



**Avatar's Awakening**

H E McVay

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to Jeremy Jinks, for teaching me the value of tree jousting and Pamela Peak for all the red ink on my first book over ten years ago.

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## Chapter 1

Jade eyes stared at the darkened city street, passing over each face with a speed and precision recognizable only by a Predator. A slight nod was given in the direction of a familiar smell. The figure moved closer to the owner of those eyes.

Hands were curled into loose fists, fingers itching to reach for a weapon that was not there. Sure steps carried her closer to her fellow Predator. Reaching a distance within ear shot was not difficult, given the extraordinary abilities possessed by the woman with those bottomless eyes, those eyes that had seen millennia come and go through her ageless years. The woman pushed her hands into the pockets of the charcoal gray slacks she wore and canted her head to the side, the challenge clear in her words. "These are mine."

The man stared at her with equal determination, his own eyes flaring a momentary gold. He measured her in that moment. Her stance, her confidence, and most importantly, her power. His eyes flickered indignantly before returning to their customary gray, the color that let him blend in with his Prey. "I have not encroached on your borders, Scion." His tone, though respectful, retained a mocking quality.

Elizabeth straightened, her left hand leaving her pocket, coming to rest on her hip, one perfectly manicured nail tapping a warning. "Your disrespect will not be tolerated. Consider this your warning, Vitiate."

He drew himself up to his full height, and sneered lightly. "My apologies, Scion. I will leave you to your hunt."

"See that you do not disturb me or my Prey." She lifted her chin, jade orbs flashing a bright emerald, reiterating her silent threat.

She maintained her posture until he stepped away and faded into the gloom behind him, taking with him the darkness that had pervaded the remnants of her soul. As he disappeared, she relaxed, turning to regard the passersby with no small amount of smugness.

Her arrogance was well earned; survival was not merely that of the fittest ... it was that of the weakest as well. She had protected the people of her city, at least for the moment. It was her duty, not only to maintain the behavior of her Predators, but also the delicate balance of the citizens. She slipped her hands into her pockets once more and continued on her evening rounds. The hourly rotation of the Space Needle was almost complete and soon the streets would fill with the tourists who flooded her city. They would be drunk, merry and ripe for the taking. After all, no one would miss a tourist here or there.

\* \* \* \*

Adam draped his arm around Natalya's slight form. She huddled beside him for warmth as they exited the museum. "Are you hungry, Nat?"

Natalya shivered against him and shook her head. "No, I'm just going to catch a cab and head home. That last tour group really took it out of me."

He nodded in response and turned up the street towards McCormick's. "I'm meeting

with the new investor for drinks. You're welcome to change your mind and join us."

She broke away from him, head turning towards the street as she looked for a taxi. She flagged one down and glanced to him as she stepped off the curb. "No thanks. I'm absolutely beat. I'm just going to go home and take a quick shower, then it's off to bed with me. Now straighten your tie and put your game face on. Call me in the morning. I want to know how it goes."

"I will." He waited until she was safely in the cab with the door closed before raising a hand to wave. In his pocket, his other hand curled around the switchblade, a habit he'd formed after being mugged a few years earlier. He never went anywhere unarmed.

Adam quickened his pace, eyes darting around nervously. He altered the mental map in his mind's eyes as he went. Nothing seemed wrong until someone collided with his shoulder. Adam stopped cold and spun to regard the perpetrator with narrowed eyes. A quick check revealed that his wallet and car keys were still safely tucked in his back pocket.

The man who bumped into him stopped and cocked his head to the side, mirroring Adam's expression with a mocking one of his own. Ice gray eyes sparked gold for a moment. Adam blinked, wondering if the long hours were playing tricks on him. The man's eyes were once again a dull gray even as the man spoke. The words tickled Adam's mind, somewhere in the back. As though he'd heard the voice before. *Follow, Prey.*

His feet moved towards the stranger of his own accord, following the retreating form back the way he'd come, rounding a corner into an alley. The street lamps flickered then faded until only darkness remained. Adam's senses dulled in the wake of the darkness. The voice tickled at him again. *Come.*

Leaded feet carried him forward, even as he realized this was wrong. He wasn't supposed to be here. He had 20 minutes to make it to McCormick's and the meeting with the finicky investor. Adam opened his mouth to speak, lips working to protest soundlessly. He found himself pressed to the grimy wall behind him, the leather of his coat whispering against the brick as the stranger moved towards him. A silky voice murmured in his ear. Adam tipped his head to the side on instinct. "Good boy."

The man was upon him now, a hand reaching out to caress his face in a gentle manner, those odd eyes sparking gold once more while needle-sharp nails traced down his neck over his jugular. "I prefer it when my pets behave. Adrenaline makes the blood bitter."

Warning bells went off in Adam's head. Pain registered next as the man's teeth bit into the flesh under his chin. Adam struggled to find his voice, horrified when he found that he could only manage a whisper. Better than it not working at all, he supposed. "No offense, man. I'm not into this kind of thing."

The man chuckled darkly, cool breath fanning over Adam's ear. "Trust me, when I'm done with you it won't matter."

\* \* \* \*

Her senses prickled as she heard the whisper of the Vitiate in her mind. Elizabeth growled, rage coursing through her. The disrespectful cur, daring to trespass when he'd been so clearly warned. She spun and bared her teeth in warning to any who dared not step out of her way. She broke into a run. The Prey's life hung in the balance.

One mortal, more or less, was not going to be missed. However, this man radiated something besides his calm fear. It was a fascinating sensation, a muted outrage, the last vestiges of an Enthralled person giving up their struggle to retain their tenuous hold on life.

Elizabeth opened her mind and let her senses soar as she embraced the Prey's fear and let it guide her. She moved at top speed, until she could hear it physically. The man's heartbeat quickened with every passing second. She came to a stop at the entryway of the alley. Her lips curled in disgust as she spotted the Vitiate and his quarry. "You were warned, you insolent little whelp." The snarl was followed by fast steps that carried her closer.

\*

Adam's eyes flew from the gold-flecked orbs in front of him, when the cloud of passivity snapped with the new voice. He barely focused on the newcomer as she surged forward and grasped his assailant by the shoulders. The man was shoved into the wall beside him. Adam scrambled out of the way, eyes widening as the fear that had been held back by some unknown force now bombarded him fully.

Strong fingers sank into the delicate flesh of his attacker's throat, slamming him bodily against the bricks. His head bounced off the wall and when the woman spoke, her voice was a soft hiss.

"You repay the mercy I showed you by hunting where you know you are not welcome."

The man gurgled and clawed at her hand, struggling for breath as the woman pushed him up the wall and off his feet. Adam was barely able to make out the words when the woman spoke again. "You have pushed my patience beyond its limits. Your life is forfeit with the dawn if I lay eyes on you in this city again. Do you mark me, Vitiate?"

Adam watched in morbid fascination as she tightened her grip until her knuckles were white. Her nails broke the man's flesh, rivulets of crimson trailed down her hand, marring the cuff of her sleeve. He should be running ... should not be a witness to this act of vigilante justice. He scurried back. The woman's eyes flashed to him, a brilliant green as she gazed at him. "I'll deal with you in a moment."

That intense gaze was diverted once more to the man. He snarled at her, baring his teeth. Adam blinked. Were those ... fangs? His eyes widened in disbelief as she lowered the man, pulling him forward.

"You have no business commanding me, Scion. I am not one of your Cherished." The words spat with hateful force.

"Enough." Her left hand rose, lacing through the man's hair in an almost gentle movement. The mugger's eyes widened for a fraction of a second before Adam heard the snapping of bone and the sickening crunch. In the next moment, the woman's hand snapped up. The nameless assailant's eyes stared out at Adam from the decapitated head, frozen in mute horror.

Adam opened his mouth to scream, but again no sound came out. A new voice issued a single word into his mind, a command that would not be disobeyed. *Silence*. Adam's limbs remained frozen, though he did not know why.

The woman raised her head to the sky and released her hold on the body, letting it fall to the ground with an expression of open distaste. She tossed the head to the other side of the alley and reached into her pocket, withdrawing a small plastic bottle. Adam

shook his head and looked closer. Was that ... antibacterial hand sanitizer?

She remained silent as she flipped the top open squirted a generous amount into her palm, resealing the container and pocketing it once again before rubbing her hands together brusquely.

\*

The man's fear was palpable and as intoxicating as if she'd just consumed all of the lifeblood he had to give. Elizabeth held her hands out before her and frowned; she'd gotten a fair bit of blood on her cuff. The shirt was essentially ruined. She stepped forward to the man and canted her head slightly, studying him for damage. She extended her hand to him. "Your coat."

He frowned at her, mouth working wordlessly. Elizabeth arched a brow at him, her good humor restored. "You can speak, can you not?"

He nodded soundlessly. A smirk tilted her lips upwards. "Well, then rise and show your gratitude by giving over your coat."

The intended pushed himself up off the ground and shrugged out of the battered leather coat, extending it to her between two fingers. His fear mounted as she reached out and accepted it from him, letting her own fingers linger on his a moment too long. She reveled in the moment, it wasn't often she had contact with the living long enough to exchange words. If it had been any of her Cherished luring him into this alley instead of the Vitiate, he would have died unnoticed. This nagged at the long dead morals she'd pushed aside eons ago.

She slung the coat over one arm and swiftly unbuttoned the cuff of her shirt, rolling the sleeve up to protect it from becoming stained. She would take no chances. Her voice was soft, her tone commanding as she spoke. "You will leave this place and take no notice of this incident any longer. You will communicate what has taken place to no one. Do you understand?"

He stared at her, caught in the Thrall and began to nod before frowning and shaking his head, suddenly finding his voice. The force of his defiance startled her. "No."

Elizabeth slipped into the stranger's coat and lifted her hair free from its entrapment between the coat and her shirt. "You dare to question me?"

He blinked then, and she smiled inwardly at his obvious confusion. He attempted to hold himself straight under the scrutiny of her gaze. "Uh ... yeah. Forget that you just ripped some poor guy's head off without so much a blinking?" The disbelief in his voice was amusing, at least for the moment.

She watched him through impassive jade orbs, slipping her hands into the pockets of the jacket. "Does it not matter to you that the 'poor guy' was going to kill you?" She kept her tone purposefully even, stepping closer to the man, the first person she'd encountered in more than three centuries who'd refused to be Enthralled.

\*

Adam stood his ground when the woman stepped closer. Her left hand slipped from the pocket of the coat, rising to her own throat and touching her pulse point. Her voice was low, accented with melodic tones he couldn't place. "He was going to kill you by ripping out your jugular and hanging you upside until he'd drained you completely. It's not a fast way to die, I assure you. It isn't like the movies. Vitiates are so sloppy." She glanced back to the headless body with a delicate sneer.

Something inside Adam finally snapped. "What the hell are you about, Lady?"

She smiled then, an icy, amused expression that just barely reached those sparkling green eyes. "Never mind that. If I let you leave here alive, it must be with your word that you will speak of this to no one. Ever. And, rest assured, I will be aware if you do."

"What? Hell, no. I'm calling the cops." Adam backed away from her, patting the pockets of his pants. The meeting could be damned for all he cared at that moment.

"With what?" She cocked her head to the side.

Adam scowled at her. "My cell..." He trailed off into silence as he realized his cell phone was in his coat. The woman's hand appeared holding the phone carefully in one hand. Her amusement mounted as she tested the weight of it.

Her smile abruptly disappeared. She drew her hand back and threw the phone at the wall. Adam watched in mute horror as it shattered into pieces and bounced to the ground. "Hear me, and hear me well. You have a choice. Either you comply with my command or you die here and now by my hand. Either way is fine with me."

Adam swallowed hard and nodded. Was bringing the obviously delusional and psychotic woman to justice, after she'd literally saved his ass, worth sacrificing his life? It was an easy decision to make. She smiled again, evidently pleased with his answer as she approached him, her hand raising to his face. One of those impossibly strong fingers tipped his chin up gently, scraping him. He barely noticed that she'd broken the skin until she drew her hand away and studied the droplet of blood on her finger.

He stared in mute horror as she popped her finger into her mouth and licked the drop off. Her finger was withdrawn and tucked into her pocket as she tipped her head to the side and regarded him coolly once more. "It was interesting to meet you, Mr. Montrose. I do hope you'll take better care of your life in the future. It would be a shame for the Science Museum to lose one of its tastiest curators."

Adam's brows knitted together as the woman turned to go. She strolled away as though nothing had happened. He trailed after her, eyes busily scanning the street as he turned the corner. His menacing savior was nowhere to be found. He swore under his breath as he glanced at his watch. He had only ten minutes to make it as many city blocks to McCormick's. Struggling to put the bizarre occurrence out of his mind, he broke into a run towards the restaurant.

\*

Elizabeth's hand slipped into the pocket of her slacks, drawing out her own cell phone. With barely a glance to the keypad, she punched in a number from memory. Being a Predator certainly had its perks. One of those being a photographic memory. It came in handy at the oddest of times.

"McCormick's, this is Sean." A deceptively young voice caught her ear, prickling her senses. From her perch on the fire escape of the building across from the alley, she watched with a smirk as the bewildered Mr. Montrose gaped around himself. She could clearly hear him swear when he realized she was no longer within sight.

She chuckled as she spoke into the phone. "Sean, my Cherished one, why are you still working in that horrid place? We both know you could do so much better."

There was silence on the other end before he responded. "Miss De Maigne, how are you this evening?"

Elizabeth's voice dropped to a veritable purr. "I need a favor." Her eyes followed the retreating form of the marked Prey.

"It is ever my pleasure to serve you, Miss De Maigne." The implications of Sean's



words were met with an indulgent smile.

“Good.” The pleased tone was genuine before the smile dropped from her face. “There’s a man headed to your establishment with whom I have a meeting. Would you be so kind as to detain him until my arrival? Make my excuses for me and inform him that I will arrive shortly.”

“You’re running late?” Again, Sean’s words were laden with his intended meaning and the superficial one.

Elizabeth was, as a rule, never late. Time was valuable to every being, mortal or otherwise. Loathing crept into her voice as she responded. “I ran into a bit of trouble this evening, nothing more than a minor annoyance. I will be no more than fifteen minutes late arriving. Serve Mr. Montrose a drink, if you will, a good stiff drink. He’ll need it.”

“I understand, Miss De Maigne, as I said. It is always my pleasure to serve you. And will there be any other message this evening?”

“No, that will be all.” Elizabeth drew the phone from her ear and snapped it shut, making certain it was snugly tucked into her pocket. She leapt from the railing of the fire escape, landing on the street below without so much as a whisper of sound. She needed to make a visit down the block to the proprietor of her favorite clothing boutique.

\* \* \* \*

Adam nursed his second Bloody Mary in less than ten minutes. He’d arrived at the restaurant freezing and with only 2 minutes to spare. When he’d gotten there, the host had informed him that the person he was meeting was going to be a few minutes late. Adam was grateful for the reprieve. He needed a few minutes and a few stiff drinks to clear his head. The scene from the alley kept running through his head as though it were straight out of a B movie stuck on slow motion.

That someone so seemingly frail as his rescuer could be so vicious as to rip someone’s head off was, quite simply, fucked up. That she’d done it with such obvious disregard for the man she’d slaughtered with inhuman strength was downright disturbing. He was beyond relieved that the bitch hadn’t killed him, too. He could hardly believe what had happened, let alone that the woman’s delusional ranting could have been true.

*Hung him up and bled him out.* Yeah, right. He snorted and took another long pull off his cocktail.

“Pray tell, Mr. Montrose? Do you find my tardiness amusing?” The voice was eerily familiar, yet certainly not the voice of anyone he knew.

He hurriedly rose from his seat, face flushing brightly as he extended a hand to the woman. “No, I was just thinking to myself, Miss De Maigne.”

Elizabeth De Maigne watched him from behind black-rimmed glasses with a bemused expression. She accepted his hand and shook it briefly before moving to take a seat in the chair across from him. He frowned at her, a certainty flaring up within him as he studied her. His mind must have been truly disturbed by his brush with death; the young woman before him was a dead ringer for the psychotic bitch in the alley.

But there was no way that was possible. The murderer had possessed a head of fine brown hair, wildly whipped around her by the unusually windy night of the city. Miss De Maigne’s hair was lighter, bordering on dark blonde and pulled back into a complicated bun. She was impeccably dressed in some finely tailored, obviously expensive designer suit. Her odd green eyes were friendly behind her glasses as she studied him with no

small amount of amusement. "My apologies. I was detained by an unexpected visitor."

Adam nodded, not completely understanding, forcing his mind to focus on the task at hand. He needed to make a good impression on the eccentric woman. Her endowment to the Science Museum meant upgrades to the technology exhibit, upgrades that would make a difference in the number of patrons they drew in. Sucking up was essential, and that included humoring her every whim.

The waiter returned, bearing a drink and a smile for the woman. Adam frowned as he watched their interaction. The light flirtation between them was obvious. Evidently, their new investor was on friendly terms with the waiter.

Miss De Maigne's hand rested briefly on the waiter's arm as she laughed softly at something he said. The familiarity, for some reason, angered him. Adam cleared his throat, hoping his tone was even. "Miss De Maigne, thank you for your willingness to meet with me face to face." He was stunned when she waved the server away and lifted her own drink to her lips with an indulgent smile.

"Please, Mr. Montrose, call me Elizabeth. That is *de rigueur* among close business associates, is it not?" Her questioning tone seemed genuine, though it held an edge of some unrecognizable challenge.

"Elizabeth," he amended. "On behalf of the Seattle Museum of Science and History, I want to express my gratitude to you for your willingness to make this donation. It is vital to our institution for our efforts to update our exhibits and cataloguing equipment. The amount you have offered is beyond generous and we were hoping there was some way we could honor your efforts."

"Like what? Putting my name on a plaque and hanging it in your facility?" Her eyes sharpened as she shook her head. "The donation is tax deductible and quite frankly, that is enough for me. However, I do have one request to make of you."

Adam arched a brow in question as he leaned forward and abandoned his drink. "Name it. If it's within my power as both a curator and board member, I will do everything I can to make it happen."

Elizabeth chuckled softly. "You are well-trained in the art of ass-kissing, aren't you Mr. Montrose?"

"Adam," he corrected with a smile, his relief evident. "And though we ass-kissers prefer the term brown-nosing, it's a necessary evil when all funding is entirely from donations and government grants."

She smirked in amusement. "I was rather hoping you might be willing to let me personally examine some documents in the museum's archives."

Adam's expression shifted into a frown. "This is beginning to sound vaguely like bribery."

"Only vaguely," she agreed cryptically. "I will not withhold the funding I have offered should the answer be no, I was merely hoping it could be seen as a ... perk, if you will."

"A perk?" He relaxed into his chair, good-humor restored. "It would take a lot of strings to pull that off. Only certain people are allowed in the archives, and only then with an escort. What is your specific interest?"

Those strange eyes nailed him without flinching. "They are original documents from the middle ages written by some long-dead scholar referencing myths of angels and demons. It is a peculiar obsession of mine, rare and interesting documents. I enjoy

studying them.”

“And you would want liberty to study them at length, I take it?”

Elizabeth nodded with a small smile. “Of course, a glimpse is hardly worth the trouble, don’t you agree?”

“Yes, that’s true.” He supposed she was right. And what she was asking was not outlandish, though it would take a great deal of smooth-talking with the board chairman to secure that kind of permission. “I’ll do what I can, Elizabeth, although I can’t make any promises.”

“Thank you for your efforts, even if they do not pan out.” She finished off her drink in one long gulp then set it aside and wiped her fingers on a napkin. Her hand disappeared into the breast pocket of the fitted black jacket. A second later two envelopes appeared in her hand. She slid these across the table to him.

Adam lifted them, eyes moving to her in question. The benign smile appeared again. “Two checks. One to the museum for the agreed upon amount, the other to you. A token of my thanks for your efforts.” Her head cocked to the side. “Another for the same amount will follow should I be permitted to view the documents.”

Adam’s eyes widened in disbelief. He slid the envelope bearing his name back to her, gray eyes hardening. This was a bribe, outright. There was no other, more innocuous term for it. “A favor is fine, considering the generosity you have shown to the museum. However, I will not accept a bribe in any form.”

\*

Elizabeth’s brows quirked in blatant surprise. The man was displaying a spine, for the second time in a night. Most people whose palms she greased to secure her will were easily swayed, not only by money but by being Enthralled. Their silence, bought and paid for with their very lives as leverage, was necessary for the balance of her city. She relaxed her face into a semblance of a rueful smile, willing a naïve blush to stain her cheeks. “You misunderstand, Mr. Montrose.”

She leaned forward, covering the hand that still rested on the envelope with her own. “I am not in the habit of offering bribes. However, among the powerful in this city, a reward here and there is standard procedure. An expression of gratitude, if you will. I am not seeking to sully your character. Not by any stretch of the imagination. Please, take the money. It is important to me that you are rewarded for your efforts, be they successful or otherwise.”

He stared at their joined hands for a moment before pinning her with a hard stare. Were she any lesser being, she would have been cowed by the quiet indignant anger that lay in those baby blues. “I can assure you, I need no reward for doing the right thing.” He jerked his hand from beneath hers and rose from his seat.

Elizabeth remained as she was, genuinely stunned for the first time in centuries. She remained silent when he pushed the other envelope to her once more. “If you want your check back, now would be the time to take it.”

Her expression relaxed as she shook her head. “No. I am a woman of my word. The museum will have its donation.”

Something in his eyes shifted once more. “And you, Elizabeth, still have my promise that I will do everything I can to let you see the documents you asked about.”

This Prey was an interesting person indeed. Honor was a rare virtue in mortals, and one that Predators did not dismiss easily. It was an uncommon trait, presenting with it an

inherent desire to break the Prey who exhibited it; to see how far they could be pushed before they succumbed to the base desires that set the Predator apart from the Prey.

Elizabeth's smile was genuine. "In that case, Mr. Montrose..." She paused, lifted the envelope and ripped it in half. "Forgive me for my unintentional insult to your integrity."

He stared at her a moment longer before withdrawing the proffered envelope, folding it in half to tuck it into his back pocket. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Elizabeth. Be careful going home. The city is a dangerous place for a person alone."

Had they been in any other century, he would have given a proper bow before leaving. As it was, he gave a nod before disappearing through the doorway of the bar towards the exit.

Elizabeth let the smile drop from her face, returning her expression to its customary impassive state. This Adam Montrose was interesting Prey, a man who warranted her closer attention.

## Chapter 2

Adam adjusted the sensitivity on the x-ray machine and returned to his station. The imaging software had arrived only the previous day and not a moment too soon. The sarcophagus had been delivered a week earlier. It was a rare find, located in the catacombs beneath Paris during the clean up efforts of a recent sewage break.

The delicate stone edifice had been damaged because of ground seepage through the centuries, leaving it in a pitiful state. The once-gleaming gold inlay had been eaten away over the centuries, until the only decipherable hieroglyph remaining was that of a single golden feather resting on a set of scales. The other side of the scales had long ago worn away, so there was no telling what had been weighed against the feather. Any colors brighter than the dull gray of the stone were lost to the ravages of time and sewage. Few decipherable clues lingered on to tell him of who had been in the box. The portion of the sarcophagus that was still intact was an inscription carved directly into the stone surface. Most likely a curse, it was a common addition to burial crypts and containers, Adam knew this from his research.

According to the French authorities, their own museums had no interest in the piece, strictly because the smell of the sewage permeated that entire structure. The integrity had been compromised some time in the past century; most likely because of the shifting in the grounds beneath the city due to construction taking place above the location where it was found.

Adam had come across it in an article several months earlier. Any chance to study something so ancient was a thing to be savored. The French government had only been too happy to get rid of it. The generous endowment given to the museum more than covered the absurdly low asking price they'd set for the piece. The board had readily granted his request to use such a small fraction of the funding to acquire it, provided that he document each step of his efforts and work it in between his other projects.

And thus he'd found himself staying late at the museum every day for the last week, far past their regular closing time, and even going so far as to sleep in his office. The past month since receiving the funding had passed by quickly, leaving him busy with the numerous projects that were now underway to upgrade the exhibits and renovate the older parts of the facilities. He'd not gone back on his promise to push for their benefactor to be able to review the documents. The board had agreed after only token argument. A letter had been sent to the eccentric Miss De Maigne a week earlier, requesting that she contact the head curator to set up an appointment. She still hadn't responded.

Adam firmly pushed the memory of the woman from his mind and studied the results that appeared on the screen before him. His jaw dropped open as he realized what he was looking at. The sarcophagus the French had assumed was empty was, in fact, occupied. He glanced over at the monument, mouth working silently. He rose from his seat and reached for a pair of clean white cotton gloves. He'd spent the first night after its arrival carefully cleaning it of the debris that marred the lid and sides. The cracks were not deep, but were enough to compromise what was inside.

This was bad. This was very bad. Whatever had been preserved inside would quickly

begin to decompose. He made his way around the workstation and towards the sarcophagus, grabbing the digital camera as he went. If he was going to save the contents for study, he needed to remove them immediately and dry them out. Leaving them to rot in the foul mess that had undoubtedly leaked in through the broken seal beneath the lid was a very bad idea.

\* \* \* \*

Elizabeth stared down into the room from her perch on the roof of the neighboring building. Her eyes focused on the odd Mr. Montrose as he hurried from his computer terminal to the stone container on the sturdy metal worktable. Her head canted to the side as she watched him pull on gloves and lift a camera, taking it with him to the table. Those jade orbs narrowed when she realized his intention. He bent and began taking photographs of the side of the coffin. She bared her teeth in a snarl. The little fool. He had no idea what he was doing.

She straightened and took a few steps back, getting a running start. The leap between rooftops was easy enough, given that the buildings were the same height. Once atop the Seattle Science Museum, she scanned the area, breaking into a run as she noticed the roof access door had been left propped open. The stench of stale cigarette smoke assailed her acute sense of smell. She lifted a hand and stepped past the bucket full of butts, pulling the door open. A swift kick was given to the brick doorstep, sending it skittering across the rooftop.

“Stupid mortals and their vices,” she muttered as she quickened her pace, barely paying attention when the door clicked shut behind her. She descended the stairs to the third floor of the museum. It was here that the administrative offices and the research areas were located. She paused at the entrance to the hallway to slip on her black-framed glasses, and pull her hair back into a demure French twist. The only sounds that reached her were the thudding of Adam Montrose’s excited heart and the soft strains of Bach. At least the man had taste. She pulled the door open and paused again, surprised when no alarm went off. “Stupid mortals,” she repeated as she emerged into the hallway and set off once more in the direction of the research lab.

\* \* \* \*

Adam waited for the multiple flashes before lowering the camera and setting it aside on the rolling tray that held the smaller, more delicate equipment. He rested a hand on the stone lid and tugged upwards experimentally. To his shock, the lid gave a bit. He frowned. No wonder the French were itching to get rid of it. From the slight gap he’d managed, the smell of rotting sewage assaulted his nose. He gently pushed the lid back down and crossed the room to retrieve one of the respirators kept on hand for just such an occasion.

As he returned to the side of the sarcophagus, pressing the plastic clasp together behind his head, the CD player went dead. He spun, startled to find a very pretty woman holding the cord in one hand, a very annoyed expression on her face.

He frowned, pulling the respirator from his face, letting it dangle from his neck as he spoke sharply. “How did you get in here?”

The woman arched her brow and dropped the cord, tucking her hands behind her

back as she sauntered closer. Her voice was smooth and vaguely familiar. "I should have earmarked a portion of my donation for upgrades to your security system."

Relief set in as he recognized the voice at last. "Miss De Maigne?"

She chuckled, a dry sound laced with amusement. "I thought we'd agreed that we were on a first name basis, Adam."

"Not to be rude, but how did you get in here?"

Her head was cocked to the side. "The more important question, Adam, would be why did one of your security guards leave the roof top entrance propped open after his last smoke break? Were you aware that the roof is directly accessible via the fire escape? Interesting, isn't it, that a security system is only as good as the person in charge of locking the door behind them."

Adam flushed brilliantly. "Ernie left it open again..." He sighed, all anger draining from him. "I can understand you wanting to protect your investment, Elizabeth, but it's after one in the morning."

"What better time to test your security?" she retorted sharply as she came to stop beside the sarcophagus, hand rising to hover above the lid for a moment. "Who's in the box?"

Her blatant attempt to change the subject was not lost on Adam. He surged forward and grasped her wrist gently, pulling her hand away. "I don't know yet. And if you must touch it, please wear gloves. The oil from your fingers will cause damage to the little remaining gold on the lid. The markings are already faded."

The woman lifted her eyes, tilting her head once more. He got the distinct impression that her amusement was near its end. Obliging, she stepped past Adam and lifted a pair of gloves from the stack on the tray. He pointed to the shelves across the room. "There's a spare respirator that should fit you over there, in the box with Natalya's name on it. There are new filters on it."

Her chin lifted defiantly at the command. Adam stared her down; evidently, this was a woman who was not accustomed to being ordered around. It didn't really matter. She'd trespassed and was uninvited in his domain. It was by his good graces he hadn't called Ernie and had her kicked out yet. His curiosity however, as was its wont, had run away with him again. He was interested to find out why she was here, beyond the flimsy excuse of testing their security.

He turned back to the sarcophagus and knelt beside the table, studying what was left of the seal closely. He pulled the respirator back up over his mouth and fastened it once more. He felt, rather than heard his uninvited visitor return to his side. When he glanced up the mask was firmly in place over her nose and mouth, leaving only those odd green eyes to watch him from behind her glasses. Her voice was muffled. "What are you planning to do with it?"

Adam reached for a scalpel, redirecting his attention to the coffin once more. "I'm going to open it. I got it a bit a few minutes ago. The smell will knock you over. It's a rare privilege for a civilian to be able to view something like this."

She ignored his not so subtle barb. "Why is the smell so bad? And how did the seal come to be compromised?"

\*

Elizabeth reached out, gently caressing the lid before her. The markings were familiar to her. It was never supposed to have been found. Her mind worked quickly,

seeking ways to divert the inevitable. Adam spoke to her in low tones, as though the occupant of the box could hear him. Her question spurred him into a lengthy explanation involving a sewage line break in Paris several months ago.

She stared at the stone crypt, her expression carefully schooled into one of vague interest. She could kill him, she supposed. It was a moot point should the Avatar within the sarcophagus be released. Ra was one of the more vengeful Avatars. The ancients among her race killed without remorse or any thought to the balance of things. Ra had been driven to madness when Uriel had captured his original heart millennia before, only shortly after her transformation. The Avatar had supposedly been under the control of Uriel, leaving him a shadow of his former charismatic self.

After the Avatar had caused the death of one of the Risen, as the rare ascended demons were known, Uriel had seen fit that balance must be restored through punishment, leading to Ra's confinement within the sarcophagus. None of this would have made any bit of difference had Uriel destroyed Ra's original heart, but the Archangel had other plans evidently. The seal had been cracked ... and from the cold darkness beneath her palm, she could feel the beginning of consciousness edging into the long dormant spirit of the Avatar it contained.

If she killed Adam Montrose, it would be messy. These kinds of things took planning and time, disposing of a prominent member of the community was not a hastily undertaken effort. Disposing of the sarcophagus and its occupant was an even riskier proposition. With no way to call Uriel at will, there was a genuine danger to the delicate balance of her city. If Adam Montrose was a problem, Ra was a nightmare waiting to awaken before her very eyes.

Adam Montrose was immune to her Thrall, and his will too strong to bend to make him one of her Cherished. He would end up destroyed, if not by her hands, then by another Scion when he violated their territory. He was a creature of honor, but still a mortal ... still fallible. Transforming him was an unsavory prospect. His blood had told her of his ideals, his high morals. The very integrity that intrigued her would be his ultimate destruction. She'd seen it happen before.

The scraping of his tool on the seal pulled her back to reality. Whatever her decision was to be, she had to reach it soon. The seal, when compromised, had to be restored or it would fail altogether.

\*

Adam palmed the scalpel, working it beneath the lid. He slid it along the seal, astonished when it fell away so easily. Beside him, Elizabeth De Maigne had fallen silent as he explained the origins of the stone sarcophagus. He trailed off into silence as he smoothly moved the scalpel along the edge of the seal, prying it loose in the places it stubbornly stuck.

"Why did you stop speaking?" Her voice had shifted to one of empty inquiry.

He paused and raised his eyes to her. She stood with one hand on the gold plate that marked the lid. She had pushed the mask off her head, letting it dangle from the other hand. He withdrew the scalpel from the area on which he was working. "I got distracted."

She did not move, those strange eyes hardening as she regarded him in utter seriousness. "Did you translate the writing on the lid? Before you began to open it?"

"No, I'll be setting it aside for further study after I've recovered the contents." He frowned at her. "If I took the time, the sewage that leaked in will have damaged whatever



is in this thing even further.”

“Do you not find it odd, Mr. Montrose ... that an Egyptian sarcophagus was found in Paris?” She did not give him a chance to answer before she rounded the table, approaching him slowly. “If you had taken the time to read the inscription, you would find that it is a warning to any who would tamper with the seal.” She removed the gloves with a delicate sneer.

“A warning?” His frown deepened, brows knitting together. “How do you know that?”

“I dabble in ancient languages.” Her expression did not change as she ran her bare palm over the flat top before them. “The warning speaks of a great evil that will be unleashed upon the world should the sarcophagus be opened. A Pandora’s warning if you will.” She paused, a small, cold smile playing at her lips. “It speaks of a slain god whose wrath will rain havoc on those who would dare to disturb his slumber. Should that seal be broken, it will be a swift and final death to the person responsible.”

Her tone spoke of a knowledge beyond the little she revealed. Adam’s frown smoothed out, replaced by an expression of amusement. “You’re trying to scare me.” He reached out with the edge of the scalpel and tapped the crypt. “All these things have curses inscribed on them.”

“Wrong,” she interrupted, jade orbs intense as her hand closed around his wrist in an iron grasp. “The warnings are on the tomb walls themselves, rarely on the vessels containing the remains. I would suggest you heed this particular warning, Adam.”

He tugged at his wrist, genuinely angered. “I think it’s time for you to leave, Miss De Maigne. You can call to make an appointment to study the documents you wanted to see, during regular business hours.”

Her grip tightened so far as to cause him to wince in pain. Her next statement set his heart to racing. “I won’t be going anywhere, Prey. Not without you.”

\*

Elizabeth could feel her heart quickening in reflex to the rush of adrenaline her Prey felt. His eyes widened to comical proportions. Behind her, she could hear the first stirrings within the sarcophagus as Ra began to waken fully. Her Avatar was rising and it was done now. The seal could not be restored by any but Uriel past that first heartbeat that echoed itself within her own chest.

She flexed her wrist, lips curving into a feral smile as she heard the bones in the Prey’s wrist snap, breaking within her grip. His instant fear fed her bloodlust, his defiance, her desire to consume him.

The scalpel dropped from limp fingers as she released his hand. He cradled it protectively to his chest. Decision made, she growled and reached out to upend the sarcophagus, sending it tumbling from the table. It fell over, the weight of the massive stone pinning the lid shut. The weakened Avatar within would not be stopped, but he could be delayed at least long enough to get away from the museum. Behind her, the luscious Mr. Montrose squawked, though whether in pain or indignant rage she did not know.

She turned on him with a snarl. “Shut up! I don’t have time for this.” Her hand shot out, grasping his broken wrist and twisting painfully. It did not take much effort to force him to the floor. Her eyes sparkled, the natural thrill of the hunt always heightened her senses.

Elizabeth used his limp state for leverage, dragging him to his feet and pulling his body to her chest, the broken hand pinned behind him. She nipped at his ear as her free hand came to rest above his jugular, nail digging in at the pulse point. "You will obey without hesitation or you will die. Do you mark me, Prey?" Her voice dropped to a hiss in his ear. She could feel his pain edging in on her, feeding the bloodlust.

He swallowed hard and moved his lips soundlessly. "You will not speak. You will only obey. If you so much as blink in the wrong direction, I will snap your head off as easily as I did with our friend in the alley. Nod if you understand me."

The man within her arms shook. Anger and outrage coursed through his veins. He would be cowed by his fear long enough for her to lock him away, giving her precious time to decide his ultimate fate. She applied subtle pressure over his throat as she pushed him towards the door, a warning she fully intended to carry out. She was a Predator ... she did not make idle threats. It was the way of things.

\*

Adam's wrist throbbed in time with his pounding heart. The weight of his captor's arm over his throat was rigid, her slight frame overpowering with an ease he would not have imagined her capable of. He'd spent the last month trying to forget what had happened in the alley. He'd almost been able to dismiss it as a nightmare, or a delusion of being extremely drunk by the time he'd left McCormick's. Unfortunately, he now realized, it hadn't been a nightmare. And he hadn't been drunk.

"Call the elevator."

Adam gritted his teeth, briefly considering defying her. He did not doubt she would kill him. She'd snapped his wrist like a twig. She released the pressure on his uninjured arm, allowing him to move it only enough to punch the button. He strained in her grip. "What are you planning, Lady? There are cameras on every hallway."

"Do not speak again, Prey. Or they will be your last words." She growled low in his ear as the elevator dinged its arrival. She pushed him forward, not giving him a chance to correct himself as he stumbled. Once inside the elevator, she hissed another command. "Parking garage."

He opened his mouth to protest only to snap it shut as she dug her forearm into his windpipe in warning. He reached out, tapping the button. How in the hell was she planning on getting past Ernie? He wasn't the most observant fellow, but he would notice Adam being taken against his will out the employee entrance.

The doors slid open, granting them access to the parking garage. Adam's heart felt as though it was trying to beat its way out of his chest. The woman behind him shifted, releasing his broken arm, letting it fall to his side as she pushed him forward, past Ernie's booth.

The aging guard lifted his eyes to them with a friendly wave. The woman jerked Adam to a halt, pinning him with her eyes. Adam watched in morbid fascination as Ernie realized something was wrong, his hand snaking out towards the alarm button. The woman's hand shot through the half-open window and caught Ernie's hand in her own.

When she spoke, her voice was low, intoning something that simply wasn't possible. "You saw Mr. Montrose leave alone. He told you goodnight, got in his car, and you haven't seen him since. You will also destroy all the surveillance tapes from the last half hour. Vandals broke in through the door that was left open on the roof. Do you understand?"

“Yes.” Ernie’s eyes softened as a smile came to his lips.

The woman broke eye contact with him. Ernie’s usual grin returned. “Good night, Mr. Montrose. Careful out there; it’s raining again.”

Adam’s eyes were wild as he watched his last hope for salvation slip away. The woman pushed him forward once more through the revolving gate. She shoved him forward, releasing him. “Which is your car?”

He spun, glancing briefly past her to Ernie’s booth. The guard had returned his attention to the latest issue of *Sports Illustrated*. He flexed his jaw, eyes narrowing as his mind fought through the cloud of pain and fear, attempting to focus on a plan of escape. His head snapped to the side from the force of it, barely registering that she was backhanding him until he found himself sprawled unceremoniously on the concrete.

He pushed himself up into a seated position, eying her in disbelief. Once steady for a moment, he raised his good hand and rubbed his abused cheek. She stepped closer, crouching down until she was eye level with him. “Next time, I assure you, I will not be so gentle. Now speak. Which is your car?”

Adam’s eyes flickered to the guard booth again, then back to his captor. It struck him then, that though he feared for his very life, his would-be abductor was striking. She radiated a quiet power, fine brown hairs escaping the perfect French twist. Her glasses had been taken off at some point, opening those strange mutable jade eyes to gaze at him. Her expression was a shuttered one, relaying to him the steel within her veins. She was exquisite. He caught his breath as he pushed himself to his knees and ground out the words. “The black Camry. Space B5.” He moved his good hand slowly, reaching into the pocket of his khakis and extracting the keys.

A satisfied smile curled her lips up as she snatched them from his grasp. “Good boy, Prey. It seems you’re a fast learner.”

She rose and took a step back, beckoning him to do the same. Adam slowly rose to his feet, awkwardly cradling his broken arm protectively to his chest. She motioned him forward with the hand that held the keys. “Let’s get going.”

He moved slowly, praying with everything that was in him that Ernie would snap out of whatever the woman had done to him. They walked in silence until reaching his car. She regarded it was a sudden glint of amusement in her eyes. “You have good taste.”

The words were the equivalent to an indulgent pat on the head. She depressed the button on the remote, deactivating the alarm. Another quick movement of her finger and the trunk popped open. Adam watched in disbelief as she studied the interior for a moment before reaching out and grasping the encased wiring behind the emergency latch. The cord was not merely severed, it was ripped out altogether in one swift movement. A moment later, she motioned for him to turn around. He frowned, then complied. His hands were jerked unceremoniously behind his back to be bound tightly with the cord. Even the useless, broken right wrist was bound tightly. He cried out in pain when she gave it a firm tug, testing the strength of the knot. She pulled him back and towards the car, her voice once again commanding. “Watch your head.”

He was pushed into the trunk, body folding uncomfortably. She regarded him for a moment, expression unreadable. “I wouldn’t recommend screaming and thrashing about, you’ll only suffocate yourself.” She snorted. The trunk lid slammed down, leaving Adam in utter darkness.

He didn’t know how long they drove, only that it hurt like hell. His right arm was

trapped beneath the weight of his body, numb from the shoulder down. When she took a corner too quickly, he was thrown onto his back, knees coming up to hit the lid of the trunk. Pain lanced through his arm as the blood rushed back to his broken wrist. He couldn't move enough to get in a good kick at the wiring for the taillights. And even if they did get pulled over for speeding, she would probably be able to do that Houdini hypnosis stuff on the cops.

Adam lost count of how many turns they made, how many times she seemed to backtrack. He did, however, learn that Elizabeth De Maigne was a demon with a horn. By the time the car's engine died, he had somehow been thrown into the furthest reaches of the trunk. He heard the door slam, the crunching of those highly polished shoes on gravel. The trunk popped open, and he acted on instinct. As soon as he saw enough light, he shot both feet out at his kidnapper.

\*

Elizabeth saw his feet uncurling towards her and twisted her body out of the way, letting his legs flail at empty air. She quirked a brow at this belated display of temper and chuckled darkly. So, his spine was displaying itself at last. He'd been boringly easy to take, barely resisting her at all. His feet lashed out again as he realized he had hit nothing. Elizabeth leaned against the taillight and waited patiently until he ceased his nonsensical struggles against the imagined presence of his foe.

"Are you quite finished attacking thin air? I can close that lid and drive you off Galloping Gertie if you really want to die so badly." She fixed him with a bored stare, though he was actually amusing her for the first time that night.

