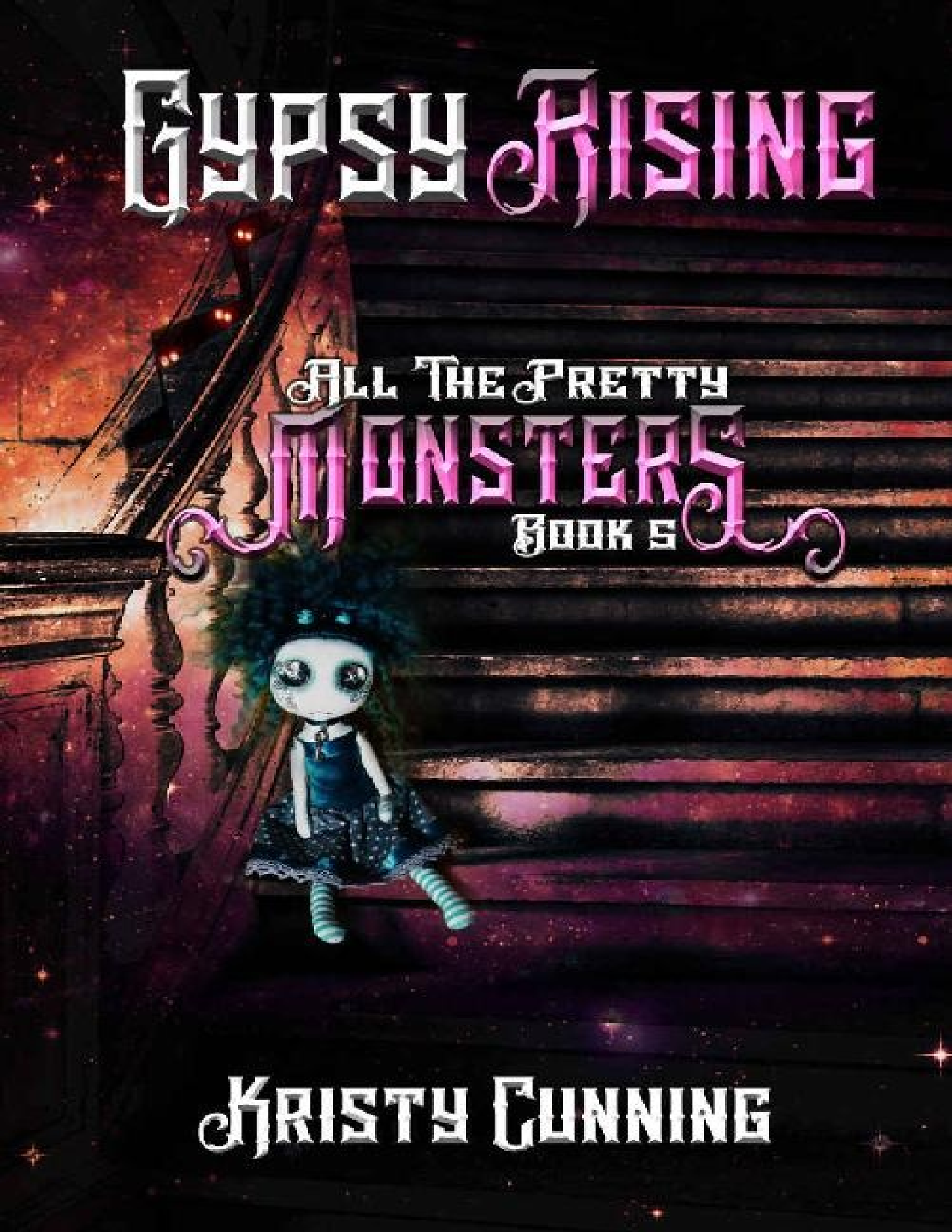
Gypsy Rising



All The Pretty Monsters

Book 5

Kristy Cunning

Gypsy Rising

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C.M. Owens writing as

Kristy Cunning

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Prologue

Ten years ago…

JANUARY (VIOLET)

“January! January!” Mom shouts in a way that lets me know she just heard that potion go bad and she’s not far away.

“Coming!” I call back, looking around at the scorch marks on the ground, as some burning embers float back down from the sky.

I quickly grab my arm, and the threads start lacing it back to my elbow. Obviously, I hurry, since I’m trying to get it sewn on before Mom makes it out here.

Damn, that shit hurts.

But…no pain equals no gain.

“What blew up?” she demands.

She runs that two miles from the house very fast when she’s worried.

“Just a little mistake!” I assure her as I glance down and see I’ve sewn my arm on backwards. “No need to worry,” I add, frowning.

Before my arm can start healing backwards, I quickly let the threads drop.

A cracking limb startles me, and I whirl around…as my arm drops to the ground. Mom is releasing a frustrated breath while palming her face when I spot her.

“I’ve already told you I want to start going by Violet. It suits the new me better than January,” I remind her.

“You can’t just change your name because you’re going through a phase. I’m supposed to have to worry about chasing away boys after curfew at this age, *January*. Not you blowing yourself up in some random spot on our property,” she states very calmly, as her somewhat trembling hand lowers. “My heart is

more fragile than you seem to realize."

I grin at her, gesturing around at all the damage done to the ground. "But I withstood the worst of that. I wasn't expecting a phantom tail whip to—"

"Get cleaned up and go to the movies, or mall, or *something*. You haven't spent two hours doing your *teenage* things like you promised," she states as she turns and walks away.

"Do I really have to?" I call back on a groan. "I almost got it this time."

"You *just* blew yourself up trying to make shampoo, January. Yes, you really do have to go be a normal teenager for a little while. You're just a few years older than—"

Her words stop when she chokes up a little. Any time she almost revisits my late brother's memory, she gets that solemn, regretful look in her eyes.

He died before I was ever born, and apparently something awful happened to him. I'd understand her constant paranoia, and certainly be more sympathetic… if I could die.

"Well, *I* can't die. We're pretty positive of that by now, and I'm getting so much closer to success. It was just the arm," I tell her one last time, finding her completely unreasonable when it comes to things like this.

"You need to be careful not to lose your head, dear. Quite literally," she grinds out. "It could end you even if nothing else ever does, or something far worse could be brought about if not. *Two. Hours*."

She really is melodramatic. It's more dangerous to be on the roads with people who drive like maniacs, and show major disrespect and offense to those of us who drive the speed limit and follow the law like responsible human beings.

"It's terrifying when the horns blow. You know how much I hate surprises."

"When you're doing thirty in the fifty, it shouldn't come as a surprise that someone honks at you!" she snaps, and then says a lot of Spanish words that make no sense to me.

One day, a foreign language will make sense to me, and I'll know all the shit

ways she's cussing me out. Then I can surprise her by cussing her back.

"The minimum is thirty! It's still legal! I'd come closer to losing my head in a car crash than I would making shampoo," I argue.

"Then *walk* to the bowling alley with the boy across the street who keeps asking you to stop by when he's working," she says, jabbing a finger in my face.

"I'm content with making shampoo in the backyard and you're shoving me at a boy? What mother wants her daughter to throw it at any cute boy who offers free rental shoes as incentive to stop by? Is this because I have no womb? You feel like there doesn't have to be a high standard for me because you don't have to worry about what the grandkids will be like?"

I can't believe her. I never thought she'd stoop this low. She wants me miserable. It's her goal in life.

She exhales harshly, pinching the bridge of her nose, as she shakes her head…and I think she prays for patience. Mom didn't used to pray. She seems to be doing more and more of it these days. Especially since around my fourteenth birthday when we learned you don't need a period or living womb…to have PMS.

"Two. Hours. And then straight to your room to watch TV, or read, or anything that will limit the potential for losing a body part. Do you understand?"

"You don't want me to have any fun," I petulantly mutter, as I stalk toward the bowling alley to get my free rental shoes.

"He better give me a free lane too, or you'll reimburse me," I call out.

"I'll give you an extra twenty if you stay out for three hours," she volleys. "And change clothes! You can't show up with scorch marks and a terribly sewn-on arm!"

I could make twenty dollars for a bottle of shampoo, and I wouldn't have to go through the hassle of primping for an unwanted date.

Hurriedly, I clean up, and get on something semi-decent to wear that matches my favorite choker. Then I walk all the way to the bowling alley, ignoring the stench of sweaty bodies and smelly feet.

My date for the evening smiles at me from behind the counter.

“Is January Carmine really standing in front of me, in a public place meant for fun right now?” he drawls, propping up in front of me, as his grin stays fixed to his pretty face.

“I’ll take those shoes you offered,” I tell him, watching as his smile only spreads.

“You’ve got good timing. I’m just finishing up my shift,” he says as he glances at my feet over the counter.

Then he grabs me some rental shoes without asking my size. “Let’s have some fun. It looks like you could use it,” he adds with way too much enthusiasm, while spraying my shoes with disinfectant stuff.

I *was* having fun until I had to go on a date. However, at least he seems… nice.

***

“…then I could turn my shampoo into a legitimate business line for my mom’s store. It’s just really hard to get the specifics of the ingredients right without risking some lost eyebrows and stuff,” I tell him on a sigh. “So far, toothpaste has been the only thing I’ve managed to nail down with perfection.”

He stares off at some other girl, who is lining up her shot, and his attention remains there.

“Why are you spending so much time talking about shampoo and toothpaste?” he finally asks when his eyes lazily return to meet mine.

“Because you asked what was on my mind. And I’m not talking about it; I’m talking about all the work that goes into producing those things,” I clarify.

“But *why*?” he asks again, no longer seeming as nice as he did forty-five minutes ago when I walked in.

“Because I find it interesting,” I say, wondering why I have to explain this at all. “*And you asked*.”

His lips purse before me makes them pop, and he stands, stretches, and glances down his nose at me.

“Right, well…I find bowling more interesting than shampoo, so I’m going to go talk to that girl who is here bowling all alone. At least we tried, right?” he asks me, smiling to cushion the blow of rejection.

It’s so sudden that I’m stunned into momentary silence with no reaction at the ready.

I’m being rejected? By the guy who has pestered the hell out of me to the point of bribing me with free rental shoes? After my mother forced me to come?

This is why shampoo is more fun than boys.

Shampoo leaves me with more dignity.

“Yeah. She seems cute,” I say before I can stop myself, feeling too idiotic for words.

He grins and turns to go, while I sit here wondering why in the hell I couldn’t have said something a little snider and much less encouraging.

I glance around, noticing the bowling alley has filled up with people. Feeling embarrassed, I stand, suffering some really pointless dejection, since I didn’t want to be here to begin with. Now I can tell my mother how awful this was, and she will feel guilty for ever making me endure this.

Winning all around. Silver lining, see?

It’s not like monsters need to risk dating guys who like something as normal as bowling.

I glance back over my shoulder at the pretty girl, who is already clearly more engaging to him than I was. She smiles and blushes, batting her lashes as though today is her lucky day. She appreciates his company far more than I did.

Good for them.

Good. For. Them.

I don’t understand why anyone at all would want to date. This sort of sucks.

Shoving through the doors, I stalk back home. Literally, the whole way, I’m doing some mega heavy stalking, because I’m gonna let Mom have it.

That was humiliating.

And mortifying.

I was chased until I opened my mouth, and *then* I was rejected.

I'm a monster, so I have no idea why Mom thinks dating normal guys is even an option for me. Normal guys would shit themselves if I had a panic attack. Or I could kill them.

Rejecting me was likely the smartest thing he's ever done. It feels more life-saving and less embarrassing when I think of it that way.

And I'm going to find a way to force her to call me Violet. January was the child. Violet *is* the adult I am now. It really does suit me better.

I stop midway down the road when I hear Mom's soft singing voice carrying gently over the winds, like she's singing just for herself. It's weirdly that old double-dutch song.

"The tea leaves warned of blood and death. Four gypsy first-borns breathed the last breath…"

CHAPTER 1

Now…

VIOLET

“What are you doing?” Mom asks as she walks into the kitchen where I’ve got four pots on.

“They’re going to need everything, so I’m working with what I have to give them all the things they need to make them feel clean, after being disassembled and buried for over a thousand years,” I tell her absently, testing the thickness of the shampoo batch. “I had to work with the fruit extracts Damien gathered for me from town, but when I get home, I’ll use my stockpiled apple products that no one else seems to want. The orange stuff is flying off the shelves, though. Including my toothpaste.”

My hand starts shaking as I stir the second pot, and her hand comes down on my shoulder, giving it a small squeeze.

“That’s very thoughtful, Violet,” she says quietly.

There’s a moment my mind drifts back to how overwhelming it all was. The screams inside my mind, the various languages, the song they sang in unison…

“I felt their pain so real like it was all my own, and then I felt their relief. I don’t feel peoples’ emotions like that,” I go on, focusing the vast majority of my attention on the pots. “The guys keep saying I’m empathic, but I’m not even sure what that means.”

“It means a lot of things for a lot of people,” she says quietly. “In your particular case, you don’t actually have a strong empathic trait. It just feels strong when you do have overwhelming emotions, because they’ve not felt very

many emotions at all these long, *long* years. Some people *feel* less and less with age. Monsters really grow numb," she adds on a murmur, releasing a heavy breath. "Some of my family carries empathic traits. I've taught you to handle yours, even if you don't realize it."

"Yeah, that makes no sense to me, since I genuinely don't feel very empathic and never have. My question is…how did I feel them so deeply, when I've never once felt anything at all like that before?" I ask her, glancing over to meet her eyes.

"Because they are very, *very* empathic. We were so close and they channeled all they had at us," she explains, her eyes filling up with tears. "They empowered you."

She turns to face me more, almost hesitating before her next words.

"Pandora's box opened. My family flew in on the coattails, and seven new monsters were born. However, that still left hope at the very bottom. We all received a piece, Violet. It was the tricky box-maker's design. Every monster was both blessed and cursed with hope."

She swallows thickly, her eyes glancing out the window. I wonder if the shred of a soul Arion has is not his soul at all. What if it's just his piece of hope?

"Out of seven alpha monsters—vampires, werewolves, deviants, sadistic skin walkers, Van Helsings, soul-eating Portocales, and the gentle, forgiving Simpletons—who do you think has treasured and cherished their piece of hope? Who do you think has sullied theirs to a diminished existence by consistently *hoping* for a chance to reap more bloodshed?"

I don't say anything, and she gives me a tight smile.

"My hope was somewhat cleansed when you were born, regardless of my many mistakes. Still, it's nowhere nearly as powerful as the hope they've remarkably maintained. All that beautiful hope is likely the real reason Idun's House is so much stronger," she continues. "That's something I only deduced after remembering what it felt like to have hope at all—the very day I held you in my arms."

It’s too much to deal with right now, and way too heavy.

“I should have brought apple products with me to begin with. Not that they’d have survived the plane crash I caused.”

I’m rambling at this point, but I passed out before I could meet them, and now it’s been four hours, and we’re just waiting on the mother to wake up in a few days, since she’s second of the Neopry House and Idun is still in the wind…

I don’t really know what’s going on. I’m just catching bits and pieces in between me zoning in and out. If my purpose is concluded, why do I still feel incomplete?

“It’s going to take them a bit to hydrate Nadine. She’s not nearly as strong as Idun and can’t do these things herself. For now, they’re more focused on just being free. They won’t care what products get them clean,” she assures me.

She abruptly sniffs the air, and whirls around, just as Emit steps through the door. The gorgeous savage tosses a small smile in my direction.

“Vance’s travel team has just arrived, and some very concerned omegas stowed away on that flight,” he tells me, and then steps aside, as Leiza bursts forth first, followed by Tiara, Lemon and Mary.

My smile grows when I feel a slight tapping under my foot, signaling that Ingrid is also here and hiding under the floorboards already.

“*What’s this*?” Mom hisses, snarling at the wolves, who quickly all lower their eyes.

“My friends. Be nice,” I caution her, which only elicits another groan.

Mom says a few words in yet another language, and I pointedly ignore her, while returning my attention to the omegas.

“Where’s Dad?” I ask Leiza, as Tiara carries in a large bag of what is likely more clothes for Emit and me, since they know we lost ours.

Emit takes the bag, and I let my eyes follow his bare ass into the next room where he shuts the door.

“What do you mean? Why would they know where your father is? What are wolves doing with your father, Violet?” Mom asks, interrupting my thoughts

with what sounds suspiciously like her panicky, Violet's-blown-herself-up-again tone.

"Long story," I say to Mom, too emotionally exhausted to tackle that conversation right this second.

"We left him with Shera, since she's been staying at our house during Arion's absence to avoid Emily and Isiah," Tiara says, managing not to gag on Shera's name.

I actually feel better knowing he's in Shera's hands, rather than theirs. They'd run off and leave him to die because they can't help themselves, and then they'd be wracked with guilt.

"Shera?" Mom asks in an unusually high octave, staring at me in horror, as Emit walks out with twitching lips, dressed in a muscle shirt and thin athletic pants.

Glad he's amused. Lovely.

Briefly, Damien appears in the corner, grinning as well, before winking at me and disappearing from sight. It's as though he also wanted me knowing he's enjoying my mother clutching her heart as she says a bunch of things in a language I don't understand, talking to herself, it seems.

"The bloody *Vampyre* beta to the coldest monster in existence, aside from Idun? *That's* who is with your father right now?!" Mom says in her loud, arguing-talk tone.

"She's actually quite good with him. She's handling the store as well, because she's a workaholic machine," Leiza says with her eyes still lowered, all of them noticeably standing close to me and keeping me between her and them.

Smart wolves.

"I've only been missing for seven damn months, and you've only been in that town for four of them, Violet. Why are there wolves and vampires living in my house?" Mom snaps.

"It's *my* house, since you technically died and left it to me, and I'm keeping it as payment for all your lies and stuff," I tell her, as Tiara scampers outside

behind Emit, following him.

"*This* is why I hid my money from you. I knew you wouldn't give it back," Mom grumbles as she narrows her eyes on me. "Why is Tom with Shera?"

"Because Arion released him into my custody with the stipulations that he be kept under supervision," I deadpan, carrying on as her eyes widen even more. "After Dad stabbed him through the heart with a stake."

She staggers back like she just got lightheaded, and I cut off the heat to my pots, annoyed with the consistency of the liquid.

Mom's mouth opens and closes a few times, and she finally walks over to a corner. Wordlessly, she lowers herself to a chair, shaking her head slowly.

"I was just dead for seven months, right?" Mom quietly asks, as though she can't fathom how things escalated so quickly in her absence.

I glance at the paper Lemon is discreetly holding up, and I skim its contents quickly.

Is that Marta Portocale?!!!! OMG! You really should have warned us!!!

"H-how did he manage to put a stake through Arion's heart?" Mom asks on a worried whisper, her eyes still slightly dazed.

"I assume it's because he's a stocky construction worker, who has a lot of experience with driving stakes into things," I point out. "Shera said humans need a certain amount of physical fitness to injure—"

"Violet, you know damn well that's not what I mean," Mom bites out, her impatience and frustration building.

"I'll give you the specifics later. I have to focus on this right now," I tell her as I go to toss out the useless batches. "Maybe I can find a recipe for one of you to follow, since you're more normal than me and no recipe works the same for me as it does for others," I tell the quiet omegas.

"*Or* you could use some of the Gypsy Magic apple products we brought for you," Leiza says, as Tiara comes back in with a couple of boxes in her arms, along with Emit, who is loaded down with them.

"We're good omegas," Mary tacks on with a broad grin.

“Yes, you are,” I murmur under my breath, as my own smile grows.

Dusting off my hands, I round the counter, as Mom prattles on about how it’s impossible for life to have changed this much in her absence.

“Maybe you’ve been the weighted shackle holding her back,” Damien chimes in, earning a little side-eye from me, since he’s now visible again.

Mom doesn’t even acknowledge him, lost in her own headspace, as she rambles about how wolves and vampires don’t share a space with a Neopry monster in a Portocale gypsy’s house. Something about laughable blasphemy in there too.

I tune her out so I can see what all they’ve brought. “We even carted over your new apple toothpaste. And we racked up a little more debt on Alpha’s card to clothe them all. We *knew* he wouldn’t mind,” Leiza says directly to me, as Emit’s head drops back, a sigh passing through his parted lips.

“Just a little debt,” Mary says, pinching her fingers together as Lemon nods.

Ingrid makes a series of taps under my feet, and Leiza stomps like she’s trying to silence her.

I arch an eyebrow, and Leiza gives me a nervous little smile. “A little debt on your card, too, because we had some things we needed to buy you—”

A loud series of taps under my feet get stomped out by Leiza again, while Tiara gives me a mischievous wink.

“*And* we needed things as well,” Leiza grudgingly tacks on. “We couldn’t come without proper footwear, now, could we?”

“I’ll reimburse you for whatever they spent. They’re supposed to be my wards,” Emit says from some room he’s apparently disappeared into in the past five seconds.

He hasn’t been still very much since I woke up, and Damien hasn’t been visible much. He’s currently invisible again.

I feel like they’re semi-ignoring me because they’re mad, without wanting to be obvious about it, since that would be childish and all.

“You brought your harem to live with my daughter?” Mom asks Emit like

he’s finally crossed a line she can attack him for, now that she’s processed this fresh information a little belatedly.

She stands so abruptly that her chair flips over.

When a knife appears in her right hand from nowhere, Emit pops out of the room he was in, grinding his teeth as his muscles bunch.

Seriously, if they break out into combat, I’m going to finally lose my cool.

“It’s actually not at all what you’re thinking. I can assure you,” Emit says very tightly. “And I’m not discussing it farther than that.”

“I’ll be damned if my daughter joins your omega har—”

“I stole them from him by accident, and I feel bad enough about it. Can you not make it a deal *right now*?” I ask in interruption to my very embarrassing mother.

“You stole *them* from *him?”* she asks like she’s confused. “I thought you were with—”

“Do you remember that mother in the park who flung sacks of dog shit at a group of kids after one kid *looked* at her daughter wrong?” I ask her very seriously.

“Of course I do. That woman was batshit crazy. Why are you—”

“Because you’re more embarrassing than her right now. If you could stop, that’d be great,” I say over my shoulder, as I kneel in front of my lesser purchased items that are all in one box.

“They’ve been under for a while,” Leiza says quietly to me, as Mom makes a frustrated noise at my back. “They’ll need a lot of everything, and it almost feels like you were making them supplies that had a comforting scent…like the good omega you are.”

So…they know. About *me*. It’s apparently all out in the open now. Great. In a game of life and death, everyone wants to know when a new player is on the floor. It only makes sense the hardcore survivalists know what’s going on as it’s going on.

At least they seem to be confirming my suspicions that I’m omega.

“Not all of them will need comforting,” Damien says from right across from me, appearing abruptly, as he lifts a bottle of the shampoo. “And not all will appreciate the scent of this apple. The mummified Neoprys you didn’t get the chance to see are the ones who won’t thank you or even appreciate what you risked for them, Violet.”

He slowly lowers the bottle back down.

“They’ll spit in your face and kick you for being thoughtful. They’ll call you pathetic and punish you for being kind. The cold doesn’t soothe them; the fire does,” he goes on more seriously, his eyes flicking to my mother. “Fire and ice in one family has left them subject to the worst House to be a member of, unless you’re of the skin-walker variety. You’ll stay in the Simpleton ward when visiting. And I advise against your mother’s ploy to use you as a treaty token for her to make new allegiances with Nadine.”

I exhale harshly, as Mom goes rigid, eyes narrowing on Damien.

“It won’t work, deviant,” Mom says calmly, glaring at him. “You won’t tear down my daughter’s trust in me just because you toss in a few well-placed warnings about things I’ve already told her would come. War is on the horizon. We all feel it. I’ll be looking after mine. You worry about yourself, and only yourself, as you always do.”

Leiza bristles at my side, and my eyes flick over the omegas they’ve forgotten are even here, as Lemon quietly hands me a full inventory list.

This is the part where I keep my head down and let the alphas rev the engines on their pissing contest. Lemon’s clearly trying to guide me into my role or whatever.

My eyes scan the sheet, even as my nervousness ratchets up.

I really don’t want Mom and Damien breaking out into combat the way the guys do.

“I’m worried, since you’ve left out quite a great deal of family history, Marta. About why Nadine hates you enough to have backed Idun, despite the monstrous acts performed on her favorite children,” Damien carries on.

Emit scrubs a hand over his face, darting a worried glance to me, as I turn around.

Mom's jaw trembles, and I glare over at Damien.

"I got the gist," I tell him very seriously as he opens his mouth to say something really cruel, not having an ounce of compassion for the woman, who has apparently made his life pure hell in a different way than Idun.

"Mom told me I had a brother who died. She told me he was cruel to be so young, and that he'd gotten that way because of her dismissive eye. I've heard the guilty tale more times than I can count, as she took far more blame than she deserved," I go on, causing Mom to glare at me like I've committed some sin, mostly because she seems mortified that I'm sharing this so freely.

But Damien's eyes lose the menace immediately, as some realization sweeps over him.

Marta Portocale may be his enemy, but she's been the mother who has protected and loved me for my entire life.

None of the top-tier alphas are very perfect, and they've all been cruel at some point, including him.

I see a flicker of regret, but it's gone before I can be certain, as he looks over at a vacant spot on the wall.

"Given the story, and how severely the Portocale Council hated all of you before this even escalated, I've stitched things together. It's the only way to get answers, since no one here wants to come out and say the whole truth all at once. It's given in small, confusing, somewhat convoluted fragments, leaving me to search through the wreckage of information for the important pieces."

I give Damien a pointed look, but he continues staring at the spot on the wall as though it has all of his attention.

"Bobo killed four children after they nearly stoned him to death for a laugh. Four Portocale first-borns from four different branches of the thick Portocale tree make up the immortal Portocale Council. That most likely means those children who tortured Bobo…belonged to the four Portocale Council members. They

may have done awful things, but those kids still had parents who loved them and were vicious enough to go after vengeance. Am I right? Or did I overcomplicate it?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest, genuinely too tired to even have emotions on the matter.

"That's the gist," Damien concedes, lips thinning, as he exhales his own tired breath.

"She told me the good about him too, but she didn't shield me from the truth to that degree. She told me she was older than she looked, but it's not like I did any math or tried to find plot-holes in her stories. A lot of things make sense now, because she always planned on telling me everything one day. Just not until she had to."

I lift a case, hand it off to Tiara, and gesture for her to load it. She's happy to escape the room. I now can tell that my mother is still hiding things, because I've found a lot of those plot-holes since I had a reason to start looking for them. However, I keep that to myself.

"So yes, I do trust her. Just like I trust her to stop talking when I ask it, because she told me to never let her be cruel to people when I'm around," I go on, lifting the next box to pass it along. "Because she had to be cold to endure the life she'd lived, but that she never wanted me—"

"Violet, I'd greatly appreciate it if some things stayed between us," Mom cuts in, eyes sharp and somewhat lethal.

"That's the problem," I say as I hand off the next box, "everyone wants to yell, scream, argue, take inexcusable shots, and bitch about the past. No one wants to just talk. Even now, everyone wants to remain defensive. All of you just want to hold on to the very thing that's made you miserable all these years, and at this point, you're just piling onto the fact no one is seeking resolution."

The girls hurry out like they're relieved to finally be able to exit without being told to go.

"You can spend your time doing whatever you want. I'm not an alpha and have no say in these matters, nor do I have the pressing, world-ending

responsibilities you guys have. I'm not judging, because that seems like a lot to put on anyone's shoulders. However, don't pull me into your fights or try to manipulate whose side I'm on. I'm going alone to—"

"You *won't* go alone," Emit says sharply, eyes cutting to me like it's an order.

He's never really *ordered* me to do anything before…besides *turn over.*

I blink a few times, almost caught off guard by it, and admittedly get a little distracted in a very ill-timed sort of way Anna would be proud of…

Clearing my throat and remembering now's not the time to let my troublesome vagina get her way, I bring my attention back to the three argumentative alphas in the room.

"I'll stick to the Simpleton side of the home. You said the skin walkers wouldn't even be up yet because it takes time to rehydrate them," I remind him.

"I'll come with you. I've barely argued all day, and you're not cross with me right now," Emit states.

"Why are you cross with me if I'm not allowed to be cross with you for dating my sworn enemies?" Mom asks like she's hurt, and then she gags.

She mocks a gag every time she mentions *us*.

There are so many ways I'd love to answer that question right now.

Put a pin in it.

Talk about family drama…

"They're not going to want to see the ones who put them under while they're trying to get reacquainted with a much different world inside a Van Helsing's home. A Van Helsing who everyone seems to think not even *I* should have to meet. I know this is difficult for all of you, since the only person who makes you feel weak is Idun, but for one second, be them. Think about them. They're the only innocent ones in this mess, and I know that's true, because it's the only thing you've *all* agreed on."

I lift the last box, glancing over at Emit, as Mom clears her throat.

"Give them one day where they don't have to deal with you. Give me one day to help them get the gist of what's going on in the world today, before the

alpha-arguing sets in all around them, with everyone else dictating what they do. Since all the scary and *important* Neoprys are taking time to heal, give the forgotten an ounce of freedom while it lasts."

When no one makes a move to immediately argue, I take my opening while I have it.

"I'll keep the omegas with me," I assure them as I turn to go.

"They'll just run if there's trouble," Emit says like he's working hard to hold back.

I glance over my shoulder to see that the muscles in his shoulders, biceps and forearms are all tensing, as his jaw tics. The full moon isn't *that* close, is it? No. No. It really shouldn't be affecting his temperament as much as it is right now.

"They'll run and find you like their instinct demands. If there's trouble, I'll attract it whether I'm here or there. It's just my nature. Don't worry so much, or you'll never be able to adjust to the new normal that's starting right now."

Leaving the false bravado behind me, I hurry out to the awaiting, unique van the omegas apparently rented. Tiara adds my box to the back, and then we all pile in. I take the driver's seat.

"I feel ridiculously stupid for unloading the van now, and then immediately loading it right back up," Lemon comments. "It really does make us look stupid when we do things like that in front of Damien. I prefer him to think of us as cunning she-wolves. He respects the cunning. I'm fucking cunning. *I am.*"

She sniffs the air, and presumably strikes a 'cunning' pose. It looks more like an unpracticed, amateurish 'fierce' pose that would make the perfect backdrop for a 'caption this' meme.

"Everyone does something that makes them want to palm their face from time to time," I tell her, trying not to smile when she deflates.

"Marta's going to think we're nothing more than Alpha's ex-harem and try to force us out," she adds on a sad sigh.

"You're not being forced out," I assure her.

A relaxing sound of seatbelts click in a wave, without anyone needing to be

asked, and Tiara cuts up the music.

Just as I start driving, I see Ingrid pop up and climb over the back row to sit alone, relaxing like she's happy to stretch out, and I smile.

"Stop!" half of them shout at once, as I stomp on the brake.

"What?" I ask, looking around at absolutely nothing but our van on the road.

"Wrong side of the road," they all say in unison.

I feel my cheeks burning as I swap lanes. Guess this is my face-palming moment.

"Why does everyone else has to drive on the other side of the road?" I grumble, weirdly embarrassed.

"How very obnoxiously American of you," Ingrid chimes from the back with a singsong voice.

"You hide under floors and behind walls. You don't really have room to mock me," I grumble, only feeling her grin at my back.

I roll the window down, letting in the cold, when Tiara starts sweating, since purebloods run warmer. Makes sense that I run colder, if I'm gauging myself off her.

Wolves are hot-blooded. Neoprys and Portocales are cold-blooded.

I'm just starting to relax, while they all discuss their trip over here, when my eyes narrow on a quickly approaching glass ball aimed right at the windshield.

The salt dives to the left like it's steering the ball, and then darts into my window, before dropping to my lap. I lift it, studying it in stolen glances, as I keep most of my attention on the road.

A tiny crack, too small for even one grain to escape, is on the side, but it's pristine other than that.

I'd given up on trying to call for one, certain all the balls had dropped and the grains had scattered out to sea.

I squeeze the fragile glass between my fingers, feeling it shatter. I'm impressed that this one survived well enough to travel to me.

A stone settles on my stomach when I feel the salt grains.

“What’s that?” Leiza asks from behind me, as I continue rubbing it between my fingers.

“Table salt,” I state quietly, my mind moving back to the first day I met Anna.

The day she rode in on my mother’s casket and jabbered directly to me like she knew I was going to meet her eyes.

“Why do you look upset about that?” Ingrid asks.

I glance down, not seeing even a hint of the subtle gray coloring it should have. “Because it’s supposed to be ghost salt.”

I should have noticed this sooner, but who actually pays close attention to salt?

The triplets didn’t leave behind ghost salt either…

What the hell is going on?

I add it to the bulletin board of things to process and deal with later, as I return my attention to the task at hand.

“What do I say to them?” I ask, briefly glancing over at Tiara.

She cuts down the music, and everyone goes quiet for a second.

“I’m trying to recall if any of the books I’ve read mentioned if they speak English or not. They were buried in Ireland, so one can presume they may speak some form of English,” Tiara says thoughtfully, tapping her chin.

“Unless they only learned Gaelic while here,” Mary states, not helping things out, as they all deliberately dodge my question.

“Gypsies traveled all over and were actually quite educated with languages of all kinds, a tool that often kept them alive, while also making them valuable, in the event someone kidnapped them instead of killing them on the spot,” Lemon adds. “It’s possible they know old English, but it’s still going to be a communication barrier. Fortunately, Simpletons seem to catch on quicker than others to languages.”

“Great. Let’s say they speak some form of English. No one has told me what I should say,” I state dryly to that long, detailed answer.

After a long beat of silence, Leiza clears her throat and glances around, as if she's waiting on someone else to answer.

"Say *hi,*" Tiara states in a way that suggests she finds it to be profound wisdom.

"I'll come up with something on my own," I mutter, as a thousand things run through my mind of what to say and how to say it.

Mom says it's about delivery. She's more passionate than I am, though. She's loud and insistent. I'm quiet and easygoing. My delivery always sounds like an aw-shucks sort of thing when I try too hard.

Probably not an aw-shucks day for them.

"Maybe this was a bad idea," I state with my confidence on the decline.

The road I'm on dead-ends at a massive gate that is no less than fifty yards away once I top the hill. VVH is over the massive gate that is already open.

"Little too late to turn back now. They'll still need things, and while the Van Helsings have a protocol in place that forces them to give up their home for a case like this, it isn't likely they'll do much else to help these people out or make them feel comfortable."

"Do you have a pen and paper?" I ask her as we go under the gates.

"Yeah, why?" Leiza says, always prepared as she starts digging around in her bag.

"Because you're going on a shopping spree today. They're going to need even more than you've already acquired for them if no one else is going to help them. Besides, I've seen their cages before. I won't see them again," I go on, a very abrupt, somewhat crazy plan forming in the back of my mind. "And then I'm taking them home with me."

There's a long beat of silence where everyone just sort of stares at me like I've sprouted a tail and a second head. I probably needed a bridge from our conversation to that announcement.

"We're going to need a bigger house," Tiara finally points out, eyes on me like I'm crazy.

“We’ll put them up at Vance’s instead of leaving them here. I read that rule book Mom gave me. They can put up their House anywhere.”

“But Idun will lock site in Shadow Hills, and—”

“Doesn’t matter. Nowhere in the rulebook does it say anything about multiple *Houses* not being in the same location for the Neopry family. It’s a nonissue, because there’s always been plenty of territory to spread out and claim. The House has to have a three-fourths majority vote to change a law.”

I stop talking as we pull up in front of the massive, eighteenth-century, castle-like home that faces a vast field full of magnificently healthy, shiny horses. I stop just to admire the beauty for a second, because it really is a full work of natural art.

“So the guy who built this place—”

“Is Vanzuela Van Helsing,” Leiza says as though she’s finishing my sentence, her tone riddled with slight terror.

“The alphas call him Zuela. We call him the Van Helsing monster, because of how much he loves killing our kind,” Lemon says in a hushed tone. “He’s gone, right?”

“Emit wouldn’t have let Violet out of the house if he was expected to be here,” Tiara whispers like she’s convincing herself of that.

“He can’t just kill us without a reason, though, since we’re not at war,” Ingrid also says like she’s convincing *herself* of that, her tone even softer than Tiara’s.

She scrambles over the backseat and disappears from sight after that.

“How do wars even work with everyone so close together?” I ask, still reveling in the captivating beauty.

The castle doesn’t look old and dusty. It almost shines with glory and awe… if that makes sense. I idly wonder if Vanzuela is as much of a perfectionist as Vance.

“We all pull to various points of one country, and the alphas move to the bunkers there to rest and feed. Then they war across the land during the times in between, until someone captures a metaphorical flag of sorts, and everyone has

to regroup. Then alliances shift when someone pushes the boundaries another won't cross, and the war shifts, reigniting, and we start all over again until the alphas finally reach some sort of understanding," Leiza says in a whisper like she's carefully prepared that speech for me.

"That's the gist of it, isn't it?" I ask with a grin.

She pats my arm. "It's an easy compromise, since I suck at remembering the fine details."

"It's a time of great separation and brutal sacrifice, Violet. Tensions run so high after a war that it's not much better. If not for Arion's tantrum, we'd be much farther along in the healing process," Lemon adds, as we all just continue to stare up at the gorgeously intimidating home.

"Not to mention how very critically inconvenient a war would be in this era. They'll live long enough to see the world plunge back into the dark ages, but we likely won't. Too many cameras and touch-of-the-button technology out there. We'll be the reason the world is plunged into the dark ages if we cause widespread hysteria, and we'll be mostly wiped out," Mary adds very quietly.

"Then the alphas will just pick themselves back up and start all over again, caring less and less with each stupendous failure, because it's simply too painful and too hard to keep caring. Aside from the *Vampyres*, who are a little more psychotic by nature," Tiara goes on, always getting her vampire jabs in when she can, "the alphas didn't all start out soulless. They once cared."

"It just did no good to care, because Idun always broke their favorite toys, or so Marta would say. It's when they cared the least about Idun. Marta mocked them for it, got in her punches when she could, even managed to kill them on occasion, when she was really pissed off at them for all the power they'd allowed Idun to garner."

"*Allowed* her to garner?" I ask, confused.

"Long story for another time. You're just stalling at this point. The longer you stall, the less time you'll have before those Neopry skin walkers rehydrate and all hell either does or doesn't break loose."

Shoving open the door to the van, I hop out and stare up at the massive home's doors, going over my semi-perfected explanation of who I am and how harmless I am, so as not to spook them.

"We'll bring the boxes. Start with knocking on the—"

The door opens, and Leiza stops speaking, as we both simply stare with bated breaths.

A man with slightly ashen skin, who hasn't fully healed yet, simply blinks at me like he's shocked to find me here.

I recognize him; though he's not as tan, flush with color, and vivid as he was in the small death window I saw of Caroline's. A girl who couldn't die but still had a death window open…

He was in the cell across from hers.

Blue bounces out of the door, and I startle as he comes up and almost stares me in the eye, snarling at me. I'm so focused on him, that a small yelp escapes me when I'm airborne suddenly, the world flipping around me, as I'm slung painfully hard over a shoulder.

Leiza drops her purse, eyes wide in horror on me, as the man with a hunch on his back runs inside with me, caveman style. I know four or five alphas who will never let me out without supervision ever again if this goes wrong.

The world tilts again as I'm dropped to my feet, and the man grabs me and smashes me to his chest with one arm. I feel a tickle of satin at my cheek, as my eyes widen.

Oh, shit. What have I—

"*Et øjeblik*, Bobo," a man's voice says.

Is that Danish? It certainly isn't English.

I seriously will never hear the end of—

"*Et øjeblik*, Bobo," a man says more insistently.

I manage to cut my eyes over to see that the guy holding me to him is very animatedly tapping another man on the shoulder. Both of them are just wearing robes.

I’m not sure how I feel about this situation, but I do know that this is all going in a really scary direction.

The other man knocks his hand away, getting annoyed, distracted by his struggle with a remote.

“Hvad?” the other guy groans, as he turns around, but then straightens when his eyes widen on me.

He points at me, as he jumps to his feet, causing *Bobo* to stumble back, his grip tightening on me. I’m forced to sway with him, growing increasingly worried for obvious reasons.

My captor is Bobo…

The man my mother had hanged, after he killed her son, who almost killed him. This all got complicated real damn fast.

“*Det er hende!”* the other man says with a broad grin, pointing at me.

Still not looking good.

I feel Bobo nodding with excitement.

Please don’t let me have been all wrong. I took the word of horrible monsters these people were sweet and innocent, not thinking of the danger I’d be putting the omegas—

“Um…English?” the guy in front of me asks like he’s remembering something, his accent thick and raw.

I nod, since it’s all I can do.

“Bobo, you sc-sc-sc-scare her,” he says with a slight stutter and a small tic of his mouth.

He’s really tall.

They both are.

I always felt tall until I entered the realm of monsters.

The man’s eyes water in front of me, as he slowly bows at the waist. “W-we all in y-y-your debt, V-V-Violet Carmine.”

They know my name.

I relax a little, just as Bobo releases me and gives me a little space. I glance

over at him, remembering he's mute. I guess that's why he carried me in instead of speaking.

He gives me a huge, lopsided grin, smiling with a lot fewer teeth than one should have. Dental care back then sucked balls, I'm sure.

This is going to cost more than expected in the long run. Good thing I know a bunch of rich, guilty alphas who will be eager to pay off a debt they forgot they owed.

"Bobo does not s-s-s-s-s-speak," the guys carries on, and then taps his chin. "I am not the best s-s-s-speaker. New English harder." He points to himself. "Ighan."

"It's nice to meet you both, Ighan and Bobo," I tell them as the omegas tiptoe in, drawing my attention just a little.

Without a doubt, they've been listening to find out if it's hostile or hospitable in here.

"C-come! Come!" Ighan says, gesturing for me to follow, as he limps his way toward the doorway of another room.

The omegas hang back, and neither of the men bother to glance in their direction, as they guide me toward a large, cathedral-style opening in the middle of the house.

I spot four levels of balconies in the massive home, before a stained-glass skylight tops off the beauty.

While I'm lost, admiring the breathtaking art of the glass, Ighan makes some sort of really loud bird-like sound, startling the hell out of me. My gaze swings around, and I spot several heads timidly peeking over the balcony with wary curiosity.

Every floor has so many faces—forty-eight in total, not counting Ighan and Bobo.

This is a lot of people for one real family, but I remember reading the tree Tiara showed me. From what I've gathered, most of them are cousins, who had banded with the family for protection when they were all human men and

women braving a harsh world together.

“They sh-shy, but I v-v-vow they grateful,” Ighan assures me.

There’s a burning warmth surrounding me with an edge of fear...but *I* don’t feel fear. This isn’t *my* fear.

These aren’t my feelings at all.

“I’m not concerned with gratitude,” I murmur quietly, still slightly confused by the growing sensation that I’m feeling someone else’s feelings. “I brought gifts you’ll need.”

Simpletons really are very empathic…

Bobo and Ighan finally dart a glance to the omegas, who are patiently holding heavy boxes stacked on top of heavy boxes, while they wait.

“I’m sorry,” I say as I quickly start toward them. “Put them down. I’ll—”

Bobo makes a surprised sound in his throat, before he almost shakes the floor with his weird running. He runs worse than I do. I’m not sure why that makes me smile.

He snatches a box from Tiara’s hands, and her eyebrows lift, as she freezes in place.

Bobo takes a long sniff of the box, squeezing it to his chest in a tight embrace.

When he groans and smiles, as though he’s happy and tortured, I add, “It’s all made from the same apples you grew. Or so I’m told. I grow the green apple trees.”

Bobo and Ighan both give me a confused look, as Bobo tears open the box he’s holding with one hand…as if it’s featherweight. He pulls out a bottle of shampoo, and Ighan catches it when it’s tossed to him, even though he bobbles it a few times, before clasping it with two hands.

He opens and sniffs the bottle, a slow grin spreading over his lips.

“Y-y-you one of us?” he asks like he can’t believe it. “B-b-but they said you a P-P-Port—”

“She’s Portocale and Neopry. Apples and oranges. You can’t really compare

her to anyone else," Tiara says like she's informing them that I'm different, making this incredibly awkward.

Ighan and Bobo just smile brighter instead of being upset about…anything.

The alphas are still technically arguing over how much about me they'll be able to keep a secret from Idun.

If she's as vindictive as they claim, I doubt I have any secrets left that she hasn't uncovered…

The stirrings of an odd memory pop into my mind.

Puddles and splatters of blood.

Numerous severed limbs.

Broken walls and crushed beams…

My heartbeat kicks at my chest in two heavy blows when I see the full image of the massacre I sat out to do the night my head was knocked off.

A face flashes before my eyes, but it's gone before I get a good look at it. Was someone left alive?

No. Not possible. My monster doesn't leave witnesses.

Except for Ian and those other wolves…

Shit. Why is this now bothering the hell out of me? Why haven't I ever remembered that before?

Something hard lands against my side, nearly knocking the breath out of me, as I slam into the wall beside me. My head bounces off it, and for a brief moment, I see stars. I rapidly recover, and glare over at a wide-eyed Tiara, who has her elbow suspended mid-air, because she just *elbowed* me across the room.

"Sorry," she says, blinking a few times. "I was just trying to get your attention, because you seemed to have dazed off. I'm in heat this week, so I'm a little stronger than usual," she adds very bluntly. "I forgot."

Great. If one's in heat, they're all in heat. Mom is going to kill me.

I run a hand over my face, shaking my head.

"In h-h-heat?" Ighan asks as though he's confused. "T-too warm?"

"The temperature is great, but we're not here to talk about that. I wanted to

give you something as close to comfort food as I can cook. I also came to help you learn a little about the way the world works now," I quickly deflect, smiling brightly at them, while rubbing my aching side.

Don't piss off a wolf with PMS. Duly noted. Seriously, there should be some big book to keep up with all the little things people seem to find unimportant—

"G-g-good," Ighan says, smile only growing, as he gestures to the TV. "It stopped."

I can fix the TV, but there's a lot more needed than I initially thought of.

Leiza steps up with the pen and paper she had earlier, ready to write, like she knew I was about to ask it of her.

"What's the quickest way to help English along for them? You said they picked up on languages fast," I state to Leiza, already impressed with the amount Ighan has mastered just from watching freaking TV, apparently.

"I never made it past the first course of Spanish because it was really hard to learn another language. Again, I've been robbed of hereditary perks, and I'm starting to feel a little singled out," I note aloud.

"Singing, of course, is the best tool," Tiara tells me with a grin that is definitely insulting. "It's what the Simpletons are known for."

I'm already failing at being a Simpleton, because I suck worse at singing than learning a new language. They make it seem as though it's as simple as watching freaking TV. *And* I failed singing lessons when my mother refused to believe I couldn't carry the tune of a songbird.

If they're considered Simpletons…no wonder the guys treat me as though I'm the biggest village idiot there has ever been in their presence. *This* is why they keep acting like I'm some sort of breakable doll who needs to be monitored at all times.

"G-g-got it," Ighan says, figuring out which button to push on the remote. "I s-s-sat on it."

A thousand years underground and knew the remote was linked to the TV. I had to be thoroughly taught how to use my first calculator.

“My life sucks so hard sometimes,” I mutter under my breath, pinching the bridge of my nose. “We’ll start with the basics,” I go on, turning my attention to Leiza, as I try not to look over at the very curious men and women who’ve started peeking around the corner, getting closer and closer to us as they *sneak* down the stairs.

Sometimes it’s also rewarding to be me, since I helped make this happen. But this doesn’t feel like enough.

Not yet.

I can do more.

CHAPTER 2

EMIT

“My credit card is maxed out? How is my brand new card—”

Marta stops talking, as the woman on the other line interrupts her to say, “I’m sorry Ms. Portocale, but it’s been used quite a lot earlier today. Are you saying you didn’t make these purchases?”

Marta digs through her wallet, glaring a little, as her jaw grinds. “My daughter took it shopping, it seems. I’ll have this conversation with her instead,” she states as she hangs up.

Damien glances over. “Violet went shopping?”

“I’m sure she sent a couple of omegas, whom she swore would stay by her side,” I bite out, staring at my phone when it goes to Leiza’s voicemail. “None of them are answering their phones right now.”

My muscles tense, as Marta stands and starts pacing. They always answer my calls. Never once have any of them ignored a call from me. Not a damn one of them is bothering to answer today.

It’s been *hours* of radio silence.

“I should have known she’d nab a credit card when I wasn’t looking. She always tries to get out of paying for her own things when I’m around,” Marta gripes.

“She’s likely paying for *their* things,” Damien points out, narrowing his eyes at her. “Don’t make it sound like Violet is a grubby little thief.”

“She’s not a thief; she’s a typical omega,” Marta counters dismissively.

Damien scrubs a hand over his face. “If we just peered in, it isn’t like they’d notice. The Simpletons are there alone, for all intents and purposes, until the skin walkers hydrate. They won’t smell us or sense us. No one has to know.”

“We’ll have to walk. The car will certainly draw their attention if they hear

it," I chime in, for once agreeing with a suggestion made by Damien.

"Walking with a werewolf and a deviant to Zuela Van Helsing's home to check on my daughter, after she's just raised the entire family of Simpletons. All this happened in seven months," Marta says as she walks out the door, her head shaking as she makes several frustrated sounds.

"Better than looking at it as happening within four months," I call after her, just because I hate her and want her brain overloaded the same way mine is.

"I'll wait for you outside," she snaps as she slams the door behind her.

"Arion and Vance are getting close to Idun's trail. I think," Damien says as he looks up from his phone and pockets it.

"Idun will be gone before they reach her, no matter how close they get," I murmur under my breath, thinking about what Marta said about Idun loving being chased as much as she loves chasing.

"That bitch is already walking and leaving us behind," Damien says as he jerks the door open, glaring down the road at Marta's back, while she quickly heads off on her own.

Not wasting another second, we easily catch up and pass her, even with our slow jog. In less than a few seconds, she's caught back up with us, even though she looks damn angry about all this.

"We look absolutely ridiculous right now," Marta points out.

"Only because you're with us," Damien says with a smartass grin.

I leave them both behind, running faster toward the castle. But my footsteps slow when I hear music blaring from up ahead with some *awful* singing.

"What the hell is that?" Damien asks as he comes up on my right.

"*Rockband* is what that is, and Violet's singing," Marta says as she passes us.

That's Violet singing? I've never heard her singing without a radio, another singer, and…I've never heard her with a very loud microphone.

I don't even bother trying to peer inside like the outdoor-stalker I sometimes am. I climb the side of the castle and come in through a third floor window.

Marta and Damien end up on the same indoor balcony, as we all look down

at what seems like an eighties prom mixed with a Nerf gun war, all surrounding a makeshift stage.

Violet is wearing face-paint and a backwards hat, as she wails into the plastic microphone about wanting to rock-and-roll all night.

I don't have it in me to tell her that whatever she's doing right now…isn't rock-and-roll. It's more like roll-to-a-corner-and-rock music.

Bobo is playing a toy guitar, a grin on his lips and eyes full of concentration, as he stares at the TV. Ighan is drumming on toy drums, singing along with Violet, as he bobs his head to the music.

I can't believe she's not embarrassed to be singing with Ighan, since he sings a helluva lot better than he speaks. Next to Bobo, he has one of the best singing voices.

Violet starts jumping up and down, and everyone cheers when she starts the chorus over, dancing just as horrendously as…Violet always dances.

"As charming as I find her, I see the horrified looks on your faces and wonder how in the world my daughter ended up with all four of you," Marta notes with a very snide, but also extremely confused, tone.

My eyes settle over the crowd, really taking in the scene, as I pointedly ignore Marta. Quite literally, they're all dancing just like Violet. She's found her tribe for the dance floor.

"Ah, so that explains the dancing. Can't believe I managed to forget how bad they are at it," I say almost as though I don't really know what else to say right now, recovering from the momentary speechlessness.

Damien lifts his phone, videoing the scene with a broad grin on his face. Marta quickly loses interest in us, her gaze back on Violet. Even as she shakes her head, tears fill up in her eyes and a small, genuine smile graces her lips.

She'd never allow such a reaction if she worried we were a threat to Violet.

I don't like this. I don't like seeing Marta with even a little bit of her guard down. I *hate* this woman almost as much as I hate Idun.

Violet has already started singing another song with the same horrendous

tone that draws a lot of excitement, and she ends up stealing my sole attention.

“Where’s Caroline?” Marta asks quietly.

“Probably hiding in the walls, if I had to hazard a guess,” Damien states so softly I almost can’t hear it over the music. “I don’t blame her.”

“Why are you videoing this?” I ask him, eyeing his phone as he keeps it trained on Violet.

“I’m sending this to Vance, because he’ll never believe what went on in Zuela’s home otherwise,” he states with some awe.

I spot some of the omegas dancing with some of the Simpletons like this is a perfectly normal day. It’s so loud in here that I’m no longer surprised they didn’t answer my calls.

I smell Leiza before I see her, turning to find her walking toward us, smiling tightly.

I catch a foam bullet before it can hit me. Dropping the Nerf bullet, I step back from the railing before someone sees me and the fun is ruined.

Leiza meets me halfway, keeping her voice low as she speaks. “Vanzuela Van Helsing just pulled up,” she says, wringing her slightly trembling hands. “I caught your scent, and—”

“We’ll handle him,” I say in response to her unfinished request, as I walk toward the window I came through.

Damien is right behind me when I hit the ground, and he lands at my side. But Marta is already almost to Zuela, as he steps out and narrows his eyes at her.

I crack my neck to the side, since he doesn’t look like he’s going to be easy to deal with.

“You can’t be here right now,” Marta informs him.

“So it’s true. Marta Portocale is back once again and acting like she’s in charge,” Zuela says with a sneer. “Why can’t I smell your blood? What trickery is this?”

“The same trickery you use to morph your silver into even more diabolical weapons these days,” she says, arching an eyebrow. “Care to tell us how you

manage that, Van Helsing? I heard it's made you all much more efficient."

"Stop skipping the point. This isn't your show, Marta," he growls, practically spitting the words out at her.

With a sigh, Damien decides to cut in. "In this situation, she's not wrong. You're prohibited from visiting these grounds—"

"These grounds are my *home,* Morpheous. You have no authority here either," Zuela states through clenched teeth, barely reining in his temper by this point. "You don't even handle your own alpha House. Dorian has yet to be dealt with, and here you are in my yard instead. Likely camping out and hoping Idun shows up, while my son is off chasing after her. Instead of putting that bitch back underground where she belongs, you simply raised the rest of that contemptuous, pointless family, only empowering the fucking bitch," he grinds out, disgusted with the lot of us.

It's not as though he's any less repulsive to me than I am to him.

"You're welcome to take this up with Vance, but until then, you'll go no farther. As by law, the nearest Van Helsing *House* always turns into neutral territory in a state of crisis during times of peace," I inform him, silently hoping he does something stupid.

I'd love to fuck something up right now. Zuela would be a lot of fun to fuck up.

I hate him far worse than I ever imagined hating Arion for the things this man has done to wolves.

Marta just stands back, eyes flicking toward the house.

"Times of peace," Zuela scoffs, throwing his hands up as he shakes his head in disbelief. "The flags of war aren't flying yet, but only because Idun loves to make a horrible entrance. By this time next year, we'll be in a war so thick—"

"Violet, go inside," Marta warns, interrupting Zuela, as she straightens.

I can see her eyes pleading with someone I can only presume is our foolish fucking new monster. I don't allow myself to cut my eyes toward her, in fear Zuela, the perceptive son of a bitch, will see a quick chink in my armor.

Damien shows the same restraint, smiling tightly, as Zuela looks around us toward the door.

Violet can't handle the wrath of a man like Zuela, if he notices her as the weakness she's become for too damn many of us.

"Sorry. I heard Sir Van Helsing was out here, and I wanted to bring out his host gift," she says, being naïve at a very inopportune time.

Zuela glances between all of us.

"Violet? As in *the* Violet who had something to do with all this unnatural chaos?" Zuela barks.

"That'd be me," Violet says with such cluelessness that it's almost laughable. "You have a beautiful home. The stained glass is possibly the finest I've ever seen, and Mom and I have gone to a lot of the best places in our home country just to look at the stained glass inside beautiful architecture," she carries on like she's sucking up to the son of a bitch. "Mom always said there was a place in Ireland she'd love to show me one day, but that it was a private estate that wouldn't allow it. I'm guessing this is the one. Am I right?"

Damien casts her a disbelieving, slightly horrified look, as Marta just shuts her eyes and exhales harshly.

Zuela sniffs the air, likely catching the telling scent of Portocale blood. He looks between Marta and Violet a few times, his brow crinkling in confusion, as Violet calls too much attention to a secret none of us planned to tell anyone… until we were safely back on our own territory.

"That's not possible," Zuela says, more confused than aggressive right now, his eyes shrewdly assessing Marta. "The women are as sterile as the men. It's not possible she's your child."

"I was born with no womb, so I guess that makes me sterile too," Violet throws out there like she's tossing out a bonding line.

He's not some omega she can be nice to and make friends with, for fuck's sake.

"The girl who raised the Neoprys from their undead graves is a Neopry

Simpleton monster. She brought in the lightning like only one of them could," Zuela argues, even as he studies Violet with far too much intrigue.

"I'm mostly just a Simpleton, since Mom wouldn't ever let be a badass like her," Violet carries on.

I snort now, only because it's not funny at all. All the times she said that, I never once considered she was speaking about *the original* Marta Portocale.

Fuck's sake, why is that only just now becoming so painfully fucking ridiculous to hear?

"You chopped off your own foot when I tried to teach you to use a sword, Violet. You lost an arm learning to swing an axe, for Pete's sake. Don't even get me started on archery; I've never seen a person shoot their own kneecap. It's not something that should be possible," Marta says as she glares back over at Zuela.

"This is the girl who broke through unbreakable thresholds like only Idun can do?" Zuela asks in a tone that suggests he believes we're all fucking with him right now.

I glance back at last, seeing Violet holding a wooden box in her hands, her face painted black and white, and a hat still backwards on her head. I'm not entirely sure what she's wearing, but I think it's a…prom dress. A very bright pink one with a lot of ruffles.

