



Bitten By Prophecy

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She was raised to hunt monsters like me.

So why does her scent make my fangs drop and my control snap?

I've lived in the shadows my whole life—half wolf, half vampire, full mistake. Hunted by the Order. Feared by my own kind. I don't do attachments. I don't do mercy.

Then she crashes into my world.

Kaia Draven is fire in combat boots. Shes lethal, loyal, and utterly wrong for me. But the moment our eyes lock, something ancient stirs—something wild and unbreakable.

She doesn't know what she is.

The Order buried her truth.

But her power calls to mine like a vow already sworn.

And now the monsters are the ones hunting us.

She thinks she can survive without me.

She thinks she can run.

But I'm done hiding.

I'll protect her. I'll train her.

And if it comes to war?

I'll tear the world apart to keep her mine.

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KAIA

My boots slap the cold cement of the training hall as I jog to briefing, sweat still clinging to my back from sparring drills.

The air stinks of metal and recycled fear—Order HQ always smells like this.

Like the sweat of ghosts and the sharp bite of blood on steel.

Clean, clinical. Controlled. Like everything they want us to be.

“Draven,” Commander Wells barks the second I cross the threshold. His voice is gravel and grit, matching the deep scars raked across his jaw like some monster tried to carve him open and gave up halfway.

I give him a curt nod, jaw tight. “Sir.”

He jerks his head toward the central holomap flickering with movement.

It shows the outline of a suburban neighborhood in Jersey, the streets crawling with red pings.

“Another nest,” he says, voice gruff. “Three vampires confirmed. Two possible shifters. We move in thirty. Orders are seek, neutralize, extract any intel, and burn the rest.”

The room is dim, lit only by the eerie blue glow of the map and the harsh buzz of

overhead fluorescents. Everyone's armored up, quiet, grim. I know all their faces. I trained with some. I've saved a few. Others I've watched bleed out.

None of them look surprised by the briefing. That's what we do. Find the freaks. Eliminate the threat. Repeat.

I tuck my ebony curly hair beneath the black tactical hood, pull the zip of my armor up to my throat. My hands tremble slightly as I snap on my gloves. I tell myself it's the adrenaline. Not doubt. Never that.

"You're point with West and Mendez," Wells continues. "Entry from the south. We sweep fast, tight formation. Draven, you're clear to engage if they don't submit."

"Copy," I say, even though my stomach knots. Not because I've never killed a vamp before—I have. It's the easy part. It's what happens before. The moment their eyes lock with yours and there's something ancient and empty behind the hunger. Something that remembers when they were more than monsters.

But they're monsters now. The Order made sure I never forget that.

We load up. The van hums with low whispers, last-minute checks, the rustle of gear. West is picking at his nails like he's bored. Mendez keeps bouncing his knee, shotgun across his lap.

"You okay, Kaia?" West leans in a little too close. His breath smells like spearmint and arrogance.

"I'm breathing, aren't I?"

He chuckles, but I don't. I stare out the window as buildings blur past, and I can't shake the tension crawling up my spine.

The Order always taught us that the Veil is a wound in reality, stitched together with ancient Fae magic and lies.

For centuries it held, hiding the monsters.

Vampires, werewolves, witches. Things from storybooks.

But when the world started watching everything—posting, recording, streaming—the Veil started to thin.

Now it bleeds. Sometimes in trickles. Sometimes in ruptures.

And we're the ones mopping up.

But sometimes I wonder if the Order is too quick to call things monsters.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm one of them when all of the killing is said and done.

The thought lodges in my brain like a splinter I can't dig out.

The house looks normal. Brick siding. Blue shutters. Plastic flamingos in the front yard. But there's a wrongness to it that buzzes in my skull the second we cross the lawn. A static hum I can't shake, like the moment before a storm cracks the sky open.

We breach silently. Mendez on the door, West on my six. The air inside is cold, wrong. Not just temperature-wise. It's off. Too quiet.

I step into the foyer, boots silent on old linoleum. I sweep left. Living room. Toys scattered. A crusty plate on the coffee table. Someone lived here.

Then the scent hits me.

Blood.

Iron and rot and something sweet beneath it, like flowers wilting under heat. My skin prickles. I move fast, silent. Down the hall.

Screaming from the bedroom.

We storm in.

Two vamps are hunched over a body—what's left of it. West fires. One drops, disintegrating into dust before it hits the floor. The other one snarls, fast, faster than anything human. It lunges right at me.

I twist, duck, slam my blade up through its ribs. It hisses, claws at my face. I grit my teeth and drive the silver in deeper. Its body convulses.

Then something happens.

Something I can't explain.

Its eyes lock with mine.

And at that moment, I felt it.

The hunger.

The agony.

The fear .

It's like the creature's emotions punch into my chest, raw and sharp. I choke, stumble

back. My vision goes blurry around the edges, my head splitting open behind my eyes. It's like something inside me wakes up and screams.

The vamp's scream echoes it.

I don't remember pulling the trigger, but I must have. Its body turns to ash at my feet.

Silence.

Mendez is shouting something. I can't hear it. My knees hit the ground. The room spins. Blood thunders in my ears, my heart slamming against my ribs like it wants out.

I see light . Just for a second.

Blue-white and searing.

And a voice, not mine—whispering inside my skull.

Daughter of twilight, why do you sleep still?

Then it's gone.

“Kaia!”

Mendez grabs my shoulder. “Are you hit?”

I shake my head, but my mouth won't work.

“Your nose is bleeding,” he says, his voice softer now. “You blacked out for a sec. What the hell was that?”

I don't answer. I can't.

Because I don't know.

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ELIAS

There's blood in the air.

Fresh. Sharp. Terrified.

I crouch on the rusted fire escape outside the busted window of a crumbling tenement, listening. City noise thumps below—honking horns, a kid crying, somebody screaming at a busted coffee machine—but all that fades when you're tuned to the scent of fear.

It always hits first, fear. Before the pain. Before the begging. It's primal. Loud.

And right now, it's coming from the third floor.

I drop silently, boots finding the steel railing like they belong there.

This city—Bronx side—is dying slow, like the rest of the world.

We've got internet and iPhones and overpriced boba joints—but also monsters in the alleyways and shadows that don't follow the rules of physics anymore.

Supernaturals are out, technically. Shifters, vamps.

People know . But they only believe what they can film.

And they haven't filmed anything like me .

I don't make a sound as I slip through the cracked window. The stench of mildew hits hard, but underneath it—The Order.

Two agents, both human. I catch the glint of the Order's insignia on the sleeve of one—black sunburst over a sword. They're cornering a kid, maybe ten, all wiry limbs and wild hair, eyes glowing faint orange like a lit coal. Fire-shifter. Just a baby.

He's trembling so hard his whole body rattles. No weapons. No fangs. Just dirty sneakers and fear.

"You sure this one's on the list?" one agent mutters, pulling out a silver-lined restraint collar.

The other sneers. "Don't matter. Hybrid registry says unaccounted. That makes him contraband. Same rules apply."

My fingers curl around the hilt of the knife strapped to my thigh. It's not silver—it's obsidian, laced with ancient runes that hum when I'm close to death or violence.

Right now, they're singing.

I move fast. Shadow-fast.

The first man never sees it coming. One second he's reaching for the kid, the next—my blade's buried in his ribs. He lets out a soft oof before his knees give out and he crashes to the floor.

The second man spins, gun raised.

Too slow.

I'm on him before he can shout. I don't bite. I don't shift. I just knock him cold with a punch that cracks his jaw sideways.

The kid shrinks back like I'm the monster now.

Maybe I am.

"You hurt?" I ask, sheathing the blade. My voice comes out lower than I mean it to, rough. I clear my throat. "Hey. Kid."

He shakes his head. Doesn't say a word. Just stares at me like I'm made of knives.

"Good. You need to go. South exit's clear."

He hesitates. Looks at the men on the ground. "You... you killed them?"

"No." I crouch to meet his eye. "But I should've."

He bolts.

Smart kid.

Back on the rooftop, I let the cold wind slap me in the face. My hands shake, so I stuff them in my coat pockets and try not to look like a walking contradiction. Not that there's anyone watching. Not yet.

I should've left the kid. Let the Order have him. Safer that way. Cleaner.

But my wolf side doesn't like cruelty, and my vampire side—well, he gets twitchy around blood.

The moon's low tonight, a crooked grin behind the clouds. My mother always said that's when the Veil thins. That's when the old things stir.

I pull the small device from my coat—a Veil sensor, tuned to energy pulses. Velara gave it to me last winter, right after she kissed my forehead and told me I was the last hope of a doomed race.

Thanks, Mom.

The screen flickers, then glows.

Red.

Shit.

The Veil's unstable tonight. Again . But this time the surge isn't in the woods, or some distant mountain village. It's here. In the city. Right under Order jurisdiction.

I scroll through the data feed. Coordinates. Pressure spikes. A signature I haven't seen before—wild, bright, but familiar. Fae resonance, laced with something more chaotic.

It's not just the Veil weakening.

Something, or someone is punching through it.

My gut tightens. I know what this means. Someone's awakening. And that kind of raw power? The Order will want them caged. Or worse.

I run a hand down my face. The world's not ready for what's coming. They barely know about us. Sure, they've seen fangs on some nightclub security guards, caught a

wolf on dash cam once or twice. But witches? Fae? Real old-world shit?

Still hidden.

Still behind the Veil.

If that curtain falls completely, humans aren't gonna throw a welcome parade. They're gonna panic. Lock us up. Burn our books. Erase us.

And me?

Hybrids like me don't even make it to the panic stage.

They execute us.

I hop down the fire escape, hood up. Back into the night.

I need to find the source of that spike. The girl. It feels like a girl. I don't know why. But her power sings in the air, like violin strings stretched too tight.

Whoever she is, she's dangerous. Not just to herself. To all of us.

And I need to get to her before the Order does.

Or we're all screwed.

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KAIA

There's a knot in my chest that hasn't loosened since Jersey.

No matter how many times I replay the mission, the same damn question echoes in the back of my skull—what the hell happened to me in that room?

I felt something tear open inside. Like a door slamming off its hinges. I saw light, and a voice that wasn't mine whispered like it had been waiting centuries for me to hear it. But when I tried to bring it up in the debrief, Wells just stared at me like I'd grown antlers.

"You hit your head," he said flatly. "Next time, wear your damn helmet, Draven."

That was it. No follow-up. No concern. Just a flick of his wrist and a warning to submit a full written report to Archives. Which I didn't. Obviously. Last thing I need is my father reading that his daughter hallucinated on a clean raid.

He'd drag me in for "reconditioning" so fast I wouldn't have time to blink.

The thought makes my jaw clench. Dad doesn't believe in softness. He believes in control. In elimination. In loyalty above blood. Above love. Especially above truth.

If he finds out something's... wrong with me?

I exhale hard and grip the edge of the building's rooftop, letting the breeze scrape against my skin. Night's dropped like a curtain over the city, and the wind smells like

exhaust and burnt coffee and something darker underneath—like copper and smoke and secrets.

Perfect hunting weather.

Solo patrols are technically discouraged, but I called it in as recon. There's been chatter on the Order's comms about a possible supernatural nesting site near Grand Street. Reports of flickering lights, sulfur smells, and some poor bastard who swore he saw a child "turn into smoke."

He's probably drunk.

Still... the static feeling in my chest is back. That same prickling hum from the Jersey raid. It's faint, but steady, like a heartbeat that's not mine.

I follow it.

The alley behind the warehouse is narrow and soaked in shadow. My boots crunch glass and something slick. A cat darts across my path, yowling. There's no sound otherwise. Not even the wind.

And then there he is.

I freeze.

Silhouetted at the far end of the alley is a man. Tall. Broad shoulders. Still as a statue, like he's part of the night itself. But even from this distance, I feel it.

That pull .

It's not attraction, not exactly. It's deeper. Raw. Like the universe just yanked an

invisible thread taut between us, and suddenly I can't breathe right.

He turns slightly. Just enough that the faint streetlight catches part of his face.

And holy hell.

His eyes, ice blue, sharp as broken glass. He's got cheekbones like carved stone, lips set in a line that says don't come closer, and a jaw that looks like it's clenched on centuries of secrets.

His hair's dark and pulled back, and his skin's pale, but not in a sickly way. More like moonlight. Or death.

I step forward without thinking. "Hey!"

His head tilts, slow and deliberate, and I swear my pulse skips like a scratched record. He sees me. I know he does.

And then he's gone.

One blink. That's all it takes.

No sound. No movement. Just... vanished.

"What the actual—" I mutter, spinning, weapon half-raised.

Nothing.

The alley's empty.

Not even a trace of movement. Just the lingering echo of something electric buzzing

against my skin.

I reach the spot where he stood, scan the ground. No prints. No blood. No scent.

But there's heat , strangely enough. Radiating off the brick wall like something powerful stood here too long.

I press my palm against it, just to make sure I'm not losing my mind.

Wrong move.

The second my skin meets stone, a shock hits me hard enough to make my knees buckle.

Images—no, feelings —slam into me.

Pain. Rage. Hunger. Grief buried so deep it tastes like rot.

And underneath it all, a name that feels like it doesn't belong to me but anchors itself in my chest anyway.

Elias.

I stumble back, gasping.

My heart thuds wildly as I scramble away from the wall, swallowing down bile and confusion.

I don't know that name. I've never met that man. And yet...

I do know him.

Somehow.

I know his pain. His silence. The scream he doesn't let out.

The air is cold again. Empty. The presence is gone.

But the pull?

That magnetic tug?

It's stronger now.

I head back to HQ, fingers still twitching like they're reaching for something they can't see. Something they maybe never should.

I don't want my father to find out anything .

Because if he even suspects I felt something...

If he thinks I've been touched by whatever the hell that was...

He'll come for me and see me as a threat.

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ELIAS

She touched the wall.

I felt it.

A spike of heat, right through the marrow.

My claws itch beneath my skin. Not wolf. Not vampire. Something else . Something raw, nameless. I grip the rusted edge of the rooftop like it'll keep me from unraveling completely.

What the hell is she?

She shouldn't exist. Not like that. Not in the Order.

But she does. And she's glowing .

I crouch in the shadows above the alley, breath shallow.

My long coat flutters around my boots in the wind, and the city below hums its usual, ugly tune.

The girl—Kaia Draven, if I heard right from the Order's encrypted channels—stands in the middle of the alley, her hands trembling at her sides like they've just remembered a power they weren't supposed to have.

Her eyes scan the darkness like she knows I'm here.

And I hate it.

Because she's not supposed to matter.

She's Order. Indoctrinated. A knife aimed at people like me.

When I saw her, I felt something snap tight in my chest. Not lust. Not curiosity.

A pull .

A bond, ancient and terrifying, humming in my blood like prophecy trying to break free.

Fated, something inside me whispers.

I shove the thought away so hard it nearly takes my balance.

No.

No goddamn way.

There's no fated bond. No connection. I'm a mistake.

A contradiction. The son of two worlds that were never meant to touch.

The prophecy my mother clings to like gospel says someone like me might "bridge the broken Veil" or "unravel fate entirely." But those are just words.

Dusty scripts written by witches who wanted to feel important.

There's no reason I should feel this pull.

Unless.... she's not fully human.

But that makes even less sense. The Order doesn't recruit supernatural blood. They butcher it.

I step back into the deeper dark of the roof, fingers still twitching with the aftershock of that moment.

I felt her soul.

Not in the poetic sense. I felt the resonance of her energy—bright, volatile, ancient.

She's not just human.

Which means someone has been lying.

I make it to the safehouse near Queens an hour later, my boots tracked with soot and my head full of noise.

The building's a rundown brownstone wedged between a boarded-up bodega and a vape lounge.

Looks like trash from the outside. On the inside, it's reinforced with Fae wards, vampire sigils, and enough iron to burn through a shifter's skin if they try to breach it uninvited.

I shut the reinforced door behind me and drop the veil sensor on the old wooden table.

“Still vibrating,” I mutter to myself.

The screen glows faintly, a ripple across its rune-etched glass like a heartbeat trying to sync with mine.

I ignore it.

Instead, I pour myself a glass of bloodwine—dark, thick, spicy, and older than some countries. One sip burns like truth down my throat. Good. I need something to chase this ache from my chest.

The ache that started when I saw her .

I sit on the edge of the bed, elbows on knees, glass dangling from my fingers. I think about her hands—strong, scarred. A fighter’s hands. I think about how she stood in that alley, jaw clenched, ready to draw steel on whatever monster crawled from the dark.

Except... she didn’t flinch.

She felt me. I know she did.

And that’s what’s got me twisted up.

Because I’ve spent years hiding from connections. Every time I let someone close, they either try to kill me, betray me, or wind up in a body bag because someone else wants me dead. No matter where I go—Crimson Court, rogue packs, witch enclaves—I’m a walking target.

The son of Velara Vorn, vampire queen of ice and knives.

The bastard of Tarek Vorn, Alpha of the exiled packs and now probably rotting in some Order lab if he's even still breathing.

And me?

I'm the creature both sides want to pretend doesn't exist.

The Order calls me "an anomaly." Their agents have standing orders to shoot me on sight.

The supernatural world calls me worse.

Monster. Abomination. Mistake.

And now this Order girl feels like fate?

I slam the glass down. It shatters, thick red liquid dripping off the wood like the blood it is.

I can't feel anything for her. I won't .

It's not just dangerous, it's suicide.

Still, my mind drifts to the way she moved. Like she's been trained to kill since she was old enough to walk, but something inside her isn't wired for it. Her body was all tension and grace—like a wolf in a cage.

Her eyes haunted me. Golden-amber. Unnatural, even by my standards.

Fae eyes.

I dig into my coat pocket and pull out the tiny black flash drive I snagged last week from an Order drop point. I plug it into the encrypted tablet and scroll through intel until her name appears.

DRAVEN, KAIA.

File classified.

I snort.

Of course it is.

But the fact that it's locked tells me everything I need. The Order doesn't hide files unless there's something worth hiding.

She's not just a soldier.

She's a secret.

And that means I need to stay far the hell away from her.

I lay back on the bed, one arm over my eyes, breath slow, trying to ignore the tension in my gut that hasn't gone away since I saw her.

But it's no use.

I know what this is.

A bond has started.

And the worst part is that I don't know if I want to fight it.

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KAIA

I don't sleep.

I pretend to, lying flat on my back, arms crossed over my stomach, staring at the ceiling like it'll blink first. But my mind won't shut up. It hasn't since Jersey.

The buzz inside me hasn't stopped. It's not adrenaline or nerves.

It's deeper. Like my bones are vibrating, humming some song I don't know the words to but can't stop listening to.

Ever since the raid, my dreams have been weirder, too.

Not nightmares exactly—but... ancient. Like stories told through firelight.

Creatures with wings made of ash. Trees that bleed.

Eyes, always eyes, staring from shadows.

And a voice I can't place, calling my name in a language I don't understand.

Kaia. Wake up.

Yeah. No thanks.

I sit up with a groan and drag myself to the ancient terminal in the corner of my

quarters. The Order doesn't exactly encourage unsupervised browsing, but perks of being the golden girl? I've got access to more encrypted shit than I should.

My fingers hover over the keyboard.

Veil fluctuations.

Mythic bleed.

Unknown magical phenomena.

I punch in the keywords and lean back, rubbing at the gritty exhaustion clinging to my eyes.

The results aren't what I expect.

Half of it's redacted.

The rest is buried under ancient scanned documents and pieced-together translations from languages I didn't even know existed—Sumerian, Old Fae, something written in blood I'm hoping is metaphorical. One entry catches my eye. Dated nearly a thousand years ago, it describes a tree.

Heartwood.

Bastardized by time, of course, but the description matches a sketch I saw in a dream last week. Twisted roots, pulsing veins, something living in its trunk that's not quite alive. The translation calls it the Veil's anchor. The thing that holds our world and theirs apart.

And now it's dying.

I swipe through pages faster. One reference talks about a “Bridgeborn.” A child of opposites. Blood of two warring species. Someone who could either destroy the Veil or heal it. Balance, rupture, death. You know, casual stuff.

My heart kicks in my chest.

That man. From the alley.

He felt like that.

I don’t know how I know, I just do. The second our eyes met, something in me recoiled—and then reached . Like he was made of gravity. Like part of me already belonged to him and just forgot until now.

It’s insane. I know that.

I’m not some weak-kneed girl in a romance novel. I was trained to kill monsters, not get butterflies when they look at me like they can see every secret I’ve buried under armor and attitude.

I slam the laptop shut, harder than necessary.

And then I make the mistake of thinking about my father.

Shit.

If he knew I was even looking into this stuff, he’d lose his damn mind.

General Jareth Draven doesn’t do questions. He does orders. Pun fully intended.

My earliest memory of him isn’t a lullaby or a bedtime story—it’s him teaching me

how to disassemble a sidearm blindfolded. I was six. My reward was a nod and a “Good. Now again.”

I thought that was love.

Still not sure it wasn't.

He's a tactical genius, revered by every field agent like a war god in a well-pressed suit. To the world, he's a savior. To the Order, he's gospel. To me... he's Dad .

Cold. Unyielding. And once upon a time, he held me like I was the only reason he hadn't burned the world down.

But he changed.

It happened slowly, like rust creeping across iron. My uncle—his brother—was killed by a rogue vamp on recon. And just like that, the father who used to bring me sweets after drills stopped smiling. Started preaching. Started talking about purity. Order. Cleansing.

He hasn't touched sugar since.

And Mom?

Mira was quieter about it. She never joined in on his crusade songs, but she never stopped him either. She's softer—more hands than fists—but just as deadly in her own way. Espionage. Intel. I grew up with lullabies whispered in code.

She's the one who taught me how to lie with a smile.

She kisses my cheek every morning like she doesn't know how many people I've

killed. But she does know. She tracks my kills better than I do.

That's what the Order does. It makes everything black and white.

You're human, or you're a threat.

No gray. No questions.

And for twenty-four years, I believed them.

Until now.

Until the Jersey raid. Until him .

Now everything feels... wrong .

There's too much red tape in the files. Too many gaps in the archives. Too many questions answered with warnings. And I can feel it—like my skin's become a radar for lies. Something is being hidden, not just from the public—but from me .

Which means either my parents don't know... or they do.

And that thought is what makes me want to punch holes in concrete.

Because if they've been lying to me about what I am, about what we're really fighting—I've been on the wrong side of this war my whole damn life. And that means I have no idea who the hell I really am.

I've never questioned them, but this is too much. There's too much missing. I went looking to confirm I was delusional, that there were answers, reason, but now that my own eyes broke the seals and looked where I'm not supposed to, all I have is more

questions.

I shove off the bed, tug on my boots, and grab my jacket.

I need air.

I need space.

And I need answers before the buzzing inside me turns into something worse.

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ELIAS

The blade slices clean through the lock with a hiss, metal shrieking as it hits the ground. I step inside the crypt, my steps are loud on the damp gravel, the smell of rot and stone thick in the air.

Why the fuck do all ancient prophecies live in goddamn holes in the ground?

The old Fae ruins were buried deep under Brooklyn, masked by centuries of concrete and bullshit bureaucracy. Took me four weeks and a favor from a drunk blood-mage just to find this entrance. The tablet I'm after is supposed to be here—an artifact tied to the origin of the Veil.

And maybe to her .

Kaia Draven.

I haven't stopped thinking about her since the alley. Not her face—though yeah, she's stupid fucking beautiful in that dangerous, sharp-edged way—but that feeling . Like my soul got yanked across the goddamn universe and said "There. That one."

I hate it.

I hate how strong the pull is. I hate that she's Order. I hate that when I see her name on the files I snatched, my chest feels like someone's got their fist wrapped around my ribs.

And I hate that my mother might've been right.

“Beware the girl born of light and blade,” she told me once. “She will burn your name into the Veil or carve it from the world.”

Velara always was dramatic as hell. But when I felt Kaia's energy ripple against mine... it felt like a match had been lit in my blood.

Now I'm here.

Needing answers.

The tablet is supposed to be sealed in the crypt's heart chamber. I pass a row of old sarcophagi—decorated with glyphs that twitch when I get too close. Something old stirs in the walls. Hungry. Restless.

I draw my obsidian blade, feel its familiar hum against my palm.

“Come on, assholes,” I mutter. “Let's get this over with.”

The first wraith crawls from the ceiling like a shadow vomiting itself into form. Mouth like a vertical split of teeth. Too many arms. Eyes that don't blink. My wolf growls inside me. My fangs itch.

I don't shift, not fully. Just enough for speed.

I lunge.

The blade cuts clean, blessed and bound to me through ritual and pain. One wraith shrieks, dissolves into smoke. Another slams into my back, sending me skidding into the crypt wall. Pain flares through my shoulder, but I twist, slam my elbow into its

malformed face and drive the blade home.

They fall easy, these things. Old guardians. Not meant for someone like me.

Not meant for someone broken .

I wipe the black ichor off my jaw and kick open the final door.

The heart chamber is round. Quiet. Stone glistens with sweat from the earth. At the center—there it is.

A plinth wrapped in Fae vines and runes that hiss when I step forward.

On the plinth lies the tablet.

It's humming.

And glowing.

Which... yeah, is never a good sign.

I slide my fingers over the surface. The moment my skin makes contact, a pulse shoots up my arm and straight into my skull.

Images flash.

A tree, burning.

A woman with gold eyes screaming.

A wolf standing in blood.

And her.

Kaia.

But not just her now, her older . Covered in ash. Eyes glowing like twin suns.
Screaming my name.

My whole body jerks back.

“What the fuck are you?” I breathe.

“Who the hell are you ?”

The voice hits me like a shot of lightning.

Kaia.

I spin.

She’s standing in the entrance of the chamber, gun drawn, eyes wide but focused.

She sees me.

Really sees me.

And fuck, she’s even more dangerous up close.

Hair curled around her face like a halo of black fire.

That golden skin glowing faintly under the crypt’s lights.

Her stance is sharp, controlled, but there's something wild in her eyes.

Like she's one breath away from demanding the truth out of the gods themselves.

And right now? That wildness is aimed at me .

“Don't move,” she snaps. “What is this place? What are you doing down here?”

I should run.

She's Order.

This is a trap.

But I can't fucking move.

Because the second our eyes lock again, that thread, the one I've been pretending doesn't exist—yanks tight.

And I see it hit her too.

Her breath stutters.

Her gun hand lowers just a fraction.

“Shit,” she whispers, barely audible. “It's you .”

I take a step back.

“Stay the hell away from me,” I growl, voice sharper than intended.

She flinches, but recovers fast.

“You’re breaking into Fae tombs now? Looking for souvenirs?”

“I’m looking for answers.”

“To what?”

I hesitate. Just a second. But it’s enough.

She narrows her eyes. “You’re tied to the Veil. Aren’t you?”

More than you know, I think bitterly.

She starts forward.

I backpedal fast, boots skidding.

Not yet. Not here. If I stay, I’ll fucking lose control. I already feel the change creeping up my spine. My pupils dilating. My fangs itching to drop. The wolf is howling .

“You don’t want me to answer that,” I snarl.

“Try me.”

Suddenly, the chamber shakes.

The tablet glows red.

The runes on the wall begin to hum.

Kaia looks around, suddenly alert. “What the hell did you do ?”

I don’t answer.

Because I’m already running.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

KAIA

The fucking crypt is alive.

The walls are breathing, pulsing—like a heartbeat made of stone and shadow. The second that asshole bolts, the whole chamber shifts under my boots, groaning like it's waking up after a thousand-year nap.

I don't even think.

I run after him.

I don't know what the hell this place is, don't know why I came here tonight except that same damn itch that's been clawing at my insides since Jersey led me here.

Veil tremors, prophecy rumors, weird-ass dreams—I followed the trail like some possessed bloodhound and landed face-to-face with him again.

And now he's sprinting through a collapsing tomb like it's a morning jog.

“Stop!” I shout, feet slamming against the slick stone floor as I dodge crumbling debris and nearly trip over a busted skeleton arm. “You bastard—stop!”

He glances back. Briefly. Just long enough for those too-pale, too-fucking-intense eyes to flash in my direction.

Smug, pretty, arrogant.

I pick up speed. My body moves like it's on instinct, training taking over, Order conditioning hardwired into my spine.

I tackle him.

We crash against the wall hard, stone cracking under the impact. He grunts, rolls us over, and suddenly I'm pinned beneath a lean wall of muscle and heat and something that hums under his skin like restrained lightning.

"You don't wanna do this," he growls, low and feral.

I slam my knee into his side.

"I already am."

He lets out a grunt, but I'm fast, faster than most. I've always been. It's part of what made me a prodigy inside the Order. My body reacts before my brain catches up, before logic and hesitation can ruin a good opening.

I twist, elbow up, and catch him in the jaw.

He stumbles back, wiping blood from his mouth with the back of his hand like it's nothing. Like it's fun .

"You hit like a Purist," he mutters.

"Lucky for me, I'm not aiming to impress."

I charge again.

This time, he lets me get close.

Stupid. Except, he wants me close.

He grabs my wrist mid-swing, twists. I spin out of it and go low, trying to sweep his legs. He jumps clean over it and drops behind me. I turn too slow, and suddenly his arm is across my throat.

