



# Hunted By Darkness

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** In the final book of this duology, Nika might be forced to choose between love and the end of the world...

Nika

I've got the voices of several dead in my head. I'm a Soul Collector, and I'm being hunted by a demon with my gorgeous boyfriend's face. Weird doesn't cover the feeling. If I don't send the demon back to the After, he'll destroy the world, so I'm learning everything I can about who I am and what my power is capable of doing. But fate works in strange ways. Suddenly it's not just Silas, my best friend, Lev, and I fighting to stop the demon. I now have three extra men bent on helping me save the world. Except, the jealousy and tension between my overprotective mercenary and them threatens to ruin everything.

Silas

As an infamous and unkillable assassin, it's a rare day when someone gets one over on me—but I'm dealing with an opponent only my feisty rebel can fight. She's determined to save the world, and I'm determined to keep her safe no matter what it takes, no matter who I have to kill. I've made it my business to destroy any bastard who's ever hurt her, or who ever intends to, but the three I can't are the worst yet. My goddess is too kind, and she welcomes the undeserving lot with open arms. They used to be the enemy, and now they say they'll do whatever it takes to protect her. What a load of bollocks.

**Total Pages (Source):** 82

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Nika

"Again, I was right. This was a bad idea. Tobas is an ass and a half. He deserves a good kick to the nuts, not a fucking love touch," Salvator grumbled in my head, his voice rippling across with the usual asserted dominance. "Does she listen to me? No."

"Someone's extra salty today." That one was Ryker, a wolf spirit with a lot of spunk and very little filter. He'd really embraced his snark over the last half year.

The never-ending joys of having several men—well, two animals and one man—in my head made it difficult to think half the time, but I'd gotten used to it.

"I don't even know what that means. More made-up nonsense you probably stole from one of those ridiculous shows that asshole insists on watching, like we don't have shit to do and a fuckin' demon to destroy."

Couldn't argue with Salvator there. Lev and Silas had bonded over their shared love of Normie shows. Without fail, they forced me to watch with them every chance they got.

Silas affectionately called it Netflix and Chill, a phrase certain to be perverse for how excited his eyebrows got and how grossed out Lev was anytime the mercenary referred to it that way. "Let's go Netflix and Chill, princess." "Been a long day—Netflix and Chill?" "You seem tense. Netflix and Chill can help." "What I wouldn't do to Netflix and Chill with you right now." I might not know what it

meant, but I got the general sense quickly enough.

Silas wasn't what one would call...subtle. An irony made wholly hilarious by the fact that he was called the Shimmering Assassin, a notorious mask-wearing, for-hire killer no one could catch. He was swift, deadly, and gone in a cloud of shimmering blue magic. That was the man who confidently claimed the title boyfriend despite my distaste for labels.

The wolf in my head scoffed, sounding oddly human and animal at the same time. "Says the guy who told us we were all simping over a female. Sheesh, losing your corporeal body has definitely made you insufferable, old friend. And that's saying something considering how absolutely shit your personality was before our pretty girl did us all a favor and cut your reign of terror short."

Indignant rage floated across my mind, but it was mixed with guilt and shame.

Salvator hadn't gotten any less himself over the months the two of us were stuck together—the would-be-assassin and the target who stole his soul. He complained all day, every day, but the socially-stilted grump was incredibly perceptive and insanely knowledgeable. Salvator might seem all dark and bad and annoyed, but underneath it all was a man who cared.

"I heard that, woman, and I resent the implication that I'm anything less than an evil bastard," he grumbled.

Hiding a smile, I finished my drink.

Salvator might not have a body anymore, but I could almost see him standing in my head, his arms crossed over his chest and his jaw locked in disapproval. He'd been against us coming here since Silas discovered it was Tobias who'd helped Rilas infiltrate the Dark Fae Society.

Tobas had been an old friend of Rilas's and part of the Brotherhood. He was our best chance at finding where Rilas was hiding while he collected enough powerful souls to fight me again. But Tobas had been killed by a mercenary a little over a month ago. It took weeks to figure out who, and that was what led us to tonight.

"Sally is so in love with you, it's adorable," Ryker rumbled with a wolfish laugh. "But I have to agree, keep the touching to a minimum, sweet girl. Moon goddess knows where that man's been. What if you get a disease or rabies? He definitely has rabies."

"She's safe with Silas and Lev," came Tometi's sound-minded interjection. But then he added, "Silas would tear that guy's cock off and shove it down his throat if he tries anything with her."

I shook my head, sighing.

Sometimes Tometi was as vicious as his bear form. It was hard to tell if the bear was being sarcastic whenever he said something decidedly out of the box. But right now, his unwavering tone suggested he wasn't joking.

"Oh, that's a blowjob no one wants." Ryker's laughter echoed from ear to ear. Even after months with these voices in my head, it was still an odd sensation.

I didn't waste my breath—thoughts?—on the fact that I was plenty capable of keeping myself safe. The men in my head were worried, and it'd fall on deaf ears. You know, if they had ears.

I crossed one leg over and flagged down the bartender for another drink. So far, no joy. But he'd be here. Silas was sure of it. Unfortunately, it'd barely been fifteen minutes and the boys were already arguing. Not a great sign. I couldn't tune them out tonight because their collective knowledge outweighed whatever annoyance they caused inside my head.

My grandmother's presence was floating near the surface of my mind, but she was silent tonight. What happened here would be the final test, and I'd get no help from her. I needed to detach Tobas's soul from the mercenary who killed him.

Doing it would differ from what happened with Rilas and the Box of Black Souls, but it was close enough. Grandmother said that once I could do that, there'd be nothing more she could teach me. I'd need to practice and get to know my power better. She finally agreed that if I pulled it off, she'd cross over.

Nothing was more important to me than giving my grandmother peace. She'd spent her life in the service of others, and in the end, she was locked away in a world of torture she didn't deserve, all because she refused to be used for the Council's selfish agenda. If anyone deserved to find peace, it was her. She knew how important it was for me to do that for her, so she didn't fight me on it.

I'd spent a half year training my power—learning how to track and trace souls, seek them out, listen to their voices, utilize their presence without corrupting my own soul. It was vital that I practice it without her intervention.

Because I couldn't selfishly keep her.

With Silas and Lev by my side, I wasn't alone. Even the weird trio in my head refused to leave, arguing I needed them to save the world. No matter how often I told them I could do it without them and they deserved to have new lives—Grandmother taught me how to free the animal souls so they could have their own futures—the head squatters, as Silas affectionately called them, refused. I might want them to get their happily-ever-afters, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little bit relieved they'd decided to stay.

They probably already knew that, and it was the entire reason they refused to go.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:32 am*

I'd already sent the dark souls I'd collected from the box into their awaiting afterlife. The innocent ones, too, of course. I was worried Rilas would come looking for them.

Grandmother said I had a powerful ability to change someone's soul, but the dark ones I'd collected were far too corrupt. Darkness like that festered. It was impossible to root out. Their presence in my body would only corrupt my power over time.

It took a few weeks to send all the souls I'd collected into their appropriate afterlife—it was impossibly draining—but now only Grandmother and the guys remained.

I hadn't used Ryker or Tometi's animal forms in nearly a month. Every time I did, another speck of black appeared in the clear gem hanging from my neck, a warning against corruption. I needed to be very careful how I used their powers because, as far as Grandmother knew, there wasn't any way to purify the corruption.

She argued I didn't need anyone else's power but my own, and I agreed. Before all of this, I'd spent sixty years with nothing but my defensive magic, agile combat skills, and wit. I'd lived despite all the torture and attempts on my life just fine.

I was a survivor.

Purple curls escaped my braided updo and fell into my eyes as I sipped my shot and cut a look to my left, watching the door. A burly man stepped inside. His eyes swept the space before he called out to a few patrons nearby, limping over to them. But nothing stood out about him.

Not our guy.

I let loose a sigh and took another sip of my drink.

Sometimes souls wandered. Sometimes they attached themselves to a person. Tobas was the latter. Most often, the soul attached itself to a loved one. But in this case, our guy spitefully clung to the mercenary who'd killed him. My soul-sensing abilities—a mirage of images that appeared in my head—could only tell me so much.

Soul-sensing was one of the harder abilities I'd learned over the last few months with my grandmother's guidance. Grandmother explained it was similar to what oracles in the Fae did, but with the dead. Soul Collectors had the ability to access the afterlife in a way no other magical being could, and in this case, access the past of someone's soul.

Nearby souls could convolute the images without good control, so it took focus to latch onto a specific one. It often required something personal if there wasn't a connection between the soul and Soul Collector. It didn't work on the living. It didn't work on Rilas, whose soul was something dark and changed, and it didn't work on the souls Rilas collected because they were anchored to him and needed to be detached first. So, I couldn't use the ability to find him.

With Grandmother's help, Silas commissioned an enchanted item to capture my soul-sensing visions. She warned me to erase them as soon as we got what we needed. Smart, considering that while they could help us, they could also be used against us.

Lucky for us, Lev was an incredible artist. He captured important details in his sketchbook. Lev's art was disguised with a special ink only visible with his magic. Meaning, no one else could see it if the sketchbook were ever stolen.

In the vision I had after Silas managed to get his hands on one of Tobas's favorite

watches, a face played over and over. The mercenary who killed Tobas. A face Silas immediately recognized. It was what brought us to this pub.

We'd caught a lucky break. Silas knew where this particular brand of asshole came to let off steam. The complication? Speaking to the soul required I get closer. Detaching the vengeful spirit from the mercenary was going to set off alarms if I wasn't careful. I'd need to touch the brute to collect Tobas's soul, and that'd require all three of us.

Lev was in the back corner of the pub, his moss-green eyes carefully scanning the area. His blue hair was messy but styled that way. He'd leaned back in his seat, the ever-casual patron, but everything about my best friend was on high alert.

Silas wasn't far. He'd stayed outside to do the usual perimeter sweep. Probably to make a few of the mercenaries that frequented the area cry. Turns out, his mere presence made the regulars uncomfortable, and it kept the focus on what he was doing instead of me.

One thing was for sure, the dead were rampant here. And they were talking. Their whispers droned on, begging me to listen, desperate for my help, but I couldn't risk exposing myself or weakening my abilities by helping them cross over. This was our best chance at finding where Rilas was hiding and what the evil asshole was doing in the shadows.

We'd only get one shot at this.

After Rilas failed to collect my grandmother's soul and realized I could steal them back, he'd disappeared to gather greater power and minions. Well, probably. It'd been half a year since we'd attacked the Dark Fae Society. The Council's deaths hadn't destroyed them, but without their leadership, it'd take time to rebuild their power and become a problem again. With the bounty lifted the minute their crownless queen died, I was a free woman.

Sort of.

Freedom didn't mean much when a demon was out to destroy the world and you might be the only person capable of stopping him.

I turned in time for the face I'd seen in my visions to manifest right in front of me. A scar bisected his face, dragging one eyelid down halfway and cutting a deep depression in his cheek on the way to his jaw. One eye was a foggy white and the other was an abyss black. His sharp glare identified him before anything else.

Greggory Black. Mercenary for hire. Light Fae gone dark. Raging alcoholic. The only thing he liked more than blood and whiskey was women. Silas's words, not mine. Seemed Silas and Salvator finally agreed on something—they weren't fans of this notorious killer.

The bartender nodded at him and then pointed to an empty table at the back. Black waved a greeting and headed over to it without bothering to look around. His shoulders were slumped, his posture withered. I got the distinct impression he needed sleep but chose to drink instead. I'd let him settle in a bit before heading over.

The bartender had barely poured my next shot when a familiar sheen of silver appeared through the door leading out to the busy street.

This area was teeming with bad deeds, so it made sense mercenaries felt free to wander here.

The oversized newcomer dipped his head, a little too close to the top of the doorway. He was all height and brawn and swagger as he strolled through. Golden eyes caught mine before the brute ambled over to where I sat—confident, smirking, and completely rogue.

Again.

## Page 3

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“Here we fucking go,” I heard Salvator growl.

Leaning across the bar with a predatory grin sure to get him a knee, the shameless asshole winked at me. “What’s a darling thing like you doing in a dank and dangerous pub like this? Waiting to be rescued?”

The entire pub quieted, perceptive patrons homed in on the giant flirt and me.

“Just trying to enjoy my drink,” I said, sipping my whiskey.

There was that devilish twinkle I knew so well. My mercenary was about to say something stupid, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t looking forward to it.

“Oh, love, it’d be my pleasure to give a pretty thing like you something else to enjoy with that lush mouth of yours.”

“Didn’t see that one coming,” Salvator huffed sarcastically.

“And the innuendos, they just keep coming,” Ryker cackled in that wolfish way of his.

Tometi didn’t speak, but I sensed his growing confusion. Poor bear didn’t get any of it.

I cocked my head to the side, removed my dagger, and stabbed it right next to his arm. “Fuck off, asshole.”

His shit-eating grin broadened as I yanked the blade free and left him at the bar.

Without waiting, I made my way over to Black. His unsettling gaze was already on me when I stood in front of his table.

“Black, was it?”

His eyebrow lifted in question. “Depends on who’s asking.”

“A paying customer,” I retorted.

Silence stretched between us before he motioned for me to sit. “You’re in luck, doll. I just finished my last job. Buy me a drink and we’ll talk.”

2

Nika

Black ditched his glass for the entire bottle of scotch I ordered. He took heaping swigs before wiping his mouth and leaning back. His eyes skated over me in quiet assessment. “What sort of trouble are you looking for, doll? And how much will it pay?”

At least I could count on someone like him being straight to business. Despite the scoff from Salvator in my head, his relief matched mine. The paid killer’s stare might be hungry, but it was for money and the prospect of a paid-for bottle of booze more so than what my body could offer.

Small miracles.

Matching his energy, I leaned back and nursed my shot. My gaze roved over his physique, checking for weapons in case our communication broke down and I was forced to disarm the asshole then disappear into the night.

A gun and dagger were all I could immediately find, but he was bound to have a few things stowed away if he was as clever as they said. Maybe a few enchanted items to help in a pinch.

Lucky for us, strict rules upheld the lawless types roaming these streets. Fighting would get him banned, and Black couldn't afford to lose his membership here. The biggest and best paid contracts were offered in this city. Not exactly neutral territory, but as close as the underbelly of magic society got to it.

Gregory Black looked exactly how I expected someone who killed for a living to look. The mercenary couldn't afford to let himself go even when it came to his love for alcohol. He cut a powerful shape in the disheveled shirt and pair of jeans he wore. Scars riddled his flesh, covered by black tattoos, and everything about him screamed just-try-me.

Nothing about his appearance was inviting. Like most Fae types, his face hid his true age, just shy of three hundred. His ability to control water made him dangerous around any source of it. I would've steered clear of someone like him if I weren't his soul-sucking nightmare come to life.

Listening carefully to the world around me, I quieted the voices of the dead begging for my attention and searched for the one I'd come for. I sensed him the minute Black walked in, so I knew Tobas was here. So far, he'd been quiet, but then his disembodied voice floated through my head. An uncomfortable caress, but one I recognized.

"I thought you might come looking," his garbled baritone murmured inside my head as Tobas appeared, hovering above Black's head much like my father had in my dream.

This little evolution of my power took me a bit to get used to—their physical capture

before death. Most were normal, if a little haunted. But the angry ones carried their death into their afterlife form.

So, Tobas had blood pouring from an open gash in his neck and tears of dark blood streaming down his face, never going farther than his chin and never waning. His distinct features matched the ones drawn by Lev, but they were translucent and faded in and out of view.

I held the floating man's angry glare and smirked to myself. Knocking the table twice, I swallowed the rest of my shot. Lev had already moved into action. He grabbed a quick drink from the bar and headed our way. I sensed his careful, measured steps while I kept my eyes on the trained killer and his tagalong spirit.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:32 am*

“I’m looking for an old friend. I was told you might know where to find him.” I breezed into a speech prepared the night before. Silas made it clear no one found Black without help. He’d want a name, but I didn’t intend to get that far.

Silas’s eyes were on us, and by the sideways look Black directed at the bar, he’d already noticed. “Oh? Don’t suppose you can give me the name of the one who told you where to find me? You know, to properly thank the helping hand,” Black probed, his posture projecting cool calm, when his razor-sharp eyes and clenched jaw suggested otherwise.

This man killed for a living. He was always ready for things to turn violent, and Silas being in the room put him on edge. So did some unknown shadow offender who’d given his location to me. The paid killer was distracted enough to miss Lev walking over, tripping, and tossing his drink directly onto Black’s outstretched arm.

I saved the bottle of booze Lev knocked over in his feigned concern over the man he’d just showered with booze. I used it as an opportunity to brush Black’s naked hand. With careful strength, I yanked on Tobas’s spirit and severed their connection. It’d become second nature to move from one fluid action to the next, so I effortlessly trapped the stolen soul and withdrew my hand from Black’s to place the bottle far enough away from the chaos.

Black hadn’t noticed the subtle flash and glow of my necklace as I turned and waved at the bartender, the eerie sensation of collecting Tobas’s soul slithering up my arm and across my chest. “A little help, sir. A towel, maybe?”

Silas appeared with a towel in hand, the side of his mouth ticked up in amusement.

Our gazes connected, and when I licked my lips and glared at him—our sign for mission accomplished—his grin was positively blinding. “Fancy seeing you here, mate. Thought karma had finally caught up with you. Pity it hasn’t. Yet.”

Black sneered as I handed him the towel Silas gave me. The sour man refused it and chose to glare at Silas instead. “You have some fucking nerve showing your face around me after—”

Ignoring the growling man covered in scotch, my mercenary crouched next to me and took my hands in his. “Whatever brought you to Black isn’t worth it, princess. You’re better off with someone who can handle you. Whatever price he’s asking, I’ll take half. Whatever you need, I’ll do faster. And I’m much prettier to look at, yeah? What do you say? How about you ditch Black for Silver?”

I nearly sighed and rolled my eyes. He’d gone off script again, but it wouldn’t be Silas if he hadn’t. His eyes danced, giddy I was at his mercy and much too proud of himself for it. He’d pay for that later.

Black was on his feet, but Silas didn’t move. He didn’t need to. The bartender was already at the table with his hand on Black’s shoulder.

“Leave it,” I heard the bartender murmur.

Silas winked down at me, then helped me out of my seat, pretending to be the prince when everyone knew he was the rake. “Right, we’ll just be going on our merry way, then. We’ll call what you pulled last time even, yeah? Or would you like to settle things tonight, Black?”

I hadn’t gotten the full story from Silas about his history with Black, but now wasn’t the time to ask questions. I stayed quiet, and for once, so did all the voices in my head. Even the soul I’d stolen didn’t tug at me.

I'd trapped him in a corner of my mind until I wanted him to hear me. It was something I'd worked hard to learn so I could think if things didn't go as planned. But Tobas wasn't fighting like I thought he would. If anything, he was uncomfortably compliant.

Black was red in the face, but he didn't try anything, just stood there and seethed. Whatever history they had, it was enough to stop him. His eyes jerked over to me before he clicked his tongue and stole the bottle of scotch from the table. "She's all yours, you smug bastard. I don't want whatever mess she's wrapped up in, anyway."

Lev had already left the pub by the time Silas led me out to the street. We were going to rendezvous outside the city in case someone thought following us was a good idea. Black would be interested in why I went searching for him, but Silas didn't seem worried that he'd do anything about it. After their exchange, I was starting to understand why.

Black was afraid of Silas.

Everyone was.

"Should we—" Lev started to say as we closed in on the front door, but Silas was quick to cut him off.

"Ah-ah, better to hold that thought for now. I have very important business to discuss with our resident devourer of men here."

"That's a new one," Ryker snickered in my head. "Devourer in more ways than one, aye, Nika?"

Great. Taunted by men inside and outside of my head. Lucky me.

Lev crossed his arms, his judgmental eyes narrowed on the giant buffoon spouting shit. “Now? After we’ve barely walked through the door?”

It wasn’t a new thing, but it’d become clear over the last half year very little got in Silas’s way when he decided to do something. Lev knew I’d handle it when the time came to put an end to whatever nonsense Silas was starting.

“Troublesome indeed, lad, but necessary business all the same. Wouldn’t want to emotionally scar a precious thing like you. What I’m about to say isn’t fit for cute wanker ears, you understand,” the mercenary went on self-importantly as if what he said wasn’t absolute nonsense. Nothing was more Silas than talking out of his ass to fit his own version of the truth.

One look at Lev and I could tell he was losing the battle with himself. For all his wit and low tolerance for assholery, my best friend had a weird soft spot for Silas. He’d been on the receiving end of countless pranks, but other than grumbling and scoffing, Lev seemed to enjoy every bit of it. Not that I could talk. I mean, I shared a bed with this oversized jokester every night.

Silas didn’t wait for Lev to answer before ditching him at the front door.

He’d taken us to another safe house he kept out of necessity, and it was our third since we upended the Dark Fae Society. Another spot in the middle of nowhere. The start of every horrormovie, Lev argued, when we first saw it in the clearing, the sun’s rays breaking through the tree cover and shining down on the isolated cabin.

Silas swept me into his arms like it was his favorite thing to do and took the stairs three at a time. My brain didn’t have time to catch up before the oversized brute flew down the narrow second-floor hallway, entered the farthest room on the right, and kicked the door closed behind him.

“Hey!” I growled. “We need to debrief about—”

## Page 5

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Large hands eclipsed my face, two beams of gold fixed to my lips before his face blurred and his mouth came down hard on mine. His tongue pushed its way in, stroking and flicking. I couldn't help it, I kissed him back. I let him have his way despite knowing it'd only make things worse.

But this man kissed me like it was our last day alive every damn time. His lips were hungry, impatient, and demanding. And like always, he overwhelmed me with sensation until I gave into him.

He yanked and pulled the jacket off me, mindful of all the weapons I could grab and use on him. His naughty boy smile appeared as he tossed the small arsenal onto the floor. "Won't be needing those, will you, love?"

"You're the only one who thinks so," I quipped.

Tossing off his shirt, he walked me back until I was crowded against the wall. "You're plenty lethal without them, and I'd be a daft arse not to think so." He guided my hands over his chest, the tattooed muscle rippling under the forced caress. "Oh aye, these hands alone are trouble, yeah? I wouldn't mind you punishing me with them."

I smacked his stomach and pushed the brute farther away. "Is it punishment if you like it in the end?"

"Dunno, love. Want to give it a go and see for yourself?" That gleam in his partially silver eyes was back. The one he always gave me when he was up to no good.

But if I gave into him, we'd be here for hours, and I'd rather interrogate the ghost I'd been chasing for the better part of the last month than be hostage to this insufferable menace all night. It didn't matter if the man was a damn god of pleasure. I had shit to do.

"No, thanks," I moved, but his arms shot out to cage me in.

"Now, now. Where do you think you're going?"

"Downstairs," I growled with another push, but the ridiculously large troll didn't budge. "Move."

Silas groaned, coming closer instead of moving away. "I do love it when you growl orders at me, princess. Really gets me going."

The trouble with his type was nothing I said or did would deter him. I'd need to play this smart. Give in long enough to make him believe he'd won, then make my escape.

Biting my lower lip, my eyes glided up to his. "Then make it worth it, asshole. I'm bored already."

His chest rumbled with the challenge, fingers tracing the subtle curve of my neck. "If I didn't know better, I'd think this was a trap."

I dragged a hand down his chest, watching his pecs and abs dance again. "Guess you'll just have to try your luck."

My hips were grabbed and yanked into his, the hard length of his cock already outlined by denim. He kissed my bare shoulders, across my collarbone, then along the column of my neck. His impatience dotted several spots on my throat and jaw.

My eyes fluttered in near surrender. One of his hands kneaded my breast, and my shirt caught under my arms. My bra was pushed aside as he dropped to his knees in front of me.

“Have I told you lately how much I bloody worship you?”

My voice was softened by lust. “Yes.”

“Well, let me say it again. You’re exquisite, and I’m a lucky bastard.” He raked a hand through his silver locks, his similarly colored eyes shooting up to my face in overt reverence.

It was annoying how goddamn pretty this man was. I shouldn’t give into him so quickly, but every time that silver gaze landed on me, I couldn’t deny him anything.

His hot breath fanned out across my breasts. I shivered, hands on his shoulders. With a growl, he twisted me around, pushed me up against the door, and then his front lined my back. He dragged my jeans down, and I angled back. The place between my legs throbbed for him.

Maybe a quickie wouldn’t be a terrible idea. I needed to work off the adrenaline this night gave me, and this asshole was good for it. So was his cock.

As if reading the surrender in my body, Silas chuckled and slid my underwear to the side. The crown of his cock teased my center before he punched forward and his massive shaft spread me wide open. I gasped and my body tensed, shocked by the sudden swarm of sensation.

He set the pace for rough and fast. His length slammed in, the slap of his hips meeting my ass a loud echo in my ears. The stimulation was everywhere, inside and outside. One of his large hands kneaded my breast, while the other worked my clit. It

was nearly too much, but I couldn't get enough of it.

Neither could he.

His low grunts fell next to my ear as he used his weight to deepen our bend and thrust his cock in. He pressed a hand over my stomach to intensify the stimulation. "You're so fucking tight, princess. No matter how many times I fuck you, you're always so wet and tight. So bloody perfect."

"Silas," I breathed his name in prayer, close to coming. And by the way he tensed and sped up, he was, too. "Fuck me harder and stop talking."

His breathless laughter painted the side of my face. His hands worked me over his girthy length, thrusting hard enough for the door to threaten to collapse. But the tension in my waist snapped, and I came hard enough not to care if Lev heard. My legs shook as Silas slapped into me a few more times and locked up, groaning his release.

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I sucked in greedy gulps of air, but the fog in my head cleared, so I shoved him away with a click of my tongue. Collecting my discarded clothes, I redressed while Silas leaned against the door, his chest rising and falling with effort. His eyes followed me for a few seconds before he finally figured out what I was doing.

“Wait a tick. I’m not done, little rebel.”

“But I am,” I countered, nudging the brute to the side so I could open the door.

He worked his way into the space between me and the exit, arms crossed. “You could barely call that a reward.”

I scoffed, then pushed hard enough to dislodge the pain-in-the-ass brute. I inhaled a calming breath and leveled a glare on him. He grinned like I was the cutest thing he’d ever seen, and my rage only worsened. I yanked the door open, ignoring the fact that he still had his dick out. “I’ve got shit to do, so you’ll just have to wait, or so help me, Silas—”

“You know how I love it when you use your mammy voice on me...” His pretty silver eyes were practically sparkling, all mischief and excitement. “Gets me so bleeding hot.”

I evaded his reach as he attempted to capture me again. I slammed my fist wrapped with magic into his stomach—something he clearly hadn’t expected—and the oversized idiot collapsed. Without waiting, I left him to his painful grunts and returned downstairs where Lev was waiting, smirk on his face.

“Back already?” he teased.

I shot a scathing glare at him the same way I had Silas. “Don’t you start, either. Let’s get this over with so I can send Grandmother on her way.”

3

Nika

I didn’t acknowledge Silas or his very visible erection as he took a seat next to me. The asshole spread his legs wide enough to make his point. Silas never hid how much he wanted me, and from the way Lev visibly cringed after one look at the brute, he definitely wished he would.

The mercenary’s arm was laid across the top of the couch, and like he wasn’t embarrassingly erect or been thoroughly chastised only minutes ago, his fingers toyed with the loose hair dangling at the back of my neck. “So what now? Your Soul Collector voodoo, is it?” he sassed, tickling my nape in an effort to get my attention.

I ignored him. “Lev, you ready?”

My friend opened his mouth, but Silas spoke first. “Come now, love. Everything went to plan, didn’t it? Doesn’t your handsome boyfriend deserve a reward...or three?”

“For what, agitating Black? Or maybe you mean for watching her and I do all the work?” Lev teased. “If anyone deserves a reward, it’s me. Everything went perfectly to plan because I showered that bastard with my drink.”

“Steady on, lad. I knew where to find that seedy wanker. It was my information that put her in that seat. I’m the reason everything could happen in the first place.”

“And you get rewarded for it every night, if my interrupted sleep has anything to say about it,” Lev clapped back.

I glared at my blue-haired friend, not amused. He simply smiled in that roguishly handsome way of his, as if to say I had it coming. My punishment for not keeping the beast at bay. To be fair, no one really could. Not even Silas could rein himself in when it mattered. That was half our issue.

“Oh aye, lad. You do make a very fine point there,” Silas acquiesced too quickly, chuckling to himself.

“Just kiss already,” I said to them, smirking in triumph when both men responded in a ridiculously cartoonish way. Equal parts disgusted and insulted. “Now shut up. I need to focus. Lev, be ready to draw whatever I can get transferred to the mirror. Not sure if I’ll be able to hold the images in it for very long.”

Lev had already put the enchanted mirror on the coffee table. It’d capture any images I sent to it, and he’d draw them. After, we’d wipe anything it kept. But first I needed to lure Tobas into giving his master away.

I sighed and reached into my mind, searching for the feeling before his voice echoed from ear to ear. It wasn’t as disembodied as before. It was clear and rich like I imagined it would’ve been when he was alive.

“How odd to be living inside the head of the woman Rilas can’t seem to forget or defeat,” he murmured in contemplation, his genuine interest tickling across my mind.

Silas and Lev watched me as I leaned forward, centering my effort on the man in my head. “You don’t seem surprised I’d come to find you,” I said out loud so the other two would hear it.

“I wasn’t. Rilas knew you would.”

I blocked the surprise and confusion threatening to filter into my thoughts. I’d know if he was lying or being intentionally misleading, but he wasn’t. At least to Tobas, he was telling the truth. Had we walked straight into a trap?

The look I shot over to Silas had the mercenary suddenly on alert. I quickly signed my concern with well-practiced hands, a silent communication my father taught me when I was younger, and the other two were quick to move into action. I needed Tobas to think that I hadn’t suspected anything, so I continued to pry.

“He knew?” I asked with a burst of intrigue, and the strong sensation of pride answered back.

He thought he’d gotten one over on me, and I needed him to continue to think he had. Whatever tie he had with Rilas, it was set into motion the second I collected his soul. In my gut, I knew it. We didn’t know what Rilas could do, and if he was pretending to hide so he could strike when we least expected it, then planting Tobas would definitely be a good way to go about it.

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Silas's magic flickered across the room, securing doors and windows. Lev joined him, his dark green magic darting from one place to the other. Neither one of them saw the glimmer in the mirror, or the face that had plagued my nightmares appearing in it for a glimpse. Tobas's voice grew distant.

Then it was Rilas I heard.

“Hello, Fated One. Miss me?”

The mirror on the coffee table cracked and broke into pieces, and the face disappeared. Silas and Lev hadn't been given time to react. Time crawled to a stop, the other two slowing until they were frozen in place. Magic had filled the room, but it no longer moved or sparkled. Life seemed to come to a shuddering halt. Everything stilled. Only I hadn't.

Fear was in my throat as I checked for ice growing over Silas and Lev's bodies. Relief was instant. I didn't see ice anywhere. Other than immobile, they didn't seem harmed in any way.

Smoke gathered and grew up from the floor, forming a figure in all the black. My grandmother's voice carried over the deafening sound of Rilas's arrival, his black shadows flowing out of one spot in front of me.

“Whatever happens, stay with Silas and Lev. Only you can stop him, so never give into him, Nika. Never stop fighting, no matter what you have to sacrifice.” Her voice softened but stayed strong and confident as she whispered the next words across my mind, “Not even if it's me.”

Her essence filled my limbs like we'd done several times before. My arms were her arms, my voice her voice. The two of us meshed as one. The flicker of red eyes before Rilas materialized in front of me didn't slow my hands or the words leaving my mouth. The darkness around him swayed and reacted to the barrage of magical symbols. Narrowing a glare on me, his arm stretched out.

Grandmother's voice boomed inside my head, "Don't come for me, darling. It's the only way to—" She was abruptly cut off.

Pink magic floated and formed all around me, symbols exploding in front of Rilas in a strobe of light. And before I understood what was happening, her soul was ripped out of me.

The pain was excruciating. Visceral and body-shattering in a way nothing had ever been. It was like the edge of a blade slicing from the top of my chest to the bottom, exposing my raw insides, and it left emptiness where she'd once been.

As I collapsed, several pink symbols branded Rilas's forehead and disappeared. I wasn't sure if I'd seen it right because he didn't react to them. He only smiled as if he'd won already.

Offering his hand to me, Rilas spoke in a voice summoned from the very recesses of the After. "Come with me, and I will release her. Deny me, and the torment she's suffered thus far won't hold a candle to the agony I will inflict on her."

I swallowed nothing but anguish and glared at him from the floor. "No."

He took another step closer and tossed a look over his shoulder at the frozen forms of Silas and Lev. "Then shall I take them with me, too?"

My pink magic flew out to protect them. The barrier wasn't likely to hold against his

power for long, but it'd buy me a few seconds. I'd left all my weapons upstairs, so I searched the room. Then the glint of glass caught my eye. That'd have to do. I eyed several pieces of the broken mirror to snatch the second he made a move.

I staggered to my feet, the blade's edge of his assault still an agonizing echo inside my chest. "Don't you fucking dare," I growled in warning.

Rilas's mouth was hitched up into a devilish grin, then his hand stretched out their direction. "Or what? Do you think you're stronger than me without calling on the darkness living inside you, Nika? Do you think you can overcome the night with a mere flashlight?"

"You talk too much." I dashed for the most lethal mirror shard on the coffee table and stood between him and my two.

"That won't save them, and you know it."

Ever since I was younger, I could move faster than most. I called on that speed and was already sinking the shard into his throat, the other hand wrapped around his naked forearm, forcing it away from Silas and Lev. An electric current raced the length of my arm where I grabbed him. I hadn't felt anything like it, not since Silas. The sensation of fate. Something inside me twisted and unfurled, coming to life with the touch.

"Feel that, Soul Collector? It's our bond. We're fated to be together, you and I," he murmured, unbothered by the shard of glass impaling his neck.

No. I'd never believe it.

Blood trailed down from the wound, but still, he smirked. Coming closer, he made the shard sink deeper into his throat as our bodies fused.

Rilas grabbed me around the back of my neck and whispered next to my ear, “You know what, love? I’ve changed my mind. I think I’ll use these powers I’ve collected and finally kill them whether or not you come. Maybe then you’ll remember which one of us has the real power here.” I was spun, his hand around my throat and my back against his chest. “Maybe then you’ll realize it was me you were always meant to be with.”

I sucked in a sharp breath, power simmering and ready to attack. But when he stretched his arm out, nothing happened. The grip on my throat fell away with a hiss. His other hand was on his forehead. He tried again to do something, but still nothing happened. I stole a couple steps away from him, assessing the sudden change in his demeanor.

Whatever this was, it wasn’t meant to happen. The great demon resurrected from the After had hit another snag, but I wasn’t sure what that was.

Snarling with his red eyes pinned to Silas, he tried to hide the pink symbols inscribed on his forehead. It was the same ones I saw when he stole Grandmother’s soul. Did she do something? Did she know he’d take her and use our power in that event?

I retreated a few more steps, summoning magic and snatching a dagger from Silas’s belt. But Rilas didn’t come closer. If anything, he was retreating. Touching a hand to the glowing mark, he staggered back several steps.

He was vulnerable, and I needed to act before I lost my chance to do something. I didn’t wait. I responded on impulse and rage. Power thundered out of me like it had a mind of its own.

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I'd get her back. I wouldn't leave her with him. I'd save her.

But as if knowing exactly what I meant to do, Rilas disappeared and the world snapped back in motion. The radiating agony in my chest remained, the loss of my grandmother a brutal burn inside my body.

Silas was already holding me as my knees buckled. Lev blinked and looked around in confusion, but I didn't have to tell them what happened. They both knew.

"What did he do to you, love?" Silas demanded on a growl.

I swallowed and rubbed a fist over my chest. Tears slipped down my face. The arms around me tightened, and I felt Lev's hand take mine.

"Take your time, Niks."

A void existed where she had been, but to my horror, it wasn't the only void inside me. All the souls were gone. I couldn't sense Ryker, Tometi, or Salvator anymore. The loss of them hit like another blow to the chest, and if not for Silas, I would've collapsed again.

"They're all gone. He took them."

4

Silas

It had taken several hours of coaxing, but finally my little rebel was asleep. The pain of another loss faded from her face as she slipped deeper into a much-deserved slumber. Her gorgeous purple hair glided through my fingers as her soft breaths hit my naked chest.

Given a choice, I'd keep her here forever.

Again, she was forced to face my brother alone. Again, I'd been nothing more than a frozen dolt in need of protection. It was bloody maddening. Rilas had exploited our efforts to find him, and I should've known he would. He was cleverer than I oftengave him credit for, even before he was a demon summoned from the After.

My darling was exhausted from the fight where she lost more people she cared about.

I'd planned to celebrate the day those three head-squatting wankers moved along and left my bird alone, but not like this. Not when it made tears wash down her face in worry, destroyed by the mere thought of what Rilas might do to them.

I might think Bear Claw was an irredeemable fuckwit, but she didn't. And whatever my sweet Nika wanted, I'd give her. If she wanted to rescue that undeserving bastard, his weird animal tagalongs, and her saucy grandmother, I'd be right there to help her do it.

It wasn't all bad news. After detailing the clash between them, it appeared the swanky old Soul Collector did something to bind Rilas's power. What Nika described was clearly some kind of seal on his abilities, though I couldn't be sure how much or what she'd targeted. But I'd seen it done a few times. It wasn't easy. It required a level of skill most Fae didn't have. If my suspicions were correct, it might mean recovering her grandmother wasn't as straightforward as it seemed.

Bind or no, we'd need to find Rilas first or lay down a trap when he came to find us.

Lev had left to do a little digging into the symbols Nika said appeared on Rilas's forehead. He'd drawn them, his forest-green eyes gleaming with purpose as she helped him get the lines right. Like me, he wanted to do whatever he could for her. He was convinced we could find what they meant, so I called in a few favors to make sure we had the best in the business assisting us.

I stared at the number a contact passed along after I followed the bread crumbs Bane left behind. Nika mentioned a man the powerful Fae was involved with before his death, and until a few hours ago, I'd been convinced the bloke had either been involved or dead.

She'd want to talk to him first. She'd want to know where her father's lover had been since his death, but I needed to be sure the bloke wasn't a threat. My bird wanted to believe the best in everyone. It was what I loved about her. I didn't mind being the sorry sod who saw the worst in everyone who came near her. I'd be a feckless villain if it kept her safe.

I cast my eyes down on the sleeping woman. After tracing her cheek with my knuckles for the millionth time, I carefully disentangled myself from her sweet embrace. I gingerly moved her soft body until she was settled on the bed and wrapped in comfort. Then I left the room. My magic swept out. It'd alert me should she wake or move at all.

Leaving the safe house I kept in yet another undisclosed location, I walked the perimeter and checked the security magic I had in place. Rilas had gotten through earlier when he shouldn't have. The barrier magic was said to be the strongest in existence outside of blood magic. It'd never failed me before. Even the Brotherhood couldn't find my safe houses.

This time I couldn't take any chances. I used one of the rarest items I'd ever purchased from a now-dead Enchanter. I hoped never to use it. It was a last resort

because Nika wouldn't approve of how it was created. Not that I agreed with how it was made, either. Blood magic rarely did anything good. But my soul was already black, and sometimes the only way to fight the Dark was with darkness.

Unfortunately, even that might not be enough.

Dialing, I put the burner mobile to my ear. It only rang once before a voice came through the receiver. It was a voice I knew well. A voice that went by another name, in fact. My guard was instantly up.

"Silas," the man greeted.

"Dugan." I paused, growling the next sentence. "Or should I call you Trevion? How curious you're the one answering this line. Who would've thought the man I've known for nearly a decade would be living this sort of double life even I hadn't caught onto. One might think it were a set-up from the start."

There was an audible sigh before Trevion spoke, "I know you have questions, and you're owed them, Silas. You and Nika both. But just tell me one thing first, is she okay? Is she safe?"

I detected the concern in his tone, but I'd have to be daft to believe it.

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“You’ve become ghosts the last half year. You were always impossible to track when you didn’t want anyone to find you. No one has even mentioned the name Silver until you showed up to give Black hell in No Man’s Land.”

My other identity, the one tied with this face. Silver. I’d built a name for myself with it. As far as the contract killer world was concerned, the Shimmering Assassin and Silver were two different blokes cut from the same cloth. And until this moment, Trevion only knew the one. But if this was Bane’s elusive lover, I suspected he’d always known I was both.

“Not too smart, that,” he chastised. “You know what an insufferable ass Black is when you publicly humiliate him.”

Smarmy bastard. As if he’s in any position to scold me.

I scoffed, not worried. Black would run his mouth, but unless revenge paid for his next drink, that was all he’d do. I brushed a hand through my messy locks and lifted my face to the moon’s light. “I think you’re bloody dreaming if you think it’ll be business as usual between us, mate. Or that I’d tell you anything related to her now.”

Another sigh. “That’s fair. I’d rather not do it over the phone, anyway, and I’d like to see her before...well, it’d just be nice to see her. I’ve missed that girl terribly.”

“The fuck you will.”

“It’s important, Silas. I have something her father gave me, something she needs, and I don’t expect to have long left to give it to her. You have every right to be cautious,

but her father made me promise that once she recovered her Soul Collector powers and gained her grandmother's help, I'd give it to her."

I paused, staggered by the perfect accounting of what occurred. "When did Bane tell you this?"

"Before he attacked the Council."

"Before? Not after?"

"I never saw him after," Trevion admitted. "It was important that no one come looking for me. He said timing was everything, and you'd call. You'd find me as Dugan."

Fucking hell.

"He did, did he? And this thing you need to give Nika, what is it?"

There was a long pause before Trevion spoke again. "It's not safe to speak about it over the phone. You better than anyone know this." The bugger was unfortunately right about that. "I'll send you the coordinates of a meeting place and time in the usual manner. Be there. Take precautions, if you must. I don't expect you to trust me, but you know I'm no match for you. And certainly not with her by your side. We'll talk then," he said before the line went dead.

It might go against my instincts, but I couldn't risk Nika not getting something her father left for her. At the very least, I'd give her the option. But first, I'd let her sleep. Trevion—or was it Dugan?—could wait.

The lad hadn't returned by the time I retrieved the coordinates for the meeting, so we made sure he knew we wouldn't be at the usual spot should he come back before we

did. Nika, no surprise, believed her father's lover despite learning that he was connected with the contract killer world.

"There has to be a reason," she argued before spiriting away to grab the usual arsenal of weaponry. At least she wasn't treating it like a happy little family reunion. "My father didn't trust easily, Silas. That means something. And it's not a coincidence that you two met after you and him crossed paths."

"Oh, aye. But even powerful Fae like your father, and say a certain handsome rogue you know, can be a little shortsighted when it comes to the people they worship."

She shot me a proper glare. Too bad I found it impossibly adorable on her. "Are you suggesting that you've become shortsighted with me?"

"Nonsense, love. I'm as clear-headed as they come with you," I rebuked with a smirk.

Her eyes went into a full cyclone roll. "You're an idiot."

She sheathed a couple daggers on her belt and put on the usual leather jacket she wore. It had nifty little pockets where she kept an assortment of throwing blades dipped in poison. Lethal little thing had built an immunity to them all. Bane was a ruthless teacher, I was quickly learning. He'd vigorously trained her from a young age, anticipating a future where she'd be forced to fight without him.

Nika collected her vibrant locks into a ponytail, and I, the lovesick troll, watched her do it with hearts in my eyes. Didn't matter how often I saw her, my little rebel was a snack waiting to be eaten. And had I not already been punished earlier for attempting a side quest in the hallway, I'd be all over this sweet little treat.

Her dazzling blue eyes dashed up to mine, reading my mind, no doubt, because her eyebrows pinched together in another scowl. I smirked, but she only sighed and

ignored me. “I believe him. I refuse to believe Dugan is out to hurt me. There are very few people in this world I trust, Silas, and he’s one of them. Come or don’t, but I’m going to see him, and that’s that.”

I crowded her against the bed post, locking her to it with an arm wrapped around the engraved wood. “That soft heart of yours is what I love most about you, princess, but you could benefit from a little caution.”

Her eyes seared mine, strong and unbending. “And you could do with a little less, so I guess we balance each other out.”

I dipped my head and claimed her mouth in a fierce kiss. “Finally something we agree on, aye, little rebel?”

She smiled against my lips before her little hand grabbed a handful of my shirt and dragged my mouth harder into hers. The little minx sucked my tongue and nibbled my bottom lip like a goddamn seductress of the night before fleeing my arms and leaving me to trail after her shadow.

I’m a bloke on a leash, and bloody chuffed about it.

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We'd be traveling for several hours by motorbike to get to the meeting spot. He'd sent an enchanted stone, but I wouldn't trust it. Nika was safer on the back of my Harley, and it gave me an excuse to have my lethal princess pressed up against my back.

Win-win.

The two of us started the several-mile hike to where I'd put my Harley, then it would be open road from there. She pretended to be all bothered and tired when my hand reached for hers, but our fingers twined and a ghost of a smile reached her pretty mouth.

After everything, it was these little moments between us I cherished. I'd nearly lost her again. If not for her nan and mydarling's resilience, she'd be in the clutches of a demon wearing my brother's face.

I watched the sunlight rain down on her in sporadic bursts. Her hand squeezed mine, and when I grinned at her, she returned it. The woman had been through hell, but you'd never know it. As we climbed, I vowed to protect that smile.

5

Nika

The gleam of sun-yellow hair greeted us when we arrived in the field where my father and Dugan met. Dugan's familiar figure was outlined by radiant light, his front turned toward the bright sun with thousands of flowers sprouting from the earth until

they disappeared along the horizon.

This was their special place. I recognized it immediately when Silas gave me the coordinates. Asking me to come to this place was a powerful statement. Dugan's love for my father hadn't faded. He hadn't betrayed him. He still cherished the love they had.

My throat was tight with emotion and tears threatened to fall if I wasn't careful.

It wasn't immediately clear what Dugan already knew. Was he aware my father was dead? Had Father told him everything beforehand? Silas said he mentioned that I was a Soul Collector and I'd found my grandmother's soul, so what else did Dugan know?

After collecting my father's soul, I didn't question whether there was a reason Father had involved him, or why he and Silas were already connected. My parents had gone through great lengths to prepare. They couldn't stop fate, but they'd done what they could to give me the best chance at facing mine. Dugan was just another piece of that.

I paused when the man my father loved turned our direction, his soft brown eyes lighting up with relief and happiness at the sight of me. He let loose a breath and brushed back his golden hair so it wasn't falling into his eyes, then he walked the short distance between us.

"Nika, darling. I'm..." His mouth quivered. "I'm so happy to see you again. I thought the worst when—" He cleared his throat and grabbed hold of my hands. "Well, it doesn't matter, does it? What matters is that you're here."

Next to my father, who'd always reminded me of a dark forest, Dugan was a sunlit field of flowers. Maybe that was the reason this place where the two met was a perfect embodiment of their love. And like many times in the last half year, it felt as

if another piece of fate had clicked into place.

Silas stiffened, but he didn't stop Dugan from touching me. And while he grumbled under his breath about me being so touchy-feely with "unworthy wankers" when I cradled Dugan's cheek and smiled at him, he didn't stop that either.

"I'm glad you're okay too, Dugan." His pretty smile beamed back at me. It was the most Dugan thing he could ever do. "Or should I call you Trevion?" I teased, and his smile faded. "Which name is the real one?"

"Sassy," he grumbled. "Dugan, of course. Trevion...well, that was only an identity I assumed with—well, you know."