She wasn't wearing that a few minutes ago.

"It's not your concern," I say as I return my attention to Zuela, moving my body into his line of view to block Violet from his sight.

Zuela's eyes narrow on me, and I see the calculated glint in his—

"That just makes it sound more exciting than it really is, Emit," Violet carries on as she steps up beside me.

"Go inside, Violet," Damien orders, his hand going to her waist to pull her back.

Zuela's eyes drop to the contact, and a smirk lines his lips, as he darts a knowing look to Marta. Just that one touch, and the son of a bitch *knows.* It's written all over his face.

“Surely not,” Zuela says to Marta like he’s more hopeful than anything, inspiring the idea to toss Violet over my shoulder and lock her inside until this over.

“Enjoy the moment, Zuela. It’ll be short-lived or overshadowed soon enough,” Marta assures him tightly.

Zuela’s lips twitch. “I’m sure there’s nothing worse than seeing that, though, Marta. Don’t play me for the fool by pretending you’re not on the verge of losing your already broken mind,” he carries on, as Violet gently tugs away from Damien.

“Trust me. There’s far worse,” Marta surprisingly says, as she continues to stare down Zuela like this isn’t the worst day of her immortal existence.

“Worse than having an impossible, but very ridiculous Simpleton daughter, who can’t be taken seriously? One who is also very comfortable with the sex deviant…who can kill her if he enjoys the *ride* too much?” he adds with all the disrespect he can muster.

“Here,” Violet says as she rolls her eyes. “While you insult me to take very immature jabs at my mother, share the cigars I’ve been assured are some great ones.”

Everyone goes stiff, including Zuela, as Violet leans forward abruptly and places a quick, chaste kiss on his cheek.

“What the fucking hell?” he snaps at her, reeling back as though he’s about to stab first and ask more questions later.

Violet startles a little, clearing her throat. “It’s customary to kiss a gypsy’s cheek when they’ve graciously invited you into their home, before you part ways. At least that’s what my mother taught me. I should get back,” Violet says, as Zuela continues to stare at her like she’s lost her damn mind.

“She’s *your* daughter?” Zuela asks Marta like he no longer finds this joke funny.

“I’m January Violet Carmine,” Violet says from the door, drawing everyone’s attention once again. “I’m apparently some omega designed for one specific task

as a result of the freaky shit that happens when you mix blood magic with gypsy magic and break some kind of oath you signed in blood," she adds, causing Damien's head to tip back.

"Violet, go the fuck inside," I snap.

"She's not your omega, so show her respect," Marta grinds out.

"Respect? For an omega?" Zuela asks on a humorless laugh. "These words are really being spoken from Marta Portocale's lips?"

"It's apparently too close to the moon," Violet says in my defense.

I realize she truly does bloody believe I'm not every bit of the alpha Arion is.

If Arion had yelled at her, she'd be hiding under a table right now.

"And she's not scared of the big bad wolf," Zuela says amidst laughter that now starts turning almost cathartic, his entire body vibrating with the force. "Is she fucking the wolf too?" he barely manages to ask through his guffaws.

"One night. We only fucked one night," Violet says as though she's clarifying and making things less…surreal. "I think. To be honest, it's all starting to blur together by this point."

I scrub a hand over my face, when Zuela crows, bellowing his laughter toward the heavens.

"*I can't…I can't take anymore*," he wheezes.

"Now I just feel like I'm making all of you a laughing stock. Sort of rude of the host, since I came out here to be polite and even smiled while he insulted me," Violet points out like Zuela is a reasonable human being.

"*Oh, St. Mary and Joseph, the girl thinks me rude*," Zuela has to say on an even thinner wheeze, as he slaps his knees and continues with another bout of violent laughter.

I glare at Marta for raising her to be this naïve, but a ghost of a smile toys with one edge of that crazy bitch's lips, as she looks back at Violet. I glance behind me too, but Violet's back is to me…as she struggles to walk in the ridiculous pink dress, stumbling a little toward the door.

Zuela's laughter is only reenergized by the slight stumble, and Marta doesn't

look the least bit insulted. In fact, she's almost struggling to keep a straight face.

Damien's phone rings, and he answers, as Zuela's laughter turns into full-blown hysterics.

"Who's laughing?" is the first thing Arion asks.

"I'll tell you about it later," Damien says unsurely, taking a step back from Zuela, eyes assessing the madman we've never heard laugh quite this much. "Have you found her?"

Honestly, I think this is the first time I've heard Zuela laugh since he was mortal. Even back then it was done in very sparing, minimal doses.

"No, but we found a nest of shapeshifters, who had a very large ring of humans waiting to be turned, so Idun's fortunately been more worried about building an army than stalking us, it seems. I'll tell you about it later. Where's Violet? The omegas aren't answering my calls, and you worthless fucks haven't replaced my future bride's phone yet."

Future bride?

"*The bloody fucking psychotic vampire alpha too*?" Zuela says on a wheeze so thin I can barely hear the strained words, his face turning bright red, as he just continues cackling. "*H-how is this possible*?"

He collapses to his knees and starts slapping the ground, his entire body rocking, as he genuinely struggles for breath.

"Really…who is that?" Arion asks more seriously.

"Zuela dropped by to find out if Violet was a threat, and now he knows she's not, so he's simply reveling in the disturbing reality I find myself in," Marta states dryly, not sounding nearly as offended as she predictably should.

"I thought we fucking agreed not to let my father around Violet," Vance says like he's frustrated, as something wet splatters somewhere in the background.

"*My son*?" Zuela asks, choking on the laugh he can't hold back, even as true horror and nightmarish terror strikes his features. "*My son is with a bloody Portocale Simpleton*?" he goes on, still struggling with the laughter, even though he seems like he's forced to laugh in spite of his repulsion.

“Nooooo!” he says, still laughing.

He’s less concerned with the fact there’s such a monster even in existence than he is with the fact his first-born is with such a creature. Typical, arrogant, prideful Van Helsing.

“That’s not funny,” he says even as the momentum of the laughter just continues. “Not at all. Not fucking at all,” he carries on, the volume of his cackling only lifting. “I can’t. I can’t,” he says as he finally walks away, laughing with an angry face, as though he’s frozen in this somewhat mortifying state of hysteria, I’m sure.

It really isn’t funny anymore to him…but…Marta’s smile has spread to take up her whole face, because the bastard just can’t seem to shut it off.

“Thanks for that,” I say, knowing Vance will hear.

I almost hear Vance’s smirk.

“If you haven’t found Idun, why are you calling?” Marta asks on an irritated sigh, the amusement gone.

“To check on Violet. Would you please tell me how she fucking is?” Arion asks loudly. “Demetria is somewhere in the neighborhood, according to one of the mouths attached to one of the heads we took off.”

“Just what we need. Idun’s unnaturally powerful gypsy freak beta, who has been impossibly hard to capture for the past thousand years, popping up right now. I was hoping someone had exterminated her,” Marta grinds out.

“Why is Marta Portocale listening to this conversation?” Arion asks with a somewhat chilling tone.

“Because she’s going to tell us more about Violet if we include her in on conversations such as these,” Damien states with a shove-it-up-your-ass grin in Marta’s direction.

Marta outright laughs, before walking in the opposite direction from the house, apparently heading back to her makeshift home now that she’s seen enough.

Damien continues talking to Arion like he expected no less, though they both

lower their voices to near whispers, as I jog down to Marta.

“You’re leaving Violet on her own right now?” I ask like I don’t believe it.

“I’ll just agitate them if they see me while Nadine is still vulnerable,” she says dismissively.

“But Violet is—”

“Violet just left Zuela Van Helsing in a fit of giggles because of how ridiculous he found her to be. She’s perfectly safe for the time being. He won’t hurt anyone who has snagged his eldest, much stronger son’s attention, especially while Idun is free. Certainly not my daughter, who he now knows has more protection than any other omega. Congratulations, you’ve all made enduring this disgusting situation slightly more bearable. For this moment, at least.”

She keeps walking as I stop, and I stare after her for a second. She’s still taking this too easily, and it hasn’t settled well with me. I keep waiting on the inevitable fall-out, and the suspense is killing me.

“Why did you let her grow up without telling her anything about who she is? Even if just to let her know she wasn’t completely alone? We all have nests, packs, covens, dens…among other things. There’s a reason for that. Gypsies drift together, Marta. It’s in our blood.”

She exhales harshly, her steps slowing, as she turns around to face me.

I expect a self-righteous tirade that tells me nothing, but she gives me a tight smile, as she opens her bag and starts walking back toward me.

“When Violet was born, she was born without a heartbeat,” she tells me quietly, while she pulls out some sort of magazine. “I knew immediately what she was just by her mannerisms. At least, I did once I’d researched Tom’s tree. It took me a solid year to find ties, but I found them. A bastard son of a bastard’s son started a new thread of Neoprys straight from the original line. Though, clearly not from any of the immortal branches.”

“But how did she end up immortal if—”

“The perfect storm happened,” she carries on, grimacing. “Tom Carmine and

the *other* Marta Portocale were in the throes of passion, because he was the first man she grabbed at a bar on a bad night. Drugs had been unkind to her heart, and it went out just as they…"

She lets the words trail off, rolling her eyes and clearing her throat.

"I gypsy-hopped into her body and absorbed all her memories, just as the final beat sent an ER machine into a buzzing frenzy I'll never forget. On paper, it seemed to be a *miracle* that my heart started beating all on its own. Poor Tom was traumatized. It was his first one-night-stand. He thought he'd been the luckiest guy ever, even though he was just her random pick of the evening. He was waiting with roses and *Get Well* balloons when I came out."

Her jaw grinds like she doesn't want to share this, and I have no idea why she is.

"The honest truth?" she asks.

"If you're capable of it," I counter.

"I've gotten good at giving honest answers," she states with a shrug. "The *other* Marta had conceived before I took over," she carries on, her look immediately softening. "It came as a shock, to say the least, when I discovered I had a child inside of me. She had no heartbeat inside a womb that started dying and deteriorating the moment I took over, but she continued to grow. I had to find some very outrageous, somewhat alarmingly open-minded physicians. After she was born, her heart began to beat slowly, as she became aware of her surroundings."

She clears her throat and tugs at her collar.

"Understandably, I was baffled by the whole ordeal, but felt too blessed to look a gift horse in the eye too closely. I was a mother again," she says, her voice lowering to a rasp that forces her to clear her throat again before continuing.

"I took over Marta's life—the parts I wanted, anyway. While I studied her, assessing who and what she was—along with what she was capable of—I lived as that version of Marta Portocale, and prepared my daughter for her future, without ruining her entire childhood with the daunting reality that awaited her."

Her eyes find mine and turn darker as she hands me the magazine. I take it, but warily keep my eyes on her.

“Not too terribly long ago, her head came off, and I knew what it meant when she woke up with it sewn back on. She was officially immortal. It only made sense. Because immediately after, her obsession with old, black-and-white monster films tripled. She started visiting ‘haunted’ towns and watching independently made monster films in parks, cemeteries, and anywhere else they’d have public screenings.”

I glance down at the magazine that has all sorts of stars on a map, and one is in the middle of Shadow Hills.

“It was on her travel possibilities. Imagine my horror,” she tells me on a humorless laugh. “She went to various other towns without my knowledge. She even landed in the middle of Everly Falls for a Dracula marathon screening.”

My eyebrows go up, and she nods.

“Yes, Dorian’s home. *My* heart stopped when I heard that, but she fortunately decided against it, because it was too far away. She didn’t want to fly. Her obsession and fixation on finding out what *her* monster was capable of became a very big goal of hers…before and after her head came off. I told her to never let that happen. She finally got to change her bloody name as a result.”

That last part makes no sense to me, but it’s the least important of all she’s said.

All of these towns that are marked are towns with immortals. Even though she didn’t know, she still knew where she belonged.

“I went there for the exact same all-night werewolf movie marathon,” Damien states idly, pointing at one star that has been marked as *“visited,”* as he shoves by me. “Visited my miserable younger brother who didn’t come out of his room the entire time.”

Marta and I both glare at him, as he continues to point to the town like we don’t know which younger brother he’s referring to.

Amos Morpehous.

“I wonder if I just didn’t notice her scent then,” he adds like he’s confused. “I should have.”

Marta bristles, and my eyes narrow more on her, as she shrugs like she’s not concerned.

“She never got to bond with any of Tom’s family, because I knew it’d hurt her to know they’d one day be irrelevant. She hasn’t made meaningful attachments, because Violet knows she can only keep so many things. It’s hard work to carry everything around. You have to be certain it’s worth it.”

I’m not sure if she’s trying to confuse us when she smiles like she’s recalling fond memories. Her smile steadily falls, as her gaze comes out of lala land and goes flat.

“She’s too good for all of you *combined*. She doesn’t understand the weight of so many centuries of baggage. She’s too young for now to fully comprehend what that means.”

She shrugs a careless shoulder as she turns and walks away once again, leaving me with the magazine like she’s been carrying it around for a moment like this.

Typical Marta—giving unimportant information wrapped in a dazzling package.

“She’s too good for all of us,” she adds so quietly I almost miss it. “She just doesn’t know it yet.”

The second she’s almost out of sight, Damien turns to face me, eyebrows furrowed.

“She’s not telling us something,” Damien states like he’s worried I’m too stupid to pick up on that.

“It’s Marta Portocale. When she tells you something small, it’s to distract you from something bigger,” I state flatly. “We’ve lived too long for her to change that much.”

I glance back at the house, and Damien makes another sound.

“Dorian and Emily are both overly interested in Violet,” I tell him quietly.

“Just as Zuela was.”

“She’s unique. We’ve lived long enough to notice as much. Dorian circled her like prey, I pissed *my* circle around her to mark my territory, and he walked away. Haven’t been bothered by him since,” Damien states dismissively.

“You haven’t bothered to *deal with him* either,” I point out.

He arches an eyebrow at me. “Also a bit like the pot-to-the-kettle thing. Dorian’s not my problem if all your mutinies aren’t *a big deal*.”

“It’s too close to the full moon for you to be a prick,” I caution.

“Bullshit. The moon is ages away. You just don’t want Violet knowing you really yelled at her while of sound mind, and the moon is your overused scapegoat for all the things you do too aggressively.”

“You yelled at her too.”

“Of course I did,” he says with a roll of his eyes. “She was drawing the attention of Zuela fucking Van Helsing. Now he just thinks she’s a joke, and that’s her own doing. She wasn’t wearing that fucking dress before she came out here. How’d she know he likes cigars? *Why* did she know that?”

I spot Leiza from the upstairs window, as she darts her head down. I’d wager all my omegas know such things. Since when do my omegas get involved in politics of any kind?

“She listened to others who knew all about him, because omegas don’t fight unless they’re backed into a corner,” I answer distractedly. “Omegas woo alphas.”

Damien scrubs a hand over his face.

“She was ridiculous on purpose, which is why she never even really got defensive. She *wanted* the attention on her, just like Marta said,” I add, even though he’s deduced as much by now.

“She really needs to stop *protecting* us from fights with other alphas. She’s confusing war with alpha-ness stuff,” he grumbles.

Alpha-ness stuff?

I don’t even repeat the gibberish. I simply give him a questioning look.

“You know what I bloody mean, wolf,” he says, distractedly, as he peers through the window.

“Should I be concerned that there’s a tie hanging around her forehead and that she’s now wearing a tuxedo that’s too big for her?” Damien asks, drawing my attention to where Violet has moved on to dancing on a table with Tiara.

Tiara’s in a bridal gown that is a little small for her shoulders and not fully zipped.

Simpletons are chanting both of their names like they can’t figure out who to root for. I’m not sure what the fucking hell the goal of this ridiculousness is.

“Maybe we should have invited the Simpletons into all our alpha meetings after all. We might have avoided more wars if they’d sucked the tension right out of the air with this nonsense,” I finally say, shaking my head, as I pull out my phone.

“What are you doing?” he asks me.

“Proving to Arion that my wolves are closer to her than his beta, before I up my game.”

“He’s already surpassed you. You’re at the back of the pack,” he says as I smirk at the screen, zooming in on Violet’s smile. “Pun intended,” he adds as though he’s attempting to provoke me.

I keep the clip short, just to piss them off that they’re not here to see it, because I feel like being a dick. I don’t get to punch Zuela in the face or wreck any of his precious, handmade stained glass, so this is almost like a consolation prize of sorts.

“Until now, I had one foot in and one foot out. It kept me in as much trouble as Arion. Now I know what I need to do.”

“Oh tell me, wise wolf, what great epiphany did you just have?” he asks in a flat, condescending tone.

My fist slams into his smug face before he even has time to register it, and he curses as he staggers back, cupping his nose.

“You fucking barbarian!” he shouts, gesturing between us, as he covers his

bloodied nose with one hand and glares at me. “This is why we can’t hang out. You have violent fits like Vance and Arion to soothe your hostile insecurities. I give people fucking great orgasms. You bring pain.”

“I’d apologize, but Zuela left me riled, so that felt too good to be sorry about,” I say with an unapologetic shrug. “I’m sure I owed it to you since the last time I did it.”

He pauses like he’s thinking. “Nope. But I’ll get a free pass when I do deserve it,” he decides.

I gesture to him. “*This* is why we don’t *hang out.*”

CHAPTER 3

ARION

I flip back to the clip Emit just sent, as I sling green goop off my rusty heap of metal that *was* a masterful Van Helsing sword seconds ago. Vance, the bastard, knew the exact amount of swings I'd take. I don't even get to save just one last strike for a later date.

"Your focus is too sharp, and I don't like it," I inform him.

"Thought my focus was a thing of beauty, Arion," he states absently, as his knights finish helping all the freshly turned, and the unturned, out to start cleaning up the mess.

"Your job sucks. Why do we have to do it right now?" I ask him as I step over another green pile of sludge.

"Because civilians were caged, Arion. Remember being human for just a brief second, while I try and figure out why in the hell Violet wants to transport all the Simpletons to Shadow Hills."

"Idun will put them underfoot, regardless, so we may as well bring them on over," I note aloud.

"I'm not in a hurry to make things easier for Idun," he reminds me.

"Push her on every little thing, and she just pushes back harder. Save your strength, Van Helsing. Play this game my way. Also, give Violet what she wants, because she won't like how often we have to cater to Idun. It's best to not rile the one we want over the one we want to carefully detach from," I tell him as the last of the knights leave us alone with the final shapeshifter of the evening.

Clearly he knows he's dead by this point. We're discussing far too much in front of him. Not to mention he essentially broke all the human laws Vance has.

That little lip-quiver proves he's self-aware.

"Unlike you, I already detached long, *long* ago. Tell me why you're so

confident," Vance says as his hands go to his hips. "I swear to take it to my grave if you just tell me why you truly believe you can control Idun."

"Take care of that shifter while I go ensure there aren't any lingering ears," I grind out, gesturing toward the doorways. "I no longer trust our noses, since Marta Portocale shot arrows through us from the very next room."

"To be fair, her scent is unnaturally wrong and weak right now. It makes me worry we're being played," he answers like he's read my mind a few times.

"We need Emit and Damien to find Demetria, who just so happens to be in the same area as Violet is now," I carry on, trying really damn hard to remain calm…because now would be a terrible time to lose my temper. "Tell me Demetria isn't playing us and pretending to be Marta Portocale, because I'm certain that woman is most definitely not Idun. As for the confidence, I have something valuable…that I can't discuss until I search this place."

Vance's eyes flick to mine. "I believe Marta Portocale is who she says she is. No one is here, besides him, and he's about to die," he tells me, gesturing to the sniveling man on the ground. "Speak freely, Arion."

The guy chokes on his sobs. *"P-please don't kill me. I serve Idun faithfully,"* he cries.

"You fed from children. Even *I* find that abhorrent. The more whimpering you do, the longer your death will take," I point out, hoping Vance lets me take out all my frustration on this one.

Violet will overlook me brutally torturing one who fed from kids. With any luck, it may even turn her on to know how ruthless I was with this one, considering his offenses.

My lips curve up, and the shifter bloody pisses himself, forcing me to stop breathing so I don't have to soil my lungs with the foul stench.

Just for that, I'm going to stretch him out by his limbs and then run some of my biochemically engineered pencils through him, while sawing off pieces he's most attached to. Should be a splendid evening for me.

"Stop thinking of all the ways you're going to torture him and speak freely,"

Vance says, cutting through all my fun fantasies. “Otherwise, I’m going to kill him quickly and deny you the reward for your assistance.”

Looking away from the shifter I can’t fully decide how I want to kill, I pull my small, time-consuming painting from my jacket pocket and hand it over to him.

He glances down, frowning. “Why does a portrait of Idun’s face answer my question?”

“It’s actually Idun’s neck that will answer your question,” I state flatly.

“A purple necklace?”

“I couldn’t quite capture the beauty of it, because it looked very easy to replicate, yet turned out to prove impossible to achieve. It annoys me still,” I prattle on in my tangent. “But yes, a purple necklace. That necklace was gifted to Caroline by Pandora. Idun liked it so much she took it for herself. Blessed by Pandora, this necklace was actually a way to channel the power of her hope.”

He cants his head, almost like he’s now recognizing the necklace Idun never wanted painted on her, never wishing to call attention to it.

“What?” he asks coldly. “What do you mean? This fucking thing allowed her to channel her hope’s power?!”

“You’re getting angry. I’ll stop talking and you won’t hear the best part, if you continue to get angry. This is why we can’t have honesty,” I point out.

His eyes narrow.

“It would have been nice to know she was extorting a powerful fucking necklace that Pandora herself had gifted Caroline, Arion.”

“Pandora was a fool for believing Caroline could keep it a secret,” I say with a careless shrug. “Caroline was a fool for constantly trying to make Idun like her.”

“Caroline was mentally destroyed and physically disfigured by Idun. I know you’re insane, but understand that Caroline will likely be a very heated topic with Violet. Try to remember how to seem more sympathetic, because I don’t think Violet will understand how genuinely impossible it is for you to conjure an

absent emotion," he cautions.

I make a mental note of that. I'm almost positive I can mock sympathy.

"Anyway, I'm telling you now, as a true gesture of my intentions," I go on, watching his offensive stance ease just slightly. "I can't tell you things if we're going to fight about them all individually, and I can't remain neutral if I tell you too much. Just know I'm a wealth of information, and it's best if I remain an equal member."

"Stop negotiating, Arion, and please fucking tell me that you have this necklace in a vaulted, secure location that bitch can't find."

"I'm the only one who knows its location, since I'm paranoid enough to be worried that freak Demetria would pry into any beta's mind and find it too easily," I say on a tired sigh. "It would have been nice to find a way to kill off Idun's favorite, before she dug her way up. You had a thousand years to track her down, Van Helsing."

He glares at me.

"If Demetria harms Violet—"

"Quit being dramatic and tell me you know for certain that necklace is untraceable. Stick to the important things like that," he cuts in.

"It's untraceable. I hid it from her once just to test the theory."

"Who paid for that crime?" he asks me, eyes narrowing to slits. "Certainly not you, I assume."

"Why does it matter? You said to stick to the important things."

"You don't understand that it will be important to Violet if ever it becomes relevant to her. Violet is like a new beacon for omegas from all groupings, and even your favorite beta, who we both know is only as good as she is because you helped her cheat her way into her spot. Does Violet know why you did that, Mr. Loyal and Faithful?"

I glare over at him.

"I'm being generous by sharing this information, and you're threatening me with private information, Van Helsing."

He blows out a frustrated breath.

“I’ve only ever seen Shera as a sister, regardless of the nostalgia her appearance recreated. It just left me with a soft spot for her, but everything else stayed *very soft* as well, if you must know. And though I wasn’t tempted by Shera, I’m still a sliver of man, prick. I’ve found women attractive and even alluring. But mild temptation is different from surrender,” I tell him, bristling when he continues staring directly at me.

His bloody lips twitch like he’s just won.

Son of a bitch.

The amusement in his eyes is so immediate that it catches me off guard, and I end up battling a stupid smile.

“You baited me into that confession, even though it’s completely off topic, for a reason, didn’t you?” I guess.

His own lips struggle to stay pressed in a thin line. He gives one shrug of his shoulder.

“What was the bet? Who desperately wanted to know if I’d ever fucked Shera?” I ask, lifting an eyebrow. “And how very immature of you to use this moment to cash in on whatever that sad bet was.”

“It was just a small wager, Arion. One placed out of boredom between Emit and I, after I had to bloody his face up a bit for slacking on a border issue. Shera caught our attention, since she was the only beta you’d ever personally trained, especially since she looked far too similar to you know who. Don’t worry. You’ll thank me when I cash in.”

I don’t like it when Vance smiles like that. I hope it’s pointed toward Emit and not me.

“Back to the important matter, since life may hang in the balance and all,” I carry on, finding it unnerving to be the one forcing the serious topic. “The necklace wasn’t the only reason she was so strong, but it did play a significant role. Without it, she may be able to lift a curse, but she won’t be able to inflict one. She’ll lose some of her heaviest threats.”

He leans forward, brow furrowing. “Even without you aligned with us, we’d likely be able to handle her, if she doesn’t have curses in her back pocket.”

“Precisely,” I say with my own dark smile. “Not to mention all her weaknesses I can extort, if she crosses any lines regarding Violet. Violet is safe, and so is my favorite beta. Emily will have to fend for Isiah.”

He stares, not saying a word or making an expression for several long minutes, likely processing the severity of such well-kept secrets.

“When it comes to war, how significant will the loss of that necklace be? How much will that turn the tide?” he murmurs almost absently.

I can see the wheels of war already brewing in his Van Helsing mind.

“It won’t come to war, Van Helsing. And I’ll keep all the other details to myself, if you plan on using me against her like she used me against you.”

“You act as though she’ll give us a choice. We *forced* her underground, Arion. She didn’t go down willingly. Nadine nor the other skin walkers went down willingly. This is going to get ugly the second they begin rehydrating. It’s all Idun’s waiting for. And the very first weakness she’ll attack is the one we set ourselves up for—Violet. She’ll ruin her if we don’t stand together. For fuck’s sake, wake up, *Vampyre!”*

He pants for air in the otherwise silent room. In a span of moments, he went from believing the three of them could handle her, to trying to bully me into taking a side.

“This is why I turned on Idun enough to chase after the first woman to tempt my curiosity. I was a man of iron faith, who never strayed from his values or beliefs, in spite of the many times you three tried to tempt me with the darker pieces of the world,” I tell him, perching up next to the still-sobbing shifter on the ground. “As a soulless immortal, I have a different moral compass and view of the world, but still, I could never be tempted from my path. Violet tempted me like nothing and no one, aside from Idun, has ever tempted me before.”

I leave out the bits about being forced to watch them agonize over my punishment for a full century. Even as Emit hated me with all his might, he also

hated himself for putting me under.

“Idun tempted me into the darkness. I was a man who chose my own fate. I may have voted against the altar, but I chose not to be left behind. In the end, I chose all of you and Idun. Violet is a much more satisfying center, and I love the ways she tempts me. I love it far too much.”

He scrubs a hand over his face when I smirk.

I gently take the portrait back from him, feeling the fine threads of the canvas brush over my fingers.

“You all played Idun’s game every time you went on the attack,” I tell him, as I take the rusty sword and find the sharpest edge. “I learned from your *many* mistakes what I’d do differently if ever I stopped caring for her. Do you honestly think I’d leave room for error?”

He simply stares at me for a moment, hesitance shining in his eyes. After a beat, he finally answers me.

“I think Idun has played you the worst, and you’ve still been unable to see it, even as you claim you’re ready to let her go,” he says somberly. “And I think I dread the day you realize just how unpredictable she can be, when it’s you she crosses with not one single ounce of compassion.”

I say nothing. He keeps using what I say against me, and if I punch him right now, we’re going to really fight. The tension’s in the air. Idun’s too close to risk that right now. Not when I still need to set the new rules.

My phone chimes with a message, and I click open the short clip of our very drunk little monster climbing atop a table, dressed like a man. I’ve never found men’s clothing lewd until this moment.

“We can have this debate at another time, Van Helsing. Damien and Emit are getting a drunk, partying, fun Violet all to themselves, while we do all the work. I’d like to get this wrapped up as soon as possible.”

The head of our private, one-person audience drops to the ground, as a few drops of blood fly from Vance’s quick-swinging sword. I pretend I saw that coming, mostly because I didn’t realize how low my guard had gotten.

“As you wish, Vampyre. Do me a favor and start the fire,” he says with mock casualness, as he strolls out.

“You’re a complete asshole,” I call to his back, glaring at the dead body. “Torture is only fun when they’re still alive.”

The bastard laughs under his breath.

I glance back down at the newest video Emit has sent of Violet. This one is different. This one is just her smiling, as some of the Simpleton women gather around her, while she turns on a movie.

Dracula scrolls across the screen, and I groan aloud, pocketing my phone, as I roll my bloody eyes and head toward the exit.

I pause on my way out, smelling something so muted I almost miss it. A small, ticking, barely recognizable heartbeat hits my ears, followed by another, slightly more subtle one. The now dead shifter’s heart was racing and pounding so loudly it must have masked these two.

With stealth and quickness, I move to the wall, hearing one heart beating faster, as the other stays a steady, quiet pace.

The stone wall bleeds into a wooden paneled one off to the side, and I finger the edges of it, before ripping it back. A woman’s scream dies when the tip of the rusty blade touches her throat.

Her eyes are wide, as her heartbeat only drives up, not slowing down. “I knew better than to trust my nose. Too much shifter blood on the ground to spot one so close by,” I tell her, checking the little hidden cubby, but only seeing her.

“P-p-p-p-please don’t. I s-s-wear I didn’t hear anything.”

“Of course you heard something, or you wouldn’t say that,” I tell her dismissively. “If you’d wanted to live, you’d have come out when we were sifting through victims and offenders. Only offenders hide. How quickly you die depends on how fast you tell me who the other heartbeat belongs to and where I might find them. Save me some time, and I’ll save you some pain—”

My words get lost in my throat when my eyes drop to where her hands are cradling a barely-there bump that is bare to see, since her top is merely a scrap of

dirty fabric that stretches across her breasts.

“They were g-going to take my baby. I just want to keep my baby safe, and shifters are hated by vampires and Van Helsings alike—so I hid out of natural instinct. P-please. I swear I won’t say anything. I have no reason to. I’m not a loyalist to the cause, and until I was stolen from my house, I’ve never once interacted with any other shifters.”

My eyes stay on her belly, as the small heartbeat ticks again.

“Bloody hell,” I groan in frustration, as I run a hand through my hair.

“Arion, are you fucking coming or—”

Vance stops, eyes widening when he comes back in. Her heartbeat is louder now, and so is the child’s.

“You’re quite the thorn in our sides now, aren’t you?” I ask her as she stays tucked in the cubby, while I back my blade up a few healthy inches.

“She’s of no consequence. Only offenders hide when a Van Helsing sifts through victims and offenders,” Vance states dismissively.

“Told ya,” I quip, staring at the trembling woman, who reeks of fear.

“Kill her and the other, and be done with this,” Vance states, already distracted by his phone.

“And he thinks he’s less of a monster than I am,” I tell her with a broad grin, even as the pit of my stomach sours.

We really don’t need this fucking problem on our hands right now, of all times.

The woman whimpers, but tries to hold it back, since she likely remembers the threat I made to the last person who whimpered in the room.

“Quit drawing it out, Arion. We have shit to do.”

“If Violet would be upset with me for some tedious oversights in the past, she’s going to hate you for that call,” I decide to inform him.

I drop the blade and drag the woman out, as she cries out in surprise—not pain. Vance’s eyes immediately widen on her stomach.

“The *other* heartbeat is coming from inside her, Van Helsing.”

I don’t kill babies. He knows I have rules against that.

“If you’ll just let me live long enough to have the baby…that’s all I ask,” she goes on, eyes filling up with tears.

“Completely new paradigm we find ourselves in, eh?” I ask Vance tightly.

“Fuck my night,” Vance says as he scrubs a hand over his face.

“Demetria would crack her skull like an egg,” I remind him. “We’ve said an awful lot that beta could easily pry out of this one’s mind.”

He starts to say something, but his phone rings.

“It can’t be more important than this, Van Helsing, so don’t—”

“Yes?” he says into the phone, turning his back on me.

I glance over at the shifter, who is avoiding my eyes as she trembles.

“He never listens to a thing I say and wonders why I make his life harder than it has to be,” I tell her with a tired sigh.

“Are you busy right now, or in a life-and-death situation?” comes Violet’s voice over the line.

“Ah,” I say to the shifter, nodding in understanding now. “I would have answered too.”

Vance darts an annoyed look in my direction, and heaves out a breath, as he glances over at the pregnant shifter we can’t kill.

“Do you need something?” he asks Violet in a non-answering sort of way.

“I actually need to know about that really old hotel in the middle of town. It’s the rundown building you bought a long time ago and never did anything with. Leiza was telling me about it.”

We both blink.

“She does this on purpose just to confuse us. She has the most random things come out of her mouth during really critical moments like this,” I inform the terrified shifter. “We’re not going to kill you. Relax your heartbeat before you somehow hurt the child.”

The woman goes limp almost immediately, and I barely catch her before she crashes to the floor when she faints. Given the weak scent and fainting spell, it’s

likely she's truly an omega.

Violet really fucking loves omegas. Damn this night.

"What about the hotel, Violet?" Vance asks with a little impatience.

"If you're not going to do anything with it, I was wondering if I could buy it from you."

Another round of blinks.

"If you want the hotel, you can have it. I was going to use it as a neutral location, but never got around to it," he tells her.

"It'll still be neutral. Promise. But I have to buy it. I'd feel indebted to you otherwise. And I know the fair cost based on Tiara's research—"

"You don't sound drunk," Vance notes.

"I'm not drunk. I haven't had a drink."

Now I want to watch those videos again with that new knowledge, because no one can be that shamelessly ridiculous while sober.

"Can I buy it from you or is it too important?" she goes on.

"It's not too important, but I don't want your money. You won't have enough for a fair offer, simply due to the location."

"Sounds interesting," I butt in. "Know what else is interesting?"

I dramatically gesture to the pregnant debacle we still have on our hands.

He sighs harshly.

"I have the money. I have enough in my bank account for that, and I won't even have to dig any up," she tells him, causing me to shake my head, as I stare up at the ceiling.

Priorities are a bit fickle these days, because I thought she was struggling with her finances just a few months ago. This girl…

Vance essentially says aloud what I'm thinking. "When you first came to town, you couldn't even hire a delivery person. Now you suddenly have enough money to—"

"The money is/*was* my late grandmother's money, so I've been saving it. She was loaded because she invented some sort of really popular toothbrush design,

so I have plenty of money. You don’t just sink a ton of money into a new business. You work it up until it’s paying for itself so it doesn’t become a financial drain.”

Vance opens his mouth, then closes it, and then opens again.

“That’s why you made toothpaste,” he says like he’s solved a very important puzzle.

“It definitely gave me the idea,” she states as the music in the background gets louder for a second, before dulling again, as though someone has left or entered the room she’s in.

“Whenever someone asks you about it, you always say how you came to make toothpaste isn’t an interesting story,” he argues.

“Took five seconds for you to figure it out on your own from one sentence. I don’t think that constitutes it as being very interesting,” she deadpans. “Can I buy the hotel for my new tribe?”

Vance releases a breath, as he continues to stare at the downed shifter.

“You can’t keep them, Violet,” he tells her gently. “They belong to Idun, and she’ll have it no other way.”

“I’ve got all that covered. Can I buy it or not?”

“Of course you can buy it. I want to give it to you. But you can’t—”

“Mary is going to send over the formal paperwork via email and get a date set for the closing. Thank you,” she says sweetly. “And be careful while hunting Idun.”

She hangs up after that, and Vance stares down at his phone.

“This day just keeps getting worse. Violet’s already too attached to them,” he groans.

“We’ll deal with that later. What about the pregnant shifter who knows too damn much?” I ask him, my patience fraying.

He pauses like a thought has just occurred to him. “You always carry around a portrait of Idun in your pocket?”

Un-fucking-believable. He’s so distracted and unfocused that his mind can’t

stay trained on the problem at hand.

“I carry around a portrait of the *necklace*. Did you not hear me when I said how hard it was to even get the stone’s impossibly-hard-to-recreate-details that close? And the portrait is damage-proof to withstand time, so it’s not as though I could hack her face off like a lovesick pup after a hard break.”

His phone rings again, while the woman in the floor remains unattended.

“Violet?” he asks into the phone, turning his back on me again.

“Yeah, me again. Sorry. But this time I do need an actual favor, since you’re the pilot with all the girl-named planes. I sort of need to get a lot of people overseas. Is it okay if I call your hangar and work something out?”

“Idun will nest in Shadow Hills, so it’s not like they won’t be coming over anyway,” I remind him, since he wanted to argue this earlier.

“Yes. Of course,” he tells her all too easily, despite his earlier objections. “Pay me in apples for that one.”

I’m starting to think he can’t deny her directly. The prideful Van Helsing is fucking whipped. I’ll mock him for it later, and settle for grinning about it now.

“I’m going to need to save my apples for now, but I have something you’ll appreciate.”

“If it’s lacy and black, I’m in for that one as well. Dibs on the Devil’s three-way this time,” I tell him very seriously.

He gestures to the pregnant shifter’s belly, giving me a silencing look.

“It’s not like *it* knows what I’m saying,” I dutifully inform him.

And I thought Emit was stupid.

Vance pinches the bridge of his nose briefly, something he does when someone is irritating him, before returning his attention to the phone call.

“Violet, anything you want to trade is perfectly good with me. I have a bit of a mess to clean up. If you need more, have Leiza call Avery and set it up,” he tells her a little distractedly, as he kneels in front of the woman.

“O…kay. Sorry. Be careful out there.”

The line goes dead again, and he lowers the phone.

“How far along would you say she is?” he asks.

“She’s a little on the small side, so the size of that bump would lead me to roughly estimate twenty weeks, give or take a few.”

“Then Shera has a new prisoner to attend for another twenty or so weeks,” he decides.

I almost want to groan. “She’s going to hate me for this one. She hates shifters worse than wolves.”

My phone rings this time, and I answer just to be a dick to Vance, hoping Violet’s calling me from Emit’s phone.

“If this is really you, wolf, make it worth my time.”

“Damien is going to stay with Violet. I’m on my way to meet you right now.”

“What? Did something fucking happen?” I ask, nervousness catching me by surprise.

“I just decided three hunters are better than two, and the sooner you prove you can make good on your promise, the sooner I’ll be able to actually focus on Violet, without all the distractions Idun brings with her head games.”

“Damien can’t protect her for shit on his own,” I remind him.

“Van Helsing knights started showing up an hour ago after Leiza called Avery to schedule a plane.”

“An hour ago? Violet *just* asked me for the plane,” Vance says as he pinches the bridge of his nose again. “What the hell is going on over there?”

“She’s young, stubborn, and impatient. Don’t ask. Just focus on finding Idun so we can get out ahead of this for once,” Emit says before hanging up.

“What the hell does he think we’re doing?” Vance asks like he’s offended.

“We’re dealing with the mess you make when you don’t check for prying ears,” I remind him, since this is clearly all his fault.

“Like you would have checked behind a wall.” His dry tone is coupled with a condescending look.

The woman between our feet groans as she starts to wake up, and all our attention returns to her. She blinks a few times, startling as she takes in her

surroundings. Then her eyes widen in remembrance, and fear draws her stiff, just as her eyes collide with my chest, never lifting any higher.

“Welcome back,” I tell her with a cold smile. “Congratulations. Instead of dying, you’re about to be my personal prisoner.”

The entire room chills, and she aptly trembles. She’s old enough to fear me. Smart omega.

CHAPTER 4

VIOLET

“How long until they rehydrate?” I ask Tiara, mostly to take my mind off the very horrifying second flight of my life, in which Vance was not the pilot.

My legs are still unsteady, and Bobo is carrying Flem, because Flem passed out during the first bit of turbulence. At least there was no lightning nor plane crash this time.

Avery personally charted our flight plan to account for a plane full of conductors. Then he flew us. Then he led the convoy of SUVs to the hotel. Now he’s wheeling my bag for me like I can’t do that myself, as he follows me inside.

“He’s always quiet like this when he’s on duty,” Leiza says from beside me, eyeing the man I swear could second as a facial statue. “I love the strong, silent, silver foxes.”

She makes a little growl in her throat, and his lips finally twitch.

“Glad to see you’re human, Avery,” I tell him, only making those lips move subtly again.

I glance around at the grand foyer, which has a lot of little side rooms that could serve as stores if we knocked down a few walls.

“Van Helsing knights have the option of picking the immortal they want to be if they decide to take the plunge,” Leiza says as she moves closer to him. “Silver *wolves* are much hotter than silver foxes.”

“I’m sure they are, Ms. Tine. I’m planning to stay human, though,” he informs her very respectfully, as though she’s more than an omega.

I swing my gaze back to him, finding him at a militant stance, while he stares straight ahead, dressed in all tactical gear like Vance wears on a hunt. Apparently it’s just a uniform for them, because we got a full escort by very silent men, who all dressed the same.

“Is it still a rule that you have to leave your pack if you want a Van Helsing knight?” Leiza purrs from behind him, as she stares at his ass.

Thankfully, he seems like he’s used to this.

“Since last I checked, Ms. Tine. Which was last month when you asked the same question.”

This shouldn’t be more interesting than the hotel, but this is a refreshing first. People…who don’t snarl at my wolves.

“When will you check again?” she asks, smiling broader.

“When I’ve finished my shift for the night and have a first-officer present to relieve me.”

She struts away from him, apparently satisfied by that answer, and he darts a look to her ass for the barest of seconds, so quickly I almost miss it, as he smirks again.

When his face goes stoic once more, I realize the moment of distraction is over, and I step over the threshold and into…the semi-damaged guts of the home.

“The wiring is outdated and needs to be brought up to code,” Tiara states from the kitchen.

Okay, so I knew it’d be a little bad.

“The ceiling will need to be replaced as soon as possible,” Mary yells down from the top of the fifth and final floor.

Okay, so it’s worse than a little bad, because that’s a *whole lot* of ceiling.

“Is Dad here yet?” I ask Avery.

“He is, madam. He’s been busying himself all day with the calculations, if you want them,” he says almost regretfully.

“Yeah, whatever those calculations are, tell Vance I’m deducting it from what I’m paying him,” I murmur absently, as Lemon squeaks out a sound of surprise, and a chunk of the balcony from the second floor drops to the ground. “He may end up having to pay me for taking this off his hands,” I add flatly.

“Going to need a *lot* of new windows,” Leiza informs me…from somewhere.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve got it,” I grumble, feeling almost cheated, even though I begged for this.

“I’m sure Sir Van Helsing would appreciate hearing that directly from you. He’s been trying, rather unsuccessfully, to reach you for the past two days,” Avery reminds me.

“He told me to forward all my questions to you because he was busy, and now I’m a little too busy for him to tell me I can’t do this.” I dart a dubious look toward him. “Are you going to tell me I can’t do this?”

He fights a smile, as he gives one shake of his head. “The law says you can.”

“I bet you actually know more about the law than Vance. Can I pick your brain about some things later and you keep it between us? Or is that a really disrespectful request that puts you in a bad position?”

Martha, the tallest woman I’ve ever met in real life, chooses that moment to go riding through the foyer on a pink bike with a little bell, smiling broadly as she honks the horn. I’m worried about what stiff, dead thing she’s found with black fur to carry around in the front basket…

Even Avery just stares for a second, as she rides on through, disappearing around the corner.

“It’s…fine. I’m on your service until Sir Van Helsing returns,” he assures me, distractedly, when Blubber—I can’t seem to get too many real names from this bunch—squeals in excitement, as he zooms by on a hover board.

“Wheeeeeeeee!” he squeals, expertly turning the same corner as Martha just did.

“Am I supposed to call you Sir Avery?” I ask.

“It’s not a formality used outside of the men under me,” he says, eyebrows hitting his hairline when Felipe comes racing through on a unicycle with a diaper strapped to his head.

Felipe stops, stares at us for a second, as he chomps on what sounds like rubber gum, and then starts blowing a bubble, as he drives off like there’s nothing to see. My eyes widen in slight horror when I realize he’s not chewing

gum and blowing just any bubble. It's a condom. Felipe has a condom in his mouth. How did he—

Shera snorts, drawing my attention, her shoulders shaking with silent laughter, as she runs away from the third floor balcony like she's trying to hide from me. Unbelievable.

"You're going to have to work harder to keep a straight face around here, Sir Avery," I state dryly.

He wipes his smile away with one hand, but it stays in his eyes, as he darts an amused look my way.

"Construction is going to be interesting," I say as a chandelier drops straight down.

We both hop away just as it crashes to the ground, and glass sprays, as the crash echoes through the hollow halls.

Avery clears his throat and lazily moves back into his militant stance. "Demolition might be just as effective, madam."

I move my head from side to side, looking at the new mess of glass blocking the fun train that has come to an abrupt halt. Popeye—*seriously, some real names would be great*—brings his Segway to a screeching stop, frowning at the glass, as he pulls off his oversized sunglasses and drinks from a coconut.

I don't know what's going on anymore. Where did all the toys come from?

"Curious, Sir Avery, did the guys drop off Christmas presents a little early or a little late?"

"They are actually from your mom," Ingrid says from inside the wall next to us, causing Sir Avery to startle and turn a little red. "I love how much space there is in here—I can actually do more than stay in just one spot. Can you rebuild it the same?"

Before I can answer, Dad comes walking down the steps with his hard hat and tool belt, quirking an eyebrow in my direction.

"How long will it take to spruce up the place?" I ask brightly. "It'll replace that job you're losing because of that really stupid thing you did."

He completely ignores my jab, since we're still not talking about all the lies he's told and secrets he's kept.

"Some bones are broken, but the foundation is solid. It's going to take me some time to get a crew out here, though. At least six months or so. May want to hire outside. My guys are staying on the planned job, and my foreman is going to run it," he informs me.

Now he's just being cold. He's also being passive aggressive because I forgot to call and tell him about Mom, and he found out elsewhere.

Family drama is getting a pin shoved in it pretty hard.

"You're going to do the job because you won't trust anyone else to do it, and Ighan is your project foreman. He'll introduce you to your project crew," I tell him as I turn and walk out.

The hairs rise on my neck, as the air almost seems to crackle around me. A loud clanging echoes through the halls, and I whirl around, finding the doors have been blown open.

Feeling eyes on me, my gaze is dragged far across the street, into the park, as if I know exactly where to look.

I connect with a set of piercing blue eyes that are striking, even from this distance, as a familiar face stands out. That crackle of electricity pops in the air, and my breath hitches in my throat.

She stares at me, and I stare back.

For several long seconds, we stay locked in an unwavering stare-down.

Avery sucks in a sharp breath, as though he sees what I see, and from the corner of my eye, I spot him reach for one of the many weapons on his person.

"Don't," I caution, staring ahead at the brunette, who is far more alluring than I could ever be.

"That's—"

"I know," I tell him, exhaling a heavy breath, as a slight whimper sounds from inside the walls, followed by a hushed silence that makes the prickle of awareness that much more intense.

Wearing what looks to be some ritzy, equestrian riding attire, the woman everyone has been dreading the return of stands from her park bench.

It takes me a second to notice I've subconsciously moved outside, standing on the steps. Avery's hand clamps down on my upper arm when I try to walk toward her.

"This is neutral territory. The only way she can lay a hand on you is if you break the law," Avery says to me very, *very* quietly. "Go over there, and she'll guide you off into non-neutral territory so she can hurt you very severely, Ms. Carmine."

"She's not my problem," I tell him, a little unnerved at how perfectly those paintings have portrayed her beauty.

I was sort of hoping they made her look more flawless than she is in real life. If anything, she's possibly more stunning than I realized. Even the death windows haven't done her beauty justice.

He draws his sword as he releases me, and steps in front of me as he says, "Step inside."

If she's stronger than Vance, she's going to murder Avery.

"You step inside. I can't die, Sir Avery," I counter.

He gives me a look that suggests I may have sprouted an extra appendage right out of my forehead.

All his knights quickly move in front of us, taking a defensive stance. It's drawing all kinds of attention from townsfolk who wonder why ninja soldiers are preparing for battle in front of a dilapidating hotel.

I've *just* realized I have to make sense of this place for humans…

Yeah, I'm putting a pin in that, since that's going to take some thinking.

Idun stares for a moment longer, and I finally start ushering the knights back inside.

"In. In. In. We have more important things to do, and she's not our problem," I tell them.

The hair on my neck stays raised, even as I pointedly ignore her and head

back inside.

“She’s not going to attack,” I tell the empty hotel full of people, who’ve taken refuge inside the walls. “Mostly because it’s too predictable, and from what I’ve heard on numerous occasions, she’s not predictable.”

Leiza peeks out from behind the old counter, fully trembling, as her almost wolf-pupiled eyes meet mine, as if simply sensing Idun’s power is *that* terrifying.

Shera drops to my side from above, now fully dressed in her own form-fitting tactical gear that looks a little Selene-from-Underworld-ish.

She’s clutching two things that look like bombs.

“Really?” I ask, restraining a smile as I glance over the tight-fitted leather, and she cuts her gaze to me.

“Not the time for jokes, Violet. She’s—”

“—irrelevant to me,” I interrupt, finishing the sentence for her. “She’s not my problem. She won’t be a problem for anyone here,” I remind her, as I head to the back of the hotel, finding Dad to be the only one undisturbed, as he takes some measurements. “I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Tires squeal and a horn honks somewhere outside.

“You can be anything but naïve, Violet. Closing your eyes doesn’t make the problem go away,” Shera calls to my back, but I flip her off as I keep walking. “She’s our worst problem,” she tacks on like she’s trying to make me understand.

Without turning around, I start helping Dad by writing down the measurements as he calls them out, only saying, “I’m sure the guys are already on their way by now. She’s clearly very much their problem.”

“Can you run upstairs to the third floor and grab my toolbox?” Dad asks me, as he gets on the floor and starts doing something with the unsalvageable tile.

No one acknowledges us, since most everyone is hiding, and Shera’s still waiting behind the line of defense the Van Helsing knights will offer, like she’s the last line of defense for me.

I roll my eyes as I head up the stairs, wondering why he couldn't have left his toolbox on the first floor instead of the third. This is really a lot of stairs.

"And go grab my specs from the fifth floor," Dad calls again, his voice easily carrying. "I'm going to have my guy come out and make blueprints happen."

"The fifth floor?" I yell over the edge of the third floor balcony, shaking my head. "Really?"

He shrugs unapologetically, resuming his tile examination directly after.

Until I reach the top floor, I don't realize the stupidity of lugging the heavy toolbox up the stairs, when I have to lug it right back down after I grab whatever *specs* are.

"Room five-oh-eight," he specifies.

"Stop announcing her location in here step by step," Shera hisses.

"Found them," I shout back down when I find his chicken scratch on yellow legal paper.

In the corner, next to the words *Blueprint Guy,* is a very familiar phone number. I glare at the number, because my Dad is being extra passive aggressive if this is really still Jerome's number. My ex surely can't be his blueprint guy. That would currently be very, *very* bad.

I pause as a breeze rolls through the broken window, chilling me more than it should. I turn, and my breath freezes in my lungs as my eyes land on someone who really shouldn't be here.

"What's wrong, Violet?" *Anna* asks very quietly, smirking. "You look like you've seen a ghost." Her head tilts to the other side as I just gape at her. "You're the one who told me to find a way back."

Everything tumbles from my hands at once.

As I stumble back a step, she grins and adds, "Looks like things are finally getting interesting around here. And you kept a lot of secrets from me."

Anna.

Anna's here.

Anna's back from her second death.

Anna is…here.

“Ditto,” is all I manage to say on a quiet rasp.

CHAPTER 5

VANCE

AVERY: We've just reached the hotel, and I'm about to escort Ms. Carmine inside.

ME: Is her new phone working?

AVERY: Yes, sir.

Then why the bloody hell isn't she answering any of my texts or calls?

"Everything points to her being near, but I can't track her down," I grind out, wiping the blood from my nose, as the migraine from this chase pounds on, stepping into dangerous aneurism territory that will put me down for days I can't afford to lose right now.

"If she were in town, we'd know it. We'd *sense* it," Damien argues as he sits up.

"Has Violet talked to any of you since she left Ireland?" I ask idly, as I wipe more blood from my nose, a byproduct of my latest loop break.

"She's not listening to much reasoning, and she refuses to even hear what a stupid idea it is to essentially set up a House that Idun will destroy or take over," Emit says absently, staring ahead at the wall. "She's so naïve, and Marta isn't stopping her from painting herself a target."

"Marta is still working an angle for Nadine's backing. Her own agenda is more important than Violet. How is that not obvious?" Arion drawls.

All our phones go off at once, a message from Shera. It's oddly a picture of the park across the street from them. Arion is suddenly out of the room, distracting me, as Emit frowns and pulls his phone back out.

“Fucking son of a bitch! Idun’s in front of the hotel,” Damien says as he darts out as well, just as a second image pops up before I can even play the game of finding Idun in the photo.

This picture is of Avery, pulling Violet back, as she just stares over at Idun like she’s simply a curious girl with no motherfucking clue.

“She has lost her fucking mind!” Emit snaps before he jumps to his feet.

The migraine disappears, and the focus goes so sharp in the next instant that I don’t even realize I’m in my car and halfway there, passing Arion’s blur of motion, as I max out my car’s speed for the first time.

It all slows down around me, as I weave in and out of traffic, effortlessly dodging everything. I skid to a halt, before I leap out of the car, leaving it abandoned just off the shoulder.

I ignore the honking horns as I walk across the street, and cars screech to a halt in front of me as I catch my first sight of Idun. She’s still exactly where she was in the image, only she’s taken a seat on the bench now.

Avery darts a worried look in my direction, as I continue *walking* toward her, not trying to raise her hackles.

A thousand years under and she just shows up in front of Violet’s place to sit and wait for us to arrive? Nothing feels right.

A chill rides up my spine, just before Arion is suddenly beside me, breathing a little heavy, as he keeps his eyes trained on her.

She picks at the sleeve on her right arm like she’s waiting for something.

“You can be anything but naïve, Violet. Closing your eyes doesn’t make the problem go away,” I barely hear Shera say. “She’s our worst problem.”

Idun’s eyes finally lift, revealing the cosmic blue that was always her best feature, as the few tendrils of curls fall from her hairpins.

“I’m sure the guys are already on their way by now. She’s clearly very much *their* problem,” we all hear Violet say loud and dismissively.

For fuck’s sake, is she trying to rile her?

Idun makes no expression as she murmurs, “I guess you’ve warned her about

me.”

Certainly an anticlimactic entry line. After a thousand years, I expected something a little bigger to come out of her mouth.

Arion’s eyes narrow on her, both of us trying to figure out this very underwhelming entrance.

I dart a glance to the hotel to find Emit and Damien standing across the street, staring over like they’re taking the second line of defense.

I’m paired with the *neutral* fucking vampire who won’t lay a hand on Idun when she does finally strike. This is about to get ugly.

“Can you run upstairs to the third floor and grab my toolbox?” I hear Tom yelling in the mostly silent household, aside from Violet muttering curses about the expense of an elevator she’s going to get installed.

The gravity of the situation escapes her, and she’s only riling Idun, even though Idun feigns disinterest.

“And go grab my specs from the fifth floor,” Tom shouts like the town needs to hear him. “I’m going to have my guy come out and make blueprints happen.”

He’s the fool who put a stake through Arion’s heart. Obviously he doesn’t understand the severity of this situation.

We wait on Idun to make the first move, and she simply clears her throat, before saying, “Since the gang’s all here, I—”

“The fifth floor?” Violet shouts, cutting Idun off like she can’t believe she has to climb more stairs. “*Really*?” she adds just as loudly.

Idun doesn’t even glance toward the hotel, and seems remarkably unbothered by the interruption. It’s all an act, of course. She always enjoys the added drama of suspense.

“I guess you haven’t made me sound too horrible,” Idun says tightly.

Damien snorts from across the street, and Idun’s eyes lift to glance over at him. I can feel the angry heat of his glare on her from here.

“I know what you all think,” she says when we just remain silent.

“Room five-oh-eight!” Tom shouts abruptly.

Is he really fucking advertising her exact location?

Are all my knights outside? Does anyone fucking have eyes on Violet?

“Stop announcing her location in here step by step,” Shera shouts from a different location than Violet’s voice is.

I try not to make any subtle moves, waiting to hear Violet’s voice again, hoping she makes a sound, as Idun seems to stall.

“I highly doubt you know what we’re thinking at all,” I point out.

“You’re worried about her right now. Worried I have someone in there who’s going to hurt her,” Idun says, actually telling me what’s on my mind.

I fucking hate her.

“Damien is envisioning me dead, when we all know I can’t die, much to your dismay,” she says softly, suspiciously contrite.

Arion’s narrowed eyes only narrow more, as he slowly moves away from me, keeping his gaze warily affixed to her.

“Emit is checking the air to see if his wolves are coming yet, and feeling disappointed that they’re not,” she carries on, likely nailing each one.

“Found them!” Violet says, causing some ease to fill me.

Idun’s eyes move to lock onto Arion’s for the first time, and she just stares at him for a brief second. “And you’re about to leverage my necklace over me to keep me from being the monster none of you want to deal with.”

Her eyes flick from us to the sidewalks, where people are walking through, and she stays seated, as she pensively observes them.

“I don’t want the necklace back,” she says calmly, eyes still on the people who don’t even pay her any attention.

Most of them are more curious about the knights in front of the hotel, who look like security, drawing way too much attention to it.

“Violet, are you bringing my stuff or what?” I hear Tom shout, listening for her response.

“Y-yeah,” I hear her call back, sounding somewhat unnerved. “On my way.”

I glance through the window to see her running a hand through her hair, as

she hurries down the stairs, her lips moving but no sound reaching me, as she seems to speak to someone.