He doesn't squeeze. Not hard.

But it's a warning.

And holy shit , he's strong. Not Order-strong. Not soldier-strong.

Supernatural strong.

I slam my head back, connecting with his face. He grunts again and lets go just long enough for me to break free, pivot, and draw my dagger.

“Try again, freak,” I hiss, blade aimed at his throat.

He bares his teeth.

And that's when I see it.

The shift.

For a heartbeat, his face changes. Not just emotion. Bone. His irises flash molten gold, his jaw stretches, fangs lengthen. Then it's gone.

But I saw it.

Vampire. No—wolf too. Both.

“What the fuck are you?” I whisper.

His expression tightens. For a second, he looks... tired. Like I just asked a question that hurts more than any blade.

“I’m what happens when the world breaks its own rules,” he says quietly.

Then he lunges.

We clash, blades and fists and breath and rage. He’s not trying to kill me—I can feel it. Every move is precise, controlled. Defensive. He’s trying to disarm me.

But I’m not letting up. I want answers.

I need them.

Every strike is a scream. Every block a plea.

Tell me why I feel this pull.

Tell me why you make my bones hum.

Tell me what the Order never did.

I slice toward his shoulder. He dodges.

He grabs my wrist again, but this time I throw myself backward, using the momentum to land a kick square to his gut. He stumbles.

The tablet from the tomb clatters to the floor between us.

Its glow pulses faster. Hotter.

Like it knows.

We both reach for it.

But I hesitate.

Just a fraction of a second.

Because something in the energy makes my skin burn. Not pain. Just... truth .

It terrifies me.

And that's all he needs.

He snatches the tablet, tucks it into his coat, and backs toward the corridor behind him.

“No—no, no, no—” I move to follow, but the path behind him starts to crumble. Stone drops in thick slabs, sealing the exit like the crypt is helping him flee.

I hurl my blade.

It bounces off the closing stone with a final, mocking clang .

And he's gone.

Again.

I stand there breathing hard, blood dripping from my lip, fists clenched so tight my

knuckles scream. My dagger lies a few feet away, useless. The tablet is gone . The crypt is still. Silent.

I lost my mark.

Me.

Kaia fucking Draven.

Order's rising star. Top of my class. Untouchable.

I never lose my mark. Ever.

And now I'm standing in a goddamn Fae crypt with no backup, no plan, and a chest full of questions I don't know how to fucking answer.

Who is he?

Why do I feel like I already know him?

And why does it feel like something inside me chose him the second our eyes met?

I sink down against the wall, knees drawn up, heart pounding against bone like it's trying to break free.

The Order trained me to fight monsters.

Nobody told me what to do when one looked back with eyes that made me question my whole existence.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

ELIAS

The minute I'm through the last veil ward, my knees damn near buckle.

I slam the door of the safehouse behind me, chest heaving, breath ragged. The tablet's still burning hot against my ribs, tucked inside my coat like a live wire. My whole fucking body hums like I'm standing inside a storm.

Kaia's scent is still all over me, smoke and wildflowers and blood. Her voice's still ringing in my goddamn head.

"Try me."

Fuck.

I drop the coat on the floor and pace, clawing at my scalp like I can rip the thoughts out by force. I should've killed her. I should've knocked her out, tied her up, left her deep enough in that crypt for the Order to find and scrub off the map.

But I didn't.

Couldn't.

She looked at me like she saw through all the layers. Order enemy, hybrid freak, prophecy mistake—and still didn't run.

She chased me.

She fought me.

And for one goddamn second, I wanted to lose.

I stop pacing and slam my fist into the wall hard enough to send dust raining from the ceiling. The old safehouse groans like it's used to me punching shit I can't make sense of.

I sink to the floor, back against the cold wall. My hands are shaking. I can't tell if it's rage or adrenaline or the ache of that fucking pull between us, stretching thinner every second I try to deny it.

I've known a lot of things. Pain. Betrayal. Survival. But this?

This need ?

It's new.

And I hate it.

I yank the burner phone from the bag under the floorboards and punch in the number I know not to use unless I have to. Or if I was bleeding out or the world was ending.

Technically, both might be true.

The line clicks. One ring. Two.

Then her voice, cool, smooth, and lethal as silk over a knife.

"Elias."

I drag a hand down my face. “Mother.”

“I take it this isn’t a social call. How are the Order’s graveyards these days?”

“Busy.”

She hums. “Did you find the tablet?”

I glance at the coat. “Yeah.”

“And the girl?”

I hesitate.

She doesn’t wait for me to answer.

“Of course you did. Your magic’s already knotted up with hers, I can feel it from here.”

My stomach turns. “You knew this would happen.”

“I hoped,” she corrects. “The prophecy is older than both our bloodlines combined. But the signs are aligning. Veil tremors. Hybrid awakenings. The Order unraveling from the inside out. And now her .”

“She’s Order,” I snap. “She would’ve gutted me if I hadn’t run.”

“She didn’t, though, did she?”

I grind my teeth.

She sighs. “You always were sentimental. Like your father.”

That makes my hands curl into fists. “Don’t.”

“I’m simply saying—he also believed love could save the world. Look where that got him.”

“Imprisoned. Tortured. Hunted like a dog,” I spit. “Yeah. Thanks for the reminder.”

Silence stretches between us like a noose.

Then she says, softer but with that same damn sharpness that makes my spine bristle: “She is the key, Elias. She will either rebuild the Veil—or destroy it. And you.”

My throat tightens.

“She’s not just a girl.”

“No,” she agrees. “She’s the woman .”

I close my eyes. “So what do I do?”

“Protect her. Or destroy her.”

I let the words sit there.

Heavy.

Brutal.

Final.

“I don’t want to kill her.”

“Then don’t,” she says like it’s simple. Like it won’t tear me apart.

“But if you hesitate again,” she adds, voice going quiet and lethal, “you won’t be the only one who suffers.”

She hangs up.

I drop the phone. It clatters to the floor, screen cracked. Fitting.

I pull the tablet from my coat, lay it in front of me. It’s still glowing, symbols pulsing softly like breath. I stare at it like it might offer answers it doesn’t have.

Kaia Draven.

Fierce, reckless, and so goddamn bright it hurts to look straight at her.

She made me bleed.

She made me feel after years of being a recluse and living among the shadows. Being okay with that.

And now?

Now I’ve got the future of the Veil burning in my lap and a warning in my ears.

Protect her. Or destroy her.

I have no fucking idea which one I’m going to do.

But I know one thing for sure.

She's not done with me and I'm not done with her.

If I don't get to her first, she may just track me down and I'd rather play this out on my own terms.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

KAIA

The training mats are cold under my feet, but it's nothing compared to the ice running through my veins.

I can still feel him.

His weight against me. The heat of his breath. The power rippling off him like a second skin. And now he's gone again—with the only goddamn thing that might explain what the hell is happening to me .

And I'm stuck here.

Back in the Order's belly, surrounded by sharp-eyed agents and sharper-tongued instructors who would kill me without hesitation if they saw even a fraction of what's clawing beneath my skin right now.

"Kaia," Cole says, bouncing on the balls of his feet across from me. "You in or are we just gonna stand here looking pretty?"

I snap out of it, jaw tight. "Shut up and hit me."

He smirks. "Your funeral."

He lunges fast, aiming for my ribs. I twist just enough, let his momentum carry him past, and deliver a clean elbow to his spine. He grunts, stumbles, then pivots and sweeps my leg. I drop, roll, spring back to my feet.

We've sparred a hundred times. Cole's fast, clean, textbook. But I've always been just a little faster. A little meaner.

Today, though? Today something's different.

It's like my skin doesn't fit right. Like something's pulsing underneath it—alive, restless. My fingertips tingle, and not in the cute “I'm ready to punch something” kind of way. More like I'm about to ignite .

Cole feints left, goes high, then swings a roundhouse toward my jaw. I duck, twist, and slam my fist into his gut with a grunt.

And that's when it happens.

The world tilts.

The second I make contact, something inside me detonates .

Blue light explodes from my skin like a shockwave. It blasts out of me—raw, untamed, wrong . The air warps. The mat beneath our feet cracks. Cole goes flying back like he's been hit by a damn freight train, crashing into the wall hard enough to dent the metal paneling.

And then everything goes still.

Dead still.

“What the actual—fuck?” Cole croaks, groaning as he tries to sit up.

My hands are glowing. Faint but real. Like veins of starlight under my skin. My breath saws in and out of my chest, heart pounding like it's trying to shatter bone.

Across the room, I see movement.

My mother.

Mira Draven—quiet, elegant, cold as a whisper in winter—moving toward me fast . Her eyes are wide. Terrified. Not scared of what just happened.

Scared of me .

She grabs my wrist too tight and mutters under her breath in a language I've never heard but that hurts to hear. The glow on my skin fizzles out. The light vanishes like water down a drain.

“What the hell was that?” Cole coughs. “She—Kaia, you lit up . That wasn't tech. That wasn't gear. What the fuck?—?”

“Nothing,” my mother snaps.

She's standing in front of me now, shielding me with her body like I'm a bomb about to detonate. “Kaia's just... full of energy. She's been pushing herself. After that, uh, mishap in the crypt ruins. You know how her adrenaline spikes.”

“Bullshit,” Cole mutters, eyes narrowing.

Then the doors slam open.

And of course it's him.

My father strides in like a damn storm cloud, every inch the high-ranking Order officer in full field gear, boots thudding across the mat like gunshots. His face is stone, but his eyes—those cold, piercing bastards—are burning.

“What’s going on?” Jareth barks.

“Nothing,” my mother says again, too fast.

“She’s fine,” she adds. “Just a surge. We’ll recalibrate her baseline in medbay, make sure she’s not overextending. No cause for alarm.”

I don’t say a word.

Because what the fuck is happening right now?

Why did she just chant some ancient verbal backspace into my skin? Why is my mother —Order intel specialist, human fucking lie detector—covering for me like we’ve rehearsed this a hundred times?

My dad steps closer. His gaze snaps to Cole.

“What did you see?”

Cole hesitates, glancing between all of us. “She hit me. Harder than usual. Weird light. Don’t know what it was.”

Jareth grunts, then turns to me.

“You okay?”

I nod once. “Fine.”

A lie. A clean, practiced one. He taught me that look—flat voice, eye contact, no tremble.

He studies me for too long.

Then he says, “You’ll debrief with me later.”

Fuck.

My mother’s fingers twitch at her side.

“Yes, sir,” I reply, and it tastes like ash.

He leaves without another word. Cole follows, still rubbing his ribs.

And then it’s just me and my mother.

I round on her the second the doors close.

“What the hell did you just do to me?”

She steps back. Her face is pale, voice shaking. “Please, Kaia.”

“No. Fuck that.” I grab her arm. “I’ve got blue lightning shooting out of my fucking soul , and you’re muttering fairy bullshit in response. You don’t get to play secret keeper with me.”

She shakes her head, eyes glassy.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what ?”

She doesn’t answer.

Just slips out of my grip and walks away.

I stand there, fists clenched, chest heaving, the smell of burned ozone still thick around me.

I don't know who the hell I'm supposed to trust.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

ELIAS

I knew coming back to the Lower Wards was a goddamn mistake.

The air's thicker here, tainted with sweat, smoke, and bad decisions.

Magic hums under every cracked brick and shadow.

I keep my hood low, boots moving fast through the alleys of Old Dockside, past rusted sigils painted over with street tags, broken wards humming like dying fireflies.

I should've stayed at the safehouse.

Should've ignored the summon.

But when you've got ghosts whispering your name through blood-soaked walls, you show up. Even if every cell in your body's screaming not to.

Especially when that ghost is him .

Ty. The leader of Typhon's Brood itself.

I round a corner and find the door already cracked open. No one guards it, but I feel the eyes. Watching from the dark. Always.

I step inside.

It's a former church turned sanctum—crumbling stained glass, pews replaced with steel crates, weapons stacked against an altar where saints used to watch. The irony's not lost on me.

Ty leans against the dais like he owns the place. Bastard always did love theatrics. He's tall, wiry, all angular muscle and vicious grin, black eyes rimmed with red like he hasn't slept since the last full moon. Which he probably hasn't.

“Look who finally decided to crawl outta his hole,” he drawls. “Missed you, Vorn.”

“Cut the shit, Ty.”

He grins wider. “Still charming as ever. You're late.”

“You're lucky I came at all.”

That gets a laugh from the shadows.

Of course he's not alone.

Two shifters lean against a pillar to my left—scarred, twitchy, half-shifted claws visible even at rest. A witch with blood-slick fingers and smudged eyeliner lounges by the window, watching me like she's already got my bones mapped out for a hex.

And in the center of them all—Ty.

Leader of the Brood.

Rogue alpha. Vampire-cursed. Fae-blooded. A walking powder keg of broken bloodlines, and the only son of a bitch more hunted than I am.

He spreads his arms. “Come on, Elias. We’re family. Sit. Drink. Plot the future.”

“I’m not here to plot anything,” I say flatly. “I came because you called. That’s it.”

He tsks. “Still Switzerland. Still neutral. Still pretending the world’s not about to split open.”

“Because I’m not playing that game,” I snap. “You think I’m going to pick a side in this war when both sides want me dead?”

“You don’t have to pick a side,” he says. “You are the side. You’re the bridge, man. The prophecy .”

I let out a laugh that sounds more like a growl.

“That prophecy’s gotten more people killed than saved. You think leading your little rebellion’s gonna change anything?”

He steps forward.

“No one else will, Elias. No one else can . You’ve seen the Order.

You’ve seen the Council. They’re both rotting from the inside out.

The Veil’s falling. The humans are sharpening stakes.

The elders are getting desperate. And us?

We’re sitting here playing scavenger while the fucking world crumbles. ”

“Then maybe it should crumble,” I mutter. “Maybe that’s the only way it’ll rebuild

right.”

He stops. Eyes narrow.

“That girl,” he says quietly. “The one from the crypt. She’s changed you.”

I clench my jaw. “How do you know anything about that?”

He laughs sharply. “There’s not a whole lot that happens around here, especially in our world, that I don’t know about. You should know that more than most.”

Before I can say anything, the humor in his eyes are gone. He steps closer, voice low and lethal. “We can’t afford that change.”

I don’t answer.

Because fuck him, he’s right.

Kaia has changed me. And it scares the shit out of me.

Not just because of what she is or whatever the hell that turns out to be—but because I feel her in my blood. I feel her rage, her fear, her hunger for answers. And for once, I want to give someone something instead of taking.

“I’m not leading your fucking army,” I say finally. “You want a war, start it yourself.”

The room goes quiet.

Even the witch stops twirling her blade.

Ty's smile drops. "That's disappointing."

He turns his back to me, walks to the altar, rests his hands on it like he's praying to a god that long since abandoned this place.

"I offered you a crown," he says softly. "I offered you a home."

"I don't want either."

He turns. The fury's back. Cold. Coiled.

"You think you can outrun this? You think hiding behind alleyways and crypt doors is going to stop the world from burning?"

"I don't care if it burns," I say. "I care who gets torched with it."

His jaw clenches. "You walk out that door, Elias, you're on your own. No protection. No sanctuary. No more neutral ground."

"I've never had sanctuary," I growl. "So nothing new there."

I turn to go.

His voice chases after me. "You're still going to be hunted. But now? You're going to be hunted alone."

I don't look back.

Because I already am.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

KAIA

The Order's briefing room is too damn cold. Always has been. Probably on purpose—keep you alert, uncomfortable. Keep your blood sharp.

My father's already seated when I walk in. Perfect posture, suit pristine, silver at his temples like a badge of war, eyes cold enough to freeze lava.

"Sit, Kaia," he says without looking up.

No "hello." No "are you okay." Just— sit.

Classic Jareth Draven.

I do as I'm told, spine straight, boots flat on the ground. I keep my hands in my lap so he doesn't see them twitch. Because they are. Still. Like the power's hiding under my skin, waiting for round two.

He finally lifts his gaze. "You going to tell me what happened in training?"

My voice comes out steady. "Sloppy energy dump. My focus was shit. I overcorrected. It won't happen again."

His brow arches. "You threw a fellow agent across a combat mat and cracked a wall."

"I said it won't happen again."

Silence.

I stare him down.

And he stares back like he's trying to see through my skull and rearrange my thoughts for me.

“You’ve always had... intensity,” he says at last. “But this wasn’t controlled.”

“I’m just tired, Dad.”

His eyes narrow at that word— Dad. I never use it in here. Not when we’re in uniform.

“Stay sharp, Kaia. That’s not a request.”

“Always am,” I say with a shrug. “Debrief over?”

He doesn’t respond. Just waves me off like I’m something to file away. I rise, give a clean salute, and head for the exit.

I make it halfway down the hall before I feel like I can breathe again.

Back in my quarters, I slam the door behind me, pull out the Order’s encrypted terminal, and punch in every goddamn clearance code I’ve got to research the one name that has echoed in my chest and head since the moment I came into physical contact with him in a voice that isn’t my own.

Elias Vorn.

The file is sealed tighter than a damn tomb, but I’ve broken into deeper shit before.

Takes me fifteen minutes and a bypass I'm not supposed to know to finally access the core report.

CATEGORY OMEGA: TERMINATE ON SIGHT.

Subspecies: HYbrID—VAMPIRIC/WERE-LYCAN

Known Affiliations: NONE

Known Offenses: Unauthorized access to Veil sites, crypt raids, confirmed body count (approx. 27 agents), resistance leader contact suspected.

Threat Level: Extreme.

Directives: Capture impossible. Destruction only option.

My breath catches.

Destruction only option?

No trial. No interrogation. Just... erase.

I remember his face when I asked him what he was. That split second where the monster cracked, and there was something else underneath. Something human .

Why do I feel drawn to him?

Like something is hot in my chest and heavy in my gut, like gravity bent itself around him the second our eyes met.

And now I'm reading about him like he's just a code and a threat profile.

Fuck.

I slam the terminal shut and pace. I need answers. Real ones.

Starting with that crypt.

I rerun the footage from my suit cam, what little didn't corrupt in the collapse. Pause it on the runes. Trace them into the Order's symbology system.

Most come back as "UNRECOGNIZED." But one—just one—pings something buried in a redacted intelligence file:

Site-7: FAE ORIGIN—HEARTWOOD RELIC ZONE (SECTOR DISMANTLED).

Heartwood.

That name again.

Same word from the dream. From the tablet. From that old Fae tale buried in the archives that made my skin itch like it was being rewritten.

It lists one surviving location. Deep in the Grayspine Preserve—off-limits Order territory. Red-zoned after a Veil surge five years ago. Claimed unstable.

Bullshit.

I dig further. No recent scans. No patrols. The file's been scrubbed.

They don't monitor it.

They buried it.

And suddenly I'm not just curious.

I'm fucking done playing nice.

I pack fast—stealth gear, blade, neutral ID chip. I swap my comm for a ghost frequency module, jam tracking in my boots, lock the door, and reroute my logs to make it look like I'm on med-leave.

Mother still hasn't spoken to me.

She walks past me like I'm glass—see-through, delicate, dangerous. I can feel the space between us now like a wound that's not healing.

I've always loved being alone.

Now?

Now it just feels loud .

I hit the streets after dark, hood up, heartbeat steady. No cameras. No agents. No eyes.

It's just me.

And whatever the hell is waiting in those ruins.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

ELIAS

The forest around Grayspine's edge is breathing wrong.

It's too quiet. No birds. No rustling in the underbrush. Just this... pressure. Like the trees are leaning in to listen. Like the whole place knows someone's trespassing and is just waiting to pounce.

Which is exactly why I'm here.

The ruins buried beneath Grayspine are old—older than most fae living today remember. This place was sacred before the Veil even had a name. I've only been here once before, when I was seventeen and stupid and still thought maybe the world had a place for something like me.

It didn't.

But the tablet I stole from the crypt won't shut the hell up. It pulses at night. Glows when I get close to places like this. And when I traced the runes etched into its frame, it pointed me back here.

So I came.

I keep to the shadows, senses sharpened, every step calculated. My wolf is tense under my skin, sniffing out wards and whispers.

Then I smell her.

Kaia.

Her scent slams into me like a truck to the chest—wildflowers and gunpowder and something burning from the inside out. She's here . Again. And gods help me, my body reacts before my brain can say “bad fucking idea.”

I find her crouched by a twisted archway, inspecting runes with the same grim focus she'd use dissecting an enemy. She's in full stealth mode—Order-grade black gear, blades strapped to her thighs, hair tied back tight—but it's her eyes that stop me.

They're glowing.

Not brightly. Just a faint shimmer. Gold with flecks of something older, deeper. Fae.

I stay in the shadows.

My back presses against an ancient tree, bark biting into my shoulder through the fabric of my coat. I watch her move through the ruin's edge like she was born for it—silent, lethal, precise. She's scanning the stonework with a focus that borders on obsessive.

Something about the way she crouches, tilts her head at the carvings, the way her fingers skim the old Fae sigils like she knows them but doesn't know why —it grips me harder than it should.

She's glowing again. Faint, but there.

She's not human. Not fully.

I'm about to move, say something or anything when she shifts too close to the wrong stone.

And the rune flashes red.

“Shit—”

She doesn’t even have time to react.

I’m on her before the ward finishes powering up.

I tackle her hard, roll us across the overgrown floor just as the trap triggers. The magic lets out a blast of violet flame that chars the moss beside us to ash. If I’d waited one more second, she’d be a smear on the stone.

She gasps under me, body tight, fists already flying before she even sees who it is.

“What the fuck!” she roars, twisting beneath me, knee aimed for my ribs.

I catch it mid-thrust, flip her sideways, and land on my feet in time to catch her blade’s arc with my forearm. Sparks fly as her steel scrapes my vambrace.

“Kaia—”

“Don’t you dare say my name, freak,” she snarls, eyes blazing. “You been following me?”

“You were about to get vaporized!”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah, clearly,” I snap, blocking a punch aimed for my throat.

She doesn’t stop.

Neither do I.

She fights dirty, fast, brutal—elbows, knees, throws. I counter, shift just enough to keep her off-balance but not enough to hurt her. Not really . She doesn't hold back. Her blade slices across my side—just a graze, but enough to make my blood start to burn.

She's stronger now.

Her power's waking up.

It's right there, boiling under her skin. She doesn't even know how dangerous she is yet.

And I can't bring myself to stop her.

Even when I should.

The fight is chaos, tumbling across moss-slick stones, magic flaring with every impact. I drive her back, she counters, I twist her blade from her hand and toss it.

I've got her now.

I slam her against a carved pillar, my hand around her throat—not squeezing, just holding. Her chest rises and falls fast, lips parted, pupils blown wide.

I could end this.

I could kill her.

She'd do it to me without blinking.

But I don't.

I can't.

Her eyes lock on mine, gold and furious and alive . And I know, without question, if I let her go right now, she'll try to kill me again.

But my hand won't move.

And gods help me... I don't want her dead .

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KAIA

I don't move.

Can't.

The bastard's hand is still around my throat—not crushing, just there , holding me against that carved stone like I'm something fragile. Breakable. His eyes burn gold, wild and unrelenting, like he's weighing the universe behind his stare.

This is it.

He's going to kill me.

And I don't flinch.

I won't .

Because I'm Kaia Draven, daughter of the Order's finest, and if I'm going down, I'm going down staring death in the goddamn eye.

But then he lets go.

Just like that.

His hand falls away, fingers ghosting over my skin as he steps back. The fury's still in him. The power. The hunger . But something else flashes across his

face—something that doesn't belong in a creature designed to tear things apart.

Regret.

Confusion.

Maybe... mercy?

And then he's gone. No warning. No snark. No final blow.

Just gone , like smoke on wind.

I stay frozen a minute longer, heart jackhammering in my chest. My hands tremble, my pulse still pounding like I just survived a bomb, and all I can think is, why didn't he do it?

Why couldn't he?

By the time I make it back to the compound, my legs are jelly and my mind's stuck on a loop.

He could've killed me. He should've .

I'd have done it if the roles were reversed... right?

No. Maybe.

Fuck.

I sneak back through the perimeter right before the first field patrol switches shifts. Slip through the tunnels, reroute the logs, wash the ash off my skin in a too-cold

shower that doesn't erase his scent.

Then I collapse onto my bunk like someone yanked the plug out of me.

The dreams start that night.

Not nightmares. Not the usual Order-induced kill-loop bullshit.

This is different.

It's dusk, somewhere warm. The air's thick with the scent of moss and rain. I'm standing under a massive, gnarled tree with roots like claws and leaves like fire, and I'm not alone.

He's there.

Elias.

Not in gear, not covered in blood or shadows, just... standing next to me. Like he belongs there. Like I do.

And the strangest thing?

I'm not scared.

I feel calm. Whole.

I reach out and wake up choking on my own breath.

It happens again the next night.

And the next.

Each dream clearer than the last. I start to feel the bark under my fingers, the warmth of his hand brushing mine. Sometimes we speak, but I never remember the words. Sometimes there's light pouring through the branches and a melody I can't name curling around us like mist.

Sometimes he kisses me.

And it's not heat or lust or even the battle-fueled adrenaline of our real-life collisions.

It's something else.

Something old.

Something terrifying.

I wake up every time soaked in sweat, fists clenched, heart racing like I've been running. And the worst part?

I start waiting for the dreams.

Counting down the hours 'til sleep like a junkie chasing the next hit. Wishing he'd vanish from my head.

And fearing the moment he does.

On the fourth night, I punch a hole in my pillow and scream into it like a lunatic.

“Get out of my fucking head, you crypt-crawling, halfbreed son of a?—”

A knock at the door cuts me off.

“Kaia?” Cole’s voice, muffled. “You okay?”

“Fine,” I lie, dragging my ass off the floor. “Bad dream.”

He pauses. “You sure? You were yelling.”

“Just reliving training. You in bed or you trying to flirt through a wall?”

“Gods, I regret caring,” he mutters, then walks off.

I wait ‘til I hear his door click shut, then sink back down and stare at the ceiling.

There’s no protocol for this.

No Order guidebook entry on what to do when the enemy starts haunting your dreams and not in the ‘kill them harder’ way.

I don’t know what the hell’s happening to me.

But I’m starting to think the rules I was raised on aren’t just flawed.

They’re a fucking lie.

And I’m scared that maybe, the monster I’ve been trained to hate is the only one who’s ever seen me.

ELIAS

I should've killed her.

That's the refrain echoing in my skull as I pace my sanctuary like a caged animal.

I should've ended it. Cut the cord. Burned the thread. Whatever the hell this thing is between us—it should've been over the second I had her pinned. One move. One twist of the blade. And it would've been done.

But I didn't.

Because I'm a fucking idiot.

I slam my fist into the stone wall again. The skin splits. I heal. Doesn't stop the ache.

I haven't left this room since the ruins. Not because I'm scared. No, fuck that—I've never run from anything in my life. I just... I can't trust myself out there. Not with her scent still burned into my damn synapses.

And the dreams?

They've only gotten stronger.

But I don't talk about that.

I drown it instead.

The bottle of whiskey I stole from a black-market bar in Prague last year is half-empty. The burn in my throat's the only thing I feel that isn't tied to Kaia Draven.

I drop into the chair by my desk, drag the cracked stone tablet onto the table, and scowl at it like it's personally responsible for my unraveling.

Which, to be fair, it kind of is.

The runes glow faintly, pulsing in that slow, rhythmic beat I've come to recognize as Fae-coded script. But it's fractured—part prophecy, part warning, part memory.

And the one symbol I can't translate?

Looks a hell of a lot like the one that flared behind Kaia's shoulder before she tripped the trap.

I stare at it. Memorize every edge. Every line.

She's tied to it.

And if she's tied to it...

She's not human.

Not fully.

I drag open one of my old archives, scan through a dozen dusty volumes and half-rotted scrolls from the days I ran with the hybrid underground. There's references to "Heartwood Lineage." Fae-born mortals. Blessed and cursed.

Bound.

Marked.

I light a cigarette with shaking fingers, puff out smoke, and mutter to no one. “So what the hell are you?”

The Order’s whole purpose is to eradicate anything with magic. Supernaturals are the enemy. End of story. That’s their gospel. I’ve seen what they do to mixed-bloods. Hell, I was almost dissected at sixteen when they got close enough to snatch me.

So why’s she in their ranks?

Why would they train someone like her?

Unless she doesn’t know .

A cold wave settles over me.

She doesn’t.

She has no fucking clue what she is.

Which means someone hid it from her. Maybe even her parents. Someone powerful. Someone desperate.

And now it’s waking up, and she’s wrapped in a prophecy she can’t read, hunted by the same people she calls family , and somehow tangled with me in the middle of it.

Fuck. Me.

I take another swig from the bottle and slam it down.

This is why I don't get involved. Why I keep walls up and feelings buried. Why I sleep in bunkers and keep weapons under my pillow.

Because attachment gets you killed.

Because love gets you hunted.

And she's the goddamn epicenter of a coming storm, and I am not about to let myself get pulled under.

Even if every inch of my soul is already soaked in her.

I drag the cigarette down to the filter, snuff it out on the table, and grab my notebook.

