

HE'LL RUIN ME.
I'LL DESTROY HIM.



GOD
OF
RUIN

LEGACY OF GODS

TRINA KENT

GOD OF RUIN

OceanofPDF.com

LEGACY OF GODS SERIES BOOK 4

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*To the psychos,
May we enjoy them in fiction but never encounter them in real life*

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AUTHOR NOTE

Hello reader friend,

If you haven't read my books before, you might not know this, but I write darker stories that can be upsetting and disturbing. My books and main characters aren't for the faint of heart.

This book contains primal kink, somnophilia and mentions of childhood trauma. I trust you know your triggers before you proceed.

God of Ruin is a complete STANDALONE.

For more things Rina Kent, visit www.rinakent.com

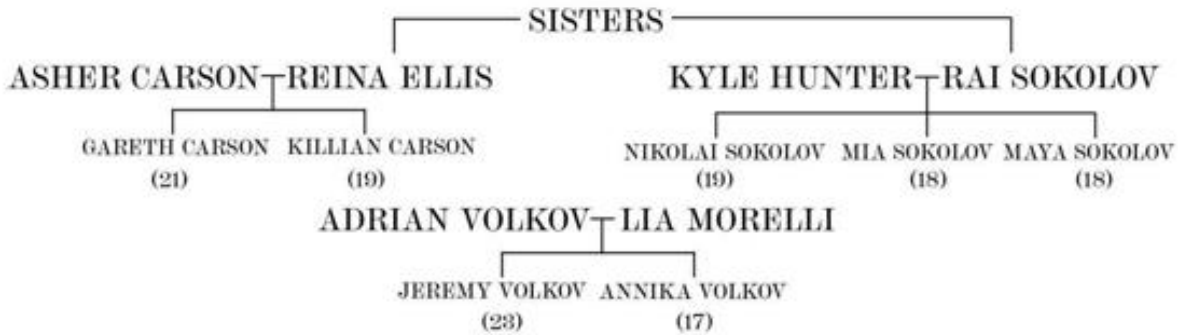
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LEGACY OF GODS TREE

ROYAL ELITE UNIVERSITY



THE KING'S U'S COLLEGE



BLURB

I'm out for revenge.

After careful planning, I gave the man who messed with my family a taste of his own medicine.

I thought it'd end there.

It didn't.

Landon King is a genius artist, a posh rich boy, and my worst nightmare.

He's decided that I'm the new addition to his chess game.

Too bad for him, I'm no pawn.

If he hits, I hit back, twice as hard and with the same hostility.

He says he'll ruin me.

Little does he know that ruination goes both ways.

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PLAYLIST

Blood on Your Hands – Veda & Adam Arcadia
Angel of Small Death & The Codeine Scene – Hozier
RUNRUNRUN – Dutch Melrose
Roman Empire – MISSIO
The Worst in Me – Bad Omens
Skins – The Haunting
Don't Say I Didn't Warn You – VOILA & Craig Owens
Supernatural – Barns Courtney
Rude Boy – Rihanna
Happiness is a Butterfly – Lana Del Rey
Artistry – Jacob Lee
Bad Decisions – Bad Omens
Last Cigarette – MOTHICA & AU/Ra
Anarchist – YUNGBLUD
Colors – Halsey

You can find the complete playlist on [Spotify](#).

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MIA

Tonight, a certain eyesore presence will get a taste of his own medicine.

I stride through the darkness of the night with a chip on my shoulder and rage boiling in the very marrow of my soul.

My fingers splay on the strap of the mask covering my face. Breath condenses against the plastic and sweat coats my upper lip.

The place where my plans will take place materializes in front of me—huge, imposing, and dreadfully heartless.

Not empty, though.

These types of hedonistic meccas are often brimming with wannabes who like to think they're worth more than their parents' bank accounts.

But, oh well, none of my plans would have meaning in the absence of a crowd.

The dazzling lights of what can only be called a mansion slash through the night with the brightness of a falling star.

There's nothing modest about what I'm looking at. It's a huge three-story architectural wonder whose front brims with wide, tall windows.

That's where all the lights shine through, particularly on the first floor. LED strips cover the trees in the vast garden surrounding the property. I can't help feeling bad for the poor trees that are being suffocated for some random celebration.

The mansion's exterior boasts a welcoming Victorian-like vibe that promises great fun, but I'm not fooled.

Inside that mansion lurks skin-crawling danger wrapped in a dazzling appearance.

And tonight? I'm going straight for that danger's throat and bringing him to his damn knees.

"Slow down, Mia!" a feminine voice calls, crowded with frustration.

I throw a glance back to find my twin sister, Maya, holding her carnival mask with golden ornaments in hand as she pants.

My eyes grow wide behind my own mask and I pull her to the side before we cross the property's gate.

She struggles under my firm grip, her whines resembling those of a petulant child.

"Ugh, you're hurting me." She releases herself from my merciless hold after a long struggle. It's no secret that I'm the twin who loves strength training. Maya is more interested in massages and sculpting her model body.

We're under a tall tree with bent branches that offers some form of camouflage from any onlookers.

Maya hikes a hand up her hip over the skintight glittery black dress that leaves nothing to the imagination. My sister has always been proud of her slim hourglass figure and C-cup breasts, and she's never shied away from showing them off.

We're identical twins, so we have the same petite facial structure, almond-shaped light-blue eyes, and full lips, though hers are slightly bigger than mine. Our hair is shiny platinum blonde, but she keeps hers long—currently swishing to her lower back—while mine falls just below my shoulders.

Usually, I'd have a ton of ribbons in mine, but since I'm trying to stay under the radar, I have it in a ponytail tied with only one blue ribbon.

I'm also wearing my least attention-grabbing outfit—a simple strapless leather dress that reaches the tops of my knees.

My boots for the night are the tamest I have and the only ones that aren't chunky or covered with chains.

Maya, however, chose to wear heels, as usual, not seeming to care about whether or not that would hinder our mission.

I point at the mask in her hand and gesticulate to her face, then sign, "You're supposed to be wearing that! They have cameras around, and you might have just offered them a front-row seat to our identities."

She rolls her eyes dramatically, proving her position as the ultimate drama queen I know. “Relax. The camera range only starts once we’re close to the gate. And I was going to put it on, if you’d been patient for, like, two seconds.”

“Don’t mess with me.” I snatch the mask and smash it to her face, then strap it around her head so that it’s secured.

She whines and groans. “You’re running my hair, idiot. Let go. I’ll do it myself.”

I only release her once I’m satisfied with the mask’s placement. She glares at me through the eyeholes as she proceeds to fix her hair.

“Don’t give me that,” I sign. “You know how much effort it took for me to get a goddamn invitation to this pretentious event. The last thing I need is for something to go wrong.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She throws her hand in the air with obvious exasperation. “I’ve heard the story about your sacrifices a thousand times, to the point that I can recite them back.”

“In that case, stick to the plan and stop giving me headaches.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She does a mock salute and I make a face behind my mask.

Since she can only see my eyes, Maya can’t get the full picture, but she still smirks anyway like an annoying idiot.

My twin sister has always been my best friend, but she often drives me up the wall with her shenanigans.

After I make sure neither of our faces is showing, we start walking toward the mansion again.

Or more accurately—the Elites’ compound.

When I first came to Brighton Island, I had to learn a few rules. The most important one is that there are two rival colleges on this island. The one I belong to is American and called The King’s U. It’s funded by powerful people whose pockets are filled with new money. The kind whose source or motives are hard to pinpoint.

My parents are included in the group of powerful people. We’re Russian mafia royalty and they happen to be leaders in the New York Bratva.

The other college is Royal Elite University—or REU. British, loaded with old money and pretentious aristocracy.

Our college has two clubs: the Heathens, with which our loyalty lies since my brother and cousins are members; and the Serpents, who are

second on my shit list.

First on that list, however, is the Elites. The secret club and the holy grail of REU.

While the Heathens are full of mafia heirs and American royalty, the Elites are...dangerously different.

They appear elegant and suave, but there's a nefarious undertone lurking beneath the surface.

Maya and I are infiltrating their mansion and party. It's impossible to get an invitation to these close-circle gatherings unless you're part of the club or their family and friends.

Lucky for me, I managed to snag two invitations that were meant for someone who's part of the family.

When Maya and I arrive at the entrance, a large man stops us. Masks are mandatory tonight, and he's wearing a black carnival one with golden ornaments.

From my research, I gathered that mask nights are important nights. They're not only a members' meeting, but they're also when they celebrate wins and announce plans for the future.

It's the main reason why I waited such a long time to execute my plan. There needed to be this level of significance for the mission to be satisfying.

I reach into my bag and show him the black invitation card with 'Elites VIP' written in gold. After Maya does the same, he takes and scans them with a special gadget.

Geez. No wonder it's impossible to get into these things. They even scan invitations to make sure there are no forgeries.

Once the light goes green, he nods more to himself than to us and motions behind him at his colleague, who's in a similar mask.

"You'll leave all your personal belongings here. No phones or cameras are allowed inside." His gruff voice with a barely understandable British accent fills the air. "If we find out you snuck any communication devices inside, you'll be thrown out."

Maya releases an exasperated sound as we ditch our bags. "You better protect it with your life. Actually, since this is a special edition Hermes and is, therefore, worth more than your life, lose it and I'll use your skin as my new bag. Capisce?"

The man shows no reaction to her dramatics, and I grab her arm and then basically push her inside a dimly lit hallway.

“You just made him take note of us,” I sign discreetly. “What happened to our plans about blending in, idiot?”

“Excuse you. My bag is worth more than this mission.”

“Are you telling me a bag is worth more than getting revenge for our brother?”

“Well, since he can get that himself—which he should’ve by now, but I’m not sure why he hasn’t—I think...yes?”

“Maya!”

“What? I had to pull strings to get that bag.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have brought it on a night like this?”

“It’s my lucky bag. Of course I’m bringing it to your suicidal mission.”

“I have everything planned. It’s not suicidal.”

“It will be when Niko finds out.”

I wince at the thought of our older brother, Nikolai, catching a whiff of this. Pissed off is going to be the milder reaction.

Maya's eyes twinkle behind the mask with a mischievous grin. “He’ll skin us alive.”

I lift my chin. “Don’t care. I’ll deal with him once I’m done with our revenge.”

Our conversation comes to a slow halt as we exit the hallway and find ourselves in a main hall.

Huge chandeliers hang from the high ceilings, illuminating a glittery interior, marble flooring, and ornate pillars.

All the attendees wear masks similar to ours and are dressed up in fitted tuxedos and elegant party gowns. I definitely look the least sophisticated of the bunch, while Maya blends right in.

“I told you so,” she whispers in my ear in reference to her earlier suggestion that I wear a showier dress.

I elbow her side, but she only laughs in mock reaction.

If she weren’t my sister, I would’ve kicked her in the face a long time ago.

We each grab a drink from a passing waiter, but I don’t take a sip. One, I’d have to lift my mask, and I’d rather not reveal anything about my identity. Two, I’m such a lightweight that even a beer can get me tipsy. So I

only pretend to drink while keeping my attention on the people mingling about.

Some of them are dancing to unknown classical music like they're a bunch of middle-aged couples. Others are talking and laughing at what I'm sure are boring topics.

The subject of my revenge, who should be somewhere in the middle of the charade, isn't here.

"Do you see him?" Maya signs, as is our habit whenever we don't want someone to eavesdrop on us.

I shake my head.

My foot taps on the floor in a manic rhythm. This is bad.

That asshole is the star of the show, so unless he shows his ugly self, our plan is practically null and void.

All of a sudden, the lights dim. My eyes adjust to the darkness, but I can only see shadows and silhouettes of other attendees.

My spine jerks upright and my manic tapping comes to a halt, mainly because the panic is too great to be contained by mere tapping.

Sweat trickles down my spine and the rotten stench of mold invades my nostrils.

I'm not going back there...I'm not...

"Hey." Maya's soft voice fills my ears as she wraps an arm around my shoulders. "It's going to be okay. You're not alone, Mia."

I stare into her eyes, which are identical and yet somehow different from mine. As the seconds tick by, my breathing slows back to normal.

She's right. I'm not alone, and I'm definitely not back in that humid, dark place from ten years ago.

I flash her a tentative smile because I'm so thankful for having her, but at the same time, I'm so ashamed of my weakness.

My inability to get my shit together even after all this time.

Every year, I say this is the year I get over it, but so far, I haven't had any luck.

"I'm okay," I sign, then force myself to focus on the scene.

Sure enough, a few newcomers dressed in gowns and tuxedos walk in as if they not only own the place, but also expect everyone in it to worship at their feet. They're wearing luxurious masks and are holding their noses in the air as if it's their mission to judge the world.

Our target is in their midst.

No doubt about it.

In fact, he's probably the one in the middle who has one hand in his pocket and the other hanging nonchalantly at his side.

My blood boils and it takes every ounce of my control not to jump for his throat and claw his eyes out.

Stay patient, Mia. Everything is sweeter in its own time.

Maya and I exchange a look, our twin hunch activating at the same time, and we nod at each other.

We slip between the party people who are too mesmerized, by whom I assume are the club leaders, to notice us.

For the first time in forever, I'm thankful for the darkness. Maya and I go unnoticed all the way to the designated hallway.

While it's true that getting invited to an Elites party is a highly selective process, gaining access to the mansion they use as a compound isn't as hard.

Especially since I'm friends with someone who lives here.

Not sure he'll still consider me a friend after I'm done with his asshole of a brother, but, hey, he knew I would never forgive him for kidnapping Niko and, in retrospect, causing his injury.

Someone needs to teach that bastard a lesson, and what am I if not a Good Samaritan?

Since I had access to the mansion yesterday, I managed to stack our weapon of destruction within the party's main event.

All we have to do is go up and hit the button for all hell to break loose.

But before we can do that, we have to make sure what I planted is still in place.

To do that, Maya will check the power supply and I need to reach the trigger button.

There's no need for any communication outlet because we're the type of twins who feel each other no matter what.

If everything is all right, I'll get a hunch before I push the button.

We slide our palms against each other and tap the back of our hands together in our special shake, then part ways.

I reach the second floor, and since everyone is busy with the pretentious assholes, I don't encounter any of the invitees. But there are definitely guards and cameras, which is why I'm pretending to go to the bathroom.

Once I'm there, however, I hop on the sink and remove the vent cover, jump into the airway, and close it behind me. I'm slim enough to fit. Once I'm inside the tight space, I breathe deeper and start crawling.

You're going to be all right, Mia.

This is not that place from ten years ago.

You're just serving justice for Niko.

I'm so close to relapsing into my illogical panic, but I don't. It takes me about five minutes to get to the other end. By the time I reach my destination, I've inhaled more dust than a vacuum and I'm sweating like a pig.

I slowly open the vent cover and once I listen in to make sure there's no one in this bathroom, I maneuver my way out until I land on the sink, then jump to the floor.

Phase one. Done.

Maya should've gotten to the other side by now. She doesn't need to do any jumping or crawling. Nor can I ever convince her to 'lower' her 'sublime' status.

She probably just needs to flirt with a guard if she encounters one.

I tap my mask to make sure it's in place, then check my reflection in the mirror, smooth my hair, and dust my dress. Once I'm satisfied with my look, I exit the men's bathroom. Anyone could walk in and ask what I'm doing here, but oh well, even if I'm caught, I'll pretend that I got here by mistake.

All I have to do is reach the control panel at the corner and activate the timer.

The moment I'm out the door, the hair on the back of my neck stands on end.

However, before I can turn around and inspect the source of the intrusion, I'm pushed back inside the bathroom with a blinding force.

I'm too disoriented to focus, let alone try to stop the inhuman, raw power I'm handled with.

My back hits the wall and I groan, then lift my hand, ready to flip whoever it is a thousand fingers while kicking them.

All my plans come to a halt when my gaze clashes with dark-blue eyes.
Familiar eyes.

The eyes of my enemy and the target of my revenge.

Landon fucking King.

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MIA

This isn't part of the plan.

In fact, it's so far away from the plan that I can hear meticulously laid-out scenarios crash like broken china.

I'm standing in front of none other than *the* Landon King. A charming god, a genius sculptor, and, most importantly, an insufferable bastard.

His hand squeezes my upper arm, pressing it against the wall with a power that renders me immobile.

My lips clamp together even as condensation covers the interior of the mask. Sweat trickles in the valley between my breasts and glues the dress to my back.

Any attempts to control my breathing end in epic failure. The air coming through my mask's nostril openings wraps a noose around my neck—suffocating, nefarious, and as dangerous as the eyes staring down at me.