"Me?" Silas supplied, sneering.

I ignored the annoyed oaf next to me. "It's been a while."

"It has," he whispered, covering my hand with his. "Much too long, darling."

It'd been nearly a year since I last saw him. The longest we'd ever gone. He was a Light Fae, so Father met him outside of the Dark Fae Society, but he always found a way to visit. And when my schedule permitted, I'd go along with my father, but it'd been chaotic since we'd last seen each other.

Dugan might look my age, but he was several hundred years old, and he was much thinner than he had been when last I saw him. He used to fill out his clothes better, but now they hung off him, practically swallowing his thinner frame.

"I can't imagine what you must've thought when I didn't come for you. When those vile creatures tortured you for information. You must've felt so alone." He visibly swallowed, closing his eyes. "When your father sent me that letter before the attack, I

thought he'd gone absolutely insane. I never thought...it's all a bit surreal, if I'm honest. I never imagined that everything would take place the exact way he'd written it."

I giggled, finally dropping my hand. "Imagine how I feel."

Amusement swam in his gorgeous brown eyes. "At least you haven't lost your spark. I'd been worried the harsh world might take it from you." He stole a look at Silas, whose arm had wound around my waist and tucked me in close. "But it seems a few things have changed since last we spoke."

I glared at Silas, but the brute didn't step away. He was determined to make a statement. It wasn't a fight worth having, so I offered Dugan a one-shoulder shrug and moved on. "What was it that Father gave you?"

Dugan seemed to come out of his head and sunk a hand into the messenger bag he'd brought with him. Pulling out a little worn leather-bound journal from inside, he handed it to me. "He said you'd understand what was inside. I've never seen a language like it, so I couldn't possibly know what it all means. Hopefully you do."

I took the journal and flipped through a few pages. It was in our code, but it wasn't written by Father. It was written by someone else. And after flipping from front to back and quickly scanning the content, its importance was made perfectly clear.

This journal was authored by both my grandmother and mother, and everything inside of it was meant for me, and me alone. Several entries spoke directly to me, and I wasn't sure how. Not when Grandmother was meant to have died before I was born and never knew my name or face. I'd seen her handwriting before, so I knew it was hers. Which begged the question, how had she known that one day I'd need this journal? My mother's clairvoyance was this powerful?

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Without reading it, I hadn't any hope of understanding. I'd need to carefully review each page, and I had to rein in my curiosity so I could address the man watching me with the same level of intrigue.

Clutching the journal to my chest, I stared at Dugan. "He gave you this before he attacked the Council? So what do you know? Why were you and Silas already acquainted? Was it all on purpose or by accident?"

The arm around me tightened, his distrust of my father's lover in the hold, but he didn't know Dugan like I did.

Dugan's smile was apologetic. "You might not believe me, but even now, what I know is very little. I only know what he wrote in the letter he sent and what I've overheard in the last half year since your escape."

He wet his mouth and stared back at the field of flowers, grief reaching his eyes. His smile lost its usual brilliance. He was mourning my father. It was in the tired lines of his face and sad stare he cast at their special field. "I loved your father, Nika. I fell in love with him knowing that he had secrets, and many of them he feared telling anyone. It might not make much sense to you, but I trusted him in spite of the secrets he kept."

A tear trailed down his cheek before he wiped it away and gave me a small smile.

My heart broke for him. Dugan loved my father despite knowing he still loved my mother and kept secrets. Despite knowing he could only give him pieces of his heart. And yet, Dugan loved him with everything he was and stood by my father to the very

end.

That was why I trusted every word he said.

“Bane and I had always talked about changing the world together, and whatever he asked, I did. So my meeting Silas, while apparently intentional from his end, was something I didn’t connect until after all of this was said and done. I never anticipated it would be Silas you’d choose. When I first heard it was him who you’d contracted to help you, I couldn’t believe it.”

Silas caught my eye, wagging his eyebrows. “Guess I’d called the wrong bloke in worship, little rebel.”

“Pardon?” Dugan asked, confused.

I elbowed Silas and smiled at Dugan. “Ignore him. I’m sure you’re plenty aware of what an idiot he can be.”

Laughing, Dugan nodded. “Rather perplexing, isn’t it? How could this shameless brute be one of the most fearsome mercenaries in the business? Doesn’t make much sense, does it?”

“Oi, you smiley cloak-and-dagger wanker,” Silas barked. “That’s part of my charm.”

“Sure it is,” I teased. “So you didn’t know much before he attacked the Council? Do you know what happened after?”

Anguish crept into Dugan’s expression. “Very little, darling. I’ve been careful to stay hidden. Your father made all the arrangements, and he only told me what he did the night before he attacked the Council. I know he was killed. I know you’d escaped with Silas. I heard about the attack on the Dark Fae Society and Yuma’s demise.

Your father mentioned your powers and that you'd collect your grandmother's soul, so I imagine that was somehow connected with the attack, yes? But outside of what I needed to do and what it could mean should I not, not much else. I was told to wait for Silas to talk to me as Dugan, not Trevion, and I've been waiting for him to reach out ever since."

"What it could mean should you not...what?" I clung to that one statement.

Dugan bent down and pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead. "It isn't important, darling. You have it."

I opened my mouth, but Silas cut through quickly, "Did you know who I really was after we met?"

"That you're Silver and worked for the Brotherhood at one point in time? I mean, I'd be a bad friend if I didn't know at least that much after eight years. We were all meant to be morally-challenged mercenaries, after all."

Silver, not the Shimmering Assassin?

My brow furrowed in confusion. "Silver?"

"Doesn't matter." Silas finally let me go and turned to look at me. "We should go, love. I don't like to stay out in one place too long, and dusk will be here in a few hours. I'd rather not lose daylight for our drive."

I peered down at the journal. "You should come with us," I said to Dugan. "I like to think we're family, all things considered."

Silas stiffened. "Nika—"

Dugan took several steps back and readjusted his messenger bag as tears tracked down his cheeks. The smile that overtook his face was one of rejection. Why was it that the most beautiful things in my life were also the most painful?

With a hand over his chest, Dugan let the tears fall and didn't make any attempt to stop them. "We are, Nika. You'll always be my daughter, and nothing will change that. If I could come with you, I would, but I'm afraid that's not my destiny. And it's not yours."

Silas peered over at him, a sudden wind blowing his hair all over the place. Leaves took flight and petals danced across the sky. But it was the man in front of me who stole the show. I'd missed him, and I hated that I couldn't keep him.

I couldn't keep any of them.

Biting my lower lip, I nodded.

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Dugan's smile grew, then he removed a little pouch from his jacket and held it out to Silas. I was worried he'd leave Dugan hanging, but he took it without argument. Peering down at the pouch with caution, Silas seemed to miss the way Dugan's smile faded and his eyes dropped out of sight. But I didn't. Something about him was off, like he was here on borrowed time, and my gut twisted at the thought.

I tried to take a step toward him, but he rejected me with a shake of his head. "I'm very glad to have known you both. I'm so very glad, Nika, that you came here and trusted me. I know whatever the future holds, you'll take it on in that brilliant way of yours. Because nothing in this world is stronger than the love you give, darling.Nothing."

Then he was gone. He disappeared from sight and left me staring at a field of flowers.

6

Silas

My bird had been nose to book since she got that bleeding journal from Dugan. She'd barely touched the food I'd brought a few hours earlier. Her legs were crossed on the sofa, hair in a messy bun that dropped curls into her eyes as she penned indecipherable scribbles on a notepad. I'd asked about it once, but she said she needed time to explain and had been buried in the book ever since.

Nibbling at the end of her pen, she didn't notice me come sit beside her. She didn't give me that saucy eyebrow when I cleared my throat and widened my legs, taking up as much space as possible. And after a few minutes of trying and failing to get my

bird's attention, I plucked the journal from her hand.

“Hey—”

I put it on the coffee table and scooped the feisty thing up, then sat her adorable bum on my lap. Her eyes went from the book to my face, anger twisting her mouth in a fucking adorable way, but she didn't move. I touched her jaw and brushed the line of her cheek.

Oh aye, my little rebel was a force to be reckoned with when she was on a mission to help the ones she cared about, but I'd be an absolute twat to let this beauty wither away in front of me the way Dugan had. I'd rather face her wrath than leave her vulnerable to our enemy. Because the way things were going, she'd whittle away to a fraction of her strength without proper rest and mealtimes.

She might be a beast of myth and legend, but no one was invincible, and certainly not without any energy to fight.

“If Bane saw you now, he'd have it out with me for letting you work yourself into this state,” I whispered, noticing the slight shake in her hand as she tossed the pen on the table. “It's been four days, love, and you haven't left this bleeding sofa. You haven't slept, save a few hours. You've barely nibbled the food I've left for you. Do I need to make a trip to Maude and Dick so they can feed this little baby bird?”

Her eyes danced around my face, clearly agitated by the threat, before she sighed. “You're right.”

I didn't believe my ears. “I am?”

“Father was ruthless when it came to training, and one thing he never let me forget was how vulnerable one becomes when they don't take proper care of themselves.”

Her body relaxed, and she leaned into me, her head settling on my shoulder.

The smell and feel of her were toxic to the senses, and I always turned into a blubbering troll whenever she was in any way soft on me. I, the knobhead, just stared at her like I hadn't two brain cells to rub together to offer a coherent reply.

She giggled a little to herself and swiped the sandwich I'd made her from the plate. Taking a few bites, she hummed happily to herself. "Since when did you become the domestic housewife, mercenary? Has Lev rubbed off on you?"

I caught her wrist and brought the sandwich to my mouth. With a sleazy grin, I took a huge bite out of it. "What kind of man would I be if I couldn't make my woman a sandwich?"

Rolling her eyes, Nika finished what was left and straddled my lap. My hands quickly went to her hips as she settled, her arms dropping around my shoulders. Dainty fingers that had punished plenty of men—myself included—teased through my hair before her mouth came down for a light kiss. My tongue swept out, but she pulled away before I could have my cheeky way with her.

I groaned and dragged her closer. "Don't tease me, love. It's been four days since you were last in our bed. Days since I've been given a proper kiss, yeah? Don't make this sorry sod work for it. A bloke can only take so much."

Her lips twitched, hiding a smile. "I thought you wanted me to rest?"

My hand traced the length of her spine until it curled around the delicate nape of her neck. "I'll be quick," I lied, stealing another kiss.

Her fingers gripped my hair, and her waist rubbed and rolled over me the way we both liked. "That pent up? You'll... 'only be but a minute, love,' right?"

Her eyes sparkled in amusement. It might be at my expense this clever minx was humoring herself, but I'd take it on the chin so she'd keep smiling like that.

Careful not to hurt her, I removed the hair tie keeping her bun together. Purple hair fell around her face and shoulders in soft waves and curls. I teased a little between my fingers before sinking my hand in. Her eyes closed, weak to the gentle way I wrapped her hair around my hand and tugged.

In these quiet moments, it was her and I. She'd never stop fighting me, but it made the times she gave in all the more entrancing. Every day this beautiful Soul Collector chose to keep me by her side was a day worth living.

Our mouths collided. No matter how many times I'd kissed her, it was never enough. I always craved her. Have it my way, and she'd never leave our bed. I'd pleasure her until the end of the world if she'd let me. But my bird was kind and wanted the rest of the world to thrive. She wouldn't abandon them to their fate, so neither would I.

Taking on Death himself was a small price to pay to stay by her side.

I dipped down and bit her throbbing pulse. Slipping a hand under her shirt, I grazed her soft skin with calloused hands before cupping her breast. The dangerous beauty pushed into my touch, asking, begging in the only way she knew how.

"Fuck me, Nika. You drive me bloody mad," I groaned, lifting her shirt and yanking her bra down just enough to tease her nipple with my tongue.

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“Silas,” her lust-rough voice breathed.

I sucked what I could of her breast into my mouth before returning to her lips for a kiss. They slid against mine with urgency. Nika’s hand dragged down my front, and just as she finally reached the prize, the barrier I’d put around the area shuddered with someone’s entry. Only one person would be allowed through, and I tossed my head back in frustration.

I fixed her shirt just as Lev came through the front door and immediately caught sight of us. The cute wanker had the gall to look annoyed as he set down his bag and folded his arms over his chest.

“Interrupting, am I?”

Nika was already out of my lap before I could demand the lad go find something else to do for a few hours while I played out every single fantasy I had with his friend. Instead, she was wrapping her arms around him and giving the cute bugger that beautiful smile that stole hearts. He smiled back.

Wanker.

“Did you—”

Lev dropped a kiss on my bird’s head and nodded. “Find something? I did. It was busy so I couldn’t reach out much, but I’ll show you what I’ve found.”

I grumbled as the two claimed seats next to each other and the state of my trousers

remained uncomfortable. Readjusting the monster, I leaned forward as Lev pulled out his sketch book. Nika eyed the journal, desperate to tell him everything we'd learned on our little excursion to meet a bloody two-faced menace.

The lad's eyes sparkled the same way hers did. The two of them together were trouble, but in this case, the good kind.

"Your grandmother is a goddamn genius, Niks." Lev showed a few pages he'd drawn. "This magic is insane, and it means you can do a whole lot more than I ever thought. If she could do this through a proxy, then...well, it's no wonder Rilas is scared of you." He pointed to the symbols Nika helped him draw before he left. "I had to be careful not to show them together. Your contact was a little too interested in what I was trying to do," Lev accused, green eyes on me.

I shrugged, grinning. "I told you she would be."

"Well, I had to do a little reading on my own to keep half of them to myself. Lucky I have an eidetic memory, or I'd have to worry about a loose end," the lad chastised.

Nika also tossed me a chiding look.

My grin grew. "Loose ends are easy enough to deal with, lad. I wouldn't worry your pretty little head about it."

The two of them immediately gathered my meaning, and no surprise, neither approved.

Nika spoke out first. "You're not allowed to kill her, Silas. We've talked about this."

"I was careful," Lev added. "She thought I was a scholar for the Dark Fae and nothing more. I doubt she'll connect it to actual use."

Shrugging, I leaned back with a purely sinister stare. “It’s better not to worry, I find. No loose ends means no one to find themselves in front of a demon chasing us, yeah? I’ll make it quick and painless, promise.”

Nika was on her feet and in front of me, glaring in that devilish way of hers. “No. She’ll be left alone and checked on if necessary, but you and I both know how clever Lev is. She’ll never know who it was for.”

Our eyes met in a clash, and it was very few who could overpower me with mere words. But my bird was a terrifying thing, wasn’t she?

“Have it your way, love. But I’ll have her watched for a few weeks to make sure. There’s very few contacts I trust these days, and she’s a Fae who can be bought off at the right price. As can anyone in my world.”

Nika gave me one curt nod before attempting to return to her seat, but I was quicker. I grabbed her around the waist and dropped her back on my lap before she could fight it. With a gesture to continue, I wrapped a possessive arm around her and dropped a kiss on her cheek.

Without missing a beat, Lev went on, “Your grandmother bound his powers.”

Nika’s eyes opened wide, but I chuckled and nodded. The wily old fox was clever to do it. She must’ve guessed that his next move would be to take the souls back, and she exploited it.

Bloody brilliant.

“Bound his powers?” Nika questioned.

Nodding, Lev pointed to a few of the symbols. “When he stole her soul, she made

herself something of an anchor. It's likely she targeted certain abilities, the ones most closely aligned with a Soul Collector. I can't be sure what all she did, but if I had to guess something, I'd bet she at least took his ability to collect and expel souls."

"Wise old fox," I breathed in admiration. "If he can't get rid of her, he can't unbind his power. And the only one who can—"

"Is me," Nika interjected, lips downturned. "That's why she told me not to come for her."

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Lev brushed a hand through his blue hair and nodded in agreement. “If you were to remove her soul, his power would likely be unbound. My guess is she was looking for a way to weaken him, and that was the best way to do it.”

My bird had quite the devil trio behind her—her mother, father, and grandmother. I’d never been so grateful to be outclassed until now.

Nika slumped against me, a tear trailing down from her eye that I was quick to brush away. “Stupid selfless woman.”

I turned her head and forced her to look at me. “Runs in the family, doesn’t it? Why don’t you tell her the good news, Lev.” I tossed the lad a little grin, knowing he had a plan given the smile he wore since coming in.

His eyes glinted and he crossed his arms, smirking. “Thought you’d never ask.”

7

Nika

My pulse thundered in my ears, but I’d known Lev long enough to know that smile came with an incredible idea.

He leaned forward and pointed to a few of the symbols. “I remembered some of these. I’ve seen them before in the texts Mother kept hidden. If you can learn to do what your grandmother did with your power, I think there’s a way we can expel Rilas’s soul back to the After.”

Why hadn't she taught me before? She never mentioned anything like it, but Dugan hadn't come until after Rilas had attacked us. Maybe there was a reason. Maybe this was what they saw. It was the only conclusion I could draw as I twisted my thoughts around the new information I'd learned from both Lev and the journal.

"But how will you get that text?" I asked.

Lev's grin was downright diabolical. I'd never seen him look so excited, not since we'd seen each other again in that field.

Silas cackled as the two men stared at each other. "Another dance around those pompous wankers? I accept. I think a little extra spook might put them off trying to regain power if they think I'm watching. It's a win-win, it is."

"The Dark Fae Society?" I surmised, humming. "Are you sure they wouldn't have tossed everything out or hidden it somewhere else?"

My friend shook his head, laughing. "They're not that clever, Niks. Not the ones that matter, anyway. You know this. It's why they did everything through the power of the Council. They're probably still trying to name new leaders. I doubt they'll have done much else."

He wasn't wrong. The Dark Fae Society was nothing if not wholly focused on performative measures rather than real ones. It was all lineage and bureaucratic bullshit. Skill wasn't how you obtained power in that society. It was who your family was for the last thousand or so years. So they wouldn't be thinking about another attack; they'd be worried about leadership and regaining their foothold in the Fae space.

"So we go back and grab what we need, then leave?"

Silas's arm tightened around me. "What's the fun in that, love? I still have a list of bastards to pay a visit to who Lev failed to mention last time."

I glared at Lev, and he shrugged, not even the slightest bit sorry. "He's annoyingly persistent, and I didn't think we'd have to go back anytime soon. Sorry, Niks."

"No, you're not," I clapped back angrily.

"No, I'm not," he agreed with a sly grin.

Silas kissed my shoulder and stared at me like he wasn't the biggest child in the room. "I won't be but a minute, love."

"Bet you won't. Hope you like a cold bed," I threatened.

Silas pouted and snuggled closer. "You don't mean it, do you, little rebel? Why protect those undeserving tossers after all they've done to you? Why worry your pretty little head over them at all? Not like I wasn't quick the last time."

I wouldn't win this battle with him. Silas was a monster about revenge. He'd made that clear when he risked the box to destroy several Dark Fae who hurt me. And I'd fallen in love with him despite the many shades of grey. That, however, didn't mean I had to give into him every time.

"How long is the list?"

Knowing he'd won, the smug mercenary wore a grin and produced a list inked in silver. Did he just keep it in his pocket everywhere he went? "Only about...thirty or so. Won't take long at all, princess, and Lev will be right there with you to grab what we need while I take a little stroll through your past."

I shot a look over at Lev, and he was already grinning. I hadn't known him to be the vindictive type, but Silas certainly brought it out in my friend.

Go figure.

Sighing, I caught Silas's face in one hand and growled, "You'll be quick, or we're leaving you behind. I mean it, asshole."

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His grin was distorted by the hold I had on his face. “Growl like that, and I’ll do whatever you want. You’ll get no cheek from me, love.”

I released his face with a click of my tongue, ignoring the kisses he dropped on my shoulder and neck. Lev stared at the journal sitting on the coffee table, and I snatched it up. Turning to the page I’d bookmarked, I showed it to Lev. His brows knitted together in confusion.

Right, no one but me could read it.

“My grandmother and mother wrote this journal. Dugan gave it to me when we went to meet him.” His eyebrow went up in question. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you after, but this part specifically talks about how to form symbols. It’s often used to cast what they call the old magic. It’s magic we draw from the After. Not sure if that’s what she did to Rilas in the room with the box and at the cabin, but if you know the combination, this part tells me exactly how to do it.”

Silas whistled as he leaned his head over my shoulder. “Is that what you were doing down here for four days?”

I scoffed, flipping through the pages. “What? Thought I was just reading for fun?”

“Didn’t see you casting any spells, did I?”

Lev was already closer and looking at the journal with interest. “This is what Dugan gave you? Why? How did he know you’d need it? How did your grandmother?”

I'd learned over the course of reading the journal that it wasn't only my mother who had clairvoyance. Grandmother did too, though it wasn't as powerful as Mother's.

She created this journal and passed it on to my mother. It was everything I could ever want to know—my powers, our ancestry, what Soul Collectors were truly meant to do. The parts specifically addressed to me were areas both my grandmother and mother thought I might need eventually.

One such place was how to call on the magic lingering in the After. They referred to it several times as the old magic. I hadn't attempted it yet, but I didn't want to accidentally cast something I couldn't reverse. If we went after Rilas, I'd only get one shot at it. I'd have to take the souls he collected first, then quickly expel him to the After if what Lev said was true.

"She had clairvoyance too, yeah?" Silas asked, peering at the journal despite being unable to read it.

Nodding, I closed it and escaped his lap. "Seems like it. Doesn't really matter now. We'll only get one chance at this, and I don't want to be sitting on my hands for another few months."

Silas was on his feet, hands on my shoulders as he stared at Lev. "We'll be needing those texts first, I suppose. Then we'll track that demonic brother of mine to wherever cowards go to hide and send him back to where he belongs."

Lev stood from his seat, peppier than when he walked in. "It's a plan, and a damn good one in my opinion." He started to walk toward me. "Dinner?"

But I was already over Silas's shoulder like a sack of potatoes. "She and I have important business to discuss. You understand, don't you, lad?"

I slammed my elbow into the brute's shoulder, annoyed he'd used his magic and strength to keep me from escaping. "You can't keep saying that like no one sees through your bullshit, asshole." I struggled, his magic weaving around my body to keep me from getting loose. "You better hope I don't get free, mercenary, because you'll lose your favorite body part when I do."

Lev chuckled as I was kidnapped, no longer on my side. Damn traitor. "Have fun you two and, Niks, make sure to get some sleep after you're done playing business partners, will you? You look like one of the undead you're always talking to."

"I hope you choke on your first bite," I yelled out, already halfway up the stairs thanks to the large oaf and his floor-eating strides.

"Love you, too!" Lev called out before Silas strolled into our bedroom.

I blinked, standing in a field of grass. The moon was beaming down as fog rolled in from all sides, obscuring most of the world around me. Trees speared into the sky. The quiet was only broken by the sound of an angry wind. I didn't recognize this place, but it felt familiar somehow. Why did it feel like I'd been called here? Why did it feel important to be here? Who was I waiting for?

Hair danced around my face as I looked around in confusion, not sure how I'd come to this place or even for what reason. After a little sweep of my eyes, I caught sight of a humanoid shape. It loomed in the fog, unmoving, hair blowing with the wind, frozen and waiting.

I inhaled a sharp breath, but Silas was suddenly next to me, his sword out. He was in his assassin outfit—cloak and mask—but he wasn't looking at me. He was glaring at the figure ahead. Whoever stood hundreds of feet in front of us, covered in fog, only his shape to distinguish him, Silas saw as our enemy.

Confused, I tried to walk forward, the scuff of dirt and dead leaves barely audible with the harsh wind in my ears. A gloved hand wrapped around my arm and yanked me back. Silas's beautiful silver eyes greeted my next glance, his masked face hiding his expression, but his voice gave every bit of emotion away. It was dripping with hostility.

"Don't, love."

"Why?"

He put a finger to his mask to silence me and deftly swiveled his sword, preparing for a fight. "He's a demon, little rebel. He can't possibly be the Soul of Death you've claimed. He's a bloody imposter, he is. You can't trust him."

"Who?"

He didn't answer, just glared at the figure that never moved. I wanted to venture closer to see who he meant. Who was this person I'd called the Soul of Death? Was it Rilas? But why would I ever willingly chase after Rilas? What was this urge inside me that beckoned me forward? Why did it feel like I should go to whoever stood in an obscure wall of fog?

"Silas—"

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“You mustn’t go to him, little rebel.” My mercenary’s voice cut like a knife, demanding I stay.

I snatched my hand away, taking several steps back. The impression of his hand was still on my skin, blaring red. He’d hurt me? But Silas had never put a violent hand on me.

Never.

“What the fuck, Silas? Why are you acting like this?”

I rubbed my sore wrist and glared at him in accusation, but all the mercenary did was watch me retreat and cross his arms.

“Me? What about you, love? You haven’t made sense for days, going on and on about the Soul of Life and Death. I was forced to follow you here when you said this was the only way to corrupt your gem and call on the darkness inside you. That without him you couldn’t maintain balance. It’s you who isn’t making any sense, yeah?”

The whispers of the dead floated around my head—murmuring, calling, pleading. The volume overwhelmed me in an instant. I was weighed down by their outcry and desperation to reach me. To get me to listen.

I stumbled and swayed on my feet, trying to run toward the figure who hadn’t moved in all the time we argued, but Silas was already there, catching me by the shoulders.

“Leave him, love.”

“No!”

“You said so yourself, princess. It’s you who’s Death, not Rilas. You might be hunted by darkness, but you don’t have to become it to win. There has to be another way you can maintain the balance and send Rilas back,” Silas said in my ear, and despite never hearing the words before, it felt as if I knew them. As if something inside me responded to them.

8

Nika

Jolting awake, a cry left my mouth, and Silas immediately scooped me up into his arms. He checked me for injuries while his magic swept the room, on high alert. I quivered and sucked in air like I couldn’t breathe.

I was hyperventilating, I quickly realized. Fear inched its way through my body, ever so slowly. Sensation crawled over my limbs, and I quaked inside Silas’s arms. The whisper of voices hadn’t left my head. They were still there, calling, seeking me out, reaching for me. I’d heard a similar chorus of whispers in that hallway before we found the dead woman. Their growing murmur was a warning.

A foreboding.

Silas’s eyes searched mine, his giant hands moving to cradle my face. “What is it, love?” Silas’s voice was soft and soothing. “Are you hurt? Did you see something? Was it that bastard again?”

My hands absently covered his as I tried to get control over my frantic breaths. The

voices faded, and I could finally think again. “No. I’m...it was a dream.”

Slightly disheveled with his silver hair a mess around his face, Silas let loose a relieved sigh and wrapped his arms around me again. “A normal dream, or one like you had of Bane?”

I swallowed, voice shaky. “I’m not sure.”

“Not sure?”

“It felt different...like the one with my father, but it also didn’t. Nothing in it made any sense. You weren’t—the voices, they were here when I woke up. I still heard them whispering.”

I tried to turn my head to look around the room, but Silas reached for my face again and held it in place. “I was in this one, was I?” The muscles in his chest contracted violently. “What did I do to you, Nika? What did I say? Don’t skimp on the details because you’re afraid of hurting me. I need to know everything.”

I wasn’t sure if I’d made any sense, but I recounted what I could remember down to the minutest of details. Silas’s expression didn’t change, but I sensed his alarm.

“I don’t know what it means,” I admitted to him in a soft whisper. “The voices, the person in the fog, the things you said—I don’t know what any of it means.”

Silas hummed and leaned back against the headboard. Gently running his hand through my hair, he brought my head to his chest and wrapped a secure arm around my back. The steady pound of his heart was against my face.

He might not realize it, but whenever he was worried, he’d always hold me close as if he could protect me from everything and everyone. And in his arms like this, it really

felt like he could. I truly believed Silas was the reason I was alive at all.

“You said I called you Death?”

Nodding, I settled against him and let loose a sigh. “My mother said something to me before...” I started, latching onto the memory before I sent my parents into their afterlife. I remembered every word she’d murmured inside my head, so verbatim, I repeated, “‘You may think Rilas is Death, but Death is balanced and just. If anyone’s Death, it’s you’.”

Lifting my eyes to Silas, I watched his brows furrow. “She said that to you? Those exact words?”

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“I didn’t really understand it at the time, but...it feels connected somehow. You remember when I told you she said that I’d cross paths with the Soul of Life and the Soul of Death? In my dream, you thought the figure in the fog was the Soul of Death. Said it was what I claimed, but you thought he was an imposter. What if he’s one of the people she mentioned? What if he’s the person we’ve been looking for?”

“You mean what your mother mentioned before? The souls whose paths you’d cross? But you’re saying that in this dream I thought he was an imposter and didn’t want you to go to him?” Silas mused, the muscles in his chest tautening. He was agitated by the thought. His heart thundered under my palms. “You’re saying that one of us had it wrong in this dream of yours? But you still feel as though he was the Soul of Death?”

Thinking quickly, I lifted my head. “That’s exactly it. The voices were calling me there. To him. It felt like I’d been searching for him.”

“But one of these so-called souls will determine whether the world is saved or ended, is it? That these so-called Soul of Life and Soul of Death are the end all be all, yeah?” Silas suggested before I could mutter the words myself.

Another piece clicked into place, and somehow I knew we were onto something. Maybe these were the souls my mother mentioned. Maybe whoever it was in my dream was one of them. Mother couldn’t be certain Silas was one of them, but she did think he was. Maybe this other person was someone I needed to find to save the world, as weird as it was to admit such a thing to myself.

“I don’t know how to explain it, but I know for certain I was in the right place. He

was who I was looking for.”

Silas went rigid under me. “Rilas...?”

“I can’t be sure it was him.”

His voice was dangerously low. “He called you his Fated One, little rebel. If he’s the Soul of Death, then I was right to keep you from him. I’d bury my own sword in my chest before I let him have you.”

Something in my gut told me it wasn’t Rilas.

“It wasn’t him.”

“You can’t be—”

“It wasn’t him,” I said again, punctuating every word. “I know it wasn’t him, Silas.”

“So what do you mean this bit about balance and corrupting your gem with darkness?” He pried.

“I can’t be sure,” I mumbled.

Silas hummed and twisted my hair around his fingers. “If it’s about balance, then embracing both parts of you, the light and dark, that’s something very few can do. That sort of balance is hard to strike. Death isn’t meant to be either side of the coin. It’s always been portrayed as impartial. Both light and dark.”

“Grey,” I whispered.

Silas smirked and dropped a kiss on my mouth. “That’s it, little rebel. Death is neither

light nor dark. Death is grey.”

I sat up and looked at the gem hanging around my neck. Tiny specks existed in all the white, but otherwise it was relatively unscathed by the choices I’d made. “I sought him out to corrupt the gem, why? Why would I want to corrupt it?”

Silas reached out and cradled the gem in his palm. “To find balance, yeah? Muck up all this clear white with a little darkness? Maybe it was meant to bring a little more balance to your power. Not sure why you’d need that bloody faceless cockwobble to do it, though.”

“The only thing is, Grandmother told me not to let the gem become corrupted,” I argued. “This was meant to warn me because I couldn’t undo the corruption of my soul.”

“Or it was meant to guide you,” Silas rebuked. “If this dream wasn’t a dream at all, princess, then maybe this gem helps you find the perfect balance of both light and dark.”

Grandmother had been very pointed in her comments about the gem and corruption, that I couldn’t repair it once I’d stained my soul. What if she gave me that warning knowing one day I’d need to use it as a guide?

It wasn’t a totally crazy thought. Mother had made it clear they couldn’t mess with fate. Fate always found a way of rebuking efforts made to alter it. Much of what they’d done came at different points, never all at the same time, and what happened in the future fell on me to decide. They could only give me the tools to make the right decision when the time came. What if the gem was another tool?

I stared at the glistening surface. “Do you think the text calls for balance? Do you think casting it requires me to draw out the darkness inside me and corrupt the gem?”

My eyes went wide, and I scrambled off the bed. Silas barely caught up with me by the time I got downstairs and flipped through the journal. It was a very small section, but both mother and grandmother circled it several times as if to emphasize its importance. I wasn't sure what it meant, but now I had an idea.

I found the page and read it off for confirmation. Silas hovered close to my back, his head dropping into view as I pointed to a small section. "Using the old magic requires the balance of both life and death. One cannot be without the other. There is always a cost when summoning this magic, and it always requires the darkness inside you."

Rilas mentioned the darkness inside me enough times for the words to feel ominous, but in my grandmother's writing, even more so. Doing what I was about to do came at a cost—the light in my soul. It was why she warned me to avoid corruption, because I'd need to balance it when the time came to send him back. If I didn't...

The world would end.

But how would I know when I'd reached the right balance? What if my soul suffered too much corruption or not enough? What then?

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My head swirled with the reality of what I'd need to do, the tight rope I'd be forced to walk to do what needed to be done when the time came.

"You think the dream is because of the text the lad was mentioning?" Silas slid around me, his naked torso catching strays of moonlight. "Finding the two souls is a step toward balance, are they?"

I was momentarily distracted by the dark edge of his tattoos. He'd mentioned how each one signified a moment in his life, often dark, to serve as a reminder whenever he looked at it. Or in many cases, as a warning. He admitted in the privacy of our bedroom that he despised the person he was when he killed his brother. The person he was in the Brotherhood. And while he still lived in the grey, he never wanted to go back to black.

If anyone knew what it was to be grey, it was Silas. For some reason, I was confident when the time came, he'd be the reason I could strike the perfect balance. He'd be my guide. He'd be the reason I could find the perfect shade.

"I'm not sure, but I think anything to do with sending a demon back might require a little more than a few symbols. Everything comes at a cost, no matter if it's meant to help or destroy." I paged through the journal until I reached another spot. "Grandmother talks about dark souls that escaped the After in this part here...how they're much harder to deal with."

I hadn't read everything in the journal yet, but I was sure that there was more about them later on. I'd seen a few mentions in passages I hadn't decoded and studied yet.

Silas might bemoan the days I'd spent studying this five-hundred-page journal, but weeks wouldn't be enough with how much information it contained. I'd eventually need to build an index alongside the notes I was taking to aid me in the future, because I was determined to have one.

"She didn't call it a demon per se, but I imagine it's similar to Rilas. He went a step farther than the ones she describes who escaped the After. He gained a physical body. Nothing in this section talks about a resurrection. I'll look through and see if I can find anything about it. I'm not sure if a body changes much because the soul is the same, but she talks about balance here, too. The balance of life and death to send them back, and the fact that it takes an especially powerful Soul Collector to do it. Right here it even says: 'Even one soul for a soul is a heavy price to pay, but a price we must'."

Brushing his hair back, Silas eyed the text. "Maybe whatever book the lad was talking about has something in it about all of this. Rilas can't be the first demon they've summoned, seeing how Reaper knew how to do it. Others would've done it before. Even I've heard of demons once upon a time, though never been daft enough to summon one. Suppose your nan faced enough to write about it. Maybe she has something in there that'll help you."

"You're right," I murmured, determined to find something. Without looking at him, I headed for the couch again. Silas was quicker, though. I was scooped up, the journal plucked from my hands, and up the stairs before I knew it.

"I know you're eager, love, but you've barely slept. You can pick it back up in the morning," Silas chastised.

"And whose fault is it that I've barely slept?" Despite my snark, I didn't fight him. I couldn't when he'd already settled in next to me on the bed and wrapped his arms around me.

“I haven’t any clue what you mean, little rebel. I was as quick as I promised.” Silas chuckled and spooned me like it was perfectly normal. And in a way, it was.

Smiling to myself, I closed my eyes and snuggled closer. “Three hours is quick?”

“For me it is.” He scoffed and kissed my shoulder. “No more dreaming unless it’s your handsome rogue, and even then, tell dream me to bugger off. You’re mine.”

9

Silas

After making a few calls, the lad had gone off to gather the necessary items we’d need to infiltrate the Dark Fae Society. It wouldn’t take long, so I didn’t feel bad for relying on him again. My bird needed me, and I wouldn’t leave her unless there wasn’t any other choice.

I slipped back into the bedroom like a ghost and caught sight of the slumbering beauty on the bed. Her hair was strewn around her head like a halo, half on my pillow and half on hers. I’d blocked out the sun before leaving.

She hadn’t moved much since I escaped to chat with the lad earlier on in the day and been fast asleep since our little middle-of-the-night revelation. She’d barely stirred in my arms all night, only repositioning a little when I begrudgingly left the bed to update the lad and narrow down plans for our little skip and hop through their home territory.

I’d leave her to it if it wasn’t important we got a move on. It’d already been half a day, and the saucy bird would never forgive me for letting her sleep.

Last night had been full of unfortunate revelations. Nika would stop at nothing to get

answers. Suppose it was a case of like father, like daughter. Nika had already put pieces together most would spend weeks trying to understand. My quick-witted Soul Collector would let no one and nothing stand in her way. I might be a notorious assassin, but she was a bleeding legend, and I knew better than anyone not to get in her way.

Nika had only gone to bed on the promise I'd wake her at a decent hour. Decent had slipped by a few hours ago, but she'd forgive it as long as we didn't lose the entire day. Despite what the gorgeous nymph might think, she did, in fact, require sleep like the rest of us.

Tossing off my shirt, an evil grin played across my lips as I snuck under the covers and shouldered my way between her legs. I kissed a trail up one, then dropped a few on her naked stomach. She'd only worn a pair of shorts and tank top, both easy enough to remove. My fingers slipped under one side of her shorts, getting a good handful of her squeezable bum.

Nika's hips moved before resettling. I froze, waiting for a strike I no doubt deserved, but then a sleepy sigh whooshed out of her and she relaxed.

Still deep in dreamland.

I, the blubbering troll, reveled in the stolen moments where her heat merged with mine. It was a secret only I knew about when I touched her like this, under the cover of darkness, in a room with just the two of us. In these little moments, the looming danger didn't exist.

Pulling the fabric aside, I dipped my tongue into her soft folds and swept the length of her sweet opening. The sleeping rebel gasped, hips rolling in surprise. I licked two fingers and slid them inside, while my tongue tortured her clit. It wasn't minutes before Nika's waist chased the pleasure, seeking more of it, coaxing my fingers to go

deeper.

The whispered exhale of her breath, the tantalizing roll of her waist, the flood against my tongue—it was fucking brilliant, it was. My rebel was at her loveliest when she let go and gave into her urges.

The blanket came away, and her hand reached down for my head so she could tangle her little fingers in my hair. My cock throbbed, weak to her touch the same way she was mine.

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“Why can’t you ever just wake me up normally?” she complained, gasping when my tongue moved faster to pleasure her.

I smiled and flicked an impish look up at her through the tunnel of blankets. “This is normal, love. Don’t mix me up with some other undeserving gobshite. My girl will never wake up any other way.”

Her head flew back as I sucked harder and drove my fingers in deeper. Moans carried out of her mouth like the dam had broken and she couldn’t keep them anymore. The fingers in my hair tightened and her thighs quivered. She was close. I wouldn’t have mercy. My day didn’t start until my rebel was screaming my name in pleasure.

“Oh fuck, Silas!” she groaned, hips pressing down on my mouth. Her powerful thighs clamped like a vise on both sides of my head, and if a bloke wasn’t careful, it might be the last thing he ever did.

Worth it.

She arched off the bed, and I lapped up every morsel of her pleasure as she rode out her orgasm. When she collapsed with a soft huff, I dropped one last kiss on her sweet cunt and then laid out next to her with a triumphant grin. I made sure she was watching when I wiped my mouth with a thumb and sucked off the remnants of my favorite breakfast.

“Morning, love.”

“Is it, really?”

“Is it really, what, my sweet goddess?”

“Morning?”

Bollocks.

“For you it is.” I stole a kiss in hopes she’d forget how I promised a decent hour.

She leveled a glare on me and slid off the bed with a little shake of her head, thoroughly chastising my brazen attempt to talk around the subject. My smile faded, and I offered my hard knob a pitying look.

Looks like it’s just our hand today, little buddy.

Me and this little trouser dweller were never really satisfied. I’d had her for hours before I finally let her sleep. I didn’t have any business being this stiff after all I’d done, but what was a bloke supposed to do when he tasted the sweet nectar of a goddess? I was doomed to pine for another taste every minute of every day until death took me.

And not anytime soon, have it my way.

I watched her go around the bed, expecting her to dress for the day, but she didn’t. My jaw fell open as she tossed off her shirt and toed out of her shorts. Taunting me with a devious smile, she unhooked her bra and dragged her thong down in full view of my greedy gaze.

The curves alone on this blue-eyed vixen were enough to render a bastard speechless. Words would never come close to highlighting the pure eroticism and lethality this woman struck with nothing but a sly grin and come-hither glance.

Nika was the most beautiful woman in existence.

Naked and encased in shadow, she crawled onto the bed like a bloody fantasy come to life. And for a second, I wasn't sure if I'd nodded off. This couldn't be anything but a fever dream my brain concocted to taunt me. Or maybe I'd died somewhere along the way and been sent to my happily ever After. But as the seductress straddled my hips, hovering over me with her luscious body on display, claws cutting moon shapes into my pecs, I quickly realized I was wide awake.

I tried to speak, but her magic slid across my mouth and rendered the words I tried to say unintelligible. Pink slithered across my body, just as seductive as the vixen now perched on top of me. It wrapped around my wrists and ankles before tightly binding them to the bedposts.

Fuck me, when had my bird learned how to use her magic to restrain a hapless sod like me? No. More importantly, just who did she practice on? It better not be the lad. He was a good kid, and I liked him more than I'd ever admit, but I'd destroy the cute bugger if I found out he let her practice on him.

I was petty, and I didn't care if she knew it.

My heart thundered inside my chest as Nika bent her head low and whispered next to my ear. "My turn, mercenary. How does it feel to be at my mercy?"

I couldn't help the wild groan that fled me.

The jealousy that had twisted my thoughts swiftly morphed to desperate need. I wanted nothing more than for this naughty rebel to take me hostage and do whatever she pleased. Best believe only she could ever claim this sort of power over an infamous assassin like myself. Anyone else would be dead on their feet before they came close to the bed.

Biting my ear, her magic swept out to steal the clothes off my body and dropped them in a pile on the floor. I was stripped down to nothing, on display to my sultry rebel.

The muscles along my chest contracted and rippled as she ran her hand along them, but that was all she did. She didn't touch me more than a little, and I strained against the magic holding me. She clicked her tongue in admonishment and another burst of her magic dashed out to reinforce the binds holding me to the bed.

"Be good and stay still," she commanded, and another desperate groan rumbled inside my chest.

Lilith's tits, this woman brought out the absolute beast in me.

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I might be struggling to touch her, but my overactive knob was all too happy to be part of whatever she had planned. Hell, all things considered, so was I. I'd never been strung up to a bed before. I'd never been on the other side of bondage. I hadn't expected the thrill it gave me to let her take control, the lucky numpty who got to be her plaything.

I'd made it my mission never to be at the mercy of another person, but she was different. Nika could ask anything of me, and if it was within my power to do, I'd do it.

"You look good tied up, mercenary," she purred, biting her lower lip with a feisty stare that made my cock agonizingly hard. "I think I get it now, why you like it so much. It's like besting your equal in a fight, right?"

Gods. Her sultry voice whispering nothing but cheeky taunts went straight to my knob every time. I couldn't be harder. It was bleeding painful, it was. Bold and beautiful? Even the great Shimmering Assassin was beat.

She collected her hair and tied it up so it didn't fall into her view. The icy blues that enslaved me to her from the very moment we met trailed down my chest in open appreciation, and my cock jumped behind her.

It didn't feel too bad being appraised, if I were honest. I quite liked it. It was as though my bird was taking her time to decide what to do with me and how to do it. It agitated my pulse to think of all the things the devious little rebel would come up with. She was a clever minx. She'd have me begging by the end.

Leaning forward, Nika licked a path from ear to pec, circling my nipple with her tongue. I sucked in a sharp breath as she latched on and tugged. My bird could be feisty, yeah. Grunting, I tried to move, but she punished me with another painful nip. The slick between her legs coated my stomach as she continued her downward assault.

For fuck's sake, I'd give anything to taste that sweet cunt again. She was so wet. My rebel was enjoying the power she had over me.

It was torture to see the luscious curves of her body, the perfect round of her breasts, the eye-catching tattoos scattered across her pale flesh, those strong thighs that had nearly done me in, and not be allowed to touch, taste, and savor.

Absolute. Fucking. Torture.

Her eyes caught mine as she bit her way down my stomach, coming within inches of my cock. Which, as it were, was already shamelessly desperate for her attention. Moving around it, she dragged out the torture—kissing, licking, and biting everywhere but there. Her hot breath marked several spots along the way as she took her time teasing me. The muscles in my stomach and chest had become stone in the ongoing battle I waged to hold back.

It wouldn't take much to break this sort of magical hold, but I wouldn't risk angering her. I'd be patient and let her have her fun. Because the reward of having her on top, taking control and seizing her own pleasure, would be worth every bit of suffering.

Another shaky breath left me when she slid between my open legs. I caught her gaze before she tucked stray hair behind her ear and bent forward. Without waiting, she swirled her wicked tongue around the head of my cock and the perfect heat of her mouth racked my body with sensation.

“Bloody hell,” I groaned, the curse muffled behind a layer of her magic.

10

Nika

I’d only planned to tease him a little and leave him to suffer, but I didn’t expect to feel so powerful. I didn’t realize I’d enjoy having him at my mercy like this. So instead of leaving, I did more and reveled in the unintentional reactions he gave way to.

His sharp eyes chased every move I made. It was obvious by the way his chest hitched and lost rhythm I wasn’t the only one enjoying this.

Silas was living for everything I did to him.

He could easily break this sort of magic. He could escape and take over. I didn’t think for a second I’d overpowered someone like him, but no matter how much I teased and refused to give him the pleasure he craved, he didn’t break the hold my magic had on him.

He stayed my prisoner.

I wanted to see how far I could take it before he couldn’t take anymore and broke out. Before the torture was too much and he had to get his hands on me. Soon, it was the little wager I made with myself to see how much the brute could stand.

The salty taste of his excitement spread across my tongue as I dipped down and took more of his length into my mouth. I swirled my tongue around the crown and bobbed a little. His hips punched upwards, but my hands restrained the movement, magic glowing around them. Another feral sound he made dissolved into the magic wrapped

around his mouth. Frustration burned in the stare locked with mine.

Lips tilted, I swallowed more of his shaft until I felt it at the back of my throat. His muscles clenched against the onslaught of pleasure. The torture struck every muscle in his body as he fought to stay still. He was barely keeping it together. It wouldn't take much on my part to make this huge brute break.

I took my time, deep-throating his dick the way I knew he liked. Silas groaned again, his pecs and biceps flexing. I was going too slow for him. The stimulation was probably just on the edge of what he needed. The strain of his body was visible everywhere I looked. He was losing the battle. He pulled on the restraints, but he didn't break them.

Just a little more, and I bet he would.

Taking it excruciatingly slow, I withdrew to the tip and slickened the crown with my tongue again, tasting more precum than before. His chest swelled with the effort it took to fight himself. He was stronger than me. He could push my hands off if he wanted to. Sink his cock deeper. Fuck my mouth the way he was desperate to.

But he didn't.

Rising to the challenge, I straddled him again. His eyes followed me, his chest rising and falling with effort. He couldn't hide how erratic his breathing had become. Silas might be a trained killer, but under me, he was just another man.

The way he'd throbbed in my mouth, it wouldn't take much to make him come, and I'd break him. The power had gone to my head. I couldn't go back. Plans be damned. I wanted to see Silas give in and lose control. Nothing else mattered.

