

He took my broken pieces and filled them with gold

COLOUR STARTS

The
of



a novel by
EMMA HESSE

THE COLOR

a novel

OF STARS

Part One:

DOUBLE-EDGED DIVINITY

Chapter One

Silk curtains flowed like rivers of ivory, outlining the view of the Sicilian coast. I watched the sun rise slowly over the horizon, illuminating my parents' large estate. I let the silken stream drift past my face as I walked towards the sparkle of the cerulean sea. I climbed the cold marble railing and sat atop it, letting my feet dangle off the edge.

Today's my birthday. I learned over time that the worst thing you can do is set expectations. You never really feel the level of appreciation that you need.

It's just another day, another reminder that I am living and others are not. An annual deadline to what I thought I would have by now, and don't.

The fragmented memories of the mistakes I've made in the past year push to the forefront of my consciousness like waves on the shore; relentless and unending. All the milestones left untouched. All the bridges burned and moments missed.

I gripped the cold marble beneath my palms and slid myself to the edge. My nightgown didn't move with me, and my breath caught as stone bit at my exposed thighs. I waited for my heart to race, for the fear or cold to jumpstart my body.

I felt calm, as if the rage and despair that burned within me for so long has turned to hot coals, and settled just beneath my chest.

Time has only confirmed my suspicion of this life being a beautifully crafted form of torture. The happiest moments of my life were expendable and fleeting. While the worst seem to hover over me, unavoidable and consuming. I'm tired of what we're forced to convince ourselves.

We need the bad to appreciate the good.

Fate is unknowable and inevitable.

In the end, it'll all make sense.

It's bullshit. If there were someone or something out there that was an omnipotent force, I've only been able to accept that they're evil, or I'm repaying some cosmic debt. Maybe even a corrupt scientist's experiment to test the effect of experiencing *every* human emotion. Especially the *really* shitty ones. If they really existed, why would they give me a brain that torments itself, or happiness that is temporary and hard to hold on to? My mind has been trained to call itself weak just for wanting a break, for not wanting to constantly be searching for the right way to live.

Is it weakness or strength that urges my mind to rest?

You try to be hopeful. You spend every day looking for evidence that people are good, and life is worth sticking around for. So many of us depend on faith and morality to give us purpose, and to answer the unanswerable questions. But what if you had the answers? Would it give you peace of mind, or would it steal the ambiguity of existence? For me, every answer gained has ripped me in half and left shadows in the space between.

I fall into an old memory, the one I use most of my daily energy trying to lock in the forgotten part of my mind. The same air I'm breathing now, the same sea-lined horizon, the same hands I'm staring down at.

Those hands are younger now, gripping the collar of a boy who lived a few properties down. Muffled screams and chants from the neighborhood children pounded through my head like an unwelcome guest. *Let him go, you freak!* Tears blurred my vision, I could hear his wool vest tear under the force of my grip. I looked over his shoulder to the cliff just a few feet behind.

The boy's hateful gaze softened to a silent plea as he saw the intention in my eyes. I really didn't give a shit. They carved out my childhood innocence and left me with no explanation. No mercy. What choice is a child left with when they're faced with agony and betrayal, and no tools to navigate

big emotions? It felt like the end of the world. And in a way, it was. It was the end of the world as I knew it.

I hit my hand violently on the marble balcony, forcing myself into reality. Letting pain be my grounding force. I looked down at the limestone boulders five stories below. I closed my eyes, lifted my grip from the balcony, and slowly leaned my weight forward. My stomach leapt into my throat as air flew up my body. I counted the seconds. One... two...

As my feet hit the ground, I drove my fist into the earth. It wasn't my bones that broke the silent sunrise, but the loud crack of limestone against my immortal skin. The unbreakable bones of a body that cannot be destroyed.

The Roman Gods and Titans scattered across history are far from myth. Gods from every religion, and all throughout the world, are real. Some have several names, a God of one religion could be the same in another. Many are depicted inaccurately, but they exist. They ended contact with the humans before the fall of the Roman Empire, but returned in the year 2112. That was over thirteen thousand years ago.

Since then, humans have been lost, and only immortal blood remains. The problem is, humanity without mortality changes everything. Our drives, our fears, our purpose. And yet, we know all too well that there are many things that are worse than death.

Many.

Things.

Chapter Two

What a waste it is to have decades of childhood trauma, centuries of therapy, years of contentment, and three months of absolute bliss, just to have all of it ripped away in a single night.

For a world that bases its utopian-like societies on the idea of balance, I'd say I'm certainly lacking in mine. Either that, or my first millennial birthday is going to be Godsdamn sensational.

My depression is often circumstantial, flooding my mind at a time like this, where hopelessness surrounds me, and any and all of my efforts seem to be in vain. Other times, it comes when I least expect it. Though over the years, it had become an old friend. Allowing me to see the world how it truly is—riddled with Chaos.

Ares—my therapist, bless him, I've practically paid for three of his five vacation homes, and this single event will surely pay off the last two—explained to me that depression is but an internal battle against who you are, and who darkness wants you to be.

My fault in this, after what seemed like a simple slip in judgement at the time, may haunt me for the rest of my life.

When terrible things were happening to me, my mind often forgot them completely, though they still left a mark. My skin covered in invisible scars, and scabs that I couldn't stop picking at.

But now, this isn't a burden I can carry on my own. What I had done, directly impacted another person's life. Someone who is personally responsible for the miracle that *was* my happiness. Now, for all I know, they could be enduring unimaginable torture, or... Gods forbid...

They could be dead.
And that, of all the things I've endured, I know for certain,

I will not survive.

ANDINO'S ESTATE  PRESENT DAY

My eyes squint against the shine of the sea, like diamonds falling past the sun. As I look west, the last dark sheet of night tucks into the horizon. There is something comforting about dawn. I'd rather stare lifelessly at the soft blue of the early day than at the endless ebony of night. Not when its void has haunted me my entire life.

Some time ago, I was cursed with visions. I thought at first that maybe it was intense intrusive thoughts, until the things I saw either came to fruition, or happened a long time ago. It made each one that much more haunting, and every moment of my life cruel anticipation.

One vision in particular has burdened me my entire life. Like a dream you have over and over, so vivid that you could draw each scene.

It always starts out with a wisp of lights, like I'm falling through the air. I can feel wind forced past my body, like I'm not really falling... more like I'm being sucked up into the sky.

Then everything turns black. An ebony so dark that it makes my eyes burn. My iris's aren't able to adjust fast enough, and my head pounds as stars fill my vision.

I inhale sharply in a panic, but no air fills my lungs. I can't breathe. My body is weightless as I look around, but no light meets my eyes. My gut is met with cold fear as I move around, grasping for anything to touch. Anything.

I gag as my efforts to breathe leave my stomach heavy. It felt like trying to inhale with your airways blocked, nothing but increasing pressure and a tight fist around your stomach with each attempt.

This is how I'm going to die. In an endless void, alone and terrified. No idea where I am, how I got there, or how to leave.

When immortals asphyxiate, we basically pass out, eventually come to, only to pass out again, and repeat the process until we are somewhere with oxygen. So I suppose you could say this vision is less of my death, and more of an endless loop of torture. Like the worst Gif ever.

You could say I've never been the most optimistic individual. Not when my future looks so... dark.

So, here I am, looking out onto the sunrise of my five hundredth birthday, wondering how many more I have until that day comes.

I opened my fingers and let the wine glass slip from my grasp. I watched as it fell and shattered loudly on the rocks below, on the edge of the crater I left mere minutes ago. So easily broken, always one wrong move away from destruction. There used to be billions of humans that lived with this fear. Never knowing when death was near, and not even given the solace of being told what comes next.

I don't know how many traumatic events led to my first encounter with depression or its many mistresses, or if it was something in my genes, destined to be triggered at some point. All I know for certain is the day everything changed. A crossroad that presented two possibilities:

1. Admit defeat and give in to the darkness.
2. Fight until even the Demons fear your name.

Over four hundred years ago, I was confronted with that very choice, walking quickly through an unfamiliar forest as if I could outrun the horrendous thing that had just happened to me, and the intrusive memory of it. The choice found me in the kind eyes of a stranger, and the possibility of a stationary future. I may not have truly known why at the time, but the choice was clear.

It was time to put fear in the eyes of my Demons.

NEAR LAKE COMO  56-YEAR-OLD RAE

It was 15,175, I wasn't even close to my first century birthday, barely a young adult in the eyes of the elders. I had been making my way north for five months, going from city to city trying to find the first thing that felt right.

I made my way by singing in taverns, collecting a small pay for emergencies, and occasionally food and lodgings. I found friends along the way. But not always.

My feet stumbled as an exposed root caught my boot, bringing me out of a tormenting trance. I had encountered so many dark souls in my young life, even when I had forgotten a particularly terrible memory, there's always a part of me that still carries it. Like dying in a past life by drowning, then refusing to live by a body of water without every truly understanding why. Though my mind may not, my soul remembers.

Despite the events I *do* remember, and my irrational fear of men and heights, what had happened only a day ago seemed to overshadow it all. I let my guard down. And I certainly paid for it.

“That was quite the performance, young lady.” A regular at Buddy’s Tavern said with a cigarette in his mouth, ash falling to the ground.

I nodded my thanks. “Buddy said he’d pay me after my show, but I can’t find him anywhere. What exactly did you say he asked you to do?”

“Buddy’ll pay you, sweetie, don’t you fret. He just asked that you help me haul in some supplies first. Get his money’s worth. Don’t worry, it’ll only take a second.” He opened the door to the back alley, and flicked his cigarette.

The drunk stranger’s voice was raspy, as if he spent hours each day yelling. My gut told me to run, but my broken brain told me I was being prejudice, and unkind.

Allow me to let you in on a little secret. Buddy never asked him to haul in supplies. It wasn’t until I bent over, reaching towards a box of glass bottles in the back alley, that he shoved me to the ground. My forehead hit the cement so hard that I nearly bit my tongue in half.

I repeated his name in my mind as he pinned my arms behind my back, the stench of his moonshine breath mixed with the blood dripping from my mouth made my stomach curdle. Seth. Seth. Seth.

It seems like such a silly thing looking back, having to repeat his name to make sure I didn’t forget it. As if I could ever forget something like that. Someone like him.

When I heard him fumble to loosen his belt, I did the only thing I could think to do. An instinct born from desperation.

I laughed.

It certainly wasn't a laugh I recognized, neither genuine nor fake, but... defeated. That would have to do. And it worked. That didn't mean I'd be free. Only punished in a different way. At least it was the better of two gruesome options.

And when his final blow to my head knocked me out. The last thing I remember was falling into my void vision. A black abyss, only... there was something in the distance this time. So faint, and so brief, but instantly recognizable.

There were stars.

I hummed loudly into the open forest air, trying to drown out the flood of my thoughts. I never thought I'd miss my void vision, but it would be welcome company right about now. In an attempt to get out of my own head, I noted every inch of the world around me.

There were parts of this place that reminded me of home. The tall WILLOW tree's with white blossoms that hung towards the earth, grassy mountains sprinkled with lavender and magnolias, and beautiful rocky coasts outlined with breathtaking blue water. I think even then I knew, Palermo was never truly my home, but maybe this place could be. Perhaps my home was everywhere. Or nowhere.

I tried opening my eyes, but they were filled with dirt and blood. I wiped them with my sleeve, and blinked at a shimmer on the ground. Something must have spilled, because I was covered with some kind of gilded paint, sparkling with so many different colors that I thought it was stars in my vision and I was about to pass out again.

I moved against the ground, gravel cutting my thighs as I tried to move my dress back down my legs. The dress. Buddy and I had been talking earlier about how much I admired one of the patrons dresses, and the stocky little man waddled upstairs—without explanation—until he returned with a bundle of folded black linens.

He explained that his late wife had a taste for fashion, and was about my size. His crooked smile made his eyes squint as he hollered with approval at my acceptance of her clothes. There was a rib corset tucked between the floor-length gown. Buddy said that his wife "had a proclivity for danger" as he showed me the hidden compartments in the corset, for concealing weapons and valuables.

When I saw that same stocky figure hustling down the alley through my swollen eyes, back from wherever he had been, I hoped the dress was still salvageable. Perhaps it was cursed, and it wasn't made for danger, but attracted it. I was surprised by how easily

Buddy carried me upstairs, my long legs and limp arms nearly touched the ground by his stubby legs.

He gave me a new dress and tights as I took the longest bath of my life. I don't remember much about what we talked about before I left, I only remember Buddy promising that the next time I saw him, the stars would align, and I will be safe.

Then I remember walking. Hustling down streets and alleyways until I was in the countryside. I remember hills, then rivers, then mountains. I remember it got colder, and I snatched a coat off a mannequin, and ran until I couldn't hear the store owner's angry screams anymore.

I don't think I'd only been walking for a day.

Buddy's place is in Rome.

My boots crushed the fallen leaves and twigs of the forest floor. I swung myself around a tree as I jumped to lower ground, making my way north. I ran my fingers over the moss growing on a nearby tree. Buddy mentioned that it always grows facing north, which made it a lot easier to find my way. I hummed softly to myself as I swung around another tree, for the pure theatrics of it.

I looked down at my clothes, an azure linen midi DRESS, formed to my figure with the same cream rib corset. I wore the latter mostly to keep money and small weapons, but also because it felt like a strong hug, and whether I was willing to admit it or not, sometimes nothing halts a heavy moment like being held.

The pressure of my secure clothing tightened with every breath, each inhale a tight embrace that kept me in reality. Kept me safe.

The past has passed.

My boots matched my long brown coat, made of a heavy, yet soft material. Wool may have been warmer for this spring weather, but I hated the way it felt on my skin. The sensation became borderline painful over time, not to mention that it made me too aware of my body.

I cursed myself for being so fragile, so easily overwhelmed by such frivolity. How is it possible that I can steady myself in the face of danger, but can't bottle my panic when my dry skin rubs wool, or keep my teeth from aching when a heavy table screeches over a polished floor? How do I know

the true measure of my hardships if I become enraged over minor inconveniences?

I looked down at my coat and noticed the fourth button was missing. Great. I looked up and headed, for no particular reason other than pure instinct, towards a cluster of three weeping willows, surrounded by three large limestone boulders. When you walk aimlessly, you never really doubt your choices, you just do what feels right, and learn to listen to the whisper in the wind.

My humming instinctively stopped as I heard a faint noise in the distance behind me. I turned towards the eery sound and closed my eyes in an attempt to extend my hearing. The sound grew to a distinct scream. A wailing like a widow crouched over the body they mourned. It dug a pit in my chest, and my eyes shot open at the uneasy feeling that now filled me.

I turned back and continued walking, forcing down my irrational instinct to run towards the noise, to find the mourner, and hold them. A great example of how I keep finding myself waist-deep in trouble.

Movement in my periphery caused me to catch my breath. A beautiful grey wolf stood with its head low, staring at me. I've crossed paths with many wild creatures on my travels, and yet I am still left speechless every time. Its eyes were such a bright blue that they almost seemed white. They traced cautious lines down my body, waiting for a threatening movement.

There was a thin sheet of snow on the ground between us, but it seemed to stop near my feet, as if blocked by a large tree. It was like a line dividing our two worlds, interconnected by our constant state of survival, and fear of strangers and sudden movements.

One thing the humans left behind, aside from a poisoned earth, in mind and in rotting soil, was an unbreakable fear instilled in every animal of the merciless cruelty of humans, of which I appeared to be.

The terror, the mindless murder, the extinction. My kind is lucky to have the technology—both science and immortal magic—to create any food you could imagine. Including meat. Animal populations boomed in the absence of hunting, and after a few thousand years, as the earth healed, the lifespan of all species grew.

Dogs live for hundreds of years, fish grow to enormous sizes and live for thousands, while some species, like lobsters, elephants, and turtles, are practically as immortal as the Gods.

I grinned at the cautious creature, making sure I didn't show my teeth, but only my adoration. Its head tilted slightly, as if it begged to be free of its fear, to run alongside me, instead of from me.

I suppose we had now formed an unbreakable bond: that of two souls with a shared experience. The unshakable fear that those who look like me burned into our essence like a brand. I promise you, my friend, that I will show you what *true* humanity is like, and I will try to remember it for myself, so that we may both be free of the burden of cautious stares, hearts that sink, and hazy futures.

My hand moved slowly, as its eyes followed, to my coat pocket. I pulled out a piece of bread I broke in half for my travels. The first half I ate around twenty miles ago, and I was saving this half to eat before I made it to my next place of refuge.

I bowed my head slightly as I pulled my hand in front of me, and held out the loaf, hoping it would smell it, and know my intent. With a silent prayer to the Mother, I tossed the bread its way. The wolf's feet spread as if preparing to run, but as its head bowed to smell my gift, it looked again to me, with eyes that held their thanks behind a wall of caution, and a hint of surprise at my kindness.

I couldn't help but fall into its stoic stance, and memorize its features, as if we would meet again one day, and share another moment of soul entanglement, and talk between glances like old friends.

As it picked up the loaf with its mouth and scurried off, I took that as my opportunity to keep making my way north. I looked up to the tall trees covered in moss and fog, and wondered if the forest found that this moment shared between strangers was a testament to the true nature of humanity. I hoped it met their approval, as the silent keepers of all life on land, especially the wanderers of the woods.

The crunching of my boots suddenly turned into more than two steady beats, and I whirled toward my sudden companion, wondering if the bread

was not enough. A pit opened in my stomach, ready to be filled with whatever emotion the sneaky stranger would elicit.

I found no one there.

“Hello?” I said louder than I intended. I turned back to continue on and nearly fell back on my arse as a hooded figure stood mere feet away from me. They pulled their hood back, revealing softly curled hair, as bright and red as Phoenix feathers. Her immortal beauty made me forget for a moment that there was a blood-curdling scream still ringing in the distance.

“Are you lost?” The cloaked female asked with a gentle smile, no doubt trying not to laugh at my clumsy near-fall. She pushed her hair from her face with a delicate hand, decorated with silver and gold rings. The opal sprinkled throughout seemed to catch the sun that was barely visible through the tall forest trees. Her fingers twitched as if she was just as uncertain and cautious as I was.

“Can one be lost if they don’t have a destination?” I said as casually as my still-pounding heart would allow.

“Philosophic quandary before noon.” The woman huffed out a sweet laugh, as smooth as her soft features. “I like you already.” She turned on her boots and asked, “Are you headed this way?” I nodded shallowly before she continued, “May I walk with you? It’s not the best time to be wandering these woods. Unless you *intend* to cross paths with the Wailing Widow.”

“I’m going to have to pass on that last part.” I looked behind me to where the screaming grew louder. Seems like I had to choose between two possibly dangerous routes, and it didn’t feel like the most appropriate time to flip a coin. “You seem... sane enough.”

I could take her. She was at least five inches shorter than me, the ink staining her fingers must mean she spends a lot of time indoors, so with any luck, her figure beneath her cloak is slim and unthreatening.

There was a curious nature to this woman. My instinct told me to trust her, as if I was convinced that *I* was the stranger trespassing on *her* territory.

The long sage shimmering silk skirt that peaked out of her cloak every time she stepped over a fallen tree or large rock was a good reflection of the sudden pull in my gut: this place, this woman, was a beauty, wrapped in a mystery, wrapped in a feeling. A feeling that I had no words for in my native

tongue. It seemed certain that I was going to spend the rest of my life looking for them.

Although her muscle mass wasn't visible under the falling fabric of her phthalo flannel and wool garb, from the way she moved around me, like a cat through thorns, every step intentional and nimble, I knew she could fend for herself. Like she moved through the world to survive and stay hidden, but not to fight. Not unless provoked.

"How very kind of you." She grinned as if genuinely amused, but clearly shocked by my blunt honesty. "And what about you? Would my chances be better with the Wailing Widow?"

"Oh, I'm certifiable." I said without hesitation. "It's a bloody miracle that no one's found it essential for the good of society that I be thrown into Tartarus. I'm just relieved you hear that ghastly screaming in the distance too... or *I'd* be the one throwing myself in that inescapable prison."

"I haven't heard anyone say *bloody* in a... very long time. Do you have an interest in 21st century human studies, or were you involved in a particularly gruesome crime that I should be aware of?" She made to back away a step, but it was obvious that she wasn't concerned, if anything, she seemed to enjoy our playful banter.

That should've made me certain that this woman was also clinically insane, but after what happened, still so fresh in my mind, the tiny chance that she was actually kind, gave me something I desperately needed: hope.

Though my body is healed from the cuts and bruises, she looked at me in such a gentle way that I thought perhaps she could see them beneath my forced smile.

"Nothing I've ever been convicted for." I smiled, and fiddled with the strings that once held the fourth button on my coat.

"Well then," She offered her arm, and I stared at it as if I didn't know what she meant, simply because my broken mind was waiting for her to steal the pathetic amount of money I had on me, or perhaps beat me for the thrill of it. "If we're on the run, we better get moving."

"For a woman who appears to live in the middle of no where, you certainly have quite the sense of adventure." I took her arm, and I wondered if she could feel my hesitation through our thick coats.

I'm used to flinching under a stranger's touch, but when she held me, in such a careful and reassuring way, I felt anything but afraid.

"We may be in the middle of nowhere, dear, but where we're headed is certainly... somewhere." I looked north, in the direction we now walked, through a forest that somehow felt... alive, and a sky peaking through the trees, seemingly as curious as I was to see what was going to happen next. "I'm Maeve, by the way."

"Rae." Was all I offered her, still a little shaken by our meeting and the continued bellowing from behind. I managed to offer her a friendly grin, and her returning smile put that small paranoid part of me at ease.

"You feel like seeing something incredible, Rae?"

My inevitable death, perhaps? The usual instinct in my gut, the alarm that goes off when I meet someone with a dark soul, was silent. What's the worst that could happen?

Ah... you beautiful idiot.

Chapter Three

We walked for a mile or two before stopping in a clearing. We talked of my travels on the way, I gave her the highlights, and after a few genuine smiles and laughs filled with anything but pity, I found myself divulging the lowlights, as well. Maybe after all this time on my own, a part of me learned to pick up on the malicious movements of an enemy, or I've acquired some magical ability to sense darkness, because I felt surrounded by light and hope. For the first time in my immortal life.

Maybe that should've scared me, should've made me look closer into the microscope and become cynical. I had experienced enough friendly foes and lovable liars that it may be better for me to question everyone I meet, to expect the darkness until even the shadows have to prove the presence of light.

As we passed the threshold between where we'd come from and where we were headed, I could've sworn the air around us grew a few degrees warmer. In the space beyond, on the other side of a field of moss and clovers, was the most beautiful garden I had ever seen, painting the side of a hill, with a babbling brook encircling it all.

The vast field was filled with every color imaginable, with the softest green weaving throughout a maze of flowers and blossom trees. Nestled in the center of the garden, climbing up the hill's gradual slope, was an enormous cluster of seventeenth-century STYLE buildings, each one at least five stories tall. Moss and vines covered the largest building, pulling my eyes to the glass roof covering the highest peak.

Each structure had various shapes and architectural details that came together in a U-shape, with a giant fountain in the middle. It looked like a massive sandcastle, decorated by the passionate and imaginative hands of a

patient child, in the middle of the Garden of Eden. I could barely see the tops of a few smaller buildings tucked far behind the large estate. Each one a different shape, a distinct personality.

The air felt thick with possibility, and the enchanting space beyond was nearly seeping with potential. I couldn't escape the feeling of relief, and relaxation that had suddenly overcome my tired body.

"Where are we?" I asked breathlessly, as if the sight of this hidden haven took the very breath from my lungs.

"For me, it's home. For the rest of the world," she paused for what I can only assume was dramatic effect, "this is Doctrina, the athenaeum of the north—a university and a library—and the home of all accessible knowledge." She said with a proud smile.

"*All* knowledge?" I nearly choked on my words.

"Well... not *all* knowledge." She said while turning from the breathtaking view to look at me. "That's theoretically impossible without creating a massive black hole that would destroy Earth and every planet in our—"

"Chill, red. I get what you MEAN."

"But, yeah..." She cleared her throat, and it burned my chest with shame. "Doctrina is as close to you'll get to it, I'd say." She huffed out an insincere laugh and smiled down at the ground.

I felt a soft brush of guilt touch my stomach, like I had just interrupted the passionate streamline of thoughts from an eccentric genius, and told her I wasn't interested. My impulses seem to impede my ability to form relationships that actually mean something.

I made a mental note to never stop Maeve when those wheels started turning. Whatever she wanted to hyper-fixate on, I'd be there to listen, even if she got so lost in her mind that she forgot I was there.

A sudden surprise within me was elicited by the realization that I was actually opening up to this stranger, that her energy brought out the untainted version of my own, untouched by the decades of anger and betrayal.

I hate people. And yet, I didn't hate the company. She seemed like the type of person you feel you've known forever, like I couldn't possibly fear inconsistency from such a steady force.

"You were right. This is incredible, Maeve," I said with genuine sincerity. "I've never seen so many different flowers in one place."

"Well, that's the other great thing about Doctrina." She pulled gently on our linked arms to direct us towards the estate that I had not yet been able to pull my gaze from. "We employ hundreds of healers to grow and harvest all sorts of medicinal and ritual plants."

I finally turned from the view and grinned widely at the sparkle that shown in my new friend's viridian eyes. "I've never been one to turn down medicinal plants." Maeve shook her head and rolled her eyes at my insinuation.

"I may not know you, Rae, but somehow I don't doubt that one bit." She laughed quietly to herself. "You're going to be trouble, aren't you?"

"Potentially problematic at best." I laughed, the sound foreign, and yet so innocently beautiful, a thought I don't think I've had about anything besides a doe curled up in the woods, certainly not for myself.

Not out of survival, not out of pity, and not to break the incessant noise in my head, but because the lightness of the air around me, the hope of this moment, and a quiet love for myself made me feel safe enough to allow such a luxury.

I walked towards my future with ease alongside someone I had no business trusting, and yet no excuse not to. Knowing full well that I shouldn't blindly follow someone I met wandering the woods less than an hour ago, I followed her deeper into Doctrina anyways.

As we trailed the steep hill separating the forest from the property, I couldn't stop the feeling of familiarity from flooding my thoughts. There was an energy around this place that felt like the last puzzle piece to the truth I had been desperately trying to find.

I think that a part of me knew right then, that this was the beginning of the most fulfilling and the most debilitating moments of my life. It would test me. Train me. And ultimately, save me.

“There’s another part of this place I have a feeling you might really like.” Maeve said with a mischievous grin.

“I may not know you, Maeve, but somehow I don’t doubt that one bit.” I mocked her previous words with as much amusement and kindness as I could muster with the eery feeling of something bigger than myself still possessing my mind.

“What’s troubling your mind, dear?” Maeve asked with a quiet sincerity that made me feel like I could’ve said anything and she would somehow manage to make me feel understood.

“I have this weird feeling that I know this place. Or I’ve seen it before, like in a dream. Foggy, but so damn familiar.” I squinted while looking at the place that was now a quick five-minute walk from where we strolled without hurry.

“That sounds like *déjà vu*.” Maeve said under her breath.

“Hm.” My pride never really lets me admit to what I lack, and right now, I very much lacked a definition.

“*Déjà vu* is a word from one of the old languages. It means *already seen*.” Maeve’s words were filled with anything but condescension. She hesitated for a moment, like she wasn’t sure how much to tell me. “It’s a strong feeling that you’ve been somewhere before, that you’ve already lived in that moment and somehow forgot.”

“That’s dead on. I know that I’ve never been here before.” I inhaled the welcoming smell of lavender and old books before continuing. “I definitely would’ve remembered a place like this.”

Maeve’s smile seemed forced as she cleared her throat before changing the subject. “Anyways, about this place I thought you’d like.”

“To be honest, I’m excited to see what you think interests me.”

“Then I hope I do not disappoint. If you look ahead, towards the left side of the main building,” Maeve waved her free hand casually, and suddenly there were hundreds of armored women sparring and engaging in various exercises. My eyes widened at the sudden clang of metal and distant shouting and grunting. “This is also home to the Valkyrie. Female warriors created for the first Celestial War, although very few of the original army are

alive today.” Maeve’s eyes glossed over as if the words sent her into a dark memory.

I swear I could feel the air thicken, the ground vibrate, and trees bow in respect to the ancient warriors that moved in ways I never thought possible. In a way that made me feel that I’d both be absolutely annihilated and entirely safe the closer I got.

“What are they?” I asked under my breath. It was truly the only thing I could think to say. I was still taking in the overpowering energy that seemed to fill the air and space between us.

“They’re mostly Gods, some new demigods recruits, and a whole lot of strong-headed and fierce personalities.”

“So naturally, you thought I’d fit right in.” I said with a soft nudge from my linked arm.

“Any woman brave enough to sing and dance through the woods alone has to be strong-willed.” She huffed out a laugh at the last words and returned the playful nudge.

“Or incredibly daft.” Despite my attempt at self-deprecation, I believed her. What I had done all this time after leaving home—on my own—even after certain events should have made me either crawl deep within myself or look for who I once was at the bottom of a bottle, I never gave up. I kept moving, always north. Always forward. She was right, I was... strong.

“You are brave, Rae. Probably more than you know.” Maeve said rather bluntly, and though she didn’t know me, it felt like she did.

“Is now the time that you tell me you’ve been stalking me for months or should I remain blissfully ignorant?” I said with a sidelong glance at my friend. She only smiled in return and I continued, “I’ve got to admit, if this is blissful ignorance, I will gladly accept my... dumbassary. Just take me to the dungeon, I bet it smells like laundry and was designed by Athena herself.” I held my hands out as if waiting to be cuffed.

Maeve huffed out a genuine laugh. “Did you just make up that word?”

“Yeah, that happens sometimes. Better to create your own than say something insincere, I think. I also hate when there’s too much pause between my words. People have often cut me off, even when I’m passionately speaking, so I make sure they can’t. Otherwise I feel vulnerable, and stupid.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Maeve said while leading us towards the warriors still sparring without a moment of rest.

“Excuse you?” I said in an accusatory tone. I definitely thought it would be longer until she was brought to that conclusion. I did say *dumbassary*, and she did lure me this whole way without even a moment of protest.

Yikes.

“I think you *are* sincere, but you’re definitely not stupid.” Maeve looked towards me, her gaze was a warm brush on my cheeks. “I may not know you, but I do think I have the ability to get a good read on people. So I apologize if I come across as forward.”

“No need to apologize, foxy.” I said while holding back a grin.

“Foxy?!” Maeve blurted with a surprised look on her face. Her steps faltered a moment as we neared the Valkyrie, large courses and equipment racks now held my attention.

“You called me dear earlier, and it seems only fair to give you a pet-name as well.” I let my smile break past the barriers of the wall I put up those many years ago. My shoulders seemed to finally relax, and I accepted the trust that was now growing in my gut. Fully aware of the consequences of that gift, but unable to stop myself from giving it, in spite of myself. I turned to Maeve before continuing, “I mean, the way you managed to sneak up on me and that vibrant red hair of yours, it’s very fitting.”

“No objections here.” Maeve said while dropping our linked arms. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet.” The moment I took my eyes from Maeve’s face, I saw a figure approaching us from the center of the warriors dance that now flowed all around us. Once the golden figure cleared the sleek shadows of those around her, my eyes instantly snapped to her silken hair.

The golden brown river flowed just above her chest, with two plaits on each side of her head weaving the side pieces from her face. The shine of her hair seemed almost luminescent as it sparkled in the glow of the midday sun. Her golden armor stood out from the sea of silver, a representation of her rank on the field, I assumed.

“This,” Maeve motioned a hand towards the tall woman, a few inches taller than myself, “is General Brynhildir.”

The graceful Goddess gave a shallow tilt of her head before saying with a honey-sweet and relatively deep voice, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Rhea.”

“I go by Rae, actually,” I said with no semblance of swagger, feeling a little stunned in her presence. “Wait, I’m sorry, how do you know my name?”

I could feel pure power radiate off her body, it was like stepping out into the midsummer sun after having just been wading through a blizzard. It was actually a lot like what it felt to step onto the property, leaving the cold spring air behind. Perhaps it was she that such an energy came from. She only smiled, and Maeve cut in before she could answer my question. “Bryn has a way of…” she paused momentarily, “knowing.”

“Ah.” I said as if I had any idea what that meant. “What a suitable place to call home then, I suppose.”

One side of Brynhildr’s mouth rose slightly in a sly smirk. “It’s surely never boring.” Her hand moved from behind her back and motioned to the organized chaos continuing without falter behind her. “Let me show you around, maybe we can find something to entertain you—if you choose to stay with us.”

I glanced down at my golden brown hair, sandy in the mix of colors, like a slightly overdone loaf of honey bread. It was choppy and frizzy as it made its way down my back. It now seemed to come back to life in the presence of this fruitful land, bits of gold now catching the light. My bones felt stronger, as if some ancient power lived in the very soil, and fueled the fire within me.

I quickly ran my fingers through it, patting down the stray hairs and pushing it behind my ears. I felt so aware of my appearance, like I was in the presence of a future version of myself, if I just got my shit together and stayed in one place for once.

“Over here,” Brynhildr motioned towards an array of hundreds of spears, swords, and shields lined up on wooden racks, “are the Añendos, weapons forged by Hephaestus himself before the first Celestial War.”

“The blacksmith?” I asked while following close behind the most intimidating and yet approachable person I’ve ever met. I reached my hand towards a dagger, the pearl hilt wrapped around the golden blade like white

smoke. I looked to Brynhildr before making contact, she nodded slightly with approval.

As my fingers touched the cold metal, I sucked in a breath. My brain flooded with a brutal and bloody battle. Images flashing like an old memory. I quickly pulled back my hand, hoping no one noticed the terror flooding my body.

“The God of fire and forging, yes.” Maeve chimed in.

“There are several training rings as you can see.” Brynhildr placed her hands behind her back, slowing to an elegant stroll.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, miss Brynhildr—ma’am—but it all looks so... fake. Every move, it’s like choreography, perfectly executed and... graceful, even.” I said in a soft tone, trying not to offend my new hosts, but I am who I am. I have a real knack for speaking my mind, *pure unadulterated audacity*, as it’s been referred to.

“You can call me Bryn. Everyone does.” She looked out upon the hundreds of muscular women still running through their precise movements, barely a bead of sweat on their brows. A faint smile of pride shadowed her face. “It’s the dance of war. After hundreds of years of training, it becomes second nature. After thousands, it becomes inscribed in your very bones.”

“So this Celestial War, when did that happen?” I asked while looking back at the giant library. It was becoming blatantly clear that I have some pretty large holes in my ancient history education. I’m only fifty-six years old and I’ve spent half of my life taking care of my family’s estate, and the other half drinking away the end of the week.

Maeve, unsurprisingly, answered my question. “A little over five million years ago. The Gods rallied their troops to stand against their Titan parents and the Creatures of the Dark. After ten years of constant battle and bloodshed, the Gods won, and claimed the land. Caelus, Father of the Titans, was trapped in the underground prison. Almost all of the immortals then spread across the Universe, high from the adrenaline of war, wanting to conquer and rule their own worlds.”

“So, the Valkyrie have been around for over five *million* years?” I asked while staring out onto the ancient warriors, feeling acid run up my throat with shame for calling their perfected craft *fake*.

“The practice has.” Bryn said with a grim look on her face. “We lost almost all of the Valkyrie in the ten years war.”

“*We?*” I blurted louder than I intended to. “You’re saying... you were there?”

“I was.” Bryn’s eyes faded to a deep blue as she fell into the memory. “I led the fleet.”

I stood there gawking like an idiot, trying not to look like I had never met anyone as old as she was, embarrassed by my utter lack of knowledge of life before the New Era. I couldn’t find the words, the millions of questions that now overflowed my mind.

“Well, fuck.” Maeve’s eyes widened as she covered her laugh with a cough. “I mean...” I fumbled for the words that escaped me. “So, why gold?” I looked Bryn’s armor up and down, the intricate curves running along the lines of her athletic body. She looked down at me, not with distaste for my foul mouth, but with adoration for my bravery.

“It’s the color of her blood.” Maeve replied softly with a repressed grin.

“Would you ladies like to go to the main house for a glass of wine? I have a feeling you might have a lot of questions that will need answering.” Bryn offered with a hand towards the ginormous building.

“Wine before sundown?” I straightened my back dramatically and strutted towards the library, smiling as I shook my head. “We’re going to get along just fine, old lady. Come on, little fox. Or shall I call you Firefox, since you’re essentially a Godsdamn Encyclopedia.”

Bryn raised her eyebrows at my bold choice of words, and Maeve laughed loudly, it seemed her sense of humor was a sweet spot between nerdy and 21st century human history. Luckily for me, I’m a huge dork and a big human history buff.

The ancient Titan put her arm around my shoulder and walked alongside me. I thought of the relentless sea when I looked into her deep blue eyes. I could’ve sworn they whirled like waves in the eye of the storm. Bryn smiled as she said, “I have a feeling that you’re right, kid.”

As Maeve filled my empty crystal flute, I couldn't help but take in the view from the rooftop. Bryn explained that this particular part of the large property is reserved for faculty. The large limestone platform was enclosed by a golden balcony that was made to look like vines. Vintage chairs surrounded beautifully hand-crafted marble tables.

"I really appreciate the offer, Bryn, but I'm hardly an expert in the fields I've studied." I sat back in my chair, the sage cushions a perfect compliment to the many potted plants. "I afraid I wouldn't be a competent professor." My already wine-flushed skin burned as Bryn and Maeve stared with understanding, or pity.

"We have many experts you can learn from, but from how you talk about psychology and human studies," Bryn placed her elbows on the table, and looked out onto the sun that hung low in the sky, as if she noticed that I felt exposed under her intimidating warrior's eyes. "A passion like that should be honed into something as gratifying as teaching."

I took a sip of wine slowly into my mouth, giving myself time to think things over, for the inevitable psycho-evaluation of the women before me to fill my every thought. Despite the fact that I live my life by a gut feeling, and it seems it has taken a back seat since I arrived here, I couldn't turn off my racing mind as it noted every subtle change in body language and every word that was said. My body may have felt safe, but it didn't keep my mind from looking for a reason to keep running.

I made sure not to seem too interested in my drink. It had been a thousand years since the banning of fermented drinks due to the alcoholism epidemic. Wine was the only one left that used the ancient process. Any other drink was made from herbs such as kava kava, or enchanted spices that had a calming and euphoric effect.

Dionysos, the God of wine himself, enchanted every bottle that was made, and every bottle thereafter, so that the person who consumes it would be deprived of their drunkenness at any sign of addiction.

I suppose the two women sitting before me, bringing their drinks to their lips without the liquid line seeming to decrease at all, waited to see if I had the same illness. A most dangerous disease that spread darkness across

humanity for thousands of years, promoting violence and impulsivity. If I proved taken by that same darkness, there was no doubt I would no longer be welcome here.

Luckily for me, I'd come across enough demigods drinking illegal moonshine that led to the most unspeakable behavior that I rarely drink, especially if I think it may put me in an unsafe position. As I listened to the calm bustle of gardeners below, the distant shouting of football players on the pitch, and the soft hum of wind through the vines that climbed up the side of this magnificent mansion, I let my small sips ease me into the comfort I knew was going to be my salvation.

"As I'm sure you know, Rae, children are very rare." Maeve fiddled with the sleeve of her loose sweater. The way her long silk skirt was only a slightly different shade of sage was really speaking to me.

Fashion is not always appreciated by those I've come across, and damn if I didn't miss being able to pick from a large closet of options. I only took as many clothes as I could carry when I left home, and I didn't exactly make enough money to buy what I wanted.

"Only a thousand or so babies are born each year." Maeve said with shadows in her eyes. "And with the suspicious rise in deaths in Amerrysia, there are less and less people going to university and becoming professors. Doctrina is the most prestigious university in the world, you're welcome to study whatever you like, but you're more than competent enough to become a professor. There are also many other opportunities here. All you have to do is find something that makes you happy."

"You make it sound so easy." I looked to the white-haired woman who approached us, smiling with such sincerity that I couldn't help but smile myself.

"Excuse me, my friends," her voice was so soft that it settled the anxiety curdling in my stomach. "Our vegetable garden has overflowed with produce, I thought you might enjoy the spread we've prepared to go with your Prosecco."

"That is terribly kind of you, Gemma." Bryn's demeanor changed, as if it became essential that the kind lady was greeted with gentle grace. "Why don't you join us?"

“That’s very generous, *vasíllissa*, but I have to return to my sisters in the greenhouse for harvest.” She set the various roasted vegetables on our table before bowing lowly, and excusing herself.

“*Vasíllissa*?” I asked once Gemma had descended the spiral staircase.

“She’s from Crete, it means *Queen* in her native tongue.” Maeve smiled at Bryn who shook her head modestly. “Bryn’s leadership is highly respected here, and in many territories.”

“Rae,” Bryn looked to me, her golden armor glistening as she placed a hand on the table. “You don’t have to do anything, or even *be* anything but yourself while you’re here. There’s an empty room in the west wing, it’s yours if you wish. We’d be more than happy if you stayed, and I know Maeve would be happy to show you around.”

“It’d be nice to have a friend,” Maeve leaned in, a mischievous look in her eyes, “there are *far* too many men here.”

I couldn’t help as silent panic filled my eyes, Maeve’s smile dropped slightly with regret. I’ve had enough dark experiences with men in my life that my mind goes numb at the thought of being outnumbered by them.

“There are one hundred and forty-four Valkyrie always on the property.” Bryn added as she scanned my face. “Every person accepted here, whether it be a student or faculty, is put through a rigorous background and psychological evaluation. There is no safer place on Earth, kid. I promise you that.”

I nodded, trying to look convincing.

“*Please* tell me we’re gossiping,” A deep man’s voice—his accent making me reminisce of the sun shining through palm trees—came from the stairwell. I quickly turned to find a golden-skinned large man in athletic wear. His curly chestnut hair was tied up in a high bun. His smile was radiant as his white sneakers skipping across the ground.

There was certainly a boyish charm about him, even more so as soft dimples lined his smile. “It’s been a *loong* day and I’m in desperate need of a chat, but if you’re still going on about the time I failed my psychological evaluation, I’ll turn my amazing ass right around.”

His hair seemed gilded in the light of the sun. He danced as he made his way towards us, eyes to the ground, as if he always lived in a world of his

own. He mumbled a song under his breath before looking up, eyes going wide with surprise at the sight of me.

“You failed your psychological exam?” I looked to Maeve to explain, trying to make my voice sound playful and failing through the concern eddying in my eyes.

“I’m sure the chatty brute will explain.” Maeve sat back in her mahogany chair and shook her head at the large stranger. “Don’t worry yourself, love.” Maeve smiled and rubbed my hand with soft fingertips before looking back to the stunned man and rolling her eyes, as if the dramatics were too predictable.

“Dear Gods,” He stopped where he stood a few feet from our table. He dropped to his knees dramatically, a large hand on his chest. Bryn shook her head as she sighed. “I beg to be introduced to this marvelous creature.”

He stood and I pushed back in my seat, an instinct. He noticed my apprehension and moved slowly, his eyes beaming. He leaned over the table, offering his hand.

“Marcellus Kane,” I held out my hand, knowing that Maeve and Bryn seemed to know my fears enough to not let me be in the presence of anyone who would hurt me. His hands were softer than I expected, and he gently, and ever so slowly, lifted my hand to his lips. “I’m sorry for staring, you just have the most enchanting eyes. They’re the color of the sea and terrain of my kingdom, and I may be a little homesick.”

“Kingdom?” I nearly chuckled, although he was nothing but a gentleman, I thought as though he was trying hard not to say the wrong thing, as if it were in his nature.

“Marcellus is the Prince of Poseidas, his father sent him here to study and be safe from the conflict in Amerrysia, their northern neighbors.” Maeve said, huffing out a laugh as Marcellus bowed dramatically, then hopped to his feet, hands on his hips in a proud stance.

“And in terms of my psych-eval, I’ll have you *know*,” he pointed a finger to Bryn, who looked over to me with annoyance that was unmistakably laced with adoration. “I thought you were trying to trick me with that first part of the test, so really, I should’ve aced it purely out of... my coming wit.”

“I think you meant cunning.” I said under my breath, Maeve and Bryn seemed unfazed by the error.

“Or did I mean coming. Because I am be-coming more wiful the more older I grow.”

“Jeesus Christ.” I couldn’t help but feel astounded by his confidence, despite being so blatantly incorrect.

“Good man.” Marcellus thumped his chest. “I’ve been called that before, I think it’s the hair.”

“It certainly wasn’t your *coming* wit that made you fail that first test, Mar. You filled in the line for your name with *Prince of Hearts*, you fool.” Maeve laughed as she pulled her sweater further over herself.

“It didn’t ask for my *name*, Dissy, it asked for what I call myself, so really... ten points for thinking outside the box and another twenty for creativity.” He folded his arms as if he were immensely proud of himself, a sweet laugh coming from Maeve as Bryn scoffed before looking to me.

I bunched my eyebrows at Maeve, and by some miracle she knew exactly what I was curious about, as if she read minds, or her intelligence went past the walls of the library.

“A play on the last part of my surname: Lykoudis.” She leaned in on her elbows, and I shook my head. Marcellus didn’t move from where he stood, as if he waited for my approval. It was a comfort to finally be seen as someone with an opinion that matters. One that is valued, and not overlooked or written off.

“Well, then,” I could feel the anxious silence as they stilled in anticipation of my next words. “Would you be so kind as to join us, your Royal Highness.” Marcellus’s eyes went wide with excitement as he frantically pulled up a chair, the screeching noise against the stone made my teeth ache. “And please indulge us with whatever gossip you have.” I looked between my new friends before continuing, “I’ve decided to stay, and I would love to know all about what goes on in this hidden haven. And please, the more scandalous, the better.”

Bryn’s smile filled the air with a calmness that I let myself fall into. I had been living my life on edge, navigating everything I do by the pull of my gut, and in this moment, in this place, with these people, I felt as if I had

known Doctrina all of my life, and was relieved that I had finally made it home.

“And for the love of Gaea, you *have* to tell me where you guys get your clothes,” I leaned forward, a show of vulnerability I knew they all noted. “I have been deprived of my thirst for fashion for far too long and I am *obsessed* with both athletic wear and your *entire* outfit, Maeve.”

Marcellus lurched forward in excitement so quickly that I had to grab my glass from the table before it knocked over.

“To answer your first question,” Marcellus beamed, and I couldn’t help but note that nothing I said was a question, but he was too adorable to correct. “You’re never going to *believe* who I found smoking pot in the equipment room earlier, and let me just say this... it wasn’t all... they were doing.”

“The body’s ability to multitask is truly a marvel” I noted through a laugh at his pure joy.

“YES!” He threw his hands up in the air. “Finally, a kindred spirit. And spoiler alert... it was Grae and Charlo! Can you believe it? A healer and a student! It’s actually quite impressive what they were doing... given that Grae, you know... is blind.” He said without taking a breath.

“The mind reels.” Bryn said before looking to the sky.

“Oh, to answer your other question.” Again, not a question. “I just got this sweatshirt from the town a mile west on the coastline. You’re going to love it, *BABE*.” He quickly fumbled over his sweatshirt as he pulled it over his head and threw it on my lap. “Here, it’s yours.” He settled in his seat and smiled like a golden retriever just happy to be included.

“What the hell are you wearing, Mar?” Maeve laughed as she looked at his T-shirt.

“Oh!” He looked down proudly before explaining, “They also do customs, I had this one made last week.”

I looked at the shirt that was a figure outline of what looked like his face and his curly hair wrapped up in the style I now have no doubt is his signature look.

“Look,” he pulled on his shirt to reveal the writing below.

“I like Mar-buns,” Bryn began reading it, then shook her head as she looked at us. “And I cannot lie.”

I laughed out loud, earning a look of surprise from everyone. I curled over, laughing harder. I didn’t expect him to be familiar with ancient human history, and anyone who had an interest in their music was surely a friend of mine.

“I like him.” I pointed with my forehead before I took a long sip of the delicious sparkling drink my generous hosts provided. As I leaned forward to grab what looked like grilled eggplant, I noticed Bryn’s shoulders drop in relief.

Marcellus leaned back and put a hand on each of the women beside him, as if he didn’t believe what he was hearing. He hit Bryn’s armor several times before she swatted him away.

“That is the best thing I have ever heard in my entire life.” He said as his lip quivered. “I don’t even know your name, but we’re best friends now, ku’u lei.”

I laughed again, before standing up and curtsying low, my head bowed.

“I am Rae Andino, Princess of worn down taverns and drunken men.” When I looked up I surprised myself with my genuine smile, and the feeling of warmth, whether it be from the wine or the trust I had in the strangers around me, I couldn’t help how good it felt.

“I’m in love.” Marcellus said with a hand on his chest.

“We could show her Hygge tonight, if you’re not busy, Mar.” Maeve said before looking at me.

“Oh my *Gods* yes.” Marcellus hopped in his seat with excitement. I noticed a tattoo covering his forearm. I recognized it as *tā moko*, the ancient practice of the Māori people.

Although Marcellus is the Prince of Poseidas, there had been a long-standing fight over New Zealand between his nation and Gaesha, where the beautiful country resides. I remembering hearing that the Vengeful King had sent his only son to New Zealand as a boy to infiltrate the islands with his homelands culture. It seems to have had the opposite effect. “It’s the most beautiful little town. There’s so much to do, and the bar we go to all the time *loves* us.”

“Weren’t you banned for a year from that place?” Bryn said as she stood, setting her full glass on the table before resting a hand on the sword strapped to her hip.

“Right...” He said as his eyes dropped to the table. “Oh well. There’s plenty of other places we can show you. Oh, heavens I’m so excited I could piss.”

“Are you leaving?” I looked to Bryn.

“Yeah, kid. I have to meet with the Valkyrie in the training pit. If ever you’d like to learn our ways—learn how to protect yourself and hone your powers—my office is three stories below us, and if I’m not there, you can come straight to the pit.”

“I don’t have any powers.” I scoffed as my eyebrows dropped in confusion.

“I wouldn’t be so sure. I can feel them eddying inside of you. Come find me and we will figure it out together.”

“Whether you like it or not, Rae.” Maeve took my hand in hers. “You’re never going to be on your own from this day on.”

“We’ve got you, sis.” Marcellus placed his hand on top of ours, and Maeve gave him an annoyed look.

“Is he always like this?” I looked to Maeve, who pushed his arm with her elbow, mumbling irritated pleas under her breath.

“Unbearably so.”

“It was my greatest pleasure to meet you, Rhea.” Bryn stepped back before she turned to leave. “I look forward to seeing how you choose to spend your time here. Goodbye you two, I’ll see you at the faculty meeting tomorrow.”

“Thanks for the drinks, ma!” Marcellus shouted as Bryn made her way to the stairs.

“Bryn’s your mum?” I looked between the two of them.

“No, but she’s certainly Doctrina’s mom.” Marcellus said proudly.

“He grew up without one.” Maeve leaned in and whispered to me as he stood to kiss Bryn on the cheek. I nodded, understanding the feeling. Mine may be *alive*, but with most of the memories I have with her being with her back turned or with a red face of rage, she certainly wasn’t *there*.

“Bye mum!” We all said in unison, and she turned quickly, her lips curling in appreciation.

“Behave tonight, kids. Don’t overwhelm the poor girl with your tomfoolery.” Bryn placed her hand on the black decorated railing of the staircase as she made her elegant descent.

“See, only a mom would say *tomfoolery*.” Marcellus said in an old English accent with his fingers pressed to his lips, pinky raised in the air.

“I can show you to your room, love, and I’ll bring you loads of options for clothing. We like to dress nicely before heading to Hygge, it’s just too beautiful of a place not to.” Maeve put a hand on my arm, her long curls falling in front of her as she leaned in.

“Respectively, little fox, I don’t know if we’re the same size.” I looked down, I was at least five inches taller than her, and my hips would certainly stretch her pants.

“There is an entire room that all the girls put their old clothes in, we certainly are paid well enough to expand our closets from time to time. I promise that I will try to quench your thirst for fashion—as you said—and bring some of Charlo’s old things. She has impeccable taste.” Maeve stood, grabbing a roasted carrot and dipping it in hummus before motioning towards the stairs. “Well, come on then. I’m afraid Marcellus will implode from the anticipation of showing you our favorite hideaway.”

Marcellus squeaked with excitement. “I can hardly stand it. A newcomer... it’s too much!” He stood, holding his hand out to me. “After you, Princess of Taverna. You’re going to *love* it.”

My room was larger than any bedroom I had ever seen, even given the large Italian estate I was born into. The corner room had large windows from floor to ceiling, with a semicircle decorated in opal glass at the top. I walked towards the French doors that sat between the two windowed walls, a beautiful archway leading to the stone balcony, furnished with day beds and sea glass side tables.