If I can break the rune...

If I can find out what the hell she is, what the prophecy actually says—maybe I can sever this bond before it guts us both.

Because I know this much for sure:

I can't stay away. That much has already been proven.

But if I don't figure this out soon, she's going to be the death of me.

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KAIA

The lock clicks like a gunshot in the dark.

I slip through the door and shut it behind me, heart pounding like I'm back on my first solo recon.

I've trained to infiltrate vampire dens, breach shifter hideouts, and slice through skin with surgical precision.

But nothing, not even standing face-to-face with that hybrid monster, Elias—feels as dangerous as this.

Breaking into my parents' quarters.

I'm not sure if it's the betrayal or the fear that hits harder. Probably both. Because if I'm right—if what I feel is right—then they've been lying to me my entire life.

Not just little white lies.

Big, soul-reshaping ones.

The room is tidy. Predictably sterile. Like it's been cleaned by someone who doesn't believe in comfort.

Two twin beds on opposite sides of the room—how poetic.

My father's side is razor-neat, all hard lines and military precision.

My mother's softer. A framed photo of me at ten, scraped and grinning from a training win, sits crooked by her bedside.

She probably doesn't even realize it's tilted.

I start with the desk.

Nothing useful. Reports, encrypted logs, a few half-burned holos of old missions. I crack a drawer, rifle through the contents. Mostly outdated Order intel chips and an old combat medallion—my dad's. There's a faint smear of blood on the back. Not his.

The air's getting heavier. My stomach's twisting with something cold and low, like grief laced with guilt. My mother's voice echoes in my head— not here, Kaia... please, not here.

But I don't stop.

I can't.

Because if I don't find something soon, I'll lose my fucking mind.

It's not until I stand in front of the closet that something shifts.

Something in my chest.

Not physical. Not even emotional. It's deeper than instinct. Like something dormant in me is leaning forward —urging me. Go there.

The floorboards.

I kneel, fingers brushing over the grain, and without thinking, I press on a knot in the wood.

Click.

The false panel lifts.

Inside, wrapped in faded black cloth and tied with fraying twine, is an old leather-bound journal. The thing looks ancient, the cover cracked and worn with time. It smells like earth and wind and something faintly metallic.

Blood. Old, magic-touched blood.

My breath catches in my throat.

This... this isn't my mother's.

It's older. Maybe here before The Order made this their home.

I untie the cloth with shaking hands, fingers clumsy from adrenaline. A photograph falls out first—creased, faded, the edges curled from age.

A woman stands in a garden I don't recognize. Tall, poised, with starlight in her eyes and silver threaded through pitch-black hair. Beside her, a girl about six or seven—dark curls, sharp chin, that same quiet watchfulness in her eyes.

It's my mother.

I flip the journal open.

And my world begins to tilt.

“To my dearest Mira, may the bindings hold and keep her hidden long enough to choose her own fate...”

The script is elegant. Flowing. Like someone wrote not just with ink but with intention. The entries speak of exile. Of the Order’s growing reach. Of hiding what should never have been hidden. Of Fae bloodline .

My bloodline.

I clutch the journal so tightly the leather creaks.

This woman, this mystery grandmother—she was Fae.

And if she’s Fae... then so is my mother.

Which means...

I stumble back from the panel like it bit me.

“Oh my god.”

Everything shifts. The way my skin itches before something bad happens. The power I felt crackle under my bones during training. The dreams .

And Elias.

That pull between us wasn’t just lust or adrenaline or some cursed coincidence.

It was something ancient. Something written. Maybe even some of the prophecies we

have been forced to destroy for their threat on the world.

They hid this from me.

She hid this from me.

My mother, who taught me to kill supernaturals—who watched me be shaped into a weapon—she knew.

She fucking knew .

And she said nothing.

I slide to the floor, legs folding underneath me, journal pressed to my chest like it's the only thing keeping me from falling apart.

Because now?

I don't know who I am.

But I sure as hell know who I'm not.

I'm not just human.

And I'm not their pawn anymore.

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ELIAS

The bottle's dry.

The last drops of blood-wine hit the back of my throat like smoke and copper—useless. My head's still screaming. My skin still burns. And the damn dreams won't stop crawling through my veins.

I smash the bottle against the concrete wall, glass shattering across the floor like jagged little confessions.

Fuck this.

I need something stronger than this, stronger than the aged whiskey. I need out .

The city's night-stained and humming when I slip through the lower tunnels, back alley cloak pulled over my shoulders, hood low. This part of town's forgotten—veins of rust and ash that run beneath the surface of the so-called “clean” zones. Where the rules don't reach and monsters bleed like men.

Which is why my guy, Drevik, hides out here.

He trades in things you're not supposed to want—fae-dust, blood-wine, relics carved from bone and nightmares. He doesn't ask questions, which makes him a rare breed.

I duck under a rusted gate and follow the stink of oil and wet stone to the old freight house.

And stop cold.

Voices.

Too many.

Order agents.

I melt into the shadows, heart kicking up into my throat, breath tight in my chest.
They're not just patrolling.

They're doing something.

And then I hear it.

A scream.

High. Wet. Young.

I creep closer, slip behind a crumbling pillar.

Damn, they've got a hybrid.

Kid can't be more than seventeen. One of ours. Shaggy hair, claws barely formed, eyes still glowing from his last partial shift. They've got him chained between two steel pylons, blood leaking from gashes across his chest. One agent's holding a rune-brand, still hot. Another is prodding.

They're laughing.

Like it's a goddamn game.

And then I see her.

Kaia.

She's standing just behind the one holding the brand. Not smiling. Not laughing. Arms crossed, jaw tight. She's not stopping it... but she's not in it either.

She's watching.

And she looks wrecked.

Her body's stiff. She flinches every time the kid screams. Her eyes don't move from him, not even when one of the agents cracks a joke about the "dogboy squeal."

It doesn't matter.

It's enough.

My vision blurs .

The wolf in me snaps loose first, fur surging under skin, bones stretching tight, but I don't shift fully. I don't need to. My speed's enough. My rage is more.

I move.

Fast.

Faster than they can blink.

The first agent goes down with a crushed windpipe that I tear into with my fangs, lapping up his blood to quench my anger but all it does is fuel me on.

The second tries to grab his blade but I'm already behind him—tearing his side open with one swipe of my claws.

Blood arcs across the air like paint on a canvas. Beautiful. Righteous.

Kaia shouts something I don't hear.

Another turns to fire—too late.

I crush his skull against the wall with my boot. It explodes like a melon.

And now they're screaming.

Now they realize who I am.

Too fucking late.

The branded hybrid collapses as the pylons short. I grab him, toss him to the side out of the fray. "Run," I snarl. "Now."

He does.

I pivot.

There's only one left standing now.

Kaia.

She's frozen. Weapon raised but not aimed.

Her mouth is open, words trying to form, but nothing comes out.

And I stalk toward her slow, step by blood-soaked step.

Her eyes flick to the others, dead. Broken. Mine.

Then back to me.

Her hands tremble.

I don't stop.

I can smell her fear. Her conflict. The war going on inside her.

And I don't care.

Because she stood there.

She didn't stop it.

I'm inches from her now, heart a livewire, claws flexed, vision swimming red.

I could end her.

Right here. Right now.

My hand rises.

Her breath catches, then a total stop.

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KAIA

He doesn't kill me.

He should've. He wanted to—I could see it in the way his hands shook, in the way his lips curled like he hated himself for stopping. But he didn't.

Instead, he leans in close, voice low and rough like gravel dragged across skin. "Next time," he says, "I won't."

Suddenly, he's just fucking gone. Smoke and shadow and rage, melted into the dark like he never existed at all.

I'm standing there, breath shallow, fists clenched, and I can't even scream. Not from fear. From frustration.

"Wait!" I call out, stupidly, voice sharp, desperate. "Wait!"

But he doesn't.

And why the hell would he?

The other agents are dead. The ground's soaked in blood. The air reeks of burnt flesh and ozone and something older—feral, supernatural. I can't feel anything past the ringing in my ears and the weight on my chest.

Gods.

What the hell just happened?

I drop to my knees next to Brooks' body. His face is frozen in something between horror and confusion. He never even had a chance to react. I swallow hard, pushing the bile down. He was an asshole. A cruel one. But still—he didn't deserve this .

And I didn't stop it.

Then I think about the hybrid they were torturing. How I did nothing then either, but it felt more wrong than this...

My hands start shaking, and this time I don't stop them.

How the fuck am I supposed to explain this?

Oh hey, Commander. Sorry we lost a handful of men. Elias Vorn dropped in, murdered them, and then decided to spare your daughter for shits and giggles. Cool, right?

They'll ask how I survived. Why I didn't kill him. Why he didn't kill me . And if I lie, they'll smell it. My father will see it in my damn eyes. He always does.

But if I tell the truth? Elias is already on the Order's Omega Threat list. They'll hunt him harder. Put trackers on me. I'll be on lockdown—no fieldwork, no questions, no freedom. Just monitored and “evaluated” for trauma.

That's the Order's way of saying: We'll decide if you're still useful.

And I can't let that happen. Because I need to find him.

He knows something. Something about me. About the visions. The fucking dreams

that won't stop. He's tied to this—whether he wants to be or not.

And if there's one thing I know for damn sure, it's this:

I don't trust anyone else to give me answers.

Not my mother.

Especially not my father.

I stand, wiping blood off my palms onto my pants. My jaw clenches tight, and my voice shakes when I finally speak.

“Shit,” I whisper to the bodies. “I'm sorry.”

Then I hit my comm.

“HQ, this is Draven. Agent team compromised. Hybrid ambush. I'm the only one left.”

A pause. Then static.

“Copy that, Agent. We're dispatching recovery and containment teams. ETA twelve minutes.”

“Understood,” I say. “I'll secure the area.”

I don't say who ambushed us. I don't say it was one man. I don't say his name.

Not yet.

Because I don't know what's true anymore.

And I'm not going to hand over someone who might be the only damn person who can help me figure it out.

I slide my blade back into its sheath and glance at the horizon.

Wherever the hell you are, Elias Vorn, I'm going to find you.

And this time, you're going to talk.

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ELIAS

The Order's compound looks different at night.

Not cleaner. Not softer. Just quieter.

Quieter, like death waiting to breathe.

I crouch on the edge of the broken bell tower, the stone cold beneath my palms, eyes trained on the eastern wing—what they call Central R&D. On the surface, it's all pristine walkways and mirrored glass, polished steel and perfectly-aligned protocols. But I know better.

I know what's buried beneath that clinical bullshit and reinforced concrete.

The Vault.

There's no record of it in the Order's files.

No names. Just rumors whispered between the condemned.

Supernaturals yanked off the streets, stripped of their magic, sanity, humanity—and dumped into cages deep underground.

No rights. No trial. Just experiments, dissection, reprogramming. All in the name of “protection.”

They say it's for the greater good.

Fuck that.

I know it's real, because I've been there. I know what it smells like, the sour stench of fear and rot, of magic burning where it shouldn't. I know what it sounds like when someone's pushed past the brink and finally breaks. I know, because I almost did.

And I made a promise the night I escaped.

Every single one of these fucking labs would burn.

And tonight?

Tonight, I make good on that promise.

The Vault beneath Central R&D is the largest I've found. I've spent two weeks in the shadows, watching, learning, marking their rotations and memorizing weak points like scripture.

I snuck in through sewer lines and cursed tunnels, rigged collapse glyphs in the sub-basement conduits.

Every rune calibrated. Every pressure point exact.

One push, and it all comes down.

One push, and maybe I can finally sleep without hearing the screams of people the world forgot.

But that last assault, the one I watched earlier this week? That did it.

That poor hybrid. Young. Probably barely out of his first shift. Screaming as they pinned him down with silver restraints and pulsed electricity through his veins like it was training.

It wasn't research.

It was cruelty.

And it ends tonight.

The plan was clean. Precise.

Until she shows up.

Kaia.

She steps into the corridor like a storm I didn't see coming.

Tactical braid. Clean black gear fitted to that lean, lethal frame.

Her golden-amber eyes are focused on a tablet, frowning slightly at whatever she's reading.

There are two soldiers flanking her. She looks like she's briefing them—but not leading. Following a protocol.

My stomach lurches.

What the fuck is she doing in that wing?

She's never been there before. Not once in the weeks I've been watching. That area is

usually restricted to high-clearance scientists, enforcers, and whatever the hell they call the fuckers who sign off on torture.

Kaia isn't one of them.

Unless she doesn't know.

Unless this is just some random reassignment. Some screwed-up coincidence.

But Kaia Draven doesn't get reassignments by accident. She's her father's daughter. She is protocol.

Still... her eyes. She's not at ease. Her gait is stiff, her shoulders tight. Her fingers twitch too fast across the screen like she's trying to make sense of something that isn't making sense.

She's suspicious. Or at least confused.

Which means maybe she doesn't know what's under her feet.

And gods help me, that's worse.

Because now, if I blow the Vault, she's collateral damage.

And I've seen what collapse glyphs do when they trigger properly. Bones don't break, they powder. Blood boils inside the body. Skin peels in layers.

It's not quick.

It's not fucking clean.

My fingers curl tighter around the detonator rune, the slick obsidian edges digging into my palm.

I stare at her, willing her to turn around. To leave. To walk out of frame and out of the fucking kill zone. My pulse pounds in my throat.

Go, Kaia. Get out.

But she doesn't. She walks deeper in. Down the corridor that leads directly over the main chamber. Her shadow falls across the exit ramp.

My jaw locks. My heart sinks.

This complicates things.

No, this screws everything.

But if I don't do it now... I may never get another shot. They're moving the captives next week. I overheard a comms whisper—Project Rebirth goes mobile. Once the Vault disappears, we'll never find it again. Those people, those lives—they'll vanish forever.

They'll suffer worse than death.

This isn't just revenge. This is the only chance.

The only goddamn chance.

So I stare at her.

At her hesitation.

At the frown between her brows that says maybe she feels something wrong.

Teeth grinding, I mutter under my breath. “You’re not supposed to be here. Not tonight.”

She stops near one of the stairwells. Tilts her head toward one of the guards and points something out on the screen.

I can’t hear her, but I see the tension in her jaw. The suspicion.

She knows. On some level. She knows.

I close my eyes.

“Shit.”

I whisper it like a prayer. Like an apology. Because this isn’t just war anymore. This is choice.

And I choose.

I open my eyes, blood humming in my ears, and press the rune.

The glyph ignites.

And the world, well...

The world erupts.

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KAIA

B oom.

The world tears open like the gods themselves just declared war—and I’m caught in the goddamn middle of it.

One second I’m walking through Central R&D with two rookies, barely paying attention to the bullshit protocol check we were assigned. The next? The floor lurches, a roar splits my skull in half, and the ceiling comes down like judgment.

Everything happens so fast.

I don’t scream. I can’t . My lungs are crushed by the shockwave as stone and steel rain from above. A wave of raw force slams into me, launching my body into the corridor wall. My head snaps back. Then, nothing.

Pain drags me back.

A white-hot lance straight down my spine. I taste blood. I smell fire. My ears ring like a goddamn church bell, and I realize I'm buried.

Trapped.

Can’t move. Can’t breathe.

"Fuck," I gasp, spitting dust and ash from my mouth. “What the hell just happened?!”

Panic claws its way up my throat like a living thing, but I slam it back down.

Focus, Kaia. You're not dying like this.

I twist, one arm pinned under a collapsed pipe. My other hand's free enough to grope for leverage. A hiss of pain slips through clenched teeth as I wedge my foot against a half-broken beam and shove .

The pipe gives.

Barely.

But it's enough.

I roll onto my side, coughing, vision spinning. The world's on fire—flames licking through busted conduits, smoke turning the air thick and choking.

And then I hear it.

A sound.

Not rubble shifting.

Not fire crackling.

A whimper.

High-pitched. Childlike. Broken.

What the?—?

I blink hard, rubbing blood from my eyes, crawling over a mound of cracked concrete. The whimper comes again.

I freeze.

It's coming from behind a collapsed column, beneath it, maybe. The eastern vault hallway. The one I wasn't supposed to go near. The one the map didn't show but that's humming under my boots every time I walk this route.

I wedge my shoulder into the gap between two slabs and push. "Hold on," I rasp. "I'm coming. Just hold?—"

Another whimper. Muffled. Weak.

The column won't budge.

Rage flashes behind my eyes. Pure, wild and unfiltered. My chest burns, a strange sensation buzzing low and deep—like something in my blood is waking up .

I slam both palms against the stone.

"MOVE!"

Light explodes.

Not fire. Not heat.

Magic.

A flash of golden light erupts from my skin, from my fingertips—no, from beneath them. The stone vibrates , groans, and then it splinters , shattering outward in pieces

like the compound itself is obeying me.

I stumble back, panting, and just stare at my hands.

They're glowing.

Not like a flashlight. Not like some tech glitch. No.

Something I've seen very little of before. Fae-light.

My blood turns cold and electric all at once.

The shimmer fades fast, but not before I see it: faint markings along the backs of my hands, curling up my forearms like vines etched in fire. Beautiful. Terrifying.

Real.

“What the fuck —” I whisper, heart jackhammering.

And then, the kid.

I dive into the space I just cleared. There's a boy, no older than ten—curled in the corner. His skin is streaked with soot, one leg clearly broken, gashes lining his torso. His breathing is shallow, chest fluttering like a bird too far gone.

I crawl to him, hands shaking. “Hey, hey, you're okay,” I murmur, even though I know that's a lie. “You're gonna be okay, alright? Just stay with me?—”

His eyes flutter open.

Yellow. Not like a sickly yellow. Like wolf eyes.

Shifter.

“Please,” he whispers. “Don’t let them take me back. Let me die if you’re going to return me.”

My breath catches.

He knows. He’s been here. He was caged here.

“Oh gods,” I whisper. “What the hell is this place?”

I look around and realize I’ve never seen this section of the lab before. There looks to be crushed cages everywhere. And the bodies...

He gasps. His whole body starts to spasm, lungs seizing.

“No, no, no—stay with me—shit—don’t you fucking die on me?—”

I press my hands to his chest without thinking, pure instinct.

And that feeling floods me again.

It’s not like anything I’ve ever known.

It’s not like my Order training, or adrenaline, or even survival instinct.

It’s warmth. It’s wildness. It’s like the earth breathes through me and the stars bend down to help.

And the glow returns.

Fae light erupts from my palms, threads of gold and white weaving into his skin, into the wounds, through the breaks.

The air crackles.

The boy gasps.

Suddenly, he breathes.

Even. Calm.

Alive.

I collapse forward, forehead hitting scorched stone.

Everything fades. My muscles give out.

But not before I see him.

Through the settling smoke, half-shadowed in the rubble.

Ice-blue eyes.

A flicker of ash-pale skin.

Elias.

He's not close enough to touch. Just there.

Watching.

I blink and my vision goes black.

All I know is everything just changed.

Forever.

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ELIAS

The smoke's thick enough to drown in.

I shove aside another chunk of broken concrete with a growl, boots slipping on ash-slick floors, scanning the ruins like the gods themselves whispered my name and demanded payment in blood.

The Vault's gone.

Good.

But it doesn't feel like a fucking victory.

Not when I see the bodies.

Supernaturals—shifters, witches, fae-bloods—crushed or burned or already half-dead before the explosion finished the job. My stomach churns as I step over a charred body, the smell of cooked flesh punching me straight in the goddamn gut.

I know that this was a mercy kill. I was here once and I know exactly what was happening in this section of the lab. This was kind in turn to what they were doing to us. But still...

I clench my jaw. Force myself to keep moving.

Because somewhere in this hell, she's here.

Kaia.

And if she's still alive...

I find her in the east corridor, she looks like she dragged herself over to another, her body now free of debris but it's now limp, her thick black hair loose and tangled across her bloodied face.

My chest tightens, something feral clawing up my spine.

I drop to my knees, shoving the rest of the debris off her, ignoring the way my hands shake. And when I finally see her—her skin shimmering faintly, light pulsing under the surface in patterns I recognize like a fucking brand on my soul.

I freeze.

Because there's no mistaking it now.

She's not human.

Not just human.

Golden markings ghost over her arms, faint but there, like vines laced with ancient starlight. Her pulse beats against my fingertips, strong and defiant, and my throat tightens when I realize, she's Fae.

Half-Fae.

The prophecy... shit.

I mutter to myself as I start brushing blood-matted curls from her forehead.

Sirens wail in the distance, Order reinforcements, no doubt scrambling to contain the chaos—and my instincts scream at me to run.

But I can't leave her.

Not like this. Not glowing with untrained magic and half-conscious, ripe for anyone to see and report.

If they catch her like this? She's dead. Or worse.

I swear viciously under my breath and scoop her up into my arms.

She's lighter than she looks. Strong muscles built from years of Order training, but right now, she's just soft, limp weight against my chest. Trusting me without even knowing it.

Fuck, this is a mistake.

I should leave her. I should disappear and let her crawl back to her perfect little Order world and forget about me.

But something deeper than logic grips me by the throat.

I can't.

Not with her blood humming like a livewire against my own.

Not when I've seen what she can become.

Not when she might be the only goddamn chance we have left.

I move fast, ducking through the smoke and shadows, keeping low as guards swarm the edges of the compound like angry ants. Most of them too busy screaming into radios or trying to pull survivors from the wreckage to notice me.

But it's a fucking miracle I make it out with her and the kid.

Yeah, the kid.

The one she saved.

The tiny shifter is tucked into my jacket, barely breathing, eyes wide with shellshock. I managed to dig him out while the smoke was still thick enough to hide me. Found two others too, a witch and a dryad, both battered but alive.

Most?

Most didn't make it.

And I'll carry their fucking screams with me for the rest of my miserable life.

I stash the rescued survivors with a contact I trust, deep in the ruined parts of the city, before hauling ass back to my place.

My safehouse is little more than a collapsed train station half-buried under vines and abandoned graffiti. But it's secluded. Ward-runed to hell and back. And right now, it's the only place where she won't be found.

I kick the door shut behind me and carry Kaia into the back room, laying her gently on the old cot shoved in the corner. She stirs, a soft whimper escaping her lips, and that thing inside me —the part I try to strangle into silence every goddamn day—roars to life.

Protect.

Keep.

Mine.

I shove the thoughts down, gritting my teeth so hard my jaw pops.

Not mine. Not fucking mine.

When she wakes up, she's going to kill me.

Or worse, she'll go back to the Order and hand me over herself.

Still, I sit there, watching her breathe, until the glow under her skin fades and the markings slip away like mist.

When she finally comes to, blinking groggily at the cracked ceiling, I'm already crouched beside her.

Her golden-amber eyes snap to me.

Wide. Confused. Fierce.

"Where the fuck—" she croaks.

I offer her a battered tin cup of water. "Relax. You're safe."

She shoves herself upright, groaning. "Safe? Safe? You kidnapped me!"

I smirk, dry and humorless. "Saved your ass, actually. Could've left you to the

fucking Order. They would've loved the little light show you put on."

She freezes, suspicion flooding her face.

Good.

She should be scared.

"Why am I here?" she demands.

I lean back on my heels, studying her. "Because you'd be dead otherwise. Or worse."

"And you care because...?"

I shrug. "I don't. Not really."

A lie.

A terrible one.

But she lets it slide for now.

"You need training," I say, voice low. "You're leaking power like a cracked dam. Next time it flares like that, they're gonna notice. And you won't just get a slap on the wrist. You'll disappear."

She swallows, hard. Her hand drifts unconsciously over the faint place where the markings once shimmered.

"You're not what you think you are," I add, softer now. "And the Order sure as hell isn't what they told you."

She glares at me, stubborn to the core. "And you think you know better?"

"No." I stand, pacing, restless. "I know better. I've seen what they do to people like you. And trust me, sweetheart—you don't want to end up on one of their goddamn tables. Have you really never been to that part of the lab?"

Her fists clench in the threadbare blanket. "You don't even know me."

"Maybe not," I say. "But I know enough."

I meet her gaze, hard and unflinching.

"I'm giving you a choice. Stay. Train. Live. Learn what they tried to bury and why they're keeping it from you, someone who works for them. Or go back. Back to the Order. Back to lies."

She hesitates.

Just for a breath.

But it's enough.

"Why me?" she whispers.

I hesitate. The truth burns my tongue.

Because of the prophecy. Because you're the key to everything. Because without you, the world might not fucking survive apparently.

But I just say, "Because you deserve the truth."

Silence stretches between us.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

KAIA

I haven't seen the sun in a week.

Elias keeps the place dim on purpose, says too much light fucks with the wards—but I think he just likes the shadows. Fits him. Broody bastard.

At first, when I stumbled across him in the ruins, there'd been this pull between us—something low and wild, whispering at the edges of my sanity. I told myself it was just adrenaline, or magic, or hell, even trauma. Something explainable. Something I could bury.

But after a week of being stuck in this half-collapsed safehouse with him, training until I'm dripping sweat and raw nerve endings, that stupid pull hasn't gone away. If anything, it's gotten worse. Sharper. Hotter.

I twist the dagger he gave me between my fingers, the blade catching the faint lantern glow. My whole body hums like a livewire, energy thrumming under my skin in a way that's not normal, not right.

I'm not human. Not fully.

And I sure as hell can't go back.

I don't even know if there's a back to go to.

Maybe they think I'm dead. Maybe my father's planning a fucking manhunt. Maybe

Mira is sitting in her quarters, sipping whiskey and lying to herself that her daughter didn't just light up like a goddamn supernova.

Hell, maybe no one saw.

Either way, it doesn't matter.

If they see what I am now... I'm done.

Burned. Bagged. Buried.

And the fucked-up part?

I'm relieved.

I flex my fingers, feeling the energy crackle at the edges, barely held in check. It's like something inside me is waking up, something ancient and hungry and wild. It's terrifying. It's thrilling. It's... intoxicating.

We've been training every day since I've been here, trying to control my emotions and this power inside of me, and it's getting me nowhere besides being more irritated with more questions. Elias pushes me hard. He doesn't let me whine or fall apart or think myself into paralysis.

And it drives me absolutely insane.

He's so damn smug about it, too. Standing there with that infuriating calm, like he's seen this shit a thousand times before, like nothing rattles him.

And every time he shoves me to do better, every time he levels those glacier eyes at me and dares me to lose control, it scrapes against something raw inside my chest.

I hate that I notice the way his mouth twitches when I curse at him.

I hate that I notice the way the veins pop on his forearms when he spars.

I hate that when I fall into exhausted, restless sleep at night, it's his face that haunts my dreams.

Not bloody.

Not broken.

But close.

Too close.

Mouths brushing. Hands sliding. Bodies pressed tight enough to burn.

I don't know him. Not really.

But something deep inside me howls for him anyway.

And that scares me more than my magic ever could.

"Focus, Kaia," Elias says from across the room, voice low and rough like gravel.

He leans against the cracked wall, arms crossed over his chest, his long black hair falling loose around his shoulders.

His ice-blue eyes pin me in place, sharp as blades.

The bastard always looks like he stepped out of some ancient nightmare—lethal, half-

feral, carved from storm clouds and blood.

"You're leaking magic again," he adds.

"No shit," I mutter, trying to breathe through it. Trying to breathe through him.

"You're thinking too much."

"Gee, thanks for the fucking wisdom, Obi-Wan," I snap, even though my pulse skitters wildly under my skin just from the way he's looking at me.

His mouth twitches, almost a smile, almost—but he pushes off the wall and stalks toward me, that predatory grace making my heart stumble in my chest like it forgot how to work.

I back up a step without meaning to, and his eyes flash molten for half a second, like he likes that I flinch. Like he wants me on edge.

"I mean it," he says, voice dropping lower, rougher. It strokes along my spine like the whisper of claws. "You can't just think your way through this. You have to feel it. Control it."

"Control it?" I snort, desperate to keep the conversation anchored somewhere safe, anywhere but the heat curling in my gut. "It's like trying to leash a damn hurricane."

He stops a few feet in front of me, hands loose at his sides, close enough that I can smell the leather and smoke on his skin. Close enough that the air seems to shudder between us.

"Then be the fucking hurricane," he murmurs.

The world narrows down to this single heartbeat—me and him and the thrum of power between us, thick and electric and inevitable.

And I don't know what snaps in me, frustration, fear, something hotter and more dangerous—but I lunge.

The dagger flies from my hand without me even thinking, propelled by a surge of raw power that cracks the air like lightning.

Elias moves fast, but not fast enough.

The blade stops an inch from his throat, frozen midair by some invisible force— my force—and the pressure in the room spikes, heavy and charged.

We stare at each other across the trembling space, breathing hard, the air between us practically vibrating.

He looks at me like I just stripped naked and bared my soul, like he can see every broken, desperate part of me. And for once, he doesn't flinch.

"You're stronger than you think," he says quietly.

The words hit something deep in my chest, a place I didn't even know was empty until now.

And then the tension snaps.

Not slow. Not careful.

It explodes.

One second we're standing there, locked in some kind of electric standoff, and the next, I'm crashing into him, fists grabbing his jacket, mouth finding his with a rough, angry kind of hunger.

