

Alabaster

Lindsey Parker

"Here, now," Naphele grunted, stopping to a full halt in front of Pan with nothing but displeasure in her voice. "Look what you've done to the place."

Naphele was a staggering six foot ten, so tall that even Pan had to crane his neck to look up at her, and he wasn't a short guy. She was built like a siege engine and hit just as hard. She had the tell-tale mineral formations growing along her arms and neck. Well, she did have troll blood.

Pan lifted his head from resting on the palm of his hand and turned towards her. "I'm your commanding officer, Naphele. I'm allowed to sit here and be messy and miserable if I bloody well please."

"Psht," Naphele said, muttering something in a language he had never learned. She turned and galumphed towards the exit of Pan's office. But at the tail end of her rant, he caught the hitch of her words that sounded something awfully like, "This would have never happened before."

"Naphele," he warned.

He glanced down at his desk looking for his missing pen. He saw nothing unusual until he spotted the drawer with the lock that was yet again open. Without looking away from the troll in front of him, he closed it shut.

Long ago, before he had been promoted, this office had been kept in pristine condition. Silken red curtains hung from the windows, bookshelves lined every square inch of wall, and papers were folded and properly sorted. Crystals of every different shape and size floated on the tables.

"Oh, cut your crap," Naphele chastised, hand at rest on the doorknob. His attempts at intimidation had failed. "Stop wallowing around like a sick pup."

"What did you just call me?" But she had already hammered the door shut. "Damn troll."

He found himself hesitating, tapping his fingers on his desk. Then, he catapulted his second to last bottle of rich blood wine towards the door with all the strength his left arm could muster. He missed by a foot, but the bottle still shattered against the alabaster, raining a red flood down on all the books nearby. It felt oddly satisfying. Such a waste of an expensive wine, but still.

Pan sighed. He blew his lank hair out of his face. He pinched his brow and paced the length and breadth of his alabaster office. His hand found the rough line of skin along his throat where someone had once almost managed to separate his head from his shoulders. He had healed in a matter of hours, but it had been a very messy business. He'd also lost several fingers over the past few decades, but they had grown back. A little stiff, he would admit, a little lighter than the rest of his dark skin, but altogether whole.

When Pan next returned to his desk, the locked drawer was open again. It was the drawer on the left and second from the bottom. It was tiny compared to the others. Long and thin. It was supposed to be permanently locked. The key had been lost some time ago, probably his doing, tossed aside to be forgotten, hidden under papers that were months overdue. But as hard as

he tried, more often than not he would return to find the drawer open.

He would close it, try to reopen it, and find it locked once more.

The contents had stayed the same.

Old bits of sealing wax, letter openers, and a pair of richly crafted leather gloves, made for the dainty hands of his former commander. They had a thick layer of dust on them. Dust and the speckling of old blood.

Pan honestly couldn't say why he'd kept them. They belonged to Ambrose, his former commander. He'd tried, once or twice, to get rid of them, but something always stopped him. A hard clenching in his gut and a tightening of his throat that persisted even years later.

That drawer put his mind ill at ease.

He could go months without thinking about it. Push it closed when it was open and push it out of his mind.

He didn't need such worries. He had plenty enough to worry over on his own. Naphele could shove her scowls and her disapproval on her ugly face up her sanctimonious goddamn ass for all Pan cared.

If he wanted to destroy his hard-earned work, he could. He would.

If only his head would stop blistering, but his drink only seemed to make it worse.

He couldn't focus. He swore he looked up through the window to find that hours had passed.

"You're drinking again," she said, in a soft voice. Her voice.

"And?" Pan answered automatically. He rubbed the sand from his eyes, wobbling between amused and perplexed. "That is nothing new."

She was ridiculing him again. Wasn't he getting a bit old for this?

"An incredible amount." She paused, a catch in her throat. "Much more than you used to."

Pan didn't look up, didn't react. But something in the tone of her voice caught his ear. There was something silhouetted in front of his desk. Something familiar, something moving.

He pushed back from his desk in fright, searching with his hands for any sort of blade or object he could use. She'd come to kill him. Finally.

"Commander," he stopped. Swallowed that word. She wasn't his commander anymore. Ambrose had been caught, and tried, and sentenced. Guilty on all counts.

"You," Pan tried again, caught, frozen, blinded by something behind her that he could not see, "are dead. I saw it myself." But when he turned to flee, there she was. Between him and the door. On the other side of the room.

She tugged open the collar of her coat, revealing a fist-sized hole in her chest where her heart should have been, the alabaster pillars behind her peeping through it. "Four javelins to the chest does that to you."

Ambrose was wearing her old gloves. The gloves in his desk. Frayed edges but relatively well taken care of. She'd been wearing them when she'd been—when . . .

"I told you your greed would bring this to you," she said. Pan's eyes were searching rapidly around her face, looking for the details he knew should be there, her freckles and her pointed chin. He found them quickly enough, but it was impossible. He had played his role in her trial.

And her conviction.



Arms folded over his chest, he had once very long ago watched her glare at him from between cell bars, hands gripping at the steel hard enough for them to let out shrill screams.

