



Shadow Bonds (Shadow War Academy #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Death was supposed to be my end. Instead, it was just the beginning.

I woke up in someone else's body, inside the Shadow Academy, a school for elite warriors. Now they think I'm someone I'm not, and until I escape, I'll have to play along.

But things get complicated when strange powers awaken inside me, along with forgotten memories.

Then there are the four Elite Shadows who hate me for some reason, but also think I'm their mate:

Knox, the lethal assassin who hears my every thought and whispers back in a voice like sin.

Malakai, the Shadow shifter who sees through my eyes—and likes what he finds.

Theon, whose shadows alone cause pain, pretends to be cold, but one hint of my fear sends him feral.

And Cyrus, the nightmare Shadow who slithers into my dreams just to play.

Between brutal classes, war camps, and deadly games against a rival academy, I'm also hunting the truth. Because this body isn't the only thing that's stolen.

My death was no accident. And if they think I'll play by their rules, they're dead wrong.

Answers or ashes. Maybe I'll just end up burning this place down.

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Dark shadows blur across my vision as I struggle to pull myself from the heavy drowsiness trying to drag me under yet again.

I need to get out of here. Wherever here is.

A memory of walking down an alleyway flashes across my mind, followed by the feeling of being watched. And then nothing but darkness.

I claw my way back to the surface of slumber once more, forcing my mind to stay awake.

To try and focus on everything around me and get moving.

But an invisible weight, so heavy it pins me to the ground, stops me from shifting even the slightest. I try again to move, not ready to give up but my body doesn't move an inch, and every part of me right down to the bone is heavy and grows more numb by the minute.

I'd rather the pain than the cold numbness settling in. At least with pain, I know I have a chance at surviving.

I focus harder on the blurry deep orange, and slowly the fuzziness clears a little, revealing the source of the color.

Flames. And they're everywhere.

They start to move closer, and the heat slowly seeps into my body, finally

withdrawing the cold numbness.

I quickly regret the thought of wanting to feel pain when it hits me like a ton of bricks.

I gasp as the sharp agony shoots up and down my body, the sensation similar to being electrocuted over and over. Every nerve quickly becomes too sensitive. Too sore. Too overstimulated.

I still can't move, my body as heavy as it was before the numbness. But I know I can't stay here. I'm going to burn alive if I don't get out of here soon.

As more of the blur clears, I fight and push harder against the heaviness, and my gaze spots another figure across from me, closer to the flames.

A jolt of shock rushes through me when I see who it is. But it can't be...

I blink to clear my vision over and over, but no matter how many times I do, I still see the same thing.

Me.

My body is directly across from me. My long brown hair splayed across the ground, my brown eyes open and empty as they stare upward. My face so pale and deathly.

An icy chill crawls down my spine at the dead look in my eyes.

She... I'm dead.

But I have to be seeing things... It's a hallucination from the pain or concussion I must have. It has to be. I'm lying on the ground across from her, not over there.

And even though I can't move my body, I can feel every inch of pain in it.

Maybe I'm just seeing a vision of my impending death. Something that will quickly happen if I don't get moving soon.

I try to move again and sigh in relief when I feel something happen. But my stomach drops and swirls when the slight shift I felt turns into a tug as something drags me backward.

I open my mouth to scream, but no sound comes out. And whatever pulls me continues to tug me backward.

My fear slowly fades when I quickly realize I'm being dragged outside and away from the flames.

My gaze draws once more to the body that looks eerily similar to mine as I move further and further away from her and the raging fire.

The flames touch her still body and frozen face of horror. An expression I hope to never see on my own.

I move further away from the strange hallucination. And a soft breeze whispers across my face as I'm dragged through what must be a large hole in the building.

A few feet outside of the burning building, the ground trembles beneath me. Hands quickly slide under me, holding me tight in a run as we move farther and farther away from the destruction.

A moment later, a large boom sounds out, and most of the building explodes, collapsing in on itself.

My heart races, picking up speed as the flames rise higher and higher, setting off more smaller explosions as the rest of the building quickly burns to ashes.

A hand slides up and around to my head and a spear of pain splinters across my body in waves.

Unable to speak or move, the pain becomes overwhelming and dark spots begin to cloud my vision. Growing and growing until the bright flames and destruction before me slowly disappears.

“It was the only way,” a soft voice whispers just as darkness closes in around me.

I jolt awake and sit up, slightly disorientated. Glancing around, I frown at the room I’m in.

Where the hell am I?

There’s a white desk and chair to the left of me, a white door beside it, and another across from me. And a chest of drawers and set of long shelves lining the wall on the other side of the room.

Gray and white blankets try to wrap around me as I get up off the queen size bed where I lay and make my way to the door across from me.

I’m still fully dressed, but the black leggings and white top is definitely not what I was wearing.

An icy chill crawls down my spine at the thought of someone changing me.

As silently as possible, I make my way to the door and turn the handle. Relief instantly fills me when it opens, revealing a long hallway.

I step outside and move down the hallway, making it to the top of a stairway when I hear voices. Male voices.

Shoving down the panic trying to overwhelm me, I continue down the stairs, staying as quiet as possible. But even though none of the steps creak, the voices pause when I reach the end.

Shit.

There's no door that I can see. Which means I'm more than likely going to have to pass whoever those men are to get out of here.

I step further into the open area while looking for anything I can use as a weapon. But a couple of steps in, the men come into view.

Four extremely attractive men that look a couple of years older than me.

Three of them have dark hair, one that's chin-length, while the fourth's is platinum blonde, tight and short against his head. All are tanned, toned, athletic, and built and look like they could take me down in seconds.

Though not the kind of takedown I'd enjoy.

Spotting the door just behind them, I push their good genes and my worries to the back of my mind and try to come up with a plan.

None of them make any move toward me which means they either don't see me as a threat or think I wouldn't be stupid enough to try and escape.

Two misconceptions they'll soon learn are wrong.

“Where am I?” I ask, while still looking for something I can use as a weapon. But the long gray marble counters are bare, and the only available weapon I can see are the knives and forks they’re all using to eat with.

“Where you’ll unfortunately be for the next year,” the brown-eyed, dark-haired one mumbles. He gives me a patronizing smirk, revealing his dimples.

His words finally penetrate my tired brain, and I flinch a step back.

There’s no way I’m staying here for a couple of hours, let alone a damn year. “What the hell are you talking about?”

The one with hazel eyes and chin-length dark brown hair gets up off his seat and glares at me. “Sena, cut the crap. It’s too fucking early for this shit.”

I take a step back from him and the animosity seeping from him. “Who’s Sena?” I ask, and they all freeze.

“What kind of game are you playing at now?” Dimples asks with a snarl.

“Game? I—” A sharp pain shoots through my head, and I raise my hand to the spot behind my ear and wince. Pulling my hand back, I spot red on my fingers. Blood.

“She’s bleeding,” someone says, but I don’t glance up at them, still in shock at the blood on my hands.

The burning building, the pain, the mirage of my body across from me... it all flashes across my memory, reminding me of where I was last night.

“What the hell?” another asks, his deep voice full of shock. “Call a healer.”

“She’s probably faking it,” someone grits out.

I glance up to find the male with the platinum blond hair glaring at me, his deep teal eyes getting darker by the minute.

“Call a fucking healer now,” the one with deep indigo blue eyes says. He’s as handsome as the rest of them, but he’s also pretty with full pouty lips and sharp jawline.

Such a pity they’re all psycho kidnappers.

Dimples glares at me as he makes his way out of the room, his brown eyes so dark they look almost black.

“Sena, what the hell?” Hazel Eyes asks.

I take another step back from them, and they still.

“Again . Who is Sena?” I ask, getting more frustrated by the minute. My head starts thumping the more I try to wrap my head around what type of game they’re playing.

“You,” he replies with absolute confidence.

I freeze, and my gaze finds his. “My name isn’t Sena, it’s...” My brain glitches, and I wait for it to remember my own name, but nothing comes to me.

“My name... It’s...” I keep trying to think about my name, but my mind goes blank.

“Sena. S-e-n-a... Sena...” Hazel Eyes narrows a look at me, his expression full of suspicion as I try to think of my actual name.

But it's like it's wiped from my memories.

I know who I am. I remember the foster homes I grew up in, the horrible people I met, and everything else about my nineteen shitty years of life. But I can't... I can't remember my name.

Panic slices through me, making my chest grow tight. Before it grows into a full-blown panic attack, the door opens, and Dimples returns with a female in a green uniform.

"Hi, Sena, my name is Dawn. One of your Shadow companions said you might have had an accident. Do you mind if I take a look at it?"

She makes a move toward me, and I instantly take a step back. "What's a Shadow companion? Where am I? How did I get here?"

The female, Dawn, freezes and frowns. "Sena, no one here is going to hurt you. You're safe." Her voice is soft and gentle, but it does nothing to ease the panic rushing through me.

"I'm not Sena," I tell her. "You all must have me confused with someone else." That or they're playing some sick, twisted game. I glance around trying to find any hidden cameras. But I guess if they were hidden on purpose, I wouldn't be able to find them so easily.

Dimples scoffs. "Then who are you?"

"I..." I try to think about my name again, but nothing comes to me. I try harder and harder, but the sharp pain in my head returns making me wince.

"Sen..." Dawn starts but stops herself, clearing her throat. "I mean... What's the last

thing you do remember?”

I frown trying to think about last night. “A building. It was on fire. I remember I was inside it. I couldn’t move, but someone pulled me out before it blew up. I think I passed out after that. Then I woke up here.”

I glance up at Dawn and watch her frown deepen.

“What a load of bullshit.” Dimples barks out a laugh before glaring at me. “Your parent dropped you off yesterday evening. Tucked you in nice and safe and then left after you went to bed.”

I narrow my eyes on him and his fucking attitude. “I don’t have any parents, you dickhead.” The throbbing in my head grows to a thumping throb, making me groan.

“I really need to take a look at that wound,” Dawn says as she inches her way over to me.

I keep my eyes on the men as she moves in front of me, scanning my face as if searching for something.

“I just want to take a look,” she says, and I can see in her eyes that she doesn’t want to hurt me. I’ve met enough horrible people to know the difference.

I nod, and she steps around me. My eyes find the four men as they all watch me with nothing but suspicion and hate in their eyes.

But they’re not the only ones feeling suspicious. I wouldn’t trust any of them as far as I could throw them.

Dawn presses a spot at the side of my head, and I hiss when a sharp slice of pain

shoots through to the other side.

“And you don’t remember how you got this?” Dawn asks from beside me.

I shake my head, quickly stopping when it sends waves of pain up through my skull.

“It’s pretty deep,” she says, and the four guy’s expression slowly start to morph into confused frowns.

“I can close this up here, but I want to do some further testing if you don’t mind. Your lack of memories is very concerning,” she says, the worry in her tone evident.

“Maybe it’s just because she’s blonde,” Dimples says with a roll of his eyes. Obviously, he’s not very concerned. But he’s obviously fucking blind. My hair is brown.

“I’m not blonde,” I grit out, only making my headache worse.

He raises a brow, and when I don’t say anything else, he lets out a dramatic sigh and moves over to the kitchen counter, searching the drawers for something before walking over to me with an object in his hand.

I tense up, ready to dive out of the way, when he places the object a few inches away from my face. But it’s just a mirror.

I relax a little but freeze when I see what’s staring back at me.

Blonde hair. Turquoise eyes. Small nose. Full lips. Olive skin.

I slowly move a trembling hand up to my face and watch as the girl in the mirror does the same. My fingers graze along her cheek, her unscarred skin, and small nose. And

I feel each brush of finger as it slides across my skin.

No freckles. No scars. No brown hair and pale skin.

She's around the same age as me, and from the looks of it, the same height too.

But this can't be real. This isn't me.

An image of my own body lying across from me in that burning building flashes across my mind.

I was looking at her... at me . But she was dead. I thought it was a hallucination. I thought I was seeing things. Not... Oh god.

My heart races, thumping loudly in my ears and chest.

She... I burned in that building. I'm... Dead...

But how? How is any of this possible? I feel like me. A little stronger though confused with a whopping headache. But I don't feel any different.

No. I shake my head and quickly regret it when the thumping spreads. I'm here. The mirror has to be a trick. It has to be...

I bend forward as the world tilts and starts to spin.

"Sena... I need you to breathe. Deep breaths... deep breaths..." Dawn says from somewhere far away from me.

But I can't breathe, there's no air... I can't... The room closes in around me, and dark spots fill my vision. The world spins and tilts once more, and then darkness swallows

me whole.

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My eyes blink open, and the first thing I see is white. White walls, white sheets and bedding, and a white door.

“Where am I?” I mumble and sit up while trying to remember the last thing that happened.

The house. The four males. Dawn. The mirror. It all flashes across my mind as Dawn comes into view with a reassuring smile on her face.

“You’re in the healing center. How are you feeling?” she asks.

Healing center... I glance down at my body. A body that looks a little healthier than... than my real one.

Shit... this really happened. Someone switched my body with this one.

Dawn still stares at me, waiting for a reply and I try to think back to what she asked and focus on that instead of having another panic attack.

“Tired but okay.” I reach up to my head and relax when I don’t feel any pain.

“Do you remember anything?” she asks, and the concern on her face makes me want to answer her genuinely.

“I remember... waking up in a strange house and meeting four dickheads.”

She tries to contain her smile but fails. “And anything before that? Of your life as

Sena?”

I freeze, realizing she still thinks I’m her... The girl in the mirror.

Swallowing hard, I shake my head while trying to figure out how to explain what happened to me.

Dawn nods and writes something on the notepad in her hands and then gives me a sad smile. “It’s not uncommon for a head wound like yours to cause amnesia.”

Amnesia ... She thinks I’ve lost my memory and not that I’ve swapped bodies with someone else. Which now that I think about it, sounds even crazier.

If I say anything when I don’t know where I am or who these people are, I might end up in a straitjacket instead.

Maybe I’ll stick with the amnesia for now. At least until I can figure out how I can get out of here.

“So, you’re saying she actually has amnesia?”

I jump and turn to the right, spotting four pairs of angry glares.

How the fuck did I not see them?

“Yes. The head wound was deep. It caused damage to the temporal lobe and even though I’ve healed the injury, it looks to have already caused some damage,” Dawn answers them before looking back at me.

“I can’t give you your memory back, but there have been many cases where people recover them partly or fully over time.” She pats my hand in a soothing gesture.

“Don’t give up hope yet.”

I nod, playing along with this farce of a lie but the minute I glance over at the guys, I can see none of them buy it, their suspicion slashed across their faces in droves.

“These dickheads will meet you at home,” Hazel Eyes grits out.

“Can’t I just go?” I ask Dawn, hoping I can just get out of here.

Hearing my words, the four guys put a pause on their little dramatic exit.

“You said I was healed,” I remind her.

Her eyes grow sad, and she takes a seat beside me. “Sena, you’re a female Shadow. It’s what we call human females that have a percentage of Shadow DNA.”

I shake my head. “No... I?”

She takes my hand. “I know you don’t remember this, but you were matched with these four Shadows when you were a child.”

I glance over at the guys as the room grows thick with tension. Their expressions quickly morph from annoyed to outright hostile.

“Where am I?” I ask her, fearing I might already know the answer if any of the horror stories I heard growing up is true.

“The Shadow Academy,” she says, and just like that, my whole world tilts on its axis.

The Shadow Academy is a school for warriors and those that fight against the terrigons and dark beasts that slip from another realm called the Hollow.

The entire academy holds the ethos of kill or be killed.

It's supposed to be brutal and savage, and those that manage to stay alive only become more vicious.

Not only that, but the entire academy is a fortress. With shields and barriers that hide it from the outside world. No one knows where it is. And anyone that accidentally ends up too close to it is said to have mysteriously disappeared.

There's no way I'm going to escape without coming up with one seriously thought-out plan.

"We'll take care of you as we do all female Shadows.

With the help of our instructors and your Shadow companions, you'll train.

You'll go to class with the other females and you'll...

you'll get the chance to be a part of something much bigger than yourself.

" Dawn gives me a soft look full of compassion before she steps out of the room, leaving me with my so-called Shadow companions.

As soon as the door shuts, Hazel Eyes steps closer to the bed, his eyes narrowing to slits.

"You're stuck here with us for the next year whether you like it or not.

Play your little game all you want. But we sure as hell won't let you ruin our only chances of getting out of here.

You already fucked us over. We won't let you do it again.

" Each word drips with venom, and the icy look in his eyes just adds to the raging asshole look he's got going on.

I tense my body, ready to dive out of the way of the incoming hit. But it never comes.

With cutting glares, they turn and leave. But it's not until the door slams shut that I start to relax.

Fuck. It looks like Sena did a number on them. But lucky me, I'm the one that gets the end tail of it.

His words finally filter past the panic and fear, and a sliver of hope starts to grow.

Ruin our only chances of getting out of here.

They want to get out of here too. Maybe I can convince them I want the same thing?

That is, if they don't end up killing me first.

Following the map of the academy Dawn gave me, I try to head in the location she circled.

The male Shadows that have companions are placed further away from the main building and dorms on the academy grounds. Which doesn't give me a lot of confidence should any of my four companions decide to kill me.

And the large forest that weaves in and around the buildings—the one that could be used to hide my body—makes the sliver of confidence I do have plummet.

My companions are also supposed to train me, help me to adjust here at the academy, and guide me toward an awakening of my Shadow abilities.

Something I doubt any of those four will be doing. Nor will any Shadow abilities be awakening.

I push it to the back of my mind and focus back on the path. I finally spot a large modern two-story house with deep gray walls covering the entire building. There's a line of small windows placed on the first story with all the lights still on.

A jolt of nervous energy slides through me at the thought of them all sitting around waiting for me to arrive.

Shaking it off, I steel myself for the four assholes and their attitudes and make my way to the front door.

I try the handle, but it's locked. Regretting my life choices and cursing my bad luck, I release a harsh breath, pull up my big girl pants and knock on the door.

A minute passes and then another and another. But no one comes to open the door.

Narrowing my eyes, I knock again, harder this time, but more minutes pass, and no one comes to answer. I'm about to try a third time when the lights switch off, sending me a clear message.

They're not going to open the door.

Absolute dicks. I glance around, wondering what I'm supposed to do now.

Dawn said I had to stay with them. That there aren't any female dorms, and all female Shadows stay with their companions.

I glance down at the map, wondering if there's anywhere else I can go.

At least for the night or until I can figure out something.

But unless I want to sleep in a dorm full of male Shadows, one of the classes or rooms in the main building—which are probably locked by now—or back in the healing center, my only option is the forest.

It's not like it's the first time I've slept outside or in the cold.

The breeze grows cool, reminding me it's only going to get colder the later it gets and that I need to find a place not out in the open.

Instead of waiting around for one of them to open the door, I mentally wish them all a shitty night's sleep with warm pillows and horrible nightmares before heading back into the forest and making my way toward the spot on the map that shows me there should be a lake close by.

A few minutes later, I come out to the edge of one. The minute I see it, something instantly calms inside me. A warmth that spreads through my chest and then out to every limb making me feel like I can finally breathe since the moment I woke up here.

The thick trees from the forest grow out far enough to block me from view if I wanted to stay here, but I spot a group of rocks nearer to the lake that look like they might block the breeze better.

Glancing around to make sure no one is nearby, I head over to it and toward a high flat rock that looks like it would conceal me while also protecting me from the growing wind.

Pocketing my map, I move to sit in front of it when I spot a small pool of still water a couple of feet beside it.

Taking a deep breath to steel myself, I move over to it and glance down, jolting when I see the image of the girl from the mirror, her turquoise eyes wide with fear.

I breathe through the rush of panic sliding through me and try to inspect the rest of my new body. I twist and turn it wondering if I'll feel like I'm in a suit that's been pulled too tight. But everything feels normal.

Which I suppose should be the first sign that something is wrong.

I usually felt pain in my left foot from when one of my foster mothers decided to stomp on it, breaking it.

She wouldn't let me go get it checked out, and it never healed right.

The twinge of pain in my wrist is also gone.

And there're no more dull headaches that I used to suffer from incessantly every day.

Instead, I feel strong. Stronger than I have in a long while.

My eyes find the blonde in the pool of water once more. At least we look around the same age. It would have been beyond strange if I had ended up in an older body. Or even worse, younger.

I wince when I realize I'm thinking how worse this could be when it's already surpassed that.

Maybe it's because none of this feels real. How can it? I'm in someone else's body,

my own most likely burned to ashes, and in the notorious Shadow Academy with four Shadow warriors that think I'm their companion. Someone that Dawn said can help keep them sane.

All male Shadows are apparently drawn to the dark. They can become volatile and unstable if not kept in check. That's why most live here, to train and to learn how to control their shadow abilities, and in turn, become stronger to fight against the Hollow and its dark beasts and creatures.

If they don't learn to control it, the madness sets in.

Instead of thinking about how most females here are used as a damn Xanax, I let the rocks block me from view as I spin and move, testing out multiple combinations of fighting moves I've learned and burned into memory.

This body moves like it was born to do it, with far more graceful spins and kicks than I could ever manage with my broken body.

I guess that's what happens when you have a healthy body that's taken care of with consistent food and rest. But most of us don't have that luxury.

A pang of guilt hits me like a punch to the chest when I realize I might have technically stolen this girl's life. Not by choice, but whoever switched us might have placed her in my body and killed her before she... burned.

My stomach knots and rolls. I hate that I'm a part of this. But another part of me is still glad I'm alive too. Even if my entire life has completely changed. At least alive, I have a chance to figure everything out.

I run my hands along my side, expecting to feel the jagged scar, but pause when all I feel is smooth skin.

I glance down and pull up my top. There's nothing there. No jagged scar. No uneven skin.

But of course, it wouldn't be there. This isn't my body. This body was never attacked by a group of vicious terrigons. Never beat by her multiple foster parents or abandoned and left to survive in a world that always looks down on you.

An icy shiver slithers down my spine when it finally hits me.

My real body burned in that building. And unless there's someone out there that can resurrect me, I have no way of getting it back. No way of turning back time and changing whatever messed up thread fate has fucked up with.

This is my body now. Whether I like it or not.

Everyone here also thinks I'm a female Shadow. Something that isn't possible.

Unless you call attracting trouble at every turn, I've been normal my entire life. I've had to fight to survive each day, claw my way through the darkness to even find a sliver of light.

I suppose, at least that will help me while I'm here. My stubborn nature and will to live has never done me wrong. I doubt it's going to start now.

I move over to the long flat rock and sit with my back to it, ready for this day to be over already.

In my own little hiding space, I wrap my arms around my body and glance out at the lake while trying to figure out what I'm going to do now.

Those four men hate me. Well... they hate Sena, not me. Not... I try to think of my

name again, but there's a blank spot in my memory where it should be.

After a few minutes of getting nowhere, I give up, leaning my head back against the rock and glancing up at the sky now starting to twinkle with stars.

I need answers. But in order to get them, I need to get out of here first. To get past the shields and barriers that are supposedly impenetrable.

Exhaustion quickly seeps into my mind and body, and my stomach grumbles, reminding me I haven't eaten in a while. But it's not the first time I've gone without food, and I doubt it will be the last.

Pushing the thought of food away, I curl into my knees, letting the soft ripple of the water help lull me to sleep.

Tomorrow... I'll figure it all out tomorrow.

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“Where the hell could she have gone?”

“She couldn’t have gone far.”

“We should have let her in last night. She was injured.”

“She was faking it.”

“There was blood. You could smell it, so could I.”

“She had to have done it to herself.”

I wake to the annoying sound of four familiar voices. They’re close by, but I have no intention of telling them where I am.

I wait until they’ve left before getting up and stretching, soon regretting my spot near the rocks when I find every part of my body groaning and aching with multiple kinks from my awkward position.

I stretch them out and then make my way to the main building, hoping there’s a free canteen inside.

Once I hit the main door, a delicious scent hits my senses, and I follow it. After a few wrong turns and strange looks from the males here, I eventually find the canteen and make my way toward the long table of food.

Nobody looks to be handing over cash or cards, so I chance my luck and line up in

the small queue.

When it's my turn to pick out some food, I get a bit of everything, eggs, pancakes, sausages, and any extras and then head for the nearest empty table.

When no one tries to stop me for not paying, I take it as a win and sit down to dig in.

A couple of minutes later, a shadow blocks my light, and a male with blonde hair and warm brown eyes sits down in front of me.

I glance over at him with a raised brow.

"Where are your companions?" he asks as his eyes dip to my lips and eyes.

"Around," I tell him, still unaware of the rules here and what I should and shouldn't be saying that won't get me or those four idiots into trouble. I dig back into my food, loving the fact that it's free and warm and with the hope he'll take the hint and leave me to it.

"You shouldn't be by yourself," he says, making that little hope shrivel up and disappear.

I glance at him, wondering if he's trying to warn me. But he's smiling at me, his body relaxed. "No one as beautiful as you should be sitting alone."

Instead of smiling back at him, I frown. "I'm a little new to this. But isn't there rules against trying to chat up another Shadow's companion?"

"Only if the other Shadows find out." He smirks again and gets up from his chair. "You ever get bored of eating alone, come find me."

With one last look, he turns and heads out of the canteen while I'm left confused and annoyed that the females here are seen as nothing more than tradable objects.

I quickly finish off my food and ignore the strange looks from every other male in the room before heading out of the canteen.

My hopes for a shower and change of clothes gets derailed when I get flagged down by a tall lean male with brown hair and glasses that looks to be in his early thirties.

"Sena? There you are. You're supposed to be in class. Come on, I'm heading that way now," he says before ushering me towards a room down the hall.

"I've been notified of your incident." He gives me a sad look that only makes me more confused. "If you need any help with settling in, let me know. My door is always open."

I frown at his kind smile meant to reassure me and follow him into a classroom where a dozen other girls are already sitting, waiting.

"I found her," he says to them with a small chuckle before pointing to a seat at the back. Realizing I'm not going to get out of this one, I head toward it and ignore everyone and anyone as I make my way there.

"Hello, everyone. I'm Professor Graves, and I'll be covering Shadow history and anything you need to know about Shadows and abilities."

He glances down to me. "There's a book on the table, Sena. We're all only starting the history of the Shadows. So don't worry about not remembering anything."

Whispers and hushed giggles break out around the room, but I ignore them to look at the thick book in front of me.

I open it to the first page and grimace at the tiny writing. Already dreading this class, I sit back and try to soak up some information that might help me figure a way out of here or something that can help me deal with the four assholes.

But after a few minutes of listening to how superior the Shadow genetics are and how naturally skilled they all are, I zone out.

Glancing around the room, I watch a girl with blonde hair similar to... mine make fun of a redhead across from her. Pointing at her clothes and hair.

But I honestly cannot tell what she is trying to make fun of. Her hair is stunning, her clothes pristine, and she has looks that others would kill for.

I drown them out and flip through the book again trying to look like I'm attempting to learn something when a chapter heading catches my attention.

Class One Supernaturals deemed a threat:

There's a list of species and creatures I've never heard of underneath it, but it gets me thinking of the supernatural or being that switched my body. Maybe it's in this list or on the radar of the Shadows.

I wait until the girls have left before making my way up to the professor. He's just finishing packing up his books when I approach his desk, and he glances up at me.

"Everything okay?" he asks with a kind smile, and it instantly reminds me of the janitor from one of my old schools. He always looked out for me, turned a blind eye when I used the showers or took extra food for later from the canteen.

I lasted the longest in one place because of him.

“I know it can be a lot of information, especially on the first day,” he continues, patiently waiting for me to say why I came up to him.

Shaking the memory away, I give him a small smile while trying to come up with a way to ask this without sounding crazy. “Yes. I’m sure I’ll catch on. I was just wondering if I could ask you a question?”

“Shoot,” he says immediately.

I try to act embarrassed and scrunch up my nose at the thought of asking it. “I saw this horror movie last night...”

He chuckles as if knowing where this is already going but I play along and act like I’m a little worried.

“It was about someone who switched bodies with another person.” I force out a tight laugh and rub the back of my neck. “It kind of freaked me out to be honest.”

“You can put your mind at rest. Nothing like that would ever come near the academy,” he says with a chuckle, and I freeze.

His eyes soften at what must be the shocked look on my face.

“What do you mean?” I laugh but it’s completely forced. “Something like that actually exists?”

He nods, unbothered or worried with that little fact. Maybe whatever being that switched me is not as bad as I originally thought.

I might be able to tell him or someone what happened to me and figure it out from there.

“There’s a rare species that once existed called Variants,” he says with a far-off look as if thinking about it. “Most, if not all, are extinct now.”

Not all extinct, considering I’m here. I open my mouth to try and breach the subject when he continues.

“They were all too dangerous and ending up being hunted to extinction by the Shadows.”

I shut down any questions I was about to ask after that and instead keep the facade of just being curious. “They were dangerous?” I ask, trying to see if I can get some information about them.

He nods. “Very.”

I swallow hard, not having to fake my worry and panic. “What would happen if you or any Shadow came across one that managed to stay alive?”

“They would be killed instantly, along with those they involved in their dark powers,” he says, and my heart drops.

He chuckles at the look on my face and pats my arm. “Don’t worry though. I’m nearly positive they’re all extinct.”

I force a smile and thank him. He leaves without a backward glance while I stand there and wonder how I got myself into this fucked up situation.

One thing I’m sure of though, I can’t tell anyone here what happened to me. If I do, I’m dead.

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I still don't get my shower, and instead I'm forced to go to another class with a group of females. Though at least this one is outside and physical.

"Sena, come stand with us," the blonde from the class calls out.

But I ignore her to head straight to the back of the group.

She rolls her eyes at me and turns to the brunette beside her with an irritated look directed towards me.

But I don't know her. I'm not the Sena she may have known, and this Sena's impression of her is that she is a little too judgmental for my liking.

I prefer to stick by myself anyway.

The thought only leaves my mind when the redhead walks over to me.

"You really don't remember anything?" she asks, low enough that no one else can hear us.

I shake my head and glance at her, wondering where she's going with this.

She tilts her head toward the two girls now starring daggers at us. "I'm Robin. I'd stay away from them if I were you. They're nothing but trouble."

I glance over at them and catch the calculating look in the blonde's eyes. "You don't have to tell me. I can spot that a mile away." I turn to her. "Thanks for the heads up

though. Anything else you think I should know?"

She looks at me for a moment, searching my face for something. She must find what she's looking for because she nods her head and then tilts it to the spot across the long field where we stand.

There's a tall, muscular male with short brown hair heading in our direction. And although he's attractive, something about him just rubs me the wrong way.

"That's Dane. Our instructor. He's an absolute dick and will follow through with every threat he makes. He hates females for some reason and doesn't hide it." She sighs as he grows closer. "Keep your head down. Do everything he tells you. Within reason."

She gives me a pointed look. "And get ready to hurt for the next couple of hours."

Great...

The closer Instructor Dane gets, the more vicious he looks. As if the sight of us alone makes him angry.

The girls scramble around me and line up, keeping an arm's distance between once another. Robin stays beside me and gives me a nod as if trying to reassure me, and something about it warms my cold little heart.

I glance ahead just as Dane steps in front of us.

"What the fuck are you all doing standing around? Get moving. Five laps. That's if you can even make it," he says with a snarl.

The front row gets moving with each row following behind. As Robin joins them, she

quickly turns and rolls her eyes at me, making me smile.

I start running, pacing myself, and stay close to Robin, matching her speed. The first and second laps aren't too bad. But by the third and fourth, I really start to feel it. By the fifth, I push this body and legs, promising them a rest if they hold out a little longer.

We stop beside Instructor Dane, but he doesn't even look at us.

"One more," he says and the girls all groan.

But one vicious look from him gets them all moving.

I frown at Robin but follow them too without vocalizing my pain.

Each breath feels like swallowing flames by the time I'm done, my legs trembling like Jell-O.

Dane is gracious enough to give us a minute to get a drink of water—Robin shares hers with me—and then stands in front of us with a big smile that makes me feel nervous.

"Now that we're all nice and warmed up, let's get down to some real work."

Real work... I frown at Robin.

Dane turns, and we follow him past the field to what looks like a large obstacle course.

It's a huge, long strip that coils back around with at least twenty obstacles. There's a rope ladder, a double beam, trip wire nets, tunnels, stepping-stones, a sloping wall

with rope, a two-meter-deep pit, a high wall, zigzag balance beams, crawling nets, and more...

I'm hurting just looking at it. Robin shares a look, commiserating with me.

"This is the assault course. You will be using it to train on until you can pass it in under ten minutes," Instructor Dane says with glee in his voice.

My eyes widen. How the hell are we supposed to finish that in ten minutes?

"Get started," he says. "There are small red arrows directing where you should go."

When none of us moves, he glares at us all. "Get moving," he shouts, spurring us into action.

We head straight for the start of the obstacle course, pairing in groups of two. Before the first girl starts, Dane calls out to us, and we all turn to him.

"Oh, and you can only leave if you each finish in twenty minutes. And until you do, you'll redo it again and again." He gives us all a savage smile, promising pain. And the look in his eyes makes my skin crawl.

"He's a sadist," someone whispers.

And I have to agree with her. This is going to be torture after exhausting ourselves running already. And that's without having to pass it in twenty minutes.

Something that feels impossible in this moment.

We get moving through the obstacles, all of us sluggish and taking far longer than we should.

It's safe to say that I don't pass it the first or second time in under twenty minutes. It takes another three times before I'm able to scrape under the time to pass. And that's by sheer luck and possibly a blessing from the gods.

My entire body trembles, my stomach cramping with hunger as I wave Robin off and head back toward that gray house on the other side of the forest, all while hoping the four dickheads haven't locked the doors for the night. Again.

It takes me twice as long to get there with every ache and pain in my body making itself known.

I'm about a yard away from the house when I spot them walking from the forest behind the back of the house.

They freeze when they spot me, their expressions turning murderous as they veer in my direction and head straight for me.

"Where have you been?" Hazel Eyes demands.

Too exhausted to have a verbal spar with them, I answer him. "Class, then training."

It's not like they can't smell the stench of me from here. I can, and I want to get away from me. I really need a shower and change of clothes.

"Where did you sleep?" Dimples asks with his fists clenched by his side.

But I don't know why he's angry. They're the ones who locked me out. What did they expect me to do? Beg to be let in?

"We don't give a shit." Platinum Blonde cracks his neck and looks everywhere but me.

I nod, glad that at least one of us is on the same page. “Good. I’m going to bed.”

I start moving, but they span out in front of me, blocking my way past them, and Hazel Eyes steps directly in front of me.

“No. You’re going to train with us.”

A laugh bubbles up my throat, but there’s not an ounce of humor in it. “I just spent the last four hours training. Hard pass.” I move to step around them when Dimples swiftly steps to the side, blocking my path once more.

“You have to spend time with us each day,” he says with a scowl. “It’s in the rules whether you like it or not.”

I rear back and frown at him. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Like you don’t already know,” he grits out, narrowing his eyes at me.

“I don’t,” I tell him giving my best ‘fuck you’ look. “So, explain or move the hell out of my way.”

He grinds his jaw looking everywhere but me. “It helps... the madness.”

I look at them like they’re already there.

“You all locked me out, made me sleep in the cold, and yet you expect my help. Fuck. That.” I cross my arms feeling like a petulant child.

But really, I’ve just reached my limit. I’m tired, hungry, and still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that I’m in someone else’s body with no way of getting back to my own.

“We didn’t think you’d run off,” Hazel Eyes growls.

“It doesn’t matter,” Dimples says. “Let’s just get going. My fucking skin is crawling. I need to run this off.”

They all look at me as if expecting I’ll just agree. “I’m hungry.”

“We’ll make you something when we’re done,” Hazel Eyes grits out as if it pains him to even talk to me.

I narrow my eyes on them, but they all lock down their emotions, and I can’t figure out if they’re lying or not.

Too exhausted to care, I nod, agreeing to their little trade. Even if I don’t get food, at least I’ll get to sleep in a warm bed tonight.

“A quick session. And I’ll mostly be watching,” I tell them, and they smile. A smile that looks eerily similar to the one Instructor Dane wore right before he introduced us to the assault course with a time limit.

It already makes me regret my decision.

“Deal,” Dimples says.

We get moving, and I hobble behind them, trying to keep up with their pace. They eventually realize I’m not moving as quickly as them and groan as they force themselves to slow down to my pace. Or closer to it at least.

“I can’t keep calling you by your physical features in my head. What’re your names?” I ask them.

They all freeze and turn to look at me.

“Are you serious?” Dimples asks.

I open my mouth to tell him, yes, I am damn serious, why else would I be asking. But I quickly shut it when I realize they don’t believe I have amnesia. Which is technically true. But this Sena doesn’t know them. Nor have I ever met them.

Fuck it. I’ll downgrade them to dickhead one through four instead. They don’t even deserve names at this point.

We make it through the forest to a large clearing. There’s another obstacle course in front of me, but it’s far more vicious with climbing walls that are double the size and have spikes and huge pits and balance beams with dug out trenches that are filled with jagged rocks.

I make my way over to a large tree trunk and wave them off. There’s not a hope in hell I’m even attempting this. Not after the day I’ve had.

The quiet one of the four, the pretty male with deep indigo eyes, glances at me. “Aren’t you going to?—”

“Nope,” I tell him, quickly realizing what he’s asking.

He frowns. “But?—”

“Nope.” I shake my head and lean back against the tree, closing my eyes.

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I hear a sigh and peek an eye open as he makes his way over to the others. A second later, they start making their way through their self-made obstacle course of horrors.

I watch for a little longer as they move through it, feeling a little jealous that they make their way through every obstacle with ease while I seem to struggle with a much smaller version.

At least a hour passes as I zone out and try to rest my aching muscles. Droplets of rain start falling, slow and steady at first. I get to my feet, hoping they'll take the rain as a hint that it's time to go back. But glancing over, I spot three of them gathered around one of the larger pits.

I move over to find them all looking down at Dimples. "What happened?"

"I fell." Dimples gives me a deadpan look before sighing. "The wet mud is slippery. I can't get back up," he says with a huff as if annoyed by that little fact.

I hide my smile. I guess karma is real after all.

"There's no rope." Indigo Eyes walks up beside me just as the heavens open and the rain starts pouring down.

Hazel Eyes moves to the other side of me, his gaze flicking to mine. "I'll hold onto your legs, and you can grab hold of him, and we'll pull him up."

"Pass. Pick one of the others instead." I point to Indigo Eyes and his cold glare while stepping back as I start to worry they might throw me down there if I don't agree.

“You’re the smallest and weigh basically nothing. The others are too damn heavy.” Hazel Eyes looks at me like I’m stupid for even asking.

“Fine,” I grit out before moving to the edge of the pit and bending down. I feel him move behind me and grab my ankles before he slowly pushes me down until I’m close enough to grab Dimple’s hands.

Dimples wraps his hands around my wrists and gives me a look that makes me pause. It’s there and gone before I know it.

“I’ve got him,” I shout up. But instead of pulling me back up, Dimples’ grip tightens as he yanks me down into the pit.

Luckily a pile of sloppy mud eases my fall, but I’m completely covered and soaked to the bone in thick, wet sludge.

I get to my feet, ready to run through him, when he chuckles and climbs up the pit wall like it’s nothing to him.

The four of them look down at me, all wearing savage smirks.

“Get me out of here now,” I growl.

Dimples, now known as Bastard #1, winks at me. “You skipped our training session. This is your punishment. Get yourself out.”

