



LORD *of*
ETERNAL
NIGHT
BEN ALDERSON

LORD OF ETERNAL NIGHT



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The *Dragori* Trilogy

Cloaked in Shadow

Found in Night

Poisoned in Light

The War of the Woods Series

The Lost Mage

A Realm of Fey Series

A Betrayal of Storms

Kelsey, thank you for spending hours on call with me whilst I wrote this book from start to finish. I could not have done this without you.

Please be aware this novel contains scenes or themes of toxic relationships, murder, loss of family members, death, abuse, manipulation, anger, grief/grieving, depression, profanity, adult scenes, adult themes and blood/gore.

Fire curled around my fingers as I watched the pregnant moon rise above the castle. Since dusk had arrived it was impossible not to take my eyes off the monstrosity of stone and mortar that seemed like a toy building so far in the distance. Not even the friendly warmth of the conjured fire could keep at bay the cold dread that had settled, unwelcomely, into my bones.

There was a flurry of snow that drifted across the world beyond the window. The first bout that came as a warning to the harsher conditions that would follow in the coming days and weeks. It did little to help the shivering that passed over my skin.

From my perch on the windowsill, I could see Castle Dread perfectly. It would seem my mother had purchased this humble dwelling for the view alone. A way of reminding me of my life's duty. Not that the view before me was the reminder I needed, not when every day for as long as I could remember I was reminded of it.

Every day was in preparation for this one.

I pulled my gaze from the sleeping castle, giving up on waiting for the countless windows to glow with light. It only happened during the final month.

A signal of warning for the guest it would soon welcome within its empty rooms.

Me.

"Jak, they are waiting for you."

I fisted my hand and the flames winked out. Fire was my most obedient element, the one that came more naturally to me. Tearing my gaze from the castle, I regarded Lamiere who had poked her head around the bedroom door.

“And they can wait a moment longer,” I replied.

Lamiere lowered her stare to the floor. It was custom to respect your elders, but that was a wasted tradition for the mundane. A witch never bowed to those with more age. For with age came a lack of power. And I was the last of our kind with ties to magic. It was why they held respect for me.

“Margery has asked for you to join the coven for our last circle. She worries that you will be late before the Claiming.”

I sucked my tongue across my teeth and peered at the faint glow of candlelight far down the dark corridor behind Lamiere. “I cannot help but feel that I am being rushed out the door. If they believe me to be late on such a special day, then they do not know me well enough at all.”

“You know that your mother holds you to a high esteem... she means well. I can sense her anxiety for your pending separation.”

I hated the term Lamiere used. *Mother*. I scoffed at it, knowing that it was likely the very woman before me that deserved the title more.

“She has an awfully odd way of showing it.” I moved across the room, sparing it a final glance. I had never slept anywhere but here. For as long as I remembered, these four walls had become my den. A place of safety. Of peace. I was more worried about sleeping away from this place than I was the deed that would soon follow.

“Will you miss me, Lamiere?” I asked, studying her expression closely as I passed her.

“So much that it already hurts.” Lamiere pressed an aged spotted hand to her heart and held it there. Her wide, amber eyes glistened with tears of honesty.

I sighed, reaching for her cheek. “I will return. Do not be sad.”

“You are a kind boy, Jak.”

“Kind boys are not brought up as killers.”

Lamiere winced. “Perhaps not...”

“And anyway, I am not a boy. I’m a witch. Has Mother not drummed that into you enough since morning?”

Lamiere laughed through a hiccup, her smile returning to her creased face. "I fear that it is your humour which will finally destroy it."

"There are worst ways to go," I said, taking her arm and folding it in the crook of mine. "Do not worry for me, Lamiere. You know as well as I that I am ready for this. I do not believe anyone in this life or the next has ever been more prepared to complete a task as I am."

"This is no simple task, Jak."

"Really?" I tugged her away from the room, leaving it for the final time in a while. "And here I was thinking that it was an easy feat, ending the life of the Eternal Prince."

It was a silly name given to the creature that dwelled within the castle. Even the name of the castle was conjured by youths of past and present. *Castle Dread*. I was certain it would have had a real name lost to the forgotten memory of history. Much like that of the creature that was trapped within the castle's boundaries.

"It is not a laughing matter," she scolded, feet shuffling across the worn, carpeted floor of our home.

"If you do not laugh, dear Lamiere, you cry."

She stopped me halfway down the corridor. The sounds of the coven had picked up. They spoke in rushed whispers, reflecting the inner anxiety I had for the evening ahead of me.

We both were similar heights which made it easier to hold her gaze. Mother would say that the resurgence of my power stunted my growth, that and the insolent human she sired me from.

But I did not mind. It was an inside joke I shared with Lamiere, as I was the same height as the old woman. Lamiere revelled in it.

"Promise me you will be careful."

I averted my eyes, unable to see the worry in her stare. "I will be fine."

"Do not be foolish. He is dangerous and unforgiving. Never has someone returned from the Claiming. You may have the upper hand in training and preparation. But out there..." she pointed to the window far back in the bedroom. "Is different from in here. Be smart. Be cautious."

"There is one great difference between me and the ninety-nine that precede me." I raised my spare hand and wiggled my fingers slightly. Sparks of fire tickled across my skin as a phantom wind blew down the corridor, tousling my loose, brown hair. "I have power."

"And so will he. You are cut from the same cloth, Jak, just be wary."

I could not fight the curl of my lip at her comparison. “We are nothing alike.”

Lamiere’s brow furrowed as she regarded me. “Come, Jak, before your mother believes you have fled for the night. It is time to say your goodbyes and receive your final blessings.”

“I have not wasted a childhood to simply flee at the final hour.”

Lamiere’s face pinched into a scowl. “You are doing what is required to restore our power. Your life and duty to our kind is the most valuable. That, Jak Bishop, is not a waste.”



WHEREAS I COULD CALL UPON THE ELEMENTS WITH A SINGLE THOUGHT, THE only ability my fellow coven members had was the art of staying silent. It was a pathetic ability — passive, unlike those I wielded. The last of my kind to possess the true power which had long since dwindled out.

It was why they all came to give me their final blessing before the Claiming. A moment in our history — the tipping of the scales of fate.

If I would succeed in my task, they would soon share the power they had since long lost.

The room we entered was full of them. Witches. Still and silent they filled the space, heads turning slowly to watch me walk amongst them. I kept my chin raised as the weight of countless stares settled on me.

Lamiere held onto me with firm, stiff fingers, but I did not need her touch to calm me. These men and women would tumble beneath a single gust of conjured wind. I could shake the very room and layer them in broken wood and stone.

They did not unnerve me.

But the woman in the midst of them did.

Her raven black hair draped like rivers of molten shadow over her narrow shoulders. Everything about her face was soft. From the light blue of her gaze to the button shape of her nose. She was a painting of beauty. She was of an age that would expect deep lines to set across her porcelain skin. But she clung to youth more so than me.

“You look divine, my son. Handsome. Likes of which the creature has never seen.” *Creature*. The only name she dared speak of him. “The perfect

ruse.”

I released Lamiere’s hand, leaving her at the edge of the circle. “Mother.” I bowed to the matriarch of the coven, and my family. The only blood relative I had left.

“Let me take you in for this final time.”

The crowd murmured in agreement.

“Do you hold little faith in my return ... Mother?”

She barely flinched at my bite. Her finger snaked beneath my chin and raised it, her nail nipping into skin. “Now, my son, you know there is no room for failure. You have the tools. You have the confidence in your abilities. You... you know what is to be done and when.”

I snap my head from her touch, leaving her painted nail to hover awkwardly in the air. “It will be done.”

She opened her arms wide, smiling to the crowd that listened in. “To restore our greatness. To break the curse that was laid upon us when the creature was punished for his... greed.”

I knew the story well. Everyone in this room and the town beyond had been brought up on it. Even those who came before us. I did not need reminding now.

“Should we not tie this up?” I said. “Unlike you all, I have somewhere important to be.”

The sharp crack of Mother’s laugh sounded painfully. “With wit like that, Jak, you will fail long before entering the door.”

“Do not let it worry you. I can assure you I will play the part well.” With that I smiled, relaxing the tension from my face. My lips softened and my forehead smoothed. It was an act — but a simple one. A face I had mastered from years before a mirror. “I have had years of practice... Mother.”

Her dress swept across the wooden floor, catching dust among the swirling black fabric as she walked away from me. I kept still, holding my blissful expression as though it were a test to myself.

“You are permitted to take two items during the Claiming. Items in which we have prepared.”

There was a clink of metal as she fussed with a clothed table in the middle of the room. Her altar, although organised, was a shamble of relics, candles and jarred herbs.

It was a risk taking anything that would give me away as a witch to the creature. It would ruin the entire plan in a heartbeat if a candle etched with Mother's runes, or a pack of tarot cards would be found in my possession by him.

"I felt these were necessary. You will not be allowed to leave the grounds of the castle. Not for the entire duration of the Claiming, not even if you desire to. The cycle of the moon will be your guide. From tonight you will have until the next full moon. Only when the moon bleeds on the final night will you do what is needed of you. This bowl..." From the plain brown sack, she pulled a brass item. Shallow enough for stew or soup, there was nothing out of the ordinary about its design. "You can use to scry. I have its sister component with me. Simply reach for it if you need our aid. Or ... encouragement."

"I do not imagine encouragement is what I will be craving."

"Jak, do not be fooled. The creature is a trickster. A devil. This cycle of his has gone on many years and he has perfected his own agenda, I am certain. The bowl is there when you need it. Not if."

She put the tool back into the sack. I waited for her to retrieve the final item but her hand came back out empty.

"What of the other?"

"That is for you to decide," she replied, her bright stare trailing me from head to foot. "Perhaps a home comfort would be ideal to take with you."

My brows tugged inward. There was nothing that I could think of that would be of such nature. No comforts but my grimoires and tools that I had to leave behind.

"The bowl will be enough," I said plainly.

Mother tugged at the thin rope that bound the sack closed and handed it to me. I was surprised with how light it felt.

"Then you must take your leave, my son."

Suddenly my legs did not work. I heard her speak but my body seemed to ignore her. Twenty-one years had led up to this night. This moment. Now looking forward at the front door of our home, I lost all ability to move.

Mother was inches from me. A waft of sage and cedar wood filled my nose. "You are ready for this, Jak. I know you are. Go, do what is needed to be done. And when you return, your name will be remembered for an eternity."

She pressed her lips to my cheek and held them there. Beneath her hands that gripped at either of my shoulders I felt her warmth. Human, living warmth.

The last I would feel in weeks. For it would be death that I dwelled alongside. Until I gave him his release from his entrapment. *And my own.* Or I failed and his bindings to the castle would break. Allowing him to be free to spread his disease across the world.

His curse was the flipside of our own. With one that succeeded, the other would not.

As I was guided to the front door I only hoped that I had learned enough. Retained what I needed to know.

The front door opened and with it the cold was invited into the home. Snow dusted by my feet and every dark hair on my arm stood on end.

“After you... Jak. He waits.”

This is it.

Much like those who watched from cracks in doors and behind shuttered windows, I too had been a criminal of the same intrigue. Studying as the yearly Claims walked through the streets of Darkmourn towards the boundaries of the castle that crowned it. But my interest was always educational. Seeing how the Claims held themselves as they walked, or were dragged, towards their doom. I often wondered what my day would be like. I suppose, as I now walked calmly surrounded by the coven, I did not imagine it to be far different from this.

The only difference between those that watched my procession, was they would have revelled in knowing that it was my turn. The son of the very woman who picked those that were sent before me. It was the duty of our family since the first Claiming – to choose whose child would be sent. Knowing that it would one day end with me.

They likely believed this would be a just punishment. My Claiming arrived as they watched on with bellies full of revenge or pleasure. Feelings returned in tenfold to my family from those who already lost loved ones to the yearly sacrifice.

Except I would be the first to return, setting an end to the curse.

A woollen shawl had been draped over my shoulders and with it a welcomed warmth. “This will fight the chill.”

I thanked Lamiere with a gentle smile and hugged the itchy fabric close.

It was Mother’s idea to go dressed in very little. Exposing the glow of my skin beneath the full moon. To distract the creature upon my arrival. The trousers I wore were made from leather which made them ripple with

each footfall up the levelled path towards the castle. The tunic did little to cover me. The sleeves were dramatic – a loose design that hid the nimble curve of my arms. The collar barely touched my neck as it was sizes bigger for me than it should have been. Exposing my neck purposefully. Mother's choice.

If I needed to warm myself a simple call of flame would cease the cold that racked my bones. But I could not use my power. Not yet. Not with fear that the creature watched from the countless windows that speckled across the face of the castle. Each now alight with orange flames. Waiting for my arrival. *It cannot know*. Not until the final day, the final hour when I would break the curse. Only then would I reveal myself.

Darkmourn connected itself to the castle by a bridge of aged stone. Far below the chasms of jagged rock waited potential threats for those who drunkenly stumbled over the unprotected edge. Wind ripped across the bridge, whistling its deadly song as it did so. The brown locks of my hair danced beneath its force — not once did I lift a hand to stop it.

We walked in silence, bathed only in the screaming of wind and the chorus of nightly creatures that dared prowl this close to the castle's boundary line. The place in which the curse began. Or ended, depending on where one stood. The tickle of gazes from Darkmourn faded the further we travelled towards the castle, giving way to another. The feeling was strange. A cold, burning of awareness that someone else watched on. An unseen witness.

I raised my stare towards the towering walls of the castle, looking out for his outline in the many windows. For any sign that he watched my arrival. It made distracting myself from the cold that much *harder*.

Too focused on the feeling and silence, I hardly noticed the shuffle of footsteps slow to a stop.

"This is where we leave you," Mother said, leaning in and pressing a kiss to each cheek, lips close to my ear. "Remember to conceal yourself. Be smart. Be cautious. And return our saviour."

"I know what is required of me," I said, teeth threatening to chatter as the cold spread throughout me. "Mother." She stiffened as I held my voice firm, not whispering back as she did to me.

"Then you may go." Her face remained frozen, lips pulled into a thin, white line. "Take up your position as this year's Claiming."

"I shall."

Whereas the group that followed me here kept back, Lamiere hovered between both parties.

“I will send my thoughts as positive castings, Jak.” Lamiere’s silver locks billowed in the wind, her own cloak held around her. “When you return I promise to cook you your favourite soup.”

I moved towards her, feeling a sudden softening of my heart, and put a hand on the short woman’s shoulder. “With such promises you will make the following weeks painfully long.”

Lamiere snorted, wiping the bubble of snot that burst from her nose across the sleeve of her muddied shawl. “May *She* guide you.”

We both glanced to the moon as if it watched from above. “Do not miss me too terribly, Lamiere. I will return.”

There was something about the way she glanced away that told me that she did not believe me. That single moment sunk my heart into the pit of my belly.

“You should take your leave, Jak.” Mother distracted me from my moment of self-doubt. “Do not keep the creature waiting.”



THE WALL OF SHADOW WAS VISIBLE ONLY UP CLOSE. I TILTED MY HEAD, LEFT and right, admiring the strange power that raced far up into the sky and far below the ground where the bridge met the castle’s boundary. Many had tried to break through, but never with success. It was a magic even Mother could not explain. Only the Claim could enter.

I raised a hand and pressed it against the membrane of dark magic. To the touch it was cold. But with a push, my fingers began to slip through it as though it was no more than the dark waters of a lake. My hand reached through first, followed by a foot.

Holding my breath, I proceeded through the strange barrier. Only when the sensation of nightly winter cut across me did I dare open my eyes. I made it.

I allowed myself a moment to catch my breath before walking ahead, not once looking back at Mother, Lamiere and the coven as they witnessed from the other side.

As I passed beneath the crumbling pillared archway, it seemed that the shadows beyond it thickened.

All my focus was on the haunting building before me. The years had not been kind on it. Although it was near impossible to ignore that this castle would have been a spectacle of beauty and architectural prowess long before the curse settled upon it.

A place of grandeur and wealth. Where the vines would have been more than brown corpses clinging to the weathered bricks of the building. The pillars that lined the elaborate walkway would have stood tall and proud. Even the walkway beneath my boots was sodden with weeds and cracks, overgrown to a point that the slabs beneath were close to impossible to see.

Noise in the thick shadows that devoured the overgrown gardens I walked within made me pick up speed. I dared look long enough to see what lurked within.

Was it the creature? Stalking me as I walked towards his front door?

I longed to call on that fire now — to shed light across the hungry darkness around me. A guiding light would come in handy as I stumbled my way up the ruined perron towards the closed door of the castle. But I resisted, hands fumbling across the vine-covered stone banister to keep myself upright.

I waited before the door, unsure to knock or wait. He would know I was here. From the stories I had heard, I knew he likely sensed my presence the moment I stepped foot on his land. Yet the door did not open, but I grew colder and impatient.

Giving up, I raised a fist but before my knuckles could rap upon the dark oak door, it swung inward. I cringed at the sound of old hinges as they screeched.

If he did not know I was here before, he would now.

“Hello?” My voice echoed into the barren entrance before me. I hesitated, foot poised to take my first step into the castle, as I waited for a response.

Silence greeted me in return.

Whereas the world beyond the castle was shadowed in darkness, the inside was not. Although worn, I was greeted by colour. The wooden flooring glowed orange beneath the lit candelabra. White candles dripped furiously among the intricate twisting of metal. Wax melted in frozen drips that puddled across the polished, yet ancient floor. As I stepped inside a

wall of stale air slammed into me. I cupped a hand over my nose, trying not to inhale the scent. But it was too late. It lathered the back of my throat and clung to my tongue. This air that had festered without the benefit of an open window or door.

“Hello?” I questioned again, body tense as I reached for the door to see who had opened it. I readied myself for a scare, only to find the space empty behind it.

Years I had readied for this moment, but the fear that stiffened my body was never expected. Its presence shocked me. Mother taught me about fight and flight, always urging me to clench fists and throw power. But now, standing here, I wanted nothing but to turn and run.

The door slammed suddenly. I jumped back, spluttering a shout as I got out of the way of its aggressive swing. The phantom movement shook dust from the walls and rafters until it settled down upon me like snow.

“You rush to leave so soon?” The voice was everywhere and nowhere at once. My fists clenched at my sides as the velvet tone slithered down my spine.

“Forgive me.” I kept my gaze down as I turned around, unable to bring myself to look up at the stairway that took up the majority of the entrance. He was there. I knew it.

“It is that time already...” the voice purred. “Another year has passed without much thought. And here I find a Claim standing in my presence. How can it be a year already when I still can taste the last Claim so... clearly?”

I looked up for a moment, long enough to see the towering figure standing at the top of the stairs. Only to snap my gaze back down to my feet in a blink.

Adrenaline flooded through me, setting every vein on fire. I felt the elements stir at my reaction. A readiness that made my bones shake. This is it. My target. That fear that had not long raced through me was blown out with a single exhale.

Should I cower? Force my hands to shake so he thought me weak?

I opted to keep my gaze low as I fought the urge to smile.

Play the part.

“They normally scream, you know.” The voice was closer now, yet no more than a whisper. “It has been many a year since one stood without words before me.”

“I fear words fail me... in your presence.”

There was a shift in the air. He had moved from his perch at the top of the stairs to a place inches before me in a blink. Where the floor was empty before me, now stood boots; black polished leather that caught the light of the candles that hung far above.

“Let me see you,” he purred; a sweet brush of breath tingled over me. I breathed it in, images of orchards in spring flooding my mind. But there was something else beneath it. Copper. A sharp tang that hid almost perfectly beneath the illusion of apples. “Do not fear me.”

I should have not looked up so quickly for fear that he sensed that I was not scared of him. But my reaction that followed would have covered up any distrust in my forced demeanour.

His eyes were obsidian. No. I squinted closer. Red. Deep red that it seemed they were nothing but pits of darkness.

He was pure light. From the white marble of his manicured hair, to the glow of his skin that seemed to shine from within. His entire body had been crafted from strands of moonlight. My neck ached as I had to look up at him. He towered over me by a foot, or two.

“I do not fear you,” I said, eyes darting across his face. A face I had imagined a million times. *Such a waste.* He was handsome, so much so it should have inspired songs and stories. Perhaps it would have been harder knowing the outcome of this visit if I had grown up looking upon his face. Somehow it was easier creating images of it from my imagination all these years.

They were always different. Sometimes human, like the man before me, other times I would play on his title of creature and imagine a beast with horns and a twisted face.

His lips were flushed with colour, as if he had taken a bite from a pomegranate a moment before he smiled. “How... unexpected.”

I wanted to agree with him, but I swallowed my words as he exposed two points of his canines. *How unexpected indeed.*

He fiddled with the golden buttons of his dark navy velvet jacket. His nails pointed and sharp. One tug and he would likely slice through the threading with ease.

A shiver ran down my arms as I studied him. Not from fear or disgust. But of anticipation.

“I suppose you wonder what happens next?” he asked. “But I feel as though I should at least know your name before indulging you in such... things.”

I nodded, trying to steady my breathing. I felt my desire to lash out with my power now. And it would likely hurt him, maim him perhaps. But the curse was clear, Mother had drilled it into me. Only on the final night when the moon bled would his immortality waver. That was when I had to strike.

Focus. I hissed to myself. *Wait.*

“I asked you a question.” His tone dropped suddenly that my stomach flipped with it. He pressed a nail into the bottom of my chin. It pricked my skin until there was a kiss of wetness beneath his touch.

“Jak,” I said through gritted teeth. “My name is Jak.”

The creature snapped back as though my words burned him. In doing so a sting of cold was left at the mark where his nail touched me.

He stood back for a moment, studying me with his wide, ruby eyes as though he looked for something. Then he lashed forward again, gripping the tops of both my arms and pinching with an urgent hold.

Fire boiled within me.

“DO NOT FUCKING TOUCH ME,” I SPAT, LOSING ALL CONTROL. HIS TOUCH riled disgust throughout me. My hand moved in a blur, knocking against his cheek. The pain that followed had me screaming out. The force sent a shiver of agony up the bones in my arm until it spread across my back. It felt as though my palm had connected with stone.

I stumbled back, hand cradled to my chest as a sob of anguish racked my lungs. I landed on the floor as I tripped over my own feet, landing awkwardly on the sack that was tied around my belt. The bowl jolted into my hip beneath the fall.

“You dare raise a hand to me?” The creature spoke, his voice growing louder with each word. “In my own home?”

His mouth split in a growl that shook the very shadows of the castle. The air vibrated as spit lined his straight bottom teeth to the two canines that grew in size before my eyes. He loomed above me, features distorted. The darks of his eyes seemed to devour all of the white that had been there.

I cowered on the floor, unable to muster the strength to protect myself as pain radiated through me. Fear. Honest, boiling fear.

“Get up,” he hissed, raining spittle down over me. “Get up, now!”

Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. With my arm cradled to my chest I could not fight as his hands found me and yanked me from my sitting position.

I winced as he struck out, expecting his own forceful slap to reach me. Instead, a vice grip wrapped around my good arm and lifted me from the slabbed floor. His strength was unimaginable. I was a doll beneath his grasp.

“Stop!” I cried out as he dragged me across the floor, legs dragging pathetically beneath me.

Only moments into my arrival and I had shattered my chances of getting close to him.

As he dragged me across the entrance room, he hissed and seethed. His shoulders rose and fell dramatically. Anger shivered in the air around him, intensifying the strange glow from his skin.

“Please...” I pleaded, shoulder now splitting in pain as it took the brunt of my weight. “You are hurting me.”

“You know little of pain...” he hissed, nails biting into my skin as his grip tightened. “But you will. I see now what you want from me. You want the beast. The creature you have heard much about. You will soon come to know that I am what you make me. Fool me once, *beauty*, and you will not have the chance to do it again.”

With a heave he threw me to the ground before him. I scrambled across it, trying to put distance between us. The corridor we were in was dark, untouched by the candles that burned in the distance. The darkness played tricks on my mind as it pulled and twisted at his face.

I stopped, not by choice. My back pressed against a door, I felt the rigid wood as it stopped me in my tracks.

“In.” He flashed his pointed teeth in warning. “Now.”

I barely had a moment to stand. I fumbled with the brass knob of the door, hands coming away covered in dust. I even noticed the mounds of it that now clung to my trousers and dirtied tunic.

I threw the door open, slamming it against the wall behind it. I did not register what lay within before the creature was there, hand gripped around the door, wood creaking beneath his grip.

I stood frozen. Body a mess of aches and pains, and I seethed, “Do... do not touch me again.”

He barked a laugh. “You are in my home now. You are my Claim. Did they not warn you of what that meant?”

My lips curled over my own teeth. Through my lashes I looked at him and snarled, “You know nothing of the knowledge I possess of you, demon.”

He faltered for a moment, head tilting slightly. “Demon. Hm.”

Then the door was slammed in my face. Enough that I flinched, closing my eyes as the wood barrelled towards me.

There was a click. A turning of a key. Then footsteps, sounding off into the corridor beyond the room.

Alone. I was alone.

Countless times I had dreamed about this night. Yet I had not once imagined that this would have ever been the outcome of my first moments within the castle.

I sagged to the floor and unleashed the tears of anger. Far off in the distance of the castle I heard a roar. A feral scream that clawed down my spine.

And deep down I felt Mother’s presence and the disappointment towards me.

Day one and I had already failed.

I woke to noise. A shuffling of feet mixed with the hushed murmurs of low talking. My entire body ached having slept on the floor beyond the door — where he had left me. But I was rid of all grogginess in a single moment.

Sunlight streamed through the large window in the room, slicing spears of light that exposed bouts of dust that danced once unveiled. After being left last night I had not moved from my squat behind the door. How long had it been? Enough for night to pass into day.

The room had been in the cloaks of night and I feared to explore it. Mother always said that what was hidden in the dark was best left there. So I stayed still, listening for the return of the creature, until I had fallen asleep whilst on guard.

In daylight I saw that there was nothing amiss in this chamber room. All but the impossible noise that sounded beyond the locked door. There were others here, in this castle. It should have been empty as all my teachings had informed me. I was not alone. Which went against everything I was led to believe.

The hairs on my neck stood on end as I listened intently, calming my breathing in hopes to catch some word or string of a sentence.

I pressed a hand against the polished wood of the door, covering the multitude of scratch marks beneath. Vibrations tickled across my skin. Their movement was close and their murmured chattering told me that they too were aware of my presence.

On my knees I reached my hand up for the brass knob, knowing that it would still be locked even before my fingers fully grasped around its cold, rusted handle. I had not woken to the click of the key.

“Shit,” I hissed, pushing myself to standing and dusting the dirt from my trousers. I had hoped the old lock had grown weak over the years.

It had not.

I breathed heavily, examining the marks across the door. Scars of a battle between another Claiming and a locked door. I had not been the only one locked away in this room. The thought sent a stabbing discomfort through my already aching body.

“Hello?” I called out, not caring for subtly. I waited for a response only to find the noise had quietened. “I can hear you! Please let me out...” I forced my voice to sound meek and pathetic. A plea that would tug at the guilt of someone listening. But it fell on *dead* ears.

I slammed my palm on the door, shaking dust from the frame above. Bang. Bang. Bang. I hit upon it until my wrist ached more than it had when the creature had dragged me into this room.

Fire willed within me, urging to be released. I could burn this door down if I wanted. Devour this entire room until the ancient stones that constructed it broke beneath my heat.

But I couldn't. I mustn't. Not yet.

Whomever filled the rooms with candlelight beyond did not want to help. Perhaps they worked for the creature? I thought that seemed both possible and impossible. I called out for them until my throat itched and I worried my annoyance would break through my pleas. If they had heard me, they did not want to reveal themselves.

Giving up, I moved to examine the chamber.

Dust layered every surface of the dark furniture that filled the modest room. The four-poster bed was far greater than anything I had slept in before. Sheer curtains draped between the four posts, held back by thin ties that revealed deep burgundy bedding.

Had he done this? The question echoed within me. Did he prepare this chamber for every Claiming?

I sat myself down on the end of the bed, a cloud of dust exploding around me. From my seat I could look out of the bay window before me and almost feel the fresh air this room so desperately required.

I wasted no time in unlatching the rusted, black handle of the window and pushing hard to throw it open. The glass almost shattered as the force swung the window wide, slamming it into the wall beyond.

Morning air, fresh and cool, trickled violently into the room.

It swirled around me, encasing me in its familiar touch, finally clearing my nose of the stale scent of the room. The air was brisk. It spurred a shiver to course across my arms and neck.

Then I smelt myself. An odour strong enough to turn my stomach. No amount of fresh air would help that. As soon as I could leave, I needed to wash.

There was a brass tub that took up space across a tiled corner of the chamber. I could only imagine how it would have been filled with warm water for the patron of this castle long before the curse. Now it sat, wasted space, with cobwebs taking home among the curved body of metal.

Like the dusty bed and dull furniture, the tub was only more proof that this room had been untouched.

So who was beyond the room now?

I leaned out of the window, taking in the view. Perhaps I would spot someone outside? Mist clung to the overgrown garden I looked over. Being on the ground level made me see little of Darkmourn that sat nestled in the valley. Would my family be thinking of me? Biting nails in hopes that I succeeded?

I could have reached for the scrying bowl and revealed my first failure to them. Instead I busied my mind, looking at the line of broken white stone statues. Limbs and heads littered the ground beneath those that were left standing. The carpet of mist clung to the ground, dancing and twisting along the blades of overgrown grasses and wild hedges. I reached a hand for the ghostly smoke which licked up the cold slabs of the castle's walls, clambering towards me as if it had a mind of its own. *Perhaps it did.*

Entranced in the moving mist, I was locked in position. Unable to pull my hand away as it grabbed for me. A hand split from the mist, fingers closing around mine.

Panic gripped at my heart. Nails of anxiety stabbed into my flesh as the hand materialised and hardened into skin made of smoke.

Its hold on me was as strong and real as the creature's had been.

Instinct warmed my blood. Just as I had the night before, I called upon my magic. At the tips of my fingers I commanded the air that lingered

around them. My most familiar, wilful element. The blast of it exploded from my skin, dissipating the hand of mist in a moment until I was free once again.

I stumbled back, flicking my hand and sending a bout of wind to close the window as I put distance between it.

The glass vibrated within the frame, threatening to shatter from the impact as it closed.

“What in the Goddess’s name...” My breathing was uncontrollable as I pressed myself against a bedpost. Watching, unblinking, half expecting a ghostly face to appear behind the glass with a taunting smile.

But nothing happened.

I pressed a hand to my forehead and chuckled, the other held over my frantic heart. “Focus, you fool.”

There was a small, quiet knock at the door. It spurred a small scream as my body and soul was already on edge of panicking from the phantom I had just seen. I snapped my head towards the sound, expecting ghostly fingers to slip beneath the crack in the door.

“Are you okay?” a quiet voice called out from the corridor. My heart slammed in my ears, each beat deafening. Slowly I took a step towards the door, trying not to make a sound. “If you have hurt yourself you should tell me. I can help.”

There was something songful about the voice. It was light and gentle. Full of youth.

“I am ... fine.”

I tiptoed towards the locked door, leaving footprints in the dust covered floor.

“Others have tried escaping through the window. But your fate within the mist is far worse than what you may experience here.”

I lowered myself to the floor, my cheek so close to the ground that I felt the coldness of it. Looking beneath the crack in the door, I expected to see feet.

But the floor beyond was empty.

My breath hitched. Closing an eye, I looked again, straining to see who it was that spoke. “I was not trying to escape.”

I expected no response knowing that the space beyond was empty.

But the small voice replied, chilling my blood to ice. “Good. Are you hungry?”

“Starved,” I said, pushing myself to standing. My stomach ached at the thought of food. Perhaps that was what caused the vision beyond the window. And this strange interaction.

“Then you should be pleased to know that we have prepared you a feast. Eat as much as you want. You can take it back to your chamber if you wish. But heed my warning: you must return to your room before the sun goes down. For that is when he will wake again. Marius will not be pleased to know we have let you out.”

Marius. The name rolled off her tongue. And with it brought a vision of the lord of moonlight.

“He... he locked the door. I can’t leave.”

Something knocked against my foot. I looked down to the key that rested beside it.

“Promise me you will return before nightfall?”

The key was in my hand in seconds, turning in the sister lock on my side of the room. I held my breath as I threw my door open to expose the speaker.

But the corridor was empty.



THE CASTLE WAS A MAZE. EACH TURN, EACH FLIGHT OF STAIRS, I FOUND myself lost. No corner was the same. Walls peeled with paper — exposing broken boards beneath. Carpets were worn. Stained sheets covered up hulking shapes that I could only imagine to be unwanted furniture.

And I found no one. No matter how frantically I searched.

As I lost myself in my exploration, I conjured an image of the person I’d spoken to. A young girl, it must have been. She would have to be here somewhere. Her and the rest of the people that made the noise I woke to.

Yet there was no sign of any life among the sunlit rooms. I clung onto the key as if it was the physical reminder I needed to prove I was not going mad. Leaving an imprint of it in my palm as my fist tensed with each undiscovered moment.

It was not long before I caught the scent of the promised feast. Yet another reminder that I was, in fact, not going mad. I picked up my pace,

sniffing the air as I followed the scent to its origin. Perhaps the others waited within?

The room in which my nose guided me towards had its door half open. Whereas the other doors I passed were all closed, this one was a clear invitation for me to enter.

Pushing the door, the creak made me cringe as the door's weight struggled against the old hinges. I found myself swearing beneath my breath. My profanities soon dwindled into a breathless sigh as I beheld the vision before me.

Laid out across a long, set table were plates full of food. Delights of all varieties. Steam still curled from sliced meats surrounded by a bed of vegetables. What looked to be buns glazed with sticky honey, and other sweets, broke up the savoury options laid out across it. For such a large table, there were only two seats. One at the side closest to me, the other at the far end.

I found myself hesitating with my hand above the empty, waiting plate before me. Mother's scolding voice filled my head, urging me to wait for the others to pick food first, followed by the sting of a slap on the back of my hand.

But I was alone, and she was far beyond the curse boundaries of the castle. With a smirk I snatched the plate and wasted no time in piling heaps of food onto it, and impatient fistfuls into my mouth. I did not care for the mess I made, nor the questions of how this food came to be, as I lost myself to the lust of hunger.

My mouth exploded in flavour, which was soon washed down by a glass of red liquid that I swept up without much of a thought.

The entire gulp burned as it laced down my throat. Wine. I had drunk it before during rituals and sabbats with the coven. But this taste was... different. As though I drank wealth rather than the scraps of wine Mother could obtain from the town's small market.

I drained the glass until I stared at its crystal bottom. Then I found another and finished that too.

My mind spun but on I ate until my belly ached, pleading me to rest.

Candles burned in holders all along the length of the table. But their purpose was wasted as daylight lit the room from the four, elaborate windows across the far wall. The glass was stained with blue, red and yellow. Its reflection created a rainbow of colour across the room.

Unlike everywhere else I had been thus far, this room was well kept. Sideboards and shelving were kept clean from dust and the table still shone as though it had not long been polished.

I could not imagine the creature doing this. Which only added to my belief that others did in fact dwell within the castle.

Did they too hide from the creature? Coming out during the day when they knew they would be safe from the night dweller?

So many questions — answers of which I would get when I next came into contact with someone.

I stayed in the room, warmed by the food in my belly, until the light began to dim beyond the windows. It may have been time itself that was impossible to grasp, or the aid of the wine that let it slip away from me. But what the wine did not dull was the warning the girl had given me. As the colour changed from bright blues to dark navy I knew it was time to return.

Before I left to find my way back to my room, I grabbed a handful of cheese and bread. It may be a long night.

I should have left sooner as I did not take getting lost on my way back to the chamber into consideration. The longer I took, the more the cold fear returned at the base of my skull, which only intensified by the slicing feeling of eyes following me through the darkening castle.

The sensation of that gaze prickled the hairs down the back of my neck and made me walk faster. But the wine made my legs clumsy and my feet awkward.

The castle was darkening quickly. Quicker than I thought possible. I threw myself down the stairs and back towards the main doors of the castle, turning left down the corridor that led to my chamber. The very same hallway I had been dragged down upon my arrival. Returning to this room was easier than expected, but studying ones surroundings was one of mothers many lessons. And it was now being put to good use.

By the time I entered the room and turned to close the door behind me, I was certain I saw a figure standing at the other end of the corridor.

I did not wait long to be sure of it.

My hands shook as I pulled the key from my pocket, locking the door with awkward fingers. I left the key in the lock to ensure no one could undo it from the other side.

Knowing the power was in my hands, I calmed, pressing a hand against my heart in hopes it would still.

“Get it together...” I hissed, almost laughing at the fear that had found comfort in me. “If he saw me now he would think me pathetic.”

Good. The thought passed through my mind. *That is how you want him to see you.*

The room was dark. Void of light which made the room seem endless as the corners were lost to the shadows. It was a long while since I was fearful of the dark — a luxury I was not blessed to have. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I remembered the scolding Mother gave me as a child who struggled to sleep without candlelight.

Do not fear the shadows, for they do not fear you. But what Mother seemed to forget was it was not the dark that frightened me as a child. It was the creature that was warned to command the shadows.

And now I was in his domain.

The creature did not show himself for two nights. And with the time that passed, my anxiety blossomed into a wildflower. Silence bathed the castle both day and night. I hardly slept, constantly waiting for some sign of life. During the daylight the girl did not return, and nor did the beast during the night.

I was alone and it did not fill me with comfort.

Although the castle was seemingly silent and empty, the dining hall was refilled every day when I visited.

So I kept myself busy with eating and drinking. Hardly bothering to investigate the castle beside my chamber and the room that was filled with delicious food.

By the arrival of the third night, I was desperate. Enough to take the scrying bowl from the sack that had been left untouched since I had arrived. It was time to consult with the coven. For guidance, not sympathy at my predicament. Mother was not capable of the latter.