Pan found himself being grabbed by the collar, yanked forward, and pulled close enough to her face to count the eyelashes clustered together and sticking to her cheek.

"What," she lingered. "Oh, child. Did you really think you had killed me?" She raised her free hand to strike him. "That I wouldn't come back to reclaim what was taken?"

"I didn't kill you!" Pan said, driving his hands up, hoping that she would stay the hand that she could use to throw him against the nearest wall. "I didn't kill you, I swear."

"You were there when they passed the sentence." He couldn't see her lips move. His office had suddenly fallen dark. "You might as well have done it yourself."

He struggled against the grip that lifted him off the ground. She had never gotten angry with him. Not ever. It wasn't in her temper.

"After all I did," Ambrose yelled. "You watched them kill me." Pan could barely hear her over the thundering in his ears.

He caught just a sliver of light at the hard edges of her face. A malignant glint in her eyes that he had never seen before. The closer they were, the more of it he could see. She had a stretched grin on a too-stretched face. Sharpened teeth carved upwards in a horrid grin. But she was also too gray. Cracks and crumbling skin crawled over what little of her he could see. Like she was made of stone.

"You aren't real," Pan tried. A passing thought

occurred to him. That blasted drawer. And the gloves, too. "How long have you been tormenting me?"

Her clawed grip certainly felt real. But she wasn't. She was just another one of his nightmares.

Ambrose seemed to beam, the dreadful cracks in that stone face breaking apart at the movement. "Look at you. Learning so quickly."

"I tried to steal you, didn't I? I didn't learn so quick from that, did I?"

Ambrose looked at him oddly. The tilt of her head would have snapped the neck of a living person. "I never wanted you, Pan. It was you that wanted."

He twisted his grip around, tried to get more air into his lungs. "That's not true, is it?"

"You sell people, Pan," his nightmare muttered. "For cheap wine and station and what you thought made me happy."

Pan paused. That voice wasn't hers. The sound of his own name caught rough on his ears. The face was all wrong. It was far too perfect, lacking scars and freckles and the lines of age that she must have worried over. The smile stretched too far on either side of her lips. Her teeth were sharpened and beastly. Grinning.

She had never grinned. Smiled, maybe. Just a little.

"You never call me Pan," he replied. "You never did. You always hated that pet-name."

The only features in her face that hadn't crumbled away were two bright holes in the dark glamor. Ambrose's eyes moved, searching his face. But she wouldn't be able to find what she searched for, even if she looked into his mind. He didn't respond to anything anymore.

Something hit him in the gut, something squished,

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and Pan felt himself falling sideways. The alabaster ceiling slid from his vision and his eyes went dark.

“Pan.”

He moved, jolted. Stiff. Cold. The heat from the afternoon broil was completely gone from the sand.

“You ass, get up.” Pan hissed. That crow-scream could be no one but Naphele. “Damn you, what did you even do to the place?”

“Hrm, what? What’s happened?” he blinked only to have the light launch straight through his head, right into the part of his brain that still remembered the drink from last night. “Oh, it’s too early.”

“Oh, now look what you’ve done,” Naphele said. Pan felt a hand on his chest, brushing aside something damp and crusty. “Cut yourself into bits, you did.”

This was the same woman who was tough as nails and preferred to hit him where it hurt. Now, there she was, examining his wounds. “M’fine,” Pan said, flinching.

Pan was hauled to his feet, Naphele only needing one spare hand to drag his entire body weight upright. He remembered the ruined remains of his papers, scattered about his office. Pan’s mind clung to it, that thought, but the rest of what had happened seemed to be empty. His memory wasn’t gone; it was voided.

It took him a few moments to realize that not only was that not the case, but his office was in goddamn pristine condition. “Naphele, did you clean?”

The curtains were hanging straight on shiny silver rods. His papers had been piled into three neat towers on his desk. There was a damn apple sitting on his desk.

He didn’t have time to peruse the room more because Naphele had pushed a compress at him to stop his wound.

Naphele pushed him towards the door. “Get.”

He couldn’t find the will to protest. Naphele pushed

him out without any mercy, and after the first second of resistance, his office disappeared from his sight. That shiny red apple was still perched on top of his papers like it had won a game of king of the mountain.

Pan and Naphele were gone, but the curtains fluttered in what little breeze came through the balcony doors. Something like a gentle hush, a whisper that skittered across the floor. A murmur of something here, a bashful word there, and something crossed the room and came to a stop in front of Pan’s desk.

It could have been a trick of light, or maybe even one of the heat’s cruel games on a wandering traveler.

But suddenly there was something standing in the middle of the vacated room, as if Ambrose had been there the whole time. Gently, faintly, her skin a pale grey; flickering in and out like she wasn’t really there one moment, but solid again the next.

Ambrose appraised her handiwork and beamed. She picked up the apple with stony fingers and bit down on one side. One of the windows creaked open, pushed by an unnatural flurry.

The apple was back on the papers, missing a chunk.

Pan’s office was empty again. 

