

A man with dark hair and a goatee, wearing a black leather jacket, is the central figure. He has extensive tattoos on his neck and chest. The background is a dimly lit church interior with rows of pews and a vaulted ceiling. In the top right corner, there is a logo featuring a cross inside a shield-like shape.

CHAPEL
CREST
BOOK THREE

STITCHES

THE BOYS OF CHAPEL CREST

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

K.G. REUSS

STITCHES

A DARK ASYLUM ROMANCE

THE BOYS OF CHAPEL CREST

BOOK FOUR



K.G. REUSS

BOOKS FROM BEYOND

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For the ones who like to bake cookies while I bake bread. This one is for you.

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FOREWORD

Dearest Reader

I'll make this easy. A rat king is a group of rats twisted together by their tails. It's glorious. Google it and see for yourself. Save this information for later in the book.

This series is part of the Chaos Universe. A complete list is located in the back of this book. I encourage you to dive in and meet everyone.

Trust the process and don't read this series if you have any aversion to the following:

Dub con

Non con

Bullying

Violence

Knife play

Breath play

Nyctophobia

Somnophilia

Acrophobia

Fits of mania

Psychopathy

Sociopathy

Depression

Bi-polar disorders

Physical, mental, sexual and emotional abuse

Body modifications

Captivity and confinement

Buried alive
Dead bodies and their parts
Animal death (forest animals)
Dysphoria
Drug use and abuse
Eating disorders
Hallucinations and delusions
Homomisia (father to son)
Kidnapping
Feral/Primal play
Medical experimentation
Murder/attempted murder
Mutilation
Needles
Selective mutism
Aphasia
TBI
Nightmares
Obsessive compulsive disorder
Overdose
Panic/anxiety attacks
PTSD
Psychiatric hospitalizations
Detainment
Religion
Scars
Schizophrenia
Seizures
Self-harm/Self-Flagellation
Sleep disorders
Slut shaming
Stalking
Obsession
Suicidal ideation/attempts
Dissociative identity disorder
Borderline personality disorder
Narcissism

Verbal abuse

Victim blaming

Whipping/flogging

Group scenes

On-page sex

Cannibalism

Masturbation

Abortion

Child death

Torture/electro-shock therapy

Blackmail

Feelings of worthlessness

If you've made it through the list, welcome to Chapel Crest!

PROLOGUE



SIN

I watched as the blood dripped onto the white tiles at my feet. My body screamed at me for mercy, but I refused to obey.

Clenching my teeth together, I delivered another crack of the already bloody whip across my back, the searing ache making me let out a snarl, my chest heaving.

“I admire you,” a soft voice called out to me.

Asylum.

“Your dedication is so. . . *refreshing.*”

“Go fuck yourself,” I muttered, sinking to my ass on my bed.

A bed that was now tucked away in the corner of Seth Cain’s dorm room. Or Asylum’s room. Whoever the fuck it belonged to. I still couldn’t wrap my mind around the shit I knew, so I didn’t even bother thinking about it.

Asylum managed to get me assigned to his room after my best friends tried to torch my ass in the cemetery. I had it coming though, and I didn’t have one ounce of anger toward them over it. I got what I deserved after what I’d done to them and the shit I’d caused.

Stitches trying to hang himself.

Sirena being. . .

Fuck.

I couldn’t even think the word.

I looked to Asylum to see him leaning against his dresser, his arms crossed in front of his chest and a dark eyebrow raised.

“You think too much,” he finally said, dragging that intense blue-eyed gaze over me.

“Or not fucking enough.” I got to my feet again and went back to beating

myself. *Self-flagellation*. Every fucking day for over a week now. That was how long it had been since I'd left this room. Church had told me to punish myself.

I was really fucking working on it.

The bite of the leather snapped against my skin again, making me swallow down a cry, and my breathing stuttered.

Again.

Again.

Fucking AGAIN.

"AH!" I dropped to my knees, my eyes stinging with unshed tears. My bare torso was chewed to fuck. I'd spent nearly every waking hour devoting my time to my punishment.

"You should rest," Asylum said.

"No. I don't need your fucking pity."

"I'm not saying it because I feel sorry for you. Quite the opposite, *bestie*. I'm saying it because if you let your body heal a bit, the delicious bite of justice will hurt that much more. Isn't that what you crave? *More?*"

I looked at him through my long curtain of damp blond hair before I forced myself to stand. Asylum was wicked. His heart was black as pitch, and he'd been buried inside Siren not two weeks before. It sickened me, but if it had to be a monster, he was the best kind to do it because deep inside that tarry heart of his, lay a twisted love I didn't think I'd ever be able to match to the girl who had captivated so many of us at Chapel Crest.

"Your wounds need cleaning," Asylum continued, eyeing me with his piercing blue eyes.

"Fuck 'em," I muttered, wincing at the sharp ache throughout my body.

"You also need to return to classes."

I said nothing as I moved slowly past him to the bathroom. I closed the door on him without a word uttered and turned on the shower. Quickly, I undressed and leaned against the porcelain sink and stared at myself in the mirror.

Bruises littered my body from head to toe. Some old wounds from the night in the cemetery and some new ones. Together, they screamed my guilt.

I'd really fucked up. I'd lost everything I'd tried to keep.

The lacerations to my body were many. Some were deep and tender, others were shallow and sore.

And they all reminded me to not fuck up ever again.

I kept hoping that I'd get the strength to just kill myself, but I still hadn't found it. I hadn't been punished enough just yet and didn't want to take the easy way out either.

Although all things considered, I'd doubt anyone would miss my treacherous ass anyway. After all, the watchers had strung me up on a cross and set fire to everything around me. If that didn't scream *fuck off and die*, I didn't know what did.

I breathed out and straightened.

Fuck, I was a mess.

I needed to return to classes. I knew I did. The idea of seeing the guys *and her* again made bile burn my throat and tears sting my eyes. God, what I wouldn't give. . .

But I knew it was over. I'd been cast out, an angel who had once helped rule. I'd plummeted like the demon I was, and now, this was my life.

I hated feeling sorry for myself.

I pushed away from the sink and got into the shower, the water stinging my skin. A cry left my lips at the pain before I buckled down and absorbed it. Became it. Existed in it.

And then I slid painfully down the wet tiles, the water raining on me, as I huddled into myself, the tears blending with the water. The red from my bleeding wounds washed around me as I sobbed on my ass.

The water ran cold, and my body shivered, but I didn't give a fuck.

"Get up," Asylum said in a low voice, turning off the water.

It took me a minute, but I finally wiped my eyes and looked up at him.

"What do you do when you feel like you can't breathe?" he asked softly, the familiar words tearing at my heart.

"I do it anyway," I whispered back, my voice shaking.

"What do you do when you need help?"

"I-I. . ."

Asylum squatted, a towel in hand, and cocked his head to the left at me. His black hair fell across his forehead and his blue eyes darkened.

"You fucking trust in me to keep you insane," he answered. "I'm not a watcher. And neither are you. Get the fuck up and deal with life. It's the only one you've got, *brother*." He tossed the towel at me and stood.

"Seth will be here to dress your wounds," he said, going to the door. "He's better at fixing things than I am. My joy is in tearing them apart." He left the room as I clutched the towel, my throat tight.

He was right.

I had to get the fuck up.

I didn't even bother contemplating how he knew our watcher mantra. I knew the guy was fucking magic made from stardust or some shit. Not in a supernatural way, but in a fucked-up, scary way. In a way that made me believe the devil might be real.

At the end of it all though, he really was right. I had to pick myself up. This was my life now, whether I liked it or not. My new reality.

I'd gambled and paid the ultimate price.

Eventually, the sin catches up to the sinner.

And this was my personal hell.

STITCHES



I watched as she nibbled along her sandwich, her brilliant, colorful eyes downcast, her ass planted firmly in Church's lap. He hadn't let her out of his sight for a fucking minute since she was hand-delivered to Ashes's bed just over a week ago.

She hadn't spoken yet. Ashes said she only said one thing to him. A promise.

I blew out a breath. Ashes caught my eye and offered me a sad smile.

Everything had been shit lately.

We'd gone back to the cemetery the following morning to find Sin had been removed from the cross we'd lashed him to.

I'd been so angry when we'd kicked his ass and tied him up. When the morning came, my heart hurt for him. I thought we'd find him half alive. Hell, maybe even dead. I hadn't wanted him to die. I just wanted him to understand what he'd done to us wasn't right. I wanted him to know angel had suffered alongside all of us.

Because I knew Sinclair Priest loved her like we did.

We were three now though.

Sin had disappeared to god knew where. I only hoped he was safe, but in misery with thoughts on what his actions did to us all. My feelings were caught someplace between heartache and fury a week later.

Although, if I had to guess where he was, I was certain he was with Asylum.

As for Sirena, I kept my distance from her. Immense guilt flooded me over what had happened. I'd not protected her in the facility the way I'd wanted to. I'd broken with her that day.

I was still trying to sort those broken pieces inside my mind.

I wasn't myself. The urge to scream until my voice was broken and I was as silent as my angel clawed at me daily.

"You're not done," Church said softly, tucking her hair behind her ear as she made to put the sandwich down. "I tell you when you're done. Eat. You've lost a lot of weight."

Her hands shook as she picked her sandwich back up and bit into it again.

"She's full," I muttered. "Don't push her. She'll throw up. Her body is used to not getting a lot of food. She needs time."

Church narrowed his eyes at me as Sirena took another bite and swallowed. He snatched the sandwich out of her hands and threw it before she could take another bite. It smacked some kid in a rabbit mask in his chest before it fell to the ground.

Sirena flinched, fear washing over her pretty face.

"He's not mad, heaven," Ashes murmured. "He's just worried about you."

She said nothing and ducked her head.

I watched Church sigh. A tremor went through his body. I knew my brother well enough to know he really was concerned about her. It ran deeper than lunch. It ran Everett deep. I had the same fears because I knew exactly what that prick was capable of.

Church reached out and tilted her chin up and dragged her against his body, his lips meeting hers.

I watched as she parted her lips for him and kissed him back, his hand cradling her face.

Ashes turned his attention from them and looked at me.

"How are you today?" he asked in a low voice as Church's hand moved down to angel's waist and squeezed.

I swallowed and looked away. I hadn't kissed her yet. The last time I'd touched her was when I'd hooked pinkies with her the night we'd punished Sin. I hadn't spoken to her either.

But I loved her. Fuck, I loved her.

I guessed my guilt was eating me alive.

It could have been worse.

It's what I kept telling myself lately.

"I'm OK," I muttered, biting into my own sandwich so I wouldn't have to speak.

“It’s Friday,” Ashes continued.

I nodded and swallowed. “It’s your fire night. I know. I’ll be there.”

He exhaled and looked away, a sad look on his face.

He missed Sin just as much as I did. He didn’t need to say it. It was written all over his face.

But fuck Sin right now, wherever he was. He deserved to feel like shit. God knew I’d already been through it. It felt nice to sprinkle around the self-loathing.

Church and Sirena were still kissing.

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t jealous. I wanted to kiss her too, but I was too scared. Of what, I wasn’t sure. Maybe it was because I’d failed her and didn’t feel like I deserved her now.

“Hey, stranglehold,” Cady greeted me as she flopped down next to us and opened a carton of milk.

I caught Sirena breaking away from Church to see her sister, but Church was quick to draw her lips back to his.

Cady raised a brow at the action and looked at me. “He needs to let her breathe. He’s aware of that, right?”

I shrugged and bit into my sandwich again.

“He just loves her,” Ashes said, offering her one of his gentle smiles.

“Yeah, but don’t you two? I never see you guys with her. It’s always that dipshit.” She jerked her thumb in Church’s direction.

“He’s greedy,” I muttered.

“No argument there,” Cady said, picking up her ham sandwich and eyeing it. “I fucking hate ham.” She bit into it and chewed quickly.

“Then why do you get it?” Ashes asked.

“Because *fuck ham*. This is my punishment to it,” she said around a mouthful of ham and cheese.

He chuckled and shook his head at her. “How do you like your dorm?”

“Sucks.” She tossed the sandwich down and took a deep drink of her milk. “But I like it at the same time. You guys are getting the rest of Rina’s things today, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah. That’s the plan.”

We’d moved Sirena in with us. Only a few items of hers were left in the dorm Cady now roomed in. She was hard to persuade at first, but once Ashes mentioned she could sneak guys into her dorm without the threat of Church running them off, she was keener on the idea.

She was angel's opposite in every possible way.

"Good. The only thing that would make her room better is a bigger bed. You know. . . for extracurricular activities." She ate more of her sandwich again.

Ashes snorted at her before he turned his attention to Church and Sirena. I watched as he slid in closer to her and pressed a kiss to her neck as Church's lips moved to the other side of her neck and sucked along her flesh. Her eyes were closed, her pretty pink lips parted.

"She looks happy," Cady mused. "Lucky sister."

"You want Church and Ashes sucking on your neck?" I asked, raising a brow at her.

"Fuck no, but I wouldn't say no to two hot guys up in my shit," she said.

"You think they're hot?" I smirked at her, trying to get myself to be normal again.

She rolled her eyes at me. "Eat shit, Stitches. You know you ass hats are hot. Everyone knows you're hot. You're hot to me in the way shit is when it comes out of an asshole."

I wrinkled my nose at her as she ate. "How the fuck are you even related to Sirena?"

She shrugged and winked at me, her cheek packed with food.

I bit back a smile.

I hadn't really liked Cady when I'd first met her, but she'd grown on me. Sort of like a tumor.

I turned back to the guys with my angel and watched as Ashes whispered something into her ear before Church whispered in her other ear.

I'd heard the story of the cemetery that night. I knew what had happened between the three of them.

Lucky.

Aside from Asylum, Church had been the only one to fuck our girl. As far as I knew, Church hadn't fucked her since either.

That was his way of letting her settle in.

It would all change soon. I knew that.

Everything would change soon.

And for that, I prayed.

ASHES



We were a devil and an angel on her delicate shoulders whispering sinful things into her ears.

I was certain Church's words were far dirtier than what I was telling her. I preferred the build-up while Church was more about the tear-down.

"You're so beautiful, heaven," I whispered. "You're my pretty girl, aren't you?"

Her fingers dug against my thigh while Church whispered more sins into her other ear.

I knew we'd both take her here and now if we were into other people watching us. Our public claiming should have been us doing it in front of everyone, but to hell with them. No one saw our girl come but us.

Church pulled away from her and kissed her again before he broke it off and pushed her face toward me.

I claimed her swollen lips immediately. I swallowed down the groan I wanted to let pour from my lips as her tongue slid against mine.

She tasted so sweet and perfect.

My dick was rock hard as I kissed her.

I broke the kiss off and ran my lips along her jaw and toward her ear.

"Sleep in my room tonight, heaven?" I pulled away to see a tiny sparkle in her colorful eyes. She squeezed my hand before Church nodded to her apple slices and demanded she eat more.

And like the perfect girl she was, she picked a slice of apple up and ate again.

"Rina, Mom sent a few things. I've put them by the door for you in my dorm," Cady called out.

“Claws, we’ll get her shit later,” Church said. “Let her eat.”
Cady gave him the finger but didn’t push the subject.
Sirena would need her strength later. I was sure of it.

†

I FLIPPED my lighter open and closed on repeat as I listened to Sister Grace drone on. I’d tuned her words out long ago. Math wasn’t my thing. I found it boring as hell. Instead, I let my mind wander to Sirena. She was upstairs in a Bible study class. Cady had the class with her, so it offered some comfort in knowing she wasn’t alone.

If I kept my mind on Sirena, I’d end up with an embarrassing situation, so I thought about Sin. The fire. His lies. His betrayal. And how much it hurt to lose him.

But I didn’t feel remorse over his punishment. He deserved more for all of the shit he’d done. I knew why he did it, but that still didn’t make it right. I was certain Asylum had something to do with saving him. I’d have let him burn in that moment had it been me, but when I lost myself in the flames, it was hard to think clearly.

It was all smoke and ash to me.

It was something I was working on.

Now that the ash had settled, I found myself sick with worry over him. Not that I wasn’t pissed, because I absolutely was and would punch him in the face again if I saw him. But I was worried about him. His mental state had been weak. I knew he’d loved us. I knew why he did what he did. He didn’t think it through though. He didn’t consider the consequences. That was one of the things I’d learned in my life. Starting a fire always had a consequence.

Maybe he’d learn it now too.

The bell rang, signaling our freedom for the day, so I got up and shoved past everyone to the door, hoping to get to Sirena quickly.

I took the stairs two at a time. I’d told Claws to always wait for me. So far, she’d obeyed. I hoped today wasn’t the day to change her actions.

When I reached the top of the stairs, I hauled ass through the crowded hallway to the bench outside the room where we arranged to always meet.

I halted in my tracks because Cady was nowhere to be seen. Sirena was sitting on the bench with Bryce beside her. He was talking a mile a minute to her.

Jealousy reared its ugly head inside me. I wasn't a jealous guy. At least I never was before Sirena. But Bryce was different. He was kind. Patient. And he cared about her. He was everything a good girl could want in a guy, which was why I probably felt the way I did. She'd been with him before us. They made sense together. The watchers with such a perfect girl didn't make sense.

Not that I didn't trust her. It was I just didn't want her to feel for anyone but us. I wanted to be her best friend. Her confidant. The one she smiled at and her eyes sparkled for. From what I could witness, she was into their conversation just as much as he was.

Cady was in hot water when I caught up to her.

Schooling my emotions, I went to them.

Sirena looked up at me with her big, innocent, pretty eyes as Bryce's words faltered on his lips.

"Heaven," I murmured.

She held her hand out to me. I gave her mine in return and pulled her to her feet.

Bryce followed and shot me a nervous look. "Sorry. Cady got in trouble for telling Sister Mary to eat her ass and was sent to the office. I stayed to make sure Sirena was OK."

"Thank you," I said, definitely planning on having words with Claws later on. She needed to learn to control herself.

Like I'm one to talk.

Bryce continued to stand there, staring at Sirena. I cleared my throat and gave him a pointed look.

His cheeks flushed pink for a moment before he looked at me.

"I-can Sirena hang out with me tonight—"

"No," I said immediately, not even contemplating it for a moment.

Her hand squeezed mine, and I looked down at her to see her brows crinkled.

She wanted to hang out with him.

"Heaven," I murmured, turning to face her. I cradled her cheek and frowned down at her. "No. Please. Not-not tonight, OK?"

I knew that made it sound like some night soon, but to hell with it. I'd cross that bridge when I got there. Since she'd returned to us, we'd vowed to

never let her out of our sights again. So far, it was working, but damn Bryce Andrews to hell for making it more work for us.

She licked her lips before she pulled away and looked at her feet, deferring to me.

I let out a breath of relief.

“Some other time,” I said to him. I turned and began to lead Sirena away when he called out to me.

“She's safe with me too, you know.”

I said nothing and kept moving with Sirena's hand in mine. When we reached the path that led to the house, I spoke.

“I don't want you to think we're being too protective. But I guess at the same time we are. It's just the thought of losing you again makes me sick.”

We made it to the door of our house, and I opened it. She stepped inside and turned to me as I followed. I let the door close with a click and stared down at her.

“I'm sorry, but I'm also not,” I murmured. “You're our girl, heaven, a-and I love you—”

I was silenced by her soft lips as they brushed against mine.

I lost it.

The control she had slipped as I took over and pressed her against the wall, my tongue tangling with hers.

We hadn't had sex. In fact, I knew none of us had touched her since she'd come home to us. My control on that matter was slipping fast as her body pressed against mine. I was still drunk from kissing her at lunch.

“I want you,” I said between breathless kisses. “God, so much, heaven.” I held her face between my hands, kissing her hard. “It's taking every ounce of willpower I have not to take you to my bedroom and finish what we started in that cemetery.”

She broke the kiss off and stared up at me. My pulse roared in my ears.

Maybe I'd screwed up by mentioning that night. The night Sin had been punished.

“Heaven,” I whispered. I kept my eyes trained on her as she took my hand in hers and stepped around me. I had no idea what was happening, but I let her lead me through the house. When we got to my room, my heart rate picked up.

She opened the door and led me inside. With a click, the door closed behind me. “Sirena?” I murmured, drinking her in.

She said nothing as was her fashion and pulled away from me. I watched as she backed up to my bed and sat on the edge, her fingers fumbling slowly with the buttons on her cardigan. I didn't move a muscle while I watched her finally unfasten the cardigan and drop it to the floor before she made slow work of her white uniform shirt. When that puddled to the floor, I took a tentative step forward, drinking in how beautiful she looked in her white lacy bra as she stared back at me with wide eyes.

When her hands wound back and unsnapped her bra, I knew I was done for. She let it slip down her body, her hands covering her breasts as a pretty pink flush swept over her face and chest.

She stood, trembling slightly while she stared back at me.

With one arm shielding her breasts from me, she removed her skirt, letting it pool at her feet before she stepped out of her shoes, her panties still in place.

"No," I murmured as she made to slip them down her thighs.

She froze, her eyes wide.

I closed the distance between us.

"Let me," I said softly, brushing my lips against hers.

With gentle hands, I slid her panties off, letting them fall to the floor.

"Let me see you," I whispered. I stepped around her and sat on the edge of my bed and stared at her. Her body was amazing. All the pretty dips and curves exactly where I liked them. Her creamy skin. The pink flush painted across it. The goosebumps. I liked that she kept her pussy bare for me. At least I told myself it was for me. That sexy as fuck hip flare and tiny waist. I envisioned my name tattooed on her hip bone someday. The thought of her loving me that much to mark her body with my name made me ache in all sorts of delicious ways.

"I still can't see all of you," I said, letting my eyes traverse each dip and curve of her body. "Show me."

She bit her bottom lip for a moment before she let her hands fall away. I loved how shy she always was. It turned me on in so many different, sometimes voracious, ways. It wasn't like I'd never seen her breasts or pussy before, but fuck, each encounter was like the first time all over again.

And I'd never seen anything when it was just the two of us.

If I died right then and there, I'd go a happy man.

Then, Sin popped into my head and ruined everything.

I tried to push his battered face out of my head as I stared back at my girl.

He'd done what he'd done because he was trying to do what he thought counted as protecting us from this beautiful creature before me. The one who was pure sunlight and gospel.

I swallowed as Sirena walked slowly toward me, the innocence rolling off her. She went to her knees before me, her brows crinkling and her lips parting.

My breathing was ragged as she unbuckled my belt and undid my pants. Her hands shook with each movement, but it only turned me on more.

Or at least it tried to. Sin danced in my mind, ruining everything. His soft cries. His blood. The look in his eyes as I lit that fire around him. The pain. The defeat.

Sirena's warm tongue brushed tentatively along my aching cock after she pulled it free from my pants.

I hated Sin, but I fucking loved him too. Knowing he was alone and broken now. . .

Fuck it.

He committed his treason.

Let him drown in it.

But a little part of me wanted to go to him and tell him I still fucking cared about him.

It was too soon. Way too soon. I was delirious.

A soft groan left my lips as Sirena sucked along the head of my dick.

I'd never been a guy to come fast, but in this instant, I may just blow it all and ruin my record.

I liked to take my time. Savoring pleasure was what I was all about. Maybe it was why I enjoyed flames so much. They could burn all night long.

"Deeper," I whispered. "Take me, heaven."

She did as I asked, my cock hitting the back of her throat. She gagged a little, making me smile. It was that innocence again. She was still learning, but she was doing a hell of a job.

I twisted my fingers in her hair, telling myself this was about me and her right now and everything else, Sin included, could go fuck themselves.

I guided her gently along my cock, making sure not to go too deep just yet. Although the thought of her choking on my dick did something to me I didn't quite have words for.

After a few moments of getting her warmed up, I spoke.

"Can you take me deeper, baby?"

She let my cock sink deeper into her throat. She coughed and choked again, my dick coming free from her mouth.

She looked up at me with glistening lips, her eyes wavering.

She was upset. She thought she'd failed.

"It's OK. You're new to it all," I murmured, not wanting her to feel bad about it. "I love that you are. Take your time if you need to."

She let out a breath and moved forward onto my dick again. I let my head fall back while she serviced me, the feelings incredible. For being new, she was a fast learner. We'd get to the deep throat part someday. For now, having her choke on my cock was just as good. Maybe even better.

I tangled my fingers in her hair, relishing the way her mouth felt on my dick. She let me guide her how I liked, and before long, my body was tensing with an impending release.

"You're going to make me come, heaven. Right into that pretty mouth of yours. Is that what you want? You want to make me come?" I rasped, moving her faster.

Oh god. So fucking good.

My breathing picked up.

"Baby, if we don't stop, I'll fucking burst. I'll fill that mouth of yours."

She didn't stop. In fact, she sucked me harder.

"Fuck. Sirena. Oh fuck. *Fuck.*" I came hard, shooting my load into her warm mouth, my cock twitching against her tongue as the pleasure rolled through my body, making me tremble.

When I'd completely unloaded, I pulled her off my dick.

"Swallow it," I whispered. "Show me what a good girl you are."

She'd swallowed for me before, but I also knew it was something she still struggled with as well. That only made it hotter to me.

She swallowed some of it and sputtered, her body shaking, before she swallowed again. I watched her struggle, my cock still rock hard.

"Open, pretty girl. Show me what you did."

She parted her lips and showed me her empty mouth. There was still a dribble of come on her lips.

"Tongue out," I whispered, leaning down.

She opened wider and put her tongue out.

I closed the distance between us and licked across her tongue before I lapped the dribble of my release off her lip.

Her eyes widened at the move, making me ready for round two.

My poor heaven had no idea what she'd gotten herself into with me. I tended to get a little wild when I was turned on. I tried to keep myself in check, especially since she was new to all of this, but man. . . I was struggling.

I stood, and she stared up at me from her knees.

Damn, what a beautiful sight.

"Get on the bed," I commanded softly, running my cock along her lips. I pulled away from her and finished removing my clothes and watched her crawl onto my bed.

"On your back," I continued.

She did as she was told.

"Spread your legs for me."

I watched her legs fall open, her chest heaving.

"Wider."

She did so, trembling.

I crawled onto the bed between her parted legs and stared at her.

"Now fucking hold on."

Her hands had barely twisted in the bedding before my mouth was on her wet, bare pussy, eating it like my last meal.

Ah, heaven.

SIRENA



Ashes worked between my legs, his tongue doing some twisted dance on my clit while I squirmed beneath his mouth.

I couldn't even think straight. He was all tongue, lips, teeth, and fingers, raining havoc down on me.

I wanted to scream my pleasure, but I swallowed it down. Honestly, I had no idea what I was even doing, but I loved these watchers. They angered me all too often, but they were so sweet in their own way.

I knew I shouldn't be in Ashes's bed with my legs spread wide, letting him eat me, when I should be doing things like painting or getting my homework done so I could get out of this nightmare.

But I'd seen the look on his face when we'd walked in. He loved me, and I loved him. He was struggling with the Sin thing. They all were. Even I was, despite my having suffered so much because of his choices.

They hadn't told me what they'd done to him. I feared he was dead and didn't like to think about it because it hurt my heart so much.

They were quieter. More subdued with Sin gone.

I prayed every night that they hadn't killed him. Not because I cared for Sin, but because they did, and I didn't want them to be hurt.

Ashes's warm mouth on my pussy brought me careening back to the moment, the heat of my release beginning to tease me.

I'd been so nervous and embarrassed giving him head. I knew I wasn't great at it, but he seemed to enjoy it a hell of a lot, so I figured I was doing decent enough. And now we were here, exchanging pleasures.

Ashes's pace picked up. He slid a finger deep inside me and teased a place that made me buck beneath his mouth. He let out a growl and with his

other hand, he held me down, continuing to work his magic on me.

My back arched off the bed, my release pouring out of me in a hot rush. I was making a damn mess, but I was too delirious to care as I continued to come in his mouth.

I came down, breathing hard.

My body twinged beneath him while he continued to gently clean me with his tongue, eating down all I'd given him.

Slowly, he kissed up my body until he was balanced over me on his arms, his lips and chin glistening from my mess.

The head of his cock teased against my pussy as he stared down at me. I hadn't had sex with him. I wanted to though. I knew I did.

Would Asylum be mad? Would Seth be? Would Church? And Stitches. . .

He hadn't tried to touch me or speak to me since the night in the cemetery.

I don't want anyone to get hurt because of me.

I blinked back a tear as I stared at Ashes.

"We don't have to," he said softly, misinterpreting my tears.

I pressed a finger to his lips to silence him. I wanted to. Having this memory of us together would be good for me. Plus, I just wanted him. I wanted this moment with us.

"OK," he murmured. He leaned in and kissed me gently before his lips moved along my jaw and down my neck.

I let out a shaky breath, relishing the way it felt to be loved by him.

Asher Valentine was pure fire. *My firestorm.*

His lips pressed against my breast before he sucked a nipple into his mouth, making me whimper.

He liked that. He liked when I made tiny noises for him.

I whimpered again as he did it to my other breast before he moved back up and kissed me once more, his dick dangerously close to entering me since he'd already slid through my folds.

He broke off the kiss and stared down at me.

"I want to see your face when I fuck you for the first time," he whispered.

I clung to his biceps, his words lighting a fire inside me, as he pushed forward, his head breaching me.

I squeezed my eyelids closed.

"Open. Look at me," he said in a rough voice.

I snapped open my eyes and stared up at him. The blues of his eyes had

significantly darkened.

“Tell me no if you want me to stop,” he continued in that rough, sexy voice. “Because once I’m fully inside you, Sirena, you’ll be my new home forever. Your pussy will be mine now too. Not just Dante’s. We’ll both fuck you whenever we want. Do you understand?”

I said nothing as I stared back at him, the implications of his words all too real.

Instead, I lifted my head and met his lips.

That was my answer.

He pushed inside me. Stretching me. Making it ache.

I opened my mouth to cry out, but there was no sound as he bottomed out deep within my heat.

“Oh, baby,” he whispered, peppering kisses on my face and lips. “Oh, my heaven. You’re so fucking tight and perfect. Are you OK?”

I clung to him tighter, earning a soft groan from him.

“I can’t stop now,” he whispered in a shaky voice as he pulled out of me and pushed back in, making me shake beneath him. Ashes knew how to get deep. He made it hurt in the most delicious way.

“You belong to me.” He pulled out and burrowed back in, the fullness of each of his thrusts making me want to cry out his name and scratch my nails down his back.

“You’re not even taking all of me yet. Relax,” he cooed into my ear. “Let your legs fall to the sides and open that pretty pussy up for me. Let me bury myself deep into your soul, heaven. Forever.”

I did as he instructed, knowing it was going to hurt. Church liked to fuck me deep too. He brought a similar kind of pain with his pleasure. I hadn’t had Church inside me since the cemetery though. The thought of both of them burying themselves in me made me squirm with want.

Ashes pushed back into me so deep a soft cry left my lips.

“Oh, there you, go, baby. Fuck. That’s it. I’m going to do it again and you’re going to cry out for me.”

He pulled out and pushed back in.

The cry came without me forcing it.

It hurt.

But it felt so good too.

“Good girl.” He kept his pumps shallow, fucking me slowly. “You’re my good girl. I’ll go easy, OK?”

And he did.

He was gentle as he moved in and out of me, his kisses perfect and sweet, his hands cherishing every part of me they touched.

When I tightened around him, he pressed his lips to mine, his pace staying even before he stared down at me, so much love and adoration in his eyes it made my heart clench. This was a man who loved me with every bit of him there was.

“Come for me,” he whispered. “Come on my cock, heaven.”

God, he has such a dirty mouth...

I came hard, my chest heaving as I dug my nails into his back.

“There you go. Keep coming, baby. Keep coming for me.” He moved a little quicker, taking the tail end of one orgasm and weaving it into the next. “Do it again. Do it for me again.”

I came hard once more, amazed at the skill he had to know my body so well.

His lips crushed against mine as he ground his dick deep inside me, hitting that place that sent my senses wild and my pussy weeping.

“Fuck. You’re coming so much for me. Good girl. *Good fucking girl.* Fuck, Sirena. Fuck, baby. You’re going to make me come too. Is that what you want, pretty girl? To make me come inside this tight, hot pussy you’re making me sin for? Huh? You want me to paint your pussy white with my come?”

How one man’s words could send me over the cliff again, I’d never know, but I came at his dirty words, my body trembling and my head spinning.

“Oh, heaven. Fuck yeah, baby. There you go. There you go. Come on my cock just like that. Just like that, baby. Oh god. Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*” He came with a cry, both of us shaking in each other’s arms. His cock pulsated, filling me with every ounce he had.

Breathless, he rested his forehead against mine. My body was jello. I wasn’t sure I’d ever walk again.

“I love you,” he whispered. “So fucking much, Sirena. I want you to know that. I’m never letting you go. I will protect you forever. I swear it.”

Tiredly, I cradled his face, my emotions a jumbled mess, but one thing I knew was certain.

I loved him too.

CHURCH



Ashes had proclaimed the night his.

I watched him hold Sirena's hand while throwing shit into his barrel, the flames licking the night sky.

He was acting differently.

He was acting like he'd gotten laid, but it was more than that.

I frowned, jealousy over him fucking her engulfing me.

Apparently, I was a jealous prick, even when it came to one of my guys with her. I was trying to work on that, but it was a struggle.

Like now.

I was staring at the pair, watching Ashes pull her around the flames. He paused to kiss her deeply. Her small body molded easily against his when he wrapped both arms around her, their lips fused to one another's.

"She still loves you," Stitches said from beside me. "Just as much as always, you twisted fuck, so get out of your head on that."

I tore my focus from Ashes and Sirena and looked at my brother. The scar on the side of his face was dominant in the light from the fire. His dark eyes were downcast in some hidden sadness he didn't want to talk about.

He was hanging in there but only just.

"I know," I said, turning back to watch Ashes and Sirena continue to kiss. "She loves you too."

He shrugged.

"You know she does," I grumbled. "So stop keeping your distance from her. May as well join Ashes. He looks happy."

"Maybe she does. Maybe she doesn't. Life's weird." He took a hit from his joint and looked to the sky. He muttered something in Spanish I didn't

understand. It was rare he ever spoke the language, but it was just as much a part of who he was as the noose that had been around his neck weeks ago.

“They’re fucking,” I finally said.

“Of course they are. What does it matter? You fuck her.”

“I just didn’t expect it so soon. Figured we’d let her settle in.”

Stitches raised a brow at me. “Really?”

“Really.” I smacked him in the chest with the back of my hand. “I’m not as big of a fucking monster as you think I am.”

“No, you definitely are. You just know how to hide it.” The way he said that made me look at him.

“What’s going on with you? You’re not the same. You have me. . . concerned.”

“Do I?” he mumbled, and took another hit before blowing out the smoke. “I’m just saying we all wear masks. You know exactly who you are, Dante. Just like I know who I am.”

“Am I a monster?” I studied him.

His dark eyes glittered as he stared back at me. “We all are. It’s why we’re here.”

“But to specter. Do you believe me to be a monster to her?”

He licked his lips. “I believe we are who we are. Loving someone doesn’t change that. It simply means we’re worse than before because now there’s something to die for. To kill for.”

“I would kill for her,” I said softly. “I intend on it.”

“Me too,” he murmured. “Every single motherfucker who has wronged her will die.”

I said nothing else, opting to go back to watching her kiss Ashes. There wasn’t anything else to say. We both knew what was worth fighting for.

She was it.

We’d figure our own shit out later, and if that made us monsters, so be it.

†

I DROVE us back to the house after the fire, taking in specter nestled in Ashes’s arms in the backseat of my Bronco while she slept.

“Thanks for tonight,” Ashes called out. “I needed it after everything.”

Stitches grunted and stared out into the night from the passenger seat.

“I’m glad it helped,” I said, turning down another road to head back to Chapel Crest. The fact I was allowed a vehicle on campus spoke volumes about the status I held there.

Ashes dropped a kiss on the top of Sirena’s head.

“Did you fuck her?” I asked, catching his eye in the rearview mirror.

“Yes.” He held my eye contact. “That’s not a problem, right?”

“Right,” I muttered. I knew she was for all of us, but Stitches was right. We were who we were, and I was a jealous prick.

“You guys think Sin is OK?” Stitches called out, breaking the tension that had settled in.

Fucking Sin.

“I don’t know,” I grunted. “And after the shit he pulled, I really don’t give a fuck.”

“I don’t either,” Ashes’s voice was thick though.

“I care, but I think I’m more angry. It’s clouding my feelings,” Stitches murmured. “Shit was bad in the facility. Sirena. . . she. . .” His voice faltered.

“What?” I demanded, glancing over at him.

He simply sighed and shook his head before going silent.

I knew my brother well enough to know he wasn’t going to talk about shit, so I didn’t push it.

For now, I’d let it go, but at some point, he was going to have to talk, even if I was beating the words out of him.

I pulled back into Chapel Crest and got out. Stitches followed with Ashes bringing up the rear, a sleepy Sirena tucked under his arm as she stumbled along beside him.

When we got into the house, I watched Ashes led her to his bedroom.

“Asher,” I called out, my throat tight.

He paused for a moment before he said something into Sirena’s ear. He released her, and she continued to his room. When she was gone, he finally turned to me.

“She’s sleeping with me tonight,” he said firmly. “We had a good day today. I want it to extend through the night so tomorrow is good too.”

“You don’t get all her good days,” I snapped.

“No, but I get this one,” he replied. “I’m not above fighting you for her tonight, Dante.”

“You like her bad days best anyway,” Stitches commented ,flopping

down on the couch and grabbing the remote. “Let him take her tonight.”

I narrowed my eyes at Ashes and breathed out the best steady breath I could manage.

“She’s happy. Let her be,” Ashes said. “Please. I’m happy too, all things considered.”

I gave him a tight nod and backed away. The tension visibly left him, and he offered me that fucking gentle smile of his before leaving to go to his bedroom.

Sighing, I went to sit in my chair, watching in silence for a long time while Stitches cycled through channels.

“Are you ever going to tell me what happened in the med ward?” I asked, my attention on the TV.

“No.”

“Malachi—”

“Stop fucking asking me, Dante,” he snapped, throwing the remote onto the cushion and getting to his feet. “I said I’m not fucking interested in talking about it, OK? Shit was fucked up. I’m dealing with it, so just let it go.”

I rose to meet his stance. “I care. We’re brothers—”

“We are, but I’m just not ready, man. Please. I’m asking you as my brother to just stop, OK? I have a lot of shit I need to sort through in my head. It’s going to take me some time. Can I please have that?” He gave me a desperate look, his dark hair a mess from his fingers tugging at it.

“Ashes has been practically inseparable from Sirena,” I said softly. “You tried to kill yourself because you thought we were losing her, and now you won’t even look at her.” I fixed my gaze on him. “I’m more than a little concerned.”

He shook his head before looking away, a soft sigh leaving his mouth. “We both know it just means there’s more for you. Sin is gone. I’m . . . working things out. You just have Ashes to deal with. So deal with him and leave me alone.” He left the room without another word, and I let him.

I knew I needed to stop pushing him, but I was frustrated too. I wanted answers. It seemed like all I did lately was lurk in the background of all our problems. I hadn’t done shit to work things out when Specter and Stitches were locked away. Not when my father got involved. Not when Asylum did.

I was pissed. Confused. Angry. I was used to being in charge and handling shit. Lately, I’d been on the back burner just trying to fucking

survive.

I hated it.

Loathed it.

I reached over and turned the TV off and went upstairs where I showered and got ready for bed. Then I lay there for hours, lost in my thoughts and hating that my bed was cold because my specter wasn't in it.

Hating that I felt like a helpless piece of shit. That I felt weak. Worthless. Not in control.

I was always in fucking control. I was the leader. A boss. It was what I was bred for. I had the emotional, mental, and physical scars to prove it.

I ground my teeth together and glared at my ceiling, the shadow of a branch outside dancing against the dim moonlight shining through my window.

The clock read three in the morning.

The witching hour, so they said.

I couldn't handle it.

I was sick of hanging out on the back burner while shit happened around me. I needed to be in fucking charge.

Quietly, I crept into Ashes's room and stood at the edge of his bed and stared down at my specter in his arms, the moonlight cutting a sliver over their bodies.

I wasn't sure how long I stood there, taking in her beauty and the way his hand rested on the curve of her waist over her white nightgown. When she finally rolled away from him, my heart sped up, my cock aching to be buried inside her tight heat.

I had issues. It wasn't like I tried to deny who I was. Apologizing for being the creature I was wasn't something I wasted time doing, nor did I try to deny myself my wants, which was why I reached out and gently trailed my knuckles along her delicate jaw, watching as her chest moved in and out slowly.

Fuck, I wanted her.

Licking my lips, I reached into my pajama bottoms and gave my cock a tight stroke, my breath shuddering beneath the rolling desire rushing through my veins.

There was no way stroking my dick was going to soothe my pain.

I reached out and trailed my fingers lightly along her delicate flesh, allowing them to wander to her chest and skim across her breasts. She wore

the white nightgown I'd gotten her.

She looked like Sleeping Beauty to me. Absolutely perfect beneath the moonlight.

So vulnerable. So beautiful.

So fucking mine.

Fuck it.

I pushed my pajama bottoms down and slowly climbed onto the bed and ran my hands gently up her thighs, pushing the white material aside until her panties were visible. Gently, I slid them off before I ran my cock up her warm center.

She let out a soft breath when I pushed forward, and I held my breath. I was so fucking turned on. If there was one thing I loved, it was fucking her this way.

I shifted forward and breached her, my heart lurching with excitement as she parted her lips, her brows crinkling.

Slowly, I slid deep inside her body, bottoming out in her heat, and buried so deeply inside her I could fucking feel her soul connect to mine.

And the tightness of her pussy.

Fuck.

I pressed my lips to hers before I pulled out and pushed back in, relishing in how her body felt impaled by mine.

She shifted beneath me while I fucked her gently, her small body jostling beneath mine, my breathing heavy.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Ashes’s groggy voice called out.

“What the fuck does it look like?” I answered breathlessly, thrusting back into her.

“She’s out fucking cold, man. She took some meds before she went to sleep. Fucking stop.” Ashes sat up, his weight on the bed shifting.

“Not happening.” I slowed my pace and breathed out. “Do you have any fucking idea how she feels like this?”

“It’s wrong.”

“Then why does it feel so fucking good?” I countered, shoving into her harder. Her lashes fluttered and a soft moan escaped her, but she didn’t wake. “I fucking want her, so I’m taking her.”

“That’s not how this fucking works, Dante—”

I slowed my movements before going still and turned my head to look at him. His blue eyes wavered when they met mine.

Something flashed in the depths of his eyes that made me smile.

“Fuck her with me,” I said softly. “You know you want to.”

He blinked at me before looking over to her, his Adam’s apple bobbing. The want for her flashed across his face.

I shoved into her again. “You didn’t fuck her tonight. Not yet anyway. Take her with me, brother. You know you want to bury your cock in this pretty, pink pussy. Even sleeping, her pussy weeps for cock. You hear that?” I pulled out and pushed back into her, letting him hear the wet noises fucking her brought. “She wouldn’t tell me no awake, so I know she wouldn’t say no to me now. Not that it would fucking matter. She belongs to me, so I’ll fuck her whenever I want.” I thrust into her again, allowing my eyes to roll back at how her cunt hugged my cock in a tight embrace.

“It’s not right,” Ashes mumbled, but he slid closer, his eyes betraying his mouth.

“She fucks us both already. Would she tell us no?”

His brows crinkled. He looked from me to her face, his morality silently warring it out within him. I stilled, waiting for his decision.

Several silent beats passed before he leaned in and brushed his lips against hers, his body trembling.

“There you go,” I murmured, going back to sliding in and out of her. “Touch her.”

Tentatively, he reached out and cradled her face. I’d have rolled my eyes if I hadn’t been having the time of my life. I watched him kiss her again, this time deepening it.

I fucked her a little faster, the bed squeaking beneath us.

“Heaven, baby,” Ashes whispered. “Wake, my love. Please wake up. I want you to be awake for me.”

I let out a snarl and fucked her harder, irritated he was trying to wake her on me.

He continued to beg her softly as I jostled her body, racing to finish before she woke. I knew once she opened her eyes, I’d punish her for it. That was just how I was.

Frustrated, he looked back at me. I knew he was mad I was doing this, but he shouldn’t have pushed me out earlier. No one fucking pushed me away from what I wanted.

I grinned at him and railed into her so hard that a tiny whimper left her lips that had me going all sorts of crazy.

Ashes shifted, slowing me to a stop. He got up and moved her to a sitting position. I had to vacate her warm pussy and the irritation raced through my body while I watched him slide behind her and hold her back to his front, her small body positioned between his legs.

“Now you can,” he said gruffly. “I want to hold her since you won’t stop.”

That worked for me.

I reached out and unbuttoned the top of her nightgown and let her breasts spill out before I pushed back inside her, groaning softly as Ashes held her sleeping form.

“Fucking touch her,” I rasped. “Squeeze her tits for me.”

He hesitated for a moment before he reached his hands upward and cradled her breasts for me, his lips at her ear, whispering shit to her.

“I love you,” he said softly as her head lolled on his chest. “It’ll be over soon. It’s OK, heaven. I’m here, baby. Holding you. You’re safe. It’s OK. It’s just me and Dante.”

Her pussy tightened around my cock, and her body trembled for a moment before she came all over me, wetting everything from my groin to the sheets.

I loved the way she came. So hard and fast. So fucking wet.

I snapped my hips forward and let out a groan before I pulled out and blew my load all over her pussy, my head thrown back and her name on my lips.

With my chest heaving, I looked down at the mess I’d made before I reached out and rubbed it into her skin. She let out a final soft whimper as Ashes pressed a kiss to her temple again.

Carefully, I got off the bed and put my pajama bottoms back on, not nearly as sated as I wanted to be, but I was doing a hell of a lot better than I was. It would keep me sane for a few more hours.

“I don’t like that you did this,” Ashes said softly, her still in his arms.

“I don’t like that you didn’t.”

He sighed. “Man, what if she didn’t want it? She’s out cold—”

“Tell you what. I’ll tell her what I did in the morning. If she doesn’t like it, I’ll. . . stop.” The words felt hollow. *How the fuck could I ever stop doing it?* I loved it and her, but I knew if she said no I might let it go. Maybe. Probably.

Ashes surveyed me for a moment. “Promise me, Dante.”

It was my turn to sigh. “I promise.”

That seemed to ease his mind because he jostled her gently and laid her back onto the bed and got out. I watched him disappear into his bathroom before I turned back to my sleeping beauty.

I took her hand in mine and pressed a kiss to the top before I placed both her hands on her abdomen, making her look like my perfect, living dead girl. I adjusted her top before leaning in and kissing her forehead, then her lips.

“I love you,” I whispered, my throat tight. “Don’t make me stop, specter. Please.”

Ashes returned then with a wet washcloth in his hand. I watched as he cleaned her pussy off before shimmying her panties back up her legs and tucking her in. Carefully, he got back into bed beside her and rested his hand over hers.

My throat tightened again as I stared down at them.

“Join us,” Ashes finally whispered. “Sleep with us, Dante.”

I didn’t say shit. Instead, I climbed in beside my specter, resting my hand over Ashes’s and nuzzled against my girl.

Our girl.

Always.

ASYLUM



“Stop brooding,” I said to Sin as he walked beside me through campus, his head bowed and his body tense. All he did was mope. If I thought I was a sad fuck, it was nothing compared to him. I was almost feeling kind enough to put a pillow over his face while he slept and put him out of his fucking misery, but I also knew I had to hold off on something that drastic if I was going to put all the pieces back together again.

Making my puppets dance was one of my most favorite pastimes, and they had only started moving. But fuck, how frustrating.

“Fuck off,” Sin grunted, his hands shoved deep into his pockets. He hadn’t even bothered to properly tie his tie, opting to simply let it hang loosely around his neck. His hair was an unkempt mess in his stupid-ass bun atop his head. Dark circles rimmed his gray eyes, and a frown was carved deep onto his face.

I knew he was in pain. All he’d done was punish himself since his exile. The beatings he’d give himself were quite impressive, even I had to admit that. His agonized screams well into the night could keep the dead awake. The tears I wasn’t a huge fan of, but I knew what they meant, so they satisfied me just the same.

I snickered at his response to me.

“I prefer Mirage to you,” he continued. “When will you let him out again?”

We stopped beneath an oak tree, and I leaned against it, taking in the student body. The sheep and cattle, here for the slaughter. Or fucking. Or what-the-fuck-ever.

“Many do prefer him over me,” I said absently. “We don’t much care

about your preferences though. You're not really in a position to have them. As for when?" I shrugged.

He scoffed but didn't refute my words.

I continued my scan of the crowd. Before long, my focus settled on what I was searching for.

My forever girl.

My firefly.

She clung to Church's arm as he led her through the commons, Stitches on Church's left and Ashes next to Sirena, all moving like a well-oiled unit.

They've been fucking her.

You've fucked her.

I let out a soft huff of laughter which made Sin look at me with narrowed eyes. He was getting accustomed to our insanity.

I glanced to my left.

I did. You mad?

Yes.

I smirked. Of course Mirage was mad. He thought she was his first, but really, she was mine since I called dibs.

Childish, but effective.

Church was the first to notice us. His green eyes narrowed in our direction.

He'll come this way. I know he will. . . He can't resist.

I grinned when they made their way over.

I was always right. What a fucking gift.

Or curse.

I rolled my eyes at the familiar voice inside my head and looked over to see Sin had straightened and was fidgeting with his tie as the watchers made their way over to us.

When they reached us, it was plain to see that my sweet forever girl was trembling as she dug her nails into Church's arm, her gaze darting from Sin. Church pushed her behind him, shielding her from us.

That pissed me off.

I'd anticipated it though.

I unclenched my jaw and plastered a smile on my face.

"Dante. Malachi. Asher. Good morning." I broadened my smile at them as they glared back. I didn't let it deter me. "And my sweet firefly. How are you?"

I watched her duck her head. Judging by the way Church's shirt moved, she'd twisted her fingers into it and was now using him as her shield.

Disappointment surged through me. I thought we'd mended all those fucking fences, but I guessed I was wrong.

"I see you survived." Church focused his attention on Sin. "How. . . *unfortunate.*"

"Sorry to disappoint," Sin muttered.

"So you two are friends now?" Church's voice came out in a harsh bark, his green eyes narrowed at Sin. "*Pathetic.*"

Sin said nothing, which didn't surprise me.

I raised my brows at Church. "I beg to disagree, Dante. I think I'm a rather fun guy, voices aside and all that."

"You're a whack job," Ashes said.

I shrugged. "Sometimes. That's neither here nor there. I just don't think name-calling is the way to start out the morning. Let's begin again. Good morning, Dante. Asher. Malachi. And. . . *Sirena.*"

I expected to *hear* her, but there was only silence.

That pissed me off. We didn't fuck just for her to recoil and ignore my existence. I ground my teeth and stepped forward.

"Sirena," I called out again.

"Don't fucking talk to her," Church said, closing the distance between us. "She's made her choice."

I snapped my attention to him.

"Oh, Dante, precious little *sladkiy d'yavol.*"

He tensed at my words, his green eyes flashing. "What did you call me?"

I cocked my head at him, *listening* all around me.