He growls low in his throat, fuck, that sound—and then he's kissing me back, just as desperate, just as reckless, his hands fisting in my hair, pulling me closer until there's no space left between us.

It's not sweet.

It's not gentle.

It's fire and fury and all the fucked-up emotions we've both been choking on for days—loneliness, rage, fear—igniting at once.

When he lifts me, I gasp into his mouth, legs wrapping around his hips without thinking. He pins me against the wall, his body solid and hot against mine, and I feel alive for the first time in what feels like forever.

"Kaia," he breathes against my lips, like he's trying to stop, trying to be good.

But I don't want him to be good.

I want him real.

I want this.

"Don't you dare fucking stop," I whisper back.

I'm tired of trying to control everything and right now, I need to let loose. With him. Because nothing makes sense, so why should this?

His control shatters.

He kisses me harder, like he's trying to brand me, claim me, and gods, I kiss him right back because I'm just as fucked, just as desperate.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a tiny voice screams that this is wrong—that we barely know each other, that he's dangerous, that I'm broken—but I crush it under the heel of my boot.

Because in this moment, with his hands on my hips and his mouth on my throat, I feel more me than I ever have before.

I feel free.

KAIA

His teeth scrape my lower lip, sharp enough to sting. I bite back harder, tasting iron. The growl that rips from his chest vibrates through my bones.

"Still think you're in control?" My fingers tore at his leather jacket, seams splitting under the strain of whatever new strength pulses through my veins. The garment hits the floor with a wet slap—raining season had left everything in this ruin damp except the heat between us.

Elias's hands find my hips, thumbs digging into the divots above my jeans. "You started this." His pupils swallowed the blue of his irises whole, twin eclipses burning through the dim.

"Finish it then." I yank his shirt collar until fabric shreds. Pale scars crisscross his chest, old silver wounds, poorly healed. My nails catch on one as I shoved him backward. He stumbles into the kitchen's rusted sink, pipes groaning in protest.

The cold edge of the counter bites into my spine as he lifts me onto it.

Cans of preserved peaches rattled to the floor.

His mouth crashes against mine again, all desperation and cracked restraint.

I hook a leg around his waist, pulling him flush against me.

The hard line of him through his pants draws a ragged sound from my throat I don't

recognize as my own.

"Kaia." My name sounds like a warning between his teeth.

"Don't." I fumble with his belt, fingers trembling not from fear but the raw current under my skin. "Don't you dare stop being a bastard now."

Leather hits linoleum. His hands still mine when I reach for his waistband. For one heart-stopping moment, I thought he'd pull away—play the noble monster. Then his claws slide out, just enough to slice through my tank top. Cool air kisses my stomach.

"Better." I arch into him, all defiance and frayed nerves. His palm slides up my ribcage, calluses catching on sensitive skin. When his thumb brushes the underside of my breast, the world tilts.

He freezes. "You're shaking."

"From wanting to strangle you." I drag his mouth back to mine, swallowing his dark chuckle. My back hits the counter as he leans over me, fangs nipping at my jawline. Distantly, something shatters—a jar? A plate? The sound barely registers over the blood roaring in my ears.

His fingers dip below my waistband. "This what you want?" A challenge, not a question.

I grab his wrist, pushing his hand lower. "What do you think?"

The first touch drew a gasp I refuse to let him hear. I bite his shoulder instead, salt and smoke flooding my tongue. He hisses, the vibration of it traveling straight to my core.

"Fuck patience," I breathe against his collarbone.

His claws prick my thigh. "Begging suits you."

"Go to hell."

"Already there." He presses an open-mouthed kiss to my pulse point. "You feel that?"

I do, the tremble in his arms, the way his breath hitches when I scrape nails down his back. The great Elias Vorn, coming undone. My victory tastes sweeter than any magic.

"Now," I demand, nails digging crescent moons into his shoulders. "Unless you're?—"

He surges into me with a snarl that shakes the cabinets, a sound caught between wolf and something older, the kind of noise that makes the copper pans above us shiver like wind chimes.

The world fractures into sensation—the stretch bordering on pain, the burn of friction igniting sparks behind my eyelids, the unbearable rightness of it like a spell finally snapping into place.

My head cracks against the cabinet behind me, glassware singing a high, sharp chorus against wood.

He growls against my throat, all teeth and velvet threat. His fangs graze the same patch of skin where his training left a bruise last night—a twin claim.

I choke on a laugh that becomes a moan, the sound swallowed by the slick slide of his hips.

Every thrust scatters thoughts like gunshots— no Order, no lies —just this primal rhythm pounding louder than my heartbeat.

The wild thing in my chest snarls back at him, all claws and Fae-starved hunger I still don't have a name for.

His fingers tangle in my hair, tilting my head back until I'm staring at the water-stained ceiling, until the ache in my scalp blurs with the delicious sting of his grip. Silver rings dig into my skin—cold metal against the fever-heat of him. I arch, reveling in the contradiction.

"Look at me."

I force my eyes open. Gold eclipses the blue entirely now, his true self laid bare.

His hips jerk forward and I lock my legs behind him, forcing every inch until there's nowhere left to go but hell. My grip on his shoulders tightens.

"Faster." The word rips from me like a dare.

Elias's laugh is all fang. "That's not how this works." He drags out, slow, excruciating, until the stretch burns. "You want punishment?" His breath scalds my ear. "Beg prettier."

"Rot ." The curse tears from me like a storm wind cankering peach blossoms—too sweet for what hunts in my marrow.

I buck against him, teeth sinking into his lower lip hard enough to taste my own ruin.

He snarls, slamming me back against the counter's edge hard enough to rattle ceramic jars of wolfsbane behind us.

The sudden fullness punches a choked gasp from my throat, all lightning and gravel.

“There it is.” His thumb drags over my bottom lip, smearing vampiric blood that glitters faintly against my skin.

Gold drowns his irises completely now—werewolf hunger fracturing through vampire ice, a collision of primal legacies I feel in the scrape of his fangs against my jugular.

“That delicious desperation you keep choking down.”

I choke on a moan as he shifts angles, fire licking up my nerves. My nails carve crescents into his shoulders, drawing twin beads of black-blooded pearl. Wait. Wait. Damn you, not yet.

His claws dig into my hips, pain flaying through pleasure’s syrup. “Let go.”

The counter bites into my spine. My pulse races where his throat meets my teeth. “Make me.”

He does.

The climax cracks through me like glass shattering, brutal and blinding. My nails gouge his back as I arch, a broken noise tearing loose. Elias’s forehead crashes against mine, his own release shuddering through us both. The sink faucet drips three times before I remember how lungs work.

His claws retract first. Cool air rushes between us as he steps back, leather sliding up his hips in one practiced motion. I scramble off the counter, yanking my shredded tank top into place. My hands won’t stop trembling.

He watches me dress, expression unreadable. "Regret's a bad color on you."

"Shut up." I snatch my jacket from the floor. Peach syrup from shattered cans smears the fabric.

"You said yes ," he reminds me as he pulls on his own pants.

"To the punishment, not the commentary." I jam my arms into the sleeves. The linoleum creaks as he steps closer.

He stills. "Running won't file this under 'mistake'."

"Watch me."

The door splinters when I shove through it, unable to deal with what I had just done. Rain soaks through my clothes in seconds, but I don't slow. Stupid. Reckless. Order-trained discipline dissolved in five minutes flat. My boots skid on wet concrete as I round the corner, alley walls closing in.

I break into a sprint.

What did I just do?

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

ELIAS

I lean against the battered counter, jaw tight enough to crack.

The lantern overhead swings slightly, casting long, stuttering shadows across the wreck of the safehouse kitchen. My blood still runs too hot under my skin, my muscles coiled tight like I'm ready for a fight—or something worse.

Fucking hell.

What did we just do?

I drag a hand through my hair, yanking it back from my face. My palms smell like her. My mouth still tastes like her. I could still feel Kaia's nails digging into my back, her body pressed against mine, desperate, furious, alive, and then she bolted.

Just... took off like the place was on fire and she was the last goddamn evac.

I clench my teeth so hard my head throbs.

Good.

She should've run.

Hell, I should've run.

One week. That's all it took for her to slip under my skin, for her to wedge herself

into all the places inside me I've spent years trying to board up and bury.

And now?

Now, after tonight, after touching her, tasting her, feeling that reckless, impossible connection between us snap taut and real .

I know I'm fucked.

Before, it was just a pull. A vague itch under my skin, a wrongness when she wasn't nearby, a restless energy that made me pace the perimeter like a caged beast.

But now?

Now I want her.

All of her.

Not just alive, not just safe.

Mine.

I hate that word.

Despise it.

Chains and collars and broken promises. That's all mine ever meant to me growing up.

That's what my mother taught me, love is weakness. Attachment is a liability. People are a sharp blade aimed straight at your throat.

But Kaia?

She doesn't feel like a liability.

She feels like war.

Like something I'd burn down the whole godsdamned world to protect.

I slam my palm against the counter hard enough to make the rusted utensils jump.

"Get a fucking grip," I mutter to the empty room.

She's smart.

Trained by the Order.

She knows how to stay low, how to avoid patrols, how to vanish when she needs to. She's not a kid. Not a victim. She made her choice when she stayed to train and then chose to leave.

But she'll come back.

She has to.

I grit my teeth, grinding the instinct to tear out after her into dust. If I chase her now, if I act like the half-wild thing clawing inside me, I'll only push her farther away.

Better to wait.

Better to let her come to me.

Meanwhile... I've still got work to do.

I yank on my jacket and grab the cracked satchel hidden under the loose floorboard in the next room. Inside are old codes, glyph maps, forged keys—everything I need to get inside the Order's classified archives.

I need to find out what they are really planning. Why they are lying to Kaia and probably many more that are their 'trusted' soldiers. All I know is it has to be big of the golden girt of The Order doesn't even know anything about it.

I move like a shadow through the old tunnels beneath the city, past broken catacombs and abandoned safehouses. The night clings to me, the way it always does. Familiar. Comforting.

When I finally reach the edge of the Order's restricted district, I pause in the lee of a crumbling statue, scenting the air. Guards are thin tonight. Probably still licking their wounds after the compound explosion. Good. Easier for me.

I slide through the wards, using the old bloodmarks Velara taught me before I was even tall enough to meet her eye.

Once inside the sub-levels, the stench of old magic and older blood slaps me in the face.

The archives aren't much, a few rows of ancient file cabinets, dusty shelves stacked with scrolls and datachips—but I know better than to underestimate this place. Most of the Order's true atrocities? They don't live in the computer systems. They live down here, buried in secrets and rot.

I start digging.

An hour later, my hands are coated in grime, my eyes burning from the shitty lowlight spells flickering overhead, when I find it.

Tucked behind a false panel, warded so tight it nearly sears the skin off my fingertips when I pry it open.

A ledger. Handwritten.

Old-school. Untouchable by tech hacks or spell forgeries.

The cover reads:

Project: Bloodbound

My gut goes cold.

I flip it open, scanning the first few pages, and the pieces start snapping together so fast my head spins.

Subject T-001: Tarek Vorn.

Blood extraction: confirmed. Hybrid serum trials: phase three in progress.

I freeze, breath locking in my lungs.

Tarek.

My father.

He's alive. Or was.

And they're using him.

Not just for torture.

Not just for leverage.

They're bleeding him dry. Siphoning his blood, splicing his power, building a binding serum from his genes designed to shackle hybrids into obedience.

And who signed off on the project?

Who approved the trials?

Who ordered the funding?

Jareth Draven.

Kaia's fucking father.

My fingers crush the paper in my fist, a low growl rumbling up from deep in my chest.

Of course.

Of fucking course.

All this time, the Order's been pretending to "protect" humanity, while plotting to enslave every hybrid they couldn't exterminate. Using us. Hollowing us out. Turning us into good little pets for their fucking empire.

And Kaia...she doesn't know.

She can't know.

The look in her eyes when she fights, when she questions, she's not built for this kind of betrayal. Not yet.

But she's going to find out.

And when she does...

There's no way she'll stay loyal to them.

She's already halfway gone. Already unraveling the noose they tied around her neck before she could even walk.

I press the ledger against my chest, closing my eyes for one hard, broken moment.

Kaia deserves the truth.

And god damn, when she comes back, when she finally trusts me enough to listen, I'm going to burn the whole world down for her.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

KAIA

The night cuts cold against my skin as I move, my boots scraping the crumbling concrete with every step.

I don't know what the hell I'm doing.

No, that's a lie.

I know exactly what the hell I'm doing.

I'm going back to him.

Back to the one person who makes me feel like I'm losing my mind and finding it all at once.

I curse under my breath, yanking my jacket tighter around me. The leather feels too thin. Everything feels too thin. Like the whole world's paper over glass, one wrong move from shattering.

I can still feel him.

His hands. His mouth. His goddamn presence branded into my skin like wildfire.

And Gods help me, I want it. I want him.

Even though I shouldn't.

Even though I barely know him.

I spent a week snapping and snarling at him, fighting the pull like a damn fool. Dreaming about him in ways that made my cheeks burn and my fists clench. Wanting more when all I was supposed to want was distance.

And then, I gave in.

No control. No thinking. Just instinct and heat and this desperate, aching need that had been building between us like a thunderstorm.

And what did I do after?

I ran.

Like a damn coward.

“Pathetic,” I mutter, kicking a loose stone down the alleyway.

But I can’t go back to the Order. Not now. Not after what I saw in the rubble. Not after that hidden lab—the screams, the cages, the truth I hadn’t even realized was rotting under my feet this whole time.

And Elias, he knew.

He said he knew more. He said there were things I needed to understand. And for once, I’m not content to just nod and follow orders like a good little soldier.

I need to know.

I find the safehouse by feel more than sight, slipping past the old wards he laid like a

second skin around the place. The door creaks when I push it open, the scent of old smoke and blood and something achingly familiar wrapping around me.

He's here.

I can feel him.

I find him in the back room, crouched over a spread of old maps and ledgers lit by a single grimy lamp. His black hair falls in a messy curtain around his face, and his jaw is locked tight.

Elias looks up the second I cross the threshold, and for a moment, we just... stare.

The air between us snaps taut, electric. Memories of skin and teeth and whispered curses flaring hot and sharp between us.

"You ran," he says, voice low and rough.

"Yeah," I bite out. "I did."

Silence stretches. He doesn't move. Doesn't blink.

I shove my hands into my pockets, heart hammering against my ribs like a trapped thing.

"I'm not here to... pick up where we left off," I say, even though every nerve in my body is screaming for the opposite. "I'm here because you said you knew things. About me. About them. About the lab."

His expression darkens.

"I need to know," I say, stepping closer, voice shaking but steady. "No more cryptic bullshit. No more half-truths. And no more training until I do. Tell me, Elias."

He leans back slowly, studying me like he's deciding whether to trust me with a loaded gun.

"You're not gonna like it," he mutters.

"Too late for that," I snap.

Another beat of tension.

Then he sighs, long and broken, and reaches under the table. He pulls out a battered leather folder, the edges frayed and stained.

"This," he says, tossing it onto the table, "is your father's legacy."

I stare down at the folder like it's a coiled snake. My stomach twists, bile rising in my throat.

With shaking hands, I open it.

Schematics. Bloodwork. Names. Trials.

Project: Bloodbound.

My blood turns to ice.

Tarek Vorn—subject T-001.

Hybrid conditioning. Serum manipulation. Binding.

My father.

The man who taught me to fear monsters, to kill anything that wasn't pure-blood human.

He's been trying to enslave them. Not just enslave them, but be able to use them as science projects to weaponize their powers. Enslave people like Elias.

No.

Not just like Elias.

People like me.

The world tilts.

"You're lying," I rasp.

Elias doesn't flinch. "I wish I was."

I squeeze my eyes shut, clutching the folder so tight it creaks.

"I didn't know," I whisper. "I didn't know any of this."

"I know," he says. "That's why you're still breathing."

The accusation stings, even if it's deserved.

I force myself to meet his gaze. His cold blue eyes are hard, but there's something else underneath. Something broken.

"I'm not them," I say fiercely.

"I know," he says again, softer this time.

"You were there? They did things like this to you?" I ask before I can stop myself. I knew my father had turned cold after my uncle died, but this?

Before he can answer, the windows explode inward.

I hit the ground instinctively, ears ringing, vision full of smoke and glass. Elias moves like a phantom, yanking me behind the overturned table as shadows pour through the breach.

Black armor. Crimson insignias.

Gideon's Torch.

Elite Order hunters.

Fucking legends.

And they're here for him.

"Where you followed?" he snaps in a harsh whisper.

"No! You think I'm that stupid? What about your wards?"

"Obviously, they're compromised," he hisses back.

"Elias Vorn!" a voice booms through the wreckage. "By the authority of the Order, you are hereby sentenced to death! We know what you are and we know what you

did!”

Elias bares his teeth in a snarl, eyes flashing molten gold.

"Well," he mutters, flexing his hands as his claws slide free, "looks like they finally sent the welcome wagon."

I scramble to my feet, grabbing the dagger at my belt.

"I'm not letting them take you," I snap.

He flashes me a feral grin, blood and fury written across every sharp angle of his face.

"Good," he says. "Because I'm not fucking going anywhere."

The first soldier charges.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

ELIAS

Blood sprays across the broken floorboards as my claws tear through another one of Gideon's bastards.

But there's too many. Too fucking many.

Every time I think we've thinned them out, more shadows move through the smoke—black armor, red insignias flashing like a goddamn death warrant.

I pivot, tearing through one with a brutal swipe, the scent of burnt steel and charred magic filling my nose. Pain flares along my ribs, but I shove it down, focusing on the rhythm, strike, dodge, kill.

Kaia's somewhere behind me.

Alive and fighting.

Every instinct in me howls to keep her there.

I crush another soldier against the wall, bones snapping under my hand, and whirl to look for her and that's when it happens.

A searing pain slices through my side.

Deep, hot.

I stagger, snarling, grabbing the wound. Blood pours between my fingers, thick and dark, and for one fractured second the whole room tilts.

“Fuck,” I hiss, vision swimming.

The bastard who got me grins under his helmet, raising a blade wreathed in silver-fire. Poisoned. Meant to kill my kind slow and ugly.

I brace for it, but Kaia’s there.

A blur of dark hair, golden-amber eyes, and pure goddamn fury.

She slams into the soldier with a snarl, knocking him back. The force isn’t human— isn’t even close. Her hands flare gold, raw magic crackling along her skin like a second layer, bright enough to blind.

She doesn’t hesitate.

Doesn’t falter.

She chooses me.

"Move, Elias!" she shouts, voice raw.

But I can’t, not fast enough. Blood loss hits me like a brick wall.

Kaia swears and grabs me under the arm, hauling my heavy-ass frame against her. I can feel her trembling with effort, but she doesn’t let go.

Not once.

Through the haze, I catch flashes—the chaos of battle, the dead around us, the scorch marks painting the walls. The Order's elite falling like fucking dominos because one girl decided she wasn't playing their game anymore.

She half-drags, half-carries me through the breach, down into the service tunnels below the safehouse. Dark, damp, reeking of mildew and rot. I stumble and curse, nearly blacking out, but Kaia tightens her grip.

"Not yet," she mutters, voice breaking. "You don't get to fucking die on me."

We crash into a hollowed-out corridor, the ruins of an old stronghold The Order abandoned years ago after a raid gone sideways. I barely remember how she'd know this place existed—but right now I'm too busy trying not to choke on my own blood to care.

Kaia shoves me into a corner, drops to her knees, and presses trembling hands against the wound.

"Hold still," she says through gritted teeth.

"Not... going anywhere," I rasp, trying to laugh. It comes out a weak, wet sound.

Suddenly, that feeling again.

The same raw energy I saw in the lab.

The same golden light.

It pours from her palms, lighting up the entire damn tunnel. Her markings surface—faint glowing veins of gold up her neck, down her arms, shimmering across her face like some ancient warpaint.

It's... beautiful.

Terrifying. Holy fucking gods.

I shudder, head falling back against the stone wall, fighting to stay conscious just to keep looking at her.

She's gritting her teeth, sweat slick on her brow, trying to pour everything she has into healing me. But she's new at this. Untrained. Half her power leaks wild around her, making the air hum, making the ground beneath us breathe .

And it fucking hurts.

I snarl as the magic lances through my wound, burning and stitching and reshaping muscle in ways nature never intended. I dig my nails into the dirt, riding out the pain, trusting her in a way I've never trusted anyone.

Kaia's voice breaks as she whispers, "Come on, come on, don't you dare fucking die?—"

And just like that, the worst of it passes.

I can breathe. I can feel again.

The glow around her fades, sputters, and she slumps forward, catching herself with both hands on my chest, panting hard.

We stay like that for a long second.

Just breathing.

Just existing.

Her forehead presses against my collarbone. Her hair smells like smoke and salt and something purely her .

I lift a shaking hand and tangle it in her hair, pulling her a little closer, like maybe I can anchor both of us before we drown.

"You're a fucking idiot," I mutter.

She lets out a breathless, shaky laugh against my skin. "Takes one to know one, asshole."

I huff, the corners of my mouth twitching.

Silence thickens between us, heavy with everything we're too broken to say.

I shift, grimacing as the movement tugs at my half-healed side. "You saved my ass."

"Damn right I did," she says fiercely, pulling back just enough to meet my eyes.

Her golden-amber gaze sears through me, all fire and defiance and fearlessness.

Gods, she's stunning.

Wild.

Untamed.

I clear my throat roughly. "You didn't have to."

"I know," she says. "But I wanted to."

Something unspoken passes between us, crackling and raw.

I tighten my grip in her hair, my other hand sliding up her waist, feeling the tremble under her skin. She doesn't pull away. Doesn't flinch.

If anything, she leans in.

The last shreds of restraint I had snap like old rope.

I tug her mouth to mine in a kiss that's brutal and desperate and real —a promise and a curse all wrapped into one breathless heartbeat.

She kisses me back like she's been waiting for it. Like she's been burning for it. Her hands fist in my shirt, pulling me closer, grounding me when everything else threatens to fall apart.

We're a goddamn mess.

Blood. Dirt. Magic. Pain.

But it doesn't matter.

We're still here.

Still fighting.

And for the first time since this whole fucking nightmare started, I believe we might actually have a chance.

KAIA

My breathing's still ragged when we finally break apart.

Elias leans against the cold stone wall, dragging a hand through his long black hair, the muscles in his arm flexing with the motion. His eyes catch the low, flickering light, turning them sharp, dangerous.

It takes me a second to realize my hands are still fisted in his torn shirt, and when I step back, it feels like I'm tearing something out of myself.

Gods, what the hell is happening to me?

I set my jaw and pull my shoulders back, trying to stitch myself back together. "I need to tell you something."

Elias straightens, like he already knows it's not gonna be something small. He studies me, like always—with that unreadable expression that makes my chest tight.

"Go ahead," he says, voice rough, almost too steady.

I lick my lips, nerves skittering under my skin. I'm not scared of him. I'm scared of the truth that's been rotting inside me since the moment I found it.

"I found a journal," I say, voice cracking halfway through. "In my parents' quarters."

Elias's gaze sharpens instantly. "What kind of journal?"

“My grandmother’s.” My throat feels dry as hell. I wrap my arms around myself like that’ll hold me together. “My mother’s mother. She was... she was Fae.”

I force the words out, ugly and raw.

“She wrote everything down. About the exile. About how she had my mom. About how my mom hid it—hid me —because of the Order’s fucking purity mandates. Because she knew if they even suspected...”

I trail off, swallowing hard. The silence around us feels loaded, like the stones themselves are holding their breath.

“I mean, I assumed once specific things started happening, but I wasn’t sure. Maybe I didn’t want to believe in it. And I just... I haven’t seen a lot of Fae in my life—”

Elias doesn’t speak right away. His stare is heavy, weighted with something that feels too big, too dangerous for words.

He says, voice low, “I knew.”

I blink, heat rising in my chest. “You knew ?”

He pushes off the wall, stepping closer. "The second you lit up like that in the lab? Yeah. Only Fae magic resonates like that. And your aura... it’s got the old blood woven into it. Ancient. Untouched."

I shove him lightly, frustration boiling under my skin. “And you didn’t think to fucking tell me exactly what I was?”

His hand catches my wrist, his grip firm but not punishing. His eyes lock onto mine, and for a second, I see past the hard, brooding mask he always wears.

“I was waiting for you to be ready to hear it, Kaia. You’ve had your whole goddamn world ripped apart in days. I wasn’t gonna add to that unless you asked.”

I yank my wrist free, stepping back, even though part of me aches from the loss of contact. “Well, I’m asking now.”

His shoulders tense. “Good. ‘Cause you need to know—suppressing a Fae’s nature? It’s dangerous. That power inside you? It’s alive. It’s meant to grow. Suppressing it doesn’t just keep you weak—it makes you volatile. Like putting a wildfire in a glass jar and hoping it never cracks.”

The image hits too close to home. My stomach twists painfully.

“And your mom...” Elias’s voice softens, surprising the hell out of me. “She did the only thing she could. By burying herself in the Order, by burying you in it, she gave you the only cover that would’ve worked.”

I stare at him, something clawing its way up my throat. “They made me one of them.”

“They made you their weapon,” he corrects, voice sharp. “But they didn’t break you.”

I don't know whether to laugh or cry.

I rub a hand over my face, feeling the exhaustion seeping into my bones. “I was so fucking naive, Elias. I believed in them. I worshipped them. I thought... hell, I thought I was protecting something that mattered.”

“You were,” he says. “You just didn’t know who you were protecting.”

I lower my hand, meeting his gaze again. His face is open now, more honest than I’ve ever seen it. And it does something dangerous to the hollow space in my chest.

“Maybe that’s why I found you,” I whisper, half to myself.

His mouth twitches, half grimace, half something that might almost be a smile if it wasn’t so damn sad.

"Maybe," he murmurs.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself. “There's something else.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You’re full of surprises tonight.”

“Yeah, well, brace yourself for another one,” I mutter. “We need to find your father.”

Elias’s whole body goes still.

Tension rolls off him like a goddamn wave. His hands flex at his sides, claws threatening to break through.

“That’s not your fight, Kaia.”

“The hell it isn’t.”

I step closer, poking a finger into his chest, ignoring how solid and warm he feels under my touch.

“You think I’m just gonna sit here, knowing what they’re doing?”

Knowing that part of the reason you are who you are is because they stole him from you?

I read the file you gave me and saw the dates. I know he was taken from you.”

His jaw tightens. His eyes flash molten gold for half a heartbeat.

“He’s my responsibility,” Elias growls.

“He’s our responsibility,” I snap back. “You’re not doing this alone, Elias. Not anymore.”

The words hang between us, electric.

Something shifts in his expression, something almost vulnerable. He looks like he wants to argue, like he needs to push me away, but can’t.

Because we’re past that now.

He exhales slowly, like dragging the air out of his lungs hurts. “You’re gonna get yourself killed.”

"Maybe," I say, a crooked smile tugging at my lips. "But at least it'll be my choice."

A heavy silence falls again, not angry this time, but full . Weighted with understanding. With the start of something neither of us can walk away from anymore.

He reaches out, almost hesitant, and brushes his knuckles along my jawline, sending a shiver skittering down my spine.

“You’re dangerous,” he murmurs, like it’s the best and worst thing all at once.

I grin, wicked and tired and entirely me .

His mouth twitches again. Not quite a smile, but it’s closer than I’ve ever seen it.

“We leave at dawn,” he says quietly.

I nod, heart pounding.

Tomorrow, we hunt for the truth, we start breaking the chains.

Together.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

ELIAS

The night stretches thin, heavy with the kind of tension you can taste on the back of your tongue.

Kaia's sitting across from me on the beat-up couch that wasn't too scorched from the explosion, her dark curls falling in messy waves around her face, her amber eyes locked onto mine like a goddamn vice.

She's got a file clutched in her hands, thick enough to be dangerous if she decided to hurl it at my head—which, knowing her, isn't off the table.

She hasn't said a word since barging back into the safehouse an hour ago, dirt smudged across her cheek, sweat plastering her shirt to her skin.

I smelled trouble before she even stepped through the wards.

But seeing her—seeing her alive and fire-eyed and furious—yeah, it makes my chest ache in ways I don't know how to fucking fix.

"You gonna tell me why you smell like blood and bad decisions, or do I have to guess?" I finally break the silence, voice low and sharp.

Kaia tosses the file onto the table between us. It lands with a heavy thud.

"I went back," she says, and there's no apology in her tone. Just that stubborn fucking edge that both drives me insane and makes me wanna tear the world apart for her.

I arch a brow. "Back where?"

"Compound." She leans forward, elbows on her knees, hands laced together so tight her knuckles turn white. "I needed to know more. About your father. About the shit they've been hiding."

A muscle in my jaw ticks.

"When?"

"While you made sure the coast was clear to come back here. When I said I'd grab some things for us."

"You could've gotten yourself killed."

"I can take care of myself."

"That's not the damn point, Kaia." I push up from the couch, pacing the narrow space between us because standing still feels like an impossible task when she looks at me like that—like she's daring me to tell her she's wrong.