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Rubbing myself over his cock, I made sure he knew just how wet I was for him. How much being in control had turned me on. His little groan and twisted expression suggested he got the message loud and clear. And for a second, I lost myself to the incredible sensation of riding on top of him. I forgot the ominous future waiting for us outside this room. I escaped it all with this dangerous man and his pleasurable torment.

A sizzling crackle of magic snapped me out of my head. I was still sliding back and forth on top of him, my head dropped back, but after a second crackle and loud snap, Silas's hands were on my waist, holding tight.

"Fucking sod it," he cursed angrily as his cock slammed into me. I didn't have time to gasp. His pace was brutal from the start. He drove into me hard enough to send my body into a violent bounce, angling so his hips did all the work, not mine.

"Oh, fuck!" I cried out, his dick burying deep inside and hitting all the right places.

His breathing was rough as he drove into me without waiting and without mercy. My mercenary had lost it. I'd won. His thrusts were frantic and forceful. I might be moving, but it was his powerful upward lunges that made it so. I came down on him several times, on the edge of something violent and world-shattering.

My fingernails cut into his flesh as I tried to anchor myself to something solid. "Wait, Silas—"

But it was too late.

My orgasm crashed into me, nearly sending me flying back, but Silas had already wrapped his arms around me. I was crushed against his chest as his cock pushed in so deep I worried it'd destroy my insides. My arms clung to his head as I rode out the intense flood. A little growl was smothered into my shoulder, and then his cock pulsed several times as he came.

I tried to crawl off, but Silas's hold tightened, a wild gleam in his eye. "And where do you think you're going, love?"

"Lev will be back soon," I argued, trying to disentangle myself.

Silas had me off the bed in his arms, cock still buried inside. "Oh, the lad can wait. My insatiable rebel couldn't possibly be satisfied with just that, yeah? What kind of bloke would I be if I left my bird unsatisfied?"

A sharp breath caught in my throat as he dropped me down on his already hard length several times. Sadly, the pleasure was enough of a distraction that he got what he wanted before I managed to get my thoughts together. And when I finally did, I was already too deep into it to let go.

"You better be quick, asshole," I threatened, my arms wrapped around his neck.

He kissed me roughly before winking. "You can't rush perfection, love, but I'll do my best."

After dropping a claiming kiss on my mouth, Silas fitted the usual mask over his face and pulled his hood to hide his silver hair. "No funny business, lad. Anything happens to her, and it's me you'll have to answer to, yeah?"

Lev scoffed and crossed his arms, several weapons visible along his belt. "As if I'd ever let anything happen to her. You must be joking." The muscles in his arms flexed

as green magic danced around his body in growing agitation. “I’ve been by her side for decades, you forget.”

Silas revealed the list he kept tucked inside his pocket—the one he’d written after dragging names out of my best friend. “This list wouldn’t exist if you’d been doing your bleeding job, lad. These numpties would’ve already been dead and buried.”

Lev’s jaw ticked.

I pressed a hand on my friend’s shoulder and leveled a glare on Silas. “That’s not fair, and you know it.” Silas deflated a little at the scolding. It didn’t take a genius to know he’d crossed a line. “Lev was the reason I stayed alive a lot of those times. You can’t possibly know what he risked by staying by my side all these years. What he gave up by choosing me over her that night. Lev has sacrificed more for me than anyone else.” I paused, the next words punctuated. “And that includes you.”

Silence fell over the three of us. The evening wind swept the grass around our feet, and the moon beamed down from a cloudless sky speckled with stars. We were only a short walk from Dark Fae Society territory, and once we crossed over, we’d need to be swift and silent. Our squabbles had to be left here on this grassy hill, or we’d risk everything that brought us here.

“My mistake, lad,” the mercenary finally mumbled.

Lev brushed back his hair and nodded, the moonlight hitting his eyes in a way that made them beam several ethereal shades of green. “It’s fine.”

“No.” Silas blew out a sigh from behind his mask. “She’s right. You’ve more than proven to be my bird’s greatest ally and friend. We’re lucky to have you on our side.”

Lev seemed impressed by the big oaf’s apology, but I’d seen this side enough to

know it was coming.

Silas walked around like he was the biggest and meanest mercenary that ever lived. Like nothing and no one could ever touch him. And yes, he might be an arrogant asshole who was all jokes and perversion, but he knew how to admit when he was wrong.

It might take me reminding him every now and again, but at his core, Silas was a good man who'd spent his life living in the dark while pining for the light. He wanted to be better than he was. Most of all, he respected Lev. He knew better than anyone Lev would protect me, or he would've dragged me along with him to carry out his revenge.

I put on the mask Lev had commissioned a few days ago. It was modeled after the ones the Dark Fae wore for missions. Lifting my hood, I covered my purple hair like the mercenary in front of me. "Besides...she is plenty capable of taking care of herself, thank you both very much." Blue met silver, and without seeing it, I knew the mercenary was smirking in that obnoxious way of his. "You get as long as it takes us to get the book, or we'll leave you behind."

Turning, I watched Lev put on his own mask and cover his blue hair with the hood of his cloak. "Fine by me. I doubt he'd have any trouble escaping without us, and if he gets captured, it'd be his own damn fault."

"A compliment from the lad? Is it my birthday?" Silas taunted, but the inflection in his voice suggested he was, in fact, flattered.

"Only you would hear that as a compliment," Lev complained. After a little shake of his head, he gestured the direction we had to go. "Let's stop wasting time. Our window is short, and the longer we linger, the more we risk arousing suspicion."

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We didn't have a traveling stone to get in this time. We were infiltrating old school, with the tunnels he'd used to get me out last time. We'd have a long trek from where the tunnels spat us out and the area we'd find the book in. Since Lev took part in their security detail, he was fairly confident he could figure out the placement pattern after identifying a few guards. It'd lay out our path once we did.

The Dark Fae didn't know Lev was involved, but they also conveniently thought he was dead. That he'd been taken when his mother was killed. So the three of us took extra measures to keep our identities hidden. We couldn't risk them knowing it was us. It wasn't clear what Rilas did or didn't know, or who he'd employed to feed him intel. The more precautions we took, the better our chances to catch Rilas by surprise.

Lucky for us, most high-ranking Dark Fae wore some sort of cloak and mask that covered the upper half of their face on missions. Nothing like Silas's, but the outfits were aimed to conceal their identity, at least in part. It wouldn't seem odd for us to be wearing one. They couldn't halt their ongoing initiatives. Assignments were vital to their survival. As long as they didn't stop us and ask questions, we'd go through the halls undetected. Just two Dark Fae on their way to execute orders.

Silas took a knee in front of me and snatched my hand, his mask concealing everything but his silver eyes. "Be careful, love, or I'll be forced to kill them all." He lifted the mask just enough to drop a kiss on my hand, then he was gone in a sparkle of blue.

"Show off," Lev mumbled cutely before making his way toward the place we'd once called home.

Nika

Lev popped his head out of the secret door in the eastern corner of the main compound. After a moment, he motioned for me to follow. We both entered the hallway and secured our cloaks. A few corridors, and we'd mix with the general population.

He led the way, his shoulders back and posture that of any high-level Dark Fae roaming these halls. It was the Lev I'd grown up with, his mother's son. It never failed to impress me how quickly Lev fell into the role he was born into. How easily he gave off aristocratic airs and dominance—the mask he'd worn all his life. It was the farthest thing from who he really was, but the pivot from one Lev to the other was as seamless and as remarkable as it had always been.

If not for me, he would've been chosen as the next Council leader. It was the position he was always meant to take, and it was the one Yuma trained him for. And with him, maybe the change my father sought by staying all these years would've happened one day with Lev's leadership. But the greedy part of my heart was glad he'd left that life and chosen this one. Leaving him behind was one of the hardest things I'd ever done.

Following his lead, I lifted my chin, and we exited the hidden hallway into the main corridor. We slowed to a leisurely stroll as if we had all the time in the world. We didn't, but people in the Dark Fae Society didn't rush. They didn't run. They didn't hurry at all, honestly.

I didn't expect the crowd we were met with when the hallway curved into the center of the building. It was where most of our gatherings took place, the Entertainment Hall. I didn't expect anything to be taking place tonight. Most events were held on certain days of the week. Today wasn't one of them. So Lev and I made every effort

to blend in with the people we'd escaped over half a year ago.

Dark Fae were everywhere. Many I knew by their hands, their eyes, their mouths, the rings that they wore. Many who'd used those very things to torment me over the years. At first, I didn't understand what was happening. They never congregated like this on a random day of the week, but then I realized the grave mistake we'd made by coming tonight of all nights.

They were holding a ceremony for the new Council they'd selected.

One look at Lev confirmed I hadn't read the room wrong. Because standing on a platform was Lev's cousin. The guy who'd made my life hell for decades. The man who was the first to scar my back so it didn't heal.

The arrogant Dark Fae had donned the official Council uniform, his shoulders decorated with gems and precious metals. Some dark hair was braided around his head, but the rest hung loose around his shoulders. In this light, he was the palest Fae in here. And while his skin might be white, his heart was one of the blackest with Yuma and the rest of the Council gone and buried in the ground.

Zephyr's yellow eyes scanned the crowd, lips lifted in a condescending smile he'd worn plenty of times while staring down at me. He'd given me the same look before tearing all of my nails from the root. After battering my hand and breaking every finger when I refused to answer his questions. After tying me to a table and stripping me down to nothing, then using a jagged knife to cut my flesh to pieces.

I'd made myself his target from the moment I smirked and flattened him out in front of all his buddies. He'd tried so hard to break me, and it was his greatest regret that he never could.

He'd never gotten a word from me in all the years he tried despite claiming to be the

best interrogator the Dark Fae Society had ever seen. While my pain softened the sting to his pride every time I refused to give him the thing he craved most—my secrets—it hadn't made the annoyance go away.

If it was one thing Zephyr hated, it was someone who didn't bend to his will.

Seeing him again, the pain of every injury he'd inflicted over the decades came creeping back in. My jaw clamped shut, and I refused to give into the memories of everything he'd done to torture me.

The asshole standing at the head of the platform, whose name was at the top of Silas's list and circled several times, as if Lev made it a point he was the one Silas wanted most, had clearly claimed the coveted position Lev was always meant to take.

"Shit," Lev murmured as the crowd cheered. "You don't think Silas would be ballsy enough to—"

But he wasn't given time to finish because Zephyr raised his hands and silenced the congregation. "Brothers and sisters of the darkest plight, tonight we celebrate a society renewed and reenergized. Rebirthed from the ashes of our fallen brothers and sisters. Tonight we take a step into a grand future where our society reigns. A society rising to its truest and greatest potential."

Lev smirked and tossed me a little look. "Bet he spent hours rehearsing that in a mirror."

"Count on it," I whispered, pursing my lips. "Pretty sure he had someone else write it for him, too."

Lev harrumphed, nose crinkling. "I didn't know he could pronounce all those words. I'm not even confident it's really him standing up there after all that."

I hid a laugh behind my hand, taking care of our surroundings so we didn't unintentionally reveal ourselves.

Zephyr's condescending gaze moved across the Fae gathered, full of pompous shit like always. "We'll find that bitch of a traitor and crucify her on this very platform. Her blood will be the fresh coat of paint this sacred place deserves. You have my word."

"That's more like it," I whispered with a snicker.

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Lev rolled his eyes and folded his arms against his chest, not at all impressed. “Can’t help himself, the bastard.”

He hated his cousin more than most because of everything Zephyr had done to me over the years. Of course, he’d made his cousin’s life hell in the cleverest of ways, but in moments of candid hatred, Lev revealed how it was never enough. And maybe it was why he put Zephyr’s name on the top of the list. Maybe that was why that name was the one circled several times.

The Dark Fae around us cheered Zephyr’s words. I eyed the corridor to our right. It’d be risky to leave with so many peoplewatching, but if we didn’t, we’d risk not getting the book at all. Lev and I shared a look, thinking quick on our feet.

A distraction might be enough, but what? We didn’t have anything that would cause a big enough stir to slip away from this many Fae. I could move quickly, but Lev wasn’t as fast as I was. He couldn’t match my speed. Without him, I wouldn’t find the book. As I stood in a crowd of the people who’d spent their days making me their enemy, Zephyr went on.

“Meet the Council you’ve selected as your new leaders to march the Dark Fae Society into its new age,” he announced, several Dark Fae joining him on the platform. Orion, Agnus, Willow, Dela, and Locke. Of course. Every single name on Silas’s list was now neatly lined up at the front of every Dark Fae in this society.

“Guess I should’ve called that one,” Lev murmured in frustration. “But no one’s stupid enough to go after a whole new Council in front of every Fae in this place.”

My lips twitched. “Have you met Silas?”

“You’re right. He’s absolutely that stupid.” Lev tossed me a saucy wink and then sighed. “What now? We can’t get away with this many watching. What’s the play here, Niks?”

Sensation washed over me, and a glimmer of blue caught my eye. Behind Zephyr and the other five loomed a familiar figure. Silver eyes beamed from the shadows. His mask caught the light raining down on the platform before a murmur rose from the crowd. I heard several whisper to each other in confusion.

“Who’s that?”

“An additional leader?”

“Why’s he just standing there?”

“He doesn’t look like anyone I know.”

Lev finally caught sight of the same thing I had. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me...”

I grabbed his hand and took several steps back, trying to get us out of the crowd. I’d just barely made it to the edge when blue spikes of magic entered the confused congregation, striking several recognizable Fae. Every one of them was a name on the list written in silver. They collapsed into the others standing around them.

Zephyr barely pivoted before he was grabbed around the throat and lifted into the air. Silas withdrew his sword so fast my eyes barely saw the movement. Cerulean magic whipped out and bound Zephyr, keeping him Silas’s prisoner.

Twisting, Silas moved like the wind, the metal sword he held a flash of light in the night. Only a second later, the line of newly appointed leaders lost their heads, blood splattering the Fae nearest the front.

No one had time to react. No one had the opportunity to conjure their magic. No one was fast enough for the beast assassinating their newly elected leaders.

The demon was back in front of Zephyr, his sword already impaling the Dark Fae. “You and I have business, yeah?”

Zephyr struggled, but every movement sent the blade deeper. He cried out and stopped moving. “Who the fuck are you?! What do you want, assassin?”

Silas clicked his tongue. His striking gaze found mine across the terrified crowd.

No one dared to move with their leader hostage to an enemy they didn’t know. Even the guards were too afraid to do anything. The Dark Fae never expected someone like him to show up, and their inexperience showed in all the inaction. It was no wonder Yuma hired the Brotherhood to come after me. The Dark Fae Society was nothing but a name.

“Let’s just say I’m the assassin revenge hires,” Silas mused behind his mask. “Think I quite like that. Poetic, it is.”

I used the distraction to push Lev toward the hallway we needed to take, all while keeping my eyes on Silas at the front. He had me in his periphery as he twisted the blade and made Zephyr cry out again.

“Revenge for whom?! I’ll give you whatever you want, just leave now and I’ll forget this ever happened,” Lev’s cousin bargained helplessly. His magic had been disabled by whatever Silas had done, and all he had left was to beseech his executioner.

I didn't think I'd ever see him be more pathetic than the day I flattened him out, but here we were.

Chuckling, Silas moved the sword again, taking great pleasure in the agony that left Zephyr's mouth. "For whom? My goddess, of course. If it were up to me, I'd torture you until you begged for death. But tragically, I have places to be, people to kill, so disemboweling you in front of your doting subjects will just have to do, yeah?"

A guard near me tried to summon his magic for an attack, but Silas, without so much as looking the guard's direction, sent out several daggers. One sunk between his eyes, one in his neck, and the other into his heart. Any one of them could've been the dagger that killed him, but it was a message sent out to the rest—Silas would make sure they didn't escape death.

The guard collapsed dead on the floor, and the room froze with fear. No one else moved as Zephyr tried to plead with the frightened mass to come to his defense. But if it was one thing these Fae excelled in, it was cowardice.

"We need to go," I whispered to Lev, trying to get my friend to move, but he just stood there, watching his cousin bleed out on the stage he promised to coat in my blood.

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Without another word, Silas dragged his sword from Zephyr's stomach to his throat. His insides became his outsides. Blood and guts poured onto the ground and anyone near the stage. Then with a whirl, the mercenary cut Zephyr's head clean from his neck.

Chaos erupted. Dark Fae around us scrambled to flee. Only a few were attempting to fight back, mostly the guards stationed outside the mass. Silas moved like a demon, beheading every single Fae who tried to attack him. Lev was paralyzed by shock, watching the scene play out. It was the first time he'd seen Silas truly become the Shimmering Assassin.

Grabbing his arm, I dragged him away, and after a few blinks, my friend finally came to his senses.

"Wow," he whispered, moving in sync with me. "I—well, now I can't really blame him for bragging. It's annoying how impressive that was. And gory."

I dashed between doors, heading for the room where the book was kept. "I get it. I didn't really expect him to be such a monster when we first met either, but right now, we need to get what we came for and then get the hell out. You need to focus."

Lev shook his head as if to dispel his disbelief and led me into another corridor. "It's faster through here. The upside to all of this chaos is that it's unlikely they'd have many people guarding this area. And if they did, they'll be rushing off to deal with...well, another blow to their plans."

"Can't say I was sad to see your cousin's head and body part ways," I joked.

Laughing, Lev activated a hidden door and motioned for me to go ahead. “You and me both, Niks. Just a little sad it wasn’t me who did it. That asshole deserved worse than he got, but I’m glad Silas didn’t hold back.”

Slipping into the room, I nodded. “If it’s one thing we can count on, it’s that Silas doesn’t hold back.”

12

Nika

Once we cleared the outside border, I finally breathed a sigh of relief. Grabbing the book after Silas’s little revenge show was easier than it should’ve been. I hadn’t risked looking at it. We left quickly after and decided to wait for the renegade mercenary within a safe distance of the Dark Fae Society lands.

It’d been nearly an hour, but Silas hadn’t returned. The night had grown impossibly cold over the last hour, and my gut was twisted up in knots. The longer I waited, the less I was confident he was coming.

I’d seen what he could do. I didn’t doubt his skills. But what if he was injured? What if they locked him up and he was in the middle of planning his escape? What if he needed me and I didn’t come?

I panned our surroundings, hoping to catch a sensation I knew to be my mercenary, but it was only us out here. My chest was unbearably tight with the thought that he might be somewhere hurt.

He might be an infamous assassin, but even he couldn’t take on an entire society of Dark Fae. He wasn’t invincible. If anything, his unwavering confidence could be his inevitable downfall.

Would I feel it in my heart if something happened? Would our connection break to pieces and my heart with it? It had to, and that was what I held onto as I searched the trees for any sign of the man I loved, convinced I'd know if anything happened to him.

"We should go," Lev finally murmured. "He knows where to return. We're sitting ducks out here, Niks. I don't want to risk losing that book, so we'll head back and wait for him there."

Sensation slithered down my spine. Voices broke out of the quiet, their inaudible whispers carrying on the wind and growing louder. I tried to listen, but I couldn't understand what they were saying. Something was calling to me.

Silas?

"We're going back," I announced, securing my cloak and starting back on the path toward the Dark Fae Society.

Lev snatched my arm before I got far. "You can't, Niks. You know you can't."

His cloak caught a stray breeze, and the icy wind hit my face hard enough that I was forced to blink several times. The whispers continued, but they weren't calling me over to the Dark Fae Society. They were calling me somewhere else. I turned my head, and when their voices grew louder, I knew I needed to go that direction. I started to walk again, but Lev didn't let go.

"Nika, what are you doing?"

"The voices," I said slowly, staring at the direction they coaxed. "They want me to follow."

“The voices want you to follow?” he asked slowly, his hold loosening. We both stared where I heard them calling, the soft chatter almost songlike in the wind. “But why?”

The strong pull was the same one I’d felt the night my father called me back to that decrepit house. Strong enough to leave me with only one option.

To walk wherever the voices led.

Moving again, I beckoned him. The hood of my cloak was blown off, and more of my purple hair was set loose. Our cloaks fluttered out behind us, and each step was an effort to take with the force of an oncoming storm hitting us. The wind howled loudly in my ears, but the whispers were louder now that I was going the right direction.

“I’m not sure, but I need to go wherever they lead. It’s important, I know it. I can’t explain it, so you’ll just have to trust me.”

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Lev offered me a dashing smile, his blue hair whipping around his gentle face. “You’re the person I trust most in this world, Niks. Of course I’ll go with you anywhere.”

“Such a smooth talker.”

“Learned from the best,” he clapped back.

“Silas?” I taunted.

He cackled loudly with a shake of his head. “You think that oversized kid is smooth? I’m so disappointed in you, Niks.”

Scoffing unattractively, I acted like he hadn’t made a very good point. “You’re extra sassy tonight.”

“Yeah, well, we’re friends for a reason, right? But our questionable decisions aside, if you say we have to go, then we have to go. And that’s that. Who else is going to keep you out of trouble?”

I might be worried about Silas and whatever waited for us at the other side of these voices, but Lev’s smile had a way of calming my anxiety. Maybe because I’d spent years coming back from torture to that smile. Maybe because I knew he’d always be there even when shit got hard.

Lev was my oasis, and I was grateful I had him to lean on.

My handsome friend reached a hand out to me, and I took it with a smile of my own. “But what if I walk us right into a trap? Hard to keep me out of trouble when you’re in it with me.”

Shrugging, he matched my pace as the wind tried to blow us back. “Then bring on the trouble. There’s no one else I’d want to be walking in a trap with,” he teased, showing a little of his sharp incisors in his amusement.

We trekked through mulch and grass for nearly a mile before the whispers were so loud I couldn’t smother them anymore. My arms prickled with the sensation of someone nearby. At first, I was worried it was Rilas and prepared myself for a fight, but the figure that loomed in a wall of fog was the farthest thing from my enemy.

It was the same man from my dream.

This time, though, the person didn’t freeze or stay hidden. He walked straight out of the blanket of misty haze and into a bright patch of moonlight. His striking eyes met mine before he stalked forward, never hesitating.

“How?”

Standing in front of me was the same man I’d killed. The man whose voice I’d heard inside my head for months. Salvator was in a pair of pants but nothing else. He stood barefoot on wet grass and earth like it was his natural state of being. His brown skin caught stray beams of light, illuminating parts of him and leaving others masked in shadow. His once-red irises were now a fathomless abyss of darkness.

Lev’s magic danced around him in alarm, but I put a hand on his arm to stop him. “Who is that?” he demanded, ready for anything with a dagger grasped in one hand.

A ghost of a smile lifted Salvator’s mouth briefly before it was gone. “Why am I not

surprised you'd be the one to find me, woman?"

"How are you here?"

Salvator brushed a hand through his long dark hair, no longer a mess of curls like I'd seen him the first time. It was only the slightest bit wavy, and longer than I thought. White and red tribal paint decorated a large part of his brown chest and face, tattoos other parts. The scars were still there, but the brand of the Brotherhood the two men shared was gone.

His physique was just as impressive as I remembered, all strength and violence in one glance. After knowing he could change into large beasts that could tear a person apart, it didn't seem so odd he was so fit.

"Your guess is as good as mine. I woke up like this."

"Ryker and Tometi?" I asked, a bit breathless.

I never thought I'd see the man who'd growled at me in my head for months alive, let alone smile, but the naughty grin that spread across his face was one that would haunt my dreams for a long time.

"Still here." He pointed to his head. "Unfortunately. Even my second chance at life couldn't get rid of these bastards."

Lev shifted uncomfortably from side to side, agitated by the seemingly calm conversation we were having. He was worried I'd lost it. I could tell by the way he kept peeking at me, sure I'd come to my senses eventually.

I was anything but calm. I was all twisted up at the thought that Salvator might be the person from the dream I had a few nights ago. That the dream wasn't a dream at all; it

was another vision. Worse, I still wasn't sure what any of it meant. I had theories, but nothing in the journal talked about the Souls of Life and Death.

"Who's this guy, and what does he have to do with those animal souls?" Lev asked, casting doubtful eyes on the man in front of us. He was wary and had every right to be.

"This is Sal—Bear Claw," I murmured, still too shocked to say much else. "You woke up like this?" I asked the tall animal shifter in front of me. He looked exactly like he had in frozen time out of his wolf form. You know, aside from not being naked.

Crossing his arms, Salvator tilted his head and studied me for several silent seconds. His dark eyes swept down my body in open interest, as if this was his first time really seeing me. And maybe it was. I'd only been his target before I took his soul. After, he saw the world through my eyes. It had to be disorienting to see me in front of him after being in my head all these months.

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Our eyes met, and Salvator took another step closer. Lev stiffened, but I wasn't worried. Because I'd felt what this man in front of me felt for so long that I knew he'd never hurt me.

Reaching out, Salvator touched some of my stray hair that had gotten swept up in the wind. "I don't remember it being this purple..." he murmured to himself. Then his knuckles brushed my cheek, and Lev snapped.

"Don't touch her," he warned. It'd been a long time since I'd heard Lev so hostile. He didn't sound like himself.

A smug smirk graced Salvator's mouth before he withdrew his hand and answered my question. "It wasn't long after he took our souls that I found myself here. But I couldn't say how many days." His jaw clenched. "Something told me to wait, so I stayed here, and now I know why." His dark eyes glinted as they roamed my body again. "What's with the cape?"

"It's a cloak."

"Looks like a cape," he grumbled. "You Dark Fae are weird."

Yeah, this was definitely Salvator.

"So you woke up like this? Alive? Back in your body? But how does that make any sense? Were you resurrected? But who would've done it?"

He cradled his jaw, his fluid movements oddly animal. "It doesn't make sense to me

either, but I do remember that old fox saying something right after Rilas took us. Right before she took over his body and anchored his magic.” The sudden mention of my grandmother had my full attention. “She said balance had to be struck. That life and death always found a way to correct the imbalance. She was sure you’d know what she meant, the babbling hag.”

Correct the imbalance...

I stared at Lev, and he returned the look, eyes dropping to where I kept the book. A flash of blue surged out in front of me, and Salvator was suddenly in wolf form with Silas attacking him. A huge explosion of blue nearly sent the two of us several feet back.

Terrifying growls quickly morphed to soft whines. When the blue cleared, Salvator took another hit after Silas spirited to a place behind him. The bear-sized wolf hit the ground hard enough for the earth to quake underfoot, and it whined again.

My heart lurched inside my chest. It wasn’t just Salvator who felt the pain of those injuries. It was Ryker, too. My sassy little wolf was hurting, and I needed to stop it. His belly was left exposed as he struggled on his back. I rushed forward, moving like my life depended on it, and intervened before the mercenary could land a deadly blow with his sword.

Getting to his feet and crouched, ready to lunge, Salvator snarled behind me. He was slumping to one side, suffering an agony that I felt in my own body. I couldn’t explain it, but the pain radiated inside me. His pain was my pain.

I stretched my arms out in defense of the man I’d once considered my enemy. “It’s really him!”

Silas removed his mask, glaring at the wolf behind me. “It’s a demon, love. He

couldn't be anything else if he's back. I don't know how Rilas did it, but taking care of him now—"

"Balance!" I yelled, baffling everyone around me. I clicked my tongue and explained what I meant. "Balance goes both ways, right? This has to be...it's exactly like my dream. I know it is."

Suddenly, Silas growled. "If he's been brought back—"

"Then him being who we think he is makes sense, doesn't it?" I cut in, arms still out like they'd really stop a monster like the Shimmering Assassin.

The mercenary's face was warped with fury. He couldn't argue because he knew I was right, and after a long, silent stand-off, he finally sheathed his sword. In a blink, I was in his arms and several feet from where Salvator was crouched, still ready to fight.

Silas's voice was next to my ear the way it had been in my dream. "You can't trust him, love. I know what you saw in that little vision of yours, but now I'm convinced I was right to stop you."

When it was evident that Silas didn't intend to attack him again, Salvator shifted back to his human form. His pants were shredded to pieces around him. With a little growl, Silas ripped off his cloak and tossed it at the naked shifter who didn't seem at all bothered to have all his bits out for the rest of the world to see.

"I don't trust a sly bastard like you. A toe out of line, and I'll personally see to it that you're second life is ended as quick as it begun." The silver-haired mercenary issued his warning before dropping a possessive kiss on my mouth. "Touch my bird, and I'll take limbs."

Silas

Ididn't take my eyes off the demon sipping from a cup Nika insisted on preparing for him. The wanker was smug, and why wouldn't he be? My bird had vouched for him after throwing herself between us. To add insult to injury, she'd refused to hear one word from me about how unsafe it was to bring him back. How it was a disaster waiting to happen. How this wolf bastard was the worst of the worst.

He'd changed? What a load of fucking bollocks that was. The fact that his eyes were no longer red and he didn't bear the mark of the Brotherhood didn't mean anything.

Say for a minute we ignored the fact that he was dead and in her head less than a few weeks ago, and that this tosser hadn't come back as a demon smelling like the After and bent on destruction, it didn't change the fact that he was still the same old Bear Claw, and that bastard was as sly and as conniving as they came. As long as he was near my goddess, he was a bloody problem.

If he was really the one she called the Soul of Death, then I agreed with the version of me she saw in her dream. He couldn't be trusted. She wasn't safe. It didn't matter what she thought about him, what she was sure she knew. Bear Claw had been, and would always be, a vicious killer.

Nika tried to take a seat on the other side of the sofa after putting a plate of food in front of the wolf bastard, but I slipped closer and pinned the feisty darling to my side before she could fully perch. Her annoyed glare was lost on me. My eyes were firmly set on the bastard eating food my bird had made for him.

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Bear Claw shoveled meat into his mouth like a goddamn savage, licking his fingers and smacking his lips. My upper lip curled in barely contained disgust.

It was insult enough the bastard had already made himself at home, but chomping down on his meal like an animal was worth every bit of poison Nika spat my way when I threw his ungrateful hide out to eat with the rest of the beasts.

It'd been decades since I'd spent any amount of time with Bear Claw, and it wasn't long enough. The arrogant wolf always grated on my nerves. He did what he wanted when he wanted. Didn't matter who he threw in danger's way to do it, either. He was a selfish twat, and he was sure to get my goddess in trouble before the week's end.

“What happened after that feral ingrate took our souls?” the wolf bastard asked between mouthfuls, his tongue darting out to catch stray juice.

Ghastly.

At least the lad was on my side. His eyes flicked from Bear Claw to Nika, just as suspicious as I was, and just as disgusted by the feral display of his abysmal manners. I respected the hell out of the lad. He knew a villain when he met one. His eyes slid over to mine, mouth thinned and jaw clenched in open distrust.

Oh aye, he was a smart lad, he was.

For as perceptive as my goddess normally was on any given day, she really didn't seem to pick up on the tension building in this room. Not even when I clicked my tongue and cut a look so scathing it'd set the bastard on fire if I had the flames to do

it. Not when her friend scowled at the demon nibbling away at bits meant for the dogs.

My oblivious rebel went about her business as if it were any other day. She smiled and shifted, attempting another escape. I didn't let her. My arm squeezed around her waist and kept the fluttering bird from leaving my side. I'd take whatever brutality it earned me to be the troll lording over what was his if it kept her safe. I wasn't ashamed to say any punishment was worth her staying as far from Bear Claw as possible.

He might've crossed the barrier, suggesting he didn't mean any ill will...yet, but I didn't trust this wolf bastard. He'd been tricky back when we were on the same side. He wasn't an enemy I'd underestimate. I knew him well enough to know not to. These years spent out of his path only cemented that fact, and now he'd come back a demon. Who knew what powers he kept close to his chest now that he'd gotten a second chance at life.

"We might have a way—" she started as if it were a friend she talked to and not a brand-new enemy who could very well rip our throats out in our sleep.

"I hardly think that's wise, love," I interjected, projecting cool calm despite the deadly edge to my voice. "Who's to say he wasn't sent here by that bastard brother of mine on the promise he could keep his life after he delivered you like the pretty little gift you are."

Bear Claw leaned back, his muscles rippling the way they always did when he was angry. He didn't cast his eyes my way; they stayed on Nika. For some reason, he wouldn't look away from her, and it only convinced me he was in the midst of masterminding a kidnapping.

"If he'd asked for you, maybe." The wolf bastard said to me without bothering to look

my way. “But her? Not a fucking chance.” Bear Claw leaned as far forward as he could, catching Nika’s gaze with his, head bent low and tilted like the wolf he so often was. “I think you know that, Nika. You’ve had me inside your head all this time. Do you think I’d ever let him get to you?”

I didn’t like the way he said her name. I didn’t like anything he did, but especially when it came to the way he moved in close, talked in a husky whisper, and stared at her like he never planned to look away. Like she was the salvation he’d sought after losing his soul to the Brotherhood.

My lips twitched.

For the first time since meeting the selfish wanker, I believed him when he said he wouldn’t let Rilas have her. And while it might be a comfort to most to know he didn’t intend to hurt her, I picked up on something far worse than the intent to kill in everything he did around my rebel.

Affection.

Bloody fucking hell.

Nika smiled and nodded, while staying completely oblivious to the motive behind his vow. “You’re a grumpy asshole, but I know you wouldn’t.”

Her cheeky grin speared a hole straight through my chest. How dare he get that from her. The wolf bastard didn’t deserve an ounce of her compassion or thoughtful reassurance.

My rebel was too kind for her own good. She’d forgive him for every dark deed, every evil transgression, all because he promised he’d changed. Because he’d convinced her that she’d shown him the light, and it’d be on me to keep the bastard in

line when he thought it made him special.

“Bet Ryker and Tometi would take over before you could do anything, anyway,” she added, amused by the thought.

Bloody bastard was getting on my last nerve.

The shady tribesman did something I’d never seen him do. He laughed. His face lit up and the tension eased in his body as he leaned back again, satisfied with himself. Even Lev seemed to relax after the exchange. But I was tense for an entirely new reason.

Was this bastardin lovewith mygoddess? Had he fallen for her in all that time he’d played her head-squatting numpty?

I didn’t think anything could be worse than a demonic wanker sent to destroy the world, bent on claiming my bird as his celebratory prize. My own brother who I’d been forced to kill. The devil among us. That was easy enough because Nika never held any affection for Rilas. But this gorgeous twatwaffle? Who knew what connection she shared with him in her head all those months. Her taste in men was questionable at best.

I mean, she’d chosen me, hadn’t she?

Jealousy poisoned my thoughts in a way it never had with anyone else. The lad was a friend, but this wolf bastard...

He was a complication I couldn’t afford to have.

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Nika beamed like the two shared secrets I'd never understand, and my hold on her tightened. My thoughts ran rampant as I watched them share smile after smile, sure to destroy me. Her gentle touch roused me from the spiraling nonsense in my head with a jerk.

"You doing okay? Were you injured tonight?" she asked, concern lacing every word.

And suddenly, I felt like the worst bastard in the room.

"No, love. It's kind of you to worry, but tonight was hardly a challenge worth it." I brushed my knuckles along her cheek. Her pale skin was quickly colored by a faint red. For all her venom, Nika still fell under the spell of my attention and touch.

"If you're sure..." she breathed, her soft smile calming the rage weaving its way through my body. "I still think you need to rest." Her nose scrunched in that adorable way that made me desperate to snog her face off. "And shower," she added, eyeing the sullied clothes I wore still drenched in the blood of her tormentors.

"Only if you join me," I goaded, earning myself an elbow to the stomach.

Worth it.

Finally, her focus was solely on me. It felt as if I'd won.

I tossed the wolf bastard a wink, and the scowl he sent my way only served to amuse me. If he was head over heels for my little rebel, he'd find out soon enough how little chance he stood to sway her. I'd make bloody sure of it, even if it meant him hearing

how good I gave it to her.

Nika stood from her seat, glaring when I tried to keep her. “We can talk more in the morning. There’s only two rooms here, so I’m afraid you’ll have to take the couch, but I’ll grab you a few things to keep comfortable and warm.”

The bastard was a damn animal. He could sleep outside, but the look she sent demanded I didn’t voice my obvious complaints. For once, I listened. I didn’t plan to sleep while he was here, anyway. I’d talk to the lad about taking shifts, he the day and I the night.

Bear Claw was on his feet, so I was instantly on mine.

The man and I weren’t far off in height. He was a tall bastard, I’d give him that. Powerful, too. Covered in tribal paint the way he was, he’d make anyone second-guess their ability next to his.

I squared him up with a look, but his eyes never left Nika. Crossing my arms, I nodded an agreement she didn’t need. Nika was already moving about the room to grab a pillow and blankets for the wolf bastard who not only didn’t need them, but didn’t deserve them. I stole what she’d grabbed before she could hand them off, or worse, make the bed for him. Her sigh was full of irritation as I haphazardly tossed the bundle onto the couch.

He could make his own bloody bed.

“Well, good night,” Nika said to Bear Claw before she turned to the lad. “You and I will go through the book in the morning.”

Lev snuck a look at Bear Claw before nodding.

“Tometi might have a way to track down Rilas,” the tribesman said out of nowhere.

I glared at the bastard.

He’d only just said he woke up in that forest and didn’t know what happened, so how would the bear know Rilas’s scent without shifting around him first? What, did this wanker think I’d miss that after all this time? What a load of bollocks.

Nika tossed me a little look, one that said I wasn’t allowed to be stupid and speak my mind. She knew me a little too well, because that was exactly what I planned to do.

“How? I thought he couldn’t catch a scent without shifting, and you woke up in the forest with no memory of how it happened, right?” she asked, speaking my thoughts for me, just in a prettier voice and putting it far nicer than I would’ve.

Bear Claw chose that moment to stare at me, the bear in his eyes, gleaming as if speaking for him. Even his voice dropped into a guttural, growling tone. “He caught his scent somehow and thinks he can find him if we can get close enough.” The bastard crossed his arms, and the confidence he’d do just that radiated off him like a goddamn scent. “I’ve got a few contacts I can use. When you haveaway, I’ll havetheway.”

“You can’t trust—”

Bear Claw cut me off, his eyes set on mine. “I think you’re a two-faced bastard. I’ve never liked you. You’re shameless and always convinced you’re right.” Nika opened her mouth to interject, angry on my behalf, the sweet darling, but he went on as if she hadn’t. Just another reason to despise the overconfident alpha-hole. “I’m not asking you to trust me. I don’t trust you either, but I trust her. I’ll do it for her. I vow it on my ancestors and my tribes’ souls that whatever is within my power to do, I’ll do it to protect her,” his eyes jerked over to Nika, the bear’s soft amber glow inside them.

It was with great displeasure I admitted this was the first time I'd ever heard Bear Claw vow anything on the family he'd lost. In all the years we worked together, he never once talked about the past he'd left behind when he joined the Brotherhood.

Little was known about the man who was more beast than anyone I'd met in my long life. But what I did know was that whatever happened to his tribe, whatever he left behind, it'd blackened his heart. And if anything, that was something I could understand. Not enough to forgive him for trying to kill my goddess, but enough to know how fierce the vow he made was.

Bear Claw stared at Nika, enunciating every word with a growl. "I meant it when I said I wouldn't leave you to deal with him alone. I always keep the vows I make, woman. That's something even this possessive asshole can't argue isn't true."

For fuck's sake...

It'd be easier if he was our enemy. It'd give me a reason to send him back to the After. If I'd thought for a second he might hurt her, I wouldn't apologize for doing what needed to be done. But what I got from him was worse.

He meant every bloody word.

My jaw clenched in frustration. I sunk a hand into my hair and toyed with how to handle the new uncomfortable reality that the wolf bastard was in love with my woman, and he'd do whatever it took to protect her.

Bear Claw was powerful before he died, and now even more so. Turning away someone like that when it could mean the difference between winning and losing, when it could mean she was safe when this all ended, wasn't an option. I had to do something I never thought I'd do.

I let him stay.

"We have a way," I said, voice dripping with distaste. "That's all you need to know right now. Use your contacts and get us to him, and we'll finish what that bastard started."

I didn't wait for him to reply. I wrapped a possessive arm around my bird, making sure it was clear whose she was as I escorted her upstairs to calm the raging monster inside my head.

I'd made a deal with the Devil, but if my goddess survived and Rilas was destroyed, it'd be worth it.

“Sweet girl...” The husky whisper was unmistakable. “Wakey, wakey.”

Ryker.

“Why are you calling to her?” another voice asked, this one just as familiar. “How are we even here?”

Tometi.

Ryker sighed loud enough that I could’ve sworn he was right next to my ear. “I don’t know. If I knew that, do you think I’d be here trying to get her to wake up so she can either confirm or deny our existence, hmm? If you’re not going to do something helpful, just go stand over there and wait like a good bear.”

“You’re not making any sense, wolf,” Tometi complained somewhere nearby. “Why would she know what happened to us? She barely understands her own power.”

“Sheesh, have you always been such a Negative Nancy?”

“I don’t know anyone named Nancy.”

“It’s a turn of phrase, you big idiot.”

“I still don’t know a Nancy. You never make any sense, and unlike in our hosts’ heads, I can’t tune you out anymore.”

Ryker released a long, suffering sigh, and that was when I opened my eyes with a start, sure it was all a dream until two figures next to the bed came into view—and it wasn’t the figures I expected. Two men towered over me, their translucency giving away what they were.

Not of this world.

One had shaggy light hair and a wolfish grin. He was about Lev's height, lithe but muscular. The air he gave off was distinctly predatory. His smile broadened when our eyes met, and I sucked in a sharp breath of surprise.

I wasn't sure how I knew it was Ryker, but everything about him felt that way. Big and fun-loving. Full of life for an animal that'd never truly lived his own. A friend who'd been there for me in the worst moments over the last half year.

The other man was a goddamn mountain. Nothing but muscle and masculinity everywhere I looked. Easily seven or so feet tall with how small the other seemed by comparison. Even Silas couldn't out-height this giant.

His skin was darker, his eyes a striking amber color. Short dark hair framed a lethal stare that would paralyze anyone to their spot, and yet, his eyes were the gentlest I'd ever seen. Simmering with intelligent concentration and affection. Somehow I knew it was the quiet, gentle friend I'd relied on for months.

Tometi.

I'd never imagined him as a man, but now that I was seeing this one, there wasn't a question in my mind it was him. He couldn't be anyone else.

The two looked similar to the way my father had in the dream I'd had before finding his soul—see-through specters who occupied the space between life and death. They weren't solid, but they weren't flickering in and out of existence, either. They felt more permanent than my father had, and I couldn't pinpoint why.

Was this a dream?

“Ryker?” I rasped, voice still rough with sleep. “Tometi?”

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The shaggy-haired man beamed another heart-stopping smile at me. “Told you she’d recognize us.”

The giant haunting the corner of the room nodded. “And see us.”

“Pretty girl,” Ryker practically moaned the term of endearment, “you have no idea how relieved I am that you can see and hear us. I was so sure we’d never get to talk to you again with that jerk playing host and keeping you all to himself.”

Barely breathing, I stared at the two of them and tried to piece together why they were here, and more importantly, in these very human forms. “How did this happen? Why are you...well, not a wolf and bear?”

“Beats me,” Ryker replied, a little too happy for someone who’d woken up a man. Well, a ghost man. One who sported a pair of jeans and a tight-fitting shirt under a biker jacket. And...tattoos? Piercings? Weird didn’t cover the feeling, but it felt like him. “It’s a good thing you can hear and see us, or I’d go batty with this meathead keeping me company forever.”

Tometi huffed and crossed his arms in annoyance. It was the first time I’d seen the bear do anything that felt remotely human. The mountain of muscles he sported flexed but were thankfully hidden under regular clothes. Not sure if I could keep my wits about me if they’d shown up in the nude.

“My head is more bone than meat, wolf,” the giant complained.

Ryker rolled his eyes in the most Ryker way possible. “See what I mean? He’s a troll

who never gets the joke.”

“I’m a bear,” Tometi corrected, confusion twisting his face in the most adorable way possible. It was quite beguiling how quickly a man his size became cute. “Trolls no longer exist. They were eradicated centuries ago, you know this. And they looked nothing like bears. I would know. I fought an army of them.”

“Ah, but you don’t look like a bear anymore, friend,” Ryker sassed. “You’re devilishly handsome now.”

I snuck a glance at the giant. His mouth was pursed and he glared down at the body he now inhabited, not at all in agreement. “I’m neither devil nor anywhere near as handsome as I once was. Females would travel great distances to spend their heats with me when I roamed this earth. Where’s all my glorious fur? This skin is no different than being naked.”

“How are you this old and still not get it? Maybe for animals, but humans and those like them don’t like fur, obviously. Smooth is popular. Females find it hot,” the light-haired man explained, both amused and annoyed.

“I don’t see how temperature has anything to do with it. I was far warmer in fur than this hairless form.” Tometi flexed his muscles and checked his body for any sign of fur. “How do they keep their females warm during hibernation without it?”

Ryker scoffed. “Easy. They don’t hibernate.”

“A flaw in their biology,” Tometi said, disappointed.

“Have you been sleeping under a rock all these years we’ve been in Salvator’s head, or any others for that matter? He’s never hibernated, and he’s kept plenty of females warm.”

Tometi shrugged his massive shoulders. “That’s an odd thing to ask. I’ve only ever slept in caves, not under rocks.”

The conversation had derailed significantly.

The fact that Tometi took everything literally was part of his charm. I’d noticed he’d tune out most conversations, and sometimes he’d understand the odd idiom or turn of phrase, but mostly he didn’t get it. He didn’t seem to be learning them either, which only made him cuter somehow. But the defeated look Ryker gave me stopped me from saying anything about it.

I couldn’t hide the smile, though. It crept across my face before I could stop it. If it weren’t imperative I find out what the fuck was happening, I’d be curious to hear more about trolls and Tometi’s thoughts on his new form versus his previous one.

But one thing was certain as they continued to grumble at each other, both stubborn and refusing to back down: I’d missed this comedy duo more than I could ever express.

It was surreal to see them together in a way that felt human and animal all at the same time. Ryker had always been expressive in his voice, but it was fascinating to watch that personality come through in both his gestures and expressions. He’d never been so Ryker until this moment.

“How did this happen?” I asked before we could go off track again. They probably didn’t have a clue—I’d heard as much before opening my eyes—but it felt important to ask. “Do you guys remember the transition from Salvator’s head to...this?”

Ryker shrugged as if none of it bothered him. “No idea. Just sort of did. One minute we’re chattering away to annoy that grumpy asshole into coming to talk to you, and then we’re like this. No bright light. No magical humming or chanting. Just poof,

phantoms roaming this plane in bodies we've never seen before."

I blinked at him. "Did Salvator see you?"

"He was asleep when we appeared like this, so not sure. Probably not or he'd be raising hell." Ryker ran a hand through his translucent locks that still somehow beamed color.

Unlike my father's form in the dream, the colors weren't faded. If anything, they were vibrant. I could distinguish all the shades and colorations of their bodies despite the translucency. And one color that struck harder than the rest was the blue of Ryker's eyes. A clear sky on a shiny day. The color gleamed under a thick line of lashes.

My eyes naturally went to Tometi for confirmation. "It's as Ryker says. I've never seen these forms. It happened in an instant. I have no recollection of any moment that would've made us this way. I was never a man. I've always been a bear, even before I wandered as a soul seeking hosts. This is magic I don't recognize or understand."

It had to be weird for them to appear as men when they'd never once had a form outside of their hosts that were. They still kept a lot of their animal mannerisms in what they did—shifting in agitation, smelling the air, eyes skittering about the area in caution, pulling back their upper lip to show their teeth in moments of discomfort.

But they weren't animals anymore. They were men, and equally gorgeous in their own right. It hit differently because they'd been in my head for so long. For some reason, it felt like they'd been this way from the beginning, like they were never animals to me at all.