"*Sladkiy d'yavol.*" I let my head fall back and breathed in. "*Sweet devil. Kak ad blagoslovil menya.*"

I knew he was going to hit me before he'd even made his mind up to do it. The impact of his fist into my face made me stumble back, laughter erupting from me as the blood dripped down my face.

I licked my lips, tasting the crimson life-force on my tongue, and smiled at him.

"I do so love a red breakfast. But so do you. You remember breakfast, right, *Sladkiy d'yavol?*" I said softly. I spit a mouthful of blood at his feet as he visibly shook. "Wicked as your father. Broken as your mother. Lover. Monster. Brother. Be careful with your next move. He is watching." I backed

away from him, taking in the way his green eyes tracked my every move. Dante Church was a predator through and through. He came by it naturally though. He was his father's son, after all. I expected nothing less of him.

Monsters beget monsters in this world.

They also got pretty little fireflies.

"Come, Sin," I murmured, backing away. "Let's let Dante think about what I said."

Sin glanced at Church, a pained expression on his face, before he backed away. His focus moved to my firefly clinging to Church. She twisted her fingers tighter into Church's shirt, her head down.

Sin turned a moment later and joined me.

"She will come to you soon to end your punishment. I don't know why you worry so much," I said. "It's not an attractive quality."

"I wouldn't talk so much after getting punched in the face," Sin muttered. "Unless you want to get punched again."

"You won't hit me. You need me, bestie."

"Fuck off," he grumbled.

He didn't deny it though, and that was how I knew I was right.

Again.

SIN



I stared out at the lake, Asylum's words repeating in my head.
She will come to you soon.

While odd and completely off his rocker, I hadn't ever known Asylum to be wrong. With the knowledge of her coming to me, my heart clenched, the pain very fucking real as I tried to keep my emotions at bay.

I didn't know what any of it meant, just that I was hurting. Sure, my flesh was destroyed, but it was the emotional and mental shit that was taking its toll on me. I was drowning in it.

The waves crashed against the rock I sat perched on, the air chilly. Before long, the lake would freeze, and it would be nothing but white for miles. I shivered and pulled my jacket tighter around my body, wincing at the pain it brought all the cuts and wounds on my skin.

In some places, I probably needed a doctor, but fuck it. Maybe it would kill me finally.

Sighing, I stood from the rock and turned just as Church darted along the edge of the woods on one of his runs. He must have seen me because he slowed to a stop and turned his attention to me.

I swallowed hard and stared back at him.

I missed him and the guys so much that it was tearing me apart inside. The loss was all-consuming.

And her.

Siren.

She haunted my nightmares. My dreams. Everything. There wasn't a place I could go where I could escape her because she was constantly on my mind. Even here at the lake, all I could think about was her. How she'd

suffered because of me. How I'd betrayed her when she'd needed me. How fucking soft and sweet her lips were against mine as I'd kissed her for the last time.

How broken I was because of it.

That wasn't true though. I wasn't broken because of it. I was broken because I was a fuck-up. That was all on me. Even when I tried to do something right, I was wrong.

I parted my lips as I stared at Church. His tight, black running gear graced his body, his blond hair a mess from rushing through the forest. He took a step toward me.

"Why are you here?" he asked, his green eyes narrowed at me. His silver nose ring glinted against the setting sun.

"Because I didn't die."

There was no humor on his face. "Shouldn't you be punishing yourself for being a worthless piece of shit?"

I let out a breath. "Trust me, brother, I am being punished."

"Don't fucking call me that," he snarled, getting in my face. "You are no brother to me any more than fucking Danny Linley is. Imagine my disgust to find you still breathing after the shit you pulled. You're lucky I'm not my father, Sinclair—"

"Am I? At least he'd have been merciful enough to grant me my death and consume me after so there wasn't a trace left of me in the world. Not you though. You specialize in the long game of torture. I don't blame you though," my voice shook. "I deserve all the pain and more. I'm trying, Dante." I pushed my jacket off and lifted my shirt to show him my wounds.

He stared at them, a muscle thrumming along his jaw.

"Tell me when it's enough," I whispered, wincing at the cold bite against my cuts. Some still bled they were so deep from the whip and knives.

"It will never be enough," he said back, his voice low. "Your cuts aren't deep enough. Carve out your fucking wicked, blackened soul then come see me. Until then." He reached into his pants and pulled out a knife and pushed it against my palm. "Use this. It knows how to properly carve flesh."

I stared down at the blade he'd given me and swallowed. It was the one his father had given him to cut things with. Horrible things. Things that brought him to Chapel Crest. Things that twisted him into the monster he was today.

"Consider it a parting gift." He backed away from me.

“Is she OK? Siren?” I choked out, stumbling toward him. “Is Stitches?”

“They aren’t your concern anymore, Sinclair, so don’t worry about it. I have it handled.” He didn’t wait for me. He turned and ran back into the woods like the black spectral shadow he was, disappearing from my sight as I stood rooted to my spot, my eyes burning with unshed tears.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered into the gentle, cool breeze. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

†

THE PAIN WAS IMMENSE, but I continued to push Church’s blade into my flesh, cutting as deeply as I could. I’d been at it for an hour. I’d passed out once from the pain, but got back up and continued my work.

With my chest heaving and the blood running in rivulets down my chest and stomach, I stared at what I’d done to myself.

Siren.

Carved deep across my chest.

Her name forever embedded into my body so I wouldn’t forget my sins. So I wouldn’t forget her.

The pain was otherworldly, burning through every fiber in my body. I gripped the edge of the sink in the bathroom before I vomited into it, my hair a damp, sweaty mess. When I was done, I washed it down and rinsed out my mouth, the blood still running down my body and dripping onto the ugly, pale-green tiles.

The room tilted, the dizziness gripping me.

I pushed through it, grabbed fistfuls of my hair, and began hacking it off in uneven chunks until I was sporting a shorter, shaggier style that looked like I’d just had a prom-night breakdown.

The room tilted again. This time, I didn’t try to hang on. Instead, I toppled to the floor, my head smacking hard against the tiles.

I cried out, my vision dotted with stars before I was able to roll over onto my back and stare up at the buzzing overhead fluorescent light.

I watched as it flickered, the room spinning around me.

Or maybe I was spinning.

The blood continued to leave my body as the darkness teased the edges of

my vision. I breathed in and out, praying that each one would be the last.

A face appeared over me. He cocked his head to the right, his brows crinkled, his blue eyes flashing. I didn't see him often these days.

"Mirage," I rasped softly.

"What have you done?" he whispered, going to his knees at my side.

"Please. Finish me," I managed to choke out. "I want to die. Let me. Kill me. Tell them I did this. P-please."

"Now isn't the time," he murmured, placing a hand towel over my chest and applying pressure. "You self-sabotaging prick. You're running in the wrong fucking direction."

A tear leaked out of the corner of my eye.

"I n-never could find death," I said, my voice hoarse. "It's found everyone else and has forgotten me. Perhaps I'm not even worthy of it."

Mirage pushed a button on his phone while giving me a look I couldn't read.

"There's been an accident in my room. Yes. Room 444. My roommate cut himself. No. Yes. Of course." He stuffed his phone back into his pocket and stared down at me.

I shivered, the room growing darker by the second. "Please. Kill me."

"You won't die today, Sinclair. No amount of begging will make it happen," he said softly. "We won't let you."

"Why?" I whimpered, my vision blurry from the tears and blood loss.

"Because Death doesn't want you."

I let out a soft sob. "Why?"

"Because," he murmured, the darkness beginning to overpower the light. "Death is nothing compared to wrath, and you, my friend, will bring it in spades. We've seen it. Now close your eyes. When you wake, you'll learn."

I breathed out a shuddering breath, not sure if I'd even heard him correctly. Weakly, I wrapped my hand around his wrist, feeling the rough scars beneath my fingertips.

"Does she know?" I mumbled.

"Of course she does," he called out as my eyes shuttered closed. "And she knows we're coming for her to bring her home."

Good. I wanted that. I wanted her home.

Wherever the fuck that was.

SIRENA



“So I set his car on fire.” Cady grinned at me, her eyes sparkling. “He was pissing me off, Rina. Seriously. Shit was bad. I knew I needed to get here to take care of you, so I did what I had to do. Mom is pissed.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s whatever though. She has her head so far up Jerry’s ass I can’t tell where he ends, and she begins. Dad would be livid.”

I swallowed at her mentioning our father.

He hadn’t cared in years, so what did it even matter at this point?

“Jerry was in the car when I did it,” she added. “That part is important. I wouldn’t have been able to get in here if he wasn’t. Had to make it look legit.”

I stared at her. She was an enigma. And braver than I could ever be.

She took a bite of her ham sandwich and chewed it. I watched her, fascinated. She hated ham, but she always ate it. It made little sense to me.

“I wanted him to die.” She swallowed. “But you know how shit goes, right? Never in our favor. I gave him a good scare though. Pretty sure he pissed his pants.” She grinned at me and polished off her sandwich. “So. These watchers. What’s that like?”

I continued to study her as we sat on the couch in the watchers’ house. Well, my house too now since Dante had decided I was to stay. I was still uncomfortable being here. It wasn’t that I felt unwelcome. Quite the opposite. The guys were incredibly accommodating. Seeing Stitches was a rarity though, which was beginning to bother me. I wanted to see him. Be alone with him. Whenever there was an opportunity, he darted away like his heels were on fire.

It worried me.

I thought everything was OK after leaving the facility, but he avoided me like the plague. I also didn't have my own room, which I was desperate for. I liked my solitude sometimes, and I wanted to paint. For now, I just slept in Church's room in bed with him. Sometimes I was allowed to go with Ashes to his room, but it was a rarity as well.

"I've never been with more than one guy at a time," she continued. She cocked her head thoughtfully. "Well, there was this one time at Holly Randall's. Remember Holly? Cheerleader. Bitch who stole my boyfriend from me last year? Anyway, me and Jason were hot and heavy and Darren. . . remember Darren?"

I blinked at her. I vaguely remembered him. My time in school wasn't spent paying attention to many people. They were never kind to me. I was the weirdo everyone whispered about. I hadn't liked it, but then again, who would? It wasn't that I focused on my feelings over it really. It was because it caused Cady to lash out and fight more than she should. I always felt guilty over it. At some point, I had to figure out a way to repay her for all the ass-kickings she gave to people over the years on my behalf.

"I'm taking that as a yes," she said. "So. Darren came into the room when Jason and I were getting busy. He watched." She waggled her brows at me. "He was so cute too. I wished he'd have joined or that I'd had the lady balls to invite him."

She let out a sigh, a dreamy look on her face like she was reliving the moment. Finally, she looked at me, her eyes sparkling.

"So. What's it like?"

"You ever get a birthday party where there are a bunch of different desserts and you have room to eat them all? And they're the best sweets you've ever had?" Ashes came in and sat next to me on the couch and dragged me into his arms. The smell of his cologne mixed with smoke clouded my senses when I snuggled into his hold.

"It's like that," he finished. "Or I assume it is."

"So you think you're a delicious dessert?" She raised her brows at him. "If you were cake, Asher, what flavor would you be?"

"I'd like to think I'm chocolate," he said, kissing the top of my head. "With whipped chocolate frosting and chocolate sprinkles. And probably a layer of whipped chocolate between the layers. Or something fruity since I'm here. Maybe like a cherry or something."

Cady chuckled and shook her head at him.

I went up and kissed his cheek, making him grin down at me.

“What kind of cake would you be?” he asked her.

She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t know. I’m more of a pie person.”

Ashes rolled his eyes. “Fine. What pie flavor are you then?”

“Razzleberry.”

“What the fuck is a razzleberry?” Church came into the room and motioned for her to move away from me so he could sit on my other side. She rolled her eyes at him and slid over to another leather cushion. He immediately put my feet on his lap and began rubbing them. The move made me smile inside. Church was sweet when he wanted to be. He’d told me about fucking me while I was under my meds. I knew he’d done it because I’d awoken all sore down there. While it frightened me that I could sleep through it on my meds, I trusted Church to take care of me when he did it. I didn’t hate it, even though every moral part of my body screamed at me that I should.

He looked relieved when I’d kissed him gently and squeezed his hand after telling me.

“It’s blackberries, raspberries, and blueberries,” Cady said. “It’s crazy.”

“Makes sense since you’re a crazy bitch,” Church muttered.

I frowned. He noticed because he brought my foot to his mouth and kissed the top as a means to apologize to me for saying that about Cady. Of course, he didn’t offer her an apology.

“It’s fine, Rina. I am crazy.” Cady grinned at me, knowing me well. “He doesn’t offend me like he thinks he does.”

“Guess I’ll try harder,” Church said.

“By all means.” She opened her arms wide, inviting his insults.

He smirked and said nothing, which offered me some comfort.

“What flavor cake are you?” Cady prompted, staring at Church.

“I’m not cake.”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on. Don’t be a shit. Play the damn game. You’re vanilla, aren’t you?” She gave him a look that clearly meant she was teasing him.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “The last fucking thing I am is vanilla, Claws.”

“So then, like, French vanilla?” she pressed.

He scoffed. “Red velvet.”

“Why?”

“Easy. It’s the color of blood.”

She wrinkled her nose at his remark. I focused on him, wondering if he was serious. I knew how dark he was though, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he was sincere.

“That’s right. Rumor has it you’re out in the woods like a barbarian carving up the forest critters.”

He said nothing while he rubbed my feet, his focus on the task. Ashes tilted my head so he could kiss me again. He’d been silent the entire time, holding me tightly.

“Is it true? Do you cut up animals in the woods?” Cady sat forward.

“Yes.”

“What do you do with them once you kill them?”

“Eat them. Stuff them. Sometimes I just do it to watch them die. Something about seeing the last breath leave a body does something to me.” He turned his focus directly on her, his words hollow and without emotion.

I shivered against Ashes who was quick to give me a gentle squeeze. Church’s words frightened me.

“Cold, heaven?” Ashes murmured.

I nodded, and he shifted to grab a throw blanket and drape it over me. Church continued rubbing my feet, nothing about his words seeming to bother him.

“That’s fucked up.” Cady sat back in her seat. “You’re a real weirdo.”

“Look at the pot calling the kettle black,” Church shot back.

“What?” She scoffed. “I’m not the one running around gutting the wildlife, *Dante*.”

“No. Just setting cars on fire with people inside.”

“He had it coming,” she said, giving him an indignant look. “Plus, it got me here with Rina. I regret nothing.”

“Maybe you and Ashes should team up since you like fire,” Church continued. “He could teach you a thing or two.”

I looked from Church to Cady who nodded.

“We go out on Fridays,” Ashes said. “For me to set fires. If you want to come, you can.”

She shrugged. “Maybe. If it’s the best thing to do here on a Friday night then I might be interested. Will we set houses on fire? Or people?”

“Barrels,” Ashes said. I could hear the smile in his voice. He’d been kind to Cady. I liked that he was. It made me happy to know he was trying. She

and Church tore at each other like they were siblings who couldn't stand one another.

"Lame." Cady sighed.

"It is. I'd much rather set houses on fire, but I'm trying to quit," Ashes said. "Same with people."

Cady snorted at that and got to her feet. "Well, I have to go. Rina, I brought a nail kit with me. I think we should paint our nails. I'll do yours and you do mine." There was a hopeful note in her voice. When we were kids, we'd paint each other's nails while gabbing about school and our friends. That was before everything went to hell and Asylum tried to kill me. Cady continued to do my nails while I sat mute staring at a wall.

"Rina?" she called out, her voice hesitant. "Do you think we could?"

I swallowed, wanting to tell her yes.

Nod your damn head. Do something.

"It's OK to communicate with me," she said softly, a note of pleading in her voice.

"She'll be there," Ashes confirmed, his voice gentle. "I'll make sure of it."

Cady let out a sad sigh and nodded before coming to me. I sat forward as she hugged me.

"I love you," she murmured, giving me a squeeze. Tentatively, I reached out and hugged her back. She relaxed in my arms, a contented sigh on her lips.

"We're getting there," she whispered. "I know we are. We'll be shit-talking about these assholes in no time, huh?" She pulled away and looked at Church. "Spoiler, you're one of the assholes."

"Fuck off," he said without missing a beat.

"Thanks for the advice. I think I'll do it with Jonathan Wise. I heard he's hung like a horse and has OCD. Rumor has it, he has to do things over and over. Figured that might translate into some hot sex." She grinned at Church who rolled his eyes at her.

"He's an asshole," Church called out as she gathered her things to leave.

"So are you and my sister still loves you, chipmunk murderer." She left, the door clicking closed behind her.

Church looked at me. "I've never killed a chipmunk. They're rather quick."

Ashes let out a soft laugh.

A wicked little smile cut Church's lips upward as he drank me in.

"You should come hunting with me, Specter. Imagine taking a life. I think it could help you. It helps me. It's free therapy."

I swallowed hard at his words. The last thing I wanted to do was harm a sweet little forest animal.

"She's too sweet for all that," Ashes said, hauling me onto his lap. I cuddled into him, my eyes on Church. He licked his lips, that dark look he wore so well on his face. Before he could push the subject, his phone rang.

He tore his focus from me and answered it.

"Hey, where are you? Yeah? That's stupid. No, we're just hanging at the house. Yeah. Yeah. No. Fuck no. Fuck him. OK. Bye." Church hung up and looked to us. "Stitches is on his way back from therapy. He sounds like he's upset over some shit Vice Headmaster Dickweed did."

"What did he do?" Ashes asked.

"Don't know. Guess we'll find out when he gets here."

I hadn't seen Vice Headmaster Atkins around much. I'd catch glimpses of him here and there though, but he always seemed to be in a hurry. A few days ago, I'd seen him break up a fight between Mason Langston and Demi Crank while the guy who wore the rabbit mask circled the fiasco. There was something about rabbit-mask guy, though, that intrigued me. It hadn't been the fight. It had been him. I saw him on campus a lot. Most of the time he was simply lurking in the background somewhere and lately, it had been near me.

I had no idea what his name even was. He was built though. I wondered if he worked out with his rabbit mask on. The idea made me let out a little titter. In my mind, his rabbit ears were floppy and kept falling in his face as he lifted weights.

"What's this?" Church asked, shifting so he was closer to me. He thumbed my bottom lip. "A smile? A little laugh?"

I bit my bottom lip as Ashes gave me a gentle squeeze.

"What are you thinking about?" Ashes murmured in my ear. His warm breath blowing gently across my skin made me shiver.

I said nothing, my heart thrumming along. Church leaned in and brushed his lips along my jaw.

"Tell us." Church's soft lips trailed up to my other ear.

My angel and my demon on my shoulders, urging me to divulge in things I knew should be kept silent.

Church's hand moved slowly up my thigh and beneath my skirt while Ashes peppered gentle kisses along my jaw.

My breath hitched when Church's lips moved to my neck where he nipped and sucked against the sensitive flesh.

I twisted my fingers in the black shirt Church wore, my breathing ragged. Ashes cradled one of my breasts, kneading it gently as he continued to kiss along my flesh. Church's fingers teased the edge of my panties before he worked his way beneath the fabric and rubbed against my clit, making me let out a hiss of air.

"You like when Church plays with your pussy, baby?" Ashes husked out, turning my head so he could kiss me.

I parted my lips, allowing him to deepen the kiss. It was my answer to his question.

"Spread your legs wider for him," Ashes whispered between kisses. "Open up so he can make you come, heaven."

My heart banged a quick rhythm as I did as he said, letting my legs fall as open as I could get them. Ashes hefted me quickly, my back to his chest, causing Church to let out a frustrated growl. Carefully, Ashes put his knees between my legs and kept me spread wide open. Church wasted no time getting to his knees between my legs and dragging my panties down. In moments, he was diving beneath my skirt, his mouth on my pussy, eating me while I squirmed and writhed in Ashes's hold.

"There you go, baby. Show Dante how much you like him eating your pussy." Ashes's lips were at my ear, whispering all sorts of dirty things into it. "You feel his tongue on your clit? Feels good, doesn't it? Show him how much you like it."

I thrust my hips upward to meet Church's mouth as he ate me out. He was taking his time, teasing me, making me feel like a pile of snakes were writhing in my guts.

"Tell him, baby. Tell him how much you want to come into his mouth. On his tongue. Tell him you want him to taste you on his lips for the rest of the day, so he knows your pussy belongs to him." Ashes slowly unbuttoned my shirt while he continued murmuring in my ear, each button popping open making me squirm more.

With my blouse open, Ashes pushed the cups of my bra down and cradled my breasts, taking care to roll my stiff nipples between his index fingers and thumbs all while continuing to whisper to me.

“I can hear how wet you are when he fucks your pussy with his finger,” he murmured, his erection poking me in the back. “I love the way your pussy sounds when you’re turned on. Can you tell me what you want? More tongue? Fingers? Cock?”

My breathing hitched up a notch at his words. *God, I wanted it all.* I twisted my fingers in Church’s blond hair and tried to drag him closer to my pussy, but he laughed softly and put the brakes on, making me let out a pitiful huff of frustrated air.

“You have to tell me what you want,” Ashes said in a soft voice. “Tell me, baby, and we will make it happen. Anything you want.”

I wiggled a little in my seat, trying to jut my hips up to Church’s mouth, but he pulled away, his warm breath teasing my bare pussy.

Internally, I huffed and whined, desperate for my release.

“Tell me,” Ashes urged, his breathing heavy. “Please, baby. I need you to tell me.” He held his hand out to me, palm up.

I hesitated for a moment before I reached out and scrawled clumsy letters across his hand.

All.

Ashes laughed softly at my response. Church stared at him from between my legs, waiting for the answer.

“She’s greedy,” Ashes said, chuckling. “She wants all of it. Tongue. Fingers. Cock.”

“Then what do you say we give it to her?” Church’s green eyes flashed with that darkness I was becoming accustomed to.

Ashes smirked, turning my face to his and kissing me deeply. I let it happen, my insides feeling like they were fit to explode with excitement. Church tugged me away from Ashes and brought me to my feet. I stared up at him, wondering what he had in mind. As terrifying as it was, it was also exhilarating.

The night with them in the cemetery flashed through my mind.

“Follow,” Church murmured, leading me to the kitchen table. When we got there, he pushed my chest down over it.

I breathed heavier as he ran his fingers up my slit, my backside exposed to him from beneath the short Chapel Crest uniform skirt.

Then he dove in, eating me from behind.

A sharp gasp left my lips when his tongue infiltrated my senses, making my eyes roll back in my head.

Ashes threaded his fingers through my hair, tugging my head back so I could look at him. Church worked me over until I was nearly exploding. A soft whimper left me when Church pulled away, once again denying me my release.

“Oh, what’s wrong?” Church cooed, giving my ass a slap. I jerked on impact, my guts clenching. “Does our good girl want to come?”

I ground my teeth, frustration rushing through every fiber of my being.

Church bent so he was face to face with me.

“Specter, if you want to come, you’re going to have to tell me you do. *Beg me.*”

He was playing dirty and knew it. I swallowed thickly and wiggled my ass. Ashes let out a soft laugh and released my hair before he moved behind me and teased my pussy with his fingers.

“All you have to do is say please,” Church continued as Ashes pushed a finger into my heat.

Church looked at what Ashes was doing and smiled before looking back at me.

“It’ll be a long night if you don’t tell us you want to come, pretty girl.”

I breathed out, knowing he was right. I couldn’t help but wonder which of us would crack first though.

Me or them.

CHURCH



*W*e'd spent the evening teasing Sirena's pussy, listening as she let out those nearly inaudible pitiful whimpers each time we denied her. It was a twisted game, and I knew she deserved to come, but watching her squirm and pant for us was such a turn on I was having a hard time giving in to her.

I liked eating pussy anyway. At least I liked eating *her* pussy. The way she tangled her fingers in my hair and juttied her hips up to my mouth drove me mad.

I wanted her to beg me with more than her little whimpers, sexy as fuck hip thrusts, and that sopping wet pussy of hers. In my mind, I'd put a time limit on it. Eventually, we'd give her what she wanted, but we had to try. I was desperate to hear her voice. Hear her say my name. Beg me to give her my cock and end her torment.

With my dick in hand, I stroked myself, watching while Ashes ate her pussy for the second time, her back arched off the couch since we'd moved her back there an hour ago after feasting on her pussy on the table.

Carefully, I straddled her chest and tapped my cock against her lips. She parted easily for me, and I slipped inside her warm mouth, groaning as I did because there was something really fucking magical about being inside any part of her body.

Twisting my fingers in her hair, I fucked into her mouth, groaning with each thrust. She gagged on me, and I pulled out to let her cough before pushing back inside. There was something about her choking on my dick that just fanned the flames already burning strong.

I wanted to come just as much as I knew she did, but I told myself I'd

hold back. Even though I was great at being focused, this was killing me to do. The urge to just say fuck it was riding strong with me.

Removing my dick from her mouth, I got up and turned to see what Ashes was up to. The thing about Ashes was how good he was at taking things slow. It fascinated me how calm and patient he could be. Although, looking at him now as he denied her another release, I could see the want in his eyes beginning to overpower his control.

“Specter, are you ready to come?” I asked, looking down at her face. Tears of frustration threatened the edge of her lashes as she stared back at me. “You know what you have to do if you want it.”

We’d been over this for what felt like a million times and still, she didn’t speak. It was beyond frustrating. I wanted to hear her voice so badly it was making me focus just a little harder, but I had limits too. She was definitely testing them.

She sat up, all her long, black hair tumbling around her in wild waves, her colorful eyes still glistening.

She looked to Ashes who gave her his gentle smile.

“It’s not me you have to convince, baby, it’s Dante,” he said.

Her large, luminous eyes fixed on me.

“You have to tell me you want it,” I said, moving away from her. “Then I’ll give it to you.”

Slowly, she rose from her seat and approached me. My guts clenched, anticipation cording through my body. I had no idea what she was going to do or say, if anything. In one quick movement, her mouth was on mine, claiming my lips in a fierce kiss. While surprising, it absolutely cracked my resolve.

I was putty in her hands as she worked me back over to the couch, my dick in her hand, stroking me.

With a shove from her, I landed on my ass on the couch. She wasted no time taking control and straddling me. I let her, impressed with this sudden turn of events.

And then she sank down onto my cock, her pupils blown wide and her lips parted. Her tits bounced as she rode me, taking over control.

I stared in wonder at her as she took what she wanted, too stunned really to do much of anything but let her. Ashes sank beside me and watched, stroking his cock in the process.

“Fuck,” I hissed out as she moved faster, my hands on her hips.

Her breathing picked up, letting me know she was close. I made to lift her off me just to see if she'd let me, but she surprised me again by taking my hands and pinning them above my head. I could have broken her hold easily, but something about her move made me accept my fate.

She threw back her head as her pussy clenched around my cock, her release rushing from her like a river.

"Oh fuck," I cried out, my orgasm teasing me as she milked my shaft, her hips working me over in a way that made my damn eyes roll back in my head.

Seeing her come was fucking paradise.

She slowed her movements when she came down from her release, making my brows crinkle.

Then she rose to her feet, leaving me wanting.

I stared in disbelief at her when she winked at me over her shoulder and left the room, her glorious hips swaying.

Ashes and I were both silent, sitting together with our dicks in our hands.

"I don't think she's coming back," he said, humor in his voice, but devastation and surprise laced in with it.

"What the fuck just happened?" I looked over at him.

He grinned at me. "She bested us, brother. How fucking perfect is she?"

I shook my head. "Are we just going to let it happen?"

"Pretty sure it already has. Let's give her this victory."

I let out a sigh and stroked my dick. "For now. We can make her pay later. I'm thinking anal. I want to fuck her tight little ass."

Ashes gave me a knowing smile. "Me too."

"Well, then. I think we have wild plans for a night in the future, don't you think?"

He said nothing, but it was the fire dancing in his eyes that let me know we were on the same page.

STITCHES



“*H*ow does that make you feel?” Janice, my therapist asked, looking at me from over her glasses.

“Bit cliché,” I muttered, sliding down in my seat in irritation. I rubbed my hands up and down my thighs, eager to just get the hell out of there. The fact they didn’t put a damn clock in these rooms caused me copious amounts of frustration. I felt like I’d been in there for the hour I was assigned. Hell, I felt like I’d been locked in there for an eternity.

“Malachi, I’m here to help you. To listen. To treat. I can’t do those things if you remain closed off.”

“I’m not closed off. There’s not shit you can do for me unless you unlock that damn door and let me leave.”

“You are mandated this hour to discuss your feelings—”

“I’m feeling pissed off,” I shouted at her, losing my cool. I fisted my hair, my chest heaving. “I want to leave. I don’t want to fucking talk. I want to go home, take my fucking meds, and then take a nap. Can I do that?”

She let out a sigh and sat back in her chair. “You know you’re hurting inside. If we don’t get to the root of it and make a connection, we can’t get you better—”

“You want me to get better? Then let me fucking go home. This place isn’t going to help me.”

“There are other options. We can admit you back into the facility. Headmaster Sully has been making strides in the treatment of many mental health issues.”

I glared at her.

“I’ll die before I go back in there,” I snarled. “Don’t even fucking

threaten me with it. I won't go back."

"I understand you're angry—"

"Either you're absolutely clueless about what happens in the facility or you're in on it. Whichever it is, fucks us both."

"Nothing but treatment happens in the facility," she said gently. "It's not uncommon to see stress worsen mental health. Too much stress is never good for our bodies. I'm going to write you a new prescription for your anxiety."

"I don't have anxiety."

"You do, Malachi. When you start accepting you have issues, we can begin to see the light at the end of a very dark tunnel." She typed into her laptop for a moment before looking up and smiling at me. "All set. Stop at the front desk on your way out and pick it up. I want you to take it twice a day. It's going to help you sleep."

"What is it?" Sleeping was always a good thing.

"It's a new experimental drug that's showing a lot of promise—"

"Fine. I'll take it."

She smiled at me. "Perfect. We can call today a success. I'll see you next week. Same time. Start taking the medicine as soon as you get it, OK? We should start to see some changes by next week.

"Whatever." I pushed out of my seat and left the room without looking back. The therapy at this place was a fucking joke. On my way out, I stopped at the desk, grabbed the meds that were waiting for me, and left.

Instead of going home, I pulled my leather jacket tighter around my body and walked toward the lake.

The cool air felt good on my skin after the shit show I just broke free from. I needed to feel the relief. Being locked in a fucking room with someone who wouldn't stop talking had been wearing heavily on me. I'd like to think it was just something with me hating authority, but deep down I knew it was the lock on the door.

I hated feeling trapped.

It reminded me of the shit I couldn't get out of my head. The way it felt for the hands to be on my body. The mouths. Lips. Tongues. Other. . . things.

I shook my head.

I didn't even know if it was real. With no idea if it was all a hallucination in the facility or not, all I could do was torment myself with the knowledge that at least in my mind it had happened. It had been real.

And I knew for a fact angel had suffered it.

I bent down and threw a rock into the lake, the pain I felt in my chest at her hurting, building within me. All I wanted to do was hold her, but the guilt was keeping me from going to her. For a guy who said he'd protect her, I was a big failure.

Now that the dust had settled, here I was, a piece of shit.

I sank to my ass on the beach and watched the waves lap at the shore until the sun set, the sky deepening to shades of pink and purple. Lying back, I stared up at the incoming night sky, the wind chilly against my skin and the gentle sound of lapping waves filling my ears.

It did nothing to quell the turmoil twisting inside me.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the pills and stared at them as I held them above my face.

I hated taking meds but fuck it. I needed relief.

Quickly, I uncapped the bottle and let one of the tiny white pills fall into my hand. After closing the bottle, I popped the small pill into my mouth and swallowed it dry, waiting and praying that relief would come.

A breath left me. Another. Deeper. Deeper. I felt like I was falling fast, my heart racing. My eyelids fluttered.

And then. . . calm.

I blinked up at the stars in confusion.

I had to have fallen asleep. Or passed out.

My body felt heavy, my tongue fuzzy, and my head foggy.

I breathed out. In. Out.

My thoughts were muddled.

Why was I even upset?

I had no idea, even though I felt it lurking in the deep recesses of my mind.

But fuck it.

I liked this small bit of relief.

Sitting up, I looked around. It was definitely night, and I must've really passed the fuck out. For how long, I didn't know.

When my phone buzzed in my pocket, I pulled it out and stared down at Ashes's name.

“Lo?” I mumbled into the phone.

Fuck, my tongue felt heavy and thick.

“Where are you? It's almost ten, and Dante is losing his shit because you haven't answered all night. He went out to look for you and couldn't find

you. What's going on?"

"I don't know," I said, my words slightly slurred. "I guess I'm at the beach and fell asleep."

"Get home, man. Do you need me to come down there and walk with you back? You sound. . . weird."

"No. I'm good. I think. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"OK." The anxiousness in Ashes's voice made my chest twinge the smallest amount, but the rest of me just kept rolling with it.

I disconnected the call and looked back up to the stars.

Something wasn't right, but maybe I didn't even know what right was anymore. Maybe I'd felt so wrong for so long that right felt wrong.

It was a confusing thought I just didn't have the energy to entertain, so I staggered to my feet and began the long shuffle back to the house.

Tomorrow would be a better day.

It was the same lie I'd been telling myself for years.

But with every lie, it held truth. I just had to get the right damn day.

†

"WHERE WERE YOU?" Church was in my face the moment I stepped into the house, his green eyes flashing with anger.

"Lake," I said, exhausted off my ass again. The walk hadn't done shit for me but made me more confused and tired.

"Call next time. We were out there looking for your ass. I don't like dragging Sirena around in the cold." Church gave me a sour look before going into the living room. I took my shoes off and followed him.

"You good?" Ashes asked from his spot on the couch. I sank onto my usual spot and rubbed my eyes.

"New meds," I muttered. "Fucking me up."

"Why are you on new meds?" Church demanded. "What's going on?"

"That's the problem," I said, slurring slightly. I rubbed my eyes again, hoping to clear my blurry vision. I felt drugged as fuck. And high. Way high. It almost reminded me of the drug I'd been given in the facility. A lower high, but still fucking high.

I didn't hate it.

It just felt weird.

It was the heavy feeling. Definitely the heavy feeling that was fucking with me. Like I was two Malachis stuck in one body.

“Why is it the problem?” Church was like a fucking dog with a bone. Relentless.

“Because clearly I’m fucked in the head and need help,” I snapped back at him. “Stop fucking badgering me on it.”

“I don’t like you taking new meds.” Church narrowed his eyes on me.

“I don’t like being me, so I guess we both have a problem, huh?”

Before he could answer, Sirena came into the room in her white nightgown. I sat up straighter, noting so did Ashes and Church.

“Hey, baby,” Ashes greeted her, reaching for her hand. “How was your nap?”

She slid easily onto his lap and nuzzled against him. My chest clenched when he cradled her face and kiss her.

“Specter,” Church called out after a moment.

Ashes kissed her once more before releasing her to my brother. She went easily, looking breathtaking as she did so. I could only stare at her as she settled on Church’s lap.

It was a similar greeting to what she’d given to Ashes. A deep kiss. Touching. Then Church murmured something in her ear, making her still. Another kiss. More whispering.

I looked away, my throat tight, and caught Ashes’s eye.

He gave me a smile and nodded to Church and Sirena as if to say *look at them. How sweet.*

It was sweet. It was also completely unlike Church to be that way with anyone.

That was how I knew what he had with her was real.

My brother was in love.

And I was in turmoil.

Church released her, and she got to her feet again. This time, she came to me. I stiffened when she paused in front of me, her pretty eyes giving me a nervous look that did something to my insides.

I watched her twist her fingers anxiously in front of me.

Her lips parted. We locked eyes. Her chest rose and fell faster. A tremor raced through her body, giving her a small frame a slight shake.

I hated it.

I fucking hated it.

She shouldn't feel that way.

I scared her. That was what this was.

I got to my feet and stared down at her, our bodies nearly touching.

I leaned in, my body unsteady, and whispered in her ear.

“Go to Dante or Ashes. Not me, angel. I'm unworthy.” I moved past her and didn't look back, but I heard Church call out to her to come back to him.

The door to my bedroom clicked closed behind me with the thought that my angel was now being held by Church or Ashes. It brought me some semblance of comfort.

And for that, I was grateful.

SETH



I stared at Sin as he lay in his bed, the blankets twisted around his fucked-up body. He'd punished himself to the point it was making even me a little sick.

The last thing I wanted to do was call his condition in, but I'd done it anyway. Now, he was in one of the hospital beds, all bandaged up and on pain meds.

"Asylum. Why am I not surprised to see you here?" Sully's deep voice met my ears.

I looked over at him from my seat next to Sin's bed and scowled, hating that he was calling me Asylum.

"Maybe because I called this shit in," I said, loathing this man to my very bones.

"Well, we are so grateful you were in the mood to save a life." He walked over to Sin's other side and peered down at him. "Tell me what happened."

"He fucked up with the watchers. They tossed him out on his ass. Told him to punish himself for his atrocities against them."

"And those are. . .?" Sully raised a dark brow at me.

"Don't play stupid," I snapped at him. "You know what the fuck went down in here. They blame him for Sirena and Malachi."

"Did Sinclair put the noose around Malachi's neck?" Sully's eyes glittered. "I think not. So how is he to blame?"

I shook my head at him. He knew what Sin had done. How he'd given Sirena to us.

"I see. That's the story you're sticking to, huh? OK. I'm good with accepting it."

I didn't care if he was willing to accept it or not. He could fuck right off the edge of a cliff, and I wouldn't bat a lash.

"What's going to happen? You going to keep him here? Torture him as therapy? Abuse him?"

"I think he's doing a fine enough job on his own, don't you think?"

I grunted. He was definitely giving it his all.

"So he's going to get discharged?"

Sully nodded. "Yes. He's a fantastic specimen to study. Self-flagellation always is. In fact, we adore that sort of therapy here. You should try it sometime."

"I already have," I shot back, thinking about my own punishments to myself.

"Yes, well, it's neither here nor there. He's been bandaged and medicated. You can pick his meds up at the front desk on your way out once he wakes. His therapy has been doubled, so he'll be doing it twice a week now instead of once. Make sure to give him the good news." Sully walked to the door. "Oh, and Asylum?"

I looked over at him.

"Try to stay out of trouble. If you keep coming back here, I'm going to assume you want to stay. Everett has given his blessings on using your services again should I require it."

I ground my teeth but gave him a curt nod.

Everett was a fuckhead, plain and simple, but I knew the game and what was at stake, so I played along.

At least for now.

Sully smirked at me before departing, leaving me alone with Sin.

I watched him for a long time before I got up and stared out the window. The leaves were changing. Brilliant shades of orange, yellow, red, and brown greeted me.

So many damn trees.

My favorite places to hide.

To lurk.

To watch from.

With the leaves dying, I'd have to find a new place.

We will be fine.

Sort of have to be, don't we?

No.

Sin's groans had me turning back to look at him and pushing the voice out of my head.

"You're alive," I said, watching him wince.

"Why?" he mumbled, his words garbled.

I went to his side and sat in the chair beside the bed.

"Because you're a fucking idiot who deserves his chance at life."

He stared at me through slitted eyelids. "Says who?"

"The fates. Me."

"Asylum?" he croaked out.

"Yeah. You trying to overdo it and kill yourself throws a wrench into the plans. Can't have that happening."

He groaned again but didn't say anything for a long time.

"Am I being admitted here?"

"No. Sully was just in. They're actually releasing you back into the wild, surprisingly. You have some new meds to pick up at the desk and another therapy session each week now."

"Fuck," he grumbled. "Should have let me bleed out on the floor."

"I could have, but as I've said before—"

"Just shut up," he said with a grunt. "You and the magical voices in your head know more than the average person. I get it. Delusional fuckwit."

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. "Listen, prick, I don't like this any more than you do. Do you think this entire thing is a joyride for me?"

He looked over at me. "You're right. *Seth*. It's hard to keep track of you and your other half. You switch so often I don't know who the fuck is who."

"I haven't switched to Asylum since last night. And I certainly didn't do it mid-sentence. You knew who I was when you woke."

"I'm delusional too," he muttered.

"Yeah, you're something, that's for sure. By the way, nice haircut." I eyed the shorter, shaggier hair he now sported. Gone were his long, blond locks he kept in a man bun. Now, the hair would be lucky to scrape the bottom of his earlobes. I suppose he'd still be able to wear it up if he chose to. Maybe that was by design. Hell if I knew.

"Thanks. I'll do yours for ten bucks."

"I think not. Asylum would lose his mind."

"He has one left to lose?" Sin sat up with a soft whimper and a wince.

"Well, no. I suppose he doesn't. He is a bit unhinged."

Fuck off. If I'm unhinged, what does that make you?

I cocked my head to the right and listened to the voice, a smile on my face.

“It makes me eager,” I said, chuckling. “To cut our hair now to see how you react.”

Sin stared at me in confusion.

I will weave every cut piece of hair back together and choke you with it.

“You’re just throwing in the entire toolbox, huh? Fuck the wrench in the plans. Let’s just strangle us over a haircut.” I let out a soft laugh.

“You’re so fucking weird.” Sin shook his head and got to his feet, groaning again.

I cut off the voice in my head and got to my feet. Quickly, I steadied Sin as he made to tip over.

“I’m a little—”

“Dizzy,” I supplied. “I’m aware.”

“Of course you are,” he said sourly. “Do you also know I need to take a piss?”

“Common knowledge would suggest that after being in bed overnight hooked up to an IV that yes, you have to take a piss,” I said.

“You going to hold my dick for me too?” he asked as I led him to the bathroom, my hand around his elbow to keep him steady.

“Not really my thing, but I guess I could if you beg nicely.”

We reached the bathroom, and I stepped inside with him.

“Are you going to fucking watch?”

I shrugged. “Hadn’t planned on it, but I also can’t leave your unsteady ass in here to fall.”

“I’m not going to fall.”

“Why? You going to sit to piss like a girl?”

He shot me a look of pure irritation that only made me grin at him.

“Just trying to lighten the mood. How the fuck did the watchers put up with your moody ass for all those years is beyond me. Church must have the patience of a saint. I’d never have expected that of him.”

Sin said nothing, opting to simply pull his cock out and piss into the toilet before shuffling with me still on his arm to the sink where he washed his hands.

I led him back out to the bed and helped him to sit.

“By the way, this shit is over.” I gestured to the bandages on his bare chest and ugly bruising. “There are far better ways to punish yourself.”

“Yeah? How?” A frown took up residence on his lips.

“Just follow *us*. We know the way,” I said, offering him a dark smile that made him shiver. “We know all the ways to punish a soul.”

“And you’ve decided to just now tell me?”

I shrugged and dropped his shoes at his feet. “What’s life without whimsy?”

†

THREE DAYS after Sin was released from the facility, I was wrestling him in his bed while trying to not get cut with the knife he was wielding.

“Fucking drop it. Drop it!” I shouted, attempting to pin his arms.

“No. Stop. Get the fuck off me!”

He made a move to kick me, but I stopped that attack. Unfortunately, it ended in the knife swiping down and catching me across my arm.

I let out a snarl at the instant burn and bubble of blood.

In my life, I was always fine until I wasn’t. I had issues with losing control. I suppose I needed help, but I’d never really gotten any. There wasn’t a time in my life when I was ever able to control myself if I let go.

This time would be no different.

My fist smashed down on his face. The crack of my knuckles making contact made him drop the knife. It clattered to the floor, the blood dribbling down my arm and hand.

“Stupid fucking idiot,” I snarled, smashing him in the face again. And again.

He groaned beneath me, but he was quick to hit me back, knocking me sideways off him. Within moments, we were tangling with one another, fists and curse words flying.

Sinclair Priest was strong as hell and knew how to fight, but so did I.

You’re going to kill one another. Knock it off. Seth. SETH! Don’t fuck this up by making me show up! Focus. Fucking FOCUS!

The voice screamed in my head so loud I sagged back, ignoring the hit Sin landed against my ribs.

“Truce, asshole,” I said breathlessly, my shirt covered in both our blood.

“Whatever.” He shoved me once more.

I ground my teeth and grabbed the knife. I was so pissed I was still seeing red. With an elaborate twirl, I pointed the knife just beneath his jaw.

“I’ve killed three people by hacking off their limbs,” I said in a soft, dangerous voice. “Four if you count the motherfucker who died by me gutting him. Don’t be the fifth.”

He glared up at me and wiped at the blood on his face from his busted nose.

“You don’t really want to die. I can see inside your soul, Sinclair. I know you better than you know yourself,” I continued in that soft voice. “I’m not Asylum and won’t just finish you off right here, but if you try that shit again when we told you to stop, I’ll give you something to scream about. You get me?”

He visibly swallowed. “You’re nuts.”

“So are you. Welcome to the fucking madhouse. Now get your shit together. Either we move forward and get what we deserve, or I’ll fuck you with the blade of this knife. Trust me when I say I’m not fucking gentle.”

His gray eyes darted to the knife, his chest heaving, the blood still trickling from his nose.

“I know you want to go home. So do I. How about we figure out how to make that a reality and stop these punishments? You’ve paid your penance with the physical pain. Now it’s time to get up off your fucking knees and take back what’s yours.”

“I can’t stop,” he said, his voice wavering and the fight leaving him. “I need to prove myself.”

“You’ll end up dying when you go too far. You nearly did just days ago. I’m asking that you trust us this one time. I promise we will deliver you back home if you have a little faith in the process.”

No one ever trusts the fucking process.

Shut up. Not now.

Just pointing out the truth. Fucking stab his ass. Prove a point so he understands the gravity of the situation. Of your words.

I snapped my attention to the right. “You shouldn’t have stopped me or it would have already been done.”

We all make mistakes.

The voice quieted, and I looked back to Sin.

“How do you do that?” He pointed to his head. A drizzle of blood oozed from his nose, and he wiped at it.

I took the opportunity to swipe at the pain in my arm. He'd really fucked me up. I'd probably need stitches. Sighing, I left the room without answering him and went to the bathroom we shared and dug out my suturing kit and set to work cleaning the nasty cut.

Sin leaned against the doorway, watching me through the mirror. I began stitching the wound back together without any medication to numb it.

"Are you going to answer me?" he asked after a beat of silence.

"It's a cute parlor trick," I said, wincing as I pulled the needle through my skin. "Nothing more."

"You hear his voice in your head. You hear each other just by speaking aloud. It's weird."

"Well, we're weird. What can I say." Another stitch.

"Was it always that way? Your whole life? The voices?"

I breathed out and did up another stitch before answering him.

"Maybe. I don't know. If it was, we just didn't realize it. I was about five when I first heard him. Maybe it was the trauma. Being locked and beaten for being different can take its toll on a kid."

"Is that when you got branded as crazy?" He was still watching me, his arms folded over his chest. The blood had dried on his face, and the cuts he'd given himself on his arms were barely trickling now. His chest was a fucking mess with Sirena's name carved into it in big letters. The bruising was terrible, and the stitches were ugly. He was going to have a hell of a scar.

"No. It wasn't until much later that I got the brand," I muttered.

"Sirena?" he asked, his voice soft.

I finished off the stitches and began cleaning up, the ache very much fucking real in my arm.

"Sirena," I murmured, turning to him. I leaned against the bathroom sink. "I completely lost it with her. She was my best friend. The voice of sanity. She kept me grounded our entire childhood together. She's. . . everything to me."

To us.

I sighed, ignoring the voice.

"Then Asylum came out to play," he said. "What was it like finding out what happened?"

"Devastating," I whispered. "There was so much blood. Her blood. On everything. Mom saw it, and we packed up and left. She never asked whose blood it was. She knew though. She always knew. She answered the cop's

questions, but she never told them she knew who had hurt Sirena. Her love was different, but loyal. I suppose that was a good thing.”

“Did you miss her? Sirena?”

“Do you?” I countered, eyeing him.

His Adam’s apple bobbed. “Can’t miss what you never had.”

“Liar.”

He looked down at his feet and was quiet for so long I didn’t think he’d answer. When he finally did, his voice was low and shaky. “The truth is, she’s too good for someone like me. It doesn’t matter my feelings, especially now. None of it matters. I accept that I’ve lost my family over my actions. I don’t blame her. I don’t blame them. This is on me. I accept that. I’ll try to right my wrongs and hopefully earn forgiveness. I don’t expect to ever fully go home to them, but if I could get somewhere in their lives where they don’t hate me completely, I would be OK.”

“And her?”

He looked back to the floor again. “I deserve whatever punishment she deems fit for me.”

“Do you want her, Sinclair?”

He let out a deep breath. “I need to get some sleep. I’m sorry about your arm. I’ll, uh, do better next time.”

“No more punishments.”

He nodded. “Well, no more big ones. I think I should be doing something every day though. Doesn’t feel right not to.” He left the room, leaving me alone.

Sighing, I bandaged the wound since it was still bleeding a bit and swallowed down some pain meds.

Tomorrow would be a new day. Hopefully, a better day.

We were getting closer to things finally going right, and I wasn’t about to let Sinclair Priest fuck it up.

We were all going home.

Home was where the heart was, and that heart lay beating in my Rinny’s chest.

SIRENA



I sat alone, staring out at the sea of students in the courtyard. Church's father was here. I'd heard the whispers in the hallway that Everett Church was on campus.

People feared his name.

I was one of them.

He'd called upon Stitches and Church to meet with him, and Ashes was stuck in a therapy session. Cady had been sent to the office again and had a meeting with Vice Headmaster Adkins since I assumed Sully was in with Church.

I'd gotten the message from Ashes to wait for him in the courtyard, so I was doing that. I crinkled my brows when I caught sight of the guy in the bunny mask lurking on the edge of the courtyard.

He nodded his head at me slightly.

Or at least I think he did.

I frowned and watched him walk further away from the courtyard. He paused and turned back to me before gesturing with his finger.

Definitely me he was looking at.

As much as I knew I shouldn't go, I couldn't seem to stop myself from getting to my feet and following him. When he reached the edge of the thick forest, he paused to make sure I was still following him. I was, but I was quite far behind.

He turned back to the forest and stepped inside, the darkness swallowing him.

When I reached the edge, I lingered, my heart banging hard in my chest.

My curiosity drove me forward after a moment of warring in my head,

and I stepped into the darkness too. I wandered through the thick trees, my breath coming out in white puffs the deeper I went.

I could feel him all around me.

A snapping twig.

A cool breeze.

The thickening air as I stood rooted in place, looking around.

“You’re brave,” a deep voice whispered over my shoulder. A chill raced over my skin. I swallowed and stared straight ahead.

He slowly moved to stand in front of me, the mask carefully in place, his full lips and jaw exposed.

“I’ve missed you,” he continued.

I said nothing as I stared up at him.

He closed what little distance there was between us and reached out. I squeezed my eyelids shut when he cradled my cheek, his touch warm.

“I’ve been watching you. You’ve closed yourself off to me. Why?”

I tried to focus on my breathing. I opened my eyes to look at him.

“Why are you so afraid? It’s just us. Here. Alone.” He let out a soft, sad laugh. “I’ve saved you more than I’ve hurt you. That means something, doesn’t it?”

When I didn’t say anything, he continued.

“It’s me.” His voice was almost desperate. Pained.

I closed my eyes and breathed out.

What should I call you like this? Because it’s not you.

He leaned in and whispered in my ear. “*Mirage.*”

“*Are you always Mirage like. . . this?*” I still didn’t understand how he knew what I was thinking. All I knew was that if I didn’t want him in my head, he couldn’t be. And that frustrated him.

“Yes,” he murmured, circling me slowly.