"You wanna tear the Order down, Elias? Good. Me too," she snaps. "But you don't get to decide how much I'm allowed to know. If I'm gonna keep standing with you, fighting for this, I need the whole truth."

Her voice cracks a little on that last part, and something in my chest fucking breaks.

I stop pacing. Stare at her. Really stare.

She's not just doing this out of stubbornness or rebellion.

She's doing it because she trusts me. Because she's choosing to tie her fate to mine, even when every instinct she's ever had probably screams at her to run.

Godsdamn her.

I sit back down, closer this time. Close enough to see the faint shimmer in her eyes that she'd die before letting me call tears.

"You want the truth?" I rasp. "Fine. You'll get it."

She doesn't move. Doesn't flinch.

So I start talking.

"My father's name is Tarek Vorn," I say, the words tasting like rust and old grief. "Alpha of the Red Ash Pack. Strongest shifter in five generations. Stubborn as hell. Smarter than most of the Council combined. And completely fucking doomed the second he fell in love with my mother."

Kaia leans in slightly, listening like the world outside us has stopped spinning.

"My mother, Velara... she's Crimson Court royalty. Vampiric bloodline older than some kingdoms. They said it was a disgrace when she chose a wolf. Said she betrayed her lineage, weakened her blood. They hunted them. Both sides. Vampires and shifters alike."

I drag a hand through my hair, memories clawing at me from every angle.

"When I was five, they caught him," I say. "Order operatives. Black-bagged him right out of our safehouse. They told my mother he was dead. I thought he was dead."

Kaia's hand twitches on her thigh, but she doesn't interrupt.

"It wasn't until I was older that whispers started surfacing. Rumors. About a prison. A place they kept 'unstable assets.' Supernaturals too dangerous to kill outright, too useful to waste. Experimental material, they called them."

Her face twists in horror, and fuck, I hate putting that look on her. But she asked for the truth, and I'm done sugarcoating the ugliness we're wading through.

"I spent years searching for proof," I mutter. "Found pieces. Never enough. Never close enough."

Kaia swallows hard, voice rough when she speaks. "You think he's still alive?"

"I know he is." I meet her gaze, letting her see the bare, bleeding thing inside me. "Because if they killed him, they wouldn't still need his blood."

The weight of those words settles like a stone between us.

"Your father..." She hesitates. "My da— Jareth. He's leading the serum project, isn't he?"

I nod once, curt and brutal. "Using my father's blood to make new weapons. Hybrids they can control."

Kaia flinches like I struck her. She presses her palms into her thighs like she's trying to ground herself.

"I'm sorry," she says, so softly I almost miss it.

And gods, that undoes me more than any apology ever could.

I shake my head. "Not your fault, Kaia. None of this shit is."

She finally nudges the file across the table toward me.

"Look," she says, voice still unsteady. "I found current records. Your father... he wasn't in the lab when the explosion happened. He's alive. They moved him. Here."

She taps a map tucked into the file. I lean over it, studying the coordinates. Recognition slams into me like a goddamn freight train.

"The Graymoor Wastes," I whisper. "No man's land. Even the Order doesn't patrol there much anymore. Too many old wards. Too much residual magic from the old wars."

Kaia's eyes spark with a fierce, reckless light.

"Then that's where we're going," she says.

"Kaia—"

"No." She cuts me off, standing now, full of fire and defiance. "I'm not asking, Elias. You said it yourself—we're doing this together. "

I stand too, close enough that our bodies almost brush.

She lifts her chin stubbornly, daring me to argue.

And gods help me, I love her for it.

"Together," I rasp.

For a heartbeat, neither of us moves. The pull between us hums like a live wire, electric and inevitable.

Then I reach out, threading my fingers through hers, grounding us both.

Her fingers tighten around mine.

Tomorrow, we walk into hell.

Tonight, we remember why we have something worth saving.

ELIAS

The floorboards dig into my spine. Papers rustle as Kaia shifts beside me, her leg brushing mine where we lie sprawled between empty coffee mugs and maps marked with tomorrow's suicide route to Graymoor. Her curls fan across a blueprint of the prison facility, black ink swallowing blacker strands.

"You're vibrating." Her fingertip taps my clavicle—three sharp bursts. "Like a pissed-off hornet's nest."

"Shifter metabolism," I lie, staring at the water-stained ceiling. "Happens when I skip meals."

She rolls onto her side, propping her head on her palm.

"You've gnawed that thumbnail down to the quick." She catches my wrist. "Talk."

I pull free. "Habit."

"Bullshit." She snorts. "I've seen you fight, Elias. You're particular about your hands—kept those claws sheathed when during fights unless needed. Now you're acting like you've got termites under your skin."

My jaw clenches. A memory slams in uninvited—mother's cold fingers prying my teeth open after the first change, counting incisors with clinical detachment. Every bite leaves a scar, little wolf. Even the accidental ones.

Kaia's scent shifts, amphetamines and iron giving way to bergamot irritation. She sits up, knees knocking mine. "If we're walking into a death trap tomorrow, I need to know what breaks you before?—"

"I killed someone."

"We've all killed, Elias?—"

"No. Not like this. I don't know why, but it's been bothering me. Thinking about what a monster I am when you sit here wanting to risk your life to save my own father." The words drop like stones. "First blood I ever drank wasn't from a glass."

Her breath hitches. Suddenly the room's too small, the musk of her pulse too loud.

I press the heel of my hand against my sternum. "Her name was Lira. Vampire—full-blooded. Found me after my parents were gone. Mom in hiding and Dad... supposedly dead. Taught me control. Or tried to."

Kaia's thumbnail digs into the old rug. "What happened?"

"My first lunar cycle. Wolf surged while she was... tending me." Bile coats my tongue. I don't mention how her nightgown had slipped, how I'd memorized the vein beneath her ear. "She smelled like moonflower tea. Thought she'd feed me synthetic blood vials. Instead offered her wrist."

Lightning crackles outside. Shadows warp the scars on my knuckles.

"I tore her throat out."

Kaia goes preternaturally still.

“Woke up soaked in her.” I mimic her earlier tap against my collarbone. “Found molar fragments here. Burial was... messy.” My chuckle tastes like rot. “Let’s just say funeral pyres aren’t romantic when fueled by guilt. I was fifteen.”

Silence festers.

Then her fingers find my jaw, forcing eye contact. "You were an adolescent."

“Doesn’t erase the stain.”

“No.” Her thumb traces the scar under my ear—Lira’s last gift, a defensive swipe that nearly decapitated me. “But you carry it. Every day. That’s your penance, isn’t it? Letting the memory eat you alive so you don’t...”

Her pupils dilate. She smells like epiphany and salt.

“Kaia—”

Her mouth crashes into mine.

It’s not gentle. Her teeth clip my lower lip, hands fisting my shirt like I’m smoke she can’t catch. I grab her hips to steady us, but she pushes harder, all wildfire conviction and trembling fingers. When I pull back, breath ragged, she chases me.

“Don’t.” Her forehead meets mine. “I’m not her. I won’t splinter.”

My claws breach, pricking her waist. “You don’t know what I am.”

“Moody half-breed with a martyr complex? Yeah, Elias. I’m fucking terrified. But running?” She presses closer, lips brushing mine with each word. “Not this time.”

This kiss ignites slower—embers catching dry tinder. Her palm slides under my shirt, tracing the ridge where ribcage meets scar tissue. Every touch brands, purges, rebuilds. She gasps when I nip her neck, my thumb finding the rabbit-quick pulse beneath her ear.

“Still think I’m a monster?” I murmur against her skin.

Her laugh reverberates through me. “You’re worse.” She threads fingers through my hair, tugging harsh enough to bare my throat. “A chronic over-thinker who needs?—”

I silence her with another kiss. Tomorrow’s hell can wait.

Her fingers tangle in my hair, pulling just shy of pain. “Still thinking?” Her breath scalds my throat. “Or finally feeling ?”

I catch her wrist, the pulse beneath her skin thrumming against my palm. “Kaia, the hybrid side—if I lose control?—”

“You won’t.” She straddles my hips, knees pinning me to the floorboards. Papers crinkle beneath us, the scent of ink and her sweat mingling. “But if you do?” Her teeth graze my earlobe. “I’ll stab you with that letter opener.” She nods toward the desk, all sharp edges and steel.

I choked on a laugh. “Romantic.”

“Practical.” She yanks my shirt over my head, her thumbs skimming the lattice of scars across my ribs—a roadmap of every fight I’d barely survived. Her gaze lingers on the jagged line where a werewolf’s claw had nearly gutted me at seventeen. “You’re still here,” she murmurs. “Still here, Elias.”

Her shirt joins mine somewhere near the overturned inkwell. Moonlight catches the

ridges of old knife scars across her abdomen—Order training, she'd called them once. My fingers traced a particularly vicious one curving under her left breast. "Who gave you this?"

"Lieutenant Veyra. Lesson three: never drop your guard during a ceasefire." She arches into my touch, a shiver betraying her steady voice. "Your turn. That burn mark on your shoulder?—"

"Molten silver. Hunters in Prague." I flinch as her tongue followed the scar's path. "Kaia, wait. Let me?—"

"No." She unbuttons my jeans with ruthless efficiency. "Tonight's not about your guilt. Or your body count." Cool air hits my thighs as she strips me bare, her gaze raking down. A sharp inhale. "Fuck. You're... engineered."

I cover myself, heat flooding my face. "It's the hybrid blood. The...proportions are..."

Her laugh punches the dark. "Proportions." She peels my hand away, her grip unyielding. "You're a fucking cathedral, Elias. Now stop blushing."

Her pants slide off, a whisper of fabric on skin. I reach for her, but she catches my wrists, pinning them above my head. "Let me work."

Every scar, every callus, she maps them with her mouth. My hips jerked when her teeth find the sensitive hollow of my thigh. "Kaia?—"

"Say it again."

"What?"

She rises over me, backlit by the flickering bulb, curls wild as brambles. “My name. When you’re undone.” Her hand slides down her stomach, fingers glistening.

She sinks onto me with a gasp, heat and pressure and rightness that steal my breath—like molten silver pouring through every vein.

My claws shred the rug’s fibers, splinters of oak floorboard cracking beneath them as her hips roll in a serpent’s rhythm.

The drag of her body against mine wrings a growl from my chest, my fangs slicing my tongue as her muscles clench.

Copper blood and her salt-kissed sweat bloom on my palate.

“Look at me,” she demands, nails scoring my collarbones.

My vision flares gold, pupils slitting—the werewolf’s hunger and the vampire’s hunger tangling, a tempest thrumming beneath my skin.

Her grin sharpens, all predator, her own hips pistoning faster now.

Her scars press warm against my thumbs—ridged battle marks from Order blades—as I dig into her waist. She arches, tendrils of her sweat-damped hair clinging to my chest like ink spilled across parchment.

“There you are,” she breathes, and I realize I’m snarling, my cock swelling thicker as the shift claws at my bones.

Her rhythm fractures into something desperate, our skin slapping wet and primal.

The bulb overhead swings, throwing her shadow across the wall—a writhing

chimera.

Every snap of her hips punches the breath from me, her inner walls fluttering like a trapped bird's heartbeat.

I feel the riptide building—that terrible, glorious edge where my control frays.

“Kaia, I’m not—” My hips buck upward, feral, as my spine bows off the floor. Her nails rake down my sternum, drawing twin lines of fire. “— can’t hold ?—”

The warning dissolves into a roar as she slams down hard, her cry splitting the air. Her back arches like a drawn bow, her throat bared—an offering and a challenge.

“Then don’t.” She leans down, sweat-damp curls brushing my chest—a thousand electric points of contact burning through the cold dead places in my marrow. “Come for me. Let me feel you break .”

Her rhythm turns erratic, nails scoring my pecs deep enough to make my cursed blood bead black in the creases.

I arch, a growl ripping free as she clenches around me—wet velvet vise tightening against the howling thing in my gut.

My canines lengthen before I can stop them, tearing my lower lip as I choke on her name. “Kaia?—!”

“ Again. ”

Her command isn’t words now—it’s a vibration in the hollow of my throat where her teeth rest. The part of me that’s feral recognizes prey turned predator. The part that’s vampire tastes her pulse fluttering against my tongue like a sacrifice.

“Kaia!”

The third cry does it.

Her back arches as she shatters, muscles fluttering like moth wings against glass.

My hips snap upward—no longer flesh but a force of nature, claws erupting to gouge the concrete floor.

Our mingled scents flood my nostrils—ozone and iron and strange wildflowers blooming where she should taste human.

Her scream harmonizes with mine, two predators caught in the same snare.

The world narrows to pulsebeats and the salt-tang of her skin, to the dark realization that her storm has scoured me down to raw nerve endings—no monster left, just a man trembling beneath a creature far more dangerous than my dual-blooded curse.

When she collapses onto my chest, her laughter vibrates through me. “Monsters don’t whisper apologies mid-climax, Elias.”

My arms lock around her. The papers beneath us stuck to our sweat-slicked skin, plans for tomorrow’s suicide mission forgotten as I hold her there making sure she doesn’t run and that I don’t hide. Not from her.

KAIA

I don't trust the woods.

Too quiet. Too dark. Every crunch of dried leaves under my boots feels like it echoes across the goddamn world.

Elias moves ahead of me, loose and lethal, his long frame a whisper against the trees. He hasn't said much since we left the old tunnels hours ago, just that he knew a way to the hidden prison where his father's being kept.

And that he needed to make a call.

He pulls a burner phone from his jacket, flipping it open like a man about to detonate a bomb. His fingers are steady, though his shoulders are tight enough to snap.

I hang back, arms crossed, pretending not to eavesdrop. (I'm totally eavesdropping.)

"Mother," he says, voice low and hard.

A long silence stretches. Then a voice, faint but razor-sharp, cuts through the stillness. I can't make out the words, but whatever she says, it slams the tension even tighter into his frame.

"He's alive," Elias grits out. "They have him. And we're getting him out."

Another pause. Longer this time.

Then Elias's mouth twists in something that might be pain. "You're closer than I think? What the hell does that mean?"

He listens. Jaw tight. Then without warning, he snaps the phone shut and pockets it, eyes flicking to mine like he forgot I was there.

"You good?" I ask, trying to keep my voice casual. Like my heart isn't beating a goddamn drumline against my ribs.

He nods once. "We camp here tonight. Tomorrow we move."

The fire crackles between us, small and sharp, barely enough to keep the cold at bay.

Elias sits cross-legged on the other side, sharpening a wicked-looking dagger, his hands moving with a methodical, almost meditative rhythm. The light catches on his features—stone-cut jaw, high cheekbones, dark hair spilling loose around his face—and something inside me twists hard.

He's beautiful. In that raw, feral way that should come with warning signs and barbed wire.

And I'm such a fucking idiot because I'm falling for him harder every goddamn day.

I wrap my arms around my knees, staring into the flames, trying to shove down the chaos in my chest.

That's when I feel it.

That shift in the air. Like gravity tilting sideways.

I snap my head up just as a figure materializes out of the trees like a living

nightmare—tall, elegant, and radiating danger so thick it makes my teeth ache.

Velara Vorn.

Elias's mother.

And holy shit, if Elias is a storm, she's a goddamn hurricane.

Ashen skin, silver eyes that could slice through steel, long dark hair braided down her back like a whip. She moves with a grace that's inhuman, every step calculated, predatory, like she's sizing up the world and finding it lacking.

She doesn't acknowledge me at first. Her gaze zeroes in on Elias like he's a puzzle she's trying to solve.

"My son," she murmurs, voice velvet-wrapped steel.

"Mother," Elias says, standing slowly, the wariness bleeding into every line of his body.

There's a beat—a thick, brittle beat—then she crosses the distance and presses a kiss to his forehead. Strange. Intimate. Chilling. A queen greeting her heir... or maybe a general marking her soldier.

Then her eyes snap to me.

"And who," she says, voice sweet as cyanide, "is this?"

I rise to my feet, spine straight. No way in hell I'm cowering.

"Kaia Draven," I say, voice steady even though my insides are coiling tight. "I'm

with him."

Velara's lips curve, but it's not a smile. It's a goddamn challenge, an unspoken dare to prove I'm worthy of the breath I'm wasting.

"Ah," she purrs. "The half-blood. The Order's prodigal daughter. I've heard... whispers."

I clench my fists, digging my nails into my palms to stay calm. Stay sharp.

"You look fragile," Velara says, tilting her head like she's examining an interesting stain on expensive silk. "Pretty. But fragile. Tell me, girl—do you really think you're strong enough to walk beside him? Strong enough to survive the war that's coming?"

I don't blink. Don't flinch. My voice is steady, even though my heart's trying to beat its way out of my damn chest.

"I'm stronger than I look," I say flatly.

Her smile widens, sharp and hungry.

"I would hope so," she says. "Because I came out of hiding for this moment. I came to see you, Kaia."

A beat. My breath catches.

"Why?" I demand.

Velara's gaze cuts through me like a dagger. "Because if you are to stand with him—my son—you must be tested. We cannot afford weakness in this bloodline. Not now. Not ever."

Before I can react, she moves.

Too fast for a human eye to track, but I feel it—that shimmer in the air, that predatory snap of intent, the weight of her power crashing toward me like a tidal wave.

She lashes out, a whip-crack of raw magic aimed straight at my chest.

Instinct kicks in. I slam my hand out, catching the blow midair with a surge of something wild and golden sparking to life inside me.

Sparks fly, golden light spilling between our hands where they meet, burning hotter than fire.

For a second, just a second, Velara's eyes narrow—not with anger, but with something almost like... grudging approval.

Or maybe just deeper, darker curiosity.

I hold my ground, teeth gritted, my whole body trembling from the impact but refusing to fall.

"I will not break," I bite out, voice low and fierce.

"You might," Velara whispers, almost gleeful. "But perhaps that's the point."

She draws back slowly, satisfaction gleaming in her silver eyes.

Elias steps between us before she can strike again, his body a wall of lean muscle and protective fury. His voice is a low growl, lethal and vibrating through the clearing.

"Enough."

Velara raises a perfect brow, utterly unbothered. "Testing her is necessary. If she cannot withstand me, she cannot withstand what's coming."

"She's not yours to test," Elias growls.

Something unspoken crackles between them—years of battles fought behind closed doors, in shadows and whispers and blood.

Velara's gaze softens, just slightly, as she studies him.

"You think I want her to fail?" she murmurs. "You think I want to lose you?"

Elias stiffens.

Velara steps back, folding her arms across her chest, a queen surveying her battered court.

"I tested her because weakness in our line," she says, voice like a blade, "must be cleansed. Rooted out. It is the old way, the true way. Strength must be proven, not assumed. If Kaia is too fragile, too naïve... she will not survive what is to come. And her fall will drag you down with her."

I bite down hard on the instinct to snarl at her. To tell her where she can shove her goddamn old ways.

Instead, I lift my chin.

"I'm not fragile," I say again, stronger this time. "And I'm not going anywhere."

Velara studies me for a long, chilling moment.

She nods.

"A storm brews, daughter of Fae and mortal," she says. "You will either weather it... or you will be consumed."

Without another word, she turns and melts into the woods, her presence fading like a nightmare at dawn—but not gone. Never gone.

The tension in the clearing is so thick it's like breathing smoke.

I sag a little, finally letting the adrenaline crash hit me, but I catch myself before I fall.

Elias turns to me, those molten-gold eyes full of things he doesn't say out loud.

"You held your ground," he says roughly.

"Yeah," I rasp. "Barely."

He steps closer, his hand ghosting over my arm like he's checking for cracks, for damage.

"You did good, Kaia. You okay?" he mutters, hands hovering like he wants to touch me but doesn't know where to start.

I nod, throat tight. "Yeah. Just... tired of being tested."

His mouth twitches—a grim, almost-grin.

"Get used to it," he says. "Everyone's gonna want a piece of you now."

"Let 'em try," I say, and the fire in my gut is real, burning brighter than fear.

Elias steps closer, so close our bodies brush. His fingers graze mine, a whisper of a touch.

"You scare the shit out of me sometimes," he murmurs.

"Good," I whisper back, and somehow, somehow, we're smiling.

We stand there, in the ruined quiet, breathing the same broken air.

ELIAS

The prison stinks of old magic and older death. It's the kind of place that leaves a mark on you just by breathing it in.

I move low, silent as a fucking ghost through the crumbling corridors, Kaia tight at my side. She doesn't even need to be told anymore—she mirrors my steps, matches my pace. Like she belongs next to me. Like she's always belonged.

The thought cuts deeper than it should.

We reach the main block, and gods, it's worse than even I remember. Empty cells. Some still occupied, but barely. What's left inside them ain't worth calling human or anything else anymore.

Kaia stiffens beside me, that golden-amber gaze sweeping the wreckage, her hands twitching like she's dying to help—but knowing she can't. Not yet.

Not now.

We head for the back.

That's where they keep the high-value prisoners, the ones they want to bleed dry slowly.

My father.

Tarek Vorn.

We find him shackled to some twisted machine, tubes and wires hooked into his arms and throat, siphoning him like he's no more than livestock.

I stop breathing.

It's him. Alive.

But barely.

A broken shell of the man I remember... and somehow even stronger because he's still fucking here, still fighting, still breathing after everything they've done.

A goddamn war cry builds in my chest, but I shove it down.

Later.

I'll burn this place later.

Right now, we get him out.

Kaia moves first, slipping toward the control panel, her fingers nimble as she searches for a way to release him.

Suddenly, a soft voice, cracked and weak, echoes from another cell.

"Kaia..."

My blood turns to ice.

Kaia jerks upright, turning toward the sound.

I follow her gaze and freeze.

Across the hallway, in a rusted, rune-burned cage, hangs a woman by shackled wrists.
Pale, bruised, bloody.

“Mom,” Kaia whispers.

Kaia bolts toward her, all instinct and no thought. I grab her wrist, yank her behind cover just as a guard passes by the end of the hall.

Her chest heaves against mine, her hands fisting in my shirt.

"We have to get her," she whispers, voice shaking.

I stare at Mira, at the wreck she's become.

And I see the war tear Kaia apart right in front of me.

She's still angry at her, still betrayed—but that bond, that blood, it cuts deeper than all of it. And I know... she'll never walk away.

But we don't have time.

Footsteps. Shouts.

They know we're here.

Fuck.

I look from Tarek to Mira.

One. Maybe both. But not if we waste another second.

Kaia's torn in half, and it kills me to see it.

So I make the call for her.

"I'm getting her," I snap. "You get him."

"No—" she starts, but I'm already moving.

I slam my shoulder into her cage door, shattering the lock with a pulse of raw force. I catch her before she hits the floor, cursing under my breath at how light she is, how wrong it feels.

Kaia's already at Tarek's side, slicing through the cables with crackling gold magic.

We move.

No hesitation now.

Boots thunder down the corridor behind us. Enforcers, shouting orders, firing bolts of suppression magic that splatter against the walls like blood.

I keep Mira shielded against my chest, Kaia dragging Tarek beside me, her face pale and grim and furious .

A bolt slams into the wall inches from Kaia's head, showering her in stone dust. I roar, covering her without thinking, taking the brunt of the next blast across my back.

Pain flares white-hot, but I don't stop.

I will never stop.

Not when she's looking at me like that. Like I'm the only thing between her and losing everything.

We burst through a side door, stumbling into the night, lungs burning, blood pounding.

But we're alive.

Barely.

Kaia collapses beside me, cradling Tarek as gently as she can, tears streaking the grime on her cheeks.

I lower Kaia's down, checking her pulse. Weak. But there.

When I look up, Kaia's watching me.

Something raw and unspoken passes between us, gratitude, grief, fury, relief—all crashing into one.

I could drown in it.

Could let myself fall right into her without a second thought.

But not yet.

Not until we get them somewhere safe.

Not until this nightmare ends.

I hold her gaze, steady and sure, even when everything else feels like it's crumbling.

Her lips part, like she wants to say something—but she just nods, clutches Tarek closer, and together, we disappear into the trees.

Into the dark.

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KAIA

The trees feel too close, the night too heavy, but I sit anyway, legs folded under me, blood and dirt caking my skin, staring at the crumbling shack where we dragged our wrecked families to hide.

Mom lies a few feet away, barely breathing, her face pale and hollow. Tarek—Elias's father—sleeps in fitful jerks, tethered still to the phantom pain of too many years lost.

And Elias.

Elias stands near the shallow cave we crawled into like a goddamn sentry, arms crossed, shoulders coiled tight, watching the dark like it's a war he can win just by glaring it down.

He hasn't looked at me once since I sat down.

He doesn't have to.

I can feel him.

The weight of him. The way he's holding himself back because he knows I'm one wrong word away from snapping.

Mom stirs, coughing weakly, and my feet move before my brain can catch up. I'm crouched at her side, heart thudding so loud it drowns out everything else.

"Mom," I croak out, and her eyes—faded but still sharp as hell—flutter open.

A weak, broken smile curves her cracked lips. "Kaia... you're alive."

"Yeah," I rasp, bitterness coating the word. "Somehow."

I want to scream at her. I want to shake her until the truth falls out of her like pennies from a busted vending machine. Instead, I sit there, the anger roiling inside me like a storm looking for a place to land.

"What the hell were you doing in there?" I ask, voice sharp enough to slice through bone.

She flinches, shame flickering across her battered face. "I was trying to find you," she whispers. "After the explosion. I... I used my magic. I thought... maybe I could sense you, track you."

I go still, every muscle locking up. Magic. She used magic. In the Order's own goddamn fortress.

"And Dad caught you," I say, low and guttural, not even needing her to confirm it. I can already see it in her hollow, sunken eyes.

She nods weakly, guilt dragging her shoulders down like chains.

I rake a hand through my tangled hair, pacing two sharp steps away because if I don't, I might do something I'll regret.

"You're fucking Fae," I say, barely keeping my voice steady. "Aren't you?"

Mom swallows hard, but she doesn't hide. Doesn't lie. Doesn't sidestep.

"Yes," she says simply. "Half. My mother—your grandmother—was Fae. I tried to bury it. To bury it in you . To keep you safe."

I let out a hollow laugh. "Yeah, that worked out real fucking well."

Her eyes shimmer with unshed tears. "I did it because the Order... they would have killed you, Kaia. They would have torn you apart the moment they knew what you were."

I step closer, fists clenched at my sides. "You should have trusted me."

"I couldn't!" she says, voice rising, cracking under the weight of it. "You were a child. I thought... if I could bind your powers, if I could keep you hidden long enough, you'd have a chance at a normal life."

"But I didn't, did I?" I snap. "You raised me inside the Order. You raised me to hate what I am."

Mira shakes her head frantically. "It wasn't supposed to be like this. I thought— I thought we had more time."

I glare at her. "Time for what? To keep lying to me?"

"No," she breathes. "To prepare you."

Something cold slithers down my spine. "Prepare me for what ?"

She reaches out, but I jerk back before she can touch me.

"You're more than just Fae, Kaia," she says. "You're a nexus point. The prophecy—it speaks of a bloodline that will either save the Veil... or destroy it."

I stare at her, heart hammering against my ribs like a trapped thing. "And you're telling me I'm that bloodline?"

Mom's voice drops to a near whisper. "You are the Veil's last anchor."

The world seems to tilt sideways.

I cross my arms tight across my chest, forcing myself to stay upright when everything inside me is collapsing.

"And if the anchor breaks," I say slowly, "the Veil breaks too."

Mom nods. "And the monsters on the other side—the ones the Veil keeps locked away—will tear through our world. They'll burn it to ash."

Silence roars between us.

I force myself to meet her eyes. "And you thought lying to me, binding my powers, making me into a good little Order soldier... that was gonna stop it?"

She flinches like I slapped her. "I was trying to protect you."

"Yeah," I say bitterly. "You protected me right into a goddamn prophecy."

A prophecy I never asked for. A future that's not mine to want or not want.

It's just... expected.

I suck in a breath, my vision swimming. "I already figured it out, you know. That I wasn't normal. That something inside me was... wrong."

"Not wrong," Mom says fiercely. "Never wrong. You were always more, Kaia."

"Yeah?" I laugh, but it's a broken thing. "Then why does it feel like the second I find out who I am, the whole fucking world has already decided what I'm supposed to do?"

Tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall.

I can't do this.

I won't do this.

I glance toward Elias, who's standing there—silent, grim, his eyes carved out of agony.

He would fight for me. I know it like I know how to breathe.

And that's exactly why I have to leave.

Because if I stay... he'll die for me.

They all will.

And maybe the Veil falls anyway.

Maybe everything falls, and it'll be my fault.

I turn back to Mom, my voice hoarse. "I love you. I always will. But you lied to me. You built me for something I didn't choose."

Mom's face crumples.

I don't wait to see her break completely.

I look at Elias one last time, memorizing the way he stands like a goddamn fortress, memorizing the way his mouth curves like he wants to call me back but he won't. He knows.

He knows .

And then I run.

Because running feels like the only choice that's still mine.

Because staying feels like death.

Because if I stay, I bring their ruin with me.

The Veil. The Order. The prophecy.

I see it all laid out ahead of me—death and fire and endings—and I can't drag them into it.

Not Elias.

Not Mom.

Not even Tarek.

They deserve a chance to survive.