His chest heaved as he stared up at her with wild eyes. His fine blond hair was mussed from his exertions. He opened his mouth to scream, only to be silenced as Elizabeth decided she'd had enough. She moved before his heart had a chance to complete a single beat. She grabbed him by his hair and hauled him from the trunk, throwing him to the ground. Her eyes flared emerald as the scent of his anger fueled the bloodlust within her once more. He was truly a marvelous specimen, though it was a pity he was not to be her Prey for the evening.

His head bounced merrily off the gravel driveway. She did not worry about injuring him further. Gravel was forgiving, even if it might leave minor abrasions. Mortals were delicate creatures, even the most sturdy of their kind. She crossed her arms over her chest and regarded him, allowing her eyes to reveal to him something of the true killer within. He groaned in obvious pain, the movement having jerked his bound arms. Elizabeth reached out and slammed the trunk closed with more force than was necessary. The luscious Mr. Montrose seemed to rouse at the sound. His eyes focused on her warily. She bent, threading her fingers through his hair, dragging him to his knees. "On your feet."

He stumbled a bit, gasping for breath. Elizabeth's lip thinned into a grim line. Perhaps she shouldn't be so rough on him. He had cooperated more beautifully than most of her victims. Once he was on his feet, she released her hold on his head. "In the house." She pushed him forward none-too-gently.

His eyes drifted upward, focusing uncertainly on the house. For a moment, she wondered if he felt as she had the first time she'd seen it. The house was massive, far more than she needed for only herself, but appearances had to be kept. Her eyes followed his, taking in the traditional lines of the Tudor-style mansion. It was obscenely large, and for good reason. On the rare occasion she had visitors, she preferred to be able to

maintain her privacy without worry that someone might wander in on her, by accident or otherwise. Adam's eyes grew round, and she suppressed an impulsive smile. There was much to be said for imposing structures and the influence they made on captives.

She nudged him forward once more, watching as he fought to maintain his balance. His anger mingled with the pain and the rush of adrenaline that was now receding to create a mixture that threaded deliciously through her chest. Her tongue absently caressed her razor sharp canines. How she itched to tear the man's throat open, just to taste that heady life force that had teased her memory for the last month.

Elizabeth forced the urge back down and followed her Prey to the back door. It was promptly pulled open by her Bewitched.

Adam paused at the door for a moment, eyes widening at the sight of the barefoot man who stood inside the doorway, clad in a pair of cut off jeans and a black wife-beater despite the obvious cold of the night air. She nudged him forward, silencing him with a single finger poking into his back. Obediently, he trudged on, crossing the threshold. Elizabeth spared a glance to Raul. "He is welcome. Do nothing."

"Yes, my Scion." The Bewitched man's words were prompt as he stepped aside to let them enter.

\*

Adam watched as the man looked to the woman with nothing but adoration in his wide hazel eyes. His fascination lasted only a moment before he shifted his gaze to the kitchen. How odd that he should be curious about something so inane as the spacious room. A pot of fresh coffee waited on the counter, half of it gone. It puzzled him, though, as to why she would have two coffee pots side by side. The room was as large as the outside of the house would seem to dictate. It was appointed as if there were a professional chef in residence. The scent of bacon and eggs lingered in the air, though the normally welcome smell turned his stomach. His eyes passed over the room, taking in the little accents that made it appealing. The cream-colored paint, maple cabinets and stainless steel appliances were balanced by the heavy mahogany dining table in front of the bay window on the other side of the room. The odd thing, though, was the lack of any personal touches. No pictures on the walls, nothing to make it homey. For all its flawless features, it felt decidedly sterile.

The man turned to regard Adam, mute curiosity flaring up in mostly blank eyes as he stared. Adam stared right back. Raul's gaze shifted to Elizabeth, silent question obvious. Elizabeth's voice was different as she spoke to the man. "Summon Jacob. Tell him he has a patient with a broken arm and to bring painkillers."

Without introduction, she pushed Adam towards a set of stairs across the kitchen. He went willingly, heart rate spiking again. A patient. She'd been referring to him. Relief flooded him as he realized that she did not intend to kill him, at least not yet. He would survive the night. His shoulders visibly slumped as he mounted the stairs, stopping at the door she indicated with another sharp poke to his back. He bit back a sharp retort; it would be suicide to demand she cease the rough treatment just when he'd been granted a stay of execution.

The doorknob was twisted open quickly, and he stepped inside before she could poke him again. She flicked the light on, bathing the room in soft white light. Adam's eyes flickered over the room, searching for an escape route. There was a window. The woman who now stood next to him snorted. "Don't bother. It's been cemented shut and the glass

is bulletproof. You won't be getting out through there." A hand on Adam's shoulder spun him. She worked at his bindings for a moment before his hands were released.

He hissed in pain as blood rushed to the broken wrist. He cradled it to his chest again as he turned to look at her. Her expression was unreadable as she spoke, her voice still hard. "I would suggest you rest. Jacob will be here in a bit. He'll reset your wrist."

With a flick of her hand, she indicated the bed. "I would appreciate it if you would bathe before using that. The sheets are silk. There are changes of clothes in the closet. There should be something in your size." She pointed once this time to the massive armoire directly across from the mahogany bed. "There's cable. HBO, Showtime, Pay Per View."

Adam frowned. She'd abducted him on the pain of death and now she was treating him as a guest. He cleared his throat. She stopped speaking as she arched a brow. "What is it?"

He glanced around himself. "Why all this?"

Elizabeth lifted her chin and narrowed her eyes. "You would prefer the basement? Chains and shackles ... no medical attention?"

Quickly he shook his head. She smirked, those eyes sparking bright emerald once more. "Adrenaline makes the blood bitter. Happy Prey is tasty Prey." She waited to watch his eyes widen.

"What the hell are you? What did you do to Ernie?" He demanded, instantly outraged at the situation.

Elizabeth's smirk disappeared. "I am a Predator. And your guard will be fine, if the Avatar you unleashed doesn't kill him."

"Avatar?" Adam's innate curiosity warred with his anger. "Predator, Prey ... Scion ... this means nothing to me. You owe me some kind of explanation, Lady."

"I owe you nothing. You will address me with the respect I am due. My name is Elizabeth or Miss De Maigne. Disrespect will not be tolerated. I spared your life, and that is payment enough for the injuries I caused." She turned and strode from the room, door slamming behind her. He heard the lock click shut, leaving him to his pain and mounting confusion.

### Chapter 3

Elizabeth paced the library, bare feet silent on the marble floor. A knock sounded at the door. From the gentleness carried within the heartbeat that sounded in her ear, she knew it was Jacob. "Enter." She lifted her head and ceased her pacing. The pocket door slid open, and Jacob entered.

He bowed low before moving towards her. "My Scion."

"Jacob, thank you for coming on such short notice." She purposefully kept her voice neutral. "How is our guest?"

Jacob's eyes, a mirror to her own light jade, regarded her seriously. "He is resting comfortably. I gave him enough Demerol to knock out a horse. He should sleep until nightfall, if not a bit later. His wrist was a clean break; you didn't damage any nerves, and I expect him to make a full recovery."

Her grandchild, many centuries removed, watched her carefully. "Elizabeth, are you all right? Your coloring is off."

She waved a dismissive hand. "I'm fine. I simply haven't eaten tonight." She glanced to the window. The edges of darkness were slowly being pushed away in the eternal battle for light with the sun. "I will correct that before I retire. You may rest here as well, if you wish."

"I think it would be wise. Raul can wake me if there is any trouble with Mr. Montrose." He did not question her evasive answer to the implied question. He was an obedient boy, unlike some of her younger Cherished. He opened his mouth once more, then closed it again.

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. "Speak freely, Jacob."

His expression shifted, gaze unwavering. "Is it possible that you have at last found your Aureate in Mr. Montrose. It isn't like you to leave Prey alive, and you certainly never toy with them by bringing them back to your home."

Her eyes narrowed as she spoke sharply. "Don't be ridiculous. I would not compromise myself or my family in such a way." Jacob did not flinch beneath the verbal assault. "Scions who succumb to such archaic notions as having an Aureate are no better than mortals with their ridiculous proclamations of undying love and endless devotion."

"Some do not think it so archaic. Tell me, Elizabeth. Will you be taking him as your consort since he cannot be Enthralled? You would at least be able to control him then, should you decide you have use of him." Jacob's voice remained soft, implying nothing beyond that of which he spoke.

Elizabeth sneered distastefully. "A consort indeed." Her cryptic words were the last she spoke as she waved a hand dismissively, turning once again to the window. Her eyes locked on the receding darkness over the mountains beyond the city.

\* \* \* \*

It was dark again when Adam woke. After a few moments of disorientation, he realized where he was. The silk linens were warm against the coldness of the room. He was loath to leave the comfortable bed. The knock that had awoken him sounded at the

door again. He pushed himself up on his good arm and eyed the door warily. The bitch wouldn't have knocked. "Who is it?"

"It's Jacob. Don't try anything when I open the door." The voice was friendly enough, given that the man was in the employ of his abductor. The key sounded in the lock just before the door swung inward.

Adam swung his feet over the side of the bed, holding the casted arm to his chest protectively. "You aren't going to give me another injection are you?"

"If you had cooperated with me, I wouldn't have had to sneak it up on you like that. Come now, no complaining. After all, you did get yourself into this whole mess." The young man possessed a self-confident air, though he lacked the arrogance Adam had seen in his abductor. Brilliant eyes, the same shade of green as Elizabeth's own, twinkled at him merrily as the doctor pulled the armchair forward from the wall, taking a seat on the edge of it. "How are you feeling this evening?"

Adam allowed his arm to be coaxed forward, spine rigid despite the friendly demeanor of the man. "Groggy. Hungry. Angry. Confused. Pick one. Any of them would be right."

"Can you flex your fingers around mine, please?" The man's forefinger slipped into Adam's grasp. The blond man obligingly squeezed, flinching when pain shot through his wrist. "Excellent, Mr. Montrose. So far as pain goes, I'll be leaving some pills with Raul. Please see that you take them as prescribed. One every 4-6 hours with food or water."

He released Adam's hand, gently pushing it back to rest in his lap. "I will escort you to the kitchen. You have permission to take your meal down there after you have showered and dressed. My Scion has ordered me to keep an eye on you should you be out of this room for any period of time. I daresay if you behave yourself, she may even allow you to contact your family within the next few days."

"I don't have a family." Adam grimaced. "What's a Scion? Is she like the queen bitch or something?"

The man's eyes narrowed fractionally. "You best not let Elizabeth hear you being so disrespectful. Scion is a title and that is all I can tell you. If she wishes you to know more, she will tell you herself." Those eyes were friendly once more in the next moment. "I can see why she is intrigued by you. You are not a simpleton like the rest of your kind."

"My kind? Museum curators?" Adam's brows furrowed.

Jacob chuckled. "Museum curators ... yes that's it exactly." His expression revealed nothing as he rose from the armchair and replaced it. "I will fetch you in half an hour. Please be certain not to get your cast wet. I'll have Raul change the bed linens. It won't do for Elizabeth to know you slept in them before you showered."

"What is with that?" Adam surged up from the bed, suddenly incensed at the entire situation. "What is up with kidnapping me and then treating me like some kind of child that doesn't know to bathe? The reason I didn't shower is because you shot my ass full of Demerol when I wasn't looking."

"My Scion is extremely sensitive to smells." Jacob turned and headed for the door once more. "Twenty nine minutes, Mr. Montrose. I'll be back."

\* \* \* \*

Elizabeth's eyes snapped open at the sound of the timer beeping. She glanced over. The blinds slid up seemingly on their own. The timer was a handy thing, befitting her



curious affinity for technological gizmos in all their forms. Her stomach clenched violently in reminder that she had blatantly lied to Jacob. She fisted her hand and lifted it to stare at it in the dim light of her bedroom. She was so pale as to be able to see the veins beneath the near-translucent skin.

She heaved a sigh and pushed back the covers, rising from the bed. She stretched in a feline-like movement, satisfied to hear the snapping of her back in the process. She ambled to the small kitchen area off the living area of her quarters, one hand stifling a yawn as the other fisted itself behind her head, elongating her torso in another stretch.

Within a few steps, she'd reached the fridge and was pulling it open. A despised dark green bottle was pulled out. She uncorked it and sniffed with a grimace of disgust. It was horrid, but it would have to do. A scathing glance was given to the microwave as she tipped the bottle up, and took several long gulps. It had been a thoughtful gift from Jacob, having it installed in Elizabeth's suite. It was however, relegated to reheating beverages and soups before spiking them liberally from her private stash. Human blood, like other mixtures of so many different elements, did not reheat well. The bottle was lowered only after she'd drained half the contents. She corked it and returned it to the fridge, making a mental note to speak to Jacob about restocking.

She lifted her eyes to the door, letting her heart focus on the rest of the house. Her guest was awake and none too happy, given the circumstances in which he was finding himself. Jacob was still there, obviously having received her note regarding the feeding and care of their visitor. Raul was busy as well, preparing a meal. His muted emotions were vaguely amusing. His confusion was obvious, having a new member added to the household. He was not capable of defying her, but was obviously wary of the newcomer.

She turned resolutely, padding barefoot to the bathroom. She smelled of adrenaline and sweat, undoubtedly it had rubbed off on her from Adam. She needed to rid herself of the stench before she felt ready to fully greet the night.

\* \* \* \*

Adam pulled the soft wool sweater over his head, It was several sizes too large, but it would do. It covered the cast and that was what was important. His stomach growled as he studied his reflection in the mirror critically. His hair had gotten shaggy, pale blond locks hanging over his eyes. He reached for the brush he'd found earlier. He ran it through the wet locks, pulling it through quickly and efficiently. The baby fine hairs stubbornly refused to settle themselves on his head. He cursed beneath his breath, then tossed the brush onto the marble countertop.

"Such language, Mr. Montrose." Jacob's voice was silky in the doorway behind him. He moved to stand behind Adam, gazing at him with an expression of open sympathy. "Perhaps a bit of wax..."

Adam twisted his head to regard the doctor in disbelief. "Your boss is holding me against my will. I do not want to talk about hair styling products with you. I appreciate your help and concern, but unless you're going to bust me out of here, I'd just as soon have you leave me alone."

"No can do, my friend." Jacob grasped him by the shoulders and propelled to take a seat on the stool in front of the vanity. "I can, however, make you irresistible to Elizabeth, and that will help you make your case."

"I don't want your boss to find me irresistible. I just want to go home," Adam

growled, but complied. Jacob, though a good deal more sociable than his bitch of a boss, still possessed the same air of danger.

“Nonsense. Predators have a natural affinity to beautiful things. That includes people as well.” Jacob pulled open the top drawer of the vanity and extracted a very small, very expensive bottle of hair wax. He flipped the top open and squeezed a small amount into his palms, rubbing them together quickly as he dropped the bottle back onto the counter.

Adam frowned as the man went for his hair, showing no regard for the fact that he might have been tender-headed. He wasn’t, of course, but it did smart after having his hair nearly yanked out by the man’s boss the night before. “What is a Predator?” He broached the subject, hopefully taking advantage of the man’s momentary distraction. “Your boss kept calling me Prey last night. I don’t think it was a term of endearment either.”

Jacob tipped Adam’s head up, surveying his work with a critical eye. “She’s not my boss, she’s my Scion. And I’ve already told you I can’t go into it.” He sniffed the air with an appreciative smile. “There now, you smell much better.”

Adam sniffed experimentally. “I don’t smell anything.”

“You wouldn’t.” Jacob fell silent as he stepped back. He said nothing more, leaving Adam to wonder at the cryptic remark.

Jacob scratched his nose absently as he regarded Adam when he stood. “Where on earth did you find those slacks and that hideous excuse for a shirt?” His brow furrowed in disapproval, arm crossing over his chest.

The blond man frowned. “Now what’s wrong? They’re clothes. I’m not in a fashion show.”

Jacob turned on heel and beckoned Adam to follow him, voice floating back as he entered the bedroom once more. “Mr. Montrose, it does not matter where you are, only that you dress according to what looks appropriate to your physique. Off with those vile things, then put them on the bed. I’ll have Raul burn them.”

The prisoner-turned-fashion-makeover-project followed on bare feet, flinching when he saw that Jacob had opened the closet door and disappeared within its depths. He emerged bearing a pair of black slacks and a bright blue button down. “I left these here several months ago when I stayed for a while. They should fit you.”

“My cast won’t fit under that sleeve.” Adam began to get an inkling as to the true glee his guard was having with the situation. He bit back a sharp retort about the good doctor’s sexuality and obediently stripped the sweater over his head. It was going to be a long night.

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Stiletto heels clicked on the slate floor of the kitchen as Elizabeth entered. Her clothing choice for the day was based solely on her need to regain some sense of control over the situation she had to tackle. Her hunger had eased off a bit and warmth restored to her as a result of the scalding shower she’d indulged in. She’d chosen the leather pants simply for the feel of the fabric against her skin, the same for the crimson silk tank top she wore beneath the matching cashmere sweater.

Three pairs of eyes lifted to her as she entered the room. The three men in her house sat at the table silently eating the meal prepared for Mr. Montrose’s benefit. She surveyed the three of them briefly before nodding dismissively in their direction. Raul rose from

his seat and moved quickly towards her. "Coffee, my Scion?"

"Yes, please." She bestowed a brief glance to Raul. He was shaggier than usual. It was time to do something about that. "I want you to go to the salon before it closes. Get a haircut and a manicure. Those nails are pitiful." She reached a hand out, running sensitive fingers over his jaw. "You remembered to shave. Good job, Raul."

He bent his head low before her, a hint of a smile in those absent eyes. "As it pleases my Scion, she will be obeyed." The doctored cup of coffee was presented to her, from the coffee pot reserved for the non-mortal members and guests of the house. There was a separate pot that held only the best imported, freshly ground brew from far corners of the world for those with a briefer lifespan.

She took an appreciative sip, hand rising to rub the top of Raul's head gently. "It's especially good Raul. Excellent job."

"Thank you, my Scion. There is also a meal warming for you in the oven."

Elizabeth nodded briefly in acknowledgement before she resumed her course to the table on the other side of the kitchen. She glanced to Jacob with a slight smile, ignoring the perturbed expression on Adam Montrose's face. "Did you rest well?"

"Yes, Elizabeth, I did. Thank you for putting me up for the night."

Her gaze was warm for a brief moment, though her expression grew shuttered when it shifted to Adam. It did not escape her that Jacob must have had some hand in dressing the poor boy. He looked as though he was about to attend a photo shoot for GQ instead of spending the rest of the night locked away. Despite the absurdity of it, she had to admit he was handsome without the hair falling in his face, leaving clear blue eyes exposed to her scrutiny. She nodded in approval. "You're looking better, Mr. Montrose."

A plate was set before her, along with a napkin. She lifted her arms, allowing Raul to rest the linen cloth across her lap. She dismissed him with a wave of her hand, pinning Adam with her gaze. The challenge had been issued. This night would be the one when she saw of what he was truly made.

His voice was flat as he spoke. "I think that's a relative statement, Miss De Maigne."

Elizabeth arched her brow as she took a bite of the eggs. She waited until the food was chewed and swallowed before reaching for her coffee. It was more to keep her stomach used to taking solids that she ate what little she did, than for the taste of it. It all tasted like chalk to her when compared to the fare she preferred and lived on. "I think you should watch your tone, Mr. Montrose."

Her voice belied the same coldness she'd used with him the night before. *The ungrateful whelp*. He dared to lift his chin defiantly.

"You kidnapped me and you're holding me here against my will. Believe me, when I get away ... and I will, I'll be pressing charges."

Jacob opened his mouth to speak; Elizabeth cast her eyes to him briefly. "Silence." She returned her eyes to Adam. "I am nearing the end of my patience with you, Mr. Montrose. You do not realize what you have unleashed with the breaking of that seal. I saved your life last night. I spared you something far more horrible than anything your mortal mind can conceive of and yet you continue to try me. Why?"

"Why?" His brows shot up in disbelief, fork dropping to his near-empty plate. "Because you can't just kidnap someone, for some silly reason that you refuse to share, assaulting them in the process, then expect them to be grateful. I would rather you had killed me if that's the alternative to the hell I'm apparently in right now."

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed as she regarded him. Her patience was indeed at its end. "You will silence yourself. You have no idea what you speak of and yet you persist. I will hear nothing more about how unfair I have been to you." She drained the coffee cup and pushed the plate away.

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Something within Adam snapped. "I'm not finished. I want answers and I want them now. Something beyond the vague threats and the cryptic remarks. What the hell are you people, and what the fuck is your problem?"

To his astonishment, his captor did not immediately respond. Instead, she very calmly glanced to Jacob. "Aureate indeed, my Cherished?"

Adam's eyes darted between the two. Now he was not only pissed, he was completely lost. Elizabeth pushed her chair back and rose. Jacob did not respond, merely lowering his eyes in shame for some unknown reason. The brunette watched the two men carefully before she spoke. "Jacob, you will bring him to the basement." He watched as her eyes sought out the man next to him. "Raul, you will bring me the keys to the girl's chains."

Chains? And why did the hired help seem not to mind the fact that there was someone chained in the basement? Jacob's hand rested at Adam's elbow as he rose from his seat. Silently, Adam complied with the man's unspoken urging and rose, following him towards the mudroom. Elizabeth disappeared through the door, heels tapping on the burnished wood of the staircase leading to the basement.

Jacob's voice was soft in Adam's ear. "Do not push her too far. She is gracious and will not kill you so long as you cease being disrespectful."

When had his life once again become endangered?

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Elizabeth eyed the door before her, preternatural senses heightened by the rapid heartbeat of the woman within the room that lay beyond. She had no wish to involve more than one employee of the museum, but had none-the-less given the order to have the girl brought here. The woman's fear was delicious, causing Elizabeth's heart to quicken its pace. The hunger pangs she'd delayed earlier now returned full force. She had not had anything in more than a week, far too long for her tastes. The woman was to have been leverage; unfortunately, the poor soul was now relegated to dinner.

What little sympathy there was for the woman was quickly shoved aside. Adam Montrose's cooperation was far more important than the well-being of a common street rat. And Natalya Jensen was just such a street rat. The woman had been pitifully easy to capture, she hadn't even attempted to resist Sean's Thrall. He'd delivered her mere hours before Elizabeth's excursion to the museum.

Elizabeth's visit to the Prey had been brief, but revealing. Natalya Jensen was a con artist, and not a very good one. A few well-placed questions to the Enthralled woman had given Elizabeth all the information they needed. She was a former drug-addict who had supposedly gotten her life back on the straight and narrow. Unfortunately for Natalya, Elizabeth had tasted trace amounts of heroin in the droplet she'd taken from her the previous night. It was a dead giveaway that the young woman had used within the last week. And it hadn't been a one-time thing.

With appallingly little pressure, the woman had admitted to theft from the museum's petty cash fund as well as taking less discriminating clientele into the employee restroom

after concluding her guided tours. The woman behind the door wasn't particularly bright, nor did she have a bright future. She was a common thief, a whore. And her blood sang to Elizabeth. It was a sad song, a small winding ballad that told of a harsh life that the Prey did not have the courage or inclination to rise above. All in all, her life was not a major loss and would not be missed. Her death would not disturb the balance of things.

"The keys, my Scion." Raul bent his head low, hand extending the key chain that contained the keys to the room and the chains of the woman who cried within. She patted Raul's head affectionately. "Excellent work, my pet."

She could hear the heartbeats of the two newcomers as Jacob guided Adam down the hallway to door where she stood. Elizabeth tipped her head to look at them, her poise the very picture of calm. She caressed Raul's head once more before releasing him with a gentle pat. "Return after your trip to the salon to clean this up. You may go."

"Why do you talk to him like he's a child?" Adam's voice was harsh, angry.

His voice was angry, touching something deep within Elizabeth. She slid the key into the lock and twisted, pushing the door open. She did not look at the men as she spoke, her voice uncharacteristically subdued. "He is Bewitched."

"Ah, I see. Another of those words you aren't going to explain," Adam retorted sharply.

Elizabeth spun, eyes sparking emerald for a split second. "Silence. From this moment on you will speak only when spoken to, or your life is forfeit, do you understand?"

He fell silent immediately, answering with a single nod. She entered the room, twisting the dimmer switch, lighting the room for the benefit of the mortal. He did not possess her ability to see in low light. Beside her, she could hear Jacob's heart quicken as he felt the fear of the Prey. His instincts pushed forward in Elizabeth's chest, and she twisted her head, giving her Cherished a gentle smile. "Not now, Jacob."

Jacob responded with a nod, though his eyes glowed a bright gold in the dim light. Elizabeth stepped closer to the twin bed in the corner, eyeing the girl steadily. She measured her for damage, then nodded succinctly. Not the most appetizing meal she'd seen, but she would do nicely. It was pitifully easy to kill two birds with one stone. The girl's miserable existence would end and she would drive her point home to the wayward Mr. Montrose at the same time. Elizabeth moved to the bed, sitting on the edge for just a moment.

The girl's eyes blinked at her, struggling to focus on Elizabeth's face. She ceased her sobbing and scooted back, curling into the wall. "No! I'm sorry."

"Hold out your arms." The command was softly spoken. Elizabeth made no attempt to Enthrall the woman just yet. She needed Adam to see, needed to show him the extent of what he was dealing with.

Hesitantly the girl's eyes flickered to the pair just inside the door. "Who..."

"No questions, Prey. Give me your arms if you wish to be rid of your shackles." Elizabeth's voice was firm.

Natalya's heart skipped a beat as she recognized her co-worker. Her mouth worked soundlessly for a moment before Elizabeth's hand shot out wrapping around the bony wrists, firmly pulling them forward. The Predator's voice carried an unmistakable command. "You will not speak to them. They are above you." The shackles were unlocked and tossed to the ground, keys pocketed as Elizabeth rose once more. "Jacob,

shut the door.”

“Yes, my Scion.” The immediate obedience was relished; Jacob’s presence a balm to her rumpled temper. The door was shut firmly, her grandson never releasing his hold on Adam’s elbow.

Elizabeth reached out and gestured the woman forward. “Do not let him near her, Jacob. He is to observe, nothing more.”

Jacob did not speak this time, though his tongue darted out to wet his lips. His grip on Adam’s elbow tightened marginally, not so much as to cause him harm, but enough to get his attention. The two Prey in the room made eye contact, a second later. Adam’s gasp was audible, and Elizabeth could feel his heart begin to beat wildly.

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes in his direction as she came to stand behind the shorter woman, hands resting at her shoulders. “A friend of yours, I believe.”

“What the f...”

“Language, Mr. Montrose. Unless you wish her to die slowly and painfully you will obey me.” She snapped the order to him, satisfied when he fell silent once more. The woman beneath her fingers trembled. Elizabeth’s thumbs caressed the shoulders beneath her hands, her voice dropping. “Calm yourself, Prey. It will all be over soon enough.”

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Adam’s heart felt as though it were trying to beat free from his chest. His stomach twisted in knots. Beside him, Jacob was fairly shivering. Adam dared to glance his direction, wondering if it was the cold, or Natalya’s unexpected presence. Elizabeth’s words struck him deeply, demanding his attention once more.

“She is a curious little thing, isn’t she, Adam?” Those intense jade eyes shifted into a brilliant emerald hue. Adam’s left hand fisted as he fought the urge to take a step forward. Jacob held him firmly in place, though. “I’ll bet there are many things you don’t know about our little whore.” She leaned forward, nipping at Natalya’s ear. Her tongue followed instantly, soothing the bite.

Adam’s vision blurred slightly, the realization of what the woman intended to do setting in. He opened his mouth to speak, only to be silenced when those emerald orbs settled on him once again, feral smile firmly in place. “I have set your blood to boiling. A good thing, too. Too much lethargy makes for a bitter meal.”

The woman was something else ... his mind flashed back to that night in the alley. The pieces suddenly fell into place as he recalled his attacker snarling at Elizabeth. Fangs. He’d seen fangs. His sense of reality warred with this new knowledge. Natalya whimpered within the woman’s arms, which were now wound around her waist, holding her as protectively as a mother would. It was a mockery of something sacred.

Elizabeth’s voice was deathly still as she spoke once more. “I see you’re beginning to make the connections, Adam. And not a moment too soon.” One arm gripped Natalya in a tight embrace as the other rose, fingers weaving through Natalya’s short spikes. Natalya released a strangled sob as the woman jerked her head back, eyes fastened on the now-visible pulse that surged beneath the pale skin there. “Shush, ducky. You’ll soon be able to sleep. I promise it won’t hurt. In fact, I’ve been told I’m an expert.” Elizabeth’s tongue darted out, trailing along the vein.

Adam released a strangled cry. “Let her go, you monster!”

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Elizabeth’s eyes sparked dangerously in the direction of the voice. Her own was a

snarl. "Monster? No. I am a Predator, Mr. Montrose, and you would do well to remember that. Your whore is nothing more than a druggie and a thief. The very scum I rid this world of. Nothing more than a common prostitute. I am the Predator. She is the Prey. It is the way of things."

Adam's heart rate spiked until she was feeding off not only the girl's fear, but his as well. It was a healthy fear, coupled with disbelief and laced with outrage.

She tipped her lips closer to the woman's ear, her voice dropping to a mere whisper. "You will feel nothing but the most exquisite pleasure you've ever experienced. It will be better than your first high, my sweet. Won't that be nice?"

The woman within her arms stiffened in response before relaxing in the lull of her Enthralment. Elizabeth looked up at the two men with a smirk. "You wanted an explanation? Here it is. This is what I did to you friend, Ernie. She is what we call Enthralled." Her hand rose from the woman's side, ghosting over her ribcage until she encountered her breast. A folded knuckle brushed against one of the unbound peaks beneath the loose t-shirt. A groan of pleasure emitted from the woman.

Adam's eyes were wide. And Elizabeth could tell it was nothing less than utter horror. However, his disgust had receded, replaced now with morbid fascination. Elizabeth continued, giving a light tweak to the woman's hardened nipple. "You see, it is nothing more than what I tell her she will feel. Her own will is too weak to resist. Most mortals are unable to. I have encountered less than a dozen in my lifespan who can." The girl in her arms panted as though the simple motion had aroused her further.

Elizabeth smiled indulgently towards her Prey, hands moving swiftly, jerking the woman's head as far as it would go. Razor sharp canines tore into her flesh, a flood of crimson instantly gushing into Elizabeth's waiting mouth.

Adam's cry did not go unnoticed, nor did the quickening of Jacob's breath at the sight and scent of the blood that trickled from Elizabeth's lips. She tilted the woman back, gaze rising to regard her captive audience with luminescent, gemstone eyes. The woman within her grasp stiffened, screaming out in a strangled cry as she experienced what was to be the most powerful sensation of her life; the last of her life. Elizabeth felt the flow of her Prey's essence pervade her body, strengthening her and sating her raging hunger. As the heart began to realize it was fighting a losing battle, it began to slow. The river became a stream, and the stream a trickle until it stopped altogether.

Elizabeth pressed a gentle kiss to the surprisingly small puncture marks before she lifted the now-lifeless figure into her arms. She cradled it close for a moment, letting her own heart beat calm as the Prey's life mingled with her own. Images and memories melded with the Predator's until the two could not be distinguished. It took several long seconds before Elizabeth's chest stopped heaving, desperately drawing in gulps of air. She moved to the bed and gently set the young woman down, whispering soft words of gratitude into the hair of her Prey before rising to regard the two men once more.

The intimacy of the act she'd allowed them to see, it was a rare thing. Mortals were invariably involved, but rarely were they anything but Prey. Jacob stepped forward, his grasp on Adam loosening as he extended a handkerchief to his Scion.

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Adam was beyond disturbed by the display he'd just witnessed. He now understood, to some degree, why he should fear her. His mind spun as he struggled to process this new information. Natalya had obviously felt no pain, but it did not lessen the impact that

her corpse made on him. The Predator, as he now understood her to be, was essentially a vampire. The technicalities were the same at least. Yet, beyond her cruel words, what he'd seen in her manner of handling Natalya during the act of taking her life ... it had been nothing less than reverent.

His emotions warred within him. He should hate her, that awful thing that she was. She had murdered Natalya in cold blood without so much as a by-your-leave. But she'd gently kissed the wound and embraced the lifeless body. As she'd risen from placing Natalya on the bed, he'd caught something he hadn't expected to see there. It was gone almost before he realized it, leaving him to wonder if he'd ever seen it at all. Sadness.

Perhaps the Predator, in some small measure, did have some redeeming qualities about her. Making a run for it when he'd felt Jacob's grip loosen did not enter his mind. As she accepted the starched square of linen with a nod, he couldn't believe his own ears when he heard the words he blurted out. "Are you all right?"

Her eyes, once more their usual jade, flickered to him in unveiled surprise. She did not respond; instead, Jacob spoke. His words echoed her earlier ones, almost in a mocking manner. "Aureate indeed, my Scion?"

Elizabeth wiped the last traces of the blood from her lips and tossed the handkerchief back to Jacob. "Return him to his room. See that he is comfortable. Allow him no access to the phones or computers. I'm going out. You will stay as long as Mr. Montrose is still here and alive."

Adam clamped his mouth shut abruptly. She brushed past them, carrying with her the unmistakable scent of Chanel #5. Adam felt the immediate and sudden urge to bash his skull into something very hard. He shouldn't be this dismissive of Natalya's death only moments after it happened. He should feel saddened. He should have been angry, or upset. But he was not, absolutely not, supposed to be concerned for Natalya's murderer, or taking notice of her perfume.

His confusion mounted as Jacob tugged him towards the door. "Come, you must need some time alone."

Adam nodded mutely allowing the other man, to guide him back into the darkened hallway and towards the stairs.



## Chapter 4

“You must listen to me, my Father.” Ma’at watched her father pace the floor.

He turned on her, face contorted in rage. “Silence, girl. Your insolence is intolerable. You will do as you are bid, and that is final. Narmer is incapable of ruling without the balance you will give to him.”

“No.” Ma’at held herself steady, spine rigid in the face of her father’s latest quest for domination. “I know why you want this, and it isn’t for the good of Egypt. It is for the good of you and you alone. You believe that by installing me in his house, it will cause the Pharaoh to look on you as more than an advisor. It will not happen. It is foolish. The man is damned, Father.”

“If he is damned then it is by his own doing. You can restore balance to him, Daughter.” Ra slammed a clenched fist to the tabletop, sending texts and tomes flying from the force of it. “You can, and you will. You are destined to bring balance to this world, and you will begin with the king.”

Ma’at surged forward, grasping her father’s wrists tightly. “Father, my destiny is yet to be decided. Only I will decide my fate, and my fate is to bring balance. But I will not do it beneath the watchful eyes of Narmer and the palace guards.”

Ra narrowed his eyes as he regarded his child. Ma’at could feel his anger, his righteous indignation. She tightened her grip on his wrists. “You are looked upon as a god, my Father. Because you rose from the dead, the people of our land are yours to command. You hold more sway over our king’s armies than he himself does. You have no need of me to exert your control over them.”

Jade eyes flashed angrily as she released him and turned away, crossing to the window. She stood before it for a moment, drawing in deep breaths to calm herself. The sun was warm, soothing on her bare arms. It was a pleasant day outside, the heat not yet at its unbearable zenith. She closed her eyes for a moment and placed her palms on the sill of the window, tipping her face up to the sunlight. Her voice was soft when she finally spoke again. “Father, Thoth is my mate, and he is the only one I will ever let claim me.”

Behind her, she could hear the table as it was upended, her father giving an angry roar. She smiled a bit, amusement settling into her chest as she felt her father’s rage explode inside her. She turned once more, settling herself in the window, letting one leg dangle out of the window, bare flesh scandalously exposed as she idly swung her foot back and forth. She leaned her head back, letting it rest against the stone wall behind her. “Really, Father, You must learn to control your temper. You were the one who arranged the match, after all.”

She cracked one eye open and stared at her father. He was shaking with barely-contained rage. A bemused smile played at her lips as she observed him. “A man may have more than one woman, but a woman is obliged to be only with her mate. Those were your words to me at our binding, when you bid me do your will then. And now you would have me defile myself and our king? It is preposterous and not even Narmer himself would take me on. You know that as well as I.”

Ma’at turned her face to the morning sunlight once more. She remained still for a

long moment. "I'm going for a walk, Father. Then I will return to my husband's house and tell him of your plan." She swung her leg inward and pushed herself off of the windowsill. Her father remained rooted where he was, fists curled tightly into his palms. She offered him a nod of her head. "I am at your bidding, my Father, should you come to your senses and see the folly of your scheme."

With those words, she left Ra to stare after her, seething silently. Ma'at wandered into the bustling market place, her mind occupied by this latest turn of events. He was a danger to Egypt, and to the delicate balance that bound their land to their wayward king. Around her, the capital city was alive with activity. Merchants hawked their wares; wizened crones bartered with pretty servant girls over the fresh fruits and vegetables. The smells of cooking meats from the bachelors' houses down the way drifted to her.

Her stomach grumbled, sharply reminding her that she'd skipped breakfast again. Ma'at frowned, hand hovering over her swollen belly. Thoth would scold. She lifted her head to peer down the street. Her home was no more than a stone's throw away, but should she return with the taint of hunger on her, her mate would know. In the few months since he'd come to know of the imminent birth of their first child, he had zealously guarded her well-being.

Ma'at was a mere 4 months into her pregnancy. It would not be long before she could no longer keep it a secret from her father. He would be furious. This would be a rude awakening that his scheme hadn't a chance of working. Ma'at veered to the left, towards the corner. Old Eli would have fruit and bread. She slipped a coin from the purse tied at her waist as she approached.

"Eli, how are you on this fine morning?"

"I am well, child." The old man gazed up at her with unseeing eyes.

"And your wife? Is she better?" Ma'at smiled gently at the shriveled old man. She knelt before him and extended the coin to his grasping hand. He held her own hand fast for a moment, his free hand coming up to run his fingers gingerly over her face. "Ahh, it is Ma'at. My hearing is still keen. I thought it was you, dear girl. My wife is well for the moment and will remain that way, gods willing."

"Gods willing." Ma'at echoed dutifully.

The old man's hand fell away to sweep in a grandiose gesture over his wares. "I have grapes from the Pharaoh's private stores today. And Mekhi made the bread fresh not two hours past."

"And I trust you have come by your goods with permission from the Pharaoh himself?" Ma'at's voice held a teasing lilt. She knew the blind man's grapes were from his own garden as well as the next person.

He smiled indulgently. "Of course, child. The captain of his guard delivered them himself, on the order of our Great One. A benevolent king we have, Ma'at."

Jade eyes narrowed fractionally, her amusement evident in her voice. "I suppose the grapes of the king deserve two coins, given your sacrifice of them. How rare it is to find a soul that would part with such a windfall from our king." She slipped a second coin from her purse and pressed it into Eli's palm.

His smile broadened. "Dear Ma'at. You are kind to a blind old servant of our Pharaoh. Your compassion will not be forgotten by the gods. May the blessing of the Pharaoh and your father's house be upon your child."

Ma'at's eyes widen as she froze. Her mouth worked silently as she grasped for

words. Eli smiled. "Mekhi has noticed that you no longer indulge in her sweets. They were always your favorite. She says that your daughter will be a strong-willed and hardy soul. Truly the first of many, gods willing."

A bunch of grapes was pushed into her hands. A slow smile spread itself across her face. "Thank you, Eli."

"My dear girl, the pleasure of your patronage is all mine. Now go, eat before your Thoth finds out you've forgotten another meal."

Eli withdrew his hands, slipping the coins into his purse with a smile. Ma'at rose, plucked off one ripe grape and popped it into her mouth. A strange occurrence to add to a morning of strange occurrences.

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At the sound of his wife's voice, Thoth raised his head from the work on the table before him. A smile reached his lips when Ma'at entered the room. She was as radiant as ever, odd jade eyes catching his when she entered the room. He studied her for a moment, as though surveying her for damage. He was loath to let her leave their home in her condition. Since her announcement that she was expecting, he'd found himself objecting to the oddest things. The palace healer had assured them, more specifically him, that Ma'at was strong. A sturdy woman, despite her frail appearance. She was doing well. The sickness that seemed to plague every expectant mother had not afflicted her. Her appetite had changed a bit. Her sweet tooth had disappeared, and she was now devouring fresh fruits with a vengeance, especially grapes. Ma'at normally hated grapes.

She had filled out a bit, the flowing robes she wore did little to hide the recent additional endowments to her breasts. Thoth found himself drawn to her even more than he had been in the first months of their union. He hadn't been able to restrain himself then. And now, it was only fear of harming their unborn child that inhibited his usually raging libido. This was, of course, much to Ma'at's protest and frustration.

"You did not partake of breakfast this morning, my Golden One." Thoth rose from the chair and moved around the table to stand before his wife, an expression of affected indignation in his ice blue eyes.

Ma'at snorted as she moved closer to him, rising on her toes to press a gentle kiss to his jaw. "Why do you persist in calling me that, my love?"

"Because..." His eyes slid shut as Ma'at's hands went around his waist, slipping beneath the leather armor to caress his bare skin. "You radiate with the gold of the sun. You are my Golden One. Why did you not eat this morning? Are you ill?"

His wife chuckled against his neck, nipping him lightly before speaking. "My father summoned me as soon as I woke. He wished to discuss his latest scheme to endear himself to the Pharaoh with me."

"Did he?" Thoth leaned into the caress that was his mate's breath across his ear. A shiver ran down his spine. Whether it was from the news of Ra's newest plan, or the soft curves of Ma'at's body molded against his, he did not know. "And what is his latest treasonous plan?"

Ma'at withdrew, her expression growing instantly shuttered. "It is nonsense." She snorted as she moved away, toward the open door that faced east and the mid-morning sun she loved so much.

Thoth followed, leaning against the railing to regard her seriously. "Tell me of this

nonsense, Wife.”

“He is scheming that I must dispose of our union and become the consort of Narmer.” Ma’at’s voice was cold, sending an icy chill through Thoth. He remained as he was, listening carefully to each word. “He claims that my gifts should be used to restore balance to our misguided Pharaoh. He says that I am the only one who can do this.”

Thoth cleared his throat and turned, gazing over the lush gardens his wife tended to so lovingly. The beauty was not lost on him, but it was the last thing on his mind at the moment. He cut his eyes to Ma’at, waiting patiently for her to continue.

She lifted her chin almost defiantly. “He wishes to conquer through indirect means. Already the people see him as a god, but it is not enough for him. He holds Narmer under a spell, yet he does not realize that his control is limited only by his tenuous hold on the humanity that binds him to very thing he wishes to be rid of.”

