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Blood Tear Trilogy—Book 1: Burning Rose

By: Corrine Shroud

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### **Dedication**

Thanks to all of my wonderfully weird family and friends; you are constant inspiration. Also, thanks to Writing.com that gave me the opportunity to be seen. You all da'bombdiggy :)

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## Burning Rose

### 1.

"Your Dad let you get a tattoo?" Danielle asked incredulously.

Aloisia raised an eyebrow and looked behind her where her friend was attempting to slip a pink blouse over her head. "What do you mean?" she asked, trying to register what she was talking about.

Danielle didn't answer as she struggled with the tight shirt for a moment. Aloisia watched her fight with amusement before she felt sorry for her and reached out to help. "You could actually get this fashion disaster on if you unzipped the side, you know." She pushed the zipper down and the shirt immediately fell down past her head.

Danielle smiled sheepishly as she balled her curly hair up and pulled it out from beneath the shirt's neck and straitened the silky blouse across her small stomach. "Thanks, but I wish you'd hurry up and stop hogging the mirror. It's not like you need much makeup with that complexion of yours."

Aloisia rolled her eyes as she applied the last of her mascara and stepped aside so that Danielle could see herself in the mirror. "You never answered the question," Danielle remarked with a small smile as she situated herself in front of the lighted mirror. "Does your Dad know about that wicked tattoo? And, if he doesn't, how in the hell do you plan to hide something like that?"

"What tattoo?" demanded Aloisia exasperatedly.

"Have you gone insane, girl? How can you forget about this?" Danielle tapped the middle of her back, just below her bra strap.

Aloisia finally realized what she was talking about and her smile faltered. She turned from Danielle to hide her uneasy expression as she slid her red spaghetti strap shirt on to cover it. It really was a beautiful tattoo, but it wasn't for display. Granted, she wasn't going to try as hard as other Heart members to keep it hidden, but she had hoped to keep it from her friend. She shouldn't have let Danielle see it at all—she had to lie to her enough now as it was. How she could forget about it so easily was beyond her; it wasn't as if there wasn't something, normally with fangs or claws, to remind her every day.

"Yeah, my Dad knows about it," Aloisia said nervously. Hell, it was *because* of her family that she had Zaintili's Blood Tear on her back.

"Wow, your Dad sure is cool. It's beautiful; I bet it costs fortune. When did you get it?"

"It was a ... birthday ... present." Somehow Aloisia couldn't keep the bitterness from her tone. If Danielle caught her tone, she ignored it.

"Your Dad paid for it? Somehow, that doesn't surprise me. Did you design it, 'cause I've never seen it in one of your drawings before?"

Aloisia shook her head, wishing she could think of a way to change the subject. She didn't like talking about the Blood Tear. It was a burden, a brand. Despite how beautiful she thought the red, black and

purple rose was, she wished she'd never even heard of it, let alone it adorn her back. The tattoo was large, the black and red hearts that rested below the rose settled into the small of her back while the yellow and orange flames that backed the iridescent rose and hearts licked as far up as he shoulder blades.

Danielle peered backward at her after a moment. "Your birthday was almost two months ago, Lo," Her friend accused, sounding hurt. Why haven't I seen it before? You'd think I would have been the first to see it. You could have at least said something."

Aloisia shrugged, fighting the rush of guilt that surged through her. "I haven't thought about it is all."

"Umm," Danielle hummed disbelievingly, but she didn't comment further as she applied pink eye shadow that perfectly matched her shirt. There was an uneasy silence, and Aloisia couldn't think of anything to say while she watched Danielle apply makeup. She was more aware than ever of the rift that had started to grow between her and her best friend of over five years. She had to fight the urge to tell her for probably the millionth time as she sat down on the toilet and waited for her to finish.

Danielle was putting her makeup in the cabinet under the sink when her mom opened the door.

"Dan, Lo, what on earth is taking so long?" she demanded. "You two are going to be late for your dates. What a fine impression you would make if you were still in the bathroom when they arrived."

"Geez, mom, don't have a cow," Danielle griped, smiling. She ran a brush once more through her long streaked curly hair and gave herself a look in the mirror. The pink complemented her milky dark skin. She turned her head to one side, allowing Aloisia to catch a glimpse of the dark blue eyes that were uncommon with her skin color. She'd inherited her eyes and freckles from her fair father. "I'm finished."

She stepped out and motioned back toward Aloisia. "Come on."

Aloisia shook her head. "I'll be out in a minute."

Danielle rolled her eyes. "Perfectionist," she muttered as she followed her mom out.

Aloisia smiled at her friend's retreating back before turning back to the large, lighted mirror. Her figure peered back at her wanly and she fixed a few loose hairs back behind her ear. She scrutinized herself. Danielle's mom, Chloe, called her beautiful and exotic. Aloisia didn't know if she was really that pretty though and believed that it was mostly Chloe being her normal exaggerating self. She was at a normal height—not shorter than most girls but was towered over by most boys—and was petite with taunt muscles that showed she worked out. Her face was small and framed by short black hair she had spiked in the back and one side. The other side was longer and curled under her chin. There were red streaks through her angled bangs and the slicked down side of her hair.

Aloisia stepped back and straitened her shirt. The red shirt had a dark purple skull and crossbones and fitted snugly to her body. A line of midriff peeked between the shirt and her black cargo pants. After a moment, Aloisia looked out of the bathroom to make sure that the hallway was empty before hurrying to her purse.

She unzipped it and slipped out the small blades and long dagger she had packed from home. The blades were only slightly larger than a razor and were devoid of a hilt, making for easy concealment. Aloisia slipped a blade into each of her arm bands, two in inner compartments in the pants and one in an inside slip of her bra. She made sure the dagger was hilt deep in its sheath, strapped it to her right calve,

and pulled the pant leg down.

"Lo, you need to hurry, honey. They'll be here any minute!" Chloe yelled from downstairs.

"Hold your horses, I'll be down there in a second," Aloisia yelled out, amused. "I'm good enough to wait for." She could hear Chloe's laughter as she fished through her purse again and pulled out her red lip-gloss and went back to the mirror. She checked her purple eye shadow that was on above large, round eyes that were a dark forest green that sometimes glinted black. She applied the gloss and was finally satisfied.

Aloisia slipped her black converse shoes on, grabbed her purse, and walked out, switching off the light. She was glad her bruises from the fight last weekend had faded enough to cover them up with makeup.

They had been horrible and had covered the right side of her face. Diablo, a Bloodbane she had been hunting for nearly a year and a half, had shoved her head into a tree and she had barely managed to keep him from snapping her neck. Her brother Toby had offered to heal her, but the injuries hadn't been life threatening and her father hadn't allowed it. Personally, she was surprised the social services hadn't been called yet, as often as she had injuries. She could only suppose the influence her family had in Clions allowed her father to speak to the right people to keep things quiet. She was only happy that it had been the last week and summer vacation had begun. Now it would be easier to hide injuries from the public.

There was a knock on the door and Aloisia hurried down the stairs, trying to leave her troubled thoughts behind her. Her family had promised her a break this week, and she had spent her first week of summer vacation with her best friend. So far, it had went good, and her father hadn't called her into a battle, and she wasn't going to ruin her last day of freedom by worrying about her duties as the Avenger. Today she was going to be normal, even if it killed her. Aloisia walked through the hallway that led from Danielle's stairs, wondering why she let Danielle talk her into a blind double date. Her friend had met this boy, Charlie, at the mall before the end of school. He had just moved to Clions and she decided it would be fun to show the new boy and his brother around. That would have been fine if she hadn't included her in it. Aloisia shook her head to herself as she entered the living room and stood beside Danielle as Chloe let in two boys.

"This is Charlie," Danielle said motioning her hands, "and this is Asher, his brother. Asher, this is my friend Aloisia Zanadel."

They smiled in greeting and Aloisia felt herself smiling back. She couldn't help but think that Danielle had done a good job. They were both slightly taller than her and well built. Charlie had short brown hair and dark brown eyes. He was wearing a white shirt with a blue eagle on it with a pair of blue jeans. His brother was taller by about an inch with darker brown hair that brushed his shoulders and light hazel eyes. His shirt was black that, Aloisia noticed with a smile, had a white skull and crossbones.

"Wow, you have really good taste in clothes," he remarked, smiling widely.

Aloisia laughed, thinking that if his personality was as good as his humor and looks then she had herself a winner. After all that was going on in her life, the thought was a comforting one.

"I expect these girls home at ten," Chloe said.

"Then we better be off," Charlie replied. He led Danielle out and Asher and Aloisia walked out behind him side by side.

"We had to drive separate trucks," he said. "Ours only sit two; we would've brought our uncle's car, but

he's getting work done on it."

Aloisia shrugged. "That's alright." She looked down the drive to where two trucks were parked beside each other. They were an old make but looked well taken care of. One was white and the other was black.

"Sorry for the clunkers," Charlie said from ahead of her. "They were our sixteenth birthday presents. Our uncle calls them perfect little college vehicles." He rolled his eyes. "Don't worry though; they run good."

"They're fine," Danielle said. "You should see the car mom got me."

Charlie laughed and led her to the white truck. He opened her door and shut it behind her before going round and getting in. He drove off, leaving Asher and Aloisia behind him.

"Don't worry, they'll wait for us at the restaurant," Asher said as he went to the driver's side and got in.

"What, no door holding?" Aloisia asked wryly as she got in beside him.

He raised an eyebrow and answered, "You didn't strike me as that kind of girl."

She nodded. "Damn straight!"

He grinned and started the truck. He backed out and turned onto the main road. "Sorry no music, the radio broke and I haven't had time to get it fixed yet."

Aloisia shrugged. "The radio doesn't play my kind of music most of the time anyway."

Asher nodded his head and didn't say anything else. They drove on in silence as Aloisia watched the buildings of Clions city pass her by. She rolled down the window and allowed the summer air to rush past her face. She breathed in deeply and sighed. It was good to just sit back and relax. She'd had a very trying couple of months; they had been the most difficult in her life. They had been more exhausting than her Preparation, but she expected no less. As the first few months were always the most difficult when entering the lone hunting stage of training, it promised not to let up and give her a rest on her summer break from school. As much as she hated it, it was necessary. Who would take over the protection of this city and the surrounding Body when her Dad died if not her? She was the only Avenger other than him; she was the only one with the strength to protect it from the Bloodbanes. So, instead of a sweet sixteen party, she had gotten marked and burdened. Aloisia couldn't help but think of the irony of how most girls anticipated their sweet sixteen, but she had dreaded hers.

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## 2.

"Will you look at that," Asher breathed, bringing her out of her thoughts. Aloisia looked out the front window to see a massive traffic jam. She looked out further to see a large, black plume of smoke trailing out of a two story building. The shrill sirens of ambulances, fire trucks, and police cars called in screeching cries that reminded Aloisia of birds of death.

"Wow, I wonder what happened," Aloisia said, watching the flames lick out of the first floor windows.

"I don't know, but I know a way around it," Asher replied. He put the truck in reverse and turned around, earning a honk from the vehicle behind them.

"Around it?"

"Yeah, there's a back road to the Main Course, but it's sorta roundabout and it takes almost fifteen more minutes. I'm positive that Charlie would have gone that way."

"How is it you just moved here not long ago and you know more about the city than I do?"

Asher smiled. "We live around that way and it's the way we got to your friend's house."

"Oh."

"Is that alright?"

"Sure," Aloisia said absentmindedly as she glanced back at the shrinking fire. She tried to tell herself that she couldn't have done anything. Well, not without blowing her cover. Besides, they had probably already gotten everybody out anyway. She kept telling herself that until she almost believed it. Almost. Still ... she had a horrible feeling about that fire she just couldn't shake.

"You know what?" Asher said, breaking the silence.

"What?" Aloisia asked, turning her head away from the fiery building. She rolled her window up before the smoke had any more chance to invade the small area. There was enough smoke already pervading the small cab of the truck and she had to take a moment to chase away her choking nerves that was always associated with fire.

"People normally speak when they go on dates."

Aloisia laughed in spite of herself. "Sorry about that. I've just got a lot on my mind."

"I'll say," he remarked. "You look like you bear the weight of the world."

"You can say that again," she muttered.

"You want to talk about it?"

Aloisia thought about it then shook her head. "No. Sorry, but I don't feel comfortable spilling my guts to a guy I've just met."

"Hey, don't worry about it. I understand completely. Maybe later on, right? I mean, that is, if we go out a couple of times more or something."

Aloisia raised an eyebrow. "You're not pushy like the other guys I've dated."

It was Asher's turn to laugh. "And you're blunter than other girls."

"Thanks."



Asher glanced at her for a moment before turning his attention back to the road. He drummed a tuneless beat on the steering wheel. "How much can I know about you?"

"Well, I have four older brothers," she said.

"Four?"

"Yeah, it's just us five and our Dad."

"Wow, you're the only girl. What about your mom?" When Aloisia didn't say anything he said quickly, "I'm sorry. You don't have to answer."

"It's alright," Aloisia finally said. "I just don't like talking about it. She died in a fire when I was six. We were close and her death really messed me up."

Asher hesitated, his expression thoughtful. "You don't seem messed up to me," he said quietly, "cool, but definitely not messed up."

There was something laced in his voice that Aloisia couldn't understand. She glanced at him, puzzled, before saying, "Then I hide it well." After a moment she continued, "What about you and your brother? You twins?"

"Yeah, how can you tell?" Asher joked half-heartedly. He turned into the parking lot of the restaurant The Main Course. "Seriously though, it's only us and our uncle. Our real parents died when we were three. If you're wondering why I was so quiet after you told me about your mom, it's because our parents also died in a fire. We had been staying with one of their friends while they redid our rooms and there was an electrical fire. Our uncle adopted us." He turned into a parking space and turned off the truck, looking toward the entrance of the restaurant. "I think that's Charlie and Danielle waiting on the bench."

Aloisia knew he was changing the subject purposefully, and she gratefully allowed him. "Well, let's not keep them waiting any longer," she stated, getting out of the truck. She waited by his door while he got out and locked the truck. They walked slowly, enjoying the fading light and evening smells of summer.

"You guys need to hurry," Charlie called out. "We have two and a half hours before we need to get the girls home."

"We have time," Asher reassured him.

Aloisia jumped as her phone started belting out its metal ring tone. Danielle groaned. "Don't speak too soon, Asher," she complained as Aloisia felt through her purse. She found the cell phone, flicked it open, and sighed as her home number lighted across the screen. After debating a moment, she held up a finger signaling for the others to wait and hurried to a corner of the outside area where nobody was.

"Hello?" she said into the phone. As odd as it seemed, she hoped it was only one of her brothers checking in on her. She knew better than that, considering that she hadn't heard from her family once during the week, but anything would be better than the alternative ... being called in on a battle.

"Who but seeks the truth?"

"Damn it, Donny, Dad promised me a break," she exclaimed, her worst fears confirmed. There was no

answer and Aloisia sighed. She repeated her part of the code. "Those who wish only answers."

"Look, I'm sorry, Aloisia, but Dad needs your help."

His tone of voice made Aloisia breath in deeply. "You've got my attention; what's happening?"

"Did you see the fire on Vessin Street?"

"Yeah, we had to take a side street to get to The Main Course." Aloisia's heart plummeted. "What about it?"

"That's no normal fire. It set Toby's alarms, pardoning the expression, on fire. Dad went to check it out when it started and we've not heard from him. It was your turn to patrol, but he took it so you could finish the rest of your weekend. I'm sorry I'm interrupting, but the fire started this morning and he should have at least called."

"I understand," she resigned, hanging her head slightly. She fought the already rising unease that was threatening to swallow her.

"Gregory is coming to pick you up. You know him; he won't take long. He left about a half an hour ago. We called Danielle's but you two had left so we thought we'd head you off before you went in to eat."

"I'll be waiting." She was proud that her voice didn't waver any.

"Are you armed?" Aloisia hesitated and a sigh blew through the phone. "I'll take that as a no."

"Hey, I've got five of those micro blades you got me for my birthday and a dagger. That was enough for a night on the town," she said defensively.

"Aloisia," Donny sighed, tone dangerous.

"I'm sorry, alright?"

"Gladly, your brothers anticipate your amateur mistakes. Shaun packed you a backpack of your favorite weapons."

His condescending tone made her bristle. "Look, if I'm such an amateur, then you go into the flames for the baddy."

"Aloisia, don't jump onto me because your weekend is ruined. You're the only Avenger other than Dad, and you know our Codes, or at least you should. I'm a Scholar. I can't hunt and neither can Whisperers, Weaponists or even Conduits. You're the only fighter amongst us, girl, and you're going to have to accept that eventually."

"Yeah, yeah, well I need to tell my friend and date that I'm ditching them."

"I am sorry, but I just don't want to lose another parent. Especially in a fire."

"Okay," Aloisia said, her voice softening. "Don't worry; I'll bring him home safely."

"Now that sounds like my Aloisia. I love you. Be safe, alright?"

"I will."

"Avenge the might of good, little sis."

"Bear the knowledge of ages," she replied immediately.

The phone clicked as he hung up.

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### 3.

"Don't tell me," Danielle huffed as Aloisia walked back up, "you have to leave."

"I'm sorry, Dan, I really am." Her friend didn't answer. She growled and shook her head, her curls bouncing like an angry sea behind her. Before Aloisia could stop her, she threw the door to the restaurant open and stormed in. After a moment of bewildered staring, Charlie followed her.

Asher approached her after a moment of awkward silence. "You're leaving?"

"Yeah, my brother Gregory is picking me up."

"Anything wrong?"

Aloisia shrugged, swallowing and clearing her voice. "My Dad needs me. Donny didn't give specifics."

"Well, I'm sorry you have to leave."

She looked at him, knowing he wouldn't want to speak to her again. It was a shame too, because she already liked him. "I'm sorry too."

"You got a number I can call to talk to you?"

Aloisia started in surprise and smiled. "Sure." She gave him the number, fervently hoping he would call.

"I'll wait with you for your brother and then go on home. No reason why I should intrude on Danielle and Charlie."

"He won't be long." She watched her black sports car turn sharply into the parking lot. "Speak of the devil. Damn him, I told him to keep out of my car."

"That's your car? Nice," complimented Asher. "You may be picking me up next time."

Aloisia laughed. "Sure." She reached out and hugged him. "Thanks for being so understanding." She hesitated, then thought what the hell and kissed his cheek.

"It was nothing really," Asher grinned.

Aloisia patted his shoulder before she ran to where her car was stopped. She got in, slamming the door behind her. She waved as Gregory pulled out and drove off.

"Stop grinning," Aloisia snapped as Gregory glanced at her. He made no attempt to mask the wide, goofy grin that encompassed most of his handsome face. He put a hand through his short blond hair, ruffling the bit of gel he put in it. He had an air of confidence that women loved about him, even though she never quite found the appeal. He had a different girlfriend nearly every week.

"My little sis has herself a honey. How cute."

"Shut up and tell me where my weapons are."

"In the seat behind you. You'll need to hurry. I know a way behind the building with less people, but after that you're on your own."

"What kind of Whisperer are you?" she demanded as she turned around and grabbed the red backpack.

"A damn good one to clean up your messes."

Aloisia ignored him as she ruffled through the contents of the bag. She slipped on her shoulder holster with her guns and clipped ammo to the rings that ran across the front. She replaced her micro blades with wrist sheaths, slipped two of the knives into her waistband, and slid a belt of throwing knives around her waist. Her weapons were an assortment of different blades and metals that prepared her for most that she would face, because it took different things to kill most Bloodbanes. After a moment of debate, she put the rest of the micro blades down her bra where the other was kept.

"Be careful or you'll cut those things off and then your boyfriend will be so upset."

"Shove it up your ass," Aloisia returned as she dragged out the last thing in the backpack—a pair of thick gloves with the fingers cut out. She fished through her purse and found a small clip to push back the long side of her hair.

Gregory stopped on the side of the road. "Hurry and get out," he said as he unbuckled and stood from the car.

Aloisia stuck her head out of the window. "Why? We're at least five minutes until we get there."

Gregory rolled his dark grey eyes as he walked to her side of the car. He tapped her forehead and explained, "You're going into a fire right? Well, Shaun sent me this spray for you. It's the newest stuff that he and Donny developed. It has flame retardant properties and Toby kicked it up with an enchantment. It won't save you from all the burns, but it'll keep you well done instead of extra crispy."

"Fine." She got out and allowed him to spray her from top to bottom. The spray came out in spurting mists that were cold and sticky and left an oily, slimy feeling. It smelled old and musty, like her attic.  
"Uck, I don't even want to know what's in this. I'll never get it off my skin."

"Poor baby. Don't be such a girl." He winced as she punched him in the shoulder, the bone popping.  
"Come on, get in," he said, rotating his shoulder and rubbing it. "We've wasted enough time."

They got in and he revved her car up and sped down the road. Taking one hand off the steering wheel, he pushed a button and opened the dashboard. "This is for you." Aloisia got out a slim face mask

attached to a small oxygen tank. "It's small so as not to hinder your fighting capabilities, but Toby concentrated it so that it'll last longer. You have an hour—two tops. Don't turn on the oxygen until you have to."

"Thanks, Greg," Aloisia said, relieved. "I was wondering how I was going to get through the smoke."

"No problem."

"Now one last thing is missing," she said. Aloisia turned around and lifted the hidden catch on the floor board behind the front seat, revealing her most prized possession. It was her mother's sword. It was fashioned from various styles and was long with a samurai shape. Both sides were sharp and had blessings and incantations entwined around the blade. The hilt was thin and stout, made for the small hands of a woman, and was covered with the Zâintili's Blood Tear. The sheath was black with red roses and gold thorns embroidered into it.

"You and that sword," griped Greg.

"Hey, don't dis the sword." She felt calmer just handling it. "It's saved my ass more times than I care to count."

"It's just ... well it would be hard to explain a sword if you're caught."

Aloisia rolled her eyes. "Oh, and the guns and knives wouldn't be."

Gregory ignored her as he bypassed a squalling ambulance and turned onto a back street. "I won't be too far from here. Just get out as quickly as you can and I'll take care of the rest. The side of the road is lined with high grass. They've been trying to make sure it doesn't catch as well, but it's your best bet to start. I'll drive by slow so you can get out and maybe try to get the attention of some of the firemen, but then you're on your own."

Aloisia strapped her sword on and slipped the mask over her head, letting it hang around her neck. She put the oxygen on her back and was surprised by its light weight. "In the end, that's how it always is," she said.

"Yeah, it is," Gregory agreed grimly. "Bring Dad home safe, alright?"

Aloisia looked at the imposing wall of fire and tried to swallow the rising wave of fear the threatened to overcome her. She had fought hard not to think about entering the burning building on the trip here. Now, her nerves bore down on her; it would be the first time she encountered a fire like this since her mother died. "I'll try."

Gregory slowed the car down to a crawl. "Avenge the might of good, little sis."

Aloisia opened her car door. "Keep forever our secrets silent," she replied before jumping out and running into the high weeds. She dropped to the ground immediately and crawled army style back to the edge of the weeds, peeking her head out to watch her brother drive further on. As her Whisperer, it was his job to make a distraction and insure that she wasn't caught. She wasn't as good as her father yet; she'd had a lot of close calls from being discovered.

"Hey, hey, you can't be around here!" a fireman yelled. He ran out to the car, arms out.

Gregory rolled the window down as he stopped the car. He flashed a dazzlingly friendly smile and said loudly, "I'm sorry sir. I don't know my way around this part of the city and thought this road might lead away from the fire. I guess I was wrong." He looked around his surroundings and pointed backward. "Now I'm trying to find a way to turn around."

"Well you'll have to back up into those weeds. I can't let you go any further. This entire building could go down at any moment."

"So you've not had any luck putting the fire out?"

"Luck?" The fireman snorted in amused laughter and wiped at his sweaty face. "Hell, if I didn't know any better, I'd say the fire restarted itself and had a mind of its own. Every time we think we've got it all out, it just starts again."

"Well, that's odd," Greg said, scratching his chin. Aloisia realized that was a sign for her to start moving. She glanced at the firemen up further on the road, but they were too busy fighting the fire. She looked around for a place to hide near the burning building. The bushes that lined the walls were strangely untouched. She found that odd and way too convenient for herself. She couldn't help but feel like she was walking straight into a trap. Still, she couldn't leave her father and she knew she was backed into a corner. Now, to find out what had done it.

Aloisia glanced back at her brother to see him getting a map out. He was pointing at it and asking the fireman something, but Aloisia tuned him out. She watched closely as the fireman bent over the map as she rose up into a low crouch and steadied herself to run. She launched herself forward, sprinting across the road in a blur. Aloisia stopped herself against the wall and slid her back down the brick wall until she was completely hidden by the bushes. She breathed in and fought the urge to cough as smoke filled her lungs. After a moment of controlled breathing, the feeling passed and she could breath normally again.

Sweat already beaded across her forehead and waves of heat from the fire assaulted her. The wall against her thin spaghetti strap shirt was warm. Even though the summer air was cooler because of the coming evening, it was still hot and this made it nearly unbearable. She wished her brother would hurry so the fireman would join the others and she could slip into the building. Her brother was turning around awkwardly in the weeds. She winced as she heard a branch slap the back end of her car.

"If that car is scratched, he is so getting it fixed," Aloisia muttered to herself. The fireman was walking back to his spot, and she waited on bated breath as he passed her hiding place. When she knew he was far enough not to hear, she unsheathed her sword and used the hilt to break the window out, shirking back as glass shards rained down on her head. After she had made sure the noise hadn't attracted the firemen's attention, she stood up, sheathed her sword, and pushed herself through the window, falling heavily onto a desk and rolling onto the floor with a thump.

The smoke hung heavily in the air and she began coughing immediately. Her breath became strangled as she struggled to get her mask onto her face. She turned on the oxygen tank and took deep breaths before she could calm her breathing down and stand up.

"Stupid," Aloisia groaned, her voice muffled by the mask. She looked around and was surprised to see that there were no flames—just heavy black smoke that hung low to the ground like a dark fog. The walls were blackened, along with everything else, but other than that, the room seemed fine. There was no excessive amount of wreckage or damage and that struck Aloisia as the oddest thing she had seen yet. She looked around the small, office like room and couldn't understand it. If there had been a fight between a Bloodbane and her father there would have been signs of a struggle—blood or something.

There had been a fire, that much was evident, but there was nothing left of it.

It was eerily quiet, and Aloisia thought that she should hear something else, but the silence was oppressive and pressed down on her more heavily than the heat did. Her footsteps crunched in a layer of ash and broken glass as she took small steps. The sound echoed across her surrounding contrasted by a slight crackling, no louder than a campfire. The roar of the flames had been audible from the road, and they should have been louder in here. It didn't take a genius to see something was wrong.

A loud thump from above her head shook her back to attention. The ceiling shook as footsteps sounded. Aloisia barely had time to roll out of the way as a tile fell and crashed to the floor.

"Did I hurt you, young Avenger?" Aloisia froze as the voice boomed down at her. It was loud and crackled like a flickering blaze. There was power in the voice and it stirred something within her. She didn't understand why, but the voice terrified her beyond anything she had ever experienced. "I sincerely hope not. Who else would save your father? He's not got much time left, you know, and you took such a long time getting here. You'd better hurry up."

There was a groan and a strangled yell that jolted Aloisia back into action. She found her voice with and yelled, "You leave my father alone, damn it!"

"Oh, such language," the horrible crackling voice mocked. "What would your mother say?"

Aloisia knew he was trying to goad her, and she tried to ignore him as she searched for the stairs that had to lead the way up. After a few seconds, she found them. She slid a gun from its holster, clicked the safety off, and made for them, skirting the debris as quietly as she could. She put her back to the edge of the wall and slid to a crouch before turning quickly, gun pointed along the arch of the stairs.

They were empty.

Aloisia stood and pointed the gun to the ground. She stepped on the first step, careful not to creak and kept her eyes on the top entrance. The stairs were long, dark, and narrow, and there was a red-orange glow under the door at the top. She ghosted up the stairs and paused as she reached out for the metal handle of the door.

"How stupid does he think I am?" she whispered to herself as she held her hand inches from the handle of the door. Heat radiated off of it and she knew how bad her hand would have been burned if she had tried to open the door. Instead, she aimed her gun, turned her head, and fired, blowing the handle off. She kicked the door as hard as she could, breaking it inward.

Aloisia ran in and dropped to the ground in a crouch to make herself a smaller target as her eyes scanned the room. Her sight fell briefly on the suspended form of her father, but she forced herself to keep her attention on the surroundings like she had been trained. Small fires burned in the corners of the room, but other than her father, the room appeared empty.

"Well, well, I have a professional on my hands." Aloisia watched a wall of bright blue fire form feet in front of her. It rushed toward her and she dropped her gun and jumped up, grabbing onto a light fixture and pulling herself parallel to the ceiling. She bit back a pained sound as the flames licked her back and passed by her. There was a crack and she crashed back to the ground as the light broke from the ceiling.

Aloisia looked at where she had dropped her gun. It was melted into an indistinguishable glob. "Damn," she whistled, "that was my favorite gun."

She unsnapped the strap that held her other gun in place and clicked the safety off but didn't draw it as the thing spoke again. "Really, you are good! You just might be the one. Most of the other young Avengers run to check on their fellow Heart members, but not you." Aloisia kept scanning the room as she stood up but couldn't find whatever was speaking. The voice seemed to come from the walls and she couldn't distinguish any particular direction. She started to make her way to her father. "You won't be so easy to kill."

"Well, Bloodbane, if you've realized that much then you're not as stupid as I thought you were. Still, that's not saying much." Aloisia felt a breath breeze past her neck and she spun around, pulling blades from the sheaths on her wrist. She made a neck slashing movement with her left and a gutting strike with her right. The blades passed through the flame and came back melted. She dropped the now useless enchanted silver blades before they could burn her.

"Can't cut flame, honey," it said as Aloisia stumbled backward. She choked back a scream as what she was fighting stepped out of the wall of blue flames, towering over her. She had never seen anything as morbid as it was. The Bloodbane had pale, transparent skin that was stretched tautly over its muscled body. Screaming faces writhed in flame beneath his skin, swirling in churning shades of blue and black. Pearl white eyes stared at her dark green ones from a sunken, ashen black face. Horns curved down his face, shining like poisonous black snakes. In place of legs, his body trailed down in tendrils of blue fire and black smoke. Aloisia stumbled, drawing her gun. She shot at the thing as she fell, hitting it three times in the chest.

"Can't shoot me either," it said as it wafted to her. The ground flamed beneath him and the air became unbearably hot. She holstered her gun as she scrambled up and turned to run toward her father.

Aloisia screamed as it grabbed the back of her shirt. Heat burned and seared her shoulders as it took her in its hands. She could practically feel her skin blister and peel away. She tried to fight as it tied a loop of rope to her hands and hung her on a hook beside her father, but her struggle was futile. "Now, to see if you're the one that got away." The monster touched her cheek with a clawed finger that had cooled and become cold enough to hurt. He trailed the claw in a long line that began to bleed immediately, trailing a slow, lazy line down her sweat streaked face.

"I'd better not scar," she muttered.

He ignored her as he cut deeply into her, following her jaw line, down her neck before pausing at the beginning of her cleavage. "You've got a beautiful body," he said.

"Yeah, well, wish I could say the same for you," she said scathingly as she fought back a groan.

"Ah, you're spirited. Nice change from the begging I so often hear," he said as he took his nail away and licked the blood off of it. His tongue was long and forked, like a snake's. Aloisia struggled not to react as he patted her body for weapons. He took her belt of knives, the gun, and the dagger from her, casting them to the ground below her. His hands paused over the sword and he took it off with care.

"You leave my sword alone," she growled.

"Your sword? I think not," he said after a moment longer of staring at it. He strapped it to his back. "It's mine now."

"The only way you get to touch that blade is when I shove it in your heart."



"I really tire of your words," he said, his voice bored. He ripped a long hole down her cargo pants at her right thigh. "I think I'd rather hear you begging after all." He looked at a spot on her thigh and smiled widely, revealing a row of razor teeth and his forked tongue. "Especially since I found the Avenger I've been looking for. Scream for me and I'll let you die quickly." He dug his nails into her thigh, and she threw her head back in pain. She gritted her teeth, but didn't cry out.

"Sorry to disappoint, but I don't beg for anyone," she said breathlessly.

"Really? I wonder if you'd say the same thing when I take your mask off."

Aloisia shirked back, shaking her head. This was her worse fear—smothering to death. Though she knew there were much more painful deaths an Avenger could endure, to her this was the worst. When you died that way, it wasn't in battle. Instead, you died helplessly, your own body betraying you; the last thing you heard was the sound of your coughing and the silence as your heart quit. Her fear went deeper than a phobia; it was primal.

Aloisia was ready to fight anyway she could to keep the mask on when the monster paused and looked down. "We have company," he hissed. Crashes sounded from below and hurrying footsteps quickly followed.

"Police! Put all your weapons down and come down the stairs slowly with your hands on your head."

The Bloodbane turned his attention back to her and smiled slightly. "Ah, what fun. How much would you like to hear them scream, Avenger? Since you can't beg, they'll do it for you." He began to melt away in small droplets of vivid blue flames until he bled through the floor beneath them, leaving them alone. Not long after that, the yells began, but Aloisia tried to ignore them.

She couldn't help them now. No one could.

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#### 4.

"Dad?" Aloisia whispered. "Are you alright?" She kicked out, knocking her foot against his leg. He stirred weakly. "Dad? Can you speak?"

He groaned softly and said in a cracked voice that was muffled by his oxygen mask, "Yeah, barely."

"If I got us down, could you get out of here without my help?"

"I don't know ... probably."

"I know you've been hurt, but I need your help. If I hurt you I'm sorry, but not that sorry."

"What are you going to do?"

"Just hush." Aloisia took a deep breath to steady herself and twirled her body to face her Dad. She moved him with her feet until he faced her and lifted up with her arms until she hooked her legs around his

shoulders. She pushed with her legs, trying to lift her loop of rope over the hook.

"Damn!" she exclaimed.

"What's wrong?" her father grunted.

"He's bent the hook so I can't lift out." Aloisia thought for a moment. "Hang on, I've got an idea. She steadied herself then lifted again, flipping her legs up until they touched the ceiling. She fought the groan of pain as her hurt shoulders screamed in protest. Her arms strained against the rope as she reached into her shirt and took out three of the micro blades. She put them in her mouth and lowered herself to the ground.

The screams were still sounding from below as Aloisia lifted up and carefully took the blades out of her mouth. It didn't take long to cut herself free and she dropped back down. "What in the hell is he doing to them down there?"

"I don't know, and I don't want to know," her father said quietly. "Hurry and get me down." Aloisia reached up and cut him loose, catching him before he fell completely to the ground. "What are we going to do now?" he asked as he pulled his mask off. He coughed slightly but kept the mask off. He shrugged out of the small tank on his back and set it on the floor.

Aloisia started, surprised that her Dad didn't take charge like he normally did. "I can't leave those police to die down there, I just can't," she said. Her father opened his mouth to argue but she shook her head and continued quickly, "Besides, you're too weak to make a window jump. I will rearm myself and go down there as a distraction. Follow in behind and leave as quickly as you can."

"I can't leave you alone with that monster," her father protested.

"You're in no condition to fight," she argued. "You'll just get in the way. Don't worry, I've no intentions on killing the Bloodbane, just distracting it. Try to lose yourself in the panic and hide in the weeds on the side of the road until I get out. Then we'll find Greg together." The whole time Aloisia had been speaking she had been strapping her holster and belt on. She slipped her dagger in its sheath.

"Fine," her father relented. They hurried toward the door and looked down. Flames were ignited at the base of the stairs, casting darting shadows. The yelling had grown less and Aloisia could distinguish a low whimpering and laughing. She swallowed her fear and looked back at her father. Her neck and shoulders burned dully, and distantly she knew that the Bloodbane had burned her badly; the cut he had made still trickled blood and stung but she ignored it.

"Don't look back. Just run forward. One of us has to get out and report to the Heart."

"What do you plan to do?" he asked hesitantly.

Aloisia released the clip of the silver ammo and pushed a clip of iron and lead into her gun. If silver hadn't worked then maybe this would. "I want my sword back."

"Be careful, Aloisia," he said as he pulled her into a hug. "I'm sorry I ruined your break with Danielle."

"It's alright," she said, taken by surprise. "Don't worry; I'll be fine."

He broke the hug and clasped her arm. "Be strong, fellow Avenger, and avenge Zâintili."

"Rest, fellow Avenger, and ready for the next battle," Aloisia returned automatically before she nodded and bounded down the stairs. She didn't bother with being cautious; the only thing that was going to get her and her Dad out alive was surprise. Aloisia steeled herself as she launched forward and rolled through the flames. She extended her roll to be sure her clothes didn't catch and stopped near the center of the room.

Aloisia scanned the room, taking in the broken bodies of the scattered policemen. Several of their corpses were still ignited and another was burning alive. She forced them from her mind; she could do nothing for them, although she knew the sight and wails of agony would haunt her dreams. Instead, she sighted and aimed for the Bloodbane that had caused all of this.

He had a policeman by the neck, raised high above his head. The shot took him in the head and he staggered, dropping the policeman. He released an ear splitting howl as he turned around and faced Aloisia. He started toward her and flames breathed through his body, enveloping him until all Aloisia could distinguish was his white eyes.

She vaguely registered that her mother's sword had fallen to the ground, the strap that had held it in place falling in ashes, before she turned and tried to run from the rushing flames. She wasn't quick enough and a massive, blistering hot hand enclosed around her neck again. She ignored the pain and slammed her head backward, connecting with a hard, cool chin. The hand released her and she spun around, holstering her gun. She drew the two enchanted iron and lead knives from her waistband and went into her fighting stance.

"You think you can kill me?" it smirked.

Aloisia shook her head. "No, but I'm not just going to lie down and die for you, either." She threw both knives in one fluid motion and he tried to move away, but wasn't quick enough, and one of the knives glanced off his cheek. To her amazement, dark, viscous liquid seeped from the cut.

"Seems you can be hurt," she said, taking the two knives that were iron and lead from her belt. They weren't enchanted, but maybe they would still have the same effect. She hoped.

"You'll pay for that."

"Talk is cheap," Aloisia smarted, starting to circle him. Adrenaline was rushing into her, easing her fear. Her muscles tightened and her mind cleared. She knew her expression was cold and calm. "I'd rather dance." She barely dodged the stream of fire he sent her way and had to drop to the ground to keep his claws from slitting her throat. She rolled to the left and right as he slammed his fist into the ground before driving her feet into his chin. He staggered backward and Aloisia took the opportunity to straddle his shoulders. She drove her knives into his head and shoulders and twisted his neck to snap it.

Aloisia didn't pause as she took her last two silver knives from her belt and thrust them into the base of his neck. She made an attempt to curve the upward movement of the blades to disconnect the neck vertebrae from the spine, but she never had the opportunity. Instead, he howled angrily, making her ears ring, and reached a hand behind him, grabbing her arm. Aloisia lost her grip on the knives' hilts as he slammed her into the ground, knocking her breath away. He pressed down with his other hand on her chest and Aloisia grunted as some of her ribs splintered and broke. She tried vainly to push him off of her but was too weak.

Aloisia's vision blurred and blackened and she coughed weakly in her mask. Her hands stopped their

vain struggle. He bent his head down and blew hot mist into her mask, fogging her lens. "Know this, Avenger; you die in the honor of battle." Aloisia tried to breathe past the pressure on her chest, but the weight compressed her too much. She thought hazily of her dagger in its hilt, but knew there was no way to get to it. There was nothing she could do; she was going to die.

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## 5.

The loud crack of a gun being fired sounded and the weight loosened on her chest as he staggered to the side. Aloisia breathed in deeply as she looked to where the policeman she had saved was standing. "No," she said, her voice strained and hoarse. She tried to move, to sit up and get away, but she could barely lift her head. "No, run. He'll kill you too."

The monster was making his way back to her, and the policeman backed away, holding his gun in a shaking position. "Take another step closer and I shoot," he said in a quaking voice.

He laughed as he paused and looked incredulously at the terrified man. "You've shot me once, Rational, what's one more bullet to me?"

"Run," Aloisia croaked out. "There's no point in us both dying."

"I don't know what the hell you are," the policeman said, ignoring her, "but I am not going to leave this girl to die. Not after she saved me."

Another crackling laugh sounded. "Fine, but she did warn you. You can watch her die before I kill you." He was almost in touching distance of Aloisia, and she could feel the heat and power radiating off of his body. He bent down to grab her throat when he paused and growled. He seemed to be listening to something, but the only thing that Aloisia could hear was the painful pounding of her own heart and the roar of the flames that covered the Bloodbane that was about to kill her. Finally he looked at her and shrugged. "I do not need more company," he said, fire leaking from his mouth. He stood up and pointed to Aloisia. "Now that I know who you are, you cannot escape me a third time. I will come for your soul, Avenger." He laughed and faded away.

The sound of flames faded with him, and Aloisia could now faintly hear sirens coming this way and knew that police reinforcements were approaching. She had to get away. She tried to get up but fell backward immediately.

"Don't move, miss," the police officer said, hurrying up to her. He bent down on his knees and checked her pulse. "When my backup comes, we'll rush you to the hospital."

Aloisia shook her head. "I can't go there," she rasped. "I have to get ... home."

"You're too hurt," he protested. "Are you even thinking clearly?"

"Please ... trust ... me," Aloisia gritted past her pain. She could hardly get enough air to speak. "They can't help ... me. I can't be discovered ... it'll destroy me."

The police officer hesitated. "You saved my life, and you didn't have to. I saw the man that limped out

behind you from upstairs. You saved him too, didn't you?" The man sighed and tore his wallet and a pen from his pocket. "I can't believe I'm doing this," he muttered as he wrote something down on a scrap bit of paper and slipped it into a side pocket of her cargo pants. "I expect answers later."

The sirens sounded closer as she allowed the policeman to pick her up. "Is there anyone ... outside?" she groaned.

"No. The firemen were moved out momentarily just in case there was a shootout."

"Then run me to ... the high grass and hide ... me. My people will be there to ... take me somewhere I can heal."

"Your people? Man, girl, I'd do anything to know who you are." He started to walk out.

"Wait. My sword ... get my sword."

"That's yours? Fine; makes about as much sense as everything else. I'll have to run, and I'm sorry if I hurt you. I hope you've got a way out before the other police come," he said as he grabbed her sword and sprinted out the door. "They'll comb the place after what I tell them."

"What are ... you going to ... say?" Aloisia coughed again, her ribs aching with a sharp throb.

"I don't quite know yet. Certainly nothing about a demon and a warrior chick. I don't want my badge pulled."

She would have laughed if she could. "Good, this is my ... fight, not the police's."

He stopped for a moment, midway from the side of the road. "There's a black car coming."

"It's alright. They're coming ... for me. Put me and my ... sword down and turn around ... get down on your knees ... and don't look up. Wait ... until we drive away to ... stand. Whatever you do ... don't look ... or they'll kill you."

"What? Why?" he asked as he sat her down on the pavement.

"Because ... they're not like me. They ... think a secret is more ... important than a life. Just do ... it."

He nodded and did what she said. "Will I hear from you again?" he asked quietly.

Aloisia hesitated as her car stopped and Gregory got out. That kind of contact with a Rational, a person outside the Heart, was forbidden without the permission of the Society and she seriously doubted that they would allow it. Still, she saw what kind of opportunity having a link with the police would give her, and it wasn't like it would be the first time she's kept something from the Heart of Revenge. Granted, it would be the biggest thing she had hid. Finally she whispered, "I'll be in touch."

"Avenger, who is this?" Gregory demanded. He drew his gun from his hip holster and clicked the safety off. The policeman tensed.

"A Rational I saved ... and who saved me ... in turn," Aloisia panted out. "His mind stays ignorant ... and he has sworn his tongue ... to me." When Gregory didn't move the gun, Aloisia swore and said, "Whisperer, I am in pain ... and have come from weary battle, 'tis ... your honor to bear me home and ...

uphold our secrets ... from approaching ignorance. I ... claim protection for this ... Rational."

Gregory stared at her in wonderment before lowering his gun. "I accept your claim with only warning to the Rational that secrets take procedure over all else and I will follow my duty and hunt him if he reveals anything of our existence."

"He's not going to say anything," her Dad yelled out from the front seat of her car. "Get the Avenger now or we're going to have more than one policeman to deal with."

"Fine," gritted Gregory as he knelt and picked Aloisia up.

"Hurry," Aloisia whispered. Now that she was in the open air, her mask felt restrictive and she couldn't breathe beyond the pounding, piercing pain in her chest. The jolting movement of being picked up again sent another shiver of pain down her body, making her vision blur as unconsciousness threatened to take her.

Greg's expression softened as he carried her to the car. "You did good, sis," he said quietly. He slid her down into the backseat, placed the sword in the floor beside her, and shut the door.

Aloisia groaned as Greg started the car and it lurched forward. Her Dad looked back at her worriedly. "Aloisia, how bad are you hurt?"

"Pretty bad ... Dad," she said with effort. "I can hardly ... breathe." She tried to lift her arms to take the mask off, but couldn't get her arms to move. "Please, help me get this ... mask off." She tried to breathe in but could barely get a stir of oxygen. The horrible thought that her oxygen was running out crossed her mind and she tried harder to lift her arms. "Dad," she gasped, and she couldn't keep a panicky whimper from escaping her lips.

"Alright, don't panic," her Dad soothed as he unsnapped his seat belt. "Lift your head so I can slip it off."

"You've not got time for that Dad," Greg said, pulling his pocket knife out. "Use this; we can get a new mask."

"Hold still," her Dad said as he bent over and cut through the straps. He pulled the mask to the side and Aloisia gasped in deeply as cool, sweet air hit her sweating face. "Is that better?"

Aloisia nodded, ignoring the inward screams of pain from her chest as she tried to get her breathing under control.

"He's hurt you bad," her Dad said, stroking her cheek.

Aloisia rolled her eyes and opened her mouth to let out her normal sarcastic remark when a shuddering overtook her body.

"Aloisia?"

But Aloisia barely heard him. The air was boiling around her, growing hotter until blisters rose off her skin. She tried to call out, but her throat seized up. A weight was pressing down on her chest, pressing until there were loud cracks. She tried to fight, but there was nothing there, only a terrible heaviness. The cracks and snaps grew louder until blood blossomed through her shirt and the weight lifted from her chest. The air continued to elevate in temperature, and electrifying, horrible tremors of pain exploded in

waves, bowing her back.