I just catch the one glimpse of her, but never anyone else.

“You don’t want it back?” Arion asks with clear suspicion.

Violet and her father begin to go back and forth, talking about the work that needs to be done…like nothing at all is going on out here.

Emit and Damien draw closer, and Idun gently shakes her head, as she drops her gaze to her lap again.

“I don’t want to see it. Hear about it. Be tempted by it in anyway, Arion. Keep it far away from me. Bury it in or under hell for all I care. I can’t be close to it,” she says as she stands.

I immediately put my hand on my sword, and she grimaces, which is highly unexpected. She loves it when I prepare to fight her.

“I spent longer than a thousand years underground. I’ve served my sentence,” she continues. “I won’t even fight against whatever it is she’s doing right now with my family. So long as that necklace stays far away from me, I’m done.”

She says the words so seriously that I almost stupidly believe them, just because I want it to be true. Life would be grand if it really was this simple.

Emit and Damien cast a narrowed gaze in my direction.

“Just that easily?” Arion drawls.

“Nothing is ever easy with Idun,” Damien states in a bored tone, as he and Emit move in, and we begin to circle her very subtly.

“Sitting directly in front of Violet’s recently purchased home for your power stash of alphas, who can handle nesting that many together, was all to say you’re done playing games?” I muse.

She lets out a tired, humorless laugh.

“It’s not easy to go cold turkey. And don’t think I didn’t spend a few centuries being really creative. But there’s a point when the agony is so fierce that the hold of something as powerful as that necklace suddenly breaks,” she says, her eyes distant like she’s stuck in a memory.

She blinks rapidly and clears her throat, as we tighten the circle just a little, still waiting on whatever nasty shot she's planning to take.

Violet's scent hits me hard, and I dart a quick glance to see her stepping out, stumbling to a clumsy stop when her eyes land on all of us. She looks away in the next instant, and collects a sledgehammer from the ground, after she puts on a hard hat. Without ever looking at us again, she walks back inside.

Idun's eyes level mine when I turn back around, and she gives me a lopsided smile. "I truly don't expect anyone at all to believe me. My House is a rather enormous mess, due to my absence, and I'm referring to the shifters running awry in your very own regions. I've been mending and getting caught up. Demetria will be arriving soon, and I will be setting up here."

"And it starts," Emit scoffs, scrubbing a hand over his face as he laughs humorlessly.

"Nothing is starting. You hated me, and I understand why. After the hold of that damning necklace broke, I felt it all. There's nothing I can do about the horrible past we all share, but I can move forward. I'm not here to torment you. I'm here to coexist and prove myself. No matter how many centuries it takes."

"Unbelievable," Damien mutters as he pinches the bridge of his nose. "Does anyone here believe this rubbish?"

"You know you broke the rules?" Arion asks her like he's genuinely curious, and a sinking feeling collects in my stomach.

"Yes," she says softly toward him. "I know. I don't blame you for finally straying. Knowing I lost you just proves I'm right about the necklace, and that it should be kept away from me. If you can find a way to destroy it, I hope you do."

"In other words, she wants you to get right on that so she can follow you to it and leave you dead for the next twenty-eight years, while she does whatever phase-two of her plan is," I state dryly.

A shadow passes over her eyes, and she looks over at Damien.

"If you want the curse lifted, I'll do it. If you want it to remain so that she's

one of the limited warm bodies you can feed from, I'll do that too."

"How convenient," he spits out.

"I'd have done it at least four hundred years ago if I could have gotten out. I knew you'd leave me under indefinitely, and with your revenge, my entire alpha line would suffer because of me."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Idun. Cut the shite," Damien shouts, his accent hitting old notes that he's long since trained against. "There have been some changes since you went under. You'll find the world you live in much harder to lay under the radar. So many new toys have been created—by the humans of all people—that may just send your ass straight to hell after all. It's not the Dark Ages anymore, and we fully intend to keep it nice and dull."

She gives one small nod.

"Don't speak for me," Arion cuts in. "I'm remaining neutral, so long as Idun works to make that a truth, and not just a suggestive thought in my mind to persuade me that's what she's doing, when she's really not."

It feels like he's having the vaguest argument in history with her.

"Only time will tell that. I know that's not what you want to hear, but you're only going to believe me if I prove I mean what I say. I don't ever want to return to the monster that stone turned me into. I'm not asking you to trust me—"

We all make some derisive sound on that note, aside from Arion, who just continues to study her.

She smiles tightly.

"As I was saying, I'm not asking that, because I know it'd be laughable. But Arion went under and came out different. It's not so hard to believe that it took a thousand years to break even the demon that had latched onto me. Ask Arion to tell you what it's like to be trapped in that coffin, cut off from your den, nest, or whatever your group calls it."

A muscle jumps along Arion's clenched jaw.

"He's not punishing you for it, because he had no choice but to break," she goes on, quieter. "I was dismembered. My head waking up with no body

attached…was far worse. I assure you."

A loud noise buzzes, and a series of shrieks go off so loudly that the bits of glass remaining on the house shatters. In the next instant, I'm rushing through traffic and leaping into the open window closest to me, panic damn near seizing my breath.

"Sorry!" Violet shouts, slinging her voice in a circle. "It's just a saw that gets loud. I'll warn you next time!"

She swats at a little dust, as she stumbles toward Tom, pulling something out of her bra.

"Healing potion. Put it in your ears!" she shouts to him, as he winces and digs a finger into his ear.

I roll my eyes, my heart hammering in my bloody chest, and sway to the side, as I exhale in relief.

"Vance?" Arion growls just loud enough for me to hear him from across the street.

"All in one piece," I assure him as Tom shouts at Violet.

"What?!"

She holds up a finger as she looks over at me in surprise. "Are you okay?" she asks me so sincerely.

"Can you please pretend to realize the reality of the situation at hand until I can explain it to you later?" I ask her.

She cocks an eyebrow. "I've got my problems—a lot of them at the moment. You've got yours—one of them at the moment. You deal with your shit, and I'll deal with mine."

I point a finger at her, as she crosses her arms over her chest a little defiantly for no reason at all.

"We're going to talk about you sending all my calls to voicemail the second we have a chance. And then I'll check to ensure the text messaging is working on your phone as well."

"*What?"* Tom shouts again, cupping his ear toward us.

I really do hate that man.

Violet holds a finger up at him again.

“It’s just been a few days, Vance. You’ve been busy, and so have I. Can we do this later? I sort of need to help my dad be able to hear again, since no one mentioned Simpletons could do that scared shrieking thing. Then I’m going to be up all night doing what little we can, before we have an actual game plan, so that we don’t waste any time with construction.”

There’s a sociopathic monster with jealousy issues just outside, after we’ve painted Violet a glowing target, and *Violet’s* too busy to deal with *me* right now.

I’m not sure if I’m still stuck in a hellish Portocale curse trance, or if this is just one of those days where Violet makes no sense.

Idun is watching me as I begin my return, and she glances around.

“I’m not the monster anymore, and I won’t interrupt this relationship you have going with her,” she tells us very abruptly.

When we all look at her like we know she’s leaking horse shit, she rolls her eyes.

“Again, you’ll just have to see to believe. I’m working on diluting my accent, catching up to an acceptable vernacular, and I simply haven’t had time to even try to catch on to how very different the world looks.”

Cue her dramatic head-tilt toward the sky, paired with a distant, thoughtful stare.

I actually roll my eyes, and Damien checks his reflection in his pocket mirror.

“But for now, I have things to do, such as learn as many changes as I can in a vastly new setting. I’ve secured the fifth available wheel that will fortify the circle here. I could only assume that seat would be mine, since we’re all the family Heads of our respective Houses.”

“And you really expect us to believe you’ll just leave Violet be, when she’s the very first person you taunt with your presence?” Emit asks through clenched teeth.

I keep a keen eye on Idun, waiting for the trap. Always waiting for the trap.

She glances toward the hotel, eyes never meeting ours, her expression staying stoic.

“I can understand your trepidation, given my past, but even if I felt threatened by a young, *mildly* attractive Simpleton, I still wouldn’t react, because you’re on the verge of giving her up,” she assures us.

Damien grins broadly, and I make another derisive sound.

Arion has stepped back, arms crossed over his chest, and has propped to a lean against a tree, seemingly content to observe her.

“How long do you foresee a girl, who is carrying a burdened heart such as hers, to open her arms to monsters not all that different from me?” she asks us seriously. “Because I’m not the only one they all fear, and you’re all even bigger hypocrites than you already were if you don’t see that.”

With that, Idun turns to leave, and I hold my ground, since I can physically take no action against her until she gives me a reason to.

She glances back a few times, giving us a small smile, just before she turns the corner and disappears from sight.

Damien is gone in the next instant with Arion, both of them trailing her under Damien’s illusion, and Emit’s eyes meet mine.

“Okay, Van Helsing. Now we know her game,” he tells me idly as just a handful of his wolves line up alongside my knights a little late.

Both of us are doing what we can to hold our composure in front of so many prying eyes. A composed, united front looks better than a rattled one, and monsters stuck in a state of fear and paranoia would be a volatile concoction in this era, more than any other before.

“And now you know your betas still aren’t up to par. You need to bring in your best for this, Emit. Quit leaving them out there and bring them in to restore your House, before Idun tears it down out from under you, while pretending she’s lost the monster inside her.”

We turn and look over at the hotel, and he releases a frustrated breath.

“Violet almost has a good idea. She just doesn’t realize the true depravity lurking inside Idun,” he says in deflection, as I watch movement stir in the house, even though the occupants remain quiet—aside from Tom and Violet, who loudly discuss which walls need to be opened up.

“A neutral haven for omegas, charged and legalized by the alpha Simpleton collection she’s recently acquired, and aided by Arion’s best beta. It’s the sort of ideology that will only break her heart when Idun uses it all against her to do just that. Idun may as well have said as much before she strutted off like she was untouchable,” I add, as Violet comes out with Bobo on her heels.

She’s carrying a small bag of trash. He’s carrying two overflowing, fifty-gallon trashcans.

She pauses at the street, and as they drop the trash curbside, her eyes coming up and landing on us. She gives us a small wave.

“All good?” she calls out.

Emit makes a gesture with his hand that signals all’s well, and she returns the gesture with a lazy thumbs-up, before heading back inside with Bobo lumbering at her side, instead of behind her. She even slows down to get behind him when she sees he’s trying to hurry in front of her to keep us from being at his back.

It’s all done so subtly that I wouldn’t have noticed if Idun hadn’t already planted the seed in my head. Violet doesn’t need her eyes opened, though; she already knows we’re monsters.

And they’re going to tell her just how terrible we all really can be.

“Fucking hell. Things are changing too fast,” Emit states, echoing thoughts too similar to my own.

“We focus on Idun for now. We need to know when her first move is coming before it actually comes,” I tell him, as a text comes through from Damien, giving me Idun’s current location.

“Now that she’s made her entrance, it won’t be long before the entire monster world is on edge,” Emit states flatly, as Avery crosses the street to join me.

Just as Avery reaches me, I tell him, “Call in more men. Violet is now your

only priority for the foreseeable future."

My phone goes off with a text from an unknown number with a link attached. I click the link, and it immediately takes me to a live video of Idun walking into a house. The screen flips to a new room as she sits down on a decadent chair that suspiciously resembles a throne.

Her eyes move to the camera, as she smiles tightly. "I figured I'd save you the trouble of having me watched. I'll be under open surveillance, available to all alphas. Betas and omegas will also have access to this channel for their own peace of mind," she says, causing my brow to furrow, as I cant my head.

"Full transparency is what I'm offering to everyone. I'm not asking for anything in return. For now, let's focus on our own Houses in our own regions, as we once intended to do. My website has everything detailed there about what's happened since my rising."

She keeps her eyes soft, as she tries to shoot for sincerity. My jaw grinds seconds before I laugh to myself at how certifiably insane she is if she thinks this is really going to work.

"I'm not seeking penance," she says as if we needed to know that. "I know I don't deserve that," she goes on. "But I've served my sentence, so please leave my family in peace, as we heal from the wounds some may feel are too severe."

"Nice dig, Idun," I mutter.

"It's irrelevant now, because the only way to move forward is to stop fighting about the past," she adds.

I idly wonder if she's not weakened without that necklace, and if she's trying to rattle us with this just to cover that up. She should be slitting throats and removing heads by now.

"And," she says as she smooths a wrinkle out of her dress, while the camera nearest her pans wide to reveal the large room where all the skin walker alphas have gathered, fully hydrated now, "we're about to hold our first on-camera family meeting."

"Are you watching this?" Damien asks as he holds his phone up with a

fucking-eh look on his face, while he stalks toward us.

“Of course I am,” I say as Clive, Idun’s father, steps up to the front of the table.

“As minutes-keeper of this meeting, I now call us in session.”

Idun kicks up her feet on the table, as she shuffles a stack of papers in front of her.

“Let’s begin,” she says with her red-lipped smile.

CHAPTER 6

VIOLET

Month One…

“And you really think you can do this in five months? I don’t even know if some of the materials can be here that soon, and I need longer to finish up some of the—”

Jerome’s words stop when he turns around, following my father’s line of view to me.

I pause descending the sketchy stairs to lift Arion’s bag out of the way and drop it over the edge. Jerome watches me, as his grin slowly grows.

“Why in the world are you buying and building a hotel, Violet?” he asks by way of greeting.

“I’m getting it for a steal, so it’s easier to make repairs,” is all I tell him. “When do you think you’ll have the finished outline?”

“You’re asking for an impossible timeframe here. Something like this can take up to a year or longer just to get mapped out before construction even—”

“There’s a guy downtown who says he has a design he can easily modify, and even have it ready within a week or two,” I cut in. “I just wanted someone I trust who can make changes as we go, because it’s going to be a lot of work done really fast but very well. I have *the best* construction crew ever. I need a flexible, hard-working architect to match them.”

Jerome gives me a look, lips twitching.

“Always just as impatient as ever, huh, Vi?”

“You know me,” I say with a private smile, as I meet them in the middle of the foyer.

Jerome gives me an awkward hug that I return just as awkwardly, and then

quickly back away because I hear four deranged alphas coming…who may tear him apart for that.

Should be fun hiding a bunch of immortals from Jerome over the next five months. Hopefully he'll stay too busy to notice.

"She's trying to convince all the stupid shifters hiding under rocks to come out so she can rebuild her army. This is all part of her ploy to look sane and reasonable. After she punishes them for hiding, of course," Arion is saying, as the guys walk in.

Emit is holding a very massive TV and heads off to one of the side rooms where they've started setting up. To keep me safe and all.

Dad makes a frustrated sound, as I loudly clear my throat.

"We have an architect here. Can you take that new TV show conversation somewhere else?" I ask them.

Arion moves to me, kissing the top of my head. "Sure, love. Come find us later."

Jerome's eyes follow after Arion briefly, but they widen on me again when Vance distractedly gives me a quick kiss on the head too.

Damien doesn't settle for a chaste kiss. His lips are on mine so fast that it's dizzying, and his arm circles around my waist as I lean into him, momentarily rendered stupid, as he works his mojo.

He grins and nips at my lips just before I hear, "We have an agreement, Morpheous!"

Hearing your Mom's voice, even from a new, foreign body, is the quickest libido killer. Especially when coupled with your father's disapproving grumbling.

I quit kissing him, and he grins before slapping my ass and running off. "Violet, we've got training class at five," Emit says as he points a finger at me.

"I'll have to miss. I have a lot to do," I tell him distractedly, and then turn to face him again. "But you can help with the—"

The door shuts to the room they've taken over before I can finish asking for

his help.

“You’re going to want to work on the padded room first,” Shera says to Jerome, drawing my eyes back to the people actually ready to work.

Jerome is just staring at me like I’ve sprouted a second head.

I understand his confusion, but I’d rather not delve into explanations about my *monstrous* love life with my human ex.

“Sure,” he tells her, even though I don’t even know if he knows what he’s agreeing to.

“Clear!” Anna shouts just before I hear a whir of electricity.

A squeal is startled out of me when Ighan comes crashing through the wall across from us. Chunks of plaster violently spray into the room, and I barely get in front of it before it slaps Jerome.

It crashes to my chest hard enough to force a grunt out of me, knocking a bit of my breath from my lungs. As it falls off me, I blow dust and hair out of my face and glare through the hole that Anna is peeking through, ghost-eyes wide.

“I said *clear,*” Anna reminds me, as Ighan laughs like a giggly kid on the floor.

I can actually feel the electricity humming through him, and I inwardly groan, as I literally watch his stitches start visibly healing. Right in front of Jerome.

“That’s great!” Ighan shouts, pumping his fist in the air.

“I-I-I-are you okay?” Jerome stutters, as he grabs my elbow and spins me around in a panic, his eyes way wider than Anna’s were as he looks me over.

“I’m fine. Just fine.” I glare over at Dad, since this is his fault.

If Jerome keeps touching me, I’m going to have to deal with at least three possessive alphas.

Emit will be a coin toss, depending on his mood.

Jerome releases me when he realizes I’m uncomfortable, and he clears his throat.

“Well, I’ll get started on this. If you want to stay and help, I’ll get it done

faster.”

I dread the impending argument that will come when they realize how much time I’m having to spend with my ex, and four brooding stalkers will be in the room with me.

Should be great fun.

***

Month Two…

“I’ve never seen construction moving at the same speed as design layers, and I have to tell you that leaving no room for error is proving intimidating,” Jerome tells me as he hands me my cup of coffee.

I pass the sugar once I’m finished, and he absently takes it as he studies his latest draft.

“I have to hand it to you, though. They catch any potential problems before they happen,” he adds. “It’s all impressive.”

“They’ve built a lot of homes in their time with far lesser technology,” I say as I glance over the flooring options, smiling to myself.

“Why are they all so tall? Usually I feel tall, but unless your dad is in the room, I’m the shortest man most times.”

“Don’t forget Luis,” I point out just as Luis comes to pat my back on his way by, hobbling a little.

“Why does he have the huge hunch?” Jerome asks me.

“It’s just something to add to his character,” I state idly, sipping my coffee during my ten-minute morning that I take daily.

Damien walks through, landing a quick kiss to my forehead on his way by, as he goes to the coffee pot.

“Can you believe she’s going to cull the cult that’s supposedly linked to feeding her power? The cult who has killed all those Portocales these past

centuries?" he asks, not even acknowledging that Jerome is sitting here.

Jerome is used to this, and believes Idun TV is a pilot show they're somehow involved in.

I've been creative over the past several weeks.

"How exciting," I tell him dryly, as I glance at some of the cabinet choices Jerome scoots toward me.

"Ooh, I like this grayer one," I tell him, as several shrieks ring out with the saw.

Fortunately, they're far away. Hence my ten minute mornings in this area.

"And get this, she genuinely thinks we're stupid enough to buy into all the bad acting. She should have at least hired professionals," Damien goes on, scoffing as he walks out with the entire coffee pot.

Good thing I have spares.

Giving his back a subtle glare, I mask my features and smile back over at Jerome.

"Get any sleep last night?" he asks. "Because I could have sworn I drove by and saw you unloading a truck at two this morning."

"Mom drove across two states to get all the quality materials Dad needed. I didn't want anything getting rained on."

"When do you sleep?" he asks as I stand and head out, coffee in my hand, daily plan in my head, and a list of tasks to delegate to the massive team assembling for the morning meeting.

I don't answer Jerome, because the answer is unbelievable. I'll take a long nap when I'm done.

Shera stops me just as I reach the lobby. "The guy I hired to track down your roots sent over a lot of stuff."

"Why are you still researching your family trees? I think by this point that'd be considered a fruitless endeavor, since you know everything there is to know," Anna says from my side, and then snorts. "Get it? *Fruitless* endeavor?"

When I pointedly ignore her, she snorts again, and then she bursts out

laughing.

“Maybe I’ll start a traveling comedy act only certain gypsy bloodlines can see,” she states through her laughter.

“Stick to your day job,” I mutter.

“Excuse me?” Shera asks, since…she can’t see Anna.

“Thanks, Shera,” I tell her instead of answering, as I head to my makeshift office.

“Can I ask what you’re looking for?” she asks with some hesitance, trailing me.

One look into Bobo’s innocent, pure, genuine eyes, and I had a whole lot of questions.

“Answers to questions I never thought to ask before now,” is the reply that absently tumbles from my lips, as I push through the rickety door.

Papers are spread out all over the barely-stable desk inside, and I go to start examining them.

“You know you’re a Portocale-slash-Neopry monster, which shouldn’t be possible but is. I’m not sure how many answers one can gather about something that’s never happened before,” she tells me. “You were a freak born to raise the Neoprys from their graves. Are you saying there’s more?”

Everyone else seems so distracted by Idun that an impossible monster is barely a blip on the radar. Call me arrogant, but I’m more interested in my existence than Idun’s games.

“I’ve spent my whole life searching for answers without knowing where to look or what to look for,” I remind her. “The questions don’t stop, because with answers comes even more questions. That’s life. It’s smart to be curious.”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” Anna chirps as she hops up on the table, giving me a mischievous grin. “You don’t particularly like cats or any other animal. Aside from wolves. Think it’s because Idun makes animal shifters? Is it your natural instinct to fear all things that could relate to Idun?”

I glare at her.

Although, she does have a point, now that I think about it.

“That would make Idun a problem for you after all,” she says, her grin growing darker. “What are you going to do about it, Violet?”

We have a staring contest for a few minutes.

“Can I ask what you’re staring at?” Shera asks in a dry, unimpressed tone.

Ignoring her, I continue glaring at Anna.

“Are you just going to let her step in and captivate your delicious harem, while you build a home for her family? Are you that pathetic?” Anna goads, her grin slowly getting larger as she taunts me.

Without any farther provoking, I toss salt at her, and her smile spreads all the wider just before she disappears.

Idun’s not my fucking problem.

Anna, however, is starting to scare me a little bit.

***

Month three…

“I’m saying a ghost doesn’t come back from a final decay without some divine intervention, Violet. She needs to explain herself to *me*. Not to you. And the dead should *not* influence the living. You know this,” Mom is saying in her arguing-talk voice from behind me.

“Anna isn’t here to influence, just to help. No worries,” I assure her.

The Neoprys working on the dining room are dancing, and I turn up the music to drown Mom out, as I dance alongside them on my way through.

Then I dart into a closet, listening as Mom curses.

“Very mature, Violet,” I hear her saying as she paces, presumably searching for me.

She finally walks off, and I exhale in relief, as I push open the door…and run right into a very devilish looking vampire. Arion immediately pushes me back

into the closet, and I grin as his lips come down on mine.

I feel his grin forming to mimic mine, as my fingers tangle in his hair. I jump up to wind my legs around his waist, kissing him harder.

“Arion! Get up here. She’s about to have an impromptu family meeting about the boundaries between your border and hers,” Emit calls very loudly from somewhere.

Arion groans into my mouth like he’s actually about to walk out of here and leave me hanging.

“Sorry, love. That’s unfortunately a very important matter,” he murmurs against my mouth, nipping my lower lip, before leaving me bereft, just a whisper of wind in his wake.

He’s gone so fast that I don’t even see him leave.

“What is happening right now?” I ask incredulously, adjusting my skirt.

Hell, I’ve even started wearing dresses and skirts to make it easier for them, and still get left hanging.

“The chase is over, and so they’re over it,” Anna supplies as she pops in next to me. “And by *it* I mean *you*. Obviously.”

“Thanks for clearing that up,” I state dryly.

“So that means I *do* influence the living after all. I’ve been a naughty girl. Let me possess you so they’ll spank me,” she adds very seriously.

“You have no excuse to be this ridiculous anymore,” I inform her as I walk out of the closet.

“Says the girl with her skirt still flipped up in the back. Newsflash, he ran away because of the granny panties you’re wearing right now,” Anna says very loudly.

Seriously? This day blows.

“Oh, you look like a dog chasing its tail right now,” Anna says, laughter belting out of her, while I turn a circle, trying to see if I’ve fixed my damn skirt.

“You’re exhausting,” I groan, wondering how many consecutive days someone can stay awake and still be considered sane.

“At this rate, you’re going to start spending time kissing your hand in the closet instead of real boys, if you don’t fight for them a little,” she says a little more seriously.

“Why compete with a woman they supposedly hate, Anna?” I ask just as seriously. “I have to know exactly what I’m fighting for, because there’s something a lot bigger that needs my attention.” I pause for a second. “And who the hell kisses the back of their hand?”

“Apparently every kid from the nineties, according to movies,” she deadpans.

Rolling my eyes, I turn and trip over the stack of wood that seems to just be randomly lying in the hallway, and my head slaps the wall hard enough to make my ears ring because I don’t get my hands up to catch myself in time.

“This, ladies and gentleman, is the future of your species,” Anna says as she mocks a clap.

“Har,” I groan as I push away.

Then I hear a hoarse, broken whisper through the wall that stops me.

“You’re losing them,” the wall whisperer tells me in her barely audible rasp. *“You need them.”*

I put my hand on the wall, about to speak, when my heartbeat drops as my knees wobble, and I fall forward again.

My head spins as the air around me thins. Dizzied, I glance around, seeing lightning flashing outside of a dark castle. I’m only confused for a second when I see Idun dragging a familiar girl down a hallway full of agonized screams.

Idun just smirks, as Caroline writhes, begging for mercy in a language I don’t understand, but the terror in her screams gives it away. My heart sinks as Idun drags her into a cell.

Bile rises to my throat when I see her patches of hair are few, and Idun tosses another handful of it away, as Caroline sobs, getting strapped down to a familiar metal chair.

Her skull has been cracked and lifted, and some sort of metal contraption keeps it there so you can see through to her brain. My jaw grinds when I hear

Idun humming merrily, just before she jabs a metal rod directly into Caroline's brain.

Caroline barely whimpers in pain, as though her tolerance is so high that it's not even enough to cause her to cry out.

A man shoves Caroline's feet into a pan of water, and then picks a piece of lint from his trench coat, as if this is all grown monotonous and boring. That's Idun's father—Clive.

I hear the thunder crackle a warning, and Idun continues humming, as she rips open Caroline's shirt. Nausea sweeps over me when I see her heart beating, another metal contraption holding her skin and bones back so Idun has a clear view.

Idun says something to her father, and they both back away. I try to look away, but I'm stuck in a death window for a girl who can't die, as lightning pours through the window and filters into the metal rod.

Caroline's screams wreck me, and my heart feels like it's being dragged out, as a putrid scent fills the air. The stench is so heavy, it almost seems to cast a filmy layer of oil into the air.

Caroline's body seizes as her eyes freeze open, and Idun casually speaks in a foreign language with her father, gesturing to Caroline's heart and brain so coldly, as Caroline suffers in raw, tormenting agony.

Then it hits me like a hammer—all that unbridled, sickening pain.

I'm on the ground and heaving for air in the next instant, praying for a breath that doesn't smell like that, and hear distant sawing echoing through my ears, as I choke back tears.

Rocking forward on my hands, I hear someone scurrying away from the wall, as I try to stop the spinning in the room by staring at my hands on the ground.

"That must have been one nasty death window," Anna concludes, as her head slides between my arms, because now she's lying under me and staring up into my eyes.

"Deep breaths, Violet. Big girl panties right now, remember?" Shera says as

she pats my back on her way by.

I just stare at Anna, waiting for a second, before I turn my gaze toward the wall, my heart crumbling like the pieces are already broken and just holding on by thin threads.

“Do you know how a death window forms for someone who can’t die?” I ask Anna very quietly. Before she can even muster an answer, I give her my theory. “They pray for death so sincerely in that moment, that they know they’ve been damned when they wake up still alive for all eternity.”

With that, I clumsily push back up to my feet, my legs still trembling, and I push into my office.

The hotel is just one thing I’m working on. My family tree is just one thing I’m researching. I made a really crazy plan, and every time I see a new death window, my determination grows and my plan gets even crazier.

My eyes move back to thethick stack of research on my family, and I take a seat. I need to know everything before I finalize my plans. I only have two months left.

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Month four…

“It’s getting time to start being a boss. You’d better not get me killed,” Shera says in a flippant tone as she wheels in the cart full of the blue-leather-bound books.

“Good job to you too,” I tell her as we leave the padded room after barely getting the mon*star* quad to pause Idun TV for long enough to half-ass sign some major legal documents.

I kick the door shut when Arion tries calling for me to come back in, and I keep walking. Shera doesn’t bat an eye as she pushes the books into my bedroom next door.

“Jerome said he had to take an early flight, but he’ll be back next month to see how it all turned out and wants to know if you can get coffee. I’d say he was an idiot, but I said that four months ago, and they never killed him,” she deadpans. “What should I tell him?”

“Coffee’s fine,” I say distractedly as I peer inside the wall for Ingrid, spotting her giving me her daily wave from the end, smiling as she starts chasing after someone else.

I shut the hidden entrance panel and carry on, smiling a little to myself, as I look around at all the progress.

“I mean it, Violet Carmine. You’d better be the badass I’ve taught you to pretend to be, or all this was for nothing,” Shera tells me again as she glances over the edge.

“Avery’s warned me of everything that could come at me, and he’ll continue to walk me through what’s happening next. I’m good, Shera. I can take what’s coming next.”

“They’re going to lose their minds when they realize what they signed,” she dutifully points out.

“I told them to read it. You heard me.”

“I did hear you,” she agrees. “And I filmed it too.”

“Maybe they can watch it when Idun sleeps if they need a reminder,” I state, sounding just a *little* petty.

“I don’t even know which way I want to judge you right now, so I’ll save my insults for a more decisive moment,” Shera says as she walks off.

The bells start ringing, scaring the living shit out of me, but surprisingly, none of my fellow omegas shriek. I glare straight up at the bell tower I’m under, through the glass floor, and see Luis swinging on the rope.

“Sanctuary!” he shouts. “Sanctuary!”

“That’s just too real,” Anna says from beside me.

I shake my head and turn to walk away, because I still have miles to go before I sleep. So many miles to go before I sleep.

And I’m already a little crazy with the constant death windows every time Caroline stalks me through the walls.

I almost think she’s trying to warn me.

I pause, my eyes scanning a line on a mislabeled document, and I slowly lower myself to my chair. My heartbeat kicks against my chest, and my eyes slowly lift to meet Anna’s, as the wheels of my mind turn.

“Who are you, Anna?” I ask, my eyes meeting hers.

She grins at me. “I’m Casper the friendly fucking ghost,” she assures me, her smile spreading larger. “Who do you think I am, Violet?”

“You’re someone who left table salt behind, along with a good-bye letter, even though ghosts leave behind a silvery tint with their salt. It’s their soul stains, I’ve learned.”

“Maybe my soul wasn’t stained,” she argues, leaning forward as her grin stays fixed.

My mouth opens and closes, and I narrow my eyes on her.

“Stop playing games.”

She crosses her legs, sitting taller, still fucking smiling. “But I love games. Play with me, Violet. Let’s play with Idun together. It’ll be fun.”

“I’m not playing with Idun, but unless you want me turning my mother loose on you, you’re going to explain who you are.”

Her smile turns more devious in the next instant.

“Fair enough. I hope you’re rather open-minded, my favorite-ever person.”

CHAPTER 7

VIOLET

“The final touches are coming together really quickly,” Shera says like she’s actually surprised, as I collapse to the ground and groan.

So, so close to getting to sleep. Tonight I get to sleep. In a bed. For *hours and hours and hours.* It’s my reward for giving it up for so long. But all the other Simpletons did it with ease, and I didn’t want to be the one dragging my feet when this was my idea.

I thought my work ethic was stellar until meeting them.

“Almost five solid months of around-the-clock labor is not *coming together quickly,”* I point out, admittedly a *little* bit cranky.

She rolls her eyes. “You’re just impatient.”

I smile to myself, just as Anna pops out. Shera, despite her gypsy blood, can’t see her. She hates that she can’t see her.

“The guys are watching Idun TV. I vote you walk through the room naked to remind them *you’re* their girlfriend,” Anna unhelpfully suggests.

Want to know what Anna has been doing for almost five straight months while my hands are full and I don’t have time to deal with her theatrics? She’s been doing this—trying to make Idun my problem. Just like everyone else.

However, she scares me less. Sort of. She’s still…sort of scary, if I’m honest.

“I thought you got me,” I tell Anna in mock disappointment.

“Got you what?” Shera asks distractedly, as she does something on her phone. *But* she forgets she’s even talking to me as she adds, “All the beds are arriving in a few minutes, and we still don’t have a fully installed elevator.”

“We have plenty of manpower,” Anna tells her primly, following behind a Van Helsing knight and checking out his ass.

She gives it a little ghostly squeeze, and I roll my eyes because she’s a single,

resurrected ghost—for all intents and purposes—and just the phantom hand grab is more action than I've gotten since *last* month.

Again, I'm not entirely sure what Anna is. I don't think Anna knows either, because…she's still possibly delusional after all. The more sensible answer is she's a delusional ghost I managed to resurrect and she's very much crazier than ever.

Idun TV is the newest growing addiction in the immortal community. It sucks to be a girl who doesn't want Idun to be her problem.

It's Idun's idea of true transparency for everyone to see she's genuinely changed. She's put herself on around-the-clock video surveillance that shows her every breath, every text, every phone call—name it. It's all there.

It's the fast-track solution to the trust issue surrounding her.

And Shera is currently watching the live feed through an app on her phone.

It didn't take Idun long to catch up to the times.

"You really should watch sometime. Nadine is on here a lot, and—"

"So far, not a single skin walker has even tried to contact me in any capacity since I left them still hydrating in Ireland and took the Simpletons, who were terrified, away from them. Currently, I can find no reason they'd be my problem," I absently reply, looking over some of the family tree's key pieces.

My family really is fucked up.

"You're still reading the Neopry family history books?" Shera asks with some mild annoyance.

"Since starting this inquiry, I've learned my father's family stemmed from a distant cousin. It—"

"It doesn't explain why you're immortal, since all your other relatives died and you can't die," Shera cuts in. "It is definitely a conundrum; however, we have more pressing matters to concern ourselves with. Don't you think?"

She wiggles her phone, as though to tempt me with Idun's bullshit.

Giving her a dry look, I rise up, standing on the newly finished floors that are slightly dusty because of the rapid construction. My new store will be a lot

bigger in here, and Mom can have her house back…when she buys it from me.

“I still have questions, and everyone seems finished with looking for answers. Except me. I’ll find them on my own, and at least this way I don’t have to deal with any confusing circle-talk, just so everyone can dodge answering uncomfortable questions about the past,” I point out.

After a beat, she rolls her eyes.

“Anyway, your mother sent more care packages, and she’s close to setting up a Portocale Council meeting that will present you with an official apology for that pesky little assassination attempt,” Shera quips.

Anna pops up right in front of me, smirking.

“Please let me go to that. *Please. Please. Please*. I’ve been waiting for so long for someone to actually have to hear about how un-Buffy you are aloud,” Anna chirps. “Also, I’m nosy and want to know how someone apologizes for an assassination attempt, because that’s possibly the only thing more interesting than Idun TV right now.”

She beams like this is the greatest day of her undead life.

“You don’t get to be this annoying today,” I deadpan.

Shera looks between me and Anna, not actually seeing Anna.

“It’s frustrating when you talk to the dead. The dead aren’t supposed to be acknowledged,” she reminds me.

“Do you think she can actually see me?” Anna asks, turning a studious gaze toward Shera.

Shera just darts her eyes around like she’s trying to peer through the complicated fabrics of the universe.

“I don’t have time for this,” I tell them both, as I idly wonder when the last time I even slept was.

Two arms are suddenly around me, and a sense of warmth fills me, as an accidental groan slips through my lips. I really do miss touch.

“I’ve scoured this place looking for you,” Damien murmurs against my ear. “Why is your scent so weak?”

“Maybe because I’m tired?” I suggest, leaning against him, as I allow myself a second to rest.

It doesn’t last long, because he turns me, and his lips hungrily fuse to mine like he can’t wait another second to have me alone. Another moan slips through my lips when he backs me into the cider shop.

My fingers tangle in his hair, as I desperately pull him closer, not having the amount of time I wish I did before I have to start directing beds to rooms.

He makes another impatient, hungry sound against my lips, as he lifts me to a counter, shoving my legs apart.

I’m so happy I wore a dress today.

“I have five minutes, sweet little monster. Demetria is bringing in new betas today to start cleaning up the human cult problem that has ‘*gotten out of hand*.’ It should be an absolute mockery of bad, scripted acting,” he says, apparently forgetting how to be good at dirty talk.

He starts to pull my underwear down, as his lips drag to my neck, but I roll my eyes and shove hard at his chest.

He leans back, frowning down at me.

“Well, *I* only have two minutes, and to make that work, I needed the mood you just ruined when you started talking,” I tell him as I shove my flowery dress back down and hop off the counter.

“I’m…sorry?” he says, making the apology sound more like a confused question.

I walk out of the cider shop without a backward glance, and just in time, since the beds are being backed up by the truckload.

Shera suddenly goes still beside me, eyes widening like she senses something I don’t. Which is the norm. I rarely ever sense anything at all, and I’m *supposed* to be empathic.

I’ve been told I was. My emotions affect others. However, I’ve lived with the Simpletons for five months, and their version of empathic strongly differs from mine. The only time I feel another’s emotions is when they channel their

emotions to me—either by accident or on purpose.

She grabs her phone with shaky hands, but I stop her when I see what's going on.

Maybe I jinxed myself by boasting too soon about the skin walkers not being on my radar.

Nadine—who I've only seen in portraits and in very dry skin—is standing across the street in the same place Idun stood almost five months ago.

"I have to call Arion," Shera says on a hushed whisper. "He's just upstairs."

"No," I say distractedly when I see the very familiar and extremely thick book in her hands. "She's here to talk to me. Not them."

"Violet, don't—"

"If you're really going to split time between this House and Arion's, you need to learn how to manage that. Here, Arion isn't in charge," I remind her as I head outside and toward Nadine.

Shera blows out a breath of frustration, but I know she's simply watching and not calling in the troops. Yet. Her finger's hovering on the trigger, no doubt.

Avery immediately joins me at my side, his stance relaxed, as he leisurely picks up stride with me.

"Evening, madam," he says conversationally to me, eyes on Nadine.

"She's here to talk to me and not Vance," is all I say to him.

He just gives a nod and stops behind me a few feet, while I move the rest of the way to Nadine.

She doesn't even glance at him, because she knows he's a nonissue for her.

"I can't decide if you're a saint, a fool, or just too daft to know the forces in which you toy," she says as she holds up my blue-leather-bound proposal. "Maybe a bit of all three," she concludes.

"I only need the support of five of the six Houses, and I have those five. That was just a courtesy—sending you the full proposal for full disclosure."

She snorts. "Marta Portocale, your supposed mother, signed off on this? Did she read it?"

“I was under the impression she’s the only alpha who did read it until you showed up holding it.”

“Do you have any idea what Idun will do to you once she realizes the things you’ve put in here?” she asks in a very condescending tone.

“Doesn’t really matter what she does. Idun’s not my problem.”

Anna pops up, and Nadine predictably doesn’t acknowledge her.

“You tell her, Violet,” Anna champions as she mimes dramatic clapping, which makes me sound like I’m about to hit the tee-ball in front of all the adults for the first time.

I glare at her, and she grins at me until I roll my eyes and look away.

“It’s good to have me back and you know it,” Anna states as she feigns interest in her nails.

Nadine barely flicks a glance toward Anna, seeming very unimpressed with the ghostly company I keep.

Something crosses her eyes, and she cracks her neck to the side as she tucks my book under her arm.

“You raised us when everyone else left us to rot,” Nadine tells me like I’m somehow unaware of that. “So I’ll pay this debt with a warning, January Violet Carmine. You are of our blood, and for that, Idun will punish you twice as hard as she’s likely plotting to punish you right now. And she’ll punish you through my favorites first. Because she knows they’ll hurt you the worst,” she adds very seriously.

“Hmm. She almost sounds like she cares about the Simpletons who are going to own their very own beds for the first time ever,” Anna states, words dripping with sarcasm. “I wonder if she poops food since she talks shit.”

I palm my face, as Nadine works to not acknowledge Anna, her jaw ticking.

“Really, Anna, I’ve got this all by myself.”

Anna pulls her fists up like she’s a thirties boxer and dances around us the way she probably thinks boxers dance.

“But my zingers are on point today,” she argues, taking a few phantom jabs.

“And I’m your intimidation factor, since you don’t really have one otherwise.”

“Are you serious with this?” Nadine asks me very pointedly, as though she’s warning me that I’m looking worse by the second.

“Believe it or not, I really miss her when she’s gone.”

“The dead should not influence the living,” Nadine bites out like I’m crossing a very personal line, her tone going cold and angry.

My brow furrows, as my lips purse, and Anna’s eyebrows go up as she lowers her fists. “Everyone says that to us, Violet, but you never listen to me unless I tell you what *you* want to hear,” Anna dutifully points out.

“That’s because, even when you’re not in a delusional state of mind, *you’re still delusional,”* I say, really too tired to be carrying on a conversation with Nadine *and* Anna at the same time.

“Maybe the dead should influence the living, since the living should be old and dead too by now,” Anna says as she sulks and turns away.

I redirect my attention to a very impatient and cold-eyed Nadine.

“You’ll end up being your mother’s child for sure if you continue to listen to the dead,” Nadine states like she’s filling in a missing piece of the puzzle for me.

It actually does…

I file the information away, since I haven’t enough brain power to keep vertical for much longer.

“Yes, yes. My mother is absolutely horrible, and you’re secretly just another misunderstood Portocale victim. Glad we had this chat,” I tell her as I throw up a thumb and smile, and then turn to walk off.

“So you only judge the Neopry family, while you fuck my daughter’s monstrous castoffs. Why am I not surprised?” she drawls.

My steps slow, and I find myself idly wondering if she’s even worth the effort, since I’m really busy today.

“You showed up here to tell me how stupid and disgustingly Portocale I am, but I have a lot of people who are going to get to sleep in their new rooms with their own actual beds tonight. It’s sort of a big deal, and I have to make sure the

place is clean so that it feels like home."

I glance over my shoulder to find her glare still scathing.

"I'm not judging the Neopry family. I try not to judge people at all, because I'm never going to understand all the very complicated dynamics of this lengthy entanglement between all of you. But you? You, I admit…I judge the hell out of you."

Her scowl wavers just a little, a hint of confusion crossing her features.

"Idun tortured them, and you wouldn't even fight for them to have a bed for comfort while they licked their wounds, even after they finally had a home," I say as I face her fully again.

Anna's smirk grows devilish, as she takes a seat like she's finally interested in this conversation enough to listen. *That incorporeal bitch.*

"You put bars up instead of doors, because they might panic if the thunder rumbled too hard and turned them into a *stupid monster that smashes up all your pretty things."*

Nadine's jaw trembles just barely, and I almost stop, because I'm worried that my own exhausted emotions are affecting hers right now, instead of this being a genuine reaction.

"You grow cold when you realize how powerless you are to stop the things that shred your heart, Ms. Carmine. You judge at too young an age to fully comprehend your inevitable future," she bites out, even as her eyes glisten just a little.

"Oh, you have to wait until you're really old to judge, Violet. It's a rule around here. I heard that too," Anna says very seriously.

I cast a dry look in her direction before shaking my head at Nadine.

"I didn't come to argue. In fact, I hope you keep this naïve notion of yours alive while it lasts, and maybe you have enough self-righteous Portocale blood in your body to be stubborn enough to make it work for at least a little while," Nadine goes on in a more tired tone as she looks away, unable to muster up more anger in the moment, it seems. "I came to warn you to change article-one,

section-two, addendum fifteen," she says.

I don't even have to look to know exactly what part she's referring to.

"She'll eat you alive, little girl. The second she sees it, she'll destroy you in ways you never imagined possible. Marta, for whatever reason that defies all logic, raised you far too soft for what's on the horizon when Idun grows bored with her current game."

After she finishes her warning, I turn and start walking away again, and Anna clears her throat.

"Idun's not her problem," she informs Nadine, before zapping to my side.

I feel Nadine's eyes on me, but I don't turn back around. Shera's phone is still clutched tightly in her hand like she's prepared to dial Arion if anything happens.

She'd be able to yell, if they hadn't taken the padded room to enjoy Idun TV without hearing all the construction going on around them.

Shera visibly relaxes, and I turn back to see Nadine getting in the back seat of a car and riding off toward the horizon.

"Do you think you could not attract the attention of anything dangerous while I go deal with a thing?" Shera asks me.

"What thing?" I ask, considering this is the official move-in day.

"Just a thing I have to do because apparently today's the *due* date for it," she says with intentional vagueness, the thing she does when she wants me to know something Arion told her she couldn't tell me.

"I was hoping it would be *due* any day but today; however, *today* marks the *ninth* or *tenth* month. Whatever it is," Shera adds like this is her spoon-feeding me giant clues.

She rolls her eyes when I just wait patiently on the next giant clue that will hopefully sound more like a clue.

"Usually, I wouldn't care, but in this particular case, there are extenuating circumstances that naturally cause concern for most monster women, who may find themselves in the same predicament. It's not an area I'm comfortable—"

“Arion can’t touch you. He signed over his punishment rights months ago,” I say on a huff.

“I just worry this may be that straw-weighted tipping point that always does in the camel’s back, and if I cause turmoil, that immunity may just tumble off the mountainside…along with my dead body,” she tells me matter-of-factly. “And I don’t think they’ll allow this problem into our House, if you know what I mean…”

“Oh my damn,” Anna says as her eyes widen, and she snorts out a laugh. “You are so screwed, you poor vampire,” she tells Shera like Shera can hear her.

“What are you talking about?” I ask Anna.

“I have no idea. I just wanted to sound smart like I figured it out first,” Anna confesses on a sigh. “She makes no sense.”

“Shera, just tell me what—”

“Arion has a pregnant shifter about to give birth in a house full of vampires, who will have no choice but to smell her blood. And once that baby’s born, she’ll be torn to pieces because she’s unregistered and apparently has a secret she’s not allowed to share with even me,” she states in a quick, flat rush.

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I thought she’d say,” Anna states with a firm nod.

“What?” I ask incredulously.

“She’s unregistered, so it’s a clean kill on the books, and even if she wanted to register—like pureblood shifters are required to do—she couldn’t, because Vance needs the legality of the kill. But she wouldn’t register, even if someone walked her out of there, because then she’d be on Idun’s radar, and her baby would also be on Idun’s radar. I haven’t figured out the part of saving the baby from Idun.”

I just stare at her for a second, as it all gets a little heavier. There’s a reason omegas don’t try to contend with alphas. There’s a reason this has never been done before, even though it’s all perfectly legal. There’s a reason the Heads are all cold and vicious.

It’s really hard work. Especially when the first fight you’re going to have to

fight is one against Idun. Apparently no one wins those battles.

“This could all be an elaborate scheme to pick this place apart from the inside,” Shera tells me, eyes seriously affixed to mine. “After all these months, she still seems genuine, but some people are older and cleverer than I am, Violet. It’s impossible to trust a shifter right now. Idun would risk the life of a pregnant woman just to get someone in here.”

This is what Idun does best—relies on her reputation to spread panic. Shera’s already frazzled, and we’re not even technically in business yet.

“I’ll get a form signed,” I say a little numbly, seriously too exhausted for this. “Take Avery with you. I’ll have it forwarded.”

She gives me a hesitant nod, and I hear Avery directing her from behind me, as I walk in, taking a fortifying breath as I lean against the wall.

“This is the part where I need to disappear for a bit, isn’t it?” Anna asks.

“Just stay down here,” I answer as I clear my throat and quickly get my emotions under control, not wanting to influence anyone else’s.

It’s never been harder to do than it is right now. This is the breaking point. The moment when it all feels too heavy is always the breaking point.

“You weren’t meant for this,” Anna says a little seriously. “Your part is over, Violet. You did what you were meant to. They need to pick up their own slack.”

Bobo comes running around the corner, smiling from ear to ear, and I find it easier to push back the emotions when he lifts me from the ground and squeezes me in a hug.

When he pulls back, tears are in his eyes, and his smile is just as bright. I mentally prepare to continue the really hard work, because they really are fucking amazing.

“You’re welcome,” I tell him, knowing this is about the new bed.

He holds his hand over his heart, nodding once at me, as the tears grow more prominent in his eyes, and his smile starts to waver. Then he gestures to Anna, and he nods again.

“He’s saying he heard, and he agrees that you’ve done your part,” she states

like she can read his mind.

“No, he’s thanking me for the bed, and acknowledging you exist, because he’s nice like that,” I tell her as Bobo releases me completely, and I turn to head up the stairs, snatching a tablet from Leiza’s hands as I go.

Predictably, Shera has the file already filled out and marked urgent under my folder, and I pull it up as I head up to the padded room and push through the door.

Shera was right. This place needed that padded room built first thing. I’m glad I listened.

“This is the worst acting I’ve ever seen,” Damien groans, throwing popcorn at the TV that I don’t even bother glancing at.

“Demetria is a mischievous devil, even when she’s in a good mood. She’s not this robotic bullshit Idun is trying to sell us,” Emit chimes in, gesturing to the woman on TV. “Either Demetria is reading a script, or they’ve got one of the other skin-walkers posing as her.”

I make my way to Arion first.

“Hey, love. How’s the hotel coming?” the distracted vampire asks me absently, as I try to hand him the tablet.

He uses my arm to jerk me onto his lap, kissing the side of my throat.

I shove at his chest, making a frustrated sound for a number of reasons, but mostly still trying to put a big-ass pin in all the emotions.

With a lot of effort, I manage to force my way out of Arion’s lap.

“I have a form you need to read and sign,” I tell him, putting the tablet right in front of his face this time.

“Another beta thing?” he asks as he takes it.

“No, an omega thing.”

He snorts and runs his finger over the line, signing it for me without even glancing over the words. Predictably.

His eyes move back to the TV, already distracted by whatever is going on. I just turn to Vance. “You too. I suggest reading it first.”

He simply signs it without even a glance, eyes forward, as Idun laughs at something.

It's like I'm not even in the room at all right now.

I forward the signed form to Shera, before I put down the tablet and calmly walk over to the TV. Then I jerk the fucking cord out of it, causing all of them to sputter sounds of surprise.

"What the hell just happened?" Vance snaps as he stands.

"Now that I have your attention," I state as I circle around the TV and toss the cord into the fire, "I have something really important to say."

I'm too tired to even have the energy to be as mad as I probably should be right now.

"I apologize for interrupting the binge-a-thon so abruptly, but this is the last airing Idun TV will have in this House. As of now, you can watch it in all your own homes," I state very calmly.

Damien gives me a lazy grin. "Are you jealous, sweet gypsy? Because it's very sexy to think of you as jealous," he says to me like he's thrilled with the prospect.

"Jealous," I echo, nodding just once as it gets a *little* easier to hold in my emotions with that freaking accusation.

"I don't think she's jealous," Arion points out, while he eyes me like he's a little worried.

Taking a deep, steeling breath, I shake my head. "No, I'm not jealous."

Emit stays seated, a finger running over his lips, as he observes me quietly.

"Surely, it looks that way. Clearly that's the only reason I'd take issue with you almost literally watching your ex-girlfriend's every move on a channel she made specifically for you to do just that, while you all scheme to figure out a way to keep from doing exactly what she wants," I say in a flat, dry tone.

The smile is sucked off Damien's face slowly, and they all move like they're going to surround me. I back to the wall immediately, so they can't do their stupid, predatory circling thing.

Arion narrows his eyes, as Vance rakes his gaze over me like I'm once again new and fascinating. Damien disappears, probably already within touching distance, if I had to hazard a guess.

"I get angry, and you prepare to chase," I say, pointing out what they're doing. "Then you all say I'm the one who loves the chase, when it's just *you* who loves it so much."

Emit's brow furrows as I gesture to the TV and me.

"Like in the game of survival, I rarely even know I'm being chased, unless someone makes it obvious. Everything starts for me when I finally get caught. And that's exactly when you all seemed to check out. Now you're giving me stolen kisses on your way to this box. Not one compliment or comment on the hotel you've lived in. Not one offer of help while we killed ourselves to make this happen—"

"Violet, I offered to help you in any way necessary," Vance quickly interrupts.

"You offered me your checkbook, Vance," I counter on a quiet breath. "The very next second, you bypassed Ighan and Bobo as they struggled to get a scaffolding into place. I remember it because you didn't once glance at them."

He opens his mouth and closes it again, doing the surprised blinking he does when I zag on his zig or whatever.

"And it doesn't even matter. I'm not leaving you for any *one* reason, and I want to make that very clear before you finally realize what you've refused to read, but insisted on signing all this time," I go on. "Remember that I would have *loved* for you to read all the things you've been signing, and it was never me intending to manipulate your trust."

They all look confused right now.

"I had a lot of people working really hard, and they were sort of hoping you'd find it all intelligent, mature, and reasonable. Not that you'd care enough about that when you've gotten so dead inside that you really plan to kill a pregnant woman just because it's convenient to you."

Vance's eyes grow really cold, just as the air drops a few degrees. Arion is suddenly right against me, caging me in, as his eyes level mine.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken, Violet," Arion tells me as he brushes a lock hair out of my face. "If we wanted to kill a pregnant woman, we wouldn't be waiting until after she has the child."

"For fuck's sake, Arion," Vance says from behind him, as I glare up at my vampire, seeing the detached look in his eyes, even as tears fill my own.

"No. Her mother sheltered her. We've tried to shelter her. Now she's standing here sounding too much like a Portocale as she spews her better-than-thou shit, like she has any right to judge. And she's better than that," Arion says to them, while staring directly into my eyes.

A tear finally falls from my eye, and he wipes it away with his thumb, as I swallow the knot in my throat.

"I guess even I have limits as to what I can and can't judge," I tell him honestly.

"She hid herself after we'd called for survivors, graciously taking the time to separate offenders and victims, something Vance took precious time to do just because you're too soft for the real world just yet, and he worries what will come back to roost," Arion continues.

My eyes stay on Vance, as Arion twirls a lock of my hair around his finger. Damien turns visible once again, eyes on me, as he stands between Vance and Emit.

They've spent a lot of time in this box bonding. Arion only ever really wanted them, after all. My purpose has been spent.

"But the truth," the vampire carries on, as the other three just keep blank expressions, "is that the world is not so—"

"She's in my custody now, and you can't touch her. Any punishment you give to her, I take upon myself," I coldly interrupt.

His entire dark, condescending expression falls.

"*What*?" he asks in a much more confused and horrified tone that suggests he

thinks I've lost my mind.

"You *just* signed it. I told you to read it, but you never bother. I don't know why I bother tossing in so many fair things, when none of you bother."

I shove at his chest hard enough to catch him off guard, and manage to move him enough for me to walk by.

"You can't do that, Violet. First of all, it makes no sense. Secondly, why is that even a fucking idea in your head?" Arion snaps.

"My job wasn't to raise them from the ground, Arion. It was just step one. The reason I was born was to make people care about them. But I can't do that when people just *won't* care. I spent four months drafting the House documents you all signed off on, but you didn't even read one word."

Vance's eyes narrow on mine.

"What have you done, Violet?" the Van Helsing asks like he's suspicious.

"Everything I told you I was going to do, but you were too busy chasing Idun to listen. Does that make me sound jealous too?" I ask, pretending to muse it over, before cutting my eyes to Damien.

He's not smiling this time.

"I don't even get the time, attention, or genuine interest I need from *one* boyfriend between *all four of you combined* since she came back. You're all sitting around, calling each day's events scripted and obvious, wondering what she has to gain from this charade. Meanwhile, you're all sitting around *watching her day and night.* Congratulations. She's winning."

Damien's eyes widen marginally, and Emit's as well. Vance's jaw tics as he tugs at his collar, and Arion's neck cracks as the vein pulses in his temple.

"Consider the eye-opening epiphany my parting gift. I'm sure your hands are going to be too full with Idun to worry about a nonissue such as an unregistered shifter, who will register, but remain in sanctuary here. With us. *Sanctuary* of Carmine."

Emit groans as he massages his temples. "Violet, we went over this. You're not an alpha, you can't—"

“Like I said. I already did, and you signed off on it. You all listen as well as you read when it’s just little ol’ me instead of big bad Idun.”

“Violet, I understand you’re upset, but we’re—”

“I get it. Idun’s a big deal,” I say in interruption to Damien. “She’s dangerous. She poses a major threat and needs to be taken seriously.”

They all stare as if they’re too smart to open their mouths right now, since everyone is hesitating to speak.

“Even though it’s a little insulting, I’m okay with the fact you put a pin in me, so to speak, in order to learn what you could, since it’s a rare opportunity,” I go on, sounding as reasonable as I can. My eyes narrow, even as the ire tries to give way to emotion. “I put a pin in you too, because I’ve been too busy to sit around watching TV.”

I can’t believe this.

“I didn’t even get a honeymoon phase, before the four of you jumped into the old-and-married phase of our life like I’d somehow allow that to become the new normal,” I continue, jaw grinding as I let my gaze flick from prick, to dick, to jackass, to brute.

Emit arches an eyebrow at me when my gaze lands on his, but the asshole almost seems amused, even though I’m extremely upset.

Are my emotions not channeling to him?

“Five months ago I pictured the five of us bonding over building this thing, while getting advice and counsel from your many years of experience with the law,” I point out, gesturing mostly at Vance. “It’s better that you didn’t, because the four of you are finally getting along so well that I’m willing to finally step back without worrying about sparking an argument.”

“You’re being a little hasty, sweet monster,” Damien tells me, using that tone he uses when he’s talking me into a dark corner.

“If I’m not needed for the relationship, then I’ll take my leave and what’s left of my pride. But I’m young, and I like sex, and it sort of sucks the youth right out of me when the four of you act like you could take it or leave it,” I word-

vomit.

My hands are shaking as my temper really starts to shine, the fleeting moment of surging anger built from months of repressed anger.

“I don’t have time for four guys who don’t make time for me. Four boyfriends and not one ounce of romance to break up all the hard work I’ve been doing, while you guys watch Idun. Salt on the wound by now. My time’s important too.”