All as one, they turn without a backward glance and leave me here.

The weather decides to let me know it can always get worse, and the rain beats harder, drenching me in seconds and making the pit of mud more sloppy and dense.

I move over to the nearest wall and try to find a grip, but my hands slide straight through it. I move to the one across from it, hoping there might be harder mud behind it, but it's just like the first one.

My feet start sticking to the pit floor, making it harder to move from one spot to the next, but I keep moving, trying each part of the pit walls for any type of traction. But there's none.

My feet start to sink the longer I stay still, so I keep moving from one side to the next.

Rage keeps me going as I tell myself if I get out of this, I'm going to fucking kill them.

A small yip distracts me from my murderous thoughts, and I glance up to find a small familiar white and black animal.

A Vim. A small harmless creature that looks like a mix between an arctic fox and cat. And by the looks of it, this one is just a youngling.

They range in different colors, but this one is adorable with a soft white fur covering every part of it except its eyes and paws that are black.

It purrs down at me before climbing down and jumping into my arms, making me chuckle. Vims have always been drawn to me for some reason even though I don't have any power they can syphon from me.

It lets out a louder yip, and a couple of minutes later, four more Vims appear. They all climb down the pit and rub up against my legs and climb my arms, purring.

"Okay, Okay. As much as I think you're all adorable, I can't stay here. Anyone got any ideas how I can get out of here?" I ask them, not really thinking any of them

understands a word I'm saying.

But they tilt their heads as if thinking about it, and a second later, they all move to the pit wall across from me and join together creating a chain.

I move over to them, wondering what they're doing when the one nearest to me wraps its tail around my body.

Before I figure out what's happening, I start moving upward. I glance up at the Vims and realize they're dragging me up and out of the pit.

It takes them not even a minute before I'm out and over the edge.

Laughing in relief, I bend down and kiss each one of them, thanking them for their help, and they all curl around me, purring.

I give them all a nice big rub before straightening up and making a move toward the four dickheads.

After a couple of minutes, I realize the Vims are following me. I stop, and they stop. I move, and they follow.

I'm about to tell them they can't follow me when an idea pops into my mind and a wicked smirk slides across my lips.

After all, the Vims deserve a treat after helping me.

Coming up to the house, I move inside quietly while telling the Vims to be as silent as possible. Sneaking up to my room with them, I make sure they're hidden before I slip out of my sloppy clothes and have a nice hot shower.

I wait until I hear no more movement in the house before making my move.

Silently sneaking down the hall, I open each door and let a Vim in each room, making sure I close the doors behind me.

Because there's five Vims and not four, I decide Bastard #1 deserves two and let him have them both before making my way back to my room with a wide smile on my face.

The Vims may not be able to syphon any energy from me, but maybe they'll work on four assholes.

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S unlight flickers across my room, waking me. But instead of making me annoyed, all I feel is happiness.

I'm warm, in a bed, and got to take a hot shower last night. So many simple things people take for granted.

The assholes also left the front door open last night. Either they learned their lesson in some way or forgot to lock it. But my bet is on the latter.

The sound of something crashing makes its way up to me, and I smile as I remember my little payback last night for their dick move.

Throwing the blankets off me, I quickly head downstairs to get a front row view of it.

The four dicks stumble about, all looking like Bambi on new legs as they attempt to get the Vims out of the house.

It takes a few minutes—and only after they've fallen into the table and counter a couple of times—but they eventually manage the small feat and close the door behind them.

They glance at one another, all looking relieved, and the expression on their faces makes me laugh.

Four pairs of eyes veer straight to me.

“You!” Bastard #1 growls.

I give him an innocent look and point to my chest. “Me?”

“You brought the Vims in and put one in each of our room,” Hazel Eyes grits out, but it lacks any of his usually energy, so I just roll my eyes at him.

Bastard #1 frowns. “Why the fuck did I get two?”

I give him a deadpan look, wondering how someone so pretty can also be so dumb.

Quickly switching it up, I change my expression back to that fake innocent look and glance at all four of them. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Maybe they just sensed some bad energy and wanted to get rid of it.” I shrug.

They narrow their eyes on me, not buying it one bit.

Hazel Eyes opens his mouth—more than likely to call me out on it— when his eyes drop to my legs, and he pauses.

The others glance at him and his silence and then in the direction he’s looking, and all their expressions quickly change.

I frown, wondering why they’re all silent now, and glance down only to realize I’m only wearing an oversized tee and short shorts. It was too hot after the shower, so I didn’t put on any leggings like I usually do.

Ignoring their heated stares and how it’s starting to make me feel, I glare at them and then turn and move back upstairs, heading straight for the shower and making it cold before eventually heating it up.

I quickly get dressed—relieved that there’s drawers of clothes available to me—and head downstairs.

Four pairs of eyes follow me as I move to the counter, hoping to make myself some breakfast.

Dimples moves closer to me and glares at me. “Do not touch anything that belongs to us,” he grits out.

My heart drops. I guess that also includes their food.

Ignoring me, they start moving about, making their breakfast, so I slip out and turn toward the canteen to grab something quick.

Robin comes up beside me on my way there.

“Hey. I’m heading to the canteen, wanna join?” I ask, remembering the weird looks from the Shadows and hoping with two of us there, I can block them out.

Robin squints at me, thinking it over. “Still don’t remember anything?”

“No,” I laugh, and she smiles. A smile that has every part of her tense body easing.

“Good. You were kind of a snob beforehand,” she says, and I wince.

My stomach drops. “Yeah, sorry.”

She chuckles, shaking her head as we make our way inside to the canteen. There’s only a handful of people here with some of them being female. I instantly relax, and Robin gives me a questioning look.

“I came here yesterday. There were a lot of stares.”

“Ah,” she says nodding. “Gotcha. Sometimes I think the Shadows have never seen a

female before in their life.” She shrugs. “Maybe they haven’t.”

I chuckle as we grab our food and move to a table at the side.

“Are there no female Shadows born?” I ask as I dig into my food.

She shakes her head. “No. Not that I know of. Shadows are all always male. A female companion can give birth to a Shadow, but it will always be male.”

“But we’re?—”

“Compatible but human,” she points out making me even more confused. “They just call us that to claim us as theirs.” She rolls her eyes. “But technically I think our DNA comes more from the royals. An extremely watered-down version of it.”

“The royals?” I ask.

She nods. “Before they were killed in the war, they were the only thing that kept the Shadows from going mad.”

I glance around watching the men sitting throughout the canteen. Some just blatantly stare at us in confusion and interest. Others look a little more than angry. But many look beyond hostile. “Shadows weren’t always like this?”

She shakes her head. “No. There was a time before the war when they didn’t have to worry about going mad.”

“But how is that possible?” I glance back at her trying to understand any of the setup here.

“The royals’ power.” She shrugs. “Something about it made them stronger and kept

them sane.” Robin glances around and dips her head closer to mine while lowering her voice.

“Shadows are technically not supposed to be able to exist without them. I think it’s similar to a beehive.

Without a queen, there is no hive. And without their royals to ground them, they can go mad. ”

So, they weren’t always like this, always balancing on a tight rope between sane and madness.

I get lost in my own thoughts, thinking about the four males I’m living with and what I should do about them. When I finally zone back in, I catch Robin frowning at me. Well, not at me. Even though her stare is directly on me, her look is somewhere far away.

“I’m really not looking forward to going to the war camps in a few weeks. Or being forced to watch the war games with the other academy at the end of this semester,” she says with a fearful look in her eyes.

The fork in my hand freezes halfway to my mouth. But Robin doesn’t notice my shock, too absorbed now in something behind me and the information she’s sharing.

“Being close to the Hollow actually helps the Shadows stay sane for some reason, and they keep it from seeping out further, so I guess it’s win-win,” she says but doesn’t look too convinced by her words.

“But we’re expected to go and fight?” I place my fork back on my plate, my stomach now twisting and churning.

I've heard there are hundreds of terrigons there, considering it's right beside the entrance to the Hollow. And many other dark, horrifying beasts.

Robin finally looks at me and nods. "We won't have to participate in the war games.

But we will need to stay near our Shadows, and sometimes that means joining them in a fight.

Other times there will be tests setup specifically for us.

"She gives me a look full of frustration.

"They may see us as something special and rare, but they also do not want weak females."

She scans my face for something, but her frown only deepens. "Technically, you should have been doing some form of training since you were younger. When you found out you were a companion to Shadows."

I lean back in my chair and glance down at my body. No wonder this body is strong. It's more than likely been training for war these last few years. But to go to the war camps... That's not something I expected.

Robin shrugs. "Hopefully your muscle memory will win out. If not, your Shadows will keep you safe."

I scoff, very much doubting it. They would soon rather throw me to the terrigons and laugh about it than ever save me.

"Come on. I'll give you a tour of this place, so you don't land yourself in any more trouble," she says.

I give her a questioning look, and she gets up and rolls her eyes.

“Cora and Sage already have it out for you,” she says.

I frown. “Who?”

She glances over at me and smiles. “The blonde and the other half of her braincell.”

“Ah.” I chuckle. “I’m not worried.”

Robin shows me the layout of the main building, where the males’ dorms are—and a place I will be completely avoiding if the looks I’m getting are anything to go by—before bringing us outside to a huge field that’s lined into different sections.

There’re small group of males already training in the different sections with groups of other males watching and waiting for their turn.

I immediately spot the four assholes, and Robin chuckles at the look on my face.

“Is it Malakai or Knox giving you trouble?” she asks, and I give her a confused look that makes her brows practically hit her hairline.

“You don’t know their names?” she asks with complete shock in her voice.

I shrug glancing over at them. “I’ve been calling them by their eye or hair color, and when they really piss me off, they get demoted to bastard, dickhead, or asshole.”

Robin barks out a laugh and then points at Hazel Eyes. “That’s Malakai. He’s a Shadow shifter. He can transform into most prey animals and beasts.”

She points to Dimples next. “That’s Knox. They call him the assassin because he’s

able to slip in and kill without you ever realizing he was there.”

She finds Indigo Eyes next, he’s standing against the wall, observing everything and everyone around him. “That’s Cyrus.” She shivers, and I glance at her as she frowns.

She gives me a look full of worry. “He’s a little different. He can literally create nightmares with his Shadows.” She glances back over at him but then looks somewhere else just as quick. As if she’s a little frightened to stare at him for too long.

“They use him when they want to torture someone. Most end up killing themselves.”

Damn. “And him?” I point to the white-haired asshole.

She follows my line of direction and nods. “Theon. He can cause pain.”

I frown at her, and she explains. “His Shadows, he can use them to literally send out pain to others. One touch and you’ll be in excruciating agony.”

“That sounds... lovely.” I stare at him and the other three, wondering what the hell I’ve gotten myself into.

“They’re all powerful. Scary as fuck. And Elite.”

“Elite?” I ask.

Robin nods. “Shadows are divided into four sectors after they pass their tests. Elites. Sentinels. Seekers and Shields.” She points to a male at the top of the queue. “See his white glowing markings?”

My gaze follows to where she’s pointing, and I find a male with glowing white

tattoos swirling along his arms.

“If they’re white, it means they’re Shield. It means their Shadows are more defensive.” She points at another, but this one has purple glowing swirls. “Purple are Seekers. Meaning they’re good at finding things.” She tilts her head to the one beside him. “Blue is Sentinel. They’re the watchers.”

I watch each of them, quickly learning that their glowing tattoos only glow when they’re using their Shadow abilities.

“What about him?” I dip my head to the male a few feet away from us that looks to have black tattoos. The four assholes also have them, but they don’t glow. At least not that I’ve seen.

“Some get normal tattoos.” She gives me a look. “It should come as no surprise that your four are Elite. Highly trained. The best of the best. But...” She gives me a worried look. “That also makes them more susceptible to the madness.”

“What color are their Shadow tattoos?” I ask not really seeing any of them glow. But I guess none of them are using their abilities yet.

“Black.”

I whip my head to hers, and she nods her head. “Creepy, I know.”

My eyes find the four of them, and something they said tumbles around in the back of my mind.

“They mentioned something about having to spend time with me each day,” I admit, wondering if anything they tell me is even true.

“Considering they’re Elite, they should be spending more than just some time with you.” She frowns at me, opening her mouth to say something but shakes her head and thinks better of it.

I don’t push her on it, still reeling from the information she’s already shared with me.

My eyes draw back to Malakai as black swirls slide along his skin as he shifts, his shadows growing and growing until he becomes a black mass. It morphs, and seconds later there’s a huge beast similar to a tiger. But one that looks at least three-times its size.

He rips into the male Shadow that looks to have volunteered for a fight, taking him down in seconds before backing off and waiting for the next male Shadow to step forward.

Every single one of them have nothing but violence in their eyes.

“He’s trying to help them,” Robin says, her voice low as she quickly glances around us. “Take the edge off so they don’t end up in the Void.”

“The Void?” I ask.

She nods as she watches the fight. “If they tip over the edge, they end up in the Void to try work it out of their system.”

She winces when Malakai tears into another male Shadow, leaving him barely alive. “I’ve only ever heard horror stories about it, and to be honest, I wouldn’t even send my worst enemy there.”

“How does it help them?” I ask, no longer able to look away as Malakai destroys each Shadow as if they’re nothing. The strength in every move he makes. The

calculated way he ensures each stay alive, but barely. And the power he wields and controls like it's child's play.

I am well and truly in over my head.

“It helps purge the dark from them. But it's extremely cruel.

None of the Shadows want to end up there.

The academy only believes in the strong.

That weakness should be killed or snuffed out.

Kill or be killed is their ethos. I've heard they even send the Shadows to the Void when they're barely teens. ”

“Seriously?” I ask and she nods, her eyes growing sad.

“There are vicious dark beasts and creatures there, always on the hunt. Barely any food or water and the weather is constantly violent and brutal.”

It sounds like a horrible, cruel place to send anyone to. But so is living a life where you don't know whether or not you're going to snap any moment.

“What happens if they can't control it? If they go into the Void but it doesn't purge the madness from them?” I ask, a little afraid to hear her answer.

Robin gives me a look that already tells me everything I need to know but she says it anyway. “They die.”

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:03 pm

Crawling my way through the shallow water along the edge of the lake with a group of other girls was not how I expected to spend my weekend.

But Instructor Dane doesn't believe in weekends and rest. Apparently, every single day of the week should be torture.

All while he gets to stand there and spew comments about how weak we all are while staying warm and dry.

I'm starting to see a trend in all of these males. They're all cocky, over-confident and way too good looking, but it's overshadowed by their bad temper, lack of manners, and asshole-ish ways.

Half the day is gone before I stumble to my feet and limp back to the house.

The four are already outside, all looking like they're waiting for something. I figure out what that something is when they spot me and glare at me as I made my way toward them.

"About fucking time," Knox huffs, acting all annoyed when all I'm doing is trying to exist.

"What?" I grit out, ready for my bed and not this shit.

"You're training with us," Malakai says like a statement instead of a request.

"No, I'm not. Especially not after last time." I move to step around them when they

span out, blocking my way.

“Let’s be honest, you deserve that and more,” Knox says like it should be obvious. But I haven’t a clue who they are, and whatever happened between them and the other Sena wasn’t my fault.

I pause, realizing they don’t know that either.

And it just makes this all the more confusing and frustrating.

I should be mad at them, and I am. In fact, I’m livid most of the time I see one of their faces.

But I also know the Sena before me did something to make them this angry. And I haven’t a clue what it is.

Cyrus has been silently watching me and the exchange between the others these last couple of minutes, but he finally speaks up. “You really don’t remember any of us?”

I sigh and shake my head. “No, and up until the other day I didn’t even know your names. Someone else pointed them out. That day, you all got demoted from eye color to assholes by the way.”

A round of chuckles rings out. But they quickly realize they’re laughing at something I said, and they cut it off, clearing their throats and frowning at one another before glaring at me like it’s my fault they even laughed.

“Fine,” Malakai says. “Let’s pretend you don’t know or remember .” He glances at the others and shares a look I don’t quite understand. But they nod to whatever silent question he asks.

“Let’s start over,” he says.

I narrow my eyes on him, not trusting his little truce for even a second. “You left me in a pit of mud when it was lashing raining out. I could have died.”

He rolls his eyes at me as if I’m being dramatic. “You would’ve been fine. You got us back with the Vims. I was fucking drained most of the day. Could barely lift my legs and arms.”

The thought puts a nice big smile on my face.

He shakes his head at the look, but I don’t miss the slight curve to his lips. “Let’s call it even and move on.”

I groan, not wanting to walk any farther, let alone do another couple of hours of training.

“Look, I’ve been training all morning. Instructor Dane is a fucking dick.

Just like you all.” I give them all a pointed look.

“He made us crawl through the edge of the lake over and over before moving onto the obstacle course from hell. I’m tired. ”

I glance up at them when I realize they’ve all gone quiet. And all are wearing frowns.

“What?” I ask.

Theon clenches his jaw. “Your training is supposed to come from us. Not anyone else.”

“All the other females train along with me,” I tell them, and their frowns only deepen.

“Where the hell did you think I went all this time?” I ask, realizing that they just assumed I was off living my best life.

Malakai shrugs. “Class?”

“To do your nails?” Knox says making me narrow my eyes on him.

“If I was ever doing my nails, it would be to sharpen my claws to tear you apart,” I warn him, but instead of getting annoyed or angry with me, a slow sliding smile curves his lips that has something inside me stirring awake.

“How do you know I’m not into that kind of thing?” he says.

“Why would I care?” I reply, but his smirk only grows.

“I’ll talk to him,” Cyrus says, cutting off the little back and forth between me and Knox.

I shake my head. “Don’t bother.” It would only bring more trouble than it’s worth.

“Fine. But you still need to train with us,” he says, and the others nod agreeing.

I glance around trying to think of something that will get me out of this but then I remember I have to spend time with them to help push back the madness.

At least that’s what Robin said. And even though they’re assholes, I don’t want any of them to have to end up in that Void place she described.

“I’m hungry,” I admit to them, feeling weak for even having to say it. But I didn’t get

to go to the canteen this morning with surprise training starting at the crack of dawn, and I'm not allowed to touch anything that belongs to them.

Cyrus takes out something from his pocket and throws it to me.

I catch it and glance down at the green apple in my hand. "Is it poisoned?"

He smiles, and it's fucking devastating that he's so handsome. "No. But maybe next time."

I roll my eyes and take a bite, moaning when the first juicy bite hits my taste buds.

Knox clears his throat. "Let's get moving."

I nod and follow them, but my focus is on the apple and trying to make it last as long as possible. But it's gone far too quickly.

After a few minutes, I realize we're not heading to their obstacle course as we would've been there by now.

"Where are we going?" I ask, and Knox glances over his shoulder to answer.

"Malakai wants to shift, and Cyrus wants to let loose, so we go out a bit beyond the forest to a large clearing to train. It's just up a bit farther."

A bit farther ends up being another half an hour walk before we come to the large clearing.

I glare at them while they spread out around me.

Malakai immediately shifts into a huge black wolf made from shadows while Cyrus

becomes the shadows. They grow and grow around him, turning the afternoon light instantly into night.

“Cyrus, I didn’t say fucking blind us,” Knox groans.

I hear Cyrus chuckle from somewhere around me, but it’s so dark I can’t see where he or any of the others are.

“I thought this was supposed to be training. How am I supposed to do anything if I can’t see?” I ask them.

Cyrus reels back his shadows, containing them to just him, Malakai and Knox.

I take a step back, wondering if they’ll notice if I slip away while they do their thing, but another step back has me hitting a brick wall. Or what feels like one.

I turn around to find Theon staring down at me with a scowl.

“Start running to warm up,” he says.

“The walk here made me warm enough,” I tell him, and he clenches his jaw.

“Fine.” He takes something from his side and hands it to me. I glance down to see he’s placed a small silver dagger in my hand.

“Don’t cut yourself, and aim for that.” He points at the thick tree trunk with a red target drawn onto it. “If you?—”

I flip the dagger in my hand, aim, and throw it, hitting the target dead center. I glance at Theon to find his mouth open and his eyes wide with shock.

The darkness beside us shutters out, revealing Cyrus, Knox, and a human Malakai fully clothed, all are wearing similar shocked expressions.

“How the fuck did you manage that?” Malakai asks.

Knox is the first to drop his shocked expression and scoffs. “It was a lucky shot.”

Biting my tongue, I take the second dagger in Theon’s hand and move farther back before throwing it, all while imaging Knox’s head at the center.

I hit him right between the eyes.

“What the actual fuck?!” Malakai frowns, glancing from me to the target while Cyrus moves closer to me.

“Where did you learn how to do that?” he asks.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” I tell him.

“Maybe we can—” Cyrus starts, but Malakai cuts him off.

“Let’s keep going.” He glances over at Theon. “Switch it up and challenge her. She looks like she needs it.”

I groan, realizing my mistake. I should’ve faked it for a while at least.

Theon has me practicing the shot over and over, moving as I hit it and getting me to throw the dagger from every angle until my eyes blur and the target starts to look like two inside of one.

I start missing more shots, and they all go out of their way to let me know about it.

The sun starts to set, and I realize how long I've been doing this. As soon as I stop, the exhaustion sets in on every bone, joint, and muscle in my body.

"I'm done," I tell them, and they actually agree with me.

I start making my way back the way we came—already regretting my life choices—when they practically zoom past me in a mass of shadows, chuckling.

They're gone in seconds, leaving me here in the middle of nowhere while the night sets in.

What did I expect? Really, I only have myself to blame. Besides this isn't that bad. I was going to have to walk back anyway.

I keep moving, hoping I'm heading in the right direction. But I get to a point where I don't recognize anything and curse myself for paying too much attention to that apple instead of my surroundings on my way here.

My stomach growls loudly, reminding me I haven't eaten much today either. I rub it and keep moving, planning to pig out in the canteen tomorrow no matter who's staring at me.

A twig snaps from somewhere to the left of me, and I pause, trying to listen out for anyone.

"Hello?" I call out, but nothing but silence greets me.

It's probably one of the guys playing a trick. That or a wild animal.

Not wanting to meet either, I try to quicken my pace and head in a direction I hope is the location of the house.

But after another few minutes, another twig snaps and another until I hear something following me and moving closer to me from behind.

I whip around ready to call out whoever it is trying to scare me when I freeze.

It's not one of the guys or a wild animal. It's a terrigon.

A huge alien-like creature on all fours with black metal-like skin covering its entire body, a thick snout, razor sharp teeth, and two sets of eyes, and I know I'm in trouble.

Images of dozens of huge terrigons surrounding me flash across my mind, freezing me in place. It was almost like a memory.

But it's not mine.

The terrigon growls in warning, snapping me out of my spiraling panic and confusion, and gets me moving, running like my life depends on it. But lack of food and exhaustion from training all day wears me down, making the small adrenaline spike wane faster than it normally would.

Something slams into me from the side, making me gasp in pain. I roll and try to scramble to my feet, but my eyes find the newcomer.

Another terrigon.

I reach out a hand, trying to find a rock or a stick. Something I can use as a weapon. But they rush forward.

I grab whatever I find and fling it at them. But instead of a rock or stick, a glowing light bursts out of my hand, pushing the terrigons back a few feet.

I shake off the shock of whatever just happened and get to my feet, running as fast as I can once more. But the sound of their clawed feet thump behind me as they catch up to me.

I try to call on that glowing light again, but nothing happens. Not ready to give up yet, I push my trembling legs and think of how I'm going to kill each of the guys when I find them... If I make it.

I come to a stop, my eyes widening when I glance up and around me to realize I've run myself into a dead end of thick trees that sit side by side.

I move to climb the one closest to me when I spot the small sharp spikes that run all over it.

What type of tree has spikes on it? I glance over at the other trees, but they all look the same, all hiding those tiny spikes up and along the entire trunk.

If I only had an actual weapon, I might stand a chance.

I turn and quickly get into a defensive position as the terrigons move in on me, all while still trying to think of a way to escape them.

My stomach drops, and I hear a swoosh right before something hard and cold flies into my hand. I glance down at it, and my eyes widen when I spot a long black blade now sitting in my palm.

I don't get much time to think about where it came from as one of the beasts lunges forward.

Diving out of its way, I roll and get to my feet before shooting forward and slamming the blade into its side.

The beast howls before shattering into dust. I turn, ready to use the blade on the other—hoping it will have the same impact—when more long black blades appear as if from nowhere and slam into it, destroying it in seconds.

After the second beast is destroyed, the new blades fly back, and my gaze follows them. Turning around, I find a group of male Shadows all watching me with shock slashed across their faces.

But it's the four in front that quickly draw my attention. Their intense stare and dark eyes veer from mine to the weapon in my hand, a similar expression of shock slashed across their faces. But also rage. So much rage it has me taking a step back from them .

Malakai raises his hand and the black blade in mine flies into his before disappearing completely.

It was his. Then how... His eyes glow gold for a moment, distracting me completely, and seconds later Theon, Knox, and Cyrus' eyes do the same thing.

Malakai takes a step towards me, his rage not dimming the slightest. "Mate," he growls.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:03 pm

A flurry of activity passes by in a blur after the attack. Dawn shows up and takes me immediately to see the commander.

Slightly happy to get away from the four raging assholes, I wave Dawn off and make my way into the office where a large black desk overlooks the main campus.

A tall, built male has his back to me, his short, dark brown hair well-kept with not a strand out of place.

A female that looks only a few years older than me with short black hair walks in before shutting the door behind her. The male turns around as soon as she arrives, revealing a fake smile that doesn't reach his dark green eyes.

"It's nice to meet you, Sena. I'm Commander Talos." His eyes flicker to the female. "And this is Sloane."

Sloane dips her head to me and gives me a real smile. But one filled with apprehension.

"I heard you lost your memory," Talos says while glancing through some papers on his desk.

"Yes," I answer, trying to keep as much information to myself as possible.

He frowns. "Well, that's unfortunate. But you've been settling in well?"

I glance at Sloane, wondering if he's going to get to the point. "I have."

“Good.” He finally glances up at me. “I want to apologize for the attack. We were testing the shield, and one came down. Unfortunately, those terrigons slipped past while it happened.” He works his face into what I’m guessing is compassion but everything about it is wrong, fake and overly exaggerated. “It won’t happen again.”

I feign a smile, playing along with whatever this is with the hope I can get out of here quickly. “Good to know.” Also nice to know that there’s a way for the shield to come down. Maybe I can work with that.

“Now onto the most obvious,” he says with a sigh. “You called on one of your companion’s weapons.”

“I didn’t mean to.” I glance between him and Sloane, wondering if that’s why I’m here and if I’m in trouble because of it.

Sloane steps forward. “It means you’re not a companion; you’re their mate.”

Ice fills my veins as I glance between them both. “I don’t understand.”

“A companion is a human female that is compatible with a male Shadow. They have a very small percentage of Shadow DNA. And although they can help ease the pull to the dark, they will never be able to fully help rid them of it,” she says.

“Whereas a mate can. Once fully bonded, a Shadow never needs to worry about the madness ever again.”

I shake my head, still not understanding what she’s trying to tell me. Because it sure as hell can’t be what I’m thinking.

Her expression grows gentle and patient. “A mate is another part of you. A part of your soul.”

Everything inside me freezes. “Wait. You’re saying those four...” I stop myself from saying assholes, getting way too used to the word when it comes to them. “You’re saying that they’re my soul... mates?”

I swallow hard, trying to wrap my mind around it. It was bad enough being stuck with those four until I figured a way out of here. But having them be my soul mates takes on a whole other problem.

“We haven’t seen one in nearly two decades.” She shares a look with Talos before glancing back at me. “And with four Elite is... extremely rare.”

“We will check in with you from time to time,” Talos says. “This is all very new to us too. So, we will figure it out as we go along.”

He waits for me to look at him before continuing his little spiel.

‘This is good thing, Sena,’ he says as if trying to convince me. “For us all. Mates only make us stronger.”

Mates make them stronger. Now I’m not just a relaxer but a damn steroid.

I nod, holding back my biting words. “Can I go now?”

Talos smiles that fake smile again. But this times there’s an edge to it. A warning.

“Of course. You must want to get back to your mates. I’m sure you have a lot to talk about it.”

“Yes. Lots.” I mirror his smile with my own warning, ensuring he knows I’m not going to be playing by his rules anytime soon.

His smile only grows.

Walking toward the house feels like I'm walking to the gallows. Each step gets slower, more dragged out.

I should be angry. Furious that I have four dicks for soulmates.

How is this even possible? I'm not even a Shadow...

A memory of the attack in the forest and the light from my hands flashes across my memory, making me pause.

What was that? I glance down at my hands trying to find anything different, but they look the same as they have these past weeks.

Feeling stupid for standing here looking at my hands, I get moving and hope I can deal with whatever all this is after some sleep.

It's late. Maybe I can bypass the four dicks and just head straight to bed.

But I open the door to find said dicks all waiting with scowls and glares directed right at me.

I guess that little plan went right out the window.

"How did you do it?" Knox demands.

So instead of dealing with their bullshit, I go for dark humor. "I summoned a demon and gave him my soul in turn for a trade. He obviously fucked me over on the deal though. But I suppose my soul wasn't really that good to begin with."

Malakai doesn't seem to like my joke, growing more irate by the second. "Stop fucking around and tell us the truth."

I throw my hands up. "What do you want me to tell you? I hadn't a clue mates existed before Commander Talos pulled me into his office to explain. So how on earth would I ever know I was yours?"

"You did something," Knox grits out. "You had to have. You can't be our mate. There's no way."

The others nod, agreeing with him.

"I was left in the woods by four assholes that already knew I was exhausted and hungry. I then had to walk back alone in the dark and ended up getting ambushed by not one but two terrigons." I glare at each of them as their anger slowly lessens and morphs into a myriad of frowns and confusion.

"Fuck you and your assumptions," I tell them. "And for the record I don't want to be your mate either."

"Are you hurt?" Cyrus moves toward me, his eyes running over my face and body. I'd actually believe he cared if he hadn't just fucked me over with the others. A second time.

I narrow my eyes on him. "Like you care." I step around him and head straight up to my room, locking the door behind me.

It's not until I'm showered and in bed do I realize that maybe they are right. Maybe I'm not their soulmate. Maybe it was the old Sena that was. And instead of feeling happy, something about it just leaves me feeling sad.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:03 pm

Combat training in the gym with the other girls is not what I expected. I thought they didn't want weak females but from the way they're attempting to train us, I'm starting to think they just want someone they can control.

There's no real technique to the moves they're showing us. Nothing that would help us actually defend ourselves against an attack.

They show some spins and kicks that try to make it seem they have skill, but it's nothing but flashy moves that will hinder more than help.

Realizing I'm not going to learn anything new from them, I zone out and think back to this morning.

My so-called mates ignored me from the moment I walked downstairs. Something I immensely enjoyed as I headed to the canteen and then ignored everything and everyone around me as I ate like a pig. And enjoyed every damn minute of it.

They can ignore me for the rest of my stay here for all I care.

I now know it's possible for that damn shield to come down, thanks to Commander Talos informing me of his little tests. Which means I might be able to leave here sooner than the year I thought I'd have to stay.

A crack sounds out, and my head whips to the girl now coughing and gasping on the mat while the male stands over her with a savage smirk.

"That's what happens when you leave yourself open," he gloats, happy to see her

injured.

From the way the girl is holding her side, I have a feeling he went much harder than he should have and all to prove how much stronger he is in comparison.

Dick... I guess no one told him, the bigger you are, the harder you fall.

An excited thrum rushes through me as I step in front of him for my turn. He looks at me and then glances away, already assuming that I will be an easy takedown.

It only makes this so much more fun.

He bounces on his toes from side to side trying to make this a damn show.

I focus on him and see his foot change right before he lunges. But I've already seen this move play out a hundred times.

I duck and move fast, striking him hard in the side before moving back a step, getting my balance before spinning and throwing a roundhouse kick directed at his head.

His body spins before slamming into the mat as he goes down with a groan.

A couple of whistles sound out, followed by, "Hell, yeah!" from the girls around me.

I inspect the fucker as he groans. His jaw and face are starting to look a little swollen already.

"Why the fuck is she thinking about another male right now?"

I jolt at the sound of Knox's voice and spin around, trying to find him. But there's no one there.

“Where are you?” I ask, glancing around trying to find where he’s hiding. But the other girls just frown at me.

“Who?” a girl with a short black bob asks.

I shake my head, laughing it off. “Nothing,” I tell her but frown when I still see no sign of Knox.

With the male still groaning on the floor, we decide class is over and start heading toward the locker room to change.

I spot a couple of glances from the girls on the way but think nothing of it until the girl with the black bob steps up to me.

“So... There’s a rumor going around that you’re a mate?”

I roll my eyes. “Unfortunately,” I mutter.

The girl flinches back. “Oh my god, it’s true?”

I nod. “Apparently.”

The girls inch closer to me, all wearing a myriad of emotions, from shock to intrigue, to awe and fear.

“My mother has books on this stuff,” a blonde with brown eyes says. “Apparently when a Shadow finds their mate, they can’t get it up for anyone else.”

I freeze, and the others all turn to look at her.

“Only she does it for them, in all ways, if you know what I mean.” She wiggles her

brows with a little smirk on her face, but instead of feeling amused like the others, all I feel is sick.

No wonder they're pissed at me. I may be able to stop their madness, but it turns out now I'm also their cockblock.

Another girl groans. "Whereas I can't even get a back rub from my Shadow."

"Yeah, but here's the kicker. Apparently, the female can do whatever the hell she wants. With whoever she wants." She glances over at me with a wink, and the other girls giggle.

My mouth goes dry. The hostility and rage when they found out I was their mate makes a hell of a lot more sense.

If what she said is true, I get to pretty much do whatever I want, be with whoever I want. But all they've got is... me.

I ignore the girls chattering and get moving, needing some fresh air to clear my mind.

I'm past the main door and heading for the path through the forest when I hear it again.

"Where the hell is she going now?"

I freeze and glance around looking for Knox. He has to be close by. It sounded like he was right beside me.

"Where are you?" I call out.

"You heard me..." he says, his voice a little shocked.

But I freeze realizing where the sound of his voice is coming from.

My head. He's speaking to me in my fucking mind.

"What. The. Fuck?" I say out loud and hear him bark out a laugh in my mind.

"Hello, Princess," he purrs, and I almost feel the smug smile slide across his face.

"Oh, this is going to be so much fun."

Fuck my life.

Taking a deep breath, I walk into the house and stop short when I spot all four men waiting in the lounge.

They all seem a hell of a lot more relaxed than this morning, and it instantly has my guard up.

Theon smirks. "She's nervous."

I narrow my eyes on him while trying to lock down any facial expression that makes me look even the slightest bit nervous.

"She hurt her arm earlier," Cyrus says before dragging his eyes down the rest of my body as if inspecting it.

My right arm has been a little sore since my fight with that Shadow male, but how did he know?

"Probably when she took down that stupid fuck," Malakai says with a nod. "Nice kick by the way."

I freeze and frown at them all, wondering if they have cameras following me now.
“What the hell is going on?”

Malakai smiles. A smile I wouldn't trust if you paid me to. “The mate bond seems to have given us a little... surprise .”

My frown deepens, and they relax further, all wearing satisfied smirks.

“Now you can't hide anything from us. You try and we'll know,” Malakai says.

“What are you talking about?” I ask again, getting more frustrated by the minute.

“I know you heard me,” Knox says and taps his head, and I freeze.

“That was real?” I was hoping I was just overtired. But... “You talked to me? In my mind?” I ask.

“Not only that. It's looks like we all got something a little different.” He tilts his head to the others. “Malakai can see what you can.”

My eyes find Malakai's and the savage smile he wears. So that's how he knew about the fight with the other male.

“Theon can sense your emotions,” Knox says, and my eyes find Theon's.

The cool look in them is no different than it always is, but there's something I almost catch. Something darker. It's there and gone before I know it.

“And Cyrus can feel you physically.”

My gaze draws to Cyrus but he's already watching me. Always watching me it

seems. He's a lot less vocal about his hate toward me, but it's there. Just beneath the surface.

Knox chuckles and moves away from the others to step in front of me. "Guess our little mate is about to learn a thing or two."

I step forward, meeting him toe for toe. "I also learned a thing or two about this bond of ours. Apparently, you all now have little problem getting it up for anyone else." I raise a brow and glance at each of them, watching as each of their smirks quickly drop.

I nod. "I can take it from your expression that it is, in fact, true. While I get to do whatever the hell I want."

Their expressions quickly darken along with the atmosphere in the room.

I stand my ground as Malakai gets up from his seat and moves a step closer. "You're forgetting what we just told you. I can see wherever you are. Meaning if I see someone that's getting a little too close for my liking, you can bet they are going to find themselves at the end of my blade."

He tilts his head to Theon. "Theon will sense any type of... pleasure you may feel. And we can promise you that it won't finish with a happy ending."

Knox glances down at me with a smug smile. "And once I figure out how this really works, you can bet any little secrets you have, will be mine."

A bolt of panic rushes through me at finding out what happened, and I catch Theon narrow his eyes on me.

I take a step back from them and try to think of something else. Something that won't

reveal my every worry and fear.

Malakai cross his arms. “So, try as you will. But if we’re stuck in this hell. So are you.”

“Well see,” I tell them while giving them a wicked smile, making them lose a little bit of their confidence while I feel absolutely none.

I turn and head to my room, trying to lock down and contain my panic while I think of a way to block them all out. For good.

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B lock... It's the first thought that comes to me as I open my gritty eyes with a groan.

Knox kept me up all night, talking to me in my mind about anything and everything he thought would annoy the hell out of me. And it worked.

It went on for hours. And then he started singing. It turns out he has an amazing voice. But as soon as he figured out I liked it, he stopped.

He then moved on to tell me every single moment of the movie he was watching. And he must have chosen the worst movie known to man because it was beyond terrible.

He eventually fell asleep a couple of hours ago, but by the time I was able to fall sleep, it was already time to get up. And now I have to go to training and class.

I trudge to the bathroom and have a quick cold shower to try wake myself up. Getting out, I throw on my clothes and head downstairs.

Malakai, Theon and Cyrus are already up. Their eyes veer to me the moment I walk down the stairs.

"You feel a little frustrated this morning," Theon says with a smug look.

"And exhausted," Cyrus says but with a frown as if he's actually worried.

I ignore them and then my tired brain finally wakes up and realizes something. The bond isn't a one-way thing. Knox could hear me talk to him. Which means if they can

do it, so can I. I just have to figure it out first.

I smile, and their smug looks start to drop.

“Game on, boys.”

After another entire afternoon wasted in the labyrinth that is the library, I’m no closer to figuring out this mate connection between us.

Heading back to the house and straight to the shower, I strip and get in, hoping it will ease some of the frustrations rushing through me.

My mind is thankfully blank, which can only mean Knox is asleep.

I take my time showering, thinking about how I can learn how to block them out, especially Malakai, when my vision blurs and shifts.

No longer am I in a plain white shower but a gray and black one.

I glance down and gasp when I spot a six... no eight pack. Muscles upon muscles, tight, corded and fucking lickable.

Large hands run up and down, lathering soap over every inch.

My core clenches, and it takes a minute for me to snap out of my shock—and lust—to realize I’m seeing through Malakai’s eyes.

I’ve been practicing for two days now with no luck, but apparently all I needed to do was clear my mind and focus on him.

I glance down at my body and my vision flickers from my wet breasts and stomach to

his.