Aloisia dimly registered yelling from her father, but she barely heard that. Instead, dark, crackling laughter filled her ears. The last thing she saw was her father's worried face before her body gave up and blackness overcame her.

The laughing continued as she fell.

*"Your soul is mine."*

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## 6.

*The fire was everywhere, engulfing her home like a ravenous beast. Aloisia huddled in the corner of her room, clutching her stuffed dragon to her chest desperately. She tried to get up, to move, but her fear rooted her to the spot.*

*"Aloisia! Honey, where are you?"*

*Aloisia began to cry in relief. "Mommy, mommy, help me," she called. She saw her mother's figure cross the threshold and reached out for her. She knew everything would be fine when she was in her mother's arms. Then the flame roared between them and Aloisia shrieked and shirked back...*

"How is she?"

"Not good, Dad. I've fought the Bloodbane's hold on her for the last two days with little success. Her vitals are never stable, and I'm running out of ideas. I can't stop her from blistering, and even though I've kept her room freezing, she's still burning alive."

"Tell me the truth, Toby; are we going to lose her?" Aloisia finally recognized her father's mournful voice and fought to open her eyes.

"If I can't stop this, then yeah—there's no stopping her death." Her brother's cold voice faded away as Aloisia lost the battle of staying conscious and drifted away.

*"Aloisia, it's okay; it's alright. I'm coming," her mother said from behind the wall of flame. There was a flurry of movement and the flames parted like a fiery show curtain. Her mother beckoned to her and Aloisia stood, running into her outstretched arms. Her mother swept her up and clutched her tightly to her chest.*

*"Hang on, baby, hang on to me, sweetheart," she gasped out. Aloisia felt her lips press to the top of her head. "Listen to me, my strength, my little warrior, close your eyes and don't look, alright?"*

Aloisia nodded, burying her head into her mother's shoulder. She took in the smell of her. The light scent of honeysuckle perfume mingled with the smell of clean sweat and smoke...

"Aloisia, you need to wake up, please."

Aloisia could feel herself stirring. Her head moved side to side and her eyes opened slightly, letting in slivers of light. A small, protesting sound grumbled past her lips.

"That's it, my strength, my little warrior."

The familiar voice made Aloisia smile, made her forget the aches and pains. The voice gave her warmth and strength.

"Mommy," she whispered as she opened her eyes and looked around her bare surroundings. She was in the recuperation room of her home, and she was alone. "Mom?" Aloisia asked in a tiny voice.

There was no answer.

And Aloisia knew that there shouldn't be; there hadn't been for over a decade. But she was so sure she had heard her mother ... no one else called her their strength or their little warrior. Tears leaked from her eyes as foggy images of the fire resurfaced and she saw fleeting images of her mother walking through fire to get to her. No, her mother was no longer there to comfort her. She was dead, and Aloisia had to remember that. She raised a weak hand to wipe the tears away and found I.V.'s running along the length of it. She looked around again to get a better view. The room was set up like a hospital, plain and bare. She was hooked up to a monitor that emitted a light beep now and again.

Aloisia looked away from the machine as the door opened and Shaun walked in. He glanced at Aloisia. "Oh my God," he said. He turned and yelled out, "Toby, she's awake." He ran to Aloisia's bedside.

"Are you alright?" he asked. He glanced at her face and smiled weakly. His light blond hair was tousled, lying across his shoulders and back. He must have not took the time to brush it; it was so different from the neat loose ponytail he normally kept it in. "Sorry, wrong question. Really, I should ask if you're happy to be alive."

"I know you're trying to cheer me up," Aloisia croaked, her voice small and barely audible, "but you really need to shut up."

"Glad to see you're back to your normal self," Toby said as he wheeled in. He looked up at Shaun from his wheelchair. "You should go and contact the Society. Verdin can see her after I check her over."

Shaun nodded. "Fine, but be quick, alright?" He hurried out.

Aloisia watched Shaun's retreating back apprehensively. Even though she was still groggy, she had sensed a palpable tension run through the room.

"Toby, what's wrong?" she asked immediately. "Why is the Heart's leader here?"

Toby sighed as he pushed his wheelchair parallel to her bed. He pierced her with a look that made her squirm. He looked a lot like her brothers; they had all taken after their father, but she could see some of herself, of her mom, in him. His eyes were darker, a strange mix between hazel and grey and his hair was a sandy brown that he kept a little longer than his ears. It was curly and fine and suited his small, pale face. "You've been unconscious for nearly eight days, Aloisia. You've never been this hurt. A lot has happened."



"Like what?"

Toby hesitated. "Actually, I'm not supposed to tell you." He pushed a button on the bed and lowered it to where he could look at her better.

"What do you mean you're not supposed to tell me?" she challenged.

"Calm down, girl, or you'll spike your vitals," he said as he pulled the cover away from her heavily bandaged chest. He put two fingers to the top of her sternum and pressed. Aloisia expected it to hurt, but it only ached with a dull throb. The pain she had experienced when she was just waking was already dissipating.

"Toby, I know you," Aloisia pressed urgently, "are you really going to keep me in the dark with the Society breathing down my neck?"

Toby was the second youngest child and the closest to Aloisia. He was a Conduit, a user of magic and psychic powers, and most people were nervous around him. Aloisia never had been though, and knew him better than anyone. Most of the time Toby exuded coldness and uncaring, the epitome qualities sought in a powerful Conduit, but he let his guard down around Aloisia.

Toby smiled at her, it made his face seem less harsh and she could see that he was actually handsome under his cold expressions. "Yeah, I guess you do know me. When don't I break the Heart's Codes for you?"

"You might want to hurry, Toby. They won't be kept waiting."

"Then listen and don't interrupt," Toby said, his voice lowering. "The Society arrived two days ago when we reported the Bloodbane's hold was lifted. From them we have learned that the creature you fought is a Pyroenchanter who calls himself Cinder."

Aloisia rolled her eyes. "Drama queen," she muttered.

Toby arched an eyebrow. "Be that as it may, Cinder has crossed the country searching for young female Avengers just entering the lone hunter age. They don't know why, but they're most interested in what Dad had to say about your fight with Cinder. They're..." A knock at the door interrupted him.

"Toby, the master Avenger wants you to finish the examination while he's in there," Shaun said.

Toby swore softly. "Fine, I'll be there to open the door in a moment." He looked back at Aloisia and whispered. "Look, they're going to say things you're not going to like, but remember your place. Keep calm and don't let your emotions rule you. Something doesn't feel right about this, about you. We need to tread carefully, so keep quiet and follow my lead. We'll figure stuff out later."

Aloisia nodded, and Toby wheeled himself to the door and opened it.

"Greetings to the Master Avenger Nikolas Verdin, leader of the Society," her brother said formally.

"Greetings, Conduit Tobias Zanadel," he returned, stepping into the room. Nikolas Verdin was an imposing man. He was tall and broad and seemed to have been chiseled from stone. He had thick, grey hair that was cropped short to his head. His face was stern with deep wrinkles and a long scar that ran the length of the left side of his face from his forehead to past his chin. His cool, grey eyes shone with

intelligence and experience and he moved with an aura of strength and power that belied his age.

"I'm heartened to see you awake, my young Avenger," he said in a deep rumble that reminded Aloisia of coming thunder. When she was little, Aloisia had been afraid of Verdin. She used to have to tiptoe to look all the way up and glimpse his face. She was less intimidated by his presence now. He still towered over her, but she had experienced things that made her uneasiness seem unreasonable.

"To what do I owe a visit from you?" Aloisia asked politely. Her voice had grown stronger as she had talked to Toby. Now, her voice was nearly back to normal, and she was glad of that. She never wanted to appear weak in front of the Master Avenger.

"I have troubling news, daughter, but I'd rather save it until Tobias has finished his inspection." He turned to Toby. "What all have you checked her for?"

"Only her mental state, sir," he replied. "I've checked her memory and she has no memory loss."

"What else have you left?"

"First I want to check her physical wounds, and then I will read her aura. After that I will leave, and you can speak to Aloisia privately."

"Fine. I will wait until you've finished"

Toby turned back to Aloisia and removed the wires that connected her to the monitoring machine. "If you want, I will remove the I.V.'s now. I took everything else out of you this morning, when I knew you were going to pull through. This is the last thing, and they've had to be changed often because your veins kept collapsing, so it's going to hurt a little."

Aloisia rolled her eyes. "Please, if this hurts more than what that monster did to me then I'll eat my sword."

Toby smiled softly and pulled the I.V.'s from her arm. It stung, but Aloisia didn't let it show except to say, "You could have been gentler."

Toby ignored her. "Try to stand up," he commanded as he pulled the covers off of her.

Aloisia nodded and swung her feet over the bed. She slid off the bed carefully and was surprised to find her legs were able to support her weight. Really, she didn't feel as bad as she thought she should. She ached all over but knew that would fade within a few days. As bad as she had been hurt, she shouldn't even be up yet. She had had enough injuries to know, and she had been incapacitated longer for less serious injuries. Later, she would have to ask Toby about how she had healed so quickly.

"How do you feel?"

"Surprisingly well, actually," she replied, letting her surprise show in her voice. She had on loose, flowing jogging pants that must have been one of her brothers. She had to tie them tighter to her waist to keep them from falling down.

"Well, you look pretty well off," Toby commented. He reached up to the edge of the bandages that wrapped tightly around her chest. "Inhale deeply and stay still. I'm going to unwrap these bandages and see if your ribs have healed properly." Aloisia breathed in deeply and lifted her arms, trying to ignore her

unease at being shirtless in front of the Master. She wasn't embarrassed about it in front of Toby anymore; he had healed her injuries and taken care of her so many times that it was pointless to be self-conscience around him.

It was a relief to have the bandages removed and she could breath normally again. Toby raised an eyebrow as he felt down her sternum.

"What? What is it?" Aloisia asked quietly.

Toby shook his head slightly. "Nothing," he said blandly. "Your ribs are healing nicely. You should be up to full mobility in a few days." Toby's voice was the same monotonous, bored voice he had cultivated over the years, but Aloisia could sense an underlying worry. She understood the warning not to pursue it, though, and didn't say another word.

Aloisia stayed still as he checked the rest of her bruises. Finally, he wheeled backward, got into a drawer of the desk beside the bed, and threw Aloisia an old black shirt. "You're fine physically," he said. "The few bruises and burns that remain will fade and be completely gone by this weekend."

"You heal remarkably well," Nikolas commented. "From what your father told me, you're lucky to be alive, let alone almost unharmed."

"Yeah, I am lucky," Aloisia agreed, slipping her shirt on carefully to keep from straining herself.

"Now I will read your aura," Toby interrupted quickly, motioning for Aloisia to bend down to eye-level to him. He put his hands on her temples and pressed his forehead to hers. "You've had this done before," he said, "so you'll know how uncomfortable it'll be. It'll be even more so this time because I have to delve more deeply than I normally do; alright?"

Aloisia nodded and steeled herself as her brother reached out with his mind and pushed into hers. Her body shuddered from the pressure of the invasion and her spine bowed. He kept a firm hold on her temples and burrowed deeper into her subconscious. The pressure grew until it was like Toby's hands were vices. Then an odd feeling, a small tingle of warmth, pushed his exploring probe away.

Finally, he lifted his hands and Aloisia backed away, holding her head. She glanced at Toby's expression to find it troubled and worrisome. He let her see it before he masked it and turned to the Master Avenger. "The presence of the monster is little in her mind. There are still remnants, but they will not dissipate completely until it is hunted and killed."

"Do these ... remnants ... endanger her any?" Verdin asked. "Does Isaac need to aid you in protecting her?"

"No." Toby's voice was quick and sharp. He blinked and said more softly, "I am capable of taking care of my own Avenger. This is more for an enchanter than a healer. Besides, my sister has the strongest will I've ever sensed. The remnants are only tainted because of his presence and will have no influence in her thinking."

Verdin nodded thoughtfully. "So what is your final decision, Conduit?"

"Knowing my sister's strength, I am sure she can return to battle in but a few days."

Verdin looked at him incredulously. "So soon?"

Toby shrugged again. "You asked my opinion, Master Avenger, and I gave it. I know her mind and her body are healed save only soreness. If she is fit, she will not lower her weapon and allow someone to avenge her name in her stead."

"I will consider your words then," Verdin said.

Toby took his comment as a dismissal and wheeled himself out quickly, leaving Aloisia alone with the leader of the Heart of Revenge.

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## 7.

"What news do you have for me?" Aloisia asked as she pulled the chair that was beside her bed around and sat down carefully. She wasn't too sore, but she was tired, like she had run a marathon.

"We have learned a little about the Bloodbane that you fought," Verdin replied. "His name is Cinder and he's been murdering girl Avengers your age. Until now, he has always been successful. He's claimed six girl's lives along with their training Avengers he had captured to bait them. In all, Cinder has killed fifteen Heart members. Before you, only one other escaped him, and he killed her through her mind like he attempted with you. She died, but not before her Conduit was able to take information from her mind. Now, we don't have much, but we do know that Cinder has been searching for a certain Avenger. We don't know why. Though we don't have any proof, we don't believe he's working alone. Who or what's helping him, we can't say."

Aloisia waited for him to continue and when he didn't she blurted, "Is this all you know?"

"We wish we knew more, but we don't. The Avenger didn't live long, and the Conduit died soon after the attack on Cinder's mind. It seems this Bloodbane is powerful and a real dangerous threat to the entire Heart. We don't even know where he came from or his reason for searching for Avengers your age. He started about two months ago, but before that there wasn't any record of him. Actually, we were hoping you could tell us what he was looking for."

"Me? Why?"

"Your father told us that he heard Cinder say something along the lines that he had found what he had been looking for. When Cinder had incapacitated him the way he had, he missed a lot of what Cinder said and did to you. Do you recall anything about your encounter?"

Aloisia shivered. "It's hard to forget that son of a bitch," she said, rubbing the back of her neck where she could feel the faint remainder of a bruise.

Verdin raised an eyebrow at her use of language "Obviously," he said shortly. There was an uneasy silence before he continued commandingly, "Tell me everything that happened, Aloisia." She grimaced but complied and when she finished Verdin frowned, his brow furrowed in thought.

"So you say he didn't say that until he looked at your right thigh, right? What's on your thigh?"

Aloisia shrugged. "It's just a scar from the fire that killed my mom. I was young and don't remember but glimpses of it. Toby once told me that I blocked the memories because I watched my mother burn alive. He doesn't remember much more of that night than I do." She fought to keep her voice neutral, but still couldn't stave off the trickle of tears that leaked from her eyes. She didn't understand what was wrong with her; she was normally a lot better at hiding her emotions than this.

Verdin nodded his head in understanding as she hastily wiped her tears away. "Don't be ashamed, Aloisia. Even after all this time, we all miss your mother and her family. She was one of our best Avengers in our history and she left you large shoes to fill. Shoes, might I say that you have proven you can fit." A smile lit his face and he patted her knee. "You are the child of two of the most powerful Avengers the Heart has seen in a long time, and you have had no difficulty protecting your Body without the help of your father. He sends reports to me about you, and they are always impressive. You are strong, Aloisia; you have the most kills of lone hunters at your age, and the most Rational saves as well. Out of the majority of the Avengers, I would choose you for aid."

Aloisia bowed her head. "Thank you, sir. You honor me."

"Then you will understand that my next decision is but to protect one of my most powerful Avengers."

Aloisia felt her heart seize up. "Your decision?"

"I'm relieving you of your duty for this hunt, Aloisia."

She jumped up immediately, ignoring the groan of protest her back gave her. It wasn't that she was sore; it was more that she was stiff from being in bed for so long. "You can't do that!"

Secretly, she would be glad, and that made her madder. She had never let her fear rule her, and she'd be damned before she let another Avenger clean up her mess. "I would think that you would be glad not to have to face Cinder again."

"Well you thought wrong," she replied, fighting to keep her voice from rising. "I am no coward, Master Verdin."

"I'm not saying you are, Aloisia," he said calmly, raising a hand to silence her.

She ignored it and continued, "But that's what I hear when you tell me that."

"I only think of your safety." Verdin stood, shaking his head.

"Who else would you have but me, sir?" Aloisia demanded. "Who else has managed to both mark him and escape?"

"I've chosen my son Josiah for this," Verdin said going to the door and opening it. Josiah stood in the doorway, smiling smugly. Aloisia snarled as he walked in closely followed by Toby. She hated that pompous brat with a passion. Their rivalry existed back as far as her Preparation, and he had never been able to beat her in anything. She didn't even understand the reason Josiah had decided to fight with her. The only thing she did know was she was more than ready to return his animosity.

"Do you honestly think that he could succeed where I failed?" Aloisia asked forcefully, meeting Josiah's gaze with a glare. Behind him, her brother was shooting her warning glances.

"He is a higher ranking Avenger than you are, Aloisia," Nikolas said, his voice going low.

Catching Toby's warning, Aloisia forced herself to be calm as she said, "Only because he has been a lone hunter for more than two years. I've been one for less than three months. I mean no offence to your family, sir, but counting my kills during training, pack hunting and lone hunting, I have more kills than he does now. If Cinder is as dangerous as you say he is, and I most definitely believe you, then the best interest of the Heart of Revenge is to allow my continued pursuit of him."

"Cinder nearly killed you, Sister Avenger," Josiah said, coming up to stand beside his father.

"And what do you think he'll do to you, Josiah?" Aloisia challenged. She refused to give him the title of brother. She turned her attention back to Nikolas Verdin, dismissing him. "Please, Master Avenger, this is my kill," Aloisia said. She pointed to herself. "He's marked me, hurt me. Because of this I can call him as mine to Avenge. It is my right and Code. I call it, Master Verdin."

Verdin scratched his chin thoughtfully. "You are a fierce Avenger, Aloisia, but I doubt that even you could defeat Cinder on your own. I admit to the fact that you have more kills than my son. Nevertheless, he is still a strong, able Avenger. You can use his help. This is no longer a lone hunt. My family and yours will combine our resources. This way you can be protected, but your honor is not infringed and you can still participate." Aloisia opened her mouth to protest, but Nikolas silenced her with a hand. "I will not waver from this, Avenger, and you're lucky to fight at all."

"Fine," Aloisia gritted, crossing her arms.

"I have already spoken to your father of this. He'll be both surprised and pleased, I believe, to hear you are aiding in the hunt. We must call a meeting together to begin planning on how to kill Cinder. You can offer any helpful advice you would have. As you are the only one to fight him and live, we will listen attentively."

"I will start today."

"No, Donald and Gregory are doing some investigating of other fires around Clions city with your father to see if Cinder has set those as well. Take the rest of the day to recuperate at least, Aloisia."

"Alright," Aloisia relented.

"In the meantime, though, Josiah needs a room. Your brothers Donald, Shaun, and Gregory have taken residence in one room to spare rooms for us Masters of the Society. However, I believe that Josiah should stay with you until better arrangements can be made."

"No," Aloisia said quickly. She would do anything to keep him out of her room. Her eyesight fell on Toby. "He's a guest," she said, forcing herself to form a smile, "and he deserves his own room. Toby can bunk with me until Cinder is killed."

"I can?" Toby asked. Aloisia nodded and Toby shrugged uncaringly. "Fine. Give me about ten minutes to transport my things to Aloisia's room and my room is yours."

"Thanks," Josiah said, flashing his happy-go-lucky smile.

It didn't fool her.

Aloisia felt herself smile back but knew it wasn't a pleasant smile. She forcibly swallowed the dozen or so scathing remarks that came to her mind but promised herself she would remember them for later.

"That's alright. It's my honor."

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## 8.

"What were you freaking out about in the recuperation room?" Aloisia asked as she walked into her room.

Toby was leaned on the wall of his bed, his head propped up on his numerous pillows. He paid no mind as Aloisia walked in and kept his full attention on the three black stones he had revolving around his head. His wheelchair sat parallel to the bed. Aloisia looked around to see her desk and bookshelves had been shoved to the side near the door that led to her own small bathroom, giving Toby one half the room.

He had placed his own bookshelves against the walls and stuffed them full of various ancient looking books and instruments that Aloisia couldn't even begin to identify.

"You're out of the bed already?" he asked finally. The black stones that had been floating above his head paused as he looked away from them before quickening their course, whistling in loops around his head.

"Of course. Did you expect me to stay in that bland, boring room all day?"

"Sorry. I'll try to remember to paint it a different color," Toby smarted dryly. "Since when did you care about the way the room looks anyway?"

"I spend enough time in there," Aloisia stated, shrugging. "I get tired of staring at nothing while I heal."

"I'll be sure to paint it a bright pink for you then."

Aloisia ignored him, going to her dresser and looking in the tall mirror. Her hair was a tangled mess that would shame a bird's nest and dark circles outlined her eyes. "Wow, I look like shit."

"That's what happens when you laze around the house for over a week."

She chose not to comment and headed to her closet. She searched through her clothes and threw out some of her training outfits. "I'm taking a shower."

"I don't care. Why are you telling me?" Toby's attention turned back to his floating stones.

"Oh no, big brother, I've not been diverted that easily," she stated. "You're moving your big butt into that wheelchair and talking to me through the door."

Toby grimaced and ran a hand through his curly mass of hair. The stones he was floating pelted around his head once more before his concentration slipped and they fell down on his bed. "Come on, Aloisia, do I have to?"

"Yes," Aloisia said firmly. "I've never seen you so flustered." She came over to his bed and sat down on it, drawing her legs in under her. "What on earth is bothering you?"

Toby didn't answer her. He picked up the three stones he had been floating and turned them over in his hand. "You remember the time we spent in Preparation?"

Aloisia shivered as she nodded. Preparation was when the new generation was trained in the ways of the Heart of Revenge. All the families of the Society sent their children when they reached ten. The children stayed a year before returning to start their own training.

"Yeah, I remember the Preparation," Aloisia said, drawing herself away from surfacing memories. "It's where they taught children how to murder."

Toby frowned at her. "Well, I'm not going to argue about morals or comfort you for your stolen childhood. I just brought up the Preparation to explain my point."

"And your point is?" Aloisia asked impatiently.

Toby ignored her tone and handed her a stone. "One way our teacher Conduits taught us to call on and control our powers for the first time is to concentrate on a focus stone. We weren't asked to do anything else but to keep our mind completely blank while they monitored the flow of energy we gave off. After a while—for some it only took minutes, others it took days—the stone would begin to float and do one of three things. It may glow, grow cold, or heat up. Whatever you made the stone do explained your power. The ones that glowed had psychic abilities ... the power to seek Bloodbanes, speak in minds, see the future ... people who's stone grew cold were healers and hot stones foretold enchanters. The height the stone rose was a measure of the Conduit's strength."

Aloisia stared at him blankly as he finished talking. "Why are you telling me this?" she demanded. "You know that it is forbidden to talk about training to other Society Classes."

Toby rolled his eyes. "Please, like you care about Codes."

"You're right," Aloisia admitted, "but please get on with it. Your skirting is driving me insane."

"Fine," Toby said. He hesitated before saying bluntly, "Aloisia, you should be dead."

"Dead?" Aloisia repeated blankly.

"Dead. I saw the damage that Cinder did to you. I know that Avengers can take a beating, but if you were a normal warrior, you would have died before they could have got you home to me. What's more, Cinder's presence in your mind kept me from healing most of your injuries and his powers were too strong for me to help you. I fought his control for four days and it only strengthened. Aloisia, he was burning you alive. If you could have only seen yourself. By the second day, your whole body was covered in third degree burns and by the third day, you were so bad that I didn't allow anyone to come into the room and I didn't leave."

"So, how'd you fix me?" Aloisia asked softly.

Toby shook his head. "I didn't. I had given up by the end of the third day. At the time, I believed the only thing that was keeping you alive was my attempt at staving Cinder off and..." Toby had to pause for a moment. "I didn't want you to suffer anymore. So, I ceased my power flow and took you off of the various machines I had you on. I held your hand and waited through the night for you to die. But, by the dawn of the fourth day, I noticed a substantial change in you temperature. It had fallen, and the burns



around your face weren't as bad. I practically watched your injuries fade over the next three days. Finally when you had returned nearly to normal, I drew courage to feel for Cinder's presence. There was nothing. I told Dad and he contacted the Society. I kept your secret, though."

"My secret?" Aloisia asked hesitantly.

Toby looked at her seriously and took her hand, pressing the focusing stone deep into her palm. "That you're a Conduit," he whispered.

Aloisia blinked and withdrew her hand from his. "A Conduit?"

Toby nodded. "I felt a power's presence when I delved your mind the first day, but I thought it was from Cinder. I confirmed its presence this morning. Didn't you feel anything different when I read your Aura? I sure did."

Aloisia didn't answer him as he shook her head. "But, I don't understand. I thought that it was impossible for anyone other than Conduits to use magic," she protested. "The Deciders would have felt something inside me, surely."

"Avengers have nearly the same qualities as a Conduit does," Toby explained. "What decides them is their physical strength and dominating personalities. They have a stronger aura than Conduits. It doesn't happen often, in fact there are only a few instances of it, but a child with the ability can be mistaken as an Avenger. As soon as it is discovered, however, the child is immediately exiled where they die because of the lack of training to control their power or, if they're old enough, because of their broken link to the Blood Tear."

Aloisia's hand strayed to her heart. "But why? I know the Heart isn't a bunch of saints, but why would they do such a thing ... especially to their own people."

Toby shook his head. "I don't know. Hell, what I've told you isn't common knowledge. I could be exiled just for knowing it."

"Why? What did you do?" Aloisia asked quickly.

"I snuck into the Master Scholar's room while she was out," he said quietly, "and read through some of the files she had laid out. It didn't say exactly what I just told you; that would have been too convenient for me, but with a little mental probing, I basically figured the rest out on my own."

Aloisia swallowed nervously and stood up, starting to pace. "So what're you going to do?"

Toby sighed. "I could never bring myself to notify the Heart. Our brothers might believe in the almighty upholding of the Codes, but I never have. You're my sister, my only friend. My own family doesn't see me as a human, only as a spell caster ... an abomination ... except for you. I almost feel normal around you. No, I would never betray you."

Aloisia was staggered by her brother's loyalty. This wasn't like when he covered for her when she snuck out at night or broke a simple Code. No, this was serious. He would be exiled, a fate worse than death. Even if he was a Conduit, he would die a slow, painful death without the bond that Zâintili's Blood Tear gave them. She looked into her brother's face and saw him smiling. Tears came to her eyes and she went over and hugged him tightly. "You don't know how much that means to me," she whispered as she released him.

Toby grimaced, rubbing his neck. "Ouch, yeah, I think I do."

Aloisia laughed. "So what are we going to do?" she repeated.

"We?" Toby questioned. "Well, you are going to take your shower and calm down. I've got to find a way to steal you a focusing stone. It'll take a couple of tries and a strong spell, but I can do it by this evening. Later on tonight, I will begin your training."

Aloisia nodded, picking her clothes up from the bed. She wiped at her eyes and started toward the bathroom. Her hand paused at the doorknob as she looked back at Toby. "Exactly what kind of training?"

Toby shrugged, and Aloisia watched the three focus stones rise from the bed and restart their revolutions around his head. "My kind, sis."

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## 9.

Toby's words kept cycling through Aloisia's mind as she assaulted herself with steaming hot water. If anyone else had told her what he had ... she wouldn't have believed them. But Toby wouldn't lie to her about anything; especially that, still, doubt flourished in her mind. How could she have powers? The thought that he might be wrong had occurred to her, but it was immediately disregarded. Toby was one of the strongest Conduits in the Heart's history. He wouldn't be able to mistake something like this.

Besides, her tendril of fear told her, she had to be powerful. She had been able to fight Cinder's hold on her. She had succeeded where Toby had failed. The idea of having that much power to control frightened Aloisia more than entering the burning building had. She'd always looked on in awe of her brother; he'd told her of the exhilaration using his abilities gave him, how the pressure to let loose his careful control and allow the magic to devour him was ever present. She had never wanted that burden; she already had too much to deal with.

Aloisia sniffled loudly, trying to stop the tears from escaping her eyes. The initial shock of finding out that she was a half-love was wearing off and now all she could feel was shame and fear and disgust for feeling that way at all. She had never agreed with how the Heart had treated Conduits. Sure, they were the most respected Class other than Avengers, but that respect was feigned. The other Classes feared their abilities because they seemed too close to many of the things that they hunted. Often the Conduits were called half-loved dark children as a derogatory term. The term came from the legend that Zaintili's youngest daughter, the first Conduit, had been half sorceress—the result of an illegitimate and forbidden love with a Bloodbane ... the monsters her children swore to kill to avenge their mother's murder.

She had never believed that, and if it ever had been true it didn't warrant the veiled distrust that they received now. Still, even with the fact that she knew her brother so well, she couldn't help the fear and mistrust she had for the magic he wielded. She didn't want this; she didn't want any new responsibilities. Her burden had already been so heavy. She was the new Avenger for the largest Body with the heaviest population of Bloodbanes. She had to be strong enough to keep the Body that her father's family had been guardians of for over three hundred years in the Heart's protection. She was the first female Zanadel Avenger and she had to bring honor to her mother's name. At the thought of her mother, Aloisia sank to

her knees and started to shake. She had been so sure that her mother had been with her this morning. So sure. The water pounded against her back and neck as she sat down and started to rock, her knees pressed tightly to her chest.

Aloisia would never let anyone see how broken she had become; her pride wouldn't allow it. She was ashamed of herself for being so weak, but she couldn't find the strength to stand. Her head began to ache—a slow, pounding ache that caused shivers of pain to slide down her body. Too late, her body realized that she was losing consciousness. Dimly, as she tried to call out and her eyesight faded, she registered the scent of honeysuckles.

*The fire was everywhere, engulfing her home like a ravenous beast. Aloisia huddled in the corner of her room, clutching her stuffed dragon to her chest desperately. She tried to get up, to move, but her fear rooted her to the spot.*

*"Aloisia! Honey, where are you?"*

Aloisia began to cry in relief. "Mommy, mommy, help me," she called. She saw her mother's figure cross the threshold and she reached out for her. She knew everything would be fine when she was in her mother's arms. Then the flame roared between them and Aloisia shrieked and shirked back...

And the fire raged forward, transforming from the fiery red to a crackling, howling blue. Aloisia staggered away, hands thrown up to shield her face. Her already burnt and blistered arms took the brunt of the heat as she fell backward into the rusted railing. The railing groaned behind her and Aloisia felt it give. She fell with a crash while a voice whispered, "And the cradle falls."

"Aloisia!" The cry was harsh and terrified and horribly familiar. She fought the urge to go to her friend and unsheathed her sword. There was no one around and Aloisia inched her way to the suspended figure. Finally she made it there and looked up.

"Shh, it's alright, Dan," Aloisia whispered as she reached up to cut her down carefully. "I'll get us out of here."

But Danielle shook her head, mumbling words under her breath that Aloisia had to lean in closer to hear. She was whispering, "Not while he's here you won't." Danielle whimpered, her eyes bulging at the sight of something behind her.

"You aren't going anywhere," a familiar voice said before there was a deep, intense pain in her head, then nothing at all.

Aloisia woke in a quickly cooling shower, lying on her stomach. She groaned, rising to her knees and wiping water off her face.

There was a knock at the door. "Lo?" her brother called. "Are you alright?"

Aloisia coughed water out of her mouth and cleared her voice. "I'm fine," she answered.

"You've been in there a long time; you can't have any hot water left. What are trying to do, drown yourself? Trust me, being a Conduit isn't that bad."

"I'll be out in a minute, I promise," Aloisia replied, thinking about how lucky she had been that she hadn't really drowned.

"Well," Toby didn't sound convinced, "as long as you're alright."

Aloisia stood carefully and turned off the water shakily. She wasn't sure what had happened and remembered vague visions from when she had passed out. They were blurry and unclear though, and the only thing that truly remained was a feeling of fear and dread. She tried unsuccessfully to shake the ominous feeling as she dried and dressed in her dark purple sports bra and shorts. She brushed her teeth, put deodorant on and blow dried and brushed her hair. She left the bathroom feeling refreshed, if just a bit uneasy.

"You going to the training room?" Toby asked, eyeing the outfit.

"Yeah, I need to ease my nerves, and I'm stiff from being in bed for so long."

Toby shook his head. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Aloisia stopped and turned back to him. "I don't think so."

He blew out angrily. "Hmmm, what was it you told me a couple of months ago?" He pretended to think about it. "Oh yeah, I remember. You told me that no matter how hectic your life as an Avenger became you were still going to try to have a life outside of the Heart."

Aloisia stared at him, puzzled. "What on earth are you..." then she stopped and pressed a hand over her mouth. "Oh shit, I completely forgot about Asher. Man, it's been eight days. There's no way he'll want to see me now."

"Calm down," Toby said, smiling slightly. "I took care of it."

"What did you do?"

"I took your purse from your car and when he called I told him that our grandmother was sick and that you volunteered to go and take care of her. You left in such a rush that you left your cell phone here."

Aloisia arched an eyebrow. "And he bought that?"

Toby shrugged. "Why wouldn't he?"

Aloisia shook her head in amusement. "Nice one, brother. Just how many times do you plan to save my life in a week?"

"I've done it, what, three times this week? That's a tie with the last record. However, let's not go for the tie breaker." Toby wheeled himself over to her dresser and threw her red cell phone to her. "I even took the liberty of putting his number in your phone for you."

"Thanks." She flicked the phone open, pressed the key for his number and waited for an answer. A man's voice travelled through the phone and Aloisia said, "May I speak to Asher?"

"He's not here right now, but he'll be back later. You want me to take a message?"

"No, that's alright. I'll try later. Thanks anyway."

"No problem."

There was a click and dial tone as she shut her phone. "He wasn't home," she told her brother. "I'll try again later. I guess I'll go and train now."

"Be careful and don't overwork yourself today," Toby advised. He was smiling widely, like he knew something she didn't. He rarely smiled, even around her; it was almost unsettling. "Remember, they think that you still have some injuries left. Let's not do anything extraordinary, okay?"

Aloisia nodded and gave him the thumbs up and walked out, closing the door behind her.

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## 10.

"Don't tell me that you're up lifting weights already," Shaun said disapprovingly as he walked in and shook his head. He crossed his arms. "And without Dad as a spotter too. You know better."

Aloisia laughed breathlessly and lifted the weights once more before setting them down on the bar and sitting up. She wiped a towel across her sweating forehead and drained the water bottle she'd taken from the fridge. "Nope, I've just finished." She quailed under his gaze. "Don't worry," she assured quickly, "I know better than to overstress my body." Shaun snorted in disbelief and Aloisia went on defensively, "I've only been exercising for fifteen minutes, and I did basic aerobics and simple lifting for ten of those minutes. Not only that, but I also lifted over a hundred pounds less than I normally do."

Josiah stepped in behind Shaun. "How much can you lift?"

"I normally lift around three fifty."

"That's not bad," Josiah complimented.

Aloisia raised an eyebrow in suspicion. "Thanks. If I'm stressed, I can lift a lot more. What about you?"

Josiah shrugged. "About the same as you. Sometimes I add a hundred pounds or more, but it strains my body too much."

Aloisia was surprised at the honesty Josiah exhibited. The tie the Blood Tear gave Avengers to the Heart allowed them increased senses, speed, agility, and strength. In theory, an Avenger could have virtually limitless power. But that was theory, and Avengers had their limits. Their true human boundaries constrained the amount the Blood Tear could affect them. Josiah could have lied and Aloisia wouldn't have been able to discredit him easily. Instead, he told her the truth and allowed Aloisia know that she rivaled and matched his tie to the Heart. She was instantly wary of this new, more open and welcoming Josiah. She wiped the towel across her forehead again before she stood up, studying Josiah intently. Try as she might, she couldn't discern any bad intentions as he smiled widely at her.

"When I'm up to full health, maybe we'll train together a little before you leave," Aloisia offered reluctantly.

Josiah's smile widened a touch and he nodded. "I would like to see if I've improved since your

Preparation."

Aloisia couldn't help but laugh. Josiah had come with his father to visit the new Avengers being trained. It had been near the end of her year, and she had just finished her trial to see if she was ready to leave. She had passed, of course. That was when Josiah had seen her for the first time and had approached her and demanded a sparring match. She'd agreed and had beaten him within ten minutes. As far as she knew, the other Avengers of her generation had never let him live it down.

"I would hope you have," Aloisia said. "But realize this, I have improved as well."

"Then it would be an interesting fight," he remarked, going over to where a large trunk was stashed away in the corner of the large room. He lifted the lid, took out two practicing staves, and walked away, allowing the trunk lid to slam shut on its own. He threw one of thick wooden staves to Aloisia, and she caught it in instinct.

"You want to spar her now?" Shaun asked, amazed. "She just got up from an eight day magic induced coma. Truth be told, she shouldn't even be in the training room for at least a day."

"Calm down, Shaun. I don't plan on sparring with her today. That wouldn't be fair. I only thought we could exchange blows. You know, to limber her up. Nothing too strenuous, I promise."

Shaun shook his head and turned to leave, grumbling about pigheaded stubborn Avengers. Aloisia watched her brother's retreating back with amusement before she turned back to Josiah. "So, what do you got planned?"

Josiah shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe we'll just take turns on offence and defense, like the Tap game they taught us in Preparation. They did do that with you, didn't they?"

Aloisia nodded. "Yeah, I loved Tap. Winner always got an ice cream."

"Yeah, that was the only dessert I would get that whole year," Josiah said, smiling at his memories.

"It was the most precious substance we ten year olds could think of, after being so long without it. Our trainers used that knowledge against us and pitted us against one another, knowing we would fight with all our ability," Aloisia said quietly, frowning. How could Josiah smile at anything he remembered from the Preparation? "Well, who do you want to be the Bloodbane?"

"You go first and then I'll play the monster," he replied. "Loser buys the other an ice cream."

"Fine, I'll take that offer," Aloisia said, going into her fighting stance. She crouched slightly, feet spread apart as she leaned the right foot forward. One hand clutched her stave out, away from her and nearly parallel to the ground. The other hand was held out in front of her, her palm raised and the fingers spread and curved.

Josiah stared at her for a moment before asking, "What kind of a stance is that? It looks awkward; aren't you uncomfortable?"

Aloisia shook her head. "No, I'm fine. It doesn't look it, but this stance gives me perfect balance. I can go to an attack strike or a defensive parry with equal effort and the lower center of gravity makes it harder for most things to move out of the way when I come up for them."

"But what about your fighting style? What martial arts do you use?"

"I don't use a particular one. I know bits and pieces of a lot of them, but only because Shaun makes me. Mostly my fights rely on my instinct and reflexes."

"You're kidding," Josiah said disbelievingly.

Aloisia shook her head. "No, I'm not. I know the basics of many martial arts and I also know their weaknesses. When I was little I used to watch my mom train. She told me that every art is flawed, has weak points, and that she learned the good parts and remembered the bad. This stance was hers."

"Well, whatever works for you," Josiah shrugged. "God knows that you can take care of yourself."

"So, how many chances I got?" Aloisia asked impatiently.

"We used to play to twenty," Josiah said, going into his own stance.

"Alright," Aloisia said. She studied Josiah for a moment, trying to figure out the best way to approach him. After a few seconds of examination, she found that the way he stood left him vulnerable for a high attack unless he moved quickly enough. The point of the game was the person chosen to be the Bloodbane attempted to pierce through the Avenger's defense. They were given a set amount of times they could try and if they succeeded they won. The Avenger won if they blocked all the attacks. "On the count of three."

"One," Josiah counted, "two ... three."

Aloisia swung out immediately with an upward sweep, using the back end of her stave. Josiah raised his own stave to block her attack and barely met it. The force of her assault made him stagger and Aloisia took the opportunity to try and tap his heart. He was too quick for her, and he spun his stave, batting hers away. She continued to try to hit him but Josiah managed to parry every move. Finally, after eighteen attempts, Aloisia paused, backing away and returning quickly into her stance.

"You've only got two more chances," Josiah said smugly.

"I know," she panted. "But don't worry, that'll be all I need." She swung out high like before but swiftly dropped the swipe and knocked against his knees, buckling them. He fell backward and she flipped the stave over her shoulder, angling the end to Josiah's heart. She stopped an inch away from his chest.

"Tap." She stood up and reached a hand out to him. "You owe me an ice cream."

"Guess I do," Josiah grunted as Aloisia helped him up. He was about to say something else but stopped, his mouth open as he stared at something behind her.

"Damn, girl, remind me never to make you mad." Aloisia spun around at the sound of the voice to see Asher leaning in the doorway. Toby rolled in beside him.

"Asher, what are you doing here?" she asked breathlessly as she unconsciously tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

"Your brother called me up and we decided to surprise you," he said. "If you're up to it, we'll finish our date at The Main Course."

"Sure," Aloisia said with a smile. "Let me get cleaned up a little. You can come with me to my room and talk with Toby while I get ready."

Asher shook his head. "Nah, I've got something to do on the edge of town tonight. I just thought I'd visit to tell you welcome back. How about I pick you up tomorrow at six?"

Aloisia nodded. "Sure, I'll be ready."

"Great then." He looked down at Toby. "I can show myself out?"

He nodded. "Yeah, thanks for coming."

Asher turned to leave. "Trust me; it wasn't a problem." He glanced back at Aloisia. "It was great seeing you again."

"You too, Asher," Aloisia replied. "Wait a sec, and I'll walk out with you." She turned to Josiah and threw him her stave. "Put this up for me, please. Oh, and don't forget my payment. I expect a huge bowl of rocky road." She left the room before he had a chance to respond.

"This is a nice house you've got," Asher said as he followed her out.

"Thanks," Aloisia said, leading him through the dark hallway. "It's been in my family for God only knows how long."

"Really?"

Aloisia nodded. "Really." In truth, the home was almost as old as America itself. Her father's family was one of the oldest of the Heart of Revenge and had protected this Body, territory, since the Declaration of Independence was just an idea. It was a two story Victorian style home that was just shy of being a mansion.

Asher stopped, looking into the mirror that hung on the wall opposite the flight of stairs. It was large and bordered by an angel carved from mahogany wood. It was kneeling, wings spread out and face in its hands. In its lap was a woman, her eyes closed and her expression peaceful. The weeping angel was her mom's family's signet, and her Dad had it made for one of their anniversaries before she died. Asher placed a finger on the weeping angel's wings. "It's dark. I like it."

Aloisia laughed and pointed at the griffin that was perched on the banister, talons raised in attack. "The house is full of this kind of stuff. We constantly add pieces. It's sort of a pastime for the family."

"Your family's cool then," Asher said going down the stairs. "I especially like your brother, Toby. Most big brothers go all protective when it comes to their little sis."

"Well, be careful because my other brothers are like that to varying degrees and my Dad definitely is. Only Toby seems to trust my judgment."

"Was that one of your brothers that you were exercising with?"

Aloisia made a face as she opened the double doors that led to the outside. "Who? Josiah? No, he's not my brother, thank God."



"Then who is he?" he asked, puzzled.

"He's the son of one of my Dad's friends. Some of his old college friends come over to visit now and again." The lie flowed through Aloisia's mouth without a pause; it came easy to her. "Let's just say I came home to all my older brothers sharing a room and Toby pushed into my own."

"Wow, that's gotta suck."

"You have no idea." Aloisia stopped, looking around. She had led him around to the edge of the house where the large garage was. All she could see was her car and Gregory's truck. The family van was gone and she could only assume that was what her Dad and brothers had taken. "Where's your truck?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Your brother met me down at the gate. Man, he can really move in that wheelchair. I had trouble keeping up with him as I followed him up the hill."

Aloisia laughed. "Well, he's had a long time to practice." She walked around to the paved path that led down to the gates that enclosed their family's land. Her home was situated just past the suburbs of Clions city and was at the top of a hill sheltered by tall oaks, poplars, and birches that shadowed the large expanse of yard circled by the tall brick wall.

"You certainly enjoy your privacy," Asher remarked, glancing up at the revolving security camera.

"Dad put those in a few years ago after someone tried to break into the house. It makes sneaking out a real bitch." They finally made it to the tall metal gates and she pushed on them. They didn't budge. "Oh man. I forgot my key in my room. I really don't want to go back up there."

"Honestly, Aloisia, I think you're the one crippled, not me." Aloisia smiled and looked toward the screen on the outside of the gate. Toby peered through it with a wide smirk. She reached a hand through the bars of the gates and pressed the button.

"Hey, Toby, mind doing me a favor?" she asked sweetly, letting go of the button.

"I don't know," Toby teased.

"Please?" she pressed.

"It would serve you right if I made your petite ass march up to the house and get your key." Toby let out a dramatic sigh and shook his head. "But seeing as you just came home to us this morning, I'll open the gates this once. Stand back."

"Thanks Toby," she said before pulling her arm out and backing away. There was a buzzing noise and the gate swung inward.

"See you tomorrow?" Asher asked as he got into his truck.

Aloisia nodded. "I'll meet you at the gate." She turned around and started her way back up the hill.

"Aloisia."

She paused and glanced over her shoulder at Asher. "Yeah?"

"I really like that tattoo on your back. It's kick ass."

Aloisia's hand strayed to where the tips of the flames were covered by the crisscross straps of her sports bra. She forced a smile to her face. "Thanks, I like it too."

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## 11.

"Where's my stuff at?" Aloisia asked suddenly, raising her head.

Toby arched an eyebrow. "Aren't you supposed to be concentrating on keeping your mind blank?"

"Seriously," Aloisia said, uncrossing her legs and sliding to the edge of Toby's bed.

"What stuff?" Toby demanded irritably.

"The stuff I took with me to fight Cinder," Aloisia replied impatiently.

Toby rolled his eyes. "How are we supposed to understand the extent of your power if you won't even concentrate for ten seconds on your own focusing stone? Do you realize how difficult it was to steal that stone from the Preparation grounds? I've never concentrated harder in my life."

Aloisia ignored him and repeated, "Where is my stuff?"

Toby shook his head. "I swear. The only weapon that survived was mom's sword. It's already tucked away in your car. The rest, including the holster and belt, were either destroyed during your fight or burnt away by Cinder when he tried to kill you again."

Aloisia's face fell. "So none of my clothes survived?"

Toby's puzzled gaze fell on her. "Well, in the beginning Cinder's power targeted you and your weapons, leaving your clothes alone. By the time they got you to me, your clothes were beginning to smoke. Your shirt caught first, but we were able to take the pants off before they did."

"So where are they?"

"There were torn, tattered, and stained. I didn't think you wanted to keep them so I tossed them."

Aloisia groaned and laid her head down back down on his bed. "You didn't check the pockets?"