Ma’at canted her head slightly and stared at her husband, jade eyes hard. “He has the power of the gods, but does not wield it wisely.” She drew in a deep breath. “The time is coming, Husband, when I will have to restore balance to my father and those affected by his merciless ambitions.”

Thoth approached her, gingerly wrapping his arms around her waist, hands resting on the slight swell of her abdomen. “My Golden One.” He murmured as he pressed a kiss into her hair. “You do not sound pleased with this.”

“I am *not* pleased. He is my father, and no matter how unjust his actions, I am loath to cause him harm.” She relaxed into his embrace, leaning back against his taller frame. “I am not without emotion, Thoth. I will do my duty whether it is against my father or a stranger who would threaten the population. That does not mean, though, that I must enjoy meting out punishment to the wicked.”

His hands stroked her belly lovingly as he dropped another kiss to the top of her head. “You sound as though your gift is more of a curse, my Heart.”

“Isn’t it?” She snorted ruefully, gently extracting herself from her arms. “I will not move until after the child is born. It will take him that long to gather his wits and come up with another plan. An even more insidious one. I can feel its beginnings within the recesses of his rage even now. He will no longer be content with merely Egypt. He will want the world in its entirety. Narmer is only the beginning.”

Thoth resisted the urge to shake sense into his wife. She was to be a mother, yet she still spoke of imparting justice to those who would otherwise go unpunished. Did she not understand she was endangering not only herself, but their small family as well? He drew her closer to him, hands coming to rest on the slight swell of her abdomen. The stiffness she carried in her posture spoke of the severe nature of the anxiety the situation caused her. She was upset, though her expression did not betray this. Had he been anyone but her mate, he would have missed it himself. The anxiety could not be good for their child, no more than it was good for her. He tightened his embrace, whispering in her ear. “Ma’at, I understand that you have obligations to your gifts, but it isn’t wise to let them consume you. You will cause make yourself sick if you are do not put your own welfare first.”

To his shock, she brushed his hands aside and stepped away from him. The irritation in her voice was painfully obvious. “Don’t you mean, I’ll risk the welfare of the child? That’s what upsets you the most, the prospect of causing harm to the babe.”

Thoth furrowed his brows in confusion. He took a step closer to her, voice low. “You are mistaken. You always have been, and always will be, my primary concern. Surely

you know this.”

“I know what I see. And what I see is that you never touch me anymore, and the only words you speak are of concern for the child. You talk of nothing else. It’s always what I should eat for the child, what I should do to stay well for the child. The words you speak are never meant for me anymore, are they?”

It disturbed him to see her so deeply upset. “Do you really believe that? I want you to be well for your own sake, foremost. I love you, Ma’at. If I didn’t I would have never risked my life by going to your father to ask for your hand.”

The words, which should have soothed her, seemed only to further incite her wrath. She spun on him, jade eyes narrowed in anger. “If you were so intent on being with me, why do now never touch me? It’s because you are putting the baby’s welfare above mine, is it not? You seem to think that any bed games will cause it harm, though you have been told, and repeatedly, that there is nothing you can do to harm it. You are well-endowed, my love, but not that well-endowed.” She arched a brow in challenge.

The realization of her expert manipulation brought a smile to his face. Her expression never wavered. Thoth relaxed and closed the distance between them in one long stride. “You’re absolutely right. My deepest and sincerest apologies. I have never had any feelings for you beyond the basest sort of lust. And now that you bear my child, your duty by me is done and I no longer find you to be of interest or use to me.” He grinned flippantly. “How was that? Humble enough to earn a kiss?”

She gave a mock frown. “Humility has never been your strong suit. You may very well be my first lost cause.” Her frown dropped as he pulled her into his arms once more, bestowing a gentle kiss to upturned lips. The contact did not remain gentle for long. He slanted his lips over hers, grip tightening around her. The answering moan she gave was all he needed. He cracked one eye open, spying his worktable beyond the open door. He broke the kiss, dropping another on the tip of her nose, before stepping away. He grabbed one of her hands, dragging her along behind him. Her eyes widened in surprise when he swept the contents of the table to the floor and spun, lifting her easily to the surface of the desk. A sly smile appeared on her face when she felt his hand slip beneath her robes. She leaned her head forward, resting her forehead against his. To his surprise, she did not squirm away as she usually would have in an effort to rush him toward the inevitable. Instead, she settled her arms on his shoulder, pulling him forward to claim his lips once more.

His fingers danced a line up her inner thigh, light enough to draw a girlish giggle from his usually serious mate. When he found her center, though, all humor was forgotten in her first intake of breath. Her tongue darted out, sweeping over his lips. He yielded easily, for it had never been a fight for dominance between the two of them. Ma’at was his balance, as he was hers. Her hands moved, working at the fastenings on his armor and tossing it aside as quickly as was possible. Thoth had never been more grateful for his wife’s lack of inhibitions when she lifted her hips to let him strip her garments over her head and toss them to the floor to join his clothing.

Her smile shifted into something infinitely softer. She fairly radiated light as he pulled her to him, reveling in the touch of her bare skin. It was in the back of his mind to be gentle, and he sent up a prayer to the gods that the midwife was right when she’d told him that their lovemaking couldn’t hurt the babe. His hand grazed the swell of her belly, eyes lighting with smug satisfaction. It was the ultimate mark, showing the world that the

beautiful creature in his arms belonged to him. The thought of her in another's arms was sickening. She was his.

"Narmer will never have you." He growled the words at her, pushing her back on the table, as he thrust into her. Her eyes widened as his hands sought out her face, brushing the pad of his thumb over her lips. Her tongue snaked out, curling over the tip of it before drawing it into her mouth and suckling lightly. He did not remain still inside her as he usually would have done. Instead, he set a steady, careful pace. "Your lips, Ma'at. Your tongue." Thoth lowered his head, laving one nipple with his tongue before giving a firm bite to the flesh and then soothing it with a gentle caress. His eyes glinted darkly at her as he spoke again. "Your breasts, your legs ... every part of you is made for me." Her tongue drew circles over his thumb, nipping lightly in approval, though whether it was his words or the sharpness with which he spoke them that she was responding to, he didn't know.

He pulled his hand from her mouth and reclaimed her lips, reveling in the soft mewls that she made. She was pliant and soft beneath him as his hands sought out her breasts once more, kneading them gently. She arched into him, and he was lost. He slammed himself into her in earnest, intent on driving them both higher, to a place where nothing existed besides them.

Ma'at's back bowed, and he knew nothing short of ecstasy as he drove himself into her again and again. He had almost forgotten how good it felt to be one with her, to take her and claim her had been his greatest pleasure since the first night of their marriage. Her responsiveness was incredible as evidenced by the way her face contorted uncontrollably as he buried his face in her neck, baring his shoulder to her. She sank her teeth into him as her body seized around him. Thoth reveled in the muffled cry she released when he gave a strangled shout, signaling his own completion. She clutched at him, as if to hold him inside herself, an instinctive movement borne of her desire to hold on to their shared sensation as much long as humanly possible. It touched him deeply, to know that she held as deep a need for him as he did for her. So many men were condemned to loveless marriages, and they all had his pity. He knew to the very core of his being that every moment he had with her, his Golden One, was one moment of utter bliss. Never had any man ever been so blessed.

\* \* \* \*

Narmer listened with a bored ear as the men who stood before him spoke in turn, telling of their efforts to turn the tide of a losing battle. One thousand of his best men were dead. The victory had been hard-won, coming only after weeks of waging war on a rogue state in the lower portion of his kingdom. In the end, the losses to both side had been enormous, the bloodiest victory of his reign.

The ten men who stood before him bore the responsibility for the legion that had been lost. Cowards who had, by all reports, run and sought refuge with the enemy when defeat had seemed imminent. He held up a hand to silence the one who was now speaking. The man's voice was muffled as he knelt before his king, face firmly planted on the stone floor. Narmer signaled for the guard who'd escorted the men in. The man approached, kneeling before him, face tilted down to gaze at his Pharaoh's feet. "Bring Ma'at."

"Yes, my Pharaoh." The guard rose and took a step back before turning and sprinting

for the door.

The traitor who had been begging for mercy lifted his head suddenly, staring at Narmer in shocked outrage. "A woman! You would permit a woman in the private trial of men who are above her?"

Narmer rose from his seat swiftly, surging down the steps to stand before the man. His foot connected with the man's face with a sickening crunch, sending him sprawling on the floor in an unceremonious heap. Narmer's lips curled into an expression of disgust. He extended his hand to yet another guard, fingers beckoning for the whip curled at his waist. It was no sooner pressed into his hand than he grasped it by the woven handle and stretched his arm back. The blow fell with a sickening crack over the man's bare back.

The traitor cried out in pain when the sharp rocks woven into the leather bit into his flesh, tearing the golden skin as it was drawn back. Narmer spat out words as he swung again and again. "Are you, a traitor, above the woman who has the favor and confidence of your divinely appointed king?"

After the tenth lash, Narmer threw the whip aside and bent. His hand threaded through the gathered tail of hair at the man's neck. "You would speak ill of the woman who will decide your fate? And more importantly, you would dare to defy me, your god, to my very face?"

The man stared at him, eyes stricken. He fought for breath, gasping for air. The brutal assault was evident in the blood that trickled down his face where one of the tails of the whip had caught him in the eye. Narmer's snarl eased as the man shook his head, whispering the words breathlessly. "No, my Pharaoh. Forgive my impertinence, I beg of you."

Narmer released the man, throwing him bodily to the floor. He growled as he slowly paced off the distance before the other nine, eyeing their prostrate forms critically. His voice was as honey when he spoke. "Would anyone else care to question my edicts?"

Other than the groaning of the bleeding, beaten man, silence was his only answer. "My King, I have brought Ma'at." The guard spoke breathlessly from the entrance to the room. He must have run the entire way. Narmer rolled his eyes as he turned expectantly towards the door. Imbecilic man, he would dare take the chance to cause injury to the woman who would be his consort? If one hair on her head was harmed, the guard would suffer the full extent of his wrath.

Narmer looked past the guard to the dark-haired woman who stood just inside the door. Her expression was perfectly neutral as she surveyed the occupants of the throne room. Narmer studied her for a moment; she was perhaps a bit breathless, but otherwise seemed fine. He motioned her forward. Bare feet carried her across the massive room to kneel before him, her forehead touching the floor before gazing on the pharaoh. He extended a hand, placing it atop her head with a gentle smile. "Rise, daughter of Ra. I have need of your gifts."

She rose fluidly, those strangely-hued eyes flickering over the kneeling men. Her gaze lingered on the bloodied man who was gasping in pain. Her voice was soft as she spoke, barely above a whisper. "And what does my Pharaoh wish of his servant?"

A smirk curved at his lips as Narmer watched Ma'at move down the line of men. "They are reported betrayers of Egypt. You will judge them according to their crimes."

Surprise flickered in her eyes for a moment. He could see the question in her eyes.

He smiled to her, a gentle expression that spoke nothing of the cruelty he'd exhibited only moments earlier. He stepped towards her, hand rising to caress one golden cheek. "You may speak freely. They are already condemned; it is only their fates which you must decide."

Ma'at bowed her head in the face of those words. "As my Pharaoh demands, his servant will comply." Narmer dropped his hand and took a step back.

She moved down the line once more, stopping to kneel before the fallen man. Her hand rested upon his head. Several tense moments passed before she rose and stepped to the one beside him. "You will speak to me, honestly. I will know if you lie."

The man rose to his knees, venturing a glance to the small woman who stood before him. He nodded vehemently in agreement. Ma'at smiled, a small mysterious expression. It was that smile that sent chills down Narmer's spine. Her voice was silky, strong. It carried with it an authority she did not use when addressing Narmer himself. "What are your crimes?"

"I am accused of treason and cowardice, of disobeying the direct orders of the Pharaoh." The man's voice was threaded with a healthy dose of fear.

Narmer smiled when Ma'at spoke again. "I did not ask what you were accused of. I asked what your crimes were. Now speak again, honestly this time."

The man's shoulders visibly slumped. "I betrayed my Pharaoh and his army. I betrayed our gods and our laws by running from a battle because I thought we were going to be conquered."

"Have you so little faith in our Pharaoh that you must run rather than die with honor in battle?" Ma'at eyed the traitor levelly.

His eyes lowered in shame. He did not answer. Ma'at took a step back, nodding singularly as she looked to Narmer. Her voice shifted once again when she spoke to him. "Justice for these will be the same fate their men met. Their pain must be intensified one hundred fold, for each of the deaths they have caused. It is your servant's judgment, with her Pharaoh's blessing, that they be sent to Ra for his pleasure until such time as Ra, in his mercy, decides they be executed."

Narmer's expression shifted. "A rather harsh sentence, Ma'at. Why do you believe their crimes to be so great as to disallow them a quick death?"

The men in the line fairly radiated with fear and no small amount of outrage that the scrap of a girl could sentence them to what amounted to torture before their certain death. "For each of them, when they ran, it exhibited a lack of courage and faith in our great king. Because of them, lesser men fell. Each of these men is worth one hundred of the soldiers under their command. Thus, their deaths must reflect the gravity of their offenses. Only then will their souls be purified for the underworld." Ma'at moved forward, kneeling before Narmer once again, eyes cast to his feet.

Narmer shifted his gaze to the men. "Lift your eyes, traitors, and look upon your judge." He did not wait to see if they complied as he lowered his eyes once more to Ma'at. "She is the faithful servant of your god, and it is by her mercy your souls will be redeemed. Rise, Ma'at, so that the condemned may kiss your feet in thanks of your judgment on them."

Ma'at accepted his hand and rose to her feet. One by one, the condemned prisoners moved forward, kissing the bare feet of the woman who had condemned them all to slow, painful deaths. As the bloodied man moved forward last, Narmer extended a hand to stop



him. "You do not deserve to touch the feet of one so pure as my servant. For your insolence and disrespect, traitor ... it is the sentence of death for your family."

Beside him, he could hear the sharp intake of breath from Ma'at. The man released an anguished cry as he heard the pronouncement of the fate of his family. Narmer motioned for the guards. "Return them to the prison and inform Ra of his good fortune. Be certain he knows that it is by his daughter's judgment that he is gifted with the traitors for his pleasure. He may do as he pleases with them, so long as they end up dead in the end. Beyond those orders, I leave them to his mercies."

Narmer turned to regard Ma'at with an indulgent smile. "You will partake of lunch with me in my rooms. A reward for your loyal service to your Pharaoh."

Ma'at regarded him, and he saw something he had never expected to see in those jade eyes. Defiance. She took a step back and knelt before him. "My Pharaoh." Her forehead touched the tips of his toes as she spoke. "Your kindness is without limits, and your servant is most grateful. Unfortunately, my husband would not approve of an unchaperoned liaison, no matter how innocent. I would not bring shame to his name in such a manner. Your servant begs your forgiveness, my king, for any impertinence is unintended."

The Pharaoh's eyes narrowed fractionally. "Your loyalty to your husband is commendable, Ma'at. However, I am your king, and as such, my word is law. It was not an offer of lunch. It was an order. You are a slave to your god, are you not?"

He could see the resistance leave her as her shoulder visibly slumped. "Your servant will do as her king commands. Forgive my insolence."

He smiled, good humor restored. "Obedience is a virtue, Ma'at, one that will serve you well in the future, should you remember to hold your tongue. I will send word to your husband that you will be dining with me."

He signaled to one of the scantily clad slaves that hovered amongst the pile of pillows beside his throne. Ma'at rose from her prostrate position, eyes lowered as she bowed low to him and turned, following the slave from the throne room. Once they were gone, Narmer spoke, voice raised slightly. "You can come out now."

Amusement was evident in his voice as he turned, watching his chief advisor step from behind wall of the veranda that overlooked the palace courtyard. "Why do you skulk, my friend? Do you not wish your daughter to know of your role in the plot to dispose of her mate?"

Ra gazed at Narmer with unnaturally bright eyes. "She is an insolent child, who despite her gifts, would betray both of us if she is not kept under control."

Narmer snorted. "I tire of waiting for her cooperation, Ra. You will rid us of the nuisance before the noon hour. Do I make myself clear?"

"What of the child she carries, Narmer?" Ra's steely gaze narrowed. "You will bring no harm to the one who will carry on my line."

"Of course not. The child will be safe." Narmer's smile was feral. "It will be leverage for her compliance. Ma'at need not know of our agreement. She will be my consort before nightfall, and the babe will be claimed as the child of the Pharaoh. It will not be my heir, but it will be treated with as much respect as it will deserve. After all, the mother is to be the consort of the king." Narmer's smile disappeared as he turned for the door. "I do not care how you rid us of the scribe, so long as you do it quickly and quietly."

Ra turned to go, only to be brought up short by a sudden movement of Narmer's hand. "Bring me his head; a gift for Ma'at and a symbol of my divine rights over her very life." Narmer smiled cruelly, as he stepped around Ra. "I want it done immediately."

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Ma'at stared at the table before her. The slave girl fussed over her despite Ma'at's visible irritation. The girl's hands combed through the loose waves of hair that fell down her back, ending at her waist. Ma'at swatted at the offending hand, brows furrowing. "Leave me."

The slave's voice was tremulous. "I can not, my lady. The king has ordered me to see to your comfort."

"It would be to my comfort to have your hands off of me." Ma'at's voice was sharp as she reached behind herself and gathered her hair, pulling it away from the girl's questing hands. "I have no wish to appear eager to dine alone with him, and your fussing will give such an impression."

Shock was immediately evident in the girl's eyes. "You do not wish to be at the service of our Pharaoh?"

"I am always at the service of our Pharaoh, but I am bound to Thoth. The king knows this and would not dare violate that." Ma'at regarded the girl with glittering eyes. "Now be off with you. The sooner I get through this meal, the sooner I will be permitted to return to my home."

The girl's eyes flickered to the arched doorway, growing fearful at the sound of approaching steps. Her voice was furtive when she spoke. "I hope you do not anger him. His wrath is without bounds. Even the Queen fears him."

"The Queen is a mouse with no brain of her own." Ma'at retorted with a snort. "Now go, if you fear him so."

The slave bowed her head low and headed to the door that led into the palace gardens from Narmer's personal chambers. Narmer's shadow fell over the open door before he entered. He was tall, an imposing figure in the too-short doorway. As he shut the door behind him, Ma'at held herself rigid. His presence was dark inside her chest, constricting her lungs and making it difficult to breathe. Her fists clenched tightly in her lap as a sudden realization hit her hard. He was acting with her father. It was not all Ra's plan after all. She swallowed hard, biting back the rising fear in her stomach. Within her, the babe moved in sympathy of its mother's anxiety.

Ma'at shifted to her knees, palms flat as she lowered herself until her forehead touched the floor. "Your servant thanks you for the kindness you show in providing the noon meal."

Narmer's pleasure was genuine as it curled through her, warming her in spite of the fear. It was a sickening feeling. She, who based her life on truth, was now forced to lie. His wrath, should he know her true disgust of him, would mean her death and undoubtedly that of her husband. Narmer expected nothing short of utter submission from his people, even those who were kin of his most trusted advisors.

He chuckled in amusement as he spoke. "We are alone, Ma'at. You may dispense with the formalities."

She pushed herself up until she was sitting back on her heels, gazing at him with an affected expression of innocent obedience. "I would not insult you so, my Pharaoh."

His head came to rest on top of her head, caressing affectionately. It lingered a moment too long as he moved to sit on the pillows beside her. "You are clever, Ma'at. It pleases me that you show the proper respect to your betters." He waited as Ma'at reached for the deep bowl of fresh water off to the side. She lowered her eyes and held it for him as he washed his hands. It was an intimate act, one done by a woman for her mate. It was wrong.

She set the water aside, following suit. The water was cold, a welcome distraction. Narmer watched her closely as she dried her hands on the clean linen cloth and then set it across her lap. She paused, the bile rising in her as she struggled to maintain the façade of innocence he now expected from her. "Does my Pharaoh wish for wine or water?"

"Wine." Those calculating brown eyes did not leave her form. She lifted the earthenware jug of wine and poured it into the gold cup before him. She filled her own then set the jug aside. To hide the trembling of her hands, she lifted the cup to her lips and took a sip. It wasn't until she replaced it back on the table once more that Narmer lifted his own.

He spoke softly. "The wine is especially good today. It is your company that makes it so."

The swine. Instant rage coursed through her veins. Her face flushed as she gritted her teeth. Beside her, Narmer laughed heartily. His head was thrown back. Evidently, he found her discomfort to be quite amusing. When he calmed, his words were not what she expected. "You blush as if you were a virgin, Ma'at. Yet the swelling of your belly tells me otherwise."

Reflexively, Ma'at's hand covered her stomach. How had he known? Her eyes flew to Narmer's expression, unguarded for a moment. He chuckled again. "Do not appear so surprised. Your father heard the child within you weeks ago. He probably knew before you did. I am pleased that you are to have a babe. It will make your life easier."

The cryptic words sent a bolt of lightening through her body. Her voice was soft. "What do you mean?"

Narmer's gaze hardened minutely. "Only that when a woman is cursed with the inability to breed she is often cast aside. It would be a shame for that to happen to a woman of your station."

Ma'at lowered her eyes once more, fighting for air, to control her racing heart. A hand appeared in her line of vision, a chunk of meat grasped within it. "You must eat for the child." She raised her eyes to him once more, reaching out to take the proffered food in trembling fingers. Narmer watched closely as she pulled a bit of the chicken from the bone and brought it to her mouth.

It tasted like dust, the rich flavors escaping her tongue. She ate mechanically, listening to Narmer's idle chatter. When silence fell, she set aside the half-eaten chicken breast and reached for her wine again. She could feel those hard eyes on her once more. Narmer watched as she took a long sip, holding the cup to her lips longer than necessary. "Try the grapes. They were picked just this morning. Your father tells me they are your favorite."

Ma'at swallowed hard as she reached for a small bunch of grapes. She pulled a couple free, slipping one into her mouth. They were good, but it wasn't what she wanted. She wanted to be at home, with Thoth, preparing for the coming trouble. "You are too quiet, Ma'at. What are you thinking of?"

She shifted her gaze to Narmer, expression serene by some extraordinary feat of will. "Your gardens."

"Yes, they are lovely." Narmer shifted until he was reclining, head propped on one hand. "But no more than you. You far outshine the loveliest of flowers in Egypt."

Trite words, empty compliments. It was enough to drive any sane person to madness. Ma'at flushed once more in anger. Her hand was caught as she brought another grape to her mouth. She eyed that hand warily as it was guided away from her mouth and toward that of her companion. He stared at her expectantly as he released her hand, fingers hovering mere inches from those thin lips. Narmer's mouth opened as his eyes held hers. Trembling, she pushed the grape into his mouth with her thumb. She could not avoid touching his lips, but she was unprepared when he grasped her hand once more, holding it there firmly as he pressed a soft kiss to the pad of her finger.

Ma'at swallowed hard and lowered her gaze until she was staring at the floor. "You do play well at being the innocent, don't you?" Narmer's voice was soft. He tightened his hold on her hand as he spoke. His rising want coiled within her as she gently tugged at her hand. "My Pharaoh is blessed with great strength." Her voice was not her own.

Narmer's grasp immediately grew slack, though he retained a firm grip on her. "My apologies. You did not seem so delicate when you were sentencing those men to torture and certain death." His voice was threaded with a challenge.

Ma'at swallowed hard. "Your servant did only as her king commanded, as was his pleasure."

"Yes." His voice was a sickening purr as he pushed himself up to a seated position. "You are an obedient servant to your god. It pleases me."

Survival became utmost at that moment. He released her hand and watched her, face expressionless. She moved then, head bowed low. "Your servant begs her Pharaoh's leave to return to her husband's house. He has demanded her presence during the afternoon to assist with his work."

Narmer scoffed. "What work could he have for you that is greater than your service to me?"

Ma'at remained silent, heart sinking as his intentions became clearer. He reached out, resting his hand on her head once more. "Your loyalty is first to your Pharaoh, then to your family. My demands of you are great, and you will obey without hesitation." His fingers ghosted over her jaw, stopping at her chin to tip her head up. "Do I make myself clear, Ma'at?"

"Your servant is ever obedient to your command." Her words were barely a whisper.

His thumb caressed her lips as he pulled her towards him. "You will serve me in any way I demand, won't you, my clever girl?"

Her stomach twisted as she stared at him. His smile was feral. "You are the slave of Egypt and your Pharaoh." His hand slipped behind her head, fingers threading themselves through her hair. "The child you carry is the child of your king."

"The child is Thoth's." Her words were hushed as she fought for the last vestiges of self-control. Her hands fisted at her sides, nails digging into the skin of her palms.

The fingers in her hair tightened suddenly. Jerking her head back until he was staring down at her, lips curled in anger. "It does not matter whose seed created the child. It matters only that you are the servant of your god. I am the Pharaoh, the parent of all under my command and therefore the child..." He paused, his other hand rising to touch

her stomach in a nauseating mockery of fatherly pride, “is mine. You would not dare to defy me, would you, Ma’at?”

A tear slipped from the corner of her eye as she was pushed back onto the floor. Her head was pressed down on cool stone, as he knelt over her. The robe was pushed up and over her knees, exposing her to hungry eyes. His hands seared her flesh, nails digging into her skin as she released a scream.

Narmer’s voice was thick in her ear. “You are ever the obedient slave to your god, and you will remain as such for all your days.” He was inside her then, moving with painful, abrupt thrusts. Her cries were stifled with his lips, lips that had issued the edict that had just changed her entire world. Another tear came. It was followed by another, until they were falling freely, blurring her vision.

\*

She was crying. Narmer smiled against Ma’at’s lips as he pushed into her again. Her skin was hot beneath his hands, her channel tight around him. She was submitting beautifully, a perfect consort. Her tears served only to spur him on, the brutal movements of his hips bringing punctuated cries each time he buried himself inside her.

He growled low in her ear once more, a wordless expression that lasted only a moment. He drew his hips back once more and drove himself into her one last time, releasing himself inside her even with a strangled shout of completion. Beneath him, Ma’at at last ceased her efforts to push him away. Her head fell to the side, eyes tightly closed. Narmer smiled darkly once more as he pushed himself up on his elbows. His words were breathless as he spoke, echoing his last words for emphasis. “An obedient slave to your god, Ma’at. You would do well to remember it.”

Narmer withdrew from her and rose to his knees, adjusting his clothing appropriately. His eyes were hard as he stared down at her. Her robes had been torn in his haste, exposing her swollen breasts and belly to his view. His lips curved into a smile as he watched her. She moved reflexively, curling into herself as she turned onto her side.

Narmer lifted himself from the floor and adjusted the circlet atop his head. Ma’at’s chest heaved with silent sobs as she clutched her stomach. Briefly, he wondered if he had really been so rough with her. A vague guilt crept into him at the thought of harming her unborn child. It was immediately quashed as she spoke in gasping breaths. “You will pay, Narmer.”

He lifted his chin, regarding her thoughtfully. Her defiance amused him. Under other circumstances, he would have ordered anyone’s immediate death for outright disobedience and disrespect. Only Ma’at would respond to being conquered with familiarity and contempt, rather than fear.

Narmer’s voice was harsh as he retorted. “I will pay for nothing. I am your Pharaoh.” He paused, waiting for a response. Satisfied that she would not persist in her defiance, he snorted. “Bow before me, Ma’at.”

Jade eyes slid open to stare at him in disbelief. “I will not bow before any man who would do such a horrible thing.”

Brown eyes flashed in instant outrage. He bent and grabbed her by the hair, tugging her to her knees. He snarled at her, his other hand rising to strike her across the cheek. “Your insolence will not be tolerated, woman. You will bow before me and thank me for my gift to you.”

The blow snapped her head to the side. He twisted his hand in her hair roughly and

pulled her forward, throwing her to the ground. Narmer straightened and stood before her. He waited in silence for a moment. Her lips moved soundlessly as she stared up at him. He narrowed his gaze at her, the glare promising certain punishment. "Speak up."

Her voice grew in volume, though her words tested his patience further. "You are not my god; you are worse than the dirt beneath my feet, and I will never thank you for what you've done."

Narmer's eyes widened for a brief moment before he smirked, rage suddenly subsiding into cold anger. Yes, she would be fun to break. He moved to kneel before her, hand coming up to grasp her chin roughly. The smile on his face was cold as he pulled her towards him. "Clever, Ma'at. You believe that if you refuse to thank me for my gift, I will not wish to bestow it upon you again. You believe that you will return to your Thoth, and he will rally the people and seek vengeance upon their rapist king."

His thumb caressed the growing red mark absently. Her eyes sparked then, the first shred of bare fear shining through. "I see through you as if you were the most transparent raindrop. You are a gifted woman, but never doubt that you are still merely a woman. You do not see it now, Ma'at, but you will be remembered forever. You will be immortalized among our people and it will be because of your loyal service to me." His other hand rose, lacing through the mussed waves of her hair once more. She winced as his fingers came into contact with the base of her skull.

A knock came at the door then. Narmer smiled. "Has it been an hour already, my dearest? Shall we see who it is?"

He canted his head to the side, glancing to the door. "Enter."

The door swung inward, revealing the slave girl who'd brought him such pleasure the night before. She carried a basket whose lid was covered with a scarlet cloth. "My Pharaoh, our god Ra bids your servant to give you this gift, along with his respectful thanks for the opportunity to serve you."

Narmer gave a toothy smile to the slave girl. "Good. Place it on the table and then return to Ra. Tell him that you are the reward for his ... loyal service." He cast his eyes back at the slave. Her fear was evident in her eyes.

Her face paled as she dared to speak out of turn. "My Pharaoh, has this girl displeased you?"

That same cruel smile ghosted over his face once more as he tilted Ma'at head back forcefully. "Look to the girl. See how she begs for our blessing, even as she is given over to her death? You will be as she is, in time." Ma'at's eyes closed tightly once more. Narmer waved a dismissive hand to the girl. "Go to Ra. Serve him as you would me."

Tears gathered in the slave's eyes as she bowed low and backed out of the room, closing the door behind her as she went. Narmer rose to his feet once more and pulled Ma'at forcefully with him as he neared the table once more. He indicated the basket with an expectant smile. "It is a gift for you, Ma'at. A reward for your obedience to me."

He pushed her up on her knees as he moved behind her. The basket was within reach. Narmer's heart quickened in anticipation. The woman before him trembled. His tongue flicked out over the shell of her ear even as his hand lifted what remained of the gauze-like linen that was her dress. She pushed at the offending hand, stilling only when he tightened the hand in her hair in warning. "Reach for the basket."

She did not move. Narmer's hand abandoned her thigh, rising to slap her firmly on her bruised cheek. "I said take the basket, girl."

He dropped his hand to her thigh once more, and dug his nails into her flesh. She sobbed brokenly. Even as she cried, Ma'at reached forth a trembling hand and lifted the woven basket. She held it for a moment, tears falling down her cheeks freely. Narmer nipped her ear lightly as she held it in a shaky grasp. "Pull the cloth aside, Ma'at, and see your gift."

She stared down at the basket, unmoving. He chuckled and released her hair to reach around her. His hand grasped a corner of the cloth covering the basket and ripped it off. He felt, rather than heard the harsh intake of air as her eyes fell on the decapitated head nestled so lovingly among bloodstained cloth.

\* \* \* \*

Ma'at tried to scream. She tried to move. She was frozen. Her fingers fell away from the basket, letting it fall to the floor. It landed with a sickening thud before listing to the side, the severed head within it rolling out. Thoth's face stared at her with horror-stricken eyes that told her of his final moments. The icy blue orbs were bright with outrage and brilliant anger. His head had not been severed with a sword, the remnants of what had been his neck were ragged and protruding. His head had been ripped from his body, a feat only her father was capable of. Blood leaked out onto the stone floor, pooling around the shaggy hair that feathered out from his face.

Narmer's voice was intense in her ear, bringing her back from the edge of that precipice and propelling her towards the pain that tore through her chest. "Such a gift, Ma'at. To be freed from the confines of your union with the scribe, to be released from the damnation of eternity with a man of such little value."

She shook with rage, her shock magnifying the wrath she felt, all directed towards the man who now held her too tightly. She couldn't breathe, couldn't make it fit. Thoth was at home; he was working. He would be waiting for her when she woke up from this nightmare. All she had to do was wake up. Just wake up.

Narmer's voice was silk over stone against her skin. "I have liberated you from a life of servitude to an undeserving peon. You will now be able to take your place at my side as my consort, Ma'at. You will bear me children, and they will share in your gifts and my divinity. They will be a great nation of leaders. Beginning ... with this one." His hand moved, caressing her belly.

Bile rose in her throat, whether from the sight of her mate's amputated head or from the sentence pronounced to her by Narmer, she did not know. All she knew was blind rage. Slowly, ever so slowly, the wheels in her head began to turn once more. She drew in a long, quiet breath and forced down the tremors that wracked her body. Narmer spoke once more. "You have only to obey me, Ma'at, I will ensure that your life is long and fulfilling in your service to me. I will clothe you in the finest cloth and give you your heart's desire. You merely have to say the words. Say thank you."

Ma'at's lips parted as she tried to speak. Her mind spun with the realization. Her life was not over; it was beginning. She was justice incarnate, divinely appointed to seek vengeance upon the wicked and protect those who could not do so for themselves. Her hands began to work again, the numb cold replaced by a sudden flush of warmth. It was the warmth of a quiet resolve, bred by rage, fueled by determination and tempered with hatred.

Her hands gently disentangled themselves from Narmer's. She moved away from

him, turning to stare him directly in the eyes. He gazed back with an expectant stare. She lowered herself until her forehead was touching the ground. Her voice was void of feeling as she spoke. "Your servant thanks her Pharaoh, for the plethora of gifts he has bestowed upon one so unworthy this day. It will ever be this girl's pleasure and privilege to serve her divine ruler."

When his hand touched her head this time, it was a gentle caress. He indicated that she should rise to face him once more. Her eyes remained down as he kissed her. Her stomach did not turn; she did not feel the disgust. It was as she were watching herself through eyes that were not her own. It was her beginning. She would bide her time, and wait. Justice was patient. She would have her vengeance on Narmer and his house. More importantly, she would have her vengeance on Ra. Even if it took all of eternity. She was, after all, the judge of his immortal soul.



## Chapter 5

What a curious time this was. Ra stared down at the room below him. The window in the roof was a perfect perch from which to view the Prey that scurried about below him. They were oddly dressed, all in black. "They must be soldiers." The words rolled off his tongue with the fluency of an Avatar who was gifted with great intelligence. He'd conquered nations, learning a new tongue was hardly a challenge.

The soldiers darted to and fro, their pulses racing as they cordoned off the area. The unnatural blue and red lights from their strange wagons hurt his eyes, even from the rooftop he'd taken refuge on. They had no fear, only a sense of urgency. He could smell their diluted blood through the sturdy barrier within the window beneath his hands. They'd lost any purity centuries ago; it would be sour on his tongue.

Ra grimaced and straightened. His fingers flexed as he turned his attention to the city before him, his new kingdom. Torches burned in windows, exposing the occupants of those impossibly tall buildings to the weakened gray eyes. He sniffed the air experimentally, seeking out his first Prey in eons. They were all weak, impure. There was no accounting for this change. Was it possible he'd been sleeping so long that the Prey had finally regressed to the state in which the Fallen had originally found them?

A bitter smile touched paper-thin lips as Ra considered this. Impurities in exchange for willing chattel. A fair tradeoff. His hunger rose within him as he caught a scent he had never smelled before. It was odd and stood out from the rest of the citizens of the kingdom. Ra sniffed again. It was the cleanest aroma he'd smelled since awakening the night before. And it beckoned to him. He leaned off the edge of the rooftop, measuring the distance to the ground. He shook his head with a snort and stamped his foot experimentally on the material beneath his bare feet. It was far harder than the stone that had paved the streets of his last kingdom. He was weak yet, and such an impact would undoubtedly be a setback.

He moved towards the staircase he'd taken refuge in during the day. It had been pitifully easy to shield his presence from the prying eyes of the uniformed soldiers who'd ventured up earlier that morning. His stomach had turned at the smell of their blood. The impurities were rife, generations of tainted breeding coming to the surface. It had immediately quashed any notion of simply sating his hunger and disposing of them.

He paused for a moment and asserted a vague Thrall, the best he could do before descending the stairs. He needed to catch up to the pure Prey he'd caught wind of before they were too far away.

Getting past the soldiers was far too easy. He was out the back door of the building before they even noticed the screeching noise that had been triggered when he finally figured out how to manipulate the metal bar to push it open. He clutched his hands over his ears for a moment, using a preternatural burst of speed to dart around the corner before he could be spotted. The noise had startled him from the Thrall he'd cast, his concentration shattered. What a curious time indeed.

\* \* \* \*

Elizabeth lifted her eyes to the heavens, gazing up at the unusually clear night sky. It was after midnight. Her patrol of the city had taken longer than usual. She'd gone so far as to take a stroll by the museum. It was teeming with police and museum administrators who were working deep into the night.

She could smell no fresh blood, a relief. It meant that Ra had not yet claimed his first meal in countless millennia. The knowledge soothed her jangled nerves. He was awake; confused and lost, but definitely awake. His awareness edged at her, and she could feel his nearness. Several blocks away, a Vietnamese woman was leaving work. Elizabeth's lips curved into a smile. Her Avatar was nothing if not predictable. His sensitive palate demanded only the purest blood available, and the strong Asian population in Seattle would make a prime target.

The alarms pierced the stillness of the night air. Elizabeth immediately placed it as the alarm of a fire door. Was it possible that Ra had not yet even left the museum? She had her answer before her question was even fully formed. The vague Thrall she'd barely recognized before dropped as a form darted around the corner and huddled in the nearest doorway, hands clasped firmly over its ears.

So her Avatar was on the move was he? She studied him from her hidden place at a table in a twenty-four hour coffee shop. Before her sat a stone cold cup of coffee. It was still filled to the brim. The Avatar was immediately recognizable because of the awkward garb he'd been wearing the day he'd been condemned and sealed in the sarcophagus. The only difference was that he now reeked of sewage and fear. His heart beat rapidly, a weak flutter reminiscent of the last futile attempts of the Prey's dying heart to keep them alive. How utterly ironic that the powerful Avatar who had once ruled through fear and intimidation had now been reduced to this.

Elizabeth lifted her chin, lips curving into a defiant smile. She abandoned her coffee as she rose from her seat, leaving a five-dollar bill on the table in payment. It was time to go.

\* \* \* \*

It was cold, far colder than his long-dead kingdom had ever been even in the deepest recesses of winter. Ra's eyes slid closed as he huddled against the cold. Where were his Cherished? Were their unnatural lives forfeit in recompense for his supposed atrocities?

The wind picked up, spiking his sense of smell. He shivered, a natural reflex triggered by the extreme temperature. The Prey was moving further away. He steeled himself against the cold and glanced furtively around. He had to catch up. His life, his new reign depended on it. A cruel smile played at his lips. It would not simply be his kingdom that would pay for Uriel's folly. It would be the world. But first ... dinner.

\* \* \* \*

Adam paced the length of the bedroom he'd been confined to hours before. A glance at the clock on the wall told him it was well past one. Jacob had locked him in and left him alone after bringing him back upstairs. He'd spent the last three hours trying to make sense of what he'd witnessed.

It burned at him that any person, any being, could be so cold-hearted. It made his blood boil to recall the darkness in her voice when she'd spoken to him and Natalya in

those final moments. She was a monster. *She was, she was.* He repeated the words himself firmly as he sank into the chair beside the bed. Dimly it flared up in him, less than a heartbeat later, that she had enjoyed it. “Of course she enjoyed it; she’s a vampire.”

“We prefer the term Predator, really.” Jacob gazed at him in open amusement from where he leaned in the doorway. “Vampire is so archaic. Negative connotations abound, you see.”

Adam’s gaze hardened. “What? Come to finish me off?”

The Predator snorted and pushed the door shut behind him as he entered the room. “Mr. Montrose, I couldn’t do that if I wanted to. And believe me, it would be a privilege to taste you. But my Scion wants you for herself.”

“Why? What is she going to do with me?” Adam sighed, suddenly tired of all the mind games. “I wish she would just kill me and get it over with.”

Jacob chuckled as he took a seat on the bed, uninvited. “If she had intended to do that, Mr. Montrose, you would have been dead a month ago.”

“So her threats to kill me are empty?” Adam retorted sharply.

“Hardly.” The brunette man smiled indulgently. “She is perfectly capable and willing to dispose of you should it come to that, but you have a larger role to play in this matter and she knows it. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have brought you to her home.”

“What then, Jacob? Please, enlighten me?”

Jacob tipped his head to the side, giving Adam a friendly smile. “That, my friend, I could only guess at.”

“Then please, guess,” Adam spoke wearily. “I, at least, deserve the opportunity to prepare to defend myself, don’t I? Even the weakest animal in the wild has a sporting chance.”

The Predator regarded him thoughtfully for a moment. “I suppose enlightening you would do no harm. After all, we can’t exactly release you now that you know about us.”

Adam snorted. The man on the bed seemed satisfied with this. “Each Scion is said to have a mate. An Aureate. His or her Golden One.”

“Golden One?”

“Don’t interrupt, Mr. Montrose. It’s horribly rude.” Jacob cleared his throat and continued. “To each Scion there is an Aureate, chosen by the Archangels to either condemn or redeem the soul of the Predator they are fated to. In the process, the Aureate’s soul is bound to their Predator’s until such a time as the Scion becomes whole again.”

“Whole?”

Jacob shrugged. “It’s the terminology used in the ancient texts. Thus far, though some Scions have found their Aureates, or at least they believe they have, but nothing about them has changed. Except that they become simpering, lovesick fools.”

“That’s a truly frightening prospect. And you’re saying that Elizabeth thinks I’m her Aura ... her mate?” Adam’s brow furrowed as he attempted to digest this information.

The brunette man snickered in amusement. “No. My Scion believes you to be a nuisance and nothing more. She adamantly refuses to admit to any belief in Aureates. To her, they are nothing more than legend, a myth concocted to keep the Scions guessing. However I do believe that eventually she will take you as her consort, and that is an honor indeed, Mr. Montrose.”

Horror burgeoned within Adam's chest coupled with a healthy disgust. "You're not suggesting that I sleep with her."

"Suggesting? Of course not. However, my dear Adam, if you are her Aureate, you will have no choice in the matter. As her consort, your influence would be without limit over all her affairs, including her running of this city." Jacob gave him another secret smile.

Adam began to get some inkling of what the man was saying. He opened his mouth to speak. Jacob held up a hand to stop him.

"It's a position that bears thinking on, wouldn't you agree? You wouldn't have control over my Scion, but you would be able to effect changes that would regulate the Cherished within the city. If you can control the Predator, it also means you control the Prey." Jacob rose from the bed and brushed invisible wrinkles from those immaculate black slacks.

