



# When a Wolf Loves the Moon (Drew Collins #3)

**Author:** *Granger*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Students go missing at this mythical and magical HBCU campus. No one knows why but as our four girls continue their education and learn more about themselves, the mystery begins to affect their friendship with each other. Can they solve the case and stop this growing feeling that something is about to change, all while remaining friends? Let's find out.

**Total Pages (Source):** 23

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:59 pm*

Celeste Taylor

I opened my eyes, taking a deep inhale of my breath as I looked around. I'm dreaming again. This is definitely another one of those dreams where I was in the middle of a dark forest again. Looking up, I saw millions of stars in the sky but most of it was cluttered with leaves and branches sticking out and intertwining together. I looked down at my hands and feet covered in mud as I slowly stood up to find my balance.

It's quiet. For it to be woods in the middle of the night with no clear sign of opening or foreign lights, this was eerily too quiet. I started to walk, stepping over twigs and dried out leaves falling for the change of seasons. There was a certain snap in the air as the wind blew by that sent chills down my spine.

"Where the hell am I, now?" I asked out loud, touching one tree trunk as leverage to step over a dead log.

There was no end to the forest. Something was definitely pulling me forward, and driving me to walk in this direction. I looked up again in an attempt to see clear skies but the trees seemed to twist and intertwine with one another, closing the small gaps of the stars and clouds in the night sky .

I stopped walking as I brushed my hands down on my jeans, trying to get rid of the mud and dirt before adjusting my glasses on my face. This is definitely one of those fucked-up dreams again where everything seemed so real...so clear. I just need to find a way to wake up.

“Helloooooooooo!” I called out.

Irritated, I kept moving, pushing through the forest until I heard a sound. It was faint but I could tell I was being followed. The padded footsteps crunched through the leaves like a soft march until slowly coming to a stop. The low, guttural growl rumbled and echoed through the dark as I slowly relaxed my shoulders.

“This is a dream...Celeste...this is a dream...This is what writers do. They vision it and then they write it. That’s all. You got this girl,” I said to myself. “Nothing but a weird dream...”

“Who are you?”

The voice suddenly said from behind as my shoulders bunched up. My skin began to crawl in response to the deep, commanding tone. Male...not sure if they were human but the voice definitely belonged to a male. I slowly turned around just in time to see the large, dark as a shadow, wolf with piercing yellow eyes, suddenly reach up. Its body slowly morphed into a human body standing on two firm brown legs .

Putting my hand over my forehead, I covered my gaze from his completely naked body. I only caught a glimpse but I knew he was dark brown complexion, rivaling any chocolate bar, and his kinky hair was a wild, thick mane he let grow in any direction. That’s all I saw of him because the rest was dangling between his legs like a pendulum. Just bouncing and swaying in whatever direction he felt like.

“Do you not have any clothes?” I asked.

“Who are you?” he asked again.

I rolled my eyes as I turned to the side so I wouldn’t have to stare at him. The temptation was there but knowing this was a dream kept me sane. I refused to lust

after some imaginary person I made up in my head.

“My name is Celeste,” I replied before dryly adding, “and this is a dream. I know you’re not real. I just saw you shift into a human from a wolf, which makes you a shapeshifter...or a werewolf? I’m not sure of the technicalities.”

I heard him step as the leaves crunched underneath his toes. I glanced down at his feet and cringed because his legs looked stacked, like a workhorse, veins and muscles just pushing out beneath the tough skin.

“A dream?” he repeated. “How do you know this is a dream? ”

“I know it's a dream because what I just saw is not humanly possible.”

“But I’m not all the way human,” he said calmly, hearing the amusement in his voice. “You are...a seer or an oracle?”

“No. I’m just Celeste.”

“Heavenly...”

“Yes, yes...Celeste means from the heavens,” I dragged with a roll of my eyes. I glanced back at his feet, seeing he was closer than I needed him to be. “How about those clothes?”

“You’ve never seen a man before?”

“You said you weren’t human so whatever you are,” I said, looking at a random tree in front of me, “I don’t want to see it.”

“Hmm,” he chuckled. He sniffed the air, trying to catch a scent lingering with the

breeze. “My name is Seth...”

“Nice to meet you, Seth,” I said, still refusing to look at him. “Any minute now, I’ll wake up and this will all be forgotten. This isn’t my first time, you know...”

“You’ve...been in a dream like this before?”

“Not exactly but...I imagine things...see things...and it usually stems from something like this although...this...” I glanced at his feet as they stepped closer. “...is something new for me. I’ve never been this close...usually, I see things that happen and watch or hear it in my head...”

Come to think of it...I’m not sure why I was even talking to him. That’s never happened before in my dreams...Could it be that I’d actually started to lose my damn mind?

“Such is the life of a tortured writer.” I sighed dramatically.

“What do you write?” he asked.

Now, his feet were standing directly in front of me as I stared down at the ground, refusing to raise my eyes.

“Stories...fantasies...things that I see, like this...I write about werewolves, too, which is why I’m not shocked to see you. I just wish you would have clothes on. This isn’t that type of dream...”

“Do you not want to see me in my natural form?”

“I don’t want to see you in any form without clothes on...”

I heard him chuckle again but it mimicked something like an evil...sinister laugh from a villain in a cartoon character. His energy was dark but not...threatening. I couldn't explain it except that he felt...familiar to me. I wondered if he was the wolf I'd been seeing walking alone.

“What about werewolves do you write if you don't mind me asking?” Seth asked .

I pursed my lips, annoyed that I wasn't snapping out of this dream before deciding to cave in.

“Well...I'm going to call it the Tale of the Three Brothers, still a working title, of course. It's tension building within this wolf pack that I've been writing on for years now.” I started to walk through the forest, letting him trail behind me. “It starts with three brothers. The first stayed away in order to protect his mother and sisters... The second becomes an alpha and lets fear and pressure get the best of him. The third falls in love with his soulmate. It's a classic fairytale about brotherhood and power. In the end...only one is meant to actually be a leader...”

Seth walked behind me as the leaves crunched to the sound of his feet.

“What happens when the second lets fear and pressure get to him if you don't mind me asking?” Seth questioned.

I almost jumped at the sight of his dark fur on four legs, stalking beside me. He shook his head as the rest of the body followed all the way to the tip of his tail. Somehow, even in his wolf form, I could tell this was a Black man walking beside me, keeping a step or two ahead of me .

“He attempts to kill the first out of fear, and betrays the third out of pressure, or maybe it's the other way around. He kills the first from pressure and betrays the third out of fear.”

Seth became quiet as we continued to walk together. He didn't say much of anything for a while before randomly asking, "Will I see you again?"

"I doubt it..." I pushed my hair back from my face. "...it's only a dream after all and you're not real."

"And if we meet in the real world, what are you gonna say then?"

"Then, I'll say...I like a nice dinner, wine, no coffee dates...that's cheap and lazy. Movies are fine, preferably action or romantic comedy."

"I can do that."

"Of course, you can, dream-wolf...Of course, you can."

I looked down at the wolf, who began to trot ahead of me, protectively scanning the area. This man really thought he was a damn wolf or this wolf thought he was really a man. Tuh! What in the world kind of dream was this?

I couldn't wait to wake up.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:59 pm*

Coach Namir

The disappointment in my father's eyes hit me harder than I expected it to. I stood before fifteen men, cousins, uncles, grandfathers, and Tyee, who refused to look at me. He wouldn't even make eye contact.

I had blood gushing from my lip and the corner of my eye was wide open. My knuckles were raw from the peeled and scraped skin around each bone, and I had no shirt, no shoes, just shorts and the last bit of my dignity left. I tried to tell myself I would have done this even if I hadn't met Maggie but I was having a hard time with that thought. This is for my sister, Maze. This is what I was meant to do. This was always my path. I followed my brother out of respect, not because it was right.

"Your mother has brainwashed you, boy," Roy said with a shake of his head. Eyes bulging out of his head, he pointed a split bloody nail at me and gritted his teeth at me. The tears in his eyes refused to fall as he smeared his arm across his mouth. "That bitch brainwashed you! YOU WANT TO LEAVE YOUR OWN?!"

"That bitch raised a bitch." My Uncle Horace spat angrily. "I told you to never lay with her but you did—— "

"He had to make up for the first one he fucked around with."

"The problem is this generation coming up! They are getting too influenced by those above! These humans and their weakness for acceptance and their fragility. They forget all about their traditions...their values, their family by trying to be like those who are NOTHING like us! It ain't his mama that brainwashed him, Roy."



“It’s that white-haired bitch...He’s laying with her now. My boy done told me.”

I saw the disgust cross Roy’s face but I didn’t move. I didn’t say anything in response. Picking my chin up with the throbbing eye, I dared anyone else to come at me. It was the middle of the night in the middle of the same fields they used to drag my sister. Drew Collins University was way out in the distance, nothing but lights and faded buildings in the shadows of the night. Nothing but the cool breeze of the wind blew and not a single hint of the moon in the otherwise cloudy night sky. My breath was shallow but steady as I tightened my fists and kept a strong stance, not saying anything. I hadn’t said anything except for, I’m out . I disown this pack and family for good .

“Just hurry up and do what the fuck you gotta do,” I said, leaning over to let out a glob of spit towards the ground. I sucked my teeth, turned my neck from side to side to crack the sore bones before staring Roy in the face. Nobody moved since he made his first few swings on me and out of respect, I chose not to fight back. I knew what I was doing so I was going to take this as my punishment on my way out.

“You have nothing to say for yourself?” Earl asked, his brows pinched together as he frowned with his usual grumpy expression. “I’ve known you since you were hanging on yo’ mama’s teat, and this is how you show respect? You’ve been a part of this family since the beginning. Are you prepared to go out on your own...no one will have your back. You will never run with another pack because they will never allow a rogue wolf near their family. You can’t be trusted. You will never see your cousins...your brother...He will no longer acknowledge you...You don’t know what being lonely is until you’ve been removed from the family...and you’re prepared for that? We are family, Caine. FAMILY!” He shouted angrily with a shaky tone of betrayal.

He was hurt. They all were. I know they all had expectations and high hopes for me and this is how I decided to repay them, by removing myself.

“Do you understand what you’re doing by letting all of this go?! You will be alone! For the rest of your life! You will not have anyone to turn to! To represent you! To pick you up, and cheer you on... You will be nothing. You will die by yourself with nothing or nobody to your name! Are you prepared for that?! ”

“You’re betraying your own brother,” another said in complete disgust. “Even if he decided he didn’t want to do this, I could never look at him the same. I could never trust him around me and mine. One of them killed Aria and tried to cover it up like we wouldn’t know...This isn’t the time to let him have the chance to decide if he wants to stay——”

“You’ll learn to get the fuck over it, Boyd!” Roy snapped as he wiped his mouth again. “Caine, this is the last——”

“I understand what I’m doing and accept it. I will be shunned by everyone. I know nobody will speak, see, or hear me again as family...I know I’ve chosen to lay with someone that is not...”

I saw Ty visibly shake at the thought of Maggie so I kept quiet out of the last bit of respect I held for him. I knew how this looked, me choosing her over him.

“I accept my fate...Do what you gotta do. If I live, I’m walking away knowing I made the right decision for me and I’m not looking back. If I die, I’m dying knowing I stood on what the fuck I believe in.”

“And what do you believe in?!” Roy shouted angrily. “Huh?! What do you believe in?! THAT BLOODSUCKING BITCH?! YOU THINK WHAT YOU’RE DOING IS PRIDEFUL!? SACRIFICING YOUR FAMILY TO BE WITH HER?! YOU THINK THAT IS SOMETHING TO BE PROUD OF?! ”

“I believe the man I am shouldn’t be determined based on who I choose to be with. I

believe my sister should have been protected by the same family that did her wrong. The same family that stands before me right now.”

Out of nowhere, Ty yanked his glasses off with a frustrated scream. Slamming them to the ground, he charged towards me with his fist swinging. I heard him scream again, letting the powerful bone connect against mine before falling back to the ground as I took every hit without so much as a defense of my own. With my swollen eyes barely opened, I saw my cousins and uncles on the side watching everything play out. It took power to attack a man to submission. It took strength for that same man not to raise a hand back in defense.

My fists remained balled up at my side, not once raising to my brother or my father who jumped in, dragging my leg down against the ground to his reach. The frustrated tears fell for losing a second son as his brothers had to pull him back, and let Ty handle the rest. My head knocked from one side to the other as he gripped my face. Fingers crowning the corners of my head, and sharp nails digging deep into the skin. He leaned down, showing his row of multiple fangs from top to bottom. He always did have that rare ability to shift any part of his body at any given time. I envied him for it but right now, my brother...my best friend was hurting. I saw the tears in his eyes because I know he felt blindsided and betrayed.

“I’m going to spare you for obvious fucking reasons,” he threatened in a low voice. “But you and I both know you’re using Maze as an excuse to hide your feelings for that girl.”

“I’m not hiding it,” I muttered, feeling my face throb as blood spat between my teeth and lips. “She’s who I’m supposed to be with...”

Ty’s eyes widened with a flash of fear crossing his gaze as he stared at me. His eyes searched mine with growing panic as he slowly pulled back.

“You don’t...you don’t even fucking see it...The moon...I can see it in your eyes...she’s imprinted on you...You...you don’t...”

“Finish him off, Ty! He’s done talking! Kill him!” Boyd hollered. “You wanna prove you should be pack leader! KILL HIM! Show you loyalty to us!”

My father snapped with a sharp, barking tone to silence him.

“We’ve lost more than enough from this family!” He shouted. “We’re not losing anybody else! Let Namir go! We have bigger problems, Ty! He wants to be on his own, let him! No more money! No house! No coming back to see anybody! Let him go! Our plans for our pack go beyond him and that blood sucking bitch. He wants to fuck the dead, let him. He’s nothing to us anymore.”

Ty stared at me as my eyes slowly wavered back to my uncles, seeing some of them look unsure as they shared glances with one another. They were still divided on the decision. I looked back at Ty, trying to fix my mouth to say something but he leaned in close with his final threat.

“I will make you regret choosing her over me...”

Ty stood up as the tears began to fall before he raised his shoe above my face and stomped down hard. The last thing I remember hearing was the snap of my neck.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:59 pm*

Celeste Taylor

“Ms. Taylor?”

I heard her voice but I stood in complete awe of the building decor. The commotion came from people standing up from different tables, gathering their papers for schedules and other things needed for school.

“Ms. Taylor?”

There were girls there that had visible signs of wings on their backs, just in the center of their spine.

“Msssss Taylor?”

There were also men as tall as tree limbs and some with vertical eyes like crocodiles in the swamp, blinking ever so slowly. I felt like I was in my own creation, walking through the different types of creatures I’d created but I was amongst them. I was no different than them. There were girls talking about Chris Brown and sour jar spells... There were men discussing sports before speaking about who could shift the fastest into their beast type.

Shifters!

Black shifters!

Black witches! Black fairies! Black everything was all right here...

“Ms. Taylor?”

The calming voice was directly in front of me as I blinked a few times to see an elderly woman staring at me with a welcoming smile. Her purple blazer and matching skirt had a huge green and white flower pinned in the corner with the letters BNP written together. Beta Nu Pi.

“Come with me, dear, so we can get you settled in. I’m sure you have a lot of questions,” she said, taking my hand.

I heard a collective “ ohhhhh ” as I looked up, watching two black birds whip around the high ceiling of the building, both attacking and flying into one another with their fluttering wings until someone shouted.

“AYE?!” The deep voice let out, hearing a whistle blow. “Knock that shit off! Now! We’re not doing that! Y’all just got to the damn school! Knock it off! ”

The birds separated as they warped into two lanky teenage boys glaring at one another with hate and teary eyes. The tall, deep complected man with muscles and seductive eyes stood in between the two with a clipboard in his hand. Another shouted as the man chucked his chin up to acknowledge the request.

“Coach Namir!? Make sure I’m in yo’ class, bruh!”

I found myself smiling because just by the way his nostrils flared and his chest in the maroon t-shirt heaved up and down, I could tell he was something strong...beastly. A werewolf! Oh! A Black man that was a werewolf! Oh my God! It almost made me forget about the two puncture wounds on the side of my neck from that bastard.

The woman in the purple suit closed her office door behind me as she motioned for me to sit.

“This has been an exciting and busy past few days,” she said, walking around her desk to sit down. “My name is Mrs. Nates. I will be your student advisor and counselor should you have any questions throughout your stay. Do you have any questions for me?” She crossed her fingers together on her desk with a smile.

My mouth fell open but I wasn’t sure what to say. I followed the directions on the back of the letter on how to get here and...It was as simple as opening the door, literally, and now I was sitting in this woman’s office with...my books...She had a stack of my books on her desk! Just Another Vampire Story by Celeste Taylor. How in the hell did she get a hold of those?

“Um...” I tucked the loose strands of hair behind my ear. Nervously, I crossed one ankle behind the other in the light blue denim and adjusted my black frames. I probably looked so red in the face from this humidity and my lips felt chapped but I didn’t have anything on me. Damn it. Focus, girl. Focus. You are in this place...it’s real and you’re worrying about cracked lips.

“So...if I wrote something similar to this in a book...about...mythical beings and creatures existing beneath us,” I said slowly as I looked around her neat office. “Does that mean...this is real and I’m...”

“Well that is what we, at Drew Collins University, would like to figure out. It can be one of two things... You can be a fallen or lost soul or spirit. The term varies depending on where you’re from. Your magic comes from visions created by your imagination. The other would be having visions that happen in real time dealing with real people you have never met before ...” She paused, hesitant to speak on the latter. “You are able to see things that have yet to happen... That...is quite dangerous for someone like you. If you were to get involved with the wrong people that is...”

I sat back in my seat, stuck as I stared at the woman.

“I’ve read your book and although it made no specific mention to any particular student here...it’s very telling that a lot of the things you’ve mentioned have indeed happened here at this school or could possibly happen.”

My mouth dropped as I shot up from the chair before dropping back down.

“WHAT?!” I gawked before laughing with a shake of my hand. “Noooo!”

“Yes.” She nodded calmly. “ Just Another Vampire Story ...by Celeste Taylor...several of us have read it and agreed.

“So, I’m a fallen...spirit?” I asked, intrigued. Even I, couldn’t make this up!

“Or...an oracle,” she replied, voice deepening. “If you are indeed an oracle, precautions will have to be taken in order for you to remain safe. Unfortunately, we do not allow oracles in The Underground without supervision and high security. With that being said, do you usually have dreams and visions when your eyes are closed?”

“Um...Yeah.” I nodded. “Most of the time...I mean, I daydream but...mostly...it's just dreams...really detailed dreams..” I tucked my hair behind my ear.

Mrs. Nate began taking notes as I heard the laughter and screams just outside of the door .

“Have you found yourself in someone else’s dream?”

“What?” I let out, confused. “No. They’re my own.”

She frowned with an approving nod.

“Have you made any contact with anyone in your dreams? Do you speak with them



or tell them things about this world?”

“No,” I said, swallowing hard. It was a lie that came a little too easy but something told me not to give that detail away. The woman looked at me, peering over her glasses while I pushed mine up.

“I usually take notes, write down what I see and hear and write my stories from there,” I told her.

“How nice.” She smiled, scribbling something on the paper. “I believe you are showing signs of a fallen spirit.” She looked up. “And I think Drew Collins University is the perfect place for you to find your way.”

“Do I...just stay a fallen spirit or—”

“Fallen spirits have lived many lives, many times over,” she said. “Once you tap into that...Most lost spirits take on the role of writers and stories for writers live many lives and have been all over the world without having to go anywhere at all.”

“Are these...lives real?” The question felt dumb but it was needed.

“Hardly...” She blew off. “More like bits and pieces of distorted memories of dreams and imagination...It’s seen as a creative ability...most take on the role of artists such as painters, singers, and writers... You have an imagination that is gifted with magic. That is simply all it is. A gifted imagination that allows you to move through different realms. That is why we call it a lost soul or fallen because it belongs to no one or nobody.”

That was fine and all but this didn’t feel like a gifted imagination . This felt more like scenes, visions, and moments that happened or didn’t happen. It felt real.

“Now it’s curious that your book is very similar to actual events but the key trait is the ability to talk in your visions...receive messages that can be passed on to people in real time and you don’t possess that trait. That is what would make you an oracle and that...” She shook her head with a frown. “Well that will be a different case entirely.”

Mrs. Nates dug into her drawer, and I heard a set of keys jingle until she pulled out a large, slender skeleton key to place on her desk. She stood up, closing the drawer with her hip as she dug into the shelves behind her for clothes wrapped in plastic.

“I am placing you in the school of the spiritual. Your uniform will be all black as is tradition with dark arts and black magic. There are teachers here that specialize in such artistic spirituality. The ability to move from different realms and times and create a form of art from it...Very much like how the moon and sun control day and night. Space and time. It’s what the door system is based on and how it was created.

“The... door system ?” I questioned.

“Yes. How we move through time and space to get somewhere. The professors here know how to help you channel some of that energy and who knows, you might unlock a new ability and turn your stories into movies or more.” She shrugged as she tossed another uniform in a pack on the desk.

“We have a growing film industry here in The Underground and a great film course here at Drew Collins. One of our students who is a fallen spirit, has developed a talent for creating something out of thin air...If she wanted to make a pig fly...she can simply think it and it happens. Very rare ability. Only a few are born every decade or so.”

She turned around with a smug grin as she pointed at me.

“You will fit right at home,” she said.

“But if I was an oracle——”

She shook her head, waving her hand for me to keep quiet.

“You would not be alive for long,” she whispered. “That is the truth I rather not repeat in my office. ”

Her eyes slowly darted up and around the ceiling as if someone was listening before she let out a bright smile.

“Now here...It’s unfortunate you received such an unwelcomed introduction from The First Family but that isolated incident will never happen again. This is your schedule.” She handed me a folder. I opened it up to see a stack of papers with letters being typed as we spoke. “Our administrative staff is currently coming up with all the student schedules so it may change from time to time but by morning, you will know where to go. You will have a roommate.” She handed me my skeleton key. “Her name is Souxie Lafayette...She is...”

The woman forced a smile, swallowing whatever truth she wanted to say about her.

“She’s a very gifted witch. I think you two will get along just fine. Her father, on the other hand...he’s a unique individual...one of those flashy, sassy types, you know,” she whispered with a wiggle of her fingers. “Now come, I’ll have a student show you to your dorms.”

...

“Scuze me! Coming through! New student arrivals, all follow me! Thank you!”

The short woman with the bouncy, curly hair raised her hand in the air before adjusting her white blazer with a tug. She wore matching white pants that were impossible not to stain and a maroon blouse tucked in the waist. She smirked with her nose held up high, poised posture, and a look that said, I'm better than you but I also try hard.

I knew that look all too well.

“My name is Clementine. I am the daughter of a very famous legacy here at this school, and I come from a line of historical doctors, healers, and there's a drop of witch's blood on my mother's side.” She raised on her toes to reach those in the back of the group. “I will be your student guide as I drop each of you off to your dorms! I hope everyone can hear me! If you are here at Drew Collins, it is because you belong and something is deep down in your ancestry and bloodline, you are unlike any other above. Welcome to your new home.” She clapped.

“Booooo! Beware new students! Hide your carpets! Hide your drapes! Clepto over there likes to munch on both!” Someone shouted as Clementine's face turned bright red. She turned around to see two girls walking across the campus while one with locs flipped her the bird. The other wearing a black hoodie kneeled over in laughter as she slapped her knee. I tried not to laugh but the small cough was hard to ignore. She turned back to glare at me. I hid my grin behind the box of clothes and school supplies.

“You may leave,” she said with a roll of her neck.

“Whaa...I didn't even do—and leave where? You don't own this—”

“That is all. Everyone else, follow me. We don't talk to the dead fish here on The Grounds,” Clementine said. She brushed past me with a shove as the box I was holding suddenly tipped over. Everything spilled out from the packs of clothes to the

stack of books I was given for my classes.

“Really!? How old are you?!” I shouted after her as the rest of the new students followed behind her like minions. I adjusted my glasses before bending down to grab the things. Laughing, I dumped the things into the box. “Mean girl on campus...classic!” I didn’t realize the two girls that were walking came up to me, looking like they hadn’t slept in days. They had their bags across their back when one dumped hers right in front of my things.

“You look normal as hell,” the one with the locs said. Ironically, she looked far from normal. Her deep brown skin was scarred like someone clawed at her cheeks at the same time and stained her skin with black lines. Her eyes were hardened, and her demeanor was aggressive unlike her friend who was texting on her phone with her pure white hair spilling down her face from the hoodie.

These are the misfits of the campus.

“I’m Asha,” the one with the locs said before nodding towards her friend. “This is Maggie. What are you? ”

“I’m...Celeste?”

“Nah, I mean what are you?” She asked again. Her northern accent, heavy like she was purposely laying it on thick to sound intimidating. I stood up with the box in my arms.

“According to my paperwork,” I said, nodding towards the paper stacked on top of the clothes. Asha swiped it first as the three of us slowly began to walk.

“You’re a fallen spirit...” she read out loud before sucking her teeth. “What is that?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” I laughed. “I just got here.”

“Let me see,” Maggie said, taking the paper to read. “Fallen spirit...Spiritual student...dorm...OH! Oh my God! Look who her roommate is!”

The two girls stopped to look at the paper before Asha’s mouth twisted. She looked at me, trying to hide what I thought was a smirk.

“This is her,” Asha said with a hard sigh. “Fuck, this is who Souxie was talking about and of course, I randomly come up to you without even knowing.”

“The fifth?” Maggie exclaimed. Excitement dancing in her eyes as she looked at me.

The two stared like I was a hot meal on a cold night... Ooo...The writer in me can’t even help it, even in my own thoughts. The two stared like they were anxiously waiting to devour... Okay, that’s enough, Celeste .

“The fifth what ?” I asked.

The two shared a glance at one another before turning to look back at me to say in unison, “You have to come with us.”

I found myself sitting on a small twin size bed that was pushed up the wall of my otherwise empty bedroom. It was past two in the morning and there were four girls staring me down, and talking black cat that freaked me out. I found cats to be gross.

I was being interrogated by a witch...a beautiful blue-eyed witch who had the softest expression like she was as sweet as pie. I knew better about pretty girls. She was probably hell when done wrong. There was Isis, the wide-eyed nymph in her PJs that smelled like straight weed. The friendliest of them all. Maggie looked like she could nod off at any given moment, and Asha, who was the big bully but probably the

softest out of the four. I knew the type. She was probably carrying so much on her plate and lashed out at everyone else as a way to relieve herself. Yeah, I knew the type very well. They all seemed on the younger side but I wondered by how much? Maybe I could find women around my age as I got settled .

“I don’t like her,” Quan the cat stated as he had the nerve to hiss at me.

“Does he always talk? ” I pointed at him.

“Unfortunately, he doesn’t shut up but one thing is, he’s not going anywhere so you’ll have to get used to him,” Asha stated.

“Ahhh.” I nodded. Noted. Quan hissed again. I leaned over and hissed even louder, letting my mouth stretch back to show teeth. His eyes widened as he backed up slowly.

“Did this bitch just hiss at me——”

“Hsssssssh!” I let out again as Isis laughed. “Far from a bitch, Lil Catnip so don’t address me as such. I’m cool and chill but don’t get it twisted. I’m the wrong one to push.”

“I love her already.” Isis beamed. “We are definitely keeping her.”

“We are.” Souxie smiled. “Quan be nice. He’s upset because he was planning on using this room as his own.” Just as soon as she said it, we heard the low rumblings of the building as the walls lightly trembled. I gripped the edge of the bed and looked around as the girls stood, unfazed.

“They’re moving rooms around,” Isis said. “Old magic. It happens all the time in my building. When I came back, my two-bedroom dorm was made into one now that my

roommate is gone.”

“They have you in a lot of writing classes,” Souxie cut in as she looked at my schedule while Isis hung my clothes up. “That’s unusual for a spiritual student. They should have made you an intellectual.”

“Well, I think this is great! We met our final member of our club!” Isis beamed excitedly before gasping. “Do you smoke?”

“Hell yeah.” I grinned.

“Drink?” Asha pressed.

“I’m particular but I do,” I popped with a twist of my lips. Isis giggled with excitement as she brought my clothes to her chest.

“Okay, okay...what about men...women...what’s your choice?”

“Strictly dickly. I don’t play that,” I said. “No offense to anyone else that does.”

“None taken,” Souxie said as she sat down on the floor, still watching my schedule change constantly.

“Y’all, I gotta go.” Maggie yawned. “I’m gonna walk Asha back to Legacy Row and then get my car from Namir. Breakfast tomorrow?”

“Class.” Isis frowned, folding another black pair of pants to place in the drawer. “Lunch, possibly?”

“Oak tree,” Souxie said, studying my schedule with curiosity. “It’s going to be a beautiful day tomorrow.”



No one said a word but we all found ourselves slowly leaning closer to Souxie to watch the black inky letters slowly type on the paper.

Celeste...Taylor... Fallen Spir ...

Celeste Taylor. Fallen Spirit...

Oracle and prophetic tendencies not detected.

“What are they talking about? Prophetic? Like a prophet?” Asha muttered as I felt a furry tail curl against my ankle. I jumped at the sight of Quan before gritting my teeth again like a crazy woman.

“My bad,” he apologized, just barely above his breath. “I can’t help the shit. The tail does what it wants to do.”

“Uh huh,” I muttered, moving away to keep my distance. Of all the things I’d seen, this talking cat was the one thing I was having trouble adjusting to.

“They can’t figure out where to place you,” Souxie said as she looked up at me. “They normally don’t take this long...last time they did that...it was with Maggie.”

“Who are they ?” I asked.

“The system,” Souxie whispered dramatically.

Maggie’s phone started to vibrate just in time for her to gather her things.

“Asha, are you coming?” she asked with another yawn.

“I’ll stay with Isis. I don’t feel like doing that long ass walk.”

“Bet.”

“Oak tree tomorrow! Lunch time!” Isis called out.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:59 pm*

Celeste Taylor

“I’m in this bedroom,” I started, looking down at my hands as I recalled the latest dream. “I don’t know who it belongs to or why but I’m there with two girls shaking...They’re terrified about something...This was something I never experienced before...It felt like my first nightmare.”

Lowering my head, I tried to think about what I heard. Conversations were going on just on the other side of the wall while I was stuck in this room with the two girls.

“How old were they?”

I looked up for the first time seeing Seth standing completely nude before me. The curly fro draped down his face and features like a plant, his bright eyes were fierce with emotions I couldn’t quite place. Every muscle was etched perfectly into his dark brown skin, and he cracked his neck from side to side as he listened.

“How old were they?” he asked again.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “Teenagers at best...maybe a little younger? I’m not sure. They were afraid of whoever was on the other side of talking...A woman was pleading for her life...and...then the door opened... and Bam!” I clapped softly. “They charged in. The mother was pleading...another woman walked in with a werewolf standing on his legs...It felt so real...From the hairy feet and claws on his toes to the contorted face. Another wolf walked in and then another...but the wolf started to say something...the words were kinda muffled. We were all in this room——”

“Could they see you?”

“No. Not at first anyway,” I said, looking at Seth. “That’s how I know it was a dream. You’re...the only one, for some reason, that I can talk to.”

“What happened next?” he asked with a lick of his lips. He never once blinked nor gaze lingered elsewhere. He was locked in with every word.

“The werewolf attacked the girls...Killing them right in front of me. I’ve never seen bodies and bones snap and break...Skin tearing and eyes just...” I shook my head with disgust. “It felt so real. The other woman drew her fangs and instead of coming at the mother like I thought, her eyes turned red and launched towards me. I just remember screaming and waking up here...” I looked around the forest. “It’s the last thing I remember, being attacked by a vampire.”

I looked at Seth, seeing his eyes become glossy and his jaw slowly circled and jerked to the side repeatedly.

“Wh-what do you think it means?” I asked.

“You think it’s a part of the story you were telling me about? Tale of Three Brothers?”

“Oh that for sure was the second brother...betraying the first out of fear or pressure. I just don’t know how it relates and where the woman with fangs came from? Anyway...” I sighed as I looked down at my hands. “Just in case I don’t see you in my dreams anymore since they’re starting to change again...I thought I’d tell you...” I smiled. “You’re the only one who seems to enjoy my stories anyway so I’m glad to entertain you. Not really a successful writer in the real world. If I am some sort of oracle like you’re saying I am...then what I’m telling you is only meant for you.”

“A message for me, and a warning for you.”

I rose from the bed with a gasp, air shooting through my nose like someone was forcing me to suffocate from the inside out. I looked around the plain college dorm. The small window had a little bit of light from the natural sunrise in the distance. Touching my neck, I felt something wet as I pulled my hand back to look at my fingers. The tips were bright red as I clamped my neck with my entire palm, feeling blood staining. I looked down at the sheets, seeing a pool of red blood everywhere and began to freak.

“No, no, no, no, no, no,” I hissed, flipping the covers back.

I jumped up from the bed. I tried to stop the blood from pouring out when I turned back to look at the bed, seeing the maroon and white sheets stain free. Slowly, I pulled my hand from my neck, seeing bone dry fingers.

“A message for me...and a warning for you,” I said out loud, the only thing I can remember and hear in my head. “A message for me and a warning for you...”

Was this about me? Am I the one that needs to be warned? Is this my body’s way of telling me to be careful of Seth and the werewolves?

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:59 pm*

Souxie Lafayette

“Oh this class is huge,” Celeste leaned in to whisper.

I looked back at the seats filling up as I sat my things down underneath my desk and tucked my hair behind my ears. It was a brand new class that just opened up. The amount of students piling in while others hung around the doorway in hopes to get a peek of the teacher was shocking.

“They all want to see what she looks like,” I said under my breath.

Celeste organized her notebook and textbook accordingly on her desk while straightening up her posture. I smiled. Without even trying, you could tell she was feminine and a girl’s girl from the way she pulled out a small pouch to apply her lip gloss to the way her nails were freshly done. She was naturally pretty with the light makeup and I bet when she took her glasses off, her pretty lashes had room to flutter, and her round, full cheeks had a natural red undertone against her otherwise caramel complexion. She was older than all of us, that much I could tell in the way she carried herself. My guess would be mid-thirties but just starting over in life with no clear direction. Very much grown and sexy and too old for the BS but that was right up my alley. I preferred the company of older men and women and had she been into women, I would have already made my move since she was my exact type. She was refreshing from the usual girl next door, Maggie Grey, the earthy bully that is Asha Avery, and my wild flower, Isis.

“Did you want some gum?” She asked, turning to look at me. I smiled before nodding as she dug into her bag.

“What do you think a mere human can teach us about ourselves?” Someone complained. “I wanted to transfer out of this class but like everyone else, I was curious.”

“I just want to see if she’s pretty,” a girl retorted.

“They say she was handpicked by The First Family themselves...”

“Please...she’s their blood slave,” one of the guys let out. “They’re all taking turns fucking her. How else do you think she got this job and was allowed down here? She’s probably running late now because she’s laid up with one of them.”

Celeste looked at me while I slipped the strip of gum in my mouth.

“Vampires?” She questioned with her glossy, heart-shaped lips. I nodded as we continued to snoop in on the various conversations surrounding the new teacher.

“They said she got a nice house...one of those fancy townhouses that new teachers aren’t supposed to get. She’s getting the special treatment because she’s fucking them. ”

“Yeah...hundred percent human blood is the best blood for them to drink,” another said.

“He’s not lying, y’all. I saw one of the guys walking around The Grounds, and he was definitely here because he heard there was a human professor. I’m sure that white-haired girl will be the first to attack her.”

I slowly turned around, ready to say something when I heard heels clicking loudly against the floor in the hallway. A few of the students lingering around the door suddenly backed up as a tall woman with a head full of wild, curly hair burst into the

room with her things.

“I’m so sorry I’m late,” she said with excitement. “My first ever class and of course, I’m late... I had to drop my son off at his new school and that was a whole ordeal...”

Everyone grew quiet as we watched her put her things down on the desk from her iced coffee to her tote bag and purse. You couldn’t get a look at her face because she was moving so much but when she finally did face the class, I smiled.

She was absolutely beautiful in a natural disaster kind of way. Her wild hair stuck out in different directions. She wore a white blouse that was halfway unbuttoned where you could see a peek of her bra. She also wore high-waisted black pants and heels as she quickly adjusted her shirt. She knew she was showing .

“She looks like a model,” a girl whispered with envy. Professor Birdie Jones was indeed petite in frame and lanky in height.

“This is my first class...and you’re all in your cute uniforms,” she said in awe, looking around the large room. “First off, let me just say...I know there is some hesitation with some students not wanting to be in my class. If you feel you’ve been misplaced...leave. You can leave. I’ll figure out the paperwork later on how to transfer you out.”