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My expression must've given me away because Ryker stretched his arms and hopped from one foot to the other with a happy whoop. "But I like it! It's a new adventure, and now I stand a real chance at wooing our girl here."

Wooing me?

"You stand no chance," Tometi rebuked firmly.

"Says you."

Ryker didn't seem bothered by anything Tometi said. I got the sense that it was a normal thing for these two to trade verbal blows without ever letting it harm their relationship. Or maybe because they'd never had a choice but to make it work. Still, I'd heard it enough over the months to expect these phantom forms wouldn't change any of that.

Turning my head, I noticed Silas was no longer in the room. Panic took hold of my chest, and as if he'd read my fear, Ryker took a knee in front of me and reached out, his exuberant grin fading to something much kinder and softer.

Shock struck me as his hand lifted mine. The second he touched me, he wasn't translucent anymore. Every color of him sharpened and solidified, much like the touch of his hand, and his warmth fed into mine like he was a living and breathing person.

His eyes went wide before shooting over to where Tometi stood. The bear of a man glared at us as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Deciding something, the giant phantom stomped over and offered his oversized palm to me. He didn't just take my hand like Ryker had. Because he never would. Tometi was himself no matter what form he took. No matter how large and intimidating he might seem, Tometi would always be the gentlest giant I'd ever met.

He waited with a quiet stare, hand outstretched. My brow stitched together as I reached out and took it. His fingers closed around my much-smaller hand, awe twisting his expression anew. Same as Ryker, Tometi was no longer see-through. He stood over me like any other man, a solid body I could touch.

"Holy fuck," Ryker whispered in mirrored awe. "We can touch you." His eyes cut up to Tometi. "And now we're...solid? It feels different than it has up to this point, like I'm alive or something. I'm not sure how to describe it."

He didn't need to. I sensed the change, too, without understanding why or how. Then again, very little made sense since I'd unlocked my power.

I chalked it up to the Soul Collector effect. That was what Lev called anything that went over our heads since escaping Rilas that night, when I'd put his soul back in his body. We didn't understand how it worked, only that it did, and sometimes that was all a person needed. At least, that was what Lev thought. I, on the other hand, would like to figure this one out.

"But how?" Tometi asked next.

A lot had occurred over the last few weeks, but especially since we'd gone to collect the book. Salvator was back. His two animal souls were no longer inside him; they were roaming free, and now I could touch them and make them less phantom for some reason. What was happening? Was this really a dream or something else?

"Silas..." I murmured, shooting to my feet. Maybe he'd know something, or at least

confirm whether or not I was the only one who could see them.

But the two men holding my hands didn't let go. They kept me from leaving, their hands tightening around mine.

Ryker got to his feet as well and dragged his hand not holding mine through his shaggy locks, his blue eyes on the door. "He's been downstairs since you fell asleep."

"Downstairs? Why?"

Tometi answered in place of Ryker. "Because he doesn't trust Salvator."

That sounded like him. I didn't think he'd let up for a minute even after giving Bear Claw permission to stay—permission I never needed. Hearing he'd snuck off to keep an eye on the shifter wasn't a surprise, but it made it less likely that this was a dream.

It didn't feel like one.

When Ryker moved closer and lifted my hand, I finally realized I was still holding onto two men who shouldn't exist, not like this. I took my hands back with a snap. And as soon as my touch fell away, their bodies became translucent again.

Interesting.

Peering down at my hands, I sought answers in them I wouldn't find. "This isn't a dream, is it?"

"Afraid not," Ryker huffed, shifting as if it bothered him to be on two legs instead of four. "I can't really tell you what happened, or why, but one minute we're in that grumpy asshole's head, and the next we were walking around in these...forms."

Nothing in Grandmother's book mentioned anything like this. As a Soul Collector, we could hear and help souls, and our connection with the After was powerful, but we couldn't touch them. Not at least until now. Grandmother never said anything about it, and I was confident I hadn't seen mention of it in her journal. But then again, she'd said every Soul Collector had their own unique abilities. Was this one of mine, or was this because of what happened with Salvator?

I stared at the two men, not sure how to proceed. If they were walking around and Silas was awake, did that mean he couldn't see them? Looking to test the theory, I headed for the door.

Ryker's voice stopped me before I made it into the corridor. "Where are you going, pretty girl?"

I pivoted, both afraid and desperate to know. "Come downstairs, and you'll see for yourself."

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Nika

Without waiting, I headed to where Silas was perched at the kitchen table, nursing a bottle of whiskey. His sheepish grin greeted me before it faded. As if sensing something was wrong, he was on his feet and quickly in front of me.

“Was it another dream?” he asked, cradling my face.

I glanced over my shoulder, and sure enough, both men were standing in full view of the mercenary. He hadn’t seen them. He couldn’t. Jaw set, I ripped myself from his touch and headed over to the couch where Salvator was laid out. His eyes shot open before I made it to his side.

“Do you see them?” I asked, ignoring Silas when he came to stand beside me. “Can you at least hear them?” Whipping my head the two men’s direction, I commanded, “Say something to him.”

Out of my periphery, Silas’s expression grew increasingly confused, arms locked over his chest. I was too focused on the task at hand to care. I needed to know what was happening and to what extent. Had Salvator and his animal souls separated? Was he no longer connected to them?

The sleepy shifter sat up, his fathomless stare pinning mine. The blanket I’d given him pooled around his naked waist. “Hear who, woman?”

“Ryker and Tometi.” I turned to them, gesturing for them to do as they were told. Both stared at me like I’d grown another head. “Say something to him.”

“What should we say?” Tometi asked.

Salvator’s eyes widened, his head snapping the direction the bear-turned-man now stood. “What the fuck...? Tometi?”

“Don’t forget me, Sally,” Ryker’s wolfish voice hollered.

Again, Salvator’s expression gave him away. His eyes darted to where the wolf-turned-man stood, arms folded across his chest, plenty pleased with himself. On his feet, the tribesman searched the room.

“What in Lilith’s seventh circle is happening?” Silas demanded.

“That’s what I want to fucking know,” Salvator snarled, pivoting but clearly not seeing the two like I did. He’d only located them by the sound of their voice. “Why can I hear them as if they’re standing right in this room, woman?”

“Because we are, duh. And it’s Nika, not woman, you uncivilized brute,” Ryker taunted, suddenly the sentinel guarding my side. He leaned in, blue eyes sparkling. “So I guess that answers our question, pretty girl. Only you can see us.”

He was right. Salvator might hear them, but he couldn’t see them. Silas couldn’t hear or see them. So did that mean no one else could touch them the way I could? Was this because I was a Soul Collector, or was it something else entirely?

Questions I couldn’t answer swirled around my head as the two men in the room argued, and the two unseen strolled from place to place and enjoyed the show.

Silas turned to me and captured my face in his hands again, his voice entreating and soft. “What’s this all about, little rebel? It’s sounding a lot like you’ve both lost the plot. What do you mean those head-squatting tossers are in the room?”

Tometi appeared next to Silas, his face uncomfortably close to the mercenary’s. Which was a feat with how massive Tometi was and how much he’d been forced to bend over to put his face next to Silas’s.

Was he sniffing him?

Tometi scowled but resumed his efforts.

Yeah, he was definitely sniffing Silas—and apparently not a fan of whatever scent he’d caught. Had I not been so overwhelmed, I might’ve laughed at the way Tometi dragged his nose all around Silas, moving from right to left, increasingly disgusted with each sniff.

After he’d satisfied his nose—or unsatisfied it?—the gentle giant tried to touch the unsuspecting mercenary who I’d all but ignored in light of the curious actions of the bear. Because hell if I’d miss this determined phantom on a mission to conduct several amusing experiments on the man I loved, his oblivious subject.

Tometi’s eyes narrowed when his hand went straight through Silas and the silver-haired man didn’t appear to feel it. Dissatisfied, he wandered over to Salvator and attempted to touch him. Still nothing. Ryker snickered behind me as I got my head together long enough to answer Silas.

“It’s going to sound crazy,” I said slowly, watching Tometi smell himself then Salvator.

And weird.

“Have you met us, love? That’s all we know.” Silas chuckled, oblivious to the antics going on around him.

My eyes landed on Ryker, and the blonde just shrugged, then dipped in to take a whiff himself. “Smells like secret pining and simmering jealousy.”

Tometi paused, sniffed, then shook his head. “You never make any sense, wolf.”

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Ryker slapped the confused bear on the back, laughing. “Don’t worry about it, big guy. Just familiarize yourself with their scents and leave the battle planning to me.”

“A battle?”

“Between men,” Ryker explained, only baffling the giant further. I already felt sorry for him. At this point, Ryker was doing it on purpose. “You’ll see soon enough, promise. These two will be at each other’s throats in no time. The tension is close to combustion, and Sally’s never been very good at managing his emotions.”

Tometi agreed with a nod, a sentiment he clearly shared.

I didn’t think my life would get weirder than an infamous, masked assassin who followed me around like a puppy or talking to a bunch of dead souls in my head, but I was wrong.

So very wrong.

“I woke up and two men were standing over my side of the bed,” I started.

Silas didn’t let me finish. His sword was out and magic swept the room, on the hunt for an enemy he’d never find. “I knew we couldn’t trust this two-faced twat,” he growled under his breath. “Bet Rilas is up to his old tricks. You better prepare yourself, you wolf bastard, because I know it was you who brought them straight to our doorstep.”

Salvator’s answering growl was beastly. “What’s to say you weren’t the one who led

them here?” The angry shifter stood, wearing only a pair of shorts Lev had lent him. They clung to his thighs for dear life, and it’d be comical if the two weren’t on the cusp of killing each other. “You’re the whole fucking reason she was attacked last time. You’ve gotten sloppy, Sparkles. Admit it. You can’t protect her, and that’s why Rilas was able to find her in the first place. It’s lucky I came when I did. Who knows what trouble your incompetence might drag her into this time.”

The air ignited between the two.

“Told you so,” Ryker snickered.

As if impressed, Tometi watched the two ex-Brothers glare at each other. “You must have clairvoyance, Ryker.”

“Not exactly.” Ryker’s face was split by a mischievous grin.

Rolling my eyes, I grabbed Silas’s arm. “Would you just listen? It’s not what you think. They weren’t enemies, obviously, or I wouldn’t be down here acting like nothing happened, would I?”

Silas’s searching eyes paused on me before he sheathed his weapon, acquiescing with a nod. “Go on, love. I’m listening.”

Salvator had his arms crossed, closer than before. His upper lip was pulled back as his eyes darted around the room, seeking out the voices he’d heard from different spots.

Ryker and Tometi were wandering around, making absolute nuisances of themselves. Neither seemed to care that I was suddenly expected to explain their situation and play mediator between two battling brutes. This situation was oddly reminiscent of the first time I heard the three talking inside my head.

Also, where was Lev when I needed him? How was he this deep of a sleeper after all we'd been through? The fact that their antics hadn't woken him up was a problem I'd need to address after everything calmed down.

"It was Tometi and Ryker," I went on.

Silas's jaw ticked. "The head squatters?"

"Jealousy doesn't look good on this three-dimensional Silas, does it, Tome?" Ryker joked, walking in and out of view.

Tometi was leaning in close to Silas again, his face mere inches from the mercenary's. "I don't understand what you mean. He looks the same to me. Smells acrid, though."

"That's the jealousy, big guy." Ryker patted the bear's back and headed over to where their previous host stood, hearing every word. "I never thought I'd see Sally like this. He's never been a fan of his own reflection. I'm a little annoyed he's so pretty to look at. And tall."

Salvator was nearly as large as Silas, so he was easily a head taller than Ryker. The wolf clicked his tongue and did a slow circle around him, sizing up his previous host.

"Do you think he's prettier than me, sweet girl? Should I see if there's a phantom way to make myself taller? Stronger? Maybe with a cute but pert backside? Who knows if I can customize this body, but it's worth a shot," Ryker rambled off.

I cleared my throat, close to laughing. I'd missed Ryker's nonsensical rambling despite it being a major distraction on far too many occasions.

"Oi, love. Which of those head-squatting wankers is giving you that smile? And what

do you mean they were standing over your bed?” My mercenary was slowly losing it. I’d have to be careful with what I told him and how I addressed it, or he’d think the worst and throw me over his shoulder like an overprotective brute.

Salvator’s jaw clenched, and he took an unintentional step back as if sensing the wolf nearby. “They have different bodies?”

“Yes. They aren’t a wolf and bear, at least not anymore,” I confirmed, earning a wide-eyed stare from the mercenary beside me.

Silas’s brow pinched together and his pecs flexed several times, an agitated tick he did whenever he was uncomfortable. “So...they’re no longer animals? They’re blokes?”

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Nodding, I watched Tometi do the same thing to Salvator that he'd done to Silas, sniffing him and scowling. My lips slid up because the way he smelled him was all animal. "Seems so. And there's something else."

"We can touch her," Tometi said before I got the chance.

Salvator's voice was a wild sound leaving his chest. "They can touch you?!"

Silas stiffened and shot a look at me. "They can touch you?!"

"Nice going, Tome. You've riled both of them up with one fucking sentence." Despite his chastising words, Ryker was more than a little amused. He was outright hysterical.

Fucking fantastic.

A sigh escaped my mouth as footsteps echoed down the staircase. "What's going on?"

"Now you're awake," I complained, rubbing my temple. "Okay, everyone sit down and shut up. This is easier if I don't have you all barking at me."

I hadn't expected them to listen, but all three men took seats. Ryker and Tometi stood next to me, one on each side. I wanted to test a theory, so I was glad they had.

After waiting for everyone to stop glaring or mumbling, mostly Silas and Salvator, I told Lev everything that had happened up to that point. His pretty green eyes

searched for the figures unseen, but he listened quietly. Which was more than I could say for the other two. They both made little noises of discontent all throughout the retelling. After nearly ten minutes of explaining what I'd woken up to, Lev was finally caught up.

Ryker snickered and leaned in. "You have your hands full, don't you, pretty girl?"

"No thanks to you," I grumbled, throwing the smiley wolf a glare.

Salvator sneered Ryker's direction. "You said you could touch them. What do you mean?"

Without waiting for me, Ryker threw an arm around my shoulders and his body solidified. The three in front of me all reacted in a different way. Lev was surprised. Silas was ready to tear Ryker to pieces, possibly with his bare hands. But Salvator was the show stopper. I didn't think someone like him could gape in shock like he'd seen a ghost.

Then again, he had.

"Well, this is fun," Ryker said, laughing. "Guess they can see us when we touch you."

"Oi, take your arm off her, mutt, or I'll take it off for you," Silas warned, standing and unsheathing his weapon. "With my sword."

"I liked him better when he couldn't see or hear me," Ryker whispered, his wolfish laugh tickling my ear. "He's a bit much, isn't he?"

Couldn't argue with him there.

Tometi hummed and pressed a kind hand to my shoulder, appearing in front of the already stunned three. His giant form towered over everyone, taking him nearly to the ceiling, close to nine or so feet above us.

Okay, so I might've underestimated his height a bit. It'd been harder to discern when I was barely awake and in shock. Seeing him next to Silas, who was one of the largest brutes I knew, made it plenty clear that the word giant was the only way to describe the bear.

Silas blinked, his eyes darting over, then up, up, up. Next to Tometi, we were all tragically small. The mountain of a man was heads above everyone else, his muscles bulging, the mere size of him casting a large shadow.

"Let Nika explain," he commanded in a voice so low and firm it could've been summoned from the deepest parts of the After. "You've talked over her this entire time. It's unbecoming of men claiming to care about her."

I'd forgotten how little Tometi minced words when he'd had enough. It was nice to have someone notice, though. Normally I handled it, but I was still trying to wrap my own head around everything.

Silas stared at the giant, his sword still out. "Who is this massive troll, little rebel, and why is it touching you?!"

"I'm a bear," Tometi said for the second time, a feat all on its own. "Trolls were eradicated—"

"Yeah, yeah, Tometi. We all know. I think what my big friend here means to say is that we're all shocked and confused, so let's all take a breath, okay? Let her finish, and then we can all argue about it." Ryker beamed a smile, happy with himself.

Lev laughed and patted Silas's arm. "He's right. Maybe once we have all the details, it'll make more sense."

"Or not," Silas grumbled, but reclaimed his seat. "My threat still stands, mutt. You've made your point, yeah?"

"Aye, aye, Sparkles," came Ryker's saucy quip.

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Sighing and already over the bickering, I removed Ryker's arm and touched the men instead. After confirming they were visible to everyone, I continued, "We aren't sure how it happened. It just did. The real question is why these forms and what does it all mean. We still don't know how Bear Claw ended up alive again, either. I'll see if there's anything I can find in Grandmother's journal. Until then, we'll just have to deal with another mystery unsolved and move on. We can't be distracted. I am curious, though..." My eyes flitted over to Salvator, whose glare stayed on Ryker for some reason. "Can you no longer shift?"

As if it hadn't occurred to him, Salvator was on his feet. He stalked over to the door and took off the several-sizes-too-small cotton shorts he wore. I got an eyeful of naked ass before he was gone.

Silas was on his feet with an angry grunt. "That absolute twat just had to give us a show before running off."

He didn't make it to the door. A huge bear peeked its head through the opening, and recognizable eyes fixed to me. Tometi's bear. It huffed an agitated breath before its massive face shifted and became something different. Then a familiar wolf snarled at us from a crouched position. Ryker's wolf. A half-second later that, too, shifted. Salvator was naked again, standing in the doorway with his terrifying physique on display, deep in thought.

Silas clicked his tongue and tossed the discarded pair of shorts at the naked shifter. "Get dressed, you bloody numpty. No one wants to stare at your meat sword."

"I see no sword of meat," Tometi mused, giving everyone a reason to gawk.

But it was Lev who threw his head back and laughed. “The infamous Tometi charm, right, Niks?”

“The one and only,” I confirmed with a little grin, immensely glad for the friend who always came through when I needed him to.

Silas grumbled and eyed the towering giant with caution. “Bit of a headcase, this bloke?”

Scowling at Silas, I gave the giant an affectionate pat on the arm. “That’s extremely insensitive, Silas. Tometi just...thinks a bit differently than most. It’s part of his charm.”

Tometi, who’d been a steely-eyed piece of stone from the moment he was visible, peered down at me with a soft smile that even I couldn’t help but be enchanted by. “It’s you who’s charming, Nika. I’ve always thought so.”

“Damn. Who would’ve thought Tome would be this smooth out of her head?” Ryker complained, pushing into my touch. “Istall, dark, and handsome your type, pretty girl? Be honest with me.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Silas cursed, in front of me. “Love, a bloke can only take so much. Your handsome rogue needs a bit of reassurance to carry on, yeah?”

His adorable pout claimed several beats of my heart, and I finally caved into the oversized idiot. Wrapping my arms around him, Silas lifted me under the thighs and held me close. His face pressed into my neck, and he dropped a few kisses along the curve of my throat and shoulder. Reluctantly, he set me back down and dropped a final kiss on my lips before smirking in victory.

Lev was on his feet, more excited than he should be, but Lev always did love a

mystery. He enjoyed the thrill of unraveling secrets, and this wouldn't be any different. "Do you think this has something to do with Bear Claw coming back?"

Shaking my head, I watched as Salvator took his seat again, jaw clenched and searing stare on me. "I'm not sure, but at least he didn't lose his ability to shift."

"There has to be some reason this happened," my friend argued astutely.

It felt like another piece of fate had slid into place when I woke up, so maybe Lev was right. This all happened for a reason, although I couldn't be sure what that reason was.

I stared at Ryker and Tometi and wondered if they were meant to play a part in what I'd need to do to send Rilas back.

16

Silas

Karma had come to collect. A life of bad deeds had finally caught up with me. Consequences had sunk their vicious claws into my happiness. Nothing else could explain a sudden surge of bastards vying for my rebel's attention. First Rilas, then Bear Claw, and now the other head-squatting wankers.

It was as if the universe was conspiring against me. Lilith in her infinite cleverness had masterminded my punishment. She'd brought these bastards to our doorstep with one objective, and one alone—to destroy my happiness and take my gorgeous goddess from me by way of devilishly handsome, awe-inspiring pirates of love, and the only bastard I could blame was myself.

Nika stayed just out of arm's reach, next to Lev and trailed by two hapless wankers

bent on following her shadow wherever it might lead. The wolf bastard and her faithful rogue.

She'd worn a shirt that clung to her luscious curves and a tight pair of pants with the usual coat, hiding a number of daggers. Her luminous purple hair was pulled up into a cute, braided ponytail. Like the slobbering wretch I was, I'd already fantasized about wrapping those gorgeous locks around my hand and bending her over somewhere out of sight. But even I could control my beast brain for one night.

Over the last few blocks, I'd caught several numpties drooling over her like two-bit dogs. But the moment they caught my deadly stare, they were at least smart enough to move along.

We'd blend in with the rest tonight. Few would be brave enough to challenge us in the open streets of the human world. Normies might not be magically inclined, but they weren't defenseless. They'd killed our kind before, and in great number. Humans were quick to destroy anything they didn't understand, so we didn't conduct business where Normies could overreact. At least not anywhere where their population dominated.

While we might be out in the hells of a Normie city to meet Bear Claw's contact, magical folk were everywhere. The Brotherhood's network was far-reaching and ever-growing, so I didn't think for a second Rilas couldn't find us out here in an ocean of humans. It was risky business to think otherwise.

Any faces I recognized would fall under the typical loophole clean-up protocol. It was one of few things the wolf bastard and I agreed on since he waltzed right back into our lives—everyone who wasn't his contact was an enemy and a loose pair of lips we couldn't afford to have.

My flittering bird insisted on coming out tonight. No matter what I argued, she didn't

want Bear Claw to go alone. She'd reasoned that his absence from the Brotherhood might make him a target of whoever we were meeting. Not to mention he'd escaped Rilas not long ago, so she wouldn't leave him to fight alone.

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Her concern for him was another punch to the gut. She promised to be careful, but she was dreaming to think I'd ever let her go anywhere without me. Where she went I went, and nothing and no one could stop me.

Scanning the buildings, I kept an eye out for surprise attacks. My detection magic was quicker than the human eye could see, so it slithered across the tops of the buildings and down side streets, checking on anything that gave off a magical flicker. Plenty came back, but nothing I worried about.

I wasn't the only one on the lookout.

The other two wankers might be out of sight, but they were certainly not out of mind. Nika had said in so many words they maintained their ability to smell dark magic even in their phantom forms. Nifty trick, that. It could make all the difference for my little Soul Collector. We weren't sure what else they could do. It took touching her for them to take their physical forms, and I'd rather eat glass.

It had to be some sort of cosmic joke that these two brutally good-looking blokes needed my goddess to unlock new parts of themselves. That they were given special access to Nika no matter how I felt about it, and I couldn't see or hear them until they put their filthy, undeserving hands on her.

It'd only been a few days since the three upended our plans and boggled our heads with a mystery none of us could make any sense of.

I was at the end of my metaphorical rope. I'd been a proper twat since Nika revealed the animal souls turned handsome ghosts. Little got to me. I was a man who'd killed

for centuries, who'd faced down the most powerful of our time, but anything to do with my bird and I lost my head altogether. I dissolved into what Nika often called her "big pouty baby." Imagine calling the deadliest assassin this side of the business a big pouty baby. The things this woman did to me...

The things I'd never hesitate to do for her.

Nika hadn't been given time to review the book we took from the Dark Fae Society, and she hadn't found anything in her nan's journal to explain what happened with Bear Claw or his two animal souls, but she'd cleverly reasoned that it was easy enough to review along the way. Staying on the move and finding Rilas should be our priority, and I couldn't argue with the logic.

I might want to keep her locked away, but it was undeniable how beautiful my bird was with her lips lifted and eyes wide, living life the way she was never allowed to. I might not like what brought her to this city, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't absolutely chuffed to watch my rebel laugh and enjoy herself for once.

Moments like these were far and few, and after losing this undeserving lot of head squatters to Rilas, she'd lost her spark. With them back, her fervent energy had returned. I didn't have to like them, but I'd tolerate them to keep my goddess happy and smiling.

My rebel was thirsty for a life she'd chosen for herself, and I'd do whatever it took to give it to her.

As if she couldn't help herself, Nika stared in open wonder at anything that captured her interest. She and the lad were arm in arm, strolling as if they were on a visit to town rather than a mission to find a demon.

Lev, her tour guide, pointed out a few of the finer things in this vibrant,

overpopulated human city. He'd been its frequent visitor over the years, and he knew it well. Most of us did. It was a well-known Normie city, and it attracted all walks of life—the desperate to live however they wished, the degenerates out to hide or hunt, and the tragic lot caught in between.

Her head turned, and our eyes met. The gentle smile that grew across her lips like wildfire settled the savagely jealous thoughts in my head. She always seemed to know when I needed attention, and she always gave it to me.

Oh aye, I was a simple man, I was.

Lev dragged her to a human stall set up along the sidewalk. The two squabbled over what to buy, and I stopped to keep an eye out for anyone or anything that might exploit their fun. The street light cast a bright beam on the two as they ordered from the vendor.

My little rebel was finally laughing again, trading banter with her friend like nothing could hurt her. And nothing would, not while I still breathed.

The huge wolf bastard stood shoulder to shoulder with me, his intense stare fixed on Nika. I was surprised when he spoke first. "I didn't want her to come tonight, either. I was in that bastard's head. He's a sick fuck who'll do anything it takes to make her his. Anywhere we go, she's in danger. I don't think he's powerless even with what that old fox did to him."

I might not like it, but Bear Claw had proven he cared about what happened to Nika several times over. He'd been the first to argue with her when she demanded she go. Even sought my help to convince her. It was the first time I'd fought with him instead of against him. But to keep her safe, I'd be whatever version of shameless bastard I needed to be.

Trouble was, Nika wasn't someone you could convince once she'd made up her mind. She was stubborn and did whatever she wanted. Neither of us stood a chance against her. A fact made increasingly obvious when we both transformed into blubbering trolls barely able to rebuke her astute reasoning. Had I not been right there with him, I would've taken immense joy in Bear Claw being tamed like the animal he was.

I didn't look at him and brushed back the hair that'd fallen into my face. "My rebel does what she wants."

Smirking, I watched Nika shove her street taco in Lev's face, snickering behind her hand when he glared at her. Sauce was all over his mouth, cheeks, and nose. She hadn't been kind. My bird was a brutal prankster, and I'd never been so proud.

"That's true," he agreed in a soft voice, as if he hadn't meant to say it out loud. "That woman can't be told what to do by anyone."

My eyes flitted over to the quiet tribesman. I didn't miss the ghost of a smile or the way every part of his face softened the longer he looked at her.

My gaze snapped back ahead. I ignored the pang in my chest when faced with how uncharacteristically tender the oversized shifter had become around my bird. If I thought on it too long, it'd rouse the jealous beast living inside my head.

I cleared my throat and did another sweep of the area. "She's had to fight that demon every time on her own, and every time she's won. You've seen what she can do. She's more powerful than any of us. And when the time comes, it's only her who can fight him. I don't like it, but that point has been made plenty clear to me, yeah? So I'll get her what she needs, even if it means humoring a bunch of undeserving twats along the way."

“The feeling is mutual.” Bear Claw’s wolf eyes beamed before they disappeared into the dark abyss of his irises, then his head turned my way. “The next time has to be the last, Sparkles.”

Grunting, I nodded. “It will be, Sally.”

His lip pulled back into a sneer, probably wishing his wolf hadn’t spat the nickname several times around the rest of us. It served him right. He’d called me Sparkles since I’d unwittingly been named the Shimmering Assassin, and I’d never bothered to call him much more than wolf bastard. Thanks to the blonde-haired mutt, I had a new name for him.

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Coming over, Nika lifted the food in her hand and offered me a bite. “It’s delicious. You should try some, Silas.”

Catching Bear Claw’s stare, I bent over, bypassing the taco altogether, and stole a long, passionate snog. My hand wrapped around her nape, bringing her lips harder into mine, and I drove my tongue deep inside her gasping mouth. Nika couldn’t fight me off out of fear of losing her meal, so I luxuriated in making the wolf bastard watch how good I gave it to her.

“Saw that one coming,” Lev complained, but I didn’t spare the cute wanker a thought.

It didn’t take long for her to kiss me back and mewl her pleasure. It was the sound of another victory. Another thing that cemented the fact that she was mine and no one else’s. Let these bastards drool and pine for it to be their lips instead of mine. Let them covet this goddess who chose me, not them.

I’d never take it for granted.

Pulling back, I took a bite out of her savory treat. “Delicious.”

Her lips thinned and she flipped me the bird before catching Lev’s arm and walking off ahead. Proud of myself, I wiped the sauce from my mouth and followed.

It was another several blocks before we arrived at our destination. The street was lined with different establishments—restaurants, pubs, and places of entertainment. Normies crowded the streets, slinking from one place to another. The night was in

full swing, swarmed by the loud and the plastered.

Nika and Lev had stopped to comment on one of the posters taped to a nearby window when Bear Claw stiffened, eyes searching the street. My magic crackled and sparked, sensing something nearby, and my head whipped the direction it came from.

Jaw clenched, he gestured across the street and leaned in. “I should’ve guessed he’d bring them.”

I caught sight of three mercenaries who pledged allegiance to a group I’d thought long gone. At least, last I’d heard they’d been wiped out. “Those nutters who like to unironically call themselves Shadow Pirates? Didn’t think they’d still be alive and operating after—”

“Waging war with Vapor?” Bear Claw supplied, grunting. “They got lucky. They offered a trade he couldn’t refuse, so they got to keep their lives.”

If they were here, that meant...

“Bones is your contact? Wasn’t he the one who put a price on your head back when I was in the Brotherhood?”

I was genuinely taken aback by the idea that the two of them talked at all after Bear Claw spent the better part of a year evading mercenaries bent on claiming the bounty on his head. To put a price on anyone’s head in this business was a grave offense—and one that rarely ended with both living, let alone working together.

Shrugging, Bear Claw’s dark gaze found Nika who’d pinned the two of us with a curious look. “We have a blood contract. If he doesn’t make good on this favor—”

“He forfeits his life,” I finished for him. “Can’t say I’m not impressed you got him to

agree to one of those. Must've been a hell of a fight."

Brushing back his dark hair, the wolf bastard huffed. It'd been the first time neither one of us was looking to antagonize the other. "You're not wrong, but it bothers me that you'd be surprised at all. I was on the Death Team for a reason, same as you. Bones learned not to forget it."

He sighed and stole a glance at my rebel again, killing whatever amenable air had grown between us. The way this wolf bastard looked at her like a lad in the throes of his very first love was bloody obnoxious, and he'd be lucky if I didn't pluck his eyes out by the night's end.

"They'll need to be dealt with. I don't doubt for a fucking second Rilas owns them," he growled their direction.

Nostrils flared, I grumbled my reluctant agreement. "Those nitwits still dabbling in blood magic?"

"Not like they used to." Bear Claw cracked his neck from side to side. "They'd dabbled a little too much, and it ended up killing half their crew."

I chuckled, tickled by the idea. "That's one way to do it." Scanning the street, I counted off the ones I saw. "So that leaves...seven? Eight?"

"Six. Vapor killed one before they cut a deal." Bear Claw's smirk was diabolical. "That was one of his more amusing kills, I'll admit."

I ignored the pang of intrigue.

"We'll need to get them isolated," Bear Claw started, his eyes moving from Nika to Lev. "There's no clean way to kill them out here."

Guessing his line of thought, I shook my head. “Every paid mercenary knows her face and that Silver was in her employ. Pains me to admit it, but they aren’t cotton-headed ninnies. They’ll figure it out.”

The other two started to come closer.

“Not her,” Bear Claw rumbled, his eyes tracking Lev. “Him.”

The blue-haired son of Yuma stopped in front of us, a perfect eyebrow raised. “Should I be worried that the two of you are talking instead of fighting?”

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Oh aye, this lad was as clever as they came. My rebel was about to have another reason to lecture me.

Conspiratorial grin on my face, I landed a hand on Lev's shoulder. "Funny you should say that, lad. We have need of your silver-tongued services."

"No," Nika immediately cut in, arms crossed and hip out. "Don't even think about it."

Saucy bird.

"I'm wounded, love. You think I'd ever put this cute bugger in danger?" I acted the part of the innocent rogue.

Nika sneered at me, and she'd never understand how lovely I found her no matter what venom she sent my way. "Yes."

"Cheeky," I cooed, snickering.

"So, what's the play here?" Lev asked, answering my grin with his own.

17

Nika

Dashing smile on his face, my friend strolled straight across the street like he owned this city and spoke directly to who I assumed to be the leader of the group by the way the others deferred to him, waiting for his response before they gave their own. I

wasn't sure what he'd said, but whatever it was, it convinced the men to follow him.

After catching our gazes from across the street, Lev led the group to the spot we planned to ambush them. Without waiting, we all moved to get there before Lev was left alone too long with a group of money-hungry mercenaries.

I'd seen Lev in action before, but it never failed to impress me how good he was at what he did. Not only did he lure all six of the Shadow Pirates—lame name, I know—to the location Silas instructed, but he did it in under ten minutes.

Silver-tongued was right. Bureaucratic bullshit was definitely Lev's area of expertise. I'd never been very good at it. He didn't struggle to find common ground to exploit. I only had my seductive charms to fall back on, but Lev was the whole political package—perfect charm, words, and mannerisms. Silas was right to pick him despite my complaints.

Like demons, the two ex-Brothers swooped in on the mercenaries surrounding Lev. He and I didn't have time to get our weapons out as we avoided the onslaught of magic, swords, and teeth.

Salvator, having taken his wolf form, and Silas, who'd donned his signature mask and cloak, were quick to navigate the dark magic violence of all six enemies. Their chosen name made more sense with the look and feel of their magic—billowy darkness that grew up from the ground like a second body.

Blue magic exploded, and the rampaging wolf moved like a swift shadow from one mercenary to the next. Blood splashed and sprayed from all directions, Lev and I doing our best to avoid the stray sprays. I'd forgotten how fast Salvator was as a wolf. Faster than I could ever hope to be on two legs with magic powering them across the floor.

The beast zoomed past me, its claws eating into asphalt and pounding the floor on its way to the next unlucky asshole. I'd barely caught a flash of fur in all the chaos. One of the mercenaries lost his arms, his mouth opening in confusion, before the rest of him was gone in a blur.

Ryker and Tometi were at my side, watching the spectacle unfold. The two phantoms had chosen to stay invisible since entering the city. It'd give us the element of surprise. As long as I was touching them, their physical forms acted the same way ours did. They could fight the same way as us, and Tometi suggested that if it came to it, I only needed to touch them and they'd join the fight.

At the very least, I could calculate bursts of assaults to surprise an unsuspecting enemy between the two unseen men. We might not know what all they could do, but at least I knew Tometi could throw a punch. A brutal one at that.

I'd seen it in action only a day ago when Salvator said something that evidently flipped a switch in the giant. I'd heard the telling sound of bone cracking when Tometi's fist landed directly on Salvator's face after asking for my hand with a tender smile. To say I didn't expect the violence was an understatement. Tometi didn't hold back. His attack was powerful and precise and knocked his previous host to the ground without fail.

It'd given the surprised shifter pause when his face didn't correct on its own and he was forced to take a strong potion to heal his injury. Apparently, Salvator discovered his fast-healing abilities weren't as fast as they once were. We weren't sure if it was because he and his animal souls were no longer connected the same way, but as someone who'd shattered and broken plenty of bones over the years, I knew it was a painful few hours of recovery.

Silas became an instant fan of Tometi's, no longer agitated by the sight of the nearly eight-foot giant.

Eyes following the trail of carnage, I nearly missed the massive wolf bite down on an enemy he'd slammed to the ground. Snarling, he dragged the mercenary's innards out with his vicious fangs. Silas cut another to pieces, his cloak spinning around him as his sword moved with deadly precision.

If not for all the blood and gore, I might've thought the entire scene beautiful with how elegantly the two moved.

It was quite a sight to see the two men work so seamlessly together when all they'd done for the past few days was argue. I never thought they'd set aside their differences like this, but it was a relief all the same. The last thing I needed was to play mediator while they cut our enemies to pieces.

"Steady on, Sally. You're making a bloody mess," Silas called out over another swipe of his sword, sidestepping a splash of blood from the Shadow Pirate the wolf attacked.

"Oh, and you aren't, Sparkles? Fucking hypocrite."

I spoke too soon.

Salvator had even shifted out of his wolf form just to clap back, he was that petty. The two continued to snap at each other as the naked shifter slammed one enemy down, Silas having tossed him a dagger to use, and my masked assassin sent a barrage of glittering spikes at another, throwing the unsuspecting Shadow Pirate into a nearby wall. Their bickering carried over deadly swipes and terrifying assaults.

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It was lucky we were far from the hustle and bustle of the inner city, or their bickering would give us away before anything else did. The whole point of luring these men here was so we kept it out of the public eye. Any louder, and the place would be swarmed with curious bystanders in no time.

Sighing, I leaned against Lev, and he patted my head with a raspy laugh. Neither of us intervened. It wouldn't do us any good. The two had some ongoing rivalry between them, and nothing we said could put an end to it. After another few seconds, the only people left breathing were the ones in our group.

"Well, that was quick," Lev murmured, the body parts of the six slain Shadow Pirates strewn about. "And...messy."

Ryker clapped his hands together in giddy joy. "It's such a mindfuck to watch my wolf from this angle. I'm so damn pretty."

"You are no longer that wolf," Tometi said, grief-stricken. He wasn't just talking to Ryker. He was admitting that he was no longer the bear he'd always been, and I had to stop myself from putting a hand on him in support.

The air shifted, and I went rigid. The other two men sensed the change. Dark magic crawled across the floor before Silas's cerulean power cut across it, easily constructing a wall of blue to stop the magic from coming any closer.

"Silver and Bear Claw? That's a duo I never expected to see again," a man said, appearing in the middle of the alley.

Silas had explained the night before that everyone in the dark, seedy underworld of paid killers knew him as Silver, not the Shimmering Assassin. The infamous and uncatchable assassin identity was never connected with the name Silver or Silas. It was only a handful of people who knew it, and most of them were dead.

The newcomer wore a mask of bones over his face with a cloak concealing the rest of him. Red eyes, the mark of blood magic, beamed from two eyeholes. Thick gloves covered his hands, but otherwise, there was very little about him on display. Even his overall figure was distorted by the layers he wore. It was meant to hide his identity the same way Silas hid his.

I'd gathered quickly that this was Salvator's contact since neither side had attacked.

Tometi was already towering over the cloaked mercenary, bent almost half his height, sniffing him. Ryker had that proud look of a father on his face as the bear looped the stranger several times, disgruntled but determined. He didn't like the smell of this asshole, but that was a given. Even I caught a whiff of the pungent aroma of blood magic. It wasn't a pleasant scent at all.

I didn't relish the idea of working with someone who used blood magic, but we were fighting a demon. Compromises needed to be made, and Salvator seemed confident whoever this was could help us find Rilas.

The giant phantom left the newcomer and returned, keeping close to my side. "Your scent never fails to wash away the putrid stench of others, even blood magic, Nika."

Smirking, I kept my eyes trained on the figure looming in shadow, regarding the two men in front of him with a frigid stare. "Thanks, Tometi. That's high praise coming from you."

Lev stole a glance at me, eyebrow raised. "What'd he say?"

“That I’m essentially a scent palate cleanser,” I whispered as our two stared down the cloaked figure, gesturing between them in a silent code I didn’t understand.

Lev grinned and looked the direction he thought Tometi was in. Which was hilariously off the mark, because Tometi had left my side for his and was currently leaned over and sniffing him, too. “What a sweet guy. Tometi, you’re one in a million.”

“I do not think the bear population is at a million. Evil humans have kept our numbers low,” the giant grumbled, nose still close to Lev’s blue hair.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing. “He says thank you.”

Salvator, naked except for the blood that covered his body, sneered at the bone-masked mercenary. “What are the Shadow Pirates doing here? Are you breaking our blood contract already, Bones?”

It wasn’t easy to discern this new asshole’s expression with the mask on, but I got the sense he wasn’t bothered by the threat. “Just a little insurance, though it seems I didn’t bring enough.”

The shifter growled low in his throat, a beastly snarl punctuating every word. “You’re on thin ice already. I can find someone else, but that means our contract terms are broken. Your choice, asshole.”

The blood magic user swayed in his cloak, finally showing a little discomfort. He’d put on a good show, but Salvator’s last statement got to him. “Once I fulfill my part, I ask that you put an end to this blood contract business,” he said in a low hiss. “I think I’ve delivered more than enough over the years.”

Salvator folded his arms across his chest, the muscles in his back rippling in agitation.

“Not a fucking chance, but I can let the contract boil you from the inside out tonight if you want to put an end to it sooner rather than later.”

It took a concerted effort not to stare at the blood-covered shifter’s naked ass. Thanks to Ryker and several comments he’d made about pert butts, my eyes naturally went there every time Salvator was naked. Which was a lot more than I’d like. If not for Silas, he wouldn’t wear clothes at all. He didn’t seem to like them very much, wearing as little as possible whenever he was forced to.

Lev didn’t have the same qualms I did staring at the naked shifter in front of us. His eyes were openly ogling. When I offered him a saucy glance, he shrugged and grinned. “It’s a nice backside.”

I didn’t manage to hide my smile. “I didn’t realize butts were your thing.”

Lev’s eyes glimmered with amusement. “Even if they aren’t, you can’t argue that’s a nice one. It’d make anyone a butt person.”

“I hadn’t noticed. I haven’t been openly ogling it,” I partially lied. I had noticed, but other than Silas’s, I didn’t care.

“What, a guy can’t admire another guy’s butt without it being weird?” Lev pretended to be affronted, but his adorable smirk gave his real motive away. He was absolutely attracted to the shifter and wouldn’t mind a hands-on approach to appreciating said butt. Seemed like the two of us were beyond help when it came to the morally grey men in our lives.

“You said it, not me,” I teased.

Ryker snickered next to me as the two men stayed weirdly quiet in front of the one we were determined to use to find Rilas. Thankfully, our antics were ignored by the other three. The one they called Bones had barely noticed us. His concern lied with the other two. As far as he knew, we were just tagalongs meant to beef up their numbers.

It was better that way.

“Have it your way,” Bones finally murmured. “Who do you want me to find?”

Salvator offered Silas a cursory glance. My mercenary gave him a curt nod, and it was all he needed to go on. “Rilas.”

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The bone-masked mercenary froze, and silence hung between us for nearly a minute. My two didn’t appear bothered by it, though. They stayed silent with their arms crossed and eyes set on Bones, waiting for him to say something.

“He’s dead,” Bones argued, a bit breathless. “What do you mean find him?”

“He’s back,” Silas rebuked.

Bones visibly stiffened. “Back? That...then...”

“He’s a demon,” Salvator confirmed. “Reaper and the others brought him back despite knowing what he’d do. And now they’re all dead.”

I wasn’t sure how much we should be telling this stranger, but it didn’t appear to worry Silas or Salvator that he was getting more details than most.

I’d heard about blood contracts before and how potent they were, but I wasn’t sure what all they could do, or what it meant to have one. It was an unwritten rule never to enter a blood contract, and if you did, breaking it was a death sentence. But that was all I knew about them.

“You want me to track a fucking demon, and one with Rilas’s knowledge and power? Are you crazy?” Bones growled behind the concealment of his mask. “That’s a death sentence.”

“It’s death whichever direction you go, Bones. All you have to do is find us a general location, and we’ll do the rest. Call in a few favors. Ask around. No one’s telling you to put yourself directly in his path,” Salvator reasoned with the cloaked stranger, but his tone left no room for argument.

Silas spoke up next, taking a few steps around Bones. “Come now, Bones. A demon is bad for business. They only know how to destroy, and this one comes from our side of the world, yeah? He’ll come after all his contacts eventually.”

Silas edged closer, behind Bones now, and it appeared our new friend wasn’t as confident with the assassin at his back. Even without seeing his expression, I picked up on his fear.

“If I remember correctly, you worked with him for a short time. What happens if he

comes calling? Think you can fight a demon as powerful as my brother? You think your blood magic will hold a candle to what he can do now with the power of the After behind him?" He tutted the rigid man with a finger. "Believe me, Bones, you should be chuffed it was us and not him who found you first. Get his location, and we'll take care of that pesky demon before he has any reason to find you. Or I might just tip him off and use you to lay the trap, yeah?"

Silas's voice dropped to a dangerous whisper, silver eyes glowing from behind his mask. The man had adopted a whole new level of ominous around this bone-masked stranger. It was hard to imagine my goofy brute when he threatened and killed without mercy.

"They say he can steal souls. Wonder what awaits the ones he steals..." Silas hummed low in his throat. "Nothing good, I bet."

A breath escaped Bones before he cleared his throat, eyes jerking from Silas to Salvator. "You're crazy if you think just the two of you can win against a demon with the power to steal souls." His chuckle was humorless. "It took armies and a Soul Collector the last time. You have neither."

The last time?

I was tempted to ask, but I kept my mouth shut. I'd pick Silas's brain about it later. I'd been aware there were other demons, other Soul Collectors, but Grandmother never went into detail. Every demon was different, and she'd argued that Rilas was exceptionally different from the rest. That his earthly ties hadn't been severed like the others. It made him both powerful and vulnerable, though she never explained why despite the numerous times I asked.

"You'll know when the time comes, darling. You'll understand what it is you have to do, I promise," was all she had said.

Laughing like Bones had told the funniest joke he'd ever heard—probably because we did have a Soul Collector—Silas clapped the red-eyed man on the shoulder. “You let us worry about that, yeah? Just run along and get us what we asked for.”

Without waiting, Bones disappeared.

The carnage was everywhere I looked—the ground, the walls, and the two men who'd been covered in it in some way or another. We'd need to leave before anyone could stumble on the massacre.

“What about the bodies?” I asked, peering around at the devastation still bleeding into the asphalt. “We're not leaving it like this, right?”

I practically heard the smirk on his face as Silas navigated the carnage. “Leave it, love. It'll send a nice message for the ones who took note of us in the city. This will remind them why they'd better forget they ever saw us. Mercenaries are a self-preserving lot. I don't doubt they'll understand what it means to cross us.”

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Salvator turned around, the blood failing to hide every part of him. Specifically one part I wished I hadn't glanced at first. "I hate to agree with Sparkles, but it'll do our job for us. Word will get around, and they'll keep their mouths shut to avoid being our next targets."

Lev made a little noise in his throat, eyebrows waggling. "If that doesn't send the message, then I vote for sending you around town just as you are to make the pointbigand clear." He emphasized the word big with a snicker my direction.

I was surrounded by children.

I glared at Lev with the violence of a thousand papercuts, but it only made his smile grow. I'd make him pay later. As much as I loved Lev, I hated him right now.

"I don't see how that'll help, boy," the shifter grumbled.

My friend didn't appear bothered by the tone Salvator had used or the patronizing title he'd given him. I took issue with it, though, and cast angry eyes at the shifter. But I wasn't given time to chastise Salvator.

Ryker cackled behind me. "Sally's pulling a Tometi. Night officially made. I love this kid. I'm keeping him."

The grinning phantom tried to throw an arm around Lev, but it went straight through, and for some reason, that only made him laugh louder. Salvator couldn't see him, but that didn't stop him from scowling the wolf's direction.

Catching an eyeful when he glanced at Salvator, Silas tossed his cloak at him before the shifter could make his way over. “Oi, you wolf bastard. I remember telling you to bring clothes tonight.”

“They’re in the car,” Salvator replied and begrudgingly wrapped the cloak around his naked body.

