



# Cruel Alpha, Season Three (Wolves of New Eden #3)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** "Either fall in line and be treated like a queen, or rebel and force me to show what a beast I can be. Heaven or hell, Annalise... the choice is yours."

Every alpha needs a mate, and Cas plans to claim Annalise Breedlove.

Too bad she wants nothing to do with him.

Sold by her family for gain, she clashes with Cas like oil and water.

Not even power and wealth sway her.

Yet, behind closed doors, their hot tempers and deepening frustration boils over, making Cas lose focus.

Hes no longer concerned with taming his Little Wolf.

He wants to win her heart.

That is if ghosts from his past and hidden enemies dont stop him before he has the chance.

**Total Pages (Source):** 24

# Page 1

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1

Sins of the Father

Caspian

The walls of my study close in on me by the second.

I loosen my tie, pacing as I'm plagued by torturous thoughts of how I've most likely ruined any chance I might've had of being even remotely happy in this lifetime. Not to mention, I also unraveled the one chance I had to ensure the security of the clan.

All in a single night.

"Shit!"

The glass of whiskey in my hand wizzes across the room, shattering against the wall. How the hell did I get here?

My thoughts are on Aunt Pen again. Whereas I'd thought for a moment that I owed her a bit of gratitude for having inspired my actions during dinner, I'm now tempted to put her out on her ass. But what good would that do me? What's done is done, and if I'm honest, there's no one to blame but myself.

"Fucking hell."

I'm not entirely certain where I'm headed when I exit my study, snatching my tie off

altogether before dropping it to the floor. My path becomes clear as I race up the stairs and across the catwalk above the dining hall. Glancing down to the scene of my earlier humiliation, I almost lose my nerve.

Almost.

It's the sheer strength of my desperation that keeps me pressing forward, and my feet don't stop until I've reached Annalise's door. Surprise fills her guards' expressions, but they collect themselves quickly, nodding as a show of respect.

"Good evening, Alpha."

"Good evening," I echo. "You're both dismissed for the night."

Their eyes are questioning, but they know better than to express their curiosity out loud.

"Yes, sir," they say in unison, and I watch them round the corner before I face Annalise's door, questioning everything.

Whether I said too much at dinner.

Whether I should even be standing here, knowing she'd rather not hear from me.

But the one decision I'm certain of is that the Consort Elects have no place here—in my home, in my life.

In hers.

"Annalise," I call out as I finally get up the nerve to knock, and as expected, no answer.

My forehead falls against the door, and I'm defeated. Again, it crosses my mind that there isn't a soul underneath this roof with the authority to deny me access to any corner of this estate, but I've been a brute too long. Running over her—trampling her will, stealing her voice—is what got me here in the first place.

“Annalise, please.”

Again, my request goes unanswered. The thundering inside my chest is so unfamiliar, but I can hardly say that now, because it seems this one woman causes my heart to go wild every time she's near. Even if near simply means on the other side of a door.

I slowly squeeze my hand into a fist at the memory of what her skin feels like against my palm. Not to mention, her scent lives inside my mind, there to recall it whenever I'm in need. But these memories eventually fade, and I'm left longing for the one I'm no longer allowed to have.

That sense of defeat intensifies, and I lower to the floor for a second time tonight. Not on my knees this time, but I may as well be as I find myself seated outside her bedroom. My back settles against the wall as I stretch my legs out before me, wondering if she even cares that I'm here, wondering if my effort is even registering with her.

“I'm...”

My voice trails off as the war within me intensifies. My ego is disgusted by what I've become—a begging, weak version of the man I was even this morning. But my heart... it's screaming at me that I have yet to do enough to make up for all the harm I've caused her.

And as seems to be the case so often these days, my heart wins the battle.

“I’m not leaving,” I state firmly. “You can refuse to open your door, but I’m not moving from this spot.”

There’s only silence on the other side of the threshold, and while it’s disheartening, I’ve come to expect it.

“My parents’ union was never about love. Yes, they grew to be fond of one another, and they respected one another, but... love was never a factor. Everything between them was always so... transactional.”

I’m reminded of an incident that took place when I was no more than twelve. It was autumn, that much I remember. The crisp air is what stands out to me the most. We hosted a dignitary from Clan Eris that weekend, and Father was entertaining him outside in the courtyard. Mother had gotten a call from Aunt Susan, letting her know that their sister had passed away. It was the first time I’d seen Mother shed even one tear, but her voice remained calm when she told me to go let Father know what had taken place.

I raced across the courtyard, feeling this impending sense of urgency as I zoomed down the stone pathways, hurdling rose bushes, thinking I was delivering pertinent news. News that would spur my father into action in Mother’s hour of need. But when I got there, out of breath as I explained, his only response was for me to get inside and collect myself. He stooped down to whisper that it’s unseemly for a man to get so worked up and involved in matters of emotion, but... that was the end of it. He sent me on my way, then continued his conversation as if I’d said nothing. I remember being so confused, hearing the men sharing a laugh when their conversation picked up right where they left off. I couldn’t understand why he wasn’t already inside, holding Mother while she grieved.

“I know their interaction is no excuse for anything I’ve done, but... I only mean to explain that it affected me. While I longed for a union built on love, I suppose I never

expected it. Which is why, when it arrived, when you arrived, I didn't immediately recognize what was happening."

I fall silent, processing the intense feelings that rush through me. I was raised to hold it all in, because as Father so diligently stated, 'it's unseemly for a man to get worked up and involved in matters of emotion.'

"Like I said, I wanted love, but the idea of going after it, basing my life on the idea of finding it, felt... inherently selfish."

I lower my head when those words hit me. Now that I'm awake, my recent ways of thinking all sound quite archaic. Having love and being loved isn't selfish.

It's necessary.

"I fucked up. No one knows that more than me. And I know I don't deserve your forgiveness, but... I'm asking for it anyway. No, I'm begging for it. Because I'm desperate for you, and I always will be."

I breathe deep, feeling how she's changed me. It's so clear to me now that I'm no longer fighting it.

"It's okay if you don't open your door tonight. You're well within your rights," I say. "But I'm well within mine to keep trying. For however long it takes for you to not only hear that I love you, but to feel it. That's my goal. For you to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that I am completely and irrevocably in love with you, Annalise."

I listen closely when movement inside her room grows louder. For a moment, I'm hopeful that I might've gotten through to her, but when the faint light beneath her door fades to darkness, I realize she's simply gotten up to blow out her candle.

And just like that flame, the short-lived hope disappears, too.

However, I'm not giving up so easily. She may not let me in today, or even tomorrow, but when her heart finally does soften toward me again... I intend to be here waiting.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

2

Recompense

Caspian

“Cas. Cas!”

I startle awake when someone nudges my foot, and it takes my groggy mind a moment to realize the one staring down on me, laughing, is Dimitri.

“Rough night?”

“You could say that,” I groan, spotting Annalise’s guards at the end of the hallway, ready to start their day. Typically, they’d be posted at either side of the threshold to her bedroom, but I’m guessing they knew to keep their distance when they arrived to find me asleep outside her door.

Like a misbehaving dog.

I’m slow getting to my feet, feeling stiff and disoriented from waking up someplace other than my own bed. While I don’t glance toward Annalise’s door, fearing my brother might sense how I long for her, I do find myself wondering if she’s awake. Is she aware that I kept my word, that I didn’t move from that spot the entire night?

“Sorry to disturb you, but... we have guests,” Dimitri says, walking beside me as I smooth my hands down my wrinkled shirt.



I estimate that it's approximately five-thirty or six a.m. by how low the sun is in the sky.

"Guests? This early?"

He nods. "Yes, and if I were you, I'd brace myself."

The warning has a groan resonating in my chest, but there's no time to ask questions when Dimitri and I part ways the moment we finish descending the stairs. He's at least mindful of pointing me toward the parlor where I'm to guess that the early-morning visitors have been taken to wait.

Before I twist the knob on the door, I hear the passionate chatter of angry men, which is never a good sign, but especially not so early in the day. Taking a deep breath, I enter the room, observing the vaguely familiar faces. I'm aware of them being the fathers and grandfathers of the Consort Elects, but many of their names escape me.

"Gentlemen?"

One by one, they turn to meet my gaze, and the scowls set on their faces are telling of the tone this meeting will take. Supreme Arbiter Emory steps forward, making it clear he intends to speak on behalf of the other men.

"I'm aware that it's impolite to darken someone's doorstep before the sun's fully risen, but I will not apologize for disturbing your morning, Alpha. Not when I spent my night tossing and turning to the sound of my dear, sweet Wilhemena's sobs!"

Not only does the man have a flare for the dramatic, he's also a fucking liar. The only thing sweet about Wilhemena is the sound of her footsteps when she leaves your presence.

I take another deep breath. “Yes, I’m certain you all were caught off guard by last night’s development, but I can assure you?—”

“She said you were on your knees, begging that Breedlove girl for her forgiveness? Meanwhile, Wilhemena and the others whom you so callously chose to toss aside, were forced to watch, having their hearts ripped out of their chests, having their dreams shattered, because you’ve... changed your mind,” he adds through gritted teeth.

The other men get riled up, complaining amongst themselves before Supreme Arbiter Emory quiets them.

“Can you imagine what will happen once word gets out?” he gripes. “Our girls, our families, will be the laughingstock of New Eden! It will be nearly impossible to find them husbands now. Every man in Clan Centauri will see them as damaged goods, women coldly rejected by the alpha. There is no recovering from shame of that magnitude.”

My blood is boiling, but losing my cool will not bode well.

Another fucking deep breath to keep from tearing heads from shoulders.

“You men have my deepest, most sincere apologies for whatever hardship you fear this decision may cause your families, but you have my word that I will release a public statement, clearing the names of the Consort Elects. When I’ve completed my address, there won’t be a question in anyone’s minds that this change is a reflection of me, and me alone.”

“Clear their names?” another speaks up, scoffing at the offer. “We were promised wealth... status ! That was the agreement!”

The others concur, and my nerves are wearing thin.

For a moment, it's as though I'm seeing behind the veil, observing our world through Annalise's eyes. A world where women are pawns and men tout their selfishness and greed like a badge of honor. I recall the words she spoke that fateful night I first made her acquaintance in my study. They were honest and vulnerable, but they went in one ear and out the other, because I was only aware of my own needs. In arrogance, I ignored her plea in favor of brutishly staking my claim on her.

A right I had neither then nor now.

A chill rushes down my spine and, in an instant, I'm awash with shame and guilt for having ever been that man.

For having only recently shed his existence.

But that's a moment of reflection for another time. Setting aside my own emotional unfoldment, I focus on the emotions of the men standing before me.

Angry, entitled men who think more highly of themselves than they ought to.

"We demand your word," the arbiter states.

"My word concerning what exactly?"

"Concerning your personal guarantee that our girls will be paired with noblemen, men of notoriety."

That sense of my blood boiling returns, and I'm not sure how much longer I can suppress my true nature, the side of me that would rather spill these men's blood on the floor than negotiate.

Taking measured steps, I approach them. Supreme Arbiter Emory's gaze slips down to my feet as I detect a hint of perspiration in the air. He's afraid.

As he should be.

"Leave."

His nostrils flare as that single word leaves my mouth, but he seems to suddenly remember he has an audience of men behind him. Men paying careful attention to his response to my demand. Men who likely put him up to being their spokesperson because they lacked the courage.

"Not without your word," he says, but his voice is noticeably shakier now.

But no one will have a chance to analyze how he's begun to cower, because he's barely gotten his sentence out when I grip his collar, shoving him toward the parlor door.

"I tried handling this like a gentleman, but you've left me no choice." For every step I take forward, they take several in the opposite direction.

"Alpha, we?—"

"Go! Before I lose my temper, leaving your families nothing to identify you by but your fingerprints."

One seems to sense the seriousness of this matter before the others, gripping two of the men by their shoulders as he pulls them toward the foyer. The others follow. Supreme Arbiter Emory pulls the door open, and during his less than graceful exit, he trips over the threshold and nearly tumbles down the steps. He glances back in fear, and I decide to confirm what he likely already knows.

“Consider this my formal denial of your request. And for your own safety, let this be the last time you step foot on my property.”

I slam the door behind them, breathing wildly as I rest my head against the cool wood. I’m filled with a sense of pride for having resisted the urge to take at least one of their lives, but it was so incredibly tempting.

“Bravo,” a voice calls out, drawing my attention toward the staircase.

Standing at the bottom of the steps, clapping slowly as a faint smile curves her lips, is Aunt Pen. She turns and begins to ascend, biting into an apple as she leaves me with a few sage words as always.

“Well done, Nephew. It appears you’re the alpha after all.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

3

The Man Behind the Mask

Caspian

“I hear it’s been quite an eventful morning.”

At the sound of Creed’s voice, I peer up as he crosses the study. He drops down into a chair, and I can assume Dimitri has filled him in about our early-morning visitors.

“Eventful is one way to put it.”

He laughs, and I set my pen aside, needing a break from work. My nerves have yet to settle after being confronted by The Merry and of Assholes a few hours ago. The fucking nerve of them, demanding that I find husbands for their daughters, like I don’t already have enough shit to deal with.

“How are you?” Creed asks. “That couldn’t have been a pleasant visit.”

“Not quite how I imagined I’d start my day, but I’m fine.”

“Pretty sure I already know the answer to this question, but is there any chance this is the last we’ll hear from them?”

A short laugh leaves me. “Only if I meet their demands, but there’s no way in hell I’ll bend to their will. My decision is firm.”

“As it should be,” he agrees. “And if they do circle back and try to stir up trouble, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, just take the win.”

Take the win.

The phrase resonates inside my head, but I’ve struggled to identify this elusive win he speaks of.

“You sound so sure.”

His brow quirks. “You’re not?”

“Dismissing the Consort Elects was a no-brainer, but... I suppose this newfound freedom feels somewhat bittersweet without... without...”

“Without Annalise,” Creed interjects, stating what I couldn’t.

“Yeah,” I nod. “That.”

It’s painfully true. If I’d walked away from this ordeal with some measure of certainty that Annalise will even one day reciprocate my feelings, it wouldn’t feel like it was all for nought.

Creed doesn’t interrupt the silence that creeps in. It’s brought on by the sudden realization that this has all been so ironic. And yes, being rejected stung, but I’m not naive. The pain I felt last night pales in comparison to what Annalise has endured.

By my own doing, no less.

“This isn’t like you,” he says, bringing me out of my thoughts.

“What isn’t like me?”

He gestures toward me with his hand, as if to say everything.

“You’re the alpha.”

I laugh, rolling my eyes. “Shit. Now you sound like Aunt Pen.”

“Then, she’s on to something,” he smirks. “You are the alpha. And, yes, Annalise is angry with you now—perhaps for good reason—but I’ve never known you to give up, accept defeat.”

I hear him, but he doesn’t get it. He didn’t see that look on Annalise’s face when she said those devastating words.

You’re too late.

“I’m not giving up, I’m?—”

“Listen, Cas,” he cuts in. “You’re my alpha, yes, but... before that, you’re my friend.”

I nod, agreeing with him wholeheartedly. He’s one of very few people I trust without limits.

“So, as your friend, I’m gonna call you on your shit.”

A laugh leaves me, because it isn’t often Creed steps out of his professional role to speak so freely.

“Okay then. Call me on my shit. This ought to be good.”



I rest on my fist, giving my undivided attention as I hold in a laugh.

“Well, for starters, I think you’ve forgotten that you’re more than your title. It wouldn’t kill you to charm her a bit.”

The laugh I held in slips out now. “Charm. Yeah, I’m fresh out of that. You’re about a decade too late.”

What little charm I did have has been snuffed out by life, my position.

“Nonsense,” Creed counters.

“Ok, so let’s say I somehow rediscover this charm you speak of. What if I pull out all the stops and she still won’t have me? What then?”

Creed settles deeper into his seat, thoughtful for a moment.

“In that case, I suppose you’d have to take it like a man. But if you ask me, I don’t see it ending that way. Call me a hopeless romantic or whatever you’d like, but love always prevails, my friend.”

His optimism is a breath of fresh air, but I’m not so easily convinced. Perhaps I’m feeling a bit jaded from having spent the entire night on the floor outside Annalise’s bedroom.

I peer up when Creed chuffs a short laugh. “I wasn’t trying to cause you more grief. I?—”

“No, it isn’t that. It’s just... I’m not sure where to start with her. I’ve already done so much damage, caused her so much pain.”

Creed nods, acknowledging the truth in my words. But somehow, I still haven't snuffed out that hint of optimism he's harboring.

"Well, I have a feeling you know exactly where to start," he says. "From what I've gathered, Annalise strikes me as a woman not at all impressed by the frills and luxuries of our world. I suspect she'd be most impressed if she were to meet the man behind the mask. The real alpha. The real you."

I mull this over, his take on things, and... he might be on to something. Over the last several months, Annalise has all but screamed in my face that she's not a part of this world. Despite being born a Breedlove—a family name that should afford her certain privileges in this life—she's real, she's simple, she's... perfect.

"I'll give it a try."

A victorious smirk crosses Creed's face. "Good. And when you get the girl, I'll be here to celebrate with you. Because, believe it or not, you deserve a little happiness."

### The Third Night

Annalise

The sun set hours ago, and I typically look forward to Tabitha and Guinevere's recap of all they've seen and heard around the estate throughout the day as I prepare for bed. It's become our rendition of being told a bedtime story. But tonight, I'm hardly aware of the conversation between them. They're laughing and smiling as they discuss more pertinent gossip circulating throughout New Eden, but my gaze is distractedly focused on my bedroom door.

Two nights in a row, Cas has taken it upon himself to sleep outside in the hallway. The first night, he asked to be let in, pleaded with me to hear his side of things. Then, when he returned twenty-four hours later, he settled in the same place, but he only spoke to let me know he'd be sleeping there again, and that he hoped my day had been well. Silence followed, and he dozed rather quickly, indicating that his day had been exhausting. I couldn't imagine having looked after our entire clan, performing the many tasks of an alpha, and then choosing to sleep on the cold, unforgiving floor, instead of my own bed.

The thought of it has me feeling sympathy for him, but I quench the emotion the next moment. Because I remember spending several nights on the floor in a cell when I was first brought here. Dragged here. Kicking and screaming, against my will.

Did he feel sorry for me back then?

Did he lose sleep, worrying as I tossed and turned on the filthy cement?

My jaw ticks with a flare of rage, and whatever softness I'd just felt toward Cas evaporates into thin air, acknowledging that the answer to both these questions is a resounding no.

“Annalise?”

Only now do I realize Guinevere had been trying to get my attention.

“Yes?”

She smiles when my gaze shifts toward her. “I asked if you heard what’s become of the Consort Elects.”

At the mention of them, I feel my lip curl into a snarl. “I’ve kept to myself these last few days,” I say back.

Hearing that I haven’t already heard whatever bit of news she’s holding in, her eyes light up at the idea of being the first to fill me in.

“Well, one of the servers overheard someone on the kitchen staff saying that?—”

“For the love of the gods! Stop gossiping!” Tabitha hisses.

Guinevere recoils from the harsh rebuke.

“No, please continue. I’d like to hear,” I cut in.

Guinevere’s expression relaxes when I lean forward, reaching to place a hand on her arm where she sits cross-legged on the edge of my bed. Then, she smiles and tosses

an ‘ I told you so’ glance toward Tabitha before continuing.

“As I was saying, the server who told me overheard someone in the kitchen stating that Alpha Caspian has called the whole thing off.”

My brow quirks. “Called what whole thing off?”

Guinevere’s eyes brighten even more. “His plan to bring the Consort Elects into the estate is no more. After dinner a few nights ago, he asked that Mr. Archibald escort them out, stating that he was no longer interested.”

Guinevere’s words aren’t registering with me just yet. All because bringing the other women here was such a huge part of Cas’s “master plan”. He’d been so adamant about the necessity of their presence, but now that’s suddenly changed?

Something isn’t adding up.

“And that’s not even the best part!” Guinevere beams, prompting Tabatha to roll her eyes. “The fathers and grandfathers stormed the estate yesterday morning, demanding that the alpha pay for what he’s done.”

“Pay?”

Guinevere nods emphatically when I clearly don’t understand. “Yes, although, I don’t think he’s literally expected to pay. It was, however, suggested that Alpha Caspian be responsible for finding the girls husbands. You know, since they’ll certainly be labeled as damaged goods now.”

I’m no fan of the Consort Elects, but I wince at that phrase. Damaged goods. The fact that a woman’s worth can be unanimously deemed damaged, simply because one man no longer desires her is absurd. However, there isn’t a doubt in my mind that this

is how our society will perceive them moving forward.

“So, what happened next?” I ask.

“Well, from what I’ve heard, Alpha Caspian refused to meet their demands, and the men left in quite a state. Mostly because he used force to remove them from the property, making it abundantly clear that their coming here was a horrible mistake.”

I don’t speak right away, taking in all Guinivere has said, the implications of it. How, despite all his effort to bring his plan to fruition, he’s suddenly decided to let it all go?

My thoughts are on that night again, imagining how he felt when I refused him in front of everyone. The male ego is a fragile thing, so it’s entirely possible this is a tantrum of sorts. Perhaps feeling wounded and jilted, releasing the Consort Elects is merely a phase. In fact, I’m certain he’ll soon correct his course and make amends with the Consorts and their fathers.

Yes, that has to be it.

I straighten my posture, being careful that my expression gives nothing away either.

“Wait, does anyone hear that?”

Tabitha has Guinivere falling silent as I listen harder. Just outside my door, a soft squeal has my brow tensing as I climb out of bed to investigate. It isn’t until I twist the knob and peer out that I identify the source of the sound—the squeaky wheels of a small cart being placed in front of my door.

Startled, the servant who’s just made the delivery offers a smile and shallow bow.