They're all that's visible beneath his white Venetian carnival mask that's decorated with elegant golden lines. On other people, it would look tame, welcoming even, but on this man, it's nothing short of a horror scene.

One distinctive feature gives him away. The eyes.

They're a dark, shiny blue, like an ocean that's twinkling under the silver moonlight. Deep, mysterious, and...deadly.

I've heard so much about Landon, but this is the first time I've believed he's a lethal danger whose path I shouldn't cross. Unless I'm in the mood to be drowned in his ocean so fast that no one will find a trace of me.

Too bad for him, I'm the type who likes swimming in open water.

I let my hand fall to my side, abandoning the flipping-off idea, but I lift my chin. I've been so looking forward to kicking this asshole in the face that I'm barely holding on.

Yes, his appearance has ruffled my plan, but it's far from ruined. I just need to abandon his eyesore company and go on about my business.

"Care to explain what your insignificant presence is doing here?" His suave British accent echoes in the empty space like a lullaby.

This is what I've hated about the bastard ever since I met him that one time when he was vandalizing my cousin's car. He has a natural way of sounding haughtily elegant while delivering cold-blooded threats.

I'm ninety percent sure he's emotionally checked out and has no link whatsoever with the human side of himself. And while I don't give two fucks about his relationship with his feelings, it makes it tricky to deal with him.

My cousin Killian is in the same category and possesses the emotional IQ of a goldfish, but at least he likes me, so I don't have to be on guard when facing him.

The same can't be said about Landon.

Not only does he not like me, but he also wouldn't hesitate to teach me a lesson just to get back at Kill and Niko.

His fingers tighten on my arm and I swallow the wince before it manages to pass through my lips. Dad always taught me to never show weakness in front of enemies, even when I'm in pain, even if every fiber of my being demands to release it.

Some monsters get off on your reaction to pain more than the fact that they're inflicting it, so never put yourself in a position where you're someone's source of entertainment.

My father's words echo in my head as I stare back at the monster of the day.

What? There have been so many of them in my life that I've stopped counting.

"I asked you a question." He squeezes again until pain pulses all over my arm. "Where's your answer?"

Fuck you, asshole.

But since I can't say that, or anything, actually, I just continue staring.

I could sign, but he'd figure out my identity immediately. Besides, it's not like he can understand me anyway.

So I purse my lips further and attempt to shake my arm from his grip.
Huge mistake.

His fingers dig in so hard, it's like he's attempting to break the bone.

My eyes widen. Wait...is that what he wants to do?

All of a sudden, he becomes taller and broader, nearly eating up the horizon with his build.

It's clear he has more height than me, but at this particular moment, he seems like a wall.

One that's covered by wires and glass shards. Was he always this muscular? Did his shoulders strain against his tailored tuxedo jacket a minute ago?

Or maybe I'm just becoming super aware of his presence to the point of hyperfixation.

Landon is a tall man, at least six-foot-four, with a lean, muscled body and a perfectly straight posture. To make things worse, those superior physical traits are topped by his natural charisma.

He carries himself with frightening assurance and a blinding ego. He's frustratingly confident, antagonistic to the point of bagging enemies everywhere he goes, and has an arrogance that could bring Narcissus to tears.

But there's another side of him I'm currently discovering.

He's...frightening.

And I don't mean in the way some wannabes try to look scary. He doesn't puff his chest out or raise his voice. He doesn't try to be terrifying by modifying anything in his demeanor.

All he has to do is let his true colors show through. The long fingers of his free hand wrap around his mask and he casually lifts it.

The moment I see the entirety of his face, my theory becomes fact. All Landon had to do was remove the mask so the real him could shine through.

His face is logically gorgeous, model-like in its symmetry. He has a high, straight nose, defined cheekbones, and a jaw so sharp, it could cut through stone.

Illogically, however, he didn't reveal his face to charm me into anything. It's a weapon he's using with the purpose of pure intimidation.

He willingly revealed his identity so that it's clear who has the upper hand here—him, the leader of the Elites and the host of the event at which I'm a mere invitee.

“Let’s try again. Who are you and what are you doing in the men’s room?”

My gaze meets his. Unwavering. Unblinking.

No fear, and certainly no change in demeanor, just because his face—that he doesn’t deserve, I might add—is in view.

“You refuse to speak, is that it?”

I nod once.

“I see,” he muses and eases his grip on my arm.

Is he letting me go?

I cast him a doubtful glance, but there doesn’t seem to be any malicious intent in his eyes.

They’re neutral. Amicable, even.

My heartbeat slowly returns to normal despite my alerted state.

Then, all of a sudden, something happens.

It’s so fast and fleeting, I would’ve missed it if I’d believed in the fake safety he offered and dropped my guard.

In a heartbeat, he reaches for my mask, openhanded, as if he’s about to suffocate me.

I don’t think as I push his palm at the last second and it ends up on my breast.

My chest heaves and the weight of his hand on my breast makes it worse.

Instead of backing off, a smirk tugs on the corner of his lips and he squeezes the flesh over my dress. “So this whole charade was an invitation? You girls sure come up with the most creative ways to get my attention. Are you up for it here, where anyone can walk in and see you getting fucked senseless like a dirty, *dirty* girl?”

For a moment, I’m stunned into silence. Partly because no one’s talked to me like that in the past.

No one’s dared to.

I’m Mia Sokolov. The daughter of Kyle Hunter and Rai Sokolov. If anyone ever dared touch me and say those words to me, I would punch them to another planet. My parents would find them and have their balls for breakfast.

Don’t even get me started on my brother. He’d resurrect them and slaughter them all over again.

In my stupefaction, his hand slides down my hip and over my ass cheek before he squeezes it and slams me against his front.

A wordless gasp falls from my lips as my stomach rubs against his semi-hard erection.

My temperature rises with pure fucking rage.

How dare he...? How fucking...

I don't think about it as I try to lift my knee and kick him in the balls.

Before I can do that, however, he tightens his grip on my ass, giving me no wiggle room whatsoever.

"Easy there, mouse. While I'm rather open to wrestling, I'm not sure you can take me on."

I'm going to take you to meet your fucking maker, asshole.

I attempt to slip sideways, but it's impossible to get rid of his fingers that are digging into my ass.

"You're a silent little thing." He grabs my other ass cheek with the hand he's holding his mask in. "You did your research, didn't you? I love them mute."

That's it.

I rein in my temper and let my body relax in his hold, willingly turning molten in his arms.

Then I lift a hand and stroke my index finger down his cheek to his jaw, slowly, flirtatiously.

His smirk widens and he doesn't seem to mind the touch.

That's it, psycho. Let your dick lead you like every other idiot.

I pull on his bottom lip, trying my best not to focus on the way he's taking the liberty of grabbing me.

He thinks I'm seducing him, but I'm just erasing that damn smirk so he'll stop looking like Lucifer's lost heir.

He strokes my ass and I resist the tingles that explode down my spine. I get on my tiptoes so that my mask-covered face is a few inches from his and then I punch him.

In the nose.

As hard as I can.

Damn. That hurts!

The motion is sudden enough that he freezes.

I use the surprise element to push against him, release myself, and run out the door.

Despite being disoriented and hot from the bastard's touch, I don't stop to look behind me. Not even for a second.

In fact, I run as fast as I can in case he's following me.

Even though I don't detect any steps, I don't let my guard down and keep running until I reach the control panel.

My heart nearly jumps from my throat, but I breathe deeply and push the button. I have no doubt that Maya succeeded.

Just as I expected, the timer goes on.

I go back through the garden—my plan B. There's no way in hell I'm returning to that bathroom, where Landon can ambush me again.

Note to self: Never be alone with the bastard.

He's a damn pervert, and a persistent one at that.

It takes me longer to return to the main hall, but I arrive at the back of the partygoers just in time.

After I join Maya, she signs, "What the hell took you so long? I was getting worried."

"A small complication, but don't worry, it was absolutely nothing."

I don't believe my words, even as I sign them.

That definitely wasn't nothing. It was everything but nothing. My body still tingles with both frustration and rage.

"What do you mean there was a complication?" Maya hisses under her breath. "What happened?"

I place a finger to my mouth when none other than Landon walks to the stage and taps his glass of champagne with a spoon.

Just in time.

He's wearing his mask, but it doesn't matter. After our encounter just now, I've developed the useless power to recognize the asshole from a mile away.

"Thank you for coming to our party," he starts in his suave, elegant voice that could be mistaken for a politician's.

That gorgeous British accent is lost on him. Just saying.

"We're delighted to open the Elites' doors for the people we consider VIPs. Tonight, we're going to have a personal meet and greet with yours truly, the man and the legend, Landon King."

Barf.

"He sounds and looks edible," Maya signs. "Too bad he's a dick."

“What’s taking so long?” I sign back as the crowd goes wild for the potential future cult leader.

Did I somehow not click the right button in my haste? I was temporarily out of my mind after the bastard touched what he had no business touching.

No, I’m sure I did...

He raises his glass. “To the Elites.”

“To the Elites,” everyone else echoes.

Just then, the gates of hell open and pour right on top of him. Pig blood bathes Landon and his glass of champagne in an instant, turning him into a messy goo of ugliness right in front of the people who worship at his feet.

A collective gasp overtakes the crowd. I laugh behind my mask.

Take that, prick. You’ll learn not to mess with me or my family ever again.

People and security rush to the stage, and Maya tugs on my hand. “Time to go.”

I chance one last look behind me just to see the asshole looking like a fool, but he’s already removed the mask and his eyes meet mine.

A wide grin lifts his lips, looking even more terrifying when he’s covered in all the blood.

He does the universal ‘I’m watching you’ sign, and I don’t know why I run the fastest I ever have.

MIA

“**Y**ou didn’t answer me.” Nikolai’s voice booms in the room as he nudges me with a foot.

I lose balance, but I go back into position and don’t open my eyes.

Anyone with any form of common sense would leave me to meditate in peace, but my brother and common sense have been fighting each other for his entire life.

He pushes me again, and this time, I fall to my ass and start to glare up at him, but I startle when I find him in my face.

Literally.

He’s leaning so low, the bent position appears creepy at worst and awkward at best.

My brother is a year older than Maya and me, but he couldn’t look any different. Where we take after our mom and her identical twin sister, he takes after Dad. They share the chameleon eye shade of turquoise blue, some of the same body structure, and dark hair—though my brother wears his long.

It’s currently tied in a low ponytail at his nape, which highlights his unwelcoming, grim face. I love my brother, and he’s actually handsome, but you have to look past his usual manic expression to see that.

Also, he’s shirtless ninety percent of the time—now included. And that puts all his hedonistic, scary tattoos on display for the world to see.

Add the fact that he’s quite buff, and you have the perfect recipe for a disaster waiting to happen.

It doesn't help that he was brought up as the mafia heir for my parents' positions in the New York Bratva.

At times, he's like a psycho with a license to beat, maim, and even kill. Other times, he's just my brother who used to take me and Maya for ice cream and defend us in front of a deadly stray dog.

"I'm still waiting for an answer," he repeats his earlier words.

I can't help glancing at the bandage covering the base of his neck.

That's the reason I bathed that asshole Landon in pig blood a few days ago, and I would do it all over again in a heartbeat.

"I'm still waiting," Nikolai says again in his usual gruff, but now completely irritable voice. I swear he has the patience of a toddler.

"For what?" I sign, wearing my innocent face. "And rude, by the way. Didn't I tell you not to bother me when I'm meditating?"

"Blah fucking blah. You're not deflecting." He gets even closer so that I'm breathing mint off his breath. "Where did you take your sister the other night, and why were you laughing like evil maniacs after you came back? I know an adrenaline rush when I see it, and you two definitely had one. So out with it."

I play with the dozen blue ribbons in my hair, pretending to fix them. "What makes you think I took her somewhere? Maybe she's the one who took me."

"She's malicious, but you're the brains behind every disaster you two plan. I don't have all day, Mia. What the fuck did you do, and do I have to maim someone?"

I point a proud thumb at myself. "Your baby sister took care of it. Just rest assured, Niko."

He narrows his eyes and it looks maniacal, scarily so. He's not the type to be deterred from his inquiries, especially when Maya and I are involved.

Besides, although we live in a flat close to the mansion where he resides with the Heathens, he doesn't have access to us all day long.

Yes, there are bodyguards, but Maya and I made it clear that they were only for outside and would never come inside the house. Or, God forbid, follow us around.

We were unlucky the other day, because when we came back, we found Nikolai waiting for us.

He definitely didn't believe our lie that we were with friends. One, we don't have those. People have always been either scared or wary of us, so

Maya and I became each other's best friend.

My sister has a huge following on social media and is in a clique with people who are similar to her, but even she wouldn't call them friends. She used to be super close with our nanny when we were growing up, and she often called her a friend, but that ended after the nanny left the state to be with her family.

Two, despite my and Maya's abilities to come up with an imaginary scenario on the spot and finish each other's lies effortlessly, Nikolai has been with us all our lives, and while he likes to pretend he can't differentiate between us when we dress the same, he actually can.

He can also tell when we're acting.

"What happened that night, hmm?" he asks, completely undeterred by my answer. "And don't tell me nothing, because I call bullshit."

"It's really nothing," I sign with a sweet smile.

I learned early on that I have a cute face. Maya does everything to make hers sexy. I'm using this shit to my benefit.

If you're cute and you smile, people will easily fall for your charms.

I just have to appear gullible until I find the chance to kick or punch them in the face. Like I did to Landon King.

A shudder snakes down my spine at the image of his manic smile that night. I actually had a nightmare about his bloodied smirk and the 'I'm watching you' sign.

He couldn't possibly know it was me. I never removed the mask, and I technically wasn't invited to that party.

My ally, the one who provided those invitations and let me in the Elites' mansion, wouldn't sell me out.

In fact, Brandon, Landon's twin brother and my ally, sent me a picture of his brother covered in blood with a text.

Brandon: Did you do this?

Mia: If I say yes, would you hate me?

Brandon: No. I actually like you more now. I'm impressed.

Mia: You're not mad that I used the invitations you gave me to do this?

Brandon: Not really. I figured you were up to no good when you asked for them.

Mia: What if you get in trouble with your brother?

Brandon: I know how to deal with him. Don't worry.

So it was a win on all accounts. I get to keep my fresh, new, and completely unsure friendship with Bran, and I also got revenge for what his psycho brother did to mine.

Still, I've been unconsciously watching my surroundings the past couple of days, expecting Landon to jump me from behind.

Or worse—drag me into some dark corner, where I would definitely be defenseless.

“Okay.” Nikolai rises to his full height.

“Okay?” I repeat in sign language, not sure if I heard him correctly.

“Yeah, okay. You and Maya can have it your way.” He tilts his head to the side. “In exchange, I'm adding two more bodyguards, and everyone on your bodyguard team will be following your every move.”

I jump up and sign furiously, “You can't do that.”

“You'll see proof of me doing exactly that first thing in the morning.”

Oh crap.

If my brother says it's happening, it's definitely happening.

“Wait,” I sign and release a sigh. “Okay, we lied. I actually met with a new friend of mine I don't think you'd approve of, which is why we didn't tell you.”

“Name. Address. School.”

“Brandon King. He lives in the Elites' mansion, and he goes to REU.”

My brother pauses and his brows nearly reach his hairline. “Since when are you friends with someone from REU?”

“It just happened. You know, that time his brother, Landon, was bothering Kill and being rude, Brandon apologized on his behalf. Afterward, we played a game together and became friends.”

“Killian never told me this.”

“Not sure why.” Because Bran actually asked him to, I think. And since Killian was trying to get on Bran's good side so that he could date his sister, he kept quiet about the whole incident.

“So you're telling me you and Lotus...” he trails off and clears his throat. “And *Brandon* are friends.”

“Yeah. We meet for gaming and stuff. We keep kicking each other's butts. You should see it.”

“Maybe I should,” he murmurs under his breath.

“Does that mean you're okay with it?”

His bemused state completely disappears, and he narrows his eyes. “Absolutely not. You’re not to get involved with anyone in the Elites.”

“But he’s really different, Niko. He’s so nice and such a gentleman.”

“Oh?”

“Totally! And he’s nothing like his tool of a brother, Landon.”

“So you and Maya were with Brandon that night?”

I nod.

“Where? In their mansion?”

“No. They had some sort of party there, so we met in a gaming café and played for a while.”

“Maya. In a gaming café? The nerd hotspot, as she calls it?”

Shit. I miscalculated that.

Maya wouldn’t step foot inside one of those places with her cheapest heel.