The view was even more beautiful than the one from the rooftop. Rolling hills painted with flowers, large willows, and the faint bustle of herbalists held my adoring attention.

A long river weaved through, encircling the large property, with cobblestone bridges scattered throughout. Several gardens were visible behind the trees, covering hills that weaved towards the sea beyond, the sparkling light came through the trees like Gaea reached out a golden hand to bless this precious land.

“That’s my house, the one built over the river.” Marcellus pointed a finger from behind, towering over me by nearly a foot.

“It looks very tropical next to the Apls.” I squinted towards the cedar and silk floss tree covered home. It was very open to the elements, a large porch wrapping around it. I’d never seen anything other than a bridge built over the water, let alone a house.

“It reminds me of home.” Marcellus said softly, not in his usual manner of speaking. “If you stay here long enough, you’ll get to commission your own. Maeve’s is just to the left, there’s plenty of space between if you’d like to build there.” Marcellus looked down at me, and inhaled sharply. “Are you alright, ku’u lei?”

I hadn’t realized that a tear fell down my cheek. I don’t think I’d ever cried from anything but despair. I wiped it away with the back of my hand.

“More than alright.” I looked up at him, his adoration for me didn’t make me feel as though he’d blow past my boundaries, it made me feel safe, an almost unbelievable feeling. “Where’s Hygge?”

“Just past the tree line, you can see the Baltic Sea, it’s right on the coast.” He spoke softly, gently, as if he feared he would startle me.

“The Baltic Sea?” I whispered in surprise. How the hell did I walk all the way to the *Baltic Sea*? I had to have been walking for weeks. If not a month. Without sleep, without food. That isn’t possible... I should be near death, not full of energy... and *life*.

“I brought a few things, too many perhaps.” Maeve said as she walked through the door, a huge pile of clothes in her hands and thrown over her shoulder, high enough that she could barely see over the top of it. I moved towards the bed against the eastern wall, and plopped my bag down. “I wear a size thirty-eight in shoes, you look pretty close if you want to borrow a pair.” She looked down at my worn boots. “My cottage is just across the river,

the one that looks like a wood fairy and hermit commissioned it.” She huffed out a laugh.

“You know where I live, if you ever feel the urge to raid *my* closet.” Marcellus lifted his hand to rest on my shoulder, but seemed to doubt the action and ran his hand down the back of his neck.

“You’ve both been incredible kind and welcoming.” I looked around the room, the soft blues and muted neutral colors reminded me of the coastline of my home. “It’s all more than enough.”

I settled on a cream silk midi dress with a slit down the left leg, and a sage rib-corset over the top, accentuating my hourglass body shape. I felt more like myself now that I could finally dress how I’ve craved. Although the new attire was very similar to what I wore every day, it felt like an elevated version of who I was, reflecting exactly how I wanted to spend my time here. I looked at my ragged clothes draped across the bed, I hadn’t realized how worn they had been until they laid next to the chic clothes Maeve provided.

I threw a light brown knee-length coat over the top, a chill coming through my open French doors. I looked in the giant gold-trimmed mirror resting on the floor next to my bed. *My* bed.

Maeve was kind enough to curl my hair for me, the loose waves falling down my shoulders with fish-tail plaits scattered throughout, and the side pieces twisted and pinned back. It was perfect. She was so careful and intentional that I knew she wanted me to feel beautiful, and included. Whatever this was, this place and these people, I wasn’t going to let my fear ruin it. Even if it was a fever dream, I needed it.

“You look stunning.” Maeve said from the vanity across the room, turning around on the taupe velvet chair, an arm draped over the back.

“You’re too kind.” I turned and walked towards her. She brought her collection of makeup, and it was extensive. “Could you teach me how?” I looked to the overwhelming spread.

“I’d be happy to.” She sat up straight, pointing to each product and telling me the name and purpose. I thought of my childhood friends, and my parents who wouldn’t let me buy many things for myself.

I had asked my friends to help me with my makeup when we were teens, and noticed that on several occasions I looked ridiculous next to their carefully placed blush and eyeshadow. I stopped asking for their help. I thought maybe it was harder to do makeup on another person, or perhaps I didn't have the face for it, until I realized that it was intentional.

Something deep within in me whispered that I didn't have to worry about anything like that with Maeve. Sometimes you meet someone and you just know their character. When you see good in someone undeserving, it's really just your mind seeing someone like *her* behind their calculated manipulations, so that when you finally find someone *truly* good, they'll be easier to spot.

"Why is his house over the river?" I asked Maeve as we approached Marcellus's beautiful home. She seemed to be a direct line to any knowledge I needed, or random curiosities I would otherwise feel too embarrassed to indulge.

"The boy's a fish." Maeve scoffed. "He likes to be able to dive right in every morning before doing laps around the entire property."

"Impressive." I turned to follow the river with my eyes, noting how far he swims every single day.

"The man decided to not take life too seriously a few years ago, and I assure you, he's stuck to that promise." She looked up at the tropical home of her friend as she thought of her next words. "Something about being the son of the Vengeful King made the majority of his life as a prince focused on his duties, and making his father proud. Personally, I think the latter was never an achievable goal."

"I know what you mean." I admitted, knowing the hopeless endeavor
ALL TOO WELL.

"Marcellus met a girl not that long ago, she was a student here, as shy as she was beautiful. She got a scholarship for swimming, so you can understand how he immediately took a liking to her. I caught them doing their morning laps together a few times. Don't tell him I said this, but one of those times they were *definitely* naked.

Gods did she make him light up. He called her his Island girl. She transferred here from the University of Maui, and I'm sure you're aware of the trouble that's been going on in Amerrysia. She came here to get away from it all. I think being with her helped him enjoy life, and stop trying to live for his kingdom, and start living for himself. He's actually really smart, you know. I think he just really loves making other people laugh. She had the most delicately beautiful laugh."

"You keep talking about her in the past tense, did something happen to her?" I turned to meet her malachite eyes, intrigue pulling my eyebrows together in a focused glare.

"I don't know." She admitted, as if that feeling, coming from someone as brilliant as her, elicited significant discomfort. "She disappeared a few months ago."

"Poor Mar." I looked at the railing, as if expecting his bright smile to peer over the side. "How is he?"

"Well..." She gave me a forced smile, and I looked for regret in her eyes as she divulged such a heavy piece of information to someone she just met, but it seemed we talked as if we knew each other for a lifetime. I hoped she knew her troubles were safe with me. "He's Mar. He's coping, but she was his forever. I can't imagine he'll ever truly get over it, he'll just pretend he's okay."

"I understand." And I really did, pretending I was fine, or completely ignoring my reality, was my go-to. I didn't realize how terrible it was for me until I imagined Marcellus doing the same, and felt compelled to help him. "What was her name?"

"Kalea." Maeve smiled as if her very name drew beautiful memories into her mind. "It means *happiness* or *joy* in her native tongue."

"That's beautiful." I repeated the name in my head, wanting to make sure it was filed in the *do not mention* part of my mind.

"There you are, you sexy fucks." Marcellus shouted from his wrap-around balcony, peering over the side. I could barely see his cream linen pants, complimenting his loose grey satin button-up. THE MAN had taste.

"Hurry up, you beauty queen." I yelled up at his wide smile.

“I am a beauty *prince*, darling.” He shouted down with a hand up, then heaved his legs over the side, hitting the ground with a loud thud. He held out his arm to me, and I wrapped my own around it. “Let’s get drunk.”

The walk into town felt short with the pleasant company of my new friends. I had never laughed harder than at Marcellus’s stories and exaggerated expressions. Maeve’s soft giggle made me laugh even harder. It was as if the man had waited for someone like me to add to his hysterical hypotheticals and wild theories about various students at the school.

“Good Gods.” I said breathlessly as we walked down the long stairs leading to the town square. Every shop and bar was intricately decorated, a style I had only seen in my brief time in London when I was a girl.

The soft earthy tones of each building blended beautifully with the vines, flowers, and trees that weaved between and around each store. Soft lights shone through windows on several of the three to four story buildings. I wondered if each shop owner lived above with their family, each person so close to anything they could ever need.

There were twinkly lights covering the entire path like a canopy. I pulled my friends arms closer to me and walked faster, pulling them along. I could faintly see where the winding path led: to a large cliff looking out onto the Gulf of Riga, and out onto the Baltic Sea that laid beyond two giant islands.

“Easy now, Dino, there’s plenty of time to see it all.” Marcellus laughed as we ran down the stairs.

“You’re really creative with your nicknames, aren’t you, big guy?” I laughed as I skipped down the steps, my companions excitement matching my own.

“The bar—the one he’s allowed in, at least—is just at the end of the road.” Maeve held out her free arm in that direction.

I broke free of their hold and ran towards the soft lights of a pastry shop. I placed my hands on the glass, feeling like a little girl again, nothing but wonder in my eyes.

“Would you like something?” Maeve said from behind.

I ran my hands down the pockets of my coat. “I forgot my money.”

“Psh. As if we were going to let you pay.” Marcellus put an arm around my shoulder, pulling me toward the doors. “Come on, the macaroons are *divine*.”

We walked towards the end of the road, sweet pastries in hand. I skipped down the cobblestone road, the blush sneakers Maeve lent me more comfortable than any shoe I’ve ever owned.

“The terrain used to be mostly plains in this area.” Maeve turned back from where she strolled a few steps ahead of us. “But a few strategically placed bombs and,” she motioned with both hands to the steep hill we’ve been climbing, “hills, mountains, and...” she picked up her pace a bit, Marcellus and I following close behind, until we were at the end of the road where a balcony looked over the sea.

“Woah.” I gawked at the drop towards the sea was like being on the top of a skyscraper in Amerryisia.

“Cliffs.” Maeve said while peering towards the rocks below.

“Here we are.” Marcellus said while looking towards an opening next to the balcony, a chain impaled in the rock, leading down.

I walked cautiously over to where he stood, and a staircase built from perturbing rocks on the side of the cliff, leading towards the sea, seemed to extend endlessly down the huge drop. The gold chain acted as a railing, but it was rusted enough that I wondered how old it was.

“Nope.” I blurted, gripping the balcony harder, as if they’d drag me towards that stairway to hell.

“It’s enchanted, sweet deer, by Bryn herself.” Maeve held out her hand to me, and her smile made it hard not to trust her. “Don’t worry, I promise it’ll be worth it.”

“The place we’re going is in a cave in the cliff, this is the only way to get there.” Marcellus skipped to the first of at least a hundred steps, his large body slowly disappearing as he descended, looking back to us with a nod of encouragement.

“It’s the best place to watch the sunset.” She looked towards the sun setting between two distant islands. “There seems to be a storm coming in too, so the slight cloud cover is going to make it a beautiful one.”

I don't know what sudden confidence had me walking down the steps, Maeve only a few behind me, but I thought of my new room, the rolling hills from my balcony, and the endless possibilities that this place and these people will gift me, and somehow, it kept my feet moving.

I breathed slowly through puckered lips, Maeve going on about something behind me, but I couldn't hear over the whistle of the wind against the stone. The weather had been clear all day, and it seemed that the incoming storm perfectly reflected the panic that settled in my gut, waiting to tear through me at any sign of danger.

Walking on the side of a *stupidly* large cliff felt like just the thing to do it.

"Mar," Maeve shouted towards the broad-shouldered beast that walked slow enough that I knew he was making sure he stayed five or less steps ahead of me. "Storms rolling in pretty quickly, you won't fall, Rae, but rain might make it a bit slick, so best to pick up the pace a little if you're up for it."

"Don't love the idea, Firefox." My hands hurt from how hard I gripped the railing, and my thighs burned from how hard my legs clenched with my increasing anxiety. I made the mistake of looking over the edge, and my heart sunk to my feet. "I fell off a cliff when I was young. Not really their biggest fan anymore."

Marcellus looked back with a look of guilt that made me regret sharing that piece of information. So as penance, I picked up my pace.

Panic stabbed my diaphragm, and part of me knew it wasn't any rational anxiety from conquering one of my fears, or my usual worry from meeting new people, it was a desperate scream from my gut.

I don't know what it was exactly—my gut, my instinct, or something completely taking over my body—that sent me turning and sprinting up the two steps that separated Maeve and I.

And just for a single moment, I could've sworn that time paused, in the seconds it took for me to get to her. The reason for such an unexplainable feeling came quickly, as a giant bolt of lightning struck my back, shooting through my body, smashing the large piece of stone we both stood on.

The next thing that happened was even harder to explain. I knew I was almost instantly knocked unconscious, due to the impossible fact that I was now viewing the macabre scene from above our bodies as they fell towards the sea.

I watched Marcellus drop to his knees, gripping the side of the step he flew to from the impact. I'm thankful that it wasn't his instinct to jump after us, because from how the storm had brought in giant waves, crashing hard against the cliff, our only chance of survival was having one of us safe.

At the exact second my back hits the water, my point of view is now from deep in the angry sea, looking up to where my body sinks towards the sandy floor. Maeve is thankfully conscious, trying to swim towards me, but getting swept by the harsh waves.

All I could do was watch. Watch my body sink as Maeve struggled to make it above water as she took short breaths. A golden chain hit the surface before sinking a few feet in. Maeve's feet pumped fiercely as she tried moving for it, and made fast glances towards me every time her head went under.

Finally, her hand gripped the chain, but I could sense how tired, and surely injured, she was. Even if she could hold onto the chain and climb, the waves were whipping her against the sharp stone. It was a miracle none of the blows had knocked her out yet.

As if I had wished it into existence, a loud crack followed by her lifeless body sinking towards mine sent a hot rod of fear in my chest.

In an attempt to test how far my reach into the realm of impossibility really was, I extended my arm. And sure enough, I watched as my unconscious body lifted their arm as if in a deep sleep.

My throat bobbed with hope, and I screamed without sound in my non-physical state, and a shimmer began sparkling beneath my skin. Maeve's body began lifting, her body arched, arms back, head tipped.

And like a proper idiot, or a fearless friend, Marcellus dove skillfully into the water where Maeve's body rose towards the surface.

It was likely that I was dead, and whatever this was, was my soul's attempt to thank them for how perfect my last day on this realm was. As Marcellus swam past Maeve's body and towards mine, I believe a sound of shock and annoyance would've escaped me had I still been in my body.

No sir, not on my Astral-Realm watch.

Marcellus's eyes went wide as my other arms rose, and he flailed as he, too, was pushed towards the surface. I watched them with immeasurable appreciation as their bodies rose out of the water.

I looked at my own laying against the sea floor, the faint shutter of lightning briefly highlighting my soft features. I had been conditioned to look at myself with eyes of disgust, the kind of perfectionism that made true beauty an impossibility, an unreachable standard that held me captive, and kept me below people who didn't deserve me.

But now, looking at myself, dead or unconscious or something in between, I looked so peaceful. My eyebrows not pinched in judgment, eyes not heavy with insomnia, nor jaw clenched in anxious anticipation.

This could've been the first time in my life that I was free of worry, free of pain, free of... it all.

I would not have minded being swept away into the sea.

Oceans have a calmness to them, but hidden beneath lies unimaginable strength and secrets. My kin.

Even in death, I couldn't live with myself if Maeve or Marcellus had been hurt, or Gods forbid, had died from my unlucky presence.

And there it was.

For the first time I realized that if I couldn't live with myself after feeling responsible for a stranger's, an almost friend's, death, wouldn't the same be true for them?

I said a sweet goodbye to my peace, with a promise to see it again one day. Either in life, or in death. But for certain, nonetheless.

My body rose, and my consciousness moved slowly towards it. Just before I breached the surface, I shot back into my body with the same impossible force of the lightning that took me out of it.

"Rae!" Maeve's broken scream became clearer the more I rose into the air. "Oh my Gods. Mar, look!"

I began feeling my body, my bones heavy, my back burning in the place I was struck. My friend's voices became muffled as the wind picked up, rushing past my ears.

“GO AWAY. FARTHER.” It felt like a shock to hear Maeve’s tone turn into a hot rage, even with how little I knew her. It also didn’t seem like the best demand someone with her vocabulary could come up with, but she did get quite the blow to her head, so it’s not all that surprising.

As my body laid itself down gently on the cobblestone, I felt their hands grip my body as if it were made of glass. Mar’s large palm cupped my head, while Maeve’s delicate fingers searched my body for injuries.

I tried to speak, and failed. I tried lifting my arms, but it only made me feel more tired. So, so tired.

I finally grunted, and Maeve’s gasp of relief encouraged my body to fight harder, and I could feel my fingers flex against Maeve’s hand that held my own tightly. Had we known each other in another life? Almost died together in another life? The familiarity must mean something.

Marcellus’s laugh was full, his thumb rubbing the side of my head, bringing me into my body completely.

Given that I was struck by literal lightning, and fell at least a hundred meters, my injuries should be so much worse. I shouldn’t be alive, and neither should Maeve. No demigod could survive a fall like that, and from what Maeve told me, her and Marcellus are just that. Just like me. An immortal born from the blood of lost humans, and the Gods.

“Can you hear me, deer?” Maeve said softly, the bustle of patrons rushing over to help, or watch, filled my now pounding head.

As my eyes began opening, the bright and vibrant colors that filled my field of vision was overwhelming, and yet life-giving.

“Holy Hera.” My voice was raspy, and I coughed up a bit of water before attempting to push myself to sit up, my friend’s helping me in my endeavors.

Maeve’s hair was an impossibly bright color red, and Marcellus’s green eyes made me blink rapidly at their intensity. My eyes traced down their bodies, until it caught on a shimmer that had my squinting. The pair of them had thick liquified platinum dripping down their arms.

“Maeve...” Marcellus said breathlessly. “Her eyes.” Maeve and Mar looked to each other, a million questions in their locked gaze.

“I must’ve hit my head *really*. Fucking Hard.” I massaged my temple, but my new vision didn’t cease. I turned over, trying to get a look at my eyes in a puddle, as if they were swollen and were simply catching the light differently. “Can we maybe eat somewhere else?”

What I saw in the reflection beside me had me speechless, my eyes were swirling with white and blue light, like two bands of smoke intertwining as a light shown from beneath.

What the hell happened to me?

I don’t remember passing out, or Marcellus carrying me back to Doctrina, but the scar the lightning left, spreading like pink roots from the center of my spine, surely reminded me that what happened was real.

Even if I had no idea what any of it meant.

Not for many, many years.

Chapter Four

I flexed my back as the old memory faded, and the view of the sunrise filled my immortal eyes. If I focused hard enough, I could almost hear the deafening crack of the lightning as it hit my spine.

A few months after that day at the cliffs, I brought Marcellus to Hygge with me to get tattoos. He got one of my birthday, with the first number formed into a cliff. I shouldn't have been surprised, he had one of Maeve's, Bryn's, and our friend Jax's already. Allegedly not too long after he had met all of them. Mar was a gambler to be sure.

I got the fading pink lines of my scar tattooed black, knowing my immortality would soon render them invisible, but I wanted to remember them. Forever.

There are many aspects of the accident that I may never understand, but one thing was for sure: I was no demigod. I was not even a God, or a Titan. I was something else.

For years, I was reckless in an attempt to test my limits. It scared the shit out of my friends, and definitely pissed off Bryn.

Apparently, in order to find out who the hell I am, I had to unlock repressed memories sitting irritatingly deep in my mind. I had remembered several by now, like a handful of pieces to a thousand piece puzzle: Important, but useless.

As the sun now fully breached the horizon, visible in its entirety, there was no escaping it. It is now officially, to both myself and the rest of the world, my five hundredth birthday. I'm still young compared to many of the

immortals I know. My best friend, Maeve, for instance, is 1,312. My mentor Bryn, is a five million year old Titan. Give or take a few hundred thousand years. Marcellus definitely lies about his age, because he is somehow both 415, and 615. So I'd wager he's somewhere in the middle. Truthfully, he's the type to forget something as essential as his date of birth.

Our friend Jax, a mysterious force I'd met a few weeks into my stay at Doctrina, was an unknown age. There was a lot about him I didn't know, like why literal shadows seemingly made of smoke circled him, whispering things about the world. From his incredible skills in defense training, I'd say he's got at least a millennia under his belt.

I let the sun burn my iris's as its delicate colors now filled the morning sky. As I closed my eyes, I thought of the traditions my inner circle has for significant birthdays. The number five hundred is known within the divine realm for signifying manifestation and the law of attraction.

At a person's half-century celebration, everyone writes down the things they want to come into their or their loved ones lives—wishes, if you will—and the dreams are then folded and placed in an ENCHANTED flame. It has to be five hundred in total, or it won't work... allegedly. It's said that with the right ritual, the paper's ashes will reform into the manifestation of a granted wish.

I have no idea what that means, but the idea of getting drunk and dancing around an eternal flame, dressed in traditional pagan sundresses while eating all of my favorite dishes, sounded pretty enticing.

We call ourselves immortals, but the truth is, as I learned from a very young age, some of us are more immortal than others. You'd think immortal would be pretty straight forward: Cannot. Die. Well, apparently not. It's possible for our bodies to be destroyed—after considerable effort, of course—but the essence of our soul simply moves to another compatible body.

Regardless of our soul living on, those left with the remains of our body mourn just the same. We don't know how to track where our souls go, and we don't remember our past when we wake up. It wasn't always this way. Yet another reason why this life seems like the perfect punishment.

I looked down at my feet dangling off the balcony, then into my crystal wine glass, sparkling with the same luminescent wine I drank the night the dominos began falling.

I had been at Doctrina for over four hundred years, studying as a psychologist and Valkyrie-in-training. Very much, in training. I've been working with Ares—my therapist—to try to unlock my repressed memories. Memories repressing not only the horrors of my past, but my unknown power, too.

DOCTRINA  THREE WEEKS AGO

“Let’s go over this again before we dive into the big stuff. Our world is made up of Titans—like Bryn—Gods—like the... *wanker* who wants you dead—”

“*Language*, Firefox.” I scolded my friend. I was used to the worst word she’s ever said being *stupid*, or *defecate*. I surely cursed enough for the both of us. “Go on.”

This stuff was elementary, but a few of my memories have released during my studies to become a professor, so it seemed like the right move to start with the basics and go from there.

“And demigods, of course.” Maeve explained to me a few weeks ago in the dim candle light of a dusty library. “Titans are one of the most immortal beings on Earth, and are extremely difficult to destroy. When they are, their essence can be split into several bodies, without depleting or splitting their power, since it’s summoning from an infinite source—from Caelus—Father of the Titans.”

I squinted my eyes and jerked my head slightly as if wordlessly saying, *huh?* I knew exactly who she meant, I just felt like being a pill. The many memories my subconscious locked away—without my consent, might I add—had begun flooding my mind often recently. At entirely inconvenient times.

The memory of walking in on my first boyfriend underneath a girl I had once considered a friend hit me like a physical blow, moments before a

literal blow to the chest during defense classes in the training pit. It was unfortunate to say the least.

The very same day, while in the treatment room, having warm oils massaged down my sore arms, a quick flash of a dark stone room invaded my mind for only a moment, but the abject terror it elicited, for whatever reason, had me accidentally slamming poor Hygeia—our best healer—into the white brick wall.

And now, while half-listening to Maeve and admiring the ancient library, a new version of an old memory came in unapologetic waves:

I remember going to the cliffs with my friends, I was old enough to be able to leave without my parents really giving a shit, but young enough that they definitely should have.

I couldn't figure out why my tiny group of friends had been giggling the whole walk, I always felt like they were whispering about me, but blamed it on my insecurities, and narcissistic habits they always shamed me for having.

Until I fell off the cliff, and onto a stone ledge thirty feet below. I always remembered that part. The essential detail I somehow forgot was that I didn't fall from being reckless, with my friends screaming after me in a panic...

I was pushed.

And they weren't screaming, they were laughing. There's a reason creepy little girls are a staple in horror films. There is no creature more diabolical or brilliant than a little girl who thought herself wronged or challenged, or simply in a quiet, brewing, feminine rage.

In the society I grew up in, my family—owning and operating the largest Hadron Collider in Athenia—held a heavy influence, but it was the patriarchal charmer that controlled our societal standards like a puppeteer. Sir Brian.

He spent most of his time in his mansion in Frankfurt, but his son resided in Palermo. A delicacy to the young girls of my town. I certainly couldn't help the fact that I matured faster than my friends, and Daniel took a particular liking to me. He would later become my first boyfriend.

One of the leader-types of my friend group wasn't entirely thrilled that he laughed at a letter she had written him in class, asking him if he would go on a date with her, replying on the same piece of paper with:

Sure, if you can get Rae to talk to me.

She probably would've gotten over it if Daniel didn't hand the paper to his friends, who laughed before naming things I had that she didn't. They were all cruel, underdeveloped swine, that was certain.

I wasn't in that class, but I heard about it the next day, and went to my friend, begging her for forgiveness. Something I apparently had to do a lot in my friend group even when I didn't understand why.

"They're just a bunch of arseholes, T. Don't let them get to you."

Clearly, she was still pissed when she pushed me off the cliff.

There was another part I had forgotten, now filling my mind with relentless invasion that felt like less of a thought, and more of someone's immortal power pulling pieces of my subconscious to the surface.

It started storming, and I pushed myself back on the sharp edge of the cliff's lip, and into a cave. I was shaking from the cold, making my injuries scream. I had fallen on my side, breaking my collarbone and parts of my arm. My head was so swollen that I worried I'd be unrecognizable and I'd have to run off to this cave and call it my new home. I was a bit dramatic. Shut up, I was twelve for Gods' sake.

I must have stayed there, in a half-fetal position, for hours. I don't even think that the worst part was that no one came looking for me, or that I was screaming so loudly during my attempted climb that surely someone heard me and just didn't care. The worst part was that it took an entire day until I heard voices above me.

My present self cried, hand covering my mouth in an attempt to keep from sobbing as I watched the memory of my friends telling my parents that I had tried to push one of them off, but I fell off instead, and must've fallen to my death. Their forced sobs kept me silent, laying on my back, tears blurring my vision of the cave's edge, as I listened.

Betrayal. Confusion. Pain. I didn't understand. Did I remember it wrong? Had I truly been so thoughtless and cruel? How hard did I hit my head?

Long after they had left, a rope nearly scared the piss out of me as it swung in front of the cave's mouth. I shouted after my rescuer, but no one responded. When I reached the top, relief momentarily overshadowing my broken bones, I found no one there.

Walking home sent acid up my throat. I shouldn't have been so surprised when my parents screamed at me for so long, ordering me to apologize to my friends and their parents first thing the next day. When I asked to be taken to the hospital, they refused me. They said that my injuries should *serve as a reminder* and maybe next time I won't *be so stupid and reckless*.

I don't know why these visions had come, what had triggered them, or what I was supposed to do with pieces of my childhood being forever changed. My inability to trust people makes sense now, but it doesn't change my chances of getting any better at it.

As if only a moment had passed since I fell into the memory, Maeve continued explaining our world's history, completely lost in her one true love—knowledge—that she didn't notice as I wiped my tears.

"Imagine Caelus is the planet—all planets, to be exact—and the Titans are the mountains, oceans, and forests." Maeve wore loose knitted sweaters tucked elegantly into floor-length silk skirts, always of the same shade. She has inspired many of my monochromatic moments, though I always suspected that her choice of clothing and modesty was driven by a pained past, and not a fashion statement. "They were created *from* Caelus, *by* Gaea. It's believed that Chaos gifted Gaea the planets, moons, and stars, so they could watch life slowly evolve. Together."

"That's lovely." I groaned before I tapped my chalice to hers, earning a loud chime that probably irritated those around us who were trying to study for Midterms. "Let's drink up, and plow through this shit."

"This *shit* holds your entire future in its fist, so listen up." Maeve pushed her sunset red hair over her shoulder, revealing her beautiful immortal face and blue eyes, shining like polished aquamarine. "In the very beginning, there was a vast Universe of nothingness, only Chaos. We don't really know why, but Chaos eventually bore Gaea, the Mother of All Life. His equal. They were the first Primordials; the creators. They soon gave life to the

Primordial balances: light and dark, love and hate. These became the Primordials we now know as Hemera and Nyx, and Eros and Erebus.”

“So, she’s the Mother, and those are the first four children?” I bunched my eyebrows at the question. I had to keep pulling my eyes from the intricate details of the ten story library. Each marmoreal pillar had hand crafted animals, plants, and geometry that felt almost cinematic. The golden curves of the balcony railings glistened in the light of the floating candles that filled the air.

Maeve flipped through the large book before her so fiercely that I waved my hand in front of my face to keep the dust from reaching my eyes.

“Here, listen to this: *The first Mother formed her children from the pieces of herself that kept the Universe from nothingness, from the essential balance necessary for life, and made them her equals.*”

“So...she’s the Mother...who made more mothers?” The weight of my golden goblet scraped the ancient mahogany table as I pulled it to my mouth and took a sip. I huffed a soft laugh into my drink before continuing, “Not a fan of her mate’s masculine tendencies, then, I suppose.”

“Technically, she made two male and two female Primordials. Nyx and Hemera were made first, and usually personify into female bodies, but they’re all pretty fluid.” Maeve flipped surprisingly quickly to a page and tapped her finger on it while scooting the book between us. “See, here’s a painting from 1634 CE, there’s Hemera and Nyx.”

I studied the page for a moment before saying, “It’s all very compelling, but get me to the good stuff, little fox. We’ve got places to be.”

If there was one thing I knew about my Firefox, it was that she never gets sick of relaying her unimaginably vast knowledge.

“Caelus was trapped in Tartarus—a celestial being of, well, an underground prison—and while he was there, he whispered through the wind and shadows to pollute human minds. He preached love and acceptance, but his actions revealed death and despair. He created a dark revolution under the guise of kindness, and fed off the evil that ensued. The Primordials, Hemera and Nyx, created Tartarus in order to confine Caelus to Earth, severing his ties with every other planet in the Universe. Caelus also

created the Furies—Angels and Demons—who did his bidding on the human lands.”

“He sounds like a bitter old fart.” I said mostly to myself.

Maeve turned to a page of her book that depicted an image of a man and God sitting on clouds, arms outstretched, their fingers nearly touching.

“He made sure that humans and immortals never procreated, always seeing the mortals as unworthy.” She rolled her eyes.

“Dick.” She was definitely in enough of a rant that she definitely wasn’t listening to my little comments anymore, they were more for me.

“The Gods were kind of doing their own thing at the time. They wanted to thrive on other worlds after they imprisoned Caelus. Earth holds many dark memories for immortals. They had no idea he was manipulating the humans for millennia while they left him unchecked. Caelus wasn’t silenced until 2,112 CE.”

“That was over thirteen thousand years ago, mind if we skip ahead a bit, red?” I looked back at the image. So much truth created in a time where the humans were being brainwashed.

“Well... A lot happened.” Maeve let out a long exhale before continuing. “Basically, the Gods returned and took order back on Earth. Hemera and Nyx took two pieces of the key to Tartarus, and put them on opposite ends of the Earth, creating a massive energetic field, which acted as a dampener on Caelus’s powers. They fell in love with humanity again, and eventually, there were no humans left. Just dems—demigods—with a small percentage of human genetics. There are mostly dems in the world, with maybe a thousand Gods, and even fewer Titans. And of course, there are only a handful of Primordials... that we know of.”

I stared at the sparkling wine in my glass, and found myself lost in the faint glow that comes from the enchanted drink. A true beauty to behold, probably even more so with a slight buzz.

“So, what exactly *is* Gaea?” I said as I pulled Maeve’s book closer. I could’ve sworn I saw her flinch in the corner of my eye.

“Honestly, I think she’s life. And I think she’s a lot more than that. She didn’t *give up* the qualities she gave to the Primordials, she’s infinite, half of

infinity is still infinity. So, I think she's life and everything else. Everything we know, and everything we don't." Maeve sat back in her chair, faintly smiling.

"So, she's life. Then why is life first, why is she the greatest force in the Universe?"

"Because life and death are not equal, not really. That's the thing, if they were equal, there would be no life. The mere fact that life has existed for eons, means that it has always conquered death—or at the very least—has been more powerful." Maeve shifted towards me. "Death is just the absence of life, like darkness is the absence of light. So, I think that... Chaos overcame darkness and death, and what Gaea created—what she was created for—is light and life.

"Existence persevering. What Chaos truly wanted, was a mate with whom to experience life with. I think he wanted one thing he didn't know; couldn't predict. Seems pretty human of him to experience desire and yearning, but I suppose omnipotence can be lonely, and predictable. I think he wanted to know what life could be like if it were in another's hands. I wonder what he thinks of what it has become, from his self-inflicted isolation in a far away galaxy. I'm sure to him, it's a wonder."

I looked at her with a stunned look on my face, with a hint of awe at the casualness that Maeve always presented her intelligence. Never brash or arrogant. I could feel her love herself more when she let her beautiful mind and curiosity run free. Her freckled face always made me wonder if she got a spot for every brilliant thought she had.

"Anyways," Maeve said while aimlessly flipping through the book. "That's just a theory."

"Well, for what it's worth, I hope you're right." I set down my chalice with a loud thud. "It's brilliant. But a bit haunting."

"Are you remembering anything? Even the small things are important." Maeve looked down at her book, making it a little too obvious that she was avoiding eye contact. I read once that you're not supposed to look a gorilla in the eyes, you should appear submissive and small, in an effort to not get mauled.

It felt like that.

“No, nothing.” I lied. Sharing the memories was sometimes more painful than remembering them. The last memory I shared with Maeve was particularly gruesome.

I was a child, maybe three years old. A man stood over me, his long hair falling in front of me like beams of white light. When he lifted his hand, my skin burned as if it was being melted off the bone. I screamed, my throat aching as I did.

Burned onto my skin, was a prophecy. Not enough to scar, not with immortal skin, but enough to hurt really fucking bad. The man, has plotted against me ever since. A *wanker*, as Maeve called him.

And now, over four hundred years later, he’s taken everything.

If I had known that this one conversation, a wine-flushed evening with my best friend, would lead me to spending the morning of my five hundredth birthday alone, sitting on the balcony’s edge while contemplating the worth of my existence, I might not have ever asked.

Despite the fact that I know accessing my memories is the key to everything, it brings me no peace. I never thought that I’d be better off ignorant. But now, after everything that happened, I wish I could go back to before.

The beautiful and blissful before.

“Should we take a break, my deer?” Maeve broke me from the torment of my thoughts.

My body seemed to be lost in the memory, too, so I simply gave an insincere grin, and nodded.

“Your place or mine?” She closed the book in front of us, and gathered her things.

“Considering mine has not only a bar, but a bartender on-call, and yours has so many books that you rarely have a chair not already occupied, I’d say the choice is clear.”

“Oh, it certainly is, I just find it a bit churlish to invite oneself over.” She tipped her head as she smiled at me, and rose from her chair.

I squinted at Maeve, and she seemed to know my meaning. I’m not usually adept to admitting when I don’t know something, but with Maeve, I never felt stupid for asking for clarity.

“Rude or improper.” She said with a complete absence of condescension as she stood and turned towards the exit.

“Well, Lady Lykoudis,” I spoke in my best proper old-lady-English, “far be it from me to encourage churlishness.” I quickly moved to the door, opening it and holding out my hand. “Such impropriety shan’t be... doneith in this respectable township.”

Maeve huffed out a laugh as she strode through the large oak doors.

“I couldn’t agree more, Lady Andino.” She held out her arm, urging me forward.

She shook her head as she looked back at me. As we made our way towards the main entrance, I recognized a few students and dipped my head as I tried to remain professional despite my sudden need to be a giddy child.

I noticed a few new plants decorated the large entrance, which is no surprise given that Doctrina is surrounded by acres upon acres of gardens. Nature was a pillar of this community, which would also explain the vines that climbed each wall of the entrance, and the large willow tree at the center, reaching towards the tall glass ceiling that surrounded a large atrium where sun and rain could make its way to the behemoth of a tree.

It truly blew my mind that such careful detail was put into every inch of this massive building. Even the classrooms had individual personalities, reflecting the taste of each professor. The history room was filled with old books, faded maps, and riddled with plants and naturalistic decor that perfectly captured my dear friend Maeve’s taste.

“Ya best hold yer wheesht, ya wee git.” Maeve and I watched as a student yelled to his friend walking quickly away from him. I looked to Maeve and gave her a look that said, *how churlish*. She only rolled her eyes in response.

“Silas.” I called towards the boy, still fuming as he mumbled under his breath. His perfectly combed hair flopped as he kicked an invisible rock.

“Oh, hey there, Miss Andinah.” He beamed at the sight of us. “Will ya be needin’ my services tonight?”

“If you’re up for it, we’re heading there now.” I smiled at him, noticing his light brown hair seemed to be a bit blonder, and wondered if it was sun or his obsession with his looks.

“Can ya do the t’ing?” He straightened his back, as if preparing for something.

“You know my place is barely a quarter mile from here, and you are the best football player we have?” I raised my eyebrows at him, finding that my insinuation was lost within the compliment, and he shifted around with a proud smile. “Fine.” I raised my hand, and he vanished, as I sent him to my house.

“You realize that with your powers you don’t *need* a bartender, let alone a bar?”

“Of course I realize that.” I stopped as I took in the magnificent entrance one last time before pushing through the glass doors. I noticed the light chatter and sweet laughs coming from the students as classes ended for the day, the sound only confirming my next words. “It’s not his fault he doesn’t come from a wealthy family, or that his family’s business isn’t doing well. He’s doing me a service, and is getting paid a reasonable amount so that he can stay here, and send money back home.”

“I know, my gentle deer.” Maeve grabbed my arm as we stepped out into the beauty that was Doctrina’s front courtyard. “I just think you needed a reminder. That your kindness is not lost on this world.”

“You sneaky little minx.” I kissed the side of her head. “What did I do to deserve you?”

“I don’t even know the answer to that one.”

I looked to my friend slowly, my eyebrows bunched together.

“I’m sorry... Did professor Lykoudis just make a *joke*?”

“It seems so, and I did not care for it.” She attempted to look too proud as she lifted her head. “Perhaps you’re churlishness is finally rubbing off on me. I shall be the talk of the town by morning.”

“Oh, such a scandal.” I replied in an exaggerated prissy voice.

We giggled as we finally walked past the blossom trees and several golden benches, some with students studying, drinking, or snogging.

The babble of a long river, weaving around trees and gardens, making its way around Doctrina’s border, connected each one of our houses.

When I first arrived here, I had my own apartment, but stayed in Maeve’s spare bedroom several times, which was practically a tiny library.

Bryn offered to have the Valkyrie women build me a home, one that I could design myself. After a lot of consideration, I figured that with my reluctance to train as a Valkyrie, or a professor, I could somehow heal myself as I built my home. With my own two hands.

As it came into view, I admired the Italian style facade, with vines climbing the entire thing. The windows were rounded at the top, as was the maya blue front door. The beautiful limestone perfectly complimented the white blossom trees that surrounded it. The creams, light browns, taupes, sage, and sky blues of the outside was perfectly reflected in the various textures and shapes of the decor within.

Just as Doctrina attempted to bring nature indoors, I felt inspired to do the same. It is such a gift, to be surrounded by the beauty of the earth, and such a simple and easy way to heal oneself. My study of humans only made me more sure that if all else failed, the ground beneath my bare feet, the colors of life around me, and the sound of wind through the trees could heal whatever is broken inside of me.

I turned to Maeve, who seemed to be looking in the direction of her own home, the structure of which blended into the forrest that surrounded it, as if she wanted to be one with the world, as well.

I found myself looking over to the other side of my house, where a gorgeous tropically inspired home sat like a bridge over the river. My friend who lived there, woke me up nearly every morning from the loud splash of him jumping in the river. Sometimes I think it's on purpose. A cannonball isn't exactly the most practical way to enter the water from five meters up.

"Should we invite them?" Maeve asked as our boots hit the hard stone of the bridge that connected our two havens.

"Why ask when you've already invited them?" I turned my head to face her. "You know you're incredibly obvious when you use your Ocullum."

"I am not." She argued.

An Ocullum is a brilliant and widely used piece of technology that was first invented several thousand years ago. It's a little silver disc that sits on your temple, transmitting and pulling information from your conscious mind, while having the ability to project it into your eye sight.

In other words, if you think about sending a message to someone, it will project the message in the top left corner of your sight. This message then can be sent to other Ocullums, and since I noticed Maeve's eyes darting back and forth in front of her a few minutes ago, I assumed she was doing just that.

"I just told Phoebe, not *them*." Maeve admitted. It seemed she was not-so-subtly suggesting that I be the one to invite them.

I exhaled loudly as I thought of my code word, something you think to pull up your Ocullum, something that no one knows, in case it's stolen, or hacked.

white-eyed wolf one, one, one, five.

"You really shouldn't have your password be your birthday, Rae." Maeve huffed out a laugh.

"What the hell, fox?" I blurted.

"You were mouthing it, deer." She shook her head at me.

"I was not, you arse-breather." I exhaled dramatically as I thought of what to send to our friends.

"That's certainly a new one. Try it out on Bryn yet?" Maeve laughed to herself, as she usually does at her own jokes.

"HA!" I laughed sarcastically. I looked at the words that now hung in my vision, trying not to overthink them.

Fancy a drink? Was all I decided to say. Once I thought about sending it, it was done.

Maeve and I sat on the plush barstools as Silas cleaned glasses and tried not to interrupt our much needed banter. I transformed the four-season part of my home into a beautiful bar with a large quartz countertop, light cedar floors, hints of sage sprinkled without, and maya blue in the fabric of the large vintage couches and the booths in each corner. The ceiling was made entirely of glass, golden lines holding each piece together, creating a mosaic of shapes.

The copper barstools matched the glass shelves that held an obscene amount of alcohol across the wall behind the bar. Although we could never finish it all, even in an immortal lifetime, it was really more of a collection than a necessity.

“Your birthday is only a few months away, and it’s a big one. *Please* let us plan something for you.” Maeve insisted.

“Mae, I really don’t want to make a big thing of it. You know how I feel about my birthday. There’s no reason you should all be going out of your way.”

“There *is* a reason, and it’s *you*, love.” Maeve looked down at her glass of wine, and shook her head as she thought of her next words. “We want to celebrate you, there is no obligation about it. Please just accept that you are adored, and quit being a pill about it.”

“Just don’t go through too much trouble, okay?” I begged.

“*I* will decide what’s too much trouble.” Her voice was stern. When it came to me, there’s nothing she wouldn’t do.

“Trouble’s not a foreign idea to you, though.” A deep voice said from the door behind us. “Is it, Rae, darling?” We both turned to find two large men making their way to us. Both of which I had sent a message to only a few minutes ago.

“You tell me. I’ve heard you’re the expert, Darling.” I held my head high at the most beautiful man I’d ever seen, hoping my heart would not betray me and reveal what his very presence did to every atom in my body. Curse his immortality for being able to sense it, anyways.

“I adore when you call me sweet names, my love.” He crooned. “Are you trying to make me blush?”

“I didn’t give you your last name, *Captain*.” I said his rank like an insult, but I couldn’t help that a laugh escaped me.

“No... but I hope to give you yours.” His smile was infectious, the way it perked his cheeks and drew soft lines around his eyes. “Then call me Nyx and I won’t get my hopes up all the time.” Just so I didn’t reveal my molten core, I looked to the other man, my dearest friend for over four hundred years.

“Hello, Marcellus, how are you, princeling?” I said sweetly, not having to try as I smiled widely and laughed out loud as he crouched down, ready to catch me.

The enormous man, a few inches taller than the arrogant arse to his left, usually dressed in tropical colors or athletic wear, with his coffee hair tied in a high bun. He laughed, and dipped down as he wrapped his bulging biceps around my waist and pulled me into the air.

“I missed you, Dino. And you too, little one.” He looked to Maeve who was grinning at the sight of us. She described such a thing as *gunnen*: experiencing happiness at the sight of someone else’s, simply because of how much you love them.

I was once used to my friends getting incredibly jealous when I even talked to any man, let alone had one as one of my best friends. Another thing I never imagined.

They would make me the butt of the joke, point out any mistake I made, until I developed a stutter from the sheer panic of messing up. And here Maeve stood, hands pressed together, held to her cheek, reveling in the utter love shared between Mar and I.

“I suppose I missed you, too, Prince of Poseidas. And you too... Darling.” I daresay that was as much flirting as the woman was capable of. And my Gods was I proud of her for it.

“Two espresso martini’s, please, barkeep.” Nyx walked to the bar with a charming grin to Silas, who was frantically watching all of us, as if waiting for some grand moment he wished to gossip about tomorrow. I suppose he enjoyed being an insider to the faculty of his school.

“As ya wish, Mr. Darling.” Silas smiled widely at him, smoothing his hair back as he stared at the effortless waves of Nyx’s ebony silken hair, such a painfully perfect compliment to his golden skin.

“Just call me Nyx, please, Silas. It’s after school hours now, no need for the formalities.” The sincerity of his words sent me walking towards the booth in the corner, if only to distance myself from the pull I always feel towards him. I could hear him mention Silas’s last football match with genuine interest, and that, too, heated my skin.

“Where’s Jax?” Marcellus looked around the room in question.

“Scouting talent in the eastern part of Gaesha.” Maeve responded quickly. “As Bryn’s right hand he surely keeps busy.”

“And how was your day, Mr. Darling?” I asked Nyx, unable to stop myself, as I took my seat in the cornflower blue velvet booth.

“Being that I spend half my day training defense and combat classes, and the other half in the library looking for books that would apply to Bryn’s wild and random areas of study, you can say my days are never dull.” He grabbed the two glasses, making sure to give Silas a grateful smile and a bundle of cash and made his way over to the booth. Silas, known for his quick remarks, was speechless. Nyx’s body moved in such a way when he walked that it made it *very* hard not to stare. His smooth strides and swagger was no doubt a product of his battle rank. He was a natural soldier, and leader. “And how was your day, Andy?”

“Still training, of course. I just don’t know if I’ll ever be ready. Professor of psychology *and* school counselor just feels like it’s out of my wheelhouse.” I huffed a laugh as I felt a bit overwhelmed with it all, not quite being able to imagine that I’ll truly get there. Not with the other work Ares and I do.

“You’re a natural, deer, I’m sure you’ll be teaching brilliantly in no time.” Maeve’s pink lips turned up in a grin, contrasting beautifully against her Venetian hair. “The students talk highly of you as an intern counselor. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Is it not kind of sus to be training with your therapist?” Marcellus said as he sipped his martini, pinky up.

“For the love of the Gods, Mar, keep your bloody nose out of my human studies journals.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “And we’ve talked about it, he’s helping me unlock repressed memories, and come into my full power, why not also help me train in an area he’s an expert in? The boundaries of our professional and therapeutic life are very clear.”

“Anyways,” Maeve seemed to sense my nerves and thankfully changed the subject, “why are you two drinking espresso martinis in the late evening?”

“Bryn said the Aurora Borealis would be out tonight, so we thought we’d get drunk and go see some shiny things.” Marcellus said proudly.

“I hope that’s an invitation, otherwise I may have to break those girly glasses over yer t’ick heads.” A female voice said from the other side of the room.

“Phoebe!” Marcellus shouted as he popped out of his chair and ran to greet her. The poor guy was completely smitten with her, and luckily for him, she had a little crush on him, too.

“It’s so good to see ya, mo leannan.” She smiled as he hugged her tight, her crimson jumpsuit the same shade as her bright red lips. Phoebe is equally as mysterious and burdened by her past as our friend Jax is. Which is why I never pushed her to explain why she only wears red so her enemies can *never again* see her bleed. Even so, it’s definitely her color.

“How’re you doing, gorgeous?” I winked at my friend as Marcellus reluctantly put her down. Her slender body and long platinum hair made her undeniably beautiful, but it was her kindness and love for life that made her an amazing friend to have.

Maeve may be my compass, my reason, and my sanity, but Phoebe was without a doubt the person that kept me moving forward. She tells it like it is, and even though her thick accent made it hard to understand her at times, her sincere eyes and kind heart never made me doubt what it was she tried to say.

“Sound, tanks.” See what I mean? Phoebe leaned over the table to meet my outstretched hand with her own, and bring it gracefully to her forehead. Ever since Phoebe had begun training with the Valkyrie, she seemed to take their practices *very* seriously. I, of course, brought her always perfectly manicured and ring-decorated hand to my forehead, to satisfy her obsession with Valkyrien tradition, and because, truthfully, being a Valkyrie saved my life. I’d always uphold The Oath, it felt like the least I could do.

Why the far-away look, mo chara? Phoebe sent me a message through our Ocullums, and I blinked hard, not realizing I had been lost in thought.
You’re not still fixating over that void vision, are you?

No. I lied. I think about it even more than I did when I was young. Because back then it was always the same: sucked into a void, choking, can’t

breathe, pass out, the end. But a few months ago, the vision changed. Expanded. First it was stars, then something impossible.

Liar. She smiled at me as she sat down, rubbing Marcellus's shoulder as he not-so-subtly looked her slim figure up and down.

"What're you drinking?" Maeve said with a hand to Phoebe's arm, her way of saying, *hi, I missed you.*

"Well, I suppose were stayin' up late, den, aren't we?" She turned to face Silas, who was very clearly gawking at her. His chiseled jaw was clenched as he took her in. A few pieces of hair fell in front of his eyes, but he didn't seem to notice. "A round of espresso martinis for the table, Silas. And maybe wipe yer mouth so there isna drool in 'em."

We all laughed loudly, pulling Silas out of his trance. Phoebe had a way of drawing people to her. She was luminescent, as was her energy. When you're around her, it was impossible to be anything but content at the worst, and absolutely happy at best. I suppose that's what makes her and Marcellus so perfect for each other. Since I've known them, I've been a better and happier version of myself.

"Make one for yourself if you want to, kid." Nyx said in a low voice, as if he had something on his mind, and yet kindness came so naturally that he couldn't help himself. I clinked my glass against Maeve's before taking a large sip, and then another.

"Tanks, boss." Silas beamed.

"How nice of you." I smiled as I put my elbows on the table and rested my head on my knuckles. "For you to offer to pay. Hell, Silas, why don't we make it two rounds, then?"

Phoebe hollered loudly at the suggestion, throwing her hands in the air, as if she had been waiting all day for this. I suppose in truth, it's the best part of my every day.

"Be kind to the man, Rae." Maeve scolded me, then did something I don't often see her do: she actually looked Nyx up and down before she said, "he *is* a very rich and handsome son of royalty, after all."

Phoebe's mouth fell open at Maeve's blushed cheeks, knowing she only said such a thing with liquid courage. Or to make me smile.

“Mo chara,” Phoebe reached out her hand and held my elbow before continuing, “cut ‘em a break. We’re celebratin’ tonight, so I want our little family all gettin’ along, okay?”

The foreplay is excruciating. Are you truly going to keep the poor lad pining after you for the rest of his immortal life? Phoebe scolded me, hand squeezing a little harder as she did. *Stop punishing yourself.*

“What’re we celebrating?” Nyx asked, and I don’t know if it was the slight buzz or Phoebe’s demand that made me turn my head slightly and look up at him lovingly. He turned to me, and his gaze softened as he took me in, his hand unclenching as it rested on the table.

His thumb turned his obsidian rings, as it always does when something’s on his mind. It was always the silver one that looked like a flying serpent with its bat-like wings wrapped around his thumb that caught my attention, and curiosity. We have dragons on my world, but not whatever those are.

“Could ya run to the basement and grab us one of those fancy bottles of champagne, boyo?” Phoebe motioned to Silas, who quickly hurried off to the other room.

“What is it?” I couldn’t help my excitement as I asked.

“Oh, nothing.” She leaned in, and looked towards the bar before continuing, “I just wanted to gossip about what happened today.”

“Thank Gods, I’ve been dying to talk about this.” Marcellus said like a little kid as he drummed his fingers on the table frantically and leaned in.

“Silas got beat in a one-on-one with the new kid earlier this afternoon.” She looked to Mar who was nodding as if it was the most scandalous thing to happen at Doctrina.

“Gudrun? The kid from Zoria?” Nyx asked with his eyebrows bunched. He shifted in his chair, causing his loose onyx silk top to reveal a bit of his collarbone, and the curved lines of the tattoo hiding beneath.

“You can’t call them a kid if they’re over one hundred.” Maeve cut in. “Don’t forget it wasn’t long ago that you were new here, Nyx.” She was right, he’d only been here less than a month, but we all seemed to take him in

instantly, and care for him as if he were one of our own. It feels as though I'd known him for a lifetime, and I think he felt the same about us.

"Are you saying you thought I was a kid when I first got here?" I scoffed at Maeve, who only blushed and shook her head. "Rude."

"That's the one, Nyxie." Phoebe said, playing with the stem of her nearly finished drink. "Charlo told me that she saw them trainin' from the vegetable garden, and the kid *absolutely* annihilated him. And what's worse, rumor has it he's been flirtin' with Gēzi in their Amerrysian history class."