“Good evening, ma’am. I was instructed to bring this into your room,” he says, but

I'm confused.

I step aside, allowing him to finish the task of wheeling in the cart full of boxes, all of which vary in size. There are envelopes, too, nestled in between the other items. Someone's printed seemingly random numbers on the outside of each, and this is by far one of the strangest things I've ever seen.

"And this is also for you," the servant says, handing me yet another sealed envelope before bowing again as he makes his exit.

I study the gold seal on the front, recognizing it as Cas's. My stomach twists at the sight of it, and I hate that despite all the wrong he's done, he still affects me in ways he shouldn't. But I certainly don't let that show. As far as I'm concerned, he no longer deserves the emotion he evokes.

And maybe, he never did.

I pop the seal, reading the neatly written words I find on the slip of paper tucked inside.

'Annalise,

Because I can't seem to find the words to tell you who I really am, I thought I might try showing you. When you're ready, open box number one.'

I'm lost in this short message, feeling even more intrigued than before.

"Ladies, would you mind giving me a bit of privacy, please? I'll see you both at breakfast in the morning."

The looks of sheer disappointment on their faces are easily detected. My guess is they

hoped I'd give them some sort of hint as to what all this is about, but I keep it to myself, offering both girls nothing but a polite smile as they leave my room.

I stand there for several seconds after locking the door, staring at Cas's message, and then glancing toward the gold cart. I'm tempted to push it back out into the hallway, but curiosity gets the best of me, and I search the stack for box number one. I spot it off to the side, eventually reaching for it when I simply can't stand waiting any longer.

Whatever Cas has placed inside is meant to help me gain a deeper understanding of who our alpha truly is. And although I know I should be beyond caring at this point, that isn't the case.

I do care.

More than I'd like to , actually.



## Page 5

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5

Box Number One

Annalise

The letter in my hand has my full attention, reading Cas's handwritten words, his plea for an opportunity to show me who he is.

I settle on the edge of my bed now that my maidens have left, and I'm at war within myself. Yes, I'm tempted to let him try, but I'm also adamant about standing my ground. He has the power to keep me here, but he doesn't have the power to make me fall for him.

Not again.

"Annalise?"

The sound of Cas's voice bleeding through my door causes a breath to hitch in my throat. He waits, maybe thinking I'll answer, but he should know by now that I won't. Instead, I listen as he settles outside the door, sitting beside it like he's done the last two nights in a row.

"I know my special delivery is a bit confusing, but I hope it starts to make sense by the end."

My eyes shift toward the cart, then back to the door.

“I won’t force you to participate, but it would make things easier,” he says, chuffing a short laugh. “So, if you’re keen to follow me on this journey, now would be the time to take box number one.”

A deep breath leaves me, and I glare at that cart. Unfortunately, curiosity gets the best of me, and I’m on my feet again, snatching the first box from the top of the pile before returning to bed. With his excellent hearing, he’s definitely heard me grant his wish, and likely the frustrated sigh that came with it.

“Unwrap it, please,” he says, and I slowly pop the tape on one side before tearing through the thick, brown paper. Then, holding my breath, I flip open the lid and peer inside.

I pull out a key with a non-descript, orange keychain attached. There’s zero context other than the words *The Aurora* printed in large, bold letters.

“It’s the key to my father’s first yacht,” he says, his tone hinting at his amusement.

My first thought is of what a pretentious first item choice this was, but then I decide to reserve judgement until the end.

“The boat has long since been out of commission, but I held onto that little piece of history because it marks the first time my brother and I formed an alliance. It was the first time we lied for one another, because it was the first time we had to lie for one another,” he shares.

And, yeah, I’m listening.

“Father had been terribly busy that month. Looking back, I can’t even recall what event or disaster or whatever had him so preoccupied, but whatever the case, Dimitri and I took full advantage,” he says. “I convinced one of Father’s footmen to let me

into his sleeping quarters one night, claiming that I was planning a surprise for him and needed to measure his bedroom to pull it off. But in actuality, I was grabbing the key from the crystal jar on Father's chest of drawers."

I lie back, settling into my pillows as I'm told the story.

"Dimitri and I wasted no time sneaking out that very night. We made plans with two sisters we'd met in town one weekend. Before then, we settled for exchanging letters with them in secret, but this time, we made the bold move to meet with them in person. And what better way to impress a young woman than by taking her out on a yacht?" he muses. "Long story short, that was the night Dimitri and I became men, if you will. But... the sisters weren't the only thing we defiled. Turns out it's damn hard to park a yacht. It's a wonder we didn't sink that fucking thing."

He laughs and before I can catch myself, a dim smile curves my lips.

"I managed to return the key to the jar without being noticed the next morning, but needless to say, Father was enraged when he discovered the damage to the boat. Dimitri and I were naturally his first suspects. However, we stuck to this ridiculous story about how a powerful storm had blown through in the middle of the night—a storm no one but the two of us seemed to have heard. We claimed that the wind must've tossed the yacht into the dock. I'm positive Father didn't believe a word either of us said, but to this day, I swear he only let it slide because Dimitri and I had actually managed to work together on something. Even if that something was crafting a very, very weak lie."

I bite my tongue, wanting to ask questions.

Was this the start of his closeness to Dimitri?

Was this the end of the love story with the two sisters?

“Anyway, that’s probably a terrible story if my goal is to convince you I’m a good guy.” He laughs again, but it’s softer this time. Like he feels some small measure of regret for having shared the memory.

“There’s an envelope marked number two. If you’re not dozing in there, take a look inside it.”

I hesitate, but after a few seconds of deliberation, I’m on my feet again, bringing the envelope he mentioned back to bed with me. I crack the seal on it, and then remove the letter tucked inside as Cas begins to speak.

“I’ll give you a moment to finish reading,” he says, and it isn’t lost on me that his tone is far more somber now than it had been just a moment ago.

I scan the words that are scrawled in neat penmanship at first, but then halfway down the page, the handwriting becomes wild and angry, matching the dark words scrawled before me. It doesn’t take long to pick up that they’re written by the angry mother of a wolf. A wolf whose life I’ve gathered Cas seems to have taken. But what isn’t clear is why he would keep such a thing.

Silent, I fold the paper slowly, brimming over with questions I’ll never ask out loud.

“His name was Emanuel Ritter,” Cas says, but then he’s quiet. So quiet I’m not sure he’ll explain beyond this. “We were friends once, and taking his life is one of my biggest regrets.”

My gaze shifts down to the letter again, suddenly feeling as though it weighs more than it did before.

“Emanuel had a great passion for writing. So much that he’d begun crafting elaborate fantasies about an alternate reality here in New Eden. He was... brilliant. More clever

than I could even dream of. He began to gain a bit of notoriety here in the capital. First with short stories that were published in the newspaper, but later full-length novels that were sold in a few local stores. He hadn't yet been recognized on a national level, but... it was coming. I could feel it. People like him—bright, determined, exceptional—you can't keep them inside a box.”

I realize I'm hanging on his every word as I'm engrossed by the story.

“However, I wasn't the only one who saw Emanuel's potential to reach people, to actually affect them. And with mere words, at that,” Cas marvels. “My father got curious one day and picked up one of Emanuel's latest works, and immediately found fault with it, stating that the ruler in the story—a tyrant who exacted punishment unprovoked—was meant to depict him. So, Father decided that if that was how Emanuel perceived him, then... he wouldn't disappoint.”

I sense where the story is headed, and my biggest question is why Alpha Evander would send Cas to carry out his wishes instead of a soldier, but when Cas speaks again, I'm not left in the dark for long.

“I was made to lure Emanuel out the next day, under the guise of friendship. He met me near a stream, armed with notebooks filled with his latest musings,” Cas says. “I still remember the feel of his overcoat clutched in my fists as I held him under the water, keeping him there until his body went still. I only questioned why Father would send me for the first few days, but then it came to me. Clear as day.”

I lean toward the edge of my bed.

“He was testing my loyalty, making sure I knew the measure of his intolerance, making sure I understood how important our family image was to him. So much that he'd have me take a man's life simply because there was a small chance someone could read of this character Emanuel created and wonder if he was patterned after our

alpha.”

My heart’s racing, and I realize something. This mission of Cas is not only showing me him, I’m gaining insight into the man who raised him, which is admittedly just as important.

He sighs on the other side of the door.

“You’re probably asleep,” he says with a soft laugh I’m sure doesn’t match the troubled look he must be wearing. “If you’ll allow it, I’d love to pick up with box number three tomorrow.”

In usual fashion, I don’t say a word. I simply rise from my bed, blow out the candles on my dresser, then slip back beneath my covers. It doesn’t surprise me that Cas doesn’t move, choosing to stay posted right outside my door again.

“Thank you,” he says quietly, and I turn my head in the direction of his voice. “Even if you still decide I’m not what you want, I’m grateful you’ve at least allowed me to try.”

Breathing deeply, I face the ceiling again, and with my alpha claiming the space on the other side of the wall as his new post, I drift off.

6

Unladylike

Annalise

“Thank you for joining me. I know the invitation was extremely last-minute.”

I smile at Aunt Pen while lowering into a seat across from where she’s settled at the table. “No, I’m pleased you asked.”

There’s a glimmer in her eyes at my words, and I can guess she knows the sentiment is sincere. We don’t know each other well yet, but she’s been kind so far. And not to mention, quite generous with her wisdom.

“I’ve requested that the cook prepare steak tonight. I hope that’s okay.”

“Yes, it’s fine. I’m not picky.”

She pauses with a glass of wine halfway to her lips, then smiles dimly. “Hm.”

A longcase clock standing at the center of the paneled wall ticks loudly through the silence. The motive behind her dinner invitation wasn’t very clear. It simply stated that she’d like for me to join her. The first thought that enters my mind is that she’s aware of her nephew’s advances, this campaign he’s launched to win me over. Perhaps she’s been sent in to see if I’ve softened. To see if I’m still just as angry and bitter as before.

But either way, whether this is genuine or a setup, I accepted and I'm here.

Aunt Pen's glass makes a light tinkering sound when she sets it down on the table, then levels another intense look my way.

"I'm aware of the rift between you and my nephew, but does that mean you won't be attending the military ball? You are aware that he's been selected as this year's Commendation of Gallantry award recipient, aren't you?"

My posture stiffens, and I don't miss how Aunt Pen's expression dims, possibly realizing that her nephew is still a rather sore subject for me.

"I won't be attending," I say. "And, no, I wasn't aware that he's being honored."

I bite back the snappy remark that's on the tip of my tongue.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to anger you," she says. "Honestly, I only brought it up because I wondered if I'd see you there."

I don't respond, and Aunt Pen being somewhat intuitive, she seems to sense the need to shift to a new subject. So, she wastes no time doing just that.

"Your garden," she pipes up, "how's it coming along?"

I intentionally let the budding frustration I felt roll off my shoulders. It's still possible that this could be a pleasant dinner.

"It's... great," I say with a calming breath. "I make it a point to venture out there at least once per day, mostly just to take in the beauty. It's the most peaceful place on the entire property."



“Yes, I can imagine. I’ll have to join you out there one day.”

“I’d enjoy that.” I pause to taste my wine as a question comes to mind. “Do you have hobbies?”

She seems shocked that I’ve addressed her with a question. I almost get the sense that she’s maybe not used to anyone taking an interest in her.

“I do, actually. Although, it’s a passion that found me much later in life.”

“Oh?”

“I enjoy sparring,” she says with a nod. “I’m aware of this not being the most ladylike pastime a woman can partake in, but I’ve found it to be a great stress reliever.”

I never would’ve guessed.

She laughs to herself, and I’m curious what thought or memory has just popped into her head.

“Father’s probably turning over in his grave. As I’m sure you can guess, the men in this family were— are— very much attached to their ideals surrounding gender roles.”

A deep breath leaves me. If there were ever anyone she doesn’t have to explain this to, it’s me. Apparently, my expression gives me away, because the next second, Aunt Pen belts another laugh.

“Right. I’m preaching to the choir.”

I neither confirm nor deny these are my exact thoughts.

“Can... I ask another question?”

That same look of intrigue fills Aunt Pen’s expression, and she nods. “Of course.”

“Since I’m certain it wasn’t your father or brother who taught you to fight, who did?”

Something about the way she smiles now makes me incredibly excited that I asked. If I’m not mistaken, there’s an interesting story here. But then I see something else, a hint of emotion in her eyes as she says a name.

“Bastien Fontaine.”

Now, I’m certain there’s a story.

“I don’t think I’ve heard the name before.”

A quiet laugh leaves her, but her gaze never meets mine. “My guess is the Larks thought it best to shield you from the clan’s bad apples .”

I don’t speak, but my silence doesn’t mean I don’t have anything to say. In fact, I have many questions to ask. Only, I suddenly get the impression there are many layers to this story, and for fear of causing that flare of sadness to return to Aunt Pen’s eyes, I don’t say a word.

“He’s not someone my father could ever accept. And by my brother, Alpha Evander, being that man’s carbon copy, he couldn’t accept it either.”

“Is... that why you’ve stayed away?”

Shit. I didn’t mean to say that out loud.

Aunt Pen nods, and I breathe a sigh of relief when she doesn't immediately scold me for prying into her life.

"He was the reason, yes," she admits, amending her statement a moment later. "Or rather, he... is the reason . "

The more I'm around her, the more I think I'm starting to understand. She's a noblewoman, yes, but she's the embodiment of all I've ever wanted to be. My awe of her has nothing to do with her wealth. Instead, it's her freedom, her audacious independence that calls out to me. She saw the proverbial line drawn in the sand, and she crossed it anyway.

While she hasn't come right out and said what it is about the Fontaines that makes them bad apples, I can guess that they, too, march to the beat of their own drum. Whatever that means. And here, in New Eden, anyone who doesn't follow the status quo, anyone who thinks for themselves, is considered an enemy.

I'm reminded of the story Cas shared with me last night. The one about the writer who dared to express himself creatively, only to be cut down in his prime, before he had a chance to reach full potential. It's these restrictions, these unspoken and spoken regulations that I desire to see change.

For me.

For everyone.

"But enough about me," Aunt Pen says, and I don't miss how she blinks away the light sheen in her eyes. "I invited you here for a bit of lighthearted conversation while we dine. Not... this ."

She seems mildly embarrassed for having let me see so much, but I wished she knew

there was no need for that with me.

No need to hide.

No need to pretend.

I shrug, and she peers up when I speak. “I don’t know. I’m okay with things getting heavy sometimes. After all, it isn’t often I find someone I’m comfortable sharing my thoughts and feelings with. And maybe you’ve felt the same.”

She’s thoughtful for a moment, then nods as she takes another sip of wine. “I have indeed.”

The staff enters the room with our meal the next second, but Aunt Pen’s eyes stay trained on me. And as she stares, I can’t help but wonder if she’s holding the same hope I am.

There’s more than just the potential for interesting dinner conversation between us.

Perhaps, in this place that hasn’t always been kind to me, I’ve just found something similar to what I’ve discovered in Tabatha and Genevieve.

Friendship.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

7

Progress

Caspian

My head falls against the wall, and for some reason, this new arrangement has yet to frustrate me—sleeping outside Annalise’s door, pouring my heart out to her in one form or another. My guess is that I haven’t tired of it because it feels necessary. She deserves this and more.

“Good evening.”

As expected, my greeting goes unanswered, but I know she’s in there. Yes, it’s late and there isn’t any place else for her to be, but I’ve also caught her scent from underneath the door. The distance is killing me, but this is better than nothing.

“I hope you’re not too tired to pick up where we left off last night. We should be on item number three. It’s another envelope.”

I wait, listening for movement on the other side of the door, and a smile crosses my face when I hear bare feet shuffling across the floor. She pauses, and I imagine her searching the cart for the envelope, then there’s a faint creaking when she climbs back into bed.

My heart swells with gratitude that she’s even indulged me thus far. With all I’ve done, with what I put her through in my ignorance, I’m not owed a single thing.

But her heart...

She still has room in it for me.

“Open it when you’re ready,” I say, listening as the seal on the envelope breaks. Then, I give her a moment to examine the photograph inside.

I picture it in my head—the image of my father in one of the garages on the property.

“Father was an avid collector of many things, but seeing as how he never did anything simple or small, his primary obsession was classic cars. They didn’t always arrive in the best shape, but that was kind of the fun part,” I say with a smile. “His passion for restoring them back to their original grandeur meant we spent many nights with our heads underneath the hood of whatever beauty wandered into our life that month. Dimitri was never interested, so it was always just me and Father.”

I shift on the floor, feeling like I’m back there, all those years ago when things seemed so simple, so black and white. Of course, that was only an illusion, the blessing of being young and unaware, but still, those were magical times.

Even if there was no truth to them.

“When I came across this particular image, it seemed important to share. It made me think of your garden. I wondered if... maybe that was something you used to do with your mother.”

I pause, hopeful she might actually confirm my suspicion, but... silence.

My mood deflates a little, but I’m getting used to our conversations being one-sided these days.

“Well, whatever the case, I was glad to hear you were comfortable enough to plant one here. Because I hope you know this place is no longer a prison for you. If my effort has had any impact on you, I hope you’re starting to realize this can be a home. It can be our home.”

There’s no shaking the feeling of being too exposed in this moment, but there’s no taking back the vulnerability I’m certain she just sensed through those words. Then again, I wouldn’t want to take it back even if I could. For too long, I was just going through the motions, never being the real me or exposing the real me. And look where that fucking got me.

I scoff, drawing my knees closer, letting both elbows settle on them. This has been hell, but I’m trying. With everything in me, I’m trying. Hopefully, hopefully, she sees that.

“I love you, Annalise. With my entire being. If I could turn back the hands of time, I would do that,” I confess. “I would court you properly, introduce you to my life and my world slowly, letting you decide for yourself which parts you wanted to be a part of. Not... forcing it all down your throat.”

A heavy sigh leaves me, and I’m disgusted with all I’ve done up to this point.

“I would’ve told you these things about myself from the beginning, letting you get to know me as a man, not just your alpha. I would’ve tried to impress you, likely making an ass of myself along the way, because... I wouldn’t have known yet that you don’t really care about any of the frills—wealth, material possessions. But I would’ve learned not to care about those things either over time. You would’ve taught me to be a better man, a better person overall. And slowly but surely, I would’ve also become a better alpha.”

I push a hand through my hair as a weight settles on me. Tallying up what I did

versus what I should've done probably won't make for a restful night's sleep. Then again, neither does stretching out on the hard floor.

"I'm sorry I ruined this, ruined what we could've been," I admit. "I think about it every day, feeling the loss of a future that may never be, and it honestly breaks my heart."

I'm still full of emotion and words, but the weight of sadness steals my will to say more. Instead, I stare at the wall, imagining her on the other side, and I'd give anything to be in bed beside her. No, not fucking her, not even touching her. I just... I missed being allowed to exist near her. I've screwed things up so badly, that this is as close as I can get, which is nothing short of a tragedy.

"Good night," is the last word I'm able to speak. Feeling a bit heavier than usual, I slump to the floor, using my arm as a pillow as I do my best to settle in, bracing my back against the wall.

My eyes have just fallen closed when I hear movement in Annalise's bedroom, and I glance toward the sliver beneath her door, watching the glow of her candlelight go dim. But instead of going right back to bed, the door creaks open, and my heart shudders to a complete stop.

This has never happened.

She's never so much as acknowledged that I'm even here. So, when she reaches out, holding a pillow and a folded blanket for me to take, I smile and accept it.

"Thank you."

Per usual, she doesn't respond, slamming the door shut right after. But this—a simple gesture that might not amount to much to anyone else—is so much to me.



It's everything to me.

It's a sign of progress.

### A Little Power of Your Own

Annalise

The sun's beating down on our heads, my hands are covered in dirt, and I couldn't be happier. It took Tabitha and Guinevere a while to see the beauty in being out in the garden for hours at a time, but even they seem to have taken a liking to it.

Tabitha stuffs a cluster of weeds into the compost bag, then rears back on her shins. She wipes her brow with the back of her gloved hand, glancing toward the estate.

"It's been rather lively in there today, hasn't it?"

I cast a fleeting look toward the house, then focus on the garden again. "It has."

"They're preparing for the alpha to receive his award tonight. You wouldn't think so much went into it with the estate not hosting the event, but there are a lot of moving pieces."

I don't engage in the conversation, because I don't want to talk about Cas at the moment. In my peripheral vision, I catch Tabitha and Guinevere exchanging a look, which usually means Guinevere has just silently scolded Tabitha for having said too much.

"I, um... have you given any further thought to meeting with the Laurel Guild?"

Tabatha stammers, clearly aiming to change the subject.

I consider her question, and then shrug. “I can’t say that I have. The idea of cozying up to a bunch of snobs while they gossip and trade recipes sounds like hell, actually.”

She laughs, and I pull my hands from the dirt to glance toward her.

“Do you really think that’s what they’re about?”

I stare at her, but don’t respond.

“They’re quite influential from what I’ve heard,” she adds. “It’s somewhat of an honor that they’ve taken an interest in you.”

I lean forward again, pulling a particularly stubborn weed out by the roots, effectively ignoring Tabatha’s attempt at making me bend on this.

“I don’t mean to pry.” She pauses and reaches for the small shovel beside her. “I only mean to point out that Guinevere and I have noticed how you’ve changed, how you’ve taken a stand on the way things flow here. So, I just thought maybe a little power of your own wouldn’t hurt.”

She falls silent after that, and despite trying to tune her out, I’ve heard her loud and clear.

I zone out again, focusing on the task at hand, still thinking on what Tabatha’s just presented when a shadow approaches, looming over me.

“Have I heard correctly? You’ve declined yet another significant invitation? This time, it was an invitation from the alpha, no less.”