Silas sighed like he hadn’t been just as frustrating as Salvator at every turn tonight. “What good will they do you all the way out there?”

“You looking for a fight, Sparkles? Because I’m plenty ready. I was just thinking tonight hadn’t been much of a challenge.” Salvator’s wolf gleamed in his vicious stare, changing the color of his irises.

“With your knob swinging about? I’ll be the bigger bloke and save you the loss of a precious part, Sally. My bird has had a long enough night, yeah? She doesn’t want to watch us having it out because you can’t bring a bloody pair of trousers.”

Looks like I have two big pouty babies now.

Lev and I shared a little look before heading back the way we came, leaving the two to figure their shit out.

We’d have to avoid the main streets, but we’d planned on it from the start. All things considered, it was another successful part of the plan carried out. It was time to return to the safe house and figure out how we were going to send the demon hunting us back to the After. I needed to learn how to summon the old magic, and I wasn’t sure how long I had to figure it out.

Voices whispered in my ear, and I woke with a start, covered in a thin sheen of sweat. My pulse pounded, a loud thump thatechoed a fear I couldn’t place. My night had

been dreamless, but the whispers beckoned me awake as if I'd come out of a fantasy world.

I'd fallen asleep after spending hours reviewing the book we stole from the Dark Fae Society. Based on its content, this book was meant to be read by only the most trusted in our society. It contained secrets dating back millennia. Secrets I wasn't even aware existed, that I was confident even my father hadn't known. It was a hulking, several-thousand-paged monstrosity guarded by magic I'd never seen before. Old, dark magic that both did and didn't smell like blood.

"She must've sealed it after I last saw it. It's been a couple decades," Lev mumbled to himself, inspecting the book closely. "This is a bit...extreme. I knew it was important, but I hadn't realized how important. This is lineage magic she used."

Which explained the hint of blood without it being blood magic. Lineage magic was stored in objects. Generations of magic aided in its strength. Its reserves weren't endless, so using it was left to things of great importance. The power of the lineage and how many contributed determined its potency, and only someone with magic from that lineage could break it. Meaning, any new Council members wouldn't be able to open it.

Lev was the last, and he didn't hesitate to break the magical seal keeping the book locked. She'd always intended to make him her predecessor. She never imagined that he'd one day betray her, so it was only him who could.

With his eidetic memory, it didn't take long to find the passage he'd mentioned. After he translated the old text written in a language most Dark Fae couldn't read or speak, Lev confirmed it called for "the old magic" to summon or banish a demon, and that only those whose power touched the After could use it. More specifically, Soul Collectors.

A little further into the passage it mentioned the price that must be paid after true balance was achieved, and the message Grandmother circled several times immediately came to mind after reading it. ‘Even one soul for a soul is a heavy price to pay, but a price we must.’

A soul for a soul? Was it mine or someone else’s? Mother had said the time would come where I’d bind myself to one, either the Soul of Life or the Soul of Death, but what happened to the other she never said. Grandmother said I’d know what I needed to do when the time came. It didn’t feel right to leave everything up to a moment.

But it was the summation of the text at the end of several pages that sang out over the rest. One stark statement that brought everything into crystal-clear focus. The words felt as if they’d been written for me to one day read, though I doubted that was the intention of the original author.

“It’s been prophesized that one day a demon with the power of a Soul Collector and the strength of the After will appear. It will seek to end the world. Death, in its mysterious design, will send powerful souls to restore the balance. These souls will be the difference between a world saved and a world ended. How they achieve the necessary balance will determine the world’s inevitable fate, one that will come to fruition no matter what is done to stop it.”

Death would send powerful souls to restore the balance? That part in particular called out to me. My father, mother, and grandmother. Salvator, Tometi, and Ryker. Were they the souls this prophecy mentioned?

The Dark Fae had called me the Foretold, and after reading what was written in the book Yuma kept sealed with powerful magic, the name felt like another piece of fate sliding into place.

The Dark Fae Society hadn’t killed me for a reason. They’d definitely wanted to.

Maybe even tried to if the memory Fatherleft in the necklace was any indication. The Council had feared me and said I'd one day be the end of them—and I had been. I was absolutely the reason they were destroyed, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

I was the granddaughter of the Soul Collector they couldn't control and locked away in a box of untold torture; I was the daughter of a mother they tried to silence; I was the daughter of a Dark Fae they couldn't beat; and I had every reason for revenge. Maybe they thought I'd one day take the whole world with me.

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It was easy to misunderstand the prophecy written in this coveted tome. I was a Soul Collector with the power of the After. It was likely they thought I'd become the demon who'd destroy the world. Except, now it was clear to those of us paying attention that the demon was Rilas. They were right about one thing—I'd be the reason the world was saved or ended, that much I did know.

It was a burden I carried with me every day.

Unfortunately, there wasn't anywhere in the text that explained how a person achieved balance, only that they needed to. I wasn't sure if corrupting the gem was the right move to make. And even if it was, I wasn't sure how I'd corrupt it fast enough to take on Rilas when I needed to.

There had been one place that mentioned corruption in Grandmother's journal: "We are hunted by darkness as Soul Collectors. Darkness ultimately seeks to corrupt us for the part we play in helping Death keep balance. Acts of darkness stain our souls, and the ultimate act of darkness for a Soul Collector is the use of the souls we collect.

"The gem that's been passed down for generations in our family serves as a warning. It will darken when the corruption has become too great, and measures must be taken to ensure darkness doesn't irreparably consume our souls. But it's said a perfect balance for a Soul Collector is to live in the grey, and the grey is much easier to achieve and maintain than one might believe."

I'd decided to think on it for a bit and address it with Silas after I'd given myself time to digest all that I'd read. He'd begged me to say more with numerous glances throughout the evening, but I hadn't. I couldn't. Not yet. We still needed to explain it

all to Salvator. The shifter needed to understand what waited for us at the end of the road. He might have insight into the demon version of Rilas that would help us figure more out.

I just needed to convince Silas.

With a sigh, I sat up and brushed shaky fingers through my hair. My heart was still pounding, and the whispers still called to me, but I was able to find my usual calm with a few deep breaths. Licking my lips, I peered around the room.

Silas was gone. Tometi and Ryker weren't in the room, either. But I wouldn't be surprised to find them in the front room.

We'd moved places again. This time not far from the city where we'd met Bones. They didn't seem to think it'd take the bone-masked mercenary long to find Rilas, but even if it did, we'd be better off staying close than having to travel back. I was honestly relieved. It was tiresome to hop from one forest to the next, a prisoner in my own life again.

I'd had a taste of normalcy the other night before we slaughtered a group of lame-named pirates. It reminded me that with everything going on, I still deserved to enjoy myself a bit. Lev had said as much to me in a candid moment near the fire, that he hoped my future responsibility to the world didn't stop me from living and laughing today.

And I couldn't help but pine for that, too.

I threw my legs over the side of the bed and tuned into the soft whispers. They were calling to me again, leading me somewhere. Each time, I'd found something important, something I needed, so I didn't hesitate to get to my feet and throw on a pair of pants and a shirt. It wasn't cold in this part of the world, so I just slipped on a

light jacket and tucked in a few weapons for a peace of mind.

Keeping an eye out, I left the room and headed to the front of the house. Every door but Lev's was closed. He was fast-asleep on his bed, hugging his comforter like a big body pillow. I took in the sight with a smile.

He'd spent the better part of the day translating tiny text. Worse, some of it in his mother's handwriting, which was nothing short of abhorrent. Even when his eyes glassed over and he struggled to stay awake, Lev didn't give up. It took me commanding him to sleep to get him to put it down.

Took a page out of the Silas handbook, I guess.

Like me, he'd spent his life as a prisoner to circumstance. He couldn't be who he truly was. He couldn't like who he wanted to like. He was expected to carry his mother's legacy, and the legacy of his family. Joining us to go after Rilas was the first time Lev got to be exactly who he was, and I'd do whatever it took to make sure he enjoyed as much of it as he could.

Pushing off the doorframe, I continued to walk down the hallway, fully expecting all four men to be in the living room. The whispers carried across the air like secrets as I entered and peered around the empty space.

The fire was crackling embers. Silas had insisted on it despite it being plenty warm in the house. Dishes littered the coffee table where we'd left them. Lev had dragged Salvator to a nearby store to get food and drinks. He'd really taken a shine to the shifter, and I didn't get the feeling that Salvator minded as much as he complained.

Several bottles of booze were scattered across the room, but none of them were touched. I'd argued with Lev and Silas over it. I didn't need a repeat of every time the two drank together. Not after a full day and with so many things still left to do. It

never ended well for me. The two were ridiculous with their drinking games.

Walking a short distance, I peeked into the kitchen, but it was as empty as the front room. Alarm settled in the back of my head as I rushed out the front door.

Silas often did perimeter checks anywhere we stayed. He'd become obsessive about it since Rilas attacked. Salvator might've found a reason to go with him. But I didn't sense magic anywhere. I couldn't feel Tometi and Ryker like I normally did, either.

It was just the voices.

I cut across the lawn and searched for where everyone had gone, but nothing. The sounds of the city were drowned out by the whispering voices, their chorus growing louder.

The feeling in my gut was heavy. Something was wrong, and I didn't have time to go back to find Lev to tell him. Instead, I took off at a brisk run to follow the voices wherever they led. After several streets, the droning of voices without bodies amplified to the point of debilitation. I struggled to keep focus and my pace, shooting a glance down side streets before moving on.

After blocks of searching, a figure came into view ahead of me, and by the shape and size, I knew it right away. I let loose a relieved breath and, still running, headed for him. A sudden wind hit him, throwing his hair into chaos around his head. His cloak danced around him as he turned. The glow of the city behind him cast his large figure in light and shadow.

Silas was obnoxiously gorgeous like this.

"Hello there, love. Fancy meeting you out here," he murmured with a cute grin. "Hurried all this way to join me in a little moonlight liaison, have you?"

The voices hadn't quieted. They were practically screaming, but I didn't understand them. My pulse thundered as I reached Silas's side and scanned the illuminated horizon, a fresh rain leaving a lot of it wet and glossy.

"Where's Bear Claw?" I asked when he didn't speak.

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Turning, Silas leaned down and pressed his mouth against mine. It wasn't the sweet kiss I expected. It was demanding and brutal, almost as if he wanted to devour me whole. A growl rumbled before he lifted me in his arms and locked me against his chest.

I wrapped my legs around him and returned the kiss, ignoring the nagging sensation at the back of my head that something about all of this felt...off. Different. Unfamiliar. Wrong.

His hands roamed my butt and thighs, our tongues chasing back and forth. Throwing my head back, I sucked in air and tried to remember why I was out here.

The voices whispered and urged me to listen. I might not understand the words they were saying, but I sensed their urgency. When I tried to escape his hold, Silas gripped me harder and kissed me again.

"Don't think you can distract me, asshole," I complained, biting his lower lip. "Where's Bear Claw?"

Thousands of whispers escalated in an instant. An ominous feeling of unease swept over me. Something had shifted. The wind howled and seemed to respond to the change. My purple hair swept into my eyes, obstructing my sight for a second before I caught glimpses of my mercenary through the breaks.

I brushed it back, pulse agitated by the deadly quiet man in front of me. "Silas?"

"You're not going to like my answer, love," Silas's golden eyes flashed, lifting to

meet mine. The gold in his irises quickly became silver, then bled to a violent red, and I inhaled a sharp breath. “You won’t like it at all.”

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Fear slammed into me, and I threw my head back, smacking someone hard enough to get a grunt. It only took me a second to realize I wasn’t outside anymore. I wasn’t at the edge of a cliff looking for Salvator. I was in bed assaulting the most infamous assassin in the magical world.

“Easy there, love,” I heard Silas murmur in a pain-laced voice. “What’s got you choosing violence so early in the morning?”

I turned my head and caught sight of a familiar pair of golden eyes, no longer the ominous red they had been in my dream. Silas had taken a hit to the nose, made evident by the crack and hiss when he fixed it.

“Shit. Did I break it?” I sat up and wiped away the blood leaving one of his nostrils. With an assessing eye and careful touch, I checked the state of his nose, and then the rest of his face for any other injury I might’ve inadvertently caused. “I’m so sorry, Silas.”

Laughing a little to himself, the groggy mercenary reached for something next to the bed. He popped the cork and drank the vial’s contents. A minor healing potion. Shit, I’d broken it. I’d assaulted the man I loved in his sleep. So much for keeping our night from melting into violence.

“No need to apologize, love. You can’t help that you’ve got a formidable skull. My nose never stood a chance.” He checked the time, and it turned up nearly five in the

morning. Lev would be awake soon. “Another dream, was it?” he asked, his voice muffled as he wiped away the remaining blood.

I brushed back my hair and dropped an apologetic kiss on his healing nose. A cute smile spread across his handsome face, then he puckered for another. Giggling at the goofy-grinned man-child, I bent down and kissed him again. His hand sunk into my hair, tongue sliding across my closed lips in demand, but I pulled away before he could get ahead of himself.

The sleepy-eyed brute rumbled a happy growl, bending an arm behind his head to look at me as if I hadn’t denied him a damn thing. “Is this one of those dreams I should be worried about, love? You’re being quite...affectionate.”

I smacked his chest, pursing my lips in annoyance. “I’m affectionate.”

His eyebrow raised and his grin broadened. “You and I talking about the same person, little rebel?”

“Oh, shut up.”

I grumbled a bit under my breath, unable to refute his claim. But in my defense, it was hard to initiate affection when this oversized idiot was always kissing or touching me, and in the most public places possible.

I didn’t want to encourage his antics.

“I think it was just a dream,” I finally answered. “Though, it’d make me feel less like an asshole if it’d been a vision. Then at least your assault wasn’t for nothing.”

I hadn’t heard the voices after waking this time. I didn’t think it was a vision. Maybe a deeply-rooted fear manifesting as a dream? I tried not to jump to conclusions with

every weird dream. I'd had plenty since my father attacked the Council. Plenty since I discovered I was a mystical fucking monster with the power to steal someone's soul. And while it didn't feel like a normal dream, it didn't give me the feeling of a vision, either.

I didn't have a good answer to give him.

Sitting up with a devilish gleam in his eyes, Silas hummed in that conniving way of his. "Oh, I don't know about that, princess. I'm sure you can find a way to make it up to me." He licked his lips and reached for me. "I have a few ideas."

"Bet you do." I smacked his hand away and shuffled closer to the edge of the bed.

I ignored how incredible he looked with the sun peeking through a slit in the curtains, casting his tattooed body in partial glow. I refused to acknowledge how enticing he was in only a pair of boxers with the blanket no longer covering him. The shape of his morning erection caught my eye, but I glanced away.

The undeterred mercenary chuckled in a devastatingly sleep-rough husk when I did. "Is that a blush I see?"

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My eyes shot over, and I immediately regretted it. He was biting his lower lip and staring like he'd give chase the second I tried to escape. If anything, he hoped I would.

The hard ridges of his torso were admittedly tempting. I wanted to trace every corner with my fingers. Okay, my tongue. I blamed this obnoxiously alluring man for how insatiable I'd become. It never used to be this difficult to smother my urges, but Silas brought out parts of me I'd never seen before.

As if reading it all on my face, he crooked a finger at me. "Come here, little bird."

"He's a horny animal, isn't he?" I heard Ryker mutter behind me. "I'm surprised he finds time to do anything else."

"Do you think he's in rut?" Tometi asked.

Ryker cackled. "Fae don't have heats or ruts."

"A flaw in their biology."

The wolfish laugh that came next was filled with unbridled joy. "Something we can agree on, big guy. I'd pay good money to watch a bunch of Fae rutting at the same time every month, slaves to their base instincts like the rest of us. Although, after watching these two over the last several days, I'd argue they already are."

Silas, unaware of the peanut gallery commenting on his virility, tugged me close and pulled aside the collar of my shirt. His tongue chased the line of my neck as the two

phantoms went about their conversation like it was totally normal. I spent several seconds asking the universe what I'd ever done to deserve any of it.

"Okay, that's enough."

"Come now, love. I've been patient. I think I'm due a little affection from my gorgeous little rebel," Silas said between kisses, hands sneaking under my shirt.

I clicked my tongue and tossed a cursory look over my shoulder at the two unseen men whispering to each other. "Oh? I didn't think you'd want the guys to watch, but I guess we've never talked about group activities."

His head snapped up and a growl left him. "Piss off, you lot, or I'll find a way to toss you out myself."

I heard Ryker laugh and sensed them leave the room without another word of complaint, probably to bother Salvator. They'd made it their daily mission to antagonize the shifter whenever time allowed.

Silas glared at the corner he thought they were in, and I decided I'd let the charade go on a little longer. He'd been difficult since Salvator showed up in that forest, and it was only fair I got to enjoy the secret hilarities of this crazy ability of mine. So, I watched the big brute talk to nothing.

Revenge was sweet.

"Don't think I won't deal with a pair of invisible deviants the same way I deal with every wanker who's perving around my goddess. I'll have it out with you like men, and we'll see if you can feel pain as a pair of phantom bastards," the assassin continued to rant, holding me close like he was protecting me.

My lips twitched as he growled and peeked at me, looking for any indication his threat had worked. I waited nearly three full minutes before telling him they'd left long before he'd launched into an increasingly creative series of threats.

"Cheeky," he growled with a sly smirk. "Seems like my bird needs proper punishment. How dare you exploit your boyfriend's genuine worry over you."

I dodged his hands and tried to escape, but I was over his shoulder before I could. His hand landed on my ass with enough power to make sure it was a smack heard around the world. Or at least around the house. I wanted to be angry and snarl at him, but I remembered the last threat he'd made to the wall—"I'll make you fetch for hours. It'll take you that long to realize I never threw the bloody stick"—and dissolved into laughter instead.

Silas walked us into the master bathroom and flipped on the water. "You'll let me wash you from head to toe, and you won't complain, yeah? That's a fitting punishment for a naughty little rebel like you."

"Is that all?" I sassed, letting him caveman his way around the large space with me slung over his shoulder.

I caught a glimpse of his sneaky grin in the mirror. "Every part of you, love. Even the parts you rarely think about. The ones I'll have to use my fingers to get to, yeah?"

I didn't like that grin. That grin always came with a whole host of fucking problems for me. Silas would never do anything I didn't want, but he liked to push it as far as he could. He knew me better than anyone, save Lev. I didn't back down from a challenge, and everything he did in the bedroom was a challenge.

Whatever he had planned, it was something we'd never done before, and he wanted to see if I'd give up. The spark in his eyes said so as he pulled my underwear off and

appreciated my ass with a squeeze. Turning his head, he lifted me enough to take a bite out of the ass cheek nearest him.

I gasped, reacting in spite of myself. I tensed and didn't miss the victorious look he cast at my reflection. Maneuvering me without the use of magic, which was a feat, he tossed my shirt on the floor. He bit my ass again, and his fingers teased my pussy from bottom to top.

I didn't gasp this time. I moaned. He made sure I was watching as he licked his fingers in the mirror's reflection. Then he smacked me again and set me down on the sink.

Grabbing a handful of my hair, he dragged my head back and dropped a claiming kiss on my throat. "That's my girl. Can't help herself when I do what I want," he whispered into my ear. "You like it when I have my way with you, don't you, princess? Gets you all worked up, yeah?"

The air was hard to catch. I tried not to play directly into his hands, but every word was another nail sealing my future surrender. It was a quick flip from playful boyfriend to dangerous lover. Silas had mastered the switch. I'd give in whether or not I wanted to. I just didn't want to do it right away.

Guiding my hand down his naked chest, he urged me to help him out of his pants, and I did without hesitating. His grin was feral as my hand slipped up one muscly thigh to graze his already-hard cock.

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Chiding me with a sound, he yanked my hair farther back and pushed my legs apart. “Already going straight for the prize, love? That’s hardly a punishment,” he lectured, snatching my hand and biting my fingers as if to discipline them. “Naughty.”

His hand grazed my naked front, teasing my breasts and stomach. He purposely stayed away from anywhere too sensitive. A moan got caught in my throat when he finally dropped his head and sucked one of my nipples into his mouth. My stomach contracted as I fought voicing my pleasure. Silas was relentless, though. He clawed my thigh, pushing my legs wider, and teased my clit with the hand not holding my hair.

Sensation stormed my waist, and I swiveled without intending to. His sure strokes kept me on the edge. He didn’t do enough to make me come, but he didn’t stop either. He kept his pace deliberately slow to torture me.

“Silas,” I growled in warning.

His fingers sunk inside, and I arched. “What is it, love?”

“Tease me any longer, and I’ll break your nose again,” I hissed, the electric warmth spreading across my waist and thighs.

“Oh, aye,” he laughed, his thumb running circles over my sensitive nub. “You always do know how to threaten me with a good time, don’t you, little rebel?”

His hand caught mine before I could reach for him, trapping it to the counter, but I used the other one to grab his hair and bring his mouth to mine. The kiss was brutal. I

sucked his tongue and licked his palate. His groan filled my mouth before I was yanked close and my naked chest pressed hard into his.

The anxiety and stress from the ominous dream ebbed away, leaving desire in its place. That might've been his entire objective, but all I could be was thankful. Silas never failed to give me an escape when I needed one, even if sometimes he went about it in the most obnoxious way he could.

Pulling away, he huffed a breath and his fingers dug into my ass. "You're not playing fair, little rebel."

"I wasn't aware paid killers followed rules to begin with," I rasped, nipping his pec and sinking my teeth in. The little hiss that escaped his mouth was all the reward I needed. "But you're right. I feel absolutely filthy and should probably shower."

His cock jumped between us, a sure sign I'd won. His hold tightened, and a wild groan fled his mouth before I was kissed again. "I never stood a chance against you, did I?"

Grinning against his mouth, I licked his bottom lip and locked my legs around his strong waist. "Too bad, so sad," I teased. "Now take me to the shower, you big brute."

Snickering with a devilish grin on his face, Silas lifted me and I clung to him, my arms dropping around his shoulders. I tugged his ear and celebrated the way he quivered against me. His steps were hurried over to the shower, the heat coming out of the box in misty wafts.

"You'll have to make it quick," I warned, kissing him again as the spray washed over us. "Lev will be awake soon. He'll want to review what we found yesterday."

Pressing me against the wall, Silas trailed kisses and bites from my ear to my shoulder. “The lad asked me for a favor today, so he’ll wait. I never promised him a time. You and I have all morning to explore the limits of your body.”

That got my attention. “He asked you for a favor? What do you mean?”

“Cheeky birds aren’t owed explanations. You’ll just have to wait and see,” Silas clapped back and twisted me around.

I was now facing the wall, breasts plastered against the cold, wet tile. His hands caught my hips and dragged me back so I was bent over with my legs spread.

“Now be a good girl and let your handsome rogue have his wicked way with you.”

20

Silas

If breaking my nose got me my gorgeous rebel bent over and at my mercy like this every time, then call me a masochist because I’d happily break it several times a day.

Water poured over my face as my hands lathered soap all over my goddess. I washed every part of her and left the best for last—the one place I hadn’t gone before. The blood had fled my head for my knob when I thought about how she might react. Would she fight me? Would she demand I stop? Would the pleasure be swift and steal every complaint?

If Nika asked me to stop, I would. But something told me that whether or not she openly admitted it, she’d enjoy what I did to her next. She’d enjoy it as much as she enjoyed every bit of affection I laid on her.

Because my rebel was weak to pleasure.

Nika looked over her shoulder when I dropped to my knees behind her. Her mouth opened, but she wasn't given time to speak. My fingers were quicker. After slathering two with lubrication, I teased my bird's puckered hole with a fingertip before pushing past the tight ring of muscle. Her back arched and every part of her tensed. She hadn't expected it.

"What the fuck, Silas?" she rasped.

"Hush, love. Just close your eyes and feel it," I told her, cock throbbing and desperate for attention. But this was about her. Everything I did in punishment always was.

The hands she'd flattened on the wet tile curled inward, but she didn't move or fight to get away. She let me have my way.

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Water splashed and beat down on us, heat rising, but I didn't let it stop me from admiring how gorgeous my little rebel was like this. She never failed to take my breath away. I was a lucky bastard to call this fierce fighter mine.

Lips hitched, I sunk my finger in deeper and set out to taste everything just under it. The air rushed out of the water-battered woman as I swirled my tongue around her clit and then licked the length of her slit twice over. The tight clench around my finger eased the more I did. Soon, Nika was breathless, panting, and moving her hips like the sultry minx she was.

I added another finger, stretching her. Her spine curved and her head fell back into a desperate moan, feeling far more than I ever dared to dream. Even fantasies didn't compare to how beautiful Nika was drenched, moaning, and fully surrendering her body to whatever I wished to do with it.

Bloody fucking perfection, she was.

Her gasping breaths painted the tile in white steam next to her face, her cheek pressed against it. "Silas..." she whispered hoarsely, legs quivering when I added another finger.

My name was all it took to get me on my feet and bending over her. I slammed my fingers in harder, and she swallowed and bit her lower lip to keep from moaning too loudly. The acoustics in this long-dormant home weren't the best for keeping these moments secret.

Which was exactly my intention.

I wanted to keep her voice in the throes of passion to myself, but I wanted those undeserving wankers to know that no matter how much they drooled, no matter how often they stared, no matter if they cozied up to the devastating beauty, she was mine.

My hand moved faster, and her body tensed against the onslaught of sensation. Her glare cut over before she bit her hand to smother her intensifying moans.

Well, we couldn't have that, could we? Because then what good would all this effort be if this house full of wankers didn't hear how good I made my bird feel? I needed every day to start and end with the message so clear it settled into their heads and never disappeared.

They'd never sway her, not with the way she screamed my name as she came.

"No biting, love."

I captured her wrist and bent her arm behind her back so she couldn't do it again. Magic slithered down my arm, locking the limb to her back. Her quickened breathing hit the tile, but she didn't fight me. Grinning, I covered her other hand and locked it above her head. I'd caged the fluttering bird in, but she didn't seem to mind.

No, if anything, she quite liked it.

"You're an asshole," she hissed as if ready to sink her fangs into my throat, but the way she pushed back against me said otherwise.

"You always say the loveliest things, little rebel." Catching her ear between my teeth, I lubricated my cock and pressed it where my fingers had been only a few moments before, teasing the red bud with the tip.

It was maddening how good it felt to touch her. It'd never be enough. I'd always want

more, and I wasn't a gentleman. I'd take it if given the option.

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth and stopped herself from moaning.

"Let's see how long you can keep quiet. Not long, I bet," I whispered huskily.

"Silas, please—"

My thrust cut her off. I speared in deep and without waiting. Lilith's tits, it was the tightest my bird had ever been. The shuddering clench of her vise-tight arse on my cock nearly made a bloody joke out of me. I had to slam my other hand on the tile next to her head to keep from going over the edge. I'd come if I wasn't careful.

Her groan was positively wild. It wasn't one of pain like I worried; it was rich with pleasure, and I breathed a small sigh of relief that I hadn't hurt her in my haste. The lubrication was meant to dull the pain, if not completely erase it. I hadn't been confident it'd work on her with everything she'd become immune to.

Hurting my rebel was out of the question.

Pressing her forehead into the wall, she quaked and gasped. Releasing her pinned arm, I slotted her bent knees over both of my forearms and lifted. Her hands pressed and glided against the wet tile to keep her from falling forward, her head landing back on my shoulder as I pressed close, buried bollocks-deep in her arse.

It was bloody glorious.

I expected to take a hit to the gut, but my rebel was always surprising me. Instead of punishing me for coming in too quickly, she rolled and swiveled her hips, testing the feel of it. She used the wall to power her downward thrusts and her fighter strength to lift and fall on my cock over and over like it was her who initiated it all, not me. It

was my turn to groan. The stimulation was too much, and I hadn't expected it. Nika was always keeping me on my toes. I didn't stand a chance against the clever minx.

"You better make this worth it," she hissed with a sharp gasp, her head turning just enough to put her sexy threat right into my ear. "Because I'm going to kick your ass for this one, mercenary."

"Lilith's tits!" I cursed before withdrawing slightly, only to slam back inside a half-second later. "You know I can't control myself when you talk like that, little rebel."

She didn't answer. She didn't have to. Her hips did the talking for her. She moved them in time with my thrusts, her arm reaching up behind her to wrap around my neck. I dropped a hand between her body and the wall and rubbed her clit the way I knew she liked. That did the trick. The clench of her soft inner walls around my shaft nearly cut the bloody thing off.

"You're way too tight, love. You'll take my knob straight off at this rate," I growled between staggered slaps.

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Her laughter was mixed with moans and grunts. “Serves you right, asshole. It’s the least you deserve.”

I pressed my forehead into her shoulder, hips moving on their own. The pleasure was bloody intoxicating. It always was, but exploring the depths of her arse made it new and exciting. I kept that bit to myself though, out of fear of what my saucy rebel might do if I muttered it out loud.

When she yanked my mouth close to hers, I kissed her and lost myself to the incredible tightness of her body. Steady smacks echoed around us as I sped up, close to making an absolute wanker of myself.

Well, more than I already had.

I hadn’t expected Nika to like it so much that she’d chase every thrust of my hips with her own, but the two of us were in perfect sync. I clung to her, and she clung to me.

After what I’d argue was longer than ten minutes, though I was confident it barely reached a minute or two, I spilled myself deep in her arse. Rigid and huffing as the water continued to wash over us, I pulled out and checked her over. I didn’t see any tears or blood.

Nika swatted me away with an irritated laugh, her pale skin a fierce red and her breathing haggard. “I’m fine, Silas. Stop fucking touching.”

“Na-ah, love. This is your first time with the untold pleasures of the bum. What sort

of bastard would I be to leave you in any painful state?" I complained, wiping away water from my face before slicking back my hair.

Her smirk was impish. "Who said it was my first time?"

My gut dropped straight through my bollocks to the floor. "What?" Jealousy was a swift fucking monster. "This isn't your first time with it, princess?" Every word was a growl leaving my mouth. "What wanker was it? Were they on the list? If they weren't—"

Nika's smile overtook her face, and she laughed a little too happily at my miserable expense. "I'm joking, Silas." Red crept back into her cheeks, though the color already stained several parts of her pale body. "This was my first time."

Another first? I was bleeding chuffed.

I walked her back, sandwiching her between the wall and my body. "It was, was it?" I couldn't help the victorious grin on my face. "What'd you think, princess? Like it?"

"I'm not telling," she grumbled, but her hand reached for my face. "Are you finished?"

My smile faded.

It only dawned on me when she asked that she hadn't come. Like a bloody wanker, I'd come first. My reputation as her sex god boyfriend was on the line if she left this shower unsatisfied. But more than that, I never wanted my rebel to be left wanting. If anyone was going to leave unsatisfied, it'd be me.

"Silas?" she asked when I didn't speak.

Dropping to my knees again, I maneuvered her legs over my shoulders. Our eyes clashed when I glanced up at her from between her thighs. “I have one thing left to do. Won’t take but a minute, love,” I murmured in a devilish tone before driving my tongue into her wet cunt.

Like a vise, her thighs latched onto my head. I smirked against her soft folds and hoped I’d make her come before these powerful thighs could put an end to an infamous, uncatchable, and unkillable assassin. I grappled with her strong leg muscles and devoured her cunt like it was my last meal.

Nika’s hands gripped my wet hair for leverage, rocking back and forth against my mouth. I hummed and released one thigh to slide my fingers along her slick folds until I reached her well-stretched hole at the back. Her breath caught and her stomach retracted when I grazed it. And then my bird waited on bated breath for me to finish what I started.

With a happy little growl, I sunk two fingers in and flicked her pleasure nub expertly with my tongue. Her delighted moan motivated my fingers deeper, my tongue into greater flicking, twisting, and swirling actions. I was at her mercy, desperate to do my goddess’s bidding. If she’d commanded it, I’d let these dangerous thighs smash my skull to pieces.

“Right there,” she moaned, gripping my head harder.

My insatiable cock throbbed, always ready for the next round. “Here?” I confirmed with a suck. She quivered and nodded. “How about another finger, yeah? My greedy little rebel likes the feeling from both ends, doesn’t she?”

“Shut up,” she breathed between sharp gasps. “If anyone’s greedy, it’s you.”

“Never said I wasn’t, love.” I chuckled and bit the inside of her thigh. “I’d be a

bloody numpty if I didn't take full advantage of a sweet cunt like this, yeah?"

Water glistened and streamed down her beautiful pale skin. Nika had come undone the way she always did, surrendering to the pleasure I gave her. I enjoyed the view before snaking up her body and lifting her under the back of her thighs.

She curled around me and used her powerful muscles to lift herself. Then she laid one on me. My bird was good with her mouth in a lot of ways. She never failed to get a groan out of me when she took control. I didn't have a brain cell left to spare when she dropped down and swallowed the length of my cock with her tight cunt.

My hips snapped up to finish the job, and a wild sound left her throat. Neither of us had the patience for slow love-making. Our pace was ruthless from the start. She hopped on my knob like it was her bleeding job, one she was fucking good at, and I just did my best to keep up.

Our harsh breaths echoed around us, the smack of my hips punctuating our lustful chorus. It might've lasted hours if I hadn't a band of unwelcome wankers waiting down the hall. Instead, it was only a few minutes where we didn't speak, where our mouths never left each other and our pace never faltered until the end.

"Oh, fuck," Nika cursed, her walls squeezing around me like they'd never let go.

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I wasn't far behind her. With a grip like the one her cunt had on me, even the strongest bastard couldn't keep it together. My rebel was the fiercest in the land, she was.

I crowded her, expecting a loving moment, but she evaded me and left the shower after making sure she was clean. Her sneaky grin taunted me on her way out of the bathroom, leaving me with no other option but to wash myself.

She's a devil. Drives me bleeding mad.

21

Nika

Silas spent equal parts of the day grinning like he'd won a prize and pouting like a child when I paid attention to anyone other than him. But by the time evening rolled around, I finally understood what Lev had up his sleeve and wrangled the big child into doing with him.

Arms crossed over, I glared at the diabolical prankster next to me.

Lev had his blue hair gelled back in a smart look. His green eyes were a shade lighter in the outfit he wore. It was the sexiest he'd looked since leaving the Dark Fae Society. Normally, when he was in something this crisp and expensive, it was so he could pretend he was someone else.

Tonight he wasn't pretending. Tonight Lev had stepped out in a trendy outfit he'd

hand-selected for our outing as himself. Everyone around us noticed him for the gorgeous man he was.

I stole a glance at the sign glowing across the side of the building. Violet Rage, the nightclub where humans went to let off steam and rub up against strangers. I'd seen enough to know it was weird we'd come here at all. What sort of living happened inside a place like this? Dancing? Alcohol?

Guess that aligned with the two next to me. They enjoyed both and probably thought I would, too. I was more worried about what would happen to all the tension in the group by the end of the night if there was alcohol, dancing, and strangers involved.

"Don't glare at me like that. You'll have fun, promise," Lev assured me. His eyes naturally strayed between the other two men joining us out. Well, the ones visible to everyone. "You can't deny that Bear Claw and Silas look hot tonight."

Peeking at the two in question, I was unfortunately in agreement. Eyes everywhere were fastened to them. Human women were whispering, too starstruck to come closer. The human men with them weren't as excited by two handsome men in their midst, but I'd heard several ask if they'd seen them in a movie or if they were models.

Silas made it a point to keep his arm around me, warding off any of the men looking my way. Salvator sneered and glared at any person who came close, acting more animal than man. The shifter wasn't at all interested in blending in with the people around him, and he didn't seem to be on the lookout for fun.

His eyes were on me whenever I spared the tall shifter a glance. Dark hair fell around his strong jaw and angular cheekbones. His arms stayed perpetually crossed over his massive chest. I didn't think he had any other way of standing, honestly. He sneered at Lev when my friend smiled at him, but his fathomless stare didn't leave mine, as if I

was his sole focus even in a crowd.

But that was to be expected.

Salvator had been in my head for months, and we'd grown close. I'd felt how much he cared even when he argued he didn't. He might be a growly asshole, but I still considered him a friend. The shifter could've disappeared after reclaiming his body and a second chance at life, but he'd waited for me. He chose to help us. That meant something.

Silas might not trust him, but I did.

It'd taken all of Lev's charms and silver-tongued finesse to persuade the shifter to not only wear more than a pair of pants, but to look like someone who'd steal the limelight from any beautiful Fae in our society. Ryker and Silas had taken immense joy in the shifter's misery after he agreed—up until the moment he came out looking like a dangerously sexy bad boy, as Lev described it.

Silas had grumbled something about showing off and then disappeared to get dressed in our room. When he reappeared, his silver hair was in a chaotic but alluring mess around his head. He'd put on a torn pair of jeans and tight shirt that highlighted his massive torso. His arm tattoos were on display.

It wasn't so much the outfit but the way the mercenary wore it. He strutted around like a god visiting our realm. At least that was the way Lev put it. My friend was a bit over the top with his descriptions sometimes. His love for everything Normie played a huge role in his verbal flair.

"If we touch Nika, will we become sex idols for all the females to adore, too? Oh, maybe we can change into something flashy and expensive. Bet we wouldn't be able to keep the females off us," Ryker murmured to Tometi behind me, invisible to those

around him. Humans passed through their bodies, neither seeing nor feeling the phantom pair.

I was the only one who could.

“I’m not in rut. Why would I need a female?” Tometi asked. I turned my head just in time to catch his face twist in a way that was quickly becoming his signature look. Confusion. “And why would I wear clothes when I only intend to take them off? You say the oddest things, wolf.”

It was a fair point, one even Ryker couldn’t refute. His happy laughter meant he still would because the wolf had the most fun when Tometi missed the point entirely.

After arriving, Tometi had spent a good fifteen minutes smelling everyone close to us. It’d given Ryker something to laugh about, but now he was bored. And when the wolf was bored, he picked fun at the bear or his previous host in creative ways.

It was his M.O.

“You’ve never been with a female out of your rut, Tome? That’s no way to live,” Ryker chastised his much taller counterpart with a grin.

The giant who no one could see laughed, taking three of our group by surprise. Even Salvator snapped his eyes over to where Tometi stood. “You might be right, Ryk. Females always smell...so good. I wouldn’t be against exploring more of that scent out of rut.”

Uh...

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Ryker bounced in place. “Did you hear that, sweet girl? He gave me a nickname and he wants to explore females. I’m such a good influence.”

I heard Salvator snort, but the shifter glowered when I smirked at him. “I don’t know about a good influence.”

“What, you’d deny my big loveable bear here the pleasure of a female’s touch that’s not brought on by instincts? That’s just mean,” Ryker complained, leaning against Tometi in a way I could only describe as cutesy.

Tometi didn’t seem to return the affection because he eclipsed the wolf’s entire face in one hand and pushed the offensive blonde away.

Clearing my throat, I leered at the blonde. “You realize I’d have to touch you guys the entire time for you to do anything with someone, right?”

As if the idea had only just occurred to him, Ryker perked up, and I could’ve sworn I saw wolf ears. “Oh! There’s an idea. A threesome is on my bucket list. Four-P, even? What a way to celebrate this new body. Wolves aren’t exactly the sharing type, but I’ve always been open to things other wolves aren’t.”

That tracks.

I tried not to laugh. I wasn’t clear on what four-P was, but I could hazard a guess. Either way, I didn’t want him to think I was on board, but the wolf had a way of making me smile.

“Sorry?” Silas asked next to me, visibly disgruntled. “What’s this about you touching those head-squatting wankers while they’re with someone else, love? That a joke? It better be.” He glared at the spot he thought the two unseen men were, but he was looking in the completely opposite direction.

I giggled and shook my head. It tickled me that an infamous assassin with skills that put the fear of death into anyone who heard his name had met his match in two phantoms he couldn’t see or hear.

“It is a joke,” I promised, patting his arm. “I don’t have any intention of helping Ryker get laid.”

Lev chuckled and moved forward with the line of humans, eyeing the club bouncers who’d gotten closer over the last fifteen minutes. The two of them were talking and looking our way. “You have the worst luck with perverts, Niks.”

“Tell me about it,” I said, casting a glance at Silas.

My pervert’s grin was impish, his silver hair falling around his eyes in the sexiest way possible. Because, of course. “I don’t know what you mean, love. I’m the picture of innocence, I am.”

“Sure you are.”

“Okay, no sex, but dancing should be fine, right? I want to test out how good I am at moving this body on the dance floor.” Ryker swayed his hips with a wink, stopping himself from touching me when Tometi snarled at him.

“You promised,” the bear warned. “Only if she touches you first. She’s not your female. You don’t get to touch her without asking.”

I offered the giant a grateful smile. “I appreciate that, Tometi. Consent is very important.”

I didn’t mention the fact that if they suddenly became visible, the humans would run and scream away from them, not toward them. But I was interested to see if they could change their clothes or lift weapons. It’d be worth testing. We’d only tested their initial physicality with a punch, but if they could use weapons, then it’d be smart to carry more for them to use.

Rilas and his minions could attack at any moment, especially if Bones betrayed us. I wasn’t convinced we were in the clear. We weren’t sure what power my grandmother sealed away, or what the demon could initially do. What I did know was he’d wait for us to get comfortable before striking, so I’d never be comfortable.

“What’s the giant troll said now to get that smile out of you, little rebel?” Silas pouted. “I don’t like it.”

“I’m a bear,” Tometi repeated for the nth time that day. It was quickly becoming his catchphrase, not to mention it was often said to people who couldn’t hear him. “For an assassin, he’s not very smart, is he?”

I couldn’t help but laugh, and Silas’s pout only deepened.

Ryker made a sound with his lips and pushed Tometi aside. “We’ve gone off topic. One dance, pretty girl. That’s all I ask. It’s not fair that your overprotective boyfriend calls all the shots. He’s been a massive tool all day. He hasn’t even let us touch you once.”

“Tool? Shots? You’re speaking in riddles again,” Tometi bemoaned, huffing and coming closer without touching me.

It was difficult to deny the wolf anything, I was quickly discovering. “Okay. One dance.”

Silas’s eyes shot over. “Sorry?”

I ignored him and looked over at Salvator. The shifter’s jaw clenched, and as if he’d decided something, he came closer. “He only wants a reason to put his hands on you, woman. You’re better off ignoring him. Give the wolf an inch, and he’ll take a mile.”

“Well, I never,” Ryker cried out in ghoulish horror. “And if we’re going to be sharing secrets—”

“It’s not a secret,” Salvator growled.

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“—then I have several exhibits of evidence to present to the court,” Ryker went on, his voice warped by a weirdly professional tone. Guess Lev and Silas weren’t the only Normie show lovers. He’d been subjected to the same stuff as I had over the last half year while a guest inside my head.

“This isn’t a courtroom, and she isn’t a judge,” Salvator complained with an irritated breath.

“I’ll be the judge of that, Sally.” Ryker smirked, his arms crossed and eyes aimed at his previous host, as though Salvator could see him at all. “Exhibit A: I’ve caught Sally more than once using his wolf form to sneak around the house to keep an eye on you.”

Ryker was absolutely an agent of chaos.

“I’ll kill you if you say another word.”

“He hid in a closet once when your ridiculously attractive and immensely scary boyfriend nearly caught him doing it,” Ryker added with a little grin my direction. “Ended up watching you undress when he couldn’t escape right away and became a shade of red I’ve never seen on the man.”

I’d come to terms with the fact that Tometi and Ryker had seen me naked several times already, but this was news to me. When I peered over at the shifter, brow raised, it was the first I’d ever seen him look ashamed and apologetic.

“It wasn’t intentional,” he said under his breath. “I can smell Rilas better in that

form.”

So, he was worried about me.

Silas peered down in question, and I gave him a little smile to assure him it was nothing. I mean, it wasn't nothing, but he'd see it as a reason to draw blood, and I didn't want to be in the middle of another fight.

“Exhibit B,” Ryker went on. “He's marked you with his scent.”

Marked me with his scent? What did that mean?

I wasn't given time to ask because Salvator bristled and snarled at the phantom blonde. “Touch him, Nika. Do it now. Let's see how confident he is to mouth off when there's nowhere to hide.” His voice belied a rage I hadn't heard on him in a while, but it was Lev who cut in before things could unravel into violent chaos.

“In case you guys have forgotten, we're in public with humans and you all look crazy.”

My mercenary, his arm still securely wrapped around my waist, didn't seem to agree. “No, no, lad. I wouldn't mind letting this little row run its course, yeah? Let the two of them handle it like men.”

“You would say that.” Lev sighed in open distaste. “But tonight's about Nika, not you emotional animals incapable of putting a pin in it for one night.”

Apparently the gloves had come off.

“Only two of us here are animals,” Tometi corrected next to Lev like my friend could see and hear him.

“Not anymore,” Ryker said with another one of his secret grins. “Unless you’ve found your inner beast?”

Tometi was suddenly sad and looking at the ground. A long breath escaped him. “I haven’t.”

Finally turning to Lev, I sassed him with a grin. “And here I thought this night was all about you.”

He stuck his tongue out at me but didn’t deny anything. He couldn’t. I wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t insisted, and he knew it.

With a glare at the two unseen animals-turned-men, Salvator asked Lev, “Why are we really here, boy?”

“Like I said earlier, Niks has never been to a human club. I thought it was time to live a little,” he proclaimed for the second time that day. “The end of the world can wait one more day. She deserves one night where she doesn’t have to worry about all that bullshit.”

“Live a little” was the pitch he’d made when I first told him no. I was worried about going into the city with everything still messy at best, but both he and Silas insisted it wasn’t going to be a problem, and against the two of them, I didn’t stand a chance of winning.

I was mostly surprised Silas was on board. He’d been anti-anything that put me in danger. I didn’t know what Lev said to get him to agree, but the big brute hadn’t complained about being out in the heart of the city at all since we’d left.

It was suspicious.

“What does Lev have on you?” I whispered to the silver-haired assassin wrapped around me. “Did you lose a bet?”

Silas gave me a sneaky grin and shrugged. “I don’t know what you mean, love. I just thought it was a good night to live a little.”

Lev snickered next to me. “Well, and I told him that you’re an incredible dancer. Even the Dark Fae Society fell silent in collective awe when you put on a show for your father’s birthday that one year. I still remember that asshole Devion’s face. Total captivation. Pretty sure you’re the reason he died out on assignment the next day.”

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“Lev, I’m going to obliterate you. That was supposed to stay between us,” I complained with a withering sigh. I’d hoped never to relive that night. I’d been propositioned by more than Devion, and it ended in a fight. “I haven’t danced in thirty years.”

“Which is a damn shame,” Lev clapped back, winking.

Silas leaned down and whispered in my ear, “I’m of the same opinion. You’ve deprived your handsome rogue a part of yourself, little rebel. We can’t have that, now can we?”

“You know what, you’re right,” I agreed a little too quickly, catching my group off guard. Turning my eyes to where Ryker and Tometi stood, I beamed a smile at them. “I’ll dance with you boys first. It’s only right, seeing how neither of you have had a chance to enjoy your new bodies yet.”

Silas’s mood soured in an instant. “That’s bloody diabolical of you, little rebel.”

“Creative punishments for difficult blokes, right?” I crossed my arms and offered the big oaf a saucy wink, imitating his accent in the worst way possible. “You dragged me out here with the help of my best friend, so I’ll be making the most of it.”

Lev tossed his head back and laughed. “She’s got you there.”

“Oi, lad, whose side are you on?” Silas scowled and clung to me as if it’d keep me from doing what I threatened.

Shrugging, my friend watched as one of the bouncers made his way over to our group. “Hers, obviously.”

Before Silas could argue, the bouncer who was ironically shorter and had less muscle than the two giants in our group tapped his shoulder.