Shivers raced over my skin when he stopped behind me on the second circle, his lips at my ear again.

“I dream of you every night. You dream of me too.”

I swallowed thickly and remained silent.

“You think of me when they touch you. I’m always on your mind.”

Again, I closed my eyes. His warm hands rested on the tops of my arms, and he squeezed me gently.

“You’re still mine, aren’t you?”

I shook beneath his hold, hating the thoughts in my head because they

were so confusing to me. I shouldn't think them. I shouldn't feel them, yet there they were. Bold and very much there.

"Answer me," he said, his voice so low and dangerous that it made my heart jump in my chest.

I turned in his hold and stared up at him wordlessly. Carefully, I reached out and traced my fingers lightly against the white of the mask. Down to the opening where his jaw and lips were exposed.

He parted his lips as I gently ran my fingers along them.

Slowly, I went up on my tiptoes and kissed the corner of his lips. A small taste. An inhale of his rich scent. So very. . . *Mirage*. So very much a secret that could get us both killed.

I lingered for a moment before I pulled away from him, the distance sending a wave of cold through my body.

"Don't go," he called out, his voice trembling. "Please. Stay with me."

I paused and bit my bottom lip.

He closed the space between us, his lips crushing mine beneath his deep, possessive kiss. I tried to push him off, but he tugged me closer, his hold on me tight, his lips demanding.

"Give yourself to me," he whispered against my lips. "*Sirena. Mine.*"

I tried to fight him off, but he was insistent, his lips against mine.

"I need you," he said. "I fucking need you. Please. Give me this."

My heart ached at his words.

"Tell me you need me too. Please." Another kiss on my stiff lips. "*Sirena. Stop fighting the inevitable. Talk to me. Tell me you feel something. I hate that I can't see you the way I want. I hate it. It's killing me to be so close yet so far away.*"

Another kiss from him. The same confused resistance from me.

"I won't tell. I keep secrets too," he whispered, resting his forehead against mine, the mask cool against my skin.

I closed my eyes, everything within me wanting to give in to him, but I couldn't. In these woods, I was lost to the madness of my *Mirage*. I wasn't myself. My brain wasn't working. In his presence, I was lost to my feelings for him. Ones I knew really ruled me and I'd never be able to get rid of.

"Eventually, we will all be together. Church knows it," he said softly. "*Ashes knows it. Asylum. Stitches. Sin.*"

I shivered at the mention of Sin's name.

"He cares about you," he continued. "He's punishing himself. He was

admitted into the facility overnight because of the cutting a few nights ago.”

His words made my guts clench. *Sin was in the facility? He cared about me? He could be hurt if he's in the facility.* Fear raced through my body. His hurting would hurt the guys, despite their anger and denial over it. I didn't want anyone to hurt anymore.

Please, no. . .

“He's out now. He is safe. For the time being. I can't say for how long. His fall is long and hard. He's struggling.”

I licked my lips and stared into his eyes, a cool breeze sending me shivering. Immediately, he reached out and rubbed my arms up and down.

“I will wait for you. I will wait forever if it's what you want. I'll keep watch over you. Always.” He rubbed my arms again. “I come here every night. If you ever want to see me, you can find me here. You decide the when. This is the where.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Go. Church is searching for you. He's upset. He's. . .” his voice trailed off for a moment. “He needs you. I'll make sure you get there safely.”

I didn't hesitate. I backed away from him and turned, rushing through the dark forest until I hit the old trail. My chest ached as I ran to the house. Something told me my rabbit was somewhere behind me, doing as he promised.

I burst into the house right after catching a glimpse of the white bunny ears disappearing into the darkness of the trees.

Church's arms wrapped around me immediately and crushed me against his body.

“I couldn't find you,” he whispered, clinging to me. “I was worried.”

I held him back and looked over his shoulder to see Stitches watching us from across the room. His dark eyes locked on mine for a moment before he raked his fingers through his shaggy black hair and looked away from me.

The overwhelming urge to go to him overcame me, but there was no way Church was going to let me go, so I continued to hold him back before burying my face in his chest.

“Where were you?” he demanded softly, tilting my chin up so he could look at me.

I stared into his green eyes and said nothing.

“It doesn't matter. She's here now,” Stitches said, going to the living room and settling on the couch. I watched him light a joint and take a hit, his head falling back against the cushions, a cloud of smoke hanging over him.

“Don’t ever fucking do that again,” Church warned. “This is your warning. You don’t disappear like that. Not now. Not when my father is on campus.” He gripped my chin tightly. “Do you understand?”

I twisted my fingers in his shirt, wincing beneath the pressure he was putting on my face.

“I love you. If something happened to you, I’d fucking die. You know that, right?”

I lunged forward and kissed him hard, his words doing something to me.

He fell into the kiss immediately, his hands all over me. Easily, he lifted me off my feet, allowing me to wrap my legs around his waist. Without another word, he walked us upstairs.

I cracked my eyelids open along the way to see Stitches watching us, a look of sadness on his face that made my heart hurt all over again.

We needed to talk. And we would.

Tonight.

But right now, I had an angry watcher to soothe.

And confusing thoughts about my rabbit to deal with.

Sometimes I hated myself. Today was one of those times.

STITCHES



*M*y night had been pure shit.

Everett showed up just to fuck with us. A power trip. That was all it was. A way for us to know he was watching. Waiting.

Fucking prick.

Church and I discussed it at length after he'd left, warning us to be good boys or suffer the consequences.

We knew his power moves.

He showed up with nothing of importance to say. Just a wicked smile and a few words to remind us who the hell he was and what he was capable of.

I think it was safe to say we were both sick of his shit. I still hadn't told the guys what had happened in the facility. I knew it would start a fucking fire I didn't have the capacity to put out, and I didn't want to make our lives worse. Now wasn't the time to say shit. We needed to get ourselves sorted before we could go plotting the murder of our old man.

I stared up at my ceiling, my chest tight. Before all this shit, I hadn't been the anxious sort. That was more of an Ashes thing, but as of late, I was really taking the crown on that shit.

Knowing that sleep would evade me, and I'd suffer tomorrow for it, I rolled over and popped one of those pills into my mouth I'd been given by Janice and swallowed it down with the glass of water on my bedside table. I'd taken it earlier in the day. It still made me feel heavy and weird, but all meds did that shit to me until I got used to them.

Rolling over, I went back to staring at my ceiling.

I wasn't sure how long I was lost in my thoughts on life, Sin, and angel, but my door cracked open, sending a sliver of light from the hallway into the

room. I crinkled my brows as I looked to see who the intruder was.

My heart stumbled in my chest when Sirena crept into the room, the door clicking closed softly behind her. With my breath held, I watched her through the moonlight streaming into my room as she approached my bed.

Wordlessly, she crawled into bed and cuddled against me, her head on my chest. The breath I'd been holding whooshed out of me when she twisted her fingers in my t-shirt, her warm body pressed against mine. She was doing things to my body I hadn't felt in what seemed like forever simply by her nearness.

We lay in silence for a long time before I finally spoke.

"Angel?" I croaked out. "What are you doing? Is everything OK?"

She'd gone to bed with Church. Ashes had come home, and we'd hung out in the living room watching TV in silence until he'd gone to bed, his head hanging. I knew we were all suffering the loss of Sin, and I was dealing with my own shit, but he'd seemed exceptionally sad tonight.

It was killing me that I couldn't fix this. It didn't matter what I did, our lives were fucked now.

She said nothing, but I didn't expect her to just come out and speak to me.

Silence was my answer, but she didn't pull away from me. Instead, she snuggled closer, her fingers twisting tighter in my shirt like she was scared I'd float away if she loosened her hold.

Guilt flooded every facet of my being as flashes of not saving her swept through my mind. Of her tears. Of the way she trembled when Asylum fucked her. The fear in her eyes because she knew what we knew. We had an audience. Sick men were behind the glass, getting off on the pain we caused her.

I swallowed hard, my body tense as I tried to hold back the sob that threatened to erupt from my mouth.

She lifted her head, and I saw the tears on her cheeks.

She was crying.

My baby was sad.

"D-don't cry, angel," I whispered, my own tears spilling down my cheeks in a silent stream. "We can't cry. OK? We can't."

She shifted and pressed her soft lips to my cheek, crumbling my heart just a little more. I wanted so much to kiss her back, but it didn't feel right. I felt like a thief who had stolen from her and didn't deserve the shit she wanted to give to me.

It was torture in the purest form.

I'd failed her when she needed me the most. I'd been weak and had fallen. Had I been able to hold my shit together, I'd have been of more use to her. Instead, I'd been a basket case right beside her and it had fucked us both. Her quite literally.

Fuck.

My throat ached and burned from trying to hold back the wild scream that threatened me.

She moved back down and laid her head on my chest, her fingers twisted in my t-shirt once more. I didn't touch her back. It didn't feel right. As much as I wanted to, I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

I love her so fucking much.

I'm a failure.

I tried. I tried, angel. I swear I did. But I fucked up. I always fuck up. Weak. I'm so fucking weak. It's my fault. I couldn't save you because I wasn't strong enough to save myself. Your love isn't what I deserve.

Despite all the shitty thoughts in my head, I couldn't shake one constant one.

It felt right. Her against my body and in my bed.

Just. . . her.

Her breathing deepened, and her body relaxed against mine.

I licked my lips and closed my eyes.

I'd accept this gift of her at my side tonight, but I couldn't allow it again. My brain circled right back to me not deserving her.

The anger simmered just below the surface. My old friend. It was always my go-to emotion, and here it was, tempting me to just let loose.

The meds settled in on me, making my head feel heavy, so I closed my eyes and prayed that tomorrow would be a better day.

†

I AWOKE with a mass of dark hair tangled around my body and Sirena still clinging to me. A headache from hell banged relentlessly against my skull. I was beginning to recognize it because I'd started getting them when the new meds began wearing off.

Carefully, I reached over her and grabbed the bottle and downed another before pausing for a moment and closing my eyes, letting her warmth seep into me with the hopes that it would hold me over for eternity since I knew I couldn't let her in my bed again.

Not yet. Maybe not ever. Not until I found a way to forgive myself for my shortcomings and failures.

But fuck, I wanted her.

It was eating at my soul.

Swallowing down all those emotions, I untangled myself from her and got out of bed and went to the bathroom where I brushed my teeth and took a piss before coming out to see her still sleeping peacefully in my bed.

I grabbed my clothes and dressed for the day, hesitating as I went to the door and looked back at her.

As much as I wanted to go to her side, I forced myself out the door and into the kitchen.

"Morning," Ashes greeted me as Church came down the stairs in his uniform.

I settled into my place at the table. Ashes slid a plate of scrambled eggs and toast in front of me.

"She's in my room," I said the moment Church stormed forward, a look of worry on his face.

He stopped at the table and clutched the back of the chair he usually sat in.

"She is?"

I nodded. "She came in last night and lay with me. That's all. She fell asleep in there, and I let her."

"You're slurring," Ashes commented, settling in next to me.

"New meds," I muttered. "Killer headaches when they start to wear off."

Ashes cast a quick look at me then focused on Church. I knew they were worried about me, but there wasn't shit all that could be done right now. I just needed to ride it all out and hope I could find the bright light at the end of this seemingly never-ending black tunnel of *what the fuck*.

"What time did she go into your room?" Church asked.

"I don't know. After midnight," I mumbled, moving my eggs listlessly around my plate.

Church looked down at his watch. "I'll wake her. She needs to eat."

He moved away from his chair and left the room to get Sirena while I sat

poking my food.

“I’m not great at eggs,” Ashes finally said. “Or any breakfast food really.”

“It’s all good, man. Thanks. I appreciate it. You’re the best we have when it comes to food.”

“Think so?” He ate a forkful of eggs. “You’re pretty good at making that one soup thing you make.”

“*Mole de Olla*,” I said, mentioning the soup my mother used to make with me when I was a kid. It was really one of the only things she ever did with me. It was a core memory, and I never forgot how to make it.

Ashes cleared his throat. “How are you and Sirena? Was last night good?”

I stuffed my mouth full of eggs, so I didn’t have to answer right away. Chewing slowly, I prayed he’d become distracted, or Church would come back.

Of course, luck never worked in my favor.

I swallowed. “It was fine.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“No.”

“Anything, man?”

“No.”

He sighed. “Do you want to talk to me? I’ve been told I’m a good listener.”

“You’re the best listener, but I’m just not ready. I need to sort through the shit in my head, and you guys constantly asking me isn’t helping.” I put my fork down. Church came back into the room with my angel looking as beautiful as ever. She’d dressed in her uniform and her hair hung loosely around her.

Church pulled her chair out, and she sat in it.

Sin’s chair. His old spot. Now hers.

My throat tightened again, and I quickly got up. I noticed she’d reached for my hand, but I’d been too quick to leave to feel her touch on my skin.

Quickly, she snatched it back, her cheeks darkening to a deep crimson.

“I’m going to head out.” I stumbled a little and caught myself on the kitchen island and shook off the tipping feeling I was becoming accustomed to with the meds.

Ashes reached out to steady me, but I shook him off.

“I, uh, need to do some stuff,” I mumbled, desperate for some damn air.

“Malachi—” Church called out, but I didn’t let him finish.

I left the room fast as I could and went out the front door, the cool air smashing into me like a damn brick wall.

Fuck, I hated the cold.

But I hated myself more.

And I repeated that shit to myself all the way to my first class of the morning.

CHURCH



She was sad, and I fucking hated it.
So was Stitches. Ashes. *Me*.

Having emotions wasn't something I enjoyed having, and as of late, it seemed to be all I was filled with. Navigating it all was making me feel like I was losing my damn mind.

And my father.

I hated that man to the very bottom of my being. I was a mess myself, though, and really, I had no room to judge, but had he not been such a cunt, maybe I wouldn't have been fighting the war I'd been fighting since I was old enough to hold a knife.

Being so close to anyone besides my brothers, my best friends, was unheard of for me. I glanced at specter to see her pretty eyes downcast.

It made me grind my teeth.

She didn't need to be sad, and all I really wanted to do was figure out all the things that made her that way and bury them after I gutted them with my knives.

I didn't mind the chase though, so if that was what I had to do to figure out what was causing her so much turmoil, I'd hunt it all down before I put an end to it.

Although, I was sure Stitches was part of her heartache. Whatever had happened to them in the facility was putting a damper on shit.

And that all cycled back to Sinclair Priest.

I tore my focus from Sirena as we walked through campus, my arm around her waist, and looked for the fucking dirtbag.

I wasn't surprised to see him walking across campus with Asylum. Sin

was moving slower. His strides looked like he was in pain.

A pang went through my chest upon noticing it, my stomach twisting from the feeling of worry that quickly washed over me.

I schooled it fast, hating I felt anything for the prick who tried to ruin our lives. He was one of my best friends. I'd trusted him. He'd ripped our lives apart with his shit.

Seeing him at the lake that day swept through my mind. The cuts and bruises littering his body. The look in his eyes. The sorrow. The shake in his voice.

Had we punished him enough?

And if we had, now what? Did we just fucking open our arms back up for the asshole and invite him back in?

The answer was simple.

No.

We weren't there yet. I didn't even know if we ever would be. Sirena was settling in. Stitches was still going through his shit. We just weren't ready. And what if his feelings for our girl hadn't changed? It would just be a vicious cycle, and he really would end up dead if he fucked up again.

We were going to walk right into them. Maybe Asylum planned it that way, and maybe I didn't care enough to detour because I wanted Sin to see what he was missing as Ashes and Stitches flanked me and Sirena.

"Good morning," Asylum called out when he noticed us, his blue eyes flashing immediately to Sirena when we stopped in front of them.

I tightened my hold on her. I hated the way he always looked at her. Like she was raw meat, and he was a starving animal.

She was quick to cling to me tighter, something I found immensely satisfying. I liked being her protector. It didn't take a fucking rocket scientist to figure out these guys scared her. If I had to put my finger on it, I'd say Sin more than Asylum, considering his atrocities against her. When I thought back to what it must have been like for her, my fury always exploded to the surface. Although, being locked inside a stone box with Asylum couldn't have been a pleasure cruise.

Hearing her screams for me would never be silenced in my head.

Sin would have to cut himself deeper in order to make me give a shit about him again.

I said nothing, eyeing him and trying my hardest not to punch him in his already busted-up face.

“Move,” I said, not bothering with the niceties.

“Now wait just a minute,” Asylum said, a smirk on his lips that made me want to punch him in his pretty face. “Every morning will be this way. We all have to live here. We have to walk through the courtyard. We may as well try to get along. I did, after all, deliver what I promised, did I not?”

“You knew Sin did this,” Ashes said. “You let us hunt and search for who hurt her and never told us.”

“Wasn’t my place, *Torch*.” He winked at Ashes.

Ashes scowled at him.

“Angel,” Stitches said, his voice soft.

I glanced down at Sirena to see her peeking up at me, tears on her pretty face.

Immediately, I turned to her and pushed her hair away from her face.

“What’s wrong?” I murmured, cradling her face in my hands. She was shaking like a leaf.

“Specter? What’s the matter?”

Her eyes were focused across the courtyard from us. I followed her gaze and saw Sully striding forward.

“What the fuck does he want?” Ashes snarled.

“Take her.” As much as it killed me to do so because I wanted to protect her myself, I pushed her to Stitches, knowing Sully was the last motherfucker he wanted to see. Sirena stumbled into his arms, and he was quick to take her hand in his and lead her away wordlessly.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Sully greeted us, offering us a smile that didn’t look happy at all.

“What the fuck do you want?” I snapped at him, tearing my focus from Stitches and Sirena. Cady had found them and was walking with them.

“Dante, manners.” Sully straightened his tie. “Your father said if I needed your assistance to come find you.”

“My father doesn’t speak for me, so you can suck my dick on assistance.” I glared openly at him, my irritation barely controlled. If I didn’t get a handle on it, it would morph into rage, and then it would be Sully’s life on the line. I knew I had to keep myself together because of my father, but one of these days, I was going to lose it and kill all those fuckers. I just needed a better plan and a more unique way to hide the bodies, or what I’d have left of them.

“Careful,” Asylum called out, his voice sour. “He’s into that shit.”

“Mr. Cain—”

“Mr. Cain is my old man. I’m Asylum,” Asylum corrected him.

Sully gave him a curt look before focusing on me. “Dante, I need you in my office this evening. I have something we need to discuss.”

I let out a sour laugh. “Go fuck yourself.”

“Either you show up to my office this evening or I’ll admit Sirena back into the facility for more observation and treatment.”

I ground my teeth and tightened my hands into fists. “Fuck you.”

“I’ll be in the office until around eleven tonight. I’m working on some new things.” His eyes sparkled with his wickedness. “I’ll send the wards if you’re not there by the time I leave. I have a new method that I think may help your sweet little princess speak again.” He turned and left us without another word.

“Let’s kill him,” Ashes said softly.

“Easy,” Asylum said in a raspy voice. “Just. . . relax.”

“Fuck you. You relax. I have shit to take care of.” I caught Sin’s eye before quickly looking away. Standing here near him wasn’t doing me any good. I was torn between wanting to gut him and wanting to rip his heart out through his throat.

“What do you know?” Sin looked to Asylum.

As much as I wanted to leave, I was also compelled to stay because I wanted to know what Asylum knew too. He was off his rocker nuts, but so was I. That being said, I was well aware of my insanity making me more intelligent than many people I’d ever known. It made me. . . sane in my own way.

So maybe whatever he had to say had weight. It was already apparent to me that he possessed a gift of some sort. That much I couldn’t deny even though I’d recounted shit in my head on repeat since Stitches and Specter were taken from me. I had no explanation for the shit Asylum could do.

“What I know is what you know with a twist.” Asylum leveled his gaze on me. “We must play by the rules to win the game. Unfortunately, it’s going to be a long game. Any decisions made in anger and haste won’t bode well for anyone, including my pretty little firefly.”

I took a dangerous step toward him. He didn’t flinch or look the least bit concerned as a tiny smile played on the edge of his lips.

“She doesn’t belong to you,” I snarled at him. “Don’t fucking ever say that shit again.”

“You’re right,” he said without a bit of hesitation. “I did that thing I just

warned you not to do. My, my, haste is a tough enemy, isn't it?" He chuckled. "Allow me to rephrase that. She's not mine. . . yet. Soon, though."

I launched myself at him, but Ashes was quick to intervene at the same time Sin did. Sin pushed Asylum in the chest, moving him away from me while Ashes tugged me backward.

"You're on his side, you prick?" I shouted to Sin. "You fucking asshole. Should have known!"

"I'm not on his side," Sin yelled, turning back to me. "I'm fucking not, Dante. You know me. You fucking know me better than that—"

I spit at his feet. "I don't know shit about you other than you can't be fucking trusted."

A look of despair washed over his face as I backed away.

"Come on," Ashes said, casting a look at Sin who stayed rooted in his spot. Asylum moved forward and whispered something in his ear that made him visibly swallow.

"Take care, Dante. Mind what we said. You'll be the monster your daddy wants if you aren't careful, and many will end up dead. Trust me."

Asylum's words were so fierce they made me pause for a moment. The blue of his eyes darkened with sadness.

"I'll see you soon. . . friend." He nodded at me before gesturing for Sin to follow him.

"He's so odd," Ashes murmured. "He scares me sometimes."

I stared at their backs as they walked through the courtyard, neither of them speaking to one another.

"The truth is always scary," I answered back in a soft voice.

"What's the truth?" Ashes stood beside me, watching Sin and Asylum disappear into the crowd of students.

I swallowed, not wanting to voice my thoughts. Instead, I turned and walked the way Stitches had taken Sirena.

She was who mattered right now. Not Asylum. Not Sin. Not anyone.

Her.

It would always be her.

If that meant I had to eat shit with Asylum for a little while, I'd tuck in and do it with a smile on my face.

I'd learned how to dine with monsters. It was the monster who hadn't yet learned to dine with me.

But they fucking would. Every single one of them would if they kept

pushing me.

I wasn't my father.

I was worse.

They'd all find out just how much if they kept playing games with me.

ASHES



We found Sirena sitting with Cady near the science building, Stitches nowhere to be seen. I'd had hope blossom in my chest he was getting better based on the fact I'd gone into his room to find Sirena curled in his arms and him holding her tightly as they slept.

The look on his face when he'd come out of his bedroom this morning had doused those hopes in ice-cold water.

And now he'd left her with Cady as a means of escape.

The irritation at that was apparent on Church's face when he went to Sirena and pulled her off the bench she was sitting on and kissed her deeply.

Cady raised a brow at me and shook her head.

"Where's Stitches?" I asked, ignoring her reaction.

Cady shrugged while Church continued kissing Sirena, whispering words to her whenever he'd stop for her to breathe before he dove back in. I pulled my lighter out and flipped it open and closed five times.

I was worried about Stitches. As much as I hated to admit it, I was also worried about Sin. He looked like hell today. He was losing weight. His gray eyes were dull and lifeless. He was the shell of the guy he once was.

And for that, I had regrets.

I just couldn't deal with all this shit right now though. Stitches had to be a priority because we knew exactly what he was capable of if he went off the deep end again. I prayed every night he wouldn't.

"I don't know. We stopped here and he mumbled about needing to leave. He didn't elaborate and I didn't ask," Cady said, looking past me. I followed her gaze to see Bryce headed toward us.

He stopped next to me and cleared his throat.

“Hey, I was wondering if Sirena would be available tonight.”

One of my worst nightmares. Him wanting to hang out with her. The ex. The one she was still friends with and who clearly cared for her and vice versa.

Church broke off his kiss to Sirena and openly glared at Bryce.

“No,” he said without missing a beat.

Sirena looked from Bryce to Church, her lips curled into a deep frown.

Damnit, heaven.

I sighed, knowing we couldn’t just keep her from having friends.

She pulled away from Church who let out a protest and came to me, her pretty eyes focused on mine.

Carefully, she took my hand and traced a single word onto my palm. The rarity of her communicating was always a shock and one that made me want to do whatever she was asking for.

Please.

“Heaven, baby,” I murmured weakly.

“What did she say?” Church demanded. Cady looked on with interest, the eagerness to know plain as day.

“She said *please*. She wants to.” I took in the look of anger on Church’s face and watched as he turned and directed it on Bryce who had the decency to take a step back.

“What is your fucking problem?” Church seethed, advancing on him. “You keep coming up in here trying to spend time with her. Trying to get close to her. You do realize she belongs to the watchers, right? That she’s not yours. That she will never be yours again.”

“She’s my friend,” Bryce answered, drawing himself up. Bryce wasn’t a small guy by any means, he was just quiet. If I had to compare him to something, I’d say he’s the guy the girl cuddles with and always knows just what to say to make her smile. He was just a sweet guy. At least that was how I took him.

A muscle popped along Church’s jaw as he continued to stare down Bryce.

Sirena squeezed my hand, making me sigh.

I was giving in. She knew I was. How the hell couldn’t I? She could have anything in the world I could give her if she wanted it.

I guessed hanging out with Bryce was one of those things.

“If Church and Stitches are agreeable, you can come over tonight and

hang out in the living room with her. Watch a movie or something,” I said, the words gross on my tongue. Bryce was a nice enough guy, but he was still her ex. That meant something to me and clearly to Church who snapped his attention back to me, the glare hardening on his face.

“We’ll be there,” I continued, preferring to have them at our place and not Bryce’s. “Dante, she’s asking. She never asks for anything. Let’s give her this, OK? We owe her.”

Church stared at me for a moment before he looked at Sirena who stared back with wide, innocent eyes.

I could already see Church’s resolve crumbling.

She just had that effect on us.

“Fine.” He nodded and took her hand in his. “If this is what you want, I’ll agree to it.”

Her entire face brightened, and she threw her arms around Church’s neck. He seemed surprised for a moment before he wrapped her in a tight hug and held onto her, murmuring things to her we couldn’t hear.

“Seven tonight,” I said to Bryce. “Does that work?”

He seemed completely surprised we’d agreed to it. “Y-yeah. That’s perfect.”

“That’s only if Stitches is cool with it.” I looked to Sirena who was still being mauled by Church. “If he says no, then it’s off. We all have to agree.”

“OK.” Bryce gave me a quick smile. “I understand.”

“I’ll be there too,” Cady piped up.

Bryce’s gaze darted to her before looking back at me. I figured Cady would be there. She was over nearly every night since Sirena had moved in with us.

“Claws,” Church warned, untangling himself from Sirena long enough to aim his wrath at her.

“What?” Cady gave him an innocent smile. “I’m the babysitter, chipmunk murderer. It’ll free you up to go scare the local wildlife.”

Church scowled at her while I let out a laugh. Even Bryce cracked a grin. And Sirena? She went up on her tiptoes and kissed Church gently on the cheek, making all his anger melt away as he dragged her back into his arms.

†

I FLIPPED my lighter open and closed five times before pausing to breathe, then starting the rhythmic flipping again. The smooth patch I'd worn into the metal of the lighter brought me comfort as I rested my head against the willow tree in the dark cemetery.

"Want some?" Stitches asked, handing me the joint he'd been toking on.

I didn't typically partake in weed, opting to go with my cherry vape, but I decided I might as well since both he and Church were pretty toasted. Felt weird to be the odd guy out.

I inhaled deeply, feeling the warmth of the high slowly seep into my body. The smoke left me in a heavy haze before I took another hit and handed it back to him. He took his turn before passing it to Church.

"It's weird to be out here," I murmured, staring into the darkness.

"What's so weird about it?" Church blew out his cloud of smoke and sank onto the stone bench he seemed particularly attached to.

"I don't know," I muttered, accepting the joint Stitches passed back to me and taking a big drag from it.

"Is it because Sin isn't here?" Stitches's voice was soft as he took the joint back from me.

I blew out the smoke and coughed, my chest feeling heavy. "Yeah. I guess. Just feels weird with only three of us. We've been the four of us since we were kids."

"He fucked up." Church tipped his head back and stared up through the branches of the willow tree. Many of the leaves were beginning to fall. I loved this time of year. It was beautiful in Northern Michigan when the leaves changed. There was a whole-ass trail dedicated to driving through the tunnel made of trees. People from all over the world came to see it.

I hadn't been there in years. Not since Abby was alive. We'd drive there every year and look at all the colors.

My chest ached at the memory of my twin, and I ground my teeth to keep from letting go of my emotions. I always felt like shit when I thought about her. It reminded me of what a fuck-up I was.

I hated that part of me.

"Are we going to forgive him?" Stitches asked, sinking down to sit on an old headstone.

"Fuck him," Church muttered. "He can fucking rot with Asylum."

I sighed. I didn't know what I felt and said as much.

"It's too soon," I said. "All of this. I want to forgive him, but he hasn't

really done anything to earn it. I don't even know if we can trust him around Sirena. If something happened to her because he lost it again. . ." my voice trailed off.

"Exactly," Church said, getting to his feet. "That's a hard fucking pass for me. He needs to prove himself."

"What do we consider *proving*?" Stitches asked.

I said nothing, having no idea how to even answer that as I flipped my lighter open and closed, each time the flame springing to life before I extinguished it with a snap of the lid.

"He's been cutting himself," Church said after a beat of silence.

"What? How do you know that?" I stopped with my lighter and looked over at him.

"I saw the wounds. I went out for a run and saw him at the lake. I stopped to remind him to go fuck himself. He. . . he showed me what he was doing to punish himself." Church looked at his feet. "He's fucking himself up."

"What do you mean?" I glanced at Stitches to see him watching Church with crinkled brows.

"I mean, it's bad." Church rubbed the back of his neck and let out a loud sigh.

"He's physically hurting himself?" I frowned at that information, my guts twisted in knots. While I wanted him to fucking hurt, something about knowing he really was made me a little sick inside. Sin was the type of guy who never stopped. He didn't have that button inside his brain. Once he was set on something, he saw it through.

"Yeah. Beating himself. Cutting. Who the fuck knows what else. He was chewed to hell," Church looked up through the willow branches again. "It doesn't matter though. It's nothing compared to what Sirena went through." Church leveled his gaze on Stitches. "Or you."

Stitches stared back at him for a moment before shaking his head, his face pinched in pain.

"I'm fine," he said, his voice low. "It doesn't matter."

"It does," I started, but Stitches held his hand up to silence me.

"Listen, bad shit happened in that place. Really fucking bad, twisted shit. Some of it I'm not even sure was real," his voice cracked, and he wiped quickly at his eyes. "I'm still trying to sort through it all. I want to tell you guys, but I don't even know what I could tell you. If my words would even be real or true."

“If they’re real to you, they’re real,” I said gently while Church eyed him, his forehead wrinkled like he was deep in thought and contemplating something.

Stitches shook his head. “When I get shit sorted in my head, we’ll talk, OK? I’m just not ready. I know you guys want me to be, but I’m just not. Focus on Sirena, not me. I’ll be OK.”

“Will you though?” I flicked my lighter open and watched the flame dance for a moment before looking at him.

He visibly swallowed and looked away. “I’m always OK, Asher. You know that. I-I’m working on things. I swear I am.”

“I need to meet Sully,” Church said, clearing his throat.

I looked at him in surprise. I knew he wanted to get to the bottom of Stitches’s trauma and feelings, so his abruptly changing the subject caught me off guard.

“I thought he could fuck off?” I went back to opening and closing my lighter again.

“He can, but I want to know what that fuck he’s planning. Seems like the best way to know is to meet with him. I’m sure it’s some bullshit to do with my father, so I may as well get it over with. If that’s the case, then Sirena could be involved. We can’t allow that.”

I nodded. It seemed like a good idea, even though I knew Church didn’t want to meet with any of them.

“I’ll be back later. Tell Sirena. . .” his voice trailed off.

“We’ll take care of her,” I said.

Church nodded and without another word, walked past the hanging branches of the willow and disappeared into the dark cemetery.

We were both quiet for a moment before Stitches spoke.

“I miss him,” he said.

“Who? Dante?”

“No. Sin. I wish things could go back to the way they were before Sirena got here.”

I ran my fingers along the edge of the flame from my lighter for a moment, mesmerized by the slight twinge of pain and the warmth.

“Then we wouldn’t have Sirena,” I finally said.

“And she’d be safe. I don’t see a downside.”

I closed my lighter and looked at him. “What do you mean?”

Stitches tugged at his dark hair for a moment before finally speaking.

“They’re going to use her against us. Our father. He will use her to get to Church. You know he will. As much as I love her, I know she’s not as safe with us as we’d like to think she is. She’s become our weakness, and you know Everett likes to exploit weaknesses. It’s a fucking appetizer to him. He wants Church to work with him. You know that. You know the shit Church has been through and how much he’s overcome. You remember. . . after, right?” Stitches’s voice shook.

I swallowed hard and opened my lighter again to stare at the flame.

“I remember,” I whispered.

“It’ll be worse this time. You know it will. You know what he went through and her. . . what she went through. We can’t have that for Sirena, man. We can’t. We will if we keep her with us. We didn’t think this shit through when we decided on it.”

“What aren’t you saying?” I didn’t stop staring at the flame as the lighter grew hotter.

“You know what I’m saying. We need to let her go so she’s actually safe. Write her off.”

“Is that why you’ve been so distant with her?” I continued to stare at the flame, relishing the slow burn on my fingers.

“Partly. The other part is I feel like I’ve failed her. I should have been stronger for her. I’m. . . embarrassed at my weakness.”

I finally looked away from the flame. “You’re not weak, Malachi.”

He looked down at his hands. “I don’t want her hurt. You don’t know the shit I’ve seen. Experienced. Sully and this fucking place is just the tip of the iceberg. The Underground. . . man, if she gets taken there she won’t ever come out. She’ll be devoured,” his voice cracked. “I’ve seen it. I’ve heard the screams of others taken there. I’ve. . . Church won’t be able to handle it this time. We have to do something.”

“We don’t know that something bad will happen—”

“Fucking stop, Asher!” Stitches glared at me, his bottom lip trembling. “You’re always trying to be positive. The only fucking positive in all of this is that Everett is a fucking madman, and she really is in danger. They know how close we are to her. We have to do something.”

I stared back at him, my hand shaking as my skin grew hot beneath the burn I was inflicting on my fingers.

“What do we do?” I asked softly.

“You know what we have to do,” he answered back, his voice shaking.

“Believe me, Asher, they’re coming for her.”

I dropped the lighter, sending my world plunging into the darkness.

The real world. The one I lived in. It was all fucking darkness.

I knew what we had to do, but I really didn’t want to. God help me, I didn’t want to let her go.

“We should talk to Dante,” I said, my voice trembling. “There’s another way. There always is.”

“Maybe.” He paused. “I love her, you know. So fucking much. I love her so much I’d let her go if I had to. I’ve heard her screams. Seen her terrified face. Wiped her tears. Felt her trembling body against mine. I know her torment. We have to save her, even if it means destroying ourselves.”

“Or destroying them.” I got to my feet, desperate to see my heaven.

Stitches rose with me. “Or destroying them.”

I was good with that. Way too fucking good with it. I tucked my lighter into my leather jacket and walked out from beneath the willow, Stitches at my side.

We needed a plan, and I had a feeling I knew a guy who would have one.

One fucking name.

Asylum.

SIRENA



“I can’t believe I’m here,” Bryce said, settling in beside me on the couch in the living room. The guys had left us alone, although Church had gotten in Bryce’s face and threatened his life before stomping out of the house. Ashes had kissed me so sweetly before whispering he loved me, and Stitches had simply cast me a sad look before leaving.

He was breaking my heart.

I missed him.

I was well aware of what we’d experienced in the medical facility, but I was doing all I could to not think about it. It was hard, and some nights, the nightmares would come, and I’d wake up with my heart pounding hard and my body drenched in sweat. They were rare, but they happened. So far, I’d be fortunate to not have them when one of the guys was in bed with me. The few times they’d occurred, it had been near waking hours and the guys had been in the shower or downstairs.

“I’ve missed hanging out,” Bryce continued, relaxing beside me. “How are you? Is everything...OK?”

I knew what he was asking. He wanted to know if everything was good with the watchers.

I stared back at him, my brows crinkled.

“If you’re being kept here against your will—”

I rested my hand over his to silence him and let him know I was fine.

He exhaled and offered me a nervous smile. “If you need help, ever, just...let me know. These guys are completely terrifying. I just worry about you.”

I squeezed his hand again to reassure him everything was good.

“OK. Well, good. I’m glad. It’s hard for me to tell sometimes, and with you not talking...” his voice trailed off. “I was so worried about you, Sirena. That night...what happened? Did Asylum hurt you?” His gaze raked over my face.

I released his hand and folded mine in my lap and licked my lips. The truth of the matter was, Asylum had terrified me. I’d been so helpless that night. I really thought I was going to die, and there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that he’d have left us both to perish in that damn box and never be found again.

Had I not screamed...

God, I’d be dead right now. They’d probably still be searching for my body because there was no way anyone would know where we were. I very much doubted Sin would fess up.

“I’m here if you want to, I don’t know.” He sighed. “I know you don’t talk and all that, but Sirena, I’m here. I just need you to know that I’ll do anything you need. You just have to let me know. Promise you will?”

I looked over at him and took his hand again and squeezed it. He relaxed and gave me a quick smile, but I knew Bryce. He was truly worried for me.

Asylum and I, well, I didn’t even know. I was still scared of him, but there was something else there. Something I hated to admit because it made me feel like I was losing my mind and really did belong here being treated. He made me just feel so alive. Confused. Terrified. I couldn’t even begin to describe it.

He was a wicked boy, and I was the sweet, corruptible girl.

Stitches knew the depths we’d fallen. I was certain he hadn’t told the guys yet, and I feared the day he did.

Then there was Mirage.

God, what was I doing thinking about any of this when I was with the watchers? When I loved them the way I did. When I had my best friend sitting at my side, wanting to spend the evening with me. When I...well, when I could be doing anything but thinking about the monster I didn’t even really know anymore but certainly wanted.

Shit.

I hated that thought too.

“Do you want to watch a movie?” Bryce’s voice pulled me out of my panicked thoughts.

My answer was simply to get up and go into the kitchen and rummage

around in the cupboards until I located the popcorn and tossed it into the microwave. Bryce thumbed through channels while the popcorn popped, the smell of the buttery goodness filling the air.

“Lord of the Rings?” he called out. “Or Star Wars? Actually, these guys own a lot of really amazing movies. It looks like they downloaded all of them. Damn. This one hasn’t even left the theater. How the hell do they have it?”

The knocking on the door had me snapping my attention away from the display of movies on the massive television. Quickly, I went to the door and peered out the peephole to see Cady standing on the step, her jacket wrapped tightly around her.

I opened the door and stepped aside for her to come in. She did so, throwing me a grin before I closed the door behind her.

“Sorry, I’m late. I got sidetracked. Do you know Adam Larson?”

I had no idea who he was, and if I did, I didn’t realize it. All the faces here seemed to bleed together for me.

My brain had become this muddled mess of crap since the facility. Painting was typically my escape, but I hadn’t done that either. I didn’t have my own space here in the house and didn’t want to encroach on any spare space the guys had, so my painting supplies remained boxed up in Church’s closet. All I had were my clothes, a couple of books, and my phone I didn’t use.

“He’s a nut job,” Bryce called out as Cady went to it on the couch. She narrowed her eyes at him for a moment.

“We’re all crazy here,” she said, waving his words off. “He wants to hang out with me tomorrow night.”

I quickly put the popcorn into a bowl and came back into the living room and sat on the couch. Bryce sat forward and eyed Cady.

“Don’t do it,” he said, his body tensed.

“Why not?”

“I told you why. The guy isn’t good. He’s an asshole.”

Cady waved him off and rolled her eyes. “That’s fine. I’m used to assholes.”

“No, he’s worse—”

“Listen, Bryce, is it? I don’t care about your opinion. I appreciate it, but I’m not interested. I need to maintain my crazy if I’m going to stay here, OK? So if I had to bend over and take one for the team, I’m willing, so lay off.”

Bryce said nothing as they stared one another down. Finally, he cleared his throat and sank back into the cushions.

“Fine.”

“Good.” Cady looked at me. “Hey, sis. How’s it going?”

I slowly chewed my popcorn, telling myself I’d find out who Adam Larson was because I didn’t want Cady to get hurt. I trusted Bryce, and if he said someone was bad news, I believed him. Cady had saved me more times than I could count. I wanted to return the favor.

“That good?” Cady grinned at me. “It’s weird seeing you without your entourage of basket cases. It feels good to breathe, doesn’t it?”

She had a point. As much as I loved and cared for the guys, they did overwhelm me a lot. I didn’t have my own space or time for myself now living here. It wasn’t like Church had given me a choice in the matter. He’d simply spoken, and I’d obeyed.

A tiny smile touched my lips that made Cady’s eyes light up. She liked it when I showed signs that I was inside this strange prison I dwelled in.

“Yeah, I get it. They’re hot as fire, but drive you nuts. I’m glad they let you out to breathe. I was beginning to think I’d have to say something.”

“It is annoying,” Bryce grumbled. “Sirena and I have been close since she arrived. It would be nice if they let me get closer.”

Cady raised her eyebrows high as I darted a quick look to see Bryce’s cheeks flushed.

“Not like that,” he said quickly.

“You were dating her before the guys,” Cady said, grinning widely at him. “What happened?”

“It just...didn’t work out.” Bryce gave me a sad look that made me feel confused. As far as I’d known, we’d been just friends. He’d help keep me safe when I first arrived here.

“You know,” Cady started. “You’re probably a better option for her. These watchers, while I think are cool enough to chum around with, are dangerous. I worry about her.” Her voice caught and she looked to her hands. “I’ve spent my life trying to keep her safe. It just feels like this isn’t keeping her safe.”

She cast me a look, her sadness prominent on her face. “I’m sorry, Rina. I love you. I just worry. I want you to be happy though, so, you know.” She shrugged helplessly.

I looked back down at my hands, my heart in my throat. The truth was, I

knew I wasn't safe either. It scared me to think about the things I'd already endured and what could happen again to me. While I didn't want it to rule my life, I knew that it could at the drop of a hat if I didn't keep myself in check. The last thing I wanted to do was go back to the med facility. Knowing what I knew, what I'd experienced, terrified me. It made me want to find a way out of this place. I knew if I didn't have the watchers, I'd have already tried to escape. I wasn't sure where I'd go, but I'd have gone somewhere no one would find me.

"Let's not talk about this," Cady said. "She doesn't like it. What movie are we watching?"

I felt Bryce's gaze on me as I continued to look down at my hands.

Finally, he spoke. "I was thinking *Lord of the Rings*. She loves that trilogy."

"She really does." Cady chuckled. "OK. I'm in. You know, I haven't seen the entire thing. I always fall asleep."

Bryce let out a little laugh. "It's definitely something you need to be into, but if you stay awake this time, I promise you'll love it like she does."

"All right. Bet." Cady put her feet up on the couch and lay back, and Bryce hit play on the movie, all talk on the stressful things in my life gone.

If I were any other girl and this was any other time, I'd continue eating my popcorn and laugh it all off.

But I wasn't that girl.

I was never that girl.

And I'd never be that girl.

I was the watchers' girl, and that meant I needed to be stronger than my fear.

I exhaled and stared at my favorite movie.

But damn, that fear was killing me.

It was killing Stitches too.

We were on the same page, and I had no way to tell him that.

Maybe I'd just have to show him.

CHURCH



I stared Sully down. He sat across from me, his fingers steepled while he surveyed me back. The fact I even showed up said a lot about the current situation with my father. I knew what he was capable of, and I knew he didn't pull punches.

The last thing I wanted was for Sirena to end up being his punching bag.

"What did you need?" I asked without an ounce of emotion.

"Just to see if you'd come." He sat back in his seat and smirked at me.

I ground my teeth, focusing all my effort on not launching myself out of my chair at the piece of shit.

I wasn't a lapdog for anyone though. Weakness wasn't who I was. I rose to my feet and glared down at the asshole in front of me.

"Do not summon the fucking devil without good cause," I snarled softly. "Just because you think you and my father are best friends doesn't mean I won't fucking snap on you."

The smile on Sully's face faltered. He pushed away from his desk and got to his feet. I noticed he kept the desk between us. If I wanted to, that desk wouldn't stop me from choking the life from his body. I was sure he knew that though. It was probably why he had wards stationed outside his door.

Sully had never really seen me in action. I'd been bred to kill. Trained in all the ways to make someone scream. I'd have carved his soul from his body before he had the chance to scream for help, and that was me being gentle. Had I a solid plan in place, I'd carve him like a fucking pumpkin, but I didn't have that just yet. Once I did though, these little meetings might become more enjoyable for me.

"Do not threaten me, Mr. Church—"

“Say that to me without your fucking voice shaking,” I snapped back, taking a step forward. He mirrored my movement by stepping back, a muscle thrumming along his jaw.

“I have an arrangement with your father. You know what we do here. This is a kingdom you are so lucky to inherit someday.”

“This kingdom will be razed someday,” I said. “And I’ll piss on the ashes.”

“You’re a stupid boy. What your father sees in you is beyond me—”

“He sees a killer,” I said in a low, menacing voice. “A killer he trained. A fucking nightmare he created. He knows who and what I am. You’re the stupid one. Keep fucking with me. At some point, my father will cut my chains and then there will be blood. I’ll be sure to pay you a visit. I’m skilled at teaching lessons.”

Sully’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he stared back at me.

“The next time you call me in here, it better be for a good reason. I don’t play games with amateurs. Your wards wouldn’t even make it in here in time if I decided to kill you. We’re done here.” I turned and walked to his door.

He called out to me as I wrapped my hand around the doorknob.

“You think you’re top of the food chain. Just wait until Everett’s hell is poured out on you.”

“I’m not afraid,” I said, looking at him from over my shoulder. “I am the devil, remember? I’d only be playing in my playground. You’d be wise to remember that. Have a good night, Sully.”

I pulled the door open and stepped out into the hall, the click of the lock sounding out behind me.

“Church,” a ward nodded at me.

I inclined my head at him before continuing down the hall and out the front door.

I needed my specter to calm me before I lost my fucking mind.

†

AFTER TAKING my frustrations out in the woods with my knife, I made it home to find Ashes and Stitches walking onto the front step.

“You just getting back?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Ashes answered, his gaze skirting over the blood on my clothes from the animal I’d slaughtered. “We smoked a little more.”

He didn’t need to tell me. I could see how glassy his eyes were. Stitches too. Both seemed on edge, despite the high.

Something I could definitely share in since I was internally losing my damn mind. I’d gone to the woods rather than returning home right away because I knew the violence in my blood was bubbling too close to the surface. I was on the edge of losing myself and didn’t want Sirena to become a victim of it.

I knew well enough that she was a problem. She was what kept me chained and locked safely away from losing myself in my madness. She’s what my father would use to keep me here. To control me. I wasn’t dumb, and neither was he.

I’d thought about it the entire run home I’d taken through the thick forest. It plagued me as I gutted my prey. It tormented me on the walk home. And it was still buzzing inside me like an angry wasp.

“You good?” Stitches stared at me with worry on his face.

“No,” I answered simply, pushing open the front door and stepping inside.

Immediately, my focus snapped to my girl.

My girl who was asleep on another man, his arm around her.

I saw red.

“Fuck,” Ashes shouted, trying to grab me before I could move, but he was too slow. Even Stitches tripped trying to get to me, and he was the one typically prone to irrational violence. I was the one who let it stew a bit so I could better savor it.

I didn’t even see Cady come into the room, but I felt her as she dove on top of me before I reached Bryce whose eyes snapped open in horror.

Cady and I tumbled to the floor, both of us grappling for control. She was fucking tough, I’d give her that, and hard as hell to pin. Wherever she’d learned to fight was impressive.

Her fist came out and caught me in the jaw, snapping my head sideways. I let out a snarl and grabbed her wrist, but her wiry ass evaded me, and her leg shot out to kick me in the chest.

Hands were on me. The entire scene was chaos as Ashes and Stitches dove in, Cady clocking them too. Even Bryce joined in, trying to separate us and catching my fist in his nose when I’d gotten the upper hand for a

moment.

We were a fucking rat king on the floor of the living room, all fists and curses flying. I didn't even know who was fighting who anymore when Ashes caught me in the ribs while Cady slugged Stitches and Bryce was kicked in the chest by my foot.

It all ended abruptly as a shrill scream rang out. It chilled my blood and sent my heart into my throat.

Sirena.

My specter.

She was screaming at the top of her lungs, her fingers twisted in her long black hair, her eyelids squeezed closed. I scrambled to untangle myself from everyone, but before I could get to my feet, she was out the door in her bare feet, streaking through the night in her white nightgown.

"Fuck," I snarled, shoving Cady off me as she tried to get up and go after Sirena. She pushed me back and I hit my elbow on the end table, a snarl coming from my mouth at the electric jolt it sent through my arm before she dove on me again.

Bryce tripped trying to get over me to go out after Sirena, but it may be because Ashes grabbed at his leg. He tumbled forward and his foot caught Stitches in the forehead, knocking him backward.

"Get the fuck off me." I bucked Cady hard from my body and she fell backward onto Ashes, making him grunt. I was on my feet and out the door in moments.

I had no idea which way she'd run, but I took the main trail, hoping to find her. When I rounded the corner and she was nowhere in sight, my heart thundered hard in my chest. Ashes clapped me on the back as he stopped beside me.

"She'll be OK," he said, slightly breathless from running.

"She was losing her fucking mind." I stared into the darkness, no sign of her. "She's not going to be fine. We need to find her."

"Stitches, Cady, and Bryce are looking too. Let's check the cemetery." The way his voice shook let me know he was just as worried as I was. I don't even know what the hell happened. Maybe I'd scared her. All I knew was that I wanted to hold her and tell her everything was fine. It was completely unlike me, but I wanted it more than my next breath.

"Come on." I broke into a run again, Ashes beside me, as we made our way through the darkness to the cemetery. I hoped beyond anything we'd

locate her there.

I went straight to the willow tree and bench, praying with each step I'd find her curled beneath it, waiting for me.

When we broke through the limbs, it was to empty space.

"No," I whispered, the hope dying in my chest. "Fuck. Sirena!" I shouted into the night, desperate to find her. "Specter!"

"Sirena!" Ashes joined in calling her name. Of course, we were greeted by silence. The one fucking time I needed to hear her screaming and it wasn't there.

"Sirena!" my voice cracked. If Sully got her, he'd haul her straight into the facility without a second thought. I knew that fuck would call my father. Shit would go from bad to worse. My father was simply biding his time. Watching. Waiting. Observing. He wanted to see my desperation. Losing Sirena for any amount of time would make me absolutely insane.

I'd be pliable. Usable. We both knew I'd do anything for her even if I hated admitting it out loud.

She'd ensnarled me, and I was hooked. I didn't want her to let me go, and I had no fucking desire to release her.

Shit was going to get bad if someone else found her first.

"I'll call Stitches and see if he's found her," Ashes's voice cut through my thoughts. I said nothing as he dialed Stitches. I stared into the dark cemetery before walking through it slowly, hoping to catch a glimpse of her pale skin or white nightgown hiding among the garden made of stone with its bone roots.

"Please, Sirena," I whispered into the night, stopping next to the old mausoleum. "Come back."

ASYLUM



“Come on.” I gestured for Sin to get off his ass and follow me out of the dorm.

“Fuck off.” He gave me the finger to emphasize how much fucking I could do.