I run harder, tears blurring my vision.

Somewhere behind me, I swear I hear Elias roar my name into the night—but I don't look back.

I won't.

I can't.

Because this isn't just about survival anymore.

It's about saving them from me.

ELIAS

Kaia's mom kneels next to Tarek's crumpled body, brushing sweat-slicked hair from his bruised forehead. She's all bone and desperation, her Fae aura so thin it's barely a shimmer now.

She looks up at me, those tired gold-flecked eyes meeting mine without flinching. Her voice is rough but steady. "Your father needs to disappear. I know a place. Safe. Ward-shielded. Old magic."

I clench my fists so hard my claws bite through skin. My blood runs hot, my heart pounding against my ribs like it's trying to escape.

Kaia's gone.

Gone without a goddamn word except the look in her eyes that said I can't do this anymore .

She didn't give me a choice. Didn't stay to fight. Didn't even stay to talk .

And now I'm standing here, with the ghost of the woman who hid Kaia's whole damn life from her, promising she'll tuck my broken father away like a wounded bird.

I laugh, low and mean. It sounds like it's coming from someone else's mouth.

She flinches.

“Fine,” I rasp, shoving a bloodied hand through my hair. “Take him. Get him the hell out of here. Just don’t fuck it up.”

Her mouth tightens, but she nods. No argument. No retort.

Smart woman.

I barely remember helping lift my father’s limp body onto a stretcher of magic and willpower. I barely remember the soft words she murmurs to Tarek, or the way she presses something into my hand—coordinates, maybe, or a blood-tether spell.

All I can think about is her .

Kaia.

Running from me like I’m the damn monster she’s been trained her whole life to fear.

Maybe I am.

Maybe that’s all I’ll ever be.

The forest closes around me, thick and black and heavy with the scent of moss and rot.

I hunt.

I tear through the underbrush, my boots slick with mud and old blood. I don’t think. Don’t feel .

I just move .

The first idiot who tries to rob me in the woods gets a broken wrist for his trouble. The second gets a shattered jaw. I don't even shift fully—just enough that my strength snaps bones like twigs.

And when the third one, a scraggly bastard with desperation bleeding off him like cheap cologne—pulls a knife and lunges?

I grab him by the throat.

Slam him into the nearest tree.

His pulse hammers under my fingers.

Fast.

Terrified.

Alive.

Alive only because I let him .

The scent of his blood, salt and copper and life—fills my mouth, my head, my whole fucking soul .

I could take him. Right now. Tear into his throat and drink deep and forget that I ever cared about anything.

Forget her .

My fangs snap down with a painful click.

The man whimpers, a sound like a dying animal.

And for a second, I almost let go.

Almost let the rage win.

Almost become everything the Order said I was.

A monster.

A goddamn tragedy in a pretty skin.

Golden eyes flash in my mind.

Not the pleading, broken ones from the prison.

No.

The ones that stared down my mother's magic without blinking.

The ones that burned when she said, I'm stronger than I look.

The ones that said fight for me without ever saying a goddamn word.

I shove the man away so hard he crumples to the ground gasping.

I stagger back, hands shaking, teeth grinding against the need still burning in my veins.

"Run," I snarl.

The man scrambles away like a kicked dog.

Good.

Because if he stayed another second, I might not have been able to stop myself.

I sink to my knees in the mud, fists buried in the earth like it's the only thing tethering me here.

"You're better off without me," I growl into the empty dark. "You were right, Kaia."

I can't protect her.

I can't even protect myself.

How the hell am I supposed to stand beside her when everything inside me is built to ruin ?

When every time I get close to someone, they die, or break, or run?

I claw a hand across my face, dragging mud and blood down my skin like war paint.

I breathe in her scent, still clinging to me like a fucking curse.

Jasmine. Steel. Storms.

It hurts worse than any wound.

I sit there until the sun starts bleeding through the trees, until my body aches and my head pounds and my chest feels carved out and hollow.

And then, I drag myself up and stagger toward the shadows.

Toward the dark that's been calling me since the moment she left.

Because maybe she was right.

Maybe this is better.

Maybe this is what monsters deserve.

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KAIA

I don't know how long I run.

Long enough that my lungs are screaming and my legs feel like they're splintering under me.

The forest changes around me, trees thicker, twisted, the air thick with something old and electric. The human world fades behind me like a bad dream, until there's only this: the wild, humming heart of magic.

The Fae wilds.

I didn't mean to end up here. I didn't even know how I could. The barrier's supposed to be sealed off, stitched together with blood and ancient wards.

But something calls me.

Not with words.

Not even with thought.

Just... a pull.

Deep in my bones.

In my goddamn soul.

I stumble into a clearing and collapse, hands sinking into the mossy ground like it might swallow me whole. My body shakes, the remnants of power flickering under my skin like fireflies.

Everything's wrong.

Everything's broken.

I'm broken.

I press my forehead into the cool earth and squeeze my eyes shut, fighting back the tears threatening to claw their way out of me.

I can't be what they want.

I can't be what Elias wants.

I can't even figure out who the hell I am anymore.

I hear it then, soft, like wind chimes in a storm.

A voice.

“Kaia.”

I jerk my head up so fast it makes me dizzy.

Standing across the clearing is a woman.

Not a woman.

Something more.

Her hair is a wild crown of silver curls, her skin glowing faintly gold under the heavy moonlight. Her eyes shimmer with ancient light, like twin suns behind a veil.

I know her without knowing how.

She's the woman from the picture.

"Grandmother," I whisper, the word falling from my lips like a prayer.

She smiles. Sad and sweet and knowing.

"You found your way," she says, her voice rich and warm like the earth after rain.

"Or perhaps... it found you."

I struggle to my feet, every nerve screaming to run, to fight, to hide . But I don't.

I can't.

"Why am I here?" I rasp.

Her smile dims, and she lifts one hand. A pulse of magic rolls through the air, thick and sweet and terrifying.

And suddenly, I'm seeing .

Visions slam into me, raw and brutal.

The Veil, spun from blood and bone and will. Fae and human magic woven together like a fragile tapestry.

The wars that tore the realms apart.

The sacrifice it took to seal the Veil and keep the worlds from destroying each other.

And through it all—one bloodline.

One anchor.

A tether between realms.

A last hope.

Me.

I stagger back, breath ripping out of me in a broken gasp.

"No," I whisper. "No, I—I didn't ask for this. I don't want this."

"You were never meant to want it," she says gently. "Only to be it."

The clearing shifts around us, the trees bowing closer, the stars bending like they're listening.

"You are the Veil's last breath," my grandmother says. "It's heart. It's end, or it's beginning."

I shake my head, fists clenching. "I don't even know what the hell that means."

"It means," she says, stepping closer, "you are the line between survival and annihilation."

She brushes her hand against my temple, and the visions sharpen, sharper than a blade to the bone.

I see myself, glowing with wild power, the ground cracking beneath my feet.

I see the Veil, torn and bleeding, shadows pouring through like a wound.

I see Elias, bloodied, roaring, fighting against monsters I can't even name.

I see the world burning.

I wrench away from her touch, panting, fury bubbling up inside me.

"This isn't fair," I snarl. "You—you talk about bloodlines and destiny like they're a fucking gift. They're a death sentence."

Her eyes soften, but there's iron under her voice. "Sometimes, child, death and life walk hand in hand."

I stagger back another step, heart slamming against my ribs.

I think about Elias, his hands rough and steady on my skin, his mouth on mine like he was trying to memorize me.

I think about the way he looked at me.

Like I was salvation.

Like I was hope.

And all I can think is— he deserves better than this.

Better than a girl caught in a storm she can't control.

Better than a bomb waiting to go off.

Tears burn down my face, but I scrub them away with shaking hands.

"I can't—" My voice cracks. "I can't drag him down with me."

"You will not be alone," my grandmother says.

But the words feel hollow.

I already am.

Hours later, maybe days—I stumble out of the Fae wilds, bruised and battered and hollowed out.

No idea where the hell I am.

No plan.

No map.

Just the pounding ache in my chest, and the cold certainty ringing in my bones:

If I stay... if I stay with him...

I will destroy him.

And I can't let that happen. I already know, in such a short amount of time, before the visions, he's too important to me.

I turn away from the direction I know leads back to him.

My fists clench at my sides.

One step.

Two.

Each one a knife in my gut.

Each one slicing away the pieces of me that still remember the way his arms felt around me. The way he whispered my name like it meant something.

The way he believed in me when I didn't even believe in myself.

I'm sorry, Elias.

I bite the words back.

Bury them deep.

Because apologies won't save him.

Only leaving will.

Only walking away.

Only letting him go.

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ELIAS

The sky is bleeding when they catch me.

I knew it was coming.

Knew the way I've been moving, reckless, angry, half a breath away from tearing the world apart—was gonna get me into deep shit.

But knowing and caring? Two very different things.

It happens fast. Too fast, even for me.

One second, I'm hunting a pack of rogue Order scouts through the Dead Marsh. Next thing I know, the stench of silver fills my nose, a rune explodes under my feet, and the world goes black.

When I come to, my hands are shackled in iron.

Thick iron laced with spellwork that burns against my skin like a thousand tiny needles.

"Motherfuckers," I hiss, jerking against the chains, but it's no good.

They're smart this time.

Prepared.

I lift my head, vision swimming.

A circle of hybrids surrounds me. All shapes, all breeds, except for a cross like mine.

And standing at the front, the biggest bastard of them all—is Ty.

Typhon's Brood.

I should've fucking known.

Ty smirks down at me, arms crossed over his barrel chest. His dark hair is cropped short now, beard thicker, but those eyes? Still the same. Hungry. Fanatical.

"Well, well, if it isn't the prodigal son," he drawls.

"Go fuck yourself," I snarl, voice rough and bloody.

He laughs, full of easy, oily confidence. "Good to see that mouth still works. We'll break the rest of you soon enough."

I bare my teeth, feeling the wolf itch under my skin. Don't shift. Don't give them the satisfaction.

"What the hell do you want, Ty?"

His smile curdles into something nastier.

"What we've always wanted," he says. "A future. One where we aren't hiding in caves and sewer holes. One where all supernatural beings rule. You're gonna help us get there."

"Like hell," I spit.

"You don't have a choice."

I yank against the cuffs again, sparks flying off the iron, searing my wrists.

"I'd rather fucking die."

"Would you?" Ty tilts his head. "Or would you rather watch your daddy and that pretty little Fae bitch protecting him get butchered instead?"

The air in my lungs freezes.

Slow.

Deadly.

I lift my head and stare at him.

"You're lying," I say flatly.

Ty just grins wider. "Am I?"

He tosses something at my feet.

I don't want to look.

I know it's bait.

But I can't not.

It's a picture. Grainy, black-and-white surveillance.

Tarek, my father—strapped to a gurney. And behind him, Mira Draven. Kaia's mother. Pale, worn down, but still standing guard like a goddamn sentinel.

"Found them easy," Ty says conversationally. "After you transferred 'em out of that little nest you took them from. Took some digging. Took some blood." He taps his temple. "But we've got eyes everywhere."

I clench my fists so hard the cuffs bite into my flesh.

"You touch them," I growl low, "I will end you."

Ty laughs like it's the best joke he's heard all year.

"You'll end no one, Elias. Not chained like a dog." He leans closer, breath hot and rancid against my face. "You want them safe? You'll do what I fucking tell you."

I want to tear his throat out.

I want to burn this whole place to ash.

But the memory of Tarek's hollow eyes and Mira's brittle strength roots me to the spot.

And the thought of Kaia—of her finding her mother's body because of me—makes something inside me snap. Something fragile and precious I didn't even know I was still holding.

"I won't start your goddamn war," I snarl.

Ty straightens. Shrugs.

"Then you'll watch them die."

He signals to his enforcers, a pack of wolves barely restraining themselves.

They start dragging me toward a dark tunnel at the back of the cavern.

"We'll give you some time to think it over," Ty calls after me. "But not much."

The cuffs burn hotter, stealing the strength from my limbs.

The last thing I see before the darkness swallows me is Ty's smirk.

And I swear to every god and monster still listening— he won't live to regret it.

The cell they throw me in is little more than a pit. Cold, wet stone. No windows. No hope.

Just the sound of dripping water, my own breath rattling in my chest, and the faint, endless gnawing at the edge of my mind.

Every second, my brain chews itself raw. Memories tearing through me like wolves.

Kaia's face—bright and burning—seared into the backs of my eyelids no matter how hard I try to shut it out.

Her stubbornness. Her fire. The way she could look right into the rotten, cracked parts of me and not even fucking flinch. Like she wasn't afraid. Like maybe I wasn't as broken as I thought.

The way she looked at me like I wasn't just a fucking mistake stitched together by bad bloodlines and worse choices.

Like maybe I could be something better.

But I never let her see the worst of me. Not really.

Held too much back. Built walls around myself so high, even she couldn't climb them.

Maybe that's why she ran.

Maybe she saw what I didn't want her to. That deep down, I'm too fucked up for her. Too angry. Too hollow. Too... poisoned.

Maybe she was right to leave. And everyone's better off without me.

The thought festers, rotting inside me.

I don't sleep. I don't eat. I just sit here in the dark and let the hate settle into my bones. Let it fill up every crack inside me until there's no room for anything else.

And when they come back for me?

When they dangle the lives of the only people I have left in front of me like meat to a starving dog? I'll be ready.

I'll tear this whole fucking world apart if I have to.

But somewhere deep down, a different voice stirs.

Quieter. Rougher. Older.

Not the rage. Not the wolf.

Not even the cold-blooded pragmatism the vampires taught me.

Something else.

Kaia's voice, maybe. Or what she saw in me.

You're better than this, it whispers. You're not just a weapon. Not just a monster waiting to snap the leash.

You can be more.

Not for them. Not even for her. But for yourself.

I press my palms into the stone, nails biting deep into the rock, and breathe through the hurt. Through the fucking grief clawing up my throat like acid.

I am not my mother's blade or my father's shame. I am not Typhon's fucking pawn.

I'm Elias fucking Vorn.

And if Kaia's out there—still breathing, still fighting—then I owe it to her to fight too.

Not just to survive. To win.

Because if I can get her back...

If there's even a chance I can fix the wreckage I made of us...

I'm gonna take it.

And the best way to start?

Is to stop lying to myself. To stop pretending I'm some broken, worthless thing just because it's easier than fighting like hell to be better.

Caring hurts. Caring makes you vulnerable.

But it's also the only goddamn reason to crawl out of the dirt at all.

So yeah.

I'm gonna start caring.

And caring means burning Ty and his whole fucking crew to the ground.

For Kaia.

For Tarek.

For me.

I think about my father for a moment, and all that he's survived. If he can find a way to hold on, then I sure as hell can.

I lift my head from the filthy floor, eyes blazing gold in the darkness.

Let them come.

I'm done waiting.

I'm done hiding.

KAIA

I 'm not fucking ready for this.

The thought drills itself into my skull as I dart through the alleys, the rotting underbelly of the city yawning open around me like a gaping wound. The underground smells like mold, rust, desperation—and right now, fear. My fear.

Fear for them. Fear for him.

My boots scuff against the cracked concrete as I press deeper into the maze of tunnels, heart hammering so hard it's a miracle I'm not leaving a damn echo. Every step slices through me, but I don't slow down. I can't.

Word travels fast through the underground if you know which rats to shake. And I shook 'em all.

Every last lowlife, smuggler, rogue spellcaster, and gutter-witch that owed me a favor—or was stupid enough to fear my name—gave me the same whispered truth:

Elias has been taken.

Typhon's Brood has him.

The moment I heard it, something inside me shattered wide open, raw and screaming.

I thought breaking away from him would save us both.

I thought pushing him away would save the fucking Veil.

But the second his name came out of that rat-faced trader's mouth, I knew I'd made the biggest goddamn mistake of my life.

And I'm not about to sit here and wring my hands while he bleeds out in some underground hellhole.

No fucking way.

The tunnel opens up into a half-collapsed station, the air thick with mildew and regret. I yank the hood lower over my face, scanning the place.

My little "army" waits in the shadows—half-wild shifters, a rogue witch whose magic leaks like a cracked dam, two pissed-off half-bloods from the Outer Rims. Not much. Not even close to enough.

But they came when I called and need a group quick. They were fast to take on the Brood and that's all I needed.

Because of him.

Because of what Typhon's Brood wants to do.

Because someone still has to believe in more than fucking survival.

I square my shoulders and step up onto the broken fountain, ignoring the pain rippling through my ribs. Took a few hits getting here.

I can bleed later.

"We move fast," I bark out. "We hit hard. In and out before Typhon even knows what the fuck happened."

The shifter leader, a broad-shouldered guy named Corran—grunts. "They'll have wards."

"I'll burn through them," snaps Sansa, the witch, her palms already sparking with dark blue light.

"And the guards?" asks one of the half-bloods, spitting on the floor.

I bare my teeth. "We kill what we have to. We leave who we can. But we get him out. No matter what."

A low ripple of agreement moves through them.

Good.

I need them furious. I need them ruthless. I need them ready to spill blood for a cause bigger than their own miserable skin.

I jump down, blade already sliding into my palm, and lead the way.

Typhon's compound sits like a goddamn cancer in the woods.

Old, abandoned military base. Half-covered in vines. Shields flickering around it like oil on water.

But I can feel him inside.

Elias.

It's not logical. It's not some Order-trained sixth sense. It's something older. Something raw and tethered to me so deep it makes my whole damn body ache.

He's in there. He's hurting. And I'm gonna rip this place to the fucking ground to get him back.

We breach the first shield with a blast of fae-light so bright it sears the bark off the nearby trees.

The guards scramble—too slow, too soft.

We fall on them like wolves.

I fight like I'm possessed. No hesitation. No mercy.

Steel bites flesh. Magic howls through the air. The night stinks of blood and smoke and burning lies.

Corran and the others clear the south wing. Sansa shatters the outer ward. I move straight for the heart of it. For him.

It takes everything I have not to break when I find him.

Thrown in a pit, chained like some goddamn trophy, bruises marring his ash-gray skin. His long hair is matted with blood and dirt. His breathing is ragged.

But he's alive.

I can feel it the second I step into the room, feel the pull between us, deeper and fiercer than anything I've ever fucking known.

His eyes flutter open when I drop to my knees beside him.

Ice-blue. Shattered. Still burning.

"Kaia," he rasps, voice broken, raw.

I choke on the lump in my throat and grab his face in my hands. "Yeah, yeah, it's me," I whisper. "I'm here. I'm gonna get you out."

He tries to shake his head, tries to warn me about something, but I'm already working at the chains with a blade half-melted from the wards. I don't give a shit. I will tear these fucking walls down if I have to.

"You're so goddamn stubborn," he croaks, his mouth curving in something that's half a smile, half a snarl of pain.

"You're goddamn right I am," I snap, blinking fast. "Now shut up and let me rescue your ass."

The chains fall away with a shriek of metal.

I catch him as he collapses forward, and for a heartbeat, we just cling to each other—two broken things held together by something bigger than pain.

Something stronger than fear. Hope.

I press my forehead to his, breathing him in, the scent of leather and blood and smoke. "You're not allowed to die," I murmur. "Not before you piss me off one more time."

His laugh is low and cracked but real.

And gods, it's the best fucking sound I've ever heard.

But the ground rumbles beneath us—the alarm spells finally tripping—and I know we've got seconds before Typhon's forces flood this place.

I sling Elias's arm over my shoulders and haul him up.

"We're not done," I whisper against his hair. "You and me. We're not fucking done."

He squeezes my wrist, weak but sure. "Damn right we're not."

We stagger toward the breach, blood pounding in my ears.

And for once I believe it.

I believe we're going to survive this.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

ELIAS

The crypt's stone digs into my spine, but I don't feel it. Not when Kaia's fists clench in my shirt, her mouth claiming mine with a desperation that leaves my fangs tingling. Blood still smears her collarbone—not hers, never hers—and the iron tang can't drown out her wild rosemary scent.

She tears herself back an inch, breath ragged. "I'm done running. Every time I bolt, I just— gods , I just end up sprinting into worse hells." Her thumb swipes the cut on my jaw, a leftover from Ty's claws. "You're a disaster magnet."

"Took a memo, did you?" My voice comes out gravel, half the growl still lodged in my throat from the fight. The moonlight slices through a crack in the ceiling, catching the gold spiraling in her irises. New. That's new. "Wait—your eyes..."

"Shut up." She presses her forehead to mine, knuckles white against my chest. "The bond. I feel it now. Not some vague 'chosen' bullshit the Order fed me. It's like... a thread. Tugging here." Her hand flattens over her sternum. "Tugging you ."

I go rigid. The wolf snarls a warning; the vampire calculates escape routes. Her palms cradle my face, gritty with ash.

"Stop it. Whatever you're spinning in that broody head—stop." She nips my lower lip, sharp enough to sting. "I'm choosing this. The moonlight, the blood feud, the whole godsdamn circus. You."

Our noses bump. Laughter bubbles out of her—raw, disbelieving—as my control

snaps. I crush her against the wall, my claws pricking her hips through torn fabric. “You realize,” I murmur into the hollow of her throat, “this makes you a masochist.”

Her teeth find my earlobe. “Says the man who took on six Brood hunters with a broken rib.”

“Seven.”

She laughs again, and the sound unspools something barbed in my chest. The kiss turns slow, deeper, her fingers weaving into my hair to yank loose the tie.

Ebony strands curtain around us, blending with her curls.

Her gasp echoes when my thumb traces the hinge of her jaw, when the wolf in me rumbles approval at her pulse fluttering against my tongue.

The stone floor is merciless, but we don’t reach it. Her legs hook around my waist, her back braced against moss-caked brick. The world contracts to the hitch in her breathing, to the way her swear fracturing into a moan as my claws skate up her ribs.

“Still logical, Draven?” I murmur.

Her nails carve crescents into my shoulders. “Shut up and move.”

We do.

Gold bleeds across her eyes again, luminescent. My own gaze flashes molten—I know it from the way her breath catches. “Elias?—”

“I see it.” My nose grazes hers. “Pretty little liar. Not just human, are you?”

Her smirk falters. “We’ll unpack that later.”

The thread between us pulls taut, humming with something older than reason. Her heartbeat thunders against my tongue where it races at her throat—metallic adrenaline, burnt sugar desperation, the salt-flush of skin I’d crawl through hell to taste.

Later’s a problem for survivors.

We’re fresh out of mercy for tomorrow.

“I’m done running,” she gasps into the ragged space between our mouths. Her words fray at the edges, torn between a vow and a sob. “I’m here. I’m with you. I can’t lose you— When I heard the shots, when they dragged you into that cell?—”

I swallow the rest with a snarl, my fangs catching her lower lip. Not gentle. Not careful. The beast in my ribs claws upward, starved and snarling, but her fingers knot harder in my hair— pull . “You aren’t going to lose me.”

The lie tastes like blood. She knows it. I bite harder.

Her back arches off the rain-slick stone as I drag her shirt up, the damp fabric sticking to her ribs.

My tongue flicks over the peak of her breast—quick, cruel—and she chokes on my name.

The sound unravels me. I bury my face against her, inhaling amber and salt and the ozone-sharp tang of whatever dormant magic thrums beneath her skin. It hums against my teeth. Mine.

“Fuck your gratitude,” she hisses, heels digging into the small of my back as I tear her pants open. The seam splits like parchment. “Just— Elias ?—”

I don’t let her finish. Don’t let myself think. My palm grinds her hipbone into the wall as I shove inside, slick and vicious. Her moan cracks against the vaulted ceiling, echoing down the alley. Let the whole damned city hear. Let them know what survives.

Her nails rake down my spine, drawing blood. I hiss, fangs punching through my gums as her heat clenches around me—a vice of velvet and fire. Every thrust splits the wound in my side wider, but the pain crystallizes into something bright, honed. Ecstasy as a blade. I want it sharper.

“Look at me.” My hand fists in her hair, forcing her gaze to mine. Gold bleeds across her irises again, the same eerie glow as when she’d shattered the chains binding me. Not human. Not entirely. Our hips snap together, wet and filthy.

She swears, thighs trembling.

I laugh, raw and breathless, as her walls flutter.

Her teeth sink into my shoulder. The sting blooms sweet down my spine. I let her.

Burn me. Break me.

As long as ash tastes like her.

The beast and the man in me howl as one when I drive into her. Not gentle—never gentle—but with the jagged precision of a blade finding its sheath. Her back arches off the damp stone wall, nails scoring my ribs. I welcome the burn.

"Louder," I growl against her throat, tasting salt and wildfire. "Let the whole fucking city hear who you belong to."

She does.

Her scream unravels into something between a prayer and a curse, gold-flame eyes reflecting the animal gleam of mine.

Wet heat clenches around me, tighter than any chain that's ever bound me.

I bite down on the claiming mark blooming violet across her shoulder—half vampire hunger, half wolfish need to brand what's mine .

"Elias—"

The way she snarls my name cracks the last vestige of control. Stone crumbles under my palm as I pin her harder, hips snapping in a frantic rhythm. Her legs lock around my waist, pulling me deeper. Too deep. Always too deep with her.

When the tremors take her, I feel it in my bones—that devastating ripple of release.

Her teeth find my collarbone, drawing blood.

The metallic tang floods my mouth as I roar, spilling into her with a violence that leaves us both shaking.

For three heartbeats, maybe four, I forget which scars are hers and which are mine.

Her sweat cools on my chest as she pushes off me. My claws retract with a sting when she traces the half-moon wounds on my hips.

“I need to see my father.”

I snort, picking gravel from her tangled hair. “Brilliant plan. Let’s waltz into Order HQ so your murder-puppeteer dad can practice his crossbow aim.”

“Not the compound.” She sits up, wincing at the scratches I left across her ribs. Her shirt hangs in tattered ribbons. “Safehouse in the Weeping District. Where he interrogates... cases.”

I catch her wrist before she can button what’s left of her pants. The thrum between us pulses hotter.

“You’re hunting him. For vengeance or closure?”

“Both.” She jerks free. Silver glints as she retrieves her boot knife, thumb testing the edge. “He’s been funneling civilians to Brood gulags. Turning dissenters into lab rats instead of corpses. Makes me wonder...”

“If the monster remembers diaper changes?” My talon flicks the blade from her hand. It clatters into shadows. “He’s a zealot with a flamethrower, Kaia. You stick your head in that oven...”

Her knee pins my thigh, all heat and coiled muscle. “I need to hear his reasons. To know if the man who carried me on his shoulders truly died with my uncle.” The gold flecks in her pupils flare—something ancient and feral in that stare.

I mock-gasp. “My little pacifist wants a therapy chat with Colonel Genocide?”

“Piss off.” She smacks my chest, but her knuckles linger over the scar Ty’s claws gave me. “He’s got answers. About Mother.”

Ah.

“You think he knew what you are? What she was?”

“Well, I damn sure know he does now.” Her laugh’s brittle as salt-rot. She snatches her blade back, holds it between us like a truth serum. “You don’t have to come.”

“Because abandoning you in sniper range is something I would do.”

Her grin’s all teeth. “We’ll take the sewers. He’ll never?—”

My fangs graze her throat. “If he so much as blinks wrong...”

She shoves me against the wall, straddling my legs. “Then we’ll give his priests a new sacrament. Now move your carcass. I want recon before sundown.”

The punchline curdles in my throat. I watch her dress in the pale light filtering through crypt vents, buckling straps with military precision. Love and terror taste identical when she pulls her hair into a knot and says, “You smell like a two-for-one massacre special. Rinse off at Pump Seven.”

“Keep orders to your Order.”

She flips me off as she vanishes up the crumbling stairs, golden eyes glinting like struck matches.

I know that look. She's determined, but my gut knows she's not going to like the answer he's going to give her.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

KAIA

I 'm done running.

The thought isn't just a whisper this time—it's a fucking war drum, hammering through my veins as I shove open the rusted iron doors.

The abandoned hall yawns in front of me, all cracked stone and stale air, the bones of a place long since bled dry of hope. Figures. Perfect place for a man like him to rot.

But he's not rotting. Not yet.

Jareth Draven stands at the far end of the room, as rigid and commanding as ever. The only difference is the thing gnawing behind his eyes—something colder than the Order ever trained into him.

The man who raised me.

The man who made me.

The man who's about to break me.

Elias's hand grazes the small of my back—steady, grounding—and then it's gone, leaving behind the phantom heat of his touch as I step fully inside alone. His presence stays though, a hum against my senses, fierce and ready to tear the world apart if I call.

But this... this I have to face myself.

Jareth turns as I approach, hands folded neatly behind his back, the perfect goddamn soldier. His mouth twists into something almost resembling a smile, but it's nothing but a blade.

"Kaia," he says, voice smooth, cold. "I wondered when you'd come crawling back."

I don't flinch. Won't give him that.

"You sound almost disappointed," I say, voice sharper than I feel.

He lets out a dry, joyless chuckle. "Disappointed?" His gaze rakes over me, clinical. Dissecting. "You have no idea."

I keep moving, step by step, boots scraping across stone. My fingers twist the silver ring my mother gave me, the metal grounding me when everything else wants to splinter apart.

"You're not surprised I'm alive."