Toby's eyes widened. "I know what this is about. I can't believe I forgot it." He waved his hand and a drawer to her desk flew open. With a flick of his wrist a small piece of paper rose and floated to his outstretched hand. Aloisia made to reach for the note but Toby shook his head and pulled it out of her reach. "First tell me why you have a policeman's cell number in your pocket."

Aloisia sighed and told him about the policeman she had saved. When she finished he had a look of disbelief written across his face. "And you're actually going to contact someone outside the Heart? You're going to break one of the Society's most sacred Codes?"

Aloisia shrugged. "Why not? I already face exile if they find out about my Conduit powers. Having a policeman on my side may help me in the long run. At the very least, he could have some valuable information."

Toby shook his head. "I think you're pressing your luck. It's going to be easier for you to get caught if you break more codes."

Aloisia shivered at the thought. "So, you think I shouldn't?"

Toby was quiet for a moment. "I didn't say that," he finally relented, surprising Aloisia. "We just have to be very careful and cover our tracks."

"We?"

"Oh please, Aloisia, you would get caught in less than a week without my help."

Aloisia squirmed slightly. "You're doing an awful lot for me Toby. What if you're caught?"

"Look at me, Aloisia," Toby said seriously. "I'm your big brother and I'll do anything for you. The risks I take in protecting you are more than worth my safety."

"Thanks, Toby," Aloisia said quietly. She smiled. "We could say that you've broken the record of saving my life in a week."

"And all in the last couple of days," Toby teased. "Gee, I need a medal." He handed her the paper and her cell phone appeared in his hand. "You going to make the call?"

Aloisia nodded as she grabbed the phone and unfolded the small piece of scrap note paper. The handwriting that scrawled across the sheet was hurried and blotched but Aloisia could make out his name and number. She flicked the phone open and dialed the number. It rang twice before a male voice answered.

"Officer Alvin Brook?" she asked.

There was a sharp intake of breath. "Who is this?" he demanded.

Aloisia hesitated. As much as she wanted his help, she didn't want him to know who she was. "You tell me."

There was noise in the background of his phone. The sound of voices and ringing phones could easily be heard. "You the warrior chick?" His voice had dropped to a whisper.

Aloisia laughed. "Glad you remember."

"Man, I didn't know if I would hear from you again. Hang on a second." There was a rustle of movement and the background noises softened. "There, that's better. Now we can't be overheard. It took you a long time to contact me."

"Yeah, well I just got out of my coma today." She couldn't keep her normal sarcasm from her voice. "Sorry for keeping you waiting."

"Coma? Damn girl, how'd you survive that monster?"

Aloisia shrugged but realized that he couldn't see. "I was lucky."

There was a long period of silence before Alvin said, "Are you going to tell me what the hell happened?"

"Yeah, well as much as I can tell you, but I don't think that it should be over the phone."

"You suggesting a meeting?"

"If that's alright with you."

"Sure, listen I go on patrol in about five minutes."

Aloisia glanced at her dragon clock hanging on the wall; it was almost six thirty. "Can you meet me in the city park at seven?"

Alvin hesitated. "Where?"

"Near the fountain. Don't worry, I'll find you." She didn't wait for him to answer before she hung up. "I'm going to get some weapons from Shaun," she told Toby, getting up and heading to her closet. "No way am I going unarmed at night into the park."

"What are you going to tell him?"

"That I'm patrolling," Aloisia answered, drawing a pair of black jogging pants over her short pajama shorts. She slipped a large, long-sleeved shirt over her head that covered her spaghetti strap shirt. She sat down and put her black tennis shoes on and grabbed her small black side pack. She stuffed a thick black ski mask in it, her cell phone and a pair of gloves in it before throwing it across her shoulder.

Toby threw her focusing stone at her. "Here, you may not know how to use it, but once given to a Conduit they can't leave their possession."

Aloisia hesitated then nodded, slipping the stone into her pocket. "I'm leaving now."

"You think they'll let you go alone?"

"If they know what's good for them," she snapped.

"Well, just in case, I think I'll help make sure you're not followed."

"What are you going to do?"

Toby only smiled and lay back on his bed. He shut his eyes as his three focusing stones floated out of his pocket. "You should go. It won't take me long," he said as the stones began to glow and circle around his head. Aloisia watched as the stones glowed brighter and quickened their pace. Soon the stones revolved so quickly that they blurred together and became a pulsing nimbus above Toby's peaceful face. The light brightened and flashed, making Aloisia shield her eyes. She backed away, her eyes closed as she felt for the doorknob behind her. She found it and took one last glimpse toward Toby. His body was completely lost in the light. She shivered as she looked away and left quickly.

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## 12.

Aloisia parked her car on the outskirts of Clions City Park and got out. She checked to make sure her shoulder holster was securely fastened and straitened her sword's hilt behind her. It had been surprisingly easy to convince Shaun to let her out and Aloisia knew that Toby had had something to do with it.

Thinking about Toby brought up her worries of being a Conduit to her mind, but Aloisia pushed them back. She had been working hard to keep from thinking about it on the drive here and she couldn't afford to now.

Aloisia ghosted through the park silently. She paused and slowed down as the fountain made her view. She could vaguely see a man leaning against a tree looking in the opposite direction. It was darker than it should have been at seven; storm clouds blanketed the sky and hid the sun. The man was the only person around; the pressing promise of bad weather had chased everyone else away. The twilight cast long, eerie shadows across the park as Aloisia hoisted herself into the nearest tree. She climbed branch to branch, using the trees to make her way to the waiting policeman. If she wanted to keep her secrets, then she did not even want him to know from what direction she had entered the park.

Finally she rested in the tree behind him. Aloisia took a moment to grab the ski mask and slip it over her head, exposing only her eyes. When she was sure the cloth was secure, she lowered herself to the ground and cleared her throat.

Alvin jumped, spinning around and drawing his gun. Her reaction was immediate. Her palm came out, hitting the butt of his gun. It was released and fell to the ground. She dropped to the ground and swept his legs out from under him. The knife in her right wrist sheath was out and she had placed it against his throat before she realized what she was doing. Aloisia blinked slowly, easing her breathing. She swayed for a moment and shook her head.

"Oh man, I'm so sorry," she gasped out, slipping her knife back into its sheath. She stood and reached a hand out to help him up.

Alvin hesitated but then took her hand. She helped him stand and he picked his gun up, making sure not to point it at her. "Those are sure good reflexes," he complained, rubbing the back of his head.

"I am sorry, but you were the one who pulled the gun." Aloisia inspected the cop. She hadn't really seen him after Cinder's fight; that had been the last thing on her mind. Alvin Brook was young, somewhere between twenty-five and thirty, and tall with broad shoulders. His skin was the dark color of milk chocolate and his hair was cropped close to his head. His eyes were large and a deep brown that shined and gave his handsome features a kind look.

"Yeah, I guess I did. I'm sorry; I was jumpy."

"I know the feeling."

Alvin laughed but stopped as he noticed her guns. "You're armed."

Aloisia rolled her eyes. "Are you going to turn me in?" she asked teasingly. "I'd be gone before they

could arrive and you couldn't arrest me on your own. Do you even blame me after what you saw me fight? We're in the middle of the park, a meeting ground of Bloodbanes, at night. Besides, I thought you wanted to talk. If you don't want to, I'll just leave."

Alvin raised his hands in surrender as he said quickly, "No, I mean, yes I want to talk. Please, don't leave."

Aloisia smiled against the cloth that covered her face. "I won't. Now sit down on the bench and help me keep watch. I don't want to be seen." He followed her to the bench that faced the four walkways that led to the wide marble fountain. The only sounds that could be heard was the water trickling and the distant rumble of cars driving past. The summer night was warm and Aloisia wanted nothing more than to take her gloves off, roll her sleeves up, and remove the mask. Of course she couldn't; she would just have to suffer through the heat.

"So who are you? What was that thing you saved me from?" Alvin asked eagerly.

Aloisia smiled. "Calm yourself, tiger. If you want to understand what happened then you need to know more about me and what I do." She hesitated. "However, once you know your life is forfeit. If anyone else finds out that you know, they'll kill you. You remember my br ... the man that came for me? He really would have killed you. They're serious. Our secret is more important to them than a Rational's life. I'll let you make the choice. If you don't want that kind of danger, I'll leave, and I won't think any less of you."

He hesitated before asking, "If it's so dangerous, then why did you contact me?"

"You fought a Pyroenchanter. When I saved you, you could have just run, but you didn't. I would be dead if not for you. I admire bravery. I thought you deserved the truth and for you to make the decision on whether you could take it or not." Aloisia shrugged uncomfortably. "Besides, I see the benefits of having a contact inside the police of my city."

Alvin was silent for a moment before he said, "My cell phone hasn't left my side since I gave you my number. Somehow, I knew you would call me. My mind wanders to what happened constantly. I don't think I could live without knowing."

Aloisia nodded. "Then there's no going back for you. Don't interrupt while I tell you what I can."

Alvin settled deeper into the bench and turned toward her. "Alright."

"First, you know all those ancient stories about magic, monsters—vampires and werewolves?" She watched him nod. "They're real. The stories about them stray from what they really are, but the actual creatures exist. All the monsters are called Bloodbanes. I am part of a society called the Heart of Revenge. Our entire purpose is to hunt and kill Bloodbanes in revenge for what was done a long time ago."

"I'm not exactly sure how long ago it was or what exactly happened; history is not in my job description, but once there was a woman named Zâintili. She was a self-proclaimed peacekeeper between the Bloodbanes and humans, and she worked for a better understanding between the two groups. Then one day a Bloodbane murdered her. Her five children vowed revenge and the oldest started the Heart of Revenge. Each of her children had a specialty and they worked together to better what could be done. Today, what they did is dictated into five Classes. A child born into the Heart is chosen at birth for whatever they would be best at."

"Conduits are magic users—like the youngest child of Zâintili. Scholars keep the history of the Heart intact, learn about Bloodbanes, and keep records. Whisperers keep the Heart secret—they'll be the ones that kill you if we're caught. Weaponists keep us armed and take care of anything that is needed by the Heart. Avengers are the leaders. They came from the oldest of Zâintili's children. He was the one who hunted the murdering Bloodbane." She paused to see how he took it. She hadn't meant to say that much, but she hadn't been able to stop herself once she began. It felt good relating the story to someone who didn't already know it.

Aloisia breathed in deeply, her mouth dry, before beginning again. "The Heart of Revenge is spread across the world. Normally one family or group protects a certain amount of territory, called the Body. My people have protected this city and the Body around it since before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. I'm the new Avenger of this generation and I was acting on a call from my Scholar that my Conduit was sensing a Bloodbane in the fire. My training Avenger, the one who had protected the Body before me, had gone in but hadn't come out, so I was sent in to see what had happened." She stopped and looked over curiously at Alvin. "You alright there, tiger?"

Alvin swallowed and nodded shakily. "Yeah, I just feel like I'm in over my head a little."

"But you believe me?"

"After what I've seen, how could I not?" Alvin licked his lips anxiously. "What was that thing? I watched it burn my friends alive; I lost my partner in that fight."

"I'm sorry I couldn't get down there sooner," Aloisia said softly.

"It's not your fault," Alvin amended quickly, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I didn't mean that. I know you would have saved them if you could. Don't beat yourself up over that. But who was that ... Bloodbane?"

"His name's Cinder. He's a Pyroenchanter that's been travelling across the country killing young female Avengers. He's managed to kill six Avengers and fifteen Heart members together. We don't know why he's doing this, but he's powerful enough to attract the attention of the Society—the leaders of the Heart. They're here to help me kill him. According to them, I'm the only one who has survived a fight with him."

"What's a Pyroenchanter?"

She had wondered the same thing earlier; Toby had had to explain to her what it was. "Pyroenchancers have complete and utter control over fire. They have the ability to steal the souls of whomever they burn with their flames. They grow more powerful with the more souls they consume." Aloisia shivered as she thought of how many faces she had seen underneath the monster's skin. All that howling torment ... and she pushed the thought away. According to her brother that was what had happened when she was dying; Cinder had been trying to take her soul. "Their other abilities can vary with the amount of souls they have taken and the strength of the people they've consumed. Cinder's been hunting Avengers and Heart members ... I don't want to know the full extent his powers may be able to reach."

"So what are you going to do?" Alvin asked slowly.

Aloisia shrugged. "Don't know yet. The Society's working with me and my da ... training Avenger to kill him. There's not many Pyroenchancers left. We've nearly hunted them to extinction. They're one of the most powerful Bloodbanes out there."

Alvin opened his mouth to say something else but Aloisia raised a hand to stop him.

"What is it?" he whispered as she looked around. She heard the rustling before the long, wild howl tore through the quiet air. There was a mocking, powerful tone to it that she knew too well.

She looked to him. "Don't interfere this time. I know this Bloodbane and as long as you don't fight, he won't kill you. He has no interest in Rationals. You don't have to worry about my safety this time."

"What is it?" he repeated fearfully as another howl sounded, this time close enough to hurt their ears.

Aloisia looked toward the sound of the howl. "Diablo," she said, drawing a silver knife from her belt.

Alvin didn't have a chance to respond as the massive furred body collided into the bench and toppled them over.

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### 13.

Aloisia jumped to the side as the massive furred creature barreled into the bench. She landed crouched and threw the knife she had drawn. The werewolf swiped a clawed hand and knocked it to the ground effortlessly.

Aloisia backed away as the monster disentangled itself from the bench. She looked quickly to see that Alvin was on the ground a couple of feet away from the werewolf. He groaned and rolled over onto his back. He took one look at the rising animal and started to back away hurriedly. The werewolf took no notice of him as he advanced on his hind legs toward Aloisia. He was an oddly beautiful mix of wolf and human.

"*Hola Chiquita*," it said, a smile lighting across its muzzle. "*Buenos noches*." The werewolf's words were deep and guttural and sounded forced as they passed through a muzzle that had never been meant to speak.

"Hello, Diablo. Long time no see," Aloisia snarled, drawing the other silver knife from her belt. Diablo laughed and it had a wild sound to it. He lowered himself to all fours. Even hunched, Diablo's shoulders stood taller than Aloisia's waist. He almost reached her shoulder and was the size of a small horse. The long, coarse hair that blanketed his body was a dark, wooden brown and a large white streak started at the tip of his muzzle, followed his spine and ended with a furl of fur on the tip of his long, curled tail.

"*Si, Si*, it's been too long," Diablo agreed, smiling at her. His smile seemed more a snarl as it lifted the lips away and revealed long, saber teeth. "I haven't seen your sweet form haunting my streets for over a week." Even with the harsh growl deepening the voice, a heavy Hispanic accent thickened the words. He pointed with his massive left hand that was both wolf and human to his thick upper right arm. "You want this back?"

Clasped tightly to his upper arm was a large onyx pendant attached to an ancient, thick silver chain. The pendant was carved with her mother's family crest—the weeping angel and fallen woman—with the Zaintili's Blood Tear etched under it.



"Yeah, I want it back," Aloisia said as she went into her fighting stance. She flicked her wrist and brought an enchanted silver knife from its wrist sheath. She'd saved her two wrist blades for close combat with him. They were the only ones that would really hurt him. Diablo was the only Bloodbane, other than Cinder, that had ever escaped her, and he had done it over a dozen times. He had snatched the pendent from her waist the first time they had fought and had taunted her with it ever since. She didn't know why, but she had never been able to sufficiently mark the werewolf enough to hurt him. It was a spur in her side.

Diablo laughed that wild, snarling laugh again. "Then come and take it from me, *Vengadora* ."

Aloisia started toward him and threw both knives. Diablo dodged them and bounded toward Aloisia. He moved too quickly for her and casually swept her to the side. Aloisia hit the ground and tumbled, her arms covering her head to protect it. She rolled until the fountain stopped her. She hit it with her back and it knocked her breath away.

Diablo was on top of her before she could do anything. He pushed her away from the fountain and pinned her legs with his lower body. He swung inward and Aloisia stopped his arms with her hands. She tried to push him off but couldn't. All she could manage was to keep his claws from carving her face.

"What's with the mask, beautiful?" he asked her, his face close to hers. His snout came in inches close to her face and she could feel his hot breath through the cloth of the mask. "Trying to hide the bruises I gave you a couple of weeks ago, or are you trying to hide the fact that you're breaking a sacred Code of your precious Heart?" He glanced quickly over in Alvin's direction before turning his complete attention back on Aloisia. "Shamey, shamey, *Chiquita* , what would they say if they found out you were trading secrets with a Rational?"

"How do you know that's what I was doing?" she groaned, fighting to keep her elbows locked underneath his weight.

Diablo noticed her trouble and, with a slight movement, he situated himself higher above her body and used the leverage to press harder down with his arms. "Because I know you," he said, pressing down with all his force. Aloisia's arms began to shake with the effort of keeping him away from her. Finally, an instant before her arms gave, she folded them under and the werewolf fell on top of her.

The sudden movement startled Diablo and Aloisia took the moment's hesitation to flip his body off of hers. The other knife in her right wrist sheath slipped into her hand and she slashed blindly. He breathed out sharply as she made contact. When she had gotten to her feet, Diablo was on the other edge of the fountain, holding a hand to his right forearm. Dark blood was dripping as he tried to stave it off. Aloisia could make out a steady stream of Spanish cussing.

"Enchanted blade?" he asked, a growl lighting across his voice.

Aloisia nodded smugly. "Yep, and silver too."

"Yeah, well not all your weapons are like that," Diablo snarled. "We'll see if you're as lucky next time."

"How do you know if they're not enchanted?" Aloisia challenged.

"Because I've touched most of your weapons at one time or another, *Chiquita* . That's the only time I've ever had that reaction."

Diablo was right. Out of her eight blades, only four were silver, and out of those four two were enchanted. Aloisia watched Diablo worry with his wound. The strike itself wasn't near fatal, but enchanted silver blades were the only thing that werewolves really had to be wary about. They took a long time to heal, and the enchantment caused the silver's poison to spread twice as quickly as it would normally. He wouldn't be able to fight anymore tonight with that wound.

"Ready to give me my amulet back, doggie?" she teased.

To her surprise, Diablo laughed. He let his wound go and flashed it to Aloisia. It was a nasty, deep gash that glowed softly. Lines of silver arched across his fur as the silver's poison began to spread. "Why would I give it back when I get such amazing perks from it?" Aloisia watched the pendent begin to glow a soft black. A moment later tendrils of red travelled down his arm from the pendent. The tendrils pooled around the wound and a bright red light pulsed. Diablo growled and threw his head back as a ringing noise sounded softly. When the noise faded and the light had ceased, his arm was healed and only a small silver curved scar remained.

"Man, how'd you learn to activate my family's pendent?" Aloisia grumbled.

"*Es un misterio, no?*" Diablo mocked. "Believe it or not, there's a brain behind this pretty face." He lowered himself to the ground and stalked toward Aloisia.

She shook her head and raised her knife. "Don't you ever get tired of this, Diablo?"

"What? Dancing with you, *Chiquita* ? Never." He was nearly within reaching distance when he stopped, sniffing the air. A growl crawled across his throat that was so ferocious and feral that it made Aloisia jump back. The white strip of fur that followed his spine rose and stood on end.

She had never seen Diablo act like that; he was always cool and controlled. The sound of his snarl struck a chord of fear in her heart that had nothing to do with the werewolf. Despite herself, Aloisia lowered her knives and backed away in a half circle until she was side by side with him. "What is it?" she whispered.

"There's something not right in this park, *Chiquita* ," he replied. "Something evil."

"Like you?" she asked.

Diablo looked toward her with dark chestnut brown human eyes that glinted red with the life of the animal he was. Despite the animal face, there was intelligence in his gaze and it cut through Aloisia better than his claws ever could have. "That's what's wrong with you *Vengadores* ," he said vehemently. "You can't distinguish between Bloodbane and evil. I'm not evil. Sure, I like to fight—that's in my nature—and I love starting up with you. You're always a *fiesta* , but I'm not evil." He stopped and sniffed the air. "What I smell on the air, now that's evil and something I've never sensed before. It smells like the pit of Hell itself—like sulphur and ash."

"Are you sure?" Aloisia asked, taking a deep breath. She thought she caught something faint, but she couldn't distinguish what it was.

"Never question a werewolf, *Chiquita* ." He looked around. "I suggest you get yourself and your Rational boyfriend out of the park. Don't go up against a Pyroenchanter alone again, Aloisia."

Aloisia raised an eyebrow at the use of her name. "That Rational is not my boyfriend and how did you know about Cinder?"

"The Bloodbane grapevine. Now get out of the park, we'll finish our *lucha* soon, I promise." Diablo sounded tense and uneasy. He started to back away, but Aloisia stopped him with a hand.

"Wait, you're letting me go?"

"I don't want to be caught by Cinder; he can steal a Bloodbane's soul as easily as a Rational's or a Vein's."

"You're as scared of Cinder as we are, aren't you?" Aloisia asked softly.

A shiver ran through the length of his wolf body. "Man, Pyroenchancers scare the shit out of me. This is one thing I could see Bloodbanes and Veins working together to kill. I know that if I can help I will."

"But what can you do?"

"At the moment nothing except run. I suggest the same for you." He didn't give her a chance to respond before he turned around and started to sprint away. In less than a couple of seconds, Diablo's quick gait had carried him out of Aloisia's eye sight. She heard his distant howl a moment later as she hurriedly made her way to where Alvin was standing shakily beside the broken bench. She knew she had to get them out of there. If Cinder scared Diablo, a Bloodbane she had never sensed fear from, then maybe he was even worse than the Heart believed. Regardless, she did not want to meet him in the park. All she wanted was to go home.

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## 14.

"Was that a were..." Alvin stopped and swallowed. "A werewolf?"

Aloisia nodded. "Yeah, now come on, we've got to get out of the park." She put a hand on Alvin's shoulder to lead him away but stopped at the sight of his wide eyes. "You alright there, tiger?"

Alvin nodded rapidly, licking his lips. "Yeah, yeah, I'm ... fine."

"Don't break down on me yet," Aloisia said, squeezing his shoulder. "We need to get out of here."

Alvin shook himself. "You're right. I heard what it said."

"You did?"

"It wasn't exactly trying to be quiet," Alvin pointed out.

"Well, I would think you were too busy trying to stay sane than listen to a werewolf."

"Listen, just because I'm a Rational, or whatever, doesn't mean that I'm ignorant," Alvin said forcefully. "I'm a little shaky, but that's only because you've come and thrown my whole world out of whack. I may

not be able to fight like you or arm-wrestle a werewolf, but I'm not useless."

Aloisia rolled her eyes and pushed him ahead of her. "We don't have time to nurse your injured ego," she griped. "If I thought you were useless I wouldn't have contacted you. Now, which way did you park?"

"That way," he answered stiffly, pointing the opposite direction she had parked.

"Then come on," she said, grabbing his hand. There was no doubt now. The air was thick with the smell of sulphur. She looked around uneasily as she dragged Alvin behind her. The smell grew thicker until it hung heavy in the air. Aloisia tried to breathe past the sulphur smell, but couldn't. She slowed down, her chest heaving.

"What's wrong?" Alvin questioned as she stumbled to a stop.

"Can't ... you ... smell ... it?" she gasped out, her free hand around her throat.

"Smell what?" he asked wonderingly as Aloisia began to cough. "Hey, are you alright?"

Aloisia shook her head, backing away. "We can't go that way. That's the way Cinder's waiting for us."

"But what about my car?" Alvin protested as she pulled him away.

"I'll drive you to it," she said breathlessly, giving him a tug. She dragged him down the path she had followed earlier and the further she got from the fountain the better she could breathe. By the time they had reached the edge of the park she could breathe normally and the smell of sulphur had nearly dissipated. She glanced down the street to find it clear and almost empty of cars.

Aloisia sighed. "Tonight went all wrong," she said. "I didn't want you to know who I was, what I drive ... anything."

"But then Diablo came and messed up everything, didn't he, Aloisia?"

She groaned. "So you did hear my name?"

Alvin looked proud of himself. "I told you I listened to the werewolf; why should that surprise you? You know, you can take the mask off. It's kind of pointless now to hide your face."

She blew out angrily as she took her gloves off and rolled her sleeves up. She reached up and jerked the ski mask off and stuffed the mask and gloves into the side pack.

"God, you're so young," Alvin said as he looked into her face.

"Well, who'd you expect, your grandma?"

Alvin ignored her sarcasm as he said, "I expected someone young, but maybe my age, slightly younger, but certainly not under twenty. How old are you?"

Aloisia shrugged uncomfortably. "Sixteen."

"You're not even an adult! You're hardly old enough to drive."

Aloisia rolled her eyes as she started toward her car. Alvin followed closely. "Yeah, well, I'm an adult in the eyes of the Heart. At sixteen, we take over the jobs of the ones above us and they are moved to wherever they are needed. The only exceptions are the old families of the Heart." Aloisia unlocked her car and got in, shutting the door. She pushed the button that unlocked the passenger side.

"I assume you're an old family?" he asked, getting in. Aloisia nodded and he continued, "What do they do?"

"The old families guard the largest Bodies, and normally the guardianship stays within the family. Of course, most generations don't give rise to all five classes, and so the Heart loans them until the family does birth a child to replace them. But the family works together in full partnership until the older generation dies. My Dad was the Avenger before me and he still shares partial protection even though I'm the official Avenger of this Body."

"Sort of like replacing old blood with new?"

Aloisia started the car. "Yeah, that's right. My generation is the only one that has all five Classes in over two hundred years." She hesitated. "I wasn't going to tell you our names or relations, but the information may help you stay out of our way. I have four brothers—Donny, Gregory, Shaun, and Toby. Donny is the oldest and he's twenty-five. He's my Scholar. Gregory and Shaun are twins and are twenty-two. Greg's the Whisperer who wanted to kill you and Shaun's my Weaponist. Toby is only a year and a half older than me and he's the Conduit. He's also the only one other than me who knows about you."

"He knows? I thought you said no one could know."

"Toby's cool; he's like me. Don't worry." Aloisia stopped at the red light. "My Dad's the only one left of the old generation. His name's Izicar."

"No way, Izicar Zanadel?" Alvin asked excitedly.

Aloisia nodded. "Yeah, we're the Zanadels." She inched forward as the light turned green.

"I don't know why I didn't figure it out sooner. You're the Zanadel's daughter that's always in trouble."

"I'm not always in trouble," Aloisia said defensively.

Alvin ignored her. "Most people think you're being abused by your father or one of your brothers."

Aloisia glanced at him before returning her attention back to the road. "Really?"

"Yeah. With all the injuries you go to school with, can you blame them? From what I hear you finished the school year with a bang."

Aloisia nodded, blowing a strand of hair from her face. "Yeah, I was pretty roughed up. Diablo had shoved my head into a tree a couple of times before Dad could get him off of me."

"The only thing that's kept the Social Services at bay is his connections to all the important people in Clions."

"You know an awful lot about my family," Aloisia said suspiciously as she turned onto the road that

bordered the other side of the park.

"Yeah, well, the police have a grapevine too."

Aloisia laughed despite herself as she parked her car behind the police car. She turned the car off and got out. Alvin followed her.

"You've got to be kidding me," Alvin groaned, staring at the front wheel.

"What is it?" Aloisia asked. He didn't answer, instead he pointed at the slashed tire.

"Who did that?" she demanded.

Alvin bent down and snatched a small note from the ground and looked at it. He made a disgusted sound and shoved it under Aloisia's nose. "It's for you."

She took it and glanced down to see her name written in long, flowing letters. She opened it curiously.

*Hola Vengadora,*

*I found your boyfriend's car. It was easy to follow his scent. Hope he likes my gift. I think you'll find it amusing. I call a truce until Cinder is killed. If ... when ... you see me, do not draw a weapon. I will speak with Bloodbanes on your behalf. I hear that Verdin and his son have been seen in your Body, but we both know who will be the one to kill the Pyroenchanter, now don't we? Enjoy this truce while you can, Chiquita, because we will fight again soon. I'll be in touch. Until then, "Avenge the might of Good" ... or whatever it is that you Veins say now.*

Adios,

*D*

"Damn you, Diablo," she whispered as she pocketed the note. She looked up at Alvin. "Do you have a spare tire?"

"Of course, but I don't have a jack."

She raised an eyebrow. "How can you have a spare tire and no jack?"

"I was using the jack to fix a car at my house and didn't put it back," he answered defensively.

"I don't have a jack either."

"And you complained about me."

"My brother Greg borrowed it and never gave it back," she said defensively.

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"Just get your tire. I'll take care of the rest."

Aloisia went to the front of the car and waited for him to roll the spare tire over. "You ready?" she

asked him. He nodded and she bent down, putting her hands under the bumper. She breathed out as she lifted the front of the car off the ground.

"How long can you lift that?" Alvin asked hesitantly. "I don't want to be under there when you decide to drop it."

"You don't need to worry about me; this isn't heavy."

Alvin shrugged and sat on the ground. "So, Diablo did this, did he?" he asked as he started to loosen the nuts.

"Yeah. He does this kind of stuff all the time."

"What's the story behind this werewolf?"

"I met him on patrol about a year and a half ago. He's the only Bloodbane, not counting Cinder, which I've failed to kill. He normally makes an appearance every other week; sometimes he comes more often, sometimes less."

"But it's not the full moon. How was he—"

"Don't believe every story you hear," Aloisia interrupted. "You'll be better off not believing unless I say it's the truth."

"So what is the truth about werewolves?"

"They're some of the best healers among Bloodbanes. They can heal anything from a bullet shot to dismemberment. Fire can hurt them, but not kill them. Silver is your only safe bet, and even silver can be healed. Enchanted silver works best. When it comes to the moon, most can shift without its call and the really powerful can even resist the moon's light for a while, but all have to shift at some time during the nights of the full moon. They have nearly unrivalled strength, speed, and agility in their wolf form and they keep a portion of their abilities in human form. Venom in their claws and teeth carry the disease of lycanthropy, but an injury from them can be healed before the first change with an enchanted silver pendant placed over the wound for a certain amount of time. There is no cure after the first shift."

"So they're powerful?"

"Yeah, that pretty much sums them up."

"And you've killed werewolves before?" Alvin asked, looking around the car at her.

"I've killed a few," she admitted.

"Then why is Diablo so different?"

Aloisia shrugged and rotated her shoulders. The car wasn't very heavy, but she was in an awkward position and wished Alvin would hurry up. "I don't know; I've just never been able to beat him. Did you see the silver chain and onyx pendant? That was my mom's before she died. He snatched it off my waist in our first fight. I've not seen him without it since. I use to think it was just to tease me. I mean why else would he wear irritating silver? I had never thought he would recognize it as a healing and strengthening pendant and learn how to use it. It's magnified his natural werewolf powers."

"Then if Diablo's so powerful, then why hasn't he killed you?"

"Well, he's tried, but he's failed."

"Actually I don't think he has really been trying. He hasn't moved as quickly or used enough strength to warrant enough excuse for him to get away from you for so long. I saw your fight with Cinder and let's just say that tonight didn't compare to then. If you ask me, I'd say flirting."

Aloisia frowned as he rolled the slashed tire away from the car. She took the opportunity to set the car down for a moment and stretched, keeping a hand on the car to keep it balanced. She sat down and lifted again as he rolled the new tire underneath the car. "Flirting?"

"You haven't noticed? Oh, come on, I thought all girls were good at stuff like that. How can a Rational see what you didn't?"

Aloisia didn't answer, but Alvin didn't notice. Instead he asked, "What are Veins? I heard Diablo say it."

"That's what Bloodbanes call members of the Heart." Aloisia answered absentmindedly, lost in thought. Could Alvin be right? Even though she didn't want to admit it to herself, it would explain a lot about the werewolf's behavior. Thinking about Diablo brought back what he had said to her earlier. He had said that Avengers couldn't distinguish between Bloodbanes and evil, but Aloisia had been taught by her Dad that all Bloodbanes were evil; that all deserved to die. And she believed it, and still did, and she killed all monsters without discrimination.

Sometimes, though, it was difficult to remember she was the good guy when she entered a vampire's lair and killed it—they could seem so human. She would want to look away in a werewolf's last minutes of life, but she never allowed herself. She made herself look into their frightened, fading eyes as they died in their human forms. Anytime she began to doubt her role, she just thought back to her Preparation—the stories her trainers told her of the murders. It had worked in the past, but lately she had seen a crueler side of the Heart and now ... she wasn't so sure.

"You can put the car down now," Alvin said, breaking her troubled thoughts. "Unless you want to hold it up all night."

Aloisia blinked and set the car down carefully before standing up. "It took you long enough," she complained. "Geez, how long does it take a guy to change a tire?"

"Give me a break," Alvin said defensively. "I've only changed a tire twice in my life."

Aloisia ignored him as she shook her head and muttered to herself, "Well, I've had a productive night. Shaun's going to kill me for losing more knives."

"You mean these?" Alvin asked, taking knives out of his back pocket. "I picked them up as you threw them. I thought you would want them back. One was stuck in a tree, and I thought I'd never get it out."

She stared at them for a moment before smiling slightly and taking them from his hands. "Thanks, tiger," she said as she put the knives back into their places. "I appreciate it."

"You're welcome."



"We'll need to meet again soon. Now that I've given you information, I expect some in return."

"Sure, how can I contact you?"

Aloisia hesitated. "Well, I'll give you my cell number. Just call and let it ring once or twice. I'll call you back when I can."

She waited for him to fish out a sheet of paper and a pen from his pocket and gave him her number.

After she watched him drive a way she got in her car and started home. Aloisia glanced at her car's clock; it was nearly ten. She sighed, rubbing her eyes. She was already tired, and if Toby had anything to do with it, she still had a long night ahead.

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## 15.

"I can't believe you went out on your own!" Verdin yelled. "I thought I told you we were all going after Cinder."

"I didn't go hunting for Cinder," she assured him calmly, unperturbed by his outburst. She unsnapped her belt of knives and slipped out of her holster. "I just patrolled my Body. It's been over eight days. I had to."

"Do you expect me to believe that you didn't go after Cinder?" Verdin laughed, but it was cold. "You forget, Aloisia, I know you. You're too stubborn and proud for your own good."

Aloisia rolled her eyes and shrugged out of the large sweater. Blissful night air hit her sweating skin. "I may be stubborn and I may be proud, but I'm not stupid. I know my limits. If you must know, when I even had the suspicion of meeting Cinder, I marched my ass the other way." She stepped up on the porch and stood in front of Verdin who was blocking the double doors.

He crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. "Should I believe you on that?"

She shrugged. "Belief or not doesn't prove truth. I know the truth and that is all that matters. Please, Master Avenger, may I enter my home? I tired myself out on patrol and wish to retire to my room."

"Your word of honor and trust as an Avenger that you did not go out to hunt Cinder alone."

"I give you my word," she said immediately.

Verdin gave her a searching look before he said, "Your father and your brothers will be back early in the morning. I will send for you when they arrive, but we'll have to hurry if you're to make your date." He smiled slightly as he stepped away from the door.

Aloisia didn't comment as she rushed past him and up the stairs. She paused to put her weapons up before going into her room and shutting and locking the door behind her.

Toby was waiting for her. "So?"

Aloisia told him about the night as she took her focusing stone out of her pocket and slipped her pants off, adjusting the shorts that had been under them. When she had finished, she sat down on his bed and waited for a response, her hand playing across the stone's smooth surface nervously.

"Diablo may be a good ally in this," he said thoughtfully.

"You're kidding me," she griped.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Basic ideology."

"Yeah, we'll see how well that blows over with Verdin and Dad."

"Just don't tell them. Like you said, what's one more secret?"

"I guess," Aloisia said uneasily.

"We'll talk about it more tomorrow after we've had a chance to think about it," he said dismissively. "We've more important stuff to do tonight. Put your focusing stone down on the bed. Concentrate on it and clear your thoughts. I'll open your mind."

Aloisia nodded and did as she was told. She felt silly as she stared at the stone. To her it was nothing special. It was just a small, oval piece of onyx. It was perfectly smooth and the light reflected off of its flawless surface. A breath of air passed by her face as Toby waved his hands over her head. His hand stopped above her forehead and he hovered his fingertips above her skin. Even though he wasn't touching her skin, it felt as if his hand was caressing ... something.

A shudder ran through her body as he clenched his hand into a fist. "Now," he said, his voice tight with strain. "Concentrate on your stone. Nothing else should enter your mind."

Aloisia hardly heard him; her mind was already transfixed on the stone in front of her. She stared at it so hard that her vision blurred. Distantly, she could feel a strange, enticing warmth spreading inside her body. Her skin tingled as the heat swept through her form ... and then it left, leaving her cold. Aloisia shook her head. No, she didn't want to lose that warmth. It was like seeing a fire in a snowstorm—too far to feel its warmth but close enough to see its promise.

Aloisia reached out and tried to grab the fire, but it eluded her, and she nearly stumbled forward before the flames leapt toward her, enveloping her completely and burning her alive. The sensation bowed her back as the power, her power, filled her. It filled her completely until she was overflowing and she knew she had to force it into something else other than her.

She urged herself to look back down at the stone. The moment the focusing stone was in her sight the connection was made. In a burst of purple light, the stone shot into the air. She looked up; breathing heavily as it hovered, rising until it hit the ceiling. It knocked against the ceiling before starting a sharp, small revolution. Aloisia watched it through half closed eyes as the stone continued to spin, growing in speed until it was one black line.

Aloisia let out a loud gasp as she felt the stone crack and give, breaking into three separate pieces. The fragments immediately stopped, dropping onto the bed in front of her. Toby reached for them but Aloisia shook her head.

"No, no Toby don't," she whispered, her voice echoing slightly. The warmth still filled her, and she could

still feel a connection to the three pieces in front of her. She reached out tentatively and touched the piece closest to her. It moved beneath her fingertips as if something alive. She jerked her hand back as a pulse of power ran through her and into it. The piece she had touched began to glow brightly. When the glow faded, the piece had molded to an identical match to the focusing stone that had broken.

"You're a powerful psychic," Toby whispered. "But you've also got more powers. Touch the other fragments."

Aloisia nodded and reached out with both her hands. She gripped each tightly. The one in her right hand began to grow hot until she dropped it and it lay on the bed, smoldering. The one in her left was ice cold. She put it down. "What's happening?" she asked shakily as the stones returned to normal. Instead of the two fragments that she'd held, two focusing stones rested by the third, each identical to the one that had broken.

"What does that mean?" Aloisia asked, picking up the focusing stone that had glowed. The warmth that had covered her skin had faded, but she could still feel it in her mind, an overwhelming presence.

"It means that you're a very, very powerful Conduit," Toby breathed.

Aloisia glanced down at the focusing stone and noticed a small mark on its surface. She brought it up to her face to study the long scratch down its surface.

"Toby, explain what happened, please," Aloisia pleaded, her voice shaking slightly. "No skirting or riddles. I just want to know straight up."

"What just happened is technically impossible," he said. "There are only two other instances in the Heart's history. I told you before that the stones did one of three things and that dictated the boundaries of the Conduit's power. Every Conduit has some ability in all three areas, but are very restrained in their master line. You are a phenomenon; you are nearly equal in power in all areas. That's why your focusing stone broke."

"So what am I then?" Aloisia asked impatiently.

Toby laughed. "Imagine you wording it like that. I called you a psychic because your main stone, the one that has the scratch, glowed. You may be equally powerful in all three, but you have a special interest, a knack, for things done with the mind. After that are enchantments. You're hardly interested in healing, which doesn't surprise me."

"You said there were only two other instances of this?"

Toby nodded. "Yeah." He took his three stones from a small red pouch he had around his neck. "I'm one of the two," he said softly. "My main stone claimed me an enchanter, my next a healer and the one after that as a psychic. The other is the Master Conduit, Verdin's brother Isaac. He's a healer, psychic, and enchanter."

"That's why he trained you after your Preparation instead of our uncle," Aloisia said, suddenly understanding. The Master Conduit had lived with them for nearly six years, replacing their uncle as the main Conduit for the Body until Toby had turned sixteen and took over. It hadn't been long after that their uncle had died.

Toby nodded. "He was the only one who could teach me what I needed and I was too powerful to be

allowed to train on my own."

"So how powerful am I?" Aloisia asked again, feeling like a broken record.

"Aloisia, I'll be honest. I'm the most powerful Conduit the Heart has ever seen. That's not me bragging; it's just the truth. Most think that I could rival the first Conduit, Daughter Serene of Zâintili. You equal me and surpass me in certain ways."

Aloisia's heart was thudding painfully in her throat. "I don't understand this, Toby. If I'm so powerful then why haven't my powers come before this? For that matter, why now?" Tears blurred her sight and she wiped angrily at them. Her voice rose as she said, "God, Toby, what am I going to do? I can't hide forever."

The light bulb in her dragon lamp beside Toby's bed grew brighter until it exploded and Aloisia shirked backward. Toby put a hand on her shoulder and she instantly felt soothed and calm. It was one of his special gifts, one that few Conduits claimed, to be able to influence other's minds. Most of the time, Aloisia hated him to use the ability on her, but tonight she was just relieved.

"First thing's first," he said, his voice soft and layered with cool, calming power. "You're going to have to calm down. Conduits can lose control in extreme emotions and you don't have any control to start with."

Aloisia took a deep breath and nodded and Toby continued, "I find it odd as well that you didn't stumble across your powers until now. Children that are born as a Conduit are bound away from their magical powers until ten when the Masters reawaken them through the focusing stones. That's what I did with you. Somehow, you were bound as a child—I don't know how. Your power broke from the barrier in defense of Cinder. That was why I could feel the power afterward. Whoever or whatever bound you did a really, really good job. There have been times when a Conduit's power doesn't evolve until they are older, but it is extremely rare for it to develop as late as yours has. It's not unheard of, but it's not common either. The way I had to open your powers demonstrates that they were bound. Even with their magic hidden away, Conduits can be sensed. I don't know how many times I've played around in your mind, and I've never felt something like that."

"So we still don't know what happened, do we?"

Toby shrugged. "Not really, and we may never know. Seeing how powerful you are, we really need to teach you to focus and to control your powers under emotion. Since you'll be meeting with the Society tomorrow, I think it's a good idea we don't stop until you have some kind of control."

"How long will that take?" she asked uneasily.

"I'm going to try to teach you what takes a child Conduit a few weeks to learn in the span of a night," Toby answered blankly.

Aloisia's heart plummeted. "No chance I could get some sleep tonight?"

Toby took his hand off her shoulder. "No, we'll be lucky if you can leave the room by noon tomorrow."

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16.

Someone was shaking her and Aloisia groaned, rolling over and pulling her covers over her head. "Leave me alone," she grumbled.

"Come on, Aloisia, wake up," a voice pleaded. It took her a moment to recognize Josiah. "It's almost one and the Society's been waiting on you and Toby for nearly an hour."

Aloisia vaguely remembered Josiah coming in and trying to wake her earlier. She had waved him away and fallen back to sleep. Though she didn't want to, she knew she had kept the Society waiting long enough and she had to get up. "Alright, alright," she grumbled, forcing herself to sit up. "We'll be down there in a minute."

Josiah shook his head. "Toby left about five minutes ago, and I'm not allowed to leave without you. They want you up now."

"Fine," Aloisia growled, dragging herself out of the bed. "They had better have some coffee made."

Josiah only shrugged as he led her out of the room and down the long hallway. "Your father and brothers were extremely happy to hear you were alright."

"Were they? Frankly, I second their emotions," Aloisia said smartly, rubbing her eyes. Slowly, her grogginess was fading away and she was able to focus better. Despite the fact that Toby hadn't been satisfied until nine and she'd had only four hours of sleep to fight the exhaustion of the day before had taken their toll on her, Aloisia was feeling strong and fairly awake as she followed Josiah down the stairs. She was accustomed to surviving on small amounts of sleep.

There was a loud cheer as Aloisia entered the living room and she was seized into a tight hug from her father. "Thank God," he said as he released her. He clasped her shoulder. "It'll take more than a Pyroenchanter to take down my Avenger. You do your mother proud."

"Thanks Dad," Aloisia said, smiling. Inside, her guts were squirming with guilt from everything she was hiding from him. "What did you and the boys learn?"

He frowned on her abruptness but motioned to the empty chair at the head of a large table that had been set up in the center of the room. Aloisia sat down in wonder. Normally, her Dad sat at the head of any meeting table, but today he sat near the middle of the table, across from where Josiah sat as if he was only a guest in her Body. Becoming the main Avenger had been taking a lot of getting use to.

Aloisia situated herself in her seat and gratefully took the hot mug of coffee that was waiting on her. She sipped the steaming liquid carefully to find that it was overloaded with sugar, milk, and cream just the way she liked. Shaun must have made it. She breathed in the vapor and sipped the coffee as she looked around the people at the table. At the other end Verdin sat, studying her; she ignored him, her eyesight passing over him Aloisia glanced over to see how Josiah was taking being sat at the center of the table as a guest, but his expression was blank. Best she understood how the hierarchy of the Heart worked, Josiah had taken his father's place in protecting their Body, but Nikolas still claimed the title of Master Avenger. Josiah wouldn't take his place as Master Avenger until his father died. The Verdins were the oldest family in the Heart and were believed to be direct descendents from Zaintili's oldest son Vincent.

"How do you feel, Avenger?" Nikolas asked, his cold, grey eyes regarding her.

"I am tired and I am sore, but nothing else is wrong with me," Aloisia answered, pushing her thoughts away and focusing her attention on the man across her.

"That is good," Verdin said seriously. "You'll need all your strength in hunting Cinder."

"What did Dad find out?"

"There have been two other fires in Clions," Donny answered, looking over at her. His eyes were a pale, nondescript blue and his hair was short like Greg's, but unlike his brother, he didn't keep it gelled and fixed up. He never cared about his rumpled appearance. "They have been as mysterious as the first and are baffling the police."

"Cinder?"

"It seems so," Donny agreed. "But I don't think he's trying to lure the Heart to him right now."

"So what is he doing?" Toby asked.

"Knowing him, he's leading the police on the story that the survivor from the first attack told," Adrianna, the Master Scholar, said.

"What did the survivor say?" Aloisia asked quickly, thinking about Alvin and wondering how he had covered up all his dead friends. In all the excitement with Diablo and Cinder she'd forgotten to ask him.

Gregory snorted in laughter. "That idiot you saved came up with some crackpot story about some fire terrorists with flamethrowers. Honestly, I was surprised the Rationals believed it. They get more stupid every time I deal with them. He said there were three and that they got away in a large tinted black car. Now, to keep the story up, Cinder's been warning the police and starting fires."

"But why? Why would Cinder want more attention drawn to himself?"

"Because he knows he was hasty in his first attack," Adrianna answered simply. "He thought he would be in the city for a day and leave the next. He hadn't been expecting you to survive and he made himself quite a bit of trouble when he killed those police. It was even worse that you had managed to save one. So, he feeds the stories the Rational told to keep the people away from the real truth."