I made sure the door was locked, twice, before calling upon the element of water to open the window required for communication. With one hand gripped on the handle and the other pressed against the door, I pushed and twisted. But the door stayed shut.

It was the only privacy I could ensure. And using my magic was a risk I was willing to take.

Set upon the unmade bed, with the bowl between my crossed legs, I reached out to the water. I closed my eyes to connect with it better. Removing such a mundane sense always helped me connect with my

magic. And water was the trickster of the elements. I needed to focus as much as I could for this to work.

Water hung in the air around me. Hidden from sight, but there nonetheless. With my palm held above the bowl, I urged the element to heed my call.

The cold trickle of moisture pooled above my hand in a sphere. It spun, an orb of azure that sloshed in a larger ball the more I pulled from the air around me. Once it swelled, the air dry to the taste, I urged the water into the scrying bowl where it settled. Not a droplet misplaced.

To scry was simple. Look upon the waters cast by a witch and that or who you most desire will be shown. I had done it a few times before. It was easier to visualise my goal in my mind's eye before coaxing it into the water.

I stared at my face among the rippling blue. At my dark brown hair and piercing blue eyes glaring back at me. The same as my mother's. "Show yourself," I commanded, to the water, to Mother, to my reflection.

The command was simple. A snap of will that soon shattered the surface of the water until a face, not much different than my own, looked up at me.

"You should be preoccupied making the creature fall in love with you. I did not think it possible for you to have such time to waste this early on in your task. Why do you call on me so soon?"

I kept my face straight as I replied, "For council."

"I do not like the sound of that, Jak."

"Then you really will not like what I have to tell you."

She knew instantly. I could see it from the slant of her mouth and the pinch of her stare. "Need I remind you that there is no room for failing your task, Jak."

"I know the outcome well, Mother. This is not the reminder I have called you upon for. I need advice."

Her laugh sent ripples through the water. "Entertain me, my son, please."

"The creature, he has not shown himself since my arrival. I have searched this castle for him and have not found him. I am losing precious time."

It was a lie. I had not searched for him, not thoroughly of course. For it was impossible to open most of the locked doors in this wretched place. Not without using magic. So I kept myself busy with eating and drinking.

Hardly bothering to investigate the castle beside my chamber and the room which was always refilled with delicious food.

“You still do not know his name?” she asked.

I fisted my hands around the sheets and bit down on my lip. “I hardly remember what he looks like, but yes... I know his name.”

Marius. The strange girl had said it, at least this many days into my stay I hoped she had. For I was beginning to believe our interaction was no more than a dream. Only made real by the key that still sat in the door to my side. A reminder I was not going crazy. Not yet at least.

“Then you are on the road to failure. My son, bringing the end to our kind once and for all. Poetic I suppose, but I will not forgive you. Not in this life or the next.”

“Quiet the dramatics, Mother. Even from our distance it pains me to listen.”

She closed her mouth, silencing whatever comment she was about to snap at me.

“Tell me what I need to do...” I forced a plea into my voice. “What is to say he never returns, not until the final night?”

“Is the beauty I have given you not enough to capture his attention? He is a creature of lust, you should already have him in the palm of your hand.”

“Perhaps he is not what you first thought, Mother.”

The water in the scrying bowl began to boil at my comment.

“Do not dare think me a fool, Jak. I know what that beast is and soon, if you fail, so will every innocent soul beyond the boundaries of that prison. If you think his unbound hunger will not end this world, you are wrong. I know what he is, for it was my own ancestor that cursed him. And she was also your own. Do what you need to get an audience with him. That is up to you. Burn the castle down if you must. But do what is needed to end this. Or your life will have been a waste.”

I leaned back, away from the hot steam of the water as it sizzled from the bowl, muttering to myself. “I am sorry.”

Did I apologise to her, or myself for bothering to begin this conversation?

“Do not be sorry, for apologies will not help end this curse. Only action. Next time I see your face I want to hear positive news. Do not ruin my day again.”

The last I saw was her hand as it collided into the sister scrying bowl in her possession.

Our connection winked out as the remaining hot water splashed from the bowl and lathered over my legs.

Well that went well. I wasted no time in moving for the window and tipping the remaining water out of it. *You should have known better to call on her. Next time, ask to speak with Lamiere. She would give you sympathy.*

The pressure of my task weighed down on me, more so than before. I was desperate for attention. Just the thought of it alone nearly made a bubble of a laugh burst aloud.

A flicker of flamelight caught my attention. The candlelight danced proudly as if calling my name.

Burn the castle down. Mother's words flooded through me.

I shrugged, reaching for the candle and dislodging it from the iron holder on the wall. With a single thought I could have commanded the flame to jump into the palm of my hand. But if this was to work, I could not have magic be to blame.

"Perhaps you *can* give good guidance, Mother..." I said, smiling to myself as I cradled the candle to the bed.

I had to make it look deliberate but mundane. I clambered back into the bed and held the candle beneath the sheer, lace curtain that framed each side of it.

It caught in a single breath. And the hungry flame turned into a wildfire that circled the bed. I dropped the candle on the mattress, not before blowing the flame out. I was stupid, not irrational. Clambering into the middle of the sheets, I waited as the fire grew around me. The wonderful heat only fuelled the madness that dwindled within me.

Desperate times call for equally desperate measures.

On the fire burned, and still he did not come. Not as the fire spread from the curtains to the aged, wooden frame. Nor when it filled the room with black, heavy smoke. Carefully I kept the flames away from me with a swatting hand of dismissal, but the thicker the smoke became the harder it was to hold focus.

He will come. I hoped.

Although the fire stayed far from my skin, the smoke didn't. With each passing moment it thickened, making each breath as painful as the next.

I coughed into the crook of my arm, trying to keep my lungs clear.

I should stop this. The thought rang true. All around me was the raging red of fire. It burned as though it had been starved for centuries, devouring the area around me in only moments.

My gaze flicked to the door constantly. *Come on.* He had to come. *Come on.* Dread strangled my lungs. *Come on.* Then my heart skipped a beat. The key. I had left it in the lock on my side.

Horror cut its claws down my spine.

I moved, swinging my legs from the bed. But the fire crackled across the bedframe, spitting red fingers out to reach me.

It kept me in place.

The smoke was becoming unbearable. Each breath weaker than the next.

I was surrounded in flames.

Heat seared at my skin, threatening to melt it clean off my bones. I pulled my legs to my chest as the fire found its way onto the sheets.

I was losing my mind. Unable to hold a grip onto reality. Each blink was longer than the last. Each time I fought to open my eyes, the fire was closer than it was before. The open window did little to rid the room of the engulfing smoke.

Mother's voice rang clear across my foggy mind. *You have doomed us all.*

Wooden beams snapped, raining debris over me in sprinklings of burning ash. I raised a hand to batter it away from catching across my hair, my face. In that moment I felt the world slow as the amber glows flew around me. My breathing hitched and my eyes grew heavy, each blink dragging on into an eternity.

My connection to the fire dissolved with my lack of clarity. And in that moment my eyes refused to open again.

Then I felt a touch.

The cold kiss of ice that wrapped around my body, lifting me from the bed. My neck lolled back and I was unable to lift it up. It was as if I watched from a deep cave in the darkness of my mind, unable to act or speak.

The world was upside-down now.

The room moved away from me.

"Be still."

I wanted to breathe but my lungs hurt too much. The pain was terrible, yet in the same moment I couldn't register it.

"You foolish boy."

My chest heaved as I tasted my first gulp of fresh air. Air unspoiled by smoke or fire. It slid down my throat and stretched my lungs. I breathed, in and out, eyes still closed as though if I dared open them, I'd see my skin melting from my body. I feared this was a trick, my mind's way of lulling me into a false sense of comfort whilst my mistake burned away at my skin.

"Wake." I barely registered the growl, even though it was inches from my ear. "You come into my home, raise a hand against me. Now you will for it to burn."

I cracked an eye open, only enough to see a face of woven moonlight hovering above me, nose close to the tip of my own.

Then I forced the other open only to see the points of sharp, white teeth before me.



I BOLTED UP TO SITTING, AWARE OF THE WAY I MELTED INTO THE BED I WAS in. The chill of air brushed against my bare chest, kept from my knowingly naked body by a thin sheet tucked around me. I half expected to see nothing but red. But there was no fire here. Nothing but the few candles that barely light the room I was now within.

That and the broad figure that blocks their light from reaching me.

He stood before me. The creature. Shadow cast across his cheekbones which hollowed out the features of his devilish face.

I looked down, unable to hold his blood-red stare and muttered, "You saved me."

Even in my state I knew how to act. Humble and... submissive.

"I merely prolonged your stay. It has been many a year since a Claim attempted to end their visit early... prematurely. I vowed I would not do it again."

I spoke to the sheets that protect my modesty. "It was an accident. A slip of a candle."

"Then you are a nuisance and clumsy. What two... inseparable traits."

"Thank you," I forced out, glancing up into his never-ending stare for a quick moment.

He raised a hand, his eyes closed. "Stop."

I stilled, swallowing my next words. The sheets were stiff in my hands and I gripped on tighter, pulling them up to cover my exposed skin.

His eyes tracked my movements.

"I could not stand the smell of your clothing. It had to be removed."

"Next time ask... please."

I tried hard to keep my face soft. Just like Mother had taught me. I could not mess this up. *Be beautiful, get close to him.*

"I have not needed to ask in years. I will not start with you."

My knuckles paled as I gripped the sheets tighter. "Have I..."

"Burned the chamber to cinders? Likely. Now we must think of a new place for you to stay." His nails were pale and sharp. He tapped one on his chin as he lost his stare to contemplation.

"There are plenty of spare rooms," I said.

"You have explored." His gaze narrowed on me. "Of course you have. Did you find anything of interest on your travels of my home?"

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps?” He tilted his head. “You have little words for an arson criminal.”

“It was an accident.”

“So you have said.”

Before I could shift to move from the bed, he was on it, hands pressed on either side of me. He was like a shadow, no more than a whisper of smoke as his outline settled into physical form again.

“Is my bed not good enough for you, Jak?” he snarled, face inches from mine. “Would you prefer to lay in cinders than comfort? For if that is what you so desire, I can ensure that happens.”

I felt my cheeks blush with warmth, no matter how I tried to fight it. I risked a moment to break his entrapping stare to scan the room I woke in. Everything about it was dark. From the patterned wallpaper to the stained furniture. This place was a cavern of gloom and elegance.

“I do not mean to offend,” I said.

“We are far past that.” He glowered. “You will stay here until a new room is prepared.”

Lines creased the sides of his eyes, the only imperfection I could see.

“I—”

His fingers pressed against my lips. Cold, so cold. I almost swallowed my tongue at the shock of his touch.

“It is early so I must retire.” The curtains were drawn across the stained-glass window to my left. Although the crack in the middle allowed me to see the lightening of the sky. “Please refrain from setting this room ablaze. I have grown rather fond of these four walls.”

His eyes took me all in. Trailing up my bare-chest, my shoulders, and stopping only at my own stare. I spluttered a breath as he released his finger from my mouth, moving it to the strand of loose hair that fell across my forehead.

“Thank you, Marius.”

He tilted his head, not once inquiring how I had come to learn his name. In a blink he was off me, seemingly floating across the slatted floor to the door that my eyes soon found at the far end of the room.

“Where will you stay tonight?” I asked, keeping my voice as gentle as I could muster without dropping his piercing stare.

He paused, face turning slightly, only to show his side profile. “Is that an offer?”

Mother would want me to say yes. I could almost hear her answering for me.

“Am I in a position to make offers in your own home?” I questioned.

He grinned slowly. “No, no you are not.”

I blinked and he was gone, his final words hardly finished before he vanished. Only the phantom sensation of his touch was left.

Not even the air seemed to quiver as he simply disappeared. No door was opened or closed, no pattering of footsteps. Just... gone.

I relaxed my hold on the sheets at last, letting them slip over my chest once again.

You have done it. My attempt had got me into the heart of his own personal domain. This was more than a step in the right direction. Even if it meant nearly risking my life to get here. If I failed, I died either way.

I leaned back in his bed and sighed, hands resting behind my head.

Rather die by my hands than his.

I woke to the itch of sunlight across my eyes, groggy yet comfortable in the creature's bed. I smiled through the sluggish feeling that soddened my limbs as I put my back to the light, face squished against the down-feathered pillows.

Peeking an eye open, I got a view of the room I was in. The night before I had slept straight after my head hit the pillow.

I could not deny, his room was... grand. The bed far larger than the one I had been provided with. Even as I stretched out, I was miles away from feeling the edge.

It was surprisingly easy to feel at ease in this room. I suppose the glaring sunlight helped, knowing the creature, Marius, would not return.

"Marius." I spoke his name aloud. It was strange not only having a face to the creature I had grown hearing about daily, but now having his name felt odd. As though I had obtained some divine secret that I could not share.

The strange girl beyond my own chamber door had called him by that name. But hearing it from his own lips made it seem real. As though I had not connected the dots before he told me himself.

All my life I had envisioned the beast I would soon kill. Never did he have a face or name. Now, only a handful of days into my stay in his cursed castle, I had obtained them both.

I allowed myself to lay back in his bed until my stomach grumbled for attention. It was the cue I needed to finally roll out from the welcoming embrace of the sheets. Just as it had been every day thus far, I knew food would be waiting for me.

Out from the warmth of the sheets, the room was deathly cold. The hearth was empty of cinders or wood. It was clear from the uncharred bricks around it that it had not been lit in a long time.

Which left me, naked, in the middle of the creature's room. With no sign of my clothes around me.

My cheeks warmed at the thought of him seeing me like this, his cold hands removing the clothes from my body.

I could not deny the turn of my stomach, from sickness or something else entirely I was not certain.

Dragging the sheet from the bed, I wrapped it back around myself as I searched the room for something more suitable to wear.

Almost every cabinet, dresser and wardrobe that filled the chamber was empty. Only home to the small creatures that had taken up residence among the dark spaces.

But there, in the top drawer of a grand, wooden carved cabinet did I find clothing.

A nightshirt.

"That will do," I said, shrugging.

I pulled the stiff white fabric over my head until it draped loosely around my ankles. The sleeves were long and baggy, so much so that I had to roll them up to prevent them from getting in the way.

Before a golden mirror I stood and inspected myself. The glass was scratched and worn; the surface almost impossible to see a reflection.

"Jak, you need a wash," I told myself. My feet were still stained black with soot from the fire. My face pale and blue eyes ringed with tiredness. I pressed a hand to my stomach as it rumbled again. "But first it is time to eat."



THE DOOR TO MY CHAMBER HAD BEEN DESTROYED. EXCEPT NOT BY THE fire. No. It lay in parts across the charred room, even the brick of the wall that held it up by the frame had come away. It had been caved in. From the outside.

I inched cautiously into the room, careful not to step on an iron nail or splinter of wood. It was early evening and I had been without shoes all day.

After waiting in the great hall for someone, anyone, to come in, I had finally given up and went to retrieve my boots.

Luckily they were where I left them. Neatly lined up beneath the window that overlooked the garden. Now, as the sky was painted a dark purple, it was hard to see the world beyond.

I pulled my boots on, thankful for the break from the ever-cold floor of the castle.

The chamber was close to destroyed. Yet the fire had been put out — by what or how I did not know. Nor did it matter. My potentially dramatic action resulted in what I required.

Attention.

The scorched scars reached as far as the outer walls but it had been stopped before spreading beyond. The bed was in ruins. Sheets no more than crispy ashes. The posts of the frame now leaned against one another amongst the mound of burned wood and material.

“What a clumsy boy I am.”

There was a glint of metal nestled within the pile of ashes. I reached for it, pushing the dusting of destruction out of the way until I got a grasp on the item and pulled it out.

The scrying bowl. It had warped slightly. Not completely broken, but enough to feel as though I would not be able to use it again.

It was the perfect excuse not to call upon Mother or the coven. For a moment, a wink of orange flickered across the dull metal of the bowl. It happened so quickly I almost passed it off as something in my eye. But then it happened again. A reflection of an amber glow. I turned behind me, facing the window to catch what I had seen.

Beyond the window, in the darkening view, I could see it.

What if it was Marius? No. The moon had not reached its apex yet. That was all I knew of the creature before he appeared. It was only in the dead of night that he roamed.

Then it must be the people that live here. The very ones that had done their best to keep out of my way, no matter how I longed to see them.

My heart slammed in my chest as I raced out the room, discarding the scrying bowl back on the floor without a thought. A short run down the corridor and I was there, at the front door ready to find out who lurked beyond it.

But it was locked. *Fuck*. No matter how I tugged and pulled at the large, circular hand, it did not open. Giving up with a breath of frustration, I ran back to the room, hoping to catch the direction the bobbing glow moved in.

I was left with one choice.

It was easy, pulling myself onto the thin ledge of the window and slipping through the gap that it allowed as I pushed it open. I was thankful for the overgrown grass that I landed upon. It not only cushioned my short jump, but kept my footfalls quiet.

The nightshirt did little to keep out the chill of the evening. Mist swirled around my ankles and for a moment I remembered my first night and the hand that reached for me.

I did not stay in one place to find out if that same apparition returned.

Through the darkening gardens I moved, looking for another glare of light to signal where the intruder was heading. My heart thumped in my chest, palms damp with sweat. But on I pushed, desperate to find someone — anyone that was not the beast.

Blindly, I waded through the gardens. Lost among the towering hedges, pathless walkways and monstrous roots and weeds that seemed to have overtaken what must have been a glorious garden once upon a time.

Then I caught it again. Through the gaps of the hedge I almost walked face-first into, amber light that moved beyond it.

I quickened my movements, frantically looking for a way around the hedge wall before me. The twigs scratched at my hands as I searched for a way through.

“Wait!” I shouted, the glow of light disappearing once again. “I see you, just wait!”

I sliced out a hand, reaching for the grounding element of earth. The hedge split in two, parting enough for me to slip through.

It was a risk, using my power. But the blanket of darkness grew heavier. I could hardly see a hand before my face, let alone someone else see me use my power.

I ran. And so did the person I chased after. I was on the stone path now, evident from the loud patter of my footfalls as I took up chase. There was a faint stinging from the cuts I had gifted myself on the soles of my feet. Yet I pushed on. “Please... just wait!”

As if the blossoming night responded, a noise filled the darkening gardens. It seemed to echo from all around me.

I slowed for a moment, searching for the origin of the sound. In the shadows around me my eyes played tricks. I was certain I saw shapes speeding through the dark.

Then the noise occurred again, this time louder, clearer.

A howl.

I picked up my pace, this time urged on by a sudden, piercing fear that tried so desperately to overcome me. Burned wilder by yet another howl that sounded in response to the first.

The nightshirt blew up around my bare legs. I almost tripped on a cracked slab on the path beneath me, but steadied myself as yet another howl pierced through the settling night.

My prey turned a corner, signalled by the sudden change in course the bobbing flame took.

I followed, boots slapping on the ground.

Closing in, I started to see the person. The girl.

Long black hair flowed behind her, caught in the wind she left in her wake. She wore a dress made from dark materials that seemed to blend into the very shadows we ran through.

And her head, like mine, snapped across the darkness surrounding the path as other noises joined in on our chase.

All I heard, above my own heavy breathing, was the snapping of teeth. The shifting of a shape which ran beside me flickered in my peripheral. I risked a look and saw two pools of red glaring back at me.

It happened too fast.

I slammed into something hard, tumbling in an entanglement of limbs, across the ground.

It was not my cry of sudden surprise that rattled across my skull, it came from the girl I had run straight into.

I felt the wet grass around me. Not the hard stone path.

“I am so sorr—”

“Shut up, you fool!” she snapped, pushing herself from the ground with wide, unblinking eyes. Her focus was not on me, but something in the dark before us. I followed her panicked stare to see what captured her attention.

From the shadows stepped a large hound. No, a wolf. Fur made from melted shadows, so dark I could not see where it started and the night around it began. The beast prowled, large paws padding across the ground slowly as it moved for her.

I shifted my arms, trying to get myself from the floor before the creature attacked, its intentions clear as its maw dripped and its lip curled. But it stopped me from moving with a warning snap of its jaws. I could almost feel the stabbing of its red glare as it stared right through me.

“You took us off the path,” she muttered, voice laced with fear. “You’ve doomed us both.”

The wolf threw itself towards the girl, body melting in wisps of shadows made solid as it blurred through the air. In the brief moment I had fully glanced at her, she must have been no more than thirteen. A small, wiry frame but a face of determined fire.

There was no time for her to scream. That or she did not fear the unbelievable creature that attacked her.

In moments she was devoured in shadows as the wolf landed above her. Only then did she make a noise as her body hit the ground with a hefty crack. The wolf hardly flinched as her shriek split the sky.

Help her. The words were so clear in my mind. An urgent plea. I was frozen to the spot, watching as the wolf lowered its bared teeth, huffing its deathly stench across her face.

The creature slammed a paw upon her chest. The guttural breathless sound that followed sickened me as the beast slammed all air from her lungs. Her hands slapped at the dark paw, both no match for its size. Then she simply stopped as the shattering of bones sang into the night.

Now!

The thought was no longer a plea, but a command.

And my magic answered without further reluctance.

The wind went from still to screaming. A storm of powerful gusts that brewed around the gardens, whistling through trees and broken statues. My air was fearful of the stalking creatures — I sensed it as I willed for it to attack. The mighty force of conjured wind nearly ripped me from the ground as it barrelled into the wolf's sides. I gritted my teeth, jaw clenched

as I forced my energy into the element. My heart jolted with relief as the yelp of the whimpering beast sang a song to my very soul. Ripped from its prey, the cloud of shadow and fur was thrown into the night. A useless doll in the grasps of my power.

I wasted no time in moving for where the girl lay across the ground, the wind dwindling to the natural breeze it had been as I relaxed the leash on my power.

“Are you alright?” I said, breathless. I leaned over her, head snapping back towards the dark where the beast still cried and whimpered. My neck threatened to break as I looked from the shadows back to the girl. She was unresponsive, eyes closed and lips parted. I held a finger beneath her nose and felt the tickle of breath against it. She was breathing, but weakly. Her youthful skin as white as snow. I could not deny the small pulse that sounded beneath my touch of her wrist. Even in the dark my eyes adjusted enough to see the small rise and fall of her chest.

A string of profanities spilled across my mind as the whimpering turned into a growl and grew closer once again.

I faced the dark and the hidden creature that lurked within it. A scowl pinched across my face.

Hands readied at my side, I willed the wolf to strike.

“Come on!” I shouted, body tensed, a wall of flesh and bone between the beast and the girl. “Give it another try. I dare you.”

Deep, guttural growls responded and more wolves of shadow stepped into view. Each lowered their bodies close to the ground. Ready to strike.

Wind raced around me. Fire warmed beneath my skin. “At last, a fight.”

One of the larger beasts shook its mane of shadow and snapped its jaws. It seemed to be a signal as the pack of wolves split and raced for where I kept crouched above the young girl.

My skin burned as the fire beneath my skin itched for release. But as my scream tore out of my throat, yet another shadow joined the chaos. It landed between me and the racing beasts. Pure white hair glowed among the night, body broad and arms wide as though he would simply catch them as they pounced.

Marius.

I could not see his face, not as he screamed towards the pack of wolves. He was bent low, hands curved in a claw-like motion as he gave a single,

never-ending screech. I let go of the elements, clapping my hands over my ears to block out the horrific sound.

The very night seemed to shake around us.

I watched in... awe as the wolves dispersed into the night. Each whimpering as they ran, tails between their legs.

Their fear mixed with my own as Marius snapped around to us. His eyes glowed the same red as the beasts he had frightened away. His mouth was split, unnaturally, exposing the lines of spittle connected to his white, pointed teeth.

I could not catch a breath as I looked up at him.

"What have you done?" he growled from the pits of his stomach.

"I didn't — I was..."

"She knows not to leave the path!" he snapped, gaze flaring with anger. "What have you done!?"

Refusing to look away, no matter how I wished to, I seethed my response, "I was not to know."

In a blink he was before me, teeth mere inches from my eyes. "Get out of my way. Now."

I could not move fast enough, flinching as Marius lifted a tensed arm to push me himself.

As he hovered over the girl, his entire demeanour shifted. His body softened and his shoulders lowered. With a long sigh, he scooped her small frame into his arms without much of a thought.

"If she dies..." Marius did not face me as he spoke. But I heard as his voice hitched. "You will soon follow her."

Helplessly I watched as Marius carried the young girl back towards the castle, her pale face resting against his chest. I could hear him whisper to her, but only a muttered sound. I made out not a single word he said.

Did he see my magic? The thought sickened me, but soon melted away as I caught sight of the limp arm of the girl he carried. Guilt fuelled me to get off the floor and follow after him. *Slow, sloppy.* Mother's voice filled the darkness of my mind. My pace only urged to quicken from the fear that the strange creatures would return for me.

Marius did not complain that I trailed after him. He knew I was behind him from the subtle glances over his shoulder. I half expected him to scream at me to leave. But he didn't.

I stayed on the stone path through the gardens, not deviating from it, heeding the warning the young girl had said to me before the creature had hurt her.

I was soon thankful to be back in the castle with the door shut behind me, leaving the reaching mists and moving shadows behind lock and key.

Marius took her to his room. The one I had woken in this morning. I kept my distance as he entered, laying her across the freshly made bed.

A bed I did not make upon leaving the room earlier.

“Will she be okay?” I asked from the corner of the room as Marius ran his hands across her. He did not reply. He carefully pulled at the cords of the dark corset she wore, revealing the top of her chest.

Even from my distance, I could see the dark bruise that had already bloomed across her skin.

He released a breath, one that whistled through gritted teeth. “Broken ribs. She will survive and you... you may live to see tomorrow, Jak.”

“Can I help?” I stepped forward cautiously. “It is my fault.”

I said it because it was true, and it would have been what he wanted to hear. In truth I did not care for his reaction, but it was clear she meant something to him. And such things become weapons in the right hands.

“Pray tell, what can you do to relieve the pressure her broken ribs are currently causing as they press on her lungs? Do you harbour such power to heal her?”

I harboured power, just not the kind that could heal. Bowing my head, I kept quiet, watching from the corner of the room as Marius moved into action.

He rolled the loose sleeve of his shirt up to his elbow, brought his own wrist to his mouth and bit into his pale skin. My stomach twisted as I watched on. Beneath his lips blood spread, dripping down his chin as he lowered his hand towards the girl’s parted mouth, not caring about the drips of ruby that splashed across the white sheets.

He cupped a gentle hand beneath the head of the young girl, lifted her up ever so slightly and held his bleeding wrist over her mouth. My stomach coiled in revulsion. To watch on as his life force fell like fat drops of rain across her paling lips. As if she registered it, her mouth parted, and her tongue slowly unfurled outward to catch the blood.

It was an innocent action, one a child would make during the first rains of spring. Catching the fresh drops of water and drinking from the clouds

themselves. But this, this was wrong.

“I smell your disgust,” Marius muttered, lowering the girl back onto the pillow. He pulled a laced cloth from his breast pocket and wiped at the blood across his wrist. “Remember it would not have been required if you had not caused this. Be thankful I have the means to help her heal. For your sake.”

I closed my gaping mouth shut and tried to clear the revulsion from my expression. “How was I to know that those... things would attack us? It would not seem a handbook is provided upon arrival to this haunting place.”

“Blood hounds,” Marius said, ignoring my jibe. “Creatures of shadow that hunger for the same thing as I. Now you know, so keep away.”

“Noted,” I snapped, glancing at his now clean wrist to see not a single mark upon his skin.

He followed my gaze and lifted his wrist up. “Miraculous, isn’t it? How a curse can hold such... beauty. My blood has healing properties and keeps me sustained for years but can also heal others if ingested.”

I could not answer. It was far from miraculous, but also far from anything Mother or the coven had warned me about.

“Who is she?” I asked, happy to change the topic.

Marius took his time rolling down his sleeve and buttoning the cuff.

“And you believe you deserve an answer... as if she concerns you?”

My face warmed. “It is a simple question. I know you have people living in this castle. I spoke with one. Is she your... servant?”

“She is no servant of mine.”

“Then what?”

The corner of Marius’s ashen lips curved into a smile, one of intrigue. “I have never been fond of questions.” His sudden laugh bounced across the stone walls of the chamber. “And I have never known a Claim to be so... intrusive. Let me assure you, Jak, there is no living soul inside this castle. She —” he waved to the girl on the bed behind him “—simply visits as did her mother and her mother before that. How else am I supposed to keep in touch with the ever-changing world?”

A shiver spread down my arms. He had an informant from Darkmourn. I looked back to the girl, the traitor, unsure why I did not recognise her.

“And what is it you care to know?” My question escaped me before I could think. “Why do you care what happens beyond this place when you

know you can never leave?”

Unless I fail.

Marius silver brow lifted, arched above one eye. “Do not mistake my want for knowledge as caring, Jak. I simply need to know what changes. Because one day, long after you have been drained upon your final night, I will find a way out of this forsaken cage. And when I do, I will be ready for what waits beyond.”

“You are confident I will let you feed on me?” The hairs on my arms rose. That part of his curse I knew well. How he would fall into a bloodlust rage — not satisfied until every drop had been devoured from his Claim. Mother told me a story of the first year the curse was laid upon him. It was the one and only time he ever left the body on the boundary of the estate.

Hollow and empty.

He never again gave back the bodies of those he had drank from after that.

“I do not need confidence, Jak. It is inevitable.” He traced a finger down my cheek, the nail a hairbreadth away from scratching my skin. “You are the Claim. It is your duty.”

Before I could speak, the girl on the bed spluttered a cough. With his unnatural speed he left me, hovering over the girl as her fit of hacking coughs dissolved the heavy tension.

“Steady, Katharine, slowly,” Marius cooed. “I have got you.”

She pressed a hand to her chest and her coughing soon settled. And I noticed the lack of bruising that had not long covered her skin beneath her fingers.

“What happened... what? I did not leave the path.” She spoke fast, her panicked words broken and rushed.

“I know... you did not.” Marius cupped a hand to her cheek. “That was the fault of another.”

Her head snapped to me. I expected a growl, but her chestnut eyes only widened. There was a part of me that recognised her, now that I saw her beneath the firelight of the burning candles in the room. And that unnerved me.

I readied myself for her to tell Marius that I was a witch. That I had magic and that was how I helped her. An ancestor to the very woman that laid the curse upon him. *Upon us.*

But Katharine's words shocked me. "Do not be angry with him." Her voice was small, but full of strength for someone of her young age. "Since I am still breathing, he must have saved me. The last thing I remember is the blood hound atop me."

Marius stared at me, eyes squinting. "He did?"

I looked to my feet, clenching my shaking hands into fists. "It was nothing."

"Do not be shy now, it does not become of you."

"I pushed it off her," I forced out the lie.

"You pushed a blood hound?"

I nodded, fearful that another lie would only make it obvious. "It was crushing her so I did what I could." I caught the gaze of Katharine who, unblinkingly, stared back at me. I did not drop her stare as I spoke on. "It was my fault she left the path after all."

"Then I must apologise for my reaction," Marius drawled. "Katharine is very dear to me. I merely acted in a manner I saw fit. Please give me and Katharine a moment. I fear we have much to discuss and would prefer you not to be involved." He smiled, slyly.

I bowed my head, stepping backwards towards the door.

"Jak," the small voice called out. Raising my chin, I regarded the young girl. Katharine. "Do not stray from the path. If you enter their domain again the blood hounds will have a vendetta against you."

"Why?" I questioned, hand hovering over the door handle.

"Because you prevented them from a meal," Marius answered. "One never forgets that."

I jolted awake to the slam of something on the table before me. Surprised, I kicked out, knocking myself backwards.

“Careful.” A hand gripped the back of the chair, stopping it from falling to the floor with me in it. “We would not want yet another accident. Would we?”

I came to quickly, gripping the seat as Marius rocked me back to safety. How long had I been sleeping? Long enough for dribble to have dried on my chin.

“You have had an eventful evening. I am far from surprised that you are tired.”

“I’m fine...” I regarded the large sack that now took up space on the empty table before me. But before I had slipped into sleep the table had been completely covered. “The food is gone.”

“Were you that famished?”

I shook my head. “No, the food is gone. This table was full and now it is not.”

I had fallen asleep with a belly full of more delicious food. Yet there was not a scrap left. “You said no one else lives here. But I hardly imagine you stoop low enough to serve and clean in your own dwelling.”

Marius kicked a chair out for himself and sat upon it. He leant his elbows on his knees and rested his chiselled jaw in his palms. “You are wrong. I said that there is not anyone *living* inside this castle.”

“But I—”

“Smell terrible. Truly.” He leaned back, nose scrunching. “I have drawn a bath in my chamber for you. In that sack is a spare set of clothes. Ones that are not so... revealing. Clean yourself up.” His voice was soft yet demanding.

I stiffened in the chair, gripping onto the sides to keep my hands busy. “What about Katharine?”

“She has returned home. The room is yours.”

“What about...” I silenced myself.

“Speak, Jak. Do not be shy.”

I was far from it.

“Where do you sleep?”

He tilted his head to the side. “I do not sleep.”

“Then where do you go? I have seen enough of this castle to know there are other empty rooms for me to stay in.”

“Those rooms are not mine.” His neck straightened, his deep voice hardened.

“Is that supposed to make me feel a type of way?”

He was still. Burgundy eyes flicked across my face. Searching. I held my breath. But then he smiled. “If I wanted to make you feel a certain way, Jak, I would not need it solely to be in my room.”

The chair squeaked across the floor as I stood abruptly.

“Have I said something to offend you?” he said through a sly grin.

My hands shook wildly at my side. “I do not know what you have grown used to, Marius. But I can tell you I am not like the others you have ... played with. Watch what you say to me. And how you say it.”

Marius stood now, towering inches over me. “That sounds awfully similar to a threat.”

I stepped forward. “What if it is?”

We held each other’s stare. Neither one wanting to break it before the other.

“You are right, Jak,” Marius whispered, being the first to step back. “You are nothing like the others that have been before you. Nothing.”



THE WATER WAS STILL WARM WHEN I SLIPPED INTO ITS EMBRACE. I released a groan until my head went under, mouth filling up with water. I kept my eyes open, watching bubbles escape from my mouth and rise to the surface.

Bliss. And much needed.

Only when my lungs burned for breath did I burst from its warm belly. I hardly cared as it splashed over the edge of the brass tub and splattered over the slabbed ground of Marius's room.

The man... creature, infuriated me. Disgusted me. At least that was what I told myself over and over as I washed the days of dirt from my skin until it was red raw.

I was becoming accustomed to the late nights and early mornings. My normal routine had completely altered since arriving. Before the drawn curtain the sky was lightening and with it brought my tiredness. The short nap I had at the dining table was not sufficient. I longed to swaddle myself in the comforting sheets of Marius's bed. Which had, yet again, been prepared. No sign that Katharine had ever lied upon it nor the dried droplets of blood.

I did not climb into the bed until the water had grown cold and I struggled to keep my eyes open. My arms shook from tiredness as I lifted myself from the tub and trailed a line of water to the bed. I gave little care in letting my bare skin dry. Barely rubbing at it, nor allowing myself time to dry amongst the air before clambering within the sheets.

I turned over in the bed, stretching my exposed body as far as I could. Something stiff scratched against my arm. I fought the tiredness enough to lift my head and look through one eye as to what it was that I felt.

There, on the pillow beside me was a note. A folded piece of parchment that was sealed with black wax.

I ran my thumb over the seal, feeling the ridges of the design that I could not fully make out. It was what I thought to be a cross. But it seemed a rose was etched in the middle of the crosses interlinking lines.

It was a shame to pull the folded parchment apart, breaking the seal too.

JOIN ME FOR SUPPER.

M.

THE NOTE WAS SHORT. PRECISE.

“Dinner.” I laughed, discarding the note back on the pillow. Turning my back on it, I rolled over, my heart beating calmly in my chest.

Who knew it only took chasing a girl through the gardens to get his full attention?

I almost longed for the scrying bowl to be fixed, so Mother could see how I had changed the tides in my favour.

I suppose she would have to wait and see when I walked back home with his head in my hands.

I studied myself before the mirror, this time wearing more than just the loose nightshirt I had found yesterday.

Someone had been in my room as I'd slept. For the pile of clothing had been laid out ready for me at the end of the bed. The thought unnerved me, knowing someone had watched as I slept. Being vulnerable was a new feeling, yet I woke without harm. That was enough to prevent the feeling from becoming overwhelming.

The clothes were grand. Each thread screamed wealth and privilege. The perfect outfit for the supper I had been invited to. One that I clearly had no choice but to accept — not that I would have declined.

The jacket was made from velvet. Each touch left marks in the dark navy material. In the candlelight it looked as though I wore the very ocean captured at midnight. I turned my body, from left to right, taking in the beauty of the material.

The breeches were fitting, hugging my slender legs to the cuff which was held together by a button made from the iridescent belly of a shell.

Everything was tailored to my body. All besides the shirt that was countless sizes too big. If it was not for the jacket holding the shirt in place, it would have slipped over my shoulders each time I moved.

I could have tied it up at the neck with the cream cords that were strung loosely. But I didn't. I kept my neck on show purposefully.

I took my time preparing my brown hair, smoothing it down with the cool water that had been left in the tub. I ran my hand through my fringe, tucking it backwards to expose as much of my face as I could.

My weapon. More powerful than my magic could be against a creature of notable hunger.

He wants a feast. So I shall give him one.



“AT LAST, HE ARRIVES.” MARIUS STOOD AT THE HEAD OF THE TABLE. HE wore a dark cloak of shadow that swallowed the chair he had only moments before sat upon. “I was beginning to believe you would simply ignore my invitation.”

“I did not realise I had a choice,” I answered, walking towards the chair that Marius gestured towards.

“One always has a choice.”

“They do?”

Marius teeth chattered as he smiled. “You interest me, Jak. I cannot deny that.”

I forced my own smile and bowed my head. “I am no more than a boring, simple Claim. I am certain you have had far more interesting company than what I can offer.”

