dragging over me like he was looking for sins. I almost felt bad for fucking with his music; he was going to freak in the morning.

“Take those clothes off, I’ll fetch you something appropriate,” he snapped, marching away into the closet and my smile fell into a scowl.

Enjoy your wake up call, assbag.



I withdrew to my room for most of the evening, my mind a whirling mixture of emotions which I didn't know how best to process.

On the one hand, I was glad that Tatum knew the truth about the Unspeakables now, about Deepthroat and what she'd nearly done to me. But on the other, I knew that information had only hurt her again. And I was getting sick of hurting her all the fucking time. But that was who I was. And if I gave into my selfish desires to pursue her then I knew I'd only hurt her again. And again. And again.

That was what O'Briens did. And as much as I liked to pretend I wasn't an O'Brien and cling to my Roscoe name like it was a lifeline, I knew it was bullshit. My father was calculating and shrewd and a coward. He was totally cowed by the family of the woman he'd married. He had no backbone, no mettle, no grit. Hell, the only thing I'd gotten from him genetically was his dark hair and height. Everything else in me was O'Brien, right down to my bloodthirsty nature and hunger for violence. As much as I wished it wasn't so, the truth was the truth. And no one had ever gotten close to an O'Brien and come away unscathed.

It was my night with Tatum in my room, but even after our little heart to

heart, I wasn't going to sleep in with her. Part of the reason was my hurt feelings and lingering anger over the things she'd said to me before. But it was more about me and her and all the things she was never going to be for me.

I had the TV on with re-runs of Fear The Walking Dead playing, but most of my attention was on the sketch I was drawing, capturing the way Tatum had looked with the rain pouring over her. That haunted look in her eyes which said she feared she really was alone here, the way her shirt had clung to her skin and raindrops had spilled from her hair. Fuck, that girl was on my mind way too much. Not that I was trying very hard to get her off of it. Sitting on my own and sketching her all the damn time wasn't helping either. I was paying way too much attention to her mouth too, especially considering the fact that there was no way in hell that I was going to be kissing it.

A knock came at the door and I grunted as I kept my eyes on my work, shading around her eyes as the door swung open and the real deal cleared her throat.

I fell still, fighting against the urge to snap the sketchbook closed. I probably should have realised it would be her, but I'd been too focused on what I was doing to think on it.

"Hey," Tatum said, hesitating in my doorway.

I usually hung out in the front room with everyone in the evenings so she hadn't actually had to come and kick me out of bed on any of the nights where she was due to sleep in with me up until this point.

I lowered the sketch book into my lap, my thumb still wedging the page open as I looked at her.

"I won't bite unless you ask me to, baby," I teased. "You can come on in."

She rolled her eyes at me and stepped inside, closing the door behind her. "Are you drawing?"

“Tattoo designs.” I shrugged nonchalantly and her eyes lit with curiosity.

“Can I see?”

Fuck, should have seen that coming.

“No,” I replied, falling back on my asshole reputation to save me from getting caught out. Tatum narrowed her eyes at me and I let out a huff of frustration. “Shit, if you’re gonna cry about it then come here,” I said, beckoning her over with a jerk of my chin as I turned the TV off.

She drew closer as I flicked the pages over until I wasn’t looking at an image based on her, settling on the eagle I’d been designing instead. I’d dedicated six pages to trying to capture the beast just right so it was a pretty safe bet to show her them.

I hadn’t bothered to pull a shirt on and my dark red sweatpants were riding low on my hips. I pressed my thumb to the corner of my mouth to hide my smirk as her gaze dipped down to my waistband.

I may have had my reasons to keep away from her, but when she looked at me like that, I couldn’t help but get the urge to reel her in.

“You know, it’s not actually necessary to be a douchebag all the damn time,” she muttered as she came to stand over me.

“That thought had never crossed my mind,” I teased. “What exactly would I do with the rest of my day if I didn’t though? My only real hobby is being an asshole.”

“You’re right, it would definitely be a struggle for you to fill all of that time doing something else. Perhaps you could take up knitting?” she suggested.

“Hmm, that’s not a bad idea,” I replied, running a hand over my jaw. “I never know what to get Saint for Christmas, but if I could knit I could just make him an assortment of cock socks to go with every outfit.”

She snorted a laugh and I smirked at her as those big blues drifted to the

sketchbook in my hand which I'd let fall against my chest so that she still couldn't see it.

I patted the spot beside me on the bed and she moved into it slowly, arranging herself beside me, careful not to touch as she curled her legs beneath her and leaned up against the headboard. Saint had gotten her changed into a little black sweater dress which rode up her thighs as she got herself comfortable and I let myself look even though I probably shouldn't have.

I held the book out casually, keeping it open on the page with the first eagle and she took it with eager hands, her eyes lighting up as they fell on the sketch.

She didn't say anything, her lips parting as she ran a finger down the page alongside the bird, almost like she wanted to touch it before her gaze shifted to the sketch on the next page which was slightly different. The faint scent of cigarettes clung to the pages and it wafted over me as she turned them, making my stomach knot with thoughts of my family.

"Kyan..." she breathed, her eyes glued to the sketches like she couldn't help but drink in the subtle differences from one image to the next. "These are...I mean, they're incredible."

I grunted dismissively, reaching over her to point at the right wing of the eagle she was currently studying. "The angle is all wrong here, there's something off with the shading – makes it look like the sunlight is hitting his underside or something." I shifted my finger to the one below. "This one got closer to the mark, but that look on his face isn't right, it's too serene, too calm –"

"I think they're all beautiful," she murmured in disagreement and I paused in my criticism of my work as I just looked at her.

I hadn't taken art class when choosing my timetable here, knowing my

family would find out if I had and not wanting the headache of trying to defend myself over the choice. Blake and Saint had seen my work enough times to toss the odd compliment my way, but being told something was shit hot or that it would look sick branded onto my skin wasn't exactly the same as the quiet, almost devout appreciation she was offering. Her gaze trailed over the pages like she wanted to crawl right into them and the way her fingers kept caressing the paper made me cut the self-deprecation and swallow back the dismissive comments I wanted to make.

"Thank you," I muttered, not really sure what to do with myself as she turned the page again.

"Do you only draw things with the aim of them becoming tattoos?" she asked slowly, her gaze still fixed on the sketches.

"Mostly," I said, wondering what the fuck she'd think of me if she flipped to the back of the book and found her own face looking back at her. She'd probably have to wonder if I was the motherfucker stalking her or something.

"When you tattooed Monroe, you did it freehand," she said. "How does that work? Do you design things first and then just roll with that idea, or do you usually use a stencil to put it on skin?"

"I like to sketch out the designs over and over," I admitted. "Tweaking details, getting into the flesh of the piece, feeling its heartbeat-"

"Your art has a heartbeat?" she asked curiously, turning her head to look up at me, her gaze tearing away from my sketchbook for the first time since she'd gotten her hands on it.

I almost cursed myself for saying that out loud, wondering why the fuck I was engaging in this conversation for a moment before realising that she wasn't being condescending or judgemental, just curious, like she really wanted to know what it felt like for me when I was creating something.

"Yeah," I said in a low voice. "It does when I get it right, when it really

feels like I'm breathing life into something. And once I feel that connection to it, I don't need an outline to work from. I can feel the way the lines should curve, taste the way the shadows should fall..."

She reached out and pressed a finger to my chest, tracing the outline of the devil I'd inked there, sitting on his throne, lording it over the entire world with nothing but his dominating aura to confirm it.

"How does that work for tattoos that you can't do for yourself?" she asked, obviously realising that I'd have had trouble inking that one to my skin while looking at it upside down.

"If the positioning I want means I can't use the tattoo gun to ink my own flesh then I have a guy in the city who I trust. I create my final piece on paper and he can replicate it like a mirror image."

Her fingertips continued to move across the lines of my tattoos like she was trying to feel that pulse in them for herself and I just watched her in silence for several long moments as my skin burned beneath her touch and I fought the desire to take more.

"What about when you're creating a design for someone else?" she asked curiously. "Does that affect your process, or?"

"Yeah. The art feels different for different people. If something is destined to mark their flesh then it should be as personal to them as the colour of their eyes or the whorls on their fingerprints. I don't do work on strangers, only people I know well enough to get it right."

"What would you design for me then?" she asked, a challenge in her voice which said she didn't believe I could create something that would suit her that way.

I tugged the sketchbook out of her hands, closing it and placing it on the nightstand before pulling the drawer open and taking a sharpie from inside it.

I turned back to her with a grin, clamping the sharpie between my teeth

and reaching over to catch her waist between my hands as I dragged her into my lap. She gasped as I dropped her down, straddling me in that little black dress which rode up even more with her thighs parted over my legs. She never made much complaint about me manhandling her like that and I had to admit I was getting addicted to that look which flashed in her eyes whenever I did it. It was somewhere between murderous and exhilarated and I couldn't help but enjoy watching the battle between those two emotions take place within her.

I reached for her left hand, turning her wrist skywards and slowly pushing the sleeve of her dress all the way up to the crook of her elbow, my rough fingers dragging across her soft skin and making goosebumps scatter over her flesh.

I tugged the lid off of the sharpie using my teeth and spat it onto the bed beside us as I assessed her skin, trying to feel the right design in the tension that coiled through the air between us.

“Hold still, baby,” I murmured as I supported her arm in my left hand and began to draw with my right.

The pen was thicker than I'd have liked for the delicate design I marked out, but I ignored that slight flaw as I concentrated on what I was doing, outlining a lotus flower coming into bloom at the centre of the piece before working out from there.

Tatum sat quietly, watching me work as I tried to create something that embodied the fierceness of her spirit with the beauty of her soul. I turned her arm slowly in my grip, painting out more and more fine lines, a web of intricate details that made it look like her skin was dressed in jewels. But the edges of them were sharp enough to cut. There was beauty and purity in the piece, but there was savagery in it too.

I lost myself in the creation of it as the minutes ticked by and Tatum just

sat there, her hips pressed down over mine as her breathing grew shallow.

When I was finally done, I looked up at her and found her gaze on me instead of the design I'd drawn on her arm and the sight of her dilated pupils made my pulse quicken.

I tossed the sharpie down on my nightstand and tangled my fingers with hers as I raised her arm for her to inspect. I'd been so lost in my art that I hadn't noticed the tension growing in the room between us, the heat of our breath kindling in the space that divided us, the way my body had responded to being so close to hers for so long.

My dick was hard and throbbing between her thighs and the way her teeth sank into her bottom lip said she was feeling the heat in the room just as keenly.

"It's...fucking perfect, Kyan. I've never really considered getting a tattoo but this is coming close to convincing me. You're really talented," she murmured as her eyes fell on her arm and she turned it back and forth slowly, admiring her fake tattoo from every angle. "You could make a fortune doing this."

"Naw," I scoffed lightly and her brows pinched in a frown.

"Why not?" she asked, still keeping my fingers mixed up with hers and squeezing slightly.

"Let's just say, my future is already mapped out," I replied vaguely, not wanting to think about my family right now.

She seemed to catch on to that fact and let the subject go with a crease forming between her brows.

"So where is the eagle going to live once you're happy with him?" Tatum asked, glancing down at my bare chest for a moment.

I used my grip on her hand to tug her fingers to my stomach, pressing them against my flesh and using my own hand to push the waistband of my

sweatpants even lower so that her fingers skimmed down over the unbranded skin which ran over my pelvis.

She took over the movement, fingers circling over the skin which should have been beneath my pants as her gaze moved back up to meet mine and my dick continued to throb between her thighs. There wasn't much chance she couldn't feel it, but neither of us had said anything about it or made any move to part from each other.

"Kyan," she began slowly, my name on her lips almost a plea as she watched me for my reaction.

"Yeah?" I asked, not moving a damn muscle as I waited to see where she was going with this.

"I've been thinking a lot about what you told me earlier... About what Deepthroat did to you-"

"I don't wanna talk about that," I growled in warning, but that fire in her eyes said she wasn't going to drop it.

"I just think-"

I caught her waist between my hands, lifted her off of me and dropped her on the bed so that she fell back against the pillows with a squeal of surprise.

"I'll get out of your way so that you can sleep."

Before she could even scramble upright, I was out of bed, snatching my sketchbook from the nightstand and striding from the room.

"Kyan!" she called after me, but I ignored her, tossing the door shut behind me and striding out into the central part of the church.

Blake and Saint had taken themselves off to bed already and the darkness hanging over the place gave it an eerie feel. I headed down to the crypt with my blood pumping angrily as I tried not to think about what that fucking asshole, Deepthroat, had done to me. All my life I'd been subjected to all kinds of fucked up shit, born witness to death and violence so many times I

couldn't count it. But I could count the amount of times I'd found myself vulnerable and unable to defend myself, at the mercy of some fucking girl I'd never even given much thought to, let alone seen as a threat. But wasn't that just the way life liked to fuck with you? I was given all of the tools necessary to defeat almost every demon imaginable and then the thing that nearly takes me down was something I never even would have imagined happening. Some fucking rich girl used to getting whatever the fuck she wanted and refusing to hear the word no. The thought of her hands on my body while I was out of it made my fucking skin crawl, the idea of what else could have happened made me want to fucking vomit.

I found a bottle of Jack Daniels and leaned back against the cold brick walls as I unscrewed the lid and tipped the whiskey between my parted lips, enjoying the burn of it on the way down.

My hard on was sinking fast with thoughts of that bitch; Deepthroat was more than enough to put a dampener on it and I gave myself a few minutes to fucking wallow as I drank.

When I'd swallowed around a quarter of the bottle, I screwed the top on it and placed it back where I'd found it before stalking upstairs with a warming fog of alcohol numbing that unpleasant prickle which had been creeping along my skin.

I flopped straight down on the couch, shoving my sketchbook in between the cushions as I threw one arm over my eyes and pushed another into my pants to cup my junk.

Sleep at least was an oblivion I could rely on and my breathing grew deep within minutes as I gave myself to the darkness and let it pull me away from reality.

I woke to the warmth of a soft body pressing against mine in the night, my head resting in her lap as she sat up and her fingers tangled in my hair.

Tatum murmured sleepily as I rolled over to look at her, her head tipped back against the cushions as she slept soundly on the couch with me.

I had no idea when she'd appeared and the why was enough to make my chest tighten. Why did she give a shit about me after all the things I'd done to her? Why would she have come out here to comfort me when she knew exactly the kind of monster I was?

She shifted in her seat as I watched her, her neck tipped back at an awkward angle and I sighed as I pushed myself to my feet.

I leaned down to pick her up and she mumbled something sleepily as she curled against my chest.

"Tell me about it, baby," I muttered as I carried her back through the church to my room.

I placed her down on the bed and made a move to leave again, but her fingers caught mine before I could go anywhere.

"Stay," she breathed, her eyelashes fluttering sleepily as she looked up at me and as she tugged on my fingers, I found myself giving in and letting her pull me down onto the bed beside her.

She scooted back to make room for me and the moment my head hit the pillow, she curved herself against my body, her head on my chest, leg curling over mine and fingertips brushing against my jaw softly.

I wanted to make some protest, but my eyes were already falling closed as I tugged her closer and the scent of vanilla honey blossom enveloped me as her golden hair tickled my nose. Something about that smell was soothing and my objections fell short before they even made it to my lips.

I wasn't going to make a habit out of this. But for one night, I wasn't

going to fight it either.

I woke to the sound of Saint screaming curses as the distant recording of Blake jerking off played through his speakers and I laughed to myself as I pulled a pillow over my head. I didn't really want to wake up, but now that I had, I realised something was missing. Or *someone*. The shower was running in the bathroom beside my room and I groaned beneath my breath as I tossed the pillow aside and scrubbed a hand over my face.

The bed was empty beside me and a part of me wondered if I really had fallen asleep with Tatum Rivers in my arms or if I'd just been dreaming. But then again, if Tatum had been visiting me in my dreams, I could guarantee my dick would have been getting a lot more action than that.

I pushed myself to sit up on the side of my bed just as Tatum entered the room wrapped in a towel, her gaze dragging over me as I looked up at her.

This long silence passed between us and she slowly touched her fingers to the sharpie tattoo I'd given her last night. I was surprised she hadn't scrubbed it off in the shower and almost asked her why not, but the words just kinda stuck in my throat.

"Morning," I grunted, pushing myself to my feet.

"Morning," she replied, clutching her towel in a way that suggested she was either making sure it didn't fall or was about to drop it. And if she did that then every last crack in my armour would come crashing down.

I sidestepped her and headed into the bathroom, pulling the door closed with a sharp click as I headed for a piss, yawning through the dull headache the whiskey had delivered to me as a parting gift.

Blake knocked on the door on his side of the bathroom and I grunted to

tell him it was me before he let himself in.

“I’m so fucking horny,” he complained, gripping his dick through his boxers as he strode across the room and set the shower running.

“What do you want me to do about it?” I asked through another yawn as I finished peeing and moved to wash my hands.

Blake turned to look at me with his eyes squinted and his head cocked to one side before sighing dramatically. “Nothing. Even with my eyes half shut and your girlishly long hair, I can’t convince myself you’re a girl. You’re too fucking big.”

I barked a laugh as he just stood there with a hard on in his boxers and a pout on his lips and I started brushing my teeth. I didn’t ask him why he didn’t just go and get laid. We hadn’t bothered to spell it out, but it was obvious why. The girl in my bedroom was the only one either of us wanted at the moment, though I was pretty sure that meant our balls were destined to stay blue. My life would have been so much fucking easier if I could have just fucked him instead. I already loved him so all I really needed to work on was my preference for knockout blondes with an attitude problem who happened to have nothing dangling between their legs and I’d be good to go.

I spat toothpaste into the sink and smirked at him. “You wish you were hot enough to land me,” I joked. “But I bet you fuck like a rich girl anyway. Your hands are too damn soft, Bowman.”

“C’mon, Kyan, you’ve seen the tape, I think we both know I could handle you.”

“You can give it, but I’d need you to take it, baby,” I teased and he smirked at me like he thought he could, before dropping his boxers and turning away into the shower.

“If this situation goes on much longer, I’ll consider it,” he joked and I laughed as I headed back out to my room.

Tatum gasped as I opened the door, snapping her school diary shut in a really fucking obvious way and I arched an eyebrow at her as I closed the bathroom door again.

“I thought you were showering,” she said, tucking the book beneath her leg like I might forget it was there. That shit was suspicious as hell.

“Blake is,” I explained, stalking towards her slowly as she tried not to squirm.

She’d pulled on one of my old band tees and her hair hung wet around her shoulders, making her look kinda innocent with her face bare of makeup. But I knew she was anything but that.

“How is this going to go, then?” I asked, moving to stand over her so that she was forced to crane her neck back to look up at me.

“What?” she breathed, batting her lashes as her cheeks heated like a virgin on her wedding night.

“I showed you mine, baby,” I purred. “So I’m gonna wanna see yours.”

“I don’t know what you-”

I lunged at her with a playful growl, knocking her back onto the bed beneath me as my weight fell over her and she squealed in surprise as I pinned her down.

“Give it up, baby,” I said as she wriggled and squirmed, her ass staying firmly on top of the diary as I fought to catch her hands.

She slapped me away and even punched me a few times, but I took the punishment as I crushed her under my weight and finally managed to snag her wrists into my grasp.

I grunted as she bucked beneath me, trying to get her knee into position to go for my damn balls again, but there was no way in hell I was giving her enough room to pull that shit twice.

“Kyan!” she shouted, half outraged, half laughing like she couldn’t decide

what way this wrestling match was going yet.

I barked a laugh as I managed to get both of her wrists secured in one of my hands and leaned over the bed to snag my belt from the loops of a pair of jeans I'd tossed down there.

"Don't!" she gasped as I wrapped it around her wrists and managed to force it through the buckle so that I could cinch it tight.

I laughed as she fought harder and suddenly her teeth sank into my shoulder. It hurt like a bitch and I grunted as I forced myself to take the pain of it without recoiling as I secured her wrists to my headboard.

"Harder, baby," I hissed through the pain of her teeth. "Don't stop until you've torn a chunk from me."

She yanked her teeth back out of me and started cursing as she thrashed against the belt, making the headboard slam against the wall like we were doing something way more fun and giving my dick a few ideas of its own.

Once I was sure it would hold, I sat back with a triumphant grin, glancing at the teeth marks in my shoulder and smirking as I spotted the blood there.

"Wild girl," I teased, catching hold of her thrashing legs and managing to get them under mine so that I was straddling her hips, my weight immobilising her as she panted beneath me.

"What the fuck?" she demanded, blowing a long strand of blonde hair out of her face, but it only floated back down into her eyes again.

I reached out like a true gent and tucked it behind her ear for her, getting off on having her at my mercy like that.

"You've been a naughty girl," I purred, reaching beneath us and cupping her ass so that she gasped in shock. But as nice as her ass was in the little black panties she was wearing beneath my shirt, that wasn't what I was after. My fingers dug into her peachy flesh and I lifted her ass up so that I could reach beneath her and tug the diary free. "I just need to figure out how

naughty.”

“Wait,” she breathed, her eyes wide with concern as I looked down at her, the diary in my grip, ripe for the picking. “I...I’ll make you a deal,” she said, clearly trying to think up some clever scheme to get out of this. But curiosity always was my downfall. I never could just leave anything mysterious.

With a knowing grin, I flipped open the first page and glanced over it before making a show of licking my finger and turning the next.

“Is this what you like to do to girls?” Tatum asked, drawing my attention back to her for a moment as she flexed her fingers against the belt securing her wrists. “Tie them up like this?”

“Sometimes,” I agreed. Though really, that had been all of the time in the last eighteen months. Not that I’d admit it, but the idea of letting the girl be in charge had been pretty fucking repugnant to me after what Deepthroat had done and this had been a way for me to make sure things happened on my terms. And even though I wasn’t as bothered by all of that now as I had been right after it had happened, the girls I’d been fucking had been used to it so I hadn’t stopped.

“Is there more to it than this?” she pressed, dropping her voice seductively and I gave her a knowing smile as I turned another page in her diary. She wasn’t going to distract me from my task.

“Sure. If you wanna try it out sometime, you only have to ask. But be a good girl and stay quiet right now, yeah? I’m reading...”

Tatum cursed me and tried thrashing again, but there was no way she was getting free unless I let her go and I wouldn’t be doing that without figuring out what she’d been hiding from me in this book.

I flipped through every single page in the diary before reaching the very last one where my efforts were rewarded. There, in black ink on the white page, she’d written out a list. More than a few of the things on it had been

crossed out but as I read over them, my heart started pumping ferociously. This wasn't just a list, it was a promise. A fucking oath which she'd sworn to herself to get revenge on the monsters who had claimed her.

~~The sex tape~~
~~The fish stew~~
~~The Unspeakables~~
~~The storm~~
~~The font~~
The bathtub
~~The ice~~
~~The gun~~
The clothes
~~The humiliation~~
~~The shower~~
~~The letters~~
THE VOW

“Here was me thinking that you were getting comfortable with us, when we've been at war the whole time,” I teased, flipping the list around to show her and the raw hatred in her gaze made me pause. “What is it, baby, do you think I care that you're out for revenge? That's the kinda shit I like about you, remember?”

“What's that supposed to mean?” she grunted and I looked over the list again, remembering each of the crimes she'd named and silently admitting what a bunch of utter fucking assholes we really were.

“Are you crossing these off as you get even?” I asked, eyeing the list. A few of them were pretty obvious now that I was looking at it in black and

white. She'd destroyed Saint's records in return for the letters, made the tape of Blake jerking off for the sex tape, covered me in fish just like we'd done to her...

"Yes," she hissed, her blue eyes blazing with an anger so pure I could taste it.

"Well..." I read over the three things she still hadn't crossed off before going on. "I haven't really had anything to do with your whole clothes situation. And I'm not even sorry for the vow - I'm glad you belong to me."

"I don't belong to you," she snapped and I laughed.

"Yeah you do, baby. Vow or not. You can feel it just as surely as I can. Besides, it's like you said the morning after we all killed a man for you - I'm yours too. So as far as I see it, we're even on that front."

Her eyes narrowed but she didn't start yelling, so I was taking that as agreement.

"I'm guessing the bathtub relates to you having to sleep in it before I insisted you got a bed?" I asked. In all honesty, I'd hated that fucking arrangement from day one and I had been the one to put an end to it, but I was willing to admit I was still culpable for the nights she'd spent in there.

"Yes," she growled.

"And you want revenge for that?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Alright then. Do your worst."

I tossed the diary aside and reached out to release her arms from the belt. She scrambled out from beneath me, massaging her wrists as she narrowed her eyes at me suspiciously.

"You're willing to let me get even?" she asked like she sensed a trap, but I was so fucking tired of all the family shit I'd been dealing with recently that I was just glad of the distraction.

“You’ve been fighting three on one for months now,” I said casually, offering her a shrug. “And you’ve still managed to scratch a whole lot off of your little list. So I’m willing to give you the upper hand for once. Besides, you’re too hooked on me to do any lasting damage, so I’m not too worried.”

She bristled at that assessment and I hid my smile beneath my thumb.

“I’m not hooked on you,” she assured me.

“Sure you are,” I replied, leaning back against the foot of my bed and gazing at her across the mattress. “You’re hooked on hating me right now instead of wanting me. But whatever way you cut it up, I’m on your mind all the damn time. It’s two sides of the same coin.”

She tutted dismissively, but she didn’t outright deny it again. Couldn’t. The truth spoke for itself. We might drive each other insane most of the time, but here we were. Facing off. Again. It was a cycle that just wouldn’t quit and I didn’t fucking want it to.

“How about you give me something instead of me punishing you,” she said slowly, licking her lips as her eyes got that steely glint in them which made me fucking ache for her. “It’s not like you give a shit about pain or humiliation anyway, so that won’t hurt you. What I want is something real. Something you don’t want to give me. A single truth – one that matters.”

I pushed my tongue into my cheek as I considered that, wondering why she wanted to play this game with me again. Why she cared about getting to know more about me at all. The most frustrating thing about it was that she was right, I didn’t really give a shit. I didn’t care when she’d slathered me in fish paste in front of the whole fucking school. I didn’t care when that tape of me covered in syrup and tampons had circulated around everyone I knew (and even though she hadn’t admitted to that one, I knew it had been her). Physical pain just got me high on life. The only things that really touched me were the weapons she’d already wielded against me, the darkness of my truth

which had the power to cut deeper than anything else ever would.

“So was your offer just bullshit then, Kyan? You don’t really want me to get even at all. You’re willing to let me punish you in ways that won’t affect you because you don’t care about them, but you just hate the idea of giving me anything else that’s real, don’t you?”

“Fine,” I grunted, willing to admit to my own bullshit.

But I didn’t know what to tell her. The worst of my truths came unbidden to my lips and for a second, I wondered if I should just tell her. Blurt it out, rip the band-aid off and accept the fact that she’d never again look at me the way I ached for her to. Because wasn’t everything else between us a lie while I hid that? Shouldn’t I just fucking get it out there, tell Saint and Blake too and let them choose their own feelings on it even if it left me abandoned and alone? But I couldn’t do it. And maybe that made me a fucking coward, but I was pretty sure that if Tatum Rivers ever looked at me the way I looked at myself, I’d break into a thousand fucking pieces and never find a modicum of peace again in my entire miserable life.

I hesitated for so long that she rolled her eyes at me, getting up and retrieving her diary from the floor and making a move towards the door. But I couldn’t let her go, snatching her free hand into my grasp and looking up at her as her brows rose expectantly.