"He's leading the police away from his goal," Donny said. "Each fire is further away from the heart of the city. He's making them believe that the *fire-terrorist* are leaving. The last fire was last night around eight at the edge of the city in the bordering suburb on Isle Street."

"What?" Aloisia shook her head. "That can't be right. Cinder was in the city park last night around that time."

"I thought you said you hadn't met Cinder," Verdin stated, his voice going low.

"I didn't," Aloisia amended quickly. "I had been patrolling the park when Diablo cornered me. We were fighting when he stopped, sniffed the air, said something about *damn Pyroenchancers*, and ran. It wasn't long after that the air grew thick with the smell of sulphur and ash and I got my ass out of there. I came home almost as soon as that happened."

"Diablo?" Isaac asked, surprised. "Is that the werewolf your father reported to have stolen your

mother's family pendent? You have still failed to kill it?"

Aloisia nodded, swallowing her pride as she said, "Yes. What's worse, he has learned the healing and strengthening abilities of my mother's pendent. I cut his arm open with an enchanted silver blade and he healed it almost effortlessly. I'm afraid the only thing that will kill him now is decapitation."

"Is he that big of a threat?" Josiah asked. "Should we help with him as well?"

"No," Aloisia said sharply, surprising everyone. "I claimed him after our first fight. No other Avenger can hunt him. I may have to share Cinder, but Diablo's mine."

Josiah opened his mouth to argue, but Nikolas stopped him with a look. "Hush, Avenger. You are only a guest in her Body when you are at the meetings. You know the Codes. You do not question the leader of the Body and you do not speak out of turn." He looked over at Aloisia's Dad. "What do you think, Izicar? You know your daughter better than anyone else. Can she handle this werewolf on her own?"

Her Dad nodded. "Diablo's strong, but he isn't a threat to the Heart. He's only an annoying nuisance in our lives. We needn't focus any attention on him; especially if he's afraid of Cinder."

"Then let's focus on Cinder," Shaun snapped. "Aaron and I need to know what weapons to supply." Aaron, the Verdin's Weaponist, nodded in agreement.

"Aloisia's the only one that can tell you that," her Dad said. "Cinder caught me by surprise. I didn't even have a chance to draw a weapon."

"Silver does nothing," Aloisia said, remembering her battle. "The silver bullets and knives didn't mark him. The iron and lead made him stumble, though. That was how I made him let go of the policeman. It doesn't do much damage, but it did make him bleed. It didn't last long; he healed almost immediately, and it only pissed him off royally when I shoved the knives in his back and snapped his neck."

"It's been over a hundred years since the last record of a Pyroenchanter," Adrianna said, "and he was killed by an enchanted onyx blade to the heart."

"Onyx?" Shaun asked incredulously. "That doesn't make sense."

"Yeah, it does," Toby argued. "Onyx has the ability to be infused with more magical power than any other material. That's why it's used in pendants and amulets."

"I have some spare onyx stones we can use," Isaac said. "I will get them tonight and pass them to Aaron so that you two can make the weapons."

"I have a stone that can be made into one now," Toby said. "I'll give it to Shaun, and he'll make it so that Aloisia can take it with her tonight, just in case."

"We'll use iron and lead bullets also," Aloisia said.

"And Alexis's sword will probably be the strongest weapon," her Dad said quietly. "That was one of the few things she took from her family when she left it. That and the pendent."

"Yes, Alexis's family sword is something of a marvel," Adrianna said. "I'm surprised her family allowed her to take it along with their pendent when she left her Body to live with you."

"Just because she left her Body to marry me didn't mean they hated her," her Dad said softly. "They understood and they still loved her. Besides, she still protected her Body; it was just more difficult for her to devote her full attention to it."

"It was a sorrowful day when we lost that family in the fire," Nikolas said quietly.

Alexis, Aloisia's mother, had been the Avenger for the powerful family Airtos before she had met Izicar. It had been the only family that consisted of all female Avengers and male supporting Classes. Alexis had taken Aloisia and Toby to meet their family and they had stayed in the family's house. Aloisia could hardly remember much of the trip—how happy the family had been that Aloisia had been chosen to be the Avenger of a once all male family. Then the fire had erased all the happiness away ... along with the lives of everyone but Aloisia and Toby.

"Do we have any way of finding Cinder?" Toby asked, interrupting the solemn air that had fallen over the table.

Isaac shook his head. "All spells I've tried to locate him with are unresponsive. You're welcome to try, but he shields too well. I'm afraid that we'll only sense him when he's ready. What we really need is a psychic."

Aloisia shifted uncomfortably and said, "Well, we don't know much more than when this meeting started. All we do know is that he's powerful, the only way to kill him is an onyx blade to the heart, and that he's not working alone." A shocked silence met her statement and she continued, "There is at least one other and it would be safe to assume another Pyroenchanter—one not nearly as powerful or he would have helped try to kill me."

"You think there are two Pyroenchancers?" Adrianna asked disbelievingly.

"At least two, but I'm betting on three," Aloisia said, thinking hard. It had been a sudden burst of knowledge to realize that there were three Pyroenchancers, but she didn't understand where it had come from. Nevertheless, she knew that she was right. Intrigued on how she had found that out, Aloisia reached further in her mind, only to find the strange, unbelievably powerful heat that Toby had begun to teach her to control. The power sensed her, and it swelled unexpectedly and bumped against its mental prison. The sudden strength caught Aloisia by surprise and she put her hand into her short's pocket and gripped the small purple pouch that Toby had given her to hold her focusing stones. There was a flurry of voices and images before her vision swam. Distantly, she was aware of a dusty old building...

Toby laid a hand on her hand that stayed on the table. The instant he touched her, Aloisia felt calmer, cooler, as the warmth stopped fighting. The images and voices faded and she was able to look at Toby without clouded vision. "Why do you think that?" he asked urgently, keeping a grip on her hand.

Aloisia fought to keep her voice steady as she said, "Nikolas told me that evidence existed that he didn't work alone. It only makes sense he would have more than one and that both would be Pyroenchancers he was probably training or helping take souls."

"But do you realize the odds of three Pyroenchancers?" Nikolas asked. It seemed that no one had noticed Aloisia's lapse of concentration and she breathed a sigh of relief. Slowly, Toby lifted his hand from hers, and she found that the odd tingling warmth didn't try to surge forward. "It was amazing enough to learn that one still existed, but three..."



"Would make sense," Adrianna relented. "They are a dying species. It would make sense to stick together."

"So, we assume we know that there are three Pyroenchancers and that we know how we can kill them," Donny said, shaking his head. "But we don't know where they are or when they'll turn up or Cinder's reason for targeting female Avengers across the country. Frankly, we don't know enough to fill a sheet of power."

"Then this'll be what we do," Aloisia said, thinking quickly. "You and Adrianna continue to research. It wouldn't be a bad idea if your whisperer Melanie helped Gregory = with his side of the information pool. Shaun and Aaron can fix a pack of weapons that'll stay with us in case Cinder tries something fast on us. Toby and Isaac can continue to look for him and maybe they could work on developing some new tricks for us to try."

"What about the Avengers?" her Dad asked, smiling wryly.

"You and me will continue to patrol the Body," she said.

"And us?" Nikolas asked, wearing a smile identical to her father's.

Aloisia hesitated. "You can join us if you like," she relented. "As long as no one interferes with any fights between me and Diablo."

"That sounds like a good plan," Nikolas agreed. "And I thank you for giving us permission to help protect your Body. I know how hard that was for you."

"Aloisia likes to hunt alone," her Dad said proudly.

Nikolas was about to comment when the phone rang from the family room. Shaun jumped up and ran to answer it. After a few moments, he re-entered the room and looked over to Aloisia. "It's for you. Sounds like Danielle."

"I think it's time to end this meeting anyhow," her Dad said. "I don't think we can say anything else for now."

"I agree," Nikolas said, standing up. "Isaac's taking us back to our Body for some supplies we'll need. We will be back some time tomorrow."

"Alright," Aloisia said as she stood up and bowed slightly. "Safe journey to my leader and his people."

Nikolas acknowledged her with a nod of his head and she stood up straight and walked out of the living room and into the family room where the phone rested on the arm of the chair. She picked it up. "Hello?" she asked tentatively.

"So you are back." Her friend's voice was short and clipped and Aloisia could tell she had been pouting.

"Hey, Danielle," Aloisia said, trying to sound cheerful. "Look, I'm really sorry I bailed on you and I haven't called you for so long..."

"I know, Charlie told me the bullshit your brother told Asher."

"What do you mean?" Aloisia asked uneasily, sitting down on the arm of the couch.

"Going to take care of your mamma?" Danielle's scorn rode through the phone. "Please, we both know that all your grandparents are dead."

"You didn't tell him that, did you?" she asked quickly.

"It would serve you right if I did."

"Come on, Danielle. You didn't, did you?"

A sigh blew through the phone and Aloisia could imagine her friend fishing her hand through her hair in irritation. The image almost made her smile. "No, damn it, I didn't. I just didn't have it in me. Unlike you, I value our friendship."

Aloisia winced. "Ooh, that was a low blow."

A slight laugh sounded. "No, you leaving was a low blow. Any chance you can tell your friend why you really left?"

Aloisia hesitated, tempted for the millionth time to tell her the truth. She shook her head in aggravation. "I really can't, Dan. I am sorry, but Dad made me promise."

"Fine, I get it, as secretive as ever. I guess I should be used to it."

"Come on, Dan, don't be that way. Trust me, I'd tell you if I could. I hate keeping stuff from you."

"And you're really bad at it too," Danielle stated, her voice softening. "Tell you what, I'll stop being mad at you if you promise me the next chance you have to tell me whatever you're doing you will. I'm your best friend; my job is keeping your secrets."

Aloisia hesitated before she finally relented. No matter what, she couldn't stand losing Danielle's friendship. Besides, she had been tossing the thought around in her mind for a while. If she was going to be exiled, might as well go out with a bang. "Fine, but we'll have to talk about it first. Not over the phone, though."

"I don't know what you and your family's into, but I trust you, Aloisia. God help me, but I can't help it. Promise me you'll tell me."

"I already said I would," Aloisia said, feeling guilty.

"Promise," Danielle pressed.

Aloisia groaned slightly, biting her lip. Her friend knew her too well. She steeled herself, knowing that she was sealing a forbidden contract with her and Danielle's blood. "I promise."

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Aloisia and Danielle had talked on the phone for hours; she'd even put the phone on speaker so she could get ready for her date and talk at the same time. No matter what was happening in Aloisia's hectic life, Danielle always made her feel normal, and she was able to forget her problems while she got ready for her date with Asher. It was a welcome relief. "What time is it, Dan?" she asked as she put her lip gloss on.

"Don't worry, Lo," Danielle laughed. "You've still got fifteen minutes until Asher is supposed to arrive."

"Do you think he'll like the outfit?" Danielle had helped her pick it out. Her friend knew her wardrobe better than she did. Most time, Danielle helped her buy it. She had on dark green capris that had a light brown dragon crawling up her right thigh, the tail whipping across to end on her back pocket. The dragon's head was barely visible past the forest green shirt that lay resting on her thighs. It was loose and flowing and hid the hilts of the knives she had stowed away in her waistband. It was a pretty shirt, and it brought out the color of her eyes, but it was cut a little too low for her taste; Danielle had demanded it. The light brown headband pushing her hair back and leaving ribbons gliding down her back completed the outfit.

"Girl, you could wear rags and make it a fashion statement."

Aloisia laughed. "I think you've inherited Chloe's exaggeration."

Danielle's laugh mirrored Aloisia's. "Maybe, but it's still truth."

"So what's your take on Asher?" Aloisia asked as she started putting her makeup up.

"He seems perfect for you. He's got a great personality and likes what you like. He sometimes hung around Charlie and me."

"So you and Charlie hit it off good?"

Danielle's voice turned dreamy. "Yeah, I like him a lot." There was a pause as Aloisia heard Chloe's muffled voice in the background before Danielle said, "Mom says hi and she's sorry but she wants to relinquish the phone from my ransom. Have fun on your date with Asher and try not to ditch him."

Aloisia laughed again. "I'll try not to. Tell Chloe hi and I love you for me."

"I will," Danielle said, hanging up.

"Shaun left you some weapons for your date," Toby said as she left the bathroom. "He brought them in while you were taking a shower."

"How does he expect me to hide all this?" Aloisia growled, glancing at the arsenal on her bed. A dagger, a gun, some ammo, and four knives. "I've already got four knives. One of each of the kind I normally carry, and no way I can carry a gun without being caught."

"Way ahead of you, sis," Toby said, setting down the book he had been reading and pointing to the large beach bag purse hanging on the post of her bed. "I went through your purses, and that's the only one big enough to fit all of that in the secret compartment and not bulge. I lined the purse with a concealment spell so even if your purse is searched or you have to go through a metal detector you're safe."

"Thanks," Aloisia said as she started to stuff the weapons into the back lining of the purse. She paused as she picked up the dagger. Its black blade reflected off the light. "Onyx," she whispered. She lifted her shirt and slipped it through the waistband beside the other knives. It was bigger, but there was only a slight bulge when she put her shirt down and if she was careful, she should be able to hide it.

"You're welcome." Toby regarded her critically as she zipped the hidden compartment of the purse up. Aloisia took the small purple pouch that held her focusing stones and put them in her pocket.

"Be careful, Aloisia," Toby said seriously. "You almost lost control down there in the meeting. I won't be there on your date to help you if you do that again."

"Do you think that's a problem?" Aloisia asked worriedly, pausing as she stuffed her cell phone in her purse.

Toby shook his head. "No, not if you're careful. You were just caught off guard. Unfortunately for you, psychic abilities are the most unpredictable of the three powers."

"Great," Aloisia mumbled, putting her brush, mirror, powder, and lip gloss in her purse. She zipped it up and set it down so she could slip the jewelry she had set out on. "That's just what I need."

"Don't worry. The more you know, the easier you can control your abilities. We'll start you on simple spells tonight. In less than a week you'll know enough not to kill your fool self."

"Yea," Aloisia replied sarcastically. She glanced at the clock. "Well, brother, I've got five minutes to get down there and meet him at the gate."

"You'd better hurry or Shaun will get there first. He told me that he was going to give him," Toby made quotations in the air, "*the big brother talk*." I don't think you want that."

Aloisia cursed and slipped her heeled flip-flops on as she hurried to her tall window, skirting past Toby's shelf of books and scrolls. "I think I'll take the quick way." She opened the window, lifted herself on the sill, and balanced on the tips of her heels

"Have fun," Toby stated vaguely as he picked his book up and began to read again.

Aloisia didn't answer as she secured her purse on her shoulder and dropped forward. She used her legs to push herself out and she caught herself on a low branch of the oak tree beside her window with her right hand. Her left hand had a quick hold on her purse. She steadied herself before dropping the rest of the way.

Aloisia jogged down the hill, her heart plummeting as she saw her brother's form bent into the passenger window of Asher's black truck. "That's enough, Shaun," she growled, pulling his blond ponytail.

Shaun looked up and smiled. "How'd you get out so quick? Dad was going to distract you."

Aloisia pulled harder on his hair and he lifted up. "The window," she said sweetly. She pulled him away from the truck. "Now, go on, we've got to leave."

"I'm not done talking yet," Shaun protested.

Aloisia shoved his back, making him stumble. "Shaun," she warned, "don't make me kick your ass in front of Asher."

"Oh please," Shaun said, rolling his eyes. He kept his distance as he started to walk away slowly. "Fine, I'll leave you two lovebirds alone."

"Thank you. I'll see you tonight." Aloisia shook her head and got into the truck. Asher was laughing beside her.

"It's not funny, you know," she griped as Asher pulled out.

"I think it is. You weren't kidding when you said your other brothers are protective."

Aloisia groaned. "What did he say?"

"Not much before you interrupted him, but enough to get the point across. Would you really kick his ass?"

Aloisia laughed. "If he made me mad enough. I know how to take care of myself."

"I know. I saw you take care of Josiah yesterday."

"Oh yeah, I'd forgot about that."

"So his name was Shaun? You know, he didn't really look like you. Come to think of it, neither did Toby really—although he did have some similar facial features."

"My brothers took after my Dad's side of the family," Aloisia explained. "I'm the only one that inherited mom's hair and eyes. My Dad calls me her spitting image."

"Wow, she must have been beautiful."

Aloisia blushed and didn't answer as she looked out the window. Asher turned onto the main road and she watched suburbs pass by.

"Did you and Danielle make up?" Asher asked, breaking the silence. "She's been pretty mad at you the last week. Anytime your name was mentioned she practically spit fire."

"Yes, she called today. We talked things over while I got ready."

"You guys have been friends for a long time?"

"We've been friends since she moved here almost six years ago."

Asher nodded. "Charlie and I could tell you guys had been best friends for a long time. You two seem really close."

"I think of her as a sister. Being raised with only boys, her friendship means the world to me."

"She said you've been ditching her a lot lately."

Aloisia shrugged. "A lot's been happening."

"You've got that look again."

Aloisia looked over, puzzled. "What look?"

"Like you bear the weight of the world. You seem to get it a lot."

"How do you know?" Aloisia asked defensively. "You've not been around me more than a couple of hours."

"That just goes to show you how often you wear it, Atlas."

"What?"

"You know, Atlas. He was the titan—"

"That Zeus condemned to carry the heavens on his shoulders," Aloisia interrupted, smiling slightly.

"Right. Wow, you even know your Greek mythology. Let's see—you're beautiful, a family girl, a good friend, could kick my ass, and a mythologist—how's your school life?"

"Oh, you know," Aloisia shrugged uneasily. "I make A's, but I'm in trouble sometimes."

"Why?"

"I'm tardy a lot and I get into fights sometimes."

"So you're tardy, get into fights, and a lot's going on in your life, but you still get good grades. You take honor classes?" He glanced her way as she nodded. "Well no wonder you're Atlas, but it's summer. Couldn't you take a break?"

Aloisia shook her head. "Maybe from school, but there are some things I can never rest from."

"Wow, you are so solemn," Asher said quietly.

"Sorry. I'm ruining our date," Aloisia mumbled.

"No you're not. I may not understand why you're so solemn, but I can at least make you forget your worries for a couple of hours. Before you chased your brother away, I told him that we may be out a little late. The movie is almost three hours long, and instead of dinner at The Main Course, I thought you'd prefer a sandwich and a walk in the park. I know this great stand where they sell pizzas, melts, hotdogs, and milkshakes. We could watch the sunset and walk around a little."

"That sounds fun," Aloisia said. "How did Shaun take you telling him that we'd be out late?"

Asher shifted uncomfortably in his seat as he turned left. "He said you had better be home by ten."

Aloisia rolled her eyes. "He's not my boss, even if he thinks he is. I told my Dad I was going to be out late and he said my curfew was between eleven and twelve."

"He must trust you."

Aloisia shrugged. "He does. He has to."

Asher blinked. "That was an odd thing to say. Why does he have to?"

Aloisia looked at him and wondered what he would say if she told him it was because she was the only hope he had of keeping the protection of the Body in the family and he trusted his life in her hands on a weekly basis. She thought about it and sighed. She got so tired of lying and keeping secrets, but she knew it was too soon to tell him. She was already breaking enough Codes. "I'm the only girl," she said instead. "He can't keep me forever."

"Oh," he said thoughtfully, lapsing into silence.

The rest of the drive was quiet and Aloisia took the opportunity to try and forget her worries for the night. She tried, but it was hard when there was powerful, tingling warmth in the back of her head calling to her and the hilt of an onyx dagger digging into her side. No, there was no way for her to forget who she was. She was the Avenger, and no matter how hard she tried, she would never be normal.

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## 18.

The movie had been good, an action packed vampire thriller. Aloisia had liked it and was glad that Asher hadn't picked out a sappy chick flick. She couldn't have sat through it. Instead she laughed inwardly at their misconceptions of vampires as she allowed Asher to drape an arm around her shoulders. He had behaved himself admirably and hadn't tried anything through the entire movie. When it had ended they left with the crowd, and Asher drove them to the park and showed her the stand he had told her about. They each got a slice of pizza and a milkshake. They walked, eating and talking until they came to rest on a bench close to the one Diablo had broken the night before.

"I wonder what happened to that," Asher said, motioning to the mangled bench.

Aloisia shrugged; surprised that it hadn't been moved yet. "I dunno," she said as she finished off the crust of her pizza.

Asher got up and went over to it. "Wow," he whistled. "This metal is bent double."

Aloisia went over to where Asher was studying the bent metal. She crouched beside him. "The city was probably disposing of it. They've just not had the opportunity to pick it up."

Asher raised an eyebrow. "That didn't even make sense, Aloisia."

Aloisia forced a smile on her lips. "I was just making a guess."

"Well, it gives me a bad feeling," Asher said as he stood from where he was crouched. "Maybe we should leave this part of the park."

"Fine," Aloisia said, standing up beside of him. They started walking along, Aloisia finishing the last of

her milkshake.

Soon they reached the playground that bordered the north side of the park they had parked across from. When they had first entered the park, there had been a few kids playing, and their laughter had carried through the summer air. Now, the park was quiet and seemingly empty except of Asher and Aloisia. The playground was large with swings, slides and various climbing areas. It was situated on a raised piece of land and light colored sand blanketed the ground. Asher paused and Aloisia stopped beside him, looking at him curiously. Asher took her hand and nodded his head slightly to the playground.

Aloisia followed his gaze and saw two guys leaning against the monkey bars. Despite the warm night, the two wore long, black cloaks that were buttoned up all the way. Hoods were drawn up and it obscured the view of their faces. Asher hesitated, but then continued to walk. Aloisia followed beside him, and her heart quickened as the men disengaged themselves from the monkey bars and made their way toward them.

Asher gripped her left hand tighter and Aloisia's other hand made its way to her purse slowly.

"No, no, little lady," said a light, accented voice. "Keep your hands away from that purse."

That was all Aloisia needed before she jerked her hand away from Asher and spun around. Hands grabbed her arms and forced them to the side before she could draw a weapon. She could hear Asher fight with the other as she struggled with her assailant. He flipped her around, gripping her from behind. Despite her strength, she couldn't throw him off of her.

"Don't move and don't fight, girl, or we'll kill your boy," said the one that had Asher by the neck. He was the same one that had spoken earlier, and Aloisia couldn't see much of his face, but she could catch glimpses of white from the long, pointed teeth that were extended from his shadowed mouth.

"Whatever you want just take it and leave," Asher groaned past the hand that gripped his throat. "My wallet is in my back pocket."

"We're not here for your money, idiot boy," hissed his captor.

"Get away from him, monster," Aloisia growled.

"You're not in the position to call us names, *Chiquita*," said the man holding her.

Aloisia started in surprise as she recognized Diablo. He must have realized she knew who he was because he loosened his grip slightly and pulled on her. "I need to talk to you," he said in a voice so low she barely heard him. She gave a slight nod and went still as he started to drag her away. She could hear Asher trying to get to her.

"Call out or fight anymore and he'll kill her," the vampire said. Aloisia didn't hear anything else as she was dragged away to where Asher couldn't see them anymore.

Aloisia was released as soon as they were out of earshot. "What was that all about?" she demanded as Diablo backed away, making sure his hood was straight. "And who is the vampire?"

"That vampire is a friend of mine. His name is Sangre." Diablo's voice was devoid of the growl she'd grown accustomed to, but it was still familiar and deep, his accent light and pleasant. "We needed to tell you something and we've been waiting to see you out."



"Well, did you have to stage a mugging?"

"I thought I was being pretty considerate myself," Diablo mocked. "Would you have preferred me come in wolf form near your boyfriend? What, you have a new one every night?" Was it her, or did he sound a little jealous?

"Alvin wasn't my boyfriend. Not that my personal life is any of your damn business."

"Never mind that," Diablo said hurriedly to cut off the other insult she'd been about to say. "We don't want to take long, or do you want to leave your boy toy with Sangre?"

"No," Aloisia said quickly.

"Then listen. Sangre and I went around the Bloodbanes in the city and spoke to them. Cinder's the talk of the town and he's not alone. He's got two others with him and they're both Pyroenchancers. They're younglings, not taken their first soul, but they're still powerful. We Bloodbanes are terrified. Cinder's been taking souls left and right, Aloisia, but he leaves the Rationals alone. That way the Heart can't track him except through those fake fires. It's smart. He's able to grow in power but you aren't able to find him."

"So what are you saying?"

"I want you to call a truce with all the Bloodbanes until Cinder is caught," Diablo said. "I want it put around that all us monsters can approach you and talk to you safely."

Aloisia shook her head. "That won't work, Diablo. Nikolas and his family will be staying and sharing this territory until Cinder is found and killed. Besides, the Bloodbanes would never trust me."

"You'd be surprised. We are desperate. In the ten days he's been here, he's taken as many souls. That's a soul a day, Aloisia. Who knows when the younglings will begin to take souls, and Bloodbanes souls are stronger than Rational's. It wouldn't be long before he would be too powerful to deal with. We can't afford being tight lipped. Besides, I'll be the one you'll see the most; I'm a sort of spokesperson for them. As for the other *Vengadores*, I'll make sure that they know it's only you they should approach if they speak to you at all. I'll take it that your father doesn't know that you have been conversing with Bloodbanes and trading secrets with Rationals?"

Aloisia shook her head. "No, he doesn't."

"I expected as much." Diablo motioned with a darkly tanned hand, the only thing that could be seen of his body. She noticed the silver half moon scar from the night before above his wrist. The image made her smile. "Now, if you want, we can reunite with your boy toy and Sangre."

"How are you going to let us go?"

Aloisia could hear the smile in his voice. "I'm going to let you kick my ass, as long as you promise not to glimpse my face."

"What?"

Diablo came over and gripped her from behind roughly. "Your word that you will not lower my or Sangre's hood and you'll get out of this completely unmarked."

Aloisia hesitated and then nodded. "Fine, but then you'll have to meet me here in the park around eleven tomorrow. I want to know how Bloodbanes take it."

Diablo laughed as he trailed a finger across her hips where her pants began. The sensation tickled and she was about to tell him to stop when he slipped a knife from her waistband. He studied the blade for a moment, spun it in his hand skillfully, and held it to her neck as he pushed her forward. "I knew you couldn't stay away from me for long, *Chiquita*."

Aloisia rolled her eyes. "Don't flatter yourself. I may be bringing a friend, so watch your behavior."

Diablo stopped for a moment. "A new one?" Aloisia nodded and Diablo whistled. "Damn, just how many Codes are you breaking nowadays, *Chiquita*?"

"Enough to be exiled," Aloisia said before she could stop herself. Her breath caught in her throat as she realized what she had told him.

Diablo sensed her reaction and laughed. "You have no worries about my mouth, *Chiquita*. When our *lucha* resumes, I will only defeat you with my skills, not with something as underhanded as tattling."

"Thank you," Aloisia said awkwardly as he pushed her forward again.

"*De nada, Vengadora*. I only expect the same from you. Now, when this new friend sees me should it be a furry picture?"

"Preferably," Aloisia answered quietly as Asher and the vampire slowly came back into sight. Once they grew closer, Aloisia started to struggle.

"Let me go!" she growled.

"What are you doing here with the girl?" Sangre demanded.

"The *punta* won't stop fighting," Diablo snarled. He grunted as Aloisia drove an elbow into his chest. "I wonder if she'll fight as well with a knife in her throat."

Aloisia then realized that a Bloodbane, her main enemy no less, had her pinned with one of her knives to her throat. And she had allowed it. She had trusted her life in the hands of a werewolf. The thought sent slimy chills of fear down her spine and her body reacted to it immediately. She threw her head into his chin and drove her elbow as far up as she could, connecting with the base of his throat. There was a grunt and a muffled Spanish curse as she was let go.

"What the..." Sangre started but didn't get to finish as Asher kicked backward and slammed Sangre's knee. The vampire hissed in pain as Asher threw him over his head and into the paved walkway. Asher hit him in the head before he could get up and Sangre didn't move. Aloisia didn't pause to say anything to Asher as she spun around and kicked high. Her foot met with the side of Diablo's hood and the werewolf dropped instantly. She leaned down and gripped the sides of the hood. Diablo breathed in sharply.

Aloisia was tempted to raise the hood, but couldn't. She didn't understand it, but fair play was the only thing she had ever considered when fighting the werewolf. Instead, she lifted it only to expose some of his ear. She leaned down. "An onyx blade to the heart," she whispered as she slammed his head as hard as she could into the pavement. Diablo went limp.

She stood up immediately and grabbed Asher's hand. "Let's go," she said. "There might be others." Asher didn't argue as he ran behind her. She had to slow down to make sure she didn't outrun him too much and reached the truck a few seconds before he did. She waited from him to unlock the doors.

"Who the hell were those freaks?" Asher demanded shakily after they had hurried in and shut the doors. He locked their doors with a button.

Aloisia shivered, hugging herself. "I-I don't know."

Asher glanced over worriedly. "Are you going to be alright, Aloisia?"

Aloisia nodded, letting out a shaky breath. "Yeah, let's go."

"Aren't we going to call the police?"

"Oh, I, I forgot. I will, but I still want to leave. My Dad would freak if he found out." Aloisia got her phone out.

"Yeah, my uncle wouldn't be ecstatic either," Asher agreed as he started the truck. He started to drive as Aloisia faked a phone call to the police. In all honesty, she thought this had been some of her best acting she had ever done in her life. She should win an Oscar.

She flipped the phone shut and stowed it away in her purse. "You taking me home?"

Asher nodded. "Yeah, those bastards ruined our walk." There was a pause before he asked, "Where was that one taking you?"

Aloisia shivered and wiped away nonexistent tears. She sniffled. "He said he was taking me to their car."

"Why didn't you fight at first?"

"They were going to kill you. I waited until we were out of sight before I tried anything. D ... the man said his friend was going to kill you anyway so I started fighting."

"You were really good," Asher complimented.

Aloisia blushed. "Thanks. Those were some good moves yourself. You know self defense?"

Asher shrugged uneasily. "Yeah. I'm like you; I can take care of myself."

"Maybe one day we could spar." It was out of Aloisia's mouth before she realized it.

"I would like that," Asher said as he considered it. "It would be interesting to know who is better at defending themselves."

Aloisia breathed a sigh of relief and smiled. "Yeah, but I know who would be better. Me."

"Probably. I saw that kick you took the guy out with, and you weren't exactly gentle when you slammed his head into the pavement. I swear I saw blood. I wouldn't be surprised if you cracked his skull."

Aloisia shrugged, almost guilty that she had used that much force on Diablo. Almost, but not quite.  
“Well, he wasn't exactly kind to me either.”

"Hey, no complaints. I was just saying. You probably saved both our lives out there tonight."

Aloisia didn't comment as she thought about what she had agreed to do. She was at a truce with an entire population of Bloodbanes. She couldn't believe it. What was the most unbelievable thing is that she had decided to tell Danielle tomorrow and show her Diablo to prove she wasn't insane. It had been a subconscious decision she had made when she had lied to Asher. She was tired of hiding stuff from her friend, and she knew that she couldn't last much longer anyway.

That wasn't the only reason though. Not really. As much as she hated to admit it to herself, Aloisia knew she wouldn't be able to bear the burden of being a Conduit by herself. She knew that this new turn in her life only meant more constant worrying and lying. Aloisia knew that Toby would be there for her, but she wouldn't be able to tell him *everything* ; she couldn't break down and cry on his shoulder. But she could on Danielle, and she wouldn't think any less of her. She needed that.

Aloisia let her mind wander as she laid her head down on the window of Asher's truck. Who was the vampire that had been with Diablo? Vampires rarely mixed well with other Bloodbanes, especially werewolves. Their animosity toward each other was infamous; they killed each other more often than the Avengers managed to kill them. The man had sounded as Hispanic as Diablo, but his voice had been softer—more cultured and mature. His name was definitely Hispanic. She could understand a little Spanish from her classes at school and she knew *Sangre* meant *Blood* . Aloisia smiled slightly as she shut her eyes to rest them. Blood and the Devil. All Bloodbanes were so melodramatic.

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## 19.

*"Aloisia, help me!"*

*Aloisia turned around, trying to catch whoever was yelling for help, but the darkness yielded no one.*

"Aloisia!"

The scream was high pitched and seemed so close, but she still couldn't see anything. There was a soft, constant sobbing, but Aloisia couldn't tell its direction. The cries came from everywhere. Distraught, Aloisia began to run forward. She was blocked by the wall of blue fire that leapt up in front of her. Aloisia skidded to a stop and tried to get away, but the wall overtook her, enveloping her in a cage of fire.

"Aloisia!"

And then Aloisia could see her; a woman on her knees, her head and back bowed. Her tight blue tank and baggy pants were stained and tattered, the remnants of a holster and a belt evident across her burnt and battered shoulders and waist. Long, sleek black hair draped over one of her shoulders and obscured the view of her face. She was shaking horribly.

Then a dark, horned shadow fell across the woman and she screamed, looking up.

Aloisia bashed herself against her fiery prison, ignoring the burns that arched across her skin instantly. "No," she yelled, her fist banging against the flames. Tears inched their way down her scorched face as the shadow darkened and nearly hid the woman from sight. "No, mommy!"

"Aloisia!"

"Aloisia?" Someone was shaking her shoulder roughly. "Hey, wake up."

Aloisia jerked awake, breathing heavily. She fell forward, her seatbelt catching her before she hit the dashboard of Asher's truck.

"Are you alright?" Asher asked worriedly, putting a hand on her shoulder. Aloisia nodded and wiped away the tears splashed across her face. "Yeah," she said shakily. "Yeah, I'm alright. I must have dozed off."

"You were having a nightmare," Asher said softly as he took his hand off her shoulder. He reached over her and unbuckled her and Aloisia shrugged out of the seatbelt. "You fell asleep as we left the park and I didn't wake you. You started muttering and jerking, but I didn't know whether to wake you or not. At one point you leaned forward and slammed your head into the window so hard that I was sure you had hurt yourself; that was when I decided to wake you up."

Aloisia tried to slow her breathing as she shook her head to clear it. It took her a moment to realize that they were stopped. "Where are we?" she asked, her voice cracking.

"Your house." He peered over at Aloisia's expression. "Listen, are you sure you're going to be all right?"

Aloisia nodded, forcing herself to smile. She almost pulled it off, but she knew the flash of teeth didn't match her wide, frightened eyes. "Of course I am. It was just a bad dream. Thanks for waking me up."

"It was nothing." There was an awkward pause where Aloisia fidgeted. She really liked Asher, but she knew that the date had been horrible. They had been attacked by Bloodbanes, she had fallen asleep, and she had freaked him out. That was bad even for her. If she hadn't liked him so much, she would have laughed. Not knowing what to say, Aloisia looped a hand through the strap of her purse and opened the door to her side of the truck.

"Can I call you tomorrow?" Asher asked, making her pause.

Aloisia looked back, surprised. "Sure, but I'm not sure why you would want to talk to me."

Asher expression was puzzled. "Why wouldn't I?"

Aloisia shrugged. "Let's just say I'm not happy with myself right now. I don't see how you could want to be around me."

"Look, I know a lot happened tonight, but none of it was your fault. If anything, I think you're pretty awesome for keeping a cool head around those two guys."

"Well, it wouldn't have helped to freak out," Aloisia mumbled.

"No it wouldn't have," Asher agreed, smiling.

"Thanks for taking me out, Asher," Aloisia said, returning his smile after a few moments.

"You're welcome," he replied. "Talk to you tomorrow?"

Aloisia nodded as she bent over and kissed his cheek. "I look forward to the call." She slid out of the truck and shut the door before he could answer. She watched him drive off before sighing and going to the gates that enclosed her home.

"Home are you?" Shaun's voice buzzed through the intercom, making Aloisia jump.

Aloisia rolled her eyes as she pushed the button and replied. "Yeah. Open the gates, I left my key."

"You are *always* leaving your key."

"I left in a rush, so sue me."

"You're an hour late."

Aloisia grumbled and smacked the wall beside the monitor. "Just open the damn gate, Shaun."

"Grouch."

"I'm going straight to my room and I don't want to be bothered. You know I'm home, so you have no excuse to come and try to aggravate me until the morning."

"Fine. Good night, sunshine." The gates swung open and Aloisia hurried through them, heading straight for the oak beside her room. She hoisted herself up and jumped to the branch closest to her closed window. She broke a small piece of bark off and threw it at the pane. The window opened by itself immediately and she jumped through.

"Thanks," she told Toby as he shut the window with another gesture.

"No problem. Have fun?"

"Sort of." Aloisia told him about her date as she emptied the contents of her purse out. She set her weapons outside the door but kept the new onyx blade with her.

"Hmm ... that was eventful," Toby said conversationally.

"You think?" Aloisia replied sarcastically as she grabbed some pajamas and headed for the bathroom.

"I don't think it's safe to teach you any magic tonight," Toby said. "We'll wait one more night to calm your raging emotions. Instead, I'll teach you how to meditate and use your powers to keep you calm."

"Will that be difficult?"

Toby shrugged. "Depends on the personality of the Conduit. Some found it extremely easy; others never really learned how to do it."

"I don't understand," Aloisia said exasperatedly.

"The optimal qualities for a Conduit are calm, submissive, logical and critical. We have to keep calm to keep our powers under control and only those who are submissive can render full control because it entails allowing the warmth to overtake you—you have to succumb to it. If we are ruled by our emotions instead of logic then it is harder to control. These personality traits are what make our aura different from those of Avengers, because the strength of them is nearly equal. Avengers are inheritably dominant, emotional, and impulsive, and you are on the extreme end of that spectrum even for an Avenger. That's why you weren't found as a Conduit. Given that, I'd say you will have a very difficult time."

Aloisia groaned. "I don't think I can pull another all-nighter like that."

Toby smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry. It's not like last night. It was a literal life or death situation that you learned to fight the attraction to your powers. The rest of this can be learned less quickly." Toby looked toward her dragon clock. "It's eleven-thirty. Go change and get comfortable. We'll train you until one. Then you can get some rest."

"There's no such thing as rest in my life," Aloisia muttered as she shook her head and entered the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

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## 20.

*The fire was everywhere, engulfing her home like a ravenous beast. Aloisia huddled in the corner of her room, clutching her stuffed dragon to her chest desperately. She tried to get up, to move, but her fear rooted her to the spot.*

*"Aloisia! Honey, where are you?"*

Aloisia began to cry in relief. "Mommy, mommy, help me," she called. She saw her mother's figure cross the threshold and she reached out for her. She knew everything would be fine when she was in her mother's arms. Then the flame roared between them and Aloisia shrieked and shirked back.

"Aloisia, it's okay; it's alright. I'm coming," her mother said from behind the wall of flame. There was a flurry of movement and the flames parted like a fiery show curtain. Her mother beckoned to her and Aloisia stood, running into her outstretched arms. Her mother swept her up and clutched her tightly to her chest.

"Hang on, baby, hang on to me, sweetheart," she gasped out. Aloisia felt her lips press to the top of her head. "Listen to me, my strength, my little warrior, close your eyes and don't look, alright?"

Aloisia nodded, burying her head into her mother's shoulder. She took in the smell of her. The light scent of honeysuckle perfume mingled with the smell of clean sweat and smoke.

There were screams everywhere as Aloisia's mom carried her down the long, narrow stairs. Louder though was the roar of the flames and their heat washed over them both as they descended deeper. "Mommy, what's happening?" Aloisia whimpered into her neck as she clung to the blue pajama tank top shirt her mother had on. "Where's Toby?"

"Don't worry, my warrior," Alexis said. "Your brother is waiting for us."

"Mommy!" Toby's voice rose above the crackling and screams as they neared the foot of the stairs. Then she felt her mother stumble and they fell forward through the blistering air. Alexis twisted as she fell and she landed on her back, Aloisia lying on top of her. Aloisia raised her head, looking into her mother's face. She watched her mother's eyes widen in fear as she gazed at something above them. "Oh my God." She forced Aloisia head down as she tried to look back. "No, don't." And there was a jar as her mother stood back up. "Toby, come here."

"What is that?" he asked fearfully as Alexis picked him up.

"Don't worry about him, darling, I'm here," she said as she started to run. "I'll protect you."

"No you won't." The voice came from behind her and Aloisia looked up to see a body of flame before her mother was thrown in the air. Aloisia shrieked as she was tossed from her mother's arms. She landed hard, her breath knocked out of her. Toby landed close to her, tumbling away until he lay in a warped doorway.

"Aloisia! Toby!"

Her mother's yells were strained and distant as Aloisia raised herself up weakly. She drew up to her knees, clutching to her red dragon's wing like it was her only lifeline. She looked over to Toby to see that he still hadn't moved. Tears blurred and distorted her vision as the flames closed in around her and her brother.

Aloisia forced herself to stand, trying to remember what her mother had taught her. She pushed back the crumbling edges of panic as she stumbled toward her still brother and knelt beside him. She shook his shoulder as she bit back the fit of coughing that itched the back of her throat. No matter how hard she shook him, he didn't move.

"Toby?" she asked, her voice choked by smoke and tears.

Toby didn't move.

Aloisia stood up and backed away. She looked around the consumed room, but the devouring flames were her only companions. She glanced backward to her still brother. She had to get help, but she knew she couldn't leave him alone. Where was her mother?

The flames parted and her mother was in front of her, her eyes wide and panicked. Her pajamas were torn and tattered and burns arched across her skin. "Aloisia, where's your brother?"

Aloisia couldn't find her voice as she pointed behind her. There was an echoing groan as the entranceway began to crumble. "Toby, no!" Aloisia looked backward as her mother waved a hand. The falling entranceway paused in midair and Toby was lifted up and placed into Alexis's arms. "Not my son, you bastard," she snarled into the air. Heated laughter echoed from the surrounding fire.

"You won't get out of this alive, Alexis," whispered the voice.

Alexis ignored it as she bent toward Aloisia. "Listen to me, my warrior." She reached out and put Toby into her arms and Aloisia nearly collapsed under his weight, but Alexis put a hand on her shoulder to



steady her. "Take your brother, leave the house. Go to our special place. Your father will find you there."

"No, mommy..." Aloisia began, but Alexis put a finger to her mouth and shook her head, smiling sadly.

"You have to do this, my strength. I know you can. I'll keep the flames away from you. Just run. Start running and don't look back." She squeezed Aloisia's shoulder and she felt strength flow into her. Toby suddenly felt lighter and her chest no longer hurt from breathing in smoke.

"Please don't leave me, mommy," Aloisia pleaded desperately.

Alexis tucked Aloisia's long black hair behind her ear and kissed her forehead. "I have to. I love you, Aloisia." Tears trickled from Alexis's eyes, furrowing deep rivulets in the grime that covered her face. There was a moment of resigned understanding as their identical eyes met and then her mother was gone, her form swallowed by the flaming jaws.

"Avenge the might of good," Aloisia mumbled. She stood still for a moment longer before she hooked her arms underneath Toby's arms and began to drag him to the front door. Even though she had the strength to carry Toby, he was taller than her and still heavy, making him awkward and cumbersome. It seemed to take eternity to drag him out of the house. She continued to drag him down the path through the woods her mother had shown her. She followed it to the special place her and her mother shared.

It was a small, half circle clearing situated just past the path. The clearing had once housed a shed, but time had stolen the shed's wood and all that was left now was the foundation and a wall and half of the wooden fence that had separated the shed from the surrounding forest. Wild branches of honeysuckle grew across the face of the ruins and the orange and white flowers blanketed the branches, making the air thick with their mellow sweet scent, melding with the pervading musk of smoke.

Aloisia dragged her brother to the wooden foundation and stopped, breathing heavily. She dropped the stuffed dragon she had clutched so protectively on top of Toby's barely rising chest before she turned her back on the clearing and began to run back to the fiery home. She didn't hesitate in entering the burning threshold. "Mommy!" she called.

There was no answer.

Aloisia hurried blindly, wrapping her arms around her head to protect her face from the heat. Smoke filled her lungs, burning her chest and causing her to cough. Faintly she registered the kitchen table as she turned to the hallway and started up the stairs. Near the top she stumbled and threw her hands out and caught the banister, banging her knees on the heated floor.

The gurgle of pain caught Aloisia's attention and she looked up sharply and peeked around the corner of the banister. Her mother's form was prone on the floor, her body silhouetted by blue flame and black smoke. Then the flames reached out and grabbed her shoulders.

"Your magic tricks won't save you, Avenger!" And her mother was thrown effortlessly where she hit a wall and crumpled; her small form limp. "Where is she, your abomination?"

"Go to Hell, Cinder," Alexis coughed. "You can't have her. I won't let you." The demon stepped out of his flame and smoke cloak and Aloisia shirked back as the monster made his way past the stairway and toward her mother.

"Let me?" He laughed as he reached out, taking Alexis by the neck and lifting her from the ground where

she fought weakly. "You can't stop me. What now, Avenger of Serene? Your family is dead, your home destroyed, and regardless of your meddling I will find your abominations. Her soul sings to me; there's no stopping our fates."

Alexis groaned and spat in his face. "Just kill me and take my soul, Cinder. You won't make me beg."

"Fine, Alexis." Cinder laughed as her skin began to smoke. "I will honor your final wish."

The flames started at her bare feet and travelled in slow tendrils upward, swallowing her from sight. The blazing lines followed the grooves of her body, devouring. Her back bowed in pain and she tried to fight, but Cinder kept a strong hold. Gradually, as the flames closed in around her body, her struggling lessened and a small groan of pain betrayed her lips.

*"Though you have my soul," she choked out as the flames began to lick and caress her shoulders, "I will still keep my thoughts from you. You don't have me."*

*Cinder laughed.*

And her mother was swallowed by his fire.

Cinder dropped her mother's ashen corpse and Aloisia let out an anguished cry before she could stop herself. Cinder looked her way and a smile crawled through his lips, his white eyes resonating with the power he had taken from her mother. "Did you enjoy the show?" he asked, making his way to her. "Because that is nothing to what will happen to you, girlie."

Aloisia turned to run but Cinder grabbed hold to her thigh and she screamed as his hand ate through the cloth of her pajamas and pierced her skin. "I've got you," he laughed as he lifted her up. Soon she was upside down, her hair trailing behind her like a dark halo. "What are you going to do now?"

Aloisia thrashed around, twisting and convulsing as she tried to loosen Cinder's grip. Distantly she realized that her fear was being eaten away by remorse and agony. She stopped fighting and looked into Cinder's eyes as he lifted her higher.

