


"I AM NOT ADAM. I AM NOT EVE.
I AM THE SERPENT IN BETWEEN."



THE PUPPETEER AND THE POISONED PAWN

BOOK THREE

BRANDI ELISE SZEKER

The Puppeteer and The Poisoned Pawn

by Brandi Elise Szeker

OceanofPDF.com

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The Pawn and The Puppet Series

The Pawn and The Puppet

The Master and The Marionette

The Puppeteer and The Poisoned Pawn

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Content Warning

Honestly, for those who don't have any triggers (besides cheating), this one's for you. I'll never write a cheating trope!

Disclaimer: This book contains explicit content and dark elements and may be considered offensive to some readers. Check trigger warnings before reading. It is not intended for anyone under 18 years of age. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by underage readers.

This is a dark dystopian society that is intended to be problematic. Please note that this is a fictional world and in no way reflects the author's personal beliefs. We will see the society grow and correct its moral compass over the series.

This book contains gratuitous violence, mental health journey, grief, depression, death of a loved one, mention of suicide, gratuitous/detailed torture, physical injuries (such as burn wounds), eating disorder, hallucinations, misogyny, mention of pedophilia, romanticized mental illness, gore, child abuse, mention of animal cruelty (what's vaguely mentioned will never actually happen) dismemberment, female oppression, degradation, starvation, body shaming, sexually explicit scenes, explicit language, religious trauma, horror.

Do not continue if you're unsure of the contents of this book.

Seriously.

Don't.

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*For Theo James,
(Or his doppelgänger)*

*We could have been great.
Your loss. I can put both legs behind my head.*

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DEMENTIA



MIDNIGHT SEA

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Author's Note

I encourage all to read this before proceeding to the book. This is a work of fiction, yes. However, the mental illnesses that certain characters have are based on real disorders. The one I'd like to note is Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). Some know it as a "split personality" or a "multiple personality disorder." That is not the correct terminology. Please let this work of fiction open the eyes to those who look at DID in fear or with a lack of respect.

The representation of DID in this novel is a morally gray, dangerous character. This is NOT an accurate representation of DID. It is a symbolic representation of how DID appears to modern society—feared, misunderstood, and a mystery of the mind to gawk at. Please know that the rest of the series will be a journey for this fictional society and the characters to understand and accurately represent. But allow me to set the record straight for this nonfictional world. This community of people is NOT the monsters. They are NOT the villains. They are kind, intelligent, wonderful human beings that were the victims of horrendous injustice and abuse.

Let this message encourage you to ask the right questions and seek to better understand. For more information about DID, please visit these sources:

<https://did-research.org/home/map>

<http://traumadissociation.com/index>

<https://did-research.org/did/alters/functions>

<https://did-research.org/did/myths>

PS: If you disagree with representations of different forms of trauma in this series, please be considerate of those who cope differently and feel accurately represented as a survivor of their experience. Everyone has their own encounters and ways of healing. If certain descriptions, situations, or explanations aren't for you, they may help or empower someone else.

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Playlists

For every badass scene.	For every scene of darkness, heartache, and soul-shattering love.
Feel Invincible by Skillet	Never Enough by Loren Allred
Dangerous Woman by Tom Evans & Justas Kulikauskas	Dying Soul by Antonio Pinto
Everybody Wants To Rule the World by Lorde	Shelter by Birdy
you should see me in a crown by Billie Eilish	It's Ok (Slowed) by Edith Whiskers
DARKSIDE by Neoni	Broken (Acoustic) by Jonah Kagen
Daisy (slowed) by CedanVibe	Train Wreck (Violin) by Joel Sunny
Mount Everest by Labrinth	Broken by Isak Danielson
Toxic by 2WEI	Control by Zoe Wees

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1. Aurick Demechnef

IT ISN'T EXACTLY THE NAME that hits me first.

It's the proud glint in his glacier-blue eyes. The tilting of his head. The upward curve of his thin lips. He's absorbing my shock with a sense of achievement, exhilarated in his deception, anticipating every reaction I will have. Because he managed to fool me. He managed to play me at my weakest.

Aurick Demechnef.

Our country's leader.

The man who saved me from the cold. The friend who cared for me after Scarlett died. He plucked me from the snow, gave me a home, a job, a support system that came crumbling down when he first hit me.

And it was all a trick.

Why?

Betrayal sinks into the pit of my gut. Sharp and jagged, like a rusted nail. I open and close my mouth. Words rushing to the surface, then sputtering out before they reach my lips.

A large hand grazes my shoulder, and even though it's Dessin, I jerk away like I've just been slapped. My wide-eyed stare rips from Aurick's face to Dessin's cautious mahogany eyes.

How could he keep this from me?

Pathetic, glossy tears coat my eyes and blur my vision. I'm a scared, cornered animal. Thoughts slam against the inside of my skull. Aurick Demechnef. A trick. *Liar*. Everyone lied.

"Skylenna," Dessin says softly.

"No." The small word comes out in a gasp. A puff of breath from a collapsed lung.

"Wait," someone says from behind me. "*This* is Aurick?"

I focus on the flickering candle sconce to my left, the smooth cherrywood walls, avoiding the faces turned to me, avoiding my name being called, avoiding the urge to take off in a sprint.

This entire time I was building a friendship with Dessin in the asylum and he never told me. The moments he would hint at his contempt for Aurick. But what about the time Aurick struck me down? Left a mark? He didn't think I deserved to know then?

A few men remain behind Aurick's desk, waiting for orders, leaning back into the shadows until they're needed.

"How—" My question falls off the face of the earth. I'm looking into those cold, glassy eyes and wonder how I didn't see it? The money. The power. The questions about Dessin. The consistent curiosity about the asylum.

Is that what happened to Sern? Dessin said Demechnef found her, tried to use her family against her, which is why he broke her spine.

"He used me to get to you," I finally say to Dessin. But Aurick makes a sound that is close to a laugh. As if I'm so deep in the dark he wouldn't know where to begin with me.

I turn my head to him, cut into his silhouette with a glare of fire and blood. "You were my friend." And this time, I don't look away. I let the tears spill over my bottom lashes, dripping from my chin to the floor.

Aurick's shoulders droop, but he holds my gaze as if looking away would admit defeat.

"We have much to discuss." But that voice is detached, distant, absent of any sentimental feelings he could have had toward me.

This man is a stranger. He looks like Aurick. Sounds like Aurick, but we've never met.

"You—" I clear my throat. "You must have thought me such a fool." I look back and forth between Aurick and Dessin, unable to decide who I should direct the majority of my hatred toward.

"We can discuss my lack of a moral compass, or we can get down to business," Aurick says, straightening his back.

"This is getting down to business," Dessin growls.

"No. He's right." I back into the comfort of Ruth's hand, running up and down my back. "We're here for a reason. Let's get to it."

Dessin watches me, unsure of how to continue after this obstacle.

"I assume you came here for something specific since you've had us on your heels for five years." Aurick takes a seat behind the desk, pouring himself a glass of scotch.

The muscle in Dessin's jaw twitches. "The Vexamen Breed took something from me. And you're going to help me get it back."

"What did they take?"

"None of your concern."

I want to interject and scold them for getting us nowhere. But I can't. I'm frozen, trapped in a glass shell. A broken doll to gawk at.

"It is if you want my help," Aurick argues with a cool smile.

"Oh, you'll help without that information. Because you're the one that wants me to win this war." Dessin looms over the desk like a grim reaper, shadows casting around him. And my stomach dips as his hands grip the edge of the desk, causing the wood to make a whining sound from his weight.

"Fine." Aurick leans back in his chair. "But I know you. There isn't anything I can say in this arrangement that will make you believe I won't try and double-cross your plan."

The room is so silent we can hear the voices outside the room loudly.

"And to be frank, I don't see a scenario that you wouldn't double-cross me. I'd have no choice but to lock you all up, pump you with Mind Phantoms, and try my best to rearrange the rebellious part of your brains."

I look at Aurick like a tornado coming my way. A dooming presence. Why did we think we could trust Demechnef at all? They won't help us. He's admitted to it.

"I have something that will change your mind. Would you like to know the name of the man that blew up your betrothed? The same man that is also a Vexamen spy lurking in our city?"

Aurick pops up. "One of your tricks?"

"I have irrefutable proof." Dessin doesn't blink. "But if I give it to you, you'll write a treaty right now stating my terms of our surrender. We train on my conditions. Go by my rules. No methods of torture. No Mind Phantoms. I call the shots."

"Kind of feels like we're eavesdropping, don't ya think?" Niles whispers in my ear. Before I can roll my eyes, Chekiss pinches the back of Niles's arm.

After a moment to consider, Aurick nods. "Let's see it."

"Write the treaty first."

It seems as though Aurick knows better than to argue with Dessin on this. We stand here for the next fifteen minutes while they negotiate the fine details of our stay with Demechnef.

"Get behind me." Warrose is suddenly at my side, signaling for me and Ruth to move quickly. I give him a questioning look, glancing at his focus shifting to the corner of the room.

“Now, please,” Warrose whispers, a strand of long dark hair falls over his eye. I take a small step back, standing up on my tiptoes to peek over his shoulder to watch what happens.

Dessin signs the bottom of the parchment, then reaches in his pocket to reveal an envelope. Old and crinkled. I squint to get a better look.

Wait. Is that the envelope my father left behind for Kane?

Aurick rips it open, tossing the shredded paper to the side as he pulls out a photograph with what looks like a letter. His eyes widen, hands clamping into fists, and he stops breathing.

Warrose reaches back to me and Ruth, gripping our arms to keep us put.

The room shifts like there’s a stench in the air. Dessin remains perfectly still, watching Aurick, waiting for him to react. And it’s one quick glance up from those blue eyes. An avalanche of emotion.

“Masten,” Aurick snarls, swiping his hands across his desk, sending all of its contents skittering across the floor. His bottle of scotch shatters, cold liquid bursting over our shoes.

Masten. He’s the Vexamen spy. He killed Red.

“Find him!” he barks at three of his men.

Dessin steps out of the way as Aurick breaks free of his crisp composure, kicking over his desk, bellowing into the room at no one in particular.

Warrose chuckles. “You don’t want to subdue him?”

“Not in the slightest,” Dessin says.

“I trusted you!” Aurick roars, slamming his fists into the cherrywood walls. “My closest friend!”

“It’s sick, isn’t it?” I speak up, stepping around Warrose. “To trust someone that is living a double life.” And I hope my words stick him in the ribs, crack through bone, and crush his heart the way he has crushed mine.

Aurick stills, glancing over to me with sweat dripping down his temple.

“When you wrap this up, I’ll be back to discuss strategy on how to find the Vexamen Breed. We’ll see ourselves to our rooms.” Dessin nods for us to leave from the door we came in. And as we pass his panting body sliding down a wall in defeat, I exchange a look with Aurick. One that tells him I won’t forget this.

I won’t forgive.

2. A Grey Distraction

THERE ARE ONLY THREE ROOMS we can share, side by side. It's important to Dessin that we're not split up.

Niles sees how extravagant the interior is, lush carpet, dark cherrywood walls, glistening chandeliers and large feather beds. He whistles and hollers. "We should have turned ourselves in sooner!"

But then realizes he has to bunk with Chekiss. And his good mood quickly dissipates.

I try to tug Ruth into our room, because I can't look at Dessin right now, and I'm not letting her sleep in a room with a strange man.

"Hey," Dessin barks. "No. You're with me. I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"Too bad," I tell him.

Warrose stands off to the side like he'd rather be riding into battle than watching us bicker.

"It's okay. I can room with Warman." Ruth squeezes my hand assuringly.

"*Warrose*," he corrects, voice like crunching leaves and thunderstorms.

"Mm-hmm."

I look back and forth between them. My gut instinct is to trust Warrose. It's something about him, the calming presence, the protective energy he exerts. But if I'm being honest, this is more about my unwillingness to be alone with Dessin. I refuse to let him sweet-talk me into accepting his betrayal.

"No. Hell no." I look into Dessin's eyes and it's nearly painful. My eyes water involuntarily as if I'm looking directly into the sun.

"We're in the barracks with hundreds of untrustworthy men who might come looking for the women that just arrived. I can't have you two staying in a room together. Unprotected."

His tone is stern, yet pleading. His reasoning is sound. I don't want to put Ruth in any danger just because of my personal feelings toward Dessin.

I nod to Ruth. "Okay, but if you're uncomfortable at all, please come get me."

She gives me a gentle hug, kissing me on the cheek.

We depart into our rooms. I head straight for the foot of the bed, removing my shoes, avoiding looking in his direction.

“I want to talk about it,” Dessin says, clicking the door shut. *So now you want to talk about Aurick Demechnef?*

Something inside me breathes fire. The sick taste of betrayal coats the back of my throat. I might be sick. I want to throw my shoe at his head. *How could he keep this from me?*

He’s kept his secrets. I’ve forced myself to accept that about him. Accept that he knows best. Accept that he has a plan for us. Accept that I’m a stupid, stupid woman who isn’t worthy of knowing the depths of his mind. *This is Aurick Demechnef.* My fists clench the velvet duvet on the bed. *He’ll hurt you. The way Jack hurt you.* Anger vibrates the muscles in my stomach, my back, my thighs. I’m sweltering with this pain that is slowly gnawing at my heart, pushing the tip of a knife slowly into my arteries. *How could he do this to me?*

“*Fuck. You.*” I can hardly breathe. Tears of disgust are begging to be released from the stinging pressure behind my eyes.

“I know you don’t understand—”

“Because I’m a stupid little girl, right? Did you laugh to yourself when you found out I had willingly gone into the lion’s den? Did you shake your head at my naivety when I obeyed his house rules like a pet?” A rainstorm of fire sears through my soul.

Dessin’s face hardens into something dangerous. Like he’s holding on to his temper by a string of yarn. “*Don’t,*” he warns.

“What about when I cowered in the corner of his room after he hit me? After his fist cracked into my cheekbone? What about when I sobbed into that corner, wondering why you didn’t save me? Were you laughing then?” I’m on my feet, body clenched tightly in a fighting stance. My blood runs rampant through my veins, a choppy river of acid.

Dessin is practically shaking, chest heaving to draw in more oxygen.

“So help me God, Skylenna.”

“I hate you!” I screech through my teeth, tears springing free, dripping fast enough to fill an ocean. “I don’t want to see you *or* Kane tonight. Leave!” A sob breaks off from my chest. I can’t trust Kane right now either. Whatever Dessin knows, he does too. They both lied to me. They both made me look like a fool. They let me live in the home of a horrible ruler, a deranged psychopath.

Dessin looks at me for a long moment, watching me sob, sniffle, and wrap my arms around my own body to comfort myself and calm the raging

meltdown.

He nods once, like it's all he can do not to race to my side, hold me in his arms and keep me steady. Tell me I'm safe with him.

It's a few moments while I fight to regain my composure. His brown eyes glaze over, and his body relaxes. Shoulders droop, fists uncurl, brows soften. It's as if he's drifting off into a daydream.

He's leaving, but his body will stay.

The man standing before me blinks several times, glancing around the room in confusion. But as his eyes land on me, his lips curl into a smile. But it's quick, temporary. He seems to notice my rosy tearstained cheeks and my trembling shoulders. That wicked smile dissolves, and a pair of darkened eyes trail over me, studying my body language.

"Are you hurt?" It's the accent that gives him away. The satiny, elegant way he says each word. The soothing, sensual tone. The burning coals in his eyes.

Greystone.

"Yes." I nod, sniffing. "I'm hurt."

I am torn to shreds. My insides are in a puddle around me. And I can't breathe.

Greystone takes a step closer, his face uncharacteristically serious and pinched with concern. He taps his fingers together, unsure how to comfort me.

"May I comfort you?" he asks.

More tears spill from my eyes as I nod. "Yes." *Please.*

Greystone closes the few inches left between us, using his thumbs to clean my cheeks of the streaming tears. I lean into his touch, grateful for the closeness, the gentle comfort.

"You're okay," he purrs, cool breath grazing my cheek.

And with considerate caution, Greystone wraps his arms around my shoulders, bringing me to his chest. "You're okay."

I rest my warm, wet cheek against his shoulder. "He's a bastard," I whimper.

"I've known that for some time, yes." He sighs.

I chuckle between sobs, snuggling deeper into his chest. His scent is my safe space and slightly different than Dessin's. It's the rich aroma of cedar and dark musk. I love noticing their differences. What makes each alter unique.

“You smell nice,” I whisper.

“I know that too.”

I laugh again. “I’m sorry this is what you had to surface to. I’m sure this is definitely not your normal trigger.”

“Actually,”—he pulls my wavy golden hair off to one shoulder—“the sound of crying that sounds like moaning is a negative trigger for me.”

I straighten up as my stomach braids into a knot. “Oh.” Something dreadful sinks its teeth into my thoughts. I can’t imagine what that sound makes him relive.

“Let’s not dwell on it,” he says quietly. “Let’s lie down.”

I let him guide me onto the soft bed. It doesn’t even squeak as we get situated against the massive pillows. I slip under the cream-colored silky sheet, under the weight of the comforter. Greystone leans against the headboard, positioning me between his legs, arms curling around me as he pulls me against his chest. I frown. This is how I used to hold Scarlett when she had a breakdown. This is how I would subdue her temper.

“Did you know?” I ask cautiously. “About Aurick.”

“What about him?”

“That he’s the leader and heir of Demechnef?”

“Of course,” he murmurs, shrugging as if that’s obvious.

I clench my jaw. “And you didn’t think to tell me either?”

“Why would that come up in conversation?”

“Because I was living under his roof!” I twist my neck to get a side-glance of him.

Greystone goes completely still. Arms tightly coiled around my waist.

“You were?”

Wow, Dessin *really* keeps him out of the loop. I sigh, relaxing back against his chest. Taking deep breaths to calm that inflamed need to lash out. But it’s hard. How do I ignore this kind of betrayal? How can we overcome this?

“We’re more alike than I initially thought,” I tell him.

“We’re both insatiably aroused every hour of the day?”

I snort. “No. We’re both left in the dark.”

“Ah,” he exhales, his breath blowing through my hair. “Apparently, I’m reckless and not too skilled with keeping secrets.”

“At least you know the reasons they lie to you.”

He’s so silent, I wonder if he’s fallen asleep.

"I wish Scarlett had someone like you to protect her when she was a child," I say.

"Your sister." He nods, relieved that he knows that much.

"Yes. She was—harmed as a little girl. It ended up being too much for her."

"I see."

"My point is that... you are far more important than they give you credit for. Your reason for existing probably saved Kane's life the way I wish it would have saved Scarlett's." I turn to my left to face him, still tucked between his legs. "You matter, Greystone."

His cold, dark eyes widen as his breathing grows heavy. He searches my eyes, seeking truth in my statement. It both breaks and warms my heart to see how grateful he is to be appreciated. I nod twice, paying him a sad smile.

"Please let me kiss you." He breathes against my mouth, hand running up the length of my neck. And he's hot under his shirt, feverish to the touch like he'll burst into flames if he can't get a taste of my lips.

"Okay."

He dips his head down to capture my mouth. I suddenly realize I've never kissed him before. And it's different. His breath is hot, his lips parting slowly over mine, his tongue slipping into my mouth lazily, like he's going to take his time exploring me.

I melt against his chest, feeling him grow hard at my backside. The way he moves is like an art, savoring my flavor, flicking his tongue against my own. And my god, he knows what he's doing. Because that lick, that sweet taste, makes me arch my back against his erection. I press into him, moaning at the way he pries my mouth open with his thumb, sucking on my bottom lip.

"Do you need me tonight, pretty one?" he rasps against my lips.

"Yes." I really do. It's taking the edge off my burning anger, sitting like a tumor in my belly. I want to forget what Dessin has done. I want to pretend like none of this has happened. Just for tonight.

"Yes, what?"

"Please. Yes, please!" I roll my hips against him, letting him feel the softness of my ass.

He laughs darkly, hands gliding up my waist, stopping over my breasts. "Would you like me to teach you something new tonight?"

I nod my head, panting as his fingers caress my nipples. My head falls back against his shoulder.

“Good, because I’m foaming at the mouth to see your mouth stretched wide.”

I don’t know what he means by that, but his tone triggers my thighs to pinch together, trying to control the heated need to be touched there.

With one arm under my legs and the other around my back, he scoops me off the bed, setting me on the carpet gently. I tuck my feet under my butt, looking up at him as he towers over me.

“My god,” he purrs, licking his lips as he devours my body with those insidious eyes. “You are devastating to look at on your knees like this. A gorgeous little offering for me.”

I gulp loudly, attempting to calm my stuttering breaths.

“Teach me,” I beg. *Make me forget.*

He smirks. “I want you to feel my need for you.” He reaches for my hand, guiding it to the bulging length in his pants. A current of buzzing energy shoots up my arm as I connect with his visible desire for me. I nearly forgot how large he is, my hand barely covering the bottom of his shaft.

“Mmm.” Greystone presses my hand against him, urging me to feel him pulse under my fingers. “Unbutton them.”

I look at the three buttons of his black pants, sitting just under my palm. I nod, raising my other hand to assist in unfastening them.

“That’s good,” he praises me. “Now, pull them down.”

I blink. *Pull them down.* I’ve only seen him in the darkness of the thirteenth room. And this room is comfortably lit. *And* I’m on my knees.

My hands tremble as I tug at his waistband, lowering the pants until he’s free. Long and hard as stone. I try not to look shocked, try to keep my mouth closed. But he’s watching me, and the size is bigger than I remembered.

“You want to put your hands on me,” he says, his accent like a tongue licking between my legs. “So, do it. Touch me.”

I use my fingers first, trailing them over his tip, down the length of the shaft. A quiet exhale whooshes from his chest. The sensation is light against the tips of my fingers, but powerful enough to make me squirm with electric desire, insatiable arousal. I squeeze my knees together, unable to handle the neediness he’s provoking in me.

“Go ahead, wrap those pretty little hands around it.”

My pussy is dripping, and I can’t tell what burns into me more... his voice or the hardness between my hands.

Without another thought, I do as he says, curling both hands around him, feeling the pulse thrum against my skin, the heat swelter against my palms.

“Good girl.”

His moan is an aphrodisiac, a husky sound that drives me into a wanton frenzy. I want to do things to him. Touch, rub, feel him move inside me.

“Please.” I’m stroking him desperately, like I need something but can’t quite name it. It’s the tension building like a pot of boiling water in my center, making me into a rabid animal.

“Open your mouth for me.” His voice is distant and strained, yet still very much in control. “That’s right, a little wider.”

I unhinge my jaw, looking up at him with eager anticipation.

“Do you want to taste my cock?”

Do I? Yes. *Hell* yes. I’m nodding in a cloudy daze.

He narrows his eyes. “Let me see your tongue.”

And the tip of his cock is sliding into my mouth so slowly, it’s torturous. I groan at the need to feel him unlock my jaw, and that seems to untie his carefully curated seduction.

His thick cock glides into my mouth until it reaches a stopping point.

“Keep your hands around it. Yes, like that.” He pulls my hair away from my face. “You can taste me, suck me, or lick me however you want—*Mmm.*” His head goes back, and that sound makes me tremble inside.

The throaty groan soaks my panties, stripping me of any ladylike ideals I have left. I’m licking the length of him, up and down, tasting, swirling, worshiping every terrible inch. And the more I do, the harder he pants. It’s fuel to the tingling between my legs. I start to moan while I choke him down, letting his tip touch the back of my throat.

“You’re such a good girl,” he utters.

I need this. Right here, I can forget, I can believe it never happened. And I’ve even managed to drown my rage and fill it with pleasure. Greystone growls at my rhythm, using my hands to grip his base. He’s writhing, fingers weaving into my hair, completely at my mercy.

“Like this?” I ask, pulling away gently.

“Yes.” He smiles, eyes hooded and drunk. “You’re doing so well.”

I take him in my mouth again, this time ravenous, faster, deeper.

“Sweetheart, you’re going to make me—lose it.”

But I don’t stop. I remove one hand to touch myself, rubbing between my legs until I’m chasing an inferno of pleasure. I let out a breathy moan, and Greystone is tightening his fists, grunting.

“You want me to spill in your mouth, sweetheart?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Then I need you to come for me, rub your pretty little clit right in front of me. Can you do that?” His tone is authoritative and laced with thick droplets of lust. I moan against him in answer.

“Because when I kiss you again, I want to taste the mark I leave in you. That you are *ours* to keep.”

I explode. Completely taken over with a firestorm of euphoria, bliss, agonizing pleasure that could easily be mistaken for a drug. And the sound that rumbles up my throat is cut off by his cock filling me up.

Greystone jerks, gasping as he spills over my tongue, both salty and sweet. When he stops pulsing, he pulls himself out, mesmerized as some of him leaks past my lips.

With the pad of his thumb, he wipes away his hot liquid.

“Swallow.”

One gulp and it’s running down my throat. All of him.

Greystone hums his approval, lifting my shivering body from the floor, tucking me under the covers, and spooning his body around mine.

“You’re not alone in the dark anymore,” he whispers.

3. Demechnef Training

“I’M SWEATING IN WEIRD PLACES.” Niles catches up to my left, jogging like he’s moments away from dropping dead.

Dessin was gone by the time I woke up, meeting with the war strategists to plan how we’re going to save DaiSzek. Leaving me to fester in my disappointment, my solitude, my silent wrath.

Warrose got the rest of us dressed, fed, and out of the mountain to train. Chekiss was sent to the library; his lungs, after years of drowning, could never withstand physical conditioning. He’d rather read about war strategy. Sharpen his mind with whatever Demechnef could offer.

Warrose leads us on a slow jog through rocky terrain. We’re equipped with hiking boots, loose moss-green tunics, and soft black pants.

“Same,” I tell Niles. I’m covered head to toe in sticky sweat, panting like I’m about to cough up a lung, and we’ve only been running for seven minutes.

“Pick up the pace, Ruthie,” Niles hollers over his shoulder.

I glance back at Ruth to see her descend into a fast walk, shaking her head. I slow down, waiting for her to catch up. “I’m done.” She waves her hand, shooing us away.

Niles and I both come to a stop.

“Are you hurt?” Warrose is suddenly cutting between us, trudging up to Ruth as she plants herself firmly on the ground, completely out of breath.

“No.” She shakes her head. “But women aren’t made for exercising, which is why we fast and control our meal intake.”

Ah, we need to take her to the Stormsage Keep. That’ll teach her.

Warrose scoffs, a low raspy sound. “That’s horse shit.”

“Pardon me?”

“*Horse. Shit.*” He emphasizes each word as if he’s trying to speak to an alien species. “A woman can do anything a man can do. More, actually.”

Ruth straightens her back, avoiding his deadly gaze.

“I’m not going any farther. I’ll meet you all back at our rooms.” She crosses her glistening arms, firm on not leaving her position in the dirt.

Warrose is still for three seconds, watching her like a vulture, jaw rolling at the sight of her dainty stubbornness.

“Ruth...” I warn.

“I wasn’t aware I was in the presence of a *queen*.” The words leave his mouth like venom spewing from the fangs of a snake.

“I’m not interested in—*oh*, hey! What are you doing?!” Ruth squeals as he tosses her petite body over his shoulder. “You’re all sweaty!” She swats at his back.

Niles and I exchange a look with raised eyebrows, then burst out laughing.

“Let’s go, we have half a mile left,” Warrose orders as he begins to run.

“Wowwww!” Niles chokes, attempting a slow clap. “I’m practically recharging with testosterone just being in his presence!”

He’s running with a one hundred and fifteen-pound woman slung over his shoulder like a rag doll. And Niles and I are gaping, unable to move, unable to rip our eyes away from Ruth’s screaming, bobbing head.

“Now!” Warrose barks.

Niles gives me a playful shove as we jog to catch up.

“So, you unknowingly were living in the lair of Demechnef’s secret leader.”

“I really, *really* don’t want to talk about that.” The sting is still fresh. The running helps, but every time Dessin or Aurick pop into my head, I want to scream.

“I never liked him,” he huffs.

“You never met him.”

“I have a sense about people.”

I laugh through my heavy breaths. “Are we back to Cupid?”

“He’s probably not that bad of a guy. He lost his betrothed. Losing your soul mate to the grim reaper can do horrible things to someone’s mind.”

I remember the brief moments he spoke about Red. How his father hurt her. How she told him everything. Maybe Niles has a good point.

We stop in front of a canal, rich turquoise water with the gentle sounds of a babbling brook. Warrose turns to us. “We’ll swim across, and then we’re done for the day.”

No. Nope.

“I’ll sooner drown,” Niles says what I’m thinking.

“No, you won’t.”

Ruth wiggles until he sets her down. “I’ll swim,” she agrees, not wanting to be thrown over his shoulder again.

I sigh. “Fine. But there better be a lot of food to eat when we get back.”

Niles nods in agreement.

Niles and Warrose remove their damp tunics, tossing them to the ground.

I look over at Ruth, who is mirroring my open-mouthed expression, staring at them like she's never seen shirtless men before.

Niles is lean and toned, probably from doing his best to keep a strong physique in the asylum. But Warrose is another breed entirely. With his abdomen cut into bulging squares, arms, and chest like swollen hills. He's about the same height as Niles, only an inch or two shorter than Dessin.

Although Niles is radiant in his golden skin, Warrose's darker complexion is another beautiful sight entirely. He's a light shade of brown with hazel eyes that match the water sloshing by our feet. They turn to the lake, glimmering with drops of sweat. And Ruth and I are gawking like two mindless toddlers.

"Scream if you need help," Warrose says, slicking his long, dark hair back.

"Solid pep talk." Niles deadpans.

And the boys go first, stepping into the crystal clear water, sinking into its slow stream.

Ruth puts a hand on my shoulder. "These clothes will slow us down."

I look back at her, catching the mischievous twinkle in her brown eyes, the shy shrug of her pointed shoulder. "I knew I've always liked you." I smile back. I can't think of a better way to subtly get back at Dessin and Kane.

While Niles and Warrose have their backs turned, Ruth and I scramble to remove our clothes. I peek over at Ruth's undergarments. She's wearing pink silk panties and a matching bra. Her ribs are prominent, sticking out like she hasn't had a decent meal in years. Sharp hip bones, sunken stomach, flat chest. I look away quickly, sick at what that city has done to her but also hopeful that we can reintroduce her to a healthy perspective of food.

She glances over at mine. A matching black lace set that Runa stashed in my pack, along with a few others. I'll have to thank her if I ever see her again.

We descend into the cool water.

"Absolutely the fuck not." Warrose stops, only looking at our faces to avoid our unclothed bodies.

“They’ll slow us down,” Ruth says.

“Put them back on.” His expression is unreadable. Hazel eyes like the glittering sea in the morning sun. “I won’t ask again.”

“Good, then don’t.” *Damn, Ruth.*

Niles makes an O shape with his lips.

Warrose turns to me, jaw clenching down. “Dessin would cut out my spleen if he knew I saw you... *indecent.*”

“Dessin doesn’t have a say in what I do anymore,” I say, holding hands with Ruth as we drop ourselves deeper into the canal. We hiss, huff, and groan at the icy stream rushing over our skin. But as I adjust, it’s nice, like a cold drink on a hot day.

Warrose glares at me for a moment, running his wet hand through his shiny hair.

“If anyone tells him I saw Skylenna half-naked, you’ll sleep out in the cold. Understood?”

Everyone nods. Niles does so with a smile, delight reddening his cheeks.

We start swimming, kicking our legs, paddling our arms through the body of water leading into the massive Emerald Lake. I’ve never told anyone this, but I’ve been a remarkably strong swimmer my entire life. The times I went to the Red Oaks with my father, the afternoons we’d spend floating in the lagoon, I would swim as fast as I could from one side to the other.

And even though I’m sore and weak from the run, I glide with each stroke, taking deep breaths through my nose as I push the stream past me, catching up to Warrose.

“Don’t look at me,” he says, only slightly out of breath.

“I wasn’t.”

“I’m not speaking to you.”

Water splashes in my eyes, and I fall behind by a couple of inches to shake it away.

“It’s nothing personal,” I pant.

“Say that again when my balls are no longer attached to my body.”

I wince.

“He does that, y’know? Makes the punishment fit the crime. Decides what body parts would wound your ego the most.” Warrose huffs out a laugh.

I do know. An unwanted visual of Albatross's face pops into my head. The thick pink scars that spelled Dessin. The marks where his mouth was sewn shut. He is rather creative; I'll give him that.

"He's not going to hurt you because he knows that'll only upset me more." It's getting harder to form a sentence from my labored breaths. I'm practically wheezing.

"What he did wasn't vindictive, Skylenna. You don't have a clue about the weight he carries while he keeps you in the dark. It guts him. But he has to do it. And honestly, you'll feel like an asshole when you realize why he had to do it."

"Hey! Aquatic bastards! I'm stuck!" Niles shouts. Warrose and I turn around, treading in place.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

Niles is also treading in place but struggling to keep his head above water.

"My foot! It's caught on a root or something."

Warrose growls under his breath. "I'm coming."

"Take your time. I'm only drowning."

Ruth floats beside me, trying to keep her breathing under control. She glances at me with red-rimmed eyes and mouths, "*I hate this.*" I snort. *Me too.*

Before Warrose reaches Niles, a golden object emerges to their right, slow and daunting. Niles yelps with a mouthful of water. It's a head, a beautiful face, brown skin, and wide eyes. Forest boy. The man from the Naiadales. The Emerald Lake colony.

"Oh shit!" Niles wails, flapping his arms away from the man.

"It's okay!" I shout as I thrust my arms through the water to get closer. "He's not going to hurt you."

"He tried to kill me!"

The Naiadales man lifts a thick curly root from the water, chopped unevenly on either end. He cut Niles loose. "Free," he says, a soothing whisper.

Niles stares at him, pink lips parted, wet hair falling across his forehead.

"I am Rydran." And he's gone, sinking back into the water, feet flushing him away from our circle of exhaustion.

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4. Unforgiven

RUTH AND I SIT ACROSS from each other in the dining hall, hair dripping in our laps, prune fingers, and wearing baggy men's clothes.

It's as if Aurick's mansion was repurposed for a massive dining room. Cherrywood rib vault arches and walls carved in intricate designs. There are five rectangular tables that seem miles long, decorated with silver platters of roasted pigs, steamed vegetables, and platters of freshly baked bread. It booms with the sound of laughing men and clanking silverware.

"People are staring," Ruth comments, taking a small bite of a strawberry.

"That's because there aren't any women here. They're probably thinking of ways to get you and Sky—"

"Would you like me to tell Dessin how that sentence was going to end?" Warrose glares at Niles, digging his fork into a pile of broccoli.

"Eat your food, kid." Chekiss sits down with his plate, giving me a shy smile.

I turn my attention back to Ruth, watching her shove food to one side, picking apart a piece of fruit until it's small enough to be guilt-free. My stomach twists. Is this how I looked back with the Stormsages? Brainwashed?

And even worse, I can't do for her what Asena did for me. I can't tell her that eating until she's full is acceptable. Because we aren't in the North Saphrine Forest anymore. We're in the heart of Demechnef. The source from which these ridiculous societal standards came.

But as I attempt to turn away and focus on Niles and Chekiss bickering, I catch Warrose studying how Ruth moves her food around. He nudges her with his elbow.

"Eat," he says in a hushed tone, like he's making a solid effort not to bring attention to the way she's moving her food around.

She raises an eyebrow. "I am."

"No, you're playing with your food." His tone softens. It's in the slight crease of his brow that he's trying to be patient with the standards she was raised with. However wrong they might be.

"No, I'm portioning my food like a lady."

His lids fall closed like he's fighting the urge to roll his eyes.

“My dear queen, if you do not eat, you’ll faint. If you faint, I’ll have to peel your slippery body off the floor and carry you back to our room. Don’t make me do that. I’m tired.” He swallows, then leans closer. “Please. I’m just trying to help.”

Ruth turns to him with a condescending smile. “You’re not a woman, so let me explain how this works. I may get away with sneaking a snack or two when I’m alone. But when I’m in public, I have to eat this way. If I don’t, someone will say something. Someone might even throw me into the female ward of the asylum.”

“If anyone—”

“May we sit?”

Two men stand to my right, hovering with one hand on my shoulder and mocking smiles. My stomach does a flip, and my fingers twitch to yank the hand from its tight grip on my skin.

They look like brothers. Dark-brown skin, hair braided close to their scalps, and maroon vests with gold tassels.

Soldiers.

“You may not,” Warrose says calmly, yet his hazel eyes stew in severe irritation.

“Come on, War! You vanish without a word, and now you don’t introduce us to the pretty ladies?” A quick squeeze of my shoulder.

“Remove your hand.” His tone isn’t loud, yet it’s dripping in slow death. Warrose keeps his eyes on the place my shoulder is being covered.

“You’re no fun any—”

Warrose is nearly as fast as Dessin. It’s a swift movement, like the closing of a Venus flytrap. His hand unsheathes a machete on his, and with one flick of his massive arm, he barrels it down to chop off the hand that is gripping me. Only a centimeter before he makes a clean slice, he stops. The wide blade hovering a hair’s length over the man’s wrist.

“Off,” he growls, holding his attacking arm perfectly still, then follows the other man’s gaze to Ruth. “She isn’t a painting on display. Eyes off her too. If I catch you looking again, I’ll carve them out with this rusted machete.”

Well. He certainly is Dessin’s friend, isn’t he?

“Jesus! Relax.” The hand unclamps from my shoulder. The two men grumble about Warrose losing his mind before they leave the dining hall.

Ruth gets my attention with her rising eyebrows and pursed lips. “Wow,” she mouths. “*I know*,” I mouth back.

We both look away before we start laughing at the other’s expression, and it isn’t hard to wipe away the dopey smile on my face as Dessin enters the dining hall. The volume of the room lowers, loud voices morphing into hushed whispers, heads turning to watch him move, watch him claim every bit of dominant energy in the room.

I swallow down my bite of ham and look away as he gets closer. I see Warrose nod to him from the corner of my eye. Suddenly, my appetite vanishes, replaced with a sour churning of nausea. I stay perfectly still as Dessin lowers himself to the seat next to me. My eyes focus so hard on the meal they begin to burn.

“What’s the plan? We ride at dawn to save the furry grim reaper?” Warrose slides a glass of water to Dessin’s place setting.

“No.” Despite my anger, his deep voice sinks between my legs. “Scouts reported that they’re on the shoreline. They lined a few miles of Hangman’s Valley with traps to catch us or kill us. It’s going to be a couple of days until I can map it out and figure out how I can get through it.”

“How we can get through it,” Warrose clarifies.

“No. I can do this on my own.”

“Hangman’s Valley is the forest of every deadly species of beast there is. That’s *my* specialty. And you don’t have DaiSzek to help this time. I’m going with you, brother.” *DaiSzek*. His name burns a hole through my heart.

“I’m going too,” I announce quietly.

“No,” Dessin responds without looking at me. “You’ll stay here until we get back.”

“Like fucking hell!” I whip my head to him, bones shivering under my skin with a cold, silent rage. My boy is out there, and God knows what the Vexamen Breed is doing to him. I won’t sit back any longer like a helpless doll. I want to fight. I want to be strong too.

The table stiffens, shoulders back, trying not to look at us as Dessin and I stare each other down. His face is unreadable, yet his dark-mahogany eyes flicker, like something buried deep in his subconscious is trying to claw its way out.

“I’ll train! I’ll strengthen my body. I’ll do whatever you want. But I won’t sit here and wait. You’ll have to chain me up and knock me out.” My

voice is trembling along with my hands, breaking into thin shards of glass, announcing that at any given moment, I might burst into tears.

Dessin doesn't say a word. He lets his eyes fall closed, taking a shallow, uneven breath.

"Dessin... you know how the Vexamen breed treats their animals. We don't have time to argue. We just have to get him back." Warrose's jaw sets as if the knowledge behind his words has turned his stomach.

"What do they do to their animals?" I ask him, unsure if I want to know. But I need to hear it. *Turning a blind eye won't help anyone.*

Warrose opens his mouth to speak, but Dessin holds up a hand. "Don't you fucking dare." His face says it all. It tells us that he's teetering over the edge. That at any moment, he'll combust, burst into a fiery vehemence. The pressure on his shoulders is a sharp dagger to his heart. Despite my pain, I want to hold him, tell him that we'll be okay, tell him that it's not his fault. But I can't. I still cannot get past how much he's hurt me with his omission of truth.

The table sits in uncomfortable silence for several minutes before Dessin finally speaks again.

"You'll keep training until we're ready to leave. Then we'll free DaiSzek together."



I SNEAK INTO WARROSE AND Ruth's room, twisting the crystal knob quietly, and slipping inside without making a sound. The only light splashing across the glossy wooden walls is from the fireplace. Ruth is sitting on the carpet, flat on her tummy, reading. Warrose is two steps out of the washroom, running a towel through his long, wet hair.

He looks at me with an eyebrow raised. Without a shirt, he's covered in raised tattoos. Gray-and-black markings, like a calligraphy pen drawn over his muscles in a foreign language. He tightens the towel around his hips.

"I have a question," I ask him, closing the door behind me.

"Okay." He finishes wringing his hair out. Pauses. "Can I put pants on first?"

"That would be best."

He disappears into the washroom, and Ruth peeks at me over her book.

"He wouldn't let me do my lady-doll regimen," she whispers.

“That’s probably best too.”

“No, it’s not. I feel all dry and lifeless without it.” She folds a page over to mark her place. “Remember how much we enjoyed taking our baths together? Sneaking Aurick’s food and wine?”

His name is a sword puncturing through my chest, snapping my bones, and filling my lungs with blood. Too many emotions jolt through me. I could cry, scream, throw a tantrum, or sit empty in silence. I don’t know which to feel.

“It’s a disgusting rule to control women.” Warrose bristles past me, wearing black-as-night pants and no shirt. I look over at Ruth, who is gawking at his arms.

I sit on the twin bed next to his. “What were you talking about when you said the Vexamen Breed doesn’t treat their animals well? How do they treat them?”

He shakes his head quickly, warding off the question. “Dessin was right. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Well, you did. Now tell me. I deserve to know.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Tell her, coward!” Ruth is sitting up now, looking rather adorable in her white nightgown and furrowed brow.

“*Coward?*” Warrose cocks his head to her. “So now I’m cowardly?”

My mind buzzes with the fear of the unknown. How will DaiSzek be treated? Would it hurt me to know? Would it only make me feel more powerless?

“Yes. You’re too chicken to do something Dessin won’t like. That makes you a chicken coward.”

“I am not.” Warrose looks both amused and annoyed as he gazes down at Ruth like she’s a pest he can’t get rid of. “And wow, you’re really gearing up with your insults. *Chicken coward.*”

“Prove it. Tell her.”

I sit up straight. “I can take it.”

Warrose exhales loudly. “Fine, but you have to swear you won’t go crying to him once I tell you.”

I nod once.

“Vexamen isn’t exactly the most civilized place. They do things very differently. Their culture. Their military. Their laws. It would turn your

stomach to hear the stories I could share.” He rubs a large hand through his wet hair. “But specifically, they have something called a meat carnival.”

I really don’t like the sound of that.

“A meat carnival is where butchers bring the beasts they find and torture them in front of a crowd as a form of entertainment. They—well, I’ll spare you the gruesome details. But it isn’t pretty.”

“They—*what?!?*” My voice is a choked, quivering mess.

“Oh my god!” Ruth drops her book to the floor, crawling to my side.

“Oh, Skylenna!”

But I can’t breathe. Is it warm in here? My feet are clenched in my boots, and I can feel the pressure of my dinner rising in my esophagus. *Not my DaiSzek. Not my boy!*

“We’re going to get him back,” Warrose says.

I shake my head, although I have nothing to say. They can’t hurt DaiSzek. He’s a monster. A legend. A force stronger than anything they can throw at him.

But what if they keep him drugged? What if he can’t fight back when they bring him to this meat carnival?

I’m on my feet, walking absently to the door. My name is called. Footsteps shuffle toward me. The pain in my chest is crippling. The fear of losing my friend, the betrayal of Dessin and his secrets, the new knowledge that Aurick was using me. It’s biting into my flesh, sucking out my soul.

“I need to process this alone,” I say to them, opening the door to leave.

The last thing I hear is Warrose speaking to Ruth. “You’ll attend my funeral, won’t you?”



I OPEN THE DOOR TO my room. Step inside mechanically, like my joints are rusted and old, like I’m moments away from falling to pieces.

Dessin is sitting on an armchair by the fire. Elbows on knees, head in hands. He’s having a hard time too. He knows what’s at stake. He knows what could happen to our boy.

“I can’t figure it out.” My words float from my lips to the warm air like a new butterfly taking flight. And for a moment, you can’t tell how heavy they are.

Dessin turns his head, finding me standing in front of the door with his tired eyes. So sad. So defeated.

“I can’t decide on what to feel right now. Hatred for you and your lies. Mind-blowing fury that you left me under his roof, even after he hit me. And you let me find out in the most humiliating way.” I take a sharp breath in, and he watches me with a stoic, guarded expression.

“Or...” My throat clamps up, forming a thick lump that I can’t swallow. “Terror. Because I don’t know what’s going to happen. I didn’t know how Vexamen treat their animals. I didn’t know about the meat carnivals. I didn’t know—” I suck in a stuttering breath, hot tears pooling over my eyes. “I might lose him forever!” The cry breaks through my walls, shattering my heart in its wake. My arm reaches out to the doorknob, a lifeline to keep me on my feet.

Dessin is up from his seat in a blink of an eye, and he’s at my side, hands hovering around me because he knows he doesn’t have permission to comfort me.

“I can’t lose him, Dessin!” I sob hysterically like I can’t find the oxygen in the room, like I’ll choke to death on my own grief. “We’ve lost so much already. He’s the only family we have!”

“I’m sorry, Skylenna—I’m so fucking sorry. Please let me comfort you,” he says with a strained tone, breathing heavily against my face. I nod my head through the breakdown, unable to see him react through my tears, but I feel it as soon as his big hands slide around either side of my face. Holding me like I might shatter into tiny pieces at his feet. The fragile doll he fears might stop working.

“I’m going to save Dai. He knows that. And you know I’d give my life to protect the ones I love.” He’s the image of heartache and the devil’s wrath. A man bleeding on the inside. An apocalyptic storm that is only briefly contained. “I will become hell on earth to bring him home to you. Please believe me.”

“I believe you,” I mutter despite his lies. Despite the betrayal I still feel deep in my bones. If there’s one thing I’ll believe at a time like this, it’s that Dessin can do anything he sets his mind to.

“They haven’t left the Dementia shoreline. He won’t get sent to the meat carnival until they believe they’ve lured me out, trapped me, and taken me with them. But I’m mapping it out. You know I never enter a situation without being ten steps ahead.”

“I know,” I say. It’s one of the many things I love about this man.

Dessin leans his forehead against mine like he’s resting, using me to hold him up. His eyes close. “You named him.”

I sniffle, unsure if I heard him right. “What?”

“You’re the one that named DaiSzek when he was a puppy. DaiSzek was a warrior king in one of your favorite books Jack used to read you. The story of the fae king DaiSzek, and his elven queen Knightingale that gave their lives to end a great war thousands of years ago.” Dessin studies my wet, sobbing expression as he’s waiting for me to remember.

I shake my head. “I don’t remember that.”

“I know.” He smiles sadly.

“I knew DaiSzek as a puppy?”

He nods.

That both warms and breaks my heart at the same time. I release my hold on his strong arms. “I suppose you aren’t going to tell me more than that.”

He sighs, releasing his hold on my face. “I didn’t tell you about Aurick because it opens up many questions I can’t answer.”

I blink away the tears, wiping the stragglers away with my sleeve. It comes back in a devastating wave, the sickening punch in the gut as I saw Aurick Demechnef walk into that room. As I watched Dessin wait for my reaction. I hate feeling this way.

“I see.” My feet begin moving to the washroom. “I’m going to take a bath. Please don’t wait up for me.”

After closing the washroom door, I twist the faucet to gush scalding hot water. Steam fills the small room, fogging up the mirror and moistening my skin before I can step inside the large copper tub.

The lady-doll regimen supplies are set out on the vanity. Jars of lavender cream, a pitcher of milk, a bowl and spool of honey, glass servings of dried herbs, and salts. I’m a moving zombie as I fill the tub with everything I’ve grown familiar with. Like I’m still under Aurick’s roof, because I am. His property. Indebted to his hospitality. Maybe I am weak and helpless. That’s why Dessin never tells me anything. That’s why I need the assistance of a man to get me a job at the asylum, to feed and clothe me.

I lather my dirty hair in oil, digging it into my scalp until my fingers are sore. And as I pick one leg up, placing it into the hot bath, I watch more tears fall into the milky, sweet-scented water.

I'll pull myself together. I won't let them see how this has ripped my heart out. I'll clean myself up, scrub the dirt and devastation from my skin, and wash away the stained trail of tears from my puffy eyes and cheeks.

I'll be better.

I'll be stronger.

If not for myself, then for DaiSzek. The friend I've apparently known since he was a pup. Sinking into the cozy tub, I dunk my head in, wetting my hair.

I'll be better.

I'll be stronger.

As I turn off the faucet with my foot, I close my eyes, resting my head against the edge of the tub, chanting the words in my head. *Better. Stronger.* I don't care how long I have to train. I don't care if they abuse me, strip me of my humanity, or work my body into the ground. I have to be stronger. Have to be better.

And I float away in the water, sinking into a dreamless sleep.



I'M YANKED FROM THE DARKNESS, dragged from silent peace. Water rushes over my face, and I gasp at the sudden cold burst of air.

"There you are." A deep voice booms over the rushing water. Hands grip my arms, pulling until I'm propped upright in the tub. "Breathe, little siren." An accent, ancient and foreign. Close to what the Stormsages sounded like.

I cough at the water in my nose draining down my throat.

"What happened?"

"You fell asleep in the tub," the man says, voice smooth like a warm ocean breeze.

I squeeze my eyes closed, wiping them of the milky water.

When I open them, I see Dessin kneeling to my left, hands still on my arms. But the expression is blank with a small splash of curiosity. He looks down at me like I'm a small, interesting human...

"Who are you?" I ask.

The alter lets go of my arms, letting them rest on the tub's edge. "We met once in the asylum."

"We did?"

“When we were drowned.” He tilts his head, waiting for me to recognize him.

“Aquarus,” I say, quickly covering my breasts. God of the sea.

“Yes.”

I glance at the water that spilled onto the marble floor. “You thought I was drowning.”

He stares at me, hickory-brown eyes holding worlds of wisdom.

“That’s why you’re here.”

“This body has been under severe stress. It hasn’t been sleeping. And it’s disturbing the other alters.” Aquarus looks away, thinking out loud. “It seems you’re experiencing similar pain.”

Our situation has made it hard for his system to function. His world of alters. They’re all affected by what we’re going through on the outside.

I nod. “It’s been hard.”

“Hmm.”

“I’m sorry you don’t get to surface on better circumstances,” I say.

Aquarus lifts his chin. “I don’t mind it.” Accent rugged and northern.

I feel like an insect under a magnifying glass. The way he looks down at me, examining my mouth, my bare body. Like he’s never been this close to a naked woman before.

“You are rather beautiful.” He sighs, looking as if he might smile. Just a little.

“And what do you look like? In the inner world? How old are you?”

His chest rumbles with a closed-mouth laugh. “I’m three hundred thousand years old. I’m six foot eight, with long golden hair like yours.” He twirls a finger through one of my wet strands with a smile. “I believe Kane read a book about me when he was young. That’s why I split with this identity. Because I am Aquarus, the god of the sea, and I am not afraid of water or drowning.”

Every time I learn something new, it stings in my chest. Kane remembered a fictional character that felt invincible.

“We call them introjects. Fictive alters,” he adds.

“And what do you do in the inner world?”

“They don’t see very much of me. I stay in the ocean until I’m summoned to the front. Like I was today... with you.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

Aquarus studies me a moment longer, glancing down at the milk water and the floating dried leaves and lavender. "Dessin was worried because you've been in here for so long."

"I—I thought this bath would relieve my anxiety." My heartache. My churning stomach of toxic lies that I've been swallowing. My fear of what is happening to DaiSzek.

"But you're still in pain."

I nod.

"Would you like my company or prefer to suffer alone?" He shifts his large body toward the door.

My eyes roam over his face. "I'd like you to stay." Time alone has always made my mind race with bad memories. And since there are a lot of those lately, I'll take his company gladly.

Aquarus acknowledges my words with his eyes. A slight glint of an idea. He grips the edge of the tub and pushes himself to his feet. "Wait here."

Moments later, he slips back into the washroom with a full glass bottle of brown liquid and a tray of steaming bread. A smirk warms my cheeks. This reminds me of my days in the thirteenth room with Dessin, minus the alcohol. Or that night, Ruth and I stayed up talking, drinking wine, and eating Aurick's food.

Fully clothed, Aquarus steps into the copper tub with me, lowering himself into the hot water across from my end. He's lucky this is an abnormally large bathtub; otherwise, he'd never fit.

"Have you ever had bourbon?" he asks, angling the tray to sit by itself across the tub.

"I don't think so." *But there's no time like the present!*

"Good." He reaches his hand over to me. "Eat this before we start." A chunk of hot sourdough bread with a clump of butter on top.

"Mmm," I hum, taking a large bite.

He takes a long seven gulps of the bottle, then sets it on the tray with a sigh. I watch his movements like a child looking at the sky for the first time. His expression is relaxed yet subtly amused by my presence. It's like he's patiently awaiting what I'll say or do next. Like I'm a rare species that he gets to observe for the day. But it's also the way his elbows hang over the edge, the way he blinks slowly. Aquarus doesn't believe he is human. No, his body language screams deity. It blasts an energy of almightiness. A

carelessness for any threat that might linger. Because, currently, he's a king sitting on a throne, studying me.

"What is it like?" he finally asks, unblinking.

I arch an eyebrow at him. My mouth is full. So full. Stuffed with buttery, warm, breaded goodness.

"Living in this contradicting world of rules and death and male superiority complexes," he clarifies.

I chew faster so I can answer. "Good. Fine. I mean, I often wish to be caught under an avalanche or accidentally trampled by a stampede. But other than that, pretty swell."

The corner of his mouth ticks up. It's the only cue that he has a sense of humor.

"I'd take you back with me if I could."

"To the inner world?"

Aquarus moves his head down a centimeter as an answer.

"You'd let me come live with you?" I ask with a tickle of warmth spreading across my chest.

"I am isolated there mostly. But I would enjoy your company in the sea."

I try not to smile. "I could live on a boat."

"You do have the hair of a siren."

My father did always say I had mermaid waves in my hair.

With one finger, he pushes the bottle of bourbon my way. I finish another piece of bread, then bring the bottle to my lips. I take two big gulps, then hiss at the burn clawing its way down my throat.

"Yummy," I lie.

"You'll get used to it." He takes the bottle back, sipping it this time.

I watch the milky water saturating his shirt, glancing over the part of his chest that isn't covered. "Do you like fronting? Being in this world?"

"Not particularly. The only times I do are when sadistic little humans are trying to drown me." He looks away, blinking slowly, like even mentioning them isn't worth his breath.

"So, finding me asleep in the bathtub was a better alternative?"

His dark, dilated eyes slide back to me slowly. "It was."

I smile, taking another swig from the bottle.

We talk about his version of the inner world. How he rarely sees any of the other alters, if ever. Although, there was that one time he saw Greystone

enthusiastically waving at him from the shoreline. Besides that, he's spent much time alone, listening to the ocean's waves, feeling the cool water seep into his skin. He has no memories of loving anyone or being loved at all.

"Dessin's going to be mad at you for getting me drunk," I say, my face warm and numb. "*Drunk*, I mean."

Aquarus seems to smile with his eyes. "He isn't mad. But I am rather annoyed with the constant heaviness of guilt and stress pouring off of him and close to me at the moment."

"You can feel him?"

"Whoever is hosting can feel any alters that linger close to the front."

That makes sense.

"Well, thanks for getting me drunk. It helps." Hell, he's so good-looking. I don't know why I've been so mad. Why hasn't he tried to kiss me? Do I want him to? I like getting to know him, but wow, he's beautiful. And he carries himself with so much power and grace.

I really want to touch his mouth.

"You're staring."

"Am not." *And drooling.*

"Is it strange for you? To speak to different people in one body?" he asks.

I shake my head. "No. I know it should be. But I like it. It's an adventure getting to know everyone." I smile lazily, relaxing deeper into the water and attempting footsie with him.

"You're touching my foot."

"I know. Touch mine back."

"Why?"

"Err. It's a way of flirting."

"You're flirting with me?"

I deadpan. "Careful. I'm in a fragile state. If you reject me, I might burst into tears."

This time, the corner of Aquarus's mouth curls upward. *A smile!* "Yes! I knew you had a smile waiting to come out!"

"You can't flirt with me when you're this... *naked.*"

"And wet."

His smile, or attempt at a smile, slips away. Those large pupils seem to dilate even more. A calloused hand finds my foot, stroking it underwater.

"Mmm," I sigh, heat pooling between my legs.

“I’d like to see you again, little siren. Maybe when you’re of sound mind, I can do more than flirt with your foot.”

“I *am* of sound mind.” *Ish*.

But his focus disappears. And I know he’s going back to the sea. There’s the sound of a trickling waterfall as he steps out of the bathtub. But I stay put, wrapping my arms around my knees against my chest, trembling at the sudden cool draft kissing my naked body.

“Skylenna.” The accent is gone. It’s replaced with a familiar warmth. Like reading your favorite childhood storybook. Like smelling chocolate and being taken back to a sweet winter memory.

Kane.

I look up from where my head rests on my knees. He’s standing by the vanity with a towel around his waist, and holding one out for me, the way he did when I bathed in the lagoon. I’m not sure why he’s come to the front. If there was a trigger, I’m not aware of it.