A deep sigh leaves me, and I rear back on my shins, squinting through the sunlight to meet Lady Radcliffe's gaze.

"To be clear, I haven't received an invitation from the alpha, but if you're speaking of tonight's ceremony, then, the answer is no. I will not be attending."

I scoot down the row a few feet, tugging more weeds from the ground. Tabatha and Guinevere haven't said a word, but their discomfort from being interjected into this awkward conversation is palpable.

"Well, perhaps he hasn't had the chance to invite you, because you're on some incredibly stupid, childish mission to give him the cold shoulder. Which, by the way, has already become the talk of the entire estate. And soon, I'm certain it will spread across the entire city of New Eden."

Her words cause my blood to boil. She—a woman who has no doubt personally experienced the disparity between the sexes in our beloved capital—has chosen to take Cas's side. For no other reason than the title he holds.

Un-fucking-believable.

However, now that I'm aware of how closely Tabatha and Guinevere are monitoring my behavior, I'm careful when I respond to Lady Radcliffe.

"I appreciate you checking in to make sure I'm aware of the upcoming event, but I've decided to stay behind," I say. "There's a meteor shower tonight, and I intend to watch it from this very spot, so..."

"A meteor sh..." Her words cut off there. I can only guess she's fuming even more than a moment ago. "Do you have any idea how fortunate you are? The sheer audacity of turning your nose up at an opportunity of this magnitude is sickening! In

all my years, I have never crossed paths with someone more ungrateful, someone more unworthy, of the blessing you've been given. Shame on you for wasting this gift. And shame on you for not showing the alpha the respect he's due."

I'm still on my knees, but I've lost sight of my actions. Instead of pulling weeds, I've simply gathered fistfuls of dirt in my gloved hands, trying my best to remain calm. But the storm raging inside me is proof that calm is no longer an option.

Lady Radcliffe holds her ground when I rise to my feet, staring her directly in her eyes. I'm still mindful of having Tabatha and Guinevere's undivided attention, but this is a teachable moment. Not one in which they need to see me being meek and quiet. Lady Radcliffe has crossed a line, and it's time she realizes that.

"This was the absolute last time," I say, speaking through gritted teeth, because it's all the tension in my jaw will allow. "It ends here—the disrespect, the disregard. You're all out of warnings."

Her eyes narrow when I step closer, feeling my wolf beginning to rise within me.

"You've gotten rather high and mighty, haven't you?" she shoots back, but I smell her perspiration, see the fear in her eyes.

"What I've gotten is sick and tired of your shit," I hiss. "This is the last time I will ever tolerate being spoken to in this manner. By you. By anyone. So, since news travels so quickly within the estate's gossip wire, make sure to put the rest of the staff on notice. Let them know that if I'm crossed again, the least they stand to lose is their job."

She cocks her head back in offense, scanning me with a quick look of disbelief. But the next second, she huffs, then crosses the courtyard. I keep my eyes trained on her until she's back inside and without another word, I lower back down to my knees,

intent on finishing my work. I'll relax tonight, doing exactly what I shared with Lady Radcliffe.

Watching the meteor shower in peace.

Alone.

Just as I like it.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:40 am*

9

Plus One

Caspian

“Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?”

I flash a brief smile toward Mr. Trenton as I adjust my bowtie. “No, I’m all set. Have a good evening.”

He offers a gracious nod. “You as well, Sir, and congratulations. ‘Tis quite a high honor to receive the Commendation of Gallantry. ”

“Thank you, Allen.”

He responds with another nod, then I’m alone in my dressing room, staring at my reflection in the three surrounding mirrors.

Mr. Trenton has outdone himself with this tux, just like he’s done with every tux or suit before it, but I’m unsettled. I’m guessing he sensed this, which explains his concern before taking his leave. But despite the ‘ high honor’ of the award I’m receiving tonight, there’s this massive cloud of dissatisfaction hovering over my head.

And there isn’t a doubt in my mind why it’s lingered.

In a perfect world, I wouldn't be heading into this ceremony alone. There would be a beautiful woman on my arm, and only one woman will do.

The one who has made it more than clear she wants nothing to do with me.

I let out a deep breath with the realization, and instead of tonight feeling like a great accomplishment, it feels like an event I can't wait to put behind me.

I latch the door closed when I exit, headed toward the front entrance where there's a car waiting. At first, there's only my footsteps echoing across the marble as I turn from one empty corridor into another. But now, another set of steps click and clack behind me.

"I hear you're in need of a plus-one."

I glance over my shoulder and meet Aunt Pen's gaze. She's decked out, wearing a gold, ornate ballgown, the cost of which could likely fund a small city. There's a smile set on her face, and her intentions are clear. She's had quite the love-hate relationship with events such as these. On one hand, being rebellious by nature, she tends to buck against high society and the pretentiousness that's often associated with it. But on the other hand, I've never known the woman to turn up her nose at an excuse to get dolled up.

Apparently, tonight is no exception.

"Ah, I see you've taken the liberty of inviting yourself to tag along."

Despite the harsh words, I smile a little, lifting my arm for her to take, and our steps fall in sync.

"Nonsense, Nephew. I do not... tag along. I prefer to consider my presence more of a



spontaneous enhancement to your evening. In other words, I'm the bit of flare you didn't realize you needed."

A laugh slips, knowing she actually believes the bullshit that comes out of her mouth.

We fall silent and stay that way as we continue on to the car. Once there, I open her door, then join her in the backseat. And even ten minutes into the ride, she still hasn't spoken.

At first, I thought she was simply silent for the sake of being silent, but that pensive look on her face says otherwise.

"What is it?"

She arches a brow when our gazes meet. "I beg your pardon?"

"What's that look on your face mean?"

My question has her tilting her head in confusion. "The look on my..." She stops midsentence, then scoffs at me. "From where you're sitting, I'm the one with an issue? I'm simply doing my best not to poke the bear."

It's safe to assume that this bear she speaks of is me.

"If one of us is wound tightly, it's you," she adds. "No offense, Nephew, but you're already being a bit of a buzzkill."

She holds my gaze, standing firm on her assessment.

"Well, pardon me for dampening your evening."

She rolls her eyes. “Please, let’s not resort to passive aggressive jabs, Caspian. It’s beneath us. Just tell me what’s eating away at you, so I can blow your mind with my awe-inspiring advice.”

She flashes a half-smile, and my eyes fall away from hers as we make a sharp turn. Between her remarks, and Mr. Trenton’s questioning, it’s safe to say I’m not hiding my foul mood as well as I believed.

At first, I’m resigned to keeping my thoughts to myself, holding it all in, but bottling up my feelings has only felt toxic lately, like a slow-moving poison. And although Aunt Pen has ruffled my feathers too many times to count, there are few people I trust more than her, so...

“This whole award ceremony bullshit just feels... empty,” I admit, letting my head fall back against the seat. “It’s the same shit just on a different day.”

“Are you not excited about being honored tonight?”

“It’s not just this. It’s everything. It all just feels so fucking mundane, and I swear the walls are starting to close in on me.”

I don’t meet Aunt Pen’s gaze, but I can feel her stare burning a hole through me. And before she speaks, I already know what she’ll say, because she has a knack for seeing her way through the bullshit, right to the heart of a matter.

“This is about Annalise.”

I could lie, but what would be the point? So, I let my silence confirm.

“Well,” she sighs, “if it makes you feel any better, you’re not the only one on her shitlist.”

My head pops up, and my first thought is— who crossed her, and will I be tearing someone's head from their shoulders tonight?

Aunt Pen arches a brow, and only now do I realize that she senses how her statement riled my wolf.

“Relax,” she says. “It was only Lady Radcliffe, and it was only words.”

I settle into my seat, not embarrassed in the least that I just completely overreacted. I'm more on edge than usual and will make no apologies for that.

A laugh leaves Aunt Pen, and my gaze shifts back to her.

“I understand that Lady Radcliffe has been with the estate for quite some time, but I suspect her service to the family may be drawing to a close.”

“What happened?”

Aunt Pen holds in another laugh. “Well, for starters, she stupidly thought she'd strongarm Annalise into attending the ceremony this evening, and it didn't take her long to realize she'd made a mistake. Word around the estate is that Annalise stood her ground, told Lady Radcliffe that she had other plans this evening, and she intends to keep them.”

“Other plans?” It's as though those were the only words I heard.

“She'll be watching the meteor shower in her garden.”

“Alone?”

Aunt Pen laughs this time. “Well, I suppose that depends.”

When I meet her gaze, clearly missing her point, she rolls her eyes.

“It depends on whether my nephew gets his head out of his ass and joins her.”

I’m silent, staring out the window as we wander deeper into the city, pulling up at the steps of the New Eden Historical Museum where the ceremony is to be hosted. Only, when the driver comes around to open my door, I don’t budge.

“Is something the matter, Sir?” he asks, but I’ve hardly heard him, turning to Aunt Pen instead.

“Will you be alright attending the event alone?”

She shoots me an incredulous look, as if to say she’d shine with or without me. Then, I remember that this is exactly what she will do.

Her hand warms my cheek, and she looks directly into my eyes. “Thanks for your concern, but my plan was always to attend alone.”

At first, I’m confused by what she means, then it settles in. She planned this. Planned to plant the seed about Annalise, planned to be present to receive the award on my behalf, which will raise fewer eyebrows when I don’t arrive.

She yelps when I take both sides of her face, then kiss the middle of her forehead. “May the gods bless you, you infuriatingly manipulative woman.”

She smiles, patting my knee as paparazzi begin gathering outside the car. “I do what I can.”

With that, she reaches for her clutch on the seat, and then steps out when the driver opens her door. The volume of the crowd swells as she takes to the red carpet, and

she bellows a poised, “One at a time, please,” as photographers yell her name, clamoring for her attention.

A quiet laugh leaves me when she flares her dress in dramatic fashion, then strikes a pose. What was I thinking, asking if she’d be okay without me? That woman thrives in these situations.

I have no idea what’s next, no clue what I’ll say or do when I return to the estate. But the one thing I’m certain of is that I’d rather be there, with Annalise giving me the cold shoulder, ignoring me, than at this ceremony without her.

With any luck, she’ll see something in me tonight that she hasn’t seen before, and... maybe we’ll finally have a breakthrough.

I could definitely use a win right about now.

10

Written in the Stars

Annalise

Radio tuned to my favorite station; fluffy blanket in the middle of my garden; comfy pajamas and a basket filled with snacks.

I've got everything I need, and to top it all off, the sky is putting on one hell of a show tonight.

On cue, I lie back, and another silver streak zips across the deep blue. A smile curves my lips as I bite into a fresh-baked cookie, and the feeling inside me is one I haven't felt this strongly in quite some time. In fact, it's been so long, I almost don't recognize it.

It's happiness.

The song changes, and because I'm convinced everything is going my way tonight, I'm not surprised it's another good one. Tapping my feet on the soft, thick blanket beneath me, I quietly sing along. Even the estate seems more beautiful tonight, a far cry from the prison I've often felt it's been to me. Warm light glows through a few of the first-floor windows, ivy creeps up the side of the stone facade, and the lights of the city twinkle below.

Lying on my back, staring at the sky in all its otherworldly perfection, I take

everything in, reveling in the solitude. Well, almost solitude. My guards are around, but they're standing out of sight per my request. And I settle in knowing that there isn't a single thing that can ruin this moment.

At least, that's what I've convinced myself is true, right up until my heart nearly shuts to a complete stop the next second.

"Shit!" I gasp, staring up at the shadow that's just stepped between me and the estate. Clutching my chest, I cough to clear my airway of the cookie crumbs that slipped down my throat.

I scan the upside-down figure standing above me, quickly realizing the one who's nearly caused me death by asphyxiation is Cas. There's a look of grave concern on his face, but all I feel is confusion. He shouldn't be here. I know this for a fact. There's an entire ceremony dedicated to him tonight, honoring him with an award. Yet, the tuxedo-clad alpha's hand is on my shoulder, likely thinking this coughing fit could be the last time he'll see me alive.

Hell, with how I'm currently hacking up a lung, he might not be too far off.

"Are you alright? I didn't mean to startle you."

He helps me sit upright, then uncaps the bottle of water in my basket. My gaze lingers on him a moment, but I eventually accept it, taking huge gulps to stop the cough. My breathing is still labored, but I'm hardly aware of it.

Because I'm so aware of him .

"I'm fine. I just... wasn't expecting anyone."

His expression softens and concern gives way to uncertainty. Likely because this is

the closest we've been to one another in quite some time, and it's definitely the first time we've touched. He seems to suddenly be aware of the contact too, which would explain why his hands slowly fall away from my back and shoulder.

My mind's flooded with recent memories, thoughts of the nights he's spent asleep outside my door. Then, I think of his many attempts at unveiling the real him, sharing his innermost thoughts and feelings. The declaration that stands out most came that fateful night we dined with the former Consort Elects.

His confession that he's... in love with me.

It's hard not to stare as he remains crouched beside me. Per usual, his tux is tailored to an impeccable fit, and the scent of him is nothing short of intoxicating. His dark hair is neatly trimmed and styled, and my recent near-death experience isn't the only reason my heart's racing now.

However, I haven't forgotten all the bad. His recent effort to do good hasn't erased it like I'm sure he's hoping it has.

"What are you doing here?"

It's been weeks since we've spoken, accounting for why the question leaves my mouth so harshly. Only, the tone feels forced, making me question whether I've grown tired of projecting so much anger, exhausted from propping up the wall that divides us.

"Aunt Pen and I arrived at the ceremony, and there were cameras everywhere," he says. "I just... I couldn't go inside."

Straightening my posture, I cross both arms over my chest. If things between us were different, I'd ask what he meant when he said he couldn't go inside, but this version



of me, this version of us, makes it hard to say the words.

“If you’d rather be alone, I understand. But if you don’t mind, I’d love to join you.”

I stare after he’s made his request, studying his features, hating that he’s so hard to read. Sure, yes, he seems sincere, but I’ve seen his dark side, and I won’t let my guard down so easily. So, instead, I choose not to speak.

“If it makes a difference, I won’t say a word,” he promises. “I seriously just want... no... I need to be near you.”

His phrasing isn’t lost on me, and I’ve been aware of his efforts to be more transparent for some time now. But I’m somewhat of a sucker for his extreme honesty, whether I like it or not. So much that as I’m facing him now, taking in that pleading look in his eyes, my heart softens in ways I haven’t given it permission to soften.

My gaze shifts down to my blanket, then back toward Cas, and damn it all to hell... I can’t seem to find it within myself to say no. But I also don’t quite know how to say yes, so I say it with an action instead.

Cas studies me when I scoot to one side, making room for him on the blanket as I lie back, resuming my original position from before I’d been startled. I focus only on the stars, and I ignore how my breathing quickens when he slides off his shoes and the well-fitting jacket of his tux. He lies down beside me, and waves of heat roll off his large frame, warming my right side as I do my best to pretend he isn’t here, do my best to pretend I’m not folding my arms over my chest to fight the urge to hold his hand.

Despite myself, I watch him from my peripheral vision, realizing how much I’ve missed simply existing near him. He’s done a shitload of bad during the course of the

time I've known him, but he's also managed to work his way into my heart, which means I've seen some good in him, too.

Even if I've tried pretending that side of him doesn't exist.

The stars have my attention again, and I'm actually surprised Cas has kept his word. For the last hour, he's been nothing but quiet. Although, he has snagged a few of my snacks and stole a sip of my water. But if I'm honest, seeing that he's still this comfortable around me despite me keeping him at arm's length, I've found myself fighting a smile.

I glance over, scanning the length of him. From where his fingers lock casually behind his head as he stares up at the sky, to where one ankle rests on top of the other. He's completely focused on the last moments of the meteor shower, chewing the remains of a cookie he snagged from my basket. And... I'm finding it harder and harder to be angry with him.

"Why'd you skip the ceremony?"

He glances over like he isn't immediately certain I'm speaking to him. Not that I blame him for being confused. It's been weeks since I've initiated any sort of communication between us.

His gaze lingers on me a moment before he speaks, and I don't miss that look of longing in his eyes. Like maybe he's been waiting for this. Waiting for me to finally stop icing him out.

"That's... actually a really good question," he says, flashing a dim smile. "I suppose, when it came time to go inside, the thought of mingling with all those people, all those strangers, I just... couldn't bring myself to do it."

The second he finishes, the song changes again, and I wish it weren't such a slow one. The acoustic guitar and clear, soulful voice coming through the speakers makes me feel raw with emotion. Especially as Cas's expression shifts from calm and lighthearted to sweet and contemplative.

And then, as if I weren't already struggling to stay angry with him, he turns to face me. My breasts heave when I breathe deeply, trying to blink, but my eyelids are frozen just like the rest of me.

"Yes, but... why?"

I don't even mean to repeat the question out loud, digging deeper, but I ask anyway. I'm surprised when Cas's lips part, then close again as his eyes stay trained on mine. I've never known him to hesitate or hold back, but I'd swear that's what this is.

Hesitation.

"I... just couldn't see myself spending the entire night surrounded by a bunch of pretentious suits, all vying for my attention, knowing none of them actually care anything about me beyond the title I hold. All I could think about, all I can ever think about... is you."

My stupid heart skips again, and I realize I'm practically panting, wanting him to say so much more. But then there's the side of me that hates being so taken by him, enamored by his openness, but... I am. I'm absolutely addicted to the way he makes me feel when he's being himself, unapologetically Cas.

It's new and refreshing. It's also something I didn't realize I needed so much until recently.

I don't have a response. Not one that won't make me feel like I'm betraying my own

standard. So, I fall silent again, and we stay that way long after the last streak blazes across the sky.

Without words, we stand, gathering the collection of things I brought out with me tonight, and once it's all in the basket, we're plunged into awkwardness. Cas clearly wants to speak, but the chill between us likely has him wavering between that being a good idea and the wrong move.

So, I put him out of his misery, bracing the basket against my hip when I hoist it into the air.

“Well, goodnight.”

Swallowing my feelings, I turn to walk away, resisting the urge to say more for fear of being too vulnerable with the trust between us still broken. Only now, as the distance between us grows, the odd cocktail of emotions inside me finally begins to settle. However, that glimmer of peace is short lived.

“Annalise, wait...”

At the sound of his voice, my steps halt. Then, half a second later, he's standing between me and the estate—staggeringly tall, formidable.

I've been in knots about the possibility of having an actual conversation with him tonight, but as his stare disarms me, I know there's no avoiding him.

Only, if I'm being completely honest, I'm not entirely sure avoidance is still my goal.

Fuck.

My heart and mind are at war, teetering between the belief that enough time has

passed that maybe, maybe, I'm safe to at least hear him out. But these things can't be predicted, and the uncertainty of it all is what terrifies me.

I'm starting to question things, and there's one question in particular that screaming at me louder than all the others.

Yes, I've got everything to lose, but with what's potentially to be gained, I'm asking myself... is it possibly worth the risk?

11

Consider Me

Annalise

Face-to-face, his stare intensifies, and I swear the night air is suddenly heavier. I try to imagine what he'll say, try to imagine what was so pressing that he called out to me. Especially with it being entirely possible that I won't stick around to hear him out.

But maybe I'm not hiding the truth all that well anymore—that the ice is beginning to thaw.

"I can't take this anymore."

He steps closer, and I draw a shaky breath, listening intently to every word.

"Trust me, I know that's probably not the right thing to say, seeing as how I'm the cause of all that's broken and screwed up between us, but I'm... I'm a fucking mess," he admits. "I've said it before, but it's all I know to say—if I could take back every shitty thing I've done, every terrible thing I've said, I would. In a heartbeat. But I can't."

My heart picks up speed, and while frustration is definitely among the feelings battling for dominance within me, it certainly isn't the only thing I feel.

“What is it that you want from me, Cas. I can’t just... blink my eyes and pretend everything between us is suddenly right.”

“Nor would I ever ask you to,” he rushes to say. “All I am asking for... is a chance.”

His voice seems softer, maybe because he feels unworthy of that—a chance.

My forgiveness.

There’s a weight on my chest, and I’m not sure why, but now there are tears stinging the corners of my eyes, too.

“Allow me to court you. Properly,” he adds. “Let me show you how I should’ve treated you all along. Let me prove to you that I’m not the worthless piece of shit you have every right to believe I am.”

He laughs quietly, and I smile despite wishing I had it in me to remain stone-faced, but I can’t help it. I want to let him in, but the idea of it has me scared shitless.

What if he flips again?

What if he makes another fucked up decision, only to later justify it because of his title?

Can I ever really trust that he even knows what it means to love?

Sure, yes, he says he feels it, but there’s only one way to know for sure. And that’s to let him show me, like he’s asked to do.

There’s a long breadth of silence between us. It’s during that quiet moment with the breeze moving through the trees and over my skin that I realize I’m not as strong as

I'd been weeks ago.

I take a deep breath, staring straight into Cas's eyes as a single tear slips down my cheek.

"I don't trust you," I say coldly. "And I deserve so much better than how I've been treated here."

He lowers his head as my words seem to get through to him, which is exactly what I wanted. He needs to not only hear them, he needs to feel them.

"I made up my mind to let whatever I held in my heart for you die. Because I didn't think you were worthy of it and, if I'm honest, I still don't know, but... I don't... hate you."

That admission leaves my mouth through gritted teeth. It was difficult to say, because for so long now, I believed he deserved my hatred. But as we stand here tonight, with little more than a foot of space between us, I'm not so sure anymore.

"I know you'd like a definitive answer right away, but the best I can do is tell you I'm considering it."

The smile that curves his lips twists my stomach in knots, seeing the pure excitement blossoming inside him. He's suddenly got the courage to take my free hand, and I don't pull away when he leans in slowly to kiss it.

