



PATHICAL

PART I



V.H. FAOLAN

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War

Panic attacks/disorders

Vomit

Emotional abuse

Animal cruelty

Sexual content

Domestic abuse

Sexual harassment

Blood

Grief

Xenophobia

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Gore

Murder

Cursing

Alcoholism

Sexual assault

Stalking

MODERATE

Bullying

Rape

Toxic relationship

Suicidal thoughts

Toxic friendship

Misogyny

MINOR

Alcohol

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS, ETC. IF YOU ARE IN ANY
WAY UNCOMFORTABLE WITH OR
JUDGMENTAL OF ANY OF THESE, THEN
PATHICAL IS NOT FOR YOU.

*To those who were never loved properly, who gave
their all and it still wasn't enough – this is for
you. May you find your mate in the midst of the
chaos and may your love echo throughout eternity.*

~V

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PROLOGUE

KATALINA

~ APRIL 17TH, 2020 – ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN – 12:23

PM ~

When your world collapses, who do you want to be? That's a question I now ask myself. When we're young, it is rare that we think of such things. We are trained to focus on the latter of the question, never the former. But that isn't all.

We are trained to focus on rising up in the world we are born into. Whether you're rich or poor, we are always striving to become more. Like me, some are never fully satisfied with their lives. Deep down, there is a calling sealed within our hearts. One that makes sense. Makes us whole.

So, what did I want to be when I was younger? I can't remember what came first... Was it being an Olympic horseback riding champion? Was it being a renowned artist? Was it owning an equestrian stable of my own? Was it being the princess of my own castle? Was it being a singer? A dancer? A musician?

Thinking back, I never wanted to be just one thing. I wanted to be me while achieving every dream I dreamt. Quickly... I was made to realize that the more you spoke of your dreams, the less easy it was to find those who would encourage such aspirations. And when you try to be your own encouragement, some who you want to share your successes with... shoot you down.

Depression and anxiety take over as the years press on. The image you have of your young life begins to fade. You lose direction, motivation and purpose. You worry about what others think and say, not because you want to but because you've been conditioned to. You give your heart and time to those who misuse and abuse both. You seclude yourself little by little until... You end up in the dark.

Simple things hold less meaning, less joy. You feel the need to force a smile. Love seems so conditional to you, now, and yet... You can't help but dare to continue dreaming. Letting your mind slip into daydreams you thought you long passed and those you think you'll never find.

I allow myself to drift into those poofy, silk gowns, my body swaying with the motion of the navy-blue carriage pulled by Andalusians. To run barefoot down the massive, stone halls lined with endless carpets, antique décor and rich and vibrant colors. To bake with my husband and our children, laughing and being the weirdos we are.

To gallop through the mountains on a dapple-grey mare, the fresh air combing through my curls. To loose arrows and knives into homemade targets as I weave through obstacles. To dance various dances with many a people who enjoy every culture just like me. To kiss in the rain. To surrender myself to my man without worry he'll harm me. That I reach new realms of pleasure and acceptance I've never had with anyone else. That he too will feel the same with me.

To play the violin, piano or guitar whenever I feel like. To climb without fear of heights. To lift hundreds of pounds. To defend myself and others with ease. To travel to lands that need aid and be able to make a difference – no matter how small – that sticks, and pushes progress forward, not keep current conditions stagnant. To save species that are essential and are hardly ever considered. To reach spiritual awareness. To be able to garden – which is harder than I thought it to be. To create life-like works of art, whether through the brush or through the chisel. To write stories of werewolves, vampires and magic.

Alas, I'm confined to my desk, wondering what comes next. I'm broke as a joke. This society sucks ass. And the men are lack luster in terms of morals and personality. I've considered dating women but, personally, it's not for me – I love dick too much.

Closing my laptop, I peer down at Ina curled against my right foot, her head resting on the poofy, powder blue kitten on my slipper. She sighs deeply, her legs twitching and lips flapping as she lets out a little whine. I snort to myself.

It's hard to believe this little girl was that shivering skeleton on the back of that pickup months ago.

On an evening road trip home from grandma Rae's, I stopped at a gas station for an energy drink. On my way out, I heard something from a black pickup. I got a little closer and caught a glimpse of a wired cage. Freezing rain was pelting on the hood of my jacket. Against all logic, my gut had me peeking into

the back of that truck. There Ina was – soaked to the bone, malnourished and crying for shelter. I yanked out my phone, took a picture and video of her, and a picture of the license plate and the make and model of the truck.

When I was done, I put on my flashlight to get a longer look at her. Her gold eyes met mine at the same moment that bastard came out, throwing a fit. I was about to tell him off when I calmly asked him if she's for sale. The sleaze ball wanted a thousand. He was practically jumping for joy when he saw me pull out my wallet.

Boy was he in for a surprise when I offered three hundred in one-hundred-dollar bills. He hit my hand away, scolding me.

"You think I'm some kind of chump?!" he bellowed.

"Only a chump would have an illegal animal in his possession for everyone to see. You can either take the three-hundred and give me everything this animal comes with. Or – " I showed him a flash taken picture of Ina then this license plate. " – I post these all over social media and call the authorities."

Thankfully, he was the type to shit his pants rather than cause a scene. With a sneer, he snatched the money from my hand, shoved passed me and yanked his trunk open. Thankfully, it was a small gas station, and the car before us had already left. After handing me her muzzle leash and papers he had on her, he didn't bother helping me with the crate. He just got in his truck and waited for me to get her out.

Ina was not happy with me moving her crate or being so close to her. It didn't help when the asshole decided to honk his horn. She growled the entire time. Talking her through every step of getting her into my car – Thunder – was as much for my benefit as hers.

On the ride home she would make noises in the back seat, letting me know she wouldn't stand for any funny business. She's been spunky from the very start, just like I am deep down. Smuggling her inside my apartment was a challenge but it worked. I didn't think through everything else. I was flying on the seat of my pants with getting her settled for a few days. Everything I ordered seemed to trickle in at a snail's pace.

The same night I brought her in; I read her papers. It said she was a wolfdog – more wolf than dog, clearly. Thankfully, our apartment has no breed restrictions so I was able to put her on the lease without any issues. I was surprised at how she almost immediately took to not only me, but to being leashed, walked, socializing with other humans and passing dogs, getting washed, fed and so on.

It was as if she understood she was safe. She put on muscle and necessary fat within months. Her fur grew fluffy and soft. She became a princess practically overnight. Sometimes I wish that would happen to me; becoming a princess, living carefree.

Hands threaded on my stomach, I lean back in my office chair, chin tipped to the ceiling.

I'm twenty-two years old and life has already fucked me into societal submission. Son of a bitch. The only thing I want fucking me is a six-foot something, cool drink of water with emotional intelligence, loyalty, honesty and the ability to be as goofy as he is serious.

I sigh through my nostrils. *Does a man like that exist for me in real life? If so, when?*

Will it be instant for both of us? Then again, one day of meeting doesn't create love... Right? Perhaps, it *feels* like you love someone, but it doesn't mean you love them.

Love never seemed to be in the cards for me. The courting, being tended to while I'm sick, being held while I'm falling apart, receiving gifts from the heart, taking the time to know me, them opening up to me, spending time together and being lovey-dovey and carefree – I've never had that.

Whenever I think about it, it feels like a crime that I've been alone all this time. Granted I'm young but seeing so many people I've known and know have relationships, it makes me ache. Crushes are as far as I came throughout my younger school years. To this day, I've gone on a few dates and had a couple failed relationships and situationships.

Romance novels, music, movies and shows – they make love seem possible no matter where we are in life. If it was that simple... so many of us wouldn't struggle to find it.

I sigh as I look back on a life I never knew. A fairy tale, of all things, that will doubtfully come true – for me, at least. I wish

I were so lucky but I'm not in a novel, nor film, nor show of any kind. Until I finish with this chapter of my seemingly never-ending story, my prince will have to wait.

Oh, to be in love. To care for someone and to have your love reciprocated without doubt. What a wonderful dream...

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BROKEN KING

JEROPH

~ 1873 - DEEP IN THE MOUNTAINS OF EUROPE ~

What does it mean to be a king? How is one deemed a royal? Eras of empires, kingdoms – each having been ruled by a soul or a pair. Nowadays lands across the world are known by other names, conquered by countless individuals who hunger for power in its cruelest form. I recall a time when most wars were waged by royals who led their soldiers into battle. Royals who did not cower behind their people. Any king and queen who had done so were met by revolt or were left to fend for themselves without a people.

Now, we have entered generations of those who no longer hold honor above criminal acts. There is no justice. There is no sense of right. Wrong is blended so it may be deemed justified. Corruption lurks in the brightest corners of the world and yet, we have softened in the wake of darkness. Some surrender to it because their fight faded long ago alongside the fire that burned within their ancestors. Whilst others fight in the name of peace and are reprimanded by their rulers. Why?

When was it deemed that to be a ruler you must be cruel?
When was it deemed that a ruler must represent deceit over truth?

How is it that a lack of morality means that you are a strong leader? I asked our father countless times what it meant to be a king in his eyes.

He would stare into the distance or stare straight through me. Only then would he bestow a recurring answer, "To question is to know the true meaning of being a ruler."

To this day, his answer tumbles restlessly about my mind. Like many other beings, he kept his secrets sealed inside himself. Even in death, he is still a mystery to everyone who knew him. Our father should be sitting upon this throne discussing matters of state with the clansmen. Not I. The clanswoman who is cowering before my brothers and I is proof of this.

She bows hesitantly doing all she can to not meet my gaze. "Th-th-thank you, your majesty," she stutters.

My chest tightens as she scurries from the Persian Hall. Centuries past, when father had brought me to Tiscareno Manor, these reactions were a common occurrence. Not only was I a newcomer, but I was also an unpredictable, blood lusting monstrosity. A tool used for laying waste to any my former master deemed unfit to breathe. Back then, I cared not for emotional attachments, nor the fear I caused. It was insatiable. Addicting. Rare was it that I showed any morsal of compassion or conscience. If I had, I would be met with unspeakable horrors.

“Fear is the mark of the power you hold that others wish they could attain,” my master said. “Be proud you tower over them with the strength you carry.”

When I heard those words, I was already at the mercy of his treachery. I recall swelling with pride. Or... what I believed pride to be.

Father took a chance on me. On us. My wolf Conri and I were separated from the moment my former master changed me. Within this manor, I began to care, again. Father, Uncle Hiram and a brave few helped Conri and I – separated yet one being. Not the whole Mad Wolf our former master bred us to be from the moment power coursed through my veins.

Through my lessons, I learned that I had locked Conri away, very similarly to how Ares is, today; forced to become a prisoner and bystander. Never heard, never known to me nor I him as we should have whence, I was turned.

Overtime, I began to speak with Conri and he with me. Through our knowing each other, came understanding of what being a werewolf *truly* meant. As werewolves, our wolves have a space within us for which they reside. They are a secondary soul, one that is born of our true nature. What our former master created – our persona as Ares – we still know not why he is now separate. According to our uncle, Ares should have been no more than that; a persona. So why does he exist?

Decades passed before we had earned the clan's trust that we would not turn into the beast we once were. Today, it pains us that we are once again that untrustworthy outsider.

My youngest brother, Defretreie, sneers at the empty archway of the Persian Hall we sit within. "Spineless whelp," he spits.

Riordan, my second youngest, reprimands him with a snarl before I can. Rather than return it, Defretreie clamps his mouth shut as we await the next clansman.

The title of king was bestowed upon me by our father – King Bale. His final wish was that I become King of the Tiscareno Clan in his place. I, who am undeserving in this cursed, fragile state I have been in since his murder. A day we will not soon forget. Our father knew each of us as well as he knew our wolves. He understood that out of the four... *three* of us, Riordan has control.

He can stroll through our marble halls and converse with our clansmen, without worry that his demons may take hold. His mien comforts our people – they approach him with ease, seeking counsel for their troubles. Often, he must relay their concerns to me himself because they are afraid of me. That is how it has been since our father's death. I long for the days when everyone had approached me without hesitation, but more than that, I long for those when our father was still breathing.

Before her hurried exit, I granted the clanswoman the lands she sought for her crops to prosper so that she may continue providing our clan with food and herbs. From what I recall, she is mated to a

Tiscareno Omega. Who – like many – is also very wary of my presence.

Though I have shared over two hundred centuries here, many a name are lost on Conri and I. These days, I can only identify most of our clansmen by face, rank and scent. Unfortunately, the same is true for my pack – the Beckman Pack. It is my mental curse. One for which I have found no cure. If only that were the only curse I bare. Lately, Ares has been emerging, unprovoked and without permission from Conri nor myself.

This afternoon, I would have slaughtered our healer and dearest friend, Genevieve, had Callum – my Beta and best friend – and Uncle Hiram not arrived at the Azure Ballroom in the south wing of the manor. From what I can recall, she and I were discussing attendance for our annual ball in celebration of father's memory. 'Of a sudden, the hall became drenched in garnet hues before everything became pitch black.

Sturdy as werewolves may be, we are not immune to pain of being thrown into a marble pillar by one of our own. My head still aches at its base from the impact. It has been weeks without incident and yet, this afternoon, Ares emerged. *Again.*

The only clue I have as to why this is happening is when they began – just after father's murder. Conri and I had thought Ares a distant memory. Conri's sanctuary – the space he resides freely – was once filled with sprawling forests, mountains and streams. As the years came and went, it began to fade and Ares's chained prison

became the forefront. Now, there is nothing but a sprawling black nothingness with Conri pacing about, aimlessly.

With every wary clansman who enters this Hall, I am immediately transported back into that hallway. Haunted by the memory of Genevieve cowering, clinging to Callum for support as he helped her to her feet. I will never forget the betrayal in her eyes as they walked away. The full strength of my uncle restraining me in a headlock that nearly rendered me unconscious. The shame of no longer harboring control over the Mad Wolf.

Prison or no, he has found a way to unlock those iron bars whenever he sees fit. And though time has dragged on, I must discover why.

A guard enters the Hall, snapping me from my thoughts. He halts at the foot of the steps leading to our thrones. Head bowed, fist over his heart, he takes a knee. "Your majesties." He lifts his head and is cautious not to meet my eye. "Our hunters have discovered a group of felines and another unknown. One of the hunters believes that the unknown is a hybrid with wolf's blood."

"You allowed *cats* into our territory?!" Defretreie bellows. "How-!"

"Defretreie," I boom. He quiets though his scent is brimming with rage. I address the guard, "Forgive our brother. Have the hunters made contact?"

He pales though I hold no anger toward him. His eyes dart to the floor. "No, your majesty. There was no need. A male tiger from

their group came to our hunters in human form. He claims he is their leader. He is just outside.” He pauses. “He wishes to have an audience with you...” He glances at my brothers sitting upon their thrones on either side of me. “All of you.”

Defretreie growls. “Tell this tiger we have no desire to hear –

“I believe he was speaking to *Jeroph*,” Riordan interjects.

The snapping of wood accompanies Defretreie’s scent of anger as it permeates the Hall.

“And if we are to put it to a vote, you are outnumbered two to one,” Riordan adds smugly.

Defretreie’s throne creaks as he falls against the backrest, his annoyance and anger further tainting the room.

I straighten my posture. “Escort him in.”

The guard stands and bows his head once before exiting the Hall. Minutes pass and soon our noses are gradually fed potent doses of the tiger’s scent as they approach the towering ogee doorway. Riordan and I ignore Defretreie’s growls of protest as our guest trails behind the guards. When they reach the steps, our men greet us in the same manner as the last while our guest remains standing, admiring the Hall.

“Are there any other clansmen who have concerns they wish to discuss?” I inquire.

The guard at the far-left flinches at the sound of my voice. I press my lips into a hard line as I ignore the knot in the pit of my stomach.

I open a private link between Riordan and me. *‘Best you speak to them.*

‘Cowards.’ The scent of his irritation joins Defretre’s in the Hall. The guards watching the door tense alongside those at the foot of the steps.

“Should I have to continuously address you because you fear my brother, I dare say that there will be *two* ill-tempered wolves. *Answer. His. Question,*” Riordan commands. His tone is cold, contrasting with the burning anger in his hazel eyes.

The flinching guard peers up at me. “My apologies, your majesty.” My heart clenches as he gulps, immediately dropping his troubled gaze to the floor.

The stench of his fear tickles my nose. Something about this clansman’s fear compared to the others, spurs the monster within. Chains clank loudly against iron in the void of Conri’s sanctuary. My sadness of being feared merges with the bloodlust seeping from Ares’ prison. I crane my neck, clenching my jaw as I fight for restraint.

Our clansmen know not to show fear, but they cannot help themselves. I cannot blame them.

Tension collects along my back and my muscles heat beneath my skin. Riordan and Defretre reach out to me through our individual bonds to one another. Uncle and Callum soon follow suit from

wherever they are, now. They offer comfort; nudging Conri and I through the bonds.

Though my body settles, the heat behind my eyes tells me my irises are still the brilliant gold speckled emerald of Conri's. Noticing the change, the guard cannot help trembling. His comrades' irritation at him outweighs their lingering fear of me.

Riordan's growl causes the guard to jump. "Gather your thoughts, soldier," my brother commands.

The guard's voice is barely above a whisper when he speaks, "There are no others, your majesties."

Riordan watches him for a time then dismisses the lot. "We shall take it from here."

Each guard mimics the previous guard's departure in unison.

'I will speak with him,' Riordan grumbles.

No need. I swallow the lump in my throat and cut the link.

Hands clammy, I peer into Conri's corner of our shared being. He sneezes, wrinkling his wet nose. *How much longer must we endure this?*

Soon, we will be able to retire to our chambers and return to seclusion, I assure him.

Assure him as I try, we know the true nature of his question, and the lack luster answer attached to it.

Our guest observed our exchange with the guards without so much as a twinge of fear. The ghost of a pleasant smile plays on his lips. Curious, I tune into my senses and inspect him.

His heartbeat is steady – there is nary a whiff of fear seeping from his skin. What is more perplexing is that he *willingly* entered wolf territory. ‘Tis not often that felines fraternize with wolves. In fact, it is rarely heard of. We keep to our own – that is how it has been for ages. According to father, when he taught us this, he claimed to have hosted felines prior to our arrival.

I wonder...

“Our guard tells us that you approached our hunters and requested an audience.” I pause to give him a chance to reply but he simply stares. “What is it that you wish to discuss?”

He crosses his left forearm across his chest and bows, his head low. “Prince Jeroph Beckman. A great wolf who is soon-to-be King Beckman of the Tiscarenos.” He up rights himself and is bold enough to lock gazes with me. “My name is Quiffen Butler. I am a tiger from across the seas. My Roma and I humbly ask to reside in your territory for a week’s time.”

“Your *kind* are not welcome on Tiscareno soil,” Defrettrie mutters at my right.

“Hold. Your. Tongue, brother,” Riordan snips. “It is *Jeroph’s* decision. There are many here who care not if our guests are wolves or otherwise. Do *not* make the mistake of speaking for the rest of us. *Especially* in the place of our future king.”

I sense Riordan’s wolf – Cacil – wavering close to the surface at my left causing Conri to stir. Cacil and Conri have always had this effect on one another. Riordan and I soon realized it is because we

share the same mother. When we first met, we had little to go on. We looked similar, acted alike in many a way. However, it was not until father came across our mother's last letter that it was confirmed.

I crane my neck marginally to the right and close my eyes as I struggle to contain Conri. Ares's shackles clank against the iron bars of his cell once more. I grip onto the golden arms of my throne, an itch forming beneath my nails as they begin to lengthen at will.

Cacil contained, Riordan and Defretreie slip into our bond, once more. Their warmth steadies the tornado swirling within.

Confident I am back in control, I study Quiffen further. Light streaming in from the towering arched windows highlight the creases in his sepia skin and provide an unearthly shine to his midnight hair that is sleeked back into a low ponytail. His defining facial features make him appear as though he is in his late fifties. His beige overcoat differs from the fresh, colorful ensemble he wears beneath. His scent is mixed with fourteen others. One reaches out to me in familiarity – a hybrid wolf.

As I furrow my brow in curiosity of this outsider, the corners of his lips tug higher.