He freezes and groans, low and throaty. “Fuck...” he breathes and then slides his hands down his body to his...

I squeeze my eyes shut, after seeing something I probably shouldn't have and try to think of one of the others.

But it doesn't work. Even with my eyes closed, I still see what he does.

He slowly slides his hand down to his hard cock and groans. “Sena...” he rasps, and I freeze.

He can't be thinking of me. But... he supposedly can only get it up for me now.

I push it to the back of my mind as he pumps his hand along his thick, hard cock, finding it hard to look away.

A drop of pre-cum beads at his tip, and my core clenches making me gasp.

He stills, tightening his grip on his cock. “Sena?”

Shit. I immediately try to pull back; to block him out, but his chuckle makes me pause.

“You can see what I can see, can't you?” he says out loud. Unlike Knox who I can talk to in my mind, it seems I can see and hear everything Malakai does.

He places a hand on the wall and shifts so I can see every inch of him, his eyes directly on his hand and cock.

“Do you like what you see?” he asks. “Do you like watching me?”

He grunts as he starts moving, sliding his hand up and down his thick length.

“Do you see how fucking hard I am?” he says with a dangerous tilt to his tone, as if he’s a little angry about it.

I bite back a moan as he pumps himself harder and faster, grinding his hips into his hand.

“Does it get you wet looking at something you’ll never have?” he asks with a smug tilt to his voice, and his words quickly snap me out of my little daze.

Instead of pulling back from the connection, I try to keep it open while focusing on my own body, glancing down at it to make sure he gets a good view. I gather some soap in my hand before lathering it across my breasts, slowly taking my time to get every inch.

He makes a strangled noise, and I know he’s seeing what I am now.

A deep groan sounds out around me. “Where the fuck have you been hiding that body?!” he pants, his voice hoarse.

I chuckle and ignore him while trying to hold the connection, showing him exactly what he will never have.

I exaggerate each movement, slowing my hands around the curve of my breasts and down my stomach.

“Fuck, those tits are a thing of beauty,” he purrs, and I pause at the compliment. But then realize it’s because he’s speaking with his dick and forgetting how much he

really hates me.

“You’re fucking stunning. Every damn inch of you.” The compliment throws me again, but he quickly brings me back to reality a moment later.

“Slide a hand down further,” he growls as he continues to pump himself. “Show me how wet you are for me.”

“For you?” I say out loud, and he laughs, it’s husky and way too cocky for my liking.

“We both know if I were there, I’d have you bent over, begging for everything I gave you.”

The image alone makes me shudder, and he chuckles. “Now be a good girl and show me what belongs to me.”

I could get angry. Try to cut off the connection here and now. If I connected to him by clearing my mind and focusing on him. Technically all I need to do is the reverse. But what would be the fun in that?

I leave the connection open and smile, biting my lip while sliding my hands up my body.

“Sena...” he warns, clenching his jaw.

I ignore him and slide my hands slowly across my stomach and breasts, moving lower and lower before dragging my hands back up and starting over again and again. I make sure to gasp and moan, putting on a little show for him.

His breaths are ragged by the time I’m finished my little warm-up.

“What will do you if I give you what you want?” I ask him while making a show of squeezing my breasts.

“ Whatever you want,” he growls out, practically panting.

Biting back a smile, I sink to my knees and spread my legs wide, arching my back.

“ Whatever I want? ” I ask.

He glances down at his thick, hard erection and squeezes.

“Yes...” he grits out, making a smile spread across my face.

I slide my hands down the tops of my thighs, painfully slowly. Before curving them toward my center and sliding them back and forth. I almost feel his heady look and his hungry dark stare.

“I want...” I make sure he sees exactly what I’m doing, while teasing him with what he wants and will never have.

“...you to fuck off.” I quickly cut out the connection between us, filling my mind with every thought and worry while thinking of everyone but him.

My vision quickly returns to the white shower as a loud bang echoes from somewhere in the house.

It’s followed by a slew of curses and hard thumps.

Feeling damn happy with myself, I get up from my position in the shower while chuckling to myself.

Fuck him and his little demands. Unlike him, I don't need any of them to get myself off...

I slide a hand down my body and try not to think about him and his dirty mouth. Or the fact that I come not two minutes later to the sound of him telling me I'm a good girl.

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Over the next week, I avoid the four assholes at every chance I get and instead head back to the library to learn as much as I can about mating bonds and how they work.

Mainly so I can use it against them. Turns out there's an entire shelf of books about mates and I was just looking in the wrong place.

"It's been so peaceful without you around as much."

I grind my teeth, hearing Knox again. The fucker never stops talking.

"And yet here you are talking to me," I tell him, and he chuckles. It didn't take me long to learn how to talk back to him. But blocking him out completely is a whole other thing.

"Only because I know it annoys you so much. I have better things to do."

"Then go do it. And fuck off," I tell him, glancing back down at the book in my hands.

Mate bonds.

I read through the section quickly, realizing that there's really nothing I didn't already know. Or guess.

I had my confirmation in the shower with Malakai. All I really need to do is relax, clear my mind, and focus. It apparently gets easier over time.

But it doesn't help when you have a dickhead like Knox constantly in your head.

Knox chuckles this throaty sound, and it slides down my back, making me feel things I have no right to feel.

I tell myself it's because I heard him singing and that's it.

That Malakai's dirty mouth isn't something I ever want to hear again, and when Cyrus looks at me with worry, it's not because he actually cares.

Focusing on Malakai, I take a few deep breaths as I blank my mind and thoughts.

A second later I feel it. Our bond. The warm energy expands, and in seconds my sight changes from shelves of old dusty books to the lounge in the house.

He's sitting beside Cyrus while Knox and Theon are across from him.

"Where is she?" Cyrus asks Malakai.

"In the library," Malakai answers, clenching his jaw.

"She's been hiding out in that library all week, and when she's not there, she's in class or training," Knox says. "She's avoiding us."

"Maybe she really doesn't remember," Cyrus says, and the others glance over at him, not immediately shutting it down.

"Or maybe she's fucking us over, just this time playing the long game," Theon says with a smile. And fuck if it isn't one of the most beautiful things I've seen. Even if it is completely vicious and unhinged.

It only makes me want to mess with him.

“Tell Theon he has a pretty smile,” I tell Knox and smile wider when he jolts back.

“She’s watching us,” he tells Malakai.

Malakai narrows his eyes and then smirks. “She seems to like doing that,” he murmurs, and I instantly get warm remembering our little game a few nights ago.

He glances over at the kitchen as if I’m standing right there. “Are you enjoying watching us, Sena?”

I roll my eyes at the cocky fuck. “Theon is prettier to look at. Tell Malakai to turn back around,” I tell Knox.

Knox barks out a laugh, and Malakai and the others look at him.

“What did she say?” Cyrus asks.

“She thinks Theon is pretty to look at,” he replies.

Theon smirks but as if realizing what he’s doing, he frowns and then glares at Malakai.

I laugh out loud at his expression and start thinking I’m seeing things when I catch the small curve to Knox’s lips.

“Stop avoiding us and come back to the house,” Knox says. “You can’t hide out in the library forever.”

“Watch me,” I tell him.

Knox tells the others what I said, and I watch as Malakai clenches his fists . “You need to spend time with us,” he demands.

I scoff. “And you all need to stop playing games with me and being complete assholes.”

Knox tells the others what I said, and they narrow their eyes.

“We’ve been watching. We know you’re in the library. If we want to, we can head straight there and drag your ass home,” Malakai warns.

I clench my fists and tell myself I’m doing this. Now. Fuck them.

They may have been watching me, but I see them now. And there’s no way I’m going to fall for any more of their tricks again.

I focus on clearing my mind—it helps that Knox isn’t talking incessantly in the background—and then I feel for each of the bonds, immediately feeling Theon’s first.

In my mind it’s blue, cool and calm like the ocean. But I can also feel the tip of a scales. As if he can easily switch to a treacherous storm with vicious waves.

I block him out first, imaging a huge translucent barrier between me and our bond and watch on through Malakai’s eyes as Theon sits back and frowns, wondering what the fuck happened.

I move onto Cyrus next and feel nothing but an endless darkness. As if it could go on forever and it could swallow me whole if I allowed it.

But there’s something almost peaceful about it too. Something comforting and safe that makes me want to lean into it.

I have to focus harder to create the barrier between us, but it slams down just like Theon's, completely shutting him off from me.

"Sena," Malakai growls in warning, finally realizing what I'm doing.

"What is it?" Theon asks, but I shut them all out to try and stay focused. Their words slip in though.

"She's learned to block us out," he replies.

Yes, I fucking have.

I quickly move onto Malakai. The bond between us is red and warm, almost fiery. I feel his passion, his protectiveness towards the others. But just like Theon's switch, there's also something almost soft and gentle about it too.

I slam the barrier between us and focus on the last of the four.

Knox.

I frown when I see his bond is green and light and airy. Like a wide-open forest. But there's something almost sharp about it too. Like the edge of a blade.

"Don't you even think about—" he starts, but I yank the barrier down on him too. And then there is nothing but silence. And a thumping headache.

But I'll take that over having to deal with any of them.

I take a moment to breathe before packing up and moving. Knowing they'll probably head straight to the library, and I need a few hours to myself before I have to head back to them.

I spend the next four hours eating, training, and hiding out in the forest. Enjoying every damn minute of it.

When it's time to head back, I hide some food in a small container and place it under a rock in a hidden spot in the forest just in case. While also hoping the animals don't steal it from me.

I slip into the house after I know they've gone to bed and head upstairs, breathing a sigh of relief when none of them come thundering down the hall to my room.

Stripping into just a tee and shorts, I slide into bed and sprawl out, happy that I'll have a peaceful night's sleep tonight.

Taking advantage of the beautiful silence in my head right now, I let every inch of my body relax before slowly starting to drift into a deep sleep.

In the back of my mind, I hear a door open and close. But I think nothing of it as I drift further into the dark.

An arm slides under me, and I jolt awake only to find Knox pulling me closer to him and his body.

"What the hell are you doing? Get out!" I shout.

Knox ignores me, so I start moving, shoving and kicking him away.

He tenses up and glances right at me and the look in his eyes makes me pause. It's dark, making warning bells go off in my head, but there's also layers of pain and sadness.

"I'm on the edge right now, Sena," he admits. "The others are managing. But right

now, I need this. So just suck it up and fucking let me hold you. You can go back to hating me in the morning,” he grits out before settling in behind me and moving us until my back is to his front.

“You hated me first,” I remind him, still trying to figure out what the hell is happening.

“Yeah, I did,” he whispers, and I pause at the complete honesty his voice.

I wait for a minute for him to completely relax and then I ask, “What did I do?”

He stills, and I feel every inch of his body tense up. He doesn’t answer, instead choosing to stay silent. But I really need to know what she did to them that made them this way. There are glimpses of the men they could be. But it’s completely overshadowed by their complete and utter hate for me.

“What did I do to make you hate me so much?” I ask, allowing the vulnerability in my voice to seep out, hoping he’ll give me something. Anything .

His hand slides up and curves around my throat, and he leans up and over me as he turns my head to him, looking down at me like he doesn’t know whether to strangle or kiss me.

I’m about to decide for him and break each of his fingers when he leans down and chooses the latter, running his tongue over my lips and mouth and destroying every thought I just had.

The kiss starts off lazy and languid while he holds me still and tempts and teases me with each stroke and brush of his lips, leaving me breathless.

Lost in a haze of pleasure, I hungrily push back, kissing him and sucking his tongue

needing more.

He groans low and deep, making me shudder, and something snaps inside him. His hand tightens on my throat, and I feel him harden behind me.

Within seconds, the kiss turns angry and brutal, like he hates that he's enjoying this as much as I am but can't stop himself either.

And even though I still hate him and his shitty attitude, this body and the bond between us doesn't. And it's desperate and fucking hungry to feel more of him.

He bites my bottom lip and sucks it while groaning, sending a spark of heat straight to my clit. And my dirty little mind only makes me think of all the other places he can use this talent of his, greedily wanting his lips and tongue on every inch of me.

Crushing his lips to mine, he swirls his tongue before fucking my mouth in a bruising kiss that has me gasping for more. But all too soon, he drags his lips away and releases my throat, pulling back to stare at me with ragged breaths.

I fist my hands, stopping myself from reaching out to him and pulling him back to me.

Something shutters in his eyes, and after a minute, he sighs and leans down, rubbing his cheek along mine before settling back behind me and pulling me into the curve of his body.

Feeling dazed, confused, and completely frustrated, I wait a moment for my heart rate to slow down and my mind and heart to catch up to realize what just happened.

But I still don't know what to make of it. And instead of sleeping, my mind decides to wake up and come alive, running through different scenarios of 'What the fuck?!' .

“You know this doesn’t mean anything, right?” I tell him and myself, making sure I remember it too.

He doesn’t answer me, but a moment later, I feel his grip tighten.

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I wake to find Knox's face right in front of me, his eyes closed and his body completely at ease. Every inch of us is plastered together, our arms and legs entangled.

It's as if we couldn't get close enough to one another so we wrapped ourselves around each other and held on tight.

It's something I'm desperately trying to shove to the back of my mind right now, along with the fact that it was one of the best night's sleep I've had in a long time.

Also, something I'm never going to willingly admit to him or anyone else.

For some reason, I feel completely safe in his arms. Another thing that only annoys the fuck out of me.

I start to inch out of his hold, but he pulls me back into him with a frown, rubbing his cheek against the top of my head.

I try again, this time moving slower, trying to at least remove my leg from over his. But he shifts sliding his leg up more into my center.

I gasp and feel him tense up, and instead of being an adult and having a conversation about everything, I close my eyes and block him out, slamming that barrier down between us.

I try to even my breathing and keep my heart rate steady but then I feel the soft brush of a finger slide down my cheek, and my heart rate picks up speed.

He sighs, unravels himself from my legs and arms, and gets up, dragging himself away from me slowly.

I don't hear him moving, but instead feel his eyes burn into me, as if he's standing there watching me.

The sound of hands running through hair hits my ears, followed by another deep sigh. Footsteps move away from me, and I finally start to relax. I wait until I hear the door shut before opening my eyes and stare up at the ceiling, wondering what the hell just happened.

The guys have been working hard trying to break my barriers, and every now and again, they do.

I learn that Theon can sense my emotions similar to an empath whereas Cyrus is more like a physical empath, feeling anything I do physically.

I enforce my block once more when I start feeling Knox trying to wiggle his way into my mind.

I found out I can still block them from reaching me while also slipping into a one-sided connection to mess with them.

I slip into Malakai's bond and find him on a field with a group of other males around him all running drills. I spot Knox across from him with Cyrus and Theon to the left of him.

Focusing on my memory in the shower with Malakai and the kiss with Knox, I allow myself to fall into the feeling of pleasure, remembering Knox's touch and Malakai's dirty mouth.

A strangled choke has me focusing back on Theon and his growing erection.

Clearing his throat, he moves to Knox and whispers something in his ear before quickly slipping away.

I chuckle but accidentally open a connection with Knox.

“Sena...” he says . “That was naughty.” I hear the smile in his voice, and then they all try to bombard me through the bond, and I immediately pull back.

But not before spotting Knox smile and shake his head.

Instructor Dick is in right form today. Something or someone must have seriously pissed him off.

Instead of his normal torture of running us beyond exhaustion and then forcing us to do the assault course over and over until we’ve knocked off a few seconds, he’s decided we need to beat the shit out of each other until one of us is knocked out.

And if we don’t agree, he’s decided to step in and take over the job for us.

He pairs me up with Robin. But there’s no way I’m knocking her out just because he says so. There’s a difference between learning certain moves and how to get the upper hand or escape a hold. But this is nothing but an excuse to get us to hurt one another, all so he can get his kicks out of it.

“I’m not fighting her,” I tell him.

Robin opens her mouth to say something, but I give her a look, and she sighs, closing it just as quick.

The Dick is going to be annoyed either way. It's better that he's annoyed with just one of us.

"If you don't fight her, you fight me," he snarls.

I nod, and he gives me a savage smile. And something about it has my nerves on edge.

The girls move to the side to watch as I step closer to him.

We circle one another, sizing each other up, but he smirks as if he's found something he was looking for.

I don't give him any more time to think and shoot forward, blocking his attack before punching him straight in the face. His head whips to the side, and when he turns back to me, he doesn't look happy.

Spitting out blood, he rolls his shoulders and cracks his neck before getting in position again.

He moves forward, and I reach out to block, but... nothing happens. Instead, I get my hand a couple of inches from his side, and it freezes.

Pain slams into my ribs as his hard punch meets my right side, making me gasp.

But I still can't move.

I open my mouth to tell him something is wrong. But no words come out. My eyes find his, and the savage look full of glee he gives me tells me everything I need to know.

It's him. He's doing this. Whatever this is.

Finally able to move again, I move forward and strike hard, but just like last time, as soon as I'm a couple of inches away from touching him, my body freezes.

And then he attacks. This time he doesn't ease up. He kicks and punches me until my body bends over in a gasp of agony.

After he's finished, he releases whatever hold on my body as he steps back, and I drop to the ground.

The girls try to move closer to me and from the corner of my eye I spot Robin's long red hair, but one warning from the Dick, and they back up immediately.

All but Robin.

He rounds on her, and I know she'll end up his next target if I don't do something.

I try to move but every muscle and bone in my body feels like it's been dragged towards the ground and held there.

I open my mouth and manage to mumble out some incoherent version of, 'Go.'

"This is what happens when you don't listen to me. Now, onto the assault course. She can sit here and think about what she did wrong. Now move it."

What I did wrong?! That fucking asshole.

"But—" I hear Robin start, but he must have given her a look because she grows quiet really quick.

Shuffles of feet move away from me, but one pair moves closer.

“Next time you don’t listen to me, I’ll leave you more than a little broken,” Dick grits out.

I still can’t to tell him to go fuck himself, and after a moment, he leaves me alone in my silence and agony.

Another few minutes pass before I can actually move. And when I do, I realize how much of a beating I actually took.

I groan, crawling to my hands and knees while realizing he must have some type of paralyzing ability.

He knew I was going to give him a run for his money, so he cheated instead.

Pain shoots up through my body as I get to my feet. I limp my way through the forest to my hidden spot of food. Finding it untouched and still safely in its container, I sit down with a groan and wolf it down while trying to assess the worst of my injuries.

Nothing seems to be broken, but my ankle is definitely sprained. I’ve a nasty bruise on my right ribs and some more sprinkled over the rest of my body. But apart from some shallow cuts here and there, everything else is good.

A spike of aggravation slashes through me, and I know it’s not mine. I draw down the barrier between me and Knox—thinking he’ll be the only one who won’t be able to figure out what state I’m in—and roll my eyes when I instantly hear him.

“Where are you?” he growls.

“Getting my nails done,” I reply with a smirk.

“Sena...” he warns. I guess he’s no humor for games.

“What happens if I don’t spend time with you all,” I ask him, wondering if I can just hide out here for the night and forgo the embarrassment of them seeing me after I got my ass kicked. They’d probably just laugh about it making me feel even shittier. “Will you really hulk out?”

“If I have to hunt you down ? —”

I sigh. “ I’m honestly just asking. I want to know if you’re all just fucking with me. I have no one to talk about this stuff, and you’re all assholes that like to play games. So, is this another one of your games or do you actually need me?”

I feel him pause before reluctantly answering. “Yes,” he hisses. “ We need you... close by.”

Close by... I glance down at the blood on my body and the cuts and bruises and my stomach churns.

I don’t know why I’m so worried about them seeing me like this. It’s not like they really care. I’m just there to help them stay calm.

“Fine. I’m on my way,” I tell him.

“You—”

“And don’t even think about asking me to train with any of you.” Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, fucking shame on me. It wasn’t happening a third time.

He chuckles as if sensing my change in mood. “Hurry up.”

Getting up with a groan, I start my trek back to the house while every ache and pain makes itself known. Opening the door, I head inside but freeze when I see all four of them still up, standing around waiting.

They all freeze when they spot me, and the atmosphere in the room quickly changes, becoming tense and full of rage.

“Who. The Fuck . Hurt. You?” Malakai bites out.

I laugh, not really feeling one bit of humor. “Oh, I got my ass kicked. Thought you’d be happier about it.” I run a hand down my face and avoid looking at any of them and their intense stare downs. “I’m heading to bed.” I start limping by them when Theon steps in front of me.

“Who?” he asks, and I glance up to find his teal blue eyes darkening with rage and murder.

“Why does it matter?” I ask with a frown.

“No one gets to fucking touch you!” he growls.

I raise a brow. “Because I’m your personal Xanax?” I ask, and they all frown, probably wondering what the hell I’m talking about.

Sighing to myself, I shake my head, too exhausted for this. “Look, I’m tired. Can we do this—whatever it is—another time?” I don’t wait for their answer and step around Theon before heading upstairs to my room. Knox said I only need to be close .

Thankfully no one follows me.

I take a quick shower, washing away the dried blood before getting changed and into

bed.

Slowly drifting off to sleep, my mind replays their reaction to seeing me. They didn't look angry at me for once. Instead, they looked angry for me.

It makes me think that maybe somewhere deep, deep down, that they do care.

Then I realize I don't live in a damn fairytale and remember they're all still assholes and force myself to go asleep.

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Darkness surrounds me, trying to snuff me out. But for some reason I'm not afraid of the dark.

It's the monsters that I know are hiding inside it that frighten me.

A flicker of light reveals a long hall that opens up around me.

I move down it but pause when a growl echoes from somewhere behind me.

Avoiding looking over my shoulder, I run into another hall and find a door to the side. Making my way toward it, I head inside and try to listen out for any sound.

I move a step back but my foot hits something. Turning, I glance down and gasp.

Dozens of bodies lay on the floor, bleeding out. All of their eyes are open, revealing their last moments were full of fear and horror.

I don't recognize any of these people, but grief hits me like a punch to the chest, and pain and sadness rush through me seeing them. Seeing their empty eyes that will no longer see the light again.

I rub my chest trying to ease the pain when a low growl vibrates through the door. I whip around just as a dark beast crashes into the room and heads straight for me.

Stumbling backward, I fall straight onto the bodies. A strangled choke slips from my lips as my gaze meets a pair of eyes almost familiar.

I scramble away but not quickly enough as a sharp burn slices down my thigh, making me gasp.

My entire body trembles as I try to get away, but I can no longer move. I close my eyes and hear the growl right in front of me.

“You’re safe,” a familiar voice says, and hands wrap around me from behind while the growl slowly disappears.

“You’re safe. I have you,” Cyrus says. “Now... Wake up !” he orders.

I jolt up in bed with a gasp. My eyes immediately find Cyrus’ deep indigo blue eyes and the worry in them.

Placing my hand on my chest, I try to take deep breaths and calm my thundering heart. It starts to slow after a minute, and I realize Cyrus and I are not the only ones in my room.

Malakai, Knox, and Theon all stand at the end of my bed, all wearing the same worried expression as Cyrus.

“She had a nightmare,” Cyrus says to the others with a frown. “But I’ve never felt anything like it.” He searches my face for something. “It didn’t feel like a dream.”

Finally starting to feel less panicked, I focus on Cyrus and try to understand what he’s talking about. “You were really in my dream?”

He nods. “I can dream-walk. It’s an unusual ability for a Shadow to have. But none of the four of us have usual Shadow abilities.”

I glance over to the others, but they’re now glaring at Cyrus as if he’s just revealed

something they would rather have kept to themselves.

But I've already seen Malakai shift. It's not like it changes anything.

"What was the dream about?" Knox asks.

"Nothing," I reply.

Knox clenches his jaw. "You were screaming in pain. Like you were fucking terrified."

"It was just a dream. I'm fine." I move to get up and hiss when a sharp fiery burn slides down my thigh.

Cyrus is beside me before I move another inch, whipping the blanket off me to reveal three long claw marks down my thigh and a pool of blood around it.

"What the fuck?" Knox says while my eyes find Cyrus'.

"How is that possible? It was just a dream." Wasn't it?

"If you hadn't blocked us out, we would've known you were badly injured," Theon grits out.

"That wasn't from earlier," Cyrus says, and they all look at him with a questioning look.

"In her dream, something attacked her." His eyes find my thigh. "And it had claws."

Malakai frowns. "Maybe the bond allowed her to be dragged into your dream?"

“No,” Cyrus replies. “That was definitely hers. But maybe something else got in.”

I blanch, not even thinking that could be a thing. “What if it happens again?”

Malakai drags a hand down his face with a sigh. “Someone needs to stay with her.”

I open my mouth to cut that asinine idea off when Cyrus replies to him.

“I will,” he says, and I turn to look at him. There’s a look in his eyes that I don’t understand. But the worry in them is unmistakable.

“I’ll be able to watch her dreams too,” he says, but doesn’t look away from me.

I drag my gaze away from him to look at the others. “I don’t think?—”

“It’s not up for discussion,” Malakai says, cutting me off.

Knox groans. “Someone just get her to the healing center so I can go back to bed.”

I stop myself from making my way to him and slapping him upside his head and instead get to my feet, hiding my wince. “I didn’t ask any of you to come in here. I don’t need any one of you to bring me anywhere. And I also don’t need a damn watchdog. Get out!”

Knox’s eyes narrow on me. He opens his mouth to say something, but his gaze drops to something on my side, and he pales.

“What the fuck are they?” he asks as his eyes grow wider by the second.

The others move around the bed and all quickly freeze with the same look of shock and horror on their faces just like Knox.

Haven't they seen a little cut before? I glance down at my thigh but freeze when I realize it's not the cut they're looking at. It's the long black tattoo on my upper thigh.

I pull up my top and gasp when I find it runs right up to my side. But it's not the only one.

There's another long swirling tattoo on the other side, but this one starts at my rib and stops at my hip.

"Someone want to explain to me why I now suddenly have two huge tattoos on my sides?" I ask. They're stunning but also something I never asked for.

"Four," Theon grits out, and I glance over at him, finding his hands clenched at his sides and his entire demeanor hostile.

"What?" I ask.

"Four tattoos," he says, talking to me like I'm a two-year-old. "Two on each side."

I ignore his shitty attitude and glance back at the tattoos to really look at them. There's a small break between each of the intricate swirls, but they blend so well you would never notice it.

"Explain," I demand. They obviously know what's going on. They might not be happy about it. But I deserve to know when I'm the one involved. "I have a right to know. It's my body." Technically.

"They're ours." Malakai releases a harsh sigh before lifting his top and revealing a mirror image of half of the tattoo on my right side. "It means you're our..." he pauses as if finding it hard to say it, "our true mate."

I frown. “ True mate? I don’t understand. Is that different from a mate?” I glance between them, but none of the others look at me, instead finding my room and their clothes much more interesting. I glance back at Malakai and cut him a look, demanding he answer me.

He rolls his eyes at me. “It’s old ancient bond between mates that is extinct.” He frowns. “Was...”

Knox glances between the others. “We can’t tell anyone. If they find out she’s our...” He pauses as if unable to say it anymore, and all of their eyes veer to me and their faces pale.

“If you’re worried about me announcing I’m somehow more connected to you four than I want to be, then think again.” I never wanted to be connected to them in the first place.

“How? How is she...” Knox glances from Malakai to Cyrus looking for an answer. “How is she our fucking true mate! Off all people. Her ?!”

I’m two seconds away from punching him in the face when he, Malakai, and Theon all send glares my way before stomping out of the room like children having a temper tantrum. All annoyed at me again for something completely out of my control.

So fucking dramatic.

Something brushes against my side, and I jolt, forgetting Cyrus is still in the room.

“Do you want me to take you to the healing center?” he asks with a soft look on his face.

“I’ll be fine. You can leave.” I turn to move toward the bathroom when he stops me.

“No, I can’t. You don’t realize how bad this is. Dreams don’t do what yours did unless someone makes them. They could kill you.”

I flinch back, but he drags me closer and runs his hands down my arms.

Warmth seeps into my body and every pain and ache slowly disappears. I glance down at my thigh to find no claw marks or even a scar, just dried blood from where it once was. All my bruises and cuts are also gone from the fight with Instructor Dick. And my sprained ankle is completely healed.

I glance up at him. “How?—”

Cyrus’ shocked expression finds mine. “I was told that true mates can heal one another. But I didn’t know if I could do it, I just hoped I could.”

His eyes search mine, and there’s something that draws me to him. But he can’t be here. Not when I’m feeling this... fragile.

“Thank you for healing me.” I clear my throat and take a step back. “But you should go.”

“You’re vulnerable,” Cyrus says as if reading my thoughts. “And until we figure out who’s attacking you in your sleep or how we can stop it, one of us will have to stay with you until then.”

“How do we even know you can stop them from happening?” I ask while trying to come up with a way to get him to leave.

He shrugs. “Call it a hunch. But true mates are...” he searches my face for something and sighs, “they’re special.”

His eyes find mine, and I spot the hard glint in them. “I won’t let anything happened to you,” he promises, stunning me silent.

What am I supposed to say to that?

He searches my eyes again for something and nods to himself when he seems to have found what he’s looking for. “Wash the blood off and get changed. I’ll sort out the bedding.”

Realizing I’m not going to get him to leave, at least not tonight, I nod and give in, too tired to fight him on it.

One night. It’s just one night.

Exhaustion sets in, feeling like I haven’t slept in days. Grabbing a fresh tee and shorts, I head toward the bathroom have one of the quickest showers I’ve ever had before getting dressed and heading to bed.

Cyrus has already changed the sheets and bedding and is lying on the left side waiting for me.

“Just get into bed. I promise not to touch you.” He pauses. “If that’s what you want.”

It isn’t. The thought shocks me, making me freeze.

“Sena?”

I clear my throat and get into bed, all while trying to ignore the questioning look he’s giving me.

“Talk to me?” he pleads, and something about the tone of his voice makes me want to

answer him truthfully.

“I don’t understand any of this. You all hate me. So why are you trying to be so nice now? I don’t want to play anymore of your games. I’m tired,” I admit, and he sighs.

“We’re adjusting,” he says, and I feel him shift beside me. “We’re trying to understand this new version of you and if it’s real.”

I turn on my side to look at him. He’s already turned my way and watching me.

“Yes, we’re assholes for the tricks we played on you. But you used to play games on us that were much worse.”

I wince. “It was that bad?”

“Worse,” he says without any humor in his tone. Just sadness and heartbreak, making my own heart break a little.

“I’m sorry—” I start, but he shakes his head, moving closer to me.

I see his indigo blue eyes up close and almost get lost in them.

“Let’s talk about something else,” he asks while reaching out and tucking a piece of stray hair behind my ear.

I ignore the warm tingle it brings and try to think of something. “What’s the difference between a mate and true mate?” None of the others explained before stomping off like little children, and I was too stubborn to ask.

“A mate is supposed to have a deeper connection than others. A soul bond that’s forged between two or more.” His eyes flicker to mine. “But a true mate is one soul

shared between all. A bond so deep that none of us are whole without the other.”

He smiles with a far-off look as if remembering a fond memory.

“I remember meeting each one of the guys when I was just a child. Remember finally feeling like I had come home. Like I belonged somewhere.” His soft gaze finds mine once more.

“It all makes sense now. We were all pieces of a puzzle. But we were just missing one. You.”

Me. Or the old Sena.

The thought makes me flinch back, and he frowns and tenses up. But all I can think about now is how the other Sena might actually be their mate and I’m just along for the ride.

But then my mind starts trying to think logically on how that would be possible. I’m in this body which must mean my soul is too...

They also said they met her before. So, they would have known beforehand if she was their mate. Wouldn’t they?

I can’t voice my worries and fears. So instead, I do what I do best and shove them to the back of my mind for now.

“What now?” I ask him, wondering where we stand now that things have shifted again.

He sighs and his body starts relaxing once more.

“The bond will grow, eventually making us stronger over time. Stronger in ways none of us can imagine.” He frowns and a sliver of worry seeps into his eyes.

“We’re already stronger than most. But if people found out what we are, they would want to control us. ”

“I know you don’t trust me,” I tell him, and he opens his mouth to probably try to deny it when we both know the truth.

“I won’t tell anyone,” I promise him before turning back over and trying to force myself to sleep. But my mind has already decided to wake up and ruminate on everything that has just happened.

It takes a few minutes, but slowly, my mind starts drifting off, making each worry and fear disappear for now.

On the brink of sleep, I hear Cyrus whisper my name.

“Hmm?”

He sighs. “I need you to know... We’re all truly connected now. There is no out for any of us. Including you.”

My eyes blink open as sleep quickly abandons me. “What do you mean?” I ask while my stomach churns with fear.

I hear him as he swallows hard. “It’s means that after we bond, we truly become one. Meaning if you die, we all die too.”

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I wake to the feeling of someone watching me. Opening my eyes I find Cyrus doing just that.

“Did you even sleep?” I ask, a little startled to find him staring right at me. There’s no suspicion in his eyes, no distrust or hard edge. Just a soft curiosity that examines every inch of my face.

“I did,” he says with a slow smile that builds, leaving me a little dazed. “How did you sleep?”

“I don’t think I dreamt at all.” I try to think of any dream I might have had after we went to sleep, but there’s nothing. I also feel much more relaxed, similar to when Knox stayed.

“Good, I made sure of it,” he says, and my brows rise.

“You can do that?” I ask, and he nods.

“What else can you do? Or is that something super-secret I’m not allowed to know?” I roll my eyes, and he laughs.

“It’s not a secret. Everyone knows our abilities. It’s one of the reasons they give us more leeway than most.”

“What makes you four so different to the rest of the Shadows?” I ask, remembering Robin telling me a little bit about the different types, but I still don’t understand why they fear them so much.

He reaches out and brushes his fingertip along my cheek, his eyes darkening when I shiver at his soft touch.

“Shadows are divided into four sectors based on their powers and weapons. Sentinels are blue. They’re the foot soldiers.

Our watchers. They can form chakrams as their weapon.

When thrown, it acts similar to echolocation, revealing whatever they’re watching out for.

” His finger starts exploring my face, his eyes following it.

I try to focus on his words and not how his touch is making me feel.

“Seekers are white. They’re our archers. They can form arrows that seek out their target, and their shadow abilities ensure they don’t miss.” His finger slides down the curve of my neck, and I start focusing on his touch more than listening to his explanation.

“Shields are purple.” His eyes flicker to mine, and I spot the hungry look in them.

A hungry look that must also mirror on mine.

“It may come as no surprise that their weapons are shields. But they can also infuse them with their shadow abilities to make them more powerful.” His fingertip slides back up my neck and chin to my bottom lip.

“And finally Elite. They’re black,” he smirks as if he has some inner joke about that little fact. “Their weapons are daggers, swords, and any close combat weapon. Our shadow abilities are more powerful. More destructive. More malleable.” He drags his

hand away but still stares at my lips.

“Even though we’re Elite, we’re not the same as them.” His eyes flicker to mine. “Our abilities are stronger. And on top of that, we also have our own individual abilities. Only one percent of all Shadows have a separate ability.”

I raise a brow giving him a smirk. “So, you’re all super special? No wonder you’re all so cocky.”

He chuckles low, giving me an amused look.

“What’s it like? Your abilities?” I ask, wondering what it would be like to have such a power. No matter what they think, I’m human. Well... mostly. If we don’t count that random burst of light that happened. It probably has more to do with them and their bond than me.

“Would you like me to show you?” His eyes darken with heat, and in an instant, he’s hovering over me with an arm on each side of my body, caging me in.

“What are you doing?” I ask, and he smiles.

“Showing you one of my many talents,” he whispers just as black shadowy tendrils slide from his skin and wrap around my arms and legs before curling up and around my body.

“Cyrus...” I breathe as a feather-like touch brushes against every inch of me, making my body come alive.

“Yes, mate ,” he says, his voice low and husky, sliding down my back like silk.

Although the black tendrils feel light and airy, no amount of force helps me escape

their hold. I glance at him but still when I find his eyes completely black.

“Sena...” he breathes before leaning down and brushing his lips against mine, running his tongue over the seam before swallowing my gasp with a heady groan. I try to move; to drag him closer to me but his dark shadows don’t budge an inch.

He continues to tease and torment me with every stroke and caress of his lips until I melt into a puddle of heat beneath him.

But he draws back all too soon and presses his forehead to mine. “I’ve decided that I’m no longer going to fight this,” he breathes, his breaths ragged. He moves back, and his eyes slowly clear, revealing his normal indigo blue. But the heat in them is unmissable.

“From here on out you’re mine ,” he growls, and I feel the husky rasp of his voice right down my spine. “I’m on your side as much as I am theirs.”

My eyes drop to his lips, wanting to feel them again, to feel every part of him. But I shake the thought away to focus on his little vow.

“So, no more joining up and tricking me?”

My heart pounds as he dips down and nips my lip before licking the spot with a mischievous smirk. “No more games. At least not from me.” His shadowed tendrils slide down my body, making me shiver.

“What if the others act like dicks?” I ask while the possibility of him and me opens up in my mind. Even if it is just for now.

He chuckles and moves back to beside me, taking his shadows with him. “We can team up against them, and then I’ll come to your room and make sure your

frustrations are thoroughly seen to.”

I turn on my side to look at him and narrow my eyes at his little promise. But pause when I realize that none of them actually believe me. They still think I’m her. The other Sena.

“I’m not lying when I say I didn’t know you before waking up here,” I tell him honestly and his eyes soften.

“I know that now,” he says.

I raise a brow. A little shocked that he so easily believes me now. “And all it took was you sleeping next to me to figure it out?”

He smiles and shakes his head. “I’ve been watching you for a while now.” He runs a finger down my cheek again, almost like he can’t help but touch me, his eyes following it. “You’re different from how you used to be.” His gaze finds mine, searching for something. “It’s like you’re another person.”

I clear my throat, hiding my shock while trying to quickly change the subject. “What was I like... before?”

“Stubborn,” he says immediately. “To the point of being reckless. Selfish and extremely impatient.”

A dry chuckle slips past my lips. “I’m sorry I asked now.”

“Deceptive,” he continues, and I pause to look at him. “But this version seems to wear her heart on her sleeve. She has kindness, pain, and sadness in her eyes. But I enjoy watching every emotion cross her face.”

“Even when I’m pissed off and angry?”

He gives me an easy smile. “ Especially then.” Leaning over, he places a kiss to my head. “It’s time to wake up,” he whispers before pulling back.

I frown at him and then jolt, and I blink awake.

My eyes find his and the slow teasing smile on his lips.

Wait... “That was a dream?” I ask, glancing around the room as I try to figure out if this too is a dream before my eyes find his once more. “But it felt so real.”

I can still feel his feathery shadows that held my wrists and ankles. Still feel them as they brushed across my body.

I sit up, and he follows before moving in front of me and grasping my chin and tilting it up to him.

He drops a kiss to my lips. “Don’t worry. We can play as much as you like,” he promises with a hungry look in his eyes before getting up and heading out.

Shaking off my shocked and fizzled brain, I take a quick shower, more to cool my overheated body down than anything else before throwing on some clothes and heading downstairs.

As soon as I hit the bottom step, I spot Knox and his savage smirk and instantly want to turn back around.

“There she is. Our true mate,” he says with a chuckle, but there’s not an ounce of humor in it. “Whatever type of fates exist must fucking hate us to match us with you.”

I raise a brow and walk over to the lounge, quickly spotting Theon and Malakai on the sofa eating. “I’m not exactly over the moon about it either.”