"You once said that you didn't choose me," he says, and I feel the sting of those words as if I've just said them. "However, I intend to show you that I am, in fact, worth choosing, Annalise."

I swallow deeply, having a sudden change of heart. It's frustrating how badly I want



to give in, how badly I want to tell him I've changed my mind and don't need time to think. Because I already know he's what I want.

"May I walk you to your room?"

His eyes flit toward the basket I'm holding, then back to me as I nod. "Yes. That'd be fine."

He doesn't hesitate for even a moment before taking the basket from my grasp, and then our steps fall in sync as we start toward the estate. There are no words exchanged as we make the trek to my bedroom door, and once we reach it, I glance toward the floor, immediately thinking of the many uncomfortable nights he's spent sleeping there, hoping to prove a very clear point.

That he wants to make things right, and he doesn't intend to give up until he's done exactly that.

He follows me into my room, but only to place the basket on my settee. My attraction toward him is alive and well, which is evident when I can't take my eyes off him as he crosses the threshold again, stepping back into the hallway. I don't miss how his bicep tenses when he cradles his tux jacket in the bend of his elbow, but I force my gaze back to his eyes. He's so damn handsome. Unfairly so. But, while I'm relieved he knows better than to assume he's welcome to linger in my space, I'm equally certain I'd prefer for him to stay.

"I'm going to my quarters, but only to change," he says. "I'll return shortly."

My eyes narrow when he speaks, because I'm taken aback. I assumed his pursuit had drawn to a close after making his request to court me in the garden, but it seems I was wrong. Apparently, he isn't going anywhere until he's worn me down completely. It's when I find myself fighting a smile that I realize his persistence is paying off, and

his plan might just be working.

I offer a shallow nod, but nothing more than that. “Okay.”

Pursing my lips to suppress the smile threatening to betray me, I grip the edge of my door to close and lock it. Only, before I get the chance, Cas leans in and, all of a sudden, I’m breathing his air.

He kisses me.

Not the deep, passionate kind that tends to leave me weak in the knees. This kiss is soft, and it’s gentle, warming the center of my forehead.

My lashes flutter closed at the feel of his lips lingering on my skin. It’s been so long since I’ve felt him this close, and I... missed this.

Shit. I’ve missed it so fucking much.

He pulls away, and only now do I open my eyes, focusing on his face, the sincerity I find there.

“Goodnight, Annalise.”

His sultry tone lingers inside my head, and while I’m still hanging on those simple words, he turns to leave, nodding toward both my guards when he passes. My eyes trail Cas all the way to the corner where he disappears, and only now do I take a breath.

Behind the closed door of my bedroom, my mind races as I slowly gather a pillow and spare blanket from my bed. When I reopen the door, I pass a distracted smile toward my guards. I can only guess what they’ve made of the strange arrangement

between Cas and I as I place the neatly folded bedding on the ground. However, their judgement is inconsequential at this point, because it's become clear to me that I no longer care what others think. Unlike Aunt Geneva, I'm perfectly content with the who's who of New Eden thinking I'm insane. And, to my surprise, I'm beginning to suspect Cas has come around to this thinking as well.

Before I can overthink things and talk myself out of taking action, I quickly scrawl a few words on a piece of paper, then open the door. Again, I feel both guards' gazes on me as I place the sheet on Cas's pillow before retreating into my room, bracing myself against the wall.

I'm overcome by a strange mix of fear and hope, but history quickly reminds me to carefully manage the latter. I'm scared to feel too much too soon, but with how my heart's racing, I'm afraid it may already be too late.

Of all the ways I saw this night ending, of all the possibilities... facing my feelings for Cas head-on was certainly not one of them.

12

More than Enough

Caspian

“Well, well, well. Look who woke up on the right side of the bed today. Or should I say the right side of the hallway ?”

I peer up to find Aunt Pen smiling through the mirror’s reflection, proud of her well-timed joke. The corner of my mouth curves with a smirk as I pull a hoodie over my head, adjusting it over the waistband of my joggers.

“Good morning to you, too, Aunt Pen.”

She daintily lowers into the armchair across the room, and I practically feel her wheels turning from here. If I had to guess, she’s anxious to hear how last night went.

“Oh, for the love of the gods, Caspian, put me out of my misery already, would you?”

Her exasperated tone draws a laugh from me. “I’m afraid I’m not sure what you mean.”

She rolls her eyes, and I see it through the mirror. “You cheeky little asshole. You’re actually enjoying this!” she hisses. “Did you go to Annalise last night or didn’t you?”

To annoy her further, I give a casual shrug. “If you’re asking whether that

manipulative little stunt you pulled on the way to the ceremony was all for nought, the answer is... no, it wasn't."

Her face lights up. "Tell me everything. Unless, of course, the evening concluded in your bed. Those particular details would be best kept to yourself," she adds, cringing a little.

"Well, there isn't a lot to tell, actually, but what little progress I did manage to make... it was enough."

My voice trails off, and my thoughts are on the letter I found placed neatly on a pillow when I returned to sleep outside Annalise's door. It was short and simple, but it meant the world to me, and all it said was 'My answer is yes.'

I don't realize I'm smiling at the recent memory until I glance toward Aunt Pen, realizing that she's smiling, too.

"That girl truly does have a hold on your heart, doesn't she?"

I don't even bother denying it or trying to save face, so I just admit what we both already know. "She does. Completely."

A triumphant laugh bursts from Aunt Pen's mouth as she slaps her knee. "Fantastic! I knew my prying ways would pay off one of these days."

"Congratulations."

She stands and takes a deep, dramatic bow. "Thank you very much."

Shaking my head at her antics, I lace my sneakers, then grab my gym bag from the floor. Aunt Pen's steps are in sync with mine when I start toward the door, and I get

the feeling her line of questioning isn't quite complete.

“So, what's next? Have you planned a special date? Picked out a sensible piece of jewelry? Annalise doesn't strike me as the type who'd appreciate anything too flashy.”

I'm impressed my aunt has already picked up on that.

“Actually, I'm meeting Annalise for our first date now.”

The moment we cross the threshold, I have Aunt Pen's full attention. First, she scans my extremely casual attire, then her stare settles on me.

“You put in a lot of work to win her heart,” she says. “Shouldn't you, I don't know... put the same effort into your appearance?”

A laugh leaves me when her attempt at constructive criticism borders more on insulting.

“I'll have you know these clothes are perfect for what I have planned. As you've noticed, Annalise isn't like other women. For starters, she's simple, and all things considered, I believe she'd appreciate a gesture that shows her I'm in tune with who she is.”

What I don't say out loud is that I hope this outing will offset Annalise's sense of myself, or anyone, attempting to change her, pushing her to conform to life within the estate. She deserves to know that I only see her as perfect, and that I intend to embrace her exactly as she is.

Aunt Pen shrugs, and I can tell she still isn't convinced as she scans me with a slow, sweeping look.

“I suppose you know best,” is the conclusion she reaches as we part ways. She’s headed toward the dining room, likely enticed by the aroma of fresh brewed coffee, while I continue my course to the foyer.

Annalise agreed to meet me here at eight o’clock sharp, and in my excitement, I’ve arrived fifteen minutes early, replaying how this date came to be. It began when I awoke this morning to the sound of her stirring on the other side of the door. So, I took a chance and knocked. She answered and, to my relief, I didn’t get the sense that she’d changed her mind about giving me a chance overnight. There was this sweet, bewildered look in her eyes, and I don’t think I’ve ever been more nervous about speaking to a woman in my life. She has this powerful effect on me. So intense that, as I spoke, asking her to meet me in this very spot, I shoved my hands inside my pockets to keep from fidgeting. While I know a date so early in the morning is unorthodox, unorthodox seems rather fitting for us.

Movement in my peripheral vision has me turning toward the stairs just as Annalise begins to descend them. Per my request, she’s dressed in athletic clothing—a tank top and sweats—and I’m now convinced she’s absolutely stunning no matter what she wears.

The soles of her sneakers squeak as she steps down onto the marble tile, and then approaches. There’s a hint of uncertainty in her eyes. When she crosses one arm over her torso, hugging herself a little, her awkwardness makes it apparent we’ve taken so many steps backward. But she’s here, and considering that I wasn’t sure this moment was even possible a few days ago, I’m not discouraged.

“Shall we?”

Her eyes flit toward my hand when I reach out, then half a second later, her palm warms against mine. We exit through the front door, and I’m fighting the urge to get ahead of myself, resisting the allure of letting my emotions run wild. But that’s easier

said than done when everything about this feels right. I'm aware of having a long way to go before we're sailing in calm waters, but I can see it. Our future and all it has the potential to be.

The rumble of an engine draws my attention to the left as the valet pulls around on my bike—a matte black beauty. It's a recent purchase, so I've only ridden it twice, but I requested to have it freshly washed and gassed up for this very special occasion. The valet steps off, and I grab the two helmets off the back, smiling at the confused look on Annalise's face before I place one over her head.

“Where are we going?” she asks, watching as I shift my duffle bag crosswise over my chest, then pull on my own helmet.

“It's a surprise, but I think you'll enjoy it. Just... trust me.”

She breathes deeply when those words leave my mouth, and I imagine she didn't think trust was something that would ever exist between us again. But as I climb onto the bike, and she tosses her leg over the seat behind me, wrapping her arms around my waist, it's safe to say she's at least willing to try.

And while I'd love to fast track our progress, having her willingly take this step with me is enough.

No... it's more than enough.



13

### The Art of Falling

Annalise

The engine goes silent. Now, the only sound to be heard is the occasional flutter of insect wings, and birds chirping their morning song.

I'll admit, I wondered where we were headed when Cas pulled off the main road and onto a stone path that's led us deep into the forest. Lush, thick greenery surrounds us like high-reaching walls. Straight ahead, at the end of the path, is a foreboding archway that's half-collapsed at the keystone. Climbing off Cas's bike, I study the structure, the tall pillars and dilapidated walls of white stone—the diminished remains of ancient ruins.

“Careful,” Cas says, and only now do I spot the log that would've tripped me if he hadn't reached for my hand, drawing me into his side.

He's warm and his touch is still so familiar. Hence the reason the contact has me sucking in a breath, admitting to myself how much I've missed it.

It's been weeks since we've talked. Or rather, it's been weeks since I've reciprocated conversation, and there's so much I want to say, so many questions I want to ask. For starters, what changed his mind about the Consort Elects? He made it seem like there was so much on the line, like there were so many reasons to follow through with his initial plan. So, how did we get here ? To a place where it's only the two of us, just

me and the man who makes my stupid heart skip every other beat.

Like now, as his hand slips from my waist, and he casually laces his fingers with mine.

“What is this place?” The question leaves my mouth as we pass beneath what’s left of the archway. Ivy slinks up the large stones, and an array of wildflowers add a splash of color to the bases of the crumbling pillars that surround us.

“I assumed you’d been before,” Cas says when he glances toward me. One corner of his mouth curves with a smile, and my gaze briefly slips toward his lips before I force myself to look away.

“I—no. My aunt and uncle weren’t big on exploring. Because they were raising a household of girls, they only saw value in activities that promised to yield some sort of financial or social benefit.”

Cas’s expression has me wondering if he wishes he’d chosen his words more wisely. Life for men within the clan differs greatly from those of our women. Even from an early age. For them, education and self-discovery are both highly encouraged. For women, it’s abundantly clear in the way we’re yielded that it’s believed our place is within the home.

“Would you like me to tell you where we are? Or would that make this feel more like a history lesson than a date?”

I blink twice when he uses that word.

Date.

Yes, I’m aware that’s what this is, but... who would’ve guessed that the alpha even

knew how to date?

Clearing my throat, and clearing the thought from my head, I nod with a smirk. “Mmm, tough call,” I tease. “If we’re not careful, we could find ourselves leaning into after-school special territory, but you’ve got me. I’m dying to know more.”

He laughs, and I’m adding that sound to the list of things I’ve missed while we were distant.

“This temple belonged to an ancient civilization. One that existed long before our clan came to be,” he says. “Well, I suppose that’s only half true. Technically, our people occupied this land even then, but the four quadrants didn’t exist. There was no division of clans at all at that time. There was only one unified clan among all of wolfkind.”

My brow quirks. Our history before we were Clan Centauri is such a tightly held secret. It’s almost as though the elders would prefer that we believe there was nothing before there was us. I’m reminded of the plea I made to Cas when I first stepped foot in his study. So many months have passed that it feels like a lifetime ago, but the moment was too pivotal to have forgotten the details. Like how I all but begged him to lift the veil, to educate our people and trust them with information that had previously been gatekept. So, for him to now be sharing so openly, I can’t help but wonder if he’s beginning to evolve.

“There were four families,” he continues. “They all reigned together, but as you can probably expect, having equal power only worked until it didn’t.”

I smirk because that outcome was so incredibly predictable. Very rarely are two or more powerful entities equipped with the level of emotional stability and humility to truly coexist in harmony.

“Long story short,” Cas continues, “the four families had their own vision of how they saw the unified clan growing and prospering into the future. And, of course, these rogue thinkers also had hoards of followers who aligned with their ideals. So, they split, formed their own clans, then connected with covens of witches who either bought into their vision, or saw opportunity to thrive with one clan more than another. It was out of this turmoil and chaos that the four clans were born, and this fallen temple is all that remains of the past.”

I imagine what it may have been like for Clans Centauri, Eris, Sedna, and Atria to function as one powerful, united people. It’s wild to me that something so pivotal, something so essential to our history, isn’t more widely known.

“I had no idea that’s how it all began.”

Cas nods. “It’s easy to think things are as they’ve always been, because the transition took place millennia ago, but our history is actually quite colorful.”

I don’t speak. Not because I disagree with him, but rather because I do agree, and he seems to realize this pretty quickly.

“I suppose I’ve just inadvertently made a good argument for why our people should be taught these things.” His expression is contemplative, and I wish I was inside his head as the revelation unfolds.

Silent, we walk toward the clearing at the center of the ruins, beautiful and damaged, a shadow of its former glory. Sunlight glints off the tips of the dew-covered grass, and a gentle breeze sweeps through, turning the shimmering droplets into liquid gold. We stop beside a deteriorating staircase, and Cas places his duffle bag there.

This place truly is magnificent. Everywhere my gaze lands, there’s something new to observe, something new to be in awe of. Cas mentioned that the ancient civilization

that reigned here fell apart thousands of years ago, and it's evident that nature has been slowly reclaiming this space ever since. But although I'm taken in by the beauty of it all, I'm admittedly unsure why I've been brought here. Dressed in sportswear, no less.

Cas chuffs a laugh, and my gaze slips toward him.

"I'm guessing you're confused," he says, and I can assume this means my facial expressions are a bit more transparent than I realized.

"I... yeah. Maybe a little."

He laughs again, gesturing toward the steps. When I sit, he drops down beside me, staring out toward the otherworldly scenery as I do the same.

"Well, I thought it would be fun to do something a little different, but now that we're here, and I'm thinking about it... maybe this was kind of lame."

He's so solemn, concerned I'll judge him as harshly as he's judging himself, which makes it seem even more cruel when a laugh slips from my mouth. Cas slides a look my way, and I try to stifle the sound, but there's no use.

"Damn, I haven't even explained, and you're already giving me shit about it?" When he laughs, I'm unable to hold in my own laughter.

"This is just... kind of new."

"What's new?"

I shrug. "It's just strange seeing you so... I don't know... in your head."

“Glad to hear my mental anguish is comedic gold to you,” he teases.

“Oh, yeah. Big time.”

Cas shakes his head, and that smile is still on his lips when he gazes out across the clearing again.

“At the risk of you laughing yourself to death, I’ll tell you what I have planned.”

I purse my lips together, pretending to lock them shut while he finishes. His shoulders rise with a deep breath, and when he blows it out, I’m practically on the edge of my seat.

“I brought you here... to spar,” he says. My brow arches because that wasn’t at all what I expected.

“Interesting.”

His smile broadens a bit. “Shit, I messed up. This is a terrible idea, isn’t it?”

“No, not at all!”

He shifts on the step beside me, disappointment marking his expression. I’m guessing he feels misunderstood, or like he didn’t put his best foot forward.

“The day we met, I heard everything you said. Even if, in my stupidity, I pretended not to,” he admits, chuffing a quiet laugh.

My thoughts take me back to that fateful day, recalling it as though no time at all has passed. I remember so clearly what it felt like being seated in his study with my heart in my hands, praying something I said would make a difference. Only to be shot

down and objectified in a soul crushing display of flagrant disrespect. The memory races through me like poison flooding my veins, but I refuse to allow anger to consume me, dragging me back to the dark times I've only recently escaped. It takes me closing my eyes to rid my mind of the thoughts, and I feel centered again.

That was then, Annalise, and this is now. He's changing, and the kindest thing I can do for him is to give him room to grow.

I reopen my eyes to find Cas staring, sadness swimming in his gaze. The look serves as proof that a heart does in fact beat inside that broad chest of his. If someone told me he had it in him to be sweet, thoughtful, and transparent, I never would've believed it. But somehow, he's become all those things.

He lowers his head, and I don't miss the hint of shame that lingers with him.

"All you wanted was to be considered an equal," he says softly. "This is my way of declaring that I see you, an acknowledgement that you're not some weak damsel in distress. You're formidable and powerful in your own right, so I thought I might teach you to harness that power."

He breathes deeply, wearing his heart and insecurities on his sleeve. While I'm certain he hates being so vulnerable, I kind of love it. The softness. The humanity.

"Okay, you have my attention."

His eyes flit down to my lips as I wet them, and the rawness of the moment has me wondering if he's thinking what I'm thinking. That I'd love to kiss him right here, right now, show him that despite what the last several weeks have looked like, I no longer believe we're broken beyond repair.

"I figured we'd stretch for a bit first," he says distractedly, forcing his focus away

from my mouth. “Then, if you’re up for it, we’ll work on some fighting techniques.”

“I hear you,” I say, holding back a smirk. “But don’t you think it’s a bit presumptuous to assume I don’t already know how to fight?”

His stare stays trained on me, and I manage to keep a straight face. He’s been so worried he’ll screw something up, I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to mess with his head a little.

“I just... I figured you...”

A smile slips, hearing how he stammers.

“Relax. It’s a joke. Thanks to my upbringing, I’m actually embarrassingly helpless when it comes to combat.”

Relief fills Cas’s expression when he realizes I’m not actually offended, but I nearly laugh out loud when I think of that word.

Helpless .

My grandfather, the great Gideon Breedlove, would never stand for anyone in his bloodline falling under that category. Not even the women. But this is a fact I’ll let Cas discover for himself once we begin.

I place a hand on his arm to relax him again, but I’m now more focused on the feel of his solid bicep than anything else. He’s held me many times, and I don’t think the feel of his protective embrace warming my body is something I’ll ever grow tired of, but we’re not here to get reacquainted physically . So, against my better judgment, I deny myself the pleasure of letting my hands wander, and I pull away, dropping my hand to my lap again.



Focus, Annalise. It's imperative that you take things slowly. Cas is still one hell of a wild card, and you'd be foolish to rush into something just because you're horny and haven't been touched in what feels like forever.

I take a breath as phantom pleasure pulses through my clit, prompting me to clamp my thighs tightly, owning my truth. Especially the part about being horny.

So incredibly horny.

Cas stands, and with his staggering height, he blocks out the sun. The glow illuminating him from behind makes him appear almost ethereal, and I don't realize I'm staring until he smiles.

"Are you... ready to stretch?"

He extends his hand, and I don't hesitate to take it this time. I've completely warmed up to him, and I've also warmed up to the idea of spending more time alone together.

I'm pulled to my feet with very little effort, and as I trail behind him, I'm overcome by a feeling I didn't expect—hope.

And what's more surprising is the fact that, for the first time in a long time, I'm not pulling back. I don't know this new version of Cas, but what I do know is that I like what I've seen of him so far.

And at the risk of getting ahead of myself, I must admit... a girl could definitely get used to this.

14

Helpless

Annalise

There's no chance I can focus with him standing so close, looking at me the way he looks at me.

Like he'd have his way with me, right here and now if he thought I'd allow it.

Would I allow it?

Focus, stupid.

I lean my head to the right, nearly pressing my ear to my shoulder as I mirror Cas's movements. He stretches one arm across his chest next, counting it out for twenty seconds. I do the same, trying my damndest not to gawk at the definition in his bicep. Part of me wishes he'd hadn't removed his hoodie before we began, but here we are. Me, losing count as we switch arms, because I'm suddenly back in that private room at The Wet Bar the night of my birthday. I remember the taste of him, spilling down my throat when he couldn't take anymore. Then, the feel of my thighs clamping the sides of his face as I writhed on that mattress, balling the sheet in my fists.

"Annalise."

My name falls from Cas's lips in such a way that I'm certain this isn't the first time he's called out to me, which means I've been caught fantasizing. I'd be screwed if he could read minds.

"Yes?"

One corner of his mouth curves up with a half-smile, and for the fraction of a second, I'm wondering if that mind reading part might be true.

"I asked if you'd like some help. Stretching your hamstrings, I mean." He stammers in this incredibly self-conscious, boyish way that somehow makes him even harder to resist.

I'm nodding before I answer, because I'm still a bit off kilter, having visions of him standing before me naked.

"I... yes. Please." I flash an awkward smile with the equally awkward response.

Thank the gods, Cas doesn't call attention to it. Instead, he quietly walks over to the steps where we sat a moment ago and grabs something from inside his duffle bag. It's a rolled mat, and he spreads it on the ground. I take note of how careful he is, removing a sharp stick hidden nearby in the overgrown grass.

"Let me help you," he says, offering his hand the next second. I take it and lower my back onto the soft mat, knees casually bent and pointed toward the sky. Cas kneels beside me, and I do my best not to grin when he slowly lifts my leg, pressing it toward my chest.