The blond man stared at Jacob, unabashed curiosity evident in ice blue eyes. The Predator merely gave another of those innocuous smiles. "As far as sex goes, I'm sure you noticed the exquisite expression on your friend's face this evening. Imagine that ... each and every time ... only you get to survive it. It is a rare honor indeed, Mr. Montrose. One I would encourage you to consider seriously before coming to any hasty decisions. And of course, you heard none of this from me."

At last a smile, a genuine one, spread across Adam's face. "Thank you, Jacob."

Jacob bowed low, his voice teasing as he spoke. "My pleasure to serve you, my liege." He straightened, his expression growing serious. "However, I must warn you, Adam. The resentment and the disparaging remarks must stop immediately. I will not tolerate it. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Adam spoke without hesitation. "I'm sorry, Jacob."

"Good. And please, no more pacing. You're driving poor Raul to distraction. He's already dropped two pieces of Elizabeth's good crystal, and I'd hate to have to explain it to her if there were more." With those final words, Jacob left the room, locking the door once more behind him.

\* \* \* \*

He was within arm's length of his intended Prey when a hand grabbed his wrist. Ra spun, startled by the sudden presence of someone who dared to interfere with his hunt. The Prey released a startled cry when she realized she was in imminent danger. The person who held his wrist in an iron grasp snapped at the woman. "Run, you fool. Run and don't look back."

Ra screamed indignantly as he was thrown off balance and knocked to the ground. He blinked owlishly in the darkness at the person who had dared to attack him. Damned Cherished, they were more trouble than they were worth. Did they not know he was an Avatar? He was their ruler by divine right, their superior in every way. His lips curled back in a snarl even as the person's foot came to rest on his throat. "Do not move, or I swear I will make this night exceedingly more difficult for you."

He knew that voice. It nagged at the back of his mind. The pitch and intonation ... he knew this person. "Who are you?"

"I am your judge, that is all you need know." The foot pushed on his neck, exerting painful pressure on his windpipe. "You are out of your element, Avatar. And you are in

my city. Do you know what that means?"

Ra's voice was raspy as his hands came up to grasp the offending foot. In his weakened state, he could not budge the Predator who dared to attack him. He sniffed the air, memorizing the scent. It was a female, a familiar female. He growled lightly. "I am an Avatar. You will release me at once and beg my forgiveness."

"Doubtful." The woman snorted, leaning into the light. Ra's eyes focused on her, trying desperately to place that face. Her voice was silky. "Uriel's mistake was in allowing you to continue in your pitiful excuse for an existence. He is a merciful being, a heavenly body whose limitations prevent him from causing undue harm to any living thing."

Ra's fingers closed around the toe of the shoe that held him in place. The leather was hard beneath his fingers. Still, she continued. "His mistake will be corrected, my Avatar. And I will not be merely your judge. I will be your executioner. See that you take care, old man. You best enjoy your last bit of time in this world. One false step, and I will dispatch you with a smile."

He knew that voice now. "Ma'at."

She lifted her foot from his throat and stepped fully into the light of the artificial torches that lined the street. Ra's heart made a feeble attempt to speed up, but was impeded by his fragile stamina. He scrambled to his knees and lifted a hand to her, silently demanding her help to rise.

She scoffed and lashed out. A loose fist caught his face as she backhanded him. He stumbled back, catching himself on the step of one of the buildings. He gasped in pain, arm shooting out to catch her by the wrist, pulling her down on top of him.

He reverted to his mother tongue as he hissed at her. "I'd planned on taking the woman, but your blood is far purer, isn't it, Ma'at?"

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Elizabeth shrieked as Ra used his momentum to pull her down, rolling them until he sat atop her. He straddled her, pinning her arms above her head. Those cruel eyes glinted down at her as his lips curled back. He held her hands firmly in one of his own. Paper-dry fingers threaded through her hair and jerked her head to one side.

He didn't even attempt to ensnare her in a Thrall when razor-sharp teeth tore into her flesh. She screamed aloud, more out of surprise than pain. She'd underestimated him once again. He hovered over her, his foul smell invading her sensitive nostrils as he fastened his lips on the gaping wound.

She was growing weaker by the moment. A single foolish move was now endangering her life. If he was able to gain enough strength from her, it would merely speed up the process of his recovery. Elizabeth drew in a deep breath and kicked her knee up as hard as she could.

The body of a Predator was just as delicate in certain areas as that of any other man, and she was satisfied when Ra's mouth was torn off her neck. He immediately rolled into a protective ball, clutching his injured groin protectively.

She struck again, hand reaching into the sheath at the small of her back and withdrawing the stiletto hidden there. It was plunged into his neck with a quiet grunt of effort. Elizabeth pushed him off of herself and rose to her feet.

She staggered for a moment and pulled in deep lungful of air. She glared down at the blood-and sewage-encrusted form of her father. "You are pathetic." With those words,

she stripped off her cashmere sweater and balled it up, holding it to her neck. She glanced around the abandoned street and strode away, back in the direction of home.

\* \* \* \*

Jacob flinched as the door to the house was flung open. Across from him at the table, Adam held what was the winning hand of the rather vicious game of poker they'd been playing. The door glanced off the brick of the entryway and slammed closed behind Elizabeth, who staggered in.

Jacob abandoned his cards and surged from his seat, catching her just before she collapsed in a heap. He gritted his teeth as his senses were bombarded with a smell so foul he could scarce catch his breath. "Elizabeth?"

One jade eye cracked open. She was fighting for breath as he gently guided her to the floor. A new presence loomed in the doorway, one familiar to Jacob. The doctor glanced up to the newcomer, relief flooding him. "Leon."

"Good heavens, Jacob. What on earth did you do to the poor chit? She smells like London in the middle ages at the height of summer."

Jacob's brow knitted into a frown. "You weren't with her?"

The other man shook his head, wrinkling his nose and waving a hand beneath it for emphasis. "No, I just happened to be in the area and thought I might pop in for a bit of a visit. What happened to her? And what *is* that smell?"

Jacob became dimly aware of movement from the table. He cast a glance to Adam and bared his teeth. "Not a move, Montrose."

Adam held one hand up before him, a sign of compliance. Jacob shifted his gaze back to Leon. "Take care of Mr. Montrose for me while I tend to Elizabeth, if you don't mind, Leon. Do not let him leave this room."

The dark-haired scion stared over Jacob's shoulder to where Adam sat at the table, still holding his cards loosely in one hand. Leon clapped his hands together gleefully, "Of course, Jacob. I would be glad to."

Jacob rose from the floor and hefted Elizabeth into his arms. Her head fell against his shoulder, jade eyes staring dully at Jacob's chin. Jacob snorted at the older Predator. "Do not dare touch him. Those are my Scion's orders."

Leon's face fell, shoulders drooping comically. "Well, I suppose if I must, I will strive to keep my hands and my teeth to myself. Damn shame though, he's absolutely delectable."

Jacob snorted once more and strode to the back staircase. In his arms, Elizabeth was gasping for air, her body on the verge of shutting down. He squeezed his Scion lightly, nails digging in just enough to cause the pain necessary to jolt her back to reality. The cashmere sweater at her neck fell away as she winced, revealing the cause of her ravaged state. She'd been bled almost dry.

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Adam's head spun as he watched the macabre happenings. The woman who'd occupied his thoughts most of the night appeared to be in a state he'd never thought to associate with her. Injury was not something he'd thought would be a problem for a being with preternatural strength or speed. He frowned as he abandoned his cards on the table and reached for the glass of water, simply for lack of anything else to do with his hands.

The newcomer stared at him, the appraising gleam in his eyes sent chills down

Adam's spine. He stared right back, unflinching. "Who are you?"

The man's eyes flared a bright emerald for a moment before returning to their previous cinnamon state. "I am Leon."

"Let me guess, Ponce de Leon."

"Of course not. He was a meddlesome fellow, and we never did get on well." The man bowed deeply with a flourished movement of his hand. "I am Leon Wyngate, at your service. It is my duty to see to you until Elizabeth and Jacob return and see to you I shall. Tell me, Mr. Montrose, have you eaten?"

Adam's frown shifted to an expression wary distrust. "Not since just after dark. Why?"

"Well, I've always enjoyed cooking. Where is Elizabeth's Bewitched? That luscious little Mexican. What's his name ... Ralph?"

"Raul."

"Whatever." A careless wave of his hand was given. "Where is he?"

Adam lifted his chin almost defiantly. "I don't know."

"Hmm." Leon shrugged out of his ridiculously shiny vinyl jacket and tossed it over one of the barstools. "Join me." He moved to the kitchen, opening cupboards at random.

Adam remained rooted where he was, unsure of what to make of the man. He was obviously in good humor, and was obviously a Predator, but he didn't seem to give much thought to why Adam was being held captive.

Brown orbs shifted to Adam once more as he pulled out a box of Macaroni and Cheese. "Well, don't just sit there staring. Chop chop. Ellie will want to eat when she's patched up. And it's up to us to make her a fabulous meal."

Adam's mouth moved without sound for a few moments before he pushed his chair back and rose. "Ellie? She lets you call her that?"

"Of course. She's only my oldest and dearest friend. However, I wouldn't recommend *you* calling her Ellie. It's an inside joke." Leon frowned momentarily. "I suppose it's not so much a joke as it is a test."

"A test?" Adam stared dumbly, feet stubbornly refusing to carry him to the counter where Leon was assembling a veritable feast of boxed food goods.

Leon's grin returned. "Yes. She's constantly telling me not to address her by such an undignified name, and I can't help but see how far I can push her. It's really great fun. Would you be a love and get the milk for me from the fridge, ducky?"

"My name is not ducky." Adam glowered at the Predator, even as he moved from the table towards the fridge. He pulled it open and stared inside. It looked to be a normal enough fridge. No bottled human parts jumped out at him. Swallowing hard, he reached in and grabbed a half-gallon jug of milk and the tub of butter.

\* \* \* \*

Elizabeth's world tilted dangerously. She groaned as she was gently deposited on her bed. Jacob hovered over her, checking her for damage. Gentle hands pulled the sweater from her neck and tossed it aside. Fingers probed at the wound, a hiss of relief coming from Jacob as he realized the puncture wounds were the only damage she'd sustained. "Elizabeth, how did this happen?"

She gritted her teeth and batted at his hands, pushing them away with the little strength she could muster. "I'm fine."

“No, you’re not. You’re barely breathing.”

“You know as well as I that I will heal.” She made a vain attempt to push herself up on one hand, only to find herself being pushed back down by Jacob’s stronger ones. He frowned down at her and shook his head. “You need to rest. I’ll call Raul.”

“No.” Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. “I need a shower first. Then I’ll rest.”

Jacob’s eyes flared gold for a moment as he spoke more firmly. “Elizabeth. Just be patient. You can shower later. Let me help you, now. It will be easier on you if you take blood first. You will be healed by sunrise.”

Elizabeth heaved a sigh of acquiescence. “You won’t let this go, will you?”

“Of course not. You know me better than that.” He snorted lightly as he straightened and lifted the phone from its hook and punched in the extension for Raul’s personal quarters.

The older Predator watched as her Cherished waited patiently. The phone was replaced in its cradle a moment later. “There’s no answer.”

“He’s probably playing that damn video game.” Elizabeth’s chest was heavy with the effort it took to breathe. She rolled onto her side and coughed in a vain effort to force air into her lungs. “In my fridge.”

“No, that’s not good enough, and you know it.” Jacob frowned. “I’ll bring Adam.” He took a step away, only to find Elizabeth’s hand around his wrist in a weak grasp.

She glared at him with all the determination she could muster. “No.”

Jacob’s brows knitted together. “Why not? He’s Prey, Elizabeth. It’s the least he can do for you after you spared his life.”

“No,” she reiterated before falling into another round of dry coughs. When the constriction in her chest eased up enough to allow her to speak, she ground the words out angrily. “It’s bad enough he saw me like this, but to hold my life in his hands is unacceptable.”

“What is unacceptable, Elizabeth?” Jacob shot back just a vehemently. “Is allowing yourself to suffer when there is perfectly acceptable Prey just downstairs. You said yourself he means nothing to you. If that’s so true, then take him. He is at your mercy, and yet you hesitate.”

“Watch yourself, Jacob. I may be immobile for the moment but I am still your Scion.” Elizabeth’s eyes flashed dangerously.

Jacob bristled momentarily, then he forced himself to relax. His words were carefully measured, voice subdued. “My apologies, my Scion.” The formality in his tone would normally have pleased her, however she was beyond the point of being soothed with mere words. She gritted her teeth and tightened her grasp on his wrist, pulling him forward. Those keen eyes burned with righteous indignation. Her tone was icy as she stared at Jacob. “Help me sit up.”

He complied wordlessly, his own eyes glittering with unspoken frustration. He opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off when her free hand pointed to the floor. Silent still, Jacob sank to his knees before her. Elizabeth’s grasp shifted to an impossibly gentle one as her hand rose, threading into the hair at the base of his neck. She tugged him forward, tongue flicking out to trace over her lips.

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Jacob found himself pulled off-balance, heart speeding up as he felt the first whisper of Elizabeth’s breath at his ear. A smile curved his lips upward as his tongue came to



rest against his own razor sharp canines. It was a rare occurrence for Predators to drink from one another. And far more rare for a Scion to take from her Cherished after the initial transformation. It was an experience he had never shared with Elizabeth. He stiffened reflexively at the first sharp scrape of her teeth against the sensitive flesh of his neck.

A soft shushing noise resounded in his ear as he realized that she'd wrapped her arms around him. A gentle nip was given to the shell of his ear as she spoke. "Have faith, my Cherished one. I will not harm you."

Jacob's lower lip was drawn into his mouth, his senses prickling as he was drawn into the moment. Elizabeth's heartbeat sounded loudly, though it was weak, within his ears. Her breath was shallow. Had she been anything but a Predator, she would have been dead hours ago. A shiver traveled down his spine as he felt the smallest sting. It was gone almost before it registered. Her lips fastened over the wound at his neck, a sigh emitting from her.

The world burst into a myriad of smells and colors as he fell into her embrace. Jacob's entire being thrummed with the energy that resonated from her. Her arms supported him as he suddenly fell into the lightest of Thralls. It wasn't even a purposeful action on Elizabeth's part, this much he knew. It was the basest of instincts a Predator had, to bring pleasure to the person who was gifting them with their life force.

The shivers changed to trembling as his arms moved on their own, winding around her waist in an effort to pull her closer, to meld them into one being. The eruption of colors behind his closed eyelids was followed by the memories of the deceptively frail woman he held so tightly, too tightly.

His lips fell open as he heard a moan, then realized it had come from him. His arms trembled from the effort and vaguely he realized his heart was beginning to speed up, an effort to staunch the blood loss. He was starting to get a bit woozy. His fingers dug into her sides ever so lightly.

Obligingly, Elizabeth released her hold on his neck. She nuzzled the spot lightly before letting her tongue run leisurely over the spots. The cuts were already scabbing over, and would be sealed within minutes, a perk of being a Predator. Jacob's head fell against her shoulder as he sagged into her embrace.

Vaguely, reality began to piece itself together in his mind once more. His breathing settled itself into a slow rhythm within mere heartbeats. They remained there for several long moments, his Scion's strong arms supporting his weight. He became aware of words whispered into his ear as a gentle kiss was pressed to his jaw. The murmured thanks was acknowledged with a weak nod from the younger Predator. He lifted his head from its resting spot, just a few centimeters until he could breathe a warm caress over her cheek. "Better?" The question was posed gently.

She nodded against him, her hold loosening. He held her a moment longer before pushing himself back and settling on his haunches. His hands rested lightly at her waist, thumbs absently stroking in soothing circles on the crimson silk tank top. He stared at her for a moment. Already her color was returning. She was warm beneath his hands, a welcome and relieving change to the pale form that had not had the strength to sit up moments earlier.

He studied her in silence for a moment before nodding. "You look better."

"Thank you, Jacob." A rare expression graced her features. It took him a moment to

place it as humility. He rose to his knees, one hand rising to cup her face.

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Elizabeth stared at Jacob. She did not have the strength to push him away. He was possibly the only person in the world she could trust without question. No one else would dare touch her without her permission, and certainly not in such a familiar way. His hand was blissfully warm, almost human. She found herself leaning into the palm that rested on her cheek. He hovered before her for a mere moment before his lips touched hers in the lightest of kisses.

He did not push her further, but released her promptly. He bowed his head, eyes never leaving her face. "It is ever a pleasure to serve you, my Scion."

A smile came to her lips as her hand rose, resting on the top of his head for the briefest of moments. "Off with you, Jacob. False humility does not suit you."

He nodded briefly and rose to his feet in a graceful movement. "Have your shower. With your leave, I'll find Raul for my own ... needs."

"Of course." Elizabeth's eyes faded back to their usual muted jade as she watched him execute a perfect bow and turn, striding purposefully from the room. She remained as she was for a moment, musing over what she'd seen when she had taken from him. She'd forgotten, over the centuries, just how human her child really was. It was a pity that such humanity remained, trapped eternally in the body of a being whose sole destiny was to bring death to the world. Even after almost a thousand years, she was still humbled by Jacob's gentle nature. His innate need to bring comfort to those around him was ever at war with his thirst and need to destroy mortals. The question still haunted her. Had she been wrong to make him what he was? It was her responsibility, the suffering she'd tasted from the last of her natural line.

She frowned and shook her head abruptly. It did no good to regret the past, nor to dwell on the 'what ifs'. Things were the way they were for a reason. Jacob had knowingly made his decision to join her in eternity. The responsibility was equally his. He'd made an informed decision and lived with it daily.

He did far more good for his Prey than most other Predators. He was a killer, but also a healer. He brought comfort to those who would otherwise suffer. He saved lives when he could, and spared those he could not of a difficult death. It was, in his own estimation, an even trade. So long as he was not wrestling with his conscience, it was beyond her power to decide for him. It was a rare curse, for a Predator to retain that little bit of their soul that would forever brand them as a victim to their own humanity.

Shrugging off the torrent of emotions that went with the memories flooding her veins, she rose from the bed. A shower was in order, then a serious discussion with Mr. Montrose. Her dominance had to be re-established before he got any delusions of her supposed weakness in his head. It was time to get on with her night.

## Chapter 6

Adam winced as the smell of scorched macaroni and cheese assailed his nose. At the stove, the self-proclaimed master chef cursed loudly. He arched a brow as he watched the man attempt to smother the smoke with a hot pad. The furrow of his brow became a frown when the hot pad burst into flames. Adam rolled his eyes and abandoned his place at the microwave where he'd been put in charge of the instant brownies.

He reached out and twisted until the gas burner was in the off position. He grabbed the remaining hot pad and grasped the handle, tossing the pot into the deep stainless steel sink and turning on the cold tap. The flames popped before dying out, smoke billowing from the ruined saucepan.

The two men stood in silence for a few moments, staring at what remained of the blackened cookware. Adam turned off the tap and sighed. "I warned you that you don't put bourbon in macaroni and cheese. It catches fire if you aren't careful. I hardly think Miss De Maigne would approve if you burned her house down."

Leon snorted, an action Adam was quickly coming to realize was a trademark of his. "She'll forgive me anything short of killing one of her Cherished." The words were said so flippantly that Adam almost missed the bitter undertones. Adam did not push, sensing it was a delicate subject.

"What the hell did you do?" Jacob's bewildered voice spoke from the doorway as he stepped back into the kitchen.

Adam grimaced. "Your friend here decided to cook and damn near burned your Scion's house down."

Inquisitive jade eyes that so resembled his abductor's own shifted to Leon. "You used bourbon again, didn't you?"

Leon lifted his shoulders in an elegant shrug. "I can't help it if the new stuff doesn't have the same properties as the old when exposed to high heat. Besides, Adam put the fire out before any real damage was done. Didn't you, my good man?"

"Yeah. Sure. Whatever." Adam tossed the hot pad onto the counter top and shook his head. "I'm done."

Jacob leaned against the refrigerator with a grin. "I'm sure you are, my friend. Will you do me a favor?"

Adam stiffened. He didn't like that tone. Ice blue eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What's that?"

Jacob did not wait for a reply, but pushed himself away from the refrigerator and towards the butler's pantry. He returned with a crystal wine goblet and a small glass bottle. He pushed these at Adam. "Take these upstairs to Elizabeth. Tell her to take it no matter how bad it smells ... or tastes. Doctor's orders."

Adam hesitated before reaching out to take the bottle. The label was in Russian, unfortunately not one of the languages he spoke. He glanced at Jacob with a frown. Jacob cracked another of his disarming grins. "It's a liquid iron supplement. In fact..." Jacob stepped forward and took the glass from Adam, placing it on the countertop. The bottle was taken next and unscrewed, the plastic wrapper tossed aside to be dealt with later.

"That is *vile*." Adam's nose wrinkled in disgust. "If it smells horrible to me, how will

she even be able to be in the same room with it, let alone drink it?"

Jacob's grin faded to be replaced by a shrewd expression of understanding in those keen eyes. "Is that concern for my Scion I detect in your tone?"

"No." Adam shook his head, teeth gritted in denial. "No more than a murderer deserves."

Jacob's expression was instantly shuttered as his hand shot out to grab Adam's good arm. His grip was like iron, and he jerked Adam forward. "What did I say about the disrespectful comments, Mr. Montrose?"

Adam winced in pain. "I'm sorry. I'm trying, I really am. I can't help it if I don't understand or appreciate her motives or what she is, what any of you are. And I certainly can't push aside the fact that she *did* kill a very good friend of mine in cold blood only a few hours ago, so pardon me if I don't ooze respect for her."

The dark haired man did not speak as he extended his hand to Leon, motioning to the knife block. "The utility knife if you please, Scion?"

Blue eyes widened in fear as his hand was jerked over the goblet. Jacob held his hand tightly, and he nodded to Leon when the knife was delivered into his palm. The Predator's voice was tight as he spoke. "You have no idea what you are toying with, Adam. I assure you I am not nearly so forgiving as she seems to be at the moment." Adam's fingers were folded down until his middle finger was the only one extended, hovering over the glass. "Leon, the band-aids are in the third drawer to your left, if you will get one for me, please."

Leon remained silent, even as Adam's eyes cut to him. Fear coursed through Adam as he watched the Scion move to retrieve the requested item. Adam tugged at his hand in an attempt to liberate it from Jacob's grip. He felt the sting of the cut before it really registered in his mind what the other man was doing. He hissed in pain, eyes darting to his finger. Jacob held his hand firmly over the goblet, watching with golden eyes as the droplets of blood pooled on Adam's fingertip before dripping into the liquid below, further darkening the murky brown color.

Once more, Adam attempted to extract his hand from the painfully tight grip. Jacob spoke again, his voice threaded with a steely determination. "You are so concerned for my Scion that you do not wish her to be uncomfortable, therefore you will contribute an improvement to the smell and taste. Very generous of you, Adam. She will be impressed and grateful."

Jacob's hand released his as he reached for the bandage, unwrapping it. It was pressed over the cut without so much as a protest from Adam. He stared at the goblet for a moment, tempted to throw it down the sink next to him and run for it. Beside them, Leon snorted and spoke for the first time. "You do realize, Jacob, that she will be all the more apt to partake of our new friend now, don't you?"

Adam's eyes grew round once more. Jacob chuckled, his customary good-humor restored. "All the better. I grow tired of her indecisiveness. The sooner she consciously realizes the decision she has already reached, the better. At least then I will be released to return to my real work, rather than babysitting the wayward Mr. Montrose."

"I'm standing right here." Adam snapped, surprising even himself.

Jacob's eyes landed on him once more. "Well, then, perhaps you should be on your way with this." The goblet was pushed into his good hand without fanfare. "Before it grows lukewarm, and I have to cut you deeper."

Adam gritted his teeth in the face of the patronizing tone. Jacob pointed to the back staircase. "Second floor, last door at the end of the hallway. Be certain to knock first." Jacob smiled dismissively, returning to his conversation with Leon.

He didn't hear much past the last order as he turned, walking sluggishly towards the staircase. His life, it would seem, had taken a turn for the incredibly weird.

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Elizabeth had just slipped on her robe when she heard the knock at her bedroom door. She paused in pulling the brush through her damp hair as she focused on the heartbeat of the person on the other side. Adam. She sighed heavily and crossed the room. She let the brush dangle loosely from one hand as she pulled the door open.

He stood just on the other side, casted arm raised to knock again. In his good hand, he held a crystal goblet with some sort of foul-smelling liquid in it. It was tinged with something sweet, something vaguely familiar. She resisted the urge to reach for it simply to sniff it more closely to determine exactly what the mixture was. Instead, she carefully schooled her expression into one of nonchalance, stepping aside. "Are you going to come in?"

Panic flitted across his features for a moment before he swallowed audibly and nodded. She caught the scent of fresh blood, his own, as he passed her and entered the room. The door was pushed shut, the lock twisted once again as she turned to regard him. She remained silent, watching without blinking, waiting for him to speak.

The goblet was extended to her wordlessly. She stared at it with a raised brow, arms crossed over her chest, the brush forgotten as it poked almost painfully into her ribs. He was the first to relent. "Jacob said I should bring this to you. He said that you were supposed to drink it no matter how bad it smells or tastes. Doctor's orders. His exact words."

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes as she regarded him suspiciously. "What is it?"

"An iron supplement. I guess he thought you might need it after ... your ordeal. Whatever it was. He said you should drink it before my..." He trailed off into silence eyes lingering on the glass.

She stepped closer, reaching out for the glass. "Before your what?" Careful not to let her fingers touch his own, she raised the glass to sniff it delicately. Her lips curled up in a distasteful expression. "You do realize that this is foul."

"I used the word vile, actually." Adam's agreement was instant.

"Your what?" Elizabeth inhaled it briefly once more. She could smell his blood mixed in with the liquid; she simply wanted to hear it from his own lips.

Adam swallowed hard, eyes focusing on her once more. "My blood." He stated this flatly. "Jacob thought it would cut the bitterness of it or something." He shrugged carelessly and took a step back.

Elizabeth's nose wrinkled reflexively. She turned the goblet up and drained it in one large gulp. A full-bodied shudder ensued as she clamped down the reflexive urge to vomit up the foreign substance. Jacob's insightfulness never failed to surprise her. The addition of the blood did indeed make it a bit easier to consume. The glass was set aside on the bar as she turned away and headed back for the bathroom. "Thank you, Adam." The words were succinct, bearing no emotion behind them.

She could feel his eyes on her as she disappeared into the bathroom. He was frozen

there, just inside the room. His very posture told of his desire to unlock the door and make a run for it. This improved her disposition considerably; her dominance was not in danger as she'd feared it would be.

There was silence for a few moments before she heard his footsteps, bringing him closer until he was hovering in the doorway of the bathroom. After she finished brushing her hair, she placed the brush on the marble countertop and glanced at him in the mirror. He was staring in unabashed curiosity. It pleased her to know that she'd been right, that his innate inquisitiveness would outweigh his natural fear of a being he did not understand.

She suppressed a smile and reached for the hairdryer from its resting place in its cubby beside the vanity. "You seem surprised, Mr. Montrose. Why is that, I wonder?"

He frowned marginally. His statement surprised her with its naivety. "You have a reflection."

Elizabeth's brows shot up to knit together. "Yes, I do. Don't you?"

He frowned for a moment before smiling nervously. "I thought vampires didn't have a reflection."

"I am a Predator, Mr. Montrose, not a freak of nature. I am also able to be photographed, and I can walk in daylight without bursting into flames," she replied with a distinctly smug tone.

He had the good grace to blush, arms coming up to cross at his waist. "I'm sorry if I insulted you."

"Ignorance is forgivable, Mr. Montrose. After all, I'm sure you've never had the opportunity to meet many of my kind, and you have certainly never studied us before." She allowed a small smile, effectively ending the conversation as she flipped on the hair dryer.

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Adam watched nervously as she turned her head upside down and set to work on the impossibly thick, cinnamon-colored mane. He surveyed the lavish bathroom curiously. Like the rest of the house, it seemed obscenely normal. It was also warm, as though someone had just taken a scalding hot bath. The vanity top held no makeup, only a few bottles of what he recognized as high quality perfumes. The only thing that seemed out of the ordinary was the blood-soaked silk shirt, thrown carelessly on the floor. The slacks she'd worn hung neatly on a hook beside the massive tub. For all intents and purposes, it was the bathroom of a well-to-do woman. It could belong to any woman in Seattle.

His gaze traveled back to Elizabeth, who had finished with her hair and was now running her fingers through it to settle the wavy strands back into order. She appeared to be a normal woman performing her everyday grooming rituals. One hand snaked out and lifted a bottle of Chanel, dabbing a bit just behind her ears and on the inside of each wrist. It was subtle, barely even reaching Adam's nose from his position a few feet away. She turned to regard him, motioning him out of the room.

She flipped the light off behind them, brushing past him towards the walk-in closet that stood open on the opposite side of the room. She disappeared into the closet, her voice floating back at him. "You're making me nervous just standing around like that. At least sit down if you're going to stay."

Obediently, Adam took a seat on the chaise against the wall. He glanced around the room, his curiosity taking hold once more. The room wasn't so much a bedroom as it

seemed to be private living quarters within the home. It was substantial in size, yet seemed comfortable.

The bed was an enormous affair, big enough to get lost in. Heavy draperies hung from the canopy's mahogany frame, pushed aside carelessly, as though they were for more than mere decoration. The room was decorated in lush silks and brocades, soothing shades of lavender and rich gold lending an air of calm to the space. It was a retreat. He realized this with a new understanding of his captor.

A large armoire stood open on the opposite wall, a vast array of electronic equipment standing at the ready. DVDs stood neatly in a row underneath the TV and stereo components. He squinted as he attempted to read the titles. His smile returned, more easily this time. Elizabeth De Maigne seemed to have a soft spot for black and white movies, judging by the myriad of classics in the collection. His eyes moved again, towards the small galley kitchen on the other side of the room.

The countertops gleamed, not a dishtowel out of place. Beside the kitchen area, a set of French doors stood open, revealing a home office. Several computers occupied a massive workstation, all around a single chair in the middle. It also seemed that she had an affinity for technology. Vaguely, he wondered where the coffin was. The thought was squashed as he recalled her remark about not being a circus freak. Everything he saw merely seemed to confirm that his abductor was in fact surprisingly normal. A monster, yes, but one with likes and dislikes of her own. She seemed almost ... human.

It suddenly struck him what he was doing. He was searching compulsively for evidence that would enlighten him as to who she was. Not the murderer or kidnapper she was on the surface, but who she was as an individual. It startled him, that he was so calmly sitting in the lair of a creature who had the power to murder him with one movement of those elegant hands. He should be grabbing for the cell phone that lay charging on the bedside table and smuggling it back upstairs to his own room. He should be trying to get away.

It occurred to him, with no small amount of alarm, that he was more inclined to explore her and her existence than he was to escape from her.

"One of my Cherished bought it at Wal-mart on sale for my last birthday." Elizabeth's voice was silky as she interrupted his train of thought. Adam's eyes darted to her, silently questioning. She pointed with one perfectly manicured nail. "You've been staring at my microwave for the last ten minutes. I thought perhaps you were fascinated by it for some reason that escapes my comprehension at this moment."

He blinked owlishly at her, unable to bring himself to speak. She was dressed in pair of charcoal slacks and a royal purple button down. Her feet were bare, toenails painted a ridiculous shade of baby pink. In that moment Adam hated himself, hated her. He was not supposed to see her as a person. She was a murderer, a killer. She was without remorse or guilt for her actions. He was certainly not supposed to be fixating on the small details that marked her as remotely human. He forced a measure of lightness into his voice. "It is a nice microwave."

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Elizabeth's eyes narrowed fractionally. His heart rate had suddenly spiked and resentment bubbled in her chest: his resentment. No fear. Only a quiet, indignant rage that made her toes want to curl. It was intoxicating. This mortal surprised her at every turn, one minute docile as a mouse, the next tensing as though he were preparing to

pounce on her and attempt to end her very existence. Men were such fickle creatures. He was staring at her feet now. She arched a brow and glanced down, assuring herself that they were clean and perfectly manicured. Had he never seen a pair of feet before?

She cleared her throat and crossed her arms over her chest. "I thought I might have a word with you."

"And if I don't want to?"

There it was, that rebellion that was fascinating and confusing at the same time. Her eyes held his for a long minute. "We will talk whether you are amenable or not, Mr. Montrose. Perhaps you have forgotten, but you're my prisoner, not my guest. As such you are not entitled to make decisions for yourself while under my care."

"Your care? Is that what we're calling it now?" he shot back.

Her brow arched further, her mood shifting to one of bemusement. "You are under my care, Mr. Montrose, for as long as you are in my home, whether your presence here is voluntary or not. I would not have allowed you to receive medical treatment otherwise. Hear me and hear me well, Adam Montrose. I am the Scion, and you are the Prey. You will do as you are told or you will suffer the consequences. I have had a long night, and my patience is not at its greatest. Do not test me."

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Adam watched in fascination as her chin lifted, those ageless eyes glinting dangerously. He remained stubbornly silent as she spoke again, turning to make her way across the room to the small kitchenette. "Would you care for a drink?"

He blinked; the sudden change in her tone did not escape him. One moment she was threatening his life, the next she was offering him a drink? Just what the hell was she thinking? His mouth worked without sound for a moment as she lifted the goblet from the bar and rinsed it clean, placing it in the sink. He watched, mute, as she reached into the cabinet and pulled down two clean glasses. Her voice was smooth as she spoke again. "It's not world peace, Mr. Montrose. It's only a soda."

"Soda?" He parroted, brows knitting in helpless confusion.

Elizabeth turned to arch one perfect, aristocratic brow at him expectantly. "Yes, Adam. Soda." It was then that he noticed the can of Dr. Pepper she held up for his examination.

He nodded despite himself. "Please."

"Ice?"

Another nod. Adam stared, disbelief plainly evident on his face as she opened the small refrigerator and deposited ice in one of the glasses. The can's tab was popped and poured over the ice before she reached into the fridge once more. A wine bottle was uncorked, telltale dark red contents flowing into the glass without the ice. Adam's fascination as well as his disgust mounted when she poured the other half of the soda into her own glass.

His nose wrinkled, stomach turning in reflex. "What..."

"What do you think it is?" Elizabeth strode over to him once more, offering him the undisturbed glass.

He remained wisely silent, taking the glass, but not taking a drink. Instead, he held it in his good hand. Elizabeth took a healthy sip of her own drink, tongue darting out to lick her lips before she deposited the glass on a coaster on the low table before the chaise. "I didn't do anything to it." She nodded to his drink, turning once more to return to her



closet.

As soon as she disappeared into the closet, he took an experimental sniff. It smelled fine. A small sip was taken, followed by a larger one when he realized it was in fact, just Dr. Pepper. Elizabeth reappeared a moment later, carrying a small metal box.

Adam's eyes followed her as she dropped into the wingback chair that sat at an angle to the chaise. Her voice was smooth, yet still tinged with an innate distrust. "First things first, Mr. Montrose. I want to make it very clear to you that you are not free. Nor are you trusted."

"Neither are you," he retorted.

Elizabeth's eyes flickered to his, head canted to the side, expression curious. "I beg your pardon?"

"You aren't trusted. At least, not by me." Adam raised the glass to his lips once more to hide the sudden anger that colored his cheeks.

His words were met with sudden, unexpected laughter. His eyes slid to her once more. For the first time that he could recall, she was not threatening. Her lips were curved into a delighted smile, shoulders shaking as she giggled. It was a girlish sound, one that took any sign of her murderous nature out of her petite form. "What's so funny?"

She snickered lightly, then snapped the latches on the box open. "Nothing, except that you amuse me at the moment." Her expression relaxed as she straightened in her seat, bearing once more regal. "Now, as I was saying. You have at least earned the privilege of being allowed to leave your room unescorted. Until you violate this measure of trust, I will allow you the freedom to roam my home at will."

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Ice blue eyes narrowed suspiciously, banishing the momentary amusement he'd brought her. Elizabeth stiffened, shifting her gaze to him once more. His voice was deathly still. "You bitch."

She blinked. Okay, this was unexpected. She was offering him a measure of freedom, and he had the gall to curse at her? "I beg your pardon?" Her own tone shifted, reflecting the quiet anger that radiated through her.

He slammed his glass onto the table with enough force that the vibrations almost made Elizabeth wince. Almost. Liquid sloshed out, marring the perfectly maintained mahogany surface. "You heard me. You're a bitch, and I'm tired of playing into your hand."

He rose from the chaise and turned towards the door. Elizabeth's baser instincts took over as she leapt after him, the bracelet she'd pulled from its container in one hand. She pounced on him, their combined weight sending them tumbling to the floor.

His good wrist was grabbed in one of her hands, the bracelet snapped into place and activated in one smooth motion. His struggle ended as he snarled a curse at her, twisting beneath her until he was glaring up at her in unabashed anger. His heartbeat echoed a tattoo in her own chest as she regarded him, her usual composure shattered. "What the fuck do you want from me?"

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Adam twisted his wrist in her grasp, dragging their joined hands into his line of sight. A sleek black band encircled his wrist, green light blinking at him ominously. His eyes narrowed as something within him snapped. "What the hell?"

The woman who straddled his waist gave him a decidedly grim smile. "This was to

be a privilege, Mr. Montrose. One that I thought you had earned. Obviously, I was mistaken.”

“I repeat.” His voice was uncharacteristically low, belying his outrage. “What the hell?”

“It’s a monitoring device, quite similar to the one used on people who are placed under house arrest. There is however, one key difference. Whereas those are merely tracking devices, this one contains...” He found himself pushed back down roughly as he struggled to overpower the deceptively delicate frame. She grunted with the effort of holding him still, continuing without missing a beat, “A setting which automatically alerts me on my cell phone when you violate the preset perimeters. It allows me to remotely send a harmless yet painful electric charge surging through your body. It will not permanently harm you, but will incapacitate you long enough for me to arrive and take the proper action to ensure another violation will not occur.”

Adam ceased struggling long enough to stare at her in open horror. “An electric fence! I’m not a dog! I’m a human being, damn you. I’m not one of your pets to discipline or one of your ghouls to control. I’m a person who is fed up with your vampire bullshit and I’m sick of you making your control issues my own.”

“You will cease this nonsense immediately, or I will subdue you in a way I swear you will not like.” Her voice was like steel, laced with the promise that she would carry through her threat.

“Fuck you! I’d rather die than go through this anymore.” He bucked beneath her, his determination mounting. “You’re a callous, unfeeling monster, and I would just as soon be dead than go through another minute of this insanity. Now, either get off me or kill me.”

To his utter shock and not a small amount of horror, Elizabeth’s voice dropped, eyes shifting to a telltale emerald hue as she hovered above him. “If you really wish to die, Mr. Montrose, I assure you ... it can be arranged. However, the effort you are putting into your struggles and your heart’s attempt to keep up with your panic inform me otherwise.”

Adam’s terror mounted when her hands moved to his shoulder, and she leaned over him. They were nose to nose when he realized she was practically purring. It was a low growl from deep within her throat, reminding him of the lions he’d seen sunning themselves at the zoo as a child. The predatory gleam in her eyes shifted as her lips parted, tongue caressing one of those tiny, razor sharp canines. On instinct, he redoubled his efforts to free himself.

Her head touched his own, forehead forcefully nudging his to the side. To his surprise, she did not tear into him as he expected. Instead, she spoke in a throaty growl. “Keep struggling, Prey. I don’t usually indulge myself in such actions, but if you keep moving those hips I might have to give in to that most pleasurable of acts you mortals seem to find so enjoyable to engage in.”

Adam stilled instantly. A sound burst from his throat, forming a horrified snarl. A quick flick of her tongue was given over the shell of his ear, followed by a deceptively gentle nip to the lobe. Finally, he found his words again. “You’re evil.”

“Ahh ... but that’s where your wrong, Adam.” His given name rolled off her tongue in that odd accent of hers. Her voice was as silk when she spoke, and vaguely it occurred to him as odd that her breath was warm. *She* was warm. “I’m not evil. I am the bringer of justice, the essence of balance. I restore that which your kind destroys.”

Against his wishes, his body seemed to find the slight weight settled atop his abdomen to be just scintillating enough to pique its interest. It rebelled against him as her nose nuzzled the pulse point just at the base of his neck. Adam's jaw clenched as he willed his body to cooperate with his mind, just this once. It wasn't supposed to be happening like this. "It's always fascinated me, you know."

Frantically his mind worked, desperately searching for a way to distract her long enough to get away, or at least get her off of him. "What?"

His jaw was nipped gently before warm breath fanned over his skin once more. "How mortals can be satisfied with the mediocrity that passes for mating in your culture."

A sharp inhalation of breath was his body's automatic response to the increased stimulation as those perfectly manicured nails ghosted over his sides. He could throw her off him, he supposed. His heart sank even as he knew she would likely tear his throat out with those very deadly canines that were even now skimming over his neck.

To his utter astonishment, she did not break his skin. He had to give her some credit for that. She was skilled with those teeth; her control was impeccable. A bemused chuckle broke into his temporary reverie. "Why thank you, Adam. I can assure you ... I am far more skilled than you know. I'd be more than happy to demonstrate. You have only to ask."

Adam groaned, though whether as a result of his mortification at realizing he'd spoken aloud or the sudden addition of her lips whispering over his jaw line once more, he didn't know. "Please, Elizabeth."

He was curiously breathless as the plea fell from his lips. Her lips curved into a satisfied smile against his skin. "Please what? Hmm?" A sudden pinprick of pain flashed through his fogged brain, followed by the soothing caress of her tongue over his earlobe. "Please forgive you for being an ungrateful, petulant little boy?" The pain returned, though it was this time hazed by a heightening arousal as one of those warm hands found the bare skin beneath his shirt, trailing up his sides once more.

"Please allow you to live on to find a way to torment me until I snap and tear open that luscious neck of yours?"

Adam's back arched as her fingers found one nipple, twisting it just enough to bring him back from the edge of oblivion. His hips pressed into hers, bringing another smile of her lips. Her tongue clucked gently, her tone becoming chiding. "So easily stimulated are we?"

"Please get off me." His voice shifted to a strained one, betraying the war his conscious mind was fighting with his body. "Let me go."

Her eyes glinted at his from above a moment later. Gone was the killing anger he'd seen earlier, replaced by a mysterious curiosity. "I haven't been holding you down for quite some time, Adam. You're now here of your own free will."

He stared at her in mute disbelief. The hand on his chest still lingered, though her touch was gentle now. A quick turn of his head revealed that her other hand was planted firmly on the floor beside his head, easily supporting her slight weight as she'd hovered above him.