Knox scoffs at me and opens his mouth to reply when Cyrus walks down the stairs, heads straight for me, and places a kiss on my head before heading to the coffee machine.

Knox does a double take. “What the fuck, Cyrus?”

He turns to him and shrugs. “She’s my mate. There’s no question about it now. You all saw our markings. I’m not wasting my time playing anymore games. She’s changed; we all can see that.”

His eyes widen as he points to me. “She sicced the Vims on us!”

“You left me in a pit of mud in the lashing rain. You fucking deserved it.” I move past him and head for the door. I need something to eat, and the smell of fresh coffee is only making it worse.

“Where are you going?” Knox calls out.

“Out,” I tell him, choosing to be the bitch he thinks I am.

“Sena,” Cyrus calls out making me pause.

I turn to look at him.

“Don’t block us all out. Check in every now and again. Please ,” he says, and I see the soft, hopeful look in his eyes.

I swallow hard against the knot in my throat and nod before heading out, all while

frowning at myself and my bad choices as I walk through the forest.

One kiss and a promise to be on my side and I'm already giving in.

I need to not be so naïve. It's gotten me into far too much trouble before.

Glancing back, I make sure none of them is following me and that all of my blocks are in place, before heading straight to my little hidden spot.

Grabbing some food from the container that's now kept stocked with food from the canteen, I wolf it down with some water before making my way to the library.

I couldn't research much about Variants until I learned how to fully block them out. I can't risk them finding out what happened. Not if it's going to get me killed.

Heading into the library, I start looking for any books on dark energy and beings. It takes me a while, but I eventually find an entire section on it.

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Skimming most of the pages, I quickly realize none of these are going to help me on Variants. And I can't exactly walk up and ask anyone either.

The things I do come across though send an icy shiver down my spine.

Demonic possessions. Psychokinetic control. Malevolent sprits.

All things I never thought were real, but now that I do, I hope to never come across any of them.

Closing the books, I grab them and place them back where I got them before heading to the canteen. Grabbing some food to go and some extra to refill my little stash, I hide it in a spot before making my way to the training field near the obstacle course.

But once I'm there, I stop short beside the girls.

Instructor Dane is dead. Not figuratively dead, actually dead.

Except for his head, which is on display on a long pole. It's as if an animal tore him to pieces and decided to show us all his kill.

The men are still cleaning up his blood and entrails as I gather around with the girls watching on in horror and disgust.

Robin gags. "I think I saw some of his insides." She gags again, and I pat her shoulder.

“What could have done something like that?” she asks, and I shake my head not understanding it either. I thought the academy was shielded from any outside threats. But maybe they did another test that I didn’t know about, and it slipped in.

The group of men are still cleaning up the mess when one of the older males with graying hair walks over to us.

“There will be no training this week. We’ll find a new instructor for you when you return.” He turns and leaves, heading back to the others without any further explanation.

I turn to Robin, hoping she’ll know what he meant. “Return? From where?”

“I’m guessing your mates didn’t remind you,” she says, and I shake my head, giving her a look that says she should know better than that.

“Start packing,” she says with a sigh. “We’ll be heading to the War Camps soon.”

With a groan, I get my food from my temporary hiding place and head back into the forest. Keeping an eye out, I make sure I’m not being followed before coming up to my hidden spot.

I should probably head back to the house or even do some more research in the library, but now with the impending visit to the War Camps growing closer, I should start focusing on brushing up on my skills.

I start stretching and warming up my body while thinking about what Cyrus told me about the sectors of Shadows.

Shield. Sentinel. Seekers. Elite.

Each one of them is powerful in their own right. The abilities and weapons that he explained for each of them proves that. But the four Shadows stuck with me are even more powerful than them all.

A thought I immediately shove to the back of my mind as soon as images of them hunting me down start flashing past it.

I train for the next few hours, working myself to exhaustion while trying to remember all the skills and techniques I learned before the switch.

After a couple of hours, I have to take a break and sit down as every muscle starts to ache, my body quickly drained.

I was hoping to go to the obstacle course and do a couple of rounds. I need those privileges of getting out of here if all else fails.

But I feel Knox almost punch at my barrier between us, and groan before slowing dragging it down and letting him in.

“Sena. Come back now,” he demands without an explanation on why he sounds so urgent.

“Did something happen to someone?” I ask, a little worried about the others. Even if they are assholes.

He pauses with a sigh. “ No. Everyone is fine. It’s late. You’ve been out all day. Cyrus... misses you.”

I bark out a laugh. “Yeah, right.”

“Sena,” he growls, and the sound of his low throaty voice does something to me.

Something I'd rather never admit to him.

Especially because he'd gloat about it, use it against me, and hold it over my head until the end of time.

"What?" I bite out. "I'm busy." I'm not really. There's no way I can train anymore. But he doesn't need to know that.

Maybe I'll just have a nap out here instead. But then I realize it's not the best idea considering something is attacking me in my sleep.

"No fucking way," Knox shouts, and I realize I'm still open and he's heard it. "I'm in your bed tonight."

"Like hell you are." I'd rather Cyrus. At least he's not being a dick to me.

"Sena," he warns.

"No, Knox. You don't get to treat me like shit one minute and then need me the next. I already told you I'm not her... I mean, the her you knew before," I say correcting my little slip up.

"And it's not easy to forget what you did to us," he says with a grit to his tone. "Cyrus may be able to move on, but it's not that fucking easy for the rest of us."

A sliver of anger slides through me thinking of the other Sena and what she must have done.

"I don't remember what I did," I tell him. "But for what it's worth, I am sorry." Sorry for whatever she did to you all.

I sigh, already regretting my next words. “If you promise not to be an asshole for the rest of the night... you can sleep in my bed.”

“Deal,” he says immediately. “Now get your ass home,” he orders.

I immediately block him out, hearing a frustrated growl as I do.

My head falls back against the tree trunk. What have I gotten myself into?

Cyrus’s words flash across my mind reminding me of what this means for them.

If I die, they die. But I guess that’s only if we complete the bond.

I freeze when it hits me what that truly means. I’m not a Shadow. I’m not strong like them.

No wonder they’re all so pissed. I’m just a liability to them.

Not only that. If anyone finds out what happened to me, I won’t be the only one that ends up under the firing squad. I’ll be dragging them down with me too.

I hit my head off the trunk and groan. I only wanted to figure a way out of all this. Now I possibly have four lives in my hands.

Shaking off my shitty mood, I hide what’s left of my food and head back to the house.

I head inside and sigh when I find them all waiting around looking as pissed as they were yesterday. Apart from Cyrus. He actually looks happy to see me while the other three look like shit. Like they haven’t slept in days and it’s finally catching up to them.

“What did I do now? Was my existence too loud for you?” I ask, truly over them and their shitty mood swings.

“You look fine,” Theon grits out.

I frown. “And you look like shit. What’s your point?”

In fact, they all look a little under the weather apart from Cyrus. Maybe they all caught something.

But I keep my mouth shut. They’d figure a way to blame it on me somehow.

“Tomorrow we’re all heading to the War Camps. Knox is with you tonight in case there’s another attack,” Malakai says as if he’s the one that commanded it. But I let it slide, having already made a deal with Knox. Something he seems to be upholding by keeping his mouth shut at least.

They start to move, but since a couple of them are being amicable, at least for now, I take my chance and ask them a question that’s been playing on my mind since I woke up in here and ran into them.

“When I woke up here after the accident. You said that you wanted to get out of here. What did you mean?” I ask, and they all turn to look at me.

Cyrus frowns while Knox gives me his normal suspicious look. Theon just outright glares at me, as if I’ve offended him somehow. And Malakai narrows his eyes on me.

“Well?” I push, hoping they’ll give me something .

“We want what we’ve always wanted. To finish our time in the academy and move to the War Camps,” Cyrus answers. “Permanently.”

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Cyrus' reply slowly filters through my mind as I line up with the other girls and make our way to a portal that will bring us to the War Camps.

I misunderstood them completely. None of them ever wanted to really escape. They just wanted to move to the War Camps. A desolate place that's apparently brutal, savage and absolutely chaotic.

It's also near the Hollow. A place where monsters and beasts are born.

Robin moves closer to me as we step into the portal. A rush of warmth and then cold slides across my skin as we move through it.

Hot, dead heat hits me as a desert of beige sand greets me.

Glancing to the side, I spot hundreds of steel framed tents with heavy black and beige fabric.

They're all setup in different sections around the area, with hundreds farther down from this spot.

I move farther away from the portal and find dark reddish rocks sitting everywhere and anywhere.

Some are huge, reaching the size of the tents while others only reach up to half of my thigh.

There's nothing else here. No water. No breeze. Nothing.

Why on earth would anyone want to live here? Permanently .

Sloane—the female I met in Commander Talos’ office—gathers us to the side and waits for everyone to step through the portal before speaking.

“The camps are setup similar to the academy. Those who have companions will stay with their Shadows.” She turns around and points farther down from us to a large tent four times the size of the others.

“That’s the main tent. Behind it you’ll find most of the Shadows that just arrived. There will be small flags on the tents that align with the color of your Shadow’s sector. Those who wanted to speak with me, come with me.”

A handful of girls follow her while the rest of us head toward the large tent.

Moving around it, I pause when it opens up to a huge network of tents and paths.

Quickly spotting the colored flags, I realize what she means. Blue for the Sentinels. Purple for the Seekers. White for the Shields, and finally, at the very back is black for the Elite.

But to get to any of them we have to move through a wide path that’s been taken over by dozens of angry looking male Shadows. All spread out, in and around the path and tents.

As soon as they spot us, the atmosphere kicks up a notch, and they make it clear that none of them are too happy with us being here.

“What in the other realm are they?” Robin asks and I glance over to see eight huge beasts.

Four on each side of the path we've to move through.

Each look to have the head and half a body similar to an eagle and the other half similar to a lion.

Their coloring is a mix between black and gold, and each are double the size of the largest lion I've ever seen.

A small brunette beside Sage shrinks back and lowers her voice.

"I've read about those beasts. They're called griffins and are as vicious as terrigons.

The tips of their razor-sharp claws and teeth are poisonous and will leave you writhing in pain for days before you succumb to death.

"She gives us all a grave look. "I don't think there is a cure either. "

"Hell no!" Sage says. "There's no way I'm going anywhere near them. If those beasts don't eat me, the angry Shadows will."

"Yeah. And not the way we like," the small blonde beside her says, making me laugh.

"If we don't use this path, we have to go all the way around," Robin says, and I glance over to the side to find the path we'd have to take if we don't head straight ahead.

It spans out and then curves around. Large reddish rocks block most of the path, ensuring we would have to go up and around them before coming back in.

It would easily take an hour just to get around it.

Whereas the path in front of us is only a few minutes' walk.

An older group of male Shadows with black markings stare us all down while giving us vicious smirks that grow when they see the girls take a step back.

A dark-haired Shadow with piercing blue eyes steps out onto the path. "Ah, come on. Don't be scared. We promise not to bite... much," he shouts over and the males around him chuckle.

"Fuck them," Robin says as she steps forward. But the griffin moves as if sensing her and stares her down. She pauses and then takes a step back.

The males' voices grow louder, grating on my ears.

"They can't even walk a straight line. How the fuck are they supposed to fight?!"

"Weak females!"

Their words make the pit of anger simmering in my stomach come to a boil.

Sage shakes her head. "I don't care that it takes a little longer. I'm going to take the long way around."

While the girls start to move, I focus on the nearest griffin and watch as its eyes almost soften. A second later, a strange comforting energy slides through me similar to when I'm around the Vims.

Trusting my gut instinct, I step forward and ignore the male assholes around me as I make my way onto the path.

All the griffins get up, but I give them each a look that demands they yield.

Something inside me telling me they will.

And they do.

Moving along the sides of the paths, the griffins move to stand on each side as if on guard, watching as I make my way through. Every Shadow's gaze falls on me, the shock and confusion on their faces as plain as day.

I ignore them all, silently thanking the griffins and continue past asshole center to the small village of tents.

Realizing the girls followed me instead of taking the long route, I wave them off as each find their tents and then head through a smaller path down the back to where a dozen tents with black flags lay.

I'm about to open a connection with Knox to figure out where they are when a Greek god with an angry scowl steps in front of me. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for four tall assholes. Have you seen them?"

He smirks, losing a bit of his ire. "I'm afraid you're going to have to be a little more specific. That description pretty much covers everyone here."

I smile. "These specific four are Elite and just arrived?—"

A shadow flies overhead, and I glance up, my eyes widening when I spot a winged male flying high above us. "What..."

"From the other academy," he glares up at the male. "Stay away from them. They're nothing but liars and manipulators. Not one of them are to be trusted."

“They share the camp with you all?” I ask still mesmerized by his black feathered wings as they soar through the sky.

“Unfortunately, but their camp is on the other side,” he says.

I wonder what it would be like to fly. To feel the wind across my face that high. To just be free.

“It must be nice to fly though,” I say.

“Don’t think about going anywhere near them. As far as you’re concerned, they are the enemy. You belong to us, not them.”

I raise a brow at his idiotic assumption. “I belong to me.”

He smiles. “And your companions.”

“Mates,” I say without thinking.

“Mates?” He tilts his head, his smirk dropping. “So, it’s true?” he asks, and I nod while wondering why he looks a little frightened now.

Clearing his throat, he takes a step back from me. “Your mates should be in the last tent on the left. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention our conversation.” He turns and disappears before I get the chance to ask him why.

Shaking my head, I walk in the direction he pointed and straight into the tent.

The inside is clean and tidy with a dozen beds. Six on each side and a trunk at the bottom of each. There’s a door at the very back that I assume leads to the bathroom.

Everyone inside pauses what they're doing to stare at me and what looks like the only female in this tent. At least at the moment. There are a few empty beds still available.

"Over here," Cyrus says, and I find him at the back where the four of them have started unpacking their things.

"What took you so long?" Knox asks.

"And why have you got us all blocked? It dangerous here," Malakai says, glaring at something behind me.

"You all annoy me," I tell him like it should be obvious.

Cyrus shows me my bed that is just across from them. "That's mine," he says pointing to one beside me.

I sit down when another male steps into the tent. "All females are to move out."

I frown and glance over at Cyrus, wondering if he knows what this is about.

"Move it," the male shouts.

The male frowns when the tent goes silent. He glances over at Cyrus and flinches back before mumbling something and leaving the tent as fast as he can.

"Keep yourself open and check in," Cyrus says.

Grabbing a bottle of water, I head out after the male, wondering what the hell I'm in for now.

Given nothing more than a bag with a couple of items, me and six other

females—including Robin—are brought through a portal and out into the middle of nowhere before being told we have to survive the next two days out here alone.

“Great. What are we supposed to do now?” Robin groans just as the portal closes.

I glance around at the open land of desert. “I think our first goal should be to find shelter. We’re vulnerable out in the open like this, and anything could be out here watching us.”

The girls whip around as if just realizing that too.

“I agree. Let’s head over there,” Robin says pointing to a large group of rocks.

We start making our way toward them, but a few feet forward, the ground starts to shake and tremble beneath us.

“What the—” Sand explodes around us as something huge shoots up and out of the dunes of sand.

I widen my eyes on the gigantic beige worm as it shrieks, revealing its pinpoint jagged teeth. It shrieks again, and I realize I’m standing there like an idiot instead of running.

“Run, damn it!” I tell the others, and they finally snap out of their shock to get running.

Glancing over my shoulder, dread knots my stomach as the huge worm follows, shooting forward on the sand and heading straight for us.

I keep running while quickly glancing around to make sure the girls are doing the same.

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We make it to the rocks and move through them, getting halfway before realizing the worm isn't following us.

My gaze falls on the sharp edges of the rocks and the jagged direction pointing outward, and I start to relax, realizing it's probably the only thing stopping the worm from reaching us.

I bend over to catch my breath and find the others do the same.

"Where the hell did they bring us again?" a blonde with thin black streaks in her hair asks.

"Somewhere they're trying to kill us off," another answers.

"The Shadows do this every year. They take a group of girls and place them in harsh terrain to weed the weak. It's lucky we have companions that actually care enough to even tell us about it," the blonde with black streaks says.

"Weed the..." A girl with long raven black hair, shakes her head. "I fucking hate the academy."

"So, I'm not the only one?" I ask, feeling relieved but also pissed at my mates for not warning me about this place.

The raven-haired girl glances over at me. "Definitely not. Most of us hate it. I'm Callie, by the way."

“Sena,” I tell her, and she nods.

She points at the short girl with a hot pink bob. “Cora.” She moves to the brunette next, “Skye,” and then to the girl beside her with blonde and black streaks in her hair, “Lily. And you already know Robin.” She glances at the girl with long, thick wavy brown hair, “And you are?”

“Arabella,” she answers.

“Great, now that we’ve all been introduced, how the hell are we going to last the two days here?” Callie asks.

I glance up at the blistering sun that only seems to be getting hotter. The rocks provide no cover from it, which means we need to find proper shelter.

“Shelter should be our first priority,” I tell them, and they look to me. I tilt my head up at the sun. “Is it me or does it feel like it’s getting hotter?”

Robin frowns. “I was thinking that, too. From the time we got here, to now, it feels much hotter. If it gets any warmer, we’ll start to blister.”

“So, shelter is the priority,” Callie says with a nod. “What’s everyone’s rations like?”

We all check the bags we were handed, and I open mine to find the bottle of water I brought and that’s it.

Frowning, I glance around at the girls to find them taking out bars and multiple bottles of water and various items of food.

“Score. I suppose my companions aren’t that bad,” Skye says, lifting up a can of coke and bottle of water. “They know me so well.”

Companions... Their Shadows filled those bags for them. They gave them all a heads up about this place and made sure they had enough food and water. While my so-called mates didn't even bother to let me know I would be doing this.

I drop my barrier and open a connection to Knox, ready to chew him a new one when I hit against a wall. As if another barrier outside of our own somehow erected between us. I try Malakai next but quickly find the same wall-like barrier as I try to reach him.

"Sena, what about you?" Robin asks and the others look to me. I shake off my frustration of not being able to chew them out to focus on what she's asking me.

I force a wince and shake the bag, quickly coming up with a lie. "I took the wrong bag."

"Don't worry, we have plenty here and will divide this between us," Robin says.

Arabella huffs. "So, the rest of us get less because she can't follow basic instructions?"

I wave them off. "It's fine. I had a big meal. I'm not hungry, and I have some water."

"Don't be stupid," Robin says to me before glaring at Arabella. "There's plenty to go around. It's less than two days now. We'll be fine."

I shake my head telling her it's fine again and then glance around looking for a change of subject when I spot the grooves in a large rock a couple of feet from me.

Heading over to it, I manage to get a footing and start climbing up.

"Sena. What are you doing?" Robin asks.

“Trying to get a better vantage point to see if there’s something we can use for shelter.” I glance around and then spot it. What looks like a small cave not too far from here.

But the only problem is the wide-open space in between us and there. There could be another worm waiting underground. There could be more than one. Or something much worse.

“Well?” Arabella says.

I bite my tongue and give her a fake ass smile as I get down before ignoring her completely and looking at the others.

“There’s a cave not too far from here, but to get there, we’ll have to pass through a wide-open space.

I don’t know if there’s any more of these worm creatures beneath the sand though.”

Callie frowns. “So, we can either wait it out to see if the sun gets worse or chance our luck?”

I nod. “Looks that way.”

“I say we stay here and wait it out,” Arabella says.

“I think we should make a run for it,” Robin says. “I can already feel the sun getting hotter.” She touches her shoulder and winces. “I’m definitely burning.”

Arabella rolls her eyes. “It’s just a little sun. We’ll be fine. Beside that worm thing can’t reach us here. Staying near the sharp rocks is a smart idea.”

“But also one that could get us killed,” I mumble, and everyone looks at me.

I point at the small rodent on the ground. “That looks like it’s melted. Completely .”

The girls move closer and cringe in disgust.

“I think Robin’s right. It’s only going to get hotter. We need shade,” I glance up at the sky and beating sun that looks to be growing bigger, “and by the looks of it, fast.”

Robin raises her hand, “I vote we go.” Callie, Skye, Lily and Cora all raise their hands too.

“Majority wins,” Robin says before glancing over at Arabella. “Or you could just stay here and take your chances,” she shrugs, not bothered either way, and then gathers her stuff and starts moving through the rocks.

Arabella glares at me as I grab my bag and water bottle and follow Robin and the rest of the girls.

“Let’s keep our eyes peeled,” I tell them. “Any movement and we run.”

They nod, agreeing, and we get walking, trying to be as quick and silent as we can.

Lily hisses, “Fuck, that’s hot.” She places her hands on her shoulders and pats them as she moves.

I glance up at the growing sun and then across at the open area to the cave. It’s much farther than I originally thought.

A low growl stops me in my tracks, and I freeze and glance around. But there’s nothing there.

Maybe the heat is messing with me. I shake it off and get moving when Lily speaks up.

“Did anyone hear that?” she asks, and my stomach drops realizing it wasn’t something in my head after all.

“I did,” I tell her and glance over to share a worried look with her.

Another growl echoes out around us. But this time, it sounds much closer.

Arabella turns and runs without a backward glance, and a beast that looks like a huge black wolf reveals itself and heads straight for her.

Arabella glances over her shoulder and spots it, her eyes widening in fear as she lets out a loud scream. It’s so loud it’s probably woken up every beast and creature near us.

“That idiot,” Callie hisses as we head after her, running twice as hard just to try to get ahead of the beast.

I make it to the beast first, and Robin shouts over to me, raising something in her hand. A blade.

She throws it to me, and I catch it by the hilt before diving onto the beast’s back and slamming the blade into its side.

Before it gets a chance to turn on me, Robin is on the other side of me within seconds, slamming another blade into its other side.

It growls and then moans before collapsing.

“You fucking idiot,” Callie shouts as Arabella walks back toward us. “You could’ve got us all killed,” Callie says, panting while trying to catch her breath.

Arabella narrows her eyes on Callie. “What did you expect me to do? Get eaten?!”

Robin hisses, and we all look to her to see smoke curl from the material on her shoulders. Seconds later it sparks, with the edges starting to flame and burn off.

“Shit.” Callie opens her bottle and quickly pours it over Robin’s shoulders.

The burn from the sun intensifies, and all of our clothes start to smoke. Small embers start forming, forcing us to waste more water and strip off layers of clothing to cover our heads.

I share a worried look with the girls. “Let’s run.”

“Oh, now it’s okay to run,” Arabella huffs while patting a small flame on her top.

“Shut up, Arabella,” Callie grits out as we all get running.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck ,” Skye hisses as the sun literally burns us.

It gets hotter within seconds and small fires start erupting across the ground.

“There,” Robins shouts, and I glance up to find the cave not too far away. Pushing my legs harder, I keep telling myself we can make it.

Ignoring the blistering pain all over my back and shoulders, I keep moving while glancing around at the others, hoping they’re all okay.

Nearly there.

I make it to the small cave first, but my stomach drops when I realize it's not a normal cave. There's a small entry but it's not big enough to fit anyone. It's more like an indented wall with the only shelter looking to be above in a small cove.

I shout over to the girls as they make it to the cave and tell them what I see before I start climbing. I reach the top and sigh in relief when I spot the small ledge and shade. It's not much of a cave either. But hopefully it's large enough to fit us all.

Turning around, I start helping the girls up when I hear a growl and freeze. Ice crawls down my back when I hear another and another growl just before over a dozen huge black wolf-like beasts appear.

The beasts start making their way toward us, and it snaps me out of my shock. I quickly grab Robin's hand and pull her up and we work fast to get the rest of the girls into the small cove.

"It's too tight, we won't all fit," Arabella moans beside me.

I ignore her and pull up Cora, feeling relieved that we're all safe for now.

"What now?" Cora asks as we all try to stay inside the cove and out of the blistering sun.

Robin sighs. "At least the beasts can't get us from up here."

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I glance down at them circling us like prey. None of them seem bothered by the sun or heat. It has to be their thick leathery fur.

A scream comes from the left of me, and I turn too late to find Cora falling to the ground. I jolt forward, ready to go after her, but within seconds, the beasts are on her, ripping her to shreds.

Gasps and wails of anguish echo around me as shock spears through me. My eyes burn and blur as I force myself to look away from the horrific scene to make sure none of the other girls fall.

I glance around at the ledge as confusion seeps into my shocked brain. It's small and tight but not so small that Cora would have missed her footing and fell.

My gaze veers to where Cora was to find Arabella standing near me with a smirk and look that tells me she's only too happy about Cora's death.

The haze of shock and confusion slowly clears from my mind, giving way to a slash of anger as I continue to watch her look at the beasts with nothing but glee on her face. The little smirk on her face is the final straw that makes me realize this was no accident.

"She pushed her," I tell them and the other's pause, glancing from Arabella to me.

Arabella's expression quickly shifts to one of horror and agony before she starts wailing and denying it.

“Did you see her?” Callie asks me.

“No,” I grit out. “But she was right beside her and looked only too happy when Cora fell.” I don’t look away from Arabella and the fake fear and tears I see.

Skye sighs. “Look. I get it. Cora was...” She swallows hard, clearing her throat. “We’re all tired. Let’s just ... make it through the rest of this and then we can deal with everything after.”

I clench my jaw and move closer to the edge just to get away from Arabella, knowing that if I don’t, I might be the one to push her over.

Staying closer to the edge of the cave, but in the shade, I keep an eye on the rest of the girls.

But especially Arabella. She snuffles and plays the grieving act nicely in front of the others as they try to soothe her.

But I can see the slight shift in her when she thinks no one is looking.

The glint of darkness that simmers beneath the surface telling me she’s more of a threat than the black wolf-like beasts beneath us.

“You should drink something,” Robin softly says from somewhere beside me.

I have no water left after using it on my and the other girl’s clothes. I glance around at them once again and spot the minimal supplies they now have. Most must have been lost on our way up here.

I’ve gone without food and water for longer. They need it more. Besides, it’s only another day and we should be out of here. I can last without water until then.

I shake my head, keeping my guard up and eyes peeled. “I’m fine.”

The rest of our little test passes in a haze of heat, grief, and pain while the beasts watch us from below, hoping for another one of us to fall.

Or get pushed. I glare over at Arabella once again and find her glaring right back at me.

When she realizes the others are all asleep, her expression quickly changes, and she smirks at me before blowing me a kiss.

I don’t sleep for the entire night, as rage constantly boils and simmers while I try to ensure the rest of the girls are safe from her.

The hours drag on by, but the Shadows that dropped us off here eventually arrive, knocking out the beasts with a wave of their hand.

“If you want to leave, get moving,” one Shadow says without much care to his tone.

I share a look with the girls as we climb down from the cave ledge and head over to the portal. I keep my eyes forward and on the portal, and not where Cora was...

I swallow hard and squeeze my eyes shut for a moment, trying to rid the image of her falling and being ripped to shreds. But no matter how hard I try; it doesn’t stop and instead replays on a loop over and over again in my mind.

“Someone died,” Robin tells the Shadows, and they shrug.

“The rest of you are still alive. At least you’re not all completely useless,” he replies with a narrowed look.

I share a look of disgust with the girls before glaring at the males as I make my way through the portal.

Once we're through, I wave off the girls minus Arabella who I give a look of warning to, telling her to watch her back before making my way through the paths around the tents.

I try to calm myself as I come to the Elite's tent. But nothing I do calms the fire burning through my veins.

Heading into the tent, I glare at each of my mates as I bypass them and head straight for the showers.

Instead of acting confused at my rage or hurt, they glare back at me apparently just as annoyed at me.

"You blocked us out," Knox grits out.

"Fuck you," I tell them all before heading into the small bathroom.

Once inside, I slam the shower door behind me, quickly strip and turn the water on, hissing when it touches my layers of blisters.

Fuck them all. They could have told me. Given me a heads up. Anything .

They don't care. They can't if they'd send me out into something like that without a damn word. I nearly died. Cora... did die.

I let myself feel the pain and rage inside me, allow it to burn through me as I turn the water colder. It takes a few minutes for it to cool me down, but slowly, it starts to ease the burn inside me.

I start lightly scrubbing my body while trying to keep my mind blank. But the last couple of days flash across my mind over and over like a beacon, reminding me of four shitty mates that don't give a shit about me.

Cyrus wants to be on my side but then he goes ahead and forgets to tell me about this. His actions speak a lot clearer than his words.

As soon as I get back, I'm out. I'll live in that damn library for as long as I have to if it will help me figure a way out of the academy and away from them and all of this fucked up mess.

Once I'm clean, I quickly dry off and get dressed before ignoring them all and getting into bed with my back to them.

I can feel each of their stares burn a hole in the back of my head, but my anger is too vivid right now to even glare at them.

"Sena... the dreams..." Cyrus says reminding me of the attacks and why I need them close. But he's close enough as it is and I don't want any of them near me. I would rather take my chances with whatever is in my dreams than them right now.

I'm finally starting to drift to sleep when I hear movement down the front of the tent.

"Come on, can't you even get it up," I hear a familiar female say with a giggle.

I glance down to the front of the tent and spot Arabella. She killed Cora, I know she did. She nearly got the rest of us killed too, and now she's laughing and giggling like nothing happened.

She doesn't care about anyone but herself. Or the fact that the male she's grinding all over is looking at her with nothing but disgust in his eyes.

Arabella drags hand down his chest. “If you don’t give me what I want, I can make it hard in other ways for you. We both know I have that pull,” she says with another small giggle, and I see red.

Getting up from my bed, I head straight for her. She doesn’t notice me, too absorbed in trying to grind all over the uninterested male. His fists are clenched by his side, his face now looking away from her. He doesn’t want this, but she doesn’t seem to care either.

And it only makes me angrier.

I come up the side of the bed she’s on, grab her by her hair and slam my fist into her face knocking her out.

She drops forward onto the male, but he sighs in relief and gives me a look of gratitude before lifting her up and discarding her on the ground beside her bed without care.

I head back down the tent, catching small glimpses of smirks and shock and ignore them all as I get back into bed.

But I don’t miss the heated look from the four I fucking hate right now.

KNOX

A buzz of excitement is in the air with the upcoming war games. Before they start, all Shadows take part in small trials to find the strongest among the academies. Those who win will end up in the games against the other academy in a few weeks.

There are Shadows that stay here all year round, and the entire camp is usually a place that brings me comfort and peace, calming the darkness inside me. But all I can think about is how my mate is angry with us when she has no right to be.

She blocked us out. Ignored us and then disappeared for two days without a word.

Being closer to the Hollow usually helps the madness, but instead I'm slowly unraveling the more she's away from us.

I don't want to depend on her or anyone else. I've fought long and hard to get here—we all have—but it looks like that's all about to change.

“Why are you so fucking angry with us?” I ask her, ready to shake the answer out of her if I have to.

She came in last night, looking like we had ripped her world apart and betrayed her. And has ignored us ever since. Even Cyrus, who was making headway with her.

The four of us have to head out in a few minutes to the main sector to help push back a group of terrigons and beasts that slipped through the Hollow—something we all usually look forward to—but I can't figure out why she would be acting like this

toward us when we did nothing fucking wrong.

Something happened. It's usually not the first thought that comes to me when it comes to Sena. But this last month, she has been different.

Not a lot gets to this Sena. She's feisty and willing to give as much as she gets. But I can tell something is off. She's not just ignoring us; she's downright pissed.

And I haven't a clue why.

She ignores my question, acting like I'm not even standing right beside her. I'm about to reach out and fucking throttle her when Theon comes up beside me.

"We need to leave," he says while glancing at Sena with a frown.

Sena continues to ignore us both and then heads into the bathroom and locks the door.

I take a step toward it, ready to break it down, when Malakai moves in front of me.

"We'll deal with her when we get back. Let's go."

Glaring at the door, I scrub a hand down my face and follow the others with a heavy sigh.

We head through the portal and come straight out into something close to Hell.

Shadow warriors from all sectors span out across the colossal area with a huge backdrop of darkness behind them, seeping outward.

Beasts and creatures I've never seen before and hundreds of terrigons young and old all rush out of the long, dark crack, heading straight for the Shadows.

But the lure is no longer there. We've been working hard to get here, training our bodies and abilities to make it through to the war games. All so we could be closer to the small measure of peace being in this place brings.

"Anyone else feel it?" I ask them, wondering what it means.

Theon glares at the Hollow as if it's the thing that has personally offended him instead of a certain blonde beauty.

"We're more drawn to Sena than the Hollow now," he admits out loud.

The four of us stare at it for another minute. As if we're trying to understand how our entire world just shifted on its axis. With Sena now at the center of it.

More terrigons slip out of the Hollow, snapping us out of our little moment, and we dive right into the thick of the fray, cutting a path through to the center of the mayhem.

I let myself go, let every thought and worry disappear and slice through anything that comes within a few feet of me. I drown out the screams and grunts around me and get lost in the bloodshed and fight. In the chaos and havoc.

My dark shadows consume me, and I disappear, slipping among the violence while driving my blade into everything I mark.

Spotting a large terrigon, I make a move toward it when a strange energy jolts through me making me pause. I release my shadow ability and glance over at the Theon and Cyrus, but they're both finishing off the beasts around them.

I look to Malakai when he stills and narrows his eyes. His eyes veer to mine, and my heart nearly fucking stops when I see the glint of fear in them.

“Where is she?” I move over to him as I try to reach her, slamming against her damn barriers over and over. There’s no one else that brings us this much worry and heartache at the same time.

“She’s in the red zone,” he grits out, and my heart actually does stop before kicking up speed.

Fuck . I’m going to kill her when I get ahold of her.

If I find her in time.

SENA

“ S ENA!!”

I wince, blinking awake with a groan, hearing Knox scream my name in my mind.

“God, do you have to be so loud,” I tell him as my head throbs in pain.

“Fuck...” Knox says with a hint of relief in his voice. “What the hell are you doing in the red zone?” he bites out, making me wince at his sharp, cutting tone.

I blink and clear the blurriness from my eyes and glance around to see nothing but sand and rock. How the hell did I end up here?

“What’s the red zone?” I ask him.

“It’s an inhabitable area. Every couple of hours, the weather shifts and solar rain burns everything in touches. Get out of there. Now!”

Panic shutters though me. I try to move but realize my hands are practically numb. I

glance down to find them tied together with thick black rope. It's looped and nailed with a thick metal bar into the ground.

I start pulling, trying to loosen it. But it's like pulling against a steel ton. The metal bar must be dug in a lot deeper than it looks.

I try loosening the rope, pulling it against the bar at different angles. Getting on my knees, I use my body weight to pull harder and harder, pulling until the skin on my hands and wrists are red and raw and starting to bleed.

But nothing works.

Panting, I glance back up at the sky as the clouds start growing gray.

"I can't," I finally admit to Knox, realizing just how bad this is.

"If you don't get moving, I'm going to ? —"

"I think it's going to rain soon," I tell him and almost feel his panic. But it's quickly overshadowed by my own.

"Sena. This isn't fucking funny ? —"

"I'm tied up... I can't get out." I swallow hard trying to think of something else.

"Stop blocking us and let us in," Knox says, a little quieter this time, like he knows I'm panicking and needs to be the one that's calm and patient for once.

Swallowing my pride, I drop the rest of my barriers and instantly feel Theon's shock and anger.

“Look around and show us where you are,” Knox says, and I slowly glance around at the sand and rocks before looking up at the darkening sky and down at my tied hands.

“I’m going to gut whoever did this.” The vehemence in Knox’s shocks me silent. “Cyrus says you’re in pain.”

I glance down at the ropes and pull again with no luck. “I tried loosening the ropes, but they’re too tight, and I think whoever dragged me out here hit me in the head. I don’t remember even being knocked out.”

A low rumble groans from above quickly followed by a crackle.

The rain.

Fuck. “Knox... I think ? —”

“No. We’re not going there. Keep looking around you for anything. We’re already on our way.”

I start pulling at the rope again, harder and harder, but nothing I do makes it budge.

If only I had a blade or something sharp.

I glance around for a rock, anything . But there’s nothing but sand, and the only rocks I can see are too far to reach.

They’re way too big to use to break the rope anyway.

I squeeze my eyes shut and try calling on one of their weapons, but I must be too far away or too panicked for it to work because nothing happens.

“I need you to keep talking to me,” Knox says, his tone sounding almost vulnerable.

Thunder rolls out above me, and the heavens open as rain starts to fall.

“SENA!” Knox screams in my head making me wince.

“I’m not ready to die,” I tell him before squeezing my eyes shut, and waiting for the onslaught of pain... But nothing happens. Nor doesn’t anything touch my skin.

“Talk to me! Say something. Anything!” Knox begs.

I open my eyes, and they widen when I see the red rain—almost like blood—pour down around me, followed by a sizzling hiss.

But none of it touches me. Only the small shadowy shield that’s now completely surrounding me and protecting me from the blood rain.

“I’m okay,” I blurt out in a release of harsh breath. “Just... stay away until it passes.” I glance through the shadowy shield and watch as the red rain scorches the ground and starts small fires around me.

“We can see the rain from here,” Knox say in shock and relief. “How are you okay?”

“I don’t know how to explain it. But I’m somehow... shielded from it.”

“What do you mean by shielded ? —”

“How long does the rain last?” I glance around, hoping this dark shield holds up.

“Not long. Usually a few minutes,” Knox says, and I nod and grow quiet, trying to think of anything but the sizzling sound the rain makes as it hits the ground and how

much heavier it is now.

“I need you to keep talking to me, Sena,” Knox whispers in my mind. “Malakai can’t see what you’re seeing.”

“I’m not trying to block him out,” I bite out, not in the humor for him to tell me off for another thing that’s out of my control right now.

“I know,” he says softly, surprising me. “Theon feels your panic. Just keep talking to me.”

“You want me to tell you how much of an asshole you and everyone else are?”

“Sure.” I hear the smile in his voice. “Let’s go with that.”

I grow quiet again, getting lost in my thoughts. In everything that’s happened since I came here.

“Sena—”

“Why didn’t you tell me about the test?” I ask, needing to know. He sounds like he actually cares. Like they all do. But that doesn’t make any sense. None of them even gave me a heads up about it.

“What test?” he asks, sounding baffled.

I roll my eyes, wondering if he’s going to try pretend he doesn’t know. “The one where I was sent to a horrible place with monstrous worms that shoot up from the ground and vicious beasts that look like huge wolves.”

“You were in the Wastelands?” he growls, his voice doing a one-eighty. “Who

brought you there? Is that where you were the last couple of days?" he grits out.

There's no way they couldn't have known. "You're telling me you didn't know?"

"No, I didn't fucking—" he releases a harsh breath. "Just... tell us who brought you there."

I pause and then for some reason tell him. "A couple of Shadows. They said all females had to do it to cull the weak."

"Cull the ? —"

"A girl died. One of the beasts ripped her apart." My chest grows tight remembering Cora's scream as she fell.

"I'm sorry," he says, and it actually sounds like he means it too.

"You really didn't know?" I ask, still not ready to believe him.

He grows quiet. "I know we're assholes. But none of us would ever put you in danger like that."

I scoff. "You left me in a pit in the rain."

"The mud wouldn't have killed you," he points out. "You were safe. And you got us back with the Vims."

True. But I never got them back for the forest incident. "You left me in the forest with the terrigons. You knew I was exhausted and still ? —"

"We didn't know there were terrigons there," he sighs, sounding as exhausted as I

feel. “We would never have left you alone if we had of known.”

“I don’t know if I believe you,” I tell him, honestly.