My stomach clenches and rolls, but I step out of the tub, holding my hands over my breasts and panty line. With water streaming down my body, I walk to him with quivering legs from the alcohol buzzing through my veins.

I didn’t want him to leave. It’s as if he popped the bubble I was safely in. Now, I’m back in the real world. My eyes burn, and my heart twists.

I hope the water pouring from my hair will disguise the tears in my eyes. But one look at Kane wrapping me in the large fluffy towel, and I know he sees me falling apart.

“I can’t talk to you,” I say, holding back my leashed anguish.

“I know, honey.”

But he guides me to bed, helps me into my nightgown, tucks me under the blankets, and keeps one hand on my back while I silently cry myself to sleep.

5. The Key to Breaking

BURNING PAIN EXPLODES THROUGH THE muscles in my legs, shooting into my lower back.

“They’re not human,” Niles pants next to me, nodding his head to Dessin and Warrose leading our run this morning. It seemed with sleep, Kane went back into the inner world by the time I woke, leaving Dessin to take his place.

We’re following the Emerald Lake River that cuts around the city to Hangman’s Valley—the forest of beasts. The barrier between DaiSzek and us. The woods littered with traps to capture or kill. Dessin wanted to scope it out in person.

“They’re figments of our imagination,” Ruth shouts from behind us. “Like we didn’t escape the asylum.”

“Like we’re in one of Skylenna’s wet dreams.” Niles nods to himself.

It is a sight. Warrose has his shirt off, tattoo markings glistening in sweat and the golden morning sun. Dessin sweats through his black-and-gray soldier’s attire. He refused to wear Demechnef colors of maroon and gold.

And looking at his back, muscles flexing under his clothes, shoulder blades moving in and out as he runs, I remember the burns on his back, stretched under his shirt. The beautiful, devastating pattern and proof that he’s looked after me on so many different occasions. It makes my heart stop and start, flipping happily in my chest. I bury the feeling immediately, drowning it out with the sting turning into a gruesome infection under my breastbone.

The wound of his lies.

Niles glances back at Ruth, who is falling farther and farther behind.

“Did you eat something this morning, Ruthie?” Niles asks.

“Of course I did; Warrose practically spoon-fed me.” She huffs in frustration. “But my legs are so much shorter than all of you. It’s hard to keep up. I have to work twice as hard!”

I look back to Warrose and Dessin. “Can we take a break?”

“No,” they bark back in unison.

“You know... you could always start moaning loudly to get Dessin to stop.” Niles continues running with a smile on his handsome lips.

“What?”

“Moan. Seduce him, and he’ll stop to ravage you behind a tree or something.”

We stop hearing Ruth’s struggling footsteps behind us, so we look back, catching her resting at the side of the river, legs dangling in the rushing water.

I want to laugh. She’s such a slacker; honestly, it’s a refreshing contrast to Warrose, who has probably never slacked in his life.

Niles and I stop at the same time, turning to go back for her with suppressed smiles.

“It’s kind of cute how she’s not afraid to piss them off, huh?” Niles asks.

“Yes, actually.” Very cute. She’s leaned back on her hands, kicking her small feet in the water, basking in the sun like she’s on vacation.

“Having a nice spa day, Ruthie?” Niles sits next to her, glancing over his shoulder at Dessin and Warrose moving farther away in the distance.

“There’s a chance you have bigger balls than me.”

I laugh. “We need to keep moving. They’re going to be pissed.”

“Fine by me. I’ll wait right here until they circle back.” Ruth lets her head fall back. “It’s kind of nice not having to worry about the sun freckling or aging my skin anymore.”

We’re not exactly being displayed like perfect little dolls in the city. We’re hidden away, which gives us more freedom.

I nod. I missed the sun on my skin. When I was little, I’d crave the warmth of the sun every day. Every time I was locked in that dark, cold basement, I’d pray for my next moment in the warm breeze, waiting for my next chance to absorb those golden rays.

I drop down next to Ruth, rolling up my pants to let my legs sink into the splashing river water. The cold is shocking, making goose bumps prickle over my entire body. But it’s revitalizing, soothing my hot, sweaty skin, slowing my heart rate and rapid breathing.

Niles and I sigh at the same time.

“Skylenna had wild aquatic sex last night,” Niles comments.

“Niles!” I scold. “We were just talking!”

“In the bathtub. The walls are paper thin.”

“Did you really? I thought you were pissed at him.” Ruth sits up straighter, twisting her neck to look at me.

“I’m pissed at Dessin and Kane.” *And we didn’t do anything.*

They’re silent for a long moment before it clicks.

“Jesus Christ! You’re kidding me. You get to have sex with different people in the same body?” Niles lets out a low whistle. “You have to give us every detail. Do they have different styles? Like different positions? Don’t leave anything out!”

“Maybe another time,” Dessin’s brooding, deep voice booms behind us.

I don’t have to look back to know they’re both standing behind us. My eyes squeeze close in embarrassment.

Niles nods to himself. “I just forgot... I have to go drown myself in this river now.”

Ruth swats at his arm, snickering at his quick wit.

“Am I interrupting, my queen?” Warrose kneels down behind Ruth, so close I’m sure she can feel his breath on the back of her neck. His raspy voice is calm, but that edgy masculine face and those piercing hazel eyes hold back a wicked temper.

“Yes, actually, you are.” She turns to give him an annoyed sidelong glance. “Run along, Warman; I’ll catch up with you later.”

I bite my lip. How did I not know Ruth was this brave?

“Get your entitled ass up before I throw you over my shoulder again.”

“Bite me, chicken coward.” She hops from her seated position into the river, holding on to a rock to keep from floating downstream.

I gasp. “Ruth!”

“Oh hell no,” Warrose snarls. “Get out!”

Niles and I look at each other with slow grins spreading over our faces. We jump in next to Ruth. The ice-cold water splintering up my spine, waking up my nervous system. I dip my head back, wetting my hair with a beaming grin.

We hold on to boulders to keep from drifting away, looking up at Dessin and Warrose, who wear mirrored expressions of shock and displeasure.

“I won’t ask again, your highness.” Warrose stretches his arm out to Ruth, gritting his teeth.

“Give her a break,” Niles barks. “None of us are accustomed to this type of physical activity.”

But Ruth sighs, shaking her head. “Fine. You’re so dramatic.” She reaches up to Warrose’s hand, gripping it with water dripping from their linked arms. She lets him pull her up three inches, then bucks her hips, using her feet against the edge to yank him downward.

Warrose goes flying. A meteor crashing into the body of water.

Ruth tips her head back in laughter as Warrose bobs to the surface, throwing his hair back out of his face, spraying water over us.

He tries to look angry, furrows his brow, flexes his jaw. But then he looks at Ruth, wheezing from her amusement of his fall, and smiles. “Goddammit.”

“Sorry, but you needed a bath!” Ruth snickers.

“Pain. In. My. Ass.” Warrose shakes his head, still unable to wipe the smile from his face.

After a moment, we look back to Dessin, standing in the same spot with his arms crossed. I notice the painful shadows under his eyes, how unbearably tired he looks, the lack of color in his cheeks.

Despite the fact that I still haven’t forgiven him or let go of the fury still crippling my thoughts... he needs to live. Needs to forget about his responsibilities for a moment.

“Come on, Dessin!” Niles waves a wet hand toward him.

Dessin glares in his direction. A dark flash of impatience.

“I mean, *sir*....” Niles corrects himself.

I smirk, debating on whether I should do this or if it’ll even work like Niles said. One last glance at his silent-suffering expression, and I decide.

Letting my head fall back to the trickling water, I let out a soft, satisfied moan that dances across the water. Just like Niles suggested I do before.

And in the corner of my half-closed eyes, Dessin tugs his shirt over his head and jumps in. The waves splash in a cool mist over us. Ruth cheers that she got everyone to stop running and go swimming instead.

“I might be a genius,” Niles mutters under his breath, impressed that his own advice worked.

And that’s when the splashing starts. Niles, Ruth, and Warrose break out into a war of bickering about who would die first if they had to swim against the current while continuing to splash each other in the face.

Dessin places one arm over a boulder, keeping himself in place as the water brushes past him. He turns his back to me, and I see it. The intricate pattern of burn marks from a collapsed ceiling. The way it was melted and healed, morphed a shade darker than his tan skin tone.

I float closer to him, reaching my hand out to his back, grazing the tips of my fingers over the raised skin. I sigh. He got these because of me. I’m not bothered at all by the appearance or feel of it under my hand, but I am frozen, numb, and unable to decide how I feel about this.

He got these scars from saving me. From trying to save Scarlett. He's put his life at risk so many times, walked through fire, fought off an army of beasts, carried my broken body to an infirmary for miles.

Why would he do all of that just to lie and betray my trust?

Dessin lets his head fall, reacting to my featherlight touch on his back. I know he's tired. When I fall asleep at night, he tosses and turns, gets up, walks around. Whatever weighs on his shoulders is killing him slowly. And that's suffocating to think about. A man so powerful, so genius, so magnificent is being brought down by what he knows.

"Does it hurt?" I ask.

"Not anymore."

I wince, realizing he was a patient in the asylum when Scarlett died that day. He had to return to the asylum with third-degree burns. He had to suffer through his treatments without being cared for. My heart cracks right down the middle.

"I'm sorry you were only there because of me..."

He sighs, still not looking back at me. "I'd do it a thousand more times."

"Why?"

Stupid question. But is it? After everything I've learned. Why would he put himself through all of this for me?

"Because... I'd never let you burn alone."



"WELL DONE, IDIOTS. NOW WE have to run the rest of the way in solid water weight," Warrose shouts back at us, his footsteps making loud squishing sounds in his boots.

Ruth laughs, keeping up right behind Niles and me.

We're only a few yards away from hitting the forest line of Hangman's Valley. The sky is cloudless and sunny, the wind is gentle, and the air smells of lavender and honeysuckle.

"Why do you suppose Rydran helped me?" Niles asks.

"Who?"

"The merman."

"Oh. He's not a merman."

"Yes, he is."

"I saw him on land—*walking*—twice," I say.

“That information means nothing to me.”

I laugh.

“I don’t know. They have weird prophecies. Maybe it was predicted that you’d need help one day.” I shrug.

Dessin and Warrose stop running, staring at something blocking their path at the edge of the forest. I jog up behind them to get a better look, but Dessin’s tan arm shoots backward to capture my arm, keeping me at a safe distance behind him.

There are two men dressed in heavy charcoal-gray robes. Middle age, light-brown skin, and black hair braided in thick rows.

“Skylenna?” one man calls out. “Is it Skylenna?” he seems to be asking the man to his left.

“My friend here is without sight. But we’ve come to speak to you both.” The younger one nods his head to Dessin, eyes looking back and forth between the two of us.

Dessin’s arm tenses. “Who are you?”

“The Druidalas Kin. From Shaman’s Land.”

I recognize the name. It’s from one of the seven forests on the map.

“Okay.” Dessin shifts on his feet. “What do you want?”

The younger man steps forward, holding the arm of the blind one. “You never came to visit us. We heard you saw the Nightamous Horde and the Stormsages.”

“We’ve been a little busy,” Dessin says coldly.

“We understand. That’s why we’ve come for you, tracked you several weeks. To tell you something that will help with your journey.” The blind man takes a quivering step forward, and the closer he is, the better I can see his cloudy white eyes. “You’ll know she’s ready when the first blood is drawn for the one that was born of slaughter.”

We blink at him, silent, waiting for more. But that’s it. That’s what he came this far to tell us. “What?” I blurt out.

Dessin remains silent, working something out in his head. Putting those words together like a puzzle. “I see.” He nods, letting go of my arm. “Is that all?”

The old man nods his head. “Prophecy says, when the war begins, we will ride with you. Remember that.”

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6. The First Blood

MY HAND HOVERS OVER THE DOOR, rethinking if I should wait until I'm in a better headspace.

But it opens before I can decide. Niles widens his eyes, looking me up and down.

"What're you doing here?" he asks.

I don't answer. My hand falls back to my side.

"Want to go with me to sneak food and hang out with Ruthie?"

I shake my head. "No. I was hoping to talk to Chekiss."

Niles opens the door wider. "Oh, come in." He moves aside so I can enter. "What're we talking about?"

"Alone, Niles."

"But—"

"Out, you little pest," Chekiss says from the corner of the room, sifting through a spread of books.

Niles rolls his eyes. "Gladly."

And we're alone. The room crackles and sparks from the roaring fireplace, filling my nose with the scent of burning wood and rosemary.

Chekiss looks up at me from under a new set of bifocals. "Come here, child."

My chest rises and falls with each step toward his upholstered chair. Anxiety clutching at my throat. I haven't had a chance alone with Chekiss in a while, and I need this. He's the closest thing I've felt to a father in so long. The need to seek out his comfort has been an endless weight on my shoulders.

I stand in front of his chair, holding myself together.

He looks up at me, closing his book and setting it among the rest. His cheeks are sprinkled with raised freckles, his moss-green eyes look more awake and alive than I have ever seen them, and his brown skin radiates in the orange glow of the fire.

I missed him so much.

"Chekiss?"

He waves his hand for me to kneel at his side. I drop down beside him, reaching my hands out for him to hold.

"Talk to me," he says, voice as scratchy and rough as ever.

I let out a weak sigh. "I'm having a hard time."

“With finding out who Aurick is?”

I nod. “And the fact that Dessin and Kane have been lying to me about it.”

“Ah,” he says quietly, thinking on it. “Did they tell you why they had to keep it a secret?”

I shake my head.

“Does he normally have good reasoning for what he does?”

“Yes. But I can’t think of any reasonable explanation for that. Aurick assaulted me when I lived with him. He *hit* me and Dessin knew.” I look into Chekiss’s surprised eyes, and my voice breaks. “He knew.”

I drop my face to rest on Chekiss’s lap, holding in my need to scream or throw something. And it’s a feeling I might never be able to replace. He just runs a hand through my hair, shushing me, telling me it’ll be okay, it’ll always be okay.

How could a man that was brutally tortured for so many years of his life be this kind? This understanding? This compassionate?

“I don’t know what to do,” I tell him.

“Why don’t you talk to him?”

“Dessin will never tell me the truth until it’s the right time in his grand plan.”

Chekiss sighs. “I wish I had better advice, my child. If only we could be a fly on the wall to learn what Dessin and Aurick know.”

My shoulders tense with a new idea tightening my muscles. If Dessin won’t tell me what I need to know, then I guess he’s not the man I need to talk to.

I close my eyes, not wanting to leave the comfort of Chekiss’s warmth and calming presence. This is exactly what I needed. To be held by someone who unconditionally loves me.

“Maybe I will talk to him.” Only, it’s not Dessin I’ll have another conversation with.

It’s Aurick.



SURPRISINGLY, AURICK’S DOOR ISN’T LOCKED. It’s the large oak one at the end of the hall. I suppose he stays here when he isn’t manipulating young

women into staying in his lavish estate.

I open it, not caring if I walk in on him while he's indecent. Not caring if he'll be angry I'm invading his space. And the worst part is, this act of seeing him in his bedroom is familiar. Normal for me. I hate it.

Aurick is standing in front of his fire, staring blankly. Hands in his pockets. Wearing night pants and no shirt.

I slam the door shut.

He flinches, turning to face me like he's about to scold a soldier for forgetting to knock, until realization spreads over his sharp features. His mouth closes.

"Aurick," I greet him with cold venom coating my tongue.

He dips his head. "Skylenna."

I walk over to his couch, my bare feet sinking into the soft carpet. With one last glance in his direction, I lower myself, nodding to the space next to me.

"You owe me answers." Despite how breakable I feel, my voice sounds strong, fierce, nearly destructive.

"Without Dessin," he clarifies, dropping down to the leather couch.

"You wanted me to answer without Dessin in the room."

I shrug. "He's been just as secretive and duplicitous as you."

Aurick's expression changes, a flash of guilt, a brief furrowed brow, darkened gaze. But it vanishes, replaced with cool indifference. He scratches his head. "Yeah. I can't figure that out either. I know why *I* lied. I know why I needed to betray your trust. But I still can't figure out why he didn't tell you who I was. I was so sure once he learned of my association with you, my cover would be blown."

I blink at him, studying his body language, searching for any signs of deception. But he seems genuine. I know I can't trust anything he says, but he has a point. Why wouldn't Dessin blow his cover? How could this have been part of his plan?

"I'm not here to talk about him," I grit.

"No?"

"No. I need you to tell me everything. Why did you use me? Why did you lure me in? Why did you—*hit* me?"

Aurick cringes at the last part. "I think it's rather self-explanatory," he says casually. "I needed someone to spy on him for me. Dessin found a loophole in the system."

I shake my head. “But why me?”

“We learned that Dessin saved you from—an accident—when he was nineteen. He had a few escapes when he was growing up that evaded my father’s attention. But this one he caught.”

They found out I was his weakness.

“My father wasn’t sure if it was a random coincidence that he saved you. But when he pulled you out of that burning house, it was confirmed.”

I cross my arms. “So, your father was the one running operations? He was the one experimenting on Dessin?”

Aurick shifts in his seat uncomfortably. “Yes. The project was passed down to me when he died a few months ago.”

A few months? “After he learned of Dessin saving me from the fire?”

He nods. “Mm-Hmm. I have wondered if he was the one that offed my father. I can’t say I’d blame him, Vlademur Demechnef ruined his life. Killed his family. Tortured him for years. But he was terminally ill for years. I don’t think that’s Dessin’s style.”

“So you just recently inherited”—I wave my hands around the room—“all of this?”

“Yes.”

I don’t know if that makes me feel better or worse.

“And you really didn’t know that Masten was a Vexamen spy?”

He scoffs, rolling his neck. “I’m ashamed to say I had no idea.”

“Then that part wasn’t a lie. Your fiancé really did die. And—did your father really hurt her?” I know it’s probably rude to ask. But he used me like a pawn on his war board. I can ask whatever the hell I want.

“Yes.” He stiffens, looking at the fireplace with hollow fixation.

“And you thought if I was Dessin’s weakness then you could use me to lure him out.”

He nods his head slowly, lids drooping, like he’d rather talk about anything else.

“But why? You don’t exactly sound fond of your father or of his methods. Why continue his work?”

Aurick’s fingers dig into the leather arm of the couch. “I wasn’t going to. My fiancé was the heir of the Blackforth line. Remember when I told you about the founders? Orin Blackforth and Abraham Demechnef? We were supposed to inherit this together. We wanted to stop the experimentations.” He takes a steadying breath. “But—before we could

wed, someone blew her up. We had a secret getaway, a cottage in the Bear Traps. And I knew it was Vexamen. I just didn't know he was living under my roof." A mask of trembling rage fills his expression. "We can't find him anywhere. Maybe he was tipped off that his cover was going to be blown and fled."

"And it made you want to create the perfect soldier to end the war. Out of vengeance."

"That's right."

"You wanted to keep ruining lives because yours was ruined."

"Is there a question in there?" he bites.

"Why does there even have to be a war? Why can't you let this go and make an effort for a peace treaty with Vexamen?" I ask.

Aurick turns to me with wide, hateful blue eyes. "*Peace?* Could you let this go if you lost the love of your life? Your soul mate?" His eyes are an avalanche, burying me in his grief. "Besides, do you even know what's going on over there? Have you heard of the meat carnivals? What about how they rip babies from their mother's breasts? Raise them to never know empathy, make them take their parents as pets to break them. They are literally breeding children to be the deadliest army in the world. The Vexamen Breed."

I gulp. No, I didn't know that. I only just learned about the meat carnival.

"I only have to ruin *one* life. The most skilled, genius warrior in the world who can end the war by outsmarting any army, any government, and world leader. I'll do it. To save the lives of thousands of children. To end the meat carnivals. To avenge my soul mate."

I think about this. In a twisted way, I can see how this logic makes sense to him.

"But why him? Why out of all the people in this country did it have to be *him?*"

Aurick blinks at me in disbelief. "He hasn't told you that either? Really?"

I ball my hands into fists. Shake my head.

"*Huh.*" He eyes me suspiciously, like there's no way I can't already know this. "Well, it has to do with his birth. That's all I can really say about it."

"Of course it is." Why would he tell me anything that Dessin won't?

He's quiet for a moment, thinking about something that makes him rub his eyes with his left hand. "Skylenna?"

I look to him warily.

"What does Vexamen have that's so important to Dessin?"

"If he won't tell you, then you know I can't."

"Whatever it is, I can't use it against him. In exchange for Masten's name and evidence that he was a traitor, I can't do anything to him that he would consider a breach of the treaty."

I sigh. Why should I give Dessin the respect of keeping his secrets now?

"If I tell you, will you answer one last question with complete honesty?" I ask.

He narrows his eyes into small slits. "Depends on the question."

"Was it ever real for you? Our friendship? Did you—did you ever feel remorse for tricking me? For attacking me?"

He holds my gaze for a long moment, a little caught off guard that I asked. One hand runs through his slick black hair. "Despite my efforts to remain indifferent and keep myself from getting attached, it was real for me. And I'll never forgive myself for striking you. I apologize, I do. But I know I don't deserve your forgiveness either... not that you'd ever give it." He leans forward, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Red would never forgive me for that man I've become in her absence."

I take a few deep breaths, remembering the shooting pain of his knuckles blasting across my cheek. The terror I felt watching him lose control.

"DaiSzek," I say quietly. "We are close with the last RottWeilen in existence. And they took him. That's who we're trying to get back."

I rise from my seat, exiting the room with both a little relief and guilt that I shared one of Dessin's weaknesses with the leader of Demechnef.



I THINK DESSIN IS ASLEEP when I crawl into bed next to him.

I'm twisted in a painful knot of guilt for telling Aurick this secret, and anger because apparently Aurick was surprised about the details Dessin still has yet to share with me.

As I slip under the blankets, my cold toes touch his warm leg, and he shifts, rolling onto his side.

“Skylenna.” A tenderness to his tone, a sweet husky whisper that I know must belong to Kane. I tuck myself under the blankets, pretending like I didn’t hear him.

“You don’t have to talk or even acknowledge me, but there’s something I have to say. I hope you’ll listen.”

I swallow, closing my eyes, wishing I could will myself to fall into a deep sleep. I don’t want to hear anything he has to say.

“We’re going to rescue DaiSzek tomorrow. But before we do, I needed to tell you that”—he takes a breath—“we have no intention of ever answering your questions, telling you how we know what we know, or filling in the blank spaces of your memory.”

My eyes shoot open. *Is he joking?*

“We want you to figure it out yourself. I know you don’t know how to do that right now, but I promise you will. You’ll learn how we met, the history we share, the reason we did all of this. And when you do, please know how sorry I am. I didn’t want to plan it this way. I didn’t want to keep you in the dark. It wasn’t my choice.”

He sighs, running his fingers through my hair. My heart dips at his touch, and I shut my eyes, not wanting to like it.

“But I’m the one who will live with that choice until my last breath.”

Kane leans over me, then places a long kiss against my temple. My nose is reluctantly filled with his sweet scent of cedar. I want to lean into him, turn my face and bury it in his warm, solid chest.

“You have to go back and figure it out yourself,” he whispers in my ear. “You have to be brave. And please, *please*... remember me.”



WE EAT BREAKFAST IN SILENCE. Six of us dressed in tight, yet breathable hiking attire. Forest-green fabric to blend in. Ruth and I have matching ponytails, pulled high and tight on top of our heads.

We exchange glances between bites, silently acknowledging the building tension.

I just need to get DaiSzek back. Then, maybe, I can figure out how to move forward with Kane and Dessin. But I can’t sift through my feelings, can’t offer any solutions on how to heal or understand what’s happening.

All that matters is saving DaiSzek, keeping him away from the meat carnivals.

“Chekiss is staying here,” Dessin announces, looking down at his food. “The rest of us will move out with a unit of twenty-five men in an hour.”

I look back at Chekiss, who is holding a hand up to me, stopping my words before I let them out. “It’s okay. I’ll only slow you down.”

“Only twenty-five men? Shouldn’t we bring an entire army?” Niles drops his fork with a loud *clank*.

Dessin shakes his head. “No. We need to sneak up on them without setting off any of their traps. I can’t do that with an entire army at my back.”

It makes sense. He works best alone.

“You’re actually letting me and Niles come with?” Ruth asks skeptically.

It is odd. We’ve only just started training. And the only reason he’s letting me come along is because I’m not giving him another option. But why Niles and Ruth?

Dessin is quiet for a moment. “Consider this another form of training. You’ll stay out of the way and do exactly what Warrose or I tell you. No going rogue,”—he shoots me a glare—“or improvising. You’re there to watch. To witness how special operations are done. That’s all.”

He did say he wanted them to be a part of this. He won’t always be here to protect us. I can understand the weight he carries for that. At least this way he’s preparing us the best way he knows how.

The group nods in agreement. But Warrose remains quiet, moving his food around with his fork. Before I can ask him if he’s okay, the dining hall door opens, scraping against the hardwood floors.

Aurick and three of his personal guards walk in. The chatter in the room goes quiet, tapering out to hushed conversation and whispers.

Dessin doesn’t even look up from his meal as they approach us.

“The unit is ready whenever you are.” Aurick nods to Dessin.

But Dessin does not look up. Does not acknowledge his existence.

Aurick clears his throat, running a hand over his black suit. “I hope you’ll remember this when I need something from you.”

Still, no answer. My stomach twists at the blatant awkwardness piling in the center of our group.

“That I was willing to send twenty-five of my best men, risk starting an early open fire with Vexamen—all for a fucking *dog*.”

My heart falls through my stomach, dropping to my feet with a painful thud. The table gasps, stiffens, and worse—Dessin finally raises his head, not to look at Aurick, but to stare at me in utter disbelief.

He must have known I went to Aurick’s room last night. But he never would have guessed that I would tell him this. And the guilt is so pathetically written all over my face.

I drop my hands into my lap, wringing out a dry napkin. I could kill Aurick right here, right now, for doing this to me. But then again, I never told him not to mention it.

Dessin’s dark, cloudy eyes slide to Aurick. “I’ll let you know when we’re ready.”

My palms are sweaty, my chest tingling with burning embarrassment and remorse. It doesn’t matter that Dessin and I are in a rough spot right now. It doesn’t matter that I’m mad at him. He’s done so much to protect and keep us safe. And I gave Aurick his final weakness on a silver platter.

I put DaiSzek’s life at risk.

I’m ashamed and gutted. How could I be so thoughtless? What have I done? It wasn’t until I saw the look on Dessin’s face, the shock and disbelief, that I realized the weight of my action.

I betrayed him right back.

“Wait.” The man behind Aurick steps forward, an offended expression warming his freckled cheeks. “We’re doing all of this for a pet?”

I bristle at the word.

“He’s not a pet,” Dessin says in calm indignation.

“What?” The man laughs, looking around the room like he’s shocked no one else is outraged. “You just thought because you’re an asset to Demechnef, you can command an entire army to save a furry friend? That’s fucking asinine!”

Dessin clenches his silverware in one hand, and I know that he’s trying not to let his temper get the best of him.

But I am. The fury I’ve felt the last few days is boiling under my skin, capturing my heart in a choke hold. I can barely breathe.

I turn in my seat. “That’s enough.”

The redheaded man with a face full of freckles grins at me. “Oh,” he says in amusement. “A woman’s calling the shots now? Is that why we’re

risking our lives? Because she heard about the meat carnivals?”

“*Dex*,” Aurick warns, glancing over at Dessin to see if he’s about to lose it.

Dessin’s chest rises and falls, as if he’s debating on whether or not killing this man is worth it. As if he has so much on his mind he doesn’t know if he should waste his energy.

But the phrase meat carnival digs under my skin, sizzles like acid has been injected into my blood. “Yes,” I tell him through gritted teeth. “I did hear about the meat carnivals.”

Dex raises his light-red eyebrows in mocking surprise.

“Is that right? Did you hear about the way they string them up like puppets on a stage?”

Every muscle in my body hardens, shaking with a foreign wrath. I’m not seeing my peripherals anymore. They’re clouded from angry tears gathering like a flash flood. My nails dig into the side of the dining table as I stand, holding myself up.

I can sense the storm brewing behind me. Sense that Dessin is two seconds from becoming a plague on this room, wiping everyone away with his hatred and uncontrollable temper.

“We hear they do unspeakable things while the audience cheers.”

“I’m warning you.” A growl. Not a calm request. But a shaking, garbled threat. My voice unstable under the painful fire of my boiling vexation.

Dex laughs, but the man next to him snaps. “Stand down, man.”

“If you think for a goddamned second I’m going to listen to a stupid woman and save some wild beast that’ll be skinned alive—”

Dessin stands. But I explode.

My hand snatches my steak knife, and my arm moves in a blur, a thrust of agonizing hatred. Before I can process my own actions, I scream, lurching forward like a mountain cat.

And it’s too unexpected for anyone to stop me, to block my advance. I’m a hissing, shrieking, unhinged banshee of a woman.

And my knife goes straight into his jugular.

The skin makes a wet ripping sound, followed by a crimson gush of hot, steaming blood. Tears spring from my eyes like a fountain, drenching my cheeks, chin, and neck. And I don’t stop, not for a second to assess the damage. All I can see is DaiSzek strung up like a puppet, skinned alive, beaten, tortured, whimpering like a puppy as people laugh. I see red.

Images of seeing Aurick, of Dessin's face as I put the pieces together. It all erupts out of me like my body has been aching to set it free.

To unleash my villain.

Become my monster.

The knife is plunged into his neck several more times before someone pulls me off of the man. A pair of iron arms wrap around my waist, hauling me to the floor.

Through my tears, I expect to see Dessin. But Warrose pins me under his weight, staring down at me with bloodshot hazel eyes, disturbed, shocked, jaw-dropping panic. His big hands cut off the circulation of my arms, and even though his dark hair hangs around us, I see the smeared blood over his neck and chest from where he grabbed me.

My hand unclenches from around the knife.

A breeze in the room wafts over me as people rush to Dex's side. There's blood all over me. I can feel it sprinkled over my face, on my hair, in my *mouth*.

Holy shit.

"Get him to the infirmary, now!" Aurick barks at the group of men.

Warrose shifts over me, and I become aware that I'm shaking violently, like a catastrophic earthquake, like a bomb that ripped through the world's core.

"Stay down," he says quietly.

I couldn't move even if I wanted to. The adrenaline is passing, leaving me in a state of paralyzation. I'm numb, hollow, and worst of all... I'm not remorseful.

It takes me a moment to realize I don't hear Dessin. I would have thought he would be the one to pull me off of the man. My eyes dart around without moving my head. Men carry Dex on their shoulders, rushing him to get medical attention, but when I look to my left, Dessin stands over me, lips parted, eyes unblinking like a stunned warrior angel.

7. Hangman's Valley

RUTH AND NILES WALK ME steadily to my room.

They don't ask me why I did it, don't look at me in disgust as someone else's blood drizzles down my chest. They keep their eyes forward, guiding me into the washroom as Chekiss closes the door behind us.

"Arms up," Ruth says calmly. I do as she says, slowly, awkwardly. Niles and Chekiss turn away as she undresses me.

The faucet turns on, and Ruth tries to get me to move, to lift my leg and step in the tub. But I don't know what happened. I'm trying to process how I got from point A to point B, but everything moved so fast. *I* moved so fast. My blood rushed to my head, my hands began swinging, and before I knew it, I was stabbing someone.

"I've got her," Niles tells Ruth, scooping my naked body up in his arms and placing me in the bathtub. I'm shivering, crossing my arms over my chest as Ruth pours water over my head, using a yellow sponge to lather in soap.

Niles and Chekiss face the door but don't leave the room.

"What's going to happen to me?" The words definitely come from my mouth, but I don't recognize my voice. It's like a ghost.

Ruth dumps a pitcher of water over my head before she starts scrubbing. I close my eyes.

"Nothing, child. It wasn't your fault," Chekiss says somberly.

"Did I kill him?"

Ruth cleans my face. "I'm sure he's fine."

But as I open my eyes, I watch the tub fill with pink water. Runny blood streaming down my breasts. I shake my head. "I think I killed him."

"The bastard deserved it." Niles crosses his arms, and Chekiss shoots him a disapproving look.

My body is numb even though I'm surrounded by warm water. I wiggle my toes, clench my hands into fists, and try to remember how it all happened. What exactly made me snap?

"I don't know what's happening." My thoughts. But that voice is so distant, so detached.

Chekiss turns around and kneels to my side, careful not to look at my body.

“You’ll stay here with me while they save DaiSzek, okay? You’ll rest and I’ll watch over you.” His calm, fatherly words make me want to cry. “We can talk about it when you feel a little better.”

“She’s coming with us.” A dark, masculine voice rolls over the washroom with unquestionable dominance.

I look over Chekiss’s shoulder to see Dessin has opened the door and is standing face-to-face with Niles.

Niles looks over his shoulder at us with a raised eyebrow. “I was too scared to tell him to leave.”

Chekiss works his jaw. “She’s not in the right mind to do this.”

“She can handle anything I can handle,” Dessin tells him. He sounds so tired, so overcome. “How quickly can you have her dressed?” he asks Ruth.

But Ruth looks like she’d rather not answer. Her big brown eyes flick to me, a question of what to do.

I nod. “*I’m okay*,” I mouth.

She sighs, looking back to Dessin. “Ten minutes.”

The only sounds are the faucet dripping. A long, stressful moment of silence.

“Let’s give them privacy, please.”

Please? Dessin doesn’t say please. What is going on with him? What’s going on with *me*?

Chekiss squeezes my hand once, and Niles steps into my line of sight. “We’ll be just outside if you need us.”

Ruth helps me out when everyone files out of the room. She wraps me in a towel, pats me down until I’m mostly dry, and rushes to the dresser to find me similar hiking clothes.

“We’ll be with you the whole time you’re out there, okay?” Ruth fastens my brassiere, pulling a tight cotton tunic over my head. “You’re not alone. Anytime you need me out there, just hold my hand.”

I nod absently. “Okay.”

My boots go on next, and once I’m dressed, she gets me a glass of water.

“We’ll take it slow, do as we’re told, and be back with DaiSzek before sunset.” She braids my wet hair down my back, giving me a soft pat on the shoulder.

“Ready?”

I sigh. Not really. My stomach is twisting in tight knots, my brain is foggy, and I'm pretty sure I need to vomit. But I say yes anyway.



I MENTALLY CHECK OUT WHILE Dessin gives a presentation of the forest and all of the traps that are laid out to the unit that's accompanying us.

He memorized every single bomb, trench of spikes, swinging blades, and snares they have planned for us. We're supposed to follow his lead. Every footstep exactly.

And he makes everyone wear a satchel covered in dried welven piss, one of the top predators of Hangman's Valley. It'll keep most of the beasts away from us, letting us walk through undetected.

He's thought of everything.

But I hardly paid attention. My mind is buzzing with flashbacks and gory images, and I don't know how to deal with it. My whole life, I've let people walk all over me because I'd rather be hurt than hurt back. It's just my nature. I'm a nurturer. Not a fighter.

As we follow the Emerald Lake River and descend into the forest line of Hangman's Valley, Dessin makes Niles, Ruth, and I stay in the middle of the unit, protected, walking carefully in his footsteps as he and Aurick lead us down a specific path.

I take shallow, uneven breaths. I can't shake the feeling that we're cattle being led to slaughter. We just have to make it to the shoreline, and Dessin will know what to do. If we can just uncage DaiSzek, he'll be able to slaughter the soldiers.

But the doom hangs like a sword over my head.

I think we should go back.

"If the black beast doesn't finally love me after this quest, I'll be *pissed*," Niles whispers to us.

Ruth elbows him, snickering.

The light footsteps of our unit echo through the forest like a muffled drum. The soldiers around us are dressed in their merlot-red wool blazers with bronze tassel linings, despite Dessin warning them to blend in. They cling to their belts of weaponry, eyes darting through the tall collection of rubber and cannonball trees. It doesn't exactly resemble the forests we've traveled through before... but a jungle.

It's colorful, with the massive orange-and-red fruits from the scraggly cannonball trees. There are birds squawking from the branches, pecking at their nests, a humid wind ruffling their multicolored feathers.

The group comes to a stop, waiting for Dessin to give a signal. Two soldiers lower a thick wooden bridge that stretches eight to ten feet.

We've reached the first trap.

Dessin and Aurick cross it first, testing out the durability. They nod once it's determined to be safe. Everyone crosses it, two at a time until we're on the other side of a nearly invisible trap. A deathly trench was dug and disguised with branches, vines, and moss. Ruth sighs as we continue to march forward.

I just want this to be over.

I want to see DaiSzek's large cinnamon eyes again and run my hand over his soft, shiny coat. I want to go back to the time when it was just the three of us, on the run, learning more about each other without the stress of the asylum.

But here we are, climbing over the thorny weeds, wiping sweat from our brows, and waiting to meet the deadliest soldiers of this world.

After fifteen minutes, we stop again, Dessin making a downward signal with his hands. Everyone drops to the dirt, flat, waiting to see what he does next.

Dessin flings a branch the size of his arm forward; it flips and rotates in the air until it hits the ground, making a loud snap. Suddenly, a whip slices through the air, a foot or two above our flattened bodies. The air shrieks at the speed. Low-hanging branches are chopped from their tree trunks, sprinkling to the ground collectively.

Ruth gasps next to me.

It reminds me of what Dessin did the time he saved me from Albatross. He lost the group of motorcycles that were chasing us by triggering the same bladed contraction.

Warrose is behind us, helping Ruth and me to our feet as we continue to move.

"How are you holding up?" he asks me, voice low and secretive.

No one approached me about the incident. They avoided looking at me entirely. Probably in fear that Dessin would lose his temper if he caught anyone gawking.

"I'm fine," I say.

Warrose releases a breath. "I'm sure you are." He clears his throat. "I just—I wanted you to know... Dessin and Kane—they're my brothers. That makes you family too."

I refuse to look at him, at those serious seafoam eyes.

"Which means... I'll always be here for you. No matter what." *Even after you murder someone, have a breakdown, and lose your sanity.* But he's too polite to tack those on.

I swallow, feeling my heart fumble at his sentiment.

Family.

We follow in a precise line around a few puddles of water. Dessin tosses a pebble into the one closest to him, the size of a watermelon. There's a sharp hissing sound as the puddle boils, a yellow smoke rising from the dissolving rock.

Jesus.

They were hoping our unit would walk through it, burning off our feet. Crippling us before we could even reach them. My stomach flips. What if he didn't catch all of their traps? What if he misses a single one that kills us all?

But it's Dessin, I remind myself. Ten. Steps. Ahead.

We continue on for miles, dodging hundreds of carefully hidden snares, pitfalls, and land mines. At one point, Dessin throws a small knife, aiming it in the center of a bush. It lands with a wet, cracking sound. A Vexamen spy watching us.

The winds carry subtle noises of animals growling, howling, or squawking. But nothing approaches. The satchel seems to do its job for all of us.

The men grow wary as we close the last few yards to the shoreline. Their hands swipe at the sweat flowing down the sides of their faces.

White noise. Crashing, rushing, splashing sounds. A rough breeze carrying the aroma of salt, murky water, and fish.

Warrose leans into Ruth and me. "That's the sound of the ocean."

Wow. It's so loud.

"I've never seen the ocean," Niles whispers under his breath.

None of us have.

Dessin and Aurick crouch low, reaching the thick tree line that separates us from *them*. We gather around quietly. Warrose, Niles, Ruth, and I squat behind Dessin and Aurick.

The wall of vines and weeds acts as a curtain to keep us hidden, but we can still see through the peepholes. A gray sky, crystal clear water that goes on to the horizon, never ending. I focus on where the sound is coming from. Waves roll on top of each other, crashing onto the sandy shore over and over again. If I wasn't trembling with adrenaline and crippling anxiety, I might smile, laugh, celebrate that I've made it this far.

Dessin points to a ship on the horizon. A large wooden beacon with a black-and-red flag. Then I see what he's actually pointing at. The soldiers scattered across the shore like organized ants. They've prepared for a fight. Weapons hanging from metal racks, shields stacked in the sand, and flaming wooden stakes spiked around an iron cage.

DaiSzek's cage.

They've made a fortress of ten feet tall bonfires around him. Keeping everyone out of his circle. Keeping us away from him, unable to reach our boy without being burned.

"We can attack from their left and right. Not head-on. And someone has to release DaiSzek; he's our best bet at a quick slaughter," Dessin says quietly, only speaking to the five of us.

"I can get him out," I say.

They look at me with wide eyes, like the helpless little doll has finally spoken.

"No." Dessin turns his head to continue watching. Ending the debate before it has even begun.

I point over his shoulder to a bucket by one of the small boats. "If I can fill that bucket with water, I can extinguish one of the fires. I can get it."

Dessin turns to me, eyes surrounded by heavy dark shadows and reddened brown eyes. I blink in surprise. How have I not noticed how drained he looks? How much stress he's taken on because of me?

"Even if you managed to get it, there's a huge brass lock on that cage." He points to it. We all lean in to see the massive chunk of metal hanging in place. "We need a skilled soldier to get there."

That burns. But he's not wrong.

"I'll go with her," Niles offers. "If someone gives me a dagger, I can pick the lock. I had to learn when I was a kid."

I whip my head back to Dessin. "You need every skilled soldier fighting. Let us do this."

Dessin blinks slowly, clearly not comfortable with this.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Aurick hisses under his breath, nudging Dessin to look at the formation of soldiers again.

We all shift in our squatted stances, squinting to see what he’s upset about.

I nearly fall over. Every muscle locks up.

Babies. There’s a boat lined with babies. *Our* babies.

“They’re smuggling them from the city.” Aurick is shaking, his pale face now red with horrified shock and hatred.

They’re taking the babies to raise as one of them. Psychopathic soldiers in the Vexamen Breed. I can’t close my mouth.

“We need three to five men that will get the babies out of here while we fight. They need to bring them out of harm’s way, into the forest.” Dessin works out a plan, mapping it out in his mind.

“If they get them to me, I’ll keep them all together, stay with them until DaiSzek is freed and the fighting is over,” Ruth offers, her featherlight voice contrasting with the masculine grumblings. At least she’ll be out of harm’s way too. And she’s right, someone has to stay with them.

Dessin looks back at her for a few seconds. “Okay, but douse them with your satchel when you get them all together. It’ll keep any stray beasts away.”

She nods quickly.

Dessin sighs, scoping out his battlefield again. “Warrose,” he says without looking back at him. “Stay close to her.”

A bucket of chills is poured down my back. The command in his voice is strong yet pleading.

Me.

I feel Warrose tense, then nod at my side.

Aurick leaves us to pass word to his men. And we sit in silence until Dessin looks around at our group. Only, he blinks a few times, like he’s awakened from a nap. Sleepy, puzzled, and trying to understand his surroundings.

“Can I have a moment with Skylenna?” he asks the group. A soft, warm voice. Kane’s voice.

They nod, falling back to give us some space.

Kane turns to me, dropping down to his knees. Leveling his gaze to meet mine.

“I lied before,” he prompts, low and strained.

“I know.” Ice-cold words like venom from my lips.

“After we kissed under the waterfall. I lied. I told you it didn’t mean anything to me.”

My armor softens, and I lose my breath.

“That was a *lie*, Skylenna.” He swallows, eyes glistening with tears.

“That kiss was my whole world, honey.” His chest is moving rapidly as if he’s in the midst of battle already. And I can see that he needs to get this out. He’s dying to tell me what’s in his heart. “Years ago, I promised you I’d take you under that waterfall when you were old enough and give you our first kiss. I’ve—I’ve waited so long to keep that promise.”

My eyes water. *I* was the person he promised. The night Dessin and I swam in the lagoon, he told me he promised someone he’d wait to go under there. But it was Kane that made the promise.

To me.

How long have we known each other?

“Can you forgive me? For lying to you?” he asks, reaching for my hands.

“I can... for that lie.” I pull my hands away. “But not for the others. Until I learn the truth, I just can’t stomach your betrayal.”

He looks down at the space between our hands, nodding with a sad smile.

“I understand.”

It’s the slow dissociation, deserted, unfocused eyes that tell me he’s gone. Dessin is fronting again. And I’ve never been so gutted, so torn on what I feel.

But I have to be strong. I won’t let him get away with this. Men have always walked all over me, hit me, bruised me, and lied to me.

Dessin looks to Aurick for a nod that they’re ready. Then flicks his gaze back to me, ignoring the fact that there are tears blurring my vision.

“You wait until every man is fighting. Then, you and Niles work fast to free him. Once he’s out, run like hell back to the forest. Wait for me here, understand?”

I sigh. My insides burn and grumble from the anticipation.

“Skylenna, answer me,” he orders.

“Yes. I understand.”

He nods once, and the unit separates. Half of them move to the far left and the other half to the far right, leaving Niles, Ruth, and me alone.

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8. The First of Many

AS OUR TROOPS WAIT FOR the order to attack, I keep my eyes firmly on DaiSzek.

I think he is sleeping at first until his large head rises, cinnamon eyes half-open, and he looks right at me. Those RottWeilen senses are superior to our enemy. He knows we're here. He knows we've come for him.

Niles and Ruth seem to notice it, too, releasing small gasps.

"We're coming for you, buddy," I whisper. "Just hold on."

He doesn't look harmed. And for that, I should be grateful. But instead, I'm terrified—if there's even a chance Niles and I don't succeed in freeing him. We could lose. And DaiSzek will be shipped away.

Anytime you need me out there, just hold my hand. I remember Ruth's words before we left; remember that I'm not alone. I have to believe we can do this.

My hand slips into Ruth's, squeezing gently.

"You can do this," she whispers.

I look over at Niles, who has lost all color in his face, looking just as terrified as I feel.

"Do you have the dagger?" I ask him.

He nods without looking at me. "Warrose gave me one of his." With one hand, he waves it at us.

Good. We can do this. We *will* do this.

But my body doesn't agree. I'm shivering with nerves, every joint, bone, and muscle burning in anxiety. My skin tingles from the furious pumps of adrenaline coasting through me.

The world stills moments before it happens. Disturbing silence on our end. Casual conversations and fire roaring on theirs.

The two halves of our unit move in synchrony, charging from the left and right sides of the Vexamen Breed's camp.

Chaos erupts.

The element of surprise works in our favor. Their soldiers stumble as they realize they're being surrounded, tripping over their equipment to race to their weapons. The salty air is filled with the bizarre sounds of screaming men, clanking metal, and arrows whizzing through the air.

Our men attack with swords of all sizes, and a secondary group hangs back to fire their crossbows at the scrambling breed of deadly warriors.

But the unorganized surprise doesn't last long. They begin forming into fighting lineups with shields, double-bladed swords, and whips that are ignited with fire.

And the collision happens like a natural disaster. An avalanche cascading down a mountain, wiping out every tree and animal in sight. Dessin and Aurick lead each side, and although Aurick isn't half the warrior and assassin Dessin is, he's obviously deadly.

Taking an exploding leap over a cluster of falling men, Aurick swings his sword into a man's rib cage, crunching into his side until blood sprays over the sand. He's quick and well-trained, carefully avoiding their deadly attacks.

Dessin is a marvel to behold. He fights in a fury. A feral dance around their weapons. And it's more effort than I've ever seen him display. He uses his fear of DaiSzek being taken as a weapon, harnessing his aggression and letting it erupt over anyone standing too close. His movements are inhumanly fast, chopping off limbs like their joints are made of butter.

And Warrose is only a few steps behind him, swinging his whip to behead three Vexamen soldiers at one time.

Ruth is squeezing my hand to the point of searing pain.

Suddenly, we see two men running our way, holding a baby in each arm as they lock eyes with Ruth. She perks up, standing with her arms out as they hand her their babies. She stumbles a few feet back, setting them in the grass one at a time, trickling yellow liquid from the satchel over their blankets.

Niles nudges me, jerking his head to the fighting. Every soldier is occupied. This is it. This is our moment to end it all.

I look at him one last time, nodding my head. "Let's go."

We stand at the same time, taking in a deep breath before we take off in a sprint. My nerve endings are on fire with paralyzing fear. Our pace turns sluggish as we try to run quickly in the sand. Each step sinks. And we're out of breath before we're halfway to the bucket, to DaiSzek, who is now standing waiting for us to arrive.

I know he understands what's happening. He sees the battle. He sees us sneaking to reach him. The legend knows what he has to do once we set him free.

My calves burn, and my chest clenches as we get closer to the bucket. Waves rush to greet the tops of our boots, a fine mist blowing in our faces.

Beads of sweat line my forehead, dripping between my breasts.

I've never been so scared to fail in my entire life.

I fall to my knees as I swipe up the metal bucket, racing into the water to scoop up as much as I can carry. Niles holds out his dagger, watching my back while I dig my heels into the wet sand to reach the wall of fire around DaiSzek.

Scarlett, don't let me fail. I pray silently. Help me save him.

I note that all I have to do is extinguish two towers of flaming wooden stakes, side by side. Once the fire is out, Niles can slip between them without getting burned and reach the lock to DaiSzek's cage.

The battle around us sounds ugly and guttural, blades splitting through organs, men yelping as they lose their limbs. But as I'm about to toss the bucket of water, Niles makes a nervous sound, gasping.

I look away from the flames to see a Vexamen soldier charging us. Dressed in all black, he winds back his arm, ready to chop Niles in half.

I almost scream.

But something wraps around the soldier's neck. A thin metal chain. And his head slides clean off, thumping in the wet sand. The body continues to stand for a moment, taking two stumbling steps forward as if it hasn't realized it's lost its head yet. But as it finally drops to its knees, we see Warrose yank his bladed whip back, nodding at us to keep going.

I sigh in relief, turning back to the burning stakes, chucking the bucket of water as hard as I can. I thrust every ounce of strength and adrenaline into my lunge. The airborne water soars toward the source of heat, splashing over it with a loud sizzle.

It hisses before it's replaced with more fire.

My jaw drops and so does my stomach. I look back at Niles, who witnessed it too.

"Shit!" I whisper-yell. *No. No. No.*

"They must have soaked the wood in oil," Niles says with certain doom.

"What the hell do we do?" I jog back to the ocean waves, swiping my bucket through the water once more. *I can do this. I have to do this.* My muscles burn as I toss the water at the stakes again. Nothing.

Niles falls through the sand to help me, scooping handfuls of water and throwing them pathetically at the flames. It's a lost cause, but we don't give up. We heave, pant, and curse as the fire seems to grow angrier. Niles even

resorts to kicking the wooden stake, melting the bottom of his boot in the process.

We turn our heads at the terrifying sound of babies screaming. A man holding two babies in his arms is cut down, a sickle slicing down between the cradled babies, right into his chest. We hear the bones crunch in his breastplate. Our soldier drops to his knees, still holding the babies, as a Vexamen assailant tugs the sickle out roughly, watching the blood spray over his arm.

But right before our soldier falls with the babies in his arms, Dessin swings his sword through the Vexamen man's neck, batting his head off his shoulder and through the air with little effort. I lose my breath as Dessin dives forward, grabbing the babies in his arms before they can hit the sand and get buried under the dead body.

I should help him, take the babies out of his hands, so he can keep fighting.

"Dessin!" I scream, attempting to run to him.

He turns to me, blood splattered over his beautiful face, drenching his clothes from the many lives he's taken. And he looks at me with a question in his eyes.

But time collapses. The world implodes. And his stunning dark-mahogany eyes go wide before they look down at the blade ripping through his chest.

I choke on air.

A soldier from behind Dessin thrusts his sickle through Dessin's back, impaling him, puncturing the space in the center of his chest, just barely missing the babies he's holding. The sound is deafening. A wet rip that echoes through my heart.

"Skylenna!" Niles shouts from behind me. "*We have to get him out!*"

But I'm sprinting mindlessly, watching the soldier yank the bloody sickle from Dessin's back. The blade disappearing back to where it came from. And Dessin never lets go of my gaze, not even after he falls to his knees, still holding on to the crying babies.

"NOOOOO!" My voice blasts through the camp, loud enough to shatter windows and stretch across the open sea. This isn't happening. This isn't happening.

Warrose is faster than I am, bolting with an extended arm as he uses his whip to tear down the soldier that stabbed Dessin.

As I close the distance, I dive through the sand to reach him, devastating sounds of despair peeling from my raw throat.

“Take them,” he tells me, blood leaking from the corners of his mouth. He passes the babies to me, coughing up more dark-crimson liquid.

My mouth drops open as I gawk down at the screaming babies and back to his gushing chest. Footsteps thump behind me, and just as I think Dessin is about to collapse, he thrusts his sword to my right, grazing my hip and cracking into bone behind me. I spin around to see a soldier stumble back until he’s on the ground, bleeding out onto the sand.

“Dessin,” I mutter, shock blazing like a wildfire through my soul. *How did this—how could this happen?*

And that’s when I hear a man’s retching howls louder than I’ve ever experienced. Nothing in the asylum could ever compare to this.

I spin around to see Niles, throwing himself between the stakes, fire shredding his skin in a wicked storm around him. His clothes light up, and he fumbles in agony toward DaiSzek’s cage. With a hard jab, he works the brass lock, letting out a bone-shattering scream. The flames devour his arms and leg. DaiSzek jerks around in his cage, waiting to be set free, waiting for his apocalypse.

And the screaming doesn’t stop. Not as Niles throws the lock to the sand, not as DaiSzek plows through the opening door, and not even while Niles rolls to extinguish the fire in the wet sand.

DaiSzek, like a murderous giant, jumps over the burning stakes, landing in the sand, rumbling the earth around us.

And above the clashing weapons of the grunting men, he releases the roar of a fire-breathing dragon. The horn of death. The call of a god. His gallop to the enemy is quick, long strides to devour their body parts like his own personal feast.

Something tears my focus away, gripping my hands that are supporting the babies.

I look up to see Ruth kneeling between Dessin and me. “Give them to me,” she rasps, eyes filled with tears drizzling down her cheeks. “I’ve got them, Skylenna.”

I swallow, nodding my head as she takes the babies away. Somewhere safe.

Destruction ripples around me as I look back at Dessin, who is struggling to keep himself up. Face drained of his tan complexion, and

blood running over his lips and down his chin. He gulps, eyes still fixated on me.

“Skylenna,” he chokes.

And suddenly, DaiSzek’s stampede is drowned out. The slaughter is muted. I hold my hands out to him, remembering how I tore them away when Kane tried to apologize to me.

“I’m here,” I gasp, letting him fall into my arms.

Oh my god. I grunt as I cushion his full weight, watching more blood spill from the wound in his chest. His head rests in my lap as he struggles to breathe. All I can do is reach my hands to the spurting blood and cover the open hole with trembling pressure.

But I realize my lap is wet too. The puncture in his back pours over my legs. And I can’t stop it from happening. I can’t contain it.

“What do I do?” I shriek at anyone who will listen. “Dessin, what should I do?!”

Warrose kneels beside his brother, reaching for Dessin’s hand.

“Can we fix this?” he asks, voice heavy and strained.

Dessin just stares at him, making harsh gurgling sounds.

Warrose nods with a clenched jaw and misty eyes. “I see.”

What? “No!” I press down on his chest harder. “Someone help us!” I bellow.

From what I can tell, the fighting has stopped. DaiSzek did exactly what Dessin said he would do. He killed them all.

Aurick is standing over us now, inspecting the situation with alarm tightening his expression. “Where is he hurt?”

“He w-was stabbed th-through the chest!” My hands tremble violently over Dessin, wincing at the blood pooling up to my wrists.

Aurick’s jaw drops, and he takes a step back.

“What’re you doing?!” I pant, a lump forming in my throat to the point of pain. “Help him! Save him!”

But Aurick’s throat bobs, and his eyes won’t connect with mine.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? Save him, you bastard! You owe him that much.” My voice is as small and helpless as a child’s cry.

Warrose puts a hand on my shoulder. “He doesn’t have much time left, Sky—”

I jerk him away, gawking like I’ve never seen him before. “This is your *brother*, isn’t it? Why is no one helping him!”

“Baby—” Dessin tries to speak, but his lungs are filling. He coughs, wet and sloshing with blood.

“Tell me what to do,” I say frantically. “Just tell me what to do.”

Dessin groans loudly, tears spilling from the corners of his eyes. Unable to breathe. Unable to speak.

No.

Ruth is suddenly at Aurick’s side, hand over her mouth, fighting to hold in her sobs.

“He’s suffering,” she says through a garbled cry. “I think you need to say goodbye.”

I look down at Dessin, who is slowly suffocating, drowning, fighting a losing battle to breathe. And it hits me. It knocks the air from my lungs. He’s—*dying*. He’s trying to live with a broken body. And no one can help us.

“Dessin—” I whimper, reaching for his hand. “Oh my god.” I begin to cry.

He thrashes in my lap, unable to go easy, still trying to gasp for oxygen.

“It’s okay. It’s okay,” I tell him, locking my fingers with his. “I know you’ve fought your whole life. You were raised a warrior. And that’s all you’ve known.”

Tears flood my eyes, raining down my cheeks like a storm of agony.

“But—I realize asking you to keep fighting would be selfish.” A sob rattles through my body. And even though everyone’s eyes are on me. It’s just the two of us. And every alter I have grown to love too. “And I can’t be selfish because I *love* you.”

I’m in love with you.

Dessin looks up at me with pleading eyes as more blood spills over his chin.

“So, if you’ve fought all you can... then, I want you to let go. Okay?” My sobs become erratic hiccups. “Go home. Wait for me there until it’s my turn, okay? You can go home now. You can be with Sophia and Arthur.”

I’m fighting to hold myself together, but I know he can make it. I know he just needs a push. He needs to know how much I love him. I lean down, kissing him on the forehead.

“I’ll love you until hell freezes over,” I croak. “Go see the stars.”

Dessin blinks, body silencing, tremors slowing to a stop.