"I have no reason to fear what I do not know, your majesty," he replies to my unspoken question. "I am a humble traveler, who yearns for a better future for my people and creatures who are misplaced in the human realm. Be that said..." He steps forward and Defretreie rises from his seat, mirroring him. Quiffen halts with a grin. Oak and wisteria – a scent of one impressed – wafts from him.

Who is this man?

“Will your majesties come to our camp so we may prove we bear no ill will? You may bring as many of your clan as you see fit. On my honor, we do not intend any trickery.” He bows again, lower than before, then holds perfectly still.

Riordan slinks into my mind. *‘This may be a trick, brother...’* He pauses, considering our guest *‘However, I believe it may be worth quenching our curiosity.’* Though intrigue seeps from my brother, he trains a wary eye on Quiffen.

‘They are none of our concern. Let the moggies cower in a cave until daybreak. Our spies will deal with them come sunrise,’ Defretreie barks.

I steal a sideways glare at Defretreie, my emerald eyes daring him to say another ill word. He stiffens, averting his heated gaze to the crimson Persian rug beneath our boots.

Reverting to Quiffen, I say, “That will not be necessary.” He raises his head, peering at me with curiosity. “You needn’t bow ‘to those who are not your leaders,” I clarify. “Four of our men will accompany us to your camp later this evening.”

His chocolate eyes brighten, his scent a mixture of excitement and relief as he stands upright. “Many thanks.” He inclines his head in a bow then pivots on his heel, striding toward the exit. The guards close the double doors behind him as he enters the main hallway.

“Well, that was the most excitement I have had since 1682,” Riordan jests.

THE ROMA

JEROPH

Aside from Defretre's complaints regarding our visit, no further debate was had from then on. As the moon rose into the starry skies, we set out in human form to meet Quiffen and his Roma. The guards informed us that they had made camp three miles from Tiscareno Manor, in a hidden flatland, easily accessible with the help of first light. Drawing from our wolves' abilities, our trek took us mere minutes to arrive. The second we set foot on the perimeter of their camp, I felt somewhat like an outsider on this tiny portion of Tiscareno soil.

No guards were posted; instead, we were greeted by laughter, music, clapping, and intoxicating aromas of an array of foods. Their bonfire draws us into their welcome sea of merriment. Various vibrant colors adorn their tents and wagons. Lanterns are strung about by a single rope that starts and then stops at each roof of the five wagons positioned in the shape of a crescent. From the dancing, music, and gay laughter, it seems we have interrupted a celebration.

Riordan playfully bumps his left shoulder into Defretre's right. "Why not join them?"

Our little brother rolls his eyes. "Why would I join a bunch of moggies?"

The violin I have been enjoying falls out of tune alongside the other instruments. Hisses from nearby bring our attention to the

glowers of the previously celebratory felines. Our men growl in response but a sidelong glance from me silences them, immediately.

“Friends. Let us not fight with our hosts.” Quiffen’s voice comes from the shadows of the burgundy wagon lined in gold trim.

The muscles in my back wither. Conri and I had not smelt him. Shock zips down our bonds, proving that we are not alone in our bewilderment.

Quiffen steps into the dim lighting of the lanterns and strolls over to our group. “I must humbly ask for an apology from you, your majesty.” He locks gazes with Defretreie.

“I do not take orders from a lowly- ACK!” Defretreie hunches over, rubbing the back of his head. He scowls at Riordan who whistles whilst feigning innocence. Defretreie’s upper lip curls. “WHY YOU-!”

“Brothers,” I warn. They train their eyes on me. I narrow my gaze at Defretreie. “You have insulted our hosts. You are no pup; you are a *grown* wolf. Your disrespectful actions will no longer be tolerated. From this moment forward, you are to keep your tongue and mind your manners. *Apologize.*”

He purses his lips as he seldom does when defeated. His upper lip twitches as he tears his gaze from mine to meet Quiffen’s. With a stiff lip, he says, “My apologies to you and yours.”

Humor plays on Quiffen’s features. “The stubborn prince knows his manners after all.”

Riordan covers his laughter with a false cough. Defretreie scowls at him. Quiffen chuckles and pats Defretreie's shoulder hard enough that he nearly causes him to fall forward.

"Many thanks for your apology," Quiffen beams.

After Defretreie responds with a curt bow of his head, he sulks beside Riordan. Though the Roma was visibly hesitant to include our rude little brother, they did their best to be hospitable toward him. Their jolly melody resumed in its full glory, setting the mood for the evening.

Quiffen approaches, then bows as he had in the Hall, but this time, he spreads his arms out like the wings of a hawk. "Do I have your permissions to treat you as kin this evening, your majesties?"

Defretreie's sour thought echoes through our link, '*Suck up.*'

Riordan elbows him in the ribs. Defretreie stifles the sound of his pain. Humor ebbs from Riordan's pores, alongside the guards causing Defretreie to snarl. The guards become rigid; the entire exchange makes me crack a smile.

Stepping forward, Riordan says, "I could use a night off from being bowed to and called 'your majesty.'" He steps to my right. "What say you?" he asks with a grin on his lips.

At times, when I look at Riordan, it is as though I am staring at the reflection of my younger self. The self I have longed to be since I lost my humanity.

I chuckle to myself. "I suppose I could entertain the possibility of being treated as an equal for once rather than a monster."

Defretreie rolls his eyes. "If we must, you had better have good drink," he tells Quiffen.

Quiffen plucks a bottle of what smells of vintage Merlot, from a younger man passing by. They nod to each other, grinning as the young man runs off to join the merriment. Quiffen steps between Riordan and I, turns, then hangs his arms over our shoulders. The bottle in his left hand daggles close to my face.

"Tonight, you are Roma," he announces, earning jeers human and feline, from the Roma. His arms fall away and he steps out in front of us, offering me the bottle. "To the future king," he toasts.

More cheers fill the night, even our guards have a row of their own. My heart swells. It has been ages, since I have seen these men and women become lax in my presence. Let alone that they cheer for my being heir to the Tiscareno throne. Having not taken the bottle myself, Riordan plucks it from Quiffen's grasp then turns toward our company.

Arms spread wide he shouts, "TO MY BROTHER! KING OF THE TISCARENOS! LONG MAY HE REIGN!" After taking a gulp of Merlot, his eyes shift to his wolf's two-tone green and gold. He howls as though he were in wolf form.

The guards and Defretreie follow suit. Soon, the Roma join in their own feline row. Bottle in hand, Riordan points at the guards. "JOIN THE FESTIVITIES! THAT'S AN ORDER!"

They do as commanded, accepting drinks and food offered to them. For once, they are paying me no heed. A hand clasps my

shoulder, by habit, I snarl at the owner. I blink at Quiffen, the corners of his mouth crinkle, framing the grin on his lips. I was so lost in this rare bliss, I had not paid heed to my surroundings. A new, unmarked bottle of – I subtly sniff its scent trail – Brandy lies in his right grasp.

“Come.” Bottle in hand, he sweeps his right arm in gesture to the bond fire surrounded by empty logs.

We weave our way through rollicking bodies. Spirits and wine from the farthest of reaches, fill the air. Much like my pack, apparel from every century is worn by the Roma. Some are from the times of kings and queens. Others, from the time the first gun was invented.

Halfway through crowded bodies, to our left, is a woman with a tin of coffee in hand whose begun her shift. I gape as her tan, black spotted fur seeps from her pores, her face becoming more feline than human. She sprouts like a bean stalk, her bare feet lengthening until she towers over the masses. It takes mere seconds for her to become a jaguar with glimmering teal eyes. Her tail skims the ground, swaying to the music with the rest of her bipedal form. The control she has over her feline half is truly astounding.

Sensing my gaze she stops, pinning me with a questioning look over her left shoulder. Flushing, I bow my head in apology. She regards me for a moment then nods, granting me forgiveness. At the edge of the festivities, the bond fire awaits. Its roaring flames greet Quiffen and I, popping and crackling inside its cozy trench. Quiffen takes the nearest log at the right, whilst I proceed to take the left.

The fire reflects in his dark eyes. “Bale wanted you to know me in this setting, rather than amongst the – what do you call it? The ‘common folk?’” He offers me a knowing smile, my shock not bothering him in the slightest.

Shock fills Conri and I from our clansmen and brothers. Our father had many friends and acquaintances from his travels. Whether you loved him, hated him, admired him, or simply had knowledge of his name or the strides he has made for supernatural beings across the globe. He is known by even the tiniest of villages still secluded, in secret.

To this day, people whisper about ‘the fallen king.’ ‘The proud wolf who allowed his human counterpart to cloud his judgement, thus leading to his demise.’ None of which is true. Pray tell, what would Quiffen know of it?

Is he one of the felines father spoke of?

Quiffen takes a swig of Brandy then admires the bottle. “Ah! Your father enjoyed this vintage. He provided it as a gift. That is how my obsession began. Wine was never my taste. I only drank it because I never knew any better. But Bale...” He trails off, shaking his head to himself as he stares into the flames for a time. He peers up at me through hooded eyes. “Your spies have yet to find him?” There is a sinister wish in his question, one that my brothers and I share alongside our wolves.

Teeth clenched, throat tightening, I reply, "Regrettably, no..." This familiar thirst on my tongue cannot be satisfied by drink. Only by blood... His blood... The blood of a traitor.

My brothers' low growls nearly halt the merriment. Our combined rage of that night is still a bitter memory. A stain on our happiness.

"Who will we find to kill him, I wonder?" He twirls the bottle, staring at it as he does so. "A fellow feline and I made a promise to your father that we would watch over you and your brothers. Jenna was with us back then." He leans back with a knowing grin. "Indeed. We are *that* old, boy. I give you credit for dragging the old man out of his misery. When Jenna died, he may as well have died with her." He takes a swig. "An age is coming. Where kings and queens, presidents and congress – those will be relics of the past.... For some." He assesses me, his gaze unwavering from mine. "I will leave that story for another time. For now..." He reaches behind his log, revealing another bottle of Brandy and tosses it to me. I catch it. "We find joy with those around us, this night," he says with a smile.

Small talk fills the void for a time. By the end of it, I have drank nearly half of the bottle before Quiffen and I rejoin our people.

Riordan was learning a variety of dances whilst Defretreie found himself on the violin as a part of the Roma's musicians. In truth, we have not seen our little brother play an instrument since his first decade as a Tiscareno. In Riordan's case, his strengths lie in the waltz or playing the Lute or guitar, not in jovial, swift dancing.

Our efforts to teach him were comical more than helpful. Attempted as Riordan did, he continued fumbling over himself. Even though he has drunk his weight, he will not be able to blame spirits for his awkward display. When I was human, I required coaxing to so much as sway or tap my foot. Ever reticent was I until I had the pleasure of meeting Anna. My Anna.

Having noticed my receding into the past, Riordan roped me into dancing with a group of his new acquaintances. Male felines who were more so laughing at his terrible dancing rather than with him, in glee. The tempo of the music changed to a quick-footed rhythm that I could barely keep in time with. Sunset had long disappeared. The stars splayed across the berry sky, framing the moon above. Their light is a welcome addition, beside the flames of the bonfire, and the colorful lanterns and bottles hanging above.

I sang out of tune with the others, and for once, the guards smiled in my presence and carried on as though it were the peaceful years. After decades of sorrow, I laughed until my sides ached. Drink, good conversation, being seen as myself rather than a monster – things I had thought impossible to retain. Tonight, has been a welcome reminder of what it is like to feel at ease. For once, in a long while, it feels as though Ares was never created.

Drunk beyond reckoning, a difficult feat to achieve as supernatural beings, we eventually shied away from the alcohol, substituting it for stronger, less lethal vintages. Having not had it in

ages, I chose coffee whilst my brothers opted for tea. Our guards had either or, themselves.

I had asked Quiffen how he was not drunk, he replied, "I do not drink as much as I had since your father drank me under the table." When I asked how it is that we are drunk, he explained how they created a potion that gives any alcohol the potency equivalent to if we were humans. The effects do not last long, but they work well enough that it provides a twinge of a hangover within the few hours after ceasing drinking.

He provided me with a vile, should my brothers, the guards who accompanied us, and I, ever wanted to feel human for a while. Not my brothers nor the guards complained. In fact, they were overjoyed by the gesture. Though I too appreciate it, drunk or not, I am still concerned about this promise Quiffen made to father. Amongst the chief questions I have is, even though they promised to watch over us, why invite us here? Who is this secondary individual who is also involved?

As we ate venison stew with potatoes and carrots around, I nursed a tin cup of the finest coffee I have tasted in over a century. Quiffen and his Roma took turns regaling us with tales of their travels from countries in their time and what experiences they have shared together.

As suspected, Quiffen is the eldest and is almost as old as father was when he died. Quiffen and his Roma told stories and made their fair share of crude jokes. We laughed so hard, we spit out our

drinks more than once. What intrigues me is how he and his people enjoy meeting other species of creatures. In the Hall, he had mentioned wanting a good future, not only for his people but for misplaced creatures as well. He shared his hopes and dreams with us and as I assess the Roma, it is clear that there isn't a single soul here who disagrees with his dream.

With everyone gathered around the bonfire, Quiffen announces, "Your majesties. I would like to extend a gift to each of you." He smiles at our dumbfounded expressions and stands from the log to stretch his arms outward, his tin cup in his left hand. He moves his cup as he speaks, "A token of good faith and an early parting gift."

"These gifts – they are not heavy, are they?" Defretre asks. Riordan and I gape at him – he shrugs. "I will not carry a large chest back to the manor."

Quiffen guffaws. "No physical labor is required. Although... It may very well carry a weight on your shoulders." He locks gazes with me. "Or on your chest."

I tilt my head left.

“The *journey* is completely up to you,” he adds.

What does this ‘old friend’ of father’s want with me?

He tosses his head back, gulping the remainder of his coffee. He sets his tin cup on the log with a clank. “Should you choose to accept these gifts; Defretreie you will find yours when you follow Sena.” He gestures to the woman sitting on the adjacent log left of our little brother.

Though most felines smell similar due to their origins, each has a subtle scent that determines their species. For her, it is Litre – a floral scent that indicates one is a puma.

During my terrible solo, Sena had accompanied me with a bottle in hand, lifted to the sky. Her melodic soprano carried, thankfully drowning out my choppy baritone. Throughout the party, Riordan and I noticed how she took to Defretreie – offering conversation and an occasional share of her drink. Same as we noticed how transfixed he was with her. Sealing his emotions from Riordan and me. The hint of rose in his cheeks whenever her medium, rosette-tinted lips spread from ear to ear.

Once free, her curly raven hair is now being held from her heart-shaped face by a silk patterned sash. Defretreie gulps as her grey, doe eyes suck him in. When she smiles sweetly, he recoils into himself. Turning his face away, he catches a glimpse of an amused Quiffen. He glares at him. Snickers sprout amongst us.

Quiffen goes on, “Riordan, you will find yours with Kimi in that tent.” Quiffen gestures behind him to a dark bender tent with a flickering lantern inside.

Has it been there all this time?

“Jeroph.” I flick my eyes up to Quiffen’s earnest gaze. A sudden gust of wind fans the flames of the bonfire. Its tails flicker, the wood crackling beneath. The hair along my arms stands, a shiver settling through me. The longer I wait, the more I yearn for this gift.

What is Quiffen hiding? What is this... sensation? As though I am... floating on a... cloud?

“Your fate lies in the burgundy wagon.”

‘Fate, fate, fate,’ multiple voices whisper in my right ear.

I whip my head toward half of the Roma. Those who notice, give me curious looks. Gulping down the lump in my throat, I nod to them apologetically. I revert my attention to Quiffen, whose gaze has not left me. Riordan nudges our bond curiously. I nudge back, reassuring him before narrowing in on Quiffen.

Since he strode into our Persian Hall, I have felt strange. That there is information I should be privy to, nay *remember*. That it is lost on me is maddening. Confusion aside, one thing Conri and I are sure of is that Quiffen did not invite us here for the party, alone. I cannot shake this feeling that we shan’t come close to a hint of his intentions, unless I step inside that burgundy wagon.

If he desired to trick or trap us, he would have, Conri points out, his fur standing on edge.

This is very true. What say you? I ask my brothers.

'I am curious to see where this leads. I am sure Defretreie would love some alone time with his beloved.' Riordan waggles his brows at our little brother.

Irritated as he is, Defretreie flushes ever slightly whilst stealing a side long glance at Sena. For a moment, she smells of lavender, elm and straw – bashful.

Defretreie clears his throat. *'I have no objections.'*

I conceal my smile. Quiffen waits ever patiently. "We graciously accept."

GIFTS

JEROPH

~TISCARENO MANOR – KING BALE’S STUDY – EARLY
MORNING ~

The clock ticks by on the mantle in father’s study. I may have inherited it, but to me, it is not mine. I merely borrow this space. A pop from the fireplace startles me from thought. I glare at the dancing flames before peering over to my brothers enraptured in conversation in their upholstered seating.

Sunrise peeked over the horizon when we returned to Tiscareno Manor. The entire journey home, Riordan and Defretre were enthused over their gifts. Rare is it that Defretre speaks with us so freely, let alone in the presence of clansmen, without care or attitude. And though it is a rare occurrence that I should be tight lipped in their presence, I do not find anything pleasant about my gift – it may as well be another curse.

“Your fate lies in the burgundy wagon.”

His words haunted me before I even stood from the log. Why would he do this to me? I rake my left hand through my hair, gripping it atop. Question upon question rove my troubled mind, leaving me no reprieve.

“Brother,” Defretreie says, taking Riordan and I by surprise – he never calls me ‘brother,’ anymore, nor Riordan, for that matter. He rolls his eyes. “If you are going to brood, at least tell us why. This is the first time I have been in a good mood in ages, so you may express your mind, before I sour.”

“You were in a good mood once?” Riordan taunts.

Defretreie grumbles, “Must you ruin everything? I am being caring.”

“Which is out of character for your black soul,” Riordan states. He makes a show of sniffing the air. “I think I smell it burning in holy flames. Are you certain you will survive the night?”

A smile tugs at the corner of my mouth. This is the first time in a long while that I have seen these two get along without my intervention. Alas, it will not last; that Riordan and I can be sure of without discussion. For the time being, it is nice simply to have our little brother be a brother, rather than an adversary.

Defretreie’s brown eyes flash gold, his canines peering from beneath his lips. Triggered by the appearance of his wolf, Ares rams against his prison. I crane my neck as I fight Ares’ lust for blood slipping through the bars. Conri growls at him and I can imagine him shaking his head, violently, fighting to ignore the draw as well. Conri and I had forged that steel trap for him when we had begun to become whole again. When father began to teach us how to be rather than serve.

Defretre's wolf – Sy – recently began bothering Ares. Whenever he shows himself, Ares lusts for his blood. He sees him as weak – I can smell as much. However, Sy is a fine wolf. An amicable foe in battle and in training. I forget when it started, and though Eretta and Ken have tried everything, they have yet to uncover the reason for this sudden bloodlust. Thankfully, in the Hall, Sy was still far beneath the surface, unlike now.

Fear paints the air from our little brother, his golden eyes now blending with his human brown irises. A whimper escapes him and I frown as I can feel myself begin to sweat. I grip the chair arms with as much force as I can without crushing the wood in my palms. Attempting to distract myself, I focus on my gift. Something I thought I would never have and, in truth, I was not entirely convinced I could. The memory of those blasted flames and distant screams dash across my mind. Beads of sweat trickle down my temples.

Gritting my teeth, I blurt, "My gift was a mate." Ares's hissing snarls begin to quiet, his bloodlust shrinking with each word. My sweating halts, the tension within me melting away. I gulp, settling into the newfound peace.

Ticking fills the space as everything quiets within me. Minutes pass; Conri has returned to his seclusion. Ares, to sulk or whatever he does inside that prison.

"Are you all right, brother?" Riordan asks.

I glance at him whilst I catch my breath. I nod rigidly.

“Well then, do not leave us in suspense,” Defretretrie urges like an excited child.

We gape at him. Even in near danger, he can manage to return to his aloof state without batting an eye. At times we wondered whether there is a piece of him that was lost many moons ago before he came to us.