“I know...” he sighs, a sadness to his tone. “The rain has stopped. We’re nearly there.”

Dark shadows slide across my vision, and I glance up, finding the four guys around me.

“Sena what is this?” Cyrus asks inspecting the shield. He touches it but it doesn’t let him past it.

“I don’t know,” I tell him. “Are you sure none of you created it?”

Cyrus shakes his head. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Malakai bends down and frowns at it. “Can you dissolve it?”

“I didn’t even know I could create it,” I tell him.

His eyes find mine. “You created it so you can undo it. Focus and bring it down.”

I narrow my eyes on his little demand but focus on the shield and think of how I no longer need it, while trying to calm my mind and remind myself over and over that I’m safe.

After a couple of minutes, I feel a wave of energy, and the shield slowly becomes translucent before disappearing completely.

Malakai snarls at the rope before ripping it apart. Once I’m free, he lifts me up and

starts walking, healing me as we move.

“I can walk.” I try to get down, but his grip tightens on me.

“You nearly died,” he glares at me. “I don’t fucking care what you think you can do right now.”

I roll my eyes at him but give in and let him carry me, too exhausted right now to fight him on it.

We head back to the camps in silence, but the entire way back, their eyes are on me, watching me as if I’m about to disappear in front of them.

Once we’re inside the tent, Malakai places me gently on my bed and then shares a look with the others.

Cyrus nods, agreeing to whatever silent command he’s giving them. “I’ll stay with her.” The other three head out without another word.

“Cyrus?” I ask and glance at the guys’ retreating backs.

“I didn’t know,” he says, and I pause to look at him. He takes my hand in his and stares into my eyes. “I didn’t know. None of us did. But I promise you, they will pay.”

“Who will—” Screams of terror sound out from outside. I get up and quickly head out of the tent with Cyrus right behind me. But stop short when I see the scene in front of me.

In a matter of minutes, Theon, Malakai, and Knox have ripped through the camp, destroying it and anyone who looks to have gotten in their way.

Theon has a mass of thick shadows coiling from his body, spreading out to anyone that gets near him or the others.

A Shadow male attempts to catch him off guard, and Theon's long dark shadows whip out and curls around his arm.

The minute his shadows touch him, the male drops to the ground, screaming out in agony, begging and pleading to make the pain stop.

The rest of the male Shadows back away after that.

"Found them," Knox says with glee in his voice.

I glance over to find him dragging the two males that brought me and the other girls to the Wasteland out by his own dark shadows.

Malakai walks up to them, and yanks them forward, whispering something vicious to both that make their eyes widen in fear.

Malakai steps back and before I realize what he's doing, he slams his fists straight into their chests.

A gasp and gurgle hit my ears as the two men drop to the ground with a thump.

Malakai turns and walks straight over to me with nothing but rage and violence in his eyes and blood on his hands.

He places the two males' hearts in my hands and steps back. "We're the only ones that get to piss you off."

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Chaos is apparently my new norm as I wake to the sound of shouting and screams.

There's no one other than me and a male in the tent.

My eyes find the male Shadow three beds down from me. The one that Arabella tried to take advantage of.

He sees me staring and dips his head to me. "I'm Seth. Nice to officially meet you, Sena. I'm here to keep an eye on you. But also keep my distance." He smiles. It's one full of humor but also a hint of fear.

I don't have to take a wild guess to wonder who put it there.

"Where are they?" I ask him, sitting up.

"Out destroying the entire camp," he tells me with a straight face making me blanch.

He chuckles at me. "Do you even know who your mates are?"

I really don't, and it must show by the expression on my face.

He shakes his head with a small smile. "Many fear them because of their unusual and powerful abilities. No other Shadow can do what they can."

"None?" I ask, and he shakes his head.

"Most can wield shadows and create weapons based on their sectors. The rare few

have some extra abilities. But nothing like your four.”

They’re not mine. But I don’t correct him when I’m finally getting some information about them.

“Do you know what Cyrus can do?” he asks.

I nod, having actually seen it first-hand. “He can dream-walk.”

Seth chuckles. “That’s the PG version. They call him the Nightmare because he can literally slip into your dreams and make you believe you are in the worst imaginable place you can think of.

Then he makes it ten times worse.” He leans his head back and glances up at the top of the tent looking all too relaxed by this conversation. While I feel like freaking out.

“Malakai is a literal beast. An alpha in every form he takes.”

I guess that makes sense. He is one of the biggest assholes.

“And Theon...” He glances over at me. “One touch from the shadows he creates, and you will feel nothing but excruciating pain.”

I wince. That’s why that male Shadow was screaming and begging for it to stop once Theon’s shadows touched him.

“And you’ve just set them lose,” Seth says.

An icy chill slides down my spine. “I thought they knew... about the test for the females.”

Seth's expression quickly morphs from playful to angry. "It's something most of us were not aware of. But I doubt you or any other female will have to worry about it again."

I frown. "Why?"

"Your mates have not only killed those involved. They're hunting everyone that was even aware of it."

Shit...

"I heard Cyrus dragged them into a nightmare in their sleep and Knox slit their throats."

I wince at the visual that just flashed across my mind.

"Have they been gone long?" Maybe I can catch up to them and stop this madness.

But instead of answering me, he stares at me quietly for a moment. "Thank you... for the other day," he says, quickly distracting me and reminding me of Arabella.

"Why didn't you just push her off?" I ask remembering he just sat there and let her do whatever she wanted.

He shrugs. "She's a companion and has ties to some of the higher-ranking males. When she says she can get away with anything, she means it and has."

I clench my jaw. "I should've punched her harder."

He chuckles. "I doubt she'll be going near you now."

I glance at him with a questioning look.

“Your four mates have made it very clear that you are their mate and off limits.”

I sigh to myself, wondering what trouble that will bring me. It definitely won't stop Arabella in any way. She seems to like the power she thinks she has and hates anyone getting in her way.

Seth watches me for a minute before continuing.

“I heard you lost your memory.” He doesn't wait for my reply but instead searches my face something.

“Those four may be the most powerful Shadows we've ever known, but they weren't always like that.

They've had to fight every step of the way to get to where they are now.”

Another male steps into the tent, his face pale and gaunt, his body almost sickly thin. His dark eyes gloss over me to find Seth.

Seth immediately gets up and goes over to him, giving him a tight hug before murmuring something to him so low I can't make it out.

The thin male nods his head and slowly makes his way out of the tent.

“What happened to him?” I ask once he's gone. It's the first time I've seen any male Shadow that looks sick.

“Ever heard of the Void?” Seth asks and something in his eyes has a chill running down my spine.

“I heard it’s horrible place,” I tell him as my stomach drops at the look he gives me.

“It much worse than you’re imagining. Think Hell on steroids. There are beasts, creatures, and... beings that sense and hunt anyone that enters. The weather is worse than the red zone here, and the only food is the kind you can catch and kill. And that’s if they don’t kill you first.”

My stomach drops and twists. “What aren’t you telling me?” I see it in his eyes; there’s something he looks hesitant to reveal.

He slowly moves closer to me, sitting a bed away from me. “They shouldn’t have survived it the first time. They were only kids.”

They ... I give him a questioning look, wondering who he’s talking about, and he nods confirming my fears.

Nausea churns my stomach, making me feel like I’m about to throw up.

Seth watches me with nothing but sadness in his eyes.

“Your mates were sent there for months at a time. Time moves differently in the Void. It’s longer.

More dragged out and unbearable.” He sighs and shakes his head.

“They shouldn’t have been able to survive the number of times they’ve been sent there.

Most that have been sent that many times have died. ”

He swallows hard and stands up and starts pacing. As if he needs to move to release

the energy running through him.

“They were so broken after the first time. But it didn’t stop them from sending them back, over and over again.”

“Why?” I croak and clear my throat. “Why were they sent there? What did they do?”

He searches my face again and sighs. “Nothing. They did nothing to deserve it.”

“But—”

He pauses his pacing to scan my face once more. “But they grew stronger each time. They learned about their abilities and how to wield them. And eventually even the commander became afraid of them. Though I doubt he’d ever admit it.”

But why send them. Why?! He said they were only kids. “Seth. Why would?—”

Knox saunters into the tent, looking all too happy with himself. “It’s a glorious morning for bloodshed and violence.”

Seth gives me a quick look, practically begging me not to say anything. “I’m just going to... go...” Seth rushes out of the tent as fast as he can, leaving only me and Knox here.

Knox gives me a savage look, but I see past it now. See past the dark look in his eyes to the sadness.

I also believe them when they say they didn’t know about the Wasteland test. They wouldn’t be causing this much trouble otherwise.

He frowns at whatever expression he sees on my face, and my heart breaks thinking

about a younger Knox, trapped in that horrible place, scared and starving while trying to survive with the others.

They may still be assholes. But...

I get up and move in front of him. Leaning forward, I wrap my arms around him, hugging him and holding him tight. Wishing he and the others never had to go through something like that while also promising him silently that I'll make sure they never have to again.

He stills, standing there with his hands by his side, as if in shock. I start to pull back, thinking I've crossed a line, when he snaps out of his shock and wraps his arms around me pulling me closer to him.

"I still think you're all assholes," I tell him as I relax into the hug.

He chuckles and pulls me even closer to him. "We are. But you'll get used to it."

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The portals to and from the camp are a bust. They only work one way. Malakai gave me a savage smile when he pointed it out.

I guess I'm not as subtle as I'm trying to be and will have to figure something else out.

Heading into the house, I make my way to my room and ignore the guys and their hushed conversations.

After having a nice long hot shower, I throw on a tee and shorts and head for my bed.

Malakai steps into the room without knocking, his eyes dragging down my body before lingering on my legs.

"I think you've got the wrong room," I tell him.

He clears his throat. "We've decided that it's best if we take turns sleeping with you."

I raise a brow. "I slept just fine the last couple of times without being attacked," I remind him.

He releases a harsh breath and drags a hand down his face.

"We haven't been doing as well as it may have looked.

Being in the War Camps and near the Hollow usually helps.

But it didn't." He looks everywhere but me.

"Cyrus and Knox said they felt better after spending the night with you, and I'm too close to the edge.

I..." He clears his throat. "I need this."

I pause and look at him, really look at him. Every inch of him is tense. And his hazel eyes are so dark they're almost black.

The madness. It has to be. And something that probably wouldn't be as bad if not for the Void.

My heart clenches as he tugs on every fucking string I have.

"Fine," I tell him.

His entire demeanor changes in an instant as he smirks and takes a step toward me, thinking I'm going to make it that easy for him. But I raise a hand, and he freezes.

"I still haven't got you back for the forest incident. And you've been an asshole to me this entire time," I remind him.

He narrows his eyes on me. "I ripped the hearts out of the two fucks who brought you to the Wasteland. I upturned the entire fucking camp and made everyone pay."

My left eye twitches. "Was that supposed to be your way of an apology?"

He watches me for a moment before slowly releasing a long-drawn-out breath. "Fine," he grits out. "What do I have to do to make it up to you?"

A sliver of excitement rushes through me as the balance of power between us finally tilts in my favor.

Keeping my smug smile to myself, I sit down on the end of my bed and cross my legs. “Crawl,” I tell him, and his eyes narrow to slits.

“Get on your knees, and crawl to me. Beg for forgiveness for your shitty attitude and asshole-ish ways and maybe I’ll forgive you.” I give him a wicked smile. There’s no way he’s going to?—

He throws off his top, gives me a smirk that makes my toes curl, and then gets on his knees before slowly making his way over to me. I nearly swallow my god-damn tongue at the dark heated look he gives me as he crawls toward me.

“I’m always going to be an asshole, baby.” He places a kiss on my leg, and every sane thought quickly flees my brain. He places another on my knee and then thigh, his eyes never leaving mine. “That’s not something that will ever change.”

His eyes grow dark with lust, making some deranged part of me excited.

“But I promise you, you’ll enjoy every minute of it.”

When my senses finally return to me, and I snap out of the little heated daze he’s dragged me under, I crawl back onto the bed and he quickly follows, sliding in behind me. His hand curves around my waist, and he drags me back to his front.

His hand keeps moving, sliding up my body and under my top to my breast. I don’t stop him because I’m actually enjoying the feel of his touch and the way his body is curled around mine.

“Just holding what’s mine,” he says with a throaty rasp to his voice. He gets

comfortable and just... leaves his hand right there.

“How I am I supposed to sleep like this?” Especially when he’s making me wet and doing nothing about it.

“Same way we all have,” he says and presses a kiss to my shoulder and then bites it, making me gasp before licking the spot. “With plenty of cold showers.”

“Y our family should be arriving soon,” Malakai says as soon as I walk downstairs.

I pause as a bolt of shock rushes through me, “I have a family?” Technically, I knew it was a possibility, but with everything going on, I just forgot about it.

They all freeze and look at me.

“Shit, you really don’t remember,” Knox says, and I glare at him.

He clears his throat. “I mean... I don’t know... I just thought you’d remember something .”

“Well, I don’t. Do I have siblings?” I glance between them all. “Are my parents... nice?”

The guys share a hesitant look between them, but it’s Knox who answers. “One brother. And from what we’ve seen, they’ve always been nice to you.”

I read between the lines and the passed looks they share. Meaning they haven’t been nice to them .

I already don’t like them. That and they seem to have raised a spoiled brat.

“How are they getting here?” I ask.

“Portal to the main building,” Cyrus says biting into his apple. And even though his lips give me far too many ideas, my stomach is empty, and all I can think about is getting to the canteen to grab something to eat.

Wait... His reply finally filters past my foggy brain. “Portal?” I ask.

Malakai chuckles at me. “One that’s heavily guarded on both sides. You need a pass just to get in.”

I frown, and he laughs harder. “We should start working with your ability,” he says, and it takes me a minute to figure out what he’s talking about.

“The shield?”

Malakai nods. “You should also start learning how to call on our weapons, just in case.”

I suppose that would be nice. I could have used it back in the red zone.

“Sounds good,” I tell them and they still.

“You’re just going to agree?” Knox asks with nothing but shock in his voice.

I roll my eyes at him. “I’m not so stupid as to turn down actual training that might help me.” I narrow my eyes on him and the rest of them. “But if any of you try any more games or tricks, I’m revoking your bed privileges and paying you back tenfold.”

“I love it when you flirt with us,” Knox says with a wicked smirk.

I narrow my eyes on him. “Threaten, Knox, threaten you.”

He waves me off. “Same thing. Have fun with the parentals.”

I wince and hear their boisterous laugh as I slam the door behind me. Heading toward the main building, I run into Robin.

“Are you excited to see your family?” she asks, practically bouncing around. I guess she’s excited to see hers. “They should be here soon.”

She glances toward the main building, and it finally hits me that I’m going to have to meet people that have known the old Sena her entire life.

What if they figure out I’m a fake?

Panic seeps into every cell in my body, but I nod my head and force a smile on my face while trying to figure out how the hell I’m going to get out of this one.

What if they can instantly tell I’m not her?

“I think we’re all meeting up in the canteen. The Shadows are out doing some team building exercises, so it’ll just be us,” Robin says dragging me from my moment of panic.

I guess that’s something. At least I won’t have an entire audience for whatever is about to go down.

We head into to the canteen. A few parents are already there waiting while a handful are chatting happily with a couple of females I’ve never met.

I watch their genuine smiles and happiness and start to wonder what it feels like to

have someone that loves and cares about you unconditionally.

The dread and fear rushing through me slightly lessens at the thought of feeling that for even a moment.

I move to a seat near the window. Finding a book on the table, I open it and leave it in front of me, so I don't look like a complete loser sitting on my own. Even though I should be used to it by now.

Time passes as more and more families show up, and I start to feel stupid for even worrying. The old Sena didn't seem like the nicest person. Maybe she and her family weren't that close. They might not even turn up.

I give it a few more minutes before I move to get up, ready to head back to my room for a quick nap when another family shows up.

The male is tall with slick black hair, his eyes a dark green mossy color.

The woman has brown eyes and blonde hair.

But it's most definitely dyed with her dark roots already starting to show.

There's another tall male beside them that looks to be around my age.

He's the spitting image of the older male.

But looks to have the woman's brown eyes.

They glance around the room for a bit, looking more and more annoyed by the second. Until they glance my way and smile before quickly making their way over to me.

“There you are, Darling,” the blonde coos, making me freeze.

Shit. It’s them. It’s Sena’s parents.

“Why don’t you give us a quick little tour?” The older male asks with a look in his eyes that almost feels familiar, but I can’t pinpoint what it is, too wrapped up in my fears of them figuring out I’m not their Sena.

“I—” I start but the blonde woman takes my arm and links it with hers, giving me a wide, hopeful smile.

“Tyler, help your sister with her things,” my mother says.

The younger male grabs the book I was using as a prop. “I’ve got it.”

I open my mouth to tell them it’s not mine but let it go when the woman gives me another hopeful look.

“Sure,” I tell her feeling a little off kilter as we make our way out of the canteen and down the hall.

“Oh, this is lovely. How are you settling in?” she asks as I try to keep this short and sweet. I can’t risk them delving in too deep and figuring out anything.

“It’s good,” I tell her.

“That’s wonderful,” she says patting my arm, and I relax a little, relieved they don’t think I’m anyone other than the Sena they’ve raised. Now I just have to make sure it stays that way.

The older male gives me a tight smile that I ignore. Maybe Sena and her father never

got along. This is probably all normal, and they seem nice enough.

We walk down another hall, and it takes me a moment to realize I'm the one being led instead of leading this little impromptu tour. And it looks like we're heading to the wrong area. Nobody comes down here.

"We're clear," Tyler says and in the matter of seconds everything changes. The hand on my arm quickly grows sharp and tight. I glance up at the woman and see her facade quickly fade revealing her true nature.

"Where is it?" she demands.

I try to pull my arm from her grip, but it tightens making me wince. "Where is what?"

"Don't act fucking stupid," she grits out. "You had plenty of time to get it. Hand it over."

I frown trying to break her hold. "I don't know what you're talking about."

My so-called brother steps forward. We don't look a thing alike. "We heard you had a little accident. But you forget we know you. So cut the little act. We know your secret. But not only that, we have information on your mates that would send them back to the Void for a long time."

My heart drops. "How do you know about the Void?"

He laughs, a cruel vicious laugh that makes my stomach churn. "Cut the act, Sena. You sent them there."

My mind shutters to a stop as everything slows down. My heart. My breathing. When it finally picks back up and his words register, my heart nearly shatters there and

then.

I... I sent them to that place. Well, Sena did. But they don't know I'm not actually her. And she... Oh, God. No wonder they hated me. She sent them to fucking Hell on earth.

The older male rounds on me, and before I even open my mouth, I'm shoved up against the wall with his hand wrapped around my throat.

I quickly block my mates out, not wanting them to rush over here and cause a scene.

"You have one week, or I'll make sure your world comes crumbling down," he hisses as he tightens his hold, making me gasp for air. I reach up and try to pull his hands off my throat, but a hard punch to the side has me immediately stopping and trying to curl away from the pain.

"Get the fucking device or I will end you and your four mates," the older male warns as he sneers at me. His grip tightens on me, and I start to see dark spots. Before I pass out, he quickly releases me, but not before shoving me to the ground, face first, and kicking me hard in the ribs.

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Hiding out in my secret spot in the forest, I ignore the guys as they try to reach me, still needing time to process everything.

Wrapping my wounds, I try to conceal them as much as possible but give up when my stomach turns for the fifth time.

No wonder they hate me... hated me. They still should if I'm being honest. I thought the Wastelands were horrible, but they spent years in the Void on and off.

The other Sena sent them there for probably no other reason than she didn't want them as her companions. And now she's wrapped me in another one of her messes. If I don't find what her parents want, the four of them could end up back in the Void.

The thought alone makes me physically ill.

None of them know I'm not her—the real person who sent them to the Void—and yet they've already started to show me signs they care.

I can't do this to them. I can't drag them into this mess. Not when they've already suffered so much by these hands.

If they end up in the Void again and this time because of me, I don't know what I'll do. It's already killing me that the old Sena had a hand in sending them there.

The day passes quickly with class and combat training being nothing but a blur.

Strange looks from the other females start making me feel a little paranoid that they

all know what Sena did.

I push it to the back of my mind and head towards the library.

I should be researching more about the Variant and the barrier runes around the academy anyway. Using it as an excuse to avoid four male Shadows for a little longer, I get moving while making sure my shields are up, and Malakai can't see where I'm going.

Walking into the library, I feel eyes on me but ignore them and head to one of the desks at the back.

"I knew she was faking it," a voice close by says.

I ignore it, drowning out everyone and their drama to try to find anything more on the dark energy used by the Variants.

I finally come across a book when I find multiple pages missing. As if someone tore them out. I move onto another book, quickly getting lost in the pages when a shadow crosses my vision.

I glance up to find a girl with ashy blonde glaring at me and a group of others all standing behind her. They move closer when they see I've noticed them.

"What?" I ask wondering what she's looking for.

"Drop the act, Sena. We all know the truth now." She flips the phone in her hand and shows a video of...

me, but not me. I'm talking to the camera, drunk off my head, telling everyone about one big game I'm going to pull off soon.

And how when I pull it off, people won't know what hit them.

I/She giggles and then the video cuts out.

“What is that supposed to prove?” I ask while wondering what game the other Sena was talking about.

The blonde narrows her eyes on me. “It's over for you now. We have proof.” She waves her phone in front of my face. “You've been faking your amnesia this whole time and you just got caught.”

“And you got all that from me being off my head and talking about some game?” Some people have too much time on their hands. I head back to the shelves and start looking for something useful, hoping she'll just leave if I don't play into whatever games she's playing.

“So, you're admitting it?” she asks and glances over at the others giving them a ‘I told you so,’ look.

“No. I'm ignoring you and your stupidity,” I mutter trying to blank them all out while I look for another book.

Realizing I'm not going to find anything useful in this aisle, I put the books back and start making a move to the next one when Arabella appears beside the blonde, blocking my path.

She sends me a glare before taking the blonde's arm and giving her a sad look. One that's completely fake of course. But the blonde doesn't seem to be able to read past her manipulation and lies.

“I didn't want to say anything. But when I was in that cave with her in the

Wastelands, I saw Sena push Cora,” Arabella tells the blonde before forcing out a couple of tears.

Her blatant lies are like a punch to the throat. I take a step toward her. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“She tried to blame me for it, but it was her all along. I was just too frightened to say anything in case she sent her mates after me.” Arabella shrinks back as if actually frightened, but I see the dark glint in her eyes.

“ You pushed her, you absolute psycho.” I head straight for her, but the blonde steps in front of her to protect her.

I clench my fists by my side as anger slams into me.

Arabella leans around the blonde and sniffles. “Why would I do that?”

“Because you’re a horrible person,” I grit out while looking for an opening.

“ I’m the horrible person and yet you’re the one pretending you lost your memory to gain sympathy.

” Arabella glances round the library and at the large crowd now gathered before raising her voice.

“She’s probably faking being a mate too.

That or she used some dark magic to make it look like it’s real. I wouldn’t put it past her.”

Everyone in the library glances at me with frowns. Some with disgust as they fall for

her lies and manipulation.

A group of male Shadows come over and glance from me to Arabella. Without asking what's going on, they turn to Arabella and the blonde. "Get out of here."

The blonde glances from me to them with a snarl while Arabella looks shocked for a moment before masking it with a glare. "She's probably fucking them too. Slut!" She grabs the blonde's arm. "Come on, let's get out of here. I don't want to be in the same room as a killer anyway."

The blonde glares at me before turning around and heading out. The crowd quickly clears with the glares the group of male Shadows are sending them.

I spot Robin among the small group in the crowd and call out to her. But frown when I see the look on her face. Surely, she doesn't believe anything Arabella has said.

"Robin?" I call out again, but she frowns at me and takes a step back, shaking her head before turning around and heading off with the girls.

"Are you okay?" the male Shadow that got rid of them asks, as his deep gray eyes scan me for injuries.

"I'm fine. Thank you," I tell him while wondering what it is he wants.

But he just nods and shares a look with the others before heading out.

Shaking off the strange encounter, I wince when a thumping headache forms, shooting into my left eye. Seconds later, I immediately feel Knox's bond. His energy slams into me, and the bond instantly opening between us.

"Sena! Stop blocking us out. Damn it!" Knox shouts.

It takes me a minute to answer him, still a little shocked that he just tore down my barrier like it was nothing.

“What the fuck was that?” I ask.

He drags out a sigh of frustration. “You weren’t answering me.”

“I was studying. I just needed some peace and quiet,” I say, feeling shitty for lying to him.

“Come back to the house,” he says with the hint of a demand.

“Why?” I ask wondering if the rumors have already reached him. And if we’re going to start playing their game of tricks once more.

“Cyrus misses you,” he says making me smile in relief.

“And you don’t?” I ask but wince when I realize that sounds like I’m flirting with him.

“Come back,” he says, his voice softer now.

I glance around at the library and see that most left are still sending glares at me. I ignore them and head into another aisle. “Give me an hour.”

“Sena—”

“Just an hour and I’ll be back.”

“An hour. Or I’ll come find you myself,” he promises.

I feel the bond weaken and slam it shut between us. Picking up as many books as I can find on dark energy and runes and shields, I glance around before heading to a hidden aisle near the back.

Sitting down, I start going through them, reading everything and anything I can. The words start blurring and joining together the more I read. And after an hour, I'm still no closer to figuring anything out about the Variants or the rune shields around the academy.

With the threat of Knox coming, I put the books back where I got them and then head out.

Walking into the forest, I think back to Arabella and the others. The video definitely looked real. But it could have been anytime last year with the other Sena.

I know the video is damning. But how could they believe that I'd kill Cora? The look of disbelief in Robin's eyes constantly replays in my mind.

I don't care what the other girls think. I know the truth. But I thought Robin was a friend. And if she believes them, then it's only time before the guys do too.

A twig snaps, and I whip around too late to find three males surrounding me. All are dressed in black from head-to-toe with black masks concealing their faces completely.

Mentally kicking myself for not paying attention to my surroundings, I take a step back when long, dark shadows slash out and wrap around my legs and wrists. They yank me off my feet, and I hit the ground hard.

Pain explodes in my head, shooting down my side. I try to get to my feet as the world tilts and spins. Just as I crawl to my hands, an onslaught of kicks, digs and punches

attack my body from every angle making me groan in agony.

As soon as they've started, the onslaught of hits and kicks suddenly stops. Seconds later the sound of screams and gurgles claw against my ears as I groan in pain.

I whimper and try to reach out to the guys, but darkness settles across my vision, quickly dragging me under.

Just before I pass out, I spot the blurry outline of a familiar white-haired male rush toward me.

"Shh, I've got you," Theon whispers.

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My eyes blink open to find the four guys around me.

I'm no longer in pain. So, they must have healed me.

I'm also in my own bed with Knox lying beside me.

Cyrus is at the end of the bed, and Theon is propped up against the wall on the floor.

All are asleep except Malakai who watches me with a look of pain and rage in his eyes.

"Theon found you... And those that hurt you," he whispers, the rage in his eyes practically glowing.

"Where are they?" I ask and sit up, trying not to wake the others.

"Dead. Theon ripped them apart," he says, but he doesn't seem happy about it. But I can understand that.

My goal was to keep them safe and not drag them into anymore of my or old Sena's mess, and that's all I seem to be doing lately.

"I didn't know?—"

"You blocked us out," Knox whispers harshly from beside me, making me jolt. "And you're pushing us away. Why?"

I grow silent, finding the others awake now too and watching me. But my thoughts immediately turn to the Void.

I don't know what Sena's family has on them. But I can't risk it. I can't risk them ever going back there.

"What did your family say?" Cyrus says as if he's the one that can read my mind now.

"Did you hear the rumors?" I ask, hoping it will distract them long enough to figure out what to tell them.

"We don't give a shit about rumors," Malakai says. "We never have. But you're making it hard for us to trust you when you shut us out and pull away."

He leans forward, his eyes not leaving mine. "So, I'll ask again. What happened?"

I sigh, glancing down at my hands. "My family just made it clear how horrible they are. It made me realize I might not have been the nicest person before." An understatement of the century.

Knox chokes on a laugh, and I narrow my eyes on him, making him smile. It eases some of the tension in me.

"I just needed a moment to figure it out," I tell them, not completely lying to them but not telling them the entire truth either.

I need to figure out more about Sena's family before I drag them into anything else.

After my words, there's almost a collective sigh of relief in the air around us.

“Aren’t you going to ask me about the rumors?” I ask and glance between them.

“We don’t care,” Malakai repeats, and I roll my eyes at him.

“You do. And I get it.” It’s not like old Sena had a great track record.

“We—” Knox starts.

“The video must have been before. I don’t remember it, nor am I lying about not knowing any of you before coming here.

” I shake my head before narrowing my eyes on them all.

“Also, from here on out, we’re going to pretend the old Sena was a different person.

Because let’s be honest, she kind of sounds like a bitch. ”

Knox chokes on a strangled laugh while the others stare at me in shock.

“And just so you know, I didn’t hurt Cora,” I tell them as my chest tightens.

Cyrus leans over and takes my hand, “We know.”

I glance around at them all, and a rush a relief floods me when I see that they actually believe me. “I can’t prove it, but I’m nearly sure Arabella pushed her.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Cyrus says, and I nod.

The guys share a look and all get up. Cyrus takes Knox’s place on the bed.

“Where are you all going?” I ask.

“You’re training with Cyrus, and we...” Three vicious, cruel smiles stare back at me.
“...are going to hunt some Shadows.”

Outside, in a small field by their obstacle course, I watch Cyrus as he walks toward me, thinking how damn pretty he is.

Sharp jawline, high cheekbones. A tall-broad shouldered build and thick dark lashes that any girl would kill for.

The way he moves is graceful and fluid too. Even his dark tousled hair is damn near perfect.

He whips his top off, placing every chiseled muscle on display.

Damn . It’s like he was carved from stone, every fucking inch of him impossibly perfect.

My eyes eventually find his and spot the slow teasing smile that spreads across his face.

“My eyes are up here.”

“I was admiring your tattoos.” Tattoos I didn’t even notice until now.

“Sure.” He steps in front of me, and a hungry look flickers across his face. “Can you create that shield again?”

I blink up at him, trying to focus on his words instead of his abs. “I haven’t tried since it happened.”

His eyes sparkle with mischief. “I have faith in you.”

Sighing, I step back and close my eyes, thinking back to the red zone. I wanted to feel safe, protected. I take that feeling and wrap it around me.

A warm energy slides through me, and I open my eyes to find a shadowy shield forming around my entire body.

Cyrus moves closer and places a hand on it and pushes.

The slightest hint of pressure pushes at the corner of my mind. But I focus on the shield and think about it becoming stronger and more resilient.

He yanks his hand back with a hiss. “You changed it.”

“I did?”

He nods, his expression a mixture of shock and awe. “You made it offensive instead of just defensive. How did you do it?”

I shrug. “I thought about it becoming stronger to keep you out.”

His eyes sparkle, his mouth curving into a wide grin. “Then let’s try something a little harder.”

Darkness explodes out around us, encasing us both, and I feel the warm energy from the shield disappear.

Damn it. I guess I’m not as good as he thinks I am.

I can barely see in front of my face. “Cyrus?” I reach out to him but jump when a low groan brushes across my ear.

“ Nothing has ever calmed my dark the way you do when you’re near.

” He places a kiss just under my ear, making heat coil down my spine.

“I was hoping to see how you could manage with my darkness, but you’re too tempting like this.

” His shadows draw back as he steps in front of me once again.

They quickly disappear, leaving him staring down at me, his lips parted slightly, his breath shallow.

“Let’s see if you can call on my weapons instead.” His tattoos glow black, and dark shadows rise from his skin. As if lured in by them, I reach out to touch them, brushing my fingertips along one of the swirls.

Realizing what I’m doing, I pull my hand back and glance up at him to find his gaze darkening with heat.

“I thought we were going to play with your weapons,” I remind him when it seems neither of us are going to make a move.

His tongue slowly traces the edge of his lip. “You can play with anything you want.”

My gaze drifts lower finding a very large and hard... package. “Is that one of your weapons?”

His expression is all heat and barely restrained tension. “It all depends...”

I raise a brow as my eyes drawn to his lips “On?”

He smirks. “On whether or not you want you play with it.”

Laughter ripples out of me as I shove him back a step. “Show me how to do it.”

A soft chuckle escapes his throat. “Focus on the bond between us, on the energy, and hold onto it. Then call my weapons to you.”

I feel for Cyrus’ bond, and the black endless energy wraps around me, instantly making me feel safe. With the thought of needing a weapon, I raise my hand and gasp when cold, hard metal flies into it. Just like that day in the forest with the terrigons.

“Good,” Cyrus says with pride in his eyes as he steps back. A moment later, an exact replica of the blade appears in his hand. “Now show me what you can do.”

I lunge forward hoping to catch him off guard, but he moves quick and spins, avoiding a blade to the stomach.

He gives me a playful wink, as if amused by my attempt to gut him.

I round him and search for a weakness I can exploit, but he strikes and slashes the blade across the top of my thigh but only deep enough to cut my trousers.

I narrow my eyes on his low chuckle and dodge his kick to roll to the side. I get up quickly before he strikes again, harder this time as he tries to see how far he can push me.

We go back and forth, avoiding each other’s hits while trying to find a weakness in the other.

I manage to slide the blade along his side, leg, and thigh while he slices three more cuts in my clothes. The third one just under my breasts.

I glance down, realizing it, and that slight detraction is all it takes for me to end up on my back, glancing up at him as he smiles down at me with nothing but amusement and heat in his eyes.

“Let’s be honest, you just wanted me in this position,” I say on a long exhale while trying to catch my breath.

“There far more interesting positions I can imagine you in, but since you look like you’ve just been fucked, it’s moved to the top three.” He reaches out a hand and pulls me up while I stare at him in a daze.

I open my mouth to ask him what one and two are but think better of it and try to avoid the heated look he’s giving me.

I clear my throat and quickly change the subject. “I’m not professionally trained like you four. But I guess I’m not too bad either.” The skills I’ve learned over the years have saved me more times than I can count.

“I’ve seen you throw a blade and hit it dead center. Multiple times in a row. You’re beyond skilled. Talented, in fact. I think we just need to work on your stamina and endurance.”

My mind takes a completely different turn, thinking of all the ways I can get some stamina and endurance in without ever running or swimming. In fact, I bet I wouldn’t have to move that much at all.

A muscle jumps in his jaw as he stares at me. “Now go hit the showers.”

I chuckle. “Is that a nice way to tell me I stink?”

His pupils dilate, almost swallowing the color of his eyes. “I’m telling you to get

moving before I decide I want to lick every single drop of sweat off you and demonstrate some of those positions I've been imagining you in."

A warm shiver slides down my back before pooling low in my stomach.

He exhales sharply, his nostrils flaring. "Sena," he warns.

My feet get moving, even though the rest of my body wants to stay and find out exactly what positions he's talking about.

Just before I'm out of view, I quickly glance over my shoulder, finding him in the same position, his back to me and his fists clenched by his sides.

As if sensing me watching him, he starts to turn around. I quickly get moving, heading through the forest and straight into the house, all while thinking about an ice-cold shower.

Opening the door to my room, I take a step inside when I spot a piece of paper on the floor.

Picking it up, I open it but freeze when I read it what it says.

"I know who you really are."

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Somebody knows about the switch. They have to. What else could the note have meant?

I barely listen in History class; my thoughts completely consumed on that one little piece of paper.

My gaze flickers around the classroom, and I start to think my distraction maybe came in handy this time. The glares and disgusted looks I'm now getting probably happened throughout the entire class.

Professor Graves ends the class but calls me just as I'm about to leave. He waits until everyone is gone before speaking. "I've noticed a little tension between you and the other girls. Is everything okay?"

I chuckle and wave him off. "Just girl drama. It'll all blow over sooner or later." At least, I hope.

He doesn't buy my lie, his brows dipping. "If it gets any worse, come find me. Even if you just need someone to talk to."

I clear my throat from the knot of emotion he seems to have created.

"Thank you," I tell him, meaning it. No adult has ever cared enough to listen to me or my endless problems. And even though I more than likely will never take him up on his offer—being too stubborn for my own good—it's nice to know he cares.

He gives me a small smile and heads out. As soon as I leave the class, I run into the

blonde I met in the library and her group of friends. Robin isn't among them. And even though she's still avoiding me, it's nice to know she hasn't completely turned to the dark side and ended up with them.

Arabella isn't here either. Another bonus. But I could've used her face to offset some of my frustrations.

"We've decided to give you the benefit of the doubt," the blonde I have no interest in ever learning her name says.

She sighs, not waiting for my reply. "I admit that you are... different than before. Arabella made us believe some things that really don't make sense.

" She clears her throat and frowns at me.

"We're not horrible people and I... I mean we would like to apologize for assuming the worst." She glances at the girls, and they nod their heads, agreeing with her.

I search their faces for a lie, and even though my gut is telling me something is off, I don't spot anything suspicious in their expressions.

Not wanting to drag out some girl drama, especially with everything else going on, I ignore my gut and decide to let it go and be the bigger person.

"Thank you. I appreciate the apology," I tell them, and the blonde smiles at me. A genuine smile that lights up her entire face.

"Yay!" She grabs my arm and drags me along with her little group. "We're heading out for a bit of sun after that long class. Come with us."

"I actually?—"

She pouts at me, her eyes pleading. “Please. Just let me try to fix this. I feel so bad.”

Sighing, I nod and let her lead me out to the main field and into the forest. She starts chatting about everything and anything. All the things she likes and dislikes about being here. Her clothes, her room, the men.

I give her a tight smile and nod, hoping this little get to know one another ends soon.

We round a bend in the forest path, coming to a dead end.

I turn, looking for another way. “I think we should go back?—”

A hard push shoves me backward. My hands fly out to catch myself before I fall, but another hard shove forces me down.

Instead of hitting the ground, I keep falling down a hole in the ground and land with a thump. Pain shoots up my ribs, arm, and into my head as I land on my side with a groan.

“As if we’d ever forgive you, bitch .” The blonde’s voice floats down to me, sounding far away as dark spots cloud my vision.

“Now rot in hell,” she says and the darkness listens, swallowing me up.

“ I ’m going to strangle you if you don’t answer me.” Knox’s angry voice filters past the dizzy haze, waking me up.

“You’re a dick,” I reply and hear his sigh of relief.

“Where are you?”

I open my eyes, but it's so dark, I can only make out what looks like a large tunnel and the now closed latch door I fell through... was shoved through.

I push up on my hands and whimper when a sharp burn shoots up through my left wrist. Cradling it to my chest, I glance up at the tall wall.

There's no grip that I could use to get up there. But even if there was, I don't think I'd make it. My wrist is most definitely sprained, if not broken.

"Sena... Cyrus says you're hurt, and Theon can sense your fear. Where the fuck are you? Malakai can't see anything but darkness."

"I don't know..." I glance around trying to find something that will tell them where I might be. But here's nothing but dark walls and the hard cold, ground beneath me.

"Sena—"

"Give me a minute... please ."

Knox grows quiet, but I can feel him in the back of my mind, waiting, probably not so patiently and demanding updates from each of the guys.

I stumble to my feet and hiss in pain when I put weight on my right foot.

A barrage of emotions overloads my senses making my head spin. I lean against the tunnel wall, waiting for it to pass.

"Stop it! Calm down! I can't focus," I tell Knox.