And he doesn’t blink again.

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9. “And even then...”

I STARE AT OUR BLOODY hands for a long moment.

Waiting.

Expecting.

I nearly forget about the group of people huddled around us. Watching me with tears glistening in their eyes, breathing shallowly, unsure of what to say next.

But Dessin is always ten steps ahead. This isn't the end of us. He would have anticipated that attack. He would have something up his sleeve.

I have to be patient.

I give his hand a squeeze, but it's limp, slipping from my grasp.

Someone says my name. I shake them off. Breath will fill his lungs again. The color will return to his face. “He'll come back to me,” I say to no one in particular. I believe in him.

Something I've said makes Ruth weep loudly. But I ignore it. She just doesn't understand how his brain works. He'll figure this out. Maybe there's an alter that was split to withstand fatal injuries. Is that possible? It must be.

But several minutes go by. And he's still looking up to the sky. Empty. *Gone*. Tears frozen down the sides of his face.

Warrose touches my shoulder, mumbling something I don't want to hear. I shrug him off, refusing to take my eyes off of Dessin. “We just have to wait!” I tell them.

I see a group of men carrying Niles away on their shoulders.

“Is he okay?” I ask. He's hurt because of me. I left him to free DaiSzek alone because I screamed, distracting Dessin. This is all my fault.

“He's badly burned. We have to get him back to base,” a man says to Aurick.

My fault.

I need Dessin to wake up. Once he breathes again and squeezes my hand back, we can go help Niles. We can leave this cursed beach. We can run away with DaiSzek and go back to our lives traveling through the forest.

“Skylenna,” Ruth whimpers after several more minutes. She's crawling through the sand to my left side. “He's gone. You have to let him go now.” Her cries anger me. How could she have such little faith in him? He saved

her when she was captured. He fought off a small army of beasts three times his size. He endured years of suffering in the asylum and Demechnef training.

“Just give me a goddamn minute!” I hiss at her.

Without letting go of his hand, I lean down to Dessin’s chest, pressing the side of my face against it. His heart will start beating at any moment. But more blood gushes around my ear, spreading over my cheek and into my hair.

Empty.

It’s as if his heart was torn out of his chest.

My fault.

Ruth uses both hands to cover her mouth, and she gasps and sobs. My face against his bloody chest is upsetting her more.

“I’m going to hear his heart beating,” I assure her.

Aurick drops to one knee in front of Dessin’s feet, staring at me with parted lips and round, glossy eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

But his heart still isn’t beating. Why isn’t he breathing again? *It’s been too long!* I think about the hundreds of times I’ve buried my face into his chest. Every moment I’ve heard life inside of him.

And it’s gone.

I lift my face, staring at the group of faces watching me. “He’s not breathing,” I utter, voice breaking into tiny pieces. “I can’t hear his heart beating!”

Pain wraps its strong arms around me, breaking my bones and cutting off my circulation.

“It’s going to be okay.” Aurick’s smooth voice slithers through my pounding head. And I flinch, shooting my gaze to him.

“You did this. You’re the reason he became this man. You need to bring him back!” I scream, eyes burning with fresh tears that want to be set free.

Aurick furrows his brow, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, Skylenna.”

I slam a fist down into the sand, fire coursing through my veins. My head throbs from a migraine, with small scalpels cutting into my brain.

“Bring him back to me!” I scream, hugging Dessin tighter to my body. “I won’t let go!”

“You have to. It’s time.”

“No!” My voice is unrecognizable as I shout like a rabid animal. “No! That’s not enough for me! We hardly had any time!” I kiss his cheeks,

covered in dried blood, over and over again. My tears smearing it across his face. "Please, come back to me," I whisper in his ear, remembering when I brought Kane out of the inner world.

"Let me help you up." Warrose is suddenly behind me, hooking his hands under my arms to pull me away from the man I love.

"Get the fuck off of me!" I swing my elbow into his ribs as hard as I can, gripping Dessin's body like I'm falling, slipping into the void, and he's my only way to survive.

Warrose stumbles back, grunting at my assault.

"His body is still warm!" I shriek. "Oh god," I gasp, looking down at my bloody hands. "Please don't be dead!" I'm hyperventilating, gasping for air, tears streaming down my chest as more keep coming.

Aurick orders the men to pull me away and contain my hysteria, but I'm thrashing against their hands, howling in despair as the realization hits me. Blood pours over my legs. His eyes stare up to the gray sky vacantly.

The hands let me go, dropping me back down to my seated position as something like a black storm cloud slams into them, throwing the men a few feet back. DaiSzek snarls, throwing his body over Dessin. Protecting his family. Growling at anyone who would try and tear me away from him.

And it's the way he guards us, the way he bears down and shields the body soaked in his own blood, the way he howls in despair that has me looking down at the lifeless eyes in my lap again.

Dessin. Kane. Greystone. Aquarus. Foxem. Syfer. Kalidus. Dai.

Dead.

They're all dead.

"I've lost them..." I utter, staring down at him in shock. "I've lost them all!" I bellow, my screams shredding through the forest line, clashing with the angry waves. My cries are loud and heart wrenching, a plague cast to all who can hear me. My devastation infecting every vessel, every organ.

The group stands back as DaiSzek's howls turn into whimpers, like that of a puppy. And I'm not the only one who feels the loss. He looks back at me with large cinnamon eyes, telling me he knows. He senses that their souls are gone.

We've lost them all.



WE SIT THERE FOR WHAT feels like hours.

And I can't move. I can't fathom leaving this moment. The moment I let them pull me away is the closer I'll get to never seeing this man again. He's in my arms, growing colder by the second. And my tears don't stop falling. I feel I've lost my mind. This is my own personal hell. Maybe I never left Albatross's cage. Maybe this is all a trick.

But his dried blood makes my fingers stiff, and I know this is all really happening. The understanding numbs my insides. And I am a lifeless doll, a poisoned pawn, sitting with a dead body in my lap, caressing his hair absently.

"I love you so much," I whisper, eyes glazed over, looking at nothing in particular.

I look down at DaiSzek, who is resting his big head over Dessin's waist, whimpering softly every few minutes. And then, my gaze lands on each person surrounding us, waiting patiently for me to come to terms with this.

"I don't know how to let him go," I weep.

Ruth inches closer, careful to stay away from DaiSzek. "We can help you."

I glance back at Warrose, who is still staring at my hand wrapped around Dessin's. His eyes are red rimmed, tired, and devastated.

"He's dead," I say to him, voice raw and raspy. "He's not coming back."

Warrose doesn't meet my eyes. "I know."

"I don't know—how to let him go," I say again.

He seems to snap out of the trance he is in. "You'll hold on to me, okay?" He leans closer. "Let go of him and wrap your arms around my neck, Skylenna."

This makes me cry harder. But I nod, slowly unclenching my hands, sliding them away from his hand and chest, sobbing uncontrollably at how hard it is to part ways. To no longer be connected.

Warrose guides my arms around his neck, scooping me into his strong embrace.

But the second my hands touch his skin, I fall. A quick slip into the darkness, into an endless hole. Air is knocked from my lungs, and my entire body clenches tight, preparing for gravity to crash into me.

But I don't land. I'm standing upright in a dark room only lit by a candle. Two boys sit in a corner, holding a gas lamp and a book. One is

older with long dark hair, and the other one is—the boy from Ambrose Oasis.

“Kane,” I gasp.

Young Kane.

Warrose and Kane.

My mouth falls open.

“And he conquered the ocean,” Warrose reads, voice less deep and husky than usual. “Destroyed his enemies and ended the war.”

“Where am I?” I ask them.

Little Kane smiles, tears collected on his high cheekbones. “I want to be just like Aquarus one day.”

How is this happening? This was the childhood story. The fictional character he based that alter on. Warrose was the one that read him that story.

But how am I here? It’s real. My feet are planted on a cold stone floor. And I can feel the warmth of the flickering gas lamp against my cold skin.

“Warrose,” I mutter.

I fall again, quicker this time, a dip of my stomach, and I’m back on the beach, clutching myself against his broad chest. Tasting tears and the balmy air on my tongue.

I blink, looking around at the people staring at me. Only one person stares back in shock, in disbelief. Aurick steps forward, pointing a finger at me.

“What did you just see?” he asks, a slight tremble to his tone.

I blink my sore, burning eyes at him.

Warrose clutches me tighter. “She’s in shock.”

Aurick’s crystal-blue eyes bounce between us, then turn to his men as if looking for verbal confirmation. He turns back to Warrose. “You didn’t see it.”

Ruth steps up behind me, running a hand over my hair.

“We need to get her back,” she says quietly.

“We’re not leaving him here,” I retort, squirming in Warrose’s arms.

“It’s okay. He’s coming with us.”

But Aurick is still staring at me. Like I’m a piece of the puzzle he didn’t see before. And I want to scream at him. Throw my fists into his chest.

I want to kill him.

Because although I know this is my fault...

It's his too.

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10. After

THEY PART FOR ME LIKE clouds after a storm.

No one wants to come close. Even Warrose and Ruth keep their distance as I walk through the Demechnef halls with DaiSzek by my side. They lead me to the infirmary where Niles is being treated. I know I'm going in the right direction when I hear the screams of a grown man.

I turn into the room in a daze, briefly noticing the metal table and the soldier cutting off Niles's clothes. As his pants come off, I wince at the bright-red burns and melted skin on his right leg. His right arm, ear, and some of his hair were hit too.

He howls again, and I have to put a hand on DaiSzek to keep him from growling.

They begin rubbing white cream all over his body, injecting him with something for the pain. But he keeps screaming.

Ruth rushes past me, grabbing his good hand while she cries with him.

I can only stare like a corpse. A living, breathing corpse.

I glance over my shoulder at Warrose. "Can you see where they put Dessin? I need to know where they'll keep him."

Detached. Cold. Alone.

He knits his brows together and nods. I remember the way he looked when he was young, sitting with Kane, reading him stories. Was any of that real? Or was I having a psychotic break? Hallucinations?

I watch Niles writhe on that metal table. Watch Ruth cry, squeezing his hand, speaking words of comfort in his ear.

And all I can do is stare.

Something taps on my shoulder. I crank my head to the side, not bothering to turn around. A Demechnef soldier clears his throat.

"There's a man at the east entrance. He says he knows you. Says he can help your friend." There's uncertainty in his nasal voice. Like he's expecting me not to respond at all.

I lift my chin. "Let him in."

Even though I slept in Warrose's arms after we left the beach, I'm still exhausted. My eyes struggle to stay open.

I don't know how long I've been standing in the same spot, but Niles tires himself out, only releasing grumbling whimpers of pain.

“Skylenna.” A familiar voice. He enters the room and walks around me, eyes trailing up and down my stiff posture.

One glance, and I know it’s the man who set Niles free in the canal. It’s the forest boy named Rydran. He’s holding a large wool bag close to his chest, standing over six feet and five inches.

“What do you want?” I ask.

But his eyes dart between Niles, groaning next to Ruth and me.

He’s deciding who’s in more pain.

“It’s—It’s not my blood,” I say. The statement leaves a knot in my gut. It’s not my blood. The man I love is somewhere in the vicinity. And my chosen brother is in more pain than I can possibly imagine. *And it’s my fault.*

Rydran pulls out wet leaves. Stacks of them, presenting them to me in the palm of his hand. I take in an irritated breath.

“Please?” he asks. I think he’s wanting my permission to treat Niles. I give a quick nod, and he starts laying one wet leaf at a time over the oozing burns.

And it’s quick. The way Niles gasps at the sensation, then relaxes, melting into the table with an audible sigh of relief.

Ruth drops her head, wiping her eyes to look at Rydran. “Thank you.”

He spares her a glance but keeps going, draping one after another.

After a while, I sit on the stool next to Niles. DaiSzek lies down next to me. Ruth drifts off from pure exhaustion, the side of her face is flat against the metal table, and her hand is still curled around Niles’s fingers.

“Is he okay?” I jerk at the whisper coming from Niles. “Dessin. Is he going to be okay?”

A wave of debilitating devastation pours over me, like standing under the sky as it rains fire. I shake my head. No, he’s not going to be okay. I can still smell his blood drying over my clothes and hands.

His eyes shut, brow wrinkling in agony. “I didn’t let DaiSzek out fast enough.”

“You saved us all, Niles.” His guilt hangs on my heart like dried cement. “I’m the reason you were burned. I’m the reason Dessin was distracted.

This—” My breath catches in my throat, and I swallow the lump away.

“This is on me.”

“Don’t say that,” he utters, blinking quickly to get rid of his tears. “He wouldn’t want you to think like that.”

I let my eyes close. No one knows what Dessin truly wanted. I didn't even know.

Rydran sits down on another stool by Niles's feet, watching him closely. I'm tempted to thank him and then tell him to leave. But he's planted himself in here like a tree. Dark skin covered in vines and moss, golden hair braided down his back.

Niles passes out with a few deep, uneven breaths. And I don't know what to do now, where to go from here. I'm lost, like my reason for living has vanished into thin air. What am I without the man I love? How did he not see the attack coming? Is this all really happening?

A hand curls over my shoulder.

I don't have to turn around to sense the calm, fatherly presence. Anguish flows through my core like lava, charring my insides, leaving me a husk of the woman I once was.

Chekiss lets out a breath, and it sounds like he's crying.

I bite down, letting anger and guilt smother my soul. "I told him I didn't forgive him."

The memory of our last moments before the battle ring loudly in my head. The way he reached for my hands. The way Kane finally told me how he felt about our first kiss.

And I turned him away.

"He tried to ask for my forgiveness, and I told him I couldn't. I needed more time." My hands begin to shake, to summon heat, to lock up in frustration. "But there is no more time."

I look back at Chekiss and watch the tears fall silently down his soft cheeks.

"We didn't have enough time," I whisper, choking on the sobs that are clawing up my throat, fighting to escape the walls I'm trying desperately to put up.

Chekiss wraps his arms around me, pulling me into his warm embrace as his entire upper body trembles from a silent cry. He's devastated for me.

"I'll never forgive myself!" I weep into his warm chest, grabbing onto him like a child to her father after she falls and scrapes her knee. And I can't let go. Because I'll fall away, drift out to sea without a beacon to find my way home.

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11. Truth Be Known

I CURL UP IN A tight ball next to my fireplace.

I can't sleep in our bed. Not without him. Not without the strong arms that circle my waist. Not without his voice in my ear. Not without the constant feeling of security.

DaiSzek is curled around me, his thick coat of fur keeping me from shivering. And my attention is lost in the flames, so I don't notice when the door opens until DaiSzek lets out a furious snarl.

"I come in peace." Aurick keeps his distance. But I'm consumed by my pain, wielding it into a torch that can burn him to ash.

"Give me one reason I shouldn't let him rip your lungs out," I say through my teeth.

"I brought you both food."

"Not good enough."

DaiSzek growls louder as Aurick sets a tray down on a table.

"I'll tell you the truth. The other reason I lured you into my home." His tone is grim, laced with a forbidden knowledge that he knows he shouldn't voice out loud.

I don't say anything. But my hand finds DaiSzek's head, and I run my fingers through his fur, letting him know I'm okay. He can stand down.

The bed shifts and creaks under Aurick's weight. He's silent for a few seconds.

"You saw something... when you touched Warrose, didn't you?" he asks.

My patience is paper thin. "So?"

"Skylenna... there's a reason we chose"—he clears his throat—"Dessin for this experiment. It wasn't random. And there's a reason he didn't tell you what made him a prime candidate."

I wait, grinding my teeth in anticipation.

He exhales. "Dessin was a twin."

My head pops up. *What did he just say?*

"The experiment only works on twins. His brother died a stillborn. It's the same reason—my father chose you and Scarlett."

I'm off the carpet now, sitting upright to gawk at him with sheer horror.

The sound of babies crying fills my ears. And I can tell by the look on his face that I'm the only one that hears it.

“You were a part of the same experiment he is—was. Only... my father couldn’t break you the way he broke Kane. It didn’t matter what he had your father do to you. Nothing worked.” He looks down at his hands with remorse drooping his eyes.

I was an experiment.

“It worked on Scarlett. But suicide is a common side effect in female subjects.”

Female subjects. Scarlett. My sister died for an experiment. I remember the story about Val and Vinaley that Dessin told me one night. How he killed her and himself because that’s all she wanted, to end the pain and go home.

“What are you talking about?”

Aurick rubs a hand over his face. “Someone warned your parents about the experiments. That’s why they split you two up, to hide the fact that you were twins. But Vlademur, my father, found out and would regularly pump your parents full of Mind Phantoms... I believe you’re familiar with the substance.”

Bile creeps up my throat, and I’m sure I’m going to lose it. My parents were—*forced* to hurt us? For an experiment? Their realities were distorted the way mine was in those four hours I had with Albatross.

“When you were fifteen, my father was furious that you hadn’t made any progress to letting the trauma corrupt your mind and expand its capabilities the way Kane’s had. So, he thought having Jack beat you to near death would make you finally snap. It was like you had a mental block that counteracted the pain, the trauma, the horrifying events he put you through.”

“He used my father—like a puppet,” I say.

My gut is burning with disgust, betrayal, and disbelief.

“He used Violet too. And they tried to fight back. But they were pumped with more Mind Phantoms each time they resisted. One hundred times the amount you were given.” He shakes his head.

“*No more, please, no more!*” I hear a woman’s voice shriek in my head. But it sounds like it’s coming from this room. What the fuck is happening to me?

I wrap my arms around my waist, unable to breathe normally. Pain is biting at my nerve endings. Our parents didn’t hate us? They didn’t abuse us out of cruelty? Violet... loved Scarlett?

“Why the fuck are you telling me all of this now?” I ask, shuddering like a leaf in the wind. “Does this mean I have a split personality too?”

Aurick shakes his head. “No, the mind of a female subject turns into something else entirely. A unique disorder. The subject has visual and auditory hallucinations. They’re able to use their mind in different ways than Dessin could. For example, I think we had one that could see traumatic memories from people around her. It scared her to death.”

“Vinaley,” I say.

He arches an eyebrow. “How’d you know that?”

“Dessin told me.” His name is a noose around my neck, tightening until I can barely breathe.

Aurick looks down. “That’s why I asked you about what you saw. I think losing him is what finally broke you.”

My eyes snap up. “That’s why you hit me, isn’t it? To see if domestic violence would break me?” I’m moments away from letting DaiSzek devour him.

“Yes,” he says, dropping his head in shame. “I was willing to do anything to end this war. Even recreate your trauma from your father.”

I am an experiment. Scarlett was an experiment. My pain. My heartache. Every moment of abuse was to turn us into something that could be deadly in war. To pair with Dessin’s skills.

“This has to be a joke.”

“The reason I didn’t tell you sooner is because the subject can’t know about the experiment. It’s proven not to work. Which is why I was so surprised that Dessin never told you about it. I figured he’d do everything in his power to corrupt it.”

But I’m broken now. I’m shattered. The strings can finally be cut from the puppet’s limbs. Why wouldn’t Dessin warn me? Tell me everything?

Skylenna, I’ve known you since you were two years old.

Kane’s known me my whole life. Which means he’s always known about the experiment. What was he up to?

“So what now?” I ask, unable to meet his eyes. “You hold me here, train me until I’m cold and capable like Dessin?”

But he was also warm, protective, and kind. No one will ever learn that about him again.

“And I’m supposed to believe he hadn’t already trained you?” Aurick laughs.

He taught me how to give a good right hook at the asylum. But that was mostly just a bonding moment for us. He didn't actually succeed in teaching me, and I definitely wouldn't call that *training*.

Aurick catches my look of confusion. "*Huh.*" He leans forward in his seat. "Skylenna, when you attacked Dex... you had the form and execution of a trained assassin. There's no way that happened by accident."

I think back on it, remembering how the fury darkened the rim around my sight, how I acted out of impulse, nearly blacking out.

"It must have. I've never been trained." Maybe it was the rage or the adrenaline. Maybe it was the many times I've witnessed Dessin in a fight.

He thinks about this, examining me as if trying to detect a line.

"I never wanted this," Aurick says quietly. "You were supposed to be a team. My father never anticipated that he would be your weakness. He was sure it was Jack, then decided it was Scarlett."

My spine aches. The memory of her hanging body flashes as I blink. I use one finger to lightly draw the strings of the puppet against the carpet.

"Why did it have to be twins?" I ask. But I'm growing tired and don't plan on speaking to him again if I can help it. So I'll need to get every question out now.

"I don't know the exact science behind it. Something to do with the embryo splitting to make twins." He shrugs, fidgeting with his hands. "My father did experiment only once on a boy that wasn't a twin. It didn't have the desired result."

"Who was the boy?"

Aurick looks up at me, hesitating to answer honestly. "Niles Offborth." My blood runs cold.

"His father, Charles, was taken and filled with Mind Phantoms. He was actually the only human I know of that fought the substance. It didn't matter how much torture he endured, he refused to hurt his son the way my father wanted him to."

I gasp, digging my fingernails into the carpet. "But Niles remembers a trauma that involves his father..."

Aurick nods. "He resisted until they overdosed him. He died never giving in. And Niles was eventually taken, and with the MF, he was made to believe that trauma actually happened."

"But it was a lie?" I'm going to be sick. Charles loved Niles. He would never have hurt him after all.

“It never happened. If only we all had a parent like Charles.”

My bottom lip quivers. Vlademur ruined so many lives. Tortured so many people. And he died without ever having to pay for his sins.

My sweet Niles ended up in the asylum for a fucking experiment. He believes his father betrayed him. Ruined him. And all along, Charles had the purest love there is.

My eyes flash darkly to Aurick. “When he heals from this, I’m going to tell him. I’m going to work to repair all of the damage your father has done to my brother.” It’s a promise. I will not let Niles go on believing something so horrible about a parent that died protecting their child.

“One day... I’m going to make you suffer,” I tell him with conviction. “For everything your family has done to mine. For everything your family has done to Niles. For everything they have done to Kane’s. I’ll make sure you pay for his sins, one way or another.”



I SPEND THE NEXT COUPLE of days on the floor.

Chekiss and Ruth come in occasionally to feed DaiSzek or let him outside. But they know trying to feed me is a losing battle. I won’t let them touch me. I won’t answer their questions. I won’t open my eyes long enough to see the sadness and concern stirring on their faces.

I’ve lost so many people. I’ve been given so much heartbreaking information from Aurick. There isn’t room in my mind or my heart to digest it all. So, I stay curled on the floor. And I try not to think about him. About the way Kane would hold me close when I had a nightmare. About the way Dessin made love to me in the thirteenth room. Every memory is a sickle slicing through my chest.

And every time I fall asleep, the moment I wake up is devastating. I remember how he fell to his knees with those babies in his arms. And my pain grows in size, gnawing at my broken heart like a ravenous vulture.

I can’t go on like this.

Cold, dry fingers graze my shoulder. I know it’s either Chekiss or Ruth because DaiSzek doesn’t growl. But I can’t lift my head to look. My bones are brittle, my joints are aching, and the lack of nutrition in my system is making it hard to open my eyes.

“Come here, child. I need you to get up.” Chekiss is caressing my hair, folding his hand over mine.

“No,” I rasp.

Ruth kneels in front of the fireplace, tears drizzling down her soft pink cheeks.

“Please, Skylenna.” Her voice trembles. “They’re burying him today.”

It’s as if she kicked me in the stomach.

I squeeze my eyes shut, blocking her glowing silhouette from my sight. And my body shakes with a reawakened sob and watering eyes. The pain is something close to being hung, drawn, and quartered.

I never thought those four words put together could rip my soul in half. The devastation chokes my heart, pressing down on my lungs until I’m gasping.

Chekiss and Ruth hold on to me as I go up in flames. As Scarlett used to say, they set a perimeter around the pain. Or at least, they try to. This heartbreak is boundless, limitless. There isn’t a force on earth that could suppress it.

Bury him.

“I can’t go,” I blubber into Chekiss’s arm. “I can’t watch them lower him into the ground.”

It’s an image I would never be able to erase from my mind.

“Look at me.” Chekiss raises my chin. Tears drip from my eyes as I look up at him. “Don’t let him go into the darkness alone. Don’t do that. You’re going to be strong for him today, okay?”

Breath whooshes from my chest. He’s right. Dessin and Kane would have never let me be buried alone. No question. And that makes me feel worse. Because I have to go, have to say goodbye, have to watch my life slip through my fingers and into the dirt.

“One day, you’d regret not being there.” He clears his throat, attempting to suppress the cry tickling his chest. “I didn’t get to bury my wife and daughter. I was taken to the asylum immediately, and to this day, I don’t even know where they rest.”

Chekiss ended their lives to keep them from being prisoners of the asylum and enduring the same torture he suffered for many years. I wince at the memory of his story. Of the truth in his heavy words.

They hold me for several long moments, brushing their hands through my hair, caressing my cheekbones, murmuring words of encouragement.

But I can hardly hear them as I pick myself up, let Ruth dress me in a calf-length black dress, and stare blankly as Chekiss struggles to run a brush through my hair. The world around me hums with static and wisps of dark clouds. And as they lead me out of the mountain and into a small black buggy, I feel like my soul is drifting over my lifeless body. I'm a kite attached to a string, hovering in the air as I watch the buggy fill with Chekiss, Ruth, Warrose, and Aurick.

And I'm screaming. No one can hear me. No one can see that I'm trapped and dying. I'm trying to cut the string and float far away.

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12. The Only Way Back

MY BACK STIFFENS AS WE stop in front of a cemetery.

But it isn't just any cemetery... this is the same land where my father was buried. The same place I planted a red oak tree. The same headstone Dessin told me to visit on my father's birthday.

This is where they'll be laid to rest today.

I crank my head to face Aurick, who is watching me closely with those cold, arctic eyes. He nods, knowing the question I'm about to ask.

The buggy door opens, and I follow the line of Demechnef soldiers to the red oak tree. Why would they assume that this is where Dessin, Kane, and the other alters will be buried? Is that what he wanted?

Despite the gloom around us, the sky is sunny and bright blue. The cool breeze flutters through the tall red oak tree, carrying a few fiery red leaves through the headstones across the cemetery. I stop in front of my father's grave but quickly see that the large rectangular hole is not far behind it. I can feel Chekiss's presence behind me as I step closer, noticing the three other headstones side by side.

Sophia Valdawell

Arthur Valdawell

Kaspias Valdawell

His—his family was buried next to my father? I was here only a few months ago... and of course, I wouldn't have put the pieces together because I didn't know his last name at the time.

But who is Kaspias? Could that have been Kane's twin? The one Aurick said was stillborn? I look back and forth between the headstones covered in the leaves from the great red oak nearby. I can't believe this has all been under my nose.

My attention is quickly drawn to the priest and the giant wooden coffin. An anchor that reels in my heartbreak and centers it in my chest. I suck in a sharp, painful breath at the sight.

He's in there. They're all in there.

Alone.

My knees quiver, and I sway toward the ground, but a pair of strong hands grip my waist, holding me steady against an iron chest. For a moment, my body remembers the gesture, the masculine presence, the unmovable stance behind me to catch me before I fall. And for that awful,

cruel moment, I think this was all a bad dream. He came back. He fooled everyone again. Defied death itself.

But a familiar voice breathes into my ear, "I'm here."

And my throat tightens, and my eyes shut as the single string of hope is burned into a small pile of ash.

I look down at a pair of light-brown hands, and my nostrils fill with the subtle aroma of a crackling fire and dark spice.

Warrose holds on to me and doesn't let go. Chekiss and Ruth take their places at my left side. And I suddenly wish they would all leave. Go back to the mountain. Leave me alone with this coffin, to cry, to scream, to pray over his dead body for life to be poured back into him.

But the priest begins speaking, and the birds stop singing, the wind stops dancing, and every soldier seems to hold their breath.

As the prayers come to an end, a few eyes land on me.

"I think it's only appropriate that the people who say their final goodbyes are those who were closest to him," Aurick announces.

"How merciful of you," Warrose clips back, letting go of my waist to step up to the closed coffin. He tucks a strand of his long hair behind his left ear, then places his hand on top of the wooden lid.

We all watch as he closes his eyes, whispers a few words, then places an old book where his hand once rested. As he walks back, my feet begin moving because we both know there isn't anyone here who knew any of the alters the way we did.

I will be the last to say goodbye.

I quickly notice the old book Warrose left, *The Legends of Aquarus and Kalidus*. But the second my shoes sink into the dirt closest to his coffin, I think I might be sick. My stomach lurches, and my sore heart twists into a tight knot. I can't stop myself from trembling even as I wrap my arms around my waist.

A million tiny moments fracture in my mind, tapering off until I'm overrun by memories of them. The moment Kane kissed me under the waterfall. The moment Dessin pulled me from the isolation tank, or when he held me while I confessed what really happened to my Scarlett. Each second of time I spent with him barrels into me. I let the tears flow freely, blinking rapidly and ejecting them from my eyes until they splash over the wooden lid.

“You told me I was safe with you,” I mutter with a quivering bottom lip. “But I don’t feel safe anymore. You brought joy back into my life, and now... I feel so lost.”

I imagine him sitting in front of me, watching me cry with anguish darkening his beautiful brown eyes. And I want so badly to hug him, to kiss him goodbye, to thank him for every moment of love and happiness he gave me.

“Before I let you go, I’m going to make one last promise.” I swallow down the growing lump in my throat, making it painful to speak. “I won’t ever love again. And I’ll never lose hope that I’ll see you again, either. Until hell freezes over.”

And even then.

I picture Scarlett reaching for Dessin’s hand, guiding him into a warm, loving light. And my chest burns with a broken heart that will never heal. Tears well over my lids and drip soundlessly down my cheeks as I nod to her.

“Please, take good care of him,” I whisper. “I’m sure Sophia and Arthur have been waiting long enough.” With sputtering sobs, I lean down and kiss his coffin, pouring every last drop of affection I have for him as if he’ll be able to feel it through death.

With two steps back, the wooden box is lifted and slowly begins lowering into the hole.

My entire body locks up, coiling in on itself like a bear trap snapping shut. The finality of our life together filters through my veins like a steady stream of poison. I realize I’m not ready to say goodbye. My anxiety bursts through my nerves like the violent surge of a storm.

I take two more steps back.

He’s leaving me. His body will rot under the dirt, and I’ll never see him again. I lost my father the day he nearly killed me with his bare hands and a wooden club. I lost Scarlett the day Violet ripped her heart out and tossed it at our feet. And now I’ve lost the men that pieced me back together, that accepted me even after learning of my darkest secrets.

The world shrinks, and I look around at the group of men and Ruth staring back at me. And even though no one takes a step toward me, I feel like I’m being cornered, like I’m backing into a cage where they’ll keep me until I’m their perfect soldier.

“They’re going to lock you up,” a voice whispers in my ear. But I can’t tell if it’s real or not.

Ruth reaches out her hand as she wipes her wet cheeks with the other. But I shake my head profusely. *No, this is all wrong.*

“Let’s get you home.” Aurick’s authoritative voice snakes around my trembling body. His face the palest shade of white I have ever seen.

But it’s all wrong. The reality of this setting, this coffin, this building ache in my heart sits like a bolder in my gut.

“I don’t have a home anymore,” I hiss through my teeth, continuing to back away from his hand. “My *home* is about to be under six feet of dirt.”

“Going to lock you up!” I shake my head against the voice spinning in circles around me.

Chekiss steps forward with his hands up in surrender, attempting to show me that he isn’t a threat. And I can see the all-consuming torment tightening his facial features.

“Your home is with me, child. With Ruth. With Niles.”

My guard softens for a second but then quickly hardens into agitation, disbelief, and *hatred*.

“They’re going to take you away.”

Get out of my head!

“No,” I say, looking into Warrose’s worried hazel eyes, then to Ruth, then back to Chekiss. My anger gets the better of me; it swells under my chest like a tumor, hardening my organs and burning through my bones fiercely. I can’t accept this reality as my own. I can’t accept that life goes on after Dessin. After Kane. After all of their alters.

“I don’t belong with any of you, dammit!” That acidic rage vibrates through my muscles, coating each syllable in deadly doses of venom. I begin stumbling back, heels digging in the dirt as my body screams to run, to hide, to put as much distance between me and this place as possible.

“Oh, Skylenna, please!” Ruth chokes out. “We’re sisters. We’re family.”

The urge to wound and harm the people I care about burns through my senses, scorching my verbal filter. “You. Aren’t. My. Sister,” I grit out, throwing each word at her as if it were a weapon that could easily puncture her skin. “I had a sister! And because of me, she killed herself! She didn’t even get a funeral. I’ll never be able to visit her grave because her ashes are scattered in the wind!”

Ruth is a withering flower under my murderous glare. But I won't let the guilt in for what my words have caused. There isn't room for any other emotion.

"You aren't my family. And I don't belong here."

Unable to look in their eyes a moment longer, I spin on my heels and begin running toward the forest. Each step shoots life back into my limbs, and I'm sprinting as fast as I can. Only one other set of footsteps thumps behind me.

I nearly stop as Chekiss howls. "I'll come with you, child! *Please!*"

Tears burst again from my eyes at his raspy sobs and that rough fatherly voice begging as he tries to keep up. But his lungs won't allow it. His wheezing breath grows quiet as I put more distance between us.

And even as I disappear into the tree line, I can hear the cries of a father that has lost his daughter.

Again.

13. Into The Void

AS I WANDER AIMLESSLY INTO the Emerald Lake forest, I remember the taste of blueberry pie. Scarlett used to have the first sample of it after the pie cooled down. She'd stick her fingers in its center and scoop.

I focus on that smile. That rare, beautiful smile I'd only seen when she tried to cheer me up. If only she was here to make me that pie now. I'd give anything for a glass of milk and her arms around me. But the image of her sticky blue fingers, her sincere green eyes, that steaming pie held in her oven mitts... it darkens, loses its bright essence. Every good memory I try to conjure turns into something rotten. Something cold and decaying.

It's not fair.

The only people that can make any of this less painful... are dead.

"Everyone dies around us," the voice says quietly.

I press my hands over my ears. What is happening to me?

The sun sets, a blast of orange-and-gold rays cutting through the trees, glimmering off the dewy leaves, and warming my cheeks. Quick bursts of wind carry the scent of lilac, honeysuckle, and wet soil. I begin searching the trees for our tree house. I know it was in this forest, but I'm not even sure where I am, much less which direction to go in.

Stumbling in my black dress, I trip over vines, slicing up my ankles from thorny weeds and broken sticks. And I'm numb from the inside out. A cold river of blood flowing through my veins, forcing my heart to keep beating, and that's it. That's all I have left.

"Is this what you wanted?" I call out to the void. "For me to end up alone and angry? To find a nice hole in this forest to die in?" I'm not sure if I'm talking to God or any one of the people who has died.

"They all die."

I throw my hands over my ears again and scream.

The sun sinks into the earth, and the cool-blue sky darkens. The winds pick up and coat my arms and legs in goose bumps. I stop walking, look out into the blue-and-green abyss of night draping over the forest, and I wonder how I've fallen this far. But even worse, I find myself waiting for Dessin to find me. To rescue me. My burning, tired eyes search the trees, praying I'll see him standing there, waiting for me to run into his arms.

And with that dreadful thought and the unbearable reality crashing over me, I drop to my knees and curl into a tight ball. A spot in soft, moist soil.

With sleep slipping over my eyes, I take a deep breath.
And pray that I don't wake up.



A COMBINATION OF THE CHIRPING of birds, the blazing morning sun, and a cold sprinkle of rain wakes me from the dreamworld I escaped into. It's abrupt and nearly painful as I flinch against the fat blobs of raindrops that splash over my cheeks. My memories assault me with a vengeance. The last time I spoke to Kane before the battle. The sickle that went through Dessin's chest. His blood on my hands. The conversation I had with Aurick. The coffin lowering into the ground.

I remember where I am. And my entire body shudders in despair. That aching hole in my gut and heart growing wider like an infection spreading to vital organs.

The sky rumbles with thunder, a loud crackle, then boom. The rain picks up, showering me, drowning me. I press my hands into the mud, becoming a sopping puddle, and push myself to my feet. I have to keep moving. Giving myself a task helps only a little. Find the tree house. Keep moving. Don't look back. Don't think about the harsh words I said to Ruth. Don't think about Chekiss trying to chase after me. Find the tree house. Get out of the rain. Keep moving.

My black heels sink into the mud with each step, so I rip them off my feet and fling them into the shrubs to my left. Without much thought, I begin to run, ignoring the stabbing pain of splinters, thorns, rocks, and broken branches stabbing into my bare feet. The rain blurs my vision, smacking against my skin like sharp pebbles.

"Just let me find the tree house!" I scream into the misty void once again. "I've lost everything! Let me have this!"

"It's a curse. They all die around us." The voice emerges once more. It sounds so real, but I know I'm alone. I have to grind my teeth to keep from screaming.

My head pounds with a piercing headache, my thighs burn from the exercise, and I'm certain I'm close to fainting from not having food in days. Minutes of running with bleeding feet and mushy muscles, and I lose hope. *What if the tree house was a figment of my imagination? What if I never escaped Albatross?* I've finally gone mad.

But I spot a familiar cluster of vines and ivy, like a heavy curtain covering a tree. My footsteps slow to a complete stop, and all I can do is stare. My chest coils tightly, my blood goes cold, and I could cry right here.

I can practically see him pulling the vines away like a veil, showing me the wooden planks that go up the trunk of the tree. I shield my eyes from the falling rain and look up to see it. The tree house. The wooden refuge while we were on the run. The place I first met Greystone. The location where Kane gave me some answers.

I wrap my arms around my shivering core and sigh in relief. It isn't much. But I made it here. I got away from the sad looks, the betrayal of Aurick, the mountain that turned Kane into something he hated.

My hand trembles as I pull the curtain of vines to the side, revealing the stepping planks. A ladder of sorts to find my way up. Despite the shooting pain in the pads of my feet, I start climbing. My hands grip the wood for dear life as I go slowly, careful not to slip from the falling rain. About halfway to the top, I grab a loose plank. The wood shifts a little, like the screw isn't snug in the tree. It's wobbly, not enough that it'll give, but enough to give me pause.

And in that fraction of a second, I hold my breath like I've gone underwater. A rogue wave crashing over me, making me flinch, slamming my eyes shut against the powerful pressure.

"I told you to wait until I'm done!" a boy shouts from above me.

My eyes flutter open, expecting them to meet drops of rain. But there isn't any. The tree is dry. The sky is clear and blue. And a boy about the age of ten looks down at me with frustration wrinkling his brow. Only... he isn't looking down at me. He's looking at the little girl holding on to the planks above me. Her white shoe is planted on the loose plank I'm gripping.

"I can do anything you can do!" she hollers back at him. Her long golden waves dance in the sunlight, shimmering like a spool of honey in the summer.

"It's not safe yet, Skylenna." He huffs and continues hammering.

Oh my god.

It's Kane. And the little girl is *me*.

I use my other hand to press over my mouth, holding in the cry that wells like a storm cloud in my chest. How is this happening? It's as if I'm really here. Like I've traveled back in time.

“Sure it is. You did a fine job.” The little girl stomps and tugs on the planks in emphasis, only the one under her feet shifts, and she screams.

“Hurry up, then, before you fall and break your neck.”

The wave falls back over me like a wet blanket, making me fly freely through the air, tumbling and locking my jaw as I wait for it to pass. Only at some point, I let go of the plank and am now soaring through the rain, gravity launching me into the air until I’m watching the tree house grow farther and farther away.

I crash-land in a puddle. Muddy water splashes all around me. The air is knocked from my lungs, and my joints burst with no central point of pain. The feeling is similar to being kicked in the stomach. My mouth gapes open as I try to gasp for a single breath.

What the hell just happened?

I suck in air, trying to avoid the rain getting caught in my windpipe, and force myself to think back on the talk I had with Aurick. He said I don’t have a split personality like Dessin. I’m different.

The mind of a female subject turns into something else entirely. The subject has visual and auditory hallucinations. They’re able to use their mind in different ways than Dessin could.

Can I go back and see my old memories? The ones I’ve been missing? Is this what that was? A lost memory from when I was a child? When I apparently knew Kane?

I wrap my arms around my body, holding in the aching shivers that roar up my spine. I want to remember everything. If I can’t have him in this life... maybe I can live inside my own mind, playing back each memory, reliving each lost moment I’ve been dying to remember.

I can still have him in some way. Even if it is watching what he was like growing up.

With a winded grunt, I rise from the mud, rolling my neck and stretching out my sore muscles. I’ll climb it again and again and again.

It takes me only a minute to get back to that loose plank. I tug and wiggle it, but nothing happens. The rain drenches me, splashing into my eyes already welling up with tears. And that familiar gnawing twinge of loss fills up my stomach.

I climb the rest of the way, collapsing on the wet, wooden floor of the tree house, sobbing as the shower of rain cloaks the Emerald Lake forest.

The sounds drowning out my cries for miles.

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14. Building The Armor

“IF YOU’VE MADE IT TO heaven, please, give me a sign.”

Still damp in my black funeral dress, I bow in front of my cot, hands clasped in prayer. I don’t know how long it’s been since I’ve eaten real food. I’ve collected rainwater to, at the very least, keep myself hydrated. But I’m weak after sleeping endlessly in this tree house, watching the sun rise and fall in the gloomy sky, listening to the birds whistle and flock from tree to tree, all while I lie lifeless so close to the clouds.

“They’ve taken everything from us.”

I squeeze my eyes shut as I wait for an answer from the paranormal, spiritual occurrence I’m waiting for. I just need to know he’s happy. He’s safe and cared for. I need to know what happened to the other alters. Did they become their own spirits? How does it work? Maybe if I know he’s at peace, I can find a way to crawl my way out of this dark, hopeless hole.

“Please, Kane, find a way to tell me you’re okay,” I whisper. My own voice sounding hoarse and weak, like sandpaper and the creaking wood of an old ship.

But nothing happens. The birds don’t even make a sound. It’s as if my surroundings hold their breath, waiting for him to answer me.

My shoulders sag, and I let my hands fall to my sides. I need to leave, find fresh clothes, and figure out how to navigate through my lost memories. I’m closest to the Evergreen Dark Wood, to the Nightamous Horde. Maybe I can trouble them for comfortable clothes and be on my way.

I think back to the places I could visit that might trigger a lost memory. Kane’s house. The Red Oaks. My father’s house. Those would be the best places to start.

It takes me half a day to hike barefoot through the humid forest. By the time I reach the shadowed dry lands of the Evergreen Dark Wood, I feel a tremor in the air. A ripple of awareness running down my back like warm bathwater. And without so much as a sound of breath, I can feel the rhythmic beating of two heartbeats.

Normally, I’d take one look around and decide I’m alone here. The woods are uninhabited, dark, and filled with an eerie quiet. But I can’t calm the hairs rising on the back of my neck and that thrumming of alertness filling my veins.

I start walking again, careful not to step on any sticks or pine cones. My feet are already raw and covered in dried blood and small gashes. I have to remind myself to ask for shoes and find a creek to clean my wounds.

As I descend deeper into the darkness, echoes of a breathy conversation find my ears. I stop in my tracks. Looking around, I strain my eyes to see where the sounds are coming from. To my right, I see the dimming glow of a torch that's about to extinguish. A blue sputtering flame that I follow through the trees. The sounds of hushed words get louder, defining highly registered feminine tones.

Closing in on the torch, I finally catch a glimpse of the source of the noise before I quickly avert my eyes. A woman standing in front of a tree with long white hair, pallid skin, slightly pointed ears, cheekbones, and a sharp jaw.

Runa. Like moonlight in the dark forest. She whispers to a woman leaning against a tree. They laugh quietly as if they're sharing gossip they shouldn't know.

"Runa," I say, turning around to give them privacy. "I'm sorry to interrupt."

Runa turns to face me with a raised eyebrow.

"Skylenna?"

I give a noncommittal nod.

"This is Prim." Runa nods at the woman adjusting her hair behind me.

She smiles and gives me a quick nod. "I've heard a lot about you, Skylenna." The woman is tall and muscular, like a warrior goddess. One white braid with black streaks hangs over her right shoulder, dipping down her cleavage.

"Look at you," Runa says with a sharp laugh. "You're as pale as one of us."

I haven't eaten.

Runa is narrowing her cold, black eyes on me, studying my gaunt cheeks, lifeless hair, and red-rimmed eyes.

"Where is he?" Her daunting stare doesn't leave mine.

I swallow. It's the *he* that does it. Makes my veins run in the opposite direction. My insides clench together in a death grip. The look of someone who doesn't know what happened to him. And I can't say it. The words turn to ash on my tongue, and all I can do is shake my head.

Runa lifts her chin in sudden understanding. She tries not to let the icy look of pity cross her face. But she fails.

“I need—clothes if you can spare any.” For reasons I’m not sure of, I want to hurt her. I want to hurt someone. Anyone. My fingers twitch at the idea, curling and flexing. I’ve never wanted to hurt anyone in my life, even as they were hurting me. Something about this grief, this loss, this tragedy has opened a forbidden door in my soul, releasing my demons to wreak havoc on the world.

Prim glances down at my torn-up feet and gasps. “How long have you been walking around without boots?”

I sigh.

“Come on.” Runa nods her head to the left, swiping a loose strand of white hair behind her ear. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”



I’M TOO WEAK TO FIGHT them as they do more than give me clothing to wear. Prim holds my feet over a bucket of warm soapy water, cleaning my feet of splinters, thorns, and dirt wedged into the crevices of my wounds. We’re in Runa’s private cave, where she brought Dessin and me to change. It has a wooden cot, a dresser, a table, and a cauldron that hangs over a fire.

“Eat,” Runa commands, nodding her head at a plate with slices of bread, cheeses, shreds of meat, and blackberries.

I reluctantly pick up a piece of warm bread, shoving it into my mouth mechanically. I’m aware that I will probably faint at any given moment without food in my system. And before the tree house, I wouldn’t care, but now... I have to know how to trigger my memories again.

“Were you dancing on knives?” Prim raises her eyebrows as she wraps my feet in white cloth.

I answer her with slow, unenthusiastic chewing. Runa lifts my arms to remove my black dress, replacing it with a sleeveless leather archer’s dress. I stare at the dark cave walls as she laces up the front like a corset. She pauses and glances up at me curiously.

“Actually, I’ll get a nightgown for you to sleep in,” she says, flicking her gaze back to the dresser.

I shake my head. “I’m not staying.”

“Sure you are,” Prim replies, tying the laces of my knee-high boots. “You look exhausted and malnourished. Just stay the night and get some sleep.”

“No.”

“You’re not leaving like this,” Runa grits, looking uncharacteristically concerned.

I stand from the cot, tying the rest of the laces up my archer’s dress myself.

“Actually, I am.” My voice isn’t soft or soothing the way it usually is. It’s heavy in the bed of my throat, aching raw and angry.

“Sit your ass down. You look like the dead, Skylenna. He wouldn’t want you to run yourself into the ground.” Runa’s cheeks turn a light shade of pink like she’s just realized the gravity of that statement.

He wouldn’t want... I almost laugh. He can’t want anything anymore, can he? He isn’t alive. I just watched them bury his body.

After the last lace, I push past Runa, walking with needles stabbing my sore feet as I make my way to the cave entrance.

“Fine. Go! I’ve never seen that ungrateful face on you before, anyhow. The girl I met was at the very least polite!” Runa shouts behind me.

I stop walking. And without turning around, I let a drop of emotion darken my voice.

“You’re right, Runa. This isn’t the face of the girl you first met. This is the face of a woman who has just lost... *everything*.”

15. The Woman Who Raised Him

IT TAKES ME A MILE or two before I realize which direction I'm headed.

To Kane's childhood home.

If there's ever a place that might trigger my mind to open, it has to be there. When Kane split to Dessin. Where Arthur and Sophia lost their lives. And perhaps, I can learn more about this experiment from his family's point of view.

The dark pine trees are motionless in the cool night, quiet and peaceful. I walk through them like the dead, like I'm a spirit cursed to travel the planes of this world for all eternity. And I begin to wonder if I'll ever be happy again. This hole in my chest feels infinite. It has no beginning or end. It lacks a perimeter, no matter how hard I try to build one.

The silver glow of the moon rains down on me with two slow steps out of the Evergreen Dark Wood and into the North Saphrine Forest, and through the cluster of trees, I know I've made it to his childhood cottage.

But... I can't bring myself to go in there; perhaps for a similar reason, Kane couldn't either. I push my way through the sharp pine needles, inching closer to the cottage.

It's bigger than I remember. The river rock chimney, the hand-hewn mill sidings. It's still beautiful but haunting at nightfall. And after a long, sickening moment... I decide to sleep in the shed for the night. Maybe tomorrow, I'll have the guts to step inside.

My eyes are barely open by a thread as I round the cottage, walking as fast as I can without looking through its windows. I've never desired sleep more in my life. Not just because my body is drained of every last bit of energy, but because sleep is that sweet symphony of relief. It's the only escape I have to stop living in this hell I'm trapped in.

My hand touches the wooden shed door, and before I can blink, I'm sucked into an emptiness of calm, disorienting darkness. My stomach dips, and blood rushes to my head. A tremor of energy washes over me, tossing my body through the air until I'm upright again, looking down at Kane and... *me*. I'm standing at the door, looking down at them lying near a gas lamp. She's tucked against his chest as he reads a book. Her foot is propped up and wrapped after it got stuck in the bear trap.

This isn't a lost memory.

But it is one I cherish. And somehow, I've fallen back to it, watching it play out before me as if I'm an invisible third-party bystander.

"Are you going to fall asleep if I keep going?" he asks the woman snuggling against his chest.

She breathes in, savoring his cedar scent. "Mmm. Would that be so terrible? You have a nice voice."

And as she closes her eyes, Kane smiles to himself, places a soft kiss on top of her head, and continues on to the next chapter.

My chest burns, and a log jams into the back of my throat. I clench my hand around the wooden door until splinters pierce my fingertips. It's all so real. He looks real enough to touch. To kiss. To hold.

Tears sting my eyes as they pool over my lids. It's pathetic, really. The way my heart pounds like a set of drums, echoing through my throat and in my ears. How his presence can still make me weak in the knees.

The subject has visual and auditory hallucinations.

My bottom lip quivers at the sound of his deep, soothing voice.

"I hate you—for leaving me," I say to him with labored breaths. "I hate you for making me feel so desperate to hear your voice again that I'd give in to this *delusion*. This mental disorder."

But Kane stops reading and looks down at me—at the *other* me now sound asleep. Her breathing is heavy and borderline snoring. I wince in embarrassment, but Kane chuckles quietly. He sets the book down, taking a deep breath.

"Who would have guessed that the three-year-old little girl with curly golden hair and squishy pink cheeks would have me wrapped around her little finger for the rest of my life?" He sighs, stroking her cheek with his tan fingers. His brow knits together in affliction or sorrow at the sight of her. "Dessin spent years in that asylum, being tortured endlessly, so much so that new alters had to split off just to endure each sadistic treatment. All for my sweet Skylenna."

I begin sliding down the shed wall with tears dripping down my cheeks. Anguish rips through my abdomen, bruising my insides, and my grief is energy formed into a dark cloud that hangs over the room. *I miss you so much.*

"And by the end of this, you're going to be furious with me. You're going to hate me for all of the secrets I had to keep." He rubs a hand over his face, careful not to wake the sleeping woman draped over his chest.

“But one day, you’ll be just like me. And in time, you’ll know why I had to keep those secrets.”

He leans down and kisses her temple, wrinkling his forehead like this entire conversation is burning him on the inside.

“It was all for you. So, *please* forgive me.”

I close my eyes, imagining what it felt like to be kissed again by this man. And as he turns out the gas lamp, I listen to him fall asleep, obsessed and mesmerized by the sound of air filling and leaving his chest. And in this time, I cry in a ball, tucked away in the dark corner of the shed, next to the open door and the whistling winds.

And I allow the pain to consume me.



I WAKE BEFORE MY EYES open. And I’m determined to keep them closed. If I can’t see the shed, I can still believe that he’s in here with me. Sleeping, breathing, *living*.

But the heavy rising and falling of his chest is gone from the air, and his presence no longer sinks into my soul. He’s gone. And I’m all alone again. After what he said last night, I’m determined to learn his secrets. I think that’s why he kept them... because one day, he knew I would be able to go back and remember, learning all of his secrets with this disorder.

I groan as I use the wall to sit upright. My body tingles and aches from sleeping on the floor, curled up like a baby in the womb. My neck is stiff, my joints have hardened into solid concrete, and my muscles might as well have been replaced with jelly. But it doesn’t bother me at all. No, it distracts me from the agony radiating from deep in my heart, down to my core.

I look through the open shed door at Kane’s childhood cottage. In the sunlight, it’s like this home was plucked from a fairy tale. No one would ever guess, as they walk through the front door, it once held a horror story unfit for children.

With a grunt, I pick myself up and walk toward the cottage. I don’t think I should go straight to the kitchen... which is where it all happened. I’d rather start smaller. My eyes scan the sides of the house, deciding which of the two windows I should climb into first. I see the reflection of a mirror in the first window, a glint of light from the curtains being partially left open.

A bedroom.

I hoist myself up with the little strength I have and lift the glass open. Stale air whooshes over my face, filling my nostrils with the scent of old books and mothballs. Staring into the bedroom, I freeze, with my waist halfway wedged on the bottom of the sill. Time has halted here. It's a pinhole into the past. A mahogany wardrobe filled with dusty gowns, a matching vanity with glass jars of perfume and night creams for the lady-doll regimen, and a queen-size bed made neatly with a pink silk comforter and several fluffy pillows.

This must be his mother's room.

I gulp down my hesitation and continue wiggling through the window. I use the nightstand to step on as I tumble from my perch. My knees hit the soft maroon carpet, absorbing the painful impact.

I'm not entirely sure where to start. This disorder might very well be exclusive to only my memories. But it's worth a try. If there's even a slight chance that it will work, that would bring me steps closer to understanding his world of secrets.

I'm instantly drawn to the vanity of perfumes, jewelry, and creams. My fingers glide through the thick layer of dust, and I nearly flinch at the woman staring back at me in the grimy old mirror. Matted, tangled golden hair, sunken eyes and cheeks, and lacking the usual tan shade of my skin. I'm as white as a ghost. I look ill, close to death. It's exactly how I feel on the inside.

I snag the round glass perfume bottle filled with light-purple liquid.

"Hello, Sophia," I whisper, unscrewing the lid and bringing the small vial to my nose. One whiff of roses and pears, and I'm sucked into that dark river, falling through a void that fills my head with delirium. I hold my stomach as I gasp loudly. And it throws me into a tunnel until I'm standing again, staring at a clean, fairly new vanity mirror, no longer holding the bottle of perfume.

A woman stands next to me, staring at her own beautiful reflection. She's an inch shorter than me, with soft brown hair tied in a loose bun on her head. She's wearing a white lace nightgown and robe, dabbing the contents of the perfume on her wrists, then gingerly spreading it to her neck. Her sad caramel eyes blink emptily, trapped in her own thoughts.

"You're breaking my heart, Wyatt," the woman utters, a collection of tears gathering in her warm eyes.

It's one thing to hear about his mother. It's another to stare into her eyes, see her face up close. She was stunning. Devastatingly gorgeous. I find myself fidgeting with the laces on my archer's dress, inferior to her delicate beauty.

Wait... Wyatt.

I turn around to see Kane's father leaning against the doorway. He's tall, maybe the same height, but not as strong. Sure, his shoulders are broad, and his hands are large. But he's thinner, lacking the muscle Kane has. *Had*. He wears a solid black tuxedo, loosening the tie around his neck.

"I'm loyal to country before family. You knew that when you married me." His deep, monotone voice is both calming and patronizing.

I gawk at him in horror. The man that betrayed his family and led them to slaughter.

"Don't trust him, Sophia," I find myself saying to her as though she can hear me.

Wyatt removes his hands from his pockets, rubbing a hand over his face the way Dessin did when he was irritated. His eyes are dark and cold, like the endless void I fell through to get here. And yet, he is unnervingly handsome. He has Kane's strong jaw and full lips.

"If I'm to have twins... could you really go through with it? Just to please Vlademur? You'd really harm your family?" Sophia fights to keep her voice even, but the emotion of his future betrayal tightens her face.

Vlademur. Aurick's father. The head of this operation. The leader of Demechnef.

"You're getting worked up over nothing, wife. The probability of you having twins is one in a million. Why trouble yourself worrying about something that will never be?" Wyatt takes a step closer to his wife. But she flinches away as though he might hit her.

My gut twists with protective instincts.

"Fine. I'll let it go for now. But if we find out we're having twins, hear me now... I will go to the ends of the earth to protect them, *husband*. Even if that means stepping on you to do it."

Surprise flashes over Wyatt's stone-cold face, but it's quickly replaced with an arrogant smirk. "You're a woman in the world of Demechnef." He removes his cuff links slowly, keeping his cold dark eyes plastered on her. "Which means—your threat holds no weight."

The last thing I see is the look on Sophia's face as she holds her pregnant belly. The look of a woman that is ready to go to war. And win.



AFTER FALLING BACK INTO MY reality, I search Sophia's room frantically. Desperate to find something that will pull me under again. I need to know what he knew. I need to be brought back out from the darkness that Dessin kept me in.

Maybe then I can accept his death.

I rummage through her drawers, wardrobe, and nightstand without being triggered. My brow becomes moist with sweat, and I get desperate.

There has to be something else.

Like a wild woman looting the place, I turn over the mattress, pull out her wardrobe, and yank the drawers of her nightstand free.

Something rattles as the last drawer gets stuck. I pull harder, jerking it around until it slides free. I pat around on the inside, and the act reminds me of the time I went looking for a clue from the abandoned Demechnef building.

My hand traces over what feels like leather. I tug it free from the back of the nightstand.