No, I couldn’t tell her about the worst of me or my family or Royaume D’élite. But I could lay myself bare for her in another way. I could let her see what I saw when I looked at her.

I got to my feet and lifted the mattress, grabbing the closest sketchbook from beneath it and flipping it open, leafing past tattoo designs until I found a sketch of her. It was a pretty fucking perfect sketch actually. From the night we’d initiated Monroe. She looked like a goddess as she stood before the sacred stone, her body painted with handprints and a crown upon her head as

I knelt at her feet. In the image I'd drawn, firelight brightened her features and enhanced her beauty while my own face was hidden in shadow as I remained beneath her where I belonged.

Tatum sucked in a breath as she stared at it, her features flickering with more emotions than I could easily count and I turned away from her before I had to watch the moment she realised exactly what that sketch meant.

I grabbed my uniform from the closet and started pulling it on as she just stood looking at it for the longest time, slowly leafing through more pages, seeing more images of her through my eyes while her fingers began to tremble.

"Kyan," she breathed eventually, making me look at her again as I slung my tie around my neck. I kept my chin up, but my walls were up too. She was taking a peek into my damn soul right now and I was too afraid of her opinion on it to face it dead on. "This...you..."

"You wanted the truth, baby," I said, giving her a tight smile as I shrugged my blazer on. "So there it is. You told me I was yours once before. And now I'm saying it too."

Her lips parted in shock and she clearly had no fucking idea what to say to that.

"I... you're mine?" she asked and the way she said it was different to the last time, more of a question, an offer.

"All yours," I agreed, buttoning my shirt. "For whatever that's worth. So are you gonna cross the bathtub off your little list or what?"

Her gaze fell to the sketchbook in her hand once more and she nodded before flipping it closed again and opening her diary to the list in the back. She used the sharpie I'd given her the fake tattoo with to strike it out and I grinned at her like a cocky asshole. I didn't even want her to say anything else. Whatever the fuck she came up with wouldn't lessen the ache in my

chest.

“Kyan,” she began again, looking back up at me.

“Saint’s gonna lose his shit if breakfast isn’t ready soon,” I pointed out. “And don’t worry, I won’t tell the others about your little revenge plot. Feel free to do whatever the fuck you want to Saint for the clothes. Although I’m not complaining about his choice in panties for you.”

“Oh there he is,” she said, rolling her eyes at me. “For a second there, I thought you’d forgotten how to be an asshole.”

“Never,” I assured her, tossing her a wink and striding out of the room so that she could get dressed. We weren’t going to have some deep and meaningful chat over those fucking sketches. She’d asked for a truth not a fucking declaration. And as far as I was concerned, my debt had been paid.

Saint was coming down the stairs dressed in his school uniform as I reached the body of the church and I ran at him with a feral cry as he made it to the bottom of them, knocking him onto his ass and pounding my fists into him with a cry of laughter.

“You motherfucker, was it you who screwed with my alarm clock?” he snarled.

“I know you haven’t gotten laid in a while, brother, so I thought you might enjoy the show,” I joked and he bared his teeth at me like a fucking animal.

He cursed me as we rolled across the carpet, calling me a badly bred hillbilly while I laughed in his face and yanked on his shirt hard enough to tear a hole in it.

Saint punched me in the gut as hard as he could in retaliation and I let him throw me off of him with a bark of laughter as he stormed off back up the stairs to put on a fresh uniform, giving Tatum time to put his breakfast together before he got back. I mis-buttoned my own shirt while he was gone, just to give him something else to freak out over when he returned.

Tatum offered me a tentative smile like she knew what I'd done and I murmured into her ear that she could always get down on her knees for me again if she wanted to give me a real thank you as I grabbed myself a bowl of cereal instead of making her cook my usual meal. That earned me an elbow to the ribs and I was almost certain we were back to normal by the time we were all walking down the path towards the Acacia Sports Hall where we had an assembly this morning before classes began.

When we arrived at the hall, the rest of the school were waiting for us to enter first as usual and the Unspeakables moved forward to open the doors for us, but Tatum fell still instead of entering.

“Come on, Barbie, we don't have all day,” Saint said irritably, taking her arm to pull her along, but she yanked it out of his grip again as her gaze fell on Freeloader and Squits where they held the doors wide.

“Why didn't you tell me?” she demanded in a loud voice, causing students all around us to fall quiet.

The Unspeakables looked nervous, glancing between each other and us like they weren't sure what the protocol was for answering her question, and that fucked up little bit of me which enjoyed watching those assholes squirm perked up his head.

“Tell you what?” Freeloader breathed and I barked a laugh.

This was too good. Too fucking good. They thought they'd found an ally in our girl, but they were about to see exactly what I did in her, I could feel it in the air. She was just as dark and twisted as any of us when the circumstances were right and in that moment, she was embracing that side of her.

“What you did to earn your places amongst the Unspeakables,” Tatum said angrily, almost shouting as genuine hurt shone on her features. “All of those fucked up things you did to deserve this fate.”

Freeloader's lips popped open and most of the other Unspeakables recoiled. We didn't usually make the crimes of the Unspeakables public knowledge and we banned them from speaking about them to protect the people they'd hurt along the way to earn their place in their club of outcasts. It wasn't right for the girl Bait had abused to have her name dragged through the mud alongside his, or for any of their victims to suffer the same. So aside from a few cases like Squits where a big group of people had been affected by their crimes, not many people knew exactly what the Unspeakables had done to deserve their fates.

There was a murmuring in the crowd behind us as everyone leaned close to listen in, desperate to unearth these secrets like the hungry sheep they were.

"It's not as bad as it seems," Freeloader muttered. "I did a bad thing, but I'm not a bad person-"

"What about Pigs wanting to kill those innocent animals?" Tatum demanded. "What about what Deepthroat did?"

The girl in question lifted her chin at her name and had the fucking audacity to step forward.

"I'm not like the rest of them," she insisted and a low growl rumbled in my chest, but Saint's hand landed on my arm to warn me back. This was Tatum's fight and we were going to let her have it.

"You're one of the worst of all," Tatum spat, the pure, undisguised hatred on her face impossible to miss as she sneered at the girl who'd assaulted me.

"Why?" Deepthroat demanded, practically shouting. "Because I liked a guy and he got a bit drunk one night and threw himself at me? Who the fuck punishes someone for giving them a blowjob anyway? You weren't there that night, Tatum, and I don't know what he told you, but he was gagging for it, begging me to do it. And then the next morning he just flipped out on me like

an utter psychopath and tried to make out that I'd-

Tatum punched her so hard that I heard her nose break over the scream that escaped her. Deepthroat fell back into the mud and all of the students surrounding us started shouting in excitement as Tatum leapt on her, beating the shit out of her with a feral cry of rage as Deepthroat screamed for help beneath her.

But no one tried to help her. Not one single person could have gotten close even if they'd wanted to.

My blood lit with excited energy as I watched our girl set her wild side loose, my heart thrashing beneath my ribs as I tried to take in the fact that she was doing this for me. That all of that rage and heartache and beautiful fucking fury was on my behalf.

I let her throw a few more punches before moving forward and dragging her upright again, pulling her back before she killed the bitch and gave all of us a fucking nightmare to fix. There were way too many cellphones pointed this way to contain that shit. Though I had to admit I'd had more than one fantasy about killing that whore before now.

"Fuck all of you," Tatum spat, tears spilling down her cheeks as she glared around at the Unspeakables, her gaze fixing on Bait in his white mask as she shook her head in horror like she was just now seeing all of them for the first time. "The Night Keepers have gone too easy on you if you want my opinion. And I hope you all rot in hell for the things you've done."

She yanked herself out of my arms and strode into the sports hall with the three of us following behind her without a word.

Tatum didn't stop until she'd reached our usual spot at the very back of the bleachers, dropping down and staring ahead as we moved to take our seats around her.

I couldn't keep the grin from my face as I sat on her right and I pulled her

bloody hand into mine, running my thumb over her knuckles and smearing the blood to coat her skin.

“You see, beautiful,” I breathed, leaning in to speak in her ear so that my words remained hers alone. “You’re just as dark and dirty as the rest of us when you need to be.”

“Is that a good thing?” she murmured, ignoring the looks the rest of the students were shooting us as they took their seats and looking right into my eyes instead.

“Yeah, baby. That’s a really good thing,” I promised.



These days I felt like my skin was itching almost all of the damn time. Like I couldn't sit still and I needed something to help me take the edge off every minute of every day. There were a few exceptions. Like when I managed to snare Tatum in my arms, make her smile, taste her kisses...or other parts of her body. But those moments were always fleeting, stolen, unsure. Like I was capturing the girl I'd met way back at the start of term every now and then, finding her off guard and slipping past her defences for a brief time. But they always came to an end. And I didn't even mean because she kept cock blocking me and leaving me aching for her. No, they came to an end before that happened. When she looked at me for long enough to remember all the shit I'd put her through in the name of grief. When she remembered the hateful things I'd done...the fucking gun...

It was no wonder she was guarded around me. And if I was a better man, I probably would have backed the fuck off. Stopped chasing her, hounding her, obsessing over her and trying to win her back around. Because she deserved better than me. Better than all of us really. In fact, the one clearest reason for that was blindingly obvious: we'd bound her to us in every way we could imagine, through the vow, blood, death but that only proved the worst things

about us. No one wanted to love the monster who caged them. But we were all far too selfish to set her free.

In fact, I knew that if I could find another way to bind her to me, I'd do it in a heartbeat. And another. And another. I'd chain her to this life with us and make sure she never got away.

But that wasn't something I could do easily.

I sat on the couch in The Temple, my jaw grinding as Saint cursed the entire world and their mother. In fact, he cursed the cats, the dogs and even the motherfucking fleas. But it did no good.

Tatum was currently in the library, enjoying her study time with Mila. She had strict instructions not to go anywhere else, not even on a bathroom break until one of us came to pick her up later. We weren't taking any chances with her safety now. Not while some creep went around campus stalking her, watching her, watching *us*.

"You need to start keeping your fucking blinds closed at night," Monroe snarled, tossing the heap of photographs down in the centre of the coffee table so that they spread across it, giving us a snapshot of moments which we'd all shared with our girl. He looked at them every damn time he came over here, like he thought he'd suddenly spot some clue in them that we'd missed before. Or maybe he secretly liked looking at them. Tatum did look fucking edible in every damn one. But knowing they'd been taken by a creep kinda took the shine off of any appreciation I might have had for them. Plus the look in Monroe's eyes as he flipped through them wasn't lust, it was unbridled *rage*, so fucking forceful that it was easy to see why he was one of us.

The one on top was the one of me and Kyan going to town on her at once. In the very armchair he was currently sitting in no less. And he didn't look pleased to have seen that. Not pleased at all.

“Are you angry about the stalker or about us doing that with her?” I asked curiously and Kyan released a dark laugh.

“You’re all old enough to do whatever the fuck you want,” Monroe snarled, not answering.

“There’s no point getting your panties in a twist over it, Nash,” Kyan goaded, reaching out to pick up the photograph of him eating her out on the beach the night Monroe had been initiated.

With the paint on both of their skin and the crowns on their heads, they looked like a pair of mythical creatures. The king and queen of sex, going at it in the open like they just couldn’t wait for the amount of time it would take to move inside before devouring each other. And I guessed at least that half of the story was the truth.

“That one is *your* fault,” Monroe snarled, jabbing a finger towards the picture in Kyan’s hand. “Why the fuck did you have to do that shit out in the open like that?”

Kyan laughed tauntingly, flipping the picture around to show all of us. “Because I was a dying man, starving for something to eat. And she was a feast too fucking delicious to turn down. And you’d better believe that she was more than happy to let me devour her. A single look at her face in this picture could tell you that.”

“Well, next time, keep it in your fucking pants and save it for behind closed doors. Or better yet, just keep your fucking hands off of her,” Monroe growled.

“You wanna know what she tastes like?” Kyan asked and the look in his eyes said he was hungry for a fight. He wanted Monroe to jump at him, wanted the therapy of violence to take the edge off of whatever demons he was currently battling.

He had his shirt off as he sat on the couch beside me and it was pretty hard

to miss the angry cigarette burn on his upper chest.

Tatum had been tending to it twice daily, checking it for signs of infection and administering some burn cream. I wondered if she knew he wouldn't look after it himself? Or that aside from me and Saint, he'd never really had anyone to look after him at all?

Whenever she cornered him and applied the cream, he took the opportunity to goad her, telling her that he'd heal up faster if she sucked his dick twice a day. Or refusing to move from his position on the couch and dragging her down to straddle his lap while she worked and offered to let her ride him properly if she begged. She cussed him out, delicately applied the cream to his burn and then walked away while tossing a few choice insults back at him.

I wondered if she'd ever caught sight of the way he watched her when she walked away from him. Or of the way his brow crumpled when she left a room. Hell, I didn't even really know what to make of it myself. Sure, I'd shared her with him that time, or tried to at least. But that was about sex not...anything else. At least I didn't think so. What if he wanted more than that from her? And what if I did too? The idea of me ever fighting one of my brothers over a girl was completely fucking insane.

But... Tatum Rivers wasn't just some girl.

I blew out a breath as I banished those thoughts. It was never going to come to that anyway. She hated us both with enough ferocity to eclipse the idea of something more with her. In fact, I felt like we were all just treading water here. It was our senior year and the country was in lockdown. We might have been able to keep her while we were here, but then what?

When the world went back to normal, it would become impossible to watch her at all times. To make sure she didn't run. And she *would* run. She'd run hard and fast and far. So this time we had with her now was

precious.

“I might get this one framed,” Kyan mused, trying to bait Monroe again.

“I think it rather spoils the art to know that it was taken by some little rat who was jerking off in the bushes while he watched you with her,” Saint drawled. “Imagining your fingers inside her were his tiny cock instead and trying to convince himself that he could make her scream even louder than you were. In fact, you’re most likely holding something out of his handmade porno collection. How many times do you think he’s ejaculated all over a copy of that image?”

“Jesus Christ,” Monroe snarled as Kyan dropped the photo, rubbing his fingers together like he wanted to be sure they weren’t left sticky from touching it. “Why the fuck would you say that?”

“Because it’s the truth,” Saint said in a bored tone, but his eyes flashed with rage. “Some little fucker has been trailing our girl, photographing her in her most intimate moments. Stealing her panties to get the scent of her for himself. Following her in the dark and fantasising about doing god knows what to her.”

“We could inform the police,” I suggested half-heartedly.

“They are notoriously fucking useless when it comes to stalking,” Monroe muttered. “Unless this asshole actually attacks her, there’s fuck all they can do. And by then it could be too late.”

“Besides,” Saint added. “We have this campus locked down. We don’t need police officers coming in here and risking them bringing the Hades Virus with them.”

“And I want to catch this panty thieving asshole for myself,” Kyan said darkly, lifting his hunting knife from his belt and twisting it between his fingers. “And when I do, I’m going to beat the shit out of him and cut his fucking balls off for good measure.”

I instinctively cupped my balls as I eyed the sharp point of the blade, but no one disagreed with his idea.

“We do it slow, though,” Saint said, his eyes riveted to the hunting knife which we’d all used to kill a man. “The same way he stalked our girl. We catch him, beat him shitless and then we start up a tireless mission of pain and misery. We turn up wherever he is at random times and punish him for what he did in a new and torturous way every day.”

“You’re assuming we can hold back on killing him when we find him,” Monroe growled.

“Well,” Saint said slowly, leaning back in his wing backed chair. “Accidents happen of course.”

“So we all know the plan, then?” Kyan questioned.

“We move as soon as I’ve confirmed a few things,” Saint said and I knew he wouldn’t be pushed into deciding exactly when now, but it would be within a few days, I could feel it. None of us wanted to leave this much longer. This stalked needed to be dealt with. Savagely.

“I can’t fucking wait,” I said with a grin.

“I’m going to get some homework done,” Saint said, rising to his feet and heading over to the dining table where his new laptop lay waiting for him.

“You’re seriously going to do some fucking studying?” Monroe asked incredulously. “When we’re all hyped up to go hunt down a stalker?”

“If you have excess testosterone to vent then I suggest you and Kyan go and beat each other up until you exhaust it,” Saint replied mildly. “I can collect Barbie from her study date while you go get sweaty together.”

“Only if you’re prepared for me to beat the living shit out of you,” Kyan warned as he pushed himself to his feet and Monroe grinned at the challenge.

“I’m going to enjoy wiping the floor with you,” he replied and the two of them headed off together, continuing their posturing as they began shoving

each other and dicking around, hurrying to get to the gym and the boxing ring where they could play their little fighting games to their hearts' content.

I leaned back in my seat with a sigh and snatched the Xbox control into my grip as I prepared to settle myself in for the evening.

But before it had even booted up, I was tossing the control aside again. All of this stalker shit was putting me on edge. I'd made the absolutely terrible mistake of Googling famous stalking cases last night, meaning to get an idea about the kinds of things we could expect this sicko to do next so that we might be able to get ahead of him. There were lots of different accounts of all kinds of fucked up things. But there was a theme. Boy meets girl. Girl is waaaay out of his league. Boy won't take no for an answer. Boy starts following her, photographing her, turning up everywhere she goes, stealing her things, her underwear, feeding his obsession. Then...well, then it just gets darker and darker. Boy can't take the idea of her rejecting him anymore, confronts her, demands her love, her body. And then, when she refuses again...

Nope. Zombie deaths weren't going to cut it tonight. I was too amped up. And I didn't like the idea of Tatum being over in the library while this pervert was around even if there were a bunch of other students there and she'd promised to wait for one of us to come get her before putting so much as a single toe outside the building. I'd wanted to stay in the library with her. But she'd thrown a fucking fit about us breaking the rules and taking away her only bit of private time. And of course, because to Saint the rules may as well have been etched in stone like the ten goddamn commandments, he'd weighed in on her side of the argument. Even though he wasn't any happier about her being over there than me.

I shot her what must have been the twentieth text of the night, checking in to see if she was okay and waited for her answer to come in and soothe my

concerns.

Tatum:

squid emoji

Saint looked up as the messages came through on the group text for him too and he slammed his palm down on the table with enough force to make his laptop leap off of it for a second before clattering back down.

“I swear to Christ, if someone doesn’t tell me what the fucking squid emoji means soon, I’m going to lose my shit.”

“You lost it a long time ago, bro,” I joked, trying to shrug it off, but I had to admit, the damn squids had me stumped too.

The most infuriating thing about them was the fact that Kyan seemed to know exactly what she meant by them as well. But he wouldn’t fucking tell us. Just smirked like a knowing little dickhead whenever she sent one and told us that we really needed to work on keeping up to date with the kids. Fucking asshole.

Blake:

Be serious, a minute. We just wanna know you’re alright.

Tatum:

*Gah, wasn’t my last message clear enough? *squid emoji* *otter emoji* ;*

Saint:

No, it isn’t clear enough and if you don’t explain your answer, I’ll be punishing you for it later tonight.

Tatum:

I don't know why you're getting so angry at me. I answered the question. You can't punish me for shit. Unless you found out about the thing I did to your cufflinks. In which case, I'm sure you'll find a suitable way to make me pay, master ;)

Saint slapped his phone down on the table and got to his feet suddenly. He stalked away from me and headed up to his room to check the truth of that. I relaxed a little as I waited for him to return. Clearly she was fine if she was wasting time baiting the demon in him, but I still felt uneasy about her being way over on the other side of campus.

I shot a quick message to Danny, telling him to come meet me outside ASAP. I needed something to do to pass the time and I wanted to be closer to her too.

Saint stomped back down the stairs with his fists tight, but there was an excited light in his eyes which seemed to counter his rage.

“What did she do?” I asked curiously.

“She replaced a set of my cufflinks with two raisins,” he explained, his teeth gritting around the word. I knew well how he felt about dehydrated fruit, but I wondered if Tatum had known that she was striking him with a double blow when she'd selected the raisins as her weapon of choice.

“Who the fuck ever thought it was a good idea to su-”

“Suck all of the vitamin C out of a perfectly good grape and make it look like a shrivelled old ball sack to boot?” I finished for him with a grin. The raisin rant was a classic.

Saint smirked at me as he acknowledged his OCD was showing and adjusted his belt buckle thoughtfully before heading back to his laptop.

“Why don't you seem all that pissed about this?” I asked him curiously.

When Kyan fucked with his shit like that, he always lost the plot.

“Because she knows she’s been bad and is willing to accept her punishment.”

“Which will be...?”

His dark eyes flicked up to meet mine again and the hint of a smile toyed around his lips. “Utterly satisfactory for both of us,” he said cryptically.

I opened my mouth to ask him what the hell that meant, but the group text sounded again as another message came through.

Kyan:

*We need to *onion emoji* tomorrow like you promised, baby. Don't forget.*

Tatum:

squid emoji

Kyan:

octopus emoji

“This shit has to stop,” Saint snarled.

Saint:

*I'll fucking *squid emoji* you until you're begging me to stop, unless you quit it with this bullshit.*

Tatum:

What?

Kyan:

That makes, literally no sense, dude...

“Gah.” Saint slammed his fist down on the table again and started frantically typing something on his laptop.

A horn blasted outside somewhere beyond The Temple and a message came through on my phone from Danny a beat later, telling me he was waiting for me.

“I’m going out,” I said, grabbing my letterman jacket and shrugging it on as I headed for the door.

Saint didn’t reply but I caught sight of his Google results as he scanned responses for what the squid emoji meant in current culture. His jaw was tight and his eyes narrowed and I was willing to bet Tatum’s punishment for riling him up was going to be pretty savage unless he managed to figure it out.

He didn’t even say goodbye to me as I walked out and I rolled my eyes at him. He was going to sit there trying to figure out that squid emoji right up until he had to go get Tatum from the library.

I tossed the door closed behind me and rubbed my hands together as the icy bite of winter nipped at my exposed skin. My breath billowed between my lips and the frost we’d woken up to this morning still coated the trees all around campus.

I kinda wished it would snow. I’d always loved the snow as a kid. And not just because I could go sledding and build snowmen and have snowball fights. I just loved the way snow made the world look so clean. Especially when it had just fallen and nothing had corrupted it yet. Inevitably it ended up thawing and got trampled and churned up with the mud and dirt of the real world and actually looked worse than ever. But for a little while I could

pretend everything was pure. A fresh start. A new beginning. A do over. And I could use more than a few of those. Especially during this last year.

It was strange to me really, to think of the boy I'd been being such good friends with Kyan and Saint before this grief truly corrupted me. We'd always joked about the darkness in us being the thing that drew us together, but for me, back before my mom died, I couldn't really claim to have held an inch of the torment in my soul that they'd been raised with.

Kyan's family were...well I knew for a fact that I still didn't understand half of what they were. They were dangerous in all the most terrifying ways. The most brutal, violent, blood soaked ways. He'd once told me that the O'Briens sacrificed the souls of their babies to the devil the moment they were born, bathing them in the blood of their enemies and mixing their milk with it too to make sure they were bloodthirsty from their very first breath. I mean, that was clearly bullshit, but the haunted look he got in his eyes when he talked about them sometimes made me hold my tongue on a lot of the questions I wanted to ask.

Saint's upbringing was a lot less violent. He hadn't been beaten or subjected to brutality in the ways Kyan had. He hadn't been made to bear witness to unspeakable things or assist in crimes when he was so young that there was no way he could have even thought of refusing. No. Saint had been crafted in a much more refined way. He'd been *conditioned* by his father. Subjected to various stressors time and again and forced to find a way to cope with them. He'd been denied consistency, control, routine. Which was why he was so damn obsessed with it now of course. It was also why I didn't fight him too hard on it. I mean, sure, sometimes I found it funny to fuck with his stuff like Kyan did, but I usually felt kinda shitty for it when I saw the panic in his eyes. He needed control even more than I needed to win. And I was happy enough to let him have it most of the time.

But for both of them, with their upbringings and the shit they'd had to deal with from such a young age, their darkness made a sick kind of sense. And I liked to believe that they did as well with it as they could.

I, on the other hand, had no trauma to blame for my darker tendencies until recently. Before my mom died, I'd had a pretty fucking perfect life. Not that I'd really appreciated it at the time. And sure my dad was pushy, always wanting me to be the damn best at everything and getting way too invested in any competitions I entered. But that wasn't exactly comparable to Kyan and Saint's family. No. I was just...*cruel*. I guessed I'd always had it so easy that I'd found life boring. And I'd found my calling in punishing people who stepped out of line. In forcing them beneath my heel. But I had the feeling that made me the biggest asshole out of all of us. Especially as I didn't regret it. Every single thing I'd done to the Unspeakables...I just didn't have it in me to give a single shit about it.

But Tatum...I'd fucked up royally there. My grief and blind fucking rage had pushed me into breaking my own damn rules. We only punished the guilty. And blaming her for something her dad had done was just fucked up. It wasn't like I blamed Kyan for the shit his family had done.

Fuck, I'm such a piece of shit.

I reached the end of the path and forced a smirk onto my lips as I found Danny and Chad driving a couple of the golf carts used to transport shit around campus and beckoning me over with excitement. Punch -*Toby*- was riding shotgun in Chad's cart and all of them looked seriously excited to see me. Like they could only have any real fun when I was there. And I didn't mind the idea of that.

We'd been meeting up pretty often, doing stupid stuff which was definitely going to end up in one of us getting hurt or worse eventually and finding some level of relief from the boredom of lockdown in the adrenaline

rush we took from our stupidity. I was quite literally living up to the delinquent teen dream and I was okay with that.

I needed the rush I got from playing these games. Needed to forget for a little while that I was a total sonofabitch and just do something fun and dumb and exciting.

“I thought we could race them!” Danny beckoned me to climb in beside him in the cart but as I looked at the thing, I had a better idea.

I moved towards it, but instead of getting in, I leapt up on top of it. The roof buckled a little beneath my weight but it held and I barked a laugh as I got my balance.

“C’mon, Toby, up you get,” I urged and he laughed nervously before climbing up on top of Chad’s cart too.

“Let’s race all the way around to The Hemlock Library,” I said, wanting to go visit my Cinderella and make sure she wasn’t being stalked by the ugly step sisters while she worked. “Take the mountain path - there’s more hills,” I added as Danny started the cart up again.

“Sure thing, boss,” he called and my stomach lurched as the cart started moving.

I stood upright and laughed as we began to move uphill. The carts had a top speed of about thirty miles per hour, but they needed to build up to that and be heading downhill to achieve it too.

“Winners get the glory,” I called as we began to move faster and my boots slipped on the slick roof. “Losers get to jump in the lake butt naked before class tomorrow!”

Danny whooped excitedly as he put the pedal to the floor and the electric motor whirred as it fought a battle against the hill.

I managed to stay upright until we crested the hill, but as we began to pick up speed and we descended on the other side, I almost slipped and fell,

dropping into a squat and grabbing the edge of the roof to save myself just before I did.

I laughed as adrenaline rocketed through my veins, burning through my grief and letting me forget. Just for a little while. Just long enough.

We were ahead of the other cart but Chad was grinning ferociously and as he nosed it up beside us, he swung the wheel around, ramming us hard enough to make the cart wobble precariously.

I probably should have bitched him out about it but my heart was leaping and pounding in the best fucking way and as we sped up the next hill, I couldn't help but laugh at the feeling of the icy wind tangling through my black hair and messing it the fuck up.

We rounded corners at breakneck speed, the carts almost toppling more than once as they lifted up onto two wheels before slamming back down onto the path again.

This was going to end badly, I could fucking tell. And yet I didn't want to stop. I wanted to bathe in the manic laughter tearing from our lips and soak it all into my soul so that I could sleep well tonight, knowing that there was more to my life than fucking pain and sorrow and regret.

