



CASE:0

ANNALISE STORM CHRONICLES

MAY FREIGHTER

CASE: 0

Annalise Storm Chronicles Vol. 1

MAY FREIGHTER

Copyright © May Freighter, 2016

The right of May Freighter to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her

under the *Copyright Amendment (Moral Rights) Act 2000*

This work is copyrighted. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced, copied, scanned, stored in a retrieval system, recorded or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written permission of the author.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

NOTE: This book is written in English UK.

All rights reserved.

www.mayfreighter.com

PROLOGUE

CCTV March Street CAM, Bronze District, 22:47, March 10, 2330.

The queue outside of the Landon's bar was nothing new. Chatter filled the air as people conversed about their day. A well-built bouncer stopped a man in his mid-thirties from entering and scanned him with his genetic scanner. Satisfied with the scan's results, he gave a curt nod and let the man through.

A young brunette bypassed the people who waited in line. Her purposeful stride separated her from the rest as she sashayed her hips. Gasps and quiet murmurs spilt from the bystanders. Ignoring them, she drew closer to the door.

The bouncer glowered at her. "Get out of here *beauty*. No. Freaks. Allowed."

Her top lip curled into a sneer, and she spat the words out. "*Beauty?* Scan me, idiot."

He pointed the scanner at her chest. The result was displayed on screen in neon-blue text '*PUREBLOOD, No modifications detected.*'

Grumbling under his breath, he stepped away from the door, permitting her entry.

The woman flicked her hair over her shoulder and sauntered inside.



CCTV Landon's CAM 1, 22:52, March 10, 2330.

The patrons eyed her with suspicion. Whispers and exclamations of disgust filled the air as she walked past the tables to the bar in desperate need of a drink. Her hands balled into fists at her sides, and she sat on the hovering stool and waited.

The bartender edged closer. “What would you like?”

“Something strong.” She sighed, and her shoulders slumped. She was a pureblood who resembled an *alabaster*. Purebloods were rarely beautiful, and she was that rarity. She wanted to claw at her face when she saw it in the mirror. Every person in Silver looked at her as if she was a *servant* or worse—a *worker*.

“Just look at her! Someone in her family must have fucked their *servant* at some point.”

“I bet she went to the Black District to get something done,” someone else added.

Since the Modded Wars, when purebloods won a fifteen-year-long battle for their lives against the genetically modified humans, things had changed. The purebloods gave them a choice: live in servitude or perish. The modded were then labelled and divided into four distinct genetic groups: *beast*, *flare*, *alabaster* and *basilisk*—each with special traits to benefit the purebloods.

Something hard hit the back of the brunette’s head, and her hand shot to the affected area. Blood tinged her fingers.

“I don’t know how you’ve fooled the scanner, but you’re not welcome here, *alabaster*!” a woman said, rising from her stool.

Anger bubbled within the brunette. She was sick and tired of being treated as a modded freak, like one of *them*. Why couldn’t these people believe what the scanner told them and just leave her be? Scanners couldn’t be fooled. They were fine-tuned by the best technicians in the Divinity Police Department.

Her agitation became ire and her body tingled with an unfamiliar sensation as if something climbed in, pushing her out of her shell. She bent over, clinging to her burning chest.

The whispers in the bar morphed into shouts of outrage. More people hurled curses at her, but she no longer cared. She reached for the counter. Her hand slipped, and she tumbled off the stool. Her knees hit the ground hard and her conscience faded—all control gone...

She faced the patrons as her eyes rolled back into her head. Within seconds, she launched forwards. Her hands landed in a woman’s mop of bleached blonde hair, and she yanked chunks of it out.

A deafening scream filled the bar. Eyes of the onlookers bulged, watching the events unfold.

“The *alabaster* is possessed!” a man in the back shouted.

A few patrons rushed towards her. Others shrieked and ran for the exits or remained seated—too shocked to move.

Strong, masculine hands grasped the brunette’s waist, tearing her off the bleeding blonde. With a wild expression, she kicked and bit anything close enough. A loud wail of frustration escaped her. She turned and plunged her nails into the man’s eyes, bursting the whites in their sockets.

His face contorted with agony. Clear liquid ran down her fingers as he blindly aimed for her neck.

The crowd of men surrounded her. A moment later, their bodies swallowed her small frame whole.

RECORDING DELETED

1

WELCOME TO THE DPD

Annalise lifted the new badge off her desk and clipped it onto her belt. Smoothing the material of her white blouse, she checked it for stains.

Today was her first day at the Divinity PD. The Academy went swimmingly, or so she had convinced herself. When it came to department selection, it was up to the person's scores, psych evaluations, and fate. The morning her sergeant handed her the black slip, everything from a torn trousers leg to the dying wrist comms told her that luck wasn't on her side, and she was right. The pity in her sergeant's dark-blue eyes still haunted her.

How bad could the Human Possession Department be?

Annalise took in a deep breath, pushing away unprofessional thoughts. She made her way to the living room and entered the open-plan kitchen.

Mavel, her *beast* and *servant*, waited for her by the kitchen island. He sipped coffee from his mug. His attention was on the digital projection of the Divinity News playing out on the wall.

From where she stood, he seemed almost human. His honey-brown hair was tied in a ponytail. If his face remained hidden, she would think he was unmodded. Yet, it was a lie she liked to tell her nervous heart when he was around. Mavel's cat-like, silver eyes informed any pureblood of what he was.

"Are you going to stare at me all morning?" he asked with a quirked brow.

Annalise poured a cup of coffee. She inhaled the pleasant aroma, letting it draw her further into an awakened state. "I could stare at you all day, but I doubt you'd let me."

Mavel chuckled. The sound warmed her heart, so she pretended to focus on the mug in her hands.

He pointed at the screen. "There was a mass murder in the Bronze District. It says Landon's had a possessed *alabaster* sneak in."

Wide-eyed, Annalise glanced past him at the nattering reporter. The longer the woman talked, the deeper her frown grew.

"I was there a few weeks ago," she said. "With only one way in and Tim on duty with a scanner, that's improbable."

He shrugged. "Well, either the modded drilled a hole in the concrete wall or the report is a hoax."

"It can't be a joke. No pureblood can be possessed."

Mavel said nothing. He finished his cup in a large mouthful. "You've got five minutes before we have to leave, princess."

Pouting, Annalise crossed her arms. "You know I hate that nickname."

"You're the daughter of the most influential politician in Divinity who also lives in one of the Towers. Tell me again how you're not a princess?"

Her anger sparked, and heat from her mug burned her palms. She jerked them away, gritting her teeth to keep from adding anything that could ruin the day.

Mavel knew exactly how to push her buttons which was part of the reason why she never told anyone about her feelings for him. The other part was that she couldn't love him. He was modded. Any relationship with him would result in her being cast out to the Green District. Plus, his playful demeanour had become impossible to read. She didn't want to be hurt again. Not after a painful heartbreak. Granted, she broke the guy's jaw afterwards, but it made her heart ache every time she recalled the unpleasant memory.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated on staying calm. It helped. She took a slice of buttered toast and wolfed it down along with her coffee.

“Shall we go then?” she said, her mouth still half-full.

He shook his head, his lips quirking upwards. “I am always right behind you.”

Annalise rolled her eyes. In the Academy, they were separated into modded and pureblood groups. They spent four years apart, and he could only visit during the holidays or in emergencies. A system she saw as nothing more than a tool to further segregate their society.

A light smile crept onto her lips as she thought of him finally being by her side. He could live with her, and she could see him whenever she pleased.

“Annalise, where is your coat?” Mavel asked, drawing her out of her reverie.

She yanked the black trench coat off the hanger. “I was about to grab it...” While she shrugged it on, they stepped out of the apartment into the white-and-gold hallway, spanning the thirtieth floor of Tower One.

Mavel stopped by the lift, and she raised her hand to the palm scanner. The glass doors slid open, permitting them entry. With the

upgraded ETek mechanisms, it didn't take long to descend thirty storeys and arrive in the underground car park.

“I'll drive,” he said, aiming for her car amidst the sea of silver and black vehicles.

As the distance between them grew, she couldn't help staring at the way his body moved with perfect fluidity. The modded certainly had their advantages.

When she clambered in, the onboard computer came to life with a cheerful feminine voice. “Welcome, Ms Storm. Your destination, please?”

“DPD,” Annalise replied, drumming her fingers on her thigh and staring out the window.

“Voice identification complete and destination acknowledged. Have a good day, Ms Storm.” The computer switched into manual and released the steering wheel for Mavel.

Soon, the seemingly endless ocean of cars and concrete pillars became the streets of the Golden District with the Sapphire River flowing through the centre of it. The water in the sunlight appeared blue which was why the city's founding ancestors named it so after the wars. Golden District remained a place where the most influential purebloods lived with their *servants*. No *workers*—modded who decided to live a free life outside of contractual servitude—were permitted to enter Silver or Golden. They belonged to the Bronze and Green, or as the modded called it *the slums*.

Mavel eased them onto the highway and the best view in Divinity became visible to her. The Golden District had tall, ebony, glass-and-steel structures reaching for the sky but never brushing a single cloud. None could be taller than ten storeys as it would block the view for the rich and powerful citizens living in the Towers. The only exception remained the ETek corporate building. The corporation designed most of the technology in the city and had express permission from the

government to build whatever they liked. A stupid rule she never understood. Since Divinity had a population of three million, there should have been more floors to house more people. Yet, the rich remained adamant on the matter to keep the scenery clear, and her father, William Storm, was one of them.

Mavel slowed their car at the bridging point between the Silver and Golden. Titanium gates prevented them from progressing further while scanners ran over the vehicles and the passengers inside.

He glanced her way. “Are you nervous?”

When she didn't detect any humour in his deep voice, she returned his penetrating stare. “A bit, why?”

“The HPD is not a place where you can make a career for yourself, Annalise. You could have asked your father to use his influence and help you change—”

“That's out of the question. I have chosen this path, and I will stick to it!”

Mavel sighed as his fingers clenched around the steering wheel. “I simply don't want you to regret your decision later on.”

“And what would you know about HPD that I don't? Sure, they handle a lot of strange cases. Possession remains an unknown entity to us since it began over a century ago, but I'm certain we'll be...I'll be fine.”

Mavel didn't seem convinced. Nonetheless, the clearance light came on and the gates unlocked. He drove through the bridging point in silence.

Twenty minutes later, he parked in front of the DPD headquarters in Silver. Annalise assessed the seven-storey circular architectural masterpiece as officers dressed in a black uniform walked in at their own pace.

Mavel's heavy hand landed on her shoulder. “You will be fine, Annalise. If anyone tries anything, I'll protect you.”

A scowl contorted her face. Mavel was over six feet. When comparing it to her five-foot-four frame, she had to admit she appeared like a little girl preparing for her first day at school. Perhaps the reason she wasn't intimidated by his tall frame and broad shoulders was because they had been together since she was five. That and she trained hard at the Academy. Although she was useless in Political Studies and memorising historical events, she managed to prove her combat skills. The instant she chose to become an officer of the law, she committed to it.

Annalise punched his shoulder. "Worry about yourself. I can manage anything that comes my way."

Upon entry, she passed through the biometric scanner and showed her badge to the guard. Once Mavel's turn came, the scanner beeped the second he drew close to it.

The guard walked around his desk. "ID, *beast*."

Annalise opened her mouth, ready to defend him, when Mavel stopped her by offering the guard his credentials.

"You're clear. Next time make sure to use the different entry point. All *servants* pass through the scanner over there." The guard pointed to a small entrance on the left-hand side of the ground floor.

As he did so, a woman with waist-long, raven hair came in. Her golden, cat-like eyes fit well with her dark skin tone. Their eyes locked, and she smirked.

The woman walked to the first checkpoint. She showed her ID at the one-way mirror. After the light above her head changed to green, she advanced to a biometric scanner that flashed over her body. Another light changed colour and she passed through a metal detector that activated an alarm. A security guard started rising from his chair when she pulled out a pair of titanium handcuffs from her back pocket.

"Nothing to worry about, sir," she said to the guard.

Someone chuckled behind Annalise, and she glanced over her shoulder.

“She's at it again.” A tanned man with two days' worth of stubble smiled back at her. His shaggy hair fell over his grey eyes when he tilted his head to one side. “I haven't seen you around. I'm Rios Blanc and that's my *servant*, Des. We are in the HPD.”

“Nice to meet you,” Annalise replied and looked back at Des.

Rios' *beast* blew the guard a kiss before she waved her goodbye and joined the group. She was taller than Annalise by a few inches. Golden eyes roamed Annalise's body, settling on her chest. “Are you picking up another chick? Isn't this one a tad too flat for your tastes?”

Rios snorted and patted Annalise on the head. Feeling nothing short of a child, she stepped out of his range.

“Don't worry, Des is always like that,” he said.

Mavel stepped closer and growled his next words. “Don't touch her.”

“A possessive *beast* in the DPD... That bodes well. I hope you passed all the psych evals,” Rios said.

“Don't agitate him and you'll be fine,” Annalise retorted.

“Oh?” Rios' thick brow arched. “We all know the modded can't harm purebloods. If he does, he will face charges that may cost him his life.” He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close.

Blood drained from her face as she considered Rios' words. Even though over two hundred years had passed since the Modded Wars, the genetically modified humans were still treated as the minority. With the unsettling thought plaguing her mind, she shook him off and moved closer to Mavel who continued glaring at the man's back.

Rios led the way to the lifts. With a gentlemanly bow, he motioned for her to go ahead. “Which floor, lady?”

“I'm not your 'lady'. I'm Annalise Storm and this is Mavel. Starting today, we are part of the HPD, too.”

Rios smirked. “So you're the junior Chief mentioned at the last briefing... At least, I get to brag I was your first.”

Annalise gaped at him. “You were my *what*?”

He winked. "The first team member you've met."

Des snickered next to him.

Annalise locked her jaw, stopping her need to snap at him. *Hopefully, not everyone in HPD is as strange as these two.*

Mavel's trembling hand landed on her lower back. He could lose control with Rios around. Without looking up, she knew the murderous look he would be wearing. Forgetting her earlier irritation, she studied the lift buttons and prayed the numbers would change quicker.

To her relief, the strange duo changed the topic to their pool game from the previous night, and Mavel's posture visibly became unburdened.

After arriving on their floor, Des led the way down the corridor to the Human Possession Department.

Observing her surroundings, Annalise tried to memorise the layout. A few framed pictures of different esteemed officers hung on the wall with their name and rank etched into golden plaques.

They walked into a spacious room with six desks and a small sectioned off office at the far end. The top two desks were packed with enough tech and paperwork on them to topple over. The one on her left was occupied by a man who couldn't be older than thirty. He reclined in his chair. In his left hand, he held an open manila folder. Deep in thought, he poked his full lips with a stylus held between his long fingers. His dark hair was cropped close to his scalp and his eyes scanned his notes.

At a desk across from him, a slim blonde read a paperback book with enough blood and guts on the cover to make Annalise's stomach churn. Annalise couldn't figure out why both of them were using paper instead of their terminals on their desks. *Were there cuts in the budget?* Then again, they may have forgotten what a terminal looked like with the amount of things clustering their workspace.

The woman lowered the book and rose from her seat with the grace of a panther. Her wheat-coloured bob with red highlights hugged her oval face. She studied everyone with curiosity.

Their eyes met, and Annalise knew she was a *flare*. Their genetic trait was crimson irises and an ability to read and induce emotions. They were the rarest of the modded, even rarer in a Police Department since they preferred to stay secluded. Some even ended their lives early if they were unable to control their abilities.

“The new guys are here,” she announced, sounding bored.

The man at the desk glanced up from his paperwork. He tossed his file aside and walked over. The material of his grey shirt was stretched around his biceps and chest. His body was bigger and broader than Mavel's, although their height remained the same.

“I'm Jamen,” he said, offering his hand. “And this is my partner, Calla.”

Mavel shook hands with them.

Annalise studied the woman. She was pretty, but not *alabaster*-beautiful. Her willowy form seemed almost fragile, and Annalise knew too well she wouldn't have been allowed into the Department if she didn't pass all the stamina and strength tests. *What more could she be hiding?*

Rios scratched his head and flopped into a chair by the window. “Guess I better start on my report.”

“Did Chief already assign you to the Landon's case?” Jamen asked.

“Yeah, I've been awake all night looking through the CCTV footage. The finale of it is missing for some reason,” Rios replied.

“Missing?” Calla asked, curiosity lacing her voice.

Rios winked. “Sorry, luv, the rest is on a need-to-know basis. Chief doesn't want me spilling the beans to everyone. Same goes for you, Des, mouth zipped about this one.”

“I believe our Chief said that to you personally,” Des replied with a cocky smile and took her place at the desk across from him.

Annalise guessed the last two empty desks belonged to her and Mavel, or they would if she managed to get past everyone. “Mavel—”

He met her gaze, and they brushed past Jamen and Calla. They headed for what seemed to be the Chief's office at the back. Lifting her hand in the air, her heart kicked into another nervous dance only, this time, it had nothing to do with Mavel being next to her. Drawing in a steadying breath, she knocked on the glass.

A rumbling voice ordered for her to enter.

They inched inside and waited for the man on the other side to finish his call. Upon closer inspection, Annalise noted he was in his fifties. Chief Kevin Sunderland sat behind a desk too small for his generous weight. The buttons of his snug pink shirt stretched over his belly.

He finished his call by tapping his wrist comms and lifted his piercing pale-blue eyes to meet hers. “I take it you're Annalise? Great, I'll skip the tutorial stage as I expect the Academy had taught you enough to handle minor cases. You'll be assessed by Jamen for the duration of this case.” With his chubby fingers, Chief handed her a digital tablet he had laying on his desk. “This is your case zero, Storm. It'll be your test to see if you truly fit into this division.”

She stared at him in disbelief. In her hands, she already held a case. Just how unorthodox was the HPD? Usually, new detectives and officers had to shadow their seniors for three to six months, depending on the department, prior to being allowed to lead a case.

“But—”

“What are you standing around for? Get moving and talk to your superior.” Chief huffed and dismissed them with a flick of his hand.

“Understood,” she mumbled and walked out of his office, dumbfounded.

Calla glided over. “He's a charmer, I know. Well, don't look so worried. If you have any questions regarding the procedure, I'm willing to help.”

“Thanks.”

“But, I have a condition...”

“Don't do it,” Rios shouted from his desk. He was already reclining as far as the seat would let him with a purple eye mask covering half of his face.

Calla grinned like a mischievous little girl. “All I want is to get any and every image of the dead you find. Disassembled bodies are fine, too. The more blood the better.”

Annalise grimaced. *Why would anyone willingly want to stare at those things?* During her second year at the Academy, they had to study Criminology and were forced to assess images of crime scenes. The labs had vents through which a gas was pumped to simulate the smells. The majority of the students brought their own bags to puke into. Those who didn't, well, the cleaners had a lot to deal with at the end of each session.

Mavel nudged her side. “We should speak to Jamen.”

“Yes, we should.”

Trying her best to avoid touching any of the paperwork, she beamed at her superior and offered him the tablet. “This is the case we are going to work on together. Is there anything I need before we head out?”

Jamen mumbled something and tossed his case file atop of the wobbly pile. “Follow me. I have to acquaint you with AID and then we can get your gun issued.”

Annalise frowned. “AID?”

As Jamen marched towards the door, he said, “It's short for Artificial Intelligence of Divinity. We use it to upload data to the DPD servers when we're on the go. It can record witness statements as well as be your personal time manager.”

She hastened her steps to try to match his strides. Mavel, on the other hand, had no trouble keeping up.

They headed down the corridor, and Jamen said, “AID organises your cases by updating them. If you want to access any cases from the past,

you will need to do so from here. So, outside of the headquarters, you only have access to the current case until Chief closes it or sends it to someone else.” Jamen faced her. “Am I talking too fast?”

Annalise shook her head, and they filed into a lift.

“Good”—he pressed the 'F-1' button on the panel—“because I don't like repeating myself.”

2

AID

When the lift arrived on the F-1 level, they were met with a cream corridor that spanned the length of the building.

“Where are we?” Annalise asked, studying the glass doors on either side of them.

Jamen glanced over his shoulder, not bothering to slow his hurried strides. “The underground level is an afterthought of the officials. Half of them wanted a large car park to fit anti-riot vans and motorcycles, the others claimed we needed room for data storage and an armoury. So, on the right, you can find the former and, on the left, the latter.”

He came to a stop and placed his palm on a glass door. The scanner built into the surface lit up and the door unlocked. “As a newbie, your access will be restricted. If you need any data you can’t access from your terminal or your wrist comms, you’ll have to ask me to help you retrieve it.”

Marching after her superior, Annalise came face to face with the huge space full of weapons, modified wrist comms, and other tech she'd never seen till now. Next to her, Mavel observed everything with wide eyes.

Without delay, Jamen strode to the crystal shelves and selected a pistol along with an add-on to the wrist communications device. He placed both of them on the oval table in the centre of the room and waved for them to join him.

Annalise held her breath as she edged closer. She focused on the black steel frame of the pistol. "Is that mine?"

"Yes. The modified SIG PT226 has nine-millimetre bullets pumped with a paralyzer. One shot neutralises the suspect and two shots kill." Jamen rested his palms against the reflecting surface of the crystal table. His eyes locked with Mavel's. "Against *beasts*, I suggest two bullets. You won't survive otherwise."

Mavel set his jaw. "I will keep her safe."

Raising his brow, an unnerving smile stretched Jamen's lips. "Out there, although it seems like a peaceful little city, dark things happen—things that can leave scars deeper than an amputated limb. You won't always be by her side. Instead of saying you'll protect her, make sure you don't get carried away. After all, you can turn at any moment."

Annalise's fingers curled into fists at her sides. Anger reverberated through her. As she readied her protest, Mavel said, "Then I will do just that."

"Good to have you both on board." Jamen slapped him on the shoulder. Even now, Annalise couldn't pinpoint Jamen's true demeanour.

The detective's attention returned to her, and he pointed to the wrist comms add-on on the table. "Put it on."

Doing as she was told, Annalise secured it around her right wrist, connecting it to her normal comms. The metal bands locked in place and the screen blinked on. A sudden prick on her skin made her wince.

“What was that?” she asked.

“A DNA sample. The comms need it to identify the officer,” Jamen replied.

The device finished processing the data and a holographic image of a young girl in a frilly, knee-length dress appeared on top of the display. She smiled at Annalise. “Hello, Detective Storm. I am A.I.D., an Artificial Intelligence of Divinity. Please tell me the seven digit code on your selected service weapon.”

Jamen handed her the SIG.

Forced to put away the digital tablet the Chief had given her, she accepted the gun. The familiar heaviness in her hand made her smile. She located the serial number on the barrel of the gun and read it out loud.

“Voice activation and registration confirmed. Welcome to Divinity PD, Detective,” the AI said in a pleasant, child-like voice and disappeared.

The SIG lit with a blue line along the top, causing her to frown.

“When it’s blue,” Jamen said, “it means you are the correct user. Hand it over to your *beast* for a second.”

Annalise passed the pistol to Mavel and the light immediately turned red. The AI hologram reappeared on top of the wrist comms with a sour expression. “It appears your weapon may be compromised. All trigger actions have been locked. Would you like me to fill out the necessary documentation for retrieval or issue a new one?”

“Tell her no,” Jamen said.

Annalise studied the little girl. “No, it’s alright.”

“Understood,” AID said and vanished.

Mavel handed her the SIG back. “Am I to receive one as well?”

The detective shook his head. “Modded are not trusted with police tech.”

“Then how is he supposed to defend himself if we’re attacked?”

Jamen shoved his hands in his pockets. “Simple answer? Use his abilities. Now then”—he headed for the door—“you have your case. You don’t need to carry the tablet anymore. AID has downloaded the relevant data the moment your identification was complete.”

“If we have an AI doing all the information storage and retrieval, why are you still using paper documentation?”

“Because I don’t trust technology,” Jamen said. “Let’s head to my favourite place in this hellhole—the garage.”



Annalise was not disappointed when they crossed the corridor and entered one of the many car parks under the DPD. According to Jamen, each department had their vehicle tailored for them. So, when they passed the SUVs, the motorcycles, and the anti-riot vans, disappointment filled her. Heading to the far end of the parking garage, she contemplated what the vehicles for the HPD could be.

They came to a stop in front of the two-seater cars with barely any legroom. She raised a questioning brow at Mavel who cleared his throat in an attempt to hold in his laughter. Annalise pursed her lips. Just how low was the budget for her department?

Jamen strode over to one of the navy-and-black vehicles. “This one is yours. Take the directions AID gives you to get to the crime scene. Calla and I will join you shortly.”

She said nothing as she climbed into the car, taking the driver’s seat.

Jamen headed back towards the entrance, and she faced Mavel. “What do you think?”

“About the car or the whole intervention?”

Annalise smiled. “The whole thing.”

“I don’t trust him and his *flare*. If I had a choice, I would trust that flirt, Rios, over this man.”

Placing her hands on the steering wheel, she weighed his words in her mind.

Her wrist comms blinked on, and the AI’s voice filled the speakers in the car. “Service vehicle registration complete. Where would you like to be directed to, Detective?”

“The crime scene, please.”

“Acknowledged. Setting course for the Bronze District. Would you like anything else?” AID asked, and the small screen on the dashboard displayed the directions.

“Ask her about the case,” Mavel said.

Annalise turned on the engine and repeated the query.

“The victim is Robert Fern. Sex: male. Age: forty-two. DNA analysis upon birth confirmed pureblood status. Current residence registered in the Bronze District. The residents: Robert Fern, Terry Fern, Ashley Fern, Keira Fern, and a female *beast servant*, Leila Green. The education database confirms the attendance of the victim’s children at St. John’s in the Silver District.”

Annalise analysed Leila’s name. Her surname indicated she was born in the Green District, just like Mavel. Not the most pleasant of them all, especially when it was mostly the modded who were permitted to reside there. No pureblood would ever consider staying there willingly. Even the poorest of the purebloods remained in Bronze, at least, until they broke the law and were banished to live among the modded. She heard horror stories about that district, but not as many as she heard about the Red and Black Districts.

“Any suspects?” Annalise asked as they left the car park and drove down the illuminated tunnel.

“The most recent report from the officers on-site indicates that Leila Green is the perpetrator. The *beast* was reported missing by Terry Fern this morning,” AID replied.

“Think she did it and ran?” Mavel enquired.

“It’s plausible if their relationship was bad, but what I don’t get is how a family from Bronze could afford a school in Silver.”

“It’s not uncommon for purebloods to work two jobs nowadays. Some of them force a couple of jobs onto their *servants* to bring in the credits.”

It made sense. There was no law stating the *servants* had to be just maids or companions to their owner. Yet, if the *beast* worked too hard, their mental state would deteriorate. They could become possessed and take out their master. *Is that what happened here?*

Annalise drove in silence. The only interruptions were from AID informing her of the turns to make. They passed the stone gate at the district bridging point and headed further west. Her father never considered people in Bronze to hold any importance. Residents of this district were believed to be the lower class and would rarely meet anyone from Golden.

She observed the area. The houses here were huddled together. Most of the gardens were lined with rubbish and waste bins awaiting an overdue collection. Some could still afford to build a second floor, it seemed.

Ten minutes later, Annalise killed the engine at Lower Deston Street. Twenty small bungalows lined the road. For once, she was happy she wasn’t driving her usual car because, no matter how she looked at it, her vehicle would not fit without blocking the oncoming traffic.

She climbed out and stretched. Ahead of them, the crime scene was isolated. Four police officers circled the area, keeping the curious bystanders at bay.

Annalise waited for Mavel to join her. They walked to the seven-foot-tall holo-barrier. Sucking in a nervous breath, she steadied her nerves and plastered a smile on her face. She showed her badge to the officer on duty. "I am Detective Annalise Storm with the HPD and this is my *beast*, Mavel. We are here to assess the situation."

Pity flashed in the young officer's eyes. "Go ahead. Hope you haven't had breakfast yet."

Her smile faltered as she passed through the barrier. A small group of people rushed about inside. The Crime Scene Unit was already present. Their tiny mechanical drones searched the untrimmed grass for evidence and collected samples.

Annalise focused on the small beech tree in the centre of the lawn. The leaves held a reddish tint even though it was only spring. Vine-like pink matter hung from the branches. With the next breath, the smell of decomposing meat hit her. The sight in front of her had nothing to do with poor decoration choice. Someone's intestines were suspended on the tree.

Bile climbed her throat, and she twirled on the spot, attempting to suppress her nausea.

"Are you alright?" Mavel asked.

She bobbed her head. "Yeah, fine, just getting used to...the new perfume."

"Should we wait for your superior to arrive?"

"Are you the new detective?" someone asked.

Swallowing, Annalise forced a smile and looked at the advancing older man. A pair of blue plastic coveralls wrapped every inch of him except for his balding head. He smirked at her. "Enjoying the view?"

"Yeah, just like one of those early post-war paintings you see in holo-museums."

"You have good taste in art, I'll give you that." He motioned for them to follow. The man led the way to an SUV parked on the lawn near the

front door of the bungalow and handed out two sets of coveralls. “Put these on. We don’t want your pristine clothes to get dirty.”

“Do you have a problem with me, mister?”

He pushed his half frame glasses up to the bridge of his crooked nose. “Name’s Clive Hopps. I am the Chief Medical Examiner for DPD, little lady. And no, no problem at all other than the fact that Kevin sent me a damn newbie to babysit.”

Mavel let out a low growl, and she moved in front of him. “I apologise for my *servant*, he doesn’t like it when pretentious old men let bullshit flow out of their mouths.”

Clive observed her with a pair of piercing grey eyes from behind his thick lenses. “I like your fire, kid. It might come in handy if you ever solve a case without your father’s influence.”

Chief Medical Examiner or not, he had no right to disrespect her the way he did in front of all these officers who had tuned in to watch the show. She squared her shoulders and glared at Clive. “This may be my first case, Hopps, but I will give it my best shot. I expect you to get your oversized head out of your ass long enough to tell me about the victim, so I can start investigating. And, whether I will be using my father’s influence or not is of no concern to an M.E.”

His brows shot up, and Clive flashed a lazy smile. “Good to know you don’t need me to wipe your snot for you. I’ll be where the vic is. Meet me there after you change.”

When Clive left, all energy drained from her body. Her legs grew weak, but she would be damned if she appeared anything other than strong to any of these judgemental pricks. She let her annoyance escape with a prolonged sigh.

“You did well,” Mavel said.

“This is not what I expected,” she replied, unfolding her coveralls. “At the Academy, they taught tolerance and patience. This—”

He patted her on the shoulder. “Lives were not on the line there. The M.E. seems like my instructors—always eager to get through cases before more bodies turn up.”

“You might be right.”

Her superior passed through the holo-barrier with his *flare* and came over.

“Don’t bother with those,” Jamen said. “We don’t have all day, and it’s best to take a look at the victim’s body as soon as possible.”

Annalise studied the coveralls. One of her legs was already inside. She grumbled a curse and threw them back in the SUV.

Mavel trailed behind her as they made their way over to Clive who bent over the body with his digital tablet in hand.

“Jamen, Calla, breaking the rules as always.” Clive’s disapproving eyes landed on Annalise. “...And teaching the newbie the same, I see.”

“Quit it with the compliments, Clive. What did you find?” Jamen snapped.

Leaning over, Calla whispered into Annalise’s ear. “Doesn’t this view make you want to have a nice, rare steak?”

Annalise cringed and ignored her comment. The remains on the plastic sheet were not something she considered being a *body* of Robert Fern. A severed head lay separate from the torso with both glazed-over eyes wide open, staring ahead at nothing in particular. What used to be called hair was glued to the victim’s scalp with his drying blood. Half of the upper body had its intestines hanging from the tree. She tried not to think about the remains as she bent down to examine the victim with a gloved hand.

The M.E. drew in a shallow breath and turned on the digital tablet. “The basic information about the victim you should already know from our early report. The abdominal and *latissimus dorsi* muscle tissues were torn at the time when he was...pulled apart. Small and large intestines were removed antemortem and strung up on the tree. I’m guessing, at

some point, some of the remains fell on the ground, leaving us with a sanguine swing.” Clive chuckled. When no one else found it funny, he cleared his throat. “The vic’s lower body is yet to be recovered. It would be best to send someone to the marshlands outside the city to do a search.”

“Why the marsh?” Annalise asked.

Clive knelt next to her and used his stylus to poke the victim’s hair. Lifting a plant with bluish-green leaves, he said, “This is *phragmites australis*, commonly known as reed grass. It’s usually found in the marshland beyond the slums.”

“The doctor is right, I can smell the marsh water on him,” Mavel added.

“So, he didn’t die here?” Annalise asked.

Clive smirked. “You catch on quick. There might be hope for you yet.”

Ignoring the biting remark, she turned to Jamen who gave a nod of approval and said, “I’ll ask a few officers to do a search for the remains.” He diverted his attention to Clive. “You got anything else?”

“Won’t know till I get the body to the lab.” The M.E. shrugged. “With the budget cuts, the tech on the go is rubbish.”

Calla rolled her eyes. “We don’t have time for your boring speeches about the budget. If that’s everything, can I take a few pictures of my own?”

Clive paled. “You’re a strange woman.”

She grinned and retrieved a micro camera from her back pocket. The *flare* pointed it at the body and took some close-ups of the remains.

Annalise walked over to Jamen. “We’re going to take a look inside the house.”

“Be my guest,” he replied.

With Mavel at her side, she crossed the lawn to the bungalow. A young officer with blonde hair opened the door for her, and they entered the dull property.

Mavel took her hand, taking charge of leading her into the first room on the right. He paused in the middle of the living room and sucked in a breath. “I can smell her—the victim’s *beast*. Her trail is faint. She couldn’t have been here in the last few days.”

“Maybe she waited for him outside and attacked when he was returning from work.”

“An escaped *servant* is a rogue. The victim or his spouse would have reported her.”

Annalise studied the rest of the living room. There wasn’t a single speck of dust on the book shelves. Whoever lived here took care of their possessions. The furniture seemed dated and worn around the edges. *Perhaps they paid everything they had for their kids’ school?*

She lifted a family photo off the mantelpiece. Two women stood on either side of a younger version of Robert. One was a tall, lean brunette with golden eyes—his *beast*, Leila. The other woman had a tired smile on her face. Her platinum hair had been tied into a braid that rested on her right shoulder. In front of the adults, two young girls grinned. They looked like an average family. *What went wrong?*

“Annalise, come here,” Mavel called out.

Following his voice, she entered the master bedroom.

He drew the sheets close to his nose and sniffed them. “Robert wasn’t just sleeping with his wife...”

“What do you mean?”

“The *beast*’s scent is all over these sheets. It’s stronger in here than in the living room.”

Annalise gasped. “If anyone found out he was fornicating with his *beast*, he would have been sent to the slums and his kids kicked out from Silver.”

Mavel's expression turned grim. "It's as you say."

3

FIRST INTERVIEW

Unable to help herself, Annalise paced the length of the HPD office.

Mavel set aside his digital tablet and sighed. “You will wear the floor down if you keep at it.”

“I don’t like it when people are late.” She checked her wrist comms again.

“No one does, princess.”

“Shouldn’t it be little princess?” Rios added, sliding his arm around her waist.

Annalise’s ears burned. She was a joke to him, to everyone here. Why was she in the HPD to begin with? Allowing her annoyance to rule her, she elbowed Rios in the gut with some force.

Amusement reflected in the detective’s grey eyes, and he groaned in mock pain. “That hurt...”

“Be glad I didn’t file a complaint for sexual harassment,” Annalise snapped and collapsed into her seat.

“The more I get to know you, the more you grow in here.” Rios pointed to his heart with a lopsided grin.

Rolling her eyes, she tapped the keyboard built into her desk. After entering her code, the terminal screen flicked to life. Another glance at the time confirmed it again—Terry Fern was thirty-three minutes late for her statement. Annalise grumbled a curse under her breath.

“Excuse me, is this the Possession Department?” a barely audible voice came from the doorway.

Annalise straightened her shirt. “Yes, it is. Are you Mrs Fern?”

The woman inclined her head. She looked almost exactly the same as she did in the photo—drained and unhappy. Dark half-moons rimmed her sunken cerulean eyes which were devoid of life. If she was lying motionless on the ground in the Green District’s alley, Annalise doubted she would be able to tell her apart from a corpse.

Annalise pulled up a chair for their visitor. “Please, take a seat.”

“I’ll be hard at work. Call if you need me,” Rios added, leaving for the tiny canteen next to their Chief’s office.