It's a leather journal, aged parchment on the inside, bound with a single string to hold her thoughts together. I flip through the pages, mostly blank or torn out, but one jagged edge rubs against my finger until I'm back again. Sitting on the bed next to Sophia, no longer pregnant, writing frantically in the leather journal.

She sniffs, rubbing the tears away before they have a chance to trail down her cheeks. I rush to her side, eager to see what she jots down.

The first words at the top smeared ink from a trembling hand, causing my blood to freeze in my veins.

To The Leather Man.

I nearly fall back on my butt. The letter Dessin had me find. The clue. I was right! It was from Sophia. His mother was writing to a friend. But what did it say? I can already tell this is a different letter. I read it as she writes.

She told me more about the prophecy today. I know she must have made a stop at your house as well. What am I to do? Let fate decide the future of

my boys? I tried to run with them already. You saw how far that got me. They are everywhere. Not just the men that rule this city, but the ones that rule elsewhere. I think I have a plan... meet me in the red at midnight.

Her pen hovers over the parchment, a moment to decide if that's all she has to say before she tears out the page and folds it into an envelope.

Sophia's bedroom door bursts open, causing us both to flinch. In comes a little boy with brown hair and warm-chocolate eyes. He smiles at his mom, pleased with himself that he managed to scare her. I glance back at Sophia, who is wiping her eyes of the remaining tears.

"Kane," she says, sniffing.

Kane. He can't be older than the age of six. My heart instinctively curls in on itself, trying to protect my soul from shattering at the sight of him.

"What's wrong, Momma?"

She holds her arms out to him, pushing the leather journal away. Kane wastes no time as he soars into his mother's arms, hugging her tightly as she kisses his head.

"Momma's a little sad right now, sweet boy. I'm going to need you to grow up very quickly, and it's not fair. It's not fair at all." Her voice is soothing, like warm milk after a nightmare.

Kane nuzzles in her arms. "I can grow up fast."

God, that voice is so innocent. So small. He was just a child. A sweet little boy.

Sophia's beautiful eyes well up with tears again. "Skylenna and Arthur are going to need you. To watch over them. To take care of them. It's a horrible burden I'm leaving with you."

My stomach drops, twisting into a painful knot. *Skylenna and Arthur are going to need you.* He had this burden at such a young age. The responsibility to protect me. To always be at my side.

Kane leans away from her embrace, using his little hand to wipe the tears dripping down to her jaw. His small face tilts up, showing her a look of strength and determination.

"I'm going to marry her one day, Momma."

Sophia's soft eyes lighten, and she begins to smile. "Is that so?"

Kane nods once. "Yep. I'll protect her and take good care of her until we're all grown up. Then I'm going to marry her in the Red Oaks. And you and her daddy will be there too. And and and... we'll have babies! And they'll be twins too!"

Sophia's brow wrinkles. "Does little Skylenna know about this plan of yours?"

"I bet she does." Kane sits up, nodding his head to her bookshelf. "It's like the story of DaiSzek and Knightingale. The fae and elf warriors who ended the colonies' war thousands of years ago. They were soul mates." He smirks to himself. "Skylenna is my soul mate."

The muscles in my jaw tighten as I attempt to jam my emotions back down my throat.

"I'm sure she is." Sophia caresses his cheek with her trembling thumb. "That's an important story to remember. It isn't fiction. It's the history of these seven forests that surround our city. They were at war with each other. The dark elves, fae, snow elves, nymphs, druids... DaiSzek and Knightingale were warriors that sacrificed themselves to open the veil long enough to let those magical beings cross back over to their own world before they could accidentally destroy the humans with magical warfare. They left behind their descendants, those born without special gifts."

She adjusts his brown suspenders. "Every great war needs two warrior saviors like DaiSzek and Knightingale. It's a prophecy."

The jerking sensation of falling backward catches me by surprise. I suck in a sharp breath as I sway back into the old, forgotten bedroom of Sophia Valdawell.

He believed I was his soul mate as a young boy. My hands clutch at my chest as I try to control my lost breath. But there was something else. Sophia told him the story about DaiSzek and Knightingale to remember. She said it was prophecy. Could she have heard that from the colonies of the forest? If so... could it be the same war Judas warned us about?

My head is spinning with more questions.

I need to find the receiver of her letters. The Leather Man. She said to meet her at midnight in the red. My fingers drum against my chin. The Red Oaks?

When Dessin first brought me there, he said it meant something to Kane's past too.

I stumble through the bedroom door to the hallway, determined to find more pieces, more clues, more of anything I can make sense of. But as my hand touches the glossy wooden wall, I freeze. The sounds of a woman screaming soak through every cell of my body. A boy crying. Men grunting. It surrounds me like a storm cloud. It's as if my soul is being shredded,

tossed into a spar of clashing swords. I double over, holding my stomach, preparing to vomit across the dusty walnut floors. The agony in the air hangs on my heart like cement blocks.

It's happening, isn't it? I can't go in there. I'm not... stable enough to watch the worst day of Kane's life.

My body jolts at another wounded shriek. I race back into the bedroom, covering my ears as I hyperventilate. Before I reach the window, a small movement in Sophia's wardrobe shifts my erratic focus. I turn as my hand reaches for the sill.

A little boy hiding under the length of Sophia's gowns. Shaking like a leaf. Clutching a toy... *rabbit* to his chest.

My eyes sting at the sight.

No. It's Arthur.

Please, no. I can't watch this. I have to get out of here. But before I can spin on my heels, I hear the soft snuffle and whimper of Kane's baby brother. My throat shrinks, and I'm frozen with a choice hanging over my chest.

Stay or leave.

Arthur shivers, holding that rabbit close, kissing it on the head as if he's responsible for keeping that stuffed toy calm. Anguish flows through me like a forest fire, blackening my lungs, charring my heart.

Even though this is only a memory... how can I leave Kane's little brother alone? How can I abandon him moments before his death?

I drop to my knees in front of him, unable to rip my eyes away from this sweet, scared little boy. "I'm here," I tell him.

Little Arthur is dressed in dirty overalls and tiny penny loafers. He looks down the hall through oversized glasses, wiping his nose and fidgeting with his cow-licked brown hair.

The screams pierce the cottage like a violent strike of lightning. We both jump, gasping at the sound of a woman in great distress. Arthur covers his mouth, sobbing into his hand.

"Momma," he whines, muffled by his palm.

"It'll all be over soon," I murmur, tears flowing freely down my cheeks. "You're going to a better place, Arthur. One where you and your momma won't be afraid anymore."

We cry together in that little wardrobe, listening to the awful sounds of Kane's sobs and his mother's cries.

“Your brother loved you.” I stroke his soft rosy cheek, my voice cracking like frozen glass. “I’m sure he was so happy to see you again in heaven.”

My sobs are cut off by two men tunneling through the bedroom door, lunging into the wardrobe, snatching baby Arthur by the elbows.

“Out you go,” a giant man with dark-brown skin and a shaved head says, lifting Arthur from his hiding place.

“No!” I scream.

Arthur wails. “Momma! Help!” He chokes and hiccups in a fit of uncontrollable cries.

I reach for him, even though I know there’s nothing I can do. I still reach for his hands, yell and curse at the evil men.

“He’s just a baby, you fucking bastards!” My voice is a long, tormented howl. A release of pent-up anger, betrayal, and utter devastation.

But no one hears me. They leave the room with Kane’s little brother.

And I can’t stay to hear what happens next. My body lurches for the window, tripping over items I flung around the room until I’m heaving myself over the sill, wiggling my body through the tight space until I’m falling into the grass.

I run like a madwoman. My legs take charge of the situation, getting me as far from this house as possible.

But the connection is still there, strong, like a rope I can’t cut. It follows me through the forest. Voices fill my head. Sophia, whispering with urgency.

“Protect her, Kane. You must keep her from the trauma until she’s ready. Keep her from the abuse. Be her sanctuary.”

I fall into a bed of weeds, scramble to my feet, and keep running.

“There are bad people in this world. Ruling nations like ours. One day, you’ll be stronger than all of them. One day, Skylenna will be strong enough too.”

I cover my ears, screaming to drown out the voices.

“I’ll take care of her, Momma. Jack will be proud.”

The forest blurs around me, wind and branches whipping across my cheeks. Words and promises and conversations lace together in my head, echoing in my ears, pounding like war drums.

16. Women are Dragons

I DON'T EVEN NOTICE AS the ground changes to snow and the air chills in the North Saphrine Forest. Icicles fall from frozen branches. Icy wind whistles against tree bark. And there's a shift in my surroundings; I sense I'm no longer alone. I stop my strides, boots crunching in the snow as I come to a stop. Hot clouds puff from my mouth, trickling into the cold forest air.

Light crunching sounds echo against the trees. One by one. Careful footsteps.

The same type of beasts that attacked us when I first met Warrose. They prey on me now. I see the thick manes of fur, the glowing silver eyes, the giant snouts. They're like small, wingless dragons with mounds of multicolored fur.

I stay completely still, knowing I can't outrun them. I count. There are only... four. Two at my back. Two facing me.

My pulse races in my throat, and my fingers twitch to grab the small dagger Runa attached to the belt around my archer's dress. I don't even know how to use it, but my hand flexes around its hilt as if it's handled weapons regularly in another life.

Without a proper cloak to keep my arms warm, I'm surprisingly feverish, as if tubs of hot lava are being poured into my veins. My will to survive becomes a tangible entity, widening my stance, scanning the way each beast cautiously steps forward, making an effort to detect if they have autonomic weaknesses. The one to my left favors his right hind leg.

That's a start.

The one with a weak hind leg pounces without warning. My dagger whips from its holster, twirling in my hand as I dive forward, darting through the air to meet the beast's momentum. But before we can collide, I spin to the right, ducking my body away from its razor-sharp teeth and thrusting my dagger into the questionable hind leg. It cuts directly through a tendon, and the beast screeches like an angry crow, taking a nosedive into the snow.

I don't stop to admire my work or wonder where the hell I learned to do that. Because the rest seem to decide they have a better chance of attacking together. They swarm me all at once. It's too fast, a blink of an eye, and I have absolutely no time to examine what I should do to each of them to survive this. I'm a sitting baby bird on a battlefield, waiting to be crushed.

As I hunker down, baring my teeth, preparing for the pain of biting, clawing, and disemboweling—a blade pierces the skull of the beast directly in my line of sight, spearing right between its eyes. And a second before its body even hits the ground, a hooded figure draped in dark animal skins, furs, and a belt of shiny weapons bolts through the pine trees.

I duck as they unsheathe twin swords from their back, spinning around to slice through the beasts like a kitchen knife through slabs of butter. We're both sprayed with crimson mist and raw innards slushing onto the white snow. The hooded figure is fast, wielding the sword like an artist with a paintbrush, graceful and precise.

I wonder for a brief moment if it's Warrose. He specializes in dangerous beasts that lurk deep in these forests.

But the figure is smaller than his broad frame and massive arms. They're dainty yet muscular. An inch or two taller than me. And I catch a sweet whiff of cinnamon and roasted chestnuts.

As the last beast falls to the ground in a gushing heap of dismemberment, I raise my eyes to the shadowed hood.

"Ya have come a long way alone, dashna." The smooth, deep woman's voice warms my skin like a bubble bath.

"Asena," I utter, recognizing that motherly voice and calming nickname immediately.

Her hood is pulled back, revealing her light-brown skin, long brunette braids, and beautiful almond eyes.

It's hard to believe she moves that fast, being in her forties. She's a silent storm in the night. A weapon greater than most men. I never thought a woman was capable of all that. I was raised to believe we were meant to look pretty. A lady doll.

"Ya look surprised," she says, giving me a once-over look.

I nod. "I am. You and Garanthian said you were powerful. But I guess seeing it is different than hearing about it."

Asena lifts her chin and wets her plush lips. "Ya killed that one." She points to the first beast that attacked. It bled out.

My gaze falls to my hand, covered in steaming, thick blood. I drop the dagger. How did I do that? I've never fought anything in my life. Well, except for the man that taunted me about DaiSzek's well-being at Demechnef.

“Thought ya told my husband and me that ya don’t fight,” she says calmly.

“I don’t. Not sure where that came from.”

“The memories haven’t shown ya?”

Memories. Does she know about my condition? Realization swings into my gut, washing down me like acid rain.

“This is in the prophecy, isn’t it?” My stare is unblinking. Betrayal slithers back up my spine, curling my fingers into fists, raising the hairs on the back of my neck.

Asena nods once.

“You knew he would die.” My voice isn’t recognizable again. It’s dark, cold, and detached. A monster unfurling its wings deep in my soul.

“Every colony is bound by an ancient magic to never speak of the prophecy to those that are in it.” She dips her head. “We had no choice.” Everything inside of me feels like it’s decaying. Shrinking, shriveling, becoming dry and papery. To know that someone could have warned us. Someone could have saved him.

“Memories will reveal why we kept secrets. Ya journey is only just beginnin’.”

She’s saying that the prophecy will make sense to me if I keep sifting through these painful memories? Do I even want to know after what I just saw?

I pick up my dripping dagger and turn to walk away.

“Wait,” she calls, crunching through the snow to face me again. “Let me make ya a fire. Give ya a cloak.”

Her words make me realize my bare arms are covered in goose bumps. This archer’s dress is sleeveless, with long slits around my legs covered in tight black trousers. There, essentially, isn’t anything keeping me from freezing to death.

I jerk my chin, a quick yes to her offer.

Asena removes a second cloak, black with a green tint and sleek fur. It weighs a ton as she drapes it gingerly over my shoulders.

I sit on a log, watching her assemble a fire. Her long fingers are quick to create sparks over the wood and dried moss. A small flame catches over the wood, eating through the moss until it roars to life.

“I can make ya food,” she offers next, dusting her hands on her wool pants.

I shake my head. “You’ve done enough.” *And yet you didn’t save him. You chose to watch us leave your home and enter a slaughter.*

Asena waits next to me, shifting on her feet with a new thought. “Let me brush and braid ya hair before I go then, dashna.” She kneels next to me without waiting for confirmation.

I’ve lost the energy to argue as she begins working on the knots and tangled strands. The fire thaws my toes, spreading up my legs through my numbness. My hollow being.

After the sharp pain in my scalp eases, once the knots are brushed out, she caresses my hair with her fingers. A shiver spreads over every hair follicle, and for a moment, I close my eyes, pretending Kane is with me. The way he’d hold me close, running a hand through my long hair. And I’d breathe in his scent from the crook of his neck. It was peace. It was heaven. I never needed anything more than that.

I just want to see him smile one more time. Hear his deep, rumbling laugh. Touch the scratchy scruff along his sharp jawline. Did I ever thank him for breaking me out of the cage that was the Chandelier City? Or bringing me into the only life I wanted? One where we sleep under the stars every night. Hike through the tallest trees, and bathe under waterfalls.

I was so angry with him before it all happened. The lies. The secrets. Aurick’s identity revealed. I couldn’t forgive him. He died knowing that.

And I’m ashamed.

“Ya have always let men rule ya life, dashna,” Asena says as she ties off another braid.

I take a deep, controlled breath.

“Either letting ’em hit ya or hidin’ under their protection.” Her fingers stroke the side of my neck. “It’s time ya bury that notion that men are stronger. Ya were born to lead men, not cower under their egos.”

I tilt my head to look at her from the corner of my eye. “Don’t you dare speak poorly of him.” Dessin may have had an ego, but he needed the confidence to do the impossible. To walk where no man has ever stepped.

“I meant no offense.” Her hands still. “But women are dragons kept in chains, convinced that they are helpless little birds. But that’s a lie, dashna. It’s time someone told ya that ya can breathe fire.”

My back and arms erupt in icy chills. Lately, I’ve been feeling that way. Never in my life have I felt so destructive, so hateful, so... *beastly*.

Asena pats me on the shoulder after she finishes the last braid. My hand instinctively reaches up to my scalp, patting my way down the intricate way she pulled the hair from my face. One big braid is laced together on top of my head, only using the upper half of my hair. And then there are a few small ones that fall along the sides of my head, on top of the smooth unbraided, brushed hair.

My hand falls back to my lap, and Asena moves to kneel in front of me before she leaves, looking over her work with silent pride. She smiles, her almond eyes lighting up.

“Be the dragon that flies over men, dashna.”

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17. “I wasn’t always a monster to her...”

I STARE IDLY INTO THE fire until the cloak falls from my shoulders, leaving my arms stinging in the frosty wind.

Plans for where I’ll go next skitter across my thoughts. My father’s house, the Red Oaks, then maybe the hill Scarlett’s house used to sit on.

The thought of reliving her death makes me cold inside. Inhuman, even. It’ll take a lot to convince me that I could benefit from seeing her again. From seeing that day play out in front of me.

But my father’s house must hold important memories. When Kane took me there, he gave me that jewelry box that held my parents’ locket. It’s where Kane was able to find the envelope that evidently had proof of Masten’s betrayal. How could my father have known that?

That house has to be the source of most of my missing memories. Chunks of time lost.

I’ll sleep here, then head back to the Bear Traps north of the Red Oaks. Giving myself a schedule—a mission—is the only thing holding me together. Because without it, I’ll want to curl up in that tree house again, go to sleep for hours, and pray I won’t wake. I’ll want to wallow until the life slips from my lungs. Let it pull me into the darkness until there’s nothing left.

And, oh, how that darkness is tempting.

I sit with my back to a heavy log, unable to sleep. My mind races. My stomach growls. And frankly, I don’t have the guts to skin those dead animals that Asena killed. I’ve never been a hunter.

Even though there isn’t any sound to signal that I’m no longer alone, I can feel his presence. An old, familiar flutter against my skin. A sweet warmth down my throat, like hot chocolate. It nudges me to look, although I don’t have to.

I see Chekiss walk toward me in the corner of my eye. He carries a mug and a large wool blanket. It isn’t clear if this is a memory or not. And that worries me, not being able to sift through the present and past.

I don’t flinch as he wraps the wool blanket around my shoulders. And he doesn’t say anything, only leans down to drop a quick kiss on top of my head. The action leaves me choked up and wilting with sadness.

Chekiss sits in front of the log next to me, using a wooden spoon to stir whatever is in the mug. “It’s hot,” he says with a hoarse, aging voice.

I look down as he reaches the spoon close to my lips. Steam pours off of it, curling around my mouth. I breathe in the scent of chicken broth. My stomach twists.

Closing the distance, I blow out a little air to cool the soup before slurping it down.

Chekiss continues feeding me. Doesn't say a word. Doesn't ask where I've been. He just sits. Taking care of me the way a loving father would.

After I finish the soup, he sets down the mug.

"How did you find me?" I ask.

"Warrose and I have been tracking you. We've camped half a mile away."

"And why isn't he here?"

Chekiss sighs. "He wants to give you space. But... I needed to make sure you were eating."

I glance over at his face shimmering in the moonlight and fire. His eyes, the color of slimy algae at the bottom of a pond, are glossy, and his lashes are wet.

Something lodges in my throat.

"Ruth?"

"Watching over Niles." Chekiss clears his throat.

A pang of guilt swells under my chest. "How is he?"

"Hurting, like you. But he's healing."

I remember the way Niles screamed when he threw himself through the flames. Sacrificing that perfect, glowing skin just to reach DaiSzek. He's probably reliving that trauma in his nightmares, only to wake in a violent burning sensation. I wince at the thought.

"It's selfish that I'm not with him right now. Holding his hand. Feeding him soup." I swallow at the lump in my throat. I called him my chosen brother, and yet I'm the worst sister. I let him down, just like I let Scarlett down.

"Don't do that," Chekiss warns.

I raise my eyes to meet his.

"You're spiraling,"—he rubs a withered hand over his tired face—"and I don't know how to pull you back."

His words thaw a small section of my heart, but only for a moment. A dark instinct quickly takes over, filling the hollowness in my chest with hardening stubbornness. This version of myself that avoids that sincerity in

someone's voice, that wallows in anger, that backs further and further away from their loved ones—it's all I have left. It's the only thing keeping me moving. I lift my chin in defiance.

"Then don't," I say coldly. "Go home. Watch over Niles. I'm going to spiral. I'm going to hurt anyone who gets in my way."

I don't have to look at Chekiss to sense the devastation consuming his expression.

"You won't like the person I'm becoming. So, please, don't stay and watch."



LOOKING UP AT MY FATHER'S house is like standing before his coffin.

Two stories, painted in charcoal black. The epitome of a horror house. Haunting. Grim. An aura of death. The graveyard for happy childhoods.

The lawn is crisp and dry, the windows are grimy from age and harsh weather. This will be like visiting Kane's childhood home. I won't be able to step foot in that living room. The room where he beat me. The room where he took his life.

I decide to go in through the back door, trudging through the backyard's overgrown weeds to get there. I have to shake and jimmy the doorknob before I use my shoulder to shove it open. I'm struck with the scent of decaying wood, leaky pipes, and the soap my father used to wash his clothes with.

My breath remains stuck in my chest as I feel it tugging me away, sucking me into the void. My stomach dips, my eyes go wide, and I brace myself for impact.

The voice of a little girl sets my equilibrium back in place. Soft, shy, and cautious. I grip the kitchen counter to steady myself, searching for the young version of me. For my father.

"Daddy," little Skylenna mutters, peeking over the kitchen table. Her big green eyes are barely visible with the lights off.

I jolt at the sight of him. Hunched over the stove, dripping in sweat, panting like he's been running for miles. I step closer, swallowing down the fear that I still seem to have of this man.

He's tall, an inch or so over six feet. Jack tears off his leather jacket, tossing it to the creaky wooden floor. And he's mumbling something, over

and over again. Ritualistically.

I take another step, leaning in to hear his words.

“I’m hallucinating. I’m hallucinating. I’m hallucinating.” His quiet, croaky voice sets my teeth on edge.

“I haven’t eaten,” little Skylenna says from her shadowed hiding place under the table.

Jack throws his fist down, rattling the silverware drawer. My breath hitches.

“Go hide from Daddy.” Breath whooshes from Jack’s chest like he’s battling a deep-rooted pain. A muscle spasm coming from the pit of his stomach. A monster trying to claw its way out.

Little Skylenna doesn’t move.

“Christ, please don’t let me hurt her,” he wheezes, gripping the edges of the counter as if he might rip the wood from its post. “I can’t—fight it, baby doll.”

Sweat drips from his temples to the sides of his neck. And it’s like a switch. His muscles relax, eyes soften, hands loosen their grip.

And I can feel the terror thick in the stale air before he moves. Like watching a wave build into a wall before it crashes over a boat.

Little Skylenna is that boat.

“Run,” I tell her.

But it’s too late. Jack rushes to the side of the table, plucking her by the long wavy locks on her little head.

“You’re hungry, huh? Do you even know how much I’ve lost because of you? Having children ruined my life! Think about that while you sit in the dark.”

Little Skylenna screams, holding her hair to relieve some of the pain as he drags her to the basement door. Her rising terror becomes a tangible layer in the room. I can hardly breathe, watching her fight against his hold, fresh tears springing from her eyes.

“Please, Daddy!”

My jaw aches as I grind my teeth together. He kicks the basement door open and pushes her in. This time, she doesn’t topple down the stairs. She’s instantly quiet. And I remember why. If she even made a sound, he would strip her of clothes, so she’d have to lie in the cold. Naked.

I look at Jack as he slides down the kitchen wall, staring at the door with several emotions warring behind his eyes.

“You should have fought harder,” I grit out. “Niles’s father did. Why couldn’t you have been stronger for me?”

I don’t wait for an answer. My hand grips the basement doorknob, and I fling it open, racing to the bottom where little Skylenna holds her hand over her mouth to cry in silence.

Nausea churns up my esophagus, and my heart braids in a tight knot.

Living through it was one thing. Watching my hell unfold in a dark basement is another. I’ve worked hard to avoid these memories. I’ve—

Little Skylenna wipes her nose and rises, shuffling over to the back of the basement, deeper into the darkness.

I don’t remember this. The only memory that surfaces is sitting in my own tears for hours or even a couple of days. Or maybe I blacked out that time?

My feet move behind her as she stares at the wall, sniffing, sobbing into her small hand. And she’s waiting. Watching. Displaying as much patience as she can muster. I look at the dark wall as if something is going to happen. But the only sound is a dripping pipe.

Her cries increase in volume as she begins to unravel into a fit. Her small fists bang against that wall repeatedly. I hiss at the loud noise.

“You have to be quiet,” I whisper-yell. “He’ll come back, and it’ll be so much worse.”

But she can’t hear me. She’s hiccuping, howling, hyperventilating. I can feel her hysteria in my bones, in every nerve ending. It dredges up my own buried demons. The panic attacks I’ve had in dark spaces.

I wait for Jack to charge through that door at the top of the stairs. Wait for him to blindside this screaming little girl.

The wall she bangs on makes a groaning sound, a clink, and suddenly a door opens. Sunlight bursts through the dark basement, streaming over every dim and terrifying corner. The wall is an old cellar door.

I nearly fall back at the blinding light.

But little Skylenna isn’t afraid at all. She reaches her arms up in anticipation. A pair of tan, skinny arms lower down, hooking around Skylenna to pull her up.

I inhale sharply. *What the hell?* I don’t remember this at all. It’s as if someone has glued a new chapter into my story. New words. New characters. A new ending.

I bolt toward the cellar door before it closes, climbing out after her.

My eyes water as I try to adjust to the sunny day and the gentle spring breeze. Little Skylenna kneels on the ground in front of someone. I step closer, squinting my eyes to—

Oh my god.

A little boy sits in front of her. White shirt, dark-gray breeches, and tousled chocolate-brown hair. But it's the eyes that tell me exactly who he is.

"Squeeze my hands until it goes away," he says, and my heart cracks down the middle. "You're safe with me. Say it."

"I'm—safe—with—you," she stutters through her sobs.

"Harder. Say it again, Skylittle."

Skylittle?

"I'm safe—with y-you."

"Good. You're always safe with me," Kane says, smiling softly. The warm sunrays trickle past the sycamore tree leaves, spilling into his sweet chestnut-brown eyes, only a little lighter than how I remember.

Little Skylenna takes a deep, calming breath, letting go of his hands only to throw her arms around his neck in a surprise embrace. Kane wobbles for a moment, readjusting his seated position, then lets out an endearing chuckle.

"I missed you too," he says with a voice I can only guess to be about the age of ten. And if that's correct, then I must be seven here.

Skylenna nuzzles into his neck. "I hate him," she whines.

Kane doesn't say anything for a few long moments, weighing her statement in his mind.

"You hate him now. But when you're older, you might understand what he's going through." He runs a hand through her long, tangled hair. "He knows I'm taking you away every time he locks you in that basement. He knows you get to visit the Red Oaks, play, laugh, and have fun with me. That's our loophole against Demechnef."

"But why can't he just be nice?"

"He tries. But they're filling his brain with a dangerous chemical. It makes him believe things about you that aren't true. It compels him to treat you poorly."

Jesus. He sounds smarter than me, even at the age of ten. I sit down beside them, crisscrossing my legs. I may never get used to being this close

to him, yet being so unearthly far away. It's madness. It's a sad hole I've fallen into. A warped reality.

"How long do I get to keep you?" she asks, pulling away and wiping the residual tears from her blushed cheeks.

"They think I'm in the isolation tank for the next day and a half. I'll have to be back before they let me out." He snuck out of the Demechnef mountain. At the age of freaking ten.

This puts a smile on her face.

"But if you're asking long term, then, I guess... you can keep me until hell freezes over." A boyish smirk spreads over his cheeks.

"And even then," she says back, with a rehearsed nod, like they say this regularly.

My jaw drops. I thought that was something we only recently started saying to each other. When he first said it, I replied randomly. I hadn't remembered this at all. His words must have triggered a muscle memory to say it back. That must be why he looked so surprised.

My heart swells under my chest bone. I can't believe we have this much history, this many delicate moments buried in my subconscious. But why would my head injury from the age of fifteen only block out the moments with Kane? How was it that selective?

Kane cleans her cheeks with his thumbs. "Let's not waste time, okay? We have a lot to do. We'll swim in the lagoon, have a picnic, then start building that tree house we've been talking about."

They rise on their feet, holding hands as they descend into the woods. I stare at them with wide eyes and questions spinning out of control in my mind.

Is he the reason I was never as damaged as Scarlett? He saved me from the darkness Jack would throw me into. Who was there to save my sister?



IT DOESN'T TAKE ME LONG to find the jewelry box my father left for me. In a wooden chest by the cellar door that Kane opened, I pull out the small box, weighing it in my hand. Why would he fill it with a small fortune I'll never need? I'll never escape this mess. I'll never be a part of that screwed-up society again.

The lid falls back, revealing the locket and the two wedding rings that hang on either side of it, dangling on the golden chain.

I'm afraid to touch it, knowing I might see Violet again. That is one face I swore I'd never confront again. The way she hurt my Scarlett will never be forgiven.

But... I have to learn what he knew. My fingers scoop it from the pile of precious gems, and my thumbnails snap it open. The muscles across my middle clench at the photo. Violet held one baby in her arms, laughing as Jack kissed her cheek while holding the other baby. She must have just given birth to us.

Grazing my index finger over the photo does the trick. Dizziness falls over me like a drug. My hands and feet tingle while I shift through the darkness, losing my breath as I float backward into my father's bedroom. I fall against the door, looking at their faces, their uncomfortable stances around the bed. I have never seen them in the same room. Never.

"I won't do it! Goddamn you, Jack! We can run away with them," Violet shrieks, holding a swaddled baby to her chest protectively. Her face is bright red, like she's been slaving over a hot stove and wet with gushing tears.

"They're everywhere, Vi. We'll be caught, and then they'll both be subjected to the experiment. Skylenna is the only one that can stop all of this. That's what she told us, remember? You and Scarlett can be free. Have a normal life. They just need to believe you both died in childbirth." Jack's tone is calm but tormented. I can see in the dark smudges under his pale-green eyes that he's lost many nights of sleep over this.

Violet shakes her head violently, shedding more tears. "Christ, Jack! This is barbaric. Some woman tells us that Demechnef is coming to put our family through a psychological experiment, and instead of taking the kids and running like hell, you listen to a man that tells us some fucking prophecy? To split them up and let one of them be tortured and traumatized—by *your* hand?!"

Jack slides his hands over his face, rubbing his temples slowly. "It's insane, I know."

Violet kisses the top of the baby's head repeatedly.

"But her little boy is going to make sure Skylenna has a happy childhood. We have to trust that she'll end up okay. The alternative is to run, get caught, and we both get pumped with the drug. We can't let them

both suffer.” I’ve never heard my father sound so lucid, so clear and awake. It’s as if someone cleared his head of the clouds and fog.

Wait—*her little boy*? Is he talking about Kane? Does that mean Sophia was the one speaking with him? Suddenly, my father unzips his leather jacket, leaning against the bed frame.

My father is—*The Leather Man*.

I stare at him with wide eyes, like I’m only seeing him for the first time. Sophia and Jack were friends? God, I need to remember that first letter that Dessin had me find in the abandoned Demechnef building. I hardly remember what it says. It made no sense at the time, but maybe it will now.

“We would be putting our trust in a little boy, Jack. How could we even put that kind of responsibility on his shoulders?” Violet sobs, holding the baby close to her cheek. “I can protect my babies. I *will* protect Skylenna and Scarlett.”

I am suddenly short of breath and unable to stand up straight. Violet is fighting for us. She loved us. How can this woman be so different than the woman I met at Jack’s grave?

Jack drops his head. “Sweetheart, we would die trying. And then Demechnef would have them both. This prophecy—we both saw it, Vi. I don’t know how the Crimson Kres made it possible... but we both saw how it is supposed to play out. We can’t be the reason it fails.”

The Crimson Kres. The colony that went missing. They’re the ones feeding my parents and Sophia the information about the prophecy?

Violet howls in agony. A sound I have never heard before. One that scrapes at my heart with rusty nails. A mother mourning her child before she’s even gotten to know her.

I clutch the dresser for support as Jack takes the baby out of her arms so she can successfully fall apart. A puddle at his feet.

“I can’t leave her!” she wails. “I can’t separate my babies!”

Jack kneels in front of her, holding the baby to his chest. “You’ll see her again one day. You and Scarlett.” My father fails at shoving the pain down his throat. His quiet, quivering voice gives him away. He is barely holding himself together. “You’ll find a home on the other side of the Bear Traps. Stay hidden until this is all over. Find Skylenna, and tell her the truth. Tell her I loved her, no matter what they made me do. Tell her I’ll always be with her, through every hardship, through every battle.”

I huff out a breath, shock coursing through my veins. He loved me. My father loved me. The knowledge reaches every inch of my soul. It warms my chest, tingling behind my eyes. They loved us.

Violet looks up at him through thick tears. “Tell her yourself. You’ll make it out of this too, Jack.”

He smiles sadly, brushing her thick, wavy hair from her forehead.

“We have to leave something behind for them. If Skylenna is like the others, she may be able to look back on this. See that... I wasn’t always a monster to her. See the truth.” Jack walks toward a jewelry box on the dresser, the same one that he left for me in the basement. “We’ll leave our wedding rings with them.”

As they both remove their rings and loop them on the gold chain, I wonder how everything could have gone so terribly wrong. They thought Scarlett would survive this. They thought by separating us, they would, at the very least, spare her from having to go through the experiment. But—they didn’t. Somehow, Demechnef must have found them. Infected Violet with the Mind Phantoms.

And it all went to hell.

18. The Days Under The Red Oaks

I LEFT THE HOUSE WITH the locket and rings around my neck.

I made camp just outside the Red Oaks. Before I went to sleep, Chekiss found his way to me once more, moving the braids away from my face, and getting me to eat cooked meat and some fruit he picked from a nearby tree. He sat next to me in silence until I finished my food.

Oddly, it was what I needed. What I craved. And he is the only person I feel comfortable being around.

But he left, squeezing my shoulder once, then walking into the night to find his camp with Warrose.

The morning sun blasting over my face is the signal I need to get moving again. My legs carry me to the Red Oaks with caution. Somehow, I know this might hold more missing pieces than I can handle. It's the moments with Kane that I've lost. And I'll bet the Red Oaks is where he would bring me.

Before he—died... he told me that I was the one he promised to kiss under the waterfall. That thought alone burns in my throat. And without warning, I remember our kiss. The way he held my face, pressing me into the limestone wall. It felt like the moment I lost all control over myself. It felt like... *soul mates*.

The leaves began to change color, from green to orange to flaming red. The bark saturated from fresh rain, the sky cloudless and beating with the hot sun. Each step sucks me in; without having to touch anything of importance, the area alone seems to change, to morph into a memory. My knees wobble, my vision loses focus, and I can feel the earth tilt.

Reality blends into several memories all at once.

All centered around the bright-red leaves.

Kane, looking about the age of nine, holds Skylenna's hand as they jump into the lagoon. Then, to my left, around the ages of thirteen and ten, they have a picnic, throwing food at each other and laughing. They climb the trees. They race through the forest. Kane holds Skylenna while she cries.

He kept me happy and busy, but most importantly, he made sure I was loved and protected. My hands tremble at my sides as I watch it all play out in a series of debilitating hallucinations.

My childhood was good. As the memories skitter on around me, I can see that. They succeeded in keeping my mind safe from the experiment. At least, until now.

I walk to the edge of the cliff, watching Skylenna, at the age of thirteen or fourteen, point to the waterfall.

“I’m old enough now! I can swim under it without drowning. I swear,” she argues with Kane, agitated as she treads water.

Kane shakes his head. Older, maybe seventeen. “Nope.”

“Fine.” She tilts her chin up in a challenge. “Then am I old enough to be kissed?”

I think he swallowed his tongue. His silence stretches as he glares at her. Blinks. Opens his mouth, but no sound comes out. For about a minute, he simply doesn’t move.

A smile spreads across Skylenna’s young face, matching my own.

Just mentioning a kiss made him speechless. Wow, how far we’ve come. My smile falls. How far we *came*.

“Or maybe I should be kissed by someone else since we’re friends,” fourteen-year-old Skylenna clarifies with a blush dusting her cheeks. I raise my eyebrows. Damn, I knew how to push his buttons even then.

“No.” His voice carries through the forest, echoing off the cliff walls. “I mean, no. I’ll be your first kiss.”

“Really?”

He nods, certainty coloring his expression.

“Will it be from you? Or one of your alters?” She watches him closely, clearly not afraid to bring that topic to light.

Kane considers this. “One day, you may find yourself wanting them too, and that’s okay. But I’ll be your first kiss, Skylittle. I am your oldest friend. I am the boy who has watched over you since I was six years old.” He clears his throat. “I will be the first man that kisses you. But not now. When we’re both adults, and you want me as more than your friend. I’ll bring you under that waterfall and kiss you.”

She looks away hesitantly, a little embarrassed that they’re talking about this topic so openly. “Promise?”

He smiles, the one with dimples and warm eyes. “I promise.”

And they vanish. Like smoke dissipating through the wind.

I turn my head to see Kane sitting against the giant red oak tree hovering at the edge of the cliff. Skylenna sits next to him, holding his

hand, looking into his eyes with a seeping desire to ease his pain. They look about fifteen and twelve.

“Just tell me what happened to them,” she begs, straightening her white sundress. “I can handle it now.”

Kane stares down at his hands. “Not today.”

“Please. I’ve asked you for years. Something triggered a memory, didn’t it?”

And for the first time in my life, I watch Kane cry. She’s never seen him cry either. I can see it in the panic that widens her eyes and straightens her back. It’s painful, too, the way he gently falls apart into the palms of his hands. A silent sob, shaking his shoulders, cutting deeply into my heart.

He couldn’t tell her about Sophia and Arthur’s death. It broke him. Held him captive. That must be why it took so long for Dessin to tell me. Kane never could.

Suddenly, the sky swarms with bulbous dark clouds and the rain floods the Red Oaks, drenching me head to toe in earthy scented water.

The sight that catches my attention in the midst of the red trees stops my heart. Flutters in my lungs. Fills my eyes with sudden tears.

Kane, wearing a white shirt and suspenders, looks about nine years old; Skylenna, in a long red sun dress, maybe six. They spin, twirl, laugh, and dance in the pounding rain.

I—remembered. The time we played in the fountain in the Chandelier City. I saw flashes of this moment. I *remembered*.

The urge to cry is powerful. A twisting sensation in my gut.

The way Kane chased me around, both times. I watch the children splash in the mud, slipping and cackling. And I can’t believe I could have ever forgotten these precious moments. I hardly had any time with Kane, Dessin, and the other alters. And the time I did have, I’m only just remembering.

This is cruel. It’s painful. It’s being just out of reach of the only thing in this world that I truly want. I truly *need*.

But the memory disappears again, and I have the floating sensation like I’m levitating to the next.

I’m ten, and Kane is thirteen.

“Hands up, Skylittle. You know this,” Kane barks, legs shoulder width apart in a fighting stance.

That nickname. Something warm and gooey sticks to the bottom of my belly.

“It’s no use!” Skylenna throws her arms down, pouting. “I’ll never hurt my daddy! When he gets mean, I just... close my eyes.”

Kane’s arms fall to his sides. “I know,” he breathes. “But one day, you’ll be strong enough to use everything I’ve taught you. You’ll be strong like Dessin.”

“I think you’re making him up. He sounds like an imaginary friend,” she taunts.

Kane laughs. “I wish. You’ll meet him when you’re older.”

And before I can blink, they’re fighting. Ten-year-old me moves fast and exact, swinging her leg out, barely missing his head as Kane drops to the dirt.

No fucking way.

I sit back against the tree in shock. She’s—*I’m*—amazing. Skilled. A trained warrior at the age of ten. Was he really training me as a small child?

It hits me. The time Dessin tried to teach me how to defend myself and give a good “right hook.” He must have been testing me. Seeing if I remembered what Kane taught me all of those years ago.

“Skylittle,” Kane huffs in frustration. “If you’re not strong enough, and they succeed in breaking your mind the way they broke mine, then you’ll become like all the others!”

Skylenna crosses her arms stubbornly. “What happened to the others?”

“Female subjects became catatonic. Suicidal. Do you know what that means?”

She shakes her head.

“Unresponsive. Like being awake and in a coma at the same time. And...” He runs a hand through his hair. “Desperate to end their lives.”

“I don’t like to hurt people,” she mumbles, kicking at the dirt.

That statement has always been true. My entire life, I would rather be hurt than hurt someone. I didn’t know Kane knew it, too; from an early age, he’s been trying to strengthen me, shape me to fit the harsh world we live in. Demechnef. The experiment. My father. And one day, Aurick.

Kane furrows his brow. “What if you need to protect me one day? Or DaiSzek?” He signals a hand to where a young, skinnier version of DaiSzek is sleeping in the shade. I jolt upright, not having noticed him before.

“Would you fight for us?”

“Yes.” She doesn’t hesitate. “I would.”

Like watching a drop of ink spread through water, the memory clears. I’m suddenly on my feet, following a six-year-old Skylenna and nine-year-old Kane running through the Red Oaks. A straight path, sprinting with purpose.

“Over there!” Little Kane points to a tree next to a rabbit hole. “It’s getting louder.”

I strain to hear whatever they’re running toward. A subtle whine. High pitched.

Skylenna makes it to the tree first, gasping as she gazes down into the rabbit hole. Kane falls to his knees to get a better look. The soft whimpering sounds get clearer as I hover above them.

“Oh, Kane,” Skylenna coos. “A puppy!”

Kane scoops a small, black mass of fur from the hole, dusting it off and cleaning mud from its snout.

My jaw drops. Not just black fur. But russet red covers his chest, snout, and all four paws. Little rain boots. I fall to my knees.

Baby DaiSzek.

It’s true, then. We found him together. He was always loyal to us both. Never to Dessin more than me.

“Not a puppy,” Kane says cautiously, looking around. “He’s a RottWeilen.”

Skylenna continues to make sweet, baby noises to the little ball of beast in her arms, not concerned with what the name RottWeilen means.

“Can we keep him?”

“No. Put him down. If the mother comes back and finds humans touching her baby, we’re toast.” Kane scans the forest frantically.

Skylenna makes a face. “No, he was crying.”

And, Jesus, I can see it all over his ten-year-old face. The way his expression melts at her pout. The sigh his chest moves to. He would do anything for this little girl. For me.

“Let me scope out the area and see if I can find her tracks. Stay here.”

I walk with Kane through the trees, watching him follow a set of massive paw prints in the soil. He jogs as they stretch out to longer strides. And it isn’t until we reach the end of the forest line that Kane stops abruptly, his entire body stiffening at a sight in the weeds.

I look on, searching the moss and too-long grass for whatever has him frozen.

Oh, no.

“Is that...?” I ask no one in particular. We gaze down at a few grown RottWeilen corpses. Their fur and some skin melted off.

Chemical warfare.

Kane pinches the bridge of his nose. Sighs.

I remember Dessin telling me this story. *Kane found him just after he was born. His small pack was one of the last hunted down over a decade ago. His mother dug a hole for him to hide in until his pack was killed off.*

Chills ricochet down my spine. Dread knots in my chest. DaiSzek, just like Kane and me, is an orphan. I don’t know why it’s taken seeing his dead pack to let that sad fact click in place.

“What am I going to tell her?” Kane asks the unoccupied forest.

I consider answering. Selfishly, for my need to talk to him again.

“No, it’ll break her heart, Dessin.”

I flinch. Is he... talking to Dessin aloud? I know he’s always spoken to him in his mind. They would go back and forth, judging by the way he would get lost in a silent argument.

He seems to settle on a decision on how to break the news to little Skylenna. But first, he buries each fallen beast. Eyes glossy and red rimmed. I sit by their graves as he prays over them.

“Father God, please take care of this RottWeilen pack. They left behind their baby. And I know you wanted me to find him for a reason. If it’s your path for me, I will always take care of him.” Kane looks down at each filled hole. “I’ll take care of him for you. On my word.”

I rub the back of my neck. This sweet boy was honorable from the day he was born, wasn’t he? He was kind from the beginning. And I hardly had any time with him as an adult.

We rise and walk back to young Skylenna. The sun has started to set, and Kane is dirty and exhausted from digging and burying the pack. He plops down, watching DaiSzek nap in her arms.

“Well?” she asks.

“We can keep him.”

Six-year-old Skylenna does a little shimmy.

“You can name him,” Kane adds, lying on his back, stretching one arm up to pet the small animal. She doesn’t seem to notice the despair creasing

his brow.

Skylenna thinks on this. “Remember that story about the warrior fae and elf?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“What was the boy’s name? The fae warrior?”

Kane grins, wiping his hand across his sweaty brow. “DaiSzek.”

“DaiSzek,” Skylenna repeats. “We’re family now, baby DaiSzek.”



I WATCH OUR CHILDHOOD UNFOLD with sore eyes and a throbbing heart. I can’t seem to look away from the fun we had. The laughter. The bickering. The summer days swimming in the lagoon. The winter mornings with hot apple cider and a warm outdoor fire.

It numbs every inch of me, hardening my soul into solid stone.

Why couldn’t Dessin tell me any of this? I would have believed him. I was aware of the spotty amnesia. Why the obscene secrecy? The worst part is I can’t even ask him about it now. He was my best friend. The man I could tell all of my secrets.

Now, all I have are the broken memories that kept me sane. Ironically, they’re now the hallucinations that are driving me to madness.

The kids are now sitting on the massive red oak by the lagoon, legs dangling from a thick branch supporting their weight. Young DaiSzek stands guard at the edge of the cliff, keeping a close eye on the perimeter.

Wood shavings sprinkle down around my feet, floating through the air from where Kane hovers above my head. He uses a pocket knife to carve a small chunk of wood.

“But why?” Skylenna asks, voice high and fairylike.

“Do you know what a beacon is?” Kane blows away a cloud of wood dust, cleaning around the edges of his work.

She shakes her head.

“It’s a guiding light that helps a ship return home. It’s for—both of us. I don’t know what this experiment will do to me in the long run—or to you. I don’t know if I’ll get mean or harmful. I don’t know if you’ll lose your kind spirit. But, maybe... these beacons can help us find our way back to who we really are. To each other.”

Skylenna nods, but it doesn't seem like she understands. I get up from my seated position to look at what he made from the wood of this tree.

Four carved figurines. A cross, a wolf, and—

My stomach does a flip. The basement. Dessin had me hold these beacons and tell him what I felt. I think back to that day, swallowing down the unsettling emotions rising to the bed of my throat. Holding them again unscrewed the lid on my bottled depression. Pain. Heartbreak.

The beacons must have triggered feelings from my missing past. They reminded me that I've lost something. I lost Kane. I lost the memories of *him*.

A deadened agony pangs through my middle.

Before I can determine how much more of this I can withstand, a fifteen or sixteen-year-old version of me stands on the edge of the cliff facing the lagoon.

But... I remember this. It was after I went to live with Scarlett, after my father put me in the infirmary. Something was missing. I was suffering a horrible loss—grieving, mourning, suffering. I absentmindedly went searching for it. My legs carried me to the Red Oaks, where I stood over the lagoon, tears dripping down my cheeks as I searched the open fall forest.

I couldn't understand why I went looking there. Why my mind was drawn to that one spot... until now. I was looking for Kane. For the boy I lost when my memories faded.

I focus on younger Skylenna until my attention is pulled to the far right. Deep into the trees, I catch a swift movement. Maybe a trick of the eye. But I follow it, standing from my post to race past the trees. A magnetic pull tugging me in that direction, guiding me to a spot in the shadows of the heaviest cluster of red oaks.

A pair of large cinnamon eyes watching the lost, hopeless Skylenna. DaiSzek crouches low under a low-hanging branch, fixated on her every move.

I wonder why he isn't going to her—

A large hand reaches down to stroke the top of DaiSzek's head. Bronze, smooth skin, and a light dusting of hair going up the strong forearm. In the shadows, Kane, the age of nineteen or twenty, lingers. Eyes welling with tears, jaw flexed, and chest moving up and down with great frustration.

I make a noise, a cross between a whimper and a squeak. He's so close to the age I last saw him. Less stubble, but it's the same man. My Kane.

And he's—devastated watching me. He knows what I'm looking for. Why won't he go to her? To *me*?

"Why did you waste so much time with me?" I ask him, my tone shriveled and weak.

He doesn't hear me, of course, only the sound of the fall wind and the water brushing up against the eroded cliff wall. He doesn't hear me calling to him from years ahead of his time.

"I would have believed you!" I raise my voice, the inevitable cry rising in my lungs and draining my heart of any happiness left. "We could have spent your last months talking about these moments. Sharing stories of how you'd rescue me from the basement. Telling me about our picnics and dances in the rain. About the time we saved DaiSzek. About how you buried his family. I could have loved you sooner or realized"—air whooshes from my chest—"I've loved you my whole life!"

Those words, like poisonous daggers piercing my core, rupture the last bit of restraint I had on my tears. They flow without a beginning or end now, enough to fill a bowl. I gaze through blurry sight into those warm, welcoming eyes and scream. Like I've never screamed before. A blind annihilation takes root beneath my surface like an explosion has gone off in my body.

I buckle down in front of him, holding my waist as if to keep my rib cage from scattering around me. My bellows seem to come from every pore, every particle of skin, pumping into the air like a toxic storm of rage and fire.

He took care of me. He sheltered me from the evil around us. He guarded me when there was no one to protect me. And now he's ruined me. Thrown me into a hurricane where I'm hurled around the sea, desperate to stay above water, yet drowning slowly.

"How could you leave me?" My throat burns from the viciousness rising from my middle to my mouth.

Kane remains still, except one fist is now pressed to his mouth, like he's suppressing a cry merely from the sight of younger Skylenna wandering the Red Oaks alone. Desperate to find what she lost.

"I hate you!" I wail, falling to the soft dirt with a thud. Fists pounding the grass without purpose. "I fucking hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!"

A pair of determined arms wrap around my waist, carrying a thick scent of woodsmoke and a salty ocean breeze. I struggle, jostling against their hold with the dangerous goal to seriously harm whoever is trying to restrain me.

But through my tears, I catch a glimpse of the discolored, morphed skin of their hand and wrist. Bright pink and—*burned* but healing. The man sobs against my back, holding me for dear life as he waits for my breakdown to dim.

I recognize his moans muffled by my cloak immediately. Smell his burned, recovering skin. Feel the aura of a chosen brother surrounding our embrace.

My screams turn to gasps, my gasps turning to strong, silent sobbing.

And Niles doesn't let go.

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19. Life Without Sun

“NILES, YOU’RE BLEEDING.”

I perk my head up at the soft, tender voice of the person kneeling in front of me. Ruth wears a white agronomist’s dress, with a belt around the waist and slits around her legs to walk easier.

My mouth parts seeing her again so soon. We share a look that says we don’t have to talk about how I left things with her. Not now.

I glance down at Niles’s arm, still wrapped around me. And she’s right. His burns are seeping fresh blood. I wince because he’s probably in an immeasurable amount of pain.

“Niles,” I rasp, doing my best to unhook his hands without hurting him. “You shouldn’t be here. You’re supposed to be resting.”

But he came at the perfect time. I wonder how badly I would have spiraled without Niles to pull me back.

He uses the back of my cloak to wipe his eyes.

“I couldn’t rest knowing what you were going through,” he says with a wet, strained voice.

I swallow down the zing of pain that statement brings me.

“You’re hurting too,” I say quietly.

“I tried to stop him,” Ruth adds. “But he snuck out in the night. It took me a while to catch up with him.”

We sit for a few seconds in exhausted silence.

I look down at the burns covering Niles’s right arm. Shiny, raw skin glistening in the potent sunlight. “I’m so sorry.”

He grunts. “It’s nothing.” He shifts his arm away to hide it from me. “At least the asylum was good for one thing. Pain tolerance.”

My eyes close slowly. “I should have never brought any of you into this.”

“We would have come anyway,” Ruth says, sitting down beside Niles and me. “Family stays together.”

“I don’t know how to be a part of a family,” I whisper, my eyes flicking to where Kane and DaiSzek once stood, now hollow of that memory. “I never did.”

“We all have our issues with family. Maybe that’s why we’re so perfect together.” Niles’s hands tremble from the obvious pain he’s braving through.

I don't respond. This is all a big nightmare, and I don't even know how to comfort my brother with the pain he's experiencing. The nightmares he most likely has about being burned alive. I don't know how to connect anymore.

"Tell us what you're feeling," Niles says slowly, cautiously. "Tell your family what you're going through right now."

I have the urge to lash out. It's on the tip of my tongue to give in to that foreign fire bristling through my veins. But my gaze slides from my hands to his gorgeous, close-set eyes. And the sincerity punctures a hole in my chest.

"I—I don't know how to talk about it." Where to begin? The hallucinations? Seeing Sophia? My parents? That my childhood was safeguarded by little Kane because our parents depended on him to keep my mind safe from the experiment for some reason.

"Try," Ruth pleads, rubbing the sides of her arms against a new chill hanging in the wind.

"When I was a little girl, my father used to lock me in the basement," I begin, letting the heart-wrenching truth guide me. "I remember shivering at how cold it would get at night. There was no summer breeze to chase away the numbness in my nose and fingers, and feet. But the best feeling was the moment I'd step into the sunlight after being let out."

Ruth and Niles watch me closely, brows knitted together, waiting to understand where I'm going with this.

"My skin would tingle as the cold left my body. It was stepping out of hell and walking into heaven. I could breathe again." Tears gather in my eyes, and I shift, fighting to keep the log in my throat from corrupting my calm voice. "Well, Kane and Dessin were the sun that kept me warm and safe and happy. They were the sun that obliterated that dark, lonely basement. But now—" My voice breaks, croaking to a pathetic whisper. "—now, there is no more sun. And—I'm so *cold*. I'm so cold, and I'll never get warm again. Because my sun is gone. It's dead, and it's not coming back."

I look up at Ruth as she quivers to hold in her silent tears streaming across her olive skin. And Niles tries to wipe his away quickly as if he only just realized he is crying.

"How do I live like this?" I ask them, bile rising in my throat. "How can I survive without the sun? How can anyone go on?"

Ruth opens her mouth to answer but stops herself. Shakes her head with a quivering bottom lip.

Niles's burned hand reaches for mine, gripping it tightly even though I know it causes him pain. "We are no strangers to the darkness, Skylenna. If hell is the only way out of this, we'll crawl—or walk—or run through it together." Niles tries so hard to hold in his cry that he begins to hysterically hiccup between his words. I squeeze his hand back until my fingers turn white.

Ruth reaches to place her hand over ours. "That's right. If you can't survive without the sun, then we'll build a fire."

Their sentiment chips at the iron wall around the soft tissue of my heart... but I've come too far. If I stop to grieve in their arms, then I'll never get back up. The weight of the loss would crush me. And I'm not done searching yet.

I pull my hand away from them briskly.

"Stay with us," Ruth begs, trying so hard to keep the tears at bay it nearly breaks my spirit.

"We'll take care of you." Niles is sitting up, wincing as he prepares for me to flee.

Take care of me? God, if only they knew how hard I heavily relied on Dessin for that same assurance. Take care of me. Protect me. Keep me happy. I leaned on him, weak and defenseless. He carried every threat, every danger on his back.

And eventually, it broke.

Carrying my burdens as well as his own was too much to bear. I can't imagine what they did to him. How he coped when he was sitting in that asylum, and I was in Aurick's house.

I lift my chin, cold determination strengthening the muscles in my back. I will never rely on anyone to take care of me again. Ironically, I've known how to fight all along. He gave me the tools I needed to protect myself, but they were buried deep. I won't be the weak, shy Skylenna that wouldn't fight Aurick back when he struck me down. I won't be afraid to fight for my life or the people I love ever again.

I will be equal to or more powerful than Dessin ever was.

I will be the dragon that flies over men.

My legs straighten out as I stand tall, lifting my archer's hood over my head. "One day, I'll come back," I say to them without making eye contact.

“But there’s something I have to do. And I can’t come home to you until it’s done.”

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20. The Guilt That Consumed Him

THE REMAINING PILES OF ASH skitter over my boots.

I stand before what's left of Scarlett's house. A giant charcoal shadow stains the grass in front of me, marking the earth with her tragic death.

I never thought I'd come back here. But there's one thing I have to see for myself. One last memory I need the details to.

The burns on Kane's back. He said he was here that day.

Panic and feverish nausea brew in my core. Sweat drips down the length of my spine, dampening my hands and slithering around the follicles of my hair.

I need this to be quick. In and out. No breakdowns. No lingering on the images I've tried desperately to forget. I will only gaze upon what I don't remember.

Kneeling on the grass, my knuckles graze the last bits of ash sprinkled around the area. I wait for the pulse, the shift in reality. But it doesn't happen as quickly as before. It lingers in the back of my mind, tickling my subconscious. The anxiety of it all builds in my lungs, strangling my windpipes.

Scarlett, please forgive me for digging up this last memory.

It's blocked for a reason. I don't even like thinking about this day, much less relieving it in a vivid hallucination.

Come on. I grip the ash tighter, willing myself to fall back into that moment. Doing my best to relax. To not be afraid of what I might see.

"Wait here. I'll get the blueberries." I hear my own voice whispering in the wind. Words I spoke moments before she ended it all.

"I'll be right back. It'll be fine. We'll be okay."

My stomach lurches with hot bile. I clench the ash harder, digging my nails into my palms.

Get this over with, dammit!

I take a deep breath, giving in to the voices, to the pain that is inevitable. And it's like stepping into a warm bathtub. I look up to see Scarlett's old house swallowed in a mountain of flames. Orange and yellows blazing with a dark cloud of smoke curling toward the sky.

Just as I take a step toward the permeating heat, loud footsteps thump behind me, snagging my attention from the fire.

“No!” A voice. Loud. Booming. A feeling like coming home after a long journey. *His* voice.

Kane races like a bolt of lightning toward me, eyes transfixed on the horror house coming to an explosive end.