It’s about four hours shy of the majorly epic speech I cooked up in my head, and sounds nothing at all like the lines I rehearsed so effortlessly in the mirror every time I *thought* I reached the breaking point before today.

I turn and walk out, ignoring the ache in my chest. I also ignore the tears burning my eyes, since they’re just one more shot to my pride.

I hold my shit together until I find a room to dart into, feeling the first few tears start to fall. I wipe them away quickly, mentally shaking myself, as I hold in all the sounds. If I start crying, this entire place full of very sensitive Simpletons will erupt into tears.

My head thumps back on the wall, happy to have a resting prop…until I hear Shera shouting my Mom’s name and telling her to grab something. Directly after, loud commotion explodes below. My mother is here right now?

Standing, I dart a quick glance in the mirror and freeze. I see just part of a girl’s face peering out from behind a wall behind me. Her skin is scarred like so many stitches never fully healed.

A single tear rolls down her cheek, and I shoot her an apologetic look.

I’m worried those tears are my fault, since that seems to be a growing issue. The houseful of *very* strong empaths seems to have boosted my own abilities.

No, I still can’t actually *feel* anyone else, other than a rare occasion. But my emotions seem to pack a wallop to anyone close by when I let them off the reins.

Just as I open my mouth to speak to her, she ducks back into the wall. I hear a false panel shut.

I’m glad we made the walls wide and tall. Plenty of room to pass each other,

for the ones who need to hide. There are more than just Ingrid now.

A woman's pained scream has me bolting out of the room in the next instant, just in time to see Avery quickly wheeling in a stretcher with a screaming pregnant woman in the middle of giving birth.

"Put a pin in it, Violet," I whisper to myself as I wipe away the last tear. "You can have your moment later."

CHAPTER 8

DAMIEN

Violet slams the door after her dramatic speech, and I glance over at the other three. They look about as blindsided as I feel.

Then I yank the door open and glance out after her. My eyes move back and forth between them and her.

“Did she just break up with us? Is that what just happened?” I ask, gesturing around absently.

“It appears so,” Vance says as he exhales harshly and scrubs a hand over his jaw.

“Does she honestly think that’s going to work?” Arion asks incredulously, lips almost twitching like he’s amused.

“She’s young,” Emit states idly. “I remember being young and having ideal disillusions. Idun comes back, and I remember who I am really fucking fast. Violet hasn’t seen Idun yet. Not the real Idun. I think that’s half of Idun’s game right now, giving Violet a false sense of security. Everyone on the outside of these walls is having a good laugh at her expense for essentially building a House for the misfit omegas.”

“Give Violet the shifter. The information she overheard is of tedious use if Idun already knows about you hiding the necklace,” Vance says to Arion.

“Giving Violet this pointless shifter won’t help prepare her for what’s to come. An unregistered shifter is as good as dead whether we kill her or Idun does. Best this stays our problem and not allow Idun to get invol—”

Shera shouts for Marta, who shouldn’t even fucking be here, and a stream of foreign noises cuts Arion off, because we all stop to listen to the growing chaos. We all head out into the hallway, finding the noise more of nervous pandemonium instead of tireless hammering.

Usually we have the door shut for a reason. It's always fucking loud here.

Bloody hell. I really have been a glorified prick. I really wish at least one of us knew how to stay out of trouble.

But romance is my fucking department. I'll kiss her ass until she feels awful for being cold to me, and then she's going to be so thoroughly mine she'll never try to escape me again.

"She'll be angry—possibly hostile—for a little while, but if we bother her enough, she'll start growing weak, and then wishy-washy, and at last, she'll be ours again," Arion states with too much confidence.

"Do *not* say that to her, or she'll go out of her way to prove you wrong. And honestly, I hope you're right," Vance says, pointing a finger at Arion as if in warning. "Make her stubborn just because you don't know how to keep your arrogant mouth shut, and I'll stab you."

"If she'd stop me from messing up *this* bad *before* it escalates to the part where her soft little top blows, *that'd* be fucking helpful," I dutifully point out.

"Our last serious relationship with a woman we all cared enough about to share…had disputes that were more along the lines of, *"You killed fifteen of my people, so I took thirty of yours. Care to try to level the score, Emit? Or do I win this one?"* Emit states, his tone almost lifeless. "How did I get in trouble? I deliberately didn't reignite our flames, because I knew this would be a distraction, and I wanted to wait until I could devote all my attention to Violet."

"Don't say stuff like that aloud," Arion tells him, cringing and shaking his head. "That even sounds bad to me, and she's clearly a little sensitive right now."

"I was worried when the age-gap was going to become an issue," Vance states on a tired breath. "Centuries of being monsters…versus her twenty-six-years of being mostly human."

"No wonder we stay in trouble," I grumble, still confused about all the fuss going on below.

Violet's a daily reminder of how much better life has truly been. I only thought I remembered all the disgusted, sickened feelings that accommodate that

woman’s mere presence.

“I was a midwife for two decades!” Lemon shouts as she hops from the second floor, chasing after the stretcher that crashes through a set of doors that lead into…I’m not sure what.

I glance around, noticing there’s a lot more work done than I realized this morning when I passed through. I mean…that was this morning when I looked around, right?

“That’s our fucking shifter,” Arion says, throwing his hand up at Vance. “Violet’s painting herself a fucking target, and this is a cry for help. *That’s* why she broke up with us. Now it’s just too obvious not to see.”

My eyes go back down, as Shera walks out. Her gaze quickly darts to Violet’s slightly reddened eyes. Just those barely flushed cheeks and teary eyes have me immediately moving toward her. Shera’s eyes widen in a spontaneous deflation sort of way…like a balloon that just sprung a leak, as she darts a panicked look toward Arion.

Arion’s eyes narrow, but before he can stalk toward her, Marta Portocale is there, her red cloak becoming visible as the hood falls off her head.

Arion’s throat gets scissored between her two blades, and he resists the urge to rip her head off.

Good dog.

“Oh my damn, Violet!” an oddly familiar voice shouts. “The cloak does turn you invisible! You just suck at being a good gypsy! Now *that’s* the way to be a proper bad*ass*.”

I dart a gaze around, finding only Violet for a second, and too many Simpletons rushing around with blankets, towels, and various other things.

“I still hate your mom, though,” the familiar voice adds in mock hesitation.

“Careful, Vampyre. I’m helping you out for once. You don’t even get to yell at that beta, because you can’t punish her in anyway unless you go through Violet with the same punishment first. You signed over that right,” Marta says as she withdraws from her own slight distraction the impossible voice brings.

“What?” we all ask in unison, and damn near the same tone.

I forget all about the enigmatic voice that is niggling at my mind worse than an unfinished song with just one bar of melody.

“Was Violet manipulated into manipulating us into signing something so ludicrous?” I ask, glancing a suspicious look directly into her eyes.

Clearly that’s what’s happened.

“She told you to read the shit you were signing,” she points out with a small I-can’t-believe-I’m-having-this-conversation sigh. “Shera, Avery, the omegas… all of them are under Violet’s representation. You’ve all signed over your punishment rights to those individuals, and Violet is to be held personally responsible for them as long as she sees it productive.”

“What the fucking hell does that even mean?” I ask her very seriously…as a baby cries somewhere in the distance.

“Ahhhhhh! Ahhhh!” Bobo shouts as he comes racing through like he’s been traumatized, seconds before that baby cries again.

Anna staggers out of there, shuddering like she’s also been traumatized. My eyes pass over her, trying to see into the door when it opens, but only catching glimpses of bodies blocking the view.

“What the hell is going on?” I call across the damn—

A chill slinks up my spine, and my eyes dart back over to the redhead in lingerie, as she does some stretches in front of a reflective surface.

“Wh-what the hell is Anna doing here?” I ask, my chest physically aching from the sudden surprise of such a very, *very* alarming thing. “She’s a dead ghost!”

Vance shoves past me, eyes wide and bewildered, staring at her with the same incredulity.

“Ah, Anna,” Marta says like it makes sense. “She doesn’t like me, so she doesn’t come around me much. She’s afraid I’ll salt her to her third grave. She keeps a safe distance from me.”

Marta makes a face of concentration, her eyes suddenly narrowing, and

Arion hisses out a breath. “Move again, and I slice as fast as you can wiggle. Don’t underestimate me again, and don’t make me bloody my daughter’s pretty new floors on the first day she gets to call it home.”

Arion’s holding back, and she knows it. He looks ready to kill, but knows he can’t.

“What do you mean the first day she gets to call it home?” Emit asks as he looks around.

Then I really, *really* look around. It’s amazing what the passive eye can genuinely gloss over when only a shred of attention is focused.

It looks like a regal hotel from the roaring twenties, if memory serves. From the lavish gold touches, to the delicate fabrics…and all the edges are finished.

“How long were we in that room, exactly?” I ask to no one in particular.

“Just a few hours,” Arion answers absently, as his eyes rake over the fine marble floors.

Marta releases him when she realizes she’s lost his attention.

“Well, aside from occasionally seeking out my daughter, showering in Violet’s suite next to the padded room, and sticking your head out to ask Shera to bring you food, you’ve been in there for five months,” Marta states dryly, and then smirks. “I didn’t even have to suffer much while I waited for you to fuck it up. And you all did it at once, so kudos for doing it in one clean break. Shows you care a little.”

“It’s a hiccup, Marta. She’s not free,” I state dismissively.

Her eyes turn cold. “She’ll not be turned into Idun, or you’ll not live another day. I’ll cut you down every twenty-eight—”

“Not in my house, Mom. Take the alpha threats elsewhere,” Violet calls from across the room, eyes directed solely at Marta, who just huffs in annoyance.

I glance around again, and my brow furrows when I notice the Simpletons congregating in one large room with a giant screen. It’s a theater off to the back. They all have on their wireless headphones as they walk by us, moving toward that room like they’ve had drills just for the occasion. Just as they finish piling

in, the intro to the movie starts and the door closes.

“This is supposed to be a good night,” Violet tells us all. “And right now, you’re making it tense for all of them. Please. Go.”

“Violet, we really need to—”

“What, Vance? What do we need to do? Talk? Could have done that yesterday before I broke up with you. Or the day before that. Or the one before that. All you want to talk about is Idun, though. I tried talking about all this,” she says as she gestures around. “All any of you wanted to *talk* about was Idun. Even your ‘pillow talk’ turned into Idun talk.”

She gives me a pointed look, and I finally realize why she rejected the quickie I tried to steal. It wasn’t because it was a quickie. It’s *why* I was making it one...

I wish she wasn’t so damn tempting, when she’s prickly. Maybe not quite this prickly, but in general, it’s my favorite mood of hers.

“Not once have you noticed the Michelangelo of five-month jobs. The ornate carvings on the bannisters, or hand-stitched draperies on all these massive windows—things done by all the people in here you walked right by on your way to watch Idun TV in *their* home.”

Okay, now I’m starting to get worried that she really is breaking up with us. Anna props up beside her, grinning darkly at us.

I don’t like that Anna is magically back. Far too suspicious timing.

Not to mention…she’s a salt pile in a fucking urn.

“Go,” Violet says again.

“Violet, we need to be here if you are. If Idun—”

“I’m not playing Idun’s games, and I’m tired of you trying to drag me into them. While you’ve all been sitting around waiting for her to act so you can react, I’ve been trying to finish my *one* purpose. The only reason I exist is because of them. That’s heavy, and you’re all watching TV while I do it alone.”

Arion starts toward her, and she lifts a hand, eyes glistening again.

“If you make me cry, I will hate you tonight. Don’t upset me, because I’ll set

them off if I start crying. Please don't do that to them or me. Not tonight," she says again before turning and walking into the room that has a crying baby.

Fuck's sake. How much can possibly change in five months*?*

"Set who off how?" Emit asks in a confused tone as he backs toward the door.

"You've missed a lot in the five months you've been standing still," Marta adds happily, as she walks away with an I-won-the-lottery smile.

"Five months isn't generally a relatively long amount of time, is it?" Arion asks as he eyes the row of ornate chandeliers. The place actually looks a lot bigger…

"Did Marta pay for all this fancy detailing?" I ask in some moderate admiration.

"The Simpletons are craftsmen by nature," Vance murmurs as he slides his hand over one very impressive door arch. "The money comes from the fact she only paid me eight hundred dollars for this place once she realized how much she'd have to spend on repairs," he adds with a small smile, as he glances over something on his phone. "Hell, I never even bothered looking at that either," he adds as that smile falls away, and he returns his attention to the fully finished—

My thoughts and all else cut off when Avery opens the front door, and Zuela Van Helsing steps in.

The air in the room gets sucked out. Apparently, so does everyone else who dared to loiter close by, since we're all that remains.

Lemon abruptly scurries by like hell is on her heels. Judging by the look on her face, she was far too distracted to know he'd arrived.

She crouches and dives into the makeshift delivery room. Violet immediately pops back out, her eyes looking exhausted when they meet ours.

"Really?" Anna says from behind us, scaring the fuck out of us. "I used to champion for you, but now I realize you're all too obtuse to be sexy beasts," she adds before anyone can say anything.

"Coincidental her being here?" I ask aloud.

“Not the biggest problem we have at current,” Vance says as he buttons his coat, watching Violet step right in front of his father.

Zuela casts his eyes over us, rolling them like he’s ashamed.

“What do you want, little Simpleton?” Zuela asks her dismissively.

“What the hell are you doing in my town without phoning ahead?” Vance asks him.

“I copied you on the invitation Ms. Carmine extended to him,” Avery whispers just barely loud enough to be heard. “You told me it’d be fine when I asked you about it, Sir Van Helsing.”

“For fuck’s sake, Vance,” Arion snaps, glaring at Vance.

“You signed over a very dangerous, unregistered, nightmarishly problematic shifter prisoner to her, so you shouldn’t be too riled,” I tell Arion, narrowing my eyes on him.

The vampire hesitates, as though reason has actually rooted in his mind, as he mulls that over.

Violet ignores all of us, and Zuela frowns as though he’s now confused.

“I thought I was called in on matters regarding Idun,” Zuela cuts in. “It’s why I’m here.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but I invited you here for me,” Violet says, as she walks him toward the center of the foyer and looks up.

We all mimic her, mostly because we just want to look like we know what’s going on at this point. At least that’s why I do it.

There’s a large skylight, and I let my eyes flutter shut, as my lips tighten, immediately discerning where she’s going with this. This day is going to be a bad fucking day at every turn.

“I’m great at building glass,” Violet tells him. “But I’m not an artist, and I can’t make that glass as pretty as you can, Sir Van Helsing.”

He eyes her, probably a little shocked that she titles him when addressing him.

“What?” he asks her in an indignant tone, when the surprise quickly wears

off and her alluded-to request presumably sinks in.

“I want you to design a stained glass piece that will fit up there and steal your breath. I just made something to hold the place, because I didn’t want you to feel rushed. If you decide to take the job, that is,” she goes on, wording things as professionally as possible.

Zuela snorts, and then outright laughs in her face.

Vance’s fists form, but Violet just steps between them with subtle intention.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Violet says like she expected as much.

“*Hell* no. I’m not putting one of my master pieces in a fucking Simpleton house. Even if I had no dignity and did it, it’d be wrecked the second Idun has a tantrum.”

Violet nods and starts walking away.

“That’s all then, sir. Sir Avery can take you back to your plane if you need him to,” she says like it’s no big deal, because she clearly already knew it was a long shot.

“You had me bloody fly across an entire sea to ask me a question, girl? Do you not understand what a waste of alpha time that is?” he grinds out.

Vance starts to speak, but Violet smiles broadly at Zuela, speaking before Vance can get a word in. “Sorry, Sir Van Helsing. It wouldn’t have been a waste of time if you’d said yes, but you didn’t.”

My lips resist the urge to grin, before she walks back into the room with the baby once again, leaving Zuela turning forty shades of furious red. I do love that woman prickly.

I really wish she wasn’t pointlessly trying to dump me right now. I’d reward her for that behavior.

“So you’re her beta too?” Vance asks Avery like he’s somehow been disloyal.

Avery shrugs a careless shoulder. “She’s going to need good, suicidal recruits to even stand a small chance here. The least I can do to support her cause is contribute some of my time to her efforts.”

“I thought you were wiser than that, Avery,” Zuela chimes in. “The daft girl

is just going to get you all killed, because no one here has the balls to tell her she's too fucking stupid to lead. A fucking sanctuary for omegas? Are you kidding me?"

Zuela walks out, and Vance leans against the wall, while I scrub a hand over my face.

"I thought it'd take her at least five or six years to finish this place up," Arion states, gesturing around. "Even with the technology of today."

"I'm going to see what Zuela's noticed on Idun TV," Vance states very quietly. "I suggest you all leave until Violet's stopped being angry."

Something sparks against him, and Vance hisses out a breath, as he staggers forward, cursing the air like it's shocked him.

Anna's still there, smiling like an evil prankster, as a little spark disappears from her fingertips.

"Careful, boys. I'm a *little* more lucid now, and I find I like you all a lot less this way," she informs us, before strutting off in the lacy underwear.

"Cannon ball!" she shouts before racing through the movie room door.

In a few minutes, all the Simpleton's shout her name, and they all start singing some ghost song. Unreal.

"Anna returns from an impossible death right around the time when Idun rises, and we're just all going to ignore it. Cool. Makes sense," I finally state, since I'm the only one who seems to have a motherfucking problem with *Anna* being alive. Well, not dead. Well, not dead for the second time.

"My head is going to explode if one more thing happens today," I note aloud.

I start toward the door to decide which problem I want to tackle first.

"Violet didn't tell us about Anna, because she didn't want us to make that about Idun too," Vance tells me like he's pointing it out for me.

It takes a second for me to groan in realization. "Of course our first suspicion is Idun related. Everything is suspicious when Idun is alive. Are we just supposed to pretend it's normal for a ghost to not be dead after final decay?"

"Maybe she faked her death," Emit inserts.

We all blink at him, and he literally growls at us.

“I’m trying to think of other things we should rule out long before we move toward any touchy Idun suspicions. Violet missed Anna, and now she has her back, *and* we all just got put on the curb like yesterday’s trash. I suggest doing the same fucking thing I am, unless you want to really piss her off,” he points out.

It’s actually a good point.

Damn mutt.

“So what’s the plan to get Violet back, though?” Arion asks Vance. “Has someone said it and I just missed it because of the overwhelming amount of distractions around here?”

Emit starts walking out. “I don’t need a plan. She and I were just friends, so she can’t really break up with me. My new goal is to make sure she agrees with that.”

The bastard wolf just smirks as he leaves.

“He was *way* behind, and now I think the prat just jumped to the front,” I say on an infuriated huff.

I go invisible, and Arion’s hand grabs my shoulder while I’m supposed to be unable to be seen. I turn him invisible too, instead of arguing about it, shrouding us in illusion, as we quickly walk into the room everyone keeps hiding in.

We both go still when we see the sleeping shifter in the bed, looking exhausted. Violet quietly rocks the small, very pale child that is swaddled securely in a blue blanket.

I forget about everything else in the room as Violet smiles affectionately down at the child, kissing the babe’s head while she coos to it.

It’s almost like looking at an entirely different woman who has been finding her footing without us. Marta simply watches her from a corner, eyes not searching us out, even though she surely smells us in here.

A tiny hand emerges from the blanket, capturing Violet’s finger, and Marta’s eyes water, as Violet’s wide smile seems to actually double. I drop against the

wall, eyes riveted, as Violet kisses the small, crinkled forehead of the squirming child.

It takes me a while to realize the shifter's eyes are on her, and I go rigid when I do. Until the shifter starts leaking tears.

This day hasn't made sense. Not once. Yesterday was boring and dull and predictable—everything I hate about most days. Today makes me miss yesterday.

"You should keep him," she whispers softly to Violet.

Violet's wide-eyed gaze swings toward the female like she's off her rocker.

"No, *his mother* should keep him. You'll be safe here," Violet is quick to counter. "He's going to need *his mother*."

"I'm a target, and I'm as good as dead now that I've drawn so much attention to myself. Omegas should never draw attention to themselves for this very reason. We're an easy complication to eradicate," the mother says quietly, causing Arion to bristle when Violet's jaw tics.

"If they want to *eradicate* you, they'll have to go through me first. Then they'll have to get through my mother, who also happens to be a really badass alpha just like them."

Marta smirks, casting a subtle, smug look in our direction. Fucking cunt.

"Marta Portocale sitting at the bedside of an unregistered shifter and offering her protection," the shifter says, laughing humorlessly.

"You lost a lot of blood, shifter. Rest now. You're not thinking like a proper omega," Marta says dismissively.

"This is Omega U. She can say whatever she wants," Violet tells Marta like it's a reminder.

"Omega U?" I mouth to myself, wrinkling my nose at the terrible, groan-worthy name.

May as well put up a sign that reads, *EASY TARGETS GALORE* or *IDUN'S FIRST STRIKE ZONE.*

Marta just casts a bland look at Violet, but the shifter is so loopy she gives a

dopey grin, dropping back.

“It’s all a dream, of course, but it’s the first time I’ve slept without nightmares,” she murmurs before drifting back off into a snore on the stretcher.

I finally look around and realize we’re in Violet’s new shop, given all the supplies on the shelves in the much larger space.

“She got blood all over your pretty new floors,” Marta says on a sigh.

“That’s why I got these. Blood cleans up easily,” Violet says, only confusing me, actually.

Why would there be a lot of blood?

Marta snorts as Violet stands with the babe, lifting a little bottle.

I’m not sure why Marta hasn’t outed us yet, but I notice how she watches Violet with the baby. I also notice that Arion has moved closer to her, studying the entire scene just a little too intensely.

“Their blood turns slimy and green when they die,” Marta states like she’s filling the need for conversation. “Hers still runs red, so she’ll be fine.”

“Obviously,” Violet mutters distractedly as the baby’s face crumples like he’s about to cry.

She quickly sets about soothing him, and Arion lowers himself to the ground like he’s prepared to hide in my illusion all night.

“You should get some rest. I’ll care for the child while—”

“She’s scared of alphas, vampires, Van Helsing knights, and essentially everyone else but Simpletons,” Violet says in interruption to her. “Until she’s not, no one else touches her baby. Not even my wolves. Make her trust you if you want me to get some sleep, because it’s clearly not happening for me tonight.”

The baby finally cries, and Violet kisses his head, staying calm like she’s a natural at this, as he quickly calms back down, soothed by just her patience.

I take a seat on the floor opposite Arion, content to just watch. She really is a fool if she thinks we’re letting her go that easily.

CHAPTER 9

VIOLET

“What are you supposed to do?” Ivannah asks me on a choked whisper, as I place her sleeping son next to her.

“Starting tomorrow, I begin the very impossible road of making people care.”

“What about—”

“Say her name and I’ll lose all respect for you. She’s not going to be a problem for me.”

She snorts derisively, and Jasper kicks in his bassinet.

“You only talk so brave because you’re so young,” she says like she’s warning me. “What you’re doing here will only last until she decides to tear it all down”

“Let her try,” I murmur distractedly, glancing at my phone.

She just looks at me like she’s too exhausted to argue, but her face falls when Jasper makes a whimpering sound in the bassinet. I walk out, hearing her getting up just as he starts to fuss, and I sigh as I lean against the door.

Anna pops out, giving me a thumb’s up.

“Keep an eye on her,” I tell her as I take a moment to rest my legs.

I hear Ivannah singing to Jasper. His fussiness quietens, and a small smile lights my lips. Feeling better once I hear her tending him, I watch as Anna hops back inside to keep an eye on them.

“Violet!” Shera calls from downstairs, and I make my own whimper, wishing my mother would sing me to freaking sleep.

“What?” I ask without moving, closing my eyes for just a few seconds.

Two arms lift me suddenly, and my head falls against a chest. I know exactly whose chest it is too.

“Put me down, Emit,” I mumble against his shirt.

“I’ll put you in bed so you can sleep, little monster. But you can’t be on your feet any longer,” he murmurs against my forehead, before brushing a kiss there. “And you can’t break up with friends the same as boyfriends.”

“You’ve been a shitty friend,” I point out, eyes still closed.

“Believe it or not, Violet, we’re just trying to keep you safe.”

“*Believe it or not*, that’s the last thing I want you to do,” I mumble, causing him to make a frustrated sound.

“Usually, a House of this size has thirty or more omegas doing all that you’ve been doing on your own,” he says as something soft hits my back.

I end up tucked against him, as he covers us up.

“No less than fifteen betas tackling the more sensitive items you want kept close to the vest,” he goes on, as I fight to force my body to move off the bed.

Mentally, I fight, that is. Physically, I can’t really move. I’m too tired.

“You’re trying to essentially be an alpha without an alpha mentality to pull it off, Violet. It’s too much for you to do, and you need alphas around to make things—”

“I’m certainly not trying to be an alpha, and I do have alphas. Lots of them. Forty-eight Neopry Simpleton alphas and one Portocale alpha. Please stop talking for five minutes. Just five minutes. Wake me up after that,” I murmur as it all starts to dim.

He goes quiet, just drawing small circles on my back.

Then I jar awake when I hear Emit snapping, “For fuck’s sake, Shera, give her just a little while to sleep.”

“I would, but there’s a big development on Idun TV that she needs to be aware of,” Shera says in a bit of a panic.

“Why the hell would I care about Idun TV?” I groan.

“Because she’s reading the blue book at the park across the fucking street.”

My eyes open, and I glance at the TV near the end of the bed, just as Shera cuts it on. I heave out a breath as I swing my legs off the bed and stand.

“What the hell is the blue book?” Emit asks very insistently.

I see Damien on the screen, along with Arion and Vance, as they all stand in front of her.

“Relax, boys. I’m only here to talk to her about the newly registered shifter who didn’t bother registering until she could claim sanctuary. That’s it,” Idun says convincingly.

“You’ll bleed before you make it any farther than this,” Vance assures her.

She gestures to the book in her lap. “It’s in my legal right to address such things when I feel there’s foul play and smell someone gaming the system. This shifter started as your prisoner until she claimed sanctuary. It sets a bad precedent for all of us, including your girlfriend, if this isn’t handled.”

“You barely know her, Violet,” Shera says, as I start toward the door. “It’s not going to be the statement you want. She’s choosing the wrong victim. No one will want some pointless shifter to have sanctuary. I told you this from the beginning, and warned you to be prepared to compromise this once.”

“What the bloody hell are you two even talking about?” Emit asks as I pull on the shoes he must have taken off me.

How much sleep did I get?

“You’d know if you’d read the book, *friend*,” Anna says as she pops inside.

“You have a job. Stick to it,” I remind her very pointedly.

“Bobo came and got her and took her and Jasper into the walls with the others,” Anna says like she’s bored with me. “My job is done for now.”

“Violet, you’re not going anywhere,” Emit growls as I finger-comb my hair on the way down the stairs.

I hear Idun TV blasting everywhere, and not a soul is in sight, aside from Avery and his men, who are all waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs. The walls are probably really crowded right now.

“You can’t really stop this, Emit. You signed it. You made it law. I only need five of the six Houses. After all, it’s the rule: Five gypsies families for one sacrifice.”

“What the actual fuck are you talking about right now?” he goes on, as Idun

continues explaining mostly the same thing to the other three.

“You all keep calling me naïve, simply because you won’t open your eyes or listen or *do* anything besides sit and wait. You *let* Idun call the shots.”

“You’ve said Idun’s not your problem, Violet,” Emit says as he leaps over me and lands at the bottom of the stairs to block my path.

I pause as he just glares at me.

“Let us handle this. All she wants is one shifter,” he’s saying, as TV Idun says, “Step aside, lovers. I just want the shifter.”

“Do you hear yourself agreeing with her just because it’s easier to do?” I ask Emit, and then glance back at Shera, whose lips thin, as she holds her iPad to her chest.

“Idun’s not your problem, Violet,” Emit says again, as if he even knows what I’ve been trying to tell him.

“You’re right. She’s not,” I agree with him, leaning up to cup his cheek.

Then I duck under him before he realizes what’s going on. He reaches for me too late, because I hit the alert button that shoots up the security system bars, sealing off the entire area past the lobby.

Emit curses when he realizes just how strong those bars are.

“I thought you had a problem with bars,” he grinds out as the bars cover every single window as well.

“Those were fun to lie about/explain to my architect, but he’s recently worked on some very important bank vaults, and had a unique idea to weave them in. Glad you’re just now noticing,” I add before I turn and walk out the door. “Those are to keep everyone in here safe, so don’t fuck with them.”

“Vance, she’s coming out, and I’m currently unable to stop her,” Emit says very loudly.

I catch a glimpse of Idun’s subtle smile on the screen, before I step outside the doors.

Vance is there to block me next, eyes narrowed like he’s about to throw me over his shoulder and carry me back inside.

“I heard a rumor she broke up with all of you over a week ago,” Idun muses from somewhere behind Vance.

“Go inside, Violet,” Vance tells me with a humorless, tight smile, keeping his voice calm and gentle.

“She’s here to talk about my shifter, and—”

“*Your* shifter?” Idun asks on a small, condescending laugh. “How adorable. You’ve honestly coaxed the poor girl into thinking she has the brass to pull this out.”

“It’s law, Vance. You can’t stop me,” I say as I step around him.

“Never thought you’d be one to use that against me,” he says next to my ear, pushing against me from behind, as he leans down.

I pause, turning my head so that his nose and mine brush, as I make too-close eye contact.

“Really? What else can I do?” I ask seriously.

“Relax,” Idun says as though anyone is frazzled, though Damien does look ready to rip her head off.

Arion is just standing between us, not showing any expression.

“Violet, just give her the shifter. She’s registered to Idun, and she’s right about setting the precedent not to allow runners to abuse your sanctuary,” Arion states like he’s being the diplomatic voice of reason, never even glancing at me, as he gives Idun a placating smile.

“No.”

His smile falls, and the vampire narrows his eyes over at me.

“You can’t answer *no,* love,” he says like he’s cautioning me. “It’s just one shifter, Violet. One who started as a prisoner.”

“One who did absolutely nothing wrong, has never harmed anyone, and is claiming sanctuary in *my* home.”

“I have laws, Violet,” Idun says with an amused expression. “I’m not here to cause any problems with you,” she carries on while the cameras following her pan out wider, likely to add drama to the moment.

“You’re not a problem for me,” I inform her, causing Vance to pinch the bridge of his nose as I just stare Idun in her cold blue eyes.

I see it in the way she fights to hold that amused expression in place that she can only handle so much pretending.

“Good,” she lies, smiling bigger.

“By law, you can’t pull her out of here without my direct consent, and I don’t give it,” I add.

Damien glares over at me. “What are you doing, Violet?”

I shrug a shoulder. “Taking a stand. Making you care.”

Arion’s eyes stay narrowed on me, as Idun gives a tight smile. “I see the game here. Well, dear, surely someone’s informed you, that by law, I have the right to punish any delayed registries.”

“You have a right to a public flogging attended by all alphas who wish to view it and nothing else,” I tell her.

Her lips twitch. “It just so happens that a large portion of alphas have flown in for a meeting that will happen tomorrow to discuss reinstating—”

“I know,” I interrupt. “I was waiting on you to show up. It’s all been arranged, and it turns out that Vance has the necessary viewing arena for public floggings, per Van Helsing law, of course.”

Her jaw grinds like she’s annoyed I find her entirely too predictable.

“Well, then, why are we still here? Bring the shifter out so we can get on with it then,” she says, smiling darkly.

“Actually, you don’t get to have any interaction with my people outside of the flogging grounds when one has claimed sanctuary. It’s in the rules they all signed,” I point out, gesturing around at the four angry alphas surrounding me.

“What are you doing, Violet?” Arion asks me as he takes a step my way.

Idun steps forward quickly, drawing his attention back to her the second she moves.

He quickly puts his body between us again, eyes back on her.

“You see, while you’ve pretended to have transparency and worked to drive

everyone mad with the Idun TV charade, you forgot one very important thing. They've all forgotten it as well, it seems," I say as I take another step closer, leaving only Arion separating us, as I use the height advantage the stairs give me to stare down at her.

Mostly to piss her off.

"I felt their pain, Idun. I'm empathic like that," I remind her, tilting my head, as the smile starts slipping from her lips, her pupils dilating marginally. "But you were never in pain. You went to sleep and woke up a thousand years later, because somehow you're not even afflicted by the Portocale curse. If I hadn't come to town, you'd still be sleeping underground." I glance at the cameras, smiling a little. "Now they all know it too, so they can stop guessing."

When my eyes come back to hers, I decide it's good she can't shoot death rays from them. It's nothing more than an educated guess and a risky bluff, but everything about Idun differs from everyone else.

I've learned that Pandora was her bestie.

What happened to Pandora? No one seems to know or care, apparently.

Idun's not the first-born, but she's the most powerful.

She's not the first-born, but she's the head of her House.

She's truly immortal, not someone who just reincarnates after a head is removed.

"You're saying you can feel what everyone is feeling?" she asks me like she's probing.

Leveling her with a look, I give her a crooked smile. "Surely someone's informed you by now what empathic means," I say, hearing Anna make a dramatic sizzling sound that sounds eerily like skin burning.

Idun bristles, as Arion's eyes narrow just a little more, like he knows I'm full of shit, since I can't actually *feel* anything unless it's from the Simpleton—

I don't need to think about secrets. Idun has a mind-reading beta watching us right now, most likely.

She glances at the camera, her jaw ticking, before she forces her eyes to meet

mine again. “The shifter better be there within the next thirty minutes, or you’ll be in breach of your sanctuary contract. Five families won’t be enough to keep me from tearing it down very fucking legally.”

She leans forward, and the cameras intentionally move back as if she’s silently requested as much.

“I was content to let you pretend to be important for a little longer just to appease my mother and her useless spawn, Violet Carmine,” she says, as she gives me a grin I’m sure should scare the living shit out of me.

It would have. Five months ago. Probably. Hell, it may still. I usually have delayed reactions, due to my mother’s put-a-pin-in-it conditioning that has been getting really loaded down with an excess of pins lately.

Wreak Havoc starts playing over the outdoor speakers, and Anna shoots me a wink.

“Very well,” Idun says when I just continue to stare at her, unfazed, not giving her the fear she craves so much. “Tell your shifter her pain could have just been over with a quick death, but you fought really hard for what comes next. Tell your entire *House* that, Violet Carmine. Or let them watch it later,” she adds, gesturing to the camera.

I was supposed to get to enjoy this day. I was supposed to get some quality sleep that was actually supposed to have already come. Seems like there’s always something holding me back from my shiny, barely-used bed.

“Don’t worry about my House, Idun. It’s not your problem. You’re only here because they quit watching Idun TV one week ago when I broke up with them over this particular prisoner, and I’m sure you’re very aware of that.”

Her eyes deaden, mostly because I’m calling her out, and all the visiting alphas who know her will have that ‘*ahhh, gotcha’* moment they’ve been waiting on to find out why she’s really here to begin with.

“Everyone thinks she’s unpredictable,” Anna drawls as she measures Idun with a cold, assessing eye. “Really, she’s just a basic, hostile bitch.”

Idun actually slants a gaze toward Anna, almost acknowledging a ghost, but

stops just short of looking directly at her.

“Anyone carrying salt?” Idun asks with an angry, forced smile. “Ghosts really shouldn’t have any influence over the dead. Your dead brother is the one who started this downward spiral of family feuds, after all. He wanted his mummy in the grave with him, sold my family false information, and then ran and gave her family much worse information. Or didn’t your mother mention that?”

Ah, lovely. I knew there’d be a lot of these punch-her-with-the-past-revelation jabs. All of which are irrelevant to me, since I no longer give two shits about their complicated, never-ending history.

It’s become clear there are too many details to their story, because everyone is conniving, competitive, and far too messy.

“You should probably go if I have to be there so soon,” is all I say. “Everyone who hates a Portocale will be tuned in to your show to see how you put me in my place with a nameless shifter as a proxy.”

She just rolls her eyes, pretending to still be above it all.

“Very well, Violet. I wanted to show mercy. Everyone, including the four of them, will remember that. Ask Arion what he’d do to a vampire who lived for centuries unregistered, was taken prisoner for being unregistered as a mercy, and then cried sanctuary inside his girl toy’s home after registering to escape imprisonment. We’re not humans. We don’t game the system when it benefits us, or the world erupts into disease and ends.”

I almost react. Almost.

Idun doesn’t even know that Ivannah was pregnant…

That means Arion has zero leaks inside his home, and I have zero leaks inside this one. For now.

His eyes are on me, like he’s silently willing me not to be an idiot right now. Oh, shit. Now I want to piss myself. I’ve been walking Jasper around, thinking she already knew Ivannah was pregnant.

“Arion doesn’t have a vampire to discuss at current. I personally find all this

counterproductive, since you get your pound of flesh. Why are we arguing? The law isn't being broken, and we're not circumventing punishment. Run along, Idun. Quit trying to stall and make me late, when it's being recorded for all to see," I deflect like a fucking boss—sort of…in a way…I think.

Arion makes a tense sound, as he glares at me, and I hear the bars slowly raising in the house before she's even gone. Emit has likely forced someone to break the safety protocol just so he can come watch as well.

It's like unbuckling your seatbelt when you're a mile from the house.

Idun's eyes move there like she's trying to provoke my fear at last, but I sense Emit walking out, hearing the bars quickly lowering again. It's fingerprint activated, and he's not cleared to use it.

She doesn't say anything else as she turns and walks away, and I continue holding my breath, worried my knees will collapse out from under me before I'm in a safe place.

I lock those weak knees in place, using Shera's notes on faking it for just a little longer. I know the bars are probably pointless against her supposed power, but I guess that's to be determined, given all the changes I've made in her once uninterrupted line of power.

"Oh," Idun says, smiling brightly as she turns around and opens the book she's marked with her finger, like she's been waiting for this part. "Ask your girl toy what article-one, section-two, addendum fifteen is. She's not very bright, but most Simpletons aren't. Just remember I did try."

Vance takes the book, eyes quickly scanning the section she has highlighted, but Damien jerks it away and starts reading aloud.

"January Violet Carmine, representative speaking on behalf of all sanctuary dwellers, has the right to challenge any alpha in combat, should she disagree with any ruling that directly affects Sanctuary. The combat will take place in the Van Helsing flogging rings, same as all public floggings—"

"St. Mary and Joseph," Vance says as he interrupts, running a hand over his face. "We fucking signed off on *this*?"

Damien continues as though he hasn't been interrupted. "—and combat will be judged as an alpha fight, despite the Carmine representative's undetermined omega status."

Four very angry gazes swing to me, as Idun steps into the back of a car that begins to immediately move.

"*What's wrong with you*?" Damien asks me like I've lost my damn mind.

"Shera, don't open those bars again. Keep everyone safe, and hit the panic button if anything happens," I say very loudly over my shoulder, as I start walking.

Vance explodes, metaphorically, shouting about how fucking badly I just fucked things up for Ivannah. Arion punches the air, snapping about how I can't possibly be thinking of challenging Idun.

"She *will* tear you apart. Literally," Emit says like he's pleading with me to understand. "She's not some caught-off-guard beta wolves who have no idea what you are or are capable of, Violet. She knows Simpletons far more than you even know yourselves."

I nod as I step around the monstar quad.

"Shera, let the fucking shifter out right now, or I will tear you apart myself the second I get in there," Arion threatens, his eyes turning red.

The bars don't raise as I keep walking.

"Almost there," Anna whispers. "Just keep walking, Violet."

Mom moves toward me, coming from across the street, eyes narrowing.

"Violet, this is not at all what you were supposed to do! This wasn't our agreement at all," she says louder, moving faster, but gets tangled in a remaining camera cord.

I idly notice Idun TV is split between us and Idun, as she smiles on her way to Vance's home.

"Vance, don't you dare get in our way," Arion cautions him.

"What the hell am I supposed to do, Arion? What the fuck about you? Still neutral?" Vance shouts.

Emit shoves between them just before they come to blows, while Damien is distracted with frantically reading on.

“Pssst!”

I glance over, seeing Anna behind the wheel of a sedan with the motor already running. While everyone is distracted, I hop into the back seat, and then remember…Anna’s a fucking ghost.

The car lurches forward, before quickly speeding up faster and faster, and I squeal while clinging to the door. My entire body tries to get airborne around a curve.

Anna screams just as loud as I do, as a random stack of nachos come out of nowhere and slap me in the face. For Pete’s sake! This is a tense situation, and she’s ruining that!

“Why are *you* driving?!” I shout at her. “*How* are you driving?!”

“Because you can’t have a fast getaway if you’re doing the speed limit!” she snaps. “And I have ghost powers, *eejit*!”

Another scream comes out of us both when she takes another curve.

Her scream turns into diabolical laughter, as she lifts her hands so high they pass through the roof. “Look ma! No hands!”

That, of course, only makes me scream louder, even though she’s clearly copy-catting Shera right now.

“Oh! He’s waving at me! And he’s so pretty that I just have to pick him up!”

I barely manage to push up from the floor. How did I land on the floor? I get up just in time to see a shock of dark hair, as an unknown guy slides into the back seat with me.

“Violet Carmine?” he asks with a broad grin.

“Anna, you really shouldn’t pick up creepy hitch hikers right now,” I hiss, wondering why in the world I thought letting Anna drive was a good idea.

He glances around the car.

“Damien Morpheous isn’t driving?” he asks like he’s confused, seconds before the car takes off, slinging us both into each other.

When our foreheads crash together, Anna snorts.

“That’s what you get for stealing my man, bitch. Did you not hear me call dibs?”

“He can’t see you,” I remind the mostly transparent lunatic, as I hurriedly strap into my seatbelt on the straightaway she’s zooming down. I cut my eyes to the guy still clutching his head like it aches. “Who are you? Why are you hijacking the car we already hijacked?” I demand.

The music cuts up, making it hard to hear him when he tries answering.

Anna grins at me in the rearview mirror. “Sorry not sorry. You already have four stalkers. I just want one.”

“He can’t see you!” I shout again.

Why do I bother?

As the taxi from hell wreaks havoc on my stomach that’s already dreading what comes next with every fiber in my body, the unknown guy just scrambles to also get in his seatbelt.

“I’m actually here to talk to you about a possible beta position, *after* I talk you out of this really bad idea,” he tells me, as Anna sighs. “You’re not able to challenge her, but you may be able to circumvent her plan today by asking for mercy from the alpha ring. You have enough Heads to back you, and they’ll—”

“What’s your name?” I ask him again, as Anna starts weaving in and out of traffic, taking the scenic route like the deranged sociopath she is.

“Talbot Lane. I’m an incubus, and since you have no one representing our people inside your sanctuary, aside from an alpha none of us can ever remember without a refresher, it’d be an excellent idea to consider me. I brought my portfolio,” he says, passing me a folder, as he brings his phone up.

He notably checks in on his Idun TV app to reveal that the alphas have already started pouring in, ready for a silly fight put up by an embarrassing Simpleton.

“Bloodthirsty, aren’t they?” I muse, smiling tightly.

“Idun’s been unofficially challenged, Ms. Carmine. It’s not happened with

someone of Neopry blood since she put Nadine down so hard the woman lost all face in the immortal alpha ring," he says to me. "And you're just a wee immortal, Ms. Carmine. This is what I do—I predict outcomes and consequences. And if you ask for mercy, they'll grant it and make a formal request for Idun to spare this shifter for the sake of continued unity and peace."

Anna laughs so hard the car jerks to the right…just like her head. I scream and clutch the guy's leg with the hand that isn't trying to break the door handle.

"*Whoopsy*," Anna says flatly, and then laughs a little again.

"For you, they would," he says.

I look at someone like they're naïve for a change.

He leans over. "I'll level with you. I've looked into you since your stirrings in Ireland. I'm a man who lives on predictions, and an entire race of Simpletons was raised by another Simpleton. Yet all eyes swing back to the few skin walkers, while you go on to build an entire sanctuary, get laws added to surround the sanctuary with *zero* protest from any alphas as it was done, while we all watched Idun TV. And you did this all in five months, Ms. Carmine. I predicted you'd disappear into Idun's clutches, punished for raising them before she was ready. Don't make that prediction right this day."

I sit a little still, and Anna fans herself.

"I like him. Tell him it was all my idea. I mean, I did come up with the part where you break up with them and kidnap the baby. And the part where you run away with a handsome stranger and ride off into the sunset like true monsters."

"You do know you're not delusional anymore, right? You have *no* excuse for this. At all," I tell her very seriously, as she horrifies me with even worse driving over a bridge.

Why are we on a bridge?

"Anna, now we only have fifteen minutes to get there, and I don't know a bridge! Do you even know where we're going?" I shout.

"I swear I do!" she yells, just as the car spins in a one-eighty and takes off into oncoming traffic.

I scream. She screams. Talbot curses and he screws his eyes shut, as we somehow get airborne for a brief, really terrifying second.

“Anna! How am I supposed to be a pretend badass in thirteen minutes?!” I shout at her as I silently pray we land on four wheels very soon.

We hit hard, and I’m yanked forward with the impact.

“Anna, if I lose my head, I’m really dead,” Talbot informs her.

“He said my name,” Anna swoons, and then mocks a really embarrassing orgasm charade that goes on…and on…*and on*…

“*Ooohhh, baby, yesssss,*” she groans as Talbot obliviously carries on speaking to me.

It’s hard to concentrate on a complete stranger with Anna orgasming, while using her ghost powers to drive a vehicle in no particular direction, while my entire House is dependent on me dealing with this, so I miss all of what he’s trying to *predict* to me.

Relief fills me when I see Vance’s house come into view, and I pat the dude’s arm. “Yeah. I’m sure you’re great and all, but I’m sort of busy right now,” I tell him distractedly, as I spot the guys scanning the area out front.

“Anna, stop here,” I tell her, and my entire body is shoved forward just before we plow into the back end of a stationary vehicle.

Anna screams as she catapults from the front seat, landing on the car’s hood in front of us.

Talbot groans as he grips his head like it aches.

“Did not predict a ghost,” he groans to himself. “I should have. Idun wanted salt for a reason.”

I shove the door open, and I turn to face him, since he did endure that ride. “If you can beta for Damien, then I’ll consider you, in the future, for beta at the sanctuary.”

I shut the door, and he scrambles out of it right behind me.

“He hasn’t taken a single beta in over five centuries. Why would he start now?” he asks as he chases after me, while I head straight toward the quad, who

are blocking the doors.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Talbot. Everyone else does the work before joining the madhouse. You got to really want it to put up with what’s coming, and if you can’t get Damien to take you on, then you clearly have no work ethic.”

He exhales a frustrated breath. I have no idea why people do that to *me* so much. I’m the one having to rush toward the woman everyone else is hiding from, because my life sucks so hard sometimes.

“Do this and there won’t be a sanctuary. You can’t help them if you get lost in the Neopry House. She’ll have no mercy once you commit to an alpha fight, and she won’t stop until she breaks you. Every single omega is watching Idun TV with false hope right now, Ms. Carmine. The sanctuary has so much potential and a strong foundation. But despite your best intentions, you’re not an alpha.”

I ignore him as I hear a phantom ticking clock. Emit moves toward me, but I jump back and hold up my hand. “If I don’t go in there right now, she really will tear down my House. I just spent every waking second working on it, and none of you have any right to step in.”

Vance nods curtly, so angry his jaw can’t stop ticking.

“I’ve negotiated with Idun *on air*,” Arion tells me quietly, his eyes dangerously close to the ‘red zone.’ With a slight growl, he adds, “She’s going to put you down and show you your place. You’re the first of your kind, and a small example needs to be set to remind the world she’s the Neopry alpha for a reason.”

I won’t lie. I want to cry and knee him in the balls at the same time. Instead, I make a small sound of surprise—disappointment and disgust at once.

“We can’t make you understand how dangerous it is to overstep, and Marta wants to treat you like an equal, while you manipulate us all into doing whatever delusional new achievement—”

“Let’s get on with the humbling show then, shall we?” I interrupt as I shove

past Emit.

I wipe the stray tear away as I head inside. I don’t even have time to catch my breath or reinforce my pretend badass. My knees just barely wobble, but I keep it together, thinking of everything…except what’s about to happen.

CHAPTER 10

VANCE

“I tried to salt the bloody ghost, but she disappeared before I could,” Damien says as we all stand idly on the front steps, staring at the man who got out of the vehicle with Violet as he climbs into a window of the coliseum with a distinct lack of subtlety.

I’m not even sure why they came in from that direction.

“She’s taken on too much, and she’s going down the same path as the pureblood wolves did with Emit. She’s doing the exact same thing to Idun, and she doesn’t even see it. She’s the one intentionally riling Idun the second Idun enforces her authority,” Arion bites out.

I scrub a hand over my face.

“What’d you have to give her in trade?” I ask him.

“What did her mercy cost? I promised her a seat at the table instead of seating Nadine in her place. It’s one punishment I knew she’d not be able to pass up having lifted,” he says, as I nod vacantly.

It’s a large concession, but it’s the only option Violet’s left us with.

We head inside, ignoring the probing looks of everyone. Dorian smirks at Damien, and Damien pointedly avoids glancing in his direction.

The Neopry skin walkers all sit in an isolated grouping, leisurely chatting amongst themselves, as though all is fucking well with the world now that someone we care for is about to suffer.

Idun left them underground while she created her own website and livestreaming service. Violet raised them, and this is her reward. We have to trade for mercy for a soft-hearted, naïve omega.

Nadine is the only one looking on with some sympathy, as Violet steps into the arena, cracking her neck to the side.

The suspicious fellow from earlier is lurking off to the side, though I'm not sure whose beta he is. He actually looks disgusted with all this, and disappointed in Violet.

"Be glad you have friends in high places, Violet. You won't get your way, and the shifter will still get her flogging—a lick for every year she didn't have it done—but at least you'll feel better about yourself for trying. Winning spirits all around, and the little guy gets his shot at the big one for a fleeting moment, without too much damage done," Idun says as we take a seat.

I'm not sure what anyone else is doing, because my eyes are on Violet.

She dodges a camera that moves too close, and she frowns over at Idun.

"That's going to be over three hundred licks," she says as though she's pointing that out.

My knee starts bouncing, moving faster, as the tension ratchets up.

"If she can survive that, she'll be free and clear. I will sign it in blood that she can live in your little sanctuary. See? I'm amendable."

"You get to try to kill her by beating her to death, so I'd say that's just a more fun challenge for you to get your way," Violet inserts with a dry tone.

Idun's grin grows.

Across the room, I spot Zuela rolling his eyes, before shooting me a disappointed look.

"Guess it's good to be alpha sometimes. But you don't understand our purpose, because you're omega. We're an infection. We have to monitor that infection. And omegas who forget their places infect the world in one way or another. I run a tight ship. Remember that in the future when another shifter swings by for sanctuary."

Violet nods as she takes a few steps forward, and Idun feigns stretching, as her grin broadens. I listen for Violet's heart to drop, expecting her to go with a fast element of surprise.

She moves to the small platform in the middle of the room and drops to her knees in front of the pillory. My knee stops bouncing altogether.

“Do I get to stay clothed for the flogging, or am I allowed that dignity?” Violet asks far too conversationally.

Everything goes utterly silent.

Zuela sits up, brow furrowing, as Arion leans so far forward in his seat that he almost falls out of it.

Idun blinks like even she’s surprised.

“What?” Idun finally asks her, as Damien mutters a curse under his breath and scrubs a hand over his face.

“I have no right or legal authority to stop this. I’m too young to be able to judge this law, due to the fact I don’t know the story about why it was passed to begin with. But since I represent sanctuary, I have the right to keep peace by giving you your pound of flesh, while also protecting those who come into neutral, untouchable, sacred territory and seek *my* protection.”

I exhale a painful, shaky breath, as the life is drained out of me.

Idun looks trapped for a second, as she glares at Violet.

“Why put that little combat addendum in there if you planned on just taking the punishment yourself?” Idun asks through strain, like she’s exerting herself to keep her control.

Violet’s lips twitch. “To ensure you came after me the second you read it. You predictably couldn’t resist.”

“Don’t fucking goad her, you stupid girl,” Marta says as she slams her hand against the bar closest to her.

Violet winks over at her mother. “Ah, Mom, don’t be so surprised. You secretly knew I was born for this. That’s why you told me not to lose my head every time I stepped outside. You never wanted me to end up here.”

Marta’s eyes glisten, as she fights to stay composed. My mother shoots a nervous look my way. Arion’s family all cast worried glances toward him, as Idun helps Violet into a pillory with too much amusement.

I really wish I fucking knew what laws I’ve passed these past five months.

The Morpheous family dart occasional glances between Damien and Dorian,

as Dorian enjoys the moment too much.

Emily keeps a straight face, sitting in the back with her foot propped up on the back of the chair just below her row. Isiah remains just as stoic, as Idun draws out the suspense, giving everyone time to assess how each other is gauging the situation.

Idun calmly walks over and selects one of the lesser offensive weapon choices—simple leathers braided in larger pieces for less tearing. She shoots us a pointed look to ensure we notice the *small* mercy.

All of my knuckles pop at once.

“How many licks in total?” Idun asks as Violet stays secured in her degrading position, hair hanging in her face.

“My shifter is three-hundred-and-sixty-eight. I’d say as many licks—the maximum punishment—was already predictable by everyone viewing this,” Violet, the bloody maddening girl—who is ripping my heart out—says as she goads Idun some more.

Idun glances at the floggers again, moving over to select a smaller braided pattern, shrugging at us as if to say she tried.

In the next instant, Violet is struck so hard and so surprisingly that she makes a startled, pained sound. Arion’s on his feet in the next instant.

“Sit down, Vampyre. It’s just one little blow,” Idun cautions as blood trickles from Violet’s slash.

Her shirt has ripped, and Idun circles her, checking Violet’s face.

“Sit down, Arion. Don’t draw this out and make it more fun for her, please,” Violet says in such a whisper that I barely hear it. “Stay neutral.”

Arion’s jaw grinds, as he laughs humorlessly under his breath, that crazy laugh he gets before he does something stupid. But instead of doing something stupid, he sits, shaking his head, as his eyes burn with anger.

“After every ten blows, I’m required to state who I am, and why I’m here,” Violet tells her.

“We can skip that formality,” Idun tells her dismissively.

The next two blows come consecutively, and Violet doesn't react. Idun grinds her jaw and hits her so hard that Violet's blood sprays into the first row's laps. Again, Violet doesn't make a sound.

"Being tough just makes you stupid," Idun tells her. "That's only four."

Violet's skin starts pulling together on its own, and Idun's smirk slowly starts to fall. Zuela's eyes close…as though he almost feels sorry for Violet, when the healing continues.

"I forgot to mention I heal very fast and have a ridiculously high pain tolerance," Violet quips like it's good news. "Especially after that lightning storm I got caught up in two Thursdays ago when I went out for milk. You caught me on a good day."

Nadine sits up straighter, brow furrowing, as Marta covers her mouth and makes no sound at all, a dead look in her eyes.

"If anyone interrupts this, it's considered an act of war, right?" Idun asks, glancing back at us. "I'll still get to tear down her precious sanctuary she loves so much if you make any moves. Laws don't exist during wars, no matter how brief."

The air chills, as Arion's eyes turn solid red. Idun turns away from him, and from the fifth hit all the way until the tenth, Violet is struck so hard and so fast that she crashes through the pillory from the force, knocking it off its hinges, as she slams into the floor face first.

"Don't you fuckers dare start a war after watching Idun TV for five months. You owe me this," Violet groans from the floor when we all stand.

"That's ten," Anna shouts down to her.

Violet gives her a limp thumb's up, eyes never reaching ours. "I'm January Violet Carmine, protector of the sanctuary, and I'm here to accept another's punishment because I disagree with the punishment."

"Why are you doing this?" Damien asks just loud enough for her to hear it, as his entire body remains rigid.

She darts her gaze over to meet his. "Because I can take it. And it's fun to see

her still pretending to play nice, even as she readies my next beating."

I want to glue her mouth shut, because she doesn't know her limits, and Idun is itching to show her.

"Ma, look away. I love you," Violet adds, groaning a little, as she pushes up from the floor, the pillory giving way and collapsing to shambles around her.

Marta's eyes shut as another tear falls, but they won't stay shut for long.

Idun drops the flogger and very calmly selects a longer, more twisted set of metal braids, not even glancing our way this time.

Violet starts to turn, and the braids slam into the side of her face, spraying blood all over the western side. I bite down on my fist to keep from shouting.

"That's my girl," Anna says from beside me.

Violet just spits out the blood and looks back, letting Idun take another face shot that slings her head in the other direction.

We all move uncomfortably, forced to sit and watch. All because we thought she was coming to fucking *fight* Idun.

The next several blows send Violet sailing, her skin shredding, as threads whir through the air. It takes a few minutes to realize it's her own clothing she's stealing from, as the wounds start stitching themselves up.

A few breaths of collective surprise hit the air, but Idun looks like she expected as much. Violet bloody grins like a deranged lunatic, as Anna shouts the count once more.

"Someone salt that fucking ghost!" Idun snaps, pupils smaller, as she glares in our direction.

No one moves, and she narrows her eyes at us.

"I'm January Violet Carmine—"

"I said we could skip that little formality," Idun cuts in, moving toward Violet.

"It's the law, and why are we doing this if not to follow the fucking law?" Violet interrupts.

Idun clicks her tongue. "I forgot how stupid you all are," she tells Violet.

Violet just gives her a tight smile. “I’m January Violet Carmine. I’m half Neopry. Half Portocale. I’m all gypsy with all my gypsy pride. And I’m the only person in the room who can say that last part. I’m here to remind you of just how far you’ve all fallen.”

Violet’s slammed into the iron cage with the next hit Idun delivers, and we watch as she takes each one, never crying out in pain. Frozen in our places, all we do is look on.

It’s the first time I notice us standing still, and it’s the most agonizing thing I’ve ever endured. I’d suffer a thousand Portocale curses to avoid ever facing this motherfucking nightmare ever again.

“That’s ten,” Anna says as Violet takes a little longer to get up, the wounds sealing with the next bout of thread.