Sighing, I rolled my eyes. “I’m not in the mood to do this with you tonight. Come on. I want to show you something.”

“It’s midnight, dick. I’m tired.” He continued to stare up at the ceiling.

“I didn’t fucking ask. I’m telling you to get off your ass and come with me. This is important.”

Grumbling, he sat up, his blond hair a fucked-up mess as he gave me a sour look.

“What’s so damn important that I have to go out into the cold at midnight?”

“Everything. Trust me.” I pulled the door open and gave him a pointed look.

“I fucking hate living with you.” He got up and pushed his pajama bottoms off before tugging on his jeans and a hoodie. He shoved his feet into his boots and scowled at me as he stormed past and went into the hall.

“You’re being a little difficult,” I commented. “No reason to be that way.”

“I’m being difficult? You’re the one who won’t let me sleep and wants to go stomping around at midnight in the cold.”

“I’d have let you sleep once I smothered you with your pillow.”

“Don’t do me any fucking favors,” he muttered.

I let out a soft chuckle. “Have I ever told you how much I love you,

Sinclair?” I threw my arm around his shoulder.

“Get off me.” He shoved me away, making me laugh harder. “You’re such a fucking creep.”

“I’m the creep?” We stepped onto the dark path, and I looked around. “Look at you out here at midnight with me. What’s that say about you?”

“That my creep roommate wouldn’t let me sleep.”

“So sassy, Sinclair. That’s a huge turn on for me.”

He let out a soft curse.

“Come. Let’s go into the woods.”

He groaned but followed me into the trees. After several long minutes of trampling through the dark forest, he finally spoke.

“You could have killed me in the dorm.”

“Of course, I could have. I could have killed you a million times while I stood over your bed and watched you sleep every night. But I haven’t.”

He swore at me again, making me laugh.

“You really watch me sleep?”

“Of course. I like it when those around me are vulnerable,” I said, stopping near the small clearing and leaning against a tree. I pulled out a special sugar-laced joint and lit it. I’d procured it from the streets not long ago out of curiosity. I knew it was all the rage, albeit a bit pricey. I took a hit before handing it off to him.

He eyed it for a moment before taking it and pulling in a drag.

“Didn’t know you smoked this shit,” he said. “Thought you just did weed. What is it called again?”

“It’s called sugar,” I answered, taking back the sugar stick and smoking while I continued to lean against the tree. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me. Perfect time to ask any questions you have. We can play twenty questions.”

“OK.” He settled on a fallen log and stared at me through the dim moonlight. “Why the fuck are we out here in the cold at midnight?”

“We’re hunting,” I said simply.

“What are we hunting?”

“Oh, you never know.” I took another hit and handed it back to him before blowing out the smoke.

He sighed and inhaled his hit deeply. We stayed in silence for quite a while before he asked another question.

“Where were you last night? You didn’t come home.”

“I had to see a friend.”

“What’s that friend’s name?”

“*The Archangel*,” I said, resting the back of my head against the tree, enjoying the high. “He has fallen so low. Time is ticking for the seed he sows.”

“Sounds major.” Sin stretched and let out a yawn.

“It is,” I said, looking down at him on the log. “You’ll see.”

“I honestly don’t care, man. I just want to go to sleep.”

“So sleep, princess.” I looked up through the nearly bare trees to the moon above us.

He let out another of his exasperated sighs. “So how is Mirage?”

“Tucked safely away,” I murmured, my heart picking up its pace.

Coming.

Close.

So close.

“That’s a shitty answer—”

I held up my hand to silence him and peeked around the tree I was leaning against to see her emerge into the clearing at full tilt. She stumbled and fell forward, crashing to the cold forest floor.

A small smile touched my lips as I pushed off the tree.

“Come, Sinclair. A small, innocent creature has stumbled in.”

He got slowly to his feet, his apprehension rolling from him in waves as he peered to where Sirena lay on the ground.

“What’s going on?” he asked, his voice filled with worry. It sounded weird coming from him, considering who he was. It was a nice change.

“I don’t know. That’s what we’re going to find out.” I walked carefully to where Sirena was, noting she sat up slowly, her body trembling like she was crying. And she was. I could practically taste her tears from where I was.

She wrapped her arms around herself as we circled her slowly.

“Hello, firefly,” I murmured, stopping in front of her and squatting so I could look at her. She was a mess. Her hair was tangled around her, there was a smudge of dirt on her face from falling, and her face was soaked with tears.

“You ran so far and so fast. Out of the house and away at last. Pretty firefly, why do you weep? Those watchers are wicked and you’re in too deep?” I cocked my head to the left at her, drinking in the silence I hated.

“Why are you so quiet, my light?”

Her bottom lip wobbled. Sin stopped beside me and stared down at her.

She shook harder. Her chest heaved. More tears.

“She’s afraid of you,” I said, continuing to study her.

“What happened?” he demanded, ignoring my words. “What’s going on? Where are the guys?”

I looked up at the sky for a moment before closing my eyes.

“Ah, Church is mad, and that makes her sad. Little firefly fell asleep and that was bad.”

“Enough with the children’s rhymes. Is everyone OK?”

“They’re worried.” I smiled. “They should be because look what fell into our laps, Sinclair. A pretty little firefly, far from home. Tell me, Sirena, what are you willing to do to be safe?”

She cried harder, hugging her small body tighter. I loved the way she trembled for me.

“Sirena, do you know who I am?” I asked, hoping for some sort of communication from her. I hated how she only spoke in silence since I’d released her.

She sobbed harder.

Of course, she knows. Take her home.

Let her run so you can chase! Chase! CHASE!

I let out a wild cackle.

“You came here looking for *him*. For Mirage. Ah, tut, tut, my little peanut. You found me instead.”

Her bottom lip trembled.

“Want to play a game, firefly?”

She stared at me with tears flooding her cheeks.

“If you can escape me and my friend Sin and make it back to the watchers’ house, I’ll let you go. If you can’t, we get to keep you for the night. How does that sound?”

The violent tremble was all I needed to see. She’d run here out of fear. She’d try to escape.

There was no escape, but she didn’t know that.

I reached out and ran my knuckles along her cool skin. She was freezing out here in her thin white nightgown and no shoes. Quickly, I pulled off my jacket and wrapped it around her small, shaking body.

Before I pulled away from her, I whispered in her ear.

“Fly away, firefly. If we catch you, we may not let you out of the jar we put you in. Is that what you want? To be trapped with me again?”

She trembled harder.

“Mm.” I inhaled her scent. “Better be faster. I’m worse than Church when it comes to the chase. When I catch you, you’re going to scream for me again.” I pulled away from her to see her still silently crying.

“Run,” I whispered. “Run, firefly. Don’t stop, lest the boogeyman get you.”

Her chest heaved with her labored breathing for a moment before she shot to her feet, my jacket falling from her shoulders as she darted into the dark woods.

“What are you doing?” Sin demanded.

“Having a little fun.”

“You knew she’d be here. That’s why you made me come with you.”

“Perhaps. That’s not the point.” I stood and looked at him. “The point is, we need to catch her before they do.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

I cocked my head and smiled. “Nothing. Yet. We’re going to make it happen. If you catch her before I do, make sure you follow your instinct. Always follow your instinct, Sinclair.” I backed away from him. “Now let’s have some fun.”

I didn’t wait for his answer. I loped off into the night, howling like a madman. It was the perfect night to catch fireflies.

SIN



I rushed through the dark forest, irritated out of my fucking mind at Asylum. The last thing I wanted was him to get his hands on her, but the alternative was me doing it. I already knew how much she hated me and how scared of me she was.

I assumed catching her would end badly for me. Again.

But I pushed onward, darting through the thick, overgrown forest, my breath coming out in puffs, my high pushing me forward.

My mind warred with me. I didn't want to be the one who caught her, but I also didn't want it to be Asylum. I had no idea what he planned for her, but if either of us got her before Church or the guys did, I knew the inevitable would be for her to suffer through the night with us.

When did shit gets so fucking complicated?

Easy enough to answer. The moment Sirena came into our lives.

Fucking damnit.

A branch snapped me in the arm, making me grunt as I raced through the night. I skidded to a halt when I saw Sirena against a tree, her white nightgown giving her away in the darkness. Her black hair hung in tangles around her. From where I stood, I could tell she was crying.

I looked around and saw we were alone in the darkness.

Fucking figured it would be me to find her.

The last thing I wanted was to approach her, but apparently, my feet had other plans as I slinked forward quickly and positioned myself on the other side of the tree she was against.

As much as I didn't want to do this, I knew I had to. Asylum freaked me out and made me question my sanity, but he'd never been wrong. I had to

trust his process, the weird fuck.

Drawing in a breath, I stepped around the tree and faced Sirena.

Her eyes widened at me, and her lips parted. Fear washed over her face as she drew back tighter against the tree, her chest heaving.

“Hey, Siren,” I murmured. “You look lost.”

Her bottom lip wobbled, the dried tears on her cheek visible in the moonlight. Instinctively, I reached out and thumbed away a new tear, my brows crinkled.

“Don’t cry,” I said softly.

I was stupid if I thought that was going to help her. A new flood of tears worked their way down her pale cheeks.

“Fuck,” I choked out. “Don’t. Don’t cry. It’s OK. I’m not going to hurt you.”

I saw the look in her eyes though. *Disbelief*. She didn’t believe shit out of my mouth. And why would she? I’d promised her the same damn thing before I’d stuffed her away in that box with Asylum only weeks before.

“I’m not here to hurt you,” I said fiercely. “I’m not. I-I...”

I what? What was I there to do?

The words Asylum spoke to me echoed in my head.

Follow your instinct.

Fuck it. What could it hurt? It wasn’t like I was winning any brownie points by making her cry and try to crawl up the damn tree to get away from me.

“Look,” I said, tugging off my hoodie and baring my battered chest to her.

Her eyes darted to the various cuts and bruises on my body before they settled on my chest where I’d carved her name deep into my skin.

Her brows crinkled as her lips moved, no sound coming from them, but I could recognize what she was saying.

Siren.

She was reading her name on my chest.

“For you,” I whispered. I didn’t know what I thought I was proving with the horrid display, but I was willing to do anything to get her to calm herself down to see I wasn’t there to hurt her. Not really. At least I hoped I wasn’t, but one never knew with Asylum at the helm.

She shook harder.

Well, fuck.

“Here,” I said, backing away from her and grabbing my hoodie off the forest floor. I handed it to her, but she looked away from me, her jaw quivering.

“You’re cold,” I said gently. “I only want you to be warm. You can wear it.”

She didn’t respond as she continued to look away from me. Her gaze darted around, most likely looking for an escape.

I sighed and dropped the hoodie back to the ground and closed the space between us. She was shaking like a leaf. I assumed it was from being cold mostly, but I wasn’t stupid enough to think her fear wasn’t involved.

Trusting my instinct and that crazy fuck Asylum, I gathered my courage and reached out for her. She did as I expected and squirmed when I tried to bring her against my body. She was like holding ice. She was frozen to the bone and needed to be warmed.

“Don’t. Don’t fight me. Please, Siren,” I whispered frantically as she tried to escape from my hold. I held tight though, vowing she’d have to gut me to get me to release her.

Despite the cold and her fear, she was still strong. she bucked against my body, forcing me to adjust my grip on her. Her fear only made me want to hold her that much more, so I tightened my arms around her.

She continued her struggle until she finally slowed to a stop and sagged against me. She knew she couldn’t win.

It was a repeat of the last time.

I fucking hated that. It was my nightmare, back from the dead to torture us both.

She shook against me, but I loosened my hold on her just a little so she could breathe easier.

We stood that way forever, her in my arms in the middle of the woods beneath a full moon.

“Sinful,” she finally whispered in her delicate voice.

I swallowed hard at the sound of my name on her lips.

“I-I d-don’t trust y-you,” her voice trembled with the words.

I held her tighter, my eyes burning with the first round of tears. One slipped past my lashes and slid down my cheek, followed quickly by another. I tried to blink them away, but it was no use.

“I know, Siren,” I whispered back thickly. “I know.”

She went silent as a grave after that, but she didn’t try to pull away from

me. She'd given up. I recognized her defeat as she sagged against me, the fight gone. Once more, we remained that way for so long that her breathing grew deeper. She'd given in and had fallen asleep against me.

"I won't hurt you," I murmured, kissing the top of her head fiercely. "I'll never hurt you again. I swear it."

And with those words, I scooped her into my arms and cradled her against my chest before walking back the way I'd come. I wanted to keep her, but she wasn't mine, and I knew she never would be. I'd made my bed, and this was my punishment. I could have had it all, but I'd been stupid.

I accepted that. It took losing it all for me to see it.

Slowly, I made my way back to the watchers' house and opened the front door. It was empty inside, but I didn't expect them to be there if she were missing.

I went straight to Church's bedroom with her and placed her in his bed before tucking her in. She looked like a sleeping princess as she lay beneath the thick covers.

Knowing I couldn't stay, I leaned down and brushed my lips gently across hers, resting my forehead against hers and breathing in her scent once more.

"I'm sorry for my sins, Siren. So fucking sorry, baby." One of my tears fell onto her cheek as I stayed that way for a moment.

Finally, I found the strength within me to straighten myself and turn to the door.

I stopped when I saw Stitches in the doorway, watching.

"I found her in the woods," I murmured. "I didn't hurt her. I brought her home."

He said nothing as he studied me with his dark eyes.

With a slow perusal, his gaze moved down my body, stopping at her name carved into my chest, before taking in the rest of me and coming back to focus on my face.

"You're a fucking mess," he finally said.

"I know."

He let out a soft huff. "This doesn't change anything." He gestured to my battered body, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"I know."

He was quiet for a moment. "But it helps to know you're suffering like I am. Like we all are."

“I never meant for this to happen.” I gestured to her. “I-I didn’t know... how I’d feel. How I felt. I fucked it up.”

He nodded wordlessly.

“I’m sorry.”

“If you only knew the shit we went through, Sinclair—”

“I’m so fucking sorry. I don’t know what else I can say or do.”

“Nothing. There’s nothing, OK? Just...move on. Let it go.”

“I can’t fucking let it go.” I gestured helplessly to her. “I-I realize now—”

“It hurts. I know it does, but we aren’t ready. I don’t know if we will ever be. Understand that. She’s definitely not ready. And I’m...fucked, man. I’m fucked.”

“Malachi—”

“You need to go,” his voice hardened. “Church and Ashes will be here soon. You don’t want them to see you here.”

“If I could just talk to them...”

“I’ll make sure you fucking burn alive this time,” he husked out. “I will. When I say we aren’t ready, I mean it, Sinclair. You need to leave.”

“What if I can prove myself? What then? Is there a chance I can come home? That I can be part of what I lost?” I was desperate, a part of me coming through I didn’t even think I had in me. I wasn’t someone who begged, but here I was, begging like a bitch to come home.

“That choice isn’t mine alone. It resides with her.” He nodded to Sirena sleeping soundly in bed. “Everything depends on what she wants. There is very little that matters past that. You want to come home? Win her over first, not me. Then maybe you’ll be able to win us over.”

I nodded, my throat tight. “OK.”

I stepped forward to leave, but he put his hand against my shoulder when I made to pass him.

“Don’t ever let me see you kiss her again,” he said in a dangerous, low voice. “You do not belong to her, and she does not belong to you. You ever fucking put your lips on her again, I’ll tear them from your face and make you eat them. Got it?”

I said nothing as we eyed one another.

I didn’t need to though.

I got the message loud and clear, and I was ready to die for her.

He let his hand fall away from me, and I stepped into the hallway and went downstairs before going outside. The night air bit at me, but it was

worth it.

Slowly, I made my way back to my dorm and opened the door to find Asylum lying in his bed with his hands behind his head and his gaze on the ceiling.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. I assumed he’d still be out searching for Sirena in the hopes of finding her first.

“Waiting for you.” He didn’t look at me.

I said nothing and quickly pulled my pajama bottoms on before I flopped down onto my mattress and stared up at the ceiling too.

“You knew she’d be there tonight. You knew I’d be the one to find her,” I finally said after several silent moments.

“I may have had an inkling.”

“She’s afraid of me. She hates me.”

“She won’t always. I tried to kill her, bestie, and she still acknowledges my existence.”

He had a point.

“Now what?” I murmured.

“Now we wait. Remember what I said? That she’d come to you?”

I swallowed hard and said nothing, my heart in my throat.

“Just keep the faith. You did good tonight. We’re almost back in the game.”

“You think they’ll let you in?” I finally looked over at him.

He turned his head and smiled at me. “It doesn’t matter what they want. It matters what she wants. You know that. And I’m in such a position to make her want me. Little firefly, fluttering through a nightmare. All we must do is get her to relax and beckon her to come here. A mirage in the distance and an asylum at her back. Her sin in her heart, then nothing she will lack. She will be ours. Then this world falls. We take the victory. Winners take all.” He winked at me and turned to look back at the ceiling.

“Mirage too?”

He shrugged. “Can’t have one of us without the other. Seems a given.”

“The watchers will never allow it. You’re too...much. Too...weird.”

“It’s not up to them,” he said simply. “Sleep, Sinclair. We have more dastardly deeds to commit tomorrow. You’ll need your rest.”

I didn’t reply.

Something told me it wouldn’t have mattered anyway. Any questions for Asylum always just led to more questions and no answers.

I just needed to trust the process.

I was beginning to believe it was the key to everything.

STITCHES



Sirena was pissed.

She had every right to be. Church had launched himself at Bryce and caused a fuck of a lot of issues. It was quickly becoming apparent that Sirena had a backbone and was more like Cady than we originally thought.

She may not use her voice, but she sure as shit used her silence.

It was killing us all. I'd been distant lately, but even I was feeling her coldness. It had been a week since shit had gone down in the living room, and I'd found Sin putting his damn lips on her in Church's room after bringing her home. I hadn't said a word of it to anyone. I'd simply told Church and Ashes I'd come home and found her in bed.

She'd withdrawn from all of us. As much as Church and Ashes tried to talk to her, she wasn't having it. She'd taken to sleeping on the couch and frowning a fuck of a lot lately.

I didn't like it.

I hated when she was upset, and I didn't know how the hell to fix it.

"Specter, eat," Church instructed, handing her a piece of buttered toast.

She turned her nose up at him and glared ahead, stubborn as fuck.

"Heaven, come on, baby," Ashes urged while Church's nostrils flared. "You need to eat. We're going to have a long day. We have to go out tonight to burn, remember?" The hopeful look in his eyes suggested he wanted her there with us.

I remained quiet, not sure what to say. It sucked this was happening, but I wasn't stupid enough to think she didn't have a good reason for her anger. She'd wanted a friend, and we'd shit on it. Church had shit on it most, but we were brothers, and I knew we all felt similar about coming home to find her

sleeping on Bryce.

Sirena doubled down and got to her feet.

I knew it was a bad move the second she did it because Church snagged her hand and tugged her onto his lap, our kitchen table shaking and my orange juice slopping over the sides of my glass as her hip bumped against the wood.

Sighing, I steadied the glass, knowing I was probably going to have to intervene if Ashes didn't. I could see he was already coiled and ready to spring into action.

"I'm-I'm sorry," Church started.

She looked away from him, a sour look on her face.

That only pissed him off more. It was rare he apologized. I knew that look on his face too. He was going to lose his shit in 3...2...1...

He gripped her face tightly. "Fucking stop and look at me."

She finally did as commanded, her eyes boring right into his so fiercely I'd have shook had I not known her.

But shit, maybe I didn't know our sweet girl the way I thought I did. I was fast learning she was definitely stubborn and could be pissed for days. I think it was safe to say we were all learning it. It was hitting them harder than me, but it still fucking hurt.

"What can I do to make this right? I'm sorry I attacked your...friend. I didn't like seeing you sleeping on him. I didn't like him touching you. Is that so fucking wrong, specter? To hate to see another man's hands on our girl? I'm only fucking human. Tell me." He gave her face a shake.

I watched, fascinated, as she reached out and gripped his face the way he was gripping hers and gave him a shake right back.

He blinked in surprise at her. I shot Ashes a quick look to see him watching in worry.

Church shoved the plates out of the way so fast I barely had time to snap up my orange juice before it spilled. Within seconds, he had her lifted and sitting on the kitchen table. Ashes quickly moved his juice out of the way before Church pushed her onto her back, her fighting him the whole way down.

"Hold her," Church commanded in a low growl.

"No," I said, my throat tight. I'd played that fucking part before.

"Malachi, fucking hold her," Church snapped.

I hesitated for a moment, fear and anger and every fucking emotion I

could possibly place running through my veins.

But it was the look in her eyes as she struggled beneath Church that made me reach out and take her wrists and bind them over her head.

She angled her head to look at me, the hardness of her features washing away to my sweet girl.

She knew what I was thinking. What I was feeling.

We'd been here before. Maybe not exactly like this, but I'd held her before while she was fucked.

"It's OK," I murmured to her. "It's OK, angel. I've got you."

The tension left her body as Church pushed into her pussy, making her arch her back off the table as she took all of his sudden intrusion.

"Motherfucker." Church groaned as he thrust in and out of her, the sound of her wet pussy in my ears.

As much as I didn't want to get hard, my dick was at attention in my pants.

I glanced over at Ashes to see him eating his toast, his eyes drinking everything in.

"Really, Asher? Toast? Now?" I muttered.

"I hate soggy toast," he said, smiling at me. "I already buttered it."

Church snapped his hips forward, sending Sirena twisting her hands around my wrists so she was holding me now.

Church moved faster in and out of her body, his blond hair a mess from the fucking he was giving her. The table rocked beneath them. My orange juice tipped over and made her wiggle as the coolness dampened her skin. Church grunted and gripped her hips tighter when she tried to squirm away from him.

"You don't get to be mad at me for loving you," Church snarled, leaning over her body. He gripped her face tightly. "Do you understand me, specter? You don't get to be fucking mad at me for having these feelings for you and everything you encompass. For wanting to protect you. To keep you safe."

She stared back at him for a moment before she lifted her head and kissed him. He let go of it all while she continued to cling to me, his lips fused to hers in a violent kiss that made even me blush and look away.

I met Ashes's eyes as he swallowed the last of his toast. He gave me his gentle smile and pulled out his lighter and opened and closed it.

Sirena's nails dug into my flesh as she came, her body quaking beneath Church's. He let out a feral groan as he emptied himself inside her, finally

slowing to a stop, their lips still fused to one another's in a deep kiss.

"I love you," Church murmured against her lips. "But I won't accept that behavior from you with anyone. Do you understand? No more, specter. You won't be seeing Bryce again—"

She let out a snarl, and I released her hands.

She pushed against Church hard, dislodging him from her hot center and knocking him back onto his chair.

He was clearly as surprised as the rest of us because he stared in wonder at her as she moved quickly off the table and straddled his lap. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that he was balls deep inside her again because he let out a soft groan as she shifted and gripped his face.

Within moments, she was rocking on him, her fingers still gripping his face in what appeared to be a tight, painful hold.

He took it all, surprising me. I had to admit, I couldn't tear my eyes away from the scene. The same seemed to hold true for Ashes because he was hyper-focused on them too.

She came with her head thrown back, Church gripping her hips tightly.

She finally descended from her euphoria and leaned into Church. He stiffened as she pressed her lips to his ear.

It only lasted a moment before she pulled away from him and got to her feet, adjusting her nightgown as she went.

I watched in silence as she grabbed a piece of toast off the table before dropping a kiss on Ashes's lips, and then coming to me.

I stared up at her, not sure what the fuck to do. I'd just witnessed a whole other creature in her place, and I couldn't say I was disapproving. In fact, my dick was still painfully hard in my pants, and I knew she saw it because her gaze darted to my lap before she leaned in and kissed my forehead gently. I closed my eyes and breathed out, my heart fluttering at her soft lips on my skin.

I can't. I can't. I fucking can't.

I don't deserve it.

I don't deserve her.

Fuck, angel, baby. Please...

She pulled away from me and hooked her pinky with mine, completely shattering me.

Take her hand. Pull her onto your lap. Kiss her back. Fuck. Don't let her go. I can't let her go. I have to. I fucking hate to. Someday it'll be better. I'll

be better.

Her pinky slipped away from mine, and she left the room, going upstairs to Church's room, presumably to shower.

We sat in silence for a moment before I cleared my throat. "That didn't go as planned."

A lopsided grin spilled onto Church's face as he reached for a piece of toast, his dick back in his pants. All the anger he'd had was gone, replaced by something I'd never seen before.

He was filled with light and happiness. I'd only ever known him as a looming black shadow, ready to kill at the drop of a hat. This Church wasn't that Church. He looked...heavenly. Content. Genuinely happy.

"What did she say to you?" Ashes asked, resting his elbows on the table.

Church shook his head, smiling. "*Winner takes all.* I'm inclined to believe that."

Ashes let out a soft chuckle. "So does she win this round and get to see Bryce again?"

"I think she does. For now. I'll give her another chance. I've always wanted to kick his ass. He's too fucking perfect for my liking. This may afford me the opportunity to." Church bit into his toast and chewed, that smile still on his face.

Ashes turned his blue eyes on me. "And you?"

"What about me?" I scoffed, my throat tight.

He studied me for a moment. "Malachi, you need to love her too. You're only hurting yourself. Look at what happened to Sin—"

"Don't fucking compare me to him," I snapped. "I'm not him. I'd never hurt her the way he did. I-I..." my voice faltered.

I did hurt her like he did.

I'd tried to hang myself.

I'd held her down so she was fucked by Asylum in the facility.

I'd hurt her just as much as he did. Just in different, awful ways.

"Fuck," I snarled, getting to my feet so fast that the chair toppled over behind me and crashed to the floor. "Fuck this."

I stormed from the room and went outside, forgoing my jacket. It was an immediate regret because the cold slammed into me, but I didn't want to go back inside. Like I did so often in my life, I kept on fucking going.

†

“HEY,” Cady called out as I walked through the courtyard after my latest therapy session in which Janice tried to convince me the sins of my mother were not mine to bear, at least not alone. But fuck me if I’d drag anyone else down with me.

She’d evaluated my med intact and upped my dose on the new pills. I didn’t even fucking care. They mildly made me feel detached, so if something stronger would make it even more so, I was game.

“Malachi!”

I ignored her and kept going.

It was only when her hand shot out and she grabbed mine that I stopped and glared at her.

“I’m fucking talking to you, stranglehold,” she said, her breath coming out in white puffs.

“What do you want?” We hadn’t spoken to her since the rumble in the living room. Church had banned her from our house, which was one of the reasons Sirena was also pissed.

“I need to talk to you.”

“So talk.” I looked past her to see some guy in a rabbit mask focused on us a few tables away. I didn’t know what that guy’s name was, but he’d started here earlier this year. Something told me he was one of the initiates from early on and just hadn’t taken his mask off since then. I sucked with names though, and since all he’d ever done was lurk around campus, I’d ignored it. We all had our issues. Apparently, his was identity related, or maybe he just fucking loved being a rabbit. He was a big bastard though. He rivaled me and the guys in size. I didn’t remember seeing anyone that big in our line-up, but I was high as balls, so my memory was a little cloudy.

“I’m supposed to go with you guys tonight to burn, remember?”

“No.” I frowned as rabbit boy cocked his head to the right and seemingly studied me.

“Listen, I can’t make it,” she continued. When I didn’t respond because I was too focused on the rabbit, she snapped her fingers in my face. “Malachi. Listen to me.”

I shook my head and stared down at her. “OK. Great. I was under the

impression you knew you weren't exactly the top pick to hang out with after the living room incident."

She rolled her eyes and waved me off. "It'll take a lot more than fighting with you jerks to make me leave. I'm just giving you space right now. I'll be back in no time. Rina seems like she's fine."

I nodded. "She is."

"Good."

"So why can't you come with us?"

She bit her bottom lip and looked down at her hands. "I kind of have a date."

"A date?" I raised my brows at her. "With who?"

"Adam Larson."

"Larson? He's a fucking nut, Cadence. He'd probably give Asylum a run for his money. Little shit hears voices, his just aren't as useful as Asylum's are."

She shrugged. "I'm willing to find out."

"Fucking ridiculous," I muttered.

She laughed and fell in step with me as I walked again.

"So what's up with you? You're being so weird with Rina. Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"But can you admit you are being weird?"

"I can admit that." I leveled my focus on the rabbit as we passed by. His lips were visible because of the cut of the mask he wore. He gave me a smile that made me frown deeper. He seemed so familiar to me, but I couldn't place him.

He didn't say a word as we walked past, but he did turn his head and keep focused on me as we moved away. He gave me the chills, and that was saying something. Any other time I'd have gone to him and pummeled his ass just for breathing too close to me, but call me crazy, I think I was losing my edge. Maybe it was my depression. Or the fucking drugs they had me on. Who knew? I'd let Janice know though. I'd taken the higher dose today already and wasn't feeling too horrible, although I was finding it harder to connect my emotions. It was like I knew they were there, but they were lost in a bin filled with bullshit, and I was grasping at them, unfamiliar with a new toy.

It didn't make much sense in my head, so I said fuck it.

She pulled me to a stop and stared up at me. "Talk to me, Malachi."

I swallowed hard as I stared down at the sincerity on her face. “What could I possibly say to you, Cadence?”

She studied me for a moment before she let out a sigh. “I’ll tell you one truth if you tell me one.”

As much as I wanted to roll my eyes at her and tell her to piss off, I stopped myself. Maybe I needed to say something to make the pain go away.

“OK,” I murmured, giving in.

“I saw Sin bringing Rina home that night.” She stared up at me. “I know you were there too, and I know you haven’t told anyone about it. Do you want to talk about it?”

I looked past her and people watched for a moment.

Did I want to talk about it?

Yes and no.

But really, yes.

“I-I do want to talk about it.”

“So talk. I’ll listen.”

I stood silently for a long time, staring into space, warring with myself about what to say. It was Cady’s hand in mine that brought me back to reality.

“Malachi,” she murmured. “Come on. Talk to me. I’m impartial here, really. I want the best for my sister, and I know you’re struggling. I only want to help.”

I exhaled. “I told Sin to fuck off, basically.”

She nodded and squeezed my hand. “Why haven’t you told the guys?”

I noticed she hadn’t released my hand. It felt good to feel the warmth of human contact, even if it was Cady. I knew it was a comfort thing she was doing because I’d seen her do it with Sirena. While she was all snark, fists, and teeth, Cadence Lawrence was also sweet when she wanted to be, and if it had anything to do at all with Sirena, she was ten times more violent and sweet, depending on the situation.

“And?” She prompted.

“He kissed her. She was out, but he did it. I wanted to fucking kill him, but I held back because I guess I saw the change in him. He’s not the same Sin I used to know. I’m worried he’s broken,” I admitted. “But I saw the love he has for her. He’s finally realized it. He wants to come back.”

“What do you want?”

I was quiet again for a minute, sorting through my thoughts. “I don’t

know. I miss him, but I'm so mad at him. Sirena and I both suffered because of him. More her than me. Hell, we all suffered. Even Dante and Asher. Had I not fucked up and tried to kill myself, maybe none of this shit would have happened with her at the facility." I felt the tear slide down my cheek as she held my hand. I sniffled and wiped hastily at it.

"What happened at the facility?" she asked in a whisper.

"Terrible things," I managed to say. "Horrible fucking things I'm still trying to work through. Sirena...she...*fuck*." I wiped again at my eyes with my free hand. "I tried, OK? I did what I could for her while we were in there. It was all I could do. I'd have killed every motherfucker in that place if I could have. Know that, Cady. Fucking know that someday I will."

She nodded. "I believe that."

"I told Sin. He's the only one who knows what happened aside from Asylum. So I guess me, Sin, Asylum, and my angel are bonded together in a way in that darkness. I know I should tell Dante and Asher, but I also know they'll fucking lose their minds. Honestly, I don't want more harm to come to Sin. Deep down, I want him to come home, I guess." There. I'd said it. I breathed out, feeling like a little less pressure was resting on my chest.

"Do you really love my sister?"

"Yes," I whispered. "So fucking much."

"Then why not tell her? Go to her and love her. I know it's bothering her."

"She came into my room and stayed with me one night. She hasn't been back since, but I didn't give her a reason to come back. I just ... I feel like a failure. I don't feel like I did enough to protect her. I have so much fucking guilt and remorse because of it. I don't feel worthy enough for her. Sometimes I can't stop thinking about dying. About finishing what I started."

"Do you think you'd do that again? Try?"

"I am who I am, Claws. I don't know. Sometimes I don't feel in control of myself. Those are the times we should worry."

"And now?"

"Now? Now I'm just fucking lost and hurting." I hated to admit it but fuck it. May as well lay it all out. It felt good in a way to say it.

I sighed. "That was way more than one truth. You owe me, like, four now."

She released my hand and tilted her head, contemplating it.

"OK. I already slept with someone here. He had a tiny dick."

“Body shaming is never nice, Claws.” I smirked at her, making her grin.

“It’s not shaming if it’s true, stranglehold.” She bumped her shoulder against mine. “Let’s see. Uh, I like you guys more than I let on.”

“We’re aware. I mean, we’re cool, right?”

“The coolest.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s just Rina. She loves you, and I love her. So as long as she feels that way, I’ll accept you guys, but I absolutely will fight you if I have to.”

“We’re aware. Speaking of which, where did you learn to fight like that?”

She shrugged. “While Rina was singing and dancing, I was taking martial arts. My dad taught me a lot too.”

“Your dad did martial arts?”

She nodded. “In retrospect, it’s weird since he was just a normal dad. But he’s gone now, so really, fuck him.”

I could get on board with that train of thought. I felt that way about my family as well.

“I continued on after he left. Been doing it for years. I spar with the boys both in bed and out.” She winked at me. “Spoiler. They fucking love it.”

I snorted at her, feeling lighter than I had in a long time.

“I gotta go. They have me down for therapy this afternoon. Go talk to Rina. Maybe give her some dick? Ashes said you haven’t yet. If you do, tell her I said *you’re welcome*.”

“Fuck off,” I said, grinning through the comment.

“I hope so. I heard Adam is a sure thing. He has a few personalities, one of them has to be loose, right?”

I shook my head at her as she waved goodbye to me with her middle finger.

Who needed therapy when you had Cadence Lawrence to talk to?

SIRENA



I was still upset with the guys over Bryce, but I was warming up slowly to them. It made me mad that they wanted to dictate who I kept as my friends. It wasn't like I had a lot to choose from, but Bryce meant something to me. He was all I'd had when I'd arrived at Chapel Crest, and I cared deeply for him to the point it bordered on confusion.

Everything felt like a mess. I was sure I may have gotten Church to give him another chance, and for that I was grateful. I'd had to step outside my comfort zone with him at breakfast, but I had to admit I found it refreshing and exciting. I enjoyed it more than I thought I would. It had taken all my bravery to do it, but I felt like I was getting better at taking control.

Of course, there was Sin looming over my head. Being terrified of him in the dark woods had almost made me want to rethink running out of the house during my meltdown. I really thought he was going to finish what he'd started all those weeks ago.

He'd surprised me though.

He was different. Kinder. Gentler. He still scared me though because I'd been bitten by him before during a moment of kindness that he'd offered me.

Well, mostly kindness.

And his chest.

He'd carved my name deep into his flesh. He was going to scar horribly. It made my guts twist knowing he'd done that as a way to punish himself.

I never thought my name could be a punishment, but I was fast learning it was definitely a possibility.

That hurt me more than I knew I should let it.

I stared at the wall in the living room, feeling like I needed to breathe. All

of the things were piling up on me, sending my stress levels soaring. Sin. Stitches. The awful memories from the facility. Asylum. Mirage. Different sides to the same damn coin.

Ashes sank down beside me.

“Hey, heaven,” he greeted me, placing a tender kiss atop my head. Cady had walked me back to the house before she’d left to go back for her therapy session. She was adamant that I try to spend some time with Stitches.

He wouldn’t let me though. Getting him to even look at me was one thing. I was really beginning to feel the sting of rejection. I knew he was hurting and needed time, but I was hurting too. It seemed unfair.

Everything felt so broken. I didn’t like it. I wanted to make it better, but I wasn’t sure how.

I needed space. That was what I needed.

I turned to face Ashes, and he immediately focused his attention on me.

“What’s wrong, baby?” he asked, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. He held his hand out for me, and I took it, biting my bottom lip as I contemplated the words I needed to use.

I blew out a breath and carefully wrote each letter on his hand so he could decipher it.

When I was done, I stared at him, waiting for his answer.

“Why?” The hurt in his voice made my insides writhe like a basket of snakes. “You want space? What does that mean? You want to leave?”

I reached for his hand again, knowing I screwed it up. Again, I wrote on his hand. When I was done, I waited for him to figure out my words.

“You want your own space. Here. Right?”

I stared back at him and bit my bottom lip.

“OK. We can do that if it’s what you want. Of course we can,” he said, cradling my face, relief written all over his. “It’s stupid of us to think you didn’t need some space of your own. You want to paint?”

I widened my eyes at him, so grateful he understood.

“Of course,” he murmured. “I’ll talk to the guys tonight. We will make it happen.” He leaned in and brushed his lips gently against mine. “Anything for you.”

A sigh of relief left me, and I moved back in for more of his kisses. He obliged and gave them to me slow and sweet, as was his style.

Before long, we were kissing deeply, our hands all over one another. He dragged me onto his lap and moved me along the hardness he was sporting.

“If we deny ourselves, it’ll be worth it later,” he said between kisses as he helped guide me along his jean-clad length. “I promise. I’ll make love to you in the light from the flames someday. It’ll make me so happy.”

I wanted that. I wanted him to be happy.

My sweet, troubled pyro.

My breathing grew ragged as the impending release warmed me.

“Fuck, you’re going to come for me, aren’t you, baby? I don’t want to deny you. Fucking come, Sirena. Come for me, heaven.” His hands tightened on my waist as he rocked up against my aching pussy.

I came hard, twisting my fingers into his shirt.

His blue eyes remained on me, his lips parted, drinking me in while I rubbed against him until I felt sated and quivering.

“Good girl,” he murmured, peppering my lips with his soft kisses. “I love it when you’re my good girl.”

The kisses slowed and before long, I was simply resting with my forehead against his.

I pulled away and took his hand in mine and wrote on his palm.

Are you happy?

“Oh, baby, I am.” He smiled at me.

Liar.

His smile faltered, and his Adam’s apple bobbed.

Tell me. Please.

He took my hand in his and kissed it before twining his fingers with mine.

“I feel like I should be the happiest man in the world because I have the most beautiful, perfect girl, but something is missing.” He licked his lips. “Stitches is hurting. He won’t talk to us. We see how he is with you. Sirena, he loves you so much. We just don’t know what to do about him. If we push him too hard, he’ll shut down. I know it’s hurting you.” He was quiet for a beat. “What happened in the facility?”

My heart beat hard in my chest at his question. A wave of shakes swept over me. I didn’t want to talk about it. I didn’t want them to know what happened to me. What Stitches and I did with Asylum. What those monsters made us do while they watched behind the glass.

Nausea churned in my guts while he waited for my answer.

“Heaven? Baby? Are you OK?”

I couldn’t breathe.

He sat forward and released my hands, his forehead furrowed in worry.

“Hey. Sirena. Hey, come on. Breathe.”

If they knew what I’d done, what I’d been forced to do...*God, help me.* They might hurt Stitches for his part like they did to Sin. They might hurt Asylum. They might lash out and get into trouble with Church’s dad.

His dad.

No. God, please no.

I don’t want to go back there. I can’t go back there.

“Fuck,” Ashes hissed, cradling my face. “Sirena. Come on. You’re going to make yourself sick. Please. Deep breaths. With me. It’s OK.”

His words were falling on deaf ears. I couldn’t focus.

“What’s wrong?” I barely registered Stitches’s voice through the tunnel I was in.

“She’s having a panic attack. Her fucking lips are blue. Sirena!” Ashes gave me a little shake as I continued to breathe in rapid breaths, the dizziness making the room spin, my lips and fingertips tingling.

I felt like the room was closing in and I was going to die.

The vague sensation of being moved came over me, and then there he was.

Stitches.

“Angel. Come on. It’s me. It’s Stitches. *Malachi.* I’m here. It’s just like before. Breathe with me. It’s us. No one else. No one can hurt you. You’re safe. You’re safe here with me. With Ashes. We have you. *I have you.*”

He pulled my back against his chest and held me between his legs, his hand on my chest over my heart.

“Feel me breathe, angel. Do it with me. It’s just us. Close your eyes. Focus on my voice.”

I squeezed my eyelids together tightly, desperate to cling to him. To his voice. To the warm hold he had on me.

My protector.

He was here.

“Just keep breathing. Just keep breathing, angel,” his soft, familiar words filled my ears. He’d said the same thing to me in the facility as Asylum was forced to...I couldn’t even think the words.

I matched his breathing while focusing on his words.

“Don’t let them fucking win, angel. Don’t let them inside your head. Let me fight these battles for you. *Let me.* Breathe. There you go. You’re doing it. You’re doing so good. Perfect. Keep doing it. Just like that. In. Out. Match

me. Eyes closed. Focus.”

My breathing slowed with my heart rate. I relaxed against him, my fingers loosening their hold on his pants where my fingers had been twisted.

“Here,” Ashes murmured, going to his knees beside us. I hadn’t even noticed he’d left the room. “Open, heaven.”

I parted my lips for him, and he dropped the pill onto my tongue before pressing a cool glass of water to my lips. I swallowed down the pill and cracked my eyelids to peer at him.

“Hey,” he said, smiling at me.

I fluttered my lashes, feeling exhausted and embarrassed at my outburst. We’d just had an amazing time and then I’d lost it.

“Just rest,” Stitches said gently into my ear. He made to get up and move me, but I twisted in his lap and rested my head against his chest.

“No,” I whispered, holding onto him tightly. “No.”

The tension left his body, and he settled back onto the couch cushions before he shifted me carefully onto his lap. I snuggled against him, my eyes closed as I breathed him in.

The meds slowly washed over me, making me feel heavy.

“What happened?” Stitches asked as I struggled to stay awake.

“We were messing around. We were talking. She freaked out when I asked her about the med ward.”

Stitches wrapped his arms around me and hugged me against him, making any lingering tension leave my body.

“Don’t ask her about that stuff. Ask me,” Stitches said. “I’m not going to tell you until I’m ready though. Until I know she is.”

“OK,” Ashes said simply. “I’m sorry. I was trying to help. I shouldn’t have pushed.” He paused. “We can stay home tonight if she needs to rest. His voice became muffled and far away as I struggled to stay awake.

I thought I called out a protest, but I must not have because they continued to discuss everything like I wasn’t there.

So I decided I wasn’t and gave into the meds, allowing them to carry me off.

STITCHES



We'd agreed to burn with Ashes the next night, so we stayed in. I'd held Sirena in my lap until Church had arrived, then he'd wordlessly lifted her into his arms after getting the rundown on what happened and took her to his bedroom. He'd returned to us a few moments later, telling us she was still asleep.

Now we sat watching TV and eating the pizza we'd ordered in. I didn't have much of an appetite. All I kept thinking about was her voice telling me no.

I couldn't let her go once she spoke. Fuck, how could I?

We had to do something though. As much as I hated thinking about it, I knew we did. Everett was a sick fuck. He was really the only father I knew, but that didn't save him from my hatred. In a way, he was still controlling me without saying a fucking word. I knew he'd strike if I so much as mentioned the shit in the facility to Dante. If I told what had happened to us. To Sirena.

Suffer in silence.

He was punishing me without lifting a finger. Fucking prick.

Maybe it wasn't punishment. Maybe it was a threat. I couldn't wrap my head around it. Maybe it was because the meds I was on made me feel not quite like myself. I was hollow inside. While maybe it was a good thing, it also felt bad. On the other hand, I liked the lessening of emotions, although they did seep through, like with the moment with Sirena.

My rage still burned within me, but it was odd. Like it was just a tiny flame, and fear was what owned my soul right now. Because of Sirena. Because I fucking knew what would happen.

I chewed on my piece of pizza and swallowed, not really tasting it, simply

going through the motions.

I needed to tell them about Sin being here. It felt important that they knew he'd been the one to find her.

Maybe I was looking for a way to hate him less and hoping the guys found a way so I could follow them.

I cleared my throat, making Church look over at me.

"Can we talk?" I asked.

Ashes immediately turned off the TV as Church sat forward.

"Of course," Ashes said. "What's up?"

He glanced at Church quickly who was fast to share a look with him that only said they thought I was finally going to spill my guts to them.

"I have something to tell you guys that I think you should know about. I don't like to keep secrets, especially something like this. I mean, I know I've not been telling you guys stuff, but I will. Someday. I just...fuck." I scrubbed my hand down my face.

"It's fine, man. Take your time," Ashes said gently.

I sighed and reached over to the side table and pulled out a joint and lit it. After taking a deep, fortifying hit, I blew out the smoke.

"Malachi," Church called out.

"I know. I'm sorry. I needed something to take the edge off," I muttered. "Want some?"

Church hesitated for a moment before he grabbed the joint and took a drag. He handed it off to Ashes who put away his lighter to take a hit before handing it back to me. I smoked for another moment before passing it around a final time.

"The night Sirena ran out of here," I started. "I-I lied. I didn't come home and find her in bed. Not really." I looked at Church through the dark fringe of hair hanging in my eyes.

"What do you mean?" He narrowed his eyes at me, and I sighed.

"I did come home, and she was in bed, but Sin put her there."

Church froze, and Ashes stared at me wordlessly.

"What?" Church finally asked.

"I came back to see if she'd returned. I went to your room and saw Sin putting her into bed. I heard what he said to her. What he did."

"What the fuck did he do?" Church balled his hands into tight fists.

Ashes remained wordless.

"He told her he was sorry. He didn't know I was there. He kissed her." I

swallowed hard and stared at Ashes then at Church. Neither had moved an inch.

“He was crying,” I continued. “He wasn’t wearing his shirt. His fucking body, man. There’s more bruising on him than there is healthy skin. He’s really been taking punishing himself seriously.”

A muscle thrummed along Church’s jaw.

“When he turned around, I basically told him to fuck off, but he said he wanted to come home. That he’d do anything.”

Church scoffed, a sour look on his face.

Ashes flipped his lighter open and closed quickly, a surefire way of knowing he was growing more agitated.

“He said he found her in the woods. That he hadn’t hurt her. I told him I’d burn him alive if I ever saw him touch her again.” I stared down at my hands as I rested my elbows on my knees. “I saw the look on his face though and the sound of his voice. He’s really hurting. He’s not the same as he used to be.”

“He’s a fucking prick,” Church said. “I’m not interested—”

“I told him it was up to Sirena if he got to come back,” I cut in.

Church got to his feet quickly, his chest heaving. “No.”

“No what?” Ashes looked up at him. “Dante, it’s her choice as much as it’s ours. Look what happened when you came in the other night and went for Bryce. She lost it. She ran. If she decides she wants to try with Sin, shouldn’t we be agreeable to that? The four of us was always the plan.”

“No. He tried to fucking kill her. Same as Asylum. I’m grateful we have her back, but that doesn’t mean I’ll throw a fucking welcome home party for either of the assholes. She was hurt because of them. They aren’t fucking heroes. I don’t give a shit how they try to spin the story.”

“Asylum is an asshole,” I agreed. “But I was there with him in the facility with her. I-I know where his heart is.” I hated admitting it, but there it was. Out in the open for everyone to hear.

“What does that mean?” Church stared at me.

“Sit down,” Ashes said. “Let him talk.”

Church hesitated for a moment before he returned to his seat and gave me an expectant look.

“I just...I saw some things. He tried to protect her in there just as much as I did. Hell, I think he probably did a better job at it.”

Church let out a snort and shook his head.

“I’m serious. I think all of this shit is something he has insight into. I think he knows what’s going to happen. I think he’s just waiting,” I said.

“Maybe we should talk to him. It’s no secret we know your old man is up to something,” Ashes added. “We’re worried about what it could all mean.”

Church said nothing.

“Dante, have you really considered how your father could use Sirena against you? Against us?” Ashes asked in a low voice.

Church got to his feet and paced for a moment before speaking. “Yes. I have considered it.”

“Good,” Ashes murmured. “Then maybe we need to make a move sooner rather than later. We need to be prepared.”

“You can’t prepare against him,” Church muttered. “He’s a fucking viper when he strikes.”

“I think we should let Asylum take Sirena,” I cut in.

Ashes blinked at me.

And Church. He stormed forward and glared down at me.

“Have you lost your fucking mind?”

“Maybe,” I whispered. “But don’t you think it might actually be a good idea if we showed we aren’t connected to her anymore?”

“There will never be a time where I won’t be connected to her,” Church snapped back.

“Dante, just think about it. Asylum has a way about him. He knows things. He probably could keep her safe as much as we hate the thought of him having her. He did in the facility like Stitches said. He did when she stayed with him after. I don’t fucking like it either, but it’s something to consider,” Ashes said. “I’m worried about how this will all go down too.”

“Sin is there. I can’t allow it.” Church looked to the ceiling and groaned. “Why the fuck is stupid shit like this always happening? Haven’t we endured enough in our lives?”

We were all quiet for a long time.

Finally, I spoke.

“The truth of the matter is, this all ties together. If Sirena is there, she will be able to make a better decision on what she wants. She’ll get to know Sin.”

“Fuck him,” Church shouted.

“I know you’re mad. I know you’re hurt,” I said softly. “We all are. But what if we could have it all? Our brother back. Our girl. The fucking world we’ve been fighting. Our enemies dead and our lives safe once and for all?”

Revenge, Dante. You've wanted it forever. It's here. Let's just fucking take the steps to have it. Your mom—"

He let out a snarl and stormed from the room without another word, leaving me to sigh and Ashes to flip his lighter open and closed again. Five times. Just like always.

"He'll come around," Ashes said. "He loves her. We all do. I know what you mean, and I'm on your side."

"You are?"

He nodded and closed his lighter. "I am. I know what Everett is capable of. We've discussed it. As much as I don't want to let Sirena go, if it could make her stronger—make us stronger—then fuck yes. Let's do it."

"We just need to convince Dante," I murmured.

Ashes nodded slowly. "He'll come around. Something will happen and he'll be forced to."

That was probably the case, but that something that would happen wasn't something I looked forward to, especially if Everett was part of it.

CHURCH



A week after Stitches's suggestion of letting Sirena go to Asylum and I was still pissed off. I knew he meant well, but I couldn't help but be worried just the same. This was a guy who tried to kill himself after hearing she was won by that prick Asylum.

Something wasn't adding up. I could understand his concern, but not to this extreme. Especially knowing Sin would be with Asylum. I'd taken into consideration what he'd said about Sin bringing Sirena home to us, and that may have softened me a bit, but Sin was still a cocksucker as far as I was concerned, and I'd certainly string him up again if given the chance.

Because I knew shit had gone down in the facility, shit that rendered me helpless because of my father's involvement, I found myself sitting in one of the meeting rooms on campus, waiting to see the king of the Underground in the hopes of getting to the bottom of everything since Stitches wasn't going to tell me and Sirena certainly wasn't going to.

I hadn't told the guys I'd called a meeting with my father. They'd have lost their minds. Instead, I'd gone ahead and done it on the down low, desperate to get things sorted. I wasn't always the patient sort when it came to this, and I was fucking fed up with watching Stitches wander around drugged up and lost and my specter sad whenever she looked at him.