I turn to the side, watching him run into the house that is moments from burning to the ground. And even though I’m not certain if these memories can hurt me or not, I run in after him.

The smoke envelops me, filling my lungs but not doing any harm. I breathe in hesitantly as I watch him cough and heave, jumping over shreds of burning carpet, dodging wooden beams falling from the ceiling. And it’s how I would imagine stepping foot into hell. The flames rage on, flailing around the room without purpose or direction. The singeing heat licks my skin without leaving marks. It’s an oven trying to roast him alive.

Kane calls for me. For her.

“Skylenna!” He searches each room like a madman. “Oh, god. Oh my god!”

And with the orange light radiating through the house, I see the tears streaking down his face, dripping from his chin to his neck.

I want to reach for him, tell him it’ll be okay. I’ll be okay. But we look down at the same time, right in front of the closet door; my younger body is moments away from being eaten by the angry fire. And—

“Oh my god,” I shriek, throwing my hand over my mouth, turning away from the image I’ve tried so hard to forget.

The noose.

Scarlett.

My hand wrapped around hers.

Kane falls to his knees, suddenly unconcerned with the fire ripping through the house. His face is twisted in the most excruciating despair I’ve ever seen on him.

“No,” he utters with a quivering voice. “*Scarlett.*”

He checks her pulse with a shaking hand, then quickly pulls it away with wide eyes filling with more tears.

I lower myself next to him, unable to put a perimeter around this kind of pain. Watching him witness one of the worst days of my life. It’s unimaginable.

Kane hesitates before he touches Scarlett’s hand, joined loosely with young Skylenna’s. It cripples him to slowly part their fingers, pulling one

deceased twin from the living one. He chokes on a sob, using his other hand to press over his lips. Containing the cry that wants to explode from his chest. He separates them. Separates *us*.

As the house rumbles and groans, Kane scoops up Skylenna, lifting her from the bedroom floor, taking off in a fierce run away from the heat. I take off with them, watching him mumble something over and over again, jumping through the fire with her in his arms until we're all outside, greeted by the cool breeze of winter. He sets her on the grass, hovering over her as he holds her hands.

"I'm so sorry. Oh, god, honey, I'm so fucking sorry." He repeats this over and over before he's up again, sprinting in the house for Scarlett's body.

I look down at Skylenna, sleeping, completely unaware that her childhood best friend had saved her life. The man that would cross oceans, run through fire, take a sickle in the chest for her. She coughs, ridding her lungs of the smoke.

The bellows of a grown man jolt me upright. I twist my body toward the house, remembering what he said happened when he went back in for Scarlett's body. Terror pools in my stomach, adrenaline pulsing through my veins, and I'm fumbling back into the house. Even though I know he survives it, I can't let him go in alone.

I'm reminded of Niles. The way he threw himself in the flames to release DaiSzek because I left him there. I abandoned my own mission.

I won't let Kane burn alone.

Tears spring to my eyes as I stare down at him, crushed and struggling under the beams of the collapsed ceiling. He thrashes and howls in agony as it eats through his skin.

I drop to my knees next to his face, waiting for him to rise from the debris. But—he doesn't. He gasps in pain and exhaustion, unable to stand up. I wince, eyes painfully wide, while I watch him suffer.

He's going to die. Why isn't he pulling himself out?

It's a blow to my lungs, a whip of terror slicing through my soul.

"Kane," I utter in disbelief. "You and your alters are the strongest men I have ever met. You have faced greater obstacles than this. You can do anything you set your mind to. So, get up and *fight!*"

The fear fuels every muscle, every pump of blood, and I release a hidden urge of power trapped in my chest.

I scream at the top of my lungs.

It feels like an animal's roar has climbed out of my body, sending a shock wave through the heated air, cutting into the devouring flames.

And Kane looks up at me, an instant locking of eyes. A gaze that sinks to the bottom of my stomach, nearly choking the oxygen from my lungs.

But he quickly looks away, growling as he lifts himself out of the flaming beams. One foot in front of the other, and he's barreling out of the house with me, coughing hysterically, grunting, dodging the collapsing ceiling. The moment we reach the open grass and trees, I can hear the house crumble to the ground. A puff of smoke and soot and ash are flying freely around us. And Kane falls next to young Skylenna's sleeping body, groaning in horrendous amounts of searing pain from his burned back.

He reaches for her limp hand and gasps for breath.

"It's my fault," he rasps. "I'll never fucking forgive myself. It's my fault. I should have left the asylum sooner to check on you. Oh, god, not Scarlett. It's my fucking fault!" he roars in agony, filling the smoky skies with his regret and guilt.

At this angle in the winter sun, I notice that his hair has been dripping with water. Not just from sweat, but his eyes are bloodshot, and his skin has lost its bronze glow.

He came from the simulated drowning treatment.

I force the bile back down my throat and try not to wretch. Not only was he torturing himself for what happened here, but he ran all this way after enduring hell in the asylum.

His words trigger something Dessin once said to me. After he tried to teach me how to give a good right hook outside of the asylum, I told him a theory. Something that made us more alike than I thought.

"I can't talk about Scarlett... about what happened to her, because I can't face what I have done. Speaking about the day she died would be like holding up a mirror and seeing myself for the villain I truly am. I cannot forgive myself, and that guilt is burning me from the inside out. I know I recognize that feeling in you. The guilt of something you've done or someone you've hurt. I can see it when I look into your eyes, just as you can see it when you look into mine."

It was his answer that unlocks what I'm seeing now.

"There is much irony in your words. One day, you'll understand."

This is the guilt Dessin and Kane have spoken about. Something he couldn't forgive himself for. Not being here for me, for Scarlett when we needed him most. He carried that responsibility and beat himself up when he failed or thought he did.

I sink to the grass with my hands clutching my chest.

"This wasn't your fault," I croak. "Scarlett made this choice. You shouldn't have had to carry this guilt to your—*grave*."

My hands shake, and a cold vehemence unravels within me. An awakening. I'm suddenly desperate to hurt all who've harmed this man in any way. Urgent to fulfill the promises and threats he was never able to exact.

The shadows of my weak, kind conscience break away in shards that could severely wound. My gentle hand fizzling into a ghost of a memory. My urge to always be compassionate, even to those who don't deserve it, simply shrivels up and dies.

And I become something else entirely.

It only takes a brief moment to shift focus and narrow in on the only place I'd like to start exacting Dessin's threats.

Only one place I'd find great pleasure in unleashing this broken, twisted, unmistakably vicious new wrath of mine.

The Emerald Lake Asylum.

21. The Newest... Patient Thirteen

THEY GRIP MY ELBOWS LIKE I was brought in against my will. Like I might fight back, try to flee, scream and thrash around like a victim.

But I am exactly where I want to be.

It started with me weeping like a tenderhearted little girl in the church pews. Praying loud enough for the priest to join me. The same one that thought I could hear God's voice in my head. The one that finally brought Judas to my room when we admitted ourselves.

It ended with him touching my shaking hand, revealing to me a vivid hallucination of the priest as a little boy, praying that his mother might finally die as she was suffering greatly from consumption. Coughing up blood, gurgling with each breath she took.

He just wanted her suffering to end.

I didn't allow myself to feel badly or morally sour for using this memory against him. Not even when I gasped and told him that God showed me a vision of young Juliessa dancing in heaven, singing to the tulips like she did when he was a boy. That she was no longer in pain.

The priest was caught off guard, sure, but he didn't have a moment of doubt. Instead, he collapsed to his knees, whimpering about how he missed his momma. He went on and on about how this was a miracle, a bright light cast down from the lord.

I told him how God wanted me in the asylum. That my presence would cleanse the evil from each patient. That I, myself, needed cleansing. God needed his vessel to be pure and without any temptation of sin.

The priest ate it up and nodded eagerly at my command.

The rest happened in a blur. He brought me to the asylum and wrote a report and diagnosis of the treatments I'd receive. And that since I was without my savage travel companion, I wasn't a danger to anyone. I would cooperate. I was not to be executed for the crimes Dessin committed.

And now, as I am dragged through the halls of the asylum, I breathe in the deceiving scent of wood and leather, only to detect that ripe stench of body odor and stale urine.

I feel no fear or debilitating anxiety. Only a cold, detached sense of calm.

The stone walls vibrate with the screams of the patients. They echo with the dead that never made it out, that still linger from room to room. I can

feel it blistering over my skin, the dire memories that beg for me to step through their veil. The urgency to see each injustice happen over the years, to watch the torture evolve into what they are now.

But I have a plan, and I must stay focused.

Conformists spin around to see my arrival, mouths dropping open in shock that I'm alone. Or perhaps, it's the presence of death and destruction permeating from my soul. Maybe it's the way my lips curve into a maniacal smile or the way my eyes glint with the promise of torment. Not mine, and not the other patients, but *theirs*.

They whisper and gawk at me being dragged past each room by my elbows. The orderlies yanking me are not gentle. Their touch will likely leave nasty bruises. The thought only fills my belly with satisfaction. Because each mark they make on my body, I will return tenfold.

A swish of short, raven-black hair catches my attention. A devious smirk on her face that says, *oh, I'm going to have fun with you this time around*.

She has no idea. Meridei, out of everyone here, is the person I am most excited to see.

The person I am most excited to play with.

After being stripped of the clothes that Runa and Asena gave to me, hosed down with ice-cold water, and given a white nightgown and grippy socks to wear—we stop in front of the thirteenth room.

There is only one moment that my stomach does an unhappy flip. My arteries stop pumping. It's the moment I'm shoved inside, where *he* once stood, where *he* was once chained, where *he* once suffered.

My fingernails scrape against the stone floor. On all fours, I look over my shoulder at the orderly glaring at me. "We all used to fear this room. How does it feel to ruin that reputation?"

The door slams and I'm left on the floor, with simmering excitement for vengeance flaring hot inside of me.

"It feels fucking amazing."



I'M HESITANT TO MOVE THROUGH this room. The air is heavy and almost suffocating to try to breathe in. The memories seem to be physical entities that I can't see but can *feel* pressing against my skin like a warm, wet

bubble. I take a cautious look around. At the iron bed bolted to the floor, the shackles for wrists and ankles.

I scoff. They didn't bother locking me to the bed, securing the threat in the thirteenth room properly. They don't see me as a danger. They see me as a plaything they can work out their frustrations on. A laughable patient that they've hated since I stepped foot in this asylum as a conformist.

My eyes scroll over the smoky, dimly lit room once more, with the aged brass gas lanterns, the concrete floor, and the doorway to the small washroom.

I can almost catch his lingering scent of cedar, sandalwood, and manipulation. The sensation traveling up my nostrils and to my brain leaves me grinding my teeth together. It reminds me of gushing blood, sweat, and Dessin's pale face as his eyes drained of all light.

The memories claw at my chest, begging me to give in to the building pressure, like waiting for an ocean wave to fall over my head. It blisters over my skin uncomfortably as I try to resist it. I'm practicing control. That's the advice Dessin would have given to me. To play with the ability, test its perimeter, and push the limits.

Without warning, Dessin's growls fill the room and the sound of restrained agony. The same tone I heard when he was being treated in his room for throwing a fit. The time they called me in, and I had to stop him from crippling the orderlies that held him down.

"This is what you wanted all along, isn't it?" I ask the memory of Dessin swirling around the room like a puff of cigar smoke. "For me to remember you? Remember Kane? But you must have known that the only way for me to use this disorder, these vivid hallucinations, would be for them to break me the way they broke you."

It occurs to me that he didn't know how much he meant to me.

"How could you not know that losing you would be the only way I'd break? The only thing that would be far too much for my mind to handle?"

The little bit of emotion I let slip past my concrete barriers pulls me into a memory.

Dessin sits on the bed, head bowed, hands clasped, elbows resting on knees. And he's in his white uniform.

"She seems happy," he says quietly, talking to someone.

I spin around, looking for the recipient of his conversation. But I'm the only one here. The room is entirely empty.

“At least we can rest knowing that Aurick won’t make a move until she’s of age.” Dessin nods, looking to his feet. “Yes, but he isn’t his father. His only redeeming trait is that he shows signs of having remorse. A conscience.”

Kane must be the other person in this conversation.

I take a step back, watching him with burning eyes and a locked jaw.

“I’ll keep watching, and so will DaiSzek. But it’s been quiet.” His brow furrows, and I realize how much I missed that. Analyzing his facial features, the way he’d arch his brow or roll his eyes. It was fascinating to me seeing what made him tick. What brought feeling from that cold exterior. “I noticed that too. There’s a strong chance that they’ve already broken Scarlett.”

My spine molds into a steel rod. Was Scarlett like me before she died? A female subject that has visual and auditory delusions? I think back to her behavior. The violent outbursts, the way she’d scrub her body in the shower as if she was reliving her abuse.

I gasp. *Oh my god.* She was seeing her own memories, her own trauma playing back. That’s why she would act out, throw fits, and go completely still in thought. I even caught her talking to herself on more than one occasion.

“We’ll keep an eye on her too. She didn’t”—he exhales sadly—“she didn’t have you growing up to protect her from the experiment. It makes sense that she’d show the same signs of self-harm as the other subjects. Hopefully, having Skylenna living with her will change things.”

“Holy shit,” I breathe. That’s why Kane felt so guilty. They were trying to protect us both. And he didn’t get there in time.

I slip out of the void, sinking back into reality with a knot in my stomach. With a few short steps, I lower myself to his bed. My new bed, for a short while. It’s firm, cheap, and slightly uncomfortable. And his presence is all around me.

It’s all fucking around me.

Through the thick wall, I hear a woman crying. Muffled and feminine. A slow breakdown in room twelve. My head perks up. It’s not easy, but the pressure around me is the signal I need that this is also another memory. Hearing a woman weep through this—

My eyes flick to the man sitting on the bed in front of me. Dessin is listening to this woman cry. His jaw is flexed, eyes filled with ruthless fury,

and his chest moves up and down rapidly. I press my ear against the stone wall and faintly recognize the voice.

Me.

I'm the one crying on the other side. When Dessin and I came back to find Judas. I sobbed my first night here; I was so scared. And he heard me.

I watch as Dessin places his large hand against the wall, around the same place my hand touched on the other side.

He was here with me all along.

Never letting me burn alone.

I fall back on the bed, curling against the iron railings and fighting the flashbacks of his death. I can feel myself slowly slipping into the agonizing depression, that endless sea of numbness. But I have to do this. Accomplish what I came here for. For Dessin. For Kane. For every alter that suffered the cruelty of these horrible people.

Then, I can rest. Then, I can finally sleep.

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22. Waking The Dragon

MY EYES FLUTTER OPEN BEFORE they reach the thirteenth door.

It's a thrumming in my veins, a skip in my heartbeat, a buzzing sensation under my flesh that warns me a threat is closing in.

The giant door creaks and rattles from the opening locks, and Suseas steps inside, followed by Meridei. I watch them enter with lowered lids and a bored expression.

Suseas walks to me woodenly, with purpose and conviction. That lanky posture, those wrinkled, pursed lips. She wears her judgment for others like it's a fashion statement.

She doesn't give me the chance to sit up as the back of her hand whips across my cheek. Shock and a sharp sting zing across the left side of my face. Involuntary tears flood my eyes. And I have to restrain myself from smiling.

That's one.

"Never in my career has anyone managed to humiliate me this way. *Never.*" Suseas's face turns a bright-apple red. "You should have done everyone a favor out on your little forest adventure and died."

I look up at her slowly, memorizing the details of her pinched face. Tracing the lines of the crow's-feet around her eyes and lips. Imagining the many ways I'm going to make her bleed.

"But... I missed you, Suseas." My pleasant, sweet tone doesn't match the coldness in my eyes. I sit up slowly, never breaking the long contact of our glares. "Didn't you miss me?"

She backhands me again, this time significantly harder. The impact rattles my teeth, and I can almost taste the cigarette ash on her knuckles. Amusement and a slow trickle of rage unfurl in my stomach.

"You'll be singing a different tune when Meridei starts your treatments, Miss Ambrose."

My eyes glide to Meridei. "Is that true?"

She half smirks. Nods twice.

I wet my lips, stretch my arms, and yawn. "What are we waiting for? Shall we begin?"

The two women exchange a look. It takes great discipline not to let the memories hanging around them like a smoky atmosphere invade my head. There will be time for that. Time to sift through their most intimate

moments, understand them, collect private details, and eventually... *exploit*. I challenge myself to be patient. Dessin certainly was. He took his time with prey. He valued each moment he'd have to get ten steps ahead, and that's exactly what I will do.

"I know one of your favorite treatments was being whipped," Meridei says tauntingly. "I think we'll start with that."

Suseas nods her head with approval, lightly touching Meridei's shoulder like a proud mother. I look at their navy-blue uniforms, pale skin, and tiny waists. My, oh my. Hard to believe that I used to live this way, only for a short while.

The orderlies retrieve me quickly, handling me like a dirty rag they have to dispose of. I'm shoved, jerked, called demeaning names, and thrown into the flogging room. The echoes of cries throughout the history of this area bang around my head. Women whining, begging for mercy. Men coughing on their moans. And... children. I shift away from that void and close off my senses so I can focus on what comes next.

Just like last time, I'm stripped of my gown, attached to the chains hanging from the ceiling, and reeled upward to dangle a couple of inches above the floor. And I can remember it so clearly, without letting the void pull me in. It's the reminder of that wall. The one Dessin was shackled to. Made to watch my beating, listening to my whimpers. What did he say to them when he was at his wits' end?

"*Meridei!*" I hear his voice crack through the room. It's enough to make me flinch. My eyes dart around to search for him. And I know I should be used to it by now, but sadness pricks behind my eyes, and disappointment settles like spoiled food in my stomach.

If only he'd storm through that door right now. If only this nightmare were all in my head.

"*Another move and I will rip that arm off with my teeth.*" His voice rings through the room like a trumpet of death. It was Dessin's threat to Meridei when she continued whipping me. The memory tickles the back of my mind.

I store his promise away in a safe place.

"I'll admit. The last time I had you here, I was sure your lover was going to gut me—you know, find a way to break out of his shackles. I thought if he was capable of bringing me and many others to the brink of death with food poisoning, what would he do to me now? I went easy on

you for that very reason.” She drums her fingers against her chin. “Isn’t that funny? He didn’t lay a finger on me. Must not have given a damn about you; otherwise, I would have gotten it when you two escaped the second time.”

Or, he had far more pressing issues to take care of.

I watch her without blinking. “Are you excited to do your worst?”

Meridei glances up at me, taking her time choosing the whip. For the first time, I notice how skinny her arms are. Bony, without an inch of fat or muscle. They would be easy to twist behind her back until I heard something crack.

“I’m positively levitating.”

“Good,” I say, letting my shoulders relax. “There’s no one here to hold you back.”

“No, there is not.” She makes a snapping sound with the leather of her whip, then winds back her arm and begins.

The first two strikes I have trouble ignoring. The urge to contract all of my muscles, wince, shriek, and gasp at the blinding, white-hot sting of pain is all-consuming.

But then I see him.

At first, it’s only a shadow near the door. Giant and ferocious. A poltergeist of darkness and brooding tension. But as the whip tears flesh, that shadow becomes a detailed beast. Black shiny fur with russet patches on his chest and paws.

And those big cinnamon eyes.

Hello, sweet boy.

DaiSzek huffs impatiently. A low, husky sound in the bed of his throat.

I stop feeling the agonizing pulse of her weapon that slices through my skin and up the length of my spine. My wrists simply slip out of their restraints. My feet hit the floor. And I walk away from her grunts of tormenting passion.

DaiSzek bows to me, offering his back for me to climb onto. A wave of relief washes over my scalp. Dessin was able to protect himself with alters that could withstand different forms of pain. My mind is able to walk away and go someplace else.

I swing my leg over his back and wrap my arms around his neck. He rises slowly, then shoots forward like a bird cutting through the clouds. He pays no respect to the wall as we dissolve right through it. And like last

time, in the cage that Albatross kept me in, we blink from existence, reality draining from sight.

DaiSzek gallops through tall grass, breezing through a gorgeous plain of mountains, wisteria, tall evergreen trees, and lilac flowers by the dozens.

The sun is beaming down on us, mixing waves of heat with the blustering wind. His strides slow down as he drops me off near the center. I hop off, looking around the meadow, waiting to see his face.

“Do you want to talk about it?” the young boy calls behind me. Young Kane jogs through the tall grass with a gentle smile on his face.

But I can’t bring myself to smile back. It’s the first time after all of this that I can finally talk to him, and he can hear me. He can respond.

“A lot’s happened,” I murmur.

“I see.” He signals for me to sit down with him. “I bought you more lavender. For stress.” His small hand reaches out to hand me the bundle of herbs. I push down the knot of emotion lodging in my throat.

I breathe in the herbs. “You left me.” My words crumple at my feet. And I avoid his dark eyes, looking at the purple wisteria.

“Did I?”

I nod.

“I’m sorry, Skylittle,” he mutters.

I frown deeply. That nickname burrows into my heart.

“I haven’t—” My words get stuck, so I swallow and try again. “I haven’t been taking it well. In fact, I’ve been turning into something else. Something cold and dark.”

Kane picks at the grass, twisting it in his fingers.

“Being back at the asylum makes me feel closer to you somehow. Makes me understand you a little better, I think.” I shake my head. “But I’m so angry all the time. So mad. So *hurt*.”

Kane’s quiet for a minute. “How did I die?”

I look away. *Christ, can I even talk about this with him without having another meltdown?*

“It was my fault.” The sentence comes out heavy and wobbly in my throat.

“Skylenna...” He waits until I look at him. “How did I die?”

“You were—it was a sickle. You were—” I breathe out loudly, struggling to take in a steady breath. “It was a battle by the ocean—it happened so fast. We were—there were babies, and you—”

"I was stabbed," he finishes for me.

It takes everything in me not to cry.

"And you saw it happen?"

My head moves an inch, his only indication that I mean to nod.

His throat bobs. "I wish you didn't have to be there. I've only ever wanted to protect you, Skylittle."

"I know."

"Did you get to say goodbye?"

"Yes." I don't even remember what I said. I don't want to remember.

"You died—in my arms, Kane."

He stares at me for a long moment. And there is so much he wants to say. So much he's been waiting to tell me.

"Was I buried by my family?" he asks.

"Mm-hmm."

"And Jack?"

My mouth parts. "What are you exactly? Here in Ambrose Oasis."

"Your memories of me. All of them as a child. Everything I would have said and how I would have said it. All in the safe, sacred part of your mind."

"A hallucination," I clarify.

"I guess."

I smooth the lines of my forehead. Being here is as close to heaven as I may ever get. Especially after I get through the asylum.

"I've seen a lot from our childhood. I saw how you took care of me and shielded me from the experiment. But—I don't understand why you had to keep all of it a secret. It's not like I wouldn't have believed you. I mean, it probably would have taken some convincing... but you and Dessin went through huge lengths to keep me blind."

Young Kane lifts his head. "Then you haven't seen everything yet."

"I've seen enough."

"Have you been back to the day your father beat you? The day I ran miles to bring you to the infirmary?" The wind brushes over his soft brown hair. And the sun glints in his eyes, just right, making him look so young and yet so wise.

I shake my head.

"That's the key," he says quietly. "That's why they kept their secrets."

I search my brain for those memories. But nothing significant comes up. After I get out of the asylum, I'll have to visit my father's house again. Go into that living room and find the missing piece that will make all of this make sense.

"We didn't know Scarlett was part of the experiment, y'know," Kane adds, crossing his arms over his knees. "When your parents separated you... it was assumed that you were Vlademur's only target. But he kept the information of what they were doing to Violet and Scarlett hidden. It's why we didn't check on her, protect her from the experiment too."

I take a deep breath. "I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"But we must!" Young Kane leans forward, trying to get my attention. "Vlademur was sick. He discovered my weakness when I rescued you from your father. That was his end goal. He knew he couldn't build two successful subjects without a fail-safe. Think—how does he control two people that can defeat an army from the inside? How does he keep the two subjects from ruining him?"

I shrug.

"He finds their weakness and uses it against them to keep them in line. It's why I had to leave, turn myself into the asylum. It's why—" He stops and looks over his shoulder at DaiSzek coming back for me.

Meridei's beating must be ending. I wince at the pain I'm going to experience when I come back to my body.

"I wish I didn't have to go," I mutter.

He stands with me. "Go back to Jack's house when you're ready. You need to see how this all ends."



MY EYES PEEL OPEN SLOWLY, like the inside of my lids are coated in glue.

"How the fuck did you do that? Huh?" Meridei is slumped over in front of me. Her whip strewn out in front of her feet. A thin, oily layer of sweat covering her forehead, chest, and arms.

I blink several times before my vision clears.

"You didn't even flinch." She's out of breath. Her right hand trembles. How long has she been trying to get a reaction out of me?

I make a mistake when I look down at my body. Bright red, swollen, and decorated with shiny blisters and bruising welts. She beat me senseless.

The pain topples over me like a rogue wave. My nerve endings wake back up, and I'm lit on fire. It takes every last atom of control and willpower I have left not to start screaming. And something else. An urge to sink my claws into her mind. A violent need to use my new abilities to disrupt her thoughts, memories, and brain, only I can't figure out how to do it.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" I ask in mild boredom.

She continues breathing heavily, glaring at me with defeated agitation.

"You have come a long way from that scared, overly sensitive conformist you once were, haven't you?" Meridei struggles to stand up straighter. "I am going to relish in the challenge to break you. Because, though you may have been too stubborn to cry here, I hear a scalding bath is an absolute cruelty to someone who has just been whipped."

I wouldn't hold your breath. I am already broken.

"I look forward to it." Though I sound perfectly calm, these are the only words I can muster through the searing pain gnawing on my flesh and bone from head to toe.

She grimaces at me before heading toward the door.

"Oh, and Meridei?" I call out, waiting for her to stop and turn. "When you go home tonight, don't forget to tell your family that you love them."

At first, I'm sure my words rendered her speechless. But then she laughs. Loudly. Like a crow in heat. It's off-putting and unnatural.

The guards even make faces as they enter the room to take me down from my chains. And with that sight of her black bob haircut bouncing down the hallway, I think... *Mercy.*

That was me giving her mercy.



THE PORCELAIN BATHTUB STEAMS EXCESSIVELY. In fact, the entire room is foggy from it. The slightest bit of heat singes my blisters and welts.

I don't know how I'll get through the scalding bath from hell.

But I do. It's brutal and closely compared to being thrown into a volcano. And that night, I hardly got any sleep. Just lying on the burned, blistering areas was another form of torture. Each time I turned, I'd wake in a screaming fit. The sheets were like knives slowly carving up my flesh. And though the room was cold, it felt like I was still sitting in that bath. Still burning alone.

I wished that Dessin was there to make me laugh or threaten to burn the place down. I wished to smell his skin again, to feel the softness of his lips, or to see that look he got when he was preparing to outsmart someone in a fight.

Each day, Meridei finds new ways to hurt me. Whether it's eating in front of me without keeping me fed, hosing me down with cold water at first light, or keeping me tied to a chair for hours on end.

But this morning, she has grown decidedly impatient.

I hiss as the orderlies shove me out of bed and drag me to my least favorite treatment.

The simulated drowning.

My eyes are barely open, my mouth dry and cottony. It's difficult to process how fast things have escalated when my head is locked in the metal clamps and my hands are bound behind my back.

Meridei is grinning to herself.

"Good morning," she purrs, beaming at the tub of cold water.

I grimace, not in the mood to play with her today. My knees burn against the tiled floor, sore and quivering under my weight. I decide immediately that I'll have to escape to Ambrose Oasis right away. I've always feared this treatment more than the others. Maybe watching Chekiss go through this my first day was scarring long term. Either way, this week has left me brittle with thinning patience that might give out at any moment.

I take in a deep breath, waiting for Meridei to begin. But a beat of silence makes me look up, meeting her beady eyes.

"I never asked where the real Patient Thirteen is," Meridei says coolly. "Did he—get bored with you?"

My teeth scrape against each other. I say nothing.

"Hmm, I thought so." She fiddles with the handle on the control panel. "Did I ever tell you about the time we initiated your raggedy twin sister?"

The thought wisps through my mind quickly. The isolation tank. The way they forced me to endure a treatment. Had they done that to Scarlett too?

"She was like you in the way—she didn't care for closed spaces. We didn't have the isolation tank at the time. But we did have this tub." The wicked intent in her tone is laid on thick. It's that curve of her voice, the taunting pitch that crawls under my skin, making me itch to wrap my hands around her throat.

“She had an interesting trauma response. At first, it was like she had dissociated from it entirely. She let us lock her in the contraption without fighting back.” Meridei laughs quietly to herself. “But then when we started, it was like she reverted back to her childlike mindset. She begged and cried like a five-year-old.”

The muscles in my chest and back vibrate with lethal, blinding fury. *How fucking dare they.* These monstrous, insensitive human beings have never experienced half of the horror at such a young age that Scarlett went through. To put her through that after all she endured is nothing short of evil.

And it’s there again. That primal, paranormal urge to slip past her mental defenses and—corrupt her mind. I just don’t know how to do it.

The image of Scarlett in my place flashes through me, frigid and nauseating. Then, it’s as if the floor materializes from under my legs, my body turning to vapor, and I’m there. In that hallway with Scarlett and her tormentors.

I’m watching them trick her into the room, and there’s a ghost of a smile playing across her lips like she’s relieved to finally be accepted. It only takes her a few moments to put the pieces together. As she realizes what’s going on, her entire body goes limp. And those emerald-green eyes glaze over. I hear their laughter echoing off the tiled surfaces, evil, sinister, cruel joy rumbling from their chests at her expense.

The bottom half of Scarlett’s straight hair gets wet first. It takes her a moment to adjust, to focus on the water rising in the tub before she goes ballistic. And her expression—the frown that tugs at her full lips, the back-and-forth frenzy of her gaze as she realizes she’s been deceived—shatters my heart.

I choke on my exhale as my sister cries out like a child being beaten. I have to look away as they lock her head into place and begin lowering her to the water. But there’s a sloshing sound in my ears, and my sight turns blurry.

My hands instinctively cover my ears to block out the sounds of her gurgling, choking, and splashing. But it isn’t enough. The noise is within my own mind. I can’t escape it.

With one hand on my chest, I try to control my breathing. *Am I having a panic attack?* The air in my chest turns heavy. Uncomfortable. *In, out, in, out.* But the tightness only gets worse. And then it starts to burn.

I don't know if this is my reaction to Scarlett's memory, but panic bites into my bones. A response I can't control. Blood rushes violently through my neck, pumping into my chest until I feel everything locking up.

I shut my eyes at the vision of Scarlett being dunked in the tub. It's as if it's happening to me too. Like merely being next to her while she suffers is bringing me the same awful sensations. I squirm to get away but remember that I, too, am stuck here.

My breath rattles in my chest like loose hardware, and I'm gasping uncontrollably. *Get it together! It's only a memory!*

I need to get out of here, leave this memory, because—

I exit the void, regaining enough control to slip back into the present. And for a moment, I think I'm safe. I'm back. I'm calm. Until I open my eyes and realize I'm underwater. And the urge to take a breath swells inside me.

Did Meridei really start the treatment while I was stuck in another memory? I'm being drowned, and I don't know how long she's kept me under. My mouth is gaping open, desperate to find air to reel back into my lungs. But utter blackness smudges my vision, staining the outer edges of the tub and the glimmering blue water.

My core buckles first, convulsing inwardly as I let my survival instincts take over. *How long have I been under? Why isn't she bringing me back up?*

Every muscle tightens, activates, and goes completely ballistic.

Pull me back up!

I think of Chekiss. Of all the moments he suffered in this tub. I can fight at least a fraction of the time he endured this madness.

How did you do this, Chekiss?

My face bunches together in agony. The tub clanks and jostles as I use all of my strength to break free. Only, this contraption isn't forgiving. And I am out of air.

My limbs go numb first, then everything seems to float. My body, hollow and disconnected, rises like a bubble in a bathtub. The slow banging of my heartbeat turns sluggish and uncertain as if forgetting to beat on cue. And that's it. I'm no longer in the water but looking down at myself, hair splayed across the tub, golden and wispy.

It's unreal. A painting of another world I'm no longer a part of. I can gaze upon it, observe it from afar, but no longer interact.

I somehow turn for the door and leave. My legs don't move, there aren't any footsteps, yet I seem to sift through the air. Not float, not fly, but glide.

With everything I've seen lately, I'm not sure what to believe. Is this real? Did I... *die*?

I find the use of my legs, find that I'm more comfortable using them even though I no longer need to. And I start running down the hallway, dry and in a soft white dress, like the ones I used to wear as a child. My bare feet patter along the black-and-white tiles and the asylum is deserted, silent for the first time since I arrived, with a peaceful white glow around the edges of my sight.

It's as though the world has fallen asleep. And I'm the only one still awake.

"Looking for someone?"

This—*this* isn't a memory. It isn't a hallucination of Ambrose Oasis. It isn't a figment of my delusions. It isn't a tangible memory that can't interact with me. I don't know how I know this, but I am certain. I've stepped out of my skin, out of my mind plagued with depression and trauma and irreversible damage.

And I'm fully aware that the voice behind me is *real*.

Deep, strong, warm, and familiar. It saturates the backs of my arms in goose bumps. It softens my face and loosens my jaw.

I turn around and instantly slap my hand over my mouth, squeezing my eyes shut. I fall against the wall at my back.

"Oh my god," I gasp, shaking my head without looking at him.

"Skylenna." He's closer now. So close. Real. Real. *Real*.

I can't stop shaking. Can't open my eyes out of fear that he'll be gone again. He'll vanish, and that coldness will sweep in once more and finish freezing my heart.

"Tell me you remember now," he says calmly, that warm breath brushing over my face. "Tell me you remember me, baby."

Somehow, I'm instantly enlightened that this isn't Kane or Dessin or any of the other alters. It's all of them fused together. Without a lifetime of trauma. In death, they are now one.

Tears rush to my eyes, spilling out the sides. My heart throbs and turns runny in my chest. My god, I thought I'd never feel his presence like this again.

"Tell me," he urges.

I nod, peeling my eyes open to look at him. “I remember you.” My sun. My warmth. My childhood best friend. My knight to fend off the darkness. My avenger of those who meant me harm. My love. My home. I *remember*.

His eyes close slowly, and he smiles in pure bliss.

“That’s my girl,” he breathes. And I want to fall into his arms, stay there forever.

“Is this real?” I ask.

His eyes flutter open, and I gaze into the heat of those dark-mahogany depths. It’s watching the clouds part for the sun, waiting for the rays to beam down on me, sink into my skin, and fill my body with serotonin.

“You’re not done yet,” he insists. “Honey, it’s time to go back now.”

I shake my head furiously.

“Everything will be okay. But you have to go!”

“I’m not leaving you!” My voice rips through my throat in a shrill scream. “I’m nothing without you there! I’m cold and lost and so so alone!”

“Oh, my girl, you are *everything* now. Far more powerful than you can imagine.”

I can feel him slipping away, fading like a dream.

“Please,” I whine. “Don’t make me go back.”

“Skylenna, you know what you have to do. It was always you. The asylum is only the beginning and the start of your reign.”

With one blink, I’m on my back in a sodden heap on the cold tile floor, coughing up a fountain of water. My abdomen flexes and contracts as I heave, gagging up the inhaled tub.

Someone is over me, hands pressed to my chest, staring down with wide eyes and a gaping mouth.

“Thank our merciful Father,” he sighs, lifting his hands from my sternum. “I almost lost you.”

Old, withered skin. Glassy blue eyes. And a cross dangling from his black clothing.

I turn my head to the side, letting the water spill freely from my lungs until I can breathe easy again.

The priest pivots his head toward Meridei, glaring with his upper lip curling back.

“Meridei! You could have killed her!”

I glance at Meridei, still sitting in her chair, unflustered. She shrugs.

“Get this poor woman back to bed and make sure she’s fed!” he barks to an orderly, then looks down at me with regretful eyes. “I apologize, my dear. I’ll visit you after I have a word with this sinful child.”

I’m scooped up roughly by two orderlies, dripping water in a long stream as I’m hauled back to my room. I remember this hallway being lifeless, the asylum as silent as a cold, windless night in the forest. And he was here.

My chest aches, and I drop my head, remembering the way he looked. The way he was so desperate for me to remember him.

I’m thrown onto my bed in the thirteenth room. The door slams shut as the orderlies go to fetch me a meal. But, truth be told, I’m not hungry. I’m boiling with a purpose that can’t be described with words, a set of chaotic actions that would put my morality in question.

I know what I must do.

It should have been done a long time ago.

The sounds of Dessin’s groans fill the asylum, echoing in my head like a trumpet of war. Every treatment they have ever suffered blazes through my core. Every threat he’s ever made, every promise of immense pain, rings up my spine with determination.

The door opens, and the priest steps inside with a shameful shake of his head.

“I am so sorry, my dear. They do not know the potential that God has given you. They do not understand.”

I can hardly breathe as fire races through my lungs.

“I need you to give a message to Judas,” I say calmly.

The priest nods eagerly, pulling out a piece of parchment and pen. I accept it with wooden hands and begin to write.

Righteousness is the only way out. Under the word of God. Now we live with his mercy.

-Skylenna

I know that using the same code Judas once used to get a message to Dessin and me is the best way to ensure he heeds my warning. The first letter to each sentence.

R. U. N.

23. The Reckoning

I HAVE ONE HOUR UNTIL the staff leaves for the day.

One hour is all I need.

The hallucinations swallow me whole, a ship sinking to the bottom of the ocean. I wade my arms through the memories of each orderly, each conformist, and each board member in the vicinity. It takes time to decide who deserves to go to hell. It takes looking closely at each vulnerable moment, like the time Suseas jokingly pushed her little brother out of a tree and broke his arm. She was only nine and couldn't sleep for a week from the gnawing guilt.

Or, Stefan, the orderly stationed outside my room—he was a kind child, always said please and thank you. Even Lyoness had his moments. Always treats his wife like a queen. Gives her anything she asks for.

But that does not make up for the evil they've let spread like a plague in this asylum. Suseas's second year of being a conformist, she killed a woman. A patient with severe depression who wasn't a danger to anyone, she shouldn't have ever been committed to the intricate section at all. Unfortunately, the patient looked just like Suseas's husband's mistress. And so, Suseas might have accidentally left the patient in the scalding bath for too long.

Stefan once flogged an elderly patient for wetting himself in the hallway.

Lyoness ordered the execution of a young girl that accused an orderly of sexual harassment.

Their sins drastically outweigh any good deeds they've done in their lives.

And I have shed the last bit of skin that was the old Skylenna. The girl that couldn't fight back against her father even though she knew how. The girl who cowered behind Dessin when danger neared. The girl who watched each asylum patient be treated with cruelty and torment without standing up for them.

That girl is dead. No longer in existence. No longer able to call the shots.

This woman standing in the thirteenth room... has learned to be the dragon that flies over men.



Meridei

BELINDA WHINES NEXT TO ME about gaining three pounds since last month. She can't see me smiling to myself as I fill out my daily report.

"Anyway, heard you got in trouble with the priest," she says smugly, reapplying her baby-doll-pink lipstick in a handheld mirror.

I snort. "He made some sort of treatment deal with the little narcissistic bitch. Must be getting sucked off after hours by her in the thirteenth room."

Belinda cringes.

"I managed to drown her today," I add, writing up my last treatment. "I was always too hesitant to butcher her when Patient Thirteen was around."

I sigh at the memory of her body going limp over the tub. The image seeps into my brain and releases bursts of serotonin or oxytocin; whichever it is, I'm filled with dazzling ecstasy. Since the day I met Skylenna, I wanted to treat her as a patient. Perhaps I'm a prophet. I always knew she'd end up under my care. It was all too perfect.

"Where do you suppose he is? I mean, weren't they inseparable? Thirteen never left her side." Belinda's nasally voice pulls me back into the conversation.

"I was hoping she'd tell me while I treated her." I shrug, signing my name at the bottom of the report. "But that topic seemed to be off-limits."

Belinda watches me for a moment. The annoyance of someone staring at me rises in the bottom of my belly, burning until I tighten my abdomen. I turn to her with a locked jaw and an agitated glare.

"You scared he's going to hunt you down for hurting her? That seems to be his style."

I can't roll my eyes slow enough. "No. He clearly got bored with her and jumped ship."

She doesn't stop staring.

"I am the only terrifying person left in this asylum," I bark, my fingers itching to mess with the control panel again and drown another patient, preferably Skylenna.

The way her knees bruised themselves against the sides of the tub, the way she bucked and thrashed, dulls my bad mood, softening the hard edges of my temper. I want to do it again. I want to wait until the staff leaves so I

can watch her struggle for air. The temptation is delicious and uncontrollable.

“You coming?” Belinda is already standing at the door of the study, placing her report in the conformists’ slot.

But that damning urge to watch her suffer again is too great to overcome. I shake my head. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

After the door closes behind her, I wait patiently, hands fidgeting at my sides, thinking about which treatment I want to see her in next.

Electrotherapy just isn’t intimate enough. Flogging might be exciting. It’s hands-on. I like that.

But the hushed voices outside of the door grow louder.

And then I hear Belinda scream.



Skylenna

IT’S TOO EASY. I THOUGHT I would be rusty. But my limbs sliced through the air, knocking into the orderly Stefan’s bad knee with grace. The muscle memory was strong and simple to tap into.

He came into my room after I lured him in with promises of sexual favors. I wasn’t satisfied with how slow he was to defend himself. I even gave him the chance to admit remorse, confess that he gained no pleasure in this particular line of work.

It turns out he enjoys his job. A little too much.

It only took three moves to bring him to his knees like a groveling, unfaithful lover.

And now, as he holds his groin from where my knee once was, I yearn to watch the life drain from his grayish-blue eyes. That seemingly harmless glare that once guarded the door while Scarlett was hazed and waterboarded. Or even the time he conveniently forgot to feed Dessin for three days.

Rage unwinds in my stomach, acidic and thick, oozing through every organ until I’m sure I might explode from a combustion of wildfire.

My fingers curl around his chin, nails cutting into his bristly flesh.

“I am so tired,” I say without the usual emotion furrowing my brow.

“This city makes me lose faith in humanity.”

Stefan gasps, still holding himself. His mousy brown hair is slick with fresh sweat, and his pale features are now splotchy from his forehead to his collarbone.

“And since trying to change your ways clearly failed me...”

I let myself relax further into the darkness. My face morphing into the perfect example of calm. He watches me with suspense tightening his shoulders.

“I’ll have to kill you all.”

Stefan opens his mouth to object, but the only sound in the room is of my foot cracking into his back, like a branch snapping from a tree after a strike of lightning.

Paralyzed but still alive.

Breathing. Huffing in and out like a fish out of water.

The ghost of a smile plays on my lips, and I take in a deep, calming breath, inhaling the scent of his artificial fragrance sold at his gentlemen’s club. I suddenly have the overwhelming desire to show the rest of the asylum what I’ve done. Who I’ve become due to their arrogance. Due to their wicked ways.

The rest happens in a blackened blur. My adrenaline pumping so hard and so fast that my next movements aren’t recognizable. They are brutish and barbaric. I take a step back, blinking away the murderous daze that coats my eyes and assess the damage I’ve done.

I’m standing in the hallway, looking up at Stefan, strangling with his belt tied around his neck, dangling from the rib vault arch along the ceiling.

I did that.

He dies slowly, with loud gurgling cries and spittle forming at the corners of his mouth. But paralyzed and with no way to free himself.

I lick my lips, desperate for water to relieve the cotton dryness in my mouth. I thought this sight, being so devastatingly similar to my last memory of Scarlett, would send me into a panic, mentally sketching that puppet.

But I no longer feel the helplessness that once held me hostage.

Because I am the puppeteer. And this asylum is my stage.

24. The Puppet Show

“WHAT THE FUCK HAVE YOU done?!” Belinda gawks at the orderlies hanging from the ceiling.

My puppets swing back and forth behind me as I walk toward her slowly, taking my time, playing with my food.

I’m numb all over, lacking that conscience that tells me when to feel remorse and stops me from acting on impulses that would be deemed as morally incorrect. Well, this asylum *is* morally incorrect. This city is far from moral. And I’ve lost my patience. The only feeling that remains is searing rage and bloodlust.

There is nothing else.

When this is all over, my friends will have to stay far away from me. I don’t want to hurt them—I don’t want them to see me like this. Can I even control it? Do I want to? This primal need to exact revenge. To hurt those who have hurt the ones I love. It’s the closest I have ever felt to Dessin, and I’m not sure I can ever give that feeling up.

Belinda scurries away from me, not waiting for me to explain the newly decorated hallway. But her fleeing the scene is pointless, only delaying the inevitable. I’ve locked them all in. The staff is as trapped as each patient.

“Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit!” Belinda shrieks in a blind panic, running into the first stairwell door, slamming her body against it over and over again without any success.

“You used to be Niles’s conformist, right?” I ask casually, walking slowly, without purpose or interest in her hysteria. But the monster growing in my chest pushes me forward, making my fingers itch to dive into that void, search for her consciousness, and take her soul somewhere far away from civilization. It’s on the tip of my tongue. A way to use my abilities for something greater. Something far more powerful than I can fathom.

Belinda looks back at me with wide eyes and a trembling bottom lip. Did she think that would work? Doesn’t she know I’ve been watching her very closely since I was thrown into the thirteenth room? That every time she’s asked for the orderlies to bend the rules for her—leave her with a patient for an hour longer than necessary—she trembles that pathetic bottom lip.

She’s a pretty woman, there’s no arguing that. With her platinum-blonde hair, the color of moonbeams, and those long curly lashes surrounding her

doe cerulean eyes.

“What did you do to those orderlies?” Her pixie-like voice shakes. Then, something occurs to her, and she looks around. “Did Patient Thirteen come back?”

Irritation snakes around my spine. “I *am* Patient Thirteen.”

“Christ,” she breathes. “Meridei’s done a number on you. You’ve really lost it.”

I laugh, although the sound is biting and clipped. My fingernails skim over the shoulder of her navy-blue uniform.

“Meridei was unreasonably hard on me this time around, yes.”

She winces at my closeness, at my thumb caressing the base of her throat. “It’s her you want then! I never put you through any treatments. Meridei was always the one that had it out for you. Not me! I’ve always liked you, Skylenna. I’ve always wanted to be your friend”—she gulps loudly—“we can still be friends.”

“You want to be my friend?”

Belinda nods like her life depends on it. Because it does.

“Of course. We’re the same, you and I. I never liked this place either. I was so happy when you started working here and wanted to change the way we treated patients.” She pants, eyes looking down at my hand resting around her throat. “We can change things around here. Together.”

I look at her for a long few seconds. “Really?”

“Yes! But I need you to get back to your room, and I can talk to the council and get you out. I’ll just need some time.” Her cheeks turn a soft shade of raspberry pink, and those cerulean eyes bounce around as if she’s hoping someone will find us.

I stare so long into her eyes without blinking that mine turn dry and blurry. I’m so close to her shivering frame that the sweet scent of pomegranate and vanilla stains the inside of my nostrils.

“I saw the way you cared for your little sister, Bessie, when she fell ill with pneumonia. It did give me pause.” I watch her for each little reaction to my words. The name of her sister wrinkles her forehead, and the memory widens her eyes to the point of pain. “I thought, maybe we are more alike than I once thought. Maybe—your love for little Bessie is similar to the love I had for my Scarlett.”

I wonder for a brief moment what she’ll assume from my observation. How could I possibly know such intimate details of her life?

The only sounds ringing through the asylum are those of the suffocating orderlies, taking their last strangled breaths.

“Have you”—she sucks in a startled breath—“been *following* me?”

I smile, though it doesn’t touch my eyes. “No.”

“Then how could you possibly know all of that?”

Ignoring her question, I begin running my fingers through her soft hair, savoring the way her body goes rigid with fear. “It warmed my heart to know I was wrong about you. You do have a soul somewhere deep down, even though you don’t show it in this place. And I was—so close to letting you walk away.” I nod with fake sorrow pursing my lips. “I really was.”

Belinda’s throat bobs, and I can see it before she acts on that decision flashing behind her eyes. As she swings her fist toward my face, I’ve already lifted my hand to snatch her wrist, twisting it just right until I feel the explosive pop under my palm. She screams, dropping to her knees, wailing at the sharp, venomous pain radiating up her arm, I’m sure.

“But then I saw the day you tricked Scarlett into cleaning the hydrotherapy room. She was thrilled about your false promises of friendship, wasn’t she?” I kneel beside her, keeping a firm, brutal hold on her broken wrist. “But that wasn’t enough for you. You had to turn it up a notch. Make her believe you found her desirable. You got her to strip off her clothes. You saw the scars, didn’t you? You saw the way her bones didn’t quite look right. The lasting effects of malnourishment. And you still did what you did, knowing she must have led a traumatic life to bear those marks of abuse.”

I lean my head against Belinda’s as she cries and shakes her head.

“Did you know she was locked in a closet the entirety of her childhood?” My voice booms against the walls around us. “Did you know she was violently abused and ate drywall to stay alive when they starved her?!” The memories filter in my veins like poison, and the tendons in my jaw tighten as I clench my teeth.

Belinda flinches at my raised voice, whimpering as she turns her head from me.

“No, of course not.” Nausea rolls through me, a flood unconfined. “But you blasted her with that hose anyway. You let the other conformists and orderlies in to watch while she got hosed down like an animal. Do you have any idea what that did to her? The trauma response that ensued?”

Scarlett stayed home for a week, sobbing in the washroom as she scrubbed herself raw. Feeling dirty. Feeling exposed. I never knew what caused it.

Until now.

“I think I’d like to show you what that feels like.”

Belinda finds her fight. “Go to hell, you rotten bitch!”

I smile, wide and maniacal, with teeth. “Oh, I am. But I’m taking you with me.”

She opens her mouth to curse at me again, only I’ve had enough of her talking. I’ve grown weary of her lies. Silence is what I need to focus on what’s next. Silence.

My hand yanks open her mouth, and I’m far too fast for her to react. The knife in my right hand slips past her teeth, and with one scooping motion, my blade carves into her wet, meaty tongue. The sight of her bright-crimson excretion spurting outward sends a pleasing chill skittering down my spine.

She chokes and gurgles on saliva and blood, frantically trying to put her tongue back in her mouth. I fling it off to the side, grabbing a fistful of hair to guide her crawling body to the right treatment room.

“Ohhmahhgahhh,” she groans, words garbled without the use of her tongue. I tug on her hair harder, knowing that Meridei will have heard the screams by now. I’m saving her for last.

As we pass each treatment room, I relish the way Belinda stares with pure shock at each council member tied up, tortured, and dying or already dead. Their astonished faces plead through the open door as they endure chair binding, scalding baths, and hanging upside down by their ankles to bleed out.

Suseas. Lyoness. Delilah. Sutton. Judas got my warning and clearly fled. Belinda screams something that sounds close to *no*.

“I gave them all chances,” I explain to Belinda, who is making a blood-streaked mess with her gaping mouth. “But the damage to every patient in this asylum is already done.”

She sprays a fine mist of blood as she chokes on a sob.

“You see, my brain works differently now. I hear their screams every second of the day. Do you want to know how many I hear?” I wait for her answer but don’t get one. “Hundreds. I hear every man, woman, and child that has died in this fucking hellhole. I hear the way they pleaded for

compassion. I hear the way the children begged for their mothers. I hear how the women pleaded for food only to be starved to death.”

We turn the corner and enter the hydrotherapy room.

“I owe it to them to deliver justice.”

After chaining Belinda to the white-tiled wall, the hose is turned on. And I don’t turn it off until Belinda has asphyxiated.



Meridei

I’M ASHAMED OF HOW LONG it takes me to open the study door. But hearing Belinda scream gives me pause. My hand twists the glass doorknob, and I blink quickly, ridding myself of the possibility that Patient Thirteen is back.

It wouldn’t be the first time he’s torn the place apart for this fucking woman. When they escaped last time, I was certain he’d come for me. Make good on his threat after I whipped Skylenna in front of him. Belinda said I was being paranoid, but that night at my dining party was excruciating. I stayed up sick all night, as did the rest of my guests. I don’t know how he managed to break into my house and poison an already sealed champagne bottle, but I’ll admit it’s the first time I felt true terror.

I peek out of the cracked door, only for a second. My breath catches, and I shut it before I can blink the images away. “What in the hell?” I whisper to myself.

The orderlies hang from the ceiling, swaying and turning in a half circle before rotating the other way. Their mouths are hanging open, with purplish faces and bloodshot eyes.

Patient Thirteen is back. He must be. For Skylenna.

And I’ll be the person he’ll want to hurt the most. If he was willing to murder these orderlies in such a theatric way, I know I’m on his list to hunt down. I just have to get out of here before he can find me.

I blow out a stressed breath, opening the door so slowly that the creaking is hardly audible. My feet slip out of my heels and delicately step onto the black-and-white-checkered tiles. Sweat slickens my back, and I grimace at how weak my body is for giving in to the fear so easily.

He probably just wants to get Skylenna and get out. He may already be gone.

I walk quickly through the hallway, breathing shallowly, avoiding the orderly's shoes I have to duck under. The sound of dripping water tugs my attention to the treatment room on my left. I lock eyes with a woman slumped in a tub, panting in a delirious haze.

"Suseas?" I whisper, tiptoeing in the room filled with a thick fog of steam.

Shit. He put her in the scalding bath treatment.

She parts her lips, trying to answer me, but only exhales as her eyes flutter, trying to stay open. I kneel in a warm puddle of water, crouching over her with steam collecting over my brow. My hands hook under her arms so I can lift her out. I hiss at the temperature.

Suseas is naked and covered in blisters. Her skin looks like a pruned tomato, withered around her bony hips.

"I'll get you out of here," I say under my breath.

But she shakes her head. "Get—*out.*"

I roll my eyes and bear down my teeth while I try to hoist her out of the tub. We both suck in a pained breath as the boiling water licks our exposed flesh. There's a clinking sound against the tub. I look for the source, only to be greeted with a devastating wave of dread.

He shackled her to the pipes. How the hell am I going to get her out without getting his attention?

"Damn it."

Suseas tries to say something, her cracked lips mouthing words that don't make a sound. I drop her back into the tub slowly, breathing through the jarring heat.

"I should have drowned that little insect when I had the chance," I grit out, glaring at the ripples in the water. "Both of them."

Anger flares through my chest. I use the memories of locking Skylenna in the isolation tank to calm me down so I can focus. She screamed for her deranged sister. Her cries filled the hallways, and I simply leaned against the wall, smiling. Even if Patient Thirteen gets the better of me today, I don't regret putting Skylenna in her place.

When you're new to a culture, you should be doing whatever you can to make everyone like you. Accept the hazing given. Do what you're told. And don't try to change the good thing we had going. Her sister tried the same thing before she got here, and we made her employment hell. It's the law of the animal kingdom.

Suseas paws at my hand resting on the edge of the tub. Drool drizzles from the corner of her mouth as she desperately tries to speak.

“What should I do?” I ask her.

Her eyes start to roll back in her head, so I pat her flushed cheeks to get her to focus. I don’t know how much time I have to escape, but if I have to, I’ll leave Suseas for dead. Sure, she’s been an excellent mentor. But if I’m being honest, I am the reason this asylum has thrived. I am the only person that could successfully rebuild this establishment after such a travesty.

“Shh—” Suseas tries to speak again, this time with a determination blazing in her drooping eyes.

My fists clench until my fingernails are cutting into my palms. “What? Spit it out!”

“*Shh—shh*he’s—coming back.”

Despite the heat, a painful chill races up my neck and over my scalp.

“*She?*”

“Yes. *She.*”

I don’t have to turn around to recognize the annoying softness of Skylenna’s voice. The soothing, syrupy sweet tone that makes me want to retch.

“Suseas has always favored the scalding bath treatment. She theorized that if a patient had to suffer longer from the visible burns and welts, it would be twice as effective as any other treatment.” There’s a pause, a brief moment I can feel her eyes digging in the back of my head. “Do you think this form of *treatment* will reform her? Curb those psychopathic tendencies to torture defenseless patients?”

She waits for me to answer. But I know this is a losing battle, especially if Patient Thirteen isn’t far behind.

“I saved you for last, Meridei. I thought it would be, in a way, poetic.”

I force out a patronizing laugh. “You mean Patient Thirteen saved me for—”

Turning around to face her, I physically choke on my words. My entire body locks up, mouth hanging open, eyes burning from not blinking.

Skylenna’s five-foot-seven frame blocks the doorway. I don’t know what to look at first—the wet, stringy hair? The darkened, bloodshot eyes? Or maybe it’s the deep, rich-red color staining her hands, splattered across her white gown and calm face.

The room holds its breath, and all I can hear is the light *drip, drip, drip* from the blood falling to the floor from her fingertips, one drop at a time.

She looks like she's been thrown around a natural disaster or walked through a butcher house. No, it's quite more sinister than that. It's as if she was an unwilling human sacrifice at a witch's altar, then rose after being possessed.

That's who I'm looking at right now.

A demon from hell, conquering the body of a once shy girl.

"God help us all," I mutter, unable to tear my eyes away from the ferocious look in her green eyes.

"He's forsaken this place," she says slowly, eyes glazing over in thought. "Why else would He let His people suffer this long?"

I scan the room for anything I can form into a makeshift weapon. But it's without a single object. Only Suseas and this bathtub bolted to the floor and wall.

"Will you try to run? Or fight?"

I slam my hands against the wet floor. "You're telling me you did all of this? Hung the orderlies? Tortured the council members?"

A hint of a smile plays on her lips. "So now it's torture? I thought it was treatment."

Fury sears the bottom of my stomach.