Up and up the mountain paths we climbed, the carts topping out between fifteen and twenty miles an hour as they struggled with the ascent, but I didn't care. Because around the next bend was the steepest damn hill on campus. And I was willing to bet we could push these little beauties up to fifty miles an hour if we free fell down that.

Toby was taunting me as Chad managed to pull his cart up level with ours and I ducked even lower so the wind resistance wouldn't cost us the race as I fought to make my body as small as possible.

The carts rounded the bend and the path dropped away before us, a yell of excitement passing my lips as we shot over the top of the hill and suddenly

found ourselves flying downhill.

I yelled in exhilaration and more than a little fear as we rolled faster and faster, the library appearing through the trees up ahead and students diving off of the path before us as they saw us coming.

Chad and Danny started ramming the carts into each other, making me rock and sway wildly on the roof and Toby even shouted out for them to slow down.

“We’d better fucking win this, Danny!” I commanded because if I lost then this whole damn thing would be for nothing. My mood would drop faster than a whore’s panties on pay day and I’d be back to goddamn moping all over again.

We sped up but Chad did too, ignoring Toby’s protests as he swerved away from us and we raced towards the library. We were inching ahead, but not by much and I started cursing beneath my breath as desperation clawed at me. I *had* to win. It wasn’t a fucking option to lose. There was no way I could accept being anything but the best. It was my defining fucking feature.

We shot towards the library at high speed and I whooped in victory a second too soon. Chad swerved back towards us with a howl of defiance and the front of his cart took out our back wheel.

Our cart spun out wildly and I clung to the roof for dear life as the world blurred and my fingers cut into the metal as I fought to cling on.

We were going way too fast as we shot straight towards the wooden doors which fronted the library, the finish line spurring us on.

There was a horrible sound of grinding metal and Danny cursing and then all of a sudden the cart hit something, the back end lurching skywards and bucking me off of it with the impact.

I flew through the air with a shout of panic for several achingly long moments where all I could think was *this is really going to hurt*.

My back hit something hard but it gave way and I was falling again, cursing as I slammed down onto rough carpet and rolled so many times that I couldn't have counted if I'd tried.

I finally crashed into a desk and I wheezed as I flopped down onto my back, my entire body crying out with pain as I dragged in a shuddering breath.

“Holy fuck, Blake! What happened?” Tatum's voice found me and suddenly I was looking up at her beautiful face as she stared down at me in concern.

It took me another moment to figure out what had happened. I'd crashed into the library doors and they'd burst open at the impact, allowing me to keep falling and rolling until I'd come to a halt inside. Right where my girl was waiting for me. Like it was fate.

I tried to say something to her but my lungs were too focused on dragging in ragged breaths to allow words just yet.

“Shit man, I'm sorry!” Danny's voice came as he ran into the library and I was vaguely aware of a crowd gathering around me, but my gaze was fixed on Tatum. “I'm so fucking sorry, Jesus, I didn't mean to, Chad took us out and, crap, oh fuck, oh shit, oh balls, oh-”

“Can someone shut him up?” Tatum snarled.

“What the hell, Danny?” Mila demanded. “What did you do?” I spotted her swinging a text book over her head and he cursed as she struck him with it, the noises coming again and again as she kept demanding an explanation and they moved further away from us.

“I, need...” I gasped, the pain in my body taking my breath away for a second. But I could wriggle my fingers and toes, there wasn't the blinding burn of a break to be felt. I was just battered and bruised. And who really gave a shit about that? Because I'd fucking won. First to the library. No one

could say I did shit by halves.

“What is it, Blake?” Tatum asked, her blue eyes wide with concern as she leaned right down over me.

“I need...one last kiss before I die,” I whispered, doing a good impression of a death rattle deep in my chest.

“What?” she demanded, but I reached up suddenly and caught the back of her neck, dragging her down as I reared up and pushed my tongue between her lips before she could stop me.

She melted for a moment and I growled hungrily as I kissed her with all the fuel of the adrenaline that I’d just been swimming in.

I caught her waist and dragged her down on top of me. I wondered if I asked the crowd to fuck off real nicely they’d do it so that I could bury my dick in her and get her screaming my name. There was nothing like dicing with death to get the blood rushing to my cock and there was only one girl who I wanted to put all of that thrashing energy into pleasing.

Before I could get too lost in my dirty fantasy, she yanked herself away from me and stood up with a haughty expression on her swollen lips.

“What the fuck, Blake?” she demanded. “You could have died pulling stupid shit like that.”

I barked a laugh because it actually sounded like she gave a crap and wasn’t that just fucking ironic after everything I’d done to her?

“Are you giving me a view up your skirt on purpose, Cinders?” I teased as I took a peek at the lavender thong I could see from my vantage point. “Or is it a happy coincidence?”

“Are you drunk?” she demanded, backing up a bit to rob me of my view.

“No,” I replied. “I came to pick you up.”

“I thought Saint was coming. Can you even stand?”

I groaned a bit as I got to my feet, but I was pleased to find that my initial

assessment had been right. Nothing broken, just a bit battered.

I dusted off my jeans and offered her my arm with a grin as blood slid over my bottom lip.

“I can stand,” I announced dramatically, glaring around at the lemmings to warn them that now was the time to fuck right off. They scattered obligingly and I got a little kick from the power I wielded over them.

Tatum frowned as she moved closer to me, a war of rage and concern taking place behind her eyes.

She reached out to swipe the blood from my lip and I smirked roguishly at her.

“You’re a fucking idiot, you know that?” she asked seriously.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “But it was fun.”

For some reason, my answer seemed to upset her and she sighed before heading away to grab her stuff.

I shot Saint a message to let him know I was escorting her back and I tried not to hobble as I headed outside. The golf cart looked a little worse for wear with its front end kinda smashed up against the bottom step before the library, but I managed to shove it away from the concrete it had crumpled around and was pleased to find it still ran okay.

Mila was bitching Danny out for almost getting both of us killed and he was hanging his head as he tried to explain himself, looking the picture of whipped as he failed to impress her with his apologies.

I hopped into the cart behind the wheel and Tatum reluctantly followed me into it a moment later, tossing her bag on the back seat as I started the drive back home.

Chad and Toby were suspiciously absent with their cart and I was willing to bet they were trying to cover up their involvement in the whole thing like a pair of pussies. I’d rat them out to Monroe just for running off without

checking I wasn't dead and laugh while he gave them detention and let me off scot-free.

"Do you make a habit of crashing golf carts all over campus?" Tatum asked as we zipped along the paths and I wasn't sure if she was amused or not.

"Nope," I replied. "But I do make a habit of trying new things for fun." Silence stretched between us and then she sighed.

"After I lost Jess, I stole my dad's car one night, got in it and drove down the highway at full speed just to feel...well, anything other than what I was feeling," she said and my gut twisted at her words. How was it that she was able to dissect me so completely with a single sentence? Give me one look and see all of the pain that no one else ever seemed to notice and realise exactly how hard I was fighting to keep it contained?

"Oh yeah?" I asked gruffly. "And did it work?"

"For a little while," she agreed. "But when the grief came for me again, it dug its claws in that bit harder."

I hummed beneath my breath, but I didn't really have anything constructive that I could say to that. She was right, it would hurt more when I let myself feel it again, but I still kept doing this shit. I needed the reprieve. However long it lasted. Whatever it cost me to claim it.

We pulled up outside The Temple and I grabbed her bag from the back, carrying it inside for her as she followed me.

"You wanna watch TV in my room with me before dinner, Cinders?" I asked her casually as we approached the door. I was really asking if she wanted to come in and spend several hours making out with me, letting me worship her as I kept my grief at bay a little longer and I was pretty sure she knew it.

She looked up at me, an answer sitting on her lips, but before she could

give it, the door swung open and Saint was there, frowning at me before narrowing his eyes on her.

“I hear you crashed a golf cart into the library,” he said, glancing at me again, his lips twitching in amusement.

“That’s a vicious rumour,” I joked.

“There’s videos online,” he added.

“Faked,” I joked and he quirked a smile.

“Fair enough. Come along, Barbie, there’s time for your punishment before dinner.” He offered her his hand and she glanced at me again, an apology in her eyes like she knew how much I didn’t want to be alone right now. Or maybe I was just imagining that. Because she placed her palm in his and the two of them disappeared off to his room up on the balcony and I was left with a sinking feeling in my gut and the grief creeping back in again.

I tossed the front door closed behind me and sighed as I headed to the fridge to pull out a six pack of beers. I dropped onto the couch and pulled the Xbox control into my lap as I cracked one open, wondering if Kyan might appear to join me soon or if I’d have to wallow in my own company tonight. Either way, the adrenaline was starting to fade and my body was beginning to ache. But it had been nice to forget for a little while.

I woke to music echoing around The Temple and my body aching all over as I realised I’d fallen asleep on the couch.

“Fuck,” I groaned as I pushed myself upright, squinting around as my head pounded and my swollen tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

“Get up, get showered and get ready to catch a stalker,” Saint growled behind me and I damn near leapt out of my skin.

“What?” I asked.

“While you were drinking yourself into oblivion last night, the rest of us were preparing to catch the stalker. So get up, sober up and let’s go.”

I groaned as I dropped my face into my hands and someone nudged me with a cool glass. I accepted the water and looked up to find Tatum watching me as I drank it down. She offered me some painkillers too and I grunted a thanks as my head pounded.

I forced myself to get to my feet and frowned as I realised it was still dark out.

“What time is it?” I croaked, heading to the sink to get a second glass of water.

“Four am,” Monroe’s voice came from the doorway and I looked around in surprise to find him drinking a cup of coffee as he waited for us to get ready.

“Why the fuck are we doing this at four am?” I grouched. If we’d waited until a reasonable hour, I might have slept off some more of this fucking alcohol.

“Because, it requires the element of surprise to catch someone like this,” Saint purred.

“Where’s Kyan?” I asked.

“Still asleep. But feel free to go wake him for me,” Saint suggested and I groaned as I stomped down the hall towards Kyan’s room.

“Wake up, asshole!” I shouted as I burst in on him.

“You can’t just ride a tiger,” he mumbled. “You gotta earn the trust of a big pussy like that first...”

I eyed the hunting knife which was wedged beneath his pillow with concern and crossed into the bathroom, taking a piss to relieve myself before grabbing a tube of toothpaste and heading back into his room.

I leaned forward and squirted a generous dollop of minty freshness onto his open palm then moved around the side of the bed, blowing gently on his ear so that his hair fluttered over it, tickling him.

It took three attempts before he slapped at the tickle and a roar of rage left him as toothpaste splattered everywhere.

I was running before he was even upright, a laugh tearing from my lips as he took chase. I darted back to the others and put the couch between us as he charged into the room with that fucking knife in his grip and toothpaste all over one side of his face.

“Enough!” Saint bellowed as Tatum started laughing and Monroe barked a surprised laugh too. “Save that aggression for the stalker. Today’s the fucking day.”

Kyan cursed me as he turned and stormed back to his room, managing not to stab anyone as he went and slamming the door behind him.

I poured myself a coffee to help with the hangover and jumped in surprise as a warm hand curled around mine.

“How are things this morning?” Tatum breathed and that look in her eyes said she really did care, even though I had no right to expect that from her.

“Not as dark,” I admitted, because it was true. Some days my grief seemed like this monster in the room, terrifying and brooding and impossible to ignore. Others it was more like a weight I had to carry, but the load was manageable. At least most of the time.

She gave me a soft smile, squeezing again before releasing me as everyone gathered at the door in their coats and boots. I hurried to pull mine on too, tugging a hat down over my hair and falling in amongst everyone as we headed out into the frosty night.

Everything was quiet as we walked up the path, the soft hoot of an owl echoing over the lake as our breath rose in clouds around us. Tatum walked

in the middle of our group and there was something about that which just felt right. Like that was where she belonged. Between us all.

I didn't bother to ask where we were going as we headed up towards the main part of campus. If we were looking for the stalker then I guessed we were heading for the dorms.

It was fucking freezing out, the world glittering silver in the moonlight and Tatum hugged her arms around herself as she shivered.

I moved to wrap an arm around her but before I could do it, Kyan got there first, tucking her close to him without a word despite the raging anger that I knew still boiled between them. Sometimes he surprised me with the shit he did. Like, he was always the biggest, meanest asshole in the room but from time to time he'd just let it slip how big his heart really was without meaning to.

She was still shivering even with his arm around her and after a moment's hesitation, I wrapped my arm around her too from the other side.

She glanced at me in surprise and I winked at her. "We made you come together, sweetheart, I think we can keep you warm together too. Why do you look so shocked?"

Monroe cleared his throat and moved to walk ahead of us a little, striding along at Saint's side like a man on a mission.

"I guess because...there's nothing in this for either of you," she said in a low voice, like the idea of us just holding her to be nice or because we wanted to look after her didn't occur to her. Or it did and it was such a fucking alien concept that she couldn't comprehend it.

"There wasn't a whole lot in it for us when we made you come, either," Kyan muttered, but he had a smirk playing around his lips that said he didn't mind that so much.

"I still enjoyed myself," I said with a shrug. "Not as much as I might have

liked to, but...I guess we deserve a bit of that treatment from you.”

“A *lot* of that treatment from me.”

Kyan snorted a laugh and leaned close to murmur in her ear. “You might be able to resist Blake’s cock after having a taste of it but once you’ve fucked me, you’ll never want to tell me no again.”

“*Please*,” I scoffed. “I guarantee I could make her come more times than you in a single night.”

“Doubtful,” Kyan replied. “You might win a lot of shit, golden boy but that’s only because I don’t care to compete for much. But in this, I’d wipe the fucking floor with you.”

“Wanna bet?” I taunted.

“Are you seriously betting on how many times you can give me an orgasm in a single night?” Tatum asked, sounding somewhere between thrilled and outraged by the idea.

“You’re a pair of idiots,” Saint snapped without turning to look at us. “It’s against the rule to do any such thing and it’s rude to presume she would want you to.”

“*Rude*,” Kyan mocked. “That’s my main personality trait. Girls tend to forget to be mad about that when I’m between their thighs though.”

“*Christ*,” Tatum cursed but she didn’t try to pull away from us and I smirked at Kyan over her head.

We made it to the path which split, leading off to the boys’ and girls’ dorms. Kyan slid his arm from Tatum’s shoulders and gently scooted her closer to me so that I could wrap both of my arms around her with her back pressed to my front. He headed off towards the boys’ dorms and Saint headed for the girls’ without a word.

Monroe pulled his silver coach’s whistle out from beneath his jacket and placed it between his lips. His gaze kept sliding to Tatum in my arms and

away again like he didn't want to look, but also couldn't help himself. It was impossible to tell whether she was having the same problem with him or not with her back pressed to me, but there was definitely tension lining her limbs.

It didn't take long before both dorms' fire alarms blared out and soon the thundering of feet pounded down the stairs from both buildings.

Monroe blasted his whistle loud enough to bust an ear drum and started barking orders at everyone, demanding they go to the canteen for a head count and striding away after them as they all grumbled, casting suspicious looks our way as we failed to follow.

Saint and Kyan were grabbing the Unspeakables out of the crowd and once they'd gathered all of them, they directed the terrified bunch of students down to the boys' dorm. Bait was holding his mask to his face, fumbling with the knot as he tried to tie it and I took the opportunity to offer him some superglue if he needed it, but he just scurried away without replying. I guided Tatum after them, my heart pounding with excitement as this plan came together.

"We are looking for evidence of a fucking creep hiding amongst us," Saint called as he gathered everyone in the hallway on the bottom floor. "I've got the master key, so I can open every room. I want you to look every-fucking-where for anything relating to Tatum Rivers. Photographs, notes, creepy ass poems, her stuff, her *underwear*. The Night Keepers are on the hunt tonight and I smell blood in the air. And whichever one of you finds the things we're looking for, will get a prize for your efforts. An entire week off of being an Unspeakable. You can go about your fucking business however you like and we won't make a single command over your time."

The Unspeakables all exchanged excited whispers at the idea of that and as Saint led the way up to the top floor to start their search, we followed on after.

“I really hope this works,” Tatum murmured, staying in my arms even though we were inside now and the heating was warm enough to make me sweat within my padded coat.

As Saint opened doors and Kyan prowled in and out of the dorms, checking on the hunt, I walked her to my room at the far end of the corridor, where I’d brought her all those weeks ago and fallen into my bed with her in my arms.

“You know,” I said in a low voice, just for her as I turned her and gently pushed her back against the door so that I could look into her big eyes. “I’d fucked a lot of girls before I met you.”

“Okay...”

“But,” I hurried on. “I never...*clicked* with any of them the way I did with you that night.”

“You mean *before* you got that phone call and decided to destroy me for something I didn’t even do?” she asked icily.

“Yeah,” I replied in a sad tone. “I just, want you to know that it was real for me. Real in a way I don’t think I’ve ever experienced before and I know it’s all my fault that that got fucked up and everything... and I’m not asking you to forgive me, because what I did was unforgivable. What I got the others to do too-”

“They’re big boys, they made their own choices,” she said.

“Yeah. Kinda. But the three of us stick together, no matter what. It’s our one, iron clad law. And I was so fucking destroyed by my mom’s death. So fucking devastated and angry and in such need of somewhere to aim all of that rage and hatred and injustice that when I fucked up and directed it at you, I really believed that destroying you was what I needed. What it would take to fix this aching fucking wound in me. And I know that’s twisted and messed up and doesn’t even really make sense, but I believed it. Saint’s

always been one for redirecting his emotions, so he believed it would work. Plus, he struggles to really give a shit about people. All people. Like, he's been brought up in the most fucked up way and his dad basically made him believe that most people are expendable. He's only ever truly placed value on Kyan and me, so for him it was a sensible choice to make. And Kyan just...I think he was just hurting for me so much that he didn't care. If you were the sacrifice that needed to be made to mend my heart then he was willing to make it. Because when he loves someone, he's willing to give it all. Even his morals, the objections he would have raised if it had been for any other reason-"

"He decided to sacrifice a stranger to save his brother?" she asked and a tear slipped down her cheek.

"He hasn't met many good people in his life. Many people he would think of as *worth* saving. In fact, he kinda pre-assumes that everyone is hiding some fucked up secret. So it wouldn't have been hard for him to convince himself that you deserved it one way or another. Even if it was just in payment for the chance of my recovery." I reached out to swipe another tear from beneath her eye and she leaned into my touch, making me swallow thickly.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say to that."

"Nothing," I replied instantly. "I just...I guess I want you to know that you should blame *me* for it. Not the others. Not really. I mean, I'm not saying you can just forget the shit they've done or whatever but, the three of us, we're just a bunch of fuck ups really. And there are reasons for that. But they're not excuses. I'm just, sorry."

She looked at me for the longest moment, the silence between us stretching to eternity even with the banging and crashing of the searches going on around us. But the look in her eyes made hope stir in my chest. It

wasn't the first time I'd apologised to her, but this time...it felt like the first time she'd heard it.

"I've found something!" Squits yelled excitedly from down the corridor and we both turned towards his voice as Kyan and Saint exited other rooms and hurried into the one he was in.

By the time we made it inside, Saint had shoved Squits out of the way and Kyan threw his fist into the wall as Saint lifted a pair of red lace panties from a drawer beneath the bed.

Tatum inhaled sharply and I shifted closer to get a look at what else was there. Photographs, underwear, a copy of her timetable, a sports bra, a dirty towel.

"Whose room is this?" Tatum hissed and Saint snarled with rage as he dropped the panties and stalked past us, tapping away on his cellphone with furious thumbs.

"I've sent a message to Monroe and he's bringing him out to see us as we speak," he growled, storming from the dorm without giving us the culprit's name and we were forced to hurry after him.

We strode up the stone path with Saint leading the way and Kyan cursing so colourfully he could have made a whore blush.

Monroe's dark silhouette moved towards us from the direction of the canteen and a low growl of fury left my lips as I spotted the hulking figure who he was dragging along beside him.

Tatum's fingers curled through mine and I squeezed her tight as we marched forward to face her tormentor as one.

Kyan broke into a run with a snarl of utter rage and he slammed into the guy as Monroe shoved him forward, tackling him to the floor with a sickening thump before laying into him with all the fury of the darkness he held deep within him.

We hurried closer and the pale moon slipped out from behind the clouds so that the bleeding face of the creep responsible for threatening our girl was thrown into light.

“Toby?” Tatum gasped just I said, “Punch?”

Kyan had grown sick of beating the shit out of him and he wrapped two huge hands around Toby’s throat, slamming his head back down on the path as he started to squeeze the life out of him.

Toby thrashed beneath him, his eyes wild with fear as the rest of us just fucking watched.

“Enough,” Saint snarled when it looked like Kyan might crush his fucking oesophagus.

When he didn’t stop, Monroe lurched forward to drag him off and I had to release Tatum so that I could help too.

Kyan finally let go and we dragged him back with blood coating his knuckles and his eyes dark with the promise of more violence.

“What’s going on?” Toby gasped, trembling as he cowered on the floor between us.

“Do you like our girl, Toby?” Saint asked in a voice that was dripping with ice and a promise of pain. “Do you like following her around and jerking off over her in the bushes? Do you like taking pictures of her and sending her twisted little gifts to try and scare her?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Toby gasped, his terrified gaze falling on Tatum like he was pleading with her for help.

I swung my boot into his side with a snarl of rage. “You don’t look at her!” I yelled and as his eyes flipped to me betrayal flashed in his gaze, like he couldn’t believe that I was a part of this. But did he really think our friendship would protect him from this? Did he really think I’d value that over Tatum’s safety?

“We found your hoard in your room,” I spat. “So stop fucking lying to us. We know you’ve been stalking her.”

“St-stalking?” Toby stammered, his gaze flitting to Tatum once more. “I didn’t - I don’t – I *wouldn’t*-”

This time Monroe was the one to kick him and Kyan laughed darkly as the newest Night Keeper shed his headmaster badge in defence of our girl.

“Let me spell this out for you, *scum*,” Saint hissed, leaning down so that Toby was forced to look at him. “Tatum Rivers belongs to *us*. She’s off limits to anyone other than the Night Keepers. So no one gets to touch her, look at her, or even fucking *think* about her as if she might ever be theirs. Did you seriously think you could get away with terrorising her right beneath our noses? I can only assume you wanted to bring our wrath down on you. Maybe you actually enjoyed being an Unspeakable the last time? Maybe you *like* being the lowest of the low.”

Toby whimpered as he looked between us, searching for mercy and finding none. “I didn’t,” he murmured, like he seriously thought he could escape this fate after we’d found all of that shit beneath his bed.

“I thought you were my friend?” Tatum breathed and Toby just stared back at her, choking down breath after breath as he fought to recover from Kyan’s attack. “Why would you do this to me?”

He just started shaking his head and I tugged on Tatum’s hand to pull her back again. I didn’t want her close to him. Not ever. If I got my way, he’d never lay his filthy eyes on her again in his pathetic life.

“This right here is nothing,” Saint hissed, his eyes manic and his hands curled into fists as he glared down at the shaking boy between us. “It’s just the start. Every single day, one of us will find you and torture you in some new and ever more fucked up way. We will come at all times of day or night, never letting you know when and forcing you to live in fear of your own

fucking shadow.”

My skin prickled at the darkness in his words, but I had no objection to them. I was more than a little tempted to release my hold on Kyan right now and let him finish what he’d just started.

“But I’ll give you an out,” Saint offered. “One, single way for you to make us stop. When you can’t take another day of it, you’ll come to us and beg for us to cut your fucking balls off. We will make your life so unbearable that one day, that fate will be preferable to living another moment with us coming to torture you. You will quite literally prefer a life without balls to a life with us in it. You’ll beg us to castrate you and we’ll do it. And then and *only* then will you be rid of us for good.”

No fucking way am I cutting a guy’s balls off. Points for fucking terrifying him though.

Toby whimpered pathetically and a wet patch appeared at his crotch, staining his pants as he trembled beneath us.

“Your name is no longer Toby,” I growled, remembering to play this part right even while I ached to destroy him for what he’d fucking done to our girl. The violation, the terrorising, all of it. “It’s Stalker. And you won’t answer to anything else from this day forth.”



My body was getting rewired for early mornings and I scowled at the clock on my phone as the time showed just a few minutes before six. It was Saturday for god's sake. But I already knew I wasn't going to get back to sleep. My mind was buzzing as I thought about going to see my dad in just a few days' time. I had a plan for how I was going to get off campus, but I still hadn't aired it to Monroe yet. And for it to work, I needed him onboard. Maybe it was because I feared how he might react when I spoke about my dad. We'd never discussed whether he believed he was guilty or not, and some part of me was terrified that he might go cold on me. Refuse to help me see him. But another part was sure he would even if he didn't like it. Either way, I really couldn't put it off any longer.

I rolled towards Saint on the other side of the bed and my heart softened at the sight of him curled up like a child, his features boyish and handsome without the sharp scowl he usually wore. I was tempted to reach out and touch him and wondered if it was worth the rule break. His punishments

tended to get my heart racing lately and I couldn't say I minded them at all. Maybe even hungered for them sometimes...

Saint had been my warrior the day Toby had been outed as the stalker. I still found it hard to believe Toby would risk everything again by targeting me. He'd seemed to be trying so hard to fit back in, but then maybe there'd been darkness in him he couldn't fight. Maybe watching me had fulfilled a twisted need in him. It still made my skin prickle to think about it. But at least I knew I was safe now. My Night Keepers weren't letting him within fifty feet of me and though I cringed at the treatment he was getting, I couldn't let myself pity him. He had invaded my privacy, seen me at my most vulnerable and taken pictures of me naked and in the arms of my men. He deserved the suffering he was getting in return for that.

I lifted my hand across the pillow parting me and Saint, wanting to commit this peaceful looking creature to memory. This man who stood between me and the world without blinking an eye. He may have been controlling and arrogant and downright beastly at times, but when it counted he was there for me in ways I had never experienced until I'd been claimed by him and the other Night Keepers.

Debussy poured through the speakers and I yanked my hand back just before Saint's eyes opened. He looked at me across the pillow and his brows dipped, but his eyes didn't cut into me like I expected. For the sweetest few seconds, he kept that carefree expression in place and it brought a smile to my lips. A smile he actually returned. I mean, it was only the tiniest twitch at the corner of his mouth. But still.

"Good morning," he said, his voice gravelly and delicious as his eyes fell to the pink cami top of my pyjamas. He pushed back the covers and was gone before I could reply, heading into the closet to dress in his workout clothes.

I ignored the little tug in my chest that said I was disappointed he'd left.

But that was Saint. Right on time. Never wasting a second with me that could be spent fulfilling his hell driven routine. When he was dressed, he strode into the bathroom to pee and I slid out of bed, wanting to get my letters and spend some time reading through them. I hadn't written a single one to Jess since I'd thought Saint had destroyed them. But now...maybe I could start again.

I dropped down to my knees at the back of the closet, taking the metal box off the lowest shelf and resting it on my knees. It was attached to a chain in the wall so I couldn't take it anywhere and as I turned it over to open it, I realised I didn't know the passcode.

"Saint!" I called as I heard him marching across the landing.

He pushed the door open, arching a brow impatiently as I stole a few seconds from his schedule.

"What's the code?" I tapped the box with a hopeful look and he laughed like a Bond villain.

"Oh no, you can't have the code, Barbie. Whatever made you think that?"

My jaw dropped and I gaped at him, waiting for him to admit he was joking. "But you saved them," I said in confusion, my fingers tightening around the box as I glared at him.