"No," he says simply. "After your mother's little show—and exposing herself for the traitorous fae whore she is—I figured you'd be lurking somewhere. Hiding. Ashamed of what you are."

His words slam into me like fists, but I don't stop. I can't.

"I'm not hiding," I say, voice steady even when my heart's shattering in my chest. "I'm here to end this."

He actually laughs—a short, broken sound. "End it? You think this is about you ,

little girl?"

He gestures lazily toward the altar—toward the machine thrumming in the center of the room, veins of sickly golden light pulsing over it like a heartbeat.

"The Purifier," he says with reverence. "The end of monsters. The beginning of a clean, pure world."

I stop a few feet away, feeling that death pulse crawling over my skin like rot. Every instinct screams at me to run, but I lock my knees and stay standing.

"And you were just going to wipe me out too, huh?" I whisper.

He stares at me, something almost... disappointed curling his mouth.

"I had such high hopes for you," Jareth says, voice low and lethal. "You were supposed to be the answer. The one good thing to come out of this cursed world. Proof that we could be better."

I clench my fists so tight my nails bite into my palms. "But I'm not."

"No." His voice hardens, flat and merciless. "You're not. You're a goddamn abomination. Just like her."

I flinch, the word hitting deeper than any blade ever could.

"You should have had the decency to see it for yourself. To end it before it came to this. If you had any self-respect—if you still gave a damn about the Order, about me—you'd help me finish this." He sneers. "Or you'd end it yourself. Save us the trouble."

His eyes gleam with something cruel and triumphant.

"And take that hybrid filth you've been spreading your legs for with you."

My breath catches in my throat, a strangled noise of hurt and rage.

He knows. About Elias. About everything.

And he doesn't care.

He never cared.

All those years, all those memories, scraped clean away with a few venomous words.

"You knew," I choke out. "You knew what I was. You trained me anyway. You lied to me my whole life."

"You were useful," he says without a flicker of shame. "Until you weren't."

My stomach lurches. The man standing in front of me isn't my father anymore. He's something hollow. Something hateful. Something dead .

And I almost stepped right into his trap.

My eyes flick down—catching the faint shimmer of a containment glyph etched into the floor, just a hairsbreadth from where I stand.

He's been stalling. Waiting. Playing me like he always did.

Not this time.

The heartbreak curdles into rage, hot and wild, pouring out of me in a blinding surge. Golden light explodes from my skin, ripping through the snare, shattering the runes with a crack like breaking bones.

Jareth reels back, stunned for a blink—but that's all I need.

"You should've killed me when you had the chance," I snarl, my voice not even sounding human anymore.

I pivot, shoving the heavy doors open with a scream of rusted hinges—and Elias is already there, storm-eyed and furious, his whole body a weapon aimed at anyone who'd dare try to hurt me.

He catches my wrist, anchoring me, pulling me close as we run.

Gunfire. Magic bolts. Screams.

I barely hear it. All I can feel is the ache in my chest, the part of me that still wanted to believe maybe, just maybe, he could be redeemed.

Stupid.

Stupid and over.

We sprint through the wreckage, ducking through debris, heartbeats syncing like a war drum. We don't stop until the forest swallows us whole.

And when we do— When I collapse to my knees, gasping, hands shaking— Elias drops beside me, his arms wrapping around me before I can fall apart.

"I'm sorry," I choke out against his chest. "God, Elias, I'm so fucking sorry."

"For what?" he growls into my hair. "For surviving? For seeing the truth?"

Tears burn behind my eyes but I refuse to let them fall. Not here. Not yet.

"He's gone," I whisper. "The man who raised me... he's gone."

Elias pulls back just enough to catch my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. "You still have a choice, Kaia," he says fiercely. "You always have a choice. You're not him. You're not them. "

I swallow hard, my hands gripping the front of his jacket like a lifeline.

"And you're not alone," he adds, voice breaking low and raw.

I close my eyes, pressing my forehead to his.

"No," I breathe. "Not anymore."

ELIAS

The bunker smells like old stone and desperation.

It's tucked deep under the broken skeleton of some ancient city—half-forgotten by the world, the kind of place even ghosts have given up haunting. Perfect for a gathering of outlaws and monsters.

I stand near the center of the cracked meeting hall, arms crossed, heart beating a slow, heavy rhythm in my chest. Around me, the first waves of the coalition start to gather—witches draped in raven feathers and ash, shifters in human skin but with wild eyes, even a few of the Fae, silver-blooded and wary, drifting like shadows at the edges of the room.

And dragons.

Goddamn dragons.

Kaia is talking quietly to Sonya near the far wall, the golden glow of her magic still lingering faintly under her skin. She looks like she was carved out of battle and fire, like she belongs here. Like she belongs with me.

And gods help me, she does.

I can feel her even without looking—her emotions skimming over my skin like a live wire. Grief. Fury. Hope. And under it all, that steady pull. The bond that neither of us dares name yet, but it's there. Deep. Unbreakable.

She caught me when I was drowning.

Now it's my turn to catch her.

I step forward as the last of the gathered fall silent, every supernatural eye locked on me. On us.

No fear.

No hesitation.

Just that boiling certainty that we're out of time.

"We didn't come here for glory," I say, voice rough, carrying easily across the cracked stone. "We didn't come here to raise a kingdom or burn one down." I let my eyes sweep the room, daring anyone to look away.

"We came because they're planning to wipe us out. All of us. Hybrids, witches, shifters, Fae—doesn't matter how strong you are. Doesn't matter how pure you think your blood is. The Order doesn't fucking care."

Murmurs ripple through the crowd, anger thick enough to taste.

"They built a device," Kaia says, stepping up beside me, her voice clear and hard as steel. "A weapon called the Purifier. One surge, and every bloodline not one hundred percent human will be annihilated."

The room freezes.

I watch the witches' faces pale, the shifters bare their teeth, the dragons' gold eyes slitting into dangerous thin lines.

"This ain't about power," I growl. "It's about survival."

"And we're done waiting for them to come for us," Kaia adds, chin tilted stubbornly, that fire in her eyes that makes my chest fucking ache.

Someone from the back—one of the wolf clans—steps forward. Big guy, broad-shouldered, scars running down his arms like old roadmaps of war.

"You're asking us to start a war," he says. Not accusing. Just steady. Measuring.

"No," I say. "The war's already started. We're just the first ones smart enough to fight back."

A ripple of agreement shudders through the room.

"And before you ask," Kaia cuts in, her voice lowering dangerously, "no, we're not another Typhon's Brood."

The crowd stiffens at the name.

"They wanted blood for the sake of blood," she says. "Wanted to wipe out humans entirely, make supernaturals the new ruling class."

"Replace one tyranny with another," I mutter, lip curling.

Kaia nods, her hand brushing mine for just a second—enough to ground me.

"We're not here to be kings or gods," she says. "We're here to be free."

Silence. Heavy. Absolute.

Then the dragon-speaker, a woman with molten hair and a voice like thunder, steps forward.

"We're with you," she says simply.

One by one, the others follow. Clans. Covens. Scattered Fae courts.

We aren't a polished army. We're broken, battered, furious. And we're enough.

I feel it settle in my bones like destiny sharpening its claws.

Kaia looks at me, her golden eyes catching the torchlight, and something deep inside me just... steadies.

This is why we fight. Not for power. Not for revenge. For the right to exist. To choose. To live.

I squeeze her hand once, quick and fierce, then turn back to the others.

"Tomorrow night," I say. "We hit the Order. Hard. Fast. Before they finish the Purifier."

"And if they finish it before we get there?" one of the witches asks, voice low.

I bare my teeth in a smile that has no warmth.

"Then we tear down the whole fucking place stone by stone until it's nothing but rubble."

Kaia's laugh, low and dark, curls through the air like smoke.

KAIA

The bunker feels smaller now.

Maybe it's the weight of everything pressing down, maybe it's the way the air thickens with magic just being near this many broken, dangerous people under one roof—but it's harder to breathe. Harder to think.

I trail a few steps behind Elias as we move through the narrow hall, our boots crunching over the scattered grit and dust. He's tense, too quiet, that loose, predatory way he walks when he's bracing for something to go wrong.

I don't blame him.

"You sure about this?" I murmur, nudging my shoulder into his arm.

Elias glances down, the faintest curve of a smirk ghosting his mouth, but it's hollow. "No," he says simply. "But I'm doing it anyway."

I know that feeling all too fucking well.

We head toward the infirmary where Mom and Tarek are resting, the faint glow of the healing wards barely lighting the way.

My stomach knots tighter with every step.

Because part of me still hates her. Part of me still wants to scream at her for all the

lies.

But a bigger part wants answers. Needs them.

And gods, if I'm honest... I just want my mom back.

When I slip into the room, Mira's sitting up, a blanket around her shoulders, her golden hair falling wild around her face. Her skin looks better—less bloodless, less brittle—but her eyes... her eyes are fucking haunted.

"Kaia," she breathes, voice hoarse.

I linger near the door, arms crossed, heart pounding so loud it drowns out everything else.

"Talk," I say. "I'm done waiting."

Her smile is so broken it guts me.

She pats the bed beside her. I don't move. I can't. Not yet.

"I owe you the truth," she says, voice steady. "All of it."

Tarek stirs nearby, offering me a nod of quiet encouragement before turning his attention deliberately away to give us space as Elias comes to his bedside.

It's strange seeing him like this, an Alpha made prisoner by his own blood, but still radiating strength even half-crippled by what the Order did to him.

Mom folds her hands in her lap, her gaze locked on mine.

"You're half-Fae, Kaia. You know that now."

I nod stiffly. "Found out the hard way."

Her mouth twists like the truth tastes bitter. "I hid it from you to protect you. To protect the world."

My hands tighten into fists. "Yeah? How's that working out?"

She flinches, but she deserves that.

"You were born... special," she says carefully. "As I said before, you're the prophecy and I have a feeling Elias may have mentioned some things to you as well." She takes a careful breath before continuing. "You are the last true anchor. Your magic isn't just Fae. It's tied to the Veil itself. To the balance between worlds."

I blink. "What the hell does that even mean?"

"It means," she says, voice shaking, "that if you die—if you lose control—if the wrong people bind your magic... the Veil collapses. Reality fractures. Worlds bleed into each other. And the chaos that would unleash..." She shudders. "There wouldn't be anything left to save."

Silence crashes down around us, thick and absolute.

I stagger back a step, almost knocking into the doorframe.

"Why didn't you fucking tell me?" I rasp. "I deserved to know."

"Because you deserved a childhood," she whispers. "You deserved to choose your own fate."

I laugh, sharp and broken. "Some fucking choice."

She leans forward, urgency in her voice now. "It's not too late, Kaia. The Veil can be healed. It's torn, yes, but not beyond mending. There's a way to anchor it again—to stabilize it until the worlds naturally separate like they were meant to."

I stare at her, my whole body buzzing like a live wire.

"And what's the catch?" I ask, because there's always a catch.

Her eyes fill with tears she refuses to let fall. "You would have to bind your magic. Permanently. To someone else strong enough to hold the other end."

I already know who she means before she says it.

Elias.

My chest squeezes painfully.

"But it's not just binding," Mom says. "The ritual could kill you. If it doesn't, it could wipe your memories clean. Of everything. Of everyone."

I stagger another step back, shaking my head like I can make the words un-say themselves.

"No," I whisper. "No, there's gotta be another way."

"There isn't," she says, voice cracking.

I drag in a breath that tastes like ashes.

It's not the death aspect that scares me so much. It's living without him. With no memory of the feelings I know now. Because if I choose this... if I go through with the ritual... I might save the world. But I might forget everyone I love. Forget Elias.

The thought guts me worse than anything Jareth ever said.

I look over at Elias talking quietly with his father and it almost shatters me.

I don't realize I'm crying until Mom stands and pulls me into a hug, her arms fierce around me.

"You're stronger than this," she murmurs into my hair. "Stronger than me. Stronger than him."

I squeeze my eyes shut. Just for a second. Just long enough to borrow her strength.

Then I pull back, scrub my face clean, and nod.

"You'll show me, won't you? How to do it?" I ask, sounding like a scared little girl and for once, not being afraid of showing that side of me.

My mother's smile is small and her nod is even smaller.

"I'll do it," I say, voice hard and trembling. "If it means saving him. Saving all of them."

She smiles through her tears.

"You were always meant to be more than a soldier, Kaia."

No matter the cost, no matter the risk, I would choose him.

Every damn time.

And somehow, somehow, I have to find a way to tell him without breaking both our hearts.

ELIAS

The second the door clicks shut behind us, Kaia grabs my wrist.

"Wait," she says, breathless like the words are trying to outrun her fear.

I stop. I'd stop the fucking world if she asked me like that.

Her hand's shaking where it's wrapped around mine, and when she looks up at me with those gold-flecked eyes, all wild and wounded, I know—whatever she's about to say, it's bad.

Really bad.

I step closer, crowding her gently into the wall, shielding her from the bustle of the main hall where witches and shifters and old gods are sharpening their blades for war.

"Talk to me, Kaia," I say low, trying to steady her. "Whatever it is... I'm here."

She bites her lip hard enough to draw blood. I smell the metallic tang of it and it spikes my instincts, but I force myself to stay calm. Force myself to be what she needs right now.

"My mom," she rasps. "She told me something. About the Veil. About me."

I tilt my head, trying to catch her gaze, but she keeps glancing away like she can't bear to look at me.

"I'm not just tied to it," she says, each word like it's ripped from her throat. "I'm the last true anchor. If I die—or if someone else takes my magic—the Veil falls. The worlds bleed into each other. Everything burns."

I go still.

Completely, utterly still.

Kaia finally lifts her eyes to mine, and what I see there fucking wrecks me—terror, resolve, devastation. All tangled together.

"There's a ritual," she continues, voice breaking. "I can heal it. Bind my magic permanently to hold it steady. But it's a one-way trip, Elias. It could kill me. Or erase everything I am. My memories. Us. "

My heart hammers against my ribs so hard I swear it cracks bone.

"No." The word tears out of me raw and violent.

"Elias—"

"No, Kaia!" I slam my hand against the wall next to her head, my whole body vibrating with fury and panic. "You don't fucking do this alone."

Tears swim in her eyes, but she blinks them back. Always so goddamn stubborn.

"It's the only way," she says, whispering now, like if she says it soft enough it'll hurt less.

"The only way they told you about," I bite out. "There has to be something else. There is something else. Your mother has lied to you your whole life, why do you

think she's benign honest now?!"

Before she can argue, before I can completely lose my shit, a voice cuts through the hall.

"Kaia! Hey—" Sonya, one of the witches we're working with, waves from across the main chamber. "We need you to go over the east wing layouts again. Security's tighter than we thought."

Kaia presses her forehead to my chest for a heartbeat. Just a second. Just enough for me to feel the way she trembles before she shoves it down.

"I have to go," she mumbles.

"I know," I say, even though every part of me wants to chain her to me and never let her leave my sight again.

She looks up, brushes a shaking hand against my jawline. "We'll figure it out," she promises, lying through her goddamn teeth.

And then she's gone.

Swallowed up by the movement of soldiers and sorcerers and shifters.

And I'm left standing there with the walls closing in.

Later, when the noise dies down and no one's looking for me, I slip away.

Deep into the ruins. Past the carved runes warning against trespassing. Past the pools of magic so old they hum like dying stars.

Into the forbidden archive hidden beneath what used to be the heart of the old Fae kingdom.

Velara told me once, back when she was still pretending to care—that the ancients wrote down everything. Their victories. Their betrayals. Their desperate, dangerous magic.

It's where I find it.

Buried under a collapsed archway, half-burned and bleeding ink.

A ritual so dark, so reckless, even the Crimson Court outlawed it.

Soulbinding.

Not the neat, pretty magic Kaia's mother was talking about.

This is brutal. Ugly.

It splits the burden between two lives. Two souls.

But the cost?

It takes a piece of the caster's soul to do it.

Scars them. Forever.

I sit in the dark, clutching the brittle parchment, feeling the weight of what I'm about to do like a noose tightening around my throat.

I could tell her.

I should tell her.

But if I do... she'll fight me. She'll argue. She'll try to protect me just like I'm trying to protect her.

And I can't let her.

Not when she's already giving up everything.

Not when I finally found something worth bleeding for.

I press my hand to the dirt, close my eyes, and swear the oath.

Not to the gods.

Not to the Veil.

Not even to the world.

To her.

Kaia.

Her stubborn, reckless, fire-born heart.

Her sarcasm and her quiet smiles and the way she looked at me that night in the tunnels like maybe, I wasn't doomed to rot alone.

I'll save you, even if it destroys me.

The magic burns through my blood, carving itself into my bones, setting something

deep inside me on fire.

I grit my teeth through the pain, through the certainty that nothing will ever be the same again.

Because this?

This is love, too.

Not the kind that's soft or easy or safe.

The kind that razes you to ash and rebuilds you into something stronger.

Something unstoppable.

When I finally stagger out of the ruins, I catch a glimpse of her across the field, laughing tightly at something Sonya says, shoving a map under her arm like the weight of the world isn't about to crush her.

And I swear to every god that ever existed, I will not let her fall alone.

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KAIA

The air tastes like static and blood.

I stand at the edge of the ruins, where the old world meets the battleground we're about to tear wide open.

Smoke curls from torches jammed into the cracked earth.

Shifters and witches and Fae warriors ready themselves in tight clusters, armor catching the light like a thousand tiny promises: fight, bleed, survive.

Elias moves beside me, a solid wall of fury and purpose. His long hair tied back. He doesn't touch me, but gods, I feel him—like gravity. Like breathing.

We're here. It's today. It's war.

I tighten the dagger strap across my thigh, the crystal pendant Sonya gave me tucked against my chest like a second heartbeat. The Veil Heart. The key to everything.

I need it to save the Veil. To save all of us. Because even if we destroy The Purifier, destroy The Order, someone will always try to rip the tears in the Veil bigger. And if I don't get it... if I fail...

No. I won't fail.

I can't.

Elias leans in, voice low enough that only I hear.

"You sure you're ready for this?"

I meet his eyes, so blue they're almost silver in the storm-light. And maybe I'm shaking, maybe I'm scared out of my goddamn mind, but my voice comes out steady.

"I was born for this."

A grim smile cuts across his mouth. "Yeah. You were."

The signal flare explodes over the field, green and jagged and go.

We move.

The first wave crashes into the Order's outer defenses like a tidal surge, witches throwing up barriers, shifters breaking lines apart with brutal, beautiful violence. I duck and weave through the chaos, sticking to the shadowed paths mapped out in my mind a thousand times over.

Elias breaks left, drawing half the guards with him like a bloody storm. He glances once over his shoulder— You got this, Kaia —before disappearing into the smoke.

Alone now.

It's better this way. No distractions. No hesitation.

The Order's citadel looms ahead, a spire of blackened stone wrapped in layers of magic so thick it feels like trying to wade through tar. My hands tingle, raw energy prickling just under my skin.

Focus.

I slip through a breach in the outer wall, heart hammering against my ribs. No turning back. I'm inside.

The halls are the same. And not.

Familiar routes twist wrong under the influence of the breaking Veil. Rooms bleed into each other, memories, nightmares, shadows that shouldn't exist.

The Order built this place to be timeless, invincible.

Now it's dying.

Just like them.

I sprint down the east corridor, footsteps echoing too loud, too fast. They'll know I'm here soon. I need to find it—the Sanctum. Where they hid the Veil Heart, protected it from the monsters they created.

Monsters like me.

A ripple shudders through the stone and suddenly, I'm not alone.

The walls blur. Shift.

The hallway melts into a memory.

My boots scuff the polished marble of the Order's training hall. I'm twelve. Bloody knuckles. Splitting lip. Standing over a boy twice my size, breathing hard, feeling... proud.

Jareth's voice echoes around me.

"Good. Never apologize for winning, Kaia. Mercy is weakness."

I choke on it.

On the love I once had for him. On the betrayal that still burns like acid under my ribs.

"No," I growl. "Not today."

I shove through the illusion, magic crackling off me like sparks. The hallway snaps back into focus, broken and crumbling.

My head throbs, but I run harder.

The Sanctum doors loom ahead, golden runes crawling across their surface like living vines. They shudder and spit magic like they recognize me. Like they're afraid.

Good.

I slam my palms against the seals and force the magic open with everything I have left.

The doors shriek in protest but give way—and there, in the center of the room, floating above a pedestal carved with ancient sigils, is the Veil Heart.

It's... beautiful.

And terrible.

A shard of pure crystal, pulsing with slow, deep waves of energy that hurt just to look at.

The minute I step inside, the Veil fractures again.

Hard.

The air rips apart with a deafening boom. Screams echo—not real, but memories peeling loose. I stumble, hands clutching my head as the ground splits into a hundred different versions of my past.

Me, kneeling at the Academy altar, swearing loyalty to the Order.

Me, crying into my mother's arms after my first mission.

Me, bleeding in a cell after they thought I failed them.

"You're nothing without us," Jareth's voice sneers from the smoke.

"You're strong because we made you that way."

"You owe us your life."

"No!" I scream, the sound ripping straight from my chest.

I owe them nothing.

I owe me everything.

The pendant at my throat hums hotter, brighter, until it feels like it might burn through my skin. I wrench it free and hold it toward the crystal.

It flares, recognition, acceptance—and drops into my hand like a heartbeat falling into mine.

I snatch it close to my chest, tears streaming down my face, vision burning.

I feel the Veil respond, through the cracks, through the bleeding sky.

It's waiting.

For me.

For Elias.

For us.

The room shakes violently as another explosion rocks the citadel. The battle's close now. I can hear the roar of shifters, the clash of steel, the pulse of spells.

I need to get the fuck out.

I sprint back the way I came, clutching the Veil Heart like it's the only thing keeping me upright.

More illusions claw at me, more memories trying to drag me down, but I barrel through them. Gritting my teeth, snarling curses under my breath.

I'm Kaia fucking Draven.

I am not theirs anymore.

I will never be theirs again.

When I burst through the breach in the wall, the first thing I see is Elias.

Blood streaked, hair wild, eyes burning molten gold instead of the normal blue.

He sees me and relief slams through his features so hard it makes my knees buckle.

I stumble into his arms without thinking, without hesitation.

He catches me, crushing me to him like he'll never let go.

"You got it?" he rasps against my temple.

I nod, too wrecked to speak, just clutching the crystal between us, letting its light seep into my broken pieces.

He leans back enough to look into my face, his own battered and beautiful.

"Then let's end this," he says, voice rough with emotion.

ELIAS

The second her body collides with mine, it's like the whole godsdamn world rights itself.

Kaia's shaking, clutching that crystal like her life depends on it—and maybe it fucking does. Her scent is everywhere, wild and electric, full of blood and magic and defiance. I bury my face in her hair, holding her tighter than I probably should, but fuck it—I almost lost her. Again.

"You got it?" I rasp against her temple, voice wrecked, breath catching in my chest.

She nods once, and it's like something inside me finally exhales.

But there's no time. No time to fall apart or hold her like I want to or promise her every goddamn thing she deserves.

Because the Veil's splintering faster now. I can feel it. Like the world's spine is snapping right down the middle, ready to bleed into chaos.

And the Order?

They're not about to sit back and let it happen.

"Then let's end this," I growl, stepping back enough to look her in the eye.

Golden-amber, blazing with pain and stubborn hope.

We move fast, ducking back through the ruins as the coalition pushes hard against the Order's final defenses.

Magic whips through the air, hot and vicious.

I catch a flash of Sonya flinging an enforcer across the courtyard with a flick of her wrist. A shifter in his wolf form tears into another guard's throat.

It's brutal.

It's beautiful.

It's survival.

Kaia presses the Veil Heart to her chest as we run, the crystal pulsing with a slow, heavy beat that syncs with her magic—and fuck if it doesn't make my own power rear up in response. Like the wildness in my blood knows what's coming. Like it's been waiting for this moment too.

We slip down an alley between the fallen walls of the east tower. It's quieter here. Too quiet.

I slow, instincts prickling. "Something's wrong."

Kaia whirls around, scanning the shadows. "Trap?"

"Or worse," I mutter.

Then the ground shudders.

I shove Kaia behind me just as a rune explodes from the broken stones, white-hot

light blinding, pressure slamming into my chest. Wards. Ancient ones.

Fuck.

A squad of black-cloaked Order hunters steps out of the smoke, weapons drawn. Their armor gleams, etched with sigils meant to neutralize magic, to cage beings like me. Like Kaia.

"Hand it over," the leader sneers, his voice low and mean. "You can still walk away."

Kaia steps up beside me, chin lifted, shoulders squared. "Not a fucking chance."

I'm so goddamn proud I could burn this place down with it.

The lead hunter sneers at her. "You're no better than them now, little girl. Might as well put a collar around your own neck."

Kaia's smile is razor sharp. "Come try."

I don't even wait for the command. I shift, partially—fangs elongating, strength surging—and we tear into them.

Kaia moves like a storm, magic sparking from her fingertips, blades flashing in each hand. She's pure fucking chaos, and I swear to every god that ever breathed, she's the most terrifying, beautiful thing I've ever seen.

I rip through two hunters, shoving another into the ward rune and watching him convulse under his own magic.

But they just keep coming.

Kaia shouts something, my name—but I'm locked in a grapple with a hulking bastard built like a brick wall. His blade scrapes across my ribs, biting deep, but I twist and snap his neck with a snarl and drain him lifeless, fueling my own power and need.

I turn just in time to see another hunter grab Kaia from behind, wrenching her back, a blade pressed to her throat.

"No!" My voice rips from me.

She struggles, eyes wide, fury and fear flaring across her face—but she's trapped. For now.

"You think you can win?" the leader sneers, advancing on me, sword gleaming with the same golden rot that pulses from the citadel. "The Veil's going to fall either way. All you're doing is choosing how ugly it gets."

Rage tears through me, red and blinding.

Not her.

Not Kaia.

Not today.

I pull the darkness up from my core, the blood magic, the rage, the power that terrifies even me. It explodes outward in a wave of force, slamming the hunters backward like rag dolls.

The one holding Kaia flies into the broken stone, bones crunching on impact.

Kaia scrambles up, panting, eyes burning gold.

"You okay?" I rasp, staggering to her.

She grabs my face in both hands, trembling, but nodding.

"I'm fine. You?"

I grin, blood dripping from my mouth. "Never better."

We don't wait.

We bolt.

The Veil Heart pulses harder against Kaia's chest as we race through the last halls toward the courtyard where the coalition is pushing into the final breach.

But every step feels heavier.

Every breath feels like it could be the last.

And deep down, I know, this is it.

One way or another, this is the beginning of the end.

For the Order.

For the world.

For us.

I glance at Kaia as we run, my heart splitting wide open inside me.

I'm not losing her.

Not to the Order.

Not to the Veil.

Not to fate.

I already made my choice.

I'll pay any price to make sure she survives.

Even if it costs me everything and I hope she understands when I have to bind my soul to hers to keep me, and the world, from losing her.

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KAIA

The chamber pulses around us, the air thick and choking with magic. Broken pillars lean toward the heart of the room where the altar waits, carved with ancient runes that glow a sickly gold, bleeding into the cracks of the stone.

The Veil is dying.

I feel it in my bones.

I clutch the Veil Heart crystal tighter against my chest, every nerve screaming at me to move, to finish this before it's too late.

Elias is right behind me, his hand ghosting my lower back like he's afraid if he lets go, I'll disappear.

Maybe I will.

I glance over my shoulder at him. His eyes, those impossible molten gold eyes turned with her shifter side—are wild, desperate.

"We have to do this," I whisper, voice shaking even though I try like hell to keep it steady. "We have to heal it before it tears apart."

He doesn't answer.

Instead, he grabs my wrist.

Hard.

"Elias—what the hell?—"

He shakes his head, jaw clenched so tight I can see the muscle ticking in his cheek. His grip isn't cruel, but it's unmovable. Like iron.

"You're not finishing this alone," he says, voice low and ragged. "You're not dying for them. For any of this."

I yank against his hold, furious and terrified all at once. "We don't have time to argue?—"

"I'm not fucking arguing, Kaia!" His voice cracks the air like a whip. "I'm saving you. "

And then he moves, too fast, too strong—pinning me down against the cold stone floor.

I thrash under him, shoving, cursing, fighting like hell, but he's already started the chant, ancient Fae words that slice through the air and burn against my skin.

"No! Elias, don't?—"

He leans down, forehead pressed to mine, breath shaking as he murmurs, "I love you. That's why I'm doing this. That's why I have to ."

Tears blur my vision, rage and terror and heartbreak mixing into one endless scream in my chest.

Not like this. Please, not like this.

The magic coils tighter around us, luminous and cruel, and that's when I feel what he's about to do. He's about to bind our souls.

No.

I feel the ritual begin to latch on, to pull at the tether between us.

When a voice cuts through the air like a gunshot.

"Traitor."

I freeze.

Jareth stands at the shattered doorway, his armor smeared with blood, his sword gleaming with the wrong kind of light. His face—the face I loved, the face I trusted—is twisted into something monstrous.