“Perhaps,” he mused, “there is time left for that to be determined.”

I held his stare, and he kept mine, as I pulled my chair out and sat.

“I trust you slept well,” he said, still standing long after I took a seat.

“I did.”

He lifted his chin, nostrils flaring. “And you took up the not-so-subtle offer to wash?”

As his gaze traced me, I lifted a gentle finger and ran it across my collarbone, slowly until I was certain his eyes followed my every move.

“It was glorious.”

Marius sighed as I dropped my touch and picked up the silverware beside the empty plate. Without looking back at him, I began to fill my plate with the delectable foods that waited around me.

Our conversation was a string of short sentences. I found conversation hard to start as I busied myself with the food, whereas I felt Marius was silent for other reasons.

“Not that you need me to offer, but please help yourself.” Marius finally sat, which settled the nerves that itched beneath my skin. “You must be

hungry.”

“Famished,” I said, picking a charred leg of cooked meat that must have been chicken.

Marius whispered, enough for me to hear, “You have no idea.”

He sat watching me, his stare burrowing into my soul. But not once did I look up, focused on piling my plate even more just to keep myself busy.

I usually preferred the quiet of silence, but as time went on I could not bear it. “Are you not hungry?” I questioned, flicking a forkful of meat at him. Marius had not touched anything, his hands remaining in his lap as he watched me.

“Starving.”

My blood chilled, the skin across my exposed neck tickling beneath his stare. “Then eat.”

Marius groaned, rocking back in his chair. “There is not a single item on this table that would satisfy me, Jak.”

I shrugged, keeping my gaze low. “Suit yourself. I trust you did not prepare all of this for me? Or all the food presented to me since my arrival?”

Marius raised his hands, both of them in surrender. “Do these hands looked overworked?”

I scoffed, taking my time to chew on the chicken that dangled from my fork.

“It seems that little has changed in the way of conversation, Jak. Still your kind discuss small matters such as weather, or in your case, food. Let us have more of a deeper, more interesting conversation.”

His comment was an insult buried beneath his posh accent. As though I had been slapped with a feather.

“Then please, ask away,” I told him, swallowing the lump of food that struggled down my dry throat.

“There is something about your participation in the previous evening’s events that do not sit right to me.”

I almost choked.

“Would you be so kind as to explain what happened again. Truly, it is extremely... interesting to me.”

I held Marius’s stare. He wanted me to trip up, I could sense his distrust. “Is it hard to believe I do not have the bravery to take on one of your hellish beasts?”

Marius huffed, rocking back with his arms behind his head. Muscles flexed, threatening to rip his jacket. "I do not doubt your bravery. You raised a hand to me only moments after I welcomed you into my home."

"You make it seem that my visit here is something worthy of welcome."

"Then we should toast." Marius nails tapped on the glass he raised. "To my hundredth Claim."

"You do not eat, but you drink?" I asked, studying the red wine that sloshed within his glass. He kept looking at me as he raised the rim to his lips and took a swig. The wine stained his already dark lips. The vision of him biting his own wrist flooded my memory.

"I drink because I am thirsty. Wine has been the only substance to curb the deeper appetite the curse bestowed on me."

Intrigue spurred me to question further. "And what is it you crave?"

I knew. I did not need to ask, but I could see the glint in his dark gaze when the subject was brought up. The lust he had for it made his lips part and his tongue traced his lower lip.

"Blood."

I lowered my glass back to the table, shrugging off his comment and digging back into my food even though my appetite had dissipated in that moment. I left the meat on the plate, opting for the boiled and seasoned potato.

"Where do you go during the days?" I asked, changing the subject to one that did not threaten the contents of my stomach to reappear.

"Why do you care to know?"

"You asked for conversation and I am giving it to you. Questions breed answers, is that not what you want?"

Marius released a bated breath. "Tell me about yourself instead, Jak. I find myself wanting to know more of your life before you were so unfortunate to be delivered to me."

"Has Katharine not told you about me? I thought that was the point of her visits."

"I do not care to know about my Claims. It is part of the mystery, waiting to learn of their stories myself."

"Stories," I huffed. "So you are a keen reader?"

"More of a writer. But enough about me. I asked about you, yet I am coming to understand you are skilled at diverting the topic from yourself. It is as if you have something to hide."

As *do you*, I thought, forcing a smile.

Part of my training was for this moment exactly. Weaving a lie to tell him of myself. To paint a picture I want for Marius to see of me.

“Then ask away.” I waved a steady hand, whereas my leg beneath the table was bouncing uncontrollably.

“Tell me of your home.”

I focused on the food and let my false story loose.

“My father is a baker. My mother a seamstress. I spend my time flitting between both and helping. Our home is used as the bakery and Mother works from the back rooms.”

“You are good with your hands?”

I swallowed the lump of boiled potato. “Awful. Mother will do anything in her power to stop me from ruining her projects. And the most Father lets me do is split the flour, that is it.”

“Shame.” Marius shrugged. “And do you enjoy helping your parents?”

“I— no.”

“No? Then what is it you would have wanted to do in your life?”

I couldn’t answer aloud. *To end you.*

“It does not matter what I want now. Does it?”

He knew what I meant. For any other Claim, a visit to this place never resulted in a return home.

Marius’s grin melted away, his stare lost to a spot on the table. “Because you are to die.” His voice was as cold as his touch. It lasted only a moment before he shook himself out of the strange trance I had watched him slip into.

Opting to steer away from this conversation, I presented Marius with a question.

“What do you do during the rest of the year when you are not... entertaining your Claim?”

It was a question I truly wanted an answer to. I had longed stared up at this castle from my bedroom window. Studying the dark, lifeless windows and seemingly empty place. It was only during the month of the Claiming when the castle came to life.

“I wait.”

“That sounds awfully dull,” I joked, trying to lighten the suddenly heavy atmosphere that laid upon the room.

“Time is an odd concept in this place. It has taken me years to not dwell on it. For the more I did in the beginning, the more I let myself slip into madness.”

A just punishment.

As I thought it, his inquisitive stare settled on mine and held it. His furrowed brow made me believe for a second that he could infiltrate my thoughts.

“It is my turn again.” He groaned, lifting the rim of the glass to his lips and holding it there.

“For what?” I said, licking the dregs of wine from my lower lip. Appetite was failing me as the beast bored into me. Instead, I opted for a chug of fruitful, red wine to dull my anxiety at the questions to follow.

“It is my turn to ask you a question.” Marius leaned forward on the table, finger tapping his defined jaw. “What did you know of me before you were chosen as my Claim?”

“You want to know?”

He waved a hand, urging me on. “Entertain me... please.”

Little is more. Lamiere’s words echoed in my mind and my chest warmed at the memory of the old maiden.

“I know you were cursed for killing the betrothed of Morgane De’Fray.” My own great-grandmother.

He scoffed, draining his own glass of wine in one fell swoop. “Go on,” he said, teeth stained red.

“That you have lived out your days in an eternal cycle. One that can never be broken.”

Lie. I will break it.

“I know that those who are sent to your castle never return home.”

“Why?”

I kept my face straight, no matter how the wine I had devoured made me want to act. “You kill them.”

“Why?” he asked again, a low hiss sounding from the back of his throat.

“To drink from them, to keep yourself—”

“Without pain!” Marius shouted, standing abruptly and slamming his palms on the table. It shook beneath the force, glass and china hitting into each other in a chorus of high-pitched clinks. “I drink because I must. Every year I have asked these same questions hoping that I may hear something else in response. To share in my own confusion as to what the *bitch* turned

me into. And every year the same, empty, answers are provided. Believe it or not, Claim, I know little more than you.”

I stood, swaying slightly. “My name is Jak.”

The flames of the many candles across the table sang to me, willing for me to reach out for them. But I resisted, only just.

“And I do not care.”

I pushed from the table, not caring about the chair that fell across the floor in a bang.

“Where are you going?” Marius hissed, demand dripping from his tone.

“To bed.” I kept my voice steady, fighting the urge to use magic as a means to shut the creature up.

“Dinner is not over,” Marius said, face twitching as it began to relax.

“Believe it or not, I have lost my appetite.”

Turning around, I took large steps away from the table, until Marius called out, “Wait... wait.” His deep voice cracked. “Please. My... my anger gets the best of me. It is that or I simply forget myself.”

I paused, his apology hanging in the air between us. I felt the need for magic slip away like butter over an open flame.

Get close to the beast. Lure him.

“I need more wine,” I said, turning back to face him and ignoring his apology. “And something sweet — that is my price.”

“Price to stay?”

I grinned, lowering my chin. “Precisely.”

“Then forgive my disappearance. I will return shortly.” With that he left through the door at the end of the dining hall. From his pocket he pulled a brass key and fit it into the door. One sharp turn and it unlocked, and he disappeared into the shadows beyond.

Marius left swiftly, just as I drank yet another glass of red wine in the same manner. Down to the bottom of the glass I drained it. Then another, and another, until my mind was fuzzy and eyes heavy and slow. It became apparent quickly that Marius was not returning. I must have sat like this for a while, waiting, with the hope that I was finally getting somewhere with him. Getting close to him as I had planned. But clearly, I was wrong.

The sky beyond the room lightened, signalling the arrival of dawn. And the disappearance of Marius for yet another day.

Frustrated, I wobbled from the chair, not caring as it tumbled to the floor. It was time for sleep, I knew that much. But as I walked towards the

door I had entered in, I stopped.

Marius had not left for his promise of sweat treats through here. He had gone through the unexplored door at the back of the dining hall. The one that was still left ajar.

On awkward legs I stumbled towards it, ready to explore yet another part of this maze of brick and mortar.

Where do you hide, Marius?

I heard the murmurings of soft voices as I rounded the dark winding corridors beyond the dining hall. Everything was dark here. I felt the floor beneath my feet slope downwards. The further I walked, the deeper I found myself in the belly of the castle.

There were no windows. No available light to help guide my way. I had to use my hands against the cold stone wall to know I would not collide into something face-first.

I could have called up a flame, but the wine had dulled my senses. That and the clear presence of Marius that was up ahead.

Perhaps hardly any time had passed at all during Marius's absence. I had given in to my own impatience when he would have likely returned to the dining hall soon enough?

But I stilled as the voices rose ahead. Keeping my breathing as shallow as I could muster so I would not miss out on a single word.

"You are slipping," a familiar, youthful voice said. "I would not be the one to remind you, but it was your own request that I keep you in line."

"Your worry is misplaced," Marius replied, his voice a low growl.

"Is it? We all sense your change in mood. We have witnessed it enough; some even have experienced it to know where this path will lead."

A shuffle of footsteps in the dark and the shadows seemed to vibrate. I rubbed a palm over my eyes. Was it the wine?

"It has been years since I have allowed myself more than a word with the Claim. Can this year not be any different?"

“I am merely reminding you as you have requested. Or have you forgotten the oath you made me take?” The voice sharpened. The speaker sounded so young yet held much power beneath her tone.

Marius paused in his response. In my place hidden around the corner of the dark corridor I could imagine him running circles with his forefinger over his chin.

“It all ends the same, Marius. It always will. And you will spend the year to follow in the dark place you made me swear to keep you out of.”

“There is something different about him.”

Me.

“If this has anything to do with Katharine...”

Marius emitted a low growl from the back of his throat. “Tread carefully.”

“Put your teeth away,” she said, dismissively. “They cannot harm me. But they can hurt him.”

I slowly peered around the corner, hoping to catch a glimpse of the speaker as it hit me where I had heard her before. Beyond the bedroom door during my first morning.

“It is inevitable. For years we have tried to break this curse, yet it always ends the same way. Can I not allow myself one year off from behaving?”

“You make it sound like you are a dog on a leash, Marius.”

“Am I not?”

“You are a beast in a locked cage. And there is nothing you can do to break out of it. I will not stand in your way again if this is the path you are going to choose with him. You asked this of me, and I knew a time would come when you would resist. Just know that we will not appear for you when the deed is done, and the blood warms your belly. You can deal with the consequences alone this time.”

I jumped at the sound of bone slamming into brick. If it was not for the crack that followed I was certain they would have heard my gasp. Then Marius spoke quietly, so soft I nearly missed it.

“It is his name.”

“I knew it had a part to play,” she replied softly.

“I feel as if he was sent here as punishment. This is the hundredth year without him yet the pain still cuts deep.” A strange chill fell over me. As Marius spoke, I felt the effects of the wine slip away. *Who are you speaking*

about? “His name is not the only similarity, which is making it harder for me to distinguish the difference. Perhaps I am simply weary.”

“We are all tired, Marius.”

“And I am sorry for that, truly.”

The girl chirped a laugh. “Do not apologise again. I have heard it enough. You should retire for the day, perhaps some time to clear your head will help you make a decision on which actions to take.”

“Have I ever told you how truly blessed I am to have your council, Victorya?”

She laughed again, echoed by the deep, hearty chuckle of Marius. “Who knew the Lord of Eternal Night would be taking guidance from a child.”

“Wise, but a child nonetheless.”

“You forget yourself. If I was still alive my wisdom would be reflected by my appearance. I have you to thank for my own everlasting youth.”

Still alive. Her words thundered through me. The urge to interrupt them and reveal myself was strong, all to get a simple glance at the speaker. But I couldn't. I had to stay unseen so Marius would not know of the upper hand I had just obtained from listening.

He was falling for me and I had barely begun. That was enough to satisfy me. I left them, calling upon the dank air in the corridor to muffle my footfalls as I left for the dining hall again. My magic thrummed through my body as I willed the air to thicken beneath my feet and the slabbed floor. Before I knew it I was back through the dining hall, leaving the door how I had found it.

I would sleep well with the knowledge I had obtained. The weapon in which Marius had unknowingly handed to me.

With a smile plastered across my face, I clambered back to his room and into his bed, revelling in the warmth of the sheets. My chest felt light and free of worry, making it easier to slip into sleep. But as I fell into the darkness I could not rid myself of the face that haunted me.

One that seemed to glow as if moonlight was woven through his alabaster skin.

Marius.

His fingers were tendrils of ice, leaving imprints of frozen burns beneath his touch. Marius held my gaze as his hand trailed up my thigh, effortlessly moving the sheets out of his way. My breath hitched. His mouth parted, exposing the points of his canines.

“Tell me to stop.”

I stared deeper into him, shaking my head slightly. “No.”

With one hand Marius explored me, and with the other he gripped onto himself. I risked a glance for a moment as his hand ran circles on the protrusion that waited beneath the material of his trousers. The outline of his manhood sent a shiver across my arms, until every hair stood on end.

“I am on your mind,” Marius breathed.

I arched my back as his hand found what it searched for.

“This is the first time you have called for me.”

I could not reply, not as I gripped onto his caressing hand to slow him. His touch intoxicated me.

“Do I fill your thoughts?”

His other hand now gripped my throat, nails biting into my skin as he held me down, stopping me from squirming as he worked away at me.

I was sensitive beneath his touch. It thrilled me. Enthrilled me. Marius did not once take his deep, maroon eyes off me.

“Why do you dream of me?”

His words were the crashing wave of water that woke me. I bolted up in his bed, finding the room still lit from the daylight beyond the castle window. Marius was nowhere to be seen. The room was empty.

Breathlessly I waited for my heartbeat to calm for it thundered in my ears. My forehead was damp, as well as my arms and legs. My entire body stuck to the sheets.

It took a moment for the dreamscape to leave me. I lowered my head back onto the pillow and stared up at the ceiling, shocked at myself. My subconsciousness ruled my mind during sleep, and I had conjured that sensual thought. It sickened me.

Or did it?

I rolled over, pressing my face into the pillow in hopes to suffocate the image of Marius from my mind.

“It is the wine,” I told myself, promising that I would not touch a drop the next day. But as I closed my eyes again, I half expected to fall back into the scene with him. It had been so clear. Every detail so vivid and real.

The sleep that followed was empty and uninterrupted — but as I fell into its embrace, I was certain I still felt his phantom touch linger across the skin of my thigh.

It was a struggle to hold Marius's stare as he made himself known at the threshold of his room.

"May I come in?" he asked, voice dripping with velvet.

I fussed with the sheets, making the bed and puffing the pillows. Doing anything to busy my mind from the dream that had occupied it. But it did not work. "You left me last night," I said through a slight pout.

"I did." I had to admire his bluntness. "And I come with an apology."

I glanced up at him as he clearly held something concealed behind his back with both hands. The jacket Marius adorned today was midnight black and had a cloak attached to the collar which swept proudly behind him. His white locks had been combed over to the side, not a single hair out of place.

I realised all too late that my pause in response was noted as Marius smiled, following my gaze as I searched him up and down.

"Is something wrong?" A single brow lifted in question.

I turned my back on him and sighed. "I am trapped in this castle knowing that my end is weeks away. Of course something is wrong."

It sounded funny, even to me, as I spoke the complaint aloud.

"Well put." Marius voice was right behind me now, forcing a small yelp to escape my lips, silenced by his hand as it rested upon my tensed shoulder. "I did not mean to frighten you."

Beneath his touch, my stomach jolted. Yesterday I was confident that I had him in the palm of my hand. But the dream had left me feeling a way I could not explain.

I turned to him, keeping my face void of expression. Shrugging his touch off my shoulder, I stepped back until the frame of the bed pressed into my lower calves. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company this evening, Marius?”

Marius pulled a face, fingers flexing where they hovered in the air. “If my disappearance last night has truly angered you, perhaps this will help.” He held in his hand a small china plate. Atop it was a single bun, glazed with white icing and drizzled with an amber, sticky substance. “A sweet treat as promised.”

“You are far too late,” I lied, stomach grumbling in disagreement with what I said. His lips curled upwards as I snatched the plate from his hands. “But I will take it.”

My body clock had changed dramatically since arriving. Only a few days of sleeping during the day and staying awake during the night had settled over me with ease. It felt as though I should be eating breakfast now, even though the crescent moon hung in the darkened sky beyond the window.

I used the sweet bun as an excuse not to speak to Marius who stood, longingly, before me as I ate it. Each swallow became harder as my throat dried in response to his stare. He did not look at my eyes as I ate. No. His gaze flicked down to my lips, transfixed by them. I found myself raising my hand to block his view out of discomfort.

As if shaking himself from the trance he spoke. “I was hoping you would join me for a stroll this evening?”

“Where?” I said through a mouthful. The glazing was thick and stuck to my teeth. It seemed to amuse Marius who hid his smile with his slender fingers. “I fear I have searched every corner of this castle and you will not see me stepping foot beyond it because the threat of those creatures are enough to keep me comfortably inside.”

“Need I remind you that the blood hounds will not hurt you if I am with you. And I do not mean to disappoint but you are wrong about this place. My home has many rooms in which you have not yet *stumbled* across.”

I scrunched my face, lips covered in powdered sugar. Marius leaned forward and, with his thumb, cleared my lower lip. Ice. His touch was so cold my lip faltered beneath it. I could not move, not as he lifted his hand to his own mouth and sucked the remnants of white powder from his thumb.

It became hard to swallow as I watched him take his time making sure not a single speck of sugar was left.

“I forgot the delights of food,” he moaned through a grimace.

“You do not eat?” I asked, remembering how he had not touched anything during our supper the evening before.

“There is no need to eat, unlike humans who must feed themselves to survive. For me food is something to busy myself with, but if I did not eat it would not make much difference to me.”

I knew so little of him. All my life I had studied this creature yet it was becoming more apparent daily that Mother and the coven’s teachings had barely scraped the surface of this enigma.

“Care to join me then?” He turned on his heel, extending a bent arm to me in offering.

I stared at the waiting, crook of his arm as though it was the answer to the universe’s deepest secrets. Marius must have sensed my hesitation in taking up his offer. The remnant memory of the dream was still so real. *Too real*. Marius put his arm down to his side and waved dramatically with the other for the door. “Please, follow me.”



Marius was right. There was much of this castle I had not explored. As I followed him swiftly through seemingly endless corridors and up curving stairwells, I was left muddled as to where I was. The further we climbed up through the castle, the more the darkness seemed to shift to reveal unseen rooms and unexplored pathways. I almost questioned him on what lay in the deep pits of the castle, the same area I had drunkenly followed him into. Was that where his servants stayed, preparing all the food and drink that had been presented to me? I gathered from their conversation last night the mysterious servants of this dwelling had to keep out of the way. Once again I buried my interest, for now was not the time.

“I was certain I had been everywhere,” I said, breathless from yet another climb up a grand staircase to another upper floor of the castle.

Marius carried an iron chamberstick with a single white pillar candle burning. The flame did little to cut through the darkness of the castle, but it did not deter Marius from walking forward with confidence. "The dark can play tricks on one's mind. I did not want you to simply stumble here so the dark acts as a shroud to keep unwanted visitors out. If I will it so."

I skipped up a step, his strides long and powerful. "You make it seem that the darkness is a thing that can do your own bidding."

Marius slowed to a stop, so abruptly that I nearly bumped into the back of him. I caught the shift of his movement as he raised a hand over the flame, fingers outstretched. "It does." He curled his fingers into a fist and the flame in the candle dimmed. Not because it shrunk in size, or was blown out by a gust of unseen wind. I watched as the darkness that hovered beyond the halo of light fought for control. Shadows of darkness spun around the flame hungrily, blanketing it in gloom. If I squinted, I still could see the glow of orange, but it was faint, like looking through a curtain of liquid obsidian.

"Incredible," I spoke without truly thinking.

"You are not frightened?" Marius questioned.

"More intrigued than fearful," I replied, as the flame sprung back to life with the removal of Marius's hand. "That power should not be possible."

"There is nothing about me that should be possible, Jak."

It was the curse. There was no other explanation for what Marius had just revealed to me. I knew he was not a witch, not when my own ancestor gifted him with this life. He was a greedy, selfish man. One that was mundane and lacking any natural ability. Not like me.

"Your silence unnerves me."

I laid my hand upon his arm, revelling in the slice of surprise that widened his handsome features. "Says the beast that will soon kill me. If anyone deserve the right to be unnerved, it is I."

He winced, even in the minimal light from the candle I saw it. "If I had the choice..."

"What exactly are you going to show me?" I interrupted. "Because I fear my legs will soon give out if you have me walk up any more stairs."

"We are close." Marius faced the corridor. "It has been many years since I last invited a Claim up here."

"You still have not explained where *here* is exactly."

Marius continued his walk forward, leaving me in his wake. “You will soon see.”

The destination waited beyond the door at the far end of the darkened corridor. It was closed, like all the others we passed. Marius handed the chamberstick to me as he fussed with a key he had fished from the breast pocket of his jacket. For such dramatic mystery, Marius took his sweet time unlocking it.

He pushed the door open and I was bathed in light. I raised a hand to block out the sudden flare of orange and gold, almost catching my hair alight from the candle I still gripped onto.

Then a warmth washed over me. Its welcoming embrace relaxing both my limbs and mind.

Marius kept the door open as he invited me to enter. “After you.”

I did not hesitate to enter a moment longer. Before me was a vision of excellence. Towering shelves of dark mahogany, each filled completely with books of different sizes and bindings. Twin roaring fires sat at either end of the long, yet narrow room. Before the largest fire sat a plump chair. Gold clawed feet held up the velvet upholstery. I could only imagine sitting upon its plush cushioning would have felt like dwelling on a warm cloud.

“What is this place?”

I inhaled, breathing in the scent of sandalwood and ink. On a large desk sat open glass bottles of black liquid that I could only guess was the origin of the smell.

Writing ink. And a desk covered in loose, empty pages.

“A kitchen.”

I paused, turning to Marius who chuckled into the crook of his arm. “This is my study. A haven for me of sorts. This room was my sanctuary long before I was cursed to never leave it. I thought you would like to see it. Take it as yet another apology for my... rude disappearance last night.”

Walking towards the shelves, I noticed the thick layering of dust across them. Looking back to the desk, I could see where the papers had not been moved for a time as they too were framed with dust. This room had not been used in a long while. All but the newly lit fires had changed. Even they still had the remnants of cobwebs across the piles of untouched brickwork.

“Could you not have dusted before you brought me here?” I held a finger to my nose to fight the sneeze.

Marius looked away for a brief moment. “It was a spur of the moment decision.”

“Yet you had the time to light two fires?” I pushed.

“I did not light them,” Marius said coldly, closing us in the room. “Besides the obvious need for a—” he ran his finger across the untouched desk “—clean, what do you think?”

“Well I’m not much of a reader, but I must say I’m impressed,” I replied, neck aching as I swung my gaze around the room.

“That is the first thing you have said that truly makes me ready to end you.”

Silence thickened between us.

“I am only joking,” Marius said, rubbing the back of his neck.

I forced a laugh. “Messy and inappropriate. What two charming qualities you have.”

Marius flashed a grin, one that did not reach his ruby eyes. He pulled a plain, oak carved chair from beneath the desk and sat down upon it. From his seat he studied me, as I continued to examine the room.

“It has been so long that it seems the chair has forgotten my shape.” Marius wiggled in the seat.

“Is there a reason?” I scanned the tomes before me, drifting a careful finger across the leathered spines. Some had ridges, others were smooth. What I had told him was true, I was not much of a reader. Besides studying the coven’s many grimoires, Mother did not let me read works of fiction. *Stories distract the mind, and I need yours to be as sharp as a knife. As clear as glass.*

“There are memories in this room that I had long wanted to keep behind a locked door.”

“What has changed now?”

I kept my back to him so he could not see me grin when he responded. “I am alone most of the year. Forgive me for wanting company when I can get it.”

“Except you are not alone,” I said, pulling a book from the shelf. Holding it in both hands, I opened it carefully, worried the ancient pages would simply crumble beneath my touch. “You do not light fires. Nor do you prepare the food that is presented so wonderfully every day. You say no one else lives inside this castle but...” I turned to him, looking up from the book to where he sat. “I do not believe you.”

“Kristia,” Marius said.

“What?” Confusion furrowed my brow.

“The book you are holding. It is about Kristia.”

I flipped the page, revealing the swirling writing of beautiful calligraphy. A single word, just as Marius had said it. *Kristia*.

“She was the fourth Claim that was sent to me. A shy girl, but the further I got to know her the more I sensed the fire within her. I have not met another like her.”

“And you just so happen to have a novel about her.”

“Wrong... I just so happened to write a novel about her.”

I flipped the page yet again. Once, twice, until the pages were filled with handwritten words. The pages so full and sentences so close together that it seemed there was no space left.

“I do not understand.”

“I brought you here so you could learn something about me. You think me a beast. Katharine and those before her have told me the stories people believe about me. And most of them are true. But I do not want to... kill anyone. I never have. Unfortunately you will soon see that I am not in control when it happens. I simply cease to exist for that final night. I understand this is strange to you, and you did not choose this. And I apologise for discussing the matter of your demise so frankly. But I too did not choose you. Just like I did not choose those who came before you. In truth, this room fills me with nothing but guilt. It is my reminder of what I have done, and what I will do again.”

I could not breathe as Marius spoke. Nor could I take my eyes off his. Not once did he blink as he spoke to me, unravelling his story as I held onto another of his.

“That book, and those around you, are my way of dealing with the guilt. I write stories for those whose lives I take. Create worlds and futures on pages in which I know they will never get to live. It is my way of honouring them.”

“Sounds like a lot of effort to me.” I couldn’t fathom it. Even holding the proof in my hands it did not seem real.

By the time I took my eyes off the page Marius was before me. His movements soundless and light. He took the weight of the book from my hands, closed it and turned it so the spine was facing upwards.

“Kristia is one of many of those stories I have conjured. You are welcome to read them... in your own time though. Just the thought of someone going through my work in front of me unnerves me.”

I crossed my arms, unsure what to do with them. What Marius had divulged did not sit well within me. It caused a strange, unwelcome tugging in my chest.

“Will you write one for me?” I asked, sharply.

There I went again, pushing the boundaries of the topic knowing full well Marius would not live long enough to write my name on the inside of a book.

“I will.”

I stepped towards him, closing the small gap until the book he held was the only thing separating us.

“And what will it say?”

Marius breathed deeply, eyes flicking across every inch of my face.

“That is yet to be determined.”

Being this close to Marius after the dream I had made my stomach jolt. I fought to hold his stare and keep up this illusion of confidence. But being so close made my knees shake.

“I fear I have lied to you about something,” Marius muttered, his face inches from mine.

Me too.

“Tell me.” I peered deep into his blood-red eyes, wondering how far I could see into his soul.

“There is someone I would gladly kill, without thought or hesitation.”

My arms prickled as his voice softened to a whisper.

“Who?” I said, watching his stare follow the movement of my lips.

“The *witch* that did this to me. I know she has since died, but I also know that her family live on. And one day, when I find a way out of this place, I will be certain to rain hell on them all. Out of the memory of those I have been made to kill, I will do it. For them.” He gestured to the bookshelves. “And for you, Jak.”

His cold touch found my chin and held it.

I parted my mouth to respond, but there was nothing I could say. His warning made the air around me so thick that it was almost impossible to breathe. And I was certain he felt my body tremble in the aftershock of his threat.

There, in that moment, deep in the stormy pits of his gaze, I felt the presence of the beast I had been brought up to hate. I sensed his hatred as though it was a scent in the air. It was palpable, honest and true.

Yet the worst part was the bud of fear that twisted far down in my gut. What Marius said was not a warning.

It was a promise.

I awoke the next night from a dreamless sleep. And I could not disregard the disappointment I felt. Rolling over in *his* bed, I surveyed the dark sky beyond the forever drawn curtains and sighed. I was beginning to forget what the sun looked like. Even in my head I recognised the dramatic flare of my thought, but it was true.

Marius's study had only conjured more questions I had for him. And looking at the star-filled sky beyond the dusty windows yet another question sprang to mind.

Why did he hide during the day?

Oh, and another.

Where?

I waited in bed for him to reveal himself. But his absence was obvious. The night before he had not long left after we arrived at his study. It was a change in mood that happened in a blink of an eye. Marius had offered his apologies and left abruptly, leaving me alone with the many stories of his. Stories in which I had started to read through, only giving up when the calls of hunger spasmed in my stomach. It did not feel right to take a book from the room. So I left them, promising silently to return again.

I dressed myself without a thought, pulling freshly folded clothes from the dark, chestnut wardrobe. Much like the outfit I had arrived in I opted for a familiar loose tunic and fitted trousers that buttoned up at my waist tightly.

I had almost expected to bump into him as I found my way into the prepared dining hall. But he was not there.

After I'd finished eating, only one thought passed through my foggy mind. *I have to speak with Mother.*

As soundless as I could, I moved through the castle, taking the route back to the charred room I had stayed in before I set it alight. There was no sign of Marius or the mystery servants that clearly hid among the dark rooms of this place.

Perhaps Marius's strange power of darkness kept them hidden just as he had created the illusion over the wing of the castle that contained his study.

Still the scent of scorched wood clung to the air of the burned room. It was not as pungent as before, but strong enough to smell it before I entered its boundaries.

There the scrying bowl lay, where I had dropped it as I'd ran after Katharine beyond the now closed window of the room. I scooped it from the floor, feeling the warped body of the bowl. It was cold to the touch. Almost lifeless.

Marius could be anywhere, and I had to keep my magic hidden. But the urge to speak with Mother was intense. It was likely a better idea to wait for morning since I knew there would be no risk of him listening.

But that involved waiting. And I did not like the thought of that.

I raced back to his room, scrying bowl held protectively to my chest. The door shut behind me the moment I entered through it. There were many ways I could have kept it closed without a lock and key. I could have melted the ancient bolt. Raised the slabbed flooring inches from the ground until it blocked the door if it was opened from the outside. But this magic would leave such an obvious mark — and Marius would kill me the moment he knew what I was.

Just as he had warned.

As he had promised.

Be quick. I warned myself, nestling into bed with the bowl in my crossed legs. The door was to my back, giving me a moment to act if Marius decided to show himself.

I closed my eyes, inhaling slowly, as I called for the elements. *Water.* I imagined its cool kiss, forceful strength and guiding movement. Above my open palm I felt its trickling presence as I pulled the moisture from the air. By the time I opened my eyes the sphere of azure spun wildly, waiting for its command to enter the scrying bowl.

“Stop before he sees what you are.”

The water splashed across my lap and chest in an explosion. My entire body stilled, but the fire within me rose to the surface in response to the intruder that stood behind me.

I turned to face them, ready to rain my magic upon them. To turn them into cinders to prevent them from telling Marius what they had seen.

The figure was no more than a wisp of grey smoke, twisting tendrils of cloud that hung inches above the ground. A body so faint that I could see through it, to the wall behind. It was a small girl, no more than the age of eight, features captured in youth that rippled like the water of a lake.

My mind could not comprehend what I was seeing as the body materialised before me, not completely though as the edges of the colourless girl shivered.

I blinked, unsure what I was witnessing. Flames danced around my fingers, ready and waiting for my release.

“Your magic will not harm me.” She kept deathly still. “Calm yourself.”

I fisted my hand, closing off my connection to the fire. Everything was silent as I stared dumfounded at the girl.

“What...”

“A soul. A ghost. A spirit. Your guess is as good as mine, believe me. But I am already dead. Your magic will not harm me, so do not waste your time using it.”

I studied her shimmering figure, rubbing at my eyes in hopes that it would help make sense of what I saw when I opened them again. My mind could not fathom what I witnessed. Not as the child hovered from the ground in a billow of unseen wind.

Then it hit me. “It was you. The first day, it was you who gave me the key.”

“It was.” There was something aged about her tone. Her voice was light as a child’s, but the hidden undercurrent was anything but young.

“And with Marius.” The vision of the night I had followed him into the lower floors of the castle filled my mind.

“He was careless to let you follow,” she scorned. “But that is Marius. Careless and foolish. And it would seem you are not different, using your power in this castle, let alone at night when he roams freely.”

“I cannot let you tell him.” I stood, readying all the elements to wait for my word. All my training and I had never been told how to destroy a spirit.

Souls of the dead did not linger on this plane. That's what Mother told me. But here one stood.

"And what are you going to do?" she said, arms folding across her colourless body. "Set me ablaze like you did your room? Blow me away with some gust of stale air?" She almost laughed as she taunted me. "If you stop accusing me and actually listen you would know that I would not tell Marius what I have seen. If I wanted to ruin your plans I could have done so days ago."

It was a strange feeling, being told off by a girl, let alone one that was not alive. "Why? Why not tell him?"

"We have watched you since your first day. If we wanted to inform Marius of your secrets we would have done so. I trusted you would be smart about concealing your power, but you risk exposure when using it during the night. It was a foolish risk you were about to take."

It felt as though I was being scorned by Lamiere. Not a child.

I stepped forward, hands ready at my sides. I would try everything to end this... thing. "And why do you care if I succeed?"

There was no reason to hide the snarl of the beast that lived within me. The one poised and ready to kill when and if required.

"Because we want this curse to end. And I know why you are here and what you plan to do. I heard your last council with the woman in the water. I know you are here to take Marius's life. It is time this ends."

My brows furrowed as I closed in on the spirit. "We?"

"The rest of us agitated souls. We are trapped in this god forsaken castle as part of the dammed curse your bloodline put upon him. For years I have wandered these rooms, seeing others come and die. Only to join me in this haunting existence. It must end. And we will do anything to see it through."

"I heard you speak with him. You are his closest... friend. Yet you would let me go on knowing that I will kill him?"

The spirit closed her pale eyes for a moment. "You will try to kill him and I do hope you succeed. There are countless souls in this castle that know what happens on that fateful night. How he changes into a..."

"Beast." The elements slipped away from me as the realisation hit. Marius had killed her. Her name likely sat waiting upon the shelf in his study.

"His kind is nameless. The first of whatever he is. A twisted creature made by the same magic that runs through your blood and soul. Believe me,

I do not wish death upon Marius in the manner you may think. I simply wish him freedom. As I want it for myself.”

My body grew heavy as I listened to the phantom. How her face was pinched in sorrow, all but her eyes that seemed to scream with a plea. Pleading for me to do what needed to be done.

“I feel as if I should know your name,” I said. “You know much about me, it is only fair.”

“Victorya,” she replied, blinking her wide, round eyes. It was impossible to imagine the colour they would have been. What shade her hair had glowed beneath the sun. Now she was only shades of grey and white.

“You told him not to get close to me,” I said. “I heard you, Victorya.”

“Because it is worse for us all. If you fail and your soul does not pass on as it should, Marius will be left with yet another painful reminder of what he did. You will wander the shadows. Unseen unless he requires your presence.”

“Where are the others?”

“Hidden. Marius keeps them that way. It has been years since he last let another soul manifest in the way I have. They keep to the shadows, doing what is needed, to set the scene of normalcy in this place.”

I felt my breath shudder as it all made sense to me. “It is you who prepare the food. Who fill the tub with water and provide me with clothes to wear. Why have you not shown yourself before?”

“Because Marius has forbidden it.” Victorya surged forward, a dusting of shadow left in her wake. “You must not tell him I revealed myself to you.”

It was not just her that pleaded to have her secret kept from Marius. And I sensed her fear as if it tugged on my own, overwhelming me.

“Just as you cannot tell him about me.”

“It seems we both hold leverage over one another,” she murmured. “As long as you follow your plans through.” There was something about the way she said it that screamed disbelief.

“You think I will not.”

“I have seen others fall into lust with Marius. You are following a similar path as they did. I fear that you may be our only chance to finally... move on. To wherever it is that waits for us beyond the boundaries of this

place. Please..." Victorya's light voice took a dive into something deeper, more feral and desperate. "You must finish this."

I swallowed, audibly. "This is an act. A way to get close to him."

"Is it?" Victorya floated back from me, inching towards the far wall of the room. "You will need to convince yourself first before you can convince me to believe that."

I frowned, shaking my head in disagreement. But it seemed she was not ready to hear my counter for her comments. For she moved further away from me, as though she was a leaf caught in a gust of wind. Victorya drifted into the stone wall, her body passing through it in a single, shuddering breath. Leaving me alone, in silence, with nothing but the storm of anxiety blustering through my very soul.