Nothing is said until Riordan breaks the silence, “We should not press. Jeroph has much to think of.” His emerald eyes – our mother’s eyes – flick to mine, narrowing. “But I must ask you; why do you fall ill at the thought of happiness?”

In many ways, Riordan and I are the same. Though he is gentler in appearance, we share similar facial features. Who he is, today, is how I was in my human years. Out of the... four of us, Riordan and I are the only ones related by blood. Father had done some digging and found our birth certificates alongside a rushed letter in our mother’s hand. In its contents, she apologized, explaining her wrong doings and spilt her secrets.

She belonged to a coven as a young girl but escaped, as they became obsessed with finding power. Those were dark days and our mother harbored a fair share of magic. She cared not for their plans to attain more, so she escaped. Along the way, she met my human father – a merchant who hated her kind.

At the time, she had not known and when she had mustered the courage to tell him, he turned on her. I was twelve when he became the monster I was forced to rely on. Before he had driven her

out, we had lived a good life. Honest and happy. But for centuries, I had not known what caused him to hate us so. Had it not been for her letter, I never would have discovered the truth.

Sometime after she left me alone with him, she attracted another manic. Whilst their relationship was sweet, she conceived Riordan. The man she attracted was a rogue wolf with a bad rapport with neighboring territories. The end of the letter told of how she loved us very much, that if we were reading it, she was probably murdered by him before she could find someone to save her. She had prayed that Riordan was alive to read the letter, should it prove fruitless for her to escape his father's cruelty. The letter was addressed to us, both.

Apparently, in her journey to Riordan's father, she had met a fortune teller who told her that I would be alive to read the letter but that Riordan's fate was uncertain. Riordan filled in the remainder of the story, after her death, that was missing to the best of his abilities. He was taken in and raised by the wolf pack who attempted to save them from his crazed father. In the end, they could not help mother.

To this day, we have often wondered if mother could be alive, considering she was a witch. What worries us is why she did not fight back. We have our theories. Perhaps from not using magic for so many years, she left herself vulnerable to both of our fathers. Perhaps she feared what her magic would do to them. But each time we discuss it, we come up empty handed.

My voice is husky as I speak, “Mother, Anna, Tod, father – how could I not be ill at the prospect of happiness?”

Defretre leans back in his chair, propping his feet on the upholstered footrest and folding his arms across his chest. “And you would let that stop you from enjoying life’s pleasures,” he states, returning to his bored, cold, separated self.

“Are you not scared for your future?” I counter. His eyes become wide, his panic thick in the room. “As I thought. Each of us fears happiness. I am not alone in feeling as I do.”

Riordan sighs through his nose. “I find no joy in fearing for something so pure to be taken away from me. But what good thing does not come with hurdles to keep it?”

“Yours was not burned alive before your eyes,” I say flatly.

Seeing my home engulfed in flames. Anna’s screams blared into the night as man after man fought to douse the fire. Four men had to secure me, preventing me from entering. No matter how hard I tried, I knew with every shout of her name and tug against the men’s arms, that I was too late. “That if I ran into our home, I would not come out. That is what I wanted. To be at their side.

Riordan knits his brows, the scent of his annoyance mirrored in his voice, “How long will you blame yourself? It was 1468. You were a human, doing what humans do after a good harvest. Anna told you to go. Will you mourn until your dying breath?”

“I should have stayed home with her,” I croak.

“ENOUGH, JEROPH! We have gone through this time after time. My sympathy has run dry! I digress. Perhaps you should leave your mate alone. God knows the last thing she needs is to live in the shadow of your deceased wife.” I narrow my gaze, but he does not heed my unsaid warning. “Same goes for any children you may bear with her. They needn’t live in the shadow of your deceased son, either.”

A growl rips from my throat, feral and filled with the promise of spilling blood. The moment I shoot from my seat, it topples backward. In an instant, Riordan and I are nose to nose with both of our wolves close to the surface.

“You cannot bring them back. They are gone. You must accept that. Ares returns because you take blame when you have none to be bestowed. Should you wish to fight me, I will oblige. But rest assured, I will not remain silent whilst you sabotage your life in this vain pursuit of forgiveness.”

Defretre appears on Riordan’s right, putting a hand on my shoulder. Riordan’s and my brows shoot up at his unexpected action. Riordan steps back, allowing Defretre to step between us.

“I am not for the sentimental gunk. So, let us keep this short and sweet; you cannot continue to mope about a woman and child who are dead. They are part of the Earth, now. Do you really think Anna is looking down at you right now saying, ‘Wow, I am overjoyed my husband remained a widower and kept using me as an excuse not to get laid?’” Riordan’s eyes bulge, as do mine. “Orrrr,” Defretre grinds

out. “Do you think she is saying, ‘I wish he would go on with his life and stop acting like a poor sob’?”

“He has a point,” Riordan adds. “I do not believe Yara would have told you this unless it was vital.” He gestures between Defrettrie and himself as he says, “Our gifts are a blessing to us. If you think yours a burden, then you can return to the Roma tomorrow and discuss if it can be easily changed.”

A hint of rosemary and calamata olives, pierces my nose. “You doubt it can be easily changed.”

My brothers share a look. Defrettrie sighs. “Beckman, do you really think you will be able to stay away from fate? And if you say that, ‘We make our own fate’ nonsense, I will rip off your toenails.”

Searching my brothers’ faces, I quickly realize that I am outnumbered. I could say ‘No,’ regardless of their opinions. They would not fault me, but they would not be pleased, in the slightest. I consider retreating into my chambers for days on end, surrounded by literature I have read by the tens, and only leaving by my terrace to hunt, when needed. I have been practicing staying in wolf form for longer periods to prevent my shifting fully during my... unexpected changes. But if I resign myself to seclusion, that would make me a coward. That is father rebuilt us *not* to be.

I had not given much thought about having a mate. Whenever I hear the title, I immediately think of Anna. As I look between my brothers, I consider their words. Perhaps... meeting someone new would be good for me. Would I be good for her?

“I will require your assistance in finding her.” A thrum of energy surges through me as the words leave my lips.

My brothers smile, their hope filling the room. The branches outside knock on the window from a gust of wind, gaining my attention. My brows twitch together as faint whispers echo throughout my mind. Conri lifts his nose, padding in a curious circle at this newfound phenomena.

There is a name, but... I cannot quite hear it.... Ka...

In that same breath comes a knock. From the smell, it is a female guard accompanied by Sena. It is not until small feet shuffle that we realize there is another we cannot smell. When I open the door, the lack of the third's scent becomes clear. The same issue had occurred both before and after I had entered the burgundy wagon. Only once did I ever smell her, and that was when she had taken my hand in hers to perform the reading. Yara, in her ankle-length beige dress, lined with white and accompanied by a navy-colored coat I have never seen in any fashion, stares up at me, her hands clasped in front of her.

Sena gives me a pleasant smile. “We do not mean to intrude. Yara knew she had to see you again. May we come in?”

I nod to the guard and she formally dismisses herself before taking her leave. As they enter, Defretre comes to Sena's right side, offering his arm like a gentleman of stature. Apparently, our little brother has had many firsts within the last twelve hours, thanks to

Sena. She slips her hand onto the bend of his elbow and he ushers her off to his seat – another unnatural occurrence.

I gesture to my seat for Yara to take and she accepts, soothing her skirt. Riordan returns to his chair at Yara's left, I claim the chair across from her, and Defretreie grabs a patterned chair from the back corner of the room beside the wide arched window, and places himself between Sena and I, sticking close to her left side.

Yara begins, "I was not clear with my reading, Jeroph, and for good reason. Quiffen suspects we may have a traitor in our Roma. Someone who would take advantage of this information; should it come to light. You could not smell this individual outside our wagon, but I could. Your reading was not simply a gift or fate, it is a prophecy."

My brows shoot up alongside my brothers.' Riordan is the first to speak, "Who would want that information?"

"My visions are limited due to my age and my experience with purposely searching for such intrusions. The only reason I was able to find you is because I had a dream I could not control. A vision."

"Has this happened before?" Defretreie asks.

She shakes her head. "Had it happened before, I doubt Quiffen would let me out of his sight. Meaning he is worrisome of my wellbeing."

"Would a witch be able to detect the traitor?" Riordan inquires, the gears in his head turning.

Another shake of her head. "No witch can detect it. This is Primal Marking – a rare magic used to mask one's presence and scent. Much different from the technique you use on a frequent basis. This magic is one that shifters learned to best their enemies in combat. They can smell like a friend, an acquaintance, another foe, another species." My brothers and I share looks of worry as she goes on, "It has been a well-kept secret from witches for an entire era to protect this trump card. If witches learned of it, they could learn how to manipulate it for their own usage. In dire cases, those who are using witches can use it for their own purposes."

"How many know of this?" Riordan asks.

"Everyone in this room including Quiffen and Llewellyn."

"Who is that?" I ask.

She offers a small smile of her lips. "Llewellyn is our collector and bookkeeper. He travels the world, sometimes to places we could only dream of."

Behind her eyes, I can see there is more to her words. She is insinuating something about this bookkeeper, but what? "I'll have to meet him one day," I say.

She nods. "In time. I suspect he will return within a month or so. Until such time, I am here to deliver my own message."

Tension splits the air as what she says next renders us at a loss. "You cannot meet your mate as she has not been born, yet."

FORETOLD

JEROPH

A woman who has not been born, yet... meaning I would be...

“At least give the man a date, Yara,” Defretreie says, amusement clear in his tone. “You will give him a heart attack if you keep him in suspense.”

She sighs with a pout, seeming more like a child, for once, rather than an adult in a child’s shell. “Very well. You must wait over a century before meeting.”

Riordan curses in Latin then clears his throat. “My apologies, ladies. I did not mean to be so crude. Yara, do you mean to tell us you came all this way to dash my brother’s spirits? We were intending to celebrate and concoct a plan to find this mystery woman.”

“Impossible.”

The finality of which she says it causes a rift in my heart. How can it be that she could be so far out of reach?... Why are my thoughts and heart so... I... Words cannot amount to what ails me in this moment...

“A witch will protect her as I protect myself,” Yara states, peeking our interest. “With a powerful forbidden magic that seals our scent unless touched upon by another. To answer your unspoken question, Riordan; this magic has rarely been seen and only a select few families know its function. To answer yours, Jeroph; the spell has been used five times since the beginning of supernatural kind, making

me the sixth, and your mate, the seventh. Why I use it, is to hide myself from the women who had planned to use me as a catalyst for a dangerous ritual that would render mankind but a memory. No, I will not go into details. That is for another time. They are not fond of werewolves, either, and – considering my background – I am a threat in more than one way. I could end them myself, but Quiffen forbids such brashness.”

She balls her hands into fists in her lap, glaring at them as if she could see those women now. Sena is at her side in an instant, kneeling before her and rubbing her back in soothing circles. Yara’s eyes snap back up to mine. “I cannot give you names, for I was not privy to those. As to the reason, I have no idea. I can only assume that there are secondary wards that prevent me from such knowledge as to who your mate and the witch, are. What I can tell you is the year she will be born is 1997. And no, I cannot give you a month nor day.”

“And why not?” Riordan asks, becoming more perturbed by the second.

“Because that portion would be cheating,” she replies as though it should be common sense.

He falls back against his chair and Defretre snorts at the childish act. I share no such sentiment. Why tell me about her so soon?

I lean back in my chair, thought after thought racing through my mind as I regard Yara with a cool countenance. “Though it is comforting that my mate will be protected, what does she need protection from?”

Yara stiffens in her seat. She may look young, but she has known years. Never have I seen a hybrid grow as slow as she. Which means, she is either something else, entirely, or she is using magic to hide her true appearance. Either way, my focus is my mate.

“You also mentioned a prophecy. If you want me to trust you with our fates, you must tell me everything.”

Each word leaves my lips as though I am a man possessed. No discomfort befalls me. No twisting in my gut where I feel as though I am betraying Anna and Tod as I often felt whenever I entangled with another. Though they were few and far between, I never took lovers. I can count those I have bedded on both of my hands. Merely flirting with those women felt... wrong. I may have had temporary release and companionship, but I had loathed myself afterward. And each time I would beg Anna's forgiveness.

An ache plagued my heart after every apology, causing me to wonder whether it was her way of scolding me. I was never sure if that scolding was for those women not being her, or because she truly wanted me to move on. Perhaps there is truth in Defretre's words...

My jaw ticks as I shake away the thought. My wife, my Anna, has been the light of my life even in death. Yet... Is it so very wrong that I desire to learn more about her? This mystery mate of mine who is yet to be born into this world? What kind of world will it be, I wonder? Will she be safe from it? Is there anything I can do to protect her?

“No,” Yara snips with finality, yanking me from my thoughts. Her narrowed gaze puts Conri and I on edge. Intrigue wafts from the blood monger’s prison, and I flex my fingers.

I control the bite in my tone, “Why? Am I not allowed to protect my mate?”

Riordan’s chair creaks as he creeps to the edge of his seat out of my left peripheral. Yara’s fingers fidget in her lap as her glare turns into more of a childish pout.

“We must tell him everything we can. You cannot expect people to understand right away when you offer them nothing,” Sena explains softly.

Yara glances side long at her. “But my vision said – !”

Sena lifts her chin, staring down at her as a mother would her own pup. Yara’s lips press into a thin line and she deflates. With a sigh, she reverts to me, her displeasure evident on her face.

She sits taller. “There is a woman with whom you are all familiar...” She inhales a deep breath through her nose then out. “The Mercurial.”

Tension drenches the room from ceiling to floor. Branches clatter against the windows, the wind howling into the night. Whispers echo in the recesses of my shared mind, speaking something. I know it has to do with my mate. Their energy tells me so. Conri agrees.

“The Mercurial has been dead for centuries,” Defretre says.

“Mere speculation. Whoever killed her left no trace of the body,” Riordan adds.

“Because it was burned,” Defretre counters.

“Because it was *hidden*,” Sena corrects leaving us astounded. She gulps, blinking as her eyes glisten. She hesitates. “I...”

She swallows again and Defretre is immediately at her side, resting his hand atop hers that rests on her left thigh. She gives him a weak smile of her lips that he returns with a warm one. As they run their thumbs along one another’s skin, something I thought lost runs through me. Longing. Hope for the future. One with...

‘*Katal...*’

I stiffen. *What is her name?*

“Her wolf calls to you, even before she has found her Meila,” Yara says.

My lips part.

“Perhaps,” Riordan interjects, gaining my attention. He raises his brows. “One story at a time?” He tips his head toward Sena, who is barely hanging on to what threads of resolve she has left. I nod somberly to Riordan.

“My apologies, Sena,” I say. She snaps her eyes to mine. The right corner of my mouth twitches upward at an attempt at an encouraging smile. “Please, go on with your story.”

She offers a twitch of a smile then nods more so to herself than I. Defretre rubs soothing circles on her back as she had done for Yara.

“It was Spring, 1418. The flowers were in full bloom, merriment just around the corner for new beginnings. A celebration of life was to begin.” She takes a shaky breath through her nostrils then breathes out through her mouth. “We were collecting wildflowers for the feast when our village went into a panic. We evacuated as soon as we heard news of the Mercurial running her forces through nearby towns and villages. That was the Pillaging of Secrue.”

My eyes widen. That pillage lasted for days. In a matter of weeks, the Mercurial’s forces had taken parts of Africa, Europe, Asia. In 1569, she had attempted expansion to the western regions, but by then, a rebellion led by Marsha’s mother wiped out most of the Mercurial’s forces. Leaving her vulnerable, running with her tendrils between her legs. A trusted soldier of that rebellion had stated that she and other believers of the cause had found her and burned her alive.

“That is the story.” Sena pauses, a darkness flashing across her delicate features. “But it is not the truth...” she whispers. Pain echoes through her pores as her voice cracks, “My mother was there that day... She died alongside her comrades. Apart from one.” She smirks, a bitterness lingering on her flesh. “The very one who made that report and ensured...” She licks her lips, sniffing as tears stream down her cheeks. “Ensured that we all received a peace offering from their mangled carcasses.” She clasps her hand over her mouth and Defrettrie pulls her into his chest.

Riordan and I look to each other, gob smacked. The reports made that day were made by someone who works close with Marsha.

Her right-hand woman – Denise Goberd – soldier of Cecily’s infantry.

“The report stated the Mercurial was burned alive, which is true. They did burn her alive... However, they only managed to maim her arms,” Yara says. She searches the ground. “She has spies everywhere.” Her words are hushed, her focus far beyond the present. She blinks away oncoming tears then looks up at me. “Your mate is part of a race long forgotten by the world. And for good reason.”

My brows twitch together. She gulps, peering at a teary-eyed Sena, who is doing her best to settle in Defretre’s embrace. Through sniffles, Sena gives Yara a shaky nod. Yara’s jaw ticks as she regards my brothers and I with an intense gaze. One that belongs to one who has known more than a century of living.

“Thousands of years ago, there were beings scattered across the globe called Pathical’s – beings who were once human.”

My brothers and I blanch.

Yara smirks. “Yes. Exactly. They gained their magic from the Earth. Somehow.” She narrows her gaze at the table we surround, seeming perplexed. She speaks her tale to it. “Legend has it that one fully awakened Pathical could take on two hundred werewolves. Alone.”

Whispers echo through my mind, a recognition sizzling through my veins. *There is a name... Just there... But what is it?*

Try as I might, I cannot reach toward whatever stirs within my mind. It weaves about an empty space, one I had not known was empty until this moment. A cool breeze swirls there like a beacon. My heart swells and a whimper escapes Conri. Even Ares seems focused on that breeze. Is that... emotion coming from his prison? No. Ares is incapable of feeling more than glee for the hunt. For the kill. For destruction.

Yara goes on with her story, my brothers' and my intrigue filling the room. "Centuries of peace passed until the Mercurial appeared. She believed she could harness the powers of the Pathicals for herself. She convinced many a being to side with her, making them believe that Pathical's were destined to become a race that would attempt to conquer others. That they would be their slaves, and, in turn, would become the slaves of humans."

Rage echoes through me. How dare she? That witch had no right. The whispers grow in my mind yet there is something soothing about its cool presence that is keeping Ares from rattling his cage.

"Witches were more so behind her than any other being. They would do her bidding; killing whenever she commanded. Fighting the battles she began, without thought. Wars were waged in her honor." Yara squeezes her fists tighter in her lap. "These witches called themselves the Tenements of the Omens."

The whispers whisk violently, evoking a migraine. I sink further into my seat, focusing on keeping my breaths even amid the sudden rush of pain. A newfound wave of rage surges through me.

Rage that does not fully belong to me, nor Conri, nor Ares. Both are as confused as I.

“After decades of trial and error, the Mercurial and the Tenements, succeeded. They crafted a gem that could sap the life force, strength and magic of any Pathical they so choose. Though Pathicals did everything they could, the Mercurial and her forces knew how to exploit their weaknesses. It was not long before Pathicals became scattered, their numbers dwindling. Unfortunately, some even joined them – selling their kind in exchange for freedom from tyranny.”

I suppress a hiss as the coolness rises within my mind. Yara pins me with a stare that shocks me rigid. It is not menacing but there is a command there. I know that should I move, I could very well be in great distress. Soon, the whispers fade, their cooling dying down alongside them. There is a part of me that still feels them near.

Yara breaks eye contact. Curiosity seeps from my brothers. I nudge their bonds in reassurance. They nudge in return as Yara continues her story as though nothing transpired.

“With every Pathical they captured, they used the gem to drain and use their life force as they saw fit. The first batch of captives were more so test subjects. The gem had never been used on a Pathical. Be that as it may, it worked... to a degree.”

An ominous feeling thrums throughout father’s study as the branches screech against the windows. Though Sena’s sobs have

quieted, her sadness still lingers. Upon a glance, her puffy eyes are peeking out from Defretre's shirt, focused on her companion.

"Every Pathical has a different skill set, a different element, a different animal – sometimes more than one. To answer your question, Defretre, no one knows how any of these things are possible. How could a human become more than that without a catalyst?" Her question is distant, spoken in a way you ask of yourself rather than of those amongst you. Her jaw withers. "Of course, there are rumors that the Mercurial and her forces attempted to discover the main source of their origins, but it was a fruitless endeavor." Yara sighs. "Be that as it may, it did not stop their efforts in perfecting the gem's function."