His hands rose of their own will, leaving her waist. When had they developed an attachment to the monster that wanted to kill him? To his surprise, he'd barely blinked before her weight was shifted off him, and she was on her feet, staring down at him. Her expression was serious once more, eyes again a sea of calm jade. "Let me make a

suggestion, Mr. Montrose.”

He pushed himself up with his good hand, blinking at her warily. He remained stubbornly silent, watching as her fingers laced together before her. “In the future, I will not distract you with such ... primal tactics. The next time you dare to so blatantly defy me, it will be your neck instead of your ear that bears my mark.”

His hand strayed to his ear, surprised to find wetness there. He pulled it away to stare at it, finding a smeared droplet of blood. Adam’s eyes shifted to her once more as he rose to his knees, and then unsteadily to his feet. Elizabeth spoke again, her expression clearly serious. “I will not go to the trouble of seducing you first ... I will simply rip your throat open and take the very essence of your life as I wish. Disagreeing with me is fine, even anger is acceptable so long as you are respectful.”

He gaped at her, unsettled by the suddenly reasonable tone in her voice. She did not give him a chance to speak. “You may not understand my kind and you may not approve of our ways, but you will respect me and my Cherished. There will be no insults, no baiting Jacob with slanderous remarks against me. If you have a problem with me or anyone under my care you will take it up with me.”

She held up a hand, effectively cutting him off as he opened his mouth. “I brought you here for two reasons. First and foremost, I did it to save your life. Secondly, I did it to save my city. You haven’t the faintest clue what you set free last night when you broke that seal. The being in that box is a heartless beast without conscience. If you think I kill without remorse, you haven’t seen anything yet. People will start turning up dead in droves. They will be unrecognizable after the torture they will have endured before they were finally put out of their misery. The creature you have unleashed was placed in that coffin for a reason, by an even more powerful being.”

Adam’s heart raced. The Predator before him had morphed once more, from brutal killer, to seductress, to something infinitely more aged. Something ethereal, he realized suddenly. Jade eyes belied not the appetite of a murdering succubus, but a leader, determined to preserve and protect something.

Her voice was soft, yet strong as she regarded him with glittering green orbs that demanded his undivided attention. “He is more powerful than me. He possesses no sense of restraint, no ethical code ingrained in him to prevent him from wreaking havoc on the delicate balance that allows my kind to exist. For our very survival, we must exist in a cloak of legend, thought of as monsters. We can’t fight a label. The truth is that my race is an experiment gone horribly wrong, beginning with that fiend’s generation. And do not doubt that for a moment, Adam.”

There was a slight hesitation before she plowed on. “We are a dying race. We have been dying from the moment of our creation, pushed out by the misconceptions your people have propagated.”

“You are uneducated children, ignorant of your potential and purpose. We are merely the next step up in the evolutionary chain.”

“What do you mean?” Adam’s voice was oddly curious; he’d long passed the point of cowering every time she spoke.

A bitter smile flitted over her features, lingering only a few moments. “We are everything that you are not. We are superior in every way to your kind. It’s why you fear us. It’s why you naturally seek to destroy that which you do not understand.” Her posture changed as she tipped her head to the side. “Leave me. I grow weary of your company.”

He edged toward the door, lingering a moment after he'd opened it. He hesitated slightly, the words passing his lips before he realized he'd even meant to speak. "I'm sorry it had to be this way. I think that if we had met under more ideal circumstances, I would have liked you very much."

## Chapter 7

“It’s been three days since the disappearance of Adam Montrose. Mr. Montrose, a curator at the Seattle Museum of Science and Technology, was last seen leaving the building Monday night. His vehicle has not been found, and police say there has been no demand for ransom. At this point, it is assumed the Mr. Montrose left the museum of his own free will, according to our sources. His disappearance coincides with the event of a break-in at the museum. Sources say...” The TV was shut off with a snort of disgust.

Elizabeth tossed the remote control on the coffee table and rose from the chaise. Three nights. It had been too long that she’d sequestered herself in her rooms, leaving only to give orders to Jacob that he was to stay a while longer, to keep an eye on Adam.

The knock interrupted Elizabeth’s quiet curses in her mother tongue. “Go away.”

“I can’t do that, my dear. I’ve been waiting days to see you, and I can’t stand it any longer!” Leon’s voice bordered on a whine. But then all of his speech patterns contained that affected intonation that marked him as annoying to most people.

Elizabeth sighed and pulled open the door, physically blocking him from entering. He was dressed in a pair of loose track pants and a Tarheels sweatshirt that screamed of Raul. “As unobtrusive as ever aren’t you, Leon.”

“Of course, my Ellie.” He glanced over her shoulder to the darkened room. “And you appear to be as perky as ever. I’ve waited far too long, and I’ve decided I simply won’t allow myself to be deprived of your company a moment longer.”

“I’m not exactly in the mood for company, Leon. I’d appreciate it if you would go.” Elizabeth reached for the knob, intending to shut him out.

His hand shot out, palm flat against the white door. His expression and posture instantly shifted, eyes glinting seriously. “Get dressed and come spar with me. I’ll be in the back garden, waiting. If you aren’t out there in ten minutes, I’ll break the door down and haul you out myself.”

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t.”

“I’ve done it before, along about the Crusades, I believe.” He tapped his chin thoughtfully, then grinned wolfishly. “Or I could join you in your room...” The hand left his chin, forefinger dragging its way suggestively along her collarbone, “in your bed.”

Elizabeth released a sigh and batted his hand away. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.” With those words, she placed a hand on his chest and propelled him backwards, letting the door slam as she stepped back.

\* \* \* \*

Leon grinned happily as he made his way back into the kitchen. “Jacob, would you do me a favor?”

“What?” The doctor glowered at him from beneath long lashes. His card game with Adam had been interrupted too many times to count.

“Oh calm yourself, child. It’s only ‘Go Fish’. I need you to go out to my car and get my sword. I’ll be needing it. It’s in a case in my trunk.” He tossed the keys at Jacob before the Cherished even got a chance to respond.

With a snort of disgust, Jacob threw his remaining cards to the table. "Go fish, and no touching my cards." He mumbled a few choice curses as he strode from the house.

Leon's expression darkened for a moment, turning on Adam as he meandered towards the table and lifted Jacob's cards. "He has a three, a jack, and the suicidal king."

Adam gaped at him openly. "Are you crazy?"

"No, ducky. But for you I'm willing to risk the wrath of the good doctor. Jacob is far too serious for a lad of his tender years. He should really learn to lighten up." He replaced the cards on the table and straightened just as the back door opened once more. "Ahh, thank you, Jake. I'll just be in the garden. Tell Elizabeth I'm waiting for her. Ta, dearie." He waved nonchalantly as he exited the room, barely catching Adam's words as he disappeared out the back door. "Is he always this flamboyant?"

"That's being kind," Jacob retorted with a snort. "Do you have any threes?"

\* \* \* \*

Leon shed the sweatshirt and stared straight ahead. The grounds surrounding his friend's current home were massive, lending themselves to a sense of privacy that one did not usually have in a thriving metropolis. It soothed him, to have this time to be still. He drew his scimitar from its sheath, smiling broadly when it glinted in the low lights given off by the tiki torches Raul had lit earlier at his command. Leon smiled at his reflection. "Handsome devil. Yes, you. You're a handsome devil."

"You're also clinically insane. You do realize that, don't you?" Elizabeth's voice trailed to him from where she stood, just at the outer perimeter of the oval shaped area Leon had decided would suffice for a sparring ring.

"Immortality does that to a person." Leon's voice was light, though it betrayed a hint of resignation. "Shall we begin?"

\* \* \* \*

Adam stood at the door of the back porch, frowning as he watched the slight form of his abductor enter the area lit by torches. Jacob hovered behind him, uncharacteristically silent. Adam swallowed hard and glanced down at his wrist. The electronic band was effective as a deterrent, though he wanted to step outside and watch what was going on, he hesitated.

A warm hand at the small of his back urged him forward. He glanced back to Jacob, who stared at him expectantly. "She won't activate it; you're with me."

"Will she be angry?"

"No," Jacob replied softly.

Adam moved outside, dropping into one of the barely used rattan chairs that lined the veranda. His gaze never left Elizabeth's slight form as she bowed to her opponent, pausing to speak to him in low tones.

\*

"A wager, Ellie?" Leon's voice was smooth as she straightened.

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. "What terms do you suggest?"

Leon's smile took on a distinctly vicious quality. "If I win, I have Adam for one night, to use as I wish."

Rage flooded her. Leon always did know how to get a rise out of her. "If those are

your terms, I will not engage in this nonsense at all. Something reasonable.”

“Reasonable?” A pout marred his handsome features. “Why must you take all my fun away, Ellie?”

“Don’t call me that. Now, name your terms so we can get this over with and you can be gone.” She spat the words, her foul mood forcing its way to the forefront.

Understanding lit the other Scion’s eyes. “You fancy him.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. He is Prey, nothing more.”

“Then why does he still live, Ma’at?” The deadly glint in his bright emerald eyes did not escape her notice.

It took all her self-control not to lash at him with the twin short swords in her hand. “You go too far, Leon. Do not address me by that name. Now tell me your damn terms.”

Her opponent’s expression took on a decidedly resigned appearance. “If you best me, I will stay and help you clean up the little mess your Prey has created for all of us.”

Elizabeth considered his words carefully. To find a Scion as a friend was rare, to have their help with so serious a matter was unheard of. “You swear it?”

“You have my word as your blood kin.” His expression shifted into a decidedly mischievous one. “But I won’t go easy on you. You have to earn my help.”

“Deal. And you win, I let you take me to your bed for one night.”

“A week,” he countered with a feral grin.

“One night,” she repeated firmly. “Unfettered access to me for one night ... no strings attached, to hurt me and use me as much as you like.”

“As much as I like?” That wolfish grin broadened as he leered at her.

Elizabeth grimaced. “Yes.”

“We are agreed.” He swung his weapon behind him and extended a hand to her. She shifted both her weapons to one hand and shook, sealing the odd wager before stepping back and dropping into her ready stance. One of the *wakizashi* was positioned in front of her chest for protection, the other mirroring its position across her back. Experience had taught her that Leon, contrary to what his appearance and ostentatious manner would suggest, was not above underhanded tactics.

\*

Adam tensed as he edged forward in his seat. His voice was soft as he watched the two Predators circling one another. Neither seemed willing to make the first move. “What are they doing? Why did it take so long?”

“They were settling on the terms of a wager.” Jacob’s answer held a deliberate vagueness.

“And now? Why aren’t they fighting yet?”

Beside him, Jacob chuckled. “They are sizing one another up. By virtue of age, Elizabeth has the right to strike first.”

Adam glanced to him, only to find Jacob’s expression shuttered. The other man’s eyes flickered to him for an instant. “You best watch; they move faster than the blink of an eye.”

Adam’s gaze shifted to the scene before him once more. He watched as Elizabeth dropped into a crouching position, impossibly low, and surged forward. All he heard was a low-throated growl, then the sound of metal hitting metal. Sparks flew between the blades as they met in a blur of motion.

It was only a fraction of a second before the two opponents parted. Adam squinted to



survey the pair. Leon sported a deep gash from his left leg, though if it pained him, he didn't show it. He snarled something at Elizabeth. Beside him, Jacob stiffened. Adam's brow knitted in a frown. Was a simple sparring match really so serious?

He opened his mouth to question Jacob when the pair flew at each other once more. There was a screamed curse, most likely from Elizabeth judging from the pitch of it. A feral growl followed as a small form leapt over the crouching one and struck a blow to the other's back. Elizabeth remained atop Leon for a split second before she sprang away. She rolled as her momentum carried her off balance and popped up to crouch before him once more.

"What was that?" Adam didn't recognize his own voice. "What happened?"

Jacob's eyes glittered dangerously as he smiled. "Elizabeth has wounded his pride. She ran him through from behind."

"Ran him through! I thought they weren't trying to kill each other. They're only sparring ... aren't they?" The nervousness in his voice wasn't entirely for Elizabeth. If she were killed, he would be at the mercies of Jacob, who he barely trusted, and Leon, who had been undressing him with those ungodly eyes for the last three nights.

Jacob glanced to him with a distinctly feral smile. "Neither will lose their life to the other because of wounds sustained during the match. Sparring is to prepare for battle, therefore we take it as seriously as if it were a battle. There is only one more wound to be dealt by Elizabeth for her to win."

"One more?" the blond man echoed weakly.

"Of course. They are going to three." Jacob's smile shifted once more as he returned his gaze to the pair. "It is the usual number. It prevents either one of them from becoming too weak from blood loss and needing a full night to recover."

Adam frowned and returned his attention to the match before him; the pair in the ring were circling each other once more.

\*

Elizabeth growled when the scent of the fresh blood on her weapons met her nostrils. It was a sweet scent, a smell only a Predator could appreciate, the copper-tinged aroma of the life-giving substance that flowed through their veins. Before her, Leon was struggling to remain upright. His breathing was heavy as his heart fought to send precious blood to the wound, attempting to repair itself.

"Yield to me now, and I will spare you further pain," she intoned at the looming figure of her temporary enemy.

"As if I would lose to a weak female," he spat back, lowering his weapon and tossing it away. "Shall we take it up a notch?"

Elizabeth's eyes flared a bright emerald as she realized his implications. "Sadistic bastard tonight, aren't you?"

"You would deprive yourself of the opportunity to feast on me? I can smell it on you. The ache you feel at the scent of the blood you've drawn."

Elizabeth bared her teeth at him. He never failed to get a rise out of her. Though he was rarely a match for her in physical combat, he seemed to enjoy their match of words just as much. "You will yield to me, Leon. Or you will feel more than the sting of my blades."

"Such archaic usage of the language." He chuckled darkly, hand rising in front of him to beckon her towards him. "You always do lose control of your tongue when your

temper is vexed.”

Said tongue darted out, licking her lips as she shifted her weapons to one hand and flung them out of the circle. They landed atop his own with a sharp clang. “You think you are so special as to be the one who deserves to best me after so many centuries of these matches. You have never won and you will not prevail now. Now stop gabbing and get on with it.”

She lunged for him, only to find herself airborne, literally thrown off her opponent. She twisted her body and rolled, prepared to come up in a crouch when she was tackled.

\*

“This isn’t good.” Jacob tensed in his seat. The words were spoken beneath his breath. He ignored the rapid flutter of Adam’s heart when he saw his Scion tackled to the ground. The snarl of the other Predator was audible to his preternatural ears. He could scarcely believe Elizabeth would allow herself to be so foolishly goaded into a dangerous act as unarmed sparring. The match was no longer confined to the customary three strikes.

It was now a fight for dominance that would not end until one or the other of the combatants had struck at the jugular of the other. They would not open a wound; it was merely a puncture. But it was dangerous because it represented a shift in the balance of power. Relief flooded him as Leon was smoothly pushed off Elizabeth with a graceful movement of her legs. Leon grunted and twisted, landing on his feet with catlike reflexes.

Elizabeth leapt atop him, teeth bared as she struggled to pin him down. The other Scion was longer, lean, with compact muscles in a deceptively spindly frame. He used this to his advantage, flipping them smoothly until he pinned Elizabeth. His knees immobilized her lower half, long fingers wrapping around her wrists to push her firmly into the grass. Jacob released a horrified gasp as he watched Leon strike at her neck with lightening fast quickness.

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Elizabeth released an indignant howl as she felt the sharp sting of her opponent’s canines sinking into the flesh at her pulse point. He growled against her throat, shifting to speak into her ear. “My match. I win.”

She gritted her teeth and hissed back, “Fuck you.”

“Ahh ... exactly. I certainly intend to.” His tongue flicked over the tiny droplets of blood that oozed out from the mark he’d made. “I’ll make you another deal, Elizabeth.”

Her hands curled into fists as she listened. She had no choice. Very few in this wretched world could overpower her physically, Leon among them. “Don’t bother. I will honor my end of the wager.”

“I have no doubt of that; you are the bringer of justice. The very epitome of honor. However, I will amend our earlier agreement in light of your distaste of my ... crude techniques.”

“Just say it and get off of me,” she snarled, twisting her head to stare at him.

He hovered over her, eyes glinting dangerously. “I will allow you to forgo the wager if you will mark the lovely little Adam as your consort. You no longer need to be alone. It’s making you bitter, and I don’t like it.”

“Who the hell are you to tell me what to do?”

“Let me finish.” His grip on her wrist tightened painfully. “In exchange, I am willing to lend you my assistance.”

Elizabeth blinked, taken aback. This was not what she had expected. “Are you serious?”

“As serious as you when you threatened to castrate me when you caught me seducing your Jacob after the Battle of Gettysburg.”

Elizabeth blinked, weighing her options. “All I need to do is mark him as my consort?”

“Mark him completely,” he countered. “You have until dawn. Otherwise, you lose my aid and will yield yourself to me at sunset tomorrow. Are we agreed?”

“Fine,” she spat the words at him, her anger fading into astonished horror. Was she really agreeing to this? It was a thought she loathed. It meant exposing herself to the Prey in a way she’d never thought she’d debase herself to. It was humiliating, to lay oneself bare to the judgments and ethics of others. And it would jeopardize her own dominance. He would be more than Prey. He would be ... she growled, pushing the thought aside. She would take Adam Montrose as her consort, and destroy him later. Leon didn’t need to know that.

Her friend’s weight lifted off her, as her eyes focused on him blearily. It was beginning to rain. His hand was extended to her, his demeanor cheerful once more. “Shall we go have a bit of dinner? Raul made some steaks that just looked divine.”

\* \* \* \*

Thin lips curved into a smile. She was angry. He could feel it. Ra’s fingertips dug into the flesh of the battered woman who hung from the crude device he’d fashioned and suspended from the ceiling. She shrieked indignantly, twisting to get away. Her pulse was racing, adding to it an intoxicating fear.

“Now, Mimi. Is that anyway to act towards your savior?” He clucked his tongue as the foreign words spilled from his lips. They were awkward, stilted, and heavily accented.

The woman screamed beneath the rags he’d stuffed into her mouth. He’d loved to hear the screams. But the soldiers he’d seen patrolling the area in their strange chariots were diligent in their work. He had no doubt he could kill them all when he was primed. But one did not recuperate from eons of deprivation in only three nights.

A pale finger ran down the woman’s neck, pausing to rest at the marks he’d made over the last twenty-four hours. She was pure, far more so than her friend. She also wasn’t the most intelligent. He’d lured both of them into his hiding place with very little trouble. Subduing them had been fun. Their screams muffled by the iron grasp of his hand, slowly expunging the life from their lungs before releasing them to drag in precious gasps of air.

The woman beneath his grasp trembled, her screams turning to whimpers. Ra tipped his head to the side and reached out, gently removing the strip of stained cloth from her mouth. “What was that, my darling? What did you say?”

Terrified black eyes stared back at him, as her lips worked. Her voice was a croak, deliciously accented in its cadence. Once silky black locks hung around her face, now encrusted with a mixture of dirt and tears. “Not my savior.”

Ra chuckled darkly. This one amused him. His hand rose, threading through the hair that so fascinated him. “Of course I am, child. I saved you from having to live the rest of your days as an inferior being. I have saved you from old age. I have kept you alive,

therefore I have saved your life ... even if it is only until I grow tired you.” He released her hair and backhanded her, sending that petite frame swinging from its ropes.

She released another of those delicious screams that had him instantly ready for another round of torture. Behind him, her friend stirred. A smile curved at his lips as he reached out and stopped the spinning.

Her eyes were different. Whereas Mimi’s were black like his beloved obsidian, hers were brown. Those impossibly huge eyes open just enough to realize that yes, she was still in agony, then promptly closed again. “No, no, no, Lydia.” The name was foreign to his tongue, its sounds harsh and guttural. He did not like her name at all. He did not like her at all. Too spirited this one. When had women become so untrained?

“Lydia, open your eyes for me again. Let me see those strange brown eyes, little bird.” The endearment was one he’d used for Ma’at when she was just a small girl, before his resurrection. It suited his latest victim as well. She was flighty, and anxious. He stepped closer, fingertips trailing up her ribcage and coming to rest just below her left breast. Beneath his fingertips, he could feel the faintest flutter of her dying heart. He’d gotten a little excited when he’d played with her a few hours before. She was destined to die.

She opened her eyes to stare at him once more, though her gaze was hazy and unfocused. He smiled gently, his other hand rising to caress her face in a mockery of a lover’s touch. His voice was calm now as he moved to take the cloth from her mouth. She released a whimper and stared at him, head resting on one of her upraised arms. “You’re going to die now. I’m going to kill you.”

Her entire frame began to shake as he dug his fingers into the flesh at her ribcage. Her eyes pleaded with him. He smiled as he spoke again. “I am going to rip your heart out of your chest. Then ... I am going to toss your carcass out for the dogs to feast on.”

Her lips formed a single word as his fingers at last pierced into her chest. Her heart fluttered beneath his touch for a moment. He leaned in closer to hear her. “What was that, little bird?”

“Wh ... why?” The word was barely discernable from the flutter of her last breath.

Ra’s lips curved into a smile as he pushed his hand past bone and muscle to grasp the dying organ. “Because, little bird, you are not pure enough.”

Her chest stilled as he pulled the heart from her chest and studied it. Her head fell forward as her entire being went limp. He wrinkled his nose as he tossed the useless heart aside and turned to face her friend once more. Mimi stared back at him, horror written in those black depths. Ra smiled at her, a feral expression, teeth exposed. “You look scared.”

He stepped forward, hand rising to her cheek once more. Lydia’s blood smeared over the tear-stained curves of the young woman’s face. He smiled. “Don’t be. I’m not going to kill you ... yet. I have need of you.”

His thumb traced over her lips, pushing past her teeth. She knew better than to bite him; she’d paid the price for that hours before. She’d not enjoyed the rough way he’d taken her nearly as much as he’d enjoyed her muffled screams. Her eyes flooded over with more tears even as he ran the tip of his thumb over her tongue. “You will be my consort, won’t you?”

Mimi’s eyes flashed for a moment, not understanding his meaning. It did register, however, that her life was to be preserved. The hopeful expression multiplied when he

leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek. "Show me your gratitude."

Her tongue fluttered against his thumb. He slipped his hand away and gripped her chin painfully, twisting her head to stare at her. "You will do as you are told, woman. Otherwise I will kill you and replace you with another."

His fingers threaded through her hair, dragging her head away. His teeth ripped into her neck, not bothering with the Thrall that would bring her a small measure of comfort. He had to establish his position above her. There was no better way of doing that beyond proving he controlled her comfort, and her pain. She stiffened against him, her battered body tensing as she gasped in pain. Ra smiled against her throat, hand squeezing painfully into her hair. Yes, she was a good choice, a docile little lamb. A lamb he would eventually slaughter.

\* \* \* \*

Leon hissed as Jacob peeled away the washcloth. The crimson-stained fabric was tossed into the garbage with a sneer of distaste. "Could you possibly make it hurt worse?"

Jacob pretended not to notice the sarcastic tone, instead smiling pleasantly. "The wound is already sealed." He chuckled as Leon glared up at him.

"This isn't funny."

"Of course it is," Jacob retorted. "You knew you couldn't best her with a sword, so you took advantage of her with your size. It's quite amusing sometimes, to see how your mind works."

"Enough." Leon rose from the chair at the vanity in the bathroom and headed for the bathtub. "I'm not in the mood to hear your insults, Jacob."

Jacob trailed after him, leaning against the frame of the door that separated the dressing area from the rest of the massive bathroom. "You do realize what you've done."

He was ignored, no big surprise there. Jacob entered the room fully, taking a seat on the edge of the tub as Leon stripped off the bloodied track pants and reached around him to turn on the tap. "You have forced her hand, and after all this is over, she will destroy Adam Montrose."

"No. She won't."

"Did she say as much?" Jacob countered, jade eyes glittering angrily.

Leon spared him a glance, uncharacteristically serious for the moment. "She didn't. I know her intentions, Jacob. I also know how her mind works. He is not simply Prey to her." He stepped around Jacob and climbed into the tub, reaching over to turn the tap off. A contented sigh came from the Scion as his fingers danced along the rim of the tub and found the button to activate the jets.

Jacob turned, propping one foot on the wide lip and leaning his chin on his knee. His voice was pensive. "Adam won't understand."

"He already doesn't understand," Leon retorted as he raised a hand and gestured. "Be a doll and hand me the bubble bath."

The younger Predator huffed, but obligingly reached for the bottle. He snatched it from its resting place in the wicker basket next to the tub, along with the shampoo, and tossed them into the water. "He is her Aureate."

"Don't let Elizabeth hear you spouting that nonsense." Leon's tone shifted as he flipped the cap on the bubble bath and squeezed a generous amount into the water. It immediately began to foam up, stirred by the circulation of the jets.

"I've already suggested it to her. She was not amused." Jacob sighed. "But I can see it in the way she looks at him. He will either be her condemnation or her redemption."

"I would hardly think she fancies either outcome." Leon settled back in the tub, tipping his head to regard Jacob seriously. "She likes her life the way it is. No complications, no entanglements."

"And that's why this is so important," Jacob persisted. "After so many centuries, boredom is setting in. Madness quickly follows. I worry for her. She has been alone longer than most."

Lean shoulders lifted out of the water in an elegant shrug. "She knows her own mind, Jacob. We have done all we can for both her and our little ducky. What happens beyond that is for fate and them to decide." His ever-mutable expression shifted once more into its usual manner. "Enough of this matchmaking, lovey. Elizabeth is occupied with her arrangements for the evening. Perhaps you should consider locking the door and joining me. The tub is big enough for two and the water is nice and warm."

Jacob rolled his eyes at the lascivious expression on the Scion's face. "I'd rather not. I have to entertain Adam while Elizabeth is sulking."

"She won't be sulking for long." Leon grinned smugly. "She only has until dawn."

Jacob's eyes narrowed. "She's already instructed me to show him to the guesthouse. I suppose she's going to sequester them there until he's made the transition from kidnapped curator to my Scion's consort." He rose from the edge of the tub and crossed to the door, pausing to glance back at Leon. "After Adam is secured, I'll be avoiding you. Please don't try to find me."

The glint in the other man's eyes sent a shiver of apprehension down Jacob's spine. "I'll be sure to look everywhere for you."

\* \* \* \*

Adam paced the length of the library. He'd been told he was free to wander, and had taken full advantage of it. The room was massive and the only place in the house he felt remotely safe. The bedroom he'd been shoved into had been relegated to a place to sleep, nothing more. His steps took him over the plush Oriental rug that dominated the room before he turned and headed back in the other direction.

The clearing of someone's throat caught his ear. He whirled to find Jacob leaning on the doorframe. The doctor stared at him, expression unreadable. "Come with me, Adam."

He remained rooted where he was, confusion mingling with the shock of what he'd witnessed only minutes before. Elizabeth had been bested by the other Predator, only to confer with him for a few moments as he pinned her down on the ground outside. She'd not been pleased with the outcome, that much was certain, given the manner in which she'd stormed past him and into the house. Leon had gathered their weapons and followed at a more leisurely pace, grinning at Adam wolfishly when he passed. It had left him wondering what exactly the terms of their wager had been.

Jacob stepped aside to let Adam exit the library. The doctor remained uncharacteristically silent as he led Adam down the hallway towards the stairs. Adam glanced to him, his nerves further set on edge. "Where are you taking me?"

"The guesthouse," came the short reply.

"Why?"

"My Scion's orders." Jacob fell silent, not speaking until they were out of the house

and across the courtyard to a small cottage set into the trees behind the main house. The details of the structure went unnoticed as Jacob unlocked the door and pushed it open.

Adam followed him inside, surprised when Jacob turned and reached for his uninjured hand. He punched in a sequence of numbers into the cell phone he held in his free hand. The bracelet beeped, the light turning red. Jacob slid it off Adam's wrist and slipped it into the pocket of his slacks. Jade eyes met Adam's own for a moment before his spoke. "Elizabeth will be here in fifteen minutes. I'm going back to the main house now. I won't be locking the door behind me. After this moment, I am no longer responsible for your actions."

Blue eyes flickered towards the open door. He opened his mouth to speak, Jacob's meaning registering. The vampire was giving him a way out, a chance to run. Adam's heart sped up. Jacob spoke again as he moved toward the door. "Do you understand me, Adam?"

Adam lifted his chin, then nodded. "Yes."

Jacob gazed at him a moment longer before disappearing out the door, closing it softly behind him. Adam stared at the door, feet carrying him towards it automatically. He tested the knob and found that it gave easily. Jacob had not lied he was giving him a way out. Adam's heart soared when he opened the door and stepped onto the wraparound porch, gazing at Jacob's quickly retreating back.

His mind spun with the possibilities. Jacob was loyal to his Scion to a fault, yet here he'd presented Adam with the perfect opportunity. Adam's brow knitted together in a frown. But why? *Don't ask why. Don't stop, you idiot. You have a fifteen-minute head start. Run.* But his body didn't want to cooperate with his mind's warnings.

\* \* \* \*

Elizabeth stood in the darkened bedroom, staring out the window at the form hovering on the porch of the guesthouse. Why did he hesitate? Jacob had followed her instructions to the letter. She heard the back door close, signaling his return to the main house. Still, Adam Montrose did not step off the porch of the guesthouse. Jade eyes narrowed. It was his only way out. If Jacob 'neglected' to lock the door, and Elizabeth were a few minutes late to the cottage, he would have ample time to make his escape. Why wasn't he moving? He should be halfway to his car by now, the keys had been placed on the hook next to the front door in plain sight. She'd done everything for him but guide him out the front gate and wave.

"Why isn't he gone?" The words were softly spoken, accompanied by a marked frown. "Why do you hesitate, you foolish man?"

He turned and headed back into the house. Good, he was retrieving his car keys. He would be gone. Instead of reappearing, the door closed behind him. Her eyes widened when she realized what he'd just done. She sank into the chair beside the window and buried her face in her hands.

Her entire frame began shaking as something inside her welled up. It was a foreign feeling, something she couldn't readily identify. Something warm and wet slid down her face. Startled, she pulled her hand away to stare at the dampness on her fingertips. "Why am I crying? I don't even feel sad."

And yet, her chest constricted painfully, as if she were being dealt a deathblow. The hollowness inside her bubbled forth until a strangled sob burst its way from her throat.

The floodgates were opened. She slid from the chair and onto the floor, curling her knees tightly to her chest. Silent sobs wracked her entire body as she folded her arms around her legs and buried her face into her knees. For the first time in more than five thousand years, the killer cried.



## Chapter 8

Adam watched the clock on the fireplace mantle tick off another minute. It was well past the fifteen minute time frame Jacob had given him, and still he was alone. It was going on an hour. He'd been sitting in the same spot the entire time, in the brown leather wingback that sat next to the massive fireplace. His gaze had shifted from the clock to the door.

In one corner of the combined living room and kitchen, he'd spied a duffle. It seemed that Jacob had prepared for this. Inside the bag, he'd found several changes of clothes as well as an envelope containing an obscene amount of money and a fake passport. Vaguely, Adam felt guilty, realizing the trouble Jacob had gone to in arranging the opportunity he wasn't taking.

Something held him there. Exactly what, he didn't know. Or perhaps he did know, and simply didn't want to acknowledge it. That was the more likely answer. A soft knock sounded at the door. Adam's gaze shifted from the clock back to the unlocked portal. He did not answer, instead choosing to let fate decide the course of his night.

The door swung inward, revealing his abductor. He only hoped that Jacob wouldn't get in too much trouble when she found out what he'd done. Elizabeth shut the door behind her and slipped her hands into the pockets of the white cashmere coat she wore. She remained there, staring at him for several long minutes.

Her expression was closed off, jade eyes betraying nothing of her thoughts. When she did move, her hands strayed to the belt at her waist, removing the coat and hanging it from a hook next to the door, the hook next to his untouched car keys.

She moved toward the chair across from him, not speaking. It briefly passed over his notice how ridiculous it was. That she should have been bundled against the wind in a heavy coat, but still been barefoot. She settled herself into the other chair and shifted her gaze to the fireplace. "I locked the door. We won't be disturbed."

Adam lifted his chin. It should have been alarming, to be so calm at this moment. "They wouldn't dare disturb you anyway, would they?"

"Leon would," she answered shortly, eyes flickering to him for a moment. She fell silent once more and shifted in her seat until her feet dangled over the side of the chair. Her head rested against the leather cushion. Adam waited patiently for her to speak again. It took all his self-control not to demand to know what she had planned. Instead, he stared at the clock again. It ticked off ten minutes before she spoke. "Why are you still here?"

He stiffened, eyes tearing from the clock to regard her in confusion. She was staring right back, unflinching in her softly spoken demand for an answer. "What do you mean?"

"Don't play stupid, Mr. Montrose. You must realize by now that nothing happens in my home without my approval."

Adam's eyes widened as he realized the implications. So, it wasn't Jacob at all. Jacob had been acting on her orders. His eyes narrowed marginally in the next second, countering with a demand of his own. "Why didn't you just let me out the front door and tell me I could go?"

"Because it doesn't work like that," she snapped, those bottomless eyes flaring a bright gemstone for a moment before settling back against the chair once more. "You

have no idea what you are toying with, Prey.”

“Don’t call me that again.” His good humor was quickly slipping away. “If I’m here of my own free will now, you owe me the respect I’ve shown you by staying long enough to hear you out.”

Her head tipped to the side, stunned by his outburst. Her expression remained quizzical until at last she smirked. “Touché, Adam. My apologies.” She returned her gaze to the fire, leaning her head back against the winged protrusion. “You have condemned yourself, and for that I am deeply sorry. I didn’t want it to be this way.”

Adam stared, unsure of her meaning. He’d discovered that the best course of action was to simply wait. She would eventually say what she meant. “I’ve never done this, so you have to bear with me. There has only ever been one person in this world to know me, who I really am. And he’s been dead for a very long time.”

“Who was he?” The question slipped from his lips before he even realized it.

Her expression hardened. “My husband.”

Adam stared at her, trying to picture her as a wife. He couldn’t do it. Couldn’t equate her with a family.

“He looked very much like you. Perhaps that’s why I haven’t killed you yet.” Her voice was soft once more, amused as if she had slipped into deepest recesses of her memory. A sad smile, ever so slight, played at her lips. “Sometimes I can almost hear his voice. He loved knowledge ... and music. He was a genuinely good man.”

She drew herself from her reverie and shot a glance to Adam as she cleared her throat. “But that is beside the point. He is dead as are all my offspring.”

“You had children?” He could not reconcile the Predator before him with the notion of her as a loving mother.

“Yes. I had many children. Things were different then. I was married when I was only 14. I had my first child at the age of 16; my last at 27 just before I was bonded with my Avatar.”

“Bonded?”

“The term we use for the transition from mortal to Predator,” she replied calmly, as if she were discussing a movie or book. “Only one child truly had my heart. A daughter, the child of my husband.”

Adam’s head spun. He was beginning to get an inkling as to the time frame, but exactly how old was she? And more importantly... “Why are you telling me this?”

Her gaze flashed to him briefly as she swung her legs over the arm of the chair and rose, crouching before the fireplace and reaching for a poker. “I don’t really know.”

“How many children?” he urged her quietly; it was fascinating to hear.

She tipped her head to the side, counting silently for a moment. “Seven that survived their first year. Three more that were deemed unfit because they were not male.”

“Your daughter was...” It was horrifying.

“No,” she spoke quickly. “The first was allowed to live, leverage for my...” She shook her head quickly and tapped the poker, replacing it on its hook and lowering herself to sit with her back to the fire.

“Your what?”

“My king,” she sneered lightly, one hand rising to caress the spot over her heart, as though the memories had brought on a physical ache. “It pleased him that my first born should be a girl; it made her inferior. She was born early. I called her Hanan.”

It struck him that she seemed different. Almost ... kind. Her knees were curled into her chest as she gazed at her interlocked palms. "I rarely got to see her. She did not even know I was her mother. She was raised as the child of my king, along with the others I produced. I had no reason to complain; he treated her as well as he was able. I was grateful to him for that much."

"Who was..." He hesitated, then forged on when she gazed at him quizzically. "Your king ... who was he?"

"It doesn't matter now. He is long forgotten to history and that's the way it should stay." She fell silent once more. "You know of the myth of Ra."

"From ancient Egypt. Of course, it's the most basic element of Egyptian mythology. He was the sun god."

When she raised her eyes, her expression had shifted once more. Those mutable eyes glinted with steely determination. "The creature in that box was an Avatar. He is among the oldest of my kind. He has the ability to walk in the day without losing his strength, and he is virtually impossible to subdue and even harder to destroy."

"*Was* in the box?"

"Yes. He escaped from the sarcophagus the night I took you from the museum. I warned you and you wouldn't listen. I had no choice. When he awakened fully, he would have instinctively headed for the nearest source of food."

"Me," he stated flatly.

"Yes, and I would rather have you under my control and care than leave you to him. As it is, I have delayed him for a few days. Even now, he is going on a killing spree. He has murdered three people in as many days. And there are two others missing. All female, all Asian, all in their late teens and early twenties," she concluded softly, pausing. "It's only the beginning. His appetite for destruction is insatiable. He tortures before killing. He will attempt to build his followers to a number sufficient for establishing himself as ruler."

"Ruler? This is America, a democracy."

"It is a democracy now, but he doesn't know what that means, let alone have the inclination to allow it in what he views as his new kingdom."

Adam's heart sped up as he struggled to assimilate this new information. "What does this have to do with an ancient Egyptian god?"

"Ra is the Avatar you set free. He is the Avatar who created me and he is the Avatar who will destroy me, and I can not stop him alone." Her voice was oddly inflected, carrying a thread of regret with it. "Leon will assist me, as will Jacob. I will contact the other Scions and convene an enclave. There is a possibility that Uriel will catch the scent of what is brewing. He is the only one who can destroy Ra."

"Uriel?" His quiet inquiry brought a rueful smile to her face.

"He is the archangel charged with the punishment of my Avatar. He is the one who sealed Ra in the sarcophagus, and thus the only one fully capable of destroying him. Without his help, there is nothing I can do on my own to bring an end to his sorry existence."

"And it's my fault that this monster is loose." Adam sank back into the chair, at last understanding the gravity of the situation. "This is bad."

"Yes. It is your fault. And yes, it is bad," she stated simply. "However, Leon's aid hinges on the reason I have brought you here."

\*

Elizabeth's chest constricted. Why did this cause physical pain? The creation of her Cherished was a simple matter, barely a pinprick on her conscience. Leon had said nothing of taking a consort that would cause this uncomfortable level of emotion. Her hand rubbed her heart absently. She could feel Adam's sadness in her chest as if it were her own. His guilt was overwhelming.

Her eyes flickered to him once more. "That's why I gave you the chance to run." Her voice dropped to a whisper as she regarded him. "You should have run, you little fool."

His heart beat ... he was warm naturally. He could revel in the feeling of the sunshine on his bare skin without feeling the uncomfortable sensation of burning that went with it. He was human. Wonderfully human. And she was going to destroy him. Her own guilt overwhelmed her.

She gritted her teeth and drew in a deep breath. He stared right back at her, unflinching. Understanding dawned in ice-blue eyes, and he visibly flinched. "What you did to Natalya ... that's what you're going to do to me, isn't it?"

Elizabeth lifted her chin, steeling herself against his natural defiance. "No."

"No?"

"No." She rose to her feet, moving with deliberately slow movements. "You are no longer my Prey. You are no longer my target, and I will not lie to you. I cannot Enthrall you as I did your friend. You will feel pain, but you will also feel pleasure. You will feel everything I feel, the ache and the hunger. It is not an easy thing for your body to handle. I had hoped it wouldn't come to this, Adam. I am so very sorry."

He remained rooted where he was, eyes wide in shock and confusion. No small amount of anger as well. "What are you talking about?"

"You are to be my consort. You will be bonded to me, and it will be hell for both of us. It would be better if we got along well, but we don't. I'm sorry." She did not give him a chance to speak again, but moved with every ounce of speed she could muster.

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Faster than the blink of an eye, Elizabeth hauled Adam out of his chair by his good arm, and he was nose to eye with the Predator. He found himself pushed roughly to his knees. He glanced up, bewildered at the sudden change. Her eyes glittered with an unearthly light as her hand rose to thread through his hair. He shook his head minutely as if to dissuade her, but found himself twisted, back bent over her knee as she hovered above him.

Her voice was tight, laden with a myriad of things he could not begin to analyze or understand. "This will only hurt for a moment, I promise. You must trust me."

"No, don't," he managed to gasp the words out before her hold tightened in his hair. In the next instant, a bone-chilling cold overcame him. It was coupled with a craving that ached to his very bones. It was ... he realized belatedly, Elizabeth.

The sting as her teeth pricked his neck was pushed away, yielding to a strangely comforting presence. Her mouth was warm, and she supported his weight easily. The pain increased sharply until it was the worst he had experienced in his life.

Then it was gone and all that was left was the sudden emptiness inside his gut, warning him of imminent danger. His casted arm flailed about of its own volition. He felt, more than heard, a sigh of satisfaction. Even as the warmth of Elizabeth's body couldn't fight off the cold that enveloped him. He struggled for words, but the only sound

that made it out was a gurgle.

Weakness burgeoned from within him, and he discovered that it was true ... that his life really did flash before his eyes in the moment before perceived death. His good hand clutched at the soft pink sweater the covered his killer's warm torso. Dimly, he was aware that the warmth, that precious heat, was being withdrawn from him.

She murmured to him, soft words in a language he didn't understand. He was moved bodily, propped against something. He allowed his eyes to slide shut even as her voice came again. Fingers slid over his lips, prompting him back to some semblance of wakefulness. Without her presence inside his bubble of awareness, the pain returned. It throbbed through him, abruptly drawing an unholy scream as he fought to hang on to the last vestiges of his life.

Something wet touched his face, something warm. It smelled like her. He latched on to the object that was pushed at his mouth as a child would its mother's breast. The taste was infinitely sweet and pure. It was tinged with a metallic essence, and he was aware of Elizabeth's voice in his ear again. Her instruction was precise as her palm withdrew from his mouth. He gave an angry growl, unable to form words, wanting more.

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"Adam, I need you to focus. You have to stay awake." The wound on her palm was already sealing itself. She had maneuvered him to lean against the chair, propped up precariously. He wasn't entirely with her, and judging from the rather unimpressive snarl that emitted from him when she'd withdrawn the source of her blood, he was not happy.

Her hand was raised as she crouched over him, nails ripping a jagged opening into her jugular. His nostrils flared as the first droplets hit the air. His good hand rose and gripped her hair with surprising strength. It was an animal instinct, to go for the neck. A killing instinct.