Phoebe leaned back as if she had dropped a bomb on the four of us. Marcellus just laughed lowly in his hands as if he couldn't contain his excitement. I can't believe these idiots are my people.

I'm the luckiest idiot in the world.

"Is Charlo really a reliable source?" Nyx asked as he placed his elbows on the table. I found it incredibly hard not to look down his shirt now that it revealed his perfectly sculpted chest. So... I didn't try. And it was exactly as beautiful as I expected.

"Just because she's odd doesn't mean she isn't reliable." Maeve said defensively. It made me wonder if she worried we found her to be a bit odd, too. Truthfully, she is. And it's my favorite thing about her.

"That's a fair point, Mae, but she *did* tell me once of the tiny fairies that come to her at night and sing her to sleep. I'm just saying, the girl has a wild imagination."

"Bloody good storyteller though." I almost slurred my words, making me aware of the sudden weightlessness of my head. "Fucking beautiful imagination if you ask me."

Such a foul mouth. Nyx's words popped up through my Ocullum.

Bite me. I replied.

Lean in and I'll gladly take that beautiful neck of yours.

"Hasn't Silas had a crush on Gēzi for like, five terms?" I whispered as I looked towards the bar, hoping he was still looking for that bottle of champagne.

Thinking of crushes all of a sudden, are we now, love?

Ear glass. I smiled to my friends, trying to mask my thoughts and avoid Nyx's eyes burning a hole in the side of my head.

Is there a reason your threats are oral based?

"Oh, yes. Even though the terrifyin' creature barely acknowledges anyone, I saw her almost smile at Gudrun when I walked passed them in the meal hall the other day. Like they have a little secret"

You need only ask, darling. That'll be our little secret.

"Kefe, that's hot." Marcellus sat back, putting his arm over the back of Phoebe's chair, who crossed her arms and shook her head.

"I'm tellin' ya guys, Silas is a hot-headed and proud lad, even though he may not look it with that boyish charm, I swear if Gudrun takes his position on the pitch *and* his lady, he's gunna fecking lose it."

"Are you guys talkin' 'bout me?" Silas said from the back door, a bottle of champagne in his hand, and a cautiously confused look on his handsome face.

"No, love, we were discussing a book we've been reading for our book club. Absolutely scandalous romantic strife. You should really read it." I cut in quickly.

And now with the romance. You are unnervingly good at lying. That explains how you deny me. Should we just ditch these fools and take this heat upstairs? You can show me what other threats are on that beautiful mind of yours. Oral or otherwise.

A shiver went down my spine as I used my powers to send cold air Nyx's way. His shoulders tensed as he rubbed his neck. That should do it.

"I'm not much of a reader, boss. I prefer to keep the romance in my bedroom." Silas stuck his tongue out as he went on his way. The poor kid was as clueless as he was cocky.

"We don't have a book club." Marcellus whispered as he leaned in close. I put my elbows on the table and smiled at each of my friends.

"I know." I giggled, revealing the effectiveness of Silas's drinks. "Seems we gotta start one now. Any suggestions?" I laughed and nearly snorted, causing Nyx to laugh so hard his eyes squinted and he had to cover his mouth with a fist.

“Christ, Rae.” Maeve blurted out, causing all of us to stare with wide eyes at our usually very posh friend. “I’ve only been waiting *four centuries* for you to ask.”

There was a brief pause before we all erupted into guttural laughs, and even silent laughs that sent us bobbing around like buoys in a storm. Honestly, it never took a lot of effort for us all to burst into a fit of laughter; I supposed it was the peace we found in each other’s company, and the sound of our familiar chuckles that always led to such stomach-clenching fits. In my opinion, it was the best kind of company to keep.

“Gods I fucking love drunk Mae.” Phoebe huffed into her drink as she leaned back in her chair, a soft giggle escaping her between sips.

“Watch your language, professor Lykoudis.” Nyx said through near sobs as a tear ran down his red face. “There are children about.”

“He’s a hundred and fifty eight, you idiot.” Maeve seemed surprised at her own words, and Phoebe grabbed Mar’s arm as she tried not to fall out of her chair. Maeve looked down into her glass with wide eyes. “What the fuck are in these things?”

We all swatted at each other, absolutely sobbing at our little wood fairy friend who scolds anyone who uses the salad fork for the main course, finds SpongeBob SquarePants to be “a bit racy” and unironically uses terms like *adieu* and *forthright*. So, you can imagine our surprise when such a proper lady says things like *fuck*.

“You were right.” My voice was shaky as I tried composing myself. “My churlishness is rubbing off on you, foxy.”

I laughed quietly as I looked over to Nyx, whose shoulders were bouncing up and down as he tried containing himself. I saw the intent as his blue eyes darkened and he traced torturous lines down my body.

“Don’t say it.” I begged him, but couldn’t help but smile as the sweet lull of alcohol made my mind pleasant company.

What do I have to do to get you to rub off on me, Rae, darling? He sent between our Ocullums, swallowing hard as he watched me shift.

I usually make a snide comment, or ignore him completely, but something about the lightness of the air and weight on my shoulders, I couldn’t help but play along with my flirtatious friend.

So, I simply huffed a laugh, leaned in as I bit my lip, and pulled my gaze slowly from his eyes to as far down as I could see from where I sat. He shifted in his seat, completely taken aback by my reciprocation, and yet he stilled as if he had waited for this moment his entire life.

“You don’t have to do anything, Darling.” I raised an eyebrow at his name. “I suppose we’ll see what happens at the bottom of this glass.” I picked up my martini and took a small sip, looking at him through my lashes. My eyes went wide as Nyx quickly grabbed it from my hands, a drop hitting the table before he threw back the rest of my drink.

“Was that a promise, Andino?” He set the glass down and slowly slid it my way. I grabbed the stem and inhaled sharply as our hands touched. “Or a challenge?”

I realized the room had gone silent, and looked over to our friends whose eyes darted between us like they were watching the final match of the annual Trina Tourney, and to Silas who was frozen where he stood, champagne overflowing in the glass he clearly forgot he was pouring.

HOLY SHIT. HOLY SHIT. HOLY SHIT. Marcellus’s message nearly pulled me out of whatever trance I had fallen into. I’m not entirely sure he meant to send it, or if it was just repeating in his head.

I looked slowly back to where Nyx held his folded hands against his mouth, as if needing something, anything, to keep him from blurting out his thoughts. I ran a hand up my arm and played with the thin strap of my dress with my finger, watching his eyes follow my every movement.

“Well, now I’m thirsty.” I smiled cruelly at him.

“Silas!” Phoebe nearly screamed. “We’ll have a—”

“A glass of the eighty-seven Merlot, please, Sigh.” I said loudly, cutting my friend off, who gasped dramatically in response.

“You go off, you Godsdamn Queen.” Maeve slurred her words but said it so sternly that I couldn’t help but laugh, which turned out to be a squeaky drunken giggle.

“You told me red wine makes you twirly, babes” Marcellus said with his glass held to his lips, like a kid unable to stop their oral fixation.

“What does twirly mean?” Nyx asked, a little too eagerly.

“None of your business, feathers.” I said to my friend as his shoulders pushed back at the absence of his large feathered wings. He used his magic to be with or without them, depending on how much of an inconvenience they are. I’d never admit it, but I missed them.

“If it pertains to you, my love, it’s the most important business I intend to be a very careful attendant to.”

“Say normal words like they make me do, you loquacious tit.” Maeve said as her eyes fluttered.

“A what?” Nyx put a hand to his chest with offense.

“I think she just called you a chatty bird, feathers.” The laugh that came out of me was a sound only alive in the presence of these people. It was a piece of my unfiltered soul that made my very existence feel like home; my body and the air around me, safe. Peaceful, even.

“He certainly is... when *yer* the topic of conversation, mo chara.” Phoebe’s glare was impossible not to read. Even Marcellus noticed with his all-too-obvious pierced lips and wide eyes. My family’s favorite pastime seemed to become the subtle push of my heart towards Nyx’s eager arms, and yet, I couldn’t help but hold myself back.

Luckily, our eavesdropping barkeep broke the room’s tension as he cleared his throat and nodded to the glass of wine in his hand.

“Thank you, Silas.” I grabbed the glass from his hands and tried being discreet as I handed him a wad of cash. “You can go home now, love, we’ve got it from here.”

“Are ya sure?” He looked disappointed. “It was just gettin’ good.”

“Oh, bugger off, ya wee clipe.” Phoebe’s voice was hoarse. She threw a napkin at him before he held his hands up in defeat and quickly hurried off.

“Did you guys have a place you were going to go to watch the northern lights?” I looked between Marcellus and Nyx.

“Not really.” Nyx said as he looked to Marcellus, who shrugged his shoulders. “Do you?”

“I have an idea.” I smiled to my friends, and narrowed my gaze as I tried looking sneaky. I closed my eyes, and inhaled deeply as I summoned my power. As I exhaled, a tingle went through me at the completion of my endeavor. “There.”

“What did you just do?” Marcellus asked cautiously.

“It seems my house just got a lovely new addition.” I giggled as I stood.

“Shall we take this party to the roof?”

“Does it have a bar?” Phoebe stood quickly.

“Don’t insult me.” I shook my head at her. “It’s right next to the pool.”

**You should take a dip, feathers. It'll cool you
down.**

You'd like that, wouldn't you, Andy?

Chapter Five

Three months ago, in the late summer, I made my way through the rocky terrain of Crete. The island was small enough that I could easily appear at my destination, but I've found that there's no way to appreciate a new place than taking the time to walk through it.

Appearing is a pretty boring way to explain trans-dimensional travel. It's like teleporting yourself, and you just... *appear* somewhere and disappear from somewhere else.

I've been nearly everywhere, feeding my need to experience all manners of life and culture, especially at times when I felt the unrelenting urge to *run*, but not the urge to *leave*. I think Bryn understood that well enough when she sent me here to do an unnecessary supply run.

There was something so familiar about this place, something almost uncanny, and it made me want to take my time, appreciating each element that caught my eye as if it begged to be seen. To be noticed, like an old friend you haven't seen in so long that it takes you a moment to recognize them.

I neared the top of a pile of rocks and tree stumps, the light from the city beyond filling the air above me. With my last step, I gawked at the mosaic of colorful villas and shops lining the coast of the Mediterranean.

I nearly forgot why I'd made the trip. The view was worth the temporary stop as I took in the life and energy that drifted towards me from my incredible elevated view. The evening sun gave no mercy as it heated my skin. I wore my usual Valkyrien gear, needing to be recognizable to be able to pick up Doctrina's supplies.

My black leather tank top hugged my chest, a bead of sweat dripping down my stomach. The hard fabric was tucked into the thick band of my black pants, made of a synthetic metal that was stripped into thin strings and weaved to make an almost spandex-like material. The malachite straps on my arms, thighs, and ankles held various weapons, all stamped with Doctrina's emblem.

Phoenix Ash, Essence of Gaea, and golden sheaths, I reminded myself. One stop at the apothecary, and one at the blacksmith. I repeated the list in my head as I made my way down the hill.

As I stepped onto the street of Heraklion—a trading port on the northern side of the Athenian island—the energy felt heavier here, faster. More frantic. I walked slowly, letting hurried immortals pass by. Some with frustrated looks, others without a single glance in my direction.

I made my way to the blacksmith, chucking a sack of Athenian gold on the cedar counter soon after I entered. I told the large soot-covered man that I'd be back in an hour to collect the sheaths. The expressionless male nodded shallowly before grabbing the gold and heading to his workshop in the back. I took that as a goodbye and headed to my next stop.

I strolled through the apothecary, looking through the wall of powders, reading each name and their uses. I waited for the owner—who seemed to only look at me through her lashes or the sides of her eyes—to deliver the items I had requested moments ago. She returned with a smile as she gently set two wrapped boxes down on the desk near where I wandered.

“Thirty pounds of Phoenix Ash, and my rarest elixir, held just for you. Please, send my best to Bryn.” I returned her smile with a nod and I tucked the boxes into the bag tied to my baldric before heading out the door.

A few steps into my exit, a bright blue light shone in the corner of my eye, coming from a stack of crystals in the left corner of the apothecary. I almost instinctively turned to the light, finding it had vanished, and an intense physical and energetic pull washed over me. There was one crystal I could not keep my eyes off of, a light pink soft crystal.

“That's rose quartz, do you have an interest in energy work?” The shop owner, Tahani, said from behind me in a tone that made me think that

she had already decided the answer was no, and was only asking out of a pure lack of impulse control.

I took a few cautious steps before I picked up the crystal and turned it over to sit on my palm as I examined it. It wasn't a very reflective crystal. How could it have shown so brightly moments ago?

"Energy work?" I closed my fist around the crystal and turned to face her. I felt so awake all of a sudden, so full of confidence and pure power.

"I'm sure you would have a more substantial education on such a subject at your world-renowned library, than from a humble healer like me." Tahani said with a passive-aggressive smile.

I flipped a gold coin Tahani's way and tucked the crystal in my shirt. I turned on my heel and smiled as I said, "You're right. I'll ask Maeve." And headed out the door.

The warm Cretan sun hit my face as I once again entered the street. I found myself walking east. I had some time to kill before going back to the blacksmith.

I felt pulled towards a calling in my blood, beckoning me to keep moving. As I neared the eastern part of town, the sun was nearing the horizon. There was a quiet hanging over those towards the end of the street. A large cove laid in the distance. Maeve would be playing a game of *brave or brainless* as I adjusted the straps of my weapons and bag, and headed for the shoreline that led to the beautiful inlet bay.

Though Maeve has worked extensively with me to make more conscious decisions, and put words to my feelings, it goes against what Bryn has been trying to teach me about learning the language of my inner mind.

It was Maeve who taught me about *hiraeth*:

Feeling homesick or a longing for a home you cannot return to.

My submissive love for my hometown always made me feel guilty for leaving, but there was nothing there for me anymore. The version of myself that grew up there was a stranger to me. This ancient island felt like more of a home to me than Palermo, the warm breeze and bright blue sea satiated whatever irrational homesickness I had, without the panic of seeing one of the many people who hurt me. I hoped it was enough.

A tingle traveled down my spine, pulling me from my reminiscence. This was undoubtedly one of those instinctual alarms that Bryn had told me to always trust. Her words echoed in my mind as my body became alert:

Your gut knows how to protect you. Trust it.

As I kept walking, I looked for any surfaces with reflections to get a glance behind me. My eyes caught the polished steel of an old shield shimmering in the fading sunlight. I briefly saw several figures dressed in black and red leathers, all heading in my direction, eyes straight at my back.

I controlled my breathing and began considering my next move. I was well past the end of the town, and several of the stores were already closed. I contemplated the likelihood of a problem occurring, given that Athenia was one of the safest territories in the world.

I challenged my gut, telling it to consider the fact that I have a *long* dark history with stalking men, and statistically speaking, I was probably fine.

Lightning doesn't strike the same place twice.

It was the ebony and crimson clothing that burned in my mind, the calling card of the Amerrysian Army. It's also the colors of several sporting teams, and fuck if I knew what games were occurring in the area, so finding hope that way is a dead end.

Just before I turned to nonchalantly turn back to town, I felt a shooting pain in my left shoulder. My hands hit the ground with such force that the cobblestones cracked under my palms.

Well, I guess I was wrong about the lightning not striking twice.

At this point, I've lost count.

Chapter Six

“Funny finding you here,” a husky-voiced man kicked my side to turn me around, “of all places.” I whirled and met the dark eyes of a tall, bulky soldier with night black hair and rounded features. I pushed my feet fiercely as I scooted away from the seven figures. They inched slowly towards me like predators closing in on their helpless prey.

“What is it with females and thinking they can walk alone? They make it too easy.” Another dark figure said through his cat-like smile. “Where’s the fun in that?”

He began circling me, never once meeting my eye-line. I kept moving, as far away from the edge of town as I could get. They reeked of moonshine and Mad-Medusa-knows what else.

I watched as flowers and trees wilted around us, energy moving to the matte armor covering their chests.

Blood siphoning

I had heard a rumor that it was secretly practiced within the Amerrysian regime, but the ritual is as old as Time himself.

When I first learned about siphoning, Bryn told me that everything around us is energy, the same pure energy that runs through all life and fuels the soul. Siphoning—a way to enhance one’s power—takes the energy from one life, and gives it to another. I only do so with Primordial sources: the Earth’s core, the wind, and the sea. It’s considered pure siphoning, taking from a source that could never be drained. To siphon from the innocent life energy of a plant, tree, or another person, has been forbidden. For good reason.

The dems that make up the Amerrysian Army care not for the sacred ancient practices or the essential balance of life. They take what they want, drunk off the power the Phoenix Ash armor provides them. I knew of the corruption building in Amerrysia, but this... was unforgivable.

I dug my hands into the earth, replacing the stolen life energy with my own. My head felt light at the effort, but I'd rather fight these bastards with near depleted energy than watch their bodies fall around the lifelessness of such beautiful and undeserving terrain. Plus, when I kick their arses with a hypothetical hand behind my back, I figured it would be that much more satisfying.

My eyes caught on the various colors and lengths of one of the men's hair. As I squinted to get a better look, my body all-too aware of the men that slowly inched towards me, my heart dropped at the realization. The different colors were not from a bad dye-job, and the lengths not the hands of a drunken barber, but the piece of shit had someone else's hair clipped into his. Several other people.

A long strand of platinum hair filled my gut with acid. I'd recognize the beautiful silken strands anywhere, the way the gentle purple hue catches the sun, and a beaded plait down the length. It was Phoebe's.

This realization mixed with adrenaline turned to silent rage as something eddied from deep within me. I clenched my teeth as I tried not to give away my intentions, or my skill. I made each movement unsure. Terrified.

I gave them what they wanted, what I'm sure they have done to more people than they could ever atone for.

My beauty, my seemingly soft skin, and my divinity hiding behind the veil of a damsel. It will be their reckoning.

I will become the nightmare's greatest fear.

The many-haired-man leaned down, presumably to smell me, see if I had pissed myself yet. I turned away, urging him to pull my chin to face him. Every hell-bound hellhound likes to watch, it seems. Perhaps they like to look their destruction in the face, in the hopes that they may catch a glimpse of who they used to be and it may be enough to stop them. A shadow of themselves that grows darker with the absence of light.

A small whimper escaped my lips as his putrid paws gripped my cheeks. Gods I should really be an actress in my next life.

I inhaled deeply as I clenched my fists. I willed the calm crashing of the sea into my veins. I turned my panicked eyes to amused ones and let my grin grow into a mocking smile, thoroughly enraging the man who stood before me. Those who find pleasure in their victim's fear are so easily undone when they realize the power was never theirs.

As an ode to my old self, I laughed, because this time, I'll win.

Break my bones, ruin my soil, cut my hair and wear it like a trophy, but one single laugh from my lips, one look of annoyance, and you break. Such fragility in a man who thinks he is unstoppable.

Just as he raised a hand, I placed my own on the earth, the soil rumbling beneath us. Each soldier was now stunned, stuck in place as their eyes darted around, panicked.

I grabbed the dagger strapped to my ankle and rose to my feet. My fingers wrapped slowly around the hair of the red-faced man—a few inches shorter than me; I never understood how height mattered to someone who aimed to have me on the ground—and took my time as I gathered the thief's hair in my palm.

“Little boys,” I whispered into his ear, looking through my eyelashes at the frozen faces of the soldiers in front of me. “Should learn to keep their filthy hands off of things that aren't theirs.” I flipped my dagger in my palm, inches from his face. “Whoever, or whatever convinced you that such a small-minded—and bodied—child like you had the right to judge and punish those you deem below you, clearly wasn't raised properly.”

I took my blade close to his forehead, angling it slowly, reveling in the panicked grunts shooting spit from his mouth.

“Well then, let me make up for the teachings of whatever wall you've been talking to, and the single brain cell you all seem to share.” I pulled back my blade, slowly shaving the hair off of his head. “One,” I made a quick flick of my blade, sending hair to the ground. “Violence, anger, excessive use of porn—” I made eye-contact with one of the men, for no particular reason other than... fuck him. “Is all a manifestation of your inability to live up to the standards you set for others. You are inadequate.” I shaved off another

chunk, working in jagged lines, “Undeserving.” Then another, “Soulless villains, playing the part of a sliver in my fucking arse: annoying, discarded, and never thought of again.”

As I stepped back, I made all the soldiers look at the man, piss running down his leg, hair half shaven with small drops of blood running down his head. He passed out from panic, his body falling with a thump.

“Be happy you came across me today, boys.” I leaned down to pick up a chunk of hair. “Anyone else would have strived to give you a deserving punishment, and from the looks of it.” Images flashed into my mind, memories embedded in each chunk of hair. Women. So many women. Beaten, broken, and laid bare. One woman, made my stomach drop. The bright platinum silken strands holding a horrific scene. The woman in red with a past I know little about, and now I’m begging to understand why.

“Be THANKFUL I keep my hands free of blood. None shall die by my hand.” My voice nearly cracked as I slipped the hair into my bag, needing to give the stolen pieces a place of dignity, like the Valkyrien graveyard in Doctrina. Somewhere their past can be put to rest. “You could’ve been men of worth, and here you are, taking pleasure in the pain of others. You’re a disgrace, but I will let you turn around, and give this world a reason to remember your names, not curse them.”

I pressed the retractable shield magically woven into the gold cuff on my wrist. A heavy weight now pulled on my arm and back muscles, strengthening my now perfectly balanced stance.

My free hand tucked the dagger into an empty holster on my hip. I stepped over the unconscious thief and towards the six remaining fools.

My enchanted hold on each man dropped, a few stumbled forward at the loss of resistance. There was a moment of silence, and I seized it.

I reached behind my back and summoned a Valkyrien blade from a small rip in space. Having access to different realms has suddenly become essential to my survival. I made a note to thank Maeve, and to continue resenting her for always being right.

I enchanted my house in Doctrina to be connected to me years ago, giving the items within its bounds the ability to be called to at will. I slowly pulled my hand from over my shoulder and revealed the near luminescent

golden blade. A few of the soldiers scoffed and smiled. One of them looked at the blade with unfiltered panic. Smart boy.

The first soldier lunged with his silver sword, dashing across his right side to mine. I effortlessly pivoted my body left, letting the blade get close to me, so his ego might hope he stood a chance. I made sure to bring a delighted and disappointed look to my face, mocking my first opponent for underestimating me. He grunted in frustration and pulled his blade across his body again, slicing through nothing but air as my body now casually stood behind him, face laced with boredom.

The stunned soldier whirled on his feet, the Cretan sand shifting under his thick boots. He swung his blade towards my chest. I quickly leaned back and threw my hand up at the exact moment the blood-thirsty soldier's blade crossed in front of my face, and struck. The blade flew upward, knocking my opponent off of his balance.

In a split second, I dropped to my knees and swept his front leg. Once he had lost his balance completely, I punched my fist to his face with such force that I could feel the crunch of his nose and jaw under my knuckles. I pivoted and ran my fist into his stomach, launching him several feet backwards. He hit the ground with a loud thud, and the other soldiers stepped cautiously around his unmoving body.

I grinned, my body completely untouched. My weapons feeling boundless and lethal. I started hearing the song in my head. A human melody; Lion by Saint Mesa. A gift I developed during my work with Bryn, and simultaneously during my study of human interests, such as music.

Every note and word played in harmony with the rising power coming to the surface of my skin.

I will be unbreakable, I control the consequences of my life. I stilled my thoughts, hearing Bryn's words in unison with the melody, brushing softly against the walls of my mind—*we self-actualize our reality, doubt will be your downfall.*

This time, in preparation to put my centuries of training to use, I needed to feel the power I've been trying to learn more about. Trying to unlock. I let the music go beyond my mind, and filled the air with the song, thoroughly confusing the soldiers. The eery thrum of deep chanting whispers

filled the air. The soldiers looked around confused, but the leader never broke eye contact.

I felt the music swell to the bass drop I knew was coming. I grinned wildly as I saw my opponents muscles tense. I closed my eyes a few seconds before the drop, summoning the power I felt pounding fiercely against the place I created in my mind to contain it.

I slowly opened the door to that part of myself. I summoned the lethal green fire of the underworld and the white smoke of the heavens to my eyes. In the moment the bass dropped, I opened them, revealing their changed color: a blinding emerald with swirling pearl flame. Which just happened to be Doctrina's colors.

I let the power fill my body, and in an instant, time was now an optional consequence.

I flew towards the nearest soldier, and the next, and the next. My blade flying like lightning through the air. Each one hit within a millisecond of the other, all ten knees hit the ground in the same second. Each with a different frozen face of surprise and terror. I felt limitless.

It was intoxicating. I was panting, my heart pounding from adrenaline and righted wrongs.

“Well, that was disappointing. Who trained you idiots?” I pushed one of the unconscious arms of my enemy with my black boot and sighed. “The song barely started.” I huffed a sigh as to say *oh well*, and began on my way.

A loud crack of lightning sounded behind me. I ducked out of instinct as a deep part of my chest ached. I felt a shiver run through the jagged lines of my back tattoo. I turned quickly on my feet to find the previously beautiful sunset orange sky now filled with darkness.

Chapter Seven

The storm clouds whirled into a tornado that began growing bigger, heading in my direction. I tucked away my weapons and reached my hand towards the sky. Bryn always told me that in any unknown territory, it's always best to trust your gut.

Apparently my gut felt it was as good a time as any to practice my elemental control. I closed my eyes and centered my mind. I summoned the strong energy inside of me and tried wrapping my essence around the storm. Tried becoming the water, reaching to what binds our energies. Reaching towards each individual element that created the monstrous clouds.

I tried to harness the electricity of the lightning, the pure energy behind each flutter and strike of light.

I felt something on the other end, a pull, similar to the sharp energy from the crystal, which I could now feel burning my chest. It was a delicate pull, urging me towards what felt like peace, safety. A home. My curiosity sent me willing the promised haven towards me, and I swear I could faintly hear the crashing of gentle waves against rocks, entirely apart from the rage of water that surrounded me.

There was unity and a oneness beyond the clouds that I had couldn't make sense of. This was one of those times I had to trust my gut, and above all, myself. I tried becoming one with the invisible anchor, intertwining my energy with its own. Bringing a gentle wind into the sails of the boat that would bring me home.

My eyes shot open, the tornado was nearly to me, a violent swirl of air and the sharp edges of lighting, opening to a bright glow I could see deep in the center. I'm no meteorologist, but this seems highly unusual.

It became more vibrant, and as it got closer, thunder filled the air around me. I fell down on one knee, wind whipping through my hair. I pushed my feet into the earth and summoned roots and vines to hold me to the ground.

"Very impressive for a little girl." A calm, and yet somehow terrifying voice said from the brightness above. The blinding light started to dim, revealing the source of the blood-curdling voice. It seemed familiar, as if I had heard it in a dream. Or a nightmare.

A large, devilishly handsome man—emphasis on the *devil*—dressed in a bright white tunic, with cream pants and suede brown shoes, descended from the skies as they began clearing. His bright white hair matched the paleness of his skin, and my own as the blood rushed from my face at the drop in my stomach.

His eyes were so blue they almost appeared white, and piercing enough to become distracting. Alarm bells blared within me. He seemed peaceful, but my gut felt a pure flood of instinctive terror. Terror that forces you into fight, flight, faun, or freeze, and suddenly, I couldn't move.

"Let us break bread, child." His smile said otherwise. "Agai—"

In the same moment my breath caught, a horrible tearing sound came from behind the clouds. My ears burned at the overwhelming intensity of the loud crack, and my hands instinctively covered my ears.

I steadied my breathing and dug my hands into the ground. Before I could siphon enough strength to take this *wanker* to the ground, I felt a pull in my chest. There was once again darkness filling the sky, but it wasn't from the clouds. And this time, I was not afraid.

There was an almost fire-like darkness, a black flame filled with STARLIGHT and beaming with energy as pure and bright as light itself.

The new presence overwhelmed me, my hands felt unsteady as they held my body upright. My head heavy on my shoulders. I forced myself to look up. The breath was stolen from my lungs as the magnitude of the

figure's power took all of the air around me with it. Drawing all life towards it.

In an instant, the figure landed a massive blow to the ocean-eyed stranger who looked confused and enraged in the single moment before he was taken immediately to the ground.

The blow to the earth sent me flying back thirty feet. I felt an immediate sense of relief, the timing of that emotion might need to be discussed with my therapist. Sorry, Ares, this one will surely pay for your new bathroom renovations at least. My back hit the ground with a thud, but in all the chaos, the thing that surprised me the most was the hoarse laugh that came from my lips.

Just another Thursday.

I steadied my still heavy body as I brushed the debris from my clothes. A dark figure, barely visible through the dust and smoke, began moving slowly up the crater in the ground.

A tall, winged, human-like figure appeared through a cloud of debris. I pushed myself to my feet and tried to remember the breathing techniques Bryn taught me in an effort to steady my shaking body.

"Please tell me I saved the right person." The beautifully sculpted male figure said breathlessly, his large chest rising and falling. I'm not proud to admit that my eyes did indeed betray me in this moment. I could see his thighs flex through the black leather of his pants with each step he took towards me.

I ceased the efforts to push away the energy that surrounded me, and welcomed it. Instantly, I felt my power return, my limbs felt light, and my mind an endless void of untapped potential.

"What?" Was all I could manage to say. A thousand questions now starting to form in my mind. And a thousand new emotions to boot.

The mystery male now came fully into view and it hit me all at once. Shiny black hair was cut just above his pointed ears, shimmering with purple hues and covered in dust. Impossibly bright blue eyes like the midday Mediterranean sea. And his face—Gods, his face—was utterly devastating.

His softly precise features were breathtaking. Perfect eyebrows bunched. Full, flawless lips moving with each breath, now twitching into a smile as he undoubtedly watched me drink him in with dehydration.

Immortal faces are always beautiful, but his, it was... time-stopping, blood-burning, a masterpiece that begged to be painted in the skies just so the Earth would never be deprived of it.

He was surely immortal, with a face like that, how could he not be? Which made me sure that he could hear my racing heart, watched as blood stained and climbed my neck, and knew every single time my breath caught at every part of him I took in and marveled at.

He was art.

Had he truly been, though, a still-life depiction of a man, perhaps I would've been able to take my eyes off of him, to walk away and pretend I had just made him up, that perfection—as I've always believed—is an impossibility that lives in fantasy, and the minds of the weak.

But there he stood, shifting his shoulders as his large feathered wings pulled at his unbalanced stance, drawing my eyes to trace patient lines across his arms and chest, a fortress that a wanderer like me begged to call home.

His head tilted almost imperceptibly in my periphery, and my failed attempt to avoid his gaze sent me shifting forward. My previously unmovable soldier's stance had been pulled by an invisible force my subconscious begged to be cut from.

His hand twitched, and it was then that I realized I, too, could hear his heart racing, his breath uneven and shallow, his golden honey complexion was not sun-kissed, but blushed. His hands were shaking, and I met his eyes once more to find that they seemed just as curious as mine had been.

His existence could only be described as what it was to step into a hot bath after walking through snow for two days. I found ecstasy and warmth behind the glowing of his glassy skin, and wondered if I had been a few degrees colder my entire life, waiting for his fire to unclench my muscles and thaw my hateful heart.

The pure color and depth of his sapphire eyes reminded me of seeing a supernova through Ares's telescope. If only I could swim in his eyes as I

wished I could swim through the death of a star. And perhaps it was that same wanting, and curiosity that sent me inching towards him.

His skin was tanned, growing more rosy with each passing moment we stood silently. He slowed as he approached me. His black leathers and silver armor that wrapped around his large body drew elegant curves over his muscular figure. I looked to his neck, where I could see his pulse pound beneath what seemed to be the ending part of a larger black tattoo.

As he got closer, he towered over me. I stepped back a bit and he immediately stopped in his tracks, as if he suddenly realized we were strangers, and I had a right to be cautious. He flexed his fingers, as if denying himself something. The sun hit several silver and black rings that decorated his veiny hands, drawing my attention.

“Are you alright, love?” He said with such softness that it put air back into my lungs.

“Yes.” I said, louder and more sarcastic than I meant to.

“Excuse me?” He smiled again with that arrogant and inviting smile. The slight rasp to his voice and accent similar and yet entirely apart from my own made me want to draw myself closer to him.

I tried—harder than I’d like to admit—not to let the deep rumble of his voice break past my protective barriers as he huffed a low laugh, looking me up and down. When I did, it ran like warm honey down my spine. From nape to tailbone.

“Yes, I’m quite well *and* I’m the right person. But I didn’t need saving.” I said as casually and truthfully as I could manage.

He looked around us at the unconscious Amerrysian army men.

“I’m sure you didn’t, but a thank you wouldn’t hurt.” The nameless stranger said while shaking the dirt from his hair, leaving his dark locks disheveled. He looked almost boyish, in a careless and INNOCENT way. Maybe it was his silky complexion or the slight dimple above his brow, but it was proving to be too disarming.

“How do I know you’re not a bigger threat than the arsehole you took down?” I crossed my arms and lifted my chin, trying to look sure of myself.

“You don’t.” The man gave another grin, but it was less sincere. His eyes also seemed to dim slightly, like shadows now eddied within.

“Well, then.” I whirled on my feet and headed towards the water. I stepped into the sea, summoning its energy to charge my strength and healing abilities. I could feel him hesitantly but eagerly follow me. “Goodbye now.”

“Woah, woah, woah,” He lunged for me, an arm outstretched towards my own. I turned swiftly on my heel and forcefully grabbed his wrist. He met my block with equal force. The hit reverberated through my entire body. His eyes flashed slightly in surprise, as if he wasn’t expecting my strength. The presumptuous nature of his look broke me from my trance.

He was no different. They never are. I met his darkened gaze briefly before I let go and continued on towards town.

“I’m Nyx Darling.” He shouted from behind me. I heard his feet shuffle across the rubble and rocks on the shoreline. I got an uneasy feeling deep in my chest. Like the touch of a subzero rod to the heart.

“Primordial of Darkness—that Nyx?” I turned my head to look the strange immortal up and down once again.

“I’ve been called a lot of things, but I don’t know what a primo-deal is. It’s just Nyx Darling.”

“If you don’t know what a Primordial is, you’re definitely not one.” I chuckled, but coughed to end my show of vulnerability. “And don’t call me darling.”

I studied his face with squinted eyes, and did not feel afraid to do so. It’s in the violation of my past that I usually flirt my way out of my troubles, but in this moment, I did not wish to entice, but only aimed to feed my curiosity.

“What *can* I call you?” Nyx’s voice sounded like butter, in a way that can only mean he’s practiced this particular gift many times. His accent also sounded similar to those in old northwestern Athenia. Of course it does. I hate to admit that accents are a particularly annoying weakness of mine.

I suppose my love for them reflects my love for music. From complex compositions to chatty birds in a large forest. Each accent always felt like a melody portraying each person’s history. Phoebe’s, in particular, was as

choppy as the grassy coasts and loud as the tall cliffs of the land she spent most of her life, a large island off the coast of Athenia, once known to the humans as Ireland.

“Rae.” I admitted, which is more than I usually allow for strangers. But the words kind of just fell out.

“Well, Rae,” He said my name slowly, as if testing how it felt in his mouth. “I wasn’t calling you darling. My full name is Nyx Darling.” He tried to inform me in a sincere manner, but the slight crack in his voice made me feel a bit embarrassed, an emotion I would not let leave my mind and effect my body. I would stand tall, always.

“Oh.” I said, my cheeks and chest suddenly flushed. A small flutter of my stomach sent my feet stumbling slightly—*seven hells*—I prayed he didn’t notice, I’m trying really hard to present a strong front, Gaea spare me. “Well, that’s just confusing.”

Nyx laughed and the sound felt like the swell of the song I heard minutes earlier. “My father actually used to call my mother darling when they first met. She had no idea he was basically calling her his wife before they even solidified their mating bond.”

“Mating bond?” I choked a bit on the words, instantly regretting my curiosity.

“Soul-bonded, true love... a fated pairing created by the Mother. Sounding familiar at all?” Nyx said with a little bit of concern and eagerness etched on his face.

“Uh,” I turned to face him, hearing the words fated and Mother replaying in my mind. “Yes and no. I’ve heard something similar before, amongst the ancient Primordials. It’s like having the same ideas with different terminology. A parallel.”

“You didn’t seem taken aback by my wings, I just assumed...” Nyx trailed off, as if contemplating his next words.

“I’ve seen Angels before, and Demons.” The memory of both have sat uneasily in the deep parts of my mind since I first saw them.

The Furies are no joke.

“I’m assuming those are winged people, otherwise... *very* cool... thanks for sharing.” Nyx walked with his hands tucked behind him, watching his feet as we made our way back to town.

“You’re pretty bold for a helpless stranger.” I couldn’t help but bunch my eyebrows at the way he sounded so genuine, like he’s known me for centuries. I also couldn’t deny the feeling of familiarity that grew with each exchanged word. I heard Nyx’s footsteps halt behind me and turned on my heel to face him.

“Do you promise not to think I’m crazy if I ask you a question that might seem really strange?” Nyx held his hands up as he studied my face.

“I don’t promise anything, but you can ask me anyways.” I said firmly, moving my hands behind my back, mimicking the proud stance Bryn was famous for. It intimidated the hell out of me when I first met her, I was hoping to have the same effect.

I moved my attention to Nyx’s large onyx wings, lined with a shimmering gold substance. His eyes darted back and forth towards the ground, his mouth trying to find the right words. His wings moved slightly as his feet shifted. My head started turning slowly as my eyes made their way down his body. I jerked my head back before his eyes again met mine. The abruptness of the movement may have ruined my chances of being intimidating.

“What world is this?” Nyx said finally, his voice cracking as he forced the words out.

“Earth.” I said without hesitation, surprised by how quickly I was to answer, as if I had suddenly lost the ability to lie.

“Huh.” Nyx shifted his weight to his right hip as he placed a hand on it, and bit his lower lip in a confused look. It was almost comical. “Well, then, where are we off to, Rae, darling?”

I started off towards the cobblestone streets, hiding my growing smile. I realized that there were townspeople peeking out of their stores, gawking at the pair of us.

“*We* are off on our separate ways, buddy.” I walked with intention as we neared the street. I slowed down and turned again. “Are you calling me darling or are you mating me this time?”

Nyx let out a loud laugh before saying, “I’m definitely not *mating* you, Rae. That’s not even a proper term.”

I made a noise as if to mock him, and once I did, it was like I appeared back to when I was 17, making fun of a boy I liked because I was scared he would reject me if I told him I liked him. Because there’s a reason they’re called crushes, and by then, the world had already put its weight on my back.

When every element of my life has felt like swimming in a storm, and with my particularly unfortunate romantic history, I decided that it was going to be one thing I could control, one less way that the Universe could hurt me.

There was no denying what was happening now, or why I felt like shoving this man in his beautifully broad chest, just so I could feel his heat under my palms, even if only for a moment.

“You know what I fucking meant, Nyx D—” I whirled to throw the end of the word in his face, “—irtbag.” I turned away as I cringed at the insult. Not my best shot taken, but... can you blame me? It’s been quite the day. Quite the *hour*, truly.

“I’m a bag of *dirt*?!” Nyx spat back at me through a raspy laugh, almost a humored sigh. It was far too disarming. I turned to him and tried giving my best glare of death, one that incited caution if not outright fear in most men. His returning look was more excited than terrified. Damn it all to hell. He grabbed onto the straps around his chest and leaned back a bit, his wings opening with the movement. “Such a foul mouth on this one.”

His response wasn’t so much offended as it was surprised, as if he’d never heard the term before, further proof that he wasn’t from this world.

“Hold on.” I held up a hand, as if urging whatever was stirring inside me to cease until I could wrap my head around the situation. “If you’re from another world... how do you know English?”

“English.” He said the word as if testing it out. “Well, in short, I don’t.” He took a step towards me, and my fists tightened at my sides, but I lifted my chin. He didn’t seem to notice, not when his eyes had not yet stopped staring at my own. Perhaps he hadn’t seen the shade before.

He instantly noted my discomfort, and took one more, very slow step towards me before lifting his arm, and slowly pulling his sleeve up slightly, revealing a tattoo in a language I didn't recognize.

"It's a Sea Mark, it translates any language to my own." He ran his fingers over the dark ink, as if he could read my mind. "The only downfall being that even if I know what you're saying, I may not know what you mean."

"Translate this:" I grabbed his arm and spoke into his wrist as if it were a microphone. "I'm going to stop following this woman, because she's a stranger. With weapons." His arm barely dropped when I released it, his hand flexing a moment after. I held up my wrist and said into it, like in the spy movies Marcellus makes me watch, "Roger that." And turned to keep walking. *Needing* to keep walking.

"Are you afraid of me?" He asked with such a low voice and calm demeanor that the emotions it elicited in me did far more than scare me. It was terrifying. Foreign. Dangerous.

Intoxicating.

"Hardly." I blurted, spinning around to face him, and somehow I had forgotten how breathtaking he was in the second I had looked away. All over again, I was being disarmed. "Why would I be afraid of *you*?"

"You don't know me." He tilted his head up as if the words brought out something from deep within him. "I could be as mad as all hell, or a psychopath. I could be plotting a way to kill you, and there you stand, FEARLESS."

"Try it then. See where it gets you." I said my words as if they were a promise. A challenge.

His smile grew slowly, in perfect synchronization with the rising of my burning heart as I could feel my blood filling every inch of my body. I gulped, before I knew what I had done, and prayed he didn't notice, though he had not yet taken his gaze off of my lips, drawing my eyes to his own.

"I made an assumption that your fearlessness would get you hurt, my mother would scream bloody bells at me if she knew I did such a thing." He took a step closer, and to my surprise, I didn't retreat. I hadn't known anyone

else who uses the word *bloody* as I do, and it made me want to keep listening. “I understand now that a stare like that could bring even the sky to its knees.”

“And what brings a nosey fucker like you to your knees?” The question escaped my lips before I could realize its double meaning.

“Shall I tell you, or would you prefer a demonstration?” His quick retort made it seem like the idea had already been on his mind, or perhaps I, too, had underestimated him. I let my chin rise, I let my piercing glare turn to the adoring eyes of a LOVER. A trap.

“I’ve brought many men to their knees.” I took a step closer to him, pushing my shoulders back, letting my feminine figure reveal itself further. As I made my way to his side, I tilted my head, his own instinctively moving with it, like a snake to its charmer. I looked at him through my eyelashes, long enough that his ragged breathing distracted the stiff muscles of his balanced stance.

Just as he shifted his weight, pulling one foot lazily beneath him, I took the opportunity to sweep his weaker leg, bringing him to his knees. In that very second, I summoned my sword and held it, hilt up, to his neck as I stood before him. I let my grin fall and clenched my teeth.

“Seems only fair to let them beg before my sword takes its prize. Best be on your way before you become the next poor sod to stain its blade.” Although the trick took minimal effort, I, too, found it hard to catch my breath. I looked down at him, and found no presence of fear in his eyes that seemed to reflect the sky, but instead, found something else.

“Incredible.” He said breathlessly, as if he didn’t mean to say it aloud.

I dropped my sword as I stepped back, and he caught it effortlessly. I wanted him to know I feared nothing and no one as I armed him, and turned on my heel to continue on.

“Kill me if you wish, all I ask of you is your help.” He moved to his feet hesitantly and flexed his shoulders back as if trying to compose himself. And for some reason, it cracked a vital piece of my protective walls. I could hear his hands tighten around the leather straps holding his weapons across his chest. “I’m new. I could really use a guide. Please.”

“What does that mean? Where are you from?” We both turned toward the sound of rocks shifting at the same time. The sound sent an electric shock down my spine.

“I’m not done with you, child.” And there it was.

The memory invaded my mind like a parasite. The day I met Nyx marked the beginning of everything. The moment I remembered the prophecy, there was no going back. My part in all of this, in the fate of the Universe, lies in each word that once branded my tiny chest.

*Chaos will return when the Divine Feminine takes
her last breath*

The overwhelming memory flew through my body like acid in my veins. I held my hands over my face as I begged the Earth to make the monsters go away.

Nyx rushed to me, my sword thumping against the sand as he dropped it and knelt where I seemed to have fallen to my knees. He held my hands with his own, the feeling like a memory. His touch turned to acid and I pulled from him, a dark void clouding my vision at his touch.

“What’s going on?” He said in a panic.

I looked through my fingers up to where the white-haired stranger now revealed himself in my memory as my abuser. The one who carved the prophecy into my chest. Back to finish what he started. Killing me.

Zeus. Self-proclaimed King of the Gods. Ruler of the skies.

Nyx turned from me and spread his wings as he prepared to launch himself towards the evil man.

“Don’t kill him!” I shouted, my voice shaky.

Nyx quickly turned to me, a confused look on his face. “Why?”

Zeus lunged for Nyx, electricity and lightning coating his hands.

Nyx simply held out a hand, eyes still on me, and grabbed the brute by his neck. The force made a loud thud, but Nyx seemed unfazed.

“What do you want, Rae?” Nyx said calmly, though the veins popping out of his clenched fist and forehead made me wonder if it was an act.

“If he dies he goes to another realm, and tortures them, and we may never be able to find him. And stop him.”

Zeus tried saying something but his words were muffled through his throat that was being closed by Nyx's tight grip.

I lifted my hand, and a giant hunk of metal with a large chain hit the sand beside Nyx. He looked to it, and back to me, his mouth parted.

"Breaking his neck should knock him out." I said as I steadied myself, and tried to stand. I emptied my stomach onto the sand. It seems my body rejected the memory even more than my mind did.

I heard a crack a moment later as Nyx squeezed tighter, with what seemed to be little effort. Zeus's body hit the ground as Nyx hurried to my side, a hand on my elbow to help me stand. His touch felt like the hot coals that burn my skin every time I try using my powers. It's a mystery as to why, but it happens without fail every single time.

"I'm *fine*." I said in an unfeeling way. He backed off immediately, but looked eager to grab me as I swayed back and forth on my unreliable legs. "Wrap him with the chain." He did as I said without hesitation.

He looked to me like a soldier waiting for orders. I tried to still my mind as it now flooded with the unlocked memories. My childhood becoming clearer. The source of my pain staring me in the face.

"Now throw him far, *really* fucking far, into the sea." I nearly snarled. "That should keep him occupied for a while. If we're lucky, a fish will eat him, and he'll have to *really* make an effort to escape then."

I watched Nyx rise a few feet into the air before launching Zeus's unconscious body several miles into the Mediterranean.

"Remind me never to cross you." Nyx said as he walked cautiously to my side.

"He didn't *cross* me." I said coldly. "He defiled my three-year-old body. He branded me with words that I cannot escape. A fate tied to me since my birth."

"I'm so... so very sorry." Was all he said.

I turned to walk towards my home, still feeling a bit weak. I didn't hear Nyx's footsteps as I continued on, so I turned to him.

"You coming or what?" I lifted my hands and let them fall to my side. "My best friend and I have a pact that if we ever meet an alien, we'd bring them home and hide them like in E.T."

“What’s an *alien*?” Nyx said as he quickly shuffled towards me. I whirled around quickly to hide my smile as I found it so fucking adorable that a grown man, an *unbelievably* attractive man, shuffled his boots towards me like a little boy who hurried to catch up to his parents because he got distracted looking at toys in a shop window.

“Someone from another world.” I said over my shoulder.

“Well, then, *you’re* the alien from my perspective, aren’t you?” He slowed as he neared me, and I caught his scent in the wind. It was like sandalwood and sea salt mixed with lemon and pears. I couldn’t name everything, but it was the most beautiful mixture of scents. I only wished I could bottle it up and spray it anytime I needed to escape.

“You’re on *my* world, pal.” I pushed him with my shoulder, and he let me as he leaned away slightly. His smile was infectious, and as much as I tried to avoid it, I smiled back.

“Where are we headed?” He pushed his shoulders back and looked to the palm trees and even further to the sky, wanting to take in this place before we moved onto the next.

I simply pointed north.

“I’m a visual learner so that’s very helpful, thank you.” The casual cadence of his voice was nearly impossible not to smile at.

I took a big step onto the rocks leading up a steep heel, wanting to bypass the town and head straight for our next destination. I don’t know if it was Nyx’s instant comfort or my own that had me turning towards him, ready to make a quick retort. The rock under my extended leg broke in half, sending me down the cliff, and into Nyx’s arms.

As our chests thumped, a vision hit me so violently that Nyx recalls me groaning, though everything went dead silent for me.

It was the last version of my void vision, as if it wouldn’t stop invading my mind all of these years until this part could finally be revealed.

It was as it usually is: sucked into an endless void with only the stars for company, choking on my efforts to breathe.

Despite my eyes efforts to see, I knew there was something, some force, there. If it is light my eyes know, and darkness they don’t, I would no longer make it a stranger.

I was never truly a stranger to the dark.

As I made my eyes compatible with the void, the stars burned into supernovas, galaxies, all impossibly far and yet so vibrant I thought maybe if I reached out I could touch them. But when they came together, they formed the most terrifying figure, looking up at me.

I turned from his eternal eyes, and was suddenly looking down my outstretched arm, towards an unmoving figure in the distance, and I did not need time to wonder who it was. Because I could feel him, with ease.

If it was the colliding of our chests that elicited this premonition, it would surely be the same thing that either saves, or damns us.

I couldn't help but think of something Jax said to me so many years ago. He once described his shadows—making him the most efficient Messenger at Doctrina—as *a chaotic impossibility living in the space between life and death*.

And it made me think, as my body, nearing unconsciousness from a lack of oxygen, barreled towards Nyx, that coming across this monstrous man was no coincidence. It was another piece of the prophesy. It was Chaos who stared at me like an old friend.

Just before our bodies collided, I could hear Nyx's voice distantly in my mind, saying my name in a calm and coaxing way.

I shot out of my body and sat up abruptly in a new one. I'm back in my parent's estate, on the large outdoor lounging bed on the balcony. I whirled towards the large figure seated at my feet. My vision cleared on his face, that familiar face. That perfect face.

Chapter Eight

“*Bloody* hell.” I yelped, heart racing.

“*There* she is. You know, you’re the only person I’ve met here who says that.” Nyx noted casually as he pulled a throw blanket over my legs.

“Out of the what... *twelve* people you know here, feathers?” My voice was hoarse, my mind disoriented as if I were still dreaming.

“Alien problems, as you’d say.” His smile held something soft within it, and I just hoped it wasn’t pity. “Though I prefer *extra-terrestrial*, it has a bit more flair, don’t you think?”

“I think you just say it and hear *extraordinary*.” I huffed a mocking laugh as I sat up, angry blood rushing to my head instantly.

“True either way, then.” His smile was devilish, and easy. The same ease at which we always talked, even now, when we hadn’t seen each other in days.

I pressed my fingers to my forehead, wishing to burrow into my skull and release the terrible pressure building there. Despite my pure immortality and alleged unlimited power, I still have managed to drink myself into one of the worse hangovers of my life.

“You were having what seemed like a pleasant dream...” Nyx twisted the dark ring on his middle finger with his thumb, revealing his nerves. “A *very* pleasant dream.” He said through parted lips. His jaw clenched like he had to digest each word.

Nyx’s every mannerism felt like the most comforting display of what I think humanity was like. The softness of his words and the gentle flow of his

movements soothed my hangover. And yet, I found my eyes rolling dramatically. He was being too nice, too cautious.

His power washed over me like a molten bath. A dragon trying desperately not to accidentally crush its egg. The sun trying to keep the earth warm without devouring it whole. His face always matched his words, no semblance of second thought or hidden meaning. It was the sincerity of it all that made me fucking *despise* the man.

I gripped the blanket and leaned forward in an attempt to sit up, feeling a bit nauseas as I did. I ceased my efforts and let Nyx's smooth voice do what it always did to me: massage every nerve in my body.

"But it turned into a very bad dream." His face paled a bit as he swallowed whatever kept him from saying the next words. "You looked like you were being tortured, Rae." His face painted with visual discomfort. "Was it another vision?"

"I look fine, don't I?" I said dryly, ignoring his question and motioning towards my dirty clothes and disheveled hair. Moving to my feet, I aimed for the bottle of gin still open on the ground a few feet away. I swooped down to pick it up as I kept striding towards the bedroom. I could hear Nyx following behind me, the sound so familiar.

His height and disgustingly perfect musculature made his steps heavy behind me, piercing my immortal hangover.

I'm not entirely sure it was a coincidence when Nyx's footsteps suddenly became quiet at the same time that I rubbed my forehead to try to relieve my throbbing skull. The gesture heated a very cold part of me. The sudden warmth felt too foreign, too undeserving.

"Honestly," Nyx said, his voice trailing off a bit, "You look like a bloody wreck, Andy." I whirled on my feet with a gaping mouth before he continued, "I haven't seen anyone's head in such a state since Marcellus accidentally fell asleep with a honey hair mask on."