"Son," Father greeted me as he came into the room.

I rose to my feet and took the hand he offered and allowed him the quick, one-armed hug that was his norm when he was in a good mood. Me calling this meeting must have put him there.

"Father," I said, pulling away from him.

He gestured for me to sit. I did so back in the leather chair while he took a

spot opposite of me in another one, the glass coffee table between us and a fire crackling merrily in the fireplace.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of my son’s company?” he asked, raising his brows at me.

“I want to know what happened in the facility when Stitches was taken.”

He studied me for a moment before smirking. “I see. Is Stitches not doing well?”

“He’s doing well enough. He just won’t talk about it,” I said.

“Stitches is a good boy.” He got to his feet and went to the bar they kept in this dump and poured himself a drink. In retrospect, I should have poisoned it. Damn me for my late thinking.

He came back and handed me a glass and sat across from me while sipping his. I took a drink of mine, waiting for him to continue.

“You know, he was a debt owed to me,” he said after a moment. “His father, Maxwell Wolfe, owed for some gambling troubles he got into with Matteo De Santis. He’d tried to go to Sergio Ivanov to make back the money and ended up digging a deeper hole. His mother was indebted over her drug use. They came to me to help because you know how unpleasant it can be to be tangled up with De Santis and Ivanov.” He paused to drink. “Malachi has always been such a beautiful boy. I’ve always been drawn to the way he looks. How he thinks. The way he moves. Malachi is truly magic, don’t you think, Dante?”

I glared at him.

He smirked once more and drank. “So I accepted their payment. I took in the boy with you in mind. I thought you could use a friend. Something to play with and occupy your troubled mind. It was a kind gesture on my part. Probably one of my finest to date. Do you know why?”

“Why?” I drank, a feeble attempt to drown myself.

“Because you love him. I gave you *love*, Dante.” He sat back in his seat and stared at me. “I will admit, I had buyers banging down my door, desperate to have him. Malachi’s beauty was something I couldn’t let go of. So I gifted him to you instead of...well, there were various things. Many wanted to taste him. Devour him. Be inside him. They still do.” He chuckled.

It took all my will to not lose my control as I stared my father down and listened to his sickness.

“I was recently offered a large sum of money for him. He was sick and in the facility though, and I thought it would be best if he were kept there and

treated. I wasn't wrong, and it turned out magnificent. Malachi is such a good boy," he repeated, smiling.

"What did you do to him?" I demanded.

"I did nothing to him. I gave them free run of treatment for him. Experimental drugs. Some therapy. It seems to have worked."

"What really happened to him?" I pressed, my words clipped.

He went quiet as he watched me.

"Dante, you are more like me than you care to admit."

"Perhaps," I said, not denying my own sickness which had to have been handed down by him.

A smile quirked his lips up at my words.

"Tell me what really happened to him," I said.

"It was for his betterment. Know that," he answered, getting up to get another drink. He brought the bottle back with him and refilled my glass before his.

"You know, I supply the alcohol for this room," he mused, settling in. "I think parents who are dropping their children off to us deserve to have a drink. It's one of my better ideas for this place."

I said nothing as I watched him drink.

"You always were straight to the point," he said with a sigh. He adjusted his black tie. "Well then. I'm impressed Malachi hasn't told you anything. He's as strong as I hoped he was."

"Father, while I appreciate you thinking I'm enjoying this time we're spending together, I assure you I have more exciting things to be doing than listening as you dance around my questions."

He chuckled. "Fine. I was offered some money. It was about more than the money though. It was about the treatment and joy, as it were." He licked his lips. "Malachi is a hot commodity. Many are so jealous that he belongs to you. You do realize that, don't you?"

"He is my brother," I said.

"He is *your toy*, Dante. Your plaything. A gift to you from me, your father. I'd like to see you use him at some point. Seems a waste not to, but that's neither here nor there." He cleared his throat. "Since I wasn't going to take him from you, I decided to get some use out of him. We used an experimental drug on him. He did well under the influence of it. Incredibly well."

"It made him hallucinate." It must have been the drug he'd told us about

and how he just didn't know what was real and what wasn't.

"Did it?" He cocked his head at me, his eyes sparkling.

"Everything he endured was real?"

"Of course it was real. We're at Chapel Crest. All our nightmares are real here."

I steadied my breathing. "What happened to him?"

"He paid off some lingering debts his parents had accumulated to some very interested parties. They got what they *came* for, and I got what I needed."

"You had him raped?" I whispered, my throat tight.

"Believe me when I say Malachi opened his mouth willingly. He paid off debts he didn't even know he had with each thrust into his body. It wasn't a sacrifice for him. He did so on his knees, begging. He cried at first and called out for his mother, but he was taken care of. Each touch, each cock, soothed him. I believe he even got some pussy while under. The meds given were a success. A cross of some sugar I've gotten my hands on with something a little special I've created. Malachi is paid in full."

I stood abruptly from my chair, my hands shaking with my rage.

He rose to meet me, his expression morphing into the dominant prick I knew.

"You hurt him. He's your fucking son!" I shouted.

"He is a fucking payment plan," he snarled back. "A tool. A fucking toy I got for you, my son. He is but a waste if not used. Since he's paid in full now, we have no further use for him. And if you aren't going to partake in the gift I gave you, perhaps I should take it back."

"You will not fucking touch him," I said, my chest heaving.

"I already have." He winked at me, that evil glint in his eyes. "He begged for his mother the entire time until he grew quiet and whispered your name on repeat. He came with your name on his lips."

"Fucking monster. Disgusting fucking monster." I shook as I tried to remain in control, but that control was quickly slipping.

"You want to hurt me, but that's a very bad idea. I have orders in place to have both Malachi and that pretty porcelain doll of yours taken from here if so much as a hair on my head is disturbed. In fact, they're watching them now. I am not a man without resources, Dante. You'd never make it to them in time if you lose yourself on me. Everyone at Chapel Crest works for me. The professors. The nuns. The priests. The therapists. The doctors. The

wards. The nurses. The headmaster. The fucking janitor. They all belong to me. Even some of the students. I own this place and every fucking body in every corner and every fucking grave. Mine. It all belongs to me, and that includes your pretty doll.” His nostrils flared as he glared back at me.

I stared back, waiting for the nail in my fucking coffin.

“Her stepfather sold her to me,” he continued. “I hold the deed to her soul.”

My blood ran cold at his words.

“If you want that deed to belong to you, I suggest you fall in line, or I have no problem playing with that toy too.”

“When did her stepfather sell her to you?” I demanded, barely holding it together. “How? Without her mother?”

He gave me a wicked smile. “When we were dining before she arrived here. He was barely able to keep from touching her himself. His violence was leading to a very bad place for such a prominent man. He came to me and offered her in exchange for time in the Underground where he could let go of himself safely. It was one of the best payments I’ve ever received. And again, I gifted her to you, but I can certainly take that gift back.” He surveyed me. “And I will if you don’t do what I ask of you. As for her mother, what she doesn’t know won’t kill her. I’ll have Sirena’s mind so twisted by the time she tried to do anything that it would be a waste of time.”

“What do you ask of me, Father?” I whispered.

“Anything. Everything. You come when I beckon. You heel when I demand it. You give when I ask. You are to be my successor in the Underground. I want to see you work for it.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I will fuck your pretty doll until she bleeds and allow the monsters in the Underground to feast on her blood and screams before I serve Malachi the first piece of her perfectly cooked body while I fuck him over the dinner table. When I’m done, I’ll watch you fuck his tight asshole before you put the knife to his throat and take the life of the best fucking meal we’ve ever eaten. We will go through all of them before we fill. Asher. Sinclair. Every one of them. I know your heart, Dante. You always eat what you kill.” A soft, evil laugh fell from his lips. “You remember your mother, right?”

Nausea twisted my guts at his words. At the memory. At what he was threatening me with.

“Here’s the deal. I need help procuring something. Or rather, someone. I

want to try a few other avenues before I call you in. If I make that call, I expect you to answer, or we'll end up having a nice family dinner together. If I remember correctly the last one didn't go so well, so I'm hoping this one does, and you finally get my point, Son."

"What is your point, Father?" I whispered thickly.

"That you, like everyone else, belong to me." He moved toward me and leaned in, his lips at my ear. "And you, my dear boy, are my reflection whenever we look into the mirror. You are a perfect killing machine. Bred to be another king in the Underground. A ruler."

"A monster," I murmured, my voice shaking.

"Mm, my monster," he answered back, his hand moving to my crotch where he rubbed me. I squeezed my eyelids closed and focused on my breathing. On my control.

"No one is safe in our world," he continued softly in my ear as he rubbed my cock. "Even you, my son."

He pulled away from me, leaving me sick where I stood.

"Wait for my call." His gaze raked over my face, that ugly fucking smirk on his lips. "Answer me, Dante."

"Yes, Father," I whispered.

"Yes, Father, what? Tell me what I want to hear."

"Yes, Father. I am in your service."

A grin spread over his face. "Excellent. I knew I'd win you over." He moved past me as I stood rooted in my spot. When he got to the door, he spoke again.

"By the way, excellent work on Sinclair. I was most impressed. You always did like the long game. You're like your mother in that respect. Give Malachi and Sirena my love. Oh, and see if she'll tell you about the time Malachi held her down and watched as she was raped. It's one of my most favorite stories." The door clicked closed behind him, leaving me alone in the room, his words on repeat in my head.

Stitches held her down? He helped in her rape? *Fuck, she was raped.*

I heaved my guts onto the leather furniture while tears streamed down my face.

I'd come here looking for answers, and I'd gotten them.

But at what fucking cost?

All I knew was that someone was going to fucking pay for their sins.

SIRENA



Church was acting oddly.

Quiet. Withdrawn. Violent.

He'd broken more dishes in the last few days than I had paintbrushes.

I flinched as he threw another one against the wall, his dinner sliding down it in a red streak.

Spaghetti.

"You're scaring Sirena," Ashes said gently.

Church shoved his chair back and it clattered to the floor before he stormed out of the room, leaving me at the table with Ashes and Stitches.

"Should I talk to him?" Stitches asked.

"I don't know." Ashes sighed and looked at me. "Heaven, I'm sorry if he's scared you—"

I reached out and squeezed his hand before getting to my feet. They looked at me in confusion. Of course, I said nothing and simply just left the room, Ashes calling out behind me to come back. I needed to check on Church, and I knew one of the guys would rescue me if I needed it.

When I reached his room, he was standing at his window and staring out into the cold, darkening world, his back to me.

"Silent as a ghost," he murmured without looking back as I stood at the end of his bed.

I didn't move an inch, but I didn't have to because he turned to face me after a moment.

"Take your clothes off," he said, his voice low.

I blinked at him.

"NOW!" he shouted, making me shake as his green eyes flashed with

whatever darkness lurked within him.

I jumped and quickly fumbled with the buttons on my white uniform blouse. When I had it unbuttoned, I let it fall to the floor before I finished removing the rest of my clothes.

Slowly, he circled me before stopping at my back and pushing my hair over my shoulder, his lips at my ear.

“Get on your knees.”

I closed my eyes for a moment before I went to my knees for him. He circled back in front of me and unzipped his pants and pulled his dick free. I watched as he stroked himself for a moment before he tapped his cock against my lips.

“Suck,” he instructed.

I parted my lips for him, and he shoved inside with a grunt, the head of his dick hitting the back of my throat. I gagged on him, but he didn't stop. He fucked into my mouth hard and fast while I choked, my eyes watering and my breathing stuttered.

He tangled his fingers in my hair, making it hurt as he pulled on it.

A groan fell past his lips as his cock twitched against my tongue, his hot release spurting into my mouth and down my throat.

I gagged hard on him, but he continued on, groaning as he filled my mouth. I managed to swallow him down and sagged forward once he untwisted his fingers from my hair and pulled free, tucking his dick away.

He'd hurt me.

Quickly, I snatched one of his t-shirts off the cushioned seat at the end of the bed and tugged it over my head before pulling on my panties. He didn't move. He simply watched me dress.

It was when he stepped around me to leave me there that I got to my feet and grabbed his hand.

I glared at him when he turned to face me.

“Are you mad?” he asked softly.

I was livid. I was hurt. Humiliated. I felt used when all I'd wanted to do was help him.

“Tell me,” he continued. “Or are you going to keep that a secret too?”

I frowned at him, confused. Fear bubbled up in my chest. Did he know about Mirage? About Sin bringing me back that night? About Stitches not telling him that Sin had been here?

He stepped toward me and cradled my face. “I'd die for you, Sirena.

Without a second thought, I'd die. But you need to fucking talk to me and not just when it's convenient. I get you're fucked in the head. We all are. But I really fucking need you to tell me what happened to you in that facility with Stitches."

My breath stuttered in my chest.

"Speak," he commanded softly. "Tell me who the fuck put his dick inside you."

I quaked in his hold, my eyes burning with unshed tears.

"Fucking speak!" he bellowed, shaking me so hard it felt like my brain was rattling around inside my head.

I shoved at him, trying to break him away from me, but he only shook me harder until I collapsed at his feet, my heart thundering in my chest and my breath coming in gasps.

"I can't fucking do this shit," he said, backing away from me. "I just can't. Not with you."

I stayed trembling on the floor on my ass, my knees tucked to my chest as he stomped around the room. It only took me a moment to realize he was gathering what little clothes I had and was stuffing them into a bag.

When he was done, he grabbed my arm roughly and hauled me to my feet and dragged me downstairs, my bag slung over his shoulder.

"What's going on?" Ashes demanded, getting to his feet.

Church didn't say a damn word as he hauled me through the house and outside, Ashes on his heels.

"Fucking Stitches went to therapy, so I don't have help, man. That means I'll fucking punch you in the face if you don't stop. Where the fuck are you taking her?" he shouted, running out behind us. He grabbed hold of Church and pulled us to a stop.

Church released me and shoved Ashes hard in the chest, sending him stepping backward. Ashes surged forward like a tidal wave and got in Church's face.

"Don't fucking start a fire you can't put out," Ashes snarled, nose to nose with Church. "Now where the fuck are you taking her?"

Church trembled. "I don't know. Away."

"Why?"

"Because...I-I can't."

"Can't what?" Ashes asked, backing off a little and frowning.

Church glanced at me before looking back to Ashes. "She needs to go to

Cady's for the night."

"Not until you tell me what's going on," Ashes said. "You have her out here in her fucking panties and a t-shirt."

He was quick to come to me and place his leather jacket on my shivering body.

"It's OK, baby," he murmured, wiping my tears before he turned to Church. "Tell me, Dante."

"Just fucking listen to me, Asher. Fuck." Church tugged at his hair, the frustration he was feeling evident behind his wild, green eyes. "Let her go for the night. I need her to go. Trust me. *Fucking trust me.*"

"OK," Ashes said without pressing the matter. "OK. I'll take her to Cady's. Then we talk."

Church gave me a pained look before he nodded.

"Go. I'll make sure she gets there," Ashes continued.

Church hesitated for a moment before he walked away without another word or look in my direction.

He was mad at me. Angry that I wouldn't tell him what happened. I knew he was upset because Stitches wasn't talking about it. What could I possibly say? I wanted to forget about it and put it behind me and move forward. Talking about it would just make it hurt. It made it all the more real. It made me remember that monsters were real, and this was what a nightmare was like.

Besides, I hated talking. I liked the silence. I felt safe in it.

"Here," Ashes said, handing me a pair of leggings from my bag and some shoes. "Put them on, heaven. I'll make sure no one sees."

I took the pants from him and quickly tugged them on before he wound his arm around my waist and walked with me down the trail.

"It'll be OK," he murmured as we walked. "He gets like this when he's upset about something. We'll get it worked out. He's in love with you just like I am. We'll get him sorted."

I wanted to believe him because everything seemed so abrupt and completely out of Church's character. Something big had to be bothering him, and if Ashes was promising he'd fix it, I believed him.

When we reached Cady's, which was my old dorm room, Ashes knocked on her door, his hand wrapped around mine. Her door cracked open a moment later and she peered out at us.

"Hey." She opened the door wider. "What's wrong?"

“Can Sirena stay with you tonight?” Ashes asked.

Cady’s gaze swept over me. “Yeah, of course she can. What’s going on?”

“Dante is having a bad day. A bad week, actually. He asked if Sirena could leave the house for a night.”

“That prick,” Cady muttered, opening her door and gesturing us inside.

We stepped in, and I looked around. It didn’t look anything like how it had been when I’d been living there. Cady had it decorated to the teeth with colors, twinkle lights, and pictures of her favorite bands and movies. I wasn’t even sure where she got the big squishy purple velvet chairs from, she had two of them facing the large window that overlooked the courtyard from a distance. I used to paint there, but I liked how cozy it felt.

Overall, it didn’t look like a dorm room in an asylum at all. I liked it.

“So it’ll just be for a night,” Ashes said. “I’ll go see what’s up with him and then I’ll let you know. I’ll come back and get her. Just, uh, watch her. Don’t let her be alone, OK?”

“Well, I’m hanging out with Adam tonight. She should be fine, right, Rina?”

I blinked at her and gave a slight incline of my head. Being alone felt like a great thing because I really wanted to cry again and was holding it back.

Ashes gave me a doubtful look.

“I can come hang out with her while you’re gone—”

Immediately, I squeezed his hand before I quickly traced the word *no* onto his palm.

He sighed but nodded. “OK, baby. If that’s what you want. But if you need anything, just call me. You don’t have to talk. I’ll see your name and come here, OK?”

I squeezed his hand again, noting the tension released from his body a little.

“Have fun. I’m going to go see what’s wrong with Dante. Please, be safe, OK? Don’t leave this room. Promise me?” Ashes turned to face me, worry clouding his features.

I leaned in and gave him a gentle kiss.

“Hell, heaven, I don’t want to leave you,” he murmured, moving to cradle my face. “I love you. I’ll text, OK? Or video call you. We’ll talk soon.” He kissed my forehead and backed away from me and went to the door.

“Cadence. Please, keep her safe,” Ashes said thickly.

“You know I will,” she answered.

He nodded at her and cast me one last look before leaving me alone with my sister.

“What happened, Rina?” she asked the moment Ashes was gone.

I bit my bottom lips, my throat tight.

“Did Church hurt you? Because if he did, I swear I’ll go there right now and hack his dick off and shove it up his ass so far his father will taste it.”

I gave her a sad smile and moved past her and went to one of the chairs facing the window and sat in it and stared outside. I could see Ashes walking down the trail with his head down, his hands buried deep in his pockets.

I was still wearing his leather jacket. He hadn’t taken it from me, and I felt bad that he was out there in the cold. I’d be sure to give it to him when he came back though, but until then, I was going to curl up in it and breathe in the smell of his smoke and fire, counting down the minutes until I saw him again.

ASHES



“*E*xplain yourself,” I snapped at Church the moment I stepped back into the house after dropping Sirena off with Cady.

He sat on the couch staring at the blank TV screen, his blond hair a mess.

“I love her,” he said as I sat on the loveseat and studied him.

“I know. I love her too.”

“I can’t live without her, but if I keep her, she’ll die.”

I froze. “What’s going on?”

He continued to stare straight ahead for a long time before he answered.

“I met with my father last week.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell us? What happened?” He always told us when he was going to meet with him. Granted, sometimes his old man would just show up here, but Church was always fairly quick to let us know right after.

“Stitches hasn’t been telling us everything. I knew it was something huge. I hate the way things have been around here, so instead of waiting for Stitches to tell us, I asked my father.” His Adam’s apple bobbed.

“Tell me,” I said, my heart racing.

Please don’t be bad. Please don’t be bad...

“He bought her contract from her stepfather,” he said thickly. “Her fucking prick of a stepfather sold her to him.”

My blood ran cold. “What?”

I didn’t want to believe what I was hearing.

Church finally looked over at me, his green eyes wavering. “He had her raped in the facility. Stitches held her while it happened. It’s the story he told me. I don’t know who did it, but it happened. It’s why Stitches is so

troubled.” He looked back at the blank TV and went silent.

“Dante. What are we going to do?” It was taking everything I had not to throw up on the floor. Hearing Sirena had been hurt. That Stitches had been forced to help. It was no wonder he was behaving the way he was.

“I don’t know,” he said softly. “He wants me to fall in line. Do his bidding when he calls upon me. I agreed. To keep her safe, I agreed.”

“Fuck.” I opened and closed my lighter on repeat, my legs bouncing. I was going to lose my mind. I could feel the panic rising from my toes all the way to the top of my head. “What are we going to do? How do we keep her safe? She can’t just be with Cady. It puts her in danger too.”

“I know.” He ran his fingers through his hair before giving it a tug and letting out a frustrated snarl. “I know we talked about letting her go, but I don’t think that’ll do shit for good. He owns her. If she ran, he’d find her. Hell, he’d make me find her and then I don’t even know what would happen. Nothing good.”

“You wouldn’t bring her back,” I murmured.

He gave me a sad look. “He’s threatened your lives as well. He owns Stitches. He’s a payment paid to my father for debts owed. He gave me Stitches to grow close to so that someday I could harm him.” He rubbed his eyes. “He’ll kill you and Sin too. I just...I’m always in control. In charge. With this...I don’t fucking know what to do. What do we do? He has me backed into a fucking corner, Asher.”

The front door opened, and Stitches came inside looking windswept, snowflakes in his dark hair. The light shined in such a way as to make the scar on his face more prominent where he’d cut off his tattoo while in the facility.

“Where’s Sirena?” he asked, his dark eyes darting around the room.

“Away,” Church replied, his voice thick with emotion as he got to his feet.

“What?” He tossed his jacket onto the back of the kitchen chair and came fulling into the living room. “What’s going on? Where is she?”

“I met with Father,” Church said. “Why didn’t you fucking tell me what happened in the facility? Why didn’t you tell me she was raped, and you were fucking there for it? That you held her down?” His voice cracked.

Sorrow washed over Stitches’s face at Church’s words, and I got to my feet too because I had no fucking idea how anything was going to go down. As much as it hurt to hear the words, I didn’t want another Sin repeat.

“She’s in danger, Malachi. Tell us what happened in there,” I said, my voice trembling.

“I don’t know,” he choked out, coming into the room and sinking onto the leather chair and covering his face.

Church sank back in his seat, so I followed and sat in mine, waiting for Stitches to talk.

“I was so fucked up in there. I didn’t know which was up. All I knew was that I needed her. They knew I did.” He looked at us. “I fucking tried. They broke me inside there. You don’t understand the shit I did. Or thought I did. I don’t even know what’s real and what’s a lie.”

“It was the new drug,” Church said. “Father told me about it. They used it on you.”

Stitches’s bottom lip wobbled. “It was this intense high. It felt so good, but then I couldn’t even fucking think straight. I felt like a zombie on autopilot in the dark. Nothing made sense. I thought people were touching me. Sucking me. Fucking me. Hell, I thought I did a little of it back too.” He sniffled and grew quiet.

No one said a word until he spoke again.

“It was real, wasn’t it? All of it?” The stricken and sick look on his face made my guts clench and tears prickle my eyes.

“Yes,” Church whispered.

Stitches let out a soft sob and hugged himself, rocking in his seat. I got up and went to my knees in front of him.

“Hey. It’s OK. You’re not alone,” I said softly, my voice shaking.

Please, don’t let him fucking fall again. Don’t let him lose it. Keep him strong, God. Please.

“I tried so hard. So fucking hard. I tried to keep her safe. I just...couldn’t. I failed her. It’s why I can’t even look at her. I don’t deserve her. I’m not worthy. And to know all the shit was real. Fuck.” He got up so fast it knocked me on my ass. He rushed to the bathroom and the sound of him vomiting sounded out around us.

“What do we do?” I asked, looking at Church. “You’re not blaming him, are you?”

“Why would I blame him for the sick shit in our father’s head? Those aren’t his sins to bear,” Church answered in a trembling whisper. “They’re his. They’re fucking Everett’s.”

Stitches came back into the room several long minutes later and went to

his knees in front of Church.

“Brother,” he choked out, reaching for Church’s hands. “Please. Please forgive me. I’m so fucking sorry.”

Church reached out and cradled his face while I watched, my heart jerking rapidly.

“There’s nothing to forgive, Malachi. I love you. It’s not your fault.”

Stitches let out a soft cry and sagged against Church who held him back tightly. I stood watching as they clung to one another.

“Who hurt our girl?” Church asked in a low voice. “Who fucked her?”

Stitches pulled away and I moved to sit on Church’s other side, not sure if I wanted to know because I’d lose my damn mind if I had a name.

“He didn’t want to do it. They threatened us with her,” Stitches said, pulling away and wiping at his eyes. “He tried hard to protect her too.”

“Who?” Church growled.

“Don’t make me say it. Shit’s bad enough,” Stitches said, his voice so low I had to lean in to hear him.

“We need to know, Malachi.” Church glanced over at me.

“They were going to hurt her if he didn’t. They were going to do it if he refused. They made me hold her, but they’d already done electroshock on her as a way to show us what they were capable of. It’s why she’d had a seizure. From the shocks. They forced us to watch it. I-I can’t tell you names. Don’t make me.”

Nausea washed through me, mixing with my rage as I flipped my lighter open and closed on repeat.

“She wasn’t really conscious by the end of it. She was in and out of it,” Stitches continued. “I-I told her I was sorry and that I love her. It wasn’t enough to save her from it, but he was gentle with her. He-he made sure she was covered so the monsters behind the window couldn’t see. He vowed we’d get the names of every monster and kill them all. He’s broken with us. I-I trust him. Deep down I do.” Stitches wiped at his eyes.

Church sat back wordlessly and stared down at Stitches on his knees.

“Where’s angel?” Stitches begged. “Tell me she’s upstairs sleeping. That she’s here.”

“She’s with Cady,” I said. “For tonight, that’s where she is.”

“We need to go to her—” A wild look took over Stitches’s face.

“Not now,” Church said. “We need a plan because she’s in danger.”

He launched into telling Stitches everything right down to Stitches

belonging to him as a gift and Sirena being sold to Everett.

“Fuck,” Stitches rasped. “Fuck.”

He got to his feet and clawed at his face and paced the room.

“I said we should let her go,” he said, stopping to face us.

“What good would it do?” I asked, my sadness seeping into my words. “It’s not us that’s the problem really. If Everett owns her now, it’s him who is the problem.”

“What does he want you to do?” Stitches looked to Church.

“He didn’t give me specifics. Only said to come when he called and basically be his bitch when he requested something. Past that, I’m in the dark.”

“Then we need to get Sirena. We need to be watching her,” Stitches said, continuing to pace.

“We need to see Asylum,” Church murmured. “He knows things. He’s the one we have to talk to. I know he saw all of this coming. He talks to voices and shit. We need to see what he knows.”

I nodded. “I agree. Let’s start with him and see what he says. We can go from there.”

Stitches’s throat bobbed as he looked to Church. “Dante?”

Church slowly looked at him.

“I’m really sorry for everything. I am.”

Church got to his feet and dragged Stitches against his body and whispered something into his ear that I couldn’t hear. Something that made Stitches sob softly and cling to him.

If I had to guess, we were going to murder someone else.

And I was OK with that.

ASYLUM



I took a hit from the sugar stick I had and leaned back in my chair and blew out a ring of smoke while Sin smoked on his own.

“When was the last time you got laid?” I asked, watching the smoke swirl above us.

“I don’t know,” he muttered. “I hope you’re not fucking offering.”

I took another hit and let out a soft laugh. “I’m not so hard up that I need to fuck you, Sinclair. I was merely making conversation.”

“When was the last time you got laid?”

I cocked my head left, watching the smoke swirl above me, high off my ass.

“Recently.” My firefly flashed in my mind before I took another deep drag off my drug.

“Vague. Of course,” Sin commented, smoking again.

“Was Bells the last bitch you were buried in?”

He grunted. “Thought you were psychic. Shouldn’t you know the answer to that?”

I considered his words for a moment. “It doesn’t really work that way, bestie. If it did, I’d have the winning lottery numbers and be on a white sandy beach somewhere instead of sitting here getting high with you.”

He turned his head to look at me from where he was lying in his bed. “Aren’t drugs bad for nutbags like you? With the voices and shit?”

I shrugged and took another hit. “I don’t know. This actually quiets things down inside my head. It’s nice sometimes to hear nothing.”

“Really?” He went up on his elbow and stared me down.

“Yeah.”

“Are the voices really that loud for you?”

“Sometimes.” Another hit.

Fuck, that’s good shit.

“I feel normal when I’m smoking. Weed always kept me grounded, but this shit makes my head feel a lot clearer. I’m more focused.”

“Do you even know what normal is?”

“No.” I smirked at him. “I’m only assuming this is how you little assholes feel. Minus all that self-loathing shit you sad fucks have.” I paused. “I didn’t always hear the voices you know.”

“What happened?”

“Who knows? I was probably triggered by some traumatic event in my childhood or some shit.”

“Did you have a traumatic event?”

“Does killing small animals with toothpicks at three count?”

“I wouldn’t *not* count it,” he mumbled. “Weird fuck.”

I laughed at his words. “When I was five, my old man took me to see a guy in the city. I sat there and listened to them talk. I watched as they dined. They offered me something to eat.”

“And?” Sin took another hit.

I smiled at him. “I guess it was *the traumatic event*. Turns out, it was a thirty-eight-year-old man who owed some very bad men a lot of money.”

Sin curled his lip up at me, his face positively green with revulsion.

“To be fair, I didn’t eat it, but *I felt it*. Does that make sense?”

Sin frowned. “Like, you touched it?”

“No. Like *I felt it*. The emotions this man had in his life. It was all around us. I seemed to be the only one affected though. I felt his fear. His sickness. Everything. I still feel that when I’m around people. It’s probably what made me who I am. I become what’s around me. I feed off emotions.”

“Like...an empath?”

I smiled at him and took another hit. “I’m surprised you know that word, Sinclair.”

“I’m not a fucking idiot. I read,” he scoffed, taking a hit off his own. “So you’re like this magical unicorn?”

“Complete with wings,” I said, chuckling. “But I guess that would make me a Pegasus?”

“I don’t know. Do they have horns?”

“Fuck if I know.” I smoked some more.

“And Mirage?” Sin ventured after a moment of silence.

“I don’t tell his stories. Ask him yourself.”

“I would if you let him come out more. You seem to enjoy keeping him locked up in whatever cage you keep him in.”

“We have an arrangement,” I said, not giving more away than that.

“So this empath stuff. It doesn’t explain how you know the shit you know,” Sin continued.

“I just know it.”

“The voices? Do they tell you?”

“Sometimes.”

“What’s it like hearing them?”

I considered his words. “Well, you know that little voice you have in your head?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s like having a hundred of them and they’re all arguing and yelling at me. They want me to do different things.”

“So you really are schizophrenic?”

I shrugged and took another hit, blitzed out of my fucking mind. The silence was golden. “That’s what the doctors tell me, but I doubt I am. I don’t do what the voices tell me. Usually. I run this fucking freak show. They’re just the participating audience.”

“It’s not normal to hear voices in your head.”

“Maybe it’s not your normal, but it’s mine. Besides, I don’t think they’re made up, random shit in my head.”

“You think they’re real? That’s schizophrenia, my dude.”

I chuckled at him. “No, I mean I think it’s like the fates or the dead or some shit because I see stuff too.”

“Again, schizophrenia.”

“Poor Asylum is a little crazy. Don’t let him procreate. Don’t let him make babies. But babies I will make and souls I will take. A little firefly mommy and some sugar baby zombies.” I grinned over at him, making him roll his eyes.

“You think you’re going to make babies with Sirena?”

“Someday,” I said. “Why not bring more crazy into the world? I like to shake things up. I’d make a terrible father though. Imagine me as an old man, teaching a kid to throw a football?”

“What if you had a girl?”

I wrinkled my nose at that. “No thanks.”

“You don’t want to have a daughter?”

“Imagine being fucking worried all the time. I’d have more bodies in my backyard than Church’s old man. Speaking of the devil...” I cocked my head and smiled. “We have company.”

A knock on the door proved me right.

Sin raised a brow at me as he sat up on his bed, and I winked back at him.

“Fucking circus freak,” he muttered while I got up and pulled the door open to find Church standing there with Ashes and Stitches flanking him.

“I thought I saw you coming,” I said, tapping my head.

“Can we talk?” Church asked.

“Of course.” I stepped aside, allowing them to come into my room.

Sin immediately got to his feet.

Church cast him a hard look before sitting in the chair I’d been in while Ashes took a seat on the sofa we had in the room, Stitches sitting beside him.

“This is a nice place,” Ashes commented, looking around. “It’s huge.”

“It’s a good thing because Sin and his ego take up a lot of space,” I said, winking at Sin who gave me the finger before sitting on his bed again.

“So what brings you to my slice of hell?” I went to my bed and sat down on it, surveying each of the watchers.

“You mean you don’t know?” Church asked.

“You’ll have to excuse me. I’m high as fuck right now and on a bit of a vacation from the shit in my head. It’s all very dull to me at the moment. Feel free to clue me in, boss.”

Church scowled at me. “I’m here because I need to know what you know.”

“What I know? It encompasses all things living and dead... but everything has a price, Dante. What are you willing to pay for such luxuries?”

“Enough with the shit. I’ve had a bad night, and I really don’t want to take it out on you,” he said.

I cocked my head at him. “How thoughtful of you to consider my night and feelings. OK. What I know. You’re going to have to help me a little bit here. Give me something to go on. A subject. What do you want to know? Be specific because I am high as fuck right now.”

“My father.”

“Is a dick,” I finished with a laugh.

My answer wasn't received with the humor I'd intended, but fuck was I high.

"I spoke with him. Sirena isn't safe. He owns a deed on her soul," Dante's voice was low and filled with worry and sorrow.

His words hit me like a ton of bricks though.

"What?" I demanded, twisting my hands so tightly into a fist that my nails cut my palms.

"You didn't know this?" Ashes asked, his forehead wrinkled in worry. "I thought you were clued into this stuff."

I exhaled, trying to gather my thoughts.

When I spoke, my voice was clipped and filled with venom. "This one seems to have slipped past me it would seem. Naughty, fucking naughty."

"I met with my father last week," Church continued. "He wants me to be his beck-and-call guy. I've agreed in an effort to keep Sirena and the guys safe. I know my old man though. He's not going to stop there. He's up to something. I can't lose her. I'm aware of what happened in the facility with Stitches and her."

"Are you?" I narrowed my eyes at him. "You don't really know though. You only have half the story."

"Then give me the rest," Church urged.

"No." Stitches interjected, getting to his feet. "Asylum, fucking don't."

"Because my life depends on it?" I rolled my eyes. "I'm not afraid, Malachi. There isn't much in this world that sends me screaming in the other direction. In fact, this is probably for the best. Air shit out and hope the dice lands on snake eyes."

"Do you know who the person was who fucked our girl?" Church leveled his gaze on me.

"Of course I do," I said in a soft voice. "It was me."

STITCHES



“*I don’t blame you. I could never blame you.*” The words Church had spoken into my ear had given me a sense of relief, but it only lasted for a moment because now we were sitting in Asylum’s dorm room, and he’d just said something that could get his ass killed.

I knew it was a bad fucking idea. I hadn’t wanted it to get out because I knew how fucking pissed Church would get. The fact he hadn’t already obliterated my ass spoke volumes about his love and patience for me, but I knew it was unlikely he had a backup supply of it or that he’d offer Asylum the same quarter as me.

Church sprang to his feet the same time I did, Ashes following.

Asylum didn’t move a muscle as he stayed seated.

“Do what you feel you must, but I was the lesser of the evils in the facility that day,” Asylum said, his blue eyes flashing. “It was me or them. Ask Malachi.”

“It’s true,” I whispered, his words twisting my insides, the memories still very much raw. “He did what he had to.”

“Tell me everything. No more lies and riddles. I want to know everything from beginning to end.” Church didn’t sit, but he didn’t lunge forward either. It was the best we could hope for in that moment.

“Fine. Where should I begin?” Asylum asked.

“Being admitted into the facility.” Church finally sat down, and me and Ashes followed, but I was sure to remain as close in case he lost it again. As much as Asylum was irritating to me, we were bonded in a shared trauma that I knew had cut him just as deeply as it had cut me. I’d seen the look in his eyes that night. I’d heard the tremor and fury in his voice. I’d witnessed the

way he'd taken care of Sirena.

"Well, I was found in the mausoleum with Sirena. You know that. After you punched me in the face, I made it to the facility to ensure she was OK."

"After you tried to kill her," Church corrected, his voice filled with anger.

"I suppose I could say I wasn't in the right frame of mind," Asylum said. "I wasn't thinking clearly. Besides, I didn't really see us dying in there. In my head, I saw Sinclair coming back for us. Of course, shit was derailed by her screaming, so there's that. So know that I didn't think we'd die. That part is important, OK?"

Church grunted, and I cast a quick look at Sin to see him staring down at his hands.

"So I made it to the facility. I was taken back. Here's the fun part, Dante. I work for these sick fucks."

I blinked at him in confusion. I hadn't known he worked for them. It was a huge blast of information that made Church tense and Ashes flip his lighter open and closed faster.

The rage I felt wasn't there. Only confusion at whatever the hell was going on. I assumed the anger would come later once I had all the information. The meds I was given had to be working overtime on me.

"You work for Sully?" I asked.

"Technically...not really. I work for Everett." Asylum's gaze moved from me to Church whose nostrils were flared and his chest heaving with each of his angry breaths.

"Since when?" Church demanded.

"Since...always? I have a talent he adores. I'm sure you can guess what that talent is." Asylum tapped his head and smiled. "Right now it's on hold though because I really am high."

"We know you're high," Ashes snapped. "We haven't forgotten."

Asylum cast a quick, dazed smile at Ashes, but didn't seem overly apologetic about his current state.

"I'm not really on his side. It's important to know that too," Asylum continued. "I honestly want to kill him. So do many others. I'm just there biding my time. I can't do it until the time is right."

"The time is right fucking now," Church snarled. "He needs to die."

"And he will." Asylum shrugged. "But, again, now isn't the time. There's much he has yet to do before we reach that bridge. Also, he's pretty fucking untouchable at the moment. You know that, Dante. The guy is a fucking

fortress. He needs to be weakened. I'm working on that."

"How do we know we can even trust you?" I called out.

"Because we have a shared interest. Sirena," he said solemnly.

"What interest do you have with her?" Church asked.

"You already know the answer to that. I love her," he replied without an ounce of remorse on his face. "And I will have her."

"Like fuck you will." Church got to his feet.

"Listen, this is how it works. I've seen things. If you want her safe, you need to listen to me." Asylum got to his feet this time too, which in turn put both me and Ashes on ours in case they tore into one another.

Sin hadn't moved a muscle and continued to stare down at his hands from his spot on his bed. I supposed in the grand scheme of things, he was the odd man out without really a side to fight for.

"What have you seen?" I looked at Asylum. "Because if you've seen all of this shit until this point, that makes you just as fucking bad as the assholes doing them."

"You're right. But you're also wrong. I don't get to see an entire path many times. It's just glimpses. I take what I can get and use intuition for the rest of it. And a few well-placed spies." He gave us a wry smile. "I see the end with her and you. But I also see her with me. *I see us*. So you need to understand that it's a big possibility. My visions aren't usually wrong."

"They are in this instance. I'll never let you have her." Church glared from Asylum to Sin. "And there isn't a fucking chance in hell he will ever lay his fucking hands on her again." Church jerked his thumb in Sin's direction, a sour look on his face.

"I won't," Sin said, finally looking over at us. "I won't even touch her again if it's what you want from me. I won't ever speak to her. I will do what you ask of me because it's you asking me. I want her safety, and I'll die to make sure she has it."

Church said nothing as he glared at him.

"Are you sure about that?" Asylum frowned.

"Dead serious," Sin said. "If Dante and the watchers want me to remove myself completely from her, I'll do it without question. I'll stand by and protect her if that's what they want. She will be safe, or I'll hand them the knife to gut me themselves."

"I'm agreeable to that," Ashes said, eyeing Sin. "I'm still pissed at you though so really any infraction could earn you a good stabbing."

“I think you’re a piece of shit.” Church glared at him. “But I need all the fucking hands on deck I can get. If you’re doing this, then the rules are simple. You never fucking touch her. You don’t speak to her unless it’s warranted. You are to be seen and not heard in pretty much all cases. Not felt. *Nothing*. If I find out differently, you’re dead. It’s that simple.”

“Bit harsh,” Asylum muttered.

“Same goes for you. I don’t care what the voices in your head have told you. You keep her fucking safe if you love her so much.” Church turned his angry glare on Asylum.

“And what if I don’t? What if I decide to fuck your rules, Dante, and keep her safe and make her love me back? Then what? What will you do? It’s the price for protection, after all. I asked if you were willing to pay it.”

I cast an uneasy look at Church who appeared like he was ready to pull his knife out and shank Asylum right then and there. I glanced to Ashes and found he seemed to be in the same train of thought that I was.

We needed less bloodshed, not more, at least right now. The blood could come later.

“Then you die too. Have you seen that in your visions?” Church taunted.

“I haven’t, which makes me think I might win this round. I’m good at winning. I think we’re all becoming accustomed to it, don’t you think?” Asylum cocked his head at him.

“You’re fucking nuts.” Church visibly swallowed. “But I need you. If you fuck this up...”

“I won’t,” Asylum said solemnly. “Trust me. Trust the process. If I wanted her dead or in the hands of Everett, she’d be there. I want *him* dead. That’s my end goal. You can join in and play the game, Dante, or you can sit back and try to figure shit out on your own. I assure you that *I am the way*.”

“We should listen to him,” I murmured. “He really did protect Sirena in the facility.”

Church was silent for a beat before he nodded. “Fine. What’s your plan?”

“Easy. Give her back to me,” Asylum said with a smile.

“Go fuck yourself. What else do you have?” Church sat back down. Once more, Ashes and I followed.

Asylum let out a laugh. “I knew you’d say that. It wasn’t in the literal sense you gave her back. You just allow me to be near her. Sin to be near her. I’m not going to abide by your rules really, but I will allow her to decide. In the end, the choice in who she wants should be hers, should it not?” He

cocked his head again. "I think it's only fair that we allow her to choose if she so wishes."

"She won't choose you," Church said with vehemence.

"Then what are you so worried about with her being around me?" Asylum winked at him. "I should be a safe date if you think she won't ever wander into my bed. Willingly."

I looked to Church to see if I could gauge a reaction from him. He seemed to be contemplating Asylum's words as he stared back at him.

"Fine. We'll see. I'll allow her the choice because I know what it'll be. She'll choose us."

"And if she wants me as well? And Sinclair?"

A muscle thrummed along Church's jaw, and he balled his hands into fists.

"I think if we love her like we say we do, then if she chooses, we accept whatever that choice is." I hated to say the words because I didn't want to share her with Asylum knowing he was a crackpot, but I couldn't shake what I'd seen in the facility. In the beginning, knowing he was taking her from us, it had broken me. Now, after what I'd witnessed and been through with him, I saw him as something else. Annoying, sure, but there was more to him than he let on, and I truly believed he loved her in his own twisted, fucked-up way.

And if you love someone, you have to love them enough to accept their choices, even if those choices aren't you.

"Sinclair isn't ever going to be allowed back," Church said, breathing out harshly. "He's not part of this. He already agreed to simply protect her and keep his distance."

"Is this what you want?" Asylum looked to Sin, a troubled expression on his face.

Sin looked from Asylum to Church, turmoil on twisting his features.

"I want to come home. I accept if I'm never wanted again though. I have sins to repent, so you have my word and my protection. Once this is over, I'll leave. I won't get close to Sirena unless it's to protect her. I will not speak to her unless warranted. Touch her. Love her. I will separate myself completely and offer only my services to my...brothers." He winced as he said the words.

Church studied him for a moment.

Fuck, this sucked.

“I think if Sin is able to repent, then we should consider letting him come home for good—” I started, finally fucking cracking. Maybe it was the look on his face. His tattered body with her name etched deep into his flesh, or maybe it was the sound of his voice as he tried to not let it crack beneath the pain he was in. Maybe it was because I knew the prick loved her too and I knew what it was like to love and feel unworthy of it.

“I accept his terms,” Church plowed on, ignoring me.

Ashes let out a soft sigh. I glanced at him to see him shoot me a quick, sad smile before he focused back on the conversation, his thumb slower when flipping his lighter open and closed.

It was better than nothing. At least Sin wasn't the fucking leper anymore. Not really. Maybe he'd wear Church down. Maybe Sirena would love him. Who knew at this point in the game.

All I knew was that I wanted to see her desperately and maybe kiss her.

SIRENA



Cady had left last night and hadn't returned back. I wasn't surprised because she said she wasn't going to, so I didn't worry about her. Any tiny inkling of fear I had was gone when my phone buzzed with a text from her saying she was going to get breakfast with Adam.

Curling back up in the massive bed, I darkened the phone screen without bothering to send a reply message. I never replied, so today wouldn't make things any different.

Cady had locked the door when she'd left, but I knew if Church or any of the watchers wanted in, a lock wasn't going to stop them. In a way, I'd barely slept because I'd been waiting for one of them to come back for me. When the sun rose, defeat had poured through me because no one had showed up.

So now I lay beneath the covers, all curled into a tight ball as I considered what was happening. Church was angry. I didn't know how to fix it and telling him everything was out of the question. I didn't want to feel the way I felt, and I definitely didn't want to bring it up. Knowing that some sick creeps behind a wall of glass had watched me be fucked by the same person who had tried to kill me years ago hurt my heart. It made me sick.

On the flip side of it all, I'd lost my mind and didn't hate Asylum as much as I should have. Maybe years of wallowing in everything had made me tired and apathetic. Maybe even a little angry at him for not finishing the job. Life, or death, would have been easier than existing how I existed. Whenever I could talk, I clammed up. Sometimes I found the words, but mostly it was just knee jerk reactions that sent the words from my mouth.

I imagined being with someone like me was frustrating, so it's no wonder Church needed space.

I could accept that. It hurt, but it was my reality. Men wouldn't want to be with a woman who couldn't even tell them what she wanted to eat when he asked. I was a lost cause, and I hated myself for it.

When Cady finally came home, it was already dark outside again. I'd lain in bed all day, not hearing a peep from my watchers. Only moving to use the bathroom and then right back to my spot in bed.

"Rina? Are you OK?" Cady dropped her jacket on the chair and sat beside me in bed.

Of course, I said absolutely nothing. I wasn't OK. I was scared. As much as I'd fought with my worries all day. Part of me wanted to march back to the watchers and...well, I didn't know what I'd do when I got there. The other part of me wanted to just cuddle beneath the warm blankets and never come out again. That part was definitely winning.

"Have the guys come to see you today?"

I let out a sad sigh.

"Those fuckers." Cady pulled her phone out. Before she could press Church's name, I placed my hand over hers and shook my head.

"Rina, don't let these dicks make you feel like shit."

I squeezed her hand and snuggled back beneath the covers.

She let out a sigh and put her phone down before curling around me, her arm slung over my waist.

"Remember when we were little, and we'd lay like this with you holding me while Mom and Dad argued? Sometimes we'd go into the closet and hide to try to block out their yelling."

I closed my eyes, remembering those nights where we'd hold each other and whisper about how tomorrow would be a better day, and Mom and Dad would still love each other.

"I used to cry, and you'd tell me everything would be OK. I always believed you." She hugged me tightly.

My breath came out in a soft whoosh at her words.

"Can I tell you a secret?" she whispered.

I placed my hand over hers.

"After your...accident. When you stopped talking. I would play that video Mom recorded of us that time we made that skit and acted it out for her and Dad. I missed your voice and your smile. Your singing and dancing. I'd watch that video on repeat. I brought it with me when I left because I was so scared you weren't coming back to me. It was all I had of you. That and my

memories.”

I blinked back my tears before turning to face her. Her eyes were glassy as she stared back at me.

“I love you,” I whispered to her. “So much, Cady Cat. Never forget that.”

“Oh, Rina.” She sobbed, clinging to me. I clung right back at her, desperate to just hold on for a little bit more. I didn’t know what tomorrow would bring, but if I had to guess, more pain because that was just my life it seemed.

†

I MISSED CLASSES ON MONDAY. The watchers still hadn’t come or made contact with me. Cady hung out with me and watched Lord of the Rings on Sunday and had gone to classes on Monday after promising me she’d keep her distance from the guys and let them work out whatever they needed to on their own.

I was severely depressed though. So much so that Cady was worried, and that was the last thing I wanted her to be. While I knew I needed to get up and just keep going, I felt like the entire weight of the world was crushing me.

Taking the time to just sort through my thoughts and feelings hadn’t been given to me, and I felt lost.

I knew I wanted the watchers. I knew I had weird feelings brewing inside of me when I thought of Asylum. Mirage. Even Sin, although I was still incredibly leery of him. He still made me tremble just thinking his name. Him not gutting me like a fish in the woods that night had helped me feel a bit more secure, but I also knew he wasn’t someone I could easily trust again because of that unpredictability he had about him.

Then there was Bryce. He kept playing at the edge of my feelings, making me feel even more confused. I hadn’t spent a lot of time contemplating him. It was all just too much right now. All I knew was that I cared deeply for him. Too deeply for him just being my friend. It made my chest constrict with the agony of knowing...

Right now, my focus was on the watchers though.

None of it mattered though if they didn’t want me back. At least on the

watchers' part. Anything to do with Asylum and Sin was on my no-no list. And Mirage? God, my heart hurt.

Which was why on Monday night when the watchers' still hadn't made contact and Cady was out with Adam, I crept out of my room and into the night dressed in solid black with my running shoes tied tight in case I had to escape. Not that I'd probably get far, but I felt more confident that I was prepared as I made my way into the dark woods and to the clearing. I didn't know why I was going, only that I felt the pull to be there. And a hope. A big one.

When I reached the clearing, I stood in the center of it and spun a circle to find I was alone. The woods was cold and silent, the moon casting its beams around the darkened forest. I hugged myself tightly, noting I'd need to get a coat if I were going to brave these lowering Michigan temperatures because my zip-up hoodie wouldn't do the trick for long.

After standing silently for what felt like forever, I went to my butt and just sat, staring into the darkness. I should have been scared to be out there all alone in the middle of a woods, and maybe I was, but I'd also felt a lot of fear lately and it hadn't killed me. My heart hammered hard in that dark clearing as I tried to remain calm. The dark wasn't my favorite place, but I kept telling myself to face my fears.

If I faced my fears, I'd get better. I'd talk more. I'd smile more. Maybe I'd even sing and dance again.

I felt him before I saw him.

He was the warmth that swept into the clearing. I didn't turn to face him even though I knew he was standing behind me as I sat on the cold forest ground.

"I admire how brave you are," Mirage said in a soft voice.

Slowly, I got to my feet and turned to face him.

His rabbit mask was firmly in place as he stared me down, his black attire nearly matching mine, complete with black Chucks.

I swallowed, staring back at him.

"You're sad," he commented.

I remained silent, causing him to step closer.

"Don't shut down on me," he said gently. "I'm not the enemy."

He reached out and ran his knuckles along my jaw before tangling his fingers in my hair and drawing me against his body in a tight embrace.

"You're freezing," he murmured. "Let me warm you."

I sagged against him, relishing in all that was Mirage. A tear trickled out followed by another. I felt like all I did lately was cry.

“I cry too,” he said, holding me against his body. “Too often if truth be told.”