“She wanted to meet Bran because I’ve been telling her so much about him.”

“So much about him,” he repeats in a mysterious tone.

“Yeah. She totally likes him.” Now, I have to actually introduce Maya and Bran. Yikes. They probably won’t get along.

Nikolai fetches my phone from the floor and hands it over. “Call him.”

I jerk. “What?”

“You said you’re friends and spend time together. That means you have his number, no?”

I nod.

“Then call him. I want to verify your story.”

I open my phone and type furiously. “This is ridiculous. Do you have that little faith in me? It’s like you don’t believe me.”

“I don’t,” he says point-blank. “Call him.”

“He’s not used to me calling him.”

“I’m sure he won’t mind it this once since he’s so *nice* and such a *gentleman*.” I don’t miss the way he stresses the words I mentioned.

Ah, crap.

I try to buy as much time as possible as I scroll to find Bran’s name while hoping Maya will pop in here already.

She’s always invading my space, but not this time. She’s probably hiding so Niko won’t grill her for answers. The little traitor.

When I take longer than necessary, Nikolai snatches my phone and types 'Bran' in the search bar. When the only contact with that name appears, he presses Call and hits the speaker button.

My heart nearly hits the floor as the ringing sound echoes in the air.

Don't answer.

Don't answer.

Please.

Please—

"Hello?" Bran's slightly husky voice sounds in the air as if he was woken up from a nap. "Mia? Are you okay with calling?"

I release a deep breath and catch a glimpse of my brother giving me the side-eye.

The horror.

"Mia?" Bran sobers up. "Is something wrong? Make any form of noise if you need help—"

"It's her brother, Nikolai."

Bran goes silent for a few tense beats and I nearly piss myself. This is going too bad too fast.

"Right." Bran clears his throat and sounds detached, cold, even. "What can I help you with?"

"My sister tells me she spent the night with you three days ago."

"Spent the night with me?"

"Is that not the case?"

Damn Niko. He makes it sound as if I slept with him or something.

"We met, but she didn't spend the night with me in that sense."

Yes, Bran. Thank you.

"What were you doing?"

"I'm sure you can ask your sister that."

"I did, and I'm trying to decide whether or not I'll lock her up based on your reply."

Silence again.

Poor Bran is being dragged into an unfair situation that he didn't agree with.

"We played a few games," he replies casually.

"Where?"

"In a gaming café."

"Which one?"

“The only one on the island. Play Dungeon.”

“With who?”

“Alone.”

I nearly stagger. He did everything right, as if I’d told him all the details, but he missed on the last one.

“Alone,” Nikolai repeats with a sly smirk.

“Yes. We were the only ones who played. Maya was there, but she was too preoccupied with her phone most of the time.”

My man.

I’m totally buying Bran the new *League of Legends* merch.

“If there isn’t anything else…” Bran trails off and then hangs up.

I smile at my brother triumphantly and sign, “It’s not good to distrust your own siblings. We need to work on these bad habits, Niko.”

“You’ll stay away from that bunch of little fuckers.” He pushes the phone against my chest. “Brandon included.”

And then he leaves. Gee. Talk about pissed off.

But oh well. This is still a win.

Now, I need to thank Bran personally and hope—no, pray—I never see his psycho brother again.

MIA

Since meditation in the house is virtually impossible, I had to come up with an alternative.

The chess club downtown.

We have a chess club in The King's U, but they don't provide me with a challenge anymore. Besides, I might have kicked the club's president in the shin for calling Maya an attention whore.

So what if she likes to dress up and show off her body? It's none of his damn business.

As is obvious by now, I don't react well to people hurting or bad-mouthing my family. Besides, that damn president knows shit about our lives and the type of pressure and danger we've had to navigate through since we were kids.

Maya is an independent girl who loves dressing up and showing off her beauty. She definitely wasn't looking for that scum's attention.

Naturally, I was blacklisted from the club, despite being the best they had. Anyway, I was able to join the local chess club a few weeks ago after seeing a few flyers outside our dorm building.

There are some decent older players, but many of them come to gossip, as if it's some sort of knitting club.

Anyhow, since chess and meditation help me quiet down my demons, this is my last resort.

I also love looking after plants, but I've been hesitant to have any here. It'd feel like I'm cheating on my pretty flowers back home.

Point is, I really can't get myself kicked out again or I'm in trouble. In my family, I can only play chess with Gareth, but he's busy with studies lately.

I walk down the street, ignoring the looks everyone gives me. Today, I went back to my signature look—an ample black dress with a fluffy tulle skirt, chunky boots with chains, and matching ribbons in my hair. Oh, and killer blue-mirror sunglasses.

What? It makes me feel like the villain.

Many call this a goth look, but, really, it's not. Nor is it my Satan worshiper look—I'm out of that loser's league. I also don't wear black makeup. In fact, my only makeup is pink lipstick and mascara. If I'm in the mood for mayhem, like that day in the Elites' mansion, I add bold eyeliner.

I love being cute and deadly. It's my strength.

Once I'm inside, I remove my sunglasses and wave at the club's president. The other members look up, but upon seeing me, they either go back to their gossiping or their games.

Oh well.

Somehow, they figured out my origins and won't touch me with a ten-foot pole. They rarely talk to me either.

The only one who does is the president himself. He's usually my partner in the game as well. At my wave, he slowly stands from his sitting position by the reception and advances toward me.

Mr. Whitby is a nice old man with white hair, sagging wrinkles, and an impeccable posture for someone his age.

"How are you today, Ms. Sokolov?"

I do the okay sign that he understands by now. Everything else, I have to write in my phone's notes app.

After I type out my reply, I show him. "I told you to call me Mia. Just Mia."

He nods as the most perfect English gentleman I've ever seen. After my dad—who has a British accent but comes from a very complicated ancestry.

The only difference is that Mr. Whitby doesn't kill people for a living like Dad.

The old man smiles faintly. "I'm sorry I can't stay around for today's game. I have an urgent errand to tend to."

Oh.

“I’m sure one of the others would be thrilled to play against a bright young lady such as yourself.”

No, they won’t.

Mr. Whitby faces the other members. “Anyone?”

I hang my head. Seems no meditation or chess are on the table today. I do need to purge this energy before it consumes me, though.

This morning, I caught myself standing in front of the mirror, opening and closing my mouth. The disturbing part wasn’t looking like a haunted, mentally-damaged goldfish. It’s the fact that I haven’t done that for years.

After I stopped talking at the age of eight, I tried to speak a few years later by standing in front of the mirror and opening and closing my mouth, attempting to turn the noises I sometimes release into words, but that only made me cry and even pushed me into a panic attack.

So I stopped altogether.

I’m just under a lot of stress lately or I wouldn’t have done that today. It could also be because of the nightmares—

“I’ll play against her.”

My spine jerks and that familiar chill snakes to the bottom of my tight belly.

It can’t be.

I must be imagining things.

I don’t turn around to the source of the voice, though.

If I pretend I didn’t hear it, that means it didn’t happen. Who knows? Maybe my ears are catching up to my tongue and are also becoming dysfunctional.

A shadow stops in front of me, and this time, I do raise my head. My audible gasp nearly chokes me as my eyes clash with none other than Landon fucking King’s.

For the second time in my life, I’m speechless. No, I’m stunned. Everything about this man is unsettling and none of his charm is able to camouflage it.

It’s unfair that he always looks as if he jumped right off of a runway or out of a brand commercial. A crisp white button-down is tucked into his tailored black slacks, highlighting his sculpted waist. There’s an effortless elegance in the way he carries himself, highlighted by a sharp presence and a sardonic smirk.

Unlike a few days ago, a slight stubble covers his cutting jaw, giving him a subtle ruthless edge.

The bastard sure knows how to use the weapons that are at his disposal. Beauty, style, and infuriating charm.

He cocks his head to the side, and the same grin from the other night curls his lips. Provocative, sinful, but most importantly, dangerous.

“Landon.” Mr. Whitby clutches his shoulder in a friendly greeting. “Long time no see.”

Long time no see? *Long time no fucking see?*

Please don't tell me this bastard is a member of this club.

“Frank,” Landon greets the president with the familiarity of close acquaintances, his smile subtly switching to appear welcoming. “I missed this place and the people in it, so I thought I'd pay a visit.”

Everyone, and I mean every single one in the hall, either smiles or stands up to surround the freak in a close-knit circle.

The women basically fight for his attention, and he acts like some sort of celebrity. Unlike a celebrity, however, he knows all their names and compliments one lady on her new haircut, another on her flattering glasses, and another on her cardigan. He also greets the men in a bro kind of way, and they all nod enthusiastically.

You've got to be kidding me.

I watch the show with my mouth agape. This must be what Bran meant by “You've never seen Lan in action. He can be the most charming or the deadliest depending on his mood and goals.”

Now, I see it. The other side of Landon that I've only heard about but never had the misfortune to witness.

He captures people's attention with ease. It's clear that he's a natural at this and can't possibly be challenged at his own game, let alone beaten.

The worst part is that people flock to his presence with the suicidal tendencies of a moth to a flame. In no time, I'm the only one who's standing outside the circle, an outcast through and through.

Mr. Whitby clears his throat and manages to break the circle from around Landon.

Suddenly, I'm back in Prince Not-So-Charming's field of vision. Somewhere I definitely don't want to be after I single-handedly destroyed his party the other night.

“All right, everyone,” Mr. Whitby says. “Landon came to play, so how about we let him do that?”

The man of the hour, as he probably thinks of himself, slides his attention to me while still wearing a destabilizing grin that could rival a serial killer’s.

“Landon, this is Mia.” Mr. Whitby motions at me. “She’s unable to speak, but she can hear you just fine. If she needs to communicate, she’ll write you a note on her phone. Oh, and she happens to be the best I’ve played in chess after you.”

Did he just say *after you*?

Mr. Whitby, I was just building you an English gentleman shrine in my head, but how dare you place me after this asshole?

“After me, huh?” Landon echoes, and I swear a light glows in his eyes, making them brighter and more sadistic.

“Yes. She’s such an intelligent young lady and a formidable opponent. I wish I could stay to watch you two play.”

“Now, I’m intrigued.” The bastard, who definitely doesn’t resemble Bran in anything but looks, smiles again. How could he make something as simple as a smile drip with unhealthy charm and satanic voodoo?

I reluctantly sit at the vacant table in the corner. The biggest part of me wants to flee and reconsider devil worshiping to curse the man in front of me, but if I do that, it’ll only look suspicious.

Besides, there’s no way Landon knows I’m the one who humiliated him in front of his pretentious wannabes.

Still, my movements are stiff as I sit opposite him. So much for relaxing and shutting down my mind.

It’s safe to say this whole situation is failing sideways.

I busy myself with pushing the white pieces exactly in the middle of the tiles.

“We meet again.”

I slowly lift my head, only for my gaze to crash with his sardonic one and that taunting smirk at the corner of his lips.

Keeping my expression the same, I type on my phone, “Who are you again?”

The moment he sees the words, he bursts out laughing. “You’re an interesting little mouse.”

“My name is Mia,” I type and show him.

“Mouse is a more accurate description. You love going unnoticed and leaving crumbs of havoc, no?”

Fuck this asshole.

What are the chances of me kicking him and not being thrown out by the fanboys and fangirls currently watching us from their seats?

Also, does this mean he suspects me?

Still, even if he does, he has no proof and, therefore, can't accuse me of anything.

I push my first pawn and stare at him. He stares right back as he glides his own pawn across the tiles. “I must say, you have above-average acting skills.”

I raise a brow.

“To be able to meet me and stay calm and even pretend you don't know me should earn you a round of applause.”

I type and show him, “I don't know what you're talking about. Did we meet? When? In your dreams, maybe?”

“My dreams?”

“Wow. I was really in your dreams? I know I'm pretty, but you can stop drooling.”

His lips twitch. “Someone is certainly drooling here, but it's not me. And no, we didn't meet in my dreams. I'd have to give a fuck about you to allow you access to my subconscious, and I'm not known to do that. We did, however, meet when I ruined your cousin's car.”

“Doesn't ring a bell.”

“How about when you called me a fucking tool, then proceeded to teach me how to curse in sign language when I called you a mute? Do you remember that?”

My blood boils at the reminder and I'm tempted to flip him off again just because, but, instead, I move another pawn and then type, “No. I meet a lot of tools in my life and it's impossible to remember all of them. Good for you for having a strong memory for useless encounters, though.”

There. K.O. The best way to get back at egotistical jerks with a god complex like Landon? Make them feel like they mean nothing.

“Hmm.” His gaze slides from the phone to my face. “And here I thought I would apologize for the mute remark, but it turns out, there's no need.”

I narrow my eyes but quickly conceal it. The damn prick nearly trapped me.

What is he playing at? Apologizing? People like him don't apologize. If they do, they don't mean it.

And if they do mean it, there's an ulterior motive.

"Since you have a memory lapse." He wraps his fingers around the bishop's neck and meets my gaze. "I don't suppose you've been around my place lately, no?"

"I don't even know where your place is," I type.

"Funny." He leans forward. "Because I saw footage of my brother inviting you over."

Shit.

"Oh! I didn't know it was your place." I smile sweetly as I show him my phone.

"Just like you didn't possibly suspect that my identical twin—who literally looks like a copy of me—might be, I don't know, my twin?"

"I did suspect it when I met you just now, but it's rude to talk about someone's family, don't you think?" I smile again as I knock off his knight.

Guess someone will be right after me today, not the other way around.

"It is, which is why I prefer not to show footage of your twin sister making a fool of herself with one of my guards that night."

I freeze, my cheeks turning into hot flames.

"That's right, mouse. I know both of you trespassed on my property and bathed me in pig blood. Now that we've gotten the dull pleasantries out of the way, shall we discuss that further?"

LANDON

I've never played well with others.

Yes, I might use my charm, but it's only so I can gain a favor here, a connection there, and a shag everywhere.

It's by no means to gather superfans and dreamy-eyed girls.

In fact, I've only ever played with others so they'd fall into the exact spot on the chessboard where I want them to be.

Force is for brutes who don't have the capacity to use their head. And while I relish the occasional bursts of violence, it's not truly my *modus operandi*.

Trapping a certain mouse in a corner, however, definitely is.

The insolent, insignificant little troublemaker who managed to bathe me in blood in my own house sits opposite me in a position that's an excellent imitation of a Greek statue.

Or, on second thought, maybe a Roman one. Those are more stilted and pack more of a punch in the details.

One difference, though—her eyes. They tell a different story from her posture. The muted blue is worlds apart from mine, nearly explosive in its color. Fierce, too, like a volcano that's buried in the depths of the ocean.

While it might remain dormant for years, it'll bring on a deadly tsunami the moment it erupts.

Or maybe they're the color of deep-blue wildflowers. Crushed by harsh nature but defiant. Proud and pretty yet temporary.

Her skintight dress offers a modest view of the curved slope of her round tits. Add the illegal amount of ribbons and the glasses on top of her

heads, and she looks like one of Satan's favorite fangirls.

A goth Barbie without the pretentious makeup.

The rook remains suspended in midair as if the world has hit Pause.

Only, it hasn't. And I get to watch the intriguing change in her expression from arrogance to absolute horror.

Taking my time to fully investigate the incident these past couple of days was worth it. I could've gone a completely different route with this—which would have included violence and newsworthy mayhem. And while the thrill would've been enjoyable for a few seconds, it wouldn't have lasted. And it certainly wouldn't compare to the picturesque scene in front of me.

Plump pink lips, slightly parted, revealing a hint of perfectly white teeth. Rosy cheeks and neck. Eyes so stunned, I'm wondering if she can even still see me.

In conclusion, this round is a checkmate to yours truly.

"Hello?" I wave a casual hand in front of her face. "Are you still there, mouse?"

She blinks once...

Twice...

I see the exact moment she goes in for the attack. It's like when she had the audacity to hit me under my own roof. The only difference is that she's less guarded now and doesn't seem to be contemplating the option of amateurish seduction.

She balls her fist, but before she can punch me, I grab it in my palm and effortlessly twist it to the side.

"That's not very wise, now, is it? We both know I'm stronger than you and could squash you like an insignificant insect if I choose to, so don't let me choose to."

Her face contorts with either pain or rage—I'm not sure which. Hopefully, it's both.

I love watching people flounder in a pool of their spineless emotions before they wither and drown.

As rumor has it, I'm nothing less than a gorgeous anarchist with a penchant for sadism.

"We'll negotiate my terms now, shall we?" I drop her hand and it's only after I release her that I register how small that hand is. In fact, all of her is,

from her tiny nose to her petite features. She's not short, but she's not that tall either.