"You have some nerve." I spat at him. Stalking towards the bathroom. I swung around the door and slammed it before switching the lock. Both genuine hurt and a little amusement filled me. Nyx could somehow say things in a way that made everything sound funnier. Which made it both impossible

to retell his jokes, and really hard to not at least scoff at the bastard, especially if it's to hide a grin.

"Anything to get you to bathe, my darling?" He said with a comforting softness to his voice. I waited for his footsteps to get further away, until I heard the door to the bedroom close. I waited for a minute longer until I knew he was gone, and then stripped down.

I ran the water, and heard clinking noises from downstairs. I threw a few herbs and salts into the warm bath and ran a brush through my hair as the tub filled. I turned the water off and slid my body carefully into the golden tub. I rubbed my shoulders lazily, and the water darkened with sweat and dirt from Gaea knows what.

The silence of the room played in harmony with the splash of the water as I scooped a collection of rosemary and lavender and poured it slowly down the nape of my neck. The warmth ran down my spine, bringing me deeper into reality. I didn't realize how cold I had been until I felt my skin burn under the warm water.

This is exactly what being around Nyx feels like. Satiating and safe.

I heard Nyx's footsteps climb the stairs and slowly make his way into the bedroom before he lightly knocked on the bathroom door. He knew how to make his steps silent, so I knew it was for my comfort and not for a lack of training that he made his presence known.

"Hey, buddy." His voice was muffled through the wooden door as his forehead laid pressed against it. "I've got your favorite, and I..." He trailed off as his voice cracked with hesitation.

I raised my right hand and closed my eyes before a weight pushed down on my palm. I summoned the meal from his hands to my own. I wasn't ready to get out of the tub, and I was even less ready to face him.

"You're not afraid of using your powers?" Nyx said through the door, his words cautious. "Not even after..."

"I don't care if he knows where I am." I stared down into the dark water, my fingers moving slowly through clumps of herbs. "He won't come after me now, he's waiting for me to find him. To find... them. He's too arrogant to lose a game of chicken."

I could hear his feet hesitantly step back from the door. “Thank you.” I said towards him, hoping he was waiting for some kind of cue to leave.

“It’s not your fault, Rae. If anyone should be punishing themselves it should be me.” He said softly. I didn’t reply, because he was wrong. “I’ll be on the main level patio if you need m... Anything.” He said quietly, like a dog with its tail between its legs.

I dug into the meal before he had left my childhood bedroom. Perfectly marinated steak with Madeira sauce, dill and crème fraîche carrots, garlic and rosemary potatoes, perfectly fluffy milk bread, and freshly squeezed orange juice. It was the exact meal I had with my family for every one of my birthdays. The nostalgic flavors did exactly what I think Nyx knew they would, and what I think I was subconsciously trying to do by coming *here* of all places.

They broke me.

I walked slowly through the doors to the patio, adjusting my loose sweater as it fell over one shoulder. My eyes fixed on the ground just in front of me. I rubbed my fingers over the soft cashmere of my taupe pants, trying to ease the anxiety that trapped my body. Once I said these words out loud, the groveling had to end. The depression could no longer be my place of comfort. I had to embrace what I have now come to terms with. It was this, or an immortal life of agony.

“Nyx.” I said almost too softly to be heard. My eyes slowly tracing the ground leading up to where he sat before the sunrise. My devious chef turned his head from where he also stared intently at the ground.

“Yes?” I don’t know how such ordinary words could sound like music as they exited his irritatingly perfect lips.

“Let’s go save Maeve.”

“We don’t know where he’s keeping her, but we have to do something. We have to *go* somewhere.” I said into the open air between where Nyx and I sat on the patio, my foot tapping in anticipation.

I watched the curtains blow in the wind and thought about my darkest moment, I thought about how my family had been so suddenly ripped apart and I, in all my power, could do nothing to stop it.

NOOOO. I could still hear Maeve's broken scream as if it was imprinted in the wind. I can still feel how my stomach dropped just as quickly as the wine glass in my hand. And as it shattered on the ground of the library where Nyx and I researched Zeus's true history, I froze.

RAE. She had called for me. Not for Bryn, not the Valkyrie, for me. When I had finally Appeared on the path we walked every single week, except this one, when I chose to be with *him* instead, I was too late.

Zeus took Maeve. The father of sadism has my best friend.

"We should go to Doctrina." Nyx said, eyes to the ground, giving me the illusion of being alone as his gaze did not meet mine. "We should message everyone and tell them to meet us there. Phe and Mar should already be there. I don't know what we're going to do, but surely we'll figure something out together."

"You're right." Nyx's eyes lit up at my faint hopefulness. "Don't get used to it."

He leaned back in his plush red chair, stomach muscles tightening as he gently fell into its comfort. I pulled my eyes from him, and looked to the horizon. A large bird flew by, its wings moving slightly as it rode the air. I envied that it had but two tasks in life, to eat, and to fly.

"He can't keep doing this to us. I'm not going to live my entire life scared of what he could do to my family." Another admission I felt settled enough to give.

"How do we stop him?" Nyx said as he rose to his feet and walked slowly to the balcony.

"I don't know yet." My fingers traced lines on the seams of the couch, hoping I could rub it like an enchanted bottle and make a wish.

"Then let's take it one move at a time." Nyx turned from the view to look at me, and leaned back against the marble balcony, his hands gripping the stone hard as we made eye contact. "What do you want to do first?"

"Make our way north, to our home." What a reflection of my life, always moving north, and yet never truly moving forward.

“How far?” His voice was deep, and he pulled his gaze to the ground.

“As far as we can make it without depleting our power.” My voice turned cold, and unfeeling.

“No.” He said as if it was a command.

“No?” Emotion came back to my voice as I stood. I walked quickly to him, as if I contemplated hitting him right in his beautiful face.

I turned and placed my hands hard on the balcony, inhaling deeply before huffing out in frustration.

He took my arm gently in his soft hands, and pulled me to face him.

“No, we will not be pushing ourselves to the breaking point each day.” He tilted his head as I stared at his chest. “We won’t be doing that, love, because that would allow you to keep hurting yourself, which would make you think you deserve it, and therefore are to blame for everything that’s happened.”

I raised my chin, but didn’t meet his eyes, until I couldn’t hold out anymore, and stared right into his maya blues.

“You’re wrong.” I said unconvincingly.

“Well, for *once*, twice now I suppose,” his hand raised slightly only to halt, and his fingers rubbed together as if they needed some—any—kind of contact, “I’m right about this.”

“I believe a chill was just felt in hell, now that everything is out of balance.” I said, without really thinking about it, sometimes speaking was so natural with Nyx, that it feels like my subconscious is feeding me a script I am happily verbalizing.

His eyes went wide with pure joy as he huffed out a heart-filling laugh.

“Are we up for a bit of banter now?” He asked, entirely surprised.

“Everything’s fucked, which makes anything possible I guess.”

“Anything?” He was eager for my reply.

“You never know.” I raised an eyebrow as I patted his chest, and turned on my heel, white sneakers squeaking, to move back to the couch.

I could hear Nyx speak under his breath as I walked away, a glimmer of hope to be found in his words.

“You never know.”

RÆ'S PLACE  THREE WEEKS AGO

“This is *sick*, Dino.” Marcellus blurted as he took in the rooftop bar I was surprised I didn’t think of while I was first building my house. “I could get used to this.”

“Seriously, Mar, none of the students are going to catch onto your ridiculous old human terminology. I mean, *sick* being a good thing? That’s just bloody ridiculous.” Nyx gave him a hard pat to the back. “But I admire your passion, brother.”

“Thanks, Uso, but you’re the one who says *bloody* as if it doesn’t make people think you’re a serial killer.” Marcellus swatted his hand.

“Hey, I say *bloody*, too.” I chimed in.

“Yeah, mo chara, but you’d be everyone’s first suspect if there was a murder here.” Phoebe gave me an amused look as Maeve giggled.

“I really appreciate how much everyone gets me.”

I walked over to the black metal railing that looked over Doctrina. The sky was dark, a light growing in the distance. Phoebe plopped herself on the daybed by the pool, pulling her large red blazer off as the evening summer air blew a warm breeze on our skin. And of course, Marcellus wasn’t far behind her.

I felt Nyx’s presence before he appeared next to me, looking up at the starry sky. I wondered if I’d ever not be so undeniably aware of him, in every single way.

“It’s crazy to think this is a different constellation than the one in my world.” Even his deep voice brought something out in me. Like a deep sea lullaby.

“Do you miss it?” I looked to him, my heart stopping at the perfect sharp edge of his jawline, and how it clenched as he thought of home.

“I do.” I could see the stars in his eyes, the blue so sweet I wished to paint every wall in my house with it, hoping it would make me feel as safe as they do now. “But I can’t go back.”

“I’ll learn how to open a portal, and you’ll be back soon, I promise.” The thought of him leaving poured acid on my heart, but the way he looks when he talks of home makes me sure he should be where he’s happiest.

“Easy, love.” He turned, and I nearly melted under his adoring gaze. “You’re getting dangerously close to being nice to me.”

“Well, I’m just a nice person.” I turned back to the view, the colorful lights coming into view as the sun set completely. “Allegedly.”

“You are so many things, Rae, darling.” Nyx’s hands held the railing, a few inches from mine. “Even I know you are like no other, and you hardly tell me anything about yourself.”

“What is it you’d like to know?” I adjusted my grip. Only an inch, now.

“What do you think happens after death?” Nyx kept his gaze on the stars as if he thought he could find the answers there.

“We know what happens after death.” I hoped such a revelation wouldn’t make him panic, so I forced kindness to my voice.

“You’re kidding.” He finally turned to me, wonder and... fear in his eyes.

“I never kid about death.”

“You *regularly* make jokes about death.”

“Well I don’t joke about the truth of it.”

“And what is the truth?” I now had his undivided attention.

“When we die,” I looked to the sky, the stars and Aurora Borealis such perfect company for such a thing. “Our soul is sent to the place between life and death, and by whatever force, whatever choice given, we are born into a new body. Sometimes on other worlds, sometimes on the same one. You may not be on the same timeline, but wherever you end up is where you’re meant to be.

“There are also those in our life who follow us through death. Particle entanglement is the binding of the elements that makes up the star dust that makes up our souls, and our bodies. It intertwines two or several people in such a way that they may live multiples lives together. Your mom could be your daughter in the next life, or your father your best friend.”

“I don’t think I could’ve hoped for a better answer.” Nyx followed my eye-line to the sky, taking in all the possibilities this new truth meant for him,

and his family. “To be with your loved ones after death is all I ever hoped for.”

“*Loved ones.*” I clicked my tongue. “So soft, Darling.”

“Touch me and you may say otherwise.”

I turned to him quickly, my eyes wide. And pressed my lips together to keep from smiling. Damn my skin for blushing, and my heart for racing at the thought.

“NO.” He held out a hand to me. “I meant my—my stomach, my arms. Fucks sake, I did *not* mean that.”

I laughed loudly, and I felt the watchful eyes and growing silence gather behind us like a hand on my back.

“That’s a shame.” I turned before walking over to our friends, and stood up on my toes, but he was too tall that I barely reached his ear. “I was just going to check.”

“Dear Gods.” Nyx said under his breath in utter shock.

“Who needs a refill?” I walked over to the bar, fully stocked with everything we frequently drink, and clapped my hands together as I thought of what to make.

“Wine all around.” Phoebe shouted while throwing an arm in the air, her drink slashing Maeve, who only giggled and held her palms up as if she were dancing in the rain or being showered with confetti.

“Oh, we’re *all* getting twirly tonight, bitches.” Marcellus hiccuped through his words.

I looked over to Nyx, who was restless as he leaned with both hands on the railing, hanging his head as it shook.

“Wine it is.” I smiled at my family. Their company all I would ever need for the rest of my life. Each of them gave me something I never knew I needed until I had it. Now I couldn’t imagine being anyone else, or accepting anything less.

I truly, and completely, owed them my life.

ANDINO’S ESTATE  PRESENT DAY

I looked towards the rising sun, and tried to feel empowered by the promise of a new day, but all I could summon was memories of my chosen family. Of my life's purpose. My best friend.

I will not fail. I *cannot* fail. I will make up for my mistake of leaving Maeve alone and vulnerable on our weekly walk. Of staying behind with the man who now stood patiently behind me. Of choosing him when she's always chosen me. Even when I was undeserving of such unconditional faith.

We will have days like we did on my rooftop, entirely ourselves and completely careless. It is what they deserve. It's what *she* deserves.

I'm coming for you, my little fox. Be brave, don't give in. Don't lose hope as easily as I did.

We're on our way.

Chapter Nine

“We’ll fly for a while, I promise you I’ll go as far as I can, then you have to promise *me* we will get a good nights sleep, yeah?” Nyx said from outside my bedroom as I sat on my bed, needing to be in my safe space.

“I promise I will try to sleep tonight.” Was all I could offer him.

“Thank you.” And he meant it. “How would you like to be held?”

“*Qué?*” I blurted, unable to stop my head from dipping in surprise.

“When we fly, I can hold you under your legs and behind your back, or I can hold you facing the earth, or facing me, with your legs wrapped around my waist.”

“Uhh...” It seems my brain didn’t give me a script for this part. Blood filled my cheeks at the image his words pulled to my mind. I figured he’d just grab me, but I should’ve known, given that Nyx’s feelings about *choice* are borderline religious.

“Whichever you’re comfortable with, just let me know.” Nyx said as he lifted his hand to his hair, his large biceps visible as his sleeve fell to his shoulder.

I moved forward instinctively as he turned to leave, it took me a moment to get the words out.

“Nyx,” I called to him, he turned back to me as if his moves were instinctual as well. I didn’t know what I wanted to say, and certainly wasn’t about to reveal any *more* of my vulnerability. “Thank you.”

The corner of his mouth turned up as I tried giving him a smile with feeling.

We stood on the white stone driveway in front of my childhood home, a place that had been long abandoned by my parents. I bought it years ago, for reasons I don't know. I just wasn't ready to let it go. This town and these people may not have been good to me, but this house always was. At times, it was the only friend I had, as if it held my secrets in its walls, and I, its greatest admirer.

"Whenever you're ready." Nyx nearly whispered.

My shoulders rose as my long inhale was shaky. I pulled at my sweater, as my panic always made my clothes feel foreign and wrong on my body. He just took my hands in his, and nodded. Because that's all he needed to do.

"Well, then. Now or never." I said as I slapped my hands on his shoulders and jumped into his arms. I briefly saw his wide eyes frozen in shock, but he caught me still. His wings flexed, their span nearly twice his height.

I wrapped my arms tightly around him, and locked my ankles behind his back. He hesitantly put his arms around my waist. His thumb rubbed my shoulder blade and I jerked under his touch. The pain it elicited in my body, the burning, the stabbing, it felt like the fight in my head finally had substance. It felt like all was finally balanced, and right.

Nyx shook my body and I gasped in shock and annoyance as he did.

I pulled from him and gave him a murderous and confused look.

"NICHOLAS." I growled.

"You stopped breathing." He looked equally as pissed, and his words made my features soften. "Don't do that again."

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize." I suppose when I fall into a dark thought and hold my breath, it must be because the world is so loud and heavy that I completely still under its weight and lose the one thing that keeps me in it: my breath.

I remember what Bryn once told me when we first started training together. Our breath moves our body, and our body is our lifeline.

“I am millions of years old, child. I have fought Creatures of the Dark more terrifying than your mind could ever imagine.” Bryn’s gold armor glistened in the evening sun, making my eyes squint. “I am the leader of the Valkyrie, the first army, and the strongest Titan of this realm.”

“So?” I said, arms crossed. I had been at Doctrina for almost two decades, but for an immortal, time feels different when death doesn’t follow you.

My nightmares seemed to have found me here. Though I’ve tried to outrun them, they’re even louder than before.

“So, stop holding back.” She walked towards me, hands grabbing my wrists, and holding them up. She kicked my feet apart, forcing me into a balanced stance. “You’re not going to hurt me, I know how to protect myself. Trust me.”

“I don’t trust you, I don’t *know* you.” I hoped my words would push her away, hurt her, because I would never let my hands, or my power, do that job.

“Well, then.” She turned to walk away, towards the graceful movements of the Valkyrie on the other end of the training pit. “I guess I lied.”

“Wait.” I called after her, guilt stinging my gut. “I’m stronger than I look.”

“So am I.” She didn’t turn back to me, but stopped moving.

“Use Aeolian Obsidian on me, dampen my power, and I’ll fight you.” I offered.

“Stop holding your breath, and I’ll consider it.” She moved towards a weapons rack nearby, and ran her finger down a large spear. I moved my shoulders back as I was now all-too aware of my breathing. “Fill your lungs, and just when they feel full, inhale hard, filling them completely.”

I did as she instructed, and felt my head lighten with each breath.

“Five more times.” She picked up the spear, and twirled it a few times, getting a feel for its weight. “Now close your eyes, and and make your breathing even, using as much force to fill your lungs as you do to empty them.”

And so I did.

“We can’t pump our blood to our heart, fill our wounds when our skin breaks open, or weave our bones back together, but we can BREATHE whenever and however we choose.” I continued breathing evenly as she spoke, her voice my only tie to the world as my body felt still in the world. “There’s a reason for that, our breath moves our body...”

Something tore through the world, and just before my eyes opened, my hand was in front of my face, gripping the sharp blade of a long spear. I gasped as my eyes focused on the shiny silver metal, mere inches from going through my left eye.

“And our body, is our lifeline.” She walked towards me, hands behind her back. A few Valkyrie around us stopped what they were doing to watch.

“What the bloody hell is wrong with you?” Blood filled my face and chest, and logic left me as my brain screamed to murder. To *hurt*. To tear everything apart. “You could’ve *killed* me.”

“No.” She took the spear from my hand and before I could react, she hit my shoulder so hard that it echoed in the large dome of the training pit. I looked down as the blade did not pierce my skin, but pushed against me as if I was also made of Valkyrien steel. “I couldn’t if I tried.”

“I don’t understand.” I looked around at the Valkyrie who gawked, who held their hands over their mouths, and felt exposed. Naked. “Please, stop.”

“What are you feeling right now, Rae?”

“I’m angry.” The word pulled acid from my core, burning my already exposed skin. I wanted to tear the world apart.

“Tell me more about your anger.”

“I’m just angry.” I nearly growled.

“At who, at what?” She pushed, stepping closer as her own cheeks flushed. “*Why?*”

“I’m just *angry*.” Spit escaped my mouth as tears stung my eyes. “I’m *always* angry. What is the fist that squeezes my gut if not anger?” My hand shook as I mimicked the movement above my stomach. “What are my constant thoughts of injustice and nihilism if not a product of my *ANGER*.” My skin began glowing as I shook violently. “If we’re given the answers about

the Universe, and about those who control it,” I pointed to the sky, “only to find out that there is a cosmic balance that *ENSURES* that I will not only be so *lucky* as to experience joy, but after finally finding peace, I have to sit around, wait like *fucking PREY* for the inevitable balance of horrors and torment that waits for me like a Demon around the corner.”

“I understa—” Bryn tried cutting in.

“No. Don’t. This is absurdism, not Daoism. This is not some perfect utopia like everyone pretends it is. It’s diabolical at best.” My breathing was so fast I could barely get my words out. “This is the world I’m born into: The horror that is this double-edged divinity?” I stepped back, raising my arms, and hoped the world herself would hear my questions, and maybe I’d finally have an answer that isn’t riddled with unfair conditions. “This is the world we’re told to *love*?” I shook my head. “And if we don’t, we’re considered selfish. Asking for *too much*. How could anyone ever look someone in the eyes that begs for the bare minimum, and tell them they’re greedy? Could you look a starving child in the eyes, one who sobs for comfort, for food, for basic *fucking* decency, and CALL THEM *GREEDY*?” I panted through sobs. My words aimed to kill, as if her death could give my indifference meaning.

“Rae...” Bryn tried stepping forward, but my still shimmering skin held a wall between us. Unbreakable.

“That is no world led by light. When will I receive my assured balance for what was done to me?” Bryn looked to the finger I pointed at myself, shaky and tired. Her eyes shut, as if wishing to escape.

“I decided long ago that I would be doing myself a kindness if I were to stop expecting *balance* to reward my struggle. Light is no savior. Light is but darkness’s mistress. I may admire a beautiful day, but I certainly won’t turn my back on the storm that follows. I don’t accept your foolish notions of the promise of *balance*. Because everything I do to rationalize how this could be in my favor, how I could possibly be at peace at any point in this dreadful existence, all I come up with is that immortality is nothing if not the cruelest form of punishment.”

Bryn stared at me through broken eyes. Her stoicism is famously unshakable, and yet there she stood, shoulders dropped. I shook my head at

the sight of it. Even her, a constant as sure as the rising sun, was inconsistent, and unhelpful.

“So, yes. *Bryn*.” My breathing finally slowed. “I’m just angry.”

If my rage was anything, it was my pain crying out to the world, begging to be healed, to be heard. As *Bryn* stood a few feet away, breathing steadily as she looked me over, my savior now my victim, the space she held for me made me unable to stop the truth of my words from curdling my stomach. I was angry, yes, but more than that, I was afraid.

“Then be angry.” She said finally, her head shaking as she grasped for anything that could change my mind. I expected it to take longer than it did. “You *should* be angry. You should be furious. But... you’re assuming that you know how to quantify this cosmic balance.”

I narrowed my gaze at her, no hope left in me, and yet I stood silent as I waited. If there wasn’t hope, there was always desperation.

“Think of what has been done to you.” She said cautiously. “What would be fair in return for such suffering? Could you even name it?”

I shook my head imperceptibly, then looked to where my worn boots dug into the dirt before shaking my head no. Despite all the clothes readily available to me, after once again ruining such a beautiful outfit at the cliffs, I felt as if I only deserved expendable things.

“If we know there are things at work in the Universe that we could not possibly understand, and never be able to put into words, then why is it that we still try?” She took a step towards me. Her hand moving to grab something from her lower back. “Perhaps we know we will be disappointed without a doubt; every single time. Perhaps it’s easier to live with the pain, rather than just... *live*. Between the triumphs, and between the sacrifices. Because you’re right, you will never live in a constant state of peace, not if you cannot accept the inevitability of suffering. Suffering is but the most raw form of love. A love for others, a love for peace. For life.

“It is in the things that we would never give up, never fathom living without, even if it only lives in the past, that make us realize that any form of torment could never overshadow it. Perhaps you just have yet to find that *thing*, because when you do, kid, I promise you that it will all make sense.”

Bryn pulled a beautiful golden dagger from behind her and held it between us. She slowly reached for my hand, her own surprisingly soft.

“We have the promise of balance, if not anything else.” She held my hand palm facing the sky, then pushed back every finger but my pointer and middle. “Where we find pain, struggle, and *anger*.” She balanced the space between the blade and hilt on my fingers, and ran her thumb along the blade. I inhaled sharply as golden blood now coated it.

“Bryn...” I may have pushed this too far. Let too much show.

“And where we find happiness, kindness, and *love*. This is the essential balance of life. What gives you love, gives you grief, and what gives you life, lies the promise of death.” She took my other hand and wrapped it around the intricately decorated hilt. Just as cold bit at my palm, a rush of flashing images and intense feelings of euphoria, excitement, contentment and... *peace* filled my shell of a body. I nearly sobbed through a laugh as Bryn, looking like a brighter version of herself, held a beautiful woman in her arms as they watched the sun set into the sea. If I was no stranger to pain, Bryn was certainly no stranger to peace.

I wondered if the woman was once a Valkyrie, fighting alongside these brave warriors who have never looked upon me with any semblance of judgement. Perhaps she was one of the many who didn't make it through the Great War. Maybe that's why Bryn never talks about it, or leaves the estate. Gods have I been cruel to her, speaking of unfairness when she had lost her love so long ago, along with so many of her sisters in arms. I'm a damned fool. An ungrateful, ignorant, bloody fool.

“When you feel no regret, nor vengeance, nor injustice as you look back on moments such as these, then you know that balance has come.” Bryn stepped back, placing the blade once again behind her back. She looked around us, and I had nearly forgotten that we were surrounded by the Valkyrie, every single one had their eyes fixed on me. “If you do not feel justice for what has been done to you, balance has not yet found you. You're angry with the wrong Primordial, darling. It is not light or darkness you blame, but Time himself.”

“Well...” I held my fists at my sides, wishing to squash my shame “I've got plenty of that.” I huffed out a tired laugh.

“You won’t hurt me, and I can’t hurt you.” She stepped back, and held out the spear, offering it to me. “Do not be afraid when you’re here, child. While you’re in this pit, beneath the earth, you will be safe. You will learn how to protect yourself, how to hone your instincts—your true power—and you will be stronger than you could ever imagine. I will help you do this, but you must trust me, and more importantly, you *must* trust yourself. We are nothing when we lack the ability to know ourselves.”

“I don’t know how.” I admitted, reaching out to touch the spear, but not knowing if I was ready to grab it.

“Maybe start by finally accepting Maeve’s invitation to go on her weekly walks. Just because you don’t think you’re deserving of love, or at the very least, friendship, doesn’t mean you’re right.” Her words hit me at my core, and as much as I hate being told that I’m wrong, I found myself hoping I was.

“I don’t have a very good track record when it comes to making friends.” My voice cracked and I started walking towards the weapons rack to distract myself, and keep my pain from being exposed and laid bare.

“It wasn’t your fault, Rae.” Bryn followed behind me. “You can’t change people to make them worthy of you, or change yourself to meet their needs. You have to find the right people, and trust that they’re *deserving* of you. We choose our family as much as we are born into one, darling. To be hurting is one thing, but to be hurting and *alone*... that is the real tragedy.”

“I just hope...” I couldn’t finish my thought.

“That they choose you, too.” So she did it for me.

I nodded, holding back tears.

“I choose you.” She said with a hand to my shoulder. “From the moment we met, I chose you. It is as simple as that.”

“How did you know?”

“A kind of instinct, you could say.” I looked into her deep sea eyes as she pushed my hair behind my ear. “Your gut knows how to protect you. *Trust* it.”

“Rae?” Nyx softly rubbed my back, and as I blinked into reality. I had been crying. I exhaled a shaky breath, and rubbed my cheek against his shoulder, letting myself, just this once, find comfort in his embrace.

Bryn was right. Although my body tells me to stay far away from Nyx, my gut insists that he is an essential part of my story. I certainly hadn’t received my balance yet, not with all the pain and anger I still hold onto. But to hell with the voice in my head that tells me not to try. I have found my reason to try, in my family, in every good memory I’ve made since choosing to stay in Doctrina.

No one, and nothing, can stop me from getting what I deserve.

“Are you okay?” I could feel his voice rumble through my chest.

“I wanna go home.” Though my voice was laced with defeat, and Nyx’s sleeve was now drenched with my tears, a small ember burned within me, and I was determined to set it ablaze.

We spent the next several hours flying northeast above the Mediterranean towards the mainland. It was utter madness how fast Nyx could fly, once he catches the wind, I’m certain he could outrun any machine. I had convinced myself that my problems couldn’t catch us, and as I looked back, it was as if I could see them lost in the space beneath the clouds. We’ve had to have traveled hundreds of miles, and yet Nyx’s breath was steady against my chest. I don’t know—and I quite detest the thought—why I find that so Godsdamn attractive.

I laid my head on Nyx’s shoulder, looking back towards the place I only call home by a technicality. The place that I only bare a handful of memories of, the rest seem to be tucked away somewhere. Either due to their unimportance, or to their severity. Who knows.

“We should rest soon, keep our strengths up. Do you still have friends in Rome?” Nyx said into my ear as he slowed, breaking the air that rushed past it. I tried to stop the shiver that went down my spine, and failed. I only nodded in response, digging my chin into his trapezius. Dear Gods. It’s as if he was made of Valkyrien steel. “We’ll be there within the hour.”

I touched the side of Nyx's head, then pulled from him slightly, needing to counter the intimacy of that touch with as little psychological contact as possible.

He looked down at me with bunched eyebrows. His lips parted slightly, and his gaze burned a hole through me. I broke our heated gaze and closed my eyes. I sent the location of my friend's place into his mind. As soon as I did, his wings turned slightly as we headed directly to the center of Rome.

I turned to find the city lights shimmering through the thin clouds. The sound of clamoring dems—what we call demigods—and the metallic clanging of enchanted machinery hanging in the air. The smell of freshly baked baguettes, ancient stones, and the sweat of many desperate restaurant owners attempting to coax patrons in was a beautiful aromatic memory.

Nyx dropped suddenly, pulling a small scream from my lips before the wind took my voice away all together. I could feel Nyx's deep chuckle from his chest through my own that pressed tightly against him. I reluctantly pulled my hand from his shoulder to punch his chest. He anticipated the move and dropped me completely. I inhaled a quick breath and nearly inhaled my hair as gravity grabbed me.

I fell with as little fear as I could manage and threw up a vulgar gesture with both hands to Nyx, who hovered above me, smiling wildly. I turned myself around and darted towards the ground, trying hard to fall faster than Nyx could fly, urging the wind to aid me. As the ground neared I looked behind me to see Nyx shouting something that didn't quite reach my ears as screaming from below crowded my mind.

I pulled my hands up to get my feet beneath me, and braced myself for a rough landing. Luckily, I was headed towards an empty side street. I landed with a loud crack and sent debris flying every which way. As the dust settled, I found Nyx panting a few feet in front of me, his eyes darting across my body.

"Unlimited potential, remember?" I brushed dust from my sage bodysuit and loose cream pants as I strode past him. Those two words echoed in my mind, *unlimited potential*. Something Maeve had said to me a few years into us meeting when I found out the partial truth of my identity. I wasn't the simple dem I grew up thinking I was.

I am much, much more than that.

“That doesn’t make it any less terrifying, unfortunately.” Nyx said as he followed close behind. “Human instincts, as you say.”

“Maybe don’t drop me next time.” I said without feeling, a tingle of regret and shame filled my gut at the hate still in my heart.

“I won’t.” His words felt like a promise, and something more.

“Buddy’s is just around the corner. At the edge of the square.” I turned my head slightly as I let the cold words cut my tongue.

“Is that a name or a term of endearment?”

“Both.”

Chapter Ten

The old tavern looked the exact same as it had over four hundred years ago. Knowing my old friend, I'm not surprised that he had steered away from change. I pushed past patrons as I made my way to the crystal bar lining the back wall.

A neon sign that read 'this is the place' shone in the center of a large piece of limestone. My heart cracked wide open at the sight, the corny decor I gifted Buddy all that time ago when he was just opening the place. I never told him that I found it in a dumpster and fixed the old wiring myself. He hated when I made a fuss over him, but so did I, and that never stopped him.

"Is the owner around?" I asked the beautiful Garden Fairy minding the bar. "Could you tell him that... *the stars have aligned?*" The barmaid looked at me with confusion, but nodded and headed to the back.

"Is our buddy a fan of significant constellations?" Nyx said from behind me, looking around as he admired the old-Italianate decor.

"Something like that." I said, smiling to myself.

I looked around the familiar room, cream limestone covered all walls but one, which was covered in pinned letters, drunken hopes and dreams stuck to a wall that was believed to be charmed with luck and able to fulfill wishes. I briefly thought of my own note that laid somewhere on the vast wall, until a familiar voice rumbled behind me.

"Seems as though Ellis was right, the stars have indeed aligned this night." I whirled to find my short dem friend, arms opened and smile gleaming. "I'm touched that you remembered our last conversation, after all this time."

Buddy was a stocky fellow, always dressed in the same run down brown leather overalls and white shawl. His feet always pointed apart, Gods I missed that stupid stance and childish grin.

“My dear friend, what a hopeless romantic to be speaking in rhymes.” I said while rushing into his embrace, not realizing how good it felt to be back here. I lifted him in my arms and swung him around. He laughed loudly with pure delight. He was the only man I knew who wouldn’t feel emasculated by such a thing, apart from Marcellus, perhaps, a man who slowly healed my damaged view of his gender. And Nyx... I suppose.

This was my home once upon a time, more of a home than the one I was born into. Somewhere familiar, harboring so many good memories. And one very, very awful. “How I’ve missed that stupid grin of yours.”

We caught up for an hour or two, reminiscing about my time in Rome. Nyx sat quietly, smiling between us, then excused himself at Buddy’s request, so he could arrange our lodgings for the night.

“Despite our everlasting kinship, I cannot allow your stay without a very specific price.” Buddy said with a sly smile.

“Oh, please no.” I grabbed his hands in mine, squeezing slightly to emphasize my plea. “Don’t make me.”

“I am sorry, my sweet, them’s the rules of this haughty establishment.” He emphasized his final word with a finger to the sky.

“Please be so kind as to toss a loaf of bread out of your window when I sleep in the alley tonight, then.” I let go of Buddy’s hands and placed them under my chin in sullen protest.

It seems my efforts were in vain, as I found myself taking the stage in front of the Wishing Wall just a mere five minutes later. I walked slowly to the microphone that floated above a red stool. I moved the stool aside with my foot, the screeching sound silenced half the room, and made my toes curl in disgust.

I tapped on the microphone, even though it’s enchanted and bends to my will, call it an artistic touch.

“Sorry to bother—I was blackmailed into singing something for you lovely people by a *particularly* persuasive bar-owner.” I narrowed my eyes at Buddy who only held up his arms as if to say *what did you expect?* “How lucky

we are to find ourselves in this... unique establishment on such an auspicious night.” The crowd silenced at my voice over the speakers. “This song is the first song I sang in this very spot over four centuries ago. I was desperate for lodging and friendship. Both of which I was lucky enough to find here. It's a beautiful human melody called Home.”

My eyes caught on Nyx walking slowly through the crowd, his own fixed on me. My mind temporarily laid within the bounds of his every step, until I could pull myself from it. I closed my eyes and let the song that filled me flow into the room. Every note a nostalgic memory of a very different version of me. I kept my eyes closed as to not fall into Nyx's. I inhaled deeply in preparation for my first line.

The words flowed out of me like a warm river of honey returning to the cold milky sea. My voice hummed in perfect harmony with the strum of the guitar that filled the room. My eyes opened instinctively to exactly where Nyx stood, curiosity flowing out of me at the words my now seemingly bare mouth called out like a plea. This song had always reminded me of this place, the comfort and the love I felt here. But singing it now, the words seemed to bring a new sense of longing.

Nyx looked as lost in my song as I did, a trance induced by the seduction of a melody, I hope. I could not look away from his indulgent stare as the next line rang through the room.

My heart raced at our mutual standstill. I repeated the last word with various cadence and deep humming, harmonizing with the soft orchestra. My own voice left me entranced, the swelling sounds made me feel like I could float if I just lifted my body slightly. I closed my eyes, finally breaking eye contact with Nyx.

I let my voice carry delicately through the room as the music came to an end, I carried it for as long as I could. However long as I could make this moment last. Once my note finished echoing through the room, I finally opened my eyes. Cheering and applause hit my ears the moment my eyes focused on the room. The sound seemed to dim once I met Nyx's gaze. I smiled lightly just before I caught the eyes of a horrifying piece of my past. The one thing that tainted this beautiful tavern.

A mockingly slow clap rang above the rest, until it was the only sound in the room. “Surprised you decided to show your gorgeous face at the same drinking hole we last met.” The large soot covered male grinned fiendishly as he approached the stage. He sounded drunk, and thirsty for conflict. Pugnacious prick.

The memories of the last time I was in this city flooded my mind, incapacitating me completely. If it wasn’t for Nyx’s slight movement in my peripheral, I might not have ever left my vegetative state.

“Surprised no one’s managed to kill you yet, Sadico.” I said, spitting his name out like an insult.

Memories flashed through me, my feet kicking a fit next to a dumpster, trying tirelessly to break free of a certain narcissist’s greedy hands. The sound of my cheap dress tearing fueled the power I was now summoning.

“Time away seems to have made you prideful, a sin in the eyes of our savior.” A smile laced with disgust came over the male’s hideous face.

“Gods forbid the *weaker-sex* bare pride, we wouldn’t want to learn our own strengths. Would we?” I took a step off the stage and towards Sadico.

“Seems it’s been too long since you’ve been put in your place, you cocky cunt.” Sadico barked at me, his face flushed from his drunken state.

I only smiled in response, I knew that if Nyx saw me falter or show any pain, he would pounce. I didn’t need any more words with such an undeveloped soul. I’d rather show him what I learned since our last meeting, what I wished I knew then. That I’ve prayed I could one day show him.

“Sol.” I said quietly, only needing Nyx to hear me, even if he just read my lips, he would know what I meant. Sol stands for Solivagant, it’s a term we learned while training with the Valkyrie. It’s a way to let others know you can take the opponent on your own. It’s from the old language, meaning: *wandering alone* or *let them go*. There’s something so poetic about it.

I lightly ran my fingers across the table beside me as I made my last steps to him, a grin slowly crept on my lips as I met his eyes, my own now glowing with pure power. The faint fear that flashed on his face filled me with the sweetest joy. I tilted my head slightly, and wrapped my power around his arms, pinning them forcefully behind his back. A few patrons backed up and gasped quietly at my unseen powers.

“You crazy fucking bi—” I held up my hand and made a tight fist as my power wrapped around his neck. I clicked my tongue with disapproval, delighting in his wide eyes. I held my other hand up and flicked my wrist. His heavy moonshine-ridden body slammed face-first onto the table beside us. I leaned down slowly to his body, straining against my unbreakable hold.

“I’ve learned a few things since you had me in the position you are now.” My lips quivered slightly with distaste and hot anger. “Not a very comfortable position to be in. Luckily for you, you’re not on the pavement in a dark alley. Or stripped fucking naked.”

I loosened my grip on his neck to let the brute make his excuses, beg for his life. Whatever a dick does when the roles are reversed.

“Pl-please, d-don’t do this.” He gasped breathlessly. The mask always breaks, and every merciless prick begs in the end. What’s the phrase... treat those how you’d like to be treated? Deal.

“Oh, the irony of those words. Did I not ask the same of you? Did I not plead hard enough? Scream loud enough through your defiling fingers?” I walked around the table and crouched down to look into the eyes that used to haunt my every night for over a hundred years.

“I didn’t mean—” he stumbled over his words almost as clumsily as he stripped off his belt all that time ago. “I thought you wanted me to.”

“Blinded by entitlement and self-loathing. A melody far too overplayed. Riddled with urges that you swear you have no control over. All these things do is mask the truth.” I turned my head slightly, memorizing the importance of this moment for the healing it will bring. “The only good you’re capable of doing in this immortal world,” I silently prayed that I wouldn’t mess up the next words, or it’ll be the topic of my next fifty therapy sessions. “Is leaving the rest of us in the *blissful* absence of your cruel. Fucking. Existence.” Nailed it.

Pride and amazement rang through me, loudly, like winter bells bringing in the new season. It took me a moment to realize it wasn’t my own emotions, but someone else’s. Nyx’s. I turned to find him and met his warm gaze, and mirrored it with my own. For a second I released my power, in a moment of distraction. Without hesitation, Sadico’s hands were around my neck.

Nyx lunged, but I raised a hand to halt him in his tracks, he grunted under the tiny drop of my power, but quickly obeyed. I turned slowly, effortlessly, to where the ugly male towered over me, looking down with disgust. He strained with the effort to choke me, even added a second hand.

His face turned crimson and his labored breathing shot spit at me through his clenched teeth. I gracefully wiped my cheek and gave him a mocking smile. When he attempted to release his grip, I grabbed onto his hands and squeezed them tighter.

“I gave you a chance at redemption. Regret. Even remorse. And here you are, lesson unlearned. I’m beginning to think you just don’t have the capacity to feel things such as empathy. Or even kindness.” I wrapped my fingers around his hands, letting his bones break as effortlessly as twigs under my boot. His screams filled the silent tavern. “At least I don’t have to feel guilty about what I must do next.”

I released my hands, but kept my energy wrapped around his body like smoky stardust, paralyzing him. I put my palms together and spread them apart as if I was wading through hanging linens. The group of people behind Sadico split apart, leaving an empty space.

I took a step back, closing my eyes and holding my hands in a calming position, centering my energy between my brows, just as I was trained to do. Letting the sheer force tingle and burn. I inhaled deeply through my nose, and slowly exhaled through my mouth.

“Wait—” I said while holding my hands up in protest. “There’s one more thing I’d like to say to you before you go to hell.” His eyes flashed with true terror at the last word. I exhaled one more time, then slammed my fist into his face, throwing him back three feet. Several gasps and one cheer sounded in the room at the loud crunch of his jaw. I held back, I could’ve easily killed him, but I wanted him fully aware of what was next.

“Now that I’ve lived out that fantasy, where were we?” I smiled with delight as I went back into my stance. “I hope this heals whatever is broken inside of you.” My eyes were on Sadico as he struggled to stand. I bowed my head as I set my intentions and let it flow like a river under my skin. I turned to my side, and took a single step as I drove my foot into his chest.

All of my focused energy flew through the center point of his body as if I pulled the very air in the room with me. A fun technique Bryn showed me. He flew back as energy wrapped around him. A large portal opened and sucked him in. It was like he fell into an invisible waterfall. His scream echoed in the silent tavern a moment after he disappeared.

I clapped my hands together in a job well done. Cheering erupted just as I grabbed Nyx's arm and pulled him upstairs towards our room. An amazing sense of release of bottled anger now filled my still powerful body. I scanned the room until I found Buddy, tears falling to his shirt as pride beamed from his shaky grin. A ball rose in my throat at the sight of him.

"Did you really send him to hell, can you—" Nyx choked on his words before continuing. "Can you really do that?"

I laughed, genuinely chuckled, for the first time in I don't know how long.

"If I wanted to, I could." I gave Nyx a look that said *don't test me*. "He's going to be falling past flashes of his worst actions towards others. Towards women. Towards me."

"For how long?" Nyx said through a breathy chuckle.

"However long it takes to see all the bad things he's done. Could be weeks, or years. Time doesn't pass the same way in the fold. If that doesn't change his ways, he's on course to fall in the middle of the Women's March in an hour." I opened the door to our room and turned back with a smile. "Stark naked."

Nyx's wide eyes scanned my face with surprise at my unexpected show of delight. I opened the door to find a king sized bed with candles floating above like slow dancing Light Fairies. A sudden burst of slow jazz came from a speaker in the corner. Buddy always tried playing matchmaker, but this was low, even for him.

"This wasn't me, I asked for two beds, I swear." Nyx blurted with his hands held up in defense.

"Seems Buddy still has a taste for romance." I said under my breath. "Why don't you go retrieve our meals from downstairs, and I'll summon a cot from my room in Doctrina."

When Nyx returned, I had washed and was sitting on the side of the bed brushing through my hair. He held two full plates and two goblets under each elbow. His wings tucked tight behind him. He had the option to hide them in the fold, a trick he learned from his father, he once explained drunkenly, and obnoxiously proud. But honestly, I think he likes showing them off. Something about wingspan.

I couldn't help but quickly glance at the way his biceps moved with each step. I wondered if he had to try not to accidentally crush the metal under the sheer force of his power. I could feel it pulsating around me like the thrum of bees. Bryn warned me that as I learn more about my own power, I'll start feeling others. Later, their emotions and energy. Phoebe has always been a master at feeling and influencing people's emotions, perhaps that's a part of why I've always felt so safe with her. I never had to say how I felt for her to know when I needed comfort, or someone to match my happiness, and my joy.

"Sorry, Buddy was talking my ear off. No cot?" Nyx asked as he looked around the room.

"Nope." That was a lie. I literally have an entire bed in my room. *And* a cot.

After my self-inflicted isolation, I think I just wanted to feel the comforting embrace of Nyx's presence. The warm blanket of his power wrapping around my own, like two stars swirling before they collide into a massive burst of cosmic energy.

It was as much comfort as I could get from anyone, though the minute we touch, a sharp pain and screaming ring through me like the urgent blare of alarm bells.

"Do you happen to have any burn salve in that fold in space of yours?" Nyx said softly while placing our meals down on the other side of the bed. Even with his back turned, I could tell he had a smirk on his face.

"How did you manage to get a burn already?" I shifted to face him where he now sat at the opposite side of the large bed.

"I couldn't help it under that hot stare. Could be lethal, even to an immortal." He turned his eyes to me without moving his head. I could see his cheeks perk and jaw clenched with the effort to hide his smile. I turned from

him and held up my hand. I closed my fingers around the small object I summoned from my collection of trinkets in Doctrina. I tossed it over my shoulder towards Nyx and strode towards my pile of things in the corner.

“A tiny violin?” Nyx held the object close to his face, his eyes squinting and mouth parted slightly.

A loud thud came from outside, followed by a burst of laughter and cheering. Nyx and I came to the realization at the same moment and looked straight at each other.

“Sounds like Sadico made it back.” Nyx said through a repressed laugh before darting to the window to get a good view.

The depth of my depression pit was no match for the hope Nyx filled in me. Life had meaning, moments were grounding. I couldn’t help it, I felt peace in his presence.

I burst out laughing as Nyx turned back dramatically, his eyes wide and smile beaming.

Chapter Eleven

I looked down at my empty glass, Nyx's laugh playing like a lullaby in my mind. It felt like one of those moments you'll remember vividly for the rest of your life. Nothing but comfort and company, and yet it was enough to feel like its own chapter in my story. My very being, my every sensation in a swirling entanglement with the man only a few feet from me. My friend of the most unlikely beginnings.

In the months I've known him, Nyx has been a calming and dependable presence in my life. I wanted to hate how quickly he became close with my chosen family, but how could I selfishly hate something that proved to be so good for my people? The way he and Marcellus laugh without breath, swatting each other and flailing their bodies like children. The way he and Jax gave each other a safe space to divulge their darkest moments.

Marcellus is the type of friend that would do anything you asked without batting an eye. During my bleedings just a few months after we had first met, I told him that I had a hankering for vanilla cake, like my mum used to make. An hour later, I was woken from my nap by a flour covered Marcellus, beaming from ear to ear, holding a perfectly fluffy vanilla cake, with writing in chocolate that said: *I'D BLEED FOR YOU IF I COULD*. We sat together on my bed, and ate the entire thing. Then, just before he left, he pulled handfuls of sanitary napkins from his pockets and proceeded to throw them on me, like bills on a dancer.

Jax was one of the first men I met at Doctrina. He was teaching the history of war until he became Bryn's right hand man in the defensive arts. It

took me nearly fifty years to break past his hard exterior. Even then, I'd give much more than a penny for his thoughts. I'd give my entire fortune just to know one of the dark memories that spread like shadows over his brown eyes.

I remember seeing Nyx sitting on a bench with Jax only a week after he came with me to Doctrina. Even from the moment I introduced them, Nyx looked and talked to Jax as if he were an old friend. Not playful like with Marcellus, but rather, deep and honest. The instant trust they gifted each other, it was heartwarming to witness.

Even the way Nyx always showed Maeve and Phoebe compassion and a quiet space to divulge their interests, I couldn't deny them that kindness by belittling it. Like Maeve's passion for knowledge, and Phoebe's passion for... well, everything.

They have raved about him from the moment I brought him through the threshold of our home. It's made it very hard to protest my instinct to trust him. The warm embrace of his incredible force, slipping past the tall onyx walls of his mind, blowing hot air across my skin.

"Are you okay?" Nyx's voice broke the silence, tearing me from the thoughts that left me drifting through memories. He tore a still warm baguette in half, and slowly inhaled the sweet steam. The rise of his chest seemed to lift the weight off my shoulders.

"I'm alright, just lost in thought." I admitted, that's all he needed to know. I moved my eyes towards him, trying to gauge his next words through my periphery.

"Maeve's okay, Rae. She's too strong and too smart not to be." His breathing caught as he contemplated his next words carefully. "The minute we find her, we'll all be ready. And we will bring her home."

"I know." My fingers picked at the thick thread of the knitted blanket that draped off the bed. I sat there in silence, realizing that he would let me take as long as I needed to get the next words out. "I've been with her on her weekly walks in the woods for centuries. Our entire friendship lies in the whispers of every tree in that forest. I was supposed to be there. I—I got distracted. I was stupid."

"You really think it was a coincidence that he chose that night? You've never once missed a walk, until *that* time. Finding out more about your past,

and about *his* past, it wasn't a distraction, it was essential. The timing, everything. Not only did you need to know in order to unblock those memories... you *deserved* to know." Nyx placed his hand on the blanket next to where I still fidgeted. "He may be unimaginably vicious, but he's not an idiot. He would never kill her. He has to know by now that you'd rip him limb from limb if he did. That you could, as easily as lifting a finger. He's trying to bring you out of the shadows, and piss you off. Until you can't think straight, and you make a mistake."

"I'm not going to let him win. I can't afford another mistake. I can't." I said in a voice I didn't recognize. Such monotone, blunt cruelty. Like a tiger hissing a promise to its prey.

"I know." The deep vibrato of his voice softened the part of me that I tried building a moat around. "We will fix this."

"If I had full access to my power we wouldn't even be having this conversation. I'd be able to find her." I looked over to Nyx finally. It didn't feel like a conscious decision, but more of an impulse.

"You're the strongest person I know, Rae. In more ways than one. But you can't fight time. You can't fight the past." His words both saved and destroyed me. He was right, Phoebe's said it a million times. So has Bryn. Even my therapist, Ares. I could hear it a million more times, but I don't think I'm ready to believe it. To forgive myself, forgive my failed responsibility to protect the people I love.

I grew up thinking I was an unusually strong demigod, just to find out that I'm the missing piece to an ancient prophecy. It's time I face the reality of what I've been uncovering for months. I'm not a demigod, or a God, or a Titan. I'm something else, something more. It's got the potential to be quite the identity crisis.

I realized that my lack of childhood memories was not due to the inevitable amnesia of time, but due to repression. An attempt for my mind to protect me from memories too dark to hold onto.

Therapy with Ares has been one of the hardest things I've willingly put myself through. We've worked for over four hundred years to get to this point. I've repressed so much of my power alongside my memories. Ares says

it was a way to “make myself normal” and deny the fact that I wasn’t who I grew up thinking I was.

The memories I have of my parents proved to be few and far between. I remember birthday cakes, days at the beach, and cartoons before school. The strangest part is, I don’t remember school. Not a single detail. I remember sneaking down to my parent’s library with an undying candle in one hand, and whatever snacks I could find in the other. My memories always ended at the cartoons, then it went black. My mother’s words, *it’s time for school*, have echoed in my mind in the past three months. Over, and over.

“We should get some rest, we’ll fly to Frankfurt tomorrow. We can stay the night, or you can do that *fold in space and time* thing you do. Either way, we’ll be home as soon as possible.” Nyx grabbed our empty dishes and set them on the nightstand. “For now, let your mind and body get the rest they deserve.”

“I promised that I’d try, but not that I’d be successful.” I laid my head down on my pillow, facing Nyx.

“Even if you can’t fall asleep, at least try to shut your brain off and unclench your muscles. I can feel the tension from here.”

“I thought you liked tension between us.” The words fell out of my mouth before I could stop myself.

“What’re you trying to do to me, Andy?” Nyx pushed himself off the bed and made his way towards the table by the window, setting down his empty glass slowly, as if he were occupied with his thoughts. As he turned to me, he smirked before pulling his shirt over his head with one hand.

My mind fell silent as I took him in.

DOCTRINA: TRAINING PIT  TWO MONTHS AGO

Nyx was the first person I sparred with that didn’t make me fear my power. Part of me knew that I couldn’t hurt him, and even if I did, he’d be carried to the healer’s room with pride. Every day I fought fire to not be consumed by the heat in his gaze or the embers in my heart.

I was beating him in a game of one hand. He was looking down at his dirt covered loose-fitted sage button-up. Most of the time when we trained after classes, we stayed in whatever we wore that day. We agreed that a threat can come even when you're dressed to the nines, so it didn't make sense to always train in our fighting leathers.

He groaned and brushed off the dirt and sand from his shirt. His gaze shifted towards me without moving his head, a spine-tickling move he had perfected.

"I liked this shirt." He said through a smirk.

"Then you shouldn't have fallen on your arse so many times." I said coldly as I straightened my back, trying very hard not to return his smile. Training may be one of the hardest parts of my day, but it doesn't compare to how hard I work not to let my guard down around Nyx. Every inch of him, the very air around him, and the energy between us calls to me, but there's a voice in the back of my head, the one that wakes me from my nightmares, that pleads with me to hold my ground. To stay. Away.

"If you recall, it was my *face* I fell on that last time." He brushed the back of his hand on his forehead before swooping down and grabbing his sword from where it was jabbed into the earth. His moves were even as he glided across the rough terrain. There was nothing this man could do that I didn't long to burn into my memory.

I stepped back, and flipped my dagger in my hand, so the blade faced behind me.