One hand on my calf, the other splayed across the back of my thigh. His palms are warm, their heat radiating through the fabric of my pants, making me wonder what would happen if I weren't wearing any. It's as this wildly inappropriate thought floats

around inside my head that his touch becomes even harder to ignore. He presses harder, letting some of his weight rest on me as I stare down my torso. It's then that we accidentally lock gazes, and a breath hitches in my throat.

His dark, tousled hair beckons for me to run my fingers through it. I'm tempted to pull him closer, locking him between my legs as I capture his lips—soft and full, incredibly difficult to resist or forget.

Shit. I'm doing it again, objectifying him when I should only be focused on repairing our emotional connection.

Somehow, I make it through the rest of the stretch without attacking him, but it's definitely touch and go. When we finish, his hand shoots out again, and I latch on, hardly using any of my own strength as I'm pulled to my feet with one fluid motion. The force of it causes my body to collide into his, until we're face-to-face, breathing one another's air. Of course, I'm even more tempted now to kiss him than I was before. Honestly, if it weren't for the slight hint of awkwardness still lingering between us, I'm certain I would've already gone for it. But thank the gods, Cas backs away as I begin to realize I might not have the strength to do so myself.

"I figured we'd start simple," he says. "I'll teach you a few defensive maneuvers first."

I nod, trying to ignore my racing heart. "Ok. Ready."

His brow arches, and I can imagine he's surprised. Maybe because I'm not quite as reluctant as he expected me to be, thanks to my grandfather. However, I intend to let Cas figure out on his own that I'm not exactly defenseless. My lips are sealed.

"Ok, so show me how you'd stand in preparation for a fight," he says.

“I’m gonna need a scenario.”

He smiles, then gives it some thought. “Ok, fine. Let’s say you just got mouthy at a bar, and someone’s taunting you, challenging you to square up. Show me how you’d stand.”

I smirk at his wording, trying to imagine a world in which I’d find myself in a bar fight, needing to ‘square up’ .

I space my feet apart, imagining myself in this fictitious bar, picking fights with men twice my size. I raise my hands, but I’m intentionally sloppy about it—slouching, tucking my thumbs inside my fists. Cas notices the errors right away and holds in a smile.

“Almost,” he says.

The next second, his hands are on my waist. I wasn’t expecting the contact, which makes it all the more jarring when he kicks my feet apart until my stance is wider. Next, he fixes my wonky fists, tucking my elbows closer into my sides right after.

“Better. Now, you might actually have half a chance.”

I offer a demure smile, pretending I couldn’t have made those corrections myself.

“I’ll come at you with a few slow punches,” he says. “Just focus on guarding your face.”

I nod, putting on the most frightened and bewildered expression I can manage. Then, his fist flies through the air, but not so quickly that I can’t easily block him with my forearm.

“Good. Again.”

Hearing him admonish me, I’m reminded of my training, the hours spent in that dark, sterile facility one summer, going over one defensive strategy after another. It was one of the most awful experiences of my life, but it wasn’t lost on me that I was privileged. There aren’t many women in our quadrant afforded this luxury, although not everyone would consider it that—a luxury. Aunt Geneva certainly didn’t. She made it known that, in her eyes, my training was a complete waste of time, a summer I could have spent learning to mend clothing or perfecting her recipe for homemade apple pie.

Cas comes at me the same way he did before, and just like last time, I block him with ease.

“Good. Again,” he repeats, but he goes right into the next swing without warning.

Caught off guard, I dodge him this time, and it’s clear from that look in his eyes that he’s impressed by my quick reflexes.

“Nice. You might just be a natural.”

I smile at the compliment, knowing that’s not exactly true. “Thanks.”

“Again.”

He punctuates that single word with another unannounced swing of his fist, and just to be coy, I rear back to clear the hit, but counter the move with a quick jab of my own.

“Shit,” Cas says with a wince, reeling from the blow I just landed against his ribs.

“Sorry. Guess it was just a reflex.”

His eyes narrow when he smirks, and I’m curious whether he’s starting to figure it out. That I’m definitely not helpless.

“Again?” I ask, stealing his thunder.

He nods, then tries to catch me off guard, faking me out with a right hook before actually coming at me with a left. Only, I track the hit from a mile away and block it. But just to be a dick, I lift my leg, intending to strike his hip with a kick, but he’s quick, too, and catches my leg midair. I’m breathing wildly, balancing on one foot as his large hand swallows my calf, hiking it up to his waist as I teeter a bit, struggling to keep steady.

I hold in a laugh, knowing he won’t let go until I concede. Or maybe until I admit what we now both know.

That I can hold my own.

“Mind telling me what the fuck just happened?”

I flash a grin now, unable to hold it in. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

He smirks a little, and I note how his gaze flashes toward my chest, where a light sheen of sweat glistens on my skin in the early-morning sunlight. His eyes are on mine again, and I pretend not to notice how he seems to be having just as hard a time resisting this carnal pull toward one another as I am.

“You’ve trained before,” he accuses, and my smile gives everything away. “You little shit.”

I belt out a laugh, still balancing on one foot as a flock of birds explode from a nearby tree, flying above the clearing.

“Maybe this’ll teach you not to assume you have me pegged.”

He hikes my leg higher up his torso as punishment for the smart remark. “Keep it up, and you’ll be on the ground, Little Wolf.”

And... will you be on top of me?

The off-color response is on the tip of my tongue, but I manage to hold it in. He smirks when I nearly lose my balance, winding both arms in dramatic circles to steady myself. Despite the lighthearted vibe between us, it still feels like we’re standing inside a furnace with the heat cranked to full blast.

Maybe realizing I won’t give in, he slowly lowers my leg, letting it slide down the left side of his body. But with that look in his eyes, and with the deep breath he’s just taken as he steals another glance at my breasts, I’m guessing he feels it too.

The heat, the tension, the need.

Having just endured such grueling distance, and with our newfound resolve to take things slowly, we’re fighting a powerful current. And I, for one, would love to be carried away by the undertow, tossed to and fro, feeling the relentless crash of every single wave.

Cas takes a step back, averting his eyes after they not-so-subtly land on my breasts a third time. It doesn’t help that I’m extremely turned on, and my nipples are so hard they’re straining against the fabric of my bra underneath my tank top.

I’m not sure how long I can do this.



“Water break?”

I answer Cas with a nod, but I don't think anything can cool me off at this point.

We settle on the crumbling steps again, and I'm quiet while he rifles through his duffle bag.

“I'm guessing you're pretty damn proud of yourself,” he says, and I know where this is going before he even finishes. Hence the reason I'm already smiling.

“Isn't it healthy to be proud of oneself?”

The corner of his mouth twitches when he peers over his shoulder, amusement dancing in his eyes. When he turns toward his bag again, I decide to be a little less cheeky, finally giving him a straight answer.

“My grandfather sent me to a training camp before he died.”

Cas hands me a water bottle, and I squirt a bit into my mouth before handing it back.

“That's rather unconventional,” he says, looking somewhat surprised.

I nod, because he isn't wrong. “While my grandfather valued Clan Centauri traditions, in many ways, he was unconventional. He supported the idea that women should be seen and not heard like most others, but where he differed was that he never felt as though that applied to women in his bloodline.”

Cas smiles at that, but I've only told the truth. I loved my grandfather with my entire heart, but from every angle, Gideon Breedlove was as chauvinistic as every other man in our clan. However, what he held in higher regard than tradition was his ego, and that part of him wouldn't allow for any part of himself, including his

descendants, to be considered ordinary.

Cas responds with a thoughtful, “Hm,” then takes a sip of water before squeezing some onto his face. I’m completely mesmerized and fail to even blink as beads of water stream down his skin, falling onto his otherwise crisp, white t-shirt. The moisture causes the fabric to cling to his well-sculpted chest, and now I’m the one who can’t stop staring.

It's in this moment—as I realize we’re seated dangerously close to one another—that I make a snap decision.

I have to break up the tension.

If I don’t, this whole taking it slow thing will be out the window in zero seconds flat. The list of questions I thought of earlier comes to mind again, quieting the butterflies in my stomach almost immediately. Which is perfect. Although, I’m torn.

On one hand, there’s a conversation Cas and I must have before we can ever truly move forward. However, on the other hand, I’m deathly afraid that it’s too soon. It’s entirely possible that we’re still in such a fragile state that a serious discussion could destroy our progress.

But I’m choosing to have more faith in us than that.

“Do you think we can maybe finish sparring some other time?”

Taking another sip, Cas nods. “Of course.”

“I’m enjoying myself, it’s just... there’s something I think we should talk about. Before we get too far ahead of ourselves.”

His expression turns solemn, and I don't mean to bring the mood down, but this conversation will serve two purposes.

First, it will splash a much-needed, metaphorical bucket of cold water on the two of us, cooling the premature fire that's ignited. And secondly, it will prove once and for all if we're truly ready to move forward together.

It's been amazing to reconnect with him, and I'm elated to have gotten away from the estate for some much-needed one-on-one time together, but I'm dying to know if this version of him is even real.

Or is this new Cas too good to be true?

Hopefully, once our time here draws to an end... I'll have my answer.

15

What's Real and True

Caspian

I have the sinking feeling we'll need something much stronger than water to get through this conversation. Pretty sure there isn't a man alive who doesn't sweat bullets when he hears some variation of those words— 'We need to talk'.

Annalise is silent beside me, and I take a breath, wondering how deep she intends to go, how deep she intends to dig . Because as much as I'm trying to turn over a new leaf, there are still things I'm not ready to discuss with her.

Well, namely one thing I'm not ready to discuss.

My illness.

She swallows, then casts a hesitant look my way. Pretty sure I'm meeting her with the same anxious energy.

“So, I suppose I'll just come right out and ask it,” she says. “What changed?”

The question is vague, but I don't have to wonder what she means. She's asking about the Consort Elects, and my stance on them being my mates.

Yep, now would be a great time for Vodka.

“That’s... a damn good question,” I say with a nervous laugh, pushing a hand through my hair while I think of how to begin.

However, overthinking shit hasn’t worked out all that well for me in the past, so...

“I had my reasons for being so adamant about my initial plan,” I say, hating every second of this. Embarrassed doesn’t even begin to cover it. “But then Aunt Pen came into town that fateful night, bearing good news I didn’t even realize I needed. Good news I was almost too stupid to take advantage of.”

My thoughts go back to those nights I toiled over news that the agreement between my father and I had never been made official. I was so bound by my duty to him that I nearly forfeited my duty to someone else.

Annalise.

“Good news?” she asks.

I turn toward her, feeling like I fall deeper with every glance into her large, brown eyes.

“Yes. My plan to take multiple mates wasn’t just some haphazard plan I cooked up in the middle of the night. It was something my father and I both deemed necessary in the moment.”

Listening to myself, I’m sure I’m only confusing her more.

“Father became obsessed with fortifying our bloodline, and... I suppose some of that obsession transferred onto me. For a while, it was all I could think about, all I cared about. Until it wasn’t.”

I breathe deeply, admitting to myself that this obsession only faded when I found a new fixation.

Her .

“The plan was for me to focus on producing multiple heirs. My father was preoccupied with the idea of Dimitri somehow inheriting all that responsibility, and it... terrified him.”

Annalise purses her lips together as if to hold back whatever’s on her mind.

“What is it?” I ask.

She hesitates again, but when I arch a brow, curious what she has to say, she speaks.

“Well, based on my interactions with your brother, I can’t blame your father for being terrified. You speak as though the goal was to spare Dimitri the burden, but I have a feeling your father was more concerned with sparing the clan whatever hell they’d experience if Dimitri were to inherit that type of authority.”

I’m silent. While she isn’t wrong, I admittedly have a hard time accepting that my brother is as much as a loose cannon as others have pegged him to be. But truthfully, our own father saw it, so there’s no denying it. My brother’s heart is usually in the right place, but his hotheaded nature makes him a liability.

Admitting this, I’m racked with guilt. Releasing the Consort Elects solved one problem, but simultaneously created another. When—not if —my condition progresses, that nightmare scenario, the one where Dimitri is suddenly in charge, will inevitably become reality if I don’t come up with a better plan in the meantime. Yes, having named Annalise Alpha Regent means there will be some checks and balances, but Dimitri’s title and affiliation with the bloodline will likely trump the authority

that's been bestowed upon Annalise. Particularly in the eyes of the elders, and our male-dominated clan. Annalise would fight tooth and nail to ensure justice for our people, but in the end, I'm not sure it would be enough.

"Your father was obsessed with shoring up your bloodline," she says. "But why? Was there cause for concern or were these just irrational fears at play?"

My stomach twists in a knot. I don't want to lie, but I'm equally as against telling the truth. I'm aware of her gaze narrowing the longer I hesitate.

"All I'm at liberty to say is... he had his reasons."

Her stare persists, but to my surprise, she doesn't press for more detail. Maybe sensing that this is somewhat of a delicate subject.

"You were loyal to him," she observes.

I nod. "I was. Maybe to a fault."

My thoughts deepen, and I can recall the many times I should have rebelled, but my innate sense of duty wouldn't allow it.

"I know what I'm saying doesn't make things entirely clear, but I just need you to understand that my decision to bring the Consort Elects into the estate was never about ego, or thinking I was too much man for one woman, as some have said. It was actually never about me at all," I add, feeling breathless as I explain. "But... I'm man enough to admit that I'm guilty of letting that rhetoric go unchecked in the past. I suppose it was easier than explaining the truth."

I've never said those words out loud, confessed to letting the outsiders believe the lie.

“Since we’re being honest, can I ask another question?”

My heart skips a beat, but I owe her this conversation, and so much more. “Of course.”

She turns her entire body to face in my direction where she’s seated on the step beside me. “You know my stance on how women in our quadrant are handled. Does it bother you to know that, even with rumors of you being on an ego trip, their guardians still clawed their way to deliver their daughters and granddaughters to your doorstep?”

There isn’t even a hint of maliciousness embedded in the question. Only genuine curiosity.

“It has,” I say with a nod. “But at the time, their willingness to comply served me well, so I turned a blind eye, compartmentalize the shit out of the entire plan.”

She smiles when I laugh, but it’s a dark sound. One riddled with embarrassment, shame. I’m not proud of who I was, nor am I proud of how long it took me to come around. But somehow, even with these emotions swirling inside my head, I’m more comfortable sharing these things with her than I ever imagined I would be.

“Rumor has it, the women’s guardians stormed the estate one morning.”

I don’t miss the cheeky grin on her face.

“There truly are no secrets in that place,” I mumble, smiling to myself. “It’s true. But as you can guess, they were more concerned with how my actions would impact their status than they were with the Consort Elects’ wellbeing.” I chuff a laugh, remembering one’s proposal. “It was even suggested that I personally see to it that each of the women are paired with noblemen.”



I glance toward Annalise, and to my surprise, she isn't nearly as amused as I expected. Instead, her eyes slip from mine as she fidgets with her fingernails.

I have no idea what I've said or done that pulled her out of this moment with me, but I'm desperate to get things back on track.

"What is it?"

I stare at her, blinking as I wait for her beautiful eyes to find mine. Then, when they do, there's an emotion swimming in them that's hard to read.

"You're gonna think I'm crazy," she says with a chuckle.

"I could never think that."

The look softens as she seems to realize I mean those words from the bottom of my heart.

"It's just that... you don't know what it's like," she says. "No, marriage and motherhood shouldn't be the end-all-be-all for Clan Centauri women, but unfortunately, for most, we're made to feel as though that's all the world has to offer. It's instilled in us from a young age that our worth is hinged upon these two facets of life, and most buy into it. Some genuinely desire it, while others simply see no other way, but... such a public and swift rejection by any male within the clan could ruin a woman's chances. But a rejection from the alpha?" She pauses, shaking her head. "I wouldn't be surprised if they're sent to The Vale within the year."

My mind is flooded with harsh imagery, flashes of The Vale—a clan-neutral territory set aside for women discarded by their families for various reasons. And unfortunately, being deemed unfit for betrothal is one such reason.

I consider Annalise's words. She's one of the few who hasn't blindly bought into our clan's traditions, but they exist. And in some instances, adhering to tradition is the lesser of two evils. In this case, being forced into loveless unions would be a less dreadful future than being forced into a life of servitude.

"I hold no affection in my heart for any of those women, but... right is right."

"Are you suggesting that I meet those demands? That I make it my burden to find them husbands?"

Annalise shrugs. "Well, actually, you sort of made it your burden when you changed your mind after bringing them here."

Her voice is gentle, sweet, but she still has a way of getting her point across.

"Noted."

She doesn't press, but I'm certain she'll be watching to see whether I'm a man of action or just one who talks a good talk. So, I make a mental note to at least consider her suggestion, that in their own way, the Consort Elects are victims to our societal snares.

"It wasn't easy for me, you know."

I'm pulled out of my thoughts when she speaks, confusing me with the vague statement.

"Most days I was angry at myself for being angry," she admits. "I wanted to let you in, but I couldn't bring myself to lower my guard. Not with you. Not when being vulnerable with you blew up right in my face."

My gaze lowers when I can no longer meet her stare.

“I missed you and hated you all at once.”

“As you should have,” I interject.

It dawns on me that I’ve explained why I chose the Consort Elects, but not why I ultimately decided to let them go.

“I meant it,” I say with a deep breath. “When I told you I’m in love with you, that wasn’t some piss-poor attempt at softening your heart toward me. I’d profess my love every moment of every single day, even if your only response was that you want nothing to do with me. Because I’m completely and undeniably insane for you, Annalise. You are the reason I released the others. Only you.”

Her eyes are steady, focused so intently on mine.

“I couldn’t stand the idea of hurting you by moving forward with the others. Especially knowing I will only feel what I feel for one woman. Ever.”

Her eyes glisten in the sunlight, fresh tears threatening to spill over.

“When I lie down to rest every night, my thoughts are on you,” I admit, taking a breath before admitting more. “I’ve never been the romantic type, but I swear I’ve imagined what it would be like to take you as my bride so many times it’s fucking laughable.”

She cracks a smile, wiping an unshed tear from her eye. “You’re lying.”

“Don’t you get it yet? I will never lie to you, Annalise. Nor will I do any other stupid, shameful thing that would cause you to hurt another day of your life. That’s my vow

to you.”

I’m not sure when I got so bold to take her hand into mine, but I’m clutching it as my heart races.

Her smile widens, and I’d give a limb to know what thoughts are dancing around inside that beautiful mind of hers.

“You seriously imagine our wedding?”

“Imagine it? I fucking fantasize about it.”

The laugh she belts out is completely worth laying my shit bare. I’ve come to realize that I’m obsessed with making this woman happy, which is why I immediately notice when her smile fades a little.

“What is it?”

She peers up, forcing herself to seem lighthearted again, but she isn’t fooling me.

“I know we’re just talking hypothetically,” she says. I don’t correct her even though she’s dead wrong about that. “It’s just that... the idea of it scares me a little.”

Not the response I expected.

“The idea of marriage specifically? Or is it the Unity Rite as well?”

She considers my question before answering. “I suppose the Unity Rite has always felt like more of a means of making a couple’s bond publicly known within the clan, but marriage has always felt... heavier .”

I catch myself staring at her instead of speaking.

“Well, when you commit your life to someone, shouldn’t it feel that way? Shouldn’t we feel the weight of the commitment, reminding us of what’s at stake? What we stand to lose if we’re not mindful?”

She shrugs, deep in thought. “Yes, but...”

Her voice trails off, but I’m desperate to hear what she’s thinking. “You can speak freely with me.”

She stares at me for several seconds. Then, my reminder seems to be enough to ease her mind.

“Again, speaking hypothetically,” she rushes to say. “If we were to ever take a step like that, how do I know I’d be safe with you? How do I know my heart would be safe with you?”

I’m heartbroken that she even has to ask, but I brought this on myself. There’s no one else to blame for her skepticism but me.

“Annalise, you have my word that I would put your happiness above all else. Even my own happiness.”

Her gaze lingers on mine, and I can only hope I’ve gotten through to her.

“You say that, Cas, but we both know you have to put the clan first. How can I be sure you won’t go back on your word? How do I know you won’t change your mind and decide to call the other women back to the estate and finish what you started? And how?—”

“Your pain is my fault,” I cut in, gripping her chin so I don’t lose her. “What will it take to convince you I’m not that man anymore?”

Her eyes water again, and it fucking breaks my heart when she speaks.

“Time.”

Time—the one thing that cannot be rushed.

“I’m committed to giving you that,” I say with a nod, “because I love you, Annalise. With everything in me.”

Her lower lip quivers, and I’m tempted to bring her into my arms, tempted to squeeze her.

Tempted to kiss her.

But just as quickly as the thought enters my head, the soft heat of her mouth presses against mine, and I’m not sure I haven’t conjured this in my imagination. But when her hands rest on either side of my neck, drawing me in closer, I know this is real.

As real as my commitment.

As real as my love for her.

And it definitely doesn’t get more real than that.

16

A Personal Matter

Caspian

Shit.

I can't even focus.

Walking the grounds with Dimitri, I've hardly said two words to him. My head's been in the clouds all afternoon. I only parted ways with Annalise a few hours ago, but with how much I miss her, it feels more like days.

I'd hoped things would go well, but I'm not sure I actually expected them to. It was a risk planning an outing that was literally off the beaten path, but as it turns out, that was a smart move. Even the conversation that followed went surprisingly well.

I couldn't have asked for things to have gone better.

"Care to share what's got you so... giddy?" Dimitri asks. "Don't think you've smiled this much in years."

At his words, I feel my smile grow even more. He isn't wrong. The weight of my position, the responsibility that comes along with it, they've taken their toll. At times, completely draining even any hint of joy right out of life. But that was before. When being this clan's alpha was all there was, when it was my only reason for being. But

now, thanks to Annalise, everything's changed. There's potential for more.