A height that can comfortably fit in a casket.

Crikey. I've done it again.

Imagining people dead. If I get to witness her funeral, I vote for her eyes to be kept open. So what if it creeps everyone else out? As long as I get to enjoy it, the world can piss off.

The softness doesn't fool me, though. Despite her delicate appearance, this girl has over-the-top tendencies and has proven to possess balls bigger than some men.

The moment the little mouse is free, she signs furiously, her cheeks turning red with unmistakable rage. One of the perks of my genius neurons is being proficient in languages and picking them up from a very young age. I speak five fluently and a dozen more at different levels. Sign language, however, never really crossed my radar.

I don't understand a thing Mia is trying to communicate, but I smile and nod anyway. "I gather from your expression that you're not happy about the sharp turn of events. I'll find the capacity to empathize when I find some fucks to give."

She lowers her hand to the table and forces a breath in. It appears staggeringly ineffective and worse than a child's attempt to remain calm.

With a dramatic huff, she punches her phone's screen with nails that are painted blue—like her ribbons and sunglasses.

"Easy, tiger," I repeat what I told her the night she dared to provoke me and promptly signed her death certificate. "It's not the phone's fault you're losing in epic fashion."

She thrusts the phone in my face. "If you dare hurt my sister, I'll slice your throat and hang you out to dry by the balls."

My attention shifts from the text to her when she slides her forefinger along her translucent neck that would look ethereal with a few marks. Then she squashes something imaginary—presumably my balls—in her palm and points at me.

I can feel my smile broadening as I connect my forefinger with hers. "Is this some telepathic method?"

She jerks her hand away and flips me the middle finger while wearing a sickeningly sweet smile.

One that's meant to look not only fake but also forced.

Interesting.

Seems that Mia Sokolov has no qualms about provoking me for the fuck of it.

Seems that I've stumbled across someone who's not particularly receptive of my godly personality and immaculate charm.

Then again, she wouldn't have bathed me in blood if she were.

She plays her rook, and I block it with my queen, then place an elbow on the table and lean my head against my fist. "I'm curious."

She types, "About how to be a better person? I can help with pointers."

"Don't be ridiculous. No one is curious about something that dull, and you're far from being the person to provide any pointers." I push my queen forward and she narrows her eyes at the unexpected move. "What I am curious about, however, is the reason behind your attack."

Her features contort in an "Are you kidding me?" expression before she shakes her head with a huff. It looks as patronizing as a teacher who's fed up with her problematic student.

Her attitude is eerily similar to my sister Glyndon's whenever she tells me how done she is with my antics. But since I'm about to be twenty-four and she's only nineteen, I get older-brother privileges.

And I'm the second King grandchild to roam the earth. Each is a different superpower in its own right.

"What?" I tap my fingers against my lips. "If it's something I've done, you have to be more specific. I have no recollection whatsoever of my countless masterpieces. See, I have to delete some to leave space for the newer ones."

She reaches into her little dress that appears to be stolen from a gothic doll, retrieves what looks like a pen, and scribbles on the screen of her phone for longer than usual.

Her handwriting, if that's what it can be called, is tiny and messy, like a drunk ant that's trying to find its way home after a wild night out.

"You forgot about hurting my cousin Kill? Or kidnapping my brother, which directly resulted in his injury? How could you even kidnap my brother anyway? He's much bigger and stronger than you."

"Strength holds no importance when he was drugged. I slipped it in his vodka, and he was none the wiser. Word of advice, don't drink anything a stranger offers. But then again, your dear brother is a bit thick, isn't he?"

Her eyes blaze the color of hellfire. I counter it with a broad smile.

There's something intriguing about her murderous expression. Something I want to freeze into a stone.

Maybe transform her into one of my statues and stare at her spiky expression for eternity.

Huh.

That's actually the first time I've thought of sculpting someone into a statue just to stare at them. Usually, I'd imagine them as stone for the sole purpose of snuffing out their life.

"To clarify, your cousin Kill had the audacity to go after my sister—a sin I still haven't forgiven, mind you. As for your brother, he was part of a very elaborate plan that faced a few complications but still managed to be a fantastic success."

She starts to sign but then fists a hand on the table and scribbles with the other, "It couldn't have been as fantastic as punching you in the face and giving you a blood bath, asshole."

"Now, that's where you're wrong." I knock down her bishop and casually place it to the side. "Your attack the other night was directed at me, even though I've never targeted you."

She scribbles and shoves the phone in my face. "Targeting my family is no different from targeting me."

"I disagree. In fact, I see the assault as an invitation to a challenge, and I take my challenges very seriously, which is why the first step is to expose Maya as...easy, for lack of a better term."

She jerks up, both her fists balling and a vein in her neck popping with tension.

"Sit down before I decide that after her very public humiliation, I'll also fuck her and post the video for the world to see."

She lifts her fist as if she can punch me, but I continue staring her in the face. "Sit the fuck down, Mia."

Her lips purse, but she slowly lowers herself, even as her tiny frame shakes with her attempts to camouflage her reaction.

"What do you want?" she types on her phone.

"To be perfectly honest, I'm not sure yet. All I'm certain about is that I do want something in return for my nonconsensual blood bath and the punch that endangered my aristocratic nose."

She rolls her eyes. "You're an arrogant prick with not a decent bone in your body."

“I appreciate the unnecessary opinion, though it’s pointless when I lack the fucks to give. Also...” I grab her hand that’s holding out the phone, my fingers snaking over her tiny wrist. “You might want to stop calling me names and provoking me for sport, because you’re starting to look very much like a challenge, and that’s the last thing anyone wants to be when facing me.”

My fingers glide up her bare arm, and I can feel the shivers that break out on her skin, whether involuntary or not, I have no clue.

Usually, I only touch women with the intent of seducing them into my blood-favored world. I don’t intend to do that with this wild card.

Her destiny will see her broken against my edges. When I’m done with her, dust will be all that’s left of her bull-like determination and troublemaking confidence.

Deep powder-blue eyes spark with fire. If I were petrol, I’d be burned on the spot.

She holds my gaze the entire time. When I channel my malicious, intimidating energy, people usually cower away after a second or two.

Even though I wear the charming mask so well, it’s still a mask, and when I drop it, revealing the true entity of destruction lurking inside me, others avoid it—my family included.

Not Mia fucking Sokolov.

She stares me in the face with nothing short of a “Fuck you, how dare you threaten me?”

I seem to have forgotten that she is a mafia princess. She was probably fed pride, arrogance, and power in her baby formula.

All three will be smashed to pieces by yours truly.

The moment comes to an end when she snatches her hand away and types, “Show me your worst, asshole.”

My dick twitches against my trousers and I grin. Wide. So wide that Mia’s lips purse.

Lips that would look divine wrapped around my cock, trembling as I fuck her throat before I eventually smear them with my cum.

Well, well. I’m officially turned on by the little troublemaker.

“Are you sure? My worst can’t be stomached by the majority of society. Also...” I move my rook forward. “Checkmate.”

I stand up, and before she can study the board, where I already blocked all her exits, I’m beside her.

She smells of subtle magnolia imitating a breeze in the aftermath of freezing winter. I sink my fingers in the mass of her platinum blonde hair and ribbons, then push it aside to reveal her ear.

I lean forward, my lips finding the shell of her ear before I bite harshly, to the point that she jolts.

My dick thickens further, appreciating her reaction a bit too much. He's known to be whorish, but not this much. Besides, I'm not usually attracted to someone who poses a direct threat to me.

Another first. Interesting.

I release the shell of her ear and whisper, "Better close your windows at night. You never know what might crawl through them."

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MIA

A week later, I'm sitting with Bran in the game room in the Elites' mansion.

My relationship with this space is complicated at best. I love the vibe, but I'm not a fan of how big it is. Low red lighting casts a glow on our faces and around huge screens on the wall.

The chairs are comfortably massive, and sometimes, we opt to use the sofa so I can hit Bran whenever we're playing opposite each other.

He's competitive, but he's not a sore loser.

Me? I don't have sportsman spirit whatsoever. What? I don't take well to losing.

Bran, however, is a total angel, which is why it's no fun to win against him. It's impossible to penetrate his walls or talk shit to him.

Then again, it's easier to lose against him since he doesn't really rub his win in your face.

He's usually the only one who comes to this room since, I believe, he's the sole gamer in the house.

After numerous visits, I've come to the conclusion that many men live in this mansion—Bran, his two cousins, his friend, and, most importantly, the devil himself.

My blood roars at the thought of that bastard and his gloating "Checkmate" before he left me stunned in the club. But none of that was as horrifying as the absolute skin-crawling sensation I felt when he touched me.

Not only did he touch me, but he also *bit* me like some freaking dog.

The shell of my ear is still in flames from when his teeth sunk into it like a starved monster.

It hurt, damn it.

But the pain paled in comparison to the pure terror that shot through my veins.

Even the thought of him now makes my spine jerk and goosebumps erupt on my skin.

I don't succumb to threats, but his were different. His included a vibrant image of my sister being used for his revenge. Worse, my sister would be used as his response to my hotheadedness.

Maya didn't initially agree to the plan of giving the bastard a pig blood makeover, but she's also my ride-or-die and refuses to let me go on these sorts of missions alone.

I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if she were in danger because of me. Over the past week, I've been trying to protect her and told her to be careful, but she has little to no self-preservation skills and can't be left to her own devices.

Maya and Nikolai take so much after Mom's go-getter personality. They slam in headfirst—either they get their way or they die trying.

I've always been like my dad. Silent but deadly. Appears sophisticated but could kill you with a smile.

That sense of confidence, however, seems to have left the building since my ill-fated encounter with Landon.

Not only have I been over-the-top paranoid, but my sleep has been plagued by malicious nightmares from a time in my past that I can't seem to forget.

I haven't spoken to Mom and Dad for a while out of fear that they'll see right through me.

And it's all because of the bastard who hasn't made a move.

Every night, I've been staring at my window, expecting him to jump through and murder me.

But people like Landon don't murder. They prefer to leave you hanging, waiting, and scared for your life. They prefer the mental torture and looming threats.

"Are you sure he's not here?" I show the typed words to Bran as we sit down for a dinner break.

He's opposite me on the sofa as we dig into Thai food takeout.

We've both been playing since we finished our afternoon classes. We're worlds apart in majors—he's an art student and I'm studying business management since I've always wanted to start something that only belongs to me. Not my parents, not my legacy. Just something that's purely mine.

Bran says he should be in the art studio, but he's been succumbing to 'one more game' for the past two hours.

He chews on the mouthful of rice and shakes his head. "He's out wreaking havoc and ruining someone's—or some people's—lives. Why are you asking? Are you scared?"

"He should be the one who's scared after my pig blood episode." I don't even feel the confidence as I show him the words.

Bran merely sighs. "I told you it's not wise to get on his bad side."

I wince and throw a piece of tomato in my mouth to mask my reaction.

Bran did warn me when I asked him stuff about Landon's Elite party that night.

I cock my head to the side and study him closely. He's the spitting image of his asshole brother. But I guess it's the personality that makes all the difference.

Bran is such a posh boy and what I imagine a well-bred and educated English youth to be like. His eyes are welcoming pools of pure blue, his jaw appears less sharp than Landon's, and his lips are neutral and by no means a weapon of terrorizing grins.

Oh, and their only real physical difference is that Landon has a tiny mole at the corner of his right eye. A small detail that I noticed the first time I saw them together.

I remember thinking Landon needed to be brought down a peg or two, and I can proudly announce that I'm still of the same opinion.

Hell, maybe he should be locked up for the travesty.

It's impossible to mistake the two brothers for each other, and I don't think that has to do with my being an identical twin myself and, therefore, skilled in the business of differentiating.

The truth remains, one is always calm, and the other is the definition of a shit-stirrer.

Besides, I don't feel threatened in Bran's company, whereas I'm always in fight-or-flight mode in Landon's presence.

"What is it?" Bran asks when I continue watching him. "Is there something on my face?"

I type, "I was just thinking how different you guys are."

"Just like you and Maya are different, no?"

"She's not a psycho."

"Touché." He laughs and takes a sip of a ginger lemon soft drink. "Still, I'm impressed with what you did the other day."

Thanks, but it's backfiring and causing me so much stress.

"He said he'll make me pay," I type and then show him my phone.

Bran gauges my expression. "Did you by any chance...challenge him?"

"How do you know that?"

"You shouldn't have done that, Mia. It's the easiest way to get on his shit list."

"Well, he's also at the top of mine."

He smiles, but it's sad at best and pitiful at worst. "Confidence is good, but no one has ever been able to win against Landon after he sets his sights on them."

"There's always a first. But hypothetically speaking, how far can he go?"

"You already know what he did to Killian because he pissed him off and to your brother because he was merely part of his plan. What you don't know, however, is that he was probably behind the fire that destroyed half of the Heathens' mansion, just because they proved to be an annoyance."

My lips part and I scribble furiously. "I thought the Serpents did it."

"They did, but he's the one who supplied them with the information they needed. Then he sat back and watched the entire show unfold from the sidelines. He's that dangerous."

That freaking bastard. Either I'm going to kill him or he kills me. No in-between.

I stuff my face with food and swallow without much chewing. I choke and start coughing, the obstruction blocking my windpipe.

Brandon reaches over and pats my back, then offers me a bottle of water. I gulp half of it down and do the "Thanks" sign.

He understands some of the basic sign language, and he's really been putting an effort into learning more lately. That's how much of a good person he is.

"You okay?" His eyes dip at the corners with genuine worry.

Why aren't there two of him instead of that evil Landon?

“I’m fine. Thanks, Bran. Not only for this but also for covering my back with Niko the other day.”

He reads the words and I think I imagine a tic in his jaw before he nods. “I figured you could use some help.”

“But how did you know to answer correctly about Maya?”

“I suspected that if he was asking about her, then it regarded the two of you.”

“Smart.”

“I know, thanks.”

And there it is, a hint of his brother’s overwhelming arrogance. Though Bran’s is more subtle and definitely not overpowering.

“Were you in trouble with your brother?” he asks, looking at me from beneath his lashes.

“Nah. It was just Niko being Niko. He said not to get involved with you guys, considering the whole rivalry thing with the Heathens. He wasn’t hearing it when I told him you’re different, because he’s a hotheaded mule. Anyway, these games and meetings will have to be our secret wherever Niko is involved.”

His eyes flicker as he reads the text. “It’s not like I’m acquaintances with your brother, so you have nothing to worry about.”

Is it me or did he sound a bit too restrained just now?

“Bran!” A third presence barges through the gaming room door. “Have you seen my red Jordans? I swear to fuck one of these fuckers is hiding them and my lordship is going to break all hell loose...” He pauses upon seeing me and his expression transforms from annoyed to flirty. “Why, hello there. My day just got a whole lot better.”

“You were literally just threatening violence,” Bran retorts.

“Now, hush, Bran. Don’t be rude in front of the lady.” He offers me his hand and I shake it. “I’m Remington. Everyone calls me Remi, or your lordship for short. I have an aristocratic title and a fortune that can last for generations. May I know the name that goes with the beautifully graceful face?”

“Her name is Mia,” Bran says to him. “She can’t speak, but she can hear you just fine.”

Usually, people’s expressions either change to awkwardness, or most often pity, but this guy’s smile remains the same.

He's a bit taller than Bran and has a straight nose and an easygoing, pleasant presence. "Why have you been keeping such beauty to yourself, Bran? I thought we were friends."

"Leave her alone," Bran says. "You're not her type."

"Unless she's a lesbian, I'm everyone's type."

I smile and type, "I like this guy."

"See?" Remi says with glee. "I'm the model of every girl's dream man."

It's arrogance, but, again, it's not the same as Landon's.

Why the hell am I searching for a type of egoism that fits his?

It hits me then.

I'm trying to find arrogance that's not equally intimidating and terrifying. Obviously, it's an epic failure.

"Get over yourself," Bran says with a shake of his head.

"That would be such a waste to the universe. Anyway, what are you guys doing here? Can I join?"

"Do you game?" I show him my phone.

"More in real life since I'm a basketball god, just saying, but I do play with Bran sometimes when he's being a loner."

"Join us, then," I type, then smile when he reads it.

"That's not a good idea," Bran tells me. "He's loud and a hopeless amateur who blames the game for his failures."

"Hey. Show some respect, peasant."

"Aren't you supposed to find your shoes?" Bran asks. "Lan probably hid them to mess with you."

Remi's disgusted face must match mine. I knew I liked this guy. "That little fucker is always out for trouble. He needs to chill for a second."