He watched my movements as if it was the most important thing he'd ever see in his life. His free hand pulled at the buttons of his shirt, revealing his golden honey skin. I had always noticed the part of his tattoo on his neck, and now that it began slowly revealing itself, one button at a time, my eyes were locked on him. I suppose after all of this time creating the full picture in my mind, it was like my brain needed to know the truth, and see if my mental image had come close.

"What the fuck are you doing?" My kindness goes out the window when the vulnerability of my heart is threatened.

"Preparing to fall on my arse." As he released the last button, he slowly pulled the silky fabric over his shoulder, and pointed his sword to the ground

as the light fabric fell down his blade. I took fast glances at his tattoo, until something caught my eye, and I couldn't help but stare at it and walk towards him.

The whisks that climbed his neck seemed to be the ends of some sort of plant. The leaves formed into the sharp lines of a mountain, surrounded by the thin lines of semicircles and complimenting shapes. At the base of the mountain was a long winding river surrounded by tiny homes and shops. There was a massive structure, an estate, I assumed, that was not separate from the village, but right in the center of it.

Every line was so intricately detailed into the entire picture, I couldn't help but get sucked into its narrative. It was a story that I felt had been in my mind my entire life, and was finally put into the most encapsulating picture.

Without thinking, I reached out my free hand and traced my middle finger across what seemed to be words, in no language I've ever seen. It felt as though his skin was made of needles and fire. The touch nearly unbearable, with a voice spitting words of distrust and danger in the back of my mind.

"It's in the first tongue of my people, V'liæk." I was close enough to feel the heat that radiated off his sweaty skin, steam floating into the cold morning air. "There's no proper translation into your language, but it's something like," my neck strained as I looked up at him, watching him bring his bottom lip between his teeth as he tried translating the words. "If ever we part, let my tears fill the sea, in hopes that one day," I looked into his eyes, the various shades of bright blue, and found an endless sea in the soul that laid within, "you'll sail back home to me."

As if even gravity itself begged our union, whatever tied our souls tugged at my chest, and I nearly fell into him, and for him. The show of vulnerability pushed me back on my heels.

"My people were once wanderers." He explained as he looked away, giving me time to take in a full breath for the first time in minutes. "My parents fought to separate from the corrupted minds of the western kingdoms, and the ancient sadists who claimed the thrones. We finally found a place nestled between mountains and hills, lost to the world as it had once been burned and uninhabitable in the aftermath of the seven-years war. My

parent's power was the greatest that had ever been seen. They healed the land and fortified its boundaries. We all lived together, in peace.”

I found myself once against drifting towards him, enchanted by his story, and the way someone so foreign to my world could still live a life so similar to that of my own.

“Although no kingdom would challenge them, or dare risk their retaliation, there was nothing my parents could do to rectify the deep seeded darkness that captured the vulnerable. They chose to save whoever they could, and bring them into their new kingdom. My mother bewitched the sea so that it would bring those with kindness in their heart towards our hidden city.”

I looked down and once again stared at his tattoo, and as I found myself lost in his words, I swear the dark lines began to move, as if echoing his story.

“It is believed amongst my people that when one of us dies, our souls are carried to the land of the peaceful by the very water that brings us home.”

The cold air laid dormant in the hollow training pit, but the sharp wind from above made a low whistling noise as it passed the opening above. The limestone and gold walls of the large domed arena made the acoustics perfect for the loud clang of swords and the thump of immortal bodies hitting the ground. With just Nyx and I here, the quiet was so still, so open, that I could scarcely stop myself as I fell into his story, his deep voice that covered my electric skin, and his eyes that had me falling into him. *For* him.

“The land of the peaceful?” My voice was soft as I clenched my fist, trying hard not to touch his skin now covered in goosebumps.

“I suppose that would be your heaven.” He looked between my eyes, and I wished I could read his mind, until his hand raised slightly until his fingers flexed in an effort to hold back, and I realized I didn't need to.

“Or Valhalla, for the Valkyrie.” I exhaled through parted lips before narrowing my eyes and striking quickly to his neck, wishing to drive a knife through the tension he so effortlessly creates between us.

He stopped my blow with a hand to my wrist, and the most handsome smile painted his face.

“You can’t use your left hand.” My voice squeaked in a way I had not heard since I was a teen.

“You can’t go for the neck.” He shook his head, not in a way that reflected disbelief for my actions, but more so a disbelief for something else, something much deeper within him. Something he felt for me. He became captured by the sight of my parted lips, and my heart began racing. “At least not with your blade.”

“I’ll go for whichever part of you I damn well please.” A smile pulled at my lips.

“Is that a promise,” He leaned down until his lips were nearly touching my ear, “Rae, darling?”

My head fell back slightly as his breath ignited a fire within me, one that has long been starving embers. I clenched my teeth just before I wrapped one leg around his back and the other between his legs, forcing him to the ground. He was quick as he grabbed hold of my waist and neck, pinning our bodies together. I quickly flipped beneath him and we tumbled across the ground, one move countered with another, until I was straddling him. I hit my blade hard into the earth beside his head, his own was placed across my stomach. My black sweater had come up enough to expose my torso, and his warm knuckles pressed against my skin as he held his weapon millimeters from my stomach.

“I’ll only make you one promise, Prince of Salvaris.” Something overtook me as I leaned down to his ear, and let my bottom lips brush his jawline. “I’ll have you on your back. Breathless and aching. Until you can no longer bear it.”

I didn’t expect his counter movement as he swept himself from under me, and turned on his knees. I moved quickly to my feet, turning to face him. Just as my blade went up, he grabbed the back of my thighs, locking me in place.

“Don’t threaten me with my greatest desires,” He looked up through his lashes and pulled me in as his hands moved an inch up my thighs. I dropped my blade as my hands steadied myself on his shoulders. His parted lips blew hot air on my lower stomach as he was merely inches away. “Or I may become a man who begs.”

“On your knees, no less.” I said through a near gasp as I gazed down on his endless beauty. His perfect dark locks that curved and swirled, the same pieces always falling to his forehead. The contrast of darkness to the softest tanned skin, glowing with his undeniable adoration for me, it was too much. I was the one who couldn’t bare it.

“Oh, my love, I do much more than just begging on my knees.” As his mouth hit my heated skin, his tongue sent my stomach muscles clenching as it ran through his lips. I couldn’t help it as my head and eyes fell back, nor could I help the noise that escaped my lips. He gently moved his hands up until they were at the back of my thighs, then made his way to my hips. I took his head between my hands as he pressed his perfect lips to my hip.

My mind nearly burst open with the intrusion of a long buried thought. Pain coated my veins as memories hurried to change my course, keep me from the impending danger of falling in

lust.

I have been possessed by the lure of desire. Desire to be craved. Be the air that fills their lungs. I have been tricked by the most believable Demons, and this man, his wings, although hidden behind a magical veil, I know all too well that they’re there. Just as the truest evil in my life had not been those who knock me down, but those who have lifted me up, only to stand over my tired body as I fall under the weight of them forcing me to stand. Stand and stand and stand. *All I’m doing is make you stand*, they would say, *mere tiny bruises over your body. You can’t even stand, who will love you, then? I give you only feathers to carry, whilst others hold bricks.*

It took me too long to realize that I had been holding enough, standing for so long, that I held my own weight in feathers, in the arms of a defeated body.

And as I fell, admitting failure, I began to believe them when they said no one would love someone who gives up on others. Who overreacts to tiny infractions. I’m loyal, I promise you. Please believe me. I’m not crazy, I guess I must’ve been confused. The bruises must have been the stain of your gentle lips. You are so understanding of my complicated mind, how lucky am I that you’ve stayed.

I will never leave you. Your smile when I first told you so ignited something within me, so I will carry your feathers on my back. They're only feathers, of course. I've made myself wings, though it seems they've turned black. Who's the Demon now?

Nyx's touch no longer burned me with a fire of desire, but with a deep ache, a sour taste coating my mouth. This was not safety, this was another trap. I will not yield to a man who sees me as a conquest, even though he sees me through kind eyes. *His* eyes were kind, too.

I will not be defeated by my broken soul. Never again.

The bustle of football players making their way to the pitch for training sent my eyes wide, and my breath ragged. I stepped back as a tear fell down my face, Nyx's own frozen in worry. I Appeared in my bedroom across Doctrina before I could fall anymore into my illogical need for this enchanting creature.

As I stumbled back and fell back onto my bed, it took several minutes before my heart slowed and my skin cooled. *You are safe now*, my mind said sweetly. *Safe*.

BUDDY'S TAVERN  PRESENT DAY

His lips parted as he took in a big breath, his large tattooed chest rising as he did. I swallowed hard and rolled on my back, hoping there was something around the room that could pull my thoughts.

"Can I ask you something?" My head fell to the side as I watched him run his hand through his hair before walking over and pulling the covers open. The look on his face revealed that he knew I had fallen into a memory, and it had not been kind to me.

"Always."

"What do you call your people where you come from?" I rubbed the back of my hand as I looked for any tiny detail in the crown molding that would calm the tension in my body.

"My court has many humans, and other creatures such as fairies, sirens, and lamia, but my family and I are known as Vïkn." Nyx put his arms

behind his head as he shifted under the covers.

“What are the humans like?”

“Just as you’ve described. Full of life, despite how short theirs are.”

Nyx turned over to face me, an arm folded under his head.

“How long do they live?” I was afraid of the answer, but needed to know.

“A hundred years if they’re lucky.” He seemed to fall into a thought as his eyes looked past me, and a part of me regretted asking. “And what about your people?”

“The humans lived for about the same amount of time, sometimes more like eighty years. The lifespan was fifty years at one point due to poor conditions.”

“And the others?”

“Dems usually live for eight to ten thousand years. Gods and Titans for millions, some even for billions, and the Primordials are as old as time itself.”

“I can’t imagine living that long.” Nyx ran his fingers over the flannel sheets. “If it wasn’t for Bryn, I wouldn’t believe that someone who’s had that many experiences could be... sane.”

“She’s taught me a lot of things about what it means to live, and care for each moment with intention, no matter how many we’re given.” I rolled to my side, facing Nyx, and tucked both hands under my cheek.

“She must be a good mentor, because I believe you’re the one who’s instilled that in me.” He rolled on his back, and inhaled deeply as if focusing his mind. His hand nearest to me moved between us, his fingers rubbing the soft blanket between them. It was taking all of my willpower not to do the same. “Every moment since I’ve met you has certainly been lived with intention.”

“And what’s been your intention, Darling?” His head fell to the side as his eyes sent heat to my cheeks. A soft larimar light seemed to coat Nyx like an aura, as if it urged me to trust my gut and listen to my heart. Stop resisting.

“I have no intention, nor direction I’m wishing to go.” His voice was shaky, and the mere thought of him being nervous somehow calmed the

anxiety deep within me. “I have only an appreciation for the present, and any moment I’m given with the one... the ones I love. If I have that, and the promise of a new day, what more could I possibly be selfish enough to hope for?”

“Being given what you already have, and what will be, seems like the *least* you could wish for.” I felt my shoulders relax as I watched his fingers fidget with his obsidian ring. “If your humility is truly just that, and not a ploy to gain my sympathies, then I urge you to wish for more than just the bare minimum. You owe it to yourself to give the same efforts to your own hopes and dreams as you do to others.”

“Do you think so little of me that I’d lie just to get something from you?” Nyx’s words were laced with true hurt, causing my heart to bob in my chest, a ball of guilt rising in my throat.

“I certainly don’t think *little* of you, Nyx.” My breath caught at the realization of my double meaning. I slowly let my body fall as my head now buried in my pillow.

Nyx’s hand gripped my arm as I let out a long groan.

“What is it?” He asked as he shook my arm. “What can I do?” An intrusive thought flooded my mind without warning or care for the present situation.

“You can take me.” My fantasy self said as she climbed into his arms, wrapping her legs tightly around his waist. His parted lips begged for my own. My heated body desperate to press against every inch of his exposed skin. Our hands ripping off each other’s clothes as our lips glide over one another. I moan loudly, my cheeks hot and body aching just before he pulls my shorts to the side and pulls me hard against him.

“AHHHH.” I screamed into the pillow, forcing the thought from my mind as I thought of swordplay... *FUCK*... Or livestock. Late assignments an hour before class. Clothes ripping on rocks and loose nails. A ponytail that pulls tightly on a few hairs.

Demons and the weight of feathers.

I shot out of bed and pulled the throw blanket with me, holding it over my soft pajama shorts and long T-shirt. “NO.” I said sternly while pointing at a confused Nyx.

“What did I say?” Nyx sat up quickly, the blanket falling to his hips, revealing his defined stomach and dark tattoo that ran from his left shoulder, over his large peck, down to his ribs, and moved behind his back.

“Put a shirt on you French *hoor*.” I said whore the way Phoebe does, for a reason that I couldn’t even make up if I tried.

“That was unkind.” Nyx said as he pulled the blanket over his chest and plopped down on his pillow. “You switch accents when you’re nervous... and when you’re *hiding* something.” He narrowed his eyes at me.

“False.” I blurted out unconvincingly. I moved my hand around in the direction of the bed, looking for my words. “This bed is too small. You’ll roll over and crush me in my sleep.”

Nyx looked around comically at the ten-by-ten foot bed. I inhaled deeply, hoping to find some of my pride in the room.

“I snore.” I lied.

“I already knew that.”

“*What?*” My voice cracked.

“You sleep with your window open, and we live no more than fifty feet from each other. Not to mention that I have to walk by your house in the morning.” Nyx’s smile beamed at the memory, while I lifted a hand to my hot cheek. “It makes for quite a reliable alarm clock.”

“You’re *lying*.” I moved five feet to my right, needing more distance.

“I already told you, darling, I don’t do that with you.” His eyes lowered before meeting mine once again.

“You don’t *know* me, Nyx Darling.” I aimed my words at his heart, and for a second I hoped I’d miss.

He only exhaled a long breath, his lips turning up slightly as his gaze took me in as if I were the northern star, and he a wayward traveler.

“I see you, Rae, darling.” His next inhale was shaky. “And I am at ease.”

I couldn’t help but believe him, and a part of me wanted to, begging me to jump into that bed and take him between my hands. We stared at each

other for a long moment. Until the air between us forced me to make a choice. And yet I felt as if it wasn't a decision I had the strength to make.

"I've been told you can fall asleep practically anywhere and anytime." I stepped towards the door to the bathroom. "I'm going to get ready for bed, and when I come back, please be asleep."

"As you wish." His smile melted the wall I tried putting between us.

I looked myself in the mirror several times before deciding I was as ready as one could be for bed. I splashed cold water in my face one last time before blowing out a long, shaky breath and facing the door.

I opened it quietly and peeked towards the bed. Nyx was on his back, head facing the windows. Thank the Gods.

My footsteps were silent as I tip-toed towards the bed. I slowly pulled the covers over myself as I, too, laid on my back. I scooted over gently, it seemed a bit of an overkill to sleep on the edge of such a large bed.

I pushed down my shoulders and stretched my arms and legs as I tried willing my dreams to come find me. My head fell to the side, looking towards Nyx, his wings still hidden. He looked so much like just a man when they were gone, not the larger than life creature of night that he always seemed to be.

He was just a man.

His chest rose steadily with each breath. I mimicked his breathing, thinking it might put me to sleep. His scent brought a heavy blanket of slumber over my body. I smiled as my eyes fluttered, and felt my hand move towards him, but stopped myself before I could get any further.

Suddenly, I felt movement through the bed, and even with my eyes closed, I was sure it was his hand moving towards mine.

My steady breathing turned to short inhales followed by shaky exhales.

I turned my head away from him as my mind was ambushed by another flash of the unfinished intrusive thought from earlier.

Every song I've ever known escaped my mind as I tried thinking of some music or mantra or random sequence of words to occupy my mind.

FIRST YEAR STUDENTS ARE NOT PERMITTED TO WALK NEAR THE TRAINING PITS WITHOUT PROPER TRAINING OR A WRITTEN NOTE OF PERMISSION FROM GENERAL BRYNHILDR.

Why Doctrina's weekly announcements came into my mind I'll never know, but they seemed to be working. It had been years since I paid attention to them, and clearly it was because I already knew every one by heart.

TICKETS FOR THE TRINA TOURNEY WILL BE SOLD AT TOMORROWS FOOTBALL MATCH. IF CURRENT TICKETS ARE SOLD OUT, GENERAL BRYNHILDR WILL EXPAND THE STADIUM.

"Rae?" Nyx's voice was low.

"Mhmm?" I said much louder than the low lull of the quiet room, hurting my ears.

He didn't reply right away, and I looked towards him, but he didn't move, apart from his fingers that slowly gripped the sheets beneath them, as if holding his words back.

"Goodnight." He whispered.

"Night." I responded too quickly, cutting any chance we had to talk short. I just hoped sleep wouldn't take too much time to find me.

I looked towards the table across the room, Nyx's things sprawled across the dark mahogany. With his leather bag tipped over, I could see a tiny black notebook sitting atop a thick cream sweatshirt.

I closed my eyes as a memory pulled on my tired mind.

DOCTRINA  A MONTH AGO

I woke up to the sound of Marcellus yelling the fa'aumu before diving into the river. The back of my hand rubbed my tired eyes as I walked to the window facing his house.

I huffed out a laugh at the sight of Marcellus's bare arse peaking above the water as he swam. Very on brand for the fearless man.

A blue light caught my eye as the sun sparkled through the blossom trees. Nyx's black pants bobbed with the anxious tapping of his leg. The cream paper of an open notebook sat on his lap, his back hunched over in

concentration. Soft shade through the leaves washed over him, moving slowly in the cool fall breeze. From a distance, I would allow myself to admire him. Proximity to him is what scares me, his beauty on the other hand, was impossible to resist.

I turned on my heel as I went to grab the white soft shorts draped across the olive armchair in the corner, a beautiful patterned rug tucked beneath. I made my way down the cedar staircase of my nature-inspired home in more of a hurry than I'd admit.

As I approached where he scribbled in his notebook, I made my steps quiet, not wanting to pull him from the passion he appeared to have fallen into.

He didn't lift his head until I sat on the vine covered bench beside him. He pulled the notebook to his chest at the sight of me, and my lips instinctively curled into a grin.

"Drawing Marcellus's naked arse, are we?" I pushed my feet as the bench swung back, tall ropes tied to the willows beside us. "It is a beauty, and an inspiration—or so says Phoebe."

"It certainly sees the light of day shamelessly." He laughed as he closed the pages and set it on his lap.

"I didn't mean to stop you." I said, a small grain of guilt hitting my empty stomach. I went to stand, but he grabbed my wrist before stuttering, unsure of his next words.

"I like your company." He admitted.

I smiled down at him, his toned chest visible with each breath. I sat down, smiling at his kindness, his presence so familiar to me, even in the short time we had known each other.

"Will you ever show me what you scribble in that thing?" He bowed his head sheepishly. I couldn't help but admire how soft ebony pieces of his wavy hair fell to his forehead.

"Only one." He ran his fingers through his hair, pushing the pieces back, luckily relieving my urge to do it myself.

He opened the pages only an inch as he leaned away, not wanting me to catch a glimpse. As he found the page, he looked at me, my eyes beaming in anticipation. I sat up straighter as he opened it and set it on my lap.

Intentional clusters of soft colors came together in a beautiful depiction of the Valkyrie war dance. The part of training I myself was familiar with. A bright shimmer of gold, beautifully combining soft white tones. Bryn.

I looked up at him staring nervously at me with a hand playing with his bottom lip. I looked back down, placing my own hand over my mouth, unsure of the right words to describe this incredible piece of... magic.

He managed to capture the intensity, the contrast of the setting sun to the bright metals and muted tones of the distant gardens. He was unbelievably talented, that I was sure of.

“This is...” I fumbled over my words as every description failed to do it justice. “You’re amazing.”

He blushed, pushing himself to stand as if the vulnerability was too much in our close proximity.

“My mother is an artist.” He said while walking towards the river, a hand on the back of his neck. “I used to watch her paint, and scribble with whatever she had laying around.”

With him out of my reach, looking away, I quickly turned to another page, keeping my finger in place of the Valkyrien masterpiece. I inhaled sharply at the watercolor painting of woman with her hands held out, a bright light shining from behind. It looked as if a microphone stand was placed in front of her.

It was me, I was sure of it, singing in a tavern, lost in the sound of my own voice. I looked at the pages around it, the still-life depiction of a person I didn’t recognize, and a nude of a woman I’d never seen before. Although it didn’t make sense, I was sure that the painting was created while Nyx was still in his world. Unless he had the most exceptional memory, and had managed to create a few hundred pieces of art to fill the pages since then, that was the only real explanation.

I flipped back to the warrior drawing and looked up at him still pacing, admiring how the morning sun sparkled along the river.

“Do you take commissions?” I looked down at the piece, running my fingers over the blended chaos, wondering if I moved my fingertips along them, I would feel the passion behind each brush stroke.

“What do you have in mind?” His blushed cheek perked as he smiled.

“I’ll leave that up to you.”

“I have one condition.” The way such simple words rolled off Nyx’s tongue had me thinking of wicked possibilities.

A ball rose in my throat as my chest heated, so I simply gave him a nod to go on.

“You have to promise you won’t tell the others.” I bunched my eyebrows at him before he continued, “I don’t want to be hounded with requests. And though you may doubt it, I’m not particularly eager to paint Mar a life-sized nude, as we both know he will *beg* for.”

I bit my lip to keep from laughing, but my efforts were wasted by the fact that Nyx’s presence made me glow.

“I pinky promise.”

Nyx looked down at his little finger, then back up at me.

“Are you trying to say that’s how little you promise?” He held his pinky between us, squinting his eyes. “That’s not very reassuring.”

I let out a genuine laugh this time, earning a bright huff from Nyx, his entire body suddenly at ease.

“*Bloody* hell, Darling. You really aren’t from here.” I laughed, unable to stop myself anymore. “Give me your hand.”

His large hand was held between us within a moment, the dark rings that decorated his golden skin made me wonder if they were for looks or if they meant something. I suppose if there’s so many things he doesn’t know about Earth, there’s just as much I don’t know about his world.

“A pinky promise is the most sacred promise on Earth.” I lied. I took his hand with both of mine, and flipped it sideways, and held his wrist with one hand while my other put his fingers into a fist.

“Sounds serious.” He looked so intently at my arm, as if he was counting every dark freckle that painted my skin like the early night sky. I pulled his pinky up, my hands looking so small next to his.

“It is.” I wrapped my pinky around his, and thought the pain that filled me at his touch would make me pull away, like the instinct that keeps your fingers off a hot stove. But I simply weathered it.

“It forms an unbreakable bond.” I found myself leaning forward, Nyx mirrored my movements like a snake to its charmer. I couldn’t break our eye

contact even if I tried as we each kissed the end of our curled fingers, our foreheads nearly touching.

I'd never been so close to Nyx's turquoise eyes, and in the moment I caught a glimpse of every shade of blue, I swear—I *pinky* swear—I saw a galaxy swirling within them.

The image seemed to parallel my void vision, bringing a flash of a azure supernova spread across an onyx sky. It wasn't a void. It was outer space.

I gasped shallowly and pushed myself back, mumbling an excuse and heading back towards my home. What does this mean?

A week later, I walked into my room in a hurry, changing quickly before meeting Maeve in the library. I turned to leave and gasped at a large canvas hanging across from my bed.

The beautiful light coming through the tress of the Kasari Forrest perfectly resembled the path Maeve and I walked every week. The low hanging vines of the willow trees made me sure I knew exactly where it was. Right near the opening in the forest.

The beautiful Phoenix colored waves of Maeve's hair seemed to move through the soft breeze, despite the stillness of the painting. Her arm was held out, linking pinkies with me, my profile beaming and the perfect outline of my plaited hair, falling on my long blush dress.

I walked closer, squinting to see the black lines of Nyx's elegant signature, with words written just above it.

A Pinky Promise.

BUDDY'S TAVERN  PRESENT DAY

I thought of that painting, the careless trotting of me and my best friend, not realizing we were being watched as we made our way into the enchanted woods.

My body felt heavy as I nearly fell into a dream, the kindness of the man sleeping next to me, and the love I have for my red-haired twin flame, seemed to wash away the sorrow of the past few days.

Chapter Twelve

I recognized the scream before my surroundings. My feet flew beneath me as I ran towards it. It was Maeve. Screaming like her skin was being torn clean off the bone. I tried to stay calm, to not think of the possibilities as my intrusive thoughts pounded fiercely, coaxing me towards panic.

I threw my body around a tree, and the memory hit me like a physical blow. I knew exactly where I was. Maybe this would give me an advantage.

Maeve's screams faded, revealing a male voice in the distance. The man who has been after me for over five million years, long before I was even born. Since the prophecy was spoken by the Oracle of Delphi, Pythia. The sadist who has been written in history as a hero, a champion. He was a sociopathic nightmare, but an Olympian God nonetheless. The God of the skies. Zeus.

"You are nothing but a rock in my shoe. Such an undeniable nuisance at the time, and yet, completely forgotten the moment you're gone." Zeus's voice was cold and unfeeling. I lifted myself a few inches above the ground with a drop of my strength, making my footsteps silent on the hardened air. "How dare you intercept my chance at glory. I should've murdered the bitch when I had her infant body in my grasp."

"People like you never win. Not in the end." Maeve's voice was broken, strained. I couldn't help but think about how much screaming it takes to damage immortal vocal chords.

"So many years I've given you, my daughter, and you're somehow still naive." My feet stopped as I processed those two words. *My daughter*. It could

be another taunt. Any narcissist worth his money thinks everyone else in the world owes him something. As if they can be owned. Property.

The two were nearly in my vision, as I took my last step I could see Zeus's bright white hair, golden with firelight. I crouched down low behind a thick willow tree.

"You've given me nothing but existence. Much less than the bare minimum for a father. You're nothing more than a rapist. My mother created light from darkness. Any part of me that is you, has been swept away by the light. Just as you will be. Soon." Maeve's crackly voice still held such grace and fearlessness. My chest felt heavy at the admiration and grief I felt for my friend.

"Your mother was an ignorantly optimistic cunt then, as I'm sure you are now. My dear Artemis, when will you learn that darkness always comes for those who dream?" Zeus's laugh sent fire down my spine. The man was undoubtedly consumed by whatever unthinkable darkness crawled beneath his flesh. He was enjoying this. More than enjoying this, it was his love language.

"Then tell me this, you brainwashed toe-rag," I heard chains rattling as Maeve shifted from where she sat on the ground. I could see her strain with the effort to sit upright. Her injuries were too difficult to look at. It was hard to see anything under layers of dried silver blood, but what I could see, was horrific. "Tell me why even the broken still dream, why your omnipotent evil does not deter love and joy. Millions of years you've hunted me, broken my bones and ripped my skin. The funny thing is, I'm still here." Maeve's chuckle was cut off quickly by a bloody cough.

"You know exactly why you're still breathing, and she's probably searching aimlessly for you right now. And when I have her, you'll wish I'd given you the mercy of death." Zeus held his hand to the sky at the last word. His hand flew towards Maeve as invisible lightning struck her body. I screamed her name as I lunged towards their place in the woods.

My eyes shot open and began adjusting to the dark room. I felt Nyx's presence before I could make out his features. His lips were parted slightly, and a faint snore broke the silence. He laid on his back, more towards the

center of the bed than I remember. His hand gripped the sheets on the bed between us, as did mine.

I moved my fingers over his and let them gently run over his wrist, then his arm. I pushed through the pain, let it flow to the back of my consciousness, begged it to let me have this moment. His skin was soft and warm. The silky texture and radiating heat felt so similar to my own. It felt like touching my parallel, our skin and bodies born as one.

His mouth twitched upward in a lazy smile as the back of my fingers made their way up his arm. I shook his shoulder gently. His eyes opened lazily, until he saw my face, then they opened wide as he scanned my body, then our surroundings. I squeezed his bicep lightly, reassuring him that we were safe.

“I had a dream about Maeve.” I sat up and pulled the covers tight around my waist. “The thing is, I don’t think it was a dream. I think I went into the Astral Realm again.”

“What are you saying?” Nyx rubbed an eye with one hand as the other lifted him up slowly.

“I know where he’s keeping her. We need to get home.” I threw my weight off the bed and strode to my pile of clothes. “Now.”

I got dressed quickly and was followed by Nyx who threw the covers forcefully off of his body. As I gathered the things I left on the nightstand, I noticed two creases in the sheets, mere inches from each other.

It was spot where the pair of us had gripped the bed, as if our unconscious mind needed the close proximity that our consciousness wouldn’t allow.

I quickly scribbled a note of thanks and a promise to return to my old friend before we headed out the door. A flash of blue caught my eye as I turned to leave. It guided me towards the note of wishes, towards my own note written drunkenly those many years ago.

My heart sunk at the contents of the small sapphire piece of paper. It was the prophecy. I remember my friends being confused by my wish, I just thought it was incoherent. But there it was.

**Chaos will return when the Divine Feminine
takes her last breath.**

My unknown power, unlimited potential. The white hot fire that burns under my skin. Repressed and slowly clawing its way out. I was the rebirth of Chaos. The blood that runs through my veins isn't silver like the God's, or golden like the Titan's. It's a luminescent diamond river.

The color of Stars.

Not a God. Not a Titan.

A Primordial.

Chapter Thirteen

My body pounded with confusion and fear. Fear for Maeve, and myself, for the way my heart will be torn from my chest at the sight of her bloody body. Fear driven by urgency and confusion. The pain of knowing she would've been safe if I had accompanied her on our walk, not drinking and flipping through old books with Nyx, trying to find out more about why I was a part of the prophecy, of the wrath of Zeus, a very powerful God. Driven by his lust for cruelty.

I hauled Nyx through the bustle of dems and creatures that filled the square. Once we made it to a discrete back alley, I began calming myself, using the breathing techniques Bryn showed me. Trying desperately to table the questions that invaded my every thought.

"I can fly us as far as I can, and it should be enough for you to get us the rest of the way there." Nyx said in a calming voice. He has a knack for sensing people's mental state, but I don't think I was making it very difficult.

"It won't be fast enough." I took one long breath, filling my lungs to the point of pain, and held it for a count of eight. "I can do this." I whispered under my breath.

"Rae," Nyx responded cautiously while taking a step back. "If you even make it that far, you'll drain yourself. We need you when we get to Maeve."

I looked up at him through my lashes, my eyebrows bunched in a show of determination. "We don't. Have. Time." I stepped towards Nyx before he could talk me out of it and grabbed his arm. Our bodies flew through a dark

void, the air as thick and heavy as molasses. My legs felt heavy under the weight of my body.

I could feel my energy draining, so I reached towards those that give me life. I thought of my chosen sister. The person who showed me that family is made up of those who encourage you to take off your mask. Those who unburden you of the irrational voice in your head. Maeve has never made me feel small, she makes me feel fearless. She saw my broken pieces and filled the cracks with gold.

I felt the tight grip of the companion that followed me down this ambitious path. I could feel his own body draining as we held the weight of the fold between earthly space. I thought of the Nyx I knew before catastrophe changed our dynamic.

The flirtatious sparring partner who smiled with delight every time I bested him. I knew so many men before him that turned bitter and violent when faced with defeat. Nyx reassured what Mar and Jax instilled in me:

High standards are not unrealistic expectations.

For my family, I would drain every drop of my blood if it kept them safe. I would run into the pits of Tartarus for any one of them, without as much as a moment of hesitation. Maeve, Phoebe, Bryn, Marcellus, Jax. And Nyx, all burned so deeply in my soul that I would be less of myself without them.

I summoned my strength as we neared our destination. I could see a tear in the fold. I reached for the light that shone through, and urged myself to hold on. Just a few more seconds. The garden of Doctrina came into my vision, I screamed into the void, but no sound reached my ears.

We landed in Doctrina, and an enormous weight was lifted from my body. In more ways than one. I looked up at Nyx while catching my breath, his eyes darted across my face, as if waiting for me to pass out.

I pulled at his arm, still held tight under my grip, and ran towards the courtyard a hundred yards away. I had sent my friends a message just as soon as we began packing to leave Buddy's, informing them to return to Doctrina immediately.

I saw Phoebe's platinum blonde hair through the small spaces between blossom tree branches. As she and Marcellus came into view, I could see

them sitting close on a wooden bench that sat between two cherry trees. Phoebe shifted towards us, her face turned from a content smile to frozen shock. Their eyes frantically scanned our bodies. I ran right to her, realizing how much I missed her. Maeve needed all of us, as one. Whole.

“How are you here already?” Mar blurted, his low voice cracking with surprise. I could hear the thump of Nyx and Mar’s chests hitting followed by their hands slapping each other’s backs. Nyx laughed into his friend’s shoulder before letting go.

“Our girl got a little impatient.” Nyx said as he turned to where Phoebe and I still held each other tightly. I pulled myself from the comforting arms of my friend. I turned to Mar and gave him my best, *come here, you bastard*, grin. I ran to him and jumped into his massive arms. His laugh brought out my own as he spun me around.

Mar was the type of person who was impossible to be sad around. They should’ve sent *him* to get me. He gently placed me on the ground and grabbed my cheeks between his hands and kissed the top of my head.

“Nothing can break my queen.” Marcellus whispered into my hair. I looked up at him, adoration and love in my eyes. I didn’t know a man could truly care for me without wanting more. Seems like such a silly thing to have once believed now that I know all the forms love can take.

“I have a plan.” I said while turning to Phoebe and Nyx. “It’s going to take all of us, and potentially a little luck.”

“That should be our motto by now.” Phoebe said through a wide smile. “I’m in.”

Nyx placed his hand between the four of us. “Me too.” Mar placed his hand atop Nyx’s, a grin now growing on both of their faces.

“Ew, we’re not about to do a team huddle, boys. Reign in the testosterone.” Phoebe said while rolling her eyes and turning towards the entrance of Doctrina. She held out her arm to me before saying, “Tell me what I need to do, love. I’m all yours.”

I linked my arm with hers, and turned to the boys, hands still placed on top of one another. They shrugged their shoulders and threw their hands up dramatically. Nyx yelled, *go team*, while Mar threw his hand to his forehead in a salute while saying, *operation save Maeve*. I laughed to myself as I continued

towards the large golden doors of the home that taught me what safety felt like.

“The plan is simple, and we need to move quickly. Zeus is cloaking his location. I think I can penetrate it, but you’ll have to stick close. Jax and his army won’t get here in time, so it’ll just be the four of us. The Valkyrie will be close if we need them. With the element of surprise, and with Maeve’s safety as the priority, I think we can do it.” I released my grip from Phoebe as I turned to face the others.

“We’ll need to get Zeus as far from her as possible, he’s going to try to distract us, or finish her off.” Marcellus said while pacing where he stood.

“You and Phoebe will go straight for Maeve. She’s tied up with enchanted chains. They were a glowing bright blue. Aeolian Obsidian. He doesn’t expect us to know that, but if we bring a neutralizing agent, you should be able to get her out of them in an instant.” I turned to Nyx before continuing, “you and I will go for Zeus. We’ll have to deliver considerable blows to keep him down. I have a feeling he knows it’ll be you and I going after him. Never assume he doesn’t have a plan B through Z. Expect him to be ruthless, he’s going to give us everything he’s got. Don’t hesitate, go for the neck.”

“It would be my pleasure.” Nyx said while cracking his knuckles.

“Why does it feel like we’re about to get burned?” Phoebe said anxiously.

“Anyone can touch fire and not get burned, love.” Marcellus’s soldier’s glare turned into a wild grin as he continued, “you just have to do it really fucking fast.”

“Well then,” I said while meeting the gaze of each one of them. “What are we waiting for?”

Chapter Fourteen

The four of us ran silently through the forest. Bryn extended her power, giving a path of hardened air, our immortal speed flying effortlessly nearly a foot above the forest floor. Once we neared the area, I could sense Zeus's presence like a claw around the back of my neck.

The Valkyrien warriors surrounded the area, far enough to go unnoticed, but close enough to intervene if needed. Bryn, on the other hand, either can't or won't leave the boundaries of Doctrina. She won't say, but I'm assuming she's lived long enough that her trauma has trauma. I never push the matter.

I signaled to my companions, sending Mar and Phoebe towards Maeve, and Nyx close to me. I stood behind a weeping willow, summoning strength from its immortal roots. My eyes burned like an eternal flame. Every one of my senses now heightened. I was using my powers, and in a moment he would know where we were.

So I slowed time itself.

I looked at Nyx, who fell into my eyes like a sailor to a siren song. I've been told that my immortal state is like looking at a star and seeing the core burning within.

An electric power filled my veins, pulsing through me like static. This first blow had to be instant, the minute he sensed us he would go straight for Maeve, or flee. The air seemed to still as I bent the very fabric of time to my will. I stared at Nyx's devouring gaze for another second before turning my eyes to my target.

My nostrils flared at the anger I tried to focus into every long stride of my feet. Zeus's head turned slowly. His eyes hadn't yet met the death promise in mine as I dove towards his torso. I felt the crack of his ribs under my shoulder. We flew across the forest, trees exploding in slow motion in our wake.

I could feel his hands move to my head, a slow shock of lightning filled my blood as they made contact. A poor defense against someone who has supernovas exploding in her veins. It tickled.

I let time resume around me once I felt that we were well out of range from the others. I released my grip and let Zeus's body crash against a large oak tree, while I pulled my feet under myself and reveled in the force of the earth beneath me. I walked towards him as he strained to push himself up.

"I have to admit," he said with silver blood dripping from his mouth. "I didn't see that coming."

I didn't let him continue as I grabbed him by the throat and used my influence over the wind to lift us straight into the sky. My face was stone cold, unrecognizable, as I stared into his haunting face.

"No more talking." I said flatly. I sensed Nyx's presence before I turned to find him. He was flying faster than I'd ever seen, shouting something I couldn't hear over the roaring rage within me.

Zeus threw up a hand towards Nyx, the long chain of a golden necklace dangling from his clenched fist. Lightning blasted in a bright pink as it hit Nyx's large wings. Feathers of fire floated down slowly as Nyx fell towards the ground, a cloud of smoke covered his body. I squeezed Zeus's neck until every bone broke, until he was unconscious from the severity of the injury. I threw his body a half mile away from us, just in case he recovered faster than I'd hoped.

I threw myself into the fold, Appearing right under where Nyx was falling. I made it just in time to catch his unconscious body, letting my wisps of power smother the fire that tried to consume him. Terror filled me at the lifelessness of his face. I held him tight to my chest as I folded once more, straight to where Maeve was.

Blue chains laid around the tree where she was held. I didn't waste a moment before I brought us to the meeting point in the infirmary, praying they had made it.

My heart stopped as Maeve's unconscious body draped over Marcellus's arms. I set Nyx on the bed beside the one Mar now gently placed Maeve. I could feel both of their heartbeats like a warm touch beneath my fingers. Slow, and thready.

Maeve's injuries were worse than they were in my dream. The skin on her arms was pulled back and nailed to her shoulders, keeping it from healing properly. Maybe he knew I sensed them in my dream. Maybe it's my fault she endured such horror. I should've gone straight to her. This is all my fault. Always my fault.

Maybe next time you won't be so stupid.

Our best healer, Hygeia, rushed to Maeve's side. She wasted no time before putting her skin back in place. Phoebe ran a warm washcloth gently over her skin, washing away dried silver stream.

Maeve's eyes shot open, her labored breathing sounded like her lungs were filled with blood. She tried to move her arms and failed, with a shriek of pain at the attempt. Hygeia calmly and quickly placed her hand to Maeve's forehead, and spoke in an ancient tongue under her breath. Maeve's eyes fluttered to a close and her body fell back onto the bed.

You have no need for such immortal power. You are unworthy. Useless child.

Nyx's skin was pale and burnt, I could faintly see the smaller injuries begin healing; his skin slowly weaving itself back together. I couldn't name the poison that riddled my heart. Was it fear, or rage? The tall pointed glass ceiling seemed to move further away. I walked around their still bodies, giving myself a moment to catch my shallow breath. All my fault.

Chaos is a mystery you will never solve. You will never trust him. Never give in...

My vision blurred and I tried to call out to Phoebe before I collapsed completely. I felt strong arms around me. Just before my vision went black, I could see Bryn staring down at me. I couldn't hear her, but I could read her lips mouthing, "It's alright, kid."

It's time for school.

Chapter Fifteen

MARCELLUS. AKA PRINCE OF HEARTS

“Hey, Phe,” My voice felt distant, my ears haven’t stopped ringing since I first laid eyes on Maeve.

As the Prince of one of the most heavily armored territories, I’ve seen battle. I’ve seen men blown to pieces. Children piled up and burnt to ash. But this, someone I love, it was hard to stomach.

I thought I was stronger than this, but like Rae always reminds me, strength doesn’t come from shoving down your emotions, it comes from facing them.

“What is it?” Phoebe looked into my eyes as if she could sense my every thought. The worry and the pain. Even though Phoebe can sense and manipulate people’s feelings with her Gaea given powers, it still feels like she can read my mind somehow.

“Maeve told me something,” I placed my hand on the arms of my chair, the wood strained under my tight grip. “A week before she... was taken.”

“Hey,” Phoebe placed her hand on mine, reassuring me that she will always be my safe space. “Take yer time, mo leannan.”

“She asked me to look something up in the royal library at Kymopoleia, since she knew only I would have access.” I looked over to Jax, passed out in a chair between Nyx and Rae’s still unconscious bodies. He had arrived not long after Rae passed out, exhausted from his efforts to raise a rebellion against the notorious God of the Skies. It seems in the millions of years Zeus has lived, he’s instilled enough terror on Earth that few would

even speak words against him in fear that the very air had ears. “The weird thing is...”

“It’s okay.” Phoebe followed my eyeline to Jax, and the pity that eddied in her eyes—like a forest watching its first tree fall—made me sure she was remembering the look of shame that painted Jax’s normally unreadable face when he first burst through the doors.

Jax functions in a way that it’s best that you just let Jax be Jax, and everything just falls into place. To understand the complex minutiae of a man with depth equal to his sonorous voice, and perpetual inspection of things only a highly trained individual would take note of, you’d have to be thrown into the bottomless burden of being a genius. Intellect—and take it from a Prince who has been groomed towards perfectionism in stature and mind—can take its toll. Which is why I’ve found that lighthearted oblivion is the key to living each day intentionally, and unapologetically.

I’ve always wondered if Jax knows how to keep his own thoughts from showing through imperceptible movements like a lip twitching or breath catching due to the ease at which he can read others, especially Rae’s. To be fair, she isn’t often a hard person to read. Phoebe’s eyes trailed to Maeve. Something like heartbreak etched across her face.

“Mae told me to look for a specific book, and look behind it. I found a golden lever, and when I pulled it,” my hands instinctively raised as I relived the memory. “A loud crack came from behind me, and I turned to find the floor sinking, and a winding stairway rising slowly. I—hesitantly, let it be known that I’ve been listening to your teachings on controlling my impulses—walked down, and found a giant room filled with old books.”

“What did she ask ya to find?” Phoebe asked while walking over to the tea station and refilling her porcelain cup.

“Something called the Baobhan Sith. A creature, thought to have once been a very powerful sorceress. The most beautiful thing you’d ever see—Aphrodite please don’t smite me.” I held my hands in prayer and looked to the skies, hoping the Goddess of beauty heard my plea. “She is bound to some small lake somewhere along the Alps, but has been reported to walk the woods, every step she takes on land is met with the most excruciating pain you could imagine.”

“Why does she do it then?” Phoebe walked over to Maeve and grabbed a warm towel from the bedside table. She wiped the damp cloth over Maeve’s forehead, so gently that it warmed my heart.

“It’s a heartbreaking story, actually. It’s said that Hera cursed her—on Zeus’s orders, of course—to bind her to the lake, and her lover to land. They had a child, thought to be either taken by Zeus, or killed. So the creature walks just a little bit further each time, wading through her pain and sorrow, hoping to one day make it back to her lover.”

“Couldna they like, meet up at the shore?” Phoebe asked while setting down the wet cloth and staring down at Maeve. Phoebe’s red jumpsuit caught the light through the window. She told me once, in a drunken state, that she’d never let her enemies see her demigod blood. Not again. The admission broke a part of me I forgot was there.

“I thought about that too, actually. Apparently they’re confined to specific boundaries, just far enough away to keep them apart. Yet, close enough to keep hope alive.”

“That’s awful.” Phoebe’s voice cracked as she traced the back of her fingers across Maeve’s forehead, before looking back to me. “Why’d ya tink she wanted ya to learn ‘bout this boba she?” Phoebe looked to Maeve again, her eyebrows scrunched in the adorable way they always do when she’s lost in her thoughts.

“Boh-vahn shee, lolo.” I smiled at her, earning a soft blush of her cheeks in return. “That’s the other weird thing, you know the Wailing Widow that comes through the Kasari Forest, just southwest of here?” Her eyes widened as she connected the dots, I gave her a look to say, *I know, right?*

“Shut. Up.” I couldn’t help but huff out a laugh at the way her voice dropped an octave at the second word.

“I think she’s somehow connected to all of this. Rae’s past, or she can help in some way. I think she wanted me to find the Baobhan Sith, and try to make sense of everything. Or just seek her help.” I looked to the large windows between my friends beds, out towards the distant tree line.

“She won’t be comin’ tru here for anudder six days.” Phoebe looked down and into her tea, steam rising to her face.

“Then we wait.” My words felt like an ominous promise. I wanted to lighten the air, to think of something to make Phoebe smile, maybe even earn one of her soft chuckles.

A loud gasp came from one of the beds. Nyx shot upright, his eyes wide and his look distant. Phoebe was instantly at his side, her hand on each one of his arms. She said something softly to him, persuading his emotions to settle. Using her powers to replace his fear with peace, and his panic with contentment.

I quickly went to the other side of the bed at the same time Jax woke up and instinctively scanned Nyx’s face and body. I put myself in front of him, trying to guide him into reality. “Rae’s fine.” Phoebe looked over to me, her eyebrows bunched in question. “She’s right next to you, and Maeve’s next to her. Everyone’s fine. We did it, Uso.”

Nyx let out a quick sigh, his first full breath since he came to. “My dream, t-the bad man with... bright red eyes, green icebergs, golden... flying lizards.” His eyes started to focus on my own, but I tried and failed to keep the worry from my face.

Chapter Sixteen

Nyx Darling

Marcellus was never one to hide his emotions well. It's the same reason I play poker with him. I could tell he was worried, but so was I. The dream. It was bits and pieces of what felt like memories. Memories I hadn't made yet. It was like Rae described, like falling through space and time.

"What happened to her?" I put my arm on Jax, trying to settle the nausea building in my stomach.

"She overdid it, as usual." Mar looked to his right, to the lifeless yet still iridescent woman I have fallen so completely and irreversibly in love with.

I knew the moment the portal to our worlds tore open, who was on the other side. Like the inescapable pull of a siren song. The beckoning light, so soft and promising, like a slumbering star.

My mate.

"Sounds like my girl." I laid my body back slowly, and let my head gently sink into the plush pillows. Phoebe and Marcellus overbearingly helped me move. Jax just rested a large hand on my shoulder. His calm and reassuring energy wrapped around me like a heavy blanket.

Our bond is no doubt due to the fact that he looks exactly like my uncle. A *parallel*, as they're called on this world. One soul split into two bodies, often sharing the same likeness. Bryn once told me that it is believed that a soul chooses where they are reborn in their next life, familiarity often pulling them to their parallels.

Jax was the only person that knew why I felt happy to leave my world. The only person I could manage to say the words out loud to. As if I was confessing my sins to the man I knew, and not a stranger.

I killed my uncle. We fought side by side, and we were losing. I released my power, but he was too close. My uncle not by blood, but a lifetime friendship with my father. One of the fiercest generals, loyalest courtiers, and after knowing and training beside him my entire life, he had become my best friend. The glue that made our family whole. “And Maeve? She looked... is she going to recover?”

“Her injuries were extensive. Hygeia did what she could to mend her skin and sedate her so she can heal. And to help with the... pain. But the psychological damage. She’s strong, but she’ll need us.”

“Zeus is her father.” I said abruptly.

“What?!” Marcellus blurted out, arms flailing in the air and slapping each side of his ridiculous man-bun, his jaw nearly falling out of its socket. Always with the dramatics.

Jax looked like I had just given him a blow to the chest. His eyes darted across the floor, then to Maeve. My friend was a quiet soul, he observed the world through a glass wall. I didn’t know anyone who made me feel more understood, made me feel like every thought I had was a piece of lost poetry. Yet, he’s entirely unreadable.

“She would’ve told me, that can’t be right.” Phoebe said softly, her eyes scanning the floor. Eyebrows bunched, Mar seemed to fall into her puzzled look. His shock subsided for a moment before he looked back to me.

“In Rae’s dream that led us to Maeve, she heard them talking. Not only is he her father... she’s Artemis.” I scrunched my face in anticipation for a big reaction, but they’re faces were frozen. Phoebe’s and Marcellus’s in comical shock, Jax’s in deep thought. Rae told me quickly about her dream as we left Buddy’s, and I had yet to process the insanity of it.

“Artemis is a five *million* year-old Goddess.” Phoebe said breathlessly, finally breaking the deafening silence and reminding me of my pounding headache.

“Why would she lie?” I looked over to the woman I thought I knew. Her signature red hair, falling around her like waves of amber. I reached out

my hand to hold hers, her silver blood a signature for Goddess immortality. We should've known.

Maeve suddenly gasped for breath, her eyes wide, body shaking as if she spiked a fever. Her lips moved slowly, she swallowed hard past the dried blood coating her throat. Phoebe was at her side in an instant. I didn't even see her move.

"B-b-b." She fought for the strength to get the words out, her hand clawing at her neck as if she were choking.

"Sh..." Phoebe tried soothing our frantic friend. She placed a hand to the side of her face, rubbing her cheek with her thumb. "Take a breath, mo chara." Phoebe's long platinum hair fell over her shoulder as she leaned down towards Maeve. She moved her shoulders up and down, urging Maeve to echo the motion and fill her lungs.

"Everyone's okay, Mae. He wouldn't come here with the Valkyrie surrounding the border." I said, as calm and yet neutral as I could manage. "You're safe. You're whole."

"Bor... is." Maeve tried getting the word out, her eyes floating apart as if her vision focused beyond us.

"Boris?" Marcellus asked with as little confusion as he could muster. The man was really bad at reigning in every thought and emotion he had. It made him impossible not to trust, and really hard not to love.

"Borealis." She finally got the word out, her voice breathless and exhausted. A moment after she did, her eyes fell back in her head and she was once again out cold.

"Borealis? The northern territory?" Marcellus blurted after a long pause.

"I t'ought that place was a myth." Phoebe stood up and paced, one hand on her forehead and the other on her hip.

"It's not. My father told me about how the borders are protected, no one is supposed to cross. I'm not even sure anyone could if they tried. It's a giant fortress made of ice. A massive continent in the northern most point of the earth." Marcellus looked down at his hands, tracing the lines of his palm with his thumb.

“So, what then, we take a trip north?” I said while sitting myself up, my body healing more and more with each passing moment. I flung my feet over the side of the bed, letting the rushing blood in my brain settle before I stood completely.

“The instructions are unclear.” Marcellus said with a hint of humor. I swear the man would laugh in the face of imminent death.

“You’re going.” Jax said, his deep voice rumbling through the room. He’s the type of guy to speak with his actions, and only use his words when they were essential. “Maeve once told me about her friend up north. Someone she hoped she’d never see again, because it would mean that it’s a matter of life and death.”

“Then we go.” My voice hesitated at the middle word. It wasn’t *we*, not without Rae. I looked down at her body, savoring each slow rise of her chest. I placed my hand on top of hers, thanking the Mother that her skin felt warm and full of life. As if in response, Rae’s hand flipped beneath mine, her fingers weaving between my own.

“Nyx.” Rae’s lips parted slightly, her voice soft and breathless. My name on her lips felt like a siren song. Reeling me in, any danger seemingly nonessential. Only her.

“T”ank the Gods.” Phoebe said under her breath, her hands hitting Maeve’s bed as her knees nearly gave out.

I knelt beside Rae’s bed, her eyes finally opening and looking straight at me. Seems it made my knees almost give out, too. She turned to me, her hair covering her eye as she did. I couldn’t stop myself as I pushed back the golden mess.

Rae shot up, knocking my head with her own as she did. “*Bloody* fucking hell.” I spat under my breath. She turned frantically until her eyes caught on Maeve.

“She’s fine, just resting.” Marcellus said quickly, instantly settling Rae’s rapid breathing.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” Rae held my face between her hands, her eyebrows turning up with sincerity as she did. “Did I hurt you?” The question was a loaded one.

“No, no.” I said while placing my hands over hers. “I’m just fine, Rae Darling.”