Mrs Fern sat down. “Thank you.”

Not wasting another second, Annalise launched a testimony application, and the AI’s holo-projection appeared above her desk.

“Welcome, Detective, to the reporting system. May I have the details of the citizen providing the statement?” AID asked.

She faced the victim’s wife. “Could you tell me your full details, Mrs Fern?”

“Just call me Terry, my name... No, *his* name only brings me sorrow.”

Annalise glanced at Mavel who shared the same surprise. She managed a smile.

“My name is Terry Fern.” She sucked in a lengthy breath and quoted her citizen ID number.

“Data acknowledged. Recording commencing...”

Annalise rubbed her sweat-tinged hands on her trousers. This was her first proper interview as a detective. “As his wife, I understand this is a tough time for you.”

Terry clung to her purse as something fledged behind her soul-less eyes. “A tough time?” She scoffed. “My husband is dead. His mangled remains are all over our neighbourhood! God knows what the neighbours will think of us now. His *beast* is in the wind, and my children have to leave their school in Silver. How could he do such a thing to me? How?” She grabbed Annalise’s wrist, squeezing it with her bony fingers.

Annalise winced, and Mavel appeared at her side. A low growl sounded from his throat. When she mouthed a “don’t”, he pressed his lips into a thin line and stepped back.

“Mrs Fe—Terry, I’m sorry about your circumstance, but could you please remove your hand? I don’t know if I can control my partner if you don’t.”

Terry blanched and gingerly pulled back. “My apologies, I didn’t—”

“It’s fine.” Annalise shot Terry her most professional Storm smile—a smile she had perfected while her parents paraded her in front of their high society friends.

Terry stared at her quivering hands in her lap. “Robert wasn’t a bad man, and Leila wasn’t a terrible *servant*. I cared for both of them with all my heart. It only pains me to know that she did such a terrible thing to our family.”

Annalise leant in. “Are you saying she did it?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Who else, other than a possessed *beast*, could do that to a person?”

“So, you didn’t see her do it,” Mavel said with distaste.

Terry rubbed the back of her neck. “No, not personally.”

“Then your accusations are baseless,” he retorted.

The woman jumped out of her seat with her finger pointed at Mavel's chest. She was going from hot to cold quicker than the hydrogen-powered trains moved between the cities. "It's not baseless." Her voice rose. "That shrew was sleeping with him. She ruined my family, everything we have worked for. H-how is she not guilty?"

Annalise rubbed her eyes. This argument was getting them nowhere. "Mavel, get us some coffee."

He grumbled something under his breath as he ambled towards the canteen.

"Now, Terry, could you please take a seat so we can start from beginning..." Annalise waited for her to sit back down. "When was the last time you saw your husband?"

Terry scratched her palm. "Two days ago. I told him to leave."

"May I ask why?"

"No, you may not!" For a long minute, the widow seemed torn. She stared at her trembling hands and said, "We had a fight."

That's not surprising. "What did you fight about?"

"Some domestic stuff. He was at the breaking point because Leila had run off," Terry said.

Annalise scrunched her brows. "A contracted *beast* just took off and neither of you reported this?"

"He spent his nights with her," she hissed. "Don't you think if the police came to investigate, they wouldn't figure it out? It would ruin us. It already ruined us." Terry slung her purse strap over her shoulder and stood. "I can't do this, I'm sorry."

By the time Annalise reached out, the woman had run out of the office. She contemplated chasing after her but chose against it. Robert's wife needed to adjust.

Massaging her temples, she said, "AID...?"

The AI's hologram reappeared. "Yes, Detective?"

"Did you get that?"

“Of course. Would you like me to finish the recording?”

“Please do.” Annalise buried her face in her hands. It was only the afternoon, and she already wanted to return home and sleep for a century.

Mavel placed a mug of steaming coffee in front of her. “She seemed like a bright ray of sunshine.”

Shaking her head, she tried to hide her disapproval. “I can understand her. The victim put her through a lot before he passed.”

He sat on the edge of her desk with a cup in hand. “If I was Robert and had to go back home to *that*, I would end up in the Red District every night.”

“Well thank heavens he had a *beast* at his beck and call,” Rios piped in.

Mavel rolled his eyes and brushed past him.

“Where is Des?” Annalise scanned the office. “I haven’t seen her since this morning.”

Rios tapped his nose and grinned mischievously. “Need-to-know basis, but if there’s anything you want to ask about me, I’m free to whisper the filthy details right into your ear.”

She grimaced. That wasn’t happening anytime soon. Before she had a chance to tell him to go to hell, her wrist comms beeped. She checked the display. A small message popped up, stating the address where their victim worked.

“Looks like AID found Robert’s work address. I have to verify this with Jamen,” she said, grabbing her jacket.

“I’m going to miss you.” Rios waved, sauntering back to his desk.



With her superior’s approval, they went ahead to check out the location. This was her first time in the Green. People from other

districts rarely visited the dirt-filled streets. The stench of ammonia mixed with cheap smokes was only bearable when something was smuggled, sold, or they were simply forced to work alongside the modded *workers*.

The *workers* had the freedom of doing whatever they wanted with their free time, unlike the *servants* who had to ask for permission from their owner. But if anything happened to one of them, Divinity PD wouldn't lift a finger. To purebloods, they were the filth that occupied factories and fields. It was why Annalise never came here. Purebloods were not welcome in the Green, especially if they had a badge.

Full of uncertainty, she tapped her wrist comms and read the address again. She studied the imposing red-brick factory. All four chimneys expelled steam that merged with the heavy grey clouds above.

Mavel stopped her in her tracks. "This place is dangerous. Don't leave my sight."

His warm touch sent pleasant tingles down her spine. She brushed him off to keep him from noticing the effect he had on her. "I can take care of myself."

He blocked her path. "This is not a request, Annalise. These people don't like police snooping around in their territory."

The serious expression on his face removed the upturning of the corners of his mouth she had come to love. He rarely defied her and, if he did, it was for a good reason. Looking past him, her nerves returned tenfold.

"Then, by all means, lead the way."

Mavel said nothing. They edged closer to the two large iron doors. The green paint was peeling and the rust showed beneath. Another decade and this door would fall apart at the softest punch.

Annalise lifted her badge to the camera and the door on her left unlocked. *At least, they let the police in.*

Her partner led the way. Since humanity ran out of petroleum sometime in the mid-twenty-second century, this factory produced items out of synthesised plastic compounds. Rows of different workstations and conveyor belts were arranged on the floor below them. The sound of heavy machinery and men shouting orders to each other filled the grand space.

She scanned them. Everyone wore grey coveralls. Some seemed unwashed with the amount of grime and dirt clinging to their attire and faces. With one glance, she could tell the majority of the workers were *beasts*. Their curious stares followed her as she got closer to what appeared to be the manager's office.

A short, balding man stumbled out of the doorway. His chubby fingers wiped at the coffee stain on his shirt, and he cursed. Once his attention settled on them, he gave her a sleazy smile, which made her skin crawl.

"Detective! It's quite an honour to have an officer of the law come here, 'specially when you don't seem to care unless someone from another district dies... But, do tell me, what can I do for you?"

"Are you the manager?" Annalise asked, her voice unwavering.

He licked his cracked lips. "Yeah, I am. Edgar Crook at your service."

"Mr Crook, we are looking into the death of Robert Fern. Our information tells us that he was an employee here."

Edgar's gaze raked over her from head to toe as if trying to make her clothes become see-through. Fighting the urge to shoot him with a tranquillizer, she remained in place.

"He did work here, yeah. Too bad about poor Robert, he was a good man and worked hard as my assistant." Edgar outstretched his hand towards Annalise.

Mavel blocked the manager's offered greeting.

"Were you close?" she asked.

Edgar stuck his pinkie in his ear, twisting it. “Not really. He came, did the job, and left like everyone else.”

“Then, would you mind if we have a look around?”

The manager’s lips stretched into an unpleasant smile. “Of course, I am always eager to help the DPD. Wait here. I’ll call someone to give you a grand tour of the facilities.” He waddled back into the office.

Tension left her shoulders, and she whispered, “What a creep.”

Edgar peered from behind the door. “Samson will be here in a minute.”

The manager wasn’t kidding. Exactly sixty seconds later, a *beast* climbed the steps, two at a time, and rushed to their side. He was slightly taller than Mavel, and his tanned skin highlighted the silver in his irises.

“Give the lady and her dog a tour, will you?” the manager ordered.

Annalise held her tongue, knowing full well defending Mavel would only get this freely offered excursion cancelled. Left without a choice, she counted to ten in her head to soothe the burning need to punch someone—preferably the manager—in the face.

“Follow me,” Samson said in a low drone and folded his greasy black hair behind his ears.

Trying to keep up with the *beast’s* stride, she hurried her steps. Next to her, she could feel Mavel’s body tensing and relaxing. It was as if he was unsure whether they were in danger or not.

“Did you know Robert Fern?” Annalise asked.

“Yes, a good man and all that.”

“You sound like you’re parroting exactly what your manager said.”

Samson stopped, and his lips twitched upwards. “I do, don’t I?”

They descended a set of stairs to the lower floor. Noisy machines hurt her eardrums, so she had to strain to hear the workers. The hairs on the back of her neck stood to attention. Without having to look up, she knew that every person in the room was watching them.

“What was he really like?” Mavel asked.

All humour fled Samson's face. "He was a pureblood and because of that, he was the assistant manager. He came in early, did his job, and left on time. Robert didn't complain, so we tolerated him as we tolerate the fat arse upstairs."

Annalise pressed the record button on her wrist comms. "Did Robert have any enemies here?"

Samson chuckled. "Any pureblood in the Green is an unwelcomed guest. What do you think?"

"Don't be rude to her," Mavel said through gritted teeth.

Almost immediately, the remaining chatter stopped. With one glance, Annalise knew they were in trouble.

4

RED DISTRICT

Mavel kept his attention on Samson as he stepped in his way. Instead of feeling protected, Annalise's annoyance reared its head.

She pushed past him. "Let's stop the pissing contest, guys. We're here to investigate a murder."

"A murder of a *pureblood*," Samson corrected. "No one here gives two credits about them!"

She snorted. That was the first honest answer from his big mouth since their initial meeting. She gave the workers another brief once-over, noting some men were glaring their way. There had to be a way to reduce the tension. She folded her arms. "It's a murder, nonetheless. Or do you support such antics?"

Samson sneered. "Of course not, Detective."

"Then answer my questions or Mavel will drag you to the station."

Mavel cracked his knuckles. "It would be my pleasure."

"Fine!"

“Did Robert have any enemies here?” Annalise asked.

The *beast* shook his head. “I don’t know. No.”

“Is it a ‘no’ or you ‘don’t know?’”

Samson rolled his eyes. “It’s a no. No one here would dare harm a precious pureblood.”

Her next question came to mind. It didn’t seem likely, but she asked anyway. “Did he have any friends?”

The *worker* scratched his head. “Doubt they were pals, but he was hanging out with Todd for a few days.”

“Todd who? And where can we find him?” Mavel asked.

“Todd Green is the new part-timer. He’s off for a couple of days. As far as I know, he usually hangs out in the Red District.”

Annalise grimaced. Red District was labelled as such for a reason. It, along with Black, was in the outer slums. If anyone wanted a shady deal done, they went to the underground groups in Black located in the southernmost part of Divinity. Whereas, if they fancied different kinds of uncensored pleasures not permitted elsewhere, they visited Red in the north.

She found Mavel eyeing her with interest. “What?”

“While you were daydreaming, I got the name and address of the club he frequents. Shall we return to the office?”

Annalise scanned the factory for Samson. He was already retreating to his workstation. She groaned. She had to get her head out of the clouds. This case was going to launch her career path in the HPD. They couldn’t go back empty-handed.

She deactivated the recording on her wrist comms. “Let’s visit the Red District.”

Mavel’s eyes widened. “Annalise, we’ll be breaking the rules of conduct if we head there without backup.”

“We can’t return with nothing. You’ve seen the way Chief looked at me this morning.” She turned and scaled the metal stairs. “We need a solid lead.”

“Anna—”

“I’ll take the blame if it goes wrong.”

Once they left the factory, Mavel grabbed her hand, jerking her aside. He pressed her against their car and eyed her with worry. “This is not a game.”

“I know it’s not.” He was too close for her liking. Near enough that if she reached up, she could pull him in for a kiss. She avoided his stare. There was no way that would happen.

“Anna, please don’t do this.” His voice cracked, and she looked at him.

In his eyes, she saw her reflection which reminded her of how wrong her feelings for him were. After all, they could never be together. Her life, her family, everyone she cared about would suffer because of it. With an aching heart, she locked away any unwelcome wishes his presence stirred in her.

“This is an order, Mavel. We are going to the Red District.”

His warmth vanished as he took a step back. “As per your word, *mistress*, I will obey.”



Stormy clouds hung over their heads, covering what could have been a beautiful sunset. Darkness crept over the city as they drove north through the straggly streets of the Green District and towards the Red.

Mavel parked the car a few blocks from their destination. Police were not welcome in the Red either. Over the years, she had read news reports of over two dozen officers going missing after entering this part

of the slums. Their bodies were never recovered and random searches turned up nothing.

“My family’s home is nearby. We should get changed there,” Mavel offered.

She glanced at her clothes. “What’s wrong with this?”

He nodded to the stone archway ahead. “Even a blind man would know you’re a cop the instant you step over that line.”

She couldn’t contain the blush creeping up to her ears when she saw colourful graffiti of topless women painted on the concrete walls. Beyond the audacious art, red roofs peeked out, indicating the beginning of the district bustling with life and neon lights.

Mavel didn’t wait for her response and sauntered ahead. For every stride he took, she had to take two. He still seemed mad about her earlier command.

“Slow down.”

“Why not order me to carry you, princess?”

It struck a chord. She tried kicking him, but he caught her leg. The heat from his hand seeped through the material, and her skin tingled where he touched her.

“Mavel...”

This was no time to play games. They were in the middle of the slums, and their goal hadn’t changed. Finding Robert’s co-worker in some shady club was her priority before heading to the office, hopefully, with something better than a boring statement.

He let go of her leg and strode ahead, slowing his pace enough for her to keep up.

“So, tell me about your family,” she said.

“You already know about them.”

Annalise nodded, trying to recall the details she had read in his dossier.

They rounded the corner, and he unlocked a gate to one of the terraced brown houses that were mashed together under a single grey roof. Of all the things to be kept tidy, the grass patches were populated with flowers and herbs. She knew Mavel loved gardening, but since they returned to living in Tower One, he could only keep his plants in ceramic pots.

He knocked on a beaten wooden door. After a drawn out minute, a woman in her late fifties opened it. Her silver irises were the same as Mavel's—weighed down by an emotion Annalise couldn't identify.

"Is everything alright, son? Who is this?" the woman asked.

Mavel cleared his throat, and Annalise gave her best professional smile. "I'm Annalise Storm."

"She's my boss, Mum."

"Oh," his mother said, letting them in. She ushered them into a cosy living room. Potted plants filled any free space by the window. A sizeable variety of cacti were arranged on her windowsill.

They sat on the sofa while his mother ran into the kitchen and returned with two glasses of water. She offered them their drinks.

"Sorry, I didn't think I'd have visitors," she said. "I'm Christine Green, nice to finally meet you."

Annalise gave a nervous smile. "Same."

Although this was most likely the long-awaited get-together between Mavel and Christine, Annalise sipped her drink, tasting the metal in the unfiltered water. She nudged her partner with her elbow.

"Mum, we aren't going to be here long. We just need a change of clothes to enter the Red District."

Christine's brows lifted a notch. "You and your owner want to..."

"No!" he protested with raised hands. "This is work related. We're looking for someone."

“Alright, come along then.” Walking out of the room, she added, “Mavel, go into your father’s room and pick out what you want. As for Miss Storm, my daughter’s clothes will fit you well.”

Annalise entered Mavel’s sister’s bedroom. Not a single thing seemed out of place.

Christine rounded the bed and pulled open the door to a large walk-in closet. The lights in the closet’s floor and ceiling blinked awake, and she set foot in it. With a tug on the handle, a rack of clothes glided out of the wall. For someone living in Green, this was quite an expensive piece of furniture.

“Don’t look so surprised, dear. My husband gets paid well in Silver. The only reason we live in the slums is because of the Segregation Act. As a *worker*, I can’t move into Silver to stay with him.”

Annalise’s heart squeezed. There was nothing she could say to lift the mood, so she remained silent. The restrictions were placed on the districts long ago. Although the Golden District had tall walls isolating it, other parts of the city were more accessible. Yet, if a *worker* was found in the Silver or Golden Districts, they would be severely punished. To this day, she still struggled to understand such logic, but it was the law she had to uphold. Law was what kept their society from erupting into another rebellion. Her brows furrowed. When did she start thinking like her father?

A pile of folded clothes landed in Annalise’s hands.

“Try these on,” Christine said and exited the room.

As she unfolded the material, Annalise’s frown deepened. The top layer, or so she assumed, had a low cut on the front, or was it the back? The only thing holding the two pieces of silky ebony material together was a chrome chain in the middle which prevented the wearer from indecent exposure in public. But, if that wasn’t the front, then her breasts would be on display. She stared at the items for another long minute with a growing headache.

In her mind, a tiny voice cheered her on to wear something so daring to see Mavel's reaction. Ignoring it, she set the fabric on the floor and studied the other piece of clothing in her hands. It was too big to be a belt and there were no buckles. Yet, it was too short to be anything else. Annalise placed it against her trousers. It didn't cover much. It couldn't possibly be a skirt.

"Are you ready, Anna?" Mavel asked.

She nearly jumped out of her skin. Biting her lip, she looked around. He had to be in the bedroom, but she couldn't place where. "I'm not sure if I can wear something so...revealing. The dress-code for social gatherings here must be quite different..."

"You wanted this, although it's still not too late to stop this farce."

He had a point. But, the idea of going into the Red District made her heart hammer against her chest with excitement. It doubled when Mavel stepped into the closet with her. His body blocked the entire entrance. He had changed into a green tank top that hugged his well-defined muscles, black cargo pants, and heavy boots. His shoulder-length hair was down, released from the restraints of a hairband.

Those impressive eyes held her captive. "Are you afraid to look like one of us?"

"It's not that. I just—"

He drew close, towering over her. This was the first time she felt intimidated by him and just as aroused. To keep her hands to herself, she clasped them behind her back.

"Just what?"

Annalise swallowed, trying to wet her suddenly dry throat. Her fingers gripped the skirt and heat climbed her neck, painting her cheeks rouge.

How am I going to tell him that I have no idea how to wear these clothes?

His stare carved holes in her. She had to say it. He was obviously annoyed with her lack of understanding.

“I don’t—” she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut. “I don’t know how to put these things on.”

Quiet fell over them, and she dared to steal a peek at him. He held his sides, desperately trying not to laugh out loud.

Annalise pursed her lips and swatted his shoulder. “This is not funny.”

“I can’t help it. You are too adorable,” he said, his laughter filling the cramped space.

So, maybe he wasn’t mad anymore. She readied another punch.

“Alright, princess. I’ll stop teasing you, but if you want me to dress you...”

“I swear I will cancel our contract if you add one more word!”

Mavel held up his hands and pointed to his lips with his left index finger. He mumbled something only she couldn’t understand what.

“What is it now?”

“I could ask my mum to help you.”

Beetroot-red, she pushed him out the closet. “I’ll do this myself.”

“Is something wrong?” Christine’s soft voice filtered into the room.

Annalise sighed. This was turning into a family gathering to see a pureblood squirm.

Mavel whispered something to his mother. When Christine let out a mirthful laugh, Annalise ran her hands over her face. *Great! I’m the entertainment for the night.*

Christine’s head reappeared in the closet with a playful smile. “Don’t worry, dear. That thing you are holding is a skirt and the other piece is a top you put on with the metal bit on the front. You can pick out any boots you like from the bottom shelf to match.”

Annalise decided not to stick around for too long and changed, adhering to the woman’s instructions. When she finished, the clothes felt...airy. There was so much skin showing, she would be arrested for indecent exposure in every other district.

Mavel waited for her in the living room. A smile lit his face as he chatted with his mother who handed him a sandwich.

Annalise put on a cream leather jacket she had discovered and shoved her badge in her pocket. Holding her pistol, she stared at it with longing. “Where can I put it?”

Mavel swallowed his food. “You can’t take it with you. They do a scan at every club prior to admission. If they find out you’re part of the DPD, and they will when they see that gun, then we will have a tough time getting out.”

Annalise retrieved her badge from her pocket. “What about this?”

“Leave it here.”

“That’s against procedure...”

Mavel arched a brow. “I believe we’re already past that.”

She shot him a glare but, nonetheless, took his advice, leaving everything with Christine. Soon after, doubts surfaced. Why was he so knowledgeable about the Red District? She wasn’t sure she wanted to hear the answer to her unspoken question and remained silent. After all, he had his free time and, as an owner, she had no right to pry.

They returned to the arched entrance of the Red District. Vibrant moonlight filtered through the thickening veil of clouds. As if to not discourage people seeking fun, three *alabasters* relaxed against the wall, all wearing similar clothing to hers.

Mavel pulled Annalise into an embrace, and she gasped.

“Hush,” he whispered into her ear. “We don’t want them to get even a whiff of authority out of you.”

Stilling, she clung to the material of his top. “Then what should I do?”

He ran his hands from her shoulders to her lower back. His touch warmed her through her jacket, and she buried her face in his chest to hide her embarrassment.

“Relax, princess. Remember, you are not an officer right now. You are a pureblood who wants to break the mould and loosen up.”

“Easier said than done!”

“It’s either that or we won’t find Todd. Are you willing to put your case on the line because you can’t let loose?”

She gaped at him. “I would never!”

He grinned, taking her hand. “Then pretend you are my lover for the night.”

Annalise couldn’t ignore the gymnastics her heart did at that thought.

5

MACABRE

The stretchy skirt relentlessly rode up so, for the millionth time, Annalise tugged it down. Passing through the Red District ungoverned by law made her cringe. The modded displayed their affection against buildings and in alleys dark enough even sunlight would not be able to irradiate them fully. Her mouth unhinged when she witnessed a woman kneeling in front of a short man with spiky hair. In a drunken stupor, he fumbled with his zip, and she diverted her attention elsewhere. She would never watch his weather reports again without grimacing.

Up ahead, a bright blue and red neon sign read “Macabre club”. She ran her shaking hand through her loose black hair.

Mavel wrapped his arm around her shoulders and bent down, saying, “It’s okay, Anna. I will take care of everything.”

She bit her lip. This had to be her most idiotic idea ever. She was dressed like a ‘modded whore’ as her father would put it. Because of the breeze, the horripilation on her legs wouldn’t go away. Perhaps the wind

was not the only problem she had. Stories of the Macabre club travelled all the way to the Golden District. Modded volunteered to participate in sexual intercourse with their clients to earn some money. During yawn-inducing socialite events, she overheard her father's acquaintances saying the modded would fornicate on the floors or on the ceilings, if they wanted to, with the help of pirated anti-gravity technology.

Mavel placed his hand on the small of her back and led her to the entrance. Above the entrance, a scanner activated. Blue lights ran the length of their bodies and the glass doors glided open.

Behind a reception desk stood a woman in a black crop top and a pair of leather pants. Long platinum dreads cascaded down her back with crimson and black strings woven in them. It was hard to tell what she was as dark sunglasses covered most of her face.

She grinned at both of them, and Annalise stilled.

"You seem nervous. Your first time?" the receptionist asked and licked her glossy lips.

"We just started dating, and she wanted to see the best club in the district," Mavel said.

The woman's dark brow rose. "This pureblood bundle of nerves wants to party here tonight?" She smirked. "Are you sure your parents won't be mad at you?"

Whatever discomfort Annalise suffered earlier had vanished. Balling her hands at her sides, she glared. "Are you going to let us in or what?"

Mavel pinched her side.

To hold on to her surprise, she forced a smile. "I'm sorry. It's my first time, and I don't know what to do," Annalise said in a sugar-sweet voice.

The woman rested her elbows on the table. She lowered her sunglasses, revealing a pair of assessing scarlet eyes. "What are you really doing here?"

Annalise swallowed. Seeing a single *flare* in one day was a rarity, but two? The odds of that were almost comical. Her brain scrambled for what she could do or say to diffuse the receptionist's caution. Without her badge's protective shielding against the *flare's* abilities, she could be in a lot of trouble.

Mavel let out a heaving breath, drawing the woman's attention to him. "I didn't want to do this, but..." He shifted closer to the desk. "I'm looking for Todd Green. He's a good-for-nothing squanderer who owes me money. Lent him over two grand and never seen him since. And this"—he pointed to Annalise—"is my girl." He lowered his voice. "She is a piece of work. Innocent and kind of fun to watch. Must be why I still keep her around."

Blushing, Annalise pretended to be interested in the holo-projection painting of a mountainside.

"That *basilisk* doesn't just owe you," the receptionist said. "He owes us, too. His tab is reaching the limit where I'll have to send 'The Butcher' to kindly help him remove a few essential organs. If you want to get your hands on him first, I can't complain if you cover his bill first."

"Done," Mavel said.

Annalise grasped his elbow. "You can't possibly—"

"Don't worry, love, I'll still buy you some pretty gems later."

And I will take those gems and shove them up your... Annalise stomped her foot. She fought the urge to grab him by the ear and drag him out of there. Fuming, she watched him place his wrist comms over the scanner built into the desk.

"I will deduct three thousand four hundred and seventy-five credits from you now. Can I have your voice confirmation?" the *flare* asked.

"I confirm," Mavel replied.

Annalise covered her gasp. That amount was nearly four months' salary for a *servant*. He was insane to hand over such an excessive sum to this place without confirming a refund with their Chief.

The transaction completed, and the *flare* grinned. "Please proceed to the left." As she said it, a mirror turned into a glass door, revealing a hallway. The lights on the floor lit like a runway. "And, I've included a bonus. Since you're new here, you get room 201 for free for an hour."

"We are only looking today," Mavel added.

She winked. "Don't worry, your girl will be ready for you in less than five."

Annalise frowned and proceeded inside, not wanting to spend another moment there. If she had her badge, she would be able to search for Todd without Mavel spending almost four thousand credits. Then again, if she did, she would be old news in this district.

As they advanced further into the corridor, her breathing grew laboured and strange heat spread throughout her body, tickling her insides. Breaths became pants, and she sought out the support of the nearest wall.

Mavel caught her and electricity shot through her.

"Are you alright, Anna?" he whispered, worry filling his voice.

She swatted at him, but he didn't let go. "What's wrong with me?"

He lifted her into his arms. The warmth of his breath on her neck began driving her insane. Annalise stifled a moan when he adjusted his hold, and they entered their assigned room.

"You need to stay here. The *flare* must have stimulated your sex drive," he said, seating her on the mattress.

His arms began retreating, and she grasped them, digging her nails into his forearms. It was as if her lifeline was disappearing. She couldn't let him abandon her.

"Don't go..."

With each passing second, her body became harder to control. The only thing she could think of was climbing on top of him and taking off the pesky clothes he wore. Her hand glided along his arm to his biceps, and she bit her lip.

Mavel grasped her shoulders, forcing another moan out of her. "Listen to me. Anna!"

His lips moved in a tantalising manner, keeping her attention and demanding to be kissed. Annalise closed her eyes, seeing images of his mouth on her. Her neck tingled as she visualised him sucking on it and trailing his tongue along her vulnerable throat.

"Kiss me..." She stole a peek at his distraught expression with hooded eyes.

"I have to go or you will regret this for the rest of your life!"

Annalise shook her head. She was too far gone with the need to have him and become one. But, he wasn't doing anything to help her!

A frustrated grunt escaped her. She jumped on him and encircled her legs around his waist.

Mavel tried to peel her off, but she clung to his neck and drew him in for a kiss.

When their lips locked, he let out a groan. She didn't know if he was enjoying it or not. She no longer cared. Stars exploded in her mind. His tongue entered her mouth, she was ready to give him anything and everything he wanted.

While his large hands roamed her back, Mavel's hot breath mingled with hers.

"Damn it, Anna. This isn't right," he said, tearing her off him.

She landed on the mattress and bounced on the spot. Her body screamed at the sudden loss of contact. She grabbed him once more. The fire in her burned brighter, making her feel like she was at the epicentre of an erupting volcano. She glanced at her attire. Her clothes were in the way. She needed to take them off.

Mavel grasped her face and held it a few inches away from his. “Fight it! You have to fight the drive or it will make you do something you don’t want to do.”

Annalise frowned. *Why was he still talking and not taking off his clothes? Isn’t it hot in here? Didn’t he say I was his lover? And, why were his damned clothes still on?*

“Please...touch me.” Once the soft words left her lips, he jerked his hands back as if she had burned him.

“Anna, fuck! You don’t know how hard this is for me,” he snapped. “I’m going to leave, I have to or—”

The thought of him departing made her launch off the bed and wrap her arms around his waist.

“This isn’t the time for this,” he said in a cracking voice. “We have a case to get on with. Remember work?”

She groaned. *Why is he going on about work when all I want is right in front of me?* Her hand slipped under his tank top, and she stroked his chest, enjoying the smoothness of his taut skin.

“You are not blaming me for this afterwards, you hear me?” he growled, his silver eyes reflecting the pink lights in the room.

He lifted her and carried her to the bed where he settled above her. His hot lips pressed against hers, and she moaned as his hand slipped between the folds of her top. Mavel’s hair fell forwards. His loose locks tickled her cheeks when he moved his head to deepen their kiss.

Annalise’s mind grew blank, and she revelled in everything he did to her. Every time his fingers brushed her breasts, her breath hitched. His heavy, warm body felt like a protective shield that would keep her safe from the world beyond. No more parents and their expectations. No more detectives who see her as someone lesser than them.

One moment he was on top, and the next he was lying beside her. Mavel kept their lips sealed and snaked his arm across her stomach. His

fingers glided downwards, brushed the skirt that was now around her waist, and travelled to her thighs.

He parted her legs, and her panic rid her of any arousal she had. Her eyes flew open. She pushed at him until his hand retreated, and he shifted away.

“Mavel, I—” she whispered.

Without another word, he marched out of the room.

The haze in her head cleared and her heartbeat stabilised. Never in her entire life had she forced him to do anything like this. *Servants* had to obey their owner’s commands. They either did so or lost the contract and became *workers*. With a breach on record, there was no possible way of getting another contract initiated.

“Mavel!”

His eyes remained focused on the purple carpet as he stuck his head back in the room. “Get your clothes sorted out, Annalise. We have to find Todd.”

Dumbfounded, she stared at the closing door. After being together for almost two decades, she lost one of her best friends because she couldn’t control her urges. Fighting the tears, she clambered off the mattress and rearranged her dishevelled outfit. No wonder he didn’t want to look at her. She was fully on display.

Annalise swiped at the single tear and squared her shoulders. *The case depends on my ability to think clearly. I just have to apologise to Mavel and try to make it up to him...*

She found him with his arms crossed over his chest in the hallway. He rested his back against the wall.

Taking a long breath, she approached him. “I’m sorry.”

“We don’t have time for that. Let’s get on with it.” His cold tone made her heart sink.

Mavel headed further into the club. Following him, she passed numerous corridors branching off the main one with more numbered

doors. When the lights along the floor ended, they came to an archway. Loud neo-punk music blasted through the speakers, and she contemplated closing her ears to combat the distasteful noise.

“Is he in there?” she shouted.

Mavel nodded, taking her hand.

Surprise registered on her face.

“I don’t want us to get separated,” he explained and led her into the crowd of dancing people.

She bumped shoulders with a couple of dancers, but they didn’t seem to notice or care for her apologies.

Mavel yanked her forwards, making her slam into his side. “Stay close.”

Annalise rubbed her aching nose and shot the back of his head a glare.

It didn’t take long for them to wade through the ocean of partygoers and reach a giant circular bar located in the middle of the dance floor. Colour-changing lights were suspended from tall pillars that supported the roof. When she studied her surroundings further, she saw two flights of twisting stairs on either side of the room, leading to the first floor, where a few more of the numbered rooms were. The only difference was that they had glass doors.

Who would want to have intercourse in front of everyone?

“That guy matches the description Samson gave me,” Mavel shouted in her ear and pointed to a skinny man with a sickly, green skin tone and short, sleeked-back hair. He sat on one of the hover stools at the bar with an almost empty glass of blue liquid.

Todd swayed a little. Could they get any useful information out of a drunk?

They approached him, and Mavel tapped the guy on the shoulder.

When he turned his head, Todd’s face morphed into a frown. “What do you want?”

Annalise rolled her eyes, reaching for her jacket's pocket. Her badge wasn't there, and she groaned. "We need to have a little chat with you."

Todd's cracked lips stretched into a smile. "For oo, sweet 'icks, I 'ill be 'eady in doo." He lifted his hands, showing her two fingers.

Mavel grasped the collar of his shirt. "You will not touch her. Now, let's go find somewhere quiet." He jerked the protesting man off the stool and dragged him through the crowd to the rear emergency exit marked by a bright green downwards arrow.

Annalise pushed through the swarm of swaying bodies. This time, she stumbled since Mavel wasn't there to be her shield. Someone pinched her ass, and she let out a yelp. When she whipped her head around, she couldn't tell who the culprit was. Instead of pursuing the matter of sexual harassment, she chose to ignore it and waded through the remaining crowd to where Mavel pressed Todd against the wall.

"Let's go out for a breath of fresh air," Mavel said.

"I 'ont 'onna go! I 'onna stay!" Todd screamed, flailing.

Ignoring his protests, her partner ushered Todd, none too gently, out of the club.

6

BASILISK

Mavel *escorted* Todd by the neck to the outskirts of the Red District. On the way, he *borrowed*—which was what she was going to write in her report—a thermal can of ice water from a bystander.

They came to a stop in an alleyway between two abandoned buildings. From the shadows they hid in, Annalise could see the entrance to the rest of the slums. If anything happened, they could get out fast, find their car, and return to Silver.

Mavel *helped* Todd sit on the ground and poured the chilled contents over his head.

“What’s wrong with you?” the man screamed, swinging his arms around in a feeble attempt to block the flow of water. Todd’s drunken stupor was replaced with annoyance as he peeled his drenched shirt off his chest.

Annalise took a step forwards. She activated the recording function on her wrist comms. “Todd Green, we are with the HPD. We need to ask you a few questions about Robert Fern.”

He glowered. “Never heard of him.”

“That’s not what your co-workers said,” Mavel interjected.

“Well, that’s what I’m telling you. Go bother someone else with these pointless inquiries,” Todd replied, attempting to climb to his feet.

Mavel grasped his shoulder, forcing him back down. “I’m not in the mood for an off-record interrogation, but if I must—”

“Mavel!” Annalise said in mock warning. He was trying to intimidate the guy, and with the way Todd’s eyes bulged out of his skull, it was working. “We can’t possibly go through such an ordeal again. What will the Chief say?”

After adjusting his hold on the man, Mavel bent down so they faced one another. “Tell us what you know or I’ll beat—”

She deactivated her comms. If this recording was ever played back, it would send Mavel to the incineration chamber, and she would be kicked off the force.

Todd stared at him. “I know my rights, and if you are from the HPD, I want to see my lawyer!”

She measured him with a long stare. “What century do you think we live in? And, since when can a *worker* afford a lawyer?”

“I got friends in high places.”

“What kind of purebloods can tolerate you?” Mavel asked.

Todd licked his lips. His tongue turned from pink to a deep green as he did so.

“Mavel, look out!” she yelled, but it was too late. The *basilisk* had already bitten Mavel’s forearm.

Her partner cursed and fell back, landing on his ass. “You have just assaulted an officer.”

Todd shook his head. He scrambled to his feet and ran.

She rushed to her partner's side, automatically reaching for her gun. Just like her badge, it wasn't there. Annalise grunted and spared her partner a look. He was already growing pale and sweat beaded on his forehead. According to statistics released by the Divinity Medical University, he had less than fifteen minutes until his heart stopped.

"Damn," she muttered under her breath and started chasing Todd. She picked up her pace, slowly gaining on him.

He dove into a pitch black alley, and she nearly missed the turning. There were no lights to illuminate where he could have gone.

Mavel's dying. I have to do something...

Her laboured breathing was the only noise that bounced off the brick walls. In the distance, faint music played from the clubs. They were too far out from anyone to hear them—or help them.

Reaching out, she planted her palm firmly against the brickwork as she advanced into the shadows. With her vision taken from her, her mind screamed, "He could be anywhere." She struggled to ignore her fears and press on.