"You killed my mother," she said coldly. There was a warm anger eating at her, making her feel hotter than the fire that surrounded her. "But you won't kill me or my brother."

Cinder started laughing but the sound was soft and distant as the scent of honeysuckles overtook the thick odor of smoke and ash. Her mother's voice whispered in her ear. "Send him away, Aloisia. You can't kill him, but you can transport him somewhere else."

Cinder stopped laughing as Aloisia's eyes began to glow. She swung forward and gripped his chest with her little hands. Soft purple light spread from her hands across his torso quickly and with a bright, piercing light, he was gone. Aloisia fell immediately, her back hitting the floor boards and she toppled down the stairs, landing roughly at the bottom. She got up shakily and limped toward the door; the thigh that Cinder had grabbed was throbbing...

And then her surroundings changed and she was in the dark. She looked at her hands and found she was no longer six but sixteen. "Hello?" she called uncertainly.

"Aloisia, help me!"

Aloisia turned around, trying to catch whoever was yelling for help, but the darkness yielded no one.

"Aloisia!"

The scream was high pitched and seemed so close, but she still couldn't see anything. There was a soft, constant sobbing, but Aloisia couldn't tell its direction. The cries came from everywhere. Distraught, Aloisia began to run forward. She was blocked by the wall of blue fire that leapt up in front of her. Aloisia skidded to a stop and tried to get away, but the wall overtook her, enveloping her in a cage of fire.

"Aloisia!"

And then Aloisia could see her; a woman on her knees, her head and back bowed. Her tight blue tank and baggy pants were stained and tattered, the remnants of a holster and a belt evident across her burnt and battered shoulders and waist. Long, sleek black hair draped over one of her shoulders and obscured the view of her face. She was shaking horribly.

Then a dark, horned shadow fell across the woman and she screamed, looking up.

Aloisia bashed herself against her fiery prison, ignoring the burns that arched across her skin instantly. "No," she yelled, her fist banging against the flames. Tears inched their way down her scorched face as the shadow darkened and nearly hid the woman from sight. "No, mommy!"

"Aloisia!"

And the cage of fire disappeared; Aloisia was thrown forward and she fell beside the crouched figure of her mother. Slowly the horned shadow retreated and Aloisia crawled to her. Her mother was shaking and Aloisia draped her arms around her, hugging her tightly. The slight waft of honeysuckle enveloped them both as Aloisia delicately drew back her mother's hair to look into her eyes. Her mother's face was burned and warped, like a clay figure that had been melted and allowed to dry again. Aloisia fought the urge to shirk back and continued to gaze into the distorted face of her once beautiful mother, trying not to allow her expression to betray her remorse, anger, and disgust.

"I won't last much longer, Aloisia," her mother whispered. Her voice was faint and quaking and Aloisia could barely make it out. "I've fought for so long..." She took a deep, quivering breath and shook her head, recovering her burned and disfigured face with her hair. Aloisia allowed her. She went on in a slightly stronger voice, "I'm one of Cinder's souls, but he's not been able to consume my strength and memories yet. I won't betray my family and the Heart so easily. I'm growing weaker though, my warrior, and Cinder's growing stronger. I can't fight for much longer."

"What can I do, mother?" Aloisia asked desperately

"I can't tell you much, Aloisia. He fights to quell me even now."

"Just tell me what to do, mommy, please."

Her mother's hand reached up to Aloisia's hand that rested on her shoulder and gripped it tightly. She turned her head and Aloisia felt lips as dry and cracked as sandpaper brush her palm. "Trust your brother. Learn to control your powers. One day they will guide you to Cinder. That is the only way he'll be found. Work with the werewolf to stop Cinder from taking the souls of the Bloodbanes so he will not grow any stronger. I will be able to fight him if he doesn't gain many more souls. Protect your friend and

trust the policeman. Be wary of the Heart; they aren't as ignorant of Soul Collectors as they've led you to believe, and be careful with your own heart, my strength, it may lead you astray."

"What do you mean?"

But Alexis didn't answer. Instead she started shaking.

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" Cinder's voice resonated, echoing across the landless surroundings and bearing down on Aloisia like an iron weight.

Aloisia was thrown backward as her mother was ignited. She watched helplessly as her mother's skin peeled away, leaving nothing but bone and hair until that burned too. Her mother reached out a blistering and fading hand for her and called her name once more before she was gone.

Aloisia gasped deeply as she rose from her bed. Toby was waiting beside her in his wheelchair. He wiped her bangs from her sweating face. "What did you see?" he asked softly. Aloisia realized she was trembling and sobs were rising from her throat. She couldn't stop them as she threw herself on Toby's shoulders.

"Cinder killed her," she cried. "That bastard killed our mom."

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## 21.

Danielle sat across Aloisia wearing a disbelieving and angry expression with her arms crossed across her breasts.

Aloisia was hugging one of Danielle's pillows, her heart pounding. It was early morning; she had got up as soon as the sun rose and took a shower. She hadn't slept after her nightmares and she knew she looked like crap. Aloisia had one of Shaun's oversized black shirts on over a pair of baggy blue jeans and black tennis shoes. She hadn't bothered with makeup, had barely brushed her hair, and the only pieces of jewelry she had on were her mother's amethyst ring and the large onyx dragon locket Toby had got her for her birthday with her mother's picture on one side and the Avenger's insignia on the other.

The silence in Danielle's room was deafening. Aloisia cleared her throat and muttered, "Say something, Dan, please."

"What do you want me to say?" Danielle demanded.

Aloisia fidgeted. "Anything is better than the silent treatment."

Danielle's laughter was sardonic. "No, it won't be."

"Danielle..." Aloisia started, but Danielle put a hand up to stop her.

"Don't worry, I understand," she said shortly.

Aloisia blinked, taken back. "You do?"

Danielle shrugged. "Sure I do. You don't trust me so you make up some crackpot story..."

"No, Danielle," Aloisia interrupted quickly. "That's not true."

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Danielle asked forcefully. "Did you honestly believe that I'd fall for this bullshit?"

"Please, Danielle," Aloisia interrupted again desperately. She lifted her shirt slightly to show the belt of knives strapped tightly across her stomach and the small gun stuffed in the band of her pants. She reached backward and unsnapped the belt, letting her blades fall to Danielle's bed. She took her gun out and laid it beside them.

"Is that supposed to convince me?" Danielle rolled her eyes. "You really do think I'm stupid. You thought I'd be around you for almost six years and not notice that you're armed most of the time? God, you are an idiot!"

"Then why haven't you said anything?" Aloisia asked blankly.

"Because I trusted you," Danielle answered forcefully. "I knew you wouldn't hurt me. I didn't know why you were armed, but I thought you would tell me when you were ready."

"I am Danielle. I'm telling the truth."

"Do you realize how much I've worried about you?" Danielle demanded heatedly. "Lord, I've always known you were weird. I mean, what eleven year old carries a silver pocket knife and everyone, even upper grade boys, were nervous around? But you were nice, and nobody else cared about the new kid whose parents had just divorced. I didn't know what your family was into, but it seemed like you could handle yourself and I didn't worry too much."

"Dan..."

But Danielle's voice overrode Aloisia. "Then you started to get these injuries. Deep cuts, horrible bruises ... most people thought you were being abused. Hell, they've questioned me about it, but I know that your family would never hurt you. It made me wonder. Do you realize that through all these years I've been to your house only a handful of times, and never for the night? At first, I thought you were embarrassed to have someone below your wealth as your friend, but that didn't work because you introduced me to your family and they liked me. So, my mind turned to illegal stuff. Your family is really wealthy, but other than your father being influential, I don't even know what he does for a living. Is he in the gangs?"

Aloisia's mouth gaped open. She was so shocked that she didn't know what to say. Despite herself, she felt a giggle pressing against her throat.

"What's so funny?" Danielle asked, irritated. "It makes sense."

Aloisia shook her head as she forced herself to stop laughing. "No it doesn't, Danielle, and you know it. I swear, Greg's right. Rationals practically do his job for him; they'll believe anything as long as they don't have to admit the things that go bump in the night are real." She looked over her pile of weapons to where Danielle sat fidgeting with the yellow fringe to her comforter. She reached over and stilled her friend's hands with hers. "Can you truly believe that I would make up a lie like this?" Aloisia managed a

weak smile. "You know me, Dan. If I wanted to lie I would make up something more believable."

Danielle jerked her hand away from Aloisia and shoved her weapons back to her. "Put those damn things away before mom comes in and see them." She watched Aloisia snap the belt back into place and check the safety of the gun before stowing it away in her waistband and hiding it from view with her large T-shirt.

Danielle shook her head. "You need to go, Aloisia."

Aloisia stared blankly. "Go?"

"I was fair; I heard everything you had to say, but I don't believe a word of it. Leave, Aloisia. I can't deal with you right now."

Aloisia stood up, putting Danielle's pillow down where she had been sitting. "Don't be this way, Dan."

Danielle put a hand up to stop Aloisia from coming closer. "I've put up with a lot, Aloisia, but you can't expect me to swallow this shit."

Aloisia stepped back, turning away so her friend wouldn't see her hurt expression. She went to the door and paused with her hand on the knob. "I wouldn't lie like this to you, Danielle," she stated angrily. "I love you like a sister; you and Chloe are like family to me." She shook her head. "If our friendship means as much as you keep claiming, you'll meet me in the park at the fountain tonight at eleven. You'll have your proof." She opened the door and stalked out, slamming it behind her.

Aloisia trampled down the stairs, wiping at her eyes. She was nearly to the door when Chloe came out of the kitchen smiling and wiping flour off her arms. "Are you staying for breakfast? It's my specialty."

Aloisia fought to keep her voice steady as she shook her head. "Not today, Chloe. Thanks anyway."

Chloe's smile faltered as she noticed Aloisia's expression. "Lo, honey, what's the matter?"

Aloisia just shook her head again before turning around and closing her distance to the door. She hurried out of Danielle's house and to her car where she jerked the car door open and slammed it behind her. She started the car and spun out of the driveway.

Aloisia tried not to think about what happened as she slid a CD she'd burned in the car's CD player and cranked the volume up as loud as it could go. The pulsing metal beat pounded in her ears, matching the angry thudding in her heart. She should've known better; Aloisia couldn't think of any way to patch her friendship now. Danielle had failed her when she had needed her most, and now she was in danger. What if Greg found out that Danielle knew? Would he really kill someone he had known for almost six years and liked? Aloisia didn't need an answer for that. She knew it. Her brothers would do anything for the Heart. She was glad she told Danielle that she would be in danger if she told anyone else. Maybe at least it would keep her friend safe.

With her musing blaring, Aloisia barely heard her cell phone. She glanced over at the lighted screen in the seat beside her and sighed. She turned her music down, reached for the cell, and flicked it open.

"Hello?"

"You know that werewolf is really annoying, right?"

Aloisia recognized Alvin's voice immediately. "What, no, hello, how are you?"

"Seriously," Alvin said, aggravated. "When I signed onto your club I didn't ask for a furry stalker."

"What do you mean?" Aloisia asked, rubbing her temple with one hand. She kept the other on the wheel.

"Diablo was waiting outside my door this morning when I left for work. Trust me, that is not a sight you want before your first cup of coffee."

"Well, what did he want?"

"Oh, you know, the usual. He wants me to be his eyes and ears in the police force. He wants any information we get about Cinder. He says he knows you won't share everything."

Aloisia blew out angrily. "He should know to leave you alone. I should have claimed you as mine."

Alvin's voice matched Aloisia's angry tone. "I'd rather not be owned by anyone, thank you."

"That's not what I meant," Aloisia said shortly. "I simply meant that you were mine as an informant, that you were mine to protect. There are laws the Heart and Bloodbanes share, even if they are sparse and weak. If I claim you as mine, it means if they hurt or use you, it's a direct challenge to me. There are things in my world you don't understand yet, Alvin. Don't jump to conclusions."

"Oh." Alvin was quiet for a moment. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright. I shouldn't have jumped on you like that. What did you tell him?"

"What did you expect me to tell a seven foot werewolf that's got me in the air with foot long claws to my neck? I told him I would tell him whatever I heard. I'd have told him the sky was neon green with orange polka dots if that was what he wanted."

"Well, that's alright for now. He'll need that information as much as I will." Aloisia told him about her truce with the Bloodbanes. "I just have to make sure he knows you're off limits in the future."

"Thanks." There was an awkward pause before he asked, "Are you alright? You sound upset."

"It's just been rough these two weeks," Aloisia mumbled. For some reason, she felt inclined to tell him about Danielle. "Some summer vacation I've been having, eh?" she asked, finishing her story.

"It'll turn out alright," Alvin comforted. "Danielle's right. Your world is hard to swallow. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it for myself. Give her time. If she really cares for you, she'll meet you tonight at the park. If she doesn't, then your friendship wasn't real."

"Thanks, tiger," Aloisia said. "I needed that."

"It's nothing. Listen, my lunch is about over. I've got to go."

"Fine. Thanks for calling. Don't worry; I'll take care of Diablo."

"I'd appreciate it." There was a click and Aloisia shut the phone up, settling her full attention on the road. She had drove home from Danielle's so often that she didn't even have to think about where she was going.

Aloisia glanced at the digital clock on her radio to see it was noon. She had promised Toby that she would be home by two. In all likelihood, everyone would be off trying to find Cinder. They would have the house to themselves, and they would be able to practice her powers until it was almost night without having to worry about being caught. It was time they started putting her powers to use. Aloisia's knuckles turned white as she gripped the steering wheel tightly. She could feel the plastic bend under her grasp. It was time she learned to control the magic coursing through her. It was time to save her mother from Cinder.

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## 22.

The summer night air was hot and muggy; making Aloisia glad she wore the training outfit she had worked out in. She walked the deserted pathway to the fountain, watching the shadows intently. She had a jacket tied to her waist that she could shrug into to hide her tattoo and weapons if a Rational happened to turn up. But it was doubtful—not many people would brave this part of the city after the full sunset. The park was infamous for being dangerous and most people believed that criminals and gangs were to blame. In reality, even the dangerous Rationals didn't wander here often; it was the Bloodbanes' territory. The streetlamps that lit her way were dull and spaced far away, casting long spidery shadows on the cracked sidewalk. The fountain would be better lit but not by much.

Aloisia glanced down at her watch as she pushed the button that lit up the face. It was almost eleven. She couldn't help but harbor hope that her friend would be waiting for her; Aloisia refused to believe that Danielle would abandon her so completely without a chance to explain. She just wasn't like that. Aloisia gripped her dragon locket tight, the garnet incusted wings cutting into her palm.

"Dan!" Aloisia exclaimed ecstatically, breaking into a jog to where her friend sat at the edge of the fountain. She wanted to hug her but contained the urge as she stopped a few feet in front of her. "I knew you wouldn't leave me alone."

"I was about to leave," Danielle said shortly, shrugging her curly hair out of her face. She was wearing a pink jacket despite the warm air and was hugging herself. Her dark skin reflected the light absorbed by the trickling water beside them, putting waves of light across her features. "I don't know what I'm doing here in the middle of the night in the bad part of town. You'd better have a good reason."

"I want you to meet someone. He'll prove my story."

Danielle raised an eyebrow. "Let me guess, he's a vampire or some other kind of fictional monster."

Aloisia hesitated. "Well ... he's a werewolf."

Danielle stood up immediately. "I ... can't ... believe ... you!" she exclaimed, drawing each word out. She poked a finger into Aloisia's chest, ignoring the holster strapped across her front. "You expect me to stay around so that some brat can come out in a hairy costume and try to scare me while you have a good laugh? Well, no thank you!" She turned around, starting to storm off. Aloisia went to stop her when



she felt a slight breath of wind stir against the back of her neck. A knife from her wrist sheath was out without her having to think about it. She spun around, bringing the blade out. A massive, clawed hand gripped her wrist and stopped her before releasing her quickly.

"Jumpy, *Chiquita*?" Diablo asked wryly. Aloisia watched Danielle turn around in her peripheral vision and hurried toward her friend, sheathing the blade. She cupped her hand over Danielle's mouth as she opened it to scream. Danielle struggled against Aloisia for a moment, but she kept an easy hold on her until she stilled, her body shaking.

"Danielle, this is who I wanted you to meet," Aloisia whispered calmly in Danielle's ear. "This is Diablo. He's an annoying werewolf."

"And devastatingly handsome," Diablo smarted as he lowered himself to all fours. He sat down, his curled tail sweeping across the pavement. It was an odd dog-like gesture. "I must say, *Chiquita*, this is the prettiest thing you've introduced me to. However, you disappoint me. I didn't think you swung both ways."

Aloisia ignored him. "Diablo, this is my friend, Danielle. As you can tell, she's been shook up a little. Behave yourself."

Diablo smiled, his eyes glinting a mischievous red. He leaned forward slightly, making Danielle whimper from behind Aloisia's hand. "And if I don't?"

"Then I'll have to kill you, despite any treaty I may or may not have agreed to."

Diablo leaned back again. "I'll believe that when I see it, *Vengadora*. You've been trying for almost two years, and you've failed miserably. What would make tonight any different?"

Aloisia ignored him again as she bent her head toward Danielle. "Dan, don't be afraid. Diablo won't hurt you. I won't let him." She had to ignore another disbelieving snort from the werewolf. "If I let you go, are you going to run or scream?" Danielle shook her head and Aloisia released her.

She gripped Aloisia's arm and backed as far away as she could and still manage to cling to Aloisia. Her eyes were wide as she swallowed and said in a breathy, strained voice, "That's not a costume."

Aloisia couldn't help but laugh and Danielle shot her a dirty look. "I'm sorry, Dan, but you can't say I didn't tell you so. Listen, go sit down. I'll explain everything else to you later after I finish talking to Diablo, alright?"

Danielle nodded shakily, letting Aloisia go. She backed away until her knees hit the edge of the fountain and she sat down, a hand over her mouth. Her gaze never left Diablo.

"Your friend's got the heart of a lion," Diablo said sarcastically as he shrugged up. His white strip of hair rose slightly as he shook his shoulder and rotated his head.

"Give her a break. Until now, she was just another Rational. She's acting admirably for someone whose world's been turned upside down."

"Yeah, sure." Diablo growled slightly, making Danielle jump. Aloisia recognized the laugh in the growl. "Listen, I don't have much time to be with you, *Chiquita*. I know how sad that makes you, but soon I'll be meeting Sangre in the city. There are things we've got to do, and the night has short hours."

"You can only work in the night, can't you, Bloodbane?" Aloisia asked, her voice low.

Diablo's ears pressed against his head as he rose up slightly and pointed a claw at her. "I am not the only one here that the night rules, *Vengadora*," he snarled angrily. "You and your kind can't kill without the cloak of night's shadows to cover your sins."

There was an uneasy silence as Aloisia fought to think of something to say back. When she couldn't she shook her head and snapped, "Just tell me what I need to know so you can leave."

"The Bloodbanes have agreed reluctantly to come to you," Diablo answered stiffly. "Although I doubt they do. I'm the only one brave enough to trust you."

"Or stupid," Aloisia muttered.

"They've been told to stay away from the other *Vengadores* and only speak to you when you're alone or with Alvin," Diablo continued, ignoring her. "I think I'll add Danielle to the list."

"Oh yeah, that reminds me." Aloisia closed her hand into a fist and punched Diablo as hard as she could in the face. The force of her punch pushed him backward and she took the opportunity to knee his stomach, bringing him to the ground. She shoved his head into the fountain wall, causing a small imprint in the brick and making Danielle squeal with surprise. Aloisia stood and backed away quickly as Diablo reached out for her. She watched him struggle up onto his hind legs, holding his face in his massive claws and muttering Spanish curses.

"*Que al infierno?*" Diablo demanded, lowering his hands. He bent his neck and Aloisia heard bones snap back into place. She watched his broken snout heal in front of her.

"That's for threatening Alvin this morning."

"You didn't claim protection over him, *Chiquita*," Diablo replied smugly, completely healed. He was the quickest healer she'd seen. "I was in the right."

"You knew damn well he was mine."

Diablo laughed his growling laugh again. "*Sí*, I did, but you didn't say so, so I took a liberty."

"Well now you know. We've both agreed that you need to know about Cinder; you can approach him on that, but that's all and you can't threaten him. After Cinder is killed, you're not to approach him anymore. Danielle is mine and you can't get near her at all. She's not to be involved. Make sure your Bloodbane friends understand that. I'll kill anything that threatens her."

"I can respect that," Diablo said seriously, surprising Aloisia. "Though it pains me, I wish to thank you for last night. You had the chance to learn my human identity, but you didn't. I've circulated what you told me about Pyroenchancers as well, not that it'll do much good. Not many of us Bloodbanes own onyx weapons; we prefer the weapons nature gave us, but at least they know. We've spread the rumor that the Heart is taking an active interest in disappearing Bloodbanes. If Cinder doesn't know about it, he will soon. If he wants to stay in the dark, he'll stop taking souls for a while and you can prepare to fight him. When he begins to take souls again, that means he's ready and we'll alert you immediately."

"Maybe there is a brain underneath all that fur after all," Aloisia complimented. Diablo was about to say

something when Aloisia staggered, a hand to her temple. Her body shook, her eyes rolling into the back of her head. Dimly, Aloisia felt herself fall to the ground. She heard Danielle's exclamation of surprise before the smell of honeysuckles sunk her into darkness.

Her eyes opened to see Danielle bent over her. "Are you alright, Lo?" she asked worriedly.

Aloisia groaned and sat up shakily, rubbing the back of her head from where she had fallen. "We need to leave."

"What?" Danielle's voice sounded muffled and distant as Aloisia heard the roar of flames. *She could see from the sky, looking down. There were three forms on the ground, but she was too far to see clear enough. She started coming closer.*

"Diablo, take Danielle away. Something's coming," she said, her voice still distant in her mind. *She watched them come into closer view. Then the larger form grabbed another and sprinted away, leaving one alone. Aloisia felt the thing's satisfaction. Cinder had been right; he did find the Avenger here. What's better was that she was now alone. It was time to put his master's plan to action.*

Aloisia vision cleared to an empty fountain walkway. She stood and waited, an iron and lead knife drawn from her belt. Then the night sky brightened and flared as yellow fire rained down in front of her. The flames swallowed each other, coalescing into a form with cloudy gray eyes. It stood slightly taller than Aloisia but other than that she couldn't distinguish any physical characteristics from the licking yellow flames.

"You?" it demanded in a deep, echoing voice. There was a familiar twinge to the voice, but Aloisia couldn't place it. "You're the big, bad Avenger?" It took a step closer but stopped when Aloisia sheathed her knife and drew one of her guns.

"Stop moving," she growled, sighting down the barrel. "This gun's got iron and lead bullets. Now I know that onyx is the only thing that'll stop your master, but you're just a youngling. Just give me a reason to test your healing abilities."

The monster laughed. "Don't jump the bullet, Avenger. You can't shoot the messenger."

"Try me," Aloisia threatened.

The Bloodbane raised fire-writhed hands in retreat. "I was told not to fight you, Avenger. You're Cinder's."

"I'm nobody's," Aloisia stated coldly. She slowly lowered her gun an inch. "Now, what did that bastard send you for?"

"Who says you're a complete idiot," he laughed. "I'll make this short. Cinder challenges you and only you to find him. He doesn't want to deal with the other Avengers. This is just between you and him."

"What, is he afraid?" Aloisia sneered.

"We know your mother contacted you, Aloisia. We know that you now remember Cinder, we know about your truce with the Bloodbanes, and we know about your Conduit powers. Now, I wonder if the Heart knows all of this as well."

"What, are you going to march up to the Master Avenger and tell him?" Aloisia demanded incredulously. She laughed to hide her suddenly pounding heart.

But the Pyroenchanter must have sensed her fear. "I thought we could speak on your level," he smirked.

Aloisia growled. "Fine. I'll admit that I wanted to be the one that killed Cinder anyway. It's no skin off my hide if I try to keep the other Avengers away. When is Cinder going to show his coward self instead of sending one of his whipping boys?"

The Pyroenchanter's laugh sent chills down her spine. "Oh, you'll know when Cinder summons you to your death, Avenger. Until then, your mother's soul can burn in our hell and none of your abomination magic tricks can save her. Rest assured, though, you'll join her soon enough." He pointed at her. "Cinder will send you a message soon enough."

"Well give him a message from me until then," Aloisia said, her voice clipped and angry. "You tell him he messed with the wrong Avenger." Aloisia raised her gun and pulled the trigger. The shot took him in the chest, making him stagger backward. She took aim and shot at him incessantly, emptying her gun. With a bellowed curse, the Bloodbane disappeared before Aloisia could unsheathe her onyx blade.

"Damn," she growled, "I really wanted to kill him."

She looked around the empty park. "Diablo, the coast is clear."

The werewolf immediately jumped from the tree closest to her. He turned around and helped a shaking Danielle down. She sprinted over to Aloisia and clutched her tightly.

"What the hell was that?" she demanded, her voice high-pitched.

"Don't worry, Dan, I'll explain everything later," Aloisia said distractedly. Diablo was staring at her oddly; his human eyes glinted with hidden emotions. She had never been good at reading a werewolf's expression, but his was even more confusing than normal. "Diablo? What's your problem?"

"Did I hear the Pyroenchanter right? He called you *un Conducto* —a Conduit? You can use *magia*?"

Aloisia shrugged uneasily. "Yeah, so?"

Diablo shook his head, muttering a long strain of growling Spanish that Aloisia couldn't follow. He turned back to her and asked forcefully, "Who else knows?"

"Only Toby. He's teaching me to control my powers," Aloisia answered, surprised at Diablo's tone. "We didn't even know about them until after Cinder attacked me."

"So that's what saved you," Diablo said softly. "I had been wondering what had given you the strength to fight Cinder's hold on your mind. And your brother won't tell?" Aloisia shook her head. "Keep it secret then. Don't think that just because they're your family they won't exile you and him and leave your asses to die."

"How do you know so much about the Heart of Revenge?" Aloisia asked him.

Diablo smiled, glimpsing long teeth. The smile didn't reach the odd expression in his eyes. They remained

blank and untouchable; they almost seemed sad. "I've my ways, *Chiquita*. Now, I must leave. Sangre will be waiting impatiently for me."

"What's the story with the vampire? Why's he hanging around with you? Last time I checked, you two shouldn't get along that well."

Diablo hesitated before answering her. "He knew me before I was bitten. He's like a brother to me. I owe him a lot. I got into some trouble in Mexico and he helped me escape into America with him. He saved my life." Aloisia didn't have a chance to say anything else as he turned around and started to run. Danielle gasped beside her as he disappeared almost immediately from their view.

Aloisia turned to her friend and smiled reassuringly as she put an arm around Danielle's shoulder. "Come on, Danielle. I'll call Dad and tell him I'm staying the night with you. I'm sure him and Verdin can take over patrolling tonight. We've got a lot to talk about."

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### 23.

*"She's mine, Cinder. You promised I could pick my first." The voice was dark with anger, but there was no face to the heated voice; all Aloisia could see was darkness.*

*"You shouldn't have picked the Avenger, youngling," Cinder replied, matching the angry tone with his calm one. Aloisia felt a shiver of fear slide down her spine and she was not entirely sure that it was only hers. "I've been searching for this one for a long time. You can't have her."*

"But I've been watching her," the thing protested, his anger flaring inside Aloisia. The heat lanced through her, causing her to gasp. There was a moment of sight and she saw a tall, bald man standing in front of her. He seemed normal and Aloisia would have never recognized him as Cinder if not for the white glow emanating from his eyes. Then the window of vision faded again.

"You've not watched her well enough if you had not realized who and what she was."

"You never told me what to look for," he said defensively. "I had no way of knowing she was of the Heart."

"Now you know." This was a different voice—Aloisia recognized the Pyroenchanter that had confronted her in the park. He sounded upset, his voice short and clipped. "Pick another and stop whining. There are plenty of options in this blasted city." There was a sharp intake of breath. "Damn, this hurts. I can't wait to watch the bitch burn."

"I told you to be careful," Cinder said dismissively. "It is your own fault that she got the better of you."

"I'm not going to stop watching her," he stated stubbornly, turning Cinder's attention back to him.

There was an uneasy pause and Aloisia could feel the Pyroenchanter's rapidly beating heart in her throat as if it was her own.

"I never said you had to," Cinder said finally. "I've decided we need more information before I call her

to me. She's eluded my flame for too long now as it is. I won't allow her to escape me again."

The Pyroenchanter hesitated and Aloisia was swirled into a dozen tumbling emotions. Fear, regret, and hatred were the most prevalent. None of it was betrayed in his calm, resigned voice as he said, "As you said, Cinder, I will do."

"Are you sure?" Cinder asked suspiciously. The Pyroenchanter's fear deepened, almost swallowing Aloisia's mind. There was a tense pause before Cinder continued quietly, "Remember your place, youngling. Your brother and I are all you have left. Do you think the Rationals would ever accept you? Maybe you wish to try the understanding of the murderous Veins? Hell, even Bloodbanes tremble at the mention of our names. No one would help you; they would rather see you dead."

"I know that," he spat out bitterly. "I don't need you reminding me every day."

"Are you sure, youngling?" Cinder repeated. "I can see doubt written across your features." Cinder's voice lowered to a deep brass. "Don't get in my way. She's mine and you are going to watch her for me. If you disobey me, we will leave you alone to fend for yourself. You will die; no one else will help you..."

The Pyroenchanter's anger boiled over. "I know!" he yelled and Aloisia could feel the fire eat across his skin. It didn't burn though. In fact, the flames were the best thing she had ever felt, the power they held, the utter control he had over them. It was amazing. Aloisia fought against the feeling but couldn't and fell forward into its warmth. She glanced through the eyes of the Pyroenchanter into an old, dusty building as he yelled, "I know no one would help! I know I'm a monster!"

"Aloisia, wake up, please." Danielle's voice was vague at first, but strengthened as Aloisia was being shaken. "Aloisia, wake up! You're scaring me."

Aloisia's eyes flew open and she sat up, her chest heaving. The lamp beside her began to grow brighter until finally the light blew, scattering glass across the room. Aloisia fought to get her labored breathing back under control and the shaking that had taken the couch she had been sleeping on slowed and stopped completely.

"Lo?" Danielle asked uneasily from across the room. She stood from where she was laying and pushed her wild hair away from her face. "What happened?"

Aloisia wiped a hand against her sweating brow. "I had another dream," she whispered, shivering.

Danielle walked over cautiously and slowly sat down at the end of the couch. "About your mom?"

Aloisia shook her head. "No, not this time," she replied. "No, this time it was like I was inside the Pyroenchanter. He was a youngling, not the same one from the park. I was talking ... I mean *it* was talking to Cinder; talking about me."

"What about you?" Danielle asked uneasily.

Aloisia shivered again and hugged herself. "He said that I was his; that he had been watching me for a long time. He hadn't known that I was the Avenger though; the Pyroenchanter from the park must have recognized me somehow."

"Wow, creepy," Danielle whispered. "Imagine those monsters are so good that they've been watching you and you didn't even know it."

"Yeah," Aloisia agreed, lost in thought. She had actually been *inside* the Bloodbane's mind. She had felt his emotions, his strength. He was so powerful, more powerful than the Pyroenchanter in the park; he had the strength to outstrip Cinder—she could feel it. But his fear, resentment, and hatred controlled him, locked and constrained him.

Aloisia stood, stretched, and yawned, trying to fight her growing uneasiness. "Where's Chloe?"

"She left for work about an hour ago," Danielle answered. "And it's a good thing too."

Aloisia rubbed her eyes blearily. "What do you mean?"

"You were doing some pretty freaky stuff, Aloisia." Danielle stood up and righted an overturned table and went over to the closet door under the stairs. "I've been awake since mom left, but I didn't want to wake you. You've been having a hard time, and I thought you deserved the rest. Anyway, I was sitting on the other end of the couch about to turn the TV on when the lights started to flicker." Danielle paused to take the broom and dustpan from the closet and a small handheld vacuum cleaner. "It wasn't ten seconds later the couch started to shake. I knew something was happening to you and I tried to wake you, but the moment I touched your shoulder, something pushed me away and up against the far wall."

Danielle tossed the vacuum cleaner to Aloisia before ending somewhat lamely, "It was scary."

"I'm sorry, Dan," Aloisia said guiltily. "Hopefully it won't take too long to control my powers. Toby's been working with me." Aloisia turned the vacuum on and started to clean up the shattered pieces of the light bulb from the sofa and the carpet beneath the table. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No, you didn't hurt me, but I've got to tell you your skin was really, really hot when I touched it."

Danielle came over and poked her arm tentatively. "Are you sure you're alright?"

Aloisia nodded, thinking. "It seems to me that I didn't lose control of my powers until the Pyroenchanter in my dream got really angry and embraced his. I must have actually been connected to him." Aloisia paused, remembering the amazing feeling of the fire igniting along her skin. "He was so powerful and so angry. He nearly drowned me in his strength." She looked into Danielle's face. "He had been fighting with Cinder before my mind ... connected ... with his. Dan, I'd never felt anything like him. He's more powerful than Cinder and the other. It was all I could do not to be consumed in the flame that he engulfed into."

Danielle stared at her for a moment before asking hesitantly, "What, do you think that maybe you were trying to catch on fire? I felt your skin; it was scorching, but you're fine now. Maybe you were trying to gain the Pyroenchanter's ability."

"Is that possible?"

Danielle shrugged. "How am I supposed to know? I'm new to this world, remember? You'll have to ask Toby."

Aloisia turned the vacuum cleaner off and handed it back to Danielle. She opened her mouth to say something but was interrupted by the metal ring tone of her cell phone. It made both her and Danielle jump. "I'm getting really tired of that phone," Aloisia groaned as she got up and fished through her purse that was near the door. She motioned for Danielle to be quiet as her home phone number lighted her screen. She flicked it open and answered it.

"Who but seeks the truth?"

"Those who wish only answers," Aloisia sighed, blowing her hair out of her face.

"Where's Danielle at?" Donny asked.

Aloisia glanced over to where Danielle was sitting on the couch. Her friend put a hand against her mouth and nodded to show her understanding. "She's still asleep. What, do you think I'm stupid enough to answer your code right in front of her?"

"I wouldn't put it past you," Donny said.

"Just tell me why you called," Aloisia said sharply, color flushing to her cheeks.

"Nikolas and Josiah found something of interest last night. You know the group of vampires that's been murdering the young couples?"

"Yeah, we never could find their day spot."

"Well, they think they found it yesterday. Ironically, it's in the quiet part of town. That's why we never found them."

"Give me the address." Aloisia wrote down what Donny told her on a scrap piece of paper from her purse.

"The Master Avenger said it was a large group, around fifteen of them and a couple of hopefuls. Do you want back up?"

Aloisia thought for a moment before saying, "No. This is my Body. If I can't handle a few rogue vamps then Verdin might as well exile me now."

Donny laughed. "Dad told us all you'd say that—almost word for word. He knows you way too well." His tone turned serious. "Don't go in guns blazing, Aloisia. This is the quiet part of town. You'll get caught. I know it's not your style, but try stealth for once."

"Fine, fine. I'll come home when I'm finished."

"We're giving you a three hour leeway. After that if you don't answer the phone we're sending someone after you."

"Don't worry," Aloisia assured. "I'll call when I'm done, and I won't leave any of them alive."

"Good ... then it's time that you left Danielle's house. Avenge the might of good."

"Bear the knowledge of ages," she responded. There was a click as he hung up. "I've got to go," Aloisia told Danielle as she shut the phone up.

"What's wrong?" Danielle asked as she stood and walked over to where Aloisia was gathering her purse and putting the locket into it, zipping it up.

Aloisia didn't answer her until after she put her tennis shoes on. "They found the group of vampires I've



been searching for."

"Vampires? How many?" Danielle tried unsuccessfully to hide the unease and disbelief in her voice as she followed her out of the house and down the drive to her car.

"They think around fifteen with a couple of hopefuls."

"Hopefuls?"

Aloisia opened the car door and got her dagger, wrist sheaths, belt, and holster out from beneath the seat. "Human wannabes. They hang around the vampires hoping they'll turn them. In my opinion, they're worse than vampires. They'd kill their own family just to get their throats tore into." She took all the iron and lead knives out of her belt and the gun with the silver bullets out of the holster. She stuffed the knives and the holster back beneath the seat. She wouldn't need those in a vampire's lair. She pushed the button to pop the trunk and went to it, pushing down forcefully on the false bottom to slide it away.

Danielle's mouth gaped as the bottom gave way to a small area with three suitcases. She swallowed and said nervously, "So what, you go in while they're asleep in coffins and drive wooden stakes their hearts?"

Aloisia laughed as she clipped her belt to her stomach, strapped her dagger and wrist sheaths on, and handed the gun to Danielle to hold. "Please, Dan, you've watched way too many movies. I wish it was that easy." She reached to the closest black suitcase and opened it. She took out six extra silver blades and put four of them into the empty knife slots in the belt, placing the other two in the slips made in her short training shorts. "Vampires aren't like that at all." She searched the deeper recesses of the suitcase and took the thigh holster out. "First of all, vampires don't sleep in coffins and wood would only give them splinters. Silver to the heart, decapitation, complete removal of their heart, or burning is the only way to kill them. They don't have to sleep in the day, but they are mainly nocturnal because most of their powers only work during the night hours."

"Powers?" Danielle asked as Aloisia strapped the holster to her thigh and took the gun from her. She checked to make sure she had a full clip and the safety was on before slipping it into the holster and clipping it tightly in.

"You know—levitation, mind control, invisibility—basically vampiric mind tricks. Most of them can't stand the sunlight, that is, unless they like their skin extra crispy, but some of the powerful masters have the strength to withstand the sun." Aloisia closed the black suitcase and pulled the gray one to her.

"So holy items work on them?" Danielle asked, eyeing the crosses and vials of holy water inside the suitcase Aloisia had just opened.

Aloisia hesitated before saying, "Most times. I've killed vampires that could touch my crosses, but there were others that my crosses killed for me. I know they won't work without faith and concentration, but other factors contribute too. I'm not sure." Aloisia put a large silver cross on a thick metal chain around her neck, tucking it into her sports bra. She clipped two vials of holy water to the thigh holster and put another cross into her pocket. She took two large packets of salt from the side and put them in both of her pockets.

"Salt?" Danielle asked disbelievingly.

"This salt's pure. A priest blessed it, so it's like acid to most vampires. Toby put an enchantment on it and it'll hide the smell of blood from Bloodbanes and heal small wounds," she answered, looking through

the suitcase. Her eyes fell on a large black object. "Dude, I thought I had lost this," she exclaimed happily, reaching in and bringing out a large sheath. Aloisia slid the knife out to show a wicked blade with barbed, jagged sides and runes running its length. The sheath had straps attached to it and she threw it on her back, settling the straps firmly on her shoulders. "I thought I had left it in that leviathan serpent in Clions City Lake last month. It was my favorite back up weapon."

Aloisia grabbed the third dark red suitcase and lifted it out, setting it down on the ground. She fixed the false bottom and slammed the trunk shut; she had a piece of cloth that was trapped in the trunk top that conveniently hid her license plate. Aloisia grabbed the suitcase and went to the other side of the car. She threw it into the passenger side seat and got her mother's sword from its secret compartment, strapping it to her hip.

"Do you think you have enough weapons?" Danielle asked sarcastically.

Aloisia got into the car, slamming the door shut behind her. "I can't use my gun unless it's a last resort," Aloisia retorted. "I'm going in where I'll be outnumbered at least seventeen to one and fifteen have inhuman strength that'll probably rival mine. Frankly, most Avengers go in with more."

Danielle's expression turned worried. "Then why don't you?"

Aloisia shrugged, starting the car. "I'm not most Avengers." Danielle backed away as Aloisia pulled out of her driveway quickly and drove off.

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## 24.

Aloisia pulled up a couple of homes away from where Donny had told her they would be. She leaned over, grabbed the dark red suitcase, and opened it, revealing a bundle of clothes and a wig. She grabbed the long thin black skirt from the top and unbuckled and pulled herself into it. The skirt was her design—there was a side latch that she could unsnap to remove it quickly from her body and it hid her weapons without keeping her away from them. After that she pulled out a long black wig of thick, curly hair. She pushed her hair back and slipped the wig on. The last thing she added was a jacket, a pair of gloves, and a pair of sunglasses. After checking her reflection, she got out of her car and strode up to the door, knocking loudly on it.

A girl hardly older than her answered it. She was pale with large bags beneath her dull blue eyes. Her hair was shoulder length and dark blond in color. She would have been pretty if not for the sickly look she had. "Yes?"

Aloisia cursed inwardly. She had been hoping for a boy to answer the door. Then she smiled as a boy that looked remarkably like the girl stepped into the hall. "Who is it, Jezebel?"

"I don't know, Justin," Jezebel answered. "She just appeared at the door."

Justin frowned, coming closer. He took her in, his eyes trailing down her body before he said, "What do you need?"

Aloisia let out a high pitch, pleasant laugh and threw her curls over her back, making sure the hilt of her

knife was hidden by the wig. "My car broke down and my cell's out of minutes," she said breathily. "Can I use your phone?"

"Sure," Justin said. Aloisia smiled and went to step in, but Jezebel stopped her.

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said. "What would Michael think of that?"

"I won't be a bother, honest," Aloisia trilled. She let out another giggle.

Jezebel hesitated then nodded. "Fine," she said. Aloisia stepped in and she shut the door behind her. "Wait," she told Aloisia, stopping her with a hand. She turned toward Justin. "Go tell Michael we've got company. I'm going to stay with her."

Justin nodded and left through the hall. The home seemed normal enough; the only thing that was odd was the thick curtains and blankets that covered all the windows Aloisia could see. It left the house dark and seemingly cold. Jezebel pushed her against the wall gently and started patting her down.

"What are you doing?" Aloisia asked.

"Checking for weapons," Jezebel answered nonchalantly.

Aloisia rolled her eyes, even though the girl couldn't see it. "Is that necessary?"

"Call me skeptical, but you didn't just come to use our phone. There are other homes and you parked a little past us."

"How smart of you." Jezebel's hand found the belt of knives and Aloisia spun around, gripping the girl's head tightly and covering her mouth. She twisted sharply, wincing at the loud crack Jezebel's neck made. She lowered the now still body to the floor and stepped over her, following the path she had watched Justin take.

Justin was walking back down the hall holding a cordless phone. "Where's Jez?" he asked, frowning.

"She's still in the hall. Don't worry; she said it was alright if I came on through." Aloisia laughed. "Your friend's kinda high-strung, ain't she?"

He nodded. "My sister can be paranoid." He handed her the phone. "Michael said to use the phone and leave. He doesn't want to seem rude, but he works late hours and needs his sleep."

"No problem. I really appreciate it." She took the knife from the sheath on her back and shoved it into his throat and twisted. There was a moment of surprise before the life in his eyes faded. She anchored his body against her as she took her knife out and sprinkled salt over the body quickly, wiping the blade clean on Justin's shirt. She laid the still bleeding corpse on the ground gently and put the knife back into its sheath. She sometimes had trouble killing the hopefuls, regardless of how she felt about the traitorous humans, but these she didn't feel any remorse about. They had probably helped the kiss kill the numerous couples. It helped her conscience to know for a fact that they were murderers.

Aloisia highly doubted the vampires still didn't know it was her. She unsnapped the skirt and unzipped the jacket, draping the clothes, wig, and sunglasses over a lamp to keep any of Justin's blood from getting on them. It had been a miracle she had kept them dry at all.

"I'm glad you got rid of those annoying humans," said a voice ahead of her. She looked up to see a man coming out of a room to the right of her. "I wanted to myself, but you know," he sighed dramatically, "I just didn't have the heart to put them out of their misery." He glanced to where her stuff hung on his lamp. "Your disguise didn't last long, Avenger," he remarked.

Aloisia shrugged. "I don't much like the stealth approach." The knives were out of her wrist sheaths instantly and she turned, gutting the vampire behind her. She shoved her other knife into his heart before he could react. It died immediately, silver poison overtaking the dark brown in its eyes. She kicked the corpse backward and turned back to the vampire that had to be Michael. "Don't think they can sneak behind me, Michael." She threw salt behind her left shoulder and something howled in pain behind her.

The vampire in front of her hadn't reacted as she killed his two friends. "It took you long enough to find us, Avenger," he said calmly, "and it was stupid to come alone." He stepped closer and a dozen others filed out behind him.

Aloisia laughed. "Boy, that was dramatic. Now, am I supposed to run screaming?" She took her vials of holy water and threw them, smashing them on the ground close to the crowd of vampires. Several shrieked and shirked away. Michael dodged it completely and was on her before she could react. He slammed her against a wall while two others flanked him on either side. He jerked the already humming cross from her neck and tossed it behind him as the two vampires leaned inward, their silver canines exposed and gleaming. She shoved up with both her arms, driving her knives into their chests. They looked down, surprise in the fading eyes as she wrenched her knives from the bodies and they fell backward.

Michael took the opportunity of her diverted attention to pin her arms against her. Aloisia stared up into his expressionless face. She took a moment to slow her breathing and gather herself. She didn't fight against his grip yet; she took the calm pause to study her surroundings. The two she had killed first lay in the entrance way of the hall opposite of the prone figure of Justin. Their bodies were already rotting away; there wasn't much left of their skin. On her other side five were slumped on top of one another dead, their bodies still sizzling where the holy water had struck them. The five remaining vampires approached them slowly.

Aloisia returned her attention to Michael. "Aren't you angry that I've killed most of your kiss?"

Michael shrugged. "If they were killed that easily I didn't need them; I can always make more." He lowered his face until their noses almost touched. She watched his face transform, the bones breaking and reforming into something that hardly resembled human. Aloisia couldn't help the quickening of her heartbeat as his canines slid from his mouth, coming to rest on his bottom lip. They gleamed silver in the muted light that pervaded the home. "And I'll start with you."

Aloisia brought her knee up as hard as she could as Michael bent toward her. She connected to his groin and pushed him backward as the grip he had on her loosened. She backed away, ready to throw her knives, but the others didn't give her a chance. They lunged toward her and Aloisia managed to stab one before he could grab her, but another knocked the blades out of her hand and grappled her roughly before she could reach for another weapon.

Aloisia struggled as each vampire grabbed her arms and legs and lifted her from the ground. They kept a firm grip on her limbs and dragged her to where Michael crouched. He muttered a curse as he stood and strode stiffly over to where she was being held. Aloisia stopped struggling as he peered down at her. They stared at each other for a moment before he backhanded her, knocking her head to the side and causing her ears to ring.

Aloisia could taste blood as she shook her head to get rid of the double vision, turning back to look at Michael. "I hope that I really hurt you," she said scathingly, spitting her blood out onto the floor.