Rae pulled her hands from under mine, the sudden absence felt like falling into a cold, empty cave. I kept my emotions from reaching my face, she had enough to worry about without my unrequited love burdening her mind. Assuming that she figured it out by now, despite my efforts to hide it.

I looked over to Jax, his dark leathers a perfect complement to his raven hair and sharp features. Undoubtedly the most attractive of us all. Jax was cursed some time ago with the ability to speak to souls in between this life and the next. The burden of having one foot in reality and another in purgatory definitely weighed heavy on his shoulders. Though he’d never admit it, Jax gave me a knowing look, his dark eyes somehow saying, *I’m right here, brother. Give it time. Give her space.*

Should I give her the other Primordials as well? Light, dark, love, and hate. Or should I just carve my heart out now and be rid of its ache? Jax seemed to sense my injury induced irritation and raised his eyebrows slightly with what a statue like him might call humor.

“What did I miss?” Rae said while rubbing her head. I met the eyeline of my friends as we looked around silently. None of us sure where to start.

Chapter Seventeen

Rae

“Let me make sure I have this right,” I said while trying to sit up, earning a hand on each of my shoulders, one from Phoebe and one from Nyx. My pride didn’t love the coddling, but I let them have it. “The Wailing Widow is possibly connected to everything, but she won’t come back for another six days. In the meantime, we’re going to the *forbidden* territory of the North Pole, and have no idea what we’re going to find there?”

“That’s pretty much the gist of it, yeah.” Marcellus said while curling his lips and nodding dramatically. The Prince of Poseidas was never known for being subtle, or reigning in the dramatics. I have to admit that his candor, whether it be for a lack of awareness or a respect for honesty, is something I adore about him.

“It’ll be an adventure.” Phoebe said in her bubbly let’s-pretend-things-are-going-perfectly voice.

“No one has been able to cross the borders, not for millions of years.” Marcellus said flatly, in a tone that was very unlike him.

“Maeve mentioned that actually.” Jax cut in. “The border requires Phoenix Ash to cross. Smearred across the body like warrior paint.”

“We’ve got plenty of that, but how do we get there in less than three days?” I added while running through scenarios in my mind.

“I can help with that.” Bryn appeared through the tall doors of the infirmary. Her elegant stride was followed by the long golden cape of her armor, flowing effortlessly behind her. “Cloaking yourselves can only go so

far. You'll need to use human technology to stay invisible. Zeus is too arrogant to think any immortal would use technology over their powers."

"Where are we supposed to get that?" Phoebe asked while looking the Titan leader up and down. I couldn't tell if the gaze was caution or admiration. Phoebe beats us all in poker. It was infuriating, but well deserved.

"I have a car you can take. It runs on solar energy and water, you'll have to drive through the mountains then it's a straight shot to Frankfurt. Your final destination will be in Amsterdam, I have an apartment there with a private jet. You can take that the rest of the way." Memories filled her eyes like shadows, her efforts to push past them were in vain.

"Thank you, Bryn." I said with a soft smile. My heart filling with gratitude and contentment. Bryn's presence seemed to make our family feel whole.

"May the Gods be with you, and keep you safe." Bryn looked at all of us, something like worry behind her eyes. She walked over to my bedside, and placed her hand on mine. Her other one opened, and a golden necklace laid like a coiled snake in her palm. The pendant had a gold etching of a sleeping woman. I swear I could see her hair move slowly as if underwater. "Mother of the sirens, she will bring you where you need to go, and ward off evil. Wear it for guidance, and you will never be lost."

"We'll take all the help we can get, thank you." As Bryn turned to leave, I handed Nyx the necklace and lifted the hair from my neck. He gently put it on, and gave me a warm smile when he was done.

"She looks like you." His voice was soft.

"Bryn?" I asked with my eyebrows bunched.

"The woman on the necklace. She's breathtaking." The admission seemed to blush his cheeks, as if he didn't mean to speak his thoughts out loud.

"I'll stay here and be with Maeve when she wakes up. Someone should stay in case you guys don't make it back in six days." Jax talked as if the plan was set. His arms were crossed, revealing his large biceps under the black leathers and silver lining of his jacket.

"Thank you, Jax." I smiled softly to him, which seemed to nearly crack his unbreakable exterior. "I'm nearly healed. Mar and Phe, you can bring the

car around. Nyx, you can coddle me until I can convince you that I'm totally fine." Marcellus coughed to hide his low chuckle, Phoebe turned around to hide her smile, and Jax looked neutral as always. Yet, I swear I could see his eyes narrow slightly.

"No problem, Mrs. Andino." Jax said as he settled back in his chair.

"Still not married, buddy." Rae chuckled as she shifted and tried not to wince.

"It's not my place to tell you what you're up for, Rae. I just care that you're safe." The seriousness of both his voice and face made me regret my jab at him. Despite my efforts, my pride gets the best of me.

"I'm never worried about my safety when you're with me, Darling." I smiled with sincerity, his large body still knelt beside me. "But if you try to help me up, I'll be obligated to smack you."

Nyx held up his hands as I sat up. I could feel his power rise as he had to hold himself back. Nyx meant more to me than he knew, and yet, a small part of my subconscious screamed bloody murder when I contemplated anything more than friendship. My mind would drift to my mother telling me it's time for school every time I thought about my feelings for Nyx. That part never made sense to me. I don't know what's hidden beneath that memory, but whatever it is, it holds my heart captive.

"Meet out front in fifteen?" I finally cut my gaze from Nyx and turned to my friends.

"Roadtrip!" Phoebe shrieked, earning a wince from both Nyx and I. Marcellus on the other hand, matched Phoebe's energy and grabbed her hands as they jumped around in a circle.

"Fuck sake, you two." I moaned while rubbing my forehead, failing to hide my smirk. "And in my fragile state."

Nyx jumped from where he knelt, his finger pointed towards me in an accusatory gesture. His mouth fumbled around the words he failed to find.

"Cool it, feathers. Look," I swung my feet over the bed and popped up dramatically. I did a little dance, swinging my hands from side to side and clapping. I threw my arms down and made jazz hands while smiling widely. "I'm right as rain."

Nyx gasped dramatically, his hand slapped against his chest like he was having a heart attack. “It’s worse than I thought... you’re brain damaged.”

Phoebe slapped Nyx on the arm while Marcellus curled over laughing, his hands on his knees to keep him from collapsing. Jax just slowly shook his head, he loved us, but his tolerance for our shenanigans was very low.

I slowly walked around the bed to where Nyx stood. I gave him a look that could burn even immortal skin. I ran my fingers down his arm, earning a shiver down his spine. “I must be, because you look fucking delicious today, Nyx.” I said his name like a soft purr.

Jax’s eyes widened, Mar was frozen where he stood, and Phoebe’s mouth dropped open. “Are the tight leathers for comfort, or for show?” I taunted him. Playful jabbing with a hint of flirtation seemed to become our best form of communication.

“Wicked woman.” Nyx said through a half smile. Silence filled the room, I could feel everyone’s eyes darting between us.

“Roadtrip!” Phoebe exclaimed with her hands in the air, earning a crisp high-five from Marcellus.

“SHOTGUN!” Marcellus nearly screeched, followed by a snap of his fingers and a shimmy of his hips.

Chapter Eighteen

Nyx Darling

“My parents have friends in Frankfurt, Sir Brian is the Prime Minister of the entire state, actually. We used to visit when I was really young. We can stay there.” Rae said as we packed the rest of our things in the trunk of Bryn’s car.

We don’t have machines where I’m from, not like this. Looking at the light blue paint and the silver curves that ran through the incredibly old vehicle, I could tell the Titan had taste.

“Why isn’t he called Prime Minister Brian, then?” Marcellus asked as he slammed the trunk.

“He prefers Sir.” Rae said in a monotone voice. Marcellus looked at me as if looking for an explanation. He looked just as worried as I now did.

“I’m drivin’.” Phoebe held up the keys and jingled them like a period at the end of her sentence. “You two can snog in the back.” She pointed her forehead towards Rae and I. Rae scoffed, and I now knew which direction this was going.

I huffed out a laugh in an attempt to be neutral and cool.

“That—I. Uh..” My attempted swagger failed as it seems I have forgotten all language. Lovely. I quickly moved on with a change of subject, to something I couldn’t help but say sincerely. “Rae,” I addressed my dream girl to give myself the opportunity to take her in. Savor every delicate curve and line of her face. “Can get some *much* needed rest.”

Rae responded with a very vulgar gesture, earning a low laugh from Marcellus, and a mocking applause from Phoebe.

“Such a lady.” I bowed to Rae before getting into the backseat.

I watched as she bent down before getting in, her eyebrows bunched in curiosity before reaching down. I wanted to ask what it was, but felt suddenly insecure that it was suffocating to have me so interested in every aspect of her life.

“I swear if you’re about to take a piss I’ll sue.” Marcellus said from the passenger seat.

“You’d sue over a popsicle meltin’ too fast in the sun, ya pretentious prick.” Phoebe laughed as she adjusted herself in the driver’s seat.

“It’s just a little chameleon. I’m moving it so it doesn’t get crushed by the wheels.” Rae said softly as she held it so gently in her hand. “It’s odd, they’re not native to this area, it gets far too cold.”

“Maybe it’s a student’s pet.” I said as I became mesmerized by Rae’s consideration for such a tiny thing.

“I’ll give it to Bryn, surely she’ll know what to do with it.” Rae said as she dropped her hands, my heart sunk until I realized she sent the creature to wherever Bryn was. I huffed a laugh as I thought of the look of surprise and confusion on Bryn’s face, until I remembered who she was. I don’t think she’s capable of such things.

Once we were all packed into the car, all tiny creatures at a safe distance, Phoebe took off like a wild speed racer. The air quickly sucked from my lungs. Phoebe’s long hair flew back into my face, the downside of a topless car. The name was not as fun as I was hoping.

“Hairband. HAIRBAND.” I yelled into the honey and citrus locks that tickled my throat.

Rae lifted her hand and Phoebe’s hair was suddenly wrapped elegantly in a floral silk scarf. Phoebe turned the rearview mirror towards her, admiring her new look. It took only a few seconds for Marcellus to grab it from her in order to examine the small pieces of hair that fell from his “Marbun”—as he insists we call it—and push them back into his leather hair tie.

Rae chuckled softly as I looked to her, a hand on my chest in appreciation for the heroine that saved me from attempted murder via asphyxiation. Her gaze always felt like it never truly looked at me, but instead viewed me through unfocused eyes.

I wish she truly saw me, I wish she memorized the curves and lines of my face as I did to hers, but if I'm being honest with myself, I love her just the same without her reciprocation. I just wish my love for her didn't come with a hot fist around my heart.

As we made our way through the mountains, I couldn't help but gawk at the gorgeous view. It was a good excuse to catch glances at Rae, moving her hand like a dolphin in the wind. The delight on her face was far better than the blank stare she had mere hours ago.

Rae's fascination with human studies made her an obvious choice for picking the playlist. Through all the destruction and madness the humans were infamous for, they surely knew how to make music. Each song was like a page out of her diary. A different day, a different emotion. She was a complex woman to be sure, but I was determined to finish the puzzle.

"What's this song called, Rae?" Phoebe shouted back towards us through the wind that whipped across our faces.

"About You." I responded, one of my favorites. It reminds me a lot of this very moment: Free, the earth wide.

Rae gave me a mocking smile and a nudge to the arm. The joy that filled her eyes moments ago now seemed to shadow over into dark clouds.

"We'll be there in a few hours. The owners, Sir and Lady Brian, like to host parties, so don't be shocked if there's a lot of people there. The Brian's are a very influential family." Her voice was flat, instructive. Not a hint of excited anticipation. I thought she said family *friends*.

She didn't speak again until we made it to their long gravel driveway. The GPS granted her the kindness of not having to.

"Oh, and don't stare at his eyes. He'll target you if you do." Rae said as she opened the door and hesitated before getting out.

Phoebe and Marcellus whispered to each other as I strode to Rae's side. "What're we walking into here, Andy?" I leaned over and whispered into her hair.

"A party, by the sounds of it." I didn't believe her, not with her voice still cold and distant.

“Seriously, what’s going on?” I took a quick step to get ahead of her, able to see her unfeeling face in its entirety. I prepared myself for both battle and flattery, whichever she needed. *Anything* she needed.

“Nothing. We’re safe. We like it here.”

“Rae, what the f—”

The doors to the large mansion flew open as we approached, the loud rumble of at least a hundred guests beat in unison with classical music.

Rae crossed the threshold first, always at the frontline. Ready to die for us. She scanned the room, too eagerly that it made my stomach turn. A man, slightly taller than Rae, cut through the crowd. His brown hair was dull, as were his thick features. I didn’t like him. He had an annoying smirk, and I *really* hated that he was wearing douchey sunglasses at seven in the evening.

“Rae-bee!” The brute shouted from across the room, his arms outstretched.

“What the fuck?” Marcellus whispered into my ear. I looked towards him and saw Phoebe mouthing the nickname with a confused look.

Wasn’t that a human disease? Phoebe sent both Mar and I a message on our ocular devices.

Another non-magical precaution.

Mar giggled as I scoffed, making sure to look at our suspicious host with an arrogant stare.

Rae calls it my *fuck with me and find out* look. And ninety-nine percent of the time, I *find out* that Rae can beat my arse. Without as much as a bead of sweat on her brow. Rae’s so much more than just a brilliant and beautiful immortal, she’s the coolest person I’ve ever met.

A memory flashed in my mind of Rae circling me in the training pit, I was pushing myself to stand after falling on my face. The sun hit Rae’s hair and perked cheekbones as she laughed at me. There was dirt smeared all over my body from hitting the ground so many times, while her silver armor and white cloth wrapped beneath remained pristine. She laughed again, the ethereal noise echoing in the domed pit.

“Had enough?” She taunted. Her sword caught the sunlight, then she swung it in front of her. It moved so quickly around her body that I swear it defied the laws of physics. See what I mean? She’s fucking cool.

“I’m immortal, remember? I’ve got time.”

I blinked rapidly to pull myself into the present moment. Rae walked cautiously towards Sir Brian, her smile forced. She reluctantly met his embrace and pulled from him, but he didn’t release his grip. I took a step forward, and he let go.

“These are my friends,” Rae pointed to each of us while giving our names. “I was wondering if you had a couple open rooms for us to stay the night.”

“Oh, how wonderful! The missus and I love having new blood around here.” Yeah, I hated him. “Please, join us for dinner.” He pulled off his glasses, revealing bright red eyes.

“The red-eyed man.” Marcellus said under his breath with a shallow gasp.

Sir Brian led us to a giant black and crimson dining hall. The onyx table in the center had nearly seventy-five place settings. Each chair was delicately crafted, especially those at each end. It felt like he was compensating for something.

“Take a seat.” Brian instructed. His wife sat at the other end of the table, her companions mumbling around her.

“Why do I feel like we’re ‘boutta eat bairns?” Phoebe leaned in and spoke under her breath as we all scanned the room. I nodded in agreement. There was an energy that felt so dark, the kind of darkness that does not taunt the host, but feeds their black soul.

“Rae, sweetheart, how have you been?” Lady Brian said like a machine made only for hosting, for making others happy.

“I’ve been well, thank you.” This wasn’t the Rae I knew. She felt like a robot too, as if her subconscious now ran her body. Like she was protecting herself.

It was terrifying.

The dinner was too quiet for how many people ate. I tried not to meet anyone's gaze, but I couldn't help but gawk at the lifelessness in each guest. The lack of personality, of a *soul*, felt ominous. The moment Rae requested leave, all four of us popped up, maybe too eagerly. Phoebe tried casually wiping her lips with a napkin, and nodded her approval of the meal. The rest of us, didn't have it in us to act as classy as she did.

Sir Brian showed us each to our rooms. The halls had dark black and gold patterned wallpaper, black crown molding, and red carpet leading to each room. I briefly caught a glimpse of the paintings that lined the walls, and felt them imprinted in my mind at the disturbing feeling they elicited within me. Some had naked children laid in fields of flowers, some had monsters devouring men, others were so abstract it would've taken more than a glance to fully digest.

Conveniently, Rae and I were in separate wings of the large palace. I memorized the path between each of our spread out lodgings. Just in case.

I looked into the screen hovering just in front of my eyes from the Ocullum. All you had to do was think of what you wanted to say, then think about sending it.

Goodnight! Hey, we have the same scar now! Gods, no.

What's with the weird nickname? What is wrong with me?

Sleep well, Andy.

I sent it before I could completely lose my cool, and waited for Rae's reply. The mention of her last name, her parents, usually fuels that fire within her enough that I hoped it would bring life back to her eyes. Or maybe make her stomp over here and yell at me. *Talk* to me.

An hour passed, most of the guests either left or went to private rooms. I paced as I contemplated going to Rae's. Or at least to Phoebe's to get advice. I looked to the window as an eery howling noise came from beyond the frosted glass. I forgot how Doctrina is enchanted to experience only the warmest days of summer, for the gardens' sake, and it was early winter for the rest of Athenia.

I watched as snow fell outside, and felt my gut drop as muffled noises came from the woods. Something inside me told me to turn away, to not look closer. To ignore it.

Another hour passed. I sat in the small seating area in my large sleeping chamber. I looked to the giant bed in the middle of the candlelit room. So. Much. Compensating.

Be brave, Rae. Be fucking fearless.

What the hell? I shot upward, staring at the message in my Ocullum, needing a little more context. Wondering if it was meant for someone else.

I am definitely not sleeping tonight.

HUH? What the fuck is she saying? What is she implying? Is it an innocent, *haha, I'm definitely not sleeping tonight* or is it a *oh we are definitely not sleeping tonight, wink wink*.

Am I overthinking this? Or am I possibly missing out on something *huge*. Why did she need to be brave to say that?

I'm definitely overthinking this.

Nope—No, I'm not, this is completely out of character for her.

1. She normally wouldn't reply to me in the first place.
2. She would *never* mention sleeping while we lay alone in our rooms due to her always choosing her words very wisely with me.
3. Fuck it. I'm going over there.

Before I could even get up, before I had gone over every pro and con, a pain hit me in the gut. I looked down but there was nothing there.

I placed my hand on my stomach to try to relieve the knot that tied my organs together.

Then I heard it, a bone-chilling scream. A scream that will no doubt haunt my dreams for the rest of my life.

Rae.

Chapter Nineteen

Rae

Twenty-four minutes earlier

This room riddles my body with panic, with warning. Perhaps it's the dark wallpaper, the unsettling paintings of children playing, or the reminder of my younger self. I stood by the door, unable to move. My eyes looked towards the window as I felt the room closing in on me, the unexplainable unease needing an outlet, and trying to force itself out of me. I looked to the tall trees, forever my protectors as I've spent so much of my life in the woods.

I focused on my breathing, each one bringing me into the comfort of my own company. I will not let the lack of understanding for my emotions drive me mad. There are things I cannot explain, things I may never know, and that's okay. Such is life.

I told myself to put one foot in front of the other, as easy as that, as if I had forgotten how to walk, or my body begged me not to. As my eyes made their way from the tattered red rug to the mahogany bed frame, my head turned in curiosity. The headboard looked like it holds a memory from my past self. What was it I was supposed to remember?

I felt more confident, guided by my curiosity, and I walked over to the bed, tracing my hand along the intricate carving of creatures and trees. I let out a breath I had apparently been holding as the memory came back to me.

When I was very young, I found a hidden drawer in the side of the headboard, slightly bigger than a matchbox.

I ran my fingers through my hair that was twisted into a low bun, and pulled out a hair pin. I fiddled for the tiny hole, my lips curled in concentration.

I jumped as I heard a knock at the door, and suddenly my body was moving towards it. It opened, and Sir Brian burst through the doorway, his smile sending needles in my eyes.

“How are we doing, Rae-bee?” I always remembered him being so sociable, always smiling like the politician he is.

A cold breeze filled the room, sending a rush of discomfort down my spine. My parents may have been cold people, but they weren’t *bad* people. My gut has been off since I remembered the prophecy, since I let Maeve get taken. I grabbed my necklace, desperate for guidance.

Whatever I’m feeling now can’t be as terrible as it seems, because my parents always brought me here. My *parents*. The man owned Sicily for God’s sake, he turned it into the paradise it is today, neutralizing the mafia that had controlled it for thousands of years, and built a massive Hadron Collider that benefits millions. Anyone who’s anyone would *kill* to be here, to attend his lavish parties and eat his world-renowned dinners. I’m being ungrateful. Anyone would be lucky. *I’m* so lucky.

Right?

“Fine, thank you.” I forced a smile. “Thank you again for letting us stay, we’ll need a night of rest before our long journey.”

He walked around casually, looking towards the fireplace and the large painting beside it. What—or who—he was looking for, I didn’t know.

“It’s my pleasure.” He looked around the room as if admiring its beauty, before sitting on my bed. I took a step towards the window, feeling far too close to him. “Where are you off to?”

“Our specific plans are still being decided, I’ve messaged my friends to join me here to set a clear plan before tomorrow.” I lied.

His smile dropped instantly.

“Oh.” He ran his hands along the bedsheets until he seemed to have decided on what to say next. “The one with the wings is quite rude, I am quite within my rights to end his time here, but as you know, my kindness knows no bounds.” He stood hesitantly, and turned towards the door. “And Rae,”

“Sorry, I’ve just got a message,” I lied again, needing a reason for my stunned look. He turned, trying not to move too quickly to the door. “Sir?”

“I urge you not to get too involved with yourself, young girl. Disrespect does not look very attractive on you.” He smiled through his off-putting words, and my stomach turned as his eyes pushed into my soul. “Life is unkind to those with unpleasing qualities. You are such a beautiful girl, even at five, you were so mature for your age.” He waited as if expecting my thanks, poorly disguising his rage at their absence. “And look what you’ve become now.” He clicked his tongue as he held the door handle, his knuckles white. “Time has wasted you. Such a pity.”

Just as the door closed behind him, I felt an unbelievable weight lifted from my body. I hadn’t realized I had been holding my breath and clenching every muscle until I nearly fell to the floor, gasping. I fell back but caught myself on the nightstand.

Just before I turned to continue working on the secret drawer, a bright light had me squinting my eyes tightly.

A bright blue orb flew past the stone fireplace, and towards the giant painting, knocking it slightly off center. The light faded slowly, and I didn’t move an inch until it was entirely gone.

I stepped forward as I went to fix the painting.

The floor creaked under my sneakers, and my heart nearly stopped at the noise. I silently shook my arms and mouthed curses as panic begged for an outlet. I had the unbearable sense that I was in trouble, once again riddled by feelings I couldn’t find the reason for.

My fingers wrapped around the frame of the large painting, and I looked closely at it. It was an abstract swirl of dark colors, seemingly depicting a scene of children running around the woods, jumping and looking back at each other with wide smiles.

As I took in more of the painting, my gut fell deeper into my core. You know when you see a picture of a forest and you feel warm, then there are other images, seemingly innocent, but you can’t help but feel cold inside, like you could swear someone died in those woods, ghosts surely hanging in the fog. It was like that. I couldn’t explain it, but despair riddled the piece of art despite its efforts to suggest otherwise. It’s Nyx who is the artist, not me, but I just *know* he would feel the same. Darkness haunted this painting, maybe even this place.

My hands pulled back as I felt a cold breeze nip at my fingertips. Realization hit me and I placed my fingers back at the edge of the painting.

Air only meant one thing.

I pulled on the frame, and it creaked as if I pulled on rusty hinges. I shut my eyes and tensed at the noise, silently mouthing curses with enough dramatics that some of the... *ick* that hung on me shook off.

Slowly, I pulled until I could peek behind.

There was nothing but darkness. I took my time pulling it all the way, until a pit of black filled the hidden passage, my frozen figure before it.

Be brave, Rae. Be fucking fearless. I pleaded with myself.

I took a step forward, and felt my feet hit a stone step. My breath was fast and my heart beat so hard I swear it echoed through the cold stairwell. I took one step, then another.

I am definitely not sleeping tonight.

I slowly lost my sense of self, my sense of reality. I was just a body, operating as one does as it descends steps. No thought, no purpose. Only movement and a basic awareness.

It's time for school. My mind whispered. My head buzzed as if trying to wake me up. My shaky hands touched the wall as I made my way down.

I'm the one who screams at the beautiful bombshell dumbass in the horror films who walks into an empty room after hearing noises. I even close my eyes as the eery music plays. And here I am, being just as stupid.

My feet take another step, but it is at the same level as the previous step, and the unexpected force makes the bottom of my foot tingle.

I'm at the bottom. My sweaty hands trace the wall, my eyes wide open as if I can see in total darkness. Curse my inability to use my powers, because this sucks butts, and I am *not* a fan of my curiosity in this moment. Once again, *terribly* sorry Ares, because this one seems like a multiple-therapy-session kind of thing.

A horrible smell stung my nose, causing me to bury it in the sleeve of my sweatshirt. The dread that filled my body took on a life of its own. There's no going back now. Leaving would haunt me more than whatever I find in this room, a room connected to *my* bedroom.

My hands feel something on the wall, and I quickly pull on what felt like a lever, hoping to Gaea that it isn't about to open the ground to a thousand foot drop.

A bright fluorescent light fills the space just as children's music begins playing from the opposite corner. I hold my arm over my eyes as they adjust to the room. I pulled down my arm, so very hesitantly.

I let out a soft sob at what I found.

This isn't real. It can't be real, this is a nightmare. *The* nightmare. I gasped for breath, my eyes stinging with the horror in front of me. My entire body began to shake, nearly convulsing, as my brain begged to stay far from this room. *It's time for school. It's time for school.*

I sucked in an audible breath, and let out a broken scream that echoed against the stone walls. I may not have been in a horror film, but I certainly did scream like I was.

I stared without feeling, without thoughts, at the metal table that sat in the middle of the cellar. It was stained with gilded paint filled with supernovas and what smelt like aged piss. I looked back towards the stone stairwell that led me to this torture chamber, a door hidden beneath a painting. A memory hidden—locked—under this HAUNTED mansion.

So many dark feelings that had no explanation. So many intrusive thoughts that led my decisions, led my fear, my heart. The agony I haven't been able to put into words now laid bare before me.

My head felt light and I swayed back and forth before emptying my stomach's contents onto the sticky floor.

Noises escaped me as if the pain finally felt seen, and sighed in relief. Guttural cries filled the room as I held myself, shame the most recognizable feeling of all, and pity, as I will never be the same. Never be saved from this truth. Of who I am, what had been done to me.

Hundreds of years I've spent with Ares trying to unlock my memories, unlock my true power. Hundreds of years I stormed out of his office, almost immediately forgetting why, and thinking myself a coward.

What a wonder that knowledge can be both a freeing and imprisoning thing to have.

I wasn't the one who has held my true self captive. It wasn't the petty grievances of my childhood bullies, or my lack of parental attention that led me to burying my memories. It's so. Much. More.

Sickening.

It's time for school.

I remember.

I remember everything. Dear Gods, it's all there. It's *always* been there. Each memory was too loud, too much to process all at once.

The thud of heavy footsteps came from the stairwell. I backed up towards the wall, bracing myself for their arrival. I didn't let my back touch the cold stone, part of me knew it was most likely covered in fluids I didn't want to touch. From the smell, it had been there for a long, long time.

Nyx appeared in the corner of my eye, and in an instant, he was in front of me. He grabbed my arms, his eyes wide as they scanned my entire body. His face felt so familiar that it nearly brought me into reality. In the darkest of times, I could easily fall deep into the soft lines and incandescent colors of his face. Despite the pain it produces, Nyx is the only person I could even imagine touching me right now. I felt no pain, I was numb.

"Are you hurt? What happened?" He looked around the room, pulling me to him as he did. "Mother of Gods."

"I remember. Every... every second." My voice cracked as my heart did. The memories flooded past the walls of my mind like a title wave. "*It's time for school.*" My voice broke at each word.

Phoebe gasped from behind us, her hand over her mouth as her wide eyes traced around the room. Marcellus tumbled in behind her, looking down as he tried to tie his sweatpants.

There were various tools hanging on the walls. A glance at each one brought back excruciating memories, a horror strong enough to break the mind. I couldn't get myself to look at them all.

Modernized weapons are enchanted not to rust, and yet nearly every instrument in the room was covered in it, along with my luminescent blood.

Rags were scattered across the dirty floor, none of which were stained with blood. I cried into my hands as I knew instantly what they were stained

with. *No, no, no.* My mind begged, the mantra of denial trying to drown out the truth that filled my shattered mind.

“Holy shit... we *did* eat babies.” Marcellus cried out in a shaky voice, his hand over his mouth as he gagged.

“Let’s get the *fuck* out of here.” Nyx’s voice was stern, unfazed by the horror, as if he was merely a Captain, and not my Nyx. He didn’t give me a chance to move before lifting me into his arms. I went limp, like an exhausted child as he pulled me in tightly. I laid frozen under his stronghold. My paralyzed gaze fixed on the room as we moved for the stairs. I spotted a tiny television in the corner, playing cartoons on repeat.

It’s time for school, my mother’s voice repeated in my thoughts like a mind-muting mantra.

My cheek felt cold as my silent tears drenched Nyx’s T-shirt. His arm wrapped around my back, hand held tightly to my arm, but gentle enough that I felt safe, protected. He held me in a way that made me feel like he was trying to shield me from the world.

My ears rang at the sheer volume of my thoughts, the memories now so clear. My fear of men. My distrust in Nyx. The reason I won’t allow myself to access my power in its entirety.

Years and years and years.

Of conditioning.

And torture.

Beginning at an age where it became all I knew. I didn’t have the capacity to reason, to know better. During my studies, we learned that there are vital points in childhood where the brain depends solely on one thing. Trust. When a developmental stage is stunted, it changes *who we are*.

If a parent takes too long to respond to their baby’s cries: mistrust in those who care for you.

When you learn to crawl and find yourself somersaulting down a flight of stairs: mistrust in the world around you.

At five, you learn to feel guilt when boundaries are crossed. You either take initiative, or trust others to do it for you. The guilt I feel when I use my powers, or look at Nyx, it’s all an intricate form of years of conditioning.

When you're that young... It is done. It's survival. It fights reason, it fights change. I was fighting...

The entire fucking world. I still am.

It's no wonder I took up a fascination with the mind, I had one of the most severe cases of psychological manipulation in Earth's history.

Mistrust does not cover a trauma of this magnitude, the psychologist in me knows this. It's a tragedy. An unshakable mold. The years it would take to reverse this kind of damage are daunting, even to an immortal.

I suppose that was the point, though, wasn't it?

Break me so that the soft hands of someone worthy would bleed under the shards of my shattered mind. Make me question my reality by burying the core of who I am, leading me to never genuinely loving myself. How could I? I never really *knew* myself.

Oh, it's brilliant, truly. Such a well crafted form of torture, and that must be why I've always seen life as such.

Here's the *real* kicker: I had become fascinated by humans not for their passion for life, their strength against the inevitable thief that is their mortality, but because I *envied* that they had the ability to experience death. To be reborn into a new life, and free of the torture of spoiled immortality. Immortality such as mine: Primordial, and therefore, unending.

Bravo, you motherfuckers.

You've broken the unbreakable.

I inhaled sharply before dropping my head and letting out a loud sob onto Nyx's chest. My body hurt as it shook so violently. Nyx's arms tightened around me in response, his lips pressing against my hair as he whispered something into it. Something dropped against the top of my head, and it took me but a moment to realize it was a tear.

"You're safe. You are strong." Nyx's heart thundered against my cheek. He choked on his words, barely able to get them out. "Never again."

My inhaleds were sharp, as if I could no longer exhale fully. I focused on the sound of his voice, and let his familiarity be my guide. He who stills my mind, will be my salvation.

“My Rae, what have they done?” His warm breath heated my head, sending warmth into my lifeless body. His breathing turned even, and steady. I felt his rage like a palpable shield. “I’ll kill them all.”

I heard muffled voices as we walked through the halls. I buried my face in Nyx’s shoulder. The memories became a poison my body tried to fight.

Bryn once told me that I *self-actualize* my reality. I now realize, I used my power to make myself weaker, my skin breakable. Sir Brian was only the warm-up. His attempt to tame me. No blade, fire, or stone could break my immortal skin. But, he didn’t need to. There was creativity in his torture. Until, I gave myself human skin, just to trade one pain for another.

He showed me another kind of torture. The kind that doesn’t break the skin, but instead, breaks the spirit.

When it became too much, I shattered. I’d rather have my skin and bones torn apart than have my soul in shards.

My power weakened, locked itself deep within my mind each time I was in that cellar. I convinced myself I was deserving of such cruelty, that my power was a weapon that would destroy the world, and Brian’s methods were the only way to stop me.

He was doing me a kindness.

My interest in psychology was born from desperation. Every time we learned about repression, it made so much sense. I thought I was weak and repressed anything unsavory. I thought my mind a coward, and my methods proof that I was undeserving of my power.

How could I have never known?

My parents. They brought me here. To him.

It’s time for school.

It all came back to me.

THE LION’S DEN  496 YEARS AGO

I looked down at luminescent blood dripping from my plaited ponytails. My Velcro shoes sparkled, flashing pink and purple as they pulled on glowing Aeolian Obsidian chains.

“You are a demigod. Nothing more. Your powers will lay dormant, you have no use for them.” Brian said with disgust, purposefully spitting on me as he did. “Chaos makes you feel unsafe. Chaos is a mystery you will never solve. You will never trust him. You will never give into his power.”

I screamed in pain, my voice like a child no older than five. This was too much. This memory can’t be real, how could I ever forget something like this? How could I have walked straight into a lions den, mistaking the sharp fangs of a hungry beast for the outstretched arms of a friend?

“Everyone you ever love will die, will be taken away from you, unless you *bury* your power. It will be all your fault. The pliers, Kyme.” His son grabbed the tool and forcefully pinned my hand to the cold metal table. “You will stay with your mother.” He placed it under my fingernail. I tried moving, but fear left me frozen. My overalls suddenly felt warm, and damp. “You will never leave your family. You will do anything for your family.”

This was no lion’s den, it was a fucking sociopath’s lair.

LIVING NIGHTMARE  PRESENT DAY

The little boy. Wool vest tearing in my immortal hands. The first memory that came back, was the memory of killing a child. I hadn’t realized until now who it was. Kyme Brian. The boy I murdered. The boy who tortured me. Who violated me eight years after this memory. The devil disguised as my boyfriend, someone I trusted.

He was patient in earning my trust, overwhelmingly clear with his interest in me as he gave me bold declarations of love, his intoxicating flirtation, and what seemed like a fairytale to any twelve-year-old girl: his attention.

We called this *love-bombing* in psychology. When a person goes above and beyond in the chase for your heart. It’s hard to resist, especially when you’ve only known pain. And when you’re a *fucking* child.

I believed every word, every excuse, and blamed myself when the passion went away. I was convinced that his needs were more important than

my own. Love is about sacrifice. Love is about doing things you don't want to do.

Love is pain.

He humiliated me. Time and time again. He violated me. Over and over. I forgot how to feel. I forgot what it was like to hear my own voice in my head. All I knew was him, and his conditions. His needs.

My friends were just as smitten. Convinced that I was crazy, that I lied out of jealousy. After the first dozen times he cheated on me, anything I did, anything I said that was against his character, was written off as spite.

He knew how to hurt me, even more so mentally than physically, so that the evidence was easily refutable. He learned from a man with years of practice. His craft was so well formed that I eventually had nothing but his voice in my head. *It's all your fault. You're worthless. Weak. Selfish. You're crazy.*

It wasn't until I walked in on him with another girl straddling him that I cracked. There was no voice in my head, only the sound of my piercing rage sending boiling blood into my cheeks.

You fucking BASTARD. I had screamed until my throat hurt.

I hate you. My voice broke through my tears.

LIAR.

I remember the pale faces of his friends in the room, feeling conflicted that they felt shame despite the constructed illusion of my insanity. But they didn't help me, didn't keep me out of that room. Except for one, who told me *you don't want to go in there.* And the collective knowledge of Kyme's betrayal, like the Sunday's news, somehow made it all worse.

I didn't drop a child off that cliff, I dropped a eighteen-year-old *man* off that cliff, wasted at a party I wasn't invited to.

It seems my brain changed the story so that *I* would be the villain.

The only thing I regret is not realizing sooner, Kyme. Needing to forget what you had done to me, and being someone lucky enough to not know you. Not remember your animated charm and how quickly the facade dropped when we were alone. How you would've thrived in old Hollywood. For *so* many reasons.

I pity the trees that wasted their energy photosynthesizing the oxygen you wasted. And since I never got to say it to your face, let me say it to the Universe so that she may find you wherever you're wasting more space;

You have the confidence of a *much* taller and more interesting man.
You got what was coming to you, dickhead.

You will never leave your family. You will do anything for your family. The words echoed in my mind. My family. I guess he didn't expect I'd find my own, and gladly lay my life for them. Whatever it takes.

I felt Nyx's body against my own, using his warmth to keep me in reality. His hands wrapped tighter around me, the small gesture shot me into my body completely.

Muffled voices turned to loud screams. I saw Phoebe tumbling with perfect form towards three angry men. Brian walked slowly towards where we descended the large marble staircase, looking furious.

I looked up at Nyx, his gaze lethal, and utterly calm. I squeezed his shoulder, urging him to let me down. He set me down so, so gently, and I put a hand on his chest. He immediately halted.

"I remember everything. *Everything.*" I tried making my voice even, but I had to choke out the words. Nyx took a step, until he was just in my periphery. Standing beside me. In more ways than one. I grabbed Nyx's hand, though we can't use our powers, something beneath his skin focused my mind, focused my rage, even if for a few moments. "Welcome to your penance, bitch."

Phoebe had just finished taking down the mob of drunk and violent guests as Marcellus came around the corner, giving Nyx a nod.

"Anytime you have an evil thought. Anytime you relish in the memories of what you did to me, or to others, the pain you inflicted will riddle your body, tenfold. If you ever think of taking another child for one of your hunts, or just for fun, you will burn with the excruciating pain you put me through. Your nails will be torn from their beds. Your eyes will be made into pincushions. Your bones will be crushed into tiny shards, piercing your skin as you bleed dry. You will live in fear, for the inevitable intrusive thought

to enter your demented mind. You will beg into a vast empty space, because hope will grant you no mercy, and I will never come to release you.”

“My son was always right about this one. She’s fucked in the head.” Sir Brian laughed mockingly. “I don’t think you understand who—” I Appeared before him and placed my finger to his forehead, stunning him. I bound the promise I made to him. A cosmically signed contract, my eyes reflecting white off his sweaty forehead. And it is done.

Ohhhh... tits.

I’ve used my powers.

Zeus knows exactly where we are. And he’s on his way.

“Run.” Was all I said to my companions as I held my hand out to them. The moment all of our bodies touched, I pressed the cold metal of the cuff that wrapped around my bicep like a snake climbing a tree, sending us straight to the car. Human technology was definitely underrated.

“I don’t have the keys!” Phoebe whispered loudly.

“I can hot-wire it. Get in.” Everyone flew in as I ripped off the metal under the steering wheel. Thunder tore through the sky in the distance.

He was coming.

I grabbed two wires, praying they were the right ones, finding it difficult to remember anything from my mechanics class with the flood of my thoughts, and lightly touched them together. The car purred in response. Just as Sir Brian ran through the front door, he curled over in pain. His scream made my body jump slightly. I could hear Marcellus laugh maniacally from behind me.

“If you can’t handle the heat, get out of the torture chamber.” Marcellus said while signing *fuck you* in ASL.

“Dude.” Nyx smacked his shoulder at the same time Phoebe swatted at his chest. Marcellus gave a look as to say, *chill*.

I just laughed, the broken laugh of a woman gone mad. It seemed to set my family on edge.

“Come on, come on.” I hit the wires together again, and the car roared to start. I shifted the gear and wasted no time before slamming on the accelerator.

“We’ll drive the rest night. The plane flies on its own. We can sleep then.” Nyx said calmly. It settled the slow burn in my gut. “If you need one of us to drive, just say so.”

No pet names. No *my darling* or *Andy*. That’s how you know he was worried. But *I* wasn’t. This is my life now, pretty straightforward:

You’re screwed, kid. Better luck in the next life. Oh, wait...

I focused on the road, and planned our next few days in my head. I have my memories, most of them, I suppose, but that didn’t mean I needed to dwell on them now. I worried that once I did, I’d break beyond recognition, or repair. Plus, I have *literally* forever. Denial here I come.

Luckily for us, this was a highly populated area, so we weren’t the only car on the road. I worried that Sir Brian had already given Zeus our vehicle’s description, but remembered something Bryn had told me.

“Want to see something cool?” I said calmly to my friends. They didn’t reply, but I could see Marcellus nodding and looking over to Phoebe with caution as I glanced in the rearview mirror.

I pulled the lever next to the ignition and the entire car started reforming. Metal pieces turned and pulled a thin roof over our heads. Nyx tucked his wings in tight, and I moved forward so he could stretch them out more.

The previously light blue 1957 Lincoln Continental transformed into a black 2025 Ford Bronco. Since all of the human’s ancient vehicles had been taken by rust and the ravages of time, Bryn enchanted her car to be able to transform into the likeness of her favorite cars from the 20th and 21st centuries. I have to admit, they were my favorite, too.

I looked to the skies, and prayed to Gaea that it was enough to keep us hidden. If she could no longer veil the horrors of my past, let’s hope that she can at least cover our tracks for the monster on our tail.

Chapter Twenty

Nyx Darling

Rae drove the whole way. Five hours without speaking, or even moving an inch. We finally made it to the private runway where Bryn stored her jet. Marcellus and I grabbed the bags while watching Phoebe comfort Rae, then looked at each other. Marcellus shook his head like he couldn't believe what happened. I mirrored him, in disbelief myself.

"It's a five hour flight. Get some sleep" Rae said flatly as we boarded the aircraft. The interior was chic, even *I* could tell that much. I sat in the chair facing Rae's, Phe and Mar did the same on the adjacent side.

"There's a bed in the back." Phoebe offered kindly, trying not to single out Rae, and not doing a very good job at it.

"Phoebe..." Marcellus said with a stern look. "Gross."

"Yer an eejit." Phoebe scowled as she kicked his leg.

I didn't sleep. Thankfully, Rae did, or at least pretended she did. Marcellus snored softly as he laid curled up on the couch behind me. Phoebe slept upright, a cashmere blanket thrown across her body, courtesy of her snoring admirer. Classy move, brother.

I looked over to Rae, who now sat with her chin in her palm, looking over the Atlantic through lifeless eyes.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked softly, no pressure to be found in my words. I just wanted her to know that I was ready and willing to listen if and when she felt ready to let her racing thoughts into the outside world.

She was silent for a long time.

“It started when I was four, when my powers began manifesting. My parents brought me there, and that man hunted me like an animal. I ran through the woods alongside terrified, naked, and screaming children. No older than me. Some sat in the wet mud, crying, soiling themselves. Others screamed, and ran, tripping over the rough terrain. And others... were already dead.

“Some not for long. Others rotted from previous hunts.” The image tore at my insides, what kind of sick mind does such a thing for sport? To *children*.

Phoebe’s eyes slowly opened, she sat up silently as she listened. She may have tried to conceal it, but the bright raspberry shine of her blouse pulled my periphery. Mar seemed to stop snoring, but didn’t move.

“That was the first time I folded through space and time. I cried for hours as I heard the horror in the distance. When my parents found me, I thought they had saved me, but they saw I was unharmed, and brought me to that chamber. Brian tortured me until I believed every word he said. Every time I left, the memories vanished, until I was brought back to that room. His son helped him, and coerced me into being his girlfriend. I didn’t know any better. He did terrible things to me, in and outside of that room. Until I was eighteen. Then, I held him above a cliff and... let go.”

My breath felt heavy in my chest as a knot rose to my throat.

She was *so* young.

“But the damage was done, I forgot what I did the moment I got home. I never understood why everyone seemed to hate me, and my friends stopped coming over. My parents let me choose my own studies from then on. Their plan had worked. A broken mare, bent to its master’s will.”

“Yer not broken. Ya wouldna’ve remembered if ya couldna handle it.” Phoebe got up and walked over to Rae’s side. She didn’t dare touch her, but I felt that she wanted to.

“My parents died. I remember it now. They were slaughtered in the night when I was maybe two, or three. A man and a woman stood over their brutally beaten bodies. They walked towards me, and transformed into the perfect likeness of my parents.”

“Who were they?” I asked cautiously.

“The people who raised me from that point on, were Zeus and his wife, Hera.” My heart sunk at her admission.

“No, no, no, no.” Marcellus sat up from where he pretended to sleep, his hand raised. “That can’t be right, Zeus wants to *kill* you. You stayed there until you were like, fifty-something.”

“He can’t kill me. He’s tried, my Gods he’s tried.” I knew there were memories eating away at her mind, my imagination becoming a cruel friend. “He decided to control me instead. Bide his time until he found a way to take me out of the equation. Beat me into submission as he did to Hera, and so many after her. He sees me as his weapon. A weapon gone rogue. I don’t know his plan, just that I’m the biggest piece.”

“How did ya get away, then?” Phoebe asked lightly.

“I left in the night. I never used my powers. I didn’t think I had any, so he couldn’t track me. And once I got to Doctrina, I was untouchable.” She traced a line on her palm, not wanting to meet any of our eyelines.

“Zeus is a God, we can destroy him. He’ll lose his memories and go terrorize some other planet.” Marcellus blurted out.

“We’ll find a way to trap him in Tartarus.” Rae said flatly. “But first, we need to figure out why Maeve wants us in Borealis.”

Phoebe raised her hand to Rae, offering her powers if she needed them. Silently begging her to use them.

“Please. Ya need rest.” Phoebe’s words seemed to crack the porcelain wall Rae had holding her mind together. The droop of her eyes was evidence of both physical and mental exhaustion. Rae nodded in defeat, and Phoebe lightly touched her hand. Rae’s eyes fluttered, and Phoebe reclined her chair as she fell into a deep sleep.

I leaned over and pulled the blanket bunched in her lap over her arms. A blue light shined brightly through the window. I looked to find a gigantic piece of ice. *Green icebergs*. The memory of my dream came back to me.

This can’t be good.

Chapter Twenty-One

Rae

The memories of my past flooded my mind like midnight madness, when the stillness of the night lulls you into an anxiety-ridden coma. Phoebe's touch made the memories hazy, and my shoulders heavy. Humming molasses pouring down my body, like a hive of bees running their wings down my spine.

As I fell into insomniac's relief, my mind seemed to drift further than the boundaries of the plane. My consciousness flew above the ocean, past the large northern islands of Athenia, until I stood on the sandy coast of what looked like Venice.

A low ringing sound hummed through the air, like a distant siren song. Light beamed from my chest. I looked down at the golden necklace that still draped over my black denim jacket and charcoal sweatshirt.

The sleeping woman was now wide awake. Her eyes shining like emeralds on fire. I looked up towards the sea, and my eyes caught on a figure moving in the distance. It grew bigger, as if rising from the water.

The breathtaking face from the amulet, now nearing the shore. A familiar tingle ran up my spine. A warning to run, to get home. Her presence was familiar. Urgency laced with pity.

And then it hit me... Bryn didn't give me this amulet for guidance, but for summoning. For calling upon the Wailing Widow.

The Boabhan Sith.

Her body breached the surface a few yards from where I stood on the waters edge. Her elegantly curved body was draped with white silk. *Damn* if it wasn't the most flattering thing I'd ever seen. Her long golden hair flowed

down her shoulders and chest as if it were still underwater, moving with a gentle current.

“Aren’t you usually in all black, hence the name?” I didn’t feel afraid of the approaching mystical creature.

I would not have minded being swept away into the sea.

“I am no longer in mourning.” Her voice was the most delicately bewitching sound I’d ever heard. The music I had been using to explain the complexity of my emotions, memories locked in the deep folds of my mind, laid bare in between her words. “I’ve finally reached you.”

I stood there for a long moment, absorbing her familiar voice and everything she was. Nothing more than a syllable came to mind, as the flooding of my thoughts created an illiterate streamline.

“Buh—” Half a sound was all I could muster. Well done.

“You’ve finally found me.” I can’t even imagine how stupid my face looked at that moment, contorted by confusion and entirely occupied by my grief and shame that the one person supposed to protect me from such horrors had failed: myself. “My darling daughter.”

What in the *seven hells* is going on? I’m starting to think there’s a *very* real chance that I never woke up after saving Maeve. This has coma dream written all over it. I really need to stop watching old sci-fi films with Marcellus. My imagination is getting *way* too powerful.

“Your mother and I hid you with the Andinos when you had just turned one. Your powers had started manifesting, acting like a beacon to Zeus. As you know, the Andinos ran a Hadron Collider facility, the energy it created was strong enough to mask your power. Your mother and I left, and went to kill the sadistic storm cloud, for good.”

“My *mother*? Hold on. I thought *you* were my mother.” This is a... *weird* dream.

“You were created by two Titans. Myself, and my mate, Rhea. Your namesake.” That’s... Not physically possible. Yeah, definitely a dream. A fucking cruel one, given the circumstances.

“I don’t lucid dream often, and given... Well, anyways. I’m going to go have some fun.” I turned on my heels and walked along the shoreline. I

looked back and nodded dramatically, urging my subconscious creation to follow me. “You coming or what?”

“Rhea.” Her voice pulled me from my certainty.

“Okay,” I said louder than I intended. “I’ll bite. So, I’ve got two mothers. *Expound*, please.” I held my hand out, offering her the floor.

“Your mother and I couldn’t have kids of our own, Zeus made sure I never had the option at all. Our combined powers have created wonderful things, but never children. Gaea heard our cries and reached down her hand.” Her fingers traced over her lower stomach. “I became pregnant with you. The first child born from not just two, but *three* female divinities. And the second child to be given the blessed touch of the creator.”

“Second?” This was too much to process. I don’t think even *my* wild imagination could cook up this kind of chaos.

“The first, was Nyx.” Well, that might as well have been a wet rag to the face.

“What... is happening.” I stumbled back a step. “What’s your real name?”

“Aphrodite. Born from Caelus and the sea herself.”

“Is the story true?”

“It’s metaphorical at best.”

“Oh it’s totally true.”

“I—”

“You were born from his balls.”

“Child...”

“I mean you’re implying that I was birthed from two women... so I suppose the man in the equation is *technically*...”

“I swear to the Gods if you—”

“You.”

She chucked lowly to herself, the sound sparked a glimmer of a memory. It faded as quickly as it came. “You’re just like her.”

“What am I supposed to do with this?” If this was real, it would drive a knife through my reality and shatter the foundation of who I am, as if there was anything left to break.

“You are the product of three women, my light.” Aphrodite’s hair slowly flowed behind her shoulder as she stepped closer to me. “Gaea gave you a piece of herself, righting a wrong, restoring balance after millennia of subtly seeping darkness.” She looked my frozen body over, as if memorizing every exhausted and terrified inch of me.

“I don’t understand.”

“You are an essential piece of the prophecy, are you not, my light?”

She waited for me to catch on, but my brain was surviving on two tired and confused brain cells. “Zeus knew that Rhea and I had created you.”

“I’m not Chaos.” The realization felt suddenly obvious, as if I’d known and forgotten. “I’m the Divine Feminine.”

Aphrodite smiled softly, affirming my declaration. How could I be the Divine Feminine? My Primordial blood is not that of Chaos, but of *Gaea*. Caelus’s corruption and Zeus’s terror had created an imbalance of the Primordial divinities. Erebus and Nyx were winning, while Eros and Hemera were beaten like the earth when Marcellus spots a snake: a *ruthless* overkill.

It’s like Gaea wiped Love and Light’s immortal blood with the cloth of a billion supernovas and told them to get up and fight. The only one that loses against their equal, is the one that believes they deserve it. In the incomprehensible and vast Universe, certainty can always be found in the promise of balance.

“I can’t take my last breath like the prophecy says, I can’t *die*.” The words echoed in my mind, as I looked desperately for a different answer. *Chaos will return to earth when the Divine Feminine takes her last breath.*

Primordials can’t die.

“There is one thing,” she held up a finger, her nails painted like pearls, and her hands sparkled as light caught her silver rings, “and *only* one thing that can stop you. By trapping your soul within it. The Unbreakable.”

“The unbreakable *what*, you’re killing me here.” I threw up my hands slightly and let them hit my hips as they fell.

“The Unbreakable, period. The black diamond Chaos gifted Gaea before he went into self-isolation. It holds within it, their connection. The first mates bond. The strongest thing in existence, able to pierce your skin, and

bind to your immortal soul, causing it to lay dormant inside of you. Zeus has been looking for it for five million years. The thing is, it's in three pieces."

"You're telling me the *Unbreakable* is in three pieces?" That's a shitty weapon.