"You," Jareth hisses, his boots slamming the ground, closing the space between us with terrifying finality. "You were supposed to be the future. You were supposed to save us. Save humanity. You were everything."

I claw myself up from under Elias, my ribs screaming, my legs like jelly. But rage, hot and cutting, keeps me standing. I shove myself between them, my whole body trembling but unyielding.

Elias growls low behind me, a brutal, broken sound. I feel his energy coil, ready to strike, but I whip a hand back— not yet. This is mine to finish.

"You made me into this," I say, my voice ragged, fury boiling under every syllable. "You lied. You used me. You turned me into a weapon and called it love ."

Jareth's lips curl back from his teeth. "You're an abomination," he snarls. "You should've done the right thing. Taken the knife yourself instead of shaming everything I built. I thought after the last time I saw you, you'd have the decency to do it."

A fresh, sharp pain knifes through my chest—but it's not physical. Not yet.

Elias moves then, lunging for Jareth, but Jareth is faster, faster than he should be—and he rams into Elias, slamming him back so hard it echoes off the stone. Elias grunts, dazed but trying to scramble up, fury in his every breath.

Jareth whirls on me again.

The knife flashes, silver and cruel in the dim light.

I summon everything inside me—the crackling golden energy, the heartbeat of the Veil thrumming through my blood—and it surges outward in a blinding flare. Magic wraps around my hands, a living, snarling thing.

I could end this.

I could .

But then I see him, this broken, bitter man who once kissed scraped knees and taught me how to braid leather into my boots.

And for one devastating heartbeat, the past claws its way into the present.

I hesitate .

Not because I'm weak.

Not because I'm afraid.

Because deep down, some ruined, bleeding piece of me still hoped he might see me—not as a weapon, not as a failure—but as his daughter .

A mistake that costs everything.

Jareth lunges, faster than thought, seizing my hesitation. He grabs my wrist, twisting brutally, wrenching the magic from my grasp. I cry out, staggering.

"Still soft," he sneers, twisting harder, driving me to my knees.

Elias roars again behind me, fighting against whatever trap Jareth slammed him with. I see him, struggling, bleeding , trying to reach me.

I shove magic outward, trying to break free, but Jareth's already moving, brutal and clinical, the way he taught me to be. He knows every counter to my instincts because he put them there .

In a vicious move, he forces the blade upward, driving it between my ribs.

A wet, sharp gasp shreds my lungs.

The world tilts sideways.

I feel the metal punch through skin and bone, feel the warmth blossom down my front.

My knees buckle, but I don't fall alone.

Jareth shoves me away like garbage.

Like I'm nothing .

And this time, Elias is there, catching me, pulling me tight against him as I collapse.

The dagger is still lodged deep in my chest, but the worst pain is the look in Elias's eyes.

Shattered.

Wild.

Devastated.

He cradles me like I'm made of spun glass, rocking me, whispering broken words I can't quite hear anymore.

"I tried," I want to tell him. "I tried so fucking hard."

But no words come.

Only blood.

Only silence.

Elias presses his forehead to mine, his tears hot against my skin.

"You don't get to do this," he rasps. "You don't get to leave me, Kaia. You don't. "

But my body is already so heavy.

So cold.

In the end, it wasn't because I wasn't strong enough.

It was because, just for one second, I let myself believe there was something left to save in the man who made me.

And that's a mistake you only get to make once.

"I love you," I whisper, because it's all I have left, all I am .

He sobs, a broken, raw sound I didn't know he could make—and cradles me tighter like he can somehow hold me here through sheer force of will.

But I'm slipping.

The Veil Heart slips from my fingers, clattering to the floor.

I try to reach for it. Try to finish what we started.

But my body won't listen anymore.

Everything fades.

Elias's face, the sound of the battle, the world itself—all of it dims into a long, aching silence.

My last thought is him.

Always him.

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ELIAS

She's slipping away in my arms, and there's nothing I can fucking do.

Then... she's gone.

Kaia's blood soaks my hands, sticky and hot, the scent of it a drum in my head.

I press my forehead to hers, my chest splitting wide open.

"No," I growl, voice shredded from the inside out. "You're not fucking doing this, Kaia. You're not leaving me. You hear me? You don't get to leave me!"

A sharp bootstep echoes, then another.

I lift my head, every fucking cell in my body howling for blood.

Jareth stands there, covered in Kaia's blood, breathing like he just won the fucking war. His blade gleams, dripping. His mouth twists into a satisfied sneer.

"She made her choice," he says coldly, like Kaia's life is some goddamn chess piece he just knocked off the board.

The last sliver of my control shatters.

I lay Kaia gently down, brushing her blood-matted curls back from her forehead. I kiss her temple. A promise. A prayer. A fucking death warrant.

And then I rise.

My hands are claws. My blood sings with murder.

Jareth doesn't even have time to lift his blade.

I'm on him, pure rage, pure need to destroy—my body shifting halfway between man and monster. Fangs shred through my gums. My nails turn to talons.

He swings the dagger, but I duck low and crash into him like a freight train, sending him flying back into the crumbling wall.

The fucker actually laughs—a broken, bitter thing.

"You think you're better than me, hybrid trash?" he spits. Blood drips from his mouth. "You're just another mistake."

"Yeah?" I snarl, stalking closer.

He tries to run.

Tries.

I slam him against the stone, feel the crack of bone under my grip. My claws sink deep into his throat, squeezing, cutting. He struggles—kicking, punching—but he's nothing now. Just a scared, hollow man.

"You killed the only good thing you ever had," I snarl into his face, voice low and shaking with fury. "You don't deserve to breathe her air."

And then I rip .

Blood gushes in a hot arc across my chest, but I don't feel it. I don't feel anything but the roar in my skull.

Jareth's body crumples to the floor, lifeless, useless. Exactly what he made Kaia believe she was.

I stagger back, panting, the blood dripping from my claws, my fangs still bared.

But none of it matters.

I turn.

Kaia lies there, motionless, her hand limp against the cold ground.

"No," I rasp, crawling back to her, scooping her up, cradling her like something precious and already broken. "No, no, no."

Her skin is too pale.

Her heartbeat is non-existent.

I press my face into her hair, rocking her, begging—pleading—with whatever gods still listen to monsters like me.

"Come on," I whisper against her forehead. "You fight me on everything else. Fight me on this."

I feel the ragged edge of despair sink its teeth into me.

Through the chaos, through the blinding, screaming agony inside me—I remember.

The forbidden ritual.

The one I was about to use before her father. Before he took everything from me.

This is the choice.

I pull Kaia tighter against me, wrapping us both in the blood-soaked cloak of my magic.

I slice my palm open with one claw, pressing the bleeding wound to her heart. The words spill out of me in a rough chant—ancient, ugly syllables not meant for mortal tongues. My blood shivers. The ground hums under us.

The price is immediate.

Pain slices through me, black and blinding. Like something vital is tearing loose, shredding from bone and soul.

I grit my teeth and give it anyway .

Give her everything.

The last words leave me in a broken growl. I collapse over her, my blood smeared across her skin, seeping into the wound over her chest.

My vision blurs.

Everything is slipping away.

" Kaia, " I whisper hoarsely, the last word I might ever speak. "Come back to me. Please."

I brush her hair back, trembling so bad my fingers barely obey.

Silence.

Suddenly, a gasp.

A stuttering, desperate inhale.

Kaia arches beneath me, her hands clutching weakly at my shirt, her mouth dragging in sweet, ragged life .

I choke out a sob, folding her tighter against me, burying my face in her neck, feeling the pulse there hammer back to life.

She shoots straight up, taking in her surroundings and new life.

She's alive.

She's alive.

But the cost, I feel it already.

The hollow inside me where a part of my soul used to be.

I don't give a fuck.

She's breathing.

And I'd trade every piece of myself a thousand times over if it meant I still get to hear her heartbeat against mine.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

KAIA

B reath slams into my lungs like I've been dragged up from the bottom of the ocean.

I jolt upright, gasping, heart pounding so hard it rattles my goddamn bones.

The world spins—too bright, too sharp —the colors bleeding together into something otherworldly.

I can feel everything—the ground humming under me, the crackling tear of the Veil nearby, the thread of magic in the very air twisting around me like a lover's hand.

It's like waking up in someone else's skin.

No, something else's .

“Kaia?”

Elias's voice cuts through the chaos, ragged and desperate, grounding me better than anything else ever could.

His hands are on my face, trembling, bloodied, real .

His eyes are wide and wild, flickering between that piercing ice-blue and molten gold, like he can't figure out which half of him is more terrified.

“Elias?” My voice comes out wrecked, broken and new at the same time.

His breath hitches. His forehead drops against mine like he can't stand upright anymore. "I thought—I thought I lost you."

I grip the front of his shirt, pulling him closer because the ache in my chest, the emptiness that was there seconds ago, is gone now, replaced by this overwhelming pull—to him, to the world, to everything .

"What happened?" I whisper.

He flinches like I slapped him.

"I... I used the ritual," he says hoarsely, his eyes sliding shut like he can't bear to look at me when he says it.

"The bloodbinding I was going to do before your father— I just, I couldn't lose you.

So... I gave up part of my soul to pull you back.

I didn't tell you because I knew you'd fucking hate me for it.

But now, in this case, I hope you'd understand why I had to. "

My heart cracks wide open.

Not because I'm angry.

Because he chose me . Over himself. Over everything. Again.

I cup his jaw, forcing him to look at me. His skin is cold under my touch, like the magic hasn't finished bleeding through him yet.

“You stupid, stubborn, idiot,” I murmur, tears pricking my eyes. “You think I wouldn’t have done the same for you?”

His mouth trembles like he’s about to say something smartass, something cutting to protect himself, but the words die in his throat. His eyes burn into mine— real and raw and aching —and it guts me.

And then it hits me.

My father.

The memory slams back in brutal technicolor—the fight, the betrayal, the dagger in my chest.

My hand drifts instinctively to the place where he stabbed me, expecting blood, a wound. But all I find is smooth, unmarred skin. A faint shimmer of golden light pulses under my fingertips.

I meet Elias’s gaze.

“Where is he?” I rasp, though part of me already knows. Feels it.

“Dead,” Elias says, voice low and lethal. “I made sure of it.”

Something shudders through me—a tremor of grief, relief, and something uglier. Something like freedom.

I nod once, shaky, but I don’t cry. Not for Jareth Draven.

He made his choice. And so have I.

The Veil stirs against my skin, a living thing made of hope and terror and endless memory. I can feel its jagged edges, its bleeding seams. It's dying.

But it can be healed .

And I know now, in my bones, in my blood, what I have to do.

I turn back to Elias, brushing my fingers through his long black hair, feeling the way he leans into the touch like he's starving for it.

"You with me?" I whisper.

His smile is a wrecked, broken thing—but it's real. "Always, Kaia."

I lace my fingers with his, feeling the blood magic still thrumming faintly under his skin—our magic now—and pull him toward the center of the chamber.

The Veil Heart crystal pulses there, hovering above the cracked altar.

Waiting.

I step forward, and the Veil rushes around me, through me, singing in a voice only I can hear.

Mend us. Bind us. Save us.

I squeeze Elias's hand tighter.

We don't need words. We never have.

He steps up beside me, his free hand brushing the side of my waist, steadying me like

he always does without even thinking about it.

Together, we raise our joined hands to the crystal.

Magic floods the room, ancient, wild, furious . It screams against my skin, against the part of me that's still human, but I don't flinch. I embrace it.

Elias grits his teeth, his body straining against the force, but he doesn't let go.

Not once.

The ritual burns through us, golden and red, like veins of molten power threading our bodies together. I feel it latch onto my soul—onto his —and knit us into one unbreakable bond.

The Veil shudders, tearing, screaming—and then, slowly, healing .

I cry out, the sound ripped from my throat, but it's not pain.

It's rebirth .

Elias presses his forehead to mine, whispering broken promises and cursing like he's bleeding out every fear he's ever had.

"I got you," he growls, voice wrecked. "I got you, Kaia."

"I know," I whisper back, tears running hot down my cheeks. "I got you too."

The crystal flares, one final blinding surge—and then shatters into a thousand points of light, scattering through the ruins like stars.

The Veil hums, whole again.

Alive.

And so are we.

I collapse against Elias, trembling, laughing and crying all at once as he catches me, his arms wrapping around me like a fortress.

It's over.

But it's also just the beginning.

ELIAS

The world's still spinning sideways when Sonya finds us.

Her boots crunch across the ruined stones, face smudged with soot and blood, but her smile—it's a fucking sunburst through the ash.

"It's done," she gasps out, chest heaving. "The Purifier's gone. Most of the Order's gone with it."

Gone.

The word echoes through the broken place that used to be the center of our nightmares. The place where Kaia bled, where I fucking bled to bring her back.

I sag against the cracked altar, my hand still tangled in Kaia's. She's here—alive—her golden-amber eyes shining like fire and hope and every goddamn thing I thought I didn't deserve.

But even with her warmth pressed into my side, there's this gnawing cold inside me.

The ritual tore something out of me, something important. I can feel the hole, jagged and raw, a sucking wound where my soul should be stitched clean.

At first, it's just a hum in the back of my skull. A low static.

Then the edges of my vision darken, like the shadows are crawling closer, laughing,

whispering.

Monster.

Abomination.

You should've let her die, spared her from you.

My teeth snap together with a brutal click, fangs slicing my own tongue, copper flooding my mouth.

Sonya's still talking, her words blurring, but Kaia—Kaia feels it.

She turns her head sharply, her wild black curls sticking to her sweaty skin, and her gaze slams into me like a goddamn lightning strike.

“Elias,” she breathes, real quiet, like she already knows.

I jerk back a step, ripping my hand from hers like she's made of fire. My body's not mine anymore. My pulse is a drumbeat of rage, my hands shaking with the need to tear, rip, destroy.

I don't know if I'm going to hurt her. And the thought of that—the thought of hurting her—makes me want to rip my own fucking heart out.

“No,” I rasp, stumbling backward. “Stay the hell away from me.”

Kaia's face doesn't even flicker. No fear. No hesitation.

She walks straight toward me, each step defying the beast clawing inside me.

“Elias, look at me.” Her voice is like velvet wrapped around steel. “Look at me.”

I do.

God help me, I do.

And it nearly fucking breaks me.

Because there’s no fear there. No disgust. No judgment.

Just her, stubborn and wild and stupidly brave, shining with that raw Fae magic that hums through the cracked Veil like a second heartbeat. Our heartbeat.

“You’re not a monster,” she says fiercely, grabbing my face between her hands. “You’re not some fucked-up accident. You’re just a man. A man born from chaos who fought like hell to become something more. Who gave your best to save me. That’s anything but a monster.”

I shake my head, a low growl rattling my chest. “You don’t know what’s inside me, Kaia. You don’t know what I’m capable of now. Especially with something missing.”

Her hands tighten, nails digging into my jaw just enough to hurt. To ground me.

“I know exactly what’s inside you,” she spits. “Because it’s inside me too. Rage. Fear. Power. And love, you stubborn son of a bitch. Love.”

Something in me splinters down to the marrow.

She presses closer. Her magic flares between us—warm, golden, real—and I feel it wrap around the broken parts of me like a balm.

She's anchoring me. Saving me.

Not from the world. Not from the prophecy. From myself .

Tears burn the backs of my eyes and I squeeze them shut, breathing her in like she's oxygen and I've been drowning forever.

"I can't lose you," I croak. "I already lost too much."

"You're not gonna lose me," she whispers. "I'm not going anywhere. You tied us together, remember?"

I huff a broken laugh, my hands finally finding her waist, gripping her like she's the only thing holding me to the fucking earth.

And maybe she is.

She pulls back just enough to look at me, her eyes fierce and molten, shimmering faintly with her new magic.

"You didn't just save the world, Elias," she murmurs, voice rough and thick with emotion. "You saved me . And I'm gonna spend the rest of our fucked-up lives making sure you know it."

I crush her against me, burying my face in her hair, the wild scent of her—earth and rain and something that's just Kaia —filling every shattered part of me.

For the first time in my life, the war inside me goes quiet.

Not gone. It'll never be gone.

But it's not screaming anymore.

Not with her wrapped around me, her magic twined with mine, her soul pressed against the ruins of what used to be a hollow, bleeding thing inside my chest.

The Veil outside shudders, healing, mending, singing with new life.

And so do I.

“Come on,” Kaia says, tugging me gently toward the broken doors leading out of the ruined citadel. The battle’s over. The world is waiting.

We walk out together, hand in hand, into a world that we bled for, fought for, chose to save.

Suddenly, I don’t feel cursed.

I just feel alive .

With her.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

KAIA

It's quieter now. Not the desperate, panicked silence of a battlefield—but the heavy stillness of an ending that's about to become a beginning.

I stand at the heart of it, my heart pounding against my ribs, my palms slick with sweat despite the chill.

The soldiers that survived the siege—witches, shifters, Fae, even a few humans brave or stupid enough to fight beside us—stand in a wide circle, battered but breathing, watching. Waiting. Hope in their eyes, fear in their bones.

Among them, my mother. Elias's father. Sonya.

All of them holding their breath like the world might split if they let it out too soon.

And maybe it will.

I glance sideways at Elias, and my chest tightens in a way that has nothing to do with fear.

He looks like a storm barely leashed—ashen skin, molten-gold eyes, dark hair plastered to his forehead. Beautiful and broken and mine.

He catches me looking, that crooked half-smirk tugging at his mouth—the one that always undoes me, even when the world's burning down around us.

“You ready for this?” he murmurs under his breath, voice rough and low.

I nod once, sharp and sure, even though my knees threaten to buckle.

“No going back now,” I say. “Not that there ever was.”

He huffs a breathless laugh, reaches out, and twines our fingers together.

Our connection sparks instantly—gold licking up my arms, shadows curling down his. A swirl of light and dark, chaos and order, pain and love. The mirror of what we are, what we’ve always been.

“Let’s finish it,” I whisper.

He squeezes my hand once. "Together."

We step forward, toward the cracked stone dais in the center of the room—the place where the old rituals were first performed, where the Veil was once woven thick and strong by ancient Fae blood and desperate human prayers.

Now it’s torn. Bleeding. Gasping for salvation.

And we’re it.

No pressure.

This is the final step. The first ritual was just the mending. This is the binding.

I kneel first, placing the Veil Heart crystal—pulsing soft and steady like a second heart—into the hollow carved into the stone.

It hums beneath my fingers, the magic inside waking up, reaching for something. Reaching for us.

Elias drops beside me a second later. His presence, his power, folding around mine like armor.

The air grows heavy, thick with ancient weight. The Veil itself—half there, half not—presses against my skin like a living thing. I can feel it now, not just see it. Its hope. Its terror. Its need.

The old words come easily, etched into my blood, my bone. Passed down from a grandmother I barely knew but who left her legacy carved deep into the marrow of my being. The words my mother taught me while we planned for this.

I speak them aloud, my voice shaking, rising over the chamber:

"By blood and breath, by light and shadow, by choice and by bond, we mend the tear, we heal the wound, we anchor the worlds."

Elias's voice joins mine, low and sure, vibrating through my skin:

"Let the Veil live, not break. Let it breathe, not bleed. Let it fall with grace when its time is done, not shatter in rage."

The crystal between us flares blindingly bright.

It begins.

A pulse, deep and resonant, explodes outward from the dais, knocking the dust from the rafters, making the floor shudder under my knees. Gold surges from me—raw, wild, fierce—and shadows pour from Elias, hungry and endless.

For a second, they clash.

Light against dark. Fire against night.

A battle older than any story ever told.

But we don't fight each other.

We reach for each other.

Our essences, our magic—twist and tangle and finally, finally, merge. Not perfectly. Not cleanly. It's messy, violent, terrifying. It hurts.

Like ripping yourself open and offering your soul to someone else and trusting them not to break it.

And Elias, this wild, wounded, brilliant man—he doesn't break it.

He cradles it.

Wraps it in his own cracked soul and holds it close.

I feel him, his fear, his rage, his hope, his love—so raw and open it brings tears stinging to my eyes.

And I know he feels me too.

All the parts of me I tried to hide—the fear, the anger, the desperate, messy love I never knew how to say right until him.

The chamber spins, the world blurs, and through the haze, I see the Veil.

Not as a wall, not as a prison.

But as a bridge.

Translucent now, no longer a hard divide but a shimmer between two worlds. Strong. Steady. Kind.

It will fall one day, yes. But not in blood and war. Not in hatred.

In peace.

Because we chose it.

Because we bled for it.

Because we loved enough to save it.

The light fades slowly, sinking into the stones, the ground, the very bones of the earth. Magic settles in the air like dust motes in sunlight.

When I blink back into focus, I realize everyone's still watching.

Silent. Awestruck.

And Elias, my Elias—is still kneeling beside me, his hand wrapped so tightly around mine it almost hurts.

I turn to him, my chest so full it might crack open.

“We did it,” I breathe.

He just looks at me like I'm the miracle.

"We did," he says, voice rough, threaded with a wonder that shatters something inside me all over again.

I lean forward, resting my forehead against his, breathing him in. His steadiness. His fire. His heart.

"I love you," I whisper, so quiet it's almost a prayer.

He laughs, a choked, broken sound—and kisses me like it's the only thing anchoring him to the world.

When we finally pull apart, I realize something deep in my gut:

The prophecy was never about war.

It was never about blood or fate or sacrifice.

It was about us.

Saving the Veil. Saving the world.

Saving each other.

And now, we get to live in the world we fought to protect.

Alive and together.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:28 pm

ELIAS

The salt air burns in my lungs the first time I step out onto the cliffs of Dragon Island.

The ocean churns below us, endless and alive, crashing against black stone in a rhythm that matches the slow, steady thud of my heart.

It's not quiet here, not really. The wind howls. The sea roars. Somewhere behind us, I hear the low, rumbling calls of dragons circling the peaks.

But inside me?

Silence.

Not the broken, bleeding kind that used to gnaw at my bones.

A peace I never fucking thought I'd deserve.

And at the center of it, the reason I'm even breathing right now—Kaia.

She stands at the edge of the cliff, eyes narrowed against the wind, her wild curls whipped into a black halo around her head. The light catches on the shimmer of her skin—Fae magic blooming through her now so naturally it's like it's always been there, waiting to be free.

God, she's fucking beautiful.

I roll my shoulders, adjusting the heavy leather coat I never ditched even after all this time. Habits die hard, I guess. The armor we used to wear to survive the world before we carved a new one out of its bones.

Behind us, the summit's in full swing. A thousand voices—human and supernatural alike—murmur and argue and laugh across the sprawling white tents pitched on the cliffs.

The first ever supernatural-human peace summit.

And somehow, by some cosmic joke or miracle, Kaia and I are the ones leading it.

Us. The runaway soldier and the broken monster.

"You're brooding again," Kaia says, a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth without even turning around.

"Not brooding," I mutter, moving up behind her. "Thinking."

"Same thing in your case." Her voice is dry as sandpaper, but there's warmth in it too. A softness she saves for when she thinks no one else can hear.

I wrap my arms around her waist, dragging her back flush against my chest. She melts into me without hesitation, like we're two halves of the same wildfire.

Maybe we are.

"You ever think about how fucking crazy this is?" I murmur against the curve of her ear. "All of it? Us?"

She tilts her head up, golden eyes catching mine. A challenge. A fucking promise.

"Every damn day."

I kiss the top of her head, breathing her in—salt and steel and whatever the hell that scent is that's just

Kaia .

I never thought I'd get this.

Not after everything I did.

Everything I was.

But she saw through all the rage and the blood and the broken pieces. Saw me. Chose me anyway.

And together, we didn't just survive.

We changed the world .

The Veil still shimmers above the waterline, no longer a hard divide, no longer something to tear apart or fear. It's translucent now, breathing like a living thing, a bridge between two worlds instead of a wall.

Our magic did that.

Our love did that.

When we bound ourselves to it, when our essences merged into that swirl of gold and shadow, we made damn sure the Veil would fall one day with grace, not in chaos.

But not yet.

First, there's living to do.

Kaia twists in my arms, facing me fully now, hands braced against my chest. Her mouth curves up in that wicked way that always makes my blood heat instantly.

"You know," she says, voice low and dangerous, "we're technically heroes now."

I arch a brow. "Yeah?"

"Mhm." She drags her nails lightly down my chest, and my whole body tightens. "Saviors. Peacekeepers. Whatever title you wanna slap on it."

"Sounds exhausting," I say, voice gone rough.

"Good thing we've got time to blow off some steam then." She leans up on her toes, her mouth brushing mine—a whisper of contact that ignites every nerve ending I have.

I growl low in my throat, one hand sliding down to cup her ass, dragging her even closer.

"You tryna start something?"

Her smile is pure sin. "Finish it, more like."

My control snaps.

I kiss her hard, deep, hungry—the way I've wanted to since the second she dragged me back from the fucking edge of hell. She moans softly against my mouth, and I swear to god it's the sweetest fucking sound I've ever heard.

I spin us, slamming her back against the cliff wall, careful but still desperate, like I

can't get close enough to her no matter how hard I try.

Her fingers tangle in my hair, tugging just enough to make me groan. My hands roam freely, memorizing every curve, every scar, every inch of her like a man starved.

The wind tastes like her laughter and the sea's rage as I crush Kaia against the stone, my hands biting into her hips hard enough to leave bruises she'll smirk at tomorrow. She nips my lower lip, sharp and punishing, her fingers twisting in my hair.

"You're thinking too loud," she gasps against my mouth. Her thigh hooks around my waist, dragging me closer. The cliffside shudders under our weight, pebbles skittering into the abyss below.

"Easy, Fae princess. Unless you want the entire summit to watch me wreck you." My words snarl out rougher than I intend, fangs pricking my tongue.

Kaia's eyes flare molten, her skin shimmering faintly as magic thrums beneath it. "They'd need telescopes." She shoves me back a step, all fierce grin and wild curls. "But I don't share."

I catch her wrist before she can retreat, yanking her against me. "Too late. You're stuck with this monster."

"Upgraded model, actually."

I hoist her up, her legs locking around my waist as I stride toward the arched balcony jutting over the sea. The summit's tents blur behind us, voices swallowed by the waves. She laughs, low and dark, teeth scraping my jugular—testing, always testing.

Stone cracks under my grip as I set her on the balustrade. Salt spray mists her shoulders, catching the moonlight like scattered diamonds. I arch a brow. "This unstable enough for you?"

Her nails rake down my spine, ripping fabric. "I want it to break ."

I flip open the slit of her skirt, calloused fingers meeting the fevered silk of her inner thighs.

Her scent hits me first—salt and jasmine and the electric tang of her awakening magic, so potent my fangs throb against my tongue.

The first thrust steals my breath not from pleasure, but from the sheer violence of restraint required; my claws splinter stone as I fight not to shred her dress, her skin, this fragile mortal shell hiding a storm.

Kaia arches like drawn steel, her gasp swallowed by the thunder of waves below.

Her hands map the scars across my shoulders with predatory precision, blunt human nails carving furrows that close before blood can bloom.

Every snap of her hips is a battle strategy honed against my ribs, every bite at my jugular a surrender I taste in the copper between our lips.

Her heat grips me tighter than any shackle the Order ever forged, mortal flesh impossibly soft around the brutal geometry of my cock.

"Still," she pants, fingers knotting in my hair to jerk my head back, "think this alliance is stable?" Her amber eyes flash with fractured light—gold bleeding into emerald at the edges. The change I shouldn't notice.

I growl low in my throat, the sound more wolf than man as I slam her harder against the eroding balustrade.

"Fuck stability." The ancient marble cracks further, our combined weight scattering shards into the abyss.

Her answering laugh fractures into a moan that vibrates through my bones, through the cursed blood singing in my veins.

Her teeth find my earlobe, sharp and deliberate. "There's the beast."

"You made the beast." The pulse beneath her skin quickening as my mouth claims hers.

She tastes like victory stolen from ancestral graves, like recklessness distilled into nectar.

The ivy she summons from shattered stone whispers across my throat—not restraint, but invitation, leaves soft as her gasped "Keep going" against my split lip.

The balcony disintegrates.

We fall entwined, her legs locked around my hips, my hand cradling the base of her skull—as the world fractures into sea spray and moonlight.

Saltwater stings my eyes as we plunge beneath the waves, but Kaia's grin remains etched against the dark: challenge and triumph and something dangerously like trust. Her curls fan around us like ink spilled in liquid night, our movements turning fluid and desperate as the ocean swallows our war cries.

Fractured marble bites my shoulders as we sink deeper. Cold brine floods my nostrils but I taste only her—salt and iron and that impossible spark humming beneath her skin, brighter now that she's stopped pretending to be human.

Across my fractured ribs, the wolf bays victory. Beneath my pounding pulse, the vampire counts each heartbeat fluttering against my tongue like a caged sparrow.

Our teeth clash in something too vicious for a kiss, her fingernails scoring twin rivers

down my back that heal as fast as she can open them.

When the convulsions take her, I drink her gasp—not blood but breath, not theft but sacrament.

The sea floor rises to meet our joined bodies, silt swirling around us like funeral ashes for the people we were an hour ago.

This, I think as her laughter bubbles against my throat, sharp and bright as broken glass, is what being reborn means.