I hugged him back, making him let out a soft breath, his arms tightening around me.

“There you are.” His lips were at my ear. “There’s my girl. It won’t hurt forever. Everything has a purpose, even the pain we are forced to endure. It makes us stronger. I’m so sorry for all you’ve endured.”

We stayed holding onto one another for what felt like hours before he finally pulled away from me.

“Do you want to forget your world for a moment and get lost in mine?” he asked.

I stared up at him, intrigued. I wanted to be out of my head in the worst way.

“Tell me,” he whispered.

Yes.

He smiled at me and backed away.

“You be the fox. I’ll be the rabbit. Catch me if you can.” He darted off into the night while I stood there for a moment, not sure what I was doing.

Finally, a smile touched my lips, and I shot off in the direction he’d gone, the brush cracking beneath my feet as I ran and the cool wind in my hair. I streaked through the darkness, feeling more alive than I’d felt in a long time.

I knew this game.

It was called *Chase*.

I was usually the rabbit though.

I continued to run through the darkened woods, my eyes drinking everything in as best I could as I raced through the night.

Mirage’s laughter sounded out around me, pushing me harder.

“What will you do when you catch me?” his voice echoed in the night.

I paused my run, listening.

A twig snapping.

Rustling.

I turned abruptly around and ran full tilt ahead. I let my instincts guide me. And there he was. Crouched behind a fallen log, peering out in the wrong direction.

I crept up to him and carefully sat on the log, waiting for him to notice

me. He stayed crouched for a long time, his rabbit ears making me smile, before he slowly rose to his feet and turned to face me.

A smile cut upward on what I could see of his face.

“Look at you, quiet as a ghost. You’d make a good assassin...*ghost*. Just as silent as the grave.” He moved closer to me until he was situated between my legs. My heart beat hard at his nearness that I knew was so damn wrong.

“I could train you,” he said, cocking his head at me. “If you wanted me to.”

I bit my bottom lip, making him smile a little more.

“I don’t think I’d like to see the blood on your hands though, but if it’s what you wanted, I’d do it so you could take out the monsters who have hurt you.” He held his hand out to me, and I slid my palm against his, letting my fingers trace the scars on his wrists.

A gasp of pain left my lips as he twisted my wrist quickly, bringing me to my knees.

Just as fast as he did it, he released me.

I stared up at him, confused.

“Let me teach you this,” he said. “So you can be safe when we aren’t there.” He offered me his hand again. “Trust me.”

I was desperate to trust him, so I gave him my hand again, and he helped me to my feet.

And then he showed me how to do what he’d done to my wrist. It was quick and easy. A simple twist and lots of pressure.

“There you go. Fast. Faster.” He knocked my hand away. “Come on. You can do this.”

I secured his hand and did the move on him, bringing him to his knees. He let out a hiss and stared up at me as I held his wrist in the painful pinned position he couldn’t wiggle from.

“Release,” he hissed out.

But I didn’t. I continued to stare down at him.

“Sirena,” he gasped. “Let go.”

My bottom lip trembled as we locked eyes.

“I’ll never harm you,” he said, breathlessly. “Ever. Stop thinking I will. I’m not them. I’m not any of them. And I’m certainly not *him*. Release me. You’re hurting me.”

I blinked rapidly and let him go, sickened by the desire to cause pain.

I backed away from him, my heart in my throat.

“Don’t run,” he said in a soft, commanding voice. “Not from me. Never from me.”

I stopped my retreat and let him advance on me. He hauled me against his hard body and held me tightly.

“It’s OK to be angry at me. I’m angry at me too, but I promise I’m not your enemy.” He kissed the top of my head fiercely. “It’s OK.”

When he released me, he looked to the night sky.

“You need to get back to your room. He’s coming for you. He’ll be mad if you aren’t there.” He offered me his hand, and I took it without hesitation, making him smile.

He tugged me forward through the woods for a moment before he broke into a run, my hand in his, as we raced into the night. When we reached the edge of the woods, we were both breathless.

He turned to me and gave me a smile. “This is where we part.”

I swallowed hard, knowing I was going to miss him.

“Oh, my sweet girl,” he murmured, chucking my chin up. “I’ll miss you too, but it’s time. Wild animals belong to the dark forest.” He backed away from me slowly, his white bunny ears a stark contrast to the darkness of the night. “Just so you know, I think you look beautiful in all black. It’s my favorite color.” And with those words, he loped off into the darkness, leaving me standing on the edge of the woods, confused out of my mind, but knowing I missed more than just him.

He’d taken my mind off things like I’d wanted, but with it only came more heartache.

On the other side of the coin though, I knew I was desperate to see my watchers and sent up a silent prayer that my rabbit, my Mirage, was right about seeing them tonight.

If they didn’t come to me, I’d just have to go to them.

CHURCH



Once I felt confident that she was asleep, I made my way over to the dorm room and unlocked the door before stepping inside to find her sleeping soundly in her bed.

It had been killing me to be away from her, but I thought she needed the space while we worked through shit and had a more solid plan in place.

And while we made her something special.

I stared down at her, just as intrigued with her beauty and her soul as the first time I'd seen her. Being away from her had really been hard, but I knew it would be worth it in the end. Wanting to be better for her made little sense to the old Dante, but to the one who was madly in love with her, it was perfection. And I did want to be better for her. For all of us. Seeing Sin and speaking with Asylum helped to soothe my wicked soul. It wasn't without a price though. I knew shit would go from bad to worse and we'd need to meet it head-on when it did, but I at least felt better prepared now.

Knowing Asylum was in deep with my father pissed me off. I wasn't surprised though. My father did adore the gifted and wicked. Asylum was a shoo-in.

Typically, I wouldn't have entertained shit from Asylum. I'd have gutted him and left him in the forest for the wild animals to feast on, but there was something in his voice, in his eyes, when he spoke about my specter that made me pause. Or maybe it was Stitches being so adamant that I listen.

Whatever it was, it had worked.

Now I just had a sleeping beauty to take back to my bed.

Of course, I did adore her sleeping form. It was my sickness, taking her innocence while she slumbered so peacefully. I wanted to be the nightmare

she couldn't wake from. Couldn't escape from.

If that wasn't true love, I didn't know what was.

Or maybe it was beyond love. Maybe it was obsession.

Whatever it was, it had me stroking my cock as I stared down at her. I knew Cady wouldn't be back for a long time because I'd texted her to tell her I needed to talk to Sirena and to stay away. After sending me a photo of her giving the camera the finger, she agreed.

Carefully, I reached out and brushed a black wave away from her face, my cock as hard as a steel beam.

I'd been jerking off in the shower every chance I got since I'd been away from her.

There was no way in hell I wasn't going to take her right where she lay tonight.

I pushed my pants off and removed the rest of my clothes before I crawled into bed with her and ran my hand beneath her white nightgown. I brushed against her silk-clad pussy before I leveled myself over her body and slid my dick through her folds, saying fuck it to her panties. Pushing them aside would simply have to do.

Gently, I inched my way inside her heat until I was completely buried inside her.

I didn't move. I simply stayed seated within her hot, tight confines, staring down at her.

Her lashes fluttered, and her brows crinkled. Then her colorful eyes greeted me through the dim light from the moon.

Her breath caught in her chest as she stared back at me.

I thought maybe she'd hit me. It would be a fitting punishment after being a complete asshole and leaving her.

Instead, she shifted upward and pressed her lips to mine and tangled her fingers in my hair.

I lost it.

I pulled out and slammed back into her, making her whimper against my lips while I kissed her back.

"Fuck, specter," I rasped. "*Baby*. How I've missed you. Spread your legs wider for me. I want to bury my cock so deep inside your body I fuse myself to your fucking soul."

Her legs fell open for me, and I did just that, railing into her heat so hard and fast that the bed creaked and smashed repeatedly against the wall.

With my lips on hers, she came, biting my lip and drawing blood while her pussy throbbed around my cock.

I couldn't take it. I came with her, filling her until my movements slowed and her body relaxed back against the mattress.

"Come home," I said softly, my eyes locked on hers.

She ran her nails through my hair before cradling my face. I closed my eyes and breathed out, trying to remember everything about how this moment felt with her so I could keep it forever.

"Please come home, baby," I murmured, opening my eyes. "I need you home."

I should have asked for forgiveness. I should have said I was sorry. It was always hard for me to say those things. Even when I'd said them before, it pained me to do so, regardless of the fact I genuinely was sorry. Right now, I wanted her to come with me more than I was sorry.

I withdrew from her body and helped her sit up. As much as I didn't want to be away from her, I slid off the bed and quickly dressed while she watched me with curious eyes.

"Come." I offered her my hand. She stared at it for so long I wasn't sure she'd obey, but I wasn't above scooping her up and putting her over my shoulder to take home. Just when I thought it had come to that, she placed her hand in mine and allowed me to bring her to her feet.

"We can come back for your things."

She tried to go to the small bathroom, presumably to clean up the mess that was dripping between her sexy as fuck thighs, but I tugged her against my body.

"Be my dirty girl," I husked out.

She licked her lips before biting down on her bottom one. Her gaze darted to the messy bed.

I looked at it and back at her before I smirked.

"I'm not changing Cady's sheets."

She raised a brow at me and jutted out her bottom lip.

That settled that. Call it post-coital high, but I was putty in her hands. So I released her and quickly changed Cady's sheets before going back to her side. In that time, she'd gathered her clothes and had them back in her bag and was wearing leggings and a hoodie.

I shook my head at her and grabbed the bag at her feet before slinging it over my shoulder. Taking her hand in mine, I led her out of the room and out

into the cool Michigan air, only two desires in my heart.

Her at my side always and to kill every single person who had hurt her.

And I'd bring a fucking army.

STITCHES



I bounced on the balls of my feet, my pulse high while I waited for Church to return with Sirena. I had no idea if she'd even want to come back after we'd basically abandoned her at Cady's.

As much as I knew the guys wanted to get back to her, I didn't think there was anyone more nervous than me over it. I kept having these doubts circling in my mind about her wanting me. Ashes kept telling me I was wrong and overthinking it and that I needed to leave the overthinking to him, but I couldn't help myself.

Dante had taken the pills away Janice had given me too. I'd managed to hide a few, but he'd told me I wasn't allowed to have them any longer because they were affecting my emotions, and he didn't want me to be a robot.

I knew I needed to face shit, but it was so much fucking better lost in an endless sea of denial. Now that I knew though...

Well, I'd been not dealing very well.

All I had were my depression meds, and let's face it, that shit couldn't even begin to cut through the mess inside my head knowing it had all been real. That I'd...shit, I couldn't even think it. The flashes of it all sickened me to the point of vomiting.

I hadn't eaten all day.

I'd been surviving the past few days on weed.

"You good?" Ashes asked, eyeing me as I paced the living room.

I wasn't stupid. I knew they were on stranglehold watch. With my shit out in the open and true, it didn't take a genius to understand they were concerned for me and what I was capable of. Hell, I'd given them a good

reason to watch me. I'd been swinging from a bar in my closet only weeks ago.

"No," I said. "But I'm trying."

Ashes nodded. "You're doing great."

"I'm a fucking mess, man. You know I am."

"We all are."

"Well, you didn't have some fucked-up human with his cock—" I couldn't finish my sentence. I just fucking couldn't. Nausea twisted low in my guts at the flash of the feeling. The warmth. The groans.

I swallowed down the bile and breathed out.

Nothing about this shit was good.

Fuck, god help me.

"Breathe, Malachi," Ashes called out.

I blinked at him, having disassociated for a moment.

Sucking in a deep breath, I nodded at him, not wanting him to know how fucking broken and weak I was inside. I was Malachi Wolfe. I was the strong one. The protector of my family. The one who cracked jokes but would commit murder if someone stared at me for too long.

I wasn't this...thing. This basket case. OK, maybe I was a basket case, but I wasn't *this* basket case.

The guys were terrified of me falling again.

I swore to myself I'd never fall again.

But fuck was it hard to not just stop fighting and let go. Say fuck it. Let the devil sort me out in hell.

"Talk to her," Ashes said. He pulled his lighter out and opened and closed it in the set of five he loved so much before stopping and doing it all over again. With his other hand, he took a hit from his vape, sending the scent of cherries into the air.

The front door opened, and Church stepped inside. I paused my pacing to stare as Sirena, my angel, came in behind him, her hair a wild mess from the wind and probably Church's fingers.

Just as perfect as ever.

And she's here. Fuck, she's here. I have to face this shit.

God, Mama, please. I can't face it. I can't do it. I've failed her in so many terrible ways. She deserves better. I wish I had those meds. Fuck. I need them. I can't live like this.

"Malachi." Ashes rested his hand on my shoulder. I hadn't even realized

I'd blanked out again and was breathing heavily and fast. My lips felt numb from hyperventilating.

"Breathe, brother. Relax. We got you. We always will," he murmured, giving my shoulder a gentle squeeze before releasing me to go to Sirena. I watched as he approached cautiously, clearly unsure about whether she was willing to accept him with open arms after we'd left her without a word for those few days.

I held my breath when he reached for her.

She didn't jerk away from him. Instead, she fell into his arms. He hugged her tightly, rocking her with him.

"Heaven," he said on repeat. "Heaven, baby. I'm so glad you're back. I've missed you so damn much." He pulled away from her. She took that opportunity to take his hand in hers and trace something onto his palm that made him drag her back to him, his lips finding hers.

I looked away, an ugly flare of jealousy and want igniting deep in my chest.

I wanted that.

I wanted her like they had her.

Maybe...?

No. I'm fucking disgusting. I'm not a man. I'm a fucking waste of space. I couldn't protect her. Hell, I couldn't even protect myself. Now I was this toy. This plaything for the sick.

If Everett, the man who I thought of as my father, wanted to put me through more, he certainly would.

No one was safe.

We weren't fucking safe.

Goddamnit. I was losing it. I was fucking losing it.

I'd blanked out again, lost in my terror.

Warm arms encircled me, holding me tight. My vision came back into focus. I stared down to see my angel's arms around me.

She shouldn't have to protect me.

Damn. It sure felt good to feel her against my body.

I couldn't. I couldn't though. No. No. NO.

I broke away from her and swallowed hard.

"Hey," I said, my voice husky and thick. "Glad you're back."

She stared up at me, all the hurt in the world on her face. Pain raked through me as she backed away, the defeat evident.

Fuck, babe. I'm sorry.

The shit in my head. It was killing me.

It was going to kill us.

If there was even a salvageable us at this point. I was sure doing my damndest to ruin things. I was just...fuck, I didn't know.

"I need to smoke," I said abruptly, backing away. I didn't wait to be told no. Instead, I left the room and went to the back patio and pulled out a joint. Once the drugs were in my system, I let my head fall back so I could stare up at the stars.

"Malachi," Church called out.

"I'm sorry," I said, not looking away from the night sky. "I'm having a bad fucking night, man. I don't mean to. I just get in my head and it's a fight I'm simply not winning right now."

Church moved to lean forward against the balcony next to me.

"I know. I'm not judging you. I get it. Or at least I'm trying to get it."

"Thanks," I muttered, unable to just look at him. "I feel like a piece of shit. I'm not worthy—"

"You need to stop with that shit. I know you were hurt, and I swear to you that you'll have your revenge, but right now I need you here with us. I think if you just open up a little with Sirena things could get better for you. You need to stop avoiding her. All of this will be for nothing if you don't. I want us to be together. That was the agreement from the start. Nothing has changed."

"Sin has. Asylum has," I murmured.

Church took my joint and toked on it before handing it back to me and blowing out the smoke. "Yeah," he agreed without elaborating on it.

We were both quiet.

"What's Ashes doing?" I finally asked.

"Bathing her. I fucked her before we got here, and she was a little dirty."

I let out a soft chuckle that didn't feel like there was any humor in it. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Because you know me. I know you too though, and I know you want to be happy. Your happiness is being bathed by your other best friend right now. All you need to do is join in."

I exhaled. "I think I just need some time."

"We don't have a lot of that, brother. You know that."

"I know," I murmured before we both went quiet again. We'd agreed we

were all in this shit together. That we'd all be with her no matter what. Waking or sleeping. Classes or no classes. She wouldn't ever be without one of us, and that included Asylum and Sin, even if Sin were from a distance.

When the time came, we were going to kill them all. Ashes would burn this motherfucker to the ground, and we'd revel in the ash and soot and fuck Sirena in the coagulating blood of our enemies.

It was a rough plan, but Asylum and Church had decided on a course of action. We'd agreed to it and hoped that Asylum wasn't fucking with us. So far, I didn't see that happening with him, but this world we lived in was fucked up and nothing would surprise me at this point.

And Sin.

I'd seen his face. Heard his voice. He was really in this. I kept telling myself he was. I wanted him to prove he was with us because the alternative of learning to live without him was beginning to not sit well with me. While he pissed me off and I was struggling with that hatred I had, I also still loved him.

He was my brother too. Just like Church. Just like Ashes. We were a family founded in darkness and trauma. That meant something.

"You can do this," Church said, pushing off the balcony. "I know you can. I've seen you overcome a fuck of a lot of things since I met you. This is just another one of those things. Like your scars. You earned your name because you can always be put back together. No matter what, Malachi. You're made of stronger things than you think. I've seen it. I believe it."

"Really?" I looked over at him.

"Really. Now come on. Let's give this shit a try. I don't know about you, but I really want to kill these fucks."

I gave him a sad smile. "Then what?"

"Then we rule as we were meant to. Trust the process like our new friend Asylum says. Maybe our plan is best just being spontaneous. We've always worked better that way. At least let's fucking try it until we have a better plan."

"I think killing them all is the best plan."

He smiled at me. "We're on the same page. Come. Let's go see our girl."

"I'll be there in a minute," I said, looking back to the stars.

"OK. Just...don't forget."

"I could never forget her," I murmured.

Church left, the patio door closing softly behind him.

I closed my eyes and sent out a prayer, hoping someone would answer it.
*Help us find these sick, twisted fucks, God so that we can kill them all
before they find us.*
Amen.

SIRENA



“Let’s get you out of here,” Ashes said, dropping a kiss on my bare shoulder. He’d spent the last thirty minutes washing me and telling me how much he’d missed me and how they had a surprise for me tonight.

As much as all of that made me happy and helped me to get over my anger and frustration at them, I was hurt over Stitches’s reaction to me being back. Hugging him had taken a lot of bravery on my part, and he’d simply brushed me off. It hurt.

But I wasn’t going to stop. If I was here, then I was with them all. I’d have to suck it up and show him how much he meant to me.

Fear of rejection be damned, I was going to make Stitches mine.

“Come on, baby,” Ashes urged, getting out of the tub, his muscular naked body on full display.

My cheeks heated as my gaze darted to his erection.

He let out a soft laugh and took my hand. “It’s yours if you want it, whenever you want it. I just don’t want you to think I only want sex with you, especially after we were away. I truly enjoy your company. You make me happy, heaven.”

I stood still while he dried me and helped me into a dress that definitely didn’t look like anything I’d owned.

“I picked it out,” he said, looking nervously at me as I stared at myself in the mirror. It hit just above the knees with a scoop neck cut and tiny red rosebuds printed on the soft black material.

“Do you like it?” He studied my reflection in the mirror briefly before offering me his hand.

Yes.

He smiled at my answer and began brushing my hair. “Good. I was worried. I’ve never bought anything for a girl before. Well, except Abby. When we were eight, I bought her teddy bear a new dress with my allowance because she’d spent hers on candy.”

I smiled at his words but noted the sadness in his voice. Turning, I wound my arms around his neck and looked up at him.

“Hey,” he murmured, placing the brush atop the counter and resting his hands on my waist.

I breathed in the smell of his leather and smoke that was just so *Ashes* and leaned in to kiss his soft lips. He was quick to kiss me back, allowing me to have the lead. While Ashes could be wild when turned on, he was also very much attuned to me and allowed me to explore too. It was something I really liked about him. Where Church liked to be in charge and in control, Ashes let it happen naturally and gave me a chance to have that moment.

I ran my tongue along the seam of his lips. He parted for me and allowed me to dip my tongue inside against his. His hands tightened on my waist, and I shifted closer to his naked body, feeling the brush of his erection against my belly.

Nervously, I took hold of his hard length and stroked him, making a soft gasp fall from his lips against mine.

I wasn’t a pro at this and really only did what I’d seen them do. I’d fumbled around attempting this before to no complaints, but I was still new. After a few moments of touching him, I slowed because I felt like I wasn’t getting anywhere.

“Don’t stop,” he whispered urgently against my lips. “Please keep going, heaven. It felt good.”

I restarted, earning a soft moan from him. In minutes, he’d wrapped his hand around mine to help guide me because I’d faltered several times.

“Like this, baby. Stroke me quickly. Tightly. Just like that. Make me come. Don’t slow down.” He kissed me. “I love when you make me come for you.”

His words spurred me on as he released my hand. I jerked him quickly until his dick thickened. He pulled out of my hold and finished jerking himself, his head thrown back as he groaned, his orgasm coming out of him in a thick, white rope against his tight abs. When he was finished, he gave me his sweet smile.

“I didn’t want to get your pretty dress dirty,” he said, cleaning himself off

with a washcloth. I watched him wordlessly. When he was finished, he pulled on a pair of boxers and some gray sweatpants before taking my hand and leading me out of the bathroom and back to the living room.

Church was waiting for us on the couch. He stood the moment we came back in and moved toward me.

“Hey, we have something for you,” he said, his gaze raking over me.

I widened my eyes, wondering what it could be.

Stitches came back in then, notably high, which made me swallow hard. He was really going through it. It reinforced my desire to help him.

“Ready?” Church looked to Stitches who nodded. “Come on.”

Church took my hand and led me up the stairs, Ashes and Stitches behind us. I thought we were going to Church’s room, but he led me to a door at the end of the hall and pulled it open. It had always been locked whenever I’d try to see what was behind it.

I peered past him to see a carpeted set of stairs.

“Go on,” he murmured, nodding for me to take the steps up.

Nervously, I went forward, the guys behind me as we made our way up.

A soft gasp left my lips when I reached the top.

A massive room awaited me, complete with a bed done in fluffy pink blankets and pillows, cream-colored walls, twinkly lights, all my painting stuff plus loads of new stuff. Overstuffed furniture with one of the chairs facing a window so I could look out to the dark woods. Plush white rugs. A vanity. Dresser. Closet.

I turned to look at the guys.

“Do you like it?” Church asked.

“You wanted your own space. We worked all weekend to give it to you,” Ashes added, looking around apprehensively. “We’ve never decorated before really, and definitely never for a girl.”

“If you hate it, we can completely redo it,” Church cut in.

It was perfect. I loved it.

I threw my arms around Church and kissed him before going to Ashes and doing the same. When I got to Stitches, he backed away and gave me a shaky smile. I swallowed my emotions and turned away, not wanting him to see he was upsetting me.

“Specter,” Church said, moving to stand beside me as I stared at the easel and fresh canvas.

I looked up at him.

“I’m sorry about...everything. We never should have gone silent on you. We’ve just been dealing with some shit and needed time to do it. It was never a reflection of you or anything you’ve done,” Church’s voice was thick as he said the words. I knew they were hard for him.

“You’re perfect, baby,” Ashes said, taking my hand and squeezing it. “But since you were gone, we thought maybe we could do this for you to show you how much we care and how sorry we are.”

As much as I knew I should still be angry with them, I couldn’t find it in my heart to do so. If there was anything in this world I wanted more, it was to find happiness and not dwell on the bad or ugly.

I stepped away from the guys and went to the easel and sat on the stool with a paintbrush in my hand.

“We’ll make dinner,” Church called out. “We’ll come get you when it’s done.”

I didn’t turn. I simply dug into the paints, excitement blossoming in my chest.

Ashes let out a soft laugh before I heard them leave me, the door at the bottom of the stairs clicking closed behind them.

Without hesitation, I swirled the black onto the canvas before dotting the night sky with stars.

Then I added the dark forest.

The fire barrel for Ashes.

All of us watching as he burned things.

And in the distance, I added something new.

A white rabbit, silently watching.

STITCHES



I tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable. At one point, I'd even gotten up to go to Sirena only to stop at the closed door at the end of the hall and stare at it.

When we'd spoken to Asylum, I'd been in a rush to get back to her. Maybe it was adrenaline working overtime on me. Now that I'd let everything sink in, I was back to square one.

Hell, I was probably further back than square one because now I knew everything that had happened was real. I was used and abused. Fucked by men. Fucked by women. I'd taken cock like it was my birthright.

What little innocence I had left in my life had been stolen from me.

My door creaked open, and I looked at it, my heart in my throat.

Please...

I didn't know who I wanted it to be, but the moment she entered the room in her white nightgown, I knew I'd wanted it to be her.

I went up on my elbow and watched as she walked slowly into the room like a ghost and crawled into bed beside me. Her hand slid across my bare abdomen before her head rested on my chest.

I settled back in bed, my throat tight.

When her hand slowly caressed my abs, I squeezed my eyelids closed, my breathing heavy.

"Angel," I whispered. "I-I'm..."

I didn't know what the rest of my sentence would be. It didn't matter anyway because she shifted over my body and situated herself between my legs and stared at me.

I lay in silence, watching her as she leaned down and kissed my abdomen,

taking care to pay attention to each of my scars as she worked her way up my body.

My breath came out a stuttered gasp when she peppered kisses up the jagged cut over my guts and chest.

Her small, warm body settled over mine, her lips kissing along my neck and jaw. I tried to keep my breathing even, but I was internally freaking out inside, especially when her lips skimmed across the nasty scar on the side of my face from where I'd hacked off one of my tats while under the influence in the facility.

My dick hadn't gotten the cool down message though. It was hard as fuck beneath her warmth. I was acutely aware that only two pieces of thin material separated her warm pussy from me, and it was torture. I wanted to make love to her. Hold her. Kiss her. Tell her all the shit inside my head, but I was so fucking afraid.

"Stitches," her soft voice trembled in my ear.

Immediately, I moved my hands up to hold her at her waist, my breath catching in my chest.

"I remember," she continued softly, her lips brushing my ear. "You made it better. You saved me."

I closed my eyes, absorbing her words.

"I failed you, angel."

"Never."

I swallowed hard, her words doing something to my heart.

"I love you," she continued in her soft, sweet voice. "I miss you. Everything that happened to us made us stronger. It gave us the strength to do what we have to do. I need you, Malachi. I need you with me. I-I want to kill all of them. I want you to help me."

"Fuck, baby, yes," I answered back. "I want that too."

"Then come back. Don't fall. Please."

"They hurt me. They fucked me," my voice broke with my words. "They *raped* me, baby. I'm a man, and they took it from me. But I-I did it right back, so what does that say about me?"

"That you're a victim." She kissed the scar on my face. "That we all are. Please come back to us. To me. Let's be the monsters this time. Let them reap what they sow."

Fuck, I wanted that in the worst way. Her voice. Her words. They spurred me on. They opened up something deep inside of me.

Within moments, I had her flipped onto her back and pinned beneath me. She stared up at me with those eyes I could get lost in for hours.

“Take it,” she whispered, her wrists tightly bound by my hand as I held her. “Let me make it better.”

With my other hand, I went beneath her nightgown and tugged at her panties, the cracking of stitching sounding out in the room as I tore the lace from her. It didn’t take much to get my hard cock out from beneath my boxers.

My breathing was heavy as I pushed myself between her legs.

“Fight me, Sirena. My angel. Fight back. I-I need you to.”

She bucked up against me, causing my dick to slip away from its target.

I let out a snarl and forced her legs apart, my grip on her wrists tightening.

She struggled beneath me, making it hard to push into her body. Her struggle became violent, lending me a sense of relief I couldn’t explain if I tried. I managed to get her nightgown off, revealing her naked body before I slammed her hands back against the mattress, distracting her. With a groan, I forced my way into her tight pussy.

Her body tensed at the sudden, painful intrusion as I burrowed deep inside her without giving her time to adjust to me.

She quaked beneath me as I pulled out and slammed back into her pussy.

I knew it hurt. I wasn’t a small guy, and she was absolutely fucking tiny and tight. Railing repeatedly into her trembling body made me feel powerful. In charge.

“I-I’m sorry.” I slowed to a stop and released her hands. “I don’t want to hurt you—”

She reached out and twisted her fingers in my shaggy dark hair and met my lips in a brutal kiss that made me groan out her name, our tongues tangling with one another.

“I-I want you to hurt me,” she said fiercely. “Fuck me like a monster, Malachi. I want it all from you.”

Her words were my undoing.

She was my perfect little nightmare, and I was too fucked in the head to want to wake up.

With a snarl, I shifted, bringing her with me until her ass was off the bed and my hands were tight on her hips as I fucked into her tight pussy. She was so small and pliable that I could maneuver her however I wanted. Her tits

jostling from my rough brand of love turned me on even more.

Seeing her fingers tangled in my bedsheet as she clung to it made me positively insane.

I flipped her onto her stomach and shoved back into her before I fisted her hair and continued my brutal assault.

She tried to get away from me, but I pushed her flat onto the bed and used my weight to pin her there as I continued fucking her.

“You’re a bad girl, aren’t you, angel?” I choked out against her ear. “You’re my little demon sent straight from hell to make me spread my monster wings, aren’t you?”

“Y-Yes,” she choked out.

“Fuck.” I slammed into her harder, tugging her head back so I could kiss her lips. When that didn’t satisfy me, I flipped her back over and sucked her tongue into my mouth, delighted in how her breasts pushed against my chest with every one of her heaving breaths.

I kissed her jaw. Her neck. Her tits. Sucking. Licking. Tasting.

I was a madman who’d finally lost control.

She wanted me despite it all.

And fuck, I was hers.

Her nails tore down my back as she came, her pussy spasming around my cock, her pretty face twisted in ecstasy.

It was my undoing.

I completely blew, filling her sweet pussy with everything I had, groaning out her name.

Breathless, I rested my forehead against hers.

“Welcome back, Stitches,” she murmured before she went completely silent on me.

I kissed her sweet lips slowly. Gently.

“I love you,” I whispered against them. “My angel. My perfect little demon.”

Her lips curled up into a smile as she pressed her lips to mine once more.

These fuckers had definitely messed with the wrong monster.

*Dear God. If you’re listening, I’m about to do some really bad things.
Forgive me.*

Amen.

SIN



“Looks like she wasn’t mad at them after all,” Asylum said from next to me as he leaned against the tree on the edge of the courtyard.

I took a hit from my sugar he’d given me and blew out the smoke. “Yeah.”

He looked over at me and smiled brightly. “That’s a good thing. She is a sweetheart, isn’t she?”

“Yeah,” I said, offering him the drugs.

“No. I’m working.” He held his hand up to me.

“What?” I scoffed. “You’re leaning against a fucking tree, lurking like a cocksucker.”

“Cocksuckers don’t lurk, Sinclair. They’re too busy sucking cock, hence cocksucker.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “What exactly are you working on then?”

“Follow me.” He pushed off the tree, walking away from where Sirena was holding Church’s hand while Ashes kissed on her. Stitches was nowhere to be seen, but it was after classes, so I assumed he was probably in therapy or some shit.

I put out the sugar and followed Asylum along the back of some buildings before nearly crashing into him as he came to an abrupt stop.

“What the fuck?” I asked, stumbling to avoid him.

He said nothing as he turned down a dark alleyway that was hidden from prying eyes, the bushes blocking the entrance and acting like a wall.

Sighing, I followed him and stopped when the white rabbit stepped out of the dark recesses.

“Sin,” the rabbit said, nodding his head at me.

“Mirage. Why am I not surprised?”

“I don’t know.” He cocked his head at me. “Why aren’t you?”

I rolled my eyes and grumbled about putting out my drugs to be there which only made Mirage laugh softly. Sometimes he was just as annoying as Asylum was.

“What have you found out?” Asylum asked.

Mirage pulled a large carrot out of his back pocket and nibbled on it thoughtfully.

“Are you fucking serious?” I looked at him incredulously.

“What?” He crunched on his carrot. “I’m dressed like a fucking rabbit, Sinclair. When I commit to something, I go all in. That includes eating carrots.”

“I bought them for him,” Asylum supplied.

For fuck’s sake.

I shook my head and leaned against the wall, listening to the pair of them.

“She played with me in the woods,” Mirage said.

“You fuck her?” Asylum’s voice held a note of anger in it.

“No, I didn’t fuck her.” Mirage sighed. “She chased me though. We played chase. She caught me. I showed her how to protect herself a bit. She’s a fast learner. I really think she’s perfect.”

“Yes, we all know she is. I hear it a million times a day in my head,” Asylum grumbled.

“She loves the watchers. She’s back with them. Her and Malachi are closer than ever.”

“Now him she’s fucked. She’s spread her legs for all the watchers except for this pain in the ass.” Asylum jerked his thumb at me.

“Fuck you,” I snapped, my throat tight.

Asylum smirked at me. “It kills you, doesn’t it?”

I glanced to Mirage who stared back at me while munching his fucking carrot.

“I made an arrangement with them. It doesn’t matter. I agreed I’d not be part of her life past making sure she was safe.”

“You’ll need to really work at it to get back in with her,” Asylum said.

“I’m not interested.” I looked away from him.

“Get a load of this guy,” Asylum sniggered, jerking his thumb in my direction as I shot him a scowl. “Take it from someone who has fucked Sirena, she’s tight. Hot. Sweet.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I snarled, moving forward and shoving him in the chest. He took a step back, the smile never leaving his crazy ass face. “Don’t say shit like that about her. You fucking forced her—”

He shoved me back hard, sending me stepping back.

“Let’s get one thing clear. I stole nothing that wasn’t already mine, Sinclair. Don’t get it twisted. I was going to fuck her eventually anyway. *We are destined.*”

“You’re fucking cracked in the head.” I shoved him back, the urge to punch him in the face strong. “You tried to murder her. You don’t fucking deserve her.”

“Enough.” Mirage got between us, his fucking rabbit ears bouncing, and the carrot held beneath his teeth as he placed a hand on each of our chests. His words came out weird because of the carrot. “This is over. Do you understand me? What happened in the facility was disgusting and fucked up. Asylum, fucking tell him you didn’t mean any of it.”

Asylum shot me a sour look. “I didn’t mean any of it. We were forced to do it. I did the best I could given the circumstances, but I stand by what I said. She will be mine, and it will happen again.”

I swallowed down my fury and backed away. I didn’t want to fight. I mean, I did because the urge to still clock him was strong, but I wasn’t exactly in a situation where I could make more enemies.

I had to breathe.

I took in a few deep, fortifying breaths.

“Anyway, like we were saying,” Mirage continued. “Sirena is back with the watchers. She’s seemingly happy. From what I’ve heard, Sully is bringing in some new drugs from Everett Church to try on anyone admitting into the facility. I urge you to consider your actions so you’re not the next one getting *fucked*. Get me?”

I knew he was referring to the shit that had happened to Stitches. It was killing me to know he’d suffered like that. All I wanted to do was murder the pricks who had raped him. Who had forced Sirena to suffer.

But fuck, I had a hand in it too. If I hadn’t been such an asshole, she’d never have been with Asylum in that fucking box and Stitches wouldn’t have tried to kill himself.

“You think too much. It would have happened whether you were a part of it or not,” Asylum said softly. “Stop beating yourself up over it. There are certain paths set before us. They all ultimately lead to the same damn place.

So just fucking stop, Sinclair. It happened this way because it was meant to be. Believe me on that.”

“The voices tell you that?” I asked bitterly.

“Actually, they fucking did,” he snapped back at me. He cocked his head. “She thinks about her Sin every night. She prays for him. Holds her pillow tight. Whispers Sinful words. Ah, but not a sound is heard, for her silence is golden.”

“I hate you,” I muttered, the nausea tearing through me. I didn’t want her to think about me. Pray for me. Want me. I’d fucked up way too much for all that. Right now, I just needed to pay my penance so I could try to move on.

I didn’t know if Asylum were just goading me into playing the game. Maybe he thought lying to me about her feelings would light the fire beneath me to be the guy who follows through on his promise of keeping her safe and not be such a fuck-up.

“I don’t have any more information other than that except Vice Headmaster Atkins didn’t come in today,” Mirage continued.

Asylum snapped his attention on him. “Really?”

Mirage nodded solemnly and bit into his carrot again. “Poof. Gone.”

“Gone, gone or just for the day?” Asylum narrowed his eyes at him.

“Here one minute, gone the next. I saw him yesterday, but today I did not. Office was locked up tight. So...Poof. Gone.”

Asylum scrubbed his hand down his face and nodded. “See what you can find out. May be nothing.”

“Probably is everything.”

“Most likely.” Asylum nodded.

“Always likely.” Mirage bit his carrot again.

I looked between them and sighed. It wasn’t often they got together, but when they did, they spoke all weird to one another.

Asylum let out a bark of laughter while Mirage smirked and glanced at me.

“He’ll be fine,” Mirage said.

“Truly. But he’s funny.”

They looked at one another for a moment before full on grinning. It was eerie to see.

“No. Not really. He does, but not as much,” Asylum said. “It’s been OK. I don’t hate him. Much.”

Mirage chuckled. “You know what to do.”

Asylum nodded.

“Could you weird fucks stop that shit?” I called out, shooting them a glare. “I hate it. It’s creepy.”

“We’re creepy,” Asylum said solemnly. “I don’t know how else we could possibly be.”

“Try just being normal instead of all that head shit you do,” I said.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Asylum cocked his head to the left.

“Yeah,” Mirage echoed, cocking his head to the right.

I looked away and shook my head.

Weird fucks and I was cursed to be stuck with them.

“Sinclair, why don’t you scurry off and see if you can find our sweet like firefly. Make sure she’s safe,” Asylum said.

“She’s with Church and Ashes—” I started.

“Go,” he instructed, waving his fingers in a fuck off motion.

“Right. Forgot you two suck each other off when no one is around.” I shoved off the wall I’d been leaning against.

“If you want to join, all you need is ask,” Asylum said innocently.

“Man, no.” Mirage shook his head and slapped Asylum in the arm. “None of that shit.”

I turned and walked away from them, their banter fading away as I left the space and stepped back out into the gray skies.

Sighing, I returned to the courtyard where I’d last seen Sirena and saw she was sitting alone. I frowned at that and started in her direction until I saw Ashes slide in next to her on the bench and put his arm around her shoulder. He uncapped a bottle of apple juice and handed it to her. She took it and sipped at it.

I stopped in my tracks. I hadn’t noticed he’d been at the damn vending machine. Thinking they’d wandered off and left her was stupid of me.

Ashes caught my eye and sat up a little straighter as he stared at me.

I stuffed my hands in my pocket and stared right back.

He gave me a slight nod before turning his attention back to Sirena. I watched as he kissed her deeply.

Lucky Asher.

Sighing, I turned and walked back to my dorm but not before Mirage darted out in his fucking rabbit attire. He bumped into me but didn’t stop as he did a little skip and a hop before breaking into a run toward the forest.

This world was way too fucked up.

I sighed.

“How dull would it be if it were perfect?” Asylum asked, joining me on my walk.

I didn't answer him.

Maybe I wanted dull.

STITCHES



Sirena hadn't spoken another word since the night I'd fucked her in my bed, but she'd been in my room every night since, her arms wrapped tightly around me.

Church and Ashes were both aware of the sudden turn of events, and while I knew Church was itching to have her back in his bed, he backed off.

I appreciated that more than I could ever voice.

It felt good.

I felt good.

Maybe not as broken.

Or maybe like I didn't have so many scattered pieces.

Angel was certainly making things a little better in my life.

I watched as she painted the picture she was working on. I'd sat silently on her bed since Ashes brought her home. She'd kissed me and had gone straight to her easel.

Her work fascinated me. It was so vivid and life-like. But there was an undercurrent of darkness to it that made my breath catch. The way she could capture emotion through a few brushstrokes had me mesmerized.

I watched as she swirled colors onto her brush before making the prettiest flower on the canvas. More swirls. More whorls. Color. Emotion. A face. Eyes. Lips. A nose. Dark hair.

Claws.

She was doing a portrait of her sister.

I smiled as she worked tirelessly for hours. Getting up and leaving her side wasn't an option. Not now. So I stayed, sitting patiently on her bed while she continued her painting. I didn't move. I didn't speak.

Finally, she put her brush down and got to her feet.

Her smile brightened up my dark world as she gave me a glimpse of her painting. She came to me and slid onto my lap and nuzzled against my neck.

“Hey, angel baby,” I murmured, holding her.

Her lips pressed against my pulse point, sending goosebumps rushing along my flesh.

“Mm, I like your painting. Are you giving it to Cady?”

She twined her fingers with mine, not saying a word.

I smiled, OK with that.

“Stitches! Sirena!” Ashes’s voice sounded out somewhere downstairs. “Dinner!”

“I want to stay right here with you,” I murmured.

She let out a contented sigh, and I rested my head against the top of her head while holding her.

“Hey,” Ashes said, coming into her room. “I made dinner.”

“Sorry,” I said, kissing the top of Sirena’s head. “I just...”

Ashes smile. “I get it. I can bring it up for you guys.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Grilled cheese sandwiches.”

I chuckled. “You went all out, huh?”

“Well, technically, they’re also hamburgers.”

I crinkled my brows at him. “What?”

“I thought I’d try something different. I took my like of grilled cheese and combined it with my like of hamburgers. The grilled cheeseburger was born. I have waffle fries too.” He looked smug as he leaned against the banister.

“How did you make it?”

“Easy. I made grilled cheese, then I made hamburgers. I put the patty between two grilled cheeses. Then we had waffle fries in the freezer.” He gave me a winning smile. “It looks like a complete mess, but I bet it tastes amazing.”

I let out a laugh that made his eyes light up. Sirena nuzzled deeper against me.

“OK. Can you bring it up to us and we can all eat in here? Maybe watch a movie? Would you like that, angel? If we all cozied up in your bed and watched something while we wait for Church to get home from his run?”

She hugged me tighter.

“Cool. I’ll be right back.” Ashes darted back downstairs, leaving me and

Sirena alone.

“Do you want to get ready and settle in bed? I’m going to go grab my pajamas.”

She released me and got to her feet. I watched as she went to her dresser and got her pajamas. Slowly, I got up and went to her, placing a gentle kiss atop her head.

“I’ll be right back.”

She said nothing, but she didn’t need to use words. She was able to tell me everything with just her presence. I had no idea how she did it, but she did.

Quickly, I went all the way to my room and got into my pajamas before going to the kitchen to help Ashes who had been smart enough to already put his on.

“What’s this?” I looked at the cheesecake on the counter.

“I made it out of one of those no-bake boxes. It might be complete ass, but I wanted something sweet to smear on her body.” He winked at me, making me laugh.

“You’re optimistic.”

He shrugged. “I try.”

“Here.” I took the cheesecake and paper plates along with one of the grilled cheeseburgers he’d made. He stuffed some bottled water in his pajama pockets and grabbed the other two plates and followed me upstairs to her room where she was already settled in bed, awaiting our arrival.

Her pretty eyes lit up as we brought in the food, and I couldn’t help the smile that touched my lips as she clasped her hands together when she saw the cheesecake.

“Here.” I handed her the plate I was carrying and grabbed mine from Ashes. We both settled in around her and ate.

Her cute noises of approval had Ashes grinning and me feeling happy.

When we were done, Ashes gave her a slice of cheesecake. She ate half of it before handing it back to him.

He took it, his lips meeting hers quickly, before he got up and placed the leftovers on her dresser.

I was stuffed. Ashes had outdone himself.

“What movie are we going to watch?” Ashes wrapped his arm around her shoulders and kissed her temple.

I caught her quickly tracing words onto his palm. Within minutes, he had

Star Wars on.

Fucking perfect. A woman after my own heart.

Her eyes twinkled as she slid her palm against mine and held my hand tightly.

Ashes winked at me.

She'd somehow known Star Wars was my favorite. It warmed my heart that she cared enough about my likes to sit through it, but judging by the way her eyes drank in the TV, I had a feeling that maybe she loved it as much as I did.

†

WE'D MADE it through the first three Star Wars movies when Church came upstairs. His eyes darted around, taking in everything. Seemingly satisfied, he moved forward. His hair was damp, meaning he'd showered before coming up, and he was already dressed for bed.

"A Star Wars marathon without me?" He crawled up the bed and shifted Sirena aside so he could take her spot before he pulled her between his legs, her back to his chest.

"Specter, you look pretty today," he murmured, turning her face to him and giving her a kiss.

Her cheeks darkened at his words, making him smile. He released her and she cuddled against him as the next movie started to play.

We were halfway through the movie when Church's hand moved to cup Sirena's breast over her pajamas, his lips on her neck.

I swallowed, trying to not become distracted by his touching her, but it was short lived as she gripped my hand. Church's hand moved lower down her body until he was working his way beneath her nightgown.

Ashes glanced at me before he hit pause on the movie.

Sirena tried to shove Church's hand away, but he was quick to pin her hand onto the mattress.

"Your pussy belongs to us. If I want to touch it, I'm going to, specter," he murmured between kisses against her neck and jaw.

She seemed uncomfortable though.

"What's wrong, angel?" I asked, frowning as her breathing grew harsher.

Her eyes darted to me as Church moved his hand beneath her nightgown again. He paused at her pussy before letting out a soft laugh.

“She’s on her period,” he said.

Ashes looked at me. I had no issues with her being on her period. It wasn’t exactly like blood was something I’d never been around before.

“Specter, don’t be shy. I fucking bathe in blood, baby. Now I’ll get to fuck in it.” Church turned her face to him and bit her lip, making her whimper. “Spread your legs.”

She hesitated for a moment before letting her legs fall open. I watched as she squeezed her eyelids closed, her breathing still fast.

Church carefully unbuttoned the buttons on her nightgown and exposed her creamy breasts to us.

My dick was instantly hard.

“Who wants to taste her first?” Church asked, massaging her breasts.

“Me,” Ashes said immediately.

“You hear that, specter? Ashes wants to eat your pussy. Are you going to let him?” Church cooed in her ear.

She whimpered.

Ashes situated himself between her legs and pulled her panties down. He didn’t waste any time. He dove in and ate her, making her squirm and pant while Church held her against his body.

“It’s OK, brother,” Church husked out. “Rub your cock. Don’t fight it. Let go.”

I looked from him to Sirena to see her eyes closed, her tits in Church’s hands, her breathing ragged with Ashes eating her pussy.

If she didn’t want this, she certainly wasn’t putting up much of a fight.

Feeling confident she was good with this, I shoved all the ugly memories out of my head like I’d been doing on repeat for weeks now, and pulled my dick out of my pants and gave it a few rough strokes.

It was her soft moan that got me though.

She tangled her fingers in Ashes’s hair as her body tensed, her orgasm racking her entire being.

Fuck, she’s beautiful when she comes.

Ashes came up, her tampon string in his teeth, a sparkle in his eye.

Church laughed at him. Even I chuckled a bit.

Quickly, he got up and dropped the tampon into the trash before coming back with a blanket he’d grabbed from the closet, shedding his clothes along

the way. Carefully, he tucked it beneath her and pulled his dick out.

“You want in first?” he asked, looking over at me. “I’ll wait.”

I nodded, my throat tight.

We switched places, and I situated myself between her legs. She stared up at me, Church still holding her tight.

“Angel,” I whispered.

She exhaled, letting her legs fall open once more.

That was the green light.

I pushed into her tight, bloody pussy, groaning out until my cock hit a wall and couldn’t go any further.

“Fuck, that’s good,” I husked out. I thrust into her heat, making her squirm.

I liked it when she squirmed.

Snapping my hips forward, I took it up a notch, fucking her quickly, relishing in the sounds of her drenched pussy around us. I leaned against her, kissing her, Church’s hands still on her tits as her tweaked her nipples.

I didn’t want to crush her, so I moved away and continued to pound into her.

She gripped Church’s pants, her pussy tensing around my cock until she was coming on me.

A few quick thrusts and I blew my load, filling her, groaning in satisfaction the entire time.

I stayed there for a moment before pulling out and taking great joy in watching my come drip out of her bloody hole.

Wordlessly, I reached down and pushed my come back into her before sucking my finger cleaned, adoring the way her eyes widened and lips parted at the action.

I moved away from her, and Ashes took my place. He wasted no time in pushing into her. She let out a soft whimper, but silently took him, her breathing growing heavy once more.

I leaned in and sucked one of her nipples into my mouth, enjoying the way her body jostled while Ashes fucked her.

“God, heaven. You’re so fucking wet. I love it,” Ashes choked out. “Damn, that’s good.”

I knew when her breathing became harsh and labored she was going to come again. I was right. A moment later, she was quaking beneath another orgasm. Ashes followed closely, spilling himself inside her just like I’d done.

He leaned in and kissed her deeply when I moved off her tit.

When he shifted off her, Church looked at me.

“Hold her for me?” he asked.

I swallowed and glanced at her. She was completely blitzed out.

I nodded and switched spots with him.

Church was quick to push inside her with a groan while I held her.

She turned her face to me so she could kiss me.

It made the awkward heartbeats in my chest relax. Her tongue glided against mine, letting me know it was OK. She was OK. I was OK. This...it was good. She liked it. Wanted it.

I knew Ashes was having a blast touching her breasts while Church buried himself inside her.

I couldn't be fussed with any of it as I continued to kiss her. When she came again, her soft cries I swallowed down, keeping them to myself and holding her through her release.

Church came soon after she did, adding his load to the mess we'd already made inside her.

“That's some good pussy,” he said, still inside her heat, his thumb pressed against her clit. She squirmed for him whenever he rubbed her, earning a wicked smile from him.

“You made such a mess, specter,” he continued.

He was right. His groin and thighs were covered in her blood and come.

But I knew I was too. Ashes definitely was.

“She needs cleaned up, boys. You guys going to help me?” Church asked.

Ashes was quick to move down her body. I untangled myself from her and let her lay back against the mattress.

“Here. Bind her hands,” Church said, handing me the sash from her robe.

Quickly, I bound her wrists together and against the headboard so she couldn't move.

“We've been blessed, brothers,” Church murmured, staring down at the bloody mess before us. “We shouldn't let a drop go to waste.”

And that was it. We dove in, eating her pussy and cleaning up one mess only to make another each time she came against our tongues.

I hated myself for waiting so long with her while simultaneously hating myself for being fucked by other men and women against my will.

But I pushed those thoughts aside, desperate to keep that little flicker of happiness in my chest alive. The one she'd ignited.

And I'll be damned if that flicker didn't grown into a flame, a fire, as she came against my tongue, her soft moans finally breaking the silence.

She was worth the pain. The struggle. The fucking fight.

I would do everything within my power to ensure she was never hurt again.

SIRENA



I walked through campus with Stitches's hand in mine, him quiet like he tended to be these days.

He seemed content. Maybe not happy, but it was far better than the man he'd been just weeks ago. I'd feared for his life. I didn't want him to fall again. It was something that kept me up at night. He slept in my room with me often, only being chased away by Church twice and Ashes once, but he always came back the next night and curled up beside me.

"Hey," Bryce said, coming to stop in front of us.

"Hey," Stitches muttered.

"Movie night?" Bryce looked from me to Stitches. I knew it was a touchy subject with them, but Bryce had been lying low lately. In fact, so had Cady. I'd seen her making out with Adam earlier. I assumed that relationship was going well.

I was happy for her.

"Uh, angel?" Stitches looked at me for direction.

I reached out for Bryce's hand and squeezed it. He grinned and backed away.