"Yes, and I showed you that they're safe." He shrugged, about to turn away.

"Hey!" I demanded, my breathing becoming ragged. "Open the damn box."

He glanced back over his shoulder with a look of power in his gaze as he drank in my desperation. "You may have a letter when you earn one. Right now, I am still harbouring bad feelings towards you for destroying my grandmother's records."

I felt like I'd been punched in the face. "I only did that because you

pretended to burn these!” I rattled the box in anger, aching to get to the contents inside.

“Yes, which is why I don’t lock you in the crypt every night and make you sleep with the dead in penance,” he snapped, his harsh voice making my heart lurch.

He walked away and I stared after him in absolute fury. That *asshole*. That *power-hoarding, evil nutcase!*

I clenched my jaw, looking to the box and refusing to give up. I just needed the right tools. Then I could get in and take back what was mine. He had no right to keep them from me. He’d had no right to take them in the first place.

I headed out of the closet with a huff, jogging downstairs as Saint’s music filled my ears. I marched to the kitchenette, grabbing a pair of scissors from the drawer before hurrying back upstairs and kneeling in the closet by the box. I jammed the scissors beneath the lid and tried to prise it open with all my might, growling under my breath.

I tried for several long minutes before realising it wasn’t going to budge and I huffed my fury, tossing the scissors at the wall and cutting into the perfect wallpaper to one side of the mirror. I smirked as I caught hold of the tear and ripped it wider. Then wider still, tearing whole chunks out of the white and silver paper until I’d ruined every scrap of it on the wall.

Screw Saint. He hadn’t changed at all. At least the other two had apologised to me, but him? He was always going to be a heathen. Always going to keep me as a glorified pet. I’d been so fucking stupid to think things had been improving between us. He dressed me up and paraded me around school like I was a wild animal that he’d trained for his psycho circus. And he hadn’t paid nearly enough in penance for what he’d done to me.

I stood up, staring around at his beautiful clothes with a vicious smile

pulling at my lips. *You wanna make me wear all those fancy ass clothes? Then I wonder what you'll wear when I'm through with yours?*

I grabbed the scissors and snatched a pair of trousers which were folded neatly on the shelf. Then I cut the crotch right out of them and tossed them on the floor. My heart thundered in my chest as I started working through every pair he had, casting them aside as soon as I was done. I was probably destroying thousands and thousands of dollars' worth of stuff, but I didn't care. Saint didn't care about me or anything but the perfect picture he portrayed of me all the time, so I was going to royally fuck with that image by taking away one of the things he relied on most.

By the time I'd worked through all of his pants, I started cutting two nipple holes over the chests of his shirts, throwing them over my shoulder as I finished each one. Then I snipped all of his boxers in half and cut the toes off of his socks. I smiled at the carnage around me, knowing I was running out of time before Saint came back from his workout. I was going to pay for this bad, so fuck it. *Might as well get as much revenge as possible on him now.*

I strode from the closet, running downstairs with a thrill in my veins which I knew wasn't going to last. *He's going to kill me Quentin Tarantino style. Rebecca will be cleaning my blood from the walls for days.*

I grabbed a few cans of tuna which were stacked in the cupboard then poured each one into three separate bowls before pocketing another one for later. I planted the bowls down in the boys' usual spots on the dining table, mentally refusing to cook and clean for them this morning then left a note on the table. *Enjoy breakfast, fuckwits!*

I was so angry to have my letters taken from me all over again. It reminded me that I was still chained, that I'd been lulled into a sense of safety recently. Blake at least had made some effort, but he had no intention of

letting me go. And Saint was clearly planning on torturing me forever.

I kicked on my sneakers in the entranceway so I'd be ready to run and headed back up to Saint's room, grabbing two rolls of toilet paper from his bathroom then proceeded to throw it everywhere all over his bedroom so it hung from the light and even got caught way up in the rafters above. *Have fun getting that down, dickweed.*

I headed into his bathroom, running water in the sink and wetting lumps of TP in it before launching it at the ceiling and walls, making it stick everywhere in his pristine bathroom.

I hurried back to his room to check the time and my breath halted as the clock just ticked onto half seven.

The crypt door sounded and I dropped to the floor, crawling under Saint's bed with my heart in my throat.

"What the fuck!?" Saint boomed, his voice filling every crevice of The Temple. A set of footsteps came running and Blake spoke a second later.

"Shit, where is she?" he demanded then more footsteps pounded upstairs. I held my breath as Saint's sneakers appeared ahead of me, pressing my hand to my mouth.

"Tatum!"

I swear, the whole church shook as he marched into the bathroom, kicking the door open and preceded to cuss with every colourful word under the sun. "Where is she?!" he roared as Blake's bare feet appeared at the top of the stairs.

"She must have left," Blake growled. "I'll wake Kyan." He jogged back downstairs and Saint stormed into the closet, making every muscle in my body clench as I waited for the world to end. Or for him to burst into flames and turn into a pile of soot.

The noise that left him was somewhere between a wail and roar. A bang

sounded and the crash of shattering glass made my heart tremble as he broke the mirror.

“Everything’s ruined,” he snarled like a wolf. “Fucking *everything!*” He strode back out of the room, running downstairs. “Well?! Did you find her?” he bellowed.

“Her shoes are gone,” Blake said and Kyan’s laughter reached me.

“Why are you laughing?” Saint snapped.

“Because now we get to hunt her,” he replied darkly and goosebumps rippled over my flesh. I was too angry to care what they were going to do when they found me. I didn’t give a fuck. Saint couldn’t do a single thing worse to me than what he’d already done. And he deserved to have his entire routine destroyed for keeping my letters from me. He had no right. No fucking *right*.

The front door slammed as they left and I crawled out from under the bed, throwing a surreptitious glance over the balcony to make sure they were really gone before heading downstairs. Then I jogged down into the crypt and grabbed every single one of my favourite snacks and carried them back to the couch. I reckoned I had at least a few hours before they gave up looking for me and came back here. So I was going to enjoy my morning stuffing my face and watching a romance movie where the male lead wasn’t a sadistic asshole.

I shot Monroe a message to tell him what I’d done with a grin on my face and he replied soon after.

Monroe:

I know, princess, they have me out looking for you ;)

I laughed as I kicked my feet up on the table. I was going to be staying

with him tonight so I could at least avoid Saint's rage when it carried on into the evening. Though I reckoned I was going to have to face the punishment of all punishments before then.

Two Nicholas Sparks' movies, a bag of popcorn, a large bag of Cheetos and three cans of coke later, the door sounded and my heart jolted. I reached for the can of tuna in my pocket, opening it in my lap as Saint, Blake and Kyan spilled into the church. They all fell still as they spotted me and I gave them an innocent look.

"Where have you been?" I asked lightly as Saint's jaw started ticking.

"Get hold of her Kyan," Saint growled and I sprang to my feet, leaping onto the coffee table and scooping the tuna into my palm.

"I'll throw it," I warned.

"Like I give a shit," Kyan laughed in a low tone, but I hadn't been talking to him.

He strode towards the couch as I swung my arm back, launching it across the room and it slapped against Saint's chest with a loud thwack. He didn't flinch. Didn't move. Didn't blink. But his eyes definitely set fire to his brain.

Blake stared at Saint like he was a hydrogen bomb about to blow.

Saint didn't move a muscle, but his face darkened to purest sin. "Get. Her. Now."

Kyan lunged over the couch and I tossed the empty can aside, holding out my wrists in surrender. He frowned as he caught hold of me, tugging me off the table and suddenly he was all I could see as he blocked my path.

"Haven't you learned not to rile him up yet?" he breathed. "He's going to crucify you."

"Careful, Ky," I said. "It almost sounds like you give a shit."

"So what if I do?" he hissed and my stomach swirled.

"Are you going to keep me waiting?" Saint snarled and I lifted my chin as

Kyan marched me over to him like a prisoner of war.

“What will it be Saint? Are you going to drown me in the font again?” I snatched my hands out of Kyan’s grip and stepped up to Saint, staring him in the eyes. “Tie me up, spank me? Or are you going to hurt me for real this time? Are you going to make me bleed, Saint Memphis? Is that what you really crave?” My lower lip quivered with rage and Saint gazed evenly back at me, his eyes narrowed on me like missiles. I moved another step forward, tip-toeing to get up in his face. “I don’t care what it is by the way, just get it over with.”

His lips twitched and an achingly long moment of silence stretched between us.

“Saint, maybe-” Blake started, but Saint raised a hand to shut him up and a deadly tension gripped me by the throat.

“Luckily for you, I have spent my time looking for you harnessing my anger and comprising a three part punishment for you this afternoon,” Saint said with something of a smirk. “Are you going to obey me or are you going to be difficult?”

I shrugged. “I’ll take your punishment. I don’t care.”

“You will,” he hissed, grabbing my arm and pushing me toward Blake. “Hold her there while I call Rebecca. This mess is unacceptable.” He marched towards Kyan and Blake’s room.

“Where you going?” Blake called as he took my hand.

“To borrow some of your fucking clothes because I’d rather die than dress in the hillbilly shit Kyan wears.” Blake’s door slammed a second later and I released an empty laugh.

“What’s got into you?” Blake asked, spinning me around to look at him, his eyes fierce.

“Saint just gave me the reminder I needed as to why I despise him to the

root of my being.” I folded my arms and Blake frowned.

“He didn’t burn the letters at least,” Blake defended him and I pouted.

“No, but now he’s keeping them from me like that’s perfectly acceptable, saying I have to *earn* them. I mean, who does he think he is?”

“The king of the world, duh,” Kyan said unhelpfully as he shoved my empty snack packets off the couch and fell down onto it like he was planning to take a nap.

“Why isn’t Monroe with you?” I asked, realising he should have been there.

Blake’s brows pulled together. “How do you know he was with us?”

My heart juddered as I realised my mistake. “Because you’re the Night Keepers, you do everything together,” I said with an eye roll, covering my tracks. Not that it was illegal for me to text Monroe, but I definitely didn’t want them looking too closely at our communications.

“He had some teacher shit to attend to.” Blake shrugged, then reached out and plucked a Cheeto from my hair, grinning wolfishly at me as he ate it.

“So uncivilised,” I teased and he gave me a slanted smile that made my heart pound.

“Especially in the bedroom. As your pussy well remembers.”

Oh my god.

Saint returned wearing some of Blake’s fitted jeans and a Redwood Rattlesnakes shirt, I had to actively ignore how freaking good he looked in normal teenage shit. It made him look rougher, edgier and I liked it. Not that I liked *him* of course. But I was allowed to appreciate his godlike exterior so long as I didn’t forget about the devil who lived within.

“You.” He pointed at me and Blake shot me a look that said *good luck* then walked away.

I stared at Storm Saint as he closed in on me, ready to meet the gale force

winds that were approaching.

He gripped my shoulder, whirling me around and guiding me towards the front door. I was only dressed in my thin nightwear, but I wasn't going to bitch about the cold, especially as he eyed me like he was waiting for me to complain.

"You will be completely compliant with my instructions, do you understand?" he growled in my ear and I gritted my teeth, silently nodding my agreement. I wasn't going to utter a single word of complaint no matter what he did to me. Even if he shaved my head, cut off my right foot and hung me in a tree for the birds to devour. I was not going to give him the satisfaction of cowering, pleading or crying.

"The first stage of your punishment will involve drills. If you hesitate with a single one of my orders, you will have to start the stage all over again. Do you understand?"

I saluted him mockingly, still keeping my lip zipped and his mouth pressed into a hard line. He pulled me around the church onto the lawn that slopped down towards the lake.

"Walk into the lake and submerge yourself fully then return to me within two minutes." He checked his watch, gesturing for me to go and I steeled myself as I jogged up to the water like I actually wanted to go for a swim in the freezing fucking lake, striding out into it and suppressing a yelp as the cold surrounded me.

When I was up to my waist and shivering like a leaf in the wind, I forced myself to drop under the water. I gasped as I came up for air, frozen to the bone as I waded back out again, my pink shorts and cami turning nearly transparent as I hurried up to stand in front of Saint with my teeth chattering. To his credit, his gaze didn't dip from my face.

"One hundred jumping jacks. Go," he demanded and I started doing them

as the cold wind whipped around me and water squelched in my shoes. With every jump, I cursed Saint in my mind and counted at the same time. *One - dickwad. Two - asscake. Three- letter-hoarding-Gollum. Four – Lord Shitsworth.*

When I reached ninety five I was down to the one syllable, less creative, but still effective insults. *Ninety six - prick. Ninety seven - bitch. Ninety eight - ass. Ninety nine - dick. One hundred- c-*

“Good. Warmer now?” he asked and though my blood was pumping, my skin was still dripping with cold water and rapidly cooling in the wind. So I scowled and said nothing, mentally finishing my sentence.

-unt.

“Get on the floor. Army crawl to that tree and back. Fifteen seconds. Go!”

He pointed to the ash which was a hundred yards away and I dropped down, army crawling along and getting covered in mud as I slithered across the ground, my shorts riding up my ass and giving him a view. He was probably loving this humiliating shit, sadist that he was.

As soon as I got back to him, he directed me to do it again. And again. And again. I went to the tree and back thirty times before he told me to get up. I panted as I stood with my limbs aching, my body filthy, but my will still intact. Even if he had me out here all day like this, I was not going to break.

“You’re still not getting it, are you Barbie?” he purred, stepping closer. “I am in control. Always. And you are under my roof indefinitely, so you must accept the way I do things or your punishments will grow increasingly more difficult. I thought we were starting to make progress.”

My upper lip peeled back. “You’re keeping the most precious things in the world from me. I won’t just bow down and accept that.”

Saint clucked his tongue. “You didn’t even know they still existed until recently. And I will return them to you as I see fit. If you behave today,

perhaps you will earn yourself one.”

“Give them *all* to me,” I demanded, my blood heating dangerously.

“It is one if you do well, or none at all. So what will it be? Will your punishment at least be worth something, Barbie? Or would you rather suffer for nothing?”

“I’m not suffering for nothing, I destroyed your clothes,” I growled.

“Yes, and though I am most disappointed in you for that, I can have new clothes sent to me promptly. I’m not attached to the things I wear. But you have acted like a child and you need to learn some respect.”

“Respect?” I spat. “Why should I respect you? You’ve taken *everything* from me.”

“Have I? Or have I given you the world? When you arrived at Everlake, you had no friends, no connections, no status. I’ve given you a loyal tribe who will kill for you, I’ve connected you to the most powerful men in this school, I’ve helped you rise and become a queen worthy of her place among us.”

“You didn’t make me yours for my benefit, Saint,” I hissed. “You wanted me broken and keeping my letters proves you’re *still* trying to break me.”

His eyebrows rose. “I did want that, yes. But I’m not trying to break you anymore, Tatum, I’ve seen the power in you, I’ve seen what you truly are. Now...I’m shaping you.”

I tutted, looking away from him. “Think what you like, Saint. You can try to break me, shape me or whatever else. But the one thing you will never, *ever* manage to do, is keep me.”

Something shattered in his gaze and his throat rose and fell as he stared at me. I wrapped my arms around my body as I shivered, the cold inching into my actual soul.

“We’ll see about that,” he muttered, then stepped aside. “Go shower

upstairs. Clothes will be waiting for you when you're done then we will start stage two of your punishment. And for the love of fucking Christ, if you wear those shoes inside and trail mud through my home, you will regret it."

I strode past him, hurrying around the building and kicking off my shoes on the porch before heading inside. The whole place had been freaking cleaned from top to bottom. Like what I'd done had never even happened.

Rebecca.

Blake looked over his shoulder at me from his armchair, his eyes widening at the sight of me soaking wet and covered in mud. I walked upstairs before he could say a word and slammed the door behind me as I entered the bathroom.

When I was warmed through from a long shower, my anger finally started to ease too. The way Saint had looked at me kept playing on my mind. Like he cared if I left. Actually *cared*.

Not just because he wanted to bully and hurt me. I wasn't even mad about his punishments; I'd expected no less after everything I'd done, but there was always going to be a deep wound in me over what Saint had done in the past. Despite my revenge, it was impossible to let go of that. But then...he hadn't burned my letters, even if he was keeping them from me. Maybe this was his way of regaining control over the situation. He'd revealed a vulnerability to me by showing me they were still intact. He'd proven he wasn't heartless. That a living, functioning organ really did beat in his chest. And it felt things. Things that made him spend time forging my letters, pre-empting the whole burning thing instead of just callously doing it. And if I really, really thought about it, I had to acknowledge that the punishments he gave me these days didn't hurt like they used to.

Gah, I can't start reasoning with a madman.

Maybe some of this anger wasn't just for him, maybe it was aimed at

myself. Because as much as I didn't want to admit it, at some point, I'd started to forgive them. If they weren't monsters right down to their rotten cores, then that made them human. It made them redeemable. And I was in a war with the part of me that was acknowledging that. Letting them in, piece by beautiful, terrible piece. They were crawling deeper under my skin. So I needed to hold onto my hate for Saint more than anything, because he was the ringleader. If I started to understand him, sympathise with him, then I would be on a slippery slope. And I did not want to even *think* about what was waiting for me at the bottom of that slope.

I dried my hair then exited the bathroom in a towel, finding a dark red sweater dress waiting on the bed with some delicate black lingerie, stockings and suspenders. I put it all on and it clung to my figure like a dream. How did he find stuff that fit me so well? I was never uncomfortable, nothing was ever too tight or too big. It was just right. All of it. *Did he measure me in my freaking sleep one time??*

I headed downstairs to the sound of explosions as Blake played his favourite zombie game and I glanced at Kyan on the couch who was fast asleep with his arm slung over his eyes. He never seemed that interested in gaming lately and more and more people around campus were meeting the destruction of his fists. His knuckles were busted up nearly every day and I'd taken to tending to them after the burn on his chest had healed. I didn't want to acknowledge the little voice in the back of my head saying that was because I liked looking after him and I didn't want it to stop. Frankly, a small burn on his chest had not needed the rapt attention I'd given it for days on end. But he hadn't complained. He kept showing up after that with bloody knuckles, sitting in the same chair at the same time daily as he waited for me to fix him up. It had become our routine, but that time had come and gone this morning because of the drama and I was kind of miffed to have missed

out on it. The few minutes where I bathed his wounds was the only time that we weren't at each other's throats. And the only time we were in each other's personal space flesh against flesh.

After he'd shown me his beautiful sketches and told me he was mine, he'd immediately started acting like none of it had happened again. He kept his distance, returned to sleeping on the couch when it was my turn in his bed and pretended like there was no screaming, devouring, soul-eating tension between us every time we were in the same room together. I was too stubborn to broach the subject and he clearly had no intention of doing so either. But I couldn't forget those pictures he'd drawn of me, the proof that beneath all his bullshit he held the same obsession with me that I had grown for him. And thinking about it never coming to anything just made me sad.

Saint was waiting for me at the dining table with two large black buckets sitting on top of it. His hands were clasped behind his back and his gaze was sub-zero.

"This bucket contains five bags of penne pasta and five bags of fusilli. You will separate all the straight penne from the curly fusilli. Begin." He smirked as he walked away to join the others and I looked into the bucket of pasta with a huff. I glanced over at the Night Keepers then grabbed the two buckets, heading over to sit down in front of the couch where Kyan was sleeping and placing them on the floor before me.

Saint glanced my way, his lips parting to speak but I got there first. "You didn't say where I had to do it."

He pursed his lips, but said nothing, lifting a book about Beethoven off the arm of the chair and starting to read.

I worked my way through the pasta and after a while, I separated each by touch alone as I watched Blake's game.

"Zombie on the roof above you," I called and his character looked up and

blew its head off.

“Thanks, Tate.” Blake shot me a wink and I grinned.

We soon fell into a rhythm of me watching his back and I got lost in the story of the game. When I finally finished sorting the pasta, I grabbed a controller and joined in. I felt Saint observing me from time to time, but he didn’t intervene and I relaxed as I enjoyed the free time, working as a team with Blake to destroy zombies.

Kyan groaned in his sleep and started muttering, “You can’t tape a screwdriver to your dick and use it to stab people...that’s no way to treat your tools.”

I snorted a laugh and Blake and Saint joined in, a single moment of peace uniting us for a second before we returned to what we were doing.

Eventually, Saint placed his book on the coffee table and stood up. “Enough, come upstairs. It’s time for your final punishment.”

I sighed and Blake threw his head back with a groan. “Don’t take my teammate, asshole. She’s suffered enough.”

“She has suffered enough when I say she has suffered enough,” Saint said, his eyes glittering and making me curious and freaked out about what he had in mind.

He held out a hand to me and I took it, letting him pull me upright, but his fingers only tightened around mine as he towed me toward the stairs. My anger at him had admittedly ebbed away a little, but I wasn’t going to let him know that I was quietly hoping my final punishment might be of the spanking variety. Internally, I was already on my knees pulling my panties down, but that bitch needed to get off the floor and weld her legs shut.

We reached his room and I was annoyed to find it as tidy as everywhere else in The Temple. His open closet door showed me that the space inside had been cleared out of his ruined clothes and the wallpaper had been

replaced along with a new mirror. *Hell, he works fast. Or his people do. Did Rebecca do all of this?*

I looked to the rafters, hunting down the TP I'd thrown up there, but it was all gone. *Gah. Does he have the BFG working for him now for fuck's sake?*

Saint cupped my cheek and I stilled at his cool touch, his eyes boring into mine. "You have impressed me today. And I don't say those words lightly. Are you going to continue to impress me?"

"If I do, will you give me a letter?" I asked, bitterness entering my tone. He nodded. "Any letter of your choosing."

"Okay," I agreed with a heavy sigh. I really did want my letters back, even if I had to jump through hoops to get them. I would have done anything to save them before, so now I had the opportunity, I was going to have to grab onto it with both hands even if it was bullshit. "What do you want me to do?"

"You have two choices," he mused, skimming his fingers down to my throat and brushing them over my racing pulse. "You can scrub every inch of my bathroom floor with a toothbrush *or*...you can allow me to put something in your ass."

I spluttered a non-response somewhere between a laugh and a gasp. "What?" I managed to force out.

He shrugged, but his eyes glinted with amusement and I stood there with my mouth hanging open as he waited for me to pick the bathroom.

"You're not joking?" I confirmed, my heart thumping madly in my chest.

"I don't joke about matters of the ass," he deadpanned, but his eyes said he was finding this hilarious as he watched me squirm and blush. "The toothbrush then?"

He turned, heading to the bathroom and I didn't know when or why or how I decided it, but I blurted, "No," and he fell still, glancing over his shoulder at me with confusion marring his features.

“No?” he questioned and I lifted my chin, standing my ground.

“No,” I reaffirmed lightly, then tossed my hair over my shoulder as casual as shit. “I’ll take the ass thing.” *What the fuck am I saying?? What even is the ass thing????*

It was his turn to look shocked and I fought back a laugh as he walked back towards me, his eyes narrowed like he was waiting for me to reveal I was joking. But I wasn’t. At least, I didn’t think I was. My heart was pounding and my palms were beginning to sweat, but I didn’t like taking the easy option when it came to Saint. He was always waiting for me to show weakness and I refused to do it. And maybe, just a little, I wanted to see where this was going.

I thought he was about to talk me out of it, when he snatched my hand and dragged me into the closet at speed, shoving the door closed behind us. Saint didn’t often get excitable, but he was bordering on a restrained Labrador right now, which was cute as hell to watch. Who knew I just had to agree to ass play to make him smile? Not that the half tilt at the side of his mouth was much of a smile, but it was a big deal for him. And my second one of the day.

He released my hand and pulled open a drawer, grabbing a red velvet pouch out of it. I frowned as he turned to me, slipping his fingers into it and taking out a black silicon device that was about three inches long with an arrowed head. He placed the pouch into his pocket and I sensed there was something else in there, but he stepped forward, capturing all of my attention as he placed the object into his mouth and sucked.

My breaths came heavier as I watched, my heart beginning to jump erratically in my chest. I was undeniably turned on, plus like twenty percent nervous as he directed me to turn around and bend over, placing my hands on the mirror on the back wall.

I took a few steadying breaths as I obeyed, my eyes on him in the glass as

he withdrew the plug from his mouth, his eyes swirling with a dark desire.

“Are you sure, Barbie doll?” he asked, his eyes on mine, making this whole thing so much more erotic.

I nodded, taking my lower lip between my teeth as he flipped up my skirt and pulled my panties down to hang around my thighs.

My heart hit a powerful beat as he parted my cheeks and slowly pushed the plug into my ass. I gasped, my spine straightening and he brushed my hair over my shoulder. “How’s that? Are you okay?”

“I...yeah,” I breathed and I felt him relax as his body pressed to mine.

“You can change your mind if you don’t like it,” he said softly and I frowned at the sweetness of his tone.

“I’m fine,” I said a little hoarsely.

He reached down and gently tugged my panties up, his arm closing around my waist as he guided me back against his chest. His fingers gripped my chin, angling my face directly toward the mirror as he spoke in my ear. “Now go downstairs and make me an espresso, good girl.”

“I’m not good,” I said breathily, adjusting to the strange, but not entirely unpleasant sensation of the plug inside me.

“That’s for me to decide,” he whispered, his teeth grazing my ear for a second and sending a shiver tumbling down my spine. My hate for him was dwindling, giving way to something fiercer and darker that I didn’t want to put a name to. But it was sweeter than hate. “You will have a letter so long as you continue to follow my commands. Can you do that?”

I nodded slowly and he stepped away from me, standing back so I could turn and exit the closet. I wet my lips as I started to get too hot, the feel of that device down *there* making me surprisingly turned on. As I moved, the plug rubbed me in a way that made my thighs want to clamp together. It was *good*.

I walked downstairs, a blush coating my cheeks as Blake looked my way and I smiled vaguely before heading to the kitchen.

Nothing to see here, just a girl with something in her butt as she makes coffee. Totally normal.

I started making Saint's espresso, feeling eyes on me and I glanced towards his room upstairs, finding him leaning his elbows on the balcony railing as he watched. As soon as he caught my attention, he took the pouch out of his pocket, slipping another item out of it and holding it between his finger and thumb as he smirked at me.

I was about to press the button on the espresso machine when the butt plug vibrated and I cried out, my knees half buckling in surprise.

"What's wrong?" Blake demanded as heat crawled everywhere over my body, including between my thighs.

Holy fuck, that was good and weird and oh my god Blake is still waiting for an explanation!

"Nothing, sorry, I just...saw a spider," I said lamely as the vibrations stopped.

I'd always had an irrational fear of spiders, ever since I'd camped in New Mexico with my Dad and I'd woken up with four fucking tarantulas in my tent. I'd only been six and it had scarred me for freaking life. Even the little ones gave me the creeps. So faking fear for a pretend one wasn't that difficult.

"Want me to come and get it?" Blake asked.

"Nah, it's gone now," I said, panting a little as I continued to make the espresso.

I glanced up at Saint whose body was rigid and heat pooled through my stomach at the feeling of him watching me.

When I had the tiny glass cup filled with a triple shot of coffee, I carried it

towards the dining table. Before I made it there, the vibration started again and I gasped, spilling the shot everywhere as my back arched and my thighs clamped together.

“Fuck,” I exhaled as it stopped, everything below my waistline throbbing with need.

“Is it back?” Blake asked, the sound of gunfire ringing out from his game.

“Yeah... it went under the table.” I scrambled to put my thoughts together as I placed the espresso glass on the table and moved to grab a cloth from the kitchenette. By the time I got back to the spilled coffee, Blake was hunting for the spider, pulling out chairs with a serious expression.