I turned around and pointedly looked at everyone that spoke about wanting to leave but nobody said a word and nobody moved. Her sharp eyes and full lips turning into a smile were two toned when she turned around towards the board to write her name.

“My name...is Professor Birdie M. Jones,” she said, spelling her name out in cursive. “This is Underground Mysteries and Lore 101.”

She turned around with a smile and wiped her hands on her pants, not caring that she



was getting them dirty with white chalk.

“Do you have any questions for me?” I heard a few shift in their seats from behind me as she nodded. “Yes?”

“What makes someone like you qualified to teach someone like me? ”

Jones’ eyes lit up as she slowly walked forward in her heels.

“Excellent question, and you are?”

“Nadine Winder,” she said with an uppity tone. “I’m a third year here, and I really don’t understand why they’re sticking me in a class like this.”

“What’s your major?”

“Witch doctor with a concentration in hoodoo practices in the Southern states of America.”

“I met a witch doctor once,” Jones said as she walked towards the door to close the peeping students out. “Out in South Carolina...I was doing research on families and traditions out in Charleston...the Geechee Gullah people and how they came about. Do you address yourself as a witch or...priestess?”

I heard a few gasps as the woman snorted.

“You took a guess based on my major,” she stated.

“No, I recognize the family tattoo on your neck,” Jones pointed out as I turned around to see the tribal marking. “You come from a long family history of Black magic. Just like the young man behind you is of Yumboes ancestry...It’s in your face.” She

waved her hand around her own face. “Your features are very fae like...Yumboes date back West Africa, specifically Senegal. Am I correct? ”

The guy’s nose twisted up as he gave her a small nod.

“That shit is way back in my ancestry. I barely have that in my blood. Both of my parents are regular people,” he argued.

“That’s debatable,” she said as a few people chuckled. “I will admit I’m not very good at figuring out shifters. I still have a long way to go to learn just how many different types of mythical beings exist, but I am excited and willing to learn if you’ll let me.”

Celeste raised her hand as Jones pointed to her.

“Yes?”

“What do you know about fallen spirits or lost souls?” she asked.

“Well I—”

There was a loud commotion in the hallway as her door opened with a few more students piling in. Professor Jones glanced at her watch on her wrist before rushing towards her desk.

“Of course, I need to take attendance. My apologies to everyone. This is my first day teaching...It’s all very new to me. Just give me a second and again, if you feel you’re in the wrong class or if you think I’m not qualified, please...remove yourself. After that, we can get started with going over my syllabus and basic rules for this semester...what I expect out of you and what you can expect out of me.”

Surprisingly, the class went so well that a lot of students ended up staying over just to talk with her. She had something about her that made her personal and easy to talk to, so Celeste decided to hang around for a bit after everyone left.

“I can wait for you,” I said, gathering my things. Quan was still in my bag sleeping when Professor Jones walked over towards us.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t get a chance to answer your question before getting distracted. It’s very easy to get overstimulated in a place like this,” she joked.

“It’s fine. It’s my first day, too.” Celeste smiled as the last lingering students left out of the class. “I was wondering what you knew about a fallen or lost spirit?”

“Hmmm...a tortured artist.” She dramatically sighed. “Their imagination is touched with magical abilities. I think at this school, you’re treated as an art student...do you paint or draw?”

“Write.” Celeste smiled. Jones nodded.

“Yeah that sounds about right. In my research, I’ve heard they have vivid dreams...severe daydreaming and tendencies to dissociate.”

“What about oracles?”

“Oracles?” She questioned, surprised. “Well, I recommend reading up on books written by Dr. Kevin Hanner.” She walked over to her desk to write something down. “An oracle is somewhat of a prophet. Personally, I think it’s the same thing. I believe an oracle is in fact a soul that is a lost or fallen spirit. A fallen spirit or soul has prophetic tendencies. The ability to see things for what they are, what they can be, or will be through visions and dreams. If they know how to interpret their visions properly, they could change the world. They would be the closest thing to God in my

opinion.”

I looked at Celeste, seeing the fear gloss over her eyes before masking it as she held onto every word Jones said.

“I knew of a man who claimed to be one, an oracle or messenger...They go by many names. Seer, oracle, prophet ...He would record himself sleeping. Sometimes, he would write down random notes but he mostly liked to draw, sketch, and paint.”

“Which brings you back to the fallen spirit,” Celeste said. Jones nodded. “I see why you think it's the same.”

“Here...” She scribbled her last few notes on the paper before tearing it to give to Celeste. “Let me know what you girls discover,” she said, glancing at her watch. “I have to grab some quick lunch before my next class.”

“Right,” Celeste said as she gathered her things.

“It was nice meeting you both, Celeste annnnd...”

“Souxie,” I said with a smile, locking in with her. “Souxie Lafayette.

“Clairvoyant, yes?”

“Mmm hmm.” I nodded .

“Observant...taking in energies...perceptive beyond human comprehension. Niceee.” She nodded. “Celeste and Souxie. Let me know what you discover and if you have any more questions, feel free to email me.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:59 pm*

Coach Namir

I leaned on my truck that was parked on the side of the road as I glanced at my phone. It was almost morning, and I was out in South Georgia with not a single building in sight. Just land that stretched in both directions. The stars were faint and far apart from one another with no sign of the moon anywhere. Just clouds and night sky. So, I looked back down to my left and right and continued to wait.

“What the fuck is taking so long?” I muttered, scratching at my head. I looked at the time again and saw a message from the school. It was the usual safety notification due to the girls missing. I crossed my arms over my chest with a heavy sigh and kicked at the dirt again. My ears throbbed and pulsated against the cool air. Listening to the sounds of nature, I saw headlights in the distance suddenly turn off. I kept my posture, unmoved until the white Toyota I knew belonged to my sister slowly pulled up against the crumbling road.

Picking my nose up in the air to get a sniff, I waited until the doors opened on both sides and smiled when I saw Maze. Short hair tapered in the back, she grinned, and walked up in her usual black shorts and tank top. I could still see the bruises on her body but then, that’s when I noticed the driver. Her husband. Draco Holmes. He had his hair pushed back into a ponytail with that one streak of Maggie Grey going back. He was dressed in basketball shorts and a t-shirt like he’d just gotten back from a pickup game and before I could say anything, I saw the back door open and to my surprise...

It was my oldest brother... Seth. I stood upright when he stepped out with a head full of hair widely spread about behind the rubber band he used to keep his hair out of his

face. His bright hazel eyes, almost always mistaken for yellow, stood out against his dark complexion, he chuckled his chin up towards me with a smile. I looked at Maze instead.

“Before you say anything,” she cautioned with her hand out as she slowly stepped towards me. “Hear him out...”

“You know he attacked our Mom——”

“Mom has forgiven him a loooong time ago, Namir. We have a bigger issue at hand here...”

I stared at Seth, who simply grinned with a slow blink of his eyes.

“What is it?” I said.

“Seth thinks Ty might be working with his great aunt.” She pointed to her husband, who continuously sized me up with a frown .

“What?” I said again, standing up right. “Who told you this?”

“I told you he wouldn’t believe it,” Seth said with a helpless shrug. “I was told this through a credible source.”

“And you trust him?!” I exclaimed. “This made-up source?!”

“A woman came to me in my dreams. It’s not made up, baby brother.” Seth smiled. I threw my hand up in exasperation.

“Maze?!”

“Well,” she started. “Draco also thinks his aunt is up to no good but she’s playing the long game. If the pack teams up with The First Family behind closed doors, do you understand what type of power and control that will have on the entire Underground?”

I stared at my sister before looking towards her mute husband, who continued to glare at me. He had an issue with me, that much I understood, but Maze must have kept him in check to where he wasn’t going to say a word.

“This is where I come in,” Seth said. “I’m going to single handedly take over Ty’s position and my rightful place as alpha and pack leader. I’m sure they know I’m already here. There have been whispers of my return.”

“You don’t even like coming down here!” I argued. “You don’t like shit to do with the pack because of how they treated your mom and her side of the family! Why are you suddenly coming down thinking anything belongs to you because you’re older?”

“Things...” Seth exhaled as he looked up. “Have changed, in my life...It’s different now. I want to understand my family and people better——”

“BULLSHIT!” I barked with a shriek. “Maze?! What are we really doing?! Why am I really out here?! Anything dealing with Ty don’t have shit to do with me, not anymore!”

“It actually does because if Maggie gets involved or she’s somehow dragged in this——”

“And how do you know he won’t turn around and betray you, Maze?”

“Because I don’t give a fuck about none of this shit!” Seth snapped with a bark before crossing his wrists together against his waist. “If we’re being honest, I don’t give a

fuck about vampires, goblins, ghosts, and goons! None of this moves me! I'll be the first wolf to expose all of this shit and bring us up to the top where the true power is."

Something wasn't right. Seth hasn't been around in years after being kicked out. Him popping up out of nowhere had to mean something else. I just couldn't figure out what his true motive was but it damn sure wasn't to help our sister in any capacity. I looked towards Maze, who puckered her lips at me .

"Is this what you want?" I asked. "Huh? You want this same bullshit. We do just fine living between above and below——"

"No," she said with a shake of her head. "I intend on starting my own pack here and I... I need you to stand by my side."

I looked up at the sky, exasperated. I just left one dysfunctional family and now I was being asked to start a new one.

"It won't be like before!" she exclaimed. "Namir, listen to me. It won't be like before...Draco feels the same. If we could combine forces...and take her down while Seth takes control of Ty...He will control above and we will control below."

"We ?"

She looked towards her husband with a soft smile. A smile I'd rarely seen cross her face, and this is my sister we're talking about! I'd seen her mess with men and women consistently for years and she was married to this?!

"Draco and I," she said. "He understands more than anyone the dynamics of a wolf and what a pack means...so he is comfortable letting us be the face of the new pack but he will be a part of it on the back end as well...This will be the first of its kind...a hybrid of vampire and wolves collective—— "



“You just accused Ty of the same thing you’re doing now! Are you crazy?!” I snapped.

“I’m not! At some point all of this vampire, wolf mess has to stop! That was our ancestors, not us.”

“So if they stop going around killing and draining——”

“What do you think will happen when you really start to fall for Maggie or are you just with her just because she’s forbidden?” Maze questioned. “What happens if she gets pregnant or...”

As soon as she said it, I saw her eyes twitch and nervously dart towards her husband. She must have masked the scent well because I would have caught it on the first word that left her tongue.

“You’re pregnant,” I said in complete shock. Maze’s eyes became submissive under my stare with a small nod.

“It wasn’t planned——”

“What the fuck is happening right now...” I said out loud with my hand going down my face.

“Enough of this pointless reunion, can we all come to some sort of agreement not to get in the other person’s way?” Seth asked as his piercing yellow eyes stared at me for a response. “I’m coming for my family. Our sister will start her own...what are you going to do, Namir? It’s really a simple question.”

Maze pleaded with me once more. “Namir, I need you by my side. If we are to gather more wolves...and there are so many lone wolves...We can really have anyone join

our pack!” she exclaimed excitedly. “Sirens, nymphs! Faes! Anybody! We can be our own political power and knock Wilhelmina off her throne! It’s time for new blood to take control. You can be alpha right alongside me. Maggie will have your back for sure...and she will be protected because they’re going to come after her.”

“Who is going to come after her?” I asked.

“Did you think harboring the moon to yourself would keep what she is hidden?” Seth asked. “I spoke with Ernie...Cousin Ernie up north and even he knows about the girl who is supposedly the moon. Some of them salivate at the thought of being near her...some think about killing her. Some think about taking her...and you know what I mean by that. Lucky for you,” Seth said with his hand on his chest, “the moon doesn’t do shit but put me to sleep.”

“Because your human mother isn’t one of us,” I retorted.

“And neither is your bitch——”

“STOP IT! Both of you! Just stop!” Maze screamed, stopping me just in time before I launched at Seth. He raised his hands up with a laugh before slowly turning around to walk off.

“It’s really simple, Namir... I can do this with you by my side.” She stepped towards me, seeing the ice cold stare down she got from our mama. “You and I can start our own pack and alliance with The First Family like Maggie and Draco or...you say no and hope to not get in me or Seth’s way. The three of us can be alphas and live in peace. Maybe Ty can still have some of the old, Seth can have the new and we can start our own...and I know, I know you don’t have a desire to be an alpha...but maybe you can just have my back. They won’t fully respect me unless you’re by my side. I’ll handle the responsibilities. I just want your support as my brother.”

I looked at Seth as he leaned against the hood of the car and stared at me with a twitching eye. He was off. Everything in me said not to trust him, even when he flashed a smile.

“I’ve already spoken with our father,” Seth started calmly as he picked at the paint of the Toyota with his nail.

“He knows you’re trying to take Ty’s position?”

“What do you think?”

“What does your mother think? What does she say about this? You’ve been above ground for years living your life away from this and out of nowhere, you came down here to take from Ty? Something you have no idea about. You have no idea what it's like to be a wolf...to be a pack or family. You were raised human and last time I checked, you preferred it.”

Seth’s eyes went cold as he masked his emotions, becoming nothing more than a blank face .

“Like I said, things changed.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:59 pm*

Souxie Lafayette

I walked into the bathroom with a shove of the door and heard toilets flushing and laughter echoing against the tiled decor. I had a few minutes until my class opened up for students to be let in, so I thought I'd come in to do a touch up but instead, I was greeted with a group of girls in the corner, hovering over their phones laughing. Their all black uniforms told me we were in the same school of the spiritual with the black sweater vest and knee-high socks, but they looked like they were fresh out of high school.

So, I quietly dragged my hand down the stall door before pushing it up from the top and stepped inside, closing it shut with a loud snap of the lock. I hung my bag on the hook and leaned against the wall with my ankles crossed over one another.

“Do you remember that boy from the hall last week? The one that came up to our table?” one of the girls asked. “He asked Nellie out——”

The girls screamed and giggled as the one named Nellie spoke softly .

“Y'all don't even get me started. You know what he's after——”

“But he's cuteeeee...Have you been texting him?”

“What's his name again?”

“Ronan,” Nellie said.

I closed my eyes and just listened, decompressing for a bit before lifting my skirt and yanking the hem of my panties to slide down my thighs.

“He’s a hoe. We know that for sure so don’t take him seriously,” one girl warned.

“Oh I already know how he gets down, that’s why I’m looking like, what do you want with me? I barely said two words to you...”

“But this is your chance to make a name for yourself...We said when we all got accepted into Drew Collins, we would make a name for ourselves as witches... the top witches at this school, did we not?”

“We did,” Nellie groaned. “I just...I don’t know. It’s so many girls here...”

“And yet he came to you...that has to mean something.”

My brows came together as I hovered over the toilet to pee and stared up at the ceiling, wondering if I had a normal upbringing, would I sound like that? Grabbing the tissue, I wrapped a few layers around my hand before wiping in between and chucking it in the water .

“He sees something in you that he doesn’t in the other girls...These other girls, the overly pretty ones like...” She began to whisper but I could tell they were pointing towards my stall.

“They are boring to talk to. You have brains, beauty, and substance...Men, real men get tired of just a pretty face.”

“That’s true,” another agreed.

I picked my foot up to press down the metal handle to flush the toilet. I yanked my

bag off the hook and stepped out towards the multiple rows of sinks and square mirrors. The girls got quiet but only for a second, seeing as I didn't pay them in any mind.

"He wants to link up tonight, and I'm just like...I don't know..."

"He's cute...Clearly got money. Have you seen his car?" another one of her friends hyped. "I would do it if I was you. We're young. You don't have to make him your boyfriend. Just go have fun. This is what college is about."

I cut the sink on, wanting to roll my eyes as I washed my hands. I smiled at the playful water art of tiny fish and shells spilling out of the faucet before turning into water against my skin. The art students here never ceased to amaze me .

"So, when do you meet up with him?"

"Tonight," Nellie whispered as I looked up in the mirror. With a single glance, I did a double take, seeing the dark figure stand against the stall behind the girls. I froze. Slowly, I reached for the handle to cut the water off, never once taking my eyes off the dark shadow. Looking back, I saw nothing but the row of stalls and the girls continuing to talk with one looking at me funny. I looked back at the mirror, seeing the shadow again, simply hovering behind the group of girls like tiny, black sand that formed a tall, looming figure. I leaned over the sink to stare into the mirror for the full reflection and saw that the figure didn't touch the ground. Just barely hovered over it. When the girls decided it was time to break and walk off, it waited for a second before disappearing right behind Nellie.

Death.

It was death. The same thing I felt with Hillary only this time, I was seeing it for the first time... They opened the door and walked off as I quickly followed, trying not to

be obvious, and watched as the crowd of students maneuvered through the narrow halls, and there it was... That dark shadow moving in and out of the short, petite girl named Nellie with the chunky braids. In and out of her backside like it was constantly checking her soul and body to make sure it was still intact .

Looking at my time on my phone, I began to follow her around the corner and down the flight of steps to the next level of classes. Only stopping to look over the railing when she stopped in the corner of the stairwell to check her phone. Death hovered behind her like a shadow, perched over her shoulder before moving in and out of her headspace.

“ Mortem ,” I whispered, just barely a breath of the Latin word coming out when death snapped its neck to look up at me, seeing a dark face form, before disappearing into the corner of the walls like a puff of black smoke. The girl suddenly looked up and our eyes locked. I knew she was confused but I also knew she suspected me of following her.

There wasn't much you could do in this school and students wouldn't notice. Not with the caliber of talent and magic here. So instead, I walked down the steps towards her and watched as she pushed her glasses up and shrunk underneath my presence.

“What are you?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

“What are you? What type of witch are you?” I asked, looking her over.

“I'm a cosmic witch...” she let out, trying to find the confidence to speak up. “I use magic from the stars, sun, galaxy...universe. I have a concentration in world astrology and constellations...as it relates to African descents and culture...”

A bell ringing in the distance signaled the start of a new hour. She glanced at her phone, and I caught the name of the boy texting her the address of where to meet.

“Um... I have to go,” she nervously said. She inched her way towards the door. I simply watched as she hurried and pulled the door open to walk out into the hallway.

...

“She’s alive!” I blurted out as I slammed my bag down on the kitchen table at the Wisteria House. Quan’s bowl of whatever the hell he was eating jumped as he looked up at me. His black framed glasses only made his vertical bright eyes that much more expressive when he put the fork down and sighed, annoyed. He was sitting at the table with no shirt on, a single little chain link around his neck, fresh cut on the sides with the curls laying over the fade, and black shorts that struggled to contain his muscular thighs.

“What are you going on about now, Souxie?” He groaned. “Why won’t you talk to the girls...usually you bother them with this stuff, not just me. ”

“Celeste is still alive,” I told him as I pulled out a chair to sit across from him. “I was in the bathroom earlier today and I saw death.”

“ What ?” He cringed.

“Death! I saw him!”

“How do you know Death is a him ?”

“Never mind that, Quan,” I said with a wave of my hand. “I saw what I felt when Hillary was here... The last night we walked out of our dorm to spend the night at Asha’s house...death had followed us in the hallway. When I was in the building, I



saw Professor Akeem that night...death was crawling all over that place but they use that building for autopsies and crime related research...Now...I finally saw death in its full form.”

Quan scratched at his head before leaning back in the chair as he crossed his beefy arms over his chest. The only thing saving him from looking like an intimidating giant were the nerdy glasses that scaled back his size and downplayed his features.

“Alright, so what does this mean exactly?” he asked. “You saw death following behind a girl, now what? Did you warn her?”

“No but what exactly is a school like this letting something like that walk around The Grounds?” I asked just as I heard a key slip into the lock. The alarm beeps went off as Isis walked in with a stack of books in her hand. Kicking her shoes off, she checked the small mailbox slots by the door, hung up her decorated skeleton key next to ours, and walked by with a smile towards us.

“Hey, y'all!” She greeted. Quan and I said nothing as her smile slowly dropped to a frown. “Okay well...I’ll be upstairs studying if you guys need me. Big exam tomorrow.”

I gave her a small nod, not wanting her to think anything was wrong or adding to the already tense house. Quan kept his eyes on her before looking back at me with a double blink of his vertical pupils. We both waited for the door to close shut to her room before he leaned in.

“You think the girl is alive?” He asked again.

“She has to be...given what she is... I’ve been doing some reading on oracles... They are able to jump bodies when they feel threatened. She was obviously threatened. She jumped when she was here. If they did the research the way that I did, she is probably

no use to them now so why kill her? They should be out looking for the next oracle, yes?"

"That's your problem now," he pointed out as he swiped the bowl off the table to finish eating. "You're always fixated on something...sticking to the one thing and never letting up...even when everyone else has moved on."

"So seeing death walk around, following behind a girl is not news to you?" I asked. "You're not the least bit curious as to why that is? "

"No because people die all the time——"

"People don't just die here at Drew Collins," I said. "They don't go missing as well. Same with the four girls from Society Hill. How are you not questioning this?"

"I would question why you're able to see it and nobody else can't." He scooped whatever the food was into his mouth for a mushy chew. "Guess only time will tell..."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:59 pm*

Maggie Grey

Friday night lights. Best way to describe the feeling at Drew Collins right now. The Grounds were lit with lights and everyone was just busy trying to either rush towards the hall to grab a bite or head home for the weekend. This was my last time trying to call Bellamy before giving up, but the phone just went to voicemail once again.

“Every freaking time,” I muttered as I made my way through the old stadium. It was no longer off limits to students, and any trace of what happened to those girls were long gone. Once again, the bleachers and stands were free for students to sit and chill just to escape the school.

I adjusted my backpack on my back but paused when I saw Namir running his mouth. Shirtless, of course. He looked like he’d just finished working out but there was a girl standing before him all smiles with her track uniform on. Nothing but tight shorts and a matching maroon sports bra. Her body was covered in faded spots like faint birthmarks, and she laughed a little too loud for me. Her short pixie cut was cute and I’ll admit, she was a pretty girl, whatever the hell she was. Maybe some sort of dalmatian so they had some sort of common ground. I decided to post up behind the gate and just watch and listen.

“Yeah, I need to start stretching,” she said with her leg propped up on the metal bench, exposing her brown thigh. “You see this right here is where I pulled a muscle...”

As soon as I saw Namir lick his lips, his eyes darted nervously towards me before he awkwardly stepped back.

“Yeah, you gotta get right if you’re gonna bring home some wins...Society Hill is cool but these other schools? They’re outta here...”

“Oh, I know.” She laughed. “I’m probably gonna need extra practice, me and a few of the girls...If you don’t mind.”

“Yeah, I’ll see what Coach Moore is tryna do,” he said. The look in her eyes was obvious. She wanted extra HIM. Namir tilted his head up towards me.

“You ready?” The humor in his eyes was not lost on me.

“Are you ?” I asked, walking into the stadium. The girl without another word turned and grabbed her stuff.

“Hopefully, I’ll see you at the next practice, Namir,” she said. She walked right past me without so much as a word or glance at me. No respect, and she definitely didn’t see me as a threat. Luckily, neither did I when I saw her talking to him. Namir nervously scratched at his ear while grabbing the stray football to toss in the large bin.

“You’re shirtless, sweating, and you’re attractive. I get it,” I said with a shrug before calmly adding, “let me find out though...”

Namir started laughing until he realized I didn’t even crack a smile. Last thing I’d ever let happen was me crying over a man that didn’t think twice about hurting me and my feelings. Courtesy of my dad and the game he’d been giving me since my first crush. Eric Hanes, second grade. Blonde hair with blue eyes. Broke up with me by giving another girl his pencil, and I was devastated. The asshole . Never again. That and my dad always told me to never bring a white boy home so...there’s that.

“You ready?” He asked as he took my bag off my shoulder to place on his. I smelled

the fresh scent of the shower gel he used as he pulled a crisp white t-shirt over his body. Probably took a shower in one of the locker rooms nearby and changed because damn it, he smelled good.

“Where are we staying tonight?” I asked as we walked together on The Grounds.

“I got that all taken care of... You said you wanted to learn the doors so I’m gonna teach you. ”

We ended up walking off The Grounds toward the parking lot before going past his truck as he studied his phone. I hadn’t said much since it seemed like he was concentrating. As we passed nosey teachers and professors watching us walk, I flipped my black hood over my head, and kept my head down until we made it to his truck.

“Alright,” He said before showing me his phone. It looked like a message board or discord chat full of profiles just randomly talking to one another. “This is one of the apps you can download to find a door.”

“Okaaay,” I said, still confused by all of it. They had apps now to go through secret doors? Why did it all still feel so secretive?

“But once you get the hang of it, you can kinda create your own.”

“These people are like hackers?” I asked.

“Something like that.” He moved his duffle bag aside that was already packed and waiting in the back seat. Tossing my bag next to it, he opened the passenger door for me to get in. “You’re fucking with time and different realities if you mess up but lately, the doors have been monitored both above and below. A lot of 'em have been dead doors.”

I waited for him to get in on his side before asking, “Because of the girls missing?”

“Yep. So we’re going off the grid...far, far away from the school. Less eyes...Cut your phone off. You’re not gonna need it.”

Felt like famous last words before my untimely demise. I looked at the screen, seeing notifications from the dead group chat before rolling my eyes. Yeah, whatever. I shut it off and placed it in the cup holder in the center. He wasn’t kidding when he said off the grid. I had no idea where we were driving to but it felt like a good hour ride of my stomach growling on a never ending back road. The school had long disappeared into the night. It was just his bright headlights leading the way until he came to a slow stop, pulling his truck on the side of the road before rolling carefully on the grass. There was absolutely nothing out here for miles in either direction. Not a single star in the sky, let alone a moon or cloud. Blindly, I got out as the cool air, having a snap of cold to it, hit my skin like a bad aftertaste.

“Come on,” he said, marching forward through the thick grass.

“Where are we?” I asked, shoving my hands in my pockets as he came to a stop. Right at our feet was a small wooden door with a latch, he picked it up and opened it, showing nothing but dirt and darkness.

“No.” I laughed. “If I didn’t know you, I would think you were trying to kill me and use my body for skin coats——”

“Nobody is trying to kill you,” he fussed with a shove towards the steps. It looked like a straight drop as I looked back at Namir. “Maggie...I’m right behind you.”

I took one step down before taking another step until I reached flat ground and Namir had closed the latch behind me, causing it to be pitch black. I heard him growl so low, I was expecting somebody to come out at any given moment.

“Is the growling in the dark necessary?” I snapped.

“Somebody was just here,” he muttered. Namir cut his flashlight on and showed a small wooden door that had all types of scratch marks on it. It looked like someone was trying to claw their way out of here but instead, Namir kept the light on the door.

“First thing,” he said. “You need to relax...Your mood can affect where you end up. You need to be confident when you travel through time, space, and energy, aight?”

I nodded.

“When you want to go somewhere...you find a door that’s ready or make a door specifically for traveling. This door is made specifically for traveling. It’s always gonna be ready. You knock three times to let the universe or realm know of your arrival. Wait for it to change colors or wait until you see the light beneath it to show a sign of life... So go ahead and knock on it.”

I took a deep swallow before stretching my fist out to knock on the loose door three times.

“Be cool, baby,” he muttered, watching the door carefully.

“Where does it lead to?” I asked, seeing the light wave past our feet beneath the door frame.

“Open it and let’s go,” was all Namir said with a smirk.

I pulled the door back as I stepped out first, always feeling the need to close my eyes before hearing Namir telling me to step out. I opened my eyes to see we came out of a door that led outside of what looked like...a park? It was still dark out with hardly anyone outside, but the cold air definitely had a scent to it that smelled like a major

city. The row of trees and large field of grass stretched all the way back. There were a few lit buildings in the distance but nothing obvious that gave it away.

“What is this...D...” I began to turn around. “C...”

My eyes shot straight up, bypassing Namir’s sneaky grin as I looked up. We were standing just outside of the Eiffel Tower. I clamped my mouth shut to keep from screaming before backing up to get a full view of the iron structure. We were right beneath the arch, and we just came out of the small building labeled *caisse*, ticket office. There were gates where lines were formed and even a fence where people weren’t allowed to cross to get close. It had to be well after midnight. Early hours of the morning, and the city was still well lit.

“This is real?” I asked, looking at Namir.

He nodded.

“We’re in Paris,” he said. “I can’t get you up there but that lock on that door is always loose.” He pointed to where we’d just came from, “we got lucky, considering this is usually blocked off... We don’t have to stay long but I know women think this place is romantic so...yeah...Just wanted you to see it.”

I felt like a kid when I nearly jumped in place before running over to wrap my arms around his neck. I didn’t even realize he only carried the duffle bag until it dropped on the ground at our feet.

“This is incredible!” I said in awe, looking up. “We’re literally underneath it! We’re underneath the Eiffel Tower! Have you seen anything more beautiful?!”

Namir simply stared down at me.



“I have,” he said, eyes never wavering until I met his gaze. He pulled my hoodie back, exposing my white hair and leaned down to kiss me. Just a single kiss on the lips. Nothing overly sensual or sexy. I could tell he didn’t want to overdo it for fear of shifting, which meant it was a high chance of it happening. He was being careful.

“You want to walk around for——”

I barely heard him finish when I took off towards the grassy center of the park, constantly looking back to make sure it was still there. With my hands in the air, I laughed and spun around while Namir grabbed the bag and took his time walking. Only stopping when he picked his head up to smell the air, following a particular scent trail.

“ What’s fifty grand to a mothafucka like me, can you please remind meeeee ?!” I shouted, quoting the Jay Z and Kanye West song. “ Ball so hard! This shit weird !”

I spun around as my hair pulled itself out of the loose ponytail like white curly waves. I stopped in mid laughter as I flipped the strands back from my face, getting a peek at Namir. I watched him slip something in his duffle bag before coming to sit down on the grass with his knees propped up against his arms. Making himself comfortable, he stared up at me with content.

“You know we’re in Paris?” I laughed. “Paris!”

“I know,” he said calmly. I began dancing again, letting my arms wildly move about until I stretched out towards the Eiffel Tower like I wanted to hold it. Turning around, I watched his eyes follow my every move as I ran up to him, gripping his knees and began to obnoxiously rap the lyrics again.

“ What’s fifty grand to a mothafucka like me can you please remind meeeee ?! Huh, Namir!? What is it?! Because I’m where ?! In Paris, bitch ...and without a passport!”

“Maggie?”

“Hmmm?” I bopped with my body, moving from side to side, still gripping his knees in a playful manner. I wonder if he can dance ?

“Maggie?”

“What?”

Without giving him a chance, I leaned in and kissed him on the lips, taking full control this time. Maybe I was feeling a little bold when I pulled back with a lick of my lips only to place another light kiss on his mouth.

“Thank you for not putting me in the middle of the ocean this time,” I said. He smirked, lips stretching into a grin against mine. Namir suddenly turned around to watch a few people walking, almost clumsily staggering underneath the row of lamp posts in the distance. They were most likely drunk.

“You ready?”

“I am,” I said, feeling giddy. “This was absolutely perfect...”

“Yeah?” Namir said distractedly while looking at his phone. He suddenly looked up as the sound of a police siren went off in the distance. Even that sounded so vastly different from back home.

“Are there any...mythical beings here in France?” I asked as Namir continued to smell the air. His nose twitched and his chest pumped up with each inhale as he closed his eyes.

“Yeah but they’re not as open as we are...”

“But y'all aren't,” I said before thinking. “Y'all really just separated yourselves from the rest of the society.”

“Exactly,” he retorted before grabbing my arm. “They haven't done that here yet. London has a huge Underground. Not as big as ours but they have one. You said you wanna learn how to move through the doors, another one just opened up.”

“How do you know that?!” I shouted, trying to run alongside him as we cut through the grassy media that trailed the Eiffel Tower.

“Sometimes, you can hear it! Look for any door.”

“Hear what?!”

Namir laughed, finding humor in the fact that I didn't know what the hell was happening. I just knew the pace of this night suddenly picked up when we came up on a hidden door on the side of one of historic buildings with a cute coffee shop on the corner. It boasted a view of the La Tour Eiffel and aside from the piles of trash on the street, the heavy scent of cigarette smoke laid thick in the night air .

“You see it?” Namir said, pointing to the side door. There was a small light gliding across. “Hurry and knock on it.”

“But how do you know where it leads to?”

“Think of it like roads...constantly changing direction. I don't know where this leads to but if we don't take it, we'll have to wait for another to open up. It's all based on time and who is on the other side moving...Now, go. Hurry up.”

I ran up to the door, almost tripping over the curb as I knocked three times before pushing my way through. Namir came up right behind me with his hand on my back

and gently shoved me forward into the dirt alleyway as the sound of music, people yelling out, and the smell of everything from spices to meat surrounded us.

“Come on,” Namir said. “We gotta be quick.”

I took his outstretched hand and followed him through the rows of vendors and booths, passing up some of the richest skin and features you’d ever see. I knew we were somewhere in Africa, I just didn’t know what country but seeing men gather around a small table eating rice, women passing by with baskets carrying fruit on top of their heads, and children running wild with a soccer ball, just did something for me.

“Where are we?” I asked, following him close. He turned the corner, passing up more stalls where we saw men making sandals and women weaving baskets. I heard a radio going on about a particular game while seeing a basket full of water wrapped in plastic bags for sale.

“Ghana,” Namir said as he stepped inside the covered market. “Those are where the artisans stay and make their stuff before coming here to sell it.” He pointed to the booths.

“My brotha!? My brotha! Come!” one called out, coaxing Namir to see his shop.

“What are you looking for in particular?” I asked, following behind him as we delved deeper into the market.

“I’m looking for another door but...”

He turned off but I stopped at the row of beads hanging down like drapes. The woman smiled as she waved for me to come.

“Come, Mama Moon,” she said as she walked around the corner. “I know who you are...I’ll give you something special.”

I stepped up to the market, almost feeling like I was back at The Underground but this...this was the real deal. This was the blueprint. This woman measured my stomach before taking a row of all white waist beads against my skin.

“Only show for him,” she said with a nudge towards Namir. I didn’t have to look back to know she was talking about him or to know he was standing right behind me. I just watched as she grabbed another set of white beads with tiny crystals in between to decorate my stomach. She looked around, sharp eyes searching her surroundings before bringing me closer into her stall.

“We are not allowed to do magic here,” she whispered. She took a snap of her fingers, producing the tiniest flick of flame appeared between the tips of her fingers to burn the rope, bounding the waist beads to my body. “These only come off when you...”

She playfully grazed her hand over her belly to signify pregnancy. I shook my head as she nodded.

“Yes... You will change the world. You will give birth to a new world,” she said with a gentle touch of my chin. “No money. I don’t need it. You are a blessing just being here...”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, taking the bait.

Before she could answer, we heard shouting and screaming as everyone poked their heads out of their booths to see police dressed like the military, dragging a bald man out by his feet. He was clawing at the ground, pleading in a different language before his body began to shift. His face stretched out and his body curved as he went from

two to four legs. The dark spotted fur looked like pin needles as his teeth stretched all the way to the back, snarling and growling before erratically laughing until another uniformed man stuck something sharp in its neck, knocking the hyena out cold.

“Mama Moon...” the woman let out in a hushed whisper as she began to close everything up in a panic. “You need to go.”

I stepped backwards, down from her stall as I looked for Namir, seeing he was running towards me with another hidden item he stuffed in his bag. He had a small, plastic bubble shaped pack of water in his hand when he bit the corner and began to drink.

“She’s saying we have to go,” I told him. “We need to——”

“Find another door,” he finished. “Go back to where we came from...”

I led the way, hoping to not get lost in the market until I saw a man pointing for us to go straight back. Back into the small shacks where things were being made and ready to sell. It felt so invasive, moving through their space while passing up men playing some sort of game with small wooden balls landing in holes. There were men making bags, as I heard the sawing and the slapping of leather.

Another place looked to be a kitchen for people to grab something to eat while others were seen sleeping comfortably in the darkest part of their shanty holds. It was nothing but rows of tin roofs and curtains draping down while others had doors and windows carved out. We weren’t able to find a working door but I didn’t care because just behind the market was the beach. Beautiful rushing waves came up along the coast where the sun left for the western part of the world.

“This is absolutely beautiful,” I said in awe before a couple of kids came running by with a soccer ball, dirt covering most of their feet and sandals as Namir quickly

jumped in the game.

“Namir?!” I laughed, watching the kids chase after him down the shore. I watched him kick the ball up with the back of his foot before balancing it on his shoe. Damn, was he able to play soccer too? His arm waved in the air for me to follow, so I slowly made my way down, shoes holding up nicely against the sand as Namir continued to tease and taunt the boys by keeping the soccer ball. He suddenly picked up his foot one last time and tossed it with a bounce on his heel as they rushed to catch it with their bodies.