Michael grabbed her chin and shook her. "Not as much as I'm going to hurt you," he replied, anger dripping from his voice. His grip was so tight her jaw bones cracked loudly.

"Let me go," Aloisia demanded, fighting to speak past his hand. The vampires that held her laughed.

"We'll let you go when you're dead," the woman that held her right arm sneered.

Aloisia could feel her anger building. It was bubbling inside her like a potion in a witch's cauldron. It was hard to control, and she didn't understand why she was losing her temper so quickly. She had been trained to stay calm and she knew she could get out of this easily; she'd been in situations a lot worse before. Still, her anger began to build.

"Her skin's getting hot," the boy that held her leg said, his voice uneasy.

Michael let go of her chin and backed away. "Tie her up," he said. He pointed to the room he had left. "Use the bed."

Aloisia could feel the warmth that was now always in the back of her mind swelling, testing her barrier for weak spots. Her anger fed the welling power and she could feel her barrier weaken. She desperately tried to keep it back. She didn't know what would happen if her block burst; so much built up power.

"Is she secure?" demanded a voice, bringing Aloisia back to her surroundings. She had concentrated so hard that she hadn't even realized that she had allowed the vampires to tie her arms and legs up. She pulled on the thick rope that bound her wrist.

"Let me go," Aloisia demanded again. Her voice was distant and echoed in her ears.

"Let me go! Let me go!" Michael mocked. "Where's your Avenger bravado now, girl?" He trailed his hand down her stomach below the belt of throwing knives.

"Don't touch me," Aloisia growled. The warmth had almost seeped from her barrier and it seemed to beckon enticingly while her anger continued to feed it. She finally succumbed to the power as Michael scratched a nail up her thigh. The sensation of it sweeping through her body made her close her eyes as her back bowed and she yelled out.

"Michael, what's happening?" she heard the girl demand shrilly. Michael's hand left her body and she opened her eyes. Her skin was glowing and she could see small lances of flame arch off from her skin. There was an echoing crack like thunder as the ropes that bound her incinerated.

"Stop her, damn it," Michael commanded. "Hold her down!"

The four remaining vampires gripped her wrist and ankles tightly.

"Her skin's so hot," groaned one, hiding his face behind his shoulder. "I can't hang on for much longer."

The power threatened to consume her; she'd never felt something so ... *good*. The flickering flames arched out further from her skin in a crackle. The vampires instantly leapt back, letting her go, but the fire

followed them. Their shrieks filled the air as their clothing caught and they went up like matches. Aloisia leaned forward and watched their screaming forms fall in ashes.

"What the hell are you?" Michael screamed as she stood. He backed away and turned to run but Aloisia waved a hand and the door slammed in his face.

Michael threw a punch at her and she dodged it easily, pushing him backward into the closed door. She grabbed his neck and lifted him up above her head as far as she could. The flames licked her hands and arms but stayed near her as she stared into Michael's terrified eyes.

"Please," Michael choked out. He tried to break her grip but couldn't.

Aloisia smiled. Shades of purple blurred her vision and she could see her eyes begin to glow a dark, almost black violet from the reflection cast by Michael's widening eyes.

"Where's your vampire bravado now, boy?" she asked him, her voice echoing.

The flames began at his feet, trailing up his body. The tendrils of fire were unlike any Aloisia had ever seen before. The heart of the fire, the part that consumed Michael, was a soft, honey yellow. The outer ridges darkened to a tinge of purple that matched the glow of her eyes.

There was a swell of power as Michael cried out. Aloisia stayed still, keeping her strong vice around the vampire's neck. She drank in the power that flowed from him and into her as her flame devoured him.

The warmth left her suddenly and she dropped the still burning corpse as she stumbled to her knees. Aloisia groaned, wiping sweaty grime away from her face. Smoke began to rise from the burning bodies as she forced herself to stand. She opened the door and walked shakily into the hallway, shutting it behind her. She took her time finding her dropped knives and resettling her disguise, ignoring the smoke that began to rise from the cracks in the door. She skirted the dead humans and made her way out, hurrying to her car and driving off. She passed squalling fire trucks and ambulances as she turned off the long street.

She opened her cell phone and dialed home. A voice she recognized as Josiah answered, but she said the code anyway. "Who but seeks the truth?" She was proud that her voice didn't waver any.

"Those who wish only answers," Josiah answered quickly.

"Tell Donny I'm on my way home," Aloisia stated, "but I need a little while getting there."

"Why?"

Aloisia took a deep breath as she turned down a small dead end alley. She pulled to a stop and turned the car off. "Gregory needs to get to the vamps' home and do his job. I'm going to stay low until its safe."

"What did you do?"

"I set their house on fire," Aloisia answered, fighting to keep the panic out of her voice.

Josiah was quiet for a moment. "And why did you do that?" he asked finally.

"It wasn't my fault there were stupid enough to have open flames," Aloisia said, trying to sound

defensive. "There were candles everywhere. You know how easily vampires catch on fire. Just tell Greg to get down there. My license plate was covered and I wore a disguise. He shouldn't have too big of a trouble."

"I'll tell him. When do we expect you home? Toby says he needs to check on you; he wants to make sure Cinder isn't trying anything on you. He said something about Isaac's sensing traps being set off by a Pyroenchanter power surge a few minutes ago."

"Tell him I'll be home in a couple of hours." Aloisia hung up before Josiah could answer. The tears that had been threatening her since she had left the burning house finally broke their prisons and leaked down her face. Michael's memories pressed against her, promising to drive her under. She knew what she had done, what should have been impossible. She fished her hands through her short hair as she screamed and began to rock back and forth. She succumbed to the vengeful memories; Michael's soul was hers.

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## 25.

"Aloisia, are you sure?" Toby asked disbelievingly.

Aloisia nodded wearily, sitting down at her desk chair. "I'm positive."

"But that should be impossible," Toby protested.

"Tell that to Michael's soul," Aloisia snapped.

"How did it happen?"

Aloisia shrugged. "I don't know. One moment I'm fine. I'm fighting vampires—they think they've got me but they've not really and before I have a chance to break their grip on me I get angry. I was so mad, and there wasn't a reason. My power ... fed on it, used my emotions as a key to my barrier. I tried to fight it, but I couldn't keep it back and stop the vampires from killing me at the same time. There was nothing I could do."

"Bend toward me," Toby said. His voice was that monotonous cold voice he had cultivated to hide his emotions from the other Heart members. The fact he felt he had to use it in front of her scared Aloisia almost as much as taking the soul had.

"What do you think is wrong, Toby?" Aloisia asked uneasily as she leaned forward. Toby didn't answer as he pressed his forehead against hers and closed his eyes. She gasped out loudly as Toby delved into her mind. Thoughts flashed across her mind in a blinding series of images. Toby pushed further, causing a small whimper to escape her throat. He had never entered her mind as deeply as he was now. The pressure was immense, like bricks pressed into her temples.

"Toby..." she groaned. "You're hurting me."

The pressure subsided and Aloisia collapsed forward out of her chair as Toby was pushed backward, his wheelchair hitting the edge of her bed.

"What did you find?" Aloisia asked shakily. She didn't try to get up yet.

"You won't like it," Toby said quietly. There was an edge of panic to his voice that he was trying unsuccessfully to hide.

"Just tell me Toby, please." Aloisia pulled herself to her feet and sat back down slowly. There was a dull ache behind her forehead, promising a migraine later.

"What's happening to you is rare," Toby answered. "I hadn't even given thought to it because it's mostly enchanters that have to worry about it. Your powers are growing too quickly for your body to handle. It's killing you."

Aloisia couldn't find her voice for a moment. When she finally did, it came breathy and high pitched. "Is there anything we can do to stop it?"

Toby shrugged. "I was one of the ones like that. They take you aside and train you separately in Preparation. You're put into a continuous, fast paced training until your powers level out."

"But how can we do that without being caught?" Aloisia asked desperately.

"Calm down, Aloisia," Toby said. "I'm not going to let you die, and I'm not going to let you get caught." He paused, his brow furrowed in thought. Finally he nodded something to himself. "Pack some things, Aloisia. We're leaving tonight."

"Leaving?" Aloisia asked blankly. "Toby, how are you going to explain that without giving us away?"

"Just let me handle that," Toby replied. "Don't over pack—there will be a washer machine, and I'll have Shaun get our food. Mainly worry about weapons." Toby hesitated before saying, "Asher called. You need to let him know you're going. Call Alvin and Danielle too. They'll have to be our eyes and ears in the city while we're gone."

"How did you know about Dan?"

Toby's look was condescending. "Aloisia, I'm not stupid. I knew it was only a matter of time." Toby rolled to the door. "I'm going to take care of this. I want you ready to leave in a couple of hours. We begin your training tonight." Toby opened the door to leave.

"Wait," Aloisia spoke up, pausing her brother. "Does that explain Michael's soul?"

Toby shook his head. "I wish it did, but I think I'm in over my head when it comes to you. I wish I could talk to someone who knew what they were doing. I'm sorry that all you have is me." He turned around, wheeling himself out quickly before Aloisia could say anything else. She shook her head as she closed the door and got her cell phone out. She dialed Asher's number. He answered on the third ring.

"Toby said you called," Aloisia said.

"I did. He said you'd call me back when you got back from Danielle's."

"Did you need anything?"

"Not really. I just wanted to talk to you."



Aloisia smiled slightly. "I'm sorry to disappoint. My grandmother's still sick. It seems I left too early. Toby's coming too this time."

Asher was quiet for a moment before saying, "I'm sorry to hear that. I hope she feels better soon. Any idea when you'll come back?"

"No. When she feels better, I guess."

"Well, are you going to forget your cell phone this time?"

Aloisia laughed slightly. "No."

"Can I call?"

"I'd like that," Aloisia agreed. She paused for a moment and sighed. "Look, I'm sorry I've got to cut this short, but I've got to pack. Talk to you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, you'll hear from me around eight." Asher's voice was light and cheerful, but there was an underlying emotion she couldn't quite catch. "Talk to you later, Atlas."

Aloisia didn't bother disputing the nickname. She couldn't help but think it was true. "Bye."

She dialed Danielle's number as soon as Asher hung up. "Safe are you?" Danielle answered grumpily. "Did it ever occur to you that you should have called before? I can't call your family and check to make sure you're not vamp meat, now can I?"

"Sorry, Dan." Aloisia lost no time in telling her what happened. "You were right. I did gain the Pyroenchanter's ability. Toby doesn't know how though."

"Don't worry about that for now, Lo," Danielle said worriedly. "Learn to control whatever the hell's going on with you first."

"Toby and I are leaving tonight so he can train me continuously. I'll be back to Clions when I'm safe."

"Tell Toby to take care of you for me," Danielle said, sighing. "Call me while you're gone, alright?"

"I promise. Look, I've still got Alvin to call and then I've got to pack. I'll call you later, okay?"

"Fine. Be safe, Aloisia." Danielle hung up.

Aloisia pushed her bangs from her face as she dialed the final number. It took Alvin almost ten rings to answer.

"What took so long, tiger?"

"Oh, nothing except our furry best friend," came Alvin's irritated answer. "The damn animal won't leave me alone."

"I resent that." Diablo's growling voice bled over the phone. "*Chiquita?* Put it on speaker so I can speak to her."

"I'm not in the mood today, Diablo," Aloisia warned. "Let's not play games."

"Fine, I guess you would be tired after setting a vampire's lair on fire."

"Don't start about the truce," Aloisia stated. "I've been looking for Michael and his kiss for a long time. No way I was going to leave them alive to kill more Rational couples."

"I wasn't going to say anything of that. Sangre and I have been searching for those *bastards* too. I never said you couldn't hunt murderers."

Aloisia bit her tongue to keep from saying something smart as she asked, "Why are you bothering Alvin? You know he won't know anything about Cinder yet."

"He wanted your number," Alvin spoke up, "But I wouldn't give it."

"Good thinking. I'd never have any peace."

"I needed to talk to you," Diablo interjected. "It's serious."

"What?"

"The Rationals can't put out the fire you started, and it's threatening to spread to the other homes. We need your help stopping it. I know you're having a tough time controlling your new Conduit powers, but it won't stop without you."

"How do you know I started that fire magically?"

"I can sense it, *Chiquita*, and let me tell you, I've not felt something that strong. It feels like Cinder's brand of power. I don't know how you've managed that, but we need you to stop it."

Aloisia hesitated. "I was calling to tell Alvin I'd be gone for a while and he'd have to get a hold of me if anything went wrong in Clions. I guess Toby and I will stop there."

"What's so important that you would leave your Body?" Diablo asked, confused.

"It's none of your business, werewolf," Aloisia growled.

Diablo ignored her anger as he said, "You're having more trouble than just learning to control it, aren't you? You're too powerful."

Aloisia didn't answer him. "How are we going to get around the firemen?"

"Come after the sunset and Sangre will have that solved for you."

"That'll be a lot of fire fighters for him to control," Aloisia said doubtfully. "Is he that powerful?"

"Trust me, *Chiquita*; I know the vampire well."

"I'll be there then." Aloisia shut the phone, throwing it on her bed with a sigh. She wanted nothing more than to lie down and go to sleep. Instead she went to her closet and dragged her large rolling luggage bag

out. She opened it and started throwing clothes into it. She didn't bother folding the thin training clothes and pajamas.

There was a knock at the door and Shaun walked in carrying a small white duffle bag. "I've got extra weapons for your trip," he said, his voice low. He placed them in her almost empty luggage bag.

"Thanks," Aloisia said, zipping the bag up. She opened the top part and went toward her bathroom. Shaun stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

"You'll be alright," he said comfortingly. "Toby'll take good care of you."

Aloisia was afraid she would say something that would give them away. "Thanks," she said uneasily. "I know he will."

"You're too strong for Cinder; Toby'll be able to break his hold on you easily. You'll be back in your Body soon ready to kick some Bloodbane ass."

Aloisia smiled wanly, realizing what Toby had told everyone. "Thanks, Shaun. I really needed that." Her brother smiled and kissed her cheek, leaving. Aloisia sighed again and walked into the bathroom to finish packing her things.

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## 26.

"You're supposed to stop this?" Toby asked, disbelief etched across his features.

Aloisia looked up at the fiery building. Flames leapt from the windows and roof, rising high in the night sky. "I started it didn't I?" She settled her mother's sword firmly against her back and kept a tight hold on the dragon locket she was wearing as she weaved her way through the fire trucks to where two men in full cloaks waited beside Alvin.

"About time the Avenger decided to grace us with her presence," Sangre growled from beneath his cloak.

Aloisia ignored him and turned to Alvin. "This is Toby, my only brother that won't kill you for knowing about the Heart."

"Something I appreciate greatly," Alvin said, shaking Toby's hand.

"Touching, really," Diablo smarted, "but don't you think you should try to put this fire out, *Chiquita* ? Sangre's hold on the fire fighters won't last forever."

"Problem is that I don't know how," Aloisia murmured.

"We'll have to experiment," Toby said worriedly. He looked up at Aloisia. "I can't help with this," he admitted sadly. "I was hoping I could, but this is so out of my league. The power radiating off of this is ... incredible."

" *Sí*," Diablo agreed. "That's what I told her."

"Do you have any suggestions?" Aloisia asked hesitantly.

Toby shrugged. "Just let your barrier down is all I can tell you."

"Toby, I want you to take Alvin to the other side of the street and protect him. I have no idea what I'll do once I let my barriers to my power down. I don't want a repeat of what happened to Michael."

Toby frowned. "I don't want to leave you alone."

"Please Toby; I don't want anyone hurt."

Her brother glared at her fiercely for a moment. "Fine," he relented. "You've got to promise me you'll be careful." Aloisia nodded and Toby motioned for Alvin to follow him.

"I guess we were chopped liver," Diablo grumbled.

"You're Bloodbanes," Aloisia dismissed, watching her brother lead Alvin away. "You can take care of yourselves, but I have to protect my Rational and my Conduit." She turned to see Diablo standing by himself. "Where's your vampire buddy?"

"Sangre went to stay where we put the fire fighters," Diablo answered. "He didn't think it wise to keep a vampiric match near a magical fire. I, however, cannot be killed by flames so I can stay to help you if I can." His voice lilted in a smile that Aloisia knew he was wearing beneath his hood as he said, "It's just you and me."

"Yea," Aloisia muttered.

"Come on, it can't be that bad," Diablo said quietly. Aloisia caught the hurt tone in his voice, and it made her mind wander back to what Alvin had told her. Maybe he was right. It made sense that Diablo was flirting with her.

"If we're going to put this fire out, we might as well start now," Aloisia said, perturbed. She didn't wait for Diablo to answer as she strode quickly to the roaring fire. She shielded her eyes from the heat with an arm and walked past the burning threshold. She felt rather than heard Diablo follow her.

"You need to hurry, Aloisia," he yelled over the roar of flames, holding his hood straight with a hand. Even his loud voice was nearly drowned out by the echoing growl of the fire. "This house won't last much longer."

Aloisia ignored him as she slowly lowered the barrier that kept her separated from the warmth that was a part of her. It was like opening a flood gate and the power filled her. There was a moment where time seemed to stop for her. The destructive noise cut off sharply, leaving the area silent. Even though the fire raged around her, it was quiet.

"Damn," she heard Diablo whisper breathlessly. She turned to see him backing away slightly.

"Diablo?" Her voice echoed and was deep, crackling like the fire that surrounded her.

" *Chiquita*, you've been holding back," he said, and Aloisia could feel his fear. He motioned to her body

and she looked down, stifling a scream. Dark purple flames breathed across her skin and she was surrounded by a dark gray-golden plume of smoke that obscured the view of her legs. Her skin that wasn't covered in the unnatural fire was pale and translucent and she could watch the blood pulse in her arteries. She tried to ignore Michael's tormented expression beneath her flesh.

The sight of her body like that terrified her, but she also felt a strange, pleased thrill chase her fear away. The power rushing through her was amazing, the flames a warm embrace, and she had never felt more at home than amidst the fire her power fed and kept alive. There was a terrible beauty about the leaping flames that called to Aloisia.

"Aloisia?" Diablo's voice was hesitant but firm. "Aloisia, snap out of it. This *es tú fuego* , put it out."

Aloisia nodded vaguely, hardly hearing him. The fire wanted to be united with its maker anyways—wanted to feed her power the way her power had fed it. She reached her arms out and the fire began to swirl around her, ready to embrace her like a close friend.

The flames soaked into her like she was a sponge collecting water. They lit across her skin in scorching, exhilarating waves until there was nothing left and she collapsed to the ground, breathing rapidly.

"*Chiquita?*" Diablo asked hesitantly. "Are you alright? Can you rebuild the barrier to your power?"

Aloisia groaned, pulling herself up into a sitting position. She looked around a blackened, broken hallway. The area was shadowed but lighted by the dark fire still breathing along her skin. Diablo reached out and touched her shoulder before jerking back with a Spanish curse.

*"No haga este, Marcos, no es derecho," a shrill frightened voice commanded.*

*"No, hermano, no es derecho," came the sad return, "pero esto es el Código." And there was a blinding, pulsing pain that exploded along the spine of her back and she screamed.*

"No, Aloisia, no!" exclaimed Diablo. Aloisia screamed again, her hands clambering to her back. Diablo grabbed her shoulders, pressing his forehead against hers. His mind entered hers and its intrusion stilled the powers raging in Aloisia. Slowly the ghost pain in her back faded and Diablo pushed away from her. She caught a glimpse of a long mane of dark brown hair before Diablo raised his hood and sat down on the ash covered floor. Aloisia stared at him until he broke the silence saying, "You need to calm down, *Chiquita* , so you can rebuild your barrier and we can leave."

"What was that?" Aloisia demanded in a cracked voice. "What did you do?"

"Conduits aren't the only ones with powers, *Vengadora* ," Diablo said smugly. "I have control over a variety of abilities, but I am not as powerful in my beast form. Didn't you wonder why I wasn't furry and risked the possibility of you seeing my human form? I was afraid you'd need my help. I was right."

"But what happened?" Aloisia repeated shrilly. "What did I feel? Oh God, what was that *pain* ? I've never felt anything like it. What did all that Spanish mean?"

"Calm down, *Chiquita* ," Diablo demanded. "I'm not going to answer you; it's none of your business."

Diablo's fierce tone silenced Aloisia, and she didn't pursue the subject. They sat there in silence until Aloisia's frantically beating heart slowed and she was able to breathe normally. She closed her eyes and drew the power back into her body, building the weak barrier Toby had insisted on teaching her before

they came here. When she opened her eyes she was in complete darkness.

"Diablo?" she asked, slightly frightened.

"It's alright, *Chiquita*," Diablo said softly from above her. He reached down and helped her up. "You're just so used to the light given off by your fire. You'll be fine once we get to the street."

Aloisia was surprised by how weak she was; she had to lean heavily on Diablo's arm just to get out on the street. Once they cleared the rubble, Diablo stopped, helping her lean against the street lamp. He reached a hand out and Aloisia could feel something building around him.

"What are you doing?"

"Could you imagine the fire fighters waking to a burned out house?" he asked, strained. "I'm rekindling a fire. My brand of flames isn't like yours; they'll be able to put these out." There was a roar and the house lit up again. The flames weren't nearly as high or as hot as they had been before.

"Isn't that a little counterproductive?" Alvin questioned, coming up behind them. Toby followed closely.

"Are you ready to leave, Lo?" he asked, looking up to her. Aloisia nodded wearily and he took her hand. His three focusing stones lifted out of his pouch around his neck and started to circle them.

"What's happening?" Alvin asked. Aloisia didn't have chance to answer as there was a flash of light and the street disappeared and was replaced by a small bare room.

Aloisia staggered as Toby let her go. "Wow," she said, putting her arms out to keep her balance, "that feels really weird."

"You'll get used to travelling like that," Toby dismissed. "I'll teach you how to Faze when you're ready."

Aloisia glanced around the cabin-like house she was in. It was small with two doors stemming of the tiny kitchen and living room. "Where is this?"

"This is where they trained me during preparation," Toby answered. "I asked Isaac if I could take you here to ... fight ... Cinder's hold over you. He agreed as long as I took you there by Fazing and didn't tell you where we were."

"Why does that matter?" Aloisia asked as she walked over and opened the door to her left. It revealed a small bathroom.

"Conduits hold their secrets close to heart," Toby replied. Aloisia tried to open the other door but found it locked. Toby waved a hand and the door unlocked with a loud click.

"Dude," Aloisia breathed. The door had led to a large closet filled with various instruments she couldn't name and some very large, leather bound books. There was an old, stale, and musty smell, but Aloisia could feel the remnants of strength; the objects the closet held were powerful.

"You can feel it, can't you?" Toby asked, wheeling himself to her side. "They call to your power; they don't care whether you're an Avenger or not. We'll be using this stuff to train you."

Aloisia hesitated before asking apprehensively, "Exactly what kind of training will I be put through?"

Toby only smiled.

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27.

"Aloisia?" Danielle gripped her in a tight hug. "It's about time you showed your face around your Body! I thought I was going to have to start school without you."

Aloisia laughed, stepping into Danielle's room. She made her way to her friend's bed and sat down wearily. "I couldn't leave you to start junior year by yourself. Please tell me you and Chloe haven't gone school shopping yet. I need something normal to do."

"No, we've waited for you to come back from your surprise vacation trip," Danielle said, making quotation marks in the air. "So, tell me, do you have everything under control?"

Aloisia couldn't help but smile widely as she lifted Danielle in the air and sat her down beside her. "You won't believe everything Toby taught me." The warmth inside sung to her, was never fully contained in a barrier. It was always at her call; a desire to help her. It was as if her power had its own mind. It was hard to believe that she had been a Conduit for a couple of months. It had been the beginning of June when Cinder had changed her life: now August loomed close and school started in the second week of it. Her summer had melted away while she had been trapped in that cabin training relentlessly with her brother. Still, she wouldn't change anything; her power was a part of her now.

"Have you talked to Alvin yet? He's been worried about you."

"You've met the policeman?" Aloisia asked, surprised.

"Yeah; I was introduced to him a couple of weeks ago. He's pretty cool."

"But how did you know..." Aloisia caught Danielle's guilty look and mouthed, "Diablo."

"He said he could help teach me more about your world," Danielle admitted. She covered under Aloisia's glare. "Oh, don't give me that look, Avenger. You were gone and I was lonely."

"And you trusted your safety to a werewolf?" Aloisia demanded. "Dan, didn't I stress to you how dangerous Bloodbanes were?"

"You seemed to trust him," Danielle countered.

"No, I don't," Aloisia said firmly. "My contact with him is strictly out of necessity. Once I kill Cinder, I'll be back to hunting him and his kind."

"I don't believe that," Danielle said. "If you didn't trust him, you wouldn't have let him take me away from you when that youngling came and you wouldn't have allowed him to stay with you when you were trying to put out that fire. Alvin told me all about it."

Aloisia didn't know what she could reply to that. Instead she said, "Well, what all did Diablo teach you?"

Danielle shrugged, trying not to look triumphant. She knew Aloisia well enough to know she had won the argument. "Not much. He taught me some self defense and short-blade techniques."

Aloisia couldn't help her mouth dropping open. "You're kidding."

"Nope." Danielle took a long handled dagger out from beneath her pillow and handed it to her.

Aloisia unsheathed it and studied the blade. She twirled it in her hand skillfully before stopping. "This is a nice dagger," she relented. "It has good balance and it's silver..." Aloisia stopped, tracing her hand down the etched symbols in the blade. Black stones lined the ruins. "Is that onyx?"

Danielle nodded. "Yes. He said he enchanted it himself. He also told me that it was for my defense only. I was to leave the *avenging* to his *Chiquita* ." Danielle was smiling wryly. "He's also got its twin for you."

Aloisia couldn't respond because Danielle's door started to open. She waved her hand and made the blade disappear back under Danielle's pillow before Chloe could see it as she walked in holding a cordless phone. "Lo, I just got off the phone with your father. He wants you home as quickly as possible."

Aloisia nodded. "Thanks, Chloe. I guess I have to go."

"Don't be a stranger, darling," Chloe said smiling. "Both Dan and I missed you while you were gone. Are you coming with us this weekend to shop for school? We've been waiting for you."

"You can definitely count me in," Aloisia assured. She went over and hugged Chloe. "It means a lot to me that you waited."

Chloe returned the hug before Aloisia broke it. "You're welcome, Lo. You know I count you as my own."

"I know." Aloisia stepped out of the room. "I'll come back to visit soon."

She hurried down the stairs and out of the house to her car. She got in, shutting the door behind her.

Toby was waiting in the seat beside her. "Took you long enough," he griped

"You could have come in if you wanted to," Aloisia dismissed.

"Yeah, I could really see me going up their driveway and stairs," Toby said sarcastically.

Aloisia ignored him. "Dad called. He's impatient for us to be home."

"Don't blame him personally. We've been gone over a month and a half."

"It'll be getting dark in a couple of hours." Aloisia said as she pulled out. "He's probably eager for me to start my patrolling again."

"I'm not so sure," Toby said worriedly. "There's something up. He and Verdin have been spending a lot of time together."



"So," Aloisia dismissed. "They've been friends since their Preparation. Of course they're going to spend time together."

"They're up to something," Toby pressed. "Call it a Conduit's inkling."

"You worry too much," Aloisia said lightly. "I'm the psychic, not you."

"You don't worry enough," Toby snapped. "I'm telling you, Aloisia, those two are planning something."

Aloisia laughed. "Come on, Toby, loosen up. I've had nothing but worry for the last little while. For the first time in two months I feel like I might actually have my life under control. I've had enough worries."

Aloisia's smile turned devious. "I plan on celebrating tonight."

"What about your Body?"

Aloisia shrugged. "My Dad has Verdin and if we invite Josiah then we've nothing to worry about."

Toby glanced suspiciously over at her. "What exactly do you have planned?"

Aloisia tried to look innocent but knew she couldn't fool her brother. "You, me, Josiah, Danielle, Asher, and Charlie are going out for a night on the town."

Toby smiled in spite of himself. "Does anyone know of this yet?"

"Nope, it's a plan in progress. I'll tell Dad it's a *Getting Rid of Cinder Shindig*. He'll find it funny."

Toby shook his head and threw her phone to her. "You'd better call the invited. We'll pick them up whenever you want."

"Alright, but I want to go home and change first. I'm starting to get tired of training outfits and pajamas. I want to get dressed up for once."

"Only because you'll be seeing Asher," Toby muttered. It was true. Asher had called her every day, and they had grown close.

Aloisia wisely chose to ignore him. Instead, she turned her music on and sung to herself as she dialed Asher's number. It was the happiest she had been since the beginning of the summer.

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## 28.

Aloisia parked her car near the front of the Main Course and got out, going to the trunk and getting Toby's wheelchair. She opened it up and wheeled it to where Toby was waiting. "Do you see Asher's truck?" Aloisia asked, glancing around the parking lot. "He said they would meet us here."

"No," Danielle answered, getting out beside her. Josiah followed her. "Why didn't we just use your brother's van and pick them up?"

"Asher said it would be easier just to meet them," Aloisia answered, frowning. She glanced around again but didn't see his truck.

"It's about time you showed up," said a voice from behind her. "We thought we'd be eating by ourselves." Aloisia smiled and turned around, hugging Asher as he came up. She watched Danielle kiss Charlie out the corner of her eye.

"Charlie, you've not met my brother Toby and our Dad's friend's son Josiah." Charlie nodded his head in greeting.

"I don't know about you, but I'm ready to eat," Toby said, turning his wheelchair around. He started up the parking lot without waiting for an answer and Josiah followed quickly. Charlie led Danielle away with a hand around her waist, leaving Asher and Aloisia alone.

"It's great to actually be able to talk to you face to face," Asher said, coming closer to where Aloisia stood beside her car.

"Yeah, it is," she agreed, leaning against the hood.

"You look great tonight," he stated.

Aloisia smiled. She had picked the purple and black blouse and denim skirt out carefully. She was glad he liked it. "Thanks. You look nice too." It was an understatement. The dark gold of the shirt he wore brought out the hazelnut yellow hue in his brown eyes and his light brown hair had grown since she had last seen him, coming to rest on his shoulders and shadowing across his face.

"I'm glad you think so," Asher joked lightly. His tone was happy, and Aloisia could tell he was already having a good time.

"What are you thinking about?" Asher asked.

"What?" Aloisia asked, puzzled.

Asher stepped closer, putting a hand on her shoulder. "You always have this serious look on your face."

"I'll loosen up, I promise," she said. "I won't be Atlas tonight."

"I hope so. You should try and have some fun." Asher pushed some of her longer bangs from her face.

"I want to see you happy." Aloisia knew it was coming an instant before it happened. Asher leaned toward her and brushed his lips against hers before leaning back up and glancing almost nervously into her face.

At first she didn't react and Asher reddened in embarrassment. He went to step away when she stopped him by rising on her tiptoes and kissing him on the lips.

"You had me worried there," Asher whispered into her ear as she broke away.

Aloisia laughed. "I wouldn't leave you hanging," she said smartly, tapping his chest. "That wouldn't be ladylike."

Asher rolled his eyes and backed up. "If we don't go in soon, your brother may believe I kidnapped you."

"Good idea; I really am hungry. I haven't eaten since I got home."

Asher reached a hand out and Aloisia didn't hesitate before taking it. Together they started up toward the restaurant. It didn't take them long to find the large table everyone sat at.

"Took you long enough," Danielle teased, raising an eyebrow.

Aloisia shrugged as she sat beside her. Asher sat across the table with his brother, facing her. "Have you already ordered?" she asked, ignoring her friend.

"Yeah, and don't worry, Lo, I took care of you," Danielle answered, smiling at her tactics. "Sirloin tips medium rare?"

Aloisia nodded. "You know me too well."

"I took care of you too," Charlie told Asher. He looked to Aloisia. "He eats the same thing you do, except he likes his meat burnt."

"Charlie," Asher said, turning to face his brother. His voice was low and held the edge of a threat. "That's not funny."

"Sorry," Charlie said, raising his hands in retreat. "I was just joking."

An awkward silence followed while Aloisia glanced between Asher's angry face and Charlie's laughing one. She was confused about Asher's reaction to his brother but didn't say anything as the waitress bustled to their table and began handing drinks out. By the time Aloisia had received her drink and the waitress had left, the uneasy tension had broken and Asher was smiling again. It seemed like nothing had happened. She decided not to comment on it; it was none of her business what the two brothers fought over.

The rest of the meal went well. Aloisia found herself smiling and laughing in a circle of her friends. It was a relief to have conversations that didn't regard how to control her powers, Pyroenchanters, the Heart, or the proper way to kill a Bloodbane. She listened to the music the restaurant played in the background and stole glances at the news on the large screened televisions. She liked the atmosphere of the Main Course. Families surrounded their table in a noisy, bustling sea and the food was delicious, a welcome change from the canned food, Roman noodles, and sandwiches her and Toby had made a living on.

Aloisia started as the waitress set a humongous platter of ice cream in front of her. She glanced around curiously. "But I didn't order..."

"I did," Josiah interrupted. "It seems I owed you an ice cream. A Verdin always fulfils his debts."

"And with style," Danielle complimented. She handed Aloisia a spoon from the pile the waitress had laid in the middle of the table, took one for herself, and then took a bite of the ice cream. "Yum, rocky road."

"There's no way I'm going to finish this," Aloisia said, amused. She took a bite and swallowed. "Anyone else want to help?"

"Sure," Asher said as everyone else shook their heads. He stood and scooted his chair to the other side close to Aloisia.

"Dad says he'll foot the bill for tonight," Josiah said.

Aloisia raised an eyebrow. "You sure? Dad already gave me some money."

"Positive. It's our coming back present. Save your money for when you and Dan go shopping. Shaun told me you do it every year."

"Thanks," Aloisia said after a moment. She was barely able to keep the suspicion out of her voice. It was rare for Josiah to be nice to her, let alone pay for her food. If there was one thing she had learned about the Verdins, Josiah in particular, was that they didn't do anything unless it benefited them.

Josiah smiled at her as he stood and walked away to pay for the food. She tried not to be uneasy as she finished the ice cream off with Danielle and Asher, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she was missing something. Maybe Toby was right about something being up after all.

"What are we going to do now?" Dan asked. She glanced at her silver watch. "It's only ten. I don't want to go home so quickly."

"It's Saturday; the mall doesn't close until eleven-thirty. We could go and hang out in the arcade until it closes," Aloisia suggested. "I haven't been in there to play since the beginning of the summer."

"You're a video game girl?" Charlie asked, surprised.

"You kidding?" Asher said proudly. "You're looking at Clions City Champion in both Metalman and Fist & Blade games."

"Bet I can beat you," Charlie challenged.

Aloisia smiled and spooned the last of her ice cream up. "You're on."

The Main Course was across the road from the mall and they all walked to it quickly. The mall was a bustle of activity and Aloisia recognized many of the teenagers as people she shared classes with. Few nodded their head to her though; she was disliked by most of her classmates. A fact that often puzzled her; she had never done anything to most of them, and it only seemed a natural dislike for her. Not that it mattered; she had her few select acquaintances and the rest she didn't care about one way or another.

Aloisia led the way into the blinking arcade and was instantly assaulted by the wave a noises and music that pervaded from the various videogames.

"Hey, there's the warrior chick! I've not seen you here in ages. I thought you'd forsaken your geeky followers for something better."

Aloisia smiled as Shane came up from behind the counter filled with ticket prizes and walked over there. She returned his high five and followed up by touching her knuckles against his. Shane nodded his head to Danielle and she returned a greeting like Aloisia's. "Never, Shane. I wouldn't abandon my people, for where would you be without me? I see they gave you a job finally."

"Yeah, I'm here so much they thought they might as well pay me for it." He pushed his glasses up the

bridge of his nose. "You've got new comers in your domain," he remarked.

"Oh yeah." Aloisia motioned behind her. "You know my brother, but this is my friend Josiah, Danielle's boyfriend Charlie, and my boyfriend Asher."

"Nice to meet you," Shane said. He didn't waste much time before turning his attention back to Aloisia. "We've got a new Metalman game you need to wear in," he said excitedly. "You need to play; there's a kick ass score that will be hard even for you to beat."

Aloisia raised her eyebrow. "Oh yeah? And who's would that be?"

Charlie cleared his voice behind her. "Mine."

"You can't let that stand," Asher said, putting an arm across her shoulder.

"Don't worry, I won't," Aloisia said cockily. "Shane, lead me to the game."

Shane clapped his hands. "Excellent." He motioned for her to follow him. "You're going to love this game," he told her as he walked beside her. "It's state of the art with a virtual helmet and the game play is all around. The zombies and other monsters come in on all sides and you've only got three lives. It's insane. Only one person has beat it so far. A dude whose high score name was Burn.

"That's me," Charlie said smugly.

"I can handle it," Aloisia said confidently, rolling her eyes. They stopped in front of a raised part of the arcade. A tall neon-green game stood in the center. Hooked to the game was a large helmet suspended in front of the game.

"Impressive," Danielle said from behind her.

"You got that right, and Aloisia gets a free play."

Shane stepped up onto the platform and went to the back part. By the time he had worked in the free game and Aloisia had put the helmet on a small crowd had gathered around them. Shane handed her the gun. It was unattached to the game. "It's new," he explained. "It'll work like a real gun and you've gotta sync it to the game before it starts. You've only got so many bullets, understand?" Aloisia nodded and he continued, "Head shots are worth the most points and you lose points if you miss."

Aloisia raised a hand to silence Shane. "I've got it, dude." She focused her attention back on the game that had begun. After a brief shooting exercise that tested what level she should start—the highest of course—the game started, plunging Aloisia into a sea of computerized monsters.

The graphics were good and it took Aloisia a moment to gain her bearings. She entered her shooting stance, perfectly balanced on the tall heels of her boots. The game started quickly, not giving her a chance to warm up and the monsters plagued her. She didn't panic, and only sighted down the end of her gun. When the helmet vibrated in the back she realized it was a warning that something was behind her, and she was delighted to find the game turned the way she did. She went through level after level until she defeated the final boss. There was a cheer as she lifted the helmet off. She realized that a screen hanging high on the wall above her had displayed her progress.

"Nice," Asher complimented, helping her down off the platform. "You burned Charlie up."

Charlie clapped her shoulder. "No worries," he said lightly. "Maybe one day I'll get the chance to burn you back."

"Try it," Aloisia challenged.

Charlie opened his mouth when Asher interjected quickly, "It's not long until the mall closes." He shot his brother a look. "We should leave."

"Charlie's going to take me home, Lo," Danielle said, draping an arm through the crook of hers. "I called mom and told her while you were kicking monster ass."

Aloisia patted her shoulder. "Alright. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Thanks for taking me out," Danielle said, "and thanks more for not bailing on us. It was a pleasant change."

Danielle was led away by Charlie as Aloisia waved.

"We'll meet you back at the car," Toby said raising an eyebrow toward Josiah. Josiah caught the hint and nodded his head in agreement.

"Your brother's smooth," Asher commented as they watched Toby lead Josiah out.

Aloisia couldn't help but laugh as she took Asher's hand and led him out, pausing to wave at Shane as they passed him.

"Have you ever shot a gun before?" Asher asked as they exited the cool mall. The summer air was warm and felt good against Aloisia's skin.

Aloisia hesitated before saying, "Yeah, my Dad taught me how to shoot a gun when I was around eight."

"Really?" Asher asked. For some reason, he didn't sound surprised. "Most dads don't let their children around guns."

"His reasoning was if I knew how to handle one, I wouldn't be tempted to blow my head off when he wasn't watching. He's always been careful about that kind of thing. Sometimes we shoot targets for fun."

"Well, you're really good," Asher complimented. "I know a little about guns myself, and you had an impeccable shooting stance. You rarely missed either, and most of the kills were head shots."

"Thanks," Aloisia said, glad the night was hiding her blush.

"I learn more about you every day and you are constantly surprising me. You're so self dependent and defensive; I'd never took you for an artist, poet, or writer. It's like two ends of a spectrum, and you're both. Honestly, is there anything you can't do?"

Aloisia shrugged uneasily, almost wishing she hadn't told him that she liked to draw and write. Only Toby, Danielle, and her English teacher knew besides him. It was special to her and she kept it close to her heart, like she would a weakness. She could only imagine how the other Heart members would react to it, especially Josiah. The thought alone made her shiver. "Cook," she said finally. "I can't cook worth

shit."

Asher laughed. "At least you're honest."

They crossed the road quickly and Aloisia walked with Asher to his black truck. Asher kissed her briefly on the lips before getting in. Aloisia watched him drive away.

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## 29.

Aloisia stood in front of her open car door, strapping the familiar weapons to her body. She tied her jacket to her waist and shut the door, turning to where Josiah was putting his weapons on beside her. He had a hip holster with two guns and a belt of knives similar to Aloisia's. Two long daggers hung from his thighs in a crisscross of belts. "Ready?" she asked impatiently.

"Are you sure you don't want to go back and change?" griped Josiah. He glanced down at Aloisia's skirt and heels, but Aloisia shook her head.

"We're not going to be out patrolling too long tonight. I just want to run a quick scan through the park," Aloisia said. "There's no point. By the time we get back we might as well stay. Besides, I'm fine. I've fought in worse."

"Really?"

"School spring fling. I was in a light green evening gown when a vampire decided to try and kill me on my way home. All I had was a few micro blades and a cross on. I had even left my sword at home."

Josiah smiled at her story. "I love hearing about other Avenger's hunts. What did you do?"

"Stabbed him with the tip of my cross. I lost my favorite necklace because of him."

"Bet your dress was ruined too."

"Nope," Toby said from behind Aloisia. "She still has it in her closet saved for when she might need it again." He looked up to Aloisia. "I'll see you when you come back. Patrolling is no place for a Conduit." Aloisia nodded and stood back as Toby's focusing stones left their pouch and circled him three times and he disappeared in a flash of red light. Josiah shivered beside her.

"What's the matter, Josiah?" Aloisia asked, walking away from the car. He hurried to catch up to her.

"I've never liked Conduit powers," Josiah answered. "They make me uneasy."

"Why? It's never bothered me. I actually find them useful now and again." Aloisia blinked and amended quickly, "Toby's a lot of help when it comes to killing Bloodbanes."

"They're just not natural. I've met and killed a lot of Bloodbanes that shared the same powers as my uncle Isaac. It's made me wonder the difference between them and him."

"The difference?" Aloisia asked, confused. "Josiah, the difference is that they're Heart members that help us. They are our family and friends."

"Are those the only differences?"

Aloisia stopped walking, pausing Josiah with a hand. She glanced into his shadowed face. The almost full moon lit their path through the park, but his face was shielded from its light by the overhanging branches of the trees that lined the pavement. It made it difficult for her to read his expression. "Isn't that enough?" Aloisia demanded fiercely. "Isn't the fact they share a Blood Tear brand on their back enough to earn trust and loyalty from the other Classes?"

"Calm down, Aloisia," Josiah said, "I didn't mean anything by what I said. I don't think any less of Conduits than the other Classes. I love my uncle and I have Conduit friends. I'm just wary around their power is all."

Aloisia didn't answer him. A flurry of movement behind him had caught her eye. "Move," she said quickly, shoving him to the side as a furred body streaked past them. Josiah stumbled backward and fell, hitting his head on a stone beside a tree root. He didn't move as the werewolf skidded to a stop and turned around to face Aloisia. Alien, sea green eyes peered out from its mane of black fur. She threw the knife from her right wrist sheath and it imbedded into the shoulder above its heart. It didn't react as it rushed toward her, its face twisted into a wild snarl.

"No, *Chiquita*, don't kill her," Diablo exclaimed, coming between her and the charging werewolf. He shoved her backward, making her stumble, as he turned and wrestled the beast to the ground and held it there with a hand.

"What the hell, Diablo?" Aloisia said, sheathing her other knife.

"She's a newly bitten," he explained in his growling voice. "She's only been a werewolf for about a week. She lost control."

"Diablo, it's my job to kill her," Aloisia said hesitantly, glancing down at the captive werewolf. It struggled vainly to get out of Diablo's grip. "What if she loses control again?"

"She won't," a voice behind her said. Sangre walked up to stand beside Diablo. "We'll protect her."

"I can't just let you leave with her," Aloisia said, fingering a knife handle nervously. She turned to the side so she could watch the vampire. The movement gave Diablo her back. "She's a danger to humans."

"Not once I help her learn control she won't be," countered Diablo. She didn't turn around to watch him. "Why is it so hard for you to believe we have a right to live just as humans do?" Sangre came to stand beside the werewolf, Aloisia watching him intently, and spoke in a low voice to him. Diablo nodded and looked down to where he was holding the smaller struggling werewolf effortlessly. He yanked her knife from its shoulder, throwing it to the ground. He let it go slowly and ran his other hand down its spine before it could react to being released. The werewolf dropped to the ground with a growl as it began to convulse. Bones splintered and broke underneath the undulating, shrinking skin. The hair fell away from the naked body, fading as it touched the ground. A young girl that barley looked ten lay on the ground in a shaking fetal position.

"Diablo?" She asked shrilly, glancing around. She sat up slowly and Aloisia had never seen such a terrified expression. She struggled to her knees, holding a hand to her bleeding shoulder. Lines of silver



poison were arching across her pale skin, spreading past the wound and down her arm and up her neck.  
“Diablo, what happened, where am I? What am I doing here? Did I hurt anyone?”

Diablo bent down and picked her up awkwardly, leaning forward on his back legs and using his tail to keep balanced. The girl clutched tightly to him. “Well, *Vengadora*,” Diablo asked vehemently, cradling the terrified girl in his massive, furred arms. “Can you kill her now? Avenge a dead woman who would have died to save her?”

Aloisia took a step back as Diablo turned away from her and waved a hand over the bleeding shoulder. It healed almost immediately, and the silver lines dissipated, leaving her completely unmarked. He laid the shivering girl in Sangre's waiting arms. The vampire covered her up with a bit of his cloak. “Sangre will take you home and stay with you until I come back,” Diablo said. “Calm down or you'll change again, alright?” The girl nodded and Diablo pushed her black hair away from face. “Don't worry, you'll learn to control your changes. You didn't hurt anyone this time. Just go home and rest.” He brushed a claw through her hair. “*Adios y buenos noches, mi flora delicante.*” Sangre disappeared in a dark cloud of mist and Diablo turned back to face Aloisia angrily. His expression softened as he glanced at her terrified expression.

Silence fell on them until Diablo finally said, “*Chiquita*, it isn't what it seems.”