“You have been avoiding me,” I accused, gripping the doorway as I studied the hunched figure of Marius in the plush, ornate chair behind his desk.

He hardly looked up from the quill that danced across the parchment before him as I entered his study. “No. You have simply not looked hard enough for me.”

I scoffed a laugh. “I did not realise we were entrapped in a game of hide and seek.”

Marius flicked his ruby stare my way, the corners of his eyes creased by a faint smile. “Oh, had I not made that clear? Why don’t you come in and close the door, you are letting out the precious heat.”

I did as he said, closing the door gently, feeling the welcoming warm kiss of the twin fires that burned. And I now knew who lit them. It had been short hours since Victorya had disappeared through the wall of the bed chamber, leaving me with that uncovered truth.

“Last night you left and did not return. Now you expect me to hunt for you?” I scoffed. “How entitled you are.”

“Yet you came looking for me?” Marius studied me as he dipped the quill into the ink pot. A single drop of black spilled onto the polished oak desk. “It would seem your hunt has been fruitful, for you have found me.”

I swallowed my reply, unsure why irritation roiled through me. “It was easier to navigate my way back this time.” It was. After Marius had explained his ability over the shadows and darkness I wondered if I would

have made it back. But today, it seemed that the walkway was entirely lit by the candles in iron-wrought holders across the walls.

"I willed it so. I told you this study can be used for your... enjoyment. I felt no need to keep it hidden from you."

I had mentally mapped out my walk back to my rooms the evening prior, keeping the direction lodged in my mind. Part of me expected to find the way lost to Marius's shadows, but it was simple to find. How I had missed it before was beyond understanding. But so was his strange power.

I padded across the room, keeping my focus on the bookshelves before me, and not on the devilish creature that sat, muttering quietly, in his chair.

"Have you eaten, Jak?" Marius asked, face alight with concern.

"I am not hungry." My appetite had not clawed its way back to me since seeing the walking spirit.

"Is something bothering you?" I turned from the shelf to Marius who no longer sat behind the desk. Now he stood inches behind me.

I inhaled sharply at his sudden closeness. "You need to stop doing that."

"What?" he breathed; his white hair perfectly arranged. Not a single strand out of place.

I dropped my gaze to my feet, placing my hand on his still chest. "Please, Marius, give me space."

Marius stepped back without the need for me to ask again. "I have had enough company to understand that something bothers you, Jak."

Something had bothered me, but I was not prepared to tell Marius of the company I had shared in his room. Victorya. Now, with Marius before me, I realised just how affected I had been from the interaction. Mother was usually the one to remind me of the heavy pressure of my fate. Now, with her far away, I had a phantom of a young girl to do it in her place.

"And what do you want for me to do? Spill my heart to you?"

"Jak, you do not need to do anything you are not comfortable with. Not with me." His voice was as soft as the expression he made. He took another step back, reluctantly. "I was simply asking."

I thrashed out with my tone, rather than fists as I wished. "Stop that."

One brow raised in confusion above his concerned gaze. "I fear to ask what I must stop doing."

"You speak in such a way that I do not want to hear. Just stop."

Marius's expression melted slightly, his jaw clenching as he regarded my outburst. "If you do not want to hear what I have to say, you are

welcome to leave.”

Leave. And where would I go? Back to the room, or to another empty place filled with the ghosts of his past? I could not return home, and he knew it. It was strange how quickly the anger took hold within me. Just in time for Marius to close the gap between us, only stopped by the thump of my fist against his chest.

“Get away from me,” I warned.

Before I could pound upon him a second time, he caught my fists in his hands. The length of his fingers and width of his palms encased my fists as if they were small apples. His strength was unwavering. His touch cold.

“My kindness offends you?” Marius asked, his grip tightening as I tried to pull free from him. “If you want me to be a beast, then ask me.”

“I want you to be...” I couldn’t say it. Not aloud. *I want you to be easy to hate.*

There it was. The truth that spilled out in my mind, a fact that spurred fear in me far greater than the *beast* Marius warned of. Marius was nothing like he was supposed to be. Nothing how I was lead, taught, to believe.

“Do not plead shyness now, Jak, go on. Say it.” His voice deepened as he hoisted me towards him, my chest crashing into his. He released my hands, wrapped his arm around the curve of my back and held me close. He leaned down until his face was a breath away from mine. “Tell me what you want from me.”

“Release me.” I forced as much command into my tone, but failed as my voice cracked.

“Make me believe what you ask of me.” A snarl erupted from the pits of his stomach as his lip curled over his teeth. Two points flashed in warning.

“Release... me, Marius.” Even I could hear how my own tone conspired against me.

I could hardly breathe as I lost myself in his ruby gaze. Deep down I fell through the darkness that curled inside of him. Somewhere in the distance I felt the four elements sing to me. But there was no siren call that would distract me from him.

Marius leaned down, and as he moved I could not take my focus from his mouth. The dream I had filled my mind, and twisted my stomach in knots, sending thrilling warmth through my chest, my stomach, my entire being.

Perhaps this was all it was. A dream. One of him, and his awfully cold touch, pressed against my body. But I knew that was simply wishful thinking.

Thoughts were almost impossible to hold onto as Marius's lips tightened as he spoke again. "If you want me to release you, perhaps you should release me first."

My entire body chilled as I realised what he spoke of. My arms were wrapped far around the lower half of his broad back, grasping onto him. My knuckles tensed as I fisted his jacket and kept him pressed to me.

But even as his words sunk in, I did not release him.

"I—" There were no words to speak, only the muffled spluttering of a sound as I pushed myself onto my toes. Marius's stare was intense, but so was the thrashing river of my heart that I'd lost my control upon.

Then, without thinking further, I crashed my lips into his. Marius's entire body stiffened in response. Enough to make me regret my actions immediately. But before I could pull away, his demeanour relaxed and he melted into me like butter over an open flame.

Only our lips danced together at first. Until his tongue slowly eased itself into my mouth, parting my lips and coaxing my own to join in. A waltz we both partook in.

I finally relaxed my hold on him, busying my free hands by running them up his torso. His shirt rumped upwards to expose the cold, hard touch of his midriff. Marius's hands held me close, one even reaching for the back of my neck to hold me in place.

I sensed his want to keep me trapped.

But I was not going anywhere.

As we kissed I lost all ability of reason and memory. Gone was the task set at hand for me. All I could think about was his taste. How I inhaled and smelled the incense of sandalwood. His kiss was clean, as though he chewed on clumps of freshly picked mint even now. It also forced any reasoning to a dark cage in the furthest parts of my mind. Locking them away, where I could not reach them.

It was intoxicating.

One moment I was standing, then next he had scooped me up. Instinct had me wrapping my legs around him. I did not fear to fall as his hands now held me up from my behind.

Momentum had us crashing into the shelving. The shock of the crash had me gasping, breaking away from the kiss.

“Did I hurt you?” Marius growled, voice full of allure.

“Not enough.” My words were no more than a gasp, a whisper.

His gaze narrowed and he tilted his head as he grinned at me. Marius trailed a pink tongue across his wet lips as he studied me intently. “May I continue?”

I tightened my legs around him, signalling my response.

In anticipation I closed my eyes, ready to give into his kiss again. But his lips did not find mine. Marius nuzzled into my neck, causing my head to tilt backwards.

A moan escaped my mouth as I exhaled in pleasure. Marius kissed and nipped at the skin of my neck, only breaking the intense sensation as he ran a tongue slowly across my jugular onto the other, untouched, side.

I rolled my neck, doing everything I could to make his access easy. My hands found the back of his head. I trailed them through his hair, ruining the perfect style as I held him close.

Marius growled, but not from anger. From something far sinister. Hunger. It was similar to the sound that the blood hounds made.

“Don’t stop,” I pleaded as he raised his mouth from my neck. I tried to pull him back but he held firm beneath my grip.

“I need you to tell me you are certain you want this.” There was hesitation in his voice. I looked at him, deep in his eyes, noticing his inability to hold my gaze as though he readied himself for disappointment. “If you tell me to stop now then I assure you this will not happen again.”

“Marius.” His grip on my behind firmed as I said his name. “Continue.”

“Have you ever...”

I put my finger to his mouth, almost catching on the points of his canines. “I am grown. I have lived a life before coming as your Claim. And I can assure you I made the most of it.”

“There is something dangerous about you.”

A grin kicked up the corners of my wet mouth. “Do I frighten you?”

Marius’s laugh set my skin afire. “A little. But you also thrill me. In ways I fear I could not explain.”

His mouth found mine again, stopping me from responding. Books fell, scattering across the floor as he dragged my body across the shelving.

Marius stepped over them effortlessly, lifting me from one shelf to the other.

My body tingled, the feeling spreading through every length of me.

I knew Marius felt the same for something hard pressed into me every time he hoisted me in his hands to get a better grip.

I held firm on the back of his neck, tongues dancing among each other.

Lost in the moment, Marius took a misstep and fell. Down to the wooden panelled flooring we tumbled, Marius pulling me close into him. As his body took the impact he hardly made a sound.

I rolled off him, laying on my back next to him as I lost myself to a fit of giggles. It was impossible to keep my eyes open as the laugh intensified and turned into a chuckle that shook my stomach. I had to press a hand down in worry it would jump out and run away. And I was not the only one who laughed, for Marius's deep chuckle joined in with my own.

"I fear I've ruined the moment," he said, barely catching a breath.

"I can honestly say I've never been dropped before." I rolled onto my side to face him. "Do you have a habit of being so reckless?"

Laying upon the ground his face was more defined. Gravity pulled down upon his skin, carving out his jaw and cheekbones. And his skin, it glowed. At the same level as the burning fires it caught the light and glittered.

It was... beautiful.

"It has been many years since I have been in such a ... predicament. Forgive my clumsiness for lack of practice."

My chest pranged at the thought of Marius with another. I pushed the feeling down to the pits of my belly where I uncovered another I had buried.

He was my enemy. At least that was what I had come to know. Yet here I lay beside him with the phantom touch of his lips across my own.

I rolled onto my back, a rush of anxiety coursing through me as the realisation flooded back through the barrier of reality.

My breath caught as I looked up at the vaulted ceiling. It was painted entirely with dark navy all besides the lines of gold and black that sliced in precise and deliberate shaping's. Peppered across the ceiling were gold markings of connected lines through star-like figures.

It was a celestial chart. A map of the sky similar to those I had seen in Mother's many tomes. Except this, this was far more skilled than anything

she could have shown me. Albeit, more beautiful than the night itself.

As though the ceiling was made of glass and I looked up at the constellation of night through it.

Noticing my awe, Marius spoke softly. "It is the very same design that has lasted all these years without the need for repair. It is breath-taking, is it not?"

I leaned back on my elbows, still focusing on the chart of stars and constellations. Although they were not labelled, they did not need to be. I recognized many of the shapes from my short lessons with Lamiere.

"What do you see?"

"Aquila, the eagle." I lifted a finger to point to the shape that had been joined with a line between ten different markings of stars.

Marius too lifted a finger and picked out the very same shape I had seen. "Crowned with the star Altair. You see the one we made bigger than the rest?"

I could. Only by a small margin, the shape was slightly bigger than the rest it was linked up with.

"Who is we?" I asked him, latching onto something he had just said. Marius kept his stare on the ceiling.

"A long lost... friend."

The air thickened with sadness as his lashes thickened with moisture. Although I lay mere inches from Marius's side, I felt his body stiffen. Then, in a blink, he was standing. His movements a blur.

I sat up with a sinking feeling in my gut. "I apologise if I have pried too far."

Marius had his back to me, arms folded over his chest as he contemplated in silence. "Tonight I have overstepped, Jak, forgive me."

"What are you talking about?"

Marius faced me with an expression of cold stone. "I should "

"If you think for a moment that you can just disappear on me again, stop. You cannot keep flouncing in and out, leaving me to ponder my thoughts." The words came tumbling out of me as a result of my pure desperation for him to stay. Deep down this feeling sickened me, but I kept it buried. For now. "There is something you are not telling me. You have said it, I am going to die anyway. Why not spill your secrets to me? Let me listen to your story for you count yourself to be a storyteller."

Marius looked back to the floor. Before he could utter a word, I closed the space between us and pressed a hand to his chest. There was no flutter of a heartbeat within it.

“The mural was completed during a time in my life when I was free. Free of this curse. When I was trapped by another, one who held my love.” A single tear slipped down his cheek. “It was that love that resulted in... in this.”

The curse. He did not need to say it aloud for me to understand what he suggested.

“When you lose everything you have loved, sometimes the grief can return to ruin the small moments of good that are left. Grief is a silent assassin, lurking in the dark of one’s soul, ready to cloak any light in shadow.”

I reached up, instinctively, and brushed the cold tear from his equally cold face. It soaked the tip of my thumb where it continued its descent to my wrist. Unlike Marius, I had never lost anything so dear before.

“Thank you for sharing that with me,” I said quietly.

Marius took my forearm in his monstrous hand and lifted my wrist to his mouth. He placed a kiss upon my skin where his tear had left a wet trail. “I should be thanking you. It has been simple to grow such habits of running away from these feelings. In all these years that have passed I have run from room to room, shadow to shadow. There is something about you that makes it easier to... cope.”

I blushed, guilt stabbing its talon-like grip into my stomach. The need to change the course of the subject was intense.

“Care for a drink?”

Marius grinned through his glistening eyes. “Do you read minds, Jak?”

I stiffened. That was a power that my kind had long lost. “Impossible. It was simply a wild guess.”

“Then yes, Jak, I would love a drink. You stay here and I will be back shortly.”

“Last time you promised that you did not return at all.”

Marius leaned in close, casting a shadow over me. “The difference is that this time it seems we have some unfinished business to attend.”

A tickling sensation spread from my feet until it roared through my entire body. Beneath his intense stare I felt my knees buckle ever so

slightly. And the promise of his return moistened my mouth with anticipation.

“Do not disappear on me, Jak,” Marius said at the doorway to his study.

“Couldn’t even if I wanted to,” I replied, unable to hide the raw truth in my words.

There was a missing book. Someone had removed it from the shelving recently for the outline was still clear from the layering of dust around it. I also knew that this was the first book Marius had written for he had explained they were organised in order from first to most recent. The space between the missing tome and the next was large.

It was not the only thing I noticed as I studied the shelving in Marius's absence. The older the books he wrote, the longer they were. Bindings of pages so thick that two hands were required to hold them open.

But the further I went along the never-ending shelves, the more it was clear that the recent books were shorter. Dramatically so. Small novella's that were no more than a handful of pages long.

What had resulted in Marius writing so little in the more recent years? Was it his lack of want, or the distance he put between himself and the other Claims?

He likely planned my story now. Plotting what my life could have been like if I survived whatever hell waited for me on the final day.

But I knew he would never finish the story.

As I studied the empty shelving, I felt the sudden urge to vomit. Knowing what I had to do no longer warmed me from the inside. It conjured the freezing chill of dread to sit, waiting, in my soul. It was clear to me now that Marius was not the beast at all. *I was.*

"Here you are..."

I jumped at the sudden appearance of Marius. Forcing a smile, I turned to see him standing with a dusty bottle of undisclosed liquid in one hand

and two crystal glasses in the other.

“Did I scare you again?” He bit down on his lower lip, likely remembering my previous warning and how that ended up.

“Sorry.” I ran a hand through my brown curls, the other resting on my hip. “I was lost to my own thoughts.”

The glasses clinked as Marius rested them upon his oaken desk. “No bother. I thought you might like this wine for its vintage. Has been in the undercroft long before my own father was born within these walls.”

It was hard to imagine it as Marius spoke of his family. “He must have been a King to be born in such a place.”

“He was a man who was no more than lucky to be raised in such a place. From memory his mother was a servant to the ruling house that dwelled here. He simply grew up in the shadow of the great family that lived in this place.”

“So how is it you came to claim it as your own?”

Marius slowly popped the cork from the dark-green glass bottle. He lifted it to his nose and took a deep inhale before pouring the red wine in the two waiting glasses. “I inherited it when my father passed. During his childhood he grew close with the daughter of the Lord who owned this castle. They fell in love, married and had me. Their sole heir.”

“Which makes you a Lord.”

“*Made* me a Lord,” Marius interjected. “Now drink with me. All this talk of the past is making me feel like I am sinking internally.”

He handed over a glass which I took without question. Our fingers grazed for a moment as I did so.

As I lifted the rim to my lips, Marius spoke up. “Are we not going to toast?”

“Toast?” I questioned, breath fogging the crystallised glass. “To what?”

Marius lifted his glass before him, urging me to copy him. “To discovering new friends. May the exploration only continue.”

My mouth dried as our glasses clinked into each-other. Quickly I took a sip, the wine washing away my emotions as it spilled down my throat. “Marius, may I ask you something?”

His pale brows arched above his inquisitive stare. “I fear I do not have a choice.”

“There is a missing book.” I turned to the bookcase in question. “I was certain that something was in its place yesterday. But now it is gone.”

“I felt the need to take it for my own reading pleasure. There are plenty of others for you to borrow if you require.”

Marius did not lie about removing it. But I believed there was more of a reason for it.

“It was about the first Claim, wasn’t it?”

Stories of the mangled body that had been left on the boundaries of the castle sprung to mind. The one and only time that a Claim had ever been returned. The first of Marius’s victims. I knew little of the person for it seemed that the time that had past diluted the knowledge Mother had known of the victim.

“He was not a Claim.” Marius’s voice grew sharp. “Not in the same manner you are.”

Marius revealed more in the first five words than he had meant to. I witnessed his face pinch in frustration as he too realised.

The first person to fall victim to Marius was a boy and he was not a Claim.

I pieced the puzzle together in my mind. “If he was the first, and not a Claim, he must have been ”

Glass smashed into the ground, sending a splash of red wine across the floor. I jumped out of the way of the littering shards, almost spilling my own wine down my front in the process.

Marius stood, hands clenched at his sides, breathing shallow. His face was tilted to the ground, but his eyes glowed like hot coals in a fire. Through his loose white hair, he glared at me.

“Stop pressing for answers. You may not like what you find.”

I stumbled back, watching the man before me change into the beast I had grown to know him as. Shadows quivered in the corners of the study as he flexed his sharpened nails and exposed his pointed teeth.

“You... you have only just toasted to continuing our exploration of one another.” I tried to keep my voice as steady as I could as his face morphed before my eyes.

“Do not use my words against me,” Marius seethed.

“Or what!?” I shouted, my own anger rising to the surface once again. All those buried feelings of guilt at what I had done came barging to the surface. “What are you going to do?”

Marius shook violently. “Go.”

“I will no ”

“GO.”

His shout shook the very foundations of the castle. Urged on by his sudden, shocking anger. *How dare you.* I longed to throw the glass of wine at him. To hurtle the flames from the hearth and burn away the shadows he threatened to send after me. I watched as they thrummed with his control.

I did not fear him. Not entirely. But the tension that riddled between us was close to unbearable.

Before he could shout again I moved for the door which he partially blocked. I made sure to slam my shoulder into him as I passed.

I do not fear you, for I am the beast. The thought kept me going until the study was far behind me.

I almost expected the spectral figure of the young girl to meet me back in the chamber. To hear her scorn me for acting out.

But I would not let anyone speak to me that way. Not Marius. Not anyone.

There was no risk of Marius following me here. I knew it in my soul. So I sat back upon the four-poster bed and reached for the discarded scrying bowl.

Now it was time to consult with the coven.

“Something is wrong. I can tell.” Mother’s voice cleared through the shimmering water before her face even had time to materialise. “It is still night which means the beast is awake. Yet you call upon me, as though it is the smart decision to make in your situation. Did I not warn you of using your powers during the night?”

“Marius will not come here.” Already I longed to pick up the bowl and throw it across the room. But I held firm, biting down into my lower lip to keep my tone free of annoyance. “We are safe to speak.”

Her sharp brow furrowed, creating lines across her almost perfect forehead. “You refer to him by name.”

“A name I feel that you knew long before sending me here,” I snapped.

Mother paused before responding, looking to someone who sat before her out of view of the scrying bowl. “It was not a piece of information I deemed important enough for you to know. His name changes nothing towards the end result. Everything else you have learned from me does.”

What else had she kept from me? I narrowed my gaze, holding back the fire from boiling the water in the bowl. “Tell me about the first person he killed. The body he left on the boundary.”

“Why does it matter to you?”

I leaned in, hissing through gritted teeth, “So you do not deny knowing more about him? Pray tell what other information have you decided I did not need to know!”

“Whatever has gotten into you can cease immediately, Jak. I am your mother, you do not speak to me in such a manner.”

“I do not like being lied to,” I said, gripping the sheets beneath me until my knuckles mimicked their whiteness.

“No one has lied to you,” Mother replied, voice as cold as Marius’s touch. “Perhaps you have never thought to ask the question.”

“Then tell me. I ask now, do I not?”

I could not make sense of the quiet murmurings that came from the person sitting out of view. Mother did not hide as she glanced towards them again, listening intently before nodding in agreement. “He was merely a victim. There, now you know as much as I do. His body was drained entirely of blood. Drunk dry by the very creature you should currently be getting close to rather than pressing me for questions. Have you thought to ask him?”

She was keeping the truth from me. I knew it.

“Tell me who he was,” I pressed again, not giving up until I was satisfied.

“Jak.”

“Tell me.”

“What has transpired to get you in such a state?” she asked calmly for the first time, leaning over the bowl until her curtain of dark, straight, hair fell on either side. It gave the illusion that it was only the two of us having the conversation. Although I knew that others listened on from her side. Perhaps Victorya listened on to me, hidden in her astral form. Perhaps she too knew the boiling anger I kept buried, trusting that this was *not* the time to tell me what to do.

“It is not long until the fateful day, Jak. Do not let such insignificant topics cloud your mind and the task at hand. I will do you a favour and tell you everything you seek to know when you return home with his head. Think of it as yet another pending praise for your successful return.”

“Why not now?” I rocked back on the bed, burying my face in my hands in defeat. “What if I do not make it back?”

I almost felt the shift in temperature in the room. How the mundane storm that brewed within Mother was moments from bursting out. If she had true power like me, she would have been unstoppable.

“Then you will deserve nothing. If you fail, you deserve what is coming to you.”

Shocked, I could hardly hold a breath long enough to string a response together. “Mother...”

“You are different since the last time you called for me. Softer. Not the hard-edged dagger that I have moulded with my bare hands and own sacrifice.” Mother took a shuddering breath, battering down the anger she fought so hard to keep in. “I sense a change in you, one that fills me with great concern.”

As I kept my eyes closed, the flashes of wasted hours of preparation burst through my mind. Days of magic and physical training, where the other children of town were allowed to go to school and learn mundane matters. They, unlike me, did not have the worries of the survival of their own kind to think of.

“I will not fail,” I said quietly. *Will I not?* That mocking voice returned in the back of my mind.

“Say it enough and I may start to believe you.”

Her distrust in me caused my heart to harden. It tugged down on my stomach and made me feel sick. Dread. It made me feel worthless beneath her judging, watchful stare.

“Mother, I will not fail.”

I came to regret calling upon her. Again.

“I have a piece of advice for you, Jak. Forget the small details and focus on why you are there. I can see that the creature has wormed his way into your mind. Making you ask questions that you would never have uttered before you entered his domain. Keep focused. Not just for our sake, but for your own.”

Mother must have knocked the bowl from the table, for the vision of her vanished after one sudden movement. I hardly caught what had caused it. One moment she looked at me, the next the water in the bowl was still and... empty.

In a rage of emotion, I kicked out at the sheets, sending the bowl across the floor in a crash.

Frustration not only caused by her, but what she said. Perhaps she was right about Marius worming his way into my mind. Just thinking of him caused my lips to tingle as though his kiss had lingered. I did have to focus. This was my fault, allowing Marius to soften me with his words. Work me down with his intense presence and reaching hands. *Strong hands*. Yet I had to get close to him, enough to get him at his most vulnerable. Whatever that meant in the end.

Mother's lingering presence made the room feel unbearably cold. I pulled the sheets over my legs, fending off the shakes that caused me to tremble like a leaf in a billowing storm.

Who was the first person to die by his hands? Where was the book? Why did my mother and Marius want to hide it from me?

I sat like that for a while, skimming through the questions only to add more as I went. Sleep was impossible, and the usual hunger I felt nonexistent.

Over and over I went through the events of the day, trying to find a reason for the need for secrecy. Marius would be hidden in whatever dark hole he retreated to during the day. Even if I wanted to find him, he would be in...

The undercroft.

The word sang true as it rattled across my storming mind. It was a place, deep in the pits of the castle, far below the very chamber I sulked in. A place vacant of daylight. Perfect for Marius to dwell in until night fell again.

I bolted up in bed, knowing exactly where I had to go for answers. And I had an inkling where I would find the entrance.

The door at the back of the dining hall was still left unlocked. It took all my will power to walk past the deliciously presented food that was waiting upon the long, oak table. Instead, I kept my focus on the task at hand.

To find the book.

As I entered the dark halls beyond the door, I felt a presence around me. In my haste I had not brought a source of light with me. Although it was early morning I didn't have a clue what Marius did during his time away. Did he sleep like I did? Or wait the day out until he made his way back up to the surface of the castle?

The deeper I walked, the more the walls around me closed in. The ceiling seemed to shrink down upon me, and the smell of damp rock and moss only grew more intense with each step. Without light to guide me I had to use my hands to trail along the slick walls. Using my touch and slow, careful footing to make sure I did not fall on some unseen object.

It was not long until the strange foreboding of presence was justified. A kiss of a gaze furrowed into the back of my neck. I slowed, hands falling to my side, as a chill caused my skin to erupt in goosebumps.

"I know you are here," I spoke quietly, although it did nothing to stop the echoing of my voice across the enclosed corridor of stone.

"You should not be down here," Victorya said from before me. Not caring if she witnessed my magic, I lifted a hand in front of me and called upon my favourite element. Fire.

It sprung to life across my open palm. A curling of orange and gold that haloed the strange corridor in warmth and light. Victorya floated in the air, face pinched and arms folded over her see-through body.

“Because Marius is lurking somewhere far down here? Or because it is out of bounds for some other undisclosed reason? I will let you pick your answer.”

Victorya hunched her small shoulders. “It would seem that you *also* are in a foul mood.”

“You’ve seen him then?”

The conjured flame illuminated her pale form. I looked to the ground to see that only my shadow lay upon it.

“I have. And if he sees you down here then your chance of... you will not get far.”

“If he did not want me to come here he would have locked the door behind him. Shutting me out. He is rather good at that.”

“It is habit,” Victorya said. “It has been many a year since a Claim dared venture to find Marius during the hours of the living. This would usually be a time that they longed to be uninterrupted. Free of his company... when he was willing to share it.”

I hesitated before taking a step to walk past her. Victorya made no move or indication that she would get out of my way.

“You will let me pass,” I said. I could walk through her, just waltz between her spectral form as she had with the wall of my bedroom.

“And why are you so certain?”

I took a breath, gaze cutting holes through the already dead girl. “I am tired of being kept from the truth. Let me go so I can...”

“Can wake him? Impossible to do so during the day. Question him? If Marius has ignored your requests for answers he would have done so with a reason. Do not think your presence in his personal chambers is going to sway him to suddenly give up whatever he is keeping from you.”

I smiled, having obtained yet more information I needed. This was, as guessed, the way to wherever Marius kept himself hidden.

“Good,” I hissed, “because nothing you have said relates to what I am doing here. So... move.”

Throwing out the flame, I controlled its hurtling trajectory to land upon the girl. But instead it passed through her. Victorya did not flinch. Instead she zoomed forward until her haunting gaze was uncomfortably close to my

own. "Beware how you act around me. For you will find that you go hungry before your stay comes to an end. You will be without fresh clothes. No bath will be drawn. I will... not... aid you."

"Help me!" I laughed. "If you wanted to help you would let me proceed. If he will not wake during my visit then what is the harm of proceeding?"

"What do you hope to find?" she asked, bluntly. "If it is to kill him during his sleep, then you will be wasting your time."

"I would not do tha—" The thought had not even occupied my mind. Killing Marius now, whilst he was at his most vulnerable. "That is not what I hope to achieve."

"Good, because you would be a fool to think that Marius has not tried to end his life before. It never works."

The flame in my palm died down to a simple glow. My connection to it severing as her words settled over me. "He has?"

"Not for a long time. It was terrible. Watching him being so broken. So tired. I will not explain his attempts further but know that you cannot do it."

I spluttered out my response, "I do not wish to."

What made the final night any different? I knew that my powers were linked to his demise, but why?

"As much as that relieves me... for now, we both know that we need you to do it. In the end."

"I need a book," I said, changing the course of the conversation as quickly as I could. I forced more energy into the flame so it burned brighter once more. "Marius has it. I know he is keeping it from me and I want to know why."

"Stealing what you seek will do you no favours," Victorya said. "Have you asked him for it?"

"Yes..." I stilled, shaking my head. "No. No I didn't. The topic got heated and... there is no chance that Marius will give it to me. Not after the way he reacted when I asked a simple question."

"You will ask him next time," Victorya commanded in her small, but powerful voice. "If he does not comply then I will retrieve the book for you myself. But know that I do not like going behind his back."

"You don't?" I scoffed, ready to point out her double standard. "Because you certainly are encouraging me to kill him."

"Trust me, Jak. He would encourage you to do the same if he believed it was a possibility. Now go. Leave him to rest. You do not understand how

earned his moments of peace are. From the shadows beneath your eyes it seems that you too need to sleep. Try again with him when you wake.”

I looked to the waiting darkness ahead of her, imagining the space in which Marius kept to. Then I nodded, forcing my leaden body to turn back towards the direction of the dining hall. “For someone so young, you surely behave in the manner of an adult.”

“I am far older than you, Jak. Do not be fooled by my frozen appearance. Even in this form I have witnessed more of life and death than you could imagine.”

I shot a glance over my shoulder to say something in return, but she had vanished. Gone in a single moment. Yet her presence still lingered on the back of my neck until I finally closed the door to the chamber I now called my own.

Until next time, I guess.



KATHARINE RETURNED THE NEXT EVENING. I HEARD HER SOFT VOICE WHICH floated up from the lower levels of the castle. Marius was with her, speaking in his usual low tone whilst she did not try and hide what she spoke of. I stayed out of view, hiding behind the splitting banister. On soft feet I had edged closer to try and see the scene as they conversed but the creak of the banister stopped me from leaning over any further for fear it would snap beneath my weight.

“How is your mother?” Marius asked.

“Not well. Every day her breathing shallows. I fear she does not have long left.” Katharine’s sadness was palpable.

“Let me give you something else to trade in for coin. I have other items you can...”

“Marius, stop. You have done enough.”

“Until she heals, I will not feel such a way.”

Katharine paced into view. I could see the top of her hair and the colourless, ripped dress she wore. But her expression was hidden from view as I watched from my perch.

“If I turn up with yet more unbelievable goods then they will sure catch wind of my visits. You do not know what they will do to me, to Mother, if

they find out. And before you fret about not letting them harm us, you forget you are the princess kept trapped in a tower.”

“Waiting for my prince charming to turn up and save me,” Marius droned, spurring a weak laugh from Katharine. “If only it were that simple, little one.”

“I do not hear any crying or screaming from your Claim. Has he settled into his final days?”

My breath hitched as she looked up. I rocked backwards, just in time for her gaze to miss me.

“Do not speak like that, Katharine.” I could not see Marius, but I could imagine the pinching of his expression as he spoke. How he likely brushed the loose strand of white hair from his forehead, lips turned down.

“Have I touched a nerve?”

“Perhaps you have. He has settled well... considering. Did you want me to call upon him so you can thank him for saving your life from the blood hounds?”

Katharine folded her arms across her narrow chest. “It was not his blood that healed me—”

“Ahh,” Marius interrupted. “I finally see what you came for.”

“It worked on me, it might help my mother. I promise I will not ask for another thing again.”

She wanted Marius’s blood. A vision of him biting into his own wrist with his monstrous fangs before letting his dark gore drip into Katharine’s waiting mouth filled my mind. How her broken body had reformed and healed before my eyes.

Yet another example of the power he held.

“You would take that risk but will not pawn some useless item I can give you for coin?”

“There is no medicine left for her, Marius. I, we, have tried everything to better her state. You should see her coughing. How it racks her body and leaves her exhausted for hours. This is no state for anyone to be in. She told me of your kindness when it was her who visited you. Can you not do it for her?”

I expected him to refuse further. To tell her of what a dangerous risk this would be. Marius did not know what would happen to her. But if my mother or the coven caught wind that Katharine visited, they *would* punish her. If they saw the truth of what she requested from him this evening...

The thought alone turned my stomach.

Katharine was a desperate girl, looking for an equally desperate solution. Come to think of it, I had heard of a woman who was sickly in the town. She lived in a ramshackle house on the outskirts. It was likely why I had never seen Katharine before if that was where she lived. There was never a need for me to leave town that far.

“I will do it. For you. For Paloma. But you must be careful. It is at your own risk as to what happens when you give her it.” The warning in his voice caused my fists to tense into balls. “For you both, I hope this works as you wish it will.”

“Marius, thank you.”

Marius stepped into view, enough that I could see his crown of white hair. Katharine wrapped her arms around him, burying her face into his chest. “Do not thank me yet, little one. Return and tell me of its results, will you? I suppose it is a nice thought that I can help someone beyond this entrapment. For all it is worth, I hope it works.”

“So do I.” Her voice was muffled as she kept a hold of him.

I rocked back, unable to witness anymore. Guilt riddled through me. It felt wrong watching such a personal moment. So I left them, padding back to my room on bare feet, as quietly as I could muster across the panelled flooring.

Marius is not a beast.

I found myself losing tears as I picked up my walk into a run.

He is not the beast.

How could someone care so much about life, when those beyond this castle cared little about him?

In that moment I saw the truth, I understood it all. The realisation clear to me as I burst into his chamber. A room he never slept in. My vision blurred so much that I almost tripped. I threw myself onto the bed, unable to calm my breathing. My chest ached. I pressed a hand into it, trying to still the feeling of it cracking clean open.

Crying, I was crying. Something I had long left to the past. It was a strange feeling. A breathless, painful ache that spread across my chest as the unfamiliar wetness sliced down my cheeks.

I raised a hand to clear them, only for the moisture to return as more tears were unleashed.

“You want to kill him,” I spluttered through chesty sobs. Trying to convince myself of my fate. My only purpose. “You want to kill him.”
Want to or *have* to?

“If you are cold, I can offer you my jacket?” Marius said, keeping in step with me as we walked to the castle’s exit. He must have noticed the shiver of my skin, or how I had wrapped my arms across my chest to keep in the warmth. It seemed colder each night that passed. I suppose, with winter pressing on beyond the castle, it was inevitable for the pathetic fires to hardly keep out the chill. Yet Marius never seemed bothered.

“Will you not be cold?” I asked, staring mostly at my feet as we moved through the castle foyer.

“I do not fear nor feel the cold. So please, it is a clear night tonight and I would feel more comfortable knowing you are not shivering beside me. That and it is... distracting. I would not care for you to catch a sickness and pass before your stay here concludes.” Marius shrugged the maroon jacket from his broad shoulders without needing to offer again, carefully straightening out the material before holding it out for me to slip into.

I smiled, not one that was forced or fake. I felt it tug up at my lips as his arms flexed beneath the material of his white shirt.

One hand at a time, I weaved myself into the jacket. There was no warmth left over from his body, but it was far better than the crisp nightly air that scratched at my skin.

“You are certain the hounds will not attack?” I asked, trying not to be overwhelmed by his closeness. Or what happened last time this little space between us was beheld.

“They would not dare if I am with you. They may stalk us, but that is as far as they will go. As long as we stay on the path and do not deviate, we will be safe.”

Marius had not mentioned Katharine’s visit and I felt that I could not simply add it into the, currently, stiff conversation. It had been a few, long, hours since I had listened in on them and I still felt guilty. Even more so to find out how personal the conversation had been. By the time his heavy knocks sounded on the chamber room’s door my eyes had dried, but the sadness had still taken root in my chest.

I had briefly looked to Marius’s wrist to see if any marks were left from his bloodletting. But his skin was untouched by scars or marks. As if noticing my stare, he tugged down at the ruffled sleeve of his shirt to hide his perfect skin.

“I thought we would spend yet another day in the study?” I questioned, hugging the jacket around my chest. It was so big the sleeves kept covering my hands.

“Another evening surrounded by books... ugh.” He poked his tongue beyond his lip. A tongue I had not long been so familiar with. “There is something I want to share with you that is far greater than that study.”

“How mysterious.” I laughed, hoping it covered my nerves. There was tension between us. An unspoken conversation left after yesterday’s abrupt ending. He had not apologised, nor did I expect him to. Marius was a perfect blend of cautious and polite. Offering a steady arm as we walked down the stairs yet keeping painfully tense beneath my touch.

We hardly exchanged another word until we reached the double, front doors to the castle. The very same that had been locked the last time I had checked.

Of course they now were left open. *How convenient.* As Marius pulled them open the evening breeze rushed into the castle’s entrance. The curtains across the windows flapped wildly, sending bouts of dust into the air. The flames across the grand chandelier that hung above us flickered, some even going out beneath the force of the natural, winter winds.

“Quickly,” Marius whispered. “Before it blows every candle out. This castle is far more... acceptable beneath the glow of fire.”

I moved with haste, tightening the jacket around me as I bowed into the gust and left beyond the doors.

My cheeks nipped beneath the chill, my nose running almost instantly as I stepped outside. The great doors creaked as Marius closed us off from the firelight.

Then we were bathed in night. Only the moon and stars a source of light above us.

“And you expect me to fumble my way around the grounds! I will walk straight off the path and into the jaws of your little pets,” I said in jest. However, even I could not hide the true fear I felt knowing they lurked in the shadows. Waiting. My power would be kept within, and that felt as though I was without my most important limb. My weapon.

I was... vulnerable.