“I’m January Violet Carmine, and I’m here to ensure that no alphas are gaming the system for petty, pathetic, or vindictive reasoning, as they wield life and death in their hands, while forgetting how to care about the *infections* who have to die,” she says as she spits out another wad of blood. “And I can keep the peace, because I can take whatever you’ve got, Idun.”

Idun drops the metal flogger.

“Remember that I tried,” Idun says again as she walks over and grabs the Van Helsing flogger meant only for alphas.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Damien warns her.

I’m confined by my curse, unable to break the law, even on behalf of the woman I love.

“Vance would stop me if I wasn’t within my legal right,” Idun tells him, as she gives me a pitying look. “You’re bleeding, dear. Quit trying to reach me when I’m not doing anything wrong. It only gives you agonizing migraines in the end. You never could understand.”

My eyes drop to Violet, just as Idun swings the Van Helsing braids gifted for floggings. It shoots out the silver, unbearably painful strikes that would cut most immortals into actual pieces.

Violet flies across the cage, slamming into the bars there and tumbling down, as Idun leaps the distance and hits her again so hard the concrete cracks and spills over from the impact, *after* the flogger glances off Violet.

Violet grunts and curls in on herself, as Idun hits her again, and again, standing over her as she maxes out the mark where Violet legally gets a rest.

“That’s ten!” Anna shouts as Idun just barely stops the flogger in time.

Idun’s breathing heavily, as Violet slowly gets to her feet, more of her jeans disappearing as her wounds are quickly threaded shut.

“I’m January Violet Carmine,” Violet says with a wince, as she carelessly shoves her shoulder back into its socket with a loud *crunch.* “For fun, I try new potions that occasionally blow off a limb or two. Once I burnt myself up. Took a couple of days to heal. I heal faster than average, because I was designed as a cosmic fuck-you to—”

Idun hits her before she can finish. “There’s a time limit,” she tells Violet, as Violet crashes to the ground. “Time’s up.”

She slams the flogger down into her skull, her eyes crazed, as the inner monster shows. The monster she claimed was all the devil’s work from the stone.

Zuela’s grip tightens on the railing, because like me, he knows what a waling of that magnitude feels like. Violet’s face quite literally gets beaten into the concrete.

Still, all I can do is fucking watch.

“Ten!” Anna shouts.

“I said to salt that fucking ghost!” Idun shouts as she turns and points once again.

“I’m January. *Violet*. Carmine,” Violet says through a little strain, gathering everyone’s attention once again, as she slowly pushes up from the broken concrete, spitting out blood, while one of her eyes swells shut.

“Forty-eight Simpletons have endured a hundred times as much as you’re all cringing at today. Which is why I’m here. It’s my turn. Because I’m what stands

between her petty, deranged tantrums and all of you," she goes on, which has Nadine darting a glance at all of us.

It was once her telling us how bad it was for the Simpletons. Then it was the Simpletons swearing it wasn't nothing they couldn't handle. It was easier to just believe the Simpletons.

Again, Idun wastes no time, over and over again pounding Violet into the concrete like the second time will work better.

If anyone is moving, they're not making a sound.

After ten, Violet raises her head again.

"I'm January Violet Carmine. I'm paying my dues to the Neopry community today by keeping my sanctuary safe, after opening it a mere week ago, even though I have the backing of five of the six families," Violet goes on, fucking gutting me, as her eyes water a little in our direction. Her eyes go back to Idun's quickly. "Because what I'm building is bigger than anything you can ever tear down."

Idun smirks before the hardest hit yet sends Violet's head whipping to the right so forcefully that I hear her neck snap. She spirals lifelessly through the air, before crashing into the cage. Her unmoving body tumbles to the ground and stays limp there.

There's a weighted breath where I forget she can't die, and a cold washes over me with a painful force.

Until I hear a *crack*, as Violet begins to move.

Idun makes it her mission to hit her as hard as she can, slinging her as far as the cage allows with each blow, in an effort to cheat the beating and make it worse.

Arion's hands steeple in front of his face, as Anna shouts, "Ten!"

Idun's hand starts coming down, but I'm down the bleachers and reaching through just in time to grab her wrist.

She stops and glares at me, as her hand is halted midair.

"*You don't get to interfere unless you want war*," she bites out in roughly

translated Romanian.

“She gets to fucking talk,” I counter through clenched teeth. “*It’s the law*.”

Violet staggers to her feet, both eyes swelling now, along with her jaw, as blood trickles from various places.

She clears her throat as she says, “I’m January Violet Carmine, and like all the Simpletons you’ve mocked, ridiculed, found to be a nuisance, and loathed for simply being weak, I’m here because I’m giving you a fair chance to care, after having a thousand years of an Idun-free world to thaw your scarred, cold hearts.”

I’m forced back by my Van Helsing curse when Idun tears away to resume the process of beating the fucking hell out of Violet. Violet never even cries out in pain.

With each set of ten, Anna breaks it up, and Violet hurriedly stitches the wounds shut. Each time, she talks about how she’s built differently, just like all the Simpletons. Each time, she points out her resilience. Each time, she points out our inaction.

“Why the fucking hell is this thing not working anymore? All alphas are granted a Van Helsing flogger in this room,” Idun shouts as she throws down the rusty junk, the flogger no longer blessed as a *gift.*

“You’re only allowed two hundred blows with a Van Helsing weapon,” I say very coldly.

“Not even alphas are expected to endure more than that,” Zuela adds, as even he glares at Idun.

Violet slowly rises.

“I’m January Violet Carmine,” she says as she pops all five of her fingers back into place, one by one. “I’m twenty-six-years-old, newly single, have an excellent driving record, pay all my bills on time, and work my ass off to make a living, when I’m not building a sanctuary, dodging wolves who want me dead for no reason, vampire mercenaries paid for by one of my own kin, and crazy ex-girlfriends,” Violet chirps.

My gaze finds Edmond Portocale for the very first time, his eyes somber, as he sits opposite Marta. They never once even glance at each other. Marta is staring at the ground below her, unable to watch this.

Idun's heartbeat drops just enough for me to notice, but she has a flogger in her hand before I can stop her. She kicks Violet so hard I hear bones shattering.

Ice sprays up the sides of the walls behind us, and everyone looks around as it covers the ceiling. Our breaths fog in front of us, because she pissed Arion off too much this time.

"You lose ten lashings for that," Zuela, the referee for *this evening's motherfucking event*, says in warning.

Idun just grins. "Worth it."

Violet slowly pushes herself back up, but Idun pounds her down with the flogger.

"Ten!" Anna roars.

Idun curses, but no one is looking at her, as Violet uses the wall to push herself up, her right leg broken at the knee, as she balances on one leg.

"I'm January Violet Carmine, and I'm as resilient as a Neopry Simpleton and as stubborn as a Portocale. I'm just getting started. I'm young and naïve, so I have plenty of fight left in me. I was born to be your fucking punching bag."

Violet smirks, the last threads from her jeans and shirt unravelling to stitch her up, as Idun winds up.

"It sucks so hard to be her some days," Anna says on a pitying sigh.

"I was born to stand in your way, just because I fucking can. And now everyone's going to know that you're not my problem. But I just became the only problem you're allowed to have, because you, the big, scary, all-powerful alpha can't even make me scream while I'm still just a pup."

I feel the pulse of power as Idun slams the flogger down. It's glowing red, breaking all the rules too fast to be stopped, as it crashes down on Violet's back.

The pulse of power is so potent that a ring of it almost knocks me back.

"Fault! You forfeit all other licks; the punishment is concluded," Zuela

quickly says to Idun, as she just laughs under her breath, letting the flogger tumble from her hand, as she walks toward the gate door.

Idun grins as she glances over at Violet with far too much interest.

“This is going to be fun, *January Violet Carmine*. I look forward to our next encounter.”

Violet’s body is so deep into the concrete that I can barely see the flesh of her skin. Her body is stitched together in patches with all her clothing, and only her underwear remains.

It was just flesh wounds until that last hit, but I have no idea what damage has been done now.

The concrete stirs, and Idun’s smile falls just barely, as Violet’s head pops up just enough to see her hair. She starts slowly standing once again.

Her entire body is patterned with stitches, as she reaches into her bra, cracking a small glass ball, before letting the liquid drip to her face.

There’s some instant change, but she still looks bludgeoned to bloody death.

“Still neutral?” I ask Arion so quietly only he can hear, as Marta steps by Idun and into the cage to go to her daughter.

Violet struggles to stand on her own with one leg broken.

Arion stands and walks out without saying a word to me. Damien does the same thing. Emit goes last.

Zuela’s eyes meet mine, as they all three walk out different doors, and he turns and walks out as well. Everyone is damn silent and fast to leave.

“Oh, come on. That was just like the good ol’ days when arrogant omegas or betas would show how stupid they are,” Idun crows, high off the pain she’s caused, as Violet winces.

Idun struts outside to where everyone else has gone, wanting her attention. I notice the camera that stays on Violet, as she kisses the top of Marta’s head, while Marta feigns a stoic expression.

“We’ll talk about this later,” Marta assures her.

Damien sends me a text, and I stand, buttoning my coat as I read it.

DAMIEN: Cold Well Creek. We're meeting there.

ME: I'm getting Violet home first.

He sends nothing back, as I walk through the mostly empty arena, ignoring Nadine as she looks on from the shadows. She wordlessly watches, as Marta helps Violet hobble her way toward the exit.

"Call Ighan," Violet is saying, as I come up behind her. "I need him to meet us at the back door with something to juice my healing before everyone sees me."

Marta turns her cold eyes toward mine, a lethal look in her gaze like she wants to do something that will certainly ignite a war. I know the feeling.

The yard is still littered with alphas and betas who were here to witness a *humbling fight* to put Violet in her place.

Violet makes a peace sign, as she smiles toward the camera, and the cameraman slowly backs away. My eyes come up just in time to see Demetria, the mind-reading gypsy freak, back into the shadows like she was ensuring no one tried anything against Idun.

She's probably been inside Violet's mind the entire time, prying for any and every secret to give Idun. She's supposed to be fucking forbidden from all alpha gatherings.

Zuela's eyes meet mine as he stops in front of his car, but he looks away just as quickly, as his beta/lover takes passenger side. My mother gets into another vehicle, eyes shaded by designer glasses, as her beta kisses her cheek.

It feels like all eyes are on me as I move through the thinning crowd, hearing Idun animatedly talking to the camera.

"It's not as bad as that time I *thought* I could make a combustible engine and put it on the back of my bicycle to form a rocket," Violet tells Marta, causing Marta just to glare at her harder, as Violet grins broadly over at her.

“Vance is going to give me a ride, since he’s stalking me to tell me what an idiot I am for this, and you’re going to go scream into the forest for a few hours before speaking, okay?” Violet says to her.

A tear leaks down Marta’s face, and she gives Violet one curt nod, before my arm goes around her waist. Marta doesn’t even object to the touch as she stalks off.

Avery comes over, eyes glassy, as he puts his jacket over her shoulders.

“Thanks, Sir Avery,” Violet says like she’s in some way grateful he’s a traitorous son of a bitch.

“You knew?” I ask him, narrowing my eyes.

His lethal, cold glare swings to me. “You passed these laws, Sir. I have no choice but to uphold them, and you requested not to be disturbed when I brought it up the past four times. Then you left before I could show you what is in the book you refused to read, and Ms. Carmine thought it’d be simpler to get this over with.”

I’ve stood still hundreds of thousands of times, and never once felt like I missed anything. My eyes fall down to Violet, as she prompts me to start moving.

“Who the fucking hell hit my car?” Dorian shouts, jerking his gaze around.

“Don’t carry me, Van Helsing. Cameras are rolling. I need to *walk* away,” Violet says as she puts her hand on my chest, stilling me from lifting her.

“How much more will you punish me today, Violet? How many apologies will it take to ever fix all this?” I ask her quietly, my jaw tensing, as the weight just presses me down farther.

“This isn’t about you,” she says like she wishes I understood that.

I stare at her for a moment before I finally nod, letting her use me like a crutch, even though I do subtly and unnoticeably use my grip to lift some of her weight off the leg she’s *dragging*.

My jaw tenses as bile rises to my throat, but I swallow it all back, not fucking making it about me, as Damien’s new SUV pulls to a stop in front of us.

The suspicious lad from earlier hops out and runs around to open the back door for Violet. “Ms. Carmine, I hope you don’t mind if I drive instead of Anna this time. Or would it offend her?” he asks, looking around.

“Anna’s not here, you prat. Who the hell are you?” I ask as I lift Violet into the seat too quickly for anyone to notice and shut the door.

He jogs around to the driver’s door and hops in, and I take the seat behind him and next to Violet, as I narrow my eyes.

“Talbot Lane. I’m Damien’s new favorite beta.”

“Damien took you on already?” Violet asks like this is the time to be genuinely interested in anyone other than herself.

“Not yet, but I’m exceedingly arrogant, so I’ve already given myself the job. Be seeing you around some then, eh, Ms. Carmine?”

I pause, realizing I’ve been so distracted I missed the scent in the car. Damien taps my shoulder like he knows I’ve just caught on to the fact they’re in here.

Violet remains oblivious, as Damien drops the illusion to my eyes only. Talbot drives us on.

Violet glances around like she’s checking to see if anyone is nearby.

“Talbot Lane, I need you to pull over and get out. Walk around for about five minutes, please,” Violet tells him.

I sit up straighter, expecting her to have something to say to me in private, as he does as instructed without argument.

The second he’s gone, her mask slips for the first time, and tears spring to her eyes, as she stops pretending, doubling over. She sucks back a pained sob. Arion bites down on his fist. Violet never makes more than a smothered cry of pain, rocking back and forth, as she leans her head toward me.

“I’m sorry. I’m not punishing you, but that metal has to come out of my head, and I can’t get it with the threads,” she says on a choked, pained whisper. “I don’t have it in me to pretend to be a badass right now.”

Damien gags and looks away, swallowing down any sound, as Emit’s eyes burn with wolf color, when I glance down to the battered back of her head,

noticing the blood matting her hair. The heartless vampire in the front passenger seat even cuts his gaze away like he can't stomach it.

Little threads from the stitches have opened on the back of her head and are trying to wiggle a piece of rusted metal free. The damage is…killing me.

Trying not to react, I touch just the tip of the rusty metal, turning it back to Van Helsing silver so that it will come out more smoothly. She makes a few pained sounds, her hand gripping my leg, as I manage to work it out. Then she just exhales in relief as I toss it outside, watching it turn back to rust, just so I have an excuse to look away.

"Will you get out for a second now?" Violet asks me, drawing my attention back, as she fights to keep the pain out of her expressions.

"Violet, let me—"

"My leg is healing backwards, so I have to re-break it and turn it back around. It's going to be painful, and I need just a moment to be weak before I get home and put on a brave face for everyone who needs to see it," she says very seriously, as her eyes water with unshed tears. "Apparently you need the brave face too, and I just…I just can't. One minute to be weak, Vance. Please."

I shove out the door, slamming it behind me, as I run a frustrated hand through my hair. Her little cry of pain precedes bones breaking and a scream behind tight lips.

I look back to see her head down, hands still on her freshly straightened leg, as her body shakes with her silent sobs.

Talbot returns, not batting an eye, as he moves past me to the driver's side.

Violet looks up, tears dried and face painted with a smile. It's been a long time since I struggled with tears. Tears are a weakness I eradicated very early on as a mortal lad.

But today, I find myself weakened too. Since I have no other choice, I manage to recover myself, before getting into the backseat again.

"So, Ms. Carmine, can I ask for a favor?" Talbot asks from the driver's seat.

"Really?" I ask the sniveling little incubus in the front seat, whose neck I'd

wring if not for the fact Violet would be upset by it right now.

“Sure,” Violet tells him, as she closes her eyes, the bruises on her body becoming more pronounced, interrupted by strings of stitching without her trademark satin.

Talbot clears his throat, averting my glare in the mirror as he drives, oblivious to Arion studying him rather intently.

“While I’m interning for Damien Morpheous to prove I can be a better beta than I appeared to be earlier, I’d like to request sanctuary for an omega. She’s dear to me,” he adds, eyes glancing back at Violet again.

“I have wolves who vet the omegas to ensure they want and deserve sanctuary, so that we don’t get played or taken advantage of. They’ll see anyone requesting admittance,” Violet states like he should already know that.

Talbot just gives her a slow nod. “It’ll take her a few days to get here. Is there a way I can rush her to the front of the line when she does? That’s the favor I’m requesting, Ms. Carmine.”

“There won’t be a line. We have a system in place, Talbot Lane. You’re supposed to be better at predicting things, aren’t you?”

I admit that I enjoy the incubus squirming in the seat like he’s trying to figure out what to say next.

“I think you’re underestimating the impact you just had on the entire immortal community, Ms. Carmine.”

“In other words, he *predicts* a lot of omegas will line up to let you be their whipping post,” I grind out, glaring over at her.

“That’s not—”

“Talbot, shut up. Trust me. Just shut up,” I say to him, as Arion struggles not to remove the idiot’s head.

He locks his lips, as I look back over at Violet, ignoring the car full of alphas who don’t want her noticing them, while she idly stares out the window at the passing scenery.

“Do you know why I broke up with you?” Violet randomly asks me.

“Because I fucked up,” I state, not bothering to elaborate.

She smiles a little sadly as she shakes her head.

“No. It’s because you simply don’t care what an omega—even me—tries to accomplish, even if it’s in compliance with your own laws. It’s because it’s not *worth the turmoil* Idun will cause. I broke up with you because you refused to understand that Idun will never be my problem, no matter how many times she needs to be dealt with.” Her eyes return to mine as we pull up outside the back of Omega U.

“Arion will never choose me over her, and that’s okay. I don’t need him,” Violet goes on, causing Arion to shoot a glare at her. “Damien doesn’t even bother feeding from his one source, because he has no plans of dealing with Idun,” she adds, making Damien lean forward, his hand almost touching her, but stopping short.

“Emit, the alpha who does still care, will *only* care about all his wolves—to hell with vampires and any other weaker beings Idun will crush if she goes unchecked. They’re not his problem.”

Emit bristles from the backseat, but Violet stares at her house ahead.

“I built this place, because not even you would listen to a voice weaker than an alpha’s. You’re all hardened, and I understand why. I don’t even judge you for it, despite appearances,” Violet says as she pushes open her door.

Her eyes flick back to mine as she steps out on her good leg.

“So that means I have to step up if I want someone to care about *everyone* who will die. If Idun claims even one life from sanctuary, no one will ever have faith in it. And all you care about is what she may do to all of you and me. To hell with everyone else.”

She hops on one leg as Shera comes outside, eyes rimmed red like she’s been crying, as she comes to an abrupt halt, seeing Violet in all her battered glory.

“You’re supposed to heal faster than this,” Shera manages to say through strain.

“Well, I ran my mouth a little to make sure she was hitting hard enough to

send a message," Violet chirps. "No worries, Shera. I'm good. I barely felt it at all."

She lies so well I'd believe her if not for the fact I watched her break.

Tiara practically sprints out to us, and she throws Violet's arm around her shoulders, before helping her toward the back door.

It's late, and no one is out, but the spotlights are blaring down on the ground, lighting everything up. Omegas are scared of the dark, after all.

I glance around at the bars lifting on the windows, hearing a buzzer from somewhere inside, as Violet holds her head high, despite the beating and public shaming.

Emit comes up on my left, Arion on my right, and Damien on his right. Shera wipes the tears from her face, as Arion just stares at her, becoming visible once Damien drops the illusion. She doesn't even look surprised to see him, as she turns her glare on us.

"You may want to read that big thick book now," Shera tells us very calmly, as another tear leaks from her eye.

I've never seen Shera with tears before.

My gaze moves back to Violet, as Leiza, Lemon, and Mary come rushing out to throw their arms around the maddening gypsy as well, even as Violet continues to feign no pain.

"She built this because she knew you'd stand still. Now there's nothing left to do but watch her work," Shera adds, as she turns and walks away.

"She's certainly mouthier when she's not scared of my pencils," Arion says, mock indifference in his tone, even as his jaw tics.

"Clear!" I hear Anna shouting, just before something electrical zaps, and Violet comes shooting out of the door, soaring through the air.

Arion hisses out a breath when she slams into the ground, groaning, and we all fight the urge to rush to her side.

"Too much?" Ighan calls out in a panic, as he comes jogging down the steps, stumbling over his own feet with a wide-eyed Bobo right on his heels.

“Nope,” Violet says, smoke rising from her body, as she peels herself up from the snow.

Avery’s jacket slips off, as she stands in just her underwear, and holds up an *okay* sign with her fingers.

Her body starts healing right in front of us, as she leans down and picks the jacket up.

“Hit me again,” she shouts, while the bruises continue to fade, the swelling starts to subside, and her stitches begin falling out.

Tiara’s eyes lift to Emit, disappointment shining for a moment, before she turns and walks back inside.

Music starts blaring from inside the house, and I watch as Violet walks through, already dancing and wearing a small sundress someone has apparently given her.

Simpletons pile in, right in front of the massive windows, and dance alongside her, as she pretends taking that beating was cake.

Violet dances her way over to a silent, unmoving shifter, who is holding a tiny baby. Violet just winks at the shifter she took that beating for, and kisses the baby, before dancing over to Bobo. He lifts her up to sit on one of his massive shoulders.

“You’re not my beta,” Damien says without looking away from Violet.

“I’m afraid I am, sir,” Talbot says as he gets out and hands Damien back his keys, eyes not even glancing toward us, as he watches the house as well. “You see, you’re the only thing standing between me and the legend she’s attempting to build. I’ve spent too long knowing what comes next to pass up the opportunity to see something real and different.”

With that, the fucking incubus we’d normally kill for showing too much interest in Violet, just walks away with his hands in his pockets, smirking over at the madhouse full of partiers like today was something to celebrate.

“For five months, Violet sat around planning this right under our noses,” Emit says very quietly.

“While we watched Idun to see what *she* was up to,” I point out dryly, laughing bitterly and slightly maniacally.

“I have a meeting with Idun I probably shouldn’t be late for,” Arion says before he turns and walks off.

He’s been eerily quiet and calm.

I back away, as Anna waves her hand in front of Idun TV, turning it off with a smirk on her face. Then she gives Violet a mock fist-bump. They both turn and look through the windows at us, before looking away like we’re no longer of any consequence.

“Let’s get to work,” Damien chirps as he claps his hands together.

CHAPTER 11

ARION

“I’ll keep this short and sweet. Here’s a list of my rules. Violet needs to learn what she can and cannot push for, but you know not to push me, Idun. Be gentle. She’s mine.”

That was my warning.

“For you, dear, I’ll make such a concession. Only because I owe you that much.”

She agreed to heed my warning, no matter what.

I certainly never expected the docile little monster to taunt the sadistic monster we warned her has no heart.

Images of Violet’s bloodstained face and broken sobs repeatedly assault my mind. My sanity has never been more in question than it is in this moment.

Someone is going to pay for this, and it certainly won’t be Violet.

Idun struts in, hips swinging very deliberately in the scrap of a leather dress she’s wearing, as she walks toward me in her elaborate high heels.

“I’m sure you’re here to deny me my seat at the table after your girl toy pushed me, but I did try to take it easy on her, Arion,” she says like she’s going on the immediate defense.

I nod, smiling tightly at her. “Oh, I heard her goading you, Idun. No worries. I likely couldn’t have withstood a beta’s goading, let alone some silly omega’s.”

She pauses, her eyes narrowing in clear suspicion.

“Why do I feel like you’re attempting something foolish right now, Arion?” she asks, arching an eyebrow and giving me a devilish little grin.

My own smile grows, while my hands steeple in front of my face, and I rest my right ankle on my left knee, getting more comfortable in my chair, even as she remains unfazed.

“I told Violet I was her monster, and today she very brutally revealed to me just how poorly I’ve delivered on that vow,” I say very calmly.

Idun’s lips work to resist another smile. “What’s that sweet little girl going to do with a monster like you, Arion? She willingly took a beating for an irrelevant shifter she hardly knows.”

My fingers come down, and I smile again. “We spent so long worrying you’d take Violet’s form, focused on the fact you can mimic Portocale blood.”

Her smile starts to slip. “You told them that?” she grinds out. “You’re to remain neutral, Arion. Remember what you said to me.”

“I’ve told them quite a great deal since my one request was that you leave Violet alone, in exchange for all your secrets stowed. You couldn’t make it even a year before you pushed me, and I didn’t even realize you were pushing. Neutrality is no longer an option, I’m afraid. You had your chance. Everyone knows it.”

Her smile falters just a little more, but she tries to recover.

“What have you told them?” she asks, as she works to hide her irritation.

“You see, I made one promise, and that promise was that you wouldn’t be a problem. Then you go and *beat* Violet into the ground right in front of me,” I carry on through clenched teeth, feeling the monster rise to the surface.

I scratch my eyebrow, laughing bitterly, as I move over, working her toward the center of the room. She takes a step back, cold eyes assessing me.

“All these centuries of such strong loyalty, and you couldn’t grant me one request. For that, I was punished today. By Violet. The cruel girl made me *watch* how fucking stupid I truly am.”

“Arion, this was not personal. You’d have done the same damn thing with any other beta. I’m not even sure what sort of fucked-up omega she is, but I’m letting the abomination live, simply because you’ve taken a temporary liking to her. However, the girl is simply getting underfoot,” Idun calmly argues.

“All the while, Violet was telling us not to let you become her problem. She warned us quietly, and none of us heard her. Our listening skills are subpar.” My

hands come together again, as I give her a cold smile. “Everyone always said I could have changed the war by uniting the front against you.”

That heat in her glare warms the air around me when I set off her temper a little with that jab.

“You were just the cushion between forces, Arion. Don’t get cocky. You should be smarter than them by now,” she cautions. “Your little girlfriend has resilience as an effective gift, but I’m unstoppable when I’m actually trying, and you know it.”

“You’d have cut her in half today with that little punch at the end if you’d really been able to,” Damien says, causing Idun’s head to jerk to the right.

“Yeah, I told them the truth about how your sense of smell is no better than a Simpleton’s,” I say with a mocking grin, as Damien drops the illusion. “Now they know you can’t sense them. I always was your nose.”

“He’s lying. I know you’re all in here, so you can drop the charades, Damien. They’re no—”

Her words die when the more complicated, certainly well-executed illusion drops, which means the floor falls away as well, since it was never real. The chain she never felt being attached to her throat yanks tight against the heavy Van Helsing collar. Her words die on a choked sound, as she drops ten feet down the hole she had no idea even existed, and I crack my neck to the side.

Vance moves to the edge, along with Emit, as he smirks down with the rest of us. Damien merrily skips to the edge, smiling, as he looks down as well.

Idun’s eyes are turning bloodshot, as she struggles with the confining chain and collar attached to her neck, legs jerking as she flails for air.

“I also told them how you hate suffocating and how it frazzles you, though you had no idea I took note of such things like that, I’m sure,” I tell her idly, checking my phone to see if Shera’s returned my text.

She hasn’t. I think this is the first time she’s had the bollocks to be cross with me.

My lips twitch as Damien takes a seat, propping an arm on his knee, as he

just grins down.

“You forgot how remarkably strong I am when I can feed, Idun. Even stronger when I feed regularly from another true immortal. Not that you ever let me do such very often. Now I remember why you were such a cold bitch—you worried what I could do to you if I ever reached my peak.”

Her cold eyes turn back to mine, even as she finds herself unable to do the one thing she loves to do most: Talk.

“Nadine will handle all cases dealing with the sanctuary in the future, and she will default to Violet’s decision,” Vance says coldly.

She jerks in the chains, and I roll my eyes.

“Yes, yes, I know. She’s an omega and has no right, but it doesn’t really matter. You see, the thing I promised Violet—what we *all* essentially promised her—was that we are *her* monsters,” I add so that she understands the seriousness of Vance’s demand.

“*Now* we know what that means,” Emit tells her, as he crouches near the edge, wolf eyes shining.

“If Violet wants to be a sanctuary, she’ll be a motherfucking sanctuary, and you can let a few shifters go *whenever* she asks it. In the grand scheme of things, she’s asking for so little,” Vance goes on as he absently shines his sword.

“You couldn’t be touched in that ring back there, Idun. We couldn’t start a war, cost Violet even more just so we could skip our punishment,” Emit states, as she continues to pointlessly writhe.

“She’s only got about another five minute window before she can break free, so let’s wrap this up so we can put her on ice,” I say, twirling my finger, as Damien drops the last illusion in the room.

All the hidden features reveal themselves, as Damien buffs his nails, proud of how well he’s executed his part of this plan.

I hit the lever on the side of the wall, since I reserved the honors for that. Idun’s eyes widen as the chain drops, and the lower floor lights up, coming into view.

“I planned to stay neutral, but I also planned a backup plan with all my knowledge, Idun. Violet’s just a little impatient, but since we’re *her* monsters, I’ll skip ahead.”

The chain drops the final length, and she splashes into the pool below.

Vance punches the button next to him, and the water starts immediately freezing along the edges.

“It’s amazing what technology exists in this era, Idun. I warned you not to fuck with me,” I add, as Vance starts reading off the highlighted portions of the blue-leather-bound book full of laws we’ve passed that we simply allowed Idun to break, because we didn’t bother to learn them.

“No alpha is allowed within one thousand feet of sanctuary territory without a written invitation from the House representative, January Violet Carmine,” he says as he flinches.

Marta *let* her do this after Violet deviated from her plan of the alpha fight. We heard the words and didn’t even ask what they bloody meant.

The glass I’ve been drinking from shatters in my hand, the last few sips of whiskey spilling with their newfound freedom, as Idun’s eyes widen more.

“As punishment for your violations, you’re sentenced to however fucking long it takes you to break yourself free of that,” Vance concludes.

“You don’t have your armies anymore, Idun, and I’ll not be *cushioning* you with mine,” I tell her as I lift the bottle of whiskey I’ve mostly drained, raising it as if to toast her. I guess I’ll drink straight from the bottle now that I’ve gone and ruined my glass. “Cheers, Idun. Welcome to a brave new world.”

As I sip the last of the whiskey, the pool quickly finishes freezing, and we all stare down, waiting for the monster to emerge. After a few minutes of nothing, I frown.

“I expected a fireball or one final *rawr,”* Damien says, miming a lazy cat claw, as he stares down in disappointment.

Turning up the bottle, I drink the rest of the whiskey, pushing through the door to where the camera man is tied to a tree. Shera walks off, tossing a hand in

the air as the camera flies through the air and smashes into the wall.

Well, she didn't answer my text, but she still showed up as I told her to do.

"Idun will let you know when she's ready to film again," I tell the wide-eyed male.

Vance drops a scroll in the man's lap as he walks by. "By order of Van Helsing, production is shut down until she finds her own way out of that. Anyone who aides her will get *her* immediately punished again."

"The next one will be a doozy. I'm very creative when I'm motivated," I add with a dark smile, before turning and letting it fall.

"What?" I hear Zuela asking.

Abruptly, I turn to see Vance on his phone.

"I'm calling to ask a favor. I need you to put in—"

"Zuela, do you want to see the bedroom, or do you want to have tea and talk first?" I hear Violet asking over the phone, and I drop the bottle that shatters to the ground.

The shifter on the ground squeezes his eyes shut and makes a whimper, like he's reminding us he's here, before we say anything or have any reaction.

"I'll be right there, Violet. Vance needs a favor," Zuela says in a far too charming tone.

"Oh, that is wrong even by *my* standards," Damien says in slight horror, as he recoils.

Vance cracks his neck to the side, his jaw ticking.

The shifter whimpers harder.

"Oh, sure. I'll just wait in the bedroom then," Violet says.

"We can't kill the sniveling shifter for overhearing this, if we're going to be Violet's monsters, so let's take this conversation elsewhere, shall we?" Vance asks very dryly.

"Are we killing the crying shifter or Zuela?" Emit asks very seriously.

"What conversation and what shifter, and why is the broken excuse for a hermit wolf trying to kill me off?" Zuela asks like he's getting frustrated. "What

favor?”

Vance starts talking again when we’re halfway down the street and at the car.

“Why the fucking hell are you with Violet right now?” he asks in a surprisingly calm tone.

“I’m here to see what sort of stained glass she was envisioning for the place, and she’s going to give me a bed to stay in here at the sanctuary until I’ve completed the project.”

“You can stay in my bloody house,” Vance counters very reasonably.

“Your father cannot have our girlfriend, or I’ll have to piss Violet off when I kill the bastard for fifty-three years,” I state very matter-of-factly.

Vance waves me off.

“Now the Vampyre is trying to kill me off. I’m not sleeping with your damn girlfriend. Kit would obliterate her,” Zuela states defensively.

“Kit would love her,” Damien argues very loudly and in a very concerned tone. “They all love her. Every-damn-body who spends five minutes with her loves her because she’s just that damn loveable. Zuela can’t stay with her when we’re trying to go with this stupid plan,” he adds, holding up the blue book from fucking hell.

“They feel better when an alpha is near, despite how untrue that should be. Marta’s on one end, and I’ll be staying on another,” Zuela adds like he’s annoyed with all of us.

“You’re going to share space with Marta Portocale?” Vance asks incredulously.

“Do you really want me to tell the girl you’re not allowing her to get her art piece because you think I want in her knickers?” he asks like he’s confused.

“*Violet!* Vance is having daddy issues and is trying to talk him out of giving you the stained glass!” Anna yells very loudly.

Vance’s eyes widen. “*I’m* going to fucking kill you for fifty-three years, you stupid son of a b—” He stops, calming himself, because his grandmomma was a damn fine woman who’d punch him in the nuts for calling her that word…if she

knew what it meant.

She always hated dogs. Especially female dogs.

We all have a moment, a small one, where the familiarity and insight makes this moment *almost* funny. It's brief, because I really want to put a rusty heap of sword through Zuela's face.

"No. Put in the glass. But touch her, and I really will make you regret it," Vance bites out.

Zuela waits too long to respond, before finally exhaling. "I'm not here to have sex with your girlfriend, Vancetto. Don't pretend as though I'm made of that much ice. Not you. Not after what you allowed today."

"Are you telling me you read that book and didn't speak up?" I ask, stepping closer, as Vance holds his hand up for me to stay.

"Of course not. Like all of you probably did, I read it as soon as I left. I thought you'd given her some little House for her to play pretend. That damn book is as thick as the ice on that vampire's heart, and she knows every word in it. She still took a beating she didn't have to. Idun forfeited her argument when she broke protocol. Anyway, I came here to tell her I'd give her the damn masterpiece she still wants. She's acting like it never happened."

"I'm still reading the book, and Violet is a master of withholding emotion until it's just simply gone. Don't be cruel to her," Vance tells him distractedly, pulling the book away from Emit and flipping the page.

"What was the favor?" Zuela asks like he's tired and wants to be done with this conversation.

"I was going to ask you to do the masterpiece she wants," Vance states dryly.

"So all this grief just for you to ask me to do what I'm already doing, and you've been hassling me about the shite? *This* is why you're intolerable."

"Agreed," Emit, Damien, and I all say in unison, drawing an annoyed glare from Vance.

I still want Zuela out of that house until I can be there, though.

"Tell Violet I'll be expecting her call, since it's law that the Head of a

respective House has to sign off for an alpha offering any sort of service to the sanctuary."

"That's low. Even for you," Zuela says before hanging up, even as Vance smirks and lowers his phone.

"We're trying to make her life easier, you prat. Not more difficult," I remind him. "That was the plan, correct? I remember threatening bodily harm to anyone who let us ever make that oversight again."

He pockets his phone with a diabolical grin on his face. "I just secured my invitation to the sanctuary. You all have until Idun rises to do the same, or I'll have to punish you so she can't say we're not being fair. She can't go to war with all of us on her own. She needs allies. Let's ensure we keep this smart."

I point a finger at Damien. "Ensure Dorian isn't going to be a problem."

"You just worry about Emily. She's been on Idun TV several times now," he counters.

I leave them all behind when the building doesn't explode and I feel confident Idun's been sufficiently frozen for at least a little while.

I don't stop until I'm exactly one thousand feet in front of Omega U. I prop against the perch of the roof I'm on, hands in my pockets. Then I watch through one of the massive windows, as Violet walks baby Jasper over to show Zuela.

The smile on her face is too free for a girl who was just beaten by Idun not too long ago. The marks are already mostly healed, and she looks freshly showered. Zuela, the man too cold for ice, smiles down at the child like the lad is not of shifter blood, while Violet kisses the babe's head over and over, as though she just can't stop.

Then she puts him in his bassinet next to her and leaves her hand lingering on his stomach, as she gives the rest of her attention to Zuela. I should have known she'd never give up the lad's mother, simply because she'd never fail him.

Another oversight.

"Nothing we can do about it now," Emit says as though he's prying into my mind somehow.

Or maybe I’m that bloody transparent.

He joins me at my side and hands me a whiskey bottle.

“Is that why you’re drinking as much as I am?” I ask him.

“I’m drinking this because that girl is far more calculated than I anticipated, and I didn’t realize how very differently her mind works until she put us through that. It makes me rethink my entire approach, because she’ll gut me harder the more I care,” he says on a harsh breath.

“Ah, glad we just moved the party instead of shutting it down. She’d be really pissed that we’re watching Violet TV out here after squandering away our front row seats,” Damien says as he takes a seat on the ground.

Jasper gets fussy, and Ighan takes over with Zuela, showing him so many sketches all at once, while Violet devotes her attention to the little lad.

“The look on my father’s face should be framed by some brave soul,” Vance says as he very quickly sets up a chair and puts down a cooler, his eyes quickly moving to and following Violet.

I arch an eyebrow at him that he pointedly ignores, as he takes a seat and stares inside.

We all go quiet when Violet grins and whispers something in Jasper’s ear. His scrunched face smooths, and she just keeps whispering.

“Anyone hear what she’s saying to him to relax him like that?” I ask, really wishing at least one of us had learned to read lips.

She keeps moving up the stairs, finally turning into her room, and we all adjust so we can see her straight-on. She has big windows too, and the curtains are open for the moment.

I spot a kid on the roof across from us, frowning…and then he stares across the street to where Violet is swaying with Jasper in her arms.

“Sickos,” the kid says before he ducks back inside.

“Great. Just great. Now I’m as pathetic as all of you,” I say tightly.

CHAPTER 12

VIOLET

“Are you really being this mean to me right now?” I ask Vance as I walk into his office without even knocking.

He’s sitting behind his desk, feet propped up, as he grins around the end of a pen he has pressed to his lips, eyes slanting to me.

“Your father, by some miracle, changes his mind and is going to give me this really cool piece of art I’ve only ever dreamed of owning, and Ighan played a key part in designing it. Yet you’re putting red tape in front of me over a technicality? It’s a big deal, and—”

“I’ll sign anything you put in front of me, Violet. So long as it’s put in front of me in *your* office,” he interrupts.

I hesitate, wondering why he’s grinning wider. I expected him to still be brooding over the whole surprise flogging thing. Not grinning at me.

“Then let’s go sign it in my office.”

Absently, he slides the pile of papers in front of him aside to reveal my very big book that’s open.

“It appears I need an invitation to be on the property.”

I roll my eyes. “Ah, so now I see. This is the newest chase.” I turn to walk out, adding over my shoulder, “Don’t use the sanctuary against me, Vance. I’m not playing games. That’s—”

My words stop when I slam into a hard body, forcing my head to whip around to find an amused Vance grinning mischievously down at me.

I look behind me and back at him, sighing in frustration that I was gipped out of immortal speed.

His hands go to my hips like he’s steadying me, but it’s really just an obvious move that only gets him a bored look from me.

“You’re in a really good mood and trying to manipulate me. Should I be worried that you’re no longer upset about—”

“We’ll not discuss yesterday ever again,” he tells me, his smile turning a little sour. “You made your point.”

He lifts a paper and pen, handing it to me.

“But I can’t uphold your laws if you don’t let me, and I’d like an invitation, Ms. Carmine.”

I eye him warily, as I take the pad and pen from his hand. Leaning over, I use the table next to me to quickly write him out an invitation.

“What’s with all the formalities, *Sir* Van Helsing?” I ask as I finish signing my name.

Before I can lean up to hand it to him, he’s suddenly pressing against my back, loosely dragging the strap of my dress over my shoulder, as I go still against him. He’s not exactly acting like himself. This is more of an Arion move. Or Damien, the masterful illusionist.

When Vance’s lips drag up to my neck and his hands start sliding up my thighs, lifting the edges of my dress with it, I stare into the mirror. It feels just like his touch, and smells just like that fresh, silky smell he always has.

“I don’t really know what you’re doing right now, but if it doesn’t stop, I’m going to have to hurt you,” I warn him as the threads whir through the air.

His lips tug into a grin at one corner, as he lifts his gaze to meet mine in the mirror, his hands stilling on my hips.

“To you, it’s going to seem as though I enjoy the chase, just as you’ve accused. So I’m not going to chase, Violet.”

I glance over the way he’s surrounding my body with his, caging me in, and then bring my gaze back up to shoot him a disbelieving look.

His grin remains, as he moves his hand up my spine, causing heat to stir inside me in an inconvenient way. It’s the first thing to convince me this is really Vance. The touch is too familiar not to be his.

And it’s really hard to ignore, but I do.

The breath I release is partially a groan, because I swear I want to throttle him…and fuck him right now.

I open my mouth, and he grins bigger before clamping his hand over my lips.

“Save the speech, Violet. I know what I did wrong this time, and I’m never again going to be punished.” His eyes grow more serious, and the smile gets colder. “Never again,” he echoes.

I shake my head, trying to tell him that was more of a statement than punishment, but he actually shushes me, as he spins me around and begins backing me toward the door.

“I’ll be by your office later,” he says before the door opens at my back, and he disappears out of it quicker than I can process the movement.

“That was weirder than usual, Sir Van Helsing,” I call loudly.

I really expected a lot of yelling and ‘putting me in my place’ talks about what Idun is going to do to me if I push her and blah blah blah.

“It’s making me paranoid, so can you come back and do all your twitching and silent stewing before getting super condescending?” I continue. “Maybe tell me some of the horrors Idun will make me face in that vague way of yours because you think I’m young and have the mental fortitude of a marshmallow?”

No answer.

I finally give up when I never get a response, and hurry down the stairs. All this just to get an invitation? I have too much to do to worry about running around to play their damn games.

I groan when I step outside and find Talbot Lane holding the passenger side door open to my van.

“G’day, Ms. Carmine,” he says too cheerfully, using that charming smile.

“The key to being Damien’s beta isn’t to stalk me and give me rides,” I tell him as I hop in.

He shuts the door and quickly goes to the driver’s side.

“Damien Morpheous is a little difficult, so before I commit to this, I want you to know that I’ve been the most respected rogue beta to my community for

quite some time. I'm a true catch, Ms. Carmine. Dorian Gray has tried to get me to—"

"My mother is the world's best salesman. I know a pitch when I hear it, so please stop. Do the work," I tell him as I quickly type out a text to Ighan to let him know I'm running behind.

"Happy to, Ms. Carmine. I'm just not up to speed on exactly what the work is once I'm his beta. How does your selection process work? Because it isn't mentioned in your book."

"I have a private book you can't read until you're pledged as a House beta. It explains all that then."

He clears his throat. "But all pledges are sworn to House silence with secrets. How am I supposed to find out what's in that book?"

"He sounds a little whiny and desperate, Violet. Don't be cruel," Anna says from the backseat, causing me to startle in surprise.

I really hate it when she pops up out of nowhere like that.

"I'm not being cruel. It's being careful. I don't know him," I explain to her, gesturing toward him.

She makes a purring noise in the back of her throat before pawing at him.

"You just have a thing for stalkers," I deadpan, and stare at her like I'm daring her to argue.

"Touché. They're my weakness," she admits.

"Anna's here, then?" Talbot asks as we park.

"I'll give you a hint, Talbot. If you really want to be here for the right reasons, and not just to step all over a House full of omegas with the backing of Five of the Six, read Big Blue again."

As if the hellhound thinks I've shouted his name, Blue suddenly launches himself on top of the van, sending a curse through my lips, as the van groans under his weight.

A shrill scream comes from someone in the car when Blue does his super vicious barking thing at…Talbot…who is the one screaming right now. He slams

back against the seat so hard that it breaks and collapses, and he spills into the back of the van while still screaming.

“Okay. I’ve lost interest. I can’t unsee that,” Anna sighs in disappointment, before zapping out of the car.

Talbot is covering his face like it’s his most important body part, as I hop out of the van, smiling to myself. Blue’s apparently warming up to me if he’s attacking guys who hijack my van *and* me.

The psychotic dog comes rushing inside before I can shut him out, because it’s like he knew I was going to do it while I had the chance.

He stinks. He stinks so bad. And I just don’t know how to address that.

The Neoprys don’t all think it’s sensible to bathe regularly, since they’re used to it being more of a hassle—a thousand years ago. Some are just scared of the showers. Bobo and Ighan haven’t informed me on why they abstain so much, and I’m simply not rude enough to ask.

I stop and back up again when I see Vance in the kitchen, smiling over at Bobo, as he instructs him on chopping. Bobo looks freshly showered and very clean, along with Ighan, as they both mimic what Vance is showing them.

How the hell did he get here so fast?

Oh, he had so better not be using them against me.

They follow each and every movement, including gathering pans, and follow his lead as he starts tossing things in. Bobo seems riveted by whatever he’s saying about the stove.

Leiza is suddenly at my side, nudging me.

“He’s teaching them to cook, and explaining the amount of cleanliness required to prepare food that people want to eat,” she says as she lifts the back of my shirt, inspecting the skin that took the worst of the beating.

“How are they already just dull marks? Idun wasn’t holding back. She was just shy of unleashing her monster’s strength on you,” she continues.

“Apples and oranges, remember? I work differently than most people,” I state absently, eyes running over Vance, as he pulls his fancy shirt off to avoid getting

anything on it.

It’s a terrible idea to keep watching now.

“He knows I’m standing out here, doesn’t he?” I ask, which causes Vance’s eyes to lift, as he winks at me. “And clearly he can hear me as well,” I add before rolling my eyes and walking away.

“I actually came to talk to you about Emit getting a written invitation. The wolf omegas would feel better if he had permission to be near if we need the protection,” she says quietly as she follows me.

I give her a shrug like it’s not a big deal. I can’t believe they’re going along with that law for whatever reason.

“Sanctuary had three laws in place you could have used to get out of that flogging,” Leiza says abruptly, clearing her throat.

“Only two were relevant, since no alpha had an invitation to be on the grounds,” I state absently. “And if I hadn’t taken the flogging, my mother would have challenged Idun to an alpha fight like she planned to and gotten her ass beaten for no reason at all. Can we stop talking about it? It just keeps Idun relevant when you talk about her.”

Leiza stops walking, and I glance over my shoulder as her lips thin.

“This could change our lives, Violet. But people are wary about false hope. Without the Heads, none of this works, and you’re pushing all of them away,” she says so quietly I almost miss it.

“You forget I have one very strong, powerful Portocale alpha who has our backs. Always. And Zuela Van Helsing is staying until he finishes the stained-glass for the ceiling.”

Her lips purse. “Even I want to hide in the walls with him here.”

“You know him better than I do. I just know he watched me take a beating, and he showed up to put glass in without mentioning it once. You don’t have to trust him, but do you trust me?”

She gives me a long stare. “I trust you. I don’t trust the way you skip over the past like it’s not relevant. You don’t have any healthy fear in you, Violet. You

can take beatings like that, but we can't. And none of us want to see the Simpletons go through—"

"Violet!" Anna shouts, interrupting Leiza.

Both of us swing our gazes to the balcony where Anna is pretending to ride a pony.

"You've got baby duty," Anna continues before riding her phantom pony into a wall.

"Why did I just see a ghost?" Leiza asks in a slight panic, which has my head snapping to her, as she stands wide-eyed and staring at the wall Anna just disappeared into.

"Because Anna is getting stronger," I say on a sigh. "Long story. I'll tell you eventually."

Her mouth opens and closes like she's in shock, and I quickly write out an invitation for Emit before handing it to her.

"T-that's not okay. You can't just gloss over—"

"I'm sort of busy. Can you take this?" I cut in.

She takes it absentmindedly, and I turn and walk up the stairs, as she just continues to concentrate on the wall Anna disappeared into.

I suppose the first time seeing a ghost would be shocking, even at her age.

My office is covered in every family history detail I've been able to uncover over these past five months, and I study the wall full of the most important pieces.

"All the pretty monsters want in your pants again, and you're hanging out with the archives. You don't deserve that vagina," Anna informs me as she drops in and takes a seat.

"Don't let anyone else see you who isn't supposed to see you."

"But I like the dirty omegas. I want to be their friend too. You're just stingy and want to keep them for yourself," my bestie from hell argues.

"You're going to draw too much attention, and you'll start getting salted out of fear. People are paranoid."

“*Monsters* are paranoid. *People* are completely desensitized to the possibility of ghosts,” she grumbles when I take a seat.

The door swings open before I can counter that pointless argument, and Emit’s massive body steps in. His eyes lazily run over my legs, as I turn in the chair to face him.

“Can I help you with something, Mr. Morrigan?” I drawl, wondering why he’s biting down on his lip right now like he’s thinking dirty thoughts.

First Vance. Now him. I’m starting to worry about their heads. They’re not acting right.

“You’re going to need land. You have one shifter now, but eventually you’ll have more. They can’t run on just any land, because it won’t be sanctuary.”

I pause, staring at him with real interest.

“Shifters have to shift on occasion. They get too aggressive if they don’t. The older they are, the longer they can go. The younger they are—”

“I get it. Are you here to give me advice on how to keep them on sanctuary grounds from here to the woods?”

“I’m here to give you land that connects to town. Vance just amended one of your laws to include the town as a neutral, untouchable area for those who’ve been given sanctuary. Five of the six signed off on the amendment.”

Studying him, I notice the far-too-amused look in his eyes.

“In exchange for a price, I’m guessing. Vance did this to me earlier. You’re all manipulating me,” I point out, bristling in my seat.

“Of course we are. You wanted our full attention, and now—”

“No,” I cut in, holding up my finger. “I wanted help building my pretty sanctuary. I got four men who had popcorn delivered to a room I built to keep their conversations private, so that none of my omegas were threatened into silence and made to feel unsafe in my sanctuary,” I correct.

He grimaces, exhaling heavily.

“Then consider this a debt of apology,” he bites out. “It’ll help you build your sanctuary, though I agree you deserved more from a *friend* like I was.”

“You’re still a friend, Emit. We’re cool,” I assure him, returning my attention to the wall.

His hair falls over my shoulder, and I stiffen when he shoves his nose against my neck and inhales me.

“Why is it your scent continues to get weaker and weaker? I can’t smell Portocale in your blood anymore, Violet.”

A very unbidden tremble runs through me, because just that touch is enough to remind me how good it feels to be owned by Emit when he’s in barbarian mode.

“I’m so jealous right now. You look so horny,” Anna chimes in, causing Emit’s smile to form against my neck.

I need salt. Also, I need a more supportive best friend. However, the living seem to be crazier than the dead, most days.

Emit’s hands come down around me, gripping the arms of the chair, as he surrounds me and steals all my space. His lips brush my neck as he speaks.

“Why does it feel like you’re flirting with me today?” I ask on a shaky breath instead of using the composure I meant to have while asking that question.

“I was waiting until Idun was sorted before making my move, so that I could dedicate all my attention to you. But you’re too impatient for that, and clearly you’re not going to bend here.”

He runs his finger all the way down my arm, his gaze following its path that elicits small chills in the wake of his calloused touch.

His lips brush my ear as he adds, “I’ll pick you up at five.”

He stands abruptly and turns to walk out. I hold my breath, mostly because I’m afraid I’ll melt like goo if I exhale right now.

As soon as the door shuts, Anna whispers, “I want to tell you that you’re underestimating her. But I watched you get hit by that Van Helsing flogger two hundred times, and you stood back up.”

“She could kick my ass in any fight,” I assure her, remembering that last hit she delivered. “But it’s tiring to keep breaking things that can’t stay broken.

She'll get bored with the same sessions over and over."

"What happens when she wants another Simpleton to tear apart and study like a science project? She's focused on her ex-quad for now, but eventually she'll want to play with all the new toys she can use in her fucked up experiments," she says very seriously.

I smile a little. "Do you really think my mother will ever let that happen?"

"Your mother is a horrible person, according to most everyone," Anna primly adds. "I'm not fond of her either."

"You stood in a room full of alphas who saw you that close to all those Portocales, and you didn't turn to salt. Stop being so brazen."

"Stop making this about me," she counters.

"Stop trying to make Idun my problem."

"You took a beating from the bitch feared by all and smiled about it. Who do you think is drawing more attention?" she goads.

I cut my eyes to her. "Do you really think they'll overestimate what I'm capable of?"

She hesitates, and I see her sigh in defeat.

"Oh, good grief. Let them see you stake a vampire one time, and they'll know for sure you're not much to watch," Anna groans with a shudder. "It's so sad. I wish I could unsee it."

I cut my tired eyes to her. "I hate you so hard."

She starts shaking her ass in her inappropriate underwear as she sashays through a wall.

"I hate you harder," she says from the other side. Then she squeals like she's excited. "Oh! Someone left the porn channel on in here! Score!"

A chainsaw revs just before someone screams, as the volume increases, and I groan. No doubt someone is getting sawed to pieces right now.

"If I had real fingers and a vagina, I could totally masturbate right now!" she adds in excitement.

"Crazy fucking ghost," I mumble to myself while massaging my temples.

Walking out to go find her, I pause, because I spot Jerome at the end of the stairs, leaning against the wall as he grins up at me.

“When did you get here?” I ask as I hurry down the stairs toward him.

“Just a minute ago. Shera said you had some free time, and I thought we’d get some coffee. Tom let me in, which is weird, since I thought this was going to be a hotel. Usually there’s easy public access.”

Idun’s being punished, so she’s not around, from what I gather…

The timing’s good enough, and then I can usher him out of town before he sees anything.

Dad is smiling as he walks by the stairs and toward the back, a little more pep in his step than usual.

“Nice to see you again, Tom,” Jerome calls out.

“Happy to see you two talking,” Dad says back, which just causes me to roll my eyes, because my father is delusional.

Jerome needs to be anywhere but Shadow Hills…or any other town full of immortals. Dad is a little desensitized to the threat, because he thinks his ex-wife and daughter are the most brutal monsters the world has to offer. He’s overconfident.

I don’t have it in me to explain the truth. Yet.

“Sure,” I say, smiling tightly, hoping he’s just passing through. “I’m actually about to acquire some new land, and I was wondering how hard it would be to put in some security measures. You have good timing.”

I look back to see his smile growing.

“I know the drill. Don’t ask questions. Even if I worry I’m contributing to a growing cult,” he says like he’s amused.

Before we can make it to the door, a loud, panicked scream echoes throughout the corridor. Jerome grabs me at the waist and yanks me back, just as Louis comes running around the corner with his freaking clothes on fire.

I shove off Jerome, rushing to Louis, but a fire extinguisher starts spraying, and I hop away from the spray, as laughter breaks out all around. Louis starts

laughing as well, while I drop my head back and silently remember all the times I terrified my mother just as much, so that I don't say something right now that she'll throw in my face later.

"Why? Just *why?*" I ask incredulously, as Ighan finishes spraying down Louis.

More and more gather around to laugh, as Louis pushes up from the ground.

He starts stripping out of the flame-retardant suit.

"It works!" Ighan says too happily, as Vance comes out of the kitchen, cursing as he fans smoke away.

"What the hell happened?" the annoyed Van Helsing snaps.

"Oh, so they're still hanging out around here?" Jerome asks as he clears his throat, gesturing toward Vance.

Vance's eyebrows go up. "Who the hell are you?"

"The guy who designed all this and helped make it happen in five months. I'm sure you noticed him during that time," Anna states very dryly from at his side. "You'll want to play along, because I'm doing you a solid right now, silversmith," she adds, as Vance quickly smooths his expression and tries to play it off.

Jerome, fortunately, doesn't seem to see or hear her. Since Leiza did, I'm now paranoid.

"Right. Sorry. I guess I was a little absorbed during those months," Vance tells him. "Never mind. I remember."

"Yeah, you guys were working on some weird paranormal show for some chick and trying to make it look like a reality show," Jerome says as he steps a little too close to my side.

Vance's eyes sweep over Jerome like he's now amused, before his gaze shifts to me.

"You didn't mention getting friendly with the contractor."

"Architect," Jerome and I correct in unison, only causing Vance's amusement to grow.

“Hey, Jerome,” Shera says as she passes, waving her fingers.

Ighan claps Jerome on his shoulder. “Y-y-you st-staying with us?” he asks.

Jerome’s gaze flicks back to me, and a steady smile grows on his lips.

“You still single?” he asks, pointedly avoiding Vance’s subtle glare.

“So, what about that coffee?” I deflect, really wanting away from all this awkwardness.

Jerome smirks over at Vance, which is just ridiculous testosterone, and I take his arm to start steering him toward the door.

“No more fires inside the house unless they’re in the fire room,” I remind them, as Jerome’s hand barely goes to the small of my back, and he takes over the guiding as we step outside.

Five months. Five freaking months. Not one time did I feel one of their stares burning my back as I walked away with Jerome no differently than we’re walking right now. I feel two stares on me right now, and one is trying to make a mental connection.

In the quietest whisper I can muster, I announce, “You’re both dicks.”

A brief glimpse of Damien fucking me is forced into my mind. I mentally flip him off and hope he somehow sees it in those mind mirrors the asshole uses. One day, I will understand how his powers actually work, and I’ll probably feel silly for it.

Until then, I keep mentally flipping him off, as we walk into the coffee shop.

CHAPTER 13

DAMIEN

That fucking wanker.

I’m going to tear off the wanker’s wanker and give it to another wanker who wants a wee wanker.