“Where are you, you little shit?” he murmured as I dropped to my knees to wipe up the mess.

Saint took the opportunity to start the vibrations up again and I hunched forward, sucking my lower lip as I tried not to react too obviously, but a moan still escaped me as the sensation crashed through my whole body. “Oh my god, oh my god,” I said under my breath.

“It’s okay, I’ll find it Cinders,” Blake vowed – it was totally cute and I would have told him so if I wasn’t busy trying so hard to hide what was really going on.

Saint was silhouetted by the window behind him as I glanced up, looking like my own personal demon, veiled in shadow.

I realised this was the first time he’d been overtly sexual with me, but how was he supposed to deny that this wasn’t foreplay? *You are so dead, mister.*

When I’d cleaned the mess on the floor, Saint summoned me upstairs with a single word, “Come.”

He turned the vibrations on again as I made it to the stairs and I wondered if the command had a double meaning as my legs got weak and I had to swallow back my moans as I made it to the last step then dropped to my

knees, my muscles tightening, my body shaking.

Saint's hands gripped me and he dragged me upright, pulling me into the bathroom and clamping a hand over my mouth to stifle the wanton noises escaping me. His hard dick ground into my ass and I pushed back against him in surprise, making him release a low groan as he guided me in front of the bathroom mirror to watch. I convulsed against him as it continued to vibrate, my head falling back against his shoulder as my body gave into a powerful orgasm that took root at my core then spread everywhere in waves of heat and pleasure.

Saint held me through it, his fingers twisting into my hair and his breath cool against my ear.

"Bend forward," he instructed and I panted heavily as I did so, clutching the edge of the sink as he lifted my dress. His hand slipped into the back of my panties and he removed the plug with deft fingers.

"Go wait on the bed," he ordered, his frantic breaths matching mine.

Part of me longed to touch him, turn into his arms and see if he'd take this further, but another, stronger part of me held back. I'd played his game, taken my punishments. I didn't need to give him anything in return for the pleasure he'd given me. It was just another way to get my revenge. But even as I turned to him, I found a wall going up in his eyes and I didn't think he would cross that line anyway. The rules meant too damn much to him.

I headed away from him out of the room, moving to sit on the bed cross-legged and willing my heart rate to settle and everywhere between my thighs to stop tingling.

I drummed my fingers on my knees, wondering what was taking him so long and my throat thickened as I got a mental image of him pleasuring himself. *Would he...?*

He eventually returned with the silk pouch in hand, not casting a look my

way as he headed straight into the closet. *Totally did.*

He returned a few minutes later with my overnight bag packed and the pile of my letters in his hand.

“Pick one,” he offered them to me and I leaned forward, thumbing through them and wishing I could just grab them all and never let them go. But it was pointless. And at least I knew one day I would get them all back. I just had to bide my damn time. I plucked out a letter from Jess that detailed her trip to Ireland and reached forward to tuck it into my overnight bag. Then Saint returned to the closet and I heard the box snap shut a second later, making my heart clench as I lost access to them all over again.

“Time to go to Monroe’s,” he said as he returned, still not acknowledging anything that had just happened between us.

“You broke a rule,” I said, not blinking as I accused him.

“Which rule?” he scoffed.

“No foreplay,” I hissed and he laughed darkly, taking out his phone and tapping something on it.

He passed it to me, his lip pulling up in a sneer. “Read that out loud to me.”

I dropped my eyes to the screen and my teeth clenched as I spoke the words. “Foreplay: sexual activity that precedes intercourse.”

Saint smirked as he took his phone back. “And are you expecting me to have intercourse with you any time soon, Barbie?” There was an undercurrent of mocking in his tone that made my veins sear with shame and I squirmed uncomfortably on the bed. I shouldn’t have felt so awkward and I hated the reason for why I did. I wanted him. I couldn’t help but fantasise about what it would be like to be claimed by the devil. But as my cheeks blazed and amusement flitted through his eyes, I decided I wasn’t going to let him hold the power right now. I was going to claim it myself.

“I’m not expecting you to, Saint, but sometimes I think about it,” I admitted and the mirth fell from his features instantly. *Ha, you didn’t expect that did you asshat?* I took advantage of his shock, moving forward onto my knees and biting my lip seductively. “Sometimes all I want to do is let you take control of my entire body, give all of myself to you and experience your devout power first hand.” *Devout power* might have been overkill, but his face didn’t say so. In fact, his eyes swirled with a hunger so fierce it frightened me.

“Rules are rules,” he said a little hoarsely.

“Yeah, and I don’t think you’ve forgotten that I defined that particular rule as not allowing any of you to touch me beneath my underwear.” I lifted a brow. *Let’s see you get out of that one, oh holier than thou.*

He tutted, shaking his head. “I didn’t touch you, the toy did.”

“Pah! Since when is it allowed for you to use toys on me? Your argument is wearing thin, Saint.”

“My argument is iron clad. Nothing in the rules says I can’t use toys on you, does it?”

I scowled, he scowled. It felt like checkmate, but it wasn’t. He was wrong, he just couldn’t stand to admit it.

“Get up. Get your coat. We’re leaving.” He marched downstairs and I smiled victoriously for having rattled him. The great Saint Memphis was not made of stone. He was made of flesh and blood and a heap of seriously tempting muscles and sometimes I wanted to taste it all.

I grabbed my coat from the closet and headed downstairs, finding my band of not-so-merry men waiting for me. Kyan yawned broadly as Blake slid an arm around my shoulders and muttered a promise in my ear that he would find the spider before I returned.

“Just don’t kill it,” I ordered just in case he did find an unlucky spider, and

he snared my pinky with his.

“Promise, sweetheart.”

I smiled at him, my heart fluttering at his cuteness.

We headed outside and they walked me to Monroe’s house. When we arrived outside the red brick building in the northwest of campus and Saint knocked on the door, my heart started beating out a wild tune. Staying here was always a test of my resolve. All I wanted since we’d kissed was to do it again and again and again. But I had to behave, do as he’d asked and keep away from him. I wasn’t going to put his job in jeopardy even if it was agony of mass proportions to do so. It was even harder now I knew he wanted me too...

He opened the door, clearly just back from a run, his chest bare and gleaming, his sweatpants hanging low on his hips and giving me a delicious view of the V that ran beneath his waistband. *Holy fucking hotness. This is not fair.*

Saint handed Monroe my bag and Blake pushed me toward him.

“Bet you wish you could come with us tonight, huh Nash?” Kyan said and I glanced between them as Monroe nodded with a wicked expression on his face.

“Why?” I questioned.

“Because we’re going to fuck with Stalker until he cries like an infant,” Saint said coldly and a tremor ran through me at the darkness in all of their eyes.

“Take good care of her,” Blake insisted as Monroe stepped aside to let me in and I scented pine and testosterone on his flesh.

“Always,” Monroe agreed and the look they all shared made my skin tingle.

He shut the door and planted my bag down, tucking his hair behind his

ears as he surveyed me. “Sorry, I lost track of time, I would have gone for a run sooner...”

“It’s no problem,” I said politely, the air becoming fraught with awkward tension.

Silence stretched then Monroe cleared his throat.

“I’ll just go take that shower then, help yourself to food.” He gently pounded his fist into my arm in a weirdly bro-ish gesture then stalked to the bathroom, heading inside and I swear I caught him say the word *idiot* to himself.

I didn’t bother to get snacks after my morning binge, but I did put on an episode of Monroe’s favourite truck show, enjoying the familiarity of it as I settled myself down on the couch. I needed to psyche myself up for telling him about my dad’s call and ask him to sneak me off campus in a few days. He was either going to freak out and refuse for my own safety or vow to do all he could to pull it off. I couldn’t quite decide which was more likely. But I wasn’t going to tell him when exactly I was planning to go unless he agreed. Otherwise he’d make it his personal damn mission to stop me.

He finally returned from the shower and I did my absolute best - scout’s honour – not to eye fuck him all the way to his bedroom. When he returned, he was dressed in sweats, totally covered up so I at least could avoid that distraction. Though his handsome face was enough to make my tummy squeeze and for me to fantasise about pressing my tongue between his lips. *Stop it, you sex-craving waif.*

After we’d finished an episode of Super Truckers and eaten our way through some burgers and fries in near silence, I accepted that I was procrastinating. I was so nervous to talk to anyone about Dad, even Monroe who’d been there through everything for me. But I didn’t know what he thought of my dad and part of me didn’t want to know. I couldn’t bear it if he

held hate in his heart for the man who'd raised me. Who would never have hurt anyone intentionally. And I didn't want to have to defend him to Monroe of all people, who I wanted to trust. *Needed* to trust.

"You're fidgeting a lot," he pointed out, which just made things more awkward.

"Yeah..." I chewed my lip, looking over at him in his armchair and he frowned. "I need to talk to you," I blurted and his features shifted into concern.

"What's up?"

I sat upright in my seat, picking an invisible piece of lint off my knee as I studied the area. This was either going to make or break our relationship, I could feel it. The rest of the school may have thought Dad was a villain, but if Monroe did too...

"Tatum, you can tell me anything," he encouraged and I continued to pick at my knee. He was right. I had been able to tell him anything up until now. But what if we'd reached a point where that wasn't true anymore?

I guess there's only one way to find out.

"My dad called," I forced the words from my lips, my heart pounding wildly.

"What?" he gasped, but I couldn't get a read on how he felt about that from his tone.

I made myself look up and found his brows stitched together and his jaw tight. Before I could tell him more, I needed to know if I could trust him with this. The conversation I'd shared with Dad was the most precious secret I had. My thumb traced over the rose-shaped scar on my arm and my mind whirled at the truth branded on my flesh. It was still hard for me to accept the knowledge that my blood held the antibodies everyone in the world was so desperately in need of right now.

“Do you believe me about my dad? Do you believe he’s innocent?” I fixed him with a stare, unblinking, taking in every inch of his face as I hunted out any hint of the answer before he gave it.

He sighed, leaning forward in his seat and resting his elbows on his knees. “Do *you* believe he’s innocent beyond all reasonable doubt?” he asked.

I huffed in offence at the question, but he gave me a patient look that said he wanted that answer.

I sighed. “Of course I do.”

“Unquestionably? Not a *single* doubt?”

My heart thundered against my ribcage and heat flushed through my body. “What are you trying to imply?”

“I’m not trying to imply anything, princess. I just want you to be totally honest with me.”

I tried to swallow the razor sharp ball in my throat and failed. Because of course I had doubts. They crept in at night and whispered the worst, most terrifying possibilities in my ears. But I never let them in. I built a wall against them and refused their existence. But now...with Monroe looking at me like that, I knew he was going to make me face them.

“He’s a good person,” I choked, tears threatening to come for me, but I held them back.

“That’s not what I asked you,” he said steadily, a patient expression on his face.

My lungs started to labour and I pushed out of my seat, needing to expend this anxious energy in me. “What do you wanna hear, Nash? That I have doubts about my own father?”

Anger took the place of my sadness and I let it wash through me so I didn’t feel so vulnerable.

“I just want to hear the truth, Tatum. That’s why I haven’t asked you about

this before, because I know you're struggling with it. But you need to know, you're not betraying him if you have doubts." Why did he sound so rational? Why was he so freaking calm?

I shook my head furiously. "I don't have doubts," I insisted, but I could taste the lie on my tongue.

"You're never going to trust me with this if you don't trust yourself with it," he said.

"What are you, my therapist now?" I threw at him, wishing he would stand up and fight back like Kyan did, or make a joke like Blake, or spank me like Saint would. But Monroe wouldn't do any of those things. He was too understanding, his eyes cut through my flesh to the centre of my soul like no guy ever had. He saw me too clearly. He knew my emotions better than I did. And I hated that right now.

"I just want to help," he said firmly.

"Why?" I deflected from the real discussion. "Why do you want to help me, Nash? What is it about me that is so fucking worthy of your time? I'm not a damsel in distress."

"I never said you were," he growled, an edge to his tone.

"Yes you did," I said heatedly. "You call me princess, you think I'm just some spoiled rich girl who got herself in trouble and now she needs a knight to swoop in and save her."

He rose to his feet, his impressive height making my throat tighten. Monroe may have been the most patient of the Night Keepers, but he was still not to be fucked with. And I was starting to get the rise out of him that some part of me craved.

"How much bullshit are you gonna spout at me tonight, huh? To *yourself*?" he snapped and it was worse than his teacher tone. This was a fury he felt in his heart, not just because I was some student pissing him off. I'd

touched a nerve and it didn't feel good. Especially because he could still see right through me, knew I was trying to divert from the real issue here.

The tears were making threats again, holding me at gunpoint and my anger was a wimp about to abandon me. I didn't realise I was shaking until Monroe got close and took hold of my shoulders, staring down at me with an intensity in his eyes which broke through my walls.

"Be honest with yourself. The world won't fall, I promise. I'll hold it up for you," he growled and I nodded, the tears winning out, spilling hot and thick down my cheeks.

"He's a good person," I repeated and Monroe's lips pressed together. "But..."

"But?" he pushed.

I cleared my throat, wanting to look away, but he caught my chin like he could see that urge in me. His eyes were the deepest shade of blue I'd ever known. They were an ocean of dark and light, just like him. "But sometimes...I fear he made a mistake."

The admission lifted a weight from me, but the guilt immediately set in. How could I doubt him after everything? Dad had been my rock, my guiding star. I was supposed to back him to the ends of the earth.

"Parents are just people," Monroe said gently, jolting me out of the dark spiral I was falling into. "And people do bad things sometimes. I'm not saying he did it. And I'm not trying to make you think he did either. But I know you have doubts, because you're only human. And that's okay, princess."

I managed to swallow the ball in my throat at last and Monroe lifted a hand to wipe my tears away. "I'm all he has in the whole world, if I don't defend him, who will? It's not right for me to doubt him."

"Has he given you an explanation?" he asked slowly and I shook my head.

“Then of course you feel this way. All of it is totally justifiable. The love, the anger, the guilt, the shame. Frankly, I think you’ve dealt with it all far better than any man or woman I know would. But I don’t want you to carry that burden alone anymore. You can trust me with anything. I mean that. It’s not an empty promise. No matter what it is, no matter how bad, I will keep your secrets and guard them with my wretched soul in this life or the next.”

“Nash,” I breathed, the weight of those words making me feel safer already. “I’m so afraid of hearing what he has to say. When we spoke...he had hardly any time. But he told me things that scare me.”

“What did he say?” he said gently, pulling me closer to him.

I glanced down at the scar on my arm. I’d promised my dad I wouldn’t tell anyone the truth about it. And I would never have considered breaking his trust for just anyone. Except that he wasn’t taking into account that I was all alone at Everlake. He had no idea what I’d been through, how I’d been persecuted and outcasted. Didn’t I have a right to share this with the man who had stood by me through it all? Who’d been there when my dad hadn’t?

“He said...” My lungs were tight and my throat was too thick. I took a heavy breath, making my decision as another tear rolled down my cheek. “He said I’m immune to the Hades Virus.”

I twisted my arm, showing him the scar and Monroe’s brows lifted as he took hold of my elbow, grazing his thumb across the mark.

“Fuck,” he gasped. “How?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t have time to say, he feared someone would trace the call. But, Nash...he said that’s why my sister died. That the vaccine went wrong for her. But I don’t know why, I don’t know anything-”

He cupped my cheek and my panic eased. “Shh, it’s okay.”

“He wants to meet me. To explain.” My hands shook as I gazed down at my scar again, this secret that could change the whole world filling up every

space between us.

“Here?” he asked, his eyes still tracing the scar on my arm in fascination.

“No, off campus. Somewhere I used to go with him when I was younger.”

He finally looked up from the scar to meet my gaze and my shoulders dropped. I could see how safe my secret was with him. He wouldn't tell a soul. I knew it like I knew the sun would rise tomorrow.

“You need to do this,” he said, reading that fact from my expression and I nodded to confirm it.

“I was hoping maybe...you could get me off campus to see him?” I asked, my chest constricting as I pinned all of my hopes on him.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding like he was deep in thought. “I think I can manage it.”

“You can?” I breathed, hope making my heart lift.

He nodded again, his brow creasing. “You need to hear what he has to say, Tatum.”

“I know, but I'm afraid,” I admitted as my lip quivered.

He smiled sadly. “You're the bravest person I know. No matter what he says, you'll survive it. I know you will.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, thinking of nothing but how grateful I was and how deeply I needed him in my life. “You have no idea how much this means to mean, Nash.”

My heart clenched as I thought of the looming decision I knew I had to make. Or if it would even be mine to make. Would Dad let me go with him when I saw him? Did he want me to? And did I want to go? Once I stepped out of the Everlake gates...was I ever going to come back?

He slowly slid his arms around me, sighing as he held me tight and I bathed in the closeness of him, knowing it would only last for this brief moment in time. “I'd do anything for you, princess. Come hell or high water,

I will get you to your dad.”



I stood outside The Temple with the darkness pressing in on me and my heart pounding as I waited to hear from Tatum. I was nervous, but not just because I was seeing her or because we were going to be sneaking off campus, but because my gut was telling me that this was it. That once she got out there into the wild and saw her father, the one person in this world she really loved, she wasn't going to get back into my car with me. She'd take one look at him and despite the danger involved with going on the run with the most wanted man in the entire world right now, she'd go with him.

What reason did she have to stay here anyway? Why would she come back to a school where a bunch of assholes had laid claim to her entirely? Where they told her what to wear, where to go, what to do, who to hang out with. It was a fucked up situation and I knew she hated it. She wanted to be free. She wanted to choose her own life. And that life wouldn't involve coming back here. Wouldn't involve me.

I still couldn't wrap my head around the fact that she was immune. That there was actually a vaccine to this fucking virus out there somewhere. Did that mean that it was only a matter of time until it was offered out to the

public? Or was it lost now, stolen alongside the virus that had infected the world. But in one sense, I couldn't help but be glad of it. Because at least I knew I didn't have to fear her contracting it. I didn't have to worry about her becoming sick if she really did head out into the world and turn her back on this place.

I ran a hand through my blonde hair, pushing it back out of my eyes as the straight stands were tossed about by the chilling breeze. Stubble scraped across my palm as I swiped it over my face and I sighed.

Tatum Rivers had been the ultimate fantasy. The little ray of light I'd been hooked on while the darkness that surrounded me made me ache. In the years that had passed since my family had been stolen from me, I'd been so focused on trying to achieve my revenge that I hadn't even noticed how lonely I was.

Sure, I'd known I was alone. It wasn't possible to go from living within the loving embrace of your family to a group home filled with assholes without realising that. But I'd always believed I was...content. Alone in my desire to destroy Troy Memphis, alone in my need for justice and retaliation. Alone in my life in a way that felt irrevocable. But when I was with her, it didn't feel so permanent all of a sudden.

I should have known that time was fleeting. That I couldn't even indulge in a wish of a future which involved my golden haired warrior. She was my student, I was her teacher and even aside from that, her future wasn't here.

A window slid open at the side of the building and I padded towards it, careful to keep my footsteps silent. She'd told me Saint hardly slept, but Kyan slept like the dead and luckily, tonight it was his turn to have her in his room. It was strange that two men with so many demons had formed such different habits. Sleep for me came easy enough, I was usually so exhausted by all of the anger and hatred I carried inside of me that by the end of the day,

my body craved oblivion just as a reprieve from it. But I often woke to nightmares. Memories of the crash or the imagined memory I'd formed of my mother's murder where I pictured her surrounded and alone, fighting to stay with me with everything she had before she was overwhelmed.

Tatum tossed a thick winter coat out of the window and I was there to grab her boots for her as she raised them up too.

She slid through the window next, wiggling through the small gap and allowing me to take her into my arms and lift her the rest of the way out.

She didn't linger in my embrace and that was for the best. I watched as she turned back to the window and pulled it shut again, my gaze falling on Kyan's empty bed. I guessed he'd chosen to sleep on the couch again like she'd predicted and I thanked our luck for that. Getting her out of here while she'd been sleeping in with one of them would have been near impossible.

Tatum hesitated at my side, looking back in at Kyan's room with a frown pinching her brow like there was something she wanted to say. But whether it was about him or the other Night Keepers, I didn't get the chance to ask as she turned away from his window abruptly and quickly pulled on her coat and laced her heavy walking boots.

I held out her coat for her as she stood and she slipped her arms into it, her breath fogging around us as she exhaled shakily.

"Ready?" I asked her.

It was the first day of the Christmas break tomorrow so even if we couldn't make it back to campus within the day, no one would really miss us. None of the students were allowed to go home if they wished to return to classes in the spring term and I was surprised to find that they'd all stayed willingly. Our walled sanctuary from the Hades Virus was a safe haven that not many people had been afforded and whilst the sickness ran rampant in the rest of the country, we remained safe out here, hidden in the mountains and

the forest. I never thought I'd be so glad to be living in the middle of nowhere.

“Ready,” Tatum confirmed with a sharp nod.

She fastened her coat and slipped her fingers into a pair of black gloves before leading the way down the path away from The Temple.

I upped my pace until I fell into step at her side and she gave me a tight smile, her gaze flicking over my head to the huge building which had been her prison and I wondered if that look in her eyes was goodbye.

“I won't let them punish you for leaving,” I murmured, wondering if she'd just admit that they wouldn't be able to anyway. That she didn't plan on ever seeing the Night Keepers again after today.

“Blake doesn't punish me anymore anyway,” she said softly. “And Kyan would never actually hurt me.”

“What about Saint?” I asked, my voice low and hateful. I knew that despising him on behalf of his father made no real sense, but the rotten apple hadn't fallen far from the tree with him. He had the same haughty, superior look on his face, the same disdain for anyone not in the top one percent, like dollar bills made him better somehow. More than the rest of us.

“I have a way to handle Saint,” she replied mysteriously, biting into her full bottom lip and upping her pace as we took the paths through the centre of campus.

I pulled my phone from my pocket as we walked and quickly dialled the guard on duty at the front gate.

“You're up late, boss,” Peter's voice came as he answered the landline in the booth by the gate.

“I just had a report from a student about strange noises by the wall over near the girls' dorms. Sounds like a mountain lion or a bear might have gotten close to campus, could you take the unit from the front gate around

there with the dogs to frighten it off? Last thing we need is a wild animal causing havoc on top of everything else.”

“Sure thing, boss. You want me to call someone else to come and man the gate, or-”

“Just be quick and I’m sure it’ll be fine,” I replied, sighing like this conversation was boring me even though my heart was thrashing in my chest. I needed them to do as I asked without making a fuss. It would be better for all of us if no one knew we’d left. It was two am which meant we had four hours before Saint got up and at least another hour and a half on top of that before Kyan woke and went back to his room where he’d realise that Tatum had left his bed at some point in the night. But once they knew she’d escaped, they’d be on the hunt and the less they could figure out about where she’d gone, the better.

I shoved my cellphone back into my pocket and exchanged a smile with Tatum as we closed in on the gates.

She waited in the darkness of the trees as I approached them, checking to make sure that the guards were definitely gone before I beckoned her over to follow me. There were thick chains holding the gates closed and though I had a key, it was quicker for us to scale them.

I climbed up the cold iron quickly, vaulting over the top of it and landing in the gravel on the far side. Tatum landed at my side a moment later and we jogged away from the gates, crossing the wide gravel drive and slipping into the trees on the far side of it as I led the way through them to the parking lot. I’d snuck out here last night and made sure my car’s battery was charged for the journey. The school kept equipment for basic maintenance as so many cars were left idle for long periods of time during term so I’d been able to make sure it was ready.

I watched Tatum from the corner of my eye as we passed the rows of

shiny sports cars owned by the students here and I led her over to my 68 Mustang. It might not have been a brand new, flashy sports model but I didn't think those shiny things had a patch on a classic muscle car.

The expression on her face didn't so much as flicker as she followed me to it. No sign of a bratty pout or disappointment in the fact that it wasn't worth more than some houses. Nothing to say she had any issue with it at all. And I hoped that was the case. Because there was nothing worse than someone having all that wealth and privilege and taking it for granted. Looking down on people who actually had to work for their money just because they had less. But I was starting to really believe that Tatum wasn't like that. She wasn't the cardboard cutout version of the entitled brats I knew too well. And there was something really fucking alluring about what she was that she had me hooked on the idea of finding out.

I unlocked the car and we hurried to climb in. I shrugged out of my jacket and tossed it in the back, shivering as I started up the engine. But I knew that once the heating got going I'd be sweating if I stayed in it.

Tatum tossed her coat in the back too, unlacing her boots and curling her legs beneath her as she got comfortable.

"It's a long drive," she said, clipping her seatbelt on and biting her bottom lip as she turned to look at me. "I can't tell you how much it means to me that you-"

"Don't mention it," I said with a smile, popping the glove box and revealing the sweets and chocolate bars I'd stuffed it with. "Let's just get high on sugar and enjoy the feeling of getting one over on the Night Keepers."

Tatum laughed as she dove on the snacks and I pulled out of the spot, leaving my lights off as I took the gravel drive slowly, hoping not to alert the guards to our presence. When I made it down to the road, I pulled out,

flicking the headlights on and putting my foot down as we headed north at a steady pace.

The heating soon warmed the car through and we settled in for a long journey. I just had to hope that at the end of it, I wasn't going to be saying goodbye to the girl sitting next to me.



I lay awake with a cold and creeping certainty that something was wrong. Wholly and utterly *wrong*. But I never broke my rules, never got out of bed before Clair de Lune by Claude Debussy called me out of it at six am sharp.

But...there was just something *off* tonight.

With a growl of frustration which I knew equalled me losing my shit and beating myself up for my own paranoia if I was wrong about this, I threw the covers off of my bed and pushed myself out of it.

I stalked toward the railing which lined the balcony beyond the foot of my bed, stretching my arms above my head and my spine cracked in a satisfying way.

The glow of starlight through the stained glass window fronting the church wasn't nearly enough to see by and the space below me was little more than patches of darkness in varying depths.

I traced my fingers over the tattoo which curved across my chest, the lines of the script that Kyan had placed upon my flesh so familiar to me that I could follow them even without light to see it by. *The days are long, but the nights are dark*. That sentiment resounded with me soul deep. Sometimes I wondered if it really was my demons who tortured me in the night or if

perhaps it was actually the whispering voice of my conscience desperately trying to cling to life amid the horrors I'd tried so carefully to drown it in.

I headed downstairs on bare feet, following the familiar curving route of the wooden steps easily in the dark before I flicked on a lamp at the foot of them.

Kyan was sprawled on the couch, breathing deeply in sleep, one hand cupping his junk inside his boxers like he was worried someone might try and steal the thing in the night. Though, I guessed after what that whore Deepthroat had tried to do him, maybe it was actually a protective move. The thought of that made my skin prickle uncomfortably but my soul sang a little at the memory of our girl beating the shit out of her in the dirt when she found out what she'd done. I wondered if that moment had seemed as important to Tatum as it had to me. Because the sight of her throwing herself into a fight on behalf of our family had been almost transcendent to me. It felt like her finally taking her place amongst us seriously, fighting for us and standing firm at our sides no matter what. It was the beginning of something truly beautiful. I knew it in the deepest recesses of my dark soul.

My gaze swept around the rest of The Temple. There was nothing out of place, but my soul was still restless, my heart thumping to an uncertain rhythm.

I stalked away from Kyan, checking the front door was locked as I passed it and thinking I spotted a shadow in the trees beyond the window as I glanced out. But when I looked again, there was nothing there.