A *basilisk* could only poison once a day, or so they taught at the Academy. He wouldn't be able to kill her with his bite. But, if she didn't find an antidote, Mavel was as good as dead.

"Mr Green, if a member of HPD dies because of you there won't be a district where you can hide. You will be wanted for the rest of your life and, when found, immediately incinerated," she shouted into the shadows.

She closed her eyes and strained her ears. Her foot hit something solid, and she bent down. Her fingers fumbled with the metal object. She propelled it to her left. When it bounced off a wall with a clang, she heard a gasp from a dozen feet ahead.

"If you heal my partner and answer some questions, you can continue drinking until your liver bursts."

"Why should I trust a HPD officer?" Todd hissed.

He was much closer than she originally believed, so she stopped advancing. Annalise placed her other hand in front of her, searching for anything solid.

“We uphold the law in this city. We only care about preventing the crime from happening again.”

Shuffling footsteps drew closer, and she held her breath. On instinct, she bent her knees a little, ready to act if he gave her any more trouble.

He stopped a few feet away, and she heard him clicking his tongue. “What if I just kill you here and now? No one will know what I’ve done. A lot of officers go missing in this district. You and your *beast* won’t be the first.”

She swallowed hard. It was too dark to be able to see anything properly, but he would be in the same situation. Being a *basilisk* did not give him night vision. One wrong move and one of them could have their head split open on the concrete.

Annalise drew back a step, making her leather jacket ruffle. “All of this has been recorded and transmitted to the HQ. Do you think you can get away with it?”

She knew it was a lie, but he didn’t necessarily know how the DPD worked. Her heartbeat kicked off again as she waited for his response.

His hand landed on the wall above her head and his booze-infused, hot breath fanned against her face.

“I will answer your questions, *officer*,” he said, making droplets of his saliva land on her cheek.

She wiped her skin. “Antidote first.”

Todd snorted and headed for the entrance of the alley. She followed close behind, her palm firmly pressed against the wall. After a minute, she could see his silhouette under the scarce streetlight.

Annalise quickened her steps. She tapped her wrist comms and cursed. Three minutes and Mavel’s heart would stop—if it hadn’t already.

“Hurry up!” she said, impatience seeping into her voice.

They jogged back to the location where her partner was. Mavel’s face was pasty grey with blue veins climbing up his cheeks. Her heart sank when no reaction came from him upon their approach.

Am I too late?

She checked his neck for a pulse. Nothing. She sucked in a calming breath to soothe her panic and pressed her ear to his chest. A barely audible thump vibrated through his ribcage as it expanded with his shallow breathing.

Annalise grabbed Todd by the collar and jerked him to kneel next to her. “Help him or I will get you incinerated.”

He eyed her with suspicion as he drew out a switchblade from his pocket.

“What are you doing?” she asked, scooting away.

“The anti-venom is in my blood. He needs to drink it,” he said, slicing his palm. Todd let his blood fall onto Mavel’s bluish lips.

Determined to keep an eye on the suspect, she moved Mavel’s head so it rested on her lap. She kept his mouth open, and Todd continued with the disgusting procedure.

Done with the task, the *basilisk* sat on the footpath and licked his cut. The healing chemical in his saliva clotted the blood, stopping the bleeding in seconds.

“Why do you care about what happens to this *beast*?” he asked. “You can contract another *servant* any time you want.”

Annalise brushed her fingers through Mavel’s hair, pushing stray locks from his face. The colour of his skin didn’t improve. She grasped his wrist, checking his pulse. Again, it was next to impossible to find it.

She glared at Todd. “Why isn’t he getting better?”

“It could be too late for your friend here or he is giving up the fight. Either way, I did what I could.”

“You’re not leaving until he is back on his feet!”

He burst into laughter. “Are you an idiot? Your partner is knocked out and I’m the only one with a weapon here.” He dangled his knife. “I’m only staying out of goodwill.”

She snorted. “I’m sure that’s the reason.” *And not the fact that you don’t want me to file assault charges the moment you turn your ass around.*

Todd settled against the wall and rested his elbows on his bent knees. “While we wait, we might as well talk. Didn’t you have questions?”

She gave him a complete once-over. He was fully sober, at last. This fool had gone from assaulting an officer to pretending to be a concerned citizen in less than five minutes. There was no way she could trust his answers. Nonetheless, she reactivated the comms recording behind her back.

“Did you know Robert Fern?” she asked, her voice came out calm even though the pallor of Mavel’s face kept her heart aching.

“Yes, I knew the guy. I worked with him for a bit.”

At least, that was the truth. “Your co-workers said you were on friendly terms with him in the past couple of days, why is that?”

His lips twitched, but his expression remained blank. “We had a meal or two together during lunch.”

“You ate lunch with a pureblood, just like that?”

“Not everyone is as prejudiced as you.”

Her fingers massaged Mavel’s scalp. When she realised what she was doing, she withdrew her hand. “What about his *servant*? Do you know anything about her or her whereabouts?”

He shrugged again and didn’t bother gracing her with an answer.

Taking a deep breath and praying for patience she had little left of, she looked him in the eye. “Do you have a family?”

Todd crisscrossed his arms over his chest. “I thought this was about Robert.”

“And I thought I would make you see things from his perspective. His wife is rather distraught because of his death.”

At the word ‘wife’, his expression darkened, and he trailed his tongue over his lips. *What is going on between Todd and Terry?*

“Do you know her?”

He shook his head, seemingly indifferent. “No. Never met her in my entire life.”

Annalise frowned. He didn’t seem to be lying, but, at the same time, there was something he was withholding.

Mavel coughed, and her attention diverted to him. Two half-opened silver eyes tried to focus on her face.

“Hey,” he whispered in a hoarse voice.

Todd rose to his full height. “He’s going to live, and I’ve answered enough questions.”

“I’m not—” she began.

“I’m done,” he replied, strolling away.

Biting her lower lip made the pain radiate through her jaw. Right now, getting Mavel checked out by a doctor was more important.

Annalise turned off the recording. “Can you sit up?”

“I don’t think I can move without help.”

She helped him into a sitting position and draped his arm over her shoulders. “On three. One. Two. Three...” she forced out the last word between breaths as she lifted him up.

Mavel stumbled a little, and she wobbled with him. To anyone else in that district, they must have looked like a drunken couple.

At a pace of a toddler, she led him to their car and assisted him into the passenger’s seat. As she was closing the door, he grasped her wrist.

“Just don’t crash the car,” he whispered.

She rolled her eyes. “That’s what the auto-drive function is for.”

“The navigation in that is as bad as your driving skills.”

With a laugh, she punched him in the shoulder and regretted it right after, when he cried out in pain.

“I’m so sorry...”

He chuckled through his teeth. "...s...fine. Let's go home."

"We're going to the hospital first. We need to get you checked out."

"I told you... I'm okay."

"But—"

He sighed. "Just listen to me this once, Anna. Home... Take me home."

Nibbling on her swollen lip, she got in the car. She studied his exhausted face, unable to contain her worry for much longer. He was acting too tough for his own good. Since she still owed him for today, she had no choice but to activate the car's directional holo-screen that lit up on the windscreen to help guide her to the Towers.



This was one of those days when she thanked the architects of the Towers for their design. The lift from the car park led the residents directly to the apartments, bypassing the shopping and the services floors—inadvertently allowing them to enter without anyone seeing her attire. *If only my father knew...*

At the front door, she let the scanner read her wrist comms. It held a copy of her encrypted key. The door unlocked, and she helped Mavel to his room. She guided him to his bed where he dropped like a log. Straightening up, every muscle in her body ached.

Mavel's eyes closed the moment his head hit the pillow. His breathing evened out and his colour began returning to normal. Relief washed over her as she sat next to him.

So much had happened today. So many new places, new people—it was overwhelming. She took a peek at the time. It was already past midnight, and she had no way of entering the HPD office without her

badge. If anyone found out she left it at a *worker's* house willingly, she would be fired on the spot.

Rubbing her tired eyes, she went into the bathroom and gathered the bandages and antiseptic from the cupboard. Todd's bite was still fresh on Mavel's arm. The only good thing was that it stopped bleeding sometime when they left the Red District.

Annalise bandaged the swollen bite marks and checked his temperature. He grunted when her cool hand touched his burning skin. His heavy eyelids lifted, focusing on her.

"How are you feeling?" she whispered.

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Honestly? As if I was run over by a train, a car, and then was thrown into the Sapphire River with my hands tied."

"I'm glad you're joking again. Guess you'll live to see another day."

Mavel nodded and fell back asleep. With a weak smile, she planted a soft kiss on his sweaty forehead. He was the only constant in her life. He never judged her or expected her to be a certain way like her parents did. She couldn't lose him.

Annalise went into her room and sat at her personal terminal where she imported all the voice data from the night's events and began typing up her report. With her bad luck continuing, tomorrow may as well be her last day at the HPD.

7

THE STORM

The smell of hot coffee reached Annalise, drawing her out of peaceful slumber. She peeled open one eye and found her favourite sky-blue mug resting on her desk next to her elbow. She must have fallen asleep after sending off her report.

She yawned, stretching. They had to collect her badge from Christine's place in Green.

As she took a sip of her heavenly drink, she checked the time on her personal terminal. It was 7:30 a.m. Her shift didn't start until nine. She glanced at her clothes. She forgot to change out of the rags Mavel's mother gave her. The skirt rode up all the way, revealing her underwear.

Annalise grunted and stripped. After a speedy shower, she changed into a pair of jeans and a black shirt. She meandered into the living area, spying Mavel who rested his hip against the kitchen island as he watched the news.

“How are you feeling?” She sat in front of the food he’d cooked for her, still unable to figure out how early he had to wake up to prepare her breakfast. Not to mention, she had never eaten a full meal with him at the table. Did he not like eating in her presence?

He faced her. His complexion was better but remained pale. “I’m doing fine. Don’t worry about me.”

“How about taking the day off, maybe two?”

Mavel ignored her and took another sip of his coffee. He inclined his head towards the holo-projection with the latest news broadcast. “Looks like the politicians are finally making headway with their ramblings. The pro-modded purebloods are seeking to have us get voting rights and possibly equal status in Divinity.”

“I don’t care about politics. I only want you to be well,” she replied.

“Stop it, Anna. I feel fine, and I can’t let you go outside of Silver alone.”

Taking a mouthful of her salad, she grimaced but not because of the taste. No one cooked better than Mavel.

“And don’t think about ordering me to stay behind,” he added.

Annalise sighed. This man was driving her crazy. *So much for being an obedient servant...* She shook her head and stuffed her mouth full of food.

The buzzer chirped, and her father’s voice filtered through the intercom at the front door. “Annalise, open up. I have a lot to discuss with you.”

She glanced at Mavel who gave a nod and headed for the hallway. *Oh, now he listens!*

When he unlocked the door, she heard her father grumble something before zeroing in on her. William Storm was dressed in one of his many bespoke charcoal suits. His dark hair was trimmed short to his scalp. She was surprised that at his age he managed to retain most of his hair. His vehement eyes reflected the arrogance that rolled off him in waves.

“A week from now there will be an important gathering at the City Hall. You will attend. Your mother will bring you the clothes you’re supposed to wear so you can’t ruin them,” William said sternly.

Still chewing, she grumbled, “No, ‘ello? Just straight to business with you, Will.”

Her father smacked the back of her head, and she nearly choked on her breakfast. “For a young pureblood, you behave like a *worker* wench. Don’t speak with your mouth full!”

Behind him, she found Mavel staring at the ground. His hands balled into fists, yet he said nothing. Was he upset or annoyed? She couldn’t tell. The only thing she was thankful for was that her grandmother was kind enough to leave her with a massive inheritance. She could afford to pay Mavel’s wages without having to rely on her father who demanded she cut him off the second William became the leader of Anti-Modded Party four years ago.

She finished chewing and finally swallowed. “What gives you the right to assault an officer of the law, Mr Storm?”

“You are barely a fledgeling on the force,” William hissed. His face grew redder and his body radiated anger.

“She is still a detective, sir,” Mavel said.

Her father’s eyes narrowed on Mavel. “I did not request input from a *servant*. Keep your lips pressed together, for if I hear another thing leaving that filthy mouth of yours, you will find yourself incinerated.”

“Will!” she yelled, drawing his attention back to her.

“Do not call your father by his first name! It’s disrespectful,” William shouted back.

“Is everything alright?” another masculine voice joined in on the happy family reunion.

A tall, athletically built man entered the room. The new arrival wore a slim black suit. A snow-white shirt peeked out from under his unbuttoned jacket. He studied everyone present with a pair of sapphire-

blue, deep-set eyes which eventually settled on her. Both of his hands were tucked into his pockets as he stood there in a laid-back manner. His raven hair was trimmed as short as her father's. Annalise returned his curious stare. He was too good-looking to share the fate of a politician.

She forced a smile and shot a questioning look to Mavel who shrugged.

"Everything is fine, Devlin," her father said, his voice softening.

Annalise couldn't believe what she was seeing. Was William James Storm kissing up to a guy who couldn't be more than thirty? This was a sight to behold. She was tempted to whip out her wrist comms and record the event for future reference.

"Perfect timing, actually," William said. "This is your date to the gathering, Annalise."

She glared at him. "I never said I was going."

His lips strained into a smile, revealing a bleached set of white teeth. "I didn't ask. I told you that you will be attending."

"But I have work!"

"I shall speak with your Chief then."

"Don't you dare do this to—" She was silenced by the hand he positioned dismissively in front of her face.

Rage bubbled inside of her and, if she didn't have to uphold the law, she would have throttled her father without a second thought.

Mavel shifted closer to her side and tapped his wrist comms, showing her the time. "We have to go."

Devlin, or whoever this man was, winked at her and placed his hand on her father's shoulder. "We also have a meeting to attend."

William pointed his finger at her. "If you are planning to escape this meet, I will personally hire *beasts* to drag you there."

Ah, my father, always the caring type.

She plastered a fake smile on her face and waited until he and his friend left. *This morning has to be a blessing from the heavens.*

“Anna, let’s go,” Mavel said.

Letting her emotions settle a little, she pushed away her plate and sighed.



As Mavel parked the car in the designated parking spaces for the DPD officers, she remembered they forgot to pick up their badges. She opened her mouth to speak when he handed over her badge.

“When did you get them back?” she asked with a frown forming on her brow.

“I woke up a little earlier than usual since I predicted this would happen.”

“You knew my father was going to show up and try controlling my life again?”

He chuckled and climbed out of the car. At least, the *basilisk* venom did not take away his sense of humour.

They headed for the building. Mavel used a different entrance this time, and her heart sank. *Why couldn’t we trust the modded? The Great Modded Wars were over for two hundred years. Was it so hard for people to let go of their hate and prejudice?*

She waited for him at the lifts. As one of them opened, she heard Rios shouting a greeting from the reception, and she awkwardly waved in his direction.

Des joined soon after. She looped her arm through Mavel’s, and Annalise stared at her in disbelief.

“Looks like she’s got a new toy,” Rios chimed in.

The fact Mavel didn't seem to mind, sent tendrils of irritation through her body. "What are you doing?"

Des rubbed her face against his shoulder, grinning. "Nothing much, you?"

Annalise eyed her and turned to Rios. "Is she serious?"

"We'll know after they spend a night together, I guess."

They filed out of the lift on their floor. Des still clung to Mavel, and he didn't do anything to show his displeasure.

Does he like her? She scowled. It didn't matter. His private life was his own, even if it irritated the hell out of her.

The moment they set foot in the office, the first name to leave the Chief's lips, in a booming voice that shook the room, was hers.

She rigidly marched to the back office and knocked on his glass door. He didn't respond, so she knocked again.

"I called you here, no need to knock a million times!" he shouted.

Annalise drew what strength she had left after the meeting with her father and squared her shoulders as she walked in.

"Sit," Chief said, pointing to a chair across from him. His eyes remained on his terminal.

She sank into the offered seat, knotting her fingers in her lap. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

He rubbed his eyes, and she pressed her lips together. It was either that or she was going to erupt with a rude remark which would not buy her any favours.

Chief stared at her, making her shrink into her seat. He clasped his hands together, his knuckles growing white. "Who gave you the bright idea to follow a *basilisk* into the Red District?"

"Sir, we were told at the victim's workplace that it was where we would find his friend."

“So, without any backup or informing the department of your whereabouts, you thought, ‘Why the hell not?’,” he said, imitating her voice.

“Rules and regulations state that when in the middle of—”

“I set your rules and regulations here. You are under my command and could have become another file on my terminal by this morning,” he shouted and slammed his fists on his desk.

She jumped, and her eyes widened as he took in the longest breath she had ever seen. By the looks of it, he had the lung capacity of an opera singer.

When he appeared calmer, he fixed her with a piercing stare. “Everyone under my command must report to me if they are heading anywhere beyond Bronze, understood?”

She bobbed her head vigorously.

“Good. Dismissed.”

With the help of the armrests, she stood and stumbled out of his office on shaky legs. When the door closed behind her, she overheard Rios’ chuckling.

“What so funny?”

“It’s only your second day here and you’ve already pissed off the guy. You must have a hidden talent somewhere,” he said.

“It’s not a talent, it’s a curse.” She scanned the office for Mavel.

He appeared from the coffee area, holding two steaming cups with Des in tow. He handed one to Annalise. “You alright?”

“Never been better,” she lied and sipped her drink. “Can’t wait to have yet another chat with Mrs Fern.”

“Why are you seeing the widow again?” Rios asked.

“Don’t pry into their case when you haven’t finished writing your report,” Des scolded and wrapped her arm around Mavel’s waist.

Annalise stared at her hand, willing it to fall off when Mavel tapped her on the shoulder.

“Should we get going?” he asked.

“Yes, we should.”



The officers and the CSU had left the area and, in turn, took the commotion away from the quiet street. Annalise folded her hands in her lap. Attempting to find a comfortable position on the sofa in Mrs Fern’s living room, she scooted forwards.

Terry clutched her teaspoon as if it was some kind of weapon and stirred her cup.

She noted the stiffness in the widow’s posture and activated the recording. “Terry, how are you doing today?”

“As if you can’t see how I’m doing,” the woman snapped. Her eyes bulged with realisation, and she quickly apologised.

Great. Yet another peachy encounter. “Then I’ll skip the pleasantries and get down to business as I feel you didn’t tell us everything in our earlier interview.”

“I told you all I know!” Terry protested, her hands shaking the saucer and the half-empty cup.

“The more information you give us, the easier it will be to find your husband’s killer. You do want that, don’t you?”

Mrs Fern set her drink on the tea table. “Yes, I do.”

Annalise cleared her throat. “Alright, I’ll start. Do you know Todd Green? He was your husband’s co-worker at the factory.”

The widow frowned. “I have no idea who that is.”

It was her turn to frown. The *basilisk* appeared oddly interested in Terry when Annalise mentioned her. Did he have an unrequited love for her or something?

“Then do you know where your *servant* is right now?”

Terry bit her lip. “She is where she deserves to be, that whore.”

Annalise shot a puzzled look to Mavel who seemed just as concerned about the woman’s response.

“And where is that?”

Mrs Fern burst into uncontrollable laughter. “She is a whore. Where else would she be but a whorehouse?”

Mavel growled under his breath, and Annalise clamped her hand around his arm. “Don’t,” she mouthed.

Mrs Fern’s mirth died down, and she sipped her tea. “I apologise for my behaviour. I haven’t slept since...since Robert took off.”

“You still haven’t told us exactly why he did that,” Mavel said.

Mrs Fern crossed her legs. Her emotionless eyes narrowed on him. “You are also a *beast*. I don’t see why I should tell *you* anything.”

“Believe me, madam, I would rather be dying from *basilisk* venom than listening to you talk.”

“Mavel!”

“I will wait in the car.”

He left, and Annalise stared at the empty space next to her. *Were all men going through PMS today?* With a shake of her head, she faced Terry.

“Could you please tell me the location of the place your *servant* is at?”

“It’s called ‘Macabre’, I think. It’s somewhere in the Red District, or so I’ve heard.”

Annalise cursed inwardly. They were there last night and could have brought her in. “Thank you for your time.”

The woman cast her gaze to her thin hands and mumbled something.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that...”

“The reason my husband and I fought was because of Leila. He told me if I slept with someone he knew—someone modded—then he could help get her out. But, I couldn’t do it!” she said, raising her voice. Her shoulders shook. “I couldn’t lower myself to Robert’s level. I should

have begged him to stay. I should have told him to leave that bitch to rot in there!”

Terry burst into a flood of tears, and Annalise didn’t know what to do. She placed her hand on the widow’s shoulder, squeezing it gently. Things were finally beginning to fall into place. The modded she talked about had to be Todd, and now they had reasonable cause to turn Macabre upside down in search of their suspect.

8

MILLENNIUM SUITE

Upon arrival at the HPD office, Mavel stood like a mountain behind her, and Annalise faced off with their Chief for the second time that morning. She hoped it wasn't going to become an everyday thing.

"What do you mean you won't send officers in? My lead suspect is in there!" she snapped.

Chief curved his bushy brow, and she shut her mouth.

"I am not sending the full force in because it may cause a district-wide disturbance. Who knows how many will get hurt for no reason while you try to find a *beast* in the sea of them?"

She hated to admit it, but he had a point. "Then give me someone as backup. Even Rios will do."

Chief checked his terminal. "He's gone out to interview the families of the deceased. Jamen should be back in the office in thirty. He is your superior on this case or have you forgotten?"

“No, I have not.” She started rising when he shot a glare in her direction.

“Did I say you could leave?”

“No, sir.”

His bad mood dissolved, and he ran his chubby fingers through his thinning hairline. “That’s the problem with you Storms. You are always in a hurry.” He sighed. “You are dismissed. When Jamen comes in, tell him to see me.”

Annalise held in a snide remark and stormed out of his office. Chief was toying with her. Yet he, unlike her father, accepted her suggestion and let her have some backup. No matter what, she wasn’t planning on doing a repeat of yesterday.

She sat at her desk, deflated. Instead of waiting for Jamen and Calla to arrive, she filled out some paperwork and listened to the recording of the interview with Terry. When she submitted her report, Calla skipped into the room, humming a tune. Jamen entered a second later.

“Chief has something to tell you,” Annalise informed him.

He nodded and went into the Chief’s office.

Calla drew her brows together in confusion that didn’t last long. She grinned at Annalise and sat on her desk. Uncomfortably near her face, Calla’s red eyes focused. “I can feel your excitement and apprehension, Annalise. What’s the occasion?”

To create some space between them, Annalise retreated as far back as her seat would permit. “Do you have to be this close to me?”

She tilted her head to one side. “Is it making you uncomfortable?”

“Very.”

“Pity, I wanted to get to know you better.” Calla hopped off the desk and made her way to the Chief’s office.

Annalise pinched the bridge of her nose. This was the job *she* chose. This was what the aptitude tests said she would be most suited for, yet they forgot to mention all the stress that came along from dealing with

co-workers. Her baby-face will be populated with wrinkles sooner rather than later.

After ten minutes, Jamen strode out of the Chief's office and pointed at them. "I'm in command of this mission since you are still new here. Grab your stuff and let's head out. We'll procure some suitable attire on the way."

She scrambled out of her seat and grabbed her jacket. "Lead the way."



They didn't go to the Red District immediately. Jamen signed out an undercover street vehicle from the underground garage and led them aside to the only room in there. It was next to the emergency staircase and across from the lifts. The walls and the floor were padded with large white tiles. A round matching table stood in the middle.

He placed his right palm on the table, and the terminal activated. He let it scan his communications device. The hand print started glowing green with acceptance and the lights dimmed. A second later, the furniture became see-through with a projection of AID standing in place of the table. But, instead of a little girl, she looked like a librarian with square glasses. Her hair was tied into a firm bun, and she held a stack of folders.

Who programmed this?

AID smiled at him. "Greetings, Detective Auris. What can I help you with today?"

"What's this room for?" Annalise asked.

Jamen spared her a glance. "Archives." He turned back to the AI. "AID, show us the blueprints for Macabre in Red."

“One moment...” The AI’s holo-projection moved from the table to the white wall. She placed her hand on it and a 3D image of the building appeared.

“This is the Macabre club in the Red District. The most recent update was submitted fifty-seven years ago. Based on the data provided, there are three floors above ground level and a storage facility underground. Access to the basement level is unknown. Information on the second and third floors is incomplete. By today’s standards, the data is invalid. New input pending...”

“Who’s the owner?” Jamen asked.

AID frowned. “I’m sorry, that record was removed.”

Annalise stepped closer, studying the layout of the club. “Removed? By whom?”

“This information is classified.”

When Annalise’s attention flicked to Jamen, he had a contemplating look on his face as he rotated the building representation with his fingers.

“We can either request to speak with the owner by going there, giving up our identities, or enter undercover and try to find your suspect ourselves,” he said.

“I doubt the owner will be forthcoming,” Mavel replied.

“Agreed,” Jamen said.

“Wouldn’t it be dangerous to arrive as a large group?” Calla asked. “They’ll make us there and then.”

Jamen nodded. “Then we go in groups of two.”

“I will go with Annalise,” Mavel said. “The woman at the front desk would be suspicious if she went in with anyone else.”

“Ah, yes. I heard about your adventure last night. Glad you made it out alive,” Jamen said and, in a half-hearted tone, added, “How’s your arm doing?”

“I didn’t put into the report he was hurt,” Annalise said.

Jamen crossed his arms over his chest. “Are you naïve enough to believe the Chief would let you run around without being shadowed by a senior detective?”

As the realisation sunk in, her body shook with irritation. “You followed us there and didn’t help when Mavel was bitten by a *basilisk*?”

“You managed just fine. Plus, you didn’t call for backup.”

“You—” she began, but Mavel stepped in front of her. He grasped Jamen by the collar and lifted him off the ground.

His teeth audibly ground against one another. “Do you treat your job seriously? What would have happened if I died, and she was knocked out in some dark alleyway?”

Calla grasped Mavel’s upper arm. “Let him go or I will make you pay tenfold.”

He glared at her, and she held on tighter. This was the first time Annalise had seen Calla with a threatening expression. Her red eyes glowed with violence she craved to inflict.

Mavel’s face twisted in pain, and he jerked backwards, almost knocking Annalise over in the process. He massaged the place Calla touched. “You used your *control* on me!”

The *flare* grinned and tucked her blonde hair behind her ear. “You are no match for me, *beast*. If you try hurting him again, I will rip out your heart and feed it to you.”

“Enough!” Jamen shouted, bringing everyone’s attention to him. “We can’t squabble amongst ourselves. We have to think of a plan to get your possibly possessed suspect out...if she’s still alive.”

Although she hated to agree with him after they hurt her *servant*, Annalise wiped her sweaty palms on her trousers. “You’re right. Safety of the civilians comes first.”

Mavel’s shoulders shook as he moved to flank her. She guessed he needed some distance between him and these two, and she was all for it. There was no need to get into more trouble with their Chief.

“AID, upload the information on Macabre to our wrist comms,” Jamen barked.

The AI smiled. “Of course, Detective. Is there anything else?”

“No. Once you’re done, deactivate.”



They spent the rest of the afternoon discussing pairings and entrance points. Annalise and Mavel were to enter as a couple first. They would order a room and scout the premises. Jamen and Calla would appear ten minutes later as detectives looking for Leila. The police presence would give them enough time to find the *beast* and neutralise her.

They changed into their street clothes in the back of the van and climbed out of the vehicle a few blocks away from the district’s entrance.

The sun had set and a feeling of déjà vu washed over Annalise. She could only pray things wouldn’t turn out in the same way as they did the night before.

Mavel awkwardly rested his hand on her waist and ushered her towards the Macabre. At least, she was wearing jeans. Jamen supplied them with pistols that weren’t detectable by the scanners as long as they activated a software hack developed by ETek for the DPD prior to being scanned.

They arrived, and Mavel whispered into her ear. “Are you ready?”

“I doubt I’ll ever be ready to come here again.” She let her lungs fill to capacity and heaved a breath. “Let’s get this over with.”

Annalise stopped at the front entrance.

Mavel stretched, lifting his wrist comms to the scanner above. The light underneath it blinked red then quickly changed to green.

One of his arms fell on her shoulders. If her nerves weren't having a field day in her stomach in that moment, perhaps she would have been able to feel the butterflies fluttering in her gut from the simple gesture.

They walked to the reception where the same woman with dreads observed their approach. "Back for more?"

"I had so much fun last night, I just wanted to go again," Annalise said and hugged Mavel's arm to her chest.

He stiffened and drew her into an embrace. His soft lips descended on hers, giving her a light peck. "Anything you want, you'll get."

Blushing as if her face was about to explode, she swatted him playfully on the shoulder.

The *flare* cleared her throat, urging them to separate. "I am glad you had fun. Do you want to go for a repeat experience?"

"For this occasion, we need a room somewhere more private." He winked at the receptionist.

"That can be arranged." She activated the terminal on her desk and waved for Mavel to place his wrist comms on the scanner.

The payment went through, and Annalise let out a breath.

"Take the first turn left, and it's room 1005 on the right at the end of the hall. If you see the VIP barrier, you've gone too far." The mirror revealed the hallway again, and the *flare* winked at Mavel. "Would you like the same bonus as yesterday?"

He politely declined, but Annalise noticed his fists clenching as she said it. He was most likely still upset about it...

They made their way inside. Mavel kept his hand on the small of her back, making them look like any other couple on the surveillance cameras. They took the first left turn and found the designated room.

Lifting her eyes to the number plate, she snorted. "Think we got a bonus room with music for coming back here?"

He shook his head. "Let's go in. The others will be entering shortly."

She closed the door behind her and peered at him. Too many things were left unspoken. She needed to clear the air, so they could work together like before. “I know what I did to you was wrong. I didn’t mean to—I wasn’t in control...”

“Anna, please let’s not talk about that right now.”

Her anger sparked to life at his dismissal of the matter, and she grasped his grey shirt. “Then when can we talk about it? I know you’re mad at me. I’ve already apologised more than once. What do you want me to do for you to forgive and forget?”

Mavel ruffled her hair. “I’m not angry with you. I’m mad at myself. I should have left you in the room until you overcame the *flare’s* control. I should have pushed you away but couldn’t—” He paused as if thinking about what to say next. “There’s nothing to forgive or forget.”

Her jaw almost dropped to the floor. What happened between them meant so little to him? It was just another job, an order she had given, and he complied with. She backed out of his reach, ashamed of her actions. “I see...”

Her wrist comms activated, and Jamen’s voice came through. “We’re going in. You may begin your search.”

They didn’t have the time for her to fall apart here. She steeled herself for the task ahead.

Mavel was already gripping the door handle. They sneaked out and listened for any movement around them. Ahead, another glass door with a neon sign read “VIP” above it. For such an important area, there wasn’t a single guard. This unnerved her.

“I will check this section. You go check the other rooms and the dance floor.”

He scowled at her. “I’m not leaving you alone.”

“We shouldn’t fight here. Go. I’ll be fine. I’ve got a gun, remember?”

“I fear that you may end up using it.”

“Get going.” She pushed him away from her.

With the corners of his mouth downturned, he listened, heading back in the direction of where they came from.

Annalise checked her comms. She had no more than ten minutes till the staff figured out something was off. Slipping through the VIP door, she followed the hallway until it split into two. It was quiet. Not even the faint music from the club filtered in after the door shut behind her.

She chose left and peered inside the first room with a number plate. Empty. The next was empty, too, and the next. There were two left in this section. After giving a peek into the second last room, she mumbled a curse—nothing.

Annalise edged closer to the final room in this part of the building. It had a brass plaque on the door only, instead of numbers, it had the embossed words “Millennium Suite” on it. She pressed on the handle, pushing the door open a crack.

Deep voices caused her to hold her breath. With a steady hand, she drew her gun out and nudged the door enough for her to see the dark wood and red velvet interior better. Two men held a muffled conversation inside. A half-dressed, older man in his late fifties—judging by his grey hair and a number of creases etched into his round face—moved his arms around as he voiced his orders. The second man who was listening to him was younger, fully clothed in a business suit. He appeared more like a bodyguard with the way his posture radiated attention to his surroundings.

Annalise’s stomach sank further when her eyes found a woman cuffed to the metal rings in the far wall with modified-titanium handcuffs. Those were issued by the DPD and the military in case riots broke out, or they needed to contain a possessed *beast*. *How did they get their hands on them?*

To calm her raging heart, Annalise pressed her back to the wall. There were just the two of them. *I can do this. I have to...*

A hand came out of nowhere and curled around her throat. She struggled against the assailant, almost dropping her weapon.

The bodyguard lifted her off the ground and slammed her back against the wall, knocking the air out of her lungs. He grasped her wrist, keeping her from aiming her gun at him.

“Who do we have here?” He carried her suspended body into the suite. “Did Lloyd send you after us?”

“I’m with...HPD,” she managed between gasps.

He jerked the weapon out of her hands and tossed her to the ground.

Annalise landed on her side and winced. Her wrists and palms ached from the burn of the carpet. When she lifted her head, there was something familiar about the older man.

Her eyes bulged with recognition. “You’re Ray Dawson! You’re part of the Anti-Modded Party.”

During the last political group gathering she was forced to attend, she saw him talking to her father briefly. What was he doing here?

Dawson’s features contorted with anger, and he glanced at his bodyguard. “She knows who I am. Get rid of her and this *beast*.”

BETWEEN LIFE & DEATH

Annalise stared at him. The strip along the barrel of her gun changed to red the second the bodyguard held it. Finding it useless, he threw it aside and took out his pistol, pointing it at her chest. Her body was paralysed. At the same time, AID flagged a message on her wrist comms, stating that her gun was compromised. If she wasn't fearing for her life, she would have laughed.

Why can't I move?

People always said life was supposed to flash in front of one's eyes when faced with imminent death. Sadly, such was not what happened to her. Annalise's mind turned blank, her heart rattled in the confines of her ribcage, and her palms perspired as if every water molecule wished to evacuate at once. She remained stock-still, staring down the barrel of his weapon, unable to recall a single piece of training she had received in that strained second.

She wanted to move, silently pleaded with her stiff limbs to grapple for the weapon. When the gun fired with a loud bang, she shifted unconsciously. The bullet cut through the still air and pierced her shoulder.

A cry of agony parted her lips, and her paralysis lifted. Annalise ducked and, balancing on her healthy arm, swept his legs from underneath him with her leg. The bodyguard let out a surprised yelp as he fell.

She scrambled in search of her gun. There was little time to get to it at the other end of the room. So, she dismissed the idea.

He pointed the pistol at her again, and she dove forwards, landing on top of him with her elbow buried just below his ribs. She forced the air out of his lungs. The man gasped, and she straddled his chest. She grasped his wrist and slammed it against the ground until his fingers uncurled around the grip of the gun.

Too focused on disarmament, she didn't notice his other hand lunging for her head. He caught her by the hair and tugged hard, yanking a few strands out.

She hissed in pain. Fighting the urge to massage her scalp, she hit his Adam's apple with the side of her flattened hand.

His hold loosened as he choked out a curse.

Not waiting for him to recover, Annalise stood and kicked him in the groin.

An ear-piercing howl of agony erupted from him. He folded into a foetal position and protected his damaged goods. While he rolled around on the spot, she kicked away his handgun. Her pistol wasn't too far away now. She picked it up and holstered it.

Ray Dawson had escaped sometime between her being shot and her retrieving her weapon. Her eyes darted to the hostage cuffed to the wall. She was naked. Raw whip marks marred her bare back. Annalise edged closer and lifted her face.

Two silver eyes looked at her with hope and a little apprehension.

“Are you Leila?”

The woman gave her a weak nod and that was enough for Annalise. She had her suspect, although Leila didn’t appear possessed or like she had any energy to murder her contractual master for that matter.

Annalise tugged at the restraints above the woman’s head. They wouldn’t budge. She ran to the bodyguard who seemed unconscious from the pain. Perhaps, it was for the best. She searched his pockets, finding a set of keys, and returned to Leila.

“I’m going to get you out of here.” The pain throbbed in Annalise’s shoulder. Her adrenaline was beginning to wear off.

Leila studied her from under the heavy lids. “Robert, Terry... Are they alright?”

As Annalise worked on the cuffs, she tried maintaining a neutral expression. What kind of woman worried about the family that abandoned her in a place like this?

“They’re fine,” she lied. There was no point in telling Leila anything else until they arrived at the police station.

The handcuffs fell away from her scrawny wrists, and the *beast* collapsed to her knees. Annalise slung Leila’s arm over her shoulders, lifting the woman up. The weight of another human being pressed on Annalise’s bleeding wound. She ground her teeth together as the searing pain made her legs tremble.