Her weary eyes fall upon me, sympathy lying within. A pang in my heart causes Conri to howl in sorrow. Tears threaten to spill over, something I do not do unless it pertains to father.

"Having succeeded and run out of test subjects, they went on another hunt. During this time the gem was lost. There are stories of three Pathicals who came into possession of the gem and sought out those they were told could help destroy it. Little did they know there were traitors in their midst who sold this information to the enemy. Pathicals who had sided with the Mercurial for reasons other than freedom from tyranny. Only those involved would be able to tell you why their Kin did what they did."

She trails off, her mind elsewhere. "Jeroph..." she croaks. She clears her throat, seeming exhausted. "That gem still exists. The

Mercurial is still alive. Your fated mate is part of one of the strongest Pathical bloodlines to ever exist. That a witch is destined to protect her is proof of this.” With each word, her expression becomes pleading. “You and her are prophesized to create a utopian kingdom. One where all races of beings come together and live under your rule. This kingdom becomes a bridge for a whole new world of possibilities for all kinds. Timing is essential. If you meet before you are meant to, you risk disrupting the line of events set to make this into a reality. More lives may be lost should you ignore this.”

“How many?” I inquire, my words strained.

“...Enough.” Her sadness shows in her voice as well as her demeanor. I may not be able to smell her, but I have learned enough to tell when someone is being untruthful. She is sincere.

Conflict pours from my brothers mixing with my own. King. Utopian kingdom. Mate. So many things I am unsure whether to believe or toss aside as fiction.

I release the breath I have held, through my nostrils. I am the least qualified to become king of this clan, let alone king of a utopian kingdom. I know, in my heart and through Conri’s soul, that our mate is not a ruse. However, this kingdom is a pipe dream at best. Many have tried and failed. The Tiscareno Clan was intended to be utopian... And father was betrayed by one closest to him... To all. I lightly clench the rounded ends of the chair arms before releasing them.

This... Where would this put us? I do not wish for the relationship, should there be one, between my mate and I, to be for the sole purpose of a prophecy. I will not allow it.

Yara's jaw ticks.

Pulling myself from the rapids of turmoil, I focus on my immediate concern – our clan. My brothers and I share a look. In times like these, telepathy is not needed. Quarrel as we might, what we can agree upon is that the safety and security of our clan comes first. The way we ensure that is by –

“NO!” Yara shouts, scaring us out of our wits.

“Yara,” Sena croons, exhaustion taking hold of her.

“...I'm sorry...” she whispers. “You cannot tell them a thing...” Her bottom lip begins to quiver as tears brim her lower lids.

“Why ever not?” Riordan inquires.

“Because...” she pauses. “Because more people will die if you do...”

“That does not stand to reason,” Defretreie exclaims. “Telling our clansmen of our matter should spare them.”

Yara's tiny fists tremble in her lap.

There is something she is withholding. Will she share it? Probably not.

Her eyes lock onto mine. “I will not... I cannot...”

I see. I slouch against my chair. Brothers, what do you think?

‘I think she's full of –’ Defretreie begins.

'Finish that sentence and I will piss in your tea tomorrow,' Riordan promises.

Disgust wreaks from our little brother. 'I think it is better that we tell the others. Should we refuse to who knows what should befall them... And what discourse may transpire should we fail to do so.'

'Here I thought you were taking to the Roma,' Riordan teases, his eyes flicking to Sena who has nodded off in Defretre's arms.

Her head rests in his lap and he has taken to combing his fingers through her curls. 'Tis the gentlest we have seen him with anyone. 'It is not that.' Our little brother's voice is soft. Though we speak amongst our bonds, it is as though he is worried, she may wake should he speak loudly.

A smile tugs at the corner of his thin lips making my heart swell at the sight. We thought our brother a lost cause for so long. Within less than twenty-four hours, Sena is softening him. I must thank her whence she awakens.

'Brother,' Defretre says to me. Twice in one day. That is a blessing. I cannot help twitching a smile at that. 'Should you find yourself in your mate's arms, what will you do?' His words strike me as his piercing honey brown eyes meet mine. 'Should you fight for her, I shall be by your side. But should you squander it, I shall not forgive you.'

Never have I seen this resolve from him. Especially when it comes to the topic of mates. Like me, he, too, believed mates a fantasy reserved for those with luck. And yet... My eyes trail to Sena slumbering peacefully in his lap.

I do not know what my mate will be like. I flick my eyes up to Defretre's, the whispers returning ever slightly in my mind. Certainty rings throughout my body – a certainty that I have not felt since Anna. She will be worth it.

Defretre's mouth tugs at the corners. *'Then I stand with you.'* With that, he reverts his attention to Sena. His fingers have not ceased combing her curls our entire conversation. He cuts the link.

Riordan remains. *'Our brother enthralled in a woman. A feline at that. Who knew?'*

"I did," Yara says. I blink at her. She looks to her companion. "She knew she would find you when the time was right." Curiosity brims from Defretre's pores as he locks gazes with her. She pins him with a glare. Shock overtakes him and his fingers still in Sena's hair. "You hurt her, I will have much to say."

Though Riordan and I are not fond of her threat towards our own, we understand her need to protect her companion. Clearly, Sena means a great deal to her.

"You have my word," Defretre promises, surprising Riordan and I. "I will not forsake her. Should I do so, feel free to do what you want with me."

Riordan and I blink at one another then revert our attentions to Defretre who has returned to his rhythmic combing. He seals his scent, alluding to neutrality. Whatever he is feeling, I hope he will not lock it within himself.

"I do not take pleasure in keeping you and your fated mate apart," Yara says to me. "But should you attempt to do more than is necessary, you risk throwing things out of balance."

"Is this a universal sort of thing? If he meets his mate sooner the world ends?" Riordan asks as much as he jests.

Yara glowers at him. "No..." She looks to me, her gaze softening. "But you may find yourself in more trouble than we have seen." She pauses and my mind begins to race. "I know you have many questions, however, I cannot answer them all. You must see for yourselves how things transpire. I implore you, your majesty – stay away from your mate for as long as possible... Until the time is right."

"And when would that be?" I ask, an unfamiliar frustration lacing through my tone.

"...When she is twenty-seven years of age," Yara replies.

Riordan lets out a lengthy whistle. "A forgotten foe we thought slain, a fated mate connected to a prophecy yet to be fulfilled, lives lost, a delicate timeline – anything more you wish to share?"

Yara rolls her eyes at my brother's sarcasm. "No. That is all."

"Ah," my brother muses.

Yara pouts like a child, her annoyance spurring amusement from Riordan. My eyes trail back to Defretre and Sena. The way he shields her is the way I hope to hold my mate someday... I am happy he has found his chosen mate. Hopefully they grow closer and remain so in the years to come. Defretre regards me with a questioning look.

I am happy for you. Do not break her heart.

He smirks. For once, it is one that is not bitter. *‘Many thanks, brother. You needn’t worry about her heart. It is safe with me.’*

My brows shoot up. *What have I done to deserve such treatment?*

He rolls his eyes. *‘Do not become a sob on me. Find your woman through this hybrid’s stories. We may get the better of them, yet – whoever ‘they’ are that dare mess with the mate of a Tiscareno.’*

I am not keen on remaining idle whilst my mate remains unprotected for however long. Unfortunately, I must trust the Roma. Trying to attain more information from this girl would be a fool’s errand.

“This is true,” Yara says, simply. “However, I can tell you that this prophecy was foretold during the Mercurial’s reign, in the years that paved the way forward for Cecily’s people. It may have been in vain to slay the Temptress, herself, but Cecily’s people gained many victories. Pathicals have lived longer than most beings, werewolves included. They are very old, but not much older than witches.”

“Who foretold the prophecy of my mate and I?” ‘Mate’ flows so freely from my tongue. That usual pang of guilt is there but it is not as potent as it would be if I spoke of another.

Yara leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees. She threads her fingers to provide a sling for her chin. “An old acquaintance of my family – species unknown – and a selected member from each species who was capable of communicating with other beings.” Her mouth tips upward at our stunned faces. “Many have those very expressions when they hear the story. The warlock

entrusted with coming to this meeting brought along two witches to help him conjure a vision. All sides were on the brink of war and collapse, no one could stop it. Everyone knew that fighting to unite all beings would be as foolish as the human's attempts at uniting their races. So, they forged a temporary treaty to appease everyone and decided upon a meeting. One without discourse from those who opposed it. The goal? To find a solution. A solution said to take place thousands of years from then. The birth of a utopian kingdom for all beings under the rule of a pair." She pauses. "You and your mate."

"This kingdom," I begin. "What will you gain from its birth?"

Yara's left eye twitches at the lower lid.

So... There is something. I send the thought to her, knowing full well she can hear it.

Another ripple in her jaw. "A home I lost..."

Alas, I cannot hear her heartbeat. Another irritating blockade due to whatever spell she has created to conceal herself. She is talented, I will give her that. I could very well assume that someone else had cast it upon her but that does not feel quite right. Though I have no other choice but to trust her and the Roma, I will remain cautious.

'I expect nothing less from the Great Wolf Prince.' Her sudden presence startles Conri and I, even Ares perks up at her intrusion. A rare reaction to draw out from that demon dog.

She sits back in her chair, a glint of challenge in her eye that causes Conri to snarl lowly in our shared mind. "You will make this

utopian kingdom. Your fates are intertwined in this fact. You will do it because there will be nowhere for you or your beloved to hide once this is over. Becoming stronger together will become your sole option..." Pain flashes across her eyes then leaves as quickly as it came. "People will die for this cause without question. The prophecy calls to them as it calls to you and your mate. It is why we have come all this way."

Blood pounds within my ears. This entire thing should be preposterous to me yet this nagging sensation of its truth refuses to rest. I can barely hold my clan together. They care not for my presence, they cower before me as though I were Ares, once more. My brothers have no choice but to help me with our clansmen because of this.

Whomever these beings were, they surely must have seen how unfit I am. How unable I am to lead what father left behind. His legacy that I have further tarnished with my... illness. It is not the responsibility that I cannot take on, it is the lives that I doubt will favor me as their ruler as our people do not, today. And Anna...

I know I should let her and our son go. Let them rest, far from my troubled, cursed mind. But how can I? They were my center, my heart, my soul. I could not save them. The least I owe them is to honor their memory and keep it alive throughout my werewolf life. Or... Am I wrong in doing so? Should I... let go?

Can I be a good mate? Will I be prepared to give all to another so willingly, without feeling obligated to do so? A mate bond is more

than primal instinct, it is a draw of the souls. Simply because souls are drawn together, does not mean they are right for each other. Will she be right for me? Will I be right for her? Over these years until our meeting, will I remember that I have a mate?

Yara's small hand on mine startles me back to the present. She looks down at me with a twitch of a smile on her lips. "You will not forget her," she assures. "You have not forgotten your first love, why would you forget your true, fated love?"

My heart skips a beat. My true, fated love? I had believed that was Anna. That I was robbed. Cheated by Death as a form of punishment for being born as a half witch. My luck only worsened since I was changed by a monster in more than just species.

"Sena and I must return, but you cannot allow these troubled thoughts to stall fate. You must push on, you must persevere. We will return every two decades to ensure all is right on your side of the world. For now, we ask that you stay away from camp so that we may conduct ourselves as humble travelers. You have enemies in this land." Her eyes reach each of us. "All of you. Neighboring territories are the least of your worries. Keep this to yourself, including what you learned of Denise. I cannot imagine the fights that would ensue should you attempt to accuse her of something that happened hundreds of years ago. Protecting the prophecy and those who embody it is vital. Share this information only with Hirad and Callum. No one else, understood?" Hesitant, I nod. She returns it. "When you find her, keep her safe."

Sena stirs from her slumber. Propping herself up, she places a kiss upon Defretreie's left cheek. They smile at one another, nuzzle foreheads, then she stands to leave. Their fingers linger alongside their eyes. She saunters over to Yara and they take their leave.

Whence the door falls shut, my brothers and I are left in a pondering silence. I have a feeling we will not be seeing them during this weeks' time. That – come morning – their campsite will be empty. I drag my hands down my face, leaning forward as I rest my elbows on my knees. Allowing my head to hang, I rub my forehead. Going over our conversation in my mind, one thing strikes me in the heart that had not upon hearing it.

"I feel sick thinking about how old I will be compared to her," I confess.

My brothers chuckle at my statement and even more so when I blush.

"Out of everything she said, you are focused on that?" Riordan muses. I peer right to find him smirking. My scowl only serves to further amuse him. "I must admit I am elated that you are thinking of something other than strategies and the like."

Defretreie sniggers. "'Grandpa,' we are werewolves. I do not think she will mind you being alive longer than her grandfathers should the both of you live together for thousands of years," he teases.

I narrow my gaze at him, rendering him silent. He clears his throat, grumbling beneath his breath about how he only jests. He pouts.

Riordan chuckles. "If I recall, brother, you were born—"

I interject, "1441 on a Winter Solstice." I huff a sigh, running my fingers through my hair. "I know where you are going with this. I am still older than I was back then."

"Twenty-seven is twenty-seven. When we were changed, we were frozen in time," Defretreie says.

"Yes, but we are still older, are we not?" I grumble.

"She will be of age, Jeroph," Defretreie states, firmly.

"But that is not what bothers me, so," I reply, barely recognizing this newfound sorrow in my voice. They knit their brows at me. I sigh, leaning against the back rest. "What if I am unable to let go of Anna and Tod? What if we are not... compatible?"

My brothers remain silent.

I have no issue, Jeroph. It is you.

I ignore Conri as I submerge myself into my thoughts. *Do I want this? If so... Can I be the man she needs? Nay... the man she deserves.*

VISION

SLONE

~ MAY 25TH, 2020 – SLONE'S HOME – 11:35 PM ~

“I wonder why the Daffys won’t call me back.”

Clacking noises come from where Rupert sits behind me. From the sounds of it, it’s my gift from the Council that I told him not to mess with. I tip my chin up, heaving a heavy sigh.

Why must siblings be so hard of hearing? What part of ‘Don’t touch my things’ is such a foreign concept? I ask our ancestors.

Chuckles of those I’ve met and have yet to be acquainted with, sing throughout my mind making me smile. But that joy is quickly diminished thanks to my brother’s persistent tapping and Goddess knows whatever else he’s doing with my priceless artifact.

I roll my eyes as I try to concentrate on my task at hand. “Maybe it’s because you’re wanted in thirty states, Cuba, Croatia, and, to top it off, you somehow managed to piss off Sydney, Australia. Specifically.”

The clacking ceases. I stifle a laugh at the image of the astounded, off-put expression I know is plastered on his narrow features. We have always been this way since he came to us all those years ago. Poking fun at each other. Calling each other out on our

bullshit has been our favorite past times. My smile fades as his heavy footsteps approach.

He leans over my right shoulder, his hot breath fanning my ear, making me cringe. “See anything in those bones, sweetheart?”

I arch a brow, turning my assessing gaze towards his mischievous one. I may love my brother, but he is a pain in the neck, especially when he starts with the pet names I loathe. “I see... insufferable fofoools,” I say in my spooky voice.

We snort into fits of laughter, pressing our foreheads together once before he leaves me to my readings.

The coven has been in a frantic state since December. Issuing meetings left and right, bringing in experienced witches from other covens to perform rituals and converse with our ancestors. Reason being? No one truly knows aside from the Elders. Even the most respected and nosiest witches and warlocks of the covens haven’t a clue about what has them vexed. Whenever it’s brought up, there’s a void of silence in the Council chamber – one that leaves chills running along our spines each time before our awkward dismissal.

What we witches and warlocks have agreed on in private, is that each of our powers have been sending warning signals in various ways. For most it’s through an ominous feeling, for others it’s a surge of power that they’ve never felt before. It’s almost like their magic is fully awakening for the first time. As though it’s evolving – growing so it can protect its wielder. This is what brought us together.

Regardless of these developments, it hasn't stopped us from having our petty, century-long feuds and our power struggles on how to handle the situation. Until the covens go their separate ways, the countless disputes over an endless amount of matters and how to handle them, will continue. In the meantime, the Elders of the covens have agreed to choose a single witch from each coven to oversee their other chosen candidates.

For the puissant Drulidad coven, their Elders chose Hedara to oversee their other four promising witches. Their assignment is to search through the Forgotten Ocean and the magical forests across North America for any abnormal activity. Like them, our coven – Grenil – has their specific routine to preform each day. While each witch from every coven is required to search for anything out-of-whack, we Grenil oversee searching for new entities or objects. Any surges of power that may be a threat or need protection.

Throughout our entire coven, there are witches with special skill sets and control who were chosen to participate in these routine searches. So it happens, the Caccia name is one of the several that are highly regarded. Being that there are no other Caccia's in the country – Yay, me – it was without question that I be the head of the Grenil coven. 'Perks of being a royal,' one might say. The one not being me.

Though I could have declined, I have my own reason for agreeing to this. The tension of 'what witch from which coven shall be in charge of what,' is already enough to make everyone's heads spin. Had I declined, we'd have the next three witches beneath me fighting

for my position on ‘Team Grenil.’ Drama-free zones are what I strive for, so, when our Elders had requested that I perform readings a couple of nights a week, I agreed. Plus, tea breaks in the Grenil Summer courtyard were my bread and butter before the chaos. I’ll do anything to have that slice of heaven back. Even using magic from the bloodline, I no longer want coursing through my veins.

“See me. Hear me. Know my heart. Know my objective. Find the source of this unrest within thy coven,” I chant in hushed tones as I glide my hands above the bones on my round coffee table.

Indigo illuminates my hands like a forcefield. Periwinkle lightning strikes each cartilage in random sequences. One of my electric charges connects with a larger bone, and the moment it does, I feel as though I’m being tossed into a sea of lightning. Intense pain shoots through the nerves in my left hand, rooting me to my spot, cross-legged on my white rug. My miniature charges spread out from the bones and surround the coffee table. An invisible string yanks on my head and as my gaze meets the ceiling, scenes like a movie flood into my brain.

Rupert’s muffled shouts bass in the background, yet all I can understand is when he calls my name. My purple clouds fade into a true blue, their thick cotton turned into fog. The hair on my arms rises as a new power makes itself known. Whispers fill my mind – I don’t know what they’re saying, what I can feel is that they won’t hurt me. There’s a calmness about them, a need to protect.

My magic pulses beneath my skin in response, sending a surge of adrenaline through my veins. I try to open a channel for the Elders to see what I'm being sucked into, but this vision is shutting me out.

Through the pale blue smoke, the clashing of swords rings in the distance. A blurred, moving picture fills the mist, growing clearer the larger it becomes until there is nothing but the carnage of a dirtied battlefield. Weapons of both magical and manmade descent go head-to-head with their wielders. Crimson paints the ground as ash fills the dawning sky. I cough, inhaling the smoke that should not be attainable.

I force my dinner to stay in my stomach as I meet the empty gazes of fallen warriors – new and old – nearest to me. Soldiers from all sides can be seen for yards, scattered without care, their wounds beyond healing. I gasp as two men – a human and some sort of humanoid being – rush out of nowhere, clashing in front of me.

I reach out to stop them with my magic when, suddenly, the war fades. Without a landscape, the image of a sole individual with only their eyes on display, comes into view. Cloaked I can't tell if they're male or female.

Blue as bright as a glacier, shudders around them. The whispers from before hiss at its presence, disturbed by the energy this person exudes. My magic hums in defense, my lightning practically jumping out of my skin to snuff it out. The unprecedented scent of a stream surrounds me as though my face were centimeters from it.

Water magic.

I grit my teeth, my stomach roiling from forcing my magic into submission. Sweat beads against my forehead, my dinner rising into my throat. By a stroke of luck, the person fades in a puff of black smoke. The scene that replaces the former is no better.

Tiny webs of lightning trickle around my forearms as a study – goddess knows where – appears as realistic as the battlefield had, this time two people occupy the space. Two monstrosities that should be dead: The Mercurial and her lover – Darkin.