"Is this your sick effort to win him back?" I taunt. "Become a monster just like him, and maybe he'll want to be with you again?" I know getting a rise out of her might be insane, but all I can hope is that getting her blind with anger will force her to make a mistake, and I can make a run for the nearest exit.

"He is not coming back." Her face is unreadable. "Nothing I do can change that."

I look down, shaking my brain for a way to stall whatever she has planned.

"Maybe you can. He's the one that wanted to hurt me, right? Wouldn't you rather please him by leaving me to suffer his wrath?"

She looks at me for a long moment, completely still, except for her thin fingers starting to curl.

"Another move and I will rip that arm off with my teeth."

My head perks up at her threat. It sounds disturbingly familiar.

“The day you whipped me and made Dessin watch,” Skylenna explains. “That’s what he said when he threatened you, isn’t it?”

I remember. I left them in there overnight to stew in the pain I inflicted. It seemed like an appropriate punishment for how he spoke to me. He should have begged, groveled, even. But instead, that animal threatened to mutilate me.

“Since he’s not here to make good on his promise...” She trails off but keeps her cold, demented eyes plastered to me.

I shake my head. “No.”

“You can scream if you want. But it’s my turn to do my worst.”

Skylenna pummels me to the wet floor like a rabid animal, smashing the back of my head against the tile until we both hear a crack. I can’t tell if the sound came from my skull or the tile. But the impact makes me dizzy, nauseous, and leaks inky spots in my vision.

The moment my hands push toward her body in defense, something clinks shut around my wrists. Something cold and hard, binding my arms together as I writhe under her weight, bucking my hips to get her the hell away from me.

It’s not that she’s stronger than me—it’s the fact that she knows how to use her weight against me, knows just where to place her elbow, the hardest points of her body.

“Your arm is so thin and frail,” she whispers in my ear. “It won’t be hard to—”

My world lights up in explosive pain; from my fingertips to my jaw, every nerve has been obliterated. She uses her foot, pressing down on my bicep, to break my arm the rest of the way. Not a fracture, but a clean, absolute breaking of bone. *Snap*. I lose all composure and scream like my lungs have been torn to ribbons. Bile bubbles up my throat, and my head instinctually turns to the side so I can projectile vomit without choking.

I can’t think, can’t suck in a normal breath, can’t focus on anything other than the devouring agony that stabs into my bones and bolts me to the floor.

“Another move and I will rip that arm off with my teeth.” Her voice stings my ear as she repeats Patient Thirteen’s threat once more.

And she delivers.

The moment her teeth chew through that first layer of skin, the pain burning through me like hellfire seems to numb my brain. I become dead, in

a way, unmoving, unblinking, drool spilling out the side of my mouth. Darkness smears the edges of my vision, and I've seen this in my patients. The emotionless look of defeat. Only, I haven't given up, yet my body is a useless blob of putty at Skylenna's feet.

I always thought this was a form of defiance in my patients. I thought that by going limp or making their eyes vacantly glaze over, they were standing in a silent form of rebellion.

I never knew it was their mind's way of protecting them from my—*abuse.*

It's clear that I black out her rage and the sound of her ripping pieces of me away because I blink a few times, and we're in another room. Fuzzy and white, smelling of mildew and rusty pipes. I turn my head to see a bloody stump where my arm used to be, and although I want to bellow, cry for help, and roar in agony, all I can muster is a guttural moan.

"Do you want to know why I left you for last?"

The sound of her asking a question makes me want to hurl. I'm not sure where I am or what she's doing with my body, but all I can do is hang my head loosely, chin to chest.

"It wasn't only for the way you treated me; that's such a small part of it." She hoists me up, draping the upper half of my body over something cool and unmoving. "No, it was when I saw you go home every day after work, writing in your journal. You know, the one where you relived each treatment? The one where you become aroused by remembering how each patient suffered?"

How in God's name did she know that? Has she been stalking me?

Skylenna tilts my body, snapping something against my head; I hear blood spill out of my gaping arm, splattering to the floor. And from that sound alone, I puke again. Bile erupting through my nostrils. The smell burning my eyes.

"It was the nail in the coffin when I saw that you wrote of Chekiss—*seven hundred and forty-two* times. Never missing a single detail about how you've made his life a living hell."

I've never told anyone that before. Not even Belinda. I'm aware that it might have been frowned upon to enjoy the treatments as much as I have. To feel ecstasy over the power and control of it all.

After blinking a couple of times, my vision clears enough for me to make out the rippling water below me, the shiny porcelain tub. My jaw

hangs open. The simulated drowning treatment.

“*Fuck*,” I groan.

Skylenna kneels in front of me. Blood cakes her mouth, gushing down her throat and chest. “This control panel has an interval timer. I’m going to leave it on—dunking you in for a certain amount of time and lift you back up to catch your breath for about ten seconds.” She pauses. “Maybe less.”

“Please.” The word comes out of my mouth involuntarily. I cringe inwardly. Begging is not who I am. If I’m going to die, I must do it with dignity.

“Please, *what*?”

Every ounce of that dignity leaves my body with the blood dripping from my gnarled arm. “Please, don’t—kill me,” I pant, unable to meet her eyes. “You can still—escape. Still—live your life.”

I make the mistake of looking up. Her eyes are savage and drained of all humanity. Yet, for the first time, a flicker of her own suffering saturates her face.

“I have no life to go back to.” Her voice is no longer calm and collected. It rises in volume, rattling my bones and chilling my skin. It’s as if she is letting herself have one last moment to feel the gravity of the situation she’s found herself in.

“I—have lost—*everything!*” Tears swell in her emerald, red-rimmed eyes as she screams in my face.

There is nothing left to say as she turns the control panel on, lowering me into the cold water as I bleed out. Dark, thick blood gushes around me, a heavy cloud permeating the tub.

An inch before I’m swallowed into my own personal hell, Skylenna turns from the doorway.

“This is for Chekiss.”

And there is nothing worse than waiting to die while, at the same time, fighting to breathe.

25. Dragon's Breath

Skylenna

EACH PATIENT DOOR IS OPENED.

I stand off to the side, nodding my head at each of them as they race for the exits. There's Samantha, the patient with severe OCD. She limps past me with spindly limbs that have been deformed in the chair binding treatment too many times.

There's Ray, the young man that only has severe depression and yet was treated for not conforming to the society. He shouldn't even be in this section.

I watch the rest pay me grateful looks before disappearing. But whoever is in the second and third room doesn't come out. I take a cautious step toward room two's doorway, peeking inside, careful not to spook them with my appearance.

A young woman cowers in the corner of the room, clutching her knees to her chest. Shuddering with each small breath. I raise my eyebrows as I recognize that copper hair, long and wild. It's the girl that was buried alive in the North Saphrine Forest. The girl that we've already had two run-ins with. How the hell has she ended up here?

She looks up at me with a dark, haunted gaze.

"Do you remember me?" I ask, approaching her like a cornered animal. I don't bother asking how she ended up in this tight spot. With a city this strict, it was probably something small.

Her hopeless gaze fills up with tears. She nods once.

"You've had a lot of bad luck lately," I comment, gesturing around the room.

She scans my bloodied patient's gown in horror.

"I've had bad luck too." I look down at the evidence covering my arms and legs. "I guess this was my way of getting even... for all of the bad luck I've received."

"What happened to you?" she asks hesitantly. Her soft voice is hoarse, probably from screaming during her treatments.

I attempt to smile down at her, but my face remains cold and hard. "I lost the only man I've ever loved."

She lifts her chin in understanding, then glances behind me with wide eyes. At someone who has approached. And it's stupid. So fucking stupid. The way my heart leaps. The way I think, just for a moment, that Dessin is standing right behind me.

He isn't. I turn to see the man she's been traveling with. "Niklaus," I say. Curly black hair that reaches his shoulders. White shirt and pants. He towers over me.

He gives me a once-over, jaw hanging to the floor. "Shit," he breathes. "Are you what happened to the hallway?" He nods his head at the orderlies swinging from the ceiling.

I don't answer. Just stare blankly.

His throat bobs before he redirects his attention to the girl still shuddering in the corner. "Hey, spitfire." He kneels in front of her. "Ready to get the hell out of here?"

She nods with a quivering bottom lip, wrapping her tan arms around his neck in a hug.

Niklaus looks back at me hesitantly. "Can we leave?"

"Yes." I take a few steps backward, ready to keep going. "But you should run. This place won't be standing for much longer."

For the next few minutes, I release every patient in the women's wing. The ones that don't meet societal standards like extreme dieting, keeping sinless skin, or dressing and acting the right way. This is the wing that starves, brainwashes, and creates conditioned responses for women to hate the sight of carbs and get nauseated at the taste of sugar.

After the battered prisoners of this castle file out of every hallway, I find the door of the last patient I've been waiting to see.

The door creaks open, unmasking the woman who has been waiting years for this day. The woman who has kept up the ruse of insanity. The woman that kept Dessin's secret.

Sern.

She doesn't look at me as I take my first step past the threshold. Her weary, round eyes stare into a haze that isn't quite the wall in front of her but in that general direction.

Sern is as still as a stone statue. A posture that may be from the habit of this act, or perhaps she's detached from this body altogether. Something I can relate to.

I stand in front of her, wondering if the blood dripping down my arms and neck will grab her attention and snap her out of this trance.

“No more hiding,” I say with a scratchy voice and dry mouth.

She blinks, readjusting her focus to the vibrant contrast of bright red staining my white cotton gown. Her full lips part, only a fraction of a centimeter, and she meets my eyes. A moment of lucidity, a flash of the sane woman that was never meant to live in a place like this.

“Do you remember me?” I ask.

Sern nods, gulping as her eyes scale down the horror show of my body.

“They’re all dead. You can go home now.”

Her eyes snap up to mine again. “What did you say?”

“Go home, Sern.”

She glances out the door, deciding if it’s a trick or not, but her gaze lands on the other open doors across the hall. The patients running for the stairwell.

“You did this?”

I just stare at her.

She rubs a trembling hand over the back of her arm. Sighing. “He said you’d become like him one day.”

I don’t have to ask. I know who “*him*” is.

“I have been waiting a very long time for this day, Skylenna Ambrose.” Sern shakes her head, smoothing the hair around her neat bun. “He told me that the day I would be liberated would be by your hand. That—”

But I don’t need to listen anymore. I can hear his voice now; the memory of what he said echoes around me.

“She’ll be far more powerful than I can fathom. If she uses this place to channel her rage, get her a message for me. Tell her to keep going. This is far from over.”

“—this is far from over,” Sern finishes just after Dessin’s voice disappears from my mind.

I swallow down the lump lodging in my throat. Nod my head. There are glimpses playing out around us of Sern caring for Dessin over the years, being kind when there was no kindness left, and withstanding the pressure of Aurick’s father, Vlademur, to spill Dessin’s secrets. They even threatened her family.

“Take your children and your husband into the North Saphrine Forest. When you see a pack of white wolves, you’ve found it. Tell them Skylenna

sent you for refuge. And warn them that there is a war coming in only a few months.”

Sern stands now, grasping my bloody hands with fierce gratitude. Tears trickle over her lids, and that firm trumpet of a voice spills past her mouth. “I owe you my life, Skylenna Ambrose.”

She bolts out of the asylum with a new purpose and excitement that she probably hasn’t felt in a very long time.

And with the last patient gone, I do what Asena said I would be able to do one day.

I breathe fire.

Knocking the gas lamps from the walls, the flames spread like a flesh-eating virus. The rooms go up in unconquerable flames, scaling up the walls, swallowing the beds whole. Heat drenches my body in sweat and dried blood.

With each unhurried step I take through the hallways, knocking each gas lamp from its post, I remember the way Scarlett’s house went up in flames. A symbol of my grief and all I had lost. This fire is the end. It’s releasing the pain of those who have suffered, those who have lost their lives in these walls, those who were treated like wild animals. And any conformist or council member still alive will perish by fire.

By the time I open the front doors, the cool air washes over my red cheeks, filtering through my stringy hair.

I walk away without looking back.

This is for you.

26. What's Lost Might Never Be Found

Chekiss

WE STARE THROUGH THE TREE line with aching hearts.

I'm not entirely sure if Skylenna knows we've followed her to the asylum, but we've debated letting Warrose storm the place for days. Ruth is the one that urged us to trust her. She must have a plan.

And this was it.

After we watched the patients flee, scattering quietly into the forest or the city, the prison for the wounded minds roars with a devouring fire. Skylenna, all in white and covered in blood, walks out of the flames like a demon rising from hell.

I wait for Niles to make a stupid comment, but we're all stunned into silence. The dark smoke spreads overhead like an omen.

Ruth clears her throat. "Do you think she—"

"Yes," Warrose mutters. "I think she killed them all."

Something between pride and horror leaves me speechless. How could she have done all of that herself? What has happened to her?

"Chekiss." Niles looks at me with big, glossy eyes. "We never have to go back."

Goose bumps prickle over the backs of my arms, and I just stare at him. That sweet girl has looked out for us, even when she's been walking through hell, enduring the most crippling pain anyone can fathom. My relief is quickly replaced with a deeply rooted sadness. I place a hand on Niles's shoulder, squeezing gently, careful to avoid any burns. There isn't anyone else who can relate to what we've been through in that asylum. And even though I'll never admit to it out loud, it makes Niles and me kindred souls.

"I can't stand to see her like this," I tell Warrose, who is still watching the burning asylum with an unreadable expression. "My child is in pain. We can't just keep sitting back and watching as her world crumbles around her."

In the corner of my eye, I catch Niles rubbing his hands over his face. He tried so hard to get her to come back with us, to reason with her. It broke his heart when she left him again.

Warrose continues to watch the fire with a stony expression. The blazing sunset shimmers across his light-brown skin and glitters in his hazel eyes.

“Warrose.” My tone grows impatient.

His eyes flicker to me for a moment, then he runs a large hand through his shoulder-length, dark shiny hair. “She’ll come to us when she’s ready.”

Something has been eating at this man since we started this journey. At first, I thought it was due to his best friend’s death. But lately, he is so lost in his own thoughts, I wonder if there is something larger at play here. A burden he must carry alone.

“Horse shit! Would you look at her? She looks like a butcher in a slaughterhouse!” Niles points to Skylenna walking toward the Bear Traps. Blood is splattered across her face and neck, and her arms are fully coated as if she has just performed surgery, elbow deep.

I nod in agreement. “She’s unhinged, Warrose. We have to help her.”

I hadn’t noticed before, but Ruth is crying silently, arms wrapped around her knees, refusing to look at Skylenna again. She deals with the gravity of this situation in her own way. We all have.

Niles has nightmares of the fire he got caught in. At night, he wakes in a sweat that stings his healing burns. We all pretend we’re still asleep, but he’s loud enough to wake the forest.

I’ve had trouble eating. The thought of enjoying a hot meal makes my stomach turn. How can I sit and indulge when my precious Skylenna is out there, alone, in such pain?

Warrose has barely spoken two words since we started following her. He drums his fingers impatiently, staring out into the forest with a pinched brow and clenched fists.

“She knows we’re tailing her,” Warrose grits out. “When she figures her shit out, she’ll let us know. Until then, let’s move. It looks like she’s aiming for her father’s house again.”

27. The Plan

Skylenna

AFTER BEING IN JACK'S HOUSE for less than an hour, here's what I learned about the day he died.

That morning, Kane and I met at sunrise; he told me he found out Scarlett was being targeted—Vlademur knew about Violet and her the entire time. He missed it. He blamed himself. After explaining what she was going through, I forced him to get rid of Scarlett's perpetrators, and scare Violet away from her house, even though we both knew something big was coming for me. They were drugging Jack with far more Mind Phantoms than he could take. And it was all going to implode on us.

I reluctantly touch the ottoman near the front door, running my fingers over the jagged wood that he accidentally hit with the club. The same weapon that was aimed at my head.

And with a heavy wave of darkness, I slip into that void, free-falling until I'm standing over a fifteen-year-old Skylenna, covered in her own blood, while Jack kicks her in the ribs.

"Please," Skylenna coughs out, protecting her vital organs in a feeble attempt to stay alive.

I look up at Jack, dripping in sweat and crying hysterically. "Where is he?" he shouts.

She continues to gasp.

Normally, I would be wincing at this sight, holding in my cries as I watch one of the worst days of my life. But, currently, my skin is dry and flaky from the blood of my enemies. I'm sore from head to toe, yet desensitized from violence entirely. There is nothing in this moment that could shock me.

Before Jack can land the last fatal blow to my head, I blink, and a force like a hurricane tackles my father to the ground. The impact is so damning, so incredible, that their bodies slide across the floor until they hit the wall. Paintings are knocked from above their heads, glass cabinets rattle, and the ground vibrates under my feet.

I step closer, looking at the man that saved my life.

Kane wrestles the club from my father's hands, throwing it into the hallway. He shouts at him to stop, to find the will, to realize what he's done.

“Get her out of here,” Jack wails, pointing at me. “I’m so sorry! Oh god, I’m so sorry!”

Kane kneels at Skylenna’s side, forehead wrinkled, eyes wide with shock. Slowly, he lifts her from the ground, gently cradling her to his muscular chest.

“I knew you would come for me.” She smiles up at him despite the condition of her face and body.

I’m so focused on her blood saturating through his gray shirt that I’m caught off guard when Kane yells, “Jack, *no!*”

My eyes dart to Jack, slicing a knife through his own throat.

I turn away woodenly. Kane was right. Jack did take his own life. I suddenly want to escape this memory. Why would I want to watch it happen after being haunted by it for so many years?

Kane is momentarily torn by whether he should try to save Jack or rush Skylenna to get medical attention. He looks back and forth before his tormented eyes land on Skylenna, blinking up at him through blood and tears.

He begins running. I follow.

“What’s happening?” Skylenna asks him in a daze.

“Hold on,” his voice breaks, sounding like he’s about to lose it. Cry out in pain or yell in anger. “I’m so sorry, Skylenna.”

I pick up my pace, forcing my tired legs to catch up with him and hear what other words transpire between the two.

“No,” Skylenna croaks. “I’m the one that’s sorry.”

Kane slows to a fast jog, looking down at her as she opens her clenched fist. Two red petals and the roots from a flower. I nearly trip as Kane comes to a halting stop.

“*No.*” His voice comes close to Dessin’s terrifying tone. “No!” He comes close to dropping her as pure shock overtakes him.

“I don’t have long now. Maybe an hour. If I—die, it won’t matter anyway.” She pants, eyelids fluttering closed from exhaustion.

Kane’s mouth falls open. “What have you done? How the fuck am I supposed to live knowing that I’ll be the only one to remember? To look at you and know that you’ll never see *me* again? Every memory of me—*gone.*”

I *chose* to lose my memories?

“It’s—the—only way. I can’t let them—hurt you or DaiSzek—to break me.”

Hurt him or DaiSzek? She thinks Demechnef would have used them to break her in the experiment?

“We don’t even know how the Phoenix stem works! It could erase your mind completely; everything that you are will just be gone!”

Skylenna coughs. “It’s a good thing you know me better—than anyone in the world. You always said I was your master puppeteer. Stick to the plan I made in the tree house, Kane. When it’s all over, I’ll remember you.”

Kane breaks out into a sprint, filled to the brim with raging emotions that are about to split him apart. When we finally get to the infirmary, Skylenna grips Kane before he sets her on a gurney outside. “Promise me—you won’t let me fall in love with you. I don’t want it to hurt more than it already will.”

He stares at her with anger, the urge to cry hardening his face. “I promise, Skylittle.”

It’s after she’s wheeled inside that Kane goes around back, and I listen to him roar to the cloudy sky, punching holes in the brick of the infirmary until his fists are swollen and gushing blood.



I STAND ON THE EDGE of the tree house, knowing that this will show me the last piece of the puzzle. The weight of this memory is so profound that I double over as it takes me.

They sit together, looking down at DaiSzek while they eat fruit and watch the sunrise.

“If I’m like you, we can fight together, and you won’t have this weight on your shoulders.” Skylenna tosses a piece of fruit down to DaiSzek.

“We don’t know that. The only female subjects I’ve seen are either suicidal or catatonic—or both,” Kane replies.

Skylenna’s silent for a long moment.

“Whatever is cooking in there—I don’t want to know.” Annoyance flashes through his tone.

“Okay, hear me out.” She turns to face him, adjusting her sundress. “The only reason the female subjects turn out that way is because they can’t cope

with the trauma that made their brains different, right? Well, what if we can control that outcome? What if there's a loophole?"

Kane sighs. "What if nothing. I'll find a way to get us out of here. If they can't find us, they can't use us."

"They'll follow us wherever we go! Our only way out is *in*."

His eyes close momentarily. "Go on, then. What's your master plan?"

"Using my father against me isn't going to work, but they don't know that. He has distanced himself enough, and you have sheltered me from the abuse that was thought to have been my ruin. But if that's the case, they'll eventually figure that out and dig until they discover that you and DaiSzek are my weaknesses." Her sparkling eyes go dark. "And—we don't know what they would do to you to get me to break. I can't risk anything bad happening to either of you for this experiment."

"I'm following." Kane nods.

"We also know that Vlademur's son will eventually come for me, try to break me himself, trick me into falling in love with him. You said it yourself; it's the plan *B* they've cooked up. Aurick Demechnef will lure me in and use domestic violence to break me. If that happens, I won't be able to hide the fact that I know about the experiment, I know about Aurick, I know what they're trying to do."

I stare at her with a half-open mouth. So, I've really known everything this entire time? The times I would get frustrated with Dessin or Kane for keeping secrets, he kept it to himself that I was in on those secrets at one point in my life.

"But I won't let on that I'm compromised if I don't remember you or the experiment," Skylenna finishes with great caution.

Kane's eyebrows rise. "Not happening."

"But I'm not done!"

"No."

"At least let me get out the rest of the *master plan*," she argues.

He nods with annoyance for her to continue.

"Think about it. It's said that the Phoenix stem only targets the memories you choose to let go of. All I'd have to do is focus on *you*! We can be ten steps ahead of them if we're controlling the outcome of this experiment. Knowing Aurick, he'll probably use me to get to you. See if he can kill two birds with one stone. At that point, you can get close to me

again. Be my friend. It'll be easy since you already know me better than anyone, right?"

Kane's expression is unreadable.

"If you become my anchor again, my best friend, my protector—then teach me to be strong, to fight back, be mentally prepared for what comes next. Maybe as an adult, without these memories, I can be different. I can be like you..." Skylenna takes a deep breath, looking up at Kane with a heavy expression. "You can fake your death. Control the outcome so they won't have a chance to hurt either of you."

My vision turns dark and spotty, and I come down on my knees—*hard*. Did she just say *fake*? Fake his death? *Are you fucking kidding me?*

"And I will think it's real, so in theory, I will become like you. And once my mind works differently, I'll be able to look back at my own missing memories, won't I?"

"In *theory*, Skylittle. Keyword. We don't know what you'll be capable of. You may never remember me this way again!"

"Still not done." She holds a hand up. "You'd have to keep up the ruse until then. We don't know how the Phoenix stem works. Certain information may trigger a memory, and if that happens, it's all over. You have to keep me in the dark. That means, let me believe Aurick is a friend. Let me believe you're a secretive prick for all I care. Because if this fails, those memories of us will be gone forever."

I'm still stuck on his death. I hold myself up with liquid arms and buttery legs. "Did you fake your death?" I scream at them. "Was this all a trick?!"

"It's a good plan." He rubs his hands together, thinking. "But I'd never put you in the lion's den like that. I'd never lie to you, never use you like a pawn, never risk your memories of me because, honey, our childhood together is part of who you are. Who would you become if we took those away, huh? The next time we'd meet, I wouldn't know you, and you wouldn't know me."

Skylenna considers this, chewing on her lip. "What if that's the time I'd meet another alter? That might be easier on you, and it would be like a fresh start."

But Kane has made up his mind, putting the conversation to bed. And I suppose that's why younger Skylenna took it upon herself to eat the

Phoenix stem when Jack attacked. She took it upon herself to enact this plan.

I'm hyperventilating, being consumed with a tornado of emotions. Relief. Hope. Confusion. Fury. Happiness. Anguish. It falls over me until I drop to the wooden floor of the tree house and lose consciousness.

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28. “Until I’m Old and Gray.”

“YOU CAN FAKE YOUR DEATH. Control the outcome so they won’t have a chance to hurt either of you.”

My body moves erratically, speeding through the forest with all of the energy I have left. I have to find my friends. I have to tell them what I’ve discovered. I’m not thinking about what happens next; I’m just sprinting like a crazed bull.

“You can fake your death.”

But no one could have faked that. I watched the sickle plunge through Dessin’s chest. My entire body was drenched in his hot blood. A part of me wants to protect myself from imminent disappointment. I know that if I let myself get excited about this... the heartbreak will be all-consuming.

“You can fake your death.” The voices are like screaming sirens in my head.

The pieces fit, though. He was so frustrated that he had to keep these secrets from me. It’s because it wasn’t even his plan to begin with. He was honoring my wishes!

“You have to keep me in the dark.”

It must have been hell for him to know me, remember me, care about me, and yet know for a fact that he was a stranger in my eyes.

“Let me believe Aurick is a friend.”

Jesus, I threw a fit when I learned who Aurick really was. I let my anger with Kane and Dessin tear me apart and keep me from enjoying my last few moments with him. He couldn’t tell me about Aurick because we were buying time, and I had to appear clueless to the leader of Demechnef.

I look up at the dark-gray sky, growing angrier from an impending storm. My legs burn, and my chest is tight. Sweat runs down my body as if it is already raining.

“Chekiss!” I scream.

“You can fake your death.”

“Warrose!”

If there’s any chance... I have to know.

The scent of firewood and smoke brush past my nose. I search the forest until I see a warm orange glow near a thin creek.

“Niles!” He’s the first one on his feet, racing toward me with an alert expression.

His blood covered my hands. Life vanished from his warm-brown eyes.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

The others gather around me, watching me pant, resting my palms on my knees to get more oxygen in my lungs. I grimace at the sight of my legs. Dried blood has become a second skin. What must they think? They don’t exactly look surprised to see me this way.

“I think”—a cough breaks free of my lungs—“he’s alive.”

Being around those I love makes me want to cry. To finally let go. But I lock down my emotions, refusing to let myself feel until I know if this is real or not.

“What did you say?” Ruth asks.

“Who?” Chekiss attempts to hold me up.

“All of them. Dessin, Kane, Greystone, Aquarus, Kalidus, Foxem, Dai, Syfer.” I look at them with wild, unpredictable eyes. “He faked his death.”

Ruth lets out a devastating noise. “Oh, Skylenna.”

“How could someone possibly fake that kind of death?” Niles asks with raised eyebrows.

“Look—it sounds crazy. I know that. But I saw it—We made a plan. He must have done it somehow!”

Chekiss rubs a hand over my back. “Why do you think this?”

“Skylenna—”

“No, listen to me!” I shake myself free of their hands and back away. “We made a plan years ago! He would fake his death so I would become like him. The female subject to this fucking experiment!”

I didn’t notice until now that Warrose has remained quiet. “She’s right.” His voice is barely a whisper, but loud enough that everyone freezes.

My eyes bulge out of my head. Did he know?

“He asked me not to tell you,” Warrose breathes.

“You knew?” I explode. My body, despite the severe exhaustion and aching pains, fires through the air, pummeling him to the ground. “You fucking knew?”

“We didn’t know if it would work! I still don’t know if it did.”

I stop pounding my hands against his chest to listen.

“The day the Naiadales stopped us, remember? They asked to speak to Dessin. They were giving him a rare vial of the old Emerald Lake Spring.” I think back on this. The day we gave ourselves up to Demechnef. “Its legend

says it can bring someone back from the dead, regenerate their wounded body.”

“A *legend*?” I spit out.

“They said it was a prophecy that his death would turn you into the warrior that will end the war!”

A memory flickers across my thoughts. The day Garanthian gave me the demons’-teeth weapon. *You fight yet, Skylenna?* He said *yet*. It was in his prophecy that I’d become this way.

I shake my head. “But you don’t know if it worked?”

Warrose looks grim. “No. I thought he’d be out by now, come looking for you. DaiSzek stayed at his grave. To dig him out if—when he finally woke up.”

I wilt, still straddling his hips. What if it didn’t work? What if the springs no longer held the elements that could revive someone?

“How long is it supposed to take?”

“Days or weeks. It depends on the gravity of the injury.”

I slide off of him, pressing my hand to my mouth, trying to process the thoughts racing through my mind. *He would have come for me by now.*

Maybe I should find him.

Where do I start?

“What should we do?” Niles asks, kneeling next to me.

The group is silent. But I’ve made up my mind.

“We have to dig up his grave.”



THE STORM SWALLOWS US WHOLE. Clouds that look like waves in an angry sea. Lightning claiming the powerful sky. Rain hammering down on us, so hard and so fast that it stings when it shoots across our skin. The trees overhead are waving like giant green flags, whipping through the watery line of fire.

“We should find shelter!” Warrose yells at me through the ferocious winds. “Someone will get hurt!”

But my mind isn’t operating on reason. No, it’s running on fumes and dangerous threads of hope. I let the images of my Dessin bleeding out across my lap counteract my thoughts, laced with hope that could very well kill me. I’m not thinking about anyone’s safety. I’m not concerned with the

lightning splitting trees in half or the ground beneath our feet starting to slosh with a flood.

I'm thinking of *him*.

That boy who reached his hands into Jack's dark basement, pulling me into the sunlight. The one who taught me to swim, to climb a tree, to find food in the forest, to fight like an assassin in the night. That boy who held me while I cried, while I asked God to take us far away from this horrible place. That boy who put my happiness before his own.

Kane.

I'm thinking of the man in the thirteenth room that everyone feared. The man that was cruel to all except me. The man that would ride through hell, endure endless torture, walk through fire just to save me. The man with the heart covered in armor. The avenging alter.

Dessin.

The cold rain mixes with the blood of the asylum devils, washing it away in the storm. I have no food in my stomach. No sleep to keep my eyes open. No rest to soothe my aching muscles. All I have now is my will to see him again. To feel his heart beating.

Chekiss and Niles start to fall behind, and to my surprise, Ruth picks up her pace, running violently beside Warrose and me. Our feet splash in puddles, and she looks at me through wet strands of hair and those deep-brown eyes.

"I'm with you," she grunts, sharp whimsical features covered in drops of rain, firm with determination.

My heart of ice and poison cracks, only a little, a slight hairline fracture that lets in some of her warmth. Even after the cruel words I said, cutting her deep, she is still standing by me. I give her a quick nod.

We enter the graveyard. The air heavy with lingering spirits and the strong scent of wet soil and wilting flowers. I point to the red oak tree drooping over my father's grave. Kane's family plot is right behind it. Now that I think about it, they must have planned it that way. Sophia and Jack's families, bound in life and death.

I slide to my knees, gliding through the mud as we reach his headstone. I blink several times, clearing the water from my lids. It says the names of all of his alters.

I look up at Warrose with stunned eyes.

He nods. Guilt. Fondness. Calm sadness.

Without another word, I scramble to dig with my hands. Six feet of compact dirt, only soft and mushy at the first few inches due to the storm. I'll do it. I'll break my fingers, bloody up my nails, push myself to the brink to find him.

Niles and Chekiss finally catch up, dropping to the ground to help Ruth and me dig. With every handful of mud, rainwater fills the small hole. It's exhausting. We're hunched over, sopping wet, blind from the sideways rain, and slipping around in mud.

"Move," Warrose orders. He rips off his black tunic in a hurry, revealing his raised tattoos, gray and black, an ancient language in the form of calligraphy markings all over his body.

And he's huge. The broad lines of his back. The trim coiled muscles across his stomach. I turn away quickly, looking over at Ruth, who is gawking with an open mouth. She stops digging.

"Is that really necessary?" she asks him.

Warrose snorts. "I brought shovels. So, yes."

Oh, thank God.

It feels like hours pass as we dig to the bottom. Niles's shovel clanks against the coffin first. At this point, the storm lets up, now sprinkling over us in a fine mist.

"Niles!" Warrose shouts, gripping the edges of the slippery wood. "Help me open it!"

We drop our shovels, moving out of the way to give them some space. My heart is a ball of thunder in my chest. The oxygen is too thin. And what if he's in there? What if he is—still dead? My body starts to shake violently as if it only just realized we're soaking wet and surrounded by a chill in the air.

Ruth's hand slides into mine, holding me close as they work the lid.

I hold my breath. I wasn't supposed to let that dangerous sliver of hope tighten itself around my heart. But it has. There's no denying it now. I can't protect myself from what comes next.

"You can fake your death."

Niles and Warrose grunt, opening the lid slowly.

I suddenly remember what he said the night before I saw him die. *You have to go back and figure it out yourself. You have to be brave. And please, please... remember me.*

This was all he wanted. For me to remember the life we shared. Every moment I have loved him, even as a little girl. He was my whole world, and he knew it. And he was willing to risk everything to get that back.

Watching the coffin open, my entire body clenches, and we lean forward to look inside.

I collapse with a sharp intake of breath.

“Oh my god,” Ruth whimpers, covering her mouth. “It’s *empty*.”

A thousand emotions and thoughts and questions tumble over my body as I try and take it all in. If it’s empty, then he’s alive. He got out. Ruth tries to embrace me, but I turn to the side and retch, my stomach turning over as I vomit.

“That means she’s right, doesn’t it? He faked his death!” Niles rests his hands behind his head in shock.

Warrose sighs. “Where the fuck did he go?”

My body shudders again. I get to tell him I remember. I get to look him in those warm, chocolate eyes again. I get to feel his arms wrap around me.

Nothing matters anymore, and yet, everything does.

“I have to find him,” I pant, tears burning my eyes.

“We need to fill this hole back up,” Warrose thinks aloud. “If he took the time to make it look like the grave was in perfect condition, then he must believe Vexamen is watching. He must want to keep his miraculous revival a secret.”

But something inside the casket catches my eye.

I stumble to it, reaching my hand over the satin pillow where his head once rested. A necklace. Leather string. Wooden cross.

I hesitate to grab it. Touching it will suck me into the void again. And I’m moments away from losing consciousness. I look up at Warrose. “Take it,” I say. “I’ll touch it when I’ve rested.”

They don’t ask me to elaborate. No one has any idea how to react to this, what to say, how to feel. We trudge back to the forest to make camp in silence. Warrose makes a fire, feeds the group, and I now know why I haven’t seen DaiSzek. He’s been waiting for Dessin to come back. If only I had realized that sooner.

I eat absentmindedly with the group. Letting my numb toes and fingers thaw in front of the fire, listening to Chekiss snore lightly, and Niles nudging him to breathe normally.

And as the clouds part and I look up at the twinkling stars, my last thought is:

I'm ready to see the sun.

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29. The Necklace

I DREAM OF THE LAST time I saw Kane before I ate the Phoenix stem. We were hypothetically discussing how things would work if I lost my memory. Sort of daydreaming about the idea, without the pressure of deciding to do it, of course.

But that fear of the unknown lingered; what if I never regained my memories? What if he always remained a stranger? But I had faith. *“Will you wait for me?” I asked him.*

“Until I’m old and gray.”

I dream of a time when I was only seven, taking a nap with Kane in the forest. He’d hold me in his arms, rocking back and forth as the wind rustled his hair, and he was always in the same spot as I’d wake. Looking down at me with a smile on his young face and fondness in his brown eyes.

I dream of the many times we fought. I’d throw pine cones at the back of his head. I’d call him names meant as an insult, like Kaney-Boy, Mr. Valdawell, or The Demechnef Puppet. He was the one that taught me how to draw the puppet during a panic attack. He was the one that gave me my first piece of charcoal and parchment. And it was all because of that nickname.

And lastly, I dream of the many times he’d save me from the basement. How his arms would extend to me through the thick fog of darkness. How he’d let me squeeze his hands through each panic attack. How he kept a brave face through everything he suffered in training. Never once letting me know the weight he always carried.

The feathery rays of sunlight trickle over my eyelashes. Behind my lids, I can make out a male silhouette, a tall figure hovering over my sleeping body. Heat jolts through my chest, jump-starting my heart.

Has he finally found us?

My eyes pop open with the residual heaviness of sleep. To my horrid surprise, Niles looms over me with an impatient look that would normally make me crack a smile.

“Are you going to explain what the hell is going on, sweetie pie?” He holds up the cross necklace, obnoxiously dangling it in my face. “And why this is so important?”

I groan, sitting up, and realize everyone is already awake.

Ruth looks at me from over her breakfast. “You look better now that the blood is gone.”

I bite my lip. That’s right, they did see me drenched in blood. What ran through their minds seeing me like that? Do they know what I did?

“Yeah, except now she’s covered in mud.” He looks down at his chest. “We’re *all* covered in mud.”

“There’s a creek nearby—”

“We look and smell like dogs that have rolled around in a pile of shit!” Niles deadpans. This definitely is my fault. He’s using humor to cover up the pain he’s in. Mud crusts over his burns. I can’t imagine what he’s going through.

“Enough, Niles,” Chekiss scolds.

“No. She needs to explain what in God’s name is going on. Now that we believe he’s alive again, it’s time to stop this. I’m smelly, tired, my back aches from sleeping on logs and rocks, and I’m in a constant state of pain from—the fire.” His glistening eyes stare me down without blinking. “You need to come back to us now. Lock away that scary, gory butcher shit for a moment and explain what happened while you’ve been gone.”

It’s exactly what I needed to hear. The truth spills out. The talk Aurick and I had about the experiments. The new way my brain seems to work. The memories I’ve been able to step into and watch like I’m really there. The childhood I’ve forgotten. The history Kane and I shared. And my elaborate plan to wipe my own memory and puppeteer all of this. Dessin’s death. My way to become like him without any permanent damage. My way to become like him without the residual effects that the female subjects are used to facing. And how by touching the cross necklace, I’ll likely remember something important. It must be why he left it behind.

“What about the asylum?” Chekiss asks.

I shake my head. “I—lost it. I needed something to channel my grief and rage on. I needed revenge.”

Niles holds out the necklace again. “Let’s end this.”

I look around the group, waiting patiently for me to touch the cross. They didn’t have questions, didn’t show any doubt of the truth I shared. They’re with me.

I vow to myself that I’ll make it up to them. Everything I’ve put them through. The stress. The secondhand heartbreak. The sadness. I’ll make it right again.

But first, I reach out, grasp the necklace, and allow my body to vaporize, sifting through the void in a galaxy of stars until I arrive.

My hand releases the piece of wood, and I look at my friends with parted lips and chills racing down my spine.

“What did you see?” Warrose asks.

“I’m the one that made this necklace for him...” I trail off, remembering how I found it in the abandoned Demechnef building. “The day I gave it to him, he didn’t come for me when I was locked in the basement. I got tired of waiting and went to the lagoon myself. It was the worst flood and thunderstorm we’ve had in years. But I was only nine and didn’t realize it was too dangerous to swim. When Kane fished me out, he held on to me for hours. And when I asked him how he found me, he said that there was something in him that could sense when I was in danger.”

I stare blankly into the forest, blanketed with the glow of morning light.

“He said that was how he’d always find me.”

“Will you always protect me?” I had asked him as I coughed out murky water. He looked at me then, holding me tightly to his boyish frame. “Until hell freezes over.”

Niles lifts his chin in understanding. “Does that mean...”

“She has to put herself in danger for him to find her.” Warrose looks at me with relief and silent admiration. “How’re you going to do it?”

I close my eyes. It has to be real danger. A flooding lagoon won’t work this time. I have to feel the overwhelming panic I felt that day. Thoughts of places, people, and scenarios sprint through my mind.

“She could go through Hangman’s Valley again? Aren’t Vexamen soldiers still there?” Ruth suggests.

Warrose nods to himself. “They would have resupplied the small force we killed that day, yes.”

“This doesn’t make any sense. Why can’t we just go looking for him?” Chekiss grunts, pacing the length of our campsite.

An understanding drapes over my chilled shoulders, calm and peaceful. I imagine his face, those dark eyes, that smile. My heart fills with a childlike giddiness. A swell of hope that’s fresh and sweet, like a puff of spring wind and sunlight trapped in my chest.

“I suppose I can ask him that when I see him again.”

30. “Until hell freezes over.”

EVERY MUSCLE IN MY BODY trembles as I hike through Hangman’s Valley.

I wear the satchel of urine that repels the beasts of this forest. Sure, that would put me in pretty severe danger, which is the goal, but I don’t want to be torn to shreds before he can find me.

The fall air flutters through the tall collection of rubber and cannonball trees. Birds squawk from the safety of their nests, the afternoon sun pours over the red-and-yellow fruits dangling from the trees.

After we bathed in the creek, Ruth helped me in my leather archer’s dress and pants that I saved from the asylum and hooked the strap of blades around my waist. I leave my hood up, pointing out each trap waiting for me. The puddles of acid. The trench pit disguised with vines, branches, and moss. I remember each step we took in the single-file line behind Dessin and Aurick.

Where are you, Dessin?

I, of course, have doubts that puncture my chest as I trek on. What if Vexamen dug up his body? What if Demechnef did to study his anatomy? His brain? What if that vial from the Emerald Lake Spring failed? I don’t think I could go on if—

Something makes a soft cracking sound behind me. Not a branch—smaller, like a twig or even a crunchy leaf. So light and quiet, I’m not sure I heard it. But that’s how I know I’m being followed. Someone or *someones* is trying to move undetected.

I continue walking, not giving away that I know they’re there. There are probably, if I had to guess, ten crossbows pointed at me. I can smell their sweat and adrenaline thick in the wind.

There’s a snapping sound, like a rubber band smacking against skin, and an arrow whizzes past my face, a hair away from grazing the tip of my nose.

I break out into a run.

My thick, wavy hair flies off my shoulders, flapping in the jungle wind as I sprint, leaping over fallen trees, zigzagging to avoid the plethora of arrows shooting across my vision.

Find me, Dessin.

My stomach jumps in rhythm with my frantic heart, triggering my small breakfast to jostle and slosh in my gut. Panic tingles my sweat-slicked skin,

and I have to remind myself that I, too, am dangerous. If they get close enough, I can take down at least seven. But who knows how many are around?

“You can fake your death.”

Hope urges my muscles to run faster, fight harder, push my body to the brink of what I am capable of. Even though I can defend myself, I miss the way he would protect me. At all costs. Nothing could get through him to me.

My mind floats to that waterfall. The day Kane kissed me.

“As hard as this might be for you, to be left in the dark, to have an endless stream of questions. I promise it’s harder for me. It’s ripping my heart out. It’s”—he took a steadying breath—“burning me alive, honey. I want to tell you everything. But I can’t. Not until this is all over.”

My heart burns for him. I need him more than food and water. I need to tell him I remember. I understand why he did it.

I twist my head and notice that the Vexamen Breed is catching up. They’re faster than I am. Longer legs and wider strides. Not to mention, my body has been put through the wringer recently. I’m sore from head to toe.

I’ll have to stop and fight. My eyes search for a spot that I can use to my advantage. Trees, logs, clusters of vines. And a small cliff. A hill that cuts off from erosion. I force my tired legs to move in that direction. Only a little farther. I can wait for them behind the cliff, wait for them to jump down so I can attack them one by one.

It’s not much of an advantage, but it’s something.

Racing up the hill, I’m only a good twenty yards ahead. I get to the edge and drop ten feet, my backside scraping against giant curly roots and gravel. With a thump into a bed of moss and ivy, I reach for my knives. They stopped shooting the crossbows; there’s a chance I can catch them off guard and fight hand to hand.

I’m here, Dessin.

Men in raven armor, like the black scales of a viper, leap from the small cliff, rolling through the dirt as they make contact with the ground. I pounce on the first one, jumping on his back before he can see me, and slicing my blade across his exposed neck. Hot blood sprays across my hand. The second one jumps from the cliff and lands behind me; I pretend not to hear him sneak up, ducking as his sword swings over my head, whirling on one

foot to kick my leg out under his feet. He flips backward, falling hard on his upper back. I quickly spear him with his own sword.

But the rest fall too quickly. I was hoping to get them one at a time. They trickle over the hill like a colony of ants, tumbling toward me. I only have time to scream and swing my daggers in desperation to slow them down. But there are too many, and I'm tackled to the ground, thrusting my dagger into impenetrable armor.

If I can't live with you, I'll die with you.

My scream travels the length of the forest as I fight with everything I have left. Every lesson Kane taught me. Every moment he trained me to wield a weapon, swing my fists, defend myself against the greatest warrior there is. *Him.*

But it isn't enough. There are too many. All at once.

I love you, Dessin.

The sound of a motor grumbles through the trees, loud enough to get the soldiers on top of me to look up, moving out of my view of the cliff. But then—all movements stop at the sound of a dragon's roar piercing the jungle with the heat and explosiveness of a thousand burning suns.

I freeze, stunned into absolute silence, with an army of goose bumps etching over every inch of flesh.

One blink and I gasp.

A man on a motorcycle flies off the cliff alongside a black beast, soaring with fiery red eyes and an open jaw of sharp teeth, ready to devour.

And so they do.

"It's you," I say with a loud exhale. "*Dessin.*"

Dessin, in his leather jacket and double-edge sword, kicks off the bike, sweeping through the unit like a machine, slicing through heads and limbs as if they're made of butter. And DaiSzek is unstoppable and a plague on this earth. He jumps from soldier to soldier, shaking their bodies like chew toys, and snarling after each kill.

I jump to my feet but have lost my daggers, and Dessin—without a word—tosses me a pair of gloves. The demon's teeth that Garanthian gave me. I pull them on before a soldier swings a sword in my direction. I high kick it out of his hand, slamming my fist of metal thorns and jagged blades across his face, ripping into the flesh, carving him into confetti.

The three of us fight like arch angels sent down to obliterate evil. Warriors that don't bleed. Don't feel pain. And I'm filled with an electric

current of power. A feeling of utter domination. Complete invincibility. When we're together, nothing can touch us.

Where one lacks, the other makes up.

Dessin fights three at once, kicking one into the air for DaiSzek to snatch midflight.

Within minutes, the last body drops into a heap of blood and entrails. A silence drifts around us like heavy smoke, impossible to breathe. And I look at them, streaked in blood, panting from the workout.

My jaw clamps down. His face. His broad shoulders. That towering height that leaves me feeling so small in his shadow. And he gazes back at me, burning with violent adrenaline and unreadable emotions. His sword drops at his side, and DaiSzek runs to chase down a deserter.

My hands shake at my sides as Dessin takes a single step toward me.

I suddenly can't control what I feel. The fury overtakes me, searing through my veins like poison, blurring my vision with hateful tears—it's all I've known since he's been gone. I release a stuttering breath.

He takes three more steps and remains silent.

I'm bubbling with every ounce of agony, of horror, of crippling devastation I felt when he died. The tears swell, and I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out.

"Skylenna," he says, voice rugged with deep sorrow and dominance. I feel it sink to the bottom of my stomach.

My name on his lips melts the last of my control.

"You son of a bitch!" I explode, slamming my blood-soaked fists into his hard, immovable chest. "You fucking bastard!"

My screams are the most devastating sound I've ever heard.

"How could you do this to me?" I know why he had to. But I can't help but be angry at myself, at my plan, at anything and everything. "I watched you die!" Somewhere in that sentence, my voice breaks into a million tiny pieces, and I'm crying. My cheeks wet and flushed with heat.

My fists and arms are limp and soft as I weakly try to hit him again. This time, he catches my wrists, pulling me to him as he walks me backward into a tree. My back hits the bark, and I melt into him, sobbing with loud, angry gasps for air.

Dessin presses his forehead to mine, and it's the first time I've ever seen tears rimming his eyes. His jaw is locked, his forehead pinched together,

and he looks like he wants to hit something, kill something, or roar at the top of his lungs in agony.

"I was so cold..." I whimper. And suddenly, I'm that little girl again, trapped in the basement. "I wanted to die too."

"Forgive me," he grunts, low and gravelly, hot breath brushing over my lips.

Forgive him? I'm the one that forced his hand. I ate the Phoenix Stem. I killed every last memory I had with Kane. I gave him no choice but to honor my last wishes and carry out this plan.

"Forgive me. Because I'll never forgive myself. We never wanted you to hurt like this."

I cry harder, melting into him as I fall apart. And he holds up my weight with ease, locking his arms around me like a cage. I let it all out. The pain I endured in the asylum. The days I couldn't eat after his death. The nightmares I was trapped in. The blood I spilled. The memories that tormented my soul and ate me alive.

"Please, don't leave me," I beg. It's such a small, sad request. But I'm terrified. My whole world spun out of control when he was gone. And I suddenly buckle under the weight of this new fear. That he'll vanish again. A string of smoke in the wind.

And I'll be left cold and alone, all over again.

"I'm here. I'm here." His muscles bulge under my hands, gripping him for dear life. His scent of cedar and sandalwood overwhelm me. His own atmosphere of dark, masculine fragrance. I've longed to breathe it in again.

I see flashes of the worst moments of my life. Cradling his head in my lap. Trying to stop the rush of blood with my hands.

"He's suffering," Ruth said through a garbled cry. "I think you need to say goodbye."

I howl as Dessin lets me unravel in his arms. "You were dead!"

"I was. And it killed me more watching you *watch* me die."

"I can't get the memory out of my head," I sob. "I see your blood on my hands everywhere I go."

He nods, a tendon ticcing in his jaw.

"And I've become a monster." Which I can't bring myself to feel bad for at this moment. The only emotions clouding my head are heartbreak, relief, agony, and pure bliss.

"You—"

Dessin dips his head down, taking my mouth with his own, cutting off my question. It's a tortured, traumatized kiss. It's pleading and suffering and praying for mercy. Through tears, sweat, and blood. He lets me weep softly, kissing away the scars and bruises. I wrap my arms around his neck, and he squeezes me tighter.

"I fucking missed you, baby," he exhales against my lips. And with one swift jerk of his arms, he thrusts me upward, slinging my legs around his hips.

I release a pained moan as he presses his growing arousal into my center, trapping me against the tree, claiming my mouth as he shows me just how much he missed me. Strong hands squeeze the underside of my thighs to the point of discomfort. But the good kind. I want him to bruise me. Scratch me. Mark me permanently, so there's no way I'll ever forget this moment.

I tighten my hands in his hair, pulling him closer to me, silently begging him to deepen our kiss. And he does. His hot tongue dips over mine, forcing my mouth to open wider, to whimper into his feverish kiss.

He becomes rock hard at the sounds I make. It only spurs me on.

"Christ, I need to have my hands on you every day," he growls against my lips.

"Like this?" I bring his hand from my thigh to my breast, guiding him to feel my nipple tighten at his touch.

"Yes, *fuck*," he groans. "I'll never get enough of you, baby."

"I want you inside me." I tug at his belt buckle. "I want you to fill me up. I want you to make my pain go away."

His eyes darken, expression twisting in arousal and anguish.

"Not yet," he says huskily. His hands release me from around his waist. And that gaze softens, losing focus as he dissociates from this moment.



Kane

TREES AND SKY, ALL BLURRY and unclear in my dissociation.

I blink several times, waiting to understand where I am and why I've surfaced. It's always this way, though I try not to show it. The amnesia when we front can be frightening, those heavy moments like I've just

woken from sleepwalking. My hands feel wet, my body aching as if I've been running or fighting. I suck in a steady breath as my vision clears.

And I am immediately aware of why I returned to the front.

She looks like a warrior from one of the colonies. Her hair is wild, tied down by a couple of braids on the sides of her head. And her leather hunting dress is splattered in blood. My eyes dash to her face, her emerald-green eyes surrounded by tiny red veins. Her tears track through streaks of blood.

I download as much information as I can from Dessin. From the moments leading up to where we are.

Vexamen Breed chasing her. Feeling the beat of fear course through Dessin's chest. Finding her like a ship to a beacon. Killing them all. First time seeing her again.

I've been watching, close to the front, after Dessin found her, but losing bits of that memory is our way of protecting each other.

"Kane?" she whispers, wet and strained.

My body goes rigid. She's always looked at me with this sense of comfort and fondness, like she knew or felt that we have this bond but didn't remember where it came from. It's as if someone held my heart out and dangled it in front of me.

But, my god, she no longer has the question clouding her vision. She's looking at me. Really looking at me. Tears spill over her bottom lashes.

"Hi, honey," I rasp.

She looks at me for several moments before parting her lips.

"You used to call me Skylittle."

My heart gallops, then twists painfully; I sigh and close my eyes. Pure ecstasy. Relief washes over my body like a hot shower. Emotion clogs my throat so fiercely that I can't even respond.

"You love fruit but hate raspberries because of the seeds." She takes a step closer. "You've memorized the constellations from the nights we'd sleep under the stars. The smell of cut grass makes you sneeze. And you'd stay up at least four hours after I fell asleep, waiting to see if I had a night terror so you could pull me out of it."

Tears fill my eyes until she's a blur of golden hair and tan skin. I turn away, but she grips the back of my neck.

"You tried to save Scarlett." Her strong voice breaks. "You suffered for weeks from the burns on your back. And you've hated yourself for not

getting there in time.”

I can feel Dessin close to the front, listening quietly, soaking in her words as much as I am.

“Skylenna—”

“How could a man spend his entire life being this selfless?” She looks at me the same way she did when we were young, and she thought I was her hero. “You felt Jack’s loss more deeply than I did because he was the only father you’ve ever known.”

I nod. I have dreams of it often. Every time I try to save him, his blood leaks from his body faster. I lost them both that day. Jack ended his life so he wouldn’t be a pawn in their experiments any longer. He knew by removing himself from the equation, she’d be safer.

“You saved me from that basement, Kane. You saved me from Jack. You saved me from the fire. You were *always* there. My best friend. The arms that held me when I cried. The voice in the darkness that pulled me from my night terrors. You’ve cared for me through a sea of memories.”

I use my thumb to wipe a tear rolling down her cheek. It hurts me to see her cry, but these words, these sacred memories, burrow into my soul.

“And I’ve loved you my whole life.” She looks up at me with absolution. A statement that has tattooed itself on my heart. “I am *in love* with you, Kane.”

Fuck. My shoulders tremble under her hands. If only she knew how long I’ve waited to tell her everything. How many nights in the forest I’d watch her sleep, as a grown woman, as this stunning creature I couldn’t take my eyes off of. She’s been my whole world, whether she knew it or not.

And every day, I’d wake up and see her soft, peaceful face, still in a deep sleep. I’d say it then. I’d tell her that I’ve loved her since I was a little boy. I’d whisper that she is my soul mate. That I’d protect her until the day I die.

“I have waited half my life to hear you say that,” I breathe out, trapping her face between my hands. “I love you, Skylittle. I’ve loved you every moment since I pulled you from that basement. I’ve loved you as a child, a teenager—but as an adult, I am deeply, madly, agonizingly in love with you.”

She doesn’t lean in, she *leaps* in. Jumping into me like two storm clouds, wrapping her legs around my hips and claiming me with her warm lips. But as her mouth parts, her soft, sweet-as-nectar tongue slips into my

mouth. Up until this moment, I have been a patient man. I have kept my hands off of a woman that I've loved and lusted over for years. I have fantasized about how I would lift her over my mouth and rock her hips back and forth until she was coming on my tongue.

I have been as bottled up and restless as a caged animal.

But that tongue and her soft moan make my cock twitch against the button of my pants. With her legs open for me, I push it against her, letting her feel the thick ridge rubbing at her center. She gasps into my mouth, and holy shit, I fall apart.

"God," I growl, squeezing her waist. "I've waited so long for you, honey."

She moans, and it takes every ounce of strength I have not to hike up her dress and thrust into her. Her hips buck wildly against my shaft, and I hiss.

"Then take me, Kane." Her hands find my belt buckle. Even the slightest touch of her finger grazing my cock makes me incoherently desperate.

Oh, I want to. I've never felt such a mind-blowing desire in my life. Her sweet aroma of rain and jasmine with a slight whiff of fire smoke. I want her on her back; I want to see how much of my hands can cover her breasts.

But not here. Not among the pile of bodies. Not in a place that won't mean something to us. This woman is my soul mate. My oldest friend.

There's only one place I've always known she would want me to be with her for the first time.

The Ambrose Oasis.

31. Longing Lost Love

Skylenna

IT WAS HELL TRYING NOT to touch him as we walked to a destination he insisted on.

Hiking up to the opening, I recognize it before I can take my next breath. The purple wisteria dancing in the breeze, the long blades of grass and lavender plants. A meadow that holds the power to instantly put me at ease.

The *fictional* meadow I thought only existed in my mind. Actually, not even just my mind. But a corner of it, dark and hidden from all thoughts and memories. A safe location that I can only access in dire stress.

Ambrose Oasis.

“How?” I spit out, gaze sliding from each perfect detail that I thought I had dreamed up.

Kane turns to me, holding my hands. “I figured you hadn’t been here yet.”

I shake my head. Maybe I really have gone mad now.

“Ambrose Oasis is real?”

“Yes.” He nods. “Would you like me to tell you about—”

His words are drowned out by the sound of children laughing and the thuds of a galloping animal. DaiSzek knocks a little Skylenna over, licking her face as she screams in laughter. Kane brought me here when I stopped eating at the age of seven. Depression can bite down and take hold of anyone at any age, I learned quickly.

“You brought me here to visualize our own secret haven. One that Jack didn’t even know about. You trained me to use this as a safe place to go to in my mind.”

Kane smiles sadly. “I have an Ambrose Oasis, too, in the inner world. Only Dessin’s been there.”

I look back at the beautiful landscape. The vibrant sunset lighting the horizon on fire.

“I still have so many questions,” I say without looking at him. “I found most of the answers myself. But I guess I really wanted your perspective on what happened. How it all happened.”

He steps up behind me, his hot presence warming my back. My eyes flutter closed automatically, and I lean against his hard chest and stomach. His nose grazes my hair, breathing in deeply, savoring me. I feel the bulge in his pants growing at my backside.