22

Nika

It was a sight when Silas pivoted, placing his body between me and the club bouncer as if he expected an attack. Silas was nearly halfway to seven feet, and this guy was several inches shy of six. The people around us quieted, sure a fight was about to break out. A few had their phones aimed at us, and I silently hoped Silas didn’t make a scene that ended up on a human news channel.

Probably not a great way to stay under the radar.

The human took a step back and cleared his throat. “Come with me,” he said in a much too soft voice, visibly uncomfortable with Silas leering down at him.

“For what reason, mate?”

I didn’t see Silas’s expression, but Ryker was behind the dark-haired human giving me a hilarious play-by-play. “Oh, he’s using that grin. You know, that ‘I’ll tear you apart piece by piece, and I’ll enjoy it’ grin he gives before slicing a poor asshole to bits. Real horror movie stuff,” Ryker told me, whistling in appreciation. “Gotta hand it to the overprotective asshole, he’s a scary motherfucker when you cross him. I’d be pissing my pants if I weren’t already dead.”

The bouncer’s eyes shot over to where I stood behind Silas, desperate for help. “I

just...I thought you'd want to skip the line, sweetheart. Don't you? It's a bit cold, and you're in that dress... She's with you, right?"

"Oi, you're talking to me, mate. Don't look at her. Don't talk to her." Silas's voice had dropped several octaves. "Talk to me, and you'll be sound, yeah?"

The man's Adam's apple bobbed. "Yes, of course. Sorry about that, sir."

I almost felt bad for the guy, but I'd intervene if Silas took it a step too far. With a quick glance to my side, it was evident he and Salvator were on the same page. The shifter glared at the bouncer like he'd take his head if he so much as toed out of line.

"Skip the line, you say?" Silas hummed and cradled his jaw, then turned to me. "Seems like we're getting the VIP treatment thanks to you, love. This bloke here is quite taken with you, seeing how he's a bit fretful about how cold you'll be in that dress..."

He might be smiling, but his words made every human around us shift back several steps.

When his head turned, the bouncer shrunk back even farther, knocking into a few people behind him. "No disrespect, sir. We always choose a few ladies to come in ahead of the rest. It's policy." He swallowed. "And totally random."

"Random? Oh, aye." Silas eased off the poor human and slung his arm around my shoulders with a shit-eating grin. "In that case, lead the way, Hubert." But his eyes went to Salvator, and the two shared a look that carried weight.

"It's Harry."

Silas cackled. "Exactly what I said, Hubert."

The poor guy didn't have the hubris to correct my oversized brute a second time, so he simply unhooked the barrier rope and gestured for us to head toward the entrance. The other blonde human guarding the door nodded at Silas as we passed, equally wide-eyed and uncomfortable. Neither seemed eager to talk to him.

Why had we gotten chosen?

Looking up, I waited for Silas to clue me into what he was thinking, but the mercenary dropped a quick kiss on my mouth and pulled me closer without uttering a word.

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We headed inside with another human leading us. This one was a woman, and her sole focus was the three men I'd come with. She made a big show of bending over so her cleavage was in perfect view of each one. When none of them responded, the cute redhead huffed and pointed to a door where another man in a suit stood guard. It led to the second-floor stairs. After a short inspection, I got the sense it was human security. I didn't sense any magic.

Fae types weren't the only ones with magic. Salvator wasn't a Fae. I learned he was a human whose ancestors gained favor with animal souls and were given the ability to shift into those animal forms. It was those magical forms that gave him a longer lifespan and fast healing even out of them.

Breeding with humans had a lot to do with their kind having access to different types of magic. It manifested sometimes after skipping generations, but other magical types did exist, though some had been eradicated, like Tometi mentioned before. The most prevalent were Light and Dark Fae. Fae I could sense easier, but others I needed to dig deeper to know for sure.

I hadn't encountered many myself, but my father kept a detailed accounting of every type he'd crossed paths with. Silas explained that the Brotherhood was known for its versatility, so I should expect to encounter types I never knew existed and powers I'd argue shouldn't be possible.

That was why I never doubted him when he got like this. He'd lived centuries longer. I couldn't possibly understand that level of knowledge and skill. Not only was I barely a tenth of his age, but I'd been kept under lock and key in the Dark Fae Society.

With flourish, the human female gestured to the second floor, where glass lined the side and the ambiance was decidedly intimate. “You can feel free to use any table on our second floor. It’s a section for our special guests. Let the waiter up there know what you’d like to drink. First round of cocktails are on us.” Then she disappeared to greet someone else.

“Is that normal for a human club?” I asked Lev.

He hummed and shook his head. “Not typically, no, but I keep telling you that you’re hot, and you never believe me. Hot girls in the human world get special treatment.”

“And in my bed,” Silas added, bending down to bite my neck. I barely held back a gasp. “But not to worry, love. It’s just the one. You keep me plenty busy.”

“Oh, we know. We heard it loud and clear this morning,” Lev complained before getting an elbow from me.

I took in the space with a curious eye. It was much bigger inside than it looked from the outside. It branched out to several areas: a bar, dance floor, and seated booths. I’d expected it to be overly crowded, but it wasn’t. Most of the humans congregated either on the dance floor or around the bar, but the spaces in between were easier to move around in.

The tight little number Lev picked out for me to wear clung to every curve, and Silas didn’t know how to keep his hands to himself. They were always wandering one curve or another, making sure no one mistook me as single. He’d said as much the minute I stepped out wearing it.

“You’re a diabolical bastard to give my bird a dress like that, lad. I’m going to spend the entire bloody night plucking the eyes out of anyone who stares too long.”

Lev had celebrated his victory with a laugh and thumbs up, not the least bit sorry. I wasn't happy about the dress, either. It barely covered anything. I'd be tugging at it all night. But it wasn't the first time I'd worn something like it, and it certainly wouldn't be the last if the way Silas ate me up as I walked by his side had anything to do with it.

He'd complained but didn't demand I change. He couldn't. He was enjoying it the most, and the grin Lev snuck the large brute's way said he knew it, too.

Standing tables lined a half wall as we walked deeper into the building, and I caught humans peeking our way in fascination. I didn't sense anything other than humans. Magic tickled at the end of my fingers, ready to slither around the area and find anything lurking. But out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glitter of blue before it disappeared.

Silas was already several steps ahead of me.

"What's got you two on guard?" I asked, searching for something I wasn't seeing.

"Smell anything?" Silas asked Salvator when we stopped between the bar and dance floor.

Salvator was close to my side, scanning the crowd. "Not anything I recognize, but I'm limited in this form."

"You think him selecting us wasn't a coincidence?" I finally gathered.

Silas scanned the crowd, then he leaned down so his mouth was right next to my ear. "It's possible, but I can't find anything. Either nothing's here, or we're dealing with sneaky bastards."

Peeking over my shoulder, I eyed the two phantoms. They both shook their heads. “Tometi and Ryker don’t smell anything, either.”

Silas and Salvator didn’t appear convinced. Neither of them let down their guard as we made our way to the entrance leading upstairs. The human guarding the door pressed a finger to his ear, nodded, and then gestured for us to go up. But no one in my group moved.

Silas glared at the security guard the way he had the bouncers, and the large man grew increasingly wary of what he might do.

It was several silent seconds before Lev slapped both men on the back, smirking. “Stay on guard, if you must, but don’t let it ruin our night out. I promised Niks fun, and you guys being all shifty-eyed and serious isn’t it.”

Silas grinned and landed a hand on Lev’s shoulder hard enough to nearly take my friend off his feet. The guy guarding the door flinched but tried to hide it. “You’re right, lad. No sense in ruining a perfectly good night out.” The brute’s hands were already back on my hips, dragging me close. “And I have plans for this one. You two grab a table and drinks.”

Lev waved us away, and I was taken out to the floor where the music overpowered all other sounds.

“Now...” Silas murmured when he’d decided we were in a good spot. “What’s this I hear about dancing, love? Why have I never been shown these nymph of the forest moves in all the months I’ve been your one true love?”

Shaking my head, I let him guide my hands around his shoulders. “One true love, huh?”

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“Don’t be coy, little rebel. I know your feelings for me are what inspires the verses in poetry.” He grinned down at me like a little kid who’d gotten his hands on his favorite toy.

It annoyed me how much I fell for that smile. Any time this brute looked at me like I was all he saw, I couldn’t help but fall in love with him again. But I’d give away the entire game if I said so.

“Bit of a stretch, isn’t it?”

He grabbed my face hard enough to make me listen, but his touch was as gentle as always. Bending his head close, he snickered. “Cheeky.”

The kiss was brief but powerful. His breath painted my wet lips as the music changed and the humans around us hollered and shouted their excitement. The song drew a bigger crowd. Humans poured onto the dance floor to move along with the melody and sing the lyrics.

A little cerulean snake of magic around Silas’s finger danced between us, elevating his voice over the screaming crowd. I wouldn’t have heard him otherwise. “You asked what the lad had on me.” Silas pressed close, his body merging with mine. My little black dress started to ride up my thighs, but he tugged it down before one of his large hands took the shape of my ass. “It’s simple, love. You.”

“Me?” I asked, a little breathless. We might be surrounded by a human crowd gone wild, but all I saw, all I heard, all I felt was him.

Silas's mouth moved from my ear to the pulse point on my throat. My breath caught, the feeling of his teeth scraping over my skin a surprise when it shouldn't be. "Oh, aye. That cute wanker knows you in ways I don't. I don't like it, but it's the truth, and I'd be a daft bastard to deny it." His hand locked around my jaw again and lifted my gaze to his. "When he sayssomething about you, I listen. And he said you needed this, love."

I opened my mouth to argue, but he tutted me with a little grin. Then he kissed me again. His tongue teased across mine, swirling and stroking, while his other hand grappled my ass harder.

"He's right," Silas murmured against my mouth between kisses. The music's tempo quickened, and the floor under our feet thumped from the humans around us enjoying the new song playing. "You deserve a night out where you're just...Nika, yeah?" He drew back enough for me to catch another devilish gleam in his golden eyes. "My gorgeous girlfriend."

Laughing, I nodded. "Okay, I get it." He tried to kiss me again, but I evaded him. "Even the great Shimmering Assassin has fallen for Lev's charms," I teased with an eyebrow waggle.

"Oi," he grumbled, but I was already swaying in time with the beat, singing the words I heard more than once.

Lev had gone through all the trouble to make this night happen. He'd even wrangled two men who couldn't stand the sight of each other into coming along. The least I could do was try to enjoy myself. Who knew when the next enemy would come looking?

Fighting and dancing weren't terribly different. Learning to move your body to destroy an opponent, strike back and evade their advances, became something of a

dance. I'd argue Silas was an incredible dancer himself. I'd seen it enough times to know we'd have no trouble syncing.

And tonight he was my opponent.

Embracing my mischievous self, I swayed from side to side and dragged my hands down his chest. With a careful step, I stole the spot behind him and pressed a daring kiss on his back. He tried to turn, but I evaded him again, twisting around his body and keeping just out of reach. I swayed back and forth, moving my arms and hips in a sensual display, the way I knew would get to the insatiable beast.

He wanted to see me dance? Then I'd give him a show.

His eyes tracked every movement I made. I came close and escaped whenever he tried to touch me. My caresses were brief, my touches meant only to tease. I rubbed my body against his before spiriting away. Frustration twisted his face after several minutes. He'd never met anyone he couldn't catch. I was fast even without the use of my magic.

Biting my lip, I winked at him and ran my hands along my curves within view but irritatingly out of reach. His jaw clamped shut and his golden eyes became silver. With a growl, he snatched me before I could get away again and held my body impossibly close.

"You're a bloody tease," he accused on a husky whisper.

Grinning, I reached up and traced his lower lip with my thumb. "Never said I wasn't."

We moved together, swaying and pressing. The vicious beat and strobe of lights kept the dancing fast and a little bit wild. We never stopped touching each other. It'd been

a while since I'd sweated doing anything but training or fucking. After only ten minutes, perspiration slid down my neck and chest. He chase several drops with his tongue.

"I'll be honest, love," Silas's voice rumbled next to my ear, his hands in my hair. "This is bloody fucking torture. Why did I ever agree to watching you dance in this dress anywhere I couldn't tear it to pieces and fuck the moans out of that pretty little mouth?"

Reaching for his head, I cradled his face in my hands. "You'll just have to settle for kissing me, I guess."

He groaned like I'd told him to strip me down right there in front of everyone. Yanking my head back, he bent down to capture my mouth in a feral kiss. It was unhinged, hot, and absolutely perfect with every curve of him fusing with every curve of mine.

I wasn't sure how long we stayed like that, dancing, kissing, locked in a passionate heat of our own making. It might've been minutes, hours, maybe even days, but I never wanted it to end.

It was tough to admit how much fun I was already having. I was free to do whatever I wanted. Here, my only agenda was to have a good time.

Maybe Lev was right. Living a little was exactly what I needed. It'd felt like since fleeing the Dark Fae Society, my life had become a death march to the final battle with a demon. I'd spent every day focused on what it'd take to be ready. I wanted to make the right decision. The world depended on it. That responsibility was heavy, and I carried it every day.

Out here at a human club where no one knew us, no one wanted us dead, no one

cared what we did, the weight I carried eased a little. My worries faded. It was just me and the boys, nothing more, nothing less.

Sweat poured down my body. “I think I need a drink,” I finally told the mercenary presently kissing a trail down my neck.

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Silas nodded and led me off the floor. Salvator and Lev were already waiting with my two phantoms, though they didn't know it. Ryker beamed at me before his gaze slid down my body. I noticed Salvator's do the same.

"You look like you're having fun," Lev teased, proud of himself.

I sighed with a little smirk. "Okay, okay. You were right. I needed this."

Lev fist-pumped, nearly spilling the drink he held. He stopped before the liquid could slosh over the side, then offered it to me. "You thirsty?"

"How'd you know?"

Silas rumbled a laugh, but his eyes were fixed on Salvator. "Love, I hate to tell you this, but you're a shade of red you weren't before we went out there."

Glaring at him, I drank the cocktail Lev gave me. It wasn't anything I'd had before, but it felt familiar. I tested the taste of it on my tongue, and as if he'd been waiting for it, Lev beamed a smile at me.

"It's very similar to the one Bane used to make," he told me, grinning. "I can't get the flavors perfect since he used magic and ingredients humans don't grow, but this is as close as I could get to it."

The glass was already empty when I stared down at it, nostalgia hitting like a damn gut-punch.

I'd been too scared to think about my father and mother since I sent them to their awaiting afterlife. It was too hard. He'd been my everything for so long. With my mother out of the picture from early on, my father had been my haven in a world of pain and agony. He wasn't perfect, no one was, but he'd loved me the way every father should.

Biting my lower lip, I let loose a heart-weary sigh. "Thank you," I whispered. "It's delicious."

I was worried he hadn't heard me, but Lev winked and slung an arm around my shoulders. "I think it's my turn to twirl you about the dance floor. It's been a hot minute since you and I tore up a party."

"In the isolation of my room, you mean," I teased.

Lev laughed with his head thrown back, tugging me close with a secretive smile. "Bet I can talk the DJ into a few songs..."

"Don't you dare." I scowled.

"Now I have to."

"Oi, lad. Hands off," Silas growled.

Before the two could fight, Ryker was in front of me, hand out. "Pretty girl?"

Salvator took a step in the wolf's direction, but then we all stopped. An ominous sensation erupted across the space. The lights cut out, and the entire building was blanketed in darkness.

Silas

Bollocks!

I'd been suspicious when they let us in ahead of the humans, but I couldn't sense any bastards after coming inside. My bird deserved a night out without the worries of the world clawing at her. So, I ignored the feeling in my gut.

I shouldn't have.

The glow of the wolf bastard's eyes came and went, on the hunt for enemies. He'd search out the party-crashing twats and likely find them before I did. They'd gone to great lengths to conceal themselves and wait until our guard was down, but the mistake they'd made was not attacking from the start.

Now I'd have their heads.

First, I needed to get Nika out of this death trap. She'd try to save every human life. It'd make it difficult to fight whoever had come.

I didn't think it was Rilas. Even without his time-freezing power as a demon with Soul Collector abilities, my brother would've attacked the second the lights cut out—and in a body we didn't immediately recognize. He wouldn't want to give us any time to collect ourselves and prepare to fight. He'd strike hard and fast, doing as much damage as possible.

He'd aim to kidnap Nika before all else.

Rilas was a shapeshifter, but not in the same way Bear Claw was. His ability let him become anyone with a little bit of their blood, and in ways that went beyond looks alone. It was next to impossible to know the difference between him and those he

shifted into, even with the help of magic.

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He'd made it a habit of collecting from everyone we met. I'd made sure to destroy his stash after his death, but he'd likely created a new one since his resurrection. It was why every person was a potential enemy in my eyes.

I'd mentioned it to Nika once, but I hadn't seen the demon bastard use it so I didn't want to worry her over a possibility. I'd deal with him if he shapeshifted.

I was his identical twin. Though his natural hair, present eye color, and the color of his magic didn't match mine, the rest did. I could see through the mirage of his shift. There were always discrepancies, and eventually it broke down in my presence. Because our genetic makeup was identical, his magic became confused around me.

If he hadn't used it yet, that was likely the reason.

As much as it bothered me to admit, Bear Claw would know it was Rilas, too. His nose was the best in the business. Unlike most, he'd pick out Rilas's scent even in his human form, and with those two phantoms following my rebel around, Rilas wouldn't have a hope in hell of sneaking past us. So, I suspected he'd hired someone else to do the job for him, and their target would be taking Nika to the shady bastard unharmed.

Not that I'd let it get to that point.

No one in the Brotherhood was a match for me, but the vast network of magical types made a fight here dangerous. Humans would die, and while I didn't care about a few caught in the crossfire, Nika would blame herself. If it was within my power to do, I'd never be the reason she frowned.

Spotting my confused rebel, I grabbed her arm so I didn't lose her to the sudden chaos inside the dark club. She swung out at me, but my voice stopped her from attacking. "It's just me, love."

She breathed a sigh and wrapped her arms around my waist. "Oh, thank fuck. I thought time stopped and it was...well, you know."

It was a bleeding crime how lovely she was like this, arms squeezing around me and face pressed against my chest like she'd never let go. A lethal woman capable of world-bending feats reduced to the cutest thing on the planet. It did things to a bloke when he needed all the blood in the right head. Made the devious lad in me toy with the idea of recreating this atmosphere so I could exploit it for another cheeky fantasy.

"Blackout?" the lad asked.

They couldn't see, not without the use of magic. Here, it'd be a risk to use. I always carried my mask in some way or another. It helped me see in pitch darkness. I'd put it on without thinking when the lights went out. Magic transformed my clothes to the Shimmering Assassin, or what these tossers would know as Silver, and my mask would distort any human's memory crossing my path. Otherwise we'd have our hands full with a bunch of loonies.

Humans were yelling, in different stages of panic. I heard several try to calm the crowd, while others bellowed for their lost mates. My bird was nearly rammed while still in my arms, but I grabbed and chunked the frantic wanker several feet the other direction.

"Afraid not, lad. We'll need to get out of here if we don't want these humans to be collateral damage. Did you bring weapons?"

Lev nodded and removed a few from his jacket. He handed a dagger to Nika, but my

rebel was clever. She'd already retrieved several from between her legs. I'd need to see that trick of hers for myself later because the dress she'd worn was itty-bitty. Even this sneaky bloke was mystified where'd she'd kept them, and how I hadn't felt a single one when my hands spent the entire night wandering her curves.

Nika stared up at me, still blind in the dark. "I don't want any humans killed, Silas."

Oh aye, my bird would put her life on the line to spare a couple of humans.

With a sigh, I searched the area. "Then let's head for the exit, yeah? They haven't attacked, which only benefits us at this stage. The longer these numpties take, the less advantage they have. Bear Claw's already scenting them."

After Nika grabbed the lad's hand, I led the way to the door. I kept an eye out for anything and anyone looking to start trouble, but we made it outside without incident. My guess was that they were staging an ambush somewhere nearby, thinking we'd be looking for a quick escape and not an enemy on our way out. Not the choice I would've made, so they must not be an experienced group of mercenaries.

I'd thought so until we took a side street and encountered the first sign of who'd been sent. I cursed under my breath and maneuvered my two out of the way, putting them directly behind me. An unseen string of magic snapped and a smoky cloudrained down over us. A strong barrier of magic sealed us into the area and our fate.

It was phase bloody one.

"Not these absolute muppets," I groaned, dashing my hand through my hair and thinking quickly.

"Who?" Nika asked, slinking in close with a dagger gripped in her hand. Pink magic swirled around her, already postured for a fight.

“Poison and Venom,” I grumbled.

My own magic churned in a vortex before erecting a barrier to keep us away from the noxious fumes. Nika spun another dagger into existence, practiced hands at the ready, eyeing the plume of poison. With a wary stare on the fumes, Lev unclipped his gun and directed it ahead.

“A sword or dagger is better, lad,” I instructed him, unsheathing my own sword.

The enchanted bag I’d brought summoned weapons. It wasn’t great in a pinch, but luckily we’d been given enough time to retrieve a few. Took a few minutes to spit one out. I tossed the lad a sword so he didn’t have to settle for a dagger. My bird was lethal with either one, and have it my way, she wouldn’t be fighting at all.

“You’ll only have an elusive underbelly on one to hit. The rest of his body requires brute force I doubt you’ll master quickly enough to cut through. The other one can’t be picked off by bullets unless he’s within view, which he wouldn’t be. And that’s only if you get past his poisonous fumes. He’s already sent his vaporous form and will otherwise stay out of sight.”

“Vaporous? Like Vapor,” Nika asked, curiosity mixing with alarm. “Does this one have a separate physical form?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

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I searched the area, waiting for the two fuckwits who always worked together in phases. It'd be Venom next. At least I could exploit their pattern, but it was difficult doing it when I knew how dangerous the snake bastard was when he shifted.

Bear Claw wasn't caught inside the barrier. That worked in our favor. The one who called himself Poison couldn't be far. If he could track him down and tear him to pieces, it'd be just Venom left to take down. Which was enough.

These two ranked second to the Death Team, now likely first with those bastards dead and gone. We knew them as well as any of the other Brothers. They acted in stages, but it was tried and true for taking down even the strongest opponents. All they had to do was trap them. It took every bit of your cleverness and power to escape the first phase before you were gobbled up by a slithering monster.

We were already trapped in their poisonous barrier infused with venom. It'd take too long to break down the magic, and it'd be tricky to do while fighting a giant snake and keeping the poisonous fumes from reaching my two.

Venom's snake was immune to them. My mask would keep me safe, but not my rebel and the lad. They'd need to stay inside my barrier, and the second it came down, they'd be paralyzed by Poison's gas. My guess was they expected me to focus on the fight with Venom, while the other two were paralyzed by the fumes. Then Poison would swoop in to take my bird.

Mistakes couldn't be made. If I didn't do this fight right, they'd get what they wanted. I needed to explain everything before the next phase started. We only had a minute or two at most.

“Venom takes the form of a giant snake, and he’s a tough twat to fight. He’s immune to most magic, at least mine, and it’ll take time to break down his scales to sever his head or get him to expose his underbelly to gut the fuckwit like a fish. He’s strong, fast, and like you probably suspect, venomous,” I explained quickly, twirling my sword. I kept a sharp eye out for the slithery twat. “Poison controls a vaporous form that can travel a sizeabledistance from his body. It’ll incapacitate you if you’re in it longer than thirty seconds or so. Paralyze you for the snake to swallow or for someone to kidnap.”

My gaze connected with Nika’s, and she nodded, understanding perfectly what I was implying. My bird was quick on the uptake.

“My mask keeps me safe—”

“But we’ll be at risk,” Nika cleverly surmised.

“Right,” I confirmed, cutting a look to the top of the building.

Bear Claw was in his bear form, trampling across the top. His huge silhouette disappeared. He’d caught the scent of that bastard, that much I was certain. He hadn’t stopped to check on us or cast an assessing glance.

If it was one thing I was grateful for, it was that Bear Claw was former Brotherhood. He’d know these muppets as well as I did. He’d know the stages, and he’d know what was at stake if he didn’t work to bring down the barrier and get Nika out of the fumes.

“Lev, remember the day at the lake?” my bird asked. A conversation passed between them wordlessly. “Think it’ll work with this?”

The lad was all smiles. “I just don’t have to breathe, right?”

Catching on, I nodded. “It needs to be inhaled or it won’t work. As long as you don’t breathe, you’ll avoid its effects.”

“I can hold my breath for ten minutes with a bit of magic. How long can you keep this barrier in place?” he asked, peering around us.

Impressed by his creativity, I eyed the barrier I’d erected. “I can keep it as long as it’s not attacked, but ten minutes is all I’ll need to get this bastard. And if Bear Claw takes care of our little poisonous friend faster than I do mine, then we’ll only have Venom left to fight and no fumes to contend with. It’s the fumes that makes it lethal to fight him.”

The ground under our feet quaked. My head twisted round, catching sight of the oversized monster slinking toward us. “Stay here, little rebel.”

Nika tapped her chin, thinking. “The boys and I want to try something.”

I growled at her. “Now’s not the time—”

“I wasn’t asking,” she interjected. She reached out, her fingers nearly touching the barrier.

I snarled and grabbed her hand before she made contact. “Don’t touch it, love. It’ll poison you the same way the fumes do, just without inhaling and quicker.”

Nika cut a look up at me in irritation before sighing. Then she pulled her hand away and reached out again. The two phantom wankers who’d been invisible until now appeared on the other side of the barrier. Their arms went straight through it, and the magic shuddered and cracked.

A splinter grew around where their arms broke through. I realized within a few

seconds that the poison injected into the magic wasn't affecting them. They hadn't dropped or grown wobbly on their feet. Were they immune to it, or just incapable of being killed?

"Go," she commanded.

In awe of another bout of creativity on my rebel's part, I laughed. "Chitter at me like that again, and I might forget we have to fight at all, love."

She rolled her eyes. "Just go, asshole."

Saluting her, I knocked my head the way of the snake. "Let's see how well you fight while holding your breath, lad."

We dashed into the thick noxious mist, two stupid plonkers about to take on a building-sized snake. If it weren't Nika's future at stake, I'd drag out the fun. But this needed to end before it truly begun. After reinforcing the barrier to protect my feisty goddess, I sought out the beast waiting to strike in the dense fog. He was massive, but the heavy concentration of vaporous poison inside the alley kept him well hidden.

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I only sensed him but couldn't see the bloody thing. He was immune to my magic, so I wouldn't be able to track him that way, but at least barriers still worked to keep the beast at bay.

The first movement was the quickest. I barely dodged it, but he hadn't been aiming for me. The bloody beast had his eyes on the barrier I'd erected to protect the woman most important to me. Magic exploded out of me, constructing another in record time. The massive creature was thwarted by it at the very last second. It wouldn't hold for long, but it'd keep him from getting to Nika before I could do damage.

We were on the clock. The lad only had ten minutes before he became snake food.

The monster reared its massive head. Grinning, I spun my sword and fainted to the right. It struck where it expected me to go, but I'd already disappeared to another spot. The stupid thing hit its head on a brick wall. Smarting, it recoiled with a violent hiss.

"He'll try to break down the barrier protecting Nika first chance he gets," I yelled over the loud sounds of the beast. "He wants her paralyzed for Poison to take."

The oversized creature snapped out again, massive fangs arm-sized, but I evaded it the same way I had every other time. He was fast in this form, but not faster than I was.

Lev was on the other side of the beast, trying to smash his sword into its huge body to no avail. We moved along the length of the oversized creature, testing spots. Everywhere I stabbed, my sword ricocheted off its metal-like scales. I'd have to hit

the same spot over and over to whittle down the strength of its scales.

I eyed the barrier trapping us, noticing the jagged web of cracks growing across the sides and top. Whatever Nika had done, it was tearing through Poison's barrier. Spikes of my blue magic shot out of me, helping it along. The sooner it was brought down, the less they could hold us inside the fumes. It'd ruin their normally flawless attack.

"We need to get to its underbelly," I told Lev who'd worked his way to my side.

Venom's scales shimmered as the giant thing coiled and hit the newly constructed barrier with the full force of his weight. It'd lost interest in us because we couldn't penetrate its body and do damage. He didn't have any reason to fight us now.

The wall of shimmery blue magic hissed and splintered. Kicking off the ground, I navigated the monster's back and sought out the thinnest scales to weaken. He'd protect his underbelly before all else. I needed to find the spots he couldn't. Lev ran at full speed to the top of the snake head. Lightning quick, his dagger struck one eye.

Clever lad. It was any wonder why I hadn't thought of it first. Guess protecting Nika no matter the cost had gone to my head a little. I'd blame the rerouted blood sent to the wrong head.

The snake reacted with a vicious hiss, snapping its jaws at him. In all the reactive chaos, its body rolled perfectly to expose its sensitive underbelly. I didn't waste time as the barrier I put together broke apart. I impaled my sword at one end and used brute force to drag it along its slinking form as far as I could take it, gutting the beast.

Blood the color and texture of tar poured out of its wound as the snake writhed from side to side. I'd withdrawn my sword with enough time to escape the violent thrashes, but Lev was thrown clear across the alley.

Bloody fucking hell...

If he hit the barrier and a brick wall at full force, he might not come out of it alive. My bird would never forgive me even if he did.

Magic swirled around me, and I disappeared before reappearing between the lad and barrier. Or what was meant to be a barrier. I wasn't given time to confirm it'd been destroyed before Lev came hurtling my way. Arms out, I waited like an absolute twatwaffle to catch the airborne bugger, only for the lad to get caught and saved by a furry wanker.

Peeking around, the fumes and barrier were gone, and the giant snake lay slain, pouring black blood. Bear Claw had shifted back and helped the lad to his feet. Nika came over at a full run, and before I could stop it, she flung her arms around Bear Claw in a grateful embrace.

24

Nika

My heart was in my throat when Lev shot across my eyeline, heading straight for the building after taking a powerful hit from the monstrous snake. I wasn't close enough to get to him, and my magic wouldn't make it in time to soften the impact.

The giant shifter Silas gutted with his sword writhed and hissed, blocking my way. I dodged its wriggling body as black blood flooded the street in front of me, creating a treacherous path to navigate. I could only watch in horror as Lev flew head-first toward certain death.

Every imaginable outcome cycled through my head.

He could be injured but still come out of it with enough healing. I'd brought a few potions, and with help, we could make it back to others we kept at the safe house.

He could live but be severely injured in such a way that neither potion nor magic could fully recover him. The damage could steal his magic from him, or worse, his personality. I'd seen it before—injuries so great that Fae came out of it different, changed, vacant. It wasn't much different to the humans we claimed superiority over.

Or...

He could die. No matter our intervention, an impact like that could kill him. I'd be forced to watch his soul leave his body, and this time I wouldn't be able to put it back. I might even need to help him crossover if he refused to leave.

I'd already lost my mother, father, and grandmother. Maybe even Dugan. Losing Lev would destroy me. I wouldn't know how to take on a demon without him. I hated how much I needed him, but I did. I couldn't lose him.

Emotion crowded my throat so terrible it locked down my voice. The hands wrapped around mine tightened and pulled. Tometi and Ryker weren't going to let me give up.

We started to run together, their strength giving way to mine. Then out of nowhere, Salvator swooped in and caught Lev midair. His large bear form soared with a grace it shouldn't have. The ground shook when he landed, his shape instantly morphing into a man.

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I didn't think, I just ran for them. My arms were already around the massive shifter before I understood what was happening. He tensed in surprise but didn't pull away.

"Thank you, Salvator. Thank you so fucking much," I murmured over and over, pressing my face into his naked chest, eyes shut tight.

My voice was shaking. Actually, my entire body was. I'd only noticed after his arms wrapped around me to hold me close. Awkwardly, as if he'd never done it before, Salvator rubbed my back in what I suspected was meant to be soothing.

It felt like forever since I'd breathed again. A lifetime. Watching Lev come so close to death was terrifying in a way nothing had ever been. I didn't expect it to affect me so much, but when the tears started to pour down my face, I realized how scared I'd been to lose him.

Sighing, I finally pulled away and gave the shifter one of the biggest smiles yet, hoping it'd express how grateful I was. How he'd saved me a world of agony. He didn't have to, but he did.

Salvator was a good man.

"You did good, Sally," I teased.

He stared down at me, arms still holding tight. Hair fell over his face and his eyes beamed a light-brown, different from the typical fathomless abyss. Then, as if he couldn't help himself, a smile ghosted across his mouth. Mine grew. But his immediately disappeared when he glanced up.

“Little rebel?” I heard someone call out.

I turned, suddenly aware I was hugging a very naked Salvator in front of the only man I was meant to hug naked. Shame hit hard and swift, and I distanced myself without another thought.

“Big beefy man tantrum incoming,” Ryker whispered to Tometi, no longer visible so it was only Salvator and I who heard it.

Lev, ever the insightful friend, cleared his throat. “Um, aren’t I the one you should be hugging, Niks? I’m the one who almost died and all.”

“Oops,” I said with a sheepish grin.

And just like that, the tension melted.

I was taken into Silas’s arms and checked over. He swiped away all the remaining tears with his jaw clenched tightly enough to reshape his face. He didn’t say another word, just guided me away from the devastation we’d caused and the very uncomfortable moment that came after.

“So...last night didn’t go as planned. Guess it’s on me for expecting it would,” Lev quipped with a laugh, paging through the book we’d stolen. He took a long sip from his steamy cup of tea, while I nibbled on a piece of toast Silas had insisted on making for me.

“It was still fun, all things considered,” I offered, tapping the text. “But it’s good we didn’t—”

“Die? Get you kidnapped?” Lev supplied, monotone.

I stole a glance at the two towering men nearby, who hadn't spoken much since the weird thank-you embrace. "I was going to say argue."

Lev tilted his head and considered my statement. "Wow! You're right. Should we get them checked? You think it's contagious?"

Hiding a smile, I pretended not to hear Silas click his tongue and mumble something about a cute wanker mouthing off. "Better safe than sorry. Who knows what we'll do if we catch it."

"Dance?"

I glowered at him, but Lev acted as if he didn't notice. Sighing, I returned to the task at hand—learning how to corrupt my gem. I checked my notes, still no further into my quest for answers.

The ritual to send Rilas back was straight forward enough. Thanks to Grandmother, I knew the feeling and how to use magic to draw symbols, but I couldn't summon the old magic until I'd achieved a perfect balance. Nothing in the journal or the Dark Fae Society book explained how to do that. It almost felt intentional at this point, like it'd been left out of everything my grandmother and mother had covered in theirs for a reason.

Why hadn't they talked about how to corrupt the gem? Was it out of fear I'd do it too soon?

Dugan said he'd been asked to wait until Silas came looking for him as Dugan and not Trevion. The more pieces I gathered, the more I understood that each piece had been left with the intention to be found at a certain point along the way. So was the next piece one I wasn't meant to find yet, or had I missed it altogether?

The silence that permeated the space was a heavy one as I reviewed a page I'd read through enough times to memorize it.

Silas leaned back against the countertop, his eyes never leaving me. "Well, love? What do we think? Can you summon the old magic, as you say?"

Tired, I rubbed my temples and shook my head. "I'm still not sure how to corrupt the gem enough to make it grey and achieve the right balance."

Salvator grunted, his jaw ticking. "Grey? Balance?"

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Looking up from the text, I nodded. “That’s what my grandmother wrote. It’s best to stay in the grey. Soul Collectors who want to use the old magic need to find a perfect balance. She talks about it a lot in her journal.”

The dark-haired shifter made a sound in his throat before he came over. Silas watched him like he would any enemy but didn’t move.

Salvator took a seat and leaned forward, looking at the journal in question. He brushed back his hair, and the muscles in his chest contracted. He’d refused to wear a shirt again, and after the night we’d had, I was afraid of how Silas would respond if he caught me staring.

The last thing we needed was another fight.

I’d had enough of the two being at each other’s throats to last me a lifetime, and Silas would use it as an opportunity to seek out more affection. I’d barely made it out of the room this morning. He’d been all over me since we made our way back.

It came after a little argument we had. He’d wanted to find another safe house, but I didn’t think it was worth it. Salvator was sure Bones would be back, and soon. Said he’d know if the mercenary broke their contract, and he hadn’t. The ones who attacked us hadn’t found us with Bones’s help. Instead, it was better to expect another attack and prepare in place.

“I’m not sure if this will help, but that old fox said something strange to me before I woke up in the forest,” the tribesman started, catching my attention right away.

Silas made his way over. “And you’re just telling us this now, Sally?”

Salvator’s jaw clenched off and on before he cut a sour look at the other mercenary. “That woman spouted a lot of cryptic bullshit over the months, Sparkles. I didn’t think it was important until Nika mentioned the words grey and balance.”

Curious, I waited for him to elaborate.

Knitting his fingers together in front of him with his elbows perched on the top of his knees, Salvator went on, “I don’t remember it word for word, but she said something about how grey was a necessary balance for you. That old woman liked to talk in riddles, but this rhyme stuck with me, I guess. ‘It’s the choice you’ll have to make, the soul you’ll be forced to take.’ And then she said something about how balance is struck by choosing between life and death. The old fox refused to explain, just said you’d understand.”

Salvator shrugged, not sure what it all meant. But I did. It was a staggering epiphany that hit as every word connected several things together in a terrifying way. Silas was rigid and quiet. Same with Lev. They’d been clued in every step of the way. I’d shared everything. Like me, they understood what every word meant and what it implied.

My thoughts spiraled out of control. I was having a hard time catching my breath. I’d been so sure I’d be relieved when I knew what to do. I thought my burden would ease knowing how to send the demon back. Having the answer couldn’t be any worse than fighting a demon with my lover’s face, right? But I was wrong.

Nothing but agony filled my chest.

I’d have to choose between two people I cared about, and the thought of taking the life of anyone close to me stole every bit of my strength. I finally understood why they didn’t want me to have all the pieces from the start. Father knew I’d try to find a

way to save them both.

“You, my dear Nika, are so much like your mother. You’re infinitely kind and will do whatever it takes for the ones you love. It’s both your greatest strength and your most devastating weakness. Because not everyone can be saved. Our fate can’t be changed no matter how much we try.”

He'd said it to me decades ago. It floated to the surface of my memory as my eyes flicked from the shifter I'd come to care for as a friend and the mercenary I loved. The Soul of Death and the Soul of Life. Without doubt, I'd found them both.

Salvator looked from face to face in confusion. “Does it make sense to you assholes?”

“Maybe it’s not what we think,” Lev murmured.

Silas crossed his arms and blew out a sigh. “Or it’s exactly what we think.”

“What am I missing?” the shifter growled.

The two phantoms hovered nearby, just as confused as Salvator was. Only Lev and Silas knew about who we thought was the Soul of Life and the Soul of Death and about the choice I'd have to make between them. I needed to explain everything to them, but I wasn't sure how to do it.

“The Soul of Life, if you remember, was something my mother mentioned,” I started, and Salvator nodded, having been present for that conversation in my head. “She also mentioned the Soul of Death. She was sure that Silas was one of them. I agree because I’m confident he’s the Soul of Life. But the other one...” The shifter’s jaw clenched. “We think—”

“It’s me? Because I’ve come back from death?” he quickly deduced. “You think this cryptic rhyme is about me and this silver-haired bastard?”

For once, Silas wasn’t smiling or cracking jokes. He was quiet, and the silence from him was damning. He knew what it meant to suggest the two souls were them, and what I’d be forced to do in order to summon the old magic to send Rilas back to the After. Every piece had slotted into place.

Fate’s mystery was no longer a mystery.

Like Grandmother said, I’d know what to do when the time came, and I did. It was right there in her rhyme: “It’s the choice you’ll have to make, the soul you’ll be forced to take.”

I wasn’t ready to accept it as the only option, though.

My eyes dropped to my hands gripping my knees. “But there has to be another way,” I murmured, pulse pounding. “Or maybe Grandmother had it wrong.”

Lev touched my hand as I shifted uncomfortably. “We’ll keep looking around, Niks. Or we’ll find a way to collect souls and use enough power to balance it to grey.”

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My eyes lifted and caught on Silas's silver ones. He came over and helped me to my feet as the reality of what I needed to do came crashing down on me.

“We'll sleep on it for a night, yeah? No sense in overthinking it when we don't know where he is. It's as the lad said, maybewe'll do a little soul collecting before our clash with that bastard brother of mine.”

I didn't have strength in my legs, so Silas swept me up in his arms and carried me upstairs without making a single comment about it.

25

Nika

Out of a dead sleep, I inhaled a sharp breath and shot into a sitting position. Voices murmured and whispered around me. Sweat covered my body, but I couldn't remember the dream. Or was it a nightmare? It was an ominous feeling in my gut.

In a frantic moment, I looked for Silas or my phantoms, but I didn't see them anywhere. Reactive magic coiled around my arm as I got to my feet, pulled on a jacket and pair of jeans, then made my way out of the room with several daggers on hand.

The chorus of the dead beckoned the same way they had in my previous dream, but when I peered into Lev's room, he wasn't there. His blanket was wrapped like it had been in my dream, but he wasn't hugging it in his sleep.

Heart hammering, I took the hallway all the way to the front room. Bottles were left out from the boys sharing drinks. Another pissing contest they swore was to keep my mind off things, but I suspected they'd just wanted a reason to get drunk.

The way the bottles were left out was different from my dream. The kitchen, too. Still, the whispers beckoned, and it felt strikingly similar despite the differences. It was the same sensation as walking through my dream, the voices in my ears and the unease of something amiss.

I hurried over to the door and pulled on my boots. After ensuring no one was coming back, I left the house and stomped across the wet grass.

It wasn't as cold as the night before, and definitely not as icy as it had been in a few places we'd stayed, but I couldn't stop myself from shaking. It was all too similar. I took the same streets, walked the same path, the whispers intensifying and guiding me the same way as my dream. I followed their call to a stretch of pavement I immediately recognized, eyes landing on the looming figure in the dark.

Licking my lips, I paused and tried to pick out the differences. It was the same, but also not. Silas wasn't wearing the same outfit as he had in my dream, but the wind whipped at his hair the same way. The city's illumination gave the large man a terrifying shape in the dark. Had I not been concerned this was a vision brought to life, I might've enjoyed the view more.

Silas was dangerously gorgeous when no one was watching. Who was I kidding, he was gorgeous no matter what.

The silver-haired mercenary turned, the side of his lip lifted along with a shapely brow. "Hello there, love. Fancy meeting you out here. Hurried all this way to join me in a little moonlight liaison, have you?"

I sucked in a sharp breath. It was the same words as my dream. So had it been a vision? I gripped my dagger, and his eyes dropped to it before lifting in question. He was definitely confused, but he didn't seem worried.

“Planning to punish me for talking the lad into another drinking match, is it?” His smile suggested he didn't regret anything. “No one was off their face tonight. I should be rewarded for my boundless restraint, little rebel.”

I let loose a breath. It was different from my dream. Rubbing my lips together after pocketing the hand-sized dagger in my jacket, I peered around. The whispers continued as I carefully walked over to him, not sure what the red eyes in the dream meant. He was grinning like a goddamn thief when I finally stood next to him.

“Where's Bear Claw?” It was the exact same thing I'd asked him in my dream, but I wanted to see if anything else would be different. I was desperate to find the differences. I didn't want this moment to be a vision come to life.

“Oh, he and the lad went to meet Bones,” he said, surprising me stupid for a second.

The whispers quieted. I no longer heard them. Too much was already different. He hadn't answered me when I first asked in my dream. He'd ignored me and kissed me instead. If it'd been a vision of some kind, more would align. Like my mother's, unmovable pieces existed in every one I had.

I breathed a sigh, shoulders relaxing. I hadn't breathed much since I woke up hearing the voices.

Misreading my silence, the babbling oaf went on, if not a bit grumbly, “It wasn't my idea, love. I mean, it wasn't mine at first. That wolf bastard insisted it'd be better this way. As much as I hate to admit it, he worries about you. After everything, he thought it was too dangerous for you to be out in the city again. And I agreed, little

rebel. But that cute wanker fought on your behalf.”

I let loose a small laugh. “On my behalf?”

“Said you’d be raving mad if Bear Claw went alone. So he insisted he go with him or he’d wake you up to make the decision for them.” Silas crossed his arms and grinned. “Put like that, that wolf bastard couldn’t really refuse him, could he?”

Proud of my friend and his infinite ingenuity, I giggled and nodded. “So they’ve gone to meet Bones? Does that mean he’s found Rilas?”

Silas turned and tucked the hair that had blown across my face behind my ear. “It’s anyone’s guess, love. It could be as simple as a check in or a bit of information he collected. Bones is well connected, but chasing a demon requires a bit more...delicacy. He’s not daft. Bones knows the degree of difficulty required for tracking an opponent as powerful as a demon, and one with Rilas’s power.”

I nodded and brushed back the wild curls whipping across my eyes. “What brought you out here, anyway?”

A mischievous grin split Silas’s handsome face, his shirt fluttering in the wind and exposing a sliver of taut waist. “I had been doing a little perimeter check, but now that you’re here...”

“No.” I pivoted, looking for a quick escape, but he caught my arm and dragged me over to a nearby building, practically giddy.

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“Come now, love. How often does the opportunity to commit sins of the flesh in public arise?” he murmured, already at work on unbuttoning my pants.

I glared at him and smacked his hands away. “Never, if I have anything to do with it.”

“Oh? Shagging me senseless in that underground tunnel and when we were meant to be getting our hands on the Box of Black Souls weren’t public enough for your tastes?” His golden eyes had already become silver. “Naughty.”

“That was different, and you know it.”

“Oh, aye. But you never hesitated for a second, did you, love? You hopped right on my cock like you’d been waiting all your life to do it.” His rough voice taunted me, while his hand teased the waistband of my jeans. “Just thinking about the things you did while dancing on my knob, as if you’d been sent by Lilith herself to torment me, gets me bleeding stiff, it does.”

A blush crept into my cheeks. “You’re an asshole.”

His chuckle was low and guttural. “I’ll be whatever it takes to have my little rebel the way I like.” He bent his head close, putting his mouth next to my ear. “The way she likes too, yeah?”

He drew back with a grin and caged me into the wall with his bulky arms, flexing his biceps when my eyes flicked between them. The moonlight was at his back when he pushed his massive thigh between my legs, keeping me pinned in place.

And I let it happen.

I always did.

“Feels like the first time in ages I’ve had you all to myself. No head-squatting wankers, no wolf bastard, no cute bugger. You better than anyone should know that a greedy bastard like me wouldn’t waste a moment like this.”

My gaze dropped to his mouth, heat coiling in my stomach. “You’re going to do what you want no matter what I say.”

Chuckling like I’d caught him, he cupped one side of my face and his thumb dashed across my lower lip. “See, love. Now you’re getting it.”

My jacket came off first. Then, brushing hair from my neck, Silas leaned down and sucked the place that always put me under his spell. The ticklish sensation of his hand sneaking up my shirt made me squirm, but he bit down on my shoulder and thrust his hips into mine. He was already hard. I could feel the massive length of it pressed against me.

Guess he hadn’t been lying.

His hand went around my throat, and his mouth came down on mine. Our teeth clashed before our tongues. Languid swipes quickly became hungry and demanding lashes. His possessive caress was exactly what I needed to forget everything that loomed over me like a dark cloud. Silas always gave me an escape from the thoughts destroying my carefully crafted calm.

The pressure on my throat eased, his hand taking a quick path down my front before he unzipped my pants. His frustrated grunt when he tried and failed to get his hand inside my pants made me chuckle a little to myself.