His lips whispered over her skin for a moment until he found the source and began sucking vigorously. She hissed out a gasp of pain, forcing the words out of her mouth. "Easy, Adam. Just swallow. That is why the heart beats ... to bring the blood to you."

He grunted an acknowledgement even as she held his shoulders. The seconds passed painfully slowly until she dug her nails into his shoulder in warning. It was in that moment that she learned, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Adam Montrose was a man with self-control. She had not thought of it before, nor associated it with him.

His lips ghosted over the wound. A gentle kiss was pressed to the area before his arms encircled her waist. Gently, she pushed at his shoulders, propelling him away from her and back against the chair once more.

His head lolled back, eyes glazed and unfocused as his breathing struggled to even out. His heart raced in its attempt to assimilate the new blood into his system.

Elizabeth watched carefully. He was taking this surprisingly well. His breathing hitched as his blue-tinged lips began to regain their color. His heartbeat slowed, and his chest caught again. Gradually, the gasps smoothed out into a gentle, familiar rhythm. The breathing and heartbeat of a Predator were far slower than those of mortals, the body's reaction to the more efficient blood that flowed through their veins.

A single word passed his lips as he finally caught his breath. "Warm."

Elizabeth remained silent as his entire body clenched violently. It was a horrible moment for him, she knew. It lasted no more than a few seconds. After the blood he'd ingested was absorbed, the healing to his damaged organs was rapid. Given his excellent

state of health, it was an almost instantaneous process. His body relaxed a moment later, bonelessly melting against the chair that supported him.

He lifted his head to stare at her, then blinked, slapping a hand over his eyes and hissing in pain. Elizabeth frowned for a moment, then realized it was the lights in the room. They were far too bright. She reached over him for the remote control and hit the tiny button bearing the light bulb icon. Instantly, the only light in the room was from the fireplace.

\*

Her voice was low, soothing. "It's all right. I've turned the lights off."

Adam ventured to take his hand from his eyes. Behind his lids, the light was no longer blinding. It was instead, subdued, almost normal. He relaxed and opened his eyes, blinking at the petite-framed woman who straddled his lap. One of her hands was braced on the seat of the chair behind him, the other held a remote control. Her appearance had shifted. Glowing green and gold tendrils extended behind her. He tipped his head to the side and stared a moment longer. "I'm not dead."

She chuckled softly. "I promised I wouldn't kill you."

"Yes. You did," he stated simply, his good hand rising to trail down her face. Surprise entered him, vague though it was. "You're crying."

"No." She pushed his hand away a bit roughly. "Not crying."

"Then what do you call it? Have you sprung a leak?" Odd, to have his sense of humor choose this particular moment to present itself. The expression in her eyes was obvious, the sadness was no longer hidden behind her usual impassivity or anger. "Why are you sad?"

"I'm not sad," she reiterated as she studied him closely. His hand rose once more, smoothing over the curve of her cheek. The texture of her skin was infinitely softer than anything he'd encountered before. It was as though the nerves in his fingertips were feeling for the first time. It was fascinating. And arousing.

Before he realized what he was doing, he cupped the back of her head and pulled her forward in a rough movement. His fingers threaded through the hair caught at the nape of her neck in a loose ponytail. "You're like silk ... only softer." The words were foreign to his ears, his voice unrecognizable as his own. "You smell like coconut." The scent was not overpowering; in fact, he had not noticed it before.

Elizabeth allowed his exploration patiently. It was as though his senses had never been used before. He tipped her head forward, nose to her jaw line and inhaled deeply. His voice was a rumble. "Coconut and lilac. What an odd combination. I wonder if you taste as good."

"Adam, that's really..." She fell silent as his tongue darted out, swiping over the flesh just below her ear. A shiver darted down the length of her spine. She placed her hands on his chest, propelling him back against the chair.

Disappointment fluttered through him as he gazed at her. She was staring intently at him. He tilted his head to the side and stared right back. "Don't pretend you aren't interested, Elizabeth. I recall quite clearly that you were all for showing me a few of your tricks the other night." He gave a wolfish grin and reached up for her face once more.

Her voice held a note of warning. "Enough, Adam." She rose smoothly from her place in his lap and stood over him. "You're dancing on razorblades."

The warning was coupled with a healthy dose of annoyance; he could feel it curling

inside his stomach as he surged to his feet, closing the short distance between them. "Then waltz with me." The growled command was accompanied with an instinctive baring of his teeth. Now where had that urge come from? Probably the same place as the sudden desire to possess the petite form before him.

She stood toe to toe with him, chin lifted to stare him directly in the eyes. Elizabeth's voice carried the authoritative command he was well familiar with. "You will cease this nonsense and take a seat this instant."

\*

The wolfish expression on his face would have frightened a lesser being. Had that being not lived to see over five thousand years of life, it would have been quite alarming. His eyes glinted a bright emerald at her. Why were they green? They mirrored her own when she was provoked. It was disconcerting to say the least.

His smell had changed as well; it now reminded her of freshly turned dirt and summer rain. Odd to be realizing that. He towered over her as an immovable object. She gritted her teeth against the urge to lash out at the person who dared violate her personal space despite the command she'd distinctly given to the contrary.

Her back hit the wall; she hadn't even realized she'd been moving. He stared at her, that disturbing smile still in place as he raised his casted arm into his field of view and flexed his fingers. "Hmm. It doesn't hurt anymore."

Somehow, she found her voice, though it was strange and didn't sound like her own. "Because it's healed."

"Really now?" Those disquieting eyes flickered to her, followed by a satisfied smirk. "How convenient." His free hand grasped the edge of the cast and dug into the plaster. It crumbled beneath the powerful fingers. He appeared briefly surprised, then ripped down the center and gave his hand a toss. The cast was sent flying; it glanced off the wall to land on the hardwood floor with a dull thud.

His fingers flexed again as Adam cocked his head to the side and brushed the dust from his arm. "Isn't that convenient?" he repeated quietly. Elizabeth watched him, satisfied that for the moment he was sufficiently distracted. It was in the next instant however, that he placed his palms on the wall on either side of her head. "Now ... where were we?"

"I was about to rip your head off like I did with the vitiate if you touch me without my permission," Elizabeth replied promptly.

Adam chuckled low in his throat. "That's funny, Elizabeth, that you think you can still intimidate me with death threats."

One hand lifted from the wall, threading into her hair again. He paused, as if waiting to see how she would respond. To his surprise, she did nothing. He lifted the hair and held it to his nose, inhaling deeply. "You are a work of art ... did you know that?" The words were barely audible, more of an afterthought than an intentional compliment.

\*

Elizabeth's hands rose, resting on Adam's chest. Her instinct was to push him away as far as she could, then proceed to beat the living shit out of him. Why was it, then, that she couldn't do more than simply rest her hands there, on the faded wool sweater he'd nicked from Raul?

She opened her mouth to speak only to find that no sound came out. Adam's eyes still glittered that unearthly emerald, tinged just the slightest with his natural icy blue. He

was simply stunning. She drew in a steadying breath and at last found her voice. “Adam, this is enough. We need to talk about what comes next for you.”

“I know what comes next.” He spoke confidently as he closed the distance between them and seized her lips in a rough kiss. Elizabeth’s hands pushed at him, a self-preservation instinct. His other hand came to rest at her elbow, holding her against the wall in a steely grip. The one in her hair tightened, effectively immobilizing her.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. He was supposed to be naturally weaker than her, yet she couldn’t push him away. It was frightening and intoxicating all in one turn.

\*

She smelled of coconut, it would stand to reason that she would taste of it, however faintly. What he wasn’t prepared for was the mixture of fruit and perfume that so delicately teased his heightened senses. He was only vaguely aware of what he was doing as he pushed her back into the wall, pressing his hips into hers.

She didn’t fight him, although he had not expected her to. He could smell her arousal as acutely as his own. It seemed laughable now, that he should have ever been scared of the compliant woman he held in his grasp. She was yielding to him so easily. The thought sent a possessive spiral of heat straight to his stomach. His grip on her hair tightened as he jerked her head back. His tongue swept over the seam of her lips, demanding to taste what was hidden there.

On cue, her lips parted. Adam’s other hand left her arm, trailing restlessly down the length of her side. The fervor within him spurred him on. Without thought to consequence, his fingers sought out the warmth of her bare skin, pushing beneath her shirt. He broke away from her lips and released his hold on her long enough to hook his fingers in her shirt and tug her away from the wall by its hem.

She was breathless, lips swollen and bearing small marks from the relentless exploration to which he’d subjected her. Elizabeth’s eyes were half-lidded as he stared at her. Without waiting for her permission, he grasped the delicate fabric and ripped. He was rewarded with the sound of a gasp. She opened her mouth to speak, but fell silent when he glared at her.

The scrap was tossed aside, leaving her bare for his perusal. To his delight, she wore no bra. Her skin was pink, as though she were flushed. Adam’s grin returned. So, she wasn’t entirely unaffected.

His fingers found her sides once more, dancing up and over her ribcage before coming up to cup her breasts gently. He stepped closer once again as his thumb and forefinger closed over one pert nipple, giving it an experimental twist. He hissed as she sucked in a sudden breath. His voice was a growl as his other hand settled on her hip, fingers trailing into the waistband of those perfectly tailored slacks. He growled one word at her. “Off.”

The petite form before him stared at him. Her expression was for once completely open to him. She opened her mouth as if to speak and he shook his head, applying pressure to her nipple once more. “No. I’ve been your captive until now. It’s your turn to do as I say. Now ... take the pants off, or I’ll rip them off myself. The choice is yours, my Golden One.”

\*

Elizabeth stilled as the endearment slipped from Adam’s lips. Her hands were shaking. Why were her hands shaking? It wasn’t as though she’d spent five thousand



years celibate. The sound of her late husband's term of endearment for her caused a reflexive constriction in her chest.

Before her, Adam grew impatient. His hand closed over one of her own, guiding them to the button of her slacks. She moved mechanically, mind still spinning as she tried to sort this out.

\*

Her heart had skipped a beat when the words had escaped him. Now this was an interesting turn of events. It was only a few moments before her slacks joined the ruined shirt, kicked aside. Adam took a moment to rip his own sweater over his head. The wool itched horribly against his sensitized skin, and it felt good to have the cool air of the room replace it.

"Why did you call me that?" Elizabeth's voice was not her own, it was broken ... vulnerable.

Adam cocked his head to the side and gave a toothy grin. "I don't know." Without further explanation, he grasped her by the base of the neck and pulled her in for another, deeper kiss.

Images flashed, unbidden, into his mind. Elizabeth, in ways he'd never seen her. In a robe of sun-bleached white linen, a blossom tucked behind one ear. She was bathed in sunlight, chin tilted up to feel its warmth on her face. She'd loved the sun more than anything. It lit her very being until she glowed golden. Gold like the sun.

Adam's heart beat faster. With movements he wasn't in control of, he buried his face in her neck and inhaled deeply. The scent was no longer foreign. It was, instead, one that he seemed to remember from some time long past. It didn't make any sense.

Dimly he was aware when the tender feeling receded, and he felt small hands working at the button of his jeans. It sparked something in him, some deep need to mark her ... to claim her. He growled, reached down to grasp her by the wrists, and pushed her hands roughly against the wall. "Mine."

He gave a sharp, punctuated thrust of his hips into hers and let his eyes slide shut. A whimper escaped Elizabeth's lips, a sound of arousal mingled with expectation. Adam released his hold on her hands and reined in the sudden, overwhelming need to simply take her then and there. He released her fully and stared, smug smirk playing at his lips. He turned on heel and headed for the door that stood open a few feet away, leading into the cottage's only bedroom.

He could feel her eyes on him, following his every move. Adam paused at the door, not turning as he waited. Rather than speak, he decided to wait, to see if she was indeed as ready for this as he wanted her to be. His smirk broadened into a full-blown grin as he heard the soft footfalls behind him. He resumed his pace into the bedroom, turning as he spotted the armless rocking chair in the far corner of the room. A secret smile lit his features as he turned to face his soon-to-be lover. She simply stood there, clad only in a pair of ridiculous pink panties. She did not flinch, or even move to cover herself as she stared at him. "What?"

Her tone was more curious than anything. Adam chuckled to himself and snaked his hand out, grabbing her by the wrist and pulling her forward. She inhaled sharply as he closed his lips over the fading marks at her neck. "Adam..." Her voice trailed into silence when he released his hold on her wrist, hands dropping to hook his forefingers in the waistband of the panties. Without hesitation, he pushed them down and lifted his head.

He took a step back and let his eyes rake down her form, inspecting the curves and heated flesh that now, as far as he was concerned, belonged to him.

He gave a satisfied nod and took her hand once more, tugging her with him as he made his way to the rocker. He perched on the edge of the rocker, absurdly pleased with himself that he'd thought of this. No boring bed for them the first time. He pulled her closer, letting his hands rest at the curve of her hips. Jade eyes stared down at him, tinged in an unearthly hue. He tilted his chin up just a bit, his voice never rising above a reverent whisper. "Kiss me."

There was only the slightest moment of hesitation from her before she leaned closer, brushing her lips over his in a feather-light caress. Adam's hand shot up, grasping her by the back of the neck as he seized her lips fully. It had been only minutes before that he'd been plundering her mouth, yet it seemed a lifetime ago. He drank of her lips like a starving man seeking life-giving water. The small sounds she made threatened the small hold he still had over his conscious mind, soft mewls that he hadn't thought her capable of making. Elizabeth was not a woman he'd ever associated softness with, yet she was compliant beneath his lips. She yielded to him all he demanded and more.

Adam's hand moved from her neck, threading into the hair at the back of her head and holding her firmly, allowing her no avenue for escape. His other hand moved, of its own volition, tugging her down to straddle his legs. She went willingly, once again, no shame evident within her. It stroked his ego, to know that he was the one causing the change in her demeanor. His hand lingered at her hip until she'd settled herself there comfortably. His trapped erection ached for want of her.

Elizabeth tore her lips from his, tilting her head back to stare at him from beneath half-lidded eyes. Adam gave a feral grin and let his hand fall from the back of her head, ghosting over the skin of her neck and collarbone before encountering the swell of her breast. His other hand rose to join its mate, thumbs flicking over her nipples, coaxing them to harden. To his delight, she gasped sharply and breathed his name out in a sigh.

All pretense of gentleness left him as he wrapped his arms around her, all but jerking her to him. His mouth closed over one rosy peak, teasing and eliciting a gasp from those beautiful lips of hers.

\*

Elizabeth's jaw dropped at the sudden, unexpected movement. The feel of his teeth at her breast, scraping lightly, drew a moan from her. Her hands rose to his shoulders, bracing herself. The denim of his jeans was stiff and uncomfortable against the bare skin of her legs. She wanted nothing more than to rid him of the confounded things. It was why she didn't wear denim often, the texture drove her mad with the need to scratch after the harsh fabric rubbed her skin. She rocked her hips lightly against his, a silent plea to cease his torturous ministrations. To her surprise, one hand left her side and scooted her back a few scant inches. She cracked her eyes open and glared at him in open discontent.

His now-free hand snaked between them, fingertips lightly trailing over the plane of her stomach before dropping to the dusting of hair at the juncture of her thighs. His mouth had resumed its ministrations to her breast. She was almost lost in that moment. She tasted the familiar tang of blood and realized that she'd bitten her lower lip. The taste fanned the natural instincts within her. She wanted more. The first touch of his fingers to the most intimate place on her body sealed her fate. She gave a growl and lifted her hands, jerking his head up once more to look him in the eyes. "So help me, Adam. If you

don't..."

"Shut up." He snarled the words at her, newly acquired razor-sharp canines bared.

Relentlessly, his fingers began to move, stroking over that spot, driving her to new heights. Her head fell back, mouth dropping open when she felt him slip one finger inside of her, thumb still moving without erring. Her world threatened to crumble around her ears and for once in her very long life, she felt uncertainty. She clamped her hands on his shoulders once more, struggling to keep herself upright.

Each motion of his fingers served only to drive her higher towards a precipice from which she was not ready to fall. She heard a whimper of need, then realized it was her. She gripped his shoulders harder, nails digging in hard enough to break the skin. Elizabeth's back arched as she shamelessly pushed herself down onto his questing fingers. When had he added a second? "Not yet." She ground the words out helplessly as she fought to maintain the last vestiges of self-control.

Adam's hand slid up to cradle the back of her skull. There was no tenderness in his movements as he tugged her head up to look her in the eyes once more. His voice was threaded with an intensity she had not anticipated and it sent shivers down her spine, only adding to the overwhelming need she felt. "Look at me, Elizabeth. I want to see you."

Almost without thought, the sensations were suddenly blinding. All coherent thought left her; she was reduced to a creature of pure sensation. His fingers plunged into her again and again, mimicking the act she now so desperately craved. Adam gave a low-throated growl of disapproval as her eyes slammed shut once more. He instantly ceased his ruthless assault, and she whined in discontent.

"Open your eyes."

Slowly, as though drugged, she forced her eyes open, willing them to focus on his face. Her bottom lip was once again pulled into her mouth, teeth clamping down to keep from crying aloud when he began to move his fingers within her again. She could feel Adam's heartbeat spike within her chest as her teeth cut into her own flesh, and the faint scent of the blood droplets hit his nose. He pulled his hand from her and all but dumped her off his lap. Elizabeth stared at him in open displeasure. "What the hell?"

She barely registered the speed with which he moved. The button on his jeans went flying across the room. His grin turned predatory as he rose from the rocking chair, one hand working to get his pants off as the other rose to grasp her by the hair he seemed so fond of pulling. His lips slanted over hers, tongue sweeping out to lick her lower lip before devouring her mouth with a ferocity she'd not thought the usually passive man capable. Dimly, she was aware of him kicking away the pants to pull her flush with his body.

The hard, lean line of him betrayed what she'd suspected from day one, that Adam Montrose was not nearly so harmless as she'd first thought him to be. She gasped when the sharp sting of pain hit her as he raked his teeth mercilessly over her tongue and lips. Her fingers tightened on his arms, and he gave another prompt growl. Elizabeth's arms slipped around his neck, clutching at him reflexively when he suddenly lifted her from her feet. His hands guided her legs to wrap around his waist as he moved back towards the rocking chair again. Jade eyes widened in shock. To her surprise, he dropped them unceremoniously into the rocker, leaning as far back as he could.

Adam ripped his lips from hers to regard her with a rapacious smirk. He lifted her smoothly and positioned himself against her. He held her there, preventing her vain

attempts to impale herself on him. Instead, he merely grinned with the lazy, smug expression of a man who'd just decided he was going to get what he wanted.

"Mine." The declaration seemed to be a recurring theme, she mused inwardly. He snapped his hips up at that same moment he pulled her down, entering her in one hard thrust. Elizabeth shuddered automatically, a natural response to the abrupt and unexpected movement.

Adam held still inside her for a few precious seconds. Too long in Elizabeth's opinion. She squirmed against him, a silent plea that went unanswered until she breathed out a single, plaintive word. "Please."

As if something within her lover snapped, he clenched his fingers into the flesh at her hips and dragged her bodily upwards. He filled her again, inflamed her, coaxed her higher and higher with each small rock of his hips into hers. Hunger unfurled within her, and she instantly knew that it was Adam's, not her own.

A long, low groan escaped him as he lifted her once more. Elizabeth gave up trying to match her thrusts to his when he began to take her in earnest. He set a nearly brutal pace, each sure stroke taking her breath away. Elizabeth clung to him, feeding off his heightened arousal. She could barely contain the urge to simply sink her teeth into his flesh once more, mark him as her own as surely as he wanted to do with her.

To her surprise, he abruptly ceased his movements and held himself still within her for interminably long, unbearable seconds. She opened her mouth to protest, but was cut off when he slid off the chair and laid her gently on the floor. The hardwood was cold beneath her back, a welcome contrast to her overheated skin. He gave a soundless growl as he slid his hands from her hips to rest beneath her rear, easily angling her hips higher. He withdrew, then drove in once more, releasing a low-throated sound of approval. It was almost as though he were pressing even deeper into her.

His heart gave a little leap when she whispered soft pleas into his neck. As if in response to her unexpected submission, he released his hold on her hips and grabbed for her hands, pinning them over her head as he began moving again. Elizabeth squeezed her eyes shut as the world blurred around the edges. She could feel Adam's unwillingness to let her linger there, his determination to send her spiraling into the precious oblivion that awaited them both. He began to take her with near-vicious intent, striking that certain spot within her without error. Her entire frame shook from the force of his thrusts as he plunged himself into her depths over and over, driving her closer to insanity with each stroke.

She was unprepared when he gave a guttural, strangled cry as the last reserves of his control broke. His teeth tore into her neck, and her entire being fractured. She screamed, an unholy sound that broke its way from her throat. She could feel the blood in Adam's mouth as if it were in her own and instantly she curled her fingers into her palms. All too acutely, she was aware of him thrusting into her one final time. Her slender frame rocked violently, shuddering beneath him as her scream dissolved into a breathless repetition of his name.

He gave a mighty growl as he emptied himself inside her, lips never leaving her neck. Elizabeth's heart stopped, and for a few terrifying seconds, she was, irrationally, frightened for her life. At last, Adam ceased his movements, his tongue flicking out to caress the wounds on her neck. The calm that stole over her was unexpected. She gasped for air, pinpricks of pain reaching into her arousal-fogged mind as the puncture marks

almost immediately scabbed over.

She inhaled sharply and breathed out his name. "Adam?"

As if to reassure her, his lips brushed over hers before he released his grip on her wrists and gently withdrew from her, lowering himself to lie beside her on the cold floor. His breathing was harsh, ragged, as his body and mind made a mad rush to assimilate the new experience. The new level of awareness did not leave her, and Elizabeth wondered vaguely if it was normal to feel Adam's emotions so clearly.

She didn't have time to examine the situation too closely as her body decided that now was an excellent time to nap. She dragged herself up from the floor and grasped Adam's hand gently, bringing him to his feet. Wordlessly, he let himself be pulled to the bed. Elizabeth sagged bonelessly into the mattress. She did not speak, as though daring to break the silence would ruin the simple, rare moment of peace that stole over her. Her eyes slid shut, and she instinctively curled into Adam's warmth, letting the sudden urge to rest overtake her.

## Chapter 9

Thoth stared down at the manuscripts before him, the writing on the pages made no sense. His eyes simply refused to focus. His mind was spinning; his wife's words echoed in his head. His nerves were set on edge at the thought of harm befalling her. She was strong, yes. But it was that very strength that led her to be obstinate, and in turn occasionally blind to rational thought.

It pained him to think of something happening to her or to the child she carried. It was not yet common knowledge that she was to bear their firstborn, a fact they had decided to conceal until it was impossible. A delaying tactic, but the only one they'd felt possible. And now, Ra's apparent edict threatened Thoth's fragile little family. His stomach twisted and he tossed aside the scroll he held, disgust roiling through him.

"Does something disturb you, son?" The silky voice could only belong to one person.

Thoth's eyes rose from the table before him to regard his father-in-law. He forced a nonchalant smile, his tone surprisingly even. Evil practically dripped off the man. "Only too many hours spent hunched over my work without a break, revered Father." He rose from his chair, dipping into a low bow as he rounded the table.

Ra remained where he was, leaning against the wall. His eyes were that unearthly shade of blue Thoth had seen only a few times, usually when the man was planning something. "Might I inquire as to what brings our most revered Father to us on this glorious day?"

He stepped a bit closer before turning for the garden and exiting into the sunlight. He paused there, tipping his face upwards. Sunlight. It was something he and Ma'at had in common. They both thrived on the brightness of day, finding comfort in the warmth of the sun. There was nothing more satisfying than sitting in the gardens on a balmy day, having the noon meal and simply being together.

A shiver went down his spine as Ra trailed after him, pausing in the doorway. The older man hated the sun, he avoided it whenever he could. Thoth lowered his head and turned a bit to regard his wife's father once more. His voice positively oozed with a honeyed tone. "I have come on business from our great Pharaoh."

Now this was news. Ice blue eyes met glowing azure ones, all good humor instantly gone. Thoth's heart sped up as he squared his shoulders. Had Narmer decided to act so soon? Had Ma'at been wrong in her assessment of the situation? Was it more serious than either of them had dared to think?

"Good Father, perhaps you would do me the favor of elaborating? Why would our most esteemed Father be lowered to the task of a messenger when it is surely beneath his greatness?" The taint of sarcasm was lost on Ra.

The other man inclined his head thoughtfully. "It is, I think, because this is not so much a message as it is a decree. And as our Great One's chief advisor, I am privileged to carry out his orders. I would do anything our god asks of us without hesitation, as any good servant would. As you undoubtedly would, isn't that right?"

"I will always serve our god in any way I am capable." Thoth's eyes narrowed. He did not like where this was going. One hand rose, nervously pushing a stray hair from his

face. It was the lightest shade of blond, sun-bleached and in bad need of a cut.

Ra stepped closer, into the garden. He knelt beside one of Ma'at's prized blossoms. His voice was quiet, almost regretful. "She always was far too preoccupied with living things." His tone shifted instantly, as his fingers wrapped around the delicate stem, ripping the flower from the ground as he rose. Those ethereal eyes nailed Thoth once more, voice cold. "She is an insolent girl, and she will be taught by our great Pharaoh what her proper place is in service to the gods."

Thoth instinctively took a step back. "That's enough. I think it's best you gave me your message and then left. I have a lot of work to do."

Ra tossed the flower aside and eyed Thoth, not a flicker of emotion on his face. "You don't like to hear the truth about your chosen mate?"

"I will not hear my wife spoken ill of in my own home. You should go." Thoth took another step back, his back hitting the stone wall behind him.

"So like her, weak ... the both of you. My King's message is simple." Ra's feet carried him until he stood before Thoth, nose to eye. "You will yield your claim on Ma'at so that she is free to become his consort. If you defy this decree, I am to bring him your head."

"That is impossible. Even if I wanted to put her aside, the gods blessed our marriage, and not even the King himself can undo that. It would be adultery."

"You defy me, then?" A wolfish grin spread over Ra's face now, eyes alight with a predatory gleam.

"No. I defy the king, and if it means my death, so be it." Thoth's voice was thick in his throat. He barely had time to part his lips to scream before he felt hand in his hair and another on his shoulder. Then a deep cold, the likes of which he's never imagined, filled him. Black instantly overtook him. His final thought was of laughing eyes, the color of the finest, rarest of jade. So very light they were white in the right light. How she sparkled ... how she shone. Ma'at.

\* \* \* \*

Thoth woke to warmth. Laughter, vague and coming from all directions, filled his very essence with a safe feeling. Before him, a voice spoke. It was brimming with tender affection. "Well, what have we here?"

He pushed himself to his knees and gulped for precious air.

"Ma'at." He gasped the single word as his hands reached instinctively for his throat. Relief flooded him to find that his head was indeed, still firmly attached.

The voice spoke again before he dared to venture to open his eyes.

"Oh, dear."

"Dear?" He rose unsteadily to his feet, batting away the hand that reached down to help him. His eyes felt crusty, as though he'd slept too long. His head hurt, too ... a lot.

"You know who you are?" The feminine voice spoke again, the concern now tempered with a fair dose of wary realization.

Thoth straightened and scrubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand until he could focus on the woman. She was impossibly petite, garbed in the purest white he'd ever seen. It was really quite lovely. Blinding ... but lovely just the same. Silver-blond hair fanned out around her, as if blown by some unfelt breeze. "You shimmer."

"We all shimmer, dearie. It's a part of the whole angel thing."

“Angel?” He blinked. A frown marred his features while he blinked at her stupidly. “But, I’m not dead.”

“Sure you are, love. Dead as they come.” She grinned far too happily. “Now, getting back to the issue of your name. We might have a slight problem there.”

“Problem?” He quirked a brow, mind reeling as he tried to assimilate this new knowledge.

“Not so much a problem as a kink.” She gave a nervous laugh and paused for a moment, eyes glancing upwards.

“Kink?” Thoth rubbed wearily at his temples. “I must admit, I am not familiar with this word. Perhaps being a heavenly body, you are of a higher intellect, so if you would be so kind as to explain...”

Silver eyes went round as her mouth formed a silent ‘O’ of surprise. “Oops, sorry about that. You’ve been resting a while.”

“Resting?” Thoth repeated, still not quite following the woman’s line of thought. “Just a moment, if you please. Perhaps if we begin again, we’ll be able to understand one another.” He forced a hopeful smile.

The woman gave him a brilliant, if relieved, smile. “Of course. Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Celeste, I’ll be your Guide while you’re in the astral realms. If you have any questions, I’m your girl.”

“Celeste.” He tested the unfamiliar name, tripping over it without shame. “I’m Thoth.”

“See, there’s our first problem.” She had the good grace to appear apologetic. “I’m your new guide, I was only assigned to you 900 of your years ago when Mikel was reborn. As your first Guide, his duty was to make certain that your soul’s memory was wiped clean so that you could properly assimilate all your lessons from your previous life without being burdened by the emotional ties that go along with it.”

She smiled and leaned forward, speaking in a conspiratorial whisper. “Rumor has it, that’s why he was reincarnated. Punishment for mucking it up so many times.”

Thoth blinked once ... then twice before speaking slowly. “Mucking...”

“Polite term, I promise. Swearing is frowned upon. The punishment for that is that you lose astral form for 2 days to return to earth as a fruit fly. I slipped up once, and it’s not a life I fancy having again.”

Thoth choked back hysterical laughter. “You’re quite mad.”

“Well, eternity has a tendency to do that to a soul. Just bear with me. Now, as for what comes next, after you’ve had a bit of time to adjust to your new form, you will retire to your contemplation pagoda and mull over what you learned this go-round.”

“Mull?” He had the sinking feeling that he should be understanding what she was saying, it made vague sense at best. “So, I’m dead?”

“Oh yes, quite!” She beamed at him, as though she were a proud mother whose slow child had just spoken its first word.

It took only a heartbeat for panic to set in. “Well then, send me back. Ma’at is in grave danger, I must save her!”

Celeste’s perky demeanor instantly disappeared to be replaced by a harsh narrowing of her eyes. “I’ll thank you to keep your voice down. You are going to disturb the others.” She gestured to the covered platforms that lined the dirt path they were walking down.



Thoth hadn't even been aware he'd fallen into step beside her. "I do not care who I disturb. I want to see my wife and I want to see her now."

Celeste's lips thinned out into a grim line. "As I've told you, there was a mistake made in your processing. Unfortunately, there is nothing I can do about it now." Her slight frame relaxed after a moment. "Besides, it's not like you could really help her now after so long."

"Long? How long?" His hand shot out, gripping the Guide by her shoulder and stopping her in her tracks.

She stared at him, seemingly bewildered for a moment. "Oh, for Saint Pete's sake. Have a bit of decorum, Lovey."

"No," he stated firmly, refusing to release her. "I want answers and I want them now."

Celeste considered this for a moment, then released a heavy sigh. "Fine."

Her hands came together in a sharp clap, and instantly the dirt path fell away only to be replaced by a cool marble floor. Thoth blinked. Celeste gestured around herself. "This is the Library. We can speak freely here without disturbing the others. You know there are billions of lifetimes worth of memories stored here?"

"My patience is running out, woman. You will cease this nonsense immediately and answer me without your chattering about meaningless things. How long have I been dead?"

The guide took a step back and tapped her chin thoughtfully with her forefinger. "Oh. I'd suppose if I had to put it in linear time about 5000."

"Five thousand what? Seconds, hours, days?" Thoth wanted nothing more than to reached out and shake the woman. For a heavenly body, she wasn't very bright.

"Years." She did that chirping thing again.

Thoth's face twisted in disbelief. "That's impossible. Then why isn't my wife here?"

"Well, there are several possibilities. Either she's reached Enlightenment, or she's been reincarnated already. I'd have to pull her file to be certain." Celeste grinned at him. "All that's highly confidential, you see. We can't have one person following another through lifetimes, otherwise the person doing the following isn't progressing to their Enlightenment, you understand."

"No, I don't understand. Get the information so I can be on my way."

The woman sputtered. "But you can't do that! You can't just take off like that! There's contemplating, and resting and then you have to have your interview with the Big Guy. It's not up to you! Even with free will, it's just not done." She crossed her arms stubbornly over her chest.

Thoth resisted the childish urge to stamp his foot. Instead, he drew in a calming breath. "Celeste, you've already said there were some mistake made in my case, correct?"

She hesitated, then nodded.

"Then you must understand, that the usual conditions shouldn't apply to me, right?" he prodded with a nod.

The hesitation returned before she nodded as well. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to let you have just a little peek."

"No, just a small one." Thoth calmed somewhat as she took a step back and made her way over to a bookshelf.

*Celeste ... this is highly frowned upon, you know that. I can't rationalize this one to Him, and you know it.* Michael's voice was taut in the back of her mind.

Celeste firmly planted herself on the ladder as she scanned the shelves for the file she needed. *You let me deal with the consequences and handle the Boss. If a few years as a muse is my punishment, then fine.*

*You're pushing it. You know that.*

She released a sharp snort. *Whatever. I'll handle it, Mikey. Just go polish your sword or something. Weren't you almost out of starter fluid?*

The archangel grumbled in the back of her mind before retreating to minding his own business. She reached out and plucked the too-thick tome from the shelf and scampered back down the ladder.

She motioned Thoth over to the table and hefted to volume onto the surface. "And here we are!" Celeste smiled brightly and opened to the first page.

The young man appeared to be adorably confused for a moment. "I thought you said she would be long dead."

"Yes!" She grinned happily. He really was quite dishy for a dead guy, a far cry from most of the misty gray souls that wandered back onto the plains, simultaneously sated and confused from their recent lives. She reverted her eyes to the title page. It bore simply one name. Ma'at.

Her smile disappeared as she glanced at the copyright information. Her voice came out as a tremulous whisper. "Unredeemed. That's impossible. Only the Predators can be unredeemed, and even then it's very rare."

Beside her, Thoth scooted closer, bending over the book. "I don't understand."

Celeste took one look at the table of contents and slammed the book shut. Her skin instantly flushed a brilliant scarlet hue. "I think we should put this back and go have a talk with the Boss. I'll just run up and book you an appointment."

"No," he stated firmly and forcefully pushed her hands from the book, sliding it over to himself and opening it once more.

"Thoth, I think this really isn't a good idea. You should let the Boss explain things." She reached for the book, freezing in place when she heard his breath catch.

"Bonded to Ra at the age of 28. First kill, Narmer of Egypt. What does this mean?" His voice was small, threaded with a tremor.

Celeste remained silent. Thoth's hands moved quickly as he flipped to a random page. "What are these names? Charles Mognat, Nice ... 1354 AD. December 14." He flipped forward towards the back of the volume. "Alexander Cummings, New York City ... 1942 AD, September 3." He paused, finger running down the list until he reached the end. "Why is this one lit up? It's shining, shifting. Adam Montrose, Seattle ... 2005 AD bonded as Consort, July 20."

His eyes pegged her as he regarded the name that was faint. "You will take me to your Boss. This instant. No appointment. You will take me there this instant!"

Celeste swallowed hard and reached out, lifting the book once more. "I think you're right. You weren't supposed to see this. We should get going, we haven't much time."

\*

Thoth was fairly shaking with anger and rage as he was ushered into what Celeste had referred to as the throne room. Whereas the rest of the realms they'd passed through on their way here had been filled with color, bright sounds, and laughter, the air in this

room was the purest he'd ever inhaled, and it fairly crackled with a power he could not comprehend.

A robed man stepped into their path and studied them. "You are dirty and not fit to stand before our Master." The words were softly spoken, barely a whisper, to Thoth's conscious mind. Instinctively, he bowed his head as an ashamed blush overtook him. "I'm sorry."

The man rested a hand on Thoth's shoulder. "I am certain you will do." There was a brief flush of warmth, and, in the blink of an eye, his robes were the same blinding white that the man and Celeste wore. "When you stand before the King, you will bow, but not because you must ... because you want to."

Thoth frowned a bit, thoroughly confused.

"Step forward, my children."

The voice was modulated, though its very sound was overwhelming. The man's hand fell away, and he stepped aside, motioning them forward. The pair approached, and, in that moment, Thoth understood. He was in the presence of a King. Not an earthly one, but the One. As they neared the throne, Thoth's knees gave way. He sank to the floor and breathed out a long breath. He was bathed in pure light.

"Your request has been reviewed, Celeste. Now tell me why you think this one is worthy of bending my rules?" There then came a gentle chuckle, the tone one of an indulgent parent.

Celeste remained bowed before her deity, voice quiet. "Thoth was brought to the realms before you deemed it to be his time, and, as a result, his wife, his beloved, was taken into the grasp of one of the Fallen's children. It was no fault of her own, my King. She was chosen by you to be the bearer of justice to her people and the loss of her helpmate drove her into darkness."

"An Unredeemed." The humor was instantly gone. The statement was given in a pensive manner. "And my child wishes to right the wrongs done to his mate and himself at the hand of this Fallen One's offspring. A selfless and noble goal."

"One that is well within your realm of infinite understanding, Master. He is a good man, a rare one in the fragile state of your world these days. It is humbly and with only selfless motives that your daughter begs you. Please allow him to return to her and right these transgressions so that she might be redeemed, as was her original destiny."

Thoth remained silent, even as a warm hand touched him on top of his head. He did not move. He knew instinctively that it was the hand of the Creator, the mother and father of all life, that touched him. "And you child, are you truly willing to leave Paradise and my presence to take up the role of a Damned One?"

"Damned?" Thoth breathed out the word.

"Yes, damned. You will damn yourself to redeem her. Are you willing to give up your eternity for her?"

"Yes." He spoke without hesitation. "She is more important than eternity."

For a long moment, he feared he had misspoken until there was another rumbling chuckle. "My children, they ever bring me pleasure. You will return to your Golden One. You will share the redemption of your Beloved. The name you saw as a shimmer is the name of the one you are destined to become to redeem her."

"I don't understand." The hand fell from his head as the voice spoke in a soothing tones.

“You are not meant to understand, that is the journey my children are on. However, love is divine. It is the greatest gift I have given you, all of you. Free will and love. They come without reservation and without strings. At least, none other than those you yourselves burden them with.” There was a wistful sigh. “The greatest love is the love that is willing to sacrifice for another. It is that love which is divine, as you have demonstrated to me this day.”

“The one called Adam received half of your soul when he was born, in preparation for this event. When you awaken in him and look into the eyes of your beloved once more, you will be whole again. You will remember nothing of this interaction until the time comes for you to return to my Presence at the Judgment. To manifest your love, you must overcome the obstacles of her life now, not the least of these is the defeat of your murderer.”

There was a sharp intake of breath beside him. “I will be sending Celeste with you. She will guard you herself.”

\*

Celeste frowned. For a guide to be given charge of a human as a guardian was unheard of, even more so to be condemned as an Aureate. It meant a very long time without access to her native realm. She drew in a shaky breath. She knew better than to question this turn of events. It was after all, divinely decreed. This soothed her worried spirit somewhat. In a blinding flash, they were thrown from the heavens and sent hurtling towards earth.

Celeste sucked in a breath when she was slammed bodily into the floor of the room that had suddenly materialized beneath her. Dimly, she was aware of the gasp of the man in the bed. She groaned and relaxed into the floor, letting the blackness overtake her.

\* \* \* \*

Thoth drew in a sharp breath as the first droplets of coppery blood hit his tongue. A familiar voice murmured to him in a language he did not recognize. He was tired ... so very tired. He allowed himself to sink into the suddenly unfamiliar weight of the physical body he'd been unceremoniously dumped into.

It was as though his very being had been ripped in two pieces, and they were now warring for dominance. In the end, Thoth yielded to the other, the soul whose name was Adam Montrose. His existence as Thoth receded as he merged with his new soul, melding and becoming one. His own memories became woven into new ones, until he didn't know where he ended and Adam Montrose began. All too soon, the source of that life-giving ambrosia was taken from him.

His new body seized as pain ripped through him, and all thoughts of his old life were stripped from him. His mouth worked silently as his lungs constricted, expelling the suddenly toxic air. When he was finally able to rasp out a word, it was foreign on his tongue, but he knew instinctively what it meant. “Warm.”

Just before he registered the painful brilliance of the light, he recognized the face that hovered over him. It was a niggling familiarity, carrying with it a sudden rush of strong emotion. Who was she ... he should know her. Who was she ... and why did he love her?

## Chapter 10

Mimi studied her reflection in the mirror over the bathroom sink. Her eyes were tinged with an unearthly emerald hue just around her pupil, blending flawlessly with the natural obsidian depths.

Her hands shook as she applied the cheap mascara to her eyelashes, an unforeseen byproduct of the lack of sustenance provided by her benefactor. That same sustenance that was denied her now that she was fully what he'd termed a 'Scion'. All Mimi was aware of was the fact that she'd been forbidden more than minimal contact with the outside world. It sucked.

A sudden pounding at the door of the bathroom jerked her back to reality. She dropped the mascara wand into the sink as her Avatar's voice echoed through the wooden door. "How long does it take you to attire yourself properly for an outing, woman?"

Mimi fought for breath as she clenched her teeth. She was essentially immobilized by her own fear when the door swung open. He stood before her, naked as the day he was born. In his hand, he held a pair of boxers dotted with smiley faces. He was obviously not happy with his new undergarments.

"Tell me, consort. Do you wish me to appear as a fool to my Prey?" He dangled the boxers before her, those impossibly bright blue eyes lit with a dangerous glint.

Mimi fumbled for the mascara wand, slipping it clumsily back into the tube and capping it. She turned on the water to rinse the black streaks from her fingers, and spoke in a low tone. "No, my Avatar. It is simply all that was available to me at the store at so late an hour."

He appeared perturbed a moment longer. "Am I to traipse about in nothing but this loincloth? They will mock me."

Mimi dared to turn, looking at him. For a moment, he did not appear to be the cold-blooded murderer who'd killed her best friend with that freaky smile on his face. Instead, he appeared as an aggrieved puppy, holding the offending garment out for her inspection.

The smiley faces beamed at her, blissfully unaware that the man who held them was a monster. Mimi drew in a fortifying breath and brushed past him, into the bedroom. "My Avatar, you do not wear boxers by themselves. They go on underneath your pants."

"Pants." His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Those confounded things you put in that bag? I do not like them ... they are too stiff. The craftsmanship is atrocious." The petulance in his voice was threaded with a vague threat.

Mimi's jaw clenched for a moment. She had to tread lightly, but this was not going well. How did you tell a five-thousand-year-old man that he couldn't wander around in the tattered remains of what he'd referred to as his royal garb. This was all a bit much to process. She sank on her bed and reached for the bag from the 24-hour Wal-mart she'd visited after she'd managed to introduce Ra to the bathtub.