“They told me where another door is,” he said as he grabbed my arm. “We gotta move quick. I forgot they don’t allow magic here.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Just how it is,” he said as he jogged. “You see it? Right there? ”

He pointed towards a small booth that was covered like someone usually sets up out there to sell their wares but when Namir pulled back the curtain, we saw a man sleeping on a stool. His eyes burst open, gasping into his scream before Namir stepped inside. I kept close, practically glued to his back until everything went pitch black. Only for just a second before I heard a loud chanting sound. Namir flipped the hanging blanket back as we stepped into another busy market only this time, it was quiet. People were moving around and squeezing through the narrow paths, but the prayer chanting throughout the air was all you could hear.

“Come on,” Namir said, taking my arm before sliding down to grab my hand.

I followed him through the tight spaces, passing stalls filled with beautiful rugs stacked so high, there was no way humanly possible to grab it without a ladder. Some spots actually had doors where you heard laughter and smelled the spices and meat

whiffing through the air. The shouting in Arabic, the music, and covered women with their eyes darting towards us, I wondered if we were in the Middle East. That was until I heard the same thing we heard back in Ghana.

“My brotha! My African brotha, come! I see what you are! ”

Namir ignored him as his nose went in the air before turning the corner. I followed like a child lost in wonderland, looking all around in awe while being dragged by the hand. Eventually I stopped on my own to take a peek inside an herb and spice shop. The man immediately hopped up with his hands shoved in his jeans as he stepped around me, allowing me to look at the tall shelves of herbs. He was short with a head full of dark curls. I saw one of the t-shirts hanging up on display against the back wall with Welcome to Morocco on the front, just above their national flag.

“Anything you want for tea, we have it,” he said with a flat tone and a bobble of his head. “Whatever you want, we have it.”

“No thank you,” I said, trying to step back out but the man became persistent.

“No, come...Tell me what you want. I see your eyes, look, you want something. Just tell me——”

“I’m good.” I waved my hand before looking around. I started off down the narrow path again, passing up vendors sitting on the ground showing off the jewelry to another selling traditional clothes for men on one side and women on the other. It was night time but the markets were alive and busy with people from everywhere. There was even a man in the back corner of another alley way of buildings selling a stack of books on top of a random chair.

“You ready? ”



I turned back to see Namir slipping something else in his bag, always just catching a hint of whatever was in his hand before he zipped up the duffle bag.

“For another door, right?” I asked.

“Nah...not yet. I wanna grab something to eat.”

I smiled at the same time my stomach twisted itself into knots in response. I followed Namir, keeping close behind him until my hand slipped around his thick arm with a loose grip. We were careful not to bump into anyone as we pressed forward on our way out, and others were going deeper into the market, ready to get lost. The night air began to fill with music. While hearing clapping and the smell of smoke, we came up to the opening of the markets.

We didn't truly realize how massive this place was until we were standing in the middle of the night square. Namir stood in line for some sort of meat skewers while I watched a woman dancing, moving her hips to the drums as she raised her hands in the air. Her face was covered with a scarf and the only bit of skin showing were her feet and a slither of her stomach. Everything else was draped in black in loose fabric as her hips bounced from side to side. Some of the local men walked by with judgement passing down on her while the tourists with pale faces, blonde hair, and backpacks, stood around as they pulled out their money .

She was doing it for them.

I found myself moving my hips, trying to recreate the thirteen-year-old middle school girl that stood in her bathroom mirror, trying to roll her belly button to Goodies by Ciara. It wasn't until I felt Namir come up behind me with two skewers held out as he pressed his hips against me.

“Nah, keep going.” He laughed.

I looked back at him with a laugh as he wrapped his arm around my neck as I took the meat stick to try for myself. It's one of those surreal moments where you take in everything. The woman belly dancing to the snake charmer, to the horses waiting to carry tourists, and cafes and deli spots lined up just outside of what I now learned to be the souks. A maze of over hundreds, maybe even a thousand sellers and stalls that you could get lost in for hours and Namir just...I don't know. This was overwhelming in the best way possible. I turned around within his hold to face him, ready to tease him as usual when I saw something catch my eye. I picked myself up on my toes to look over his shoulder and see one of the cafe doors had a bright light all around it.

"Another door!" I blurted out. Namir turned around. He snatched the last chicken off the stick before taking my hand. "Namir?!" I laughed, almost dropping my food. Whatever was left, I managed to toss it in the trash as we rushed on the other side of the busy market square. We bypassed vendors with their kiosks and the random snake charmer and afrobeats playing over the Arabic and French chatter. Namir stepped off to throw away his spare napkins while I went and knocked on the door three times. I was getting used to moving from place to place. Waiting until I felt him come up behind me, I quickly opened the door and stepped inside.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:59 pm*

Maze

“He’s what!?” I blurted out as I watched my mom clear the dining room table.

“Namir is bringing this girl over here for an injury. Apparently, she hurt herself,” she said. “So, I’m calling up Essie...an old college friend that helped with your wounds...She uses water for healing...”

“Ohh,” I said, nodding in an attempt to sound cool and chill. All while trying to process everything. “Oh okay. Can’t wait to see them.”

Namir was bringing Maggie over here ? He was going to let her meet our mother? This was a big deal, and my mama knew it too. By the way she started cleaning and wiping down the counters, I knew she was anxious to meet the one everyone talked about. I scurried into the bathroom at the first chance before grabbing my phone to text Draco. Fingers were typing so fast, I could barely finish without sending it.

I smiled. Namir hadn’t given me a definite response since Seth and I proposed the idea of starting our own pack, but it was already taking place. There was really nothing he could do to stop it. Draco planned on running things from his end, and I intended to dominate and guide mine with or without Namir. The plan was to move forward.

“Essie, sorry to call you this early in the morning,” I heard my mama say. I quietly slid into the living room and sat down, watching the two old friends converse by the stove in secret. Essie had just taken her jacket off and NY cap to reveal her wide, round eyes that were only born to nymphs. Her pointy ears struck out and her fangs

came down like claws on her lower lip. Who did my mama think she was fooling when they began to talk? I could hear the faintest cough from a stray cat a mile away, surely she knew I could hear her. My mom has been up here, above ground way too long. She sometimes forgot she wasn't just around humans anymore and their basic hearing.

"He's bringing the girl here," she whispered.

"What girl?"

"The one with the white hair...the one even The First Family is uncertain about," she mumbled under her breath.

"They're pawning her off as Gaia...did you hear about that?"

"Yeah but is she really?" My mom questioned with a blow of her breath. She didn't believe it. Her tone already said she wasn't feeling the idea of Maggie and Namir being together.

"He's my son but I don't...I don't like this..."

"He's also been put out...You said it yourself, who is going to take him?" Essie asked. I frowned because why the fuck do you think you know more about our politics as a nymph? Know your place, fish mouth .

"She's the reason my boys are fighting now and I can't stand it. I've tried to tell Ty to talk to Namir but he refuses as long as she's around."

"Mom, Maggie is really nice," I cut in from the couch as the two women looked at me. "She's really sweet and always makes Namir smile and laugh. She's perfect for my brother. I knew from the start."

“Was it not Ty that told Namir to get with the girl on purpose? Does she know that?”

“No, and she doesn’t need to know that...”

“What exactly am I seeing her for?” Essie asked, crossing her arms over her chest to look at her college friend. “What happened?”

“Broken arms...”

My mouth dropped. Both arms were broken ? How in the hell did Maggie do that unless...

“If she caused my son to shift, we’re going to have another problem on our hands,” my mom warned in a threatening tone.

Just then, I heard two car doors slam shut. I knew Maggie’s footsteps just from memory on how she casually strolled The Grounds. Slow, not a care in the world, and carefree .

“She’s here,” my mama said as she rolled her sleeves up. Essie placed her bag on the kitchen counter to set up.

“Well let me get my stuff together. I can heal a broken arm if it's not too bad,” she said as she ran the water from the sink. My mom was still anxious as she looked into the mirror hanging on the wall and checked her face.

“Mommy, you look fine... Maggie is cool. I promise,” I said. “You’ll like her.”

“Has your brother said anything about your plans to become alpha?”

“Not yet but he knows...At least he knows. I’m not sure if Maggie does though.”

“Hmmmph...It’s not her place,” she muttered.

“Mom, Namir can hear you——”

“I don’t care. She can’t.” She huffed just as the hard knocks on the door signaled their arrival.

I stood up, beaming from ear to ear, anxious to see Maggie for the first time, but when the door opened...my mouth dropped. Maggie stepped in first wearing sweats that belonged to him with a large black t-shirt. Her hair was pulled back and braided down to her but in one thick chunky braid, and her arms were wrapped against her chest. You could tell she’d been crying a little, probably from the pain but she was trying to stay strong when she greeted my mom first.

“Hi, Mrs—— ”

“I know who you are,” my mom said with her hand in the air to stop her. “No need to do all of that. Come in.”

I heard the attitude in her voice just from the sight of looking at Maggie but when Namir stepped in behind her, my mom became mute. My body naturally backed up. He walked into the house with his eyes hardening only for our mother, silently checking her before she could say anything else. His energy felt off. It wasn’t the usual Namir that was easy going, playful, and rebellious. This felt different. He even smelled different. Namir even looked like he’d gotten a little taller...a little thicker in muscles...and his face...matured a little with the beard coming in like thick prickly hair covering his lower half.

“Sit down right here,” Essie said, tapping the chair. “This is probably going to hurt for a moment but I need to see the full extent of the damage before I can do anything...”

My mom closed the door, nervously glancing up at her son before looking at me as I shrugged. She sensed something was off about him too, but he smiled at Essie in greeting.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen you, Namir... I was hoping my niece would have your class while she’s at the school but, how are you?” Essie asked as she unwrapped the bandage around Maggie. I silently waved to her as she grinned .

“I’m alright.” He nodded towards me in greeting. “Doing my best to get by.”

“That’s good.”

“You hungry, Namir?” My mom asked, walking into the kitchen.

“I’m not...You want anything, Maggie?” He asked while setting his keys down on the table. Our mother let out a snort in protest.

“I didn’t ask her.”

Namir stared at our mother and I swear, I felt the hairs standing up on my back at attention. There was no mistaking the look he gave the woman who brought him into this world. The only thing that broke the tension was Maggie letting out a loud cry which caused Namir to launch towards Essie with a threatening growl. He stepped in between the two, keeping Maggie behind him. Essie’s hands were in the air, wide nymph eyes startled as she looked towards my mom for help, but even she didn’t know what to do.

“Namir...chill,” Maggie whispered with a sniff. “She said it was going to hurt...You gotta chill...”

“You said you wanted her arms to be healed, she can do it,” mom said as she placed

her hand on Namir's shoulder. "She's not going to hurt her."

No one said a word as Namir slowly backed out of the kitchen and simply watched Essie's every move. That felt primal...animalistic. Nothing human or logical about that just now. He was protecting Maggie from pure animal instinct.

From boiling the water on the stove to placing particular herbs to make some sort of tea, she eventually used her hands to pull the water from the boiling pot. The bubbles formed into a small trail in midair before letting the liquid wrap around both arms and hold. Maggie winced, trying not to cry as her eyes stayed on Namir who stared back. They were locked in with each other as she bit her lower lip to counter the pain. His teeth only had a few moments of gritting and growling in response, watching her endure the heat, but they never took their eyes off one another.

He was in love with her. That was a look of love, affection, and his aggression towards everyone else was a way of making it known his territory was her. Wherever she was, is where he would be. Just like that, the balance in the house went through a natural reset. Namir had set the tone just based on how he was carrying himself. He looked, moved, and even smelled like an alpha... It was always said that he should have been, but now... You could feel it. He was different now. He smelled like power...dominance...strength. The problem is, she did too. My mom even went into the fridge to pull out breakfast food, asking Maggie if she'd eaten yet because she could sense it and naturally responded to it.

I pulled out my phone to see Draco had texted me a few times to ask if he needed to be there. If his presence was needed, I sighed, and simply replied,

Maggie and Namir.

I didn't say anything further as I tucked the phone away and slowly smiled, feeling the bittersweet moment of being an alpha of my own pack and family pass me by. It



was always my brother but even with Maggie looking every bit like his match...his mate, his equal... She was set to be the new alpha, too. Draco and I didn't stand a chance.

Namir smiled at Maggie as she spoke about her friends and watched her stand up at Essie's command to get a good look at her arms. Her white braid that hung down her back side slowly untangled from the braid and gently unfolded, moving on its own as she spoke. He watched, jaw slowly rotating like he was chewing on gum but instead, he was feeding off the energy her body was giving out.

"They feel better now," Maggie said in awe as she moved her arms.

"Be careful not to do any heavy lifting for about a day or so," Essie said as she took some cream to rub between her hands. "I'm glad you and my niece are close. She's a sweet girl..."

"She can do this too, right? She has healing abilities like yours?"

"Yes, all the women in my family do. We don't really know how or why but the men are naturally protective over us for this very reason...We're jokingly called the vampires of the waters on account of our fangs and healing abilities."

"That is so cool," she gassed. "I wish I had something like that...some sort of ability or power..."

"Tuh, you are the moon...that is more than enough." She laughed. "Your gravitational pull is strong, don't you feel it?"

Maggie shook her head. I carefully leaned in to watch Essie pull water from the sink to drop on the tile floor.

“Watch what the water does,” Essie whispered. Everyone became quiet as my eyes became fixated on the droplets of water on the kitchen floor. She spilled more water all around the floor, careful not to get Maggie wet until I heard a gasp. I got up to make my way over, watching the small droplets of water slowly trickle to the center where Maggie stood as if being pulled by her.

“In my family,” Essie said with her hand on her chest. “The women can make water move because we have the ability to see what this is.” She pointed to the floor as more water sucked towards Maggie’s feet. “We can feel it in the air and manipulate it...You should be able to as well.” She gently pulled a water droplet from the ground with a raised hand. Pinching her fingers ever so slightly, the water began a thin line just hovering in the air. “Hold your hand out for me, baby.” Maggie looked at Namir with a grin before holding her hand out as Essie gently placed the trail of water above the palm.

“Close your eyes and try and feel it...Feel the energy holding this water up,” she whispered. “This is how I taught my niece...even though she’s a natural at it.”

I looked towards Namir, who kept a hard gaze on Maggie with his chest silently heaving. It was faint but the electric jolt that coursed through my body was the same feeling I get when it was a threat around. The hairs on my back stood up, and my body began to overheat in preparation to shift. My mother looked at me, feeling the same thing I felt as her hand silently clawed at the table to restrain herself. Namir was the only one who stood calm, carefully watching her without so much as a blink or twitch of an eyelid. There’s no way he didn’t feel it. His body had to respond to hers the way ours did. It was impossible not to.

Essie backed away with her hands raised and we watched the bit of water slowly swirl, forming some sort of circle that rotated in her hand for a second or two before the water splashed against her hand. Essie clapped as Maggie freaked .

“I know y'all saw that!” She blurted out. “I just made the water move!”

“What do they have you in? You should definitely be an elemental student like my niece,” Essie said with her arms folded across her chest. “They aren’t doing you any service by holding you back but I bet that’s on purpose. That type of ability doesn’t do well with being suppressed. But...I suppose since you’re a first year...they are trying to get a sense of who you are before the real work begins. So now, you are basically a kin to a healing nymph,” she joked as she placed her hand on my shoulders. “Look at me, related to a sky god... Tah ! I’m telling everyone I know.”

“A sky god?” She repeated with curiosity.

“That’s what you are...yes...The old Black magic would have called you a sky god...Gaia is some other mess...colonizer name.” She waved off. “It’s as simple as you being in the sky...out of our reach.”

Maggie turned around to hug Essie, who looked caught off guard by the exchange.

“Thank you...I actually feel like for once... I learned a little something about myself,” she said before holding her arms out. “And my arms feel great...Do you see it, Namir?”

Namir hovered over her to take a look. It’s the way she stared my brother in the eyes with no fear as she spoke to him...I couldn’t explain it. Maggie was exactly who they say she was. There was nothing Namir could do that would deter her or scare her. She found a way to tame the most violent part of his nature and in that, she found her own strength and dominance that resonated with the rest of us.

Things were about to change.

Asha Avery

“So um...I’m just the intern here,” the high pitched voice said from behind the computer screen. I was sitting in the chair across from the desk in the stuffy office when a mousy looking girl with a pointy nose and tiny, beady eyes came in with a file. “Mrs. Levelle is who you’re going to be dealing with but...I’m...not sure why you’re supposed to be here. Are you sure you received an email to meet here?”

I sighed, trying not to get annoyed. I was already wearing these itchy ass black tights underneath this skirt. The white blouse did me no favors since I was sweating through this bitch and my scars were just...I was noticing the scars more than usual this morning. Just all around, irritated as fuck and just ready to get this over with.

“Yes, I’m sure I got the email. I’m supposed to be leaving due to unpaid school fees by the end of the semester——”

“It says here...it’s been paid for...”

“Yes, well I still have to pay——”

“No, I mean...You have a full-ride scholarship since the beginning of May,” she said. “You aren’t scheduled for any type of departure. Maybe I’m not looking at the right or updated file but as of this morning...on here ...You should be in class, not here. Now I do see you used to be a legacy but you were recently put out of that due to grades. Other than that...You are still a full-time student.”

I stared at her before shooting up to lean over the desk and look at the screen. I saw

where Solomon's name and bank was written with the last four digits of his account. He paid for all of it. So, where did the money from Maggie go? Did she even pay? Where did Solo get that kind of money from in the first place? Asha Avery. Mythical Student. Uniform colors. Black & White. Status, full time. Siren. Taluwi. Rare.

"Please don't get me to lying," the girl said with a nervous tone. "Like I said, I'm just an intern. I could be looking at an outdated file on you."

"Well how does the departure thing work since this lady isn't here?"

"It usually depends on whether you live here or above ground...For you...You'll probably just have your train or plane ride paid for to go back home."

"That's it?"

"Basically. You will leave with what you came in with or bought and head back home... If you plan on staying in The Underground then you'll just be escorted off The Grounds and just visit friends on the weekend. It's usually simple like that. Nothing nefarious. It happened to my friend and he still comes to hang out on the weekend when he gets the chance. He's from Memphis." She nodded like it was a big deal to know someone above ground. Memphis of all places. "They'll escort you through a door and arrive at an airport, grab you a ticket, and you head home...really simple if you're familiar with how doors work."

"So my memories are safe?" I asked, confused. She looked just as confused as she poked her lips out in thought.

"Um...yes? I'm not sure what you mean by that. The wiping of memories is usually for those who...pose a threat or have no immediate connection or family here... You are a siren. You automatically fall under the sirens here...You're going to always have family."

“Even if they aren’t in the Underground anymore?”

She nodded before adding, “Oh well actually, I heard that they are slowly but surely making their way back as things begin to clear up...It’s exciting. Next semester, we should see a drastic change in population here at Drew Collins.”

“They’re coming back?” I asked.

“Mmm hmm, some are deciding to come back...Have they not told you?” she asked. “Personally, you can’t let that type of money walk out without doing something drastic to get it back. Have you been to the new auxiliary gym to see the pool?”

I shook my head .

“You should definitely check it out when you get a chance. It’s actually really beautiful, like one massive aquarium.”

The door opened to the office as the woman known as Ms. Levelle stepped in with her breakfast and bag in hand.

“Sorry I’m late, Ms. Avery...Line at the hall was longer than expected,” she said. “That will be all, Chrissy...”

The intern hurried up to scurry out of the office with a small wave at me before the door closed. Ms. Levelle sat her things down with a heavy sigh and made herself comfortable as she looked up at the screen.

“Right, so it says here...You are scheduled to depart soon...Did she go over the process with you about what to expect?”

I felt my body swell with nerves as I froze. Did this woman just lie ? She just flat out

lied. I saw the screen with my own eyes, and she hadn't touched the computer, not once.

"Ms. Avery?" Ms. Levelle called out as she took a bite of her breakfast sandwich.

"Yes?" I said, sounding overly professional. My heart began to throb. Something else was going on here .

"Has she gone over what to expect?"

"Um...no...we got to talking about other things," I managed to say before clearing my throat. "She didn't mention it."

"Well, we are doing things a little different this time around when it comes to taking away your memory. Seeing as you don't have any immediate connection to The Underground...we will be sending you to the clinic where you'll be given a shot....

My mind spaced out at the word shot and instantly thought about Isis. Didn't she say she was injected with something that made her body go numb?

"Ms. Avery?" She called out. "Are you listening to me?"

"You said a clinic? I'm going to a clinic?"

"Yes. The local clinic here at Cedar Park will go over a few things to make sure you're healthy before giving you a shot. All very legal of course, just recently passed."

"A shot?"

"Yes, a shot. We've already had a successful departure of several students within the

past few months. It's much easier than taking your memories and placing you on a train or plane...unsure of where to go or how you got there. It's a lot that comes with doing it the old way. With this shot, it's instant and you won't feel a thing. It is First Family-approved...certified by all the experts here. Still magic, of course, but just a quicker way of taking it in without messing with your brain. ”

“So...where do I get poked or——”

She tapped the side of her neck, the same spot Isis touched.

“Think of it as a blessed bite from our First Family, herself,” she giggled. “You’ll wake up back home in your own bed with no memories, no disturbances, and little to no interruptions in your life. It may be fuzzy for a few days but you’ll adjust quite nicely. Any questions?”

I burst out of the building and into the cloudy late morning of Drew Collins grounds. The wind was picking up like another storm was rolling in when I heard a name that I will never forget. It was coming from two guys walking up the steps in their uniforms as they spoke.

“That’s how Ronan makes his money...He gets paid per girl that he gets to come out to the club. I’m trying to get put on, for real...You see how much he’s been making?”

“Yeah, I’m a see if he can put us on because this school shit is for the fucking birds...”

I turned around as I watched the walk inside the building. Ronan gets paid per girl? The shot he gave Isis...the clinic...All of this shit was connected but where did it lead to? I started to turn back around before stopping when a tall figure was starting up the steps directly towards me. His hair was pulled back in a small man bun, his bright hazel yellow eyes were sharp and intense, and he wore the maroon sweatsuit



with the school trojan mascot in the corner with rolled up paper in his hand. We had some old ass students here but there was no way this man was a student. I would have easily spotted him and the trail of women that gathered behind him, watching in awe. Didn't matter to me though. I didn't like men with more hair than me, and I had other shit to worry about.

"Excuse me," I said, stepping aside, not realizing he turned to watch me walk down. He called out to me again but I kept walking.

"Excuse me, sweetheart. I know you hear me talking to you, Queen ..."

Being down here, you just knew when someone either spent too much time above ground or consumed a lot of the shit up top because nobody down here called me queen . It might actually be some real queens and kings running around here but that was something strictly to Black Americans. I turned around with a frown as I stared at his intense gaze. He looked like a dark bronzed statue with his sculpted face and body.

"Ahhh, you're already frowning, and I haven't even started talking yet." He chuckled as he came back down the steps. "What's up? What's wrong?"

"Do we know each other from somewhere?" I asked.

"No—— "

"So, why are you talking to me?" I asked. He grinned as he stepped back to get a good look at me.

"I've never seen a siren this close up before...I just wanted to see what the hype was about...Truthfully...the scars make you look extra tribal." He motioned to my face. "I like it though. What happened to your face? Was it a fire or something?"

“SETH?!”

We both turned to see Namir waving his hand for him to keep walking.

“If you’re going to take this seriously then do the fucking job and go sign the paperwork!” He shouted, annoyed. Seth ran his tongue across his white teeth before looking me over again, being open with his obvious attraction.

“You on the swim team?”

“I can’t swim,” I said. His eyes lit up in surprise and intrigue when Namir suddenly barged over and immediately stepped in between the two of us like he was blocking this man from talking to me.

“What did I just say?”

“I’m not getting paid to be here——”

“But you asked me to get you on The Grounds and that’s what I did. Why are you harassing students?”

“They keep following me.” I watched more girls surround the steps to get a good look at this Seth guy. Turning around, I started to walk off again when he called out to me. “We’re hosting a hunter’s game soon! You should come see about me! Predator vs Prey. I’ll be one of the predators...”

“Ignore my brother and keep going!”

“Say less,” I said with my deuces chucked. “Later, Coach!”

Like I said, I had bigger problems to worry about. I pulled out my phone and shuffled

through the messages before texting Souxie to tell her she was right. Something was definitely going on.

Isis

“Well this is just great,” I said to myself as I stood outside of the school grounds. Just outside of the iron gates where all seven of my brothers stood, including Quan. I was missing time with my own friends because I now had to entertain my brothers lingering around the school like monsters. I kept my distance, letting the boys talk as I watched Quan being inducted into the brotherhood with ease. He was the tallest amongst them, easily one of the tallest of our kind but the way they loved up on him was sick.

Quan knew I was irritated at the thought of him being close to my family. Play the boyfriend role, fine. We both knew that’s not really what it was between us, but all of this just felt like he wanted to get in with my family.

“The guy hasn’t shown his face for two days now!” I called out. “Y’all can go home! I’m sure he knows what he did was wrong and is afraid to come to class!”

Nobody turned to look at me. Not even a glance. Irvin and Ian were laughing at something Quan said. Imari was showing Ishann something on the phone. Idris and Ismael were talking about sports and the plans for tonight. Isaiah was wandering off on the phone, probably with another one of his hoes for the night. Ugh !

“Are y’all even listening to me?!” I yelled out. Quan glanced back at me with the only one having vertical cat eye pupils before he turned back with a shake of his head.

“How do you deal with that lil’ brat, bruh? Honestly?” Imari asked as Quan laughed. “I know my sister is giving you hell.”

“Mannnn, you have no idea what she’s putting me through.”

“I’m not putting you through anything!” I argued. I wanted to yell out he’s playing you all for a damn fool, and Quan was just a little too comfortable in this boyfriend role. “The man isn’t showing up, and I don’t remember who the others were! Can y’all please go home before I call Mom?!”

All eight men turned to look at me with the same identical double blinking eyes. The fades, and locs, ranging in height and body types all faced me like I was suddenly the problem before Quan turned back with a shake of his head.

“How did y’all survive growing up with her?”

All seven brothers began talking at once as I reached down to swipe my bag off the ground.

“Well, I’m gonna be late for class! Y’all can continue to linger around or not! I don’t care! ”

“Aye, Isis! This is the one!” Ishann nodded in approval while pointing at Quan. “We like this one! Don’t bring another mothafucka around us if it’s not him!”

Quan grinned as he teasingly winked at me like got ‘em !

“He’s not even...We’re not even——”

“She doesn’t want to admit it to y’all because y’all are her brothers but she most definitely said she loved me first...”

My mouth fell open as my heart pounded. This was why I didn’t deal with my own. Nymphs were toxic, liars, and cheats, and Quan was no different! He was no

different!

“Baby sis in loooooove! You know Daddy is gonna love him!”

“He’s not going to meet him!” I shrieked like a spoiled child.

“We’ve already invited him out with us,” Irvin said, confused. “I would think you would be happy we like your boyfriend——”

“He’s not——Why aren’t you with Asha?!”

“Who ?” Mael asked as he looked towards Irvin.

“Asha! The pretty siren with the locs! My best friend that he’s been fucking since the beginning!” I accused. All the attention turned towards Irvin. They immediately poured into him with questions but he silenced them with something I wasn’t expecting.

“I dumped her,” he said with a flat tone. “She knew about you being attacked and said nothing. I don’t like that.”

“Uhh, yeah...Duh because I told her not to tell you! Look how y'all act! Standing outside of my school like bums, talking to every girl that comes out, harassing students and being disruptive! She was trying to call you when it happened but I begged her not to because nothing is worse than how the seven of you act!”

“So, you want us to leave?” Imari asked, confused.

“Yes! Please!”

“As soon as we beat his ass, we’re out and you can go back to ignoring us and we can

go back to ignoring you.”

I turned and started for the gates, officially done with it.

“Isis! You were never able to take a joke! Look at you! I bet you she’s about to go cry——”

“FUCK ALL OF Y'ALL!” I cried over my shoulder.

I kept walking, storming through the lit pathway of Cedar Park, passing up students as the evening grew darker by the second. The view of the school building in the center was just up ahead and the closer I could get on The Grounds, the further away I would be away from my brothers. They were overwhelming in the worst way possible and the first set of bullies I never knew how to deal with. Still, ‘til this day, I didn’t know how to stand my ground with them and even though I knew they ultimately had my back when it came to something like this, it would be nice... For once—For once in their lives to treat me like someone they actually respect and not just something to pick and poke at.

This was thankfully my last class of the day and the one I shared with Ronan, the one who set me up during the date. I hadn’t seen or heard from him since it happened and frankly, good riddance. The trash took itself out. I just hoped he wasn’t preying on another girl.

“Everyone, come in and take your seats!” Dr. Horace called out as I rushed down the dim lit hallway of one of the elemental buildings. My class was just on the corner but I could already hear him calling out the roster and no matter what I did, I always managed to just barely make it in time to be seated. “Take your seats, please! Class will be quick today. I have an appointment to get to tonight.”

I turned into the room with a loud exhale before freezing in place when I saw him.

Ronan sat next to the only empty seat available at the two-seater table when he smiled and chuckled his chin towards me. The sharp ears were bright red at the tip when he sat up, adjusting his gray tie to match the gray pants. His fresh haircut glistened around the edges with tiny waves, and the small silver chain he wore draped against the white button up shirt. He pulled the chair back and took his backpack off the seat as the door to the class closed shut, causing me to jump.

“Isis, please take your seat,” Dr. Horace said. “Apparently, Ronan has saved it for you——”

“Ahhh don’t do that, Doc.” Ronan laughed coolly. “Isis know she’s my favorite...”

He doesn’t remember? Is this a joke?

Ronan’s smile slowly fell as he stared at me before nervously licking his lips. He thinks I don’t remember...he hopes I don’t remember...

“Isis?” Dr. Horace called out as he scratched at his gray beard. “Any time, now.”

“Right,” I said, swallowing the lump of nerves. I slowly walked towards the chair and scooped my gray skirt against my thighs. When I sat down, Ronan leaned in close to whisper against my ear.

“What’s up with you? What happened to us and our date?”

I stared at him. Was he playing stupid on purpose? How could he even fix his mouth to ask me that? Maybe he didn’t think I remembered... I tried to smile but my cheeks were burning, and my ears felt like tiny, pinched nerves at the tip .

“Turn to page 394,” Dr. Horace said as he snapped his fingers for the lights to shut off. The large projector was bright against the white screen ahead as a clip of moving



trees played. “We’re going to do a brief discussion about walking trees in the forest and how it relates to sunlight.”

I leaned over my desk, pretending to stare at the pages of the book when Ronan leaned in and whispered close against my ear, “We good, baby?”

I slowly turned my head to look at him. His hand reached between my thighs, burying deep beneath my gray skirt. I froze, stiffening in place as I looked straight ahead.

“I’m sorry about this past weekend,” he whispered again in my ear.

I clamped my thighs shut, squeezing his hand away from the center. He paused before pulling away as he stared at me. He was starting to get nervous. Without looking at him, I smelled the salty sweat pouring down his skin. Just a few beads of sweat would have been enough for me to take his perverted ass out but my confidence always fell short at the worst times.

“Isis?” Ronan whispered.

I couldn’t look at him. My eyes darted towards Dr. Horace, who was too busy looking at his phone. Everyone else was either texting or staring at the screen where someone documented trees moving on their own and what it could possibly mean. Ronan turned his focus straight ahead as he placed both arms on the table and clasped his fingers together in thought. He was getting nervous. He suddenly reached down for his phone from his pocket to text. I grabbed mine from the bag, feeling my heavy hands shake as I caught Ronan’s head turned to the side like he was watching me.

Shit, shit, shit!

If there was ever a time I needed Asha’s loud mouth to come bursting in to save the day, this was it.

“Aye?” Ronan whispered again as I flinched. Just his hot breath breathing against my neck did it but I turned around to stare at him. “Can we talk?”

“Why?”

Nervously licking his lips, Ronan’s eyes darted around before he leaned in close.

“I don’t want it to be any issue. I got you mixed up with the job and I shouldn’t have done that,” he said.

“Job ?” I repeated.

His tongue slithered out like a lizard, licking his drying lips as he leaned in even closer .

“They pay me,” he said, voice ever so low. He quickly tore a sheet of paper and grabbed the pen to write something down. While he was doing that, I sent a text to Quan saying that he was sitting right next to me. Just then, Ronan slid the piece of paper towards me.

“I never meant to hurt you,” he whispered before leaning in close against my ear. “I actually really fuck with you, and I really do want to get to know you on a deeper level...What happened that night was some dumb, ignorant shit. I shouldn’t have gotten you mixed up with that.”

“ Ahem, hem ,” Dr. Horace coughed, clearing his throat on purpose as he glared at the two of us.

Ronan leaned back in his chair as I slid the note underneath my book, refusing to read it out right. I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of thinking he could write his way out of what he did.

The video continued to play throughout the class as I picked and pulled at the pages of the textbook. Nervously, I would glance at Ronan from time to time, seeing his knee jumping underneath the desk. His skin was becoming damp with sweat, leaving imprints on the table where his arms laid. I stared at the foggy spot before slowly stretching my fingers to pull the tiny drops of sweat. Dragging the tumbling balls of salt water towards the edge, there was a sudden knock on the door. Dr. Horace yanked his glasses off as he cut through the projection, motioning for us to stay put in our seats. It was rare that somebody would knock, which usually meant something was wrong or someone needed his immediate attention without disrupting his class.

“Aye, can you let me make it up to you?” Ronan whispered as he gripped the back of my chair. “We don’t have to leave The Grounds. We can just kick it at my dorm. Just you and me.”

“Why was I a mistake?” I asked him. His brows came together, confused.

“What are you talking about?”

“Why was I a mistake? That night when you pulled to the side of the road, the man said I was a mistake. I want to know why.”

Ronan dragged a nervous hand down his face, realizing I probably knew a lot more than he was comfortable with. He suddenly reached down, using his pointer finger to tap the table.

“Read that note——”

“Why was I a mistake?” I pressed again as Dr. Horace opened the door.

“Can I help you, sir? Are you looking for someone?”

“Yeah. I see him right there.”

I whipped my head around to see Quan's entire body and height block the door before he moved around my teacher and charged in. Everything happened so fast, and Ronan must have realized he was caught because he shot up from his chair. At the same time Quan came and yanked the table to the side before reaching over to grab Ronan and jerk him towards the floor.

“Excuse me?!” Dr. Horace screamed just as the lights burst back on in the classroom. “Somebody call security! Now!”

I swiped my things off the table, snatching the note up to shove in my bag as the class erupted into complete chaos with another student from the back jumping in to help Ronan who began to scream out.

“I didn’t touch her! It wasn’t me!” he shrieked with his feet kicking in the air. Quan dragged him out of the classroom, turning the corner as everyone followed, watching this man who was almost seven feet in height drag a body half his size down the hall.

Nobody knew what was going on but out of nowhere, a few girls who watched, shouted, “BEAT HIS ASS! HE ABUSED AND TRIED TO RAPE MY ROOMMATE!”

That was all that needed to be said as the entire crowd of students turned on Ronan getting tossed like a doll by the largest nymph known to this school. Quan yanked his body up and shoved him against the wall as the two began to fight with two other men trying to jump Quan from behind .

“ISIS! TELL HIM!” Ronan screamed as I shook my head, mortified that my name was even being mentioned. “TELL HIM WHAT I JUST TOLD YOU! PLEASE!”

Quan shoved the doors open as he dragged him outside while the rest of us followed.

“Quan!?” I screamed, wanting him to be careful because all I could think was this would be the worst time to shift back into his cat form but when I saw my brother walking in the distance, I knew it was just getting started. Imari pinched at his nostrils with a sniff as he picked up the pace. His chain around his neck bounced up and down when he started running towards the growing crowd as three men fought Quan.

“Let him go! Let him go, Quan! I got it! I got it!” Mari shouted as he shoved students out the way with a hard yank and push. “Move out the fucking way! MOVE!”

Mari burst into the growing circle with his boot hitting Ronan’s face before he reached down and grabbed him. I dropped my things, no longer able to stand to the side and foolishly ran into the circle to try and grab Quan to pull him away.

“Everybody, MOVE OUT!” Irvin’s commanding voice shouted as he appeared out of nowhere with a military badge held out .

Mari gripped the back of Ronan’s head to pull up while keeping his foot on the back of his neck to pin him to the ground.