He said he loved me. He *loves* me. Powerful endorphins filter through my neurons.

“Is this why you brought me here?”

Kane exhales. “Yes. I’ve waited a long time to have you, feel you, claim you as mine.” A large hand skims through my hair. “I needed it to be somewhere special to both of us.”

My back erupts in chills, and I can’t believe this is really happening. A day ago, I believed the loves of my life were dead. I would never see them again. I’d never feel their touch. Their affection. And that was a tormenting fate I wouldn’t wish on anyone.

“Okay,” I sigh happily. Yelping as he lifts me off my feet, hooking my legs around his waist to carry me to the middle of the meadow.

I brace my hands on his taut shoulders, looking down at those chocolate-brown eyes, feeling a wave of love splash over me.

“Kiss me, honey.” He lowers me back down to my feet, keeping his hands on my ass, squeezing until I’m flush against his chest, ravenous for his lips against mine. I tilt my head back, opening for him eagerly, and he swoops down. We’re a mess of licking, biting, and moaning. I reach my hand down to his erection, rubbing it through his pants.

“*Christ*,” he hisses. “You can’t do that now. I want this to last.”

Butterflies fill my stomach. I love the power I have over him this way. I love feeling him break away from the friendship role and finally admit he wants me.

It broke my heart the day he kissed me, then said it meant nothing. We’ll talk about that soon, but for now, we’ve earned this. We’ve fought long and hard to find our way back to each other.

“May I?” He breaks away from our kiss, pausing before he works the laces from my dress. I nod, panting. His fingers brush over my collarbone, making my center flood with heat.

After undoing the bodice, he sets my breasts free, yanking down the material until I’m stepping out of it.

He looks at me for several seconds, chest rising and falling aggressively. I lift my arms to cover my breasts in sudden insecurity, but he lurches

forward, snatching my hands and drawing them away from his view. “Don’t you dare,” he rasps, low and deep. “You’re far more beautiful than what I imagined.”

He acts quickly, like he just can’t take it anymore. My hands are being cupped in his own, tenderly, and he’s clenching his jaw. Muscles are tightly coiled over his arms and chest.

“Do you want to taste me?” I ask.

His eyes flash to mine darkly. When did he drop to a knee?

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” he chokes out, staring at my body like he’s stuck in a trance. “Once I start, I won’t be able to stop.”

My toes curl, and the muscles in my lower belly contract.

“I want to go slow our first time,” he explains, maybe to me, maybe to himself.

“Have me however you want me. As many times as you want.” I want him to lose control. I want to ruffle his feathers, to see this man that has always respected me and cared for me, become undone.

And he doesn’t disappoint.

Kane licks the underside of my left breast slowly as if testing the waters, and his eyes close in ecstasy. He snatches my nipple in his mouth, groaning against my skin until my groin floods with untamed flames. He twists my right nipple with his other hand, pinching it until it’s hard and at his mercy.

“God, Kane,” I gasp.

While he sucks and nibbles, a hand nudges my legs apart. “Tell me you’re wet for me, honey.” I hardly recognize the pained tone of his voice.

I don’t have to answer. Because his thick fingers run up my center, slippery with the evidence of my arousal.

“Oh,” I breathe out. How did that happen so fast?

My eyes snap closed as he nudges my entrance with his thumb, groaning at how tight we both know it’s going to be. “There.” He pushes the tip of his thumb inside, only a little, and I release all of the air trapped in my chest. “Is that what you need, my love?”

My knees become wobbly, and I’m certain his thumb inside me and mouth suckling my nipple are going to make me collapse.

He glances up at me, and those eyes are so dark and hazy, I’m not sure if he sees me. But he reacts to my instability swiftly, hooking his hands behind my thighs and scooping me off my feet, lowering our bodies flush to the grass. He’s on his back, and I’m sitting on his chest. Squirming to pinch

my thighs together because my wetness has dripped uncontrollably down my legs.

“Up,” he commands, pulling my legs toward his head. “On my mouth.”

I suck in a sharp breath. “What? *No.*” I clench up, gawking down at his audacity.

He pauses, gazing at me like his hunger won’t wait. “I’ll take care of you.”

But I’m still uncertain. He wants me to—*sit* on his face?

“I’ll show you how.” He smirks, though it doesn’t touch his eyes.

“How what?”

“How to ride my tongue until you come.”

My back arches, and if it’s at all possible, I’m wetter than before. Tingles spread over my stomach and thighs, and I don’t care how strange this is. I want to do as he says.

I nod once, shocked at the words coming out of his mouth. That small confirmation urges him to lift my hips, angling my center directly over his mouth.

“Relax,” I hear him say. “Lower yourself to me.”

I fight the instinct to stay stiff and hover over him. With loosening muscles, his mouth meets my clit. I suck in a sharp, edgy breath. At first, he kisses me, soft and nice, then his tongue licks through my wetness, and I shudder.

Dear God.

His groans vibrate against my pussy, sending fireworks up my spine. And he feasts like this is his last meal. Calloused hands bracing my hips, tongue dipping inside me.

I moan through my teeth, but it somehow turns into a frustrated growl. This position on top of him feels euphoric. And it’s far more attractive that he is treating this act like it’s for *his* pleasure and not mine. Like he can’t be disturbed while feeding. Like he’s in a drug-induced haze, blacking out in an uncontrollable frenzy to taste every bit of me. This sends my bloodstream roaring with pleasure.

“I want you to fucking suffocate me, Skylenna,” he grits out, digging his fingers into my hips, rocking me back and forth on his tongue.

Hot breath whooshes from my lungs.

I instinctually no longer need his guidance. That frenzy infects my need to chase the building tension inside me. I flex my muscles, rolling my hips

back and forth, faster and harder.

And Kane is sucking and licking and biting, and the friction is driving me mad with lust. I have to lean forward to place my hands on the grass, grinding on his mouth until I'm almost—

“Oh, *Kane!*” I shriek, clenching down as waves of explosive bliss shatter through my lower belly, ricocheting through my upper thighs.

“Fuck,” Kane growls, lifting me off of him. “I need you. Now.”

We rip off his clothes together, throwing them into the field. And he's sitting upright, pulling me into his lap. “You're going to keep your eyes on me when I slip inside you.”

I bite my lip. I can't believe this is happening. Fierce affection for this man chokes me, and I nod. His hands pull my hips closer until the head of his cock is nudging my slick pussy.

“You are the reason I survived this experiment, Skylenna.” Kane's eyes are drunk and shadowed but still heavy with emotion. “You are the reason I chose not to stay in the inner world. You are why I've lived through my trauma. *You* are the love of my life.”

A tear slips from my left eye. I grip his shoulders as he lowers me onto his length, working his way inside me. My mouth parts as he lets me sink downward, and we hold that gaze, drinking each other in while our expressions reflect our pleasure.

“I love you,” I exhale, adjusting to his massive size stretching me. “I love you so much.” Even though I've done this once before with Dessin... I was not expecting my soul to sigh and my heart to melt.

Slowly, I slide my hands down his back, feeling for the burn scars, tracing the way the skin has morphed, and pouring my love into each inch of pain he suffered.

Kane keeps one hand on my waist and the other on the side of my face. Tears fill brown eyes, glistening up at me as I find the hilt.

I roll my hips on him, and he moves with me, an unhurried rhythm, a gradual build of friction.

All I've had since he's been gone is grief, rage, death, and destruction. It's been my fuel. My way of life until he came back to me. Gradually, those warm eyes crack through the cold armor and bleed into my bitterness.

As the sun goes down and the sky darkens, the meadow is filled with yellow glowing lights. Small and floating.

I point them out to him.

“Fireflies,” he whispers with hooded eyes. “I told you I wanted it to be special.”

He begins bucking his hips, bouncing me on top of him, all the while keeping his forehead to mine. His hard cock hits a spot inside me, again and again; I clench around him.

“Yes, god yes. Do that again,” he breathes.

I tighten around him again, and we both make deep sounds of pleasure.

Kane unfurls his restraint, turning my head and whispering in my ear, “Tell me you thought about this when I kissed you in the lagoon.”

His pace picks up, and he’s tightening his arms around me like a python.

“Tell me you wanted me to rip your panties off and make love to you under that waterfall.”

His hot breath and fantasy sliding across my ear break me. I wrap my arms around his neck and howl as I come on his cock, watching fuzzy glowing fireflies swim across the sky.

“Focus, sweetheart,” he says as I come down from my high. “Will you let me come inside of you?”

After a moment of blurry vision and distorted sound, I process what he’s asking and pull myself back to look at him.

“But... I could get pregnant.”

“Yes.” He stares back. “You could.”

“Isn’t that bad?”

“It’s reckless. But the thought of spilling inside of you, giving you a baby... it makes my dick so hard.”

And strangely, it spurs me with a rush of power, and I’m blind with the need to feel him have an orgasm inside me. I nod, grinding against him faster, and he growls his approval.

“Tell me again.” He slams his hips into me.

I melt a little, knowing exactly what he wants to hear.

“I love you, Kane.” I kiss him deeply. “I am so in love with you.”

His eyes hood like he’s about to pass out, then he stabs me with his cock once more, ending at the hilt and roaring against my lips.

“I love you, honey.”



Dessin

THE SOUND OF DAISZEK WALKING the perimeter of the meadow wakes me.

It takes me less time to adjust than it does any other alter. I'm, in a way, the bearer of most memories. I can judge who would best be able to hold certain levels of trauma. That's just the way it is with our system.

I roll to my side, noticing that Skylenna is facing away from me, sleeping deeply. Her eyelids flutter with the dream she's in. Her soft cheeks are pink, her long hair tangled, and even in sleep, she clings to my arm draped around her waist.

The sight makes my stomach do a somersault. She sucks me in like a vortex, her glowing presence splitting apart the dark clouds of my mind and soul.

I let out a breath, running the backs of my fingers over her cheekbone. *What have you been through while I've been away, baby?* It's difficult for me to think about. But looking down at her, I see the exhaustion creating shadows under her eyes. She's been through hell alone. I wish I could take that pain from her, erase those bad memories. Because, if I'm being truthful, I would destroy this world if I lost her. And if I had to watch her die in my arms?

I'd become the devil himself.

Skylenna mewls in her sleep, shifting her ass to push lightly against my —*fuck*.

I want to touch her. Do things to her that would wake her up in disorienting surprise. I want to watch her eyes roll back into her head. Want to make her needy for me. We spoke about this opportunity before she fell asleep. I couldn't help myself; I had to ask permission to wake her from sleep if the urgency to bury myself inside her overtook me. She laughed and said yes, of course. And in return, I gave her my consent to wake me with her mouth. *Any* hour of the night.

My teeth grind together as I try to rein it in. But her round ass is pressed against my groin. I look down and instantly imagine that she is bare and offering herself for me to slide in. My cock stands freely at the visual.

I curse under my breath.

There's so much we need to talk about. I've been meaning to ask if the pile of ash that was once the Emerald Lake Asylum is her doing. I want to hear about what she went through while I was in a dark, looming limbo. Healing in that casket. I need to learn about her mind, how it works, how

she handled it. And I want her to ask any questions she has left because finally, we get to answer freely. We get to speak our truth.

Keeping her in the dark was agonizing for all of us. And we will never do it again. Not to mention, I'll have to actually die before she constructs another genius plan that involves me rotting in a box and her losing her mind, possibly going on a wild killing spree.

Although, the thought of this delicious, long-legged, golden-haired goddess slaying the staff, the council members, the conformists like a madwoman makes my cock press painfully against its restraints.

Okay, fine, questions will come after I put my hands on her. I won't fuck her yet. No, she deserves to be heard, have answers. *Talk.*

I reach my hand over her throat, and without realizing what I'm doing, my hand closes. I wonder if it would make her little cunt wet to feel me put pressure here. Choke her a little. My cock grows against her ass, and I adjust myself so I don't completely lose it.

My hand drags down to her breasts, heavy and so fucking soft as I slip my fingers under her nightdress. I use two fingers to tug on a nipple, fighting the need to groan in her ear at how easily they perk up for me.

Skylenna shifts and sighs sleepily, happily.

My heart thuds inside my chest.

My girl had to watch me die. I remember looking up at her as the blood started to spill into my lungs like a dam bursting, and she was so painfully in denial, so sure I was indestructible, so confident I could stitch myself up and walk away from the sickle that went through my chest.

And all I want to do now is make up for that. Heal the wounds that must have permanently scarred her sweet, gentle heart. I want to love her so deeply, so madly, that she forgets that day entirely. I want to chase away her hell and deliver her to heaven.

My index finger teases her clit through her panties, rubbing gently. The motion drives me up the wall, and I have to slip a finger in if only for a second, just halfway. I'm breathing erratically, like I've been sprinting uphill. Not even fighting in a battle could make me this amped up. Only her. Only my girl.

I wedge into her opening to discover my fondling has gotten her wet, even though she's still fast asleep—she's *soaking*. The beast inside me presses my hips forward into her ass until I'm shaking with primal need. I pull that finger out to taste her. That's all I need. To have one small taste of

her arousal on my tongue, that's it. That'll keep me at bay until she wakes up and we talk. I suck the slickness off my finger and lose my fucking mind. That sweetness of her pussy could make a man do anything to be in her bed. To hear her moan. To be the one that fucks her senseless.

That's it.

We'll talk after.

I'm sorry, baby, I tried.

Freeing my cock from my trousers, I angle her back to arch for me, tilting her ass upward so I can prod my way in. Her soft cunt clenches over my tip. I hiss through my teeth.

Wider. I need her to open up for me.

Hooking a hand under her knee, I hoist her leg over my hip, spreading her pink folds enough for me to push my way through. She's so fucking wet, it's slick and less work to inch my way in.

Skylenna makes a delirious sound, arching her ass against me like even in a sleepy state, her body craves my dick as deep as she can get it. I bite and suck her earlobe.

Wake up, Skylenna.

She turns her head, looking at me with green eyes that look almost golden in the sunrise peeking over the tree line. "Morning," she coos.

I smile. Fuck, she's so cute. Sleepy Skylenna is my favorite.

"Do you like waking up with my cock buried inside you?"

She nods, losing her breath. But I can see the wheels turning in her head. She's trying, in her half-awake state, to determine which alter I am.

"It's Dessin, baby," I say.

She grins, and I could explode inside her right now if I'm not careful. "I missed you," she says drowsily.

I fuck her in lazy, slow undulations. Biting her shoulder. Pulling her hair so I can clamp my teeth down on her neck. She tastes like the lavender she's slept on all night and sweat. And that only makes me hungrier. I pull Skylenna's leg up wider, showing off her swollen clit to the open meadow.

"Would you like me to make you come?"

She pants. "Yes."

And I know what she thinks I'm about to do. She waits, writhing against me, looking down at my fingers hovering over her glistening clit.

But I'm too strung tight with the desire to fuck her dirty today. That one night in the thirteenth room did very little to suppress the beastly cravings

to mark her every which way with my semen.

My fingers dip toward what I want, the tight rim behind her cunt. I skim it with the pad of my thumb. And, like expected, my little wanton goddess squirms at the lightest touch.

“Dessin,” she breathes, caution in her voice.

“I have plans for every single one of your holes,” I snarl in her ear. Pulling my hand back, I spit over my fingers, lowering them back to the puckered rim I want to explore.

“Are you sure?”

Oh, that insecure tone just won’t do. I rub my wet fingers over that spot until she’s twisting and slippery with need while I continue to saw in and out of her slowly.

“You like that, don’t you?” I ask, but it’s strained and husky, betraying how close I am to climaxing.

She nods, needy and desperate, and fuck me because I’m so goddamn close I might have to pull out and take a breather.

But she’s edging, tipping right over. I push my thumb halfway inside that precious little hole, and she seizes up, the muscles in her lower abdomen spasming as she clenches around my dick. The sensation gives me temporary blindness. I no longer hear her cries of satisfaction because my ears ring loudly, blackness crowds the edges of my vision, and that tight leash around my orgasm snaps like a thin ribbon. I fuck her viciously, mindlessly, an incoherent creature of want. And it implodes within me like a tidal wave.

I pull my cock out, slick and heavy between those soft thighs, and shoot a white stream over the perfect swell of her ass. I grip her like a rabid animal, clutching her hips and breasts as I pulse and thrash through the last rapturous effects of my orgasm.

She slumps back to her resting position in the grass, humming her enjoyment, the way she does when she eats something tasty. I smile to myself, admiring my handiwork on her backside.

“Fuck,” I exhale. “You look perfect covered in me.”

Skylenna huffs out a laugh, looking out at the sunrise that blazes through the morning sky, lining the white clouds and reflecting off the dewy leaves.

“Promise to wake me up like that as often as you can?” she murmurs sweetly.

I close my eyes. It feels like she's scraping a wound in my chest, yet at the same time, kissing it better. Promises of staying with her. Promises of waking up next to her. Promises of loving her for a lifetime.

I sigh. "I promise."

My semen drizzles down her back, and I'm hard again. Just like that. I blow out a breath, ripping off a piece of my shirt to clean her with.

"You're lucky I've turned a new leaf and decided to be a gentleman," I tell her, wiping the shred of cloth over the spill. "I'd like nothing more than to leave you in this mess, stain my scent into your flawless skin."

She laughs, a feathery sound, like sunshine trapped in her lungs. There is a secret chamber in my heart where I store that beautiful symphony. It could chase away any dark thought. It could kill any nightmare.

But what's worse is I almost forgot that sound while we've been separated.

I lean down, nuzzling my nose into her neck, inhaling her smell of jasmine and rainwater, committing it to memory.

"You've never been this affectionate with me," she whispers, still watching the sunrise.

"I know. I couldn't be until now."

The greatest challenge of my life was never surviving Demechnef training or manipulating my enemies. It was resisting the gravity that pulled us together, the magnetic energy that drew me into her atmosphere. Even after we first met in the asylum, I was dying to grab a fistful of her hair and feel her writhe in my lap.

How could I slow down the pace at which I was falling deeply in love with her?

"You wanted it to be less painful for me when you inevitably would—*die*."

I answer with a sigh.

"It didn't work." Her voice is cold and detached. A new shell of bitterness surrounding her energy that wasn't there before. I suspect she developed it while I was gone.

"Are you ready to talk about it?"

Skylenna closes her eyes, reliving something sinister, dark, suffocating. My veins pump with a spurt of adrenaline, making me want to physically attack her demons, slay those disturbing memories floating around her head.

“I don’t know where to start,” she says quietly.

I’ll take the lead then, baby.

“Can we talk about the asylum?”

She’s still for a second, muscles in her back taut and hard. “Not yet.”

“Okay.” I think about what she probably wants to know most. “Are you wondering about what happened after I died?”

She nods stiffly.

“I asked Warrose to give me the vial of spring water from the Naiadales colony after my heart stopped beating.” It’s not even worth discussing the way we damn near came to blows when I asked him to do that. I placed a heavy burden on his shoulders that day. “He didn’t think it would work. Didn’t want to give you false hope if I really ended up dying.”

“I don’t understand why you couldn’t just fake your death in an explosion or something less—*awful*.”

“I wish I could have. It was hell for me to watch your reaction before my heart stopped.” I rub a hand across my face. “But unfortunately, it had to be traumatic. It had to be graphic. It had to be too much for your brain to handle.”

Skylenna’s breath is uneven. I stroke a rough hand over her waist, placing a kiss on her shoulder and lingering there until she smiles.

“The spring water obviously worked. Just not as quickly as I would have preferred. By the time I woke up, my wound was completely healed, and—”

“But where did you go when you died?” Skylenna interrupts, tilting her head to face me.

I know what she wants to hear. But I was just as disappointed as she will be hearing the truth. “It was a darker, mirrored version of our world. Drained of all life. I wandered there until I opened my eyes again in the casket.”

“So you didn’t... see anyone?”

I sigh, wishing to God I could say yes. “No. I didn’t make it that far. It felt like a limbo, a resting spot until I chose to move on or go back.”

She continues staring without so much as a blink.

“Scarlett wasn’t there. She moved on to a better place.”

She tries to mask the emotion that I just triggered. But she fails. God, she fails miserably. Her eyes glisten with relief and heartache.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to see Sophia and Arthur again.”

Me too, I hear Kane mutter close to the front. His voice sounds like my own, as do all of the other alters. But there are unique traits that always help me pinpoint who's speaking. When Kane comes close, I feel the pang of guilt in my chest, anxiety, and humility. And unfortunately, he stays very close to the front when Skylenna is around. She has always been his anchor. Without her, even as a child, he would have buried himself deep in the inner world. Never choosing to resurface again.

Skylenna rolls over onto her other side, facing me now.

"I saw you in the asylum... I died, I think. From the simulated drowning. And I saw you there. Was that real? Or was it a dream?"

A tendon in my jaw tics. She *did* die. I wasn't sure if it was real either when I saw her in that hallway. I thought maybe it was my own thoughts manifesting. But it did happen. They fucking killed her. Acid swims angrily in my veins, and I clench my fists until my knuckles turn white.

"That was real."

"You were... not just you, Dessin. You were Kane, and Greystone, and all of your alters. How is that possible?"

It's true. When we died, it was as if the trauma we endured to split us had never happened at all. "We fused, I think. Became whole again. One soul."

Her eyes flare. "Why didn't you tell me about faking your death then?"

"Because I was still dead, baby. I didn't know if it would work or for how long I was dead. And you looked—tortured. I couldn't put you through losing me all over again."

She looked worse than tortured. That innocent, moral light that usually sparkles in her emerald eyes was extinguished. There was a murderous shadow seeping out of her pupils, a new perspective on life that lacked happiness.

"Why didn't you come find me when you woke up? Why did I have to put myself in danger, like I did when I was a girl, just to get you to reveal yourself to me?" she asks in her best attempt not to sound frustrated.

Tell her the truth. We were afraid it didn't work. We—

I know, I bark at Kane.

I rub my temples. "We did go looking, but... if the plan didn't work, if you didn't become like me, if your mind didn't achieve the level of complexity that other female subjects had—this would have all been for nothing." My heart knocks around my chest, and I swallow. "You would

have had to grieve my death for nothing. You would have suffered for nothing. And I was... afraid to face you if you didn't remember. We all were."

Skylenna's face is unreadable. I wish I knew what she was thinking.

"Kane knew that if you touched the cross, saw how we always found you when you were in danger, you'd do it again in hopes we'd come back to you. And that's how we'd know for sure if the plan worked." Christ, saying it out loud makes me sound like a coward.

The meadow is still and waiting for her response, with the exception of a couple of purple wisteria petals drifting over us in the wind.

"And... Vexamen has sent more squadrons. They've invaded Hangman's Valley. It's only a matter of time before they make it to the city line."

Skylenna furrows her brow. "What would you have done if it didn't work?"

"Found you with my tail tucked between my legs."

She snorts. My cock jolts at the sound.

"Can you explain how you seem to know when I'm in danger?" she asks, and her brow softens from the slight diffusion of tension.

I shrug. "It defies logic, but I'll try. It's like a sixth sense, I suppose. We noticed it when you and Kane were children. The first time it happened, you twisted your ankle jumping down a tree while Kane was hunting for food. We knew it immediately. His heart pumped fiercely like he was being attacked. And his only instinct, thought, and focus was to find you."

Her eyes glaze over, and I can tell she's seeing it happen now. I'm eager to learn all of the ways her mind works.

"We knew it wasn't a coincidence when we felt that panic every time Jack locked you in the basement. That's how he was always there to let you out. I'd get us in trouble, and the punishment was the isolation tank. What my instructor didn't know was that I knew how to escape it. He thought he was leaving me in for a day or two and had no idea I'd use that time to break us out so Kane could be with you."

"Wow." She shakes her head. "I always thought you were psychic. Well, I guess you kind of are."

I chuckle.

"I'm sorry I was so angry with you when I found out who Aurick is." She looks up at me, and I remember how much that information wounded

her. I've never seen her that furious. Neither has Kane. "I can't believe that was all my idea. To let Aurick think I was clueless, which I was. But it was by choice."

"I struggled every day with that secret. I almost broke him in half at the ball. I even tried to cheat the system by giving you cryptic warnings about him."

But Kane kept reminding me that this was Skylenna's wish before she lost her memories. We had to respect that.

"I just thought you were kind of jealous." She laughs.

"I was jealous he got to sleep under the same roof as you. I was territorial that he got to buy you nice things. I was angry as hell that he thought he *had* you." My cock grows instantly. The need to claim her again is primal. To mark her. To fill her until she's gasping for air.

Skylenna's gaze falls to the tent in my pants, and her pupils dilate.

"I always wondered why I was so attracted to you. I never let my guard down around Aurick. But you..." She trails off, running a hand over my thigh. "I wanted you from day one, even though I knew how wrong it was. You were all I could think about."

I am painfully hard now.

She leans down, running her bottom lip over the bulge. My chest rises and falls like a fucking animal.

"It was weird for me," I say, snatching her chin in my hands. "I've always known you were important to Kane. You were his whole world, but seeing you for the first time as a grown woman..." I remember watching her take a seat in front of me while Suseas lurked like a creep. Her chest had filled out. She suddenly had these womanly curves, and those thighs no longer had a gap. She was tall and lean, and so fucking beautiful. "And on top of that, you weren't afraid of me. I figured it had something to do with your body remembering ours. But still—you gravitated toward me, and it drove me mad."

Her long fingers curl around my girth. She squeezes, making me writhe under her hold.

But Skylenna snaps her head up, looking out into the distance, and she releases me with a throaty gasp.

I lock my jaw and whip my head around at the distraction.

A black fluff trots into the meadow, locking eyes with my girl.

"Cockblock," I grumble.

“DaiSzek!” Skylenna’s voice breaks, and she covers her mouth as tears spring to her eyes. She quickly throws on her clothes. My heart throbs at the sight of her running to him, falling to her knees as they embrace. DaiSzek uses his weight to topple them both to the ground as she cries, coos, and kisses him.

He stayed at my grave until I woke up. Maybe he caught the scent of my body healing, maybe it was our bond that told him to stay, either way, Warrose made sure he would so I would have a way out. But once my heart started beating, DaiSzek started digging until I could push open the casket lid. There’s a chance I would have died all over again if he didn’t wait for me. But that meant that he couldn’t be there for Skylenna while she experienced the most devastating days of her life.

I walk over to their heap of blonde hair and black fur on the ground, kneeling down to scratch DaiSzek’s belly.

And seeing her laugh through her tears, throw her head back in relief and happiness... I vow to give her this as much as I can and as long as I’m alive.

A family. A home.

32. His Wrathful Warrior

Skylenna

WE EAT TOGETHER, REMINISCING OVER memories of when we first met. DaiSzek sits next to us, chewing on a bone and enjoying our banter.

“What about when you poisoned the staff at the dining party?” I ask with a smirk.

“Easy. I didn’t have to open the champagne bottles at all. I just lined the bottom of each glass with the poison.”

“That doesn’t explain the photos of their families.” I make a cringing face. “How’d you really get them?”

Dessin gives DaiSzek another bone. “Exactly how you think. Before I admitted myself to the asylum, I wanted leverage. I watched them and their families, learning as much as I could.”

“Why?”

“I was succumbing myself to years of torture and cruelty. But the most dangerous and most feared man in the room is always the wisest. I knew I could manipulate the staff by using their own secrets against them.”

Kind of the way I did when I dove into their memories.

“And you really never learned anything about Judas?”

He shakes his head. “No. He never left the asylum.”

I never got a chance to dig into his past either. He never came around while I was in the asylum. Something occurs to me, and I flash my eyes back to Dessin, who is studying me.

“Sern is free.”

He raises a brow.

“I let her out,” I add.

“Before you set the fire?”

“Yes.”

He watches me. Not in the way he usually does, with hidden amusement or subtle intrigue. No, it’s in the lifting of his strong chin, the patient warmth in his gaze, the straightening of his shoulders. He’s ready to listen, to open this space for quiet. To show me that there isn’t judgment or scorn here.

“I kind of—blew the place up,” I admit.

“I’m aware.”

“I went back to the day Scarlett died. I saw Kane carry me out of the burning house. I saw the way his back caught fire. And...” I lean back on my hands, staring into the small fire that cooked our food. “I lost it.”

Dessin doesn’t ask how I went back. I’m sure he can draw an accurate conclusion.

“I went back into the asylum as a way to feel closer to you. But when I got there, and I suffered, and I heard you in pain from the many times they tortured you—All I really wanted was to exact every threat you made, fulfill every promise of revenge.”

He shifts in his seat but doesn’t reveal what he’s feeling or how he’s taking this.

I wish I could show him what I did. Paint him a picture. Conjure the memory, and—I freeze. Could I do something like that? What limitations does my mind have?

“What is it?” Dessin asks.

A feeling of confidence zings through my body. So, I trust it.

“It would be easier to show you what happened.”

His brows knit together as he watches me lean in, sliding my hands along his temples. I can feel the hollowness of the voice waiting for me, like a buzzing under my skin. Dessin’s eyes widen, and I wonder if he can feel it too.

“Stay still,” I whisper.

The moment that wave dumps over me, there’s a mental click as I latch on to Dessin’s mind; it’s quick, like throwing a fishing hook inside his thoughts. His entire body tenses as gravity pummels over us, sending our stiff frames into the void, into the stagnate nothingness, until we’re right where I want to be.

Emerald Lake Asylum.

Bodies of the orderlies swing back and forth in a terrifying display of asphyxiating human puppets.

I grip Dessin’s hand to steady us, looking up at his towering height, waiting for him to freak out.

He doesn’t.

Instead, his mouth parts and his darkened eyes travel the length of the hallway, absorbing the scene, processing what I did to those orderlies.

“You are incredible,” he exhales.

Right on cue, the unhinged version of me drags Belinda by her hair to the hydrotherapy room. Blood pours over the checkerboard tile.

I don't explain to him what was going on in my head when this all happened. We just watch in utter silence. It isn't until Meridei's arm is ripped off her body, until a blood-splattered Skylenna hooks her up to the simulated drowning, that Dessin shows the slightest emotion.

It's the moment Skylenna screams, "*I have lost everything!*" that Dessin shakes his head, backing away from the scene, wanting to leave and not come back.

"Do you want to go?" I turn back to him, trying to understand the flare of anger in his expression.

He stares at her a moment longer, eyes trailing down to her trembling hands, her bloodshot eyes, her white gown soaked in blood.

"Yes." He nods tightly.

He doesn't have time to even blink before we are back in the meadow, sitting among the gentle fall breeze and the calming scent of lavender.

I let go of his face, giving him as much space as he needs.

Dessin paces like a restless tiger measuring the parameters of its cage. After fifteen seconds of this, he lunges for me, trapping me under his weight, pinning my arms to the ground. His stare is wicked and enraged. Chest moving rapidly against mine.

"Tell me what's going through your mind," I command.

"Guilt." He lets out in a hot breath. "And remorse from Kane. He feels awful after seeing you like that. But also—"

He doesn't finish that sentence.

"What?"

"I've never been more turned on in my entire life. You are an avenging goodness. My wrathful warrior." And with one slow movement, he thrusts his erection against my thigh. My head falls back, and I sigh, succumbing to the rush of heat and wetness flooding between my legs.

"I'm going to fuck you until you forget the days you had to live without me. I'm going to fuck you until you forget your own name." He presses his hips into me again, dragging his heavy cock across my skin until I burn and tingle and go up in flames at his touch.

"Or should I just grind against your soft thigh until I come?"

I shake my head, gasping. Although, if I'm being honest with myself, I'll take him any way he wants to give it to me. If that means letting him

hump me dryly until he explodes, I'll accept with a watering mouth.

"No?" He continues his thrusts. I rub my knees together to try and relieve my throbbing clit. "You want me to fill you up?"

Something like the word *yes* bursts from my throat.

He grips my hips and jolts my body to the right, flipping me until I'm facing the grass.

"Arch for me, baby."

I do as he says without a second thought—a little too eagerly, some might say. He lifts my archer's dress, revealing my pussy to the warm sun and fresh air. And I'm given no warning as he pushes a finger inside me way too smoothly. I'm slick and so wet his finger makes a slurping sound as he pulls it in and out.

"Oh.... *Oh!*"

"You're quivering... actually *quivering* around my finger." He snatches a fistful of my hair, yanking me back until his full lips are brushing my ear. "It's too bad I'm not going to fuck you there."

I try to look back at him, but he grips my hair tighter, burning my scalp and releasing a rush of pleasure skittering down my spine. At the same time his finger pumps inside me, the pad of a thumb presses against my other hole. I suck in a surprised breath.

"You're going to have to relax for me. It's going to take some work to push myself inside of you." He bites my ear, and I can hear the impatience in his voice. He wants to do it now. But he's fighting that relentless pull to be buried deep inside of me.

I try, but it's damn near impossible. I'm tense all over. Even my toes are curled up, unwilling to loosen their grip.

Dessin swipes a hand across my wetness, drawing it back to the tight rosebud of my ass, rubbing small circles around it. He spreads my arousal evenly, making me arch at his touch, suddenly wanton and frenzied for something—*anything*—to fill me up.

But his motions slow, becoming lazy and idle—his breathing even loses its fast pace. And he stills. Not even an intake of breath.

My eyes go wide as I look around the trees. He either thinks someone is here, a possible threat lurking in the shadows or—

"Aren't you pretty when you're offering yourself to me like this?"

My head perks up at the sensual accent. The smooth curve of his words. The sultry ease of his tone.

“Greystone?”

A low, satisfied hum leaves his throat.

I try to sit up, but Greystone’s hands keep me still.

“He would have been too rough with you.” Serious. I don’t know if I’ve ever heard him with this humorless tone. This deep ring of concern. He traces a finger down my spine.

“But I, on the other hand, am a very patient man,” he drawls, flicking my clit and pressing on my tight hole at the same time. I lean into him, springing back to life with that ache building between my legs. I squirm and grind the air to try and alleviate it.

He laughs darkly, massaging my closed entrance until I’m a writhing animal, pressing myself into his groin. He takes his hand away from my clit to steady me by my hip, angling me to arch higher for him.

But the throb grows in my clit, and I reach my hand down to touch it, to take away the maddening urge to pull down his pants and spear myself with his cock.

“Don’t touch yourself, sweetheart,” he says, an amused smile coloring his voice. “I want you needy for me when I decide it’s time to open you up.”

I groan in protest. But it’s short lived. Greystone sucks the air from my lungs as he bends down, licking my ass slowly. An intimate swipe of his tongue. I gasp at the jolt of electricity shooting up my back and vibrating down my thighs.

I’m boneless as he continues to devour that part of me, his tongue fluid and intentional. And I sound like I’m dying. Actually experiencing a slow, blissful death. After he’s done, a finger coaxes its way inside of me, slipping into the wet entrance that has loosened drastically due to his mouth.

“Please.” I don’t know what I’m begging for, but this pounding sensation in my lower half is paralyzing. I need him.

He breathes as another finger works its way in, and I drop my head at the unexpected tightness.

“Please what? Tell me what you want, sweetheart.” His fingers pause.

“Please... give me your cock.”

Greystone takes my clit between two fingers, playing with it teasingly.

I blow out a frustrated breath, hunger spearing through my core. Insatiable. Delicious. But also unnerving because I’m so buzzed on this

high, so blind with craving that I would quite literally do anything to please him in hopes that he will take care of these ravenous compulsions.

“That depends. Are you going to be a good girl for me?” His hardness thrusts against my apex, thick and long.

I whimper in response.

“Is that a yes? Be a good little girl and use your words.”

“Yes!” The word half explodes out of my mouth.

Greystone strokes the side of my face delicately like he’s rewarding a pet for good behavior. A starved, desperate feeling washes over me. A frantic need to feel more of his touch. I lean into his caress, pushing the side of my face into his calloused hand like a very good, very deserving pet.

“Hmm,” he coos, caressing my hair as I pant and nuzzle in as close as I can. “What a good girl you are.”

I nod, suddenly overtaken by the insidious yearning to earn his approval, to make him satisfied with my eager obedience.

“Will you do whatever I say?” His fingers twist inside of me. I bow my head, nodding and huffing like a wild beast ready to be tamed. “Let’s start with the head of my cock. If you’re still behaving, I’ll think about giving you more. Do you understand?”

I make a movement with my head. Not a nod, but a bobbing motion followed by an impatient whine.

Greystone lowers to his knees in front of me, leveling his standing cock with my chin. “Open,” he says, guiding my mouth to split apart with the pad of his thumb. “You’re going to get my head nice and wet.”

I do as he says with excitement buzzing through my body, making my muscles quiver with anticipation. The tip of his dick slides over my bottom lip but doesn’t go any farther. He’s teasing me. Tempting me with only a piece of him to build my desperation.

I do all I can with what I’m given. My tongue rolls over the bead of his precum, lathering it over his soft skin. I lick and lap like it’s the last bit of water I’ll ever have. He hisses, then pets the top of my head lovingly.

“Very good,” he whispers, using his index finger to play with my tongue as I glide it relentlessly over his tip. “I’ll give you a little more. I want you to suck on it loudly. I want to hear you slurp. Show me how badly you want it all.”

“Yes.” I open my mouth wider.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, sir,” I answer immediately.

Greystone looks down at me with the eyes of a predator. Dominating. All-powerful.

“I think you’re going to be my little pet from now on. Is that what you want?” He pushes his cock another inch into my mouth, and I obey his earlier command without question. Suckling the tip, slurping, lapping it up until it’s a wet mess.

“I said, is that what you want?”

I try to pull my mouth away to answer, but a large hand rests on the back of my head, holding it in place. I answer against his tip, the words “yes, *sir*” coming out garbled and incoherent.

Greystone groans. “You sound so sexy with your mouth full.”

I hum at his compliment, and he pushes himself the rest of the way until he reaches the back of my throat. I make a choking sound, making him pulse in my mouth.

“Choke again for me. I want you to drool all over my cock, sweetheart. It needs to be nice and wet before I bend you over again.”

His deep voice zings straight down to my clit, lighting every nerve in my body on fire, sensitive to the touch. I can’t ever remember a moment in my life where I was this frisky, this crazed over being touched.

I let him hit the back of my throat again, this time harder, and I retch, my mouth filling with saliva. Greystone pulls that heavy erection out slowly, letting it fall from my lips in strings of drool.

“Am I... doing good?” I look up at him with dazed eyes and swollen lips.

Even with his measured stare, full of control and dominance, his hands flex, fingers curling, and it’s the only sign that he wants to have me as much as I want him.

“Yes.”

He moves behind me, pushing his sex against the tight rim behind my pussy. It puts pressure there, hard, unforgiving prodding until I open for him, just a little.

“Hmm, is this what you wanted, my little pet?” He presses in a little more, and I wiggle to help it along. “Ah ah ah. You only move if I say you can move.”

“Yes, sir.” I hold perfectly still, but my body rages with a built-up orgasm that is begging to be set free.

“I’ll tell you what. If you show me you’re ready to be the perfect little pet for me, I’ll keep going, okay?” He reaches around to my face, running two fingers over my lips. “Suck on my fingers, sweetheart. Show me how good you are. I want you to make a mess and pretend it’s my cock.”

I’ve clearly lost my mind. There are no coherent thoughts left in me, no moments of doubt, no questions to ask. I’m only a machine to obey. A toy for him to play with. My mouth opens, and I take his fingers greedily, letting them go as far back as he wants. And once they tickle the back of my throat, I take them deeper, feeling Greystone push himself an inch into my ass. I moan and choke until his fingers have caused my mouth to flood with saliva.

It’s primal, this animalistic horniness inside of me. It’s bizarre and explosive.

Greystone notices the drool that spills over my lips and down to my breasts. And he pushes another two inches in. I gasp on his fingers, letting him hold my mouth open like a mindless toy.

“There’s a good girl,” he purrs, letting me adjust to his size. The pressure in my clit is so close to bursting, I might go permanently insane. “Does my pet want me to fuck her?”

“*Mmmmyesss*,” I mumble around his fingers.

Kisses are dropped along my spine, another set of fingers play with my clit, and I’m almost there. I whine and reach for him, longing for even the slightest contact.

“How’s this?” he asks, pushing the rest of the way in.

I try to suck in a breath, but no air makes it past my lips. I’m frozen. My body takes several seconds to adjust. Although it’s so tight, so full, I’m not sure I can acclimate to his enormous size.

But Greystone knows exactly how to relax me, make my body soft and mushy. He tells me how good I’m being. He tells me, “You like being fucked like this, isn’t that right?” He degrades me, but even though the words should be offensive, they only succeed in turning me on.

Once he begins pumping in and out of me, his fingers do the same. They leave my clit and slide into my wet depths. In and out.

There is no concept of time. No rational thought. It’s just us and this mind-blowing orgasm hanging over the edge of his grasp.

“Do you think you deserve to come on my fingers, sweetheart?”

My answer is distorted by his other hand. But the answer is yes. *Fuck*. Yes. But he doesn't answer, so I start begging, pleading, floundering against his fingers and cock. Dignity? Gone. But Greystone grants my request, and it's as if my body was clamping around this implosion, waiting for his words to set it free. The hormones scream through my bloodstream. I burst around his fingers, clenching tightly while the climax tumbles over my body.

"I'm going to come in you. Would you like that, pet?"

I can only nod as the last waves of my orgasm curl my toes.

Greystone growls under his breath, finishing with a final thrust. We lie back down on the grass in a quiet regression of heavy breathing, and me grinning to myself.

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33. Together Again

“AH, THE SWEET SCENT OF INTERCOURSE.”

I flinch at the intrusive voice flowing through the meadow. And as the man next to me rises to his feet to glare at the trespasser, I can tell by his stance that Dessin has come back.

But his shoulders relax as he realizes who it is. Niles’s head pokes out of the trees, waving nervously at us. I sigh with a grin.

“Can we come to hang out yet, or do we have to keep pretending like this isn’t mating season?” Niles shouts.

Chekiss’s voice is muffled. But I can tell he’s scolding Niles.

I snicker, and Dessin rolls his eyes, then looks at me. “Is it brain damage, or did I actually miss him?”

“Come on,” I call to Niles.

The group walks out of the evergreen trees, all hanging their heads in slight embarrassment... except for Niles. He’s not walking, he’s *strutting*.

“It’s true... he’s really alive,” Ruth says to Warrose.

Warrose just stares ahead, jaw clenched and hazel eyes clear of any emotion. His steps are heavy, like a warrior returning home after a long battle. One where he had to make hard choices. One where he had to become someone he wasn’t proud of.

I look back at Dessin, who darts his gaze away from his old friend, clearly not ready to address whatever is sitting between them.

“Skylenna finally looks like a woman again!” Niles does a little fist pump. “The old butcher’s wife wasn’t working.”

I smirk as Chekiss swats his good arm. “Be nice.”

“We have food on the fire if you’re hungry,” Dessin addresses the group.

“I’ve already fed them,” Warrose clips.

Niles makes an O with his lips as he looks back and forth between the two men. He catches my eye, and I shake my head. *Don’t get involved, Niles.*

Ruth takes a step toward me, with the elegant stance of a ballerina, failing to meet my eyes. She’s wearing dirty brown trousers and a white tunic that’s two sizes too big for her thin frame. I glance over the elfin features of her face. The upward pointed nose. The long curly lashes. The glowing olive skin. Yet, looking past her beauty, there’s a hurt that wallows

under the surface. Her brown eyes no longer sparkle with optimism. They wilt with a weight she hides well.

You. Aren't. My. Sister.

The words I wounded her with at Dessin's funeral boom in my ears. I hit her hard and fast, and even though she knew I was suffering, that I was speaking from a place of pain, it didn't stop her from second-guessing everything. Ruth abandoned her life for me. For our family. She has stuck by me through it all. And I discredited that with one horrible statement.

I don't have it in me to address the damage I had done when I was mourning the death of the men I love. I didn't have room then for the guilt that wrapped itself firmly around my heart. But I have room now.

"Ruth."

She meets my eyes.

"I didn't mean it," I breathe.

"I know."

"You *are* my sister."

Ruth closes the distance between us, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. And the rest of our words are muffled by the other's hair. Statements like, *I'm sorry, I love you, I'm glad you're better now, thank you for staying with me.*

And then a pair of arms circles around us. I see the burns on his neck as Niles makes this a group hug, humming his approval that we made up.

"Niles! Let them have their moment." Chekiss. It's always Chekiss scolding Niles like a child. Ruth and I giggle.

"They practically *begged* me to join in," Niles argues.

"Uh. No, we did not," Ruth mutters against my shoulder.

"Shhh." Niles pats the top of Ruth's head. "Don't ruin the moment."

Everyone takes a seat around the fire, getting comfortable as the sun begins to set. The fall air drops to a chilly temperature, not cold, but low enough that we all lean into the warmth of the fire.

DaiSzek trots back to us, looking curiously at our new audience.

"I haven't seen black beastie since..." Niles trails off. And by the glazed look in his eyes, I'm there with him. In the sand. The burning pikes. DaiSzek locked in the cage. Niles's screams surround me. A hollow sound that bounces off the trees, spinning in the air over my head. I wince, placing my hands over my ears, careful not to draw attention.

But DaiSzek's cinnamon eyes lock on Niles, redirecting his path to him. Paws sinking into the soil. Head lowered in a nonthreatening approach. Niles stiffens, looking between Dessin and me for help. I nod encouragingly, and DaiSzek lowers himself to the ground, carefully laying his fat head in Niles's lap.

"No. Fucking. Way." Niles is starstruck, mouth hanging open, eyes glued to the black fur tickling his legs. He looks up at us like this might be a mistake, like, at any moment, DaiSzek might realize he accidentally rested his head on the enemy. And, *naturally*, he'll rip Niles's face off.

Ruth smiles, cooing at the interaction. "He must like you now!"

But Niles is still sitting with his back straight as a rod, unmoving, unblinking, and unwilling to make a sound.

I spit out a laugh. "Pet him!"

"Uh, no thanks."

As if DaiSzek has sensed the fear seeping from Niles's pores, he licks the burns on his hand, slow, intentional motions meant to show us that he is not a danger to the man who saved him from the cage on the beach.

Niles releases a breath. His face drooping at the contact. It takes him a moment to process, but his hand finally reaches down to stroke the top of DaiSzek's head, softly combing through his shiny fur.

"Now that we've wasted a portion of my life ogling at Niles and DaiSzek, we should discuss what comes next." Dessin doesn't fail to steal the magic from the moment like a little monster that sucks the fun out of everything.

Honestly, I'd rather not think about what comes next. I've been through the wringer, and I took everyone through hell with me. I want nothing more than to enjoy the company of my family. No talk of war. No talk of Vexamen.

"Demechnef probably knows I'm alive by now. Aurick would have had Skylenna followed."

I nod. I definitely was followed. But they kept their distance, so it didn't bother me too much.

"They'll give us a little time, but not much. And I've been thinking..." Dessin gives me a sidelong glance. "We've been warned that there's going to be a great war soon. And judging by the way the colonies were all so invested in Skylenna and me, I think it's a safe bet that we're important to ending that war."

“You’re suggesting that we work with Demechnef.” My annoyance with the proposal isn’t masked. Why would I want to work with the people who ruined my life? Who ruined the lives of us all?

“Not exactly,” Dessin says, turning to face me. “I’m suggesting we force them to work *for* us.”

Warrose snorts. “And while we’re at it, let’s outlaw the lady-doll regimen and ban the oppression of our women.”

“Skylenna is different now. She has the ability to uncover any weakness. Theoretically, she could even figure out what Judas’s purpose is in all this. He is the one that warned us about the war after all.”

I want to smile at Dessin’s confidence in me. It’s always been the other way around. We’ve relied on him for everything.

“You think I can change the power dynamic?”

Dessin hardens his gaze on me, and he lifts his chin in full confidence. “I know you can.”

“How?” Warrose asks.

“Skylenna will have to figure that out. We’ll need leverage. Something to tip the scales. Aurick won’t want to spend time fighting us when Vexamen is right on their heels.”

Awesome. No pressure.

After a while, we decide to eat dinner together. Dessin rations out the hog he hunted and cooked. Warrose passes around his canteen of rum. Normally, I wouldn’t choose to drink hard liquor. But—we’re together again. Our family made it out of this craziness in one piece. It’s cause for celebration.

I throw back a swig of the spicy drink, wincing as it burns a trail down my throat.

The meat is cooked through perfectly. Tender. Juicy. And even though we didn’t have seasoning, it’s flavorful. I smile as I tear into it. It’s been so long since I’ve eaten and experienced that rush of dopamine.

“What’s that noise?” Niles asks, looking around.

I pause midbite, searching the trees that are dimly lit by the lowering sun. Everyone goes still. Has Demechnef come for us already?

But there isn’t even the chirping sound of crickets.

“I don’t hear anything,” I say.

Dessin looks up from his food. “Skylenna hums when she eats.”

Niles barks out a laugh. “What are you, five?!”

Heat rushes to my cheeks. *Shit*. Was I humming? But Dessin pats my hand. A hint of a smile on his lips. He nods for me to keep eating.

"I think it's cute," Ruth snickers, reaching into her pack. A glass jar filled with a moss-green substance falls into her lap. "Shirt off." She nods her head at Niles.

I look back and forth between the two of them. But my moment of confusion is quickly quieted as Niles yanks his ash gray shirt over his head, unveiling the morphed skin over his right arm, shoulder blade, and a little speckled over his ribs.

A shiver prickles over my arms and legs. It looks better than it did the first day, but still shiny and bright red. My throat bobs. He's been traveling through these forests just to make sure I was okay. He's endured unspeakable suffering without a single complaint.

For me.

For our family.

Ruth scoops out a handful of the moss-green cream and begins rubbing it over Niles's burns, slowly, methodically, careful not to apply too much pressure. And he doesn't even wince. Instead, he trains his attention on DaiSzek's big head still slung across his lap. I don't think there was ever a happier man in the whole world at this moment.

Chekiss catches my stare. "I offered to apply the medicine, but Niles seems to think my energy would make it worse. He *needed* a woman's touch."

"It's true. Verbatim." Ruth snorts.

My chest tightens. I open my mouth to say something. Maybe an apology for leaving Niles to make a decision that literally scarred him for life. For not being there to hold his hand during a vicious recovery period. There's so much to make up for.

"You did a brave thing on that beach." Dessin's voice rumbles through the silence. Low and meaningful as he takes another bite of his food. "We all owe you our lives for that."

Ruth stops her application, watching Niles for his reaction, and Chekiss pats him on the unharmed arm. A glint of pride in his smile.

Niles doesn't look up from his lap. He continues watching his own hand caressing the black fur. "I'd do it again."

"I wish you never had to," I say, swallowing down the bile in my throat. "I'm sorry I left you, Niles. I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you."

Niles takes a moment, pausing his attention on DaiSzek. And I can tell he's been waiting to say whatever is on the tip of his tongue.

"I understand why you've been gone. But you don't get to walk away from us again. You don't get to shut down or turn your back on your family." His eyes flash to Dessin. "Neither of you do. No more keeping secrets. No more going rogue. I get you two are madly in love, and the world revolves around the other's axis, and I know I don't contribute a whole hell of a lot to your mastermind plans or lethal expertise in combat. But I would literally walk through fire to keep our family together."

Tears sting the backs of my eyes, and I hear his screams again, loud and agonizing. But I maintain eye contact because that's what he deserves.

"I've never known what it's like to have a family." Dessin shifts uncomfortably next to me, speaking with the same level of darkness yet in a quieter tone, like he's really trying to connect. "Kane is better at this than I am. But—I am grateful to be a part of this one. And,"—he glances over at me and sighs—"the secrets are behind us. From now on, we'll make decisions together."

I sit in silence, stunned at Dessin's response. He's grumpy and only ever sentimental toward me. It's a rare moment that he bonds with anyone else.

"You have our word," I say. And I mean it. I'm grateful Niles had the nerve to stand up to us and put me in my place after all of the stress I put them through.

There's a beat of silence. It's comfortable. Heartwarming.

"And I want a weapons belt like Dessin," Niles adds.

"Absolutely not." Warrose shoots him a look.

"Why not?"

"You'll poke your own eye out."

Nile shrugs like it was worth a try.

As we settle in to go to sleep, fireflies swarm the field, hovering over us, and blending in with the stars.

And DaiSzek doesn't leave Niles's side.

34. The Translator

Ruth

IT STARTS AS A WHIMPER but normally grows in volume as the fire lights behind his eyes and roars in his ears.

But I normally catch it when it's just a whimper. A small, breathy sound that escapes Niles's throat. It's a little warning that he's moments away from groaning in agony. He has these nightmares almost every night. Flashbacks of the fire he jumped into in order to release DaiSzek from his cage. He once told me that in these nightmares, he doesn't escape the fire. No matter how many times he rolls in the sand or jumps in the ocean. It eats through his flesh until he's a charred corpse.

Now that I know that, I usually wake up when I hear that sound at night. I know that if he has his fit now, it will wake Skylenna, and nothing will wound her more than seeing the repercussions of his trauma.

I quickly reach into my pack, snatch the jar of burn cream, and wiggle closer to Niles, sleeping on his good side. I lift his tunic to give me access to his healing skin. The cream is thick like pudding, moss green, and smells like rosemary. My fingers curl as I scoop it out of the jar, making small circular motions over his warm, raised skin.

His whimpers grow quiet, shaping into deep breaths. I figured the nightmares might be triggered by the burning sensations that bleed into his unconscious mind. So applying the cream while he sleeps usually helps him have better dreams.

Sweet dreams, Niles.

A pair of cinnamon eyes reflect in the orange light of the fire, and I can't help but flinch. The RottWeilen has nuzzled into Niles's chest, keeping him warm as the temperature drops to a windless chill.

I smile down at him. Niles will never let any of us forget that the great beast has shown favor to him.

Wiping my hands of the cream, I lower his tunic, screw the jar closed, and lie back down until I'm facing the sea of stars and fireflies.

It's funny. I used to think I wanted a life of luxury in Chandelier City. The dresses. The makeup. The glamorous balls. I truly believed Skylenna was living the dream life in Aurick's mansion. But there was something else. Something foreign shifting under my skin. A realization that Skylenna

was the first friend I've ever had that didn't care for any of that. She had this enchanting glint in her eyes, the childlike wonder that wanted adventure, freedom, and friendship.

That night when we soaked in our tubs, drank wine, and ate like it was our last meal—I had a real conversation with her. The kind that didn't include how long since we weighed ourselves. Or the boutiques that sold the prettiest gowns. It was deep and profound.

It was enough that I left behind the life I thought I wanted for nights under the stars, eating meat off a stick, making a bed out of dirt, leaves, and the clothes on my back.

"Your thoughts are very loud."

I glance at Warrose. His arms are crossed over his bulky chest, and his eyes are closed like he's still sleeping.

"Feel free to sleep in the forest where they won't bother you," I grumble.

The corners of his mouth tilt upward, not enough to be counted as a smile but as close as it gets for him.

"You'd get separation anxiety if I left your side for too long," he murmurs, deep and husky.

I blow out a shaky breath and roll my eyes. It's colder tonight than we've experienced while traveling through these forests. My wool blanket feels too thin, with tiny holes that let the occasional breeze brush the goose bumps rising along my skin.

"Are you cold?"

"Nope," I lie.

Warrose lifts himself on one elbow, pulling something out from under his back. I train my eyes on the glittering sky, pretending not to notice what he's about to do.

A warm gust of air sweeps back my brown curls as his raven feathered cloak is draped over my body. It's heavy and so wonderfully warm. Without meaning to, I breathe in through my nose, inhaling his scent of smoky spice and darkness.

My eyes flutter open as I catch him looking down at me. "Better?" he asks after a solid moment of staring.

I nod, quickly looking away from his shirtless, muscular, tattooed upper body. His skin is glimmering under the fireflies that swirl around him.

"Aren't you cold?" I ask, stealing another glance at his chest.

“Not at all.” He lowers himself back to the ground. “I was trained with a herd of northern animals. Left in the snow to adapt the way they did.”

I arch an eyebrow, turning to my side to get a better look at him.

“Why?”

“Another Demechnef experiment. If I can understand and coexist with some of the most dangerous beasts of the forest, maybe I could train them to fight alongside us in a war with Vexamen.”

I cringe at the word experiment. It always brings a knot to my stomach thinking about how all of my friends have either been test subjects or prisoners to cruel people in charge. And here I am. Ruth. Small. Entitled. Privileged. It makes me feel like I don’t belong in this group of misfits.

“Can you train them?”

He turns his head toward me, and I am paralyzed under the vibrancy of his hazel eyes and thick lashes. That stare drops like a rock to the pit of my stomach.

“Yes. Some of them.” He releases a quick breath. “But I don’t think it’s right to command them to attack or even involve them in the war with an enemy that—treats animals with such cruelty.”

I glance over at Niles and the mass of black fur that nuzzles under his chin.

“But DaiSzek will fight, won’t he?”

“He will. But nothing on earth could stop him from protecting his people.”

My heart warms.

“Do you think I’ll be able to fight? And Niles?” Warrose has been training us while Skylenna has been off on her own. We felt powerless to be of any use to her after Dessin died. More than anything, I wanted to protect the people I love the way Dessin has always done without fail. Niles felt the same way. So, naturally, we nagged Warrose until he agreed.

And I’ve gotten pretty good, if I do say so myself.

“You’re still pretty weak,” Warrose says. *Great*. “But you are wicked fast; I’ll give you that much. So, maybe, if we keep this up, *maybe* you’ll have something to offer in battle.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” I deadpan.

He chuckles. “We’ll need to hone a skill. Channel all of your effort into being the best at one thing. That’s how you’ll be of value.”

“What skill?” I’m a fast runner now. Who would have guessed? But that’s hardly a skill I can offer the group.

“We’ll figure it out.” And that is code for he has no freaking idea.