Slithering his hand around her right hip, he pulls her flush against his side, grinning like the idiot he is. His eyes devour her slender neck and full breasts, barely contained in the black silk dress that pools behind her. A matching lace veil covers her eyes. If I didn't know any better, I would say they'd gotten married. But there isn't any way in hell that would happen. Everyone knows she could care less for attachments as strong as matrimony.

The deceitful bell of her laughter makes my skin crawl. I shimmy my shoulders as a familiar chill settles in. My magic flares, the tiny charges growing into root-like lightning bolts along my arms.

Will you calm down? I scold them.

They warm my body in response, making their displeasure known. Regardless, they comply, slinking back into my skin. Nevertheless, my request does not stop my magic from being on edge. I can't blame them – this is all too real for my liking.

Having glanced down at a desk filled with papers, Darkin and the Mercurial exchange a look of pleasure. There are blurs in the scene

as they move across the room. Glitches with intense magic that makes me want to puke from feeling as though I'm in the room with them. Her Flowers.

Had it not been for me coming across some in the past and performing a Seek with the Elders, I would've never known them to be of her coven. Why the Mercurial allows Darkin to be her sole Flower shown in visions is beyond me. I can make as many guesses as I want but I won't have answers until the time is right. Whenever that will be.

The moment the Mercurial starts speaking to the room, no sound comes. Even as her lips move I can't quite make it out because they're now slightly blurred. Suddenly, the scene is veiled by a soft, true blue. I squeeze my eyes shut, turning my face from its blinding light. When it dims, I open my eyes to a forest of pines dowsed in night. Wind whistles around me, whisking my lengthy black waves. It reminds me of the whispers I had heard earlier on – serene, welcoming, hopeful... expectant.

A crisp howl rings in the distance, its song a beacon for me to follow. Having waded through trunks and greenery, I arrive at a clearing. The half full moon shines in her starry night bringing a smile to my face.

SNAP

I whip my head left toward the noise. My magic, however, doesn't react. In fact, it's... excited. I furrow my brow at the patch of rustling bushes. My eyes widen as a woman steps out from their cover.

Though it's dark and we aren't close in proximity, I can see her well enough. As I'm about to assess her, a gust of wind rushes from behind me, throwing my hair into chaos in front of my face. Scrambling to fix my hair, I find the woman smirking at me.

Can she see me?

Never has a vision directly interacted with me. She doesn't feel like an ancestor, but she also doesn't feel like a witch, either.

Like me, she's tall. If I was closer, I'm sure I'd find she's an inch taller than me, maybe more. For an instant, I consider walking to her but think better of it. Though she seems to bear a gentle demeanor, there is a subtle intensity in her aura that is off-putting. A warning. Not to me, but to those who would be deemed a threat. Regardless, I choose to be safe rather than sorry.

The moonlight shimmers against her almond skin. Her dark, loose curls half pulled back while the remainder rests just below her breasts. Her strappy white dress stops just short of her mid shin, her feet bare. She can't be older than her mid to late twenties.

She closes her eyes, tipping her chin to the sky as the wind whisks her hair. Her teeth peek beneath her parted lips as she smiles to herself.

Though I want to speak to her, I know that I shouldn't. Speaking to a vision is frowned upon, not only that, it can be dangerous. You never know how doing so can affect you, nor the individual you are seeing if they're alive in your realm. In this case...

Suddenly, her entire appearance glitches. Her once loose curls shift into wild, free flowing locks. The dress she wore replaced by dark jeans, t-shirt and leather jacket. Her once bare feet are now protected by black hiking boots. Not seconds later, she reverts to how I found her.

Throughout this phenomenon, her dark eyes never leave me, her stance and expression neutral.

Out of the corner of my left eye, a gentle, pulsing blue light draws me to the woman's left hand. I focus on the true-blue hue that's begun to envelop it like a warm, velvet blanket. Its streaks of gold and the twinkling, diamond-like objects within feel almost sentient. My magic thrums in my veins, almost like it's calling to it.

I'm so enraptured by its ethereal draw that I barely notice the dark shadows swarming her right hand like a hive of bees. When I meet her gaze, glacier blue begins to fill her dark irises. A glow accompanies the color, growing brighter and brighter until her eyes are consumed by its light.

She cranes her head to the sky, screaming at the top of her lungs. I slap my hands over my ears as the ground trembles beneath my feet. I struggle to remain standing as I try to keep my eyes on her. Just as I gain my balance, she vanishes.

The ground continues to quake as I uncover my ears. The ghost of her screams echo throughout the trees before fading into nothing. From where I fight to keep my balance, I whisper the spell that intensifies my sight. I scan the trees and brush for any signs of her

yet come up empty handed. I nullify the spell, grumbling as I fight with gravity and the funky chicken dance the ground is doing.

Irritated from being nearly thrown on my ass one too many times, I decide to try and make my way over to where the woman was. Watching the shifts in the ground, I find a patch that's refusing to break. When I go to jump with both feet, neither of them will lift.

Just as I begin to panic the glitch begins again. This time, blinking separate images of the woman being impaled from behind by a short sword, her disappearing, then to her as I first found her. Though I should sense her death whenever she is impaled, I feel nothing but life from her.

Does this mean she survived it? Or... is there more to it?

As fast as the glitches began, they cease – returning her as she was. Leaves crunch from behind a tree nearest to her rear right and my heart drops as fearing the worst gets the better of me.

A massive orange wolf with cream scattered about its body, trots from the tree bed. Its matching glacier blue gaze latches onto me as it clings to the woman's side. I gape at the wolf's back that reaches up to the woman's waist. If I didn't know any better, I'd say she was

Possibilities rush through my mind. For some reason, these two seem important. *But how? Why am I so sure they should be?*

I flick my eyes between them, repeatedly, trying to feel something other than confusion. I should be able to discern what being

this woman is. The fact that I'm not coming up with a werewolf – that I'm not coming up with anything – is criminal.

My magic hums and the wolf's ears perk high as though they can hear it. As I part my lips to satiate the urge to say something, a bright light pulses from the woman's glowing hand. The shadows that once occupied her right hand, are overtaken by matching true-blue. The light covets her body then the wolf until I can't see a thing. I throw my arms up, shielding my eyes from how brightly they shine. Whispers swirl so clearly that I'm almost convinced there are tens of people surrounding me. All at once, the light and whispers are gone.

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PROTECTION SPELL

SLONE

I gulp a mouth full of air as I return to our spell room. My head bobs every which way as I fight to stay up right. Control of my spine is surrendered to gravity and lightheadedness; I watch the vastly approaching letters of our family spell book, dreading the face plant of my century.

Instead of being greeted by pain, my nose brushes the pages as I'm withheld by something across my chest. I wheeze in a breath, still fighting for some sort of regulated breathing. Nausea threatens to join my dizzy mind when I'm sat up.

I can feel the floor beneath my butt, but I can't seem to feel my spine from the shoulders down. Whoever is trying to keep me from falling, I want to thank them while telling them to stop moving me. Right when I think I'm about to puke, the person adjusting me makes the mistake of trying to lean me back.

I fail to control my head as it snaps back. It's as though thousands of needles are sticking my neck. I want to screech in pain but only manage to inhale a deep, raspy breath.

"Okayokayokaysorrysorrysorry," Rupie rushes out.

He cups my head, adjusting the same arm so his forearm is at my back, and gently helps me sit straight. Tiny gold music notes mist onto my face and into my unblinking eyes. Tingles pop over my skin

and scalp, making their way throughout my body. When it stops in my toes, feeling in my spine returns.

“Rupie,” I mutter, half dazed.

He helps me scootch back to lean against the couch for support. My tongue grates against the roof of my mouth as I try and fail to swallow.

“Honey, drink this. Quickly.” Rupert brings a steaming brown mug in front of my face.

I crinkle my nose at the smell of the distasteful mixture of herbs – a healing remedy. Nevertheless, I lunge for it like a shark.

I nearly ding my teeth on the rim as I try to get my lips around it. My hands fly up to collect it from Rupie who lets go of it, immediately. Nausea and a headache threaten to take me as I gulp down the mug’s contents.

Healing remedies like these aren’t always supposed to smell like a pocket full of posies or taste like hot cocoa, but man would it help. I contort my face in disgust as I hand Rupert the mug, turning my face away from the infernal thing.

He snorts. “I’d rather see that face than the possessed expression you had.”

There’s a ghost of terror in his warm blue eyes. This is why I refuse to have people here whenever I do these spells. How they affect me is more than enough for me to bear without the ever-wary supervision of others.

I wipe droplets of sweat from my forehead as he asks, “What did you see?”

“War. An unknown being – which I’ll perform a Seek on,” I add the last bit knowing he’ll ask. Seeing the approval on his face, I go on, “The Mercurial and Darkin.” His eyes darken at that. I narrow my gaze. “Let me finish.” His jaw ticks but he stays silent. I roll my eyes with a sigh. “I felt and smelt the power of her Flowers. As usual, I couldn’t see them. They warped the places where they stood or sat but their energy – there were a few I didn’t recognize.”

“New blood?”

I shake my head to myself. I hiss as a nerve pinches at the base of my neck. “You should work on your healing skills,” I grumble rubbing where it hurts. It’s bad to use magic for every little inconvenience especially in the body.

“And you should work on controlling your visions,” he quips. I inhale sharply through my nose as I hit a sore spot between my shoulder blades. “What else did you see?” He knows me so well it’s scary.

I let my hand fall from my neck into my lap. “There was a woman... She had this... power. She didn’t know what was happening to her. It was... funny.”

“Comedic or ‘This is bad,’ funny?” he asks worriedly.

“Definitely not comedic.” His brows shoot up as I explain. “At first, it was only her appearance – her hair, her attire – but then she started glitching.” I turn toward him, rushing out my words in

utter astoundment. “She disappeared then came back with a short sword ran through her back, and then she went back to how she was when I met her. What’s weird is that when she was dead, she didn’t feel dead...” I trail off, the memory of it all too real.

Mom always said never to get caught up in my visions because it can cause problems when there aren’t any. In this case, it’s going to cause me to lose my mind if I dwell on it.

“After that, one of the largest wolves I have seen came out and I heard...” My hands begin to tremble as I recall the whispers.

Rupert quickly places his hands over mine. “Sweetie, you’re scaring me. Do you want me to signal the Elders?”

Whispers flood the back of my mind, their presence almost tangible. Lightning crackles beneath my skin as the room fades. I can feel the faint sway of my body as Rupert’s voice shouts to me from afar.

‘Save her. Save her. Save her,’ the whispers murmur.

Warmth spreads throughout my veins from my upper arms then throughout my upper torso. Earthy tones fill my nostrils – chamomile, soot, jade, saffron, mud, evergreens.

Ancestors. But not ours.

Quick snippets of moments in time sprint across my mind in a flurried haze that makes me dizzy. A screaming woman, war, death, the Mercurial, Darkin, a woman with black hair and another with

ginger standing side by side, horses galloping and neighing, wolves fighting, demons – it's going so fast I can't keep up anymore.

Just when I'm about to vomit, I blink and I'm back in the spell room with Rupert holding me up from my left side. I groan, falling backward into the couch. Though it's soft, the back of my head doing a quick bounce on its cushions leaves little to be desired.

Rupert helps me back up. Migraine in full effect, I hear a distinct, 'Save her.' The image of the woman with the orange and cream wolf enters my mind.

I spring to my feet without thought. I speed walk around the coffee table then out the door. Making my way down the hall, I head straight into my room. I beeline through my messy floor to reach my walk-in closet at the right side of my bed. Flicking the outside switch, I head to the very back where my old family chest is, hidden beneath a plethora of clothing.

I push aside its coverings and crouch before it to whisper the magic key. The numbers tick every which way until the chest pops open. Under secure boxes of old potion bottles, stained robes, hats, sacred charms, and trapped magics, I find what I swore I'd never use unless it meant life or death. After placing everything neatly back and whispering the locking incantation, I resubmerge the chest under mounds of clothing and rejoin Rupert.

He gawks at our leather-bound family spell book that's almost the size of my torso. "Have you lost your *mind?!?*" he squeaks. "Are you trying to get whipped by Orchid?!"

"Remove everything from the coffee table, please?" I ask ignoring him.

Annoyed, he makes mocking facial expressions as he orchestrates everything into their former places. He carefully takes our other spell book from the table and disappears into the hall. He returns, empty handed, plopping down, crossed legged in his former spot with a huff.

I bow my head curtly. "Thank you." I set the book down in the center of my rearranged bones then fan through the pages using my quick-reading skill. Near the very end of the book, I flatten my hand and the pages cease their flipping.

He looks over my shoulder at the name. "Whoa... Elder Cressida doesn't allow this spell unless it's under –"

'Save her,' keeps repeating in the back of my mind with a clear image of that woman and what I can only assume is her wolf. *No. It is her wolf. How do I know that?*

The whispers say something incoherent, yet I understand them. I'm a witch. Nothing should phase me. But this is freaking me out beyond measure. These two are important, but how?

Those snippets have something to do with it... don't they? I close my eyes, sighing through my nostrils. What a stupid question. Of course they do.

“Dire circumstances,” I finish for him, my voice almost a whisper.

Realization hits him like a freight train. He springs to his feet. “Slone Caccia, put that book back where you – !”

“We don’t have time for your theatrics!” I exclaim. I glance up at him – seeing how I’ve wounded him, hurts, but she needs this. Whoever she is. “Consulting the Elders will take too long. By then, The Mercurial will have already decided.”

“Decided what?” he asks, raising a brow.

I stare at the spell, wondering if the whispers will say something other than ‘Save her.’ But they don’t. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t disappointed. Never has another line of ancestors reached out to me. I don’t even know this woman. So why would they be communicating with me?

“I don’t know,” I admit.

‘Yet,’ say the whispers.

“Yet,” I concur aloud.

Rupert gapes at the book with wide eyes. “It knows,” he murmurs at the same time I think it.

We lock gazes. “Her ancestors asked me to save her...” *I know it may sound crazy, but...*

“Since when do *you* take orders from ancestors or anyone you don’t know?” he tries to reason as he squats down beside me. “Think carefully. Your parents didn’t put you through all this intense training for you to throw it away.”

“Our parents would have understood,” I correct him. His medium lips press into a hard line. I frown. “The Elders will understand. Even if I must lose my powers after it’s said and done, I have to see this through. For her.”

I can’t explain this sudden drive I have for a complete stranger. What I do know is that I shouldn’t go against my instincts and trust my gut and magic. Everything inside me is telling me this is the right thing to do. That I’m the only one who can do this. I *will* do this.

“Sweetie, this stranger could be somebody bad. You said so yourself, she was killed but then there was a point where she just went poof.” He makes the gesture with his hands. “Gone. Does that not sound like a baddie to you? And not in a good way. And if she’s a werewolf then that’s an even bigger no-no.”

“She isn’t a werewolf.” My brows shoot up at how certain I feel.

He looks at me with disbelief. “Let me guess – her ancestors told you.”

I shake my head. “My body did.”

He arches a brow. “Are you sure you’re feeling all right?”

I wave him off, going over what I saw. “Her powers are different. She could control this true-blue light and these dark shadows without being consumed by them. And she has another aura that’s like a glacier blue. I think it reflects the wolf I saw but also her herself as an individual.”

His eyes twinkle in wonder though there's a hint of uncertainty within. "You think that she possesses a lost power. 'May even be a new species."

"I think she might be someone worth protecting," I say. The whispers echo in my head again encouraging added urgency and I know we need to work fast. "Rupie, listen. I haven't been good at the whole witch thing since I was a babe. And even though you and I have done our share of illegal things in the past, this is absolutely warranted. I'm asking you – just as I did those times before – that you trust me." I sit on my knees in front of him. Gathering his hands in mine, I put on my best puppy dog eyes. "I need your help to do this spell."

He rips his hands away, sitting on his rump. "Are you crazy, Slone?! If I do this, the Daffys will never accept me and I will forever be an outcast. You have a place to go – !"

"Rupie, please?! What if – " Oh goddess... I'm gonna say it out loud, aren't I?

"What if, what?" He narrows his eyes, folding his arms across his chest.

"I'm not going to assume I'm that special or that I would even qualify for that sort of job but – " I pause.

The whispers swirling around my mind stop me. I listen intently wondering what ancestors are speaking to me. Who are they? Where do I fit into all this?

'Prophecy. Prophecy. Prophecy.'

Images of the woman beaming up at a tall man with brown hair, enters my mind. She seems so happy and though I can't see his face, his aura is dancing, meshing with hers. The images shift again; their hands intertwined with rings. Hers silver with a tear diamond and floral vines. His; a gold band with silver etched in a similar pattern.

A castle replaces the image. It doesn't have a specific style. It's chaotic. There's gothic, Persian, Victorian, rustic, Spanish – so many architectural and color differences that seem to work together.

Children's laughter and adult chatter rings through the air as the scene changes, landing me in a courtyard filled with beings of different species and cultural backgrounds. Soon the smells of herbs and foods surround me. Some I haven't smelt nor seen in my life. I hum in solace.

"Slone!" Rupie says firmly scaring me out of my haze. I catch my breath as I try to process what I just witnessed. He grasps my upper arms gently. "What did you see?"

I huff a laugh to myself in disbelief. His blue eyes question me. "It's real..." I murmur mostly to myself. His brows furrow as he waits. "I saw the prophecy. That woman from my vision? She's her. The one we were told about as kids." Excitement fills me saying it aloud. She has to be. She is.

"You're gonna have to be more specific," he states.

I roll my eyes. "Centuries ago, our coven heard rumors of a pair who would change the cycle of how we live – witches,

werewolves, vampires, countless other species.” His eyes widen at that. I go on while he’s still too shocked to interrupt. “She’s the queen of the utopian kingdom,” I breathe. I can’t stop myself from smiling. I always thought it was a pipe dream that grandma, mom and dad told us, but it’s not. It’s real. She exists. They exist.

“Slone if you aren’t sure about this – “

“I’m sure,” I interject.

He rolls his eyes, then tosses his arms up letting them fall on his thighs with a slap. Crawling closer to the coffee table he mutters under his breath, “If our parents were still alive, they’d have found a way to rebirth you.”

I dive into his torso, embracing him in a giant bear hug. He grunts from my hug attack then pats my head. “There, there little gremlin,” he coos. I head butt him in the waist. “OH-HOHOOOO!” he grunts, the wind leaving him.

I beam up at him and he scowls down at me. The whispers rack my brain, their presence becoming louder and demanding. I settle myself in my spot, looking over the spell. I speed through the explanation of how it works.

“Since you don’t know what she looks like, I can use you as an anchor. You’ll need to plug your powers into me as I do the spell.” The taste of blueberries and the scent of lemon icing hit me and I smile to myself. Grandma. “Also, Grandma Yip just sent me the tingle of positivity and seems to be okay with this arrangement. It’s a bonus

that she doesn't seem off-put by the woman's ancestors so... Once we do this, it'll be like riding a bicycle."

He shakes his head, fluttering his thick lashes in disbelief. "Chipmunk, say what? You have never done this spell. This is like getting on a roller coaster that has four new crazy additions that you don't know about before you buckle your seatbelt."

I place my right hand over his left. "Trust me."

He sighs, taking my hand in his. Had he felt the woman's power then he would've been able to forge a connection with her. But since it was her and I in that forest scape, the most he can contribute is this ever-flowing pulse of his golden magic.

My magic zips beneath my skin giving me a jolt. The hairs on my arms raise as Rupert's magic seeps into me like a river. Hearing dad's voice, I fight not to furrow my brow.

"Knitting your brow like that will stall your concentration. Plus, it'll give you wrinkles in your forehead," he had said.

My mouth tugs at the corners as I relax like he taught me. Feel the warmth, take it in. Like an old friend.

Inhaling deeply, my lightning attaches itself to my brother's magic. The initial sticky feeling of it subsides becoming a security blanket.

I hover my left hand over the intricate, hand-drawn symbol in the book that's supposed to locate the woman from my vision. The first part of the spell is in an old language that has long been tossed away by most covens aside from a hand full like ours. The last half is

in English, which is most curious, and the wording is as though it's meant to find me, not the woman.