Aphrodite smiled brightly, "You're asking the right questions, my brilliant girl." My stomach turned at my instinct to trust her, to run into her arms and let her love heal my wounds, erasing the traumatic events of the past day. "Gaea melted the *Unbreakable* down, given that only she and Chaos have the ability, and made three objects with it. The diamond pieces energetic pull is so massive, that it created an unbreakable barrier. One strong enough to keep Caelus trapped in Tartarus, completely, no longer able to influence the minds of the humans."

"Where can I find them?" Existential crisis, you may resume.

"You're on your way to one of them now. A piece lies with Aurora Borealis." She nodded her head north, and took a step back, deeper into the crashing waves.

I frantically waved my finger in the air, as if it would help me find the words. "It's in the fucking... floaty lights?"

Aphrodite let out a genuine laugh, her eyes beaming at me. "Those... *fucking* lights that beam across the sky are fragments of power. Power whose source is Aurora Borealis. But, he prefers Rory." She took another step back.

"Excuse me, where are you going?" I took a step towards my Titan mother, waves soaking my sweatpants.

"You'll wake up soon, my light. You have everything you need. I may be bound to water, but I am more so bound to you. Where you go, I go, my light." She reached out a luminescent hand and placed it gently against my cheek. "I'm so glad I found you. You're as beautiful as she described."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Nyx Darling

Rae's violent gasp shot me out of my dream. A dream, more like a forgotten memory. The type of memory I have a feeling I am the only person to have.

I watched myself being born.

SALVARIS  750 YEARS AGO

I watched my aunt, Norah, lay over my mother's pale body, pleading for her life. Begging the Mother to save her family.

My aunt, frozen in fear, looked to me. I walked over to my mother's still body, and placed my hand on her forehead. Golden light filled the space between our touch, sinking beneath her skin, giving her life.

I walked over to the small pale body in my other aunt, Eloise's arms. *My* body. I put my thumb on... *my* forehead, and brushed gently across the damp silken skin. Light flowed once again. A different kind. The luminescent shimmer of colliding stars. Rae's light.

BOREALIS  PRESENT DAY

I looked towards Rae and blinked violently, willing my eyes into focus. She looked stunned, her face frozen by the thoughts that held her hostage.

"What happened?" I leaned forward, needing to fill the space between us.

She only looked out the window.

“We’re close.” Marcellus said sleepily, sitting at the window like an anxious puppy.

“I’ll tell you later.” Rae said almost too soft to hear.

As we made our final descent, I wondered how we would cross the large gap between continents, we can’t just fly over.

Aw, fuck.

“Yer always boastin’ about how much ya can carry while flying.” Phoebe said to me through a smile. It was a fair, but low blow.

“That’s a...” I waved my hand towards the edge of the snow covered cliff that hung above the dark blue ocean. “Long distance. And you guys are heavy.”

Phoebe opened her mouth in disgust.

“Yeah, I am.” Marcellus crooned, a hand on each hip in a triumphant stance.

Rae only sat there, her eyes on the frosted green shimmer of the icy barrier. Her gaze distant, further than the border somehow.

“What the hell is that?” Rae said quietly as she pushed back slightly in her seat.

My head shot towards the window. I squinted at the sudden burst of bright white. Flurries of snow flew past the plane’s windows. The aircraft strained with the intense winds, until we dropped a few feet, causing us all to fly towards the ceiling.

Rae gripped the armrests next to her as she made her way towards the cockpit. If we used our powers, we could easily guide the plane safely to the ground, but we didn’t know if it was just Rae’s, or all of our powers Zeus was tracking, so it wasn’t worth the risk.

I followed behind her, clumsy while smacking my head multiple times as I was tossed about the craft. Rae, of course, made such difficulty look graceful.

We both strapped ourselves into the pilot’s chairs, and looked to each other once before trying to gently land a massive chunk of metal tumbling through a spontaneous winter storm.

“I’ll take the wheel, you pull this green thing when I tell you to.” Rae pointed to the lever to my right, and gripped the wheel tightly as she pulled the plane gradually upward.

“WE’RE GUNNA DIE.” Mar screamed from the back of the plane, I looked back to find him glued like a child to the chair I sat in mere minutes ago.

“We can’t die from a plane crash you fucking imbecile.” Rae’s words were cold, probably the harshest I’ve heard her speak towards Mar since I’ve known them. From the look on his face, maybe ever. “Just hold on, and don’t use your powers.”

I looked to Rae, pulled by the unfamiliar chill that poured from her mauve lips. The mossy sage green of her eyes seemed to darken to the color of algae, pushing slowly to the shore.

This wasn’t Rae, this was a trauma response. My poor sweet Rae. I’ve had my own trauma, loss, fear. But what she went through... I can’t imagine such horror.

Every time I even try to comprehend what she’s experienced, I feel like I’m going to burst open, leaving every fragile piece of me laid bare on the cold earth.

“How do we know when we’re getting close to the ground?” I finally said to Rae, still not able to take my eyes off of her.

“Even without my powers, I can sense the earth as easily as I can feel the metal beneath my feet.” My eyebrows bunched as I tried understanding what she meant. “Also, there’s an altimeter that tells you how far we are from the ground.”

Despite her cold tone, I knew this was Rae’s subconscious taking over, a trauma response that sent her into the safety of her mind, breaking within while she put on a brave face. I could feel the broken woman hiding within, curled over in the fetal position, chuckling through the tears that dripped down her Cupid’s bow.

There’s something I haven’t told Rae, or anyone here on earth, but it feels like I’ve missed every opportunity to come clean. Like if they knew now, every minute since I arrived would be polluted by such a big secret.

“Now.” Rae demanded, it took me a moment to realize what she meant before I pulled at the green lever. Our bodies shot forward as the flaps on the wings went up, and our speed slowed.

I looked to Rae, the cold calm of her features both settled and turned my stomach. Her confidence was reassuring, but also eery. As if she wasn't afraid of hurting herself, only the ones she loved.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Rae

I willed my heart to slow, my hands to steady, and my mind to clear as I felt the ground near through a feeling in my bones.

The same instinct that tells me which way is up, like a pull and a pressure that is hard to explain, but certain nevertheless.

“We’re going to crash. You may get injured, but we can’t risk using our powers. I’ll tend to your wounds and we’ll look for a place to stay the night.” I could feel the anxiety from my friends like electricity in the air.

Moments before we hit the ground, I pulled up on the wheel, hoping to hit the ground evenly, so the plane didn’t split and blow to pieces.

As we made contact, I could see Nyx look at me from the corner of my eye. Snow flew over the windshield like a white wave. I could hear one of my friends hit the wall behind me, and prayed it sounded worse than it was.

I clenched my teeth as the metal roared against the ice beneath us. Even though we were on solid ground, I feared we might hit a mound of ice and come to a forceful stop.

Phoebe’s scream caused me to instinctively turn my head towards her. My heart dropped as I saw Marcellus lying on the ground, the blade that’s always strapped to his chest now impaled his shoulder.

Metalic blood flowed through Mar’s fingers as he held the wound. The panic in his eyes was the last thing I saw before my body flew forward. As the plane slammed into something hard, my body crashed through the windshield.

My body flew through the snow flecked air. I held my head in my arms as I prepared for a hard fall. Warm hands gripped my waist before pulling me tightly to a hard chest. Nyx wrapped his body around mine, all light fading as his large wings covered our bodies.

We bounced across the earth like a smooth stone on still water. Our entangled bodies tumbled until Nyx's back hit something solid, slamming our chests together so hard I swear I felt one of his ribs crack.

Light illuminated Nyx's face as his wings slowly opened. His eyes darted across my face and body, scanning for injuries. Mine did the same.

I pushed myself up, careful not to worsen any of his unseen damage. *Unseen damage*, my stage name.

"Where are you hurt?" I asked accusingly, making sure to watch his lips closely for the small twitch that happens when he's hiding the truth.

"I'm fine." They twitched.

"Where. Are. You. Hurt." I made sure to give him the look that he swears looks like an eagle. Sharp features and eyes that could cut diamonds.

"We need to find the others." No twitch this time, just sudden onset panic. The same urgent dread that turned my stomach to iron.

"Mar." The memory of his wide eyes and silver blood dripping to the floor made my breath catch.

We both pushed to our feet, and ran towards the wrecked plane that was visible now that the blizzard seemed to subside. In a minute, although it felt like several, we were frantically looking through the main cabin.

In the corner, on one of the only chairs not torn to pieces, Phoebe stood over Mar. When he came into view, his injuries were worse than I remember. The blade was shoved completely into his shoulder with only the hilt visible. His face was pale, and his eyes rolled around like he was going in and out of consciousness.

"Nyx, take Phoebe out of here. Make sure she's okay." The sternness of my voice revealed the still traumatized nature of my mind. But it didn't matter. Nyx understood and gently put his hands on Phoebe's arms, and pulled her towards him.

"Save him." Phoebe's voice broke at the same time her knees buckled. Nyx caught her and scooped her shaking body into his arms.

“Hey, buddy.” I placed the back of my hand on Mar’s forehead to check for any temperature change. He clearly was in shock, and I had to make sure he stayed awake.

“Blue turtles winter time.” His words were slurred. At least I didn’t have to check for a concussion.

“Yeah?” I put pressure on his wound, he winced in response. Mar’s a demigod of royal blood, but his healing powers laid dormant as we worked to conceal our powers. I just hoped his delirium didn’t make him forget that we can’t summon them.

“My mom, she’s swimming... pleasure to meet you, ma’am.” Marcellus held out his hand, and I gently set it on his lap as I continued assessing his injuries. His serious tone mixed with incoherent words made it hard not to laugh. Even injured and brain damaged, Marcellus brought light to my life.

“Nyx?” I said loud enough for him to hear, but not too loud as to alarm the cross-eyed tenderized meat bucket in front of me. Nyx was at my side in a moment, letting me know Phoebe was unharmed before I could even ask. “Can you find my purple bag and bring it to me, please?”

“Happy to.” Nyx seemed to sense the forced calmness in my voice and followed suit. When he returned, he opened it and put it to my right, allowing me access without having to release pressure from our friend’s bleeding shoulder.

I rummaged through the bag until I found a glass vile labeled lady’s mantle. Ironically, it’s known for its connection to Aphrodite. It’s used to induce strength and conceal power. I could only find three doses before we left, and wanted to save it for emergencies. From the looks of it, this was one of those times.

With his powers, this injury would be like a paper cut, but without them, he could bleed out and go into a coma. It wasn’t life threatening, but it wasn’t looking good, either.

I poured a few drops of the oil onto my hands and rubbed them together, repeating an intention setting mantra in my head; **conceal us**

from foes, protect us from harm, bring strength to those in need.

My hands began to tingle, and just before I put them to Mar's chest, four unexpected words whispered through my parted lips.

Mother be with me.

Once I felt Mar's cold chest, I willed my power into his body. I watched as the blade slowly pushed its way out of his body as his skin wove itself back together. He leaned up abruptly, gasping as if he had been holding his breath.

Metal clanged on the ground as his blade fell between us. I placed my hand to the side of his face, calming his mind.

An idea hit me, and I realized this was my one chance to use my powers for Gaea knows how long. I closed my eyes and in an instant it was done.

My hand cooled as the power of the lady's mantle wore off. I made sure to not touch a drop of my power well before it wore off, just to be safe.

"You couldn't have used that when the fucking plane was going down?" Mar said breathlessly, humor was a good sign.

"What's the fun in that?" I smirked at my friend, looking at him through my lashes as I put the oil away and closed my bag.

"What's our next move, mo chara?" Phoebe asked from behind Nyx, her fingers pinching her arm. A sign of anxiety flooding her body.

"We can stay in an ice cave, have a meal, and stay the night. We should go over the wall in the daylight." I looked to Nyx, and somehow he understood that I needed him to help me find our things and give our friends a moment alone.

A warm light shone in the distance, my friends stopped in their tracks, suspicious of what laid beyond.

"I thought it would be a waste just to use my three minutes of power on your sorry arse, Marley, so I have a little surprise for you lot." I taunted the man who limped behind me, knowing full well he was completely healed, but needed an excuse to have Phoebe under his arm.

"Damn, Andino, you make me sound like a puppy."

“Gods save Medusa, don’t even say that. Rae made me watch the worst movie of all time wi’ that same name. Humans were sadists, I swear it.”

“What’s the surprise?” Nyx said from beside me, a place he always seemed to be.

“Dead puppies.” Phoebe whispered under her breath, her voice squeaking in painful memory.

“Shh...” Marcellus turned to Phoebe, his limp suddenly gone, and put his hand to the side of her head, pulling her into him. “It was just a movie, puppies don’t die.”

“Human ones did...” Her voice was barely audible. “Wait a second.”

Mar seemed to realize what Phoebe had noticed and resumed limping.

“Yeah, what’s the surprise?” Good save, Mar.

“Follow the light and you’ll see.” I walked a little bit faster, maybe out of excitement, or out of distaste for the vast exposure of the icy planes.

“How very poetic.” Nyx said softly. I suddenly felt guilty for ignoring him a moment ago. I guess I didn’t realize that I had until I heard the forced lightness of his tone.

When we reached the ice cave, I held out my hand, motioning for my companions to enter first. Light danced across the blue walls as the fire within burned brighter at our arrival.

I could hear Phoebe’s gasp just before I entered the large circular room the fire kept warm. Four cots with thick white duvets and plush pillows laid next to each other. In the corner on a blanket was a picnic with an arrangement of snacks and drinks.

“Won’t the ceiling melt?” Nyx asked while looking around.

“Touch it.” He did as I said without hesitation. It could’ve been molten lava and somehow I don’t doubt I’d be wrapping his burns as he apologized for not holding his hand there longer.

“It’s not ice, what is it?”

“Blue diamond. Also, the fire doesn’t produce smoke, it’s enchanted.” I traced my fingers along the soft rock.

“Boujee” Mar said while putting his face way too close to the walls.

“I *knew* you read my human studies journal, you prick!” I turned on my feet to face Mar and swatted the air between us, causing him to stumble back a step.

“I didn’t mean to, princess, I was looking for your diary.” Mar hesitated on the last word, realizing he had just exposed himself.

“You know calling someone a princess isn’t really an insult coming from you, being that you’re an *actual* prince.” Nyx said through a smile, shaking his head at our clueless friend.

“I meant like the stuck up pretentious kind,” Mar bent down to look at the picnic, “is that yogurt double strained? You know my tummy doesn’t do well with unstrained yogurt.”

“Oh, Mar.” I laughed at the last syllable, earning a quick glance from Nyx, who seemed surprised at my show of contentment. I had to agree with him.

“You beautiful eejit.” Phoebe said as she reached up and ran her fingers through his jaw length hair. The soft brown waves were unkept, and yet it suited him. Wonderfully wild.

“What do you think is over there?” Nyx whispered from where he laid in his bed, his eyes to the ceiling and hands tucked behind his head.

After we finished our meal, Phoebe and Marcellus pushed their beds together and giggled for about twenty minutes before passing out. I was surprised and yet unfazed when I found out Marcellus preferred the little spoon. I could’ve lived a happy life without that knowledge. Who am I kidding? That’s adorable.

“I trust Maeve, it won’t be anything we can’t handle.” I thought of my closest friend, and wondered if she had woken up yet. I wondered if Jax was by her side, tending to her like a wood faerie to a wounded animal.

“I know you trust Maeve, but do you trust Artemis?” The question was a leading one, I knew he had been dying to ask so many questions in the past thirty-six hours. Maybe a part of me had been dying to answer them.

“She chose to conceal her true identity, especially being Zeus’s daughter, I have to trust that she had her reasons.”

“You’re not even a little mad?” He pushed.

“I harbor too many emotions right now to risk them flying free.”

“Then just let one go, the one that sits at the forefront of your mind, begging to be heard.”

I went silent for a few minutes, Nyx didn't seem to mind. He just laid there, lost in his own thoughts until I was ready to speak.

“I'm not Chaos, I'm the Divine Feminine. I was born from three mothers, and Gaea is one of them. But the other two... I'm not ready to process that yet.” The words spilled out of me, heating my chest at the realization that it wasn't just a dream.

“How is that even possible?” Nyx turned to me, his eyebrows bunched in question.

“Sex isn't the only way to create life for an immortal.” Nyx's throat bobbed at the blunt way I said the first word, unfeeling and scientific. “My mothers are Titans, on their own they couldn't create another immortal, but with Gaea's interference, they created me.”

“The prophecy says...”

“Yeah,” I cut him off, “so you see the conundrum.”

“But your blood, it's Primordial. You can't die.” His last words felt more like a plea than a statement.

“Perhaps I'll break some world record then. Get a medal laid on my grave, or my name in a star on the pavement.”

“That isn't funny.”

“No, it's not.”

We both turned toward each other and played with the leftovers of our picnic. Every once in a while we looked at each other, and I could feel an entire storyline happening beneath those bright blue eyes.

“When I was in that cellar, they were trying to manipulate my powers, but also my thoughts and instincts. I remember him saying, *don't trust Chaos*.” I focused on my inhales, willing my thoughts to stay on the surface of my consciousness.

“Why? Hasn't Chaos been laying dormant in a dead Universe for like, ever?” Nyx crushed a cracker between his fingers, I watched as the crumbs fell on his plate like ashes on a fallen city.

“Allegedly. Until I release him.”

“You won’t.”

“A prophecy has never *not* come true, Nyx. That’s what makes it a prophecy.”

“Simply another world record to break.” Our eyes met, he tried mustering a playful look, but I could see the pain in the stillness of his features. “If anyone can defy the laws of the Universe, it’s you, darling.”

“What if Chaos isn’t laying dormant in some Universe, but is laying dormant in *someone*?”

“Like your powers are laying dormant in you.”

“Exactly.”

“Then we have to find them and trigger their powers, that way the prophecy can’t come to fruition.”

“Nyx—”

“No. We have to try. I have to try something. Wherever or whoever Chaos is, we’ll find them and fix everything. You’ll be okay.”

“I’m scared.” I stared down at my plate, pushing a finger into a small block of cheese. I kept my stare towards the ground, hoping the glistening of my eyes didn’t reveal my despair.

“Me too.”

We both turned towards a faint blue light coming from the entrance of the cave. Then, the sound of snow crunching caused us both to sit up abruptly.

I held up my hand to Nyx as he attempted to get up and scope out the threat. He took my upraised arm and pulled us towards the entrance.

If we were going to greet danger, we were going together.

As we approached the entrance, we stood on either side, slowly looking over the edge, our movements silent and looks toward each other practically telepathic.

There was nothing there, nothing we could see or sense, aside from a large broken icicle that I don’t remember seeing when we arrived. Though, one of that size would’ve made a louder noise. I looked up to where it came from, and saw the broken ice high above, and let my eyes drift to the beautiful starry sky. A promise laid within it.

I looked back towards the sea of ice, and squinted as I saw a subtle movement in the far distance, coming from the southwest. I may not have immortal sight without my powers, but I *did* have a telescope in my bag. Gods bless my love for the humans and their little trinkets.

Without explanation, I ran back inside and quickly grabbed the device, then made my way back to the entrance. I double checked that we were alone, and held the golden tube to my eye.

I gasped at what I saw, and handed the telescope to Nyx before heading into the cave to wake the slumbering lovebirds.

I could hear Nyx swear under his breath as he saw what I did. "It's Zeus's army. The Amerrysian army. They found us."

I shook my friends arms gently, "We have to go."

"Huh?" Mar said sleepily.

"They found us, we have to go, now."

They both shot upright at the realization, and frantically looked around for their belongings. Nyx already had all of our bags in his hands.

We walked towards the wall of ice, the green glow was luminescent in the moonlight.

"Since when was there a Godsdamn bridge here?" Marcellus said with tired confusion. Nyx and Phoebe looked at me, waiting for an admission.

"I swear I only conjured the cave when I used my powers, this wasn't me."

As we neared the edge of the cliff, we all looked to the sea below, it was several hundred feet beneath us with twenty foot waves.

A glimmer coming from the waves beyond caught my eye. A small dot of gold moved towards us. Somewhere inside of me knew what it was before my consciousness did.

"Mum." I said under my breath.

Nyx's gaze shot towards me, then looked where mine was. A pillar of water pulled her into the sky, closer to our eyeline.

"Oh, shit." Mar yelped, and frantically swatted his body looking for a weapon.

Phoebe put her hands on top of Mar's arms, stilling him. We all watched as Aphrodite approached, she was even more mind-bogglingly

beautiful than I remembered. It's like her beauty is too much for memory to hold, and her looks come as a shock even to those who know her best. I wonder if my mother thought the same.

Yeah, that's a good idea. Call one mum, and the other mother. A good way to keep a complicated situation moderately sane.

"Five hundred years without you and suddenly I see you twice in one day, what gives?" Any semblance of swagger goes out the window in this Titan's presence. I tried not to look at my friend's reactions to this earth-shattering new discovery. I may have said her name too quietly, but it didn't feel like the best time for an introduction, anyway.

The ease to which I accepted this stranger as my parent was unsettling to say the least. With everything that's happened in my life, and with the distance at which I loved my adoptive parents, it wasn't too far fetched, I guess.

"I suppose Gaea has given us yet another gift." Her voice elicited a weird noise from Mar, like an exhausted animal whining in defeat. I could hear a thump, and assumed it was Phoebe letting him know what she thought of that.

"How did he find us?" I figured a five million year-old Titan might know a few things.

"It's not the use of your power that summons him to you, Rhea."

"Of course it is, every time I've used my powers outside of Doctrina he has found me."

"That manipulation you've been remembering goes a lot deeper than you think, my light." Her skin looked like it had a starry river of gold just beneath the surface. She didn't just glow with the warmth of her presence, she *literally* glowed.

"I don't know what that means." I turned to my friends, looking just as confused as I did.

"You have to go now, they'll be here in a matter of minutes."

"No, I need to know how he can find me."

"It doesn't matter now, Rhea. You're safe. YOU'RE IN THE RIGHT PLACE, AT THE RIGHT TIME."

Before I could retort, I felt an arm pulling me towards the bridge. As I turned and got a closer look, I noticed the movement of the railings. It was water that created the long structure. I suppose in the madness I forgot that my mum's power came from Pontus, the sea herself.

I felt like I was dreaming as we walked quickly across the bridge. Our bodies strained as we got closer, like the boundary pushed us away.

"Phoenix Ash." I said, my voice feeling distant and not of my own.

I rummaged through my bag, and pulled the black velvet pouch that held the burned tree. I sprinkled a bit in each one of my friends palm, and looked over to Aphrodite as I smeared the grayish-blue dust across my cheeks like war paint.

Her lip quivered as she inhaled sharply. The gesture's meaning, hell if I know.

I looked back as we took our final steps, the army was not far behind. We had a minute or two at most before they caught up. We couldn't stop moving.

We all looked up at the giant wall of ice.

"It's going to take too long to climb, they'll beat the shit out of us if they get close." Marcellus blurted.

"Oh my Gods." I said as I put two and two together. I turned around, and inhaled slowly and deeply as I felt the light of the world fill me like a candle in an empty room.

I held my hands up, and suddenly every soldier stopped in place, becoming as frozen as the ground beneath their feet.

"Shall we have them do a little dance for us, for our troubles?" I giggled to myself as I moved my fingers to the beat of the song in my head, and willed the power I wrapped around each one of the two hundred and thirty-eight soldiers to dance with and amongst each other.

"Rae wait, Zeus is going to..." Mar's tense shoulders loosened as he came to the realization that the rest of us did. "Oh."

"I dinno why we've been so scared of him findin' us, this is hilarious." Phoebe laughed as she pointed to one of the soldiers that twirled another like a ballerina.

“Something Jax said before we left made me realize something. He called Borealis *a frozen place in its entirety*, and Jax, of course, almost always says something that has several different meanings. Then Aphrodite just said we were safe now, but why? I think time may work differently over there, which is why it doesn’t matter if Zeus comes, he may not know how to get over the border, or when he does, we may already be ready to come back, having already found the answers we need.

“It’s not about not being able to handle him when he finds us, it’s about not wanting him to know our next move. Zeus is unpredictable, which makes him dangerous. He’s not the smartest man in the world, but he always has a plan.” I slowly lowered my hands, but kept my power on each soldier. “And it’s always sadistic.”

We started our climb, our hands slamming into the ice as we did. Phoebe gasped as she slipped, and fell ten feet onto her back. Then Marcellus. Then Nyx. I jumped down, and slipped a little as I hit the ground.

“So, ice is a bit slick.” I said as if it were a brand new discovery.

“Dinna really t’ink that one tru.” Phoebe grunted in reply as Marcellus helped her up.

The three of us looked at Nyx at the same time, who seemed to immediately realize our intent.

“Shhhhhh—” Nyx looked up to the top of the wall, then back at us, “—it.”

Part Two:
THE FOREVER CITY

Chapter Twenty-Four

Nyx Darling

I flinched as we dove across the sky above the wall. Nothing but clouds in sight. I tried not to let my labored breathing show. When we passed through the last of the foggy overcast, it was a sea of ice. The cold bit at my skin, and I could feel Rae shiver in my arms.

I slowly approached the ground, letting Phoebe and Marcellus, both of whom gripped my legs like baby sloths, plant their feet on solid earth. I held Rae for a moment, wishing I could carry her the whole way, if only to feel her heartbeat. To know she's still alive, even with the emptiness in her eyes.

As I let her down to the ground, the memory of our bodies colliding after the plane crash made me realize what had happened. I turned from my friends and reached in the hidden pocket just beneath the holster for my weapons. I felt the shattered pieces of a ceramic tea plate.

It was supposed to be a birthday gift for Rae, and I had completely forgotten about it until I felt it shatter under the force of our collision.

I had been making pottery with Maeve as a way to meditate and strengthen my grip for swordplay.

Not like that, you vile beast.

I had made a tiny tea plate and a matching tea cup, which laid in a brown paper present tied with a cream satin ribbon, in the bag I now hauled over my shoulder.

It was well known that Rae drank and smoked various kinds of tea in accordance with her ailments and intentions. She mentioned once that she

wished she could have a classic tea cup and plate, like the humans had millennia ago.

I painted each glazed piece of pottery with the coast of Crete, where Rae and I first met. It wasn't going to be put in a museum, but I thought I did pretty well, all things considered. It took me five failed attempts and about five hundred hours to complete.

Now it lay shattered beneath the blade my uncle gave me just days before I killed him in the flame of friendly fire.

Creator, where are you, if not laughing up at me from the pits of hell, you wicked woman. The metaphor behind the broken token of love that lay above my heart is not lost on me.

You've made your point, now leave me be.

We stood in a circle, backs to each other as we took in our surroundings. In every direction there was a foggy sea of ice and snow. A green hue laid just beneath the surface.

As we began walking, the green within the ice softened, making the snow look like moss. Marcellus yelped, and I turned to find a giant wolf-like creature laying a few yards away.

"What's happening?" Phoebe said through her teeth.

The scenery misted and formed into a beautiful tropical landscape. There were large trees with hanging vines, and flower bushes the size of an elephant.

"Am I tripping?" Rae said softly to herself.

"Look up." Marcellus said breathlessly, his neck arched back as he stared at the sky. Bright blue and green waves of light towered over us.

"Aurora Borealis." Phoebe said with delight. "We made it."

"His power, actually." I could barely hear Rae's response. If I could make her mind settle, take the burden away, I'd do it without hesitation.

"Huh?" Marcellus said while crouching down, his hand outstretched towards a small creature.

"Mar," Phoebe snapped, "*controlling our impulses.*" She sounded out each word as if reciting scripture.

A deep rumble shook the ground beneath our feet. The surrounding animals didn't seem afraid, only slightly irritated by the loud roar in the distance.

“Oh, no.” The realization hit me, the last part of my dream.

Chapter Twenty-Five

R a e

Giant creatures floated on the wind in the far distance. As they came into view, the ground vibrated beneath my feet. Marcellus grabbed onto Phoebe, an instinct. The same one that swung my head towards Nyx.

“Dragons are extinct.” Marcellus repeated under his breath, as if saying it would make it true.

Hello, sister. We see you come bearing the mark of the Valkyrie. A low voice rang in my mind, I looked around for the source, but found nothing but creatures lounging quietly.

The sisters of the blade fought by our side in the Long War. If it was not for their sacrifice, we would be gone from this world. It was the fucking dragons. Their energy wrapped around me as if I were standing in the eye of a hurricane, watching the edge inch towards me. I moved my arms, making sure I still could. I wasn’t trapped, I was safe.

“Can you hear that?” Nyx said calmly, his eyes on me.

“They’re telepaths.” Phoebe blurted out. She looked so calm, excited even. And for some reason, despite the plague of my mind, I felt safe, too.

Giant claws crushed the mossy earth as two dragons, the size of a large house, landed a hundred feet away. Their ashy scales were flecked with gold, bringing out the bright yellow shine in their eyes.

“We’re looking for Aurora Borealis.” I could feel my companion’s confused looks burning a hole in my back as I stepped towards the massive monsters.

One of the aureate creatures looked up, towards the dancing colors above our heads. Their scales a white gold similar to Phoebe's hair in firelight.

They're breathtaking, are they not? Just imagine how they look from the skies.

I was definitely going to be locked up for what I was about to say. I could've told my friends about my dream, but I found it hard to stand, and breathe, let alone speak.

"Not the power, the person." Nyx stepped to my side as I finally got the words out, my voice shook, making me realize my body was, too.

Although the air was warm and the hosts alluring, I still felt drained from the disturbing dialogue in my head. And yet, as I heard the steady flow of Nyx's breath as he leaned closer to me, I tried to let it drown out the noise that ran like sharp fingers down my neck.

Hear us, let us hurt you. The intrusive thoughts were not me, but instead, the unavoidable retrieval of a haunted memory. Ares's voice rang in my head at the last words, the session I stormed out of: My thoughts are not my own, they are a response to fear that has been programmed by the trauma I've endured.

My mind, in an attempt to protect me, has repressed memories, controlling my behavior. My irrational fear, is a subconsciously rational decision. When I get too close to a memory, I run. Or fight. Sometimes bargain.

And now, I haven't just gotten close, I've opened Pandora's box, and as it's written, the Demons did flood.

The child of wisdom and beauty, here at last. He has been waiting for your arrival.

I had almost forgotten where I was, and that I spoke merely a moment ago. Goes to show how quickly my thoughts can stir in a single moment.

"Can you take us to him?" I pulled the soft cuffs of my sweatshirt over my hands, and ran the thick fabric through the pads of my fingers.

I'm talking to a dragon, I am literally making demands of an actual fire-breathing, golden-scaled *dragon*. Part of me wondered if I'd gone insane, and this was my safe hallucination.

Both dragons slowly turned, their long tails trailing from behind them like serpents preparing to strike. Strapped across their backs, were large white beds with golden railings. I turned to my companions, urging them to follow.

“Do you trust me?” I asked, looking each one of them in their hesitant eyes.

We flew slowly through the sky, the view of the sea of light was like swimming in a bioluminescent bay. I reached out my hands, expecting to catch the sage and sapphire beams. Energy filled my veins with ecstasy.

“I talked to my mum. My real mum.” I said into the wind, knowing Nyx was waiting for me to speak.

“How?” Where I would expect anyone else to make me feel crazy, or broken, Nyx made me feel heard. I never wasted any energy talking to him, because there was no second guessing or over analyzing, it was as easy as existing. It’s as if I gave him all of me, and he gave himself in return.

“She came to me in a dream, on the plane.” I grabbed the gold around my neck, letting the cold metal soothe my hot skin. “She told me about something here, something we need.”

“What is it?” Nyx said in an even tone, his fingers picking at the strings on a pillow.

“It’s called the Unbreakable. And it’s the only thing that could...”

“Kill you?” Nyx’s voice broke at the words. I nodded. My soul being trapped in an unbreakable black diamond, was a fate worse than death. He didn’t need to know that, so I let him think I could drift into a blissful death. The one thing all living things share: the promise of an inevitable end, and the unforeseen afterlife. “We need to find it first, then we’ll haul arse back to Doctrina. We’ll be protected, and figure out our next move. Maybe more about your parents, too. If that’s what you want. Either way, we’ll talk to Maeve.”

“I need to know the truth.” I don’t trust myself to be able to separate reality from my mind’s protection. I need Maeve, I need Ares. I need to know who I am.

“There are too many questions to be answered right now, we need to tackle them one by one and not expect to find them all in a day. Pick the most

important one, and focus on it. Ask it over and over in your head, until the background noise begins to fade.” Nyx placed his elbows on his knees as he leaned forward from where he sat. His voice rang through me like the warm brush of a soft creature, releasing the tension beneath my skin.

“We can ask Aurora—Rory—if he knows anything about the prophecy.” I looked to the ground, the energetic barrier I built between Nyx and I seemed to harden. On top of everything, I can’t throw him into the mix. Throw *us* into the mix.

“We’ll ask about your parents, too. Try to get the whole story, see if it opens any more of your memories.” I finally looked to Nyx, but could only get my eyes to meet his white linen shirt, and the brown leather straps that held his weapons to his shoulders. For the past few weeks, he’s been wearing a white linen shirt, the fabric thin and revealing. I’m not sure what he thinks that will accomplish, but I can’t deny that it looks very good on him. The way his tanned skin became even more vibrant.

“We can find out more about... you know who, too. Try to figure out his end game.”

“You can say his name, Hermione.” Nyx crooned towards the ground, I looked up to the soft perk of his cheeks.

“You read them?” I said with more excitement than I thought I was capable of.

“Well...” Nyx voice went low, and he cleared his throat, as if biding his time.

“You *watched* them?” I blurted in an accusatory tone.

“I read the last one!” He threw his hands up and we finally made eye contact. “Okay, I listened to the audiobook.”

“You’re a fraud.” I said through a hoarse laugh.

“Well, did you read the book I gave you?” Nyx retorted quickly with a slight raise of his eyebrows.

“I did, actually. I got through all nine of them in a month. Funny how the protagonist’s son shares your name, and several attributes. How did you even find that series, it’s quite literally ancient? Like twenty-first century ancient.”

“Maeve showed them to me.” Nyx voice went neutral, as if he spoke past his heart. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you about them for a while now.”

“I thought you just looked up, *blue-eyed winged hero named Nyx*, and got lucky. That girl really knows everything, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah, I think she does.” Nyx said through a grin.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Our massive companions dipped their long necks, pulling us slowly towards the ground. I stood up at the same time Nyx did, and looked in the direction that we were headed.

The green and blue luminescent lines that danced across the sky seemed to meet at the giant mountain beyond. As it came into view, the sight was breathtaking. On the side of the mountain, nestled between a vast range of trees and flying creatures, was a castle of mirrors.

As we got closer, I could see soft lights shining beneath the green and blue shimmer of the massive home. It wasn't mirrors, it was frosted glass, like ice that doesn't melt.

Several waterfalls flowed down the mountain into long rivers, cutting through the ground in every direction. I couldn't tell the kind of tree that outlined the large glass castle and surrounding grass fields, but it reminded me of white blossom oak trees.

As we landed, our chauffeurs gave us all well wishes and instructions towards the garden party to the left of the palace. The moment my blush sneakers hit the ground, I gasped at the sudden surge of energy that filled my veins. I looked to Nyx, who seemed to feel it too.

"Looks like they had a good ride." Nyx smirked as he motioned towards where Phoebe and Marcellus climbed down the golden scales, giggling like children as they did.

"Let's hope the dragon's telepathy only goes one way." I shook my head at my friends who seemed to be adjusting their clothes. "Shameless."

Nyx scoffed before reaching out his hand, offering it to me before heading towards our mysterious host. Even though it hurt, I strode past him.

“I’ve never been to a garden party before,” I smiled, but didn’t meet Nyx’s gaze, “I’m definitely underdressed.”

The most enchanting music lured me towards the gathering, I took in the unknown trees as we made our way there. A shimmer of pink and blue caught my eye as we passed through rose arches.

I looked toward the blossom trees and noticed crystals protruding from the bark of each tree trunk. Crystals are often used for syphoning power—the sudden rush of energy in my bones seemed to make sense now.

As we neared, I noted the vibrant colors and intricate detailing of the guests clothing. It looked like a person from every decade since the beginning of time was there. From the gentlemen who pulled at their lapels, to the woman dancing on a chair with the long silver panels of her dress covering her front and back, but leaving her sides exposed with thin chains holding the fabric together.

I looked over to Phoebe who beamed at me, her thirst for fashion as unquenchable as my own. We both stared up at a tall person who walked by with a fedora covered in muted tone flowers, and a vibrantly colored song bird sitting at the top.

Marcellus gasped and jumped behind Phoebe as it was the bird that bid us adieu and not the human, who only looked through bored eyes as he strode past.

“This is like a fever dream.” Nyx noted from beside me.

“A dream to be sure.” Phoebe said with poorly restrained excitement.

My eyes couldn’t stop scanning the gorgeous decor that weaved between eccentric people. Some sat at cornflower blue linen covered tables, each topped with a different bouquet of flowers and tall candles. Others walked around, picking crystal glasses from an enchanted wine tower, perusing the large assortment of bite sized... just about every food you can think of.

It was amazing, unlike anything I’d ever seen. I looked up, watching blue and green dance, outlined by soft string lights.

One of the first memories I have of my adoptive mother, she said, “Look up, look up and never forget how big the world is around you. Wherever you are, look to the sky, the Universe waits for you.”

Of course at the time I had no idea what she meant, I just made a song to her words and they stuck with me ever since. I don’t think it was Hera then, I think it was Mrs. Andino. Maybe it was actually one of my real parents. Who knows, but it always stuck with me.

I sang that song for years, but she stopped singing along. I suppose I should’ve realized then, that my mother was gone. Murdered, and replaced by an unfeeling Goddess.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” Nyx said from over my shoulder, his head tilted to the sky.

“It all is. A garden party in the middle of the night, why didn’t I think of that?”

“Rae Andino.” A deep voice said from behind us. Nyx and I whirled at the same time. I put my hand on Nyx’s arm, pushing him aside so I could see the stranger who knew my name.

An oversized lion with a mane of fire glared at me through dark eyes. I stepped closer, but felt no heat coming from the flames. If anything, I felt a bit colder.

“Yes?” I replied, a little embarrassed at the idea that it may not have been the lion who asked, and here I am speaking to it anyways.

“He’s waiting for you in the marble room.” The fire lion said with a jerk of his head towards the glass castle.

“Who’s waiting for her?” Nyx said, taking a small step forward, putting himself slightly ahead of me.

“Rory.” I said softly, the lion nodded in reply.

I looked up at Nyx, letting my gaze soften. I grabbed his elbow and rubbed my thumb along the inside of it, hoping it was reassuring enough that he wouldn’t try to follow me.

The lion turned, urging me to follow. As we walked towards the large glass doors, I peered inside the walls, in awe by the large paintings and crown molding. Every room we passed had an energy within it that felt so singular, so enchanting.

Like each room held within it a different melody. One for the soul, one for the lovers, and one for the dreamers. It even took me a moment to realize there were people sitting within each one, discussing poetry and philosophy no doubt. I extended my hearing, curious to see if I was right.

“There’s something different about this strain, man. I think my hands have decided to leave me. They look so unhappy. Don’t you think they look unhappy?” The one in a blue patterned kimono and corduroy brown pants said, his lips barely parting.

“What if we’re all a collective consciousness that decided to put a barrier between our bodies so that we get to experience what it’s like to know ourself?” The other one said while his eyes darted across the ceiling, smoke dancing in the cross breeze. “Your hands do look angry, dude. You should apologize.”

I giggled to myself, earning a sidelong glance from my fiery companion. He shook his head, implying that this wasn’t anything new.

As we made our way up the stone staircase to the front doors, I looked back towards my friends. Phoebe and Mar seemed to have found some sort of streamers, and were running around, skipping and screaming with laughter. Nyx was standing where I left him, arms crossed, eyes on me. I grinned, then turned to where the doors opened into the main entrance.

The nice thing about glass walls is that there was no surprise to what I was walking into. Every wall was made of a mosaic of different colored marble, it seems only the outside walls were made of frosted ice, seemingly enchanted so it would never melt.

I turned slowly as I looked around, in awe by such beautiful art the earth was capable of making. I gasped as I looked up. The ceiling was the most intricate and breathtaking crown molding, made from rose, gold and white marble.

The stone outlined a giant chandelier, every piece like a broken shard of glass, coming together to make the figure of a man, reaching down to the ground.

I looked beneath me, and quickly stepped to my side. The floor was made of glass, with the beaded outline of a woman, reaching her hand up. It

looked as though the floor was several feet deep, and the work of art was made with tiny diamonds.

I stepped back again, taking in the sight of the two lovers, separated less by distance than the shimmer of their frozen desperation. It felt like the personification of the phrase, *I'll love you in this life, and every other.*

"If art sparks your interest, you'd really get a kick out of the Great Hall." I whirled on my feet to find a brunette man walking gracefully down the white marble staircase at the end of the room. He wore white silk pants and a matching shirt, open at the top with two strings and what looked like diamonds at the end. *Oh my Gods, it's Timothée Chalamet, my mind squealed.* The likeness was uncanny. I started blushing, and thought of what he once did to a peach.

Oh wait, he's dead.

"Sounds... *Great.*" I cringed at my lazy joke, but truly it was the first thing that came to mind, and I had trouble using my brain with so much stimulation around me.

"Maeve said you made jokes when you were nervous, I truly hope that's not the case." He chuckled as he approached me, nearly my height. He looked almost boyish, aside from the sharp edges of his jawline.

"I thought you knew Maeve before we had met?" I looked him up and down, showing him that any nervousness I may feel is redundant in the face of my utter lack of filter and fearless prodding. He only responded with a handsome smile. "Why did you only ask for me, are my friends beneath you, your highness?"

"I hope you do not take offense to the privacy of our meeting, but what we have to discuss is between us until you choose otherwise." Rory turned and motioned towards the left side of the staircase, to the direction of the Great Hall, I assumed.

"Only if you don't take offense to the fact that I'm questioning the intentions behind the intimacy of this meeting." I looked him up and down again, circling him in an attempt to make him squirm, I touched his arm gently. "Given that you recently changed, from the cool fabric not yet heated by your body's warmth."

“You’re an observant one. What else have you already decided about me? All good things, I assume.”

“Your shoes are new, and handmade from the looks of it. Gaesha perhaps, those stones are only found on large islands, and are extremely rare from what our mutual friend has told me. Do you not find your presence impressive enough?”

“Next you’re going to tell me that I’m compensating for something.” Rory grinned wildly, not even slightly offended by my presumptions.

“The size of your palace and the daily show of your power seem to do that all on their own.”

Rory laughed loudly, the sound of it so smooth and contagious. The utter lack of masculine insecurity was one of the most attractive things that I could come across. I knew he had to be of high immortal blood, his powers and senses unknown to me, so I hoped he couldn’t hear the subtle increase of my heartbeat, or sense the slight arousal that burned in my chest.

“This, is the Great Hall.” As we stepped through a large archway, decorated with white flowers and deep green moss, I gasped at the fabric that fell down my body.

The moment I crossed the threshold, a cornflower silk dress beaded with tiny crystals replaced my clothes, falling down my chest all the way to the floor.

“I forgot to warn you, there is a dress code.” I turned to Rory, who was dressed in a white suit with a tie that matched my dress.

“I really liked that sweatshirt.” I turned to look at the long train of my dress, and ran my hands along the crystals, feeling energy from every sharp edge’s touch.

“Don’t worry, it’s cleaned and folded in your room as we speak.”

“My room? I’d wager that it’s not far from yours.”

“Just down the hall, in case you need anything, of course.” Rory placed one hand behind his back, and raised the other gracefully. He summoned a champagne coupe through a small puff of smoke. He tipped his head and held the glass up, offering it to me.

“You can do better than that.” I smiled at him, not worried that my flirting will make him feel any sense of entitlement, but rather a sense of

comfort. I needed the distraction, perhaps his powers were strong enough to know that, at the very least.

Rory slowly pulled his hands to the ceiling, flowers, moss, vines, and various fruits climbed the walls. Once his hands were raised completely, he turned them, and an array of candles floated from the ceiling.

I bunched my eyebrows and turned my head as if to say, *don't hold back on me now.*

He shrugged, and held out his hand to me as he bowed. A request to dance, it seemed. The moment I grabbed his hand, the room burst with an orchestra of music, and light burst from various holes in the ceiling, the same power that danced across the sky. With each projection of light, a couple danced around the room. As if the green and blue spotlight that shone on them, also created them.

I laughed more genuinely than I have in a long time. I dramatically curtsied, and took a sharp inhale as Rory's hand whipped me into several spins. Just as I stopped twirling, my hands upraised, Rory was in front of me. We skipped and swung ourselves around the room, laughing and throwing our heads back at the singularity of this moment.

After several minutes, we stopped, catching our breath. I tilted my head at the look Rory gave me, one I couldn't place. I didn't give him any time to speak before putting my hands to his shoulders and pushing him backwards.

He grunted before hitting a red velvet chaise, and quickly gave me a matching one as I dropped to my side, resting my arm over the top, my hand holding my head.

"Shall we get to the purpose of this meeting, then?" I said while folding my legs up, and pulling my gown from the ground as I did.

"I guess there's no point beating around the bush with someone like you, Rae." Rory adjusted himself, eyes looking at the ground, no doubt finding the right words to tell me whatever it is that required privacy.

"Well then, out with it." The pause was making me nervous, and maybe a little irritated.

“I understand that you’ve had trouble with your memory, and I also know why, as I’m sure you’ve found out by now.” His eyes scanned my face for any reaction that may make me run out of the room or scream at him.

I stayed neutral, I wouldn’t let myself be pushed to the edge by something as frivolous as the truth.

“I know that you’ve been working with Maeve to try to recover the memories.”

“Is there anything you *don’t* know?” I said in an attempt to ease the tension between us.

“Why do you think I adore your Maeve so much?” His jaw clenched as his lips turned upwards.

“Can you just say what you’re scared to say?” I laid down on the chaise, thinking maybe if he can’t see my facial expressions, he won’t be so hesitant. “I promise I won’t spontaneously combust.”

“Nothing is going to unlock *those* memories, Rae, darling.” I sat up quickly, knowing what he referred to.

“Nothing at all?” I said a little too loudly.

“Nothing you can find here, in this world and in this time, is going to release that much repression.”

“What do you mean by *this* world and *this* time?” Please don’t say what you’re about to say. Please don’t say it.

“I can teach you how to travel through space and time, to the moments that were ripped from your mind. To moments that will help you win the war with Zeus, and the war within yourself.”

Shit.

“You won’t go alone, it takes a dimensional being above the seventh level to travel, unfortunately the beefy adult child and the stunning lady in red are fifth level, a dimension reserved for Gods and those beautiful creatures that brought you to me. The dark haired one who hasn’t been able to take his eyes off of you, he will go with you.”

“Phoebe and Marcellus are dems, are they not?” My heart sunk at the thought that I could truly know nothing about those closest to me.

I haven’t had the chance to talk to Maeve about being Artemis for Gaea’s sake. I don’t know if I’m even ready to talk to her yet, for fear of

looking into her eyes and seeing someone else. For fear of losing the friendship that keeps me whole.

“I think you know that no one you choose to love could ever be a demigod, Rae. Not if it meant you could lose them. Or hurt them.” Rory moved closer to me, as if to hold my hand. But I pulled them into my lap, wanting to collapse inside of myself like a black hole and leave nothing but my absence behind.

“What is Nyx, then?” I said softly, his name feeling as foreign as my own body now did.

“Your friends don’t know the truth of who they are, you must not tell them until they can find out for themselves.” Rory stood, putting his hands in his pockets as he looked down at me.

“His blood was silver. Mar’s blood was silver and I didn’t even realize it at the time. I was so worried about him dying... but he’s a fucking God and I didn’t figure it out.” I stood up and turned away from him, looking out on the party through tall windows, stained glass decorating the outer rim. Hasn’t Mar seen his own blood? He wouldn’t keep that from me. He just wouldn’t.

“Only eighth dimensional beings and above can see the varying colors in blood, and an even higher being to see the exquisite cascade of nebulas that runs through your veins. Oh, if a star could bleed.” Rory moved towards me, his steps light and unhurried. “And if you had realized what Marcellus is at the time, do you think you’d been able to remember the lady’s mantle? Your brain knows how to take care of you, as does Marcellus’s.

“Is it at all possible that there’s a part of him that is not ready to have those questions answered? The boy grew up without a mother, if he is a God, that means she is too, maybe even a Titan. And with that truth, that means she didn’t die, she just left. Left him. With a father as cruel as his, that reality has the potential to change a bright man very dark. Maybe now, in the grand scheme of things, it can wait.”

“How do you know about the lady’s mantle? What’ve you been *spying* on me?” I turned to face him, giving him a look that Nyx would describe as eagle-like. I reached out my hand towards the dancing light of lies, and grabbed onto the power that created them. Rory winced. They vanished. The music stopped a moment after.

“I’m a twelfth dimensional being, Rae. There is little I am not aware of.” Rory didn’t seem to flinch at the crack of stone or the sudden silence, as if he knew it was going to happen, or was no stranger to violence.

“So, you’re telling me you exist in every single possible reality at once?” I looked him up and down, then into his eyes, as if trying to see the infinite Universe behind his gentle gaze. “You’re a Primordial, so you know every single thing about everything?” I shook my head, trying to put on a calm front, given that it felt like my head was about to explode. “Then tell me something no one on Earth knows.”

Rory inhaled deeply, filling his lungs in their entirety. He held his breath, as if wanting to escape the moment, or bide time. The silence made my ears ring. My body filled with an uncomfortable pressure at the lack of stimulation. He looked to the side of me, I don’t know why, maybe he couldn’t make eye contact as he thought about what he had to say.

“Nyx has many secrets, one in particular he regrets never telling you.” My heart dropped at the words, and I expect that Rory paused just to pull the anxiety from me. “Where Nyx is from, there are immortals with the ability to infiltrate, control, and even break minds.”

No.

“Nyx’s parents have that ability, they’re two of the most powerful immortals that have ever lived in his world.”

Please, no.

“And Nyx, has the ability as well.” Rory’s eyes moved from where they stared in the distance behind me to mine. I tried to keep the moisture from building in them, but my excessive blinking made the effort a little redundant.

“How dare you.” A familiar voice growled from the end of the Great Hall.

I didn’t need to look to know who it was. I didn’t want to look. It’s not like he needed to read my expressions to know how I felt, anyways.

“How dare you share the secret of a stranger.” Dark flame filled the room as they gathered around Nyx’s body. “What was the plan here? Tear her family apart so you can swoop in and take advantage?”

“And what was *your* plan, Nyx?” I turned to him, and let my words cut the space between us. “Wait until you learned all of my secrets, or just *force*

me into loving you?” Starry light swirled around me, pulsating with the rapid beating of my heart.

“I’ve never been past the barriers of your mind, Rae. I would never disrespect you like that. Even when I’ve ached to know what you were thinking, to see if I could find your lost memories. But I didn’t.”

“Why wouldn’t you tell me, then? What’s the need for a secret if it’s doing no harm?” I spat at him, we moved towards each other, our powers nearing one another. The mansion shook as we got closer.

“Would you have believed me if I had told you? You didn’t trust me when we met, you still don’t. The moment I didn’t tell you outright, I lost my chance. I needed you to trust me.” Nyx’s fists were held firmly at his sides, I could see his jaw clench at the effort to keep his power under control.

“*Need?*” Hot rage filled me, not only at the betrayal I felt, but the thought of what Nyx could’ve seen within my mind. “**WHAT SHOULD I CARE ABOUT WHAT *YOU* NEED?**”

Rage had become me. I had been suppressing the need to scream, to bring the world down since I found that room in Sir Brian’s estate.

And for the same reason he was my favorite sparring partner, I threw all I had at Nyx, because I knew he wouldn’t break. It was my worst trait, because his body certainly was as unbreakable as mine, but with how carelessly I held his love for me, I was throwing rocks at his glass heart.

His features softened, it was enough to pull both of our powers back, shame staining both of our faces.

“Rory,” I said without turning to him, “I’m ready to go to my room now.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Nyx Darling

When I first met Rae, I thought about looking into her mind, finding out where I was and if I could trust her. There's a code that my parents live by, once you infiltrate someone's mind, you cross a boundary from which you can never go back. Which is why it's only used for enemies and emergencies.

My desire to know what Rae really thinks doesn't compare to the respect I have for her. It's not just that I could get into her mind, it's the fact that she knows I could control it. How could she ever trust me knowing I could be influencing her every thought and feeling for me?

I've wondered if I could find those lost memories. The problem is, the more power, the more protection. I suspect the walls of her subconscious are as hard to get past as she is in a training ring. It's not like she knows that, though, I wish she did. Maybe it would bring her comfort knowing I probably couldn't get into her mind if I tried. Even then, her trust is already broken. It's not like I had much of it to begin with. I massaged the back of my neck, it seemed to ache when I get stressed, an old battle injury.