"More like for a lifetime," Bran mutters under his breath.

Seems I'm not the only one who's done with Landon's shit. His own brother and friend don't seem pleased with him either.

I offer Remi some of my calamari. He accepts it and scoots a chair over.

"Has he always been like that?" I type and show it to them.

"For as long as I can remember," Remi says, stealing Bran's drink. "This one was always the pacifist, and Lan, the anarchist."

That's such a stark difference. Maya and I have our own personalities, but we're both troublemakers in our own ways.

"He doesn't fit into a mold, and he's extremely proud of his twisted, individualistic view of life." Bran stares in the distance as if he's reliving a

faraway memory. “He has antisocial tendencies that he tames enough to make him appear charming instead of threatening.”

“Tell me about it.” Remi sounds personally offended. “That little fuck keeps getting all the pretty ladies even though he has the attention span of a fly.”

“He’s a genius at what he does, so the girls make sense,” Bran says. “What doesn’t make sense is them knowing he refuses any form of commitment but still flocking toward him anyway.”

I type, “A genius at what he does?”

“He’s a sculptor and he’s always been gifted,” Bran says with a smidge of envy. “He’s had many of his works exhibited since we were in secondary school.”

Oh, right. I heard about that before. I did contemplate ruining his art studio, but it’s thumbprint protected, so I couldn’t get access.

“I still prefer your paintings. They’re so relaxing and pretty,” I type and show Bran.

A rare smile curves his lips and he pats the top of my head.

“But Lan hasn’t sculpted in a while,” Remi says after swallowing a bite of food. “The other day, he said it’s just dull.”

“Dull?” Bran echoes. “Sculpting is the only thing that reins him in.”

“Maybe that’s why he’s been acting like a maniac lately.”

That can’t be a good sign, right?

We play together for another hour before I have to leave. Partly because I don’t want my brother to question why I was out late and partly because I don’t want to cross paths with Lan on my way out.

Still, I keep thinking about the conversation I had with Bran and Remi. How can I use the information I learned to get rid of that bastard Lan?

The answer is that I can’t. At least, not yet.

But I can store the information for later, until I eventually come up with something.

The chill of the night prickles my skin as I walk to the car.

It’s darker than I anticipated. I don’t like being outside alone in the dark. It’s where the monster lurk, waiting to ambush me.

The low yellow lights stacked between the trees do little to dissipate the claim of the night.

My skin crawls and I have to breathe deeply so as not to trigger the weak part of me.

I take large steps, but it doesn't help to dissipate my imagination.

A rustle swishes from the trees before large heads with big, ugly snake eyes rear through the branches.

My breath catches and I give up trying to stay cool, then run to where I parked my car.

You're not taking me today, assholes.

Not today.

The monsters flicker and grow in size until I can feel them spreading behind me like wildfire. They're running and I'm running, but I don't think I can outrun them.

My muscles scream with exertion and my breathing comes out chopped and unnatural.

I'm almost to the car.

Almost—

I jolt to a halt when a dark figure appears from behind a tree, wearing a mask.

A scream bubbles at the back of my throat, but I can't release it.

All I can do is stand there as it approaches me with the intention of swallowing me whole.

"We meet again, mouse."

MIA

“**B**ad girls get punished, and there’s nothing I love more than punishing.”

No.

My feet tremble, and a pebble creaks beneath my foot as I slide one leg back.

I can still hear the creatures of the dark moaning, groaning, and whispering unintelligible words into my ears.

As much as they scare me, as much as my heart shrivels and splinters, that’s nothing compared to the monster that’s standing in plain sight.

Every year I survived up to this point, every illusion I painted about getting over the past shatters into tiny black crystals.

I’m back to being that little girl who ran and fell, then ran again.

And again.

And—

The man in the mask approaches me with steady steps. Calm yet firm.

He’s slim but broad. Silent but lethal.

This is it.

I’ve escaped for so long, but I realize that was only an attempted escape. In reality, I’m stuck in the loop he created for me.

I try to summon the warrior inside me that I’ve been cultivating for over a decade, but there’s no sign of my usual boldness or bravado.

There’s just a girl. Cold, hungry, and absolutely terrified.

My legs aren’t moving anymore. The creatures of the dark have managed to catch me and they’re imprisoning me in place for their lord.

I open my mouth.

Mom.

Dad.

No words come out. Not even a tiny, horrified sound.

With both hands in his pockets, the masked monster eats up the space between us in seconds. Then he's right in front of me, towering over me, his height invading the horizon and murdering its stars.

Rough shadows fall on the mask, turning darker, nearly black in the dim light. The holes where his eyes should be are hollow, bottomless, even.

Sharp fangs of horror sink into my skin. It doesn't matter how much I tell myself to move. My mind has already turned against me and there's no way to undo the spell.

"Have you already come to your senses?"

His voice is deep, distorted notes of destruction, a mythical beast with an agape mouth and shallow breath.

"Strange. I thought I would need to scare you for a bit more. Push you into a tighter corner. Toy with you till you collapse."

The ringing in my ears heightens until all I can hear is my own heartbeat—high and torn to shreds.

"I love trapping misbehaving little creatures while they beg and cry. I might let them go or drive a sharp knife into their chests and watch them flounder and choke on their own blood. Metaphorically, of course."

Stop. Stop coming closer, stop...

"Why are you so frozen?" The monster pulls a hand from his pocket and reaches for my face.

My feet tremble, and every particle of my survival instinct demands I bolt out of here, but I can't.

Not when my mind has already checked out, leaving me as a defenseless eight-year-old. I'm thrown back ten years in time, with only myself as solace and company.

The moment his skin touches mine, I stop breathing altogether. Maybe if I pretend to be dead, he'll leave.

Maybe this is another nightmare.

Please let it be another nightmare—

He pinches my chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilts his head to the side, watching me closely, explicitly. Intimately, even.

His eyes grow behind the mask, no longer bottomless holes with a direct view of hell. But what greets me is worse.

A dash of sadistic blue stares me down, like my own custom-made curse.

My face doesn't feel like my own as he rotates it from one side to the other. "You look...positively stunning. A doll. No, a statue."

The ringing in my ears slowly subsides and reality settles in small but noticeable increments.

It's not the monster.

At least, not *the* monster from the past.

Now that I'm out of my self-inflicted panic, I can see the golden details on his Venetian masquerade mask. I can recognize the tall, broad build, the characteristically tailored slacks, and the tucked-in button-down.

I suck in a deep breath, but I only manage to inhale his head-turning masculine cologne.

"Where did you go?" He taps my cheek as if he's summoning another version of me. "Don't leave just yet. I haven't had my fill."

I finally snap out of it and push his hand away, my breathing shallow and fast.

The man in the mask, the asshole Landon, stares at his hand that I just knocked off with disturbing calm, then directs the same stare at me. He rubs his forefinger against his thumb. Once.

Twice.

As if he's reliving a dear memory.

"Hey." He advances all of a sudden, until his marble-like chest crushes my breasts. "Bring back the version from just now. I'm not done."

I place my hands on his shoulders and push, but I might as well be facing a wall. The power with which he preoccupies my space is nothing short of a barbaric invasion.

What in the ever-loving hell is this bastard's problem?

He wraps his fingers around my throat and squeezes hard enough to force all my movements to a halt.

My windpipe closes and all I can see is the shadowy side of his mask. "I said. Bring it back. Now."

My survival instinct kicks in again, and I claw and hit his arm with everything I have.

I can't breathe.

I can't...breathe.

I slap a hand against his mask in an attempt to deter his attention, even if momentarily.

"Don't be shy. Come out." His fingers tighten further until I think I'm dying.

No. I most definitely am dying.

I go still, my hands falling to either side of me, and I attempt to go into last-resort survival mode.

His grip slowly loosens and a wolfish grin lifts his lips and a striking light twinkles the deep blue of his eyes. It's like when the sun is kissing the surface of an ocean, light on the surface but will never reach any of the darkness beneath.

I slowly suck in a fractured breath but remain still so as not to encourage his choke-happy fingers.

"There," he marvels, his thumb stroking the pulse point in my neck. "Perfectly statuesque. Absolutely stunning."

There's something seriously wrong with this guy and he could use urgent professional help.

I don't like the shivers that cover my skin at his touch or the sensual intimacy in every stroke.

My body temperature rises and that can only be because I want to kick him in the nuts.

I contemplate doing that. I just need to push back—

"Don't even think about it." The rare light slowly fades from his eyes. "I'm on a high and that means I will react drastically to any provocation. Chivalry and I don't coexist and, therefore, I don't give two flying fucks that you're a woman. If you attack me, I'll choke the fuck out of you."

I try to reach for my phone so I can type a few choice words for the asshole despite being deeply disturbed and slightly terrified.

Okay, maybe more than slightly.

He shakes his head again. "I mean it, Mia. Stay like a statue before I snuff out your life."

"You need help, you sick psycho bastard. Go fuck yourself," I sign, even though he doesn't understand a thing. I just needed to get that off my chest.

He releases my throat, grabs both my arms and glues them to either side of me, then squeezes my wrists. "A statue doesn't move, now, does it?"

Then he steps back and removes his mask.

I nearly forgot how attractive Landon is. Probably because, weirdly, I don't see Bran as attractive. Well, he is, but I view it in a detached sense.

Landon, on the other hand, drips with charm and beauty. Both are muddled by his beastly nature.

He's definitely on the spectrum of either a sociopath or, worse, a psychopath.

My cousin Kill has antisocial tendencies as well, and if he's anything to go by, then Landon is a worse menace than I predicted.

I realize now that he's never really shown me his monstrous side before. Now that I've gotten a mere glimpse at it, I can't help feeling the need to turn around and run.

But I don't.

I really don't want to risk being strangled to death right now. Not when I'm still reeling from the earlier panic attack.

He throws his mask to the ground and takes a few more steps back, then tilts his head to the side.

A slow smirk lifts the corner of his lips. "I can make a brilliant masterpiece out of you. I can freeze you and sculpt you from the finest stone that ever existed. What do you think? But then again, a statue doesn't think."

I need out.

Now.

I don't ponder it as I calculate the distance to the car and run at full speed. I don't stop until I'm inside and the door is locked.

A bang sounds on my window and I gasp as I slowly glance at it.

Landon appears on the other side, tall and intimidating as he mouths, "We're not done."

I hit the engine with a shaky finger, and it takes me two tries for the damn thing to work.

Another bang. This time a fist against the glass.

I can hear the scream building at the back of my throat, but I press the accelerator all the way down.

The car revs forward, but as I speed out of the parking spot, I catch a glimpse of Landon in my rearview mirror doing the 'I'm watching you' sign.

Or maybe now, it's 'I have my eyes on you.'

This is the second time I've been this terrified in my life.

“BABY? WHAT ARE YOU DOING UP SO LATE?”

I stare at my mother's face on my tablet's screen and physically force myself to hold in the tears.

Rai Sokolov is not only my mother, the most beautiful woman inside and out, but also my role model.

Maya and I have her same shade of blonde hair and a carbon copy of her eyes, nose, and lips.

She and Aunt Reina—Mom's identical twin and Kill and Gareth's mother—used to joke by saying we're their mini-mes.

I've always known my mom to be a strong woman, undeterred and ruthless. Right now, however, there's a furrow between her brows.

It's late evening in New York, and I've caught her sitting at her vanity just after she's finished her workday as a leader in the New York Bratva. That's right. My mom is the only woman who's climbed the ranks within a male-dominated organization and snatched a chair at the decision-making table.

She's no less than my father in any way and made sure to teach us that being a woman isn't a weakness—it should be a strength.

I used to think I was as assertive and powerful as she is, but after tonight's incident, my confidence has taken a major hit.

Ever since I came back to the apartment I share with Maya, I've been blazing the lights in my room on the highest setting and lying in a fetal position on the bed, waiting for my parents to finish working.

My encounter with the new monster in my life has left a ball in my throat and a fire in my chest.

“What is it, baby?” Mom's voice softens. “Is something wrong?”

Everything is wrong, Mom. The fear, the strange arousal, and my heart that won't stop beating so fast.

Everything.

But I don't say that and, instead, sign, “I just wanted to see your face and hear your voice.”

“Oh, baby.” She smiles, but it’s a tad forced. “I’m over the moon about being able to see your face after a long day.”

I let my lips curve the slightest bit. Most of my smiles are either forced or fake. The day I lost my voice, I also lost my smile.

“Has Aunt Reina been watering and taking care of Amun, Iris, and their family?” I sign.

“I don’t know what’s weirder. The fact that you name your plants or that the head of the family has a demon name. Besides, your Aunt Reina doesn’t need to come all the way here just to water them. The gardener or I could do it.”

“Don’t touch them, Mom. I don’t want them to catch a case of early death.”

“That’s rude.”

“Well, you really kill most plants you touch.”

“I’m sorry I don’t have the green thumb gene.” She smiles and leans closer to her phone. “What’s really wrong, Mia? Is there anything I can help with?”

Of course she’d know something is wrong. She always does.

“I feel a bit down,” I sign.

“Is there a reason behind this?”

“I had a panic attack in a dark place. I wanted to scream, but I couldn’t,” I sign, then hang my head.

There’s no way I can tell her about Landon. If I do, she’ll come here herself and rip off his dick, and then she might get in trouble with his influential family.

Besides, if she fixes my problems for me again, doesn’t that mean I will forever be weak?

“I’m so sorry, baby.” Her face, tone, and demeanor drip with love. “I wish I were there so I could give you a mama bear hug.”

“I’m fine.” *Lie.* “I’ll forget all about it in the morning.” *More lies.*

“It’s okay if you can’t forget about it, Mia.” She scoots closer. “Listen, I’ve been planning to broach this subject when you come back for a visit, but how about you give therapy another go?”

I link and interlink my fingers, then shake my head. “Therapy doesn’t work. I can’t speak.”

“Of course you can, baby. You just have to find the will to do it again.”

No, I can’t.

That part of me is trapped in an unremarkable capsule that's hidden deep in the forest.

I've forgotten what my voice sounded like. But even if I do speak, puberty has already changed it. Sometimes, I think it's probably like Maya's, but deep inside me, a distant memory of it tells me there were some differences.

"We don't want to push you," Mom continues. "But have you considered that maybe you gave up on therapy way too soon?"

"We talked about this. Therapy was doing nothing for me and I hated it there. I hated dissecting myself in front of strangers and not getting any results." My movements are jerkier, angrier, and more disturbed.

Like everything inside me tonight.

"Fine, I understand. I just want you to know that the option is always on the table."

She's about to say something else when a tall figure appears behind her and says in a soothing British accent, "What's taking you so long, princess?"

My father's face comes on the screen and I'm struck by how much I miss them both. I'm eighteen going on nineteen, but I still want to hug my parents for comfort.

Kyle Hunter is tall, dark, and classically handsome. Where Maya and I take after Mom and Aunt Reina, Nikolai resembles him. But while Dad appears sophisticated and elegant but is secretly a menace, Nikolai is openly a menace. He's rougher around the edges and definitely doesn't have Dad's discreet *modus operandi*.

A wide grin illuminates his features when he sees me and speaks in a subtle British accent. "Mia, is that you?"

I wave.

"What a fantastic surprise. Wait. Isn't it late over there?"

"Yeah, but I just miss you guys," I sign.

"Which is why you should've stayed here instead of flying to the other side of the ocean," he says for the thousandth time since we got here. "Now I can't hug my baby girl whenever I want to."

"I'll have Niko hug me on your behalf," I sign.

"Doesn't count."

"Leave her alone." Mom swats him teasingly. "She's old enough to decide where she wants to be."

“Which should be beside me. Just saying.” Dad leans forward. “Is there anyone bothering my little Mia? Should I go there and perhaps erase them from the records?”

“Kyle!” Mom protests.

“What? That’s the least I can do to whoever is causing the perturbed look in my little girl’s eyes.”

He knows, too.

Of course he does.

My parents have always been the best and have made me feel loved from a very young age, but ever since that incident a decade ago, they’ve become more attuned to me.

To the point of overprotection.

That’s part of the reason why I wanted to leave New York and join Nikolai here. Maya also needed to do her thing without being supervised every step of the way.

“I’m fine, Dad. I’m feeling so much better now that I’ve talked to you guys.”

“We love you, Mia,” Mom says.

“I love you, too,” I sign, and as I hang up, I catch a glimpse of my father kissing the top of her head.

I’ve always admired the fierce way they love and protect each other. They’re a power couple and clash sometimes, but they still have each other’s backs. Their relationship is one of my favorite memories from home.