“You see that one right there?!” Mari pointed towards me. Ronan’s face was beyond recognition as the small gold chain hung low from my brother’s neck, dangling just inches away from Ronan’s face. “You see her right there?! LET THAT BE THE LAST GIRL YOU EVER FUCK WITH!”

“Security!”

Imari reached in his pocket, no doubt squeezing the black soot powder he probably picked up from the market. Without hesitation, he whipped the same blackened hand, swooped down to clap the last living breath out of Ronan before the two disappeared

completely in thin air, leaving nothing but a wisp of black smoke that dissipated.

For the love of all things below, they just kidnapped a damn student!

I saw my brothers in the distance running until they too disappeared while Irvin cleaned up the mess by talking with security. Quan was separated from the others who tried to fight him as teachers from the building all stood out, trying to recant what happened .

I knew I was about to be dragged into the office and I was prepared to fully come out with my story in order to protect Quan. I didn't think he would barge into the damn class and drag him out!

“Fuck, where is everyone?!” I hissed, trying to desperately text the group chat for the girls.

“Ma'am? You need to come with us to the office...”

I might be on the verge of getting put out as soon as I saw Irvin talking with police, who were now involved.

WHERE ARE YOU GUYS?!

QUAN AND I MIGHT BE KICKED OUT!

HUGE FIGHT! CALL ME BACK ASAP!

A sha's D ivine I ntervention.

Asha Avery

"I barely have any service out here," I said as I looked at my phone.

"Yeah it's kinda a dead zone once you venture outside of the school," Souxie replied from the back seat. Maggie sat up on the wheel of her car, driving down a dirt road with nothing but headlights guiding the way. "But this is where I read about the sacred waters...Some of the first bodies of water created here in the Underground."

"Leave it to Souxie to always read something," Maggie muttered. "I can barely see anything. It's just grass and dirt. Do y'all even see the school anymore?"

I looked back before ducking my head to peek through my window at the side view reflection. I could barely see Drew Collins in the background but the rest of this place was just open fields. If we went into another direction, it might be the highway that led to civilization but right now...it was a deadzone in every sense of the word.

"How much gas do you have?" I asked, leaning over to check.

"Namir keeps it full so we have some time to get lost if we need to. "

"We're not lost." Souxie said in her usual but unnecessary seductive tone. "We just don't know where it is but we are not lost."

"However you wanna word it." I sat back in the seat with my arms crossed over my

chest.

“Sacred waters...” Souxie read out loud. “The very first natural spring that formed on its own in response to the magic being born here in the Underground. Just outside of Cedar Park, if you walk within the whispering trees, and prickly vines...you will see blue waters that breathe on their own...this natural spring contains hidden secrets, magic, and qualities only known to certain sirens when touched...”

“And what if this is just some bacteria infested puddle?” Maggie asked with a sarcastic flippant tone. I could see the bags underneath her eyes and the distressed white hair, still and dry to the touch. That sorority was running her ragged. I told her she didn’t have to come. It could have just been Souxie and I but she insisted, claiming she didn’t want to miss anything and thought she too could learn something about herself.

“Y'all look...” Souxie said as she looked back. I turned around before leaning to the side to peer out of my window. “The school is completely gone. I don’t even see any lights...”

“Ahhh shit,” Maggie muttered when the road became bumpy. We were traveling on a dirt path as the crumbling pavement faded into a few rocks here and there. Everything ahead of us was pitch black outside of the ray of lights from the car. I decided to roll down my window, feeling the sharp wind hit my skin but I smiled when I was able to feel the moisture in the air.

“We’re close,” I said. “I can smell water.”

I stretched my hand out with my fingers wiggling in the blowing air. I captured the wet moisture, slapping my skin as Maggie drove further into the darkness.

“Do we just follow this path?” Maggie asked.



“Uh huh,” Souxie replied. “According to this old map. It’s a single path that will eventually come to a stop. Then we get out and trek through the woods.”

“You better get in this damn water too, Asha,” Maggie said through her teeth as she looked at me. “I mean it. You better dip a toe, a foot, an arm and doggy paddle in that bitch.”

“Maggie!?” I laughed. She always catches me off guard when her watered down Atlanta accent comes out.

“I’m for real! This place gives me the creeps...Whatever this...place...is.”

“It’s not so bad.” I smiled as I watched my hand take in the water droplets from the air, soaking into the skin. I sat up and peered through the side view mirror at the darkness behind us, chasing behind the car like a cloak or shadow.

“Does anybody know we left?” I asked. “Did y’all tell Lovely?”

“I did,” Maggie nodded as we slowly turned the corner of the path. We started to come up on a row of trees on each side of us, turning the dirt path into a slither of space for one car, maybe even smaller. We were squeezing into nature’s darkest corner as Maggie rolled her window down to smell the air with a long inhale and exhale of her chest.

“It smells so fresh and clean out here...”

“It does,” Souxie agreed. “Which means that water is probably just as nice.”

“Oh!” Maggie freaked at the same time that I sat upright. We came to a slow stop where the edge of the woods met the pathway. It was a total dead end. There was nothing but the looming trees that shot into the air, swaying gently from side to side

and us...in this car staring back.

“Alright so do you have the flashlights?” Maggie asked as she cut her car off. We started to gather our things, having packed a small bag with a change of clothes for all of us. I would never say it out loud but anybody would kill to have the type of homegirls I have right now. They were about to get in the water with me without pressure from me. As much as Maggie talked, there was no doubt she would at least attempt to get in the water with me.

“I have the candles, the lighter...some sage,” Souxie muttered, counting everything in her duffle bag. “We should be okay.” Maggie nodded with a scratch of her head.

“You think this spell is going to work? ”

“I hope so... Maybe Asha talking with her ancestors...and seeing her family might change something in her,” she said.

I stepped out with a stretch, feeling like we'd been riding for days before looking around.

“I'm going to try and record as much as I can for Isis. She would love anything to do with witchcraft and water,” Souxie said as she pulled out her phone. My head turned to the sound of a stick breaking, snapping in half like someone stepped on it as I turned towards the woods for a listen. Maggie and Souxie were busy recording themselves in the camera but it was something in the air...something other than water. Did they not realize it?

“ Hey guys, welcome back to our channel...Water witches... We are here in no man's land .” Maggie said into the phone as Souxie laughed. “ I'm the moon witch...”

“ I’m the black witch ,” Souxie said. “ That over there is our very own water witch...The very first siren ever created ... Asha, come say hi to the camera...”

“I don’t think we’re alone,” I said suddenly as Maggie’s face fell flat.

“Don’t start your shit——”

“I’m not joking!” I laughed. “I really think something else is out here! ”

“Well let’s hurry up and do this so we can get the hell back,” Maggie said as she let the chirps of her car alarm go off.

We peered over Souxie’s shoulders as she stayed in between Maggie and I, holding up a torn paper of the map she took from the book. Maggie had her flashlight from her phone pointing straight ahead while I constantly kept my head on a swivel. I don’t know where the fuck these girls grew up at, but I didn’t play these kind of games. Anything and everything could happen if we weren’t cautious of our surroundings.

“Do you hear it?” Souxie whispered. “Listen...Stop walking.”

We came to an abrupt stop as I closed my eyes, listening to the sway of leaves and branches. The light crackling noise of sticks and twigs breaking but just in the background of all of that, I could hear the water running. The three of us stepped forward, keeping close to each other until we came up on a small opening where we could see water stretching out like a dark field.

“This is it,” I whispered, pushing past a low hanging branch. I ducked my head as I came up on the edge of the woods that overlooked the body of water. “It has to be it.”

There was a wooden dock that stretched out towards the middle of the lake that

looked like it hadn't been used in ages. The wood was chipped and dented like the boards could snap in half at any given moment or hint of weight.

"Let me set up," Souxie said as she dropped her things on the ground. Maggie came up to the edge as she bent down. She didn't touch it but simply stared close enough to where the water rippled around her. Her white hair fell against her backside, coming down to the sides of her face as her fingers lightly hovered over the dark water.

"Do you feel anything?" I asked.

"My spidey senses are definitely tingling," she said. I sucked my teeth with a roll of my eyes as she laughed. Never serious, this girl. "Well go on... You said you're getting in."

"Aren't you getting in with me?" I pleaded with a pout.

"I already said I would dip a leg in now, come on."

"Birthday suits ladies," Souxie said. She reached to take her black sweatshirt off. "The way we came into this earth is the way we need to enter this lake."

"I can't believe I'm about to do this shit," Maggie mumbled. "If I'm not getting in all the way, can't I just pull my sweat pants up?"

She stuck out her leg from the black joggers .

"All of us have to get in and use our energy to channel her ancestors. Asha won't be able to do it on her own," Souxie explained. "If we're kind...the lake will not let us drown."

Maggie and I looked at each other, sharing the exact same face, but said nothing. I

stripped down to my bare feet, and pulled my locs up, letting my scars be exposed to the cool crisp air. I felt myself picking at my face, feeling the dry scar become crusty to the touch. Maggie tossed her bra and panties by the bag. Souxie was already nude and busy lighting the candles to take to the edge of the dock. She walked first, feet bare with a slow but determined strut before kneeling down to place three white candles together. She took a piece of chalk to draw a star and whispered a few words to herself.

Maggie was scratching at her thigh when she looked around before looking up at the sky.

“This is really some white girl hollywood movie shit,” she said. “Somebody is going to die——”

“Why would you say that?!” I fussed before laughing. “Nobody is going to die. This isn’t the movies.”

“Y'all come on,” Souxie beckoned. “And walk slowly... the dock is literally a floating board at this point. ”

The moment I stepped onto it, I felt it shift to the left before gently floating back to the right. She was right. The water was right underneath it.

“Asha wait,” Maggie called out. I reached back without turning around as my hand waved in the air for hers until I clutched her fingers in mine. Souxie lowered herself down onto the dock before turning around to dip into the water.

“Be careful of the candles...” Souxie warned. “The flames are used as guided lights for your ancestors below...We want them to feel comfortable enough to come to the surface...”

“Whatever the hell that means,” I heard Maggie mutter behind me. We came up to the edge as I slowly lowered myself down, seeping one leg in before the other. “My cooch is all exposed to the damn wind——”

“We never got to talk about Namir pounding that cooch did we?” Souxie asked Maggie with a daring tone and a raised brow.

“She said she had sex with him in his final form,” I repeated. Souxie let out an airy gasp.

“Nooooo!”

I laughed before briefly closing my eyes, feeling the shot of cold water hit my body as I lowered myself into the lake. I quickly turned around to hold on to the edge of the dock. Maggie was the last to get in as she clumsily stepped in the lake like she was stepping in a tub of ice. She too held on to the dock seeing as neither of us could swim but Souxie gently floated on her back closer to the center of the lake.

“Let go,” she egged on. “You’re not going to drown. This feels...different. Can’t you feel it? It’s not like any other water we’ve ever experienced...”

If I was going to push myself, this was part of it. So I slowly pulled away, letting go of the edge of the dock and froze. My body felt like it was being carried by the water, keeping me upright before Maggie let herself go.

“I told you,” Souxie said with an uppity tone. “Now come on...let’s call on your ancestors...I want you to relax, Asha... Breathe and open yourself up...”

I closed my eyes as I felt Souxie take my hand and Maggie take the other. We were floating in a makeshift circle. I could feel my scars pulsating, breathing and taking in the water.

“This is craaaazy ,” Maggie whispered. “We’re literally just standing in the water...My feet aren’t touching anything...but I feel like something is holding me up.”

My eyes flew open at the thought but Souxie squeezed my hand .

“Please ignore her and just concentrate, Asha...I don’t want to say the spell without you being present and ready...”

“I’m ready,” I told her before peeking one eye open at her. “I swear I am...I...” The words fell from my lips. I watched the ripples surround Maggie like rings circling her body but instead of flowing out, the water was flowing towards her, pulling towards her as she let her hair dip all the way into the water.

“Maggie is the energy we’re going to use to call your ancestors,” Souxie said with growing excitement.

“ I’m the what now ?” She let out but Souxie jerked my hand for my attention but she too was changing. Her eyes were blacked out with not a hint of white or human left in them. She looked demonic when she grinned, pressuring me to sink deeper into the water and think about my past. They were both changing. Almost as if the water was showing their true form and before I could say we needed to get out, I felt a body...a presence come up behind me in the water.

“We need to get out of this water!” I shrieked, trying to cling towards Maggie with my arms flailing. Suddenly whatever was holding my body up was no longer there. When out of nowhere, a large webbed but scaly hand reached up from behind and wrapped around my neck to grab my face. Maggie screamed as another hand came up to wrap and cover my forehead, pulling me all the way back into the water to be dragged beneath the surface .

That light ... The flicker of flames from the candle above the surface and the legs of Souxie and Maggie wading in place were the only thing I could see. I panicked, fighting the invisible weight that was trying to sink me deeper into the water as everything started to become darker. Something was pushing my forehead down, fingers cornering my face, and pinning me down far into the depths. I was struggling to hold my breath until it became pitch black. I felt a hand squeeze at my jaw tight before attempting to pry my lips apart with their fingers.

“ Breathe...Asha ...”

I gasped, sucking in the water as my body jerked, wriggling about in the water until...I felt weightless. I was just floating. Did I drown ? Naaah because I'm still conscious...I know exactly what the fuck is going on...I opened my eyes at the murky dark green water, seeing remnants of structures made of stone before watching a shadowy figure of something swim towards me. There was no face but the body moved like something that only belonged in water. I watched in complete awe the wisp of black scales, as dark as oil, glide above me. Beautiful brown arms stretched with scars the same as mine going down the spine, breathing. You could see water floating in and out of her body and the outline of her legs and feet within the dark tail fin before she disappeared.

“ Breathe...Asha ...”

The voice was telling me to release another breath into the water. I suddenly found myself gasping for air as I broke through the surface. Panicking, I looked around before clinging to the edge of the dock to pull myself up before collapsing on the planks of wood. Coughing, I rolled over on my backside as I stared at the night sky. No stars. No moon. Nothing. Just darkness and trees surrounding it. I sniffed as I sat up before coming to my feet.

“Maggie?!” I screamed. “Souxieeeeee?!”



There was nothing. I started to walk back towards the woods when I heard something. It was faint but it made me pause for a listen. Screams... Someone was screaming. I slowly turned around to face the lake again before walking back down to the edge to stare at the dark water. There were screams...cries. Thousands of cries coming from the water. Slowly, I kneeled down to get a closer look when a tiny brown hand shot out of the water, breaking the surface barrier. I jumped back, covering my ears from the high pitched screams before looking to see dozens of black faces pressed against the surface pleading for help. Some of the women had scars like mine slashed across their face and the scales. Those same scales that looked rich in color and made of glass...some even looked to be made of pure gold and silver were pressed against the surface like a cage. They began poundi ng and slapping at the water, I shook my head as I backed up.

“I can’t...I can’t help you!” I screamed, trying to yell over the cries. “I CAN’T HELP YOU! I CAN’T GET IN THE WATER TO HELP YOU!”

I heard the tiny voice yell please and it sounded vaguely like it belonged to me. I was drawn back to the edge of the dock with one hand sticking out. The webbed fingers clenching and squeezing at the air and then I saw her face. The round cheeked face of the baby girl with scars identical to mine being pushed to the surface by dozens, hundreds... If I looked further out into the lake, there were thousands of bodies beneath crying for help. Her sharp brown eyes had a certain glow burning like a flame was lit within her.

With my trembling voice, I cried out. “I’m sorry! I can’t... I can’t help you!”

The glowing light was dimming, falling deeper into the child’s eyes like she was becoming distant. So I touched her tiny hand in mine. Hoping to hold on to that little light, even if I felt like I couldn’t do anything, touching her would feel like I was trying to save her, but the screams of the lake turned to high pitched shrieks. Violent splashes of water began hitting in different directions. Something was happening.

Something was happening! I could see the deep red clouding their bodies as scales began floating like pieces of skin being torn off. They were being attacked! Why weren't they fighting back?! Why were they just looking to me to jump in and save them?!

“FIGHT!” I cried as their eyes pleaded within the water. “FIGHT BACK!”

Something was terrorizing and killing them off one by one as the cries became less and less. I tightened my grip on the girl's hand, searching for that faint flicker of light in her eyes as they began to cling to her.

“Let her go!” I screamed. “LET HER GO! I CAN'T SAVE ALL OF YOU!”

Why was she the only one who could stick her hand out in the water and the rest stuck behind this invisible barrier. “I SAID LET HER GOOO!” I cried, desperate to pull myself away from them until I saw the attacks coming closer and closer. Then I heard the voice scream out, brEATHE ASHA ! Without hesitation, I pulled her body up at the same time I fell in. Trying my best to shield her as we sunk deeper into the water with bubbles forming around us. The water was so loud, so strong, and thick against my body but I held on to her, protecting her from whatever was killing them, killing us.

I didn't know or care about knowing how to swim. It didn't matter anymore. Breathing became natural to me like it was air above ground as I held on tight to her frame until she disappeared like black liquid smoke in the water. There was nothing...nobody but me... I slowly spun around, feeling so natural in the water as I looked down at my body, seeing the faded scales. I hadn't even noticed my scars even when admiring my body in its natural state.

It was so quiet...My thoughts...the voice inside my head was whispering for fear of disrupting the space. I never thought water could feel like this...Just...I stretched my

arms as my body arched back, dipping into a full circle before spreading my fingers to see the webbed skin. I felt the weight of something wrapping around my legs, propelling me forward like a tail fin but looking down at my body, I was still as naked as I came into the water.. I felt my true form like a protective cloak around my body. Even my locs began to grow like vines, soaking up the water as they danced. I have never felt more beautiful, even with my scars. They fit so beautifully in the water that I couldn't help but smile through the water, releasing bubbles through my teeth.

How could I not love myself when I look like this? Ughh...I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream. I wanted to cuss myself the fuck out because why ? Why did I let myself fall so low when I look like this?! I slowly spin around in the water, taking command of the lake as my own domain before catching a glimpse of the small orange glow of light. I began to feel the growing weight of energy behind me...clinging to me but it didn't feel heavy... I felt power. Strength. I felt like the presence of every screaming voice, cry, and plea from before was suddenly behind me, pushing me forward towards the surface. These are my ancestors...My family, and I was carrying them with me when I broke through the water for that candle light, hearing them collectively say,

“ Breatheeee Asha ...”

I am the last of my kind. I now had some sort of understanding and knew how I needed to carry myself going forward...

Isis

“ Isis? ”

The hard whisper calling my name broke the silence of the bedroom as I felt something soft touch my nose.

“Isis, wake up!”

“Hmmm?”

I moved my hand across my face, feeling the tickling fur drift against my skin before slowly opening my eyes. Quan’s black paw was hovering over my face before he began extending his claws in and out.

“Q-Quan?” I muttered, turning my face into the sheets to rub and wipe. “Why are you pawing at my face? I don’t like that.”

“It’s been four whole damn hours. Nonstop,” he hissed. I turned back to look at him as I snuggled deeper into the sheets.

“Okay?”

Turning over, I grabbed my phone to see the time. It wasn’t even three o’clock yet. Once Namir showed up, we kind of just ended the meeting and everyone went upstairs to their individual rooms. Quan was apparently the only one who couldn’t sleep and now I had to suffer.

“Isis,” Quan called out again with his paw cupping my face. I smacked his arm away before sitting up and yanking the lamp light on.

“I told you about putting that nasty paw on my face. You’ll cause my to break out——”

“Do you not hear it? Am I the only one that hears these two fucking for hours?!”

“Okay and?!” I retorted before falling back down on the bed with a yank of the sheets to my throat. “Werewolves are literally made up of piss and cum. No surprise there.”

“Yeah, you would know,” he grumped. “I’m this close to scratching at their door. I already stuck my hand underneath it.”

I closed my eyes, hearing absolutely nothing but the tiniest sound of bed springs bouncing. If I listened hard enough, I may be able to hear it consistently but it wasn’t enough to wake up and bitch about. Every room had some sort of silencer spell on it that activated after a certain hour. It was to prevent snores and music from escaping through the walls. So in reality, Namir probably was in fact tearing Maggie up and she’s hollering and screaming but we would never know. You had to have the most sensitive pair of ears to hear them because as far as I knew, the entire house was asleep .

“Quan, we are done pretending to be boyfriend and girlfriend.” I yawned. “I appreciate you. I’m glad you and my brothers get along...you’re their exact type, in fact...but now it's done. Go talk Souxie’s ears off...not mine.”

“Why does it have to be done?” He pressed.

Just as I closed my eyes, they popped back open to look at him again. He was sitting upright, staring me down with those bright vertical eyes before lifting his front paw

up to lick and clean.

“The sex I mean...You and I would have been fucking against the door,” he boasted as he continued to lick. “I would have had you screaming for your life fucking with me.”

It didn't take long for me to have my bedroom door slammed in Quan's face with a lock. Just in case he decided to switch and burst back into my room.

“I was just joking, Isis! Damn! It was just a damn joke!” He yelled from the other side.

Tyee

“Have you been getting settled in with the Underground?”

I looked up at my uncle Vern as he slapped a playing card on the plastic white table. Seth kept his cards close to his chest, and grinned with his yellow eyes sneering at the play in the center before nodding.

“I’m getting used to the idea of being down here, getting comfortable with my roots.” He said. My oldest brother’s eyes cut slyly towards me before he slapped the card down. “BOAW!”

“Ahh hell,” Hawkins groaned, letting his cards go. “This is why I don’t play with the youngins...Always cheating!”

“How is that cheating, Unc?!” Seth laughed.

I stood by the back door of the house, watching my family sit around the back porch that led to the backyard. This was our father’s home...the home Namir and I grew up in. We lived in one of the largest communities and subdivisions in the Underground, and was one of 6 major packs in the country. Just in the distance, beyond the backyard, the houses belonging to other members were spread throughout the fields outside of Cedar park.

Seth hadn’t been a part of this since he was 16 years old. Our father and the very same uncles sitting out here laughing and kicking it with him were the ones to chase him out because of his mother. A basic black woman that had no business sleeping

with our father, let alone having children. Now here he is... Aria, before she was killed, told me she heard Seth was trying to make his way back into this family. That it would cause a shift in loyalty and I could already see it happening here tonight.

I should have listened. I should have seen Namir and Maggie happening in real time. I should have taken Aria more seriously because none of this would be a problem. I wouldn't have another male, let alone a brother I barely knew come and try and take my place right before my eyes.

Aria tried to warn me.

"What do you think about the school so far?" Hawkins asked.

"What he really means is, have you talked to Namir?" Eugene laughed.

"Yeah," Seth nodded coolly as he reached to pull his curly hair back from his face. His yellow eyes glanced at me before grabbing a handful of cards to place in his hands. "I talk to him almost every day. He's enjoying the coach's life at that school. Pretty teachers, pretty students...what's not to like about his life?"

"What about the girl?"

"Ahh man," Seth said with a hard sigh. "I can see why he left the pack...He claims it was for his sister but nah...it was definitely for her. He's in love with her."

Everyone became quiet as I adjusted my glasses on my face. My jaw became so tight, I didn't realize I was clenching my teeth together until I could taste the blood.

"So it's true?" Boyd asked.

"I told y'all she was going to be a problem," Hawkins warned. "He's sleeping with



her now?"

"It's all over his face...He's gone." Seth laughed. "Personally, I don't get it. Maybe that's the human side of me but the moon is nothing but a white rock in the sky. A mere nightlight against the stars. Maze told me something...and I already told Roy but I don't think he's taking it seriously. She's scared of what Namir is turning into with the girl by his side. I even caught a different energy when we spoke about the girl. He's different...and it's going to take a lot to deal with him when he realizes his newfound strength."

I slowly stood up against the door as everyone grew quiet and looked at each other.

"Does our brother know you're here telling us this?" I questioned .

"Does it matter?" Seth replied without looking at me. "I told Namir as long as he stays out of my way...As long as he and his sister stay out of my way...We won't have any issues. I'm here for one thing."

"You want my position," I said.

Seth placed a card on the table while leaning back in his chair to look at me.

"You said it, not me." Seth repeated with a chuckle. "The stories I heard about being in a wolfpack...the strength...the power...How you all move as one...think as one. You have each other's backs and fight without hesitation. You're protective over the women and children...take care of the sick and elderly... It's family on a different level but seeing it in person...it's nothing like I imagined and I'm a little disappointed. Had Namir become pack leader, you all would look alot different...a wolf with the moon beneath him...He gets to fuck the moon night after night and you all were scared of her?" Seth began to laugh. "You should have been afraid of him, especially now that he's gone. Nobody, not even the First Family could touch

Namir...”

Hawkins looked at me with a slight shake of his head, warning me to stay quiet but it was too late. Seth was planting his seeds of doubt in everyone’s head.

“Roy insisted Ty become pack leader because he wanted someone of logic and reason to run the family...” Boyd said with an attitude. “I wanted Namir. We all wanted Namir——”

“No you didn’t!” Hawkins snapped. “You wanted the position for your damn self! You didn’t want either of the boys to run it——”

“I said we were making a mistake when we put Namir out! Roy is so damn hard headed!”

“No, it’s because Roy can control Ty...” Vern said tiredly with a disappointed yawn. “Roy knows he wouldn’t be able to control Namir...he’s too much like himself when he was younger. You can’t really tell him shit. Hard headed, stubborn, does his own thing...figure out the consequences later. Ty follows the rules by the book...”

“What does it matter now? Ty is the rightful leader. He controls the books, the movement, everything is handled through him and doing just fine,” Hawkins stated. “What does it matter to say this now?”

“I don’t think Ty should be in the position he’s in just because he was simply born. As Namir gets stronger with the girl, you’re going to need someone to combat and keep him under control. You and Ty are the reason Namir is with her in the first place, no?”

Hawkin’s face turned red as Seth put another card down on the table.

“In the end, I am the only one that will be able to keep Namir in check when the time comes...and believe me...it’s coming. ”

“Nephew, if you’re going to place your bid in for alpha, you know this means you cannot speak with outsiders anymore...”

“Done,” Seth said.

“Your focus needs to be on this family and you need to prove you can carry the responsibility. Roy may not see it yet but...” Marrock took a swing at his beer bottle. “You have our backing. We stand behind you.”

“Hell yeah,” Eugene said as they slapped hands. Hawkins looked at me with a worried expression but I shook my head, unphased. Instead, he stood up, letting another take his place at the table for a game of cards, and walked over towards me.

“You alright?” Hawkins muttered as a loud eruption of chaotic cackles came from the drunk men at the table.

“I’m fine.”

“I’m not trying to pressure you because I know you have a lot on your plate but...”

He leaned in close, using a technique he learned from Drew Collins. Hawkins whispered only for my ears to where the others couldn’t hear.

“I can smell the murderous intent on his breath...You need to kill him before he does it to you.”

Hawkins pulled back with a raised brow as I nodded.

“No pressure, big alpha. You were chosen for a reason, let it be known why.”

...

“What would you have me do, Roy?” Wilhelmina Holmes asked as she sat behind her desk in her office. “Your family has wreaked havoc on The Grounds, and for what? Werewolves and Vampires have been at war, have fought, have procreated...long before these two started their relationship.”

I cringed at the thought of Maggie and Namir but silently watched my father. He became alpha in times like this when I felt he was cleaning up the mess I made.

“The sirens are on my fucking back and them threatening to leave this school will do more harm than good——”

“I don’t give a damn about them!” Roy snapped. “Marvin and I maintained a cordial relationship. We weren’t exactly friends but we left one another alone.”

“Yes but I am not my brother. I would much rather have sirens here over werewolves——”

“My son can lose his job. I don’t care——”

“Oh he will do more than lose his job. I want all of you removed from the Grounds,” Wilhelmina stated as she leaned back in her chair. Her one grey eye staring at me before shifting back to my father. “Your son was plotting to kill my niece next, did you know that?” Roy looked at me as I lowered my head in submission. “Yes...he needs to be a little more careful where he sticks his dick at... the male students love to run their mouths...”

I closed my eyes, feeling every ounce of anger and rage as she just revealed the one

thing I worked so hard to keep hidden. I could feel my father's gaze on me, staring me down with growing hatred.

"Remove them from the Grounds," Roy agreed.

"No," Wilhelmina laughed. "I said, your son was plotting to kill my niece. The things I have planned for the future of the Underground require her to be alive until I no longer need her. You fucked with my money when your boys killed the random ass sirens on the Grounds! Do you understand they are their own fucking nomadic economy?! If they leave, this entire Underground is threatened to collapse! Removing them isn't nearly enough...Having them arrested, having everyone of you hauled off to the the fucking dog pound isn't nearly enough! I am not my brother! I am far from weak and my tolerance for bullshit is low! I think...it's only fair that I take a life or two...or three..." My head shot up as I watched Wilhelmina smile. "My nephew is married to your daughter, yes?"

I saw Roy weaken in his stance as his knees buckled at the thought of Maze. I stood up, feeling the hairs on my arm raise at the threat.

"My daughter had nothing to do with any of this—— "

"No...of course not but I never cared for the union...and I'm okay with sacrificing Draco in the process. There will soon be plenty more of him by the end of next year. Right now...I have two ghouls standing outside of your wife's home...waiting on my word to come in and attack both——"

I hadn't realized I charged at her desk until Roy's thick arm slammed into my chest to push me back.

"STAND DOWN, TYEE!" He barked.

“Your brother Namir...a beloved coach here...can also die...I know he makes frequent trips above ground. I have people in place that will make it look like a beautiful accident...a random shooting over drugs or what have you... I personally do not care... I can have this reported back to the sirens community so I can make sure they feel safe as they are the largest in numbers in the Underground. The First Family is the most powerful...what would that make you werewolves?” Roy didn’t say anything as he licked his lips and slowly inhaled just to release a low guttural growl in response. “It makes you all expendable. Disposable. Replaceable. Maybe at one point in time you were all deemed a threat but not anymore...”

“What about a human? 100% no mythical, no magic, no creature...just pure human blood...”

Wilhelmina’s eyes twitched .

“In exchange for your wife, daughter and son? Well now that would be interesting, tell me more...”

“I have another son who is half human...”

Wilhelmina’s eyes caught a glint of interest as she slowly sat up in her chair.

“I never knew this about you Roy... So that is where Namir gets it from... Is the mother still living?”

“Yes,” he strained through his teeth. “You can take her. She has two daughters...Young...still under 18 but they are 100% human as well.”

“Is your son close to them?”

“I don’t speak to him...He doesn’t speak to me.”

He was talking about my brother Seth... Aria warned me he was trying to make his way back to the Underground... Maybe this could offset that or so I thought.

"I'll do it," I said. Wilhelmina tilted her head to look at me before turning her attention back to Roy.

"You are willing to sacrifice the mother of your first born to protect the children of the second mother."

"My daughter," Roy corrected. "This is for her. I missed the chance to protect her the first time. Let her be and my wife be... They have nothing to do with any of this shit. This is my two boys, and their mess..."

"Do you know where the mother of your first born is currently?"

Roy pulled out his phone and dialed a number on speaker. It ringed a few times before she finally picked up, answering to her own death. Her voice, frail, innocent, and oblivious to anything going on.

"Hello?"

"Are you at the house?" Roy asked. "We need to talk."

The hardened eyes suddenly swelled with tears that refused to fall. That was a look of a man who still had a connection to this woman which meant he still kept in contact with her after all these years. Wilhelmina motioned for him to hang up as she gathered her things.

"Well let's make this quick. All will be forgiven and forgotten... I just need you to get me in the door. The rest will be taken care of privately. As long as you don't say anything, nobody will know you had anything to do with this untimely death."

Now looking at Seth as he played his cards with our laughing uncles, he cut his yellow gaze towards me and held it. I could see the quiet rage building with hate for me before masking it with a blank gaze .

He knew. Somehow Seth knew we were the reason his family was killed. The questions now are, how did he find out? What was going to be my next move? Do I defend my turf, my family or do I accept my fate?



Maggie Grey

I threw on my Drew Collins jacket, pulling my white curls from underneath the collar before packing up my things. It was almost over. These exams were getting harder and harder and supposedly, the first semester...first year is the easiest. It's just the basics. Maybe between pledging and dealing with the off chance that Asha will be kidnapped by the school, might have started to take its toll on me.

Could be that... Nothing too heavy.

Now I get the text that Namir's mother is here along with Draco Holmes and Maze. I, more than anything, wanted to see Draco because Bellamy hasn't shown his red-eyed ass since, and I refused to text him. How do you harass me with Tiktok videos and send mindless messages about nonsense to complete silence? So I grabbed my things from the table, and quietly left the study hall which was nothing but a large room filled with long tables and students buried in their work. With arched ceilings with glass colored stained windows, it looked more like the inside of a church than anything. Everyone knew this was a place of silence and there were always a few teachers around on study hall duty, here to help a student in need, followed by designated tutors.

"You need help with that?"

The deep voice came out of nowhere as I turned around to see Eamon already grabbing my drooping book bag off my shoulder to sling over his. Nice guy. Handsome. Fit. Brown skin...maybe a mahogany complexion give or take. He reminds me of Isis's brother. That fit military frame, square shoulders and upright

stance. He was dressed in a maroon varsity jacket with the khaki pants, and maroon polo shirt tucked in. I could even see a peek of gray hairs curling out of his goatee. He still had a youthful appearance in the face, bright eyes but I knew he had to be at least in his 30s.

“Thanks,” I said, flipping my hair back from my face as we began to walk towards the exit. I waved at a few students in my class until we reached the exit and he opened the doors for me. Drew Collins was rightfully decorated with Halloween and fall decor from large pumpkins the size of cars stacked together to drapes of colorful leaves strung together and looping from tree to tree. It was odd knowing that there was a holiday to dress up like real live people down here. So it didn’t surprise me when I saw no costumes or masks of witches and vampires with fake teeth. It seemed somewhat offensive to some degree. Still, the fake spider webs stretching against the corners of the building doors and windows was enough to put you in the halloween spirit.

“You and I share most of our classes together and never say a word to each other,” he said as I laughed.

“Yeah well...My strategy with college is always the same. Come in, do work from the previous class and dip out. I never really been the talkative type in class.”

“Well let me introduce myself then.” He put his hand out. “My name is Eamon. Most just call me E.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Maggie.”

“Oh I know who you are.” He chuckled. “The girl with the white hair. The First Fam...everybody knows who you are.”

“Aye yo E?! The Hill, tonight?!” Someone shouted. He put two fingers up with a nod

before turning back to focus on me.

“What’s The Hill?” I asked. His eyes widened in surprise. “I know...I don’t know half the stuff that goes on.”

“You interested in going out to a party tonight then? You and your girls? I know you roll with a crew.”

I smiled.

Eamon reached in his bag to hand me a blank card. I wasn’t even going to do the stupid thing by asking what is it...where’s the information because knowing this school, you probably had to use some magical dust from the wizard in the sky to sprinkle on the card .

“We keep it blank from those who may find it on the ground,” he noted. “But come stop by if you can. You and your home girls are welcomed...”

He licked his lips with a wiggle of his brows. I laughed. Cheeky and corny, ok... I can dig it but my mack game was interrupted by my reality when my phone started to vibrate.

“Alright, I’ll look into it but I gotta get going.”

“Where are you headed? I got time to escort you to your next class,” he insisted.

“I’m actually meeting up with somebody,” I said, taking my bag off his shoulders.

“Ahh ok...Ok.” He nodded, catching the hint. “Tell the Coach I don’t mean no harm...Some see you as fair game.”

My mouth dropped. He shrugged with a cool frowning grin like he said something monumental.

“Hopefully I’ll see you tonight! It would be an honor to have the First Family at the Hill.”

It wasn’t just Eamon that was outwardly talking to me. I walked along the pathways of The Grounds and most guys who usually kept their heads down about me were finding the courage to suddenly speak. Souxie was the one to draw out the men, constantly coming up to speak to her and get their foot in her door. Asha was already making waves and asserting herself as the it girl on The Grounds, and Isis well... She was naturally that girl. Most men felt at ease around her and she could flirt their boxers off in a heartbeat.

Me ?

I was never that type. I was a guy’s girl. The one that was hanging with the boys to hear them talk about the girls they would go after. Somehow or another, we would hang out and it would go from there or not at all. Namir was the first man to make it clear he was interested amongst the rest of the guys here who were too afraid to speak to me.

Now...it feels like something is shifting. I just couldn’t tell if it was me or maybe it was something in the damn air. Maybe it was just this particular moon in the sky being attractive... To say I wasn’t used to the attention was an understatement. I just didn’t need Namir getting any damn ideas.

Knocking on the door of his office, I slowly pushed it open to see a few people standing around. Maze gasped as she stood up from the chair, short hair with curls slicked down against her scalp. She reached her arms out in a quick hug and squeezed me tight .