"You're hurt, Sena. Tell us where the fuck you are?"

“I don’t know,” I glance around me, trying to find another way out, but the only way I can see is the long tunnel that goes straight ahead.

“What do you mean ? —”

“I was pushed down some tunnel in the forest.”

A sharp, angry bolt of rage shoots through me, and I know that it’s not mine.

“Who pushed you ?” Knox asks with a hard edge to his voice.

“Right now, I just need you to help me figure a way out,” I tell him. Besides, I want to deal with the blonde bitch and her group myself.

“Sena—”

“Please, ” I beg.

“Tell us where you were last?” he growls.

“In the forest, past the field and down a narrow path. There was a dead end. I was turning back when I got shoved.”

Knox grows quiet, and I assume he’s talking to the others trying to figure out where that is. Until I feel the spike of panic and fear rush through me like a tidal wave.

“What is it? What happened?” I ask as my mind goes to the worst possible scenarios.

I try to focus on Malakai and see through his eyes to make sure they’re okay. But the moment I try to open another two-way connection, a wave of nausea hits me making my head spin and stomach churn.

I pull back and just focus on each breath until it passes.

“Knox? What’s wrong?”

He pauses before answering. As if he doesn’t know how to tell me. But surely it can’t be that bad.

“We think we know where you are,” he says quietly, his voice layered with fear.

‘That’s good... right?’ I ask.

“Sena, I need you to stay quiet and hidden,” Knox says but the tone of his voice is like he’s trying to keep me calm.

“Hidden from what?” I glance around me as Theon’s fear floods my senses making me realize there’s something they’re not telling me.

“Knox. Where am I?”

“There are four underground tunnels under the academy that all lead to the same thing,” he reveals.

“Okay...” It still doesn’t tell me where I am or why I can feel waves of fear and anger from Theon.

“It’s a place where feral Shadows go before they kill them.”

I blanch. “What?”

“There’s no coming back for them. And they will kill anything in sight,” he says barely controlling his emotions.

Feral Shadows... And I've just landed right in their little prison.

Fuck.

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Moving as quietly as I can, I slowly make my way down the tunnel, not wanting to be stuck at a dead end if I run into any of the feral Shadows.

It takes me twice as long to get to the bend, the sharp pain in my foot throbbing with each step.

There has to be another way out. I doubt they'd throw them down here through the latch. And Knox said there are four underground tunnels. There has to be an entrance somewhere. Just hopefully not near any of the feral Shadows.

"Sena... We're dividing up and each taking an entrance. Try and stay calm, we'll be there soon," Knox says, sounding a little too panicked for my liking.

"You actually sound like you're being nice... Stop it. It's freaking me out." It has the effect I intended, and he barks out a laugh.

"Don't worry. I'll be back to my asshole-ish ways once you're safe."

Sounding like he's a little calmer, I smile to myself. "Good to know."

I put too much weight on my foot and hiss when it shoots up my ankle.

"Sena?"

I wince when I hear the fear return to Knox's voice. "It's okay. There's no one around me. I'm safe." For now, at least.

I glance around the next bend, ensuring no one is waiting in hiding before I push myself to keep moving.

“Cyrus said it feels like your foot is sprained. And your wrist is broken.”

I glance down at my wrist and find it nearly double the size it was a few minutes ago. Yes, definitely broken.

“Tell me who did this to you,” he demands.

“No.”

“Sena—”

“What I’m going to do is get out of here, get you all to heal me, and then I’m going to hunt them down myself.” One by fucking one. Starting with the blonde bitch.

He groans. “Why is that such a fucking turn-on?”

I chuckle. “Maybe because you’re a psycho and into that sort of thing?”

“True. But I’m your psycho. We all are.”

I swallow hard at the complete conviction in his voice. They were in the Void because of Sena. But they don’t know that wasn’t me. And yet they still forgive her... me.

The last of the barriers I had surrounding my heart crack and shatter, leaving me feeling vulnerable and open.

A screech bounces off the walls around me making me jolt. I glance up and spot two

tall angry-looking males stepping around the bend.

Taking a slow, measured step back, I freeze when I find two more behind me. Four pairs of black, eerie eyes stare at me, and an icy chill crawls down my back.

“Shield, Sena!” Knox screams into my mind.

I mentally kick myself for not thinking of it sooner. I try to focus on the shadowy shield as they move closer to me, surrounding me, blocking me in.

Finally grasping onto the energy, I push it out around me. But instead of a dark shield full of shadows, something else happens, I glow.

The energy keeps building inside me as glowing tattoos swirl across my body, pulsing in waves. Just as the men move toward me, the glow brightens and blasts out around me, slamming into each of them.

I open my eyes—not realizing I closed them—to find the four men a few feet back from me, all staring at their hands and body.

Their gazes find one another before landing on me. But instead of black eyes that were empty of any emotion other than rage, they’re normal. Blue, green, and two pairs of dark brown. But every pair is now staring at me in shock and awe.

The blonde-haired, blue-eyed one takes a step toward me when a vicious growl echoes from behind me.

Malakai is front of me in seconds with the rest of my mates taking their place around me.

Relief fills me until I realize my mates are about to attack these men.

The blonde holds up his palms making them pause. “She healed us. The madness... it’s gone,” he rasps, his eyes flitting from mine to my mates.

Malakai narrows his eyes on him. “That’s not possible. Once you turn feral, there’s no turning back.”

A strangled laugh leaves his lips as his eyes widen. “I’m talking to you. I can see you.” His eyes find mine. “And feel everything again.”

Seconds is all it takes for Theon to have him shoved up against the wall by his throat.

“Keep those eyes to yourself, unless you want me to rip them from your head.”

“I meant no harm,” he gasps. “I’m just grateful.”

“Theon...” I call out, and his hand spasms on the guy’s throat before releasing him.

With one last vicious glare, Theon heads back over to the spot beside me, while completely ignoring any look I give him.

The other three men move over the blonde and help him up while keeping their distance.

“We are forever in your debt,” the blonde says. “Thank you.”

I open my mouth to tell them to forget about it. I haven’t even a clue what I did anyway. But before I get the chance, he and the other men all drop to their knees, glancing up at me like I’m their damn savior.

Healed and back in the house, I watch each of my four mates as they all try to contain their frustration and anger.

“What happened?” Cyrus asks.

“They were coming closer, and I tried to create a shield. But something else happened instead. I... glowed.” I frown and glance down at my body, but there’s nothing there anymore.

“It was similar to your tattoos when they glow but bright and they crawled all over my body. It felt like energy was building up under my skin and then it just... blasted out of me, knocking them a step back. When I looked at them, their eyes were no longer black, and they were just standing there, staring at me in shock.”

I glance at the four of them and realize they’re doing just that. All staring at me in shock. But that shock quietly morphs into something else, and they all move closer to me.

Malakai steps in front of me. “Show us your tattoos,” he demands, and I raise a brow.

“Please ,” he grits out.

I roll my eyes but get to my feet and pull up my top. Glancing down at them, I see them exactly as they are since I got them.

A collective sigh rings out around the room, and I pause realizing why they wanted to see them.

They thought I added a few more men to my little harem.

“I don’t feel drawn to anyone but you four,” I tell them without thinking and wince when I see their smug smiles.

Exhaustion and hunger hit me all at once. But the exhaustion wins out. I don’t think I

even have any food in my hidden spot anyway.

My hunger will have to wait until morning.

“I’m hungry, I’m going to bed,” I tell them before making a move toward the stairs.

Knox frowns at me. “Why are you going to bed if you’re hungry?”

“I’m not allowed touch the food here, and I’m too tired to head to the canteen this late. I don’t think it’s open anyway,” I say with a shrug. “It’s fine, I’ll find something in the morning.” I take another step but pause when I see them all freeze and stare at me in shock.

“We didn’t mean...” Malakai starts but stutters to a stop, shaking his head as if he’s in disbelief.

Knox frowns, looking so damn sad. “Shit... Sena...”

Cyrus looks absolutely devastated. “We never ? — ”

“That’s not what we meant,” Theon says with his hands clenched by his sides.

I glance around at them, wondering if I’m misunderstanding. I guess things have changed between us since they enacted that rule. But I know how hard it is to come by food. I didn’t want to take anymore from them then the other Sena already has.

“So... I can eat your food?” I ask, and my stomach grumbles even at the thought. “But?—”

“No fucking but . You want food, you eat it. There’s plenty to go around,” Malakai grits out, looking angry as hell now.

Ignoring his temper, I head to the kitchen, looking forward to throwing a quick sandwich together when Malakai stops me.

“Go sit down. I’ll make you something.”

I narrow my eyes on him. “This is all so you can poison me, isn’t it? I knew there would be a catch,” I joke, but it doesn’t even get a smile out of him. Or any of the others.

Shrugging it off, I head to the stairs, telling them I’m going to take a quick shower first.

They all nod but avoid looking at me. It’s not until I get to the top of the stairs, do I hear them speak in hushed whispers.

“Has anyone ever seen her eat here?” Knox asks.

“No,” Cyrus answers.

“She’s been here weeks,” Knox points out.

“And she looks like she’s lost weight too,” Malakai grits out.

Knox groans as if in pain. “Fuck...”

Frowning, I glance down at my body. Okay, maybe I’ve lost a little weight. But I’m more toned now too.

Making sure my block is up and enforced so they don’t feel my conflicting emotions, I head into the shower. Taking the quickest one yet, I get dressed and head back downstairs as my stomach grumbling loudly at the thought of food.

As I hit the bottom step, a delicious smell hits my senses, making my mouth water.

“Something smells amazing,” I tell them, but it only gets grunts as a reply.

I guess it’s going to be a quick meal.

Heading to the table, Knox hands me a plate, and I take a bit of everything before sitting down.

I’m about to dig in when I notice the frowns each of the guys are wearing and that they’re all directed at my plate.

I glance down at it, wondering if I’ve taken too much or taken one of their favorites.

“Why did you only take a little bit?” Knox asks, and I instantly relax and take a bite. “If you don’t like anything, you can tell us.”

I shake my head while trying not to inhale the food.

Damn they can cook. “I’m not used to eating this much.

I’ve pretty much been living off a meal and a snack or two a day.

If I attempt to eat any more than this, I’ll probably be sick.

And I don’t want to waste it. It’s far more appetizing than anything I’ve been having the last while.

” Home cooked food always trumps canteen food. Or any food for that matter.

Almost feeling the atmosphere in the air change, I glance up as Theon gets up and

leaves without a backward glance.

I frown after him and place my fork down with a sigh. “What did I do now? Seriously, just tell me. I can eat upstairs if you all prefer?—”

“Just eat... Please ,” Cyrus says, giving me a soft, sad look. “He’s not angry at you.”

I glance at the door Theon just slammed out of. “But?—”

“We’re still adjusting to what we thought we knew,” Malakai says. “Just eat.”

I glance at the three of them, but none of them head off after Theon or even make a move. After of minute, I shake off their strange behavior and dig back into my food. And after another minute or two, they do the same.

Heading up to my room after a meal of silence and strange stares, I’m cornered by Malakai in the hall. He quickly cages me in against the wall.

“If you don’t move, I’m going to break something very precious to you,” I tell him.

He smirks but there’s nothing smug or happy about it. In fact, it looks a little... sad. “Too late. You’ve already broken my fucking heart. Not once but twice now.”

I frown. “What?—”

He dips down and runs his nose up along the length of my neck, breathing me in. Warmth slides down my spine before spreading out to every limb.

“I can smell your desire,” he rasps, and the low throaty sound makes me shiver in heat and want and need.

“Soon,” he breathes before bending down and kissing me hard and fast before walking away with a savage smirk on his face, leaving me standing there completely frustrated and worked up.

“ Dick ,” I mutter, hearing his loud laugh as I head for another shower. A cold one this time.

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Darkness coils around me, dragging me into its abyss. But just as quick, it slides away, revealing a large room.

White walls and drawers, black bedding on a huge king size bed, and a black desk.

“Where am I?” I mumble.

“In my room.” I glance over to find Cyrus leaning against the wall, watching me.

“Technically,” he smiles.

I remember falling asleep with Knox so how did I... I glance back at Cyrus. “Is this a dream?”

He moves from his position and makes his way over to me. “Yes and no. It’s more tangible. Anything that happens here can be felt outside this world.” Tugging my chin up, he dips down and kisses me.

“Pain...” he whispers and bites my bottom lip, hard, sending a spark of heat straight to my clit. “And pleasure...” he groans, licking the spot, and sucking it between his lips.

I reach up for him, but he drags himself away with a knowing smile. “We haven’t been able to spend time with you or train you much.” He gives me a look that tells me that’s about to change. “We’ll be heading back to the War Camps soon, and I want to make sure you’re prepared.”

I freeze, misunderstanding his reason for bringing me here completely. “So, this is

a... training dream?" I ask feeling a little disappointed.

After Malakai leaving me frustrated and having to go asleep with Knox's warm body wrapped around mine, I was hoping for a little relief. But apparently, he's decided to join in and become a little tease like the rest of them.

The room around me shifts, changing to an indoor shooting range with just one station and target.

He moves me over to the little booth and hands me a gun that literally appears out of nowhere.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised. I am in a dream. Or whatever this is.

Getting in position, I focus and shoot, hitting dead center.

Cyrus' brows raise, his facial expression more than a little shocked.

Old Sena might not have been able to hold a gun, but this Sena has been able to use weapons of all kinds since she was a child.

He shakes his head. "I shouldn't be surprised." He moves behind me and dips down, kissing the top of my shoulder. "Let's make it a little more challenging, shall we?"

His hands curl around my waist, one moves up to my neck, tilting my head so he can brush a kiss at the side of my neck while the other moves lower and lower.

I gasp as he fingers slide down my leggings and run along my core.

"Now..." he breathes. "Let's see how well you can aim while distracted." He grinds into the back of me, his hard length hitting just the right spot.

I tilt my head back and lick my lips enjoying the feel of him.

“Shoot, Sena,” he says while licking a path up along the side of my neck.

Trying to focus, I raise the gun but just before I shoot, his finger slides along my core.

“You’re so wet,” he groans. And I shoot, hitting just a little off-center but still in the bullseye.

“Good girl,” he rasps as he slides his fingers into me, making me gasp.

“Now, hit the bullseye two more times, and I’ll make you come,” he promises, sliding slowly in and out of me.

He keeps his agonizingly slow pace up, sliding in and out of me before adding a second finger. My legs turn to Jell-O, and my entire body trembles as I get close to the edge.

Just a little longer. I grind back into him, needing a little more friction to push me over.

“Sena,” he warns and starts dragging his hand away. I raise the gun and shoot, again and again. Hitting dead center six times in a row before I grind against him.

“Now, make me come or I’ll shoot you.”

He chuckles and his fingers slide back inside me.

I drop the gun, and he turns my head and kisses me hard and fast before moving us, pushing me forward toward the desk.

My palms slap against it as he grinds up against me from behind, hitting the right spot with the exact pressure I need as his fingers continue to move, pumping inside me now.

“Oh, god, yes.” Little gasps and moans slip from my lips only making his movement more erratic.

He groans low as his thumb slides over the small bundle of nerves, pushing me over the edge. The darkness above me grows, and I spot actual stars as I shatter on a long moan.

“We’re going to have so much fun,” he breathes and places another kiss on my neck. “I can’t wait to see what else we can do.”

I turn and smile at him, ready to go for round two.

Knox’s husky chuckle slides across my ear, waking me with a gasp. His brown eyes find mine, and a slow, teasing smile curls his lips.

“Did you enjoy your little visit last night?” he asks, placing a kiss on my shoulder. “From your moans and little breathy gasps, I’m going to assume you enjoyed every minute of it.”

“That was real?” I ask trying to catch my breath, still feeling the remnants of my orgasm.

“I’m guessing Cyrus was a little distracted and didn’t explain his ability very well.” His hungry gaze flicks to mine. “Can’t say I blame him.”

“Tell me.”

His gaze turns mischievous. “I want a trade. What do I get for this information?”

“How about a back rub?” I reach out and drag my hands down his body, and he nods, easily giving in. “Deal.”

“Cyrus doesn’t just walk into dreams, he creates them.

More so nightmares. The things he creates inside his world of shadows are as real as they are out here.

And everything you experience in there is similar to experiencing it out here.

” Knox scans my face with a small knowing smile.

“He usually only creates nightmares so real they can kill. But I guess when it comes to you, he’s decided to make them a little more... pleasurable.”

It definitely was.

“Now,” Knox moves, rolling onto his stomach beside me. “You owe me a back rub.”

Grabbing some moisturizer, I chuckle and climb up over him before sitting on the top of his thighs and start his massage.

I’m no expert, but the little grunts and moans coming from his mouth make me feel like I am.

“I’ve never felt so fucking relaxed in all my life,” he moans.

“I guess I’m not doing my job right because that’s not my goal at all.” I lean down and place a kiss on his shoulder, and he groans, muttering something about him being

a fucking idiot.

Before I realize what he's doing, he moves quick, rolling himself over me. Dipping down, he places a kiss on my lips. "I need to make sure you eat. Come on."

I roll my hips up toward him and watch his eyes darken with heat.

"You going to be the death of me," he growls but leans down and kisses me anyway, like he can't help himself, groaning when I slide my tongue around his, trying to tease him into something better than food.

But after a minute, he drags himself away and stands at the end of the bed with a glare. My eyes drag down every hard muscle and ab to his large, hard length.

"Sena..." he warns, and I roll my eyes. They're all fucking teases.

"Fine. Let's go get some damn food." I get up and off the bed, heading for the door, but he stops me with a look, his eyes dragging down the length of my body.

"Clothes first or none of us will be eating anything other than you."

I pause thinking about it. I mean...

"Sena," he exhales sharply.

I sigh and head to the closet. "You're all such fucking teases."

He chuckles and heads out of the room while I throw on some clothes. Once I'm dressed, I head out but freeze when I spot a piece of paper on the floor near the door. Bending down, I pick it up and open it. My blood turns cold when I read it.

“You’re no longer safe here. You need to leave.”

Walking to the obstacle course, my mind turns to the note. How are they getting past the guys? It doesn’t make any sense.

The thought of it being one of the guys comes and goes. There’s no way it could be any of them. If they knew, I’d probably be dead by now. Or at least turned in. That or there would at least be a barrage of questions, insults, glares and suspicious looks sent my way.

But someone knows something, and I need to find out who it is. Soon. Going by that note, I apparently don’t have much time.

Looking up, I spot at least a dozen people who must have been staring at me, immediately glance away.

It’s not that unusual but the lack of hate or disgust is.

I find out why not a minute later when Robin hesitantly approaches me. I turn around, ready to head in another direction, when she calls out to me.

“I’m sorry,” she shouts, and I stop and slowly turn back around to her.

She gives me a look full of regret. “I’m really sorry, Sena. I should never have believed their lies.”

“Then why did you?” I ask, wondering how she could turn her back on me so quickly.

“You weren’t always like this. Before, you used to play games, the twisted kind, and didn’t care who got hurt,” she admits with a wince.

Fuck. Old Sena was more than just a bitch. She was a fucking terror.

“When they said you were faking it, my doubts crept in, and I thought there was a possibility that you were just playing some big elaborate game.” She frowns. “I was waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

Some of my anger deflates after hearing her words. “How did you figure out I wasn’t lying?”

“Your mates,” she reveals.

My eyes widen on hers, and she smiles.

“They came blazing in, threatening everyone to sit down, shut up, and listen to them. Then they proved that the video was from last year and made sure everyone knew how Stacey lied and manipulated the entire situation.”

“Stacey?” I ask.

“The blonde,” Robin replies.

Ah, the blonde bitch. “And what about Cora?”

Her eyes fill with guilt and sadness. “You helped us the entire time we were in the Wastelands. You dived on that beast to save Arabella, the bitch. So yeah, that should have been an obvious one.”

Yeah, it should have. I sigh to myself. I’m not usually the second chance kind of person, especially when someone has turned their back on me. But I can also understand that the old Sena was a bitch.

“I forgive you,” I tell her, and she immediately steps forward with a wide smile on her face.

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“But... only if you see me for who I am. To judge me on my actions and words now and not on my past mistakes,” I tell her.

Robin’s eyes soften and she steps forward and wraps me in a hug. “Deal.”

We head toward the group of girls, and I spot Stacey immediately. She glances over and spots me, flinching back and turning away.

Robin sees who I’m glaring at and nods her head. “Your mates might have also given everyone a warning not to come near you. I think something was mentioned about ripping their heads off.”

That sounds like them. But also... “I can take care of myself,” I tell Knox.

He answers immediately. “Of course you can, baby.”

“I told you I was going to deal with it,” I grit out.

“And you are,” he says with a calm, reassuring tone. It annoys the fuck out of me.

“I’m going to stab you,” I promise him.

“I’m all up for foreplay,” he answers with a chuckle.

Robin rounds me with a frown. “Why do you look like you’re about to murder someone?”

“I’m thinking about it,” I tell her and hear Knox bark out a laugh in my head.

“The only way you’re going to kill me is if you smother me with your thighs,” he says, his voice husky.

I choke on air, and Robin looks at me like I’ve finally lost it.

We come up beside the other girls, and I glare at Stacey’s head, daring her to look at me. But she doesn’t even turn around, choosing to look in the other direction.

A couple of older male Shadows walk up to us a minute later.

“It’s been decided that your companions and...

” his eyes flicker to mine, “Mates, will continue with your training instead. The obstacle test will still take place in a few weeks. Fall behind and you will keep taking it until you pass it. Dismissed.” He and the other males turn and leave without a backward glance.

Robin looks at me with a shrug. “Looks like we have some free time. Wanna head to the canteen?”

“I ate way too much this morning.” Thanks to my mates thinking I need to be fed on the hour. “I think I better try walk some of it off.”

She chuckles and waves me off, and I turn and head back the way I came.

“Apparently, we’re no longer training with instructors, we’re to train with our men. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about this new little rule, would you?” I ask Knox on my way through the forest.

“Not a clue,” he says his voice like honey.

“Liar.”

He chuckles. “Come back and give me another back rub and we can finish what we started this morning.”

“Pass.”

“What could be more important than feeling up one of your favorite mates?”

“Revenge,” I tell him.

He pauses. “Fair. Let me come with? I’ll help you gut them. Or just watch.”

“You’re actually a little psycho, aren’t you?”

“A lot, actually.” He chuckles, as if proud of that little fact.

Shaking my head at him, I open the bond between me and Malakai and look through his eyes to find Knox and Cyrus in the lineup of Shadows around him training, but there’s no Theon.

I haven’t seen him since the dinner the other night either.

“Where’s Theon?” I ask Knox.

“He’s having some alone time.”

“Where can I find him?” I ask, starting to get a little worried about him.

“What will I get if I tell you?”

“One less knife to the thigh,” I warn.

“I don’t know whether that’s a plus or negative.”

“Knox!”

“Fine... On the other side of the forest. There’s a small hill he likes to sit on and waste time feeling sad by himself.”

Knox must have told Malakai about our conversations because a minute later, I feel the bond between us open wide and an image of a big green hill and the directions I need to go to get there slam into it.

Shaking off my shock, I smile to myself, probably looking a bit crazy as I head toward the forest. “Tell Malakai I said thank you,” I tell Knox.

“Why does he get a thank you?!”

“I’m blocking you out now,” I tell him.

“Don’t you dare ? —”

Sweet silence is all I hear as I make my way through the forest and to the hill Malakai showed me. Theon is sitting at the top with his back to me.

I watch his back tense as I move up it and walk over to him to sit down beside him.

The spot is beautiful with a wide-open view of the lush green trees and fields. You can also see most of the campus from up here.

A few minutes pass before Theon speaks. “Do you want to know why we hate you?” he asks, and I freeze. He glances over at me and frowns. “Hated you?”

I swallow hard, already knowing where this conversation is heading.

His dark eyes narrow on me. “We were sent to the Void because of you.”

My eyes burn and blur at the complete devastation in his voice. And I wonder if it’s time for me to pay once and for all for one of old Sena’s biggest mistakes.

But instead of attacking me, he sighs and glances back out at the view. A view I no longer see. Only seeing the devastation and pain on Theon’s face.

“We were barely teenagers. And so fucking scared.” His shoulders slump.

“We had to learn how to hunt. To find water. To fight and survive.” He chuckles but there is not an ounce of humor in it.

“We got hurt a lot. Nearly died too many times to count. It’s lucky we’re Shadows.

Or we most definitely would have.” He sighs. “I hated it there.”

My stomach churns and twists as each word becomes a slap. I shouldn’t feel this wretched, especially when I wasn’t the one who sent them there, but I do. I feel horrible they had to go through that. That the old Sena was so heartless even as a child.

“When we finally got out, we thought it would be the end. But they sent us back over and over again because of the lies you told them.” Pain twists his features. “I always wanted to know why you did it.” He frowns and glances over at me. “We never did anything to you.”

“I’m sorry.” There’s nothing else I can say to him to fix this. I don’t know why the old Sena did it. But I do know I want her to feel ten times their pain right now. After I beat the shit out of her.

He clenches his jaw and glances away as if he can’t bear to look at me.

“There were days without food. And even more when we thought we weren’t going to make it.

When you told us about not eating, it reminded me about my time there.

” He tilts his head up towards the sun and closes his eyes. “I was always so fucking hungry.”

Sadness surrounds us like a thick fog. “I’m so sorry. I wish there was something I could do to?—”

“I know,” he says, making me pause. His eyes soften as he scans my face. “I can feel it. Feel your sadness. And every emotion you feel right now.” He stares at me with an expression full of hope and fear and so much pain it nearly breaks me.

“You really don’t remember, do you?” he asks.

A deep ache pulses in my chest. “No, I?—”

He leans forward and kisses me while dragging me onto his lap and sliding his arms around me.

It’s a kiss of hate and betrayal and sadness. Of the pain and suffering he went through. He gives me everything, and I take it with a promise of making sure it never happens again. With the hope and possibility of a new beginning.

He groans, feeling everything I do. Every sliver of guilt and pain. Every hope and wish. He draws me closer, and then I finally feel it. His emotions.

And I nearly break there and then. “Theon...” I breathe against his lips.

“I hope you never remember,” he rasps. “Because this Sena is already someone that could completely destroy us all.” He pulls me closer, and we stay like that for hours. Just holding on to one another and staring up as the sun slowly disappears.

When it starts to get dark and his grip tightens on me, I realize that they could destroy me just as easily.

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Finally! Finally, an actual book on dark beings. It just took searching the whole damn library to find.

Glancing around, I make sure no one is watching before sliding it under my top and heading out.

On my way back, I spot a certain blonde. Smiling down at the Vims beside me, I decide now is the perfect time to enact my revenge on the bitch.

She nearly killed me. Wanted to ensure I didn't survive. Not the fall nor the feral Shadows.

Well, the now no-longer-feral Shadows. Something I still have yet to figure out. But it will have to go on my long list of things I need to do for now.

Following Stacey and her little group into the forest, I make sure I'm quiet and hidden before glancing down at the Vims around me.

Leaning down, I tell them what I want them to do and watch as they slip along the forest ground before surrounding the girls.

Screams and shouts echo throughout the forest as Stacey and the others are herded back toward my little trap.

They drop with a loud scream and thump.

I make my way over to the trap I created and glance down at the groaning group of

girls.

Stacey's gaze finds mine and her eyes widen. "You?—"

"Me." I nod. "You didn't think I was going to let you get away with what you did, did you?!" I tell her with a smirk.

A couple of the girls stumble to their feet while the brunette closer to Stacey glares up at me. "Our Shadow companions will find us."

"Not necessarily. Especially since I wrote them all a little note saying you needed to go to the War Camps early." My smile widens on the look of fear seeping across their faces.

"Have you figured out where you are yet?" I ask, feeling a little too happy with myself.

Most of the girls glance around and frown, but Stacey's eyes widen when she realizes.

"Does it not look familiar?" I ask them, giving them all a little hint.

"It can't be..." Stacey breathes, shaking her head. "That's on the other side of the forest."

"I guess you didn't know there are four entrances," I tell her and watch her gaze veer to mine. "And you've just entered one."

"Get us out of here!" she screams, trying to claw at the walls.

I laugh down at her. "Why on earth would I do that?"

“They’re going to kill us!” she shouts in rage and panic and absolute fear.

“And yet you didn’t care when you all shoved me down one similar,” I tell her, each word calm, too calm. “You walked away knowing exactly what would happen when you left me. It’s only right I give you the same care and thoughtfulness you have given me.”

“Sena, please!” she cries, but her tears have no effect on me. Nor do her pleas and screams.

And even though she deserves much worse, I know tonight will not be her end.

I’ve blocked this tunnel from the other feral Shadows. But they don’t need to know that. On top of trying to escape a maze of tunnels they assume has feral Shadows in it, the Vims will be right there syphoning their energy at every chance they get.

I step back and ignore their cries and pleas and slide the latch over the door before locking it.

One of the feral Shadows I accidentally healed moves from his spot in the trees, and I throw him the keys to the latch.

“Give them a few days and then let them out,” I tell him, and he nods.

“Done.”

“After this we can call whatever happened even,” I tell him.

“I owe you my life. Babysitting some spoiled brats doesn’t even come close to calling it even.” He turns and leaves without another word while I find myself wondering if I should have asked someone else to help me instead.

But those I knew and trusted were going to the War Camps, and if I told the guys, they'd want to do much worse than what I just did.

Sighing to myself, I head back to the house and take advantage of the silence to read that book.

Sitting down at the table, I get comfortable and crack it open.

'Variant. A being with the ability to transform, shift, and even take control of other bodies. The inhabitant is usually killed, the Variant now having all memories from the stolen body. No abilities from the host are transferred, but the Variant will still contain its own.'

That doesn't make sense. I don't have Sena's old memories. I'm also not a Variant. But I have a feeling one of them did this to me.

I just can't figure out why.

Did the old Sena piss them off? But if that was the case, then why didn't they just kill her off and end it there? Not switch her with me.

"What's this?" Knox swipes the book from my hands and spins out of reach. I didn't even hear him come in.

Shit. Knox's smile quickly changes as he reads it, morphing into a frown.

He glances up at me, but before he gets a chance to ask me anything, I say the first thing that comes to mind. "It's for a history assignment."

His brows raise. "I suppose that's a lot more interesting than what we were forced to learn."

I edge closer to him and the book. “Do you know anything about them?”

“Variants?” he asks, and I nod.

“I heard they’re evil. Their power comes from the Hollow. It’s dark and unstable,” he says.

My heartbeat picks up speed, as fear claws at my chest. “And if you ever came across one of them or those involved with them, would you kill them?” I fist my hands behind my back, hiding the tremble in them.

“In a heartbeat,” he says before handing me the book back with a vicious smile and kiss on the cheek.

“We ready?” Malakai asks as he and the others filter in around the kitchen. “Everyone have everything they need?”

Knox bends down and grabs me, throwing me over his shoulder. He turns back to the guys while I get to stare at his ass.

I mean, it’s not a bad view.

“I heard that,” Knox whispers into my mind as his hand crawls up my thigh.

I smack it and wiggle to get down. He groans and lets me.

I glance around at the others, catching their small smiles. “Don’t I have to go through the portal with the other females?”

“Not this time,” Cyrus says. “You’re coming with us.”

I paste a smile on my face and try to feel some of the happiness I see around me. And not worry and spiral over the fact that if any one of them found out what happened to me, they might end up killing me.

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The War Camps are as horrible as I remember them. But at least I'm not getting glares from dozens of men who hate the fact that I'm female. Now they're just looking at me in confusion.

We head inside the same tent we had last time, and I follow my mates to the back, walking towards my old bed. But I'm quickly diverted when Cyrus ushers me to the opposite side and to a bed in the middle of two others.

"This is yours," Cyrus says and sets his stuff on the bed beside me. Knox takes the one on my left. Malakai takes my old bed with Theon beside him.

An older male, with short, black hair sprinkled with gray steps into the tent and narrows his eyes on everyone.

"All Shadows, including females, to meet in the green zone. Trials start early." He turns without another word while I try to figure out where the green zone is.

I look to Knox. "Green zone?"

He smiles. "Safe territory just before the black zone."

"Hollow territory." Theon comes around me, answering my next question.

I raise a brow. "Any other zones I should know about?"

"You already know the red zone." Knox frowns as if remembering how I know that.

“And don’t ever want to visit it again,” I mumble, earning myself a smile that does funny things to me.

“There’s also the gray zone. It’s safer than the black zone but still dangerous. And then there’s the blue zone where the commander and higher ranks are stationed.”

If Commander Talos is there, I’m definitely staying away from it. Something about that man makes my skin crawl.

“Get changed and we’ll meet you outside,” Cyrus says.

I head to the bathroom, and quickly throw on my black trousers, top, and boots.

Throwing my hair in a high ponytail, I make my way outside where the guys are all still waiting for me.

With their backs to me, I get a good look at them. Damn, those are some good genes. All broad-shouldered, strong but agile, powerful yet fucking carved like Greek gods.

Knox turns around and catches me. “Come on, stop checking us out.”

“What’s the point in having four good-looking mates if I can’t look?”

My eyes eventually move away from their backsides to find them all staring at me.

“What?”

Knox comes over and takes my hand, pulling me along.

“If you don’t stop looking at us like that, you can’t get angry when I drag you back into the tent and fuck the consequences.

” He glances down at me, a hungry look in his heated gaze that I try to ignore as we move through the groups of males that all look ready for war. I guess, technically, they are.

It’s takes us a few minutes to get to the green zone, a large expanse of sand and nothing else. Just like everything else here.

Lining up beside Knox and the others, I glance across from us and freeze.

Wings . I see lots of wings. And they’re all attached to very attractive males.

“Sena... Stop looking at the enemy,” Theon growls.

“But... they have wings.” Black, feathered wings.

“Yeah, like fucking insects,” Knox grumbles.

“I think they’re pretty,” I say, and as if hearing me, a few of them look over and smile.

Four glares burn a hole in the side of my head. I hide my smile as Theon growls and moves in front of me, completely blocking my view of the wings.

Dropping my smile, I take my time to drag my gaze down and back up his body. Slowly. “They may be pretty, but you’re hot as fuck.”

I let him in, let him feel exactly what I’m feeling right now—the heat, the hunger, the ache —before leaning up and placing a quick kiss on his lips.

His eyes smolder, and a smirk tugs at the corner of his mouth.

“If they keep looking at you like that, I’m going to rip their fucking heads off. After I tear their pretty little wings out,” Malakai grits out, and Theon whips around in the winged male’s direction.

He takes a step toward them when we’re all called to attention.

Theon snarls over at them before getting back in line.

“The trials this year will be a little different than the previous years. We have a lot more entries than ever before. So, to keep it fair...” He glances around with a cruel smirk.

“... and brutal, there will be two stages to the first trial to cull the weak. All those wishing to enter the war games will need to bring me back the head of a female terrigon before the time is up.”

“Fuck,” Malakai whispers.

“What?” I ask.

“The females are more guarded,” Knox explains. “More vicious. And fucking harder to kill too.” He shares a look with the others. “It won’t be easy.”

“One more thing,” the higher-ranking male says, gaining everyone’s undivided attention once more.

“All Shadow females have been previously tested and are more than capable of handling themselves. Therefore, all must also take part in the first trial tomorrow alongside their Shadow companions. If they don’t, then neither will their Shadows.”

Fuck. The guys freeze around me, the tension in the air skyrocketing.

“Get some sleep. After tomorrow you won’t be getting any for a while.” He heads off while the crowd gets louder and louder.

Malakai, Theon, Cyrus, and Knox stare at each other as if having some silent conversation.

“I’m starting to feel a little pissed that you don’t think I can take care of myself,” I tell them, wondering if I should go hang out with the winged males instead.

“Have you ever gone up against a group of terrigons?” Malakai says with not a drop of humor in his voice.

I open my mouth to point out the forest attack, but he beats me to it.

“Not younglings, actual adult terrigons?”

I’m about to say yes but realize that was my past and not the old Sena’s, and I’m not about to open up a whole spiel of questions and suspicion when we’re only starting to get along.

I shake my head, and he sighs. “I hate this,” he admits.

“We’ll do what we always do, look out for one another,” Cyrus says and glances at me. “That just includes you now too.”

“Let’s get some food and rest. We’ll need it,” Knox says and takes my hand again and we get moving.

With a full belly of food, I head into the tent after the others. The guys block the bathroom off so I can have it to myself to shower and change.

Beat after a long day of nothing but worrying about tomorrow, I have a quick shower and get dressed.

Heading outside, I immediately hear Knox.

“Get that butt into bed now,” he orders, pointing toward the bed between him and Cyrus.

And just because I like to completely ignore every and any order he gives, I head towards Theon instead.

He makes space for me instantly and pulls me into him.

“Why does he get cuddles?” Knox mumbles, making me smile at the annoyance in his voice.

I’m not doing anything with half a dozen strangers around us, but just the feel of him makes me feel so at ease.

It’s been like that since he opened up to me. Anytime I’m around him, I always feel safe and relaxed.

I pause and glance up at him. “You’re doing that, aren’t you?”

He gives me a questioning look, not understanding where my inner rambles have brought me now. “Making me feel calm,” I tell him, and he gives me a small smile. But it might as well be a full one with it reaching his eyes and making him so damn handsome.

It’s rare for Theon to smile, but when he does, it’s fucking devastating.

“You were worried. I wanted you to be able to sleep,” he whispers while sliding his hand up my back, making me feel more than just relaxed.

“It’s not the first time,” I tell him while trying not to moan at the feel of his touch.

His gaze turns teasing as if he knows exactly what he’s doing to me. “I like that I can make you feel good.”

I bite my lip, thinking of all the other ways he can make me feel good, and his eyes draw to it, darkening with heat.

Without warning, he leans down and kisses me, a long languid teasing kiss that makes me want to consume him.

He pulls away far too soon, licking his lips and staring at me like he’s lost for words.

“I can feel you. Feel your desire,” he groans low and husky. “Block me out, Sena or I’m going to have to kill everyone other than my bond when I make you scream my name.”

I shudder, and he groans again, dragging me closer to his body like he can’t get close enough.

It takes longer to focus with him wrapped around me, but I eventually shut him out.

Closing his eyes, he presses a kiss to my head. I listen as his breathing slowly evens out, along with his heartbeat. But even listening to the slow, steady beat doesn’t help me fall asleep.

My mind races from the heat of his body to the thought of tomorrow and the worries and fears that come along with it.

I feel like I've only drifted off when I hear a low, familiar giggle, and my gut churns, telling me something isn't right, instantly waking me up.

I listen out for where the sound came from and quickly figure out it's coming from the bathroom.

Slipping out from Theon's tangled limbs, I make sure he and the others are asleep before following the sound.

Using the small half wall to conceal me, I watch on as Arabella drags her eyes down a male's body. He has his shirt off and looks like he was about to head into the shower. I'd turn aback around and let them do whatever the fuck they had planned if not for the look in his eyes as he stares at her.

There's nothing but hate and disgust in his gaze. The same as Seth's.

But not only that, there's actual tears forming too.

"You killed him. Why the fuck would I want anything to do with you?!" he says.

Arabella smiles at him, a cruel smile that makes me want to punch her in the face. "And? We both know I can get away with anything I want. I already have. So, unless you want another of your friends to die, you're going to do exactly as I say." Her hand starts to move lower, and I see red.