"I'll come over around seven?" He looked to Stitches for confirmation.

Stitches sighed, but nodded.

"Awesome. I'll see you then." Bryce looped off to his friend group, leaving me and Stitches alone.

"I know he's your friend, but he just seems too...normal," he said.

I gave him a tiny smile. Normal was nice sometimes. I didn't hate it.

Stitches's hand trembled in mine for a moment, making me look up at him. He was staring across the courtyard at Sully who was reprimanding

Danny Linley who was holding a fistful of what appeared to be ground hamburger.

I was the queen of freak outs and could sense them a mile away. I took his face in my hands and forced him to look down at me.

His dark eyes wavered.

“Hey, come on,” Ashes called out, grabbing Stitches by the arm and dragging him in the opposite direction of Sully. I trotted to keep up with them. Ashes was quick about getting Stitches out of there. All I could really do was divert his attention, especially if he had been unwilling to follow me.

“Stitches, man. Come on. Breathe a little,” Ashes said, stopping in a small grove of trees. I shivered despite my jacket. The weather here was getting brisk and little snowflakes were floating through the air.

Stitches sucked in breath after breath, his face still pale.

“We still have classes left today. You need to be put together so you can attend. We don’t need you getting called down to that fuck head’s office,” Ashes grunted.

It made me wonder why I hadn’t been called down for missing classes. I hadn’t even considered that as a potential complication. It made me think maybe Church had something to do with me not having a meeting with Sully.

“Fuck. I-I can’t. Goddamnit.” Stitches raked his nails down his face, making himself bleed. “I-I’m sorry. I-I don’t know what’s happening to me. Fuck, Asher...”

“I’ll take her. You deal with this.”

I hadn’t even noticed that Asylum had appeared next to us.

Ashes’s eyes darted to me for a moment before he gave Asylum a tight nod.

“Don’t fuck this up,” Ashes warned him.

Asylum raised a brow at him but didn’t say a word. I stared at Ashes, wondering what was happening and why this was suddenly OK.

“It’s OK, baby. We have an arrangement with him. He’s going to help keep you safe. I promise. I’ll come find you later. Just go to class. You’ll be safe.”

Asylum snagged my hand and pulled me away before I could hug Stitches goodbye.

“It won’t matter. He won’t notice,” Asylum said as he led me away. “He’s inside his own panic right now.”

That didn’t make it bother me any less. I felt like I needed to be there to

help him.

“Your next class is a history course,” Asylum continued. “Sin is in that class. Well, he is when he shows up. Lucky for you, he’ll be there today.”

I swallowed hard at that information.

Asylum led me into the history building and upstairs. Outside the door to my class Sin leaned against a wall. His hair was shorter and shaggier now. He was thinner. I hadn’t taken a lot of time to study him in the light, but now I was as we drew closer.

“Don’t panic. He won’t hurt you, firefly,” Asylum said, pulling me to a stop in front of Sin who pushed off the wall, his gray eyes skirting over me.

“What’s going on?” Sin demanded.

“Brought you a gift, Sinclair.” Asylum gave me a little shove toward him. “*Rinny.*”

I snapped my head to look at him, taking in the familiar childhood name.

He gave me a wink.

“Your boy Stitches was having a meltdown and Ashes had to step in. Church is in his therapy session and Cady Cat is getting fucked in the auditorium, so that means this little princess needs an escort and since you both share this class, it only made sense. That’s fate, isn’t it?” Asylum cocked his head.

Sin narrowed his eyes at him. “Whatever.”

“You know the rules,” Asylum said. “Just don’t follow all of them. Talk to her. It’ll be weird if you’re both silent. I very much doubt Stitches is going to feel better by the time classes are over for the day. This is your last class, but it isn’t hers. Make sure she gets where she needs to be.”

“And where the fuck will you be?” Sin demanded.

“I’m like the wind, baby. I’m everywhere.” Asylum cackled before leaving us alone.

I was nervous. I couldn’t believe the guys were OK with this. I’d been terrified thinking they’d kill Sin if they knew he’d brought me home that night. In the end, I didn’t want to focus on it because I was worried about Stitches. Once I got through this, I’d go to him and hold him. I’d just have to suck up any of my fear I had at the entire situation and hope Sin didn’t kill me. So far, he hadn’t, but my trust wasn’t great with him.

“Come on,” Sin muttered, nodding his head.

I followed him into the classroom and took my seat. Surprisingly, he sat beside me without saying a word. The Sister came in and began droning on

like she always did. I simply sat and absorbed everything she said and quickly did my assignment before handing it in. Sin did nothing, opting to just twirl his pencil between his fingers, his gaze set straight ahead of him.

When class was over, he waited for me to get up before he followed me out into the hall and walked me to my next class. I hesitated at the door, not sure what to even do as he leaned against the wall next to the class.

He finally looked over at me.

“I’ll wait,” he said gruffly.

I contemplated my next move for a moment, deciding he didn’t get a nod from me, and went into the room. By the time my last class was over, I was more than ready to get home to see Stitches.

Sin was standing where I’d left him and fell in step with me all the way to the courtyard.

“Sirena! Hey! Wait up!” Cady shouted.

I stopped, Sin beside me, and waited for her to catch up. She arrived with a dark-haired guy at her side who could rival the watchers in size.

Immediately, he gave me bad vibes. Maybe it was the way he stared at me with his near black eyes. Handsome yes. Scary, absolutely. I even shrank away from him and closer to Sin without realizing I was doing it until my hand brushed against his.

It was the quick brush back that made my heart jump into my throat.

“What’s this?” Cady asked, looking to Sin. “Do the guys know you’re with her? Where are you taking her?”

“They know,” Sin said with zero emotion on his face.

Cady frowned at him while the guy with her kept staring at me.

I shifted closer to Sin. He looked down at me, his brows crinkled.

“It’s cold. I need to get her back to the house,” Sin continued, tearing his focus from me and looking back to Cady.

“I can take her,” Cady said immediately.

“No. I’m doing it.”

“Like fuck you are, you psycho. You tried to kill her in a fucking box with that other ass cracker. Not happening.”

“It is happening.” Sin nodded for me to follow him. I didn’t hesitate this time. I wanted away from the guy Cady was with, and when I got a chance, I’d try to tell her to stay away from him too.

With his hands in his pockets, Sin led me through the courtyard, his head down while snowflakes fell heavier around us.

“I’m coming with you.” Cady caught up to us quickly. “There’s no way in hell I’m letting you take her alone.”

“Whatever,” Sin muttered.

Great. The guy was still with her.

Sin cast me a quick look as Cady’s guy walked beside me, Cady on his other side.

I was ready to run. The discomfort was too much, and he was just too close.

Sin shifted quickly, moving so he was between me and Cady’s guy. He cast me a quick look before going back to ignoring me.

I breathed out, grateful he’d caught on.

When we reached the house, I practically darted inside, Sin close behind, followed by Cady and the creeper.

“Hey, babe,” Ashes greeted me, getting to his feet. Stitches sat on the couch staring at a wall. “What’s going on?”

I ran straight to Stitches, forgoing Ashes and crawled onto Stitches’s lap.

“Mm, angel,” he murmured, holding me against him and settling back against the couch cushions. “How was your day?”

He seemed almost normal, but I could sense the undercurrent of sadness in him. He hadn’t even acknowledged Sin or anyone else who had come in with me.

I kissed him, and he wasted no time taking it to another steamy level.

Somewhere in the distance, Cady cleared her throat.

“Not sorry,” Stitches said, ending our kiss but looking to where everyone was standing. His brows crinkled when he saw Sin.

“Asylum wanted some free time today, so I made sure she got to classes and home,” Sin explained quietly. “Cady found us at the end of the day and followed.”

“I just wanted to make sure the asshole wasn’t taking her out to the lake to drown her or shove her into another box,” Cady snapped back.

“OK. And...Adam?” Ashes asked, looking at the guy who stood beside Cady.

“Yeah. Larson,” Adam said, giving Ashes a slight nod and glancing over to where I was. I hoped he was looking at Stitches, but the next words out of his mouth definitely weren’t in reference to him.

“What’s your sister’s name?” Adam asked.

Cady looked at me. “Sirena.”

“Sirena,” Adam murmured. “I like that.”

It was Cady’s turn to frown. I snuggled closer to Stitches who kissed the top of my head.

“I didn’t know the watchers dated exclusively,” Adam continued. “I guess I’d heard it was Melanie who belonged to you guys. At least that’s what she tells everyone.”

“Does she?” Ashes snorted. “She fucking wishes.”

“You used to though, right?” Adam looked from me and Stitches to Ashes then to Sin. “I mean, I saw her and Stitches fucking once behind the bleachers in the gym, and her and Ashes feeling each other up during that dance they held last year.”

My stomach turned at hearing that. I knew the guys had other people before me, but I hated to think about it. It wasn’t something I ever wanted to talk about.

“And Church and her were always together—”

“That’s enough,” Sin snapped. “No one gives a fuck who they were putting their dicks in. They’re with Sirena now, so none of that shit matters.”

Adam snapped his mouth closed, and Cady scowled at Sin.

“Anyway, I just wanted to make sure she got home safely,” Cady said.

Church stepped into the house and dusted the snow out of his blond hair before looking around the room.

“What the fuck is this?” he demanded, his glare on Sin. “I thought Asylum was taking care of things.”

“He was,” Sin said. “He got busy and asked me to step in.”

Church stalked across the room and took me from Stitches and dragged me onto his own lap. “You OK, specter? Nothing happened? You weren’t hurt?”

I gave him a slight shake of my head.

“I didn’t fucking touch her. I said I wouldn’t,” Sin snarled. “I made a promise.”

“Excuse me, but you’ve made a lot of promises and have fucked them and us,” Church snapped back. “You’ll have to excuse my *fuck you* attitude, Priest.”

I’d never heard anyone call Sin by his last name, but I suppose that simply meant Church was upset. I pressed my lips to his in a bid to calm him because I didn’t want him yelling and fighting with Sin. If I could go back in time and make things better, I would in a heartbeat. It was one of my wishes.

“Why are you people still in my house?” Church asked, pulling away from me to look at Sin, Cady, and Adam.

“You’re such a dick,” Cady mumbled. “Rina, I’ll come see you tomorrow, OK?”

She took Adam’s hand, but he was fixated on me with Church. I ducked my head to avoid his penetrating gaze. I didn’t like him at all, and I definitely didn’t want him with my sister.

“You can leave,” Ashes said, noticing the attention Adam was paying to me. “Now.”

“Right. See you guys. Sirena,” Adam said when Cady pulled him to the door.

The moment they were gone, I relaxed.

“That guy is fucking weird,” Sin said.

“Fact,” Ashes muttered.

“I wanted to break his face. He kept looking at Sirena,” Stitches added, looking over at me.

“He’s a weirdo. Nothing we can’t handle,” Church murmured. “Sin, is there a reason you’re still here?”

Sin was quiet for a moment. “I suppose not. Have a good night.”

He turned and went to the door, but Ashes called out to him.

“Thank you for getting her back to us. Shit was rough today. We appreciate it.”

“Of course.” Sin nodded. “Night.”

The door banged closed behind him, leaving us in silence.

“I miss him,” Stitches finally said.

“We all do.” Ashes let out a sigh and rubbed his eyes.

Church remained quiet, his fingers raking gently through my hair.

“Malachi, are you OK?” he finally asked.

“No, but I’m trying,” Stitches answered, a sad look on his face. “And that’s worth everything, right?”

“Yes,” I whispered into the silence.

Stitches smiled and took my hand. “Then I’ll keep on working on it.”

I’d accept that answer because I’d make sure he succeeded.

He and the watchers were everything to me.

ASHES



That Friday night, I tossed a couple textbooks and some old clothes into the burning barrel, ecstasy flooding every vessel in my body as the flames licked the night sky.

I was acutely aware of Sirena behind me, Stitches's arms around her while Church watched me burn anything I could get my hands on.

And Cady.

We'd brought her with us. Unfortunately, she'd brought along Adam. It hadn't slipped past me that he had eyes for Sirena. I caught him staring at her more than once. I knew it made her uncomfortable too because she'd bury her face in Church or Stitches's chest, depending on who was holding her. The look on Church's face was murderous as the night wore on.

While it felt good to burn things, it wasn't the best high I'd had with it. Knowing Sirena was uncomfortable made me want to call it a night and go home, but I'd promised Cady I'd show her different ways to start a fire, and she was more than eager to learn.

We'd made it through another night of Sirena hanging out with Bryce in the living room too. It was way more successful than last time was, and she seemed genuinely happy. Everyone but me kept their distance. Church and Stitches went out to the cemetery while I'd stayed home and kept to myself in my bedroom.

If I didn't know better, I'd think Bryce still had it bad for our girl.

Mentioning that to Church would set him off and possibly ruin Sirena's friendship, two things I definitely didn't want to happen. I trusted her though, so in the big scheme of things, I figured it would be OK.

"You and Adam a thing?" I asked Cady as I watched her throw an old tire

into the barrel.

“Yeah. He’s fun. Adventurous. I like that sort of thing.”

“You do notice he keeps looking at Sirena, right?”

She looked from me over to where Stitches and Sirena were. Much to Adam’s credit, he was trying to engage Church in conversation, but it didn’t look like it was going well.

“He’s just a people watcher. He’s harmless,” she said, brushing my concerns off.

“He makes Sirena uncomfortable,” I pushed.

“Did she tell you that?”

“No. But I can tell just by watching her that he does.”

Cady frowned. “I’ll talk to him about it. I’m sure it’s just him being curious. He likes to talk to people.”

“Well, as long as he knows she doesn’t speak back and he’s wasting his time.”

“Asher Valentine. Are you jealous?”

I grunted. “I’m protective. Big difference. I’d hate to light your boy up like the Fourth of July. That’s all.”

“I think you’re jealous,” she sang in a sing-song voice.

“Shut up and give me that stick, you damn menace.”

She laughed and handed me the stick before darting back to Adam and kissing him. I caught his eyes open and on Sirena though.

Definitely not jealous. *Cautious*. There really was a difference.

Irritated, I went to Stitches and Sirena and twisted my fingers in her hair and turned her away from kissing Stitches. Pressing my lips against hers, I kissed her long, hard, and deep, earning a soft laugh from Stitches who seemed to be in a far better mood than I was. He’d been better lately, but not quite himself. While I knew it would take him time to get back to himself, it still pissed me off that he was hurting. I’d been burying down my fury at the entire situation since it had been aired out. I’d snapped my lighter closed and gotten to my feet more than once with the intent on setting Sully on fire and roasting his eyeballs like fucking marshmallows, but each time, Church had been there to talk me down and remind me we had to play the long game.

I hated the long game right now.

I hated all the shit we were going through. In a perfect world, Sin would be here. Sirena would smile more. Talk to us more. Stitches wouldn’t have been hurt and we’d all not be so fucked in the head.

This wasn't that world, so we made do with what we had.

"I'm ready to leave," I said, looking over at Church after releasing Sirena. He gave me a look of surprise. "So soon?"

"Yeah." I shot a look over to Adam to see him darting quick glances to Sirena. I'd heard he had a personality disorder. Like, multiple. Something similar to what Asylum had. In all honesty, Asylum was a hell of a lot more tolerable than this guy was though. At least he didn't sneak around trying to peek at Sirena. He was forthcoming with it all.

"OK. Let's go." He reached out and took Sirena from Stitches and wrapped his arm around her. Without so much as a backward glance, he put her in the front seat of his Bronco. The rest of us squeezed into the backseat after Stitches helped me put out my fire, Cady sitting on Adam's lap.

I was grateful Church had put Sirena in the front.

"This is a nice ride," Adam commented as Church pulled out of the clearing and onto the two-track.

"Thanks," Church said.

"Did your dad buy it for you?"

"My father hasn't bought me shit since I was a child, and even those things I don't particularly count." Church glanced at Adam in the rearview mirror.

"I see. How did you get a new car without your dad buying it? Your mom?"

"My mother is dead," Church said, his voice growing lower.

I cleared my throat. "Church bought this himself with his own money."

"Oh. I see. Where did you get the money?"

This guy was stupid as hell. No one asked Dante Church twenty questions without consequence.

"I killed for it," Church said, making the car go awkward with silence.

He wasn't lying though. He earned that money fair and square.

"So, Adam," Cady said brightly. "Tell Sirena about your treatment and how great you're doing on it."

"Sirena," Adam's voice grew silky, making me cringe.

Stitches must have noticed because he stiffened next to me.

"I'm doing therapy twice a week. I'm on some new experimental drugs. I haven't had issues in weeks."

"What sort of issues did you have?" I ventured.

"Multiple." He laughed like he'd told joke of the year. I had no idea what

Cady saw in this guy.

“You have DiD?” Stitches asked.

“Yeah. Something like that. I have other personalities that surface. So far it’s only been two plus me. It’s complicated.”

I bet it was.

“I heard you’re a pyro,” Adam nudged me. “Is that what the fire was about?”

“He wanted to roast marshmallows, but I forgot them at home,” Stitches muttered.

I bit back a smile at his jab.

“Yeah, I like fire,” I said, giving him the very glossed over version of it.

“Sweet. That’s a cool issue.”

I ignored him. None of our issues were cool. They were nightmares.

“Stitches. I heard you have bipolar? You’re prone to violence?”

“It’s like you’ve been reading my records.” Stitches looked out the window at the passing scenery.

“And everyone knows Church is a sociopath. Psychopath.” Adam laughed.

Church caught my eye in the mirror. He looked less than impressed with our guest. I was surprised he hadn’t dumped him on the edge of the two-track and left him for the wolves and bears known to roam out here.

“And Sirena.” There was that silky voice again. “Mute. What happened to make her that way? I heard someone tried to murder her—”

Church pulled the Bronco over so fast the seatbelt cut into my neck.

He slammed it into park before he got out of the car and stormed over to Adam’s door and hauled it open.

Without fanfare, he shoved Cady onto my lap before dragging Adam out and punching him full on in the face.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Cady shouted, clawing at me to get out as Church landed another hit on Adam.

“Don’t ever fucking ask those questions again,” Church snarled, his hand wrapped around Adam’s neck while pushing him against the side of the Bronco. “In fact, don’t ever fucking even look in her direction again. You got it?”

“F-Fuck you, Church.” Adam tried to twist Church’s hand off his throat. I held Cady tightly, attempting to keep her from getting out. She was making it hard for me.

“Fucking get him,” I snapped at Stitches, knowing Church all too well to know he’d just stop without intervention.

Stitches got out and darted around the back of the Bronco, but Adam had opened his mouth again.

“She’s just another one of your whores. When you let her go, the rest of us will get to fuck her.”

Church released him and nailed him in the face again before bringing his knee up and colliding it against Adam’s stomach. A whoosh of air left Adam, and he hunched over, breathing hard.

I glanced at Sirena to see her shaking in her seat.

Damnit.

“Stop, Cady. Stop it,” I shouted, trying to calm her down. “Sirena. She’s fucking terrified.”

Cady’s attention immediately went to Sirena. Her fight now was to get away from me and get to her sister.

“Rina. It’s OK. It’s fine,” Cady called out, her voice quaking. “It’s OK. I promise. It’s just an argument.”

Stitches had entered the ring. It wasn’t an argument. It was about to be a murder. Stitches’s fist made contact with the side Adam’s head, putting him down on one knee. The crazy bastard laughed, only egging on the guys.

I was going to have to intervene.

“Fucking watch Sirena. I need to stop this,” I said, pulling Cady against my chest and speaking in her ear. “Do you understand?”

Cady nodded without a word. Giving her the benefit of the doubt, I released her and jumped out of the car and pushed Church away before pushing Stitches off Adam.

“Not fucking here,” I said as Adam continued to laugh and bleed on the ground. “Fuck this guy. Let’s get Sirena home. She needs us. Please. This is scaring her.”

Church nodded at me and walked back to his side of the Bronco and got in. Stitches surveyed me for a moment.

“He’s a fucking asshole,” Stitches said.

“Just get in the damn car,” I said, sighing.

Stitches left me, and I stared down at a laughing Adam. It was just me and him in the cold, the doors to the Bronco closed.

I went to my knees and twisted my fingers in his shirt and brought his nose to nearly mine.

“I know you’ve been watching her,” I said in a harsh whisper. “If I ever see you look at her again, I’ll burn your fucking eyes out of your head.”

“What if I fuck her?” he asked gleefully, blood still pouring out of his nose. “What will you do to me then, you worthless piece of fuck? I bet her pussy is tighter than her sister’s.”

I ground my teeth together before planting my fist in the center of his cackling face.

“I’ll fucking kill you.” I released him and let him crumple to the ground, his laughing turning into wheezing. I stepped over him and got into the backseat, Cady now between me and Stitches.

“Go,” I said.

Church didn’t question it. He hit the gas pedal and left Adam laughing like a lunatic on the side of the two-track.

No one said a damn word for a minute until finally Cady spoke.

“I didn’t get to hit him.”

“I’m sure you’ll get your chance,” I said tightly.

“If I don’t kill him first,” Stitches said. “Because I really fucking think I want to.”

I nodded and caught Church’s eye in the rearview mirror.

Good.

We were all on the same page.

SIRENA



After the guys cleaned the blood from their hands, they piled into bed with me. It wasn't a typical thing with them to all be in bed with me. I think they tried to give me my own space whenever they could, but tonight had been awful.

We needed one another.

I had a king size bed, but it was still a little tight with the four of us on it. I cuddled against Church's chest with Stitches on my other side and Ashes next to him.

Cady had decided to sleep in Ashes's room for the night instead of going home. He'd stayed in his room and talked with her. I assumed it had gone OK since he hadn't come out with a black eye. I'd simply hugged her tightly and gave her cheek a kiss before going to bed.

It was a fairly subdued night, and when I woke in the morning, the only one in bed with me was Stitches.

"Morning, angel," he murmured, peering at me with his dark eyes.

I traced along his plump lips, making him smile a little.

"I want to talk to you if that's OK," he said before kissing my forehead.

I squeezed his hand and waited for him to speak.

"I'm sorry about last night. We all are. We tend to lose it, and we lose it more when it's you who is involved. The shit Adam said really pissed us off. I'm sorry you had to see and hear everything."

I licked my lips and studied him.

"You're not just some whore for us. Some piece of ass. It's not like that with you. We've been with plenty of girls before you, but believe me when I say you're *the one*, Sirena. We fucking love you. We need you. This isn't a

passing phase or anything like that. Someday, we'll figure out a way to whisk you off and marry you. All of us."

I gave him a smile. I liked that idea.

"At least I hope we can," he continued, his voice lowering. "I want that with you. To be your husband. Your protector. Maybe someday the father of your kids if you decide you want to have any."

My heart skipped at his words.

"I'd make a shit husband and father, but I'd really fucking try, baby. I would. I'd do anything for you." He kissed me, his lips soft and gentle.

"You'd be a good husband, Malachi, and a great dad," I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Oh, angel." He breathed out. "I didn't even really know my own old man. I have brief flashes of him in my mind from time to time, but that's it. My mom wasn't great, and neither were the men she'd bring home. They hurt me. All those wounds brought me here though. To you. So I guess I don't regret any of them."

I traced my fingers along the deep scars on his chest and abdomen, his body shivering slightly beneath my touch as we faced each other. The scars were jagged, but he'd covered them with so many colorful tattoos.

"I'm Hispanic," he continued. "On my mother's side."

I traced his biggest scar up to his throat and slowly back down again. He let out a soft breath.

"I don't ever speak the language anymore because it reminds me of all the terrible shit that happened to me in my life, but I've always wanted to tell you this in my language with the hope that maybe it'll make things better for us." He tilted my chin up and placed a sweet kiss to my lips. "*Si sólo pudiera amar una cosa en este mundo, te elegiría a ti para la eternidad.* It means *If I could only love one thing in this world, I'd choose you for eternity.*"

My heart melted at his words.

His lips met mine in a dance we were becoming accustomed to, only this dance was slow and sweet. Nothing like how his brutality usually was.

After a moment, I pushed him onto his back and straddled his lap.

He stared up at me with some much love and devotion on his face it made me feel like I could fly on the wings he'd given me.

I managed to shimmy out of my panties and tug off my nightgown while he pushed his boxers off.

With no time wasted, I slid onto his waiting erection, taking all of him

deep inside myself with a soft hiss that he mimicked as he held my hips.

Slowly, I rocked on him, mesmerized as his dark eyes rolled back and his face contorted in pleasure. I liked to see him like this. So free. So content.

His lips parted, and I kissed them. He came alive beneath me, his fingers in my hair, on my body, mine exploring him just the same way.

Before long, he had me rolled onto my back, making love to me in a sweet manner that was uncharacteristic for the Stitches I knew. Whenever I'd been with him, he'd been rough. This time he was careful and gentle.

He still pinned my wrists above my head and kissed my neck, his cock sliding in and out of me in a delicious slow dance.

When I came, I did so whispering his name so he could hear my prayers.

He followed, filling me completely, his body trembling as he balanced himself over me.

"Eternity will never be long enough," he murmured, resting his forehead against mine.

"It's a good start," I whispered back, kissing him again.

Actually, it was the best start.

†

"SO I WAS THINKING, you could come hang out at my place," Bryce finished, glancing at Church while we stood in the science building after classes.

"You got to eat lunch with her yesterday and today. You've been to our place three times this week, now you're asking if she can go to your place? Alone? And...watch movies?" Church shook his head. "No."

"Why can't she be alone with me? She used to be alone with me all the time," Bryce protested.

"Because she's not your girlfriend," Church snapped. "You lost that privilege when you two split. That's how breakups work."

"She's still my friend," Bryce said. "She deserves to have me in her life. You're not the only guys she cares about."

Church rounded on him so fast that I barely had time to react. As quickly as I could, I darted between them. Church knocked me into Bryce which sent him against the wall, my back to Bryce's front.

"Stop," I rasped, my voice all scratchy.

Church stopped in his tracks and took me in.

“Sirena?” Bryce asked from behind me.

I reached out and cradled Church’s face, silently pleading with him to understand that I cared for Bryce too. A lot. He mattered so much to me and was my first and only friend when I’d gotten here. He’d protected me.

“I don’t want to,” Church’s voice shook.

“Hey, Church,” Asylum called out, coming down the hall. “Let her go. She’ll have fun.”

“Shut the fuck up, Seth,” Church snapped.

I was still shoved up against Bryce whose warm breath was on my neck, sending goosebumps across my skin.

“Why the hell are you calling me Seth?” Asylum cocked his head. “I’m Asylum.”

“You’re a moron,” Church muttered, shaking his head and focusing back on me and Bryce. “My answer is—”

“Church. Seriously. Let her go.” Asylum was standing next to him now. “The voices told me it’ll be OK.”

“Fuck you and your voices. You don’t get to decide what she does—”

“You shouldn’t either,” Asylum cut in. “Let her. She’s an adult. She can choose. Besides, I’ve been sent to retrieve you.”

“What? Why?”

“Your father is here. They sent me for you.” Asylum became somber.

My breath hitched, and I instinctively reached for Church’s hand. He took it and squeezed it tightly.

“I’ll handle firefly and her boy toy. You handle your old man. It’s far more important than anything happening here.” Asylum leveled his gaze on Church. “You hurt the son of man. He stumbled home all bloodied and beaten. To the Underground he ran. To tell some truths and a few little lies. Church must go, lest someone dies.”

“Fuck,” Church snarled. “He works with him too?”

“Many do. Many don’t. He will ask you. And you won’t. Tell him your secrets and some lies. Buy us some time. We need it to commit the perfect crime.”

“Get out of here, Mother Goose,” Church said, shoving Asylum away from him. The move only made Asylum’s blue eyes sparkle and a cackled erupt from his lips.

“I can’t believe I’m leaving you with him,” Church said, looking back at

me.

“Then leave her with me.” Bryce stepped around me. “I kept her safe before.”

“Times have changed.”

“Not for me.” Bryce gave Church a measured look. “I can handle shit, Church. You may think I’m soft and weak, but believe me, I know what I’m doing.”

Church eyed him for a moment while I waited with my breath held.

“Stitches has therapy. Ashes has therapy. Sin has...well, he’s busy with his knife today. I can take her,” Asylum said.

“Fine. Bryce. Straight to your dorm. You don’t leave. The door remains locked. You make sure nothing happens to her or I’ll fuck your world up.”

“OK,” Bryce answered evenly. “You have my word.”

Church turned to me and kissed me roughly before releasing me.

“You come with me,” he said to Asylum who gave me a wink.

“Next time, firefly. Perhaps we can flit off together to the woods?” He smiled knowingly at me, making me blush. Church frowned at Asylum’s words which only made me nervous. The last thing I wanted was Church flipping out over me meeting Mirage in the woods.

“I want her home by eleven,” Church instructed Bryce, his glare hard and piercing. “If she’s a fucking second late, I’ll kill you to rid me of your problematic ass.”

He didn’t wait for Bryce to reply. He turned on his heel and left us standing there.

“Best be off. You two have fun. Bryce, not too much fun. Mind your manners and your words.” Asylum cocked his head and licked his lips. “The wrong words might get you into trouble. Or so I’ve been told.” He pointed at his head and let out another wild laugh before leaving us alone.

“I don’t know how you put up with all that,” Bryce said once they were gone. “If you aren’t insane, they’d drive you to be.”

He took my elbow and led me outside into the cold Michigan air. Snow was falling and it made it hard to see in front of us. As fast as we could, we made our way across campus to Bryce’s dorm.

My phone buzzed once we were in Bryce’s room. I pulled it out and looked at Cady’s message on the screen. She’d been keeping her distance since everything with Adam had happened. She’d hugged me and sobbed, apologizing for him speaking about me the way he had. I knew she was

genuinely upset and sad over it, and that in turn upset me because I hated when she was hurting.

Cady: Want to hang out? We can paint our nails. I can come over if you want. Or you can come here.

I looked to Bryce who had just locked the door behind him and was going into the small cupboard he had I knew he kept food in. He gave me privacy, turning his back on me. Quickly, I snapped a photo of him and sent it back to her, so she knew I was busy.

Cady: OK. Another time. He's a nice guy. Have fun. Message me if you need me. XO

I darkened the screen and sat on the edge of Bryce's bed. He was always so tidy. Nothing was out of place and there wasn't a lot of decoration in his room. No photos of his family or anything, but judging by what I knew of his home life, it wasn't great. His father hated him and thought he was gay, which made no sense, but unfortunately, some people were just cruel in that respect.

"OK. I have butter popcorn, cheese popcorn, and what I think is ranch? I'm not sure. I got it from the kitchens, and it wasn't labeled but smells suspiciously like ranch." Bryce held out several bags of popcorn to me.

I grabbed the butter one, making him chuckle.

"I also have mini muffins I liberated from the kitchens as well as these pre-packaged chocolate cupcakes. Pretty sure they're knockoffs of the good kind, but I'm sure they taste just as good." He brought out a handful of wrapped mini muffins and cupcakes and dropped them onto the bed with two bags of chips. When he finished that, he got us two bottled waters and moved to his bed where he slid up and patted the spot beside him, remote in hand.

I got comfortable next to him, grateful he seemed to like a lot of fluffy pillows, and settled in with the snacks.

He turned on a sci-fi release that I'd been wanting to see, and we sat in silence, watching it for the two and half hour long run time.

When it was over, he yawned and stretched and got to his feet. I watched him at his window.

"It gets dark so early now," he commented, staring out into the darkness. "It's not even seven yet. We have time for another movie, unless you want to talk." He wandered back to me and lay in his spot, rolling to face me.

I rolled too so I could face him and stared into his eyes. He was pretty. I knew he worked out, but it was only because life on campus was boring. He

wasn't as big as my guys, but he could still be intimidating if he didn't smile so much and always had a bright outlook on things. His copper-colored hair was a mess of waves and curls atop his head. If I squinted my eyes, he reminded me of what I'd envision an angel to look like. Fair, porcelain skin, sparkling hazel eyes, pouty lips, messy curls, a soft touch and sweet words.

I sighed.

"What's wrong?" he asked, staring back at me.

I gave the slightest shake of my head, watching as his tongue darted out to wet his lips.

"Sirena? Are you...are you happy? Sometimes I get the impression you aren't."

I exhaled. Sometimes I wasn't, but it wasn't because of my guys or anything like that. It was because of the situation we were in. It was because I worried, and I had others on my mind.

"I miss you," he continued. "I miss how we'd hang out so much. You seem OK now, but there's just something there that worries me. I know your time in the facility sucked. I just wish you could talk to me about it."

I gave him a sad smile.

"I like how you try to communicate more," he murmured, furrowing his brow and reaching out to trace along my sad smile. "This used to be a rarity, but even to see a sad smile makes me happy because it lets me know you're in there. I was so worried about you after everything. I tried so hard to see you. Church and the guys made it impossible." He let his hand fall away. "One night, I tried to sneak in to check on you. I got as far as your room and saw you lying in that bed, staring at the ceiling. It broke my heart. I-I thought I'd lost you forever. The wards found me and dragged me out and I was threatened by Sully that if I returned, I'd be punished."

The sadness on his face broke my heart.

"I know I'm out of line, Sirena, but I have to tell you this. From the moment that I saw you, I knew you were special. I knew that you and I...that we'd mean something to one another. I was so happy when you were my girlfriend, even if it was pretend. I'm grateful even now that we're friends, I just..." He paused and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, they shimmered with some emotion that made my heart skip. "I can't stop thinking about you. If you're happy, then I'm happy for you. As much as I want to let you go, I'm struggling with it because I keep wondering what would have happened if I were brave enough to just tell you how I felt. Or

feel. Or the things I want.” He visibly swallowed. “I know they’ll get me killed because the watchers don’t play. If they knew I wanted their girl, I’d be dead.”

I stared into his eyes, my heart hurting.

“We know who each other are. We make sense. At least I think we do,” he said, a note of sadness in his voice. “*You know me.*”

I did know him. I took his hand in mine and ran my thumb upward gently, noting the scars on his wrist. Faint scars.

I leaned in and placed a soft kiss on his forehead before I got up and grabbed my coat. He said nothing for a long time. When I got to the door, he spoke.

“Don’t go,” he whispered. “Stay with me. *Rina.*”

I swallowed hard at the familiar name but pulled the door open just the same and left the room, my heart in my throat. Bryce had said words that I’d been feeling and ignoring. I just couldn’t. Not right now. My life was messy and dangerous enough as it was.

By the time I made it to the lobby, Asylum was standing there waiting for me.

“Hello, firefly,” he greeted me, pushing off the wall he’d been leaning against.

I said nothing, allowing him to fall in step beside me and walk with me out into the night. The snowflakes fell around us while we walked in silence, the snow crunching beneath our feet.

“It hurts, doesn’t it?” he finally said. “To love what is right and know that it’s wrong.”

I stopped and turned to him, the pain in my heart very much real.

“It could work out, you know.” He cocked his head at me. “All of it. Everything you’re thinking in that pretty little head of yours. It could be yours. For a price, of course. Everything has a price.”

My bottom lip wobbled. The price of such luxuries usually cost a soul.

He let out a soft laugh. “Bit dramatic, but I suppose you’re right.”

He was in my damn head again.

“Why do you think I ever left it, firefly?” He cocked his head at me again. “We never leave, and we never will. As soon as you accept your fate, we can get to the main event.”

It took everything I had inside me to say the next words and not think them for him to *hear*.

“What is the main event, *Asylum*?”

In the blink of an eye, he was on me, his lips pressed roughly against mine, kissing me hard. I struggled against him, trying to shove at him, but he wasn't having it. He gripped my face tightly with one, black leather clad hand and squeezed until I complied and parted my lips for him.

“There you go,” he whispered, pulling away from me slightly as I gasped for air. “There's my little demon. My sinner. You know what the main event is, firefly. We're all in it.” He kissed me again.

“They'll never let you join,” I choked out when he moved away.

“They don't have to. It's you who decides,” he answered back.

“H-How do you do it? How do you know everything?” I stared into his blue eyes, watching as they darkened, his head cocking to the left.

“Why do you think I know everything?”

“No riddles. Just the truth,” I said in a shaky voice.

“I know what is to be because true love conquers all.” He released my face and gave me that wicked smile of his.

“You love me?” I frowned at him.

“To be fair, you love me just a little bit too. We all love the demons that haunt us. That's how true love works. We hold onto the past.”

“You tried to kill me.”

“Out of love,” he said easily. “Not out of hate. I expect I may have succeeded if I hated you as much as we loved you.”

I looked away from him, my eyes burning. He was quick to take my face in his hand and draw my attention back to him.

“You miss him,” he murmured.

“Don't you?”

He let out a soft laugh and tapped his head with his free hand. “He's always up here. Drives me nuts.” He stepped closer and let his hand trail to my chest where he held it over my heart. “He's here too, Sirena. You just have to accept it. We're a packaged deal.”

“OK,” I whispered, knowing well enough by now that you can't escape your past. I could continue running, but to what end? It would always end in the boy with blue eyes.

He widened his eyes at me for a moment before blinking. “Truly?”

“I accept it. I know who you are. I know what you've done for me. To me. I understand it.”

“You can't even comprehend how much we're willing to do for you,

firefly. It's why we have to show you."

"And you know everything will work out?"

"I know that we are strong, and we will fight until the bitter end. Our strength, our wicked, dirty love, is what will bring us to the other side. You simply can't kill true love. Only piss it off so it grows."

I bit my bottom lip, staring up at him.

"Your love is a tumor? I could hack it off and you'd still come back?"

He laughed again. "Bigger and angrier, firefly. That is how it will always be. You were meant for us. Someday you will truly see. There is no other way. Let the cards fall. Let us play. In this darkness we will rise. And in this darkness there is demise. At our hands and at our feet. The sinners will fall. Their end they shall meet."

"Why do you rhyme?"

"I think the question really should be is why don't you?" He cocked his head to the left again like he were listening to something. "Do you hear it?"

I listened as the wind blew around us, the cold chill biting into my skin despite my long, warm coat.

Asylum closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. "Something lurks in the forests with big white ears. He waits for you every night. He even watches when you are near. Soon, his mask will fall away. You should go to him before the watchers come to play. They will not be gentle, and he will remember their name. He will scream for a ghost. The pretty girl with colorful eyes is the one he loves most. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. The hour is twelve. A river of red. And then..." He snapped his eyes open, startling me. "So many...dead."

I swallowed hard.

"You needn't be afraid, firefly. After all, you are the light in this darkness we monsters dwell in." He gestured around us into the dark night. "You can save your small world. You simply need to be...there."

I had no idea what he was saying, but his words chilled me to the bone better than any Michigan snowstorm could.

"Let's get you home. It's been a very informative night." He held out his hand for me, and after a moment of hesitation, I slipped my hand against his.

He winked at me and didn't say another word until we were standing on the front porch of the watchers' house.

Slowly, he leaned in and whispered in my ear, "I don't know everything in this world, firefly, but I do know that I fucking love you. So that's the

answer to your question.” He placed a sweet, gentle kiss on my cheek before turning and leaving me standing there, more confused than ever.

SIRENA



Two nights after Bryce and Asylum, I lay in my room unable to sleep. I kept staring at the ceiling, running everything over in my head.

Bryce liked me. He more than liked me. He wanted me.

Asylum loved me. He'd told me things.

Sin was...Sin.

The watchers were being wonderful and sweet. No one had made an issue about me hanging out with Bryce which only made what happened with Bryce worse.

I cared for Bryce. A lot more than I probably should, and I hated that I had all these feelings in my body because that was a whole lot of guys taking up space in my heart.

Throwing back my covers, I got out of bed and pulled on my black pants and hoodie. Carefully, I went downstairs, wincing when I noticed a light on in Dante's room. With any luck, he'd simply fallen asleep with it on.

When I got downstairs, I slipped my feet into my boots, grabbed my coat, and went outside, letting the door click closed softly behind me. Within minutes, I was rushing through the dark forest, the cold air on my face.

When I reached my destination, I stopped, breathing hard.

Please be here. Please, Mirage. I need you. I need to talk to you.

A twig snapped somewhere behind me, and I whipped around in that direction to find nothing. Another twig on the other side of where I was looking.

I turned back to once again find no one there.

I shivered and hugged myself. I hated the dark so much. I was getting

braver though. I could do this.

Steadying my breathing, I closed my eyes, listening to the sound of rustling. Movement. It felt like it was all around me.

Warm fingers brushed along my jaw. My lips.

“Sirena,” came that soft, familiar voice.

“Mirage,” I whispered into the night.

I opened my eyes and took in the rabbit before me.

“A lot has happened.” He cocked his head to the right. “You’re confused.”

I nodded.

“Why? Is it wrong to have such an open heart and to love so much?”

“Is it? I feel...lost. I feel like I’m betraying those who love me.” I swallowed hard.

“How can love betray love?” He thumbed my bottom lip. “The answer is that it can’t.”

“I have so many questions.”

“Ask them.”

“Do you truly know everything?”

“We’ve already answered this,” Mirage said gently. “The answer is we do not. We only catch glimpses. Some are more vibrant than others. Some...are simply darkness. We *feel* people. We...read the room. We anticipate, Sirena. Nothing more.”

“But you seem to know so much and it’s always right.” I reached for him and twisted my fingers in his t-shirt left exposed from his jacket being open. “How? Tell me.”

“I cannot tell you things I don’t have the answer to,” he said, wrapping his hands around mine. “The future is a dangerous thing to know which is why we only get bits of that information from...”

“The voices? Is it the voices?” I stared up into his masked face.

“Yes. And no.”

“I just want an answer!” I tightened my hold on him.

“Sirena, my love, you already know the answers. You just have to accept them. It’s that simple. Everything is before you. You’re blinding yourself with your doubt. You can love more than one person. You can make it work. It works with three, right? Why can’t it work with more? You are in charge of your destiny.”

“Even the bad stuff?” I sniffled as he squeezed my hands.

“That bad stuff is the monsters’ destiny.” He released my hand and ran his palm along my jaw until he was cradling my face again. “You will do no harm to anyone ever. Even by loving more than one person. More than one watcher. More than me. We are at *your* mercy, not the other way around.”

“I want to kill the monsters. How isn’t that harm?”

“Because it’s not harmful to dole out punishment, Sirena. It’s not. It’s retribution. It’s revenge. We reap what we sow. It is never a disservice to coax the life out of someone who would do the same to you. It is with the innocent where harm comes into play. Not the guilty. Not the sinners. They’re the prey. We are the hunters. And the hunters must feast.”

“What do I do? I-I care so much about you. About them.”

“I know,” he answered simply. “Our time will come. Just...don’t avoid me. Don’t stay away because you’re scared. Come to me because you are. I will protect you. I will always protect you.”

He leaned in, his eyes locked on mine from behind his mask. My heart spend up. He was a breath away from my lips when there was a crack behind us in the woods. He snapped his head up, automatically going feral as his lip pulled back in snarl. He was quick to move me behind his body in an effort to protect me, but I’d already seen something—someone—in the darkness.

“There’s someone,” I whispered. “I saw him.”

Another twig snapping. Someone was definitely lurking in the trees. Another snap. Another. Rustling. The woods was so dense it made it impossible to see.

“There’s someone out there,” Mirage husked out.

He wasn’t talking to me though.

Another figure darted through the darkness in pursuit of the sound. Heavy footsteps. More rustling and snapping underbrush.

“You need to get back to the house,” Mirage said, turning to me. He didn’t wait for me to answer. He grabbed my hand and tugged me in the opposite direction of all the noise, pulling me through the night.

When I’d tripped the third time and had fallen, he scooped me into his arms and ran with me the remainder of the way to the edge of the woods.

“Go. I’ll watch,” he said, placing me on my feet.

I backed away from him slowly before turning and running full tilt to the house.

When I looked back, Mirage was nowhere to be seen.

But I expected nothing less.

He was a wild animal after all.

STITCHES



“*W*here were you?” I got up from my seat on the couch and stared at Sirena covered in snow. There were bits of dead leaves in her hair, making me think she’d been running through the woods.

Her cheeks were red, but they could have been from the cold.

I went to her and helped her out of her jacket.

“Angel, answer me. I went to your room, and you were gone. Church was gone too. Were you with him?”

She shook her head slightly at me.

“You were alone?”

She licked her lips and looked at her feet.

“Why? Did you go and look for him by yourself?”

She remained silent. I was just going to assume that was what happened because anything else was unacceptable. There was no reason for her to be out alone this late at night.

I’d been terrified.

I’d been just about ready to wake Ashes and go look for her. The fact Church was gone too was the only reason I hadn’t done anything. My assumption was they were together, and he just hadn’t told me.

“Sirena, what’s going on?” Fear clawed at my chest.

“I’m sorry,” she finally whispered before she pushed past me. I snagged her hand and pulled her to a stop.

“I’m scared. I don’t like being scared, angel. If you need to tell me something, do it now.”

She shook her head at me, tears clinging to her lashes.

I sighed. She wasn’t going to open up for me. Not yet anyway. I knew

better than most that sometimes it just took time. I'd give it to her, but we'd definitely be revisiting it at some point. As long as she was safe and home, that was all that really matter, even if I was brewing with anger thinking about the possibilities of what could have happened to her out there alone.

I hugged her and kissed her soft lips. "Go to bed, OK? We can talk later once you've had some sleep."

She kissed me back, sighing against my lips, her body relaxing.

Good.

"Go." I released her and caught the sad smile on her face before she retreated to her bedroom upstairs.

I sank down on the couch cushions and stared at the wall for what felt like hours, lost in my own thoughts. I hated to be stuck in them because they were fucking ugly. The rage, fury, and disgust made me volatile. More than once I had to shove the thought of just going to Sully and using him as a reference point with my fists out of my mind.

I held back, focusing on my breathing.

Ashes had showed me some breathing technique shit he'd been doing when he was upset. He said it helped to calm him. So far, it had been working for me, but that didn't mean it always would.

He also told me to try to turn the negative into a positive. He said I had to see the other side of the equation.

Ashes sucked at math though, and the only side I could see was me stringing all those fucks up by their entrails and watching them hang just like I'd done in my fucking closet.

I looked up as the front door opened and closed and Church came into the room. He was wearing all black and his hands were bloody.

He'd been in the woods.

"Hey," he greeted me, going to the kitchen sink. "What's wrong? Why are you awake?"

"Couldn't sleep," I said, running my hands up and down my thighs in a meager attempt to calm myself.

He finished washing and came to sit on the couch. "Want to talk about it?"

I was quiet for a moment. "I don't know. Maybe. Out of curiosity, did you take Sirena with you?"

He scoffed. "No. Why would I take her out in the cold to hunt?"

I shrugged. "Just wondering."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Tell me what's going on."

"I don't actually know. She came in from outside. I was worried about her. I thought maybe you'd taken her since you were gone too and just forgot to tell us."

"I'd never do that," he said, sitting forward, his elbows on his knees. "What else?"

"I honestly think she was in the woods. She had dead leaves in her hair."

He frowned and got to his feet, pacing.

I watched him for a moment. "Maybe she wanted you and tried to find you."

He shook his head. "No. She'd have gone to you or Ashes if that were the case." He stopped pacing and went to the door and pulled it open. I got up and followed him and watched as he went outside, his phone out and the flashlight on.

I saw what he was looking at.

Footprints.

He looked over at me standing in the doorway.

"Care to go for a walk?"

"Yeah. Let me just grab my shoes and coat." I quickly put my boots on and grabbed my jacket. I snagged Church's coat too since he wouldn't be running and might get cold, then I went outside and met him on the trail and handed him his jacket. Quickly, he put it on and shined the light on her footprints.

We silently followed them into the woods.

The thing about Church was he was an excellent hunter. He reveled in the chase. The primal hunt. If she'd been out here, he'd figure out the how and why's of it.

That made me nervous.

We already had too much shit going on. I was really hoping she'd gone out just to look for him and not something else.

Whatever that something else could have been I didn't want to contemplate.

We followed the prints for a long time as they wound through the woods. When they stopped it was in a small clearing.

Church looked around, shining his flashlight.

"There," he said, nodding to another set of footprints coming into the clearing. Big prints.

A guy sized print.

“Not you?” I asked thickly.

“Not fucking me,” he said, a growl to his voice.

I watched as he prowled around the area. He disappeared into the darkness for a bit, just the dim glow of his flashlight until even that went dark.

The cold made me shiver. I looked up through the treetops, wondering what they’d seen standing here earlier in the night and praying it wasn’t something that wouldn’t break my fucking heart.

We didn’t need another fucking Bells on our hands.

I’d fucking die with Sirena if that were the case.

Church came back into the clearing seconds later and stopped beside me.

“There are two other sets of prints out there. Hers disappears at some point over there.” He gestured in the direction he’d come from. “It looks like she fell and was running. Then she was carried.”

“Carried?”

He nodded. “So whoever she was with gave a damn about her safety because it looks like there was a chase in that direction.” He jerked his thumb behind him.

“Not you?” I asked weakly.

“Not fucking me, Malachi.”

“What are we going to do?”

He was quiet. “I don’t know. She’s hiding something from us. I intend on finding out exactly what it is. It’s too fucking dangerous for her to be out here alone.”

“Do you think it’s Sin?” I’d rather it be him than anyone else in the world. If it were Asylum, he’d have been gloating about it to us, so I’d already ruled him out.

“Maybe. Only one way to find out.” Church stared off into the distance.

“We could ask her.”

He shook his head. “I doubt she’d tell us. If she’s sneaking out, trying to keep it a secret, she’s not going to tell us.”

“What will we do if we find out who it is?” The words were hard to say.

“Easy. We kill them.”

“And her?”

He turned to me and gave me a sad smile. “She belongs to us, Malachi. She will pay dearly for betrayal. Maybe we’d let her watch us kill him, so she

doesn't do it again."

"I don't want her to hurt," I said.

"Nor I, but sometimes a little pain reminds us to not fuck around and find out." He said no more and walked back the way he'd come. I followed behind, a note of hope in my chest because at least he didn't say we'd kill her.

Thank fuck.

But with Church, the punishment always fit the crime...and then some.

I prayed Sirena would come clean with us before we found out who it was she was meeting out here in the dark forest.

CHURCH



“Come here,” I instructed Sirena when she came into the living room the following morning.

She stepped to me. I patted my lap for her, and she slid easily onto it.

“How’s my girl?” I cooed in my ear, all my willpower going into not snapping and forcing her to tell me who the fuck she’d been with last night. I’d already told Ashes about what happened, and he was with Stitches trying to locate Sin to ask him what was going on.

She snuggled against me like always. That only drove me more insane since she was acting like nothing was wrong.

“Do you want to tell me anything?” I asked, running my lips along her jaw. “Like maybe where you were last night? Because it wasn’t in your bed.”

She stiffened on my lap, making me grind my teeth.

“Where were you?”

When she didn’t answer me, I pushed her back so I could see her face.

“Tell me where you were and why you were there.”

Her bottom lip trembled as she stared into my eyes.

Finally, soft words slipped past her lips.

“Woods.”

I breathed out, grateful she’d told me.

“Who did you meet in the woods?”

Her colorful eyes darted around the room, like she was looking for an escape. There was no escape from me. Ever.

I took her chin in hand and made her focus on me as her breathing became faster, notifying me of an incoming panic attack from her.

“Sirena. I love you,” I said as gently as I could. “If there’s someone else,

you're really going to need to tell me because if I find out on my own, I will kill him and make you watch while I do it."