Marius's hand found mine and I gasped out of my mindless worry. It was not the warm, lifeful touch that fought away the cold. But it was comforting nonetheless. “I shall guide you. Do not worry yourself.”

It took a moment to relax into his control as he guided me through the dark gardens. I could make out some shapes, but without the light of a flame it was impossible for me to figure out where each step would end up. Soon enough my eyes adjusted to the eternal dark and my tight grip on his hand eased. But I did not let go.

“I hope you can swim.” His comment caught me off guard. Up until this point he had kept silent during our walk.

“Swim?” I questioned, just the thought alone sent a violent shiver across my skin. From my knowledge the nearest coastal line was days' travel by horse, if you were lucky enough to have the coin to own one.

“One of the beauties of this castle is the hot springs located among the land. Back when I was younger the townsfolk would visit during the winter months to bask in the glory of the warmed waters. It was magnificent. A place in which I enjoyed to frolic. I thought it would be the best way to negate the colder nights.”

“And keep away from the books?” I said, looking up at him side-on through thick lashes.

He sighed, eyes unblinking, lips pursed. “Precisely.”

“I admit, I have never heard of such a place before.” No one ever spoke of the castle before the curse. It was almost hard to believe it did not just conjure into existence the moment it was laid upon Marius. His life before had never seemed to matter to Mother or the coven.

“I thought that would be the case,” Marius muttered, keeping his pace slow beside me. His longer legs always kept him a foot ahead, but I could sense his controlled restraint to not pull me along. “We will add the mystery of the hot springs to the ever-growing list of others that I fear has been lost with time.”

There it was again, the tugging sadness that seemed to drawl beneath his deep voice. A pause of conversation followed, broken by me clearing my throat and squeezing his hand without thought.

“To answer your question, I cannot swim. There hasn’t exactly been any opportunities for practice back home.” It was not a lie. My control of the water as an extension of my power meant I did not fear it. Although I had not been submerged in a vast body of water before, I trusted in my ability and instinct to keep me afloat. “You surely do not expect us to go in now? It is dark and cold.”

“They are hot springs... Jak.” Even as he spoke, I could hear the smile that had returned to his mouth. As though he laughed through each, prolonged word. “I will not solve the darkness issue, but you will be warmer within the spring than outside on the bank.”

I shivered on cue. “Then can we get to the springs with haste? This walk is not as relaxing as I thought it would be.”

“Patience, Jak, it will be worth the wait.”



THE BODY OF WATER SAT NESTLED AMONG THE GROUNDS OF THE CASTLE just as Marius had explained. The crescent moon was painted across its surface as if it were the aquatic twin to the one which ruled the night above us. Tendrils of mist rose from the lake like ghostly fingers. Even from my distance on the grass-bed beside it I felt its enticing warmth.

Everything was still here. Beautiful.

“It is best you do not wet your clothes,” Marius explained, no longer holding my hand. “By the time you come out you will be thankful for something dry to wear.”

I turned to question him, only to swallow my words. Marius had stripped the shirt from his back, lifting it slowly over his head. His muscle flexed as he tugged his arms from the sleeves last. I watched as he

scrunched the material into a ball and threw it to the ground without care. Marius was sculpted with more definition and precision than I could have imagined. His chest was broad, but his hips were narrow. The image of pure strength. Muscles flexed in his chest and stomach, tightening in mounds that protruded from his skin.

“Everything okay?” he asked, hands reaching for the brass buckle of his belt. His smile was sly, his eyes narrowed as if he could read the thoughts that filled my mind.

I shook my head and turned back to the calm surface of water. Hand to my chin, I tried everything to not look back... no matter how loud the siren call to do so was. “You truly want me to get in?”

“That is completely up to you,” Marius said. “You are welcome to stand here and watch.”

Before I had a chance to act, Marius had thrown himself into the water, disturbing the once glass-like surface. I tumbled back away from the incoming splash of water that had risen up in response. Water soaked the bottom of my trousers and dampened the bank which now squelched beneath my boots.

“What happened to keeping dry?” I shouted, looking back at Marius who kept afloat in the water. My voice echoed across the surface as though it was a skipping stone.

“There is nothing wrong with getting wet,” he called out, as his arms moved to keep him afloat.

My mouth dried as I studied him. The water did little to conceal his naked body. Naked. Completely. I quickly looked away, cheeks warming as his alabaster skin glowed proudly beneath the water. The pile of his clothes confirmed all I already thought.

He had removed every article. Even his undergarments.

“You are...” I muttered, covering my eyes with my hand.

“Yes.”

“Well, could you not have... I don’t know. Kept something on?”

“And why would I do that?” I could hear that gentle swoosh of water as Marius sliced his arms through the spring. “If it makes you uncomfortable you do not need to do the same.”

It was not discomfort I felt. No, the feeling was far from it. It was not only my cheeks that warmed but my stomach and chest. My skin prickled with... anticipation. A flashback to the study filled my mind for a moment.

“Turn away,” I said, quietly.

“Speak up.”

I lifted my stare and looked him dead in the eye. “I said turn away.”

Marius’s grin widened whereas his eyes narrowed as he nodded. “As you wish.”

I only reached for my shirt when the back of Marius’s head was all I could see. A giggle threatened to escape me as I caught a glimpse of his behind that rippled beneath the water’s surface. I tugged at my clothing and left it in a heap on the bed of the lake. Like Marius, I did not leave a single item of clothing on.

It was easy to forget when my mind was full of thrill and wonder. Deep in the corners of my mind I could remember what I was here to do. But now, out here with Marius, the cold, the water, I gave myself the moment to just... live. Without rule, or fate, or anything really.

The breeze across my bare body sent a shiver through me until it turned into violently shaking. My teeth chattered and my toes curled. I stepped closer to the warm mist of the lake, thankful for the source of heat.

“Can I turn around yet?” Marius called, turning his head far enough for me to pick up my pace.

My heart skipped at the thought of Marius seeing me like this. Exposed. Feet first I stepped into the water and sighed. As soon as I entered it the warm fought away at the cold that seemed to have embedded itself into my bones.

Soon enough I was completely submerged, with the water up to my chin. “You can look now.”

Marius turned instantly to face me, the water rippling around him. “Wonderful, is it not?”

I felt completely relaxed as the water hugged me. “Could you not have mentioned this place any sooner? I have an awful feeling that getting out of this is going to be the worst part.”

“For you.” Marius swam towards me, his large arms treading water.

“Are you just so terribly brave that the cold does not affect you?”

“I am always cold, Jak, even now. It has been a long time since I last felt the warmth of this water. Even now it feels no different to me.”

“I do not understand.”

“May I?” Marius asked, offering a hand for me to take.

I took it without hesitation. His soft palm pressed against mine as his fingers held onto me and all I felt was his usual chill.

“How?” I asked, squeezing onto his hand as if I would lend his cold skin some of my warmth.

“That is an extremely good question. One that can only be answered by my assumptions. The curse altered me in many ways and this is just one of them. I am cold. Always.”

Just the thought made my teeth want to chatter. I tugged Marius closer, enjoying the sudden shock that splashed across his face. His strong chest pressed against mine and he let go of my hand, holding both of his around the bottom of my back. Even as the warm water kept me comfortable it did not stop the shiver of delight that ran across my arms and neck.

“You are dangerous,” Marius said, ruby glare piercing right through me. “So dangerous that I fear you know just how to use it as a weapon.”

“Coming from the creature that is doomed to kill me.”

“You say that as if it does not bother you.” Marius’s brow peaked.

“Well, perhaps you will not kill me,” I whispered, face close to his. Lips only inches apart.

Marius eyes flicked from my parted mouth to my narrowed stare. I sensed his want to kiss me as his hands tightened on my back, pressing my naked body upon his. He parted his lips to match mine and a low growl emitted from his throat, catching me off guard.

I pulled away slightly until Marius let go of me completely. His face pinched in what I could only see as... shame. Then he turned away, running a wet hand through his white hair with his back to me once again.

“What is wrong?” I questioned. “If I said something wrong...”

“It is not you, Jak, but me. I fear I was getting away from myself for a moment.”

Marius did not look at me as he spoke, instead he stared off into the dark distance of the lake. I paddled towards him until I was close enough to reach out for his shoulder. As my touch gripped him he shrugged me off.

“Don’t...” He turned his head to the side, enough for me to see his forehead creased and lips curled over his teeth. “Please.”

I snapped my hand back from him as I took in the profile of his contorted face.

“You do not scare me, Marius.”

I felt the need to say it. To tell him. I could raise the water of this lake around him now and encase him in an entrapment if he dared strike for me. But it was what caused his sudden change in attitude that encouraged me to wait out his temperament.

“The hunger never rears its presence so soon,” Marius said, stretching his neck from the left then to the right. “Give me a moment and it should subside.”

I waited in silence as Marius concentrated on whatever internal battle he was having.

“What do you hunger for?” I finally asked, breaking the painful silence between us.

Marius said one word that had me frozen within the body of warmed water. “Blood.”

Mother had told me time and time again that the body that was first left for the villagers to discover was completely drained of blood. Empty. A vessel of flesh and bone. The local healer had studied the remains only to find every vein and vessel dried, like a petal beneath the sun. Yet the body had not been sliced, cut or stabbed by a blade. Only the multiple puncture marks that peppered the victim's body gave evidence of what could have caused it.

Two, small puckered marks, the perfect distance of one's clamped jaw.

Blood. Marius's word echoed through me.

"I am not scared of you," I said, unsure where the comment had come from; also unsure if it was truth or not.

"You should be." Marius glared at me, his ruby eyes creased with angst. "Please give me a moment. I will be able to... control this. The feeling will pass."

I paddled in the water, body tense, as I waited for Marius to regain whatever control he desired over his hunger. Hunger for blood.

In those silent moments it began to make sense what occurred on the final night during the blood moon. Did he gradually lose his reality the closer time gave way to the fatal day?

I flinched when Marius turned back around. Gone were the lines across his forehead and thinned lips. His face was once again relaxed, but his eyes glowed with embarrassment.

"It would seem that I have grown well accustomed to ruining the mood." Marius splashed a handful of water across his face, washing away

the tense emotion. His hands were so large, fingers incredibly long, that they perfectly cupped his face as he sighed into them for a moment.

I swam towards him, closing the space between us that I so desperately did not desire. "Tell me what it feels like."

Marius lowered his hands and looked up slowly, droplets of water falling off his pale eyelashes. "You truly desire to know?"

The mist from the lake created a wall between us that only my breath could penetrate. Marius stayed completely still until I was before him, my hands reaching for his hard stomach under the water. He tensed beneath my touch. It spurred me on as I trailed my fingers down from the mounds of his stomach muscles to the smooth lines that crowned his hips. I did not look beneath the layer of blue but could sense that his manhood was close to where my hands rested.

"I would not have asked if I did not want to know."

"It can only be described as pure, agonising hunger. Although my time before the curse has grown hazy over the years, I suppose it is most likened to the feeling of being withheld from sustenance for a period of time. I was fortunate enough for that not to happen during my youth, but can only imagine how similar the feeling must be."

"But you can control it." My hands slowly moved around his lower abdomen, tracing the lines of his chiselled stomach.

"I would not describe it as control. It is more the sensation of burying a feeling until it is far too great to be kept hidden."

A chill raced across my exposed shoulders and neck. I felt all too exposed as his eyes found that glistening part of my skin which entrapped his attention completely. "You still feel it?"

Marius nodded slowly, his eyes narrowing in on my lips. "Is your plan for me to lose control? You are playing with dark waters, Jak."

I gave up tracing my fingertips and made a point of running my nails across his skin. "I told you that I am not scared, Marius. You will not hurt me."

Now, in this moment, or on the final day. It was a promise to him, as much as it was a promise to myself. Yet for this night I, like Marius, buried the thoughts of the future. Until that fate would become far too great to be kept hidden.

"Won't I?" His hand snaked out of the water and reached for my neck. It was so large his fingers splayed over my entire lower jaw.

As his frozen touch caressed my skin, I felt my stomach jolt. My hands slipped from his stomach, stopping at the definitive V-shaped lines that had burrowed into his hips.

“Are you fearless, Jak?” Marius growled, eyes fixated to my neck. The danger sent a thrill through me. He trailed a nail across my jawline, his other hand now holding me from behind until both our chests pressed together. I craned my neck, thrusting my chin skyward to allow his touch to completely trail my jaw from one side to the other.

“I want you,” I breathed. It was both an answer to his question, and my ability to blatantly ignore it. But my words harboured no lie. I did, in fact, want him.

“I will take that as a yes,” Marius whispered before diving into my neck. His lips kissed across my skin, teeth brushing close enough to ignite a fire within me. I held tightly onto him as he devoured me. As his kiss intensified I enjoyed the small moments when he sucked hard at my skin. The perfect mix of pleasure and pain. I melted into him, wrapping my legs around his waist to keep myself attached to his touch.

My hands scratched up his back, stopping only when I lost my fingers in his silver hair. Once I had a grip on him I knew he would not stop.

Marius was mostly silent, all but the subtle growls he emitted as he devoured me. But for the both of us, I made all the sound required as he worked away at me.

“Kiss me,” I demanded, tugging at his hair to pull him from my neck.

He came away with a sly grin painted across his handsome face. “In due time.”

Marius dove back into my neck as my plea echoed as a moan across the still water’s surface. “Kiss... me.”

I relaxed my hold on his hair as Marius dipped his face close to mine. Closing my eyes in anticipation, I readied myself for his mouth. But it did not meet mine. “Do not rush this. We have time.”

His voice was low and silky. The type that would have made my mouth water and legs quiver.

I had been with men before. A handful of times. It was usually quick meetings beneath my home during the dead of night when I was certain Mother was heavily senseless. The moments never meant anything. Not after they had finished in a record time. It was simply a release that I required. But this. This was different.

In the heart of the lake I let the creature explore me. It was what I wanted after all. And I did not realise just how much I needed for this to happen until his hands were already grabbing a hold of my arse. His grip was the perfect blend of firm and gentle. Whereas his nails had tickled across my jaw, I now did not feel them as he squeezed at my exposed behind.

My entire body was on fire. I was bathed in it. Marius still kissed and nipped away at my neck and shoulders whereas his hands now explored other areas of my body.

So, I repaid the favour.

Relying on his hold on my arse and my legs wrapped around his waist, I let my own hands explore beneath the water. In that moment, as the tip of my hand grazed his hard length, he pulled away from me and hissed, "Patience."

"I have none." My voice was firm. I tightened my grip around him with my legs and captured his chin with my free hand, lifting his face until his eyes were on me. "I want you."

"And I want you."

"Then take me. All of me."

There was a pause. "Are you certain? Because once you give yourself to me, I will... take you... all."

Beneath the water, I suddenly grabbed a hold of his manhood. *At last*. It was thick in my hand, so much that I could not touch my thumb to my finger. I knew little of its length, but that did not deter me. I wanted him, no matter what he had to offer.

"To my room," Marius said, his deep voice vibrating through me. "Now."

A bubble of a laugh escaped my mouth as I studied his gaze. It was hungry, but not for blood. Not this time.

He wanted me.

Marius kept me wrapped around him as he paddled with one, strong arm towards the bank of the lake. For not a single moment did he remove his stare from mine. Even as he hauled me out of the water. I hardly registered the cold chill of night across my naked body as I lost myself in his eyes. I suppose I was so accustomed to his own cold touch that the nightly air did nothing to distract me from the moment.

He stepped away from the lake, still holding me in his arms. I felt so small in his embrace.

“What about our clothes?” I asked as he began to walk away.

“They will not be required for what is to come.”

My entire body twisted and danced as his words settled over me.

Marius leaned his face towards mine and whispered, “Do you trust me?”

“I do.”

“Then I ask that you close your eyes, as I cannot simply walk at this pace to our destination.”

As he finished speaking, his lips caught me by surprise. The kiss was short, but lingered long after he pulled away. “Now do it, Jak. Do as I tell you.”

I nodded, swallowing the lump of desire in my throat. Not waiting a moment longer I did as I was told and closed my eyes.

The world seemed to shift beneath us. As though the ground was turned upside-down and I was falling. I gasped at the sudden jolt, throwing my eyes open a second later to see if the ground had disappeared completely from underneath us.

But we no longer stood outside. The four walls of the bed chamber surrounded us, the hearth alight with a warm welcome of twisting flames, the curtains drawn open across the grand windows for the first time since I had been here.

“How?” I questioned, my head spinning from the sudden movement.

“There are many things you still have yet to learn about me, Jak.” Marius kicked the door closed behind him and stalked towards the made bed. “Allow me to show you just some of those things now.”

Slowly, Marius lowered me onto the cloud-like bedding. The tickle of the material was welcomed as I sank into it. From my perch amid the white sheets, I finally saw Marius entirely, his body no longer hidden beneath azure lake water, or obscured by clothing.

He stood before me with pride. Chin raised high, arms loose beside him. I let my gaze trail down from his face to his feet. And he stayed still, allowing me to take it all in uninterrupted.

I sat upright, mouth agape, at the length of his manhood that hung between his separated legs.

So he does have length.

My cheeks warmed at the thought. It was the largest I had seen before, far greater than the baker's son or my childhood best-friend's brother.

They had been mere men.

Marius was a god. A god of night. A *man*.

"I want to worship you," I said, gripping the sheets. It was all I could do to stop my hands from reaching out for him.

Marius lifted a hand in dismissal. "Allow me to be the one to worship you first, Jak. I assure you that I will give you all the time you desire. But for now, it is all about you."

He stalked towards the bed, and I stayed deathly still. Marius leaned on the mattress, both arms flexing. My eyes did not know where to settle — at his devilish grin or on his manhood that seemed to harden with each passing moment.

I leaned back onto the bed as Marius crawled over me, his presence flattening me down upon the bed. His strong arms entrapped me from either side, but he kept himself hovering inches above me. "Well, well, well. Where do I start?"

The question hung between us. I parted my mouth to answer but was soon silenced as Marius dove in and kissed me. For someone so cold, all I felt was warmth. My toes curled and my fingers dug deeper into the bedding as his tongue explored my own. I craned my neck up to him, only for his hand to press me back down to the bed.

He wanted control. I felt it. I bit down on his lower lip, spurring him to splutter in enjoyment as he pulled away from me. His grin sent a wild thrill through me. Then Marius slipped his hands beneath my back and flipped me over until my face was pressed cheek first into the sheets.

"That will stop you from biting," he growled, hands rubbing down my back and onto my arse. I gasped as he spread each cheek with his large hands. I closed my eyes as his thumb brushed against the sensitive spot at the heart of me. My own manhood throbbed as it was pressed against the bed. I wanted nothing more than to grab it, grab him and urge him to move faster. Deep down I had wanted this moment to happen for days. Now it was here, I could not wait to begin.

Yet Marius was taking his time.

One moment it was his thumb, and the next it was his tongue. Caressing. Licking. Tracing. Each exhale came out as a sound which only seemed to spur him to deepen his exploration.

I reached back for him, only to be batted away.

"No hands," Marius said quickly, coming up for a breather which I soon regretted. I did not want it to stop.

I had never felt such a way before. In the dark of my closed eyes, I envisioned explosions of colour and imagery. It was pure bliss.

It came to an abrupt stop, followed by a grunt from Marius. I leaned up on my elbows, this time not being pushed back down by his mighty hand. Over my shoulder I looked to Marius who stood, eyes wide and chin wet. He made no move to clean his own spittle from his face. His tongue simply escaped his deep red lips and traced them.

Marius's other hand worked slowly across his hard, length. Up and down, his wrist twisting slightly with each movement. "I want to fuck you."

"Are you waiting for an invitation?" I threw back at him, lifting myself up onto my knees and arching my back.

He did not reply. But I heard the scratch of wood as he pulled open the drawer in the side cabinet beside the bed. I looked back as he retrieved a glass vial of liquid.

"What is that?" I questioned as he uncorked the small vial and tripped the liquid into his hand.

"A way to ensure I cause you no pain."

"And you have had the lubricant sitting in that drawer, waiting for this very moment?" I asked.

"One can never be caught unprepared, Jak."

I flipped myself onto my back, putting my arms behind my head to keep it propped up. "Have you thought about me... Marius?"

His lip lifted, exposing his teeth. "There has not been a moment you have not been on my mind."

I lifted my feet up and spread my knees. "Then fuck me, Marius. Do as you wish."

Marius discarded the glass vial. It shattered on the floor beneath his feet, completely empty. All the lubricant now glistered across his cock.

"Jak, I am going to fuck you. Then I am going to fuck you again. I will stop when you tell me, but I have years' worth of energy ready to expel. Are you certain you want me?"

"I do not want you, Marius," I said, staring him dead in the eye. "I need you."

He smiled, a hiss of excitement passing his gritted teeth.

Marius, besides his heated energy, was gentle. His touch was soft as he guided my legs over his sturdy shoulders. His hands not once rushing me, or grabbing me. I could see his want to devour me entirely as it glowed within his dark gaze.

But he was careful.

His calm attitude benefited us both, for it relaxed me entirely as he navigated his length and pressed it up against me. From my past experiences I remembered that breathing was the best way to get through the initial entry. Yet as Marius slipped his considerably sized manhood into me I felt nothing but pleasure. It was an explosion as he pushed it all the way within. Not an inch spared. Not an ounce of expected discomfort greeted me.

Marius's exhale was never-ending as he held himself within me. Then, hands gripping my thigh, he pulled out. It was hard to keep still as he thrust himself deep inside of me once again, this time quicker than the first. Marius released a pleased exhale, cocking his head back as he lost himself in the feeling. Instinctively I reached up to him, wrapping my hands behind his neck and pulled him down above me. Our eyes locked and our breathing synchronised as he began to move. Each time he pulled himself out until it felt as though he would completely leave me. But then he would push back in until his hips pressed against my arse. Momentum built up the more I relaxed into him. Each thrust sent a shiver up my spine. The feeling was pure magic.

My own magic had come close to the surface. As if this connection between us both reduced my sense of my power to a dull cinder. I hardly cared if I lost control in this moment.

I pulled Marius to my neck where he nuzzled into it. He kissed and nipped at my skin whilst picking up his pace.

All I could do was release an endless string of satisfied moans.

I did not question him as his teeth grazed my neck more frequently. I just ran my nails down his back in response. Soon enough he pulled away, lips glistening wet, and flipped me over onto my belly.

"You are... delicious, my Jak."

I let him guide my body until I was on my knees. His hand pushed down at the space between my shoulders until I was, once again, pressed face-down on the bed.

All without the need to remove himself from me.

Unable to reach for him as I wished, I busied my hands by reaching beneath myself and grabbed a hold of my own manhood. Everything felt sensitive. The feeling was incredibly new although it was not my first time.

Our bodies conversed with each other. It was a soundless exchange, but one that traversed the need for words.

We were one.

Time was unimportant as he filled me. I let it simply slip away.

"I want to look at you," I demanded, yanking on the sheets. Marius slowed his movements at my request. We had been in this position for a while, and although the feeling was tremendous I wanted to share the climax with him. For I knew it was close. I could feel its arrival racing towards me as though my very spirit threatened to leave my body. And Marius, his breathing was quickening. His grip hardening and deep groans intensifying.

"Here you are," he said, twisting me onto my back once again. Effortlessly he lifted me from the bed, all the while still staying deep within me. I thanked his length for that. The baker's son was hardly able to move without his cock slipping out of me on countless occasions.

Marius held my weight, all without breaking a sweat. I wrapped my legs around him, letting him hold the brunt of me from beneath my arse. Now standing, he moved towards the wall of the chamber, pressing me up against it for extra security.

"You feel unbelievable," he whispered to me as he began working away at me once again. I wrapped my arms around his neck and brought his forehead to mine. We stayed like that, foreheads pressed together, and eyes locked for an eternity.

"Tell me how it feels?" I was breathless, although not from over exerting myself. It was hard to catch a breath as he fucked me.

"Divine," Marius replied slowly. "It is pure divinity."

His eyes were rolling into the back of his head. His muscles tensed beneath my touch.

I knew the ending was coming and I was ready for it. For him. Just knowing I made him feel like that was enough to fill me with pleasure.

Then he surprised me. Grabbing a hold of my cock, Marius moved his hands in ways I never had experienced.

My hold on him slackened as he picked up speed in both his hand movements and thrusts.

I felt my own climax arrive. My breathing quickened as Marius's low grunts built in intensity. Trapped in pure extasy, I gave into the feeling that built within me.

And I released.

Marius did not stop his magic, although did slow it down as I finished. And the prolonged exhales he produced told me he had also reached the same ending.

He leaned his head onto me, eyes closed. "That was..."

"Incredible," I answered for him, breathing shallow.

He carried me back over to the bed where he put me down, gently removing himself from me. I laid back, not caring how I looked as Marius prowled above me.

"I wish it were longer," Marius said, sweat causing strands of hair to stick to his forehead.

"You know I could have managed it," I told him, eyes hard to keep open.

"I have no doubt in that, Jak." Marius leaned down and placed a soft kiss upon my dampened forehead. "It is I who could not last. Not with what you do to me."

As he spoke, his voice silky, I could have pulled him back down upon me. But my eyes grew heavier and it was hard to keep them open.

Marius did not leave me. His body clambered into the bed at my side, his weight shifting the sheets in a way I was not used to. But his presence was welcomed beside me.

We both looked up to the ceiling, breaths still coming out in quickened pants, as his hand slipped into mine.

I wanted to say something, but there were no words. Not as my tiredness rushed over me in a thick, heavy wave.

Marius's thumb moved in circles across the back of my hand as he whispered, "Rest up, my Jak, for I will need you at full energy soon."

I grinned, eyes closed as I spluttered a laugh. "Already thinking ahead of yourself?"

"Oh..." His voice sent shivers across my naked body. "Absolutely."

Time passed in a blur of delight. An endless tide of pleasure that I could not break away from. Nor did I want to. Time did not matter, we simply seemed to lose track of it entirely. There was no concept of day and night, which was only enhanced by the heavy, velvet curtains that stayed drawn.

We only slept when we were exhausted, not when our body clocks demanded. When we woke there were plates of food waiting for us, likely dropped off by his host of phantom staff.

I hardly had a moment to contemplate anything before his mouth was on me, and mine... well mine explored without limitation.

I felt... completed. Gone were the thoughts of what I was. What he was. All that occupied my mind was his taste and touch. How gentle he could be, but equally rough if the moment required.

We fucked more times than I could count. It seemed Marius had an endless stream of energy that spurred him to reach for me whenever he required. And when his hands were not touching my body, I only longed for time to speed up until he found me once again.

But Marius listened to me as well. He listened when I told him I needed a break. Not that it happened often. He was frantic, excited, but respected my wishes, my body, my patience.

We did not leave this room. Not for a short walk or a break away from our fucking to explore another part of the castle. There was nothing beyond the closed chamber that I desired more than the naked body that was lying beside me.

I had been awake for a while, Marius still sleeping soundlessly as I nibbled at the sliced apple I had chosen from the plate. It was equally light and fresh, the perfect palette cleanser I needed from the intense entanglement we had not long finished.

His back was to me, muscles moving slowly in sync with his shallow breathing. It was the first time I had not been asleep with him, his large arms cocooned around me as my arse nestled into his crotch. There was something different now. Like I was finally breaking the surface of the entrancing dream I had been locked within. As I stared at the back of his white-haired head, I could think of only one thing.

Our fate.

I bit down on a slice of apple only to cringe at the sudden sickness that flooded through me. Without care I dropped the piece, my appetite running away from me.

I have to kill you.

It was a sobering thought. One that made my hands shake violently. I had crossed a line with Marius but did not regret it. Not even as the weight of my fate fell back upon my shoulders, making it harder to catch a breath.

If I fail... I die.

I was dancing with danger, tiptoeing on the edge of a sharpened blade. The fall was daunting and impossible on either side. Kill the creature I lust for, or die alongside my kind.

Lust. Was that all it was? Just contemplating the word felt wrong. This was more. More than a simple sexual hunger for a stranger.

Strangers didn't share what we had shared. They did not open themselves the way I had, the way Marius had.

Nervous energy buzzed through my bones. I could no longer sit still and watch as he slept and I knew deeply that sleep would not befriend me. Not as a wild storm built within me.

Air. I needed some air, and time alone.

I kept as quiet as I could, opening the chest of ornate drawers to pull out some clothes. I hardly cared what I reached for. Every now and then I would glance back to the man who slept in the bed. But I could not look for long. Not as the guilt only intensified as I laid my gaze upon his calm, emotionless face.

My feet hardly made a sound as I padded across the cold chamber floor for the door. Even after I slipped out of it and closed it behind me, I half

expected to hear him call for me. But he didn't.

I let myself wander the hallways and corridors mindlessly. Not caring where I went to. Passing the large windows, I was surprised to see the light sky beyond. How much time really had passed?

I paused to look out, taking in the blanket of fresh snow that had settled over the gardens far below. The heavy mist still clung proudly to the castle's grounds, but the daylight bounced off the snow, making it impossibly bright to stare at.

It then became painfully clear just how cold it truly was as I leaned on the castle's rough wall. Had I grown used to Marius's cold body over the past few days that it took me this long for my body to acclimatize away from him?

Just thinking about him again made me push off from the wall and carry on my walk.

Before I realised as much, I had taken myself back to his study. Numb, I stood before the closed door and loosed a ragged sigh.

Like it had always been, the door was unlocked and the hearths roared inside. I felt my body relax instantly as I entered, but my mind still whirled.

I was unsure what answers I searched for within this room, but anything was better than staring at Marius. My body itched at the thought of his touch. Not because I loathed it, but I did not deserve it.

"This is your fault," I told myself, pacing the carpet without fear of wearing holes in it. "You allowed yourself to forget your task. This feeling inside is deserved. A punishment for losing yourself and stepping off the path."

I answered internally. *If I fail, and miraculously survive whatever awaits me on the final day, Mother will ensure I do not live.*

It was a morbid thought, but I knew it was fact even if Mother had never spoken it aloud. I knew her character as well as I thought I knew my own. She would not let me live.

A new thought sprang to mind, swinging through the mess of worry like a drunkard with a blunt sword.

How long did I have left?

I would have to wait for nightfall to see the moon's phase. It was hard to know what I hoped to see when night did arrive. Part of me longed for more time. Yet another felt the need to rip the thorn from the wound and get this over with. Before I fell any deeper. Because that was what I was doing.

Falling. For him, the beast, the creature. Marius. Falling so hard that my bones would likely shatter upon impact on the final day.

Tumbling through this intense oblivion of contrasting emotions.

I tried everything to take my mind off my turmoil. Attempting to lose myself in the painted celestial chart only to bring my mind back to Marius. I attempted to focus my breathing and meditate, only for his face to step out of the shadows in my mind as if he commanded those as well.

Then I studied the bookshelves, running my fingers along the multitude of novels in hopes one would stand out and distract me from how my own story was panning out.

I came to the end of the shelf, but noticed something was different. A space that was now full.

My breathing faltered as I recognised it as the missing book. The one Marius had taken.

I knew the space it left was huge, however it was hard to comprehend just the size of the tome that sat before me. Its spine was so large that it took both hands to pull it from its burrow. The weight of the novel was dramatic, straining my wrists as I wrestled it free.

I leaned back as I carried the tome to Marius's desk, trying to balance out the heaviness in my posture. It was near impossible not to dump it on the oak desk just from the relief of not having to carry it.

Taking a seat, I ran my hands down the gold, embossed cover and readied myself.

"What were you hiding, Marius?" I asked aloud, lifting the front cover back to reveal the aged, yellowed paper within.

Where the answer to my question looked back at me.

A single word. A name. Written in beautiful twisting letters that did not negate the word.

Jak.

MY BROW FURROWED AND MY FOREHEAD CREASED. NARROWING MY GAZE, I ran my finger over my name as if it would rub away the illusion and reveal

what word truly lay beneath it.

But it stayed the same. Unchanged and proud.

My name.

The chair creaked painfully as I leaned back in it, hands folding behind the back of my head. The tome discarded before me. And my stare did not falter from the page with that one, unbelievable word scrawled across it. I winced at the heavy pounding of my heart as my mind raced for an explanation.

It made no sense. He told me he wrote the stories long after the Claim's final day. Yet here sat a story with my name scripted across the first page.

"It is not what you think." Marius's voice sounded just out of sight. I turned slowly, mouth agape, as he stood in the doorway. He was shirtless, his hair ruffled from his long sleep. Had evening arrived already? Time was truly slipping away from me. My eyes dusted over the unbuttoned waist of his trousers and how it revealed the hairs that crowned his manhood. He spoke again, bringing my attention back to his placid face. "Would you prefer for me to explain, or to leave you to read and uncover the truth?"

I would have hauled the book from the table and waved it at him if I had the strength. "I will get clarity far sooner if it comes from you."

He bowed his head, trying to hide the sad glint in his eyes. "When you first arrived and revealed your name to me it was as if that single word had torn down the walls I had built within myself. Your name, his name, had not been spoken in this place for many years. It took me by utter surprise."

"Which explains your reaction..." I added, watching him walk to the other side of the desk.

"I am well accustomed to ghosts. Yet with your reveal I felt the worst of them being dragged to the surface."

I looked back to the book for a moment. “He was your first Claim.” The body that was left at the border of his castle. The one both Mother and Victorya had kept so quiet about.

“He was not my Claim. It was those after him that arrived with that label. Jak was...” Marius paused, putting a closed fist to his mouth and clearing the lump from his throat. “Jak was the very reason for why you and I are standing in this room. If it was not for him I would likely be bones beneath the ground. The remains of a withered, old man, who’d died from old age. Instead I fell for him, as he fell for me. And we were punished for it.”

I could not speak. All I could do was stay silent and listen as Marius unveiled his truth. A story I had not heard of before. But one that tugged on the familiar strings that seemed to twang within my chest.

“I thought it was some twisted punishment when you arrived, Jak. Beautiful Jak, come to remind me of my undoing. Come — just when I was beginning to forget — to ensure I would not.”

“Who was he, Marius?” I asked. “Who was he to you?”

“The love of my life.” He looked up slowly, his eyes narrowed and wet. A tear sliced down his cheek, falling carelessly to the ground at his bare feet. “We were young and naïve. Jak was betrothed to another yet we did not care. I was selfish to think he would ever be mine, and he was stupid to believe the same. When we were discovered, we were...”

Marius turned quickly, putting his back to me.

“Were what?” I said, standing from the desk with a scratch of wood against stone. I needed to hear it from him, but I had pieced the story he told to the one I had been taught to believe. “Tell me, Marius.”

I paused my plea and waited for prolonged moments. When he finally turned around he no longer held onto sadness. His eyes had narrowed and darkened in colour, as if the ruby of his irises had expanded across the entirety of his stare. His lips had turned white with tension as they snarled above his exposed fangs.

“We were cursed. There were always rumours his betrothed was a witch, but it was never believed. Idle gossip and warnings that we looked over. That was the first and only time I ever underestimated their kind. She discovered our secret and punished us. At first we simply could not leave the grounds. But I grew colder whilst Jak stayed warm. My hunger changed. His did not. I became the beast and he...” Marius choked once

again on his words before clearing his throat with an expression of distressed irritation. "Then I killed him. On the day when the moon was full and bled red, I lost myself to the creature that the witch had moulded me into. And I killed him."

Slowly I moved around the desk, unsure if the creature buried within Marius was about to finally show itself. With caution I closed the space between us and pressed my hands against his cool, bare chest. "You fell in love and were punished," I said aloud, more for myself to understand. It was not the version of events I had been taught. Similar in the sense of my ancestor cursing him for stealing someone that belonged to her. Yet I was seeing it from a different light.

"She never cared for Jak," Marius said, looking down his nose at me. "If she did she would have punished me, and not him. Yet she trapped him with me and knew what would become of him."

"I am sorry." My apology meant more than he would know.

Marius gripped a hold of my forearms. "Do not be."

I felt sick, as though my stomach was ready to empty its contents whilst the one revelation raced through me.

Mother had named me after the catalyst for the curse. Knowing I would one day be the Claim. The last Claim, come to end Marius and in doing so be a painful reminder. What did she want to achieve from that? To throw him off guard during my stay? To make it easier for him to fall for me to achieve our end goal?

Or was it more personal? More twisted? A name used as a weapon to slice at Marius whilst he was already down?

"I did not know," I muttered.

"How could you know?" Marius put his finger beneath my chin and lifted my face to his. "From my knowledge the witch died years ago and with it the chance of this nightmare ending. You were not to know."

"But..." I swallowed my words, biting down on my lip so hard the pain was what was required to silence me.

"You have served me a great deal of armistice, Jak. I cannot fully explain how your presence has given me more peace in my mind than I have felt in a long time. Do not apologise. This is not your doing."

He was wrong. It was mine. My Mother's, my covens.

There was not a justified reason for the curse to be cast and I understood that now. I almost took some pleasure in knowing the curse had taken the

witch's power and all those who came after her. Until me.

Magic is not taken, without something given in return.

"What did she turn you into?" I reached for his cheek, clearing the stain of a tear from his skin.

"A nameless beast." Marius stared unwaveringly into my soul.

"Nothing is ever nameless," I said meekly.

"Is there anything else like me out there? Tell me, Jak, for you have experienced more of the outside world than I. Have you heard tales of others that hunger for one's life source?"

I knew the answer. Whatever twisted curse had been laid upon Marius was unique. The witch herself had grown mad trying to find a cure for her lack of power. And so did the many that followed after her. She died with the mad want for her power. Mother told me that it was only on her deathbed when she finally grasped a single slither of magic to prophesise my birth and what the child would mean for our kind.

I used to think it was some cruel play of fate, giving my ancestor her power back just before she passed. As though it dangled itself before her in reminder for what she lost.

But now, standing before Marius who was the product of her jealousy, it made me feel satisfied somewhat. Knowing she died, punished in a different manner to Marius. But still punished.

By taking away from him what he desired the most, she gave up her own most treasured love.

Her magic.