“I’ve missed you soooo much. I didn’t really get a chance to say as much when you came to the house but I’m hoping to get back in the school next semester,” she gleamed with excitement.

Draco stood wearing a hoodie over his head, and some baggy jeans as he gave me a nod with a small smile. Namir’s mother was sitting down with tissue balled up in her hand, red teary eyes like she’d been crying while Namir glowered. He was pissed. Something must have just happened and Maze was trying to lighten up the mood with the dramatics.

“Did I miss something?” I asked. Maze’s smile slowly faded as she closed the door.

“Wolf business,” Draco said dryly. He walked over with his usual rich demeanor despite being dressed like he was an extra from the 8 Mile movie. “How are you my beautiful cousin?” He wrapped one arm around my neck and kissed me on the cheek. “Bellamy keeps you close.” He said as he looked me over in approval. “I don’t like that. How are you?”

He pressed his hand against my forehead like I was sick with a fever before pushing my hair back as I smiled.

“I’m fine, Draco.”

“You have a new aura about you...” He looked me over again in approval. “Shifting with the moon, again?”

“Perhaps ,” I mocked in an uppity tone. He grinned before wrapping his arm around my neck again to pull me in close for a hug.

“Come, let them talk in private...”

Draco was pulling me out of the office just as fast as I walked in as we stepped outside into the cold brisk air of Drew Collins. He shoved his hands into his hoodie pocket and stood with his legs cocked wide open, standing out like a sore thumb amongst the uniforms and coats.

“What the hell was that all about?” I asked, scooping my hair out of my face as the wind blew by.

“Apparently, the two brothers are actually fighting, for real this time and Maze really had no idea,” Draco said. “Ty and I spoke... I said what I had to say about how he handled my wife and left it at that. I spoke with their father and got a blessing from him. Not that I needed it.” He huffed. “All of this happened after I killed the wolf bitch.”

“I’m sorry, you did what ?” I let out.

“The one who dragged my wife on the ground in front of everyone. I killed her and Maze’s mother finished her off to cover me. So we don’t break out into another fucking civil war. I would have been ready either way.” He muttered before sighing. “I spoke with Ty shortly after that, face to face and we came to an understanding.”

“Okay so... All is well? ”

“Except Namir didn’t know...They approve of Maze because they really don’t have any choice. I’ve been around since we were children but...”

“They don’t approve of me,” I realized. Draco nodded.

“I don’t believe it has anything to do with you at this point and I’m sure Namir realizes that. Maybe in the beginning when they killed the girl but I don’t think so much anymore.”

“Wait a minute, killed what girl?” I asked.

“The girl...well the girls...The one who died at the house. Ty was behind that. He’s the one who did it...Did Namir not tell you? Why do you think he’s the only wolf here? Maze told me she was responsible for setting you and Namir up on behalf of the Uncle’s plan. Namir was supposed to pretend to like you to keep you close but in reality, Ty was setting you up which is why the deaths took place near you... Did you not know any of this? I assumed you did once you and Namir became serious and looked past it. You can’t blame him. He fell for you and that is what they weren’t expecting. Namir is forced to leave the pack because of you. Ty makes amends with Maze being married to me but hates Namir for choosing you over him. It’s petty sibling bullshit at the end of the day. Now, the mother is worried because she hasn’t heard from Ty nor the father. Nobody is telling her anything.”

“Like he’s missing?” I questioned.

“Possibly...”

The doors opened as Namir, his mother, and Maze walked out. Draco was reading my face faster than I could hide it when he suddenly leaned in and whispered against my ear.

“Cousin, the man left his entire family for you. Not Maze, but you. Maze wouldn’t even do that for me until she was forced to, and she still talks with them.” Draco slowly stepped back to look at me. “Do not question what is obvious.”

I inhaled deeply as Maze nervously glanced from Draco to I. She must have heard what he said but Namir was busy talking with his mother who was trying to calm him down.

“Please keep in touch, cousin. Don’t let Bellamy scare you away from us when he’s

the real monster,” Draco said. He cupped my chin and kissed both sides of my cheek. A little too intimate for us being cousins but I figured it was rich people for, tah-tah ...

“Draco, wait.” I held out the blank card that was given to me. “Do you know what this is?”

He flipped it over twice before shaking his head.

“It’s a blank card babe...Not everything is enchanted and magical here...Some of this is really just regular shit. ”

With that, he handed it back to me before walking off with Maze who waved.

“I’ll text you, Maggie! We gotta link up soon!”

Their mother didn’t say much of anything to me but she did cling on to Draco as they walked towards the parking lot. Her relationship to him seemed so out of place yet natural as she looked up to him as if he were her own son, but didn’t say a word to me. Not even a look in my direction. Didn’t matter though as I now had bigger fish to fry.

It wasn’t until I closed the door to Namir’s office that I came face to face, ready to question our entire relationship. He was upset and for good reason. Your brother played you. That slimy string bean built bitch with glasses played you. Your whole family played you for a fucking fool. Told you to get with me and when you did, you suddenly got squeezed out of the pack to the point where you removed yourself. Not to mention, he killed Hillary!

“So what are you gonna do?” I asked, breaking the tense silence as Namir stared at me.



“What are you gonna do about that walking toothpick of a brother!?” I snapped. “So he killed Hillary and you knew the entire time? ”

“I didn’t know. I put it together after the murders in the bathroom.” He said with a calm tone as he placed his phone on his desk. “My mother told me she’s worried about Ty because our oldest brother Seth is set to become Alpha now...”

Namir shook his head as he tapped the pen on the desk, trying to calm his nerves.

“Does she know her son is also a murderer?” I questioned. “Or does she not care about that?”

Namir ignored my question altogether as he spoke with disdain.

“She hasn’t heard from him since and that was weeks ago...Nobody is answering her calls. Nobody is saying anything to her about fucking Tyee.”

“So what does she want you to do about it? Go see him? Call him?”

Namir nodded.

“After all of this? After how he’s been moving? You would——”

“I know——”

“He doesn’t deserve to hear your damn voice or grace——”

“I know—— ”

“How could he just kill an innocent student who had nothing to do with any of this——”

He shouted with his fist slamming against the table, causing the wood to crack in place.

“I KNOW! MAGGIE! FUCK! I KNOW!”

I didn’t flinch, not even a blink as we stared at one another. Namir was going to do it. He was still going to reach out to his brother on behalf of his mother.

“Well I’m glad you know,” swinging my bag against my shoulder. “I’m going out tonight. Don’t wait up.”

“Maggie?” He called out but I slammed the door to his office, ignoring the stares of others as I walked out of the building. I started my long trek to Traditional Row, ignoring the shuttle stops and only stopped once to take a picture of the card to send to the group chat. When I slipped the card underneath the camera, I saw red letters forming slowly. Creeping along the white paper with a set of directions.

Go out and come back in. The Hill. Fight Night Fridays. Go out. Come back in. Doors open @ 10:33pm.

The card suddenly began to burn from the corners, crumbling into ashes before I quickly dropped the black soot, letting it disappear into the brisk air.

...

“Who is this man you got us meeting now, Isis?” Asha asked as we stood outside of the small town of Cedar Park. Right where the railroad tracks were hidden amongst the tall grass. We were huddled together underneath the only lamp post with the flickering light. The temperature was dropping and the only thing these girls bothered to wear were skirts and sweater dresses. Isis had a jumpsuit on with thigh high boots and a cropped jacket. Asha borrowed an off the shoulder dress from her with combat

boots and Souxie wore a black leather skirt with a split on the side. They all looked so cute and so cold.

I knew better though. If something is about to go down, I need to be able to run. So I wore jeans and a cropped hoodie that came in at the waist. My white frizzy curls were sprawled about and New Balance sneakers, just in case we had to get the hell out of dodge.

“He’s a friend of my brothers.” Isis said as she looked at her phone. “He’s one of the runners moving through the doors tonight. If the card says go out and come back in?” She turned to look at us with her wide glossy eyes, always having a startled expression. “That means we go above ground and back below. Two doors. I’ve been to a party that had an in and out invite card. It means somebody created a door specifically for that event.”

“What kind of party was it?” Souxie asked softly as she slipped a strip of gum in her mouth .

“Honestly, I can barely remember.” Isis laughed. “I was 14 when I went.”

“Girl,” Asha tripped as she looked at Isis. “You are a wild child for real.”

“Well now it’s coming in handy because we’re off to our next adventure!” She beamed with a fist in the air. “Here we are, Second Family, off to solve another mystery of Drew Collins and the Missing students...No!” She suddenly gasped as she grasped our arms together. “Drew Collins and the Mysterious Case of Missing Students...I believe we are officially on to our next adventure ladies.”

“I agree,” Souxie smiled. “Hillary would probably be like, g uys...I don’t know about this ...all while being right here standing 10 toes down in the mud with us.”

“Hell yeah,” Asha laughed.

My smile faded as I looked at the ground. Fuck it.

“Professor Tyee is the one that killed her,” I blurted out. You could hear a pin drop and the brush of the grass blowing as the girls slowly turned their attention towards me. I shook my head with a roll of my eyes. “I just found out today from my cousin Draco and Namir...He knew his brother did it.”

“Uhhhh,” Asha let out as she backed away with a shake of her head. “Not the whole time, right? We had homie dropping off groceries in our house when we weren't there! ”

“Don't do that,” I snapped, already on defensive mode for him. “He didn't know the entire time. He apparently found out just before school started back up. His brother is the one who killed the sirens as well...I don't know why but I can only assume it was to make me appear to be something I'm not.”

Nobody said anything at first. You could feel a gentle warm breeze that stood out amongst the cold shift between our bodies. Souxie looked up at the night sky with a smile.

“That would explain why there are no wolves here but Namir and why he's no longer in the pack.”

“Yeap,” I nodded without taking my eyes off my shoes. “He still lied to me though, soooooo.”

“Fuck him just for tonight?” Asha suggested with a raised brow.

“I'm going to enjoy myself,” was all I said.

“Oooo...are we all finally single and mingling?” Isis pressed.

Just then, you could see a bright light in the distance appear out of nowhere. Blinking into the night air like someone turned on a switch. The rumblings and howling whistle of the train drew closer as we began to back up.

“Are you sure we can’t just take my car?!” I shouted over the noise. Isis laughed while holding her slick curls in place when the massive machine came blowing past us

.

“I don’t think this train is stopping!” Asha yelled but the train had already begun to slow down, stretching along the backside of Cedar Park and the small town. We were in one of the last few cars when it came to a complete stop. The red velvet seats were peeling, showing the yellow stuffing inside to the finger print smeared windows. Nobody was on the train except for us as we made our way to the back by the heater.

“He said we have to meet him at the city station,” Isis said, showing her phone where she was texting our runner. “That’s the next stop. Now, try not to look so...new,” she warned. “A lot of scams happen out there. It’s very easy to get lost and separated. I’m not sure how it is above ground but this next station is different from Cedar Park. It’s not the quiet little countryside with the private university. This is the trenches...Okay? You have to move like you belong here so you don’t stand out.”

Asha cut her eyes towards me as we both snickered. Isis and Souxie clearly had the one up on us and were acting as much. Yet the landscape began to slowly change from the rolling fields and buildings belonging to Drew Collins and surrounding primary and secondary schools, to the growing highrise in the distance. I could see the black market on the side full of tents stretching for miles, string lights, and parked cars in the grass before it went completely black. When shot out of the dark tunnel into the crowded station where people were bundled up walking. Some were chasing behind another train going in the opposite direction. You could see billboards and

signs plastered everywhere and steps leading to the ground level. There was a large digital poster that stretched from one end of the wall to the other of a black man with a sword, fighting in a green and gold uniform. He was waving the sword around with one arm behind his back as Mardi Gras colored confetti came sprinkling down the ad.

“Is Society Hill around here?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Souxie nodded. “Their gateway is through New Orleans like Drew Collins is Atlanta. My cousin got accepted in.”

The horn on the train beeped twice. Isis stood up, pulling at the jumpsuit with her back side showing off the serious dip to her hips and ass. She gripped her breast to push up, using the straps to her onesie to adjust as the doors opened. With her fangs dangling from her smile, she motioned for us to follow her.

“Let’s go and be cool,” she reminded. “Not too much attention. Stay close so you don’t get separated. Some of these people are crazy out here.”

We stepped off behind her and Souxie as Asha and I immediately linked arms together. I flipped my curls back from my face as I looked around the packed station, already being hit with the chaos of Friday night .

“Aye!? Can we get another fucking train out here?! DAMN! Two express trains going on Friday night?! Whose idea is that?!” Someone shouted.

“This is sorta like a cross between MTA and Marta,” Asha muttered under her breath as we maneuvered through the people.

“First Family!? First Fam?! The Sky God is down here with us regular folks!” Someone shouted. I looked around, seeing a man point at me. He had missing teeth and eyes blacked out like black water, soulless and demonic.

“Oh hell no.” I said as Asha glanced back before picking up the pace. This is why I wore flipping sneakers! For shit like this!

“Don’t run from your people!” He hollered.

Asha and I kept close, losing Isis and Souxie in the late rush hour crowd. There was another long poster that stretched out showing the mountains and cliffs of Japan where black women dressed in matching kimonos bowed to the people walking by only to suddenly pull out a sword to fight.

Yasuke University. Home of the first all black HBCU in Japan based on the first black samurai, and his descendants .

“Oh!” I pointed out. “That’s where I went! That’s it! ”

The woman in the kimono with the beautiful 70s style afro bowed at me. With a small smile, she stood upright and waved at a little girl who stopped with her mother to stare at her.

“That’s where you went? You really went to Japan? You sure it wasn’t like little Tokyo or something in LA?”

“It was the real deal,” I laughed. The woman with the sword suddenly slashed at the poster, splitting it in half as it went completely blank. Asha and I froze like we were hit before laughing at another ad that appeared about mythical gummy vitamins for children. Apparently, it enhances your abilities and brings out the magic within you.

“Scuze me!?” Someone shouted as they came up from behind us. A man with a pimply face and sharp pointy ears stared at us with a grip of his prickly chin. “Y’all go to Collins huh? I can tell. Y’all got that uppity look.”

“What does it matter?” Asha popped with an attitude. “Why are you talking to us?”

“Nah, I don’t mean any harm.” He said as he smiled at her, seeing the yellow saliva stretch from the top to bottom of his teeth.

“So then move out of our way my guy,” Asha barked. The man raised his hands in the air, scared and turned on at the same time as he stepped aside and let us pass. Thank God for her brashness . We continued to walk along the sitting train as people ran to grab their seats and hold the door. Asha pulled me forward when she saw Isis and Souxie heading up the stairs, waving for us to hurry up. I ignored the stares and double takes of people looking back at me while some snuck pictures with their phone. I reached to grab my hoodie, deciding to cover up my distracting hair.

“The Solhari winter festival is almost here!” Someone shouted as we watched a woman wearing a lion mask on her face and a red dress. “Come visit the kingdom and see the real Gods and Goddesses! The descendants of Orishas! The real power! Our princess is coming of age! Come see the most beautiful girl in the world that holds all of the power!”

She began moving her body, rolling her waist like a snake as her hips warped from side to side. She looked like an Egyptian belly dancer with her feet moving like she was on sand instead of the harsh cold concrete. Her ebony complexion had a certain shimmer underneath the gold jewels adorned to her body and her braids were decorated with colorful wooden beads. She slowly spun around, barefoot with jewels dangling around her ankles. She suddenly pressed her fingers to the lips of the mask. A burst of flames shot out into the air before coming to life. A dragon began to fly over the heads of people walking until it disappeared into black smoke over the tracks. I noticed the small woven basket before her as people stopped to drop a few cents and change in it before moving on .

“We are the true power that the council is afraid of! We are the original kings and



queens! The original black people! We are the original earth, moon, sun and skies!” She yelled out. I started to question who exactly is the council but I would soon get an answer the moment we were on the main level. She and the rest of the passengers waiting on the train disappeared behind the wall, as we continued up the steps leading to the main level of the city.

“Holy shit,” I gawked in awe, coming up on the last step as I saw the bustling city life. The skyscraper buildings, the neon lights, the cars...very expensive cars waiting at the intersection. Just above were the large digital billboards like Times Square showing a picture of the council and what do you know, Wilhelmina Holmes was in the center of it and the major universities written at the bottom. Drew Collins. Society Hill. Montclair & Monroe...Sycamore. The deans were the council for the Underground? Did that mean the schools fund this entire existence of this place?

“Y'all it's almost midnight,” Souxie said, interrupting my thoughts. “We're already late——”

“SIS?!” Someone shouted, getting Isis's attention. You could see someone with a small chain bouncing around their neck wearing all black came charging towards us. Isis suddenly turned around in panic .

“Y'all, that is my damn brother. I cannot let him see me dressed like this!” She hissed before her voice began to fade as he drew closer. “He wasn't supposed to...”

Her brother stood right behind her, looking her over with the most disgusted face an overprotective sibling could have for his young baby sister. She gripped Souxie's arm and slowly turned around to face him. He looked like he could have been an extra for Lil Baby's rap video and there was no way you could tell he was a nymph aside from the ears that were slightly pointed back and his eyes that did the double blink. There were no fangs like Isis and no wide concave lens for eyes like hers either.

“You already know I’m telling both mama and daddy you out here dressed like this.” He said before turning to the rest of us. He did a double take at Asha showing a split second of interest before realizing who she was. “Couldn’t touch your brother’s leftovers I suppose. “Aight, is this everybody?”

“Out of my way!” Someone shouted from the stairs. “Y’all standing around the station like people don’t have any place to fucking be!”

“So then move around!” Asha barked back at the woman who kept moving. “The fuck!?”

“This is everybody.” Isis said, humbling herself in front of him. “Y’all this is Imari...Imari, this is Asha, Souxie, and Maggie. ”

“Real shit, real shit,” he nodded, looking at me with a frown. “You dressed like you’re going to the park to play.”

“Uh..” looking at my attire, “I’m just wearing regular clothes to be comfortable?”

“Cool shit. Aight, my homeboy got caught up at the border so I’mma take y’all. We’re moving quickly because I have somewhere I need to be. So keep up.”

I tugged at my hoodie, keeping my hair covered as I caught a few people walking by staring with curiosity. Following in a makeshift line, her brother took us down two blocks from the station. We passed up storefronts selling high end brands and a level above in the window, you could see them recreating those exact same brands from Fendi to Gucci. Everything was being recreated, bootlegged and sold here as if it was new. Another storefront of a jazz coffee shop that had the instruments playing itself against the window and the moving black artwork on the walls dancing to the beat. It was a lot of people that looked to be my age, huddled together at tables, laughing and smiling like all was right in the world.

“My man Ray!?” Imari shouted as he pulled back the door of the convenient store squished between two high rise buildings. The windows were littered with stickers, posters, and ads for cigarettes, liquor and fortune telling ads. It was only three aisle going straight back. Imari slapped the counter twice for the man’s attention .

“These are my little sisters before you even try some dumb shit.” Imari started as the old behind the glass wheezed into his laughter. He had a cigar in his mouth as he grabbed the 50 Imari slipped him underneath the glass barrier into the silver tray.

“See, I wasn’t even gonna say anything,” Ray laughed. “They look——”

“Watch yo mouth,” Imari warned. Ray gave him a single key with a black shoe string attached to it, sliding it underneath the small opening. He was about to talk his shit when he sat up in the chair, eyes landing on me, and tapped the window hard with his knuckles for my attention.

“Nuh uh. Come on,” Asha said as she grabbed my arm. I hadn’t even gotten a chance to look at the snacks and things they were selling, so different from what I would see back home from Ding Dong Ditch fireballs to Haint Honey Buns. Things based on our culture and our memories as black Americans were made into brands I would have never even thought about. We followed Imari all the way to the back of the store that turned into a slither of a hallway leading to one single black door.

“Aight.” He started with his hand smoothing down his fade. “I got somewhere I need to be tonight so I’ma make this quick. Who is the responsible one because I know it ain’t my sister,” he said. Souxie immediately reached for the key that he held out. “You find a working door with a lock regardless of where you end up above ground....Say th e name of wherever you’re going and unlock it. It won’t open with the three knocks bullshit. That’s for the public. Fight nights parties are usually a private event.”

“You’ve been?” I asked.

“Tuh.” He huffed like I had the nerve to ask. “Who hasn’t? Lightweight shit.”

“Well excuse the hell out of me,” I muttered, looking at Asha.

“Y’all got it from here,” Imari said. “If anything, Isis knows we one call away.”

Isis rolled her eyes as she went up to the black door, and knocked three times. Imari was already making his way out the store, fussing at the man behind the glass about nonsense just as we heard a lock click.

“Y’all ready?” Souxie asked. Isis pushed the door in to open.

“Ahh shit....” Asha sang. “Hereeeee weeeee go!”

We stepped in one after the other, grabbing onto each other as I closed the door behind me. It was only black for a split second before a bright light clicked and sharp cold air surrounded us. The same door that was pushed open was now a glass door inside of the dairy section of the grocery store. We were behind the dairy and eggs and the door we came through had no racks like it was a section being cleared out for cleaning. So Isis looked back at us before pushing the glass door all the way open as we stepped out. Never mind the strange looks we got as four girls dolled up walked out of the door like it was nothing. A white woman with her two kids looked startled as she stared at her chocolate milk then back at us like we were the ones who filled it up.

“We have to find a door,” Isis muttered, adjusting her strap as Souxie pulled at her skirt. We began to pace down the aisle as shoppers, mostly white with a sprinkle of asian...God when is the last time I’ve seen such pale skin? You sort of forget white people exist after being in the Underground for so long. So I was looking at them the

way they were looking at us. Aliens. Strange pale colored aliens.

I looked back at the woman by the milk. She tried to open the glass door but when she looked inside, it was clearly back to how it was. She couldn't figure out how we stepped out of it. Lady, your guess is as good as mine. I still don't understand it.

"There!" Asha pointed out. "Is that a door? I thought I saw a light."

"Oh please...not this again...I don't want to get caught up in the door drama again," I groaned.

"We're not," Isis assured. "That's not a door...I don't think... Maybe we have to go outside..."

We picked up the pace, moving past everyone who stopped and stared. Even the one black person we did see who lit up at the sight of us began to frown at our attire. My phone suddenly caught my attention as I looked down at the screen, shocked to see Bellamy actually text me.

Where are you?

I smiled. He must have heard from Namir that I was going out for the night ... That or maybe the dozens of people at the train station staring me down... Either way, I texted him saying The Hill and left it at that. Now you want to reach out to me after I leave the school? After months of silence and ignored messages...you finally reach out.

"There! I told you that was a door!" Asha screamed with a point as shoppers got out of the way. You could see one of the workers call for security. We quickly ran to the other side of the store where it looked like a back door for management only. The gold knob had a key as Souxie was the first to scurry up in her heeled boots and slip

the key into the lock.

“Hey! Excuse me! That is for employees only! We’re calling the police!”

“Everyone say, The Hill on three,” Souxie declared. “One...”

“You all are going to have to leave! Now. This is not——”

“Two!” Isis beamed as we bunched up towards the door. We ignored the two store workers coming towards us with one attempting to get to the door first. We called out three and yelled out THE HILL , laughing halfway through it. Souxie turned the key, hearing the lock snap, we opened the door. Nevermind that one of the workers attempted to grab my hoodie and Asha shoved her face back with a hard smack. We slammed the door shut behind us, stepped out of a dark cramped space and into something that was completely pitch black.

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*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:59 pm*

Maggie Grey

The sweet smell of fruit and flowers drifted into the air as we felt around for any type of support or walls.

“Are we caught between a door?” Isis whispered. I felt the panic jump in my throat just as dim lights slowly simmered on, illuminating a large office with a sofa, coffee table and a counter that held coffee and a sink. I looked back at the office door that probably led to the dark red hallways of the Holmes building.

“Where...are we?” Asha whispered. “What is this?”

“We’re back at Drew Collins.” I said as I looked around. “This is her office.”

“Who ?” Isis questioned with her mouth lingering in the shape of a small O.

“Wilhelmina Holmes...”

The girls looked at me as I began to step further into her office, careful not to touch anything. The family portraits on the wall of black women wearing black faded dresses sat perfectly still as their eyes carefully watched us move about in the office. I pulled my hoodie off, thinking that it would provide some sort of familiarity but instead, the heads just slowly turned, following my every move like a security camera instead of some old plantation portrait.

“I don’t know if she has an alarm or if this is some sort of trap so don’t touch anything.” I warned, glancing at the pictures on the wall. “This used to be Dr. Marvin

T. Holmes's office at one point..."

"How the hell did we get here?" Asha asked. "What does this have to do with The Hill?"

"I think the party was probably a lock-in...Maybe that's why a key was needed," Isis suggested. "And we got there too late, I'm assuming? I don't know..."

"How is something like this here and we as students have never seen this before?" Asha questioned. "As many times as I got sent to the Holmes building, I've never seen this before."

"Because they hide it," I said, for once having the leg up on something dealing with this school. "There are doors within this building...and I guess, apparently locked doors."

"Look at this y'all," Souxie whispered. I whipped around to see she was already standing behind the desk. "It's a bunch of folders for different students... Maybe Asha and Celeste's files are here too."

As much as I didn't want to, I found myself walking over as Isis shuffled in her heels behind us and crowded around the desk to look over Souxie's shoulder. There were different names and student ID photos. Blood types. Health records. Vaccines and list of allergies. Souxie reached to turn the small lamp light on with a yank of the dangling chain as we found a stack of papers with the cover page labeled, ADI. Advanced Discovery Institution. The Hill Laboratory.

"This..." Asha pointed to the words, confused. "This is where they kept me... ADI. I remember those letters..."

"Are you certain?" Souxie asked but Asha began looking through the pile of other



folders.

“Oh shit, this is my teacher!” Asha whispered loudly before pointing down at the folder labeled Birdie. We flipped through the heavily inked file filled with notes and an outline of every detail concerning her body and health from the strain of her hair type to a list of health concerns and diseases she might have carried in the past. Even the number of abortions and trauma to her uterus.

“Classified as 100% human,” Souxie read with her sky blue nail trailing the paper. “They’re using her sample of blood for some of these experiments...look...They have other humans...a woman...mother of two daughters...blood type O... This is for...the Vampire Induction Trials .”

“What does that mean?” I asked. Isis began to scan the documents.

“It means they are injecting students with some sort of new drug they’re calling...” Her studies in the medical portion of her education were kicking in as she picked the papers up to skim through. “They are creating a new injection called IPV-13...Immortal Pathogen Variant. A viral mutation that...”

Isis grew silent but her face said it all. She was reading and comprehending something bad happening.

“What is it, Isis?” I asked. She looked up at us with a worried expression.

“They are creating vampires out of these students to where they’re able to pass it along to whoever they infect.”

“What ?!” I freaked, snatching the papers from her hand.

“Am I mentioned?” Asha asked. “Is my file on here?”

“No and neither is Celeste.” Souxie replied before bending down in her heeled boots. “Let’s check her drawers.”

“Y'all,” putting the papers down, “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

The loud clunking noise echoed in the office. Souxie yanked the drawers open to see dozens of files and papers stacked neatly together.

“Aye, look at this,” Asha said as we turned to see the shelf she was poking around at suddenly cracked open. “I knew one of these things on the shelf would trigger something.”

Souxie closed the cabinet drawer underneath the desk as we started for the hidden archived room but out of nowhere...we heard voices. Voices that turned into growing chatter as I panicked. Isis began jumping in place with her hands flapping back and forth like wings as we started to look for some sort of place to hide.

“Go! Go!” I hissed. “Hurry up and close it!”

Asha stupidly closed herself into the hidden room before Souxie decided to slide in with her. Isis could barely move in the damn thigh high boots as she and I crouched down behind the desk, sliding just underneath the nook where the legs and feet go. I pulled her in before taking the chair to roll closer to us as we heard the door unlock. I grabbed my vibrating phone from my back pocket, seeing a series of messages from Bellamy. I put it on silent mode altogether and dimmed the screen. Isis looked so distraught at me touching my phone that I almost broke character and laughed before remembering how serious this is.

We were about to get caught snooping around this old lady’s office until I heard the voice...

“Dr. Holmes...she has been running this school straight into the ground.” The small timid voice said as the lights turned completely on. “She has her own agenda and it has nothing to do with the well being of the students and staff here. I’m so glad you’re finally back to take your rightful place as dean of this school.”

Isis and I stared at one another as the deep voice drew closer to the desk. You could hear the movement of the papers and folders we were just looking at right above us. I began texting Bellamy like a mad woman, pleading with him to get here and help us out of this office.

“She’s taking these students, paying teachers extra on the side to have them removed from the class and used for her own purposes...” the timid voice said. “I never agreed with it, Dr. Holmes. Never.”

“Of course not...”

Isis and I almost choked on our own breaths as our eyes popped out of our heads at the same time. So it was him! The rich baritone floated throughout the office as he spoke. Dr. Marvin T. Holmes has returned! He was here in this office right now!

“What about my granddaughter?” I looked up at the wood as if I could see through it to stare directly into his eyes.

“You would be proud. This school agrees with her. I know you wanted to do your best to keep her away for safety reasons but she is excelling. All of her professors have nothing but amazing things to say about her. I believe Wilhelmina knew not to bother her on account of Bellamy keeping a close eye on her. Lovely is under his guidance.”

“ Did somebody say my name ?”

I almost jumped when Isis grabbed my arm, eyes staring daggers into mine to silence me. Bellamy Holmes had entered the office, wasting no time getting here.

“Have my office restored back to its original decor,” Dr. Holmes said. “Bellamy, you and I have nothing further to say to one another——”

“Where have you been resting, old man?” Bellamy pressed. “You look good...if not, younger...”

Bellamy came to sit in the chair behind the desk as his legs pressed up against Isis and I. I tugged at his joggers to let him know I was here and to silently thank him for the distraction.

“Do you know what your psychotic aunt is up to?” Marvin asked, sounding ticked off.

“As long as she doesn’t bother my sister, I don’t give a damn what she’s up to——”

“She won’t have a need for you or your sister after this,” he retorted.

“What are you talking about?”

“She’s trying to create a dozen more Maggies...and Bellamys. She’s been experimenting on students at the labs...injecting them with some sort of shot that will allow them to move, think, act exactly like us...I should have...I should have killed her when I had the chance...I left the ideology of expanding our kind years ago. Once this school was created, I gave it my all, and dedicated my time, energy and money into building what you see today. I wanted this place to be a safe haven for the mythical and magical blacks of today and tomorrow. This is my legacy.”

The sound of the door opening caused them both to stop as I heard Wilhelmina’s

panic stricken voice.

“Marvin!?” She blurted out with a cracked tone. “What are you—Who told you—”

“What the hell is going on, Wilhelmina? What is the meaning of all of this? Testing students? Injecting them with our blood—”

“I’m doing exactly what I said I was going to do. I told you our numbers are dwindling and you ignored me. None of us can bear children. Carmilla and Maggie are our only surviving young females with Maggie possibly having a useable womb but she’s wasting it away with some werewolf—”

“Watch your mouth when you speak about her,” Bellamy warned.

“Oh pullease...” Wilhelmina spat angrily but she was losing it right before our eyes...well ears. She was losing her mind! “Maggie is a waste of fucking space and body. Nothing came of us. Just hype and white hair. She’s not Gaia. She’s no God. No moon! She’s nothing! Nothing special or unique but it doesn’t matter...I no longer have a need for her as I have the ability to create others like her who are more than capable of showing the type of power I desire for our kind.”

“Wilhelmina.” Marvin said with a strict tone. “You need to leave—”

“My sister doesn’t have to have any ability or magic to be exactly who the fuck she’s meant to be,” Bellamy said as he stood up. “You’re upset because she turned out to be exactly like Marvin—”

“A waste!” Wilhelmina spat angrily again. “Just like her grandfather! Just like our siblings that I finally got rid of! All of that power and does absolutely nothing with it but play around with this school! I’ll step down the right way and I can promise you, there will be teachers following behind in support of me.”

Isis tapped my leg and I almost forgot we were even hiding under the desk when she motioned to something on the floor. Something Bellamy had slipped us. A small tiny plastic bag filled with black powder. Isis silently pressed her hands together as I reached to grab the baggy and shuffled closer to the inside of the desk.

“Get out, Wilhelmina,” Marvin said. “I have nothing else to say to you.”

“Of course you don’t,” she laughed. “Forever weak and submissive. Accepts what is reality instead of looking at the possibilities. I’ll have my assistant clean off my things in the morning. ”

“You will come clean in front of the entire student body and staff about what you’ve been doing here and——”

“Sure, sure,” she blew off with a laugh. “I’ll do that. You have my word brother...”

“You will leave Maggie alone——”

“I have no need for a useless body like her anymore. She is no real power or threat to anything I’m doing and no potential for me to even be curious. I just played the role of a protective Auntie making sure her beautiful niece is unharmed. Nothing more.”

The way she laughed out of the room could have been something straight out of a film where the villain thinks they got away with murder. I waited a few seconds before Marvin took a phone call, declaring for a search beneath the schools of the Underground. Not just Drew Collins, but every school where it could be a possibility students were being taken.

It wasn’t until the door was closed shut did Bellamy push his chair back to look at us with a grin.

“Oh my God, oh my God,” I freaked, taking his hand to stand up.

“We have to get Asha and Souxie out.” Isis exclaimed, almost stumbling in Bellamy’s lap before rushing to the shelf. He didn’t seem to mind as he carefully eyed her obvious figure in the bodysuit before looking back at me .

“Did you know he was alive?” I asked.

“I had a feeling but I didn’t know for sure,” he shrugged. “Y’all may wanna make this quick before he returns.”

“How are we supposed to get out of here without walking out?”

The shelf slowly pulled back with Asha and Souxie holding a book and stack of folders. They looked just as distraught as we felt but Bellamy gathered us together, and with the black powder, made us all cover our palms in it. No instructions were given, Bellamy simply grabbed my hands as my body suddenly felt sucked into thin air before collapsing on the ground in the middle of a courtyard of Drew Collins dorms.

“What the hell?!” I coughed on all fours. Bellamy took one look at his phone, made a face. “What the hell was that about?!”

“What do you mean?” He asked, distracted as he texted on his phone. I stood up on weak legs, gripping my stomach that felt so lopsided and weak.

“All of that! What the hell was all of that and...”

“Careful...First time traveling through smoke can make you nau——”

Asha was already leaning over in a planted tree puking up spit and air. Souxie was

sitting on the ground. Isis was the only one who clicked her heels towards Asha to comfort her .

“Alright so...what now?” I asked.

“Now you know the truth and you need to move accordingly,” Bellamy said as he looked around. “I will call on you tomorrow. Go see your boyfriend. I have to go.”

“Wait, Bellamy!? I——”

He shot directly into the air turning into a dart of blackness into the night sky while the rest of us were just trying to recover from the overload of information. Nobody, I mean nobody said a word on the way back to the house. It was the silent death march back to Traditional Row which was its typical quiet self with cars lined up against the curb for the weekend. Wisteria House that used to look soooo whimsical with swinging branches of purple flowers now looked like the place where plants go to die. The trees were bare, the vines wrapping around the home were dried out from the cold and the house just looked old...dated. Namir’s truck was just outside beside my car and I couldn’t help but run straight for the door, ready to rush in to tell him everything.

Nevermind that he lied to me about Hillary. We had bigger problems now with Wilhelmina! The evil mistress that basically kidnapped this entire school for her personal gain. I yanked my shoes off to toss in the corner before flying upstairs, passing up Quan who was curled up on a pillow on the living room couch .

“Where the hell have y’all been? It’s almost 3 in the damn morning!” He argued.

“It’s a long story,” Souxie replied. I turned the corner of the hallway and ran to my bedroom at the very end to shove the door open.



“Namir I...”

Stopping, I saw Namir sitting on the edge of my bed with a bouncing knee, eyes swollen red with tears when he looked up at me. My heart fell...tanking to the pits of my stomach as I closed the door with a lock. He looked like he was on the brink of relapsing as he shook his head and squeezed his eyes tight. His entire body trembled and shook as his emotions took over. For the life of me, I didn't have it in me to attempt to crack a joke or make him smile because this ... This felt different. I felt different. Protective even. I wanted to burn whoever thought they could hurt this man who did nothing but try to appease everyone and their feelings.

Coming to my own silent assumptions, I wrapped my arms around his head to bring him close to my chest. You don't cry like this if you're as strong as Namir unless there was a close death in the family, a family he was no longer a part of. I felt him move his hand as he managed to give me his phone to see the multiple texts from his mother going off. Maze kept calling, trying to get a hold of him but the messages were clear. Tyee's body was found above ground in an apartment somewhere just outside of Atlanta. Self inflicted gunshot wound but I don't know if I was buying that.