It took hours to fall asleep. I paced my room for a long time trying to decide if I should go to Rae's room. Felt a lot like at Brian's, and I sure regretted not going then. But now, we were safe. I trust Maeve. Rae needed sleep, not a man on his knees pleading with her to listen. This could wait. I may never know why Rory decided to tell Rae my secret. Am I supposed to trust he had a good reason, or try to figure out why he's such a saboteur? I tried going into his mind, I got close, until he forced me out.

Light came into my room at the break of dawn. I assumed Rory put me in a room so high off the ground so I could do some flying without disturbing the rest of the house. I lazily pushed myself off the annoyingly comfortable bed and pushed my feet off the edge. This place was even cooler in the daylight.

It's like Rory somehow knew my taste, or perhaps his taste matched my own. The bed was large enough for my wings, with bedside tables that somehow listened to my thoughts and produced whatever I wanted. Tea, coffee, donuts, even a puppy, which slept at the end of the bed. I named her Blue, my little Bluey.

I looked to the side table, and exhaled a long breath as I wondered how far this magical piece of well crafted wood could go. I instantly regretted that thought.

Suddenly, Rae sat on the nightstand, a cup of chai in her hand spilled onto her black nightgown. She looked down at the spilled drink, and giggled, as if a little drunk. I screamed.

“Hey, big boy.” She crooned.

“Oh, fuck.” I stood and held up my hands, backing up as I fumbled over my words.

Rae Appeared in the doorway, “What’s wrong?” She asked before she looked past me, eyes wide.

“No, no,” I turned to find her still sitting on the nightstand and then to where she stood in the doorway. Phoebe and Marcellus arrived not long after, and tried to push their way past Rae. “I can explain.”

“You *dirty* bastard.” Marcellus laughed breathlessly.

“Oh, yer a dead man, Darling.”

“Rae, I swear, I didn’t mean to do that.” I turned and pointed to fake Rae who climbed off the nightstand and hobbled my way. I batted her desperate grasps away and moved towards real Rae.

“Disgusting.” Rae said, pointing her finger between me and fake Rae. The comment hurt me more than she realized, I didn’t find the idea disgusting, but I guess now I know *she* does. She took one more look, then turned to leave. Phoebe just looked up at Marcellus, they seemed to be having

a conversation somehow, probably through their Ocellums. She motioned to fake Rae and shrugged her shoulders, he gave her a feline smile.

“Gods bless it, go talk about your impending four-way with yourselves somewhere else.” Phoebe blushed and they both turned and ran away. “I have to figure out how to get rid of the love of my life’s parallel.”

Rae didn’t look at me for the entire time we sat for breakfast. Rory and Phoebe talked for the most part, the rest of us ate silently, except for Marcellus who occasionally fed some of his food to the creatures that ran around the room. Blue played with the other puppies, which made Rae smile, which made *me* smile.

The room we sat in was high above the city below. It was lined with marble pillars draped with vines and white roses. In between each pillar was a balcony looking over the lights in the sky. I had to fight the urge to jump off and fly through them.

“Rory wants me to travel through space and time to moments in my life that I have forgotten.” Rae blurted out, interrupting Rory and Phoebe’s conversation about how best to keep rosebushes thriving.

“Not just you, Rae.” Rory said cautiously.

Rae’s eyes finally turned up to where I sat across from her. “That’s not happening.” She said sternly. I realized that I am supposed to be her companion in our travels through the unknown.

“How’s that possible?” Phoebe asked.

“Every ninth dimensional being and higher have the ability, it’s just a matter of showing Rae how it works. It’s like Appearing, but extending your reach further.” Rory replied, looking kindly towards Phoebe.

“Do it.” Rae said to me, in a voice that didn’t sound like her own.

I just squinted my eyes at her, our stare down making our companions shift in their seats.

“Go in, and tell me what you find. I’m giving you my consent, you fuck.” She held her fork in her hand, the silver bent slightly under her grip, causing the sausage it pierced to fall off. The sight of it made me pull my hand over my lap.

“Do you believe that I’ve never done it before?” I pleaded, knowing that even if she did, it doesn’t change anything.

“The offer ends in three, two...”

I extended my mind to the walls of her own, a soft sheen of white light welcomed me as I made my way through. A soft sound rang in the distance, once I passed the boundary, the song exploded loudly in my head.

“Escapism? A little too on the nose, don’t you think?”

“It’s the only thing keeping me from becoming murderous. Should I change it?” Rae said bluntly, her fork now bending to a ninety degree angle.

I brushed a mental hand on the tall wall of Rae’s mind.

I'm sorry that I kept this from you, that I hurt you. I said only to her. You know what you mean to me, and clearly I haven't coerced you into anything. Unless you think I made you hate me.

Her inner wall shifted, as if weakening a fraction, at the heartbreaking truth I admitted. I could make her love me, I could make her beg me to love her. When in reality, it’s quite the opposite. And it’s agony.

“I don’t hate you.” Rae said out loud, making Mar jump a little in his seat. “I’m mad at you.”

“*Kefe*. What did I do?” Marcellus yelped, hands flying upwards, flinging a spoonful of scrambled eggs onto Phoebe’s face.

“She’s not talkin’ to ya, fecken eejit.” Phoebe said with forced calm. Marcellus didn’t realize what he did right away, but when he did, he quickly nibbled the pieces of egg off of Phoebe’s cheek, earning a loud giggle from her until she swatted him away.

It won't last forever, will it? You'll forgive me one day? I was scared to get an answer, but also desperate to.

You're my family, Nyx. Of course I will. My heart broke, it broke open and upwards in ways I never thought possible. A gasp escaped my lips, as did all language.

“But not today, bitch.” Rae said before standing up and throwing a handful of oatmeal onto my face and chest. I just sat there as the sticky oats ran down my face and into my lap.

Marcellus plopped his hand into his food, eager to grab a handful to throw, but Phoebe quickly grabbed his wrist and shook her head. He huffed and gave her a dramatic pout before plopping down in his chair.

“Okay, do me.” Marcellus said while holding his head foreword and closing his eyes. “Guess what I’m thinking.”

“I don’t have to read minds to know what goes on in that head of yours, Marley.” Rae said with a grin. “I imagine it’s like one of those sensory baby videos, just a bunch of shapes and colors floating around with circus music.”

I laughed out loud and looked to my friend, who looked thoroughly confused. “Let’s see,” I closed my eyes and put my fingers to my temple as if trying to get into his mind, “it’s actually just a vast desert with a tumbleweed rolling by and... nope, just that.”

Phoebe burst out laughing while Rae suppressed her laughter, no doubt because the joke came from me.

“You’re both wrong,” Marcellus crossed his arms in front of his chest, a prideful grin on his lips, “I was thinking about Phoebe’s boobs. Are you sure you can even read minds, Uso?”

“Ya were just gonna let him see em!?” Phoebe swatted Marcellus in the chest, he did little to protect himself. “Yer lucky he dinna or you’d be fallin’ down that cliff or’there right about now.” Phoebe motioned behind us. Marcellus’s face paled. She kept swatting him.

“Ow, ow, *ow*.” Marcellus groaned.

“Oh, that doesn’t hurt, you big oaf.” Rae giggled.

“It hurts my heart.” Marcellus said with an exaggerated pout and upturned brows, a puppy begging to be loved.

“Nyx’s ability will come in handy when you travel.” Rory said from the end of the table. I had forgotten he was there for a moment.

So that’s why he did it. I said into Rae’s mind. She swatted at her head as if it would get me out. *You look pretty.* I said while putting my elbow on the table and resting my chin in my palm, smiling at her.

Rae looked deep into my eyes, then the image she brought up was sure to send me right out the door. It was a naked Marcellus, swinging his dick around.

“You’ve seen Mar naked?” I blurted.

“Who hasn’t.” Phoebe said in an annoyed tone.

“Are you jealous?” Mar smiled widely as he stuck his face into Phoebe’s neck and blew a raspberry, making her yelp. I swear that boy acted on every intrusive thought he had and called it an idea.

“What’s the problem, son of night?” Rae turned her head slightly as she stuck a sausage in her mouth. “Did it make you hot?”

Before I could respond, a big splash of cold water fell onto me. It’s as if it came from a tear in space right above me. The air was sucked from my lungs at the chill, and when I opened my eyes, Rae was walking away.

“That should cool you down.” Rae shouted as she turned to the large archway and headed outside. The way her hips moved as she strutted away, the effortless sway, made me bite down on my bottom lip.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

I found Rae sitting on the edge of a grassy cliff an hour after breakfast. Her hands held her in a reclined position as she looked up at the sky.

I started running, keeping my feet soft, and my wings up. Once I got to where Rae sat, I jumped over her and dove head first off the cliff. For a millisecond, our gazes met, and she might've seen what those eyes did to me about a second later, but I hoped she didn't.

I flew effortlessly for a minute before coming back to where Rae sat and flew in place in front of her.

"You're blocking my view." She shouted to me.

"I am the view, Princess."

"You're *something*, feathers." She shook her head and looked back up to the sky.

"So when do you want to learn your hidden abilities and go crash little Rae's fifth birthday party?" I swooped closer to her, the beating of my wings making her beautiful golden hair fly back.

"Sometime between now and forever." She said while turning her head, as if trying to get away from the breeze I created.

"What does that mean?" I tried making sense of her words but found nothing.

"Rory came to my room last night and told me that time doesn't work the same here, we can stay here a thousand years and it'll have only been a few moments on the outside. I think that's what my mum meant by insisting that we're safe here, Zeus is practically frozen in time on the outside of the ice wall." I could tell she was holding her breath. I dropped a few feet in an

attempt to keep my wing-whooshing from her. “We’re in The Forever City now.”

“Do I smell or something?” I leaned down to smell my armpits, but I smelt fine, *good*, even.

“No, you don’t.” Her tone was neutral, forced.

“So, we have forever, then.” The words meant more to me than she might’ve realized.

“We have forever.” It was times like this, when her gaze softened and her smile was almost visible that I foolishly found hope. Hope that she’s just taking her time, that she’s loved me from the first moment, too, and felt naive to jump into something with a stranger from another world.

WE HAVE FOREVER. Rae’s voice said loudly in my mind, causing me to drop quickly in the sky.

“Woah.” I yelped. “How are you doing that?”

WHEN YOU WENT INTO MY MIND IT MUST’VE OPENED A DOOR TO YOURS. I DIDN’T KNOW I COULD DO THIS UNTIL NOW. She smiled as I clumsily gained my rhythm back and hovered in front of her.

“Cool.” I said plainly, my lip twitching as I did. I tried very hard not to think of anything incriminating, but when I’m around her, the lover boy thoughts play on repeat.

“Don’t worry,” she said with a grin. “I’m only touching the surface.” Her mental hand brushed down the tall onyx walls of my mind. The stronghold that my parents made sure was as tough as they come. Her delicate fingers touched so seductively, I realized I could barely fly, and didn’t exactly want to be bearing myself before Rae at the present moment.

“Stop that.” I said sternly. Flapping hard, I sent myself over and behind her. I landed forcefully on the ground. And adjusted my pants before turning to where she now stood.

DOES THAT NOT FEEL GOOD? She taunted, and took a step towards me. I moved my shoulders back as if to move backwards but found my body stuck. I couldn’t deny that her touch was bliss, but it was also more vulnerable than I was ready to be. Not without reciprocation, it was humiliating.

“*Fine.*” She said in a tone that wasn’t herself.

Welcome back, subconscious Rae.

She stood, walking slowly towards me. A cigarette Appeared between her fingers, elbow propped on her hip. It didn't smell of lavender or cucumber as they usually do, it smelled terrible.

"So, I'm curious." She held the unlit cigarette next to her, pulling up her midi dress so she could take a few long steps around me. "What else have you been hiding, Captain?"

I stayed quiet. This was one of her Demons talking, pushing me to get pissed off, so I'd lash out at her and she could confirm her fear of me being as terrible and unhinged as the ghosts of her past.

"Do you even like me?" I felt her eyes on my back like hot iron.

"I don't right *now*." I'd always love her, but when this Rae came out, I certainly wouldn't pretend to enjoy it.

"Oh, so it's conditional, then?" She held the cigarette between her teeth, still unlit. "I respect that. We're taught to have unconditional love from a young age. For our parents, for one. But mine were murdered, my adoptive ones, at least, and the real ones I don't fucking know at all, so how could I love them?"

"I don't think love has to be unconditional," I admitted, unable to stop myself from taking the bait. "You should always have boundaries, limits to what you can handle, and how someone who loves you is supposed to show and respect that love."

"Interesting." She stood before me once more, turning her head as she stared up at me. "And how do you show that *love* to those you love unconditionally?"

I raised my head, showing her that although I am at her will, I can still hold my own.

"Have you hurt them?"

I couldn't stop my eyes from falling into the memory of my uncle, Atlas, screaming as my black fire nearly consumed him, until his shadows took him somewhere, maybe to the next life.

"Oh," She clicked her tongue. "Seems I've struck a nerve."

"Rae." I warned her. Though it was to the Demon I spoke.

“What was it, did you permanently maim one...” She blew out a breath. “That’s rough.”

I only shook my head, wondering how long she’ll let the darkness rise before she just screams and gets this shit out already.

“Oh no.” She looked up at me through her lashes, my Rae not eddying behind those perfect eyes. “Did you kill one?”

“SHUT YOUR FUCKING MOUTH.” I exploded, black fire coating my skin. She didn’t flinch, only shook her head as she held out her hand, lighting her cigarette with my flame.

“There he is.” She looked up at me with disgust. “*Nyx*.” She said my name like a serpent. “Son of Night, Heir of Darkness. Thanks for the light.” She narrowed her gaze, waiting for me to scream at her. Fight her.

“You want to play it this way?” I leaned down to her, not as a threat, but so she could feel my power, knowing how it consumes her. Enrages her with its unavoidable draw. “Fine.”

“Do you *really* thi—”

“I’m speaking now.” I held her gaze with equal intensity. “Your trauma, in its unimaginable magnitude, will never be an excuse to treat those you love poorly. I love you, with every inch of myself, and I know you’ve known that from the second we’ve met. However you choose to face that fact is entirely up to you. But do not speak to me with such unkindness in the hopes that I can be one more man you can fear. One more man you can hide from. I am your *ally*, you stubborn woman. I am your *mate*, for fuck’s sake. So if *anyone* in this world, in *all* realms, is going to see past whatever bullshit wall you’re putting up now, pushing me like a *bloody* arsehole, it’s me.”

“Nyx—” Her eyes went wide as the real Rae was now fully present.

“No.” I pushed her. “I will hold my boundaries for the sake of keeping myself whole. So that I can be strong for you. For our family. So we may all heal, together. But not like this.”

And I took off. I flew for a long time, far enough away so I could scream, needing to let the pain out. And I hoped she did, too.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Rae

I cried into Phoebe's lap on the balcony of my room for a good hour. I had betrayed and humiliated the kindest person I have ever met. My trauma is no excuse. My pain doesn't make it okay. I know how much he loves me, and I took advantage of it like it was a game. I wouldn't forgive me if I were him. I wouldn't *love* me if I were him.

"You should've seen the look on his face." Snot ran down my cheek as I raised it to Phoebe's concerned look. She just lifted up the bottom of her red dress and wiped my face. She only shook her head in understanding, and gave me the space to vent needlessly. I plopped my head back in her lap, and groaned loudly onto her knee. "I'll never forgive myself."

"Sure ya will." Phoebe said softly, hands combing my tangled hair. "Surely you'll forgive yourself when you two *finally* shag."

I sat up quickly, and glared at my friend in shock. It was as if I was surprised by her staple honesty and blunt remarks, I knew them all too well, but it can still be shocking. I pushed myself back and sat with my knees to my chin.

"What do I do?" After all this time, I had nothing left to do but ask for help, knowing full well it was months passed due. Years. Centuries, even.

"You'll never feel ready, mo chara. It'll never feel right until after you've done it. Just dive head first and feck the rest. Stop gettin' in yer own way. I can't stand watchin' the pair of ya torturin' each other, I can't imagine what it's doin' to the both of ya." Phoebe laid her head on my shoulder, and

we both looked to the sky, as if it had the answers. “Forgive the world for what it’s done t’ya, mo ghràdh.”

“I forgave the world the minute I laid eyes on him.”

“Yer madly in love with him. Everyone knows it, except for him, a’course. Which is why you canna stand him.” Phoebe sat with her legs crossed, and picked at a flower that grew between a crack. “You hate him because the first person ya t’ought ya loved turned outta be a sociopathic narcissist, so ya don’t know how to love. And yer scared that if ya try, he might turn outta be the same, *or* you’ll try to open yourself to him and it doesna work. Yer worried you’ll be stuck like this forever, but yer wrong.”

I turned to her, unable to respond in a way that would come out coherent. So I just turned back, and waited for whatever else she had to say, because she was right.

“He’s not, by the way.” Phoebe smiled and pushed my shoulder with her elbow, knocking me on my side. “I’m always right about these t’ings, it’s parta my emotional influence. To be able to manipulate people’s emotions, I have to hold a piece of their soul in my hands, and his, it’s as feckin’ pure as they come. Like yers.”

“I’m not pure.” I said finally, the words hitting me like a physical blow. A shameful admission.

“Y’are, though. Just like he is, yer souls are very similar, actually. *Eerily* similar.” Phoebe’s voice had a raspy way to it. The way she said her R’s was so harsh compared to my nearly non-existent way of saying them, and Nyx’s. His accent was a little different than mine, softer.

“Don’t say that or I’ll think he’s really evil.” I scoffed.

“Stop. I’ll tell ya what’s what, and I’m tellin’ ya now, yer pure goodness.” Phoebe gave me her *fuck with me and find out* look, similar to Nyx’s but without all the cocky arrogance. “Alright?”

“Okay.” I wasn’t convinced, but for her I would at least pretend to be, and certainly try to mean it. “Rory’s hosting a ball tonight. Apparently the stars are falling or something later.” I said into the vast space in front of me.

“WHAT?” Phoebe shouted, making me jump and press my hands to my ears as she squealed with excitement. Without explanation, not that I

needed it, Phoebe pulled me off the balcony and into my room. “What’re we gonna wear?!”

“Well,” I braced myself for the loud squeal that I anticipated after my next words, “Rory offered to let us look around his Antique Hall, which includes gowns, bracelets, rings, and... tiaras.”

I swear I felt the glass castle crack at Phoebe’s scream. Marcellus was at the door a few moments later, toothbrush in his mouth and towel around his waist. He saw there was no harm done and shook his head, sighing while cursing all women as he walked off.

I threw my shoe at his back, causing him to jolt forward. Choking sounds came from his direction as his hands clasped his neck. I Appeared before him instantly and my concerned look turned to an annoyed one. The poor idiot had his toothbrush lodged in his throat, and didn’t realize that the other half was still sticking out. I grabbed the exposed piece of silver, and pulled it from his throat. Phoebe held her lips tightly together, trying not to laugh.

Marcellus gasped and coughed wildly, hands on his knees. He looked up at me, eyes wide and mouth parted. He put his hand on my shoulder as he held himself up.

“You just saved my life.” I bit my bottom lip to keep from smiling. “I am indebted to you from now until the end of time.” Marcellus stood up and promptly held a hand to his forehead in salut.

“No trouble, big guy.” I said while lightly smacking his exposed chest, and made a look of surprise at the solid rock my hand found. I looked over to Phoebe who nodded slowly with her eyes closed as if to say, *oh yeah, ain’t nothing but stone in that body*. I tilted my head as if to say, *especially his head*. We both laughed out loud, earning a confused look from Marcellus who still held his hand to his forehead.

“At ease, soldier.” I said while walking past him. I wrapped my arm around Phoebe’s. Only best friends, and only women, can talk through body language. It’s one of those moments where you feel immense pride for your gender.

In this moment, and with this half of my family, my trauma was a prisoner in my mind, not the other way around. If anyone was going to

forgive me for what I had done to Nyx, it was him. There was one thing I knew for sure: I wasn't going to take that privilege for granted, or make that mistake ever again. Not to him. He wasn't like the rest, he was *Nyx*.

No more wasting time and missing pivotal moments. There are two things I must do, two things I *must* find out about tonight. The truth, and how it might shape my future. *Our* futures. I didn't have it in me to hold back anymore. And in this moment, I had become more of myself than I'd ever been.

In this moment, I felt happy. Happy to be alive.

Chapter Thirty

When I looked in the mirror, I barely recognized the exquisite creature that stared back. The usual sharp eyes of judgement and unmet expectations softened to the eyes of an admirer. A friend.

I felt more beautiful than I think I ever had, than I thought possible. It wasn't just my beauty that had me taken aback, but the energy of rebirth, of a new version of myself, that seemed to emerge. And she, was remarkable. Nyx's words had changed me, opened parts of my mind, sending light over the darkness that creeps in the corner. Giving me strength.

What happened with Nyx would've sent me running, sent me into myself. And yet, I wanted to stay. I wanted Nyx to scream at me if he needed to, listen to me apologize if it brought him comfort, or simply tell me to fuck off if that's what I deserve. Maybe seeing his clear adoration for me crack, to know he's not a charming pretender waiting for my vulnerability, but he's, in fact, vulnerable himself, maybe that's what has me seeing things in a new light.

Nyx is not him. Nyx is *not* him. Nyx is my lifeline.

It's time to stop running.

Rory sent a stylist to our rooms, ready to do our hair and makeup as soon as we said the word. My gown was black as night with the thinnest ground crystals, billions of them, shimmering across the fabric like stars in the darkest sky. The top was a corset style sheer fabric with a sweetheart neckline. I turned from side to side, surprised at how perfectly the cups fit my—admittedly above average—breasts, as if it was tailored just for me.

The bottom was a ballgown style, not too big as to dissuade a dance partner, but just big enough to glide elegantly as I strode across the floor. A long slit ran down the left side, revealing black heels with a thin shiny strap around my ankle and pearl painted toes.

My hair was curled loosely with extensions that lengthened my hair to the middle of my back. The hair that framed my face was parted down the middle and slicked behind my ears. Tiny diamonds cascaded down my hair, and shimmered beautifully as I moved. I twirled, delighting in the way every inch of me sparkled like a glass chandelier spinning in the evening sun.

It was perfect.

Phoebe made a trumpet noise with her mouth as if announcing the presence of royalty. I saw her in the reflection of the mirror before I turned to face her. Her silver silk gown was a lot fluffier than my own, which was a surprise to no one. Phoebe would rather feel like a princess than worry about accommodating a dance partner.

“I admit it feels weird not bein’ in red, but ya were right about the silver, it’s very chic.” I smiled at her comment, knowing she is oblivious to the true reason I picked silver. Phoebe always wore red as a way to never let her enemies see her bleed. To her, her blood was red. But according to Rory, it was silver.

Her neckline was a low cut V-line with sheer fabric off the shoulders. Her hair was pinned in a low curled bun with small pieces coming out. I held out my hand to my friend, urging her to me. She walked over, letting her dress sway back and forth as she did. I pulled her to me and faced the mirror.

“Tonight, we’re just two beautiful women at a ball.” I tilted my head to rest on top of Phoebe’s as I set our intentions for the evening. “No impending death, no trauma, no mistakes.”

“No drama.”

“Our worries can wait.” I smiled down at my sister, feeling a warm brush of contentment. I held out my hand with a bowed head before saying, “Shall we, my Queen.”

Phoebe grabbed the sides of her dress and curtsied elegantly. “It would be my pleasure, yer Majesty.”

The Great Hall still had the same floral decor and floating candles that it had when Rory first brought me there. The difference being that the large windows now opened to white marble balconies. In the center of the room was a giant fountain, I realized as guests walked up to it with flutes, that it was full of champagne.

Phoebe and I both scanned the room, trying not to linger on the curious gaze of every guest as we made our grand entrance. I'm sure in a TIMELESS city that's separated from the rest of the world, newcomers were a delicacy.

"I see him." Phoebe squealed, breaking our grip and walking quickly towards the back of the large hall. I pushed my shoulders back and inhaled deeply before following behind. I hadn't talked to Nyx since... the incident.

My breathing felt cold and my skin felt foreign on my bones. I wanted to flee, to run into a scolding hot bath and never come out. I wanted to fly as high into the sky as I could, where everything is silent, and life keeps its distance. I shifted in my dress, feeling a little ridiculous with how much makeup I agreed to be painted with. It was breathtaking, no question, but I was too aware of it. Like I was wearing a mask. A liar.

"You look amazing." Marcellus moaned into Phoebe's hair as she jumped into his arms. Her large ballgown pushed behind her, keeping me at a distance. I looked around, and saw no sign of Nyx.

"He said he'd be here." Marcellus said in response to my darting eyes and confused look. For how daft he can be, Mar knew how to pick up on anxiety. Especially mine.

"Guess not." I said, failing to keep the disappointment from my tone. If space or time is what he needed, he could take as much as he'd like. How ironic that we were going to learn how to travel through both, and I now seem to have a natural talent for acquiring them.

I scanned the room again, my purpose no longer for Nyx, but for liquid courage. Something to put distance between my brain and my body.

"Follow me." I said to my friends, and took off towards the space between two balconies. As we made it to the long white silk curtains that

hung wall to ceiling between every balcony entrance, I looked up, then placed my hand atop it.

“You’re looking real cray cray, Rae Rae.” Mar said, arm around Phoebe’s shoulder. She adjusted his grip to make sure he didn’t ruin her perfectly pinned hair.

“You’ve really gotta stop reading my human studies journals. Your already limited vocabulary is scarcely benefiting from such unintelligible jargon.” I tried closing my eyes, focusing on the skill I had been practicing the last few months. There was something that haunted the back of my mind since we got here, since I met Rory. If I was going to get a chance to answer those questions, this was my one chance to do so.

“Awe,” he looked down at Phoebe who bunched her eyebrows at him, he placed his hand on his chest before replying, “thanks, sweetie.”

I slowly turned my head, getting distracted from my endeavor by the mind-blowing thought process of my poor companion. I shook my head in an attempt to keep the thoughts away. I breathed in evenly, and the stone beneath my hands began to shift.

The silk curtain pushed back to reveal a wide open space. The floor folded in on itself, creating a booth that lined the three walls. The silk grew into soft cushions that lined each bench. A marble table rose from the ground in the middle of the cozy seating area. I added our own large window looking out upon the beautiful landscape below as a finishing touch. Just as I was working on the last details, a voice spoke from behind.

“Neat party trick.”

I turned quickly. I tried hiding my disappointment as I found Rory standing with his hands behind his back, smirking at me. I noticed that every guest had stopped to watch my show of power. I motioned to my friends to sit, and outstretched an arm towards the large fountain, sending eight filled flutes our way.

“Are we expectin’ people?” Phoebe asked as she examined the glasses.

“Nope.” Was all I said before grabbing a flute in each hand and throwing my head back as I downed the contents of one, then the other.

“Ope, we’re doin’ it. It’s happenin’.” Phoebe nudged Marcellus’s arm before copying me, and he followed suit after a long moment.

“To fortuitous friends.” Rory held up a glass to toast. Phoebe glared at me, her eyes begged for answers as to why this stranger knew what I had said to Phoebe when we first met. I gave her a subtle nod saying, *I’ll tell you later.*

I raised out my hand as if introducing a friend, and eight more glasses came crashing our way. The guests had left a path between the fountain and our private room. I wondered if it was a precaution for not getting smacked by a flying flute, or if it just made it easier to stare.

“To our host,” somehow my voice was already a little slurred, and my legs felt as if they’d start floating if I didn’t press them into the bench, “I loved you in *Little Women*, but your work in *Call Me By Your Name*, left something to be desired, if you know what I mean. It was just... garsh, what’s the word?”

“Peachy.” Phoebe replied, her timing as perfect as always. We both grinned wildly as we held our glasses to our lips.

“Peaches, beaches, and beautiful women.” Rory raised his glass once more, I rose my own in response, Phoebe and Mar followed shortly after. “All of which are best enjoyed... unhurried.” His eyes darkened as they caught mine. I did my best to keep eye contact, and strained with the effort it took not to look away and blush. I just squinted in a puzzled look.

I watched Rory take a sip of his drink through my eyelashes as I drank my own. If this was going to work, no one could know what I was doing. I had to appear like all I was interested in doing is drinking, and not let it slip as to *why* I wanted to. Luckily for me, everyone expects me to be a little crazy right now, and a little broken. I can certainly play that part... a little too well.

“Marcellus Kane,” Phoebe stood from where she sat, and held a hand out to our large friend. “will ya do me the honor?”

“Woah, lady,” Marcellus held up his hands in protest, “I’m way too young to get married. Also, *weird* timing, Phe.”

“To *dance*, you brute.” I said through a chuckle.

“Oh, hell yes.” Mar said while standing quickly and taking Phoebe’s hand.

“And you’re... somewhere between four hundred and six hundred years old.” I said to their backs as they walked to the dance floor. “You’re hardly a bachelor.” I yelled as they drifted into the crowd.

“Seven hundred and twelve, to be exact.” Rory tipped his glass. “Let me ask you something, Rae, darling; Is it ever difficult for you,” Rory waited for me to meet his gaze before continuing, “being the youngest?”

“Hm” I remarked at finally knowing Marcellus’s real age. “Is it ever difficult for you,” I hit our glasses together, earning a soft chime, “being fucking old?”

Chapter Thirty-One

“Ask me what you really want to ask me.” Rory shifted in his seat, placing his elbows on the table between us. “Ask me why he’s not here.”

“That isn’t the question.” I worked to hide my surprise. How do you *not* know my thoughts, dear Primordial, how do you not know *everything*?

His smile was feline. “I know.”

“Dance with me.” I said evenly.

“That isn’t it either.” Rory’s demeanor was troubling. There was something off about him, something I couldn’t quite place. Some big question left unanswered. I stared deeply into his eyes, looking for it. Needing to get this first question answered before I can finally have the second.

I stood up, basking in the knowledge that every eye was on us, and Rory no doubt cherished the reputation he held here, which made me sure he wouldn’t risk offending his beloved guests. Their vacant stares reminded me of the signs that used to hang at zoos, *don’t throw objects at the animals*. “Well, it wasn’t a question, now was it?”

Come curious ones, see how I play so nicely in my new habitat. See how the isolation has made me cautious, learning new creative ways to adapt. Let me do tricks for you, let me get close to you. *Come closer*. Come see the Mad Woman, and find out why she’s coveted so.

Rory stood slowly, his knuckles turning white as they laid on the table. I walked around towards him, and held out my hand, he took it gracefully. My acting needed to be perfect in order to trick a Primordial, how easily I can, though, will give me my answer.

As we made our way to the center, the fountain began moving to the side, Marcellus and Phoebe still waltzed without any idea of what happened around them.

I raised my head, changing the ethereal music to a tune of my own. A very, very old song, from the brilliant mind and delicate hands of Frédéric Chopin: Nocturne No. 2. Chopin's music was one of the first things that drew me to humans. He composed with all of the perfect notes to personify sorrow, and longing, and somehow, at the same time, the very beauty of life burst wide open when he played. I thought maybe Rory needed to hear it, too.

It began slowly, elegantly. As did each step I took. I knew a few classical dances, mostly from movies, rarely from practice. But it wasn't any dance in particular I wanted to fall into. I was testing a theory, one I had first concocted when Rory brought me to the Great Hall.

"This question," I turned my head in the direction that we danced, but did not meet his eyes, "is it regarding being a Primordial?"

"It is." Rory said through a grin, a bead of sweat gliding down his sharp chin.

"I don't know much about Primordials, as you know, I haven't been at this whole *infinite power and knowledge* game very long, nor do I have full access to it." I turned my head elegantly, always in the direction I stepped, waiting for the pace of the song to pick up.

"You could have even me fooled, with the way you hold a room's attention." Rory looked to the guests around him, I caught a sidelong glance at his forced smile.

"Well, that had me thinking, isn't that the fun of being an all-knowing deity—" I turned my head quickly to the right before stepping left. Just as I had anticipated, his steps faltered. Only slightly, and barely perceptible, but I felt the compensating pull of our hands as he corrected himself. I repressed my grin. "They can't be fooled."

He didn't reply, he only pulled me around the room as the next song played, again, one of mine, *Clair de Lune*, a peace offering. I could feel him begin leading, pulling me in an attempt to remain in control.

“Since our arrival, everything has been tailored to us. Marcellus has an entire river running from the center of his room to the edge of the woods. The man’s practically part fish, who can blame him with a home like Poseidas? And Phoebe, I noticed your Antique Hall has dresses and jewelry eerily similar to that of her fashion journal. This dress,” I motioned with my head to the gorgeous gown that flowed like the entire Universe laid trapped beneath the fabric, “Phoebe drew for me the week after I brought Nyx to Doctrina. She called it, *a wedding dress fit for the Hidden City*, Nyx’s home. But that’s no surprise, of course, a Primordial should easily know those things.”

I watched Rory’s features shift with the stir of his thoughts. I held my gaze on his lips, the minuscule movement like a man unsure of his next words.

“And before we came here tonight, you made your townsfolk watch me, make me feel seen. The minute we walked in, my body burned with the gaze of an entire room. It’s odd, is it not, that not a single one of them shied away from my returned glare?” I changed the music once more, to a tune I knew would bring Phoebe crashing through the room like the crowned princess she deserves to be. It would send her looking for me, pulling her from her trance. *The Princess Diaries Waltz*. From the movie we watch every year on her birthday. “Statistically speaking, at least one person in a room of at least three hundred would instinctively turn after being caught staring. Unless, of course, they share one mind.”

“Are you biding time, or do you have a flare for the dramatics?” Rory asked, his features calm. Forced.

I only smiled in response, I heard a squeal in the crowd, and could see heads move aside for who I knew was pushing her way through.

“There’s one thing about me that seems to surprise people.” I stopped in my tracks, towards the side of the room, near where our booth was.

“And what is that?” Rory asked through a gentle smile and furrowed brows.

“I don’t like the spotlight.” I raised my hand, a spotlight now shone on Rory. He raised his arm to block the bright light. I chuckled, and raised my hand further, Phoebe squealed as her and Marcellus lifted into the air, the

spotlight now moving to my floating friends. As their feet found solid ground, or rather, a solid sheet of air I placed beneath them, Phoebe looked to me, and I gave her an enthusiastic nod.

They began waltzing around the room, the guests now looked to them, their expressions curious and cautious. Not the expected reaction of a drunken crowd told to keep their guests happy.

“It seems your pawns forgot their cue.” I motioned to the room of frozen faces. I swished my hand in the air, as if wiping away smoke, and cheering and laughter filled the room. Marcellus lifted Phoebe into the air, and the cheering grew louder. “That’s better.”

“What are you getting at?” Rory moved back a step, seems my intimidation tactics were working a little too well.

“When I asked you to tell me something no one on Earth knew, you hesitated. I watched you look behind me. I found it curious, until I realized that Nyx was already in the doorway. You saw him reaching a mental hand to you, trying to see if you were a threat. The problem was, *we* were the threat.” I looked up to my friend who seemed to lose herself in her twirls and skips across the open air. “How did you come up with the mind reading thing, anyways? Your all knowing predictability, ironically, has its limits. That’s what I love about balance: it applies to everything. Was it the wings? You did some quick calculations and figured out who his parents were, given that they both share his likeness and ability?”

Rory looked up at Phoebe, as if wondering why I had.

“Because the thing is, Nyx would never want a nightstand that could summon a drunken and horny version of me.” I stepped closer, my power rising around me, a guard dog eager to protect. “And although I appreciate the thought, I don’t wear silk pajama bottoms, I can’t stand the way they bunch when I turn over in bed.” I looked Rory up and down, his features cold and unsure. “I prefer to sleep naked.”

“Don’t you trust Maeve?” He cut in.

“Of course I do.” I walked slowly to our table, picked up a flute between two fingers, and looked up at him through my lashes as I took a slow sip. “Remember that question you wanted me to ask you?”

“Of course I do.” What is he mocking me now?

“Once I realized that there were gaps in your knowledge, a major shock in and of itself, I decided to test a theory. I created a room, silken with plenty of champagne to spare, and unbeknownst to you, I enchanted it.”

Rory’s eyes darted to the small room I created, looking for answers.

“It’s a simple thing really, a sprinkle of lady’s mantle can conceal power from even a being such as yourself. Especially if, say, I learned a new trade from our friend with the mind tricks. Well, even a Primordial like yourself wouldn’t be able to tell an infiltrated mind from a champagne buzz.”

“What did you do?” Rory said accusingly.

“Will you ask the question or shall I?”

“What did you *DO?*” Phoebe and Marcellus gasped at Rory’s shaky scream.

“It’s an important question for anyone faced with omnipotence, the *knowledge and possibility of all things*, as our red-haired friend would call it.” Rory tried moving around the room, looking for an answer, but I reached out my hand, stunning his power, an equal match to my own, only I had the advantage now that I had him scared. It was cruel, but necessary. “It’s the most obvious question, only, what will happen if I ask it?” Phoebe yelled my name, realizing she couldn’t get down. Marcellus beat his hands on the hardened air, it did nothing. “*Does the knowing drive you mad?*”

“*STOP.*” Rory screamed, the plea too similar to Nyx’s earlier that day. I had gotten my answer, it was time to release his burden.

“The question’s been asked, and the answer is all around us.” I let my power swirl around me, glowing with the same pearly fire in my eyes. “Do you know the problem with being a Primordial, Mr. Borealis?” He fell to his knees under my hold, the people around us flickered along with the light in the sky. “You’re not the only one.” I let my power fill the entire room, sending each guest back to where they came.

To Rory.

Marcellus and Phoebe slowly lowered to the ground, and quickly ran to me. Neither of them could come up with anything to say. This side of me was a little unexpected, but every broken woman is allowed to go a little crazy every once in a while, right? If we’re already stereotyped as crazy, rather than our perpetrators as cruel, why not take advantage?

I walked to where Rory laid on the ground, his head in his hands, and I crouched down, rubbing his back, sending my peace within him.

“Maeve once told me a story of a timeless boy, careless and free, until he was betrayed by an equal. He blamed himself for the consequences of his trust, and ran away. He isolated himself from the rest of the world as punishment. They say he went mad.”

“What’s goin’ on, Rae?” Phoebe stepped closer to me, and I could feel the fear and confusion radiating off her sweaty skin. I turned to her, and gave her a look that would ease that anxiety.

“So, I’ll ask you again, Rory.” I put my hand to his head, and willed stillness into the mind I infiltrated while everyone underestimated my hurry to drink in excess. But that’s what girls are expected to do, right? Get drunk and cry over boys. Not this one, not me. “What has the madness done to you, my friend?”

“It’s too loud, it’s all too loud.” Rory cried into the sleeves of his suit. “Make it stop. MAKE IT STOP.”

“I know.” I could feel Phoebe’s gaze shoot to me without looking at her. “No more lies, I will help you carry this burden, if you promise there will be no more lies. You chose this body so I would like you, and trust you, now it’s your turn to trust me.”

“How?” He lifted his head, tears falling down his red face.

I held up my hand, palm facing upwards. “Unlimited potential, and heaps of repression. You give me your pain, the vast nothingness and the vast everything, as much as you need to, and I’ll hold it for you.”

“Rae,” Marcellus stepped towards me, “that’s too much.”

“Give me what you need to let go, and I promise you the noise will grow quieter.” I smiled down at Rory, feeling guilty for circling him like a predator, but it had to be done. “You’ve tortured yourself for long enough, you sweet timeless boy.”

Rory pushed himself to sit up, and cautiously placed his hand in mine. My head flew back with the force of the power he sent inside me. I clenched my teeth in the effort not to scream. I realized then, there was a reason I could stay silent when in excruciating pain. A reason I didn’t flinch when Rory grabbed my hand. Torture was an old acquaintance.

“That’s *enough*.” Marcellus demanded. I pulled my hand from Rory’s, and he gasped in response. His head bowed to the floor.

“Alright then,” I clapped my hands together, “Shall we go watch these *orbs of light dash across the sky*?” I used hand quotes around the description Rory had given me of his beloved Luxanima.

Phoebe and Mar looked at each other, then back at me. I turned on my heels and walked towards the biggest balcony at the end of the Great Hall.

“Why didn’t he know anytin’ about y’or Nyx?” Phoebe asked from behind me. I didn’t know she heard that part, she looked so lost in her own world. I guess my fairy-like Goddess of a friend is just as territorial and protective of me as I am of her. She *must* realize that demigods rarely have immortal hearing, right?

“A Primordial has the ability to see everything, know everything, and do anything. But, instead of accessing it like a tether, obtainable at any moment, he let it all in.” I shook my head, trying to shake away the memory. “I went into his mind, only for a moment, but what I saw... what I *felt*... he’s weak, completely overwhelmed. He self-actualized his own hell, which made him vulnerable to other Primordials. And when you know everything about everything, you have the ability to change fate, which other Primordials then can’t predict. A Primordial’s only Achilles heel, is each other. They know everything that happens, so when they change fate, time becomes fixed at that point. Nyx and I are Primordials who don’t know everything, so everything we do is a fixed moment in time. No Primordial can foresee what we do, or really, who we are.”

“Nyx is a Primordial?” Mar said under his breath.

“I think he’s Chaos.” I looked to the ground, remembering how it felt to touch him, the burning. “I think he knows it too. But that means...”

“If he releases his power...” Phoebe turned to Mar, whose face went pale, “ya die.”

“He thinks that if we release Chaos, the prophecy won’t come true. Because as it states, Chaos is released when the Divine Feminine takes her last breath, so he thinks if we can release Chaos, I won’t have to take my last breath.” I shook my head, wishing I could take the memory of myself from

my loved ones and run away. If I'm going to die, Gods please don't let them mourn me. Please don't hurt them.

I'm running out of time, I can feel it. My eternal life felt riddled with urgency. I wonder if this is what drew me to humans. I wonder if my fascination with their mortal life was a premonition, as if I looked into a mirror that I thought was a window. One day, I'm unbreakable, the next, I'm crawling on thin ice, praying for every second I'm given. When blessed with forever, it's easy to waste time. My Gods, have I wasted mine.

"There's never been a prophecy that hasn't come true." Marcellus said, looking to the sky as we approached the balcony.

"I know." I whispered, trying not to let my voice break.

"What about..." Phoebe turned to Rory who sat panting on the floor, giggling softly. I flicked my fingers beside me as I walked, and Mar yelped as Rory disappeared.

"He needs to rest, I assume he hasn't had any for the last..." I moved my head side to side, doing some quick math, "billion years."

"That's going to be a long nap." Marcellus said while looking back at the space where he once sat.

"No more talk of sleep." I closed my eyes as Rory's power seemed to have sprung a slow leak of rage in my mind. "We look fucking incredible and I'll be damned if we waste this opportunity to dance at a Godsdamn ball with a bunch of brainless extras." I snapped my finger, feeling a little drunk with power, and also... a little drunk... and suddenly all of Rory's guests reappeared.

"Now we're talkin'." Phoebe lifted her dress as she trotted over to a table to grab a bottle of champagne, just to quickly turn around and grab another one.

"Uh oh." We both looked at Marcellus with bunched eyebrows. "Excessive cursing usually means Rage Rae is joining us."

Phoebe lifted her hand as if to grab my arm, and I knew immediately that she was about to check my emotional state. The fact that she wasn't going to ask if it was okay made give her my death stare.

"Good catch, mo leannan." Phoebe said without taking her eyes off of me.

“You know what,” I snatched a bottle out of Phoebe’s hand and promptly took a very large drink.

“Oh wow.”

“I think it’s time for Rage Rae to do what she does best.” I hiked up my dress and scurried over to where several guests were looking robotically casual. I held out my hand, offering it to my friends, and as my smile grew, I let Rory’s power amplify my ability to send music into the room, and I thought of which song from my *dance until it stops hurting* playlist, ready to fill the room just as I said, “Rage.”

Loud bass and a beautiful symphony of harmonies filled the giant room, making my friends jump. It took Marcellus only a moment to start jumping wildly, as if the song demanded it. Phoebe threw back one of the bottles in her hands and set them on the floor before running to where Marcellus and I were now twirling each other and laughing.

I ran my fingers up my body as I let my hips roll, my mind falling into the beat of a song that always helped me lose myself. I let my head fall back as I enchanted each guest to dance like their favorite song is playing. It seemed to make my family happy as they both squealed and somehow danced even harder.

I couldn’t help but find myself curling over laughing at the sight of Marcellus throwing his body around, eyes closed, as he carelessly let the next song puppeteer his limbs.

Phoebe and I grabbed hands, spinning in a circle, going faster and faster until I thought I might fall from laughter alone.

“You guys want to feel like you’re in a movie?” I yelled between songs. I realized after moving my hips slowly before the bass drop of the last song that the sliver of Rory’s power I have holds within it a very important piece of his Primordial power: Time.

I just held their eye contact, urging them to follow after me, and I jumped wildly at the fast paced swell of the song.

“Ready?” I nearly screamed. I threw my hands up as I slowly time itself, Marcellus’s eyes widened and Phoebe’s smile grew in slow motion. We were now all experiencing time at half-speed. It felt like moving in low gravity,

even my thoughts seemed to slow, the pressure release of their unrelenting presence eased a tense part of me.

I let my head fall back, savoring the thick feel of the air, the comforting embrace becoming a scratched itch. I looked to Phoebe, whose eyes moved slowly past my shoulder. Her features softened at whatever it was she saw.

I turned my head, though I already knew what I was going to find. My subconscious became aware before I did, instructing the guests to clear a path. His gentle and yet consuming presence was unmistakable. I'd recognize him even if I had sped up time, so much so that all things moved like lightning. Not even the Primordial boundaries of space and time could dampen our entangled souls. Nyx.

He was wearing the most incredible satin dress shirt, loosely fitted, in an ethereal cream. His pants were the most beautiful sage, fitted so perfectly to his muscular thighs that I could see them flex as he walked. His wings were in the fold, and I hated to admit that I missed them.

As our eyes locked, I didn't loosen my grip on Rory's powers, not when it gave me the opportunity to drink more of him in. To notice that which time deprives me of: the twitch of his finger when I move my eyes down his arm or the nearly imperceptible rise of his eyebrows when I meet his eyes once more.

Just before he reached us, I let go of Rory's ability, and flinched as the music resumed pace and Nyx took his last few steps towards us.

We just stared at each other. Paralyzed by possibility.

"I thought maybe you weren't going to come." I wasn't sure what to say, or how he felt. I only knew that I was fighting the urge to let my walls climb, to let the rage that clawed on my inner mind to burst through and destroy his hope. To destroy mine. Because maybe it was easier to imprison my heart than risk poisoning his.

"I couldn't seem to stay away."

"You look..." I inhaled slowly, lifting my chin. "*Good.*"

"You are exquisite in black, Rae Andino." His smirk made me shiver, and he seemed to take pride in it as he bit his bottom lip. Prick.

“Are you two goin’ to dance or play chicken?” Phoebe shouted from behind us, making me remember we weren’t alone.

I couldn’t resist that the next song had my body swaying slightly, though I resented the movement, because I wasn’t the one who sent it into the room. Nyx memorized my playlists as if they were vows.

His smirk made me bite my cheeks, fighting every urge to jump on him. Gods if he wasn’t the most enchanting thing I’ve ever seen. He let his head fall back slightly as his shoulders moved in a slow figure eight. Every mannerism, every movement, had me in a trance.

His eyes quickly moved to the space behind me, and in a second he was running towards it, grabbing Phoebe’s hand on the way.

“Mar,” He shouted to our adorable friend who was dancing in the most ridiculous way before he shot to attention and promptly grabbed my hand, pulling me towards where Nyx and Phoebe giggled wildly.

And in the absence of his power as thick as black fire, begging for an answer to a question I have never thought myself deserving enough to ask, I let myself pretend. Pretend that I’m not a walking contradiction. A woman preaching self-love, and yet hating herself for how she cannot love him. That she doesn’t know how. I will pretend, for tonight, that I can be the version of myself that he aches for. For him, I will try to make her real.

I only hope it feels good enough, possible enough, that I can leave my own self-destructive habits in this timeless place, and find peace.

As colors outlined Marcellus’s figure from where he ran in front of me, like we made our way towards a sapphire and emerald chandelier, I nearly tripped—in both meanings of the word—from how mesmerizing it was.

He slowed, and as he stopped, Mar looked back to me, smiling with wonder. I moved past his broad shoulders, dropping his hand at what I saw.

Luxanima was in full effect, orbs of light racing south. Each Star had the most beautiful glow encased by a smoky power of either green or blue. It was nothing if not celestial. Heavenly in their delicate approach, a yearning voyage to places beyond.

“Oh, to be a Star on my way home.” I nearly whispered.

“I look forward to this holiday every year.” Nyx said as if he were enchanted by some all-consuming force, and I hadn’t realized he was standing behind me, his voice having the same effect on me.

I turned to him, needing to expel the shiver that he had sent down my spine, and before I knew what I had done, I took a quick step towards him.

He retreated, ever so slightly, and I felt my heart shatter. He was so incandescently beautiful with the star’s light decorating his face, and maybe that’s what hurt the most. Shame hardened my face, and just as he moved forward and opened his mouth, I turned back to the view, placing my hands on the stone balcony.

I closed my eyes as I inhaled slowly. I was angry. So fucking angry. At myself, at those who forced me into the cage that was my mind. At my inability to trust the very person I want to the most.

Stone cracked under my grip.

“Rae?” Phoebe said with surprise. “How much of Rory’s power did ya take?”

“I can’t let this *bullshit* ruin such a perfect moment with my family.” Rage Rae had simmered in broken defeat. “This won’t be my future.”

Marcellus pushed my hair behind my shoulder, his large hand rubbing my back as he looked down at me.

Familiar footsteps faded into the clamor of the crowd behind us. I looked back to find Nyx walking away, knuckles white as his fists were held tightly at his side.

“Where are yo—” I called after him in the moment he disappeared. And that *really* pissed me off.

I lifted my dress as I took a step and Appeared to his room.

He was standing before the open French doors, the light of the Stars lining his perfect figure.

“What the *hell*, Nyx?” I barked at him.

“This is an important night to me, Rae.” My name sent some foreign and ugly emotion into my body, and I wanted to pounce.

“Well, then. Sorry to intrude.” I turned to leave. But my anger sent me quickly turning back, storming his way.

“Do you know why?” He turned to me, a look in his eyes I’ve never seen. Something between quiet rage and primal need.

An entire Valkyrien fleet cannot stop me, but one look from him has trapped me within myself. I only shook my head, unable to break our eye contact.

“Do you remember when I told you about when my parents finally admitted their feelings to each other?”

“Yes. There’s a painting of them. Colors splashed against their skin as they laughed. You always said it perfectly depicted love and devotion.”

“Those colors, were from two Luxanima Stars.”

He took a single step towards me, and up came my walls, brick by brick, my hands bleeding from trying to tear them down as they rose high above me.

“So... that’s what this night is to you?” I summed a glass of white willow bark and threw it back. “Is that what this night is for *us*?”

“Need to be drunk to be around me, is that it?”

“Yes, actually.” I said too loudly. “I’m never going to be able to give you what they have.” I summoned another glass. “Not when my love barely extends to myself these days.”

“Rae I never said—”

“I humiliated you.” I threw the drink back. “I was so cruel.”

“I don’t want to talk about—”

“Believe me, I hate myself for it. I will *not* spoil the *perfection* that is your every atom with the destruction and death and *darkness* that follows me. I don’t know what you think this could be—”

“Everything.” He cut me off, just as I had been doing to him, not wanting to hear his retort, his siren sweet voice.

“You can’t just...” I took a step towards him, another glass summoned to my tingling hands.

“You’re everything—*everything* to me.” The rage in his eyes returned, and I wanted to run towards it, but all I could do was shake my head.

“You don’t understand.”

“I do. Maybe that’s what scares you the most. I *do* understand.” He took a step towards me. “I know you, *all* of you. And I *love* you, *all* of you.

Your soul is equally as beautiful and riddled with darkness as my own. Your denial does not make you any less mine, or I any less yours.”

“Good.” I drank the last glass back quickly.

“Stop doing—”

I threw the glass on the ground, sending Nyx back a step in surprise as confusion stopped his words from forming. I grabbed a piece of glass and made my skin fragile as I ran it along my palm, drawing my luminescent blood to the surface. It didn’t hurt.

“Stop, stop, stop.” His words were so frantic and instant like they were pulled from a painful memory. He launched forward, grabbing my forearms, watching the cut fade as my skin wove itself back together.

I let my eyes close through medicinal buzzing that filled my body. He made to pull back, but I grabbed his wrists.

“Why did you do that?” His demand was anything but understanding. “Darling, you can’t just—”

I only looked up at him, running my hands up his arms.

“So I could do this.”

To be continued.

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