"You are unique," I told him.

"I am a demon."

"We all are demons. Some have just learned to hide it better than others."

Marius took my hand in his and guided me to the rugged floor. We left the book open upon the desk and laid upon the ground and looked up at the painted ceiling.

"It was Jak that helped you paint it." It was more a statement than a question.

"He always had the steadier hand."

His reply was short, an obvious sign that he did not want to discuss it further. But I could not cope with the silence. Every break in conversation

had my mind full of guilt. Guilt for having the same name. Guilt for the role I had to play in this.

I drowned in the feeling and the silence was the ball and chain strapped to my ankle, keeping me down.

“Just tell me if you do not want to discuss it further,” I said, feeling the need to provide him with the option to escape such discomfort.

He rolled his head and faced me, a smile tugging at his lips but not quite reaching his eyes. “You must think me a sappy fool.”

I forced a smile in response, my lips quivering slightly. “I have no words as to how I would describe my thoughts for you, Marius.”

“Say it again,” he breathed, blinking and holding his eyes closed for a beat longer than normal.

“What?”

“My name.” When he opened his eyes again they found mine. As though a cord connected us both, that moment sent a thrilling explosion of feeling through my body. “Please, say it again. It... it reminds me of one great difference between you and... please.”

I wanted to press him further, but could not muster seeing the wince of his eyes or the paling of his taut lips when the storm of memories coursed behind his gaze.

So I obliged, running the back of my finger down the side of his face. “Marius. Brave Marius. Terrifying Marius. My Marius.”

“Thank you.” His voice was a bare whisper.

A stabbing sensation in my gut snatched my breath away, but I forced the feeling down.

We lay like that for a while, the book discarded and the room silent. Marius wrapped his fingers between mine and held on tight as though his life depended on it. At one point I thought he had fallen asleep. A place of peace for him, at least I hoped. But as I began to tug my hand from his, he spoke, breaking the quiet.

“Katharine has not returned as she promised she would.”

“But she was only here...” I trailed off. Marius showed no sign of caring that I clearly had overheard their last encounter.

“It has been five days. The moon is reaching its third quarter and Katharine should have returned.”

I leaned up on my elbows, echoing what Marius had said. “Five days?”

Impossible. I was aware we had lost time to each other, but five days? I shook my head. That couldn't be right.

"Perhaps we missed her?" I asked, having flashes to our entwined limbs.

"I would have felt her presence at the boundary. It is how she can come and go as she pleases."

I faced him, brows furrowed. "You are telling me you could simply let me leave if I chose?"

He shook his head, eyes blank. "It does not work like that. Not for the Claim. Many have tried and you are welcome to if you so desire. But for Katharine and her family, they have remained outside the twisted rules of the curse."

Why? The thought echoed through me.

"So you let her in?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. I sense her presence and provide her with the invitation to enter."

Intrigue breezed through me, blowing away the cobwebs of guilt for a moment. "Have others tried to enter?"

"Not for many years, but yes. I did not let them in. For fear of what I may have done to them."

"But why Katharine? Why her family?"

Marius paused. "I do not know, Jak."

"I am sure she is okay," I said, but I could not ignore the tugging in my gut. It was becoming hard to distinguish my worries from one another.

"Yes, she must be." Marius did not sound so convinced. He made a move to lie back down on the floor beside me, but instead he ushered my legs apart and leaned forward above me. "My mind is a storm right now. Care to help me calm it?"

His voice grew silky with each word. His invitation to me clear and enticing. This is what I needed, to take my mind off my own storm. Him. His touch that had ways of taking me to different worlds. With him, on me, in me, nothing else mattered.

"How may I help provide your mind reprieve?" I asked, running my tongue across my lower lip. It was not only Marius who was in need for a distraction.

I longed for it. For him.

He lowered himself further atop me, his arms tensing as they carried his entire weight. His face came close to mine until he stopped a mere hairbreadth from my mouth. "Let me have you."

I nipped at his lip, urging a low growl to bubble from his throat and replied, "You already do."

With the days that passed, and the lack of Katharine's presence, Marius fell into a dark cave of worry. His mood changed entirely. For a man so still, he did not stop moving. He would disappear for hours, sometimes even entire evenings, and return to climb into bed with me before morning arose.

The curtains in the bed chamber had been kept drawn for so long that I could not remember a time that they were ever open. The thick material kept all daylight from breaking into the room, making time harder to grasp a hold of.

I was thankful when Marius pressed his cold body against mine and finally gave into sleep, I was at peace when he was.

As Marius struggled with the internal storm of his worry for Katharine, I dealt with my own raging emotions. Knowing the final day was growing closer and with it the pending doom of what was to come.

One evening I woke in bed alone. Although I could not recall my dreams, I was certain they had been bad for I woke with a heavy chest and full mind. It caused my body to ache, as though I had been through a fight. Or worse.

Rolling over, I half expected Marius to have shifted to the furthest spot away from me. But the sheets had been left rumpled as Marius had slunk out of the room. Only his lingering scent was left behind.

I swung my legs over the bed and pressed my feet into the cold floor. For a moment I sat like that, fighting a yawn as I also fought at the iron webs of anxiety that had settled within me.

Perhaps he had gone to welcome Katharine? At last. Yet deep down I knew that was not the case. Her absence worried him terribly, and there must have been a reason for it. Not that he dared say it aloud.

Like I did most evenings when I woke alone, I sauntered over to the drawn window and slipped between the heavy sheets of material. The window frame had been upholstered with a faded, blue cushion. A place, I could imagine, reading from and admiring the once beautiful grounds below.

Now I just knelt upon the built-in seat and peered out the foggy windows to see Marius pacing the dark paths. His bloodhounds sulked behind him, their whining only adding to the atmosphere that seemed to spread through the castle.

He did this. Every night. Scouting the grounds as if Katharine had simply got lost among them.

“Victorya,” I called, letting my breath fog on the windowpane.

From the reflection I noticed the wisp of grey shadow form into view behind me. “Things are no better.”

I had called upon Victorya a lot during the past few days when Marius had left me for stretched periods of time. She ensured I had food and drink, although I had noticed the supplies dwindling as the days went by. Explained from the lack of Katharine’s visit. Without her bringing food from the town, there was nothing edible to eat inside the castle.

But hunger was the least of my concerns.

“You are certain I cannot leave for answers?” I asked her again, merely echoing what I had already found out from Marius days ago. “If I can get into town I can find out what has kept her from visiting.”

“You cannot leave,” she said, floating across the ground to where I knelt. “I can keep telling you, but the answer will remain the same each time.”

“I know,” I said, pressing my head into my hands. “I just... I cannot keep seeing him in such a way.”

“This is nothing compared to what he has been through before, Jak. This mood is a mere wave to the tidal storms we have endured. It will pass, and if Katharine does not return, another will in her place. It has been that way since the beginning.”

Victorya had been an open book, answering the questions I had for her. At least in some poetic, twisted way. Sometimes her riddles would stay with

me throughout the long evenings, as haunting as my ignorance before she provided me with answers.

But the more I had come to learn, the deeper the seed of anxiety felt within me. Threatening to blossom into an uncomfortable, devouring sapling at any moment.

“It is not in my nature to simply wait. I want to help,” I told her, leaving Marius to his pacing as I faced the ghostly girl.

“Can you not speak with your... those who wait on the other side of the water? Ask them to locate her?”

“And give away my concern?” I snapped, realising immediately that I had done so. I peered down to my feet, teeth chewing at my lower lip. “I am sorry, but I cannot do that. Believe me, the thought has crossed my mind. But I cannot let Mother know that I hold some concern for Marius.”

The scrying bowl had stayed hidden ever since Marius had been occupying the room with me. Not by myself, as Victorya had explained. She had been the one to store it away to prevent him from finding it.

“Some concern?” Victorya tilted her head and narrowed her opaque eyes. “Even the dead can see you have simply more than just *some* concern. You care deeply for him and do not want to voice that you are dying inside at the thought of what you have to do.”

“I know you want the same as my mother does...”

“If Marius knew the release you could give him, he too would be more than thrilled at the thought. I have seen him beg for his suffering to end. Believe me, you do not want to experience it.”

“That is not the point!” I said, louder this time. “Have you ever had to kill someone you—”

I silenced myself, releasing to whom I spoke to.

“You forget that I was not blessed with the years of living as you have been, Jak. No, is your answer. I have not had to do the unspeakable because I was never given the chance. You must do it,” she seethed.

I bowed my head, unable to apologise to her again. “I feel helpless.”

“And pathetic seeking advice from a child, I suspect?”

“I will take the advice where I can these days. Even if it is from you.”

It was almost wasted that Victorya did not stick her tongue out and pull a face. But as she had explained before, she may have been stuck in that form, but she was far from a child now. Not after what she had seen.

“I know little of your kind, only that it was believed you should not have access to magic. But here you are. Is there not some spell you can do to find out what is happening with Katharine?”

“My magic does not work like that...” I said. “It is control over the elements. Mother never taught me spells for it was not required. The point of my power is to kill Marius. Not hexes and potions.”

“To me it sounds like you have simply been leashed. Taught what they wanted you to know, not what you *needed* to know.”

I sighed. “I worked that out years ago.”

“Yet you did not demand more knowledge?”

There was no demanding when it came to Mother. Or her coven. Only Lamiere dared whisper about the other possibilities her ancestors had access to before my ancestor took it away from them all.

“Making me admit aloud how terrible I had it with my family is not going to help us find answers to Katharine’s disappearance. If I cannot leave and seek answers myself we will just have to wait for her to turn up when she is ready.”

A roar pierced the night, shaking the very foundations of the castle. I first thought it was an illusion brought on by my tiredness, but Victorya’s reaction was painfully real. She looked, eyes wide, to me as I felt as though my entire body vibrated.

“Marius,” we echoed, already moving for the door of the room.



I FOUND HIM AT EDGE OF THE CASTLE WHERE THE OVERGROWN PATHS rolled over to the bridge which connected us to Darkmourn. He stood with his back to me, yet sensed my presence from the slight turn of his face.

“Stay away, Jak,” he warned, voice a rumble of thunder that shook the very shadows around us. “Please...”

“Tell me what is wrong.” I ignored him, testing another footstep closer to where he stood. Peering over his shoulder, I could see the faint glow of the few buildings that had not yet closed down for the evening. Even from my distance I could imagine the local tavern and the bustling crowd whom would be singing and dancing whilst spilling tankards at such a late hour.

“Tell me, Marius, I am here to help.”

“Katharine...” he growled.

I stopped dead in my tracks, my legs going numb. “What do you...” Before I could finish, Marius stepped aside, revealing a mound that lay untouched on the ground before him. The closer I got to it, the clearer it became. A bundle of hair lay by Marius’s feet, gathered by a black ribbon that held the loose strands together. It was not just a cutting of hair. It was every strand possible that would have been attached to her head. The blood-stained ends told a story of struggle.

Marius was stiff beside me. Tension rolled off him in waves. But it did not last long. One moment he was still, the next he was slamming his fists against a wall of air before him.

I stumbled back in shock as he battered the unseen barrier that kept him from leaving. Kept us from leaving.

“Let me out!” he screamed. Roared. His voice blended in with the night, causing his hounds to howl.

I clapped my hands over my ears, shying away from his anger.

“Katharine!”

He punched at the barrier, over and over, kicking and throwing his entire body weight against it. All the while screaming her name. “Katharine!” Over and over, he did not stop. Not until his voice scratched along his throat, cracking with each shout.

“Marius, you need to calm down.” I reached for him, slowly, only to snap my hands back as he turned on me. His entire face was pinched with lines. They covered his head, clawed at the sides of his eyes and tugged at his lips. In the faded light he look... monstrous. His eyes were as dark as the night around us. His lips almost non-existent as he hissed and snapped fangs at me. Marius was hunched, breathing heavily as he studied me. I saw the disregard in his gaze. How he studied me as if he did not know me.

This was the monster of the curse.

Wind picked up around my body, rushing in familiar and guarding torrents. I fisted my hands, trying to calm the fear that had stunted my ability to take a full breath. *Not now.*

“Marius, it is me.” I kept my voice as quiet as I could muster whilst the fear raged wildly through me. “It is me.”

He snapped his head to the side, dark veins bulging in his neck.

“Jak, it is your Jak.”

My name seemed to anchor him back to reality for a moment. His expression softened, only enough for the whites of his eyes to return. Then his raspy voice broke out of his snapping jaws. "I... want... I want to hurt."

I almost heard the threads of his jacket burst as he slammed his fists into his chest. Pounding one after the other.

I buried the fear and moved for him, throwing myself at his body to stop him from hurting himself anymore. It did not matter to me if he did not feel his actions, if that was the entire reason for doing what he did. I could not watch it.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and buried my head into his chest with my eyes pinched closed. It happened so fast that I readied myself for the slams of his fists into my back. Wincing in anticipation for the pain.

But it did not come. I waited, holding my breath, only to have his hands run softly down my back.

"It...I...Jak, it is me."

His words almost shattered me entirely. I could not speak, instead only tightening my hold on him as if I could never let go again.

I melted beneath his touch as he traced his fingers down my spine and held onto me.

"I am sorry if I frightened you."

I spoke into his body, voice muffled. "I am not scared of you. Only what you wished to achieve by hitting yourself."

His hand stroked the back of my head, as I gripped onto him for dear life.

"That was not even a slither of what I will become, Jak. You need to know that."

"I do not care." Tears slipped from my eyes, wetting the material of his jacket beneath my face.

He took my shoulders and pried me from him. "That was me losing control. But when the final moon rises, I do not simply lose control. That suggests I can find it again. You... I cannot explain."

"Then don't." I stared at him, thankful to see his face soften, erasing the harsh lines that had creased across it.

"You are cold," Marius announced, rubbing his hands up and down my arms.

It was not the cold that made me shake, but the subtle detail of the ribbon that held Katharine's sheared hairs in a bundle.

I had seen it the moment I had laid eyes upon it. Marius showed no sign of noticing what I had, nor did I point it out.

Marius wrapped his arm around my shoulder and guided me back towards the castle, leaving the horror far behind us. I was thankful for the quiet as we walked. Not even the blood hounds that hid among the shadows of the grounds dared make a sound.

I needed the silence to make sense of what was revealed.

Embossed at the end of the black ribbon was a faint marking of a symbol. One I had seen many times throughout my life.

A pentagram etched like a puckered scar across the ribbon's material.

It was a sign. For me.

A message from my mother. A wordless warning.

She had Katharine.

I raised a hand, wincing as I blocked the sunlight from my gaze. It had been weeks since I had been outside during the day. It took a moment for the white glare to settle and my vision to focus on the frost covered grounds beyond the castle.

It was pure luck that the front door was left unlocked. Perhaps Marius felt no need to keep me locked within anymore. Not with my knowing that I could never leave. Not until the fateful finale that we were racing towards.

I stumbled blindly down the steps and onto the overgrown path. My boots trod heavily across the bundles of weeds that had split through the cracked slabs beneath me.

The chill of winter had proudly settled over the castle, however the sky was cloudless. As I trudged through the gardens, leaving the castle behind me, I melted beneath the slight kiss of the sun across the back of my neck.

It had taken me two attempts to wake during the hours when Marius was comatose. He hardly left my side since we discovered the offering of Katharine's hair. And I could not scry for answers with him near. So I waited for the safety of daylight to do so.

I settled on the ground, the frozen blades of grass melting beneath me and wetting my trousers. Far away from any window that overlooked this place, I rested the scrying bowl before my crossed legs. I called for the element required until the bowl filled and the surface of water shivered to reveal whom I called for.

"Jak." Mother's voice drifted through the water. I had to bite down on my tongue to stop the unravelling of anger I held towards her. Instead I

swallowed the lump in my throat and questioned her calmly.

“What have you done with Katharine?”

Mother grinned, her eyes glowing wickedly. “She has been punished for her actions. I trust I do not need to indulge in what for as I am certain you are already aware.”

“Enough of the games, tell me what you have done!” It was not a question but a demand.

“I admit this was not the reaction I expected, although in hindsight I should have seen the signs. All our faith has been put in the hands of a pathetic boy. It should have been me, I have said it all along. If I had your power the task would have had no risk of failing. Yet here you are, worried about what I have done with the creature’s little pet.”

“Her name is Katharine,” I seethed, ignoring her taunt. “I will not ask again.”

Mother liked to gloat, it was one of her many flaws. I knew she would share the information and I was right.

“That girl is a blood whore. She was caught feeding her mother the creature’s gore and *that* could not go unpunished. The mother was easier to deal with for she was already on her death bed, the poor dear. But the girl, she is still alive. For now.”

My stomach hardened and my heart dropped at the thought of murder. Katharine had been caught. If Marius knew...

“Why not kill them both?” I kept my face as straight as I could muster, not wanting to give away the internal turmoil that galloped through me. “Why stop at one when you could have taken them both? Pray tell, Mother, how you held yourself back from committing yet more monstrous acts.”

“Because I am smart enough to see that you are a failure. And when you die, and he breaks free of his containment, I will need something, or someone, to use as leverage against his impending rampage.”

“I will not...” I could not finish what I had to say as the words came out with no thought. I would fail. Mother was right. I could not kill Marius. No longer caring for this illusion I had upheld, I asked the question that I had longed to know for days. “Was it your idea to name me after the boy he once loved?”

“That creature did not love anything but his own desires. And to answer your question, it was. Poetic, don’t you think?”

“You disgust me.” I leaned over the bowl, snarling at the woman through the water. “I die happy knowing you will never experience the power that I have. If he kills me, he takes your chance of a legacy with it. And from what he has warned, your kind will be the first to be slaughtered.”

“You already have detached yourself from what you are,” Mother said, stare glazed over as she regarded me. “And do tell what you believe will occur when he discovers what you are.”

My blood ran cold as Mother spoke aloud the one anxiety that I had buried deep. For Marius to know the truth about what I was. I hated myself for the part I had to play, I could only imagine what it would do to him.

“We are doomed in your name. When he drains the life out of your pathetic body I want you to know that it was your doing.” I expected her words to sting, but they did not. My body and soul became entirely numb as she spat her hate at me.

“Worthless boy. And if, by any stretch of one’s imagination, you make it out, I want you to understand you will have no home to return to.” Mother’s entire face relaxed for a moment, a soft smile lifting her thinned lips. “Unless you bring us his head, that is.”

I had nothing else to say to her but felt the need to stab at her one last time with my words sharpened by knives. “If I cannot stop him, you have no chance, no matter the collateral you hold above him. See you in the underworld... Mother.”

I closed my eyes and tensed as all four elements flooded me at once. The power was under my command. I exhaled and the bowl exploded before me, fragments flying far off into the castle’s grounds beneath the pure force. Euphoria flooded from my body, filling me entirely with its fresh kiss. It had been days without connection to my power. It had built silently within me, accepting the invitation I offered it for escape. A circle of fire exploded from my chest as I released a scream of anger. It rolled across the overgrown garden around me, devouring every plant and weed in its war path.

I longed to unleash my power, my frustration, on Mother herself. She was the beast all along. And me, a beast of her creation.

All I could do was sit still, a charred mark across the ground where the bowl had once been. Smoke curled into the cold air around me. My breathing was heavy and my mind sodden.

I cried, but not out of sadness. There was no such emotion when it came to my mother. Only fury. It burned within me long after the physical flames across the garden died out, no longer fuelled by the ground. I studied the halo of scorched grass around me, as though a star had fallen from the heavens and kissed where I sat.

There was no hiding this from Marius. He would see and question. The perfect, circular sigil of charred grass and dirt had no natural explanation. I held my shaking hands before me to see the small licks of fire still curling around my fingers.

Anger was the passion needed to keep it alight. And I was riddled with it.

It was long into the day when I finally picked myself up from the ground and walked back towards the castle's entrance. Night would soon arrive. Marius would soon wake.

And I would tell him. Reveal everything to him because keeping it hidden would kill me sooner than the arrival of the fateful final day.

I dragged myself back through the castle doors, slowly taking the steps up towards the level of his chamber where he would still be soundlessly asleep.

There was a small part of me who pleaded with my soul to keep quiet. To do as Mother had wished, what I had trained for all these years.

But as I slipped back into the room and saw Marius's placid face resting upon the swan-feathered pillow, I almost broke down entirely.

He would be free, I told myself as I slipped into the sheets beside him with a warm tear running down my cheek, pulling the sheets up to my chin to try and stop the incessant shivering. Free of the curse keeping him bound here. Free from the trauma and memories that the very walls reminded him of daily.

I CLOSED MY EYES, NOT BOTHERING TO CLEAR THE WET STREAKS FROM MY face. And I would be free. Free of Mother and the burden that my life presented.

It was easier to fall into sleep when realisation struck. If Marius killed me, I would no longer be required or reminded of the point of my own existence. Weight lifted from my body mere moments before I drifted into a dreamless, empty and peaceful sleep.

It was Marius's wandering hands that woke me. His gentle touch coaxed me from the deep sleep I had lost myself within. Tickling fingers trailed shapes around my thigh which sent shivers across my bare skin. I was facing away from him, but his body was pressed firmly into my back. Each of us slightly curved enough to fit into one another's embrace like two pieces of a puzzle. Pieces that did not fit together, but were forced together and ruined in the process. Yes, that was what we were.

Stifling a yawn, I attempted to stretch out but his cool body kept me trapped within his limitations.

"Can we stay in bed all day?" Marius whispered, pressing a prolonged kiss to the back of my head. His voice was hoarse and raspy, but lighter than it had been the nights past. "I do not feel ready to face the night ahead just yet. Let it be me and you, just us. Just like this. And please do not make me beg."

He slipped a hand beneath my side and wrapped the other atop me. One strong tug and I was firmly in his grasp. And I did not want him to let go. Not even with the bubbling sickness that brewed within, or the haunting knowing of what was to come.

I was still fighting back against the want to fall back into sleep. It was peaceful there. A place without the need to think. Waking this evening felt as though I had been thrust out of a body of warm water into a winter storm.

I barely managed to form words together in agreement. All that came out of my mouth was a string of mumbled, long sounds.

“You are dressed,” Marius announced, tugging at the shirt on my back. “But when I last left you I am certain your body was exposed.”

My eyes sprang open at his comment. I shifted beneath the sheets and felt the material that Marius still played with at my thigh.

“I was cold.” The lie slipped out before I had a chance to claw it back. I had to tell him what I knew of Katharine eventually. And with it the reasoning of how I knew. I was suddenly glad to have my back to him as I was certain my pinched and twisted expression would have given my secrets away.

“Are you now?” His voice rumbled.

“No.”

As I said it, his wandering hands quickened in pace as he gripped onto the material of the trousers with full fists and begun tugging them down off my legs. I groaned as the chill of his fingers skimmed up my leg, knowing the trousers were now discarded on the chamber’s floor.

“And what of the shirt... do you need it to keep warm now?”

I paused, my breathing shuddering. “No,” I said again.

Marius snickered, fingers moving as preciously as a spider weaving a web. Button by button he undid the shirt without needing to be standing before me, all whilst he still lay beside me, his heavy breathing prickling the back of my neck.

There was something different about him. How his hands, although gentle, seemed rushed.

Urgent.

“Has the cold made you lose the ability to say more than one word?”

I pushed back at him, nestling my arse into his crotch. Before I felt the hard rock of his length I could sense his arousal for me. My mouth watered as I rubbed back against him, slowly rocking my hips.

“No,” I muttered again, eyes held closed as Marius’s enthusiastic grip fondled further.

“If you continue using that word I will be forced to manipulate my further questioning to ensure it ends well for me. Tell me, Jak, will you waste yet another evening with me and not leave this bed?”

“There is nothing else of importance that needs to be done,” I replied, accepting his proposal without clearly saying so. Part of me felt wrong for doing this. Keeping the stone of destruction within me. Would one more

night really matter before I finally threw it, shattering the glass castle within Marius?

Marius turned me around to face him, his strength enough to complete the movement without my need for assisting. We faced each other, noses a breadth apart. His stare did not linger from mine for a single moment. I was his entire focus, and he was mine.

One more night of peace. It was a promise to myself. Over and over I repeated it in my mind as I took in his face. His handsome, perfect face.

I reached for the strands of loose, white hair that fell over his ruby eyes. He forced his face into my touch as I pushed the hair out of the way.

“You are the most handsome creature I have ever laid my eyes upon.” He did not blink as he spoke. Did not look away. His lips hardly moved as he announced his thoughts aloud.

Him saying that played with the barrier of sadness that I was trying to keep erected. It was almost painful looking at him, knowing what was to come.

I smiled, masking the emotions that stormed within me. “As are you. If you are the very last person I see it would not be terrible. You have not seen the others I have endured back home. You are... different.”

Marius winced. “Different is good, is it not?”

“Different is beyond good. It is you.”

He parted his lips to respond, but I silenced him with a kiss. I feared that if he spoke I would crumble entirely. So, like the selfish offspring my mother had so perfectly crafted, I buried the feeling and lost myself to Marius.

I pushed at his shoulders until he was laid flat on his back. Hoisting my leg over his, I took my place upon his crotch as though it was my throne. The sheets fell off my back, discarded, exposing both of our now naked bodies.

Marius grinned, exposing his teeth, and raised both his hands and put them behind his head.

“Have your way,” he groaned, his sly grin causing my stomach to flip. “I am all yours.”

My hands explored his chest and stomach, moving over the mounds of muscle as he tensed beneath my touch. I did not stop until they found his throat. I squeezed at his skin, lowering my parted mouth to his neck as he had done to me.

I started off by simply kissing. Each peck small and soft. But then I brought in a nip which erupted a growl of pleasure and surprise from his, always, parted lips. I sucked, introducing my tongue which ran across his skin, leaving a trail of glistening spit in its wake.

Sounds slipped from him, a chorus of pleased chirps and deep, thundering growls that only spurred me on further.

Once I pulled away, his neck was as red as his wide, hungry eyes.

I lost myself to the feeling. Marius's hands finally gave up hiding behind his head and he gripped onto either side of my hips. The harder I bit and sucked, the further his fingers dug into me. The pain encouraged me. It was not the type of discomfort that snatched one's breath, but told me all I needed to know about Marius.

He was enjoying this, and I was as well.

Down from his neck, I trailed my tongue across his chest. This close I admired the faint hairs that covered his skin, as silver as those atop his head. Around his nipple was a circle of darker hairs, much like the shadow of hairs that crowned his cock. I licked around his nipple until it hardened, moving onto the next as my hands held firm onto his large, tensed upper arms.

He did not speak. Nor did I. This was not a time for conversation or words for they would not add to the act I was about to commit.

I pushed off from my seat and slipped further down the bed. Marius let me do so, his hands flexing as if he was unsure what to do with them now I was out of his grasp.

My kiss found his hip. The V-shaped lines that framed his throbbing cock stood out proudly. As I kissed at the space just north of his penis, I ran a nail down those lines, stopping only when his large cock was gripped in my hand. My fingers did not touch as I held onto it. Not like the others I had seen and held before. He was... monstrous. And I could not deny the throbbing warmth that came off it in waves. Warmth that did not bless the rest of his touch.

Only this, his most sacred and magical appendage.

My entire focus had been on teasing him that when I finally pulled back to look up at him, his hand now gripped the back of my head and held firm onto my hair.

"Ah, ah, ah." His voice was husky and deep as he commanded, "Do not stop now. Carry on."

I was suddenly self-conscious, unsure if my lack of skillset would suddenly ruin the mood. But Marius urged my head back down towards his manhood until the tip was pressed against my closed, wet mouth.

I allowed it to part my lips, my self-consciousness melting away to nothingness as Marius released a moan so wild it shook the very room. It was impossible to fit the entire length in my mouth, but I felt the need to try as much as I could. Over and over I moved up and down, my speed intensifying alongside the guiding hand at the back of my head.

Marius suddenly sat up, pulling me away with his grip. I glanced up, eyes wet, as he took his spare hand and brought it to his mouth. Spit covered his fingers, his stare held to mine. It all happened in a breath.

Marius brought his wet fingers to my opened mouth and rubbed it across my lips.

“Keep it wet.”

“You are full of demands,” I told him, licking my tongue across my lower lip, his spittle mixing with my own. “How about you try and keep quiet next time?”

Marius’s low laugh made my stomach jolt. “It is you who deserves to be silenced.” With that my head was guided back down to his throbbing manhood until the tip of it filled my mouth once again.

This was what I needed. A different type of peace that sleep would never been able to gift me with.

My mind could hardly focus on the moment at hand as Marius’s groans of pleasure shook the shadows around the room.

I felt powerful as my touch conjured such a reaction. My mouth worked at his cock, but so did my hand.

It was impossible to fathom time. I knew from the slight ache in my jaw that it had gone on for a while and the changing tones of Marius’s pleased sounds.

Suddenly it came to a stop, Marius pulling my face from his crotch with both hands around my cheeks.

“Wait...” he breathed, eyes closed as he focused. His demeanour almost... panicked. I stopped my hand movements but could feel him throbbing in my hold. He was close. I was also breathless as I looked up at him, watching him trying to clamber for control of his body as pleasure burned through him. When he finally spoke I could feel pure hunger rolling

off him in waves. His eyes were dark, so dark that it made the paleness of his skin stand out. "I am not finished with you yet. It is your turn."

He moved with such unnatural speed that I was suddenly on my hands and knees, no longer looking at him, but facing the bedding beneath me.

I heard the familiar scratch of wood as he opened the bedside drawer and withdrew the only liquid that made sex with him possible.

I bit down on the sheets in anticipation, waiting for the moment that he would fill me.

Marius had touched me before as I had touched him. And it felt incredible. But there was no feeling in the world that could be replaced by the euphoria when he entered me.

The thought alone saturated my mouth even more than it was already.

His hands grasped harder, fingers digging into my skin as he traced lines up my legs and onto my arse. I peered back to see his wide, unblinking eyes almost entirely obscure.

My breath hitched. "Is something wrong?"

Marius turned his head to the side, clicking his neck and sighing. "I hunger for you, Jak."

The words sent lightning through my blood. Marius parted his panting mouth and exposed the two gleaming points of his teeth. Even if I wanted to wriggle away from it, I couldn't. Not as he held me firm in place. But I did not... not want to move away from him. He did not scare me, no. What he wanted from me, it thrilled me beyond words.

"Are you in control?" The question croaked out of me.

Marius grinned, tongue lapping across his lower lip. "I can smell you, Jak. All of you. I can feel your very essence pumping wildly through your veins. It is a song. A symphony that I find hard to ignore."

He then paused, wandering eyes settling on my stare and holding it. "But to answer your question, yes, I am in control. No matter how I desire to taste you."

I did not know if it was my own thirst for recklessness or the acceptance that my decision was made, but I invited him.

"Marius, I want you to enjoy me. All of me."

His lip curled above his teeth. "Be careful what you say to me, Jak."

"If you want to taste me..." I breathed, pulling my stare away from him and planting my face back down on the sheets of the bed. "Then do it. I trust you."

Marius's grip tightened on my arse, sending fire through my skin. "Are you certain, Jak? I fear I will not have the restraint to caution again."

I closed my eyes, my body calm. "Do it."

A low rumbling growl emitted from Marius, but I was too nervous to open my eyes to watch. I expected his mouth to find my neck or wrist, a place in which my veins shone blue from my skin. But his kiss found my arse and I melted beneath it.

He left a trail of his wet mouth from cheek to cheek. I gasped, arching my back more as his tongue would lap up against a sensitive spot. Then, as I groaned in pleasure, the cold touch shocked me. Not enough to break the enjoyment. But I felt the change.

The feeling was familiar. Reminiscent to when I would stick my gloveless hands into piles of fresh snow when I was young. Until the tips of my fingers would numb and my palms tingled.

But this sensation spread across my arse, followed by a gentle sucking.

My hand reached back and met hair. I tangled my fingers into it and held him firm.

The feeling of his bite was not painful.

No. But for a brief moment I understood that it would be if he so desired it.

Time, as it did so famously in this castle, fell away from me. I was lost on a wave of pure bliss, eyes slow to open and close as he had his way with me.

I lost my ability to hold a thought as Marius moved from position to position. Kissing, drinking, fucking.

Every time his breathing deepened and became uneven I willed him to calm, wanting this moment to go on for as long as I could muster. I refused to touch myself, even batting his own hand away as he reached for me.

At one point he had turned me on my back so I faced him. His lips were apple red, his teeth stained slightly from my blood. Not a drop ran down his chin. Not a drop wasted. Beads of sweat glistened like crystals across his temple, his chest and stomach flexing with each thrust as he re-entered me from his new position.

"I do not want this to end," I told him, legs hoisted above his shoulders as he ploughed into me from above.

I meant it in more ways than just this sex session. I did not want this stay to end. For the final day to arrive and bring death with it. If I could will

for time to swallow me entirely I would.

I pushed the thoughts into the darkest pits of my soul and dragged Marius down to my neck. As his teeth slipped into my waiting skin, thoughts simply faded.

There was only me and him. Marius lost to the rapture of our sex. Myself lost to the intoxicating kiss as he nipped at my skin and sucked on my blood gently.

The feeling we shared built like the beating of drums. With intensity and speed, it continued until we both cried out in sync as we shared in the climax we had so longingly kept at bay.

When we were done I felt lightheaded. I laid on my back, body tingling, as I stared up at the dark ceiling of the room. Marius lay beside me, fingers grazing my own as we waited in silence.

“It did not hurt,” I finally said, registering the slight tingle that spread across my neck, shoulder and arse. *Which makes the thought of what is to come less intimidating.*

It was the first thing I had said after Marius had finished within me. I had my hand pressed to my lower stomach, feeling just how slim I had become since leaving home. During the earlier days I ate my fill. But it had seemed that food had become less important now.

“I hate to ruin the illusion, but it *will* not feel the same. It did not hurt but I hardly took more than a sip from you.” *Really?* “No matter how I longed for more. You can thank the scraps of control I was able to keep, because as soon as that slips away from me I cannot promise you a painless experience.”

The silent pause between us went on for an eternity, only broken by Marius who rolled on his side to face me. “Have I ruined the mood?”

Not as much as I am about to.

The moment we had stopped, the returning sickness within me took me prisoner. His touch no longer distracted me from my thoughts. It simply stopped holding the door closed within me, allowing them free rein to overwhelm me.

“How long do we have?” I asked, voice cracking.

“Two more nights.”

It was so soon. And he was so certain as he hardly took breath before answering. I had never felt the want to claw back something so ferociously

before. Time. With the power I kept imprisoned within, it was the one concept I could not control.

Not that I ever felt the need to. Except now. I would give all my magic up if it meant that this did not have to come to the destined end.

“I suppose all good things have to come to an end.”

Although I had not yet moved to face Marius, I could feel his gaze burning holes into the side of my face.

“The word *good* will never come close to describing what you are to me. You are far more than a good time. I have had plenty of those. But you, Jak, are something entirely different.”

“I am different,” I murmured, repeating what I had not long ago said to him.

“You are.” His hand brushed across my stomach which tensed beneath his cold touch.

“No, Marius. I am different. Different to what you think I am, and I cannot keep pretending. There is no point for my lie anymore.”

I did not reach for his hand to hold it, no matter how I longed to do it.

Marius chuckled nervously, pushing himself up on his elbows beside me. “What is bothering you, Jak?”

“I know what has happened to Katharine.” Even the very air between us seemed to come to a standstill. I slipped from the bed, leaving him in it as I stood. Nervous energy bubbled through me. “And I wish I could tell you that she will be okay. But I know the people keeping a hold of her, and they would hurt their own if required. Trust me.”

I turned to him and watched him where he sat, eyes glaring and body stiff. It seemed every muscle on his exposed body had tensed as my words settled over him.

“Help me understand, Jak, for I fear your words are only confusing me.”

This was it.

I raised a hand before us. Marius’s eyes settled on it. I reached far within me to the coiling of fire that waited for my call. And it answered. Deep red flames tickled across my fingers, dancing and twisting until the room glowed beneath the flamelight.

Marius was still, all but his mouth that parted slowly and the lines that cut across his forehead as his brows furrowed.

“I am a witch, Marius, and I was sent here to kill you. And those who sent me have Katharine now as leverage.”

It seemed that I was unable to catch a breath as he watched on.

Then the flame across my hand died out. Winked out of existence in a single moment. Just as the room shook beneath the sudden roar that spilled from Marius's split, teeth-bared mouth.

“Stay back.” Marius’s two words felt like a stabbing pain through my chest. They barely came out whole and understandable through the hissing that split from him. His face was pinched, pulled between two different emotions. Rage and... was it sadness or shock? Either way I felt each moment as his glare cut into me like the dulllest of blades.

I had not even taken a step before he growled them out at me. All that stood between us was the bed. It would not stop him from reaching me if he desired.

I shook as well, but in a different manner to Marius. My forehead dampened and the room seemed to cave in on me.

“I—”

“You... you tricked me.”

“No, yes, Marius, let me explain.” I could not grasp onto a single thread of clarity.

Marius fisted the sheets, blue veins protruding from his arms beneath the tension. “Why... why!”

One word, that was it. It was all he could conjure, but it stabbed into my gut nonetheless.

“Because it was what I was brought up to do. I had no choice.”

“Everyone has a choice,” Marius seethed, spittle flying from his lipless snarl.

“Did you?” I said, quietly and unable to hold his glare. “Because from what I understand you were thrown into this situation just as I have been.”

Marius's stomach muscles tensed as he threw himself forward, slamming his palms onto the bed. I was certain I heard a snap of wood. "Do not compare me to what you are! We are nothing alike!"

My throat thickened. I found it hard to swallow the lump that had nestled in it. "I did not mean it like that."

"Then tell me, Jak, what did you mean?" He spat my name out like it was a weapon of its own. I recoiled from it, pressing a hand to my chest.

"You do not need to believe me, but what I want is far different to what my family needs. I have learned more about you in these past weeks than I have in years of study."