As the screen goes black, the sense of safety that I got from talking to my parents vanishes.

The lights in the room are still on, but I can feel the darkness creeping in from the corners, about to suffocate me.

I grab my pillow and phone and sprint to my sister’s room.

I fling her door open and flick on the light.

“Ugh, what?” Maya groans from the bed and covers her head.

I go to her side and she removes her glittery eye mask, grumbling. “Don’t mess with my beauty sleep or I will cut a bitch...” she trails off upon seeing what must look like terror on my face.

She doesn’t probe or push. She doesn’t even ask.

Maya and I share a special relationship and she must feel the unease that’s gripping me by the throat.

My sister pulls the cover back and taps the spot beside her. I don't think twice as I dive in next to her.

"Thank you," I sign.

"There's no thanks needed between us, idiot. Go to sleep. I'm here."

She pats my shoulder in a soothing rhythm like a mother who's putting her child to sleep. When I close my eyes, I can feel her sliding her sleep mask back on.

Unlike me, Maya can only sleep when it's pitch-black, but she doesn't comment on the strong light I blazed in her room or how I invaded her space.

Whenever I need an anchor, she's there for me without question.

I'm drifting to sleep myself when my phone vibrates.

After making sure Maya is out, I pull it out and stare at the text.

Unknown Number: Asleep?

Who...?

My phone vibrates again.

Unknown Number: You can't be asleep after you woke this thing in me. Come out. I need to recreate the scene from tonight.

My fingers shake around the phone. Landon?

How did he get my number? More importantly, what the hell is he still doing up past two in the morning?

My phone vibrates again and I nearly jump out of my skin.

Unknown Number: On second thought, sleep while you can. You have a very chaotic life ahead of you and you need all the energy you can get, muse.

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LANDON

The idea of a muse has often eluded me.

I understand the concept and the general consensus, but the overrated obsession of artists with the existence of a muse has always left me in a rare state of bewilderment.

And that's coming from someone who used sand to sculpt at the age of two. It was a female devil with a long, pointy tail, inspired by a painting in Grandpa's house. I recall that first time I created a sculpture and the raw feeling of the wet sand slithering between my small fingers.

I also recall the unperturbed emotions that ran through me when I watched that she-devil get washed away by a wave.

It was only later that I found out my apathetic reaction to the destruction of my first creation wasn't the norm and that I was, in fact, the definition of neurodivergent.

My steady relationship with art in general, and sculpting in particular, has been persistent throughout my twenty-three years of life. My world-renowned artist mother calls it a natural talent. The world labels it as genius genes.

For me, it's been the sole method I could use to cope with my beast, his demon friends, and dull humanity without resorting to an extreme. Like transforming someone into stone, for instance.

Every artist has a muse—or so they say.

Since I'm a very important—if not the most important—member of a family of artists, I have come to the realization that I don't share Mum's, Bran's, or Glyn's over-idolization of their imaginary friends.

In my mind, that's what a muse is all about—an imaginary childhood friend whose constant chatter they couldn't lose during adulthood, so they decided to give them a fancy name.

The idea of a muse has always been redundant, useless, and categorically ridiculous.

But since I'm a master of blending in and fitting societal expectations, whenever someone has asked me about my muse, I've said geniuses don't talk about their muse, as if it's some sort of MI6 intelligence.

Now, don't get me wrong. There's no doubt that I'm the definition of an artistic genius who brings the sculpting community to literal tears. However, I've partaken in the absolute nonsense of the nonexistent muse and fake superstitious rituals to divert the horde's attention.

I also figured my muse manifested in the massive creative energy that's impossible to satiate.

She was the inner sadism of my outward charm.

The violence that burst at the seams whenever my plans faced an obstacle.

But that lousy half-arsed explanation lasted until yesterday.

Not in my wildest dreams did I figure that a muse could manifest at the most random time.

When I was facing an enemy, no less.

When I saw the youngest Sokolov running toward the car park like her little arse was on fire, I figured I'd toy with her and provoke those wildflower eyes—to tears if I felt like it.

After I left her tending to her crushed pride, I had a fleeting curiosity about how her eyes would look when she was crying and begging for my nonexistent mercy.

Since the blasphemous blood bath incident, I've been concocting a multi-phase plan, all dedicated to her demise. In a nutshell, I'd start by tormenting her and end with using her against her brother and cousins.

While those plans remain in the background, there's a slight hitch in the process.

The way she froze up when I approached her.

I've never seen a human go so completely still—professional art models included. There's always the rise of a chest here, the flaring of nostrils there, and micro-movements to remind me that the fools aren't really stones.

Mia, however? She was the definition of a lifeless statue.

It was my sign that it's never too late to find the perfect human stone.

I release a long puff of smoke and then stub the cigarette in the middle of the crowded ashtray. My cancer-inducing habit has been going on since my name started making the rounds in the art circles about eight years ago.

The prodigy.

The special one.

The gifted child.

It's by no means due to pressure. If anything, the sudden surge of marketing my name experienced has stroked my ego in all the right places and given me better pleasure than a pro choking on my cock.

Smoking simply gives me the right balance while I'm using both hands to produce people's next favorite sculpture.

My fingers hover over the countless pieces of clay I've created since I retreated to my studio after Mia ran away.

At that time, I had two options—follow her or purge the burst of inspiration that suddenly crashed into my skull.

I opted for the second, and ever since then, I've been modeling miniature sculptures in search of the right image of the inspiration I had at that exact moment.

A million mini sculptures later, I've exhausted my clay supply and I'm still not satisfied with any of them. I'm certainly not using them on a real sculpture.

If my art professors at REU were to see them, they'd fall arse over tits and call them masterpieces like everything I've made with my supremely gifted hands.

I don't.

Something is missing.

If that little fucking shit had just remained still for a few more minutes, I would've gotten the full image. But she was more pressed about escaping me.

Granted, I might not have stopped at just touching if she hadn't run away.

I grab the last miniature and throw it against the raw stone opposite me. My details were the sharpest in the first ones, but they dwindled as I made more.

The last ones are absolute rubbish and a staggering disgrace.

The first stab of inspiration that hit me has faded, and my mind is now the usual barren black.

Black used to be the standard for me. It was with black that I sculpted and with black that I continued to thrive.

But for the first time ever, this type of black isn't as satisfying.

I want the dash of colors.

The strike of lightning.

The sound of thunder.

None of them come.

"Lan!"

I stare up from my distasteful miniatures to find my brother standing in the middle of my kingdom. Brandon is a striking identical picture of me, who can't resemble my sublime character to save his life.

"How did you manage to get in?" I sound groggy to my own ears, so I pull out another cigarette and jam it between my lips.

My brother doesn't like the smell of cigarettes, but then again, he shouldn't be in my space.

"I helped." My cousin Eli flashes me a vicious grin as he appears from behind Bran like a horror cliché.

He's my second cousin, if we're being specific, since his dad and mine are cousins. Being a couple years older than me, he takes that as a pass to brag about the King firstborn privileges.

Oh, and he happens to be antagonistic for the fun of it. Yes, I'm the same, but I don't like competition in my own game. One of these days, he'll take it too far and they'll find his body mysteriously floating in the Thames.

"With what?" I deadpan. "Giving yourself a personality?"

"The only one in this building in need of a personality transplant is you."

"He found the master key so we could open the door," Bran says in his usual attempt at peacemaking. It's so disturbing to see him being Mother Teresa and spouting nonsense with my face.

I blow smoke in his direction. "And you trespassed in my space because..."

He closes his eyes for a beat, but, like a boring nun, he doesn't display any form of anger or even displeasure. "You weren't answering your phone or the door when I knocked for the past fifteen minutes."

And the hole of fucking strange keeps widening.

I'm usually more aware of my surroundings than a predator in a dark African jungle.

"I told you he's fine," Eli supplies like an asshole. "As unfortunate as it might sound, nothing can hurt the twat."

"You, however, could accidentally end up on an MIA list." I match his grin with my wolfish one. "Don't worry, I'll console Uncle Aiden and Aunt Elsa after they receive the news."

"Not if you magically disappear first."

"Catch me if you can."

"Is that a challenge?"

"I don't know. Is it?"

"Can you both stop?" Bran shakes his head like a headmistress who's sick and tired of her most troublemaking students. "We're family."

Eli and I snort and then we burst into laughter at the same time.

Did I mention that my brother can be the sappiest plain Jane who ever walked the planet?

Eli pats his shoulder. "Family is what makes this more fun, dear cousin."

Bran doesn't appear the least bit amused, though his shoulders relax now that he's figured out Eli and I like to rile each other for sport.

He still wants to kill me for my plan that included his brother, but I'm sure he won't do it.

At least, not if he still wants to belong to the King family.

As in, the one that owns the UK and half of the world. My grandfather, Jonathan King, is a ruthless monarch with an iron fist and a sharp sense of business. He built the fortune his brother and father nearly eradicated.

My father, Levi King, and my uncle, Aiden King, have been transforming the business and making it more lucrative than oil princes' fortunes.

The future of the King empire falls on Eli, me, and probably Creighton. Bran and Glyn were never interested in business and prefer to be artists like Mum.

My art career is just a temporary ruse before I take over the world. Might need to study some business first, but who gives a fuck. I'm sure I'll excel at that like everything I've done thus far.

Nothing is permanent, and the world is a mere vessel to make my desires come true.

My every whim and want has been catered to, which tends to be boring, for lack of a better term. *Someone give me a challenge, for fuck's sake.*

"Is everything okay? You've been locked in here for over twelve hours..." my brother trails off when he sees the miniatures lying on the floor, and his eyes grow in size. "Wow."

Yes, wow. I've never made so many useless miniatures in one session.

"Wow for the murdered Smurfs he's been making?" Eli asks with a note of depleted sarcasm.

I side-eye him. "You're an uncultured swine with not an artistic bone in your miserable body. Don't pollute my studio with your lack of taste."

"I do have taste. It just doesn't include your ugly art."

"It's far from ugly," Bran says without looking at Eli, then lowers himself to his knees to inspect them closely. "These are some of your finest work. They're stunning."

"All of my work is stunning."

Bran stares at me. "You haven't sculpted a thing in months, Lan."

"These aren't sculptures."

"You haven't done any model miniatures either."

"They're doodles. They mean nothing."

"You're such an arrogant fool. If others... No, if *I* could make something like this while doodling, I wouldn't ask for anything else."

"You need to stop painting happy-go-lucky nature scenes and you'll be able to do better than this. You're welcome for the free advice from a genius."

"I told you not to meddle with my artistic choices."

"Cry me a river." I kill my half-finished cigarette and crack my neck. "What time is it?"

"Past your beauty bedtime," Eli says. "Dark circles look hideous on you."

"And that striped jacket gives you a fantastic grandpa vibe. Have better fashion sense before patronizing me about my looks." I point at the door. "Now, out of my space, and I'm going to need that master key so no one trespasses again."

Eli leans forward and whispers, "No," before he buggers off to make the world a worse place than it was an hour ago.

"You need some sort of an escorting service?" I ask when Bran lingers behind, still staring at the miniatures.

He reaches a hand to one of them but thinks better of it and retracts it. Good. That hand might have been accidentally broken if he'd put it on my possessions.

Though I might not be as murderous if he asks for permission. He's always wanted to touch my sculptures after I've given him the green light. Now, he doesn't even ask if he can.

My brother stands to his full height and faces me with a furrowed brow. "Are you going to sculpt any of them?"

"No. They're not worth it."

"Have you positively lost your mind? These are your..."

"Finest work. Stunning. A stroke of a genius," I finish for him. "We obviously have a different definition of excellence. What you see as extraordinary is mediocre at best to me."

"Well, excuse me for not understanding the genius genes."

"Nonsense. You have them as well, but as I've mentioned a million times, you're shackling them to the best of your abilities." I prop an elbow on his shoulder and grin. "Want my help to bring out the side you buried so deep, you almost forgot it existed?"

"If by help, you mean to drown me in your blood-flavored activities, then no thanks."

"One day, you'll take me up on my offer."

"Not even if you're reincarnated as a saint."

"Bloody hell, Bran. Don't go manifesting pure torture over a small disagreement." I pat his cheek with the back of my hand.

It's a gesture he used to like when we were growing up. Now, however, he drops his shoulder, making me lose my balance, and steps out of the way.

"No disagreement with you has ever been small, Lan."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Is this one of those times when you turn sappy on me as if I'm your imaginary therapist? If that's going to be the case, I get paid by the hour and in advance, thank you."

He releases a long breath and shakes his head with the surrender of an old man in the last stages of cancer.

"Just call Mum when you get the chance. She asked about you when I talked to her earlier."

Saint Bran.

The peacemaker who thinks he's holding our family together by a thread Bran.

Sometimes I wonder if the fact that he of all people happens to be my twin is some form of a calamity.

After one last lingering look at the miniatures, he leaves the studio as if his arse is on fire.

It's no secret that Bran doesn't like me. Might have to do with the number of treacherous, elicited activities I've been conducting over the years.

As Mum likes to say, we're like night and day, and while she means that as a compliment, the truth remains, it's impossible for us to meet halfway.

But Bran and his righteous shenanigans can wait another day.

I've already missed half a day in my attempts to retain the vision from last night. I don't have enough time or inspiration to resurrect it.

One thing's for sure. My next course of action starts with a certain little muse who's gotten herself into the deepest clusterfuck of her life.

TO SAY I'M ENTERING UNFRIENDLY TERRITORY WOULD BE AN understatement.

Let's say The King's U college and I share the same level of disagreement of right- and left-wing politics.

In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if the Heathens have put a bounty on my head and a wanted poster at the entrance of every class.

My track record with Killian, Nikolai, and even Jeremy doesn't help. The only member I haven't harmed, at least not directly, is Gareth, but I doubt he'd be interested in having a cheeky drink and smuggling me onto their grounds.

Which is why I came in partial disguise.

The saving grace of being among the unpolished, rowdy Americans is that there are so many of them. Definitely more than the students at REU. Therefore, wearing sunglasses and a hoodie is enough to conceal me from the unholy masses.

According to my extensive research on the Heathens and, after the blood episode, on Mia Sokolov herself, I know she's studying business.

So I make my way to that school and wait by the corner outside her classroom like a perfect gentleman. Thankfully, her clone studies law, so they don't take the same classes.

I check my watch and count the seconds until she's out. After this, Mia still has one more class, but she's going to have to take a rain check on that.

The students buzz around me, their chatter clashing with the seconds on my watch.

I don't mind the wait. In fact, a sensation of calm overtakes me at the prospect of catching prey.

I'm good at camouflaging myself when need be and waiting for the right moment.

Like the night, I'm silent, overpowering, and—under the right circumstances—deadly.

Students start flowing like ants in a disorganized colony, but I'm not concerned about missing Mia in the crowd.

That won't be possible after the alien sensation I experienced during last night's meeting.

Sure enough, I catch a glimpse of her blonde hair and blue ribbons flying in the wind as she checks her cat-themed backpack.

She's wearing another black dress that's fit for a luxurious funeral, and a certain detail stands out. The upper half has a few straps that stop at a choker around her delicate throat.

My, my.

She even dressed for the auspicious occasion.

Mia Sokolov is a beautiful goddess without putting in any effort. She barely wears any makeup or tries to doll up like most girls. She also adopts a troublemaking personality that's designed to put a damper on her physical superiority.

I've barely seen her offer a genuine smile, and that includes all the footage I've gathered on her in my attempts to dig her a hole she'll never get out of.

However, she excels at offering fake socially accepted smiles and pretending to be a naive cute girl to draw the right people's attention.

And while she might argue that we're different, she's wearing the same version of the mask I do. Which means she might have a beast inside her, too.

And I will have to murder and cut it into pieces because I only need her as a statue.

Not flesh and bones. Thoughts and opinions. Words and existence.

Still rummaging through her bag, she walks in my direction as clueless as innocent prey.

There, little muse. I might give you a treat after I turn you into a statue.

“Mia!”

She’s only a few meters away from where I’m lurking when she comes to a halt and turns around.

I curse under my breath upon detecting the last two people I need in this situation.

The first is none other than Killian—the guy who stole my sister’s heart despite my explicit refusal of the damned relationship. The other is Nikolai, Mia’s older brother, who might be out to slice my throat the moment he sees me.

Both needless presences catch up to her and I have to change my position to get a better view of the situation.

Logically, I should leave before those two catch a glimpse of me and choose to give me a taste of my own torture medicine. And it’ll be much worse than I could imagine, considering I trespassed on their turf.

The risks I’m willing to take for the sake of my muse are irritatingly stunning.