“You taking the piss, love? Why are these trousers so bloody tight?” he grumbled, working another angle but still thwarted by a simple pair of jeans.

“To keep perverts out, obviously.”

His eyes narrowed. “There’s more than one pervert you’re keeping out, little rebel? Now you’d better be taking the piss, or I’ll have to make a whole new list.”

Smirking, I slinked back and pressed against the wall. I hooked my thumbs at both sides of my waist and shimmied my tight jeans down to my ankles. “Pretty sure you alone count as more than one, mercenary.”

A wild groan left his mouth as he watched me kick my boots off and toe out of my jeans. After lifting and tossing my shirt off, I yanked on his with a pointed look and come-hither finger. His eager eyes tracked down my half-naked figure before he gave me a little grin. He didn’t waste time pulling his black shirt off and throwing it on the ground like he never wanted to see it again.

I giggled even though I promised myself I wouldn’t. It was hard not to. Silas never hid how much I got to him. How all I needed to say was that I wanted him, and he was mine. Like I said, the man was far from subtle. I never had to guess what he thought about me. It was all there on his face. And if not there, then in the next words he said to me.

Silas’s strong chest rippled with the hungry glance he gave my body. “You better not tease and leave tonight, love, or I’ll hunt you down like prey and have you wherever I find you.” His silver eyes flashed in challenge. “Unless that’s what you want. You want your handsome rogue to chase you, little rebel?”

I shrugged, magic swirling around me. “Depends. Are you the catch and release type?”

His pecs flexed and his jaw tautened, aroused by the mere thought of a new cat and mouse game. “Oh, love. I’m much, much worse. I’m the bastard who’ll catch you, then eat you.”

My pulse thrummed and I shrugged, an excited jolt slicing down my spine. “Well, in that case...”

Without waiting, I was off down the street, my magic powering my steps. I heard the mercenary curse before he gave chase. It’d take a lot to outrun him, but I was up for the challenge. I’d make him work for it tonight. He’d left me to sleep when big decisions were being made. Again.

He deserved it.

The area around the house was mostly abandoned buildings and streets. I wasn’t likely to run into many humans out here, but the odd one here and there would cut through this area or take up residence in one of the abandoned structures. So, just in case, I sent out magic to identify anyone nearby. And when nothing came back, I swiftly fled down one street after another, checking behind me only not to find the beast chasing me. I didn’t sense him anywhere.

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Had he gotten distracted by something?

My stomach was fluttering in a way it never had. I couldn't catch my breath even though it'd been no effort at all to run like this. Moonlight illuminated my half-naked physique, tattoos and scars on display. I'd lost my goddamn mind, but for some reason, I didn't regret it.

After another sweep of the area, I headed down another street, checking the tops of the buildings for an assassin on the hunt. Heat swelled in my stomach at the mere thought of him catching me. He wouldn't leave me out here alone, not after the other night, so I could only guess he was stalking me. Waiting for me to let my guard down.

I wouldn't.

I sensed something to my left, so I took off to the right, pulse quickening again. Live wires webbed across my skin and the hair on my body stood on end. I'd never felt so fucking alive.

I navigated the streets, checking every corner, evading every dark alcove, but I hadn't seen or felt him nearby in the nearly ten minutes I'd been running. Maybe he'd lost me. The mere thought of him out of his mind trying to find me felt like a sweet revenge.

Serves the brute right.

Turning another corner, I looked for a place to hide. I'd wait it out and make the

asshole use all his skills to find me. Devilish grin on my face, I stalked forward, bent on finding a place to hide in the abandoned building ahead, but I was caught before I had a chance to make my way inside.

Silas had me caged against another wall, chest rising and falling like he couldn't catch his breath, the silver in his eyes luminous beams in the dark. "Sneaky little rebel. You'll never be able to outrun me, never be able to hide from me, not in this life or the next. There's nowhere you can go where I can't find you, yeah?"

I bit my bottom lip and stared at him, neck cranked back, heart thundering in my chest. I couldn't breathe, and I was worried a single caress from him would make me come.

It was a whole new sensation being caught after running from him. I didn't want to admit how much I liked the thrill of the chase. How much I wanted him to catch me, only to fuck me with abandon out here where anyone could see us. I'd never thought I'd get off on running around with barely any clothes on, chased by a pervert, but the tension and race of my pulse suggested I'd enjoyed it as much as he did.

For seconds we just breathed each other's air with our eyes locked.

My mouth was a little dry and I was a bit shaky on powerful legs, so I only managed to say, "Make this quick, asshole. I don't want the guys to come looking for us." My voice was much softer than I'd like. "Eat quickly," I added, hiding a smile.

With a shameless grin, his pants were already undone and around his ankles, his cock in hand. "Turn around, princess, and bend over. Wouldn't want that pretty back of yours to get scuffed up with how rough I'm about to give it to you."

I did what he asked, putting my hands on the wall and bracing. He was behind me, one hand on my hip, and the other guiding his cock where we both wanted it most.

“This sweet little cunt is glistening wet, love. Did you like running from me that much?”

Without warning, he sunk into me, his entire girthy length stretching me as deep as it'd go. And he didn't wait. He withdrew just enough to slam back inside, finding the spot that flooded my lower half with sensation and heat right away.

I didn't want to moan, but he was as rough as he promised, hitting every sensitive spot inside. Rubbing my clit the way I liked. Sucking my neck and fucking me like we were the only two people in the world.

He wrapped my hair around his hand and pulled my head back, slapping into me harder. “You're positively dripping, love. Your tight cunt doesn't want to let go every time my cock slides inside.” His voice rumbled, thrusts hitting harder. “Makes a bloke wonder if you want to be chased and fucked every time, yeah?”

A feral noise left my throat before I could catch it. “I'm going to kill you.”

“Promises, promises, little rebel.”

The crest of my orgasm was hard and quick. I didn't feel it coming on before the sensation took me, and I arched and came hard enough that my vision failed. Silas groaned and thrust into me a few more times before burying himself as deep as possible. I felt the steady pulse of his cock and the familiar heat spread. It was several seconds of harsh breathing before he pulled out and used magic to clothe the two of us.

“Bollocks,” he murmured, eyes shooting left. “Fun's over, love. They're back already.”

Still a little shaky, I tried to stand up and nod, but I stumbled and Silas, swifter than

light itself, caught me inside his arms. I'd regret looking up, but I did anyway. His victorious grin greeted my glance, and I sighed.

"Bit wobbly on those powerful legs of yours, love?"

"Shut up," I grumbled, landing a blow on his stomach and forcing the troll to stumble himself.

"Oh, aye. Still as lethal as ever," he chuckled, cringing in pain. "But, love? Did you have to use your magic when you did it? I think you broke a rib."

Brushing my hair back and fixing my jacket, I offered the asshole an over-the-shoulder smirk. "It's as the humans say, fuck around and find out."

26

Nika

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We met the other two back at the safe house, and by the grin on Lev's face, they'd come home with good news. I couldn't even be angry about how I'd been left out of everything again.

The two men sat like victors on the couch, sharing secret glances and making plans for how to best assault Rilas's hideout. I was filthy, so I left them to it to take a quick shower. When I came out, Silas was waiting on the bed for me. His hulking form was slouched over in contemplation, eyes on the floor.

He'd let me shower alone, the first sign of something wrong. He hadn't followed me into our room when I left, only came in minutes after I got under the warm spray. Silas never passed up an opportunity to torment me anywhere private.

His downward cast eyes shot up when I huffed and ran the towel over my head, drying my hair instead of wrapping it around my body. I didn't bother to cover up after confirming Ryker and Tometi were still downstairs. The wandering spirits could go anywhere they pleased. I'd discovered that tonight.

They'd followed Salvator and Lev in case anything went wrong so they could come back and report. I'd been beyond grateful for their quick thinking. Despite getting information, it did appear the guys were greeted in style with a fight.

Another group sent by the Brotherhood was out on the hunt for me. Lev recounted the scuffle in excruciating detail because the ambush wasn't the biggest surprise of the night. It was the fact that Bones helped them fight off the assholes sent by Rilas. Guess he wasn't a fan of what a demon meant for business.

Naked and in front of the never-satisfied menace, I expected a comment or two—even for the brute to dance over like he hadn’t fucked my brains out barely a half-hour ago—but to my ongoing confusion, he stayed seated and silent.

Head cocked, I waited. When he said nothing, I turned and rummaged through the dresser. It didn’t take long to find what I was looking for. I put on a cute bra and pair of underwear. I didn’t bother with the rest. The uncharacteristically silent man on the bed had stolen my focus.

Turning, I leaned against the dresser. His gaze had dropped to his hands, so I waited for him to look at me again. When he did, I raised an eyebrow in question. I waited patiently for him to say what was bothering him. I didn’t think it had anything to do with what the guys discovered.

The location, while unexpectedly close, wasn’t anything we didn’t expect. We’d already assumed we’d have a fight on our hands. It was in the heart of Brotherhood territory, but it didn’t feel like that was what was bothering him.

“You were worried about something tonight, love, and it had nothing to do with where Bear Claw and Lev had gone off to. I’ve seen that spooked expression before. Did you have another vision?” Silas beckoned me over, patting his thigh.

I pretended as if I planned to sit on him but took a seat next to him instead. The big brute pouted, and when I laughed, he snatched me up and sat me on his lap. He kissed my neck and wrapped his arms around me like I was the thing that grounded him. And maybe I was. As much as it pained me to admit it, he grounded me, too. He made me feel safer than anyone ever had.

It was a relief that he was being more like the obsessed man I’d come to love, as silly as it sounded. Silas acting out of character made me incredibly uncomfortable. I much preferred this version of him.

I turned on his lap. Brushing the light hair out of his pretty eyes, I let my fingers linger across his forehead, then over the strong curve of his cheekbone and jaw. “It felt like that dream I had the other night.”

His eyes fluttered a little with the delicate way I touched him, and a little sigh escaped his mouth. “Felt like your dream?”

“My dream started the same way. I woke up alone, hearing voices, and walked the same path. I found you on the same street as the one tonight. It was all so similar,” I admitted, pulse considerably calm now that my dream hadn’t manifested into reality. “But in my dream...you weren’t you.”

Silas’s eyes found mine, his expression darkening. “What do you mean by that, love?” He pushed wet hair away from my face, concern etched into his brow.

I kissed it and tossed the towel on the bed. Grinning, I wrapped my arm around his shoulders and decided how best to describe it. “You had red eyes for starters. But it’s not just that. You...didn’t feel like you. It’s hard to explain, but I’m sure in my dream you were someone else. You hadn’t been you from the start.”

“Red eyes? Someone else?” he asked more to himself than me. “And tonight felt like that dream, is it? Are you worried I’m someone else, little rebel?”

I grabbed his face and dropped a little kiss on his mouth, denying it with a shake of my head. “No, of course not. I know it’s you. It’s tough to explain, but I feel it here.” I touched my chest, and his sneaky grin made me laugh.

I was glad that he wasn’t brooding and bothered anymore. He’d eased back into his usual smarmy glances. It didn’t suit him. Silas wasn’t Silas if he wasn’t finding the terrible humor in it all.

“Besides, things were already different when I walked through the house. So many little things weren’t the same as they had been in my dream. It just scared me at first. I don’t know why I thought you might’ve been Rilas in my dream—”

“Rilas,” he growled, grabbing my hand hanging over his shoulder. “Love, you remember what I told you about my brother and what he could do before he became a demon.”

I racked my brain for the conversation. He’d talked about it before, but briefly. I also remembered Ryker and Salvator mentioning something similar. I hadn’t thought about it at all until he mentioned it. “He’s...a shapeshifter?”

“Right.”

“He can take anyone’s shape?”

“He can.”

“With the blood he takes? But it’s not just that, right? It’s impossible to know if it’s him or the person he’s shifting as,” I added slowly, remembering what he’d told me. “Do you think that’s what my dream was about? Are you worried he’ll shapeshift as you? Seems a bit silly since it’s really only the hair and eyes he’d have to alter. There are plenty of items he could use to do that.”

His eyes fell away, and he dragged a hand through his hair, searching for the words. “It’s not that simple, love. It’s a deception most seasoned mercenaries can’t see through, and the ones who can don’t notice until it’s too late. I never mentioned it because I hadn’t thought much of it at the time, but when you last fought him and he took your nan...”

My pulse thumped loudly in my ears.

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“I’d noticed a barely-there cut on my arm, but one that hadn’t been there before he came. I thought he’d done something to get you to do what he wanted, but...” He growled the words. “That fuckwit probably stole some of my blood. Maybe the lad’s, too.”

“Don’t you have the same genetics or whatever? Why would he need your blood if it’s the same as his?”

Silas shrugged. “Not the way he needs it. It’s the magic between us that’s different. That’s what he gets from my blood.”

“Your magic?” I asked, confused. “He can get that in your blood?”

Silas’s fingers ate into my thigh. “Seems so. He’s done it before. He can use my abilities for a short time. Very short, but enough that he’d...find a way around the things I’ve done to keep you safe.”

“You think my dream is a hint of what he’s planning to do?”

My mercenary hummed and pulled me close, as if he could keep it from happening if he never let me go. “It’s possible. You’ve clearly gotten a bit of your mother’s clairvoyance. Every clairvoyant’s power is different, yeah? No two clairvoyants see the future the same way. It could be you’ve seen something, but it was meant to be a warning more than anything. If it came to you this way, it gives us enough time to prepare for it.”

“You said he could achieve a perfect deception, even to the most skilled. How will I

know it's not him?" I asked, shifting on his lap.

What if I kissed that demonic fucker when I thought he was Silas? I didn't dare utter it, but the thunderous expression Silas wore suggested he'd already thought of it.

Someone knocked on the door before he could answer. I sensed who it was well before they spoke, though. I'd know that cologne anywhere.

"Niks?"

Silas didn't let me go as I called out, "I'm just out of the shower. Did you guys figure something out?"

"We did, but I thought you'd like to talk...well, about everything. I wanted to give you a bit of time, but Bear Claw thinks it's important we don't leave anything to last minute. It's clear he's sending the Brotherhood after you, and it'll be smarter to act sooner rather than later."

The weight of what we'd discovered the other night came crashing down—the choices I'd have to make when we took on Rilas. An impossible choice, one I didn't know how to make. But I wouldn't have time to make a split-second decision. I'd need to know. Because once I recovered my grandmother's soul, he'd have access to his power again. He wouldn't be vulnerable the same way he was now.

After I finished dressing and made my way into the living room, everyone had already found a seat. Lev greeted me with a smile and offered me his favorite tea to make when things were chaotic. His calm-as-fuck tea as he liked to call it. It was a well-meant gesture, but it only made the twist in my gut tighten.

Salvator got to his feet, eyes slicing over to Silas as the mercenary leaned back and gestured for me to come over. "I need to speak with her first. Alone."

Jaw working back and forth, Silas surprised us all by nodding. “You’ll stay within the perimeter. If anything happens, I’ll have your head, Sally.”

The threat didn’t seem to bother the shifter. Another surprise. Salvator motioned for the door, asking me to go ahead of him. I caught Silas’s silver-eyed gaze before leaving. The two phantoms stayed close by, but they didn’t speak as Salvator pointed to a bench positioned under a large tree.

It was a bit odd to watch the tall shifter wipe down a spot for me to sit. He awkwardly waited for me to take my seat before taking his own, one he hadn’t bothered to wipe off. He fidgeted next to me, his muscles contracting in agitation, refusing to look my way. He just stared at the moon in the sky. It was an hour or two before dawn, so the sky had already started to lighten.

I opened my mouth to speak, thinking he was waiting for me to start, but he cleared his throat and started talking. “He’s his last earthly tie,” came his shocking utterance.

My brows knitted together, not sure what to make of the statement until it hit me. “You mean...Silas and Rilas?”

The shifter nodded, his silky hair swaying until he tucked it behind his ear. Letting loose a breath, he finally glanced at me. His jaw clenched before he reached out and touched my hand. I stiffened when his fingers threaded between mine. Confused, I stared at our interlocked hands before looking at him again. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he licked his lips, fathomless eyes dropping to my mouth.

I wasn’t sure what had come over him. Salvator had never touched me like this, and never first. It made me uncomfortable to think what he might say next.

“Bear Claw—”

“It has to be me, Nika,” the shifter whispered. “You need to take my soul.”

“I don’t—”

“It can’t be Silas. If you sever that bastard’s last earthly tie—”

It hit me what he was suggesting.

“He’ll become too powerful,” I interjected, the words burning my tongue as I said them. I didn’t stop there. “But you’re wrong. I never intended to take anyone’s soul. I don’t care what she said. I’m going to find another way. I appreciate all of this. You’re a good friend to worry, but I’m going to figure out how to do it without—”

A growl rumbled in his throat, and his grip on my hand squeezed so hard I hissed. He eased up with an apologetic glance. “There’s no other way, woman. Don’t be stupid. You’ll take my soul and send that bastard back, and you won’t argue about it.”

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Angry, I glowered at him. “And you’re all underestimating what I can do! I’ll find a way to do it without hurting anyone. I won’t let you—”

Suddenly, my face was in his hands and he was kissing me. Shock struck me so hard I couldn’t do anything but freeze. I went stone-still and every thought fled my head. Why was this shifter’s mouth so damn soft?

He kissed me neither seeking my permission nor demanding more than a simple touch. I realized belatedly that I needed to push him off, but he withdrew before I had the chance to act. And the next words he whispered were so full of agony and regret, every bit of venom I planned to spit at him died in my throat.

“I love you, you stupid girl.” His eyes were all wolf as he held my face in place. “I’m asking that you let me do the one fucking thing I can to protect you. Let me do this, Nika.” He gritted his teeth, but the hold on my face was still painfully gentle. “I wasn’t a good man. I hadn’t been one for a very long time. You’re the only reason I got my head out of my ass and saw what a terrible man I’d become. You made me better just by knowing you, just by loving you, and I don’t expect anything. I know where I stand. I know that you love Silas. I’d have to be a blind-ass fucker not to see it, if I hadn’t already felt every fucking emotion you did for him while I was inside your head. So I’m not asking you to love me back, but please don’t deny me this one thing. I couldn’t save my wife and children, but I can save you. Please, Nika. Please let me.”

Tears burned several paths down my cheek as he released me. His heart went with him. Standing, he stared down at me. The tears came faster as Salvator pivoted and stomped his way toward the house, leaving me on the bench to cry.

What was I supposed to do when a stone-cold man who'd been given a second chance at life asked me to end it? When he asked me to let him do what he couldn't do for his family? His words had shredded my heart to pieces. I wasn't sure I could stitch it back together again. I couldn't possibly say no when he put it like that, but I couldn't say yes, either.

What was I supposed to do?

I dropped my head, hot tears falling one after another on my jean-clad thighs. I couldn't breathe. My chest was on fire, and everything hurt when I thought about what I was going to be forced to do. I'd been so sure I'd already suffered the worst pain imaginable. I thought losing my father would mean nothing else could hurt me the way losing him had, but I'd been wrong.

I was in agony.

Whispering voices carried across the air out of nowhere, and I lifted my head. The moon at his back, Silas stood in front of me. I hadn't felt him at all.

"What's wrong, love?" Silas dropped to his knees in front of me, taking my hands in his.

It was odd to see him in gloves and his full assassin attire without his mask. He hadn't been wearing it when I left with Salvator. Why was he wearing it now? Had they decided to leave tonight? My thoughts swirled as the tears continued to fall down my cheeks.

"Did Salvator make you cry?" he asked when I didn't speak. His silver hair gleamed as he cocked his head to the side. "Want me to haul his furry arse back out here so he and I can have words?"

Wait, had he just called him Salvator? He never called him by his given name. Only Sally when he wanted to taunt him.

“It’s not...I’m okay,” I lied, stealing back my hands and wiping my cheeks.

I couldn’t name the weird feeling in my gut. Something was off, but not in the same way it had been earlier. It wasn’t action alone. It was the feeling the mercenary gave off that didn’t feel right for some reason.

“We should go back and discuss how we’ll get to Rilas,” I told him, trying to get to my feet, but he grabbed me around the thighs and kept me pinned to the bench.

“Ah, yes. Very clever of him to use Bones to canvass a few of my favorite spots. I’d forgotten all about that bastard.”

I tried to move my mouth to ask what the fuck he was talking about, but it didn’t move on command. Nothing in my body did. My eyes were the only thing that could. I caught sight of a glowing gem hanging around his neck. It wasn’t one I’d seen before. Silas made it a habit never to wear much in way of jewelry, but this had magic. It was enchanted.

The mercenary rose to his feet, lips lifted in a very un-Silas-like smirk. The eerie red I’d seen in my dream replaced the silver color of Silas’s irises.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Rilas.

“Time is short, love. This little enchanted item was worth the effort it took to find it. Even a powerful Fae like you can’t break its hold, I’m afraid. It’ll keep you perfectly compliant while I get the necessary items to break the bond you share with my

brother. I imagine they'll figure out you've been taken soon, but we'll be long gone by then, little Soul Collector."

I couldn't fight back as I was flung over his shoulder and the world around us morphed and moved, the woozy feeling of a travel stone hitting my stomach with relentless force. I silently hoped that Ryker and Tometi had seen it all. At least then they'd know.

27

Silas

"Where's my bird, you wolf bastard? Why are you back and she isn't?" I demanded with a growl, already on my feet.

I'd thrown the lovesick sod a bone. He'd proven to have Nika's best interests at heart. It'd been tense since she discovered what she'd need to do to chuck that demon bastard back where he belonged, so I let them have a moment. Still, I'd rip him to pieces if he'd done anything other than chitter at her.

"I did what you wouldn't," he said, arms crossed over his chest. He was heading for a good smack if he kept on the way he was. "I told her to take my soul and send that fucker back."

I'd counted on him saying a lot of shite, but that wasn't it. It hadn't crossed my mind he might volunteer his soul. I was visibly staggered by the statement.

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On guard, I stared at the absolute looney. “Are you taking the piss?”

He huffed an unamused laugh. “What, can’t imagine a bastard like me sacrificing myself for another person? Think you hold the monopoly on doing what’s right now that you’ve clung to the only good woman worth dying for?”

“Oi.” I started forward, but he closed the distance between us on his own.

His hair fell around his eyes as we squared off. “She loves you. I can’t figure out a single reason why, but she does. The thing is, she cares about me too, and she would’ve never chosen between us. She would’ve fought to the bitter end to save everyone she cares about. So I did the only thing I could think of. I took the choice away from her.”

He crossed his arms and waited for me to argue. But I wouldn’t. In the end, he was right. Nika wouldn’t have chosen either of us and put herself in danger to save us both. I’d been tying myself in knots trying to figure out how to help her, how to carry the burden for her, but I couldn’t.

I wasn’t an absolute sod. I’d never tell her to take the wolf bastard’s soul because I knew what it’d do to her. She had to make that decision for herself. And if it came down to me sacrificing my life to keep her alive and happy, I would. I’d give the gorgeous sister of Lilith leave to take my soul to send that bastard back, and I wouldn’t regret the time she’d shined her light on all this darkness living in my heart.

I just never imagined Bear Claw would be the one to do it before I could. I thought he’d cling to his second chance at life. I thought for sure he’d fight for her to stay

with him instead of me. But for once, I'd called it wrong.

The wolf bastard proved to be a better man than the one I worked with all those years ago. He was as in love with her as I was, enough to offer his soul. I hadn't expected to feel so conflicted and out of sorts. I didn't like what it meant for this bastard to lovemywoman, but I respected the bloody hell out of it all the same.

Because it was as my little rebel said, Bear Claw had changed.

Scoffing and keeping my thoughts to myself, I folded my arms and mirrored his stance. "How?"

"I—" he started before his eyes shot over to the door.

Then he was gone.

Lev sent me a curious glance, but I was already heading outside. It wasn't a lot that got my heart pounding, but the second I took in the empty garden without finding my bird, my heart was on a mission to break straight through my chest.

Bear Claw was in bear form, stalking across the grass around a bench under a tree, using his nose to track any leftover scent. When he morphed back to a naked man, his expression was grim. "She's been taken."

"Sorry?" I snarled.

"I can't catch a tracking scent, but it was definitely Rilas. Those assholes thought it was you at first because they'd been preoccupied with Nika, but then he disappeared with her. Tometi and Ryker think they can find her." The naked shifter had his hands fisted as he stormed into the house.

“Fucking shite!”

She’d been right. He’d come looking at me the way she’d seen in her dream, and I’d let her go off alone like a bloody cotton-headed numpty. My barriers were nothing to him if he had my blood and magic. I wouldn’t have felt him come inside. I could blame Bear Claw all I wanted, but I’d been the absolute fuckwit who watched her go. I was the arrogant bastard who gave the Devil access to my goddess knowing he had the means.

I dragged an angry hand through my hair. “How will those two invisible wankers find her?”

Bear Claw called out to them, then he shifted from one foot to the other, waiting. “They’re already gone.”

For fuck’s sake...

“Bloody brilliant, that is,” I grumbled sarcastically.

Fear clouded my judgment and paralyzed my body in ways it hadn’t since I watched that bastard appear in front of my bird that first time, wearing the face of someone I’d killed. I couldn’t let it. I wasn’t any good to her if I let fear terrorize my normally quick-witted actions.

Nika needed me at my best, so I would be.

I followed Bear Claw into the house after doing my own assessment of the bench and everything around it, but it was evident Rilas had used an enchanted item to take her. Tracking him would be next to impossible with the use of one, and he wasn’t likely to go back to the place we’d tracked down with the help of Bones. Knowing that gobshite, he’d been planning it for a while and used the Brotherhood attacks as a

distraction.

It wasn't clear how he'd gotten her to comply. I wasn't sure what he'd used, magic or threat. I wasn't even clear on what he could still do, but I'd need to be clever and quick if I wanted to find Nika before he did whatever he planned.

My guess was to sever the bond she and I had. It appeared to be the greatest obstacle in his way, and the longer I hummed and hawed, the greater danger she was in of falling prey to that bastard demon brother of mine.

The lad was in a fit when I returned, gathering weapons and everything he could. "We have to find her..." he mumbled to himself, packing more than he should. "Fuck. Silas, how do we track her? Are Ryker and Tometi going to be able to find her and tell us in time? They can't exactly call us."

Tracking...

Without explaining, I headed for our room to retrieve the item Dugan gave me the day we met in a field of flowers. I'd read the note briefly, but only the bit about how I'd know when to use it. Tearing the room to pieces, I finally found where my bird put it. She'd been clever to stow it out of sight, but I should've kept it with me.

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Breathing a relieved sigh, I opened the pouch and read the note. Like I remembered, the first part was about knowing when to use it, then I read the final part.

“What’s been stolen can always be found with the right compass”—Nero

That diabolical bastard had it all planned out, down to the last bloody minute. I clasped the little clear marble in my hand and returned to the frantic wolf bastard who’d left our bird outside. His head would be on a bleeding pike if not for those head-squatting wankers and this enchanted lifeline planted by a bloody fucking genius.

I passed the pacing wanker and grim bugger on the sofa, left with nothing to do but worry, and headed straight to the bench my bird disappeared from. I tossed the enchanted marble on the ground, and it exploded into a cloud of glittery smoke. The other two flanked my sides as image after image came and went, then the ash reshaped into a compass.

“Is that...” the lad murmured.

The wolf bastard grunted in surprise. “I haven’t seen one of those since that obnoxiously powerful asshole, Nero, was alive.”

My face was split in two by a feral grin. “Because this is one of his, I imagine.”

Bear Claw’s eyebrows pinched together. “But how?”

“Bane,” was all I replied before picking up the compass. “He was the one who killed

him.”

Cerulean magic swirled around me, changing my clothes to everything I needed to hunt a demon fuckwit. Mask in place, I caught the lad’s stray gaze. He’d put on a jacket, and the wolf bastard next to him had a bag tossed over one shoulder. The compass spun and then magic fled out of it.

“Time to get our stolen princess back and send a demon to Hell,” I told them, white-hot rage boiling my blood.

28

Nika

I was laid out on a table, still paralyzed. He’d left me there for nearly ten minutes. My magic wasn’t reacting no matter how much I tried. I heard the demon moving around the room. Without being able to turn my head, I had a limited view.

The place looked decrepit. The ceiling was water damaged and falling apart. The walls, too. Paint had chipped off in several places, but I couldn’t see much else.

Dark hair dashed in and out of view as Rilas set up whatever ritual he planned to use. I only got a good look at him when he bent over and cut my cheek with a small knife. Blood slid down the left side of my face as he disappeared again.

I had so many questions, but I couldn’t ask a single one. I was a hostage inside my own body. But I wasn’t completely alone. The whispers of the dead were all around me, as if calling to something. They weren’t calling to me. It was tough to explain, but they were beckoning someone to where we were.

“Bollocks,” I heard Rilas curse, the wavering firelight catching his shadow. “This

won't do."

I heard the demon leave, and it felt like the first time since I'd been kidnapped that I could breathe. I tried my magic again, but it didn't respond. Nothing did. I wanted to call out to the voices. Maybe I could reach out to Tometi and Ryker. I sensed a connection between us. There had to be. I was the only one who could see, hear, and touch them.

But nothing happened. I still couldn't move.

I was so frustrated by how unresponsive my body was and how I'd let my guard down. There were ways to counteract enchanted items, but whatever hung around his neck was too powerful for me to fight in my current state. It'd take more than sheer will to break it down. I'd need to dig deep, and that was exactly what I'd been trying to do the entire time I was prisoner to this cold-as-shit metal table.

I searched for my magic or the lurking abilities that he'd locked away with the necklace he wore. I couldn't sense the usual spark. If I hadn't known better, I'd think he'd stolen that, too.

The guys had to know by now. Had Tometi and Ryker told Salvator? But Rilas had used a traveling stone. They wouldn't be able to track us. They'd honestly need a miracle to get here before the asshole broke the bond and ruined everything we'd been working to do.

No. I wasn't allowed to give up. Silas wouldn't, so I couldn't. I just needed to think out of the box. Father always said you were doomed the minute you gave up. I'd fight to the very end. Too much was at stake if everything went Rilas's way now.

I focused on what information I could gather, like what I could see. Were we underground? It should be almost dawn by now, but I didn't see any sunlight coming

through. It was only firelight that kept us out of complete darkness. Or maybe he'd traveled to another part of the world where it was still the middle of the night. That was also a possibility. Something told me he'd gotten hold of a powerful traveling stone.

What I did gather was Rilas had been setting the stage for a blood ritual. He could've taken me at any point, but he didn't until now. It meant he'd found something to break the bond, and it didn't require his usual magic. Blood magic was the next best, and magic like that always required a sacrifice.

Without access to my magic, I couldn't sense who or what he'd brought to serve as the ritual's blood sacrifice, but depending on the rarity, he might need several. The most important part about using blood magic like this was I'd need to be an active participant. Meaning, he'd have to give me some range of motion. Could he control what parts were paralyzed with the gem? Would he drop the hold he had over me under threat?

I could give the impression of compliance and wait until his guard was down, but I couldn't send him back without achieving balance, and I didn't have anything that could put Rilas in permanent stasis.

Unless...

Maybe I could do something as a Soul Collector. Maybe I could hold him long enough to get word out to the guys. I hadn't attempted to take his soul. He was a demon, so I'd been worried to try. It could make everything a hundred times worse, or maybe it'd buy us time. I cycled through different angles to try in my head as I continued to home in on anything to help me.

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The room was ominously quiet. Had he gone somewhere else entirely? I couldn't see anything to confirm, and without the usual tricks, I couldn't sense anyone either. It was torturous waiting on this table, hyper-focused on every sound, every sway of shadow, and never know what any of it truly meant. Never know when he'd start the ritual and seal my fate.

But a relieved breath escaped me when a familiar voice broke through the quiet.

"There's our pretty girl." Ryker's head popped into view, the usual smile on his face. "That fucking bastard used a knife on our girl, Tome! I'll eat his fucking face."

Tometi came into view, his gentle gaze taking in the state of me. His jaw clenched as he looked at my injury. It was the first time I'd seen the giant radiate fury that veered on homicidal.

A tear broke away from my eye and trailed down my face. Happy didn't cover the feeling it gave me to see them. The whispering voices quieted. I didn't have to understand them to know they'd summoned them here. It was their voices that led the two phantoms to where I'd been taken.

Growling, Ryker brushed back his hair in agitation. "I'll gut that bastard like a fish and feast on his innards while he's still alive to feel it all."

Tometi nodded in agreement, saying nothing but every strained muscle suggested he'd join in.

After mumbling to himself, Ryker smiled down at me in that sassy way of his. "Oh,

wait. Is this the part of the story where the handsome prince who just so happens to also be the wolf kisses the fair maiden, and they ride off into the sunset to live happily ever after?"

Tometi grunted, acting as if Ryker hadn't spoken at all. "Can you move, Nika?"

I stared up, blinking once and hoping they took it for a no. Surprisingly, it was Tometi who understood the message first.

Nodding, he cradled his chin and stared down at me. "Is it magic?"

I blinked twice.

It was magic, but not his. I hoped at least he'd ask more questions to find out what sort Rilas had used on me. It'd be a guessing game if he didn't, and it wasn't likely to end well for us.

Ryker tried to touch me, but Tometi intercepted at the last second. "Not yet, wolf. If he senses us in the other form, we'll lose our advantage. It's better to find out what he did to her before we try to help." He crossed his arms and stared down at me with a tenderness that didn't match the power radiating off of him. "Was it his magic?"

I blinked once.

"An enchanted item, then?"

I blinked twice.

"I'm usually the clever one in this comedy duo. Guess I've been dethroned tonight," Ryker grumbled with a cute wink at me, trying to ease some of the tension. "Did you see anything on him, Tome?" he asked the bear while still looking at me.

“Not that I remember,” the bear replied, agitated.

Ryker tapped his chin before his eyes widened. “Wasn’t that asshole wearing a necklace? I thought it was odd because I’d never seen that brute wear one with that fancy assassin outfit of his. Not one single time.”

I blinked twice.

A proud grin split the wolf’s face. “See, I’m helping.”

Tometi grunted again. “The demon’s gone to deal with something, but once he’s back we’ll have our chance. He didn’t sense us in this form. He might in the other.” The giant’s evil grin made even me uncomfortable. “You snatch it, and I’ll break it. That should disrupt the magic enough to drop its hold over her. We can overpower him in all the suddenness.”

Ryker whistled, impressed. “I keep forgetting how battle smart you are, big guy. Okay, so once she’s free...”

“We’ll have a fight on our hands. He’s lost his ability to take souls, right?” Tometi asked me.

I blinked twice.

It was clear he had, otherwise it would’ve gone differently tonight. He would’ve used his ability to freeze time, and he hadn’t. I would’ve known because the feeling echoed inside me every time. Tonight he hadn’t.

The giant hummed and scratched his jaw in contemplation. “Is there a way you can hold him with your magic?”

I blinked twice.

There was, but I wasn't sure how long it'd hold him. He wasn't as powerful with his Soul Collector abilities bound, but that didn't mean he couldn't break through my magic. I wasn't as strong with it as Silas was. It was definitely not something I'd rely on for longer than ten or so minutes.

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I still wasn't sure how he healed from damage as a demon. Not much was mentioned in the journal, but if we did enough, we might buy ourselves more time.

Ryker cleared his throat and left my line of sight. Tometi watched him with a curious brow before the wolf was back, and the two shared a smile.

"How convenient," Ryker said, laughing. I waited, and as if realizing I couldn't see what they had, the wolf elaborated. "I spy with my little eye...a pair of unbreakable handcuffs. Pretty sure he brought them as an extra measure to keep you compliant, but they'll look better on him. No offense, pretty girl. I just think you look better strung up by magic."

Leave it to Ryker to chatter as if we weren't in a life and death, end of the world situation. But I was grateful he was his loosey-goosey self. It eased the feeling in my gut.

Tometi scowled. "Your eye is hardly little."

Ryker sighed and rolled his eyes. "And...he's back."

"They aren't likely to hold him long, but with her magic, it'd give one of us time to reach out to the others. You'll need to be quick when you grab them. She'll need help overpowering him." Tometi peered around, his muscles shifting in frustration. "He's kept his weapons out of reach. I don't see any left out."

Cackling, Ryker eyed the bear. "Um, hate to admit this, but aren't you sort of a weapon all on your own? Didn't you essentially break Sally's face the other day?"

“I don’t know if physical attacks will be effective against a demon,” Tometi rebuked.

Shrugging, Ryker didn’t seem worried. “Maybe. Maybe not. Still fun to try. I’ll bet he has at least one or two weapons on him. These sneaky hands are bound to find them before he realizes.” He lifted his hands with a snarky grin.

“It’s settled then. As fast as we can, break the necklace, bind him, and do as much damage as possible.” Tometi caught my gaze. “The minute he’s subdued, Nika, you’ll call Silas.”

I blinked twice.

Ryker and Tometi disappeared, and I heard something off in the distance. I could’ve sworn time crawled to a stop. My pulse thundered in my ears. Had he gotten his abilities back? No, it was only because the fear of getting it wrong made everything excruciatingly slow. If he anticipated anything, he could turn the tables on us. We had one shot at this.

Tometi and Ryker peered down at me, waiting. Neither dared to speak in case he could hear them. It was smart. Salvator couldn’t see them, but he could hear them. It wasn’t worth the risk. We had a plan and the parts we played in it. Now it was just a matter of finding the perfect moment to act.

I waited for what felt like hours, heart thundering every second it took for whoever had come back to return to the room. And then I heard him.

Rilas was on the phone with someone, whispering into the receiver. It was too low for me to make out, but he didn’t sound happy. I got the distinct impression something he needed for the ritual was missing, or what he’d gotten wasn’t right. I detected the rage in his tone despite his voice being too soft to make out the words.

At least the phone would be within reach. It'd be important to make sure it wasn't broken in the fight.

I let the fear take me because Rilas would expect it. If I found any calm at all, it'd set off alarms, so I embraced the worry and potential loss if we didn't do this right.

Ryker caught my eye, smirking. Then he did something I hadn't been aware he could do. He signed at me using the same code as the one my father and I used. Had he learned how to do it with my memories and use of it with the boys alone?

Plans disrupted, he signed. He's lost a blood sacrifice needed. Move forward with the plan.

Tometi nodded, and we all waited on bated breath for Rilas to come closer to the table. He shuffled at the door's threshold, arguing with whoever was on the other side of the call. Finally, after minutes of waiting, he walked over. His red eyes dropped to mine, and the side of his lip was lifted, completely oblivious to the two phantoms glaring at him.

"Not long now, Fated One. I'll sever this bond—"

The two men didn't wait for another self-righteous speech. Both touched me at the same time. Their bodies solidified, and they wasted no time acting on the plan we'd made only moments before.

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Nika

The topography of Rilas's face twisted in on itself as Ryker stole the necklace. The chain broke with a hard tug, and the blonde didn't waste time tossing it across the

table. The dark-haired giant who towered over everyone had already caught it and crushed the glowing gem under his boot before the demon had a chance to react.

The hold on my body fell away, and I called on the power inside of me. Pink magic swirled and rushed out, hitting the demon straight in the chest. Rilas was thrown into the wall, but he was quick to recover.

“That’s a new bloody trick you have there, love.” Black smoke twisted around his body, his vibrant red eyes on me from across the room.

Tometi glanced at me, no longer visible. I slid across the table, avoiding a jet of black power that sprung out, and the giant caught me and spun. His foot landed on the demon with powerful force, knocking him nearly through the wall. It wasn’t a hit most could recover from, but Rilas was already on his feet.

The demon went for his weapons and enchanted items, but found them gone. Ryker showed off his now phantom daggers and pouch of trinkets with a happy laugh. I didn’t think they’d become a part of him like his clothes if he grabbed them in the other form.

Rilas was right.

Neat fucking trick.

I was out of Tometi's arms with a jump and the towering giant disappeared from Rilas's view. Magic swirled around my arms and left me again in a stream, latching onto the demon's limbs and tethering him to the corners nearest him. It only slackened when Ryker grabbed my hand and then Rilas by a handful of his hair.

He shoved Rilas forward with a devilish grin on his face, dug his boot into the demon's back, and secured the cuffs around Rilas's wrists with one hand. I pushed more magic out, and it wrapped around the demon's body like a snake about to devour its prey whole.

The dance we did was somehow in perfect sync, as if we'd been fighting together all this time. I took the hand of one, then the other, sharing my power with them so they could take their physical forms in staggering attacks.

Tometi landed several blows on Rilas's head, knocking the demon down into himself, and Ryker followed Tometi's assault with his own. He stabbed the demon in several places, aiming for the most damaging spots on Rilas's body. Blood saturated the demon's skin and clothes by the time Ryker was done with him.

My magic wrapped around Rilas tighter, keeping him immobile. I didn't want to risk the other two being hurt. I wasn't sure if you could kill someone who was technically already dead and a ghost, but I wasn't about to take any chances. After minutes of nonstop assaults, Rilas's head dropped down to his chest. His body was pitched

forward and lax, only held upright by the magic binding him.

It was the first real look I was given at what had quickly become my prison. The building was as decrepit as I first believed. The floor was covered in rubble and trash, the tile absent in several spots. The table I'd been laying on was marked by a pentagram the same way it had been when we found Reaper's mother.

I'd called it right—he intended to use blood magic.

I crouched in front of the demon and immediately felt Tometi's worried hand on my shoulder. Throwing the tall man a smile, I patted him in reassurance and turned back to the unconscious demon.

With all his injuries, Rilas still breathed. It was exactly how I worried it'd be; he couldn't be killed in the traditional way. At least he could still become unconscious. That was certainly a stroke of luck.

Hoping she'd hear me, I talked directly to my grandmother. "I'm going to get you back. I know what I have to do now. You just sit tight."

Hand shaking, I stood and snatched the phone he'd put down on a nearby table. I dialed the last number Silas used and put the receiver to my ear. I hoped to Lilith that Silas had taken the same phone. I didn't have a communication stone, and the infamous assassin ditched every phone he used. You know, assuming he'd remembered to bring one in all the chaos.

The other two kept a tight hold on my shoulders so they could go through Rilas's clothes and remove anything he might find use for, or better yet, that we might. They came up with a few things Ryker missed, but without knowing what they were, we couldn't exactly use them.

I pocketed the spoils. Enchanted items were dangerous when you didn't use them right. We didn't want to get accidentally trapped by one.

The phone rang and rang. My breathing was sharp as I waited for nearly a minute before giving up. He wouldn't let it ring that long, that much I was certain. Either he didn't bring it, or he'd ditched the last one he'd been using.

"Shit," I mumbled. "We can't leave this asshole like this. It's too risky. I'll have to be here to reinforce the binding magic if he wakes up. One of you needs to go find the others."

Tometi and Ryker gave me the same look; they wouldn't leave me for any reason. Neither one wanted me to face this terrifying monster without them. My heart squeezed knowing that only a year ago, Lev was the only person I could count on aside from my father and Dugan. My life might've been upended by bullshit, but I'd gained so much in the aftermath.

"If they don't find us, I can't send him back," I argued.

My throat seized up, and it was hard to get the last few words out because I hadn't found another way to corrupt my gem to summon the old magic. I'd have to do something that would tear me apart inside.

I swallowed and pleaded with them, begging with a pointed glance at both. We didn't have time to argue about it. I wasn't sure what sort of healing abilities the demon had, and we couldn't count on him being unconscious for long.

My eyes strayed to Rilas slouched against the wall, wrapped in my pink magic with his hands cuffed behind his back. Like this he looked like anyone else. Worse, he had the face of the man I loved. It was uncomfortable to see someone who looked like Silas in this terrible state.

“I’ll go,” I heard the wolf finally say. “I’m faster.”

Ryker smiled, then he came over and wrapped his arms around me. The way he hugged me was so warm and full of feeling that I nearly shed another tear. I didn’t hesitate to hug him back. If not for him, I’d still be on that table and at Rilas’s mercy.

Pressing a quick kiss to my cheek, the blonde withdrew with a cute wink. “For my troubles.”

I heard a bunch of shit drop at my feet and looked down to find a pouch and several weapons he’d stolen.

He evaded Tometi’s punishing reach with a grace that didn’t fit his muscly frame, tipping an imaginary hat with a mock bow. “Best be off!”

Then it was just the three of us.

After checking on Rilas again to ensure he was still unconscious, I gathered the items off the floor. Tometi followed every move I made with his all-seeing eyes, but he never let the demon out of his periphery. Pivoting, I grabbed the giant’s hand without a word. His curious gaze dropped to our joined hands before I beckoned his other, offering him a couple daggers and the pouch.

“Take it,” I told him, and he did.

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I only kept a single dagger for myself. I didn't need much, not with Tometi by my side. Letting go of the massive man, he stared down at the now ghostly weapons and pouch in open befuddlement.

"The less he has available to him, the better. You saw what Ryker did. This is the best way to keep his things away from him if he wakes up, but don't ever underestimate what he can do," I explained. "Demons are crafty and bring powers from the After most of us can't fathom."

Tometi nodded and pocketed the pouch. He clipped one dagger to his hip, but the other he kept a tight hold on. "The demon bleeds, but he does not die."

The subtle rise and fall of Rilas's chest caught my eye. "Guess that's what makes his kind so dangerous. He can't be killed without..."

"Taking a soul."

My stomach hurt. "Yeah."

"Will you do it?" he asked, no judgment or persuasion in his tone.

I gripped the weapon I held tighter, glaring at the demon. The flutter of my dormant power was the only way I knew I still had it. "I don't have a choice."

Tometi stared at me, humming. "You do, but Salvator is right. He's the one you should choose. Like you've accepted your destiny, so has he. You've given him a chance at redemption, Nika. It's a great gift for someone whose soul has been

darkened by evil.”

I turned my head, but in an instant, a loud crackling erupted out of nowhere. My magic had been broken. I sensed the snap. The bindings around Rilas dissolved to nothing, and the demon was already in front of me, red eyes ablaze. Black smoke wove around his body.

“I was arrogant to underestimate you, Fated One.”

Tometi had already touched me so he could stab the demon in the throat, but fire exploded in my stomach so fierce I staggered back. The unmistakable burn of a blade penetrating my body caused me to suck in a surprised gasp.

It'd been so long since I'd been impaled like this, I nearly didn't recognize the feeling. I wasn't sure where the sword had come from, but as quickly as it struck, it was twisted and yanked out. Trouble was, Rilas still had his hands cuffed behind his back. He'd used his magic to stab me, an ability I wasn't aware he had.

I pressed a hand over my stomach, stumbling back, every step agony. Blood poured past my fingers and down my front. Nothing I did stopped it. I would've fallen if not for the man keeping a tight hold on my hand.

Tometi roared and slammed the demon into a nearby wall. It was a shove that hit with the force of a train, but Tometi was careful not to jostle me in the violent forward shift. Rilas went straight through the wall, hitting something on the other side with a grunt.

Frantic, Tometi gently lifted me into his arms as carefully as he could and searched for anything to stanch the bleeding. But it wouldn't stop. My shirt was completely saturated already, the stab too deep and too severe.

I hadn't lost this much blood in a long time. Without intervention, I'd bleed out. The shock numbed my initial reaction, and my head lulled back against Tometi's bulging arm as I was hit with a wave of intense dizziness.

In a swirl of sparkles, Silas was suddenly in the room with us, postured for a fight. Time seemed to slow when I caught sight of the man I'd been most desperate to see again.