So much more.

"Sorry. You're right. I've been a bit distracted."

"A bit? It's like you're on a different planet," he teases.

On cue, we approach Annalise's garden on our left. My eyes naturally shift in that direction as we pass, imagining her hard at work, bringing life to such a lifeless place.

Just like she's done to my soul, awakening the parts of me that had been cold and dormant for so many years.

My lips part, and I nearly let my thoughts spill from my mouth, but then I remember my audience. Remember that Dimitri and Annalise aren't exactly one another's biggest fans. I'm learning to tread a fine line where they're concerned, but I won't do that forever. Eventually, once I've convinced Annalise that I can make and keep her happy, my brother will have to find a way to not only accept that I love her. He'll have to accept that she'll also be family .

If all goes according to plan, that is.

"You said there were updates?"

Dimitri nods as our focus shifts. "There are. For starters, the male guardians of the Consort Elects are still making waves. Although, I'm relatively certain they know better than to storm the estate like an angry mob again."

When he smirks, I can guess it's at the memory of me throwing the men out on their asses after their failed attempt to strongarm me.



“Who have they been talking to?”

Dimitri shrugs. “There’s no way to be certain, but there has definitely been some murmuring. How should I handle them?”

My ego tempts me to send the men a message by way of an ass kicking they won’t soon forget, but then Annalise’s words echo inside my head. She has every reason to use her authority to cause those women far more pain than they’ve already endured. However, she spoke as their advocate this morning, encouraging me to consider the pleas of their fathers and grandfathers. So, for this reason, I don’t immediately choose violence.

Not yet, anyway.

“Let me sleep on it. We’ll revisit the subject later,” I sigh.

Dimitri nods, clasping both hands behind his back as we take slow steps through the courtyard. When he doesn’t move on to the next topic, I glance his way.

“What is it?”

He doesn’t jump to deny that something is, in fact, on his mind, which means I’m right.

“It’s somewhat of a delicate subject, so maybe we should just?—”

“What is it?” I repeat, but more firmly this time.

“I’m... just curious about things,” he sighs. “You released the Consort Elects without warning, only to shift to some sort of forgiveness campaign with Annalise. So, I suppose you could say I have questions.”

“Such as?”

“Well, for one, what happened to your plan? You were so sure, and then you weren’t. I mean, Creed, Archibald, and I moved heaven and earth to get all the pieces aligned. And then, just like that, you changed your mind. I suppose I’ve never known you to be so... impulsive.”

I give his question some thought, then answer the best way I know how.

“Love, Dimitri. Love happened.”

He silent, and I’m curious what he’s thinking.

“I suppose that answer serves as the answer to my second question as well,” he says, “which would have been an inquiry into your intentions with Annalise.”

A breadth of silence passes between us, and I can only guess he’s holding his tongue, fighting back all the dark, ugly things he would otherwise say out loud. Only, I think he knows better than to speak ill of Annalise.

In my presence or otherwise.

“Listen, Dimitri, I’m sure from the outside looking in, I probably seem insane to you, making one rash decision after another, but I?—”

“You’ve changed,” he cuts in, causing me to glance toward him. And when I do, I find a pensive expression settling on his face.

“And... I take it you see this change as a bad thing?”

He’s thoughtful for a moment, and it isn’t often that he takes his time with a response.

It's a welcomed surprise. Anything's better than his usual shoot-from-the-hip approach.

"Change can sometimes be good," he says with a sigh. "But I've been open about my thoughts concerning Annalise. I don't trust her, and in my opinion, she's a complication neither you nor the estate needs."

"And I hope you can respect that, in this instance, your opinion is irrelevant."

He smirks, but it's faint, hiding a wealth of thoughts and feelings he'll keep hidden after that statement.

"Fair enough."

"Then it's settled."

His expression tightens. "Indeed, it is."

He falls silent as we pass Mother's rose bushes. Typically, I'd coerce him into saying whatever it is that he's thinking out loud, but I don't bother this time.

"Well, if we're done here, there's something I need to take care of."

He takes a step away, then stops when I speak.

"What is it?"

"It's just a small matter," he says. "If it turns into something more, you'll be the first to know."

He forces a smile, leading me to believe he doesn't intend to share whatever this

small matter might be, but now I'm even more intrigued.

My steps halt, and I hold his gaze. We're not done until I say we're done, so he may as well start talking. Eventually, he gets the hint and tosses his head back in frustration.

"It's nothing," he insists, but I'm not buying it.

"Then there shouldn't be any problem bringing me up to speed."

His gaze shifts toward the estate, and after a brief pause, he begins to speak. "I got a call from the Larks."

This is what he considers a small matter?

"Has Elizabeth turned up?"

"From what I can gather, no, but I don't have all the details yet. Hence the reason I wasn't going to mention it until I knew more."

"I get it, but for future reference, if it involves the Larks, I'd like to know right away. Understood?"

Dimitri gives a sharp nod. "Understood."

My thoughts are reeling as I turn back toward the estate, already charging that way.

"I can take care of this, Cas. It's light work," he insists, but I can't afford to be so casual when whatever the Larks have to say could impact Annalise's safety.

"I hear you, and you're probably right. But if it's all the same to you, I'd like to sit in

on this meeting myself, hear what they have to say, ask a few follow-up questions if necessary.”

Without looking at my brother, I feel his stare settle on me. I’m certain that, in his eyes, I’m overexaggerating, but that’s because he doesn’t feel what I feel.

Annalise has become such a vital part of my world. If something were to happen to her, I would never survive it.

So, no matter how small the issue that awaits us at the Larks, I’m handling it.

Personally.

17

House Call

Caspian

The last place I expected to be standing today is outside the Lark's front door.

Dimitri is perfectly still beside me, hands clasped tightly behind his back as we wait. I appreciate his effort to keep me out of the mundane day-to-day incidents that arise, but I think I got my point across.

If it has anything to do with Annalise, I need to be notified immediately.

Footfalls on the other side of the door have a gruff sigh leaving me. I've had about enough of this particular family's bullshit for a lifetime, but I'm here.

For Annalise.

The door opens swiftly at first, but the moment Mitchell Lark lays eyes on me , standing beside Dimitri, his expression fills with dread.

I smile, liking that he knows I'd have already killed him if I could have. The only reason there's still breath in his lungs is my love for his niece.

"Good afternoon, Alpha," he says, nodding in submission as he pulls the door back, widening the gap for us to enter.

“You said it was urgent,” Dimitri grumbles, ignoring Mitchell’s greeting as we step into the dreary foyer. The home is cozy, nicely decorated, but there’s a sense of lingering oppression.

“Right,” Mitchell says, swallowing as he prepares to speak. However, before he has the chance, Geneva bounds into the foyer, anxiously wringing her hands.

“Thank goodness you’re here, Alpha,” she says, stepping in front of her husband. “We weren’t sure what else to do, and you said to contact the High Chamber if we heard from Elizabeth.”

My disinterest fades when she mentions her daughter’s name. All at once, my thoughts are flooded with the memory of that fateful day—finding Annalise’s lifeless body in the woods, thinking I’d lose her. Anger surges within me, and my wolf is alert, ready to break free if I decide today will be the last day Mitchell and Geneva are allowed to live.

A third figure darkens the archway leading to the living room as Geneva begins to ramble. Still imagining how I’d murder Elizabeth with my bare hands, my gaze lands on Winifred. Her yellow dress makes her seem ridiculously overdressed, considering neither she nor her family have been permitted to leave the premises for quite some time now. So long that I’ve lost track of the weeks. She cowers as I glare in her direction, still uncertain of the role she played in Annalise’s attack.

“Elizabeth called today?” Dimitri cuts in, steering the conversation back on track.

Geneva’s mouth gapes with surprise when she’s cut off. “Well, no. Not today. It was... last night,” she admits. “But I did ring the High Chamber first thing this morning,”

Her rushed explanation doesn’t spare her my brother’s scornful glare.

“Were you instructed to call the next day if you were contacted? Or did we say immediately?”

“I know, but?—”

“What did she say?” I cut in, needing her to stop with the fucking excuses. “And for your safety, might I suggest that you tell us exactly what was said.”

Her eyes flit toward her husband, then back to Dimitri and me. “First, she wanted to know that we’re well. Then, at least five times, she proceeded to say that she loves us. But something was wrong,” Geneva adds. “She seemed frantic. Worried maybe. I think she’s in trouble.”

She flashes a look toward me, like she’s expecting sympathy.

“Please, Alpha. You have to do something. If someone’s trying to hurt her?—”

“I wish them well,” I cut in, holding her gaze as her mouth falls slack with surprise.

I step closer, staring directly into her eyes when I speak. “For the record, the belief that anger fades with time is complete bullshit. I feel just as much rage today as I did the day Elizabeth betrayed Annalise. What your daughter did... it’s completely unfucking-forgivable.”

Geneva places a hand on her chest, taking a step back when I move into her space. Her husband is wise, observing in silence instead of trying to intervene.

“Do you realize I was the one who found Annalise? Held her broken body in my arms?” I feel it the moment their wolves shrink away in fear. “I listened as your niece, your flesh and blood, gasped for breath. And you expect me to take pity on the one who caused it all?” I pause when the memory draws me in, causing emotion to



swell within me like it was only yesterday. “If that’s what this is, an attempt to convince me to jump to Elizabeth’s rescue, you’ve wasted your breath, and you’ve wasted my time.”

Tears well in Geneva’s eyes, and Mitchell finally gets up the courage to move, placing a hand on his wife’s trembling shoulder. Having had my fill of this brood, and their futile antics, I turn, taking a step toward the door.

“We do love her, you know,” Geneva calls out, her voice trembling with a quiet sob. “You speak as though you’re the only one who has ever cared for Annalise, but how soon you forget that you only chose her because of her status, her last name.”

I spot Dimitri in my peripheral vision, glancing toward me with caution.

“After her parents’ death, we took her in when no one else would. You have no right to speak to us this way. Like we don’t care. Like her wellbeing doesn’t matter,” she says.

My heart’s racing, and the quiet rumble in my chest means that, soon, I won’t be the one in control of my actions. But to my surprise, Dimitri places his hand on my arm, and when we lock eyes, there’s a simple, unspoken message within the glance.

Don’t.

As I breathe, staring at him to settle my rage, I don’t think I ever expected to see the day that he’d be the one to stop me before going too far.

“Whatever you believe you’ve done for Annalise, I assure you, it was never out of love.”

There’s so much more I’d like to say, but thanks to my brother, I’m able to leave it at

that.

When I turn to leave this time, the Larks don't try to stop me, maybe knowing I won't likely exercise as much restraint as before.

A guard opens the back door of the car, and I climb in, settling beside Dimitri. But before the driver can start the engine, a yellow poof comes racing out the Lark's front door.

Holding the sides of her brightly-colored dress to keep it from touching the ground, Winifred bounds toward us. Her cheeks burn red, and it isn't until she approaches my window that I notice tears in her eyes.

At first, I'm tempted to ignore her incessant knocking, but it crosses my mind that she might have information her parents failed to share. So, reluctantly, I lower the window, but don't speak.

She swallows deeply, trying to muster the courage to speak, but her hesitance only frustrates me further.

"I know you hate me, and I know you think I was in on Elizabeth's plan, but I'm not here to convince you otherwise." She's breathless, lifting her eyes toward the sky as tiny rain droplets begin to fall. "I just... I just want to know Annalise is okay. I mean, truly okay. I don't imagine one simply bounces back from such a deep familial betrayal. What Elizabeth did was... deplorable," she says. "And I need Annalise to know I would never participate in any act that would bring her harm. I need her to know that... I love her."

Those words leave her mouth, and I can't even blink, needing to stare into her eyes as deeply as possible to see if there's malice in them.

“Please,” she says, choking out that single word as tears roll down her freckled cheeks.

But I’m not so easily swayed. Not anymore. I trusted members of this family once and it ended in disaster.

“You should get inside. A storm’s rolling in.”

With that, I raise my window, never giving Winifred confirmation that I’ll relay her message. Mostly because I’m not sure I will. She stands in the driveway, staring as we back out, taking our place within the line of dark vehicles that form the motorcade.

I’m not sure what she wants—closure, forgiveness—but there are far more notable things to consider where this visit is concerned.

With Elizabeth’s cryptic phone call, her urgent need to express her love for her family... is the faction planning another attack? Something that, when carried out, might cost its members their lives?

18

Equals

Annalise

Being summoned by Cas so soon is unexpected, but I can't say that I hate it. Actually, as I make my way toward the drawing room where we're to meet for a drink, I'm smiling like a child on Christmas morning. Partly because I'm looking forward to seeing him again, considering how well our date went this morning.

But I'm also remembering our last encounter in that very room.

One that ended with us on the sofa, the heat of our bodies threatening to set the entire city on fire while we warred with our emotions, straddling the line between desire and hatred.

A line that only recently became clear enough to us both to finally choose a side.

Air fills my lungs as I stare at the door before knocking, glancing down at my clothing right after. Maybe I should've gone with something a bit more refined. When a servant first knocked at my door, handing me Cas's message, my first thought was to dress for comfort—an oversized cream sweater with white shorts—but now that I'm standing here, maybe I should've gone with something... sexier.

What the hell am I thinking?

We're taking things slowly.

With how deep in the gutter my thoughts have been lately, you'd think I'm the one with a dick.

"Hey."

The sound of Cas's deep, soothing voice draws me out of my filthy thoughts, and it takes a moment to right my expression, remembering to smile.

"Hey."

"I appreciate you joining me on such a short notice, but... I guess you can say I'm having a hard time staying away."

The sweet words roll off his tongue like butter, dripping over my skin.

"I... enjoyed spending time with you, too," I say, feeling my heart skip a beat as Cas latches the door behind me. "Although, if I'm honest, I'm a little sore. Sparring showed me that I'm not quite as in shape as I used to be."

He tucks both hands into the pockets of his slacks, then his brow quirks in this wicked way that has me, once again, remembering our night on the sofa just across the room.

Stop thinking about it! Slow and steady, remember?

"I'm sorry, but... I call bullshit," he says, chuffing a quiet laugh right after.

I tilt my head in confusion. "What did I say?"

His eyes sweep over me, and I swear I feel the heat of his gaze on my skin. “There’s just simply no way your body has ever looked better than it does right now. In my eyes—and likely every other man’s eyes—you’re fucking perfection, Annalise.”

There goes my heart again. And my eyes. More than once now, they’ve tried to drift down from his face, to his chest, to... other places they ought not to settle.

“Thank you,” I say sheepishly, and just like that, the mild insecurity I felt about my attire has disappeared. According to my alpha, I’m fucking perfection.

“Sit. Please ,” he says, clearing his throat with the added word.

I smile a little, wondering if he thought I might’ve misread his suggestion, thinking he meant it as a command.

Cas lowers into the armchair beside mine, and I focus on the warm glow emanating from the fireplace. I listen to the smooth flow as he fills two glasses with wine, only allowing my eyes to flit toward him when he places a drink in my hand. While I’d love to stare at him, my gaze shifts back toward the fire as I sip instead. There’s an intensity he possesses that overwhelms me. He’s handsome, yes, but my attraction to him goes deeper than that.

Much deeper.

“I had an... interesting afternoon,” he says.

Intrigued, I draw my legs onto the seat and shift in his direction. “I’m all ears.”

Just as a smile curves my lips, his expression suggests that I’ve misread his tone. His interesting afternoon seems to have been less of an adventure and more of an incident.

“Is everything okay?”

He nods quickly, maybe sensing that I’m worried. “Yes, everything’s fine,” he says, but then he seems to rethink that. “Well, I believe it is, anyway.”

Tension spreads across my brow. “I’m lost.”

He takes a moment, then inches toward the edge of his seat with a sigh. “I wasn’t sure I should tell you. Or rather, I wasn’t sure how much to tell you, but then... I realized both thoughts were wrong. Neither aligns with the new direction we’re moving in, so I guess what I’m trying to say is... I won’t hide anything from you. Not ever.”

He holds my gaze, a sense of deep sincerity embedded within the look.

“I received word that your aunt and uncle called this morning. So, Dimitri and I paid them a visit this afternoon.”

My stomach twists into a knot. Those aren’t the words I expected to hear.

“Oh.”

“They were instructed to notify the High Chamber of any correspondence with Elizabeth, and they complied. She reached out to them late last night.”

If I weren’t already sitting, I would certainly be in search of a chair now. In a way, I’d managed to convince myself that the horror from my not-so-distant past hadn’t happened to me, but rather some other unsuspecting girl. I suppose I’d gotten used to the added security and precautions, putting it out of my mind why those things became necessary months ago.

Because my cousin, who I once loved like a sister, nearly cost me my life.

“What did she say?”

I sound like a hollow shell of myself when I ask, like half of me has journeyed far away to some distant place.

“Nothing of substance from what I can tell,” he says. “All that was conveyed to us was that she wanted to check in and to send her love.”

“Did they say if she sounded okay? Is she in danger?”

These questions fly from my mouth without much thought. I’m only used to loving Elizabeth, so it’s a knee-jerk reaction to worry. But the look on Cas’s face calls my attention to what I’ve done.

“I know what you’re thinking. That I shouldn’t even care.” A quiet, humorless laugh leaves me as I glance toward the flames, staring as they twist and dance upward toward the chimney.

My hand is warm the next second when Cas places his on top of mine.

“No,” he says, that single word making me brave enough to meet his gaze again. “I wasn’t thinking that. It’s no one’s place to dictate your emotions, Annalise. It’s completely understandable that your love for her didn’t just... fade into nothing. If anything, your continued affection toward her only serves as proof that what you two shared was real.”

I swipe a tear from my cheek as another laugh leaves me. “Yeah, and a lot of good it did me in the end.”

This time, Cas catches my tear before I have the chance, brushing his thumb across my jaw.



“Love can never be a bad thing. It’s just a shame that others don’t always appreciate it for the rare gift that it is.” The corner of his mouth curves with a barely-there smile, then his hand settles in mine again. “Your aunt believes Elizabeth is in trouble. She claims Elizabeth didn’t sound like herself.”

There’s another uncomfortable flutter inside my chest.

“But for now, our hands are tied,” he adds. “For one, we can’t draw much from a gut feeling, and we also have no idea how to contact anyone within the organization, so I suppose the only thing we can do is be vigilant and... wait.”

That conclusion leaves me feeling startlingly unsettled, and I can guess this is the reason Cas wrestled with whether or not to share this information with me. It isn’t like there’s some action we can take to prepare. We wouldn’t even know what to prepare for. But... he didn’t have to do this, bring me up to speed, share classified knowledge with me.

“Thank you,” I say, squeezing his hand to acknowledge that I see how he’s extending himself, making changes that matter.

A quick nod is his only response, and I imagine this is new territory for him.

“I was also asked to deliver a message,” he says.

“From whom?”

“Winifred.”

Sadness fills me at the mention of her name. Granted, I would’ve never expected Elizabeth to cause me such hurt, but there’s a sweetness to Winifred that has me convinced she could never even conceive such a thing. And for that reason, my

longing for her burns within me daily.

My one loyal relative, caught in the wide net that Cas was forced to cast when the Estate came under attack.

“What was the message?” I’m unable to hide how my voice quivers with the question.

“She simply wanted you to know that... she loves you,” he says. “It seemed very important to her that you hear those words.”

My eyes well with tears again, and I’m not quite sure how to juggle the swell of emotions that hit me. All at once. Like a tidal wave.

I have no words this time, so I simply nod, acknowledging that I’ve heard him.

“I’m sorry.”

For some reason, hearing those somber words leave Cas’s mouth draw a laugh from me in the midst of water pouring from my eyes.

“What on Earth do you possibly have to be sorry for?”

“I just... hate seeing you sad,” he says. “I hate knowing there’s a part of you that hurts that’s beyond my reach.”

Tired of the distance between us, I make a brave move. Cas peers up when I rise from my seat, then approach him. However, shocked as he may be, he wastes no time wrapping his arms around me when I lower onto his lap. It’s only uncomfortable for a moment, and then the feeling quickly evaporates into nothing. Because this is how we’re meant to be.

Close.

Intimate.

“There’s no part of me that’s beyond your reach,” I say. “This is just one of those things that has to run its course. One of those things that has to hurt for as long as it hurts.”

My head settles against his shoulder, and I relax to the feel of him lightly stroking my arm.

“But... what if it didn’t have to be that way?”

The vague question has me grasping for understanding. “What do you mean?”

He’s quiet again, hesitating to explain. “I mean that... you seem to trust Winifred. Since she was first detained, you remained certain of her innocence.”

He isn’t wrong. I didn’t protest at the time because emotions ran high, and it was nearly impossible to say for sure who was or wasn’t a part of the incident, but my heart has always known.

Winifred has only ever loved me.

“You truly believe she can be trusted?”

“Honestly, I’ve never doubted her.”

He’s silent for a moment after I respond.

“And you’ve never questioned her loyalty. Not even a little.”

I shake my head against his shoulder. “No. Never.”

More silence, and I’m curious what he’s thinking.

“Then... perhaps we should take a chance on your intuition.”

I lift my head, needing to look into his eyes. “What are you saying?”

He flashes a smile. It’s hesitant, but it’s there. “How would you feel if I arranged for her return?”

The thundering inside my chest causes my breath to come quicker. “You... would actually consider that?”

He smiles, seeing my excitement. “For you, there isn’t much I wouldn’t consider. Besides, as the lady of this house, it’s as much your call as it is mine.”

I’m not sure what to say as my eyes roam over the details of his beautiful, sincere face. He smiles into the kiss I plant on his mouth, and a quiet laugh rumbles inside his chest when I nip at his lower lip. I also don’t miss how his cock hardens against my hip as my tongue slips over his.

Slowly, I pull away, leaving my arms locked around his neck.