One step, two steps, she mentally counted and staggered towards the door. They reached the middle of the room, and the bodyguard stirred.

Red-faced, he rolled over, aiming his backup gun at her.

It all happened so fast. She didn’t have time to blink. The bullet was fired, and Leila pushed her out of the way. As Annalise stumbled backwards, Leila clutched at the entry wound on her chest.

“Tell Robert I love him,” Leila whispered, and her legs gave way.

“Leila!”

The door burst open, and Mavel ran inside. She was too busy to notice what he did since her attention was solely on Leila's limp body. On her hands and knees, she crawled towards the bleeding woman. Annalise covered the gunshot wound directly over the *beast's* heart with her hands in a futile attempt to stop more blood from flowing out.

"It is too late," the voice at the back of her mind told her, but she shook her head and cried out the woman's name again, louder this time. Leila couldn't die here. She was her suspect. She was supposed to come with her to the station and answer her questions.

Strong arms wound around her. Only then, she noted she was trembling.

Mavel wordlessly drew her into his chest. Without further ado, she permitted her confusion and tears to drench his shirt.



Annalise stared at the crack in the linoleum of the HPD office. How long had it been there? Why hadn't she noticed it before? If someone didn't look into this problem, they would have people tripping over the folds if the gap expanded.

The hot mug in her hands burned her skin, but it was the only thing keeping her warm even though Mavel had wrapped his jacket around her shoulders after she got looked at by an EMT. Luckily, the bullet was a through and through. They stitched her up in an ambulance, put healing gel on the wound, and covered it with oversized gauze.

While she was treated, she watched Leila's body being bagged and tagged. It was her fault Leila was killed. She was an officer of the law. It was her duty to protect that *beast*. Yet, why did that woman take a bullet for a pureblood?

"Is she alright?" Rios asked.

“She’s in shock. I will take her home and see to her,” Mavel replied.

“Make sure we receive a statement as soon as she’s able to speak in coherent sentences,” Chief ordered.

A heavy arm draped around her back. Lifting her attention from the crack in the floor, she found Mavel looking at her with concern. He took her cup away. “Let’s go home, Anna.”

She nodded, or she thought she did. Her limbs didn’t seem to want to listen to her anymore as he helped her stand. Mavel guided her to the lifts and out of the DPD building. He strapped her in the passenger seat of her car. After he retreated, she studied her fingernails. They were dirty. Dried blood managed to gather under her nails, but she wasn’t certain if it was hers or Leila’s.

The next thing she knew, Mavel was already unlocking the front door to her apartment. He helped her out of his jacket and led her to the couch in the living room where he sat her down.

“Do you want anything to eat or drink?”

Annalise shook her head, returning her attention to her nails. She picked the dirt out from under them. Maybe if she removed all of the traces of today, things would go back to how there were that morning. Leila would still be alive.

Her hands started shaking. She should have let Mavel come with her. He would have been able to save Robert’s *beast* and everything would have worked out. She was too proud—much like her father.

Mavel touched her cheek and wiped the tears away.

When did he get so close?

He drew her into another hug and stretched their bodies on the couch. His warmth welcomed her and, as she snuggled in closer, he ran his fingers through her hair.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he whispered into her ear.

She hiccupped and more tears poured out against her will. “She died...”

“No one lives forever, Anna. One day, you and I will leave this place and, hopefully, arrive in a better world.”

She grasped his shirt and let her stress seep out. “I could have saved—”

Mavel pressed his finger against her lips, silencing her. “Hush. Leave it behind you for now and get some rest.”

Slowly, she pressed her ear to his broad chest. His strong heartbeat pumped with every contraction of his heart’s valves. He was warm and alive. After a few minutes, the heat he radiated helped lull her closer to sleep.

“Goodnight, Anna,” he whispered, and her consciousness abandoned her.



Ray Dawson sat in his office chair with his elbows resting on his desk and his fingers intertwined together. He smirked, and rage budded inside of her.

Her hands folded into fists. “You killed her!”

“I believe you did, Detective Storm. You held the gun to her and fired, or did you forget?”

She wanted to take a step towards him, but her feet wouldn’t move. Looking down confirmed her fear. Her feet were held in place by titanium shackles binding her ankles together. In an attempt to break out, she reached downwards. Suddenly, her hands were confined, too.

The office morphed into the Millennium Suite, and she stood there with her gun drawn and pointed at the helpless, wounded beast wearing a simple summer dress. Leila’s eyes were sad as if she had already resigned herself to her fate.

“Tell Robert I love him,” Leila whispered.

The gunshot deafened Annalise. A bullet lodged in Leila's chest, leaving a tiny hole behind. Ruby liquid painted her lily-white dress and her eyes glazed over. With a vacant look, she collapsed.

"Leila!" Annalise yelled.

Two strong hands wrapped around her upper arms in an iron grasp and shook her.

"Anna! Anna, wake up!" Mavel shouted.

Her eyelids fluttered open, and she sat rod-straight, nearly head-butting him. Heaving breaths came in rapid succession. Drenched clothes clung to her chilled skin, and she shivered.

"It was just a dream," he repeated over and over again.

She clutched her stuffy chest. As much as she wanted this scenario to be a mere illusion, she knew it was real. She was the reason Leila died. If it wasn't for her stubbornness, that *beast* would still be alive.

"Anna, look at me. Focus on me," Mavel said.

Their gazes locked, and she mimicked his breathing until she calmed down.

He hugged her, causing her shoulder to hurt, but she didn't complain. His presence kept her sane, and his warmth cast away the chill clinging to her clammy skin.

Twenty minutes later, she was sitting in a bath. Mavel left her alone, saying he would prepare their breakfast. For some reason, she couldn't feel the heat from the water, nor could she enjoy the fluffiness of the towel wrapped around her after she climbed out of the tub.

Annalise wandered back into her room. Sitting on the edge of her bed, she assessed her nails. Mavel reappeared shortly after and helped her get dressed. He took her by the hand, bringing her to the kitchen where her breakfast awaited her.

"Eat," he ordered and passed her the fork.

She accepted it. "Mavel, did I kill Leila?"

He let out a mild cuss and lifted her chin. “*You* did not kill her, but whoever hired the man in a suit did.”

Her face paled. “Dawson.”

“What did you say?”

She placed her fork on her plate and met his questioning stare. “Ray Dawson—one of the Anti-Modded Party’s politicians—was there. He was the one who tried to get us killed.”

“He wasn’t on any of the security feeds. Are you certain of this?”

“He was there,” she said. “I remembered his face from last year’s Christmas gathering at the City Hall.”

“I will inform the Chief.”

She clasped her hand over his wrist comms, stopping him. “I want to tell him in person. I need to go to the DPD and make a full statement.”

“Sunderland said you can take a few days off. Jamen will take care of your case in the meantime.”

“NO!” She slammed her hands down on the table which caused her shoulder to burn. Her face contorted in pain, but she ignored it. “This is my case, and I owe it to Leila and Terry to find the one responsible for Robert’s death. We have to put Dawson behind bars for his sickening behaviour.”

Mavel took her right hand into his, giving it a squeeze. “Breakfast first, statements later.”

Seeing no point in arguing further, she eagerly munched on the food he had prepared for her. Dawson wasn’t going to get away with murder. The second the media vultures would receive the information, his image as a “Good Samaritan” and a strictly “Anti-Modded political activist” would go down the drain. He would be kicked out of City Hall in disgrace and have to answer for the torment and pain he rained on the citizens in this city. She would make sure of that.

10

HIDDEN AFFECTION

When they parked in the DPD car park, her wrist comms activated and “M.E.” showed on her display. She put in an earpiece and answered the call.

“What is it, Hopps?”

“Well, don’t you sound chipper!” His voice changed from sarcasm to serious once he cleared his throat. “I heard what happened to you last night. How are you holding up?”

She heard sincerity in his voice and accepted it. “Please tell me you didn’t call me just to ask me how I’m feeling.”

“No, I guess I did not. I am uncertain whom I should give the details of my autopsy to. On the case file, there are two detective names. Perhaps it’s an error in the system.”

“Whose is the second name?”

Hopps cleared his throat. “Detective Auris. It says he was added to the case file last night by Chief Sunderland.”

Annalise groaned. Chief was ready to give up on her with one minor bullet wound. There was no way she would get off his back until he reassigned Jamen to something else. “I will be right over to get the info.”

“Great, bring me some green tea while you’re at it. The last tea bag I had fell into the chest cavity of a victim I had the pleasure of dissecting. Should have left it until I was finished, I guess.”

She grimaced. “See you in five, Hopps.” Annalise deactivated the call.

Mavel said nothing and studied her with interest when she faced him.

“Clive wants green tea. By the looks of it, a dead body got the last of it.” She got out of the car, and they made their way to the building. They parted at the door because Mavel had to round the building and go through a separate set of scanners.

Ten long minutes later, they arrived at the morgue. The cold air had an undertone of formaldehyde which overpowered the faint scent of the green tea she held in a thermal cup for Clive. Mavel believed it would be a good idea to score some points with the M.E. since, in the future, they had to work together whether she liked it or not.

The white walls and doors burned her eyes, so she lowered them to study the chequered grey linoleum. Following the signs, they reached a set of sliding doors and wandered into the lab.

Clive sat behind an electron microscope with his glasses resting atop of his head. When they approached, he reached for the cup she held.

“It better be the Green Lily tea they have in Narcotics,” he grumbled.

“No, it’s from the cafeteria. If you don’t like it, you can go get one yourself.” She held the cup over the bin.

Clive jumped off his seat and grasped her wrist. “No need to do anything hasty.”

With a roll of her eyes, she handed him his drink.

He took a whiff of it and a look of delight spread across his aged features. “And here I thought you’d come empty-handed.”

Mavel tapped him on the shoulder. “You had something to tell us about the body.”

The M.E. frowned and realisation dawned on him as to why they were here. He ran to his terminal, next to the microscope, and typed in his access codes with one hand. He used his arm to clear the table and a holo-projection of what Annalise guessed to be muscle tissue appeared.

He pointed to the projection. “This is a normal skeletal tissue found in purebloods and majority of the modded, except *beasts*, of course. And this”—he pressed a key on the keypad and the image morphed into a shrivelled version of the cells, ends of which were torn—“is the muscle tissue around your vic’s waistline. It seems like a localised degradation of the dermal and skeletal tissues occurred an hour or so prior to his death.”

Annalise scowled at him. “Was it a disease? Should his body be quarantined?”

Clive pursed his lips together as he sat on his stool. “It’s too localised. No cells outside of a twenty-centimetre radius are affected. If I didn’t know better, I would swear he wore a belt or something that degraded his waistline until it became fragile enough for a finger to tear it apart.”

“Are you saying he wasn’t pulled apart by a *beast*?” Mavel asked.

Clive took a sip of his tea. “Well, the state his tissue was in, it’s hard to say. A human could do it, even a child.”

Annalise pondered over his suggestions. Whoever was behind Robert’s murder was trying to make Leila appear as the culprit.

Mavel scissored his arms. “Are there any known drugs that can do this?”

“None I know of. But, this wouldn’t be the first experimental drug developed by the military or the mad hats in the Black District that we don’t happen to have in our database. All I know is, I found no trace elements of foreign substances in the vic’s system which means I can’t tell if it was because of a drug or something else.”

“Send the full report to my terminal,” she said.

“Will do.” Clive raised his cup. “And thanks for the tea.”

Mavel opened the door for her, allowing her to slip out of the lab.

Her mind was rattled by the facts Clive gave them. A bad feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. “Do you have any idea what’s going on?”

“Follow the evidence,” he said. “It’s bound to lead us somewhere.”

“Yeah, unless we’re dealing with something bigger than a woman scorned.”



Upon their arrival at the HPD office, Rios jumped out of his seat. Des was nowhere to be found nor were Jamen and Calla.

Rios strode over and bent down to her level. “How are you doing, little lady?”

Annalise fought not to roll her eyes. She just wanted to catch Dawson and figure out who was behind Robert’s death. “I’m fine. Is the Chief in?”

His expression grew grim. “You aren’t seriously planning on continuing with your case, are you? Just leave it to—”

“I am planning to continue. I have to put the man who did this behind bars.”

Rios whistled, and his eyes landed on Mavel. “Is she always this uptight?”

Mavel chuckled. “She’s a Storm. If you see her father’s speeches in the City Hall, you’ll understand where she gets it from.”

“Oh.” Rios stepped out of the way for them to pass. “Good luck with Sunderland then.”

She knocked on the Chief's door and was invited in. Taking a seat in his office for the third day in a row was becoming habitual. Soon, she would know every crack in the wall as she did at her apartment.

"I want to stay on the case," she said.

Chief Sunderland placed his elbow on the table and rested his bored face in his palm. "Out of the question, but if you're here to make a statement on yesterday's events, I'll gladly activate the comms."

Annalise rested her hands on his desk and leant in. Her wounded shoulder ached, but her game face camouflaged her discomfort. "I want to keep going!"

Chief's blue eyes darkened with an unreadable emotion. "You need to learn to let go, Storm, or you may truly become a case file on my terminal."

"You can't treat me like a child just because I got grazed by a bullet!"

"Anna," Mavel warned.

"Grazed by a bullet?" Chief stood. He was, at least, two heads taller than her—almost Mavel's height. His large belly sagged as he straightened out to show his full authority. "I read the EMT's report. The bullet went *through* you, and you want more?"

"Ray Dawson was there." She could barely contain her sizzling anger as she said that bastard's name.

"Why was an Anti-Modded politician there?" he asked with an arched brow. His irritation seemed to be replaced by curiosity as he tapped his chin and retreated back into his chair.

"He was the one who ordered his lackey to get rid of me and Leila. After that, I don't know where he went or how he bypassed all the security feeds."

Chief spoke as if he was chewing on every word. "You are implying that one of the top pureblooded politicians was involved in a scandal."

“I know what I said. And yes, that is what I’m saying. Dawson was there, and I bet you’ll find his fingerprints and DNA somewhere in that suite.”

Chief rubbed his face, his expression turning sour. “Jamen will take charge of this case from now on. It has become too personal for you to continue.”

She erupted out of her seat. Her shoulder screamed, sending her nerve endings into overdrive as her stitches tore from the sudden movement. She bit her lower lip to keep from crying out in pain. Closing her eyes, she attempted to calm the storm inside of her when Mavel blocked her view of Chief with his body.

He bowed in respect. “Let her continue with the case, sir.”

Annalise stared at him with a slack jaw. *Why is he bowing his head for me?* She swatted him on the shoulder, and her stitches ripped further. “Chief, I will take a few days to cool off, and you can have Jamen look into this case in the meantime. But, I implore you, let me keep this case. I don’t want to quit halfway. I want justice for those who have passed away.”

Chief’s pale eyes seemed to see directly into her soul. “Fine, you may resume after three days of mandatory rest. In that time, you are not permitted to enter these premises or access any information related to the case, understood?”

Her lips stretched into a grimace since her shoulder hurt too much to produce a proper smile. “Thanks, Chief. I won’t disappoint you!”

“Hand over your badge and gun,” he said. “I can’t have you defying orders.”

Annalise undid her belt. She pulled off her badge and took her pistol out of her holster, setting both items on the desk.

“Don’t forget to give your statement to Jamen when he comes back. Dismissed.”

The heavens finally sprinkled some luck her way. At the door, she glanced at the ceiling and mentally thanked anyone who was listening. As they escaped Chief's stern gaze, Annalise grew lightheaded.

Mavel took her hand and brought her to the coffee area. He touched the back of her shoulder and his fingers came away with blood. "Your stitches have come undone. Why didn't you say you were in pain?"

"I had to convince him. It was either that or abandoning the case," she replied, struggling to stay upright.

Mavel grasped her shoulders when her legs gave way. "Anna, you're an idiot."



Bare aquamarine walls were the view Annalise was faced with from her hospital bed. She hated hospitals. Every time she had visited one, the doctors would fuss over her because she was the only daughter of William Storm, and not because she was just like any other human being. Another reason behind her foul mood was the fact that fewer people returned from them than went in. But, she didn't fear death. As Mavel had once said, 'It would get them eventually'. She wholeheartedly agreed. Be it today, tomorrow, or a few decades from now, there just wasn't much *living* going on in her life. She was a puppet to her father and a joke in the office.

The door to her room opened, and Jamen strode in followed closely by Devlin—the man her father was too friendly with.

Devlin studied her with great intensity and smiled. "You look better than I expected."

"Thanks." She turned her attention to her superior. "Any news on Dawson and the case?"

Jamen gave her a flat look. “I’m not allowed to disclose case information to you. Not yet anyway.”

She rolled her eyes. Looks like the Chief had more than enough time to put a stick up Jamen’s ass while she was getting new stitches. Her eyes wandered over to Devlin who took a seat in the visitor’s chair.

Facing her, Devlin activated the recording function on his comms. “Can you tell me exactly what and who you saw in the Macabre last night?”

Annalise shot Jamen a questioning look, yet he only glared at the other man.

“Who are you exactly to be asking this?” she asked Devlin.

He smirked and retrieved a business card from his inner jacket pocket.

She accepted it and read it. “What’s a Falcon Group? I’ve never heard of it.”

He relaxed into his seat. “We oversee anything and everything regarding the well-being of the citizens as well as keep the government officials in check.”

“So you are some kind of policing organisation behind the scenes?”

Devlin chuckled. “We are the police for the DPD and City Hall if that’s how you want to put it.”

“I’ll wait outside,” Jamen muttered. His apprehension and jerky walk towards the door interested her.

Did he not like Devlin in particular or the Falcon Group?

“I will ask again. Please recite the events that happened in the Macabre.”

She sighed. There wasn’t much of a choice. If the senior detective didn’t complain or say anything, what right did she have?

“My *servant* and I went undercover as a couple to enter the club. Jamen and his partner gave us a little time to get ahead before they came in and distracted the staff long enough for us to find Leila Green. I split up with Mavel and went into the VIP section. I was caught, got shot,

and fought for a gun with a guy who's in custody. Once I took care of him—or I thought I did—I undid Leila's restraints, which is when—" she broke off, unable to complete that sentence.

Devlin nodded. His intent gaze burned holes in her face, and she tried her best to ignore it. He deactivated his wrist comms and rose with a pleasant smile that revealed his dimples. "It was a pleasure seeing you again, Annalise. I will collect you on Wednesday around 6 p.m. from your place."

"What are you talking about?"

"The City Hall gathering. I believe you are my date for the night."

"I never agreed to that!"

Devlin took hold of her hand. His silky lips left a feather-light kiss on her knuckles. "It would bring me much pleasure if you would attend."

Her cheeks heated, and she tore her hand out of his grasp. "I finished the statement. Please leave."

"Since it wasn't a 'no', I will see you on Wednesday, *Annalise*."

Against her will, her stomach did a somersault from the affectionate way he said her name. *Who is that man?*

11

UNDECIDED

Annalise peeled her eyes open to find she was still in the hospital bed. The unnerving smell of antiseptic and aloe-scented healing gel hung in the humidified air. She sat upright and looked around the room.

Mavel was sitting in the visitor's chair, his arms were folded and his chest rose and fell in slow succession. He was asleep, and she didn't plan on waking him up.

She slipped out from under the sheets. Her lilac hospital gown brushed her knees, tickling her. An ache in her shoulder remained, but she ignored it.

Taking another quick scan of the room, she spied the bathroom and padded along the smooth linoleum to it. After locking the door, one look in the mirror told her how bad she needed some make-up. Her porcelain skin had become pasty grey, her hair a tangled dark mess, and she was in desperate need of some minty toothpaste.

Annalise washed her face in the sink and combed her fingers through her hair, making it somewhat presentable. She rinsed her mouth a few times to get the awful aftertaste out. There was no way she was going to stay in the hospital another day, not when there was a murderer on the loose.

Back in her room, Mavel was already awake and flicking through the channels on the holo-screen.

“How can you always watch the news and nothing else?” she asked.

He stopped what he was doing. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.” She rushed over to the small white dresser and pulled out her garments.

Suddenly, Mavel’s hand gripped her wrist. “What are you doing?”

“I’m leaving this place. I’ve got work to do.”

He grabbed her clothes and shoved them back in the drawer. “You are suspended from work, and the doctor said you need to rest.”

“I can rest at home. You know I hate hospitals. Let’s get out of here, please?”

Mavel seemed torn. He gently brushed the bandages peeking out from the neckline of her gown. Hurt contorted his serious expression, and he sighed. “I will inform the nurse.”

When he left, she started changing. Taking the hospital gown off was the easy part. The material fell to her ankles, and she kicked it away. She carefully unfolded her trousers on the floor and attempted to put them on with one hand, which was like trying to solve a Rubik’s cube in less than a second. After the strenuous struggle, she managed to tug them on, and Mavel walked in.

She could only thank the maker that she had her bra on. Instead of doing what a gentleman would do—turning around—he drew close and lifted her shirt off the bed.

He held it open for her without another word.

Annalise faced away from him. Her cheeks caught fire as she stared at their reflection in the window. Ever since this case began, she had embarrassed herself in front of him more times in a single week than she had done in her lifetime. But, he remained unfazed as if none of it mattered.

Mavel helped her find her sleeves and pulled the material over her arms in a drawn out manner. The heat from his proximity sent tingles down her spine. He drew closer when her shirt covered her shoulders. From behind, his hot breath brushed her cheek.

“Is buttoning up going to be a problem for you?” he asked, and she couldn’t tell whether he was mocking her or truly wondering.

Annalise turned around. Her face was right below his. Two hooded silver eyes captured every detail of her startled expression. He closed the last inch of space between them, landing his soft lips on hers.

She opened her mouth, allowing his tongue entry and revelled in the exquisite sensations he dispensed on her with his tender caress. Unable to stop, she grasped his dark shirt, pulling him to her.

Mavel’s hands roamed her arms, mindful of her wound. His fingers tangled in her hair as he guided her head back to deepen their kiss.

Before she could fully enjoy herself, he moved away, and she let out a protesting moan. Unsated, she reached for him again, but he shook his head.

“Someone is coming,” he whispered.

“Oh...” She faced the window, noting that her shirt remained unbuttoned.

There was a knock on the door, and a nurse came into the room. “Hello, I have brought the patient’s release paperwork.”

While Annalise buttoned up, Mavel greeted the woman. She glanced over her shoulder as she finished with her last button.

“Miss Storm, I would like to inform you that your doctor wants to keep you here for a couple more days for observation. After you tore

your stitches open, there is a chance of a scar being left behind if you do not stay for the cellular regeneration treatment.”

“Perhaps you should stay,” Mavel said.

“Just give me the paperwork and whatever gels I have to apply to the wound. I’ll take full responsibility.”

The nurse sighed in defeat and handed over the digital tablet.

Annalise keyed in her citizen ID and pressed her finger to the fingerprint scanner. “There, all done.”

“I will arrange for your healing gel to be prepared. You can collect it at the pharmacy on the ground floor. Take care of yourself, Miss Storm.”

Once the nurse left the room, Mavel stepped closer. The concern on his face drove another pin into her already aching heart.

“I’m fine. It doesn’t hurt,” she lied.

He bobbed his head in acknowledgement and proceeded to open the door. He wasn’t dumb enough to trust her lie, but as long as he didn’t fight her on this, she was content.

On the ground floor, she collected her prescription and got in the car in an underground car park. Sitting in the passenger seat, she observed the concrete pillars around her until they were shooting through the streets of the Golden District.

Unconscious of her action, she touched her tingling lips. The sensation of his hot mouth on hers lingered there. She smiled. *No, this can’t be.* Shaking her head, she jerked her hand away and entwined her fingers between her thighs, so she wouldn’t do it again. A possibility of a relationship between them was an illusion. They could never be together in this society. She could be kicked out of the Golden District to live in the Bronze and lose her job at the DPD. He would lose his *servant* contract and would be unable to get into another one. Somehow, she could not imagine Mavel as a *worker*.

What if he felt something for me in return?

“We’re here, Anna.” Mavel’s voice brought her out of her inner turmoil.

She undid her seatbelt and got out of the car. In silence, they marched to the lift where she became aware of his every movement, his every breath, and the contours of his body. Annalise pouted. She needed to get her head out of the clouds.

They entered the apartment, and she asked, “So, what’s for lunch?”

“I was planning on making a salad with some of the vegetables I’m growing on the balcony unless you want something else?”

Mavel’s eyes bore into her, and she almost melted from their intensity. Here, they were alone. And, although that was the norm, this was the first time she felt her heartbeat thudding in her ears.

He touched the lock of her hair, and she flinched. Mavel chuckled. “Anna, don’t look so scared. I am not planning to devour you. What happened in the hospital was just a kiss—a friendly greeting.”

Her brows shot up. “Is that how to greet your friends?”

“Maybe not all of them.” He patted her on the head and disappeared into the kitchen.

Annalise stood stock-still, uncertain whether he was joking or not. She had never seen him with anyone else, but the way he didn’t shake Des off in the office gnawed at her confidence. Pursing her lips, she went into her room and dumped her medication on her desk.

Her stomach gave a loud rumble. Before returning to the living area, she took a bath and ran a comb through her wet hair. The food was already set on the kitchen island.

On the balcony, Mavel clutched the metal railing. He was on the phone, his expression pensive. After the call, he grabbed his jacket off the sofa. “Will you be alright by yourself? I have to go visit my mother. She’s not feeling well.”

“I’ll be fine. Go take care of her.”

His eyes examined her face, and he hurried out of the apartment.

For a long time, she sat there, staring at her food. Somehow, the hunger was replaced with worry for Mavel's mother. *Was she very sick?* His expression was too hard to read to ease her mind.

She forced a few bites of salad down her throat and decided to watch something on the holo-screen. The first channel that came on was a Divinity News broadcast. Whatever Devlin was doing was distressing the politicians as there were already rumours in the media about an ongoing investigation.

She turned the holo-display off and retired to her bedroom where she proceeded to read her case file. Good thing she had backed up the information before her suspension.

Close to 10 p.m., Mavel returned home. She flew out of her room to find him studying his boots.

"Is everything alright with your mother?"

He stripped out of his jacket and tossed it on the hanger. "She's better."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," he said, brushing past her. In the kitchen, he planted his mug under the coffee maker and turned the machine on.

She frowned. He'd never acted so distant. "Mavel, have I done something?"

He slammed his hands on the counter. The violent action made her want to jump out of her skin, but his pained expression tore her apart. The silver in his eyes became molten as she stood there mesmerised.

Her body warmed from his stare alone, and she couldn't fight the enigmatic effect.

In two long strides, he demolished the space between their bodies. The notion of their bodies together had immobilised her, unsure of how to react to the overwhelming feeling of belonging. How could something feel so perfect? Her hands moved to offer him comfort. Something was terribly wrong. Mavel's body was shaking but before she

could ask him what tormented him, his face moved as he exhaled against her skin and trailed feather-light kisses along the length of her slender neck.

She moved her head, allowing him to continue the sweet torment of her skin. Mavel took this as an invitation and nibbled on her earlobe. His warm breath shifted her fine hairs, tickling her in return. She struggled to contain her giggle, but it came out anyway, and he withdrew.

His gaze roamed her flushed face. “Why don’t you push me away, Anna?”

“I-I don’t know...”

He touched her cheek, and their gazes locked. “I am modded. It is best if you push me away or break the contract with me before things get out of hand.”

She blinked several times as his words gained meaning. Grief took over her soul, and she voiced the question she had hoped never to ask him. “Are you saying you want me to erase the contract with you?”

“I am saying that it may be for the best. You could lose your *pureblood* status.”

Her hands flew to her hips, and she winced when her shoulder muscles tugged on the wound. *What was he trying to do here? Did he so desperately want to be separated from me? Why do this all of a sudden?*

“Did your mother say something to you? Is that why you’re doing this?”

Mavel shook his head. “Anna—”

“Don’t call my name like that. It makes me think you’re going to leave. I am keeping this contract intact whether you like it or not!”

Breathing hard, she stormed back into her bedroom. Her stinging eyes were blurred with tears. She sniffled as she slid to the ground, her quivering legs no longer able to hold her full weight. Heartache caused by the thought of him leaving drove another dagger into her heart.

“Mavel, you idiot...”

12

PLUS ONE

The remaining two days of her suspension had crawled by at a snail's pace. Mavel spent most of his time out of the apartment, visiting his ill mother. The only time he was present in the room with her was to help her apply healing gel to her wound. When he was done, he always had an excuse to get away from her. Without her access to the updated case file, she sat on the couch with her legs tucked underneath her and silently glowered at his bedroom door.

That morning, he made her breakfast and left to get changed. It had been twenty minutes, and he hadn't come out. Yes, he was avoiding her like a biological hazard.

The doorbell chimed, and Annalise sluggishly sauntered over to the door. She glanced at the screen to find her mother, Regina Storm, with her dark brown hair tied in a braided bun on top of her head and her hazel eyes eyeing the camera.

"Open up, Annalise," she said.

Sighing, Annalise pressed the release button on the lock.

Regina glided into her apartment in her red suit. A politician's wife had to wear the best to reflect her husband's status, or that was what her family drilled into her since she was a child.

Her mother turned on her high heels which made her slightly taller than Annalise. She outstretched her arms and engulfed her daughter in a restricting hug, in turn, tugging at her healing stitches.

A sharp pain shot through her shoulder. "Mother, stitches..."

"I'm so sorry, darling!" Regina released her at once. "So, it's true. You got shot. Do you wish to continue pursuing such a dangerous career? If you keep getting scars on your body, no man will want you." Her mother searched her face for a weakness Annalise wasn't about to show.

"Take a seat in the living room, Mother. I'll make you something to drink, but I have to leave in fifteen."

Regina's eyes watered. "You know we worry about you. What if you had died? Do you know how upset we would have been?"

Against her will, she felt a pang of guilt. When her mother cried, it could last for hours, and Annalise didn't have time to stay here and comfort her. She pulled her mother into an awkward hug. "I'm fine. I didn't die and probably won't for a while."

Regina scoffed. "*Probably won't*... What kind of reassurance is that?"

"Alright. I will stay alive no matter what. Does that please you?" Annalise asked, releasing her. "Coffee?"

Her mother bobbed her head and went to sit on the couch. "Where is your *beast*?"

Annalise inwardly groaned while she prepared her mother's drink. Regina was spending too much time with her father's friends. Their distrust for the modded seemed to be rubbing off on her and everything that moved around them. "Mavel is in his room, getting changed. Why?"

Regina's attention flickered to his door for a second. "No reason. It's unusual for him to not be by your side. Perhaps it is for the best—"

Annalise's eyes narrowed. "What are you implying?"

Her mother didn't get a chance to answer as Mavel walked into the living area. He lowered his head in respect. "How are you, Mrs Storm?"

Regina's lips stretched into a smile that did not reach her eyes. "I'm doing fine. Just came to make sure my daughter's well."

He pointed at the door. "I will wait for you downstairs, mistress."

Mavel left, and Annalise stood there staring at the space where he was only a moment ago. *Does he want me to break the contract this badly? Is that why he's acting this way?*

"I see you are busy with work, darling, so I will come back another time," Regina said, rising from her seat. "Ah, before I forget, your father wanted me to remind you about the party on Wednesday."

I get shot, and he doesn't bother to call me to ask how I am, but he sends my mother in to remind me to attend a pointless political party. Typical...

Annalise checked her wrist comms and let out a faux gasp. "I got to run, Mother. Your coffee is on the counter. Close the door behind you when you leave." She waved her goodbye and ran out of the apartment after grabbing her jacket, not stopping to hear Regina's response.

As the floor numbers decreased on the lift's panel, her mind was occupied with the way Mavel behaved. Had her father or mother said something to make him want to break the contract or did he simply wish to quit being her *servant*?

She scratched her head, making her hair stand with static. She flattened it with her palms as the doors slid open.

Instead of waiting for her as he had promised, Mavel was already behind the wheel.

Annalise climbed inside the car. "We need to talk."

He shifted in his seat and waited with a guarded expression she couldn't understand.

“Why are you acting this way? You’re distant as if you no longer want to be my—” She paused. The term ‘*servant*’ stuck in her throat. “A part of my life.”

She couldn’t tell what was going on behind that perfect blank mask of his. He bent towards her, and she automatically scooted, pressing her back against the car door. He didn’t stop his advance until his handsome face was only two inches away.

Annalise unconsciously nibbled on her lower lip which was eagerly anticipating contact.

“This is precisely why I should leave, Anna. You don’t run from me, and you don’t push me away. If I was anyone else, I would have taken advantage of you,” he snapped, retreating.

She sucked in a deep breath, but it felt like there was no air left in the car. His words clicked in her mind and her hands balled into fists. Anger extinguished any excitement her body craved. She grasped the collar of his shirt. “Are you saying I’m easy? Is that what you see me as?”

He caught her wrist and wrapped his free arm around her waist. With one strong jerk, she was hoisted onto his lap. Her wounded shoulder voiced a complaint in a form of a dull ache when his lips found hers. He plunged his tongue inside her mouth, and she let him consume her in a hungry kiss.

Everywhere he touched, her body grew hot. His deft fingers undid the first few buttons of her shirt, and he trailed kisses along her neck to her chest.

“Mavel...” she whispered his name like a velvet caress. The fire in her was carried all the way to her soul. She didn’t want their contact to come to an end.

He ran his tongue along the edges of her bra. His hands roamed her waist, and she closed her eyes, revelling in the pleasurable sensations.

When his hand brushed the hooks of her bra, he tensed and withdrew as far as the seat would permit him. With hooded silver eyes, he studied

her—eyes she wanted to watch only her and no one else. His ragged breaths told her she wasn't the only one affected by this.

“This is precisely what I was talking about, Anna. I want you, right here and now. I can barely keep myself contained, but I won't touch you again. Not until you are certain you want this. Not until you ask me.”

He helped her slide back into her seat and started the car. She was still itching for more contact, but he was right. She never went beyond kissing with men. Going further would change everything. She had to accept him and the possible implications that came with the act. After all, he was modded, and she was a pureblood. Could she sacrifice her lifestyle and jeopardise every relationship she built over the years for a night with the man she loved?



They got to the DPD, and she marched to the Chief's office, stopping on the way to greet the other two detectives and their partners. Annalise knocked on the door and entered without waiting for him to call her.

Mavel chose to wait with the others.

Chief sighed heavily when he saw her. “It's Sunday. Why are you even here?”

She smirked. “You said I'm off the case for three days. It's been just that. Now give me back my badge and case, sir.”

“Are you still set on catching Dawson?” he asked with a stony expression.

“I am.”

Shaking his head, he opened his desk drawer and retrieved her gun and badge. His cold stare reverted to her. “One mistake and you're off the case, Storm. Understood?”

She gathered her items and beamed at him. Although he came across as an ass, he seemed to care a great deal about his detectives, and she was beginning to like him.

Not waiting any longer, she strode over to Jamen's desk. "I'm back on the Fern case in Bronze. Could you transfer all the data to my terminal?"

"AID will reactivate your account in the next five minutes," he replied.

Things were already looking up. With a skip in her step, she aimed for her desk and stopped midstride. Wary, she glanced over her shoulder at her superior. "By the way, how do you know Devlin?"

"From the Falcon Group?" he asked, not lifting his gaze from his terminal. "We worked on a case together."

"You didn't seem too happy with him looking into our case," she pointed out, recalling how he acted at the hospital.

Jamen crossed his arms and met her curious stare. "I can like or dislike whomever I want, Storm. For example, I hate nosy newbies. You got your case back, get on with it. Just don't forget to report your location to me at all times. I've been assigned to a missing and possibly possessed *servant* in Silver, so I can't babysit you any longer."

He dismissed her by returning to his work, and Annalise retreated to her empty desk. She logged into her terminal and scanned Robert's case file for any updates. Dawson was a person of interest now. He seemed to be the last person in contact with Leila and could also be responsible for Robert's death, but that was mere speculation on her part. She had to talk to the widow again.

Annalise checked her comms. It was 9:27 a.m. She typed in Mrs Fern's number into the comms and put in her earpiece.

"Who is it?" Mrs Fern asked.

"It's Detective Storm. I'm in charge of your husband's case. Would you have time to answer some questions today?"

There was a long pause. "Yes, I will be home in an hour."

“Great.”

Annalise searched the room for Mavel. They had to leave now if they wanted to get to Bronze in time.

He stood next to Des who had draped her arm around his waist. Rios’ *beast* snuggled up to him, pressing her breasts into his arm. She winked at Annalise when she noticed her openly glaring in their direction. With a wide grin and a sashay of her hips, Des pulled Mavel towards Annalise’s desk.