She signs something to them that I believe means, “What are you doing here?”

I might have looked at some sign language videos—ASL, not BSL since there are significant differences. And by some, I mean dozens of them. It was enough to become proficient. What? It’s not my fault that I’m not only an effortless polyglot but also a fast learner.

“I’m taking Niko on a stroll,” Killian replies with an easy grin.

His cousin kicks his foot. “I’m not your dog, motherfucker.”

Killian doesn’t seem perturbed in the least. He’s probably the one who resembles me the most from that bunch of little fuckers. The only difference is that I’m culturally superior and have a more prominent penchant for anarchy.

As I’m contemplating the best way to dump his body in the ocean without permanently losing my sister, something happens that derails my whole thought process.

Mia’s eyes twinkle as her lips pull in a genuine, happy smile. It’s the wildest look I’ve ever seen on her face. And, coincidentally, they’ve all happened around her family members.

As if they're the only ones who deserve this side of her.

"Wanted to check on you," Nikolai says and pushes a cup in her hand. "Bought your favorite Frappuccino. Double espresso shot with caramel syrup and cream on top."

"I, unavoidably, helped him," Killian says.

"You did not," Nikolai retorts.

"My presence was in itself a massive help. If I hadn't been there, you would've been kicked out by the cashier, who was scared to death by your grim, unconsciously frightening presence."

Mia signs a thanks and accepts the cup, then she leans in for a quick hug with both her brother and cousin.

A hugger. A blasphemous, absolutely distasteful habit with no practical meaning whatsoever. It's not needed for sex and, when used, can lead to an awkward angle.

But then again, I've never appreciated touching people when my cock isn't involved.

"Want to grab something to eat before we continue our stroll?" Killian asks her.

She shakes her head and signs that she has a class.

Nikolai pats her head as if she's still a child. "Don't make any trouble, and if you do, for all that's unholy, tell me about it."

"And me." Killian points a thumb at himself. "We can turn mere trouble into a tornado."

She signs an "Okay," then they finally part ways.

Thankfully, Killian and Nikolai go in the opposite direction, while Mia continues toward me as she slurps her drink.

She reaches into her dress pocket and retrieves her phone, completely oblivious to the trap she's walking right into.

I don't make myself noticeable when she's near. No.

I wait and bide my time for the right moment.

Once she passes me, I stand behind her and whisper, "So you do use your phone, and yet you left me on Read. Where are your manners, little muse?"

MIA

My carefully built illusion shatters into a million pieces all around me. The shards prick my skin with the deliberate precision of a thousand cuts.

The straw falls from my lips and I sluggishly swallow the liquid trapped in my mouth as if it's poison.

A part of me is urging myself to run, hide, bury this episode in the tortured abyss of my soul where all fucked-up creatures reside.

And as much as I'd love to put up a brave façade, I recognize how careful I need to be instead. I've witnessed firsthand what it looks like to be in the middle of Landon King's orbit, and to say I didn't survive would be the mother of all understatements.

However, I abandon the flight option.

People like Landon get off on the act of chasing more than the finality of catching. If I run, I'll only provoke the insatiable and completely sadistic side of him.

So, against my better judgment, I gather what remains of my courage and turn around.

I'm not even fully facing him when he grabs me by the shoulders, his fingers digging into the flesh before he shoves me against the wall.

My back hits the brick and I swallow a wince as my Frappuccino shakes and swirls, almost asking for help on my behalf.

His marble-like body presses against mine as a stark reminder of last night.

Of the terror.

The helplessness.

The strange arousal.

All of it.

He's in an uncharacteristic hoodie today and his eyes are hidden by aviator sunglasses that give him a mysterious edge.

"I should've done this sooner." He tilts his head to the side, studying the length of me as if he's seeing me for the first time.

Why is he wearing the damn sunglasses? It's already hard to read his eyes without the added camouflage.

I search our surroundings for anyone who might be able to help, but I realize we're in a small nook in the corner that most people don't even notice.

Landon releases my shoulder and reaches a hand to my face. I tense, my body getting ready to fight, claw his eyes out and drink his brain through the sockets if he as much as hits me—

He strokes my cheek and I freeze, all my murderous thoughts coming to a sudden halt.

My breath catches and my lips part.

That's about the last thing I expected the psycho to do.

His long, lean fingers glide from my forehead to my brows, over my eyelashes, then swipe down the bridge of my nose. As I watch with a completely stupefied expression, his exploration continues under my eyes, over my cheeks, and down my jaw before lifting my chin.

Every stroke leaves a burning fire in its wake. No, it's an avalanche of tingles, goosebumps, and pent-up euphoria.

Like a blind person trying to discern someone's features, he lingers and strokes gently. Too gently, even.

My thoughts scatter when he slides his fingers over my upper lip, his middle finger swiping down my Cupid's bow, then moves to my bottom lip. This time, his thumb presses on the flesh with a breathtaking firmness.

I'm entranced, absolutely taken aback by the sight in front of me and the overwhelming feelings blazing through me.

It's like I've been transported to a different dimension where everything is bizarre and the merest touch provokes an extreme reaction.

"Stunning." His deep voice, the sound of dark lullabies, chains me further to the alien feelings.

I'm no different than a fly caught in the web of a spider, completely paralyzed as life is sucked out of my limbs.

"Five out of five," he whispers in words that have no business being so destabilizing. "As expected of my little muse."

He flexes his hand into an open palm and swipes it down my throat. The touch is intimately explorative and breathtakingly stimulating. His fingers latch onto the leather choker and he uses it to pull me flush against him.

I have to keep the Frappuccino to the side or he'd crush it between us.

A sly smirk lifts his sinfully gorgeous lips as he toys with the leather, his fingers skimming my skin as if he has every right to.

As if he claimed me in a different lifetime and is currently taking me back.

"I knew there was a wild side to you. Tell me. Do you fancy being strangled while a cock rams inside your soaking wet cunt? Or do you prefer having a cock choke your pretty little throat and fill it with cum?"

His crude words, delivered in the most sophisticated manner, snap me out of my drug-like haze.

And the worst realization is that another part of my body mourns the loss of that haze. There must be something freakishly wrong with me. How could I go so still when he touched me with the sensuality of a lover?

I push against him with my free hand, my face heating and my mind thinking of a thousand curses I can use to send him to the afterlife.

My attempts to free myself only manage to amuse him to no end. So I scratch at his hand, but that doesn't erase the provocative smirk from his face.

He releases me, though he doesn't give my space back. "My, my. You're supposed to be a harmless tiny mouse, but you're fast upgrading to a kitten with claws. Such a feisty little one."

I hug the Frappuccino against my chest and sign, "I'm not little, you psycho asshole. Go fuck yourself."

"Calling me names won't stop me from referring to you as little. And I would rather fuck a hole instead of doing it myself."

My lips part.

No. He couldn't have understood every word. It's just impossible.

This prick can't possibly—

"Surprised I speak ASL?" He grins. "I figured it'd be better than scribbling on your phone whenever you're about to burst with curses. Now,

I understand all the curses, not just the fuck-you ones.”

“How?” I sign, bewildered.

“I happen to be a genius. You’re welcome.”

“I didn’t thank you, asshole.”

“Which you should’ve. Again, where are your manners?”

“You’re talking to me about manners when you have a tendency to corner people like a creep?”

“I prefer the word *observer*.”

I sneer, my chest nearly exploding from the audacity of this damn man.

“Walk with me?” he asks like some sort of a medieval gentleman that he definitely is not.

I lift my chin. “You expect me to say yes to that?”

“No, which is why I asked politely. The next time won’t be as polite, so I suggest you accept the offer before it’s taken off the table.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“As I mentioned, I prefer holes, Mia. Keep up. At any rate, we’re moving to the second stage.” His voice lowers. “Walk with me or I will ask Maya instead.”

My spine jerks.

“She’s finished school for the day and is probably filming herself for social media in the Pin Café, which happens to be her hangout. I suppose if I walk there, I’ll find her within fifteen minutes. Should I?”

“I’ll slice your throat before you talk to her.”

“You mean, *walk* with her.”

“Stop it.”

He stands straighter, devouring the horizon and my air. “There’s only one way for me to do that and it is, as I specified a few moments ago, if you fucking walk with me.”

Every molecule in me demands I kick him in the face and send shards of the sunglasses into his damn eyes.

But I have enough access to logic to realize that if I do that, I can’t guarantee Maya’s safety.

She tends to fall for men’s looks more often than not, and if this bastard pulls the charming card that he wields so well, he might convince her he never intended to hurt Nikolai. He might flirt and seduce her until she reaches the point of self-destruction.

Because that's what this asshole does. He ruins things and he ruins them thoroughly without allowing them a chance of survival.

My fingers tighten on the Frappuccino, the cold condensation doing nothing to alleviate the volcano raging in my veins.

"Let's do it later," I sign while offering him my worst glare. "I have class now."

"The class can wait." He grabs my elbow, fingers nearly breaking the bone. "I can't."

He pulls me with a strength that makes me lose balance. The Frappuccino falls and splashes on the ground, the cream and coffee forming a gruesome murder scene.

The ominous image lingers in my head as he drags me behind him with blinding strength.

I try to push at his hand, to claw the skin and cause pain, but then again, he's barely human and definitely inhumane, so his type doesn't really feel anything.

In my attempts to free myself, I don't notice we're already outside the campus. Landon has dragged me to where he parked his car in a secluded place a safe distance from the college.

I know it's his car, because I saw it at the Elites' mansion once. A special edition, matte black McLaren with a unique shine material on the side.

It looks as elusive as the asshole himself.

He releases me, then removes the hoodie and his sunglasses. I often forget how illegally attractive he is, even in casual wear. He has a regal presence. Toned body, broad shoulders, lean waist, and the right height.

Everything is perfection—from his tousled hair to the slight stubble on his strong jaw. Even his only imperfection, the mole on the corner of his right eye, adds more to his penetrating charm.

An illusionary charm that he wears like a permanent mask.

Or maybe it's not so permanent. He certainly didn't waste any time in coming after me and showing his true colors following my fabulous blood bath plan.

"Why did you bring me here?" I sign.

"I couldn't exactly stay in the Heathens' territory for long or some spy would point your brother and cousins in my direction and there would be carnage. For them, not me."

“Stop being delusional. You could never win against my brother, Kill, and Jeremy.”

“But I already did. Countless times. I can do it all over again if you need tangible proof that I’m stronger than all the Heathens.”

“And yet little ole me managed to give you a refreshing bath in pig blood.” I smile sweetly, matching his savage energy with mine.

“A one-off.”

“I can make it a two-off if you don’t back the hell away from me and my family.”

“Your provocations are a turn-on, so unless you’re in the mood to get on your knees and choke on my cock, I’d suggest you refrain from making them so casually.”

He points at the small tent in his pants as stark evidence of his words. My cheeks feel as if they’ve gone up in flames.

“You’re a sick bastard.”

“So everyone keeps telling me. Don’t be part of the herd. It’s both boring and pointless.”

“Ever thought that there’s some truth in it if everyone keeps saying that?”

“Definitely not. Everyone tends to be stuck in a neurotypical, empty cycle that I thankfully don’t belong to.”

I pause, my mind going back to the times all those therapists tried to mold me into a normal person. I refused to comply. I still do.

I fucking despise therapists and their holier-than-thou attitudes. I despise how I felt in their presence—small, abnormal, and not fit for society.

Is that possibly what Landon feels when he clashes with the world due to the way he’s wired different?

Hating myself for thinking of his perspective even for a moment, I glare at him. “Are we done?”

“Far from it. We haven’t even gotten started.”

“You told me to walk with you and I kept my part of the bargain. So we’re done here.”

“Not yet.” He unlocks the car. “I’m taking you somewhere.”

“What makes you think I’d go anywhere with you?”

He appears disappointed as he tuts. “I thought you were smarter than this. Don’t make me give you an ultimatum again. We’ve been there, done

that, and it didn't exactly work out well for you."

I'm going to bash this bastard's head in and watch him bleed to death.

I shelf that thought for another day and say with fake mockery, "I feel sad for you."

"Sad?"

"You can only thrive by threatening and offering ultimatums. It must be so sad to be you."

"On the contrary, holding power over the herd is euphoric." His provocatively gorgeous smile remains in place as he juts his chin forward. "Get in the car."

"I don't want to."

"And I don't give a fuck. Must be so *sad* to be you," he repeats my words with that damn smile that I'm itching to punch off his face.

He pushes me forward with a palm on my shoulder.

I slide in with a grumble and a shove against him so he'll remove his hand. The psycho's only reaction is a grin and a shake of his head.

It's like I'm amusement material and he's enjoying every minute of pushing my buttons.

"Where are we going?" I ask once he's behind the steering wheel.

"You'll find out soon enough." He hits the engine and it groans loudly.

I instinctively hold on to my seat belt. What? I prefer smooth-sailing cars that don't make enough noise to wake the dead.

Sports cars and mayhem suit Landon to perfection, though.

As the car rolls down the road, his large hand falls on my pale thigh, touching the bare space between the hem of my dress and my knees.

His fingers squeeze the flesh. "Relax. I promise not to devour you. Yet."

I push at his hand, needing to get rid of the sudden attack of tingles and goosebumps. Now that I think about it, a variation of this foreign sensation happened the last time he touched me, too.

It must be a manifestation of my disgust. Nothing more.

"Let me go," I sign.

"What was that?" He feigns innocence. "Come closer? I know I'm irresistible, but I'm also driving, so you need to keep it in your pants for a bit."

I flash him the middle finger, to which he chuckles. "As I said, I'm open to fucking you, but not at the moment."

"You and I will never happen."

“Never say never.” He tightens his grip on my thigh as if to cement his words.

I try and fail to remove his hand. It’s like he’s attached to me by an invisible string.

“Speaking of never, how come you’ve never replied to my text or followed me back on Instagram?”

He followed me on Instagram? I didn’t notice that. Then again, I haven’t been in the right frame of mind since yesterday. I’m also still sleep-deprived because even though Maya allowed me to share her bed, I couldn’t relax enough to sleep after those damn texts and the images of his hand on my throat.

“Ever thought that maybe, just maybe, I don’t like you?”

“Small detail that can be changed.”

“Not even if you turn into a saint.”

“Why would I do something so dull? Besides, you might fool the whole world, yourself included, but I’m well aware that you’re not into saints. Not even a little. Not even close.”

I swallow. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, my little muse. We’re cut from the same cloth, you and I. Well, not identical cloth, but it’s similar enough. And if I have to prove it, so be it.”

The car comes to a halt and I stiffen in my seat as I look at the dark building in the middle of nowhere.

Landon’s grip on my thigh brings me back to him. A terrifying smirk lifts his lips. “Welcome to my territory.”

MIA

I knew I was in trouble when Landon's pretentious car pulled up to the abandoned house, its gates creaking open to reveal a nightmare I couldn't escape.

The goosebumps and tingles that snaked through my body shrivel to a slow death as the old castle-like building materializes in front of me.

It looks straight out of a medieval war—one that didn't go so well for whoever protected whatever this place.

The gray walls have nearly turned green with the smudges left by nature. Brittle leaves rustle in the wind, their jagged edges scraping against the blurry windows like the claws of a desperate animal.

The only new element in the property's immediate surroundings is the refurbished massive black gate that Landon drives through.

Even though the car remains steady, I can see the uneven, rutty road. The trees either have branches that resemble a witch's bony hand or contain so many intertwined leaves, you can't tell where one ends and the other begins.

The beds of flowers have withered to their tragic death, leaving gruesome skeletons in their wake. A grim stench reeks from every nook of this house that could serve as a den of ghosts and paranormal creatures.

The car comes to a slow halt near the front door. That is, if the old wooden shape with metal strips can be called a door.

"What do you think?"

I startle at the sudden appearance of Landon near my ear. The asshole moves like an evil snake, without making any sound whatsoever.

“About what? The poor imitation of a haunted house?” I pretend to be completely unaffected, although my stomach twists into a thousand knots.

“No imitation in sight.” His hot breath skims along the shell of my ear as his hand grips my thigh tighter. “This is an actual haunted house. It is said that its previous owner became unstable due to the horrors of the war and cast a spell on the place. Ever since then, his family members have met tragic deaths, and anyone who enters never comes out of it sane.”

“That explains your personality, then,” I sign with a sweet smile.

He chuckles, his chest rumbling against the side of my arm. And just like that, the tingles and goosebumps resurrect from the ashes as if they were never slaughtered.

“Stop being so hot.” He bites the shell of my ear. Like he did last night. Only, now, it’s more intimate and provokes a throbbing between my inner thighs.