“How could you?” Aloisia demanded heatedly. She couldn't stop the tears from leaking from eyes. Josiah groaned softly, starting to stir. Aloisia struck out carefully with her power, knocking him out again. She wanted to deal with Diablo alone. She was so angry that her power bled into her, trying to comfort her. She embraced it, and the warmth flowed along her skin in the form of gold and purple flames. “She's so young, you bastard.”

Diablo pointed a claw at her. “*Uno momento, Vengadora,*” he growled, his voice as angry as Aloisia's. “Don't go Pyroenchantress on me. This wasn't my doing.”

“Then whose was it?” Aloisia challenged. “And where is he?”

“His name was Dustin and I hope he's burning in hell,” Diablo answered. “Can I tell you what happened without you setting my ass on fire?”

Aloisia let out a deep angry breath and drew her power in. She was back to normal in moments. “I'm all ears.”

“There was a rogue werewolf in your Body that wreaked havoc for over two weeks until Nikolas found and killed him eight days ago. He got there before I could; Sangre and I had been hunting for him all night. He killed almost ten people, but the worst I saw was the small car crashed on the edge of Clions City. Only pieces of her parents were left.” Diablo stopped for a moment before he continued slowly, “I followed her scent to an old condemned building on Milan Street. Nikolas had got there before me and he'd had the pleasure of killing the monster.”

Diablo fell silent again and Aloisia thought he wasn't going to say anything else. His anger had left him and his sadness pervaded the air around him, almost choking her. He lowered himself to the ground, his shoulder hunched. His ears lay against this head and he heaved a strangled sigh that ruffled Aloisia's skirt. “Nikolas may have beaten me, but he still hadn't been quick enough to save her life. That demon had broken her—he didn't only bite her, *Chiquita*. I saved her from Verdin. He was going to kill her.” Diablo rose up again and looked at Aloisia fiercely. “He was going to look into that traumatized and terrified girl's eyes and shoot her down like some animal. I saved her and healed her with your mother's

amulet. She's been with me and Sangre since then."

"Who is she?" Aloisia asked faintly.

Diablo shrugged. "She doesn't tell us much about where she came from. All I know is her first name is Isabel ... and she likes to be called Izzy."

"What are you going to do with her?"

Diablo shook his head. "I don't know, Aloisia. Most Bloodbanes wouldn't have anything to do with her. It's hard enough for us to survive on our own without taking in a dependent, but I couldn't leave her alone. Your amulet was able to heal her outward wounds, but Dustin shattered her on the inside too. The only thing I can think to do now is to teach her how to control her new changes and abilities and maybe find some of her family for her."

"You don't know anything about her?"

"I know she likes to read and Chinese is her favorite food," Diablo said. "She's a science junkie, and so smart. I've taken her to the library where she studies lycanthropy." Diablo shook his head and laughed a low, growling laugh. "She's sweet and funny and just a wonderful person. She reminds me of Annamaria." He stopped abruptly.

Aloisia blinked at Diablo's enduring tone and his sudden silence. "Annamaria? Who's that?"

Diablo hesitated before answering quietly, "*Mi hermana*, my sister. She was eleven when she got sick and died. Even with my powers, I was unable to save her. It tore my family apart. That was when I left Mexico with Sangre." His tone turned fierce. "I may not have been able to save her, but I'll be damned if I don't save Izzy."

Josiah groaned again, bringing Aloisia's attention back to the world around her. "We need to speak without an audience tonight, Aloisia," Diablo said. "Take the bastard's son home and Faze back to the fountain. Your brother did teach you Fazing?"

Aloisia hesitated before nodding. "I'll come back." Josiah moved his head slowly.

Diablo looked back down at his stirring figure. "If I was you, *Chiquita*, I'd kill him."

"Kill him?"

"He smells evil, Aloisia. He smells like his father—cold and ruthless, but his scent is a lot stronger. Does it surprise you that Verdin wanted to murder innocent Isabel?"

Aloisia suppressed a shiver of fear as she glanced down at Josiah's stirring form. Lately, a darker side of the Heart had been revealed to her. She knew Diablo was right about Josiah, but she wouldn't kill him. She stood there remembering what he had said about Conduits, knowing one day he would lead the society that controlled her life. "No," she whispered. "No that doesn't surprise me at all."

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"Are you sure you want to go back to the park?" Toby asked. "Diablo's got you really upset. Maybe you should take time to calm down before meeting with him again."

Aloisia shook her head. "No, Toby. I don't want to wait. Besides, it isn't Diablo that's upset me."

"And that's what troubling within itself," Toby whispered.

Aloisia nodded sadly, pacing her room like a caged tiger. Toby knew her well enough to read her mind.

It upset her that Diablo, a Bloodbane she had been trying to kill for almost two years, had more compassion than the leader of the society she had served faithfully her entire life. What was worse was that she found herself thinking of Diablo less as an enemy. He wasn't her friend, but she couldn't help but trust him at her back. He had helped her when she had put out the fire and he had had plenty of opportunities to hurt her, Alvin, and Danielle throughout the last few months.

Izzy's frightened form kept invading her mind. Diablo had stopped her from killing the child, but what if he hadn't? What if she would have had to watch Isabel's terrified eyes die? She had never hesitated in killing Bloodbanes ... they were evil. But how could she continue to believe that if she trusted a werewolf more than her own fellow Avengers? And she did; she would never willingly give Josiah or Nikolas her back. It made her sick when she remembered how easily she had turned her back to Diablo to watch the vampire. The werewolf could have killed her. Once her father had been the only one she trusted completely, and now Diablo seemed to be sharing his spot. The thought terrified her.

"How do you know Diablo wasn't lying?" Toby asked, breaking her out of her deep thoughts.

"If you could have only seen him," Aloisia said distantly. She was reliving what happened and Toby seemed far away. "He was so gentle with her, and so sad and angry. I've never seen anything like it. Toby, I could just ... feel ... that he was telling the truth. Besides, Verdin mentioned something about a rogue werewolf when I asked about my Body tonight."

"Your mind is unsettled," Toby said, "and your powers are reacting to it. There are swells of energy coming off of you. Isaac could sense something. Your shielding can only go so far with someone as powerful as he is. You need to be careful." He paused before saying, "In my heart I'm nervous about Diablo; I wish we had never got caught up with him, but now we are, and he's got you questioning yourself. Doubt doesn't look good on you, Aloisia, and you need to resolve this. Maybe you do need to speak to him tonight."

Aloisia nodded, stopping in the middle of her pacing. "You're right," she said resolutely. She fished the purple silk pouch from her pocket and spilled her three focusing stones out into the floor. They began to spin the instant they hit the dark wooden planks.

"You've never travelled this far by Fazing yourself," Toby said. "Concentrate and don't let your mind wander."

"Toby, don't worry," Aloisia reassured lightly. "I've got this. You taught me well." The three stones gave a final sharp revolution around her and Aloisia felt a tight, clenching sensation around her chest. Her eyesight was overtaken by a blinding flash of violet light. When her vision cleared she could see the fountain. She went to it and sat at the edge of it, dipping her hand into the cool water. She listened to the calming sound of the water hitting the stone as she waited for Diablo to show up.

"*Hola, Chiquita*," he said, coming down the path. Aloisia started and glanced up at the hooded man that walked down the way.

"Took you long enough," Aloisia griped. "I've been waiting almost a half an hour."

"Oh, poor *Vengadora*," Diablo smarted.

Aloisia ignored him. "Why are you in human form?"

"It's easier to talk this way," he answered. "Somehow, don't ask me how, but the wolf teeth and muzzle makes it difficult to speak."

"It's never stopped your smart mouth," Aloisia observed, raising an eyebrow.

Diablo shrugged, sitting down beside her. "Only God himself could shut me up."

"Or a well placed enchanted silver knife," Aloisia muttered, looking into the hood of the man sitting beside her. He was sitting so close their shoulders grazed, but she still could only see blackness inside his hood. "Why can't I see you face?"

Diablo laughed. "I know you're eager to see just how handsome I am, *Chiquita*, but I am not stupid. It doesn't take much energy to influence the shadows to hide in, or didn't Toby teach you that?"

"Why did you want me here?" Aloisia asked, aggravated.

"I need to talk to you," Diablo said seriously. "You need to listen to me, alright?"

Aloisia nodded. "Fine, Diablo. I'm all ears."

"Sangre and I are leaving your Body when Cinder is killed," Diablo said. "We're taking Izzy and leaving."

Aloisia blinked, surprised. She glanced back into his hood, trying hard to see some kind of expression, but she saw only blackness. "Why do you think I care?" she asked finally, her breath catching in her chest.

"You don't?" Diablo wondered wryly.

Aloisia looked away and shrugged. "Not really, but it does surprise me." She tried to sound casual. "Why are you leaving?"

"Sangre and I have stayed too long here. There are things we need to do, things I need to prepare."

"Prepare?" Aloisia asked suspiciously. "Prepare for what, werewolf?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Diablo countered, laughing. "I won't tell you, Aloisia. Trust me though, I have no ill intentions toward you or the *true* Heart, on that you have my honor. Besides, sooner or later you will hear of it and be glad for it when the inevitable time comes."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That's all you'll get me to say for now, *Chiquita*," Diablo answered cryptically. "You'll learn more of it later on. Just because we're leaving doesn't mean we're staying gone. You'll see us again."

"Damn, and when I thought I was rid of you."

"You don't mean that, I can tell."

Aloisia laughed sarcastically. "You don't know how wrong you are, doggie boy. My life would be so much less complicated if you and your vampire lackey were out of it."

"I guess so," Diablo growled lightly, his voice cutting. "Who would be your conscience then? Who would be here to make you question your precious Heart and open you to their lies? I don't kid myself, *Chiquita*, I know how they've indoctrinated you and I know that what little progress I've made with you will unravel while I am gone. It'll only make my job harder."

"Progress? What progress?" Aloisia demanded heatedly.

"You see me as more than a werewolf, and don't deny that, Aloisia," he said as she opened her mouth. "I can smell lies, and let me tell you something else, I can sense emotions as well. Powerful werewolves can discern feelings from scents. For the last little while you've been able to trust me."

Aloisia didn't retort. For a moment she didn't say anything. Finally, she let a deep sigh out and blew her bangs away from her face. "So how long am I free of you?"

"I don't know. A month, a year, a decade; I'll come when I'm needed."

Aloisia didn't pursue the subject. Instead, she asked, "How is Isabel doing? I could have killed her."

"She is still shaken, but she is better."

"What caused her to change like that?"

"A nightmare," Diablo answered bitterly. "She was dreaming about Dustin."

Aloisia lapsed into silence, staring out across the shadowed park. There was something pressing on her mind; it had been bothering her since she had seen Isabel. She hesitated before finally asking, "Diablo, why didn't Verdin try to heal her? I know he probably hadn't been carrying a silver pendant, but he could have pressed an enchanted blade to the bite until he got her home. For that matter, why didn't you heal her?"

"Bite? Aloisia, Izzy wasn't just bitten, she was maimed." Aloisia could almost touch the remorse in his voice. "She was lucky to even be alive when Verdin found her. There wasn't much left of her that didn't bear his mark and not an inch of her was clean of her blood. Besides, by the time he had found her she had begun to change."

"Already?" Aloisia asked disbelievingly. "Only really powerful werewolves can change without the full moon, even if they lose control."

"Do you even know what dictates a werewolf's strength, *Chiquita*?"

Aloisia shook her head. "No. The Heart only taught me how to kill them ... no offence."

"There are four things that influence power. One is how powerful you were before you were bitten—not your physical strength, but your personality and character. Another is how strong the werewolf that bit you was. The most important contributors, though, are how violent the attack was and how much you fight back. Dustin was powerful; he had to be to change that far from the full moon, and Izzy is a very dominant, headstrong girl. It was part of the reason she was so messed up. He probably would have killed her along with her parents if she hadn't fought back so much. You can imagine how all this has made her very strong. Werewolf abilities rely entirely on emotions, and she was beyond hysterical when Verdin found her. I got there to the back of the building only moments after he did. I watched to see if he would help; he'd have been more able to take care of her than I would."

"So you waited to see if he would help her?" Aloisia asked, making sure she understood what he was saying. She was trying to match his story with Verdin's, but he hadn't even mentioned a young girl.

"Yes, I didn't rush in there foolishly claws bared. I stayed hidden and watched. Izzy was collapsed in a corner, sobbing. What little the bastard had left of her clothes had been bloodstained and shredded. When she had looked up, it had been like looking into a bloodied mess of meat with eyes. She watched Verdin walk up to her and somehow she managed to stop crying, and she begged him to help her. *Chiquita*, she begged him to take her to the hospital and get someone to help her parents. At first, Verdin didn't move and I thought he might help her. Then he raised his gun. Izzy shook her head and started screaming. She tried to get up and run, but the changes were already starting, and she collapsed again. I barely made it in time to push Verdin's gun to the side as he shot at her. I knocked the gun out of his hand and shoved him against the wall, knocking him out."

Diablo shook his head angrily. "I'll be honest with you, *Chiquita*, I wish I had killed him. I truly do. I regret not doing it, and believe me I had the chance. He wouldn't have spared the same mercy on me. I should have, but all my attention was on the changing girl. I hurried to her and had to hold her down to calm her. When she had seen me she had went hysterical again. It took a lot to convince her I wasn't a bad guy."

Aloisia stood and started to pace the length of the fountain. Diablo fell silent and watched her for a moment. "Are you alright?" he asked finally.

Aloisia stopped and turned her back on the standing werewolf so she wouldn't have to see him. "No, damn it, I'm not," she exclaimed vehemently. "I don't understand how a werewolf can show more compassion than an Avenger. It just doesn't make sense."

"*Chiquita*, I was once human, you know," Diablo said softly. "I was seventeen when I was bitten two years ago. Being a werewolf hasn't made me any less humane whether you'd like to believe it or not. Some people it does change; werewolves are aggressive and dominant by nature, but I stayed the same."

Aloisia couldn't help the trickle of tears that escaped from her eyes. "What does that make me then? A murderer?"

"Honestly, most of the Bloodbanes in your Body are evil and deserve to be killed, like Michael and his kiss. I won't say that all of the Bloodbanes you have killed were evil, because I won't lie, not to you." His voice was low. "Never to you."

"So I am a murderer then."

Diablo put a hand on her shoulder and she fought not to shrug it off. "We've all done things we're not

proud of. I'm not an innocent soul either. I've done plenty I wish I could take back. Just don't let the Heart swallow you, *Chiquita*. It isn't the white saint that its members think it is. Don't trust the Verdin family; they hold a dark secret. The Pyroenchancers..." Diablo hesitated. "They know more about them than you think; you need to be careful around the Society. Watch your family closely because they aren't loyal to you, they are loyal to the Heart. Only your brother Toby seems trustworthy. Trust in yourself, *Vengadora*, and go with your own gut instincts."

Aloisia let out a shuddering breath and wiped away her tears. Her face was stony and blank as she turned around and faced Diablo. His hand left her shoulder. "You never have tried to kill me, have you?"

Diablo laughed. "No, but it's fun to start a fight with you. I'm going to miss it." He fished a hand into his cloak and brought out a dagger in a long sheath. Aloisia stiffened immediately, but didn't go into her fighting stance as he reached it out to her. "I'm sure Danielle told you that I had a gift for you. She's got its twin. I like your friend; she's good for you, and she cares a lot about you."

"I know," Aloisia said as she took the dagger from him and unsheathed it. "This is a really good blade." She fingered the edge of the blade. "This almost looks Heart made."

"It is. Take good care of it, and make sure Danielle doesn't lose its mate. These weapons are special to me and they have a lot of history."

"Then why are you giving them away?"

"I don't need them anymore," Diablo said, sighing. "They have a lot of memories I need to forget. I can't hold onto the past forever."

Aloisia looked up in surprise. "I would give a lot to know more about you," she said. "How did you come across a Heart weapon? Why did you leave Mexico and how did you meet Sangre? What was that vision I had about? For that matter, what's your real name?"

"It's quite a story to tell," Diablo said, amused, "but not one for your ears yet." His voice turned serious as he said, "You won't be seeing me again, *Chiquita*. I'm laying low until we leave. More than my life's at stake now if the other Avengers find me. No matter what, I won't get Izzy killed, even if it means murdering a Vein. Whatever we have to say to each other will be said through Alvin."

There was something in Diablo's voice that Aloisia couldn't discern. It was sad and regretful, but there was another emotion underlined in his tone. "What are you thinking about Diablo?"

"Can't tell without a face to read can you?" Diablo held out a hand. "Shake hands with me, *Vengadora*. I don't want us to depart company as enemies. You can be friends and allies with Bloodbanes and not lose your honor. Make peace with your confusion."

Aloisia hesitated before placing her hand in his. His hand swallowed hers, the dark tan of his skin contrasting with her pale tone. His grip was strong, and she could feel his inhuman strength pressing against her. It was then she realized how powerful he really was. His power constricted the air around him and she could feel the strong aura that he exuded. Her father had been wrong in telling Verdin he was just a nuisance. Diablo could be a dangerous threat to the Heart if he wanted to be, and she was shaking hands with him.

Diablo raised her hand toward his hood and her throat caught. "Such small hands for so strong a warrior," he said softly, kissing the top of her hand and letting her go.

Aloisia couldn't find her voice at first. She cleared her voice and said quickly, "Since you're leaving, do I get my mother's pendant back?"

Diablo laughed. "No, I still have use of it. Maybe one day you will wear it again. Until then, I'll take good care of it."

Aloisia sighed. "Fine, you damn fur ball. It's not like I can take it from you anyway."

Diablo laughed again. "I promise one day I'll return it to you." He paused before saying. "But for now I must leave. *Adios, Chiquita*."

"Good bye, Diablo." Aloisia bit her lip as she made herself continue, "Thank you for helping me with my fire and protecting Danielle."

"It was nothing." He bent down and whispered in her ear, "For what it's worth, you look beautiful tonight. It's nice to see you outside warrior garb, albeit the weapons. Trust me, *Chiquita*, I will be back to bother you again. Until then though, Avenge the might of good, Seek the Truth, and may Zâintili's will be done." He then kissed her cheek and faded away in wisps of shadows before Aloisia could say anything. She stared at where he had been, a hand on her cheek.

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### 31.

Aloisia threw her backpack down on the cafeteria table and sat down wearily. "Three periods and I already have homework."

"That's what you get for taking all the honor classes with me," Danielle said, sitting down beside her. "I bet Avenging really makes it hard for you to finish your schoolwork."

"Yeah, it'll be harder this year; I've taken over almost all patrolling since becoming the main Avenger, and somehow I have a feeling that we'll have more homework this year."

"What was your first clue?" Danielle asked dryly. "Mrs. Mincin laughing maniacally or Mr. Saners promising to make our junior year hell?"

"Neither. Toby told me his junior year was almost as bad as his Preparation," Aloisia said, grimacing.

Danielle made a face that matched hers. "That bad?"

"He's happy to be a senior."

"That makes me feel confident," Danielle mumbled.

"Hey, at least I have a genius for a friend that'll help me get everything finished," Aloisia said, her voice hopeful.

Danielle raised an eyebrow. "I don't know," she said. "I might help with the math and science classes if



my English and Spanish whiz helps me with my Spanish and essays."

Aloisia nodded. "It's a deal."

Danielle laughed. A couple of people passed where they had sat down. They nodded to Danielle, but most of them ignored Aloisia. She paid them no mind. "Do you want to go get some school slop?" Danielle asked.

"Sure, I guess." Aloisia stood and followed Danielle through the sea of tables. They had left their backpacks behind; nobody ever messed with their things.

"Do Charlie and Asher share this lunch?" Danielle asked, her voice rose slightly to be heard over the raucous teenager voices.

"I don't know," Aloisia answered, straitening her dragon locket and rearranging her net gloves underneath her spike bracelets.

Danielle noticed her and shook her head, smiling wryly. "Have you even got in trouble for that outfit? I was sure some teacher would be on your case as soon as you entered the building."

Aloisia shook her head. "Nope. I've gotten some looks, but, hey, what else is new?" Aloisia had a black shirt that dipped low and fit to her body snugly. There was a red rose trailing up the front, the petals spreading across her chest and ending across the collar and short triangle sleeves. The back was sheer and her Blood Tear peeked out from beneath the material. Her cargo pants were a dark maroon with black lace around the hem of her pockets and straps. Chains hung from the straps and she wore fish net gloves on her hands that were kept in place with silver studded bands. She had gotten her hair trimmed and streaked with dark red and light purple streaks. Her makeup was dark, but not heavily applied. Personally, she thought she looked kick ass.

Normally, she wore more understated clothes at school to avoid too much attention, but after the summer she thought it kind of pointless. She was the youngest of the best known family in Clions and almost everyone thought she was being abused. Considering the fights she got into with the few Bloodbane wannabes in the school and the rumors that were always circulated by the prissies she couldn't escape attention regardless of how she dressed. She might as well dress for the part that she had been given. Besides, she liked the outfit and it made it easier to hide the few weapons she smuggled into school.

Aloisia opened her mouth to comment about Danielle's own blue blouse and jean combo when she was interrupted by a girl stepping in front of them in line and tapping Danielle's shoulder.

"I haven't seen you since last school year, Danny," she said, smiling widely and shaking her long blond hair out of her face. "Did you hide away in a book all summer?"

"Hey, Makayla," Danielle said. "How was your summer?"

Makayla shrugged. "Boring. Yours?"

"Eventful," Danielle answered, but Makayla wasn't really listening. Instead she leaned forward and said quietly, "Have you seen the new hotties?" She had whispered it, but Aloisia's sharp hearing had caught it despite the girl's effort to keep her from the conversation.

"Hotties?" Aloisia asked, coming closer as everyone moved up in the line. She loved intruding on the conversations Makayla always had with Danielle; it was amusing to watch her reaction. Later, her and Danielle would laugh about it.

Makayla glanced her way, her nose drawn up. "Yeah, there are two new boys that all the girls are swooning over. I have them both in first period and I must say they are hot." She fanned herself dramatically before continuing, "Most of the girls are practically throwing themselves at their feet, and they won't give them the time of day. Of course, I haven't degraded myself." She giggled. "Yet."

"It won't take you too long, though," Aloisia smarted.

Makayla hadn't heard her though. Her mouth had dropped open and she was unconsciously straitening her pink shirt. "Oh my God, here he comes."

Aloisia didn't have enough time to turn around before someone grabbed her around the waist, making her jump and squeal. She turned to see Asher standing behind her. She laughed and slapped his arm. "Damn it, you scared me."

"So I noticed," Asher commented. "You mind if I jump line with you?" He bent down and gave her a light kiss on the lips.

"As long as it isn't made a habit," Aloisia stated. She glanced back to where Makayla was staring open mouthed at her. "Oh, Makayla," she said, grinning widely. "This is Asher. He and his brother just moved to Clions this summer."

"Speaking of Charlie, does he have this lunch too?" Danielle asked.

Asher nodded. "He's setting our stuff beside yours and Danielle's."

"How'd you know which backpacks were ours?"

"The large *I'm a smartass, deal with it* pin on your backpack was a good clue."

"Shaun got that for me," Aloisia said. "He told me that it just screamed that I should have it."

"Your brother knows you well."

Aloisia shook her head. "I just try to make it painfully obvious."

"Where did you guys move from?" Makayla asked, breaking into the conversation. Charlie came up and Aloisia waved as he passed her and stopped beside Danielle.

"We've moved around a lot lately," Asher answered, "but we stayed a couple of months in Colorado before finally coming here."

"Why'd you guys move so much?" Danielle asked, leaning into Charlie.

"Our uncle couldn't find work anywhere," Charlie answered, resting a chin on Danielle's head. "Finally, one of his friends tipped us that we can find what we were looking for here."

"Are you glad you moved here?" Makayla asked as they moved up with the line. They had nearly

reached the trays.

Asher smiled and it seemed to warm Aloisia. "I believe so."

"Well, welcome to Clions High," Makayla simpered.

"Thanks," Asher said, glancing over to her. He turned away and rolled his eyes at Aloisia, sticking his tongue out. It made Aloisia laugh. Nobody said anything else as they got their food and left the line. Together they sat at the small table Aloisia had picked earlier, Asher scooting his chair close to hers.

"Do you like Clions so far?" Aloisia asked him, picking at her limp, dull green salad. "You've had a few months to decide whether you're going to be miserable here or not."

Asher shrugged. "Well, no matter what I'm not going to be miserable here." He placed a hand on hers. "It's alright for a city, I guess. I prefer more open areas myself. The buildings close in around me sometimes."

"I know what you mean. I'm glad we live past the suburbs."

"What class do you two have next?" Danielle interrupted.

Asher fished a piece of paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and made a face as he read, "Advanced English Lit and Writing. *That* sound like a lot of fun."

"That's our next class," Aloisia said. "We'll show the new boys around."

"If it isn't too much a bother," Charlie said sarcastically.

Aloisia rolled her eyes, taking a bite of her food. "Your brother thinks himself funny."

"You've no idea," Asher murmured. He glanced across the table to where Danielle sat close to Charlie and teased him. He frowned, shaking his head.

"Asher?" Aloisia put a hand on his shoulder. "What's the matter?"

Asher looked back toward her. "Nothing," he said, snapping back to attention. "I was just thinking."

"Now who looks like Atlas?" Aloisia asked worriedly. "Do you want to talk about anything?"

Asher sighed. "No. I'm alright, really. It's just the first day of school blues, I guess."

Aloisia didn't press him as she nodded and turned to her food again. It wasn't long before the bell rang and they headed to class. Mrs. Rivens greeted her happily; she was her favorite teacher and she'd had her since she was a freshman. After delivering the few poems and drawings she had managed to work on over the summer she sat down. Mrs. Rivens took a while to start class.

"Good evening students," she said, smiling. The class quieted down and she continued, "I hope you've had a good summer." She glanced down at the roster on the podium. "It seems we have only two new faces I don't know. Asher, Charlie, my name is Mrs. Rivens." The teacher shut her book with a hand and walked to the board. Mrs. Rivens was young with a round face and expressive gray eyes. Her dark blond hair was short and curly and she was shorter than most of her students. Despite her small

appearance, she had no problem controlling her class.

"No doubt you expect to start slow, considering the fact we just started school today after a long summer." Mrs. Rivens laughed. "But you should know me better than that. We have too much to do to be idle."

There was a collective groan as she wrote the word Poetry in large, flowing letters on the board. "I always like to start with something fun," she said lightly. She went and picked up a sheet of paper that Aloisia noticed with a start was her black and red fairy stationary from her journal. "I also like to start with an example of what I'm going to teach. I tend to stray from famous writers at first to make it more interesting, and I am lucky to have just come across an exceptionally moving and emotional poem written by someone I know will be famous one day. It's called *Mother's Wish* ." She cleared her voice and began:

"She lies broken, hapless, distorted, her back bowed.

Defeated.

I reach to help, frozen by Flame while she screams and writhes.

I am the Huntress.

Hiding my sins by the cloak of night.

Stars my only witness.

Conflicted my soul, danger, my life, despite my strength I could not save her.

How can the Damned redeem?

How can the Helpless aid?

How can the Confused decide?

No matter my conflictions

I am honor bound, the Burning Rose in my love confined, to cloak my sins in night and help, because I am the Huntress.

Despite my weary, scorched

Body,

I will fight, my desire for revenge unquenchable,

I shelter her from the devouring flames

While we burn..."

There was silence after the poem was read before Mrs. Rivens broke it by saying, "I thought it both entrancing and beautiful, but horribly sad." The teacher pierced Aloisia with a questioning gaze as she

spoke, but Aloisia kept her expression plain and looked down, pretending to write something down in her notebook.

The class passed quickly as Mrs. Rivens gave notes on analyzing poems. It didn't seem more than ten minutes before the bell. "One moment, Aloisia," Mrs. Rivens said as she was gathering her stuff. The teacher waited until all the students left before coming over. "Your new batch of writings and drawings are different than they normally are. Do you mind my asking what's different about you? Writing is, after all, a portal into the author's soul."

Aloisia shrugged. "Not much."

Mrs. Rivens raised eyebrow incredulously as she handed her poems and drawings back. "Aloisia Serene Zanadel, you must think me stupid. You didn't come with nearly as much as I'm accustomed to and what you did bring is full of fire and brimstone! Don't get me wrong, it's some of your best work, and you've never written about butterflies and daisies, but this is dark even for you. Fire is the most prevalent subject in your art, and that's not usual for you."

Aloisia looked down to the ground. "My mother died in a fire when I was six," she told her. "She died saving my brother and me. I guess I'm just trying to cope with it. I'm tired of trying not to think of it."

Mrs. Rivens nodded sympathetically and put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm here if you ever want to talk," she comforted. The bell rung again and she continued, "Go on to your next class, dear, and tell them to call me if they want to know why you're late."

Aloisia nodded and finished gathering her things.

"And Aloisia?"

Aloisia paused at the door and looked back to see Mrs. Rivens smiling sadly at her. "It wasn't your fault she died."

Aloisia didn't answer her as she turned and left.

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## 32.

"The silence worries me," Aloisia said into the phone. She sighed, her pencil tapping against the page of math problems.

"I would think that you would be happy not to hear from him," Alvin noted.

"Hardly. It's been almost three months since that youngling confronted me at the fountain. Cinder should have come out of hiding by now. Are you sure that Diablo hasn't heard anything?"

"Yeah, this end is as silent as a ghost."

"Most ghosts aren't silent; well, at least the ones I've dealt with aren't."

"It's a figure of speech we Rationals have, Aloisia."

"An incorrect one."

Alvin blew into the phone and Aloisia smiled to herself. "Do you think that maybe Cinder will leave your Body?"

"I know he won't, Alvin. I'm the reason why he killed all those female Avengers before he came to Clions. He's been looking for me since he killed my mother. I don't know what I did to him that night he tried to kill me, but whatever it was kept him away for almost a decade. Now he's back and we've got to settle it. Besides, I don't *want* him to leave. One way or another, I'm going to kill that Bloodbane."

"Well, he won't stay silent for too much longer. All I know is his little wannabes are driving us insane here at the station. There's been an arson report almost every week this summer. They're always on the edge of the suburbs now."

"They'll stop when they're ready for me to find them."

"That's what Diablo thinks," Alvin agreed. "You two think a lot alike."

"Don't insult me like that."

"It's not an insult," Alvin said lightly. "He's really intelligent."

Aloisia groaned. "Not you too."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know what it is with you and Danielle. Have you forgotten what he is?"

"No, but that doesn't mean he's a bad guy."

"You'd be defenseless if he decided one day to hurt you. He could snap your neck with less effort than to blink an eye."

"So could you and I trust you," Alvin pointed out. "Honestly, I'd be more careful around you than him if I didn't know you. I've seen what you're capable of if you get pissed off."

"Don't put me into the same class as Diablo," Aloisia said sharply.

"Aloisia, you're only trying to villainize Diablo to give you an excuse not to like him. He's one of the good guys, deal with it. This constant fight to keep a stereotype you were taught is killing you."

Aloisia rolled her eyes. "Thank you, Doctor Freud," she said, sarcasm dripping from her voice. "Are you done psychoanalyzing me?" There was a knock at her door and she said quickly, "Look, I'll talk to you later. I hope you'll actually have information when I call again."

"There's not been a fire this week yet, and it's Friday. Watch your back, because if you and Diablo are right it might mean something." She didn't answer as she hung up and put the phone in her desk drawer before standing and opening her door.

"Are you getting ready to go patrolling?" Josiah asked. Aloisia stood aside and let him in. "You didn't go yesterday."

Aloisia gestured to where her weapons lay across her bed. "I was going to finish my homework and go."

"Mind if I join you tonight? I'm going stir crazy."

Aloisia arched an eyebrow. "You went with me the time before last and the time before that. You've been patrolling your own Body too. How could you be bored?"

Josiah shrugged. "I guess I just can't stay still."

"Fine. Meet me downstairs in about ten minutes. I'll finish my math later."

"Thanks, Lo," Josiah said, smiling. He turned to leave and almost ran into Toby who had wheeled himself to the door. He nodded to the Conduit and left.

"You were right, Toby," Aloisia murmured. "There is definitely something going on." She stared at Josiah's retreating back. "He called me Lo."

"You'll think it's worse once I've told you what I overheard," Toby said grimly. "Verdin and Dad are attempting a cupid."

"What?" Aloisia asked blankly.

"That's what they've been up to since Verdin and his family moved in. Verdin and Dad want to unit their families. In short, they want you to marry Josiah."

Aloisia mouth dropped open. "You ... are ... kidding ... me."

Toby shook his head. "I deserve a big fat *I told you so* . I used my powers to listen into a conversation between Dad, Verdin, and Josiah. They want to bind their Bodies together."

"I'd rather be bitten by a werewolf," Aloisia said scathingly.

"Sooner or later you may not have a choice. Verdin mentioned an arranged marriage. The Heart's been known to condone them before."

"Dad wouldn't allow something like that," Aloisia said uneasily.

Toby nodded. "He told Verdin no, that Josiah could try to woo you by spending time with you. Just be careful, Aloisia. Dad didn't sound resolute when he refused Verdin's idea, and you know how much Dad is influenced by his old Preparation buddy. Besides, if Verdin gets tired of the game he can go over Dad's head and order it anyways."

"I don't need this right now," Aloisia muttered, beginning to strap her weapons on. The movements were robotic; she didn't glance away from Toby's face. "It seems that shit's been hitting me in the face a lot this summer. Every time I think I've got it cleaned off, some more is thrown at me."

"When it rains, it pours," Toby said quietly. "But this is a future worry for us. We shouldn't turn our minds to it until you kill Cinder."

"Not if?" Aloisia sighed. "If Cinder kills me then I won't have to worry about it."

"I've got confidence in you," Toby said firmly. "Cinder's the strongest thing you've fought, but he's not stronger than you. You've got the motivation, Aloisia. You're not going to kill him for the Heart. You're going to avenge our mother and the pain he's caused us." He glanced down at the wheelchair he sat in. "He's the reason I can't walk," Toby said bitterly. "He's the reason our lives were destroyed. Him coming back is like a fresh wound. The only comfort I have is in knowing I can count on my little sister to make everything better." Toby stared up into her face, his sad eyes sheltered by the soft curls that rested on his forehead. "Whatever comes your ways you deal with it. I don't think anything can keep you down."

Aloisia smiled despite herself. "Damn it, Toby. How can I stay mad if you're always making me feel better?"

"Glad I'm doing my job as cheerleader."

Aloisia tied her jacket around her waist. "As much as I'm dreading it, I shouldn't leave Josiah waiting. I think I'll start dropping hints I'm not interested."

"Let him down gently, sis," Toby said wryly.

"I'll drop him off a hundred foot cliff to the kraken," Aloisia said maliciously.

"You killed it, remember? Besides, is that any way to treat your future husband?"

Aloisia flipped him off as she left.

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### 33.

"It's a nice night," Josiah commented. He glanced toward Aloisia who was walking beside him, absently twirling one of her throwing knives between her fingers.

"I guess so," she said distractedly. "If you like a clear night that doesn't provide any cover. I prefer a cloudy or foggy night myself."

"Still, you have to appreciate the beautiful sky," Josiah pressed, looking upward.

Aloisia looked up despite herself. Stars dotted across the sky, sprinkled like sugar across a black sheet of paper. "It is beautiful," she relented. "You don't see that many stars in the city. The lights prevent it."

"There's an even better view at your house," Josiah said. "You don't have street lamps on your land."

"Why should we? Dad and I are the only ones out at night mostly and we have great night vision."

"True."

Silence continued while they walked until it Josiah broke it again. "It feels good out here."



"Josiah, why are you doing this?" Aloisia demanded exasperatedly. "You're driving me insane."

"Doing what?" he asked, bewildered. He stopped as Aloisia stood in front of him, sheathing the knife she had been fooling with.

"Being nice to me. Before this summer we couldn't stand the sight of each other, and now you're trying to be my best friend. Excuse me if I'm not a little suspicious."

Josiah stared at her, his mouth slightly open. It took a few seconds before he answered hesitantly, "I've changed, Aloisia. You're talking about when I was jealous of you and always trying to outdo you. I've grown up since then. I'm mature enough to see you as a strong fellow Avenger that could be a powerful ally if I swallow my pride."

"You? Jealous?" Aloisia shook her head disbelievingly. "What on Earth could you be jealous of from me?"

"Aloisia, you're good at everything," Josiah said. "Don't you see it? You're the first female Avenger in the history of the Zanadel family, and you kicked my ass during your Preparation. You even have more kills than I do. Hell, you've got more kills than anyone else in our generation."

"I live in a heavy Bloodbane population," Aloisia pointed out.

"Your Body's larger than mine; there's never a dull moment."

"You know why it's been set up that way," Aloisia said. "My family's the second strongest so we can handle the extra land to guard; your family not only has to watch over your Body, but it also has to lead the Heart. Once you become the Master Avenger you won't have time to be bored. You'll be envying my comparatively simple job for an entirely different reason"

Josiah snorted in laughter. "I doubt it." He paused before he said, "Both our families are powerful; could you imagine them together?"

Aloisia shook her head, her heart quickening slightly. "The thought's not occurred to me," she said nonchalantly. She turned around and started walking again, Josiah falling in by her side. "I'm not good at sharing; any combining of Bodies would not end well. I would take nothing less than being the main Avenger."

"So what will happen when you marry? Do you plan to stay with a Rational? You know the Codes. You need permission of the Society to reveal our existence to a Rational, and it isn't given lightly. Besides, most Rationals can't handle our lives. They're okay with it at first, but it doesn't last long until they get weirded out or frightened away."

"I haven't looked that far into my future, Josiah," Aloisia said firmly. "And I am definitely not interested in pursuing any uniting ideas. I just want a normal relationship without any political or Heart ties for now. I'll deal with the problems later."

Josiah was stopped from saying anything else by the echoing sound of shoes hitting the pavement ahead of them. They paused and listened. The sound grew closer and Josiah drew a knife from his belt.

"Put that away, damn it," Aloisia hissed. "What if it's a Rational?" She was already shrugging into her

jacket, glad that she had left her sword in the secret compartment of her car. She normally did if she was patrolling a more heavily populated area with less Bloodbane activity.

Josiah glanced at her. "What if it's a Bloodbane?"

Aloisia rolled her eyes and flicked a wrist, bringing a blade to her hand immediately. "That's why you should invest in some wrist sheaths. Now, put that knife away and put your jacket on. I hardly meet Bloodbanes on this road; it has too many Rationals."

The footsteps sounded closer as Josiah obeyed her and she slipped her knife back into its sheath. They rounded a corner and saw a figure walking toward them. Aloisia noticed with a start that it was Asher.

"Lo? What are you doing here?" he asked, coming up.

She fought to come up with a plausible lie, but didn't have to as Josiah said, "She's helping me look for my dog. He got past the gate this morning when she left for school. He's a little golden lab with a blue collar. He's named Scottie. Have you seen him?"

Asher shook his head. "No, I haven't." His voice was short and clipped. Aloisia could feel the swirling aura of anger around him like a feeding fire.

"Asher? What's wrong?" she asked worriedly. "You sound angry."

He sighed. "I've had a fight with my uncle. He's not happy with me right now."

"Anything I can do?"

Asher shook his head. "No. Thanks for asking, though."

"Still, I don't like the idea of you being angry and out on your own at night," Aloisia stated. She paused, biting her lip. Finally she fished her car keys from her pocket and threw them at Josiah. "You can drive home after you're finished looking for your dog. I think I'm going to stay with Asher for a little while. I'll come home later."

"You sure, Lo?" Asher asked hesitantly. "I'd be glad to have you around, but I don't think I'd be that good of company in the mood I'm in."

"It's fine, Asher. Did you drive here?" He nodded and she continued, "Can you go get your truck? We'll go somewhere else."

Asher turned and walked away without another word. When he had rounded the corner Aloisia hurriedly shrugged out of her jacket and took her shoulder holster off. She unclipped a gun and put it into her purse before handing the other to Josiah. She put her belt of knives in her purse beside her gun, but kept the wrist sheaths on. "Don't tease me for bringing a purse patrolling again," Aloisia said.

Josiah rolled his eyes, ignoring her. "I can't believe you're going to go nurse your Rational boyfriend's ego."

"We've been patrolling for almost three hours. It's quiet." Aloisia pointed toward the sky. "In case you haven't noticed, there's a new moon tonight. Even powerful werewolves would have trouble changing and since I killed Michael I've not had a vampire kill to worry about."

"It's been eerily quiet in your Body," Josiah observed.

"Yeah, well sooner or later it won't be. This is only the quiet before the storm."

Josiah nodded in agreement, holding his hand out. "Avenge the might of good, Sister Avenger."

Aloisia shook his hand. "May Zâintili's will be done."

Josiah turned to walk away and Aloisia called his name. "Scottie?" She asked wryly. Josiah shrugged and laughed, turning back around. He was out of sight by the time Asher drove up.

"Where do you want to go?" Aloisia asked as she got into the truck.

"Maybe we could finish that walk in the park," Asher suggested. "Surely there won't be a repeat of what happened last time."

"That sounds good to me."

Asher smiled slightly and started driving again. He drove to Clions Park in silence. They got out of the truck together and walked side by side into the empty park. They stayed silent until Aloisia took his hand and pulled him off the path to sit at the foot of a large oak tree. The tree towered over the others; its roots snaked through the ground like the thick bodies of anacondas. She loved the oak; for it to have lived this long in a city was amazing. It gave the illusion of a forest with its wide expanse of branches that offered her shade and cover when she hunted in the park. It almost made her forget the cramped, polluted city that encompassed most of her Body.

Aloisia went to her knees in her favorite sitting spot between two of the largest roots and pulled Asher down beside her. "You've been around me for too long," she said softly. "My Atlas act is rubbing off on you. You've been acting more and more distant at school. I know something's troubling you. Won't you tell me?"

Asher sighed and leaned his head against the oak's trunk. "Lo, it's ... complicated. You wouldn't understand."

"Try me," Aloisia pressed. She squeezed the hand she held. "I can be a good listener."

"My uncle and I just have different views," Asher said quietly. "He wants me to do something I don't want to."

"What?"

Asher hesitated. He was quiet, staring into her face.

"Come on, tell me."

He sighed and looked away, shaking his head. It took him a moment to say, "He wants me to stop seeing you."

Aloisia blinked in surprise. "Why?" she demanded. "He's never even met me."

"He's heard stories about your family. He doesn't want me getting involved."

"Of course," Aloisia mumbled, letting go of his hand. "Everyone's heard of the Zanadels."

"Don't get upset, Aloisia," Asher said. "I told him he was stupid. I told him that I'd met most of your family and I liked them." He pushed a strand of her hair out of her face and scooted closer to her. "I refused to stop seeing you, Aloisia. That's what the fight was over."

"I don't want to cause problems in your family," Aloisia said, standing up. She leaned her back on the trunk.

"Aloisia, you aren't the problem," Asher said. "I don't want you to think that. My uncle's idiocy is the only problem."

"How are you going to deal with it? You can't fight him forever."

An odd expression ghosted across his face, disappearing before Aloisia could read it. "No, but I can make him see, and I will."

Aloisia laughed bitterly. "Good luck."

"Don't put yourself down like that. It won't be hard; you're an incredible person. That poem Mrs. Rivens read in front of the class was amazing."

Aloisia looked away. "How'd you know that was mine?"

"I recognized you in the words. I recognized my Atlas."

"She shouldn't have read that out loud."

"Why not? Because someone might actually realize you're human with feelings after all?" Asher asked, an eyebrow rose. "You're so careful with your emotions."

"Why should I be an open book for everyone to read?" Aloisia asked defensively. "I choose people to confide in. That way my secrets are my own."

"And you are very secretive," Asher observed. "I know I've only grazed your surface." He stood and gazed into her face. She met his gaze, staring into his eyes. She was mesmerized by their hazel brown, streaked with a golden hue. She had never seen eyes that perfect of a color.

"It makes me happy to know that I am one of the few that you confide in." His voice was low, almost a whisper. He leaned in closer, brushing his body against hers. Aloisia continued to stare into his eyes, amazed by their color, as he lowered his head and brushed his lips gently against hers. Aloisia returned his kiss, closing her eyes as she raised her hands and ran her fingers through his hair. He continued to kiss her, his hands coming to rest on her hips, beneath the edge of her unzipped jacket. Aloisia rose to her tiptoes, draping her arms around his neck and pressing him to her.

Asher broke the kiss and brushed his cheek against hers. "I love you, Aloisia."

Aloisia's breath caught in her chest as she stood trapped in Asher's embrace. He hugged tightly to her like she would disappear if he let her go. Her mind seemed to have blanked as time paused. She listened

to Asher's nervous heartbeat and it made her come back to Earth. Soon time resumed and she leaned back to see his face. "I love you too," she whispered.

Asher smiled widely; it was the happiest Aloisia had ever seen him. Some kind of tension that had dominated his features just leaked away. It left his face even more handsome and amiable; his eyes seemed to glow the yellow-brown hue of honey. Aloisia pulled his head down and kissed him gently. Asher hugged her up to him, his hands tight around her waist. The gentle kiss continued, morphing into something stronger as Asher's hands ran up the length of her spine, his fingertips trailing across the rose of the Zântili's Blood Tear brand of her back. His hand grazed the sheath of the long bladed dagger and Aloisia started, pulling back slightly. She had forgotten she was wearing the dagger Diablo had given her.

"You make me feel happier than I remember being," Asher said into her ear. "I won't allow him to take you away from me." He stepped back and reached a hand out. Aloisia took it. "You don't need to worry about my uncle. I'll take care of him." Aloisia nodded and they walked back to his truck. She was surprised he didn't mention the sheath he had felt, but she didn't ask about it as he drove her home. She kissed him before she got out of the truck. He waved and she unlocked the gate to her home before he drove away.

Aloisia walked home slowly, climbing her tree. Toby had left the window open for her and she entered a darkened room filled with his soft snores. She paused only long enough to take the dagger and wrist sheaths off before she climbed into bed. She fell asleep smiling.

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### 34.

*"I won't help you," the voice said. "I refuse to." Aloisia could feel his anger filling her. His heart beat in her chest, her eyes saw through his into the dusty old building that had haunted her dreams for weeks.*

*"Do you think I need your help now?" asked another voice, amused. Aloisia's head turned to see the bald man lounged out on a dilapidated couch. He was wearing a lazy, condescending smile. "We can call her to us without you now."*

She took a step back, fear creeping into her anger, taking root like a weed. "What do you mean?"