Annalise’s jaw ached. *What was he doing letting her cling to him after what happened earlier?*

“You could order him to not let her get near him,” a voice in her head suggested. Immediately, she dismissed it. She wasn’t going to throw orders at Mavel just because she hated seeing him next to another woman. With Des, he could have a normal relationship whereas with her it would be constant hiding and pretences.

The duo arrived at her desk. Des separated from Mavel and eyed Annalise’s terminal. A frown surfaced on her face as she stared at the screen.

“Do you see something you like?” Annalise asked, tapping her foot.

“I can’t place it, but it feels as if I’ve seen this man before...”

Unable to hold back her words, Annalise snapped, “What? During one of your evening strolls through the Red District?”

“Anna!” Mavel raised his voice, and she folded her arms.

The fact that he was defending Des made her want to add a couple more colourful terms.

Des smirked. “I wouldn’t go for someone as old as this guy, although I wouldn’t mind getting some action with Mavel here.” She ran her fingers down his chest. “I’ll leave the offer on the table, big boy.” She winked and joined Rios at his desk.

As always, he had his sleeping mask on, oblivious to everything around him.

Mavel tapped Annalise on the shoulder, drawing her attention to him.

She didn't want to look at him after what happened but had little choice in the matter. So, she schooled her face into a blank. "What is it?"

"Don't we have to be somewhere? I doubt you were looking for me without a reason."

Annalise slapped her hand to her forehead. She almost forgot about the meeting with the widow.



In the end, Mrs Fern didn't know anything about Dawson or his possible connection to Robert. Annalise spent the next two days cursing the responses from Dawson's lawyers. He wasn't available for any interviews unless there was conclusive evidence of his involvement, which she still didn't have.

Without her noticing, Wednesday arrived. Back at her apartment, she pouted. "You want me to wear *that* to the party?" Annalise pointed to a teal cocktail dress that would hug everything that was dear to her. At least, it had half-sleeves, so her wounded shoulder would remain out of sight.

"You will never get a man if you behave the way you do, Annalise. Put it on and let's get you ready," her mother ordered and grabbed her shoulders, pushing her into the bedroom.

Annalise shot a pleading look to Mavel who was reading news articles on his tablet with his feet propped up on the coffee table. He smirked and waved goodbye to her. *Traitor.*

Her shoulders sagged, and she let her mother help her squeeze into the dress. Regina curled Annalise's hair, making her shoulder-length

raven hair even shorter. She applied make-up Annalise rarely bothered to wear.

Staring at her reflection in the vanity, she made a face. Although disgruntled on the outside, she couldn't help but wonder if Mavel would find this new appearance attractive.

After putting on a pair of matching heels Regina had procured for her, they left the bedroom to find Mavel gone.

Regina patted her on the head. "There, there, it will only be for tonight. It's not as if your father asks you to attend every party. Plus, you will have a handsome man at your side."

She had forgotten about Devlin being her date for the night. "Why exactly is he the one I'm going with?"

Regina smiled. "Don't look so scared. He is a nice man and a gentleman at heart. It's hard to find people like him these days. Even your father respects him."

"And why would he respect someone half his age?"

The doorbell rang, alarming them. Regina unlocked the door, and Annalise held her breath.

Devlin strode into her apartment in a charcoal tuxedo that fitted him to perfection. He wore a pleasant smile, and his blue eyes widened a fraction when he saw her. When her mother turned away, he winked at her.

Is he making fun of me? She didn't know. Just as she only knew this stranger's name and the fact he worked for some kind of secret police. As she approached her mother, Devlin offered her his arm.

Annalise eyed it and looped her arm through his.

"It was a pleasure, Mrs Storm," Devlin said.

"Take good care of her and ignore anything rude that comes out of her mouth, I beg you," her mother said quickly.

Annalise gaped at her. "I'm not rude!"

Her mother shook her head, and Devlin stifled a laugh. All of a sudden, she wanted to kick him in the shin and let him go to the party without a plus one.

13

A DANCE FOR INFORMATION

Divinity's City Hall was a cultural masterpiece one could ponder about for days. It wasn't because the dome-like roof was made of solid gold or the fact the architects designed it to be a perfect circle like an ancient Colosseum. Lies and false pretences were the true reasons why she disliked this work of art. It made her question whether these people believed the rubbish they spouted on a daily basis. To this day, she couldn't understand why her father chose to become a politician. *Is there some unknown joy these men and women receive from constant arguing and backstabbing?*

Devlin offered her his arm after his red sports car automatically drove off to park.

Annalise accepted it, feeling the muscles beneath her palm rippling. She did her best not to think about it.

He guided her up the steps to the security office where they scanned their wrist comms, confirming their invitations. With a flash of a smile to the staff, he led the way through the marble halls to the grand ballroom. Amidst the gold and dark wood décor, classical music from the nineteenth century was played by the orchestra. Who would have thought the composers of the old would still be popular among the rich and powerful today?

Devlin paused with her at the entrance and studied her as if she were a precious gemstone on display.

“What?”

He leant in and brushed her hair behind her ear. His woody cologne replaced the stench of cigars that the politicians puffed in the corner. “I believe you are the most beautiful woman here tonight.”

Her stomach did a backflip at his whispered compliment. Struggling to keep a straight face, she pressed her lips together. “Then maybe you need to get your eyes tested as I see plenty of beautiful women here.”

He chuckled, leading her through the crowd. Forced pleasantries were shared between the wives of the political opponents. Annalise hoped she wouldn’t need to spend time with them. They never stopped asking about her opinions on shoes or trying to get her to join in on some maddeningly boring venture for media exposure.

A group of people parted for her father to pass. “Annalise, I see that you have arrived.”

She snapped out of her imaginary nightmare just to be pushed into hell itself.

“Devlin, how are you enjoying the evening?” her father asked.

Devlin smiled, and they shook hands. “It is a pleasure to see you, Will, as it is a pleasure to escort your gorgeous daughter today.”

Annalise tried extracting herself from him, but his biceps flexed, keeping her hand trapped between his chest and arm.

Her father's eyes sparkled with interest, and she could tell he was already planning some kind of deal with her as the bargaining chip.

"I'll go get something to drink." Annalise yanked her hand out of Devlin's hold and walked over to one of the caterers who held a tray full of wine glasses. She selected her glass and, taking one whiff of the fragrant drink, she downed the contents in one mouthful. After she returned an empty glass, she studied her surroundings. She recognised a few politicians her father spent a lot of time with and a couple he cursed behind their backs. Her eyes lingered on a man in an expensive black tuxedo with gelled back light-brown hair. The ends of his locks brushed his shoulders as he spoke animatedly to someone. She squinted—a hint of recognition pricking the back of her mind. His face was hidden, and it bothered her for some reason. Next to him, a shorter, much older man listened carefully to every word. She had no trouble recognising him. He was a spokesperson as well as a pro-modded political activist, James Steinberg.

She headed their way and was stopped by a heavy hand catching her elbow.

"Where are you going?" Devlin asked.

Annalise pointed in the direction of Steinberg, but he and the other man were gone. She manufactured a smile. "I am contemplating the idea of getting into one of those never-ending conversations with these women, you?"

He took her hand and led her away from the ballroom, earning a few curious stares from the gossipmongers.

"Where are we going?" she demanded, trying to balance on her heels.

He didn't reply and, soon after, they left the party and entered someone's private office.

Devlin led her to a chair and pointed to it. "Please take a seat, Annalise."

She crossed her arms. *Now* he wanted to act like a gentleman after dragging her across the room full of people. “I’ll stand. Thanks.”

Devlin took a seat in the adjacent leather chair. His blue eyes roamed her body as if she was some kind of prize. She couldn’t read what went on behind the half-smirk he wore on his chiselled face. It unnerved her.

“Why are we in here?”

He retrieved a data chip from his pocket. “I believe you may find this interesting. It is important information for your investigation into Dawson.”

Her mouth almost watered at the possibility of getting past those pesky lawyers Dawson surrounded himself with. She closed the distance between them and reached for the chip.

He moved it away. “I have one condition.”

Her eyes narrowed and her excitement shrunk back into its box. “What condition?”

Devlin rose from the chair in one fluid motion and proceeded to tuck one of her curled locks behind her ear. His warm fingers brushed her skin—a simple touch to which she should have had no reaction. Yet, her heart betrayed her by kicking into overdrive.

“Provided you grant me a dance tonight, *Annalise*,” he said in a husky voice.

Her knees almost gave way from the passion and intensity he filled her name with. She sucked in a breath which was harder to do than she expected when faced with his powerful chest so close to her face. Fighting her indecent thoughts, she managed to maintain eye contact. “Why?”

“I find you intriguing. You are not a typical woman who talks just to sate the need to fill the void.” He lifted her chin. “And your eyes speak to me of your hidden suppressed urges. I love that in a woman.”

She swallowed to dampen her dry throat. He was hitting on her and, for some reason, she couldn’t push him away.

Devlin offered the data chip to her again. “A dance for information, do we have a deal?”

Nibbling on her lower lip, she weighed his offer in her mind. Should she let him get closer to her than he was? Her parents seemed to like him, and she couldn’t find a single fault in the way he acted or talked.

She grabbed the chip out of his hand. “Fine. Let’s dance.”

Devlin smiled, revealing small dimples in his cheeks that she found to be as enthralling as his eyes. He snaked his arm around her waist, and they returned to the ballroom where the conversations about the upcoming modded voting campaign were almost as loud as the music.

He stopped in the middle of the dance floor amidst four other couples who were dancing to the slow melody. Devlin drew her close enough for their chests to brush.

The scent of his cologne took away her worries as he took the lead. As they swayed to the soft undertones of the violin and the soothing melody of the piano, he nudged her closer to him until she could feel his heartbeat. She had to lock her attention on his bowtie because she was afraid he would notice her blushing face. Why did this man bring her such comfort when he was nothing more than a stranger?

Once the song ended, his wrist comms beeped. He sighed and kissed the back of her hand.

“It was a pleasure to dance with you tonight, but I must excuse myself. It would seem I have work to do. It pains me that I did not get a chance to see you home.” He seemed to mean every word. Devlin crossed the room to a dark-skinned man in a navy bespoke suit. They talked in hushed tones, and Devlin’s smile faded. He ushered the man out of the room, and both of them disappeared.

With her date being no longer around, she had a reason to return home. She stole a quick glance at her father. He was deep in conversation with someone. Smirking, she marched towards the way out

when someone grabbed her hand and turned her on the spot. Upon impact, she got a face full of a broad chest wrapped in a black tuxedo.

She found Mavel staring back at her and her complaint stuck in her throat. His eyes were brown which meant he was using the black market's contacts prohibited by the government. If he was caught with them or someone here found out what he was, he would be jailed in an instant.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered so only he could hear.

Mavel moved with the melody, leaving her with no choice but to follow his lead.

"Answer me. Why are you here?"

He let go of her waist and twirled her on the spot. A second later, she was propelled back into his hard body. "I was invited, of course. A friend of my mother's asked to see me. Why? Did I ruin your date?"

Annalise glowered at him. "You didn't ruin my date. He left to do some work."

"So, if he didn't leave, you would keep clinging to him?"

She scoffed. What right did he have to be jealous after what he did in the office with Des? She pushed him away, separating from his hold. "I am going home."

As she marched through the ballroom, she heard him calling out her name, but she was too angry to stop. It didn't take long for him to catch up.

Stupid heels.

They left the building and the cool evening air populated her skin with gooseflesh. She shivered, wrapping her arms around her sides for stray warmth.

Mavel shrugged out of his jacket and draped it around her shoulders, drowning her in the cosy material that almost reached her knees. Even his fleeting kindness didn't stop her from spearing him with her best death stare. He wasn't taking the hint or simply chose to ignore it.

He took her hand and guided her down the steps, heading in the direction of the garage.

“I can take a cab,” she said.

He scowled at her. “Stop bickering with me and let me take you home. If you want me to leave afterwards, I will.”

A chill ran through her and it had nothing to do with the cold air. When they entered the garage, darkness engulfed him. She tugged on his sleeve, and he turned towards her. His facial expression was concealed by the shadows.

“Mavel, I don’t want you to leave. You’ve been a part of my life for so long, I can’t imagine it without you. But, you’re right. I cannot sacrifice everything just yet.” Annalise lifted her eyes to meet his, or, at least, she guessed that was where his eyes would have been. The fact she couldn’t see them made her want to pull him an extra inch forwards into the light. “Mavel?”

He cupped her cheek. His touch was pleasant and warm, much like his jacket around her shoulders. “I want to be by your side forever, Anna, but we don’t know where the future will bring us. I just wanted you to know that.”

The heat from his hand vanished, and she mentally battled the need to cling to him.



During the silent drive home, she toyed with the data chip Devlin gave her. The minute they arrived at the apartment, Mavel helped her out of his jacket, and she ran over to the terminal in her room. She let the scanner scan the contents of the chip and a video feed filled her screen.

“What is that?” Mavel asked, joining her.

She jumped in her seat. He must have followed her into her room. Annalise pointed at the data chip. “Devlin said it can help me bring Dawson down.”

His expression hardened, and she activated the video. It must have been shot with a secret camera as the angle the recorded footage was at eye-level rather than from above.

On her screen, a naked woman appeared cuffed to the wall in an all too familiar Millennium Suite of the Macabre club. The woman turned her face towards the camera, and Annalise’s heart fell through her stomach—it was Robert’s *beast*. Her silver eyes glistened with tears as she struggled to break free.

Dawson smacked her across the face with a police baton. Usually, *beast* women did not bruise easily, but the force behind his swing left an imprint on her cheek.

Mavel let out of growl. When Annalise glanced over her shoulder, his body radiated pure hatred. His eyes—no longer hidden by the contacts—burned with fire she’d never seen. At the same time, his handsome face contorted with disgust.

Growing nauseated, Annalise faced the screen again and balled her hands in her lap.

“Please, let me go,” Leila pleaded. Her voice was hoarse and raw, possibly from long hours of screaming that no one could hear.

Dawson hit her repeatedly until her screaming turned to whimpers, which was when he took off his shirt.

Annalise paused the feed. Battery acid climbed her throat, but she did her best to think of boring chores to avoid ruining her carpet. After a minute, her stomach settled. She skipped thirty minutes ahead and pressed play.

In the next scene, Leila faced the wall.

How many days was she in there for?

Dawson pulled up his trousers and proceeded to button up his shirt. Annalise heard her voice on the recording and the events played out in the same manner as the night she was shot.

“I am going to kill that bastard,” Mavel said through gritted teeth.

Annalise grasped him around the waist and held on for her dear life. “You can’t! We can show this to the Chief, and he will get us a warrant for Dawson’s arrest.”

Mavel’s body tensed. He pulled her arms apart with little effort. “Purebloods will simply jail him for a year, maybe two, or he will do some community service if his lawyers are any good. How is that justice for his actions?”

“Mavel, please...”

He slammed his fist into her bedroom door. It flew off its hinges, crashing with a loud smack against the floorboards. “Don’t tell me you agree with this!”

“I don’t, but the law states—”

“The law made by *purebloods*! Laws we, the modded, are forced to obey even though they obviously do not protect us!”

She had nothing to say to that. He was right. Their laws were designed to protect only the pureblooded. The modded were *servants*, *workers*, or simply dirt under their shoe in the eyes of many. They did not deserve to have rights according to those in the Golden or Silver Districts. It tore at her heart, but she could do nothing. Her hands were tied.

Mavel turned on his heel and stomped out of her room.

“Where do you think you are going?”

“To kill that bastard!”

Her heart turned to ice and stinging words left her mouth. “I order you to stop, Mavel!”

ALL THINGS COMPLICATED

They stared at one another in a silent battle of wills. If he walked away from her command, they both knew what it meant. Inside, she shook like a leaf and her palms dampened. He wouldn't leave her now, would he?

She finally said, "You can't go. We must follow protocol."

He averted his gaze and stormed into his room, slamming the door behind him.

Annalise tumbled where she stood as if her energy was sucked out of her body. Her chest hurt, but if she hadn't pulled rank, he would have done something much more terrible than destroying her bedroom door. She stumbled into her room and collapsed on the bed.



Annalise appeared in the Millennium Suite. Leila's soft sobs came from her cuffed form by the wall, and Annalise ran to her on instinct. But, no matter how hard she tried to reach the bound woman, she never got closer to her destination. She was restricted by a pair of strong arms that wrapped around her, holding her in place. She craned her neck to see her captor and gasped. Dawson's bodyguard had returned.

A scream tore out of her mouth. As she struggled, his hold did not waver. He clamped his hand on top of her head and forced her to watch Leila.

The beast's body was painted in blues, purples, and greens—bruises inflicted on her in this room.

"Leila," Annalise cried out.

Their gazes locked.

A sorrowful smile spread across Leila's lips. "Tell Robert I love him." The light in her eyes faded. She sagged in her restraints, and Annalise knew she had passed away.

Blood started trickling from the walls and ceiling and, soon after, it poured as if someone had left the taps open upstairs.

When she glanced down, she was no longer restrained. The bodyguard vanished as fast as he appeared. She waded through the crimson river that brushed her knees, aiming for the sole door.

The handle wouldn't budge. She twisted and yanked at the smooth brass, each time with more strength.

Nothing.

Her heart was in her throat. Annalise scanned the room for a solid object to help her break it. The cool liquid brushed her thighs, and she balled her hands. There had to be something she could use to open this door.

The furniture vanished with the levels of rising blood. Leila's unbound corpse floated to the surface and drifted over. Two vacant eyes watched Annalise and a sob escaped her. "I'm so sorry..."

She shot up, gasping for air and wrinkling the material of her sweaty dress with her fisted hand. It was still dark outside.

She clapped her hands, activating the lights. The image of Robert's *beast*, bloodied and lifeless, haunted her. She didn't know what to do with these nightmares. A psych evaluation now could get her suspended from the case again. She couldn't let that happen. Dawson had to be punished for what he had done, but Mavel's words resurfaced. Being imprisoned for two years was not enough for a monster like him.

What if he has abused more modded women while in power?

Annalise climbed out of her bed and stripped out of her damp clothing. After a quick shower, she changed into a nightgown and headed for the kitchen. Her throat was dry. She massaged it as she entered the hallway. Her attention focused on Mavel's room. Usually, he would burst in at the first signs of distress. Tonight, he left her alone.

He must be still mad at me. Her heart squeezed as she poured a glass of water. Glancing at the time, she had three hours before work started. She flicked on the news.

"...a pro-modded activist, Mr James Steinberg, was found dead at the City Hall. His body was discovered by the cleaning staff after the typically uneventful annual ball ended..." the male reporter said.

Mavel was with Steinberg at the party. She saw them together. For much-needed support, she clutched the kitchen island as a sick sensation pooled in the pit of her stomach.

No, this can't be right. She shook her head. *This isn't possible.*

"Anna, why are you awake? Are you unwell?" Mavel said behind her.

The glass in her hand slid out, smashing into pieces. The water splashed her bare legs and feet, making her jump back.

Mavel pushed her further out of the way. "Be careful, you'll cut yourself."

Annalise studied his every move as he piled the jagged pieces into his large palm and threw them into the sink. He tidied the mess in no time and stood in front of her.

She pressed her back further against the kitchen counter.

“Why are you acting like this?” he asked.

“Steinberg’s dead.”

He squeezed his eyes shut and faced away, grabbing the kitchen island for support like she had done earlier.

“Mavel?”

His chest rose and fell with his heaving breaths and his fingers dug into the wood hard enough for his knuckles to go pale. “When did this happen?”

She immediately dismissed him as a suspect. A killer would not behave as if they had lost a friend. They would shrug it off or display false concern. Was he close with Steinberg?

“A couple of hours ago,” she said, pointing at the holo-screen.

Mavel’s face grew expressionless as he read the news report.

She didn’t know what to do, so she remained in place.

When he finished, he closed the distance between them. “We must get this case, Anna. I need to find the one who did this.”

“We can’t request a new case when we are still in the middle of one.”

“I think this case is related to ours.”

“What makes you say that?”

Mavel took her hand and led her to the couch. He seated her next to him and looked at her full of determination. “When I talked to Steinberg at the party, he mentioned knowing Robert Fern, but didn’t say how.”

“What dealings would Steinberg have with someone from Bronze?”

“Could be anything. Maybe their kids went to the same academy in Silver or something else entirely.”

“We need to find out how Steinberg died. If it’s the same way Robert did, we can ask Chief to hand it over to us.”

Mavel stood. “Be ready to leave in ten.”

She scrambled out of her seat and ran into her room. Soon after, she was changed into a shirt and a pair of black trousers. She even found a

spare minute to brush her hair. A wide smile tugged at her lips. *We can finally go back to normal.*

At her desk, her hand hesitated over the data chip Devlin had given her the previous night. Was giving the chip to their Chief the right thing to do?



They arrived at the HPD. Rios and Jamen were both in the Chief's office. Calla and Des stood outside the door, whispering. The women saw them approaching, and Des waved.

Dark circles rimmed Calla's red eyes as she shifted from side to side. "You couldn't sleep either?"

"We found out about Steinberg on the news. Why are Rios and Jamen in the office?" Annalise asked.

Des pointed her thumb over her shoulder. "Rios had to drag his ass here from under some chick he scored because Sunderland called. I didn't get to finish getting my tattoo either." She lifted her grey tank top, revealing her flat stomach that had a large scorpion drawn on it. Only half of the scorpion's tail seemed to be coloured in. The rest of it was like a cartoon outline.

Annalise pushed past them. "I'm going in." She opened the door and marched inside. Three pairs of eyes locked on her, bringing out her nervous smile. "I heard about Steinberg."

Chief Sunderland sighed and waved for her to join the others gathered around his desk.

She found a space between Rios' tall frame and James' muscular one.

"Judging by the photographs of the crime scene and the data provided to us," Chief said, "it would appear he was torn in half by a *beast*."

She narrowed her eyes. "And?"

“We’ve watched the security feed, Storm. You were at the party with Mavel,” Jamen added.

Annalise crossed her arms. She needed to create some kind of barrier between her and these three. “What are you implying? That he got possessed, killed Steinberg, and then what? He drove me home like nothing happened? That’s not how possession works and you know it.”

“From his physical records, he didn’t need to get a boost from being possessed to tear a man apart, but it’s a card we’re playing to keep the case in our department,” Chief explained.

Her jaw dropped. “Are you seriously trying to pin this on Mavel?”

The men stared at her as if it was the obvious solution.

“Take his prints and DNA samples if you like. You won’t find him anywhere near Steinberg’s body!” she hissed.

Chief shot Jamen a silent order, and the detective said, “I will get right on it.”

Rios gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Chill. It has to be a misunderstanding.”

“Or someone is trying to pin this on my partner,” she snapped and threw the data chip on the Chief’s desk. “This is the evidence to prove Dawson was in Macabre on the night I was shot. Before you go pointing your fingers at *beasts*, why don’t you have a look at the men you protect.” She spun on her heels and burst out of the room.

Halfway across the office, she stopped. Mavel wasn’t following her. She scanned the room, but he wasn’t around the others.

She rushed to Des who was trying to balance a stylus on her nose. “Where did Jamen take him?”

Des shot her an apologetic look. “To a containment cell for the time being.”

“There is nothing to prove his guilt!”

Rios cleared his throat, and Annalise glowered at him.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m sure he didn’t do it. It’s only a precaution.”

She stabbed her finger into his chest. “How many *beasts* over the years got out of those cells once they became a suspect in a case?”

Rios looked away and blood drained from her face. This wasn’t good. If Mavel was a suspect, she couldn’t protect him.

“Who is in charge of Steinberg’s case?” she asked.

“Jamen and Calla. She will have to use her abilities on Mavel to make sure he is telling the truth during the interrogation.”

“And Sunderland agreed to that?”

Rios gave her a lopsided smile. “He ordered it. It’s that or Mavel doesn’t get out of containment. This way, we can be sure.”

Her shoulders shook, and she buried her face in her hands, puffing out hot breaths in silent rage.

“It will be alright,” Des whispered, hugging Annalise from behind.

That was the first time Des had offered a kind word to her and it was also the first time Annalise prayed she was right.

15

SEVEN DAYS

What would it be like to see someone she cared about from the other side of the one-way mirror? Her brain struggled with the idea. This had to be another nightmare. The Divinity PD had no right to blame her *servant* for any of this. He was her *beast*, and she was responsible for him and his actions.

Chief stood next to her in the observation room. He didn't want her anywhere near this interrogation. Because of that, she had to beg to be able to oversee the questioning. And since Mavel was technically her property, Chief complied somewhere between her crying her eyeballs out and shouting obscenities at him.

The door opened, and Mavel walked into the grey room beyond the glass. Although his hands were bound with titanium cuffs, his head was held high. As if sensing her, his eyes sought her through the mirror. The second their gazes locked, her heart stilled for a beat. The moment

didn't last long. Mavel was forced into a seat by Jamen, breaking their eye contact.

The last person to enter the interrogation room was Calla who closed the door behind her.

Jamen settled into an available chair across the table from Mavel. "As you are well-educated in our protocol, I will get straight to business. You know your rights. Chief wants you to let Calla use her abilities to make sure you're not lying to us."

"No."

Jamen's brows raised a notch. "What?"

"I don't want a *flare* toying with my emotions. The answer is no."

"Didn't you say he had nothing to hide?" Chief asked.

Annalise bit the inside of her lip and watched her *beast*. It would be easier if he allowed Calla to do her job, so they could get out of here. Declining the procedure was putting more suspicion on him. Yet, after her run-in with a *flare* at the Macabre, she never wanted another one near her.

Calla rested her back against the padded wall, her eyes burning red. "You're not helping yourself here. Just let me in."

Mavel glared at her. "Touch me and I'll rip your head off."

She giggled. "You could try."

Blood drained from Annalise's face. *What is happening? Why is Mavel acting this way?*

Jamen shifted forwards with his left hand resting firmly on his knee and the other on the table. His expression grew cold and unreadable. "I don't appreciate you talking to her like that, *beast*."

Sitting back in his seat, Mavel said nothing. No shred of emotion marred his face. It was as if he'd become a blank sheet of paper—a stranger she had come to see more of during the past week.

Jamen must have taken his silence as compliance. He activated his wrist comms and the table lit with a holo-projection of Steinberg's crime scene.

The 3D miniaturised replication made Annalise's stomach churn. Although she couldn't smell it, her mind re-created the stench of rotting meat from Robert Fern's front lawn. Steinberg wore the same clothes she recognised from the party. His tuxedo was torn in places as if a wild animal had attacked him. His body was split in the middle—exactly like Robert's.

Steinberg's torso rested on an office chair. His intestines hung like vines, some of which fell onto the green carpet. Blood painted everything from the floor and the mahogany panelling. A long, drying, scarlet trail crossed the floor as if the victim had crawled to the seat before someone had helped him up. His legs lay discarded by the door where the trail began, about ten feet away from the desk.

Annalise's hand flew to her mouth. She stomped down the climbing bile by swallowing and focused on Mavel's face. For a second, she saw sadness in his eyes before he concealed his emotions with a poker face.

Jamen activated a pulse reader, scanning everyone present. "Did you know the victim?"

Mavel didn't add anything and just stared at the crime scene, searching for something.

"I asked you a question!" Jamen snapped. "Answer or you will become a pile of ash by midnight."

A smirk spread across Mavel's face. "Do you think I care about that? I've already accepted the fact you'll pin this on me, no matter my response."

"Don't make it sound like we're not looking for the culprit," Jamen said, deactivating the holo-projection. "If you answered the damn questions, we could stop wasting our time here."

Mavel sighed. "I met Steinberg for the first time at the party. I was invited by him. I did not kill him, but whoever did this is related to our case."

The pulse detector remained level, indicating he was saying the truth.

Chief glanced at her with an unvoiced question.

"He's right," she said. "Our first victim had been split down the middle in exactly the same way."

He scratched at his stubble, seemingly pondering her words.

"Whoever the real culprit is, he obviously wants a *beast* to take the fall. You must know that Mavel didn't do it!"

Sunderland's steely eyes met hers. "You are being emotional, Storm. You cannot see things clearly where you are. But, you've got a point. If these two deaths are related, our unit could be dancing to a well-planned tune. At the same time, we have no choice but to inform the press that we have a *beast* in custody. This is a high profile case, after all."

"What?"

"If they want us to play the game, we have to make them think we are doing so to catch them."

Her face heated with pent-up anger. "Mavel might be incinerated for something he didn't do."

"I'll do my best to push the date as far as possible which is why I suggest you and Jamen figure out who is behind this. You have a week at best to do so."

She gaped at her superior. He was willing to play with Mavel's life as if he was nothing more than a chess piece on the board.

"Get on with it, Storm. You don't have much time."

It took all of her willpower to contain the barrage of insults she wanted to unleash. Clamping her jaw shut, she trapped her heavy tongue in her mouth. She speared him with a glare and rushed out of the room.



At the office, no one was around. Des and Rios must have left to chase a lead. She activated her terminal and clicked on the files related to Robert's death. Chief and Mavel were right. Someone was toying with them and wanted to blame these incidents on a *beast*. If it was Dawson, she had to find enough evidence to put his sorry ass behind bars for the rest of his miserable existence.

The first body was found in Bronze. Robert had no visible connection to Dawson, but he did seem affiliated with Steinberg, according to Mavel. What those ties were, remained unknown. Annalise took note of it and moved onto the next person.

Leila Green was captured by Dawson and trapped in the Macabre during the murder. What bothered Annalise the most was that, based on the date stamp on the video, Dawson was there when Robert was killed. That gave him a disgusting alibi, but an alibi nonetheless. It didn't mean he hadn't hired another butch bodyguard to take care of Robert while he raped Leila, though.

She scratched her head with both hands. The main question remained: how were these people killed? The deaths were unusual. At a first glance, these cases seemed like an attack of a possessed *beast*. Steinberg's death was staged to perfection as well. Leaving a body on display like that was impossible for the possessed. They were usually consumed by an uncontrollable rage, not having the time to think of positioning the remains post-mortem. Even without seeing his autopsy results, she knew they would be the same as Robert's—*inconclusive*. There were no known chemicals detected in his blood. No biological anomalies either. Hopps said a child could pull a man apart after their cells degraded that much.

Was it some kind of weapon in development? She drummed her fingers on her desk. The military wouldn't risk another war. The modded

outnumbered purebloods two-to-one in Divinity. Yet, if the news about Mavel being in custody got out, *beasts* would be blamed for it. Hatred would grow and the division between the modded and purebloods would climb to a new high.

The dilemma brought her to a report from a few days ago. She typed into her terminal the date of the news article and scrolled through the links until she found it. The pro-modded side of the parliament led by James Steinberg was seeking to give modded citizens the right to vote, bringing them closer to purebloods in status.

She nibbled on her lip. Who would want to bring such awful publicity about the modded right before the decision was made by the public? Unquestionably, if Dawson had a way to take control of the Anti-Modded Party, he would do so, surpassing her father's post. What he wasn't aware of was that she had evidence that could remove him from his position of power.

Annalise smirked. He was going to pay for everything he did in the dark.

She entered her activation code into her comms to sync with the terminal at her house. After five minutes, she had downloaded the video with Dawson at the Macabre. In the meantime, she flicked through the photos of her and Mavel. It was unusual for purebloods to take photos with their *servants*, but she enjoyed doing so. She found her favourite photo where Mavel was bathed in sunlight on their balcony. Tending to his plants, his hair shimmered in the light. She studied his soft expression as he planted the seeds, and her heart swelled with sadness.

"I won't let anything happen to you," she whispered, fighting the impending tears.

She sent a message to her Chief about her leaving and headed for the City Hall.



The car felt empty without Mavel by her side. She had grown used to him driving her everywhere and replying to her with his smart remarks. Now, the silence was deafening. When she took in a calming breath, she could still smell his woody cologne. It soothed her a little.

Annalise activated the radio. The first station played alternative rock. Since she preferred to read books to music, she ignored the lyrics. Her mind was too busy picking at the puzzle at hand.

Her comms beeped, and she glanced at the ID on the screen. With a sigh, she took the call. “What do you want, Will?”

“The City Hall is a mess right now. Any news on who is responsible for this atrocity?” her father demanded.

As if she was going to tell him Mavel became the prime suspect. Her grip became painful on the wheel. She needed a solid object to hold on to. Something she would gladly bash his head in with. “I can’t reveal the case details.”

“I heard your *beast* is behind it.”

Her knuckles turned pale as she cursed. Someone leaked information from the DPD. Since she had the closest ties to him, this situation didn’t make her look good.

“You’ve heard it wrong!”

“That is no way to speak to your father, Annalise.”

“Oh, like you care. You only use me as a convenient dress up doll whenever you have meetings or parties,” she shouted, speaking her mind. She was sick and tired of listening to his terrible parenting. He wasn’t a good father. He knew it. She knew it. The only people who didn’t were the blind citizens he put on a performance for.

Instead of erupting to match her temper, for once, her father sounded calm when he said, “Annalise, I know you care for that *beast*, but you need to break the contract now and—”

“What did you just say?”

“It would be bad if people discovered he is related to our family in any way.”

Typical William Storm. As always, her father only cared about his reputation and career. She smacked the wheel, hard. The pain resonated from her wrist all the way to her shoulder blade.

“Yes, Will, if the media found out, people might talk. Whatever will you do if your political position is compromised?” She hung up. There was nothing else she could say to him without screaming.

Ten minutes later, she arrived in the City Hall’s garage. She got out of the car. Still irritated after the call, Annalise scaled the steps and passed through the security scanners.

She flashed her badge at the reception. “Is Mr Dawson here?”

The young blonde typed something into her terminal. “Yes. He is in a meeting on the first floor. You may need to wait for a little bit.”

“Thanks.”

THE SYMBOL

The section of City Hall where the murder took place was swarming with reporters. The frustrated gathering hurled questions at the bored-looking officers with dark circles under their eyes. She wasn't the only one who didn't get much sleep.

Since meeting Dawson was going to take some time, she decided to get a closer look at the crime scene. She couldn't risk Jamen missing any clues in this investigation, no matter how small they were. After all, Mavel's life hung on the line.

Annalise pushed past the outer layer of reporters, making some headway with her elbows. The constant movement of the bodies made her stumble with the current. Eventually, she broke through to the front. One of the officers eyed her with scepticism, and she flashed her badge.

He nodded, yet his apprehension remained on his face as he allowed her to pass through the holo-barrier.

At the end of the hall, she found a young officer, blocking her way to the first floor.

“I’m here to see the crime scene,” she said.

“Detective Auris and his partner have already checked it.”

Annalise forced a smile. “It won’t hurt to take another look, right?”

He motioned for her to follow. “The body of Mr Steinberg had been moved to the morgue. Nothing much is left since the CSU drones swept the place.” Once upstairs, the officer led the way. “I heard a possessed *beast* did it. Tore the man in two. Those modded have to be put down.”

She glared at the back of his head. If every officer in Divinity believed the modded were responsible for these murders, there was little reason to look elsewhere for evidence. Someone had to be orchestrating these killings and using Mavel as a scapegoat. Did Steinberg invite him here on purpose? And, why didn’t Mavel tell her about what they had talked about? Could Steinberg have said something to anger him, and he lost it? She shook her head. This wasn’t the time for doubts. Mavel had to be innocent in all of this. He needed to be...

They arrived in a long hallway with polished wooden flooring. The officer led her to the third room on the left where the holo-barrier had been erected in front of the door.

“Take your time,” he said, unlocking the door for her.

She strode inside and the smell of blood hit her. Annalise covered her nose and mouth. The officer’s footstep retreated, and she scanned the office. A few feet ahead of her was a drying puddle of blood the size of a bathtub. She wandered over to the holo-emitter rested on the mahogany desk. Once she pressed the activation button, the room was illuminated with pale blue lights. They divided and formed the original crime scene’s projection.

The victim’s lower half appeared next to the bloody puddle. Claw marks were scratched into the smooth surface of the hardwood flooring—eight nails—as if someone had dragged Steinberg to the desk.

Upon closer examination, his spine and intestines seemed to be severed. The torso in the chair was wheeled behind the office desk in front of the window. Through the clear glass, morning light shone through. The scene definitely had more impact when it wasn't miniaturised.

Closing her eyes, she willed her body to ignore the foul odour and focused on solving this. She called Hopps, but the M.E. didn't pick up. With a sigh, she returned to her assessment. She circled the desk, taking a closer look at the victim's face. His hair had blotches of blood glueing his greying strands to his scalp. His eyes stared back at her with the same emptiness Leila's had when her soul left her body. In such a short amount of time, two people were dead, and she had no one paying for their deaths.