“I take it this idea pleases you,” he smirks, but before he finishes his thought, I’m already nodding.

“It does. Very much.”

He places another kiss on my lips, but it’s much softer than the last. “Then, consider it done. I’ll begin the process in the morning.”

And just like that, he grants my wish.

He's said for weeks now that my happiness is the most important thing to him. And tonight, with what some might see as a simple gesture, he's shown me those words are true.

\* \* \*

The walk to my bedroom has been slow and steady, mostly because I don't want it to end, don't want Cas to go his own way as I go mine.

Today has been quite the whirlwind, and it's unbelievable how my feelings have evolved, even from sunrise until now. Yes, I know we agreed to move slowly, but... would it be so bad if we amended that agreement?

The guards outside my door have grown somewhat accustomed to mine and Cas's unorthodox interactions. I'm certain they aren't quite sure what to make of us, but they seem to respect the obvious bond we share. So, when they spot us approaching, they back off to give us a bit of privacy.

"It's late. You should get some rest." Cas tucks a strand of hair behind my ear when he finishes, and I lean into his palm before he can pull away.

"I will. But first, a bath and a bit of reading. Just a chapter or two," I add, knowing it isn't likely I'll stop there.

"My girl and her books," he says with a smile, and my heart squeezes a little. "I've got a few loose ends to tie up in my study, then I'll head to my room to shower. I'll bring my own bedding, so I don't have to knock and wake you when I return."

He laughs, but I feel a pang of guilt in the center of my chest, hearing that he intends

to sleep outside my door yet again.

“Finish your work,” I say, “but you can shower here. And no more sleeping on the floor. I think you’ve graduated to the settee.”

There’s a hint of a smirk on his lips that draws one from me, too. “You’re sure?”

I study his eyes, thinking of all he’s done to show me he’s a changed man, and I nod.

“I’m sure.”

His smile grows, and my eyes fall closed when he places a kiss on my forehead. “I’ll try not to be too late.”

He backs away, and I miss him already. “I’ll be waiting.”

19

As she Wishes

Caspian

Dimitri will have a fit when I inform him of Winifred's upcoming return, and the thought of his reaction brings a smile to my face. He'll want an explanation as well as every detail regarding what brought me to this decision, but it simply isn't his business. The decision was made between Annalise and I, and that's all there is to it.

The moment I turn the corner, and Annalise's bedroom door comes into view, I notice how my steps quicken. Her guards spot me, and I've long-since abandoned my pride when it comes to her, so I simply nod in their direction, not bothering to care if they think I'm being a fool for her.

If being a fool upgraded me from the floor to her settee, then I'd do it all again.

Hiking my bag higher on my shoulder, I knock, listening for her on the other side of the door. It's gotten late, and as I finished my work in the study, I almost decided not to disturb her. However, when I returned to my bedroom, glancing around at the dark colors and the vast, empty space, being at least in the vicinity of her warmth was far more appealing. So, I packed my things, preparing to shower in her ensuite like she offered, and now, here I am, listening to the softness of her feet padding toward the door.

Her face lights up when she twists the knob and lays eyes on me, and I swear my hart

skips an entire fucking beat. I don't think anyone's ever looked at me like this before, and I don't imagine anyone ever will.

"You came back," she says, and I can't fathom the surprise in her voice. Aside from not wanting to wake her, I wouldn't have considered staying away.

"I did. I hope you weren't asleep."

She steps aside, letting me enter the room as she gestures toward the open book on her comforter.

"Not even close. I did exactly as I said I would. I bathed, then got lost in a story."

I manage to smile a little, but if I'm being honest, my thoughts are now focused on the image of her bathing. Her dark hair piled on top of her head while a blanket of thick, frothy suds cover her nakedness. Oh, what I would have given to be that water, touching every surface of her skin, slipping into her body every time she moved the slightest bit.

"I placed a pillow and blanket on the settee," she says, cutting into my thoughts. "I figured you'd be tired, but you're still welcome to shower here if you'd like."

She offers a shy smile as she settles on the edge of her bed, wearing a dangerously thin nightgown. With it stretching to her wrists and reaching well past her knees, I imagine she thought this was a safe choice. A chaste choice. But the fabric is so thin I can easily make out the slightly darker pigment of her nipples, the shadow between her legs where her thighs touch at their apex, the curve of her hips.

It isn't until I taste the twinge of liquid metal that I realize I've bitten my own fucking cheek as I gawk at her.



“You can set your bag down wherever you’d like,” she says, but then a soft laugh leaves her. “I’m not sure why I said that. This is your home, after all.”

“And yours.”

There’s a quiet moment that passes between us, and I can’t help but feel desperate for her to understand that. To feel that. Because my home is every bit as much hers as it is mine.

“I suppose you’re right.” Her voice is quiet, but it seems to mostly be from fatigue.

I’m aware of the late hour again, and I know I should just shower and go to bed, but despite having spent the better part of the day together, I want more of her time.

“At the risk of being incredibly selfish, would you mind if we talk for a bit? I know it’s late, but?—”

“I’d like that.” The way she rushes to say those words, the way her eyes widen with them, I can’t help but think we’re equally desperate for this night to continue.

“Good,” I smile, and then let my back settle against the wall where I stand, staring at the space beside her on the bed as I fight the urge to fill it.

“Did you... finish your work?”

“Mostly,” I nod. “Sometimes it feels like there’s no such thing as finishing. It’s more like doing enough to temporarily sideline a task, but I never actually get to cross things off the list.”

“I imagine there’s always something popping up.” Her large eyes melt my heart when she flutters them during the pause. “Having an entire clan to run, do you ever, I don’t

know, wish you could pass it all off to someone else?”

The question draws a laugh from me, but she seems to wish she hadn’t asked it.

“That was probably a stupid thing to say. I know how seriously you take your position. I only mean that?—”

“Yes. I do, actually.” She seems shocked by this answer when I cut in.

“Oh.”

I tuck my hands into my pockets, letting my gaze slip to the floor as I think. “I take my role as alpha very seriously, but in the past, there have been times it’s cost me more than I was willing to lose.”

When I peer up again, she’s smiling a little. “Nearly,” she says. “It nearly cost you more than you were willing to lose.”

One corner of my mouth quirks with a smile, realizing she understands that she is what my position nearly cost me. “Indeed.”

She studies me after that, thinking what seems like a million thoughts as she stares straight through me. “Today took me by surprise.”

I could take her words any number of ways, but as I cycle through flashbacks of the day, I’m not worried.

“I just thought you should know... I’m glad we did this—spent time together, talked. It was good for us.” She nods, like she maybe needs to reassure herself.

“I couldn’t agree with you more.” The words leave me earnestly, without a shadow of

doubt. “It wasn’t always easy being so transparent with you, but... it was refreshing.”

To my surprise, that’s not a lie. I’ve found that people can’t always handle the truth when I give it to them straight, but with Annalise, it’s different.

So different.

Her eyes flit to the right, settling on that same space beside her on the bed that I’d been focused on. It crosses my mind that she might want me there, closer. It’s a bold move that could potentially go badly, but before I can talk myself out of it, my feet are already moving in that direction, taking me to her.

When I lower onto her bed, she peers up, her dark eyes meeting mine as my weight causes her body to shift. The slight bounce of her full breasts doesn’t slip past me either. Hence the reason my cock is stiffening behind my zipper, begging to be set free, begging for her touch.

“I—I’ve missed you,” she admits. It’s not the first time she’s told me this, but it’s the first time the look in her eyes tells the rest of the story.

That she’s missed my conversation, yes, my presence even. But also my touch, the way our physical intimacy makes us feel more complete, more connected.

“I’ve missed you so much, I didn’t think I’d survive it,” I admit, because I wouldn’t want this night to end without her knowing.

She smiles and leans into my hand when I cup her cheek. “Then, I suppose it’s a good thing we’re together now. You know... for the sake of your survival.”

What on Earth does this woman do to me? The only part of me that’s touching any part of her is my hand to her cheek, but even such minimal contact has my heart

pulsating inside my chest. I can only imagine what would happen if?—

Before I can even form a complete thought, the warmth of her fingers grips the side of my neck, bringing me closer. Then, her mouth is on mine. Soft, wet, quivering. My tongue pushes between her lips, wishing it were another part of her body against my tastebuds instead.

A very specific part, actually.

“Fuck...”

That word leaves me, reflecting the physical pain of not having her quite like I want her. Pain that’s only made worse by the feel of her hand resting on my thigh, dangerously close to my cock.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea,” I say as she gently sucks my bottom lip between hers.

“Why not?” she asks. It doesn’t even sound like she’s being coy, which only drives me even crazier.

“Because. Once I get started,” I warn, “I’m not sure I’ll be able to stop.”

Something I’ve said has her deepening our kiss, turning her body to face mine completely.

“What if... I don’t want you to stop?” Her question is more of a tease than anything. We both know we can only go so far. And we both know why.

“The council would have both our fucking heads if we break protocol.”

She doesn't groan out loud, but her wolf sure as hell protests. I nearly laugh out loud as a frustrated growl vibrates inside her chest. It isn't often she's more in need than I am, but I'm willing to oblige. Even though our pact was to take things slowly. I get the feeling she won't mind if we break the rules.

Just this once.

Her arousal was already scenting the air, like faint ribbons of untapped pleasure winding through my senses. But as the seconds tick past, it's become maddening, beckoning to me like an audible plea, screaming her request to make her needs known, loud and clear. She needs me to pleasure her, needs me to tease her slick, throbbing clit until she comes.

There is yet breath in my lungs, which means my woman, my queen, shall have what she wants. Because despite the title before my name, I'm here to serve her.

"Lie back."

20

Good Intentions

Caspian

“Cas...”

Hearing her gasp my name as she falls back, sinking into the mattress, my heart thunders like a thousand drums.

Already, I’m anticipating what the simple act of touching her will do to me. I’ll savor every fucking moment of it, only to walk away feeling as though my sole purpose in this world is to please the goddess on display before me.

She stares intently, locked in on my eyes, clocking my every move as I rest beside her. I prop myself up on one elbow, and from this angle, I’m able to take in the entire landscape of her body.

Every perfect inch of her.

She’s focused, trying to steady her erratic breaths as I slowly trace one fingertip around her nipple, feeling it harden beneath my touch. The fabric of her gown is so thin it leaves little to the imagination. My mind has already shifted, and I’m imagining myself undoing her buttons, slipping a hand over her breast to cup it, teasing her nipple with my tongue instead.

Her stomach quivers at my touch, labored breaths puffing from her lips. Annalise Breedlove is completely mine, and despite not yet being allowed to claim her fully, there's no question about this fact. There have been women before her, but none came close to making my very soul feel as if it's theirs more than it's my own. But with Annalise, I want her to have it all. Every single part of me.

My hand smooths down the flat plain of her stomach, slowing at the soft mound where her thighs meet, but her voice halts me.

"We said we'd take things slowly," she says. The words are spoken barely louder than a whisper, but I hear them as though they've been yelled through a megaphone. In fact, they prick my heart with guilt, because... she's right.

Damn.

"I'm... sorry." Without hesitation, I lean away, trying to force my brain to understand that this isn't happening, willing myself to accept that she's off limits tonight. "I got a bit carried away. Please don't think I?—"

"Wait."

She cuts me off with that one word, catching my wrist, stopping me as I attempt to put distance between us. Despite having just reminded me that we aren't supposed to yet be in such a compromising position, her eyes are telling a much different story. They're saying she maybe wishes she hadn't stopped me. They're saying she desperately wants to take those words back. But I wait, listening to the subtle change in her breathing as we stare into one another's eyes.

"I... didn't say I wanted you to stop."

Her neck throbs where her pulse races, and she's hard to read. Now, I'm frozen in

place for fear of doing the wrong thing. Whether the wrong thing is moving too far away or staying too close. Where we go next is completely up to her.

Her lower lip quivers, and my attention is completely focused there, wanting to kiss her more than I think I've ever wanted to before.

“Annalise, tell me what you want.” My voice is deep and raspy, riddled with lust as I'm drawn into her beauty.

“I—I'm not sure I know what I want. I?—”

“Annalise...”

This time, when her heart picks up speed, my wolf's senses are heightened, and I don't only see it pulsing against her throat, I hear it. And it's pounding for me, saying what she may not be ready to say, but I need her to say it. I need her to tell me where she wants this to go.

Her lips part, but no sound leaves them. Then, it feels like time has slowed when she begins to gather her gown, pulling the hem higher to expose her thighs as she slowly lets her knees fall apart. Just a little. Next, she takes my hand, pushing it between her legs until my palm is covering the warm mound at their apex. Heat radiates from her core, and as my finger trails along her slit, the tip is coated in her arousal.

Her name nearly slips from my mouth, but before it has the chance, she grips the back of my neck, bringing my lips to hers. A quiet moan vibrates in her throat as her tongue wanders into my mouth, at the precise moment I push two fingers into her pussy, taunted by the wet heat that surrounds them. Oh, what I'd give to feel her on my cock, opening for me, pushing me to the brink of insanity.

Fuck.



“Is that better? Is this what you needed?” I can already sense her relief as I breathe the question against her chin when we come up for air.

She nods, but it seems words have escaped her. There’s also this deliciously pained look on her face as her eyes slam shut. I’m tempted. Tempted to push deeper into her, but I know better. If I ruin her, if I go too far, that telling scent of hers would disappear, thus giving away our secret.

That, with her, control is almost an impossibility.

However, I have no choice but to curb my need. Otherwise, her purity—as perceived by the council’s sense of the word—would be sullied. So, using all the strength within me, I refrain, pulling free from her tight, soaked channel, using the arousal coating my fingers to stroke her swollen clitoris. First, in small, teasing circles that have her mouth gaping open. Then, letting the tender bud glide between my fingers as my own breathing becomes labored.

I swear, if I could have her in this state every hour of every day, I wouldn’t get a single thing done.

Another moan falls from her lips, and the sound is so sweet, drawing me in as I pray for another. Like a fucking addict. Her legs gently squeeze my hand as she gasps, her tightening clit tempting me to drop to my knees. I’m desperate to tease it with my tongue, suck it between my lips, watching her flood the bed as she comes, but it’s too late. Right before my eyes, she’s coming undone, placing her hand on top of mine, feeling me play, feeling me take her over the edge. And just like that, she succumbs to the orgasm that’s been buzzing within her, begging to be brought to the surface.

Set free.

She hums with satisfaction, then smiles at the feel of a kiss being placed on the tip of

her nose, then her chin, then her lips.

I pull away to stare at the contentment on her face, but it's one step beyond that. Her lids are heavy, staying closed for several seconds before she flashes her big, beautiful eyes my way.

"That did the trick, I take it?" I laugh because, on cue, she yawns, answering my question.

Her hand is warm against my cheek, and I can't look away. "I feel like I should thank you, but... that feels somewhat inappropriate," she smirks.

"Anything for you. Always."

She places one last kiss against my jaw, then her eyes do that thing again. Where they're hardly open, and her body's gone almost completely limp now.

"Rest," I say, stroking her hair before sitting up. "I'll be back after I shower."

I move to the edge of the mattress, and my cock pulses as a reminder of why I'm eager to close myself off in her restroom. After touching her, feeling her come against my fingertips, I'm desperate for a bit of relief myself.

"Hurry back," she says, and the sound of her voice has me shifting a look over my shoulder toward her. "I'll keep your spot warm."

I almost miss the hidden meaning beneath her words, but then it hits me. She's permitting me to bypass the promotion to the settee, choosing to advance me directly into her bed.

The feeling that rushes in, hearing how she's opening up to me—unafraid, with

reckless abandon—it makes all the hard days, the nights filled with uncertainty, completely worth it.

“I’ll return as quickly as I can.”

After making a promise I fully intend to keep, I grab my bag and head straight for the shower. I don’t look back to confirm it, but I sense her gaze locked on me like a heat-seeking missile. But what’s even more incredible is what I feel.

Her love.

21

Relief

Caspian

Even the short wait for the water to warm is excruciating as I stand outside the shower. There's a towel wrapped around my waist, but it's pointless. There's no such thing as modesty with my cock pointing skyward underneath it. I push a hand through my hair, but as my fingers lower past my face, I catch a hint of Annalise's scent on them.

Sweet. Subtle. Mouthwatering.

"Damn it," I grumble to myself, tossing the towel to the countertop when I decide to step beneath the stream while it's still a bit cool.

Within seconds, my hair is soaked, and a moment later, there's finally steam rolling off my body as the water heats. It soothes the tension in my shoulders and arms, but the rest of me can't be so easily pacified. If I don't come before lying beside Annalise, with how I'll likely toss and turn in frustration, neither of us will be getting much sleep.

Droplets pour down my face as I brace the wall with one hand, gripping my cock with the other. The moisture gathering in my palm from the water streaming down my arms makes it easy to replace my palm with Annalise's tight pussy in my vivid imagination.

“Fuck.”

I clamp my lip between my teeth, and I swear I can hear her quiet moans, feel her soft breaths puffing against my ear.

I stroke myself slowly, wanting this feeling—and the fantasy that goes along with it—to last. In my thoughts, Annalise is pressed against the wall before me, her breasts to the tile, the coolness making her nipples harden. Much like when I teased them through her gown.

The head of my cock gets so sensitive at the memory, and I open my eyes, glancing down as my hand slips up and down my strained length. I grip it tighter, imagining Annalise’s ass pressed firm against my stomach as I push deep into her pussy from behind, holding her small waist so she doesn’t move while I pound into her. She’ll take me so well one of these days.

And I can’t fucking wait.

A sound outside the shower has the fantasy evaporating into thin air, and when I peer up, a silhouette standing near the door sends a wave of embarrassment rushing through me.

“Shit. Annalise, I?—”

I’m in the middle of trying to conjure an apology, an excuse for why I’ve just been caught red-handed, masturbating in her shower, but I stop in my tracks. Through the glass enclosure, I stare as she slowly inches her gown up her thighs and torso, then finally over her head. The steam and condensation blur her figure, but there’s no mistaken why my heart just stopped beating.

Because she’s now completely naked.

I'm at a loss for words when she steps closer, reaches for the shower door, then tugs it open. Her breasts—bare and a fucking sight to behold—rise and fall with the deep breath that fills her lungs. She takes in the site of me—soaked from head to toe, my cock still rock hard despite my being mortified when she first walked in. And much to my delight, she steps into the shower, then closes the door behind her.

I'm mesmerized as she joins me beneath the stream, her long, thick hair lengthening as it becomes drenched. She comes closer, and I suck in a breath when heat from her palm encircles my cock.

“You took care of me,” she says. “Now, let me take care of you.”

I have every intention to turn her down, wanting her to know that nothing I ever do for her is with the expectation of getting something in return, but as she teases the head of my cock with her thumb, I can't speak.

“Will you do me the honor of allowing me to please my alpha?” she beckons, and I don't miss the air of hesitation in her tone. I usually enjoy her particular brand of confidence, but in this moment, her timidity isn't only endearing.

It's a huge fucking turn on.

My cock pulses in her hand, answering her question long before words ever leave my mouth.

“I'll allow it.”

Her nostrils flare, and I sense her excitement as well as her nerves. The combination of the two has my balls tightening, and I can imagine I'll come hard and fast.

I'm not sure what I expected. Perhaps, I assumed she'd stroke me until I came in her

hand, so when she holds my gaze, slowly lowering to her knees, my breaths become erratic.

The thought crosses my mind again. That I should stop her, because I didn't intend for her to perform tonight. However, when her full lips meet the tip of my cock, and then draw me into the heat of her mouth, I've reached the point of no return.

"Oh, fuck. That feels... so fucking good."

To the sound of me singing her praises, she sucks me in, over and over again, pushing her tongue over my tip just to drive me crazy. My fingertips move through her wet strands, smoothing over her scalp before gathering her hair into my fist. She rocks back and forth, likely ignoring the pain of the tile against her knees, because right now, her only focus is me.

"Shit. Annalise..."

There's no fighting the urge to speak her name aloud when her small, soft hand pushes between my thighs, cupping my balls. They're so sensitive to her touch, and I feel myself getting close.

My gaze lowers to her when she pulls back, flicking my tip with her tongue now, leaving the rest of me to feel deprived.

"Fucking tease," I groan, smirking when our eyes lock. She knows what the hell she's doing to me—frustrating me, making me want her more than I need air.

A jolt of electricity passes through me like lightning when she traces the tip of her tongue along my shaft, following the trail of a vein. She reaches the head again, and I'm on the verge of tears when she places a single kiss there.

My entire body is racked with pain, aching for her to finish me off. But on the other hand, I think she knows the wait is just as big a turn on. There's no doubt she senses my desperation. Yet, it does nothing to make her rush. Instead, she places another of those knee-weakening kisses to the base of my shaft. So close that her forehead lightly brushes my stomach with the motion, and I love and hate this all at the same time.

“Do you want to hear me beg? Is that it?”

She doesn't answer, but she doesn't take me into her mouth again either, so I take that as a yes.

I'm into the games, but my mouth can't seem to form the words she wants to hear. My pride won't allow me to ask for what I'm in such desperate need of. But then she peers up at me again, water gathering on her dark lashes, and I remember there's no power struggle between us. So, like she's done so many times before for me, I lower my guard, giving her what she wants.

“Please.” My tone sounds harsh and angry, but I'm nowhere near angry. Just... in need. Yet, she doesn't respond the way I hoped, still placing those light kisses all over.

So, I try again.

“I need you to suck my cock, Annalise. Desperately,” I add, feeling my legs wanting to give way. “Don't you see how hard I am from touching you? Feeling that exquisite pussy of yours on my fingers just... drove me wild. And now, I need you to make me come. So... fucking... bad.”