I almost unlocked the door to go out and make sure of that, but then my gaze fell on Kyan again. It was his night with Barbie and I didn't like the way he kept skirting the rules which said she had to sleep in his bed by sleeping out here so as not to be with her. I didn't really understand why the fuck he'd rather be out here than near her anyway. Even if he was determined to stay

pissed at her. Even if he truly wanted to believe he hated her. It was clear he still wanted her, so why deny himself like that? It didn't make any damn sense to me.

I ran my tongue over my teeth, wondering if it had finally happened. If I'd cracked and the voices in my head had actually gotten loud enough to take charge. Although, in all reality, I knew the voices weren't external. They were just my rambling inner monologue shouting at me in a series of demands or desires which I needed to help temper the panic which liked to creep up on me unawares. They were just a crutch I'd created to help me deal with the things in life that I had the most trouble processing. A system for me to lay out my needs, desires and fears in a way that I could sort through individually when I was feeling overwhelmed. Their thoughts were my own. Even if they were jumbled and loud and aggressive and terrifying sometimes. At least, I hoped so, anyway.

I'd already broken one of my most absolute rules by getting out of bed and opening my eyes before six am. If I went back now without making utterly sure that everything was alright, then I knew there was little chance of me getting any sleep tonight. And I'd probably be on the warpath all day tomorrow too.

I gritted my teeth so hard that I was sure I might crack one if I didn't ease up, then paced the rest of the way to Kyan's room.

I hesitated at the door, my heart pounding at the idea of seeing her there, lying in his sheets, swamped in one of his shirts, just like she'd been the morning after they'd broken the rules together. And though Kyan's position on the couch made it clear that no such thing was happening between them now, I had to wonder why that memory pissed me off so much.

It was the same when I thought about her and Blake. And when I'd watched the two of them touching her the other week, kissing her, making her

pant and moan for them as they drew enough pleasure from her body to make her scream, it had fucking infuriated me. But I'd forced myself to sit there and watch. I'd taken command of them too, made them bend the rules in the way that would please me most, but it had enraged me too. To watch them touching her when I ached to. But the rules which bound me didn't seem to touch them. They just took their punishment for breaking them and did whatever the fuck they pleased. With *my* girl.

I blew out a breath of frustration through my nose.

Our girl.

I knew what the vow meant. I understood what we'd all agreed to. It was why I'd sat and watched, my cock hard and aching in my slacks as rage, jealousy and lust swirled into a deadly concoction inside me.

But I couldn't let myself drown in the poison of those thoughts. I refused to give in to the negativity of my feelings about this. About *her*.

Besides, all I really wanted was to find balance between us. All of us. Where we could temper our worst inclinations with some of our best. And it felt like she helped us to do that sometimes.

She knew just how to sate my rage and my desperate desire for control. And occasionally, in the depths of the night, when my mind finally settled to sleep, I dreamed of her. Not the dark and filthy fantasies I indulged in during the day. But of kissing the tears away from her cheeks when she cried and of holding her in my arms while we slept. And those dreams might have been some of the most disturbing I'd ever had.

I curled my fingers around the door handle, let out a long breath and pushed the door wide.

For a long moment, all I could do was stare into the empty space, my eyes dragging over rumpled sheets and discarded clothes which had been haphazardly tossed towards the hamper.

A dull, empty kind of ache rang hollow in my chest and my pulse pounded in my ears as I just stood there, staring.

I managed to flick the light on, striding into the room, my eyes hunting out every dark and empty space or corner where she might be hiding before I threw open the bathroom door next.

I switched on that light too, my eyes crinkling from the sudden assault of the brightness on them as I easily saw she wasn't there.

My pace quickened as I threw open the door to Blake's room, flicking on his light and finding myself actually hoping to discover her pinned beneath him or on top of him or tangled with him in any fucking way rather than finding him alone like that.

"What the fuck, man?" Blake snarled, shielding his eyes as he sat up in alarm, the sheets slipping to pool at his waist and proving beyond a doubt that she wasn't hiding beneath them.

"She's gone," I said simply, no need to state it any more clearly than that. There was only one *she* any of us gave a damn about. Only one who would up and abandon us.

"What? How?" he demanded, out of bed in an instant, dragging on sweatpants and looking all around his room like he might spot her hiding beneath one of his discarded socks. His gaze fell on me again and I just stood there, mind whirling, panic circling my heart. "Do you think Toby took her?"

My upper lip peeled back with rage at the idea. Had that fucking stalker come here? Broken in, wrapped a meaty palm over her mouth to stifle her screams as he woke her and then stolen her away from us? Could he have done that quietly enough for me to have missed it? Could that be what had driven me from my bed?

"Search The Temple," I commanded, turning and striding from the room as I focused on what I needed to do. "If by some miracle she has her phone

on her wherever she went, I can find her.”

“How?” Blake demanded.

“I took it from her as a part of one of her punishments and installed tracking software on it,” I said simply. In fact, I’d done that to the rest of the Night Keepers too. Just so I could keep an eye on them, know where they were whenever I needed them.

“That’s...kinda genius and kinda fucked up,” Blake’s voice followed me as I ran back through the church to the stairs which led up to my room.

Blake took on the challenge of waking Kyan and I was treated to a batch of cursing before he managed to explain what was going on. That was followed by more cursing, but it didn’t matter to me. Nothing mattered aside from finding her and bringing her back here to safety.

I snatched my phone from its position on charge beside my bed and quickly opened up the app I needed.

An endless ringing started up in my ears as the map aligned itself, three little dots appearing first to show me, Kyan and Blake all together right here in The Temple. But as it zoomed out, progressively widening the map to allow for a greater distance, I couldn’t quite believe what I was seeing.

There were two dots heading north on the highway beyond the school over sixty miles away from us. Tatum and...*Monroe*.

I dropped onto the edge of the bed as I just stared at those little dots moving further and further away from us.

What the fuck?

Footsteps pounded up the stairs as I just stared at the screen, my brain firing on all cylinders as I tried to unravel this riddle.

“Has she got it with her?” Blake demanded.

“Do you know where she is?” Kyan snarled.

I looked up at them and silently held out my phone for them to see.

“What the hell is going on?” Kyan growled.

“I’ll call him,” Blake said instantly. “Find out what the fuck is-”

“No,” I said suddenly, rising from the bed to stand before them as my brain still struggled to figure this out. “If we call them they’ll realise we’re on to them and whatever the fuck they’re doing. If we give away the fact that we know where they are, they’ll realise I can trace them and they’ll switch their phones off.”

“So what are we going to do?” Kyan demanded.

“Get dressed,” I said, the only option clear to me before I even had to run over all of the possibilities. “Coats, boots, everything. We’ll take my car. We’re going after them.”

Kyan and Blake exchanged a heated look before turning and racing back downstairs to do as I’d said. I hurried to my closet to follow my own advice.

I didn’t know what the hell Tatum and Monroe were up to, but we were going to find out.

Run, run, as fast as you can. When I catch you, you’ll be sorry you ran.



Three hours was a long time to be trapped in a small space with a beautiful girl. Especially one who made me laugh so easily and somehow got me to open up about all kinds of things I hadn't even thought about in years, much less discussed.

We'd told each other stories of our childhoods when our families had been alive and we'd been happy. When neither of us had been forced to live every day with the burden of grief weighing us down. And it was, *nice* to think about those days. To smile about them and let myself remember that I'd been happy once. Loved.

After hours on the freeway, we'd pulled off and Tatum had directed me through small towns and out into the wilderness of a thick forest. We'd followed smaller and smaller roads before finally ending up driving down a dirt track all the way to the end where the trees closed in too much to allow us to go on. She'd put her boots back on as we approached, ready to get out the moment we arrived.

"It's just through those trees," Tatum said quietly as I cut the engine and looked at her in the darkness. It was just gone five am but the sun wasn't due

to rise for hours yet and even though the night was clear, the moon was low, so there wasn't much light to see her by.

"What time is your dad getting here?" I asked as I squinted in the direction she'd pointed and just about made out the shape of a cabin hiding there between the towering trunks.

"He just said today. I don't know if he'll be there yet or if I'll have to wait..."

"Why do you keep saying *I* like this is the bit where I fuck off?" I asked, trying to keep any resentment I felt about that out of my tone.

Tatum bit her lip and looked at me in the darkness. "Dad told me to come alone..."

"You think it'll spook him if I'm still hanging about?" I asked.

"Maybe." She looked away from me as she tugged her coat off of the back seat and wriggled into it.

"Can I wait here or do I need to move further away then?" I asked.

"Wait?" she asked, her eyes flashing my way for a moment then away again quickly.

My stomach tightened as my suspicions were confirmed in that one word. Even though she'd said she was coming back to Everlake after this meeting, now that she was here the doubts were creeping in.

"You're thinking about going with him, aren't you?" I asked in a low voice.

"No," she said instantly then frowned like she'd heard the lie in her own voice. "I mean, he never said anything about that. He just wants to speak with me. But...he's on the run, so I don't know if there's a chance that I could possibly stay with him anyway and-"

"But what if there is?" I asked, my heart pounding as I fought against the selfish desire in me to beg her not to go with him even if he asked her to.

“I...”

“I get it,” I said, turning away from the sadness in her big blue eyes to look out into the trees. “He’s your dad. If my mom showed up, asking me to run off into the night with her, I’d do it too. No question.”

“No question?” she breathed, but I didn’t have anything to say to that. My mom was long dead anyway. Her remains disposed of by the state and her ashes long since scattered to the wind along with everything I’d ever loved.

“There was a twenty four hour diner back in that last town,” I said. It was about a thirty minute drive away but better than the whole three hours. “I can go back there and...get breakfast or whatever. I’ll wait. As long as it takes for you to decide. Just send me a message to let me know if you need me to come back for you, or...”

“Or?” she breathed and I made myself look at her again, a lump forming in my throat as I forced myself not to reach for her, to brush her hair behind her ear, skim my thumb across her full lips, lean in and taste the sweetness of her skin. *Fuck.*

“Or if it’s goodbye,” I finished. Because we both knew if she ran with him she wouldn’t be coming back. Ever.

“Goodbye?” she whispered and the word carved into me as it hung in the air between us.

She felt like this unfulfilled promise. This offer I took too long to accept. A form of magic I should have claimed for myself before it was too late. But now it *was* too late.

“I’ll wait in the diner,” I said roughly, my throat thick with unspoken words.

“Nash...” she began, reaching out to lay her hand over mine where it rested on the parking brake, but I drew it away as her touch burned me in all the right ways.

“Imagine what we might have been in another life,” I murmured, the air in the car coiling with tension and heartache and so much damn longing that it actually fucking hurt to breathe it in.

“I wish it could have been *this* life,” she said, her voice cracking a little as a tear slid down her cheek, glimmering wetly in the faint starlight. “Goodbye, Nash.”

“Goodbye, princess,” I rasped, frozen to the spot as she reached for the door handle and let herself out.

I watched as she walked away through the trees towards the cabin with cracks forming all over my skin and breaking open as the first person I’d cared about in a hell of a long time walked away from me and the foundations of my soul were rocked apart by each step she took.

I cranked the ignition, threw the car into reverse and managed to get it turned around with some manoeuvring between the trees, possibly denting my door in the process and not giving one shit.

I just needed to get away from here. From her. From the fucking ache in my chest and that look in her big eyes which told me this whole damn thing was on me. That it was my choice. That I was the one turning my back on her. On us.

I tore down the dirt track way too fast, aiming for the road at the end of it and some kind of relief to this all-encompassing grief as I turned away from her for the final time. Left her behind. Gave up on the only shot I’d really had at something good in so fucking long that I couldn’t even remember the last time.

What the fuck am I doing?

My foot slammed down on the brake and I jerked into the seatbelt as the car skidded to a halt half way down the track. I barely even thought about what I was doing as I threw the car into reverse and twisted in my seat to look

out the rear window at the dark track and accelerated up it as fast as I could, squinting to see.

When I made it back to the end of it, I yanked on the parking brake, ripped my belt off and threw the car door wide as I leapt out. I didn't even bother to close the door behind me as I ran through the trees towards the cabin with my heart thrashing in my chest and my skin crackling with an energy so fierce that I couldn't ignore it for a second longer.

The wooden cabin was nestled between the trees, covered in moss and ivy and looking like a part of the forest itself. A thin line of smoke rose from a stone chimney to the left of it and a heavy door faced me as I tore towards it.

I grabbed the handle and threw it wide, scanning the open space inside in one sweeping glance that took in the wood panelled walls, simple furniture, king sized bed to the right of the room, bunks to the back and the fireplace with the freshly lit blaze coming to life inside it.

But I didn't give a shit about a single thing in that room aside from the girl who leapt to her feet before the fire, her eyes widening in alarm as she turned to face me, blonde hair swinging around her shoulders.

“What if I don't want it to be goodbye?” I demanded, my heart drumming a war beat in my chest so damn loud that I was sure she could hear it. “What if I can't say goodbye to anybody else I care about?”

“Then don't,” she said, her voice rough with desire and that was all I needed to hear.

I threw the door closed behind me, locking out the winter and plunging us into darkness which was only slightly lessened by the orange glow of the fire blossoming in the hearth.

I crossed the room in five long strides, catching Tatum's face in my hands and tipping her chin up so that I could capture her lips with mine. I drove her back against the stone mantelpiece with a groan of longing as I kissed her

with all the passion of a dying man offered a final meal. But she was more than a meal, she was a feast fit for gods, she was temptation embodied and every sin I'd ever dreamed of committing. She was my salvation and my demise all in one and I was done resisting her.

She gasped as I kissed her, her arms curling around my neck as she tugged me closer, giving me room to press my tongue between her lips.

We were burning up with passion and months of denying what we hungered for and as I drove the solid length of my erection against her flesh she moaned with pure, carnal *need*.

Her hands slid down my body as I drove her back against the wall and she caught the hem of my T-shirt in her grasp, yanking on it in a clear demand.

I forced myself to break our kiss, pulling back so that she could tear it over my head then planting her lips on mine again as she threw it aside.

Neither of us asked how far this was going to go. There was no stopping us now. Not this time. The heat between us was burning too fucking hot and neither of us could bear to deny it for another second.

She tried to kick her boots off, cursing when the laces wouldn't give, her teeth dragging my bottom lip into her mouth as her frustration brimmed over.

I grabbed her hips and lifted her off of the floor so that she wrapped her legs around my waist and I could grind my dick against her with urgency and the denim of our jeans created a friction which felt so fucking good that she moaned into my mouth.

Her hands explored the plains of my chest but she wasn't gentle, her nails marking my skin in her desperation to take more of me, all of me.

I growled with desire as I yanked her away from the wall, dropping her down on to the rug before the growing fire and falling over her in the same movement.

I kissed her so hard that I could taste blood and I didn't know if it was

hers, mine or a mixture of both.

We ground against each other so forcefully that I was in danger of coming in my fucking pants, my emotionally drunken state over this girl beneath me driving me to the verge of oblivion before we'd managed to do a single thing.

With a grunt of determination, I knelt back, breaking our kiss as I caught her foot in my hand and ripped the laces of her hiking boot open so that I could tear it off of her foot and throw it over my shoulder.

Tatum moaned with need as she writhed beneath me, pleading for me to hurry up as I battled her other boot and she popped the button on her own waistband, shoving her jeans down while I struggled with her fucking footwear.

“Just tug the laces,” she growled.

“I am,” I insisted.

“Well do it faster.”

“What is this? A double knot or something? Who ties their shoes like this?”

“Just get it off of me and get inside me,” she snarled and I would have laughed if I wasn't so desperate to follow her damn commands.

“I'm beginning to fucking hate winter.”

“Now, Nash!”

I finally got that one off too, tossing it across the room and hearing something break before grabbing the ankles of her jeans and tugging them hard. The material tried to resist but she lifted her ass and I pulled as hard as I could, dragging them off of her, panties and all and baring her before me.

I groaned desperately as I fumbled with the buckle of my belt and she reared up to yank my fly down, panting with need as her fingers dipped inside and she grasped my cock through the material of my boxers.

“Fuck, Nash, hurry up,” she pleaded and I ripped my belt open finally,

knocking her hand aside as I tugged my jeans and boxers down just far enough to free the thick length of my shaft.

She moaned as she looked at it, bucking her hips in a silent demand as I dropped down between her golden thighs, my dick instantly pressing against her soaking wet opening.

I was so desperate for her that I couldn't wait another moment, pushing forward with a sharp thrust of my hips, a deep groan escaping me as I sheathed the full length of my dick deep inside her. Tatum gasped as she clutched my shoulders, her fingernails digging in so hard I was sure she'd drawn blood and her ankles locking together around me.

For a moment we could only stare at each other, acknowledging the wall that had just shattered between us as my dick filled her completely and she clenched her muscles tight around my thick length. Then she reared up to capture my lips again and we were moving, my hips slamming into hers hard and fast as she met me for every move I made.

My name spilled from her lips between moans and I devoured every noise that escaped her, kissing her almost as hard as I was fucking her.

It was fast and frenzied, this desperate, messy joining of our bodies which we'd both been fighting against for way too fucking long.

She felt a thousand times better than she had even in my filthiest fantasies about her. And I'd had a hell of a lot of those. But nothing could compare to the reality of how tight she was around me, how rough and needy her voice got as she gasped between kisses.

Her breath hitched every time I slammed into her and her nails tore into my back as she demanded more and more and more and I gave it to her with everything I had.

Our pelvises ground together hard as I pressed her down into the floor and she moaned as the friction rubbed her clit in perfect synchronisation with my

thrusts deep inside her.

My heart was pounding and my skin humming with this deep, unrelenting pleasure as I finally got what I'd been dreaming of, aching for, hungering after and her body fused to mine.

We were hot and sweaty, half dressed and so frantic that our breaths came together in this ragged cacophony of grunts and gasps and moans of pure pleasure. My whole world centred in on the feeling of our bodies joining, of every inch of me consuming her, her heels driving into my ass encouraging me to go harder even as she fought for breath with every savage thrust I delivered. We were like two wild creatures rutting in the dirt, each demanding everything and giving it all at the same time.

Her name fell from my lips as the most devout of blessings as I worshiped her body with my own, consuming her, devouring her, destroying her.

All too soon, my muscles were tightening with expectation, pleasure dancing through me and my dick swelled as I spilled myself deep inside her with a low groan. I kissed her hard as she cried out in ecstasy too, her back arching off of the floor so she was pressed against me and I could feel her nipples rubbing against my chest through her shirt.

I fell over her panting, our bodies remaining joined as I pressed my forehead to the wooden floor beside her and we tried to catch our breath.

I panted, sighing her name and pressing my lips into the curve of her neck as I bathed in that feeling. Of owning her flesh like I'd been dying to. Of taking the girl I'd craved for so long and finally forgetting all of the things that had kept us apart. Because there was no keeping us apart. And I'd been a fucking idiot to think there ever could have been.

"Fuck," I mumbled as a bit of sense returned to my brain and I pushed up onto my forearms as I looked down at her. "I didn't use a condom."

"I noticed," she said with half a laugh that made her body clench around

my dick. I could feel myself getting hard for her again already and I was dying to do that all over again.

“Shit, I should have pulled out, I should have-”

“I’m on the pill,” she said dismissively. “And I’m clean...are you?”

I snorted a laugh as I looked down at her. “Yeah. I got tested about eighteen months ago.”

“That’s not that recent,” she pointed out.

“Well, it’s recent enough. Considering I haven’t gotten laid since then.” I eased off of her as she arched an eyebrow at me like she found that hard to believe and I took her expression as a compliment.

I tucked my dick back into my jeans and knelt back, reaching over to snag my shirt from the floor and using it to mop up the mess I’d just made between her thighs with a teasing smirk. She bit her lip but didn’t make a move to stop me and when I got to my feet and offered her a hand to pull her up, she took it without question.

“Well, that was...”

“Unexpected?” I offered.

“Overdue,” she tossed back and I grinned at her.

“If it wasn’t official already, I’m definitely going to hell now,” I teased.

“Not possible,” she breathed, reaching out to trace the outline of the tiger which was inked onto my chest.

My gaze dropped down her body as she stood before me in her socks and shirt. There was something kinda hot about the fact that we hadn’t even been able to wait long enough to get our clothes off properly. But I wasn’t satisfied by what I’d taken from her. Not by a long shot.

“You’re not going to go back to just being my teacher again now, are you, Nash?” Tatum asked, her gaze flickering with vulnerability for a moment.

I leaned forward slowly, cupping her cheek in my hand and making her

look at me when she tried to turn away.

“I fought this so hard because I knew you’d be the end of me, Tatum Rivers,” I said in a low voice. “I knew it the first moment I laid eyes on you, when you tripped me up with your fucking suitcase and when you called me an asshole right to my face. I could taste danger in the air every time I was near you and I had to fight with everything I had not to give in to what I wanted from you. What I needed. And every moment we spent together since has only made it harder to resist. Do you really think I could deny this now? Do you believe I could pretend that this hadn’t happened between us?”

I caught her hand in mine and laid it over my heart as I leaned in to kiss her, slowly, deeply, telling her everything I couldn’t put into words with the movements of my mouth against hers and letting her feel the way my heart pounded faster and faster with every moment we remained connected as one.

“Did you mean what you said?” she breathed as I slid my hands around her hips and started backing her up, crossing the single room which made up the cabin. The fire was roaring now and it warmed the air enough to make up for the chill trying to get in from outside.

“Which part?” I ran my hands up until I was peeling her shirt over her head and I groaned at the sight of her black lace bra with her pink nipples showing through the fabric.

“What you said when you came back,” she murmured, clearly not wanting to say the words in case I hadn’t meant to utter them.

I tossed her shirt aside as I bumped her back up against the kitchen counter and I lifted her up to sit on the edge of it as I ran my mouth down her neck, peeling her bra strap over her shoulder so that I could suck her nipple into my mouth. Tatum groaned, fisting her hand in my hair as I swirled my tongue around the hardened flesh, dragging my teeth across it and tugging until she gasped before looking back up at her.

“The bit where I said you were one of the only people I’ve ever really cared about?” I asked in a low voice and her eyes widened as I pushed her thighs apart and I couldn’t help but drop my gaze to take in every inch of her body bared before me. I’d imagined this so many fucking times that I just needed to drink in the reality of it.

“Yeah,” she panted. “It’s okay if you don’t, I just-”

I kissed her hard and soft at once, worshiping her mouth with mine as I brushed a hand up her spine and unclasped her bra. She tossed it aside and I palmed her breasts with a hungry growl as our kiss turned filthy and my dick hardened even more in my jeans with a desperate desire to claim her again.

“I haven’t felt anything close to this about anyone in a long fucking time,” I said against her lips. “And I’m not going to lie to you, I’m a dark and broken soul. I’m never going to stop going after Troy Memphis. If it kills me to destroy him then I’m okay with that. I can’t promise you a fancy house and two point four kids. I can’t even promise you tomorrow. And I’m not asking you to promise me anything. This...us...it isn’t going to be easy. It isn’t going to be clean and pretty, but I want to give you the pieces of me that aren’t totally corrupted. I want to give you whatever good and decency I’m capable of giving. I want to protect you and worship you and help you destroy your enemies. So yeah, I care about you Tatum Rivers, and I want you even though I shouldn’t and you’d be better off with literally anyone else. And all I want from you is this, whenever we’re free to be us. Even if that’s not often at all. Even if it’s only right here and now and you’re about to leave me and never come back.”

“Nash,” she breathed, her voice raw and unsure and aching.

“I’m not looking for you to say anything or commit to me,” I said in a low voice. “In fact, I don’t want you to. If I made you fall in love with me then that would probably be the greatest sin I’d ever committed.”

“What do you want then?” she asked breathlessly as I teased her body and tasted her lips and worked her until she was panting for me again.

“Right now, I’ve got a point to prove.”

“What point?” she asked.

“I think the exact wording was that arrogant assholes like me don’t know a G-spot from our elbows and wouldn’t be able to find your clit with a map and GPS...”

Her lips popped open and an embarrassed laugh spilled from her lips as I reminded her of what she’d said to me back in my office the first time I’d tried to put her into line. I’d known right then that I was in trouble with her.

“Erm, I didn’t really mean-”

I pushed two fingers inside her, curving them around and making her cry out in surprise as she grabbed my biceps to brace herself.

“Do you know how many times I’ve laid awake at night imagining exactly how I’d like to prove that statement wrong?” I growled as I circled my thumb on her clit and she gasped again.

“Okay,” she moaned, “You’ve made your point.”

“No, princess. Not yet, I haven’t.” I dropped to my knees before her, lifting her feet and placing them on my shoulders. She was still wearing her thick socks but they were the only items of clothing I’d left her with. When she reached out to pull them off, I knocked her hand aside with a wicked grin.

“You want me to leave them on?” she asked as I pumped my fingers inside her and took in the view of her writhing in pleasure for me.

“Yeah.”

“Why? Have you got a sock fetish?”

“No. But I want you to remember this every time you wear woolly winter socks for the rest of your damn life,” I teased. “And once I’ve proved to you that I know exactly where your G-spot, clit and every other goddamn

pleasure point down here is too, I know you'll remember it. And then I'm going to fuck you until you can't breathe and make up for every single time I had to force myself to walk away from you and deny us both what we've been aching for."

"Those are pretty big words," she panted. "You think you're that good, Mr Monroe?"

"Don't to that," I growled, not wanting her to play up to that teacher shit with me. That wasn't us. It was the least of our connections and I wished it wasn't one at all.

Before she could reply, I pushed forward, forcing her to bend her legs so her knees were up by her chest as her feet stayed on my shoulders and I dropped my mouth between her thighs.

The only things that left her lips after that were moans, curses and my name over and over and over again until I should have been sick of hearing it, but all I wanted was for her to scream it even more and I was going to make sure she did.



When I finally untangled myself from Monroe and he'd thoroughly proven he knew where my G-spot was - five freaking times - I got dressed and started pacing the room as I waited for my dad to arrive. Thank god he hadn't shown up twenty minutes ago when Monroe had been so deep inside me, I'd forgotten what planet I was on, let alone why I was here.

I chewed on my lip, skimming my eyes across the room that I knew so well. I'd come here on countless trips in my lifetime, but I'd never had anyone outside my family visit. The first one who did had defiled the place so thoroughly that I was half tempted to start scrubbing all the spots he'd claimed me in. I replayed each time in my mind with a stupid smile on my face and my heart began to race all over again. *Dammit, I need to concentrate. This isn't the time to start up forbidden love affairs with my teacher. Correction: headmaster. Jesus.*

I'd cleaned up the vase he'd broken when he'd tossed my boots across the room and hoped my dad wouldn't notice when he arrived. It was going to be

pretty difficult to explain why Monroe's shirt was missing too (which we'd burned because that was not going anywhere it could be found by my freaking dad).

Monroe carried two mugs of coffee from the kitchen and I got to my feet from the bed with a word of thanks as he placed them down on the night stand. He'd boiled water over the fire and everything, it had been damn cute to watch. I smiled shyly at him as the air between us filled with all the unspeakable things we'd just done to each other. Somehow, of everywhere we'd screwed, devoured and owned each other, we hadn't landed our asses on a single bed.

He eyed his bare chest, suddenly seeming uncertain of himself. "Should I go?"

"No," I said immediately, unsure why I was wholeheartedly sure that I didn't want him to leave now. Or ever again. Just because we'd given in to our urges, that didn't mean we could be together in the real world like an actual couple. How would it work? But then again, even thinking about not repeating tonight at our very next opportunity made my heart start to rip apart at the seams.