Guilt tore at her aching heart as she edged around the seat. There was only one entrance. On the way here, she noted a single security camera facing the hallway, yet she had a feeling all the video data had been wiped, otherwise, Jamen would have said something. Outside of the blood splatters, the desk was empty, not a single digital tablet in sight. This office couldn't have been used by the officials often.

Her stomach lurched, and she bent forwards. One by one, she sucked in shallow breaths to keep her nausea in check. It was a mistake. Although the body was removed, the holographic image was enough to push her over the edge. With the dangling intestines embedded in her mind's eye, she vomited the contents of her stomach onto the floor. Thankfully, no witnesses were around to see her moment of weakness.

She grabbed the edge of the desk, trying to gather her bearings. This was unsightly. Contaminating a crime scene even further would give more work to the cleaners. She already felt apologetic to the poor guys. Lifting her eyes, she discovered a symbol carved into the wood under the desk. She deactivated the holo-emitter and pushed the blood-soaked chair out of the way. Going on her knees, she crawled under the desk.

The symbol was a perfect circle with a sword passing through the letter 'S'. She took a picture of it using her wrist comms and traced her finger over the uneven surface.

She heard the door open. A set of footsteps edged closer. The officer had left long ago. Only Chief Sunderland knew she would be here. Since the official police business was concluded, no one had any reason to show up. Her heart raced in her chest as she held her breath. To keep quiet, she covered her mouth with her clammy hand.

"Annalise, are you still here?" Devlin's voice made her panic subside in an instant.

It was silly to hide under the desk as a detective. Plastering an awkward smile on her face, she climbed out. "I am."

Devlin returned her smile with one of his own. "Playing hide and seek at a crime scene? I thought I was the only one who did that."

A snort escaped her. "I... That wasn't—"

He chuckled and rounded the table, stopping a foot away from her. She had to crane her neck to be able to see his face properly.

His smile faded as did his dimples. "How are you holding up? I heard about the suspect. He was your partner..."

"Mavel *is* my partner. Someone is trying to set him up, I can feel it."

Devlin said nothing. He didn't need to. His pitying expression told her everything she needed to know. As much as she wanted to defend Mavel, she knew it would be fruitless here. This man already condemned her *servant* like every other pureblood in the DPD.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"I got a call from your father. He seemed concerned."

She raised her hands, stopping him from adding anything else. "He's not concerned about me, only about his image. Right now, I have a case to solve and the bodies are piling up without anyone to take the blame."

Devlin took her hand and tugged her against his body. Her palms landed on his muscular chest. The strong heartbeat inside his ribcage

climbed higher the longer he held her. Flustered and unable to speak, she tried pushing him back to create some distance. Instead, he pressed her closer to him, trapping her hands between them.

“I am sorry about my forward behaviour. Usually, I am much gentler, but I just couldn’t help myself. The passion you hold for your job...I wish to see that same flame burning for me one day.”

This closeness was pleasant. There was a strange comfort in the way he held her—a silent acceptance she hadn’t found anywhere else. Closing her eyes, she listened to the thumping of his steady heartbeat. Her troubled mind broke the spell, washing away the solace he gave her.

Annalise pushed him away. “We shouldn’t be doing this. I don’t know anything about you.”

Devlin inclined his head. “I apologise. My job doesn’t allow me to reveal what it entails, even to the DPD.”

She pursed her lips together. He was a walking mystery. She knew nothing about him other than his name and the fact he closely worked with the DPD and the City Hall. The way he touched her, the way he behaved, it was as if they knew each other. “Have we met before my father introduced you?”

“If you don’t remember then perhaps we haven’t,” he said with a playful wink.

“Are you ever serious?”

“Only when I’m working, otherwise, I tend to be playful when flirting with the woman I like.”

She couldn’t formulate a response. He was openly admitting to being attracted to her. No. She couldn’t let this continue. Her eyes focused on the desk again and the carving came to mind. She didn’t know what it meant, but it wouldn’t hurt to ask. Taking a step back, she summoned the picture of the carving on her wrist comms and showed it to him. “Have you seen this before?”

Devlin studied the image. His face betrayed nothing that went on behind those intelligent sapphire eyes. “Nothing I know of. I’m sorry.”

“It was a longshot anyway...”

“Did you find it here, at the crime scene?”

Even if he worked for the agency that policed the DPD, she didn’t know how much she could reveal to him. Jamen wasn’t happy when Devlin came to take her statement at the hospital. *Was that distrust personal or work related?*

“I need to go. I have to find Dawson.”

Devlin caught her by the hand. “He is a dangerous man, Annalise. You shouldn’t go alone.”

She wriggled out of his hold. “I can take care of myself. I am an officer of the law.”

Devlin ignored her statement and marched past her. He stopped at the door. “Then I will go with you.”

“No, you won’t.”

“I believe I have jurisdiction over this case as it is related to the City Hall. If you don’t believe me, contact Chief Sunderland.”

She cringed at the mention of her Chief’s name. Meeting him once a day was enough to make her want to hide in her closet. Yet, he was staking his career on the line for her to find the real culprit behind these murders. For that, she was grateful.

With a nod, she strode past Devlin and returned to the reception. To irk her further, the receptionist informed her that Dawson had left the building straight after the meeting.



Her determination to see Dawson proved useless. He wasn’t at home. He didn’t return to the City Hall for the rest of the day either. By the

time they checked all of the places a second time and requested a report from the DPD regarding his whereabouts, it was already 10 p.m.

Devlin drove her back to the Towers, and she couldn't help but wonder where Dawson had vanished to. Was he responsible for Steinberg's death and decided to hide? He didn't need to disappear. *There was no reason for him to hide*, she corrected herself. *Not unless he found out about the video I have of him in the Macabre.*

Devlin parked the car. He turned off the engine and faced her. "Are you going to be alright?"

"Alright about what?"

"You have been quiet this whole time. What's on your mind?"

She stared at her intertwined fingers in her lap. "What do you think killed him?"

"Steinberg?"

"Yes."

He seemed to choose his next words with care. "Are you saying your *beast* didn't do it?"

"Yes. Robert Fern, our first victim, died in the exactly same way. I bet the lab results will be inconclusive again. Whatever it is, it's not a possessed *beast*."

Devlin planted a reassuring hand on her shoulder and squeezed it gently. "When you come to a dead end in your investigation, the only thing you can do is go back to the beginning and think about it again. In my career, I have put quite a few corrupt politicians away, but, when I had nothing left to go on, going back and thinking things through helped."

She smiled at him. He knew exactly what to say at the right time. "Thank you for dropping me off."

"Anytime, Annalise. I'll always be here if you need me."

"You make it sound like we'll be meeting a lot."

He chuckled. "There's always hope."

She climbed out of the car and headed to her apartment with flushed cheeks. Her elation didn't last long. The case was complicated, but she had to go back to the first victim and see if she had missed anything. Robert Fern was at the core of this investigation. What exactly was his connection to Steinberg and these killings?

INCRIMINATING EVIDENCE

Without Mavel, the apartment felt empty. Annalise kept glancing in the direction of the potted plants outside. Taking her steaming mug of coffee in hand, she wandered over to the balcony.

She rested her back against the railing and closed her eyes, letting the cool evening breeze brush its fingers through her hair. Her stray locks bobbed against her neck and, in silence, she enjoyed the massaging effect it gave. Too many things had gone wrong since this ‘simple’ case began. What she believed to be a job she could do with ease resulted in a complicated spiralling staircase of elements that didn’t add up. Not only that, but Mavel’s life depended on her findings, and she couldn’t pinpoint the location of her lead suspect.

Annalise sipped her drink and cringed. The coffee in her hand tasted too bitter. Mavel used to make it for her. She had always watched him, so why couldn’t she reproduce the same taste?

Setting her mug on the railing, she bent over and touched the flower petals of the orange and purple petunias in the navy pot. Their stalks stood strong and proud—something she couldn't do right now even if her spine got replaced with a metal rod. Her support—the man she spent most of her life with—was gone. Like in bad fairy tales, one moment he was there to look after her, and the next, she was alone, wondering if there were things she could have changed. If she had paid more attention to him, she could have stopped him from going to that party. She could have prevented all of this from happening.

Her tears landed on the petals. Wiping them away, she retreated back into the apartment. In the hallway, she stopped abruptly. If Mavel killed Steinberg, there should be blood on his belongings. She could prove his innocence by bringing his clothes in for testing.

Annalise edged closer to his room, feeling anticipation building with each uncertain step. After wiping her damp palms on her trousers, she opened his door.

His room was dark, so she activated the lights with a clap. She scanned the bedroom. Everything had been neatly put away. Not a single piece of clothing or a digital tablet was out of place. Even the books, some of which were still in the rare printed form, were alphabetically arranged on his shelves.

She took a tentative step inside. Had she stooped so low as to invade his private space to quench her anxiety? With her heart rate climbing, Annalise closed the distance between her and the wardrobe. She pushed the panel aside. The glass surface glided away, revealing Mavel's clothes.

Her fingers combed through the different shirts and sweaters he wore. The scent of his cologne drifted over from his clothes and warmed her heart, making this scenario more intimate. Her hand settled on the item she was searching for—the suit she remembered him wearing to the City Hall gathering. She grabbed hold of the hanger and pulled it out. As she did so, the clothes slid off and fell into a crumpled mess at her feet. Her

heart missed a beat. Mavel would never leave his clothes in such a poor, dishevelled state.

She gathered the jacket with care, but her hand froze over the shirt that slipped out of it. A giant red stain stood out like a sore thumb—*blood*. The shirt fell out of her hands. She stumbled backwards, hitting the wall with her backside.

“This isn’t possible...” She would have seen the stain the previous night. None of this made any sense.

Biting hard on her lip, she drew blood. The copper aftertaste made her panic rise. If she sent these in as evidence, Mavel would be executed. A lump formed in her throat. This couldn’t be real. Mavel wasn’t a killer!

She stumbled out of the room and touched the panel by the front door, calling security of the Tower.

“Yes, Ms Storm?” a security officer asked.

“I need to see the access logs to my apartment since last night.”

He went silent for a second. “Is something wrong?”

Although he couldn’t see her, she forced a shaky smile. “Nothing’s wrong. I just wondered if my mother left a few things here today, that’s all.”

“Understood. The log has been dispatched to your terminal. May I help you with anything else?”

“No, that will be all.” Annalise ended the call. Wasting no time, she rushed to her room and activated her terminal. She opened the file and scanned the door access times until she found entries for today. At the back of her mind, she started counting. They returned from City Hall and left around 5 a.m. to go to the station after they heard the news report. She read the next line.

“Error?” she said with a deep-set frown. “What the hell is going on?”

She tapped her foot on the floor and dialled the security officer using her terminal.

“Is there something else I can help you with, Ms Storm?”

“There is an error in my log. What does that mean?”

“I shall find out for you. Please wait a moment.”

She sat there, listening to the radio music and staring at her terminal screen. The only thing that overpowered the sound of the noise coming from the speaker was the pulsating of her heartbeat in her head.

A few minutes later, the officer cleared his throat, and she almost jumped out of her skin.

“Well?” she asked.

“It would seem some maintenance occurred today on your floor. The video data, as well as the logs, have been offline for almost an hour.”

Shit. “Is there any way to find out who ordered the maintenance?”

“Just a regular check-up, Ms Storm.”

“Thank you.”

She logged off in stunned silence. *Someone was in my apartment and planted evidence against Mavel.* The thought chilled her to the core as she glanced over her shoulder, studying her room with newfound interest. Nothing seemed out of place. Then again, Mavel’s room was in a pristine condition, too, until she discovered bloodied clothes in his wardrobe.

At a time like this, there weren’t many people she could trust. Her parents would tell her to bring the evidence to the DPD and hope for the best. Her only friend, Monique Stratford, was out of Divinity on holiday. She had no choice. She needed to get rid of the evidence.

Annalise stepped out of her room and the doorbell chimed. Dragging her feet, she inched closer to the panel. “Who is it?”

“This is the DPD’s Crime Scene Unit. Please open the door, so we can collect the suspect’s items for analysis,” a man said with a droning voice.

“One sec, let me...get dressed first,” she said in the calmest voice she could muster.

Annalise pressed her back to the door. Her chest undulated to her rapid breathing. She needed to hide the evidence. The department wouldn't care if it was planted or not. There was no solid proof of that. She sped to Mavel's room, collected the pile of clothes on the floor, and arrived in the living room when the doorbell rang again.

"Come on. Come on," she chanted, bouncing on the spot and not knowing where to shove the suit. The doorbell rang a third time. Her head snapped in the direction of the sound. With a drawn-out sigh, she rolled the suit into a large ball as she marched over to the door. She shrugged on a heavy winter coat and trapped the suit between the door handle and her hand.

With a business-like smile, she welcomed her unwanted guests. "Aren't you the busy bees, coming here at such a late hour?"

The first man with a wiry brown beard whose voice she recognised from earlier said, "Please step aside, Detective."

"Oh, make yourselves at home." She pulled the door open wide enough, so the hinges strained. The door handle touched the wall, trapping Mavel's suit in place.

Two men pushed past her and brought in a few silver suitcases which they set down on her living room sofa. She was about to complain when the bearded man approached her as he eyed the broken door she had leaning against the wall.

"What happened to your door?" he asked.

"Termites. Terrible things."

He stole another glance at it and added, "Alright then, which room did the suspect stay in?"

She pointed to Mavel's bedroom. "First door on the left. Take your time. Obviously, none of us need sleep for tomorrow."

"We aren't happy about this either," he grumbled and followed his partner into the room.

“I’m going out,” she shouted, quickly grabbed the ball of clothing, and tucked it under her coat.

She rushed into the lift and mashed the car park button. Slower than usual, the doors caught up with her hasty commands. The lift started descending, and she let out the breath. A dull headache had settled in. She pressed her palm to her sweaty forehead and a hysterical laugh escaped her. An officer of the law—a detective—was running away with the evidence. Any normal pureblood would hand it over, no questions asked. Yet, here she was, lying to her colleagues and committing a crime.

The doors slid open. She headed out only to remember her car was still parked at the City Hall. Annalise searched the car park for a hiding spot. There was a row of waste bins at the far end, but they had a security camera facing them. Her mother’s blue Jeep caught her attention.

“Mother is going to kill me,” she mumbled, striding towards it. She let the scanner read her wrist comms. It beeped with authentication. Thankfully, Regina did not cross her off the permitted drivers list.

The trunk was partially empty except for a few shopping bags with clothes and spare shoes her mother liked to keep on hand in case something happened. She lifted the grey rug and threw Mavel’s suit underneath it. Right now, this was the best hiding place. No one would dare to search Regina Storm’s car, not unless they wanted to lose their job.

She locked the car. Her pounding heart took a while to calm, giving her some time to think of excuses on her way back.

At the apartment, the bearded technician stood by the door, eyeing her return with suspicion. “Where did you go?”

“For a walk. I didn’t think you wanted me to sit here while you tear my place apart.”

He scratched his stubbly cheek. “I guess it is better that you left. It allowed us to get most of the job done.”

His partner came out of her bedroom, holding her laundry basket.

She glowered at him and yanked the basket out of his hands. “That’s not for your grubby hands to touch!”

The tech stared at her with wide eyes and then at his partner.

“My laundry has nothing to do with this case,” she snapped.

“Leave it, Rogers,” the bearded tech ordered.

Rogers scurried past her and entered Mavel’s room.

“I can’t believe you’ve invaded my room. Get out of here!” she spoke through gritted teeth.

“Once the job is complete, we will be on our way.”

She mumbled a long array of curses under her breath and took off her coat. While he watched her every move, she plastered a smile on her face and ventured into the kitchen. The digital clock on her wall told her it was nearing midnight. With another sigh, she flicked the switch on the kettle and listened to the low chatter of the officers in the other room. So far, they hadn’t found anything suspicious. That was all she needed to know. She tuned them out and made a cup of coffee.

Someone cleared their throat behind her five minutes later. “We have finished here.”

“Then you can leave,” she called over her shoulder.

Their heavy footsteps grew lighter until she heard her front door closing. With that one click, she slid down and rested her head on her knees. Her mind was too busy trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Whoever was trying to blame Mavel would find out their sabotage didn’t work sooner or later. And, when that time came, she had to be closer to the real suspect. Or perhaps, she was getting too close, and they wanted to divert the investigation?

WAKE-UP CALL

That night, her restless mind wouldn't allow her to sleep. After tossing and turning for hours, she took her mother's car and drove straight to the Bronze District. The stars were slowly disappearing into the orange and purple hues when she parked in front of Mrs Fern's house at 5:49 a.m.

She debated whether she should go knocking on the door at that hour or not. Eventually, she chose against it. Terry had undergone more than enough stress. There was no need for Annalise to add more to her already full plate.

Bored out of her mind, she observed the neighbourhood. Everything here seemed normal. The bushes had lost their shape since the last time someone had trimmed them, weeds grew on flowerbeds, and the pavement had developed cracks from lack of maintenance. Beyond that, the only thing separating this district from the Golden or Silver was the

quality of the materials used to build these bungalows and lack of high-tech.

Her eyelids felt heavy. With a yawn, she rested her head against the headrest.

The next thing she knew, her wrist comms were beeping with an incoming call at 7:05 a.m. She checked who the call was from and rolled her neck to dissipate the built-up tension there.

“Hopps?” she asked groggily.

“Good morning, Storm.”

She groaned when he didn’t say anything else. “If you just wanted to give me a wake-up call, I’m hanging up.”

“Oh, give me a minute. I’m just sending you some files from the autopsy of James Steinberg. Also, can’t you act a little more like Rios and appreciate my talents?”

“Does he search the whole of DPD for your tea as well?”

“I see your point. I’ll get on with it.”

She glanced at Terry’s home. It was quiet inside. *Don’t the kids have school?*

“I’ve analysed the tissue samples from Steinberg. And, surprise-surprise or rather no surprise at all. Whatever killed Robert Fern was used to kill Mr Steinberg, too. Everything outside of the slight cell degeneration around the abdomen indicates a possessed modded attack. No matter how big my dark circles are, there is no trace evidence of any foreign chemicals in their blood samples.” He cleared his throat, his voice turning aggravated. “But, I did find a piece of him missing. Someone had cut out a chunk of Mr Steinberg’s thigh. I guess they wanted a trophy of some kind.” He blew out of breath. “By the way, I heard what happened. I am sorry about your partner. I’m sure he didn’t do it.”

“At least, we agree on something.” She climbed out of the driver’s seat, stretching her legs.

Hopps chuckled. “Yes, perhaps we do.” He paused and something crashed to the ground in his office. “Hey, where are you taking that?”

“Hopps? What is going on?”

“I have to deal with this,” he said. “Hey, put that down! I will call you back, Detective.” He disconnected the call.

Annalise studied her reflection in the window and smoothed her bedhead. 7:17 a.m. was a decent enough time to call on someone, *right?* She strode to the front door and knocked. When no one responded, she rang the doorbell.

Silence.

Circling the building, she found the living room window with the blinds open. It wasn’t ethical to peek in, but Mrs Fern had to be at home on a Friday morning to prepare her kids for school.

Blocking the reflection of the rising sun by surrounding her eyes with her hands, she peered inside. The living room was a mess. The chairs were lying on their sides, cushions were torn with feathers scattered every which way.

Her breathing hitched as she reached for her gun. She activated her comms device and contacted Jamen who answered immediately.

“Jamen, something’s happened at the Fern house in Bronze. Get down here.”

“What happened? Do you need me to send a unit your way?”

She peered into the living room once more, checking for movement. “I don’t think so, but I can’t be sure.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I finish at this crime scene.”

The call ended. Annalise edged closer to the front door. She checked the handle. It was unlocked. With a little push, it creaked open the rest of the way. Pointing her gun downwards, she entered the building, giving the living room another once-over. She checked the hallway and the first bedroom for movement. As she threaded closer to Leila’s room, she heard a muffled whimper.

Her heart jumped into her throat, and she rushed to the second bedroom.

One, two, three... She opened the door. Her brain registered the disturbing scene as her eyes widened. Her gun almost slipped out of her hand.

Terry was seated on the floor. Her red eyes were swollen with purple bruises and her hair was tousled as if someone had yanked it upwards. By the looks of it, her tears had long since dried. Her left arm was soaked in blood and bent at an unnatural angle, making Annalise cringe when she noticed that Terry's ulna had snapped and tore through the skin. Her other arm was tied to the bed with rope while her legs were bound with duct tape.

Averting her eyes, she found Terry's two motionless daughters on her right. Their hands and legs were tied with the same tape used on their mother.

"Oh God." Annalise entered and knelt next to the first girl. She searched for the pulse on her neck.

Nothing.

The girl's skin was cool to the touch, and she wasn't breathing. Whatever happened here, took place the previous night. Annalise checked for a pulse on the second child's wrist, finding nothing but another dead body. The girls were gone.

Turning around, she met Terry's gaze. Mrs Fern must have read her expression because she broke into hysterics. She pushed forwards, attempting to reach her children, even though her arm had a bone poking out of it.

Annalise held her against the bedframe. "Please, don't move. I'm going to take your restraints off."

Running to the kitchen, Annalise grabbed a knife and cut through the rope and duct tape on the woman's body. Terry seemed to be in shock

because her eyes didn't leave her daughter's corpses even when Annalise peeled back the tape from her face.

"Who did this to you?" Annalise asked, grasping Terry's shaking shoulders.

Terry mumbled something.

"I don't understand you. Please, breathe and tell me who did this."

"Why didn't they just kill me? My daughters...my precious daughters!"

"They? Can you describe them?"

She glared at Annalise with enough rage burning in her eyes to kill. "I have nothing left to live for!"

"You do. You still have your life."

"My children were my life—"

Annalise witnessed Terry's eyes becoming empty as her body convulsed. Tapping on her comms, she urged for an ambulance to come and rushed to find a clean towel that she could use to wrap around the woman's arm.

"Terry, you have to tell me who is behind this."

She didn't look at Annalise, didn't even acknowledge her presence as she said, "Robert did this. Robert killed us all."

Annalise frowned. "Robert is dead."

She shook her head violently. "Dead. Not dead. He killed us. He killed our children."

"It's alright. Hush now. Try to get some rest until the medics get here."

Mrs Fern bobbed her head and closed her eyes. As Annalise tried moving away, Terry's healthy arm shot out, keeping her there.

"Don't go," she whispered.

"Okay, I'll stay here. I'm sorry."

Terry relaxed and draped her arm over her stomach.

Ten minutes went past. Since she had nothing to do, Annalise kept staring at her wrist comms. Where was the ambulance? Where was Jamen? The response time should be ten minutes and it was pushing fifteen. She studied the girls again. They were so young. Who would do such an atrocious thing to this family? First, the false evidence at her apartment and now Terry's children had been killed off and their mother was assaulted. Did this woman know something she wasn't telling her? *Were the kids killed because of Robert?*

She heard the sirens drawing close, and her relief escaped in a form of a strained giggle. A moment later, the car doors slammed outside. Hurried footsteps came from the entrance of the bungalow.

"Storm, are you in here?" Jamen called out.

"I'm in the second bedroom," she shouted and watched Terry's eyes bulging out of their sockets as she stared at the door.

"It's alright, help is here."

Jamen burst into the room with Calla close behind. He briefly glanced at the victims before his eyes settled on Annalise. "What the hell happened here?"

Annalise stood up. "I'll explain everything in a minute. Where are the paramedics?"

Jamen glanced at Calla, and she left the room. He edged to the bed where he leant down, checking on the sole survivor. "What happened?"

Terry shot him a glare and grasped Annalise's hand. "Go away!"

"The ambulance was right behind us," Jamen informed.

Annalise assisted her into a standing position. "I'll bring her out. Look after the—" She was about to say 'bodies' but refrained. "Look after the girls."

Terry gave her an eager nod.

Noting that the woman was unbalanced on her feet, Annalise draped Terry's good arm over her shoulders and planted her hand on the small of the woman's back to steady her. "Please, come this way..."

They left the room, and two DPD officers approached them. “Ma’am we’ll take you to the ambulance. It just arrived.”

Terry’s wary eyes shifted between them. She obviously didn’t trust anyone on the police force. *Did an officer do this to her?*

Annalise waved at the young officers. “It’s fine. I’ll take her.”

The men moved out of their way.

She led Terry to the hallway and, eventually, through the front door, dodging the chatting officers and technicians who piled into the bungalow with equipment. Outside, thick, charcoal-grey clouds drifted over from the East, taking away what little morning sunshine Divinity had. The wind had picked up its speed, cooling the surrounding air.

Terry shivered, and Annalise hastened the pace to the ambulance parked a few cars down the road.

Calla stood next to a blonde Emergency Medical Technician. They were arguing when the EMT saw their approach and ran over to them.

Annalise helped her guide Terry to the back of the vehicle.

At the orders of the EMT, Mrs Fern lay on the stretcher and blankly stared at the ceiling of the ambulance.

“I have to go now.” Annalise gave her hand a squeeze.

Terry briefly glanced at her with such emptiness, Annalise wasn’t sure this woman would survive the day. After the loss of her husband, she appeared unstable. Now, she seemed broken inside and out.

She let her go and turned to the EMT. “Look after her.”

“Will do.”

Calla took this chance to follow her across the lawn. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. The victim didn’t tell me anything useful. She blames her deceased husband for whatever happened here.”

Calla grabbed her elbow and jerked her backwards, forcing Annalise to a halt. “This doesn’t look good, Storm. Your *beast* is a suspect, and

now you find a crime scene just like that? What were you doing here in the first place?”

The area where Calla held on to her burned a little. Whether she wanted to read her emotions or induce new ones, Annalise did not trust her enough to allow her touch to remain. She shook her off. “I didn’t give you permission to use your ability on me, Calla.”

She smirked. “Until we get the evidence we need, you are also a suspect, *Detective*.”

Annalise fought not to roll her eyes. “If I was the one who killed those girls, I’m sure Terry would not trust me enough to walk beside her.”

“Calla, what are you doing?” Jamen called from the entrance.

She pursed her lips and faced him. “Just talking to Annalise.”

He strode over, his hands burying in his jeans pockets. “Are you going to tell us what happened here?”

This time, she did roll her eyes. He and Calla had the same personality and lack of trust. “I came here last night because I couldn’t sit still after the CSU swept my apartment for Mavel’s things. I wanted to ask Mrs Fern a few questions. When I arrived, it was still the middle of the night, so I waited in my car until Hopps called me. That’s when I found Terry and her daughters. The end.”

Jamen nodded, and Calla crossed her arms.

“Did she say who did it?” he asked.

“She kept blaming her dead husband.”

“Maybe that man was into something the investigation didn’t uncover.”

“Or she finally lost it,” Calla added.

Annalise glared at her. “That woman has been through enough. You have no right to badmouth her.”

She lifted her hands. “Relax. I was only suggesting a possibility that she is not of a sound mind. Like you said, she had only a dead husband to blame for it all.”

“No,” Annalise said. “She couldn’t have done it. When I found her, Mrs Fern had been restrained as well.”

“That’s kind of kinky.” Calla snickered.

Jamen didn’t seem happy with her response. “Calla...”

She broke eye contact with Annalise to stare at him. They seemed to pass yet another silent message between them. Calla rolled her shoulders and headed back to his car.

“Alright, Storm, let’s get on with it.”

He led her back into the house. The officers had already erected a holo-barrier around the bungalow, keeping the prying eyes of the neighbours away. She was thankful for their efficiency. It did not feel right for the children to be ogled by so many curious bystanders who came out for some morning drama.

While the CSU swept the bedroom, she stood in the living room. The photos of the once happy family were a painful reminder that crime could tear anything good apart: family, friends, *beast* and master.

She took the photo frame with Robert and his family smiling at the camera. The two girls were grinning from ear to ear, their energy and life reflected in the depths of their matching eyes. To keep from tearing up, she put the picture frame back and moved onto the next. This one was taken at a pool, most likely somewhere in the Silver District, judging by the lavish architecture and furniture around the poolside. Topless, Robert squatted and hugged his two daughters. One of the daughters pouted, and the other’s expression betrayed her mirth. Robert’s baggy navy shorts rode up to his upper thighs and an outline of a tattoo peeked out from underneath.

She squinted, trying to figure out what the tattoo was of but couldn’t make it out the blurry shape. The DPD still hadn’t recovered his lower

half which could provide them with more clues. There had to be a reason why they only found half of him. This made her recall Hopps' call from earlier. Could the tattoo be something he and Steinberg shared? Was that why Steinberg was missing a piece of his thigh?

Using her wrist comms, she took a picture of the photograph. Somehow, Robert did not seem like the kind of man who would get a tattoo on a whim. He was a dedicated father. He worked for his children to go to a school in Silver. Such actions spoke volumes.

"Found anything?" Jamen asked from behind her.

"Nothing useful."

"Well, by the looks of it, the two girls died from asphyxiation. Judging by the hand prints on their necks, the suspect is male. We'll get more results after Hopps gets a hold of the bodies."

Jamen turned on his heel, but she grasped his leather jacket's sleeve. "Do you think Mavel killed Steinberg?"

He didn't turn around. "I don't think Mavel is someone stupid enough to be caught on camera if he wanted to have someone murdered. He works at the HPD and, therefore, he knows how the system works."

Her hand fell away and her palm pressed to her chest. She wasn't the only one who thought he wasn't guilty of the crime. Annalise opened her mouth to speak and stopped. There was no way she could tell him about the bloodied clothes in her apartment. Although she believed someone had planted them when the maintenance occurred in the Tower, there wasn't any guarantee Jamen wouldn't change his tune about Mavel's innocence.

He peered over his shoulder. "Anything else?"

"I am glad we are on the same page."

"I will stay behind and question the neighbours if they saw anything suspicious. You should return to the station and write a statement. Try to remember if you've seen anything odd since you spent the night

outside her home. Afterwards, head to the hospital and question the victim. She seems to trust you.”

“Wait. Have you heard anything about Dawson?”

He faced her, his expression unreadable. “Didn’t you hear? He was found dead in the Divinity Park last night. That’s why it took us so long to respond to your call. We were already at another crime scene with Reed, the other M.E.”

A dizzy spell hit her when his words sank in, and Jamen caught her. Dawson was dead—the only man who could be responsible for these unreasonable murders.

“H-how did he die?”

“Same way Steinberg and Fern passed away—a possessed *beast* attack.”

THE TRUTH ABOUT LANDON'S

With Dawson out of the picture, who is left? Annalise scratched her head as she drove along the highway towards the DPD. Her case was a mess. The more she thought she knew who was at fault, the less truth was in that statement. *This couldn't possibly be one person, could it?* Whoever was behind this madness—these deaths—had to be someone important or with enough power to pull it off. But, the way the victims died bothered her.

The faded mumble of the reporter on the radio reminded her of Mavel. An image of him standing in her kitchen, listening to the morning report drifted into her mind, and she vowed she would see him soon.

Chief had no reason to keep Mavel in custody. Not when Dawson died in the same way as the others. Yet, her gut told her otherwise. If he

had been freed, he would have called her. There would be news of some kind. And, with complete radio-silence from her boss, she knew that Mavel was still a suspect.

Annalise turned up the volume on her radio. A female reporter's modulated voice flooded the car. "...Dawson, an Anti-Modded activist, was found dead in the Divinity Park last night, only a day after James Steinberg's murder. The DPD officials are currently looking into this spree of killings but, based on our sources, these attacks were committed by a possessed *beast*..."

"Damn it!" She slammed her palms against the steering wheel hard enough for an error to appear in the corner of the windscreen, asking her if she wanted to stop. Unable to hold her rage in, she spat out another curse. Leaking that information gave them more ammunition against the modded.

Her wrist comms beeped with an incoming call. "Mum, this isn't a very good time..."

"Have you seen my car? The tracking device says it's entering Silver."

Annalise cringed. "Yeah, sorry I took it without informing you. I had to borrow it for a bit. Something came up."

"Is something the matter? You don't sound too good."

"The case I'm working on is stressful, that's all."

"I heard Mavel killed Steinberg. You shouldn't blame yourself."

Not another one. She gritted her teeth. "Mavel didn't kill anyone. He's being set up!" she half-shouted, making her words bounce around the enclosed space.

Annalise didn't need to be in the room with her mother to visualise her pity as she said, "I'm sure that's the case. He seemed like such a nice *beast*."

"Mum..." She sighed. Her head was heavy, and she was in need of coffee, badly. "I don't have time to explain. I will program your car to go home when I collect mine from the City Hall."

“Wait, Annalise. There is a matter we must discuss when you get back tonight. Your father and I have something to tell you.”

She tried to measure the gravity of her mother’s words. They seemed loaded with hidden meanings and this ‘matter’ Annalise was sure she wasn’t going to enjoy discussing. Mustering all the patience she could, she asked, “Can’t you tell me now?”

“Tonight, dear. Call to our apartment around eight.”

Regina ended the call, and Annalise stared at the road ahead. *What is so important for them to want to meet with such urgency?*



Ten minutes later, she parked the car in front of the DPD. Time seemed to move slowly as she passed through the scanners and rushed for the closing lift.

Rios grinned through the gap and held the door open for her.

“Heard your case is getting busy,” he said as she slipped inside.

Annalise quirked a brow in a silent question. *Did everyone in Divinity know about my case?*

He chuckled. “Anyone involved in your case seem to be dying like flies. You should be careful.”

She leant back against the steel wall, folding her arms. “I honestly thought Dawson was behind it all...”

Rios planted a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Hey, it’s your first case. Be glad Jamen is working it with you. He’s good at solving puzzles.”

“I don’t know. He seems hard to approach, and Calla is eager to blame this whole thing on Mavel.”

The doors opened, and when she moved forwards, Rios shifted his hand to her lower back. “He may seem stone-faced, hard to handle,

boring, yawn inducing, physically less attractive than me, but Jamen is a good guy. He won't blame someone until there's concrete evidence against them."

His hand fell away, and a ghost of a smile stretched her lips. "Thank for your insight, Rios."

He winked. "Anytime, babe. I'm here for you, day and night. You just have to holler my name, and I'll be at your service."

Too tired to argue, she followed him to the HPD office. Chief stood in the middle of it, talking to a small group of officers. His eyes met hers, and he waved for the officers to leave.

He stormed over, his eyes blazing. "Why is it every time you leave this building someone dies?"

Annalise rooted her feet. "I also want an answer to that question, sir."

He stopped in front of them, huffing something under his breath. "Storm, I think you are a promising kid. I respect you and the work you do, but I am torn. Your father wants you off this case."

Her mouth slackened. "What has my father got to do with this?"

"He called me this morning after they found Dawson's body. He doesn't want you near a case with so many dead people. It may be bad for his publicity."

"Looks like you have Daddy issues to deal with," Rios chimed in.

Annalise glowered at him. "My father has nothing to do with this!" She raised her chin up high, facing her boss. "You can't take me off the case. I need to finish it!"

Chief measured her with his penetrating gaze. His lips slowly upturned into a full-blown grin. "I was right about you, Storm. You are a force to be reckoned with, which is why you're still working the case. Catch the ones behind it already, so we can all celebrate your acceptance into our little dysfunctional family."

"Chief, I..."

He waved her words away and wandered back into his private office.

Rios slapped her playfully on the back. “Looks like Sunderland likes your spirit.”

She couldn’t hold back the smile that fought to the surface. A fuzzy feeling filled her heart and warmed her soul. *Is this what acceptance feels like?* Immobile, she stood there for longer than was necessary, staring at the Chief’s glass door. His words replayed in her mind like a mantra to urge her on.

Des came out of the canteen and tapped Annalise on the shoulder. “There’s something I need to show you.”

“What is it?”

Des pulled her to the nearby terminal, pushing Annalise into the seat. “Log in.”

“Where are you going with this?”

“Just do as I say!”

Annalise shook her head and scanned her comms over the desk, activating her work terminal.

Des pushed her hands out of the way and opened her current case file. She clicked on the image of Robert Fern, and her expression turned sour. “It’s been bugging me for a while, and I finally know where I’ve seen this man.”

Rios sauntered over to them. He peered past Annalise’s head, and Des brought up their case file.

“Des, that’s our case,” he said. “You’re not supposed to show it—”

“It’s not just our case. Look...” She clicked on the file.

A video played, showing an exceptionally beautiful woman walked up to a bouncer at the Landon’s main entrance. She had a heated debate with him for a minute. With a glare, the man scanned her and permitted her entry.

Des played the next video. The camera was inside the bar, taking in the view from above. The same woman sat on a bar stool while the other patrons chatted animatedly behind her back.