I put the phone down and stood up to go into my bathroom. I was pissed. Beyond pissed actually. Between Wilhemina showing her one eyeball having black ass to Namir's family who at this point, uses him when they see fit, and manipulating his feelings. I squeezed the wash cloth, letting the cold water run through my fingers before coming back as I picked Namir's head up. He was running hot to the point where it felt dangerous to touch him. So I gently slab the cloth across his forehead and watch a shaky exhale escape his nostrils. He calmed down almost instantly.

“Namir?” I called out, voice calm but I was seething underneath and I knew he could tell. He hung his head low, only moving it just a bit like the sound of my voice physically hit him. “I'm not gonna tell you what you should or shouldn't do...or how

to respond or what to say.”

Although its FUCK THEM! FUCK THOSE FLEABAGS! Fuck your murderous brother! Good riddance! The whole family can kiss my ass! Right behind Wilhelmina and her sick crimes against students!

“I just want to say,” I added calmly. “I’m with whatever you wanna do. I’m right behind you.”

Souxie Lafayette

“Professor Akeem...or should I call you Carmichael Holmes?” I asked. Taking my small coat off, I stared at my former professor sitting across from me in the small diner that felt like it only remained open for the two of us. We were still in Cedar Park, just the outskirts where there might have been a local grocery store, a gas station and this diner that sat on the edge of everything far and distant. The blinking neon lights above flashing 24 reflected on the window.

The small wrap-around counter in the center was managed by an older woman who had the height of a child and the face of someone who had seen life in its worst light. She stood on a stepping stool to wipe the counters down as I noticed the tribal markings on her arm. Professor on the other hand sat across from me, eyes watching me over the rim of his coffee mug in his nice basic sweater and joggers. The sparse grays sprinkled in his growing goatee, the youthful brown eyes and slicked edges of his freshly twisted locs, the only thing that showed his age otherwise was the way he dressed. He dressed like an old ass man that sat in a library all day reading the newspaper.

“You can call me whatever you like, Souxie. How are you?” He asked, putting his coffee down. For the record, I didn’t contact this man. Not directly anyway. I suppressed a grin as I thought about the picture of his face locked away in a jar underneath my bed.

Cheap calling spell but it worked .

“I’m doing fine,” looking out the window, “could be in bed by now but...I figured

this must be something serious for you to call me.”

“Yeah well,” clearing his throat. He leaned in with his arms sliding against the table.

“I called you because you sorta ran across my mind these past few days.”

“Tell me.” I said with a stretch. Pulling my hair with my fingers, I began fluffing it out with a slight turn of my neck to expose it. Just enough to see the flicker of interest in his eyes.

“With everything going on with students missing at these different schools... I just wanted to make sure you were okay and if you heard anything...seen anything.”

“I actually have.” I said with a smile. Sitting up, the short woman walked over with my plate of food, a simple pancake with no syrup and hot lemon water. “Thank you so much.”

“You’ve seen something?” Akeem asked, sitting up with interest. “Well you know I work for the city now. I’m a lead investigator for missing persons and——”

“I’m aware. I saw you on TV.” I smiled, thinking about that cash reward. I already sent what I needed to send to Jean for him to attempt to collect.

“Souxie?”

“Yes?”

“Are you upset with me?”

“Why would I be?” I questioned innocently.

“Because of how I left...because of what I said to you and now here I am calling you

in the middle of the morning to the middle of nowhere. ”

“So you find this strange too, no?” I asked, taking a small bite. “Have you not moved on?”

“I have.”

I stopped chewing as I stared at him, not expecting him to actually say it.

“You have?”

“My ex and I got back in touch with each other and decided to try it again,” he nodded slowly.

“She knows what you are?”

“She does.”

“She knows you like fucking young college girls?”

“Don’t do that. Don’t make me out to be some...sick pervert. Every woman I dealt with has been of age, well over it. Regardless of how childish they act with their games.”

“So why are you here with me?” I asked.

“I told you why I’m here.”

I frowned. Him having a woman somewhat soured things a little for me. I was never the type to attach myself to anyone that was in a relationship. Believed it was bad luck but I should have known.

“It’s going to snow soon.” I said, looking at the night clouds. “Winter is coming early this year.”

“Right around the corner.” He added, still looking at me .

“I apologize for...how I came off earlier.” I turned to face him with a small smile. “Sometimes I can’t help it, but I respect relationships and I respect the art of moving on. No hard feelings on my end.”

“I...appreciate that.” Professor was suspicious, and maybe even a little leery of my admission. “Despite bringing you out here, I really did want to see what you knew about the stuff happening with these missing students.”

“As a matter of fact,” I said, reaching in my bag to pull out a folder I took from the hidden room. “This girl was originally my roommate and now she’s missing.”

I slid it over to him on the table as he began to take a look. I began telling him bits and pieces of what happened, leaving out certain details for him to figure out himself.

“You said she was an oracle?” He asked, looking up at me. “Are you sure she wasn’t a lost or missing soul? The two can get confusing.”

“She was an oracle. I saw it with my own eyes,” I declared. “Now they’re acting like she didn’t exist in the school when really...Also, the missing girls from Society Hill are here as well...”

“They’ve been running lab work...” He muttered. Akeem began reading through the paper. “I knew Wilhelmina was crazy but this...this is fucking insane. Your roommate being an oracle means she knew she was in trouble before it happened. Even if she didn’t realize it, they have the ability to move from one body to the next in order to preserve themselves. You can’t actually kill an oracle. Wilhelmina knows

this. You can kill the carrier but not the ability itself because it's not a living thing. It's pure energy...moving light. It's...not of this world..”

“You're sounding more and more like a professor,” I smiled. He grinned. “Do you miss it?”

“Some parts of it, I do but I enjoy this more. I enjoy being on the field more.”

“I wish I would get the opportunity but somebody put me out of my own major.” I playfully teased. He looked up from the folder to stare at me.

“If you want an internship at the agency, I can get you in...”

“Us working near each other?”

“I'm barely in the building half the time,” he said. “Think about it.”

“What are you going to do with this information?” I asked. “Now that you're aware.”

“Well once I confirm everything...we'll go from there. Since she is who she is, I'm sure Wilhelmina will find a way to get out of this but the number one priority is the missing students. We're talking wives, husbands, teenagers... There are over 60 students that have been reported missing and they all come from the major schools here at the Underground.”

“My father is going to call in with the exact same tip and a little more information,” I said. Akeem looked stunned, almost impressed that I had the nerve to withhold more information but I had my reasons. Never fully trust a man I slept with and two... That money was needed for Asha as Jean planned on legally adopting her so she could officially have a family in the Underground. “I expect Jean Lafayette to get some form of reward or another.”

“I got you.” He smiled with a nod. “Anything else?”

We stood outside of the diner, just in front of his unmarked truck as I leaned against the door. Akeem stood before me, eyes darkening by the second as a sharp cold wind blew between us. My entire body was throbbing in response to the closeness. I played it cool when I wrapped my arms around my chest to keep warm.

“I wish you all the best in life, career, and love.” I said, scooping the sandy brown strays from my face to tuck behind my ear.

“You’re ready to get back to the school, huh?” He laughed as I nodded.

“It’s cold out here sir...I’m barely dressed...”

We both looked down at my lounge sweats and little coat as Akeem dragged his gaze up my body, looking a bit out of it until his drunken eyes met mine. I looked off into the distance, seeing the orange glow of the clouds from the sun starting to rise .

“Do you mind taking me back now?” I asked, cutting through the sexual tension between us. Disappointed but understanding the risk behind it, the professor nodded.

“Alright.”

We stared at each other as I brought my sleeve to my lips to keep my hand warm. Grinning, I broke the intense stare to laugh as Akeem smiled.

“What?” He asked. “What’s funny?”

“You. You’re just staring at me.”

“Am I? I didn’t even realize it.”



“Mmm. hmmm.... Aren’t vampires afraid of the sun?” I teased, nodding towards the open field. Akeem sighed like it was such a terrible fate.

“Folklore I’m afraid. White people never did well in the sun. You know us...we thrive off of it. You ready?”

“I’ve been ready... You’re the one staring at me while I’m trying to lay in some sheets and catch some sleep...”

Akeem’s lips parted for a moment. He wanted to say something but instead he leaned close to open the door. I started to laugh because what even is this sir? What are we doing? What am I even doing? I felt my hand come to his side, clinging at his jacket when he looked at me. With the sun slowly rising from the east, an orange glow bouncing off the side of our faces, Akeem cupped my chin to lift and meet his lips for a deep longing kiss. My heart collapsed and felt like it was thumping around in my stomach trying to fight for its life .

My walls that were strong, steady and intact always crumbled to dust when this man was around and all it took was a kiss to be exposed. So I pulled back with my hand gripping the back of his neck as I stared up at him.

“We can’t,” I whispered. “I deserve a man who isn’t afraid of himself when he’s with me...”

Akeem stared at me, lip twitching like he wanted his fangs to come out but he was fighting it. Exactly my point .

“And a man who isn’t in a relationship,” I teased, taking my thumb to gently swipe his lower lip free of my saliva. Akeem didn’t even deserve to taste me after I was gone. He playfully pulled my thumb in between his teeth for a small suckling kiss before nodding.

“You’re right.”

“I know,” I smirked. “Now take me back to Drew Collins, please...”

Maggie Grey

“ Harness the energy of the moon ,” I muttered, reading through the notes of the textbook. “ Depending on the moon phase...you should be able to draw from its source of energy .”

I looked back out as I silently rubbed my hands together to keep warm. It was a little after midnight and Drew Collins had become silent with students preparing for exams. Isis said it was dubbed Sleepy Collins on account of how quiet it is throughout the day and night. Nobody hardly spoke to anyone. Even in the dining hall, most people were buried deep in their books and notes instead of the usual bustle of gossip and chit chat. The girls and I barely had time to talk and hang out. Souxie lived in the library with Quan who was still a cat but we came to the conclusion, he shifts when he wants to.

Honestly, how is he even a student? They just let him linger around until he turns back or were there little cat classes we didn't know about?

Isis was in and out of labs and Asha had found solace in water in an attempt to learn about herself and her people. These exams determined our placement for spring. Unlike most schools that bumped you up every year. Drew Collins moved according to your level of knowledge. I was ready for the big leagues. College was easy for me but I wanted a chance to grow up and move into my chosen career. Namir was most encouraging, even with him going through family matters, I had the keys to his office and place if I wanted some quiet time away from everyone. Instead, I used it to make sure he had food, gathered his lunch, and dinner so he would remember to eat.

As far as anybody knew, nobody knew about the death of his brother aside from rumors. He carried the emotions on his back and kept a mask on in front of his students but there was a difference. A hardness to him that he didn't have before.

I sighed as I flipped through the book again. It had to be 30 damn degrees outside and I was the only fool out here by the oak tree, sitting on my knees before three objects. A mason jar full of water, a rose, and a small mirror that reflected the night sky above.

“Understand that different moon phases will bring on different abilities,” I continued to read. It was one of the only books I could find called *Harvesting The Moon* by Lamar Hall. Montclair scholar that studied tribes around the world that used the moon as their power source.

I put the book down and stared at the mason jar. After being out here for the past few days, I was able to make strides in connecting with the moon. I could feel her presence, like a lingering set of eyes watching my every move from the sky, waiting for me to let her in.

So I closed my eyes, finding the source of light in the sky that I could see through the darkness. The moon was right above me, just over the bare oak tree. I inhaled sharply, sucking my stomach into the back of my ribcage before opening my eyes. I could feel it buzzing through my veins and body, like electric water flowing down to my fingertips.

“Hello...Gaia...” I whispered, looking at my hands as I saw electrical currents spark in and out of my fingers. “I wonder what your original name is.”

This was my third attempt at trying this but I was never able to hold it for this long without freaking out. This time, I felt calm...at ease. Settled. I reached for the mason jar full of water and pinched my fingers together above the open rim. I felt the heavy

frequency surrounding the water as I pulled it out like a string, watching the flow slowly trickle upward. As soon as I released my fingers, the water splashed back down.

“Okay...that’s a start...” I sniffed, feeling the cold air whip around me. I grabbed the rose and calmed myself. Hoping not to interrupt the flow of energy in my body, I picked up the stem of thorns as I watched the leaves suddenly curl and crumble within itself. The rose that was once a beautiful dark winter red was now wilting away, turning black with decay as the flower sunk into my hand. I balled up the small plant before pinning it back down to the blanket to hold. It was only seconds later that I felt the rebirth from the decay. Thorns pushed and pricked at my palm, a leaf split between the cracks of my fingers, expanding out as the stem shot out in different directions from my hand and grew into a beautiful extension of 3 rose buds that have yet to bloom. I pulled my hand back, seeing the blood trailing down my arm before grabbing the mirror to look at the reflection. When I leaned in, I saw myself. My white hair that was bone straight against my face, my eyes a glowing Bellamy red. Instinctively, I pressed my fingers against my upper lips, feeling my gums throbbing. I ran my tongue across my front teeth, feeling no difference in length but they were sensitive for sure. Namir mentioned I grew fangs during sex when I was really turned on. I thought he was lying but maybe...just maybe...

Inhaling again, I closed my eyes to breathe. Taking in the cold air before looking up into the sky, feeling a sense of belonging. For some reason...whatever blockage of energy I apparently had was no longer there. I felt open...the small stars twinkled above and the thin clouds slowly rolled to the left... I raised my hand, flat into the air with a point directly into the night sky and waved it to the right. The slow moving clouds stopped before rotating slowly to the right .

“Oh?”

Time... This is what they meant by manipulating time... I can see it so clearly now.

The scream I did that turned day into night and now...I flipped my hand back to the left as the clouds began rolling backwards, rotating with the earth. It was a small moment but with practice...there was no telling what I could do but for now? There was one other thing I wanted to confirm...

...

“Did you enjoy the party? I never got the chance to ask?”

I looked up at Eamon as we walked through the back ways of dorm buildings. Each courtyard, different from the last, hosts four buildings facing one another. Eamon was stuffed in his coat with a skull cap on and thick boots as we walked the dim lit pathway with his two friends behind us. That’s right...He and I never got the chance to speak since then with exams taking priority throughout the school Grounds.

“It was um...” I started, trying to find the right words. “Well how was it for you?”

“Truthfully, I can barely remember that shit,” he chuckled. Yeah I bet you can’t. I wondered what type of college party had lock-ins if there wasn’t something nefarious going on but his two friends began coughing, interrupting the thought. They were anxious and constantly sharing glances, wondering where we were going in the middle of the night.

“Yeah I didn’t get a chance to go. By the time we started out, it was already midnight,” I said.

“Women take a long time getting ready, nothing new,” Eamon said with a shrug. “I’m glad you called me out. Even if it's a small favor. I’m happy to help.”

“I appreciate it——”

“But you have a man, no?”

My face cracked but I tried to find an excuse.

“He’s going through something right now... and what I need help with...”

I need someone who doesn’t know my damn body from the inside out. Namir could sniff an itch on me before I realized I had to scratch if given the damn chance. That’s how intuned he was with me. He was learning to work around the lack of smell to focus on mannerisms and quirks of mine. Something he was calling his own personal super power.

“What I need help with,” I repeated. “I need someone that is a little bit stronger than him.”

“Ohhh?” Eamon let out with a laugh. “You hear that boys, the lady needs someone stronger than what she has right now. Namir may have to come see about me.”

“Oh yeah,” I nodded. Idiot .

“Uhhh...how far are we walking?” One of them nervously asked. “I really don’t wanna be too far away from my dorm.”

“Just going to the old stadium,” I said as we passed up the quiet cut of Traditional Row. The houses were lit up within the trees on the single back road that led to a closed iron gate where you could see hints of the small downtown of Cedar Park. By the time we got to the old field, I could see the stadium lights were on the dried grass. There were a few abandoned balls left on the field and some old equipment that was probably too heavy to pick up and too cold to care.

“Alright.” I adjusted the maroon scarf around my neck to keep warm. Fuck it was

colder than a bitch out here. Damn! The three sizable men stood before me in their gloves and coats with some having the nerve to wear socks with slides. “I’m not gonna drain your blood if that’s what you’re thinking.” I joked as one of the men pushed his glasses up and somewhat took a few steps back. Eamon licked his lips with a grin, still intrigued. “I don’t even know how to do it truthfully. No, I brought you all here because I want to know if I can make you shift.”

The three men looked at one another, exchanging amused expressions before Eamon sighed like he had to break bad news to me. With a shake of his head, he started to explain like this was some sort of waste of time .

“So look...I know...the wolf thing and the moon might have some sort of connection.” I started to take my gloves off and undo my braid from the ponytail. “Not all species respond to the moon in the way a wolf does. We don’t carry that connection. Some of us respond to the sun...earth...time...people...”

All things associated with me still. Yes, go on.

“It’s no knock to you,” one of the others said with a small laugh. “Some of us don’t really grow up thinking you or the First Family are the creators of all creation or whatever...”

“Is that what they’re saying?” I asked, leaning my head to the side to get it untangled. I swear having long hair is for the birds. Who would want to put up with this on a regular basis?

“If you think you can make us shift...that’s like saying...I can make you fly or...I don’t know. My 36 years of living, I’ve never turned based on someone else telling me to do so. It’s always controlled by emotions...hormones...experiences and situations.” Eamon explained. 36 years old and you’re living in a dorm? Sir what is going on?



“Damn it,” I muttered, feeling my finger getting caught in my hair that I could have sworn was tightening up around my hold. All I kept thinking about is the night Namir was beneath me and I told him to shift. I dared him to do it. Maybe they were right and it was only something to do with wolves and why they react to me the way they do. Still, I wanted to find out for myself.

“And so what I’m trying to say is, you’re wasting your time,” Eamon concluded.

“Give me a second.” I said, finally pulling my hand out as I flipped the clump of white hair back from my shoulders. “There,” I sighed.

“Just let her do it,” one of the younger ones said with a low mutter underneath his breath. “That whole family thinks they run shit...”

“Do we just stand here or?” Eamon asked with a small laugh. “I’m trying to tell you, you’re gonna look stupid.”

“Right here is fine. Right in the middle of the field...I’m going to take a step back,” I said. I turned around and started walking, only glancing up at the bleachers to see Bellamy Holmes sitting quietly in the corner, unnoticed. His red eyes blinked twice, his ankle was propped up on his knee and his arm stretched out like he was comfortable. Draco was leaning on the gate entrance dressed in all black as he bowed his head in acknowledgement, waiting. He too went unnoticed but he’d been following us the entire time. Cousin Lovely sat on top of the dean’s box seats with her wide translucent blood vein wings slowly waving as she crossed her feet at the ankle. It was hard to miss her on account of her wings that she constantly loved to show off, but they hadn’t even thought to look up. She sat right in front of the stadium lights .

To accept one, I couldn’t deny the other. That is what I told Namir and something I probably should have listened to for myself. So I inhaled, taking in the earth as my

body opened up before turning around to face the three men. Eamon crossed his arms over his chest, unmoved. I slowly bent down to touch the dried grass, seeing the small ripple and wave of the turf move like a green ocean. It was small but it was enough to send gentle waves that disappeared just at the edge of their feet. I could feel her. I could feel it. Damn it, what if Gaia was a man this entire time? Some trans or intersex Godx? What if we had it wrong and it had nothing to do with a God at all but a woman who figured out how to harness the energy for herself to control after having sex with a beast? I bet that was it.

Slowly, I stood to my feet with my eyes on the targets. With my voice barely above a whisper, I said the simple command into the universe.

“Show me who you are.”

One of the men screamed, spine cracking as his fingers became tight. He was fighting it until his body dropped down to that small scraggly fox. The other to my right collapsed to the ground. The clothes became nothing but fabric on the turf and a small black bird shot out, flapping wildly into the distance before disappearing. Eamon, who stood in the middle, stared wide eyed at me, terrified. He cracked his neck with a whip of his head and his body expanded to the size of a black bear, screaming out with a charging roar. His clothes stretched and tore against the thick fur before he fell on all fours. It was only for a moment until I started to walk forward, careful not to come at him before his body sunk back into human form. Naked as the day he was born, Eamon was curled up on the ground with ashy legs white as powder and yellow toenails that looked infected.

“What the fuck? What the FUCK ?!” Eamon screamed angrily, desperately grabbing his clothes as he looked around. There was snot and tears draining from his face. “What are you?!”

The other one took off, slipped away as a fox when he saw Draco coming towards us.

He didn't even bother to grab his clothes and school ID, just left. Eamon tried to salvage what was left of his torn clothes before he took off, threatening to sue this school, with yo old ass.

"I'll be owning this school by the end of the year! Mark my words!" He shouted like a bad line in an action packed movie. I turned around to see Bellamy and Lovely coming down as she ran to me screaming with excitement.

"You did it! You did it!" She shrieked with us jumping in place. I laughed as we hugged one another. "Ohhh cousin you are incredible! They were talking so much trash too? I said, y'all do not know my cousin. She is relentless! "

"I am!" I laughed as Bellamy pulled me from her to hug.

"Alright so now that we know what she's capable of...where do we go from here and how do we keep her from the bullshit?" He asked. Draco simply smiled.

"Maze was right," he said.

"She was right about what?"

"You. She was right about you, cousin. All a matter of timing." He suddenly grinned, breaking character. "And I'm fucking related to you! How dope is that?!"

"I still have more practice and research to do but...yeah," I nodded. "This is me. I'm learning to accept it."

"Yeah just be careful," Bellamy warned. "Don't get too cocky with it. You were able to do this for a reason, don't get greedy and take advantage."

I nodded, taking heed to the warning.

“No worries...I’m cool. I can be cool...”

Yeah, in your damn boney ass face Wilhelmina. I’m more than worth the fucking hype, bitch. I’m Maggie Motha Nature Moon Harvesting, Wolf Eater, Queen of Dens GREY!

Asha Avery

“She’s always late.” I barked as I sat down in the folding chair. The auditorium was slowly filling up with students, staff, and teachers as Maggie took her place next to me. Souxie had Quan in her bag as she sat down in an all black and stoic face. The bags under her eyes were rare but real.

We were fucking tired and drained. Sleepy Collins had officially kicked into high gear as exams started up and I was scrambling. I didn’t know half the shit I needed to know. The shit I did know, I wasn’t sure even mattered at this point. I was no longer being put out. Dr. Marvin T. Holmes did a soft launch of his return and slowly stepped back into a position of control. He was making his way around The Grounds but Wilhelmina...the bitch was still here. Not for long though, and I suspect this is what the special announcement was going to be about.

“Give her some time,” Souxie said. “We have her seat saved just in case.”

I sat up with a smile when I saw some of the coaches walk in, mainly Namir who was smiling and dapping hands with students. Teasing Maggie, I nudged her in her side .

“There goes your man.”

“There goes a man ,” she countered with a yawn. “Shit...After this...I’m taking my ass straight to bed. I have an exam at 7 in the morning.”

“I have one tonight,” Souxie yawned. “Two down, six more to go.”

“When do we know the results of these so-called exams?” I pressed.

“When your class schedule gets more complicated,” Souxie replied. “Next year should be onsite learning. Not so much classroom. We need to try and grab a work study. Maggie and I applied to work at the library overnight. You and Isis could maybe work as team managers for the swim team or something.”

“Nah I’m gonna join that bitch,” I stated. The two looked at me as I laughed. “I mean, I might, daaaayuum . Can’t a girl try something new?”

“Everyone please take your seats so we can get started,” the woman said as she gathered her notes on the podium. “Move quickly now. Next round of exams starts in another hour. We don’t want anyone to be late.”

“There’s Isis.” Maggie pointed before standing up as she waved her arm wildly in the air. You could see her wide eyes looking around before smiling as she made her way up the steps.

“Y'all,” Souxie leaned in. She nodded towards the stage. “Why are they smiling and laughing like everything is okay? ”

Wilhelmina made her way on to the stage in a black dress coat and matching gloves. Her silver hair was pinned back and her one tacky white eye had a certain devious sparkle to it. She was laughing at something being said while her brother, Dr. Marvin T. Holmes grinned. They looked like siblings from decades, centuries ago, sharing a bond as old as time while people moved around them to set the stage up.

“Maybe they’re just putting on for students,” Maggie whispered, confused. “I don’t think they actually mean it. Not after everything.”

“Naaaah,” I started with a shake of my head. “They’re up to something. All of that

rah rah in the office that night was a front.”

“Y'all, this is where they're gonna announce her departure.” Isis beamed as she squished in between our legs to take a seat. “I heard them down there talking about they're going to miss Wilhelmina. She's making her announcement today and I bet you, Dr. Holmes is gonna straight embarrass her ass.”

She plopped down beside Souxie as I continued to stare at the two old siblings. It should have been that way. She was doing something evil, getting away with missing students and nothing was said or done.

“Everyone please...take your seats so we can begin...”

The lights dimmed as the rest of the auditorium filled up. It wasn't a requirement to be here. It was encouraged to come and most took any opportunity to take a break from studying, hoping to hear some good news. So when the short petite woman with cornrows came walking up in her gray suit, she smiled as she grabbed the mic.

“Good afternoon Drew Collins,” she greeted.

“Afternooooooon...”

Tone dry, drained and just ready to get on with it. I grabbed Maggie's arm for support, hoping we could see Wilhelmina fall flat on her ass and get called out. Maybe the cops were going to burst into the school and take her down. Something had to happen. There was no way Dr. Holmes would let her get away with what she's been doing.

“First, I would like to address the rumors circulating around The Grounds about a previous professor that has worked here. Professor Tyee from the intellectual department and a brother to our favorite coach and director of Athletics, Namir, has

indeed passed away.”

Everyone began to stir in their seats as the outpour of support focused on the bottom left hand corner where Namir sat with a small nod of acknowledgement.

“We want to send our love, and light to Namir and his family at this trying time and say there will be a public funeral and gathering this weekend that is open to all students, faculty and staff as well. Information will be posted on the board and you’ll receive a notification when it's live.”

I turned to Maggie, ready to ask her if she wanted us to go but the look on her face told me to shut the hell up. She looked pissed and suspicious at the same time so I listened. Something was definitely up and it seems she might have caught on to the games this school was about to play.

“I would also like to extend an invitation to all students who want to see the Winter Parade in Crystal City. All exams should be completed and the trains scheduled for Friday will take you directly to Crystal City. Courtesy of the university system here at the Underground. All schools will be in attendance. The Saint and the Queen will be making their first appearance to the public just before the holidays.”

Isis leaned down as she waved her hand for our attention.

“We are going!” She whispered. “We have to!”

“And now I would like to reintroduce a familiar face who we are more than happy to have back as our president, founder and dean of this university. The first ever university created here at the Underground. Civil Rights leader above and below, Dr. Marvin T. Holmes. ”

Everyone began clapping and cheering as most people began to stand up. Maggie



remained seated so we did as well. Dr. Holmes pressed his hand down against his sharp suit with a charismatic smile. You could tell he was probably the man back in the day. Light skin, pretty eyes, wavy hair...A typical pretty boy and still had moments of flirting when he winked at some of the staff waiting around the stage.

“Good afternoon Drew Collins.” He greeted as everyone picked up their voices. “You’ve probably seen me around the school, inspecting the changes and looking at what my sister has implemented in my absence. I am here to declare that I am back in my position full time. This school is my baby...my first love and I want to make sure it remains a symbol of elite, higher education and power when it comes to the other schools in the Underground. Drew Collins was named after my brothers, Andrew Holmes and Collin Holmes who did not get a chance to see it come to life but every day their legacy lives on in you all. Thank you staff, teachers, and aids in upholding a standard I’ve set and putting up with my sister.”

You could hear the snickering and muttering remarks as he glanced back at Wilhelmina .

“I can’t say that I agree with how she’s handled things....all students that were at risk of departure should have received an email stating that is no longer the case.”

I leaned in towards Maggie.

“He’s not going to hold her responsible, is he?” I whispered.

“Nope.” She said plainly without turning away. “He’s letting her get off easy which is some straight up bullshit.”

“For real...” I added before leaning back in my seat. Frowning, I looked around at the faces of the students from young to middle aged and they didn’t have the slightest clue of what was happening. What’s been happening.

“Thank you for that passive aggressive speech Marvin.” Wilhelmina said with a clap as she playfully pinched his arm. She came up to the podium, and the greed in her eyes couldn’t be missed.

“I would just like to say that my brother and I have different ideologies on how the young minds of today should be shaped. I believe in a more hands on approach and learning your potential...showcasing your abilities and using them in the real world. We are magic... We are the purest form of magic. The birthplace of it. We shouldn’t be hiding it in books and exams. We should be expanding, creating, dominating...” looking back at Marvin, “I’ve been moved...being here at this school has taught me so much about myself...about others... I know this is supposed to be my speech to officially step down and thank everyone for accommodating me and my needs.”

I slowly sat up as the white screen rolled down with the projector being set up directly behind her.

“Instead...I’ve been inspired to start my own university.”

Marvin gave her a small nod in approval. So he knew but it was nothing like seeing the backdrop of buildings be made that stretched for acres on end in the silent video. It looked waaaaay more up to date than Drew Collins from the easy pathways to new dorms. The student center being in the center of everything. The red and black school crest suddenly appeared at the end saying Francis Holmes University. School of Dark Arts and Defense. Jaws were dropped as the double doors opened to show students walking in now with their red long coats, red gloves, black pants and scarf to match. They looked militant, formal, and elite. Damn near perfect.

“Look,” Souxie whispered as the projector showed clips of students walking around the newly built campus. “There she is...”

Celeste Taylor was shown laughing as she stood in front of a building with other

students, posing for pictures. Only, it wasn't...her. I don't think... She still had the same round face and full figure body. Her complexion bronzed from the sun. It was her hair that stood out. The same snow white strands of natural hair that looked exactly like Maggie only...they couldn't quite get it all the way. Just a thick patch of it. The rest of it, a natural dark brown but it was still the mark of the First Family. Her and Celeste could have easily been sisters of the opposite complexion. Has she been turned into a vampire?

“These students have been blessed by the presence of Gaia being with us. They have awakened as the newest members of the First Family, and they will make history as the first to ever attend Francis Holmes University.” Wilhelmina beamed with pride. “Students who’ve shown exceptional potential, strength, poise, and class will be a perfect fit for Francis Holmes. There is a reason why I requested to open up admission for those who were not allowed...for those deemed dangerous or violent. I wanted to provide a safe haven for students that have been rejected by the formal education system since birth because of what and who they are.”

Everyone began to move and stir in their seats, unsure of what was happening and being said. So were there more vampires? Who were the students standing at the front in their red uniforms? Who — The double doors opened again as a tall dark skinned man with thick white locs pulled back stepped inside.

“What the hell is happening?” I whispered before leaning in close to Maggie. “Do you know who he is?”

She shook her head.

“Marvin and I have come to an agreement on allowing Francis to be the sister school to Drew Collins so there will be some classes that will be shared between the two institutions and a direct transfer will be made simple. I will be the headmistress of the school but my chosen dean, and director of academics, and President of Francis

Holmes will be none other than Professor D'angelo Kamara. Can you please rise," she motioned. The teacher with the long antlers sticking out of his head stood up as everyone began to clap and cheer in excitement. He gave a quick bow of appreciation before sitting back down.

"If you are interested in applying as a teacher or student, please do not hesitate. I am looking for those with real magic. Real abilities, talent, and real potential to grow. This school will focus more on what we actually are...learning what we can do and what we can become. There are not enough books in the world that can tell us what we can and can't be, even at Drew Collins." She turned back to the audience and bowed her head. "Thank you so much for your ears. I hope to see some of you at the admissions office. "

Souxie wasted no time, being the first to walk out just minutes before being dismissed. We followed behind her and made our way out as more students in their red winter attire stood outside greeting others. That's when we noticed Celeste. The striped white hair pinned back, the thick red long coat and matching gloves. She was laughing while Wilhelmina stood proudly by her side to show her off. Others were screaming at the sight of seeing their friends for the first time in months which...didn't make sense until I overheard the conversation.

"I wasn't allowed to speak on it until the trials were over but yeah," one laughed. "She asked if I wanted to be a part of it after looking over my performance. I signed a few papers and just did it. I'm going to be one of the first Francis Holmes girls!"

"This is sooo exciting!" Another squealed as they jumped in place. Souxie pushed her way through the crowd with us following until we were face to face with Celeste who was laughing with some of the guys. She stopped and smiled at Souxie. Her round yellow cheeks were still puffed out, and her full figure body covered with the long red wool coat as she greeted Souxie.

“Hi?” A little confused at the intense stare from Souxie. “Do we...know each other?”

Souxie stared at her for a moment. Wilhelmina cleared her throat as she stepped in .

“Celeste, these are close friends of my great niece,” she said but the woman had no interest in Maggie. She wasn’t even checking for her. Souxie peeped, adjusted her coat, and flipped her hair back with a smile.

“My name is Souxie Lafayette,” sticking her hand out. “Drew Collins student. Clairvoyant witch. Historical studies.”

“Celeste Taylor,” she smiled. “Francis Holmes student. Vampiric studies with a concentration in predatory behavior. Specializing in procurement.”

“How did you get here?” I asked with a blunt tone. Celeste let out a short laugh as if I even had the nerve to talk to her. So the white hair came with a side of uppity. Maggie would never.

“Well actually,” looking at Wilhelmina. “The last memory I have is a man following me and outright attacking me right here.” She touched her neck where we saw the small holes that could have been mistaken for a misplaced freckle. “I woke up a few days later unsure of what happened but received a letter from the school, and that sorta confirmed what I knew. What happened to me was unfortunate but it also made me what I am today and I want to make sure it doesn’t happen to anyone else. That’s how alot of us,” turning to point to the other students in red, “came about. Wilhelmina here gave me an opportunity, gave us all an opportunity to live out the rest of our lives understanding ourselves, knowing ourselves...and doing better. Which is why I’m studying predatory behavior.”

“Unfortunately, she, like the others, faced a terrible threat to their bodies and livelihood to live a normal life so I am providing them with the means to start over.”

Wilhelmina said with a smile before laughing. “Call it the Second Family, if you will...”

Maggie walked right past us without so much as an acknowledgement to Wilhelmina and went straight to Namir. Celeste, like most of the other students in red, followed with their eyes with curiosity and something else. They were naturally drawn to her as if on instinct. The tall dark skinned man with the white locs made it obvious his attention was on Maggie. He stood beside Celeste but his eyes, face, and body were following our girl with pure lust.

“Well how exciting,” Souxie said. “You must be excited.”

“Yes!” Isis added, clearing her throat. “You have to come visit Drew Collins from time to time.”

“Of course. I have a few art classes here as electives.”

Hmmph...Don’t treat my school like it’s child’s play. We will eat you alive here bitch.

Celeste grinned, as if she could hear my thoughts.

“Exams are starting in 30 minutes!” Someone yelled. “If you are scheduled for an exam, please make your way down to your designated building! Interest forms and sign ups for Francis Holmes will be placed in the dining hall and student board! Let’s clear this out! Please! Clear out!”

“Good luck on your exams!” Celeste called out as she and the other students in red began to walk together. It was all anyone was talking about. How perfect the students looked and what did you have to do in order to become what they are? What did this mean for Maggie if there were carbon copies of her just next door?

She didn't seem to be too worried though when she spoke to Namir. In fact, this is probably the most serious I've seen her. Maggie didn't seem concerned or bothered by it. Her focus was strictly on Namir and his well being. Not for nothing, this is where I remembered her age and how she was older than us. We were still in our bustling youthful twenties. We were still allowed to act childish and be reckless. Times like this where she showed her age, is when she was off with him and the other teachers talking, and laughing. She looked like she belonged with them and meshed so well. Instead of being in a classroom, she should have been in a teacher's lounge.

"So Celeste was never missing?" Isis questioned, confused. Souxie shook her head as she pulled out her phone .

"No, they just fucked her over. Some students actually signed up for it but others did not...I don't think she did. This is what was going to happen to you, Asha. I'm told they already have over 500 students enrolling next spring."

"What ?" I gawked. "Are they all like her?"

"No," she blew off, annoyed. I wondered if she thought she belonged in such a school. "I doubt it...but they're definitely something to get into a school that specializes in dark magic, aura, and entities."

"You still think she's our 5th girl?" I asked with a laugh.

"She was when she was Celeste the writer. Celeste the oracle. She's no more than a shell of her former self now. An empty body and they played on her memory. You remember she said she was attacked by a man with red eyes?"

"Bellamy," Isis and I said at the same time.