No, I needed him in my life. I wasn't sure how or in what way exactly. But somehow, we'd make it work. If he wanted it as well obviously...and judging by the way he'd fucked me, I didn't think he'd be letting me go anywhere any time soon. There was just the small matter of my father being on the run and this whole night making me wonder if I was even going back to Everlake.

I moved across the space parting us, taking his hand and a smile pulled at his mouth. He tugged me into his chest, wrapping me in his arms and I dissolved against him.

"Stay here," I sighed. "I want him to meet you. Besides, he might not

arrive for hours.”

“True,” he growled then shoved me back against the wall, making my heartbeat quicken as he pinned me in. “You’re in trouble if that’s the case though, princess.”

“Step away from my daughter,” my dad’s booming voice filled the room and my heart leapt as Monroe flinched back, raising his hands in innocence as he turned towards him.

Dad had a pistol pointed at him as he stepped into the lounge. He must have come in around the back of the house and I just hoped he hadn’t been lurking out there for long or he would have heard...*things*. He was dressed in all black, his stubble grown to a beard to cover most of his face, but I would have known him anywhere.

“Dad,” I gasped. “It’s okay, he’s with me.”

He didn’t lower the gun, his eyes narrowed on Monroe’s naked chest.

“I’m not here to cause trouble, sir,” Monroe said earnestly.

“I’ll decided whether you’re trouble or not,” Dad growled then his eyes swung to me through his dark rimmed glasses. “Who is he, kiddo? And where’s his damn clothes?”

“He spilled coffee on his shirt. And he’s...” I wet my lips, figuring it was best to lie. “My boyfriend.” Monroe could pass for my age, especially in the low light of the cabin. “And he’s protected and cared for me my entire time at Everlake. Which is more than I can say for you,” I accused hotly.

I hadn’t planned on being angry, but now Dad was standing in front of me pointing a gun at a man I deeply cared about, all my emotions welled up and drowned me.

Dad lowered the gun, but didn’t put it away, his eyes creasing at the corners. “That true?” he asked of Monroe. “You’ve been looking out for my daughter?”

“As best I can,” he confirmed. “Though things haven’t been easy on her since everyone at school knows she’s related to the man who released a deadly virus on the world.”

My heart pounded like crazy and I stepped toward Dad with so many questions, but I knew which one I had to ask first. The one that had been eating me alive like locusts in my brain for weeks on end. “Did you do it? Is what they’re saying on the news true?”

Dad sighed, taking a step closer to me like he longed to drag me into his arms, but I didn’t want to let my walls down until I heard the answer to this. No matter how much I ached for that too.

“I took the virus from the Apollo Company, yes,” he started.

“But?” I asked, desperate for there to be a but. *Please be a but.*

“*But*, I didn’t unleash it on the world, Tater-tot. I wouldn’t do that. Everything that’s happened since that day has been...” He shook his head and I realised how tired he looked. Goddamn exhausted. The relief at hearing him say that and the truth written across his features finally gave me the answer I needed and it felt like the entire weight of the sky lifting from me. *He didn’t do it.*

I directed him to the little table and chairs by the window on the other side of the room and he gave Monroe a suspicious glance before walking towards it.

“I won’t say more in front of him.” Dad sank into a chair and placed the gun on the table.

I looked to Monroe apologetically and he stepped forward, squeezing my arm. “I’ll wait outside. Just call if you need me.”

“Okay.”

He pressed forward and kissed me boldly and my breath hitched as I automatically leaned into it. Then he was gone just as fast, striding to the

front door and opening it, pausing for a moment as he looked to my dad. “Just so you know, sir, you have raised an exceptional daughter who I care for very much. And I’m not saying that to be an asskisser. Frankly, I don’t give a fuck if you like me or not. But I’m telling you because I will stand against anyone who hurts her. Even if that someone is her own father.”

My heart did a mad backflip at his words and Dad eyed him, his fingers trailing over his gun. “A man is made by his actions not his words. If she says you’ve looked after her then I believe you. But until I see it for myself, *son*, I won’t be giving this relationship my approval.”

I tutted as Monroe stepped outside and shut the door. “Do you really have to act like we’re in the eighteen hundreds? I don’t need your approval, I can date whoever I like.”

“I’m your dad, kiddo. And when you have children one day, you’ll wanna protect them from the wronguns of this world.”

A frown pulled at my features as I walked towards him where he sat at the table. “And what if they found me anyway?” I whispered. “And what if I fought them and tamed them, made them hurt for hurting me?”

“Then I’ve raised you right.”

He smiled, I smiled. And my heart crushed to dust as I fell into his lap like a little girl again and he pulled me against him with the entirety of his body like he never wanted to let me go. His familiar scent of the wilderness and fire smoke made my eyes brim with tears. But I couldn’t just stay in his arms. I needed answers. So many answers.

He laid a kiss on my forehead before I pulled away, moving to sit opposite him and taking a steadying breath to get my thoughts in order.

“Tell me everything,” I said evenly, taking in the bags beneath his eyes, the hollowness of his cheeks and the new flecks of grey in his beard that spoke of the stress he’d been through recently.

He took his glasses off, rubbing his eyes before putting them back on and surveying me with a sad smile. “I’m so sorry this happened. It wasn’t meant to be this way...”

“What way was it meant to be?” I asked, fighting to keep my voice from rising.

“It starts with Jess,” he croaked, his face constricting as he said her name. “Before we lost her...the Apollo Company were running trials of the vaccine for the Hades Virus. Everything came back okayed from the team who were working on it. We got samples of the vaccine sent to our department and I was in charge of processing them.”

“So you took some?” I breathed, my lungs compressing.

He rubbed the back of his neck guiltily. “There were hundreds of vials, kiddo. And a batch had gotten damaged during transportation. I had to dispose of them and I...figured a few of the ones that survived wouldn’t be missed. One for me, you and Jess. Just in case. I always liked to be prepared and this virus was deadly. I was working with it daily. One accident and I could be infected, bring it home to you and your sister. They were going to be offering it out to employees soon anyway, so what was the harm?” He choked on the last word and a tremor ran through my body as I knew what came next. “I was stupid to give it to you, to trust that the department had done their jobs properly. But it had been signed off, no vaccine should ever get that far without the proper trials,” he cursed, swiping at the sweat beading on his brow. “Me and you...we were okay. The vaccine worked, I guess, but then Jess...” A noise of pain escaped him. “I just wanted to protect you both, I just – I-” He started shaking and I took his hand, tears running down my cheeks as that old wound split open inside me and bled like a river. “I never would have given either of you something if I knew there was a chance, even the smallest chance of it hurting my children.”

“I know, Dad,” I said gently, tears still rushing down my cheeks. I did know. Truly. The pain in his eyes said it all. It was a terrible accident and one he would be in agony over until his dying day. How could I hate him for that? Punish him more than he’d obviously punished himself?

He wiped the tears from beneath his eyes, pulling himself together. “By the time I returned to work after her death, the vaccine I’d been processing had vanished. No mention of it, no paperwork. I couldn’t tell my boss, Dr Singh, what had happened without admitting that I’d stolen from the company. But I knew he knew. Things had changed between us. He didn’t fire me though, in fact, he kept promoting me, increasing my salary to extortionate amounts. I didn’t want to see it as hush money, but I knew that was what it was. And the longer I stayed there, the more bitter I became. The more suspicious I was of the entire corporation. And that was when I discovered the truth...”

“What truth?” I breathed, hanging on his every word.

“The Apollo Company weaponised the Hades Virus. I wasn’t meant to know, none of us were I suppose. But I was contacted by a CIA agent called Morteza a few months after Jess’s death. He told me everything. And he asked me to help the CIA, paid me lump sums to keep gathering intel for them. And I wanted to. I hungered for revenge against Singh. He must have signed off on those vaccines, allowed corners to be cut. And on top of that, now I knew he was planning to sell the virus and allow it to be used against innocent people in war,” he growled.

“So, what happened then?” I asked, my hands beginning to tremble as this knowledge washed over me.

“The years passed. I collected information on Singh, sent Agent Morteza anything I could get my hands on. It was difficult. Moving around the country to the different facilities so often meant I wouldn’t see Singh too

much, but I was able to get a few bits and pieces, it was just never enough to condemn him.” He ran his hand down the back of his neck, breaking eye contact with me and my heart beat out of rhythm as I tried to absorb all of this. “After a few years, I got some intel from Singh’s computer, emails to a private buyer saying the virus was ready and they could sell it to them within a few weeks. A new vaccine was almost finished too, being put through trials again and I knew Singh wouldn’t have risked cutting corners this time. If this vaccine worked, it was the real deal. So I told Morteز everything and he asked if I could get samples of the virus and the vaccine out of the lab in California and bring them to him so he could pass them on to the right people. Ensure more vaccines were made to protect the world from this deadly virus. Make it useless as a weapon against our country or any other nation. So...I did.”

I nodded, still gripping his hand as my pulse pounded in my ears, not wanting to say anything more until he was done.

“I met up with Morteز and gave him the samples and after that, I didn’t hear anything more. I emailed, called, but heard nothing. All lines of communication between us were dead and in the meantime, the virus was leaked into the world. That’s when I started to get nervous, so I enrolled you at Everlake, sensing something wasn’t right. I’d stolen a deadly virus from one of the top pharmaceutical companies in the country. I could go to prison for that alone, especially if the CIA were going to deny all knowledge of my involvement with them. I laid low after I dropped you off, waiting to see if I was being paranoid, but my hunch paid off. My name was splashed over the news when they obtained that footage of me stealing the samples and confirmed that the leak had come from the Apollo Company. A day later, I got a call from that very same agent, asking me to meet him, apologising for cutting me off and saying that it was protocol. He said if I met with him he

could ensure my name was cleared. That my old boss was responsible for the leak of the virus and that we needed to expose him together.”

“Did you go?” I asked, my fingers digging into his skin as I held onto him. Could this MorteZ man help us? Could he really clear Dad’s name?

“Yes,” he sighed. “But I was cautious. The whole world were hunting for me so I couldn’t make a wrong move. I gave him coordinates to a forest in Haverwood so I could be sure it was far away from other people. But when I got there, the fucker started shooting.”

I gasped, clutching his hand tighter. “What? Why?”

“He’s a corrupt piece of shit, that’s why. Wherever that virus went after I handed it to him, it wasn’t to some government lab to make more vaccines. So now he wants me dead to tie up his little loose end. Singh didn’t leak it. MorteZ fucking tricked me to get his hands on those samples and I’d bet my life that whoever he gave them to, *they* released it on the world. ”

“Oh my god,” I breathed. “You’ve been running from him all this time?”

“Him and everyone else in the country,” he said grimly. “Dead or alive, my head is worth over a million fucking dollars right now, kiddo.”

I sat back in my chair, releasing his hand as I anxiously threaded my fingers through my hair. This was worse than I could have imagined. How were we ever going to fix it?

“We have to expose this. Can’t we call a reporter or something?” I suggested desperately.

He hung his head. “I don’t know. I’ve thought about all of it, every angle. But I don’t think I can easily approach anyone without ending up in handcuffs or worse, with a bullet between the eyes.”

“Don’t say that,” I begged, the thought making my heart twist. “We’ll find a way.”

He smiled sadly. “You get that from me, that stubbornness. Of course,

your mother had it in her too.”

“I don’t wanna talk about her. Where is she when the shit hits the fan?” I said bitterly. “Where is she at all?”

He nodded, resting his elbows on the table with a sigh. “Well, I’ll tell you what, she’s missing out on knowing her beautiful daughter. You didn’t get her foolishness, Tater-tot, and thank fuck for that.”

“I don’t know...” I dropped his gaze as my stomach knotted. “Sometimes I don’t think I make the best choices.” I thought of everything that had happened between me and the Night Keepers. I’d tried to survive and ended up tangling myself up with them so deeply, I didn’t know where my loyalties lay anymore.

“You follow your heart, always have. Your mother followed whatever wind happened to be blowing. Trust your choices, baby girl. I know you’ll always make the right ones.” He glanced out the window into the dark. “That man out there, don’t ever tell him that I said this, but he’s a good bet.”

“You reckon?” I asked, heat rising in my cheeks.

“Yeah, he’s got that look in his eyes...” He turned to me again. “Like he’d kill for you. Any boy who looks like that at you, I know his heart’s in the right place.”

I thought of the other Night Keepers and wondered how fast Dad would take those words back if I told him about them. I couldn’t imagine he’d ever want me with men who hurt me so deeply, even if they had protected me too.

“I’m glad someone’s been there through this. And I’m sorry it couldn’t be me.” He frowned and I felt the depth of his feelings about that right down to the pit of my soul.

“We’ll come up with an answer for all this, Dad, I’ll help you,” I swore to him, feeling that vow in every inch of my being. “I’m not going to rest until your name is cleared and the people responsible pay for what they’ve done.”



We sped through small towns in the dead of night, Saint driving almost as fast as he had been on the freeway, though his controlled driving style made it easy to ignore the speed. We'd taken his car because it was the biggest, but Saint was also the world's worst backseat driver so it was the only way me or Kyan could stand to be in a car with him anyway. Luckily, because Saint was a control freak, he kept two cars on campus because he liked to be prepared for 'whatever situation might arise' and he also kept the batteries charged up and the tanks full of gas at all times.

Sometimes his OCD drove me insane, other times, I had to admit it came in damn handy. So as we sped ever north towards the markers on the GPS which pinpointed Tatum and Monroe's location, we were cocooned in the luxury Maserati Levante which Kyan had mocked him for tirelessly when he'd bought it. And in all fairness, it had seemed like an odd choice of car for a teenager to drive an SUV with its slick black paint job and red leather interior like a fucking CEO, but that smug little look on his face when he'd explained it would suit us for long journeys had certainly been proved correct. I'd called shotgun and claimed the front seat, but I honestly couldn't imagine how Kyan would have ever even fitted into the back of any of our

sports cars, let alone stayed cramped up back there for almost three hours.

Getting past the security guards had been painfully easy too. Saint just handed over a wedge of cash which probably came close to their yearly salary and they looked the other way instantly. I just hoped none of the other entitled little fuckers in the school got the same idea and put our isolated safe zone at risk.

“That’s it,” Kyan snapped from the back seat, leaning forward between the seats to start fiddling with the screen on the dash to change the music. “I can’t take any more of this intense classical shit, it sounds like we’re on our way to destroy the fucking Death Star or take down Voldemort or compete on The Apprentice. If I have to listen to any more of it then I’m gonna take my bat to the motherfucking speakers back here.”

“It’s called mood music, asshole,” Saint bit back, but he didn’t bother to stop Kyan as he searched for the music he wanted.

“Yeah, well I don’t want to be in the mood to destroy planets or battle it out in a goddamn boardroom.”

“Let me guess, you want to listen to music that reminds us all of sweaty bars and bathroom brawls?” Saint drawled.

“And fucking hot girls like an animal,” Kyan added with a smirk just as Old Town Road – Remix by Lil Nas X and Billy Ray Cyrus started up and I smirked as I joined Kyan in singing along, putting as much gravel in our voices as we could while Saint tried not to smirk and failed.

I cranked the volume and for a few minutes we pretended we weren’t out on a hunt. Or maybe it was just another way of keeping ourselves pumped for it.

“Don’t you think we should concentrate on what we’re doing?” Saint growled as the song ended and I started searching for something else while Kyan kept trying to bat my hand aside and search too.

“I’m all up for raging out when we get there,” I said with a huff of frustration. “But we’ve literally been driving for fucking hours. I’m going out of my mind here and I need a fucking piss.”

“Well tie a knot in it,” Saint growled. “Because I’m not stopping until we find them and figure out what the fuck they’re up to. Check the GPS again.”

I snatched his phone from the dash and looked at the markers more closely, frowning as I realised we’d gained on them, then zooming in.

“Shit,” I breathed, staring at the two stationary dots as the markers for the three of us closed in on them. “They’ve stopped.”

“Where are they?” Saint demanded and I frowned as I tried to find any kind of landmark on the map where they were, but there was nothing.

“They’re... in the middle of the fucking woods,” I said and Kyan grabbed the cellphone from my hands, using the end of his baseball bat to push me away from him as I tried to snatch it back.

“Blake’s right,” he said like it needed confirmation and I tutted irritably as I shoved his stupid bat away from me and snatched the phone again.

“Well, if they’re out in the deep, dark forest then that’s where we’re going too,” Saint said in a low voice which was almost lost to the heavy purr of the engine.

“And what if they really have run off? If they have no intention of coming back with us?” I asked, because so far we’d been so caught up in the hunt that we hadn’t discussed many theories about what the fuck they were up to out here. But it had to be something important.

If Tatum had been alone I would have been sure she was running from us, but with Monroe in the mix I couldn’t figure out what the fuck was happening. I mean, maybe they’d just gone on a run out for some supplies they really wanted and couldn’t get delivered. Was there a Twinkie shortage back at school? The most frustrating thing was that I had no fucking idea. But

I needed to understand. Because the idea of her just running from us without even saying goodbye cut into me even deeper than I wanted to admit. I knew she resented being ours, but recently, I'd started to let myself believe that she was starting to see some good in it too. More fool me.

"Then we drag them back kicking and screaming," Saint said darkly. "They made a vow. And they're going to stick to it. There is no getting out of the bond the five of us share. Not in this life. So if they try to run, we catch them and drag them the fuck back."

"I can pin Tatum down if I get close enough to catch her," Kyan said with a smirk that said he was more than happy to do that. "She'll fight like a tomcat but I don't mind her roughing me up. I can keep her in my arms in here the whole way back to campus."

"Yeah, sitting on your lap, I'm guessing," I said, rolling my eyes.

"Well, if that's what it takes, I'm sure I can suffer through it," he teased and Saint huffed irritably.

"And what about Monroe?" I asked. "You gonna perch him on your lap too? Give him a nice ride on your dick the whole way back?"

"We all know he prefers pretty boys like you," Kyan tossed at me and I smirked, running a hand through my black hair like a douche and not even caring that I was one. I liked my pretty face.

"If Monroe has tried to run off with our girl then he's in for a world of pain," Saint promised. "And the least he can expect is a few savage smacks from Kyan's bat, a damn good kicking from all of us and a journey back to school in the trunk of my car. After that, if they're still a flight risk we'll have to give them plenty of reasons to change their fucking minds. Even if that means chaining our girl to one of us at all times."

The look I exchanged with Kyan let me know that neither of us hated that idea and I had to wonder what that said about the three of us. We'd literally

vowed to destroy a guy for stalking our girl and now we were all chasing her into the dark and planning to drag her back to our lair kicking and screaming and chaining her to us if she still wanted to run. Yeah, we definitely had some problems. I bet we could have kept a therapist in work for years with our emotional issues. Not that that made me want to change my mind about the plan. Tatum Rivers had promised to be ours and I was going to hold her to that vow no matter what. Even though I knew it was fucked up, I just couldn't stand the alternative.

I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted as we sped on down the dark roads. "I am the dark in the dead of the night!"

"Hear me roar!" Saint and Kyan instantly replied and I laughed darkly as we all howled like animals.

I had to admit, my monster was showing again. And it liked the scent of blood in the air.



“I know you want to help, kiddo, but you can’t come with me,” Dad said seriously. “It’s too dangerous.”

“But-” I started and he cut over me.

“It’s not a debate. I need you safe. You’ve gotta give me that, Tatum. You can be of more help at Everlake anyway.”

“How?” I demanded as he rose from his seat, glancing out the window again. He didn’t answer and I got to my feet in frustration. “*How, Dad?*”

“I hear the Governor’s son is there, right? Can you get close to him?”

“Dad, I...” So many words got stuck in my throat and I couldn’t let any of them out. *I know him, he tortured me, tried to destroy me, he holds me captive, punishes me, cares for me, killed for me... Holy shit.* “Yeah, I can talk to him,” I said at last.

“Tell him what I told you and ask him to speak with his father. If the Governor will listen, give him this.” He reached into his coat pocket and took out a folded wad of papers. “It’s everything I have left from my

correspondence with MorteZ. The number he called me on, the emails we shared. It's not much, but if someone looks into him there has to be a trail. There has to be evidence," he said, his voice rising as if he was desperate to believe his own words.

I took the wad of paper and tucked it into my pocket. "I'll do my best," I promised.

"Then you will do exceptionally." He smiled, moving toward me. "I'll contact you again when I can. I'm sorry..." He inhaled deeply, the weight of the world seeming to hang on him. "I'm sorry for everything, for all I've put you through. When this is over, I'm going to buy us a house on the beach. One home, no more moving around."

"You mean it?" My heart squeezed at the thought.

"Promise, Tater-tot." He pulled me into a hug and I tried not to come apart in his arms. I was afraid of how long it would be until I could see him again. But I had to be strong, do what he'd asked and ensure his name was cleared.

He stiffened suddenly and stepped away, grabbing his gun just before Monroe burst through the door.

"There's men out there, coming this way," he panted, his breath fogging before him as the cold air swept in from outside before he pushed the door shut. "They're close."

"Fuck." Dad strode to the window, closing the curtains then gazing through the crack in the middle. "Get out the back."

Monroe grabbed my hand, but I dug my heels in as my heart lurched. "Dad, come on."

"Take my daughter. Get her out of here," Dad commanded Monroe and panic seized me as he half dragged me across the room.

"Dad, *no*," I demanded, trying to twist my hand free of Monroe's. "I'm not leaving without you."

“Donovan Rivers!” a deep voice carried from outside and we all fell still. “I know you’re in there meeting with your daughter.”

“Mortez,” Dad hissed, turning to me with a shadow cast over his face. “Get out of here. *Now.*”

“*Dad.*” I shook my head in desperation, but Monroe’s arms locked around me and he forced me to look at him.

“We need to go, princess,” he growled, fear flitting through his eyes. But I couldn’t leave my dad. He was the only family I had, the man who’d raised me, loved me when my mother refused to. I’d sooner cut off an arm than leave him behind.

“Don’t do anything foolish!” Mortez called and Dad cursed again. Monroe’s muscles flexed as he pulled me closer, the look of a cornered tiger in his eyes.

“How did you find me?!” Dad demanded.

“I’ve been tracking your daughter since the moment you abandoned her at Everlake Preparatory, old man.” Mortez laughed. My heart shuddered with terror at his words. I’d led him right to my dad. The sound of more laughter followed Mortez’s words and my skin prickled. There were a group of them out there, but how many? “It was only a matter of time until you did something idiotic like this.”

My heart thrashed in my chest as I tried to think of a way out of this. But we were caged in like birds. Dad had this place built with a bunker big enough and well-stocked enough to get us through a hundred years of war, but the only way into it was outside. It was no good to us unless we could reach the hatch.

“Dad,” I hissed. “We have to run for it.”

“Go,” he growled. “I’ll keep them busy.”

“You have to get out of here. It’s you they want,” I insisted, my throat

tight with fear.

Dad's eyes darted to me and back to the window. "He's not gonna leave until everyone in this house is dead, kiddo. I'll hold them off."

Dad never sugar coated anything for me. So I knew he was telling the truth and it was a terrifying truth to swallow. But that didn't mean I was just going to abandon him.

"You come too or I'm not going anywhere," I growled, planting my feet stubbornly even though Monroe looked half a second away from throwing me over his shoulder and carrying me out of here.

"Get your ass moving, Mr Rivers," Monroe commanded, grabbing my hand again and tugging me toward the kitchen. "Or I'll drag both of you out of here."

"*Dr Rivers,*" Dad grunted, stalking towards us.

"You've got five seconds to come outside and face your fate, Donovan!" Morteza shouted. "You behave and I'll let your daughter go. I can't say fairer than that. Five – four-"

"*Move,*" Dad growled and we ran over to the kitchen, my pulse jack-hammering against my temples.

Gunfire tore through the house and my heart stammered as Monroe shoved me behind the kitchen isle and my dad dropped down beside us with his pistol in his grip. I took several frantic breaths as bullets sped overhead and a jug Jess had hand painted exploded into a thousand unsalvageable pieces.

Three men burst through the back door, kicking the whole thing down and my body launched into survival mode as they descended on us. My heart beat wildly as Dad opened fire and two of them fell back with screams of pain.

I dove at the last guy as he aimed his gun at Dad, not hesitating for even a second as a savage animal reared its head inside me. I knocked him off

balance as my fist slammed into his face, his nose crunching sickeningly.

Monroe smacked the gun from his hand as he fired and my ears rang from the violent noise as the bullet went wide. I threw a hard kick into the man's stomach and he lurched backwards, his back hitting the wall and I was upon him in an instant, throwing furious punches that coated my knuckles in blood. My heart beat like a ferocious creature in my chest that was desperate to get out of its cage.

"Bitch!" he spat and his fist got past my defences, smacking me across the face and sending me stumbling sideways from the force he used.

Monroe yelled like a wild man, grabbed the back of the man's head and threw him into the kitchen isle. The guy braced himself at the last second, but Monroe fell on him, fisting his hand in his hair and ramming his face down into the counter. Then again. And again until blood spilled and the man collapsed to the floor unmoving.

My breaths came heavily as we shared a look that said we were going to have to fight our way out of here.

There was no chance to run.

The wolves were upon us.

And it was time to face their fury.



We'd parked up on the road beyond the edge of the dirt track and had been making our way silently through the trees, ready to sneak up on Tatum and Monroe as we approached their position on the GPS when the gunfire had started up.

For a moment, we'd all frozen, looking between each other in confusion and alarm but as a second shot was fired and a third, we'd broken into a run without question. Whatever the hell was happening in the trees up ahead, our girl was there, our brother too. And when we'd sworn an oath that bound us all together, we'd meant it. All in, come life or death.

We kept quiet as we ran and the combination of the fight taking place and the element of surprise let us burst from the trees behind the assembled group of thugs who were surrounding the wooden cabin that was nestled there.

I didn't know what the fuck was going on, but I knew my girl was in there and these motherfuckers were aiming guns her way. That was more than enough information for me.

My baseball bat was clutched tight in my grip and I swung it at the back of the first guy's head so fast that I had to wonder if he'd even known he was dying or if the lights just blinked right out. I had no intention of being so

merciful to the rest of them.

Before his body hit the dirt at my feet, I swung for the guy standing at his side, Tatum's scream from within the house lending fire to the ache in my blood and a brutal power to my muscles.

He got his gun aimed my way just as my bat slammed into his arm, breaking the bone with a crack which seemed almost as loud as the bang from the pistol in his grip. But his aim went wide as I shattered his elbow, the bullet tearing into the treetops to my right and the gun falling from his fingers as he screamed.

I kicked him solidly in the chest before he could do any more than howl in pain, sending him crashing into the two guys behind him who were scrambling to aim at me too and making them all stumble back.

I stooped down, grabbing the pistol and tossing it to Blake who had just tackled a guy to the ground and beaten him near unconscious while Saint stamped on his throat to finish him off.

Blake caught the gun, raised it and fired at the guys behind me as I hefted the bat high again and the element of surprise wore off.

There were at least ten more men spread out surrounding the cabin and their attention was turning from the fight inside towards us.

Saint grabbed the dead guy's gun and the two of them dove into the cover of the trees as the assholes we were facing opened fire.

I should have taken cover too, but as Tatum screamed inside the cabin again, a rage unlike anything I'd ever felt overwhelmed me and I dove into the fray instead, leaping at the three guys in front of me and swinging my bat with wild abandon.

My muscles flexed and burned with the force of my strikes and blood splattered me from head to toe as I roared Tatum's name at the top of my lungs in the hopes that she would know I was here. That I'd come for her,

that I'd always come for her.

The chaos of the gunfire and the yell of wounded men surrounded me until all of it just became this ringing in my ears which wouldn't quit.