“Who the fucking hell is he?” I ask, as Vance joins me in my thousand-feet-away-from-the-sanctuary rooftop perch, watching Violet as she sits across from the wanker, who’s going to suffer all those things I already mentioned. “And why is she smiling at him like that?”

“That’s Jerome,” he tells me flatly, clicking his tongue as he just glares. “He’s been helping Violet create this damn sanctuary while we ‘worked on our silly little TV show for our ex,’ according to Shera. She seemed to enjoy it, as if she were savoring delayed gratitude when I demanded some answers.”

“Are those all the answers you got?” I ask, looking at the fool who has an invitation and isn’t sharing the full wealth of information I’m sure he’s collected.

“I’ve spent my day teaching Bobo and Ighan their way around the kitchen so that I could talk to them about the expectations of today’s society. You know how much pride they once had in themselves. They need to contribute in order to feel as though that’s truly their home. They know the utilities are expensive, and __”

“I really don’t fucking care about Ighan and Bobo right now,” I cut in and angrily jab my finger at Violet, as she bloody laughs at the wanker’s stupid joke. “I care about what you’ve learned about this developing situation. What sort of action needs to be taken on a scale of one to death?” I ask very seriously.

“Death,” Arion states dryly as he drops to my other side with very little warning.

He bites down on one of her green apples, gaze steadily on Violet and the

daft wanna-be-beau, as he listens to the same puppy-dog flirting bullshit I hear coming out of that wanker's mouth.

"No, it wasn't," Violet is saying around a laugh. "It was Ms. Peppercorn. I don't remember her real name, but she had all those peppercorn necklaces that made everyone sneeze."

Cue dual laughter, as *Jerome* takes her down memory lane from the good ol' days…

"Who is this wanker?" I ask again. "How long has he known her?"

"Someone tell me his name so I can dispose of the body properly," Arion says, smiling darkly at us.

Vance exhales like he really doesn't want to waste time dealing with him.

"Kidding," Arion finally says a little sourly as he looks back.

We all watch as Jerome subtly reaches for her hand, but she uses it to tuck her hair behind her ear before he can, completely oblivious to his almost-touch, as her eyes scan the small menu on the table.

"Sort of kidding," Arion amends.

"He's an architect, apparently from one of the places Violet lived, and he erected her beautiful fucking sanctuary. He's her hero right now," Vance goes on, though the words seem to leave a bad taste in his mouth.

"She wants monsters. Not a fucking hero," I chime in. "That girl is too devious for a hero, because she'll make you fucking watch her body be tortured just to prove a bloody point."

"We agreed to not bring that up, or I will end up doing very bad things that will only make the situation worse," Arion reminds me very tightly.

"We agreed to do that around *her, not—"*

I shut up, because the wanker says something that finally interests me.

"So your life has gotten even weirder since we split up, and I have to say…I wish I'd been here to see how it all got to this point. You're more mysterious than ever, Violet Carmine," the wanker tells her.

We all go silent and still for a brief, palpable second.

“Since they *split up*?” Arion asks, as a slight chill causes our breaths to fog. “What’s his name?”

“Dead Wanker,” I say absently, just as Vance answers, “Jerome.”

“Jerome?” Arion parrots in a very agitated tone. “*Jerome* has spent five months tending to her one dream right under our noses? He’s the bloody ex she fucking lived with, you stupid fucks,” he adds like this is all our fault.

“She lived with him?” Vance asks, not sounding one bit happy.

Dead Wanker it is. Yep. I’ll carve it on his fucking gravestone myself.

“It’s not that interesting of a story, really. It just seems like it because you’re starting in the current middle,” she tells him.

“Current middle?” he asks her like he’s confused.

“Is he both deaf and daft?” I ask.

“I don’t know what *current middle* means either,” Arion says seriously. “Shut up.”

Violet shrugs at him. *“Imagine if you felt that life would never end. The most obvious downside is that you’re perpetually trapped in the middle of your story—a story without end.”* She spins the salt shaker on the table.

“But we’re just mere mortals,” Jerome says with a grin, as though he has really missed these sorts of chats with a girl who doesn’t belong to him.

“And we live our lives assuming we’re in the middle of our story, never seeing an early end, should it come. The goal is to live until you know your story is truly over…there’s an end in sight. It keeps the heart from turning to dust, because you don’t live too long to stop caring. The fault is that there may not be enough time to finish the story the way you want to.”

Jerome’s smile only grows, and I glare over at Arion.

“I hope you’re not kidding anymore,” I tell him very seriously.

“Vance, how badly will she hate me?” Arion asks like he’s weighing his options.

“She took a beating from Idun over an irrelevant shifter she hardly knew. What do you think?” Vance volleys, squashing the dream like a juicy bug under

his shoe.

"You seem…still as crazy as always, but also content. Did you finally find your home, Violet? Or are you still just passing through?"

"It's just the middle of my story right now. Who knows what tomorrow holds?" she tells him in a non-answering way.

"I hate him. I bloody hate him. He's using their past as a bonding mechanism right now," I point out, just in case they haven't caught on.

They both glare at me, as I run a hand through my hair, finding this more and more disconcerting.

"Imagine what Idun will do to a human. He won't be sticking around, because Violet would have to lock him in Sanctuary," Vance says like he's talking us and himself into that conclusion.

"What if he's just *passing through?"* I bite out. "I won't handle another man touching her. I'll break his fucking brain if I go messing around in his human head with this much anger. Someone else needs to handle this."

Arion looks over me like he's actually soaking in this moment. "I've never actually seen you genuinely jealous before now. Idun fucked Dorian and you didn't go this crazy."

The air heats around us, and Vance curses under his breath, as Arion's pupils dilate just barely.

"You acted unfazed," Arion goes on, darting a confused look to Violet and back to me. "Were you this upset then?"

"I'd rather not discuss it. Dorian is a much bigger trigger than this *wanker,"* I tell him, slowly calming down. "Violet would never cross *that* line. But this fucking gnat needs to be gone before I do get upset."

Arion studies me for a minute longer, before looking back to the coffee house where Violet is sipping from an oversized mug and eating cake from her plate.

"How'd you get an invitation?" Arion asks Vance.

Before Vance can answer, an annoying voice talks over him. "Not important. Violet isn't being stingy with invitations. Merely ask and receive one," Talbot

Lane says, as he joins us like he has the right.

“I can’t decide if you’re truly this arrogant, or just this stupid,” I tell the fool.

“I’m determined,” Talbot counters as though he’s meeting me in the middle. “They’re busy manipulating her, and the more she’s manipulated, the more she will reciprocate in kind,” he tells me pointedly. “Your only point of valid reference is Idun, because aside from her, you’ve never had the chance to love another woman. Violet is altogether different, and no one knows what agenda she’s been building these past five months.”

“Aside from Emit’s omegas, who are playing dumb, even with me,” Arion states through angry strain.

“The omegas are either clueless or very good at pretending to be,” Talbot points out.

“What do we know about him?” Vance asks me, as he narrows his eyes at the cheeky incubus.

“He’s legit, with a millennium of age and respect under his belt. I’ve made calls and had him checked out. Arguably the best rogue beta of his kind,” I say, prompting the arrogant prat to smirk. “I still don’t trust him,” I add just to piss on his little smug parade.

“A millennium of age under my belt, along with a *loud* rogue beta title, and yet you’ve never heard of me? Makes you wonder how out of tune with the world the four of you truly are, or at least it should.”

I’d kill him…if he didn’t have a point.

“Idun’s always been a step ahead because she stays in touch. But even she’s blind to many things because they seem irrelevant. Violet is just starting out, and she’s learning everything for the first time. She has an advantage, while Idun is weak, because *everything* seems important to her,” he tells us.

“That’s not an advantage, you twat. It’s a weakness that Idun will extort,” Arion coldly points out.

“Damien Morpheous is a name that isn’t feared, because it’s a name no one remembers, unless they want to. It takes *work* to remember any Morpheous.

Violet never forgets you even a little bit," he carries on.

I pause, mulling over that, as I hear the sound of her sweet laughter again. She glances in our direction, but her vision is too limited to find us. Still, I can tell she feels our gaze on her.

"She's been getting stronger these past five months. She's started allowing herself to be struck by lightning quite often, and plays it off as an accident. She's plotting something that will either turn her into Idun's newest toy, or it will be the end of Idun's threat," Talbot adds.

Arion snorts and chokes back a sound of humorless laughter, as he shakes his head.

"You're a thousand years old. Surely you're wise enough to know a Simpleton is no match for—"

"No match for Idun before she went under. I agree," Talbot says, interrupting me. "Before she clawed her way through those seals that Violet effortlessly lifted like she was made to do just that. How has no one still blinked an eye at that? She's not some weak omega running a bloody house. Wake the hell up. No omega could have taken that beating."

A chill slithers up my spine, as I narrow my gaze on her.

"She's young. Just starting out. And already she's doing things no immortal has ever thought possible. Two hundred licks from a Van Helsing flogger is equivalent to a mortal being hit with five sharp daggers on fire at the hands of the devil himself. Per lick."

Violet smiles at Jerome, shaking her head in answer to his question about if she'd ever consider moving back.

"And she took it at a true twenty-six-years old. She'd barely gotten her immortality, and the girl landed right in your laps—almost literally—the moment she moved to town. Could any omega honestly do that?"

"You're saying she's a budding alpha? That's impossible. The only alphas are the original alphas—"

"It's an ever-changing world, old chaps," Talbot tells us, glancing over to

meet our gazes at last. “Even Idun is scrambling to keep up, because she has no choice. Her alphas are in *Violet’s* home—her main power source.”

“They are pledged to her House, regardless of where they reside, and Idun still gets what she needs through those ties,” I remind him.

“True, but she can’t touch them or play with them,” he says as he starts to turn. “Still, it makes you wonder what Violet is capable of, when she’s effortlessly pulled off this much already.”

I don’t like how much he seems to know. It makes me feel like I know too little.

“His brain is broken if he genuinely thinks an alpha would drop to their knees and take a beating without even getting violent. We *have* to fight when challenged,” Arion groans, disbelieving that we’d take any of this seriously.

“I’m simply saying you were wrong; Violet wasn’t punishing you for your inaction. For whatever reason, she *wanted* to take that beating,” Talbot states more seriously.

“Yes. We know. She wanted Idun’s focus on her, because she’s bloody infuriating that way, and attracts the worst dangers she can. Like a really potent *omega,”* Vance grinds out.

Talbot’s eyes flick to his. “Or maybe like an alpha perceived to be weak. Sort of like the one who keeps fighting off mutinies, wouldn’t you think?”

Vance bristles, and Arion’s humored look falls slowly.

“I was wrong as well,” Talbot adds. “She claims she was making a statement. However, Violet didn’t step in there to prove any sort of point. I believe she stepped in there to find out just how fucking tough Idun really is. *She* was testing *Idun* to see how close she is to being able to take her.”

Now that’s just insane. Violet isn’t *that* calculated.

“What else do you think you know?” I ask him, taking him more seriously, remembering the daring glint in Violet’s eyes as she goaded Idun into using what we thought was just a little of her strength.

What if she really is weakened?

That ice is still holding her captive.

“No new omegas have joined Sanctuary, despite Violet’s resilience to that beating. Wouldn’t it be wise to have an impossibly fabulous beta, such as myself, in there when whatever is brewing finally boils over?”

“This pointless incubus is starting to make me paranoid. Idun is *not* Violet’s problem. She’s genuinely adamant about that,” Vance says as his own wary gaze moves over to Violet again.

“I wouldn’t say I’m pointless, but I am off my game when it comes to Violet Carmine. I’m just telling you the latest rumors circling the girl you all have in common. I live out in the real world where people love to whisper about the alphas. Just remember a Van Helsing, on live TV, told the world that not even an alpha was expected to endure more than two hundred lashings with a Van Helsing flogger.”

He takes a step toward the edge, gesturing at Violet, as she takes her second cup of coffee the future dead wanker is handing her.

“And January Violet Carmine essentially talked shit to every alpha in attendance after every ten licks. Then, along comes Zuela Van Helsing, the cruelest of his kind, to give the girl a gift of apology. A gift never bestowed upon anyone outside the Van Helsing family. Your girlfriend is plotting, and she’s damn good at it. She makes Marta look like a rookie, and Marta Portocale *knows* it. Start there. I’ll handle your invitation for you, like any good beta would do,” he adds before dropping off the rooftop.

I glance down to see him land in a crouch, and leisurely stroll away with his hands in his pockets.

“He’s the most coveted rogue beta among your people, and has never pledged to a House, since your laws are fucking stupid,” Arion tells me. “I looked into him as well.”

“You’re excellent at playing dumb,” I commend, as I pocket my phone. “And if my laws are so stupid, why do they work so well?”

“They don’t,” Vance and Arion say in unison, as we all just stare at Violet.

“Can we trust him around Violet?” Vance asks me after a moment of silence.

“I don’t even trust the omega wolves around Violet, so hell no we can’t,” Arion deadpans.

“But you trust your beta?” Vance volleys.

“Absolutely not,” he responds with zero hesitation. “Shera’s a damn good beta because she does what I tell her to do, and never oversteps. She’s overstepping now, and she won’t tell me why. Then that codger comes in and yaps about Violet being an alpha, and damn near convinces us there’s validity to it.”

Jerome walks to the loo, and I see Talbot Lane slide into the freshly vacated seat in front of Violet.

Violet looks unsurprised to see him, and Anna pops up behind him to start sniffing him like the daft ghost has a sense of smell.

“I’m officially the beta for Damien Morpheous,” Talbot, the stupid fuck, tells her. *“So long as I continue to be useful.”*

He shoots a look directly at me, smirks, and glances away.

“I really don’t like all the interest piquing around her,” I tell them.

Anna makes a thrusting motion behind his head, and Violet just ignores her, keeping her attention on Talbot.

“*Now you can start doing the work, Mr. Lane,”* she says with a cute little smile that boasts more arrogance than she actually has.

“Still no hints as to what the work is?”

She shrugs a shoulder. *“You’ve become his beta. Now you have to prove you’re a damn good beta. It’s simple like that.”*

“She’s toying with him,” Arion says as though he’s amused.

“I’m quite a catch, Ms. Carmine. You’re wasting precious resources,” he assures her, knowing we’re listening in.

“She’s empathic. Does that mean she senses a reason not to trust him? How empathic is she now?” Arion goes on. “Has she been hiding that much growth from us?”

“Violet brought a ghost back from final decay, and none of us bothered to ask too many questions, because she really doesn’t think we deserve any answers,” Vance states almost idly. “We have no idea how empathic she is if we don’t even know how Anna came back from a second death.”

“Because we don’t actually give a shit about an irrelevant ghost,” Arion points out.

“I think Talbot’s entire point is that we allow impossible things such as that to go unexplained, because we’re too distracted by all the female chaos surrounding us,” I dutifully point out.

Talbot taps the side of his nose and winks up at us in a quick motion that Violet misses, when her head dips to check her incoming text.

A thought occurs to me. “Talbot, if you convince Ms. Carmine to let me feed from her regularly, I’ll take you on as my beta with full title to my House,” I tell the seasoned incubus. “It’s the only way I’ll take you on.”

His eyes swing back to mine again, staring through the glass as though he can’t believe I’m tasking him with this.

“You’re a dick,” Vance states flippantly.

I’m not so sure I like it when Talbot smirks.

His hand goes to Violet’s in the next instant, and I grab Arion’s arm, pulling at him to keep him from being too impulsive. He’s seconds away from interceding.

This is my possible beta.

“Stand the fuck down,” I tell him coldly, swinging my gaze to level the vampire with a glare. “I’m every bit a monster too, and she’s just as much mine as she is yours. I’ll be the judge of what I will and won’t allow here,” I add.

His lips twitch. “If he uses this to *his* advantage instead of yours, all bets are off,” Arion informs me.

“Fair enough,” I say with an indifferent shrug.

I’ll have no use for him if that’s the case, and Arion can have something new to stab full of holes.

Talbot bristles uneasily, as Violet…continues giving him a very unimpressed stare.

"Are you trying to read my palm or something?" she asks on a confused breath.

"Is he impotent?" Arion asks me in a genuine, inquisitive manner.

Talbot's jaw grinds. It's the most insulting thing one can say to our kind, and all other monsters are always assholes about it.

"Just curious, does Damien's pheromones work on you?" Talbot asks in a nonchalant way, as he slowly releases her hand.

"Are you trying to turn me on right now?" Violet says on an indignant hiss, eyes wide and horrified. *"Against my will?"*

Talbot blinks rapidly, mouth opening and closing a few times. *"I was testing your ability to withstand our kind. It's important to know, since I'll be his beta. I need to know your strengths and weaknesses with our kind,"* he says in an easy, believable way.

Violet immediately drops her guard, and even gives the little creep an apologetic, *oopsy* sort of smile. *"Oh. Yeah, Damien definitely gets to me with those. Or did. He won't be getting to me anymore, and if you let him, I'll let my Van Helsing knight stab you. He constantly begs me for something to stab when Leiza wears her new perfume she's designed herself."*

Vance's lips turn up in an immediate grin.

Talbot once again gives her an uneasy grin. *"I knew I was stepping into a ring of barbarians. I still feel unprepared,"* he says on a tired breath.

"What?" she asks in a confused tone.

"Ms. Carmine, I'm going to ask of you, very nicely, to consider my…Alpha," he says, clearing his throat a few times as he looks away.

"Is the fucker crying right now?" Arion asks in disbelief.

Talbot indeed wipes his eyes. *"Think of how long he's gone without feeding, and remember all he's had to endure at the hands of Idun. He's paranoid right now. Uncertain. Don't hold it against—"*

“Shut the fuck up and quit guilt-tripping the damn girl,” Emit’s voice cuts in, just as Talbot was selling the hell out of me.

I glance down, realizing I’m clutching Arion’s hand like we’re two teen girls watching our crush get worked up.

We both immediately shove the other’s hand away, and I mutter a few curses toward the wolf, who I never sensed getting closer, as Vance rolls his eyes at us.

“You’re so fucking pathetic, and your beta is a cunt who is just going to sell the hell out of it. Kudos to you for not having an ounce of pride,” Arion mutters, as he huffs in frustration. “I’ve been set back farther than all of you just for being a loyal fucking man to the first woman. Me giving Idun too much attention is the worst thing I could do to Violet. I see that now. She needs my attention on her at all times,” the lunatic prattles on, as if I care.

I have a damn good candidate for beta, who is going to do the hard work for me, and drag Violet back to my arms in no time if he keeps this shit up.

“*I’m sorry, Mr. Morrigan*,” Talbot states with charm rolling about him in spades, as the wolf towers over their table. “*I was simply trying to do for my alpha what your omegas do for you…in place of your absent betas.”*

“Oooo,” Arion says into his hand while giving a small fist-pump to the air. “I vote he can be your beta if he hates the mongrel.”

“You don’t get a vote,” I point out. “But I enjoy the mutt’s red, twitching ears right now, as he fights to keep his wits about him. Violet likes Talbot already, because Anna has a thing for him.”

Talbot grins, and Emit grinds his jaw, as his eyes cut toward us.

“*Violet, Talbot’s getting coached by your rooftop stalkers across the way*,” the fucking tail-wagger states like the tattling little bitch boy he is.

Her gaze immediately swings over to find ours, as she squints and holds her hand up to shield her eyes from the sun, and her eyes narrow, as she releases an audible breath of annoyance.

“*Unbelievable. Five months and no one spares me a glance, and now everyone is stalking me right after I break up with them. I knew this would*

happen," she mutters as she pinches the bridge of her nose.

"So then she admits she wanted this to happen," Arion states with a growing grin. "Otherwise, why break up with us at all?"

"Don't repeat that question aloud, Talbot. I don't want to be standing next to him when he's speaking on that level of stupid," I state dryly.

"I don't want to be associated with either of you," Vance gripes. "I just started making progress. I'll stab you for this shit, wolf. You've been warned."

"Their lips haven't stopped moving yet," Violet says to Talbot. *"I assume that means they're being teenage boys right now."*

I hate the way the smug prick smiles, and Emit reaches down impatiently for her hand. *"I want to show you your land,"* he tells her, while the rest of us twiddle our thumbs and listen in.

"But that's later, and I'm sort of here with someone," she answers.

Emit doesn't even blink in Talbot's direction. *"Your date left in a hurry to deal with a client."*

Violet doesn't look terribly surprised, but the three of us certainly are. "Jerome never came out of that bathroom," Arion states, as he purses his lips.

"Not unless he hopped a window," Vance adds.

"I'm not sure why he'd hop a window or why Violet is bloody buying this story like the wolf is some innocent bloke who spews nothing but honesty," Arion states as he turns and drops from the building, moving too fast for the human eye to spot.

I catch up to Arion, as we head into the café, where Talbot is already walking out of the men's room, having beaten us there.

"He's really gone, Alpha. No blood or signs of a struggle either," he says to me and only me.

"You didn't seal the deal yet. Stop calling me Alpha until you do," I tell him, sniffing the air in search of the lost ex.

He catches up to me, and he hands a napkin to me. I glance down to find Violet's scribbled invite. I now have an invitation to Sanctuary.

I suppose Talbot isn't entirely inconvenient. I still don't want him as a beta.

Emit drives away with Violet, and Arion is quick to tail them, racing behind the new SUV Emit has acquired these past few months.

"You'll be my alpha soon enough," Talbot says, even though he seems unusually quiet and far less cocky as he walks out.

"Why did it look like he was sulking?" I ask with a frown, as Talbot leaves without a backward glance.

"Where are you going?" Vance calls to my back.

"To figure out what Talbot Lane is up to," I state very quietly.

Without another word, I drop down and disappear inside a reflective illusion.

I pause behind my SUV when I hear a muffled cry of some sort. Scratching my head, I pop the hatch, and a groan escapes me when it reveals a panicked, gagged, and hog-tied Jerome.

I'm not sure how this shit happens to me.

"Well…that's not good," the useless Van Helsing says from behind me.

Jerome struggles harder, panicking twice as much.

"Was it the mutt or the incubus who did this?" I ask the gagged wanker.

A muffled scream is all I receive in return.

"I'll have Arion wipe this from his memories," Vance states as he pulls out his phone.

I can smell Emit on him very distinctly now. Seriously? The wolf grew desperate enough to make this sort of reckless play?

"The wolf is apparently off his rocker and not holding back anymore," I point out. "Which means…he's clearly about to take her as a mate."

There's a pause of silence on the stunned Van Helsing's face. I may say the words too casually, given the severity of this situation. Even the psychotic vampire is showing more restraint at this point than Emit.

"He hasn't tried taking a mate since Idun. He probably can't even do it anymore," Vance argues.

"He locked her ex in my vehicle so he could bloody steal her away. He's

decidedly in mate mode," I absently counter, gesturing at the unwanted captive I'm now stuck with.

Jerome's eyes get wider as they flick between us, and we tilt our heads in unison, as he pointlessly struggles twice as hard to get away from us.

I shut the hatch and toss the Van Helsing my keys over my shoulder as I walk away.

"What the hell?" Vance snaps.

"Seems like something someone more responsible than me should handle. I have a possible beta who acts sincerely shady, so that's what I'm going to handle right now."

"I think we should be more concerned with Emit at the moment," Vance calls out. "If his wolf has taken over to stalk his mate, then there's a chance this could get out of hand."

"So deal with the dead wanker and the wolf. Violet's good at handling our monsters. She'll handle his too," I say a little too certainly, frowning as I turn back.

Emit's wolf has been caged for so long by the bars of guilt and the confines of his grief. Centuries upon centuries, he's fought his beast to the point of staying forever broken, never handing himself over to the calls of his wilder side.

He's on the hunt now. And he's clearly started uncaging his beast for the first time since that one time it broke free and claimed Idun. This time seems to be done more on purpose, since it's less frantic and wild as it was that once…

"On second thought, I'll go with you," I chirp, drawing a concerned look from Vance. "Just in case."

CHAPTER 14

VIOLET

“How will they be safe?” I ask Emit, trying not to sound like an ungrateful ass when he’s giving me such a large piece of land.

He slips in behind me, arms coming around my waist. I try not to tremble when he drags his thumb over my stomach, lifting my shirt so he can touch skin.

Why is he so touchy? Emit’s not really all that touchy, usually. At least not in such a soft, intimate way. That’s more Damien’s style.

“The borders will be bound by gypsy magic. I can reinforce them, since I’m the best at it. It’ll be strongest on the full moon, but it’ll wane with the moon’s cycle. Keep that in mind and try to make most of the moon-regulated boundaries.”

My eyes flit over the small waterfall that is trickling down. The month of May in Shadow Hills has had just a little snow on the ground from time to time. But mostly, Bobo has taught me to control myself so I can stop influencing Mother Nature so often.

I can picture them coming for a swim here when they trust the outdoors won’t bring about their demise.

Emit’s arms lift me abruptly, startling me a little, as he carries me toward the edge of the small waterfall.

“Vance, Arion, and Damien have all requested this plot of land from me. Numerous times they’ve offered me things I struggled to refuse,” he tells me.

He puts me down and walks over to the pool at the bottom of the falls.

“That means it’s too valuable for me to take then. I don’t want to be in debt for something you can hold over—”

His eyes level mine, and my breath catches in my throat. Something’s off about him. The wilder colors in his gaze are swirling, and there’s a hint of

menace there that's not usually present.

"Emit, are you okay?" I ask as he slowly begins stripping out of his shirt.

"I need you to very slowly walk out of here. Then take off in a sprint when you're out of sight. Don't stop running until you've reached your Sanctuary," he says through a slightly growly tone.

"What? Why?" I ask, darting a worried look around at our surroundings.

So much for this place being safe.

"Because I'm just starting to realize how very much in control my wolf is, and if you continue to linger, I'm going to pin you down, fuck you, and leave you with my mark."

I can't help but blink a few times. I mean…what the actual hell?

"*What*?" I ask slowly.

"Do you want me to explain? Because the longer you stand there, the more my control starts to slip. When I get in the water, you go. And go quickly. Don't turn around, and keep your distance from me for the next few days, no matter what I say to try to get you to come to me," he adds.

I notice his claws have extended, and his canines have started to peek out over the plump edges of his lower lip.

"Now!" he roars.

Even though it's abrupt and sudden, I waste no time turning and walking away, ignoring the vicious growl that rips from his throat the second my back is turned. Water splashes, but I don't turn around to see if he's randomly taking a swim.

This is all too weird. Even for me.

I have no idea what's even—

A hand clamps over my mouth seconds before I feel the world tilt.

A roar rattles the air behind me, as Arion silently moves us so fast that the world seems to whip by me in a dizzying motion.

I burrow my face against his chest, still *really* confused about what's going on right now.

“All clear, love,” Arion says as his lips brush my forehead. “The big bad wolf won’t come this far into town while on the fritz. His wolf has sharper instincts than that,” he adds with some amusement in his tone.

My head is still spinning when we’re abruptly standing in front of Sanctuary, and I peer up to see the vampire staring down at me with a smirk on his lips.

“What the hell is going on with Emit?” I ask him very seriously.

“Give me a formal, written invitation, and I’ll tell you all about it,” he states, as his arms tighten around me, still holding me bridal style.

“I already gave Shera an invitation for you,” I say on a sigh, but my breath seizes in the next instant, because we go from the front steps to inside my room so fast that my already dizzy head tries to spin.

Arion continues carrying me around the mirrored room that has…pretty much gone to waste.

“Idun was once Emit’s mate. His wolf chose her because she helped to bring it into existence,” Arion states as he gingerly puts me on the bed. “The omegas somehow knew you’d be her replacement the day they met you, hence the reason they moved themselves in with you and made themselves *yours*. Emit’s apparently been subconsciously fighting the urge, because making you his mate will come at a huge price for him.”

I groan as I drop back to the bed, putting my arm over my head.

“Emit hasn’t even tried to date me. Why does mating sound more like marriage than dating?” I ask on a long sigh.

“Because it’s a bond that forges between two souls. Idun worked really hard to remove that mark from her body, and even she struggled to do so. It gives him a certain…authority on nights of the new moon.”

I sit up, since for once, we’re not discussing the full moon.

“Authority?”

Arion smirks again. “You’d have to ask the wolf for the details, and he’s going to need some space, clearly. He tied up your ex and left him in Damien’s car. It’s only going to—”

“What?!” I shriek, bolting off the bed.

He snatches my wrist and jerks me back down to the bed, while draping a leg across me to hold me in place. My heartbeat speeds up with the intimate contact.

He smells so good, and feels just as good against me. My body has missed his way too much, and all the wrong thoughts play in my head. It’s hell to resist the urge to run my fingers through his hair, especially when his dark eyes sweep over me with a clear sense of hunger.

“Don’t worry. I’ve handled it already, and I took first watch to see if you’re ready to be claimed or not,” he goes on, still dragging his gaze over my body. “Vampires do something very similar.”

Just when I think I finally have a handle on the world around me, the most unromantic monsters in the world rip the rug right out from under me.

“I’m still stuck on the part where Jerome was tied up, and *you handled it.* What did you do, Arion?” I ask very seriously.

“I made him forget it happened. He’s downstairs waiting for you to get back from your meeting so he can take you out for coffee. Sorry. I made him forget that happened as well. Do us all a favor and turn him down this time,” the asshole tells me with a sadistic grin flirting with his devious lips.

“How is it you’re just now noticing—”

“Violet, I want you to be my bride,” he inserts very randomly.

I forget what I was even saying as my eyes go wide and round in my head. This day started out so much more ordinary—well, sort of.

“I’m sorry, but did I somehow step into the Twilight Zone. Emit wants to mate me and mark me for werewolf marriage, and you suddenly want me as your bride—*after both of you spent five months watching your ex!* Do monster men not understand anything at all about women?”

Running a hand through my hair in frustration, I turn my back on him and try to get my breathing under control, but he keeps me pinned to his body.

“We’re your monsters, Violet. We understand better how to showcase that now. My apologies for taking this long to figure it out,” he goes on like this is a

normal conversation.

“What’s that look?” he asks when I just turn to stare at him in stupefied horror.

“I broke up with you,” I state in as simple of words as possible. “And now you’re talking about making me your bride.”

He’s pins me to the bed and comes down on top of me so fast that my breath hisses between my lips in surprise.

Everything on me tries to catch fire from his cold touch, and my hips tilt forward like the traitorous body I’m attached to can’t seem to get the memo either.

Arion smirks, as his gaze stays fixed to mine, and he drags his pale index finger along my cheek. His eyes look even darker, and his skin looks flawlessly smooth with just a hint of shine.

His jaw looks to have been etched between masculine and feminine, giving him an edge of sexuality most men can’t pull off. He’s incredibly sexy when he reminds me how powerful he also is.

“Tell me you want me to walk away forever, and I will,” he whispers, brushing his lips along mine in a way that evokes a shudder throughout my body.

“Tell me you really want me to stop chasing, and I’ll leave you be,” he goes on, eyes searching mine as if he expects an answer.

Swallowing thickly, I start to shake my head, but stop. It’s the first time anyone has made that sort of statement.

“I don’t want to lose you as individual friends, but as a quad set of boyfriends…you all sort of suck. If I’m being honest,” I tell him quietly, swallowing the lump in my throat and pretending to be unfazed.

“I know we messed up, love, but you’re being too sensitive and very trigger happy on ending things,” he murmurs across my lips, his hand slipping under my shirt to rest on my side.

Steeling myself, I narrow my eyes, refusing to be belittled about this.

“The truth is…*no* woman could handle being mostly ignored by *four*

distracted men, who were obsessed with watching every single thing their ex did, regardless of the circumstances. I don't feel bad for being pissed about it. I told you I'd never compete."

My voice gets a little wobbly, emotion slipping through, as some suppressed anger stirs my tears.

His lips are on mine in the next instant, and I stupidly let my fingers tangle in his hair, feeling so starved for affection that I allow myself a moment of weakness.

Arion's hand moves toward the front of my skirt, but I stop it.

"*Friends*," I blurt out as I cut my face away from his.

He groans as he slaps the bed beside my head and hangs his own head, the black wisps of his hair hiding his face from me, as he makes a frustrated sound.

After a long beat of silence, his head finally comes up, and solid black eyes stare into mine. The fear factor has ebbed these past five months, because I'm inappropriately unintimidated by him.

"I'll be your friend. For now," he says in a way that sounds more like a warning. "But unless you cut ties to me, you will become my bride. You've not seen me chase yet, love. You just think you have."

He's gone in the next instant, his presence so abruptly ejected from my room that I almost swear I made it all up.

My head thumps against the bed, and I shove the heels of my palms against my eye sockets.

My body protests his departure, and I barely stop myself from begging him to come back.

"I certainly didn't struggle like this when I broke up with Jerome," I grumble aloud. "And I thought he was the man I'd marry back then."

Anna pops her head over mine, making a tsking sound. "Comparing them to Jerome is like comparing Confucius to Curly the Stooge. They're both bald, but one has a lot more going on inside the bald head," she says as if it makes all the sense in the world.

“Not now, Anna. Not. Now,” I bite out. “I need to—”

The wall explodes across from us, glass shattering from the mirrors and raining down all around me. Anna screams, as a stunned breath gets painfully sucked into my lungs, taking some of the plaster dust in with the gust.

Hands roughly grab my ankles, and I’m slung like a rag doll into the next wall, sending a spray of glass up into the air again. The hands don’t release me, as I cry out in surprise, pain shooting up my side as my whole body is jarred by the unrelenting, steel wall behind the mirrors.

Another cry is ripped out of me when I’m slammed into the bed, crashing with it to the ground from the powerful hit. The mattress bursts from the explosive impact, and I hear the crack of the ground beneath us as an angry scream shouts in the air.

“You’re stupid!” a woman’s raspy voice shouts. “It hurts when you’re stupid!”

The world spins around me before I realize I’ve been thrown, and I once again slam into the unrelenting, thick steel that layers the wall to the outside. A *crunch* accompanies the pain searing in my jaw, the bones breaking so badly that I don’t get the chance to even speak.

“They want you! You too stubborn! This will be nothing compared to what she’ll do to you if you don’t take them!” the angry woman shouts again, just as a powerful foot collides with my middle.

The pain is so staggering that dots speckle my vision, and two fierce fists pound into my skull against the steel portion of the floor. Copper tinges my mouth, as the voice shouts something else, but my hearing dissipates with each new hit and shouted demand.

“You have everything! Don’t throw it away! Take them! You stupid girl! Take them!”

The voice sounds so far away, as the steady thrumming of my rapidly descending heartbeat hammers in my ears like a dreaded warning.

No. No. No—

I come to, my eyes blinking, pain screaming through every muscle and bone in my body, as I stare eye to eye with a familiar woman I have pinned under me on the ground.

She's sobbing, as she shakes uncontrollably under me, and a long string of blood drips from my mouth, landing beside her face.

My hand is around her throat, and bruises are forming under my fingers. I'm straddling her waist, and my other hand is on the steel. It's a fist. A fist that has bent the steel Taylor swore couldn't be bent, even if Emit's wolf had a tantrum.

I swallow thickly as my hands begin to shake. Caroline. This is Caroline I'm pinning down. It's Caroline who attacked me.

She's the one who always whispers to me through the walls…

I'd speak, but my jaw is still hanging precariously disjointed, hurting so much that fresh tears spill from my eyes.

"*I'm sorry*!" she wails, sobbing harder as her eyes screw shut. "*I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry!"*

She starts slapping the side of her head, as I stumble off her, falling to the ground on my ass, as I struggle to catch a breath of air that doesn't hurt, wincing as I thank good fortune she wasn't just ripped apart by my monster.

I lost control of my monster that miraculously didn't stay in control long. But that doesn't matter. Only one thing matters.

I. Lost. Control. In my own House.

Caroline hurriedly scrambles into the walls, rushing through the one she put a hole in.

"I told you not to build the wall tunnels around your room. That's just weird," Anna says with her shit timing.

At my glare, she whistles awkwardly and disappears from sight.

My tears fall harder, and I cry out in pain as I slip up on the wall, fumbling with my broken bedside table for a healing potion, but the vials have all been shattered.

Fortunately, I stopped keeping explosive potions in my room for fear of

something like this eventually happening.

I’m stuck in a House full of PTSD monsters who freak out and go on ballistic rampages. Shit was expected to happen. Just not on this scale without provocation of any sort.

My mind almost blanks into a numb state of delirium when I snap my shoulder back into place, only to have it fall to the side again.

She damn near ripped my arm clean off, I realize.

It’s barely hanging on. That’s why my fist was beside her head. We fought.

Our monsters fought.

I swallow the bile in my throat.

Our monsters fought because I lost control. And she’s probably only alive because she can’t die.

We’re just starting out, and I’ve already fucked up.

CHAPTER 15

VANCE

“I’m simply saying you should investigate the guy a little farther if he’s clearly using you to get to Violet,” I explain to Damien.

“Violet likes him. She likes your favorite beta. She likes Arion’s favorite beta. She likes Emit’s favorite omegas,” he drawls, seemingly lost in his own head, as he steeples his hands together.

“She trusts them because *we* trust them,” I dutifully inform the idiot, who hasn’t been right in the head. “What the hell is going on right now? First Emit goes into some damn mating heat that is driving him—”

A howl rattles the walls and echoes down all the long hallways, just as chains rattle and Emit runs into the silver bars of the cage I’ve put him in. The Van Helsing cage and cement room will hold him.

Damien shoots a dubious look toward me.

“He told me to cage him. Don’t look at me like I’m an asshole right now,” I remind him, bristling when the long howl turns desperate and…pathetically sad.

“We’ve spent too much time together. I actually feel sorry for him, damn it,” Damien grinds out, as he crosses his arms over his chest and slinks down in his seat.

Anna pops in very abruptly, and Damien exhales harshly, as he pinches the bridge of his nose and mutters a curse.

“How are you alive?” I ask her very seriously.

She blinks at me. “Go help Violet out of her van,” she says instead, confusing the shit out of me.

Damien stands and goes to the window, brow furrowing.

One whiff of nearly muted Portocale blood, and we both launch ourselves through the open set of bay windows. I land a fraction of a second before him,

and I spring forward, practically ripping Violet's door off.

Her head is leaned over on the steering wheel, arms dangling out to the sides, as blood drips down her twitching fingers. My eyes work quickly, moving over her, assessing the damage.

Fresh stitches line both arms, though one looks to have gotten nearly pulled off her, judging by the stitching. Her shirt is ripped and soaked in her own blood…as well as another's.

I immediately recognize the second scent.

"Caroline did this?" I ask her with a false modicum of calm, aching to go shred the poor fucking girl just because she's too broken to know better.

Violet makes a pained, muffled noise when her jaw…fucking hell. How didn't I notice her mangled jaw before?

When tears start rushing down her cheeks, I quickly grab her, cradling her to me.

"Don't do anything stupid, Damien. She'd never forgive you and you know it," I say to him, causing Violet's eyes to dart all around.

Damien turns visible just in time to open the door in front of us.

His look is as cold as mine, as his jaw tics with the same violent urges I'm suppressing right now.

"Bloody aware," Damien says through his barely restrained ire.

That blue fucking book is a nightmare of procedures. Most of those procedures call for the woman, whom we all desperately covet, to have her ass stomped without any retaliation of any sort. It's not okay.

We signed this shit.

We signed it without ever once thinking Violet would deceive us in a way that would affect *us.*

She's left us mostly powerless in moments like this.

But she came to me.

I exhale into her hair as I hug her tighter, gently carrying her up the stairs toward my room. I feel Damien trailing me as I go.

“The Simpletons are a dangerous stock, even if they are ridiculous and gentle the vast majority of the time,” Damien states in a tone of forced pleasantry.

Violet grips me tighter around my neck, even though she feels mostly limp, as more tears leak from her eyes.

“Did you at least unleash your own monster to challenge hers?” Damien asks her, his forcibly pleasant tone failing in the heat of his frustrating helplessness.

“Yes,” Anna supplies with a roll of her eyes. “She lost control, so now she’s drowning in pointless guilt for the what-ifs and blah, blah, do-gooder-perfectionism blah. She’s upset that she upset Caroline—you know, the crazy bitch who charged her like a territorial rhino for not fucking the four of you.”

My footsteps halt, and Violet glares over at Anna, who grins and gives her a little wave.

“Your secrets are not safe with me when they’re stupid secrets,” Anna continues. “You brought me back from the *super* dead. I’d like to keep you among the truly living to pay off that really big debt I sort of owe you.”

Blinking out of my trance, I numbly move Violet to my bed and go to grab some of her healing potions from my drawer.

“How did she bring you back?” Damien asks like it’s idle conversation.

Violet rolls her eyes before narrowing them at him, while he pretends to be oblivious to her annoyance. Anna shrugs a shoulder.

“A big hole tore through the third dimension where ghosts go after final decay. I managed to leap through it at the last possible minute during the cosmic upset at the Simpleton gravesite, because Violet told me where to go,” Anna explains.

My eyes move to Violet, brow furrowing, as she allows her eyelids to flutter shut.

Carefully lifting her head, I pour the healing potions down the back of her throat instead of onto the wounds. She’s given us instructions in that damn book as to how to tend to her in moments of crisis.

“That’s ludicrous. Ghosts turn to piles of salt and cease to exist. There is no

third dimension," Damien cuts in, sounding highly suspicious.

"Says you. I'm pretty sure I know more about ghosts than you do, pretty boy," Anna purrs, running her finger over his shoulder. "Too bad I lost my libido there," she adds on a putout sigh, as she moves back to Violet's side.

She barely even spares us a glance, as she plops down on the bed beside Violet. Violet stares at us like she's daring us to say something paranoid and suspicious toward her…*friend.*

"We're going to have to talk about this eventually," I inform her, as I pour more healing potion down her throat.

"Should have done that five months ago…back when you probably should have first noticed me," Anna drawls with a devilish grin.

Violet gives me a look that tells me she's agreeing with the impossible ghost at her side.

"Marta Portocale hasn't drained you of your life yet?" I idly muse.

"Am I still sitting here? I suppose that answers that question then," Anna says around a derisive snort.

Clearly I'm not getting any answers about her existence today. Which is fine. Anna is the least of our concerns.

Violet's body is more damaged than I realized, because her mangled jaw took up most of my attention. Now I'm noticing the bruises as they get more and more defined.

She took Caroline on during a manic rage fit. Bobo once obliterated my entire house and houseguests during one of his fits.

"I'd say you should see the other girl, but Violet didn't do much damage," Anna states like she's annoyed with this, shooting a glare toward Violet.

Violet's eyes only well up with more tears, and Anna looks away, muttering something about being too soft.

When Violet's body goes limp, finally succumbing to the exhaustion that was likely caused by the painful damage, I thread our fingers together.

"Caroline did this because of Violet's hesitance to take us back?" Damien

asks Anna when we hear Violet snore.

Anna's eyes collide with his, as a dark grin emerges on her red lips. "You're talking to me while she's asleep? I thought the dead shouldn't influence the living," she says with a deepening grin.

"Stop being so terribly creepy and answer the question before I throw salt at you," Damien states in a bored drawl.

Anna shrugs and rolls her eyes. "It's more fun when I'm creepy. But whatever. Be a prude. Anyway, yeah. So Caroline has been stalking Violet for a while, whispering through the walls to her, tracking her every single movement. She even hangs out in the walls beside Violet's room when she sleeps. If you think I'm creepy, you best put her way ahead of me, because that crazy bitch wants to live in Violet's skin and show her how to be better at beating Idun, at least when it comes to the four of you."

There was a time when Caroline tried to give us 'love potions' to steal us from Idun, simply to weaken the Neopry alpha. We never told Idun about the failed attempt made by the pitiful Simpleton.

My phone rings, and I glance down, finding Arion's name flashing across the screen.

"Not a word about this. He'll do something terrible to Caroline, and Violet will possibly never speak to him again," I tell Damien, who simply grinds his jaw.

"The temptation is unbearable," he confesses, as he tosses salt at Anna, who curses when she's ejected from the room.

He takes her spot on the bed next to Violet, as I answer the call.

"Now's not a good time, Arion. We're—"

"I'm putting together a fun little Monster Olympics," Arion says with all seriousness.

I shoot an incredulous gaze to Damien, who looks as stupefied as I feel.

"Monster Olympics?" Damien mouths.

"Violet once told me she'd always wanted to be a team mascot, but she never

spent enough time in a town to make friends, let alone become a part of a team," Arion goes on. "I've already secured an appropriate sized stadium, several horses, some of those unnecessary hurdles people now put on tracks just to make running harder, and a few other things. I'm looking for a band. According to my research, all good events have big names headlining for such events."

Pinching the bridge of my nose and exhaling, I lean forward, closing my eyes, and give him my full attention.

"Arion, what's brought this on?" I ask on a tired sigh.

"Violet stuck me in the friend zone. I'm going to remind her I'm one helluva romantic son of a bitch, far more so than any of you lot. Then she'll be my bride."

I drop the phone, barely managing to catch it before it hits the ground. Damien's eyes are wide and round when I glance over at him.

Quickly, I pull the phone back up to my ear and say, "This is sudden. You can't just claim Violet to be your bride after spending centuries begging Idun for __"

"I never asked Idun to be my bride. I knew she'd say no," Arion drawls. "It's the only way I can make Violet understand I'm choosing her. I'll grovel for Violet in a way I'd never do for Idun."

"And a way for you to gain some control over her," Damien supplies, as he gingerly brushes Violet's hair away from her face.

Her jaw makes a few snapping sounds, as it slowly pulls back into place. Idly, I wonder if she fainted on purpose just to avoid feeling all this pain.

I squeeze her hand in mine and kiss the back of it, as Arion goes quiet.

"You two have Violet with you, don't you?" he asks quietly.

"She's been injured, and—"

The bloody fast vampire is suddenly in the room with us, and I sigh as I pocket my worthless phone.

"Idun?" he asks sharply, cutting his slowly blackening eyes to me…as they begin collecting an alarming red pupil.

“No,” Damien and I say in unison.

“Who—”

“I’ll not tell you, because you’ll do something really unforgiveable in Violet’s eyes, according to her blue book, and she’ll be too angry with you to ever consider being your bride,” I tell him, manipulating him *just a little.* “Consider this a good favor, Vampyre.”

He runs two hands through his hair in frustration, jaw tensing, as he looks her over.

“If she’s this beaten up, it was clearly a strong Simpleton during a manic rage,” he says, repeating all our earlier assumptions.

The subtle scent of Caroline’s blood has slowly been overpowered and drowned by the stronger scent of Portocale blood that still spills from Violet’s wounds and onto my bed, saturating the comforter. Her scent seems weaker inside the veins lately, for whatever reason, but decidedly very Portocale outside of it.

“She knew it would happen. They panic too easily,” I state without the details about Caroline’s panic stemming from Violet denying us.

My free hand fights forming into a fist, because Arion is far too perceptive these days, something I’ve come to realize these past five months.

“She’s being ridiculous by refusing to have us there. I swore I wouldn’t harm one of them, but I could damn well prevent this shit from ever occurring,” Arion bites out, gesturing toward our very broken little monster.

“We all sat around jovially bonding over Idun’s asinine TV show, just as our fucked up bitch of an ex-girlfriend wanted us to do,” Damien says as he presses his forehead to Violet’s, likely giving her sweet dreams. “She’s not wrong for being pissed. She’s just insane if she thinks we’ll give up so easily.”

His eyes cut to mine as he adds, “Quite frankly, *everyone* should know better.”

Clearly he’s talking about the worried Simpletons, such as Caroline, who will likely have more and more manic rages.

“I see what’s going on right now. You two just shared a silent conversation I’m not privy to. What’s going on?” Arion insists.

Instead of answering, I ask, “What about your Monster Olympics, Arion? It sounds absurd.”

He drops to the bed and pulls Violet’s feet into his lap, carefully inspecting the swollen bruises around her ankles. His eyes gather darker red pupils that are slowly expanding.

With a harsh exhale, I notice him fighting the monster back into the cage, which is a rarity with the vampire alpha.

Not even I’ve ever managed to talk him into trying to cage the monster after it’s been summoned. He likes the freedom too much to assert that sort of control.

Until Violet.

With gentle examination, he continues to inspect her ankles while answering, “We’ll include all the alphas and prospective or current betas. Omegas will have a few events they can compete in, but they’ll feel the urge to serve, so we’ll have chores set up for them. Violet will love it. Then I’ll propose.”

I groan as I scrub a hand over my face. “You can’t be serious,” I mutter under my breath.

“Of course I’m serious. It’s time we all settle down, and Violet’s just the girl to do it with. Even Emit’s wolf knows it to be true,” the obtuse vampire argues.

“Too soon, Arion. Way too fucking soon. The damn girl *just* broke up with us,” Damien reminds him, even as he kisses the inside of her wrist, the place where the bonding mark goes on a female who has accepted an incubus as her Flame.

Another mark Idun never took…

“We have too much history with Idun. It’s intimidating to Violet,” I state very pointedly to Arion *and* Damien.

“All the more reason to prove she’s who we choose over—”

My doorbell chimes, and a shock of heat licks up my spine.

Arion and Damien’s eyes shift to mine.

“She’s like Beetle Juice. We said her name one too many bloody times,” Damien gripes dispassionately, betraying the unease in his eyes, as he shifts closer to Violet.

In the next instant, Arion is across the room, and a surprised breath rattles our ears, as Damien and I both dart our gazes over.

The vampire is as fast as the skin walker these days, it seems.

Idun is pinned to the wall with Arion’s claws tightly gripping her neck. His lips are curled back, as his fangs extend, and the red in his otherwise fully black eyes isn’t caged this time.

Idun looks as surprised by it as I feel.

She recovers quickly, giving him her smug, self-assured little smile. “I just came to inform the resident Van Helsing that I’ve returned and my punishment for overstepping a petty little line has been concluded. I’ll not be punished farther, *Vampyre.”*

“There are three other infractions we’ve discovered. Careful how you tread, or I’ll punish you for those as well,” I tell her as I stand, effectively blocking the *empty* bed from her view.

In truth, Damien is just masking both he and Violet from plain view.

I almost worry I’m going to have to pull Arion back when the red in his eyes grows. Idun swallows thickly, eyes more on him than me for the first time ever.

“Easy, Arion. Don’t overstep,” I caution him. “If your Violet’s monster, listen to me.”

He doesn’t release her, but he also doesn’t try removing her vulnerable neck between his claws either.

It’s a pointless endeavor that will only spur vicious retaliation.

She really can’t smell the blood in this room. Arion wasn’t lying. Her nose is as pointless as Violet’s.

It’s just one of her best kept secrets that exposes one more weakness I didn’t know I could extort.

“Unless you’re choosing a side right now, I strongly suggest releasing me,”

she says in a cold tone to Arion.

The wild-eyed vampire simply smirks. “I choose Violet’s side. You’re the one who quickly forced the issue.”

The casual way he says it makes it sound like a meaningless confession. However, the air is sucked out of the room.

Idun can’t keep the utter shock off her face. Arion’s lips turn up in a menacing grin, his eyes narrowing on her, as though he’s savoring this moment.

“Instead of picking my battles, I’ll simply be Violet’s monster. Eventually, she’ll be my bride. And you, Idun? I’ll make you dance like a puppet on strings by the time I’m finished with you. I know all your secrets,” he says, foolishly taunting her, as the red in his eyes deepens and his voice grows into a hiss.

Idun doesn’t shrink back, but it’s clear she’d like some immediate space between herself and the loyal vampire servant, who has finally growled at its shit master.

“You were always a volatile beast, Arion. Cutting ties to you will only aide in making me whole again. In this era, I need to be softer, it seems. That will take some work. And you and I will be one less toxic relationship I have to suffer through, while catching all the blame for *our* wrongs together,” she states sourly.

Arion’s smirk slips, and I see the way the red in his eyes shuts down. He releases her abruptly, the black in his eyes receding as well.

Idun gives him a dubious look, before returning her attention to me, her gaze immediately softening.

“She always did favor the shining silversmith,” Arion tells me through a tight expression, as he goes to drop onto the bed.

As if Damien feels like antagonizing her as well, the illusion drops, revealing himself and Violet, just as our fully-healed little monster unconsciously turns over, sliding her leg over Arion’s hip, searching him out in her sleep.

Idun’s pupils try to dilate, and I see her struggle to keep her composure. I expect Arion to be smirking and enjoying her inconvenient moment of jealousy, but his attention is solely on Violet, as he brushes her hair down around her face

and curves an arm around her waist.

Damien is behind her, gingerly stroking her back as he leans forward to kiss her shoulder.

Idun won't know she's in a weakened state right now. The less curious she is about Violet, the better.

"I heard this era was more brazen and loose with sexual deviance. I bet it's delightful to finally be taking advantage," Idun says to Damien.

He smirks as he stares at her, not saying anything.

"You can look at me with all the disdain and hatred in the world. You can rebel and act like children who don't know what the real world is truly like. You can play house with the sweet, naïve little girl who tickles your easily persuaded fancy," she continues, flicking her gaze around the room. "But at the end of the day, she'll never love you at your worst. And eventually, you'll all return to your worst. I can patiently wait for the new to wear off. I won't be provoking the silly little thing anymore. You have my word."

Damien's head tips back, and he outright laughs.

Violet's certainly a little more accepting of our worst than Idun, but Idun doesn't quite understand that. Yet. She thinks our worst is rebelling against her desperate, sadistic need for control.

"Glad to see you've graciously matured," Idun states dryly. In flawless Romanian, with her very memorable accent and her silky, smooth, enchanting voice, she sings, *"Sing gypsies, sing of your lies."*

"She knows of our lies. She knows of our truths. She knows of all our many flaws," Arion drawls.

Her lips twist in a very telling grin. "But do *they* know of your lies, Arion? Did no one bother to find out what secret he's made the naïve girl keep?" Idun muses, eyes directly on mine.

She knows better than to force my intrigue. It only adds to my numerous twitches, and that royally pisses me off.

When my left eye suffers a timed sequences of blinks, I cut my gaze to

Arion, unable to stop myself.

A muscle jumps along his jaw, as Damien pretends to be disinterested, but I notice how his fingers have now twined with Violet's.

How does Idun know something we've never been able to uncover? When Arion came out of the ground, he forced Violet into silence about a secret only the two of them have since shared.

Arion keeps his glare now trained on Idun, as the blacks of his eyes return.

"Why don't you tell them, pet? It'd be better coming from you. Secrets like these only fester and cause more unnecessary resentment," Idun says to him, her voice changing to an old, familiar one.

The woman Arion thought her to be when he fell in love. *Victoria's* voice.

Arion's gaze flicks to me, and in a flat tone, he says, "If you let her tear us apart over this, she wins. I'll still be at Violet's side, so you'll have to deal with me, regardless. I'll release her from her gypsy's pride promise, and she can tell you all about it herself."

Simply because I know it's going to eat Idun alive if I go along with this, I cut my gaze back toward her, pretending to restrain a smile.

She doesn't react.

She doesn't acknowledge his response.

She simply dusts some lint from her very revealing dress and shrugs a shoulder. "Arion watched you all for decades as an astral projection of himself, after you made the terrible mistake of locking him away in a coffin," Idun states as she feigns examination of her nails.

With all the power in me, I resist jerking my gaze to him. That son of a bitch…

"Deny it, gypsy Vampyre. You'll see who they still believe more," Idun goes on.

"I have no reason to deny it. Violet already knows the truth," Arion says, as the tension in the room slowly starts to shift.

I glance at Damien, who is smirking down at Violet. "If our sweet monster

knows, then I'm sure she won't have any problem explaining," Damien states, not an ounce of anger in his voice.

"He knows you begged for death and was denied," Idun cuts in.

Damien's smile slips, and Arion looks away, scrubbing a hand over his jaw.

The vampire finally cuts his gaze to me, but before he can speak, a howl erupts through the air so bone-jarringly loud that it rattles all the pictures off every single wall in my room.

Idun startles, whirling around with a hiss, as her eyes go black and her pupils shrink. Her claws have extended, and her back hunches as it creaks and pops, her height quickly lifting up four inches, as her skin turns an ashen gray.

Trigger happy with her monster, it seems.

That's good.

That means four predators have successfully put her on edge, and now the three of us know we're getting to her.

Emit's howl bowls through my house once again, and this time I'm not paying attention to Idun's reaction.

Arion's eyes have gone solid red, and Damien's have whited out. They both dive for Idun, just as Emit's wolf crashes through the wall of the room.

"What the fucking hell?!" I shout, knocked to the ground.

I'm forced to cover my head, as my entire roof is ripped, since Arion slings Idun through it.

She shrieks, just as several buzzing bats quickly shift, a full fleet of shapeshifters hitting the ground in two-footed form, as they hiss and arch their backs at us, surrounding their alpha.

Idun cracks her neck, her large canines protruding and overlapping, as she snarls at us from the ground. I can only see through my wall of windows, as I look over just in time to see Emit's wolf surrounding Violet, standing over her body like he's ready to kill the next shifter in this house.

His mouth is bloodied, but it's his blood and no one else's I scent. His claws look just as bloody. This mate-fevered hellhound just somehow managed to dig

through my silver cage.

That’s not good.

He damn well may attack Idun, and then we’re all fucked.

Arion and Damien both hiss at the wolf, who growls at them, but the growl tapers off into nothing when Violet makes a whimpered sound in her sleep.

Emit turns quickly, shoving his nose into her stitches. Please, for fuck’s sake, don’t let Caroline’s smell still be on her.

He lets out a low groan, nudging her cheek with his muzzle, when she doesn’t notice him.

All wolf. He’s all fucking wolf right now. It’s not even time for a full moon. It wasn’t the same when he mated Idun. This is different.

Apparently, he denied it for too long, and the wolf has taken things into his own hands.

Arion starts to move toward him, but Emit growls low in his throat again, warning the vampire to keep a distance.

“She’s not just yours,” the stupid vampire says, even though I’m thankful his eyes have dulled back down to only black.

“You’ll be on your way then, right?” Damien calls out the window, waving like a loon. “Been great catching up. Our girlfriend’s unconscious and Emit’s wolf has decided now’s the perfect time to mate. Ta ta for now.”