Her lips parted, and she shook her head at me.

"No one," she rasped. "F-Friend."

"Friend?" I raised a brow at her. "That's still a no-no, baby. Who was the friend?"

"Please. I-I," she stammered, tears springing to her eyes.

"What?"

"Confused," she finally whispered. "I'm confused."

I nodded, trying to remain calm. How the fuck she could be confused about anything made me want to shake her violently because hadn't she seen what we were willing to do for her? How much we loved her? How much we fucking cared? We'd renovated an entire fucking attic for her, so she had her own space. We'd risked our lives. We'd agreed to let Asylum get closer. We let her see Bryce. Stitches had been hurt. Sin, fucking Sin. Goddamnit.

"Are we suddenly not good enough for you?" I asked, knowing I'd completely fucking lose my mind if she said no.

"I love you," she said, staring me right in the eyes. "So much."

I exhaled, drinking in the way she looked as she said it. So much certainty. So much fierceness.

"Are you cheating on me, specter? On us?"

Her lip shook and she looked away from me.

"Sirena," I seethed, forcing her to look back at me as I took her face in my hand. "Answer me."

"No," she said, a tear slipping down her cheek. "I'm not. I choose."

I frowned at her. "What does that mean?"

"I choose." She patted her hand over her heart. "I choose."

I studied her pretty, tear-soaked face. Something was fucking wrong with her, and she wasn't letting me know it all.

I had no idea what she was talking about, but I chose to focus on her words, telling me she was faithful to us.

Maybe I needed to take things a step further.

"We never really publicly claimed you," I said softly, brushing a wave away from her face. "We never showed them who you belonged to."

She frowned at me, her body trembling slightly.

"I didn't want to fuck you in front of everyone to make a point, but perhaps that's what's needed."

She twisted her fingers in my black button down, her eyes wild. “No.” I pressed a finger to her soft lips. “Shh, specter. I choose too. Remember that.”

She visibly swallowed before pressing her lips against mine. I didn’t kiss her back, my curiosity getting the better of me. I wanted to know how far she’d go for me. How much she really wanted me.

She let out a hiss of frustration when I remained motionless beneath her. She kissed me again to no response.

“Dante,” she whispered urgently against my lips. “I love you. Forever.”
Fucking hell.

I couldn’t resist her soft words.

“You fucking swear it?” I demanded, fisting her black hair and tugging her head back.

Her response was to completely fucking turn me on because she was undoing her blouse with shaky hands.

“I never lie,” she said, her voice so soft I’d have not been able to hear it had there been any other sound in the room.

I released her hair and shoved her shirt off her shoulders, drinking in her creamy skin before I unclasped her bra and let her breasts spill out for me.

Within minutes, I had her stripped bare, my cock rock hard and ready for her.

“Show me how fucking much you love me,” I said fiercely. “Make me believe it.”

She crinkled her brows and parted her lips for all of a moment before she was sliding down onto my waiting cock, spearing herself on me.

Slowly, she rode me, the sensation of her tight pussy so fucking good I wanted to scream her name to hell and back.

I wanted it faster. Harder. She knew how I liked it, but she continued to give it to me the way she was.

“Specter,” I growled. “Faster.”

I reached for her hips to move her along, but she grabbed my hands and pushed them above my head, her lips meeting mine in a deep kiss.

I gave in and kissed her back, letting her lead since she clearly wanted to run this part of the show.

Her movements picked up, her breasts against my chest, as she rode me faster.

I felt her pussy tighten while her breathing became faster. She was going

to come for me.

I let her continue her control, my tongue in her mouth as she came hard, soaking my fucking lap with her release.

Her hands shook as she held me, a surefire way of letting me know she was struggling to keep going. That her poor, pink pussy was too sensitive.

I could fix that.

“I want your ass,” I said against her lips. “I want to fuck it until you’re screaming for me.”

Her chest heaved against me at my words, and her hold on my arms lessened until I knew I was back in charge.

Quickly, I lifted her off my dick and put her on her stomach. With a tight grip, I lifted her ass until it was bare before me.

I smiled down at her willingness to please me.

She deserved to be rewarded.

I licked her asshole, tonguing her hole, making her squirm. When I pulled away, I worked my finger into her tight confines, making her hiss out a breath. It was when I added two fingers that she really tried to get away from me.

“No,” I said, bringing her back by gripping her lips and lifting her again. “You need to show me, specter. I need to see it. Feel it.”

She quit moving and let me finger her asshole again. When I was happy with it, I pulled out and gathered the slick from her earlier release and rubbed it around her asshole, lubing it up for me. I added some to my cock for extra measure and pushed the head of it against the tight ring of muscle.

She let out a soft cry that was fucking music to my ears.

Pushing forward, I relished the way she shook and twisted her fingers in the blanket she was on.

“Does it hurt, baby?” I asked, breathless.

She nodded her head.

“Good. That’ll make the pleasure so much better.” I shoved all the way, making her collapse beneath me. I didn’t stop. I fucked into her ass, unable to slow myself or be gentle. She had me going wild. Feral. Primal. Deranged with want and need.

I fisted her hair and brought her to her knees, my cock still embedded deep inside her ass, and held her back to my front while on my knees.

I gave her the prettiest hand necklace as I rutted into her body.

With my other hand, I rubbed her clit, noting just how fucking soaked she

was.

“You like this, don’t you, baby?” I asked breathlessly against her ear. “You like me fucking your tight little ass. Tell me.”

“Y-Yes,” she rasped as I snapped forward, hitting a spot that made her cry out.

“Do you know how long I’ve better waiting to hear you scream my name again?” I nipped her at earlobe while she continued to take my cock deep into her ass.

She shook in my hold, making me smile.

I rubbed her clit harder. Faster.

Her entire body tensed before she let loose with a scream, her release taking hold of her entire body.

“Church. Church. Dante!”

I came hard at the sound of my name on her lips. My cock twitch deep inside her, my groans loud and feral as I squeezed her throat, our sweaty bodies sliding against one another.

When it was over, I stayed buried inside her for a moment and loosened my hold on her neck.

“I love you,” I murmured. “So fucking much, Sirena. I’m trusting you to love me back and not hurt me. Not hurt my brothers. I couldn’t take it if you did. I meant what I said. I will make you watch me gut the motherfucker if he touches you.” I reached down and grabbed my knife sticking out from my pants and ran it along her breasts and down her body. When I reached her drenched pussy, I pressed the flat end of the blade against her folds, making her stiffen in my hold.

I gave her neck a warning squeeze.

“I will fuck your pussy with the same bloody knife I killed him with. That’s my brand of love. My brand of crazy. So tell me now. Are you staying with me or are you leaving?”

“S-Staying. Always,” she choked out.

My heart soared.

I pulled free of her ass and tossed her roughly onto her back before I straddled her.

A wail of pain left her lips as I slashed my knife across the pale skin over her heart. Blood blossomed out for me, making me insane with want. Tears streaked along her cheeks, fear in her eyes.

I cut my hand and pressed it to the wound over her heart and stared her in

the eyes.

“I sign contracts in blood. It’s fucking binding. You belong to me now. Forever. Just like you wanted. If you fuck up, the payment is blood. Do you understand?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Good fucking girl.” I pulled my hand away from her chest and pressed my lips the bloody wound I’d given her.

Then I did what I fucking did best.

I fed.

CHURCH



“**S**orry. I burned them,” Ashes said, frowning down at the burgers on the platter.

“Fire too pretty?” Stitches smirked at him. “I saw you out at the grill, fucking around. You’re lucky you didn’t melt the siding off the house.”

“It’s actually a good thing I didn’t burn the entire house down. I almost lost it.” Ashes gave me a tight smile.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be the one cooking for us,” I said, shaking my head at him.

I glanced over to Sirena to see her watching Ashes, a tiny smile on her lips.

I’d fucked her yesterday and today things felt more normal than they had in a long time. My mark was carved deep enough over her heart, so she didn’t fucking forget me. It was also a warning to anyone who got that far with her. If they saw the wound, I was hopeful they were smart enough to back the fuck off.

She hadn’t spoken since screaming my name, but I was fine with that. In fact, I loved her silence.

Ashes and Stitches had returned to tell me that Sin had an alibi and had been in therapy until late before he’d been spotted with Asylum’s group in the gym playing basketball. It gave me great relief to know he hadn’t been out there in the woods with Sirena.

A knock on the door had me stopping from dragging her onto the table and feasting on her little pink pussy. Sometimes I liked to eat dessert before dinner. It was a toxic trait of mine I had no interest in changing.

Ashes looked at all of us before getting to his feet and going to the door.

A moment later, Asylum walked in behind him, dressed in all black and a beanie pulled over his head.

“Your father is here,” he said in a monotone.

I stood abruptly. “What?”

“He just arrived. I’ve been the lucky one tasked with bringing you to him.”

I ground my teeth. There was no way I couldn’t go. I sent up a silent prayer this wasn’t about the task he might call on me for.

Wordlessly, I grabbed my coat and nodded for Asylum to follow me.

“Do you want us to come?” Stitches called out.

“No. I’ll be in touch. Keep her safe.” I looked at my specter whose eyes wavered with fear.

I’d die for you, baby.

“Be careful. Call us,” Ashes urged, following us to the door. “I mean it, Dante.”

“I’ll be fine. Make sure she is.”

Ashes nodded and we stepped off the step, the front door closing behind us.

“Is my father aware that I know you work for him?” I asked.

“I assume so since I’m the one sent to get you.”

“What can I expect?” I asked tightly.

He cocked his head to the left as we walked. “I don’t know.”

“What the fuck do you mean you don’t know?”

He shrugged. “It’s very blurry to me tonight. I didn’t even know he was coming. I’m high though, so that’s probably why.”

I let out a sigh of frustration. “Weed?”

“Eh, sugar. I know a guy who gets it for me. It’s great. I have some if you want to try it.”

I glanced at him, noting what was off about him finally.

He sounded fucking...normal.

“Is this what you’re like high? Normal?”

He let out a loud snort. “Fuck, maybe. It sucks, doesn’t it?”

I shook my head. “Honestly, yes. The only use for you was the fucking voices in your head and your complete disregard for human life and the respect of others.”

“Tell you what. Give me about an hour, and I’ll be back to my old self. It lasts me about an hour when I do an entire stick. So about the time you’re

hopefully walking out of this meeting, I'll be just as bat shit crazy as always."

We reached the admin building and I stared up at it.

"Adam's back," he said.

"I heard."

"I'd have run his head over. That's the difference between you and me."

He moved his focus to the stars. "Huh. Would you look at that. A shooting star. I wish you were just as crazy as I am."

I stared up to the streak in the night sky. "Why do you think I'm not?"

"I didn't say you weren't. Just that you're not as crazy as me." He looked at me, a dark twinkle in his blue eyes. "I'd have carved my name into her flesh if it were me. People tend to shy away from a man's name hacked into the flesh of a woman they're infatuated with."

I narrowed my eyes at him.

He smiled brightly. "Looks like my voices are coming back. I'll talk to you later, Dante. Be a good boy and go disappoint your father for me. It irritates him and makes him fuck up." He turned to go but stopped and looked back at me. "Oh, and through the haze I see this is the beginning of the end. Do it justice."

He left me there without another word, but I expected nothing less from him. That was just the kind of fucking nut job he was.

†

I STEPPED into same room I'd been in when I'd seen my father the last time. He sat in the leather chair, a scotch in his hand.

"Dante. My boy." He rose and reached for me.

Knowing better than to ignore him, I allowed him to hug me without me hugging him back.

He released me and gestured for me to sit. I did so and watched while he poured me a glass of alcohol before topping his off.

"Why are you here?" I asked, not lifting the glass from the table.

"You never change." He smiled at me. "That's fine. I have a busy night ahead of me anyway. I got word that one of mine, and ultimately yours, was harmed here on campus."

"And who was that?"

“Adam Larson.”

I steadied myself before answering. “He pissed me off.”

Father laughed. “Truly? Adam means no harm. He’s a little unstable, but that’s what I look for in a special helper.”

“Is he one of your experiments?” I finally looked at him.

“In a sense. He’s more like the independent variable.”

I scoffed at that. “What do you need from me? I know you didn’t call me down here to gloat about some mentally ill fuck you have under your wing.”

He drank and smacked his lips. “I want you to leave Adam alone. It’s that simple. I think he’s exceptional and he’s being trained.”

“Fuck him. He was talking shit. He’s lucky I didn’t kill his ass.”

“Indeed. I told him that. He was more than willing to agree to keep his distance in the future, but he is one of mine, and by default, one of yours. So if you need anything, he’s at your disposal.”

“The only *disposing* of him will be in a fucking grave the next time he gets in my way.”

A tiny smirk cut his lips upward again. “Your violence is beautiful, my son. It is one of your most perfect attributes. I raised you well. However, if Adam becomes a victim to your own madness, there will be hell to pay. Do we have an agreement?”

“Yes,” I said tightly. “But if Adam so much as gets close to what belongs to me, Adam will pay.”

“Let’s hope you don’t make that mistake.” He grabbed a bag at his feet I hadn’t noticed and opened it. I watched as he pulled a covered bowl out. “I brought you something.”

He handed it to me. “Go on. I want you to try it.”

I opened the container to see cooked meat inside. Rather than let him see the sickness that gripped me, I looked to him and saw him reach back into the bag and pull out a fork.

“Here.” He handed it to me.

I took it and leveled my gaze on him.

“You’ll love it.” His eyes twinkled. “Trust me.”

I’d always called his bluffs. This would be no different.

I forked the meat and put it into my mouth and chewed, the flavor too much. It had far too many seasonings and spices on it.

I swallowed and raised a brow at him, waiting for his next test.

“Did you like it?”

“No. Too many seasonings. You need to fire your chef.”

“Perfect. I said the same thing.”

I handed him back the container and he covered it before placing it into his bag. I twirled the fork between my fingers, making his eyes sparkle.

“Everything is a weapon, is it not, my son?”

“Indeed,” I said solemnly.

He took the fork from me and stuffed it away.

“Is that all?” I asked.

“What else would there be?” He gave me a serene look.

“Isn’t there always something?”

“Not tonight. We’re done.”

I got to my feet and went to the door, but he stopped me before I got there.

“Dante, send my regards to Sirena and Malachi. I look forward to seeing them again soon.”

I said nothing. I knew how he worked. He wanted to work me up. Instead, I pulled the door open and stepped into the hall, the echo of his laughter in my ears as I shut the door.

Fuck him. He needed to die.

ASHES



“*H*ey, baby,” I greeted Sirena as she came out of classes that evening. She immediately came to me and curled beneath my arm, and I led her down the hall.

I’d been worried along with Church and Stitches about her odd behavior lately. She’d been spending a lot of time holed up in her room painting. I liked to think she was catching up on things, but after hearing she’d gone out into the night, I’d be lying if I said I was cool with it all.

“Ashes,” Sin called out. We barely spoke these days. In fact, it was rare that I ever saw him. He still looked sad as hell though, which in turn made me feel even more sad.

I stopped and waited for him. “What?”

Sin’s gray eyes skimmed Sirena quickly, making her curl closer to me.

“I, uh, was wondering if we could talk for a minute. Alone.”

I contemplated his request for a minute.

It wouldn’t be a big deal. After all, I missed his grouchy ass.

“Sure. Heaven, I’m going to be a minute, OK?”

She pulled away from me without a word and moved to the opposite side of the hall and stood against the wall.

I watched her for a moment before turning my attention on Sin.

“How is everything?” he asked. “How is Stitches?”

“He’s better. Not a hundred, but I think he could be eventually.”

Sin stuffed his hands into his uniform pant pockets. “And Sirena?”

I let my eyes wander to where she stood. She had been joined by Bryce. He was extremely close to her, but she wasn’t pulling away. In fact, she leaned into him as he seemingly spoke in a hurry to her, clearly spilling his

guts about something. I was desperate to know what he was saying to her.

“She’s...good. Shit’s weird, man,” I said, focusing back on him.

“Weird how?”

“Look, it’s not really any of your concern. We’re handling things.”

“Listen, I know you hate me now, but I have shit to tell you. Just...listen to me, OK?”

I studied him. “Fine. What’s up?”

“That fucking Adam Larson guy is talking about Sirena. I overheard him today after class. I wanted to fucking strangle him, Asher. He’s fucked up. You guys need to watch her closely. I think he’s becoming a little too obsessed with her and the fact you guys kicked his ass. The guy wants revenge.”

“He works for Everett.”

“What?” Sin frowned. “So that’s true?”

“How did you know about it?”

“Asylum made a stupid fucking rhyme about Daddy Church and all his little demons. Mention of a fuck head who was left in the woods came up. I assumed that was Adam.”

“Yeah, well, Church went and spoke to his old man when he was here a few days ago. He told Church to not touch Adam or there would be hell to pay. We’re obligated to not fuck him up.”

“I’m not a watcher. That shit doesn’t pertain to me. I’ll do it,” Sin said fiercely.

I shook my head at him and saw Bryce looking upset. He caught my eye, a sad look on his face, before he left Sirena staring at her feet. They didn’t seem to be getting along. I found that odd.

“It does pertain to you.”

“How?” Sin demanded. “I’ll go fuck his shit up right now.”

“Because Everett views you as one of us still. So you’ll not do shit about it until Dante gives the word.”

Sin let out an angry hiss. “I’m fucking telling you this guy is trouble. He wants to fuck her, Ashes. He’s already bragging about how he banged out Claws. His real target is Siren though.”

“She’ll be safe. We don’t let her out of our sight. I promise. She’s good.”

Sin tugged at his shaggy blond hair for a moment before nodding. “Fine. You’re right. She’s your girl. You’ll look after her.” The way he said that made my heart hurt for him. But it was the look of longing on his face that

really got me. He stared at her for a long moment before shaking his head and backing away.

“I’ll see you around, Asher.”

“Hey, Sin.”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t hate you as much as I used to,” I said, offering him the smallest of smiles.

He let out a soft huff of sad laughter. “Don’t worry about it. I hate myself enough for all of us.”

He left me standing there. I watched him for a moment before I went to Sirena and took her hand.

“What’s wrong with Bryce?” I asked, leading her out of the building and toward our house.

She shrugged and said nothing, per her usual.

“Are you two fighting?”

Again, nothing.

“Heaven, come on. Talk to me. I’m worried about you.”

She pulled me to a stop and took my hand in hers. Quickly, she scrawled words across my palm.

I make him sad.

“How?” I asked.

More words on my palm.

I’m confused.

That only made the knots in my stomach grow. “Do you...like him?”

She nibbled her bottom lip for a moment before writing more words.

It’s complicated. Working through it.

“Sirena, this is big stuff. Did he touch you? Kiss you?”

She shook her head, her eyes wide.

Relief flooded through me. At least there was that. I didn’t like the idea that he had a thing for her though. I knew about their previous relationship, but that ship had sailed. We’d made sure of it.

Or so I thought.

Judging by the sadness on her face, I’d say she was still trying to navigate those waters.

“Promise you’ll talk to me, OK? With the feelings and stress. I don’t want you stressed, heaven. I can be levelheaded and help you through any feelings you are struggling with.” It pained me to say those words, but at the end of all

things, her happiness was key. I wasn't going to give her up to anyone, but I'd at least talk to her and try to give her insight.

Sirena looked past me, and I turned to see Church coming across the courtyard with Stitches at his side. They were headed off by Melanie, who practically fell trying to intercept them.

They stopped, Church looking exceptionally annoyed as she bounced up and down, talking a mile a minute. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but it really didn't matter because when she reached out to touch Church, he grabbed her hand and gave her a shove back which ended in her slipping in the snow and ice and tumbling to her ass.

Then I could hear her.

"You fucking asshole! Why are you such a dick! I just wanted to see if you were busy tonight!"

Church kicked his boot and snow wafted over her, making her sputter. I thought she'd finally taken the hint because she'd been so quiet lately, but I guessed she was bored.

Stitches reached down and gathered a snowball and chucked it at her, hitting her in the shoulder before trotting after Church who was headed for us.

Melanie's shrieks about Stitches being a giant dick sounded out around us.

"Specter. You look like a snow angel out here," Church said, taking her from me and kissing her.

I watched as she kissed him back before I looked to Stitches.

"The snowball was a nice touch," I said.

"I'd have thrown it harder if I didn't think she'd cry to someone over it."

Church broke off his kiss to Sirena and Stitches took his turn. When they were done, he held her hand.

We walked back to the house, shooting the shit the entire way. I brought out my lighter and flipped it open and closed. The moment we were in the house, Sirena darted upstairs, leaving us alone.

"We need to talk," I said, giving them a pointed look.

"Bryce?" Stitches asked, grabbing a soda out of the fridge and going to settle on the couch.

I nodded. "And Sin."

"What did you hear?" Church took his usual seat, and I grabbed mine before launching into what Sin and had said and the interaction I'd seen with

Bryce and Sirena. I even spilled on what she'd written on my hand, hoping to god Church would be levelheaded about it.

He simply nodded. "I see."

"And?" I pressed.

"And what? We have no proof of anything. If he gets too close, we make an example out of him. I'm not letting her go. She knows that. Stitches?" Church inclined his head at him.

"I'm not letting her go either. So...yeah. I'm with you. I think she needs time to think shit through. She was thrown into everything so fast. But like you said, she's ours. She's not going anywhere."

I nodded. "So we agree."

"Absolutely. As for Adam, fuck him. He tries anything and he's a dead man. It's that simple. I draw the line at Sirena. He gets too close, game over. Fuck my old man." Church gave me a fierce look. "There are some things I can wait to deal with and plan out. This isn't one of them. Father told me it would be handled. If Father breaks his word, I'll break Adam's neck. End of story."

"I'm with you," I said, hoping it didn't come to that.

"Me too," Stitches agreed.

"So...what's for dinner?" I asked, looking at the pair.

"Whatever you feel like burning, brother," Church said, but there wasn't any humor in his voice.

I knew where his mind was.

It was the same place mine was.

On a pretty girl with colorful eyes two floors above us.

SIRENA



I needed to see Mirage.

It had been well over a week since our last contact. My head was a mess over Bryce begging me to at least consider him someone special. There was no way, no matter how I felt about Bryce, that the guys would let him join us.

I wasn't even sure if I wanted him with us.

It made me nervous, but I couldn't help but think about how much he meant to me and how my feelings were growing.

It was a cornucopia of cock as Cady had said over dinner the night before when she'd come to visit us. She'd been referring to the guys playing some racing game and giving each other a hard time in the living room, but I figured it was a good use of the phrase in regard to my entire situation.

I'd liked Bryce when I'd met him. I'd felt for him then. A twinge of potential. I knew I had in retrospect. Now here I was with the opportunity to try, and I just couldn't. The timing wasn't right. He could get hurt. He wasn't like the watchers. If they didn't kill him, this life would.

And I didn't want anyone else to suffer for me.

Bryce would be better off with someone normal. Someone he could hold a real conversation with.

"Not me," I whispered into the darkness of my room.

But why, in my silence, did I want it to be? I wanted him with us. I wanted to at least try. I just didn't want to lose him. It had been a thought on repeat since the night he'd told me he wanted more.

All of this led me back to needing to go to the clearing.

I exhaled.

Tonight.

†

I STARED AROUND THE DARK, empty clearing, holding my breath.

“Hello, pretty girl,” Mirage’s voice called out from behind me. “It’s been too long.”

I turned to face him in his mask.

“You’re sad,” he said immediately.

“Confused.”

He cocked his head to the left. “Tell me.”

I closed my eyes and thought about Bryce and how much I cared and how lost I was about it all. How I didn’t want to lose my best friend but how I couldn’t stomach not knowing what could be. How he was so sweet. And caring. And really, everything any girl could ever want.

He wasn’t a watcher. He was just Bryce.

“Ah, I see,” Mirage murmured. “Is he truly your best friend?”

I licked my lips. “Seth,” I whispered.

Mirage let out a soft laugh. “You can have two best friends you know.”

But can I love them both? And the watchers?

“You can love as many people as you can fit into your heart, Sirena. The heart extends past our chests. It’s infinite. So is love.” He reached out and chucked my chin up. “Now smile for your rabbit.”

I gave him a tiny smile.

“Love who you want to love. Be who you need to be. I can guarantee these guys won’t be sad about any of it. And if you can’t be who you want, be a mirage, like me. I’m who I need to be when needed the most.”

“You’re an enigma,” I said, reaching for his hand and tangling my fingers with his.

“Everyone has a nickname for you. Mine never quite seemed able to compete. Perhaps you’re just a sweet little monster.”

“Yours was always the best,” I said, my voice thick as I gazed up at him.

A tiny smile curled his lips up beneath his mask.

“Lay with me.”

He didn’t say another word. He simply lay on his back and stared up at

the night sky through the trees. I lay beside him, our heads together.

“I’ve heard the universe is infinite too,” he said, holding my hand tightly. “I’ve heard you can manifest your destiny if you want it enough.”

“Do you believe that?”

He looked over at me, his whiskers tickling my face. “You’re here, aren’t you?”

“Is this real...*Rabbit*?”

“It is if you believe it to be. Everything in our heads is real if we choose to believe in it. So tell me, Sirena, what do you believe?”

I contemplated his words for a moment.

“I believe it’s all real, but it’s a nightmare.”

“Then wake up, pretty girl.”

“That’s the problem. I don’t think I want to.”

He chuckled softly and turned to look back at the sky. “Then it’s not a problem. It’s a solution. Stay with us crazies here in dreamworld and see what dreams may come.”

I looked back at the night sky.

For tonight, I’d stay.

And if I got lost, then maybe it was fate.

“Destiny,” he murmured.

The snow fell around us, leaving us with our nightmares in the dark as we stared up through the trees.

I was glad I’d come.

“Me too,” he said before going silent.

CHURCH



I was a good hunter. No one ever saw or heard me.

Tonight was no exception as I stared at my girl lying in the clearing holding hands with a fucking lunatic dressed in all black save for his white rabbit mask. A rustle in the trees let me know we weren't alone.

The rabbit must have sensed it too because he got up and lifted her sleeping form into his arms, holding her against his chest. Then he hummed some song I'd heard her hum before.

Slowly, he made his way through the forest while I followed quietly behind him. One wrong move and he would die. That much was certain.

When he reached the edge of the woods, he roused her and placed her on her feet.

I couldn't hear what he was saying to her, but she hugged him before leaving him to stand there to watch her go into our house. I followed his gaze as she disappeared safely inside, my fucking heart in my throat.

When I turned back to where he'd been, he was gone.

I straightened and peered into the night, not catching a single glimpse of him.

It didn't matter.

I'd deal with him later. He was always on campus. I'd just kick his ass then. But her...

Slowly, I walked the short distance to the house and went inside. I didn't go to see her. Instead, I woke the guys and gathered them in Ashes's bedroom.

This wasn't something I was going to keep a fucking secret.

†

WE WERE all hanging our heads low several days after I'd seen Sirena in the woods. We'd taken to doing rotations of sleeping in the living room just so she couldn't leave without any of us knowing.

We'd agreed we'd find this rabbit prick and kick his ass.

Of course, that proved difficult since he seemed to disappear from campus. For a week straight, nothing.

I could tell it was beginning to bother her because she grew more withdrawn. She'd stopped trying to come downstairs at night to leave, and we continued to play along. She'd have been dumb to not know we were onto her though.

"Who do you think it is?" Ashes asked while we watched Cady talk to her in the lunch line.

"A dead man," Stitches said sourly.

I watched as Cady turned to talk to some girl I couldn't recall the name of. In that span of time, Bryce approached her. They spoke for a moment, him looking like he was pleading with her. Finally, she reacted and gave him a sad shake of her head before turning away from him.

I stood up, knocking my chair back. My vision went red when Bryce reached for her. She was quick to shake her head again, telling him no to whatever he was saying to her.

"No. Not fucking here," Stitches snarled, grabbing ahold of me. Judging by his trembling hands, he was struggling not launching himself at Bryce too.

"I'll talk to her." Ashes was on his feet and moving in her direction before I could tell him no.

He spoke quickly to her, and she shook her head at him. He seemed upset, but she was quick to hug him, his body visibly relaxing as he hugged her back.

"It's OK," Stitches said, breathing hard. "It's OK. Ashes has it handled.

"For now," I snarled, ready to lose my fucking mind. I needed to know what was going on, and I needed it now. Waiting would only make me angrier.

"We're waiting. He'll fuck up and we'll really catch him," Stitches said. "It'll be better that way. We catch him in the act."

I nodded, settling back in my seat.
I could wait. I was a hunter, after all.

SIRENA



Everything was falling apart.

I could tell it was my doing, and it wasn't what I wanted.

In a perfect world, this would all work out, but I was still torn on it.

"Penny for your thoughts," Asylum said, sliding into the seat next to mine. We'd been given a free period in class. Asylum wasn't even in my class, but somehow, there he was.

"She won't even notice. The old bird has been drinking from her thermos all morning. Spoiler. It's not coffee."

I looked to where the old nun was sitting to see her sipping on a cup from her thermos and swaying in her seat.

"So...what's up with you lately?"

I remained quiet, opting to doodle a picture of a rabbit bouncing through the forest.

"Listen, firefly. Some recent information has been given to me from some rather annoying voices in here." He pointed to his head. "You can just come clean with me, or we can play a game."

I don't want to play.

"Too bad. So sad. So. This rabbit. You love him?"

I glared at him.

"Let's skip that one since I know you do. But this other guy. He's different. He plays pretend." Asylum cocked his head to the left. "Mm, he's a mirage too. Interesting."

I closed my notebook and got to my feet. Asylum followed me out to the hall. A few steps into my annoyed march away from him, he grabbed my hand and yanked me to a stop.

“Everything isn’t as clear as I’d like it to be,” he said, turning serious. “That may be because as people make new decisions, things can change. All roads lead to the same place though. They always have. Your feelings are a mess. You need to sort them. I don’t like it.”

“Why?” I said sharply in a snarl. “Because they confuse the crap in your head?”

“Yeah, I believe they do,” he answered back, not even flinching away from me as I glared up at him. “You need to sort out what you want, firefly. Nothing can progress without it.”

“What do you see happening?”

“You already know the happy ending. It’s just the weird turns that are so foggy right now. I hate that I can’t tell. It’s never been this bad before.” He frowned.

“I’ll take her,” Stitches said, coming up to us in the hall.

Asylum stepped away from me. “Watch her. Shit’s all weird.” He tapped his head, a scowl on his face. “I need to meditate.”

And with those words, he left us.

“He being weird?” Stitches asked.

I grunted a response.

“Yeah, not surprised. He’s a fucking weirdo. I think he’s sincere though. He seems calmer lately. He’s been smoking some sugar. Guess he likes the high but hates the effects that seem to be lasting with him.”

Great. He was getting high on a new drug? Like he didn’t have enough issues as it was.

“Want to call it an early day? Free hour means skip. I doubt Sister Drunkard will notice.”

I nodded and gave him a quick smile that he seemed content with because we left and went home, him chatting away, seemingly in a better mood than he had been in lately.

I was tired of feeling the way I felt though. Asylum had a point. I needed to get things sorted. I needed to just come clean about all these weird feelings inside me.

When we got to the house, I went upstairs and unpacked my backpack, promising myself I’d actually get the homework done before Sunday night this week.

A note fell out when I pulled my history book out.

I picked it up and unfolded it.

Sirena,

*Meet me tonight at the clearing. I miss you, and it's been too long. Yours,
Rabbit*

I hadn't seen him on campus in days. My worry had grown to the point where I'd almost questioned Asylum about it. I was used to seeing the white rabbit in the throng of students. His disappearance made me fear the worst.

I folded the note and tucked it into my notebook and went to my easel. Sighing, I sat down and painted the clearing with the rabbit standing in the center.

Tonight, I'd find a way to straighten this out. I'd bring him back to the house and beg for the watchers to listen to me.

It was time I told some secrets.

†

THE GUYS WERE STILL awake downstairs playing video games. I'd never be able to make it out of the house to see Mirage like this. I could have just told them to come with me, but maybe I was still nervous and needed Mirage to reassure me one last time.

I made the executive decision to go out the balcony off Church's room.

Carefully, I crept inside and opened the French doors. It led out to a small balcony that I knew I'd be able to shimmy down as long as it wasn't icy.

In my pants and hoodie, I managed to get my leg over the edge and slide down, falling near the end, but not hard enough to cause issue.

Quickly, I got to my feet and ran to the woods, heading straight for the clearing. When I got there, it was empty like it always was. But he said he'd be here, so I waited patiently for him. The wait wasn't long.

Warm hands squeezed my arms from behind.

I turned and gasped, taking in the guy before me who certainly wasn't Mirage.

"Hello, Sirena," Adam said, smiling at me from beneath a black rabbit mask. "I heard you like rabbits."

I tried to push him off me, but he was far stronger. He shoved me hard, and I fell to the cold ground with a cry. I wasted no time in trying to scramble away from him, but he was on me in an instant.

I managed to get a hold of his hand when he reached for me and twist it like Mirage had shown me. It worked, and I kicked at him, knocking him sideways.

Stumbling, I got up and ran as fast as I could, his laughter echoing behind me.

I had no idea where I was. I'd never been this far into the woods before. It didn't matter anyway.

I was taken to the ground when Adam tackled me, my face slamming off a fallen branch.

The ground was unforgiving as we tumbled to it.

"I fucked your sister to get to you," Adam snarled, pinning me down, his eyes wild in the moonlight. "She's a fantastic lay, but I bet you're better. You know why? Because you can't tell me no."

Words failed me. Terror took over. He was right. I couldn't tell him no with my words, but he knew well enough that everything else about me was screaming it.

"The watchers think they're untouchable. That their girl is untouchable. I'm about to show them exactly how fucking touchable you are, Sirena."

No. No. NO! PLEASE GOD. NO.

"When you see Dante again, tell him to enjoy my leftovers. If there's anything left of you that is." He tore my pants down, cackling as he burrowed inside my body.

The scream on my lips was silent.

So were the tears as they dripped from my face.

But the pain. Unreal.

I scurried to my safe place. The dark place where no one could hurt me. The place where Seth knew how to find me.

I didn't move an inch when he cut me, the blade digging deep into my skin. Or when he bit my lip so hard it bled.

When he came.

Or when he stood to leave, spitting on me and kicking me in the ribs several times before he fisted my hair and slammed my head against the cold forest ground, calling me a worthless whore the entire time. Telling me he hoped Church saw me this way because he hated him.

Or even when he punched me in the face.

And definitely not when the darkness finally settled, his boots becoming blurry.

I lay in the mess he'd made, staring into the darkness, my breathing shallow and my tears frozen on my face.

Asylum was right.

All roads led to the same place.

In every situation.

It was always my death.

ASYLUM



I bolted upright in bed, my heart pounding so hard I clutched at it. My mouth tasted like blood. My head was killing me.

“What’s wrong?” Sin called out groggily from his bed as I fell out of mine and onto my knees.

“H-Help. H-Help,” I choked out, clutching my guts.

“What the fuck is happening?” Sin scrambled out of bed and came to me on his knees. “Asylum. Asylum!”

“S-Sirena. F-firefly. Fuck. C-church. G-Get C-Church.”

Sin rushed to his phone and dialed Church while I tried to catch my breath. Blasts of darkness met my vision as I struggled to clear the pain from my body. As I tried to *see*.

The forest.

Dark.

Snow.

Tears.

Blood. So much fucking blood.

Her pale face as she lay with her eyes opened and unfocused.

“Sirena,” I choked out, staggering to my feet.

“Hello?” Church called out on speakerphone.

“Where’s Sirena?” Sin asked frantically.

“In her room.”

“She’s not. She’s not.” I stumbled to my closet and grabbed my jacket and fell over trying to put my boots on.

“Check, man. Go. Asylum is freaking out. I don’t know what’s happening.”

The line went silent as I struggled to get my shit on and breathe.

“She’s hurt,” I rasped.

Help her. Fuck, help her. I feel it too.

I cut the voice off and managed to get to my feet, my ribs feeling like they’d been kicked to fuck and back.

I knew my connection to my pretty little firefly was going haywire. I was feeling her pain.

“She’s gone. She’s fucking gone!” Church shouted. There was a cacophony on the line as the watchers rushed to find her.

“Woods. She’s in the fucking woods,” I said, going to the door and slamming into the wall before reaching the doorknob.

“Did you hear him? He said she’s in the woods. We’re going. I’ll be in touch.” Sin hung up and dressed in record time and beat me to the door.

“Come on, you weird fuck. We need to find her,” he said, dragging me out the door.

CHURCH



We raced through the night, it all too reminiscent of the night we'd found her in the mausoleum. The wind was cold, and the snow had started falling again.

In the distance, we saw Sin and Asylum.

We caught up to them quickly.

"What did you see?" I demanded, shaking Asylum as he tried to remain upright.

"Fucking hell. She's so hurt," he managed to choke out. "I-I can feel her pain. It's so much. He hurt her."

"Who?" Stitches shouted. "Fucking who, Seth?"

"I-I don't know. I can't see him." He shook in my hold, looking like he might throw up. I'd never seen him this way before. It was unsettling.

"We need to check the clearing," I said, releasing Asylum who sagged against Sin.

"Come on." Ashes ran away from us, sliding as he tried to not slip on the ice.

We all followed, Asylum and Sin slower.

When we reached the clearing, it didn't take a genius to see there had been a struggle. The snow was disturbed, and it looked like she'd fought and ran.

"Come on, baby," I whispered, pulling a flashlight from my pocket and shining it around. I spotted the trail of footprints, and jotted along it through the darkness.

"R-Right. Go right," Asylum called out from behind us.

I didn't bother to question him. I turned right just as the footsteps did.

She'd been chased. She'd tried to escape.

"Where?" I demanded.

Asylum vomited somewhere behind us.

"Fuck, he's channeling her or something," Stitches managed to say.

"It's good that he is." Ashes moved quickly next to me. "It means she's alive."

That should have brought hope to my heart, but it only made my fear grow. It meant she was suffering.

Not again, baby. Please, not again.

The tracks broke off suddenly, going in different directions. Whoever had been here, wanted to confuse us.

"Asylum? Which way?"

"I-I don't know," he groaned. "We have to split up."

I swallowed hard. "I'll go straight alone. Stitches, you and Ashes go right. If anything happens..."

"We'll be vigilant." Ashes clapped me on the shoulder before him and Stitches darted off into the night.

"We'll go left," Sin said.

I nodded.

"Dante, she's strong. She'll be OK," Sin said, his face stricken with the same fear I felt.

"Be careful," I said before darting ahead. I didn't want her to have to be strong. This shouldn't fucking be happening.

I hadn't watched her enough. I hadn't spoken to her enough. I should have tried to just talk to her about everything instead of waiting like a fucking psychopath.

Another toxic trait.

I was fucking nuts.

But that would come in handy later because I would find out who did this and they would pay dearly.

SIN



We followed the trail for what felt like forever. We were damn deep in the woods to a place I'd never been, and lately, I'd been all over.

"You good?" I asked as Asylum stumbled beside me. He stopped and clutched his ribs.

"Go," he groaned.

Good enough for me.

I continued onward, knowing Church and the guys were terrified.

I was too. This made me sick to my guts thinking she was out here hurting. It made me relive the nightmare of when I'd left her in that fucking coffin with Asylum. Of the weeks spent away from her, worrying. Of my own torture.

I wanted nothing more than to kill whoever did this.

Because whatever this was and to be bad to get Asylum out here the way he was.

If his condition was any inclination of hers, this wasn't going to go well.

I spotted something dark ahead and shined the flashlight from my phone on it.

"There. She's there!" I rushed forward, leaving Asylum behind and fell to my knees at her side.

"Fuck," I shouted. "Oh god. She's bad. She's fucking bad, man."

Asylum fell to his knees beside her and cradled her face. Her eyes were open and unmoving.

"Damnit," he sobbed. "Fuck."

"I-is s-she...?"

“No. Not yet. She’s gone though. She’s checked out.”

I knew exactly what he meant. She was back to being locked away.

With shaking hands, Asylum tried to pull her pants up. It was clear what had happened here. She was bleeding from it.

“Help me,” he wept. “Fucking cover her.”

I helped him put her pants back on, noting how icy cold she was. I whipped my coat off and lifted her gently, wrapping her small body in it.

“I have her,” I said, standing. “Tell Dante and the guys. I’m going to go fast. Try to keep up.”

And I moved through the trees like lightning. I carried her close to my body, praying the heat from me would help warm her. I didn’t even know if I was going the right way until I broke out of the woods and stumbled onto the path. I recognized where we were right away. I didn’t know where we had to go but the med ward was the only place I could think of.

They could stabilize her. Church would make sure she was safe, or I’d die trying because I wouldn’t leave her side while she was there, even if that meant getting admitted myself.

I burst through the doors, startling the two nurses at the front desk.

“I need help,” I choked out. “Please. Help her.”

They snapped into gear, and she was placed on a stretcher. I stayed at her side, even when one of the wards tried to get me away.

“I’m not fucking leaving her. Fight me, motherfucker.” I shoved the guy hard in the chest, sending him stumbling backward.

He didn’t try again, nor did anyone else. Instead, I lurked on the edge of the room as they cut her clothes off. As I saw the cuts on her body. The bruises. How injured she was between her legs.

The tears didn’t stop flowing down my cheeks the entire time. The foil blanket put on her. The machines. The shouts from the nurses and the doctor who I recognized as one I didn’t completely hate.

I forced my way between the chaos and held her cold hand.

“Come on, baby,” I sobbed. “Don’t go. Stay. *Please*. Stay with me. *I love you, Siren*. So fucking much. I can’t lose you. Please. Stay with me.”

The beep from her heart monitor let me know she was still with us.

She was still here.

And that meant I would be too because I was never going to leave her side again.

They’d have to kill me if they wanted me gone, and I was a proven

fucking survivor.

STITCHES



“*H*ow is she?” I stood from my chair in the waiting room as Church came out.

“She’s resting. She hasn’t woken at all. Her injuries were...extensive,” Church said, his voice wobbling as he wiped quickly at his eyes.

“What is it?” Ashes demanded.

Church sank onto the chair across from me.

Asylum sat beside me, his head lolling against the wall, a barf bag in his hand.

“He raped her,” he whispered.

My blood ran cold. Ashes slid back onto his chair and shook, pulling his lighter out and opening and closing it so fast the silver was just a flash.

“He cut her. Beat her.” Church let out a soft sob. “Why? What the fuck did she ever do to anyone?”

“The wicked in the world always try to destroy beauty,” Asylum whispered. “It’s what I wanted to protect her from.”

“You were supposed to know this shit!” Church launched himself out of his seat and grabbed Asylum by his shirt and shook him. “You’re the fucking psychic with all the voices in your head. Why didn’t you save her? Why didn’t you know?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Asylum said. “I wish it did. I only know the things I’m meant to know. Nothing less. Nothing more. Had I known, I wouldn’t have gone to bed. I’d have been at your fucking house, holding her down. She could hate me some-fucking-more, but I’d have protected her.”

Church shoved him hard, making Asylum’s head smack off the wall.

“We can’t be fighting right now. If it weren’t for Asylum, she could have

died,” I said, feeling numb inside.

Church cursed and fisted his hair, pacing the room.

Ashes was still silent, his lighter still snapping open and closed at Mach five.

“Where is Sin?” Ashes finally asked, slowing his movement with the lighter.

“He’s with her. Refuses to leave her side.” Church looked in the direction of the hall where they were still taking care of her.

“He won’t leave her,” Asylum said. “He loves her.”

We all remained silent at his words.

“Good.” Church let his head fall back. “We need someone to stay with her while we find whoever did this to her. Is she safe?” He turned his attention to Asylum.

“Do men who touch what belong to us die?” He cocked his head to the left.

“They do,” I said, getting to my feet.

“Then you know the answer to that question.” Asylum closed his eyes. “I’m going to stay right here too. I’m too weak to leave, and honestly, I want to be with her. This is where I need to be.” He was pale and shaking and seemed oddly *normal* in character. No rhyiming or anything but pure worry on his face.

“Call us if anything changes,” Ashes said, getting to his feet.

Asylum gave him a tired nod.

“Let’s go.” Church turned and walked out of the med ward, us following him into the night.

†

WE’D MADE it a point to tell no one about what had happened to Sirena. We’d gone back to where she was found and looked around but couldn’t find anything. Church made us go home and sleep while he returned to the med ward.

I’d wanted to go too, but I saw the look on his face. He was worried about me and wanted me to rest.

As much as I wanted to scream at him that I needed to be there too, I’d

gone with Ashes home.

We both lay on the wraparound couch, dozing off here and there. The moment my eyes snapped open though, I was dressed and heading back to the med ward, leaving Ashes to sleep since I knew he'd barely done any of it.

"How is she?" I demanded, meeting Church in the lobby.

"Sleeping. She still hasn't woken, but they gave her a lot of pain meds. She most likely won't wake for a while.

"Asylum?"

"Not here. I made him go home and sleep. He fought me." He pointed to the blackening beneath his eye. "But I won in the end."

I nodded tightly. "And Sin?"

"Still with her. Won't leave."

Something about that did something good to my insides. A painful good.

"I'm not going to make him leave," Church continued. "Not this time."

"Good," I said.

Church nodded for me to follow him.

"As long as Sin or one of us is with her, she should be fine. As soon as she wakes, I'm bringing her back to our house."

"Should we tell Cady?" I asked.

"No. I know Ashes wanted to, but let's not. She's fucking hell to deal with on a good day. Let's just keep this to ourselves for now until we see what happens. I even got them to not call her parents."

"How?"

"I threatened to steal their children and feed them to the rich," he said simply. "Not even Sully knows she's here. I don't know for how long, which is why we need to move fast. One of the nurses told me he's out for the weekend, which makes this work in our favor. She's in a private room."

He pushed open the door to the room she was in and led me inside.

Sin lay with his head on her mattress, her hand in his. He lifted his head up, his eyes filled with sleep.

"Hey," he said, glancing at me before looking at her.

She looked awful. Her face was swollen and bruised. Even her lips were. She'd had stitches on them from something I didn't even want to contemplate.

She had some oxygen on her and IVs hooked up with her heart monitor.

"Are you OK?" Church asked, squeezing my shoulder.

"Yeah."

He patted me on the back and looked down at his phone. “Ashes is here. I’ll be right back.”

He left the room, leaving me with my broken angel and Sin.

“Thank you,” I said to him as I went to her other side and stared down at her. “For finding her. For all of this.”

“I owe you,” he answered. “I owe her.”

“It’s more than that, Sinclair, and you fucking know it.”

He said nothing but didn’t let go of her hand.

Ashes and Church returned. Ashes made a beeline for her and let out a curse upon seeing her, tears in his eyes.

“Is it your father? Did he have a hand in this?” Ashes looked to me then to Church.

“I don’t know. This seems like something he’d be gloating about, and I haven’t heard from him. He had no reason to do this. None.” Church sighed and rubbed his eyes.

He was right. Everett was a wicked cocksucker, but he was also vain and would want to take credit for something so heinous.

We sat in silence for a long time. Everything about this shit made me sick to my stomach. Someone had hurt her. Stolen from her. I kept swallowing down the bile that threatened me. I was barely holding it together.

“Sin, take a break,” Church finally said. “Get yourself something to eat and drink.”

“I’m not leaving—”

“That’s not a fucking request,” Church said, his voice laced with venom. His expression softened. “Please. You need to eat. Check on Asylum.”

He stared at him for a moment before he got to his feet and left the room.

“Heaven?” Ashes called out.

We all snapped our attention to her as her lashes fluttered. Finally, they stopped, and she stared up at the ceiling, her brows pinched in pain.

“Specter.” Church doted over her. “Fuck, baby. It’s good to see your pretty eyes.”

I brushed her hair away from her face, praying she wasn’t locked away in her head again.

“Who hurt you, angel? Fucking please. Tell us so we can find him,” I begged.

Her breath caught in her chest before a single, soft word fell from her lips.

“Rabbit.”

I looked at Ashes then to Church whose face took on a demonic look.

“Let’s hunt,” he said fiercely, Sirena’s lashes fluttering once more before her eyes closed.

“Let’s hunt,” I whispered.

STITCHES



We waited on the edge of the clearing in the night. Not a soul knew that Sirena had been hurt. While I knew Cady deserved to know, it was better this way. Quieter.

Easier to hunt as Church had said.

Sin had come back and sat with her. We told him we were going to check some leads. He didn't question us. He simply nodded and took her hand again.

He wasn't the same Sin we'd known.

It wasn't a bad thing. It was simply...sad.

And Asylum. He was exhausted. Whatever his weird abilities were had to have drained him because he was zombie-like. He'd returned to the facility, saying there was no way he'd be able to rest in his bed.

When we'd left, he was curled up in a chair next to the heater in her room, his face pale.

He wasn't anyone I could understand and trying to left me with a headache. All I knew was that we all felt secure knowing they were with her.

We didn't tell them what she'd said. She'd fallen back to sleep shortly after without another word.

Now we were here in the dark. Waiting.

If this guy was how I thought he was, he'd show.

"There," Church murmured, nodding to the edge of the clearing opposite of us.

A guy with a white rabbit mask stepped forward.

"Mask looks different," I commented softly.

"Who gives a fuck. It's a fucking rabbit in the clearing. How many of

these fucks are on campus?” Church hissed through the darkness.

He had a point.

“Let’s fucking get his ass. Ready?” Church looked from Ashes on his left to me on his right.

“Ready,” I said.

“Ready.” Ashes shifted forward, pure fury in his eyes.

It matched what was blazing in my soul and what was written all over Church’s movements.

“Go,” Church snarled.

We launched out from the trees so fast the rabbit barely had time to turn and try to run.

I was first to catch him. I knocked him to the ground, my fists meeting every part of his body I could get to.

Then Church joined. Then Ashes.

He tried to fight us off, but it was no use. Three on one never was. We had experience in matters like that.

When he stopped struggling beneath us, his voice muffled by his mask and our fists, did we finally slow down.

His chest heaved with his ragged breathing.

“Take his mask off,” Church demanded. “Let’s see who the fuck is who hurt her.”

I reached out and grabbed the rabbit mask, my heart in my throat.

Rabbit groaned softly.

I tore the mask from his face, Ashe’s holding his arms, and stared down at the face behind it, a soft gasp leaving my mouth.

“I’m sorry,” Bryce rasped, his face a bloody, swollen mess from our attack. “I-I’m sorry. I only wanted her to talk to me. S-she won’t talk to me.”

“And she never will again,” Church said, his voice dripping with poison as he whipped out his knife. “Let’s see if you can scream as loud as she can.”

He brought the knife down swiftly, steel meeting flesh, Bryce’s screams piercing the night.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Affectionately dubbed Queen of Cliffies, Suspense, Heartbreak, and Torture by her readers, USA Today and International Bestselling author K.G. Reuss is known mostly for making readers ugly cry with her writing. A cemetery creeper and ghost enthusiast, K.G. spends most of her time toeing the line between imagination and forced adulthood.

After a stint in college in Iowa, K.G. moved back to her home in Michigan to work in emergency medicine. She's currently raising three small ghouls and is married to a vampire overlord.

K.G. is the author of the Black Falls High series, Kings of Bolten, the Boys of Chapel Crest, The Everlasting Chronicles, Emissary of the Devil, The Chronicles of Winterset, and many more with a ridiculous amount of other series set to be released.

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