"See," Souxie went on as she began to scroll through her phone. "They've updated

the enrollment with a list of names of students attending. They're trying to get more people interested in going. That's how they draw money in."

We began walking, leaving Maggie behind to be with her boyfriend as we huddled around the phone to stare at the screen .

"Look," Souxie scrolled. "Ghoul...werewolf, werewolf... Oh...it's an entire pack enrolling. This must be where they're..."

I stopped the scrolling with my hand taking the phone as we all stared at the same list of names. My heart started to flutter before drumming hard against my chest.

"Oh Asha," Isis gasped with excitement. "Do you see it!?"

There were several names listed with the word siren next to it with one male in particular having the word Taluwi next to it.

"I knew you weren't the only one!"

"I just hope he can tell me something about myself. I don't give a damn if he's fine, young, old, or ugly. I just want to know my people!"

The excitement was short lived when a message popped up from Maggie saying she wouldn't be coming back to the house until Friday morning. There was no other explanation and when we looked back, Namir was still talking with a few students but Maggie was nowhere in sight.

"Do you think she felt a way?" I asked.

"About the Maggie 2.0s ?" Isis questioned. Souxie shook her head .



“I think her probate is approaching and that’s what she’s focusing on. We should get some balloons and gifts made for her. I think she’s about to finally come out as a Beta girl.”

...

“Let’s goooo! I do not want to miss any of this!” Lovely shouted from downstairs. “It’s already dark out!”

Souxie was the only one who wouldn’t be able to attend since she was in the middle of her exams. Isis and I on the other hand came tumbling down the steps with our green gift bags in hand. Sleepy Collins was coming to life with the rare sighting of Greeks on The Ground. I always assumed at an HBCU, they would be everywhere with their colors and little one two steps but here...they kept everything hidden. There were so many damn parties I’ve missed this year alone. Ughh.

“Lovely, I don’t think you can wear that,” I laughed as she looked down at her green sweater with the black boots and coat. Her pants were white as snow and her braids had green yarn entangled in each fold. “I don’t think you can wear the colors unless you’re a part of their sorority.”

“Who would say something to me?” She innocently asked. “Is someone going to approach me about it? ”

“I...Well I don’t know,” I laughed. She easily became my favorite person in the house, by far. I clocked the immediate threat she tried to play off as cute and innocent. She was daring someone to say something to her. “I just didn’t...You know what? Fuck it. Wear what you want.”

She smiled.

“Let’s go see our girl... I hope I have the right number. Bellamy said she’s number four but he wasn’t entirely sure.”

You could almost feel the energy in the air shift. Hear the low hymn of people singing drawing closer we came to the center of the Grounds. Crowds were already beginning to form in front of the Holmes building as parents, children, and family from all over came to celebrate. There were torches sticking out of the ground with the flames burning wildly in the cold air. I spotted Namir dressed in his Alpha letterman’s jacket with all the patches of every sport he’s ever touched. He held a long stick that was wrapped in green and black ribbons. A black skull cap with the green greek letters of Alpha Nu Pi stitched on the front. He chewed on his gum, looking back as if he was bored waiting for the arrival.

“If I didn’t hate that carpet munching bitch so much, I would have done it.” Isis linked her arm into mine as we attempted to keep warm. “Where the hell is Quan? ”

“He’s probably in Souxie’s bag while she’s taking her test. You know he likes sleeping in that damn bag of hers.”

“Making her lug around that weight.” I cracked as we both laughed.

“Oh! Look!” Lovely shrieked as her thick balloons almost covered most of the air space above everyone. “Do you see them?!”

Everyone began to shush and silence one another as we listened to the faint sound of chanting. Just in the distance, walking from the iron gate entrance of Cedar Park, was a man carrying a torch, and a line of men dressed in all black, faces covered, marching behind him. All linked together by holding on to each other’s arms from behind with their bodies pressed up against one another to move as one.

“Line em UPPPP!” Namir shouted, banging the stick on the ground. You could see

sparks spraying out with each tap of the concrete. “Line em up!”

The marching grew louder as everyone started holding their phones out and taking pictures. The large spray painted green boots, the green masks with black painted eyes. They began to lean from side to side from shortest to...

“Bitch no fucking way, that’s Quan!” I shrieked. Nobody, and I mean nobody was coming close to this man’s height. That HAS to be him in the very back. When did he even have time to do this?! Who convinced him to do it?!

“Let’s go siiix!” Someone shouted. “Let’s go baby boy!”

“They’re singing,” Isis said in awe with her phone out. “I hate that Souxie is missing this.”

“ Alphahood eternal...so bold and trueee...A legacy of greatness...we pursuuue ...”

They picked their heads up, leaning back as they continued to march towards us.

“ Alpha hands united, and spirits held hiiiigh...Alpha Nu Piii...We seeeeeek the light .”

“WHAT’CHU SAY?!” Some of the brothers yelled out around them as they began to chant again. “LOUDER!”

“ Alphahood eternaal, so bold and truuuue ...”

Everyone began to move out the way as the row of 13 men came marching forward. Quan was most definitely in the back holding the line. I recognized that curly hair and body anywhere. Namir and the other men began fussing over them, picking at their clothes, and adjusting their black button up shirts. The chills I felt just watching a row

of black masked men get put together by other black men...like some passing of the torch type shit. It was beautiful to see and it felt dope to be a part of it. Quan raised his chin as Namir fixed his shirt before dusting his shoulders off.

“Let’s go QUAAAAN!” I shouted. Isis cupped her mouth to project.

“Kitty Mittens! You got this!”

I could see his upper lip twitch at the mention of the word kitty before Namir leaned in close to whisper something against his ear. When did Quan even find time to do this? Who the fuck is this guy?!

Everything became quiet as the men stood humming the chant, swallowing the words in the deepest vibrato until they came to a chilling silence. I looked back seeing the crowd of students and teachers gathering in groups by the dozen to watch the spectacle. A few minutes passed and nothing was happening. Just the masked men standing in a line according to height and the Alpha men standing around, talking and laughing amongst themselves. They were celebrating and congratulating like they were the ones wearing the green masks chained together by the arms.

“What are they waiting on? It’s cold as shit out here,” I whispered, looking at Isis as the expert of all things Drew Collins. She sorta took the place of Hillary in that way but even she shrugged.

“How would I know? ”

“It’s about time you showed up,” Lovely fussed. I turned to see Bellamy walking up with green gift bags and a green number four balloon hanging high. He looked so casual in the baseball cap, sweats, and long coat over the hoodie but those red predatory eyes continuously scanned the crowd.

“I was held up,” was all he said but Lovely smiled.

“Held up with Ms. Professor?”

I gasped as I turned all the way around to see what she was implying.

“You’re dating a teacher here ? Does Maggie know?”

“No and no. I wouldn’t do that to my sister. I’m not dating anybody——”

Lovely scoffed him off with a flip of her hand.

“Yes he is. Bellamy is in loooooove.” She teased before laughing. “He wants to keep her private and hidden because he’s scared we’re gonna come after her but I’ll figure it out. It won’t take long. That’s why he’s been keeping his distance to protect her and Maggie.”

Bellamy looked irritated and annoyed until I felt someone pinch at my side. I turned around to see my professor, Dr. Birdie Jones with a few green bags in her hand. Her wild curly hair had a life of its own and her cute black coat hugged her waist like a model with the matching gloves. She was always like a beam of light with her outgoing personality.

“I just wanted to speak just in case I don’t see you in one of my classes next year.” She asked while wrapping her arm around my neck for a quick hug.

“Professor, girl, what are you doing out here with all these bags?” I laughed.

“A few of my girls are crossing. I got the exclusive look at the line and saw some students of mine so——”

“Professor Jones!?” Someone called out, taking her attention away. She and I quickly hugged one last time before she was whisked as the most popular teacher here on The Grounds.

“There she goes! THERE SHE GO!” Someone screamed as everyone broke their necks to watch Clementine walking in a cream long wool coat with a green suit underneath, green knitted gloves, knitted white beret and the same spirit stick wrapped in white and green ribbon. Her short curly bob hung against her face, cupping her chin as she walked with two rows of women following behind her. One row dressed in an all green pants suit down to the green boots and tights on their feet. Each girl had a satin green sash across the suit jacket and green thick knitted gloves on their hands. Everyone had bone straight black hair that covered their faces as they hung their heads low, but this meant Maggie wasn’t able to stand out with her natural white strands. Isis leaned in before I could say it out loud.

“I don’t see Maggie,” she whispered .

“Naaah, me neither.”

The low hum of the women began to turn into a soft melodic chant as they slowly stepped towards us in their green heels to form a single line. Some of the girls I could easily pick out just because Clementine made it no secret when she would directly out the women during school hours. The other half, I had no idea.

“ We riiiiseee, take fliiiiight...To be a Betaaaa Nu Piiiiii... ”

“Tighten up bruhs!” Namir shouted, banging the stick on the ground over their singing. “You don’t cross until they do!”

“You don’t speak until they do!” Another shouted.

“You don’t MOVE until they do!”

“ A Beta girrrrl...crowned in graaace, with hearts so puuuure ...”

“Tighten my line up!” Namir barked as the men scrunched together.

“ She soars so hiiiigh... ” They sang louder, coming closer in their suits. Their heads were bowed and arms locked in by the elbows linked together. The fourth girl in green looked like Maggie’s height but the hair...The dark strands just bounced in front of her face as they began to slowly step in place. Clementine continued to walk as the rest of the sorority girls fussed over their line, making sure every hair was in place, untouched.

“ To be a Betaaaaa Nu Piiiiii !”

They began to hum as they stood across from the men lined up until everyone became silent. Clementine raised her chin as the rest of her sorority sisters followed. She stared down at us like we were beneath her little cult.

“We are honored that you all have gathered here to watch my sisters and brothers cross. It’s been a journey, and we’ve come a long way but we have finally...arrived.”

She walked over to the girls, fixing their hair to make sure it still covered their faces before someone shouted out.

“Introduce yourselves ladies!”

The row of green boots began to stomp in place as they leaned forward, bowing to us.

“ Beta Nu Pi! Beta Nu Pi! Beta Nuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu.... ”

Everyone started cheering and clapping, howling and screaming as they held the note. The deep rumblings of their voices spread like a spiritual cloak, covering everyone who felt their energy and presence tonight.

“ Piiiiiii !” They collectively sighed like dainty women before standing up right.

“Introduce yourselves ladies to your future brothers, and to the family and support system that came out tonight to see you.”

The spirit stick stomped twice on the ground as they collectively shouted.

“ We are the ladies of Beta Nu Pi! Till we die! All day! All night! We rise! We fly! Above and below! The best! No rest! What you see, there’s no test! So try?! You will! You’ll fail! We still! Stand tall! Above all! There’s no other! To choose! It’s always and forever! Ladies of Beta Nu !”

“Let’s gooooo Courtneeeeeeeey! Let’s go sevennnnnnnnnnnn!”

“Let’s goooooooo!”

“ Brothers of Alpha Nu Pi humbly greet the beautiful sisters of Beta Nu Pi !” The masked men shouted.

“Ladies,” Clementine said with a pouty tone. “Introduce yourselves one by one please...”

Each girl stepped out of line to say their name as they flipped their hair back to reveal their faces. Some did sort of magic like the woman who could capture any source of light with her hand. She shook her long hair, revealing the short bob cut as everyone went crazy over the one called Moca. She was apparently a fan favorite with half of the crowd here for her, and it was later revealed she too would be attending Francis



Holmes. Once she went, everyone started to put their own little flare and twist to their introductions but Maggie...My girl Maggie shut that shit down.

“Four! Step forward and introduce yourself!”

Maggie kept her head down as she timidly walked up but I couldn't help but scream her name. Bellamy was recording with his phone while Lovely broke shoulders to get to the front to face her cousin. If it wasn't for Isis holding her back, she would have reached out to hug her right then and there.

“On this day!? I was born into the sky!” Maggie yelled. She suddenly flipped her hair back as it turned a bright red to reveal her done up face, dark lip color and smokey eyes with the long lashes. She looked like a damn doll! I screamed, unable to contain my excitement as she whipped her hair to the side, letting the color go from red to black.

“I paint the trees with silver light!”

She flipped her head to the other side as it slowly trickled from black to blonde hanging in perfect natural curls.

“And keep the world oh so calm at night! ”

She slipped her hand against her hair as the color changed from blonde to burgundy. Maggie had the nerve to look sexy as she rolled her body slowly pretending to sit pretty before coming back up. Namir stomped his stick to the ground, watching her every move before calling out her number. So I joined in, not caring whose ear I was in.

“Let's gooooo Maggie!! Let's goooooooo sis!”

“Your dreams I collect beneath my hue!”

“I am the fourth in line...”

She began whipping her hair from side to side, shaking it as her white curls fell against her shoulders, shedding the rest of unnatural colors before she fluffed out her white hair.

“To become Beta Nu.”

The crowd erupted with most people not realizing it was the granddaughter, the First Family to pass as a Beta Nu until her hair was revealed. Even the Alpha men clapped it up and I felt sorry for the girl who had to follow her up. The rest of the night was filled with the two organizations addressing each other. Quan’s masks eventually came off revealing those sharp vertical eyes. Music started playing as everyone eventually broke the lines and ceremony to hug and congratulate those who’ve crossed .

“Quan, why didn’t you say anything?!” I snapped. “We would have gotten you something!”

“One of my teachers got me to join——”

“As a cat?!” I laughed. “How did you pull that off?!”

“No, not as a damn cat. Not always. I made a deal in order to control my shift——”

“Maggie?! You did soooo goood! Look at you!” Isis squealed, breaking the circle to hug Maggie. Bellamy wasted no time pulling his sister towards him in a possessive manner as he hugged and kissed her on the side of the face.

“Why didn’t you say it was your birthday?!” Lovely pressed. “We have no choice but to celebrate now!”

“ Your birthday ?!” Isis and I shouted at the same time.

“No nooo it's fine,” she laughed. “I wanted it to be lowkey, that’s why I never said anything——”

“Oh hell nooo,” I exclaimed. “We’re going out. Fuck that. You just turned 30 with your old ass!”

“Okay? I soooo resent that,” Maggie laughed while some of the alpha brothers were handing her flowers. “Ohh thank you! Thank you guys!”

The men were slowly circling around her, giving her praise and trying to make their presence known. Namir was but a foot or so behind her, staring each man in the eye as they came up to her. One guy attempted to hug her with his hand coming to her back side but Namir stepped in without saying a word. He didn’t have to either because the man understood. She was so busy being pulled into another conversation, she didn’t even notice her boyfriend threatening a man that stood a little too close for his liking. Someone that was well loved, and protected had to be something special.

Whether she knew it or not, Maggie is that GIRL. This was her year for real. She made me want to be like her when I got older. Not to say she’s old as fuck or anything. Just...I can start to see the separation between her and us. Instead of being jealous about feeling left out, I just wanted to do what I could to catch up in my own lane and own way. Soon, it will be my time to shine, just like it is for her now.

Namir came up behind her to take all the balloons and bags from her hand so she didn’t have to carry it before smoothly stepping aside to let her do her thing. He carried anything dealing with the number four in his hand to the point where they

were giving the gifts to him. She said it in passing but she was spending her birthday with him, something intimate just for the two. A loud popping sound suddenly went off as green and black confetti sprinkled throughout the cold air.

“Well fuck it. I still want to celebrate,” Quan said. As if on cue, Lovely came up beside him with a mischievous glint in her eye.

“Let’s go buy a cake, some bottles and fuck shit up at the house and then let the school pay for it.” I laughed at Lovely before adding ,

“You can then explain to us after a couple of shots how a cat managed to pledge a fraternity.”

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:59 pm*

Souxie Lafayette

“Let’s goooo! Last train of the day going directly to Crystal City!”

The train shot out a squeal of steam on the tracks as we quickly made our way into a train car. Maggie pointed to the seats at the very end as we passed up each row of Drew Collins students.

“ Please remember you are representing our prestigious university in the other cities and districts! Always be respectful and mindful of your image when in uniform !”

All of the men were dressed in black suits with maroon ties and long coats. Most of the female students wore our black winter dresses with our school crests representing the school we were placed in and our matching maroon coats. The gloves, the berets, and boots... We were the epitome of black excellence and highest degree of magic. Not a single hair was out of place, we walked down the aisle hearing a few girls look starry eyed at Maggie behind me, and congratulating her on crossing Beta Nu.

“ Last train of the day heading straight for Crystal City! Everyone please be back in time! They do NOT allow visitors or guests to stay without prior permission !”

You could feel the train start to move. We took our seats on the last back row in our identical coats and black insulated tights.

“This better be worth it, Isis,” Maggie said as she struggled to take her gloves off. “To stand out in the cold waiting for a parade.”

“It’s like the way you all celebrate Santa Claus...We celebrate the Saint and the Queen...”

“Is Namir here?” I asked. Maggie dramatically blew hot air into her hands to keep warm.

“Yeah he’s somewhere on here with his students. I may ride back with him so we can get ready to go to the funeral service tomorrow.”

“I still can’t believe they didn’t invite him,” Asha retorted. “To find out about that during a school assembly is fucked up.”

“For real,” Isis added. “That family would have to kiss my ass.”

“Hmmmph,” Maggie huffed. “The blackest part of my ass too.”

“Alright so what’s the plan for next year ladies? We solved the mystery of the missing girls...We uncovered the truth of what was happening...Celeste is alive and...I guess, well. What’s next?” I asked, leaning forward to look at everyone. Maggie wasn’t going to say it but I knew that was the furthest thing she wanted to discuss, especially on a train in front of everyone. “Are we still staying in the Wisteria House?”

“We haven’t even thrown a party in it yet,” Isis complained. “I keep getting asked, when are we throwing a kickback? I guess when it gets warmer.”

“Where are y’all staying for the winter break?” I asked.

“Well as my newly adopted sister.” Asha said as she picked at her nails before slyly smiling at me. “I may visit my family in South Carolina...After that, I’m coming back down to stay with Isis and her family in the Wetlands to kind of get a sense of

my past. There's apparently a museum there with an exhibit about my tribe..”

“What about Irvin?” Maggie questioned. Asha shrugged while Isis smiled.

“He misses her too...I told my brother he messed up because Asha is not the type to go back. Once she's done, she's done. It's one of my favorite things about her.”

“Mannnnn, I'm not even thinking about a damn relationship right now.”

Isis sighed in a longing tone. “I kinda miss having a whole boyfriend thing now. I have a few options but I want something new. Something different.”

“So no Quan?” I asked. She shook her head.

“That ship has sailed. He's too much like my brothers. It's so hard dating your own kind when you grew up in the same household as them. You view men so differently when it's seven of them hounding you from the moment you're born just simply because you're the only girl. I've noticed that I go so far left with my choices in men but I think ultimately, I would settle down with my own so I can have children like me. If I didn't want a family, I would have found a siren and settled outside of the city. Somewhere away from the drama.”

The girls began talking about relationships as I looked out the window, watching the stations pass us up one after the other. Such talks didn't interest me. If I wanted to be in a relationship, I would have been in one yesterday. Men were never a hard thing to come by and if I wanted them to act right for me, they would. That was never an issue. Except for one of course. After the winter break, new students, new situations were going to come into play and test our circle once more. I just wanted to see where everyone was at mentally. So far...all they seemed to resort back to are relationships and men. Same shit. Same...boring shit.

“Look!” Isis shouted as she walked over to my side to point out the window. “This is where you’ll be staying with me, Asha.”

We all leaned out the window to see water stretch across the land like an ocean. Tiny ripples constantly forming from the vibrating tracks of the train, we passed up the slab of concrete that made up the train station of the Wetlands.

“Where is it?” Asha asked. “I don’t see anything. ”

“It’s beneath the surface,” I said. “The water is sorta like their sky.”

“Mmm hmm,” Isis agreed. “It’s so beautiful. We have forests and trees, lakes and rivers just like everyone else...it’s just beneath the water. When it rains out here, the water will come down like rain in our city. It’s literally powered by water in every sense of the word.”

The tracks splashed against the water, kicking up the rolling waves on the side of the wheels as we continued to push forward. The sun was beginning to set over the water, reflecting over the ripples like an orange light. The water was dark and the station for the most part was empty except for the few light posts flickering on to signal evening’s arrival.

“What does your house look like, Isis?” Maggie asked. “Or what do the houses look like down there? I just imagine a bunch of beaver dams for some reason.”

“Maggie,” Asha cracked in laughter. “Beaver dams though?!”

“I can show you actually.” Isis pulled out her phone and shuffled through a few pictures before stopping at one in particular. “This is a family photo we took in front of the house just before I left for Drew Collins. We were celebrating my acceptance into the school.”



“No fucking way, you really live there?” Maggie asked in awe. I leaned forward to see the family all dressed up with the men on one side and the women on the other. Just behind them was a huge house with a wrap-around driveway. She had double doors for an entrance, a balcony directly multiple windows and floors. She lived in an estate but it made sense. Never once heard Isis complain about money nor was it an issue getting into Drew Collins for her. Asha almost broke her neck to look at Isis like she was seeing her for the first time.

“I’m not rich nor do we come from a rich family or upbringing,” she cut in. “Before y’all start to question everything. I lived a normal life——”

“Naaaaah.” Asha laughed. “You come from money. No wonder you can’t fight. You could probably pay people to do it for you!”

Isis rolled her eyes as she snatched the phone back.

“Okay, give me my dang phone. It’s not like that. I told y’all, we are the only nymphs with the ability to move water and self heal... Sometimes that comes with some financial perks... We’re not rich. We’re comfortable...”

Asha and Maggie looked at one another before laughing.

“Naaah, I’m definitely posting up at your crib now. Fuck that,” Asha laughed while Maggie nodded.

“Shoot, I might stay too. Can we all stay for the winter break? ”

“If you want,” Isis shrugged, trying not to smile. “I don’t care either way.”

I began to tune them out as I watched the row of trees of the thick forest brush past us. Branches scratched up against the windows of the train, crackling of sticks and

twigs snapping and falling below showed just how high up we were. The Woodlands station was just beneath the tracks as we drew closer to the mountains. We passed up the Kingdom station where you could see the large pyramids and palaces. The rolling dunes of sand and palm trees clump together as one of the few sources of greenery there. The station was closed, gated with guards standing on either side armed and ready to attack should anybody decide to get out. Yet the train kept moving, passing them by.

“The next station is Crystal City...This is the final destination ....”

Everyone began to gather their things to stand up as the train appeared from the side of the mountains. The thick snow blanketed most of the sharp rocks and cliffs as the temperature dropped almost instantly.

“Oh wow,” Maggie let out in amazement, peeking through the window between two seats.

The train came to a slow stop at the station where you could see the primary school students lined up, stuffed in their coats and holding hands with teachers hovering around them like protective hens. As soon as we stepped off, the typical buzz of the train noises didn't compare to the noisy children and people shouting out orders.

“Drew Collins students! Line up this way! If you already have a yearly pass, please use the gated entrance!” Someone shouted. “Everyone else, please come this way!”

“This is the City of Christmas.” A teacher said to her students. “You see the Queen of Holiday cheer and festivities? We're going to see the Queen...They're responsible for all of the holiday magic you see above and below...”

We began walking, getting in line behind the rest as the entire train had to squeeze in the small entrance that led into a building. Once inside, we were greeted with students

from all of the major mythical and magic black colleges and universities.

“Who are they in the green?” Asha asked. A group of tall and very handsome black men were walking in their forest green coats and black dress pants.

“Hillmen.” I said with a smirk. “Those who got to Society Hill.” Despite being our rival, it was the best pairing possible. A Collins girl with a Hillman and a Collins man with a Society girl. One of the more popular marriages to attend was a union between these two colleges .

“Please stand in line for your passes!” Someone shouted. “This will go a lot easier if everyone just lines up instead of being all over the place!”

Some of the men were dapping one another up while the girls in their black coats and green scarves stared us down, sizing up the competition.

“Some of these broads are looking at me like they want problems,” Asha threatened.

“Nooo. It’s nothing like that,” I assured her. “It’s because of who and what we represent. We go to Drew Collins and they don’t.”

“Exactly,” Isis said with her chin raised. Always finding protected confidence within our circle. “Universities here are like currency...social currency. It will follow you everywhere you go. It’s how you’re viewed. How you’re judged. Going to Drew Collins is the top of the top. Even with everything that happened, it is still the school to beat. The very first school founded by the First Family who created the entire Underground? Of course you’ll want to go here.”

As soon as she said it, three women walked by with their nose twisted as they looked us up and down before laughing. The navy blue gave it away that they were Monroe students. The identical braids, the tights and the rich perfume scent that lingered, they

were for sure attending the all girls private institution .

“Aye, y'all got y'all passes yet?”

The deep voice came from behind as we turned to see Namir holding up a couple of festive tickets for us. We spent the next several minutes weaving in and out of lines trying to get to the entrance of the building until we scanned our passes, and stepped out into the winter wonderland that is Crystal City. You could hear the drums and trumpets as the parade had just begun. We were walking through the thick bed of snow. Trying to find the cobblestone path as people began pointing at the top of the hill where decorated trees covered in string lights covered the entire blanket of snow. You could see a house just at the top where the supposed Saint and Queen lived. Just at the beginning of the street, the reindeer were being set up and prepped for their arrival.

The buildings had green and red string lights swinging from roof to roof. The snow covered trees lined the streets and people dressed in green and red uniforms quickly worked the rows, shoveling and salting down a path while one gave out orders. Posters of the Saint and the Queen were plastered everywhere with little kids holding up black barbies with red hair and a crown. Everything about this place almost seemed too perfect.

“This way you guys!” Maggie hollered over her shoulder. People from all over were gathered around as we followed Namir, letting him lead us to find a good spot in the heart of the town. He pulled Maggie up close to stand in front of him as she immediately reached out for me to stand beside her. Deciding to let Asha and Isis stand in my place instead, I took to the end and bundled up my coat with a smile.

“Excuse me.”

The deep voice caught me off guard as I looked up, watching this tall light skinned

man with dark brows and even darker eyes step forward in his plain brown coat. His pink lips, plump and wet despite the crisp cold air, and his dark lashes curled back into his lid as he looked down at me with a smile. Two other guys came to his side but none caught my eye the way he did. He was older but not by much. So I kindly stepped to the side, letting him take up a little more space as we faced the salted road..

“You go to Drew Collins?”

I looked up at the man, eyes piercing into his before nodding.

“And you?”

“I got accepted but never went.” He said with a nod, eyes searching his surroundings.

“Shame...” I frowned. “I’m sure you would have done well...”

He slicked his tongue across his lower lip, trying not to laugh and instead replaced it with a grin.

“Oh!” Isis shouted with a point. “It’s starting!”

The band began to sound off with the trumpets blaring, signaling the arrival of the winter court. Drums began to beat and the ground shook beneath us at the feel of the reindeer kicking and pulling at the ground with their hooves. It became so loud, I could barely hear Isis screaming next to me as she jumped up and down like a child at the candy store. The majorettes with their sparkly winter jumpsuits began dancing behind the drum major as they parade began to move. I could feel the man beside me staring at me with a smirk before his hand came to the mid part of my back, respectfully, and leaned in close for my ear.

“My name is Cedric!” He pulled back before leaning in with a lick of his lips. “I’ll be attending Francis Holmes next year so I hope to see you around the yard someday...”

“That was bold of you,” I said. Cedric laughed with another swipe of his lips with his tongue. “How do you know I don’t have a man?”

I wasn’t going to raise my voice over the loud crowd and band, but he seemed to hear me just fine when he leaned back in again .

“Because someone as beautiful as you tends to get bored easily.”

Cedric pulled back just a bit with our eyes meeting. His dark brown eyes suddenly blacked out completely, like a pool of black matter, staring into me before blinking back to dark brown. I smiled. He’s an incubus...and a cocky one at that.

“My bad for being late, man! Can you believe the damn traffic at the station?! It’s so many people trying to get in here!”

The loud voice came from behind as I caught the identical face. His complexion was a tad bit darker but the thick dark brows, the curly lashes and full soft pink lips were just as wet. He wore a denim jacket lined with wool, glasses and a fade for a haircut as he passed out some snacks and treats. He was just as tall as Cedric but didn’t seem as...cocky or in your face with it, but I saw his eyes...They blacked out like a true demon when he watched someone walk by, almost brushing past him in a hurry to find a spot. Only to blink back to an innocent dark brown. He scrunched his nose up, and pushed the gold frames of his glasses up against his face.

“This is my twin brother Harvey,” Cedric said with a clap of his shoulder. “This lovely young woman goes to Drew Collins...”

Harvey looked my way with a small nod but seemed more interested in the festivities

of the parade and town. With a few seconds to spare, he turned his attention to his brother Cedric.

“You didn’t bother to get her name yet?!” He yelled over the noise before looking at me. “What’s your name?!”

“Souxie,” I said, stepping towards him with my hand out. “Souxie Lafayette...”

He tucked his snack underneath his arm, wiped his hand down and quickly shook my hand.

“Harvey! You’re absolutely gorgeous!” He nodded with an approving frown.

“We’re twins!” Cedric yelled out, trying to get my attention but my eyes hadn’t left Harvey despite him focusing back on the parade. The sexual demonic energy coming from Cedric was thick in the air between us, like a heavy cologne that numb your nostrils and dulled your senses. It was too much too soon for me. Yet his twin brother didn’t have an ounce of it, despite being the exact same thing.

“Are you going to Francis Holmes too?” I asked. Harvey turned his attention back to me before leaning in close.

“Yeah but I really wanted to get into Drew Collins. I’d been applying for years and they kept labeling me a disruptive danger to the school. Which is bullshit. I just needed some credits to finish out my science degree. What type of witch are you? Clairvoyant, I bet...”

I smiled as he nodded, eyes watching everyone around him. The whites of his eyes would suddenly blink pitch black for a few seconds, before coming back to his human form as he glanced at me again, like I was a mere afterthought. Interesting...Not quite the professor but just as curious. Hmmm...

“You keep looking at me!” Harvey suddenly shouted, interrupting my toxic thoughts about what I’d do to him. He turned his attention towards me. “Why?”

He scrunched his nose up like he wanted to scratch an itch from inside. He was almost too easy to mess with. Too sweet and unsuspecting. At least the professor was able to hide his weakness. This man didn’t even bother to put up a defense. He’s intriguing but too easy. Harmless Harvey would have to stay where he’s at. No sense in tampering with his innocence and wasting my time.

“No particular reason!” I said. Tucking my hair behind my ears, I focused back on the parade coming down as the sleigh made its way. The courtsmen dressed in green and red walked ahead of the sleigh, loaded with protective gear, ready for any attempt at someone trying something stupid. She was probably one of the most protected black women in the world. She had beautiful skin made of pure chocolate and hair the color of rust waving with one hand in the air. The Queen held her baby in the other, wrapped in a green blanket, the tiny mitten stuck out while the Saint wore a red winter coat with the hood. A red skull cap and red dress pants with the shoes to match. The row of people on each side of the street began to lower their heads in respect with some bending all the way to the ground.

I wondered if she remembered we were the ones to break into her house via the closet door? Didn’t matter. All of us lowered our heads, careful not to show our faces until the sleigh passed by with their court trailing behind them.

“Aye!” Harvey shouted. “That’s definitely not the real baby in there! They would be a fool to bring a baby out here with all of these people!”

“That’s what I said!” Someone else laughed. “It’s probably a prop or a doll! Too many crazy people to be that exposed!”

“Nah but you saw her people were armed and ready to go!” Namir added with a



laugh. “I didn’t miss that at all.”

“We’re going to grab something to eat at,” Isis said with a wave of her phone in her hand. “A few guys from Society Hill are gonna link up with us at a cafe.”

Asha cut me a dry look .

“Don’t ask her how she knows them. This girl knows everybody.”

“I like to keep my options open. Maggie and Namir are heading back to the school.

I turned back to look at Harvey and his brother who started talking with their group of friends they came with. All older men with the demeanor of guys conversing at the barbershop or basketball court. Early to mid 30s, talking sports and wives but I watched Harvey who easily stood out, take his glasses off to clean on his shirt. Harmless Harvey is definitely going to have to stay exactly where he’s at. The nerdy act was cute but too simple for me. I was just about to tell him goodbye when he asked,

“Have you eaten yet?” Adjusting his frames on his face, he shoved his hands into his denim jacket, and he looked around. “I’m not a fan of most of the food here but there’s a sports bar they just opened up further into the city.”

“Um...” thinking out loud as I looked him over. He was my type, physically. Mature, tall, put together...and smelled good. I couldn’t sense any dark undertones or anything dealing with his true nature so he was good at concealing the incubus within him. The demon only appeared in doses and blinks the way mine came out in pleasure and pain. Sighing, I caved simply out of boredom.

Harmless Harvey will have to do for now until something better comes along.

Draco Holmes

The white church in the heart of the city district was in the most historical building in all of the Underground. Elevated from ground level with black steps walking up to it like a pyramid, it was protected by the strongest form of magic there is. It's where the very idea of this place, this sanctuary, was created for us. It's meant to represent a safe haven for all black mythical and magical beings alike. Today, they held a public funeral service and they decided to go all out. The public part being the vigil held in honor of Tyee. Professor at Drew Collins. His flag with his face hovered over the major intersection as students, and other public servants were allowed to come pay their respects with candles, signs, and flowers.

The actual service was strictly for werewolves only, and they spared no expense. Alphas from the major packs were escorted in black trucks as they stepped out fully dressed in their formal winter attire with their curls cloaked over their shoulders. Some had the head of a wolf with the thick tail sticking out of the pants, others walked on all fours as they gritted their teeth with a growl. Seth stood at the very top of the painted steps greeting everyone. His charcoal gray suit with a slab of dark fur cloaked around his shoulders. The thick curly hair was pulled back in a tight conservative braided bun against the back of his neck. His sharp yellow gaze assuring, kissed hands, and did what a future alpha should be doing. He did exactly what he said he was going to do. Seth was next in line to take over the pack and it was only a matter of time before they made it official. He was playing his cards right by shaking hands, tending to the weak, and putting on a face that said courage, strength, and dominance. Whether Tyee committed suicide or Seth had a hand in his killing, we would never know. Nor was it relevant at this point.

“Let’s go! Keep it moving! No parking! All media this way!” Someone whistled. I took the hand of my anxious wife and we began to walk up along the sidewalk towards the little white house with the black painted doors. No doubt the smallest building here, squished in between two high rise lofts and a restaurant down below. It stood out like a white house on top of a pyramid of black steps, in the middle of a modern day city.

“There’s an unusual amount of police here,” Carmilla noted as she looked around with a frown. Carmilla and Wesley Holmes walked together, keeping close to Maze while I looked around for Bellamy. Of course he was a no show which meant Lovely wasn’t too far behind him...unless she was caught up making her porn videos again. “Do you not see it?” Carmilla pressed. I adjusted my tie and looked around at the armed security lining the streets. “They even have vans ready like they plan on arresting people...What for exactly?”

I looked at Milly, wondering what was making her so anxious before feeling Maze squeeze my hand. Her breath quickened and nostrils flared when she saw a few of the men from her pack up ahead. Standing by the black cement steps leading up to the elevated home, they greeted one another while a row of cameras and media filmed.

“We’re supposed to wait here for the rest to arrive.” Wesley said as we stood at the end of the street, waiting to cross the block intersection to get to the side of the church. The cameras were already flicking and recording with lights flashing every other second in our direction. We were the First Family after all, Maze included. Naturally, we kept a circle around her as she fixed her face, and made sure her eyes were dry while I gently smoothed the wrinkles out of her beautiful black winter gown. The pearl headband on her short curls, the earrings, and black gloves that went up her arms, she looked like a vampire’s wife. The very idea of her being a wolf was laughable at this point to most of my family but to me, it was still the very thing that made me attracted to her.

“You look absolutely beautiful babe.” I told her with a sharp pointed nail gently teasing the soft skin underneath her chin .

“Thank you love,” she cooed. I leaned down to kiss her on the lips. “After this, can we please go to my favorite steak house above ground? I can’t stomach being in the Underground longer than I have to.”

“Of course,” I said, adjusting her pearl headband. Music to my ears. If I could just be with her without anyone, I would prefer it over this.

“Ahhh look how beautiful my nieces and nephews look!”

We turned around to see Wilhelmina walking up with... So it’s true... She had a woman beside her dressed in red with a wide strip of white bone straight hair. Beautiful butter like complexion, a full face and lips the shape of a heart. Her white marking was twice the size of mine but didn’t even come close to Maggie. A stunning carbon copy no less, and her smile...even I could see a small hint of blood between her teeth where she most likely just fed before arriving. The tall dark skinned man with white locs pulled back, dressed in red, had model features. A tight jawline, sharp dark eyes with a small ring of white at the bottom like a crescent moon sitting low. Had I not caught him staring my wife down, and eyeing her body in the dress, I would have been cool.