He shuts the window and glares over at me, as if I’m somehow responsible for this entire messy situation.

Emit makes a low rumble of appreciation in his throat, and I really regret getting out of bed this morning. Her body has certainly healed quickly, but not fast enough for her to go through this.

“Get in her head and find out what the hell she wants to do about this before we make a mess she’ll be pissed about later. I’ll make the dick turn into a man,” I say to him. “Arion, ensure that Idun doesn’t step foot back in this room,” I tell the vampire, as I lift my silver sword, watching as Emit starts ripping the shirt from Violet’s body with his teeth.

“And if she decides she doesn’t want to be ravaged by him and mated for fucking who knows how long?” Arion drawls.

Emit snaps his jaws, slobber flying as his wild eyes collide with mine. Claws slash across my chest, and pain sears through me, as I stumble back, finding his full wolf’s speed much faster than I remember.

I dab the blood with my fingertips, as he snarls low in his throat, baring his teeth at me like he’s daring me to step closer. But it’s clear he’s not leaving her for even a second.

“Then I’ll need some help with getting Violet out from under him,” I say in response.

“Fucking hell. She already thinks we’re too much work,” Damien groans, as the whites of his eyes return to take over his sight. “I’m starting to see her point.”

CHAPTER 16

VIOLET

“Violet,” the smooth voice says so close to my ear as my eyes flutter open.

Lush, beautiful violets are making a plush bed for me, and the sun is perfectly hidden through a thick canopy of clouds that only allows tendrils of the light to shine through.

Where the freaking hell am I? Clearly someone is screwing with my head.

“Damien?” I guess when I sit up, seeing small squirrels having sex across the way.

Ew.

“Sorry to barge in on your dreams this way, but I’m afraid your wolf needs your help,” his voice says, echoing all around me, even though I don’t see him. “You’re still healing from the Simpleton bashing you took earlier. It’s fine if you say *no* to the unprovoked mating. Arion and Vance can presumably handle him.”

I blink, wondering if this is just some really crazy dream.

A waterfall starts suddenly beside me, but it’s on mute or something, because it’s pretty without all the excess spray and obnoxious racket.

“Your omegas knew you’d be Emit’s mate eventually. They told you as much and treated you as if you already were. Surely you saw this coming,” Damien drones on.

“Damien, catch me up, please. I can’t seem to keep up with all the random shit you guys are doing since *I broke up with you*.”

I hear his amused chuckle permeate my thoughts, and suddenly he’s over me, crowding me, pressing me to the ground.

His eyes lock on mine, and my breath comes out shaky, when I feel him touching every single inch of me, igniting all those nerves. He brushes my hair away from my face with a touch I can also feel, though it seems to carry

electricity with it.

That only causes me to shudder harder, as my thighs press together against his hips.

He smirks, because he enjoys the power he's always had over me.

"Long story short, Idun has broken free of her punishment—"

"You can get out of my head right now if you're really interrupting my healing faint to talk about Idun," I interrupt, crossing my arms over my chest as I glare at him.

The dick brushes his lips over mine in a gentle caress, fingering a lock of my hair, as his lips curve in a grin against mine. "Emit's wolf has chosen you for his mate, and his most hated enemy was too close for too long, while he still waited to put his mark on you. He broke out of the Van Helsing cage, Violet. He's seconds away from claiming you and leaving his mark. Unless Arion and Vance put him down for twenty-eight years. You tell me what to tell them."

My mouth opens and closes, as several rapid blinks accompany my fish-face reaction.

"Can't a girl just have a normal faint and deal with this crazy shit when she wakes up?" I ask…admittedly using a slightly hysterical tone.

Damien grins. Of course he does.

"I'm happy to stay in here with you, but a decision has to be made. Dead wolf or new wolf mate," he says with a shrug.

"Are those *really* my only two options?" I ask him, too tired to even try to figure out which overwhelming emotion to tackle first.

I'll have my breakdown later. It's going to be massive by the time this one hits.

"Afraid so. For the record, his wolf demanded the same of Idun. She worked hard to have that mark removed, and it's left his wolf restless and lonely these past many centuries," he adds, playing me at this point.

I pause, noticing how he's purposely making Emit sound pathetic, while also pretending to be nonchalant.

“She really did bring the four of you closer again,” I say quietly, my body sinking farther into the violets, as my head drops back.

Damien’s head is immediately blocking my view of the waterfall, and he’s giving me a stern glare.

“You only think you know what’s going on, because you’re too young to understand the four very complicated individuals who’ve grown obsessed with you. We’re not closer because of Idun. If anything, she’s threatening to tear it all down. Please trust me right now. I hate to rush your decision-making process, but time is of the essence. Vance and Arion are struggling to get close without taking a claw to the gut, and the second Emit shifts, he’ll be taking what he believes is his.”

“So he’ll be a man and not on four legs?” I ask…since this is really crucial information.

“Yes,” Damien says, working hard to resist a smile when I go lax with relief. “I’ll even prime you, because he’ll be quite savage and rough with you.”

His smile falls after he adds that last bit.

“And I’ll make the pain feel really good, because you’re already too battered to endure him as it is,” he adds.

I bat a dismissive hand. “If I withstood Caroline’s rage, I can handle Emit’s wolf.”

“You can’t compare Emit’s wolf to Caroline. It’s like comparing a shark to a stingray,” he tells me as he clicks his tongue.

“You all underestimate the fury locked inside the tormented who’ve lost their voice,” I volley.

His eyes stay locked on mine.

“Will you let me allow you to enjoy this? Consent is sort of a must in this situation. I don’t want to upset my relationship with you to help him forge his,” he dutifully points out. “I need to feed, and I want to feed on you and you alone. Clearly, I need to be in good standing to reach that point in the foreseeable future.”

Only Damien can be this obnoxious and endearing.

Unsteadily, he suddenly sways to the right, and I grab his shoulders, my brow furrowing, as he blinks several times.

“This is why I need to feed,” he goes on, clutching his head. “I can’t even form a psychic link to your dreams without getting dizzy. I’m struggling to keep the link active.”

“You’ve successfully made you both look pathetic. How do I do this? I don’t want him dead. I’d rather be his mate and deal with all that when I have to,” I tell him, slapping at his arm. “Hurry up and get started before he hurts Arion or Vanc—”

His lips are on mine in the next instant, and the violets swallow us, as he presses down on me. Our clothes seem to vanish, and I have to remind myself this isn’t real…even though it feels really, *really* real.

My breath catches and my toes curl, when his mouth starts a slow descent. Each kiss to some innocent patch of skin seems to have a live wire connected right between my thighs.

A startled cry escapes me when I damn near have an orgasm, and the only thing he’s doing is kissing my shoulder. I also feel the asshole grinning against my skin, because he knows he’s incredible and proud of it.

“One would think you’re too innocent, Violet,” he murmurs, as he begins kissing his way down the valley of my breasts…working me to that edge he’s just taken from me.

“Or incredibly starved for affection, in spite of having four very complicated relationships, where sex *was* most definitely on the table,” I say through clenched teeth, trying not to make any sounds of approval while he’s being an ass.

I fail miserably when his mouth finally reaches the spot I want him most.

He winds my body tighter and tighter, keeping me on that sharp razor’s edge, leaving me to teeter on it. No matter how hard I try, I can’t seem to fall over it.

“Sorry, Violet,” he groans, swaying up to his knees when my eyes snap open

to glare at him. “I’m simply not strong enough to hold this illusion any longer *and* relieve the pain. I choose to maintain the latter.”

My breath leaves in a rush as the waterfall, violets, and everything else leaves in a blurry rush. I almost feel like my soul leaps out of the frame and gets dragged back down to my body.

A painful burst of air flares in my lungs, and my eyes truly snap open, just as the mother of all orgasms rips through me.

My nails bite into slick, firm flesh, as long, silky hair slides over my cheek.

My eyes land on a set of feral brown ones that are dancing with fire-like embers, as the skin sliding against mine rages uncontrollably hot.

I hiss out a breath when my entire body vibrates with the spasms of my never-ending orgasm, as Emit’s mouth collides with mine, feral growls rumbling his chest against mine.

Apparently this party got started before I was even fully awake.

Another painfully explosive orgasm crashes through me so hard that I end up biting his lip and breaking two nails on his steel-like skin.

A sharp cry tears out of me when the bed crashes to the ground under us, Emit still fucking me with abandon. There’s no pain, in spite of my bruises and barely-healed wounds.

Only untethered pleasure burns through every single inch of me, wringing every ounce of euphoria from the brutal force Emit is using on me.

His teeth are clenched, canines fully extended, as those wild eyes stay focused on me. His claws are stabbed into my thighs, anchoring me in place.

Even that feels good.

I notice Damien in the corner, as he sways to a seat, even as another crackle of bliss rocks through my body so hard I arch into Emit. The vicious, rough wolf flips me abruptly, claws circling my neck as he shoves himself inside me again.

I don’t know why I’m enjoying this so much. I don’t know if it’s because it’s been forever since I’ve had good sex. Or if it’s because Damien is doing whatever it is he’s doing to me. Or if it’s because Emit’s so out of control, due to

how desperately his wolf needs to claim me.

A thought occurs to me too late.

This is his wolf. This isn't Emit.

Emit told me to run.

Emit's wolf is who sought to claim me.

I never thought to ask what *Emit* wants…

A startled cry is wrenched out of me when pain slices through the blanket of pleasure, burning up my back, as blood splatters the wall next to me.

Emit's bloodied claws stab the broken bedding beside me, as his body grows still, and I go rigid, even though he's still inside me.

"Fucking hell," I hear Arion whisper on a harsh breath.

Why is the vampire in here when the wolf is off a leash? Isn't that bad?

Another pained sound escapes me when Emit probes the tender flesh on my back.

Those are the only words spoken, so I have no idea what's going on.

Pleasure replaces the burn, and I notice Damien sag to the floor on his knees, sweat beading his brow like this is hard work for him.

I almost want to reach out to him, to let him join in so he can feed…but this isn't just sex, apparently. I don't know the rules.

Emit lifts my hips, his intense, punishing rhythm starting once again. His breath parts a section of my hair as he leans over, breathing me in and exhaling on my neck, surrounding me with his body and his scent.

Why can I smell him? I smell the forest after a rain with a hint of musk.

The scents keep pouring in as his rhythm staggers, the growls getting more aggressive and desperate.

Oranges. I smell my oranges everywhere. Then I smell something acutely desirable—as though all my favorite smells are in one place. My gaze swings to Damien, finding that all-time-favorites-list scent to be coming from him.

His eyes narrow on me, as I sniff the air again, catching a hint of iron wrapped in something that smells strangely like chocolate. It's coming from the

direction I heard Arion's voice.

As Emit releases a guttural, frustrated growl, my toes curl with an impending orgasm that I'm almost scared to chase. It could shatter me.

I have no idea what's going on or why my head lulls to the side, exposing my neck to him when I smell something that can only be referred to as smoked cherries masked by subtle, enticing cologne. I have no idea why that scent makes my mouth water, or why I can't help but weirdly wonder if it's Vance.

The orgasm I actually wanted to deny hits me with the force of a house tumbling down on me. It crashes through every nerve, fiber, and cell of my body, and for a moment, I think my soul is blown out again.

It definitely feels like I leave my body behind, and I may even blackout for a second, because from the earth-shattering orgasm to the next second, I'm surrounded by a wall of muscle, and Emit's nose is burrowed in my hair, sniffing me like crazy.

His arms are circled around me—one at my neck, and one at my hips. There's a dull ache on my back where I felt his claws slash at me earlier. I'm still not sure what provoked that.

My face is shoved against his chest, as the snarling, growling, and tense hold remains.

"That was epic!" Anna shouts. "I love watching Violet have sex with you guys! See how much better this is than Idun TV?" she harps on.

I'd glare at her, but Emit growls in warning when I try to turn my head.

"Hold still for a bit, love," Arion says softly.

"I'm afraid it's going to take a day or so for his instincts to wane enough for the real Emit to resurface. Idun got too close, and we didn't even consider what that meant for him during a mating fever," Vance adds apologetically.

They don't see the true point. The point is that they all actually care about him right now, and that brings a sad smile to my lips.

"How good are you holding up? I don't want her to feel any pain from this," Vance says, presumably to Damien.

“So long as he doesn’t do any farther damage and her body heals a little faster, I can maintain for at least a few days, if needed. Anything beyond than that, and we’re going to have to find a way to get *me* in the bed with her so I can refuel,” Damien answers.

Emit makes a content sound, getting more comfortable against me, but when I try to move, he growls and yanks me closer.

Okay. So not even a little wiggle room is permitted right now. Got it.

“I’m telling you, it’ll only be a day. Tops,” Arion says like he’s arguing.

“Do you see the size of the marks on her back? This could take days, Arion. Plural,” Vance bites out.

At Emit’s low, threatening growl, they stop talking.

The arms around me clamp down harder, and a heavy leg is slung around me.

“At least he doesn’t perceive us to be threats, so long as we don’t get too close to the bed,” Arion continues.

Emit starts snoring, while I remained smashed against a lot of man wolf, unable to even move my head without earning a sleepy growl.

I could seriously use a shower.

My back merely tickles, but judging by how much pleasure is coursing through those tickles, I’m scared to know what the damage of this mark looks like. Not that it’ll matter. It’ll thread shut and heal…

Why aren’t the threads working?

I feel them bouncing against my back but not stitching together the wound.

“Mystical marks don’t heal so easily, little monster,” Damien says as though he’s noticed my pointless threads from the shredded sheet under me.

I have no idea what has happened to the clothes I had on. They were already bloody and ruined, so it’s not like it matters.

“This day has been exhausting,” I mumble as I let my eyes slowly shut, relaxing and turning myself over to the wolf’s embrace.

A content sound rumbles in his chest in response to my silent surrender, and I pat his massive shoulder that seems even bigger than usual. He nuzzles me,

making another content sound.

“If she’s this agreeable with savagery, I wish my monster had the urge to claim her,” Arion grumbles.

“If I don’t feed within the next week or so, my monster may take things into its own hands,” Damien points out very deliberately.

“This monster is going to sleep right now,” I mutter into the werewolf’s chest. “Maybe you all should have spent the last five months—”

“You’re never going to let that go, are you?” Vance interrupts, sounding amused. “Don’t worry, Violet. Such a small grudge will surely flee you soon enough. I’ll make it up to you.”

I’m not sure why I smile, but I am glad Emit’s massive arm is mostly blocking my face so that they don’t see it.

I’ll blame the post-orgasmic bliss that has almost put me into a coma for the stupid grin that won’t go away. Because I’m still pissed.

I think.

Stupid, infuriating, male monsters.

CHAPTER 17

ARION

Emit's fucking her. Again. Very roughly, I might add. It's the only thing distracting me from Vance's conversation with a worried beta of mine. It's far more interesting to watch how very much Violet's seemingly soft body can handle.

I'm not holding back next time. I'm going to give her my monster too, damn it. All of me. Make her my fucking bride the way he's made her his mate.

"It's only fair," I mutter to myself.

"Surely she'll return soon, Shera. Just have Avery pitch in if it's so hard to run Sanctuary without her…Idun won't step foot on those grounds. For now, we have her word," Vance is assuring her.

"It's been three damn days. How much longer could the wolf possibly possess his body without the help of a full moon?" I gripe, frustrated all to hell and back.

Vance pinches the bridge of his nose as he puts his phone away.

Violet was draped around me and soothing the ache inside me when that damn wolf broke free from his cage. He's occupied her like the selfish prat he is ever since.

Violet cries out in a garbled, tired tone, and I poke my head in the door, seeing her sitting atop him, as her head drops down, her entire body trembling, as two large hands come around to grab her ass and start working her hips for her. She droops in exhaustion, barely holding herself up, as the mutt continues to ravage her.

I'm so jealous that I'm visibly seething.

"That fucker broke my bed and took over my room. That bed is the only reason I get what little sleep I get," Vance grouses from the corner, throwing a

knife into the wooden board across from him.

“I’m damn near depleted. How’s her back looking today?” Damien asks from the ground, turning paler by the minute, as his lips start to fade into a blue hue.

“It’s scarred over completely today. Those marks will last a century at the very least. Or five,” I answer, idly wondering why in the hell the wolf cut her so deeply.

Idun’s mark was barely a single claw on her shoulder blade, and even that was a devastating defilement of her body that she worked hard to remove.

Violet has five deep gashes that start at the top of her right shoulder and streak all the way down her back to her hip in a diagonal. It looks like he damn near wanted to rip her in half to ensure the deepest cut.

She drops to his chest, crying out his name, distracting me, as the scent of her pleasure teases and torments the three of us, who can’t get close to that bed without catching a claw to the gut.

We’ve all tried. Vance is sliced up the worst.

It’d be stupid to fight the wolf without Emit at the reins, because someone’s going to die if we do—probably Emit. After all, I’m the vicious vampire no one can defeat.

I want to be a monster right now. Violet always pays closer attention to the monsters who turn her on…or the pathetic. Pathetic isn’t really my style.

All her attention and energy has been spent on the wolf these past three days.

“That’s it. That’s all I’ve got. I can’t go on longer without feeding. If he hurts her, someone fucking kill him,” Damien groans as his eyes roll back in his head.

“Someone drag him in here and let him get a small taste, while she’s pumped full of drugging pleasure and pheromones,” Emit calls from the bedroom, sounding completely…lucid.

We all sort of stare at each other, and Vance’s eyes narrow to slits. I find it highly suspicious that Emit’s wolf just happens to release him when Damien can’t hold back Violet’s pain any longer.

“Emit!” Violet shouts in excitement, and I peer back inside to see her throw

her arms around his neck, holding him like he needs comforting.

The motherfucking wolf smirks at me over her shoulder, his arms going around her middle, as he hugs her to him. His eyes are still fully brown with pieces of ember sizzling out. He can control the wolf's presence...

How much has been real and how much has been show?

I can't decide if I'm impressed or incensed right now.

His arms tighten around her, hands feeling the deep lines of his marks, as he kisses the side of her neck, a slight growl accompanying the touch.

It's then I realize just how strongly different this mating is from the last.

It makes me envy him that much more.

Vance kicks the door open and begins dragging Damien inside. I grab our chap by his feet, and we both drop him onto the bed.

Emit drops back with his hands behind his head, as a naked, sexed-up Violet slides over to Damien, pressing her lips to his.

His color immediately starts flooding back, and one of his hands stabs into her hair, dragging her closer.

She groans in a way that doesn't sound sexy.

"I don't think I'm going to be able to walk. Take what you can for now," she murmurs against his lips. "And then give me time to recuperate."

He hungrily kisses her, but apparently he's too low on pheromones to coerce her into more.

As more of his color fills in, Emit lifts up, kissing Violet's shoulder.

"I want in on this too," I state as I head toward the bed.

Violet quickly scrambles away, her legs shaking as she struggles to walk.

"You fuckers just won't let a man feed even when he's desperately starved," Damien whimpers, covering his eyes with his arm. "I can't even disappear right now."

Violet ends up naked on a bench, as the curtain behind her drops and lands on her shoulders, quickly fashioning itself into a makeshift cape.

She gives me a very isolating look. "I'm not sure what's been going on, but

this was all of necessity. You're all still very much in the dog house for being assholes," she states very pointedly toward me. And Vance.

She seems less angry at the wolf and Morpheous. So…I just need to get into her wadded up panties to make this better. Surely I can achieve at least that much.

Another day.

Not today. The girl looks positively bow-legged.

"That's my girl!" Anna shouts from the rafters, where she's leisurely perched with a dreamy smile on her face. "Fuck em' for three days and walk out like the boss you are, while they're begging for more. I'm so damn proud of you!"

Violet glares up at the rafters, and she exhales harshly, as her gaze moves back to Emit.

"Will you explain what all this means later?" she asks him as he stands, but she holds up her hand. "At a distance. My body is really not okay with me putting distance between us when you're that close right now."

We all exchange a look, as Emit's dark grin emerges, canines flashing from his mouth like the wolf is salivating for more of our little monster.

"The omegas will fill you in," he says softly. "I'll be by later to check on you."

"From a distance?" she asks, taking a stumbled step back when he advances.

What is this? This is new. This didn't happen with Idun when she temporarily bore his mark, did it?

His lips tug in a smirk I don't really appreciate.

"I'm the unpredictable menace. Not him. I don't like this new edge he's got about him," I inform Vance, who is studying Emit just as intently as I am.

Violet doesn't even acknowledge us, as she goes to the bed where Damien is still collapsed, though his color looks much better.

"Connecting to you without touch to create pleasure, outside of a pheromone-infused party, has left him mostly depleted. But he'll naturally replenish as the days drag on," Emit tells her without looking away from me, smirking like he

and I were in competition and I've lost.

I don't like this. At all. I'm not even sure what's going on.

"I can give you a ride," Vance offers, stepping in front of her with an easy grin.

She eyes him. "Actually, I have my van here, but can you carry me to it?"

Son of a bitch. I should have offered her a ride first.

Vance's grin only doubles as he lifts her, and she hisses out a whimpered breath. "My vagina needs ice. Lots of ice," she mumbles as she buries her face in his neck and puts her arms around him.

"Why am I being left out?" I call to their backs.

"I'll call you later," Violet says on a sigh.

"Was she talking to me or one of you?" I ask the other two dicks in the room.

Emit's still smirking, as he checks himself in the mirror, running a hand through his hair.

"What the hell is going on?" I ask him as I put my hands on my hips.

The telling roar of Violet's wretched van pulling out seems to spark amusement in the confounding wolf's eyes.

"Game on, Vampyre," he states, confusing the bloody hell out of me by this point.

"Is it just me, or does his obnoxious muscles look a little bigger? Is that even possible?" Damien grumbles as he peers out from under his arm with a frown.

I don't get the chance to examine anyone or anything. Emit streaks across the room so fast that even I barely gauge the action.

The window behind me shatters when my back collides with it, as a hard grunt is knocked out of me from the beast now made of concrete or some shite.

My body twists in the air, smoothly flipping so that I land in a crouch, and I look up at Emit, as he snarls down at me.

"You watched us without our knowledge?" he asks around a snarl. "How did you astral project?"

"Heard that, did you?" I ask dryly, straightening and pretending my muscles

aren’t screaming from the surprise attack.

Why does he feel stronger?

Vance jerks to a halt, sword in hand, looking between us with his eyebrows lifted in confusion. “What did you do?” he asks me.

“Idun got to him even while he had wolf brain, apparently,” I state, wiping blood away from my lip.

Emit drops from the window, shaking the ground when he lands.

“He’s definitely bigger,” I decide. “Not a lot, but now he sounds like steel dropping.”

The wolf man smirks. “What did you see, Arion? My armies? My generals? What secrets have you extorted and given to Idun?”

I blink a few times.

“He’s not with Idun. He plans to make Violet his bride to prove as much,” Damien chimes in from the top. “Someone kiss me. I’m hurting up here.”

I’m not bloody kissing him.

“He’s suffering because of you milking your time with Violet,” I tell the fucker in front of me. “You kiss him.”

Emit wrinkles his nose. “I only stole an extra few hours. I was somewhat present in the back of my head; I just had no control over myself.”

He licks his lips, staring down at the claws that are really a lot bigger.

“Mating Violet got you an upgrade?” I ask very seriously, finding the bride thing twice as appealing as I already did.

I hadn’t thought that possible.

“I gave up a huge portion of my soul for a woman I loved and planned to spend all eternity with,” Emit says, pursing his lips as he stares down at his claws that are retracting on their own. “She wore my mark for less than a decade before she finally managed to burn it away using Pandora’s abominable magic.”

“So you figured you’d bury your mark deep into Violet’s flesh then?” Vance asks as he twirls the sword in his hand, clearly debating whether or not he wants to use it on the wolf.

At least it better be the wolf he's considering. I've done nothing wrong for once, and I've already been pushed out of a window. Well, I've done nothing wrong *recently.*

"What did you see, Arion?" Emit grinds out, attention back on me.

"Finish up with your story. It's far more interesting than mine," I counter.

Emit rolls his eyes, looking over at Vance.

"Violet submitted. She's always submitted to me. My wolf made sure the marks would stay on the one he didn't want getting away. I fought too hard to deny I had any feelings for her at all, and it took things into its own hands, when the one who betrayed it threatened her by standing too close, after having already beaten her to a bloodied pulp. I barely held it back that day," he goes on, scrubbing a hand over his face. "It's been a fucking nightmare, and I had no idea what was going on with me, because my wolf hasn't tried to claim anyone since Idun."

I clap my hands together. "Well then. That's great and all, but why do you feel like a tank when you shove a vampire out a window?" I drawl.

Emit's eyes turn toward me with unsettling excitement. The wolf wants to fight now that his muscles are a match for my speed.

"I'll still kick your ass," I assure him.

"Only one way to be certain," the brute says before he charges.

I'm expecting it this time, and I dodge to the right, only to be hit so damn hard that it snaps my head to the left violently. The potent punch of power sends me flying. That daft animal actually guessed which direction I'd go.

Getting my feet under me, I manage to dodge his next hit, coming up with my claws and stabbing the beast in the side.

His elbow slams down on my arm, and a hand clutches around my throat, before he throws me through the downstairs window.

I crash and slide across the floor, hating the fact I fasted these last three days because I was hoping Violet would share a little of her blood with me. It's been too long, and I miss it too much.

The taste of her addictive sweetness on my tongue…

“Fucking hell. Now I sound as whiny as all of you. Congrat—”

I’m yanked back and launched out of the house, but I manage to kick up to my feet, moving too fast for Hulk-Wolf to spot me, and smirk as I slam my elbow into the back of his head.

This time, his swing is too late and too predictable, and I flip over his body, kicking him in the face hard enough to send his iron-man ass to the ground.

His head crashes through Vance’s brick walls, sending debris falling everywhere, as he lifts up and simply narrows his eyes on me like that didn’t hurt at all.

Vance stabs the sword into the ground and walks away, muttering something about working twice as hard. Emit and I both eye the sword…until it turns to rust.

Then our gazes collide once more.

My claws retract when his does this time, and he stretches his hands above his head, a lazy smile spreading across his face.

“It feels like a very important piece of me has been caged since Idun banished my mark. It’s been so long that I forgot how much it hurt for it to be gone. Even with the mark being deeper and definitely more noticeable, Violet never once mentioned removing it.”

I don’t point out that she hasn’t had time to think about much. Seems he enjoys being deliberately obtuse. I hate it when people take that from me. Seems hypocritical to attempt being the voice of reason.

Instead, I smile. “Good show, old chap. Glad you’ve gotten your balls reattached.”

He scratches his stomach, sniffing the air. “I’m going to go find a lot of fucking food, and then I’m going to retrieve my mate. I’ve already been away from her for too long.”

He turns and stalks his naked ass back inside the house, and I glance toward the town.

“She *just* left and you plan to go to her so soon?” I ask the annoying brute, who is definitely way out ahead of me now.

His rumble of laughter is all that answers me.

I’ve got my invite…so why I am I hanging out with them when I could be getting a drink from my lovely bride-to-be?

CHAPTER 18

VIOLET

“If you don’t stop laughing—”

Anna brays like a donkey with her next bout of laughter, as though my demand for her to quit mocking me right now is only fueling her hysterics.

“Y-y-you’re walking funny a-a-after fucking like a champion during a three-day sex-a-thon, and you expect *me* to resist having a commentary?” Anna asks me through her guffaws, quite literally rolling on the ground, as she zaps from place to place in front of my uneven strides.

I glare at her, as she slaps at the ground, her hand passing through, it as she feigns wiping tears from her eyes.

“It hurts when my thighs touch!” I hiss, idly wondering if my vagina will ever heal.

“I’m *so* proud of you,” she says, clapping for me, as I waddle by her on my way to push open the front door.

Just my touch ignites Mom’s magic, and the doors open.

Sighing in frustration, I try to walk as normal as I possibly can, wearing nothing but the curtain cape, and…come to an abrupt halt when *everyone* in the lobby stops to stare at me.

Looks like we have some newbies, because I don’t know all the faces.

A few tremble and drop to their knees, while Shera approaches with a glare and a wrinkled nose.

“You disappear for three days and return smelling like foul wolf sex? Seriously?!” she snaps, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Omegas have been lining up to join Sanctuary, and you’ve been off getting laid?” she adds on an irritable growl.

Speaking of omegas…

Leiza's eyes widen, and she drops to the ground, abruptly bowing before me. Lemon, Mary, and Tiara all have the same fast reaction.

"Why are they bowing at your feet?" Shera asks more seriously.

I bristle, not liking where this looks like it's heading. Those scars on my back don't look like they're going to be healing, regardless of the healing potions I've used on them. I weirdly don't mind the scars, but…what do they really mean?

"I have a lot of questions," I tell the omegas, who give small, short nods, not speaking, as they remain bowed on the ground.

I notice a few others quickly dropping and bowing to me as well, though they do so with terrified trembles.

"This is neat. Do those scars make you royalty or something? They can't even see them," Anna states from atop a banister near us.

"After I shower, I'll see the four of you. Find Ingrid. I want her there too. And make sure the new wolves who've claimed sanctuary aren't afraid of me, regardless of whatever in the hell has happened," I add.

Leiza clears her throat. "As you wish."

"Oooooh, she said that like you're royalty!" Anna gushes.

"What have you done now, Violet?" Shera asks in a worried tone. "All I smell is a lot of werewolf sex. Have you even showered?"

"Not in three days. Emit wouldn't let her out of his dastardly clutches," Anna supplies on a wistful, romantic sigh.

"I could use a—"

A very pretty red cocktail is thrust in front of me by an omega I've yet to formally meet, and her hand trembles as she waits on me to accept it.

"Thank you," I tell her with a smile.

She nods, eyes wider than they already were, and darts off without another word.

Shera shakes her head like the distraction is too annoying to deal with, and she hands the iPad to me. "I have so many things for you to look over and sign, and—*hey!* Where do you think you're going?" she shouts as I start walking off.

“To take a long, cleansing shower, so people will hopefully stop being weird around me,” I answer without looking back, waddling my way up the stairs.

When I whimper, Anna snorts out a laugh.

“I hate you,” I inform her.

“Only because I love your pain,” she volleys.

I slam my door in her face, leaning back against the door for a moment to collect myself. It’s hard to get around the distracting thoughts of Emit’s body over mine, under mine, behind mine…

It’s all I can think about.

If I wasn’t so sore, I’d call him to come back and pick up where we left off now that he’s himself. Then again, he’ll probably ignore me for days on end now. They tend to do that when they’ve gotten what they wanted from me.

How do they not understand why that pisses me off?

The freshly patched wall reminds me how this week started. I need to find Caroline and let her know I’m okay and not angry. I’m sure she’s feared the worst during my absence.

If even one of them gave a damn, they’d have already been here and doing that for me. They’re just worried about what they need from me, and I go running to make it happen, regardless of the personal costs.

“I make things too easy for them,” I decide as I shuffle my feet to my private bathroom and flip on the shower.

I don’t even wait for it to warm up. I’m out of my cape and under the cool spray, soaking in the feel of the first shower I’ve had since Caroline crashed through my room.

A hint of frustration finds me when I keep reaching for the shampoo and finding it missing from its perch. I swear, I can’t do anything right these days.

I start to crack open an eye to find it, when I feel hands in my hair and smell the strong scent of my apples…which usually don’t smell strong at all.

I also smell…Arion.

I think.

How is that possible?

“Let me take care of you, sweet monster. The wolf should have done this for you instead of selfishly taking more from your body,” he murmurs.

Since I’m so exhausted, I decide not to even bother arguing.

His bare body presses against mine from behind, as his fingers work magic against my scalp.

“Tasking the omegas with telling you your new fate. Leaving you to tend to your sore body all on your own…”

A tremble wracks my body when his cool breath blows against the scars on my back. I have no idea why the hell that feels so good.

“He’s already failing to be a good mate. I’d be so much better. Should my monster come forth for you to be my bride?”

My eyes fly open, and I stare up at the ceiling like it’s going to save me from this conversation.

“Please tell me you’re joking,” I grumble.

“It’s closing in on midnight. I could really let loose if that’s what you prefer. Or you could let me enjoy a taste, and I’ll patiently wait for you to choose me all on your own,” he says in that soft, alluring way that has me swaying.

“I couldn’t get the rest of the night off from ex-boyfriend duty?” I ask on a defeated breath, allowing myself to enjoy the fact he’s washing my hair for me.

“Idun told them about my spying. You’re free from your gypsy promise,” he tells me, abruptly shifting gears.

I glance over my shoulder, unsure what to say, as his slate gray eyes linger on my chest.

He licks his lips as he steps in closer, pressing his front solidly against my back, while those gray eyes turn black.

If my vagina wasn’t overworked and underappreciated, I’d probably be a weak fool already coiled around him.

I’m so pathetic.

Really, I am.

“Are they mad?” I ask him.

He shrugs a shoulder. “Not terribly, no. Mostly because they don’t want Idun winning. I think that’s their main incentive for being reasonable. I’m going to need you to smooth that over for me when you’re feeling up to it.”

My head falls back to his shoulder, and I turn in his arms, too exhausted to do much else.

I’m standing up by sheer determination alone.

He starts working the conditioner into my hair, as I wrap my arms around his waist to use him like a crutch, even as my eyes start to droop.

“You can’t be serious about me being your bride, Arion. You’re just acting impulsively because of whatever life-altering thing Emit’s just done that has wolves bowing at my feet. I’m assuming being his *mate* comes at a severe cost to myself, doesn’t it?”

His lips brush over my head, as he rinses out the last of the conditioner. I bite back a moan when he starts massaging the soap into my back, his fingers working over my fresh scars that are highly sensitive in very weirdly erotic ways.

“There will be an official mating ceremony and announcement, I’m sure. Everyone will know you’re his. He’ll see to that. I wanted you for my bride long before he took you as his mate,” he goes on, his hands moving down to my ass.

I’d knee him in the balls, but everything he’s doing is helping to take the ache out of all my sore, overused muscles. Another content sigh escapes me.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” I grumble in reminder, fighting off a yawn that finally wins and stretches my mouth wide in a very unattractive way.

Arion smiles down at me like he finds it cute. I swear, they’re fucking with my head again.

“Of course it’s life-altering, Violet. You chose to be his mate—”

“My options were limited,” I remind him.

“Even still, you chose to be his mate. You fully submitted to him during his claim, which is something Idun never did, obviously. Ridding yourself of his

mark will be painful for the both of you, and apparently it'll leave him a shattered mess until his wolf finds a new mate to claim."

I peer up at him after that remark, and he stares down at me.

Old horror movies flit through my mind, thinking back to Dracula searching endlessly for his bride through extreme measures. I was one of those weird girls who got mad at the chicks he kidnapped to make his bride, because they judged him for being a monster.

I know. I have issues. I'm aware.

"I'll be a damn good groom," he carries on, brushing my hair away from my face.

I roll my eyes and whimper/groan. "I can't adjust this fast. No one has even told me they love me, and now I'm mated to a werewolf alpha and have the scars to prove it. Meanwhile, the *Vampyre* alpha is proposing, while washing away the werewolf," I mutter to myself.

"What was that, love? I didn't catch all of it," he says in a bemused sort of way.

"Arion, I have more emotional needs than the four of you will ever care enough to realize. In fact, my emotional needs are constantly being ignored for the sake of the many needs the four of you have. I'm going to take the night off —rest, eat, and recover from the werewolf who apparently married me without even pretending to love me. Get back to me after I'm caught up, and we can have an adult discussion about this."

I turn and shove open the shower door, stepping out onto the slick tile that almost bests me.

His hand is steadying me immediately, as he steps out behind me. "I'll hold you while you sleep. I like that. You like that. Winners all around," he quips as he quickly puts a towel around me.

Again, I see no point in arguing, especially when he lifts me. If he's carrying me, that means I don't have to walk.

"Why were the new wolves trembling? Was it me or was it you?" I ask

around another yawn.

“It was possibly both. Their alpha took a mate, and the marks on your back have a scent that registers to other wolves. Idun liked that, but she still hated the mark. Now I’m starting to wonder if it’s because she felt like she couldn’t be away from him very long. She enjoyed her control, and she never wanted to cede any of it to us,” Arion diligently explains as he moves me quickly.

He puts me on one end of the bed, but in the next breath, he’s tucking us both under the covers, and my towel is wrapped around my wet hair instead of my body.

My body is touching a whole lot of naked vampire as he wraps his arms around me and holds me close. I’d get annoyed, but the distant, detached look in his eyes makes me realize he’s here because he needs to be touching me.

I don’t get it.

Sighing, I kiss his chest, feeling sorry for him.

“Is Idun still your wife?” I ask for the sake of curiosity.

“Vampire males don’t have wives. They have brides,” he murmurs, hands tightening on me. “And no. Idun rejected my touch most of the time. She certainly didn’t want me to mark her.”

He actually snorts as though the notion is preposterous.

“Are you trying to make me feel sorry for you so that I’ll be your bride?” I ask very seriously.

“I’ll wait until you tell me you love me before I make you my bride,” he drawls, eyes flicking to mine.

I always forget how heavy the weight of his full attention is until he gives it to me.

Clearing my throat, I look at his chest, dragging one of my fingers around to trace the line of his abs.

“Immortals such as us aren’t quite as young as you. You assume Emit doesn’t love you because he’s never said the words. Whereas, he assumes you know he loves you, because his wolf just marked you so deeply that you’re tied to him for

at least the next few centuries."

Trying *not* to think about that last part, since they act like living forever is a guaranteed promise to me and I still can't wrap my head around it, I stare at the picture in the frame at the end of my bed.

It's one with all five of us. They were extremely distracted by whatever ridiculously *fake* thing Idun was doing on that day, but when I told them I wanted a picture, they all stepped in to pose.

I'm holding up a peace sign with one hand, while wearing a really stupid grin on my face, because I'm horrible at pictures. Hence the reason I don't have many.

But they look dark, tempting, and…possessive.

Arion is twirling a lock of hair around his finger with a devilish smile just barely highlighting one corner of his mouth. Emit is towering behind me, his hand wrapped around my waist to rest on my stomach.

Damien is sitting in front of me with his legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, lazily resting his head against me. I remember how he pulled one of my hands around to the front and began kissing it, teasing me with hints of his power—hence part of the reason for my goofy grin.

His lips are pressed to my palm in the picture, and his eyes are forever teasing me in it.

Vance is at my other side. The surprise in my eyes is because he bent over at the last second to kiss the side of my head, only adding to my goofy grin. He timed it perfectly, because the image snapped with the kiss taking place.

"It was shocking to see him do that. If I'm honest, I almost broke character for the photo," Arion drawls when he sees my eyes on it. "He strongly opposes public displays of affection. If you want to see how much he loves you, walk up and kiss him in a crowded room. You're the only woman he's ever allowed to touch him affectionately in public."

I clear my throat, because I don't know what to say to that, and this entire conversation is heating my cheeks.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that Idun has lifted Damien’s curse, whether he knows it or not. I once expected him to start finding new warm bodies to entertain himself and feel important again. Instead, he’d rather starve himself than feed off anyone but you. He loves you so much that a monster of sexual deviance finds his heartbeat again, and he doesn’t so much as glance at any other woman.”

My eyes flick up to his, and he brushes my hair out of my face.

“I’m a monster who loves killing things, yet I allow the disrespect this Sanctuary instills in its subjects toward alphas. I reward it, even, because I understand what it is you seek to accomplish, however nobly naïve I find the notion to be. My love for you has turned me completely into your monster. To be honest, your wolves haven’t trembled around me in over three months, Violet. Lemon even started stocking blood packets for me, since I have a particular brand, when I’m not tasting your sweet Portocale blood.”

He moves so fast that I don’t register the motion, until he’s between my sore thighs and pinning my hands above my head.

“You do a lot for everyone, Violet. We know we’re special to you, but you fail to see how very much more we care for you. You’d never question us again if you’d been around long enough to know us *before* you,” Arion goes on, kissing the side of my neck.

My head lulls to the side, and he groans in the back of his throat, as he sucks a spot on my throat he loves to drink from.

“You’re the only vampire who has ever drank from me,” I point out.

“Only because no other vampire has *needed* blood in your presence, and only because you started it by breaking my curse,” he sulks.

I end up kissing him, because I thought I was making them special, and now he has me questioning if I’ve done as much as I thought I had to in order to prove that.

Sometimes I forget how broken they all are, because they’re so…top-of-the-food-chain and all.

I feel his stupid grin against my lips, as my arms go around his neck and pull him down—

“Sorry to interrupt!” Shera shouts as she knocks. “But Jasper is fussy and we’re all a little busy at the moment.”

Arion turns to glare at the door with blacked out eyes, and I wrap my legs around his waist just to keep him from doing something evil while he’s pissed.

“Where the bloody hell is his mother?” Arion snaps.

There’s silence for a minute. “Boss? Why can’t I smell you? I thought the wolf was in there,” Shera says through the door, trepidation in her tone now.

Arion frowns, glancing down at me and then back at the door.

“Fuck’s sake, Shera, come in. I can smell your fear from here, but Violet’s doing very well in giving me a splendid reason to stay less hostile.”

My legs tighten around his waist a bit more to be safe, and his lips twitch, as he restrains a grin, pressing down on me more, as he toys with my hair.

The door gently swings open, and Shera walks in, pushing Jasper in his mobile bassinet. Her eyes move between us, possibly because we’re both naked. Immortals don’t get too offended by nudity and sex, but when alphas are involved, everyone worries what their punishment will be for interruptions.

Shera grins when she sees how very intimately we’re placed, probably getting the wrong idea.

“It’s nice to see the two of you spending some quality alone. I’ll just take Jasper back out with—”

Jasper screams so loud the glass of one of my mirrors shatters, and we both lock our gazes to the babe. Someone cleaned up my bed, my room, and even replaced the broken wall and mirrors in my absence. Now the process of breaking mirrors starts over.

Arion is off me without so much as a warning, and Shera startles when he suddenly has Jasper in his arms, sniffing at him.

“Go,” he tells Shera, who frowns over at me as I begin to tense. “Don’t say anything about this,” he adds.

She doesn’t dawdle, hurrying out of the room.

He sniffs along Jasper’s neck, causing the tension in my body to ratchet up.

“If you even dare think about feeding—”

The vampire recoils and shoots me a horrified look. “What sort of monster do you think I am?” he asks very seriously.

Jasper makes a gurgling noise, his small hand landing on Arion’s cheek in a way that would melt my heart…if the alpha vampire wasn’t acting so suspicious.

Every day, I mute Jasper’s scent more and more with my apple products. Yeah, I haven’t told them about that small revelation just yet. I’ve learned so much these past five months. Most of it seems really important, but I’ve yet to discover why.

However…Jasper’s scent is really strong for an infant, according to Leiza. Hence the reason I started muting it. Strength instills fear, and fear motivates horrible actions.

Arion’s gaze flicks to me, and I realize it’s my tension that has him being so suspicious.

I’m such an idiot.

He smiles like he’s caught me in a lie. “My sweet monster. What are you hiding from me?” he muses. “Babes don’t scream and break mirrors. And you look like I’m going to sniff out some dirty little secret,” he adds, pressing his lips to the top of Jasper’s head, eyes never leaving mine.

I’m struggling between the image of him holding Jasper so delicately, seeming so paternal, and wondering what happens if I’m honest with him.

“Do speak up, sweet gypsy monster. No one’s close enough to hear you,” he adds, moving toward my bed. “Not with Emit’s new mating scent all over you, confusing their senses.”

He takes a seat next to me on the new bed, stretching his legs out in front of him. I cover up his lap with a sheet just to distract myself and to keep his naked body from being the wrong sort of distraction.

Jasper’s wearing his new onesie I bought him, face scrunched like he’s trying

to get to sleep.

Arion cradles him against his chest, and my heart starts pounding in my ears when his eyes widen. My stomach churns with dread as the sound of Jasper slurping resonates in my ears.

“Violet, why is there an infant shifter drinking from me with impossible fangs?” Arion asks in a calm tone, even as a harsh exhale is expelled from him.

I swallow thickly, trying and failing to come up with anything at this moment. So much for me being awesome enough to keep secrets from someone like Arion.

I honestly don’t know why Jasper drinks blood. Shifter’s drink blood, but they don’t have fangs. He’s sort of…unique. Unique beings also tend to motivate horrible actions.

Seriously, so much has happened, and I thought I was better at keeping secrets than I am. They keep asking questions they shouldn’t know to ask.

I’ve been so careful. I really am naïve, aren’t I? Somehow, I consistently underestimate the four of them.

My mouth opens and closes a few times, as Arion slants his eyes toward me, patiently and expectantly awaiting an answer. Jasper feasts on the vampire alpha like he’s a delicacy.

“Not even my betas can drink my blood without painful vomiting after just one single drop, but this kid is lapping me up like I’m a treat. Shifters don’t have fangs,” Arion goes on, gingerly patting Jasper’s back as the unique baby greedily drinks more. “This lad doesn’t seem to have any problems taking my blood, and you don’t even seem surprised by that.”

Wringing my hands, I drag the sheet up to cover my body, eyes flicking to the baby in the vampire’s arms.

“Are you going to hurt him?” I can’t help but ask, since I can barely breathe around the growing knot of dread.

Arion holds my gaze, letting Jasper continue to drink.

“I don’t go around killing babies. I do, however, make it my business when

there’s a creature acting out of habit and out of the realm of the ordinary. Even babies would sense my blood is dangerous—if babies ever had fangs. What is Jasper?”

He clicks his tongue as Jasper detaches and lets out a baby burp that sounds entirely too adorable.

Arion’s dark eyes are still on mine when I lift my gaze to meet his again.

“Half shifter. Half vampire?” I guess. “His mother won’t speak to me at all about it.”

The words are spoken so quietly that I wonder if he can hear it at all.

“Completely impossible,” he counters, eyes narrowing down on Jasper in a way that has me decidedly ready to retrieve my—*er…the* baby.

“How about I hold him for a little while?” I suggest, reaching over.

Arion pulls back, settling down on the bed a little more, as Jasper’s eyes sleepily close, and he flattens his cheek against Arion’s bare chest.

“I’d say he’s perfectly content with his latest meal holding him,” he drawls.

Did Ivannah not feed him the blood today? What the hell?

“Who’s the vampire?” he asks.

“I thought it was completely impossible,” I grind out, hating that I don’t trust him with Jasper. “As I said, his mother isn’t speaking to me about it. She’s trusting Sanctuary will keep them both safe, despite the…uniqueness he has about him.”

I also hate how natural he seems to be with him. I’m still a bumbling neurotic head case when it comes to holding such a tiny person.

Poor Jasper has no idea he’s curled up on the chest of a psychotic, powerful, immortal vampire.

When Arion just stares at me patiently, I exhale again.

“I’m serious. She’s given me absolutely nothing,” I state quietly, inching closer.

“She wanted you to raise him, am I correct?” he muses, lovingly kissing Jasper’s tiny head with a deceptively tender touch.

My eyes stay on the vampire, waiting for some sort of trap or manipulation.

At my nod, he says, “Then it’s an alpha vampire.”

I snort. “How do you come up with conclusions like that?” I ask on a tired sigh. “Alphas are sterile.”

“Marta had you,” he reminds me quietly, staring down at Jasper a little differently.

“Touché,” I confess on a tired sigh. “But I genuinely don’t believe it’s an alpha.”

“Stop staring at me like I’m going to eat the lad,” he says with a slight growl, looking truly offended by my obvious urge to snatch Jasper from his arms. “I’m proud of the fact I’m not that much of a monster.”

I bristle, shrugging a shoulder.

“How am I supposed to know what is or isn’t off limits with you?” I volley, slowly easing back, my tension lifting.

“You’re well cared for with *four* Heads of their respective Houses vying for your attention and giving you your dream,” he goes on, gesturing around him.

To that, I glare. “I distinctly remember you sitting on your asses while the rest of us worked to make this dream come true,” I inform him, quietening my voice quickly when Jasper makes a fussy sound.

Ignoring my comment, Arion plays with Jasper’s small toes, as he continues.

“There’s not a lot we wouldn’t do for you. Including keeping such an innocent babe safe at your request. However, Violet, if he’s truly the child of an alpha vampire, this could mean a great—”

“He’s a powerful beta and not an alpha,” I interrupt, exhaling harshly. “Shera seems pretty certain of this.”

It’s then I see the withdrawn, almost broken look in his eyes as his lips thin. Shit.

He had hope he could create a child, and I ruthlessly yanked that hope away without meaning to.

“But like you said, I’m the child of an alpha,” I add to attempt to recover

some of that hope I had no right to take away.

Who knew the ruthless vampire wanted to be a father?

I almost want to call Shera back to take Jasper away just so I can console Arion now.

He clears his throat and blinks, adjusting on the bed, as he looks away.

“Guess I got carried away with assumptions. You’re the daughter of a Portocale immortal who is a different breed of immortal altogether,” he counters quietly.

“And I don’t have a womb,” I go on, letting Jasper wrap his fingers around just one of mine, as I lean over on Arion, resting my head on his shoulder.

My eyes catch the reflection in the mirror. The sheet is tucked under my arms and loosely draped over his lap. Jasper is resting his head on Arion’s reclined chest, already peacefully snoozing, while facing me with his inexplicably cute, scrunched-up expression.

It’s the weirdest domestic moment—a vampire alpha and a Simpleton pureblood omega with an impossible shifter/vampire baby, who has a hearty appetite for immortal blood, all lying together like one big family.

I catch a glimpse of the softest expression I’ve ever seen on Arion’s face, as well as the far-off look in his gaze.

“What did Marta do to deserve you?” Arion finally asks quietly, eyes on Jasper. “We were meant to be sterile for the rest of our unnatural lives.”

His lips brush the top of Jasper’s head, and I start to worry he’s just fallen in love with the baby whose mother is withdrawing more and more. Every single day I have to convince her she’s the best mother for her own son.

I haven’t been here in three days to do that, and she’s apparently gone missing long enough for Jasper to be hungry enough for blood to snatch up the first available source.

Arion’s eyes widen like something has occurred to him, and he purses his lips, as he kisses Jasper’s head again.

“Emit will be along shortly. I’ll take this babe with me and let you get some

rest.”

I shake my head immediately. “He can’t leave the grounds, and you said that way too abruptly for my comfort, if I’m being honest. I’ll just keep him here with me. He usually sleeps well after being fed right from the source,” I tell him, sticking my arms out.

Arion’s lips curve in a sly grin as he arches an eyebrow at me.

“Easy, sweet monster. The lad is certainly safe with me. Not even Idun would be so foolish as to hurt an infant. It’s against the universal law. One *I* had put in place, and was easily agreed with by the majority vote. It’s why the lad’s mother even got to survive to begin with. Children are a coveted thing among those who live forever with no hope of bearing their own.”

I drop my arms, relaxing a little.

“Even when those children are an impossible existence?”

His gaze rakes over my face. “Considering the last impossible being I stumbled across is possibly my salvation, I’m not exactly worried what the future holds with him. He’s under my protection as family to an Alpha. It’s the same protection I’ve extended you since the day you dragged me from my own personal hell.”

He leans over, his lips catching mine off guard, and my hands move to cup both sides of his face like I simply can’t help myself.

He nibbles my bottom lip, and I feel like a wishy-washy ass when I actually get annoyed at him for breaking the kiss. As abruptly as it started, it’s over, and he’s standing with Jasper in his arms.

Doing some amazing one-armed dressing with the smooth motions of a practiced professional, he cradles Jasper in strategic ways, never putting him down. I’m actually impressed with how effortless he makes it look to dress himself while holding a baby.

In the next instant, he puts Jasper in the bassinet, confusing me, since he is fully dressed now and doesn’t need to—

My breath catches before that thought can finish, because the hella fast

vampire is once again between my legs, and his face is hovering over mine.

“If I hadn’t fallen in love with you that first day you spotted me, as Vance drugged you and painted your toes, I would have fallen for you the day you threw yourself at my feet and freely gave me your throat—without one ounce of regard to the personal cost to yourself—to break a curse that has tormented me for centuries,” he says on a quiet breath, eyes intently on mine.

It’s so intense that my legs tremble around his waist, the fabric of his jeans grazing my sore inner thighs.

He drags his finger down my cheek, his gaze trailing the skin he touches.

“After spending so much time unseen, desperately seeking a way out of that miserable fucking coffin, and finding such an adorably naïve gypsy with a heart so big she’d fall for anything?” he asks, both insulting and complimenting me.

I think.

His lips brush over mine, as my foolishly fickle heart speeds up.

“I don’t have a soul, Violet,” he says like he’s reminding me of that, gaze connecting with mine again as his look grows serious. “In theory, I can’t love. Yet I love deeper than all three of the others combined.”

He presses down farther on me, and I swallow thickly. Even though my poor vagina is abused and sore, every inch of me craves to feel him inside me.

“It’s because I gave up everything I valued for the sake of love. There’s no question, by anyone, that I sacrificed the most. Never once did I break my loyalty for those many, *many* years. In return, I was made a mockery by the woman I loved, and used without reward, to the point where I have no feelings—good or bad—remaining toward her,” he tells me.

The words sound so honest that I tremble beneath him. A tear rolls down my cheek, because I almost feel bad for how good that makes me feel. It’s as though that’s exactly what I needed to hear from him, and I…am so fucking confused right now.

“To say I love you is quite the understatement. I was never allowed to speak those words to Idun, because…she finds love to be something different than you

do. She demands complete submission, no matter the personal cost or loss of dignity."

His hand stills its descent on my neck, and his hand slowly closes around my throat. My heartrate kicks quicker, and my vagina forgets she needs a break.

His dark grin curves up on one side of his mouth, as his gaze stays steady on mine.

"You've completely surrendered to me once. I really loved it, Violet. I want it again," he whispers as he leans in close and runs his lips along the skin of my throat.

His grip tightens a little more, fingers pressing firmly against the side of my neck. My legs tighten on him, and I find myself rocking against him, desperately wishing he'd stayed naked.

"And again," he says even softer, gently gripping my hip to tilt my body more perfectly against him, providing some glorious friction with my next rock.

"And again," he says so softly I barely hear the words, seconds before his lips cover mine.

I kiss him so hard that it hurts, and he hungrily—and greedily—drinks in every ounce of fire in the kiss.

"It's all I've craved since that day," he murmurs against my lips, even as I fight to resume the kiss.

He effortlessly fends me off, keeping power over me, even as his lips tease mine with the barest of touches.

"If you want me on my knees, I'll happily get on them for you right now. But what *I* want is that surrender. I'm already your monster. I want you to be mine in return."

I think I'd agree to anything at all just to have him inside me right now. Fortunately, Jasper picks that moment to whimper, and the spell is broken.

Oy vey. How did I forget he's in here?!

Arion smirks at me like he can read my mind, and I can see all the smug arrogance in his dark eyes.

“I don’t need to hear the words to know you love me, Violet. You really should start seeing the bigger picture. Whatever you want from me, I’ll give it to you in spades. You’re the best prize I’ve ever found, and I’ll not give you up.”

He’s off me in the next instant, and a chill settles over me in a way that leaves me feeling bereft and unsated. I want to slap him just for confusing my already confused head.

I watch as he goes to lift the whimpering Jasper, soothing the baby, who seems to have no fear whatsoever.

Damn that vampire.

How does he do this to me so easily?

“I’m still mad at you,” I decide to tell him, since he’s left me a quivering mess with a lot of embarrassingly wishy-washy feelings.

He grins down at Jasper, shrugging one shoulder.

“It’s all a game, Violet. You don’t stay angry for long, and you love me too much to let me go. Now that I see that, I’ll be patient for a little while longer. However,” he says, eyes meeting mine as a slightly scary and serious expression steals his features, “it’s only a matter of time before I take you as my bride. You should have killed Emit instead of rewarding bad behavior. It sets a bad precedent for monsters who are obsessed with making you theirs.”

While my lips move to silent words I can’t seem to form, he grabs the diaper bag from the floor, pulling it over his shoulder.

“Send me instructions on proper feeding and such. I’ll have him back in a bit, but I don’t want to run into any surprises that lead to a screaming babe. Panic isn’t a pretty sight on any monster,” he jokes…at least I hope he’s joking.

Again, no words leave my mouth, and I just watch as he turns and goes, as though he didn’t just threaten to force me to marry him. Just like Dracula always attempted to do to his bride…at least in the disturbed/romantic versions of the tale.

Oy. Vey.

Fortunately, he’s gone when a crazy-girl smile stretches across my lips.

It’s always inconvenient when I smile about things that normal girls shouldn’t smile about. I’ll blame it on the fucked up monster inside me.

CHAPTER 19

VANCE

My head is killing me. Arion is fussing over a damn shifter baby he has strapped to his chest, which only makes my headache worse. There's no more disturbing sight than seeing Arion play father to a shifter child.

Our world used to make more sense than it does.

How does one fucking woman change so much?

The child wails like he's just woken up in a den full of alpha monsters, who are natural predators of his race, due to years of evolving wars and hereditary senses.

It's a nightmare to deal with the fallouts of our own prejudices mixed with magical DNA.

"Why on earth did you think it'd be a good idea to bring a helpless infant into a circle of alphas?" I snap.

Emit groans as he devours yet another hamburger from one of the twenty bags he has.

Arion's head falls back, and I can't help but find it amusing that this psychotic son of a bitch is working so hard to keep his temper and frustration levels in check. His eyes haven't even turned black yet.

Must be a nightmare for a bloodthirsty, murderous fiend such as himself.

I derive a lot of joy from that. Enough to make the headache bearable.

With his brow still drawn down in concentration, Damien says, "I'm still stuck on the part where he's an impossible mix of a vampire and a shift—"

"I'll believe anything at this point," Emit interrupts, working on his next burger. "Was this pointless meeting about the kid? If so, I need to get back to Violet. I want to share a bed with her for something other than sex, so that she doesn't misread my intentions. The omegas have filled her in by now, and I want

to see what she has to say about it. Hopefully, they've sold her on it, because they're damn good at silver linings and romanticism."