"Study!" Marius screeched, gripping the sheets in his hands and clenching them. "I cannot believe I did not see this coming. You have ensnared me in a hex, just like that wretched bitch had. All of this... you are no different. Tricking me into bed, forcing my affection. All to get close enough to kill me."

Victorya was wrong. Marius did not beg for what I could offer him.

I looked to the floor, hoping my hair would fall over my eyes to hide the tears that slipped from them.

"I do not hold that type of power over you." Every word he said to me felt as though another rock had been thrown at my very soul, each leaving a scar across my skin as a reminder. "You are in your right to trust me or not, but I have not only learned more about you but myself. I do not want what my coven desires. If you kill me now, or during the final evening, it would not matter to me."

Marius paused, but I dared look up to him, only to witness yet more distrust crease his handsome, pained face.

"Tell me why they... you wish for my death?" His voice was calm, so much so that I almost spluttered on my breath in relief.

I could have told him that it was not my wish. Repeated it over and over again, but the look upon his face told me that it was too late for that. He did not trust that I did not want it. Nor did I blame him.

"To prevent you from being free," I said, voice cracking, lowering my gaze to my feet.

There was a shift in the air, brushing the hair from my dampening forehead. I looked up to Marius who stood inches before me. I could not breathe. Even as he stared me down, my magic was firmly hidden away in the pits of my being. I hardly felt its comforting, familiar presence.

It kept away from me out of disgust. Or perhaps it knew there was no point to aid me. Not when my mind was made up about this outcome.

“Free? If this is yet another trick, do not—”

“It was prophesied, upon my ancestor’s death bed, that a witch would arrive upon the hundredth year of the curse. I would be the first of my kind with ties to magic, that would bring the salvation for the witches or... damnation. If I were to kill you upon the final night, then the curse would be broken and the power that kept you locked away here would no longer be required. It would be restored to those witches who have lived without it. Yet if I failed, and you were to kill me as you had the many Claims before, then the curse would also break. Not in favour of the witches, but yourself. You would be free from these grounds. Free to roam the world. Free to dwell without control or restraint. Free to be... you.”

I had to slow my words down as I felt the need to rush and tell him. As though I had never said this to anyone, that it flowed freely out of me.

There was urgency in my tale. I watched Marius’s face with intent, punishing myself in memorising his reaction.

He hardly blinked as I spoke, only curling his lips at the mention of the curse.

“And I would return to my previous state?” His voice seemed almost hopeful. My heart pained knowing that he would not. Change with magic was irreversible. It was the power keeping him from leaving that could be reserved.

I shook my head, dropping my gaze to the floor. “I am sorry.”

“Then I will never be free.” Marius turned his back on me and padded away. I wanted to reach out, to stop him, but my arms were frozen to my sides.

“Do not leave me, please. Take it out on me, I deserve it. I need you to know that I am not like them.” I paused, disgusted at myself. “Not anymore.”

“I warned myself not to trust. To keep my distance from a Claim for the pain in what was to come was far too great. Then you walked in. With that name. Which makes sense now as to why you have it—”

“I never knew...”

“It does not matter, does it? The damage is done no matter what name you have. No matter what your intentions may be. How did they know

about Katharine? Did you inform them of her meddling and have known all along that she suffers the price?"

Adrenaline burst through me at the mention of her. "Marius, I had nothing to do with Katharine. I would not have done that to her. Mother told me that Katharine was caught feeding her own mother your blood. That was what captured her attention."

"So this is my fault?" He turned, arms lifting beside him. Around the corners of my vision, I caught the shadows growing from the sides of the room, throbbing like a wave of darkness that swelled in size, fuelled by Marius's anger. "This is what you are trying to say? And dare I ask how you conversed with the outside world?"

"I had a scrying bowl."

"Had?"

"It is currently lying across the lawn of your gardens in shards of charred pieces. Mother knows that I have failed before the final day. She has seen my change. I did not feel the need to keep my lines of communication open to her for I told her my stance."

"And what is your stance?"

"That I have fallen in love with you. It was never on my strict agenda, but I have. And all Mother and the coven's hopes of retrieving their power back with your murder has simply slipped away. I have come to terms with my choice and will die happy knowing they too will suffer when you finally break free of these barriers keeping you tethered here."

Marius kept my gaze as I opened myself to him. The moment I had finished, I felt myself recoil. Out of embarrassment or shame, I was not certain.

But I had said it.

I waited for him to say something back. To see if my words melted the hardness that had returned to his face. The tough expression that I had not seen on him for a long while.

"When I change I suggest you hide. Do what you can to keep me away from you, and you away from me."

Marius turned for the door and walked towards it. I wanted to call for him to not leave. To plead, demand, beg for him to stay with me.

But with each step away from me I felt my soul break apart. By the time he left me, alone, with his words of warning echoing between us, I feared that I would never be able to piece my soul back together.

Not that it mattered now, the thought taunted through my darkening mind.

It would end soon enough. All of it would. But most of all, *I* would end.

I existed through the following hours as though I was drifting through a river. Some moments were calm, and others rough and tumultuous. It was impossible to see when I would allow myself moments to breathe, not thinking about the final night that was creeping closer by the minute. Then I would remember what was to come and my uncontrollable emotions took a hold of me.

Marius kept away from me. Even Victorya did not show her translucent, all knowing face to me. Food was not prepared in the dining hall, nor were the candles relit. Even during the long, wasteful hours of daylight, the castle seemed darker. Colder.

A chill raced over my skin as I studied myself in the gilded mirror that was propped against the wall of Marius's chambers. I was thinner, that much was obvious. Shadows in the shapes of half-moons hung beneath my dulled, viridian eyes. The cream shirt I wore hung off my frame as though it was sewn for someone twice my size, exposing my neck and the two marks nestled among the dark bruising across my skin. Raising a finger to circle the area, it still felt tender and sore. Not as much as it had once the evening with Marius had long faded. The skin around the puncture wounds was raised so my finger trailed over the twin bumps gently.

And all I could do was think of him. Marius.

I longed for his presence. Had to bite down on my tongue to stop myself from calling out for him during the darkest of moments.

But I feared that seeing his disappointed, distrusting face would only shatter me further. And I had a few pieces left that were barely being held

together.

In the quiet, lonely hours I contemplated the many ways I would see the final evening through. I knew I could not kill him. Not as originally planned. So I allowed my mind to flirt with other possibilities — ideas of holding him off, keeping him at bay just long enough to see that bastard, red moon fall back into its resting place. It had always been discussed that he must be killed on the final night. Yet the possibility of holding him off until that night was over had never been brought up.

As though it was not a possibility I was permitted to imagine. Not for the sake of Mother and the coven and any other powerless witch surviving out in the large world beyond this castle.

No one had speculated what happened after the moon lowered, giving way for the day that followed.

Only that I would survive, and he would die. And I would simply return home just in time for breakfast the following morning.

I had gone over it in my mind countless times, enough to convince myself that I had hope. A small, simmering gleam of hope that we would both see it through.

Then I would remember that I knew nothing of what I was to face. Victorya was not available to give me insight, nor did the books that Marius had written give any indication of what happened during that final, fateful night.

I had seen him lose control, only slightly, but even Marius had warned it was nothing like it would be.

Remembering I was out of my depth seemed to smother that cinder of hope. A vicious cycle as I navigated the final hours in silence.

Tiredness caused my very bones to ache. It took little effort to stay awake during the evening, lying still in the broken bed, waiting to hear a sign that Marius was still dwelling within the castle. But it was silent.

No familiar footsteps, or chatter.

It was as though I was the only person in the world left.

And that was how I felt, even inside my dreams.



I HAD LEFT THE CURTAINS OPEN, ROLLING OVER TO SEE THE PINK TINGE THAT dusted across the full moon's shape. Every time I looked I hoped to see a white crescent. But its colouring was a signal that I knew well.

Tomorrow night it would begin. *And end.*

I pushed myself away from my haunting reflection, giving up on the hopes of sleeping when daylight finally sliced through the dust-filled air of the chamber. When I blinked it seemed that the lingering moon had embedded itself into my dark mind. A constant reminder of what the following evening was to bring.

In a trance I tugged a jacket around my shoulders, and pathetically tied the laces on the boots up whilst I lost my stare to a point on the wall ahead of me. There was only one thought that held enough energy to keep moving forward.

Marius. I had to see Marius. To find and speak to him.

I moved through the castle, a husk of a boy, hardly taking note of my surroundings. Through the dining hall, up to the door that would lead me to the pits far beneath where I stood. To him.

I gave little care for the door as I threw a hand up, calling for my magic to aid me. My fire was the only element to respond. I conjured the flame to cradle the iron handle until it charred to a malleable, weak point. Then I willed for the wind to listen to my call. Unlike the fire, it was reluctant. I forced much strength into my call until a single gust of sharp, phantom wind slammed against the door and snapped the lock in two.

There was no point in hiding now.

Through the following corridor I moved, bumping carelessly into the wall as it turned and twisted. There was no light here and I did not conjure a flame to help.

On I ambled until the path ended. I did not need light to know that a door stood before me. Covered entirely in chains. The padlock on my side. Keeping something in, rather than out.

He was here. Locked away.

I pressed my hands against the wood of the door and leaned my forehead against its surface. Tears flowed freely as my urgency to see him increased. The slams of my fists echoed through the dark. Each one so loud that it shook my skull. But I continued my torrent of hits and punches, intensifying them until the skin across my knuckles ripped and my fingers dampened with my own blood.

I gripped a hold of the heavy, thick padlock and squeezed, hissing through my teeth as a shout of desperation spilled from me.

Burn. Fire danced across my hands and wrists, illuminating the space before me in orange light. *Burn.* I watched, unblinking, forcing more heat into the padlock. *Burn.* It softened beneath my touch, turning into mush as my fist tightened. *Burn.* There was an echoing of pain that spread across my palm, diluted by the fire that glowed across it. *Burn.* A guttural scream exploded from me as I yanked hard on the padlock. It came away in my hand, the web of chains spilling like useless hair across the ground at my feet. The links had been nailed to points in the wall around the door, even threaded beneath the gap at my feet onto the other side.

Yet the iron pulled away like butter, the chains tethered by my flame.

The faint ringing of metal across stone vibrated through the air as I willed the fire to die, returning it to the warm pits within me until I required its presence again.

It only took a gentle push for the door to swing open.

I stood at the precipice, looking into the midnight cavern. Candles burned in every corner, melted into a monstrous pile of wax from years of reuse. The glow was enough to see the sight that waited.

Old wooden barrels were piled atop one another, some marked with scratched and faded numbers and letters. Wine. They had contained wine. I had seen the very same beside the bar at our local tavern. But those did not look as forgotten and... empty as these. Beside them bottles of dark green glass sat, some holding thin pillar candles, others only filled with cobwebs.

But it was not that sight that sent the lightning of disdain coursing through the layer between my skin and muscles.

An open coffin lid revealing its contents rested steps before me. From my stance I could see the glow of pale skin nestled in a bed of ruby, silk sheets. I stepped towards him, hand to my chest, feeling the violent slam of my heart within. Marius slept, like a child cuddled with dark material. He looked so peaceful. His arms crossed over his broad chest, hardly enough room for movement if he wanted.

But he was still. Deadly still as he was lost to his dreamscape.

I knew there was no waking him for I had tried when he slept by my side. During the day it was as if he was non-existent. A body, a shell of a man with nothing inside. Only at night did he truly come alive.

I knelt beside him, reaching out a hand to touch his own.

“I had to see you,” I whispered, picking up his soft, relaxed hand and holding it in mine. I expected for his hand to be stiff, but it wasn’t. I studied his smooth, lineless face for a reaction. For some proof he heard me, registered my presence. But Marius did not even flinch as I spoke. “It has played terribly on my mind, knowing that I lied to you. I know I will not get to tell you now, but I promise you that I will fight. Fight to keep us both alive through the night.”

I brought his hand to my mouth and pressed my lips to it. Tears soaked my cheeks and chin. He was so terribly cold but I held on firm, his familiar feeling welcome when I longed nothing more than him to hold me too.

“We will make it through this night to come and I will spend an eternity making up for my lies to you. I promise.” My cry was building into a chest-racking sob. My vision blurred and my forehead tensed as I tried to catch my breath. “I have no one but you. A stranger, but one I know more than my own mother. My own self.”

I gave into the sadness that held me hostage. It was impossible to grasp how long I sat there, in the pits of this dark room. Only when my eyes had dried and legs went numb did I contemplate leaving him in peace. As I reluctantly placed his hand back upon his chest, I noticed something in the grasp of his other hand.

I pried a folded piece of parchment from his fist, hands undeniably shaking. It made it close to impossible to unravel the parchment. Holding it up to the flame of the closest candle, I spoke aloud the line of scripted writing that sliced across the yellowed paper.

DO NOT HURT HIM. REMEMBER. DO NOT HURT HIM.

IT WAS A NOTE. WRITTEN IN THE FAMILIAR CURVES THAT MARIUS HAD scripted across the countless books in his study.

I read it again. The words both echoing in the room and across my mind. *Do not hurt him.* He had locked himself in this room. Had that been Victorya’s final task? *Remember.* I knew he changed, and this only solidified that he became something different. A creature without thoughts. *Do not hurt him.*

No matter his anger and hateful stare as he countered me from across the room, he did not want to hurt *me*.

The note was a warning from himself, to himself.

No, not to himself, but to the creature he was about to become.

I woke to a deep, thudding laugh. It took a moment to register it as I broke through the grogginess of sleep. I had fallen asleep, back resting against the wardrobe I had pushed against the bedroom door. It was one of many pieces of furniture I had moved to block the only entrance and exit to the room by foot.

The little sleep I had did nothing to clear the cobwebs that wove from bone to bone, and vein to vein.

I listened carefully for the noise again, unsure if it was an illusion from some already forgotten nightmare. All I could hear was the beat of my own frantic heart and shallow breathing. But then it happened again. A laugh that seemed to shiver in the very shadows of the room. It came from here, but also from far away. A noise impossible to pinpoint.

Yet I knew the deep chuckle and its owner.

The open curtains gave view to the dark of night beyond the room. From my perch on the floor, I could not see the blood moon. But its deep, blood-red glow washed across the night and everything beneath it. As though the full moon had been cut down and it bled profusely across the world.

It spilled into the room, waves of crimson that touched everything before me. I raised my hands and saw nothing but the red glow across my skin. There was no time to scold myself on how long I had been asleep or when I had fallen unconscious. I vaguely remembered my eyes growing heavy but blamed it on the lack of food and the long day. It did not matter now.

I stiffened as the laugh shivered around me. A slow, devilish chuckle that dragged on for countless, horrific moments.

The urge to clap my hands over my ears and pinch my eyes shut thrummed through me. To tell myself that this was the dream and I was, in fact, still sleeping. But if my plan was to work, I had to stay vigilant. And no dream begun in such a way. Those types of dreams had other names.

Regardless if I had been trained for this moment, it did not deter the utter fear and panic that riddled through me.

“Calm down,” I said, focusing on my breathing. Marius was strong, likely powerful enough to smash through the barrier I had created with the furniture. But his laugh, although near, was also far. His laugh was different. Raspy and deep, as though it was a multitude of different voices overlapping one another.

I stood slowly from the ground, my body useless to stop him if he wanted to enter. Raising my hands in their readied position, I stood back from the door and deeper into the room.

The moments that followed seemed to drag into oblivion. I kept as still and quiet as possible, trying to pinpoint if he was close. It was impossible to distinguish the violent beats of my heart to the footsteps beyond the room.

“Jak.” The voice was a symphony as he drawled my name. “Jak, I am hungry, Jak. So, deeply famished.”

I longed for the ceiling to crash down upon me. Marius was close. His last warning to tell me to hide trickled into my consciousness. Instead I waited for him in the first place he would have looked.

More moments of silence followed that was not broken by his voice. No. It was a scratch of nails against wood. The sound was so uncomfortable it itched at my skin and made it cold with sweat. Marius was beyond the door, his nails like scraping blades against the barricaded door.

“Do you not want me now?” Marius whispered like a hurt child. “Let me in, Jak, please. Open this door so we can... discuss matters.”

I could not muster a reply. My throat had dried entirely, and my tongue seemed to have thickened in my mouth from fear.

“Let me in so I can be with you.” Marius changed his tone to commanding as he partially shouted.

“What is stopping you?” I said back, unable to hide the shake in my voice. “You could enter if you wanted.”

Marius chuckled, his laugh turning manic. "Where would be the fun in that... witch? Come now, do not be spoiled. Do I not deserve some... fun?" I jumped back as he slammed his fist into the door, wood cracking beneath the force. "Let me in."

I paced back towards the window which I had left ajar during my preparation.

"I am not letting you in, Marius. I am doing as you wished."

"Do not mistake me for the man you think you knew. We are nothing alike."

Magic swirled within my, now, awakened soul. I had a plan to keep him away and this was only the first step. Tiptoeing backwards towards the window, I kept a keen eye on the door. I did not want to encourage conversation for the fear he would hear my voice moving away.

"Beautiful night, is it not?" I shouted, hoping that would distract him from my distance.

"Delightful," Marius purred. "Red has always been a colour I admired. There is something... passionate about it."

"It is not how I would describe it." My hands fumbled against the dusty windowsill, then to the iron latch that had rusted shut before I had pried it open. "I am fonder of the morning if I am honest."

"Shame you will not see it," he replied so quickly it hitched my breath.

I clambered up onto the windowsill until I was in a perch. Ready to use the element of air, I willed for it to listen for when I called. Its cooperation was imperative to my next plan. I buried the anxiety of the possibility of falling to my death before Marius got to me. An image of him drinking from my broken, shattered body at the ground far below the window sliced through my mind.

No. Focus.

The night beyond the room was crisp as the air swaddled me. It impressed me just how well the thin glass of the window kept the cold out of the room. It was the final night of the final month of the year and the chill of winter was intense. My jaw clenched as I braced against the chill, twisting my wrists and willing the air to follow my command. It was a simple gesture, but one that would keep me airborne for as long as it required to reach the castle's towering roof.

Looking up, my stomach tugged downward as I took in the height. During the daylight it did not seem so impossible. Now, looking upwards, it

seemed that the spires moved away from me before my very eyes.

Focus, Jak, I warned again, my hands shaking at my sides as the wind began to listen.

The trick was to hold one's breath, not wasting precious air on breathing when it was needed to keep me afloat.

I closed my eyes, ready to throw myself backwards into the night when a brush of breath tickled my ear.

I spun so fast from my perch that I tumbled onto the chamber's floor in a knot of limbs. Panting, I pushed myself back up to see Marius climbing through the window.

His gaze was obsidian, not a single slither of white left. His lips sliced into a smile, cutting through his cheeks, exposing rows of sharp teeth.

I crawled away from him as his black-tipped fingers bent the wiry frame of the windows and cracked the panels of glass. One leg inside, then another until he stood before me.

"I thought it would take longer than this." He seemed taller, but crooked. And his tone was almost... disappointed, his low lip pouting slightly as he regarded me. "It would be crude to admit that I was hoping for more of a chase. You have made this far too easy."

This was the creature I expected during my years of preparation. And he was far from the man I had come to know. To love.

This being before me was twisted and dark. His face was not soft, but sharp and creased with lines. His tongue, the very same that had explored every inch of my skin, now lapped hungrily across his pale, almost non-existent lips.

"I did not invite you in," I said, forcing as much strength into my tone as I could muster.

"You seem to forget that this is my home. One I do not need an invitation to do what I desire."

I scrambled backwards until my back was, once again, pressed against my barricade. He could not be here. Not like this. His presence ruined the next steps in my plan in a single, horrifying moment.

"You are speechless... it is becoming of you."

My lip curled upward. "If this is what you warned me of, you do not frighten me."

"Don't I?" He rested his hand on one hip, flashing his fangs. "Shame..."

I looked between the open window, feeling the remnants of wind that was still waiting for my command, then back to Marius. "I do not want to hurt you... trust me."

Marius opened his mouth to respond but was silenced as my power slammed into him.

He did not see it coming. Or perhaps the slither of the man I knew simply underestimated me.

The build-up of power still lingered in my bones, waiting patiently for its release. As I raised my hands, and held my breath, billows of wind thrashed across the room at him. It conjured from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. The force crashed into his chest, doubling him over like a doll, and ripping him from his feet.

The window shattered into pieces, flying out into the night with Marius. I closed my eyes, waiting for the nick of pain to spread across my uncovered skin as glass rained down around me.

But the wind I commanded kept a barrier of protection.

Once the element was expelled completely from my being, I sagged to the ground, opening my eyes to see nothing but destruction. The nightly, natural wind caused the ripped curtains to dance in place of where Marius had stood seconds before.

Panicked, I pushed myself up and ran for the gaping hole my power had created. I hardly cared as I gripped a hold of the glass covered windowsill and peered out to the ground far below.

I expected to see a broken body amongst the scattering of shattered glass.

But I did not.

There was nothing but curling mist and shadow across the overgrown grounds.

Marius was not there. So much relief burned through me that a single sob escaped my parted mouth. My breathing came out ragged and uneven as I fought the urge not to tumble to my knees.

As far as my sight could allow, I scanned the dark garden, looking for him among the shadows, searching for answers as to how he survived the fall.

Then, as I squinted into the dark, the echoing laugh began again.

It was a game to Marius as he stalked me through the castle. His domain of shadow and stone.

For hours we played, me the role of a mouse and Marius the hungry, prowling cat. He did not attempt to get close to me, although I was confident he could if he wanted. Instead he let me run from hiding place to hiding place, laughing and scratching nails against walls as he followed me.

My initial plan had been ruined and my panicked mind did not have time to conjure another as I looked wildly for the next place to keep hidden. It was best to keep moving, not allowing him to trap me in one place.

The castle was barren. As I ran the halls, it was not the same place I had dwelled within thus far. Only the light of the red moon gave visual to the forgotten castle. No candles burned. There was no smell of freshly prepared food, or the usual warmth from the lit hearths in every room.

On this night, it was as though I had woken in a place that had been left neglected and untouched.

I found myself down an unfamiliar hallway, one not blessed with windows which made it blindingly obscure. My hands fumbled across the walls, hoping to find a nock to hide within, or a door to hide behind. Gone was the hope to conjure firelight, for that would alert him to my presence. If he was not already aware.

The slack shirt I wore was now plastered to the curve of my back from sweat. If the noise of my bare, running feet did not scream my location, I was certain my odour would.

Just as my hands found the familiar shape of a handle, a scuffle of noise echoed at the end of the hallway.

Reluctantly I glanced back. For painful long moments the hallway was empty. Then my breath halted as a figure ran across it. In a blink it was there, then gone. My heart filled my throat, beating loudly in my ears. Marius had found me.

With damp hands I fumbled for the door handle and thrust it open. Into yet another dark room I ran into, not bothering to shut the door behind me.

I stood, bathed in darkness, as I watched the door.

Come on. My body vibrated with nervous energy. *Show yourself.*

It had become clear that Marius was stalking me. There was no hiding place he would not uncover. I quickly learned to play along. Not controlling my fear as I longed for the adrenaline that came with it, hand in hand, to aid me when the time came.

“Why did you stop?” His voice was all around me. I spun in frantic circles, trying to search for him in the dark. “Do not make this easy for me, Jak... just when I was beginning to believe you were trying.”

The hairs on my arms stood on end as his rumbling, drawling tone shuddered from each corner of the room. I raised a hand ignited in conjured fire to battle the shadows, uncovering that he was not physically in the room.

Not yet.

But his power of the darkness clearly aided him.

“It seems you missed an important lesson,” I shouted back, waving my fire covered hand as though it was swordplay.

“Pray tell, what would that be?”

A cold chill raced down my spine as icy breath brushed against the back of my neck. My nose scrunched against the copper twang laced among sweet notes of wine. I was rigid and still as a clawed finger traced up my neck, stopping at the base of my ear.

If I closed my eyes it would have been no different to the nights prior when I lost myself to his touch. Although I felt as though I could simply melt beneath him, I stood rigid.

He had not walked through the door, only securing the suspicion that his mundane chase through the castle, hunting me, room to room, was no more than a game to him. He could move through the shadows. And now he had me.

My voice was weak as I finally uttered a reply. "It is rude to play with your food."

"That was a lesson I must have skipped." His nail traced down from my neck to my collarbone. I could not help but tilt my head as he traced my skin. "Why do you not fight back?" His voice was velvet steel, gentle yet sharp.

My mind seemed to scream to a body that simply ignored it. "Is that what you want?"

Marius moved his nail down to my chest, tugging at the string cords that kept the material over my shoulders. He did not stop until the point of his nail pressed against my naval.

"You burn bright yet hold your flames at bay. I sense your want for me. Is that why you keep your power contained? If you will not fight me, then let me have what I desire..."

I hardly registered as flames dripped from my slackened hands like water. The aged flooring hissed as the tongues of hungry fire took control of the dead wood. I blinked, slowly, as the room lit from the ever-growing blossoms of fire.

Marius made no move away from me, not as the fire melted the leather of his boots or flirted with the material of his trousers.

I gasped at the wet lap of tongue that tickled my neck. My stomach jolted, urging the power to burn hotter, higher.

Marius moaned, wrapping one arm around my back, the other grasping my jaw. "You are the greatest I have tasted. Like honey and sugar, so sweet."

"Stop." As I listened to my pathetic voice, it was as though I watched on in astral form, hardly lifting my hands to bat him away.

"Say it louder," he growled, voice vibrating against my skin as he pressed his lips into my neck. "Then maybe I will listen."

I fought against my own reasoning. It would be easy to give in. To close my eyes and see the end.

"Stop," I said again, lifting my hands before my face. Fire dripped down to my wrists as its unwelcome light seared into my gaze.

Marius hissed and his hold loosened. With the lack of his voice, I regained my control. I pulled away, throwing myself over the rivers of fire that ate away at the room. As though the amber glow had brought me out of a daze, I scrambled away from Marius.

Except he no longer stood in the room. It was only me and the fire that devoured the shadows until every corner of the room was bathed in its light. Strange shapes had been covered in dusted sheets, revealed by the light of my fire. Furniture forgotten from years of disuse. A room lost to the dark years that'd passed, unveiled by my power. Yet Marius was lost to the light, not hiding in the corners where the shadows fought to hold their positioning.

He had fled.

For now.

I pushed myself to standing, unable to ignore the slow movements of my limbs. Marius and his touch had done something to me. Kept me in a dulled, calm state, effects which still lingered. I took a step back towards the door and stumbled over my footing. Each blink slow, that when I opened my eyes the room had seemed to shift.

I felt... drunk, my mind foggy and limbs equally useless.

I gripped the door frame as I reached it, noticing the lack of fire across my hands. Behind me the heat from the remaining flames intensified as the room burned. I squinted back at it, watching my lingering power devour the room entirely. It spread quickly, walls and floor creaking as though it screamed in agony.

I could put it out — stop the flames with a single thought.

But I chose to ignore the notion and left them to feast across the room until fire chased after me when I finally left my compromised hiding spot.



THE FIRE SPREAD SWIFTLY, DEVOURING THE FLOOR I HAD LEFT AND THE many above it. I thought back to Marius's study, imagining how the books would only fuel the flames that had become the master of this place. Guilt stabbed at my gut as I ran down the stairs towards the entrance. I had my arm held to my nose to keep the intoxicating smoke from dragging me into an unwanted sleep. One I would not awake from.

Marius did not intercept me. Not as I took two steps at once, practically throwing myself down the flight of stairs to the ground floor. The grand doors were open, giving view of the night beyond, a domain of shadow and the beasts that lurked within it.

Yet I still ran for the exit as more sounds of shattering glass and the loud snaps of wood shuddered through the burning castle.

The kiss of night engulfed me as I stumbled outside. I took mere steps before falling to my knees as the hacking coughs overwhelmed me. My fingers dug into the gravel path, mud sinking beneath my nails, as I willed for my lungs to welcome the fresh air, to battle out all remnants of smoke that dared linger behind.

My ears rang violently. As the sound finally calmed, it gave way to a deep growling. A feral, guttural noise that resonated all around me. I looked up slowly, rigid with fear. The fire from the castle cast enough of a glow to bat away the immediate shadows around me. But among that darkness, barely an arm's reach away, was a host of glowing red eyes.

Unlike Marius, his bloodhounds lacked the sophistication and patience to stalk me. Even as I stood on the path, they lacked the rules that Katharine had explained. I supposed rules did not apply during an evening of such horrors.

I sensed its rushed move before its shadowy claws left the dirt ground to pounce for me.

Deeper into the damp, dirt ground, I dug my hands in until my fingers became the very roots that dwelled far beneath me. I called for the earth, urging it to be my protector.

The ground rumbled and split. The level of energy required snatched my breath away. I pinched my eyes closed moments before hearing a wheeze as a root speared through the gut of the bloodhound. Opening my eyes, I saw rows of teeth inches before me, frozen in air as yet more feral roots joined the first. They wrapped around the creature's dark fur, containing its thrashing and snapping jaws.

It is yours. I forced the thought through my hands and deep into the ground. The earth did not linger on my gift. The creature thrashed, feeble attempts to break free. But more roots broke through the ground and encased it, a den of wooden vipers, dragging its feast into their lair.

I sensed the reluctance from the other bloodhounds that watched their foolish pack member disappear beneath the earth.

A warning of what would become of them all.

I lowered my gaze and snarled, baring teeth at those who gazed at me, my own growl of warning echoing around me.

Then the laughing began again, breaking the moment like glass shattering in fire. The pack of bloodhounds parted for the creature that walked between them. One step at a time, his white skin illuminated beneath the ruby glow of the moon and orange flare of the fire.

Marius.

He looked up at the castle behind me, lips twitching as he studied its destruction. “Your kind destroyed my love, my life, and now my home. I see now that you do not run from me, but merely beg for me to punish you.” A blink and he was before me, strong hands clamped around my jaw as he lifted me from the ground. “And punish you I shall.”

I gripped a hold of his hands, thrashing my legs out at him in panic. It felt as though my head would implode beneath the pressure, both hands pushing inward as he lifted me from the ground. All I could do was scream, unable to truly hold onto breath as I fought hard to get out of his grasp.

“You are mine.” His muffled hiss hardly registered as I kicked out at him. Marius did not flinch beneath each blow. Pain vibrated through my feet, feeling as though my bones would shatter. But I did not stop.

I clawed my nails down his hands and arms, even thrashing out at his face. All of which he hardly batted an eye towards. Not even as deep droplets of ruby blossomed beneath the cuts I left across his face. Only his tongue escaped his firmly, closed mouth to lap up the droplet that dared fall near it. Before my eyes the marks healed, fresh skin knitting together until his face was once again perfect. Untouched.

I began to beg, his large hands muffling my panicked pleading. “Marius, let me go. Please. Please, Marius.”

“Your attempts are wasted, and here I was led to believe you were prepared for this very moment.”

I could not mutter a word as his hands clamped harder on each side of my face. I felt my cheekbones scream beneath his touch.

My vision doubled. Tripled. Until the corners of darkness began to close in around me. All I could do was look into his obsidian eyes, searching to see a part of his true self. Hoping the Marius I knew would look back at me and registered what he was doing and stop.

I gave up on my fight, losing energy quickly. Just the thought of calling on my power simply slipped between my fingers. "Please..." I managed again, voice a weak croak. "You are hurting me."

The world dropped out from beneath me in a single moment. I felt nothing as I hit the ground, his touch lingering on my cheek. My neck ached, a terrible pain that spread down my spine and up through my skull.

He had dropped me, my knees now leaking blood from the torn skin and ripped trousers.

Looking up at the looming figure above me, I willed for my vision to calm.

"I wish you had more fight left in you," he growled. "It is a true shame that my feast is too pathetic. So... weak. Promised resistance and I am left with you. I do hope your taste is worth this embarrassment you display."

"I... I will not fight you Marius."

He sneered, teeth bared, "Why!"

"Because I love you. I told you I would not hurt you and I... I hold myself to that promise."

Marius, or the creature he had now become, sucked his teeth in disappointment. "Then let us end it now. I have grown tired of waiting, which is spoiling my appetite. If you refuse me entertainment, then I give up encouraging it."

I rocked back on my hands, slumped in a heap on the ground. All around me the prowling bloodhounds reappeared through the darkness as their leader took steps towards me.

"Marius, if you can hear me, please do not do this." The sky above was lightening slightly, suggesting the arrival of dawn. Had it really been that long? I was tired, exhausted, my body a mess of aches and pains — mine not swiftly healing as Marius's did. It still could be hours away, the red stain across the sky still ever-present.

"*He* is not listening. This is my night, the boy you call for is not present." Marius smirked, dark eyes flashing. "You should know this. More than I. For it is your power that created me."

"I rebuke what they did to you," I spat, broken slabs pinching at my palms as I scrambled away from him. "What she did to you... was wrong."

"She, you. Does it truly matter who tightened the bowstring or who created the arrow? For the outcome is the same. And I am hungry. I admit I have never talked so much with my supper. They usually scream and give

in to the hunt long before this point.” Marius stopped before me, the bloodhounds faltering to his side where they bared yellowed, serrated teeth. “Stand. Meet your fate.”

I winced as I followed his command, not from fear, but from the blast of heat as yet another window exploded from the castle. Bricks crackled and charred as the fire burned on. Marius utterly unfazed that his home was destroyed, crumbling before him with each passing moment.

He hardly looked towards it this entire time, unable to take his hungry focus from me.

“I will not give in to you.”

“And you believe I need your acceptance?”

I shook my head ever so slightly, not once taking my gaze off his. “You can try but dawn will arrive and you will go without feeding.” Iron laced my words, the bitter taste of determination rearing its head for a final time.

Panic widened his stare, only enough for me to notice. His lips thinned, straightening into a pinched line. Spittle lined both lips as they finally broke into a snarl. “I *will* feed.”

Fire.

I unravelled my fists either side of me, opening them like a rose in spring, buds of orange flames twisting in warning. “You will try and fail. Then morning will return, and with it my Marius will return. You will return to me.”

Marius’s snarl intensified into a growl that seemed to vibrate through the very night. The bloodhounds at his sides echoed his anger at my taunt, each bowing their dark-furred bellies to the ground in preparation for a signal.

Air.

The world around the burning castle began to scream as the winds picked up. A gust of conjured pressure that blew through the grounds, forcing dirt and debris to swirl in torrents around my feet. The fire that reached beyond the destroyed windows bent beneath its force, longing and reaching to join in with the whipping wind’s race.

Marius shifted his weight to take a step forward but I gathered air in my lungs and released it slowly, encouraging the wind around us to strengthen in a barrier.

“I will not kill you, Marius, but my life’s preparation will not go to waste. You will see.”

Water.

The tear that escaped my eye was not from sadness. No. It was the invitation for the fat droplets that began to fall from the sky. I did not need to look up to know that pregnant clouds coated the sky as the red tint from the cursed moon dulled, covered by my power. Rain crashed down upon my head, my skin, hissing as the droplets fell into the balls of flame that were cradled in my waiting palms. I risked a blink, enough to loosen yet another tear. Then the rain thundered down upon us. Each droplet that splashed against my body made me feel refreshed. Revitalised beneath the kiss of the element's calming, all-knowing power. It thrummed within me, and around me.

Earth.

I grinned, looking through the sheets of rain as Marius teetered side to side. Beneath him the ground shook violently. A gasp of surprise broke his façade as his footing was lost to yet another tremble that jerked beneath him.

"Enough with your games!" he shouted above the elements. Marius raised a clawed hand to shield the lashings of rain and wind that battered against him. It blew the stark, white hairs from his head, exposing glowing skin and hateful eyes. I could not hear what he said next over the howls of his creatures that pounced frantically beside him. He seemed to shout as his mouth opened into a circle of dark oblivion.

Then the bloodhounds attacked.

All at once they threw themselves as balls of shadow, teeth and fur. Time seemed to slow as they each left the ground, throwing themselves with split jaws, towards me.

I cried out, fuelling my emotion into the fire in my hands. I sensed each tongue of flame that burned in the castle. Even the licks of candlelight in the town far away, beyond the barrier of this place. As I willed for the element to aid me, I became it. And it became me.

Light exploded before me, a wave of flame that burst from my hands and grew into a monstrous wall between me and the bloodhounds. I poured my very desperation into the element, causing the heat to intensify and the wall of flame to only burn wild and hot. I half expected the creatures to pass straight through. Like darkness through worn, hole-ridden drapes. But I sensed the bodies of shadow hiss and wink out of existence as they met my

power. Not a hair passed successfully through my barrier. It devoured them entirely. Light ended the darkness. Heat destroyed the cold touch of death.

I could no longer see Marius beyond the wall of flame, but I sensed him. In the back of my mind I knew that I could let the wall fall upon him and he would, like his creatures, be destroyed. Like pleading song, I almost gave into it. The power had a mind of its own. I sensed its hunger much like that of which Marius spoke about.

It wanted him. To take his life and return the power that thrummed within him to the witches scattered around the world. All it would take was a thought. A will and the fire would end this.

But in the reflection of the hissing light, I saw the soft face of the boy that hid deep within the creature that currently hosted his body.

I thrust my hands inward, urging the fire to retreat and gather back within me. It rushed for me, like a child returning to its father.

The other elements raged around me, each out of my control as I focused solely on the fire. They would wait for my command. But for now I had to fight the siren song to release my magic entirely and kill him.

The world was suddenly dark again. Only the fire that burned within the castle provided light. My hands were empty and mundane as I surveyed the emptiness before me.

No Marius. No bloodhounds.

Just me and the darkness.

At least that was what he wanted me to believe.

Before I could call out into the dark beyond me, panicked that my power had in fact reached him, a force of shadow slammed into my stomach. I dropped to the ground, winded, clawing at my neck and chest in hopes that it would help hold onto breath.

“So it is me and you. You have got what you want, now it is my turn to play my part.”

Another slamming of power collided into me, this time knocking me to the sodden ground. My hands fumbled pathetically to soften the fall but failed miserably.