I'm breathing wildly having just said so much, but also because of the look she's just given me. It lets me know that something I just said was what she wanted to hear, and



the next second, I'm taken over by the most intense pleasure I've ever experienced in my life.

The softness of her mouth moves up and down my length, as deep as she can take me, and her teasing paid off. In a matter of seconds, I'll explode, and the relief will be so, so fucking sweet.

"Damn, I'm close," I warn her, but she doesn't slow down. Actually, she moves both hands to the backs of my thighs, gripping them tight, so I can't possibly pull out of her mouth. Not even if I wanted to.

There's a moment where her mouth feels almost too good to handle. Blindingly good. And the next second, a flood of hot cum bursts from my tip with one powerful flow, and I stare at the beauty on her knees before me, sucking harder as she moans, taking everything I have to give her.

Like such a good fucking girl.

The sound of her slurping, swallowing my seed, has me emptying down her throat until I'm completely drained. It isn't until I go soft between her lips that she finally lets the head of my cock pop free from her mouth.

For quite some time, the only sound is that of my heavy breathing, and water pelting the shower tile. Then, once I gather myself, I move my hands to Annalise's arms to bring her to her feet.

She stares, seemingly curious what I'll say, but there aren't quite words to sum up my feelings for her. So, when I draw her into an embrace, she melts against me, and we simply exist in the silence for a moment.

"I love you," I eventually utter, and she smiles against my shoulder. "With my whole

heart.”

“I know that. Even when you don’t say it.”

“Yes, but I promise you. I will always say it.”

Her cheek tightens against my shoulder again when my words draw another smile out of her.

“I love you too,” she says, adding one final word that makes all the difference.  
“Forever.”

My eyelids fall closed, and it’s at the realization that finally, after too many grueling weeks to count, we seem to have made our way back to one another.

Completely.

22

All Good Things

Caspian

There are fewer things more satisfying than waking up warm and naked, nestled beside the woman you love.

Sunlight threatens to spill into the room, and the heavy curtains are all that stand between me and the realization that this can only last for so long. Just downstairs, in my study, duty calls.

I place a kiss in Annalise's thick, dark hair as she rests on my bicep, her arms nestled against my chest where's she's curled into me, just like a child, seeking comfort. I smile at the sight of her—peaceful, beautiful.

Mine.

Shit, I'd stay here forever if I could, but alas...

I lift my head, spotting my bag on the floor near the foot of the bed—my current target. Slowly, I pull my arm free, and Annalise stirs, turning onto her other side as a soft whimper billows from her parted lips. Careful not to wake her, I slip from underneath the warmth of the blanket, wincing at the sting of the cold air hitting my skin.

I make quick work of getting to my bag and finding the clothes I packed there last night. Somehow, I manage to get them on in near silence, which only leaves me with the task of unlocking her bedroom door in the same manner.

Luckily, the floor doesn't creak when I make my way across the room, twisting the lock slowly until it clicks. I glance over my shoulder, seeing Annalise still fast asleep as I slip out, and then latch her door closed behind me.

"Good morning, Alpha."

I nod, acknowledging the greetings spoken in unison by both guards, and then start toward my room where I'll finish readying myself for the day. I'll also grab proper clothing, changing out of the joggers and t-shirt I grabbed in haste last night.

My steps are quicker now that I'm no longer worried about noise, and I even pick up speed when I remind myself that the sooner I finish my tasks, the sooner I can return to her. And it's that speed that has me nearly careening into my brother when I round the corner, wearing a look on his face that tells me he's about to royally fuck up my morning.

"Brother."

"Alpha," he nods, glancing down toward my bag before lifting his eyes again. "I was making my way to your room. There's a call for you, and it's urgent."

I don't like that my heart skips a beat, as if it knows what I don't yet know.

"I'll just drop my things in my room and?—"

"There's no time," he cuts in. "For all I know, they've already disconnected."

His tone is not only pressing, it's also filled with worry. And my brother does not worry.

“What is this?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but he asked specifically for you.”

“He?” I glance toward Dimitri as we rush through the hallways, headed in the direction of the conference room.

“Yes, he ... A member of the faction.”

Our short-lived conversation dies in the shadow of those words, and I wish like hell I could return to the blissful ignorance of slumber, the warmth and comfort I just left behind.

We approach the conference room, and Dimitri rushes in with me following close behind. Aunt Pen peers up from her seat between Creed and Archibald. All seem to have adopted the same solemn expression, and it only adds to the sense of doom and dread that hit the moment I laid eyes on Dimitri.

I approach my seat as Creed stands with a laptop in hand. He clicks a few buttons, and the large, once darkened screen across the room glows to life, an image fading in from the blackness.

A single figure standing in a dim room, cloaked in a dark robe, a black mask hiding his face.

“We have audio,” Dimitri leans in to whisper, and then straightens beside me, his jaw gritting as he glares at the screen when the camera zooms out.

Only now do I realize the situation is far more dire.

“What the fuck?”

A deep, raspy laugh fills the room. Apparently, the masked man finds amusement in my reaction to seeing he’s not alone. Seated in front of him are three others, all wearing black sacks over their heads. And based on the sniffing and sobbing now pouring through the speakers, they’re terrified.

This sick fuck has taken hostages.

“How nice of you to join us, Alpha,” he mocks. “I was beginning to think you don’t care as much for this clan as you claim to.”

“Your name,” I growl, feeling my jaw tense with the demand.

“To my followers, those you foolishly call your people... I am Vex.”

Aunt Pen makes a note of that as my gaze shifts back to the screen.

“What is this? Why are you doing this?”

He shakes his head at my questions, holding a finger over the lips of his mask. “Enough,” he says. “If you want these people to live, you will only speak when spoken to. And even then, I suggest that you weigh your words very, very carefully.”

My blood boils in my veins, and while it isn’t in my nature to take threats without severe retaliation, I also know this man is unhinged. And despite what his sarcasm implied a moment ago, I do care for this clan.

Deeply.

“Perfect,” he says, and despite not being able to see his face, I know there’s a smile hidden behind that mask. “Now, since you’re so eager to get to the point, I’m interested in striking a deal with you.”

“Wh—”

“Alpha... have you forgotten the rules?” he asks, and my jaw tenses again, waiting. “Thank you. Now, you may speak.”

I take a moment to respond, imagining myself ripping through him with my teeth.

“What sort of deal?”

“I’m glad you asked,” he croons.

The amusement in his tone contrasts the whimpers of his hostages. Who, if I’m not mistaken... are children.

“I’m willing to let them go, all of them, if you’ll agree to meet with me. Alone,” he adds.

Aunt Pen’s posture stiffens, as if suddenly more alert than a moment ago.

“It’s simple,” Vex says. “Meet me for one conversation, and you won’t have the blood of these poor, innocent souls on your hands.”

My heart races and it feels like the room’s closing in on me.

“Well, what will it be?”

An image of Annalise sleeping in my arms this morning materializes right before my

eyes. I can see every detail of her so clearly, can smell the softness of her scent lingering in the air.

Then... it fades.

And I'm terrified I'll never have that again—the little moments, the small pieces of herself she allows me to savor—because what's being asked of me feels like a death sentence.

“Yes. I'll do it.”

“The fuck you will ,” Dimitri snaps, speaking up despite knowing he ought not to.

“Quite eloquently stated, Dimitri. I second that,” Aunt Pen says in protest, standing from her seat to glare at me. I can practically read her mind, and she's wondering what the hell I'm doing.

But I can't expect them to understand, to feel the weight of all that I carry. Today, Vex is threatening to harm strangers from within the clan, but tomorrow... it could be any one of the people I love.

“For all we know, those are the children of his own people, and he's bluffing,” Dimitri points out, bringing a possibility to light that I've already considered.

“Heard, Brother. But... I think we both know I can't take that chance.”

“Indeed, you cannot,” Vex interjects. “But for your brother's sake, and to make it clear to you that I'm not a man who engages in child's play and trickery... a demonstration.”

He nods once slowly, and footsteps can be heard in the background. Then, the next



second, a pair of pale hands clutch the lapel of one of the young hostages. I'm staring at the small, thin frame of a boy I wouldn't guess to be older than fifteen or sixteen as he's brought to his feet, sobbing, pleading for mercy.

"What the hell is he doing?" Aunt Pen says under her breath as our eyes stay glued to the screen.

Vex yanks the hostage from his masked accomplice's grasp, bringing them to him in one swift motion.

"Something you don't know about me, but you will know in a moment, is that I hold deep-rooted love and affection for my followers. They aren't simply numbers, nor are they disposable to me. But these three... your... people... they're nothing. Kindling for the fire," he adds.

Those words have barely left his mouth when he lifts a blade to the boy's throat, slicing clean through.

"Dear gods!" Aunt Pen gasps as the innocent gurgles, choking on his own blood while his body sinks to the floor, unable to scream, unable to cry out. However, the remaining two cry out enough for them all, and the sheer terror in their voices tears me apart.

"Enough," I roar, slamming my fist on the table when rage flows through me.

"Agreed," Vex says. "Now that you know I'm a man of my word, it is still within your power to save the two I've left unharmed. So, Alpha... what shall we do?"

I don't even have to think about it. I haven't changed my mind, and I believe my brother has learned a valuable lesson.

That he must keep his fucking mouth shut.

“I’ll do it. We’ll meet.”

Aunt Pen doesn’t speak this time, but I can feel her wolf panicking, wanting to lash out, wanting to do something, but... this is how it must be.

“Name the time and Place. I’ll be there.”

Vex nods, wiping his blade clean, collecting the innocent blood of one of Clan Centauri’s precious souls in the palm of his glove.

“You’re a wise man, Caspian, which is why I’m certain you’ll heed my warning and come alone. It is also imperative that you refrain from breathing a single word of this to anyone outside that room,” he warns. “I’ll send you the details of our arrangement.”

And just like that, the screen goes black, and we’re disconnected.

“Fuck!” Dimitri explodes, pacing as the vein in his neck throbs. “You had no right to agree to that. You’re not expendable, Cas. We need you here. We need you alive, ” he adds, staring at me with this incredulous look in his eyes that would otherwise invoke shame. But tonight, I have no regard for my own life.

Only theirs.

My people.

There’s a deafening silence in the room, and I can’t lift my eyes from the surface of the table.

“What if this goes bad, Cas? What happens then?” Despite having just been up in arms over my decision, Dimitri is suddenly subdued, strangled by his own emotions. But as much as I’d like to give him a flowery, hopeful answer, that wouldn’t be honest.

“Then, you would take my place,” I say. “And with Annalise being Alpha Regent, she’d have equal power, helping to manage the burden.”

My mind’s racing a mile a minute when I start toward the door, mentally getting my affairs in order before heading to my office to put the thoughts into action. Last night, I hadn’t imagined the next twenty-four hours playing out quite like this, but things changed so quickly.

I halt when a large body steps between me and the door, and I peer up, staring into my brother’s eyes.

“You’re not unstoppable,” he points out, his shoulders heaving with the threat as anger flares in his eyes. “You’re stronger than me, yes, but not by much. And there’s no chance of you walking out of here if I break your legs. I’m actually willing to bet I could get it done before you’d even have a chance to react. I’m willing to do what needs to be done, whatever it takes to keep you from walking toward certain death.”

He’s enraged, more than I’ve seen from him in a long time, but I choose not to match his energy. He has every right to be upset, but it doesn’t change anything.

He glances to where I’ve just placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently. “Unfortunately, Brother, this is inevitable.”

Aunt Pen, Creed, and Archibald are silent behind me, and I step around Dimitri with my sight set on the door. He isn’t wrong. Death is certainly a possibility, which means there are things I must do before walking into the lion’s den. And one task in

particular... might just rip my heart right out of my chest.

23

Something in the Air

Annalise

“Is it just me, or has it been unusually quiet around here today?” Tabatha asks, pushing both hands down her dress as she stretches out on a bench near the rose bushes. We all agree the garden is far more magical at night, so it’s become habit to visit most evenings after dinner.

“I agree,” Guinivere concurs. “During lunch, I can usually pinpoint the number of times Creed and Dimitri will cross in front of the dining room entryway?—”

“Because she’s completely obsessed with both of them,” Tabatha laughs, cutting off a suddenly red-faced Guinevere midsentence. However, instead of defending herself, Guinevere sits there, mouth agape, shocked by how readily Tabatha broke her confidence.

“She’s... she’s lying. I don’t?—”

“Relax,” I say with a smile, gazing up at the moon. “I think we can all agree they’re devastatingly attractive. No one blames you for looking.”

I can’t believe I just uttered those words about Dimitri, but whether I like him or not, the one thing he has going for him is his looks. Everything else about him is absolutely hideous.

Guinevere takes a breath to refocus her thoughts. “As I was saying, things are definitely a little strange, although I can’t quite put my finger on why exactly.”

I hadn’t given it much thought before now, but I suppose they’re right. Cas has been noticeably absent. He slipped out of my bed while I slept, and I haven’t seen him since. I chocked it up to his schedule likely being busier than usual, but maybe it’s something else.

I lift my eyes toward the estate, thinking of a polite way to dismiss myself from the girls to go check in with Cas, but to my surprise, he’s already crossing the lawn. He’s heading this way, but his eyes are fixed on his phone, the pale glow of the screen brightening his handsome face.

A smile ghosts on my lips, and I don’t realize the girls have noticed until I hear them giggling beside me.

“Come on, Tab. I believe this is our cue to get lost,” Guinevere whispers. She stands, straightens her dress, and Tabatha does the same. They both flash warm smiles my way before heading back toward the estate, and a moment later, Cas is standing at my feet.

“Good evening,” he says, somehow seeming even more handsome when he smiles. “May I join you?”

Unable to fight a grin, I glance around at the grass surrounding me. “It’s not the most luxurious seat in the house, but by all means.”

With little regard for his expensive shoes and pristine clothing, he lowers to sit on the ground beside me. I expect him to speak, to explain why he sought me out, but... nothing.

Drawing my knees to my chest, I lean toward him, gently resting my head on his shoulder as we stare down the hill at all of New Eden, twinkling beneath the moonlight.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

Cas tilts his head, letting his cheek rest on top of my head. “It is. But not half as beautiful as you.”

A huge smile causes my cheeks to tighten. “Always the charmer.”

“Always yours ,” he counters, and my heart skips at the truth in his words.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” I ask. “Did you just feel the sudden urge to admire my garden?”

He chuffs a laugh. “Well, that, but also... I hoped now might be a good time to talk.”

The gravity in his tone has my senses hyper-alert, but I quickly wrangle in my emotions.

“About what?”

Another long pause gives me time to panic, and I hate this.

“Well, in a nutshell... your freedom.”

My head lifts off his shoulder, and we lock eyes.

His breathing quickens, then he looks away, and I’m starting to think my first instinct was correct. There’s definitely cause for concern.

“I know this seems sudden,” he says, rubbing his jaw as he speaks. “And I know that word— freedom —might feel out of place, considering how we’ve evolved, but... I suppose I need to make this as plain as possible.”

I’m damn-near panting, waiting to see where this is going, waiting to see why he’s suddenly being so grave.

“You’re not a prisoner here. By any stretch of the word,” he adds. “From this day forward, if you remain within the walls of this estate, it’s because that’s what you desire.”

My brow tenses, as I study his face, as I take note of how he can hardly look me in the eyes. While I understand why he may have felt the need to define these terms, I think we both know I no longer feel as though I’m serving a prison sentence.

“Cas, I’m here because I love you. Even when I was pissed at you and wanted to claw your damn heart out of your chest, even that was because I love you.”

He smiles, and I do the same, feeling my eyes blur with tears.

“I just need to know that you understand your power here, Annalise. When I named you Alpha Regent, that wasn’t an honorary title. It’s your title, and no matter what happens in the future, I expect you to defend that title like your life depends on it. Like our people’s lives depend on it. Is that understood?”

He places a hand on my cheek, staring so deep into my eyes, I believe he sees my soul.

I nod profusely, wanting so badly to understand why this feels like more than just a casual conversation, despite Cas seeming desperate to convince me as such.



“Okay, I get it. I’m free. But what aren’t you saying? Has something happened?”

I sniffle as a few more tears fall, and he kisses them away, a faint smile on his lips as he grips my face.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about,” he says, but I don’t believe him.

“Cas—”

“Let me walk you to your room,” he cuts in, already standing to his feet.

I’m staring up at him as he turns, offering his hand. My palm warms against his, then I’m pulled to my feet with such ease I hardly put in any effort of my own. Cas’s arm slips around my waist, and as we draw closer to the estate, the sense of dread resting in my gut grows tenfold.

My bedroom door comes into view, and our pace slows. We nod to acknowledge my guards, then they venture further down the corridor to give us privacy.

“I love you,” he says, and I swear I could listen to those words roll off his tongue all day.

“I love you, too.”

My eyes fall closed when Cas presses his lips to my forehead, and I revel in the lingering kiss.

“Good night.”

His hand slips off my waist, and there’s a sinking feeling in my gut that I can’t shake as the distance between us grows.

“Wait. Aren’t you coming back?”

His steps halt, but he takes his time turning to face me. And when he does, the smile on his lips seems forced.

“I would love to, but... not tonight.”

And with that, his gaze slips from mine, and he continues his course down the hallway—head lowered, hands tucked inside his pockets—and then he’s gone.

I stare in the direction of where he’s just disappeared for several seconds, contemplating whether or not I should chase after him. But he seems determined to keep whatever’s bothering him to himself tonight. And if there’s one thing I’ve learned about my alpha, it’s that when his mind is made up, he’s like a mountain.

Unmovable.

24

### Calm Before the Storm

#### Caspian

My heart races, watching as Aunt Pen wears a path where she paces in front of the fireplace. The mood in the study is somber, and no one's said a word in several minutes. I believe that, like me, they're all hyper-aware of how the clock is winding down.

As promised, Vex sent the details, laying out a very meticulous plan for where and how we're to meet. Also as promised, I haven't shared those details with a soul. Seeing him brutally mutilate an innocent child served its purpose. It taught me that this madman isn't one to be toiled with. If one single thing goes wrong tonight, if he has even an inkling something's amiss, he wouldn't hesitate to make one of my loved ones pay the price.

"Un-fucking-believable," Aunt Pen hisses. "You're playing right into his hand."

"And what would you have me do differently?" My voice booms with the question, and she passes a glare toward me.

"What would I have you do differently? Well, for starters, you could tell us all where the bloody hell you're going! At least then we could come to you if?—"

"Why? So he can slit each of your throats like we've already seen him do once

today?”

I’m breathless, imagining each one of them clutching their throats, trying in vain to cover a gaping wound as life drains from their eyes.

“This... Vex... or whatever the hell he calls himself, he isn’t a god,” Dimitri points out. “He isn’t invincible, which means if we come up with a plan, we might?—”

“There’s no time for that,” I cut in, my eyes shifting to the clock again, understanding that I’ve got mere minutes to help my family find some sort of peace within themselves before I must leave.

It’s a sobering thought, knowing this might be the last time I look any of them in their eyes, knowing that my last conversation with Annalise might very well be that.

My last.

I look away, swallowing deeply before I’m able to speak again.

“I’m not afraid,” is where I begin, finding the courage to meet each one of their gazes right after—Aunt Pen, Creed, Archibald, Dimitri. “The only thing that’s difficult right now is knowing how it would hurt the people I love should I not return. But I... am not... afraid.”

Aunt Pen swipes a tear from her cheek when I repeat those words.

“As alpha of Clan Centauri, it is my sworn duty to do everything within my power to protect our people, and I intend to do exactly that. Even if it costs me my life.”

Aunt Pen rolls her eyes, angry that I’m willingly walking into the lion’s den, but she doesn’t speak. Because as my father’s sister, she knows as well as I do that this is what must be done. It’s what my father would’ve done.

I think of him, the man I idolized as a child, the man I still loved and cherished long after I realized he was as imperfect as the rest of us. Even after his death, I still find myself drawing courage from his example—a warrior who loved Clan Centauri with all his heart and made sacrifices to ensure their survival all the way up until we laid him to rest.

Creed's hand lands on my shoulder and he squeezes just enough that I feel the words he cannot say. As my closest friend, it feels like we've seen it all together. The good, the bad, the ugly. And now, as I face the darkness, this will be the first time neither he nor Dimitri will be there to face it with me.

I stand, his hand slips away, and he retreats to the wall beside my brother. Embers crackle in the fireplace, and it's the only sound in the room as I glance around, looking each one in their eyes.

"Whatever happens next, know two things," I say. "First, know that my heart is always with this clan. And second, know that I will do everything within my power to come home."

Archibald nods, clasping both hands in front of him. "Godspeed, Sir."

I start toward the door, but a solid grip on my arm halts me. When I turn, it's Dimitri's gaze that's set on me. At first, I think he intends to speak, but instead, he pulls me into an embrace. My brother, the one with the emotional range of a grain of rice.

"I swear, if you do something stupid, Cas... I'll fucking kill you myself."

Somehow, despite the weight of this moment, I smile at his words. "Noted."

He squeezes tighter, whispering one last thing just loud enough for me to hear. "I love you..."

My eyes fall closed as I take a breath. “Same to you, Brother.”

He releases me, and his expression goes blank, as if no words were exchanged between us at all. He retreats with reluctant steps, and I’m almost convinced this moment is as difficult for him as it is for me, but that’s impossible.

Because while his concern is only for one tonight, mine is for many.

Mine is for all .

Fighting the urge to go to Annalise one last time, I follow my intended course—out the front door to where I’ve asked Archibald to have a porter park my bike. I’m numb as I climb on, pull the helmet over my head, then start the engine.

Leaving tonight is probably the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. But as I ride toward uncertainty, with the estate shrinking in the distance behind me, both my objectives are abundantly clear.

Do what must be done to protect the clan.

And for fuck’s sake... make it home to Annalise.