My nails dig into my palm, but I have no clue how to react to the strong physical reaction building inside me.

Then, as if to make matters worse, he licks the spot he bit and I have to clamp my lips shut to keep from making any noises.

As easily and fast as he touched me, he releases me. “Now, come out.”

Just like that, he steps out of the car, leaving me in a heap of cryptic emotions.

It takes me a few seconds to gather my wits. I need to snap out of it. Since I’ve found myself in this situation anyway, might as well give Landon a taste of his own medicine so he regrets messing with me.

Armed with my new resolve, I push the door open and step out, chin held high and my nose nearly touching the sky.

The sudden chill causes more goosebumps to erupt on my skin, but part of that has to do with my company tonight.

Landon is waiting for me with that irritating smirk and amusement glinting in his deep blues. The color of an angry ocean and a midnight sky.

The color of my worst nightmares as well.

“You’re not a delicate princess, after all. I’m impressed.”

“Impressing you is the last item on my agenda.”

“And yet you’re doing it so well, I almost doubt it’s on purpose. You know, like when you crashed my party and seduced me in the bathroom.”

“That was only so I could distract you, and it worked.” I sigh, shaking my head. “Men.”

“What was that?”

“Men are so simple, no matter how grandiose they think they are.” I jut my chin in his direction. “You’re part of the herd, Mr. I’m Smarter Than You And Your Entire Bloodline.”

“I *am* smarter than you and your entire bloodline, or you wouldn’t be here, in the palm of my hand, exactly how I planned it.”

“I’m in no one’s palm. And the only reason I’m here is because you threatened my sister. I wouldn’t have given you the time of the day under different circumstances.”

“But you *are* giving me the time of the day.”

“Unwillingly.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“My free will doesn’t matter?”

“The excuses you offer your mind don’t. I have no interest in participating in whatever lies you tell yourself to convince your brain that you’re not remotely attracted to me. Unlike you, I don’t sugarcoat the truth.”

He reaches into his pocket and retrieves a key that looks like one of those enchanted treasure findings and uses it to open the door.

It creaks and squeaks like a dying person’s attempt to resurrect.

My spine jerks into a line at the graphic noise, but I still wear the mask of indifference. Or I hope I do as I carefully follow the beast into his lair.

The inside isn’t any better than the outside. Upon entry, I’m hit by the musty smell of the decaying building. The wind howling through the trees outside sounds ten times louder inside.

Grim, somber medieval stairs greet us in the middle of the foyer. There’s a sofa and a few chairs that have lost their color, appearing pale pink instead of what I assume was once bright orange.

The wooden flooring is chipped everywhere, and the few intact pieces look older than the British monarchy. It creaks every time we take a step. While I’m careful, Landon walks with a sense of pride that’s completely uncalled for.

My gaze strays to the open door to the left—probably a kitchen or a dining room. No matter how much I search for signs of life, this place seems more dead than my voice.

Whatever angle you look at it from, it’s too shabby, messy, and underwhelming to fit someone as elegant and well-kept as Landon.

As much as I hate the asshole, he is illegally good-looking and has the charisma of a model in anything he wears. Even earlier in a hoodie and sunglasses, many stared at him, whispering to each other as if he were a celebrity.

Of course, the bastard basked in every second of the attention he got, despite trying not to get on my brother's and cousins' radar.

Landon is not only a psychopath but also a raging narcissist.

Psychopaths are born not made. I wonder what type of gene pool resulted in his existence and why he turned out like this when Bran is one of the best people I've met?

Wait...why am I curious about the asshole? I don't give two fucks about him and his warped psychology.

"It is said that the lady of the house fell down these very stairs and broke her neck." His sudden hot words in my ear make me shudder.

I jump away. "Stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Whispering in my ear from behind like a creep."

"How else will I have you tremble against me? I love your innocent reactions that are in clear contradiction with your bad-girl image. Heads-up, I will provoke it whenever I get the chance. Unless..." he trails off and tilts his head. "You're down for getting on your knees and closing those lips around my cock?"

"No."

"Worth a try." He kills the distance between us and places a hand at the small of my back close to my ass, probably trying to intimidate me with his physical presence.

"Can't you tell me to walk without touching me?"

"But you feel so perfect in my hand. It's a waste not to touch you."

I shake my head and choose to drop it. If I go down that road, it'll only get worse, and it's just not a battle worth pursuing.

He promenades me around the war-like foyer as if he's showing his most prized possessions. He stops by the pale pink sofa. "This is where the ghost sits. It's probably watching us as we speak and putting a curse on you."

"Why wouldn't it put it on you instead?"

"Maybe it already did and I'm a product of its curse that's tasked with devouring you alive and sucking you dry."

“Save it.” I side-eye him. “I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“Real monsters are scarier and a lot more common than invisible paranormal creatures.”

“Interesting. Is one of those monsters the reason why you don’t talk?”

I freeze and throw him a questioning look.

“What? You thought I planned your demise without looking into your past?”

I purse my lips. What does the bastard know? He couldn’t have possibly dug up much since my parents are powerful enough to seal that part of my life.

He’s bluffing. He has to be.

Landon seems completely oblivious to my reaction as he leads me down a long corridor. What must’ve once looked like flowery wallpaper is nothing more than a faded beige vinyl now.

“It’s not that you’re a mute, it’s that you choose not to speak. I believe selective mute is the correct term. If you can speak, let me hear your voice.”

I elbow his side, forcing him to loosen his grip on my back, then sign, “What do you know about my life? What makes you think I can speak or that I even want to? And just so you know, if I do happen to talk—which isn’t possible by any stretch of the imagination, by the way—I’ll never let you hear it, asshole.”

“Never say never, little muse.”

“I’m not little. I happen to be only five years younger than you.”

“Aaaand your obsession with me continues.” He smiles, but there’s no amusement this time. Just the stark shadow of his calculation. “Tell me, what was the incident that took your voice away at eight years old? Your parents seem to have put a lot of effort into erasing it from everyone’s memories.”

I internally release a breath. So even Landon and his conniving ways haven’t managed to get any information. For the first time, I’m thankful to be a mafia princess and in possession of the Bratva’s and, most importantly, my parents’ protection.

“Ever wondered if it’s hidden because it’s none of your business?” I smile with enough sweetness to give diabetes a run for its money.

“I can get that information anyway, even if it takes a bit longer than I’d like it to. So how about you tell me yourself now and save us both the time

and effort?”

“I’d like to see you try.”

His grin turns into one of demonic proportions. It’s like I provoked the decadent side of him that definitely gets off on the mention of a challenge. Just like Bran said.

He nudges me forward again until we arrive at another shabby door that he shoves open, and then he pushes me inside.

I stop near the entrance, my eyes adjusting to the darkness of the room. It’s a studio, I realize. Half-finished statues adorn the walls, some of them covered by white sheets. In the middle, there’s a chair and a workstation with equipment methodically aligned in perfectly horizontal rows. Double glass doors hint at a balcony on the opposite side that looks creepy.

Still, this room is by far the cleanest and newest in the house. The stained-glass windows are tinted with church-like paintings of some guys who are probably important, but I can’t name them to save my life.

The colorful lights cast a rainbow glow on the unfinished, disfigured statues. Some of them have faces and the others are missing features or even a whole body. Others are only torsos without a face.

“I thought you had a studio in the Elites’ mansion that’s protected by lock and key.”

“Take it easy on your obsession with me.”

My face heats, but I sign, “I only found that out in my attempts to sabotage you.”

“An obsession is still an obsession, no matter the reason. The fact that you’re stumbling to find an excuse is enough indication of the depth of your cute obsession. To answer your question, this is my second art studio, the third if we count the one at uni, but that one’s only for show since it’s shared with other students.”

“And this one?” I sign, then turn to the miserable statues. I don’t know why I feel sorry that they’ve been abandoned.

“This one is for the boring subjects that didn’t make the cut. I have a theory I want to prove.”

I turn to him with a questioning gaze, but my insides instantly knot into thick dread when my eyes lock with his.

Dark energy swirls in their depths, promising a taste of both danger and regret.

“Stand here for me and remain still. Like last night.”

“Why would I do that?”

“For the same reason you came here with me. To protect your precious family.”

I snarl and he merely smiles, then pats the top of my head as if I’m a pet. “Be good and no drastic measures will be taken.”

He walks to a half-faced statue and strokes the unfinished part with careful fingers, as if he doesn’t want to hurt a literal statue’s feelings. But why do I feel like, if given the chance, Landon wouldn’t hesitate to erase that statue as if it never existed?

After careful inspection, he lifts it effortlessly. Or more like, he makes it look easy. I can see his biceps flexing as a translation of his smashing power.

Landon might appear lean and definitely has fewer muscles than, say, Nikolai or Jeremy, but he’s still strong.

He deposits the statue on what looks like a sack of sand and sits on the chair opposite it.

He casts me a glance, throws a flirtatious wink, and then pulls out a cigarette and slides it to the corner of his lips. As he lights it, he fetches one of the countless tools and tosses it from one hand to the other as if testing its weight.

He puts it right back and retrieves another one that looks exactly the same to me, tosses it between his hands again, then inhales the smoke and releases a heavy cloud in the air.

I’ve never cared for the smell of cigarettes or smokers in general, but Landon makes it look hotter than it should be. It’s the blasé attitude and the confidence of a god that drips from his every movement.

With the cigarette hanging from his lips, he again strokes the statue, which I notice has generous breasts. He runs his fingers along the slope and then taps the nipple once.

Twice.

My body burns with unfamiliar scorching fire. His hand slides to her throat and I can feel the choker tightening around my own neck as if it’s his fingers.

What the hell?

His eyes flash to me and I stand still, scared to even breathe properly. The last thing I need is for Landon to think I find him attractive in any sense. He’s already conceited beyond belief.

“There. You’re such a good little muse.” His hand is still stroking and groping the statue as if it’s his lover.

“I’m just doing this out of necessity.”

“Are those words directed at me or yourself?”

He grins, and without waiting for my response, he gets to work. His fingers slowly but surely shape part of the statue’s head.

I’m struck by his expression when he creates. A stark difference from his usually mocking face. While sadism is still present, there’s also something different. I’ve never seen his eyes so light and engaged. They’re often half bored, as if the world holds no meaning to his immoral soul.

Now, however, he’s so far into his task that I don’t think he takes notice of how he seamlessly picks up tools or lights one cigarette after the other.

About an hour later, I’m getting tired of standing, so I attempt to lower myself into a sitting position.

“No.” He shakes his head, even though he hasn’t looked at me once since he started. “Don’t ruin it.”

“I’m tired,” I sign, but he’s still not looking at me. So I snap my fingers. Nothing.

“Let’s take a break. Do you have anything to drink?” I ask, but his mind seems to be busy focusing on his fingers and the unmoving object in front of him.

“I’m going to rest for a while.” I start to sit down, but he stands up abruptly, making me stop dead in my tracks.

He’s looking at me now, but I wish he wasn’t. His dark blues are no different than a stormy ocean that’s about to swallow me in its depths. “I said don’t ruin it, didn’t I?”

“You’re not the one standing. It’s tiring and boring,” I sign with less bravado than usual.

“Come here.”

“Why?” I sign cautiously.

“You said you’re tired, so we’ll fix it.”

I remain rooted in place. I’d rather stay standing for another hour than get close to him.

“Don’t make me come get you, Mia.”

It’s the first time he’s said my name, and it sounds like a deep growl.

Slowly, I make my way to him, assuring myself I’ll claw his eyes out if he hurts me. I can also break his dick for humanity’s sake.

Once I'm next to the statue, Landon pulls me toward him so suddenly, I gasp.

The sound echoes around us as he pulls me down so I'm straddling with my back to his chest. I squirm when I feel the hard muscle beneath me. I've never made a habit of being this close to the opposite sex.

My previous encounters left something to be desired and the unshakable feeling that they were boys.

Landon, however, is all man. It's not about the age, it's the edge with which he carries himself. It's the unapologetic way he touches me as if it's his birthright.

"Don't move," he whispers in my ear, drawing goosebumps on my skin. "Don't blame me for what happens if you do."

His arm snakes around my waist and his palm cups the statue's breast, fingers stroking the nipple.

I shudder, then curse myself. "Why do you keep doing that?"

"Shh, not a word." He winks. "Unless you want to let me hear your voice?"

I give him the middle finger.

"That's the last time you flip me off. Do it again and I will take matters into my own hands. Literally."

He lights a cigarette and blows the smoke in my face like an asshole.

Soon after, his attention falls on the motionless statue. I'd feel sorry for her if she were a real person, but it's better if he focuses on his art rather than me.

But with the damned position, I'm forced to breathe him in, the scent of man and intoxicating cologne. This close, I can't help noticing just how well-built his face and physique are. Arguably as perfect as his beloved statues.

Too bad he's as cold as them, too.

About twenty minutes later, I start fidgeting. It's impossible to stay too long in one position. Unless I'm playing chess, and that's definitely not the case right now.

It doesn't help that I'm inexplicably drawn to Landon and keep telling myself I haven't gone crazy yet.

"Stop shifting unless you're trying to hump my leg. In that case, go for it."

"I'll hump your leg in hell, asshole," I sign.

“Fine with me, little muse.”

“Why do you keep calling me that?”

“What?” he asks without looking at me.

“Muse. Why am I your muse?”

“Figures.” It’s a single word, but he says it with such nonchalance, as if it means nothing on his destruction curriculum for the day.

I lift my hand, but he gives me a look, to suggest I stop talking, no doubt. I’m so tempted to claw his gorgeous eyes out.

I try to remain still and chance taking out my phone. Landon doesn’t seem to notice, or he probably does but doesn’t care.

My attempts to relieve myself from the growing ache between my legs tether on the edge of failure with each brush of his arm against my side. The fanning of his breath against my cheek.

Inhaling deeply, I pull up Bran’s number and find his text from last night that I wasn’t in the right state of mind to read, let alone reply to.

Brandon: Have you gotten home safe? I’m here to help if your brother causes you trouble.

Mia: Hey! Sorry for the late reply. Yeah, I got home okay, and don’t worry about Niko. I know how to handle him.

His reply is immediate.

Brandon: Good to know. I was worried something might’ve happened to you.

Something happened all right, and I’m currently paying the price for it in Landon’s arms.

Mia: Hey, Bran. I know you’ve always mentioned I should stay away from Landon (not that I’m getting close to him or anything). Do you have any pointers on how to remove myself from his radar?

Brandon: The most important step is to never get on his radar in the first place. Once you’re there, it’s impossible to shake him off unless he willingly chooses to back off. Is he bothering you?

More like he’s sucking the life out of me.

I’m about to tell Bran not to worry so as not to drive a wedge between him and his twin, but the phone is snatched from between my fingers.

I stare into Landon’s displeased face and instinctively suck in a breath. The bastard has a mysterious power of making people feel uncomfortable with a single glance.

“Keep your attention on me when sitting on my lap.”

I can feel heat flaring up my neck, but I lift my chin. “I would’ve if you didn’t happen to bore me to tears.”

“And yet I can feel you dripping on my trousers.”

My mind goes blank. Did the earlier arousal somehow transform into something physical?

No, it can’t be possible.

Landon is just trying to get in my head. If I let him, he’ll swallow me whole and leave nothing but scattered bones.

“That’s not true,” I sign.

He methodically removes the cigarette from his mouth and stubs it in a makeshift ashtray made of clay.

Then he retrieves a wet wipe and cleans both his hands, enveloping me in an accidental hug.

He does it once.

Twice.

After the third time, he places the used wipe on top of the murdered cigarettes crowding the ashtray.

The arm that’s snaked around my back grips my waist, strong fingers digging into the flesh.

His other hand slides across my dress before he bunches it up, using one finger at a time as if he’s unwrapping a gift.

My heartbeat skyrockets and goosebumps cover other goosebumps on my flesh. The visual of his bigger, veiny hands—of course, the asshole possesses hands that are worthy of porn—on my paler flesh leaves me breathless.

Unlike earlier, his hand doesn’t stop at my thigh and, instead, travels up and up, leaving a mayhem of tingles in its wake.

A part of me knows I need to stop this. Grab his hand and kick him in the nuts for daring to touch me so intimately.

But the other part is enamored. Completely and utterly taken by the monster who’s triggering these emotions in me.

That part wants to see where this is going and how far I’ll fall.

How hard it will be.

The closest I’ve been to this was with Brian from high school. He was nice and I convinced myself that I liked him, but the moment he touched me, I realized just how much I’d fooled myself into wanting something I didn’t.