Laid on my back now, I could hardly keep my eyes open against the rain that crashed upon me. One blink followed by another.

Then the force of a body pressed down above me and a face leaned over me, protecting me from the rain. I finally blinked the water from my eyes.

“I will savour every drop and stop only when you are entirely empty.”

I could not use my hands and call forth the fire for his weight kept me pinned to the ground, his hands gripping like shackles onto my wrists, preventing me from lashing out with flames.

Sucking in an inhale of air, Marius clamped a hand down over my mouth to prevent me from exhaling. The gust of air that barrelled within my chest burned me from the inside out, an energy in need of escape that stormed through me.

Marius did not speak again, instead leaning his split mouth towards the curve of my neck. There was no fighting, no kicking or punching, no strength I could muster.

So I did what he longed to do and bit down into his skin. The flesh of his hand was tough, but soon broke to my desperation. A wash of cold blood filled my mouth, threatening to choke me. Taste of copper and, something sweet, like honey. It exploded in my mouth, trailing down my tongue and cheek as though I had no choice but to devour it.

Energy flooded back into my being as his blood entered me. Fuelling me.

Marius threw his head back in a roar, releasing his hold enough for me to heave a blow.

The gust of wind that followed threw him from me as though his body was a feather. Forgotten and light. I forced every ounce of breath from my body until my head tightened and my chest spasmed with longing. The cold droplets of his blood spread down my chin, tickling as it covered my neck and chest.

I did not wait to see where Marius was thrown to. I forced myself from the ground once again, wet with his blood, and bolted.

Towards the barrier at the edge of the castle I ran, blindly throwing my free hands behind me, commanding the ground to split, the air to scream, and the rain to become shards of frozen glass, my attempts to keep him from me.

I did not stop until the barrier was before me, the invisible ending of the castle and where the world beyond began. I stopped only when I collided with the rippling surface of the barrier, slamming panicked, urgent fists against it.

Yet it stayed strong, impenetrable. I turned to face the world behind me, pressing my back against the cold layering of shadow that kept me from leaving.

The castle burned. Now a skeleton of brick and stone. Materialising from the shadows, Marius stalked towards me, a grin cut across his pale, deathly face.

“Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. Jak, you will not be able to keep this up. Not for long. You have power, enough from the starved witches that had stayed empty since the curse was laid upon me. But even you will have your limits. And I am ready to discover where they begin. And end.”

I threw everything I had at him. Every ounce of magic and energy. With each, thin and quick breath, I commanded the elements as my soldiers. My guard. And it listened, willingly. Volleys of wind, fire and water. Time slipped through my fingers as I lost the ability to think of anything but keeping him from me. It was easy at first, manipulating the emotion that roiled inside of me, feeding it to the elements as they raged as my protection. All whilst my back was pressed to the wall of shadows keeping me, and him, from leaving this cursed place.

I watched in horror as the skin melted from Marius's face as a wave of flame raced across him. It was a moment of tiredness. A lax in my judgement as I did not keep the element from harming him. All control slipped from my hands as I watched, a rasped scream echoing between us, as the fire devoured his skin.

My stomach jerked and twisted, bile creeping up my throat as I pulled the flame back. But I was too late.

Marius was caught in a roar, hand raised to do little as the wave of fire cascaded over him. As he lowered his hand, skin had been burned back to reveal bone. The side of his face less fortunate against the brunt of my wild power exposed the skull beneath, gleaming and pristine, dripping with melted flesh.

I wanted to call his name but my voice was a muddle of rasps and croaks. My throat so dry that each inhale and exhale seemed to encourage a symphony of knives to cut across it.

His cry of pain and shock soon ceased. One moment it filled the night, next not even my power dared make a noise. The world was silenced. Had I gone too far? Even as I blinked I could not rid myself of the image of melting flesh against charred bone. Had I completed what I had been fated to do?

Marius raised his hand before us and we both watched as skin crept back over bone. His pale flesh was like a small wave of water lapping back across a sand bank, leaving moisture in its wake.

He was healing, fast, before my eyes.

Marius twisted his wrist, displaying the feat with pride. My focus was entirely on the miracle before me. Dead and burned flesh, healing over, new and fresh.

When he lowered his hand, it revealed his fang filled grin, the last of the skin knitting back across his sharpened cheekbone. "You had me for a moment." Marius clicked his head to the side, the sound painfully loud over the thundering of rain that persisted around us. "I admit, even I was frightened."

My arms ached as I raised them back in defence and threat. "Next time it will burn through bone." I did not believe my warning, and from his intensifying smile, neither did Marius.

He released a hearty laugh at the cracking of my voice. "We both know that you would not maim me. You could have done that a long while ago."

If it was not for the constant force of the barrier behind me I would have fallen to the ground with exhaustion. Dwindlings of fire returned to my palms, but not the strength that it had been before. Even the winds died down to a gentle whisper and the rain calmed to a soothing shower.

"Let this end, give up." Marius walked towards me, sidestepping the curling of fire that I had thrown, missing his foot by inches. "You have fought hard but I sense you're willing to give up. Listen to it. Denying it will not help you in the end. And the end will come."

My stare faltered on his walk, catching the faint limp in his leg. It was so subtle I could have missed it. Then I noticed how his lip curled upward with each step.

He was hurt. Not healing completely as he should have. Marius, although seemingly unharmed, was exhausted.

And the clearing of the clouded sky revealed why.

Gone was the dark of night, but the deep blue of dawn's warning.

A rush of hope thrilled through me at the sight, followed by the pop of a laugh that escaped me. "It would seem you are nearly out of time."

The spark soon exploded into a wildfire of hope that filled every inch of my being.

Marius looked upward, eyes squinting towards the brightening sky. A wince pinched across his face. The piercing red that filled the sky was now pink, dulled by the blue of dawn.

"Enough of this!" Marius face creased with feral panic. Desperation turned his face into a mask of hard lines and pointed fangs. He lunged forward with speed that was unstoppable. Before I could will my magic to help, his hand was around my throat, the other gathering both my wrists and squeezing them together. The bones in my arms and hands felt as though they could shatter, his grip intensified by his urgency.

A nail dug into the side of my neck, piercing my skin with ease.

"Ahh," Marius sighed, dark eyes skirting over everywhere but my own. I could do nothing in his grasp. Not as my head throbbed, longing for air. But his hold kept that from being possible. "Enough time has been wasted."

I closed my eyes, the spark of hope extinguished as his mouth closed in towards my neck. His tongue met my skin first, lapping roughly across the cut that his nail had gifted me. I wanted to cringe away as I felt his entire body tremble with excitement.

This was it. I had tried to prolong this moment, hoping for my own selfish reasons that I would see morning and pass the fateful evening. As his fangs pressed into my skin, I felt a trickling of calmness rush over me.

For me it was the end, but for Marius... it was the beginning. I focused my stare on the lightening sky, hands hanging uselessly by my sides. There was no pain. No agony that I expected. It was the sensual pulling that I had experienced with him in his bedchamber. As he drew blood from me, he took my warmth with it. Starting at my toes, my feet numbed with each deep intake.

But still the pain did not arrive.

Only... relief.

"One feels strange watching on." A voice sounded behind us. I thought it was an apparition until the pressure of Marius's fangs relaxed and he growled, lifting his face from the crook of my neck. All of a sudden that seeping, draining feeling ceased and the warmth kept huddled in a ball deep

in my chest. “I did not mean to stop you, goodness no. How terribly ill-mannered interrupting one’s... dinner party without an invite.”

I believed to have felt fear before this moment. But a new stabbing of horror buried into me at the realisation of whom it was that spoke. The feeling was like drinking water after wine—in that moment, my attention and understanding snapped back to reality.

“Mother.”

I could not turn around to see the truth behind me, stood beyond the barrier. Not as Marius’s grip on my wrists tightened. The rumbling growl deepened as he hissed towards those who stood beyond my sight. With a sharp tug he turned me around, forcing me to stand before him, one arm around my throat, keeping my head upward, and the other around my waist. I felt like a lost lamb, entrapped within the coils of a snake, looking on at a far greater predator.

It was not only Mother who stood beyond the rippling wall of shadow. Hooded figures of the coven stood with her, each holding lit torches and other, gleaming objects with sharp pointed ends.

And there, exposed to the cold chill of morning, stood Katharine. Hair shaved violently close to her scalp, exposing raw cuts and wounds across her head. She trembled, shoulders bent inward as she did her best to cover her thin, frail body with the scrap of dirtied material that wrapped around her.

This was Mother’s final attempt. I could see it in the widening of her eyes. An attempt at a distraction to give me time to end him.

“I fear I missed all the fun.” She spoke, her voice painfully calm. “Apologies for the extra guest I have—”

“Do it,” I snapped, pushing up against Marius as much as I could. “Finish it now.”

I spoke to him and only him. Mother’s appearance changed everything.

“A waste...” Mother began, folding her arms across the dark cloak that she wore. “Such a handsome man locked away in this castle for all these years. If I had known of your beauty, perhaps I could have visited as a Claim myself.” My stomach turned at Mother’s comment. Marius’s hold on me tightened. “Goddess knows I would have finished off the task at the end of it. Something my dear son seems to have failed at.”

“You look just like her,” Marius seethed, spittle and blood dripping onto my shoulder. “If you would have visited I would have taken pleasure in

draining you long before the final night.”

“For a creature that is so feared and spoken about, you sure are able to string sentences together well. Even on the fateful night. I would have expected a more beastly creature, one who did not enjoy conversation when all he wanted to do is feed.”

“You want the beast?” His voice deepened, causing the shadows to curl inward around us.

Mother leaned on one hip and spat, “Well, go on then. Show me. For I look upon not only one, but two pathetic beings. Do as you will with my boy, our kind have adjusted to our pending fate. Yet you will not see the next night either way. I sense it now, the curse on this place weakening. Soon enough the barrier will fall and you will let go of this hungry creature. Jak will die and you will follow. You can either take your fill, the outcome for you and Jak will be the same. But hurry.” She glanced up to the sky only slightly, both the corners of her painted lips turning upward. “I give it a few minutes until the sun rears its beautiful face for us all to see.”

I followed her stare to the brightening sky. It was light enough that I could see the sleepy town materialise in the distance.

There was hesitation in Marius’s grip. A moment that I almost missed as his hold on me relaxed slightly, nails no longer digging into my skin. Yet he did not let go completely.

“Do it,” I whispered my plea. “You will be free.”

Mother winced as I admitted aloud the outcome that was moments away. I was ready for the end as desperately as Marius was ready for the feast.

He leaned in, cold breath tickling my neck once again. Then he spoke. Subtle words that shattered me into a million pieces.

“I will never harm you again.”

His voice was soft in nature. It rumbled slightly, as though he fought for a place in this conversation. I feared that Mother would sense my stiffening and know something was amiss.

“Finish him off, but forgive the aftertaste of failure when you are done,” Mother cooed from her position beyond the weakening barrier.

Marius kept his mouth hovering above my neck as he spoke again but his hold on me softened, enough for me to feel but not for Mother to see. “It is me.”

My body trembled violently, so much so that Marius had to return the strength to his hold to keep me standing. Deep within I felt the power raise its heavy head as I readied it for what was to come.

Marius breathed his next whisper. The words jagged like a blade, edged and commanding. “Unleash hell, Jak.”

It happened so fast that my breath was snatched away from me. Marius pushed me towards the barrier with a roar. I raised my hands, expecting to collide with its layering, but passed through to the surprise of Mother. Into her unexpecting arms I fell, knocking her to the floor.

We tumbled across the paved ground, rolling over limbs as she tried to push me from her. But I became dead weight from my own surprise and confusion.

“No!” someone shouted as I came to a stop among reaching hands. Countless hands from the hooded figures of the coven yanked me from the floor. Mother batted those who dared reach for her. She stood, straightening herself as we all now watched on at Marius who towered in front of Katharine.

“Fool,” Mother screamed, her shrill voice that of the dreaded banshee. “You dare play games with me?” If her pointed finger was a weapon, Marius would have been dead ten times over. Her arm shook as she kept it raised towards Marius.

But he looked at me with a pleading, sorrowful gaze. “Fight back.”

“You are free,” I murmured, eyes brimming with tears.

I could not do anything. Not as the glare of Mother turned to me. In seconds she was before me, blocking my view of Marius. A line of coven members formed between both parties, brandishing their weapons in shaky grasps, each aimed at Marius whose stance was bent and ready to move as he watched them.

“I would take your next steps carefully...” Mother spoke to Marius, but her stare did not leave mine. Not even to blink.

“The barrier is down, the curse is broken and he is free.” Spit splashed across her face as I pulled as close as I could to her. But I felt the resistance as those who held me stood strong. “I fail with pride knowing you will die by his doing. That, Mother, is the just ending.”

Mother hushed those who held me away like she was swatting bees. Her bony fingers reached for my shoulder and squeezed. Although she was powerless, her touch was enough to silence me. She leaned into me,

forehead pressed to mine as she replied, “Then you will die with the same pride.”

Confusion pinched lines across my forehead, my eyes searching her face for a sign of a lie. But as she looked up again, a single tear slipped from the corner of her eye.

She cried, but not from sadness or grief. It was something else, something more.

I wanted to shout for Marius as the blade concealed in the folds of Mother’s cloak came free. Wind blew at her blue-black hair, pushing each strand from her face so it was impossible not to see her expression. Lines creased over her forehead and I was certain she was shouting.

But the sound did not reach me. No noise did.

One moment the blade was cutting through the air between us, the next sharp tip sliced across my throat.

One fell swoop that was painless. For a split moment I could not register that it had happened as my hands fumbled to discover the truth.

Red. The tips of my fingers were red. Confusion spread through me for a moment, but soon melted away. My mouth parted and I took a breath, gurgling as blood popped like bubbles deep in my throat.

A spray of red splashed across Mother’s unblinking, wide stare. That one tear no longer the only thing wetting her face.

But before I could feel the warmth of blood spreading down my body, I was overcome with a chilled, soundless darkness. My eyes met Marius’s for a moment. I smiled.

Then nothing.

Just the sweet, calm, uncontrollable lullaby of death greeted me.

Marius

My body was a prison of agony. Hot, stabbing hunger gripped a hold of my gut and twisted. The pain almost knocked the wind from my lungs, buckled my knees, made my world spin, gripping its sharp talons into my stomach with relentless demand. Yet the feeling was no more painful than the itching that began to spread across my skin. A fire, far greater than what Jak had not long wielded, burned away at me, brought on by the skimming of dawn that washed over the world.

I did not run for cover, not as I watched the river of red spread down his neck, bathing his chest until the dirtied, cream shirt was stained beyond repair. How the colour of life drained from his face, his features relaxing as though he fell into sleep with his wide eyes left open.

So this was what it was like. Death. Inconsolable death, something I had wished upon myself more times than I could count. Usually, when my Claim passed by my doing, I was still in the dissociation brought on by the curse. But Jak had done it, kept me from feeding until daybreak. I had come to hold him in my arms, my teeth grazing his soft, welcoming neck. It was a harsh yanking feeling that felt as though I had woken from a nightmare, gasping for breath as a newborn would.

Jak — despite successfully breaking the curse — had gifted me with a new curse. To watch as he died before me. No longer blessed with being unaware. Detached.

I did not blink. Refused to look away for a moment as the light drained from his beautiful eyes. Eyes I had looked deeply into as I held him. How they would gleam from within when he caught glimpses at me, or spoke on topics he adored. Eyes that I had made weep. Now the bright colouring of blue seemed to fade away to a pale grey, a coating of nothingness passing over them as his stare was lost to me.

One moment he was there, eyes pleading with my own through the windows to his soul. Then like a flame on a candle he was gone. Snuffed out.

“Jak.” I registered the lyrics of his name. Did I speak it? Did someone else dare say it aloud?

I waited for him to register the call and respond. To lift his beautiful, soft-angled face with that smile, the one which lifted from the left corner of his mouth more than the right. The smile that creased three lines beside each of his eyes. How it peaked his brow in an expression that screamed mischief.

I registered nothing but him. Watching his death stilled the hunger that scratched across my consciousness. It nullified the pang of hunger. Like the inside of a shell, my breathing echoed throughout my ears, silencing anything else around me.

It did not last, this peaceful moment as I watched death take him.

My own pain intensified as the sun finally threatened to break the curve of the earth.

Wait. I willed the morning to listen, my shadows slipping away from me as the light joined the funeral. *Please, wait.*

She spoke, the woman whose greedy grip held onto Jak, the knife still in her hand, dripping blood across the ground. “Come and fetch *him*.” Her arm loosened around him. My Jak. She spoke again, but I did not register, not over the roaring anger that beat through me.

The noise of his blood dripping across the ground was terrible. Alluring and deadly. My eyes flicked to it, mouth parting, as I watched each splash.

“Jak.” His name again, this time I felt the tug of my lips as I finished speaking. Shouting. I was shouting.

The woman smiled and released her hold on him. One push and he was no longer held upright. His body collapsed beneath him. He fell. I moved.

In a blink he was in my arms. All I could register was his touch, as cold as mine, as blood raced rivers across my torn, charred jacket. I lowered his

stiff body to the ground, my hand carefully cupping the back of his head. Someone was crying. Was it me?

I barely felt the growing discomfort anymore, not as I lay him down. All I could focus on was him. Jak. His blood. How it never seemed to stop from pumping out the jagged slice across his neck. I reached my finger for it, fighting the urge to pop a digit in my mouth.

Then a hand reached for my shoulder. A nailed finger, tapping for my attention.

I turned, eyes narrowing against the sudden glare of light. Then the person's body moved in view of the growing dawn and I saw her smile. Her thin lips parted, revealing the line of perfect white teeth behind them.

"Being locked away all these years... I feel that it is only just I let you watch the sunrise in peace. See it in its glory and know that you will meet my pathetic son in whatever hellscape you visit in the afterlife."

I registered the murmuring of the group of cloaked figures behind her. And Katharine. Sweet, young Katharine whose scent screamed of fear and panic. She was splayed across the ground, expression a jagged slice of anger and sadness. Her round eyes wet, her lips turned in a snarl.

"Kill them..." I read the shapes of her mouth more than I heard her. The command. Perhaps she spoke something else entirely, but all I could do was think it. Kill them. Kill them.

Devour them.

I looked back to the woman who stands above me, a statue of stone carved from hate.

Her grin hardened. And I smiled back.

"You look just like her," I said, voice a rumble of deep, scratchy tones. "And I often dreamt of what it would be like to devour her blood after she cursed me."

The woman, Jak's mother, lifted the dagger and placed the bloodied tip into the skin of her palm. "And what did you think she would taste like? Sweet revenge, or regret?"

My hold on Jak, his terribly cold body, shuddered as I began to shake. "I don't know. But I suppose I am about to find out."

Her expression faltered and she parted her mouth to spit yet more hate. But this time I did not let her.

In a blink I was before her, my teeth clamped around her neck. She bled freely into my mouth. I sucked. Hard. Harder. Drinking every ounce of her

as the warmth of morning intensified.

But her life source filled me with a renewed strength. So I drank on.

No one dared to interrupt.

She could not speak for my bite had ripped into her throat so deeply that only pathetic gurgling could be heard as she struggled.

The batting of her nails against me soon stopped and her arms hung limply at her sides. Her weight fell into me, dead and stiff. Like her son who lay at our feet.

I registered the knife embedded in my gut as I pulled back from her. Looking down, neck straining, I saw the hilt and grabbed it. The slick, wet song made me cringe as I pulled it from me, still gripping onto the dead body in my arm.

There was no pain, not with the thundering of fresh, weak yet powerful blood, joining my own. I cocked my head back, releasing a sigh as her blood began to dry across my chin.

“It tastes like neither,” I spoke to the sky as the euphoria of the feed took me captive for a moment of bliss.

When I was done with her, I did not lower her to the ground gently but simply discarded her with a push.

The sound of her skull cracking against the slabbed ground was a blessing. It echoed through my own mind on a pleasing loop. One I never wished to forget.

I did not bother to wipe the blood from my mouth and chin, not as I roared in the wake of the coven which was already fleeing back towards the waking town. Not a single person stayed to fight. Pointed stakes of wood and sharpened kitchen utensils were discarded across the ground, pointless.

“You need to get to cover.” Katharine’s kind voice registered somewhere within the internal roaring. “Do not die on me too.”

Her words were the anchor I needed from the euphoria. As her soft touch laid across my shoulder, I was brought back to reality.

To this living hell.

I turned to face Katharine who threw her arms around me. She was shaking, violently. Yet I could not find the strength to hold her, not as I looked back to where Jak lay across the ground, whose face was turned away from me.

I winced as more light joined the sky; the first rays of morning finally sliced into existence.

“We need to go now,” Katharine murmured.

“Jak.” I said his name aloud, hoping he would simply roll over and face me as he had so many evenings with me beside him. But he was still.

Katharine tugged at my arm, but I pulled away from her. I would not leave him, not beside the stiffening body of his mother. Stepping over her, I moved for him, Katharine’s pleadings becoming frantic. Jak’s head lolled backwards as I lifted him from the ground, his limbs hard and his body heavier as death truly took a hold of him.

Katharine was already moving towards the castle, beckoning to follow. And I did, slowly, allowing the discomfort to become true, burning pain as the light bathed over me. If I slowed to a stop, would I die with him? Together. The thought did not scare me. But Katharine, she caught my attention. I could not leave her behind.

The ruins of the castle were now empty of Jak’s fire; it had died as the knife was slashed across his throat. Only thick tendrils of smoke remained, walls of grey and silver which seeped up into the sky.

And towards the remains I walked, away from the now destroyed barrier keeping me from the world. I walked towards the charred memory of my life, my death, my eternal. I walked with him in my arms.

Victorya did not greet me as I stepped over the boundary. Nor did the other phantoms of my past as I made my way, from memory, towards the tunnels that would lead to the untouched chamber of darkness.

Katharine led the way, bare feet patting across the ruined floors. I gifted myself small moments to look up as I followed her, quickly snapping my focus back to the boy in my arms.

To Jak.

My Jak.

It had never ended this way. With me aware as I held the remains of a Claim. Not since the first. Not since I carried another boy named Jak. Full circle. That was how it felt.

I felt tired. More so as we finally stepped beneath the shattered doorway into the shadowed pathway which led to the underbelly of the castle. Only the smell of burning stone and wood lingered here.

It did not matter. His fire could have burned this entire place until it was nothing more than ash. I would not have cared. Not if it meant he was alive.

With me.

Seeing through to morning as he had wished.

I believed Katharine was talking. To me or herself, I was not sure.

There were no words I could muster in return, not as I willed to share in the same deathly silence of the boy in my arms. I feared that I would speak and miss a movement from him. A subtle noise or pinch of his expression that would prove that this was all an illusion. A nasty joke he played on me.

Then I stopped, bumping into Katharine who blocked the way ahead. I then looked up and saw that we were in the small chamber. Melted, broken chains lay at our feet. Did I break out? Did the fire burn them? The padlock was a mess of melted iron.

“You should lay him down, Marius.”

I wanted to refuse her aloud, but I barely managed to shake my head to disregard her suggestion.

Then her small, dirtied and worn hands reached for Jak cautiously. “I understand you’re hurt. Believe me. But you must lay him to rest.”

“He is still bleeding,” I croaked, voice hoarse and throat sore. “I pushed him towards her, it’s my fault. And he still bleeds, long after his mother has stopped bleeding herself.”

“Rest him in the coffin, Marius, lay him down.”

Did she not hear me?

I stared at the blood, how it now looked deep obsidian in the dark room. A river of black blood now covered my arms, chest and hands. But not once did I dare reach down and taste. I was not full, far from it. But the feeling, the craving of urgency had left with the arrival of dawn.

Control had returned, but at the price of his life.

At some point Katharine guided me by the elbow deeper into the room. I kicked the base of the wooden framed coffin and came to a stop. With great regret I lowered Jak down into the coffin, mind screaming for me to keep him in my arms. But a single thought would not let up as I stared down at his seemingly sleeping expression.

“I could heal him,” I said to Katharine. “How I healed you. Your mother. Bring him back.”

I saw the wince in Katharine’s face from across the coffin. But with her mundane eyes she would not see my expression, or lack thereof.

“The dead cannot be healed. Only the living. He is gone, Marius. I am sorry.”

I felt a bubble of defiance rush to the surface of my soul. I bit down onto my own lip, breaking skin until my mouth filled with my own blood. I

recoiled at the taste of my life force. Bitter, aged and stale.

“How can you explain such philosophy when I am dead, yet can withstand all but daylight...?” I broke the silence, mind burning with determination. “He burned me with fire, I survived. I live years without warmth in my skin. I am death, yet I carry on. If I do not try, I will never forgive myself.”

One glance into Katharine’s eyes and I witnessed her understanding, far before my own caught up to me.

“Will it work?”

My sharp nail was already pressed against my upper arm. I did not register the nick as it broke my skin as I muttered, “For my sake, and the world beyond this place, I hope so.”

I learned long ago that the curse was rooted in blood. A defiance of eternal life that had to be refilled from year to year. For my blood was life force, and not mine at all. It was the remnants from each Claim.

Yet this was different. My body should be filled with Jak’s essence. I should desire to feed from him, even now. But I did not.

Had the curse truly broken? Or just fractured?

The trickle of blood ran down my forearm, racing around my wrist like a circlet of ruby before dripping towards the slightly parted mouth of my love. My Jak.

With precision, each droplet never missed the darkness that waited for it. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* His lips were terribly white. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* I traced my nail further down my arm in a straight line, urging for more of my blood to spill. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* My will filled each droplet, carrying my pleading deep within Jak’s still, stiffened body.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

My strength flooded from me, flowing into him. Each moment I felt myself growing tired. Blinking became heavier, slower. Each time the skin on my arm knitted back together, I tore it wide open. Shaking my head, I growled with frustration, trying to keep my eyes on him. But they were growing heavier as more of my blood spilled.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

“Wake, my love. For I do not think I can bear the wait to see you again in death.”

I woke from darkness, to darkness. My hand slapped my chest as I gasped for breath, only to feel it empty. Hollow. Without the tender, gentle beat of my heart. It felt no different than touching an empty shell or a forgotten stone.

Beneath my palm my skin felt strange — cold. I parted my mouth to call out into the darkness, but my throat was dry. I could not form words, only the scratching gasp of a noise that sounded strange to my own ears.

Thirst. The feeling was intense. I smacked my dry mouth together, thinking of nothing but the cool dribbles of liquid that would quench the longing need for something to drink.

It felt as though I had broken free from a dream. A nightmare. Yet the events of what I had experienced were hazy and distant. Kept away by the need for ... sustenance.

One hand moved from my chest to my neck. I did not know what to expect, but the soft brush of skin seemed to be a surprise. The other hand moved to my stomach which seemed to spasm deep within, the rippling of a hunger I had not felt before. No. It was not only hunger, but thirst as well. As I woke further, it was as though the feelings awoke alongside me, unfurling like a sleeping cat as it stretched its limbs in waking.

A noise sounded from somewhere in the distance. A shuffling of feet. It was loud, and quiet at the same time, so much so that I could not distinguish its distance. Then, as I came to, I could hear other noises. Sounds I had not registered before. The slight scratching of small legs against stone. A snuffling noise that could only be that of a rat or mouse sniffing for food.

All at once the world, beyond the darkness, came alive, and I heard it all.

Pressing a hand into my gut, I pinched my eyes shut, trying to focus on the one sound that I could understand.

Footsteps walked towards my location. With each step their footfalls grew and intensified in sound.

My stomach jolted and jaw ached as though my teeth danced within my mouth. The burning call of fire spread across my jaw as though it stretched inside my skull. The sensation joined the intensifying burn in my gut and dryness in my throat.

Darkness was a discomfort, a void of agony as I truly woke.

My fingers reached for my mouth as the urge of pressing my teeth back into my gums overwhelmed me. As my fingertip passed my dry lips, I felt a pain—

Voices mixed with the patter of feet.

“... come back to finish you. With the barrier down, you should find cover elsewhere. They have waited years to end you, just as you have waited years to leave. Do not think for a moment they will take their time.”

A deep voice responded, lush tones vibrating the darkness around me. “I will not run, nor hide from the likes of them. They can come. It would be a grave mistake.”

“You took the head of their queen, but that did not destroy the nest of vipers. I have been around them. I know the plans they have for you — please. You must go.”

“Katharine.” The name was spoken as a warning. And the name was equally a stranger, and familiar. “I will... not be forced out my home. Let them come, let them see what I will do to them all.”

“But you are free.” The softer voice responded. “You can leave, Marius.”

Marius. The name slammed around my skull, nullifying the discomfort and pain. My finger fell from my mouth and dropped to my still chest as I tried to focus on its origin.

My mind was a storm, but in the eye of it I sensed that the name brought me comfort. It warmed my insides. Cooled my throat like the gulp of ice water. The name, it calmed me.

I opened my mouth, lips moving in the shape of the name. Again, I tried to force the word out.

“M... ari... us.”

“Not in the sense that I have long des—” The voice spluttered to a stop. It happened quickly that I felt as though I had simply stopped listening. But I sensed the presence, its closeness to me as something joined the dark around me.

One moment I was alone, the next *he* was with me, weight shifting the coffin, forcing my body to shuffle to the side; the wood creaked in warning, threatening to break beneath the sudden presence beside me.

“Jak.” Hands reached for my face and could I do nothing to push them away. Then a face materialised through the shadows and my entire being melted into his touch. *Marius*. Looking into his ruby stare brought everything back. I spluttered for breath, crashing through the hazy surface into the world of reality.

Marius. His eyes did not stop searching my face as though he had lost something and still longed to find it. His hands took a hold of mine with such urgency and squeezed, anchoring me to him, as though some strange wind would come and simply blow me away.

“You...” I forced out, swallowing to try and lubricate my throat enough to speak. “Found me.”

I closed my eyes and relaxed into his hands as he cupped both my cheeks. When he replied his voice cracked, and I was certain a splash of wetness clashed against my chin. “You were never lost. Only misplaced for a moment.”

He was different, his touch no longer cold. He just felt... normal.

“You are different...” I said, my voice no more than a rasped whisper.

“No, Jak.” *Marius*’s eyes misted, his thumb brushing my cheek as though it was a petal. “You are the one that has changed. I am sorry for what I have done. It was selfish not to let you go, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t not try.”

He spoke so fast it was close to impossible to truly take in his words. I scrunched my face and sighed. “What happened, *Marius*?”

He leaned in, closing the space between us and placed a kiss upon my forehead. A shiver raced down my spine at the touch. He pulled away as he retorted, “What do you remember?”

I blinked, looking into the shadows beyond him. The feeling was like unlocking a gate that had been kept closed, his questioning was the key that unlocked it.

And the memories, the pain, the truth... It all returned.

"She killed me. My mother, my own blood, killed me."

I stared deeply into Marius's gaze, remembering how he had violently winced as the blade sliced across my throat. It was the last thing I could remember before the cold, endless nothingness.

"I am sorry, Jak," Marius murmured, looking down at his hands that now threaded my own and held them. "For everything."

"How... I mean... what happened? I died and... no, Marius, this is too much." The pain in my gut, my jaw, my head, all exploded in one large crash. It rocked my core from the inside. If it was not for his hold my hands would have shook where they lay.

"I watched you die. And I acted upon selfish desperation. I took your choice away from you and made you... this. I made you, turned you like..."

"You." My word was as sharp as a blade. "You turned me, to keep me alive?"

"Jak," he sighed, sorrow and guilt rolling off him in battering waves. "You are not alive, and nor am I. You are... eternal."



MARIUS WAS WRONG. HE HAD NOT TAKEN MY CHOICE AWAY FROM ME. MY mother had. He simply had reinstated what she tried to steal from me.

Life.

Not in the sense of how I had it before. Now my life was different. Never-ending like the man whom had provided me with a second chance.

Night swelled around us as we stood at the boundary of the castle, my hand in Marius's as we both looked down over Darkmourn far below. Not a single home was without light. Perhaps they prepared to come for us, or they knew what was coming for them. My stomach jolted at the promise of what waited within those homes, what pumped within their fine, pathetic, disposal veins.

Katharine waited far behind us, but the nightly wind blew her scent my way. The smell of her sweet, delicious blood. I longed for it. But she was off limits. Marius had said so when she finally burst into his chamber in the bellies of the now ruined castle. I had nearly thrown myself from the coffin in desperation to... feed.

That was what Marius had explained, lending me a sip of his blood that only curbed the desperation enough for me not to rip her throat out.

If Marius was not holding me, I feared for her. For what I longed to do. But Marius promised the feeling would pass once I had my first fill.

And I imagined I would soon be full past the point of bursting.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked, my hand squeezing his as we looked out over the view before us. I sensed his halting anticipation as if it was my own. It was strange, for I sensed more of his emotions now after he had brought me back, as though a tether of shadow kept me pinned to him.

I had wondered if he felt it too. But it was not the time for questions. We would have time for that after I fed.

“I had imagined the possibility of leaving on too many occasions, I hadn’t dared to keep count. Yet I always believed, if it would happen, I would be leaving this place alone. Not with someone by my side.”

“Someone?” I snapped my teeth, feeling my lips tug into a smile over the new points that protruded from my gums. Sharp teeth that kept ripping at my skin, only for it to heal moments later. Similar to Marius’s who had pressed his own deep into my skin, sharing in a lustful, dangerous kiss. “Is that all I am? Just a someone?”

Marius pulled my arm, spinning me around to face him. He was stronger, but I felt as though I could match him with this new strength. It was one of the many differences since waking. I was resilient. My hearing and sight as sharp as the two fangs that pressed into the skin behind my lower lip.

“You are Jak, my Jak.” There was still sorrow in his eyes for what he had done to me, yet I felt no pain or hate for his actions. Only... relief. Before meeting him I was equally trapped by the curse, prisoner to the fate I had been born into. And now... Now I was free. From my mother whose corpse was rotting in an unknown location, a place I did not care to know. Marius had shattered the bindings on my fate, just as I had for him.

Marius bowed his head as though holding my stare was impossible. With a hand I lifted his defined chin with a thumb and urged him to stop moping. “I am yours, and you are mine. For an eternity.”

“I should have given you the choice.”

“And if you had I would have agreed without question.”

“You do not know what this means. And I cannot explain it either. It was foolish—”

I raised onto my toes and pressed my lips to his, silencing him. Everything about his taste was an explosion, as though my sensations had been set ablaze as I touched him. I wanted more than to just kiss. The action did not feel strong enough, intense enough, for what I felt deep within. Pulling away slowly, Marius kept his eyes closed and mouth parted slightly, wishing for my return.

“We will discover what it means to be... us. It is a big world out there; we cannot be the only ones.”

“And what if we are?” he asked.

I smirked. Was it the thirst or excitement that made me so giddy? “You made me, what is stopping you from doing it again?”

Marius peered over his shoulder to where Katharine hovered in the distance, arms wrapped around her thin frame. “She may not want this.”

“Then you can respect that wish. But what if she does? She has no one left living. Like you. Like me. I promise you, Marius, what you have done for me is a gift. Katharine... well, she may feel the same.”

Marius lowered his head. “Not yet.”

“So, what next then?” I asked, urging for him to look at me. “You are the author. Tell me where you see my story going.”

It must have been something I said that encouraged the beautiful yet deadly smile to spread across his face; his eyes lit from the inside and lines furrowed his forehead.

“Perhaps we start with a feast.” My stomach grumbled in agreement as we looked back to the town and the unsuspecting victims that waited behind their closed doors. “You will need to feed before the urge becomes impossible to ignore. Then, once you are satisfied... and I, we can spend endless nights lost in one another’s bodies. I fear that I have many a thing I would like to do with you, to you.”

I did not hide an embarrassed grin.

“And what of your own story, Marius...?”

Marius smiled, flashing the points of his teeth. “For the first time in a long time I feel as though my story can be left open-ended. And with you by my side it will make turning the page that much easier.”

If I did not have the growing hunger within me I would have dragged Marius to the ground and devoured him in unspeakable ways. But alas, the feeling was becoming harder to hold back, the want to race for the closest living thing to feed off.

I raised a hand, noticing the ashen tones that clung to my skin, and pointed towards Darkmourn. "I know where I want to begin." Pinching an eye closed, I looked down the length of my finger towards the direction my home would be nestled within. "Leave the coven to me. There are many I would enjoy devouring, whereas some that I would prefer to stay untouched."

Lamiere. I did not need to say her name to conjure a clear image of her. Although my memories from the attack were hazy, I felt deep in my core that she was not with Mother and her coven when they came for us. Just the thought gave me reprieve from feeling betrayed by everyone I had known in my life. Lamiere had always been different.

She would be spared.

"Jak, I will follow your lead. That is your world out there, and this has been mine. I feel foolish to admit, but I think that I would never have the courage to take the first step out there without you."

I squeezed his hand, feeling the tingling of fire deep within my soul. "It is your world now too, Marius. Do not fear it. Make it fear you."

Marius leaned down into my ear, his lip brushing gently across my skin as he whispered, "With you I will never fear anything. Not again."

His words sparked the kindling of fire into a blaze that poured from my skin. Magic. Dark, burning flames curled against my free hand as we witnessed the pregnant moon crown over the town far below. My magic had not left me with death, not as I had expected. It was just as easy to call upon it now, as it had been during... life.

"If Mother could see me now... she would not be happy," I said, raising the curling flames before Marius.

"Then let her roll in her grave and seethe with disgust. She cannot do anything about it now." Marius smiled, flinching slightly from my power.

"I will prove that my power, although the cause of the curse that darkened your life, will light your way forward. I vow it."

"Then let us destroy, raze and devour, my Jak," Marius announced, speaking to the night as his own power shuddered the shadows around us. It passed over the moon, blocking out the minimal pearlescent light that kissed down upon us. "Then let us take it and claim the night as our own."

I grinned, forcing my stare from Marius, my handsome Marius, back to Darkmourn. "Let us take it... together."

*More stories within
The Darkmourn Universe
coming 2022!*

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