“There!” Des pointed to the man sitting alone at one of the tables in the corner. He had five empty bottles of beer standing tall on his table and was downing another. “That’s Robert Fern.”

Annalise studied the man, putting the similarities together in her head.

Des grunted. “If you don’t believe me, zoom in and compare the two side by side.” She moved aside, and Annalise did as per her suggestion, putting two images together. There was no mistake. Robert Fern was at Landon’s on the night of his murder. But, how did half of his body get back home the next morning? And, why wasn’t the other half found at Landon’s?

Rios’ eyes were as wide as saucers when Annalise glanced at him. He scratched the dark stubble on his cheek and let out a nervous chuckle. “Well, I’ll be damned. Looks like our cases are related, after all.”

Des scissored her arms over her chest. “We never did find a body of the possessed *alabaster* who attacked the bar that night. The woman from earlier went missing, and, over time, our witnesses stopped talking altogether.”

“What about the full video? Isn’t it stored in AID’s database?” Annalise asked.

“See for yourself.” Des resumed the feed.

The woman at the bar was hit in the head with a bottle thrown by another patron. The feed cut off and resumed when a group of people was stomping on someone at the centre of the room. The others fled for the exit.

She replayed it, and the video skipped again as if someone had erased half of it.

“What happened in-between?” Annalise asked.

“We don’t know,” Rios admitted with a shrug. “We don’t even know who the woman was. If she was a citizen of Divinity, she would have been flagged by AID, but we got nothing. She’s pretty much a ghost in our system.”

Annalise replayed the feed from the beginning and paused on the woman. “She looks like an *alabaster*, but the bouncer wouldn’t let her into the club if the scanner didn’t confirm her to be a pureblood.” She skipped the fighting scene. The woman at the bar was no longer seated there nor was she running for the exit. “Do you think she got possessed?”

Rios snorted. “Purebloods don’t get possessed, only the modded do.”

“How many witnesses do you have? Maybe one of them knows where Robert went after the fight.”

“A lot of people died that night,” Des said. “Those who are still alive aren’t talking.”

Rubbing her temples, Annalise tried to put this new information together. “Robert wound up in the Bronze District, in front of his house, after the bar fight. Someone took him there, but why? Why him? What were they trying to say?”

“Could it be they killed everyone just to get to him? He was the only vic found outside of Silver,” Des voiced her thoughts.

“I don’t think so,” Annalise said. “If they were after him directly, they would have waited until he left the bar. He drank enough to be an easy man to pick off the street without anyone noticing.”

Rios clapped his hands, startling her. “I’ll go talk to Chief since it looks like we’re investigating one big case together.”

Des nodded and followed him.

Taking this opportunity, Annalise headed to the containment cells. She had to see Mavel. It was his right to know what was going on.

The containment cells were on the second floor. This was her first time in this part of the building. Everything seemed stricter somehow. Armed officers stood outside the entrance and there was no furniture or plants like in the other parts of the DPD.

She marched to the first officer who was like a mountain to her. His bored eyes searched her from head to toe, and he scanned her wrist comms with his scanner. "Detective Storm, what can I do for you?"

"I need to talk to a suspect."

"Go on in."

Inside, black titanium lined the walls. Round lights built into the ceiling turned on as she advanced further down a long corridor with the cells on either side of her. She read the names displayed above each door. When she came upon Mavel's, she let the scanner read her comms, and the heavy door languidly opened.

Mavel sat on a metal bench. His light brown hair was out of its ponytail and tucked behind his ears. Two silver orbs framed by dark circles flicked to her, and the sight of him made her chest hurt.

"Mavel..."

He stood abruptly and took a few steps forwards, only to be restricted by the heavy shackles around his wrists and ankles. A dull clack of metal hitting the concrete filled her ears, and her throat constricted. He shouldn't be here like this. Especially, when he did nothing wrong.

"Anna, why are you here?"

"I-I had to see if you were alright. The case—" She paused, unable to continue with her trembling voice.

He offered his hand as far as the restraints would let him. She took it without hesitation, and they both sat on the bench. The cold from the metal seeped through the thin material of her trousers. She shifted uncomfortably.

"I have something—" they both said in unison.

This made her smile a little. She had missed him.

"Go on. You first," he offered.

"Dawson is dead. Robert's two daughters are also dead, and his wife is in the hospital."

He said nothing, listening to her every word with interest.

She took his silence as permission to go on. “Robert Fern was at Landon’s when the fight broke out. He’s on the video feed.”

Mavel furrowed his brow. “How did he get to Bronze?”

“The feed has been tampered with. Someone erased the evidence that could lead us to an explanation for all of this.”

He took her hand in his. “Anna, I want you to be careful. With everything that’s going on, I don’t want to see you get hurt. So, don’t go out searching for trouble alone. Use Rios as a meat-shield if you have to.”

Her eyes stung with impending waterworks. Even when he was facing a possible death sentence, he was worried about her. It unnerved and pleased her at the same time.

“Mavel, I will get you out of here. I promise.”

“Don’t make promises you cannot keep.”

She couldn’t respond to that. No matter what she could have said, it wouldn’t change his mind. Resting her head against his shoulder, she remained by his side for as long as she could.

20

GONE

After Mavel urged her to return to work, Annalise sat at her desk, typing up her report regarding the events that had taken place that morning. When she finished the final sentence, she uploaded the image of Robert's tattoo into the system. With the department's editing software, she zoomed in on the object and rotated it ninety degrees so the victim's thigh was facing downwards.

An image of a letter 'S' pierced by a sword stood out. That tattoo appeared to match the carving in the office where Steinberg was murdered. According to Hopps' earlier report, Steinberg's skin was removed on the same thigh. *Were they members of a gang? Did they belong to the same swimming club?* It could be anything.

"AID?"

The AI's holo-projection appeared above her desk. "Yes, Detective?"

"Can you search the database for this image and find out which tattoo parlour would do something like this in Divinity?"

AID beamed at her. “Of course, Detective. I shall forward the results of the search to your communications device when I’m finished. Anything else?”

“No. Thank you.” Annalise turned off her terminal and grabbed her jacket off the back of her chair. She nudged Rios who sat with his feet resting on his desk.

He grinned. “Need me for something?”

“I have to question a witness, Terry Fern. She’s in the hospital. Want to tag along?”

“For you, baby, anything.”

She laughed, and he called out to Des. “You want to come to the hospital?”

Des strode over with a mug of steaming coffee in her hands. “Not particularly. Unless they have good-looking doctors there...”

“I’ll call you if I come across a hottie.” Rios winked.

Des gave him a peck on the cheek. “And that’s why we get along so well.” She pushed him out of his seat and collapsed into it. “Go chat with the crazy chick. I’ll be here, sifting through the tapes for the millionth time. Maybe I’ll find something that can help us.”

Rios indicated for Annalise to lead the way.

She headed for the door when Jamen and Calla entered the office. Calla bumped into her shoulder as she stormed past them, not even a word of apology escaped her. Annalise gritted her teeth, holding back the cuss words she didn’t wish to share with the rest of the office.

“Where are you going?” Jamen asked.

“We’re off to see Mrs Fern. Did you just get back from the scene?” Annalise asked.

Jamen studied Rios. “Alright, but before you go—”

“Ah, great. Everyone is here,” Chief’s voice filled the office. “Gather round.”

Everyone turned their attention to the Chief. Calla sat at her desk, and Des lifted her head from the terminal she was using. The three of them remained stationary, awaiting further response from Sunderland.

Annalise squinted, noting a fresh coffee stain on her boss' shirt. He must have been in a hurry to catch them.

Chief folded his hands, resting them on his large belly. "I want to announce that, from now on, you are all one unit. The Landon's case and the *beast* attacks are to be investigated as one. Is that clear?" His icy eyes assessed everyone's reactions. He paused on Calla. "Is that clear?"

Calla's lips curled. "Yes, sir."

"Very good. Get on with it," he added and returned to his office.

"I take it I missed something big," Jamen said.

Rios grinned and hugged Jamen close to him with one arm. "Annalise and I had a breakthrough in the case while you were dillydallying or whatever it is you do."

Jamen scowled and fought out of his hold. "Get off me!"

Rios chuckled. "Alright, alright. Don't get all pissy with me."

"If you weren't the best marksman in the unit, I would break your arm."

Annalise's eyes widened. Rios couldn't possibly be that good. He always appeared so laid back. She couldn't see him as someone who put in an effort to succeed or master anything.

Rios stuck out his tongue. "I'm glad you love me enough to keep me intact."

Jamen's expression darkened, and Rios jumped back, saying, "Okay, big guy. No need to get angry."

Shaking his head, Jamen turned his glare to her. "Hopps wanted to see us. Come with me. Rios, you too."

While Rios filled in Jamen on the details about Landon's and Robert Fern's presence there, they followed Jamen to the lab. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the freezers. All the doors were hanging open.

Hopps sat behind his desk, his bored face resting on his fist. He lifted his eyes, noting their approach, and set his thermal cup down. “Took you long enough!”

“What happened?” she asked.

He swivelled in his chair until he faced his vacant freezers. “My babies are all gone.”

“Babies?” Her frown deepened as she tried to understand what he was talking about.

“What do you mean the bodies are gone? Who took them?” Jamen snapped.

Hopps lifted a digital tablet off the table and handed it to him. “See for yourself.”

Jamen grasped the tablet. Rios peered over his shoulder, and Annalise had to squeeze in between the two to be able to see anything.

“Why is Falcon involved?” Jamen asked.

Hopps shrugged. “Don’t know. They came, took the bodies, and fucked off, leaving me to drink my cold tea.”

“Aren’t those guys involved with the City Hall matters only?” Rios asked, his playful expression gone.

Jamen sneered. “They are like cockroaches, never welcomed, yet you can’t get rid of them.” He eyed Hops. “Did you check with the judge? Is this warrant legitimate?”

“I called Diana. She told me she had no choice but to comply with their request. I had to hand everything I had to them. It is now a Falcon matter. After all, two of the City Hall’s officials are dead.”

The judge’s name rang a bell. Diana Benson was the youngest woman to take on the role in the Supreme Court of Divinity at the age of twenty-nine. In the Academy, they always spoke of her as being the Iron Woman of Divinity as she dispensed judgement indiscriminately. She was the only judge who managed to hold her position for over sixteen years without a single incident or a negative article in the news.

Jamen tossed the tablet on the desk. He growled a curse and stormed out of the morgue.

Rios and Annalise looked at each other and then glanced at Hopps for an explanation.

The M.E. sipped his tea and grimaced. "Jamen had a few dealings with the Falcon group. They stole some cases from under his nose which is why he hates them."

Annalise rubbed her tired eyes. She couldn't believe they had the power to do something like this. They stole the largest case the HPD had without anyone taking notice. But, she couldn't do anything. They had a judge's approval.

"So, they're taking everything from us? What about the Landon's case?" Rios asked.

Hopps shook his head. "*All* bodies were taken. Everything related to the case had to be handed over to them."

His words replayed in her mind and their meaning sank in. If they were taking everything related to the case, they were taking the suspect in custody as well.

"Shit!" she hissed, and her body moved on its own.

"Storm?" She heard Rios' confusion permeating his tone, but he did not follow.

Annalise sprinted out of the lab. Her fingers mashed the lift button, but her attention was fixed on the numbers that sluggishly decreased. "Damn it!"

She couldn't wait, so she pushed open the door to the stairwell and climbed two flights of stairs, taking two steps at a time. Her ragged breaths matched her erratic heartbeat as she burst into the containment cells floor.

"Did you forget something, Detective?" the guard from earlier asked.

Panting, she pointed to the door. "Mavel, is-is he in there? Did they take him?"

The officer scrunched his brow.

The door to the cells opened, and Jamen stepped out. "He's gone," was all he said.

She grabbed him by the collar of his jacket. "Are you sure? Did you make certain it was his cell?"

He grasped her hands and yanked them off. "The case is out of our reach now."

Stumbling backwards, her body shook with the overflow of emotions. Annalise wrapped her arms around her waist. She wasn't sure whether she wanted to cry, scream, or hit someone. Her body decided for itself, and she let out a roar she didn't know she had in her.

Jamen gripped her shoulders, massaging them. "He's gone, Storm. You can't get him back."

She shook her head. Her tears flowed without restrictions. "He can't be... I promised I'd solve this."

Jamen drew her into an awkward hug and patted her head. Such an uncharacteristic gesture caused her heart to dive further into the abyss.

"He's gone," he whispered.

No. She couldn't accept it. She had to get Mavel back. After she struggled out of his hold, she marched back to the lift through which Rios arrived on their floor.

"What's going on?" Rios asked. "Did Jamen bully you?"

"They took Mavel!"

"Shit. That's just...well, just shit."

"I'm going to find him. Where are they?" she demanded, glancing from Jamen to Rios. The caution reflected in their eyes irked her. "Answer me!"

"Is something wrong?" one of the guards asked.

Jamen glared at him, making the man shrink back, before returning his stern gaze to her. "Storm, you can't just go into the Falcon HQ demanding your case back. Trust me, I've tried."

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

Rios clicked his fingers. “What about that Falcon guy? You know, the one who interviewed you at the hospital?”

The haze in her mind cleared. That’s right. Devlin was a member of Falcon. He should be able to help her.

“He won’t help,” Jamen said.

Her face fell. “Why not?”

“Call it personal experience. I suggest you go home and get your emotions sorted out. Rios and I will talk to the Chief. I hope he’ll have some sway over the judge’s decision or call in some favours.”

“He’s right,” Rios added. “We’ll call you once we get something solid.”

It pained her to leave everything in the hands of these two, but they had a point. She was too emotional. She couldn’t possibly make any logical decisions in her present state of mind. At the same time, she was glad they were on her side and not eager to dismiss this case.

“Thanks, but the moment—”

“We’ll call you,” Jamen assured her.

Annalise stumbled away from them. Her body grew numb as if it was trying its best to push everything that had happened to the back of her mind. She took the lift to the lobby and left the DPD building.



St. Grace’s Hospital in the Silver District was a long, rectangular, seven-storeys building that could hold approximately three thousand patients at one time. The glass and steel exterior reflected the grey clouds that drifted by when Annalise parked the car.

Climbing out of the driver’s seat, she headed for the reception where a short brunette with a face full of freckles sat. The smell of anaesthetic

and lavender filled her nostrils, and Annalise noted the bushy purple plant growing in the corner of the reception desk in a round orange pot.

“Hello! How may I help you?” the receptionist asked with a plastered smile.

“I’m Detective Storm,” she said, peeling back her jacket to display her badge. “I’m looking for Mrs Terry Fern. Can you tell me what room she’s in?”

The woman glanced at her terminal and typed in the name, or so Annalise hoped since she couldn’t hear much over the dissonance of chatting patients and staff.

Seconds later, she beamed at Annalise. “That patient is currently resting in the common ward. Please head to the third floor. She’s in room three-oh-nine.”

Annalise thanked the receptionist and set out to find Terry. *Is she safe in here?* Since she wasn’t in the private ward, most likely they did not bother posting officers outside of her room.

When she arrived, her theory was proven correct. Not one officer was guarding her. It didn’t make sense. She was almost killed that morning, yet the DPD was treating this lightly.

She pushed the door aside and entered the room. There were six beds, three on either side. All seemed occupied and separated by a single sheet of glass that projected different scenery selected by each patient.

Annalise managed a smile and made her way to Terry’s bed.

The woman was staring at the ceiling. Her face was an assortment of purple, pink, and yellow shades. The doctors managed to fix her arm and wrapped it in a pink cast that spanned from her fingers to her shoulder.

“Mrs Fern?”

“Detective?” Terry tried moving but seemed to struggle with the task. A second later, Annalise found out why. Her wrists and ankles were restrained under the blanket.

“They won’t let me see my girls. Are they alright?”

Annalise pressed her lips together. Terry knew the truth, yet she chose to ignore it. Should she be the one to further shatter this woman’s delusion of a happy family? *Probably not.*

“They are sleeping,” Annalise replied with a half-smile.

“That’s good. The others said they were dead. I did not believe them. Everyone here is a liar, everyone but you.”

Annalise pulled up a chair next to the hospital bed. “Do you remember what happened to you?”

Mrs Fern seemed to think about it and smiled. Her eyes filled with warmth. “I brought my daughters home from school. They were so happy! They both did well on their tests. Izzy said she wanted homemade pizza to celebrate, and Lisa agreed. We cooked together.” Her eye started twitching. “But then, Robert came home from work. He seemed tired, so I helped him take his coat off. He could not stop moaning about the modded at his workplace. No one wanted to join them, too scared to fight back.”

Annalise grasped her hand. “Fight? Fight what?”

Terry didn’t react and continued, “He shouldn’t have asked. He shouldn’t have done this to our family. If he let the Sentinels die out, then everything would be fine. My beautiful girls would be alive!” She screamed and thrashed on her bed. “Why? Why did Robert do this? Why did he kill them? My children!”

The other patients grumbled and pressed their buttons for assistance. Two nurses ran inside, one of them holding a syringe in her hand. They both struggled with Terry until one of them managed to inject her with a sedative.

“Please leave, Miss. She is unstable right now,” the nurse said.

Annalise glanced over her shoulder at Terry’s relaxing form. One word played on her mind—a word that after two centuries had become a myth no one wished to remember. That word was ‘Sentinel’.

DINNER WITH THE STORMS

In school, she was taught in her History classes that Sentinel was the first group of modded people who banded together to overthrow and rule the purebloods. They saw themselves as the stronger, improved human beings, and believed they deserved to control the world because of it.

On December 17, 2135, leaders of different countries gathered at the United Nations in Old New York to discuss the topic of the modded oppression and lack of trust from purebloods. Some arrived there with open minds, others with a decision already made. In one swift attack, many men and women were slaughtered to display the power of the Sentinel movement.

So, why would purebloods such as Robert Fern and James Steinberg work for such a violent idea? Was it money? Or was she getting ahead of herself? Perhaps, Terry had lost all of her reason after the death of her daughters, and Robert was someone she had piled the blame onto.

Annalise pushed away from her desk at home and grabbed her cup of coffee. She frowned when there was little weight to the mug. Glancing inside, she found it was already empty. With a disgruntled grumble, she set it back down.

The image recognition from AID hadn't finished its search yet for the symbol. Meanwhile, her mind ran around the problem in circles. The more information she had, the less sense this case made.

Why were the bodies murdered to make it seem like a *beast* attack? If this was for political reasons, why were Terry and her daughters targeted? With the way Terry behaved, she had nothing to do with whatever Robert was into. Then, there were her daughters. They had to be innocents in all of this, so why kill them? At the same time, how did Robert Fern get from Landon's in Silver to Bronze without a single street camera capturing him or his movements? How did the plants from the marsh outside of Divinity get in his hair?

One thing she knew for certain: whoever modified those video feeds from Landon's must be responsible for every death so far.

Her comms beeped, and she groaned. It was her mother again.

"Annalise, did you forget about our dinner meeting?"

"No. However, I don't have time for meetings."

"I heard that you have no case to work on right now, so stop prolonging this discussion and come over. I expect you to dress nicely."

She rose from her chair and looked at the darkness outside her window. *Dress nicely for what?*

"Hurry up," her mother urged, ending the call.

With jerky movements, Annalise rummaged through her closet, finding a pair of black jeans and a red V-neck sweater. It wasn't formal attire, but it would do for a casual visit to her neighbouring parents. She stripped out of her work clothes and slipped on her chosen outfit. Tying her hair into a ponytail reminded her of Mavel. Her heart tugged in her

chest as she fought the pain with determination to prove his innocence. *There is no way I'm going to let him be incinerated by the Falcon idiots.*

Seconds later, she was walking down the corridor outside of her apartment since her parents lived on the same floor as her.

Annalise arched a brow when her mother swung the door open with a frozen smile. To contrast her daughter, Regina was overdressed. Maybe that was an understatement. A long satin black gown hugged every curve of her body, acting as an expensive backdrop to the massive sapphires hanging from her neck and earlobes. Annalise could tell she was wearing heels underneath her extravagant, cleavage-revealing, dress. If Regina Storm paid a visit to a shrink, she would be diagnosed with an inferiority complex. Her dark brown hair cupped her displeased face as she finished taking in her daughter's attire.

"Is this what you call nice?" Regina hissed.

"It's this or work clothes," Annalise said in her defence.

Regina grasped her wrist and pulled her into the apartment. "Come with me. Since I have dismissed Sylvia for the evening, I will help you change into something more appropriate."

Annalise ran her hand over her face, her skin prickling in different places as her mother ushered her into her bedroom. After being urged to take a seat on the queen-sized bed, Regina went to search for what she thought was "proper clothes" in her closet.

"Why am I here, Mum?"

Regina grunted a response as she selected a striped red and black lace dress then tossed it at Annalise. She chose a pair of matching heels and lowered them next to her daughter's feet.

Annalise didn't move. "Well?"

Her mother pulled her into a standing position and pointed to the dress. "You'll know in a few minutes. Right now, I want you to get changed." She clapped her hands. "Hurry up, dear."

Letting out a laboured huff, Annalise changed her clothes again. It took ten minutes to fit inside the body-hugging dress that was a size too small. Her mother must have lost weight.

When Annalise was done, Regina beamed at her with a pearly smile and walked a full circle around her. “Humm...” She paused in front of Annalise and yanked her daughter’s hair tie off, forcing her hair to spring free.

A few hairs got caught in the hair tie, and she winced.

Regina pointed to Annalise’s pale complexion. “Why do you never apply any cosmetics?”

Annalise closed her eyes, praying for patience. “My work has nothing to do with looking pretty, Mother.”

“You’re not working right now, are you? Sit, I’ll help you look presentable and appear lively.” She opened a drawer in her vanity desk and removed a small velvet bag. Unzipping it, she pulled out a few glass bottles and brushes. “Close your eyes, Anna.”

With the last of the fight leaving her, Annalise let her mother torment her face until she was satisfied.

Regina took her hand and led the way into the dining room without another word. She felt like an unwilling object at one of those fancy charity events. It wouldn’t surprise her if, at any given moment, a man in a black tuxedo would climb onto a stage with a small hammer in hand and in an over-excited tone shouts, “Sold for five thousand credits!”

When they stopped, Annalise’s blood drained from her face. Her eyes narrowed on the other participants of tonight’s dinner. “Devlin, Father...”

Devlin rose from his seat at the dinner table and circled around, offering her his hand. “Annalise, you look stunning, as usual.”

He wore a fitted navy suit with the top two buttons of his crisp white shirt undone. Every piece of his clothing seemed to complement his

athletic body. To keep her mind on her anger, she tore her eyes away from him and assessed her father with suspicion. *What are you planning?*

William greeted her with a nod. He, too, was dressed up for the mysterious occasion. The blue sleeves of his Egyptian silk shirt had golden cufflinks catching the light as he motioned for her to come closer. "Come. Sit. We have matters to discuss."

"Matters like Falcon stealing my case?" She shot Devlin a glare, and his perfect smile faltered. Her accusatory gaze returned to her father. "Or matters where you ask my Chief to take me off the case?"

"Sit, Annalise," her father ordered, and she felt every drop of defiance in her blood rushing to her head. She wrinkled the perfectly soft material of her dress in her tight grasp. While they sat here discussing God only knows what, Mavel was somewhere in the Falcon Headquarters, possibly tortured for the answers he didn't have.

Her mother caught Annalise's hand and passed it to Devlin. He pressed his lips to each of her knuckles, one ticklish kiss at a time.

"Please, join us for dinner," Devlin pleaded.

For some reason, she couldn't stay angry at him. The people he worked for were trying to take Mavel away from her, yet, here she was, mesmerised by his outdated flirting techniques.

Annalise yanked her hand out of his hold and wiped it on her dress, hoping the tingling sensation where he kissed her would disappear.

"Anna?" her mother asked, planting a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Are you alright?"

She let out an unladylike groan and allowed Devlin to pull a chair out for her at the dining table. She scanned the extravaganza they put out on display. The marble table had an array of foods spread out, everything from her favourite salmon with lemon dressing to juicy slices of steak in brown sauce. Her mouth watered as the scents mingled in the air. She had forgotten to eat today.

Am I truly helpless without Mavel?

Devlin returned to his seat across from her. Her mother took this chance to open a bottle of champagne which she poured individually into the crystal flutes.

“How was work?” Will asked.

Annalise said nothing. He most likely knew how her day was. One of his spies must have told him that their case was stolen by the Falcon Group.

Regina handed her a champagne flute.

After consuming the bubbling liquid in one go, her curiosity got the best of her. “What is this really about, Will? You didn’t call me here to talk about my work. So, what can I do for you?”

“Annalise!” Her mother elbowed her in the side.

Devlin’s chuckle turned into full-blown laughter as he clutched his sides in an attempt to stop. Her father joined in soon after, and her mother wasn’t missing the action with her ladylike giggle.

The circus act they started had her confused. Her gut told her whatever they were building towards, she wasn’t going to like. She tensed when the laughter died.

“I love your directness, Annalise,” Devlin said.

“Glad someone appreciates it,” she shot back and diverted her attention to her father. “Well?”

William sipped his drink, false amusement wiped away from his serious expression. With the grace of a monarch, he set down his champagne flute and let his lips fall into a smirk, deepening the wrinkles on his aged face. “We have talked this matter over and, with your *servant* being indisposed, we thought it would be a good idea to go through with your engagement to Devlin.”

The world must have stopped moving the second the word ‘engagement’ left her father’s lips. She blinked once, twice, thrice. The words he said didn’t seem to register until Devlin patted her hand that was crushing the stem of her glass. She heard it snap, and her mother

jumped out of her seat in search of napkins to stop the blood dripping all over her expensive table and dress. Luckily, Annalise was too angry to notice the searing pain in her palm.

“Anna, you must see this from where we stand,” her father began.

She let out a laugh of her own. “No.”

“What do you mean?” Will demanded, his expression darkening.

“No. I am not getting *engaged* to a man I know nothing about, and, *no*, Mavel is not *indisposed*, he is blamed for something he didn’t do!” she snapped at him and shot out of her seat. “You”—she pointed at Devlin with her bleeding hand—“come with me for a sec.”

Her father slammed his palms against the table, making the dishes and cutlery bounce on its smooth surface. “Your behaviour is outrageous, Annalise!”

“Don’t go there, *William!*” she forced out her father’s full name—a habit of hers that she knew he hated.

Devlin rested his hand on her father’s shoulder. “I’ll talk to her. Please continue without us.”

Will visibly fought for control of his emotions. His jaw was so tightly closed, he spoke through his teeth. “Please. Do.”

Devlin walked around the table, taking her by the elbow with a painful grasp. He led her into one of the bedrooms along the hallway and closed the door behind them. Without delay, he whirled her around, and she was pressed between him and the door.

His eyes searched hers for something. He almost seemed distressed as he raked his fingers through his dark hair. His hand fell to his side, and he moved away enough for her to have some personal space. “I thought you knew and agreed to this engagement.”

“My mother called and told me to come over. I don’t think I would have come here or worn” —she waved her hands at Regina’s ruined dress—“*this* if I heard the word ‘engagement’ in her spiel.”

Devlin chuckled and took her injured hand into his. His warm touch sent a shiver up her arm and down her spine. With great care, he unravelled her fingers and picked out the tiny shards of glass from her palm. “Are you sure you do not wish to think more on the matter? Give it some thought?” Again, his eyes searched her face. “Am I the only one who feels this attraction between us?”

She cast her gaze to her bloodied hand. Certainly, she did feel a strange pull towards him. He was good-looking, kind, and a true gentleman most of the time. There wasn’t a hair out of place on his head or a crease on his spotless shirt. By her father’s standards, he was a perfect pureblood specimen with a great career ahead of him. But, this wasn’t the time for attraction or love. She had to find the ones responsible for the deaths of all those people.

“I want the case back,” she said.

Devlin withdrew a handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it around her injured hand. His deft fingers tied a knot on top, and he let go. “You know I can’t do that.”

“Why not? It was mine to begin with. I want it back.”

“Is it because you are attracted to your *beast*?” He asked the question as if he was inquiring about the weather and not the taboo subject others edged around.

She opened her mouth, but the suitable words never came to her rescue. Deep down, she had already come to terms with the fact that Mavel meant to her a lot more than anyone else in her life. She loved him, and it tore her apart to be away from him all those days. She missed his smile, his mesmerising silver eyes that made her stomach twist and turn with happiness. She missed his witty comments, his ability to make her eat, and the warming sensation of freshly made coffee that only tasted perfect if prepared by his hand. It was as if a part of her was gone—the better part of her. The emptiness in her soul was

indescribable. Devlin's words only made her feel more hollow as her lip quivered, and she fought to control her emotions.

Devlin must have noticed the change. He pressed the pad of his thumb against her lower lip and trapped her against the door with his solid body. His burning eyes bore into hers with silent determination. "Accept our engagement, and I will let you see him again."

His closeness annoyed her. He wasn't who she was missing. He could be gorgeous, but he was not Mavel. Besides, she didn't like to be cornered and manipulated. Her resolution broke when his fingers caressed her cheek and a tingling sensation spread to her shoulders and down her body as a wave of calmness made her languid and boneless.

Focusing on his eyes, she whispered, "Do you mean that?"

Devlin ran his thumb along her lip and used his fingers to lift her chin. "If it will help me claim your defiant heart, I'll help. You have until tomorrow night to decide."

He moved her aside and left the room.

Staring at the door, her mind came to a complete stop. Was she willing to accept Devlin for a chance to get Mavel out of there? The question was a no-brainer. She would do whatever it took to save him, even if it meant giving up her freedom.

LEFT BEHIND

Annalise had changed back into her comfortable clothes in the bedroom. Her mother and father sat at the dining table, talking about something in hushed tones. She took this chance to scan for Devlin. “Where did he go?”

William didn’t seem amused. His scowl worked its way up to a new degree of purple-faced anger. “Your vulgar behaviour must have scared him off.”

Her mother turned in her seat. “He left. You should have, at least, brought him to your place for a glass of wine.”

“Whether I accept this engagement or not has nothing to do with you. This choice will be made by me alone.”

“Leave. Now, Annalise, before I kick you out of this Tower and send you to live in Bronze,” William threatened.

“A little distance may not be so bad for our already diminishing relationship,” she huffed and marched out of their home.

It wasn't the idea of living in Bronze that frightened her. If she couldn't get Mavel out of the Falcon's hold, all she would have left would be the memories they had created in her apartment. The mornings they had breakfast together around the kitchen island, the days when she drank the coffee he made for her on the balcony while he tended to his plants.

Annalise held back a sob and made her way to her apartment. Her wrist comms activated with an incoming call from Jamen—a call she was waiting for all day. She glanced at the time. It was almost 8 p.m.

“Jamen, I hope you have some good news. Please tell me it's good...”

Silence came from the other end of the line.

“Jamen? Hello?”

A digitally modified snicker came through her comms' speaker. “Do you know what happens when you don't do as you are told?”

“Who is this?”

“We will see each other soon enough, Detective Storm. Don't you worry about that.”

The call ended. She pressed her back to her door, allowing her eyes to scan the hallway and the lifts. As the next second ticked by, the door to her apartment opened, and she fell backwards. She grabbed for the doorframe but missed it, and her back came in contact with the ground, knocking the air out of her. She didn't get a chance to see her attacker as he sprayed her face with an unidentified gas. Her body reacted to the chemical almost immediately. Her vision blurred, her jaw slackened, and everything went dark.



Opening her eyes was difficult. The bright light around her forced her to close them again. A dull headache made her head feel heavy. Her

throat was dry and scratchy. This time, when she lifted her eyelids, she was able to study the room she was in.

The walls were clinically white and the floor beneath her restrained feet was some kind of green synthesised linoleum. Large medical machines and chemical equipment were spread out all around her. She was pretty sure one of them was the new MRI developed by the ETek Corporation, next to a state-of-the-art Cell-Regen machine only available in the hospitals in the Golden District. Chemical compounds were neatly labelled and arranged on the tables and cupboards opposite her.

In turn, Annalise was sitting on a chair with her wrists tied together with something cold and heavy behind her back. Shifting her arms, she heard a jingle of metal before it bit into her skin.

“Great,” she grumbled and assessed the handcuffs around her ankles. They looked like the titanium-steel alloy the CSU drones found in Macabre. These had to be the same cuffs used on Leila, and, if a *beast* couldn’t find her way out of them, as a pureblood she had no chance. Restless, she tugged relentlessly at the restraints anyway. The metal cut off the blood flow to her feet when she attempted spreading her legs.

Tired and out of breath, she calmed enough to locate the sole entry point of the room. There were no windows, only the sickening walls around her that hurt her eyes along with a small break in the perfection of the smooth wall, telling her where the entrance was.

Her heart jolted into action when the door opened and a man strode inside. The grey clothes under his navy lab coat were loose on his willowy frame. A mask covered most of his face and jet-black hair fell over his thin eyebrows. He nestled a tray on the counter and placed a syringe in his pocket.

Annalise swallowed. Her nerves were taking over her body and her attention darted to the door as it slowly closed.

“We meet again, Detective,” he said, and she frowned.

He peeled the mask off his face.

“You!”

Todd, the *basilisk* who bit Mavel, watched her with interest. *What is he doing here in such a get-up? More importantly, where is here?*

His thin lips stretched into a lopsided smile. “I see you’re pleased to see me.”

She glared at him. “Where are we? Why am I here? And how did you get Jamen’s comms frequency?”

“This reminds me of the first time we met. You wanted answers to too many questions—always the inquisitive Princess of the Towers. But, you are getting too close, Detective. I can’t let you ruin my project.”

“What are you talking about?”

Todd lifted her chin, forcing her to look into the depths of his emotionless eyes. “Even Lloyd wanted to let your inquisitiveness slide, and he is more ruthless than I. But, I can’t let you leave. You see...” He used his free hand to retrieve a small syringe filled with a red see-through liquid out of his pocket. “This is my life’s work. This”—Todd waved the syringe in front of her face—“is something that will make us come out on top.”

She tore her chin out of his grasp and reclined as far as the chair would allow her. “And what exactly is that?”

“I will be more than happy to show you.” Todd removed the plastic lid off the tiny needle. He grabbed her by the throat, and she coughed when he squeezed it. Grinning, he jabbed the syringe into her stomach and released the liquid with the press of a button on top. He let go of her and took a step back, a pleased grin on his face revealed his pointed canines.

“Now you will know exactly what it is...” He lifted his sleeve and studied his comms. “...in ten minutes, the apoptosis of the localised cells will begin. Why not immediately you ask?”

She clamped her mouth shut and swallowed to stop the unsettled acid in her stomach from rising. Her palms perspired and cooled. Whatever he had injected her with was reacting fast.

He put the cap back on the syringe and returned it to his pocket. “Because this serum is derived from my venom. Perfect and undetectable in every way. It will spread to the local cells. How does it know which cells to attack, you ask?”

“I didn’t ask, asshole!” she snarled. “What the hell did you inject me with?”

Todd’s smile slipped. “It’s not nice to interrupt a man in the middle of his speech. You never do that to your father when all he talks about is stomping on the rights of the modded.”

“Then take it up with him,” she yelled. “What did you drag me here for?”

He grabbed a handful of her hair and yanked her head upwards. The sudden movement caused her to cry out in pain.

Droplets of sweat beaded on top of her brow, and she took in a calming breath. She needed to keep her heart rate low.

“Falcon wishes for your father’s career to remain intact. They protect him, keeping him in the seat of power while he is useful. He needs to be because the defiant few are killed off.” He licked his lips. “It’s ironic that I was forced to make this serum to kill my own kind. Too bad they don’t realise that it will only work on the purebloods’ genetic markers.”

“You killed those people?” she asked, growing pale.

“Indirectly, yes. Lloyd had his men test my serum on the Sentinel members to start a media shitstorm. Looks like Falcon couldn’t let fate decide if the modded were ready to have a vote in Divinity.” He shook his head. “The next step was to test it on a *beast*. But, they are gravely mistaken. I didn’t join Falcon out of fear. I did it to start a revolution where the modded take a stand for the rights that were taken from us by your fathers and their fathers!”

A droplet of sweat rolled down the side of her face. “Then, why attack Terry? She didn’t do anything to you.”

“Attack Terry? I didn’t do that. When Robert showed me her picture, I wanted to spend a night with his wife, yes, but I would never hurt her. I even offered to help him get Leila out of the Macabre if he would let me fuck his wife. Too bad he declined.”

“You’re sick.”

“Maybe a little. Look on the bright side, Detective. After tonight, you won’t be working any more cases.”