"He means I'm a success," said someone behind her. She spun around as a tall form coalesced from yellow-orange fire. The youngling from the park was grinning as he casually threw down a bound girl. Her long, curly hair fell into her face, obscuring Aloisia's view as she turned away and shook her head disgustedly. "What do you think of my prize? I've been working for over three months to get into her. Want to hear about the binding and what you could have had with your Avenger?"

"You make me sick," Aloisia growled, her stomach churning with regret and guilt as the girl gave a low groan and sob. There was a muffled thud and a cry as the youngling kicked her.

"She's only a human," the youngling said lightly.

"Our parents were humans," Aloisia countered.

"That didn't stop you from killing them," Cinder said quietly.

Aloisia sighed, fighting the self loathing away. She didn't have time to hate herself; there was someone she had to save. "It was an accident. I didn't have control." Her voice rose. "I know what you're trying to do and it won't work. It's past, and I can't bring them back. I can't change it, but I can this. I won't let you kill her."

"How do you propose to change this?" Cinder asked. His voice had grown low and dangerous.

"I'm exposing myself to her. I'm telling her the truth."

The other youngling laughed derisively. "She'd kill you."

Aloisia shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. Aloisia has a truce with the Bloodbanes. She works side by side with that werewolf. I've seen it. She may spare me."

"She wouldn't," Cinder said scathingly. "You're not a normal Bloodbane, youngling. You are a Pyroenchanter—the creature that killed her mother and has raged the inner war with Serene's bloodline. It doesn't matter what you believe now; in the end you will begin to take souls. It is our calling. Embrace it like your brother has. Don't fight it like I did."

It was the first time Aloisia had heard Cinder's voice like that. It was sad, pensive. "What do you mean?"

"It is what a Pyroenchanter is, youngling. What we were created for. We are nothing but one of the breeds of Soul Collectors. It is inbred into your power and if you fight your instinct then it will consume you from the inside out." Cinder's voice softened to almost a whisper. "If we kill Aloisia and her Conduit brother, we end Serene's line. We needn't worry for her other brothers; they have no magic calling in them. If you just help us kill those two, it will end and we won't be bound to this fate anymore. Our purpose would be fulfilled."

"I can't let you kill her or her brother," Aloisia said resolutely.

Cinder growled and advanced on her, backing her up. "And why not, boy? Why can't you kill this one girl and boy and end our suffering?"

"Because I love her, Cinder," she answered sadly. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

"You should have stayed away from her," Cinder said in a softer voice than Aloisia was used to hearing. "No matter what you feel, I will not, cannot stop. I'm so tired, damn it, and I just want this to end. Is that so wrong? You may care for her now, but in the end the reason why you were created will overtake you and you will come to hate her. Her blood taints her and condemns us."

"Then I will die for her," she said resolutely.

Cinder snarled and punched the wall beside her before grabbing her neck and lifting her up. "You don't get it do you, boy? No matter how hard you try, I will have her. She is called to me as much as I am to her." Cinder paused, staring into her eyes. "Even now she watches us," he whispered. "I see her in your eyes." A smile lit his face as he let her go and went toward the still girl. He grabbed her by the hair roughly and lifted her up to expose her face.

It was Danielle.

"Come save her, Avenger of Serene. Fulfill our fates so we can rest." Aloisia shirked back as she was pushed from the suffering youngling's mind.

A warm voice breathed along her mind as she faded, "Please, Aloisia, stay away."

Aloisia collapsed to the ground, her head ringing like she had been struck. She looked up as she heard light airy footsteps. She didn't see anything until her mother walked from the nothingness. Alexis knelt, rubbing a hand through Aloisia short hair. "You have to save your friend. She is not yet dead." The scent of honeysuckle resonated off her mother and Aloisia breathed in deeply. Wherever her mother was, so was the sweet mellow musk. It calmed her and stopped the uncontrollable shaking that had overtaken her body.

"How, mother? I don't even know where they are."

"You'll find a way, darling. Just remember, this is your fight. No one else's, not even Toby's. Don't wake them."

Aloisia nodded solemnly and her mother kissed the top of her head. "Avenge the might of good, my little warrior."

Aloisia woke suddenly like she had been slapped. She stood immediately, pausing only long enough to write Toby a short note.

*Toby,*

*Cinder has Danielle, and I know I have to find him tonight. No matter what, don't let the others know. I love you so much, and I want you to know how much I appreciate everything you've done.*

Seek the Truth,

*Aloisia*

Aloisia took a deep breath and slipped it under her brother's pillow carefully as she swallowed the rising wall of fear. She put her shoes and few weapons on before she Fazed herself into her car and grabbed the backpack that Shaun had made for her full of the onyx daggers. She hurriedly slipped the rest of her weapons on and strapped her sword to her body, Fazing out of her car and onto the street in front of Danielle's home. She was immediately assaulted by the shrill scream of sirens and the wall of yellow heat.

"Oh God," Aloisia whispered, staring at the blazing home that had once been Danielle's. She hurried through the crowd of onlookers to the edge where they were kept away by the barrier of fire trucks. No one had noticed her yet; they were too mesmerized by the roaring fire. She took advantage of their inattention and slipped in between the fire trucks. She was running toward the burning threshold when she heard a surprised yell. Soon she was being grappled from behind.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" the man holding her grunted, hugging her tightly to him as she struggled.

"My friend may be in there," Aloisia screamed, fighting. She elbowed the fireman in the stomach and started to run again as he let her go. She ran into the house before anyone could stop her. She didn't stop

as she followed the familiar path to Danielle's room, parting the advancing flames with spurts of power. Her focusing stones hovered above her head like a black halo. She called out but there was no answer.

The first thing that Aloisia noticed was Danielle's room was empty. She paused at the door and shook her head sadly. The Pyroenchanter had her and there was no way to get to her. She'd expected no different; it had been stupid to hope. Aloisia looked around her to see Chloe's door was shut. Aloisia started, her heart freezing despite the heat surrounding her. She scrambled to the door, kicking it down. The form on the bed was limp and she knew it before she hurried to the bed and saw Chloe's body. Her dark skin was blistered and cracked, peeling away from her body in morbid ringlets. Her hair was burned away from her scalp and her eyes were open, forever frozen in fear of whatever had killed her.

"Oh Chloe...." Aloisia sobbed, grabbing her hand. The skin felt like parchment paper and gave beneath her grip. She stayed still for a moment while the fire raged around her. Her head was bowed as she wept. Distantly she heard the firemen enter the home in search of her.

Aloisia kissed Chloe's hand gently and stood. She closed Chloe's eyes and looked up. Her anger consumed her grief and fear as she yelled hoarsely. The careful barrier that kept her from her power deteriorated as her acid emotions ate it away. Her power swept away from her and distantly she could feel her friend's frantically beating heart. With a resounding crack that brought Aloisia to her knees again, her power returned and she knew where Cinder was. The pounding footsteps sounded closer as Aloisia's stones began to spin around her crouched figure rapidly. The fire followed their path, creating a swirling tornado of flames and power.

Aloisia swallowed the remnants of the Pyroenchanter's power, absorbing his fire like a fiery magnet. The rush was exhilarating, pulling her head back and tearing an agonizing, piercing scream from her mouth. The stones circled more quickly, glowing dots in the midst of her power. They flashed a brilliant purple once and she felt a tight clenching that bowed her back and shut her eyes.

Everything was quiet when Aloisia opened her eyes. She stood shakily and took in her surroundings, returning her focusing stones to her pocket. It was the old dusty building she had seen in her dreams. It looked like an abandoned warehouse with a high ceiling and open floors above her. Doors stemmed from the main room. Aloisia studied her surrounding quickly before her eyesight fell on the suspended figure in the far end of the warehouse. It was her friend and she dangled by her wrist from a thick rope hung on a rusted hook

"Danielle!" Aloisia yelled. Danielle raised her head weakly and Aloisia noted her battered body. Her thin pajama set was torn and shredded, nearly none existent, and her exposed skin was lined in deep ugly burns.

"Aloisia!" The cry was harsh and terrified and horribly familiar. She fought the urge to go to her friend and unsheathed her sword. There was no one around and Aloisia inched her way to the suspended figure. Finally she made it there and looked up.

"Shh, it's alright, Dan," Aloisia whispered as she reached up to cut her down carefully. "I'll get us out of here."

But Danielle shook her head, mumbling words under her breath that Aloisia had to lean in closer to hear. She was whispering, "Not while he's here you won't." Danielle whimpered, her eyes bulging at the sight of something behind her.

"You aren't going anywhere," a familiar voice said before there was a deep, intense pain in her head,



then nothing at all.

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### 35.

Aloisia came to groggily. She groaned and tried to rub the back of her throbbing head. Her hand strained against something cold and hard and she looked up to see it bound by a metal chain. Her other hand was pinned to the wall also and a thick entwining of metal links wound across her waist. She strained against her constraints, but they didn't give. She tried to break down the barrier that enclosed her power but couldn't grip it. It was as if something oily and slimy coated the wall that kept her from her power. She couldn't hold onto it.

After a while, Aloisia ceased trying to break the chains and get to her powers, slumping heavily into her restraints until it was only them that supported her. She breathed heavily, sweat streaming from her forehead. She looked around weakly to see that she was in a small, windowless room that was bare except for a small pile of her weapons in the corner.

There was a loud creak as the iron door opened and Aloisia's head turned to see who was entering the room. She shook her head as he walked in, not believing her eyes. "Asher?" she asked bewilderedly, her voice cracked. "What are you..." She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. You don't know how happy I am to see you. Can you find a way to get me down? I know you're probably freaked out, but get me down and I'll get us both out safely." Asher didn't move from where he stood and Aloisia's heart began to beat painfully quick. "Asher?"

"I tried to stop him, Avenger," he whispered, turning his head away from her. "You don't know how hard I fought him for you."

Aloisia licked her lips nervously. "I don't understand, Asher. What are you saying?"

Asher looked back up and Aloisia watched the tears leak down his cheeks. They didn't go far before they evaporated against his hot skin. "I went to your home to tell you the truth, Aloisia, but I was too late. You had already left."

"You're the other Pyroenchanter," Aloisia breathed out. "The one I've been linked to."

"There were so many times I wanted to tell you," Asher said, anguish written through his voice. Slowly, flames began to ignite across his skin. Smoke swirled through the air, melding with the rise of power that resonated from him. The aura of strength took her breath away. "But how do you tell someone you love that you were sent to help kill her? How do you tell her he was one of the things she despised most?"

Asher's voice rose with the last words. His fire had completely engulfed his body by the time he had finished speaking. He was covered with dark red flames that gave off distorted light the color of blood, and his black cloud of smoke surrounded him, making Aloisia's eyes water. Through all this his glowing golden-brown eyes pierced her with their mournful expression.

There was silence as Aloisia stared at the Bloodbane she loved. A scalding anger took hold of her. "You've been lying to me for these three months?" Aloisia growled vehemently. "How could you spend all that time with me and deceive me if you really loved me?"

"Aloisia..."

But Aloisia voice overrode Asher's. "Chloe's dead," she screamed. "Your brother killed her and now he wants to take Danielle's soul. Doesn't that mean anything to you? Stop him. Stop Cinder."

Asher shook his head as he said, "It's not that easy, Aloisia." The fire along his skin extinguished, leaving him to look normal, but Aloisia could feel it now, his strength. Asher didn't try to shield his aura now and his power beat against her, throbbing around them both like a massive, beating heart.

"Why isn't it?" Aloisia challenged. "You're more powerful than Cinder and your brother both. You could kill them."

"They're my family, Aloisia. They're all I have. It would be like telling you to kill Toby."

"Toby's not a murderer," Aloisia retorted. "I've seen into your head. You're not like them. How could you condone what they do?"

"You don't understand, Aloisia," Asher said exasperatedly. "You don't understand what having this power is like, how souls call to you. I only have so much self control and where would I be if I killed the only two that can help me control what I am?"

"Save your pity speech, Bloodbane," Aloisia snapped, "because you won't find any from me. You have no right to assume I don't understand the allure souls have, their calling voices. I can fight it and if one day I can't, I will end my own life. Better I die then allow people to die for me."

"Not everyone has your strength," Asher said sadly. He walked closer and Aloisia fought against her chains. She stilled as he stroked a finger down her cheek.

"Don't touch me, monster," Aloisia growled.

Asher jerked his hand back, eyes hurt. "You lose your love for me so quickly? Have I no trust or respect left in your eyes because of what I am?"

"It isn't what you are, Asher. If you had told me before all of this had happened, even if it had been just last night, I would have still loved you and I would have helped you control your power when I killed the other two." Aloisia's voice turned to steel as she continued, "No, I lost my love for you when I closed Chloe's eyes, and I lost my trust and respect for you while you gave petty excuses for my friend's blood. I called you a monster because of your actions, not for what you are."

"Would you kill me if I let you go?"

Asher had whispered it, and Aloisia had to force herself to look into his wounded hazel eyes. His expression was so forlorn that it broke her heart. For the first time since Asher had told her what he was, a single pair of tears betrayed her icy, solid expression. Though her emotions were an aching, coiled mess, her voice was steady and as cold as her gaze as she said, "You're already dead in my eyes, Pyroenchanter. I swear on Zâintili's grave that one day your blood will stain my blades."

"Such harsh words, Avenger," said a voice from the doorway. Asher backed away quickly and Cinder approached her in his human form. He looked at Asher. "What did I tell you, Ash?" Cinder pointed at Aloisia. "Her kind can't be trusted. You should never give your heart to a murderer."

"You were right, Cinder," Ash sighed, his voice clipped. His tone tugged at her heart.

"Now leave me, Ash. Char will take his first soul soon and we will leave for you to find yours. We'll come back for her brother later."

Ash nodded, his flames igniting across his skin. Aloisia could feel the swirling aura of power that was collecting around him and fought to siphon some from around him like Toby had taught her. She breathed in deeply, absorbing as much as she could. Ash glanced at her oddly, hesitating, but he didn't say anything as he disappeared in a rush of heat.

Aloisia fought to hold onto Ash's power and break the barrier that they had somehow kept indestructible as Cinder advanced on her. She strained against the chains and he laughed, sending a chill down her spine. "I finally have you, Avenger," he whispered, bending close to speak in her ear. "Your soul is mine, despite your mother's interference."

Aloisia rolled her eyes, sweat rolling from her forehead from the effort she was using to break her barrier and Cinder's radiating heat. "Bloodbanes are so melodramatic."

Cinder grabbed her throat with an incoherent growl as his human form melted away and he stood with his screaming souls and blue flame. He didn't say anything as his flames ignited at her feet and began to trail upward in slow, agonizing tendrils. Aloisia didn't allow herself to cry out as she grabbed at Cinder's power. She hadn't took enough from Ash, but the connection Cinder had created to take her soul fed her and she feasted on the rushing wave, breaking her barrier as easily as shattering a thin pane of glass.

Cinder staggered backward as she pushed him away with her mind. The flames that he had begun continued to travel, rushing forward more quickly. The pain had disappeared as her magic, for lack of a better word, filled her. The force tore her head back and she let out a loud, breathy sigh as the fire consumed her, turning from the vibrant blue to a sun yellow and dark purple. The chains melted away from her body and she collapsed to the ground, the floor beginning to sizzle beneath her.

"What the hell?" Cinder breathed, backing away slightly as Aloisia stood up. "This is impossible."

Aloisia laughed, her voice echoing against the bare walls. She waved an arm and her mother's sword flew from its sheath in the far corner and she gripped it tightly in her hand. "Are you ready to die, Cinder?" She raised her sword straight ahead, going into her fighting stance.

Cinder advanced on her and she swung upward as he came closer. Her sword passed through his chest, leaving him unmarked. He grabbed her neck and smiled. "Haven't learned that trick yet, have you?" He threw her forcefully, her back crashing through the wall until she lay in another room. She stood shakily, her flames flickering and dying as she used her energy to heal what Cinder had hurt.

Aloisia didn't waste any time sprinting away as Cinder bled through the hole she had caused. She recognized the room she had entered first but Danielle was gone from it. She tried not to think about that as she ran up a pair of rickety stairs to an open floor above. Cinder followed her, his heat at her back. She knew it wouldn't be long until he overtook her and she dropped into a roll as she reached the top and turned a corner of the small hallway-like walk. The floor groaned beneath her as Cinder sailed over her. She allowed the rail that guarded the edge catch her shoulder as she stood and raised her sword again.

"When will you learn, girl?" Cinder growled. "You can't hurt me."

"I've done it before," Aloisia said, keeping her voice steady. "I've only got to wait for a lapse of your concentration."

"Which will never happen." Cinder came toward her quickly. Aloisia barely dodged his extended claws as they tried to decapitate her. She was pushed backward by her avoidance and it gave him a chance to swipe her off her feet. Her sword fell from her grasp and he kicked it off the floor where she heard it clang to the ground beneath. He grabbed her forearms before she could react and she cried out as her skin blistered beneath his grip. She shoved outward with her mind desperately as she brought her forehead forward into the base of his neck. Cinder let her go and she twisted as she fell, pushing her feet into his lower stomach as she landed on her arms and flipped back to her feet.

Her attack had brought Cinder to the ground, but she had been left weaponless by him. He struggled to his feet as Aloisia took her focusing stones from their pouch in her pocket and threw them into the air. Where they landed a red fire started. She was too weak to use her ill-gotten Pyroenchanter powers, but that didn't mean she didn't know how to summon fire with her stones. She waved a hand and the fires coalesced into one crackling wall. She shoved energy into it, enclosing Cinder before he could react.

Cinder laughed from behind his fiery prison. "You are growing weak, Avenger." And the fire raged forward, transforming from the fiery red to a crackling, howling blue. Aloisia staggered away, hands thrown up to shield her face. Her already burnt and blistered arms took the brunt of the heat as she fell backward into the rusted railing. The railing groaned behind her and Aloisia felt it give. She fell with a crash while a voice whispered, "And the cradle falls."

Aloisia used her power to slow her fall and she hit the ground on her feet, her sword in reaching distance. She grabbed it, looking for Cinder. The room was empty and had grown eerily quiet.

"Cinder!" Aloisia yelled. "Come and fight, coward. Where are you?"

"He's left, my little warrior," said a voice behind her. "You proved too strong to kill." Aloisia spun around, stepping backward as her mother walked up, unharmed and smiling.

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### 36.

Aloisia couldn't speak as her mother approached her. "Aloisia?" Alexis asked softly. "Are you alright?" She smiled. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Aloisia shook her head. "It's not possible." She reached her free hand out and tentatively brushed it against her unmarred skin, jerking away quickly. The satin warmth of her living skin clung to her fingers. "How have you gotten away from Cinder?"

Alexis stepped closer putting a hand on her daughter's shoulder. "You broke his hold on me. I'm free."

"How?" Aloisia asked, her voice quivering.

Alexis shrugged. "Does it matter how, love? All I know is Cinder has fled for now. When he will return ... I do not know."

Aloisia looked around her. Above her head a fire from her fight had started, filling the air with thick, acrid smoke. "Mother, a fire's started and I am not strong enough to stop it. We need to find Danielle and get her out of here." Aloisia turned around and was ready to start searching when her mother's grip on her shoulder tightened.

"Your friend will be fine for now," Alexis said, her voice sharp. "Is she your only thought?"

"Mother, she could be hurt," Aloisia said, surprised by Alexis's tone.

Her mother smiled. "She'll be alright." Her voice was softer, almost normal. Still, Aloisia could sense a slight difference in her mother. Above her, the fire raged into existence, feeding on the air and building itself up.

"What wrong, mother?" Aloisia asked hesitantly.

Alexis cocked her head to one side, running a hand through Aloisia's short, matted hair. She pulled her into a tight hug that almost knocked her sword out of her hand. "What could be wrong when we've been reunited, my strength? I hold you near, freed from pain by you."

Aloisia fell into her embrace, resting her head on her shoulder and breathing in deeply. The fire's smoke nearly filled the ancient warehouse and choked her, causing the back of her throat to burn. Aloisia shook her head, new tears coming to her eyes as she pulled away from her mother.

Alexis trailed a hand down Aloisia's arm, coming to rest on her wrist where Aloisia clutched the sword tightly. "You've taken good care of my sword, Aloisia."

Aloisia shook her head, her eyes watering as the smoke invaded the entire area of the warehouse. She fought back the urge to cough as she stared into her mother's eyes. They were the same ones that regarded her from the mirror every day, but behind the dark green color there was an alien expression that Alexis had never worn.

"No," Aloisia said, her voice tight. She backed up one step, jerking her wrist away from her mother's grasp. "This sword isn't yours."

Alexis didn't have time to respond as Aloisia raised the sword and plunged forward in one fluid motion. The blade slid into her mother's chest easily, like a key to a lock. Aloisia felt the ribs give, the viscous sound of metal against muscle, organs, and fluids loud even with the roar of the fire above. Aloisia shoved the blade hilt deep, bringing her face inches from her mother's pained expression. Aloisia twisted and brought her arm upward, destroying the heart as she tried to ignore the anguished gasp. She stared into her fading eyes.

"My mother smells like honeysuckle, Cinder. In the end it was her who killed you and not me."

Her mother's form melted away as Cinder dropped his illusion. Aloisia wrenched her weapon out and backed up. Cinder collapsed to his newly formed knees with a light growl. Aloisia watched his skin bleed away, his souls fleeing in a black and red cloud. It didn't take long until all that was left of Cinder was a glowing pile of embers and ash.

The mass of churning red and black faces still rose and Aloisia watched their tortured expressions disappear in a flash of bright silver light.

"You freed us, daughter. We're finally able to meet our fates after our deaths."

Aloisia spun around, dropping her sword as she clutched the figure behind her in a desperate, tight hug. Aloisia legs gave out beneath her and only her mother's arms around her waist kept her from hitting the ground. She sobbed against Alexis's breasts, allowing the wild smell of honeysuckle overcome her.

Alexis lowered them both to the ground, making soothing sounds as she rocked her daughter. "You don't know how proud I am of you," Alexis whispered. She lifted Aloisia's head gently. "You've grown into quite the young lady. Listen, I need to tell you some things before you find your friend. Char does not know what has happened; he will take his time with Danielle."

Aloisia nodded, grabbing her mother's burnt hand. Alexis was still warped and distorted, but Aloisia found she was able to meet her mother's face easily.

"Cinder's dead, my warrior, but your troubles are far from over."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you want to know why you are a Conduit? Why I was a Conduit? Cinder was searching for us for a reason." Her mother shook her head. "My family has been kept into existence just for you. You are the Airtos's gift to both Bloodbanes and the true Heart."

"I don't understand."

"You're not supposed to; not yet. Your future is set in stone, but it is not yet carved for you. You are change, darling. Question not why you have Conduit powers and always trust in your instincts. There will be other Soul Collectors after you; the past sins of the Verdins have made sure of it."

Aloisia shook her head. "Mommy, I still don't understand. Can't you tell me anything else?"

Alexis shook her head, smiling slightly. "Patience is a virtue you did not gain from me. You must wait until you are ready to meet your purpose. It will not be me who tells you."

Alexis stood and helped Aloisia up. "When you leave, where will you go?"

Her mother shrugged, expression peaceful. "Even if I knew I wouldn't tell you. We all take this trip alone. Don't worry, I'll return when I'm needed. I love you, my strength." Alexis embraced her and Aloisia was taken in by the scent of honeysuckle as she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. It wasn't long before she was hugging nothing. "Find your friend, Avenger," her mother's voice whispered into her ear. "Avenge the might of good."

Aloisia nodded, picking her sword up and running away quickly. The fire had spread during Cinder's death and Aloisia had to skirt the vengeful flames as she went door to door searching for Danielle. A loud, piercing scream led her to the last room at the corner of the building. She threw the door open to reveal a room identical to the one she had been in. Danielle lay sprawled in the center of it, fighting vainly at the burning Bloodbane that straddled her.

"Danielle!" Aloisia went to run toward her but was stopped as Char sent a long stream of fire her way. She dropped to the ground, rolling back to the doorway as the air burned above her.

"I don't know what you did to Cinder," he growled, "but I will still have my soul." He waved his hand

and there was an echoing groan as the entranceway collapsed in on her. She tried to dodge it but she wasn't quick enough and she was knocked to the ground, her waist and legs pinned beneath the rubble. She struggled to lift the concrete and metal but something pressed against it. The pressure against her body sent piercing pressing waves of pain through her and she fought to breathe past it and stay conscience.

"Aloisia!" Danielle screamed shrilly. Aloisia stopped struggling and looked around desperately. The room was empty except for one lone dagger thrown carelessly in one corner. She recognized it as one of Diablo's. She weakly waved her hand and the dagger slid in jerking, halting movements to where Danielle was fighting. Danielle grabbed it as it bumped against her head and shoved it awkwardly into Char.

"Twist it, Dan," Aloisia groaned, trying to pull herself out of the rubble.

Char let out an anguished cry as Danielle obeyed, and she screamed again as Char fell fully on top of her and died. By the time Aloisia could finally muster enough of her power to lift the debris off her, Danielle was covered in embers and ash that she frantically beat off. Aloisia tried to stand, but her legs refused to move. She dimly recognized she was numb from the waist down as she crawled weakly to where Danielle lay still.

"Aloisia, how are we going to get out?" Danielle asked, her voice barely audible. Her glazed eyes fluttered shut before opening again.

Aloisia shook he head. "We aren't. The entrance ... is blocked, and there is ... a fire burning."

"We're going to die," Danielle said solemnly. It wasn't a question, but Aloisia nodded. Danielle grabbed her hand and clutched it weakly. Aloisia laid her head on Danielle's chest, listening to her friend's racking breath and weakening pulse.

"At least our souls are our own," Aloisia sighed, closing her eyes. She could feel her consciousness slipping. Her last thought before the blackness stole her was that she would be gone while the fire consumed her.

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### 37.

Someone was rubbing her head.

The pressure was gentle, reassuring. It brought her from the darkness like a guide.

"Aloisia, come back to us." It was her father's voice caressing her ear. "You've been gone for far too long."

Aloisia fought against the iron weight that held her eyes. She moved her head slowly and parted her lips. Her eyes opened a crack and light flooded her vision. Her eyes forced themselves open and she blinked rapidly. Her father was sitting by her bed, one hand grasping hers. The other continued to stroke her hair.  
"Thank God."

Aloisia licked her parched lips and tried to croak out, "Danielle?"

She didn't think the word passed her lips, but her father understood. "Toby's been working on your friend as much as he has you. She's over there." He pointed to the bed across the room.

Aloisia looked over to see Danielle propped up on numerous pillows like she was. Her eyes were closed and her dark skin had a palled, sickly look. Bandages wrapped around her right arm and the right side of her face. Aloisia glanced to her own body but there were no bandages on her. Her pale skin was almost unmarked save a few lonely burns on her forearms where Cinder had grabbed her.

Aloisia licked her lips again, but her mouth was parched. "Water, please."

Her father nodded and took his hand from hers to grab the glass that was on the table behind him. He pressed it gently to her lips. She drank slowly at first then quickened to gulps that almost choked her. When she had drained the cup she was able to speak more easily. Her throat ached and her voice was hoarse.

"What happened, Dad?"

"You don't know?"

Aloisia shook her head. "Everything's fuzzy. I only remember bits and pieces."

"I found you and Danielle at the gate yesterday morning almost dead. Someone had rung the bell and just left you there. The camera didn't catch anything. Toby searched your and Danielle's memories to find out what happened. He said that Cinder sent for you in your mind and stole you from your bed to where Danielle's home was burning and then took you to the old warehouse. You fought and killed him and one of the younglings, and Danielle killed the other. That's when everything went blank. Does this sound right to you?"

Aloisia nodded slowly, thinking through what Toby had told their family to keep her secrets. She had to be careful to stay in the same storyline he had created. It was close enough to the truth. "What about Danielle?" Aloisia asked uneasily. "What's going to happen to her?"

Her father shrugged. "She's a Rational and she knows of the Heart. There are Codes to be kept."

Aloisia immediately went to sit up completely and get out of bed. Izicar pushed her back down gently. "I won't let Gregory kill her after I worked so hard to save her. It isn't right, and you know it."

"Peace, Avenger," her father said wryly. "I never said anything about killing the poor girl. We wouldn't have taken care of her if that's all we intended. She's a Rational, but she also took on a powerful youngling and killed him. Impressive for someone without a Blood Tear."

"So what's going to happen?" Aloisia asked again impatiently.

"It took some convincing on mine and Toby's part, but we finally got the Society to agree she could become one of the few Rationals that are a part of the Heart. She will get her tattoo when she feels well enough."

"Tattoo?"

"The Heart has to have some way of identifying our Rationals. Don't worry; it's nothing like our brand."



It's just a small tattoo of her choice that'll enhance her abilities slightly so that she can help us keep our secret. Heart members will be able to sense her connection to our society through it and if something ever happens then they'll help her."

"But where will she live? Her home was destroyed and Chloe's..." Aloisia stopped, remembering Chloe's staring eyes and the way her parchment-like skin had given underneath hers.

"Toby's been working with that too. He's been using his Conduit powers to help Greg put her in our custody. She doesn't have any family left on her mother's side and her father doesn't give a damn. The police tried getting hold of him but couldn't. Donny was able to though, and he told him that she was old enough to make her own decisions and that as long as she was happy here she can stay."

"Has she been awake any?"

Izicar nodded. "She woke this morning. The first thing she asked about was you. We let Toby talk to her alone and tell her everything. She's been waiting for you to wake up anxiously. She was worried about you." He smiled at her. "She doesn't know you as well as we do."

The door opened and Toby wheeled in carrying a small vase of tiger lilies and purple orchids and another vase with white and pink tulips. Izicar stood and smiled. "I'll leave now so that you can talk to your brother alone. Despite his Conduit façade, I could tell he's been worried about you." He kissed her forehead. "You've no idea how proud you make me. I only wish your mother could see what you've grown into."

"She sees," Aloisia said softly. Her father nodded once and turned to leave. The door shut behind him with a click, leaving her alone with Toby. At first Toby didn't say anything as he wheeled to the nightstand beside Danielle's bed. He put the tulips down and came toward her. He put her flowers down and pierced her with a stare that made her squirm uncomfortably.

"Why didn't you wake me?" he asked finally.

"I couldn't Toby," Aloisia said. "It was my fight."

"Do you honestly think your short letter was enough to say goodbye? I wouldn't have interfered; I understood that Cinder was yours." Toby's voice was severe. "You could have *died*, Aloisia. You almost *did*. I don't ever want the last thing you say to me to be on a piece of paper."

"I'm sorry, Toby. But I had a dream and..."

"I know, Aloisia," Toby interrupted. "I probed both of your memories. I know everything that happened." He raised an eyebrow. "It was one hell of a fight."

"Yeah."

"Are you going to be alright? You cared a lot about Asher."

Aloisia jaw tightened but she nodded. "He's already in the past."

"I hope Danielle can get over Char as quickly," Toby said sadly, glancing toward Danielle's sleeping figure. "You may have loved Asher, but she adored Char. He played her good."

"It'll take her a long time to get over it."

"I should have known that Asher and Charlie were the two younglings," Toby said bitterly.

"How could you have possibly guessed?"

"We knew you were being watched closely. Besides, I read what Donny researched about Pyroenchancers. The first soul taken by a youngling has to be someone that trusted and loved him. I don't know why I didn't put two and two together."

"Don't do this to yourself, Toby," Aloisia told him firmly. "You've done your best and saved us both. You can't protect me from everything, no matter how hard you try."

He looked toward Danielle again, and Aloisia wasn't entirely sure he had heard her. "She loved Char with all her heart. She gave herself to him, heart and body. They can't take their souls until they've bonded." He sighed loudly. "I can only imagine what she's going through right now. She fell in love with a monster and shared herself with someone who killed her mother and wanted to do worse to her. He's destroyed her."

"Danielle's strong. She'll heal." Aloisia noted the bandages again. "Is she going to scar?"

Toby nodded sadly. "I healed most of it, but Pyroenchancer burns are harder to heal, and you have to be careful with using magic in a Rational. She was seriously injured."

"How badly will she stay scarred?"

"Not horribly. She's not disfigured or anything. Her hand's pretty bad off, but I was more worried about her losing dexterity than how attractive it was. Her arm's got some scars. Her face isn't bad off. Most of the scars are on her forehead and close to the ear. She'll be able to hide it with her hair. There's one mark on her cheek, but it isn't deep."

"It could have been a lot worse," Aloisia mumbled, remembering how horrible her friend had looked before.

Toby nodded in agreement. "She would be better off if Isaac would have helped me with her. He's the best healer the Heart has seen in a while."

"He wouldn't heal her?" Aloisia asked, surprised.

"He flat out refused. He said he didn't waste his energy on Rationals."

"I can't believe he would ever deny help to someone," Aloisia said angrily. "My healing abilities are limited, but I could never not help, even if it was a stranger and even if it risked exposing me."

"That's the difference between us and most of the Heart," Toby said gravely. "The Verdins wanted to let Danielle die. I treated her anyway, and I fought Melanie off of her when Verdin sent her to kill her."

"Fought?"

"I pressed her against the wall. Isaac had to constrain my powers to get her down."

"Did you get in trouble?"

"She had no right to come in here if I didn't want her to. My Class is higher than hers and she's in my family's Body. Really the only people who override me are you, Dad, and Verdin because he's the Master Avenger. Dad argued with Verdin for over an hour about Danielle and I didn't leave this room. It took a lot to save her, and not just from her injuries."

Aloisia was quiet, thinking about what Toby told her. He let the silence continue as he checked her pulse and pressed on the burns of her arms.

Finally after he had finished checking her over he asked hesitantly, "Aloisia, how did you and Dan get back? You blacked out in the warehouse."

Aloisia shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe my powers did a freaky voodoo thing. It's been known to happen."

"Maybe," Toby hummed, still worried.

Aloisia threw the covers off of her and swung her feet weakly over the bed side. She stood slowly, surprised by how weak her legs felt. She limped slightly and couldn't stand without leaning on the bed for support. It hurt to put any weight on her legs.

"Be careful, Aloisia," Toby said. "Your legs were crushed. I'm still healing them." He waved his hand and a pair of crutches appeared in front of her. She took them gladly; she was too hurt to worry about her pride.

"Have the Society left yet?" Aloisia asked, thinking about how good it would be to get rid of Josiah.

"Not yet. Nikolas said he had one more piece of business to deal with you before he left. He sent me for you actually. They're packed and ready to leave after he speaks to you alone in the training room.

"Alone?"

Toby nodded. "I'm going to stay here with Danielle. I've not let this room stay empty of someone of our family, and it will stay that way until the Society leaves. Come back in here when Verdin is finished with you."

"Thanks for protecting Danielle, Toby."

"You're welcome. Now go take care of Verdin. The quicker his family's out of here, the better."

Aloisia voiced her agreement as she used her crutches to leave awkwardly and she followed the familiar path to the training room. Verdin was sitting on her weight bench when she entered.

"You recover quickly, Avenger," he said, smiling.

"I'm not out of the woods yet," she stated, coming over and sitting down carefully beside him. She laid the crutches on the ground below her. "I've still got a lot to heal."

"You're lucky to be alive. Toby told us you took on three Pyroenchancers. You'll be the talk of the Heart; this is even bigger than the sea monster you killed."

"Two," she corrected, ignoring Verdin's flattery. "I only killed two Pyroenchancers; Danielle killed the other."

Nikolas clenched his teeth slightly at the mention of her friend's name but nodded. "That's what I wanted to talk about. Your friend's caused quite a problem for us."

"So I've heard," Aloisia grumbled.

"The only reason we've let her live is because your father promised me that she won't become a liability." Verdin paused. "However, he is no longer the main Avenger. It isn't his reassurance I need."

"Danielle would die to keep our secrets," Aloisia said earnestly. "Give me a little while with her and she'll be like a Heart member."

"She's your responsibility now, your possession."

Aloisia blinked in surprise. "Possession?"

"That's how it works. A Rational Heart always has a Heart master. They are given a tattoo to identify them and they must listen to their Heart master. They are compelled to. The master is responsible for the Rational's actions."

"Let me get this straight," Aloisia said coldly. "Danielle is less than human in your eyes?"

Nikolas smiled wryly. "No, she's *more* than human. You seem to forget who we are. We are the ultimate fighters, Aloisia, things the strongest quiver in fear at. Humans are nothing to us but things we use for our purposes and bind to us to continue Zâintili's race. God watches over us; He is proud of what we do and blesses us more than he ever has any other human."

Aloisia stared at Nikolas. A zealous light glinted in his eyes and he beamed a wide, almost stupid smile that contorted his scar. Fear slid down her spine and settled in the pit of her stomach. In essence, Verdin was the leader of her life; she did not want her leader to be a Narcisist with a god complex.

"I can tell you don't agree with me," Verdin laughed. "You will see what I'm talking about soon. You are a young Avenger; you've not dealt with humans as much as I have. It won't take long; you're the strongest Avenger of this generation." He nodded once to himself. "We will keep in touch, Aloisia. My son has taken an active interest in you. Have you noticed?"

"I'm not interested," Aloisia said quickly before she could stop herself. She took a deep breath and continued in a lighter tone, "It's not Josiah personally. I've just had enough of the opposite sex for a long while."

"My son can be a patient man," Verdin commented as he stood up, "if what he is waiting for is worth it."

"He'll have to have the patience of a saint."

Verdin didn't pursue the subject as he patted her shoulder. "Rest, fellow Avenger, and ready for the next battle." He turned and left her. Aloisia waved a hand distractedly and shut the door to the room with a small gust of wind. She didn't think she could stand even if she had wanted to. It wasn't her legs that kept her immobile. Her troubled thoughts and memories weighed on her like iron, constricting her more fully

than Cinder's shackles had. She sighed, leaning back on the bench. It would be hours before anyone would come to look for her. She hadn't moved at all when Danielle found her staring at the ceiling.

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### 38.

Aloisia watched the struggle with a detached air. Another high pitched scream pierced the night. She was so close it made her ears ring.

The next scream was cut off sharply by the vampire that had the woman pressed against the tree. He hit her again, snapping her head to the side. Blood dripped from her chin to her white blouse, the red a sharp contrast. The woman shivered in disgust as the monster ran a tongue across the trail of blood, a hand starting to lift her shirt. She began to whimper.

Finally, Aloisia slipped out of the tree she was hiding in and walked up slowly, making no noise in the thick blanket of underbrush. The woman saw her first. Her eyes widened further, impossibly large in her small face. Her hands paused in their futile attacks against the vampire as Aloisia drew her dagger from the sheath on her back. Aloisia didn't give the vampire a chance to turn around as she plunged the dagger in his back quickly and twisted. The vampire grunted once and died on her blade. She wrenched it out and had jumped into the tree branches above her before the body hit the ground.

Aloisia watched the crying girl stumble forward, almost tripping over the cadaver that had already begun to rot its skin away. She looked around wildly and looked up above her, but Aloisia was hidden from sight. The girl wiped at her eyes and started to run. She would call the police, but the body would rot away before they got there and Aloisia would be gone too. She jumped from the tree, wiping her blade on a leaf she had pulled off on her way down.

"Took you long enough to help her," Danielle said crossly, coming from her own hiding place she had chosen of the wild rose bush. "What, did you enjoy the show? I was ready to kill the thing myself."

Aloisia shrugged, sheathing her dagger. "I didn't let her die, did I?"

Danielle shook her head and walked away grumbling. Aloisia jogged to catch up with her.

"What's wrong, Danielle?" Aloisia asked quietly.

Danielle shook her head. "You've changed since ... last month."

"Changed?"

"Don't tell me you don't know, Aloisia. Ever since you killed Cinder, you've been distant, darker."

"I've not meant to be," Aloisia said softly. "I guess that day did change me a little." She stopped walking and sat down on the ground wearily. Her first night patrolling and she was already tired. She looked to her friend that sat down beside her. "You're not the same either, Danielle. You're always so sad and haunted."

Danielle's badly scarred hand played against the dragon's red head of her tattoo that peeked from

beneath the black shirt she had on. Aloisia had designed the entwining oriental dragon that wound her entire waist, his tail resting beneath its head. She could have drawn something simpler and less painful for her friend, but the image had seemed so perfect for her. Besides, Danielle had approved after some persuasion. "Yeah, well, my life *has* changed." Danielle waved her hand vaguely. "Yours has stayed basically the same."

"I know," Aloisia said softly. She took Danielle's hand and squeezed it, feeling the calloused roughness of the scars. "You've adapted admirably."

"What choice was I given?"

"None." Aloisia shook her head. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry? For what?"

Aloisia shrugged uncomfortably. "A lot of things. For not telling you about the Heart sooner, for telling you at all, for letting you get hurt, for not saving Chloe, for making you be the one who had to kill him. It's my fault you're left without a family in a world that doesn't accept you as an equal." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "It's my fault you bear his scars."

"Is that what you think?" Danielle asked bewilderedly. "Aloisia, that isn't true. None of this was your fault. Char killed my mother, not you, and I'm glad that it was me who shoved the dagger in his damned heart. You saved me, Aloisia, and being scarred and a Heart member is better than being dead. I am the only one to blame for my life. I was the one that fell in love with the monster."

"We both did," Aloisia sighed.

"Do you think you'll ever see Asher again?"

"Ash?" Aloisia shook her head. "The Heart believes he's dead. It'll be a long time before he becomes active like Cinder did. Still, like Cinder said, we'll be drawn together again."

"And?"

Aloisia felt at her back where her mother's sword should hang. Its familiar weight was gone. She had lost it the night she had killed Cinder, along with Diablo's weapons. She hadn't recovered any of her weapons from that night, but those were the ones she missed the most. "I'll keep my promise."

Danielle shivered, like the coldness in her voice had chilled her. "Don't let this consume you, Lo. Ash might as well have taken your soul if you let this change you."

Aloisia's expression softened. "You're right, Dan. I can't let my revenge be the only driving force in my life. I've seen that happen too often to other Avengers."

Danielle smiled, the first real smile Aloisia had seen since she had killed Char. It brightened her face, stretching the small tear shaped burn scar on her right cheek. She often thought of the scar as her permanent sorrow. "My Aloisia's finally returned. About time."

Aloisia rolled her eyes as she stood and helped Danielle to her feet. "We'd better be further off in case that girl calls the cops."

Danielle nodded and they continued down the small, woodsy road that stemmed off of one of the further suburbs. They walked together talking softly about anything that came to them. Aloisia found herself laughing and everything almost seemed normal again. That was when she smelled it.

Aloisia stopped, putting a hand out in front of Danielle. She breathed in deeply. The scent was faint, caught on wisps of wind. Still, it made her throat catch, her heart pounding painfully fast.

"Lo?"

"Do you smell that?"

Danielle looked at her questioningly. "Smell what?"

It got slightly stronger. The light smell of smoke, like from a bonfire, wafted in the air. It was similar to what she had smelled from Cinder in the park but different, less acrid and sharp. Aloisia sent searching tendrils of her power out, following the strengthening smell. The tentacles of magic, like extensions of her fingers, struck against something solid, something powerful. Aloisia recognized that raw strength immediately. She set off at a run, ignoring Danielle's exclamation of surprise.

Ahead of her there was a dark red pulsing flash of light. She knew he was gone before she ran into the empty clearing. She let out a frustrated sound, punching a tree. It quivered and shook like it would fall if she hit it again.

"What was that all about?" Danielle panted, stopping beside her. She put her hands on her knees, struggling to catch her breath.

"Ash was here. I felt him."

"Ash?" Danielle looked around. "What's that?" She pointed to the edge of the clearing where three short and thin figures stuck close to the ground.

Aloisia peered closely at it as she and Danielle walked over carefully to them. "Oh my..."

Her sword and Diablo's weapons were driven into the ground. Stuck to the hilt of her sword was a folded sheet of paper. She took it and unfolded the sheet carefully. Danielle leaned closer to read over her shoulder.

*Aloisia,*

*There's so much I would like to say to you, but I know I cannot face you again without seeing only hatred in your beautiful eyes. I could not bear it. It is my fault; I see that now. I thought I could handle it, juggling my two sided life. Now I've lost everything. I've been left desolate and alone and only by my hand. I should have known you would have helped me. I wasn't fair to you. I'm sorry. I still love you but even if you hadn't vowed my blood to Zâintili we could never be together. Cinder was right; I am compelled to you. Your soul sings to me, begging to be taken. It makes me sick.*

I can't stay, but I don't know how long I'll stay gone either. I do know this though: we will be enemies next we meet. I cannot fight my desire for souls any longer. My will is not strong and I've broken. I know by the time I come for you I will be at my full strength, and you've said it yourself, I'm more powerful than Cinder. I'm not threatening you, just warning you. I can't help but think that it would have just been easier

to watch you and Danielle die in the fire, but it was something I couldn't, wouldn't, face. I took you both home, but it'll be the last bit of pity I show.

Tell Danielle I'm sorry for her mother. I truly am. I counted her a true friend. I cared more for her than my brother did. I regret not warning you two about us every second. But I can't change the past and I hate our future. I will match your vow with one of my own: one day I will have your soul, even though the moment I do, I'm destroyed. I don't know how you've gained my Pyroenchanter's ability, and I'm sorry for giving you another burden to carry. Please, don't fight the desire for souls; it will overcome you. I know that it is wrong, but it doesn't have to be an evil act. There are Bloodbanes that deserve worse than death, myself included. My only advice until our fight. Rest peacefully until then, my Atlas, and allow someone else to bear the world's weight with you.

*Love, Ash*

Danielle looked at her worriedly after she finished reading it.

"Aloisia..." she hesitated. "Are you alright?"

Aloisia didn't answer as she crumpled the piece of paper into a wad and gripped it tightly in her fist. A sliver of gold and purple fire caressed its way down her arm and Danielle jumped back. The paper curled into ash in her hand.

"Aloisia." Danielle reached out and shook her shoulder, wincing as she gripped her scalding hot skin. "Snap out of it."

Aloisia nodded and shut her eyes. Slowly she was able to cage her powers. She heard Danielle breathe a sigh of relief. "Are you alright?"

Aloisia nodded, opening her eyes. Her voice was level and emotionless as she said, "He's just a Bloodbane."

Only her tears betrayed her.

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### **About the Author**

I live in the Appalachian rural reaches of Kentucky, a beautiful, tradition rich area that has stolen my heart. I'm a Robinson Scholar and am currently attending the University of Kentucky, majoring in pre-Med Biology and minoring in Greek and Roman mythology. I come from a large family with three younger brothers (most of my Bloodbanes are inspired by their terrifying talent for destruction), Scooper and Chowder, our dogs, and Artemis, our cat. I'm an avid reader and writer, obsessed with dragons and other mythological beasties, odder than a five headed Cerberus (and probably as pleasant to meet), and happy about it.

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