*“Find me in the place unknown,
Search for me,
Hear my voice,
See my face,
I am who you are searching for.”*

I tip my head back, my purple clouds forming overhead. The remainder of the spell I need to conjure up and quickly. Desperate, I use my memory of the vision to guide me.

*“Find the woman from my vision who is linked
to the wolf,
She harbors the light and the dark,
harmoniously,
Her ancestors watch over her, tirelessly,
She is the one who is to bring peace to all beings,
The woman who is to create a utopian kingdom.*

*Go to her,
Protect her from those who wish to do her harm,
Let her mate and his find her,
Allow her to become whole,
May her powers be known when she is ready.”*

I look down as indigo lightning roots from the pages and grows outward until it's consuming the coffee table. My purple lightning is called by its presence, shooting out from my chest and core, joining them in their mini storm. I grind my teeth, the vast surge of power pumping through me making my blood feel like led. I glide my hands along the bones closest to me. It's like pop rocks are beneath my fingertips as I do so.

The rumbling of a storm tumbles through my belly, my chest alight with the ecstasy of freedom I feel whenever I use my magic. Dark clouds form above the book, and the mixture of indigo and purple become lost in its thunderous dome.

I wince, my insides rumbling like I had meat that was weeks old. I'm damn near drenched in sweat at this point. I hold tighter to Rupie's hand, holding down my early dinner that's fighting its way up my throat.

A heartbeat resounds throughout the room and my brother, and I share a look of unease. Mine being more so from trying not to

puke on our makeshift altar. We look back to the book just as the crease begins to illuminate a glacier blue. We remain calm, keeping our magic flowing as true-blue hues engulf the pages. With each sporadic sequence of electricity, the color glows brighter to the point where we need to squint to look at it.

Familiar intensity from my vision of the woman and her wolf leaves me short of breath. The power they hold is more than mine and Rupert's combined. Winds steadily pick up due to the ever-rolling clouds that are gradually spinning faster and faster.

The cool gusts of wind quell the need to vomit. This tiny slice of heaven is enough to make –

GRUMBLE

'What's wrong?' Rupert's worried tone fills my mind.

I can't respond, I'm too focused on the burning from puckering my buttocks. Vomit I can handle. But diarrhea? That may be a challenge.

I can hear Rupert saying something along the lines of cutting the spell. "NO!" I grit out. "We're close! I can handle it! Just. Keep. Going!"

I hold my breath while I fight to keep my ass from exploding. I know he can feel my pain. How trying to connect with power that isn't from any coven or any witch is tearing me apart from the inside out. My intestines feel like they're being shocked every other millisecond making it even harder to keep it together. Though this spell is excruciating, I refuse to let it get the better of me.

I refuse to allow this woman to be in harm's way. Health be damned. For a better future, for a better life, for our people, for hers, for his, for all creatures alike. I'm tired of seeing nothing other than destruction. If one kingdom can be built, if handfuls of species from every corner of the world are safe in one place, I'll drain my power until I have nothing more than embers.

I throw my head back and scream at the top of my lungs as I forcibly pump every drop of magic Rupert and I share into the storm, all at once. The woman's scream from my vision, echoes mine. Whether it's in my head or Rupert can hear through the storm, I have yet to be certain.

With everything going on inside me, I'm on the cusp of giving up. But I can't. Not yet. I'm almost there. Claws may as well be digging into my chest from the immense range of magic pumping inside me.

Three magics – the woman's, mine, and Rupie's – are being held together by me alone. If Rupert knew what she looked like then this wouldn't feel as though I were being shredded into bits. We'd be able to mask her power and only have of our strength partially drained by the time we finished. But since it's only me, there will be a price to pay.

Grinding my teeth, I pull on the final threads of will I have. My exploding ass no longer an issue, I can do this. I'll finish this... without hesitation, I think to myself.

Strings of lightning sink into my wrists, making me grunt out. A gentle voice enters my mind. Writhing in agony, I attempt to listen. “Watch over her for us,” she croons. “The spell is almost complete.”

“She is right, deary.” My heart skips a beat from the hoarse, soothing voice I haven’t heard in years.

The pain and our home, fade away, leaving only the raging storm above. Dull, foggy blue clouds mist

from the center of the chaos, expanding outward, enveloping me like a dome. In an instant, I’m no longer sitting, but floating, my feet barely off the ground. A summoning of the spirit.

Like I had in the past, I imagine myself being pulled down by gravity and I begin to sink. I land on the balls of my bare feet. Any time I’ve entered Ropendule I end up barefoot. It doesn’t matter if I’m wearing shoes in the present. Here, my toes are as bare as the day I was born. The mark of my coven burns on my left shoulder blade as I take in the empty meeting place.

Ropendule is somewhere and nowhere all at once. A haven where we can meet with the dearly departed, the long forgotten and the lost. We can only visit here through our minds, souls, or spirits. This place appears differently for everyone who comes here. I’ve experienced several versions of this place, some of which weren’t always the most pleasant because of the abrupt, sheer force of the summons. This night, it’s like a comforting beacon rather than a tug or a trapping – which can happen with spiteful or less friendly ancestors or spirits.

A smoky white figure lines the fog and I squint to see who approaches. A downside of Ropendule? You can't use your magic. A tether pulls from my heart as the spirit of an elderly woman with a full figure, steps into view.

Her skin and clothing are in hues of whites, appearing as ghostly as she does lively. Tears spring my eyes as she shuffles closer. Her ankle length skirt is covered at the top half of her waist with the apron she always wore at home for gardening and cooking. She's even wearing her favorite white blouse, her cuffs rolled up to her elbows. The talismans of protection she wore, rests in layers until they reach between her breasts.

She smiles at me, her soft, wrinkled face clenching my heart as I shed tears for the woman who was gone far too soon. She wasn't as known as the other witches, but she was as kind as she was vicious, and cleverer than anyone I've come across. I've met my fair share of powerful, intelligent individuals. This woman, however, has always trumped them in my eyes – my Grandma Yip.

Lost in reminiscing, I lose track of paying attention to my surroundings. I jump as a puff of smoke births a towering Native woman who looks to be no less than in her forties. Though she isn't smiling, she has a soft expression yet there is a command in her presence. Her hip length black hair frames her shoulders, her intense dark eyes unwavering from me. Her patterned, navy-blue dress reaches just above her ankles. Hands clasped in front of her, she regards me with an assessing look that makes me shrink internally.

"My berry bushel," Grandma Yip coos. "You've done wonderfully."

"How are you?" I asked in hushed tones, my vision blurring. "Are you all right?"

"Resting has been an adventure." She chuckles to herself. "Peace has always been within me, so being here is a slice of heaven. Literally."

I chuckle, my tears spilling onto my cheeks, "I miss you... All of you."

Her smile turns into a loving, widespread grin. Her eyes crinkle at the corners. "We miss you, too, deary. But you must go on for Ms. Annabelle's sake and Katalina's."

I take in the calm countenance of the woman who's hanging back from me and my grandma. "You must be Annabelle," I state more than question. She nods. "And Katalina... She's the one that I saw in my vision?" She nods slower this time. Excitement and intrigue fill me. "Is she the one from the prophecy?"

Annabelle lifts her chin. "That is her intent. If she fails, there is no telling how long we will have to wait."

From the sound of her voice, I can tell she is more than worried. "Wait for what?" I ask.

"For her to accept who she is. Your family has protected ours for many centuries, it is only fitting that a daughter of the Caccia bloodline aids the bloodline of the McCarthys." She smirks at my blank expression. "Of course, that isn't my surname or the remainder

of her ancestors'. We've skipped multiple generations in hopes of a worthy successor. Who better than our fierce Katalina?" She smiles fondly and my breath catches. Wisdom within her eyes shows her age and how happy she is with their choice.

"Forgive me for being blunt, but what are you?"

She waits as if she knows I have more to ask but Grandma Yip barks, "Slone Caccia!" Her scowl sends a shiver of regret through me. "It is rude to ask in such a way."

Annabelle approaches and touches her shoulder gently. "It is all right, Ruth. It is a fair question considering what she is doing for our Kin."

Her dark gaze pierces through me, giving me goosebumps. The kind you get when you're face to face with a being who packs a punch.

Who is this woman?

"And what she will do in the future," Annabelle adds.

I furrow my brow looking to my grandma for clarification. Grandma Yip's thin lips dip into a frown, her wary blue eyes trained on me. Annabelle waves her left hand in smooth curves, turns, and twists until ghostly wisps form a large brooch-like object. As it hovers above her palm, she pushes it toward me. I hold out my cupped hands as it floats into my palms.

It's a ghost imitation – the shape and decorations are real but this is a 4D replica made of spiritual magic, bearing no colors. A dark tear-shaped jewel rests at the center, surrounded by smaller circle

shaped ones. Jewels of clear and a multitude of darker ones, perch themselves on top of intricate spirals that entwine, twist, and curl like tree roots until they reach the bottom. The center of the large, tear-shaped jewel is hollow as though its core has been carved out.

“The heart of a Pathical,” Annabelle answers without me having to ask.

“Is this a rare jewel?” I inquire, trying to read her expression.

“Somewhat but not what you’re thinking of. That hollow hole is supposed to harbor the actual heart of our Kin.”

My lips part as blood drains from my cheeks.

“I, like Katalina, am a Pathical. We haven’t much time left before you leave this plain so I leave you with instructions. Find the Creature Codex written by Beth. She wrote our history and many others in her time. A dear friend, as well. She was one of the second generations of our Kin. But first and foremost, you must protect Katalina’s heart.” She lifts her chin to the brooch in my palms. “And this... infernal thing.” A ghost of rage sparks in her eyes, one that makes me want to stagger back a step. Why would she want me to protect something she hates?

I’m about to ask when my grandma interjects, “It was good to see you, my berry bushel.” She beams but there’s sadness as she does so. “I will let your parents know that you and Rupert are well. You have made us proud. We know you will continue to do so.”

My tears overflow once more. “We love and miss every one of you.” I don’t want her to leave, but I can feel the pull of my body. I give the brooch a good look before it vanishes in a puff of white smoke.

“We’ll be close,” grandma reassures me.

Annabelle’s eyes glow a blue that’s nearly completely white. “You have our thanks, and our blessing.”

“What blessing?” I ask.

Light blasts across the ghostly blue plain we’re on. In an instant, I’m wheezing for oxygen again. Warm hands grip my shoulders, shaking me violently. “Slone? Slone!” Rupert’s frazzled voice blasts into my ear.

I groan. “Get. Off. Me,” I grunt, my voice nasally from my face planted sideways on the carpet.

He complies, releasing my shoulders so I can get up by myself. Just as I sit up someone pounds on the door. We look at each other, our pulses racing from the magic coming from outside.

Cressida’s voice bleeds into our minds, *‘Either you can come to the door, or I can blast it into splinters and unleash my fury on you both, instead of waiting for you to be escorted to the Chamber.’*

Rupert curses under his breath. We whisper furiously at each other, tossing gestures and jabbing fingers at one another as we fight over who answers it.

‘RUPERT!’ Cressida bellows adding to my blooming headache.

I smirk smugly and he rolls his eyes as he rises to his feet. He puffs air, exasperated as he leaves the spell room. I listen intently as he walks down our spiral staircase, unlocking the five locks on our front door. He calls it 'overkill,' I call it being prepared.

You know angry Cressida has entered your vicinity when you refuse to move or breathe. My heart races as their footsteps approach. Rupert's pale self enters first, his gaze dropping to his feet as Cressida comes in behind him. She's wearing her blush Kimono tonight, which means she was most likely at an event with her family.

Joy, oh, joy. Now we're reeeeeeally in for it.

Somehow, she looks even more menacing as she glides toward me. Kneeling beside me, she puts her knuckles to my forehead. She searches me for injuries then narrows her gaze. "Give me a name," she commands in her signature chilling tone.

DEFENDED

KATALINA

~ OCTOBER 15TH, 2020 – SHOWY UNIVERSITY – 7:45

PM ~

Whoever enjoys sitting in a classroom surrounded by egotistical morons is either a saint or a lunatic. There aren't many women in my required classes, which I don't mind. It's the fact that when a horde of males are in a room, they tend to act out. Last semester, I rarely had trouble focusing. This semester, however...

"Yo, Gene! Look at the *rack* on this one!" Justin's shout echoes from across the lecturing hall.

"Ugh," I groan under my breath. I roll my eyes, then resume jotting down my essay so I can type it up at home.

The boys – yes, boys – are consistently interrupting class in one way or another. What doesn't help is that the two teachers we have would let them get away with murder. Justin – the notorious playboy, misogynist who should've grown up after graduating high school – enjoys bullying, sex, bathroom hookups, and lacrosse. He's a privileged kid who lacks respect. If morals had a scent, you wouldn't be able to smell them on him, you'd only smell his ego.

While I'm scribbling with unparalleled concentration that comes around once in a blue moon, Gene shouts in the distance, "INCOMING!"

I peer at Justin's group and my heart sinks at their wide eyes focused on me.

"HEADS UP!" Gene yells.

Suddenly, an orange Gatorade rocket plummets from my right onto my open binder, rupturing on impact. It skips across the desk, spraying me and my belongings. My jaw ripples from the chuckles coming from the clan of rejects.

I toss the amused leader an ugly glower. He's leaning back so far on that desk I wish one of his friends would push him over by those expensive kicks he wears. I shove my things into my satchel, storm up the steps and into the hallway.

I don't take note of the turns, my feet are taking me to where I need to go. The desire to pay attention to anything else other than getting to my car is beyond lost on me. By the time I reach the parking lot, the bottle boom splatters are already starting to stick to my skin like syrup.

Of course. Why would it be just Gatorade? Gotta throw some extra sweet-smelling shit in there.

I scrunch my nose, glaring at the spots on my loose, light grey tank and baggy charcoal joggers. "Fuck that damn Justin Squires and his 'genius' sidekick," I mutter as I rummage in my pockets for my keys.

I fish them out of my left pocket and press the 'unlock' button repeatedly. My baby – Thunder – chirps multiple parking spaces

ahead of me. Her response almost drowns out the sound of running footsteps behind me.

“Sweetheart! Wait up!” the oh-great-leader hollers.

I roll my eyes into the night above and turn around in time to see him waving. He meets me, his blue eyes a touch wider than they should be as his perverted gaze addresses me from head to toe. I’m itching to say, ‘Eye’s up here, bucko.’ I crinkle my nose as a chill breeze blows his expensive aftershave and cologne combo into my nose. He’s so busy ogling my body, he doesn’t even notice my reaction.

Seeming to have had his fill; his blue eyes lock onto mine – a glint of mischief and intrigue in them. “I’m sorry, little missy. Gene didn’t mean for your stuff to get soaked with ‘rade juice.’”

I fight not to roll my eyes as I raise my right hand to stop him. “It’s fine. It’s done. Goodnight.”

I pivot on my heel and resume my walk when he grabs my dropped right wrist. I kick him in the right shin, causing him to favor it but he still holds on.

“OW! What the fuck, bitch? You got a tampon stuck in your pussy or somethin’?” He glares at me.

“Let me go and leave me be.” I forcefully yank my wrist from his grip and continue on my way.

“Hey!” he shouts.

I hone in on his footsteps, my heart hammering in my ribcage as he tromps up behind me with purpose. I spin to face him and go to slam my right fist into his groin but, to my horror, he catches my fist.

He forces me to the right with such roughness, I almost lose my balance. I catch a glimpse of the trunk of the black van he's pushing me towards. Though I try to regain my footing to slip past him, I stumble, the momentum too much for me to overcome.

Pain riddles my back, the cold shell of a van bites my exposed skin. I grind my teeth, adrenaline and terror fueling me as he pins my right arm above my head, narrowing his gaze. He looks like a lion pissed at a gazelle for hoofing him in the snout.

He sneers. "You should learn to respect men. You're hot but women like you need to know their place."

His face turns into a sickening sweet demeanor, one of false sincerity that I'm desperately craving to smash to bits with my knuckles. But I'm trapped – his hands are my cuffs, and his body is becoming ever closer. Breasts forcibly pressed against him, a lump of dread forms in my throat. I can see those disgusting wheels turning behind his sky-blue eyes. I want out but I can't move.

Knowing I can't unbend my right knee, he purposefully presses his hard-on on my thigh. I swear by every nerve ending in me, I wish I could do something, but I can't do anything with this six-foot something barbarian pinning me like this. I fight my anxiety, holding my breath in hopes it'll help slow my heart rate. I swear he can feel my pulse as it jumps in my wrist because his lips spread into a stomach-churning grin.

I refuse to tremble. To so much as twitch my fingers. I. Refuse.

His lips inches from mine, I fold mine, pressing them together for all it's worth. His minty, hot chip breath fans the bridge of my nose, blowing my long bangs on either side of my face even further apart. I fight to remain calm as he licks my right cheek. I scrunch my eyes closed, turning my face and touching my jaw to my collar bone before he can attempt moving to my neck.

He traces his nose along my forehead, inhaling my hair. I remain stiff as a board, fearing moving an inch will either spur him on or give him further access. He moans as he grinds up my leg, and I stop the scream from rising in my throat. I want to call for help, but I highly doubt anyone is around. And even then, Justin is known for being ruthless towards guys he's fought with here. I don't want to imagine what he's like with a woman he's got trapped. At this point, I'm just praying he'll let me go, that this is the extent of it.

With every shift of his hard-on on my leg, my anxiety skyrockets. I want to puke my guts out in his face. Maybe then he'll let me go. Or... it may be worse. Tears threaten to spill over as he grunts into my right ear.

This sick bastard.... He can rot in hell....

Suddenly, he gives me a few inches of space, just enough for me to feel like I can somewhat breathe again. He grumbles to himself, then says to me, "I won't take your clothes off." His eyes rake down to my bosom then flick up to my brown eyes.

I shiver in disgust. He licks his lips then flashes me a lopsided grin that makes my blood run cold. Clearly, he thinks my inadvertent reaction is one of lust.

I hold my breath, tucking my chin to protect my neck as he leans down to my left ear, his stubble grazing my jaw. My fingers twitch, my pulse jumping in my neck in time with my erratic heartbeat. My back arches as my feet attempt to move on their own.

His hot breath coats my ear as he chuckles lowly. "Nervous, are we?" Open-mouthed, he slides his lips along my lobe and my body lurches again, aching to get away. "Good girl." Bile rises in my throat at the nickname.

He really thinks I want this? Is he kidding? Scream, Katalina!
SCREAM!

My fight not to tremble is in vain. He slips a finger up my left thigh and my eyes bulge when he tugs playfully at the hem of my loose tank. He pulls back that icy blue gaze boring into me. "Normally, I wouldn't go for women like you. But seeing as your body's aching to be touched, I might just make an exception."

I have to force myself not to spit in his face. "Women like me?" "No" won't do shit. He isn't the type to take "No" for an answer.

Think, Lina! THINK!

A gust of wind blows into us, and faint whispers sing as though they're at either side of me. My breath hitches as tingles rush through my body. It's like I can breathe my first breath of fresh air in

my entire life. Coolness spreads throughout the back of my mind like an ice pack. I shiver, the sensation sending me a zing of energy.

My heart drops to my stomach as I'm brought back to the present. Justin's eyes twinkle with glee.

What was that? Never mind. How can he mistake any of this for excitement? How do sickos like him exist? Are they this crazy and self-centered?!

His pearly whites are menacing as he growls out, "Yes... Spicy attitude, no manners... don't know when to put that pretty little ass –" He uses his free hand to slap my right hip and smiles wider as I sneer at him. "– in the air and take a spanking for being mouthy."

Eyes glazed over, his smile fades into a bland expression, void of emotion. His hand travels from my hip to my waist. I would knee him in the groin if I could. I wonder, how many women has he taken advantage of?

He leers over me, no longer playful but full of malice. "But I will slap you if you disrespect me again." He jerks me into him then slams me back in one swift motion against the trunk of the van. Rage thrums alongside the searing pain in my head and back. "Understand?" he rumbles.

Stiff-lipped and fuming, I glower into his eyes. I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing my pain. I nod, rigidly. "Yeah..." I pause then lift my chin. "I understand that you have a huge male ego. That you're a perverted, entitled rich kid with no future except in your daddy's business."