Dorian and Celeste were their names. He seemed a bit more of a wild card than her reserved, collected demeanor. They were both escorting a joyous Wilhelmina Holmes .

“My beautiful growing family.” Wilhelmina sighed. She gently patted the side of my face, but ignored Maze with a forced smile when she turned back to fuss at her brother Marvin about the time.

“So...we finally get to meet our newest members of the family.” Wesley said with a stretch of his round belly stuffed in the pants. Before anyone could say anything, we watched three black trucks pull up to the blocked street before a couple of men stepped out of each. Everyone was dressed in suits and ties with one standing watch, on guard with his locs pulled up.

“It’s Solomon!” Maze gasped in amazement. “Oh...He’s really coming back.”

“Sirens,” Carmilla hissed with annoyance. “So everyone is really coming for this piece of shit of a man.”

“It appears so.” I muttered, watching the armed police walk up to Solo, whispering something in his ear before casually walking by. Something was taking place, I just wasn’t sure what. I glanced at my wife who had senses just as sharp, if not sharper than mine and could see her eyes scanning, reading and clocking every movement like the alpha wolf I know her to be.

“Alright.” Marvin said as he adjusted his tie. “We will walk up as a family...Smile...no questions. We are the First Family...that is all they need to know and see from us. We are the most important people here.”

“Where is Maggie?” Wesley asked. “Or Bellamy? ”

Wilhelmina sucked her teeth in annoyance.

“They are not needed. They never wanted to be a part of this family so leave them be. She’s too busy chasing behind that wolf anyway.”

I felt Maze’s hand squeeze mine as I squeezed it back. We began to walk, crossing the street together as we came up behind another family of wolves. The reporter on the side announced our arrival as Marvin stood with a firm nod in acknowledgement

at the cameras.

“This way please...You all will be seated at the very front with the immediate family,” one of the helpers said. Maze and I began to take the stairs as she whispered close to my chest.

“I should have told Namir about the service...”

The guilt in her tone was apparent but I brought her hand to my lips for a quick kiss of assurance. Just at the entrance of the small church where Seth stood. His bright yellow eyes glowing with excitement and anticipation at the family before us until they settled on Marvin Holmes who was the first to walk up.

“I look forward to doing proper business with you and yours and continuing to expand our relations further. ”

Seth had an unreadable expression when he put on a fronting smile.

“Sure, sure. Of course,” was all he said.

Marvin clasped Seth’s hand with a firm grip, but Seth’s eyes landed on us, in particular, Maze. She said nothing, barely acknowledged him. To see him in place of her brother didn’t sit right with her and he knew it. I doubt he cared, but he knew this had to be difficult for her. However, when his eyes landed on the woman in red, he froze. Celeste... His nostrils flared as he watched her walk up past him. Did he recognize her? What was that about ? Did he think she was the same as Maggie because she certainly wasn’t. Far from it actually. I glanced back at Seth who kept his eyes on Celeste walking beside Wilhelmina.

Interesting...

We were escorted inside through the open black doors, greeted with the large arched ceiling made of gold white and black painted wood, the main level was divided into two sections. Just above on the second, third, and fourth floors of the church were seated balconies as wolves, and weres piled in up top.

“First Family, please come this way,” a woman said, motioning for us to follow. Except for us. This was our church. We would forever have a seat at the front of the very thing we’ve created. Every pack member was seated in the long wooden benches that stretched the walls and just up ahead was the ivory white casket adorned with flowers, a few pictures and candles. I could hear the low threatening growls as I walked by with Maze, particularly from the pack belonging to the girl I drained and killed...and possibly assaulted for my own pleasure. I hoped they smelt that bitch beneath my nails.

I rubbed my chin with a devious smile, thinking back to hearing her whimper and holler like a dog as we came to a stopping point in the middle of the aisle. All major packs were present, each different in complexion, and size. The rest were meant to wait outside behind the blockades and hope to catch a glimpse of something they’ll never be. High ranking members of the major packs were seated in the front rows on the left. The First Family was always going to be seated to the right in the first row no matter the district or place. I let the rest walk in first before taking the very end so I could be closest to the aisle. Marvin spoke with a few alphas of other packs before excusing himself to deal with the press. It was probably to show face for his precious little Drew Collins.

The soft howls and cries from their mother could be heard and seen as she leaned into another woman who held her. Maze was fighting back tears as she stared at the casket before us .

“Do you want to go sit with your mother?” I whispered towards my wife, seeing she was struggling. When she nodded, I stood up and took her hand, letting everyone who

was a part of the pack, see the small intimate gesture before allowing her to go to the other side. Only, no one made any room for her to sit with her mother and for the first time, her mother didn't budge. She was busy grieving her oldest son to notice Maze standing there wanting to be comforted by those like her. One day she was going to learn she couldn't have it both ways and I got tired of telling her.

"Go sit back there with them," one of the ladies growled. Her voice echoed throughout the church like a speaker. Maze stood embarrassed before anxiously looking at me. Carmilla, who had become just as protective over my wife, walked over to grab her, bringing her back to where she had no choice but to belong. I propped my foot up against my knee and stared at the rest of them on the left. Scouring the heads and faces of the men who glowered, growled, and silently showed teeth towards me.

Maybe Namir had it right not to come. It would be too easy to pluck the eyes and hairs off each bastard that thought they could try my wife. I would have the ones I would go for like the uncles and some of the sisters belonging to that Aria bitch...the rest would be a mere afterthought type of killing. The loud bang of the doors suddenly echoed as I looked back to see they were closing it up.

Interestingly enough, I saw armed police standing by the doors and blending in against the walls like they were waiting for something to happen. I started to look away when I caught two of the guards whispering to one another. That's when I saw it! The scales teasing their complexion against the jawline. Sirens for security? All of them, every last one of them were sirens. How odd? They weren't known for being particularly violent or aggressive, but sexual deviants that couldn't stop having children.

I glanced at Carmilla, seeing the puzzled expression before she nervously muttered to Wilhelmina. She simply patted her niece's knee to settle her, unbothered by the armed presence. The padded footsteps of thick boots started walking. I watched



Maze's father, Roy and his brothers walk down the aisle with their backs covered in a cloak of fur. Just over their suits, and working boots for the winter, Roy was the first to step up to the podium while Seth remained in the aisle, to talk to another member of the pack. They loved him. You could see the grief in everyone's eyes but the anticipation of having an alpha like him to replace Tyee was exciting, and assuring.

"Thank you," clearing his throat. Roy's raspy voice filled with emotions as he looked towards his wife in the front row. "My wife and I thank you all for attending the services of my son Tyee, one of three children...My daughter Maze and my oldest son who is next to take the highest seat in the pack, Seth."

Ohh... Namir wasn't even a thought...

I could see a few become uncomfortable with the statement as they became unsettled in their seats. Maze grabbed my hand but said nothing.

"My son Tyee believed in traditions...family...sacred values...as a leader, he was fair and reliable. Whatever you need from him, he would make sure it gets done and as a former alpha of my pack, that is what it's about. It's about sacrifice...What are you willing to do...how far are you willing to go to protect those you love? Tyee made unspeakable sacrifices for the sake of his family and you may feel how you want to feel about my decision to name him as the alpha, but he would have gone down in history as the greatest leader of all time. If you only knew what he gave up so everyone could be sitting here today..."

It was slight, but his eyes and a twitch of the right corner of his mouth tweaked to our side of the church. His body language was pointing in our direction but he hid it so well...like a seasoned wolf, it most likely went undetected by most.

Seth was standing by his father's side with his arms crossed over his waist, waiting patiently but he was distracted. His gaze fixated, obsessively on the woman in red

sitting beside Wilhelmina. Celeste Taylor. She was busy reading the program before looking up as she tucked her hair behind her ear. Seth's jaw twitched as he chewed on his tongue, silencing whatever he wanted to say out loud while his father spoke. Even Wilhelmina began to look uncomfortable as she protectively kept Celeste close by her side, her newest play thing.

"Look around..." Roy continued as his eyes welled with tears once more. "Take a look around and see who is here for my son and who isn't...That should tell you everything you need to know."

Roy gave a firm nod, concluding his speech before stepping down. Sitting up straight against the bench, I adjusted my suit as I carefully scanned the church just purely out of habit. Maze suddenly gripped my arm tight just as Seth took to the podium.

"Thank you for allowing me to speak...and learn...and...listen..." Seth's eyes slowly fell on Celeste who stared back. She didn't recognize him but he knew her. He more than knew her. "I won't take up much of your time today but I will say," Seth continued on. "I admire the love and loyalty my brother Tyee received from everyone. Even to those who disagree with his leadership, they still stood behind him as the alpha and I could only hope to receive an ounce of that when I...step in his place permanently. Roy has shown me so much about family...expectations...traditions..."

Roy and Seth stared at one another like it was a contest to see who would break first. It didn't look like a typical father and son relationship. There was tension there and for good reason...Ty was the favorite. Namir was the popular one. Seth was the forgotten one.

"Many of you may not know but my mother and two younger sisters were tragically killed above ground."

“Hmmm,” Wilhelmina hummed with a frowning smirk but Seth heard it. His eyes slipped over towards her before nodding with a hard heavy sigh. Almost as if he was putting on an act. What is really going on?

“With the help of my beautiful sister, Maze and a few uncles who graciously accepted me into their family... I was able to rebuild my relationship with my father, Roy. I look up to this man...” His eyes began to rest easily on Celeste. “My mother, although human, was a spiritual soul...She believed in meditating, energies, and signs. Nothing was ever a coincidence... I was always blessed with the gift of sight thanks to her and...although most won’t believe me... I was given a message from a beautiful woman in my dreams carrying the soul of an oracle within her.”

Seth was still looking at Celeste, not once blinking but now his body was turned to her as if to say she’s the one he’s speaking about. I wondered if this is what Lovely briefly mentioned in passing about an oracle lingering around Maggie... They were at the school together after all, no? I leaned down to look at Celeste but it was Wilhelmina who looked drained of her melanin. Sickly with eyes growing with fear, she clung to Celeste’s hands, keeping her close.

“I took what she said to heart about the three brothers and made sure to carry that with me wherever I go. Thank you for allowing me to have a second chance at a family, and thank you Roy for giving me the opportunity to step in Tyee’s shoes.”

“Do you know him, dear?” Wilhelmina whispered towards Celeste. She gently shook her head.

“No. I’ve never seen him before until today...”

“If anyone here wants to pay their respects to my brother...the professor, advisor, alpha, friend or other...please...You have the floor to do so...Uninterrupted.”

“ Mazaeh ,” I hissed with a suck of my teeth. Wincing at the claws digging into my suit and piercing my skin, I looked down at my crazed wife. Her nostrils flared, and her body slowly expanded. She was fighting the urge not to shift.

“ He’s here ...Namir and Maggie are here.” She let out in a breathy tone before looking back with panic setting in her eyes .

The doors flew open where you could see the snow falling outside in the city. Namir was the first to walk in with his black layered suit and a cloak of dark fur draped down his back and shoulders. He wasted no time stepping into the aisle with his hands shoved in his pockets to look around. Roy stood up first. His mother shot up a second later beside him. Her wide tearful eyes staring crazily at Namir only for her face to fall flat at the sight of Maggie stepping in behind him. She wore all white from the turtleneck sweater and pants, to the white boots with a matching cloak of dark gray fur. Her hair fell in loose waves as the two stepped inside the church aisle. Namir looked at Maggie who gave him a small nod.

He in turn, began to walk with Maggie a few feet behind him. The tension building at the sight of the moon walking in a room full of mourning wolves, wasn’t the problem. It’s what Maggie now realized she had the ability to do. She scooped her hair back from her face as she continued to follow behind Namir, protectively having his back. Maze grabbed my arm as the veins began to trail her skin around her neck. Her glossy eyes were darkening and teeth lengthening but she couldn’t quite do it.

“Pleaseeee...” she strained through gritted teeth. “Something isn’t right...”

“NAH-MIR?!” Roy barked, his raspy voice echoed throughout the church. “YOU CANNOT BE HERE——”

“Let him be!” Seth shouted. He stood up to look around at the stressed members of the packs. “Aye!? Everyone be quiet! Shut the fuck up!”

“You’re going to let him disrespect my son?! He shouldn’t be here! She shouldn’t be here!” Roy argued, his eyes were glued to Maggie. Gritting his teeth, he gripped the back of the bench and growled at her but she maintained still in her stance. She stood a few feet behind Namir as he stepped up to the casket. Looking back, I could see Bellamy leaning against the doorway with a cigarette propped in his mouth. A blood red fur draped around his shoulders like a long scarf, fitting to the formal wear of werewolves. Lovely was on the other side picking at her nails, waiting...wearing nothing of the sort to go with the theme. Just a long thick knitted purple cardigan sweater that swept the ground, and matching purple lounge wear. She was currently infatuated with the color and always found a way to show it off.

“What is going on? Where is Marvin?” Wilhelmina asked in a panic. Carmilla stood up and looked around for the guards that were no longer in the church. Every single one of them disappeared. Now I wasn’t the best with counting, but even I noticed a significant amount of wolves were missing. Were they also removed or escorted out ?

Namir rolled his neck with a shake of his head, grunting as he looked up at the ceiling with gritting teeth. He let out the lowest...hum of a howl that came from deep within his chest...his soul, sending vibrations throughout the church. Maze lowered her head as did the others out of pure natural respect. Even though their mother attempted to touch Namir’s shoulder to show sudden support, he shrugged her hand away. Nobody told him about the first funeral, the private just the immediate family and no one said anything to him about this one. I could only assume he was pissed.

“He is allowed to pay respects to his brother,” Seth said. “Everyone settle down... This isn’t the time or place to disrespect one another.”

Roy remained standing, watching Namir with tears in his eyes before looking at Maggie with hate. Something about seeing Maggie and the casket of his son was causing him to seeth.

“You have no right to stand there with her behind you!” Roy growled. “NO RIGHT! YOU MADE YOUR CHOICE! LAY WITH IT!”

Then it happened. The straw that broke the wolf’s back. The very thing to set it off. The sound of a zipper being undone could be heard, interrupting the mutterings and whispers between pack members. Namir stood before the casket, knees buckling as he reached to pull himself out. Maggie slowly turned to face the church but her eyes were on Bellamy. He continued to pull from his cigarette, releasing the thick smoke into the air when we heard the faint sound of something trickling to the ground.

Namir cracked his neck from side to side as a stream of urine shot down on his brother’s casket, causing every male to slowly rise from their seats. Seth’s lips curled, silently growling in anticipation until the pee came to a slow trickling drip. Maggie awkwardly cleared her throat as the threatening gaze fell on her. Not Namir, but her.

“I probably shouldn’t say anything but...” Namir’s head turned his head, not expecting her to speak but settled as he continued to aim for the flowers and pictures. “I feel there’s a bit of misinformation about me that I want to clear up. Since you all forced him out for choosing to be with me, I feel an explanation is owed.”

Namir zipped himself up and turned around as his body grew. Expanding in the suit as he silently shifted into one of the largest werewolves I’ve seen. His thick arms hung by his side with claws as long as his fingers. His eyes were blacked out and the teeth, razor sharp with saliva dripping. If you closed your eyes, you wouldn’t even know he transformed into his natural state, that’s how deadly silent his shift had become. He stood behind Maggie with a heaving chest, suit still fitting to his new form and held his position behind her. He was completely gone. No longer present but the amount of strength it took to remain still wasn’t missed on the wolves. They knew power when they saw it, including Roy who looked as if he’d never seen a werewolf before.

“I am from Georgia...born to two amazing parents... I have three sisters here in the Underground who I begged not to come here because they will show their ass for me.” She said with a shaky voice. Her eyes began to swell with pink tears from the blood starting to form. “I am the granddaughter of Marvin T. Holmes...I love this man behind me...despite what you all think... And although I’m still figuring out what I am...”

She turned her attention to Wilhelmina who was trembling in her dress, eyes wide with fear of the unknown.

“I am exactly who you wish you could be, and will become the very thing you’d fear I would be,” leaning her head back to look at the ceiling of the church. Her eyes began to drain blood and her hands rose in the air, trembling uncontrollably. You could see the fangs growing and her eyes closing as she screamed. “ I am what happens when a wolf loves the moon !”

Every single light went out, the roof of the church, completely gone. The original white church showed its true foundation with holes in the roof, busted windows, and nothing but scattered trees around. Remnants of the old neighborhood were originally placed in where it all started. Maggie somehow broke the thin veil between the Underground and above and now the night sky fell onto us like a blanket that concealed our violent nature.

“SETH?!” Someone shrieked as chaos broke out. I gripped the back of the bench as papers, paintings, fixtures of the church wall began to spin in a circle, causing everyone to duck out the way. Chairs, and tables began floating up and circling above wrapping around like the moon orbiting the earth, but just outside, it was beyond anything you could ever imagine. Night becoming day, day becoming night in mere seconds. The moon, the sun, and stars rising and falling as bodies began to shift, and spin at Maggie’s will. Wolves struggled to shift, others cried in mercy. The flashes of day and night showed Seth wrapping his arm around Roy’s neck as he brought him

down to the floor, and screamed in ear.

“YOU THOUGHT I WOULDN’T FIND OUT, ROY?!”

Namir attacked anyone who attempted to come at Maggie. Bellamy relaxed against the doorway, struggling to light his second cigarette as chairs flew just against the wall, inches away from his head. Lovely held on to the wall as her braids stretched sideways and she hollered out with glee .

There has never been anything like this and Wilhelmina knew it when she tried to call Maggie’s name, screaming for her to stop. Maze dropped down to her true form and guarded Maggie before having her brothers back. They were going after their own kind without hesitation! I saw the others attempting to jump on Seth so I gripped the back of the benches, leaping over bodies to get to the one who’d been on my list for a while. The uncle was scurrying, trying to shift. Body contorting and snapping as he fought against the energy Maggie was causing. Blood was everywhere when I reached for Hawkin’s neck for a squeeze, wanting to feel the hard edges of his spine through the flesh, and between my fingers.

“Bellamy?!”

I heard Wilhelmina’s cries for her nephew, looking to be saved. Carmilla was struggling to unlock the doors while fighting off the wolves that tried to attack her. No help from Bellamy or Lovely. Bellamy continued to watch Maggie, bored of all this chaos while Namir slung the body of a wolf to the ground. The newest family, Dorian became wild with violence as he began fighting anything moving while making his way towards Maggie. He hadn’t been able to take his eyes off of her since she walked in. No one could but she stood in the center, red eyes struck towards the sky in another realm as the world turned around her .

Seth, out of nowhere ran between bodies and leaped towards Wilhelmina for a



snapping bark, just to put fear into her but stopped when he saw...her. Celeste was in the corner with her newfound fangs drawn, tears in her eyes, and terrified of what was going on. Seth shot up into his human form, completely naked as he stood before her, and she began pleading for her life. Poor thing had no idea she could snap his snout in half if she wanted. I would have to take her under my wing should she make it out alive.

The rotation of the earth slowly rewinded back as the sun, moon and stars chased one another in the opposite direction. Maggie's white hair was pulled in different directions as her red eyes clouded her vision. The church's ceiling and roof slowly reversed into being restored except for the lights until everything became still, coming to a complete stop. Her body, weak and unable to sustain the ability for long, began to slowly drop when she passed out.

"BELLAMY?! GRAB HER!" Namir screamed with the voice of a thousand wolves and beasts echoing behind him. Bellamy darted towards his sister, and turned his body into hers before disappearing with black smoke drifting in the air as their only source of existence.

"Time to go!" Lovely shrieked with a clap before expanding her wings out as she disappeared into thin air .

Yeah, it was time to go. I smashed Hawkin's head into the ground, shoving it through the hard floors for the final blow. No doubt cracking the bones that held up his face before calling on Maze who was fighting behind her brother Namir. I could see people piling at the doors trying to get out but out of nowhere, you could see them suddenly backing away in fear. Namir called out to Seth before disappearing. I gripped the back of Maze's neck like a dog, picking her up off the ground just as the doors opened and police barged in.

"FREEZE! ATLANTA POLICE! HANDS IN THE AIR NOW!" They screamed with

guns aimed. Carmilla froze, eyes terrified as the flashlights waved over the torn bodies and blood. Wilhelmina was looking around, calling out for Celeste and Dorian, pleading with anybody to get her out when they shouted for her to be quiet but they were gone. Wesley Holmes looked to be done with it as he continued to sit on the torn bench with his hands raised.

Did Maggie somehow move the church? Did she become a door herself?! I felt a shaking hand cling to my arm as I looked to see Maze's petrified mother pleading with me to save her. Just before a flashlight could be aimed at me with the guns drawn, I took my wife and mother, turning into their bodies as I felt several shots of bullets pierce my backside before disappearing.

Asha Avery

“Look at Solo,” I pointed at the TV screen with a smile. “He looks...good in a suit.”

Isis shrugged.

“He’s okay.”

We sat in front of the TV screen in Isis’s room watching the funeral services being streamed live from the big city. Everything seemed so...formal. I mean, I get it was a funeral but I don’t know. It was snowing outside again and seeing Solomon standing in a suit in front of the black painted steps made me smile. It felt like seeing a long lost brother.

I may not understand the whole... Sirens are a family thing but... Looking down at my phone, I poked my lips out at the unknown number texting saying to LOCK ME IN. SOLO KING . Everything was starting to fall into place. I couldn’t wait to lay into his ass about what his ancestors and family did to my people...and smoke, and chill. He always had the good shit. So nah, I don’t understand the family thing with sirens but seeing him finally on my phone felt familiar in a good way .

“What are they doing?” Isis asked. I looked up as I watched Dr. Marvin T. Holmes in front of the reporters talking while armed men carefully circled the church. “Those are sirens...”

“ Huh ?”

“Those are sirens securing the church,” she pointed. “See? You can see how some of them are walking...They’re sirens...but why are they the ones securing the church? Why are they even in uniform?”

“ISIS?! THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?! LET’S GO!”

“Shit! We have to go!”

Isis jumped up from the edge of the bed as she raced out of the room. I could hear Quan talking to her brothers downstairs, and hear footsteps up the steps but I kept my eyes on the screen. Solomon was shaking hands with Dr. Marvin T. Holmes before turning to the camera to talk. Maggie didn’t want us to come since her and Namir themselves were crashing the funeral. She would text us as soon as she got out to spill the details of the family drama.

“ASHA?!” Isis yelled out. “Let’s go! The car is here!”

I got up, cut the TV off and grabbed my last duffle bag before walking out. Souxie was still out doing God knows what. She texted us to say she’s okay and she’ll see us when it’s time to return back to the school. Her bedroom door was still open and you could see things floating around, clothes folding on its own and things being packed by itself. Some sort of timed spell I bet. She was probably on her way back.

“Sisterrrrrr!” I playfully called out into her room. “Thank you for taking me in! I’ll be in South Carolina to come pick out my bed!”

A book that was hovering in mid air suddenly dropped to the bed while her socks being rolled up tumbled to the floor. Laughing, I adjusted my bag against my shoulder and kept moving as the spell casted in her room started once again. All that shit I talked and now, I’m legally in the process of being her sister according to the Underground Laws.

“What were you going on about up there?” Quan fussed as he grabbed my bag. Suitcases were packed and loaded at the door, most belonging to Isis and Souxie. Maggie’s things were already gone and Lovely...Well... We still never went into that basement to find out.

“Nothing in particular.” I told Quan with a content sigh. “So you’re staying with us?”

“Yeah for now anyway. I’ll probably go above ground to handle business...”

Peering at him with suspicious eyes, I wondered what Quan’s life was really like? Most of us were already suspecting that what he told us about him being cursed was a lie but why lie? For what reason exactly ?

I stepped out into the snowy front yard of the Wisteria House, and started to wrap my locs with my Little Mermaid scarf. The black Escalade truck was packed with Isis waving for me to get in. Her brother, there’s no telling which one he could be out of the seven, was in the front seat talking on the phone.

“So first things first,” Isis said as I dropped down in the seat beside her. She gave me a blue ID card with my picture, and her address. “We got this made at the last minute but here you go. You’re gonna need it for a few places when we get home. Did you hear from Souxie?”

“Nah but her things are being packed in the room so she should be coming soon.”

“I told her let’s link up at the house the day before and recap our winter break.”

The truck shook as Quan squeezed his big ass in and without so much as a goodbye to the house, we were off. My entire life in New York...seemed...I can’t explain it. I wondered if my friends...my people, my homies even thought about me or asked around? Could I even tell them about this place without looking crazy?

“I got tickets to the museum too,” Isis said as she showed me her phone. “So whenever you’re ready, we can go see this siren museum and figure out what you need to know about your past. I bet someone that works there will tell you everything.”

“What does she need to know besides her being, ancient history?” Quan let out from the passenger seat. “What? You wanna see fossils and bones of your people?”

“Would you stop?!” Isis snapped but when he laughed, I couldn’t help but laugh too because I knew the moment we got out? I was smacking the fuck outta him. Fuck you mean... Fossils ?

Isis grabbed my arm with pure excitement and energy, she peered into my eyes with her wide eyed saucers.

“What is your deal, girl?” I laughed while shoving her off me.

“I’m just excited you get to see the Wetlands for the first time. Crystal City is beautiful but——”

The truck shot underneath a tunnel full as I looked out the window at the trailing line of lights flashing alongside our windows. I knew Isis had her phone out, waiting to record my reaction and I purposely rolled my eyes until we burst out into the opening. The blue waves above reflected and bounced lines of light and water against the buildings as my mouth dropped. I hadn’t realized my face was stuck against the window like a kid and frankly didn’t care. We weren’t underwater but the sky above was nothing but water waving about as we drove onto the highway like regular 5 o’clock rush hour traffic. The highway was split into two, coming and going out the tunnel and just in between was a wide river of boats and yachts. Even tiny floating homes along the river as we slowly made our way further into the city of Wetlands. I looked at Isis who kept the phone in my face.

“Now that the sirens are coming back, this place is fucking packed again,” Isis’s brother complained. Quan held his phone up where he was watching the live stream of the funeral and it showed a few people walking out of the church, being escorted by sirens.

“Is it over?” I asked, leaning over the shoulder of his seat to look at the video. “I don’t see Maggie or Namir.”

“I think it is over. Some are starting to leave...Dr. Holmes made his bullshit speech.”

I sat back in the seat and found myself looking out the window again at the wide river with trees and greenery growing in between like mini islands.

“This river runs throughout the entire city,” Isis said with a proud tone. “We can rent a boat and I can show you around and we can even visit the floating market. It’s mostly for the tourists...this is a heavily toured city for everyone.”

“This is amazing,” I said in awe. The people I could see along the river were almost impossibly attractive from the long braids, and jewels adorning their skin to curvy bodies. To the built muscles and bodies, the men and women looked unreal.

“They’re all sirens?” I asked. She nodded .

“For the most part. Some half, or partial but they all came with Solo. They’re under his reign. They love him for some unknown reason.”

I looked back at her, stunned before looking out her side of the window to eye the river once more. Everyone here was for Solomon? Under the sea Kodak Purple Solomon King?

“Asha was a fool not to get with him,” Quan retorted. “She could have been sitting on

all of this.”

“I wouldn’t even know what to do with all of this!” I exclaimed. “This is...far beyond what I could even...I barely paid my rent back home!”

Isis leaned forward towards my side to point at a large building with the letters UNICO in red on the side. “You see that building? That’s what Solo owns...one of the largest banks in the Underground, if not the largest.”

“Who cares?” Quan grumped. “He inherited the bank. He didn’t exactly put in any work to have it. He was just born and picked by some people.”

“SOOO?!” Isis and I shouted together before laughing.

You would never know we were technically underwater until you look up and see the ripples and waves as the sky. Everything was translucent and some sort of blue and green hue with the air smelling moist...Like the smell of rain about to fall but it never actually did. One minute we were driving through the main city the next, we were in the back roads of neighborhoods covered in trees and vines looping from one end to the other. Isis said the vines were a way to keep water moving and flowing as an energy source. I even saw a movie theatre and some sort of shopping mall.

“This is beautiful,” I said, eyes looking up and out the window. I stared at the vines looping out of the trees before catching the hidden homes in between branches. Isis tapped my arm before pointing to the iron gates that showed a peek of what looked like an estate. I saw the balloons and signs saying my daughter is a DCU student decorating the mailbox when we came to a slow stop to wait for the gates to open. Isis leaned in between the seats to look out the front window and sang out loud.

“Home sweet homeeeee.”



*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:59 pm*

Bellamy Holmes

I looked down at my text seeing Namir was currently with Maggie in an undisclosed location. None of us were prepared for what she did but I knew it was only a matter of time before her Holmes side came out.

Wilhelmina was still alive as far as I knew. She, Carmilla, and Wesley were currently in police custody above ground which only worked in Marvin's favor. He was going to have them killed without anyone knowing since they technically didn't exist above ground. My fangs tinged and tingled against my gums at the thought of the other one. The one with the white locs. Dorian Holmes, Wilhelmina had the nerve to call him. He only seemed to have eyes for Maggie, eyes I couldn't read but I warned Namir he needed to be careful.

“Police are saying the scene at the abandoned warehouse downtown is a massacre with unidentified bodies belonging to people and dogs.”

I smiled. Dogs. Fucking right. Nothing but mutt bastards. I closed my eyes as I pulled on my cigarette and listened to the faint radio playing inside of my car. I leaned against the hood with a fresh pair of clothes, opting for a denim jacket and black jeans and boots.

“Atlanta police say they have a few in custody now but the scene is impossible to describe unless you see it for yourself. Some reports are saying it could possibly belong to a cult of cannibals, others are saying its foul play is involved. Animal activists are on the scene now —”

I opened one eye to see a shopping cart trailing along by itself as it bumped into the back of a car. It was evening in the suburbs of Atlanta and after this trip to the store, I had one other place I needed to see, and two things I needed to confirm before proceeding.

“ Eye witnesses nearby describe something similar to an earth shake or explosion happening near the warehouse. Although the police say there are no signs of it.”

“ I just heard a loud booming sound coming from outside like something exploded! I ain’t know what to do but to call twelve because what’ the hell goin’ on!?”

“That was my sister’s work,” I replied softly, taking another pull on the cigarette. Maggie temporarily broke the veil that protected the Underground from above. Although it was probably nothing more than a mere crack in the magical system. The fact that she moved the inside of the church from below to above spoke to her potential. No one has been able to do that and I doubt she even knew she could do it. Gaia the Moon Goddess and the First Family had no real connection outside of the lies we told to the public. Maggie figured out something we couldn’t. She learned how to harness the moon and this was just the beginning. The very lie they held onto became the truth they were about to be afraid of. She’s the real deal, but that only caused more questions than answers.

The news of this was probably being covered up in the Underground by Marvin himself. He was using the seemingly peaceful funeral as a distraction to quietly arrest teachers and those behind the experiments under the leadership of Wilhelmina Holmes. Yet, the colossal fuck that happened above ground is what came out of nowhere, but he’d find a way.

I watched every black man, woman and child walk in and out of the grocery store to the parking lot with suspicion. No one showed any signs of being fucked over by my family. Not yet anyway. A rebirth is what they’re going to call it. I already saw the press release for it. A rebirth of black mythical and magic. I took one last drag on my

cigarette and flicked it to the ground when I heard my name being called.

“ Beh-wuh-mey !?”

I smiled as I watched the three year old run down the parking lot with his mother screaming after him to stop .

“Bryson!? What did I tell you about running?!”

He held up something in his hand as he ran straight for me until I scooped the little boy bundled up in his black coat and jeans. His nose was running as he tried to show me the bag of cheap cotton candy his mother got him. The boy found out that one of the very few things I could taste and stomach was cotton candy based on the texture and immediate sweetness. He hasn't stopped trying to feed me since.

“You see?”

Bryson stuck the bag in my face. I took one of my napkins I always kept on me for bleeds and wiped around his nostrils.

“I swear this boy is going to drive me crazy because he doesn't want to listen! He could have easily been hit by a freaking car!”

I looked at his mother with a smug grin as she whipped her wild curly hair back from her face. Professor Birdie Jones looked relaxed in her leggings, long thick cardigan that provided no type of warmth and UGG boots. She was still muttering and mumbling to herself as she began to place everything into the back seat of my car .

She is the only woman, person, living being on this earth that looked at me without fear at first sight and the only other person who is crazier than me. Birdie was more fucked up than me and I didn't think that was possible. That beautiful smile and wild hair hid something much darker, and painful from her past. I made sure to protect the

most vulnerable part of her and treat her son as my own in exchange for a love I never thought I'd experience, not even from my sister. This is the start of my very own family. Birdie is going to be my wife soon, and one day when she leaves this earth for good? I would be right behind her without a moment to spare seeing as there was no other reason to live.

Now should she ever betray me...Her and her son will never see the light of day. It was a fleeting thought since I couldn't even imagine her looking at anyone outside of me. Her son is my son. I'm learning how to cook human recipes. My dick is big, and I'm affectionate. All the things human females require in a man. Plus, I have money. She would be a fool to betray someone like me.

"I got'd cotton candieeee ," Bryson muttered with a frown as he showed the bag to me again.

"For me?" I asked, taking my black thumb nail to pick at the booger peeking underneath his left nostril. He nodded before his eyes looked up at the evening sky. I attempted to take the cart from her but she was in one of her manic moods .

"Oh? Don't try and help now since y'all two are standing there. It's always me against y'all! Every time!"

I still took the cart that she subconsciously pushed towards my grip anyway and walked off with her son on my hip to put it away.

"You in trow-bow ..." Bryson said as he looked back at me.

"Nooo, you get me in trouble every time." I told him. "She doesn't like you running in the street because it's dangerous."

Dangerous for the cars and people who would even glance his way with ill intentions. There will be a fucking blood bath in this parking lot in his honor if any car or person

tried it.

“Yep.” He agreed as if he could read my thoughts. Bryson kept the small bag of cotton candy squished between his hands as I pushed the cart behind the others with a small shove. “Beh-wuh-me! Wook! Wook at that!”

I stopped walking, stopping in the middle of the parking lot to look up at the sky where his tiny finger pointed.

“You see it?! ”

“What am I looking at, Bry?” Adjusting his weight on my hip, I continued to stare at the clouds holding an orange and red glow from the sunset. I could hear his mother calling out for us to come on but Bryson’s determined tone made me look a little harder. “You see it?”

“What am I seeing?”

“The birds and the moon!”

Bryson bucked with his feet kicking against my ribs like he wanted me to walk as his personal horse. Something in the way his eyes lit up, I stared back at the sky again and froze.

It was faint and barely noticeable but a small black bird flew erratically in a continuous circle. Struggling to flap its wings, it wrapped around the sky like it was being forced to fly in this single direction. I looked back at Bryson as he wrapped his arms around my neck.

“The moon doesn’t feel good.” He mumbled sadly. “The sun is mad and the earth is scared. That’s why the birdy is sick...Bad things are going to happen...”

Bryson laid his head against my face as he continued to mutter to himself. I looked at Birdie who was distracted by her phone going off, unaware of what was happening with her son. This confirmed the first thing I suspected a while back. Professor Birdie Jones's son had become the new oracle as a means to keep close to a God-like figure. Maggie.

"Bry, who told you that?" I asked, rubbing his back for his attention. He popped his head up and looked at me.

"Told me what?"

I smiled. The message was delivered. This was probably speaking to the bullshit Wilhelmina created and it was only a matter of time before her plan came to fruition. Now I just had to confirm the second thing.

I put the car in park as we sat outside of a small brick home in the cul-de-sac of a wooden neighborhood. There was only one car in the driveway, covered and protected from weather damage. Every light was on in the house from what I could see. Birdie looked in the back seat to check on her sleeping son before looking back at me.

"You need me to walk up there with you?" She whispered, reaching to gently wipe around my mouth. "You said his mouth was sewn shut last time you saw him right? Any time he sees you or your sister, he's forced to keep quiet due to the blood contract."

"Yeah," I said as I stared at the house. I could hear Birdie festering in her seat, debating on whether she wanted to say something. "Just say it."

"I looked into blood contracts when you first mentioned it and although I'm still learning...It didn't make sense that your grandmother and mother just flat out didn't remember you whereas his mouth was closed shut."

“It’s due to him not being human,” I said as I turned to look at her. “Something you very much are...”

“Yes...or...he’s not your father...or hers. Not biologically anyway.”

I looked back at the house, having suspected this all along but hearing her say it confirmed it for me. I reached to open the door with a shove.

“Well that’s what I’m about to find out.”