Her stomach lurched and acid scaled her oesophagus, burning the sides of her throat. She barely had enough time to shift her head to one side when she heaved the contents of her empty stomach onto the floor.

Todd jumped back. “It is working quicker than I predicted. Must be because you are smaller than a man. I will have to take that into the account for the next experiment.”

The intercom in the room buzzed with static, and a man she didn’t recognise said, “Lloyd wants to see you in his office.”

Todd planted a hand on her shoulder. She studied it with her blurry vision. To try and clear it, she blinked a few more times until his fingers were no longer doubled.

“I’ll be back, hopefully, in time to see you die.”

Annalise grunted a response, and her stomach churned again. With a pained expression, she watched him leaving the room.

Should I shout for help? Would anyone here care if I did? The second she opened her mouth to speak, Todd fell back like a log onto the floor.

Devlin climbed over his unconscious body and rushed to her side. He placed his cold hands on her cheeks. “What did he do to you?”

His touch felt good, and she smiled.

“You’re burning up!” he said, letting go of her face. Devlin searched Todd’s unconscious body before he undid her restraints. “We need to get you to a hospital.”

With difficulty, she shook her head. “Too late for a hospital. I can...” She heaved again. Pain exploded in her stomach. Annalise cried out in agony, and her eyes widened when her red sweater grew darker. Her blood seeped into the cotton material.

Devlin positioned her weakened body on the floor. With steady hands, he lifted her sweater and, by the roundness of his eyes, she knew her skin was tearing itself apart. He rolled up her sweater further, not touching her burning flesh, and planted a soft kiss on her forehead. “I’m sorry, Annalise. I should have stayed with you tonight.”

She winced as he pulled away from her. “The antidote.”

Helpless, she watched him checking all the beakers and phials in the room. When he didn’t find anything there, he knelt over Todd, searching the *basilisk* once more.

“This bastard always keeps things close,” Devlin snapped. “Where is it?”

His words made her remember the night Mavel was dying in her arms. He must be feeling the same helplessness and panic she felt. She smiled at the bitter memory. *Does he care for me this much?* They had only known each other for a short time, yet he was trying to shake Todd awake in an attempt to find an antidote to save her.

A memory of Todd slicing open his wrist to feed his blood to Mavel surfaced, and she couldn’t help but wonder if that was the antidote to this concoction, too.

“His...blood,” she whispered. She could no longer feel the pain or the unpleasant burn riding her body. Instead, the cold from the ground felt like bliss.

“You’re right. He’s crazy enough to do that.” Devlin laid Todd back on the ground and cut the *basilisk’s* wrist. He dripped the blood into a beaker he found on a table and brought the liquid to her mouth.

Kneeling at her side, he said, “Drink.”

When she didn't move, Devlin opened her mouth with this thumb and poured the contents of the beaker down her throat.

Choking on the blood, she coughed, causing the liquid to splatter all over her face and sweater.

Devlin repeated the process and did two more trips for Todd's blood. Thankfully, she managed to swallow some of it.

"Mavel," she whispered, "is he here?"

Devlin brushed the stray lock of hair away from her sweaty forehead. "He's on the containment level below us. Why?"

"Save him...please."

He looked away, his expression unreadable. When his blue eyes found hers, he sighed. "Let's get you out of here first..."

She rolled her head from side to side. "No. Mavel first."

Devlin lifted her up. He effortlessly carried her over to the Cell-Regen unit and placed her on the cushioned bed below the scanner. She heard him typing in the key sequence on the control panel. Then, he positioned the scanner until it was directly above her stomach.

"This will heal some damage or keep more at bay until I return," he said.

The scanner glowed with neon-blue lights, and a laser scan of her torso commenced. The laser divided into two semi-circles that trapped her body. After it finished shifting, warm beams of light started regenerating her skin.

She turned her head. Devlin was already securing Todd to the chair. He ran his hand through his hair and rushed out of the room.

Two minutes passed, five, ten, and nothing happened. Her body was beginning to react to her commands and her strength slowly returned, as did the pain. She lifted her head enough to see the damage, and, to her surprise, it wasn't as bad as she had imagined. There was a large purple bruise on her stomach and a long thin tear that stretched across her waist as if someone tried to cut her in half. Blood trickled along the sides

of her waist. She focused on slowing her breathing to allow the lasers to stitch her skin back together.

“Anna?” Mavel called from the door.

Her head snapped in his direction as her eyes welcomed the sight of him. She struggled to remain still. “Mavel, is that really you?”

Panting and clinging to the doorframe, he took a menacing step towards the *basilisk*. His hands balled at his sides and his body radiated fury.

“Mavel, stop,” she begged.

“He did this to you, didn’t he?”

“He’s knocked out cold, and we have to get out of here.”

“But, he should pay!”

“He will but, first, help me get out of this machine.” She paused and searched the room for Devlin. “Where is Devlin?”

Mavel spared a glance at the door. “The guy who let me out? He said he’ll hold them back until we can both escape.” He rushed to her side and winced at the sight of her stomach. “We need to get you to a hospital.”

“But Devlin—”

He turned off the machine, and the scanner returned to its original position above her head.

“He’ll have to look after himself,” he said, lifting her into his arms.

Although most of her skin was stitched back together, a fine line left behind still threatened to split open. She carefully rolled her sweater to cover the sight of it.

Mavel crossed the room with long strides. He stepped over the threshold, and Devlin ran to them with his gun facing downwards.

“How is she?” Devlin asked.

Mavel’s chest vibrated with a growl. “She’ll be better once she’s in a hospital. Lead the way.”

Devlin smiled at her, revealing a set of dimples she liked. He motioned for Mavel to follow, and they ran the length of a long, winding corridor until they arrived at an emergency stairwell.

Voices came from up ahead, and Devlin lifted his comms to the scanner above the handle which opened the emergency exit for them. “Go. Get her out of here.”

“Devlin, what are you doing?” she demanded, reaching for him.

He stepped away and prepared to aim his gun, his finger hovering over the trigger. A second later, he shot Mavel a look she couldn’t decipher, causing Mavel to become tense.

“He’ll keep them off us,” Mavel said, pushing through the door.

The emergency door closed behind them. Gunshots echoed above, and she cried out Devlin’s name.

“He’ll be fine.”

For some reason, Mavel’s words made her heart ache more.

AN EMPTY HOUSE

Mavel brought her to the hospital in Silver. He called over the emergency staff, and they surrounded her, each one shouting different orders that gave her a migraine.

A nurse wheeled a gurney over, and Mavel settled Annalise onto it without a complaint. It was like watching a movie in slow motion. Two nurses, a doctor, and Mavel gathered by her side with perplexed and worried faces.

“How did the patient become like this?” the doctor asked Mavel.

“I don’t know. I just found her this way.”

The doctor eyed him then brought his attention to her. “Miss, can you hear me?”

Lights flickered above her head as the staff pushed the gurney through the halls. Burning pain erupted in her stomach when the nurse pressed something to her exposed stomach. Tears spilt out of her eyes. The pain

was too much to bear, so she tried to focus on the flashing lights above her head.

One light, two lights, three lights, four...

“Miss? ...name?” the doctor’s voice ruined her count.

She couldn’t find the energy to speak. Her mind clung to everything that wasn’t pure agony. Things like images of Todd injecting her with his serum, Devlin risking his life to save them, and the way they escaped the Falcon building. All the way to the hospital, she never stopped begging Mavel to go back for him. He didn’t listen as he ran with her in his arms. She punched at his chest with her weakened fists until she could no longer hold her hands up. At some point between then and now, her wound had opened up. Her blood glued the material of her sweater to her skin and the world darkened around the edges.

“Miss? Miss what is your name?” the doctor asked.

“Storm, Annalise Storm,” she whispered in a hoarse voice.

The doctor’s eyes widened. He glanced at Mavel. “Are you her *servant?*”

Mavel nodded. “She is a HPD detective. You should contact them first.”

“Mavel...” She outstretched her hand. “Stay.”

He shook his head. “I will come back, Anna.”

With that, he was gone out of sight. She was wheeled into surgery, and the nurse injected something into her veins. Her mind grew fuzzy and sleep welcomed her.



Annalise woke up in a hospital bed with her parents, Rios, Des, and Jamen, scattered around the room. Her mother clutched her hand and

was asleep on the covers of her bed. Her father, whom she didn't expect to see, was looking out the window at the evening view of Divinity.

"How long have I been out?" Annalise asked.

Her mother stirred in her sleep. This had to be the first occasion where Regina Storm wasn't wearing any make-up. For once, she seemed like a worried mother and not a politician's trophy wife.

Rios stood and stretched.

Jamen circled the bed, stopping at her side. "You were out for most of the day. We got a call from the hospital this morning about your situation."

Her mind raced. Memories of the previous night came flooding back. In the search for answers to what happened, she studied the worried faces of her co-workers. "Mavel, Devlin... Where are they?"

Drawing closer to her father, Rios smiled. "Sir, could we ask Annalise a couple of questions in private?"

William's piercing eyes bore into Rios who flinched and scratched his head. Her father turned his attention to her and his gaze softened. "Is that what you want, Annalise?"

She managed a faint smile. This was another first. He seemed to care about her opinion on the matter. *Was I hurt that badly?* She couldn't feel much, the painkillers ought to be still in her system. "I need to talk to them. Please wait outside."

Her mother pursed her lips together, ready to protest, but William cupped her shoulders and ushered her into the hallway.

Des stepped out after them, grumbling, "I need some caffeine in me."

Rios and Jamen both gathered by her bedside.

"Glad you're alive, Storm," Rios said.

Jamen gave a curt nod.

"I'm glad to be alive." Her eyes narrowed on Jamen. "Now answer my question."

“You are only a couple of hours out of surgery and all you do is demand answers. I swear you are a tough nut to crack.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not in this bed to receive flattery. Where are they?”

“Mavel is gone. He contacted us and told us what happened. It appears he needs to lie low from now on. After all, the Falcon Group is looking for him. He said Devlin, of all people, got you out of their secret facility in Silver.”

Her chest hurt as the next words left her mouth. “Is Devlin alive?”

Jamen shrugged. “If you are asking if we have found a body, then no, we haven’t. Other than that, we cannot be certain.”

That wasn’t good or bad news.

Rios patted her hand. “We couldn’t get the case back, Storm.”

“Of course not. Not when Falcon was behind the deaths of both politicians and Robert Fern.”

Rios’ eyes bulged, but Jamen didn’t react to the news. She raised her brow, and he said, “I expected their involvement one way or another.”

“And the Landon’s case? Did you find out anything about that?” Rios asked.

“No. Whatever the reason may be, it doesn’t excuse the death of so many purebloods...”

Jamen pinched the bridge of his nose. “Drop this matter, Storm. If you don’t, you may be our next case.” He removed his hand and looked her directly in the eye. “They could have killed you both before you got here. They could have eliminated you in the hospital at any time, yet they left you alone. *Why?* Because what you received was most likely a warning. If you keep digging into their business, they *will* kill you.”

“You seem to know a lot about the way they operate,” Rios said.

“It doesn’t take a lot of brainpower to figure that organisation out,” Jamen replied.

So that's it? We can't touch them even if we are the police? She balled her hands, wrinkling the covers she was grasping. *This has to be a joke. The Falcon Group can do anything they like, and the DPD have to look the other way.* “I can’t accept this.”

Jamen pointed at the door. “Those people back there, your family, are they important to you?”

Her throat constricted and her fingers uncurled. She knew where he was going with this. “Yes.”

“Then think about them the next time you dive into the deep waters. They will be the ones crying over your casket, even if you won’t be around to see it.”

She faced the window. His words sank in when she discovered her reflection. It was a young woman with tired eyes and the complexion of a ghost. A month ago, she was full of spirit, wanting to be the best detective there was and clean the streets of Divinity. Now, a hardened soul stared back at her. She guessed that was what they called experience.

“How long until I can get discharged?”

Rios grinned. “Two days of intense Cell-Regen therapy and you’ll be almost as good as new.”

“Good. I want to get back to work,” she said. “But, for now, I think I need to rest.”

They both said their goodbyes, leaving her alone.

Mavel was on the run from Falcon. He couldn’t possibly survive in Divinity by himself. Knowing him, he would not return to his family. That would be where they’d look first. Yet, since Falcon allowed them to escape, did that mean they didn’t care if he was captured or not? That thought brought her hope.



Rios lied through his teeth. It wasn't two days. No. For two weeks, she was stuck in Cell-Regen therapy. When she told the doctor she was leaving after a week, he had the nurses strapping her to the hospital bed and sedating her.

At last, the weeks went by, and Rios was there to collect her. He took her bag from her and slung it over his shoulder. "You ready to return to your Tower, princess?"

She punched him in the arm. "You're lucky I don't have a gun on me."

"I guess I'm glad about that, too. Ah, almost forgot. We are throwing your welcoming party at the Iron Carver in your favourite Red District tomorrow night."

"What made you think it was my favourite?"

Rios winked, and a blush painted her cheeks and neck. He couldn't possibly have watched the video feeds from the Macabre club for the night she and Mavel first went in there.

"You didn't!" she said.

He tapped his nose with his index finger and ran ahead of her through the hospital entrance.

If she wasn't told to take it easy, she would have throttled him. To return to full-time work, she had to wait until someone from the Academy was assigned as her new partner or she had to hire a new *servant* to be independent. Reconsidering Rios' murder, she got in his car.

He nattered about the lack of cases and drove towards the Towers. She took this chance to study her surroundings. Citizens of Divinity walked on the pavements in their suits and expensive clothing. Some strolled at their own pace, others rushed to get to their destination. Yet, none of them knew or cared to know what truly went on in this messed up city. The control they had over the modded was an illusion that could be shattered at a moment's notice.

Rios left the Silver District and entered the Golden one. They passed by the giant mansions separated by tall iron gates and trimmed hedges.

He cleared his throat. "Storm?"

"Yeah?"

"We're almost at your Tower. I'll drop you off out front 'cause I have to collect Des from the office."

"That's fine."

Ten minutes later, Rios parked the car in front of the 200-foot-tall glass Tower One. She got her bag out of the boot and waved as he drove away. Who would have thought she would become friends with that guy in the end? The fact he had stopped hitting on her helped tremendously.

With a light heart, she entered the Tower and passed the scanners. Instead of taking the route through the shopping centre, she aimed for the private lifts to the apartments. A group of people rushed ahead of her, making her wait for the next one.

On her floor, she stepped out of the lift, adjusting her bag's strap on her shoulder. She let the scanner at her door read her wrist comms, and she was finally at home. When the door closed behind her, Annalise stilled, listening out for any sounds. This place was just as she had left it two weeks ago—empty.

Her bag fell to the ground, and she went into her bedroom. The lights flicked on with her clap. She scanned the expanse of her room, searching for anything out of place. Her work clothes were exactly where she left them, on the floor. On her desk sat an empty mug in desperate need of being washed.

"I'm home..."

Someone grabbed her from behind and covered her mouth with a large hand, muffling her scream. Blood drained from her face. Her eyes frantically searched for a weapon she could use on the intruder.

“Anna, it’s me,” Mavel spoke into her ear, and her heart nearly leapt out of her chest from relief.

He released her.

With a flurry of emotions coursing through her, she slapped him.

Stunned, he stared at her. A week’s worth of stubble coated his cheeks and his light-brown hair had been trimmed short.

“Not a welcome I expected, but I’ll take it nonetheless,” he said, rubbing his face.

“You-you scared the life out of me!”

He smiled and his fingers trailed from her shoulders to her waist. Mavel pulled her in, and her face collided with his solid chest. His arms wrapped around her, and she relaxed into him, enjoying the smell of his musky cologne.

“I’ve missed you,” she mumbled into the soft material of his black shirt.

Mavel’s breath tickled her ear, and she held in a giggle that threatened to flee. His hold on her grew as if he was unconsciously trying to merge their bodies together. “You don’t know how long I’ve waited to be able to hold you again.”

She lifted her face, meeting his silver eyes. “All it took was a near-death experience for me to realise how much I wanted you to touch me.”

His cat-like pupils dilated, engulfing the colour of his irises. “Do you mean that, Anna? Are you sure this is what you want?”

She couldn’t think in his embrace. His absence from her side became the buffer for this overflow of strange fuzziness in her stomach. The world they lived in was too confusing with their laws, restrictions, and control. She pushed everything but him to the back of her mind.

Without breaking eye contact, she brought his head to her level, pressing their lips together.

Mavel's groan vibrated against her mouth. His fingers dug into her back as he crushed her body to his, destroying all of the barriers between them. Sliding his hands upwards, he buried his hands in her hair.

Annalise gasped, and Mavel's tongue plunged inside her mouth, accepting the invitation. She returned his needy kiss. Beneath her palms, she could feel his strong heart racing, matching hers in its excited pace. Their breaths mingled. She could taste coffee as he stroked her tongue with his.

A single minute with him felt like an eternity. Her lungs ached from lack of oxygen. She pushed against his chest, not because she wanted to separate but because she was growing lightheaded.

He reluctantly drew back, settling his hands to her waist. "I'm sorry. Do you want me to stop?"

Her cheeks flushed red, and she looked at her hands. His chest rose and fell under her touch, it was captivating. "No, it's just I've never felt this way before..."

Mavel cupped her face and planted soft kisses on her forehead, eyebrows, eyelids, nose, and a single peck on the lips. His hands moved to her shoulders, and he left tender kisses along her jawline.

She sucked in a breath when he nibbled on the sensitive flesh of her neck. He continued the arousing assault on her skin with tiny nibbles that descended all the way to the collar of her jacket. Mavel brushed her hair to one side, making the cool air send a shiver of pleasure down her spine.

Not knowing what to do, she moved her head back, giving him more freedom.

Mavel smiled against her skin. He ran his tongue from her collarbone to her jaw in one excruciatingly slow motion as his skilful fingers peeled the jacket off her shoulders.

In response, she allowed the material to slide down her arms and fall to the floor.

Mavel knelt on the ground before her. He took both of her hands in his and planted kisses on each of her fingertips. Somehow, every time his lips made contact with her skin, her heart swelled with love for this man. He was a *beast*, yes. He was her *servant*, yes. But, above every title, he was the man she loved. For all the years he spent with her, for all the times he protected her and studied with her, she would have readily given him her heart all over again.

When he finished, Mavel smiled at her, and she melted inside. His hooded eyes reflected everything he felt. Yet, amidst the hunger and the passion burning in the molten depths of his eyes, she also discovered fear. He was afraid, for them, for her.

A tear rolled down her cheek, and she knelt in front of him. She ran her fingers over the contours of his chiselled jawline, feeling the prickle of his stubble irritating her skin.

“Mavel, it’s okay,” she told him. “I’m certain I want this.”

He brushed her hands away. “You will be the death of me, Anna.”

In an instant, she was in his arms, and he was carrying her to bed. Mavel lowered her onto the soft sky-blue cotton sheets and pulled his shirt over his head.

She swallowed. She didn’t know what to do with her hands that wanted to feel every inch of his powerful body. But, her eyes were a different matter. She was unable to look away. He was beautiful. His well-defined muscles rippled as he sat back on his haunches, letting her drink him in. It didn’t take long for her mouth to go dry. Her attention travelled from the fine hairs on his chest to the darker curls that peeked from under his jeans that hung low on his hips.

Ever since this case began, Mavel radiated more and more authority as the days went by. Now, he seemed like someone beyond her world. It excited her and frightened her at the same time. *Am I losing him on an emotional level?*

He took her right hand and helped her sit up. “Do you want to touch me, Anna?”

She bit her lip a little too hard, making it throb, but she didn’t care about the sting. None of her worries or fears mattered when he guided her hands to his chest. The pads of her fingers came in contact with his smooth skin, and she couldn’t shake the urge to explore further. She let her nervous hands wander across his chest and his hard abdominal muscles before resting them on his sides.

Mavel took this chance to bring her closer to him. His fingers grabbed the hem of her shirt, and he lifted the material over her head with ease.

While she sat in front of him in her bra and jeans, his hands caressed her stomach, waist, and back with a feather-light touch. She closed her eyes, revelling in the new sensations. All it took to mediate the cold air in the room was a tender touch from him that warmed her like a campfire.

She let out a soft moan, and her hands shot to her mouth, covering her betraying lips.

Mavel chuckled, making his chest shake with his mirth.

Was she the only one nervous? She glanced at his hands. They trembled slightly and paused under her bra.

Their eyes met, and he finally asked, “May I?”

She nodded as words and logic abandoned her.

His hands moved to her back, and he undid the hooks of her bra. Oh-so-gently, he used his thumbs to pull on the straps and make them descend her shoulders and arms.

Her breasts sprang free, and she looked away. This was too embarrassing. If she knew ahead of schedule this would happen, she would have called the *flare* from Macabre and asked for her assistance.

Mavel shifted, and she couldn’t help but wonder what he was doing. His hot lips collided with hers. He pushed her down, and his hand landed on her left breast, kneading it gently.

The sensation made her arch her back as wetness pooled between her legs. He tweaked her nipple, bringing out another moan from her.

Mavel kissed her chin and rained kisses down her neck and collarbone until his lips found the pointed buds of her breasts. He kissed each one of them at first, and she had to stifle another moan with her hand.

“Don’t cover your mouth,” he murmured against her skin and tugged her hand away. “I want to hear your pleasure, Anna.”

These feelings, sensations, and emotions were beyond her. She wanted to defy his request. Every cell in her body begged her to, but the intensity in his eyes prevented her.

He smiled and dipped his head, taking the whole bud into his mouth and sucking on it.

Her breath hitched, and she clenched her legs together, enjoying the friction her jeans created. When he rolled the sensitive nipple around with his tongue, she grasped the sheets beneath her. His woody shampoo filled her senses and surrounded her like a cocoon.

“M-Mavel,” she said between gasps.

He did not stop. Instead, he quickened his actions, and her body vibrated with excitement while her legs struggled to find a comfortable position. Breathing through her nose was impossible as her body demanded more oxygen. Her lips parted, and she sucked in breath after deep breath.

He moved his mouth to the valley between her breasts and travelled to her stomach, kissing every inch of her on his journey. Mavel undid the three buttons on her jeans. His eyes never left hers. He was still measuring her reactions and, for some reason, it made her want to work harder.

She wanted him to know that being with him was what she needed, without any barriers created by the societal prejudice.

Mavel tugged her jeans off, leaving her black underwear clinging to her hips.

Her hands migrated to conceal as much of her as possible, but he caught her wrists and trapped them above her head. His hard body hovered above hers, and she held her breath when she met his passion-filled gaze.

“I have dreamt of this moment for years, Anna. I’m not letting you hide from me after we’ve gotten this far.” He lay next to her, drawing her into him. Her side pressed against his chest and his arm snaked underneath her head. Mavel pinched her left nipple and used his other hand to tug her panties down which she helped with by lifting her hips and bending her knees.

A smirk played on his lips when his hands parted her thighs enough to give him access. His fingers brushed past her dark curls. She squeezed her eyes shut as his feverish mouth captured hers.

Mavel found her sensitive spot and circled it. She bucked under his touch. It was as if her body burned from within. Every little sensation was amplified by the unison of his actions. To his quickening pace, her body hummed, dancing to his expert tune until she felt something growing inside of her with every stroke of his fingers.

Annalise cried out her pleasure, and Mavel broke the kiss, allowing her voice to fill the room. Rational thought was too far gone out of her mind. She no longer cared if anyone saw or heard her as her orgasm fried the logical circuits in her brain.

He moved his lips to her neck, sucking on her skin. It made goosebumps populate her right side in a single wave. The sudden cold quickly dissipated when he pushed two fingers inside of her, stretching her opening.

“Does it feel good, *Anna?*” he whispered into her ear, and she shivered at the way he said her name. It was intimate, fever-inducing, and loving at the same time. The word rolled off his tongue, and she couldn’t hold it any longer. Her walls clenched around his fingers in

waves as she drifted over the edge again, falling into an explosion of heat.

When she returned to planet Earth, Mavel withdrew his fingers, and she whimpered at the sudden separation. He kissed her sweaty forehead and, the next thing she knew, she was straddling him.

She blinked a few times, uncertain as to what she was supposed to do.

“Don’t look so scared,” he said with a smile.

Annalise weakly smiled back, hesitation gnawing at the back of her mind.

Mavel shifted her until her chin rested on his chest. He planted a soft kiss on her nose when she heard his jeans being unzipped. Her body tensed around him, and he brushed the stray locks of hair out of her face, tucking them behind her ear.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

She felt foolish for doubting him. Mavel would never hurt her. He always did everything with her in mind.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Mavel used his hand to guide himself to her slick opening, making her gasp. He grasped her waist and pushed her back into a sitting position.

To keep another blush under control, she looked away. Her flushed cheeks turned tomato-red when she saw his thick length pressed against her.

Mavel took hold of his shaft with one hand. With the other, he held onto her hip and gently lowered her onto him.

At first, the tip slid into the strained opening, stretching her. She closed her eyes, trying to adjust to the new sensation.

“Look at me,” he ordered.

She did. After he sat up, he enveloped her in his arms. His lips found her neck as he sank all the way inside of her with a single tug on her hips, breaking the barrier that held her together.

Annalise cried out in pain, but he continued to move her up and down his length. The pain wore off and was quickly replaced by a different kind of pleasure that built with each thrust.

“Does it still hurt?” he asked.

She glanced at him. Sweat formed on his brow and his lips were fuller. She wanted to kiss them again and, at the same time, she wanted him to continue what he was doing.

She shook her head. “No.”

He flipped them over so that her back hit the cool sheets, and he was on top of her. Mavel sank his length all the way in, stretching her further than she thought was possible. With every masterful stroke, her breathing grew more laboured as if she was drowning in the desert heat. She grasped his shoulders, clutching them for support while his muscles danced beneath. His lips sought out hers and, as their tongues entwined, another edge neared, threatening her sanity.

“Please...” she whispered against his demanding lips.

He gave her a light peck. His hand gripped her right hip until his fingers dug into her skin. He quickened his pace.

Pain and pleasure merged into one. A scream escaped her as her climax took over. She felt her inner walls clenching around him as she arched into him. Wave after wave of heat swallowed her, extending to every nerve ending in her body. The feeling was so intense, she buried her nails in his shoulders, summoning a groan from him until he cursed under his breath and abruptly withdrew from her.

With her head still in the clouds, she frowned. His glistening chest and shoulders shook as he spilt himself on the sheets instead of inside of her.

“Why?” she managed in a hoarse voice.

Mavel chuckled and kissed her sweaty brow. He settled on the bed next to her, his chest heaving with his uneven breathing.

After a blissful minute, he drew her against him, draping one of her thighs across his legs. His thumb tickled her skin as he absently drew invisible circles on her thigh. “Even though you’ve had your quarterly birth control injection, I still won’t do that, Anna. This society will destroy you if you were to become pregnant with my child.”

His words sank in, and she scowled. “We could move to the Green District together. I—”

“And give up your job in Silver to work alongside the modded?” He shook his head. “We can’t do that, Anna. Not yet.”

Her heart squeezed. “Then what are we going to do?”

He stroked her hair, brushing a few damp strands away from her face. “For now, sleep.”

She rested her head on his arm. It was as if he knew exactly what she needed and when she needed it. Once she closed her eyes, sleep claimed her.



Sometime in the night, she wasn’t certain if it was a dream or reality, but the words he whispered into her ear made her smile. “I love you, Anna.”

EPILOGUE

That day, she slept like the dead. The only thing that ushered her out of her sleep was her wrist comms beeping until she accepted the call in a haze. “Yes?”

“Are you coming tonight?” Rios asked.

She sat up abruptly and rubbed her face into awareness. “Oh, right, the party. What’s the time now?”

He chuckled. “Are you still counting sheep? Didn’t you get enough rest at the hospital?”

Annalise blushed, thinking back to the previous night and Mavel. She glanced over her shoulder, but he was no longer there. He wasn’t in the room with her either.

“Storm?” Rios asked. “Hello?”

Annalise pushed her worry to the back of her mind. “Sorry, I got distracted. What was it?”

“Just wanted to tell you the drinks are on you, and I’ll see you there,” he added and ended the call.

She glared at her comms, even if it had no effect on the idiot who just called, and climbed out of bed. A hiss escaped her when her hips and thighs ached with every move she made. They hadn't hurt this much since the Academy training days when their instructors chose to torture them by making the recruits run through the nearby mountains for hours. When she found some spare time, she vowed to utilise the gym facilities at the DPD.

Annalise checked her comms. She had about four hours to get ready and meet everyone at the Iron Carver. She ran into the bathroom and hopped in for a quick shower. Once she finished, she studied her distorted image in the fogged up mirror. With one swipe, she cleared enough steam to see her face. Her cheeks were slightly flushed and her lips seemed fuller. She recalled Mavel's kisses and sighed happily.

After towel-drying her body, she quickly changed into jeans and a tank top. Her hand hovered over the door handle. *What reaction should I have when I see him again? What should I say?* Putting on a smile, she ventured into the living area. To her dismay, Mavel wasn't there either.

She glanced over at the balcony and checked the kitchen. He wasn't there either. *Is he in his room?* She edged closer to his door and knocked. "Mavel, are you in there?"

No response came. She tried a second time. Again, nothing happened. She gathered some courage and opened his door. The room was dark, so she clapped her hands.

The lights came on, pushing back the shadows. He wasn't there either. Her heart sank as she shuffled backwards into the hallway. *What exactly does this mean?* Her mind didn't want to process the possible answers. *Mavel wouldn't just leave without a word or an explanation. He cared about me, right?*

She stumbled into the kitchen and consumed an already made cup of cold coffee on the kitchen island. A handwritten note lay next to the lone mug.

With a trembling hand, she unfolded the piece of paper.

Dearest Anna,

I couldn't stay by your side, not when the world remains the same. I don't want to see you tormented by our society which is why I had to leave.

At the City Hall, I met my real father for the first time. He was a kind man—a man who wanted to change the way things were in Divinity in a calm manner, but he was eliminated by the Falcon Group for trying. This is another reason I cannot stay by your side. You could be harmed while they chase me. You could die, and it would tear me apart. I cannot risk you.

So, please forget about me. Live the life you were supposed to live.

Mavel Steinberg

Her hand covered her sobs as she slid to the ground. Tears freely fell from her eyes and ran the length of her face. He left her without bothering to ask if she wanted to remain stuck in this Tower, surrounded by politics and greed. She would have gone with him if he had bothered to mention this last night.

She crumpled his note and threw it across the room. *He left my side!* What life was she supposed to live without him in the picture? Was she supposed to marry the man her parents chose without question?

“You should have just asked... Damn it!” she yelled and hit the ground with her shaking fists, sending a current of pain through her wrists.

She swiped at her tears. This had to be some kind of a sick joke. He would come back to her side in a day or two, wouldn't he? She buried her face in her palms, letting out her frustration in the form of a muffled scream.

Once her outburst subsided, she stumbled into her bedroom. Her logical side was finally kicking in, even though she didn't accept her situation. Mavel was on the run from Falcon. No matter how hurt she

was by his disappearance, his staying by her side would get him captured or killed. She couldn't allow for that to happen. Not when she fought so hard to get him out.

She glanced at her terminal. Falcon hadn't taken everything. She still had the video of Dawson's assault of Leila Green and the files related to Robert Fern's death. If what Todd had said was the truth, then their blood was on Falcon's hands. *But, how to prove it?*

Her comms beeped, reminding her that it was time for her to leave for the Red District to meet with the others. She was about to call Rios and cancel, but her finger froze over the call button. If she didn't show up, the others would be suspicious.

Right now, she didn't have time to nurse her wounded heart nor did she have the evidence to bring down Falcon. Sucking in a deep breath, she got ready. Everyone at the HPD would be waiting for her. Once again, she would be who she was meant to be all along—a good cop.



Chief rose from his seat at the table and lifted his pint of cider into the air. He tugged his pink shirt over his belly with his free hand. "I want to officially welcome Detective Annalise Storm into our division. I know I can be a hardass, but I do it because I want each and every one of you guys to stay with me for as long as possible."

A cheer erupted from everyone around the table.

Annalise managed a smile, and Rios waved for the Chief to sit back down. Next, he lifted his half-empty pint into the air. "To my new friend, I am sure we'll make a great ménage à trois."

Des elbowed him in the side. "I doubt she'll sleep with you, Rios. You're running out of pickup lines."

Laughter broke out from the group, and Annalise joined in. She just had to smile and laugh and the emptiness in her heart was bound to go away. The pain was only temporary, or so her best friend, Monique, would have said if she was there.

Rios sat back down, loosening the top two buttons of his shirt.

After him, Jamen rose, making the metal buckles of his leather jacket jingle. He planted his hand on her shoulder.

Annalise looked up, confused.

Smirking, he addressed everyone at the table. "Storm has a lot to learn as a detective. She doesn't ask enough questions, makes rash decisions, and death seems to follow her."

"Wow, Jamen, I don't think you should apply for a Supreme Judge position any time soon. Your speeches suck," Rios said, and Des nodded.

Jamen rolled his eyes. "Let me finish, idiot. What I meant to say is that it's our job to face the death of Divinity's citizens on a daily basis. It is also our duty to try to keep those numbers to the minimum. In time, I'm sure you'll make a good detective, Storm."

Chief and the others clapped. As if on automation, Annalise joined in.

"I couldn't have said better myself," Chief added.

"I'm sure that's not true," Des replied.

Chief chuckled, and everyone's attention turned to Calla who sat behind the table as quietly as Annalise.

The *flare* sighed and downed the rest of her glowing orange cocktail. She slammed her glass down. "I don't see a reason why I have to welcome her." Calla stood and stormed off.

"I'll be right back." Jamen ran after her.

Chief cleared his throat. "Don't mind her. She had been through a lot, and Jamen is the only person who understands her."

His words piqued Annalise's interest. "What did happen to her?"

"I'm sure one day she or Jamen will tell you."

“Makes sense.”

Rios clasped his hands together in mock excitement. “We should play a drinking game!”

Des draped her arm over his shoulder and grinned. “I’ll drink you under the table.”

“That’s fine,” he winked at Annalise, “since I’m not paying.”

Unable to hold it in, Annalise burst out laughing. No matter how hollow her heart felt, these people—this team—managed to make her smile.

“You two, go get us more drinks,” Chief ordered to Rios and Des.

They both slid off their stools and sauntered to the bar.

Chief studied her with his measuring stare. He ran his fingers through his thinning grey hair. “Look, Storm, I can see you are not in the best of moods.”

“No, I’m fine.”

He shook his head. “The amount of shit you had to wade through on your first case is unusual. I thought it was an easy matter of *beast* possession. You know, obvious suspect, obvious crime. I was wrong. I should have chosen a better case for you, maybe then—”

“Chief, the case is not the issue. What’s done is done. I just have to sort out my feelings.”

“Good. I want you at your desk tomorrow morning,” he replied with a soft smile.

“Does that mean I’m getting a new partner?”

“Yes. He’ll report to my office at nine. Be on time.”

She returned his smile with one of her own. “Yes, sir.”



LIKED THE BOOK?

Please leave a review. By doing so, you are helping other readers find the story and helping the author reach new audience. Without your voice, it's easy to get buried in the ocean of e-books.

STAY UPDATED:

Want to receive updates, join giveaways, and get freebies from the author? Sign up to May's Newsletter [here](#)!

OTHER WORKS:

[Helena Hawthorn Series](#)

Join Helena Hawthorn on her journey into the supernatural world where sarcasm may not be the best weapon and vampires are the least of her problems.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“Lover of cake, life, and writing.”

May was born in the little Eastern country called Ukraine where winters are harsh and summers are too sunny. Having moved to Ireland at the age of twelve, she learned to appreciate the temperate climate.

In her spare time, aside from writing, she likes to daydream of character murder (hopefully, it is the bad guys), plotting the next mystery, watching TV series, or simply diving into books.

May is a fan of fantastical, gruesome, horror, and a sucker for romance.

You can find her on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or her [website](#) for more information!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my editor, C. J. Laurence, for being a good friend and a butcher of text.

I also would like to thank everyone on my launch team: Y. Arcangel, L. Adams, M. Greenhill, J. Rubin, A.I. Diaz, L.W. Stuart, R.S. Kovach, M. Appkova, A. Simons, G. Cabezut, F. Loqman, N. Burger, S.G. Benson, K. Oyatedor, E. Hyder, J. Lyons, K. A. Blount, T. Archer, S. Royal, L. Santiago, J. Stark, A. Santos, R.J. Cieplinski, T. Oja, D. Goelz, K. Jacques, I. Galvez, M.J. Quinn, R.C. Kisiel, C. McDonnell, M. Hayes, S. Mason.