His jaw ripples at my words, his crystal blues ablaze. At this point, I could care less. He's stripping me of my fucking pride and getting off on it. I'll have an eye for an eye, even if I'm just using my words. If he's going to do anything to me, I'll kick and scream even if it's useless. His nostrils flare as he visibly grinds his teeth and tightens his grip on my wrist and waist.

I dispel the urge to wince, refusing to look afraid. "Now let. Me. Go," I grumble.

He seethes, "Why you little – ?"

His eyes bulge as a large, vein ridden hand squeezes his throat. A breathy noise escapes his lips, his fingers twitching as his grip becomes weaker from losing oxygen. I can't stop myself from gaping at Justin's reddening face as the veins in the hand jut out from squeezing tighter around his throat. Justin's hands finally fall from me, gripping onto the wrist of the hand, instead as he's forced to stagger backward.

He's still close, but at least I'm free... Come on, Lina. MOVE!

I inhale a huge gulp of air as the back of my savior cuts the sight of Justin off, completely. My right hand falls slack at my side. There's something calming about my savior's cologne compared to the choking hazard Justin's wearing. Regardless, I'm still terrified. Yeah, he cut off Justin's oxygen supply and wedged himself between us, but he caught Justin off guard. What happens now?

My blood hammers in my ears. If it wasn't for my savior and the van's cool surface pressing into my back, I'd be in a pool on the

pavement, shaking. Void of any thoughts other than images of me screaming to be set free by Justin. Inside I'm crumpling, itching to claw through the skin that Justin defiled with his groin. That was disgusting. I think I'm gonna hurl.

Bracing a hand against the van's trunk, I hold my mouth with the other. Vomit works its way into my throat, the sensation of that creep's dick on my thigh coaxing it out of me. My stomach roils as dizziness begins to take hold.

"Taking advantage of ladies must be a trait you picked up from your dad."

That voice... Marcus!?

Marcus Vernon is the second most well-known person in the entire university. A way I know of him is because of prep rallies, and the parties where the headmaster has him and other exemplary students publicly praised for their achievements and deep involvement in school activities. For Marcus, those are fundraisers, economics, and soccer – to name a few. I've seen him in the halls, at a distance, but this is the first time that I'm this close to him. And though I'm glad he's saving me, and I feel safe, something tells me I would only get in his way if they went at it.

From behind Marcus, I can hear Justin wheezing uncontrollably like he's trying to talk. Marcus takes a few steps forward from me and when his hand drops to his side, I can hear Justin coughing and gasping for breath. I stare at Marcus's back, flinching whenever I'd hear Justin's coughs or shallow breaths on either side of

Marcus. All I can imagine Justin doing is failing to stand up straight each time and having to double over in coughing fits, while gently holding his throat. I hear him make a grunt of rage and start to say 'You' but then he starts coughing, again.

Seeming recovered to a degree, Justin rasps, "Get out – " He wheezes. " – of my – " Wheeze. " – way." Saliva spews from his mouth, his face is near purple as he coughs uncontrollably.

Marcus remains quiet. We stay still, watching Justin's every move as he recovers.

He staggers upright, his rage-filled watery eyes locked on Marcus who slowly shakes his head. Justin snarls. "YOU WANT YOUR MOM TO KEEP HER JOB?! THEN GIVE ME THAT B – !"

I almost pin my back against the trunk I was trapped against when Marcus's words stop me. "Finish that sentence and you might not have any teeth to smile with." Marcus is so calm, so emotionless.

Whenever I've heard Marcus speak, he's always so cheerful. Always smiling. In this moment, he's the complete opposite. Any sane person facing off with an unpredictable ego maniac like Justin would try to diffuse the situation. But considering that Justin brought Marcus's mother into this, I can't say I wouldn't feel like being level-headed. If I had the strength and skill, I'd knock Justin down a few pegs. Hell, a few feet.

Justin shoots a loogie at our left. He smirks at me and my blood runs cold. The palpable tension in the air shifts – angry is an

understatement. I may just be looking at Marcus's back, but his energy...

Is this what murderous intent feels like?

How Marcus shoves his hands into his dark jean pockets is calculated. Though it's for Justin, that act alone tells me I should stay where I am.

Marcus jerks his head right, towards the school. "Get out of here before I knock out those pearly whites daddy bought you." He bounces slightly on his toes. I dare say he's waiting for Justin to throw the first punch.

For what seems like forever Justin hasn't moved or said anything. That he hasn't so much as ticked his jaw is terrifying me. The jerk isn't the silent type. My right index finger twitches, my anxiety lodging itself in my throat.

Size wise, Marcus is shorter by maybe an inch or two. He's lean compared to Justin with his bulky build. Justin isn't as athletic as Marcus. I know this because once, during a university carnival, he and Marcus raced against each other with their shirts off.

Justin has more of a pre-bulk build, meanwhile, since Marcus is the actual athlete. He barely has a lick of fat on him. But, even I have to admit, in terms of brute strength, Marcus might as well be laying himself inside an open alligator's mouth.

I've seen Justin chuck a log during a fall tournament for the school – that struck fear in me. I didn't know why but maybe it was my gut warning me back then.

Why couldn't I have gotten a bad feeling when I left the classroom, tonight? Is Marcus about to get hurt because of me? Or... will he leave? I quietly start to slip my hand over my satchel's closed flap and inch towards its side pocket closest to Marcus.

I can reach my phone –

My heart leaps in my ribcage when his hand shoots back and grabs my wrist. My eyes flick from his clenched hand to his sidelong glance.

Something in his hazel eyes tells me he won't leave, and when he shakes his head, relief crashes through me. The knot in my chest eases. That bliss is short lived as shuffling shoes on pavement jump start me into a silent panic. Marcus's brow furrows and he turns his face too late.

His arms flail as he tumbles into me. I hold up my arms, cushioning the sudden impact of Marcus's back. He rocks against me as he and Justin go at it, their noises of distress booming in my ears. Positioning my feet is damn near impossible. I keep slipping and my core strength isn't enough to push Marcus up to help him, let alone slip myself out from either side.

"Redeeming yourself by saving this slut won't change what happened," Justin grunts pinning Marcus against me. I almost gasp for air from the weight. "Your mother was a whore just like she is –"

Those words strike a cord that renders everything inside me still. Marcus's grunt of rage snaps me to as he shoves Justin off of both of us. I barely have time to savor the cool air on my skin before terror

overwhelms me at the sight of Marcus leaping into the air, his right fist cocked back. His fist comes down but I can't see if it's on the top of Justin's head or his face. What I can see is Justin's elbows on either side of Marcus, as he raises his arms to protect himself.

I squint waiting for Justin to go down. He sidesteps to his right, granting me a better view of their fight. Justin goes for a right hook, and it lands squarely on Marcus's jaw. He drops on his left knee staring at the ground in a daze.

Come on, get up. Get up.

Marcus shakes his head once.

Come on.

Marcus's name is on the tip of my tongue when my blood runs cold from Justin moving in my left peripheral. My stomach churns at the sick grin twisting on his face. He holds my gaze as he stalks toward me.

I use my hands to feel the Suburban, my only tether to reality so I can force myself to move sideways to my right. My chest heaves up then down in rapid succession, not giving me a moments breath. I no knife, no pepper spray, no blunt objects, no perfume – no nothing to get me out of this situation. I want to go home to my Ina, not be on the news or going to trial about what happened tonight.

Marcus begins to turn toward Justin as he struggles to get to his feet, glaring at his back. The closer Justin gets, the louder my heart becomes. Adrenaline, fear, terror, adrenaline, fear, terror, anxiety,

anxiety, anxiety – I can't leave Marcus like this. Even if I bolt, will I make it? Will Justin beat Marcus because he helped me?

Justin is feet from me. If I don't move now, who knows what he'll do. Instinct finally overtakes me and before I know it, I'm sprinting and diving beneath Justin's swinging arms to the pavement. I roll on the asphalt toward Marcus and crawl to him like a mad woman. Blinking hard, he reaches out for me. I stretch out my body to reach for his outstretched hands with my own just as large hands grip my ankles.

Wide eyed, I gasp as I'm yanked from my knees onto my stomach. Terrified, I lock eyes with Marcus as he and I struggle to get me to him. No matter how much he and I pull me toward him, Marcus and I can't outmatch Justin's brute strength.

Having my body being pulled both ways is causing me so much pain, at this rate my ankles will be dislocated. Each of us is pulling so much that the only parts of me that're on the asphalt are the lower half of my arms. My elbows begin to scrape just as I feel my left ankle being to pop.

I shake my head, scrunching my eyes shut. "AHHH! LETGOLETGOLETGO!" I plead with Marcus.

Another pop has me shriek out in pain and Marcus releases my loosening grip. The ease on my muscles and joints brings me little joy as I'm dragged back on the asphalt by my assailant. Knees bent, ankles still in Justin's grasp, I begin to kick, swat, and scream. Justin chuckles at my vain attempts at fighting for freedom.

Vomit and fear climb up my body as he pins my arms at either side of my face. I can barely stop the tears as his hungry, blue eyes grate my soul. Though my bent knees are keeping us apart, I know he's going to force them open sooner rather than later.

How the hell did I end up in this mess? I just wanted to be –

An unexplained warmth buzzes in my core, and I watch as in slow motion as blood spews from his smooshed mouth, and the bridge of his nose shift upwards. I hear a thunderous snap when it breaks and his molars clacking together from impact.

Before I have time to contemplate what's happening, Justin is off of me already as if he were never there. My heart kick starts.

Wh-wh – ? H-h-how – ?

Justin's muffled screams carry over to me as he lays with his back to the ground, kicking as he covers his nose and mouth with his hands. I jump slightly as hair tickles me beneath my arm. Marcus cradles me in his arms and walks to the row of cars across from us to a matte forest green Acura sedan. He sits me on the hood, his hazel eyes locked on mine. He digs into his front left jean pocket and fishes out a pair of keys that he dangles in front of my face.

"Hold on to these," he instructs, his voice giving away his exhaustion.

Too out of to plead with him to leave, I nod rigidly a few times as I take the keys from him. He twitches a smile before rolling his shoulders and neck. Darkness flashes across his features as he turns

away and trudges back over to Justin who's now swaying on the ground in delirium.

Stepping over him, Marcus doesn't give Justin a minute to look up at him standing over him. He slams his hands down on Justin's chest, the sound of the impact makes me wince. He lifts Justin's torso off the asphalt with ease.

Justin's hands drop to the ground from his stomach as he's forced to look at Marcus's enraged expression.

"You brought my mother into this..." Marcus growls barely loud enough for me to hear. His voice gradually becomes louder with each word. "After the shit you pulled you have to make it worse?!"

He cocks his right fist back and slams it into Justin's cheek, making his face whip to the right. Empty as they look, I can't help cowering as they look in my general direction. Breathing ragged, I try to calm myself.

Dazed, Justin slowly looks back up at Marcus, his hazel eyes crazed and full of hate. Spit and droplets of blood spew from Justin's mouth as he coughs. He groans in pain, barely able to look Marcus in the eye.

Marcus shakes him. "DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOU PUT HER THROUGH?!" Though Marcus is referring to me, something in his voice tells me there's more in that question than he's saying aloud.

But Justin isn't paying attention, he's too fucked up to notice. Justin chuckles, giving him a bloody grin. "Haven't fucked this one yet,

have you?" he rasps. Justin's chuckling is cut short by another set of punches.

One... Two...

Marcus Vernon... the dream jock for women and the kindhearted man who does nothing but smile in the public eye. To see him like this...

Punch after punch, Justin's spit and blood are decorating each side of the pavement as his head snaps side to side. Marcus's jacket flaps flare out whenever his elbows cock back. Even though he's dealt him only four more punches to the face, each time Marcus has thrown them, it felt like an eternity. At this rate, Justin looks like he might be knocked out cold. But from how bloodied and battered he is, I'm afraid Marcus might accidentally kill him. Fear wracking me, I think I'll have to yank Marcus off him but I can't bring myself to move off of his car.

Marcus raises his fist and I release the terror that's been lodged in my throat since Justin pinned me. "MARCUS!!!"

TRAUMA

KATALINA

Marcus stills, his left fist frozen, wavering beside Justin's cheek. It takes all my will power to tear my eyes away from Marcus's gashed knuckles to the horror on his face as he absorbs damage he's inflicted. Justin's head bobs backward then abruptly forward as he tries to stay conscious. If Marcus wasn't holding him, he would've slammed his own head backward into the pavement by now.

I force myself to slide off Marcus's car and trudge over to them. Each step feels like an eternity. Try as I might, I can't stop trembling the closer I get to Justin. Placing myself nearer to Marcus while keeping a safe distance from Justin, my knees nearly buckle at the carnage on Justin's face.

Crimson paints his once flawless face, mostly thanks to his broken nose. Its placement is farther to the left now. Marcus hitting him repeatedly must've caused Justin's nose to pop back into place then break the other way. He has swelling that's blossoming along his cheeks, his left eye is nearly swollen shut. Justin's hands twitch at his sides making me flinch toward Marcus. I stop myself halfway when I remember that Justin's legs are between Marcus's. Just because he's out of it, doesn't mean he can't snap to and pull something.

With a shaky left hand, I reach out and touch Marcus's arm. He tears his eyes from his target to look at me. There's an apology that

flickers in his eyes, but it vanishes as he reverts to glowering down at Justin.

“You might want to back up,” Marcus tells me.

I back away several feet from the two. I hate feeling exposed, like Justin’s buddies could come out at any moment and jump us. Hugging myself, I watch carefully as Marcus sets Justin’s limp torso not-so-gently back down on the ground. He picks up Justin’s left hand and walks behind his head.

Crouching down, he grabs a fistful of Justin’s hood and lifts him from the ground with his knees. As he does, he pins Justin’s arm behind him. Justin groans, looking delirious as Marcus tightens his grip, raising him on his tippy toes.

“Say you’re sorry,” Marcus demands.

Justin stares at me through slit lids then drops his gaze and gently shakes his head. Marcus gives him one violent shake. “I said apologize,” he grinds out. “Daddy isn’t here to save you. Or do you want more scars?”

Justin shudders, meeting my uncertain gaze. Marcus releases the fabric, letting him drop messily to his knees. Justin works to look up at me. Marcus is sure to keep his distance, stalking from behind Justin and positioning himself to jump between us, if necessary. Justin regards Marcus with a wary glance. He looks like a wounded child in this state, wincing at the slightest of movements.

Tiny droplets of red spray as he speaks in a muffled voice. “I’m sorry for what I did to you.” He stares up at me, his ice-blue eyes void

of readable emotion. It's a chore to force my entire body not to tremble beneath his icy gaze.

"And?" Marcus pries.

I jump as Justin spits away from us. I grit my teeth, loathing myself for showing weakness in front of my attacker. The one person I'll need to face tomorrow. I shudder.

"I won't do it again," Justin muffles.

He gulps, shakily wiping blood from his lips on the wrist of his hoodie. I force down the urge to hurl from the blood or from him. I can watch gore on TV, no problem. But when it's in person, I become squeamish.

Horror coats Justin's paling features as he takes in the amount on his sleeve. His fearful eyes snap to mine. "I promise."

Marcus nods though I highly doubt Justin can see him do so out of his nearly swollen shut left eye. Marcus makes his way to me, his body half shielding me. "Leave," he tells Justin, firmly.

I cling to Marcus's jacket sleeve as Justin struggles to get to his feet. In turn, Marcus steps closer to me, standing perfectly still. We watch him as he stumbles past at a snail's pace, sweeping his right leg back then around with each stride in an awkward limp. Whenever he got that injury is a mystery to me. I may have spaced out on that part – there's no point in reminiscing now. To my relief, Justin doesn't bother looking at us, nor looking back as he stumbles back to school. I do my best to whirlwind of emotions until Justin is a distant figure beneath the lot lights.

“Are you okay?” Marcus asks, startling me to the present.

I meet his concerned gaze. “I’ll... b-b-b-be alright...” I gulp down the remaining fear I have left.

I have to keep reminding myself that Justin is gone, but... I can’t stop thinking about what would have happened had Marcus hadn’t been there. Or if he hadn’t snapped out of it. And then there was –

My mind replays when everything went in slow motion. *Could that have been... Adrenaline? Or something – ?*

I drive my mind from those thoughts and focus on my battered savior. “Are you?” I ask so low I’m not even sure he’ll hear me.

I’ve always been this way; caring about others even when I’m breaking at the seams. I haven’t decided whether it’s a blessing or a curse. He flinches – the question left my lips without thought. Justin brought up his mother, it’s not my place to ask but... From what was said I can gather that something terrible happened.

He averts his gaze, his eyes fluttering. “Yeah...” He shoves his hands into his leather jacket pockets.

I frown deeply, turning my body at an angle. My hands quiver as I re-tie my hoodie around my waist – it’d loosened during my struggle, it’s a miracle it didn’t fall off. Adjusting it is a challenge. Regardless of how many deep breaths I take, since the adrenaline has worn off, I’m starting to shake like a leaf.

That looming expectation that a large hand will grab the nape of my neck, trapping me against that van, again... It’s too much. I glance

over my left shoulder, half expecting Justin to come barreling back here with his goons. I jump from the shuffling of a shoe at my right and find Marcus staring at me with concern.

Marcus halts for a second then boldly takes another uneasy step, holding his hands in surrender. "I'd like to help you if that's alright. If it's not, you can say no." His voice is soothing, his gaze focused on me with a softness that is making him appear to be beautiful yet safe.

Safe. Am I safe?

I furrow my brow, eyeing him suspiciously. "Try anything and I'll break your nose," I warn.

I don't know if he believes me or not, after that shit show. Doesn't mean that a woman can't dream that her threat will be taken seriously after needing help. There's a twitch of a smile at the corner of his lips that makes my heart leap. I don't understand myself; I'm scared but I can't bring myself to not be attracted to this man.

I've never been attacked before, so I don't quite understand the specifics. I've heard that you can be a mess but... It feels wrong to be attracted to someone while still being terrified of it happening, again. I want to get out of here but the fact that I've been struggling so much as to re-tie my hoodie around my waist proves I could really use the help.

Marcus drops his hands; the sudden movement makes me hop in place and stare at him with wide eyes. He backs up a few steps, his hazel eyes apologetic. "I won't hurt you. Even though I helped you, I

don't expect you to suddenly let me near you. I'm just glad your safe." He shoves his hands back into his pockets. "If it's all the same to you, I'd like to be nearby until you leave, in case he decides to get a big head and come back."

He holds out his damaged right hand, palm up. I furrow my brow at the gesture. His brows lift, his eyes flicking down to my right hand that's clenched around one of my sleeves.

"My keys," he says.

I look down, flexing my hand around my sleeve and Marcus's keys I'd completely forgotten about. Somehow, a small smirk comes to my lips. "Right." I drop my sleeve and plop his keys into his palm.

He curls his fingers over them, and I can't help but stare at the blood on his fingers. I want to hurl and help him at the same time. When I look back up, his gaze still on me.

My cheeks heat up. "Thank you." He stands still, waiting. It takes me a minute to remember his implied question. "It's okay if you stay nearby."

He blinks as if he's been lost in thought. "Right," he rasps. He clears his throat, averting his gaze to the asphalt. "Take care."

As he walks in the direction that Justin escaped, each step he takes from me makes me feel as though I'm meek prey and a pack of hungry coyotes are watching me. In an instant, I can see it. All manner of colored eyes in the shadows. The lights of the lot are all too bright, yet they aren't bright enough.

Predatory eyes engulfed in golds, reds and blues, surround me. Snarls bass in the shadows birthing goosebumps along my skin. My chest heaves up and down, my fight or flight at odds. I'm a sitting duck but I can't move. They're waiting for me to bolt so they can give chase.

Soon the eyes transform into Justin and his friends. They stalk forward, their faint laughter like a thousand needles in my body. Their eyes roam my body, making me feel small, frail, and naked. Their boastful, taunting chatter about who's going first and asking me why I look so scared.

"We'll have fun, I promise," one of his friend says.

"Don't be scared," says another. "It'll be fun," another says. Sweat beads my brow, my hands clammy. No matter how many times I try, I can't bring myself to say what's lodged in my throat.

STOP! GO AWAY! SAY SOMETHING, DAMN IT!