At least he smelled better, even if the lines of annoyance around his eyes hadn't gone away. He didn't reek of raw sewage anymore. She extracted the cargo pants from the bag and held them up, judging them against the Predator that was still glowering at the boxers. "I'm sorry if you don't like them. But they were all I could find so late at night." She gathered all her strength into her words, but still her statement came out as more of a

question.

He stared at the boxers doubtfully, then gingerly stepped into them. Mimi sighed and extended a hand. "Not like that. The tag goes in the back."

"Tag?" He repeated, brow furrowing. For once, there was no trace of the haughty man that had been there a moment earlier. He'd again been replaced by an almost placid, curious individual who had set his mind to the task at hand.

Mimi reached out and flicked the tag that declared the boxers to be a size large. "That's a tag. It tells what is in the fabric and how to care for it."

"I see." He tipped his head to the side and snaked one leg out before righting them and pulling them over his hips. He snapped the elastic band experimentally, grimacing as it hit the delicate skin at his hip with a loud pop. "That smarts."

"Yes, it would. I wouldn't advise you to repeat that action, Ra." She dared to use his given name. If he noticed, he did not correct her, but perhaps he was simply too absorbed in the perusal of the tag of the khaki cargo pants he was now frowning at.

His voice, with that lyrical accent was cautious as he read the label aloud. "One hundred oh slash oh cot-ton." He glanced up at Mimi with a scowl. "Mack-een-ah was-hab-lee? What does this mean? Is it some kind of common tongue?"

"100 percent cotton, machine washable." Mimi rose from the bed. She leaned over to extract the t-shirt from the bag and ripped the price tags off. She tossed it over her head to the man behind her. He caught it smoothly, letting it drape over his shoulder as he cursed smoothly in his native tongue at the button on the pants. "Curse you, woman. Were you not my consort, I would kill you where you stand for foisting these confounded things upon me."

Mimi surreptitiously rolled her eyes and turned, gently pushing his hands away and deftly fastening the button before pulling the zipper up. That done, she grabbed the t-shirt. "Arms up."

He frowned at her. "I am not yours to command, Scion. You would do well to watch your tone."

"And unless you want me to leave you here half-dressed, you'll put your damn arms up and stop threatening me. If you were going to kill me, you'd have done it instead of turning me into some kind of night creature. Now raise your goddamn arms before I stake myself through the heart just to get away from you."

For a moment, she was stunned at her own outburst. She'd seen the power this man wielded first hand. She still bore faint bruises to attest to the fact. But she had reached her breaking point. It was better to die than to be abused, immortal or not, by this Predator, Ra. He would just have to deal with it.

He stared at her silently for a moment, strange eyes glittering harshly before he raised his arms. His voice was taut when he spoke. "You test my patience. A woman must know her place, and it is a lesson you will learn the hard way."

"Oh stuff it, Tut, and get over yourself. This isn't ancient Egypt anymore; you aren't a king and you don't have a chance in hell of raising an undead army to take over the world."

He was silent for all of two seconds before Mimi's head snapped to the side from the force of his open palmed slap. "Insolence will not be tolerated. You do not amuse me, consort."

Mimi rubbed her jaw for a moment before balling her fist up and sending it crashing

into his own. He appeared stunned for a moment before raising his hand to cradle his cheek. His voice was quiet. "No one has ever had the gall to strike me before. I wouldn't advise that you try it again if you wish to retain possession of your life."

Mimi's fist curled again before striking out and landing a solid punch to his stomach. He doubled over instantly, clutching the area as he gasped in pain. Those intense eyes shimmered with anger and disbelief. "You tread dangerous ground, woman. You will cease this moment, or I will kill you."

"Then do it already. Why the hell do you think I've hit you twice now? How thick-skulled do you have to be to realize that I would rather be dead than condemned to an eternity with an arrogant bastard telling me every other second how to act or what to do?" She lashed out again, surprised when he allowed this blow to land as well. "You had better wake up, Ra-boy and realize that your plans will get you nowhere without my help, and if you want my help, you'd better start learning a thing or two about respect."

He straightened, hands shooting out to grasp her own smoothly, effectively immobilizing the blows. His face, normally pale, was flushed with righteous indignation. "Are all women in this century as thick-skulled and stubborn as you?"

"You arrogant ASS!" Mimi did not recognize the screech she released. "Thick-skulled? Stubborn? We're in a free country; we aren't a kingdom! We're a democracy. Women are equal to men, and if you want to take over the world, you have to realize that over half the world are women. You'd better learn some fucking manners, because you sure as hell aren't going to conquer us with your charm."

His grip tightened on her hands until she heard the bones creaking. "Enough, woman."

"No! I have a name. It's Mimi. You can call me by my name, or you can just be ignored. It's that basic respect I was talking about a minute ago. Got it?"

\*

Ra canted his head to the side and pondered this woman for a moment. It seemed impossible that she might be right. It also seemed impossible that she would rebel against him. Yet here she was, black eyes ablaze with anger and defiance.

It irked him to think that he could have possibly chosen wrongly in bonding her to him as a consort. It was also annoying that she seemed to see herself as his equal rather than a subservient being. He scoffed inwardly. How could she ever be the equal to him, a being of infinite age and wisdom? She was rash and temperamental, something her blood had not told him.

However ... when provoked, her aura glowed with passion. This much at least pleased him. Slowly, he straightened and released his grip on her hands. Almost instantly, the superior blood that flowed through her veins repaired the damage done to her aching bones. She winced, but did not lose that spark of determination in her expression.

A slow smile spread across his face as he contemplated this. It could work to his advantage, her cooperation. Of course, if she became too much of a bother, he could dispose of her easily enough. Decapitation had worked with more than one of his Scions. It had long been his favorite method of disposing of an unwanted foe. Vaguely, he shook off the meanderings of his mind and focused on her once more.

"Mimi." He tested the name on his lips. It was easy enough to say, its sounds soothing.

She seemed to relax as he studied her. She was, he concluded, silk tempered with

steel. His smile disappeared as he sternly reminded himself that this was merely a slight aberration from his original plan. Mimi would be the one to pit against the rebellious women when the time came. All he had to do was make her fall in love with him.

It was a pitifully easy thing to do. Women were attracted to power, and power was one thing Ra had in spades. He took a step closer, affecting a smile that came out as more of a sneer, but it was the best he could do given the circumstances. He was loath to play into her hand, even for a little while. “Will you help me regain my rightful place as ruler of my kind, Mimi?” His right hand came up, cupping the back of her skull in a mockery of a lover’s pose.

She stiffened before him, shrewd eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Taking over the world was never one of my life goals.”

“Your goals have changed,” he retorted promptly. “You will teach me how to manipulate the females of your city so they will yield to me. And then, we will expand our rule to the rest of the land and eventually the world. We will make war on the mortals and we will rule them as we were meant to, beginning with this city. Do you consent to aid me in my quest?”

Again, she stared at him, bewildered. “You really are insane; you know that, don’t you?”

“Quite mad indeed.” He smirked, for some reason his fascination grew. If all women were as she said, this would indeed prove to be a most interesting challenge.

\* \* \* \*

Jacob hurriedly covered himself with the sheet as he leapt from the bed. His eyes grew round as he stared up at the ceiling. A large hole had been torn in the roof, shingles dangling in through the sloped ceiling of the attic room he’d claimed as his own, an effort to escape the wandering Leon.

He blinked owlishly as he shifted his gaze to the foot of the bed. A form huddled in an unmoving ball on the hard wooden floor. A very mused form. The woman wore a robe of almost blinding white. Silver-tinted, blond hair spilled around her in waves, covering her face. Jacob blinked again, then glanced back up at the ceiling.

The doctor within his brain kicked into gear as he assessed the unconscious form for the how and why of the situation. She’d landed on the house with enough force to break through the roof; that told him she’d fallen from a great height.

However, her chest rose and fell with shallow breath, and he could hear the faintest of heartbeats. It was receding at the moment, signaling her imminent demise. He knotted the sheet at his waist hastily and called as loudly as he could muster, given his current state of surprise. “Leon! Leon! Hurry!”

He made the decision without thought, a highly unusual course for his analytical mind to take as he knelt beside her, scooping the prone form into his arms. He listened closely for a moment to her heart. It was fading by the moment.

“Leon!” Dammit! Where was the jackass? He could not have left the house, not when he had a wager riding on what was happening in the guesthouse.

The door burst open to reveal the tall form of the male Scion. He stood poised in the doorway, head tilted to avoid the slope of the ceiling. “So this is where you’ve hidden yourself, my delectable little morsel.” He stopped speaking abruptly as he caught sight of the figure in Jacob’s arms. “And what have we here?”



“I don’t know. She just came crashing through the roof. You have to save her.” Jacob rose swiftly, lifting the woman into his arms and thrusting her bodily towards the Scion.

Leon held up his hand defensively. “No. No offense, Jacob, but you know I don’t do women.”

“This is different. It’s an emergency. I can’t do it myself, or she’ll become a Vitiate. That’s as good as condemning her to death now.”

“Of course you can.” Leon spoke calmly as he motioned Jacob to the bed. “There are loopholes you know.”

“There’s no time right now to debate the particulars of community laws, Leon.” Jacob bared his teeth in frustration. Something nagged at him; he had to save this woman.

Leon chuckled. “Of course there is. I can smell it on her, you know. She’s got a good five, maybe six minutes left. More than enough time.”

Jacob hissed in frustration. “You are incorrigible!”

“Why, thank you! I do believe that’s the loveliest thing you’ve ever said to me, Jacob! I’m flattered!” The disturbing part, to Jacob at least, was that the Scion really did appear flattered.

“Ye gods, man. Are you blushing?” Jacob shook his head abruptly. “Just get on with it.”

“Loopholes! Ah, yes. Well the law states specifically that the creation of a Vitiate by a Cherished is automatic condemnation and death. The law says nothing of taking a consort, Jacob. You have only to bond her to you as a consort, and there’s nothing that Elizabeth or any other Scion can do to reverse that. But that only works if she’s a virgin. See! Loopholes! It’s a long shot, but it just might work.” Leon grinned smugly. “It’s never been done, mind you. But in theory it would work brilliantly.”

“Consort.” Jacob rubbed wearily at his temples. Were he mortal, he’d probably have a raging migraine by now.

“Ah, yes. Well, I don’t do women. My mate simply wouldn’t approve. He’s quite adamant. And none of my Cherished are female. Besides Elizabeth, the entire sex just drives me mad. I couldn’t make it through the first century without becoming daft from the sheer prattling and nattering they tend to do. Rather annoying habit, that.”

He grinned cheekily and turned with a cheery wave. “I’m off to spy on Elizabeth and the duckling. Ta, dearie. Have fun with your little foundling.” He pulled the door shut behind him, leaving Jacob holding the sudden arrival, even more bewildered that he’d first been when she’d crashed through the roof.

The woman’s heartbeat was growing fainter as he stared down at her. The hair spilled over her face, obscuring any distinguishing features. She could very well have been the ugliest creature to ever have existed, and he wouldn’t have been able to tell a thing.

Cursing beneath his breath, Jacob moved back to the bed and gently laid his charge on it. It was a daunting prospect, that he might lose his life if Leon’s suggestion didn’t work. It was preposterous, though he knew the Scion had nothing to gain by lying. Jacob exhaled heavily. It seemed like forever since he’d taken a lover, at least a century ... maybe longer.

He frowned faintly. Had it really been so long? The woman’s chest faltered for a moment. Pushing aside the nagging part of his naturally analytical mind, Jacob surged

forward and pushed the mass of hair off her face. He did not pause to consider the porcelain skin, or the overwhelming scent of wild daisies that lingered on her pulse point as he bared his teeth and sank them into her flesh, willing her heart to work for just a few moments longer.

The purity he tasted was overwhelming, and her blood told him of nothing but happiness. A small sound emitted from the back of her throat, a prick of pain entered his conscious mind. He did not pull away, instead merely lifted a hand to her face. His thumb tracked soothing circles over her cheek even as he cast a light thrall over her. To Jacob's surprise, she rebelled instinctively, lashing out with a powerful blow that defied what a dying physical body should have been capable of. Her fist hit his stomach and he gave a small grunt. She didn't understand. He couldn't make her understand. It was necessary. His hand moved from her cheek, catching her hand in his before she could strike again.

Her consciousness awoke despite her state and she gave a sudden sharp cry. Jacob forced himself to remain calm, despite the rising need for more contact. For all Predators, the bonding was an act of ultimate intimacy. It laid bare all that was within both Predator and Prey. There could be no secrets, no barriers between them. Jacob's fingers tightened on her arms as he pressed a final, soothing kiss to the wound. She was, literally, moments from death. His grip on her loosened and her body relaxed, now that he'd retreated from her mind's presence, at least for the moment.

He pushed himself up on his elbows, staring at her intently. For a moment, he did not see her, but himself, lifetimes ago. Was this what Elizabeth had seen when she'd bonded him to her as her Cherished? Had he been so lifeless, so pale as to resemble a creature already dead? She had given him a choice, and he'd seized the chance to live. He'd been dying, a slow death as his heart gave out. It was an illness that somehow Elizabeth had felt responsible for. Jacob now knew it to be genetic, but in the time of his Bonding, he'd known nothing beyond the thrill of those first few moments of knowing he'd be healthy, for eternity. Was he damning the woman beneath him to the same agony he had endured?

If he could save her, did it really matter? Were she to become a Vitiate, he'd destroy her himself, before his Scion ever found out. The hunger rose in him once more, and he forcefully pushed the questions from his mind. His tongue darted out, tasting the lingering traces of her blood on his lips. She was his, if only for a moment, and if he damning them, it was a hell of a way to die.

He balanced carefully on one elbow, raising his hand to his lips and sinking his teeth into the meat of his palm. Her eyes snapped open when he nudged her mouth with his thumb. The first droplet of blood hit her tongue. Rather than seeking out the source of the life-giving flow, she attempted to turn away from it. Jacob frowned, pressing the heel of his palm tighter into her mouth, until he could feel the blunt edge of her teeth pressing uncomfortably into the flesh. He knew he'd won when her tongue tentatively swept over the wound. His teeth clenched as an unexpected wave of arousal washed over him. Stupid, to have forgotten that his sense of touch was one of the first things to heighten.

Jacob's pulse quickened when, her eyes fell shut once more. He lowered his head, letting his forehead rest against her shoulder. He pulled his hand away, much to her chagrin, if her grunt of disapproval was anything to go by. He let his forefinger sweep over her lips, reveling in her natural warmth. The few drops she'd gotten were not enough to complete the Bond. It would, however, be enough to keep her alive and responsive in the meantime.

The scent of the blood that trickled from the two small puncture wounds hit his nose. He felt the shift before it even happened. Gone was all sense of restraint. He was a hunter, and the delectable prey beneath him was entirely at his mercy. He seized her lips in a rough kiss, tongue dragging over hers insistently. Nimble fingers moved of their own accord, taking hold of the blindingly white robes that impeded his quest for more contact.

Her response was hesitant at first, growing bolder when he stilled his frenzied exploration of her mouth. One hand rose, threading into the mass of silver-blond hair. He tasted his own blood on her tongue and gave a short growl of approval. Before the night was out, she would be his entirely. His. The realization punctuated by a surge of possessiveness that was frightening, even to him. His hand left her hair, drifting down the grasp her robes once more. Its mate rejoined it, and with a sharp tug, ripped easily. The fabric was soft beneath his fingertips, but it was nothing compared to the flesh he encountered as he slipped his arm around her now-bare waist and cradled her to him. Her conscious mind seemed to realize what his intent was.

The whimper he received when he broke the precious contact with her lips brought a feral smile to her face. Her fingers traced the line of his spine and for a moment, Jacob had to wonder when she'd begun to move. He hooked a leg behind her own and pulled her more firmly against him, rolling over onto his back. Her awareness prickled at the back of his mind, bringing with it a naïve curiosity. He made no effort to hide the bolt of arousal as he realized what made her so curious. The woman he held so securely in his arms was, indeed, a virgin. He set his hands into motion once more, grasping the little that remained of her clothing and ruthlessly pushing it off her shoulders, baring her to his eyes. Her own eyes slitted open, staring at him, as though not really seeing him. The captivating silver orbs were flecked with something indefinable, some mingling of need and unspoken dread. His grip on the robe tightened, effectively immobilizing her arms. His voice was thick when he managed to find the single word he needed. "Mine."

A touch of fear entered her eyes, sending a bolt of awareness through him. He released his hold on her garments, urging her to sit up. He followed suit, noticing, to his immense pleasure, that she was a good deal shorter than he. He tore the robes over her head and tossed them aside with a predatory grin. Her fingers sought out the buttons on his shirt, clumsily undoing them. The unpretentious nature she carried within her movements heightened the urgency that threatened to take over.

He covered her hands with his, stilling them. Her eyes widened, though the fear was gone. Jacob's grin broadened as hungry peridot orbs swept down the line of her body, as perfectly formed as a statue. There were no scars to be found anywhere on her. It was strange. All mortals bore scars, whether from some childhood injury, or illness. No person was without some imperfection, yet there she sat, gazing at him with something that could only be called defiant.

She did not speak when he completed the task of unbuttoning his shirt for her, throwing it away carelessly. He remained upright, hands rising to explore the bare expanse of her belly. "What's your name?" His tone, to his surprise, was soothing.

She tipped her head to the side and gave the sweetest smile he'd ever seen, though the mischievous light in her eyes remained. Jacob splayed his fingers at her side, tugged her closer to him. His expression hardened as he rocked his hips into hers. "You are to be my mate; you will tell me your name."

"Celeste." The smile broadened. "Who are you?"

Jacob ignored her questioning gaze and tightened his grip on her waist, turning them over once more. He hovered above her, staring at her for a long moment before he released her and rose to his knees. "Don't be so flippant." With preternatural speed, he divested himself of the remainder of his clothing. Her eyes widened marginally as he knelt to press a gentle kiss to her collarbone. "You're a..." Her words were lost when he captured her lips in a searing kiss. Jacob made no attempt to disguise the bare lust that raged just below the surface. His canines nicked her lips, tongue darting out to sweep the droplets of blood that gathered into his mouth.

She gasped in surprise when he brushed a thumb over one nipple. Jacob grinned against her lips. "What I am does not matter." He closed his hand over her breast, fingers exploring the supple flesh eagerly. It had been far too long since he'd taken pleasure in the human body. Even the taking of his 'meals' had been reduced to a matter of course rather than an experience to be savored. The time for complacency fled with the sudden quickening of her heart. She was in a sort of physical limbo, functioning only because of the few drops of blood he'd forced into her, and it was knowing that her heart beat only for him, at least at that moment, that served to incite his need for her even further.

Celeste. It was an appropriate name for a creature whose very existence was heavenly. He wanted nothing more than to bury himself inside her, to hurry toward the inevitable. The most primal instinct of a Predator was to possess the Prey. As if in daze, Jacob let his baser desires take over. His lips and hands worked in tandem, exploring every inch of the warm body that was now, for all intents and purposes, his.

One nipple was drawn into his mouth. The sounds she made sent a thrill to his very core. Her hands threaded into his hair and she cried out when he nipped the bud gently. His fingers sought out her center, lips curving into a dangerous smile as he realized that she was wet for him. He released her breast, slipping one finger inside her, experimentally. She cried aloud, hands slipping from his hair to fist in the sheets.

He wanted to hear more, he wanted to hear her scream from the pleasure of it all. Without hesitation, he withdrew his hand from her, resting it on her hip. His finger glided down her leg, coming to a stop behind her knee. Her apprehension rose within his chest once more, and rather than spurring him on, as it normally would have, it made him hesitate. He pressed a gentle, reassuring kiss to the tip of her nose. Her fear abated, and he felt her rigid form relax marginally.

He watched as her expression shifted once more when he positioned himself against her entrance. He hid his face in her neck, speaking in a forced exhalation. "You belong to me, Celeste."

No sooner than the words left his lips than he buried himself inside her in a single thrust. He bared his teeth in a satisfied grin when he felt the barrier within her give way. She was his in every way. He registered her cry of pain and a vague thread of guilt edged into his mind. Jacob pushed it aside, drawing in a deep breath in an effort to calm himself. He remained still inside her for what seemed like an eternity. Her entire body was tense. He lifted his head from its hiding place and sought out her lips once more, coaxing her from her near-catatonic state with gentle, teasing kisses. He released his hold on her legs, hands ghosting up her sides, giving a light tickle before continuing up to grasp her hands, lacing his fingers through hers.

She released a breath in a soft moan, accompanied by a giggle beneath her breath. Beneath him, she relaxed. Her inept attempt to return the kisses sent a spark of delight

through him, tempering the darker sense of need. He moved within her, a slight rolling of his hips, to gauge her reaction. The glint of humor faded from her eyes, silver orbs darkening with arousal. Jacob nipped lightly at her lips when she gave a soft whimper.

Carefully, he withdrew only a little before pushing back inside her. It was the closest thing to heaven he would ever see. Her face contorted in surprise when she realized that there was no more pain. Her legs rose, ankles locking behind his waist, hips moving against his. Her willingness was like a balm to his fragmented control. Now free from worry, he began to move without fear of hurting her. Jacob heard a strangled moan, belatedly realizing that it had come from him. She met each thrust as well as she could, spurring him on with each little sound she made.

Her attempts to please him warmed him, and for the first time in centuries, Jacob knew unfettered acceptance. He tightened his grip on her hands, no longer content with the gentle nature of their joining. He withdrew from her again, driving himself back inside her in a hard movement. She gave a surprised cry, one that he would have mistaken for pain had she not arched into him, taking him in fully. Her need did not fade from his conscious mind. Her shyness dissipated, replaced with a woman who knew what she wanted.

Jacob responded with a growl, releasing her hand long enough to tear at his neck. She grimaced in reflex at the sight of him opening a jagged wound in his own flesh. Her channel tightened around him as she tensed. He ground the words out. "You have no choice, if you want to live."

Cold air hit the blood that flowed from the wound and she recoiled. "Drink, Celeste." Her hesitation lasted only until the first drop hit her mouth. Her body was still tense, though this time it was from need and not rejection. The suddenness of the link stunned him into inaction. Her tongue fluttered against his neck and all reason was lost to him.

He took her in earnest now, giving no quarter to her comfort. She moved against him, her hands' restless nails digging into his flesh, scratching. The needle-sharp pain was all it took. Jacob abandoned all pretense of gentleness, giving a strangled groan as he drove himself into her ruthlessly. Her back bowed from the sensation of the awakening hunger within her, both hers and his combined. To Jacob's surprise, she met him with equally forceful thrusts of her own. An innate grace presented itself in her movements, something he hadn't counted on. He lost track of how long he continued to drive himself further into his frenzied state. His world narrowed to consist only of Celeste, beneath him, around him.

It was only when the world began to swim in front of his eyes that he realized, belatedly, that he'd lost his head. Somehow, he managed to push the word out, though how was beyond him. "Enough."

Her obedience was instant, though he knew on instinct it was because her mind recognized his order for what it was on the basest level, a Predator speaking to a subordinate. It was a ridiculous way to term the experience, and it was nothing like his bonding as Elizabeth's Cherished. The purity he'd tasted in her blood was confirmed in the astonishingly short moment it took for her body to assimilate the superior blood that was even now coursing its way through her to repair any damage done during her short time as a mortal.

Her walls clenched around him, and he was rewarded with the scream of release he'd so wanted to hear. Her nails broke his skin as the walls that held him so snugly tightened

even further. He drove himself into her one final time, as the force of her climax fed back into him through the bond. White-hot light exploded behind his eyelids, and for a moment, he saw himself through her eyes. His heart stopped, and he lost all ability to breathe. It was an image that would have been frightening had it not been so familiar. His eyes tinged with an unearthly hue, enhanced by the heightened emotions and physical sensations, lips stained crimson with the blood of his Prey.

He collapsed atop her bonelessly, as his heart raced frantically to keep up with his body's demand for more air. Beneath him, Celeste gave a strangled sob. Her fear was back full force. Jacob wanted nothing more than to console to, to assure her that all was well.

Her hands fell away and he summoned the last bit of his strength to withdraw from her and draw her into a protective embrace. She was trembling, and he knew it was not because of any positive emotion. The terror she felt echoed in his own chest more acutely without the haze of desire to get in the way. He lifted a hand to his face, wiping away a tear, then frowned as he brought his fingertip into his view. He wasn't crying.

His heart sank as he felt the woman's confusion and panic. She did not make a sound, save for the harsh rasp of her breathing as she came down from their mutual high. He glanced over at her and reached out to touch her face gently.

Sure enough, there were tears sliding, ever so slowly, down the side of her face. He swallowed hard and spoke softly, surprised that his own voice wasn't shaky. "I'm sorry it had to be like that."

The woman's head jerked to the side, eyeing him with wide silver eyes. Never, in all his centuries, had he seen eyes quite like that. He tilted his head closer, studying them more closely. Normally, human eyes were flecked with some other color, lending to different hues. Hers, however, were true silver; they glittered with an ethereal light, enhanced to brilliant proportions by her newly acquired status as a Predator. He rested his hand on her cheek for a moment before pulling it away. "You have my word that I will never touch you again. At least, not in a sexual manner."

She did not speak, but raised a hand and scrubbed at her face. She frowned at the tears, then blushed prettily before going still once more. Jacob fought for words, but was stunned to find that none came. It was obvious she wasn't a Vitiate. The silver orbs that stared at him curiously betrayed that much. Maybe, just maybe, he hadn't sentenced them both to certain death after all.

Her voice was tinged with wry humor as she finally spoke. "That was the most horrible experience of my life."

Jacob blinked. He certainly hadn't expected her first words to him to be a condemnation of his sexual prowess. Sure, he was a bit out of practice, but that was downright harsh.

He frowned at her and he pushed himself up on one arm. "I'm sorry if I don't meet with your exacting standards, madam, but I was left with no choice other than letting you die."

He glared at her, raking a hand through his hair in frustration. "Who are you and where did you come from?"

"My name is Celeste, you already know that. And I wasn't insulting your..." She blushed scarlet again and indicated Jacob's very naked, very sated parts. "I don't have a basis for comparison as I'm sure you're aware. I was referring to the part where I was so

rudely dropped through the roof.”

To his surprise, he found himself capable of shame as he muttered an apology. He snatched the abandoned sheet, covering himself and her at the same time. He curled his legs beneath him as he studied her. “My apologies. You took me by surprise.”

Celeste snorted and clutched the sheet to her waist. “Shall we start from the beginning? I know that you’re a Predator, and you are prone to brooding ... but perhaps you could tell me your name.”

“My name?” He echoed softly, perturbed by the sudden shift from blushing virgin to commanding wench. “Yes, it’s only fair, isn’t it? After all, you’ve known me as intimately as two people can, it’s only polite.” She held herself stiffly. “I’m Jacob.” He swallowed hard and extended a hand to her.

She grinned at him, as though unperturbed by the fact that she’d fallen through a roof and been bonded to a Predator for all eternity in just the last half-hour. “A pleasure to meet you, Jacob. You already know that I’m Celeste, former heavenly being and, apparently, your new life mate.”

Jacob froze, then blinked. He tore his hand from hers and bared his teeth in a snarl as pure rage coursed through him. “How dare you!”

\*

Celeste frowned as the formerly placid Predator suddenly loomed over her. She found herself pinned to the bed by her shoulder, a very angry, very large vampire baring his fangs at her. What had she said? Lying wasn’t in her and he HAD asked where she’d come from. She gathered all her patience and spoke in a tone that only sounded mildly annoyed. “Would you mind too terribly releasing me? You’re hurting me.”

“Don’t tell me lies, you ungrateful little...”

“You don’t want to finish that sentence.” Celeste’s voice took on a warning tone as she wrenched her arms from beneath his knees and pushed firmly against his chest. “I’ll thank you to put away the teeth and talk to me like an adult, if you please.”

“And if I don’t please?” He hovered over her, teeth still bared as he snarled. “I saved your life, wench, and you’ll tell me the truth when I demand it of you.”

“Shove off, bucko!” The sudden tint to his eyes sent a small thrill down her spine, against her mind’s wishes. “What reason do I have to lie? Think about it! I know what you are. I fell through your roof for Saint Pete’s sake.”

Slowly, the rage in his eyes receded to be replaced by reluctant acknowledgement of her words. He still frowned at her. “I am Cherished. I cannot be redeemed like my Scion. Do not toy with me, Woman.”

“Celeste. It’s my name, and I’ll thank you to use it. Now let me up.”

He straightened until he was sitting upright, still straddling her thighs. He did not speak as Celeste pushed herself up on her elbows, clutching what little bit of the sheet remained to hide her from his view. “You’ve lost your corner and your ... um ... things are hanging out.”

\*

Jacob reached out and snatched the sheet to cover himself. He remained where he was, lips thinned into a grim line. “You have one chance to convince me you’re telling the truth and then I will destroy you.”

His tone brooked no argument. The woman gathered her hair in one hand and brushed it over her shoulders. “Fair enough. Maybe you could get off me long enough to

let me explain. It's not as though I can run away naked."

"If you're an angel, you can disappear," he retorted.

"Keyword, FORMER heavenly body. Pay attention," she snapped back instantly, though her eyes glinted with good humor and laughter tinged her voice.

Body tensed and ready to spring into action, Jacob slid off her thighs and waited. "This had better be good."

To his further confusion, she chuckled lightly. "Oh, believe me. It is."



## Chapter 11

“Carrie? Where are you?”

Caroline Grady stifled a groan as she jumped. The refrigerator door slammed shut on her finger.

“In here, Dork.” She sucked lightly on her finger as she reached for one of the plastic tumblers in the open-faced cabinets.

Duncan Orbuckle Kincaid, more affectionately known to his wife and Aureate as Dork, mounted the stairs with thundering steps. He appeared in the doorway of their apartment, a bewildered expression firmly in place as he extended an envelope to Carrie without a word.

She accepted it, staring at him suspiciously. “It’s not another one of your letter bomb experiments gone awry is it?”

Dork blinked, then grinned that maniacal grin of his. “Of course not, sweets. You know I promised not to test them out on you anymore. Look at the return address.”

Carrie’s eyes widened, jaw dropping when she saw the neat script. “From Elizabeth? Why is it addressed to both of us?” Her eyes narrowed marginally. She ripped the envelope open, all thoughts of chocolate milk driven from her mind. A slender cream-colored envelope was shaken into her hand as she upended the package.

The FedEx envelope fell to the floor, abandoned in favor of the envelope that bore their names. Her heart dropped in her chest as she tore into the expensive stationery bearing the crest of the Scion.

\* \* \* \*

Dork moved to the window and propped it open. It was four in the afternoon, hotter than hell in the cramped little apartment Carrie insisted on living in. A breeze ruffled the faded curtains, though it did little to cool the room. The hot air further confirmed Dork’s frequent, reticent comment. “I’ve died and gone to hell.”

“An enclave.” His keen ears picked up Carrie’s horrified whisper. He whirled around, all musing about buying an air conditioner driven from his head. He stepped forward and reached out, snatching the handwritten letter from her fingers. In her other hand, she held two flight tickets.

The script on the letter was short and to the point, as was Elizabeth’s usual manner.

Scion Kincaid and Consort are bidden to appear at an Enclave to be held at the Abbey on the date indicated at 9 pm.

Elizabeth’s initials across the bottom of the page were unmistakable, bearing the imprint of her signet, a sign of her position as Scion. Dork inhaled heavily and lifted his eyes to Carrie. “When do we leave?”

“Tonight. She was cutting it close, don’t you think?” Carrie’s voice was uncharacteristically devoid of her innate good humor.

Dork nodded. “It must be important. She hasn’t called an enclave in more than two hundred years, not since the Vitiate outbreak in 1784.”

“That was before my time,” Carrie reminded gently. She hesitated slightly. “I don’t

suppose we could decline.”

“No. Attendance at an Enclave is not optional.” Dork licked his suddenly parched lips. “I’ll start packing. Call Mark. He’s my alternate. Tell him to inform the rest of my Cherished that we will be out of touch temporarily and all matters will be handled by him.” He turned on his heel, not bothering to wait and see that Carrie was already reaching for the phone.

\* \* \* \*

“Milos? We’re going to be late.” Anja frowned at her Consort, who was currently engaged in an animated conversation with the tomato plant he was watering.

He straightened, daring to frown at Anja. “He’s going to be lonely.”

“No. I promise. The servants will care for him. Now please come away from there. We need to leave.” She resisted the urge to tap her foot impatiently. Milos was a good man, if a bit on the mad side. He hesitated, giving the plant one final, affectionate pat before pulling on his coat and joining her at the waiting car.

Milos emanated nervous energy. It was understandable, since Consorts were not usually welcome at the rare events that were Enclaves. They were usually dreaded, and the fact that Consorts were to be present emphasized that something was abhorrently wrong this time.

Anja reached out and patted Milos on the hand as they climbed into the waiting taxi. “It will all be fine, Milos. I promise.”

\* \* \* \*

Kai’s eyes narrowed as he regarded the piece of stationary in his hand. He growled and reached for the phone. “Fucking Enclave.”

He snarled the words, surprising the international operator who answered, then snapped at her. “United States, Seattle.”

“Of course, Sir.” The operator hastily put him on hold. Almost immediately, the strains of Mozart’s Requiem came through the lines.

He growled again. “Fucking Mozart.”

\* \* \* \*

Elizabeth’s toe tapped impatiently as she scanned the list of names. Leon leaned over her shoulder, face set in an expression of uncharacteristic seriousness. “Is that all you could find?”

“On such short notice, yes.” She glared at the offending list. It was abhorrently short, only a handful of her Avatar’s Cherished had not succumbed to madness or death in the intervening eons. She’d even gone so far as to include their consorts in the Enclave, something that was virtually unheard of.

Leon moved around her and perched himself comfortably on the massive desk, pulling his legs up and crossing them beneath him. “Perhaps you should consider utilizing your Cherished.”

“No.” She bit off the response too quickly. She tossed the page to the desk and heaved a sigh. “I won’t endanger my Cherished by exposing them to that monster. The

mere fact that an Enclave is taking place should be enough to draw Uriel out of hiding.”

“If he is indeed in hiding,” Leon rested his chin in the cradle of his palm. “He could have been recalled.”

“Doubtful,” she retorted. “This mess is partially his fault for not killing Ra in the first place. He’ll come.”

Leon remained silent for a moment before venturing to speak again. “And if he doesn’t, Ellie? What then? You do have a back up plan, don’t you?”

“He’ll come,” she repeated stubbornly. She let her foot fall fully to the floor and drew in a deep breath. “What of your Avatar, Leon?” Sharp eyes nailed her friend, not allowing him the luxury of evading the question.

“She seems to be MIA. No one has heard from her in centuries.” He spoke the words unenthusiastically. “Besides that, the Avatars are generally allies. Even if we were able to find her, there’s no guarantee she wouldn’t side with Ra just to further her own goals.”

“So she’s a no go.” Elizabeth crossed the name off the already paltry list. “That leaves Marcus to be contacted. The last I heard he was on a mountain top in China contemplating his belly button.”

“Isn’t Kai still in Tokyo?”

“That’s where I sent his orders. If I know him, he’ll be calling as soon as he finds a way to threaten or bribe his way out of it. Considering the Enclave begins tomorrow night, there isn’t much time left.”

“He’s not likely to come without a fuss, is he?” Leon posed the question hopefully.

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, he isn’t.”

The intercom lit up on her phone. “My Scion, there’s a call for you on the main line.” Raul’s tinny voice was softer than usual.

Elizabeth hissed in annoyance and reached out to tap the button. “Didn’t I tell you that I was not to be disturbed?”

There was a moment’s hesitation. “It is Scion Kai.”

“Oh. Yes. Thank you, Raul.” She tapped the button for speakerphone, gifting Leon with a knowing expression. “Kai, lovely to hear from you. How’s the weather in Tokyo?”

“Fuck the weather, Ma’at. What the fuck is this shit about a fucking Enclave?” His accent was heavier when he was angry, which was virtually all the time.

Elizabeth’s lips thinned into a grim line. “Language, Kai. You know that there are no exemptions from Enclaves, not even for you.”

“Fuck you!” he interrupted her, bursting into a lengthy tirade. Elizabeth understood only a handful of the words. Something about sashimi, robots, and gorgeous young men that were supposed to be there but apparently weren’t.

Elizabeth rubbed her temples wearily and broke into her bonded brother’s tirade. “Kai, please try to focus.”

“They aren’t anywhere to be found!” He reverted to English, still apparently incensed. “They lied to me!”

“Kai!” She spoke a bit more sharply than she should have. “You have got to stop this. Once your job here is done, you may return to Tokyo and go after all the Japanese *bishounen* you want, but right now I expect you to cease this mad rambling and listen to me.”

The man on the other end obediently fell silent. Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief. “You are to take the next available flight to the destination listed on the ticket. From

there, you are going to the village of Xie Tep. You will find Marcus and retrieve him. You will then escort him to the enclave. Is that perfectly clear to you?"

Kai's sigh was resigned. He grumbled something in Japanese again before muttering in a barely audible voice. "Fine."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow."

"TOMORROW! *ONNA NO BAKA!*"

Elizabeth winced and covered her ears. "Language, Kai!" She reached out and tapped the button with a bit too much force, disconnecting the call.

Leon was silent for a moment, then chuckled. "He's as mad as ever."

"Don't let that act fool you; he's as sharp as they come," Elizabeth muttered darkly as she pushed back her chair. "Let's go. I need to feed my consort, and I would rather do it before he grows a moral conscience."

"A bit late for that, isn't it?" Leon retorted as he unwound his lanky frame from the desk and followed her from the room.

\*

Adam's nose wrinkled reflexively as he stared at the glass in front of him. "Hell, no."

Elizabeth's foot tapping grew in pace. "What's wrong with this one?"

"It smells like brandy." He reached out and pushed the glass away, glowering at Elizabeth. His stomach clenched in reflex to the scent of the blood.

He chose not to notice the impatience in her voice as she picked up the glass and moved to the sink, pouring it down the drain. "You have to get past this. All of it is going to be tainted in some form. All mortals have had their bodies ravaged by some kind of disease."

"Not you," he retorted a bit too sharply.

Elizabeth spun to stare at him in disbelief. "I'm not mortal; get that through your thick skull. I can't provide the nourishment your body needs on a regular basis. For the last time, you cannot have me for dinner or as a snack. That's not how it works."

Adam's voice dropped an octave as he rose from the chair and stalked towards Elizabeth. "You weren't complaining last night as I recall. In fact, I clearly remember you telling me to take all I wanted."

"That was different." Her voice was terse. Her fingers gripped the sink so hard her knuckles were white. "If you want to leave this house, you have to drink. I don't even care what at this point, just choose something."

He could feel the spark of her anger. It was intoxicating and instantaneous. It filled his veins and set his heart to racing. "I don't want anything but you."

"If you say that one more time, Adam Montrose, I'm going to castrate you with a cheese grater." She placed her hands physically on his chest and easily propelled him backwards.

The corner of his mouth lifted in a smirk. "Well then, it would appear we've reached an impasse."

"No, you will yield. It's that simple. You don't have the luxury of choice in this matter." She brushed past him and towards the fridge.

Adam leaned against the kitchen counter and crossed his arms over his chest. Funny thing that he had at any point found her to be intimidating. He couldn't imagine fearing her anymore. It was as though he'd been given the ability to see past the façade. And

oddly enough, he found himself liking what he saw. Even stranger was the sudden realization that he instinctively knew her. He *knew* her. The woman who had terrified him, now amused him beyond reason. The images that had flooded his mind during the bonding were no more clear than they had been at the time. It simply didn't make sense, that he knew things about her she hadn't told him. Like her love of flowers, or the way she preferred to have drink water mixed with crushed fruits for flavor.

He blinked slowly as another, purer smell, hit his nose, drawing him back to reality. He reached out and took the bottle she held out, sniffing it curiously. "What's this?"

"You wanted something pure. Well, here it is. It's the best I can do," she retorted, slamming the refrigerator door shut with such force that the bottles rattled. "It's your last chance before I wash my hands of you."

Adam inhaled the scent more deeply. Images of water and light and sound filled his head almost immediately. Some latent part of his humanity nagged at him when he realized what it was. "That's cruel."

"No crueler than allowing it to be born into a world that doesn't want it." She pointed out as she turned on heel and made her way towards the bedroom.

Adam quashed down the guilt and tilted the bottle upwards. Several long seconds later, he trailed after her. To his surprise, she was leaning over the bed, stripping the white cotton sheets from the mattress. "What are you doing?"

He tongued the rim of the bottle before taking a small sip. She spared him a withering glance. "Surely you didn't expect that we would continue to share a bed."

Now this was news. He took another, longer pull from the bottle before dropping into the rocking chair in the corner of the room. "Yeah, I kind of did."

Elizabeth paused, pillow in hand, to regard him curiously. "I told you last night, that what happened was only for the purpose of the bonding. There will be no repeat of the event."

"And I told you I didn't care what you said; I would have you forever." He flashed her a toothy grin. "You didn't reply."

"Silence does not mean consent; any first year law student will tell you that."

"Good thing I'm not a lawyer, then." His tone was sharper than he intended. A push on his foot set the rocker into motion as he lifted the bottle to his lips once more, draining it in one long draught. He watched the graceful movements of her hips and hands as she went about her task. She'd always seemed so delicate. Why had he not seen it before? It was as if a light bulb had been switched on inside his head, illuminating memories for which there was no conceivable explanation that he should have them. She moved with the assurance of a woman who knew her place in the world, it was something he'd always envied and never fully understood. Adam blinked, wondering where the knowledge had come from.

She stared at him hard for a moment before shaking her head. "You really are delusional, aren't you?"

Adam gave a crooked grin. "Once again, a matter of opinion."

Elizabeth tossed the pillowcase to the floor with an expression of distaste. "You will cease with your insolence, Prey."

"Consort," he retorted happily.

"You annoy me," she shot right back.

Adam's grin blossomed. "Only because you know I'm right."

“No, because you are an impudent, arrogant son of a bitch who has no idea of decorum or respect.”

It struck Adam as absurd that she was growing increasingly annoyed, yet made no move to end the conversation. It might not count as verbal agreement, but it was definitely progress. He chuckled to himself, much to Elizabeth’s consternation.

She frowned at him. “You are too easily amused.” She knelt down to gather the sheets together. “Come on, we need to get back to the main house. It’s getting late.”