Determination burns in my gut, and I have to resist the tingle in my legs to run, to build my strength, to prove to him that I can do something right.

Those big hazel eyes flicker across the campfire where Dessin sleeps, and he lingers there, only for a brief moment, before turning his attention back on me.

“Are you going to talk to him about it?” I ask.

He grunts. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

Yes, actually, there is. Dessin put his friend through hell to ensure his bizarre plan worked. He expected Warrose to give his dead body that spring water, pray that mythical element brought him back from death’s grip, and if that wasn’t hard enough, he had to watch Skylenna spiral and wasn’t able to tell her it was all a ploy.

Warrose didn’t tell us the plan either. Instead, he was deathly quiet. Stuck in his own mind. Which was unusual, considering he found it especially entertaining to argue with me. It wasn’t until Skylenna told us her theory about Dessin’s possible resurrection that I finally understood what was eating at Warrose the entirety of this journey.

“You’re mad at him,” I say quietly.

“He’s easy to be mad at.”

I scowl.

“Talking things out really isn’t Dessin’s style. I just have to get over it and move on.”

“You could hug it out like Skylenna and me.”

It doesn’t earn me a smile, but it comes pretty close. “I’ll get right on that.”

We remain quiet for a long time. The crickets sing, the wind tickles the leaves, and I wonder if he’s fallen back asleep.

“For what it’s worth, it takes a strong man to carry the burden he gave you. I can’t imagine a better best friend than you, Warrose.”

He doesn’t respond, but through a swift hovering of a firefly, I see that I’ve earned that smile.



THE SUN HAS BARELY RISEN. A small orange glow, like the heat from a piece of charcoal, peeks over the tree line.

It's a biological jolt to my internal clock. Every morning since Skylenna left us, since she said those words to me, I've risen with the sun to make my body stronger.

Quickly and quietly, I tie my boots, twist my hair into a thick braid, and sneak away from the group. The only pair of eyes that open are DaiSzek's. He rises at the sight of me, tilting his head curiously. I can almost hear the question in his mind, *Where are you going this early?*

I wave him off, trying to coax him back to sleep, but he steps over Niles's face with ease and follows me into the trees. I assume it's an instinct of his to make sure any member of his pack is safe when they are on their own. Or maybe it was just a convenient time for him to do his rounds.

I start off with a slow jog, letting my legs wake up and giving my blood time to pump through the rest of my body. The kiss of the cool fall air brushes the heaviness from my eyes, and I smile at the way my lungs expand, my fingers tingle, and my muscles loosen as they flood with heat.

As I pick up my pace, I remind myself of why I do this every morning. To be useful. To be strong for my family. I won't sit idly by while the men fight for us. And now, Skylenna.

Leaves slap across my face, sprinkling morning dew over me, and the greenery becomes a pleasant blur as I pump my legs harder to reach a new speed.

Faster.

Sweat drips down my back. My chest burns for more air.

Keep going.

I take a quick leap through the air to avoid an overgrown root, and my boot lands on something thick and twined together, like wool. The sound of a whip cracking across a tree shoots through the air, and I'm airborne, being swept up in a net of rope. I yelp as I'm yanked upward, thrown into the air as the net tightens around my flailing body.

I grip the webbed rope in my trembling hands, gawking down at the ground ten feet below me. It's a trap. Could it be the Vexamen Breed? My stomach twists around in a tight knot. Before I can devise a plan, hushed voices surround me. Men by the dozens in black attire that look similar to the scales on a snake.

"Demiè do meriòp. Douqe nefas rè mechtzez."

I perk up, and my blood ices over. They're speaking old Alkadonian.
Inject her quietly. We don't want the others waking up.

My father studies languages of the world. It isn't allowed, but his father started the collection, and it became a family fascination. I was taught to speak old Alkadonian at the age of three but was never allowed to speak it in public.

Wait, they're going to inject me? I watch as two men struggle to untie the long rope that's holding my net in the air. I have to make a run for it as soon as I'm lowered to the ground. But dread sinks to the bottom of my gut as I watch more of the Breed enter the area. They've come prepared, and this time, even if my friends wake up and come looking for me... we don't have the numbers to fight them off.

They're going to take me just like they abducted DaiSzek. And that's what led to all of this suffering. Skylenna's grief. Dessin's death. Niles's burns.

Determination locks my jaw and hardens my hands into fists. I'd rather die here than have them take me to their country.

"Basnakèz!" Hurry!

Something dark and the size of a bear zooms through the air, barreling the two men to the ground. The sound that escapes them is the screams of sinners straight from hell. Grown men howling as DaiSzek rips into their necks, mutilating them with only three quick movements.

I scream, not at the mess of blood and shredded flesh he left behind, but at the swarm of men in scaly black uniforms charging DaiSzek.

I know he can hold his own. Maybe it's absurd of me to get hysterical, but this sweet beast has protected us at all costs every time we've been in danger. I can't let this be the one time he gets hurt. Because of *me*.

"Warrose!" I shout at the top of my lungs, shaking the net frantically. Because they try to overpower DaiSzek with throwing knives, swords, crossbows, and spears. Each shiny piece of metal that zings through the air barely misses DaiSzek's large body. He's fast. An otherworldly kind of speed that defies all laws of gravity. And the massiveness of his frame shouldn't be able to twist through the air, dodging each weapon with ease.

But he does. And he does it like a dragon darting through the clouds.

"Dessin!" I scream again.

With one clench of his jaws, DaiSzek snaps a spear in half, tossing it to the side as he chomps down on the heads of two soldiers.

But there are so many running through the forest, ready to fight to the death. And what are the odds that one of them has the winning swing of his sword?

I pat down my clothes for anything I can use to help me. A realization clicking in place as I look down at my boots. Warrose armed me with a small dagger, strapping it to the outside of my ankle.

Thank you, Warrose!

Before I can unstrap the dagger, the energy in the forest shifts, a low thrumming of ruthlessness. A war drum beating in the distance.

Skylenna springs from the trees first, her long blonde hair whipping across her wrathful face as she adjusts a pair of gloves on her hands and throws herself into a crowd of men surrounding DaiSzek. And she's nothing of the woman I've known. She's a demonic spirit cutting through flesh without consequence. She's graceful and elegant as she swipes her fists through jaws and throats, eyes gleaming as blood sprays across her face. And the way she looks at each opponent is hard to miss. Her eyes seem to dig in deep, dissecting their weaknesses, pausing time and space to understand the art of how to defeat this enemy.

Dessin rushes to DaiSzek's side, throwing men off his back and fighting alongside him. Warrose immediately locks eyes with me, scoping out my predicament. And he's throwing his whip to have Skylenna's back, beheading anyone that comes close to her while also trying to figure out how to get me down.

"I'll free myself!" I yell down at him. "Keep fighting!" I flash him the dagger he gave me, waving him off.

With a spark of adrenaline and the fiery need to prove myself, I use the sharp side of the blade to start carving myself out of the trap. Meanwhile, the sounds of cracking bones, clanking metal, guttural moans, and slurping sounds of weapons piercing organs make my hands tremble with anticipation. What am I supposed to do when I get down there? I've learned basic self-defense. But that isn't even close to what I need to help them fight. Sweat rolls down my temple as I saw my dagger through the thick twine of rope.

"It's a good thing I'm better at this than you are." A familiar voice comes from behind me, so close I can feel his breath on my neck. I spin around to see Niles dangling from a branch above me, untying the rope that holds my net together.

“Niles!” I shriek in relief.

He flashes me a gorgeous smile, continuing his work to set me free.

“I’m sorry!” I spit out, panting as the fighting only grows louder beneath my feet. “I didn’t think they’d be in this forest. I thought it was safe to go on a run.”

“Are you kidding? Skylenna and Dessin were totally about to try and have sex quietly next to us while we slept. You just saved Chekiss from having to puncture his own eardrums.” If I didn’t just hear the sound of a man choking on his own blood, I might laugh at Niles’s attempt to lighten the mood.

“Please, hurry.”

“We’ll have to make a run for it,” Niles says, deeply focused on his task. “They have us outnumbered fifteen to one.”

“We can’t just leave them!” No. Absolutely not. I won’t leave my friends to fight because I was stupid and wanted to go on a run alone. Tears burn my eyes as I look up at him.

“We’ll only get in the way. Let them do what they’re best at.”

The feeling of helplessness swims in my lungs until I’m choking back a cry. I want to fucking help! It’s maddening being this much of a burden. I feel like a small child in their care.

“Defesuionòs fi conazaxc! Hauxverwàz fe ugaszes nosvatyui eq!”

Take out the beast! Aim the saphrine oil arrows at it!

Shit. They’re trying to knock DaiSzek out. I look around at the ongoing slaughter, seeing that Dessin is closest to me.

“Dessin! Take out the archers! They’ve laced their arrows with saphrine oil! They’re trying to take out DaiSzek!”

He only spares me a quick glance of recognition. A look that says he heard the task, he understands it, and he’ll burn down the world to ensure they don’t shoot another arrow.

As the archers raise their crossbows, Dessin picks up a spear and darts out to their left side, angling himself until he’s adjacent to their lineup. And there isn’t a moment of hesitation or doubt that he can achieve this goal. His arm whips out, flinging forward and letting go of the spear. It sails through the air, whizzing faster than a strike of lightning until it enters the first archer... but doesn’t stop there. That spear was thrown with such force that it punctures each man holding a crossbow until they’re one gory kabob. A

skewer of five archers that stare blankly at each other, not understanding what hit them, not even aware of where the source of pain is coming from.

They fall from their post as one.

Chills race down my arms at the sight. At the fact that Dessin doesn't stop to admire his work. He just keeps fighting, returning to DaiSzek's side.

But it isn't enough, is it? They still outnumber us easily.

"How did you know th—" Niles's words are cut off with a grunt. I look up at a soldier gripping Niles's throat, hanging from the same branch, and trying to kill him or throw him from the tree. Whichever comes first.

"Shit!" I throw myself as close to his body as possible, holding my dagger with a trembling hand; I don't stop to think. I thrust my arm around Niles's waist until the pointy end of my blade pierces the soldier trying to strangle Niles. I push it in deeper, feeling the gush of blood and the squishy organs I'm slicing through. The hilt slams into the soft of his belly, and I sigh loudly as he falls from the tree.

Niles gasps, holding his throat as he coughs to make room for more air.

"Are you alright?"

My hands are shaking.

He nods, but it isn't convincing. Skylenna's shriek of pain forces me to turn away from Niles. Her arm was slashed. But she only takes a moment to hiss before whirling on the assailant. Her hands twist his head in one jerking motion, and with a loud crack, he falls at her feet. She quickly holds her hand up to Dessin, who pauses with silent rage. The fabric on her arm is saturated with fresh blood, but my sister keeps fighting. Methodically. As if she's in a trance.

"Shànvaxaz!"

Release them!

I search the trees. *Who?* Who are they releasing? Off into the distance, several soldiers race forward with something in their hands. Shadows trudging before them. I squint, leaning forward in my net. Not who, but *what*. Attached to long leashes are the nightmares that Skylenna once told me about. Long, gray limbs. Milky eyes. Weather-worn skin.

"They're releasing a pack of night dawpers!" I shout down to Dessin. His head pops up immediately, following my gaze to the incoming threats. And it's like jagged nails running down my back. They're coming to overpower DaiSzek, or at least keep him busy to make this conquering easier. Faster.

“I almost got it!” Niles grunts above me. The net begins to loosen around me, but all I can see is the look of panic in Skylenna’s eyes. The frantic thought process on how the hell we’re going to get out of this one.

The net snaps free from the rope holding it up, and I take a tumble to the ground. Niles lands on his feet with a thud next to me, hands gripping my shoulders to pull me upright, away from the violence drenching the soil in puddles of blood.

“We have to go!” Niles tugs me.

But I’m frozen. My feet cemented to the ground. I can’t leave them. Yet I have no way of helping, no solutions, no escape routes for them to follow.

I cry out as the night dawpers are released from the leashes because, Christ, they’re fast. And by the look of it, they haven’t eaten. They’re starved for their next meal. The direction they sprint is toward DaiSzek. A clear target to which they were trained to attack.

I try to take a step forward, but Niles wraps his arms around me, yanking me away from the doom that’s threatening to swallow my family whole.

35. Knightingale

Skylenna

EVEN THOUGH STREAKS OF BLOOD cloud my vision, I can't miss the flashes of gray, gangly beasts that gallop toward DaiSzek. Their spindly legs stepping over bodies makes my skin tingle in fear.

I look to Dessin, who is already looking at Warrose. "Help him!" he commands.

Warrose is the only one of us that has extensive experience with night dawpers.

I slam my fist across another soldier's throat, watching a fountain of crimson liquid come spurting from the jagged wound I leave behind. The demon's teeth gloves are more than useful. They're fucking deadly.

I can't help but look back at DaiSzek, watching the night dawpers close in like a parade of demons coming to smother the RottWeilen, the last of his kind. A pang of terror hits me right in the chest. The first night dawper launches itself through the air, stretching out its long arms to take DaiSzek down. Warrose throws his whip back, ready to take out the first one, and—

Something beats him to it. A streak of copper fur crashes into the creature, wrestling it to the ground. Noises I've never heard before. Ferocious. Rabid. Bizarre growls and snarls as this smaller, coppery beast goes straight for the heart. Chewing through dried gray flesh until it reaches the warm gooey center. The night dawper hangs limp, and even stranger, the smaller beast just tosses the stringy heart to the dirt and races to help DaiSzek once more.

Throwing another soldier off my back, I look closer at the animal. It looks like a wolf, only with short shimmery fur and tall, pointy ears. It has a stocky body, heavy with muscle, and a head that is disproportionately too big.

And with this new help comes more. A small army of people wearing sandals, beige pants, gold bracelets, and chokers. Their upper bodies are covered in beautifully designed tattoos. They wield long golden spears, throwing them into the Vexamen Breed with flawless precision as they ride the backs of horses. It's enough that the Breed falls back, speaking a strange language as they turn to run.

I let out a whoosh of breath, watching several of our unexpected guests chase the enemy on horseback.

Dessin drops his weapon, stepping over bodies to get to me.

“You’re hurt,” he growls, pulling me closer to him. We’re both covered in blood and sweat. Hair disheveled, eyes blazing with violence, and hands still ready for another surprise attack. But he looks down at me, and suddenly we’re back in that meadow. I ache for his mouth.

“It’s a scratch.”

He examines it quickly, peeling away the wet fabric. It isn’t bad. But it does sting.

“You fought better than me, baby.” He tilts my chin up to look at him. I fall weak in his hickory-brown eyes. “You know how bad that makes me want to fuck you against a tree? Right here. In front of everyone.”

My eyes roll back into my head, and my toes curl. “Don’t tempt me.”

“Dessin,” Warrose calls out cautiously.

We both turn around to see Warrose slowly approaching the small copper wolf, going completely berserk on a dead night dawper. It shakes the detached arm like a dog would shake a toy. We all stare in mild amusement and a little disgust.

“What is it?” Ruth asks as she and Niles approach. Why the hell are they still here?

“She’s a Ginger Wrathbull. From the Endograves Jungle.” A woman slides off her horse, tucking a strand of her short black hair behind her ear. She’s stunning. Cream-colored skin. Straight posture. Elegant stance. And a face that shines with a rare beauty.

“You’re a member of the Faecrest colony.” Warrose nods his head in acknowledgment, wiping the blood from his face with a rag.

The woman nods, narrow eyes the color of charcoal. “We’ve been waiting for the chance to give her to you. Per the instructions of our prophecy—it told us the exact day we would need to be here, in this forest. I am Bellanne.”

I can hear Dessin’s eyes roll at the word *prophecy*.

“You’re giving us this... WrathBull?” I look down at the short-haired wolf the size of a goat. Her mouth is covered in blood and bits of entrails. And she kind of looks... mean.

“Why?” Niles asks, taking a step closer to get a better look at her. Her upper lip curls back, and she growls at him. I try to hide my smirk because,

of course, she would growl at Niles.

“She’s destined to help you in the war to come.” Bellanne watches Dessin and me closely, as if she’s anticipating us arguing about it. But I shrug, look back down at the ginger bull *thing*, and sigh.

“She’s a good little fighter. I vote yes.”

Dessin nods. “What’s her name?”

“We were told to name her Knightingale.” The name sinks to the bottom of my soul, burning like a meteor shower.

Dessin and I look at each other at the same time. Raised eyebrows. Parted lips. Knightingale and DaiSzek. The fae and elf warriors from the last war.

“Shit, seriously? Knightingale? As in Knightingale and DaiSzek?” Warrose blows out a surprised laugh. “That can’t be a coincidence.”

“I don’t think it is. Whoever wrote this prophecy knew we’d name him DaiSzek,” I say quietly, gazing down at the dirty girl with pupils so large she actually looks kind of cute.

“Looks like you’ve got another member to your pack, Dai,” Dessin calls, nodding toward Knightingale. His smile is wide, and my stomach warms knowing this is one gift Dessin actually appreciates. He loves DaiSzek. I know he’ll love having another fearsome creature in his family.

DaiSzek leans in to sniff Knightingale’s butt, stretching out his neck in an attempt to do it quietly. But ironically enough, she lunges at him, snapping viciously without actually getting him with her teeth. DaiSzek jerks back in surprise, looking at her with curious eyes that wonder why a bee has just tried to sting him. She’s comically smaller than he is.

Her growling simmers to a low grumble before she walks off.

“Ginger WrathBulls can have bad tempers,” Bellanne warns with a crooked smile. “She’ll get used to you after a while.” She climbs back onto her horse.

“Thank you for helping us,” I say quickly.

“It won’t be the last time.”

We exchange looks as her group of warriors that came to our aid turn their horses around. But before she fades into the trees, her horse stops, and she pivots back to us.

“I forgot to mention, the one you seek is in the Red Oaks!”

The one we seek... The one we seek...

Dessin and I stare at each other absentmindedly until his eyes flare with understanding.

“Judas.”



IT WAS HARD LEAVING AMBROSE Oasis, but this might be our only leg up over Aurick. And we need to do this our way.

Judas has always known something more than the rest of us. Maybe it's nothing, but there's a knot in my gut that tells me he'll give us everything we need.

The seven of us—I'm sorry—the *eight* of us, including Knightingale, trek through the forest to get back to the Red Oaks. I keep my pace close to Niles while Dessin scopes out the area ahead with DaiSzek.

I've been waiting to tell him something, searching for the right moment, but this kind of news doesn't have a right moment. It's terrible and grim and a vortex created to suck him into a hellish place. The least I can do is be here to hold his hand while he processes it.

“Do you remember the first time you opened up to me in the asylum?”

Niles looks down in thought. “The time you got hosed down like a dog for me? I'll never forget it.”

My heart stumbles in my chest. I'll never forget it either.

“You said it was hard for you to live in a world that has the kind of love that Charles had for you.” I take a deep breath, trying my best to keep my voice even.

“We're not in the asylum anymore.” Niles shoots me a glare. “We don't have to dig this up again.”

I wish to God I could listen to him now, let this go, leave it in the dark cave of his mind to decay. But he deserves to know the truth, no matter how painful it may be.

“You know how Kane and I are a part of this vile experiment that only works on twins?”

He slows his pace. Nods.

“Aurick told me they've experimented on a child that wasn't a twin before. Just once.” I keep my voice deathly low. With a tone so serious, so glib, Niles keeps his eyes firmly on me as if he knows. He *knows*. And he's praying to God that he's wrong.

“He told me it was you, Niles,” I whisper, the ache in my throat clamping down on my windpipe. “He told me it was you.”

His throat bobs, and he redirects his stare to the path ahead. “So what does that mean then?”

I wish I could stop here.

“It means... they abducted Charles like they did with my parents. To pump them full of Mind Phantoms, so they were compliant.”

I look over at his angelic face, the chiseled cheekbones, the beautifully coiffed honey hair, and that stoic lift of his chin. He’s preparing to protect his heart. He’s placing on his mask and hoping it blocks out any pain I’m about to deliver.

“Aurick said his father took Charles and filled him with more Mind Phantoms than any subject has ever been given. But—it wasn’t enough.” My voice breaks, and I have to look away to keep the tears in check. “Charles fought it. He never gave in.”

“What?” Niles stops his feet from moving another inch and turns to me with a look of pure shock.

“They had to take you instead. The Mind Phantoms made you believe that horrid reality of what you thought Charles did to you.”

“*Let me go!*” Niles’s younger voice shrieks through my mind, overwhelming my senses.

“It—it never happened?”

I shake my head. “It was a fabricated memory, Niles. It was given to see if your mind would work the way ours does now. It was a failed experiment.”

“*You won’t remember this after we inject you, Niles. You’ll only remember what we want you to.*”

I have to squeeze my eyes shut to block out the forgotten memories.

“Are you sure he wasn’t lying?”

“He knew the intimate details of your story. It has to be true.”

Niles stares at me. Soft lips parted. “What happened to Charles?”

I look away. It isn’t fair to give him this bit of relief only to rip it away.

“Skylenna, tell me.” His hands are on my shoulder, firm and unrelenting. I can feel Dessin’s gaze fixated on me from several yards ahead.

“He fought until the end. He died from being overdosed on the Mind Phantoms.” I pause, swallowing down the sadness building in my chest.

“He never gave in.”

If I could remove any moment from my memory, it would be this one. Niles sinks to his knees, blinking rapidly with an open mouth and trembling hands. I drop to my knees in front of him, gripping his hands but careful not to touch his burns.

“I’m so sorry, Niles.”

But he isn’t here right now. He’s somewhere deep in his own mind, digging through memories until tears are freely dripping down his cheeks.

“He wasn’t a monster?” he asks in a teary-eyed daze.

I shake my head. “No. He was a good dad,” I say with a sad smile. “He was the best there is.”

Niles squeezes his eyes shut, pushing out more tears, and wrinkling his forehead. I pull him into me, angling his face into the crook of my neck where he can cry in peace.

And he does.

Niles sobs into my skin, making it warm and wet with his labored breaths. I run my fingers lovingly over his raised skin, praying away his pain the best I can. The heaviness of this moment gets me thinking about my Scarlett. Oh, how I wish I could go back and tell her about Violet. Tell her about the Mind Phantoms. She deserved to know that if things were different, we would have been loved and cherished by both parents.

I’ll never get the chance to hold her the way I’m holding Niles now.

After several long minutes of rocking back and forth until his sobs become heavy breaths and those heavy breaths become a steady heartbeat, we look to the path ahead and see that Chekiss was the one to stay behind and wait for us. He smiles, not in a way that’s happy, but in the way that a parent smiles at their children during a time of hardship.

“We should get back to the others,” Niles says with a long sigh.

We turn our heads to the side and gasp. Knightingale stands eye level with Niles, nose to nose, and grimacing like a human. Even her doe eyes are in small slits.

I burst into surprised laughter. “Thanks for the time, warden.”

Niles stands with me, keeping his eyes on her like he’s waiting to be bitten.

“Do I just repel animals or something?” Niles grumbles.

As if responding to his question, she growls at him, nudging the back of his knee with her nose as if to say *get moving*.

With a light jog, we catch up to the others, slowly being surrounded by the changing leaves. Dark green to candy-apple red. Dessin is standing still in front of the group, looking forward at something in the distance.

I canter up to him, giving his arm a little shove with my elbow.

“What is it?”

He nods once. “She was right. He’s here.”

I follow his stare to the edge of the cliff that hovers over the turquoise lagoon. A figure in all black, tall like an aspen tree, looking out at the water in silence.

Hello, Judas.

36. The Family Secret

“WE’VE WAITED LONG ENOUGH FOR answers. I think it’s time you give them to us,” Dessin says over the sound of rushing water.

We take a seat next to him while the others wait back in the trees. Judas doesn’t acknowledge us. He isn’t even surprised that we found him.

“I got your message,” he says to me with an amused smile. “That was quite a performance to watch from afar.”

The fire. He watched it burn down. “Does that upset you?”

Dessin and I watch Judas as he sits in silence, thinking long and hard over my question.

“I’ve been waiting for that day my entire life.” He smiles absently at the small ripples of water beneath our feet. “*The woman who once brought compassion to the Emerald Prison will one day bring fire. And with her new reckoning, the enemy is doomed to fail.*”

That sounds like...

“It’s part of our prophecy,” he says.

“Who’s *our*?”

“The Crimson Kres. The colony that went missing. We’ve been with you all along.”

Dessin and I exchange a look. Runa told us that there were rumors of the Crimson Kres. That they blended into our society. *Spies*.

“You’re going to have to explain this. My brain is doing backflips,” I say.

“It goes back a couple of generations, back when settlers first came. I was raised in the city, in a prestigious family, told that one day I’ll welcome both of you into the asylum. I was to observe and only help if it was imperative to ensure the success of the prophecy.”

Dessin glares at him impatiently. Judas continues.

“My grandmother married Orin Blackforth. The other founder of Demechnef—or formerly known as Demechforth.” He turns to face me.

“Our family line knew we needed to get close to Vlademur and his son, the two members of Demechnef that would lead the experiments on you two.”

Each piece of the puzzle clicks in place. But there’s something about that statement that triggers alarm bells in my head. He’s a Blackforth...

“Oh my god!” I hiss, gawking like he’s just grown another head. “You—you’re related to Aurick’s fiancé?! To *Red*?”

“Her name is Marilynn.” Did he just say *is*? As in present tense? “I believe you know her as Lynn.”

I arch an eyebrow. “I don’t know a Lynn—”

But the name—not even a tangible object, but a single word, a syllable—pushes me under that veil. And I see it. The moment Judas sent me to a retired conformist. The woman with voluptuous red hair that made sure I was mentally well enough to return to the asylum after my run-in with Dessin.

I’ve met Aurick’s fiancé! “Holy shit,” I breathe out. “She’s alive?”

“Yes—”

“Does Aurick know she’s alive?” My mind spirals with questions. I trace over every small conversation where Aurick discussed the love of his life that died too young. He blamed Vexamen for that.

“No. Everyone who knows her believes she is dead. It was getting too risky for her to be that close to the mission. Vlademur assaulted her. Masten was on to her, tracking her every move. It made the most sense to fake her own death and work behind the scenes.”

“But,”—I blink twice—“why did my father have a letter that stated Masten was the one to kill Marilynn? And how did he know?”

Judas smiles to himself. “Because she’s the one who told Jack. She knew one day you’d need that leverage over Demechnef. Told Jack to hide it in the house for one of you to find.”

“So you two have supposedly been helping us this entire time? For a prophecy?” Dessin asks in disbelief.

“I know it sounds unconventional. But it’s not just a prophecy. It’s *the* prophecy. The one that will bring about a new era of civilization. One that will end this absurd societal misogyny and glamorized cultism. It’s a war that only the two of you can win for us. It’s a war that will stop Vexamen from stealing babies from the crib and training them to be ruthless, psychopathic soldiers. It’s *your* war.” Judas is calm and at ease with this belief. He sounds perfectly sane. “We had to make sure it happened exactly how our ancestors predicted it would. We had to be the shadows in your corner.”

“How have you helped the prophecy?” I ask.

“I’m the one that warned your parents of what was to come. I helped prepare them, mentally and physically. I told them the prophecies. Explained your destinies.”

“You let them die horrible deaths even though you had the means to prevent it?” Dessin’s eyes flare with cold rage.

“Their deaths are not in vain. They knew what they were perishing for.”

Dessin scoffs in his face, rising to his feet abruptly. “You’re fucking useless. We sought you out, hoping you could help keep Demechnef from controlling us long enough to end this war. But you’re just a brainwashed cult member.”

I stand with Dessin.

“Where can we find Marilyn? Maybe I can use her as leverage to get Aurick to let us call the shots.”

Judas shakes his head. “She won’t come out of hiding. I don’t even know her latest location. After the abuse she suffered from Aurick’s father, she’ll never return to his son. Not ever.”

I throw my arms in the air with a dramatic sigh. “Great. That’s great. What does your precious prophecy say about this, then? How are we supposed to go about this without the government abducting our friends and using their lives against us? How are we supposed to survive this without being pawns in the game?”

“It’s you, Miss Ambrose. You are the one that will turn the tides for Demechnef. It’s predicted that you will use your broken mind to change the son of the tyrant.”

I stare into his eyes, cold and aged with wisdom. I’m not sure what he expects me to do with that, yet that beast inside of me that set fire to the asylum perks her head up at his words. She seems to know exactly what to do.

37. The Pain of His Victims

THE CITY ISN'T THE QUIET, glamorous nook it was when I left it. It comes to life with screams, women running from house to house in their evening gowns, and children crying.

It's as if that makeup covering the massive bruise that is the ugliness of this city has been wiped clean. The women run their hands through their perfect hair, sweat and tears drip from their cheeks, and something is very, very wrong here.

I even start to wonder if this was because of me. Are they really that upset over the destruction of the asylum? Maybe the patients have done something horrible.

Aurick meets us outside of the mountain, staring at Dessin in wide-eyed disbelief.

"You are a goddamned con artist," he grits out.

"Thank you." Dessin smiles proudly.

"How'd you do it? Huh? Was it fake blood? Did you have mirrors set up for the illusion? Were we all on drugs that gave us gory hallucinations?" It's hard to tell if he's angry or just overwhelmed.

"Did you cry in my absence, Aurick?"

"I should have known. You're this unkillable *cockroach*. Of course you'd find a way to escape death."

"You should feel lucky we've come back," I say through the confines of my bared teeth.

Aurick's icy gaze slides to me slowly, losing all signs of humor and taunting. His eyes flutter in acknowledgment, and the space between his eyebrows creases.

"More than you can imagine." He glances at the group. "The Vexamen Breed finally infiltrated the city. They've abducted several children under the age of two, some of the same they stole last time. Some different. One fell swoop at midnight, and every mother woke up this morning screaming their heads off."

Dread thickens in my stomach, rising up my throat like bile.

"Have you sent your army to get them back?" I ask, unable to hide the impending doom straining my voice.

"I have. But they've already boarded their ship."

"What do they want babies for?" Ruth twists her hands nervously.

“That’s how they’ve built the greatest army in the world. They remove them from their mother’s breast, raise them without empathy or compassion, train them to kill without remorse, turn them into obedient, emotionless assassins.”

A shiver races down my back. Babies. Without their parents to teach them how to decide right from wrong, how to feel empathy, and how to respect life—humans would be monsters. Trained, highly skilled monsters.

“What’s your plan? How’re we getting them back?” I force myself to stand up straighter.

Aurick gives me a once-over look. “You and Dessin will infiltrate the ship. Come up with a way to overrun them, and turn it back to our shores.”

Oh, is that right? I glare back at him without blinking. “And if we refuse?”

Aurick glances behind him with a cocky glint in his eyes. He doesn’t have to say anything. We all see the many archers hiding in the trees. “One word and one of your friends will be killed. They aim for the head. I’m done playing this game of power with both of you. Respect the line of succession. We can either go to war with each other, or we can save the lives of innocent children.”

A few months ago, I would have cowered behind Dessin, waiting to see how this statement would have pissed him off. But today, that woman that walked through the asylum leaving a trail of bodies and blood in her wake, that woman—no, that dragon—has been stirred from slumber. She comes to a boiling point inside of me, clenching down on my muscles, pouring acid through my veins.

And it’s a knee-jerk reaction, a flex of my body that’s as primal as taking a breath of air. That monster living in my soul finally reveals how to use my abilities for something greater. It’s as if I’m possessed as I take two quick steps toward Aurick; his eyes widen, but he doesn’t retreat, and my hands find the sides of his head. Like a magnet pulling me in.

I don’t know how I’m able to do it, but the feeling rises like the sun in my chest; it tugs his conscience, once, twice, and again until he’s tumbling through the void with me. I can feel his sudden panic, sense his confusion. And it isn’t like the other times. We don’t linger on one memory. I show them *all*. A fast, strobing slideshow of my pain. Of Niles’s treatments. Of Chekiss drowning. Of Kane’s screams as he watched his family die.

But it isn't just the memory. No, it's the feelings that came with it. The childlike terror, the depression, the sting of heartache in my chest. I wrap them all around Aurick's neck like a noose. And he's my fucking prisoner in this dark place tucked between both of our minds.

For him, it feels like I've trapped him for a century. He screams as the pain swallows him whole. He begs, although he doesn't know who to grovel to. He just knows that someone has made him a slave. And here I am, pulling the strings of this puppet. Watching him experience the events that have tortured us. All thanks to his family.

Lifting my hands from his temples, I pull us back. The air whooshes around us as Aurick blinks back at me in shock, stumbling backward, tripping over his own feet. His entire body quivers like the last leaf on a dying tree.

"What just happened?" Dessin moves behind me. "What did you do to him?"

Aurick can't even answer. He's too busy staring at me like the monster he knows he helped create, trying to understand where he was, how long he's been gone, and why he can't shake the feelings of abandonment, relentless torture, and true agony.

"I fixed him," I say.

A cold gust of wind sifts through my limbs until I'm shaking too. The kind of vibration that comes from deep in my muscles, thrumming through my bones. It's like standing out in the winter forest without any clothes on. I wrap my arms tightly around my body to contain it.

"You *fixed* him?" Niles examines Aurick as he stares up at me in disbelief.

"I—gave him—our pain."

"Baby, your lips are turning blue," Dessin says, running a thumb over my bottom lip. He jerks his head back to Aurick. "What happened? What's wrong with her?"

Aurick tries to get to his feet. "She got in my head. She—" He studies me, partly out of fear, partly out of admiration. "Skylenna, have you ever done that to someone before?"

Forced them to endure years' worth of torture within a blink of an eye? "No." I shake my head.

He blows out a breath, running his long fingers through his raven hair.

“What’s wrong with her?” Dessin barks, wrapping his warm arms around me.

“How should I know? I’ve never seen a subject do that before! Fuck, it felt like I was in the penitentiary—like I was sentenced for an eternity.”

Dessin presses his warm lips to my cheeks, rubbing his hands up and down my cold arms to build friction. I nuzzle into his chest, aching to be closer, to feel more of his hot skin on mine.

“It’s called the Prison Void.” A sultry, feminine voice awakens behind us, stepping through the tree line.

Dessin and I turn to look at her. High-waisted khaki pants, a loose-fitted black button-down, and a thick braid of burgundy hair glimmering in the sun.

She looks past us to Aurick with ocean-blue eyes, a dark border of black lashes, a freckled, pale complexion, and lips so full they appear swollen and cherry red.

“No...” Aurick exhales.

I’ve met this woman once in a small house arranged by Judas. She introduced herself as Lynn.

“Marilynn Blackforth,” I say.

Aurick’s formerly *dead* fiancé.

38. Marilynn Blackforth

THIS FEELS LIKE A PRIVATE moment we've intruded on.

Aurick's face is ashen. Sickly. His jaw is slack, his hands balled into fists, and those arctic eyes glisten with tears.

"No," he repeats.

"I'm sorry," Marilynn whispers. Although, her stoic eyes betray her. The tone in her voice betrays her. She isn't sorry, not really. She speaks clearly, without a hint of emotion in her words. It isn't because she's cold and hardened on the inside. It's because she comes from a place of duty, tradition, and honor. It's plain as day on her face. She cared for Aurick, and maybe she still does, but her vows came first.

"How." It isn't a question but a demand.

"It's a lot to explain. But—to make a long story short, I had to help protect them"—she nods her head at Dessin and me—"from your father. From you. You were becoming just like him. And my feelings were getting in the way of my true purpose."

I realize Aurick knows nothing about the prophecies of her people.

He shakes his head, not understanding a word coming out of her mouth.

"I'm sorry," she says again.

Aurick takes a step back, turning away from the love of his life, putting his hands on the back of his head while taking deep, controlled breaths. It dawns on me that he's had to watch two people come back from the dead within the span of an hour.

"What's this about a Prison Void?" Dessin asks, tightening his hold around my shivering body.

"We were told that the Fallen Saint would have the ability to create a prison in someone's mind. A place where time doesn't exist. Where the Fallen Saint is the judge, jury, and executioner." Marilynn's gaze remains on Aurick even as she answers Dessin.

"The—*what?* Fallen Saint?" Niles huffs out a laugh. "Is that what they've been calling Skylenna?!"

Dessin lets out a low warning grumble in the bed of his throat. Niles shuts up.

"Doing that drains your body of energy and heat. It can bring you to hypothermic levels," she adds, ignoring Niles.

"So you've just been here this entire time?" Aurick seethes.

“Yes.”

He shakes his head like he doesn’t know her. He never knew her. And even though Aurick is on my hit list, I feel for him. I know what it’s like to be left in the dark.

“How often can she go to the Prison Void?” Dessin runs his fingers through my hair gently.

“Only Skylenna can know the limits of her mind and body. But it’s safe to say she shouldn’t do it unless absolutely necessary.”

“Did you go to your own funeral?” Aurick’s eyes are red rimmed now, exploding with building fury. “Did you watch me sit by your headstone for days? Did you get to see me drink myself into oblivion?”

Dessin and I look between them uncomfortably.

“Aurick, we can talk about this in private. But Vexamen has taken the babies of your city. And it’s only going to get worse. Let Skylenna and Dessin call the shots. Let them devise a plan and offer them whatever resources they need. We only have a couple of hours before there’s no chance of catching up to them. It’s now or never.”

Aurick looks at her in disbelief, mirroring all of our expressions.

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know. But they need to be armed and sent to the warships *now*.”



BACK IN THE DEMECHNEF MOUNTAIN, we’re armed and given the war room to plan strategy. The main objective is to get on the ship, get the babies off the ship and onto our boat, then find the boiler room and blow the whole thing up.

We can’t bring a whole unit on board. Only Dessin and me with one or two extra people to help us get the babies out safely. We even have comfortable baby slings on our chest and back, with multiple slots. That way we’ll be able to safely secure them off the ship.

“If you two think I’m letting you have all the fun, you’re blind and stupid.” Warrose blasts through the door, his big shoulder throwing the thick oak into the adjacent wall.

“I told you to wait outside with the others.” Dessin scowls.

“If Warrose gets to come, then so do I,” Ruth announces, poking her head through the doorway.

“It’s too dangerous,” I cut them off. “You need to stay here and train with Warrose.”

“But I can help! I speak old Alkadonian. I can translate!”

Translate? The Vexamen Breed was speaking another language. And Ruth was shouting down its translation to Dessin.

I look up at Dessin, who is watching me intently. He slides one hand over my lower back, leaving me with weak knees and a warm gooeyness in my chest. He’s giving me the freedom to say yes or no to their request. To decide if having a translator would be that much of a help or not.

“How do you know old Alkadonian?”

“Yes, how do you know a language that was outlawed here?” Warrose crosses his arms.

“My grandfather taught my father. It was a family tradition to learn it. They were paranoid that one day we’d have to return to Alkadon.”

We nod collectively. Well, she is the only one that knows it fluently. And it would come in handy to know what’s going on throughout the ship.

“Fine. But you stay by Warrose’s side. No deviating. No going off on your own. You do exactly as we say.” I cringe inwardly at how much I sound like a mother.

“Deal—”

“Oh, hell no. Little Ruthie gets to go? If you’re taking on charity cases, then I’m definitely going.” Niles enters the room like a tornado, bumping into tables and chairs and knocking a stack of papers to the floor.

“No,” Dessin answers this time.

“I can break into anything. You think they’re not going to have those kids locked up?”

“I can also break into anything.”

“Right. Of course, you can. But you’re far more useful as the muscle, yes? There are probably hundreds of men on that ship. Quietly put down anyone that gets in our way, and I’ll take care of any lock.”

Niles and Dessin stare each other down.

“I vote yes!” Ruth punches a fist in the air.

“This is not a democracy.” But I can tell by the slight lift of his brow that he’s seriously considering it.

“He makes a good point,” I say.

Dessin nods. We did promise to stick together. Make decisions together. But that doesn’t stop the web of nerves tying knots in my stomach. The

thought of Niles getting hurt again makes me want to vomit. Or what about Ruth? She's never had to suffer physical torture before. She was never a patient in the asylum or a subject in a cruel experiment. She's never really been touched by evil in this family.

"You can go." Dessin sighs in annoyance. "Now, are we done making my life hell, or does Chekiss want to fight the bad guys too?"

"I'll only slow you down." Chekiss stands in the doorway. His expression is sad and defeated. It breaks my heart. "I'll stay here in the library. Read up on anything that can help you find their weaknesses in war."

I smile at him appreciatively. I know this can't be easy. It's like seeing his children go off to battle, not knowing if they'll make it home.

After cleaning ourselves up and eating a hot meal, we arm ourselves for what's to come. I had my archer's dress cleaned so I can wear it again. I know it was something Runa gave me, and even though I've had moments where she wasn't my favorite person in the world, she represents freedom to me. Her wild spirit. Her beliefs about equality. I wear these clothes with pride. I even have Ruth braid my hair the same way—half of my hair pulled to the top of my head, entwined with multiple skinny braids. Before we leave, I look at myself in the mirror. I've lost a lot of weight, my cheeks have sunken in, and my eyes have collected storm clouds.

But I've never felt stronger in my life. I have Dessin back. I've learned the secrets of our past. And for the first time in my life, I'm ready to fight back.

Dessin moves behind me in the mirror, sliding both arms around my waist and pressing me into the hard lines of his body. I lean my head back on his shoulder and sigh.

"You look ready to lay waste to a small country, Skylittle."

My eyes peel open to get a better look at his softened features. "Kane," I coo, smiling at the nickname that fills my heart with sweet memories of playing in the rain and climbing trees.

"I missed you, honey," he says, husky and deep.

"I missed you too." My heart throbs a little. I don't know how it's possible that I can love and enjoy their company on different levels. I don't know how I'm not torn between any of them. And yet, Kane is my oldest friend, my *best* friend, and it's his company that makes my heart gush with fond memories and the kind of love that is old and kind and pure.

“I have a bad feeling about going to this ship.” His actions don’t match his words. He places soft kisses on my cheeks, my jaw, and down the side of my neck.

“You seem... fine.” I arch my back into his erection. He groans at the sudden pressure, opening his mouth to suck on my neck.

“Either way, I wanted to see you before you left,” he adds softly in my ear.

I practically start purring at his hot breath slithering across my skin.

“And I wanted to hear you say it again.”

“Say what?”

“Say you love me,” he hums into my skin. “Tell me you love me, honey.”

My cheeks lift in a sappy grin. “I love you,” I say quietly. “I love you so much it hurts.” And it does. It’s a physical throbbing under my sternum. It’s barbed wire around my heart. It’s an ache that will never go away.

He sighs, breathing in my scent. “I’ve waited my whole life to hear you say it. My whole fucking life of watching you grow up, of watching you... *develop*.”

“Ohhh.” I poke him playfully. “You noticed when I got breasts, huh?”

His large hands drag up my stomach and over the swells of my chest. He squeezes them gently, pushing his cock harder against my ass. My panties are instantly soaked.

“You used to sit in my lap and practically shove them in my face. Puberty... *sucked* around you, honey.”

I bark out a laugh. It’s still so strange to think how much history we share. How much we know about each other. He must have been so devastated when I lost those memories, when I forgot every precious moment that meant anything to us.

“I still have so many memories I want to reminisce with you,” he says, a touch of sadness thickening his voice.

I turn to face him. “When we get back from the ship, we’ll stay up all night reminiscing. We’ll steal trays of food, sit in front of the fire, and talk until sunrise.”

His hands cradle my face, and he looks down at me like I’ll never in a million years understand how much that would mean to him. “Then I’ll wait for you, Skylittle. I’ll always wait for you.”



AS WE LOAD INTO OUR buggies to head out to the shore, I glance over my shoulder to see DaiSzek watching us. Knightingale waits a few feet behind him.

My entire body seems to ache at the sight. I don't want to leave them. And as I glance to my right, I can see that Dessin doesn't either. His face wears the same scowl it usually has, only now his eyes have darkened.

We walk up to DaiSzek, kneeling in front of him.

"It's only for a little while," I say, scratching behind his ears.

"I know you want to come with us, but we have to keep you far away from Vexamen, buddy." Dessin places a hand on my shoulder, peeking over at Knightingale. "Not to mention, you have a new member of your pack that needs training."

DaiSzek huffs. A sign of discontent. His version of an eye roll.

I lean my forehead against his large snout. We linger there for a long moment while Dessin rubs circles over my back.

I love you so much, DaiSzek. Since the day we found you as a pup.

"Come here," Dessin says in an uncharacteristically light voice. The tone you use with a child. He uses a finger to signal to the pouting Ginger Wrathbull.

Knightingale curls her upper lip, growling at DaiSzek before approaching us. It's as if she's reminding him who the real boss is.

Dessin and I laugh.

"You're a part of our family now, girl. That means we *usually* stick together. But this time, you're going to have to hang back, keep these assholes in check while we're away."

I snort, smiling at Dessin as he talks to her like a little girl.

"We protect our family. One day, you'll learn to love DaiSzek like we do." He scratches her muscly head, smirking as she pushes up against him, wiggling her butt at an inhumanly fast pace.

"We'll be back," I promise them, standing to walk away. It feels wrong. Like we shouldn't be separated. But it's the right thing to do. I would never risk their lives with Vexamen.

Stepping into the buggy, Marilynn jumps in beside Niles.

"I'm getting on the ship with you," she tells us matter-of-factly.

"What?" I ask.

“You have two people who don’t know how to protect themselves from an attack going on board. You’ll need one more pair of hands to keep them safe. I can shadow Niles, Warrose shadows Ruth.” She doesn’t say it, but the energy surrounding her is something lethal. A quiet danger that sneaks up on you in your sleep. The Crimson Kres spend their entire lives undercover, blending into a corrupt society and spying on their targets in plain sight.

I know Dessin can sense that violent potential as well.

Dessin cracks his neck. “There’s a plan in place. I *really* hate deviating from plans.”

Or not.

Marilynn adjusts her long, burgundy braid. “No deviation. I’ll just shadow Niles.”

“I really don’t need a babysitter,” Niles grumbles. “The enemy takes one look at me and wouldn’t dare harm this gorgeous piece of ass.”

I roll my eyes but looking at Ruth makes us both crack a smile.

“Yeah, okay, you can come.” Dessin nods his head at Marilyn.

She nods quietly, keeping her eyes on her lap.

“Fine, I’ll allow it.” Niles points an authoritative finger toward her. “But I’m in charge.”

Dessin shakes his head like he’s annoyed, but a ghost of a smile melts over his mouth, and I slump happily in my seat.

Once on shore, we pull the lifeboat out to the water, complete with secure carriages for the babies. Everyone is armed. The plan is rehearsed. Yet rot begins to take root in my stomach. Watching Warrose help Ruth into the boat and Niles fumble into his seat, I finally understand the weight Dessin has always had to carry on his back.

Their lives are these delicate rose petals in my hand. A gust of wind could take them away from me forever. This is why Dessin has always wanted them to stay out of the way. Not only do we have to successfully get each baby off the ship, but once they’re off, we have to find the boiler room and blow up the place.

No pressure.

Aurick grips the back end of our boat, looking into my eyes with anxious caution. I can see how much our trip into the Prison Void has affected him. For the first time, he looks guilty, like he’s straining to maintain eye contact.

“I’ll be right here when you all return to shore,” he says, making a visible effort not to look at Marilyn. “No hero moments. If you can’t blow up the ship, just get out and get back to us.”

Dessin leans back in his seat with a dark look of suspicion. “You care about our well-being now, huh?”

His venomous eyes slide over to me. “You really did a number on those sociopathic tendencies of his.”

It’s refreshing to know that Dessin hasn’t changed. He will still make a jab at Aurick any chance he gets.

“Make sure no one lays a hand on Chekiss, DaiSzek, or Knightingale while we’re gone,” I tell him, letting a murderous intent line my words.

Normally, we’d bring DaiSzek and Knightingale in case things got bad. But Dessin and I agreed we absolutely would never risk Vexamen getting a hold of DaiSzek again. Not with how they would have treated him in their homeland.

“You have my word.”

And we’re off, rowing silently across the sea, merging with the perfect cover of fog, so the Breed will never see us coming.

39. Ephesians 6:11

WE DRIFT UP TO THE ship like a lion hunting a buck in the dead of night.

And the ship... the ship is so much bigger than I anticipated. Hundred feels like a small word as I gawk up at the iron beast.

Dessin rows us silently to the chain submerged in the water.

"We'll climb it," he breathes the words so quietly, it sends an explosion through my nerve endings. Adrenaline burns in my bloodstream, tingling my fingers and pumping sweat across my brow.

We all nod quickly as he gets us closer, tying the boat off to the chain. Dessin starts the climb first, sticking the tips of his boots in the giant chain holes, shimmying upward like a spider walking up its web. I follow his lead.

"Careful," Dessin whispers down at me. "The metal is oily."

I tighten my hold on the metal, careful not to let my hands or feet slip. I pass the warning down to the others, then look up at Dessin halfway to the top. A hot jolt of fear passes through my limbs at the sight. Fog completely blankets our path. I mean, that's a good thing for our cover, but the thought occurs to me. What if a dozen crossbows are waiting to shoot us down?

But Dessin isn't worried, so that has to be a good sign. Once I see him throw his leg over the railing of the ship, I let out a quiet sigh of relief.

We can do this.

I remember who we have on our side. Dessin, obviously. An untouchable grim reaper. Warrose, a warrior raised among the beasts. And Marilynn. I don't know what she's capable of, but something tells me we're lucky to have her fighting along with us.

Ruth will give us instructions on signs that only she can read or conversations that we might hear from soldiers on board. And Niles will get us through any locked entrance.

There's a jerky tug on my consciousness. A tempting pull toward the void. Memories on this ship that are tickling my skin like a thousand feathers. I push the feeling down. Nothing can distract me from this. The last thing I need is to hear voices or lose my sight because I've fallen back through a random memory. Not at a time like this.

Dessin helps me over the railing. And then helps the rest of our group.

Before I can get a look around the foggy, *abandoned* deck, Dessin pulls my face into his oily hands. "No Prison Voids. Keep your mind in your own head. Got it? It's you and me, baby. We've got this."

A rush of warmth floods my center. I nod, and he kisses me fiercely. A promise that when we get home, he's going to fuck me senseless.

But as Niles climbs on board, that warmth in my chest is quickly replaced with a chill. It oozes up my spine and thickens behind my lids. I can't resist the urge to touch the closest memory, just a peek, a sliver of a moment that's very recent.

Like the transparency of a ghost, I watch three men haul buckets of sloshing liquid to the side of the ship we just climbed. They heave the liquid over the side, drenching the chain in... *oil*.

Dessin sees my eyes glaze over. He grips my shoulders in sudden panic.

"*Svatenzchagranà*," I repeat their language out loud absentmindedly, hoping Ruth will hear my hushed voice. The men dump the buckets until the chain is completely coated. And it hits me. That chain. That fucking chain we climbed was an anchor. They stopped the ship.

Ruth's face pales as I pull myself from the memory. "Saphrine oil," she translates in a gasp.

Dessin releases my shoulders, looking down at his greasy hands in disbelief.

"Fuck," he growls.

"They coated the chain in the same shit that can knock DaiSzek out?" Warrose asks a little louder than our whispers.

I open my mouth to respond, but my tongue goes completely numb. My face tingles like it's fallen asleep. And through my spotty, darkening vision, Dessin says my name. And then he, along with the rest of the ship, blinks from existence.

40. The Ninth Circle

Dessin

IT ONLY TAKES ME A few moments to become aware that the side of my face is being smashed against a cold, jagged surface.

I try to open my eyes, but it's like my lids are sewn shut. My brain is filled with sludge. A sticky, syrupy sensation fills my mouth. And why can't I open my eyes?

I force myself to access my surroundings with my other senses. I'm lying down, although everything feels unstable, swaying side to side. I'm either on a boat or have been drugged. Or both. The ground I'm on is rocky and a little sharp. I take a shallow breath through my nose. The smell is impossible to miss. It's partially sweet, like buttered popcorn and candy apples, yet there's an undying stench lingering underneath. Death. The inside of a garbage can. Decay.

What's going on? I hear Kane ask, lingering near the front, but I can't answer him until I figure this out.

I block out the sound of blood rushing in my head, tune out the pounding of my heartbeat in my ears, and listen closely for anything that can tell me where I am.

Music. Low like a broken toy. A distorted trumpet, the whistle of a horn, and the elongated piano notes of an old-fashioned organ.

But there's one more sound I can't quite name. A low humming. No, not humming. It's feminine, soft, and sleepy. It's the sound of... moaning.

It's Skylenna.

My eyes break the spell, blasting through the debilitating haziness. I grunt as I use my arms to push myself upright, whipping my head around to see black bars separating me from her. She's sleeping on the charcoal rocky floor. Moaning, as my girl fights to wake up. Her instincts flickering on just like mine.

The music cuts in and out with creepy white noise. It catches my attention for a single moment, long enough to tilt my head up to our surroundings. Huge black birdcages hold us hostage. The floors and walls are made of what looks like brimstone. The long dark hallway between the cages is lit up with glass bulbs of red and yellow, dim but glowing a visible path.

Dread breaks loose like a virus in my gut.

Ruth. Niles. Warrose. Marilynn. All in fucking cages.

“Skylenna,” I whisper. Jesus, what the hell happened to us? I see the ship in my head. I see Skylenna climbing up the chain behind me.

The oil. Saphrine oil. They drugged us before we even had a chance to take two steps onto their ship. Embarrassment, horror, and gnawing rage light my insides on fire. How could I have missed that? Ten steps ahead. I always have to be ten steps ahead. *Fuck!*

We’ll get out of this. Kalidus has moved slowly, undetected, to the front. He only comes this close when my confidence wanes. And since he is a god, there is never a shortage of that for him.

“Dessin,” Skylenna croaks, trying so damn hard to lift her head to look at me. My heart clenches up in a tight fist. What the fuck have I gotten us into? I should have gone alone. I should have—

“We’ve been captured.” But she doesn’t look afraid, pissed, or confused. She seems to have accepted this fate, ready to understand this next obstacle we’re about to face. Dammit, that makes me want to kiss her, hold her, tell her how hard that makes me.

I nod. “I don’t know if we’re still on the ship or not. But they got us with that damn oil.”

She scans the dark cages with her hazy green eyes.

“I’m so sorry, baby. I’ll get us out of this.” Self-hatred burns in the back of my throat. How the fuck did I miss this?

Even gods can be tricked. Kalidus floods my center with stoic confidence.

“*We’ll* get us out of this,” she corrects, gritting her teeth as she pushes herself to sit upright. “I could have prevented all of this if I didn’t ignore my instincts to look at the memories surrounding that chain.”

I rest my forehead against the cold bars separating us. *I’m sorry, baby. You don’t have to shield her from this. She’s so strong now, Dess.*

I thank Kane quietly.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

I look through the cages to see Warrose sit up. His drugged expression is slack with exhaustion and tight with vigilance.

One by one, the rest wake up, too, Ruth being the last to open her eyes.

I pat down my pockets and belt and grimace over at Warrose. “And they took our weapons.”

He laughs darkly. “Good,” he rasps. “They’ll need a fair fight.”

Skylenna fills the others in on what we think happened. Although, we still don’t know a goddamn thing. Sitting ducks in a creepy hallway filled with sparkling circus lights and human birdcages.

“Now would be a great time to start picking locks, Niles,” Ruth says.

Niles crawls to the front of his cage, fumbling with the lock before he begins to sway like a drunk man.

“I think you’ll find lock picking rather difficult.” A deep, thundering voice knocks against the brimstone surfaces of this hellhole.

Although, that low, languid voice seems to sink its claws under my skin, making me sit up straighter.

Who is that? Kane asks, yet he steps away from the front cautiously.

I turn to Skylenna to see if she noticed it too. However, I’m even more surprised when I see an expression of wide eyes and open mouths mirrored from Skylenna all the way down to Marilyn. And they’re all staring at me.

I look down the hallway to try and find the source of that voice. Why are they freaking out? Do they know who it is?

“We put a type of magnet in your ears,” the voice drags on. “Any sign of disobedience and it will disrupt your equilibrium.”

Right on cue, Niles falls to the ground, reaching out his hands as if to keep the room from spinning.

“What in God’s name...” Skylenna utters, but something tells me she isn’t concerned about the most recent obstacle the faceless man has just presented us with.

“I bet you’re wondering who I am?” The voice sounds three steps closer.

I strain my eyes to find him.

“Although, Dessin seems more interested in learning where we are so he can begin making his ten-step-ahead plan on how to escape.”

I lock my jaw. “Only cowards hide in the shadows,” I growl.

“I wasn’t born here, you know...” His footsteps echo along the walls. “Sophia didn’t even get to hold me in her arms when the nurse took me away and brought me here.”

Kane has abandoned the front completely. Leaving Kalidus to remain close, quiet, and seething.

Ice fills my veins. *Sophia*. That—that *has* to be a coincidence.

But the look on Skylenna’s face says otherwise.

“You don’t recognize your own voice, do you?”

I flinch. No. I shake my head. No.

“Dessin?” Skylenna shifts her focus back to me with tears welling in her eyes.

The man steps into the dim red-and-yellow lights, revealing his face. White noise fills my ears, and every muscle is pumped full of adrenaline. My face. Only he has a full beard and is wearing black eyeliner.

“My name is Kaspias Valdawell. Welcome to the Vexamen Prison.”

*To be continued in the fourth book of this series:
The Doll and The Domination*

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LOL

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PS: Dessin says hi!

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About The Author



Brandi Elise Szeker is a passionate advocate of sharing the darker stories that people shy away from. After seeing so many turning a blind eye in history to the horrendous injustices of asylum care, the unspeakable acts of childhood trauma, and the growing statistics of animal abuse—it is her mission to always use her platform and stories to spread awareness.

When she's not writing about soul-shattering love or reading about it, you can find her binge-watching TV shows with her mom: her first inspiration that started it all.

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