I'm in front of her before I know it, grabbing her wrist and twisting it, snapping it with a crack. She opens her mouth to scream when I punch her straight in the nose, hearing another lovely crack.

She falls back to the ground, blood pouring from her now crooked, broken nose.

“You’ll fucking pay for that,” she whispers, a venomous glare on her face.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” I tell her getting down to her eye level.

“You’re going to stay away from anyone that doesn’t want your disgusting hands on them.

If you don’t, I’m going to break every fucking bone in your body.

And if that isn’t enough of a warning, I’ll start carving away at that face you think is pretty. ”

“You should’ve fucking died in the red zone,” she grits out, looking furious.

I freeze and narrow my eyes on her. “It was you.”

“You have no clue who I am,” she warns, but I’m well past fearing her or any other braindead female that thinks they can fuck me over again.

“I couldn’t give a flying fuck who you are.” I move forward and break her other wrist.

The male moves to the side of me, stopping me from going any further with a look. “She’s a companion for multiple Shadows including the general.” He glares at her. “She can’t be hurt by us, and she knows it.”

Arabella gasps in pain, holding her wrists close to her body. “You’ll pay for this.”

Instead of listening, I punch her again, “Next time I won’t stop.”

Her head rolls to the side, and she passes out.

I get to my feet, and the male looks at me with a frown.

“She’ll come after you for this,” he warns.

“Good,” I tell him. “I’ll be waiting.”

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A portal opens a few feet away from us, and Malakai catches me watching it.

“It only goes two ways. From here to the gray zone,” he tells me with an amused smirk. “And the portal that brought us here to the camps is also only a direct link. They won’t bring you anywhere else. You’re stuck with us whether you like it or not.”

I give him a teasing smile. “The family visits obviously were only two-way, and those little tests the commander does bring down the barrier. You never know, I might just find another way,” I tease while also being half serious.

He leans closer to me, his smirk growing wicked. “Run all you want, baby. But no matter where you go, we’ll find you.”

“If you’re playing hide and seek, I want an invite,” Knox says, appearing beside me. “I’m very good at hunting my prey.”

“And what will you do if you catch me?” I ask.

His smile grows wolfish. “Run and find out.”

A warm shiver slides down my spine in anticipation.

Knox moves closer to me. “You’re in my bed after this,” he says like it’s already a given. But he forgets. I don’t listen to his rules. So maybe he’ll have to hunt me down after all.

We step through the portal and straight into darkness as if the entire space is cloaked in shadows.

I stick with the guys as we make our way toward a colossal area of ruins. Large brick buildings that must have once been magnificent are now crumbling, without roofs and decaying to rot.

“Keep your eyes peeled for anything,” Theon says as we make our way inside.

“Remember, bullets will injure them but not kill. Use your weapon,” Cyrus says and points to one of the many black coated blades he gave me this morning. “Or call on one of ours.”

“Why here?” I whisper.

“The females are never out in the open. They’re guarded. Hidden. It’s more likely they’ll be among the ruins than anywhere else,” Malakai answers as his eyes scan the open building we are walking into.

It seems in every species; females are not to be messed with.

The more we move in among the ruins, the more the air feels stagnant and eerie. Almost foreboding.

Screams and gunshots ring out before chaos explodes around us. Terrigons appear from nowhere and strike, attacking everything in their path.

The guys move quick, placing me between them, their weapons and guns in hand.

I move beside them instead and ignore their glares.

“Aim for their chest. It will injure them enough to get the kill,” Malakai says.

I aim and shoot one of the smaller terrigons coming closer to us, hitting it directly in the chest. It goes down but tries to get up, so I keep shooting, ready to move toward it when a black blade flies past me and slams into it.

Following the blade’s return to its owner, I turn and glare at Malakai, but he’s too busy with a couple of larger terrigons. Instead of using his guns, he has his weapons in hand, each hit and strike brutal and savage. Like he wants each kill to be personal.

I glance around for the others and find Theon a few feet behind me, his long, dark shadows spread out around him and curling around a group of terrigons, holding them in place while he strikes each one down.

I find Cyrus next, moving like a ninja and slicing through the terrigons like they’re nothing.

And Knox... It takes me a couple of minutes to spot him, his dark shadows practically making him invisible to everyone. He moves almost too quick for my eyes to catch but leaves only death in his wake.

Each of their eyes flicker over to mine every now and again, making sure I’m okay while also stopping anything from reaching me.

Dozens of more terrigons flood the ruins around us, coming at us from every angle. The guys quickly get overwhelmed, but they soon gain ground, all holding their own.

A huge terrigon comes into view across from me on a broken rooftop. It has to be the female. Her body and head are twice the size of any I’ve ever seen.

I glance over at the guys to tell them but there’s no way they’ll get to her in time,

there's too many in their way.

She lets out a loud shriek before starting to move.

With most of the male Shadows distracting the other terrigons, I take my chance and head after her without a second thought, grabbing the long blade from my thigh and shooting and slashing a path directly to her.

“Sena! Get your ass back here!” Knox screams into my head making me wince.

“It's a female,” I tell him, still shooting until my gun runs out of bullets. I throw it to the side and keep running.

A strangled choke echoes through my mind. “That makes it fucking worse!”

“I'm not as weak as you think I am,” I tell him as I rush up along the wall after her. She doesn't see me coming, too focused on the male she seems to have zeroed in on.

I use her distraction to my advantage, whip out my second blade, and as she dives for the male Shadow, I dive for her, slamming my blades straight into her back before landing with a roll.

“I take it back...” Knox rasps. “That was fucking hot.”

I glance over to find him and Malakai right there, waiting. They rush her, using their long shadows to wrap around her and hold her still. But she digs her claws into ground and pulls hard, yanking their dark shadows off her.

She lets out another loud shriek, and within seconds, more terrigons appear around us, surrounding us. Using the distraction, she turns and heads off just as soon as they arrive.

Knox and Malakai head after her. I look for Theon and Cyrus but can't spot them among the mayhem.

"Stay with Cyrus!" Knox orders into my mind. But I can't find him anywhere.

A slash of burning flames slices down my back, making me gasp in pain. Before I get a chance to run, claws curl around me, yanking me backward.

The world tilts as the terrigon that has ahold of me runs with me in its grasp.

The ruins and sand start to blur as one. I know I need to get free from it soon or I'm dead. I reach down onto my thigh and find a small blade, silently thanking Cyrus for kitting me out with so many.

Grasping onto it, I wait until the terrigon gives me an opening before slamming it into its back. It drops me to the ground with roar.

I roll and roll feeling every rock and piece of dirt before finally stopping with a grunt.

Glancing up, I spot the terrigon claw at the blade in its back, trying to get it out. While it's distracted, I waste no time and stumble to my feet to make a run for it.

Pushing my feet to run faster, I run out of the destroyed building and right into the next. Only to freeze when hundreds of dark eyes land on me.

Terrigons. It's their nest. And I've just walked right into it.

Slowly, I take a step back but stop when I hear a sound from behind me.

Glancing over my shoulder, ice crawls down my back when I see the group of large terrigons block my only exit.

I'm surrounded with no way out.

They start moving toward me, slowly at first. It gives me enough time to focus and form a shadowy shield around me.

They quickly reach it, slashing and clawing at it. Two becomes a dozen and then more, all attacking it.

I feel each slice, each attack as if they're clawing away layers of my energy.

My body begins to tremble from trying to hold it up against them. Their attack becomes more vicious, more frenzied with dozens of terrigons trying to climb over others to reach me.

I glance up and around at the mass of creatures now surrounding me. At the hundreds all trying to get to me and past my shield.

There's no way out. But this can't be my end. Not now. Not after everything.

Energy from some place deep inside me rises up, brushing along my skin, making every sense heightened. It continues to build and build, powering the shield and holding it in place.

I let the energy take over, and the terrigons pause their attack as if sensing something is wrong.

Just as they start to back away, my body lights up and glows. I see nothing but white, and finally... I let go.

The energy blasts out of me, slamming into every terrigon before turning them to ash.

I drop to knees with a gasp. Panting, I try to catch my breath and glance around at the destruction I just caused.

Ashes. That's all that's left of them. There were hundreds of terrigons here a moment ago. And I just destroyed them all.

My relief is short lived when a low growl echoes from behind me and two terrigons appear.

Can't a girl get a damn break!

I get to my feet and tell my body it's not beyond exhausted as they head for me.

Just before they reach me, long shadows wrap around them, yanking them backward.

I glance over to find a winged male slam them both terrigons into the wall before attacking them.

My luck gets tested again when a third terrigon appears and rushes for me.

With no help coming this time, I quickly glance around for something I can use for a weapon when a long, white glowing blade appears in my hand.

The terrigon reaches me, and before I have time to think about it, I bend and roll out of the way of its claws before slamming the blade into its side.

Just like the white energy, the minute it touches it, it instantly turns to ash.

Getting to my feet, I glance around for any more hidden terrigons and finally relax when I spot none.

The glowing blade disappears just as the winged male appears in front of me.

“Are you okay?” he asks, his brows dipped with worry.

“I’m fine. Thank you for your help.”

He dips his head, his eyes scanning my face for something. “You’re?—”

“SENA!”

I glance around him to find the guys heading this way.

“I’m here,” I call out. And seconds later, I’m in Knox’s arms with them all around me. I ignore the slash of flames as his hands tighten on the cut on my back.

It’s lucky I have them all blocked out right now, or who knows what they might do.

“Fuck,” Knox breathes, holding onto me like a lifeline. “Don’t you ever fucking scare us like that again.”

I let myself finally feel safe and hold onto him a little tighter. I catch Theon’s frown as he watches me and enforce those barriers, making sure each is up.

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I check them all over, making sure they're all okay. But apart from some small cuts and bruises, they all seem fine.

A loud gong echoes around us, announcing the end of the first stage. But it will all be for nothing if they didn't get that head.

I pull back from Knox. "Did you get the?—"

"We got it." Cyrus holds up the head of the female terrigon. "Let's go."

"You can't," the winged male says, and they all stop to glare at him.

He stares at them calmly. "All Shadows that pass the first stage must go straight into the second if they want to compete in the war games."

They all glance at me with a varying expression of worry and fear.

"No females are required in this round," he says, making them relax. "My men will take her back to her tent."

"Like fuck they will," Malakai grits out.

The winged male raises a brow, still as calm as ever. "Would you prefer she meet a terrigon on the way?"

"We'll take her back." Seth and the other male I met last night with Arabella appears behind us. "We didn't make it through the first stage," Seth tells the guys before

glaring at the winged male. “And we look after our own.”

“Go. I’ll be fine,” I tell the guys.

“If anything happens to her...” Theon warns.

Seth swallows hard. “I’ll protect her with my life.”

“I don’t need—” I start, but Malakai gives me a cutting glare.

I roll my eyes at their dramatics. “Go. Or you won’t have to worry about the terrigons kicking your ass.”

My threat gets a smile out of them. Psychos .

They each place a kiss on my head or cheek before leaving.

I thank the winged male again, and he gives me a warm smile before narrowing his eyes on the two men behind me. Bending low, he flies up into the dark sky and disappears among it.

I head over to Seth and the other male Shadow, and we head back in silence. Both keep watch on the way to the portal, but no more terrigons jump out to attack us.

We make it through the portal and outside the tent when my name gets called.

Turning around, I find a tall man with tight, jet-black hair walking toward me.

Seth and the other male spot him and freeze before saluting to him.

“Dismissed,” he glares at them both and they quickly disappear inside the tent.

“Sena, is it?” He gives me a smile. One I don’t trust.

“Yes, and you are?” I ask, and his smile twitches.

“General Reed.”

“How can I help you, General?” I ask.

“There was an incident last night that I need to discuss with you. Follow me.” He turns without waiting for a reply, expecting me to follow.

I groan and wince at the slicing burn in my back. I really should get that seen to. Hopefully this won’t take long.

I follow him through the tents and look up too late to realize I’m walking through a portal. But I relax when I end up in another tent, though one far larger and more extravagant than any I’ve seen so far.

General Reed moves behind the large brown desk at the back of the tent and waits for me to step up to it.

“Can you tell me what happened? I’d like to hear your side of the story,” he says and then waits for an answer. But I haven’t a clue what he’s talking about.

I frown at him. “I don’t know what you’re referring to?”

“Arabella told me she was attacked. She said you and two male Shadows helped. If you tell me the name of the two Shadows, I’ll make sure this little incident doesn’t go near you,” he says with a smile.

Arabella... that bitch. Instead of just ratting me out, she’s trying to drag down those

males that won't give her the time of day. And I can tell from the look in General Reed's eyes that they're dead once I name them.

"Again, I don't know what you're talking about. Maybe this Arabella simply slipped and fell," I tell him giving him a deadpan look.

He narrows his eyes on me, losing his little fake pleasant expression.

"She had two broken wrists and a broken nose. I don't care about the little spat between females, just give me the names of the Shadows involved, and I'll let this slide," he promises.

I stare at him, letting him see how much I fucking despise him. "For the third time, I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

His entire expression changes, his eyes narrowing to slits. "Take her to isolation. Maybe a couple of days without food and water will jog your memory."

I didn't even hear the other two male Shadows come in. But I definitely feel them when they yank and shove me through a portal and close it behind me.

Glancing around I try not to panic at the small dark space, the only light coming from above. But it looks so far away that it barely touches me.

I glance around the space, trying to take note of anything I can use. But it's like someone dug a hole in the sand deep enough that no would be able to escape and changed the walls to a hard slippery form to ensure it.

Unless I grow wings and fly, there's no way I'm getting out of this.

Wiping the beads of sweat from my forehead, I pause when I realize how warm I am.

I sit down and try not to think of this overheated tight space but hiss when I lean back and a burn of flames slices up my back reminding me of my wound.

Shit . Two days without food and water would be doable if not for that.

It's probably infected. Which makes sense now why I'm starting to feel like I'm burning from the inside out.

Taking off a couple of layers, I use them to sit on and glance up at the sliver of light as I focus on Malakai.

Slipping into the bond, I jolt when a huge beast tries to swipe at my face.

Malakai's face. He doesn't sense me, too busy attacking every beast he comes across. He turns, and I spot the others all fighting dozens of beasts too. They look exhausted but keep fighting.

There's no way I can tell them about this. Technically I'm safe. At least from the terrigons. Whereas they're fighting for their lives. And a chance at something they've worked years for.

I pull back from the connection and block them all out, hoping they'll be out of there soon.

Moving so my side is at the wall instead of my back, I close my eyes, hoping sleep will come soon. And hopefully last at least a couple of days.

MALAKAI

We finish off the last of the dark beasts after what feels like days of fighting them.

“Let’s get out of here,” Theon says. “I want to get back to her. Something doesn’t feel right,” he says with a frown.

We move out of the edge of the black zone where the second test was. General Reed meets us halfway, a wide fake smile on his face.

“Congratulations, boys. I knew you wouldn’t let me down. Only four teams made it, but I have a feeling you’ll be the ones to bring us victory this year.”

“How many hours were we out there?” Knox ask, ignoring his attempt at kissing our asses. “It felt longer than usual.”

“Time works a little different on the edge. You were there 12 hours, so just over two days our time.”

Fuck . I share a worried look with the others.

“We need to go,” Cyrus says glaring at him.

“Of course. Get some rest. There will be a celebration tomorrow night. Make sure you’re all present. Commander’s orders.” He opens a portal for us, and we ignore his greasy smile and walk straight on through.

I head straight for the tent with the others right behind me.

The minute I walk in, I know something is wrong. Seth and Hawke are pacing the length of it, both looking like neither has slept in a week.

My stomach drops when I glance around but don't see Sena. "Where is she?" I grit out, my patience already wearing thin.

Seth jolts. "She was taken by the general the minute she got back. We've been trying to find her, but they put her in isolation and wouldn't tell us where."

I freeze as every inch my body thrums with rage. "When was this?"

Hawke grows pale. "Two days ago."

Storming out of the tent, I feel the others follow as I head straight for that fucking bastard of a general.

Lucky me, he walks right onto our path after coming out of a portal, a wide smile still on his face that I can't wait to fuck up.

I step forward and slam my fist into his face. He flies backward, landing on the ground as blood pours down his face.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" General Reed shouts, his face red with fury. "I'll have you for this?!" he shouts while trying to scramble to his feet.

Everyone Shadow around us steps back, not one of them daring to help him. They can sense what's going to happen and choose to back away slowly.

They're all afraid... Good... They should be.

“It’s kill or be killed. Isn’t that what you told us the first time you sent us to the Void?” Theon says as his shadows coil out around him, waiting.

Knox gives him a vicious grin. “The academy doesn’t like the weak,” he reminds him. The same words we were told when we just kids and sent to the Void.

“And you’re looking pretty weak right now,” I tell him.

He crawls backward from us. But he’s not getting away from us.

“Now... Where. The fuck . Is our mate?” I grit out.

“M-mate?” His eyes widen in horror.

Theon’s shadows uncoil around him and snap out before yanking him upward. His screams are music to my ears.

“Where. Is. She?” I ask one more time before I rip him apart along with everything else here.

Theon releases him just enough for him to answer.

“Blue zone,” he gasps. “Near the edge.”

I step forward, and hit him, again and again. I don’t stop until nearly every bone in his body is broken.

Someone very fucking smart gets a portal open for us, and we head straight into it while I barely contain my rage.

There’s about a dozen isolation holes in this area, so we break up and look in each.

That she's even in one of these makes my stomach twist into knots.

"Here," Theon calls out, and we all head over to him.

Glancing down, my fucking heart breaks. She looks so fucking frail. So tiny.

Theon starts to send his shadows down to her. "I won't hurt her," he promises and focuses as they move down to her and curl around her before slowly pulling her up.

Cyrus grabs her the minute she reaches the top and pulls her close to his body.

"She's trembling," Knox whispers and feels her forehead with a hiss. "She also has a fever."

Theon frowns. "How is she able to block us out like this? I can't feel anything from her."

"Something she's going to explain and get punished for..." I tell them with a look. "Later."

After she's healed and gets a drip full of fluids into her. Or ten.

"Cyrus, take her back." I share a look with Theon and Knox.

After we're done, she won't ever have to worry about this place again.

I wait until Cyrus has stepped through the portal with her before letting go. I unleash my rage, and the others join me. Our mass of dark shadows rip through the area, up turning every hole and destroying the entire place.

Instead of a dozen holes, there's now one huge open pit.

We leave it as it is and move through the portal and I head straight for the tent, needing to see her. To hold her and know that she's okay.

But the minute we come around the bend, I freeze when I spot the entire camp surrounded by a mass of dark shadows.

I reach out and touch one and instantly know what it is.

"Is this what I think it is?" Knox asks, already coming to the same conclusion.

"Cyrus' nightmare shadows." I give the others a look before stepping into them.

Screams and shouts echo around me in the darkness, followed by the sound of blades and grunts. But nothing touches us. We keep walking through to the direction of our tent. There are thicker shadows surrounding it. As if trying to protect it the most.

Heading inside, I find Cyrus with Sena in his arms, her body curled into him. I jolt back when he glances up at me and fear tries to take over.

His eyes. They're completely black.

It can't be the madness, I tell myself. We have a mate. It's not possible.

"Cyrus?" I call but he doesn't look at me. Instead, he glances down at Sena and frowns.

"We left her alone," he says, his voice cold and empty.

"It won't happen again," I promise him and her before making our way over to them.

Sena's eyes blink open, and I've never been happier to see those turquoise eyes in my

life.

“You’re in a lot of trouble,” I tell her, hoping she hears the anger in my voice and not the fear.

She winces and gives me a small, sad smile and it breaks something inside me knowing I fucking let her down. Again.

SENA

M alakai glares at me from down the table while Knox, Theon, and Cyrus do the same.

Apparently blocking out your mates to ensure they don’t get distracted and killed is a fucking crime.

While everyone around us is celebrating for those that made it into the war games, the four that actually did are sending me nothing but furrowed brows, squinted eyes, and expressions of irritation and rage.

“Why are your mates looking at you like they want to kill you?” Robin whispers, glancing from them to me.

“At this point, I don’t give a fuck.” I knock back my drink and try to ignore them. “I’m tired. I’m heading back to my tent,” I tell her.

“I’ll let you know if anything interesting happens,” she says as she glances across the way to the other celebration the winged shadows are having. One that looks a hell of a lot more fun than this side, with games and small competitions.

The minute I get up and start moving away from the table, my angry mates get up and

follow. But instead of walking beside me like normal people, they keep their distance, walking further behind me, and end up looking like my damn bodyguards... or stalkers.

I glance back and spot a couple of male Shadows stop them to congratulate them, but I keep moving.

“Straight to the tent,” Knox says into my mind. “You still have to receive your punishment.”

“Fuck you,” I tell them, even as an excited thrill runs down my spine at the thought of it.

Just before I make it to the tent, the winged male that helped me in the first trial steps in front of me. Two other winged males are by his side.

“I heard what happened. I wanted to make sure you were okay,” he says.

“I’m fine. Thank you.” I move around him, but he steps to the side stopping me.

“You didn’t look like you were having a good time. I can promise you; our celebration is much better. Come join us,” he says.

“I’m tired. Maybe another time.”

“We feel drawn to you,” he says, ignoring my words completely while moving a step closer as if he can’t help himself.

I freeze. “I have four mates that are a handful. I’m not interested in adding anymore.”

He chuckles. “It’s not like that. But I am more than willing.”

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Dakson?” Malakai growls, appearing beside me with the others.

Knox drags me back to him and the others step up around me.

Dakson’s entire demeanor changes, becoming more smug and cocky. “This poor female looked bored. We thought we’d offer her a chance to come to the better side of the celebrations.”

“This female is none of your fucking concern. Now get the hell out of my face before I make you unavailable in a permanent sort of way,” Theon says as his shadows leak from his body.

Fear flashes across the other two Shadow’s faces beside Dakson.

“If you change your mind, Sena. You know where to find us.” Dakson narrows his eyes on them and leaves before the guys follow through with their threats.

“I don’t understand why you’re all so fucking angry.” I head into the tent, happy that it’s empty for once and that the others won’t get front row seats to our little showdown.

“You should have told us what was happening instead of blocking us out!” Malakai shouts.

“You were fighting for your survival and trying to win a trial that you’ve been working years toward. I wasn’t going to mess that up,” I shout back.

Theon storms past me into the bathroom, slamming the door.

Knox steps forward and clenches his fists in front of me. “I can’t. Someone else deal

with her.”

Malakai glares at me. And Cyrus sits down on his bed with a heavy sigh.

Fuck them. Getting into bed, I cast the shield around me and block them all out.

They each try to break it, but I’m fueled on nothing but frustration and rage. There’s no way in hell they’re getting past it.

They soon realize this and get into their own beds instead, glaring over at me like this is all my fault.

I roll my eyes at them. “Will you all get in trouble?”

I catch Knox’s frown. “For what?”

“What you did with the general.” I heard it’s going to take him months to recover from what they did, even with the healing devices they have on hand.

“The general is lucky he’s still alive,” Malakai grits out.

“How do you get away with it?” I ask them and they look at me like they haven’t got a clue what I’m talking about.

“I get yanked into isolation for punching a girl in the face and you literally rip the camp apart, tear the hearts out of two other Shadows, and break nearly every bone in the general’s body.”

“Who did you punch?” Malakai asks, finally looking intrigued instead of angry.

Knox frowns. “Yeah, why are we only hearing about this now?”

I sigh. “That’s not the point. The point is that you all?—”

“They’re afraid of us,” Theon says, making me pause. He turns to me in his bed. “They sent us to the Void so often that the energy inside it melded with our own. They have no other punishment that they can enforce.”

I blanch and accidentally drop my shield. “Was that an option?” I glance between them all. “Sending you to the Void?”

Theon’s eyes soften. “No. They stopped sending us when we really came into our powers. It can’t harm us anymore.”

I lie back down and stare up at the black cloth. “Promise? I don’t want any of you to ever have to go back to that place.”

Silence spans out between us, and I’m too afraid to look at any of them to see their expressions. I now know what the old Sena did, and I need them to know that’s not something this Sena would ever do to them.

“Promise,” Cyrus says, and I nod, finally starting to feel a sliver of relief.

The threat hanging over my head from Sena’s family slowly loosens and falls away.

They lied. They had to have. And now I don’t have to give a shit about them or their threats.

“The academy is not for the weak,” Theon says, drawing my attention.

“It’s barbaric and cruel. They encourage fights between the Shadows.

Encourage animosity, hoping it will bring out the strong and squash out the weak.

If you're weak, you're dead. That goes for females too.

"He raises a brow. "If you think the females have it hard, you should see what they put the males through when they start here."

And they have no other choice. A heavy weight sits on my chest thinking about what they've gone through.

"Stop worrying and get some sleep," Knox says, and I hear him moving around in his bed. "We're back in the academy tomorrow and you still have an obstacle course to pass if you want any of those privileges."

Malakai chuckles. "And now with no instructor, we will be the ones to train you."

I narrow my eyes on him. "You wouldn't happen to know what happened to Instructor Dick, would you?"

"Not a clue," he says with a savage smile. And I don't believe a word of it.

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“ If you don’t complete this course in ten minutes or less, your mates will not be allowed to compete in the war games.”

The sun beats down my back as the Shadow instructor’s words play over and over in my head as I push my body to keep moving through the assault course.

Apparently being mates makes us a team. And as a team we all have to pass our trials and tests.

But I know it’s really payback for what they did to General Reed. And even though they annoy the hell out of me, I can’t take another thing away from them. Not when it was technically my fault they went after the general.

I’ve slacked on my training the last while, but I know I can do this. It’s just ten minutes, and I can already do it in twelve. If I keep practicing every day and build up my endurance, I can cut it down to ten easily.

At least that’s what I tell myself the third go around. But I still can’t get it down even half a minute.

It’s not crawling through the trip wires, nets, and tunnels that’s holding me back. Or balancing on the stepping stones and balance beam. Or climbing the sloped and high walls.

It’s the jungle ropes after the two-meter-deep pit of water and mud that always slows me down.

After the first time, the ropes are too slick with mud, and the obstacle is nearer to the end, making it harder to finish with exhaustion setting in.

While trying to slow my breathing down, I sip on some water and try to figure out a way to make myself faster on the other obstacles. Maybe if I?—

“Why are you pushing yourself so damn hard?” Knox shouts over to me, making me jolt.

I glance over, spotting the four of them heading my way, and keep my groan to myself.

They reach me in minutes, all staring from my sweating body to the obstacle course behind me.

Theon frowns. “You’ve been at this for hours every day since we came back. Why?”

I shrug not wanting to tell them. I still need to pass this to get my privileges, but if they knew the real reason I was pushing so hard, they’d just freak out and it will only bring us more trouble.

“I want to pass it.”

Knox is the one to frown now. “You want those privileges this bad?”

“I didn’t grow up in the academy. I feel like I just woke up here one day without a choice. I want to see the normal world. So yeah, I want those privileges.”

Malakai must see something in my expression, because instead of blowing up like he normally does, he nods. “Okay.” He turns and heads over to the start of the obstacle course. “Let’s go.”

“What are you doing?” I ask as they all start heading towards the start of the course.

“Let’s do it together,” Cyrus says. “Technically we’re supposed to be training you anyway.”

“I don’t know. The last time you all told me you were going to train me, I ended up in a pit of mud and left alone in the forest,” I remind them, making sure they never forget.

Instead of feeling any type of remorse or regret like they should, they smile like it’s a fond memory. While Knox outright laughs.

I move over to them just as a mischievous expression spreads across Knox’s face. “I find the best way to stay motivated is with rewards. So, let’s make it interesting.” His eyes flicker to the others before finding mine. “What do you say, Sena? Up for a little game?”

I narrow my eyes on him. “Depends. Are you going to trick me again?”

Cyrus smiles. “We promise you the only tricks we have up our sleeve are those you’ll enjoy.”

I was probably going to regret this. But... “Fine. What’s the rules? Also, you have to make it harder for you four. I’ve seen you work through your obstacle course. And this is like a baby in comparison.”

Knox thinks on it for a minute. “You get a head start. And we have to do it twice.”

Okay. That seems doable. I nod. “What happens if I don’t beat you all?”

He tries to hide his cocky smirk with the others. But fails miserably. “You have to

spend two hours with whoever wins and do whatever they want.”

That could literally be anything.

“It won’t involve anything that would hurt you. Or anything we think you wouldn’t enjoy,” Cyrus amends, making me feel slightly better about the mistake I’m about to make.

“What do I get?” I ask.

“What do you want?” Malakai asks.

“How about two hours from each of you, to do whatever I want?” I have four mates; it would be unfair of me to only choose one.

They all give me an amused look but agree to my terms.

“Fine. Any other rules?” I ask.

“Nope,” Knox says with an excited expression on his face.

Stepping up to the start of the obstacle, I take off my baggy top to reveal the small, tight sports bra underneath.

Muttered curses and groans ring around me, making me smile. They’re already distracted, and I need an advantage.

Just as I’m about to start, I hear the rustle of clothes. Glancing over, I freeze when I spot all four guys taking off their tops, leaving their god-like bodies on display.

Wolfish grins spread across their faces when they see me watching.

“We’re all about equality. Since you were gracious enough to give us something hot to look at, we thought we’d return the favor,” Knox says.

“You think you’re all hot?” I ask, raising a brow while trying to be subtle about checking them out.

“I don’t need to. Your eyes are fucking me right now,” he smirks.

I guess I wasn’t so subtle after all.

Trying to ignore them, I turn and make a run for it and climb over the tilted wall, get past the stepping stones and balancing beam, and start my crawl under the trip wire before they start moving.

I make it under the trip wire and head under the start of the thick crawling net next when I feel something behind me.

There’s no way... A hand touches my leg, making me pause. A body slides up and over me while making me feel every hard inch of it.

I bite my lip, trying to stop the groan from slipping past my lips.

“Don’t mind me,” Malakai whispers, his voice husky. He pauses when his body is completely over me and then drops and grinds into me with a chuckle and a whispered ‘fuck’.

Leaning down, he whispers in my ear. “You’d want to get moving or those two hours are mine ,” he growls, and it sends a shiver of anticipation down my spine.

“Good to know, baby,” he whispers and places a kiss on my head before lifting his body and climbing over me.

I snap out of my heated daze and get moving before any of the others try the same thing.

Heading for the high wall, I find a grip and get moving. Just as I take my next step, a hand coils around my ankle, stopping me.

I glance down to find Cyrus wearing a heated look before he climbs up over me. Just like Malakai, he leans into me, making sure I feel every hard inch of him, including his very large, hard length as it sits against my ass.

“There’s a whole damn wall beside you,” I remind him while trying to think of anything other than him, his giant dick, and the way my body is becoming overheated.

He leans into me, his length brushing along my ass, making me gasp.

“But you’re not over there,” he breathes before placing a kiss on my neck and climbing up over me.

They’re working together. They have to be.

I eventually get up over the wall and move onto the long tunnel before coming out to the dreaded mud pit and freeze. It’s a lot muddier than it was a moment ago. As if someone filled it with water. It looks a little deeper too.

I glance around looking for the others. It had to be one of them.

Groaning to myself, I bend down and drop into it. I make it to the other side, about to climb up and over the lip when hands curl around me from behind before sliding up and down my body.

Fuck. These men are going to be the death of me.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I ask, but my voice comes out all breathy.

“Just returning the massage you gave me,” Knox says with an innocent smile.

I narrow my eyes on him, not believing a word as he chuckles. I miss the mischievous glint in his eyes a second too late as he drags me back to the start of the pit and makes a run for it.

“You cheater!” I call out as I try to rush after him.

“We already declared the rules,” he shouts from over his shoulder. “You should have been more specific.”

I quickly glance around looking for all of them. Malakai and Cyrus are sabotaging one another, trying to get ahead of the other, but wear huge grins as they do it while Knox rushes through the rest of the obstacles like it’s nothing to him before rounding back to the start.

But I don’t spot Theon anywhere.

Blocking them all out, I focus on finishing off the end of the course. I may not have made it in the ten minutes I’m supposed to when getting through this, but there’s no way I’m going to let them win this little bet.

I swipe my hands down my leggings, trying to wipe as much of the mud off as I can before climbing the wooden steps up to the jungle of ropes.

Balancing on the sliver of rope, I grab onto each knotted rope hanging above and move as quickly as I can.

I'm halfway there, already seeing myself making it when long dark shadows whip out and coil around my arms and legs stopping me, holding me in place.

I glance behind me to find Theon making his way towards me, a wicked grin on his face.

I'm overheated from all their teasing, frustrated at myself for not doing better, and annoyed that they all do this with ease while I struggle on each step.

"You're all fucking cheaters!" I tell him, and he chuckles as he easily makes his way to me.

His shadows slowly slide up and around my legs to my thighs. The ones around my arms snake up and around my shoulders before curling down and under my breasts.

I'm so distracted by the slight brush of pain and pleasure they bring that I don't realize how close Theon is until he's standing right behind me.

"You like that, don't you?" he whispers as the shadows on my thighs slowly move upward. "You like that fine line of pain and pleasure."

"Theon..." I gasp as his shadows curl around my breasts and tighten.

"I love it when you say my name, but I can't wait to hear you scream it," he growls.

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I grip on to the rope tighter as he leans down and licks a path up to the back of my ear before biting it, making me gasp.

He moves around me with ease, releasing his shadows while I try to gain control over my body.

With every limb trembling, I somehow make it to the other side and climb down.

I glance around, glaring at the four hot teasers, each of them moving through the obstacles like they're on a damn kid's playground.

There's still a couple of obstacles left, and Malakai and Cyrus are gaining ground on me. It won't be long before they reach me.

I glance around, trying to think of something I can do to slow them down, when the thought of my shield pops into my head.

I've never used it outside of myself. But maybe...

Reaching down inside me, I focus on the energy of the shield but imagine it outside myself instead.

A huge smile spreads across my face when I see it come to life in front of me instead of forming around me.

Pushing it back behind me, I make it larger and larger, curling and blocking the last couple of obstacles after I make my way through them.

“What the?—”

I keep moving, rushing through them while holding the shield in place.

Raising my fist in the air when I pass the last one, I yelp when I’m lifted and placed on Malakai’s shoulders.

“Our girl has won. Meaning she gets two hours with each of us,” he says. But instead of any of them looking disappointed, they smile thinking they’ve won this. But I never said what I wanted them to do in those two hours.

“Maybe I just need my shower cleaned,” I tell them.

Knox smirks, his eyes trailing up and down my body. “I could use a shower. Might as well clean it while I’m there.” He nods, and his eyes find mine, the hunger and heat in them unmistakable. “But I’ll need someone to oversee my work.”

Theon shoves him with chuckle, and I shake my head.

“You were all supposed to help me train not distract me.” I try to glare at them but there’s no real heat to it.

Even though they ruined my training session and haven’t helped me get any closer to cutting down my time, I had fun.

And it’s the first time I’ve felt this light and happy in a long while.

Malakai leaves me where I am on his shoulders, and I don’t object, already feeling exhaustion setting in.

Knox shrugs as we get moving into the forest. “Well then, you shouldn’t have taken

off your top. Next time, wear old baggy clothes if you want us to act all serious.”

I laugh and roll my eyes at his thought process.

“When did you learn how to create the shield outside of yourself?” Cyrus asks.

“Just now,” I admit, and his brows raise.

“Fuck, that’s impressive,” Knox says and looks like he means it.

“Really?”

He nods. “It took us years to learn how to control our shadows. Those first few months were frustrating as hell.”

“Well, I guess that’s one thing. You’re all able to move through that obstacle course like it’s nothing to you.” I start thinking about how I’m going to need to come back here later to get in some more practice when Malakai squeezes my thighs trying to get my attention.

“We’ll help you,” Malakai promises.

I glance over at the others as they watch me.

“Properly this time,” Theon says with a smirk.

Knox turns around, walking backwards. “But when you win your privileges, we’ll be the ones taking you out of the academy.”

I smile. “Deal.”

The day of the obstacle test comes way too quick. The guys stuck to their promise and trained with me every day. By the third day I hit ten minutes, and by the seventh, I hit nine.

When they're not trying to distract me or piss me off, they're actually not bad instructors.

Feeling more than ready for this obstacle test, I stand beside Robin and wait to find out when I'll be taking my turn but wince when I hear my name called in the last group when I was hoping I could get this over and done with soon.

Moving to the side, I watch the other girls move through the obstacle course. None of the guys are here or anyone other than the small group of instructors and girls.

All Shadows were told its off limits, to prevent any distractions. I guess that's a good thing in my case, considering any one of my four walking into a room now distracts me.

Releasing a deep breath, I focus on the obstacle course and why I need to pass it today no matter what.

I can't let the guys down. They still don't know about the new little rule of us all having to pass our tests for them to qualify in the war games.

Hopefully they won't kill me when I tell them after this either.

The first couple of girls pass while the next three barely make it. The fourth and fifth fail by two minutes and the six by three.

Robin is right before me. She starts heading through them with a fierce look of determination on her face. She heads onto the jungle rope and gets through it quicker

than I expected but slips near the end, snapping the rope completely off.

My stomach drops but eases when she holds on tighter to the rope and swings the rest of the way before climbing down the steps.

Rushing through the last couple of obstacles, she passes the finish line and glances up at the timer with a wide smile on her face.

9:01. She made it. And now hopefully I will too.

A loud whistle rings out. “Two-minute break to fix the rope.”

Robin comes over to me with a happy expression.

“Well done. You cut off a whole minute,” I tell her.

Her smile widens. “Good luck.”

The two-minute break passes quickly, and my name gets called.

I move over to the start of the obstacle course and drown out everything around me. The horn rings out, and I run for the tilted wall, getting over it in seconds to the stepping stones. Keeping my focus, I move onto the balance beam but pause when it starts to sway.

Thinking I’m probably just feeling a little dizzy, I get moving again but have to slow down when it starts to sway again.

What the hell?

I get moving while trying to keep my balance. It takes longer than I would have liked

with the beam swaying from side to side but I pass it without falling and quickly bend down and start my crawl through the trip wire.

My back brushes against the wire and a sharp burst of pain spears through me making me hiss. Moving again, I try to ignore it, but it happens again and again every time I accidentally touch off it.

Lowering my body to the ground, I keep moving, not willing to give up.

Getting up, I shake off the sting of pain and head for the high wall. I move closer to it but pause when I find small spikes all over it.

My stomach churns. It's not hard to figure out what's happening here. Someone sabotaged it.

I immediately slam down the barriers between me and my mates. If they find out what's happening, this will end, along with it their chance in the war games.

Gritting my teeth against the sharp slices of pain in my hands, I keep moving and make it over the wall in no time. Getting to my feet, I slide my hands down my trousers trying to wipe the blood away before heading for the long tunnel. But as soon as I enter it, I know something is wrong.

It's dark. Completely dark and covered in shadows.

My gut tells me to turn the fuck around and not be stupid. But my head and heart tell me I need to finish this no matter what.

Ignoring my instincts, I rush forward but gasp and still when cold steel slashes across my legs and back, leaving a fiery burn of pain in its place.

Catching myself from falling, I try to push the pain to the back of my mind and get moving when I realize there's something or someone else in here with me. And that someone is going all out to sabotage me and the guys.

The sliver of anger inside me grows to a pit of rage and explodes out of me in a burst of light.

I hear a gasp as I make my way out of the tunnel, but I blank everything around me as I move to the pit.

Jumping in, I rush as fast as I can to the other side.