Pain seared along my side and I twisted away from it, swinging my bat in a wide arc as I spotted the gleam of a blade wet with my blood. But the asshole wielding it had barely scratched me and the moment my bat connected with his skull, he was done for.

My heart was pumping so fast that the beat of it was all I could hear, the red of the blood shining dimly in the faint starlight was all I could see.

I lost myself to the basest part of me. That fractured beast who was all instinct, violence, rage and an overwhelming sense of protectiveness for the girl who was stuck inside that cabin. My family might have forged me into this fucked up creature, but in that moment I couldn't even hate them for it. All of the bars on the cage I'd constructed to keep myself in check crumbled and I just gave in to it. To the bloodlust and steely determination to destroy everyone who came against me.

I would tear through walls of iron and fire to get to her, to protect her and bring her safely into the comfort of my embrace once more. There wasn't a thing in on this Earth that could stop me.

The taste of other men's blood coated my tongue as I charged towards the next cluster of my enemies, not caring as they raised their guns my way. They stood between me and the girl I'd sworn myself to. She was mine and I was hers and I'd give everything it took to defend her from harm.

Blake and Saint shot at the assholes before me from the trees, some of them falling in sprays of red which made my veins hum with pleasure. I was a dark and dangerous beast at the best of times, but tonight, with Tatum's screams ringing in my ears, I was far worse than a monster. I was the monster my grandfather had always known I could be. I was the creature in the dark,

the one who dined on agony and bathed in endless blood. And right now, it was all I wanted to be.

Bullets tore the air apart around me, the sound deafening and hollow and nothing to me. A flash of pain ripped across the flesh of my thigh but it wasn't enough to slow me, let alone stop me.

As I swung my bat at the next group, the power of my muscles was enough to shatter two skulls in a single strike.

I leapt on the third man, releasing my weapon for a second as I fell into the ecstasy of my flesh pounding on his, my fists burning and cracking and bleeding as my knuckles hummed with the raw and brutal power I loved so fucking much.

He was trying to fight back, but I was one big motherfucker and once I had an opponent beneath me, they never got up again.

Blake was shouting something behind me, firing his weapon as Saint drove a blade into another man's gut. Blood splattered my cheeks as I obliterated my opponent, continuing to strike at him even after he'd fallen still.

Saint was calling Tatum's name and I could hear her screaming again inside. There were still some men blocking our way to her, but I wouldn't have cared if there were a thousand of them. I wouldn't have faltered for a moment. Because they couldn't stop me from getting to her. They couldn't stop any of us. We were her Night Keepers and we were bound to her even tighter than she was bound to us. And there was nothing in this world or the next that could keep us apart.

She's a fighter. A warrior. There's no fucking way that she'll die in this hellish place.

The only thoughts which permeated the bloodlust which was drowning me were those of her. The girl with the blue eyes which saw straight through my

mask and knew me without trying. The girl I'd sworn to protect. The one I was willing to die for. The only one this monster answered to.

And if I had to give everything to save her from this fate then I'd do it without thought. Because she was the only light to my darkness and she was worth a thousand of my deaths and more.

I'm coming for you, baby. Just hold on a little longer.



We barricaded ourselves in the bathroom, the door blocked by an overturned cabinet. There were too many of them, swarming into the house like ants and no matter how many we'd taken out, there always seemed to be more ready to replace them. So we'd had to retreat and now I feared how long we could hold out.

I tasted blood in my mouth and my throat was bruised from the imprint of a man's hands. I'd fought for my life, and they'd fought for theirs. Somehow, I'd come out victorious again and again. I knew what it was like to be held at a man's mercy, and I would not come so close to death ever again. Tonight, I was doing as Monroe had taught me and unleashing the wildest, most violent monster who lurked beneath my flesh upon my enemies. And they were going to wish they'd never stepped foot in this place.

I was kneeling behind the clawfoot bathtub between Monroe and Dad, all three of us now armed after we'd taken guns from the dead or injured. The door was being ripped to shit by our bullets and theirs. It wasn't going to stay

intact much longer and I was terrified of what was going to happen when they got in. Because they *were* going to get in. There was no doubt in my mind.

I shared a look with Monroe that broke my heart. I'd brought him here. It would be my fault if he died. And Dad...Mortez had tracked me here. If I hadn't come, this would never have happened. But how could I have known?

Monroe grabbed my chin, his brows knitting tightly together. "This is not your last day on Earth," he commanded like he was ordering it of fate itself.

I managed to nod, but it wasn't me I was really worried about it. It was the two men either side of me who meant so much to me that I wouldn't survive losing them. I couldn't face it.

"Breathe, aim, shoot," Dad told me, repeating the drill he'd spoken to me hundreds of time while practising. I took a breath, then aimed the pistol in my grip at the door.

The wood gave with a splintering crack as a foot slammed into it and the weight of two men forced the cabinet aside. I pulled the trigger and one of them launched backwards as the bullet slammed into his chest, knocking the other asshole down behind him as he went, blocking the door and stopping anyone else from getting in. But no one was even trying.

Is that it? Is it over?

It took me a long second to realise I'd just shot a man without a thought. Every bullet that had left my gun could have meant the end of someone's life. But I wasn't afraid of that, I didn't feel anything but a steely coldness towards these people. There really was darkness in me after all. Would this all hit me when it was over? *If I live that long.*

Shouts rang out from somewhere outside and I looked to dad as he got to his feet.

"We have to go, *now*," he hissed and I hurried to follow him as Monroe

kept close on my left.

We forced the bodies aside and Monroe went ahead before I could stop him, my heart free falling in my chest as he shoved his way through the destroyed door.

He was still safe. For now.

Dad pulled me back, going next and I hurried after him. A dividing wall blocked the view into the central living space and my breathing quickened, a bead of sweat sliding down my spine. The three of us stood in the achingly quiet cabin, the sounds of gunshots sounding somewhere beyond the walls. But not in here. Where were they?

Monroe and Dad kept close to me as we crept into the front room.

We rounded into it and all three of us raised our guns at the same moment the four people standing there raised theirs. The guy in the middle drew my attention most; he had greased back black hair and dead eyes. I'd guess he was in his forties, his body athletic and his shoulders broad. He towered over six foot, dominating the room with his presence and making my skin prickle with unease.

“Now, let's not do anything stupid,” he purred.

“Enough of this, MorteZ,” Dad growled. “Let my daughter and her boyfriend go. They have nothing to do with this.”

MorteZ sucked his teeth, considering Dad's words as his eyes moved onto me and roamed over my body with intrigue. “Alright. Put your weapons down and maybe we can make a deal of sorts.”

None of us moved, our weapons still raised and I fought the tremor running through my limbs, stopping my hands from shaking. The barrel of my gun was directed right at MorteZ's head. One well-aimed bullet could destroy the man who hounded my father. Who had caused this entire mess. Who'd set him up, made the whole world think he was a monster.

“You make me sick,” I snarled, my finger resting on the trigger. But I couldn’t pull it. If I took the shot, we were all dead.

“Come on now, you hardly know me, darlin’,” Morteze said innocently, his voice holding a southern twang. “I can be real nice.”

“Get your filthy fucking eyes off of her,” Monroe warned, his muscles bunching as he pointed his gun at him too.

“And you must be the boyfriend,” Morteze moved his attention to him and a fierce protectiveness filled me.

“He has nothing to do with this,” I snarled.

“His eyes says he wants me dead, darlin’, so I can’t say I believe you,” Morteze said with a mock pitying expression. “But I’m willing to give ya’ll a free pass if you hand over Daddy dearest.”

“No,” I snapped as Dad tensed beside me.

“You’ll let them go before we talk,” Dad said evenly, ignoring me, the tension in the air making my ears ring.

There were more shouts outside and my brain ping-ponged at the sound of pained cries. *What’s happening out there?*

“Your little friends are causing us quite the ordeal,” Morteze explained, his chin jerking towards the window.

“What friends?” I breathed, but I knew in the depths of my heart who it had to be. The only people who would come chasing after me in the middle of the night, who would hunt me to the ends of the earth. But if the Night Keepers were here, that meant there was a chance. I’d seen the way they’d fought the looters and hope blossomed in my chest as another pained wail sounded outside which definitely didn’t belong to any of my men.

“Don’t play dumb with me, sweet thing,” Morteze warned, a real threat in his voice. “Call them off.”

“I could more easily harness the wind,” I said, a hollow smirk on my face.

“Who’s he talking about?” Dad muttered.

“My tribe is here,” I said, my eyes never leaving Morte’s face.

The window suddenly exploded in a shower of bullets and two of Morte’s men fell under the onslaught. Chaos descended as we dove for cover, my heart leaping into my throat. Monroe pressed me down as we hit the floor beside the king sized bed but I pushed him back, desperate to get to my dad.

I aimed my gun over the bed as he shifted aside and Monroe did the same, firing at our enemies as I spotted Dad fighting Morte hand to hand. They were evenly matched, meeting each other blow for blow, the two of them struggling to get the advantage.

“Dad!” I screamed, trying to get up, but the bullets kept flying this way and Monroe yanked me back.

“You can’t,” Monroe snapped and my heart juddered. I had to get to Dad. I had to help.

I aimed my gun at Morte, but he and Dad were fighting so closely, throwing punches and wrestling with one another, I couldn’t risk shooting my father by accident.

A blur of movement to my right said someone else had joined the fight and as I whirled towards them in a panic, their fist slammed into my face. My gun went skittering under the bed as I fell backwards, pain splintering up my cheek and my head spinning.

Monroe released roar of rage, bringing up his gun and shooting again and again until it rang empty, sending blood spraying as the man crashed to the ground. Monroe leapt past me as another man sped into the room, grabbing his wrist as he tried to wrestle the gun from his grip.

Someone caught a fistful of my hair, yanking me across the bed and I screamed, twisting around and kicking them with all my might. They didn’t

let go and I hit the ground on the other side of the bed, fighting for my life as they tried to wrestle me into submission.

I heard Monroe fighting close by, trying to get to me as my assailant pressed his weight down on my body. But I wasn't going to panic this time. I knew what to do.

I bit into his arm until I tasted blood then reared up and threw my fist into the side of his head. He fell sideways with a grunt of pain and I rolled, pressing my advantage as I threw my fists into his face over and over with a shriek of defiance. I was a wild creature, lost to the need to survive and blood spattered me as he fell prey to my attack, finally falling still beneath my heavy punches. My knuckles were bruised and sore, my mind sharpening as I tasted the metallic tang of blood in my mouth.

A heavy weight slammed to the floor beside me and I gasped as I realised it was Dad, his face bloody as he looked to me, his eyes full of fear, loss, love. He reared up, pushing me aside and a gunshot split the air apart. Dad's head smacked back against the floorboards as a bullet carved a hole between his eyes.

No no no no no!

Horror took root in me as my entire world fell to pieces.

I stared and stared, my ears buzzing, my skull pounding as I tried to deny the truth right before me. Blood was pooling out around him, soaking into my jeans. It was on my hands, red, so vividly, horribly red.

I didn't even realise I was screaming until someone slid a strong hand around my neck and the noise was crushed to silence in my throat. Morteza hauled me to my feet, wheeling his gun around and pressing the smoking hot barrel of it to my temple.

Tears flooded down my cheeks and my heart fell to dust. The only thing that existed inside me was pain. I couldn't fight, I was done, shattered,

destroyed. I'd lost the dearest, most precious person to me in all the world. The man who'd held me in his arms a thousand times, who'd loved me with every inch of his heart, who had kissed my wounds better, carried me on his shoulders, taken my hand whenever we'd crossed the road.

Death hung so heavily in the air it made me want to wretch and scream and cry all at once. But all I could do was stare at Dad's lifeless eyes, his parted lips and the stillness of his body which had once seemed invincible to me. All the preciousness of my childhood was wrapped in that man, the heat of a thousand burning suns had blazed through his love for me, for Jess. And now he was hollow, the man he'd been carved out from his skin and taken so brutally, irreversibly away from me.

Gone, he's gone.

Monroe snapped the neck of the guy he was fighting with a bellow of rage and the man fell dead at his feet before his eyes sought me out. He was shaking, blood peppering his flesh and he looked like a beast who'd crawled out of hell, ready to rip apart the world to get me back. But I was already lost.



My right hand tingled from the repetitive recoil of the pistol in my grip while the knife in my left hand steadily dripped blood on the ground by my feet as I looked around us at the men we'd slaughtered.

If there had ever been any doubt about the monsters which lay beneath our flesh then this act alone was enough to cast that to ruin. Right here and now we wore no masks, only our raw and brutal souls on show for the whole world to see. And there was something beautifully powerful in that.

Blood was splattered over my clothes, my skin, my shoes, the scent of it so thick I could taste it on the air.

Blake was similarly painted in splotches of red as he spat a curse at the asshole he'd just put down, swiping an arm over his face as he smeared the blood and sweat staining his skin.

Kyan was kneeling over the last fucker, beating him with a desperate kind of savagery which could only end in death.

"That's all of them," I barked, my gaze turning to the cabin where our girl still hadn't emerged.

Kyan's head whipped up at my words and he stood, bloody as a butcher in a slaughterhouse as he snatched his baseball bat from the ground beside him.

A motherfucking *growl* escaped his throat and he stalked to the front of our group as we all headed for the door with a single goal in mind.

But before we could reach it, the door opened and Monroe stepped out, shirtless and bloody, furious, fearful eyes slipping to us as he held up a hand to halt us.

“Back up,” he commanded and something about the raw tone of his voice made us fall still.

“What is it?” I demanded, stepping to Kyan’s side as Blake raised his gun again on my left.

Monroe descended the front steps quickly, stopping beside Kyan and looking back up at the cabin just as a voice called out to us.

“If I’d known the little lady kept a pack of wild dogs this close, I woulda brought more men,” he said with a dark laugh. “But lucky for me, I still managed to get the upper hand. Lower your weapons unless you wanna find out what the inside of her skull looks like up close.”

I cut a look at Monroe and the tension in his muscles confirmed my fears even before the smug asshole stepped out with Tatum clutched to his chest and a gun pressed firmly to her temple.

Her big eyes were wet with tears and mascara tracks marked her cheeks alongside the blood.

I barely spared a glance for the thug holding her, his hand around her neck. Just a single, cursory look to memorise every detail about his face so that I’d know it in a crowd of a thousand if he managed to walk away from this alive. Because his hands were on my girl. His fingers digging into her throat, a gun pressed to her head. Which meant he’d already given me his life. I’d kill him in a hundred different ways for any one of those crimes, but that hollow, terrified look in her beautiful eyes was enough for me to vow that it would be an agonising demise.

“This is a bit awkward. Did y’all realise she had so many boyfriends or is this the revelation of her promiscuity I’m witnessing?” he asked, his mouth brushing Tatum’s ear as he spoke and his grip on her throat tightening as she tried to recoil. “Though I will admit, a hot piece of ass like this might be worth fighting for if she fucks as hot as she looks.”

“I’m going to cut you open and strangle you with your own intestines,” Kyan snarled, every inch of his furious attention riveted on the man before us. “And while you’re choking and convulsing beneath me, I’ll cut your fucking dick off and ram it down your throat for good measure.”

There was something fucking terrifying in the way he promised that and the thug hesitated for a single moment like he knew it too. Because it wasn’t some empty threat, it was a promise from the devil himself and everyone in that clearing knew Kyan fully intended to follow through on it.

“No need to get antsy, boys,” he said, almost pleasantly, like he couldn’t see his death staring back at him as he looked at us, but the tightness in his grip on our girl proved that was a lie.

“Just let her go, MorteZ,” Monroe growled and I committed that name to memory alongside his face.

He had the fucking audacity to laugh in response, his finger twitching on the trigger of his pistol in a way that made my heart leap with panic and I took half a step forward before I could stop myself. Blake caught my arm with the hand which wasn’t aiming a gun at that motherfucker’s head and I forced myself to stop again.

“What are you going to do with her?” I demanded and the way MorteZ assessed me told me he knew exactly what I was. The darkest creatures always recognised their own kind after all.

“She’s my escape plan, that’s all. I did what I came here to do, her daddy is dead and there are no more loose ends for me to worry about tying off.

Y'all just need to back the fuck up and let me leave. I'll take her with me to make sure you don't get any ideas about following and then let her out a mile or so down the road."

"No fucking way," Blake snapped.

The tension in my limbs was unbearable as this situation spiralled completely and utterly out of my control. There was a fury in me unlike anything I'd ever felt before as my gaze locked with Tatum's and I swear I could *feel* her pain at the death of her father. It hurt me in a way that no emotion of my own ever could. She was ours. We'd sworn to protect her. *I'd* sworn to look after her. And yet now she'd been cut so deeply, I knew the wound would never heal right.

It's my fault.

All my fault.

All my fucking fault!

"I want the keys to that car over there," Morteز commanded and I cut a glance to the heap of shit Monroe usually drove. It was the only car parked on the track which led here, though there was an old motorbike parked alongside it too. I guessed Morteز and his band of dead men had come here on foot like us to keep their presence hidden until they sprung their trap.

Monroe hesitated and Morteز suddenly moved his pistol from Tatum's temple to jab it into her stomach.

"A gut wound can take days to kill you," he said in a low tone. "So I'll still have my hostage, but you'll have the added worry about taking her to a hospital. And in these wild and uncertain times, hospitals are not the safest places to be. Especially with that virus doing the rounds."

"You'd be wise to kill me while you have the chance," Tatum hissed in a low voice. "Because if you don't, you'll spend the rest of your miserable days running from me and wishing you had."

“Aww, don’t be sore about your daddy, sweetheart,” MorteZ cooed, his mouth pressed to the skin of her neck as he spoke while still shielding himself with her body.

Tatum was rigid in his arms, her face scrunched with disgust as she was held against him and my blood boiled.

“We’ll never let him take you,” I swore to her as my gaze stayed fixed on her big blue eyes as they darted between the four of us like she didn’t know where best to seek solace.

“Like I said, one mile and I’ll cut her loose. Last chance to hand over the keys before I put a bullet in her belly. Give them to the girl.”

“Here,” Monroe snarled, tossing the key to Tatum and she caught it mechanically.

“Good boys,” MorteZ said, his tone patronising and his eyes wary as he backed up. He was marking each of us as clearly as I’d marked him. We were hunters pitted against each other now. And this feud between us would only end in death, whether that would be today or not was the only real thing in question here.

Tatum stumbled a little as he dragged her backwards towards the car and the anger in me made my limbs fucking tremble as we stalked after them like a wolf pack, the tension in the air so thick we were drowning in it.

“Just take the car and go,” I growled. “Leave her here now. We have no way to follow anyway.”

Not that that would fucking stop me from obliterating this son of a bitch.

“Lower your weapons and I might,” MorteZ offered.

I knew it was a fucking lie, but I couldn’t just let him take her without trying to reason with him.

All of us lowered our guns as he made it to the car and he dropped down behind the wheel.

My heart thrashed as he yanked Tatum onto his lap and started the engine. All four of us lurched forwards as he threw the car into gear, but it was no use, the wheels spun in the dirt for half a second and he shoved our girl across into the passenger seat. But that was his fucking mistake.

With a roar of rage, I raced after the car, lifting my gun and firing at him, aiming for his side of the vehicle and forcing him to swerve as the rear windshield shattered.

He started shooting back, but I only ran faster as I took aim again. The pounding of footsteps around me told me the other Night Keepers were at my heels, running with me as we chased after her.

And as my muscles burned and my heart raced, I knew I wasn't going to stop. I wouldn't turn back or slow no matter how fucking far I had to run. He wouldn't take our girl away from us. I wouldn't let her fall into the hands of that monster. Because she already had her monsters and none of us were anything without her. If the last few months had taught me anything at all then it was that.

Tatum Rivers had come crashing into my life like a tornado set to ruffle my feathers beyond recognition. And every time I got caught in her path, I found that I knew myself a little less and a little more than I had before. I refused to give up on her. I refused to give in.

She was mine and I was hers and the even the world falling to ruin around us couldn't stop me from claiming her now.



I gasped for breath as I panicked.

Everything was falling apart.

My whole world was shattering piece by piece.

And this man was responsible for it.

It was *his* fault my father had been hunted by the police, *his* fault his name had been dragged through the mud and *his* fault he was *dead*.

I turned to look out the broken rear window, my heart fracturing as the Night Keepers took chase. Saint was out ahead, his arms powering back and forth, his breath swirling up around him in a fog as he ran.

“Saint!” I screamed and Morteza laughed, lowering his window and hitting the brakes.

“Let’s see how fast you can run from a bullet, little bastard,” he muttered.

“Leave him alone,” I snarled, burning hot raging coursing through my blood.

The second he took his eyes off of me I lunged at him, scratching and

tearing at him as I fought to get his gun. Saint was gaining on the car and MorteZ cursed as he shoved me back, opening fire out of the window.

“No!” I screamed, panic slicing my heart to ribbons as I grabbed hold of his arm and pulled with all my might as he fired again, my eyes on Saint. His shoulder jerked back as the bullet grazed him and I went crazy trying to stop MorteZ from shooting again.

“You already have me – let him go! Stop it you fucking psycho!” I demanded, my throat raw, terror swallowing me up and devouring me.

“You sit down in your fucking seat!” MorteZ barked as he shoved me into it so hard that my head knocked against the passenger window. He threw the car into reverse and accelerated towards Saint at high speed.

I started screaming, forgetting any care for myself as I tried to grab the wheel and stop this from happening. MorteZ slammed the butt of the gun into my forehead and I fell back in agony, dizzy as I looked out the back of the car again. Saint tried to leap off of the path but it was too late. The car was too close. It reversed into him full force, sending him flying over the roof and a scream tore from my throat.

The sound of his body tumbling across the metal overhead made me sick and I flinched violently as he hit the hood before me then fell onto the ground in front of the car.

“Saint!” Kyan and Blake were shouting, closing the distance behind us and MorteZ started reversing towards them too. Monroe was a few feet behind them with fury in his eyes, yelling my name. Terror was all I could feel and I didn’t know what to do.

“Move!” I yelled, my voice pitchy as my throat was rubbed raw.

They dove into the bushes and MorteZ snarled, shoving the stick back into drive and I twisted around to look at Saint on the ground ahead of us with fear making me ill.

He started pushing himself up and I gasped, relief spilling through me as tears washed over my skin. He was dirty, bloody and battered, his lip cut and his body filthy. But he was alive.

I grabbed the door handle, trying to get out, kicking and shoving it but it wouldn't open.

Saint raised his gun, pointing it directly at MorteZ with his upper lip peeled back, sheer determination in his eyes.

MorteZ revved the engine but Saint staggered toward us, clearly going to take out MorteZ even if it cost him his own life.

“Saint – get out of the way!” I begged as MorteZ raised his own gun and my heart splintered.

Saint pulled the trigger the gun clicked uselessly as it rang empty.

“I'm sorry,” he spoke to me.

“No,” I gasped as MorteZ leaned out of the window, aiming his gun at Saint.

MorteZ fired as I lunged for the wheel again and I drowned in my screams as Saint was thrown backwards by the bullet, crashing to the ground, the headlights illuminating the blood spreading out over his shirt. MorteZ shoved me back into my seat as he accelerated past Saint's body, aiming the gun at me to keep me there and my heart shattered into a million pieces.

I was blind, deaf, mute. A primal switch flipped in my head as I launched myself onto MorteZ's lap, knocking the gun aside before he could pull the trigger. I punched and kicked then bit into his face like a feral creature. I barely felt his punches as he returned them, my mind gone to an absent place as I fought to destroy him.

He grunted, cursing as he fought me back and I punched his temple so hard that he nearly lost consciousness, falling limp in his seat as he cursed. The car bumped off of the track towards a tree and I cried out as we hit it and

slammed to a halt. I was thrown into the dash, and gasped as Morte's weight crushed me. I shoved him back with a growl of effort, catching my breath before my gaze fell on the open window.

I lurched toward it, scrambling over Morte to escape and pushed myself half way out with hope burning a path through my veins. Monroe was suddenly there, his hand grabbing mine as he said my name with utter desperation and my fingers locked around his a second before Morte got us into reverse and the car shot backwards, peeling away from the trees. Morte's nails dug into my skin, making me cry out in pain as Monroe toppled to his knees, losing his grip on me and suddenly we were tearing down the dirt track again.

"Tatum!" Monroe roared.

I hung out the window, my gaze finding Saint on the ground as Blake pressed down on his wound, his face written in pain and grief.

"Saint!" I screamed, fighting to get out as Morte held onto me with an iron grip.

Kyan was racing after the car with fury etched into his features. "I'm coming for you!" he roared and I didn't know if those words were a threat to Morte or a promise to me.

Morte hauled me back inside with a snarl of effort, throwing me into my seat and his palm smashed across my cheek a second later, making my skull ring from the impact. My lips were wet with blood and I turned to him, spitting it at his face. He lifted his gun, placing it right against my forehead and my heart dipped with terror.

His face was marred with scratches and a bite mark oozed blood on his right cheek. "Give me a reason, darlin'."

He accelerated faster down the dirt road, the car bumping and jostling as he careered along. He returned the gun to his lap, but it was still pointed at

me and I knew if I made one wrong move, he wouldn't hesitate to kill me.

I looked back over my shoulder as tears made me choke, my Night Keepers lost in the dark, the shadows stealing them away from me.

Please don't be dead. Please please please.

“If you get feisty again, sweet thing, my finger might just slip and blow your pretty brains out.”

Mortez's eyes were a door to all my nightmares. But I was bloody and broken and bruised, so did I even have anything more to lose by trying to escape? My dad was gone. Saint was gone. My heart was barely hanging on by a thread. I didn't want to face a world without either of them in it.

Mortez's gaze shifted to my mouth and he wet his lips. “My, my, you would be fought over at Royaume D'élite by every man in attendance. I wonder what price you'd fetch? But maybe I'll just keep you all for myself. If you behave, I'll let you go once I'm done with you. How does that sound, darlin'?”

“It sounds like you just signed your own death warrant, asshole,” I hissed, my body beginning to shake with hate. “Those men back there will bathe in your blood before dawn. Whether I'm still here to watch or not.”

“Hmph,” he laughed hollowly and the sound dripped through me like acid. “There's a few hours left before dawn, sweet thing. I wonder how many times I can make you scream before then.”

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“If she sleeps in my bed every night, she’ll end up

*falling in love with me...and that'll be awkward as
hell when I have to kill her.”*

SLOAN

He's my twisted nightmare.

My blood bound enemy.

My ruthless desire.

Our fates were spun the night he **tried to kill me** and now he's back to destroy me for good.

It's always been **us versus them**. The Calabresis against the Romeros.

This city is ours but they vowed to take it from us. And when they couldn't, **they took me instead**.

Now I'm chained by the cruellest of them all; the man who wrapped his hands around my throat and tried to **squeeze the life from me** all those years ago.

But **I won't fall prey to him**. I'm older, fiercer and I've grown claws of my own.

Rocco Romero thinks he can keep me **captive**, but he's about to regret bringing a sleeping tiger into his home.

ROCCO

She's my greatest failure.

The name that always haunts me.

My dirty little secret.

And when I had the chance to **kidnap her from her wedding**, nothing on God's green earth could stop me.

She's mine. I could take her life, her body or her heart if I wanted to.

But my **brothers** refuse to believe me.

So when they bet I can't make the little principessa fall in love with me, of course I step up to the challenge.

And when she's **down on her knees**, pouring her heart out, I'll crush it in my fist.

I'm lining the Calabresis up like dominoes. And **she'll be the first to fall.**

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