The image of Gene happily hopping over to Justin's side as they approach me, startles me and I stare at his false image in horror. With a wide grin, he says to Justin, whose eyes haven't left me. "You go first, I'll get her from behind."

My heart lurches at the thought. I wobble, my skin withering like horse's does when a fly lands its coat. *Leave me alone...*

They continue to approach me, the sensation of their friends' hands on my body are kicking my heart into overdrive. I want them off. I want to hurl, to scream. I want to go home. The image of Justin

and Gene coming closer causes me to take a small step back, but I think better of it, remembering that their friends are right behind me.

Wait. This isn't...

Justin and Gene's eyes roam my body, rendering me a statue. I can't feel myself breathe. I can barely hear myself think.

Am I even thinking?

They inch closer, their sadistic grins striking fear, churning my stomach. *Go away*, I beg, my body shaking like a leaf. *Why can't I talk?*

Justin and Gene lean to either side of me, the sensation of their lips beside my skin making my pulse jump.

I want to go home. Mom... I begin to fidget, shrugging my shoulders up as far as they can go to hide my neck. *Leave me alone.*

I can feel their breath as they chuckle against my shoulders. The things they are saying are blurring together; I'm not even paying attention anymore. I can't move.

Damn you. Leave me alone... I squeeze my eyes shut. *I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to go home. Mom. Ina. Dad. Somebody save me. Anybody...*

Suddenly it becomes deadly silent. Justin's sickly-sweet voice roams my right ear where Gene was. Loud and clear. "Nobody's coming to save you," he taunts in hushed tones.

LEAVE – !

"MAAARRCUUUSSSS!!!" I screech.

The nightmare fades into nothing. I keep my eyes closed, my teeth clenched and my fists in balls at my sides. I prepare to scream for

Marcus when large hands grab both of my upper arms and give me one hard shake. I almost cry thinking that it's one of Justin's friends, or even worse, him.

"It's me!" Marcus's voice snaps me back to reality.

My eyes fly open, his hazel eyes bringing me instant peace. I don't get a moment to so much as unclench my hands before my knees finally give out beneath me. He hurries to try to gather me into him as best he can. I would hold onto him, but I don't have the strength. I don't care that he's a stranger, I don't care that I'm falling apart in front of him – he saved me. I just needed him to save me. One more time...

Where is...?

I look around frantically for Justin and his friends. I peer up at Marcus, grabbing fistfuls of his shirt. "Where are they?"

Marcus's brows twitch together. "Where are who?"

I come closer to him and his eyes widen. "Justin and Gene and their friends – wh-wh-where did they go?"

"Easy. They aren't here," he assures me.

"They were just here!" I insist.

My eyes dart all around us, my head whipping from left to right as I scan for some type of movement. My heart is about to leap out of my ribcage at this point. Marcus and I will need to run to get out of this. He can't take on any more people, not by himself. And I...

Since Marcus and I are both sitting on our knees now, I poke my head over his as my mind races of one of the worst scenarios. I

don't get much of a good look before I'm dragged back down and Marcus traps my face between his hands.

His hazel eyes dive into my brown ones. "There is no one here but us." His voice pierces through the panic and paranoia, making it somewhat possible for me to feel like I can breathe.

"...No one?" I croak, tears welling up in my eyes.

His eyes soften, his thumb wiping a stray tear from my right cheek. "No one," he says in hushed tones.

My bottom lip quivers and I bite down on it as I close my eyes and sob. I curl myself into him, not caring about the vulnerability I'm displaying. There's no one here but us; a relief but also embarrassing because I only know of Marcus, I don't know him like that. I flinch as he wraps his arms around me. He pauses then carefully embraces me, letting me cry to my heart's content.

Though I'm a teary-eyed mess, I'm very aware of everything around me. I keep waiting for Justin to snatch me. For me to be stripped bare and not have anything left, save my battered body and broken spirit.

I've been crying so much that I barely hear Marcus say, "Is there anyone you want me to call for you?"

That's a million-dollar question. I could call my mom or my dad, but... I know it sounds stupid, but I don't want them to know. What if they hear and they start hovering? Not only that, everyone knows that Justin's father is loaded to the brim in ways of money and contacts. If my family so much as tries, and if Justin's father is as bad

as him if not worse, then what will happen to them? How would his father handle this?

My family can't be bought. They're stubborn just like me. Nothing happened – that's exactly how Justin and his father will write this off.

And friends? I do and don't have them. Some people are okay with not talking for years on end then coming back into each other's lives like no time has passed. I have those friends, that's no issue and I know we all have lives. But if I'm being totally honest, I have no circle or any one friend that I can call that will come to me at this hour. Let alone listen to me about what happened and let me cry on their shoulder about it.

I'd call Ina, but she's a wolfdog without opposable thumbs. She's smart as hell, but even I wouldn't teach her how to drive even if that was even possible. Also, I'm not going to jail for teaching my dog how to drive. All in all... I'm alone.

And if this ever went to court, somehow, there will be people asking questions pertaining to how I got myself into this situation. Not about why Justin felt the need to force himself onto me against my will.

I grit my teeth, sniffing as I inhale and exhale until I'm breathing as even as I can. I look up at Marcus, who has an odd look on his face that makes him look bewildered. Maybe my tear-stained cheeks and snot dripping down my lips make me look like a crazy

person. Who knows. Right now, I'm just glad he's being so nice to me – after all I am a stranger. He didn't have to come back.

“Why did you come back...?” I ask, skipping over his question.

His expression relaxes along with his shoulders. “Everyone deserves saving...” He pauses. His eyes become clouded, a venom lacing through his words as he goes on, “People like him shouldn't be allowed to do as they please.”

Again, another cryptic response that isn't only directed at me and my situation. I'm itching to ask but I have to keep reminding myself that it isn't my business. A blink, and he's back to his normal, non-menacing self.

“I'm sorry for scaring you earlier,” he mumbles.

“What time?” I blurt, making his brows shoot up in surprise.

Shit, he doesn't know that he freaked me out when he was wailing on Justin.

I sigh through my nostrils. I run my hand up and down my left upper arm, barely able to look at him when I tell him. “I was worried for you... when you were wailing on Justin. I didn't know if... saving me would have a negative effect on you. I've only seen you happy. I mean I don't know you like that, but... you're – “ I pause. I close my eyes as I take a deep breath through my nostrils again. “You've always felt like a light to me. Not a darkness.” I fumble for clarification, “Not that darkness is a bad thing. It can be like a cloak, as can light, just different shades.”

Paranoia of Justin and his lackies coming out of the scattered rows of cars for round two, sinks its talons into me, refusing to let me breathe. But there's another lingering paranoia... One that makes me feel like more of a I'm a sitting duck. It even feels like Marcus is putting his life on the line for me this very minute and yet... there's nobody in sight. He said as much.

Justin's done his damage but this doesn't feel like Justin. It feels... predatory in the carnal sense. Like an actual animal is out there, itching to tear me in two.

Marcus adjusts himself on the ground, sitting with his knees bent and his elbows resting on them. A hand hangs limp between his legs while being held by the other. "What else scared you?"

"I was afraid of what would happen to you if you had kept going..." I admit to him as much as myself while talking to my Nike high-tops. "Would you become a murderer for someone you don't even know? What would... his rich father do to you if you had killed his son?" I revert my gaze to his. "What would your family say and do?" That causes his eyes to widen again by a hair. I adjust myself into the same position as him, and sigh. "I couldn't live with myself if I knew you were behind bars. Even to save me from that... fate..."

What would it be like for him had he gone to the slammer? The image of him muscular from head to toe with a tough exterior comes to mind. I chuckle to myself at the silly thought. No, no, he'd stay the same. Ever sweet and thoughtful, standing up for others in need like how he did with me and with the charities he volunteers for.

“Everything okay?” he asks with an amused look on his face.

“Yeah,” I say. “I was just thinking of you being a prison badass. It kind of made me feel better.” I offer him a weak smile of my lips.

He returns it with a warmer one of his own. “If that gets you smiling again and not panicked, I’ll take it. I will say, I can’t see myself being a badass though.”

“Why not?”

He chuckles under his breath. “Because I’m not that type of guy. I like peace. What you saw was....” He becomes withdrawn again, that darker side of him skimming the surface and he averts his gaze. “It was who I had to be.”

“You don’t have to tear yourself apart for me or anyone else. I’m glad that you saved me, but Marcus...” His eyes flick back up to mine, looking like a lost puppy. “Never become that again. You... You don’t seem like the type to be destructive. I would hate for you to be consumed by rage even if it’s only for a second... I’d hate that for anyone who is a good person.”

He lifts his chin, sitting taller. “And how do you know I’m a good person?”

“I don’t... But a bad person doesn’t go around saving people...”

“I could have a vendetta,” he tries.

“What is it?” I challenge. “Tell me what reason you had to save me.”

He studies me, pondering his answer. "I couldn't live with myself if I walked the other way..." he says, lowly.

Now, it's my turn to study him. After a bit, I reply, "That's reason enough to save someone. I wouldn't have known you were nearby if you left me to my demise... Theoretically, that is."

"How do you know he wouldn't have killed you?"

His question renders everything within me silent. Just like that I'm back to the terrified woman I was minutes ago. Has it been that long or has it been longer? Shorter even? I don't even know what time I left the school. A new realization dawns on me and somehow, I forget about my terror long enough to jump to my feet. Ina.

I slip my hand in my satchels side pocket and fish out my Android. I press the button; 8:47 PM lights up the screen. I slump my shoulders then heave a heavy sigh of relief. Marcus getting to his feet nearly startles me. I watch as he brushes off his jeans then shoves his hands back in his jacket pockets. He offers his barely battered left hand and I take it. He lifts me with ease and I dust off the back of my pants.

"You have to go, I take it," he says more than questions.

"Yeah."

Like an idiot, I look around the parking lot and instantly become reacquainted with where I am. Murmurs that started my anxiety in the first-place swirl around me, along with the sensation that Justin and his friends are near. I feel like doors are slamming one

after another, getting louder and louder as if something or someone is coming.

Marcus's firm grip on my arms bring me back to reality. His hazel eyes bore into mine. "Are you sure there isn't anyone I can call?"

"I can call myself, if I need to," I say without thinking.

"You sure about that?"

I drop my eyes to the ground. "I'll drive home. I'll be fine." My voice is so low I doubt he can hear me well.

"Katalina – "

My eyes widen and I look back up at him. The action stops his words. "How do you know my name?"

His face pales, nervousness painting his features as he releases me. I begin to step backward when he says, "I know it because I asked."

My foot wavers. "Why would you want to know my name?"

A blush creeps into his cheeks. "Because I wanted to talk to you... eventually."

I never thought I'd be the one to see this side of him. I've always thought it would be one of the groupies I hear gossiping about him in class. He looks like a little kid – shy, withdrawn, and embarrassed.

He adds, "...I know that now isn't the time... I wasn't trying – "

"I know..." I interject, relaxing a bit.

He frowns. "I'm sorry, I – "

“No need.” His brows shoot up as I offer him a weak smile. “I asked. Thank you for your honesty.”

His brows worry. “Aren’t you worried I’m lying?”

My heart skips a beat. “Perhaps I should be. Just because you save me doesn’t mean you don’t have your own agenda.” His expression drawn, I take an uncertain step after another until I close the gap between us and poke his left arm, causing him to meet my gaze. “But if that were true you would have taken it upon yourself to follow through already. I know that –” I pat my unsettled stomach. “– in my gut.”

The corners of his mouth twitch upward, showing off his dimples. “I’m impressed with how well you’re handling things... Are you sure you’re, okay?”

The hallucinations, the rising anxiety I’ve been keeping at bay – anything and everything I can do, all at once. *This man, he isn’t going to hurt me. I can... feel it. This is more than a gut feeling, it’s like it’s written in stone... Odd.*

“Are we really *sure* of anything?” I try deflecting. The look he gives me shows me he’s not buying it. I frown. “I’m just trying to be myself... That way I don’t have to think about...”

I bite my bottom lip as it begins to quiver. The murmurs sound miles away. He takes my upper left arm, then pulls me into the safety blanket of his embrace. I’m taken aback by the gesture but, eventually, I slip my hands along his waist beneath his jacket then up his back.

I press my cheek against his chest, allowing myself to be comforted. Free from the impending storm of fear that will accompany me once I leave. Cologne of the sweetest aromas floods my senses. A musky after scent follows that fits him perfectly, at least from the 'him' I've gotten to know thus far.

He didn't smell like this before... What is happening?

I'm still on edge, his hug is only doing so much for me. It isn't enough to keep me in the right state of mind. I don't pay much attention to how long we remain as we are. I couldn't care less. Feeling safe, secure – even if just for a moment – is what matters most, right now. I need to be calm enough to drive home.

Marcus's sporadic heartbeat drums against my ear. It speeds up whenever I squeeze just a little tighter. The corner of my mouth twitches upward at the sentiment, then I frown. I shrug gently out of our hug, and peer up at him.

"Thank you, for saving me. And for comforting me after," I murmur.

He drops his hands from my waist and steps back, immediately. "If you ever need a bodyguard, I'm here. Justin shouldn't bother you." His eyes glaze over. "If he does, tell me. I'll notify the dean of what's happened."

My mouth curves up, bitterly. "Justin's dad's golf buddy?" He seems shocked, his lips pressing into a thin line. I go on, "Best not alert the rats." I close my eyes, take a deep, shuddery breath then open them. "I'll handle this on my own," I say in hushed tones.

Pivoting on my heel, I turn toward my car – Thunder – at the right of that damned van. Head swirling with hallucinations, I do my best to ignore them then march over to my driver’s backseat door. I can feel Marcus’s gaze on me as I open the rear door behind the driver’s with a trembling hand. I have to chant in my mind that Justin isn’t here nor are his friends. *They won’t follow me, they don’t know my license plate... Right?*

My chest heaves with each unsteady breath I take, my head beginning to twitch. *Fuck. I can’t rely on Marcus. Not this time. I have to go. Ina is going to need me, soon... Get to the meadow then go home. No one is going to follow you.*

I chuck my satchel in with extra force than I mean to. My binder, notebooks, textbook, and writing tools, scatter onto the seat and floor.

“Son of a – “ I grumble under my breath.

With increasingly trembling hands, I rapidly grab everything and shove my things inside my bag, leaving my pens and highlighters for last. As much as I try, the horrific possibilities that are consuming my mind are choking me. I keep reminding myself that I can’t count on anyone to be there for me once I leave here. That I must drive out of here on my own. That I have only me, so I need to be strong but... It’s only making it worse. I can’t block this out like I can most other things.

I use the heel of my thumb to wipe tears that spring in my eyes, sniffing as I do. Marcus has already seen me fall apart enough tonight. My rising anger along with my embarrassment knowing that he’s

about to see it again is making my cheeks redder by the second. I shouldn't care, I'm sure he doesn't mind seeing me break apart either, I just hate breaking in front of strangers. I may have sought comfort from him but that doesn't mean that I don't feel as though I'm burdening him.

He speaks up, "Maybe your mom could – "

"She's asleep. I don't want to bother her," I say as calmly as I can, propping my satchel against the seat. "Plus, she'd..." I sigh bracing my fisted hands on my satchel. I squeeze the fabric as I fight back the sobs. "Freak out about my being..." I gulp... "Assaulted. I'm not weak. I can handle this."

He stays silent as I mess around with things, repeatedly. "You aren't weak..." he says.

I freeze listening to the soft rumble of his tone. "This isn't a weakness... It's an all-too-common occurrence in this world that needs to be dealt with..."

Numbness sings throughout my body as I step back from Thunder and take in the despair and anger on his face. "Whatever happened, I'm sorry..." I say, softly.

Rage flickers in his eyes, disappearing as quickly as it appears. "If I could do something to make that bastard pay, I..." he trails off, staring in the direction Justin had fled. "No woman... *No one*, should go through something like this or worse." He reverts to me. "I'm glad I could save you..." His voice nearly breaks at that last part, making my heart clench.

There are so many things I want to say yet none of them seem right. Part of me can't say them because I feel like I'm an outsider who has no real words that can even marginally dispel that storm inside of him. Everything I'd like to say may have already been said.

I could try. However, I think the only thing I can say is this, "Someday, I'd like to raise hell if you're willing to join me." I rub my arm. "If you'd still like justice when I'm ready, I'd like to have you as an ally. With my status, I can't put him behind bars but I have a feeling, someday, we can put them away for good."

He furrows his brow, curiosity plaguing his features. "You..."

There it is. So... his mother was attacked. "As I said; whatever happened, I am truly sorry..." I frown.

He mirrors it and approaches me. Upon seeing me flinch inadvertently back he stops.

"I'm fine..." I assure him.

He nods, taking a slower approach to me. When he reaches me, he flashes his million-dollar smile. "I'd like that. If you'll still have me..."

I manage a more natural smile of my lips. "I could use as much help as I can get when the time comes."

"I'll be here," he assures me. "I'll watch as you leave to make sure you don't run into trouble."

"I appreciate that..." I nervously eye the rear of the van. "If you don't mind giving me a heads up, can I have your number?" His

eyes widen slightly, and I rush to add, “You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“It’s fine. I was going to offer but I didn’t want it to seem like I was coming on to you,” he admits, blushing.

“That’s sweet. I’d like to keep in touch for the day that I need you and... to check in.”

He studies me. “You taking a few days off school?”

“Maybe more.” I avert my gaze to the cold pavement.

He sighs through his nostrils. “Had I gotten here sooner...” He trails off.

“Quit blaming yourself. Justin’s a neanderthal with an inferiority complex and a huge ego that needs rubbing.”

I wince, closing into myself at my own bad choice of words. The ghost sensation of his hard-on against my leg, makes me want to puke and wash my leg religiously until I don’t think about it or... ‘feel’ it anymore.

“Hey...” Marcus offers a warm smile of his lips. “Why don’t you get outta here.” He fishes his phone out of his back pocket, unlocks it and offers it to me with the phone keypad on display. “Give me your number, and, when you’re ready, we can revisit you getting justice for tonight.”

I pluck it gently from his hand, type in then save my contact info. I hand it back to him, screen up. He takes it back then presses a few times on the glass. A generic ringtone resounds and I turn to grab my phone alight in my satchel’s pocket.

I twitch a smile at his simple message ‘Hey it’s Marcus Vernon :)’

I save his number then drop my phone back inside its resting place. I close the rear door then walk to my driver’s side with him in tow.

“May I?” he asks.

He rounds me as I regard him with an arched brow and reaches for the door. Stepping back a few steps, I watch as he opens it then stands behind the door as he holds it. Once I plop myself inside, he closes the door behind me and waits until my car is on before leaving.

Strapped in, I roll down the window and call after him, “Hey!”

I listen as his shoes shuffle to a halt then come closer. He bends down to my level, resting his chin on folded arms on my windowsill.

“You’re a good guy, Marcus. Never change that. No matter if your heart ever gets broken or what trials you face.”

“I won’t,” he says with a smile that I return meekly. He jerks his chin toward my steering wheel. “Head home. I’ll stand guard.”

For some seconds, those attractive hazel eyes lock onto my deep brown. I can feel the effects of if I weren’t just attacked by Justin. Fight and tension aside, this interaction with Marcus was nice. I even feel comfortable enough to accept his kind gestures. I don’t know what he’s thinking or feeling. Maybe he feels that familiarity, that serenity I’ve been feeling being close to each other. Maybe he feels

nothing. I don't know. But that isn't for tonight, that's for another time.

"Though it was under... shitty circumstances, I'm glad we got to officially meet," I say.

"Me too, Katalina. Drive safe. Text me when you're home."

"Will do."

He straightens and steps towards the front of Thunder, standing off to my left side then surveys parking lot. He nods that I'm in the clear and I drive ahead. We wave to each other as I pass. I continuously peer into my rearview and the smaller Marcus becomes, the more worried I become.

What if they pop out and hurt him? What if I just condemned him to a life of hell? What do I do if something happens to him? I can't report it.

Gripping tighter at ten and two, I make my way to the exit. Once there, I take that right turn I always make on hard days. That turn leads me to my special little spot of Michigan that transports me to a whole other world.