It couldn't be overstated how incredibly relieved I was that he'd found me. He was so fucking beautiful, and I'd taken every moment with him for granted. I shouldn't have. I should've kissed him every chance I got. I should've told him I loved him every second of every day. I'd been so wrapped up in the end of the world that I took my own happiness for granted, and as I bled out, I had nothing but regrets.

Tears blazed down my face as his familiar figure pivoted. "Silas," I breathed, my voice laced with grief.

His silver eyes scanned the room until they found me, then they dropped to my blood-covered stomach. I saw fear beam in his gaze, but he couldn't come over. Not yet. Salvator came rampaging through, his wolf all fangs and claws, limber and terrifyingly fast despite nearly no room to move in.

Rilas was overwhelmed in a second by the two. They worked in tandem to attack the demon as if they'd been fighting together forever. Silas and Rilas met in a spark of magic, the two colors colliding in a deafening explosion.

Tometi hurried us back, avoiding the violence with his hand pressing over mine in an attempt to control the bleeding. Bright red liquid covered both our hands. I hissed and groaned, trying not to push his hand away. The pain was excruciating. I might've been on this side of agony more than a few times, but it never got any easier.

Silas's magic was swift and deadly. It swirled and bound the demon before Rilas could counter it. The masked assassin activated an item, and the demon was hit with a sudden rush of magic. His head dropped forward like it had earlier.

Salvator snarled and leapt through the air in a magnificent display of agility. Without waiting, he removed the demon's head with his great maw. I'd never forget the terrible stomach-churning sound of bone breaking and flesh tearing as he did.

The wolf strutted across the room on all fours with Rilas's head still in its mouth, keeping it away from the demon's destroyed body. Silas stood over the carnage in his assassin attire, sword resting on his shoulder. But just as quickly, he was in front of me to check on the gash in my stomach. He tore my shirt to give him a better view of it.

"Silas," I murmured, wincing.

He grabbed my face and brushed away an ever-flowing stream of tears. Our mouths met for a moment before he let loose a breath. "You had me out of my bloody fucking mind, little rebel. Who said you could get yourself hurt?"

"My bad," I sassed, groaning when every word was followed by a throb of pain.

"Fucking hell." His eyes flashed, and he glanced over his shoulder. "Where's the lad when you need him?" Every word that left his mouth was a vicious snarl. "Wasn't he right behind us?"

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The abnormally large wolf shifted into a man, and he dropped Rilas's decapitated head like trash. After casting a cursory glance at the demon's body, he came over to my side and inspected the wound. "We were too fast for him. I doubt he'll come in time. If I lick it—"

"Um, what?" I rasped. "Lick what now?"

Another bout of wooziness struck, and my head lulled back before I could finish my complaint.

Silas couldn't look any unhappier if he tried, but he nodded in spite of his obvious distaste. "It'll slow the bleeding and heal you enough to give us time. I don't like it, but you're losing too much blood, love. That demon bastard didn't hold back. Without a strong healing potion—"

"You're wasting time."

Salvator pushed him out of the way and gestured to Tometi. The silent giant grunted and knelt down, holding me as gently as possible. The naked shifter changed into his wolf form again, eyes on me as if asking permission, but I was too confused to do more than offer a curt nod.

I was worried if I said anything, it'd come out sounding ungrateful and accusatory. And he was right. I was losing too much blood. I didn't doubt Salvator suggested what he could out of concern I'd be overcome by my injury. They needed me.

The wolf crept forward, huffing. His insanely wide and long wolf tongue lapped at

my stomach where the gash was.

“Fuck!” I ground out, pain lancing through me. I nearly arched back, but agony kept me in place. It was impossible to explain how uncomfortable it was to have a massive tongue moving across my open wound, but it was definitely something I hoped never to feel again.

“Careful,” Tometi warned, tensing as he held me. “You need to be gentle with her.”

The wolf huffed again as if to say he already knew that and went back to his languid strokes. It was torturously slow and uncomfortable, but the itchy sensation of my injury mending told me it was working. I had to fight not to react too much because every contraction of my wound made the pain infinitely worse.

Cutting a nasty glare at the wolf, Silas shoved Salvator to the side so he could crouch close to me. He bent his head down and pressed our foreheads together, soothing me with a gentle touch to the face, while I was still cradled in a giant bear-turned-man’s arms and had a massive wolf licking my stomach.

Yeah, weirder situations didn’t exist.

“Shh, love. It won’t be long.” His eyes cut over to the wolf next to him. “Make it quick, yeah? I doubt you need to lick her the entire time, you wolf bastard. Enough saliva will do the trick.”

Saliva? Gross.

I dropped my head back again as another wave of discomfort spread through my waist. But it was cut short when my eyes caught on something. Black magic grew like vines from Rilas’s prone form. His head wasn’t where Salvator left it, either. It was closer to him.

What the fuck?!

“Wait!”

I tried to tell them what I saw, but the warning got stuck in my throat. Another slice of pain struck when the wolf’s tongue delved in too deep. I was left only to react to the uncomfortable anguish, ridiculously weak because of the blood loss.

None of my guys saw the vines webbing across the walls and floor. Even Tometi was wholly focused on my injury instead of what was happening around us. I fought to get the warning out, but I was too late. Silas and Salvator were swiftly overcome by the lightning-quick magic. Tometi tried to dodge its reach, but the vines got to him before he could get far.

I hit the ground with a groan and curled around my stomach. The vicious echo of my injury had lessened, but it still hurt enough to render me breathless and vulnerable. I quivered and tried to get to my feet, sensing him before he was next to me. I called on my magic, damning how weak I was, but my hair was yanked back so violently I gasped, and the pink flickered out of existence.

Rilas was glaring down at me, his head reattached to his neck. His clothes were saturated in blood, but I didn’t see any open wounds. Unlike me, he’d been completely healed. And it also appeared he’d somehow gotten out of his cuffs.

Fucking great.

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Nika

Every breath was fire and agony.

“How kind of you to deliver the final piece needed for the ritual right to me, love,” he cooed, every word dripping with malice. “I’d been worried he wouldn’t show, but here he is. Ever the prince charming, this brother of mine.”

“Silas,” I moaned, crying out again when he tugged my hair.

Silas was strung upside down next to Salvator’s wolf and Tometi, all unconscious and unresponsive. Rage I hadn’t felt since my father’s death warped my thoughts.

Rilas tutted me with a finger and click of his tongue. “Sadly, none of them will hear you, darling.” Hand tightening on my hair, he crouched in front of me, holding a little rock between his fingers. “You missed one. Tragic.” His red eyes glowed brighter. “Try anything, and I’ll keep them awake and in anguish. I’ll let their pain be our ritual’s ambiance.”

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It still hurt to move. I needed to conserve my energy. If I was going to do what I planned, I couldn't be taxed by meaningless fighting. I needed to wait for the perfect moment to act, when I'd regained enough strength. I'd be the sad little woman he expected. I'd let him think he'd won.

Rilas lifted me off the floor and put me back on the table. He bound my wrists and ankles with chains. These weren't unbreakable, but my guess was he thought I'd be too weak to break them.

Turning my head, I eyed my guys hanging from the ceiling. Rilas caught my gaze and went over to Tometi. Searching the upside-down phantom, who was still visible for some reason, he collected the pouch we'd stolen.

Had he put them in stasis? Was that the item he used? Why had it worked on Tometi? What I did know was I couldn't break their stasis without getting the item first.

I'd have to break it like we broke his necklace, and I wasn't sure I'd have that kind of strength. My magic was barely sparking. I'd used a lot, and while I was healing, it wouldn't be fast enough. Like this, I'd only have enough power left to do what I needed to send him back.

Hopefully.

Fuck! I hoped I had enough.

I swallowed and sucked in air when he got to Silas, holding a tiny ornate knife. A throb hit my stomach, and I had to smother it. I couldn't use my power yet. If I used it

reactively, I'd fuck it all up.

Smirking at me, Rilas cut my unconscious mercenary and collected his blood in a little vial, then left the three hanging. He didn't do more than that. The air rushed out of me in relief.

I was worried he'd kill them in front of me, but he obviously needed me compliant for the next part. He wouldn't be able to keep me cuffed to the table. He'd need me to actively take part in it. Which was easier to do with the three men alive and under threat. What he didn't know was I already had a plan.

He made his way over to the table and lit the candles around it. He was busy placing items when I caught a flash of blonde hair and a heroic wink and salute. I kept my breaths short and sharp, my pulse hammering, as if I was afraid. But it was out of excitement, not fear. Lev's green eyes appeared near the door, and my friend signed their plan.

Rilas hadn't sensed either of them yet. I wasn't sure how until I saw the item on Lev's finger. A concealment ring. I was so infinitely glad I had this clever man on my side.

Ryker and I got this. You know what you need to do. Don't hold back. It's now or never, he signed.

I gave him a very slight nod, lips thinned.

They didn't wait. Lev burst out with his magic and daggers. Ryker was already at my side, uncuffing my wrists and ankles. He winked, his hand already wrapped around one of mine, while his other arm locked around Rilas's neck from behind. Lev's magic wrapped around the demon, holding him in place. I was off the table, stumbling to get around Rilas.

Our eyes met and the final piece of fate slid into place. My breathing calmed and everything came into focus. I already knew what to do.

Live wires slithered all over my body the same way they did every time I used my Soul Collector abilities. The world crawled to a standstill. I searched for the feeling of her and grabbed hold of the invisible hand reaching out to me.

Grandmother came rushing out, appearing in front of me holding my hand in a form I'd only seen in pictures. Long purple hair poured down her shoulders. Blue eyes that shared the same coloration as mine gleamed. The elvish features that had passed from mother to daughter for generations stared back at me.

"Don't be afraid, darling. Embrace every part of you," she said in a disembodied voice, laying a small kiss on my cheek. Her smile was gentle as she disappeared into a sliver of white fog.

The feeling in my gut intensified.

Rilas blinked, and his eyes jerked over to me.

He couldn't move. His body was being slowly covered in ice. Ryker had a strong hold on him, his eyes frozen on me, unseeing. The demon fought the hold on him, but I could see the fear creeping into his stare when nothing he did worked.

The slow-growing ice reached his face, and the red in his eyes dimmed to a dull gold. Then a sliver of inky blackness escaped his mouth. It wasn't the same as the others. It was distinctly dark. It fled his body for mine, caught by the glowing gem around my neck.

The demon's voice was in my head as time shuddered and moved forward again. "You'll never do what you must to send me back, and it won't be long before

my powers return. The seal that old minger put on me is already falling apart.”

His vicious warning echoed inside my head, and I staggered back. Ryker and Lev were already there to catch me. I tossed both of them a grateful smile and stood on shaky legs. The dizziness was worse. I didn’t have long. Every minute was a fight.

Rilas’s icy form was a moment frozen in time. If he broke loose of my body, he’d find his way back to it, that much I was certain. Unlike the other souls, he didn’t need my help to reclaim his body, and I was already running out of time.

Shakily, I nodded at frozen Rilas. “The stone he has is enchanted. Probably a permanent form of stasis.”

Lev nodded and went over to search while Ryker kept me propped up. When my friend found it, everything was a little bit blurrier. “This?”

“Yes. You need to break it.”

Ryker grinned and made grabby hands for the tiny rock. Lev took his place and handed the stone over. Without waiting, the blue-haired Fae uncorked several healing potions and forced them down my throat. I breathed a grateful sigh when some of my energy returned.

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“You’ll need more, but those should hold you over until we get back,” he told me.

I nodded my thanks. I could finally stand on my own two legs without a huge amount of shaking. It was better than nothing.

The whispers came again, their chorus soft and melodic. The guys came back to life and hit the ground as soon as Ryker broke the enchanted stone to pieces. It only took them a few seconds to collect themselves before they noticed the frozen demon in the room.

“You took his soul, love?” Silas questioned slowly. “You can do that? That’s bloody brilliant.”

Rilas’s growls and shouts filled my head, and I grabbed onto it, hoping to stifle the sound. But it didn’t help. The abrupt shouting was deafening.

Silas wrapped his arms around me, concern filtering into his voice. “Is that demon fuckwit in your head now, little rebel?”

“I’m not sure how long I can keep him,” I admitted, cringing when another shout rang out.

“Niks,” Lev said in his most soothing voice yet. He was about to say something I didn’t want to hear. “You need to send him back before he hurts you or gets out.”

The whispers beckoned, and for the first time, I understood what they were saying. “It’s the choice you’ll have to make, the soul you’ll be forced to take,” they

said over and over.

I lifted my misty eyes to where Salvator stood, and he came over as if my mere gaze had summoned him. His stare bored into mine, and he took my face in his hands. Silas snarled, but the shifter ignored him. “Let me do this for you, Nika.”

I grabbed his hands, my tears falling freely. “I don’t know if I can. I care too much about you. It’s not fucking fair.”

He laughed. “You’re right about that, woman, but it’s the way things are. And let’s face it, I died once already.” His eyes were painfully kind as he sighed and used his thumbs to wipe away the tears I cried for him. “This is the only thing I can do for you, so will you let me? I’ve never really gotten to be the hero. Give me this one hero moment, Nika.”

Silas held me tighter, but he didn’t say anything. His embrace said it all. He wished it was him making the choice. He wished I was never put in this position. He might not like Salvator, but he knew what the shifter meant to me.

He was my friend.

Salvator’s smile was so painfully affectionate it only made me cry harder as he dipped down and stole another kiss, this time in full view of Silas.

“Oi, you wolf bastard. Don’t think I won’t lay your ungrateful arse out right here, right now,” Silas bellowed angrily, rigid against me, but Salvator didn’t pay him any mind.

“What is it that the humans like to say? One for the road?” The shifter offered us a one-shoulder shrug and let my face go.

Ryker gaped at the grinning man in front of us. “Did this grumpy asshole just make a joke? Our Sally? He’s about to cross over to his next life, and he finally cracks a fucking joke? How dare you wait until now to show us your fun side.”

I laughed in spite of the new stream of tears, then nodded. My head hurt worse the longer I had the demon inside it. It was hard to focus on anything, but it wasn’t an option to do nothing. If I didn’t send Rilas back, then the world would fall to his power. It seemed cruel of fate to make me choose between one person I cared about and many of them.

I only had one choice to make.

Salvator slapped Silas on the shoulder and grinned at my mercenary for the first time since he came back into our lives. “Take good care of our girl, Sparkles. I’ll see you guys on the other side.”

The whispers continued their chorus.

The grinning tribesman crossed his arms and took several steps back. With nothing but acceptance in his expression, he waited. I pivoted and peered up at Silas. His gaze met mine with visible grief. My big brute might play his part well, but even he didn’t want another senseless death.

He cradled my face, lending me his strength. “Let him have his hero moment, love. Even I think this wolf bastard deserves the glory of it after all he’s done.”

After one last kiss, I left Silas’s arms and stood in front of the naked shifter. I barely cared as I wrapped my arms around him and held tight. “I hope you find everything you want in the next life, Salvator. I’ll miss you so much,” I whispered to him before sensation crept over me and the world slowed to a stop. I was worried I wouldn’t be able to do it if I didn’t act quickly.

If I heard anything else...

Salvator was smiling down at me when the ice grew across his beautiful brown skin. His fathomless eyes lost their gentle gleam. Everything about him ebbed away. A sliver of white left his mouth in a swirling dance, but to my sudden confusion, it split into three pieces. Two of the three shot behind me, and the larger one dashed back and forth and rubbed against me before disappearing into my necklace.

The white gem immediately became a perfect grey color when, without waiting, I sent his soul to its awaiting afterlife. Salvator's familiar warmth left me, and my eyes burned with the loss of him.

Rilas was yelling inside my head, fighting to break free, sensing Fate's hand reaching for him. I eased back out of Salvator's frozen hold. Inside, something was tearing. I didn't have time to second-guess myself.

As the world moved back into motion, I let go and my magic created a vortex around me. The gem around my neck glowed bright grey as I summoned the sensation from the deepest recesses of my soul and created the necessary symbols in pink light. Each one I had memorized. Each one sealing his fate. Each one damning him to an eternity of pain.

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“Go to fucking Hell,” I yelled as a black abyss opened up in front of me.

Everyone took a step back to avoid its reach as Rilas’s soul was ripped out of me. Several others seemed to go with him, getting sucked up by the darkness. I caught his desperate face before he disappeared into the impenetrable void in the floor. The large hole closed behind him, and all my energy was sapped with it.

I collapsed.

31

Silas

“Read the notes she left again, lad. Use that impossibly clever mind of yours to figure out the code and translate what that wily old fox wrote in her bleeding journal,” I growled, dragging a hand through my hair in frustration. “There’s something, I know it.”

Lev stared at me with that pitying look of his while leaned against the doorframe. “There’s nothing. We’ll just have to—”

“Wait. I know, lad. You keep saying that like I haven’t heard you blabbering on and on about how what she did was a huge tax on her body and she’ll need time to recover,” I grumbled angrily, cradling the unconscious woman against my chest.

I’d barely left her side. The moments I had were either to shower or piss. Otherwise, I’d been serving as her resting place for nearly two weeks now, and it’d stay that way

until she woke up. Even if it took a year or a decade to wake her.

The blonde wanker with a shameless grin and obnoxious energy peeked his head into the room. “Oh? Is he still grumbling about her being asleep? I keep telling you, scary assassin man, that it’s only expected she’d be comatose after sending back a demon.”

“And I keep reminding you, mutt, if not for this generous goddess in my arms, you’d be a trophy on my wall,” I threatened.

“Noted,” was all the blonde wanker said.

He practically frolicked into my bedroom, the least worried of the bunch. At least that huge bastard had the decency to seem concerned the longer the beauty slumbered. He’d checked on her more than anyone else.

The two phantoms were no longer undead or invisible. In all the mess, they’d somehow become shapeshifters in that wolf bastard’s place. The lad thought it had something to do with Bear Claw crossing over. I couldn’t care less how it happened, only that it did.

I liked it better when I couldn’t hear or see them. Well, at least this blonde wanker. Had it not been for the fear of what my rebel might do to me, I would’ve thrown his arse to the curb the first day he mouthed off in my home.

As it were, I was at the mercy of Nika’s kind heart. The last thing I wanted was for her to wake up with problems to fix. She shouldn’t have anything to worry about but what to do with the new life she’d share with her handsome rogue. Whatever she wanted, I’d give her.

So, I’d play nice for now.

The torture of having her right here in my arms but somewhere I couldn't go was what kept me barely sleeping and eating. I didn't dare leave her side. I'd be damned if I wasn't the one she woke up to. But as the days went on and she stayed deathly still and terrifyingly unconscious, I grew less confident she'd ever wake.

Fate was a cruel bloody mistress if she took her from me after all we'd done, but I'd go to the After to collect her myself if that was what it took.

The big fucker strolled in and eyed the woman on my chest. "I'll watch over her. You should—"

"If you're going to come in here and natter at me about how I need to take care of myself because she'd never want to see me this way, don't. Out with you lot," I snarled, dangerously close to tossing these meddling gobshites out of the house altogether.

The numpties scattered with another glare, and I was finally alone to worry on my own. I peeked at the woman in my arms and brushed purple hair from her eyes. She was so bloody beautiful like this, and it killed me that all I could do was hold her close and pray that Lilith sent her back to me.

I'd lived more lifetimes in the last year than I had in all the centuries I'd been alive. We'd spent our entire relationship running from a demon with my brother's face, and when he was gone, the world saved by my goddess, it felt odd. I never considered what it might look like to live together once everything had been resolved.

Of course, I'd never be that lucky.

I'd rushed to catch Nika when her eyes closed and she collapsed, the darkness in front of her disappearing from sight. I couldn't wake her. I refused to let anyone touch her for days, trying everything to rouse the slumbering beauty. The lad used his

cleverness on me though, and reminded me that my bird wouldn't survive long without sustenance and care.

The lad had ways to nourish her. He kept Nika hydrated and fed with magical intervention he'd scored off one of his contacts, but the fear she'd never wake grew in me every day. The only reason I hadn't lost it was that the lad didn't seem worried at all. I expected him, more than most, to be losing his bloody mind, but he came in every few hours with a calm smile and tender hand.

To distract myself, I'd used all the time spent holding my unconscious goddess to plan our future together. It'd take some convincing, but I'd secure places for the others so we could have our own if I had to. I'd even consider living among Normies to find some semblance of peace. I didn't plan to share her more than I already had. It was my turn to get her undivided attention.

I wanted to build a life with this woman the way I never imagined doing with anyone. I wanted the white picket fence dream those Normies always blathered on about. I wanted the little babes with her face and smile. I wanted the simple, mundane joys found in the days spent with the one you loved. For once, I considered a future where I wasn't a mercenary; I was simply hers.

Nika's arm moved and wrapped around me. A sigh escaped her mouth, and her head shifted a little on my chest. Like I'd been struck by a bolt of lightning, everything in my body contracted. It was the first she'd moved in two weeks. I waited, heart fluttering at the feel of her warm breath and squeezing arm.

I chanced a look at her, afraid to find my bird still slumbering, but a gorgeous pair of icy blues met my hopeful glance. Her lips were lifted in the most breathtakingly beautiful smile of my entire bloody fucking life, and I became the blubbery troll I'd always been.

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“There’s my bird,” I muttered in awe, still too shocked to do much else.

She laughed, her voice husky with disuse. “Why are you crying, Silas? Who hurt my big silly brute?”

My eyes widened as she reached up and brushed away the surprising wetness around my eyes. Her gentle fingers wiped away what they could, but it was as if the mere touch of her released every bit of emotion I’d been smothering for two weeks. Hell, ever since meeting this goddess.

“You had me bloody fucking scared, little rebel. I thought that even with you here in my arms, I’d already lost you to another cruel twist of fate,” I told her candidly.

She used what little strength she had to grab my face and tug me down. “Then kiss me already. Make this real for both of us.”

With a sneaky grin, I dragged her closer and devoured her mouth, soothing every bit of fear I’d felt over the days spent wondering if I’d ever hear her sweet voice or feel her soft lips on mine again. I groaned and held her close, plenty happy to take things where they always went—where I needed them to go with my knob standing at attention.

Nika seemed to regain her strength quickly, straddling my lap and sliding her hands into my hair. It was a dream to kiss her again. I even worried for a second it might be. What if my terrible brain was playing a nasty trick on me, and any moment now, I’d wake with her still unconscious on my chest?

Her soft moan snapped me out of the thought. “I love you, you big gorgeous idiot. I worried I wasn’t going to be able to say that again. I love you.”

“Oi,” I murmured against her smiling mouth, dick throbbing. I was two words from fucking her no matter who heard or saw it. “Don’t be all sweet and barbs on me, little rebel. I won’t be able to control myself.”

She drew away, a bloody adorable smile on her face. “Isn’t that the point?” Her blue eyes glinted. “And hey, don’t you have anything to say to me?”

This dangerously sexy woman would be the end of me.

One of my hands sunk into her silky hair, and the other wrapped around her back so she could feel just what she did to me. I yanked her head back and bit her curved throat, trailing kisses up to her ear. “I love you more than words can express and more than lifetimes can prove. No matter what you do, no matter where you go, no matter what you become, I’ll always be yours, Nika.”

Her eyes blazed into mine, tears escaping. “A simple ‘I love you, too’ would’ve sufficed, asshole.”

Snickering, I stole a kiss and whispered, “Maybe for you, but not for me, love. I hope you’re ready for everything I’ll do to make sure you never forget it.”

Nika giggled and wrapped her arms around my neck. “Oh? My memory’s a bit fuzzy. Better start now.”

Was my bird...seducing me? On purpose? Bloody hell, if this was a dream I never wanted to wake up. Lilith’s clever illusion had won me over.

“Lilith’s tits,” I groaned and thrust against her, nearly forgetting about the wankers

waiting down the hall.

She was finally mine again. I could touch and kiss her as much as I'd like. Fuck her until all she could say was my name. Bask in the sweet glow of our love.

I kissed my rebel darling with abandon, bent on showing her exactly what she meant to me. Until the bellow of a nitwit put an end to any hope I had for keeping her to myself.

"Pretty girl's awake!" the mutt cried out, summoning the other two within seconds.

For fuck's sake. I'm about to make an absolute arse out of myself...

32

Nika

The first thing I registered when I roused was the strong body I knew better than my own. Then his rich scent came next. I'd come out of everything alive, and so had Silas.

I didn't have time to grieve Salvator with the mercenary kissing away all thoughts in my head. I wanted to crawl inside the little world he created with his touch and live there forever. I couldn't get enough of his taste as I tugged him closer and swiveled my hips in invitation.

It might be my attempt at a much-needed distraction from the reality of what I'd done, but I'd been so scared to lose him. That I'd lose it all. And I'd been hellbent to bury myself in his all-consuming touches before the voice carrying down the hall stopped me.

My head twisted and found Ryker, no longer transparent or phantom-like. My brows pinched together when I glanced at Silas and noticed he could hear and see him as well. Then came the other two. Lev and Tometi were separated by what seemed like several feet. The giant had to bend his head just to come into the room behind the dancing blonde.

“For fuck’s sake,” Silas grumbled. “She’s awake. You’ve seen. Now get the bloody hell out of here before I find boxes for all three of you and bury you at least six feet under.”

I opened my mouth, but Lev was already next to me, ignoring the entire awkward straddling Silas situation. He checked me over with a little item in his hand. My eyes narrowed on it.

When he noticed, he winked and showed it off like a prized possession. “One of many spoils I scored off Min.”

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“Min from the Dark Fae Society?” I asked, surprised to hear the name.

“She’s got a soft spot for me,” he admitted with a little blush in his cheeks.

I snickered, thinking back on the cute Dark Fae who followed Lev around for nearly three years in a lovesick haze. “That’s putting it lightly. But her brother—”

“Was an asshole, and she’s happy he’s gone,” Lev finished.

Min was the younger sister of Zephyr. I hadn’t been aware she didn’t like him, but I wasn’t really close with the pink-haired beauty. It was a relief to hear that not everyone was a raging asshole. Maybe there was hope for them yet.

“How do you feel, Niks?” Lev asked, waving the stone around me and mumbling something under his breath.

“Confused,” I murmured. “Why can you all see and talk to Tometi and Ryker? How long have I been asleep? Most importantly...did it stick? You know, the banishing that asshole demon to the After thing?”

Silas groaned and fell back against the pillows, in full big baby pout mode. I patted his chest in apology and grinned down at him. I did feel a bit bad that I’d gotten him all revved up. All I could do now was hide his massive erection between my legs and act like sitting on top of him was completely normal.

It didn’t appear anyone else cared. I sensed their relief. I’d probably been out a while if they were acting like this. At first I’d thought a few days, but by their expressions, I

got the distinct impression it was longer.

Ignoring the growling mercenary under me, Ryker bent over and kissed my forehead like it was a completely natural exchange between us. My confusion only grew. Thankfully, it was followed by a brutal strike from Tometi. The giant wasn't cutting Ryker any breaks. He glared at the ground-bound blonde and then folded his arms across his chest, a hint of a smile lifting his mouth.

"It was rather strange. After..." Tometi trailed off, and I realized why. He meant after what I did to Salvator. I nodded for him to continue, a lump in my throat. "It was as though we'd been given the final piece of ourselves. We can now shift into our respective animals, and yet, we are still...like this."

"Alive? Human...well, human-ish?"

Ryker was on his feet. "Exactly, sweet girl! Not sure how it happened, only happy that it did." I couldn't help but smile when he bounced around, expressing his overwhelming happiness to have his first real chance at life.

"So, you're shapeshifters?"

Silas sighed and crossed his arms, refusing to move from underneath me. "I liked them better when I couldn't see or hear them."

His jealousy was beyond adorable, if I were honest. The big man pouting like a kid always got to me in the weirdest ways. It made me want to tease him. But more than that, it made me want to kiss him and give him the affection he was so desperate to get, enough to forget his pride and pout.

Ryker scoffed unattractively, brushing back his shiny hair. "Be honest, you big brute. You never liked us at all."

“Not true, mutt,” Silas argued, earning him an eyebrow from Ryker. “I like that massive wanker well enough. I’ve never liked you.”

Talking behind his hand, Ryker winked at me. “I think he thinks I’m too pretty, and he’s probably still salty about the kiss.”

“Sorry?” Silas was upright and glaring. “What’s this about a kiss?”

“Anyway,” I cut in, hoping to end the fight before it’d begun. “How long have I been asleep?”

Lev sighed as if he’d carried a heavy burden while I was unconscious. Based on the first few minutes around the group, I could only assume it was brutal without me to mediate. “Two weeks.”

I blinked. “Two weeks?”

“Yes, but unlike some of us, I wasn’t worried you wouldn’t wake up,” Lev said with a smirk Silas’s direction.

“Oi, you cheeky wanker,” the mercenary growled. “It’s weirder you weren’t worried. What kind of bastard are you not to worry over your very unconscious friend?”

Rolling my eyes, I directed my next question to Lev as well, “What about Rilas?”

Silas interjected before Lev could, “He’s gone, love. You did exactly what you were meant to. That bastard was swallowed up by the After portal you summoned, and the world didn’t end.”

My throat burned when I thought about what I had to do to make it all happen.

Salvator.

As if he'd heard my thoughts, Silas rubbed my arm and touched my cheek. "I'm sure that wolf bastard will be living large in his next life thanks to you," he grumbled.

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Ryker danced into view, dropping to a crouch next to the bed and ignoring Silas when he glared at him. “You, pretty girl, are the reason he got his redemption arc. He went from villain to hero. So hot. Honestly, only you could get Sally to find his inner good guy. You should be proud of what you did for that ungrateful asshole.”

I smiled through the pain in my chest. “I guess so.”

“I know so, pretty girl. It was the power of love!” Ryker tried to take my hand, but Silas smacked it away.

“Bad dog,” he growled, pulling me away from the blonde and back to my big pouty baby.

Lev folded his arms over his chest and sighed. “Great. This overprotective asshole has gotten worse, and I didn’t even think that was possible. He’ll be intolerable if you let him have his way every time, Niks.”

He wasn’t wrong, but I’d be lying if I said this big brute desperate for my attention wasn’t the most adorable thing ever. Maybe I was the problem, not him.

“Oi, you cute bugger. Say that with your chest, not to my bird like a bleeding lily-livered coward.”

The two traded insults while I sunk into my head, thinking back on the events of that day. Apparently, a day that was two weeks in the past now. The subtle tug inside my head had me scrambling off the bed, silencing the antics in the room. Silas was too frazzled to chase after me as I searched for the feeling again.

“Love?”

“Shh,” I hissed at him, closing my eyes. Then I felt her. I let loose a sigh, and it was as if her arms were wrapped around me, holding me close. “I was worried you were sucked into the After with him and the others,” I said to the woman inside my head.

The men around me all opened their mouths, but I put up a finger to silence them.

“You were so brave, darling. I was never worried about what might happen to me. I only worried for you,” Grandmother’s voice echoed back.

With a smile, I reached for her again. That soothingly warm sensation grew, then fled my chest. My grandmother materialized as solid fog inside the room. Her tender eyes were on me, her hands outstretched, so I went to her.

It was an odd sensation to hug someone without a physical body. I sensed her arms wrap around me but didn’t necessarily feel the embrace. Still, it was something I didn’t know I needed until now.

“Holy shit, her grandmother is super hot. Cougar alert,” Ryker whispered to Tometi.

“Aren’t you meant to be around the same age as her?” Silas grumbled out of the side of his mouth, and Ryker only shrugged in reply.

Lev shot a glance at the two idiots, mouth twisted in disgust. I laughed and shook my head as my grandmother’s sparkling presence wavered in and out of view.

The dark-haired giant crossed his arms and canted his head. “She doesn’t seem to be any temperature at all, and I don’t understand what cougars have to do with it, wolf.”

“I have so much to teach you, big guy.”

“If you’re not ready...”she said, her painfully kind gaze staying with mine.

I shook my head. My eyes grew misty, and the feeling in my gut intensified. “No. I’m as ready as I can be, and you’ve waited long enough.” I inhaled and breathed out, resolved to send her off with a smile. “Thank you for all you’ve done for me. I’m soglad I got a chance to know you. You deserve every happiness in your next life.”

“I love you, darling. I’m happy to have known you.”

She reached for my face before the light around her body grew until it enveloped the room in white. Then she was gone. The bittersweet feeling of our goodbye echoed inside my chest. The grief of all the people I’d lost in the last year was in every swallow as I stared at the empty space she’d once occupied.

Silas wrapped his arms around me, his front pressing against my back. “I know you’re sad, love. I won’t ask you to bury your pain, but today is the first day of the rest of our lives, yeah? I’ll always be here by your side.”

“And me,” Lev added with a wink.

“Shit, they got all the good lines. Well, us, too,” Ryker said, and Tometi nodded his agreement.

Tears tracked down my cheeks, but I laughed a half-second later when Silas groaned in petulant dismay, not at all happy with everyone’s piggyback statements.

So I turned around and gave the pouty assassin a kiss.

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It'd only been a week since Nika came out of her recovery sleep. I'd been securing several properties with her in mind. I didn't want Nika to want for anything. I wanted her life to be what she chose, so the lad helped me with choosing all the things she loved.

It bothered me I didn't know them myself, but I wasn't a shameless sod incapable of asking for help. I'd destroy every bit of pride if it made my rebel happy.

It'd been rather chaotic because dealing with Normies wasn't a strong skill of mine. Maude and Dick were gems, though. They helped me settle a few of the finer things, like a location that'd work for all our needs.

Nika had a soft spot for the head squatters and the cute wanker. It was irritating to admit, but they'd become something of a family to her the way Maude and Dick had for me. She wouldn't want to be far from them, so I bought several properties close to each other. Not obscenely close, but close enough.

The lad had his own fortune, and he refused to let me pay, but the other two were plonkers without a penny to their name. Nika wouldn't leave them to fend for themselves, so I'd prove that I was an honorable bloke and take care of her in all the ways important.

Still, my bird hadn't been quite herself. Of course, she put on a brave face, but grief was hard to come out of, especially when it was for more than one person. And despite living for decades, this was the first she'd lived without other people telling her how to do it. A boat lost at sea and all that. She was out of sorts, and I wasn't the only one who'd noticed.

Hopefully, tonight would change that a bit. I was about to make an absolute arse out of myself, but if all went to plan, it'd be worth it.

I expelled a shaky breath and fixed my cloak, the usual mask affixed to my face as I waited. I hadn't been this nervous since I'd told the gorgeous nymph I loved her. What if I blubbered like a troll or forgot how to speak words as I often did around my goddess?

Over a bottle of whiskey, I'd gotten candid with the lad. I told him what I wanted to do. I expected taunting and jeering, but his green eyes lit up, and the lad had been quick to offer an idea. Forget that we were absolutely off our faces, but it was a shameless one. Even I couldn't hide my surprise when he suggested it. Little bugger was as diabolical as they came. Possibly a bit sadistic.

It made a bloke wonder how he'd figured us out, but then again, the Fae had something of a tradition once upon a time. One that included a full moon and chase through the woods. As far as I knew, they didn't do it much anymore. But one thing I was certain—I'd definitely underestimated the lad more times than I could count, that moment included.

Looking down, I took out the list I'd written in silver. It wasn't the usual list. This one had everything I wanted to say to my bird, just in case I got tongue-tied or was out of breath after...

"What's gotten into you tonight?" I heard my bird twitter angrily at the lad. "And why the fuck am I wearing this? Where are you taking me?"

"It's not me who's taking you," Lev said, pushing her out into the light after finding some smart way to send the other two nosy sods out for the night. "Have fun, you two!"

My jaw was nearly on the floor when I caught sight of her, and I was tempted to cut out the middle man and just have my fun with her somewhere no one could see. But the game was afoot, and I'd be damned if I didn't see it through.

This needed to be a night she'd never forget.

Her eyes traced my cloaked form, suspicious. "Why are you wearing that?"

I didn't answer her, just offered her a hand. She crossed her arms over her chest, her breasts practically spilling out of the corset she wore. See-through tulle made up the rest of the glittery black dress. Her hair had been curled and tucked back with glistening gems. She could've been Lilith herself for how swiftly the mere sight of her put me under a spell.

Her bare feet slipped out from under a thick ring of tulle as she walked forward. Cautious, she tilted her head and her tongue dashed across her rose-colored lips. My cock couldn't have chosen a worse time to be stiff and uncompliant. Though, I couldn't blame the monster in my trousers. My rebel looked like the gorgeous prima ballerina of a dark and seductive play.

"Where are we going?"

"Do you trust me, love?" I asked her, my voice all bedroom.

She took my hand and rolled her eyes. "You know I do."

The mischievous grin I wore was hidden behind my mask. "Then follow me into the woods, little rebel."

I led the beauty to the edge of the forest, and she peered around as if she'd figure out what I meant to do. But unless she was a scholar in the old ways—which Lev assured

me she wasn't—she'd be clueless. The practice dated back thousands of years.

I crept behind her and leaned forward. "Now run, little rebel."

Scoffing, Nika tossed me a glance from over her shoulder, purple curls adorned with gems shifting across her pale skin. "What?"

"Run," I growled.

I heard her pulse spike. "Run?"

"If you don't, I'll fuck you right here where everyone will see. But if you run, you stand a chance at escaping. Don't hold back, little rebel. I certainly won't," I warned, softening my voice to the point of a whisper.

I could see the challenge glint in her eyes as she weighed whether or not to argue, but then she was gone.

I closed my eyes and folded my arms, waiting.

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As tradition dictated, I wouldn't use any magic, only my senses. Proof that no matter where she went, I'd find her. To the Fae of old, it was a rite of passage. I wasn't much for the old ways, but this was one ritual I could get behind. It made my cock hard to think of the moment I found her. When I laid claim like I had in the city, but with a grander purpose than before.

Tonight was more than the chase.

Tonight was the start of the rest of our lives.

NIKA

It was that night all over again, but something about this was different. I knew it from the moment Lev came swooping into my room demanding that I wear the dress he'd brought and taking it upon himself to do my hair and makeup. He refused to tell me anything. It wasn't often my friend was secretive, but when he was, it was only ever with me in mind.

But still I couldn't help but wonder what they had planned, and why it was starting with a chase.

"Run," the masked assassin ordered.

A familiar warmth flooded my waist at the single, growling command. A primal calling. It made me want to do exactly what he said, no matter what it led to. It was the same thrill as the night he chased me through the city.

I didn't overthink it.

I just ran.

He didn't follow me. He didn't chase right away. He stayed firmly in place, a dangerous figure looming in the shadow of night.

It was meant to be a game the same way the first one had. It should've made me laugh or made me feel silly. At the very least, I should want answers, but I didn't. Because it was the truth. I trusted him with my life. I'd run from him just as quickly as I'd run to him. And as much as it bothered me to admit to myself, I got off on it.

But why now? Why tonight?

I weaved through the brush and around trees that climbed high into the sky, keeping the fluffy skirt of my dress from catching on branches. I navigated roots and dead leaves with bare feet.

Lev insisted I didn't wear any shoes. Or underwear, for that matter. The man had seen me naked, but even I gave him a look when he suggested I wear the dress, and only that. We might've been best friends for decades, but I still didn't know what all went on in that head of his.

The full moon shined down from a clear sky. Most nights it stood as a solemn reminder of what I'd lost, but tonight it was a different feeling.

It felt like fate.

I didn't stop running. Each light footfall took me deeper and deeper into the forest. I couldn't explain the sensation that washed over me as I fled, but maybe...

Freedom.

I'd been a prisoner in my own life, then the first step out of the world I knew put me in a world of trouble. I'd been handed an ominous fate. And then it ended. The villain was slain. The world put right. I'd waded through one emotion after another, listless and purposeless. What now? What did I see for a future I wasn't sure I'd get? Between the grief of losing and the guilt of surviving, I struggled to figure out what I wanted.

How did a woman who only knew how to survive learn how to live instead?

But without understanding how, I knew the answer I'd been searching for was here in this forest. In this chase where I was meant to finally be found.

I sucked in a sharp breath when I felt him close in, the lethal assassin in the dark. He was swift and deadly, but I wasn't afraid. His hand wrapped around my throat, and I was pushed back. I moaned as my body was pressed against a tree, his touch possessive and full of gentle authority.

The masked assassin tore through my dress and corset before yanking them from my body. I couldn't breathe as his silver eyes leisurely raked over my naked curves. His hand took the same path as his stare, touching me softly. I could've sworn my heart would break through my chest as he canted his head and brushed his thumb across my nipple.

He moved in close, the heat radiating off him. "Found you, little rebel," he murmured, angling my head with one hand and squeezing. I didn't need to see his face to know he was smirking at me.

I climbed up his body, tugging on the waistband of his pants. "You always do. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

My gasping breaths failed when he drove his hard length inside me without waiting. Bark scraped against my skin, but I hardly felt it through the devastating pleasure. I rocked back and forth, our skin slapping together. Every thrust was aimed to throw us over that earth-shattering edge. Silas pressed his masked face into my neck, and I dragged my fingernails down his cloaked back.

The intensity of being fucked after I was found couldn't be overstated. I wouldn't last long at all, and by the way he was slamming into me, he wouldn't either.

“Oh, fuck,” I moaned, biting my bottom lip.

His hoarse voice came between grunts. “You’re so fucking tight and wet. Did you want to be fucked by a masked killer that much, little rebel?”

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I sucked at the air, swiveling and drowning in the intensifying stimulation. “Yes.”

“Did you want to be found, little rebel?” he demanded huskily, his hips punctuating every word.

“Yes,” I breathed.

His hold on my throat tightened, and it was close to sending me over the edge. “Who knew my feisty minx was so desperate for this assassin’s cock?”

His breathless taunts and heady grunting only spurred me on. I swiveled and drove down on his cock like I couldn’t wait. Because I couldn’t. I wanted to feel that euphoric rush.

Silas sunk into me as deep as he could go, and the crash hit us both hard enough that it was nothing but curses leaving our mouths for nearly a minute. I clung to him, panting, and he kept me pressed against the tree with his hands spreading my legs wide open.

Liquid dribbled down my legs as I caught my breath. “All this so you could chase me through the woods, tear off a dress I’d only just got tonight, and fuck me with your mask on?” I taunted.

“Cheeky,” he panted.

He was careful as he let me get to my feet and removed his mask, but he didn’t stop there. He knelt down on one knee and wiped the white liquid sliding down my thigh.

He dropped a kiss on my stomach. Smile on my lips, I slid my fingers through his hair, still shaking a bit after an intense quickie in the woods. Never guessed it was the exact thing I needed, but it was.

Silas's eyes shot up to mine before he dug something out of his pocket. I stared down at him in confusion before seeing the thing he'd retrieved. It was a beautiful grey gem in a twisting circle of silver and gold branches. He lifted the ring, his jaw ticking and body shifting uncomfortably.

"It's an old Fae tradition, yeah? Chase the bride through the woods, and she'll be yours forever when you find her," he mumbled cutely, fidgeting. "Bit sexist if you ask me..."

I giggled, but tears were already pouring down my face. "Says the shameless pervert."

His silver eyes gleamed in amusement. "For fuck's sake, love, you can't be lovely and cheeky at me right now. I'm going to be stumbling and muttering like a sorry sod. I need to get this next bit right."

I caught my lower lip between my teeth and stared at the ring. "Okay..."

My pulse raced as Silas exhaled a breath and clenched his jaw. Shedding his smile, his eyes burned into mine. "I have a list of reasons for why you should choose me. It doesn't seem like enough. I'll never deserve you, but I hope you'll stay with me all the same, little rebel. I never understood this insistence on wearing rings and vowing yourself to someone until I met you. I want you to be mine in all the ways that matter. Say you'll be mine forever, Nika."

In that moment I knew, my purpose was to love this man.

I got on my knees and grabbed the hand holding the ring. “I’m yours forever, and you’re mine, Silas. Wherever you go, I’ll go, too. Always.”

I’d been the girl who’d spent her life believing that love happened to everyone else. I was never meant to have a happy ending, but Silas proved I was wrong. I’d never been so glad to be wrong about something in my entire life.

His smile was breathtakingly gorgeous as he slipped the ring on my finger and kissed me to seal our promise.

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## EPILOGUE

Nika

I adjusted the mask on my face, tossing a look over my shoulder at the group behind us. Then I caught the silver gaze of the man I loved.

“Just a bit of fun this time, Rebel.”

“If you say so, Silver.”

“The Sexy Rebels, out to rule the mercenary world. The vigilantes of justice. Fighting for the little guys,” Ryker said from behind me. “I’m buying me something special after we get paid for this contract.”

Silas crossed his arms. “That bleeding name again. I’ve said it over and over, mutt. Don’t call us that. If you bark it on the job, it’ll catch on. A name lasts forever.”

“The Great Sparkles has spoken,” I teased.

Tometi grunted and took his place on my right side, as large and as opposing as ever.

He'd really embraced his scary vibes. Despite having the ability to change into a bear, Tometi often chose physical combat. He was insanely powerful, more so than most using magic to strengthen their hits. And the giant was much faster than anyone anticipated. It was fun to watch him clear a room like a bulldozer. Strong and deadly.

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“You guys didn’t like any of my group name suggestions. Not Fangs and Company. Not the Rebel and Her Dashing Animals. Not Sexy Beasts. Not even the Rebel Safari. We need a name.” Ryker brushed back his silky blonde hair, wearing a cape that fluttered in the wind.

He’d insisted he needed one despite the fact that he’d be naked after shifting. I couldn’t argue that it was easy to remove and covered his bits in a pinch. But unlike Tometi, Ryker preferred to be in wolf form when he fought. The snarling beast who tore a room of enemies apart never matched the fun-loving blonde I’d gotten to know until it strutted around and huffed cutely at me. Then it was all Ryker.

“Why are they all referencing animals, though?” Lev asked with a sly grin. “Only two of us are.”

Tometi grunted his agreement.

Ryker narrowed his eyes on all of us. “You’re not fooling anyone. You’re all animals. Well, maybe everyone except Dugan.”

The man in question popped his head in and grinned at me. “Don’t know how I’m supposed to take that, but you have my thanks, Ryker.”

I’d been so worried about losing Dugan. We’d left on a weird note and what I thought was a goodbye, but Silas tracked him down later. I was surprised to see my father’s lover when the man I loved brought him back. For all the complaining the mercenary did, he’d gone out of his way to keep every person I cared about as close as possible.

I didn't think I could love Silas more than I already did, but when I realized he'd gone to great lengths to make sure I was never alone, that I never had to worry about any of them, my love overflowed. He was exactly who I needed and wanted every day, and I couldn't thank Fate enough for leading me to him.

Lev smirked and eyed the compound we were about to infiltrate. "I'd also like to add I'm not a mercenary in this group. I'm here to make sure the feral few stay in line."

Silas landed a strong hand on my friend's shoulder. "No sense in lying to yourself, lad. We're all feral here."

I sighed, hoping the fight we found inside the building would keep them from bickering more than they already had. "We're wasting time. Each of you has a task. Make sure you complete it in the fifteen minutes that communications are down. I'd rather not be stuck searching for my own team when time runs out."

The guys ran ahead, and before I could go after them, Silas caught my hand. He took his mask off and wagged his eyebrows at me. "Oi, Rebel. Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Oh?" I pretended to forget, removing my mask as well. "What's that, Silver?"

His laughter was so full of affection I couldn't hide my smile. He stepped in close and cradled my face. "I need my goddess to bless me before battle, yeah? Very serious business, this."

Returning the gesture, I cradled his face and smirked. "Oh no. I wouldn't want my mercenary to go in without protection."

"Oh, aye. Leave that to the bedroom where it belongs," he murmured against my lips.

It was a promise we made before every moment that could go awry. No matter what,

we'd find each other. Wherever he went, I'd go too.

The End.