But halfway there, mud coils around my ankles trying to stop me from moving any further.

I glance down and try to wiggle it free when a sharp sting slams into my ankles over and over.

I hiss and bend forward. Fuck that hurts.

Allowing myself to fall into my continuously building rage, something almost shifts inside me. Like another part of my mind awakening. I glance down and somehow see through the mud to the dozens of black snakes coiling around my legs.

A rush of energy slides down my body as an almost out of body experience happens and I watch on as more energy rushes out of me in small pulses into the muddy water, instantly killing the snakes.

The pain almost disappears, but I know that all of my injuries are still there.

As if on autopilot, I get out of the mud and head for the jungle ropes, my eyes

narrowing when I spot the slimy substance on the hanging knotted ropes and the fraying ends of the long ones.

Glancing down at my hands, I watch on in awe as tiny shadows cover my palms.

I climb up to the ropes and grab the first one, smiling to myself when the tiny shadows on my palm dig into the knot like nails giving me the grip I need.

Pushing my body, I nearly make it to the end when the strange out of body experience slowly starts to fade, bringing back every slice of pain. Every bruise and ache.

I gasp but keep moving. Dragging my trembling body to the end.

The rope snaps and breaks away just as I make it.

Heading down the steps, I rush through the last couple of obstacles in a blur and with nothing but the last of my adrenaline rushing through me before glancing up at the timer.

9:59. I made it. Just .

Relief rushes through me, and black spots slide across my vision as every ounce of adrenaline from my body disappears.

“Sena!” someone screams as my knees hit the ground followed by my body just as darkness completely takes my vision.

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They still haven't found who tampered with the obstacle course, but it was more than likely one of the girls. I heard Stacey and her group needed therapy after being stuck underground for a couple of days.

They must have had help by their companions or other Shadows though. There's no way they could have created those shadows in the tunnel otherwise.

I push it to the back of my mind and focus on the four angry men around me in my room. I'm already healed and safe, but they just found out about the little rule of me having to pass the obstacle course for them to continue on in the war games.

"That's why you wanted to pass it, isn't it? It wasn't just the privileges," Cyrus asks, a strange look on his face that I can't decipher.

"I still want those privileges," I tell them and clear my throat. "But I also know how hard you worked to get into the war games. I couldn't chance taking that away from you."

Silence stretches out around me, and I chance a glance at them, finding Knox and Theon frowning, Cyrus looking almost sad while Malakai looks downright pissed.

"I want to strangle you," Malakai grits out.

I roll my eyes at him. "After you feed me and let me take a shower and nap."

Knox cracks a smile, earning a glare from Malakai.

“We’re a team now, right?” Theon asks, and I swallow hard before nodding. “Then that means you talk to us. We have your back as much as you have ours.”

I sigh. “I didn’t know someone sabotaged the obstacle course. Robin went on right before me, and all of it was fine. Besides, I was going to tell you...” I wince. “ After it was over.”

Theon narrows his eyes on me. “Next time tell us as soon as you find out.”

“I’m trying,” I tell them with nothing but honesty in my voice. “I’m learning to trust you all as much as you are me. But sharing everything isn’t something I’m used to. It’s going to take a minute.”

“We’ll try to be better too,” Cyrus promises and then sighs, sharing a look with the others. And I can tell there’s something they’re hesitant to tell me.

“What now?” I ask with a groan.

“Your brother is here,” Theon says.

I freeze. “Why?”

“He said he missed his little sister and wanted to see her,” Knox says rolling his eyes.

More like terrorize. Then I remember they lied about sending my mates to the Void and that they no longer have any hold over me. And it’s about time they figured that out too.

I shove my blankets off me and throw on some clothes. “Let’s get this over with.” Heading downstairs, I hear someone follow me and glance over my shoulder to find Malakai glaring at me. We pass the kitchen, making it to the door before he speaks.

“I don’t trust him,” he says, clenching his jaw.

“That makes two of us,” I tell him before opening the door. He stops me before I head out, gripping my chin and tilting my face up to his.

“Stay close to the house,” Malakai orders before dipping down and brushing his lips across mine and kissing me but pulling back just as quick.

“Since you asked so nicely.” I lick my lips and watch his eyes zero in on my tongue, his gaze growing hungry.

He moves toward me, but I step back with a smile.

He shakes his head at me but looks a little more relaxed than a moment ago. “Be careful.”

“I’m not the one you should be warning,” I tell him with a confidence I shouldn’t have. But it gets the reaction I was hoping, and he chuckles as I head outside to the forest.

It takes me a couple of minutes, but I eventually find the dickhead leaning against a tree, looking like he hasn’t a worry in the world.

He sees me coming and steps out from the shadowed spot, moving toward me. “You better have found what we’re looking for or?—”

I keep moving and don’t stop until I’m in front of him, punching him in the face, breaking his nose.

Staggering back, he stumbles over a branch and falls to the ground, glaring up at me with nothing but venom in his eyes.

“You’re going to pay for that, you stupid little bitch,” he snarls.

“I’m not the old Sena you knew. Go find someone else to play mind games with.”

He gets to his feet and starts toward me but pauses when I don’t look like I’m about to back down or run off frightened. “You’re different.”

“Glad you noticed. Now get the hell way from me,” I warn him.

“I already know you lied about my mates being sent to the Void, so you have nothing to use on me. Tell dear mother and father they also can go fuck themselves. Preferably far, far away from me. From here on out, I want nothing to do with any of you.” I turn to walk away when he chuckles, making the hairs on my arms stand up.

“You’re going to listen to me, or I’ll tell your little mates and everyone here about the little secret we’ve kept so long for you,” he says with far too much smugness in his tone.

I whip around to him. “What secret?”

He gives me a vicious smile in reply, and it crawls down my back like ice.

“We were paid so much money to hide you and what you are.” His eyes flicker to mine, and I try to mask the spear of shock that rushes through me. “You’re not actually blood related to us,” he reveals.

“Thank fuck,” I tell him, and he glares at me.

“You don’t belong here,” he says, and I freeze.

“What do you mean? Are you trying to tell me I don’t have any Shadow DNA?”

Because my shield and other strange abilities would beg to differ.

He rolls his eyes. “You do. But it’s not this academy you belong to.”

Relief fills me. “It doesn’t matter. I’m here now. So, take your?—”

He whips out a vial with sparkling water and flings some of the water on me.

“What was...” I start, but gasp when a slicing pain shoots from my back just before huge white wings slice two large cuts through my top and fan out around me.

Wings... I have wings. They’re beautiful. Soft and feathery. But also fucking large and heavy.

“As you can see, you have wings.” The dick points out as I stare at them in silent shock.

“Why did they send me here? Why not send me to the other academy from the start?” I ask, while trying not to spiral into a pit of panic.

He shrugs, his expression indifferent. “We were told to.”

“By who?” I press, hoping for some type of information that’s useful.

“We don’t know, nor do we care.” He sprinkles me with the vial of sparkly water again, and I gasp as the wings retract and slide back into my back, disappearing once more.

“You think your mates won’t care if they find out you belong with their enemies?” he asks.

Not only will they care, but it will also probably destroy them.

I glance at him, and he smiles at me like he's already won. And I hate to admit it, but I think he has too. At least when it comes to this.

Looking all too happy with himself, even with a broken nose, he steps closer to me. "Now. This is what we're going to do..."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:03 pm

“ I did most of the work. All you have to do is get the device.”

Tyler’s words flash across my mind as I make my way toward the main building. It might have the device I am supposed to steal, but I still have to get into the commander’s office, find the safe, and break into it.

Apparently only those with Shadow DNA can enter his office. Something Tyler and the two parentals that raised the old Sena do not have.

Luckily, I have the night on my side and the darkness to cover me.

I make it to his office without anyone stopping me. Or so I thought.

Sloane walks towards me, her eyes on the file in her hand. Before I get a chance to turn around or find a place to hide, she looks up and spots me. “Sena. What are you doing here?”

I glance around trying to think of something and say the first thing that pops into my mind. “I was supposed to meet one of the girls downstairs, but she went to the toilet and never came back.” I force a frown. “I was just looking for her.”

Sloane mimics my frown. “Who is it? Let me help you look for her.”

“It’s Robin,” I tell her, knowing Robin is already tucked up in bed by now, having met her on the way over here.

Sloane glancing down the hall. “I?—”

“I’ll take that way,” I quickly tell her before faking a fearful glance down the other.
“There were a few male Shadows I’m not familiar with down that way.”

“Of course.” She reaches out and pats my hand. “Don’t worry. I’m sure she’s fine.”

I smile and nod to her and wait until she turns the corner before heading down the hall and straight for the commander’s office. I reach for the handle, hoping by some string of luck it’s open. And as soon as my hand touches the handle and keypad, it clicks and opens.

I guess luck really is on my side tonight.

Glancing up and down the hall, I make sure no one is around before heading inside.

I look around trying to find a safe. But there’s no missing it. It’s smack dab in the center of the left wall. I don’t know how I missed it last time I was here. But I guess I wasn’t really looking for it either. I just wanted to get the hell away from Talos.

I move toward it and raise my hand like I did the door. But after a minute of standing there and nothing happening, I realize that isn’t going to work a second time.

Narrowing my eyes on it, I run my hand along it and try to figure something else out to open it when the safe opens with a pop. But not before shooting out sharp daggers from somewhere in the wall beside it.

My shadowy shield bursts out of me, almost instinctually and blocks every one of them.

With a sigh of relief, I grab the only small rectangular gray device inside, close the safe and get out of there as fast as I can.

I make it outside to the start of the forest before I glance back to see if I've been followed. And relax when I spot no one behind me.

I turn back when a hand yanks me to the side and grabs the device from my grip.

Finally realizing it is Tyler, I shove him back and step away from him.

He chuckles as he stares from the device to me. "Good job, sis."

"Fuck off. Take the device with you and don't ever come near me again," I warn him.

"You got it." He turns to leave but then stops and turns back around to me with a savage grin. "Just one more thing." Reaching into his pocket, he takes his phone out and presses something. Seconds later, a loud, blaring alarm goes off.

Fear slams into me, nearly freezing me to the spot. "What did you do?" I ask as dozens of male Shadows rush out from every direction.

I turn to head into the forest when a splash of water hits me. Wiping it from my eyes, I find Tyler shaking the little bottle of sparkling water in his hand before slamming it down and smashing it in front of me.

"No more hiding, sis. It's time they see the real you." He chuckles, backing away as pain slices down my back, making me gasp.

I drop to my knees as he disappears, cursing him to hell and back.

"There's something over here," a male voice shouts, heading in my direction.

I try to move, but my wings have decided to make a slow, painful exit this time, making it impossible to do anything but wait.

“SENA!” Theon shouts from somewhere behind me.

Shit. I must have dropped my barriers to them.

I try to stop them, to create a barrier around me or just move. But nothing works. Nothing, because I’m panicking as I hear everyone move closer and closer.

I hear the rustle of footsteps around me just as my wings pop out and open wide. And this time they don’t just slice long slits in my tops, they shred it, along with my bra.

“Sen...” Knox whispers.

“What the fuck?!” Malakai says.

Wrapping my arms around my chest, I stare at the ground, not able to look at any of them, knowing I’m nothing but the enemy now.

One they more than likely hate.

I jolt as a dark shadow crosses my vision. A large jacket slides over the front of me, covering me, and I glance up finding Theon’s gaze on me. But I quickly avert my eyes, not wanting to see the hate in his.

“Look the fuck away. Now ,” Malakai grits out from somewhere beside me.

Someone helps me to my feet, and I spot the tattoo on his arm and figure out it’s Knox.

“Sena...” he starts, but someone clears their throat.

“Please come to my office, Sena,” Commander Talos’ voice calls out. “It seems we

have much to discuss.”

Shit. He’s going to find out about the device now too.

Keeping the jacket backward, I slide my arms into the sleeves and keep my eyes down as I make my way back toward the main building and office.

From the corner of my eyes, I spot Malakai and Theon on one side of me with Knox and Cyrus on the other.

The rest of the Shadows follow us but keep a wide berth from the angry four beside me.

We step into the office, and I wait for the shouts or accusations to start but nothing comes.

“You four wait outside,” Talos orders making the four of them freeze. I spot clenched fists and tense bodies.

“Sir—” Malakai starts. I glance up to find Talos giving him a sharp look. One that makes them turn to me before leaving.

Talos opens his mouth to say something when a portal opens inside the room and an older man around the same age as Talos steps through with Dakson by his side. Dakson’s eyes widen when he spots me and my wings.

Talos grows stiff, his eyes narrowed with instant animosity toward whoever this man is.

“Levington. What are you doing here?” Talos bites out.

Levington's brown eyes flicker to me and soften before looking back at Talos with nothing but hostility.

"We got a call that one of our own accidentally ended up here. I'm here to rectify that," he says.

"May I enquire who told you this?" Talos snarls.

Levington smiles. It's not a nice smile and probably one as vicious as many others I've come across. But there's something in his eyes. Something soft and protective that almost makes me want to trust him.

"I'll keep that information to myself for now," he replies.

"Of course you would," Talos grits out.

"Sena?"

I jolt, realizing they're talking to me, and glance up at Talos. He smiles at me probably trying to come across as pleasant in some way, but it comes out all wrong and fake. "Can you explain?"

I glance down at my hands. "I didn't know..." I swallow hard. "I didn't know about the wings. They just... popped out," I tell them while keeping the tidbit of my fake brother throwing some sparkly water on me to reveal them to myself.

I catch Levington frown. "We haven't had a female Alita since before the war. It's possible she had some recessive gene that awakened with her bond."

"If that's the case, there could be others," Talos says with a far-off look.

Lexington's eyes flicker to his and narrow. "Sena? Dakson will show you how to retract your wings. I'd like to discuss something with the... commander if you wouldn't mind taking it to the other side of the room."

Dakson tilts his head in the direction we should go while watching the commander and Lexington with a worried look.

Once we're on the other side of the room and Lexington and Talos are attempting to be civil, Dakson focuses on me, giving me a questioning look.

"Sena..."

"Just show me how to make them go away..." I glance at him. "Please ." I don't want to talk or think about anything else. And he must see that on my face as he sighs but nods.

"Try and relax first," he says.

I narrow my eyes on him, and he smiles. "Close your eyes, drown everything around you out."

"Easy for you to say," I huff. "You didn't just pop out wings in front of everyone."

"I was seven when mine came in. Right in the middle of my first kiss. She was human too and had never met a Shadow before." He squints. "I think I may have scarred her for life."

I frown. "Why would you think?—"

"Can you imagine it? Black wings appearing from nowhere. Me growling out in pain..." He shakes his head with a small smile. I guess he wasn't too hurt by it. "She

probably thought I was a demon or death.”

I smile, and he glances at me, his eyes softening. “Close your eyes. Breathe.”

Realizing what he’s done, I give him a grateful look before closing my eyes and try to block out everything. My mates and their anger. My fears and worries. Talos and Lexington’s harsh murmurs and instead focus on each breathe.

In. Out. In. Out.

The thump, thump of my heart slows down and everything starts to fade away.

“Now imagine your wings slowly drawing back into to the center of you,” Dakson whispers. “Imagine them disappearing completely.”

I focus, and after a minute, I start feeling a tug, but it disappears as soon as it came.

“Good,” he says, and I open my eyes and glance over my shoulder, my eyes widening when I see they’ve disappeared.

“That’s it?” I ask, feeling shocked that it was as simple as that.

Dakson smiles at me. “Keep practicing, and it will get easier and easier.”

“But if you can retract them so easily then why did you all have them out in the War Camps?” I ask.

His smile turns mischievous. “To show the other Shadows just how lacking they are without pretty wings.”

I wince, and he chuckles. I guess their hearing isn’t so bad either.

“It’s settled,” Levington says, gaining our attention. “Sena will stay here until the war games are over and then come to our academy.”

Levington glares at Talos. “Her mates will also join her.”

My stomach drops and twists as Levington and Dakson leave, both sending me small smiles that I guess are supposed to assure me everything will be okay. But not an ounce of my body feels it.

“Go to your mates,” the commander orders, no longer faking any more kindness. I glance over at him to find him as stiff as a board, his eyes filled with nothing but rage. “I doubt they will find moving to their enemy’s territory something enjoyable.”

I make my way out of the office as guilt seeps through me with his words, nearly consuming me whole.

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We walk in silence from the main building to the house, but the entire time my thoughts and worries are loud. So loud it's all I can think about.

As soon as we are inside, I try to sneak away to my room, but Malakai calls out, stopping me.

"Why didn't you tell us?" he asks.

My shoulders drop, realizing I'm going to have to get it over with and have this conversation now.

I turn around and finally look at them all. Each of them has a myriad of emotions slashed across their faces. The main one being anger.

"I honestly didn't know," I tell them with a harsh sigh.

"We're supposed to just believe that you didn't know you have fucking wings?" Knox glares at me.

I stop myself from snapping back at him, realizing I'm at fault here too.

"Tyler told me about them and then was able to reveal them to me to prove it. And then he threatened to reveal them to everyone else if I didn't go along with his little plan," I reveal.

"Your brother?" Cyrus asks, and I nod before frowning.

“Well technically we’re not actually related. He mentioned something about me basically being adopted.” Thank fuck.

“What plan?” Malakai asks, ignoring my little reveal to narrow his eyes on me.

I clear my throat and wince. “The one where I slipped into the commander’s office and stole a device for him.”

Knox opens his mouth but then closes it, while the others all look at me like they want to throttle me.

“Do you realize how dangerous—” Theon starts, but Malakai cuts him off.

“So, Tyler shows up, tells you he’ll reveal your wings if you don’t sneak into the commander’s office and steal a device?”

I nod. “Pretty much.”

Malakai clenches his jaw. “You should have trusted us when you found out.”

I should have. But I was scared. Scared they’d hate me and look at me like they are now. With anger and distrust.

“You made it very clear you hated the other academy and their wings.” I glance down at my hands, “I thought you’d hate me too,” I admit quietly.

“It’s different,” Theon says with a sigh, and I glance up at him a little surprised at the softness in his voice.

“How?”

He gives me a look like it should be obvious. “Because you’re our mate,” he says with almost reverence.

Warmth seeps into my chest, and a sliver of hope starts to grow. I glance between them. “But you hated me before.”

Knox swallows hard. “That was before.”

“So, you don’t hate that I have wings?” I ask while making sure to pay attention to each of their facial expressions, needing to know if they’re going to try to lie to me. But their eyes soften and looks of guilt and sadness seep into their faces.

“No,” Malakai says. “We could never hate anything that is a part of you.”

I blink back the burn in my eyes as relief fills me, and that sliver of hope grows.

“Besides,” Knox says. “They’re nothing like those assholes’. They’re white and soft looking. I’ve been wanting to run my hands through them since I saw them.” A glint of mischievousness enters his eyes. “Pop them out there and give us a proper look.”

A burst of laughter slips from my lips, and the tension in the air around us almost disappears. “Eh... no. I only learned how to pull them back in. I’ll wait until I can guarantee I won’t be stuck like that before playing show and tell.”

Knox opens his mouth to reply when Malakai interrupts him again.

“What happened after you went into the commander’s office? Did you get caught for stealing the device?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Surprisingly no. Some guy that looks to hate Talos showed up through a portal and distracted him.”

Malakai frowns. “Who?”

“A guy from the other academy. Levington.” I glance between them, noticing how tense they all become when hearing that name. I clear my throat before revealing the next piece of information.

“Dakson was also there,” I tell them, and the moment of ease quickly shrivels up with the rage they’re all now emitting.

My stomach churns realizing what else I have to reveal. Quickly followed by guilt.

It must show on my face because Cyrus moves closer to me with a frown.

“Sena... What did they say?” he asks, and they tense up waiting on my reply.

I glance around at all of them. “They said I’ve to go with them?—”

“Over my dead fucking body.” Malakai glares around the room.

“Like hell,” Knox shouts as rage spears through the room. They all move closer to me as if trying to stop me from leaving.

Cyrus grabs my hand, pulling me closer. “You belong with us.”

“I don’t belong in this academy anymore. Levington wants to train me and show me how to use my wings. I can’t do that here,” I tell them.

“You’re our mate,” Theon grits out.

Cyrus’ grip tightens on my hand, and the others move even closer. “You can’t leave us,” he says before sharing a look of rage with the others. “How can the commander

allow this?”

“I don’t think he has a choice,” I tell him, and they still.

Theon scans my face and whatever he sees makes him frown. “What are you not telling us?”

“They want me to leave after the war games. But they want you to come with me.”

Cyrus’ hand spasms around mine as the guys freeze, staring at me in shock.

“But you don’t have to come. I?—”

“We’re your mates. Where you go, we go.” Malakai shares a grim look with the others that makes my stomach churn.

“Look. We’re all tired,” he says. “Let’s get some sleep. We’re back in the War Camps tomorrow.”

I freeze. “That’s tomorrow?” A bolt of panic shoots through me. I thought I had more time.

Theon sighs. “The war games start earlier than our normal visits and last two weeks.”

Shit. I have two weeks to figure out another plan before I’m forced to go to yet another academy.

N one of them really want to go. Of course they don’t. And why would they? They’d be forced to live among their enemies, in territory with people they despise. Day in and day out for an entire semester.

It's all I can think about as I head into our tent in the camps. All I can stress and worry about.

Just as I sit down on the bed between Knox and Malakai this time, Dakson walks in.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Malakai grit out. But Dakson ignores him, looking directly at me. He heads straight for me, ignoring everyone in the tent and their glares.

"Sena." He smiles and the others move around me while Knox tries to outright block me from view.

I shove him with a glare, and he rolls his eyes at me before attaching himself to my side. I pinch one of his hard muscles, and he smirks down at me, promising payback that I might enjoy.

He drags his eyes from me, and the heat instantly evaporates only to be replaced by cool ice. "Lost, Dakson?"

Dakson gives Knox a bland smile. "Commander Levington would like to see Sena."

I pat Knox's chest, and he glances down at me.

"It will be okay. I'll be quick," I tell him and them.

"Sena—" Theon starts as I move around them.

"Twenty minutes, and I'll be back," I promise.

Malakai grabs me before I step away from them. "If you're not back here in twenty, we're coming to get you." He drops a kiss to my head before glaring over at Dakson

in warning.

Dakson and I head out of the tent in silence and start making our way to the other side of the camps. Everyone from our academy glares at Dakson as we move through them while glancing at me with frowns and confusion.

Once we step onto the winged side, the entire atmosphere completely changes. No longer is it stiff and tense but the males are actually laughing and having fun.

“You haven’t bonded with them yet,” Dakson says, drawing my attention to him. I give him a questioning look wondering where he’s going with this.

“I can see it in their eyes. They’re not... stable,” he says.

I frown. “We’re still getting to know one another.” And trying to learn to trust one another too.

He nods, giving me an understanding expression. “You’ll need to do it soon.”

Bonding ... It’s the least of my worries right now. But he’s piqued my interest. I never really asked any of the guys how we complete the bond.

“What exactly do I need to do?”

A heated smirk slides across his face. “If I have to explain it to you, then your mates must not be doing their job properly.”

I clear my throat, understanding immediately. “What happens if we don’t complete the bond?” I ask, but look away, not wanting to see the judgement on his face.

“The bond has already started. Instead of being tied to the Shadow energy, they’ve

slowly tied themselves to you.

As their mate, you've become their anchor.

Should you decide not to complete the bond with them, it may not kill them, but it will force them to reconnect to the dark.

And if not done right, they will unravel with madness. ”

My chest tightens making the air feel heavy around me. I try to focus on the wings of the males and not my spirally panic.

The men seem to notice me all at once, stopping what they're doing to smile or nod at me.

“We all feel it,” Dakson says, and I find his gaze as it searches mine.

“Something almost draws us to you. A need to protect you,” he admits.

I frown. “Why?”

“I didn't understand either. But now it makes sense. You're an Alita.”

“Alita?”

He smiles. “A winged female Shadow.”

I give him a deadpan look. “Let me guess, rare?”

He chuckles. “Extremely.”

I glance back at the men. They all seem approachable, unlike the other male Shadows in our camp that glare and grunt at me.

“Why do you all hate each other so much?” The guys never told me about how their feud started. Just that they hate them.

“To be honest, I don’t,” he reveals.

My head whips to his in shock and confusion.

He sighs. “The other academy has very different beliefs to ours. We don’t cull our weak, we train them. Help them reach their potential. We don’t threaten them with death either. But we’re still Shadows at our core. We should be working together, not apart.”

We reach a huge tent, and two male Shadows bow to us before opening the clothed door.

Levington looks up as we make our way inside. “Sena. Welcome. I never got to properly introduce myself. I’m Commander Levington of the Volar Academy. I’m looking forward to having you at the academy. But in the meantime, Dakson will be nearby should you need help with anything.”

“Dakson said you needed to see me for something?” I ask, hoping to move whatever this is along.

“Straight to the point. I like that.” Levington smiles. “Do you understand what you are?” he asks, and I glance at Dakson before looking back at him.

“Dakson says I’m an Alita? But I thought there were no female Shadows? I mean none born,” I say, remembering my conversation with Robin when I just arrived in

the academy.

Levington nods. “There are no female Shadows from Talos’ academy, nor has there ever been.

But female Alita have existed longer than any of us have been alive.

Usually only a female Alita and male Shadow can give birth to one.

Even then, it’s extremely rare. And you’re now one of the youngest alive.

” Levington’s expression turns sad. “Most of our females died in the war with only a handful of them making it. So, you’ll have to forgive us if we become a little overprotective of you. ”

“Are these other females in the Volar Academy?” I ask, and Dakson and Levington share a hesitant look that I don’t like.

“I’m sorry, Sena,” Levington says with regret in his voice. “But I can’t risk telling you anything until you’re safely inside Volar. I’m sure it comes as no surprise to you that the two academies are not on great terms. We’re constantly on the brink of a war with one another.”

“Why?” I ask as I try push back the reel of questions running through my mind.

Levington gives me a sad smile full of regret. “How all wars start. One side believes in something, and the other doesn’t. And I’m afraid we’re at the point where it’s too late to try and come to an agreement.”

His eyes flicker to Dakson’s. “We have the war games. That ensure the peace is kept... civil.”

But what's the point. "What do you win if you win the war games?" It has to be something big if they're willing to put aside their difference and compete.

"Do you know why the war games started?" Levington asks, and I shake my head. I honestly never really thought too much about it either. I just assumed it was because they needed some form of entertainment or a way to prove who the strongest is.

"Shadows don't have much of the original power left from the royals. But the crystal we have that contains some of their power is only enough for half of all the Shadows. We came up with the war games to decide who should hold onto it."

I frown. "You're both fighting over a crystal?"

"It's not just any crystal. It contains one of the royals' essences and helps the Shadows stay sane. None of the winged Shadows need to be near the Hollow for fear of going mad while we have it in our possession," he reveals.

No wonder the other Shadows are pissed and want to win this so bad.

"The war games happen every three years, and in the last two decades it's been going on, Commander Talos' academy has never won."

"Never?" I ask in shock and Levington shakes his head.

"But I have a feeling that might change this year with your mates entering," he says.

"Why do you say that?" I ask.

He gives me a look full of guilt and regret. "Your mates were chosen and groomed for this from a very young age. They were sent to the Void on purpose over and over to make them stronger, testing them to see if the Void and its dark energy was a

viable source the Shadows could connect to instead.”

I jolt back a step in shock. “Why? I ask. “Why would Talos do that to them? They were only kids when they first went to the Void.”

I glance from Dakson to Levington as his face grows distraught.

“Why didn’t you warn them? Help them?” Surely, he could have done something.

“There was nothing I could do. We’re not allowed interfere with each other. It’s something that would start a war.”

But... If what Levington says is true, Talos is the one who made sure they were sent to the Void over and over. Not for punishment but to make them stronger for the war games.

It means that it may not have been the old Sena’s fault after all. At least, not entirely.

“Why don’t you sound happy about them winning?” I ask. “You said you’ve had the crystal for years. Maybe it’s time they take a turn.”

“If that were the only reason Talos wanted it, then I would gladly hand it over. We protect the crystal and preserve it in its original form. Whereas Talos doesn’t want to have to rely on its power.

He wants it only to destroy it once and for all,” he admits and from the look on his face I can tell that’s something bad.

“What happens if Talos’ academy wins, and he gets it?” I ask.

Levington shares a grim look with Dakson. “Then every Shadow, winged or not...

will die.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:03 pm

The guys haven't left my side since Dakson brought me back to the tent last night. It's not helping that all the winged Shadows are now watching me as we head toward the area that holds the first part of the war games.

I tried to tell them about what Levington said, but they didn't want to hear it, saying he only lies. Just like everyone else in the Volar Academy.

"What the fuck are they looking at?" Malakai says.

"They know what I am," I tell them, remembering what Dakson said about how they feel drawn to me. "Apparently there's less winged females left on their side. They're just curious."

"Well, they better get uncurious pretty soon," Knox says, glaring at every one of them while looking two seconds away from starting trouble.

"No fights," I tell him.

He clenches his jaw. "I can't promise anyth?—"

"If you listen to me, I'll take out my wings for you later."

He freezes for a moment, and then he and the others turn to look at me.

Knox narrows his eyes on me. "I thought you didn't know how to pull them in and out."

I give him a smirk. “I’ll figure it out.”

A wide smile full of suggestion spreads across his face. “Deal.”

I raise a brow at Malakai. “You want in on this?”

A hungry look darkens his eyes. “No top, and it’s a deal.”

I laugh at his perverted little mind. “Let’s see how good you are first.”

He steps toward me with a small curl to the left side of his mouth. “Nothing about me is good. But I promise to make every inch of you feel it.”

“I—” The ground trembles and shakes, distracting me. A minute later, the sand starts dipping inward a few feet in front of us as a huge black structure with multiple components rises from the ground.

It keeps rising up and up until I’m craning my neck and looking up at the colossal thing.

There are dozens of platforms layered on top of one another, each with something different on it that could kill you.

Some drop up and down while others have shooting axes and blades.

Once you get to the top, you have to leap from pole to pole and avoid the arrows shooting at you, run across a platform without being knocked off by a giant swinging log, before diving from a wide ledge to a large circular platform. But I can’t make out what’s on it.

“What happens once you get to the platform?” I ask.

“You grab a weapon to secure your place in the fight tomorrow,” Theon replies with a savage smile, but I don’t feel even the tiniest bit of confidence or excitement they all seem to have.

No wonder they were able to run through my baby obstacle course. That was small blip in comparison to this monstrosity.

“Promise me you will all be careful?” I ask them and feel hands curl around me, pulling me back.

Glancing up, I find Theon behind me.

“We’ll be fine. Don’t worry,” he says.

Knox frowns. “I don’t know whether to feel insulted or grateful you care.”

“Grateful. Also don’t die, or you’ll never get to touch my wings,” I warn him.

He gives me a wicked smirk full of sinful promises. “I’m planning on doing a lot more than just touching them.”

They all give me a hard kiss, each with a promise to make it through this before heading for the starting line.

As soon as they hit the first platform, the monstrous obstacle course starts moving quicker. One of the Shadows from our academy immediately falls off into the sand. But he keeps sinking, quickly getting sucked in by it, disappearing in seconds.

As if the dangerous, vicious platform with multiple obstacles that could easily kill you isn’t enough, they had to add quicksand.

The guys start making their way up the platforms easily enough, but a third of the way there, on the platform with the blades, a few Shadows break them off and start attacking each of them.

My stomach churns when they go out of view. I follow them from the edges, moving around the side of the structure to a small area of large rocks.

My heart thunders as I watch Knox dive out of the way of a blade to the head. But another Shadow sneaks up behind him, and he doesn't seem to notice.

I open my mouth to shout up to him when something yanks me backward into the rocks.

Snapping out of my shock, I pull away from whoever is holding me and whip around.

Four males dressed from head to toe in black surround me, all with long blades in their hands.

I glance around, looking for a way to escape, but it looks like they've dragged me into a small area surrounded by rocks, the only exit being through them.

They take a step forward, and a long white glowing sword appears in my hand.

Something happens again. Just like in the obstacle course. But this time instead of having an out of body experience, it's as if part of my brain was asleep and is now wide awake.

I move without thinking, shoving them back and slicing through them, my body stronger, more agile and swift.

Using skills beyond anything I've ever learned; I easily take two down and then a

third.

The fourth manages to slide his blade across my arm but I barely feel it as I lunge forward and strike, taking him down.

Along with my glowing sword, they disappear as fast as they arrived and into nothing but shadows. The only evidence that they were even here is the long cut on my arm.

The awakened part of my brain slowly goes to sleep once more.

“Sena!” Cyrus shouts out from somewhere close, and relief fills me knowing they’re safe.

I glance down at the long cut on my arm as it slowly heals.

The four of them come around the rocks, and Cyrus pulls me into a tight hug. They ask me if I’m alright over and over, but all I can think about is the cut and how the blood wasn’t red. It was gold.

My mind finally starts to catch up with the fact that I just took out four men. That I moved with skills I’ve never had before.

That my blood was gold.

I open my mouth to tell the four worrying men around me, when a loud blaring horn bellows out, calling them for the second part of the games.

“Talk to us, Sena,” Knox says, ignoring the horn.

“We’ll talk after this,” I promise, but their worried expression doesn’t disappear.

“You were shaking when we found you,” Theon starts, but an older looking male comes over to us and tells them they have to go.

“Go. I’ll tell you everything after. I’m okay.”

“ Everything, Sena,” Malakai demands before pulling me into a hug.

“Everything,” I whisper with a promise, finally realizing it’s time. Even if they really hate me this time.

“Stay near the other Shadows,” Theon says. But he doesn’t have to tell me twice. Not after everything that just happened.

Along with my four, all Shadows still in the games move out to a large carved out arena while the sitting area is just raised mounds of hard sand.

I find a spot far enough away from everyone else but close enough that my mates can glance over and see me.

Something they seem to be doing every few minutes.

The groups are quickly paired off with the opposite academy. Another horn bellows out, and they begin.

I wince watching them fight, every single one of them vicious and brutal in their attacks. But Theon, Malakai, Knox, and Cyrus all hold their own.

I can see why Levington was worried about them winning. They don’t even look like they’re breaking a sweat.

I glance over at Talos and the vicious smile he’s wearing, and my stomach churns,

thinking about what Levington said.

What if it's true? What if my mates win this and Talos gets the crystal?

The sky grows gray above us, making my turbulent thoughts feel like they're coming to life.

A caw echoes from somewhere above, followed by another and another until it's all I can hear.

Everyone around me pauses and glances up at the darkening sky just as dozens of black birds flee across it. Dozens quickly turn to hundreds and then thousands, nearly covering the sky completely.

I glance over at the fights and find they all have paused to watch the strange occurrence, my men included.

A man stumbles into the arena, swaying on his feet. "The seal on the Hollow has been broken," he shouts, making everyone freeze.

His words only filter into my shocked brain when darkness seeps across the arena. No, not darkness, beasts. Hundreds of them. And right behind them are terrigons by the thousands.

Chaos erupts as the groups of male Shadows rush to stop them. I glance around me and spot the winged Shadows blocking any of them from getting near me.

Finding Malakai's gaze, I watch him breathe a sigh of relief when he sees me, the others too. He nods to me with a look that tells me they will be there soon. But a huge group of terrigons appear blocking their path.

I glance around at the pandemonium and try to call on my glowing sword or draw up that part of me that seems to be able to fight.

But nothing happens.

Metal clashing, grunts, and gasps full of pain sound out around me as the male Shadows quickly get overwhelmed.

My stomach drops when I spot more beasts and terrigons arriving, my gaze immediately searching for my men.

“Knox?” I call into the connection, but he doesn’t reply, only making my stomach drop further.

Shadows start dropping around me as more and more terrigons arrive.

Panic envelops me, completely consuming me. There’s no way out. For me. For them. They’re going to die. They’re all going to die... And there’s nothing I can do to stop it.

As if some deeper part of me hears my broken plea, it rises. An energy like nothing I’ve ever felt before rushes through me, building and building until I feel something almost crack open from the inside, calling out to the chaos around me.

I gasp as the energy doesn’t stop, seeping through every nerve, muscle and bone until my body no longer feels like my own.

My skin lights up, glowing similarly to my sword. Seconds later, my body lifts upward and floats up above the chaos, high up in the sky.

I glance down, watching the destruction and havoc, the death and masses of terrigons,

as they viciously kill Shadow after Shadow.

My wings slide out of my back, spanning wide around me while the glowing grows and grows, along with the energy inside me as if building up for something big.

Moments later, the energy becomes electric. It slides up and down my body before bursting out of me in a painful gasp and forming a sphere of light that winds around me, growing and growing.

I can't stop it as it pulls more and more energy from me.

Building and building until power like nothing I've ever felt before blasts out of me in a beam of light and slamming directly beneath me straight into the ground.

Another slams out in front of me and another behind.

Again, and again until multiple long beams of white glowing light of energy are all formed around me.

Then they start moving. Carving a path through the beasts and terrigons and destroying them instantly to ashes. The huge beams keep moving, spanning out and searching out every terrigon and beast until there's nothing left.

My eyes flicker to the scene below as the beams of light slowly disappear and I find every Shadow staring up at me in shock and awe. Most are still alive, and relief fills me.

Just as the last beam of light dissolves, the last of my energy rises up and sends out a blast toward the darkness hundreds of miles across from me, shuttering it out in a blink.

Exhaustion sweeps into every bone, making each breath hard and heavy. My wings draw back in as my eyes close on their own. And with one last gasp, I begin to fall.

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Time drags by slowly as my body and mind starts to wake. A soft swaying drags me from the edges of sleep, and my eyes finally blink open. I try to move, but my body doesn't want to cooperate, every part of it aching and heavy.

"I'm sorry," a familiar voice whispers, and I push my body to sit up, panting when I finally manage to sit up straight to find I'm in a car.

Lush green forests pass by the window as my body starts to grow heavy again.

I try to think back to the last thing I remember, and the war games and the attack flashes across my mind, making my heart race.

My mates. The Shadows. The terrigons.

I glance around trying to figure out how I got here when my gaze lands on the front seat where a man sits behind the wheel. He glances over his shoulder quickly, and my eyes widen in shock.

"Professor Graves?" I ask.

His expression grows sad and fills with nothing but guilt. "I'm sorry. I should have never taken you to the academy, Sena."

I frown. "You never..." Wait. He took me to the academy?

"What... What are you talking about? Where am I?" I try the handle on the door, but it's locked. Not that I'd want to dive out of a moving vehicle. But I need to get out of

here and away from him.

“You’re safe,” he promises but I don’t believe him. How can I?

“How did I get here? Where are my mates?” I ask while trying to come up with a plan or at least figure out where I am.

“I’m the one who found you. In the burning building,” he says softly, and I freeze. He can’t mean what I think he means.

The burning building... “It was you? You’re the Variant that switched my body?” I ask.

“No,” he shakes his head giving me a sad look over his shoulder. “I switched it back .”

Every part of me freezes turning to ice. Switched... it... back...

The words don’t process in my brain immediately. It takes a minute before I realize what he’s just said. But when he realizes I’m not saying anything, he continues.

“ This is your real body, Sena. You were switched as a child. We needed to hide you and keep you safe. So no one could find you and figure out what you are.”

A sliver of awareness slides through the shock, needing to know what he means. “What am I?”

He glances back at me with an expression full of reverence and awe. “Our last hope.”