"Cheater," Damien mutters.

"Says the prick who tasked his desperate beta-prospect to get you laid," Emit volleys.

"I thought I was making progress all on my own, before you assholes got jealous and interrupted our moment," Damien adds on a bitter note.

Rolling my eyes, I pop more of the useless pills. This headache is growing more tedious by the second.

"Jasper isn't the reason I'm here," Arion says in distraction, as he reads something off his phone. To himself, he mutters, "*Pacifier. Pacifier. What the bloody hell is a pacifier?*"

Damien leans over, lifting the oddly shaped thing, and plugs it into the intimidated babe's mouth. The child isn't going to stop that wailing when he's stuck in a room with alphas that painfully enlist his instincts to—

The crying ceases immediately, and the intriguing young thing actually stares up at Arion with wide, fearless eyes now that he's been left content.

The wee lad got what he wanted.

"She's spoiled the little crier. He apparently screams until you do what he says, and he hasn't even learned to speak yet," Emit states in observation.

My headache only marginally eases.

I'm not sure why we're all staring at the baby like it's going to burst into flames or something.

"It's scary having this sort of responsibility. Anything at all—big or small—happens to that baby on our watch, and Violet will definitely be angry for many, *many* centuries, depending on the severity of the infraction," Damien points out. "Take it back. It's too much trouble."

"The vampire is more nurturing than the fucking Morpheous. Why do I bother trying to make sense of things anymore? I think that's the reason for the increasingly frequent migraines," I confess on a tired sigh.

I massage my temples to punctuate the point, suppressing a groan.

“Fuck’s sake, Arion. Get him out of that contraption,” Emit growls as he goes to unstrap Jasper from the weird chest strappings. “Babies need connection when they’re held.”

The small lad almost disappears into the massive trunks Emit calls arms.

“The kid is going to suffocate between those rock walls you’re so proud of,” Damien gripes, as he goes to snatch the baby away, showing far more knowledge of proper care than any of us should know.

He even goes so far as to rattle off a few instructions about head, neck, and body support.

It’s a little eerie to find Arion’s eyes on me when I glance away from the weird sight of Emit and Damien arguing about who knows more about kids.

“I called this meeting, because we’re Pandora’s Box,” Arion states very randomly, eyes not leaving mine. “We’re all very fucking stupid.”

Emit and Damien cease arguing to arch an eyebrow at him. “And you thought that was the perfect thing to say right now because…?” I prompt, urging the vampire along so I can get everyone out of my house and get some rest.

Maybe I’ll sneak over to Sanctuary and see if Violet would be opposed to sharing a bed with me instead of the rough and jagged wolf. I’m not quite sure how to get out of trouble. Idun always chased me. I never did much chasing.

In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever had to chase a woman very much at all. Violet is impossibly taxing to a man with no practice in this department. I’m simply unsure how to proceed. I’ve reached a low level, because I’ve decided to go to Anna for advice, even though I should probably slay her instead of listening to anything that ludicrous ghost may spew.

“Pandora’s name wasn’t so famous back when Idun introduced her as her new best friend,” Damien points out in a confused tone. “We were there too. We know what magic we dabbled in. Hindsight is a wretched thing. Why bring it up at all?”

Arion flicks his gaze over to Jasper. “Violet started Sanctuary. It’s effectively

drawn everyone's attention. She's an anomaly, and because she's essentially getting her way about everything and shaking things up, unique creations, such as Jasper are popping up. I highly doubt he's the first. He's just the first who's had a safe option of hiding out with a very accepting monster, who will take the lashings for an unknown, unregistered shifter, *while* making a mockery of Idun in front of the entire nation of immortals," the vampire continues.

My eyes flick to Jasper again. "If this was an issue, I'd already know about it. Unlike some of you, I keep an eye on what's going on," I decide to point out.

"We had a horde spring up with ungodly numbers. Technology being what it is, and limitless knowledge resting just at the edges of anyone's fingertips…we haven't adjusted quickly enough," Arion goes on. "Idun came out of the ground and fascinated us with *Reality TV*. Violet saw her scam to the core. We only saw a piece of it."

Damien mutters a curse. "I hate that little monster is even right about that. Can we not tell her we're huge idiots anymore? The damn girl is too young to be right so much," he adds on a frustrated breath.

"Damien was ready to die, until she came to town," Arion states quietly, glossing over Damien's interruption.

"Now I'd rather see all of you die so I can just enjoy her by myself for a while," Damien mutters like a petulant child, as he sniffs the baby's ass and wrinkles his nose. "I'm not tending to that. You brought him, Vampyre. He's your responsibility."

Arion sneers. "As if I know how to tend to a paper shit catcher. I've been underground. What was wrong with cloth diapers? The downside is the trash this era has created out of laziness and—"

"Why are you off on this tangent to begin with, Arion? I really do have a searing migraine I'd like to sleep off," I cut in, my voice raising enough to make the bloody infant cry.

Emit and Damien soothe the lad, and I get glared at like I'm the one inconveniencing us all.

“If the boy is scared when he’s returned to Violet, we’ll *all* be in trouble,” Damien states as if I’m an idiot. “Be cool, Van Helsing. Just this once, be cool.”

I’m going to stab him as soon as that baby is out of my house. The Morpheous is going to cry like a baby before he leaves.

“Emit’s wolf is now sated for the first time in centuries, and he’s been gradually stepping back into his true alpha role,” Arion goes on.

Emit narrows his eyes over his shoulder, staring at Arion, who doesn’t seem to be trying to provoke the wolf for once.

“Vance has been steadily gaining focus to an intense degree, especially when and where Violet is involved. He’s also stepping up his game and breaking habits he’s had for centuries,” Arion adds, giving me a pointed look. “Just as I’ve finally learned every telling twitch and tic.”

“Because you somehow managed to be a creep, even from your casket, you damn relentless bastard,” I’m fast to point out.

“And I was ready to manipulate you all to raise Idun from the ground, handle her differently, and move forward with a different goal. Now I realize it would have all stayed the same had Violet not come to town.”

We all sort of study him as he goes to pour himself a glass of whiskey.

“I’d still be underground. Idun would still be up. All of you would be oblivious because you’d all gotten too complacent. We’d have never pulled together enough to handle that horde as effectively as we did. Tensions would only be higher between vampires and wolves,” Arion goes on, for once not earning a growl from Emit, who’s still silent as he remains content to listen.

“What’s the point to this ramble?” I ask, this time softer and far more curious about the direction he’s going.

“The metaphorical and literal box was smashed, unable to seal Pandora’s Box ever again. Hope was released into all of us—Pandora’s way of balancing the scales in an attempt to keep us as human as possible,” Arion continues, slowly sipping the whiskey as he stares ahead at the wall.

“The point being?” I prompt.

His gaze collides with mine.

“She told us that *Hope* was the most powerful magic released. I once placed all my hope in Idun. I feared it’s what made her more powerful, but I felt her holding back. She’s not shown us her strength, because she wants us to believe her weaker. That necklace was a way for her to harness more power, but she’s not upset by its loss. She’s too calm in spite of the tilted scales, and unruffled by our rebellion. She’s not playing with us. She’s playing with Violet through us.”

Emit scrubs a hand over his face, glancing over at Damien and me to see if we’re buying this. Arion’s a damn good salesman, just like most any proud gypsy from our days.

The vampire cuts his eyes toward Emit. “Your wolf just claimed her, and you’re sounding more and more like the sure-of-himself werewolf alpha we need you to be at a time when it’s needed most. Violet’s timing is a godsend.”

He does have a valid and *convenient* point in that regard.

“Or you’re twisting the facts to set up the answer you want us to believe,” I reasonably counter.

“You’re saying *Violet* is a form of hope?” Damien guesses, sounding thoughtful, taking Arion very seriously.

“I’m saying Violet is more than we realize, and she does inspire hope. Maybe our hope was dormant after Idun raged uncontrollably and uncontested all these centuries. I have no speculations beyond that, but she’s certainly caught Idun’s attention to the fullest extent, if she’s less concerned with us and more focused on her,” Arion explains, turning to face us more fully. “Violet’s intriguing to all alphas. Hell, even Zuela is breaking his rules for her, after barely sampling an audience with her. Simpletons are being spoiled and taken care of in a way not even their own viciously protective matriarch could manage.”

“Unique children are being left in her care for longer and longer periods of time,” Damien murmurs, gingerly stroking the cheek of Jasper, as he finishes cleaning up his *disgustingly* distracting diaper.

“And omegas are sensing their alpha’s new mate before he even knows it for

himself," Emit goes on, running a finger over his lips in pensive concentration. "I joked about my omegas thinking of her as my mate. I never realized the wolf would surge forth to lay claim."

His muscles bunch, and he glances to the door, just as he's done every ten or so minutes. He's in a hurry to get back to her. I want to stab his dick just to ensure it stays out of her for a little while, dammit.

"She built a sanctuary in five months, and had all the laws passed she needed to create an effective baseline for her future goals. She's attempting to create peace and trust, starting at the ground and working her way up," I conclude, sinking back in my seat and wondering if we're just romanticizing the girl's feats into disillusioned pieces of faux grandeur.

Or what if we're overlooking something.

"Anyone seen Pandora in a while?" I muse aloud, glancing around at the four of them, particularly Arion, since he apparently had a private audience with the living while we thought he was laid to rest.

"I searched for her, curious what the crazy bat was up to, since she hasn't surfaced in too many centuries to count," Arion confesses. "But I couldn't find any trace of her. I got distracted by Violet and forgot I was even searching."

I nod in understanding, since Violet has certainly been the largest distraction I've found in too long. My lips curve at the thought of showing her the ring I finally decided on.

She took the fucking wolf. Surely she'll accept me. Once I figure out the proper way to make amends for…being far too insensitive to her young, more emotional needs.

Leaning back in my chair, I study the vampire.

"You think Pandora had something to do with Violet's existence," I surmise. "That's what you're suggesting?"

He nods slowly. "After Idun started using Caroline as her science experiment, Pandora went crazy trying to limit Idun's power, to no avail. If Idun hadn't crossed a line with the Simpletons, Pandora would still be at her side.

There’s no doubt Pandora made Idun stronger. We’ve all determined as much over the years. Idun wants Violet to play with her. Pandora may have played a part in creating Violet.”

“Why choose Marta Portocale for a mother? Pandora only sided with Idun because of how vicious the Portocale family grew to be,” I remind him.

There’s a long pause, as though the thought hadn’t occurred to him.

“All of these conspiracy theories usually end up with a kink like that,” Damien says quietly as he lies down on the bed next to Jasper, wiggling a set of keys that light the babe’s fancy, judging by the enamored look in his eyes. “How does a shifter/vampire exist? Did Pandora contribute to that as well?”

Arion’s expression changes to frustration, as though he aslo hadn’t considered that.

“Maybe evolution has hit the next level and we’re farther behind the curve than we realized with keeping up,” I suggest, which draws a nod from Emit.

“It’s more likely than Pandora hand-crafting a girl we all can’t resist. What would be the purpose? Violet isn’t vicious enough to handle Idun. Three wolves escaped her. Idun would have done more damage in less time,” Emit adds, sighing as though he’s upset we’re still stuck with no answers about Violet’s existence.

“I don’t believe her to be an omega, despite her softness,” I continue. “She’s not particularly a beta. Omegas push more personal boundaries with alphas than betas do, because betas have different instincts. Talbot had me toying with the impossible idea of her being an alpha, but that’s not even in the realm of realism, because she took that beating from Idun with pride. She lost no dignity from that, and she gained power instead of feeling chastened. We all know better.”

There’s another long moment of pause. Even Jasper grows quiet, as though he realizes this is a heavy conversation topic.

“Violet took Caroline’s manic rage and somehow managed to restrain her monster enough to not hurt her too severely, even after being attacked. Yet still feels like she’s done wrong by losing that much control,” Emit murmurs quietly.

“I worry about us being there and upholding her rules about not involving ourselves, in the event one of them has an uncontrollable fit like the one Caroline just had. I’d honestly rip the girl to shreds before I could even think about it, regardless of her own personal mental problems that have piled on by this point,” the wolf adds on a small groan as he scrubs a hand over his face.

“Aye,” Arion murmurs, throwing back another drink. And another. “I’m too alpha to allow the woman I love to take a beating like that in front of me. Even Idun was punished. Trust me, freezing her was pure torture for her.”

“Yet there’s been no immediate retaliation,” Damien states quietly, eyes distant, as though he’s lost in thought. “She really is targeting Violet and not us. She’s just doing it discreetly.”

I’ve never seen the vampire so eerily calm and lost in thought. It’s quite alarming, if I do say so myself. Damien lost in just as much thought is slightly terrifying.

“Violet’s reminded us numerous times that it’s not about us,” I dutifully tell them all.

Our gazes all exchange from one to another as we hold our words and give this more serious thought.

“Marta holds the most information about Violet,” Arion finally says on a slight groan, pushing his face against the palm of his hand.

“I’m sure as hell not calling her,” Damien assures all of us.

“If Pandora did have a hand in crafting Violet, I doubt it’s a good thing,” Emit says as he looks at all of us again. “She doesn’t care about anything but the Simpletons. She took painstaking measures to try and save them, and ran away when she couldn’t, because she was in love with Bobo, and had a huge soft spot for Caroline.”

We all bristle, because suddenly that seems like a more likely theory once again.

“If she did help to create Violet, it’d be to take all of Idun’s attention. That’d be the reason Marta Portocale was given a daughter. Idun hates a Portocale more

than she hates a Simpleton. Give her a Portocale Simpleton she can torture for all eternity—”

“And suddenly Caroline and the others are finally free,” I state, finishing the sentence.

“She looked directly at Marta and told her mother that it’s what she was made for, and said Marta knew it,” Arion says so quietly, as though that’s just occurred to him. “Maybe Violet already knows this.”

This conversation started exciting. Now…it’s brutally sickening.

Idun will never get her hands on Violet the way she had her hands on Caroline. I don’t care how many deaths I have to suffer, nor do I care how many of my knights I have to sacrifice.

“As soon as I get to feed, I’ll spin you some exciting illusions, little one,” Damien chirps, talking to the child as though the infant can understand a damn thing he’s saying.

I glare over at the fool. “This is serious, Damien. If Violet is by some fucked-up, graceless, comic punching bag meant to tempt Idun away from Caroline—”

“She’ll still be ours,” he says, interrupting me, while not taking his eyes off Jasper. “She made my heart beat again, and for the first time in ages, it didn’t feel so much like a damning nightmare. It doesn’t matter what purpose she has. She’s still going to be my Flame, and I’ll protect her to my dying breath.”

“Your people still refer to brides as Flames?” Emit asks with a surprised, embarrassed-for-him expression.

“It’s less lame than the Romanian original term used for our version of mates,” Damien mutters, narrowing his eyes at the werewolf. “My monster has had her before. The only reason she wasn’t claimed then is likely because she was in the middle of breaking a curse that shouldn’t have been so easily broken.”

“Or she just isn’t meant for you,” Emit drawls.

Damien’s hiss and distorted illusion of a face actually sends the wolf reeling back in surprise. His fist wrenches back like he’s about to pounce, as static clings to his hair very abruptly.

Damien smirks, as the small touch of his illusion drops, his face back to normal and no longer demonic.

“I hate it when you do that shit,” Emit gripes.

“I hate the fact that I tell you lot that Pandora likely had a hand in creating Violet, excited by the prospect, and you all changed it into something nefarious and terrifying,” Arion bites out, really annoyed with us.

Damien shrugs an unconcerned shoulder. “It’s not like we’re going to magically come up with answers right now. Pandora is too crazed by this point. It’s more likely she’s in a cave slinging her own poop at monkeys. Besides, she lost her magic, did she not?”

I open my mouth to interject my own opinion on the matter, not that anyone cares, when there’s suddenly a fifth voice in the room.

“Powerless or not, Pandora is irrelevant.”

We all jerk our gazes to the door where Marta Portocale is walking in, a somber expression on her face, as she finishes that statement.

“You’ve been eavesdropping,” I deduce, my eyes narrowing to slits.

“Only because the vampire left Sanctuary in a hurry *and* with Jasper,” Marta states like that makes it all okay.

She takes a seat near the fire, and Emit purposely slides away from her.

“You mated my daughter with a mark so big no one will believe you weren’t trying to rip her to shreds,” Marta grinds out, glaring at him.

“I exhausted myself to keep her from feeling any pain. Does that make me your favorite new son-in-law?” Damien drawls from the bed, as he tucks Jasper against his side.

Marta starts to speak, but then her eyes steady on the lad.

“Violet didn’t tell me Jasper’s secret. The four of you shouldn’t talk so freely outside of a soundproof room. It’s always been an issue for you. Fortunately, I ensured no one else heard. There’s a barrier spell that should last for another two hours,” she says, as her eyes flit over to mine.

I hate it when this bitch tells us what we should or shouldn’t do. In this case,

however, I have to agree we're a little careless.

"It doesn't really matter if someone discovers what the lad is or what Violet is. I'll just rip their spines out the second I smell them," Arion states with a shrug of his shoulder.

"Excellent plan. Only, you didn't sense or smell me coming. All because that baby really messes with someone's senses," Marta goes on.

We all frown over at the lad.

The memory of his mother nearly evading us springs to mind. At the last possible second, she was sensed. She also remained surprisingly calm during her captivity.

That's something to revisit later.

"For all you know, there's a coven or two out there with the same undiscovered genetics. It's worth looking into," Marta goes on, brushing some wrinkles out of her layered skirts, as she sits back and gets comfy.

"I'd rather talk about Violet," Arion states, idly taking the other spot by Jasper.

"So would I," Marta says on a very reluctant breath. "Because it's clear now that she truly is replacing Idun for the four of you. Idun's going to try to remove that mark from my daughter."

"Why would she bother? She never wanted my mark for herself," Emit states in confusion.

Marta scrubs a hand over her face. "No, but she does want the four of you. To have Arion, she needs all four. To have you, you can't have your mark on anyone else. To have Vance…I'm not really sure what she needs. To have Damien, she needs to be a bit more randy in the sack."

"I'm not quite that easy," Damien tells Marta with a sneer. "Violet's going to be my Flame."

Marta groans. "You're all painting her a bigger target than she already is!" she finally gripes.

Her tone sets the babe off into a tizzy of tears.

Maybe Pandora really is behind all this. Did she send us a girl we couldn't resist just to drive Idun into a jealous rage?

Arion shushes Jasper, as he lifts him and cradles him to his chest, and Marta watches the vampire, while he gives the little one all his attention.

For a damn moment, you'd believe this was Arion's son, given all the concern over a small little outburst of tears. Marta looks as confused as she does annoyed by the sight.

She blinks away from the scene, bristling.

Frustrated, I try to keep calm, as I start speaking again. "If Violet is—"

"Then she needs less spotlight and more time on her hands. Once other alphas get word that she's something so special, they'll be after her for their own purposes. Even if Pandora is behind it, it doesn't mean we have to play into her plans, you fools. Do you really think your families won't want a taste of something so intriguing?" she grinds out.

Damien flicks a troubled gaze toward me, even as he pushes off from the bed to go grab a drink.

"We could be a family. Do you think any man or woman so suicidal as to attempt to take that from me?" Arion muses, gently patting the lad's back, as he coos in content now, his tiny body comfortably resting against the homicidal vampire.

The vampire's eyes swing over to Marta, who looks slightly horrified.

"You can't keep the baby, Arion. He has a mother," Emit points out, sounding worried.

"A mother who doesn't particularly tend to him very often," Damien adds, really not helping the situation. "Violet loves him more than his own mother."

"His mother does want Violet to raise him and is practically forcing the situation," Anna chimes in, popping in out of nowhere.

It takes a large effort to not startle.

"I think you'd be a cute little monster family. Even you, Grandma!" Anna adds in a gleeful tone.

“Salt that infernal thing,” Marta growls, glaring at Anna.

Anna gives her a narrowed, somewhat chilling look like I’ve never seen before. Then she smiles brightly, blows a kiss at us, and disappears.

“What kind of ghost can break through boundary spells laid out by a Portocale?” I ask in quiet confusion.

“The kind that shouldn’t exist. Violet’s crossed a line,” Marta states, clearing her throat.

“Does Violet know about this theory*?”* Damien cuts in, getting the topic off Anna.

“I made the unfortunate mistake of telling her that first day in the box, while the four of you overaged creeps stared on. It was a desperate attempt to explain why she couldn’t be with you all. If Pandora set all this up to tempt Idun into taking out her rage on another target, Violet can’t play into her hands,” Marta goes on.

Arion deliberately lifts his gaze to her.

“Violet’s going to be my bride,” Arion tells her matter-of-factly.

Marta pales, though she doesn’t look very surprised.

“Anyone, including you, who gets in my way will be destroyed. I’ve never wanted anything more than I want this, Marta. I’d love to give you a demonstration of how serious I am,” Arion continues as though this is all conversational material. “I’ll sacrifice my full army if need be. Even my favorites.”

Marta’s shoulders drop, and though her jaw is so clenched that I’m worried it’s about to come unhinged, I’m surprised by her overall composure.

Never once have we all sat in a room together without it quickly devolving into threats and old grievances.

“I watched you all make Idun untouchable for a great many centuries,” Marta says quietly, interrupting my silent pat on the back I’ve just given her.

Trying to keep things from rapidly turning into a blaming fiasco, I calmly state, “I hardly think this is the time to throw up ancient history when we’re

working to achieve the same goal: Keep Violet safe."

Marta just glares at me. "I know. That's the point I was trying to make. As much as I hate all of you and find it disgusting that you've taken turns touching my daughter—" Her words tumble to a stop as she releases a dramatic shudder for effect. "—at the end of the day, I know the lengths four of you will go to for the woman you love. My feelings toward you are irrelevant, so long as you do your part to ensure I don't have to see my daughter at the whipping post *ever* again."

Emit is the quietest of us all, even though we've all decided to stop talking at once. I'm twitching. Arion's patting Jasper's back. Damien is tapping the side of his drink. Emit is simply staring at Marta like he's holding back a question.

"What's on your mind, wolf? Are you thinking about more kibble for your empty pit-hole stomach or is there something of importance you'd like to share with the rest of the class?" I ask to break up the intensity.

He runs a finger over his lips. "Violet's monster tore down nearly fifty strong betas," he states quietly, glancing over at Marta with intent eyes. "She's afraid of it because of *you."*

Marta swallows thickly, slinking in her chair.

"How strong is her monster?" Damien asks, leaning up as if this conversation interests him more than he can bear. "A pureblood Simpleton and Portocale isn't exactly a typical Simpleton monster."

"Neopry monster," I point out. "We're only calling them Neopry monsters until we figure out a better name for them."

"PC culture," Damien snorts with a roll of his eyes. "We'd have had our balls handed to us if we'd gotten our feelings hurt over someone looking down on us."

"We turned ourselves into monsters because we were sick of people looking down on us," I remind him with a huff of a tired breath.

They all shoot me a look.

"I did it because I loved a woman and was sick of fighting for my life every single day," Damien retorts. "Unlike you."

I bristle in my chair.

“I did it because I loved that bloody woman and wanted an eternity with her,” Arion states. “I’m now glad I’ve lived long enough to find a woman worth spending an eternity with.”

Marta wrinkles her nose at him, but redirects her attention to me. “I did it to ensure an eternity of misery to the lot of you.”

Bloody cutthroat bitch.

“I did it mostly for Idun, but I almost hated her for what I had to sacrifice,” Emit confesses. “I carried through with the second sacrifice because I couldn’t lose it all at once.”

I feel singled out. “I did it for Idun too,” I tell them, though it’s a shallow attempt at blending in.

“You did it because you’re a prideful man who couldn’t stand being so powerless in those times, simply because of your heritage. But you wouldn’t sacrifice your heritage for the sake of your pride, because you’re proud to be a gypsy,” Marta tells me with a roll of her eyes. “We’re not fools.”

“You loved Idun, but not like you love Violet. What would be your sacrifice for an eternity with her, Van Helsing?” Arion muses, smirking in my direction. “What would you say is the most important thing you possess?”

I don’t like the turn this conversation has taken, nor do I enjoy the way Marta Portocale is staring at me as though she’d also like to hear the answer to this question.

“The point is, we genuinely don’t know what Violet is capable of. She slaughtered a barn full of betas in under five minutes and broke a cement truck in half,” I carry on, bringing us back to the severe gravity of the situation, which is the important topic.

Marta blows out a heavy breath. “She’s an above-average Simpleton. Physically, consider her the top-tier beta form of the Simpletons, who we all know actually act more omega than alpha, as far as mentality goes. Unless there’s a need to fight, Violet reacts like a Simpleton, who defuses the situation

with humor and nervous laughter. However, when she's in survival mode, she has a supreme killer instinct, which I contribute to the Portocale in her veins," she states in an almost muted tone, her hands wringing a floral handkerchief in her grip. "She taunted Idun because she wanted Idun to look weak, simply because no one knows just how much Violet can endure. But my girl has been blowing off body parts, while simply trying to make hair supplies, since she turned thirteen."

With a distant look in her eyes that is genuine as hell, her lip trembles and she clears her throat, quickly recovering.

"She's not Violet when her monster takes over. She's just along for the ride, and she won't remember, until her mind slowly pieces together what it can *after* the fact." Her eyes water, and I think Marta Portocale is genuinely holding back tears right in front of us. "But Violet is still just a Simpleton, and they're only capable of so much. Any of us, or any other alpha, would rip her to shreds with very little effort, if our monsters got out. She's arrogant because she's young."

"Caroline's monster—after all that torture—was still not strong enough to rip her apart while her guard was up," Arion fires back at her, treating the situation with a tone that suggests he's caught her trying to lie to us.

Marta looks confused, but she recovers quickly. "Caroline may be the strongest of the Simpletons, aside from possibly Bobo, but at the end of the day, she's still *just* a Simpleton. Violet is part Portocale, and if her monster unleashes, she can put a Simpleton down, should the occasion call for it."

At our look, she continues studying us.

"Again…" Her word is drawn out, as though she's trying to assess our look.

"You didn't know Caroline broke Violet very recently, did you?" Damien notes. "What did you think happened to her room?"

Marta glares over at Emit, who drops *my* very expensive, authentic, *Wild West* cowboy hat on his fucking lap to cover his stupid dick in front of his mate's mother. *At last.*

"I assumed the wolf crashed in and stole her away. There was only a little

blood, and it didn't take long to realize she was being claimed when I tracked the scent of her blood through the air. The math added up," she bites out, working hard to keep her very old temper in check.

Emit looks over at me like he expects me to save him from this nightmare, now that he's gone and finally started feeling uncomfortable.

"Regardless, Violet's monster managed to save her. It's the only way Violet would have gotten away from Caroline. Caroline's a danger to all of them. Her manic rages happen the most often, likely because she has the most pent up aggression," I state, dragging everyone back to the important matter at hand.

"Violet's monster is much faster than a Simpleton, and that gives her an edge. She's no match for a fully functioning alpha. Maybe she could do some major damage to Damien, since he's not bothered feeding, beyond my daughter," she prattles on.

Damien cuts his gaze to her, lips twitching. "You'd love to see me fuck up right now, wouldn't you?"

"I watched you fuck it all up for five straight months. I'd simply find it redundant at this point," Marta quickly fires back with a wicked curve to her lips.

Damien's expression changes from smugly taunting to infuriated sobriety within a blink.

"My daughter is a girl who knows her value, even though her father was mostly absent from her life. As far as she's concerned, he left because of the monster inside of her. He didn't leave the girl who keeps the monster on the leash. She's a psychological paradox that I'm quite proud of," Marta adds in a bored tone, as she looks down at her nails. "I've avoided him, since he seems to be around a *lot* more, but it's not been easy, *Vampyre*. You need to release him from your punishment. I'll ensure he never stakes you again. I'd be embarrassed to admit a mortal carpenter even got the drop on you, let alone managed to run a stake all the way through your heart."

Arion snorts, but his attention seems to be mostly focused on Jasper.

“Violet enjoys having her father around. I think I’ll just keep my rules in place,” the vampire tells her.

Marta doesn’t even acknowledge his refusal.

It’s odd…

All five of us lounging in my bedroom, discussing the Portocale daughter we’re all eager to steal from her, while an entirely new—*alleged*—pureblood species lies on my bed next to the psychotic vampire, who is telling the lad he’s going to buy him his first car…

It’s all odd.

Life in general is odd these days.

“She really has changed an awful lot in such a short amount of time, hasn’t she?” I ask, letting the full weight of this image sink in.

No one speaks for a moment, but I notice Marta, Damien, and Emit all staring at Arion with the same weight of surreal disbelief. The shifter mother may abandon her child completely if she realizes the kid is safely adored by the most brutal, relentless protector there’s ever been.

Arion cuts his gaze at us, a slow smile curving his lips, as though he’s realizing we’ve finally caught on to his future plans. This psychotic vampire really does want to start a family.

“I think we should help out around the *House* more, don’t you? Violet’s passive aggressive attitude will dissolve if we put forth more effort,” Arion says as though he’s talking to the wee lad.

The baby smiles and blows a spit bubble.

“*Aww*. He does agree,” Arion states as he stands, lifts the lad, and turns into a streak of dark blurs for a distracting moment.

Marta barely reacts when he stops too close to her, retrieving the downed backpack full of diapers and such.

“Let’s go see your future daddy’s favorite beta and see what needs done around the place,” Arion adds.

He’s gone in the next blink.

Emit releases a heavy, tired exhale. Damien resists the urge to laugh, clearing his throat of the inappropriate reaction, as he shakes his head and stares at the floor. Marta stares in slight horror out the window, her hands gripped on the chair arms like she's fighting to stay in her seat and not chase after him to attempt to slay him.

I consider Arion's words, weighing them in my head.

"He's genuinely going to steal that child and make Violet his bride, isn't he?" Marta asks on a shaky breath she works hard to steady.

"Yes, yes he is," Damien answers with zero hesitation.

My phone chimes with a text, and I see a message from Avery that instructs me to turn on Idun TV, even though I've made it a conscious habit not to even glance at the app.

"What are you doing turning that shit on?" Emit asks in an annoyed tone, as I work on getting the app open on my TV. "Violet's still pissed at us because of this damn Reality TV obsession with our ex."

Technology really does overcomplicate things. I always felt bloody brilliant, until this era. It's been a very humbling world to live in this past century or two.

"Avery said it was important—"

I shut up when the image and voice comes on the screen. Idun is laughing at something—fuck knows what—as she swirls her drink.

"So you see, Daphne, this will be progress if I can get my four Head of House comrades to stop worrying so much about their flavor of the month and help out," Idun drones on.

"She knows I mated Violet, and still undercuts her meaning to us," Emit growls.

"Not the important part," Marta says as she stands and goes to the television, her eyes narrowing.

"Trial by combat has always been a piece of our history that's been long forsaken, due to the softer touch of today's world," Idun goes on, her lips curving in a grin. "Call me old fashioned, but I've simply been underground for

far too long to be as gentle and timid as the world is today."

Damien snorts. "Possibly because you're the most ruthless bitch to have ever walked the face of the earth."

"You guys fill me in on whatever gets discussed. I'm going to finish up my food and go enjoy some time with my mate," the motherfucking wolf says with a broad grin as he stands abruptly.

Everyone glares at the bloody tosser. He's had Violet's complete surrender for three damn days. Even if he was the wolf for the entirety of it, it's unfair for him to have her longer.

I'm sure Marta's glaring for an entirely different reason than Damien and I. At least he'll have to battle with Arion for attention.

Nope. I'd rather do battle with Arion for her attention instead of the wolf. He's gotten too close too fast for me to catch up, and I'll be yesterday's uptight, cold garbage at this rate.

Without waiting another minute, I stand abruptly, pulling out my sword while his head is turned. With a single, silent charge, I slam the blade into his spinal cord, relishing his roar of pain, as I leave it lodged there and walk away.

Damien claps in response as I head out, while Marta calls us something akin to savages in a dead language.

That'll hold him for at least a little while.

Exiting and grabbing my ride, I drive like hell is on my ass to Sanctuary. Since I've been granted entrance, the doors open for me on their own, blessed by Marta's powerful magic.

It'll keep out the rubbish, but it'll be far too weak to stop Idun from entering at will. I hope Violet has been made aware of that.

There's a quick scattering of new omegas, who shriek in fear as I stalk by, quickly hurrying to Violet's room.

Leiza's eyes widen when she sees me, and she stands from her spot on the floor in front of Violet's room.

"We sort of explained what Emit's mark means, but she passed out before I

could give her all the details," she says as she quickly lowers her eyes and trembles.

"She only likes the gist of things anyway," I state dismissively, pushing her door open. "So long as she knows it means she's his mate, and therefore, she's now looked at as such by all wolves, she'll have the important information. The rest will come naturally to her."

She nods, but I can tell she's lingering for another reason. Impatiently, I tap my foot.

"I-is it true that Idun removed his mark when she couldn't share all four of you? I mean, because she was his mate, his wolf wouldn't allow—"

"She kissed Damien immediately after Emit awoke. He simply won't share when he's the wolf. Full moons should be interesting for a while," is all I say.

"Does that mean you're all hers again?" she asks far too hopefully.

My lips twitch, as my eyes stay on the girl, who is twisted in the sheets, tossing and turning in a fitful sleep. But my amusement flees when she whispers Emit's name. Shit, I stabbed him perfectly through the spine, so he'll need at least six hours to be able to walk again.

I didn't consider how much that mark would be affecting her, because I was busy buying myself some time alone with her. Thankfully, it seems I've beaten Arion here.

"Don't worry so much, Leiza. Even if she thinks she's broken ties, the girl won't ever get away from us so easily," I assure her, as I pull my shirt over my head, carefully folding it and placing it on a small table.

Leiza shuts the door behind her, as I strip the rest of the way down to my underwear and slide into the bed next to Violet.

This is probably not going to work out so well for me, unless she feels I've sunken to a pathetic level akin to Damien's.

The second she tosses in her sleep and collides with me, her arm slips across my chest, her hand settling near my heart. Her leg comes across my waist, and her body goes lax, losing the restlessness.

I quirk an eyebrow at her, as she snores lightly, no longer tossing and turning.

“Is it possible you need us more than you let on, sweet monster?” I ask in a register barely above a whisper.

“And we spent all our time neglecting her in favor of learning Idun’s agenda,” Damien says abruptly, causing me to curse, since I missed his scent, given my distraction.

I glare over at him when he becomes visible at the foot of the bed, but his eyes are solely on her, jaw tight, as he simply stares.

“Make room, Van Helsing,” the vampire says from the motherfucking window, as he drops inside the room, tugging his shirt over his head.

“I don’t remember offering to share, and I got here first,” I say with some annoyance as the vampire slips into the bed completely naked, sliding in next to Violet on her other side.

When the hell did he remove the rest of his clothes?

“I had a baby to drop off before I could make it this far,” he tells me in an unconcerned tone.

His arm goes around her middle, dragging her closer to him. Fucking vampire.

Her hand and leg stay on me, but she unconsciously curves her other arm up around Arion’s neck, her fingers slipping through his hair and stilling.

His grin is subtle, but I see the glint in his eyes.

“She certainly does need us. She guards her needs more than she guards her body, though,” he murmurs, kissing a trail down her arm.

She makes a content sound, even as she remains asleep.

“Where the hell are you going to fit?” I ask on a tired breath, as Damien shrugs and starts slipping out of his own clothes.

“Looks like she needs something to sleep on top of,” he notes.

Arion moves in a blur before I can, and Damien curses, as the smirking vampire ends up under Violet like a full-body pillow.

“Excellent suggestion,” Arion states, as Violet tucks her head under his chin.

“I run cold, like her, so it makes more sense for it to be me she’s on.”

I still have her touching me; although, now the naked vampire is too damn close for comfort.

“How pissed will she be when she wakes and finds the three of us decided to sleep with her in her bed?” Damien muses as he slips in next to Arion.

My attention goes to the arm she immediately drapes over him, as though she senses him the way she sensed the other two of us.

He catches her hand, kissing her fingertips, and then threads his fingers with hers.

“I’m glad Emit is paralyzed. It’d be a pain in the ass to squeeze him in,” Damien states on a yawn.

“Really? You paralyzed her mate?” Arion asks in a tsking tone.

Rolling my eyes, I let my lids flutter shut. Damn wolf.

He didn’t even have to try to get her to mate him. She gave in to soothe his beast without much hesitation at all, regardless of the lasting consequences.

“Because Emit marked Idun, she refused to be my Flame,” Damien murmurs, following his words up with a shudder. “Thank fuck for that. We only get one Flame.”

“She never even considered being my bride, not that I bothered asking,” Arion states so quietly I almost miss it. “Violet won’t be so cruel.”

My eyes crack open to see his hands grab her ass, and I clear my throat.

“She’ll not be upset about us sleeping here so much as she’d be upset with getting groped in her sleep,” I point out.

“I was considering fucking her and getting this party started,” Arion states very seriously, blinking over at me.

Damien laughs humorlessly, as I groan and toss an arm over my eyes.

“You’re an idiot if you think that’s a good idea. Damien’s the sexual deviant. He’s the only one who’d get a free pass over something like that,” I point out.

“For the first time ever, I envy you, Morpheous,” Arion bites out.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about. Damn girl yells at me when I sneak

into her room without permission," Damien grumbles. "I'd have to be my monster to get away with something like that. Maybe I'll provoke the damn thing just to see how she treats it."

"Don't be a fool," I mumble. "You're both tempting me to stab you right now."

"She's going to need a bigger bed," Arion notes.

"Her last one was broken. She had a bigger one," Damien gripes.

"Children, go to sleep or I'll make you sleep in your own fucking beds," I snap.

When it goes silent, my head roams to harder times, remembering the worst flaw with the last woman we all fought for.

"What about you, Van Helsing? Idun favored you. Would she have been the Dark Knight's lady?" Arion muses aloud, cutting through the silence.

I don't respond at first. They both know the answer. We all know why things truly fell apart long before Idun lost her sense of humanity. Arion lost his humanity, yet here he lies, leashed to the girl with a heart so big she can't really stand all the nonsensical violence.

I was the only one Idun truly wanted, and I didn't want her unless she wanted all four of us. It's my secret that will remain my secret, because I don't mind if I have to share. It's less stressful to share, because I have enough responsibility. I can't be everything she needs all the time, and still fulfill all my many obligations.

Not to mention, I still hate all three of them for never understanding the misery of my own curse.

"Unlike the three of you, I never really cared what Idun wanted. I was too cold to love her the way she wanted to be loved by me. She only made me colder," I state quietly.

Violet's hand chills against my heart, as though she's soothing pain that isn't there, and a ghost of a smile tugs at my lips. Even in her sleep, she's still protective.

I’ve never had anyone but the three of them willing to protect me. Everyone else has always needed me to protect them.

Idun included, even though she was capable of taking better care of herself.

I get comfortable, allowing myself to drift off to sleep, when…suddenly there’s a crash against the door, and I jar awake.

Arion startles right next to me, along with Damien on his other side, and we all look over in disbelief, as the omegas pant for air, while…pushing Emit on a stretcher toward us.

The wolf snarls at all of us, and I almost feel…sorry for the fucking stupid mutt who looks ridiculous.

“You wicked son of a bitch,” he bites out. “Next time, there will be hell to pay for that. I did nothing to deserve—”

“I have a list of infractions that gave me that right,” I argue, even though by now he should know I always have a reason, otherwise, my curse wouldn’t allow such actions.

The omegas heave and strain to push the stretcher right up against the bed, and Violet’s leg extends, moving off me, as she subconsciously reaches for him.

He slides over, running his hand up her leg, and releases a sigh that sounds similar to relief. I suppose it was a dick move.

“I’m selfish,” I remind him. “I hate the fact you’ve mated her and I’ve not even gotten much closer than some sexual tension.”

He kisses her ankle, still glaring at me, but I smile, because Violet murmurs my name in her sleep this time.

Then…she moans Damien’s.

“I will stab you if you don’t let the girl get some rest. If she wakes up and kicks us all out, I’ll stab you multiple times,” I warn the deviant.

Violet immediately stops squirming atop Arion, and the vampire glares over at me.

“This could go another way if she wakes up. Something to keep in mind,” the vampire—

“Definitely wake her up,” Anna chirps from overhead, blinking down at us when we all jerk our attention to her.

She fans herself and releases a dreamy sigh, as she contently lounges on the rafters. “Can I pick who goes first?” she adds.

Damien tosses up a ball of salt that shatters somewhere in the room, and she vanishes from sight.

“We’ll deal with that mystery-slash-problem another day,” he grumbles around a yawn.

“A lot fucking happened in five months, didn’t it?” Emit asks quietly, as Violet continues to sleep peacefully, surrounded by the four of us.

“The question is, how much do we actually fucking know about what’s going on?” Arion asks, his hand smoothing up her back. “And how much is she keeping from us just because she’s mad right now?”

“A problem for another day. Seriously, quit wagging your jaws so I can sleep,” Damien cuts in.

In the next instant, there’s an image of sheep jumping over a fence playing in my head. Each of the sheep are numbered, as one by one they bounce in and out of view.

“Count them until you fuckers fall asleep,” Damien mumbles.

Emit snorts, almost choking back laughter, as I try to figure out what in the hell purpose this serves.

I start feeling stupid, as I silently watch the numbers, counting them with the visual aid. As though counting sheep is going to make me…fall…asleep…

CHAPTER 20

VIOLET

Four boys are in my bed.

Well, technically three boys are in my bed, and one boy is haphazardly sprawled on a stretcher that's pushed against the bed, and he's got an arm curled around my leg.

I'll ask about the stretcher later.

I hate the fact this makes me smile. It should really, *really* piss me off. They always do this. They have no sense of personal boundaries. Though, I'm surprised Vance is guilty of this boundary crusher as well.

Arion…is naked. Fully naked.

And he's underneath me.

And he's apparently happy about being underneath me, if the thing poking me in the stomach is any indication toward his current mood.

Damn vampire.

My body is all sorts of confused, because some really inappropriate thoughts enter my mind.

I'm incensed. Or…at least I should be. Right?

Weak is feeling more like my theme song with each passing—

A hand clamps down on my ass, and the vampire smiles, even as his eyes stay closed.

"Care to use my body for your pleasure this morning, love?" he asks, even though the clock is telling me it's actually mid-afternoon.

Have I really slept all day?

He gives my ass a squeeze, and suddenly a few images pop into my mind—images not made by the slutty, shameless subconscious I have. Instead, it's images made by the slutty, shameless sexual deviant I feel kissing my inner

wrist.

Even with my eyes wide open, all I can see is Arion under me, and Damien behind me, as the two of them release their monsters in a way that has my toes trying to prematurely curl and my heart racing out of my chest.

Lips capture mine, both in the fantasy and for real, because there's no denying a true kiss with Arion. It's too consuming to be faked, and my body heats in response.

I'm not sure what's real and what's imaginary, as I shove my fingers into his hair, pulling him closer, my hips rocking against him in a way that has him hurrying to shove my shorts down.

A scream has the illusion snapping and shattering, as a cold wash of reality slashes through me with the same jarring sensation.

I pause, forgetting everything else, when I realize Vance's lips are stilled on my shoulder, his eyes holding mine, even as my shirt is in his hands.

I'm half undressed, and the four of them are all touching me in some way that suggests this was going to get real dirty real fast.

It's so quiet in the room that you can hear each breath the five of us take, as they all wait to see what reaction I'm going to have to this…scene.

I swallow thickly, because I'm not sure why we've stopped. Even though I'm supposed to be mad at them, I definitely still want to try—

Another scream seems to remind us all what brought this unexpected morning to a crashing halt. Emit is off the stretcher and racing out in the next instant, and Vance is right behind him.

Damien curses, muttering something about killing someone if this isn't an emergency, as he quickly follows them. Arion keeps me pressed to him, his hand inching my shorts farther down my legs until he shoves them off completely.

He pauses, listening to something, and a small, daring grin crosses his lips.

"You can still be mad at me and fuck me, sweet monster. I can assure you I'll enjoy it as much as you, and I'll still work very hard to get back in your good graces," he murmurs against my throat.

My entire body trembles with the desire to take him up on that.

I should still be sore, but I'm not. In fact, I'm healed so much that I can't think of anything else I'd rather do. But—

Another scream has me trying to lift off him, but he holds me in place.

"Whatever it is, three alphas is more than plenty enough to deal with it," he assures me.

I'm flipped so suddenly that I don't gauge the motion until my back slaps the mattress and he comes down on top of me.

His eyes meet and hold mine, and he smirks down at me. "I'm at your mercy, Violet. What will you do with—"

His breath hisses between his lips when I shove him hard, catching him off guard, and disappointment crosses his eyes as I lift up.

He drops to his back and puts an arm over his eyes, jaw tensing like he's annoyed his plans didn't work out.

I smile to myself, as I settle myself between his legs, and another breath hisses between his lips, this time sounding surprised, as his eyes come down and meet mine in genuine shock.

My hand curls around his very erect—

"What are you doing?" he asks as my mouth closes around the tip, only making the vampire whimper in more surprise as he goes rigid. "Violet, fuck's sake, what are you doing?"

I pause, confused by how nearly panicked he sounds, his body wound so tight it feels almost as though he'll break.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" I ask him, my brow furrowing.

He starts to speak, but my mouth is already on him again, and another breath hisses out of him, as he bites down on his hand. His hips jerk, but I manage to keep from taking too much too fast.

"Bloody hell, woman. I don't think you should do that. It's extremely disrespectful for me to allow you to lower yourself to—"

His words end on yet another hissed breath, as I take him deeper, sucking

with just enough pressure to apparently do good things.

I pause again, my lips coming off him with a *pop.*

I study him, as he keeps his eyes screwed shut, and he even has an arm over his face. I've never seen Arion look so out of sorts. An impossible thought occurs to me.

"Idun never—"

"Of course not," he says quickly, almost too quickly, as though this is actually something uncomfortable for him to speak about. "Do you think that woman would ever lower herself to such an indignity?"

I fight really hard not to smile, because I definitely don't want to embarrass a vampire who usually has zero shame.

I was just going to toy with him a little—the way he toys with me so often. But now?

Damn vampire.

My mouth descends on him again, but this time, I feel really powerful, because he has zero experiences to compare it to. I'm not a pro, but I'm definitely experienced enough to seem impressive to a very ancient vampire who hasn't ever had a taste of the good stuff.

His hands fist in the bedding next to me, as I start enjoying every second of it more than I've ever enjoyed giving pleasure before. But I hiss out my own surprised breath when I feel two large hands clamp on my hips.

My eyes dart up to the mirror behind the bed, spotting Emit's wolfish smirk in place, as a very large and blunt tip starts pressing between my thighs.

In my excitement to be Arion's first BJ, I didn't realize how worked up my body had gotten. At least not until Emit slides in almost effortlessly, filling me so completely that I make way too much noise in appreciation.

Arion's hand goes to my hair, clearly unbothered by Emit's presence, as the wolf starts fucking me like he owns me from behind, my body too turned on to focus on both men at once.

But I manage to remember this is Arion's first oral experience, and just enjoy

all the added sensations Emit's attention brings, while I make the vampire feel like as much of a king as I can.

Arion writhes underneath me, as Emit works my body to a fine edge, the two of them doing things to me in such different ways that it's almost intoxicating.

Sweat beads on the vampire's skin, and I get greedier, taking as much of him as I can, with more and more enthusiasm, because the wolf is really good at what he does for a girl's body.

Just when I'm so close to the edge that it's unbearable, Arion makes a startled cry, his hips jerking, and that's all the warning I get before he's suddenly climaxing.

In my mouth.

I swallow as fast as I can, but…this has never happened in my mouth before. However, I can't help but give it all the effort I can, because I've never seen so much tortured pleasure on one person's face. It's the sort of expression that makes a girl happy to do whatever she can to draw it out.

But the wolf starts getting more aggressive, his claws digging into my sides, as the vampire drags me closer, his lips crushing mine so quickly that I once again miss the fast motions that lead from one second to the next.

He kisses me like he's never been more thankful to kiss anyone in all his life, and as though he desperately needs so much more from me. Pleasure swarms me too quickly, and Emit's growl and perfectly executed movements send me over the edge completely.

I cry out against Arion's mouth, as my whole body trembles against him. I'm nearly crushed between them, when Emit drops to my back, and his hips still, as he muffles his sound against my throat.

Still trembling and suffering the aftershocks, my reaction time lags, as the very fast vampire moves. Emit curses as he's knocked back. The world spins around me, and the vampire suddenly has my back pinned against the mattress once more.

There's not any warning before he's inside me, thrusting in so deep he

completely buries himself inside me with that one stroke.

He shudders against me, his cool breath doing incredible things against my sensitive skin, and my nails dig into his back as he begins fucking me in earnest.

There's a sharp sting at my neck, before I feel the ginger suckling there, and my body gets way more turned on by it than should be natural. Or decent.

My next orgasm hits without warning, and I'll be embarrassed by the sound I make when I'm not so caught up in how fucking good it feels.

Arion gets rougher, drinking as much as he wants, while fucking me as mercilessly as he dares, and I'm not sure why I love it so much.

He groans against my neck, and his hands tighten on my hips so much that it almost feels bruising in the best possible way. He stills against me, and I turn my head more, giving him as much blood as he needs, because it feels so good to have him so close.

I hate him for doing this to me, but he already knows I love him. So I don't actually hate him at all, because…

My head is entirely too fucked up, and I need to stop thinking.

"Arion, we're gonna need the alpha vampire for this problem, if you're quite finished being a selfish son of a bitch with our girlfriend," Damien calls out, apparently forgetting we're still broken up.

I really do need better boundaries.

Also, I need a stronger resolve or something.

Arion's lips kiss along my throat, and they slide over mine, just barely brushing, as his gaze stays devoted to me. There's a breathless moment where he conveys so much with that lost, yet content, look.

It's the same look he gave me the first time we had sex.

As though he's found something he didn't know existed and doesn't know how to treasure it properly.

Or…I'm a romantic idiot, who is reading way too much into it.

"I'll make you my bride, Violet Carmine. And when I do, you'll love every fucking second of it. You have a month to adjust to that warning before I make it

a reality. Find a way to make peace with that," he says before he practically vanishes, leaving my mind rushing after the really crazy shit he just said like it wasn't a big deal.

Emit is beside me and pulling me against him, running his lips up my neck, and cradling me to him. He nuzzles me, affectionately snuggling against me, as I continue to reel from Arion's parting words.

"He ruins all the fun when he says crazy shit," Emit says on a sigh. "But you do continuously reward bad behavior," he points out.

I blink up at him, still too stunned for words. Arion was so serious that I believe he really did threaten to force me to be his bride, and to ultimately get over it if I have any objections.

I have no idea how I feel about this, since it sounded far more endearing the last time he mentioned it. Before he gave me a deadline and made it such a reality.

"How do you feel about being my mate?" Emit asks too abruptly.

These guys…

I swear…

"Honestly, I haven't had a chance to process how I feel about it yet," I tell him honestly, sighing as I relax and get comfortable on his chest.

I love how surrounded and protected I feel when I'm in Emit's arms. I also love how dainty I feel, since he's a beast of a man.

He grins down at me, his eyebrows bouncing up, as he drags my leg over his hip.

"How do *you* feel about it?" I ask, shifting uncomfortably against him, and finding myself avoiding his eyes like a coward.

His hand comes around the back of my head, and my eyes meet his when he forces me closer, dragging our faces so close together that our lips bump.

He smirks when I shiver against him, my body sated twice and still hungry for more, since I'm apparently insatiable this morning.

"I was rejected by the last woman I tried to take as a mate. Since then, I've

never even attempted loving a woman," he says, his smirk falling away.

He glances down to my lips, and his gaze bounces back up to meet mine, as his arm comes around my waist.

"There's no way to describe the pain of having your mark rejected after claiming someone. However, if you don't want my mark—"

"I do," I blurt, not really thinking that through.

It just sort of pops out without any sort of forethought.

His lips curve up very slowly.

"I wanted you like I've never wanted a woman before. You got under my skin, even though I fought with all I had to keep my distance. Arion claims to fall the hardest, but it's not true. He just gives so much of himself so completely that he considers that proof enough. I'm who falls the hardest. I fell so hard that I couldn't get back up until my wolf found me a new mate."

She broke him.

She literally broke him.

First, she made him sacrifice his most important love—his family's wolves. Then she treated his wolf's claim like a defilement of her body.

She rejected him, even after he threw away so much to be with her. She didn't respect any sacrifice he made, and only made him continuously sacrifice more.

"Even as I hated her, I still loved her, and she toyed with me, mocked me, and ruthlessly tore apart the wolves I loved to punish me when I didn't behave accordingly. You're like the breath of air I've spent my immortal life trying to catch, and I finally caught that breath the moment my mark was on you. My wolf was more broken than I was, Violet. Until now, I didn't realize how much damage her rejection caused. I feel whole again right now."

He runs his fingers along the strands of my hair, his gaze far too adoring, as he drinks me in.

"To be completely honest, I'd likely track you down to the ends of the earth if you tried to get away from me. It's just noble and honorable to pretend I'd be

okay with letting you go,” he states as though it’s a confession.

His eyes do that wolfish thing they do when the full moon is near, but there’s no full moon.

His smirk deepens, as though he’s enjoying the wolf stirring so close to the surface.

“I’ll give you the world if you ask it. I’ll give you anything you ever desire. That mark is as much my surrender as it is yours,” he goes on, his lips ghosting mine. “I should have known I’d never be able to fight you for long, because I couldn’t stay away, no matter how hard I tried. And I certainly tried.”

I’d like to say he kisses me, but it’s me who kisses him, because I can’t stop myself.

My hands go to his shoulders, and I slip back over on him, prepared to go round three, because I desperately need him inside me right now.

Mate.

My mate.

I have a mate.

I’m essentially married, and it’s to Emit.

The guy who first made me feel okay about being a monster.

The guy who gave me peace about something I’d never had peace with before.

The man who accepted me from the beginning, and who has always been there, even if he was pushing as hard as he was pulling.

The man who has handed over omegas, land, and anything else I’ve needed along the way, without ever once complaining about it.

The first person to ever survive around my monster’s emergence without looking at me with any fear. If anything, my monster has only brought us closer together. Little by little.

And his decided we needed to be together a lot more.

I kiss him harder, just because I can’t help myself, and he drinks me in as though this really is our honeymoon.

Even though I still don’t really know how I feel about it, I do feel myself smiling uncontrollably against his lips, and kissing him with a hunger I can’t deny.

I always knew he was holding back.

I just assumed it was because he didn’t really want to be with me.

I never considered there might be a much deeper reason.

It only makes me more desperate to have him inside me again, and he doesn’t waste time obliging.

For the third time this morning, a monster has his way with me, and I love every wicked second of it.

CHAPTER 21

VIOLET

“You fucking codgers don’t need sex to live,” Damien gripes. “Now she’s in an orgasm-induced coma, because your wolf earned you special privileges, and the vampire is like a virgin to her.”

“Finally, my loyalty is paying off,” Arion chides, sounding entirely too pleased with himself. “Your man-whoring ways have finally caught up with you, Morpheous.”

One blowjob, and suddenly his head can’t fit in a room.

“Fuck the lot of you. I’m so out of my element that I can’t get the damn girl to stop looking at me like she’s surprised any time I do anything less than perfectly proper,” I hear Vance griping, which has me covering my mouth to muffle a startled laugh.

I peer around the doorway, watching as the four of them walk down the stairs.

“How long will it take her to sleep it off?” Damien asks, sounding genuinely irritated.

Their voices trail off, and I only catch bits and pieces of their conversation from there.

“The best thing you ever did was break up with them. They sure as hell started missing you real damn fast,” Anna chirps from my side.

“What’s Idun up to right now?” I ask her quietly, barely whispering the words.

“According to our male ghost that gives you the creeps—”

“Who?” I ask, distracted by the sound of Vance’s rare laughter.

I hate that I’m smiling when I don’t even know what he’s laughing about.

“The guy who wanted you to keep up his girlfriend but you didn’t seem to

like him, so he stopped hanging around," she states like she's reminding me. "The triplets introduced you to him after I died and stuff."

"Right. Right. The stalker dude who gives me weird looks from the side of the road and shows up at random times to offer random romantic advice?"

"He offers random romantic advice?" Anna asks in confusion.

"He said if I loved something to set it free. If it comes back, it's meant to be," I grumble.

"I think I read that on a fortune cookie once," Anna says with a firm nod. "Right after I shagged a Chinese ambassador."

"You. Are. Not. A. Delusional. Ghost," I grind out in reminder to her. "Not anymore."

She taps her chin thoughtfully. "Says you. I feel quite delusional. Can we blame it on all the stress you've put me under?"

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I give up on arguing. "So my stalker ghost is the one watching Idun?" I ask incredulously, shooting her a dubious look.

"Does it really matter who stalks her? So long as it's not me, she's not going to give two shits about some random ghost lurking around," she says on a tired sigh. "Seriously, Violet, ghosts hang around this town all the time. He's just a random to her, so he's perfect for the job."

Rolling my eyes, I turn and head down the hall.

"Find Jasper and keep an eye on him for me. I'm going to my office to do some more research on myself, while the guys are busy distracting each other," I tell her.

She disappears without argument, for once, and I allow my stupid grin to take up my whole face.

I'm mated.

I have a mate.

Emit Morrigan is my mate.

He really will be a good—

My office door slams shut behind me, and I whirl around, spotting Dorian

Gray. Breath catching in my throat as uneasiness travels up my spine, I stumble back a step in surprise.

With a dark, somewhat terrifying smile, he takes a step toward me, lips twitching as he says, “It’s about time we finally had a moment alone.”

End of book 5.

The final book will be book 6.

I have a spoiler room set up so when you are finished you can go and talk about the book without worry of spoiling it for anyone.

Spoiler Room

Where to find me:

My Facebook

Private Book Club

(Very adult group. No drama. No judgement. And no one outside of the group can see what you like, post, or comment on.)

My Teaser/Book Group

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