Adam rose from the chair, moving quickly to stand before her. His hand reached out on instinct, touching her flat stomach. He paid no attention to the confused expression on her face. She allowed the gentle exploration. A marked frown marred his features as he trailed his hand over her abdomen. The flash he’d had the night before was back, more than a memory this time. Her belly should have been swollen with his child. Their first child together. She should have stayed home, refused to go with the messenger. They could have run away together, avoided everything.

“We would have been so happy.” The whispered words escaped him even as Elizabeth brushed his hand away.

She stared at him for a long moment. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re mine. No one’s but mine.” He spoke in a grief-laden voice, not quite sure what he meant by his own words.

Elizabeth stiffened. “You’re being nonsensical. You are my consort, never let the idea that you are the dominant one in our relationship take hold in that small brain of yours, Adam Montrose. You will put in your place faster than you can blink.”

With those words, she brushed past him, expression dark as she stormed out the front door of the cottage. Adam inhaled sharply, the sadness rising once more. What the hell was going on? Did the bonding precede a complete mental breakdown?

\* \* \* \*

Elizabeth stopped cold as she entered the kitchen, laundry in hand. The people at the table ... there were too many. She counted to herself, then nodded once before drawing herself up to her full height. “Jacob?”

Her favored Cherished offered her a sheepish smile and half-rose from his seat. “My Scion ... may I present to you Celeste.”

Elizabeth’s gaze fell to the beaming woman who sat next to Jacob, happily munching on pork rinds. Elizabeth’s nose wrinkled in distaste. “I see ... and who is Celeste, Jacob? More specifically, what is she doing in my home?”

“Well, that’s a bit harder to explain ... really.”

“Try me.” Elizabeth’s temper was rapidly wearing thin. The girl smelled faintly of death, tempered with sunlight and tinged with Jacob’s essence. Elizabeth’s jaw set in a hard line as she realized what her Cherished had done. “Jacob, you will join me in my office at once. Raul, please escort Celeste to the basement room. She will be held there until I make a decision regarding her fate.”

The girl’s content exterior promptly shattered as she gaped openly at Elizabeth. Jacob’s jaw dropped. His chair skittered back with the force of his abrupt movement. “Elizabeth ... it’s not what you think.”

Leon chuckled, but did not deign to speak. Raul rose from his seat and grasped the young woman by the hand, gently patting it as he guided her out of her chair and away

from the table.

“Elizabeth, you can’t do this!” Jacob protested.

Elizabeth, for her part, tossed the sheets to the floor and wordlessly stepped towards the back staircase.

Once they reached her office, tense seconds passed until Jacob shut the door behind himself. Elizabeth spun to regard her offspring, arms crossed over her chest. “Explain.”

“She is my Consort.”

“Your Vitiate you mean,” she shot back.

“My *Consort*.” He spoke emphatically. “You must let me explain before you condemn us both to death. It wasn’t something I had time to come to you for.”

“You have thirty seconds to convince me, Jacob, or it will be her death and yours.”

\*

Jacob’s heart sank as he realized the severity of Elizabeth’s wrath. He knew she did not make empty threats, especially not where her Cherished were concerned. He drew in a deep breath and prepared to make his case. “She’s a Guide that was apparently punished for breaking holy law. Her punishment, she claims, is being condemned to be my Consort.”

Elizabeth snorted. Jacob extended his hands helplessly before him. “She was injured badly, and you have a hole in the roof as proof. Elizabeth, you know me. You know I would never lie to you and most importantly, you know that I would not let a person die before their time. It’s just not in my nature.”

He was walking a dangerous tightrope. She knew well of the existence of heavenly bodies. Jacob swallowed hard, taking her silence as consent to go on. “She would have died within minutes had I not bonded with her, and there was just something about her that I couldn’t overlook.”

“Could it be her obvious lack of table manners?”

Jacob frowned at that barb. “I will admit, she’s a bit ... unpolished, but that’s nothing that can not be taught. Elizabeth, please, I beg of you. Allow me a month. If she proves to be trouble, then I will destroy her myself.”

He knew the exact moment he’d won. And his victory had been far too easy. “Do you swear to that?”

“Of course.” He stressed the words as best he could.

Elizabeth was perceptive in ways other Predators were not. He knew that she was aware of his intentions. She released a sigh. “Very well. You may keep your Consort, for the moment. But at least take the poor thing shopping. She looks positively gauche in your old jeans. And where DID you find that sweater, Jacob ... it’s revolting.”

Jacob breathed a sigh of relief and stepped forward, pressing a gentle kiss to Elizabeth’s forehead. “I do believe that your Adam has changed you more than you know, my Scion.” He knelt and gave a hurried kiss to her hand before she scoffed and waved him off.

## Chapter 12

Ra glared at his protégé. Mimi was happily drinking what she'd termed a white chocolate mocha. The smell was far too strong for his liking. However, she'd insisted that if she was to abruptly change her sleep schedule, she should be allowed this beverage.

He'd merely wrinkled his nose and waited outside the coffee shop, watching the citizens of his new kingdom amble by. It was really quite pathetic, the way they moved so freely. They paid no homage to the god who sat so placidly in a battered plastic chair.

A new smell pervaded his senses and his eyes instantly began scanning the streets. He was out of the chair and standing on the curb seeking out the source of the smell before a mortal could have seen him move.

He drew in a deep breath, mind instantly filing the smells away in their proper categories. Despair, lust, anger, joy ... all these smells and more. Fuel exhaust, burned sulfur, broken souls and tears of ecstasy. They all seemed to color the very landscape of this strange new world. And then one finally made sense. Pure blood.

His eyes sought out the source of the smell, lips curling into a disgusted sneer. The form moved too quickly to identify completely. But only one being had that tinge of tainted holiness on them. A heavenly being condemned to walk the earth for their part in the creation of his kind.

Ra spun and grabbed Mimi by the wrist. "Come, we go."

"Hey! Just slow down there!" Mimi huffed indignantly as what remained in the paper cup sloshed over the cuff of her coat.

The god paid no attention. Instead, he set off in the direction of the scent, following it closely. He gave her arm a sharp tug, pulling her into his body as he pushed off from the ground. Mimi struggled against him, then squawked indignantly when he hissed at her. "Shut up."

He landed them gently on the rooftop he'd been aiming for, then released her. "You will remain here and not engage any enemy."

"DO NOT presume to tell me what to..."

He turned on her with a snarl. "Woman ... Mimi, you will do as I say or suffer my wrath. Now, Stay!" He snapped the words at her, punctuating them with a shove that propelled her back onto the rooftop.

Ra could vaguely hear her body skittering to a stop. He ignored her as he sprinted across the rooftop and leapt to the next one, clearing the space easily. His Prey was within range. He did not pause as he quickened his pace, the scent intoxicating him and igniting his innate curiosity.

He edged closer to the street side of the building, stopping only occasionally to inhale deeply. His blood sang within his veins as he happily gave his body over to the thrill of the chase.

At last, he was on top of his target. Ra sprinted ahead of the source of the smell and stopped abruptly. He leaned over the edge of the roof, keen eyes seeking out the source of the smell. At last he caught sight of the Fallen.

His lips curled into a farcical grin as he pushed himself off the ledge and landed on the ground some fifty feet below. The Fallen stared at him, startled into stillness.



“Tiamat.” He spoke the word singularly.

The woman stared at him for the space of several long seconds before her lips parted in a sneer. “Ra. You’re looking well.”

“No thanks to you.” He hissed the words as he took a step closer.

Fury seemed to vibrate in the woman’s every muscle, hands fisting at her sides. “I’d heard you’d awoken.”

“Again ... no thanks to you.” Ra watched her closely. Her delicate frame tensed, as if ready to attack. “You are a brave one, Tiamat, to come out of hiding. Though I will admit your timing is fortuitous.”

“I haven’t been hiding.” She stepped forward, brushing silver-white hair from her face, “You were out of the picture; I had no reason to remain in the limelight of our community’s politics. Unlike you, Ra, I never wanted to rule the world.”

“Yes,” he agreed instantly, folding his hands before himself, the very picture of innocence. “But you were the one who facilitated my rise to power, and for that I’m certain your leftover moral conscience has never fully given you a moment’s rest.”

“That’s none of your concern. But I do only think it fair to warn you, Ra. Your children will come for you. And when they do, I will not help you.”

Ra scoffed and clucked his tongue. “Now, Tiamat, be honest. What chance do such inferior beings really have against a god? I will lay waste to them all, and then I will seize this kingdom for my own, as it should have been the last time.”

“Even Ma’at?” she shot back instantly.

This did give Ra a moment’s pause. He hadn’t exactly doted on his only child, but he could not deny a few paltry vestiges of fatherly regard for the delicate being he’d encountered the other night. “If she gets in my way, I will not hesitate to dispose of her.”

Tiamat snorted. “Really, Ra, you always were delusional. Who do you think will be leading the revolt? Even now, she has called an Enclave. Can’t you feel the presence of your offspring in the city? Or are you that rusty from your nap?”

Ra’s tenuous hold on his temper snapped, and he surged forward. He bounced onto the concrete sidewalk from the force of the wall she’d materialized around herself. He pushed himself up from the ground and glared at her. The shield shimmered a faint blue-green as it fizzled out of existence.

“Coward.” He hissed the word, taking a step forward.

“If I am a coward, then you are a fool. Your children will not only rise against you, they will invoke the archangel who bound you, and I will not stand idly by.” She dared to smile smugly at him. “I had thought I would wait and see how this plays out, but I think it would be so much more fun to see what will happen when I tip the scales.”

Tiamat smirked at him one last time and stepped around him, continuing on her way. “I wouldn’t go into this blindly, Ra. Your girl is far more powerful than you give her credit for.”

Ra growled at her retreating back and swore before leaping to the rooftops once more.

\* \* \* \*

Adam shifted uncomfortably. He stood next to Elizabeth in a richly appointed room. The robes he’d been coerced into wearing itched something fierce, and he had to wonder, not for the first time, why he was wearing Egyptian-style garb. The gold bracelets

weighed heavily on his wrists, delicate chains connecting them together. He was free to move his hands, making them seem more ceremonial than actually intended, as restraints.

Elizabeth stood beside him, adorned in rich white robes, a circlet of gold sitting atop her head. He wondered when her bearing had changed from the modicum of ease he'd finally managed to get her into. Now, she held herself stiffly beside him, hands clasped before her.

Jacob stood by the door, dressed, oddly enough, in the garb of a medieval courtier. It made absolutely no sense. The woman next to him, who had been introduced to Adam as Celeste, was dressed in what seemed to be some sort of outfit that mirrored his own, save for the same gold cuffs and chain that glittered when she moved.

Adam's gaze flickered around the room once again. The round stone table was massive, seating at least twenty, with room to spare. What he couldn't exactly place were the drains in the stone floor and the shackles in the center of the table. Something within him flashed, some latent memory. Countless people bound to the table, victims of an inquisition. Blood running from the floor, collecting at the drains before disappearing in a swirl to some hidden depths far below.

Adam blinked as he came back to reality. How many people had found their deaths here? In this place that seemed to make Elizabeth so unhappy. Why had she brought them all, summoned them, to this place of death and despair?

Elizabeth had called this place the Abbey. It was an imposing structure, located atop a hill overlooking Puget Sound some miles south of Seattle. Why they had needed to go so far away to have a meeting was beyond him. Candles burned in the room, lighting it in a soft glow. He swallowed hard when he heard the heavy wooden door scrape the floor as it was pushed open.

Adam's eyes instantly landed on Jacob, who stood at the door, kneeling submissively before the man who stood at the entrance. The man wore a formal kilt and stiffly starched linen shirt. Jacob spoke to him in low tones, words that Adam could not make out. He didn't seem to have the hang of this preternatural senses thing yet.

The man rested his hand atop Jacob's head for a moment before ruffling his hair playfully. Jacob rose and stepped back, voice raised to a booming pitch that echoed in the stone room. "Scion Duncan Orbuckle Kincaid and Consort Caroline Grady answer the summons of their Sister, Scion Elizabeth De Maigne."

A frown flickered over Adam's face as the man stepped forward. Behind him, a woman appeared. She looked as uncomfortable as Adam felt, in her kilt. The only thing that distinguished her were the gold cuffs at her wrists and the sullen expression on her face.

The man knelt before Elizabeth for the briefest of moments before bounding to his feet. He moved to stand before Adam, gazing at him with a measuring glance. A nudge to Adam's side reminded him of Elizabeth's instructions. Adam knelt before the man and mumbled the words Jacob had drilled into his head on the drive here. "Consort to Scion Elizabeth de Maigne and her faithful servant, Adam Montrose."

The Scion before him clapped Adam on the arm with enough force to make him stumble. "Good, good. I present my Consort to you as well. Caroline Grady, formerly of Baton Rouge, Louisiana."

The woman shot the man a hateful look and sighed in apparent resignation before bowing before Adam. The pair moved away towards the table. No sooner were they gone

before Jacob's voice boomed out again. "Scion Anastasia Isabella Karincivik and Consort Milos Karincivik answer the summons of their Sister, Scion Elizabeth De Maigne."

Adam's eyes widened. The woman was leading the man gently by the chain that bound his wrists together. Adam's world dissolved into a chaotic struggle to remember the names of the people who came through the door.

Scions Marcus Aurelius and Matsumoto Kai scared him more than a little. The more mellow ones seemed to be the Russians and the Scotsman, though the Scotsman's consort was seething through the entirety of the opening ritual.

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Elizabeth drew in a deep breath and let her eyes slide shut for a moment. She was not yet ready to face her peers. To reveal to them the reason for the Enclave had been a hard task. It had taken hours to calm them down enough to allow her to speak. Elizabeth flexed her jaw, steeling herself for what had to be said. When she opened her eyes once more, she leaned forward, resting her palms on the hard stone surface of the table.

"Brothers, Sisters ... I realize that this Enclave is not something that any of us had ever wanted to see happen again. However, to let Ra continue in his attempt to regain power will result in the destruction of the delicate balance we have all worked so hard to achieve."

She paused for a brief moment, letting the full weight of her words sink in. "We are not gods. We were never meant to be gods. We are, however, Scions. With the gifts we possess comes a responsibility to the world. Because we are innately superior in our physical and mental capacities, care of the mortals falls on our shoulders. It is not a burden any of us take lightly."

She gritted her teeth and glanced to Adam, who was staring at her with rapt attention. "They are Prey, but they are also the source of our very lives. Without them, we die. It's just that simple. I don't need to remind you, any of you, why our Avatar was placed in exile in the first place. And unless you want to see the same thing happen again, but on a more massive scale, you will lend your support and your aid."

Elizabeth's eye locked on Kai's for a moment. He was the next in line, after her. His approval to this sentencing would be pivotal in gaining the agreement of the rest of the Scions. He growled at her. In return, she bared her teeth at him for a moment before speaking. "You owe it to your Prey to protect them, so that our own lives may continue."

She fell silent and took a seat once more. For some reason, it nagged at her, that the words she spoke were not what she believed. It was the outlook she'd had millennia to cultivate, and now it suddenly felt wrong.

There was something knotted in the pit of her stomach. It wasn't anger, or hatred. It wasn't any of those familiar emotions that she'd allowed herself to feel. This was something foreign. She saw it reflected in the sadness in Adam's eyes as he watched her.

Self-loathing. That was it. She, the expert manipulator was feeling guilty for using her gifts for the greater good. Redemption was not for the damned, so why did the prospect of humanity seem so horrible now? If being redeemed meant she had to...

Elizabeth pushed aside her own uneasy guilt and pressed onward with what she knew had to be done. "I put forth to the Council, that the sentence of death be passed on our Avatar, the god Ra. I put forth for a vote that this must be his punishment for crimes against humanity, past and present."

The sheer volume of Anja's voice was enough to grate on Elizabeth's sensitive ears.

“You wish us to take responsibility for your consort’s stupidity? That’s what this is all about? Have you lost your mind?”

Elizabeth made it a point to remain impassive, though her voice was taut when she did speak. “Are you quite finished, Anja?”

“Not hardly!” The woman was fairly shaking with indignant rage. “You know very well that we can not destroy our Avatar. It is not within our power. Not even together. So why are you bothering with this enclave? It will only bring more suffering when he finds out what is taking place here, under his very nose.”

Elizabeth surged from her chair, speaking in a dangerously low tone. “You will have a seat, Sister. You will calm yourself and speak to me, as well as my Consort, in a respectful manner.”

Beside her, Adam sat stiffly, those brilliant blue eyes wide in disbelief. She could feel a thrill course through him, though she did not have the time, nor the inclination, to try to determine its source.

Anja remained rooted where she was, expression set in a defiant glare. Elizabeth’s tenuous hold on her temper was slipping. Her lips thinned into a snarl. “You walk a dangerous line, Anastasia. If you impugn my integrity just once more, you will find *yourself* at the mercy of this enclave. Your life would be forfeit for such an insult.”

“I have never spoken ill of your honor, Elizabeth. Only that of your Consort.”

“To speak of him in such a manner is to speak of me in such a manner. He is my mate and as such entitled to every respect you give to me. Do I make myself clear?”

Anja’s sneer fell to be replaced by a properly shamed expression. “Abundantly. My apologies, Sister, to you as well as your Consort.” She dropped into her seat and clutched the edge of the table with white knuckles.

It was Kai’s voice that snapped Elizabeth from her reverie. “It is the judgment of Scion Matsumoto Kai that the Avatar Ra should immediately be sentenced to death for his crimes, past and present. To this pronouncement, how says the Enclave?”

Elizabeth’s heart caught in her chest. By the time the voting was over, she was on the verge of both physical and mental exhaustion.

Mere minutes later, she stood before those gathered once more. “It is with the unanimous decision of this Enclave that the Avatar Ra is hereby sentenced to immediate execution, by either the hand of his firstborn or the Archangel, Uriel. If there be any rejection of this decree by any member of the Council, speak now or forever be silent.”

No one dared to breathe. Elizabeth somehow made it through the closing ritual. She had only the remainder of this night to plan her strategy. She was fighting her own father. After countless eons, her family would be avenged.

\* \* \* \*

Adam pulled the robes over his head and crossed to the door that joined his room to the one Elizabeth occupied. It was to his great surprise that he was forbidden from all contact with her until the following night. The execution.

It sounded so cold, so callous. He raised his hand and pressed it to the carved wooden surface of the door. Dimly, he could feel a tingle of apprehension at the base of her spine. His eyes slid shut of their own accord, forehead coming to lean against the door.

Flashes rose in his mind, unbidden. In the few hours he’d spent alone since his

change into this strange new version of himself, it was as if some piece of his soul had come to the forefront. His heart rate spiked when he heard the vague sighs of Elizabeth, then a sharp intake of breath from the other side of the door.

His eyes snapped open, and he twisted the knob. To hell with the decree of the Scions, Elizabeth was on the other side of that door. He had to be with her. He scowled as the lock refused to give way to his grip.

His hands curled into fists, beating uselessly on the door. "Elizabeth!"

\* \* \* \*

Tiamat's skin burned as the barrier she'd erected around herself dissolved. The Scion who had dared to try to attack her bounced harmlessly back onto the bed she'd flown off of. A corner of her mouth rose in a smirk. This was why she had come, to see if the woman was worth the gift she was seeking to bestow.

The deceptively frail Predator snarled as she rose on her haunches. Both women ignored the frantic cries that were increasing in volume from other side of the door that connected the bedroom with the rest of the suite.

Tiamat's smirk broadened into a smile laden with the promise of something far more than the skirmish the Scion obviously had in mind. "Calm yourself, Scion. I have not come here for your life."

Wary curiosity filled the woman's eyes. "Then why are you here? You obviously know of my plans for my Avatar, otherwise you wouldn't worry yourself, Tiamat." The name was spat at her as though it was something disgusting.

Tiamat chuckled and moved to the antique, high-backed chair beside the window she'd used to enter. "It's quite a fitting use of your fortune. To take apart the Abbey from the location where it protected your Avatar's resting place. But then, I suppose you had relaxed enough to think that after all those thousands of years, no one would find his sarcophagus. Wishful thinking, don't you agree, Ma'at?"

"What do you want?" the woman demanded again.

Tiamat offered a rueful smile. "How much do you really know about the creation of your kind, Ma'at?"

"Enough to know that it was a mistake, and that it is my duty to maintain the balance my father's generation almost destroyed."

Perfect white teeth flashed as Tiamat gestured to the other chair. "Join me. I would speak to you civilly and without reserve."

"I'm sorry, but you need to leave. I'm preparing to do battle with an Avatar."

"A battle you have no chance of winning. Isn't that right, Ma'at?" Tiamat's voice hardened. "Now sit and let us stop wasting time."

The other woman seemed to waver for a moment before dropping into the chair on the other side of the window. She remained stubbornly silent as Tiamat began to speak. "When the battle for Paradise took place, we were wrongly cast out of the presence of our Creator. Condemned to wander and forever be alone. One of the original Fallen discovered, by pure chance, mind you, that there was a way to create a Predator that could maintain the balance of the earth's natural state."

Elizabeth sat stiffly, jade eyes glittering dangerously. Her very expression told of her hatred of the Fallen that sat so comfortably before her. "I don't need a history lesson. You created my kind, and that's all that matters."

“Don’t interrupt me, child, or you will be sorely aching for this little conversation tomorrow evening.”

The Predator obediently fell silent. Tiamat cleared her throat and continued. “It was a mistake, creating the first one. But we were convinced we could get it right. So we tried again and again until the first Avatars began creating your generation. When the first Scion was created, we realized what the problem with the Avatars was. Because of their invulnerability, they were reduced to animalistic instincts that conflicted with the remnants of their humanity. Most simply chose the easy road, embracing the dark power inside them.”

Tiamat paused here, glancing to make sure she hadn’t lost the attention of her companion. She sighed heavily, not bothering to disguise the thread of regret within her voice. “Ra was one of those that was simply never conflicted. As you know, the route he took ... it led to his defeat. I know no one ever told you the entire story of why he went to trial. Perhaps you never really understood him the way a Fallen can. He and I were close once. My mate was his creator. Ra became obsessed with power, as you well know. His greed led to many mistakes. Not the least of which was his flair for the dramatic. Because he was seen being mortally wounded in battle, and because my lover saved his life by bonding him as an Avatar ... he saw it as his way of establishing himself as a god. And he truly believed it.”

Elizabeth remained still, silent as the grave.

Tiamat continued. “After your father found out you were dying, he saw an opportunity to save your life. He could hear your heart growing weaker with each passing day, and he knew it was because of what he’d done. Because he’d killed Thoth. Some latent part of him wanted to make it up to you. At least that’s what he told me. It wasn’t until centuries later that he truly seemed to go mad, beyond redemption. Because he caused the death of my mate, he was sentenced to exile by Uriel. His original heart was never given over to Uriel as it should have been at his trial. That’s why Uriel could not destroy him. Besides, the archangels’ hearts always were too soft. That brings me to the reason why I’m here.”

“I should hope so.” Elizabeth’s muttered words were met with a scathing glare.

Tiamat scowled. “I have my own reasons for wishing to help you. The return of your mate does not excuse your lack of respect. I don’t care if you are blinded by love, you will listen and not speak further until I am ready to hear from you.”

The younger woman snorted and leaned back into her chair, crossing her arms over her chest. Her brow furrowed as the words the Fallen had just spoke suddenly made sense. “Wait. Returned? What do you mean, Thoth has returned?”

The other woman gave a weary sigh. “Surely you are not so naïve as to believe your bonding with the Montrose boy to be pure coincidence? You know as well as I that intervention from above is something we must accept as inevitable. My source tells me that it was through divine decree that Thoth’s soul was merged with Montrose’s. It’s been quite the talk of the heavenly realm since it happened.”

“It’s impossible. Who is your source?”

“You know I can’t tell you that, not without risking their fall.” Tiamat grimaced. “You mean to tell me you never noticed?”

Elizabeth snapped the words at the other woman. “I’ve been a little preoccupied, if you hadn’t noticed. You are without a doubt the most arrogant being I’ve ever met.”

“Even more arrogant than Matsumoto?” Tiamat smirked, plainly pleased to have the upper hand.

“Leave Kai out of this.” Despite her harsh words and disgusted frown, Elizabeth was barely able to suppress the sudden trembling of her hands. Adam was Thoth. They were one and the same. Reincarnation was not unheard of, but this, it wasn’t supposed to happen. She was unredeemed. Had the gods truly damned Thoth as well? And what of Adam? Would he disappear? What did it mean? The emotions bubbled up inside her and before she could stop herself, she gave a sudden, indignant shriek. Her eyes snapped to the woman in the chair next to her. “Get to your damned point and get out.”

Tiamat sighed, eyes losing their good-humored sparkle. “As I was saying, Thoth’s return to this realm proves that you are the one worthy of the gift I’m giving you. It will be my last act as a Fallen, and after it is completed I will at last retire to the Fire I should have been condemned to long ago.”

This caught the Scion’s attention enough for Elizabeth to lean forward. She did however, remain silent. “Ra’s original heart ... I stole it from its hiding place. It will be delivered to you by your Cherished, the one called Jacob, just before dawn. I warn you that to destroy it will be no easy task. I am bound by celestial law not to divulge the method that can destroy it. However, I will tell you that should you defeat your Avatar ... your Redemption will be complete.”

“Redemption?” Elizabeth echoed the word softly.

Tiamat smiled gently and slid from the chair, moving to kneel on the Persian rug before Elizabeth. “Ma’at ... you will destroy me, and it will be my privilege to give you the strength you so desperately need.”

The Predator’s eyes widened to comical proportions. “I beg your pardon.”

Tiamat merely grinned and reached out, threading her fingers through the hair at the base of Elizabeth’s skull. The Scion was jerked forward even as Tiamat dug her nails into the tender flesh at the base of her neck and tore it open. Jade orbs flared to life, as Elizabeth realized what the Fallen was implying.

She growled lightly and pushed away the hand at her skull, her own rising to grasp the other woman’s head, forcing it back as her mouth latched onto the wound.

\* \* \* \*

The sounds of conversation from the other room ceased. Adam remained firmly planted before the door, hand uselessly clutching the knob. There was no sound, save for the racing heartbeat of his lover and the weakening one of the person who’d dared to attack her. Adam could feel a delicious heat uncurling inside his chest as Elizabeth feasted on the lifeblood of the stranger.

After several moments that stretched out into too long minutes, he heard the thump of a body hitting the floor. Something was wrong. Elizabeth never treated her dead with anything but the utmost respect. He pounded on the door once more. “Elizabeth! Open the door! Elizabeth!”

He heard a vague, low groan as she fell to the floor. The name left his lips before he even realized he’d spoken it. “Ma’at!” He took several steps back from the door, and with a speed and power he did not know he possessed, surged forward. Adam barreled into it with his shoulder, shattering the wood frame and lock with the force of the blow. He stumbled into the room, fully prepared to fend off someone or something, only finding

Elizabeth and the corpse.

Elizabeth was on her hands and knees, fighting for breath. It wasn't until Adam neared her and sank to his knees before her that he smelled something foul on her breath. It was the taint of death, tinged with the repugnant odor of sulfur. He wrinkled his nose in disgust and reached out to touch her shoulder, supporting her weight as he pulled her into a loose embrace. "What happened? Talk to me?"

He was stunned to find himself propelled backward into the footboard. Elizabeth snarled at him, something in a language he did not understand. Her eyes glowed a brilliant sapphire, cementing the knowledge that something was horribly wrong.

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Rage, pure rage unlike anything she'd ever felt, coursed through her veins. It merged with her being, with the pure blood that now filled her with an unholy fire. Thoth. Adam. And he didn't even seem to know her. She crouched before him. His eyes, a bright liquid blue, flared to life, hints of gold flecking the center. He cradled that back of his skull where it had glanced off the footboard.

"You bastard!" She lunged for him again. "You left me!"

Adam's eyes widened. His hands came up in front of himself, catching her wrists just before they could strike his face. She'd underestimated him. She realized this a heartbeat too late when he used her momentum against her and rolled them over, pinning her hands over her head.

She growled at him, baring her teeth for his startled view. "You son of a bitch! You left me here to rot for eternity alone, and all this time you were watching."

Something within Adam's eyes flickered. Ever so dimly, Elizabeth could feel memories flare to life within him. He opened his mouth to speak, but it worked silently. She lashed out with her legs, kicking at nothing with the little strength she had left. "You saw me here, alone. You knew I had given up any hope of ever having what we had again. You bastard, how could you? How could you condemn me to eternity of hell when you lived in bliss. You were supposed to be my partner."

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It flooded him then, the reason for her anger. The broken memories that haunted his dreams suddenly made sense. The change he'd undergone since that first night in the alley. He'd felt like he should know her, but even now, he didn't grasp it. Her name fell from his lips even as she dissolved into the harsh sobs of a broken woman. "Ma'at."

Beneath him, she cried. It should have frightened him, to have the one person who had somehow become the center of his world crumbling beneath his gaze, but instead he could only feel the deepest sorrow and regret. He hadn't known how acutely her own emotions affected him, beyond the fact that he could feel them as if they were his own.

He moved off of her, pulling her into the circle of his arms. Adam whispered words he didn't know in a tongue he didn't remember, all the while stroking the hair of the shattered woman he loved.



## Chapter 13

Ra could feel the summons. It pulled him to a place he'd never seen. His hands curled into loose fists by his side. Mimi watched him, cinnamon eyes lit with curiosity. Ra barely registered the small hand that rose to rest on his shoulder. He remained rooted where he was, brilliant sapphire orbs sliding shut as he fought to resist the rising rage.

How dare she? The insolent little monster. He hadn't believed Tiamat when she'd so boldly exclaimed that Ma'at had called an enclave. He had done nothing that wasn't his right as an Avatar. How dare she? He was a god. She was what she was because he'd saved her from certain death. Even as he'd transformed her into a Predator, her heart had been dying a slow death from the disease that had ravaged her body, mind and spirit.

And this was how she repaid him.

Ra's lips parted, teeth bared as he screamed. It was an unearthly sound, bearing in it a fury and rage that millennia locked inside himself had done nothing to temper. She would pay. He would decimate her, rip her head from her shoulders and feast on her blood. The very blood he himself had given her, to save her.

Mimi's hand tightened on his shoulder. He spun swiftly, glaring at her. "It is time for our first victory, my Consort."

He reached up and took her hand in his, not noticing the grimace of pain on that pretty face as he dragged her towards her car. He folded his lanky frame into the beat-up Mazda. She situated herself beside him in the driver's seat. "So, where are we going?"

He bared his teeth at her, satisfied when she seemed properly cowed into silence. "The Abbey."

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Adam stood quietly in the spot to which he'd been directed. All the Scions and their respective Consorts formed a large circle just outside a sparring ring that rather resembled the one Elizabeth and Leon had fought in.

He'd never heard such a deafening silence. It was as if the very air around them sparked with the Enclave's collective anticipation. Adam's heart pounded as though trying to beat its way free of the cage of his chest. He clenched his teeth, then forced himself to relax and open his eyes. Every single person was as deathly still as himself. He didn't quite understand exactly what he was supposed to be doing, though he'd read the words from the cheat sheet Jacob had given him.

Elizabeth had explained to him, in the few moments they'd had together before the ritual, that they were summoning Ra. They were actually summoning the Avatar to their presence in order to execute him. Either he would be dead or they all would be. His breathing sped up as he contemplated this.

Losing her only after he'd found her again ... it was unbearable. The powerful emotions that connected him with Elizabeth were not that of love. Love was far too paltry a word for it, and an emotion she herself proclaimed meaningless.

She was destined for him, and he for her. He didn't feel like an Egyptian, but wasn't that what reincarnation supposedly was? The rebirth of a soul into new circumstances. Elizabeth, that was how he thought of her. He knew intellectually that he was Thoth's new incarnation, her destined mate. But he could not bring himself to think of her as

Ma'at. She was Elizabeth when they'd met, and Elizabeth she would remain for the rest of their lives together, however long that might be.

He heard the laughter that floated up the hillside from the main road that led to the Abbey. Adam's entire body stiffened in reflex to the sheer malice that laugh carried. In the back of his mind, it niggled at him.

That laugh. He'd heard it ... just before the blinding pain that he'd felt before his death. His first death. Sudden resentment flared into him. Ra was responsible for the eons of hell his lover had gone through. It should be him avenging her. He should have been able to protect her and their child.

Adam's head snapped up as he saw it before his eyes as plain as if it had been yesterday. Elizabeth bending to smell a flower, then rising once more. Her head was thrown back in laughter as she glowed with more than the light of her beloved sun. She had radiated, fairly glowing with the essence of the new life she carried within her. Anger. Righteous anger filled him. He barely restrained himself from surging in and breaking the circle. For the first time ever ... he wanted to murder.

Elizabeth stepped into the circle. She was outfitted as if for war. Her hair was pulled back into dozens of impossibly tiny braids, and piled securely atop her head. The delicate gold circlet that had sat atop her head in the enclave the previous day had been done away with. In its place was instead a simple leather band bearing a tiny silver feather.

Vaguely, he wondered at the feather's significance. His anger receded a bit, replaced by her calm assurance. Adam let his hands relax, just as Ra finally stepped into view.

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Elizabeth held herself ramrod straight. Her father stood just outside the circle, a petite woman just to the side and behind him. He was dressed oddly, in a pair of loose-fitting cargo pants and a crisp gray t-shirt. A smirk tilted one corner of his lips as he spoke. "Traitors, the lot of you, gathered to kill me, your creator."

She remained silent, unmoving. Though her eyes remained on Ra, she summoned to mind the sequences of moves she knew it would take to defeat him. Combat had never been her strong suit. But she did have one distinct advantage. Her Avatar had been exiled long before the inception of modern martial arts.

The *hakama* Kai had insisted she wear fit perfectly, allowing her a freedom of movement that even sweatpants would not have given her. A simple sleeveless *yukata* was belted into the *hakama*, allowing for the movement of her arms. She would not have to worry about yards of fabric getting in her way.

The *wakizashi* crisscrossed on her back were the only weapons she would use. Though more were allowed during combat, the added weight of more weapons would hamper her speed. Ra abandoned his lone underling and stepped into the circle, his smirk growing. "I must confess, Ma'at. I did not think you had it in you. It is folly, you know, to engage in battle with an Avatar. Your power is nowhere near mine, and you will meet your death."

He stopped when he was within ten feet of her. "Because I am a gracious god, a forgiving one ... I will give you one last chance. Throw yourself on my mercy and beg my forgiveness. If you were to swear your loyalty to me, I would be willing to forget this ever happened. You would be permitted to serve me as you were created to do."

It was strange, the calm that she felt. Even now, facing almost certain defeat, she was filled with the knowledge that she was acting in a manner that befitted her as the bringer

of justice.

At last Elizabeth spoke. "Ra, Avatar borne of the Fallen Beelzebub, you have been tried in a council of your children and found guilty of violating the natural balance of the mortal world. In addition, you have brought death and havoc in your wake. By a unanimous vote of this council, you are sentenced to death. Have you any last words?"

Ra's eyes narrowed, a sneer marring that handsome face. "No."

"Very well. Choose your weapons, and we will begin."

He gave a curt nod before turning slowly to face Kai at the outer edge of the circle. The table beside the Scion bore a myriad of weapons, ranging from Leon's own scimitar to knives to spears.

Elizabeth carefully examined the emotions coming from her Avatar. Confusion, disbelief, anger. He fairly radiated confidence. Elizabeth allowed a small, private smile to grace her lips. Cocky as ever. It was a distinct disadvantage for him, though he did not know it yet. The blood she'd taken from Adam the previous night had removed the taint of that which she'd taken from the Fallen. Her Avatar had no clue he was no longer dealing with a mere Scion.

Ra selected a spear, testing its weight carefully. In his other hand, he held a bastard sword. Elizabeth arched a brow. It was a two-handed weapon, and not easily wielded by a person who hadn't dedicated years to learning how to manipulate its heavy mass. Its gleaming, too-long blade had attracted Ra.

Elizabeth was reminded, vaguely, of a child who was drawn to glitter. He approached her once more, stabbing the sword into the ground and letting it remain there, standing until he was ready to use it. "Then let's get on with it, shall we, Ma'at?"

\*

Ra lifted the spear easily. It was one of the handful of weapons he'd recognized and known how to use. In his glory days, before partaking of his Fallen and becoming a Predator, he'd been deadly with a spear, and now would be no different.

Ma'at bowed slightly to him, then dropped into a stance he did not recognize. Her hands came up, resting on the hilts on the pair of swords strapped to her back. He wondered why she was garbed so strangely.

When he'd first met Kai, the wandering traveler from the east, he'd been clad similarly, though it was a robe and not a pair of trousers and sleeveless shirt. The hiss of metal on metal drew his attention from the past to the present once more.

Ma'at crouched, two ridiculously short swords arranged in a defensive posture before her. Both weapons were curved, though not to the sharp degree of a scimitar. One rested at an angle, obviously meant to protect her chest, the other had disappeared behind her back.

It vaguely worried him that she might actually be proficient in weaponry, something she'd never been permitted to learn before his exile. A vague guilt crept in and he had to wonder what else he'd missed in her life.

At the first sign of movement, he tamped down the paternal guilt and flew into action.

\*

Elizabeth rushed at him, striking quickly with one of her blades in a downward slash and following through in an upward movement with its twin. Ra's spear glanced harmlessly off one of the swords, though its awkward position prevented her from

actually striking his body. She spun to a stop a few feet away from him, right foot extended behind her for balance.

Her father stared at her, obviously bewildered. That was good. She had the upper hand. She purposefully had not moved at her top speed, needing several precious heartbeats to gauge the range of his movement with the spear.

He lunged at her, taking no time to regain his bearing. He struck out with the spear, a direct assault on the small area of her left shoulder that was not guarded by the metal of the sword.

A quick movement of her wrist sent the spear up and over her shoulder. The weapon in her other hand rose, making contact with the shaft of the spear. The wooden shank promptly gave way beneath the steel.

Ra gave a cry of anger and tossed away the remaining bit of useless wood in his hands. He leapt away from the steel that swiped at his exposed belly, shrieking indignantly when its tip sliced nicely through the flesh it encountered.

\*

Ra spun away, hand moving reflexively to the wound on his abdomen. He growled at the sight of blood when he pulled his hand away. The little whelp. She'd actually made him bleed. It wasn't as though she could kill him, not without destroying his original heart or decapitating him. If he hadn't let her get so close...

It wouldn't happen again. He twisted away from her, hands reaching for the heavy sword he'd brought as a back-up weapon. He snarled as he hefted it before him. "You had better savor that shot, because you won't get another, Ma'at."

She merely smirked as she shifted her stance, both weapons extending, one before her and the other above her head. She was crouched, body twisted impossibly low. Ra lunged for her, swinging the massive sword above his head and rotating his body so that it came down at an angle, intended to slice between the upraised swords. To his surprise, his daughter moved with a speed she should not have been able to achieve, catching the blade of his weapon between the crossed ones of her own.

He bared his teeth at her, only to find himself stumbling backwards from the impact of her knee in his groin. His eyes drew together in a grimace as he realized she'd nailed him in the same sensitive area twice now. And it hurt just as badly this time as it had in their first encounter.

\*

Adam watched in disbelief as Elizabeth's knee made contact with the man's groin. He drew in a sympathetic gasp. He had no liking for the man, but still ... that had to hurt.

Ra writhed on the ground, hands loosely grasping his sword as he drew his knees protectively towards his chest. So far, it seemed to be going well. He frowned as Elizabeth stalked toward the fallen Avatar. Ra seemed to be gasping for air.

Elizabeth stood over him, her weapons held loosely at her sides. Why was she hesitating? She should have been able to finish him when he was down. He wasn't exactly focused on defending himself at that moment.

The gruesome scene played itself out in Adam's head even before Ra made his first move. In his mind's eyes, he saw the older man raising his arms and thrusting the sword upward into Elizabeth's stomach.

Adam broke free from his momentary paralysis and darted towards the pair. He couldn't let Elizabeth be hurt, not if he could stop it. He lunged, shoving her out of the

way as Ra pushed the sword upward. It sank into Adam's own belly, bringing with it searing heat and a world of instant pain Adam had never guessed existed.

\*

The movement of Adam was a blur, not really registering until she hit the ground and felt the pain of the bastard sword piercing his delicate flesh. The heat radiated into her own body, bringing a harsh gasp of horror. What had he done?

She pushed herself to her knees, abandoning her weapons when she saw the awful sight. Adam had collapsed to the ground, the bloody blade sticking out through his back. His mouth worked soundlessly as he stared at her.

She saw there what his mouth seemed unable to say. Her heart fluttered within her chest. Adam had thought she was in danger ... he'd thought he was sacrificing himself to save her. He was doing what he hadn't been able to when he'd died the first time.

There was no way he could have possibly know she was preparing to take Ra's head after disarming him a second time. She glanced to her father.

He appeared stricken. Odd. Ra was staring in what appeared to be mute horror at the fact that he'd run through the wrong person. How very strange. Why? Why did he seem so shocked that he'd almost killed her mate a second time?

He scrambled to his knees at her approach, swiftly reaching for the sword. The regret instantly left his expression, receding inward once more as his hand closed around the hilt.

\*

The boy had gotten in the way. An unintended victim of combat. Some latent human emotion had struck him out of nowhere. Horror had filled him, and, for a moment, he was looking into the eyes of his long-dead son-in-law. It was impossible that Thoth had returned; it simply didn't work that way.

Predators could not be redeemed. It was a myth. A fallacy made up by the Fallen and Risen to secure the eternal hope of Scions, a tool to keep their murderous nature in check. Ra snarled as he pushed aside the immediate guilt at having killed his daughter's Consort.

He pulled the sword free, only to find it knocked from his hands. A fist connected with his ribcage, shattering the bones and puncturing at least one of his lungs. A fatal blow to anyone else. As it was, the breath was knocked from him.

Ma'at's hand reached out, grasping him by the collar of the shirt and jerking him forward, until he was eye level with her. Her voice was cold, eyes glittering dangerously. "You would dare to kill my mate a second time, my Father?"

Her hand closed around his throat, crushing his windpipe until he could not even draw in precious oxygen to his damaged lungs. His mouth worked in a silent mockery of the dying consort's own vain attempts to speak.

"I waited for this moment, my Father. The moment when vengeance would be mine. I am the incarnation of justice. Your deeds have been weighed against a feather, and you have been found lacking."

The grip on his throat tightened impossibly, her other hand coming up to grasp his shoulder, nails breaking his flesh. "This is the moment you are condemned. Your time is over, my Father. And I will be your executioner, just as you were Thoth's."

\*

Adam could barely make out the words Elizabeth was speaking. A sudden light flared just beside him. A hand gently clasped his shoulder. His eyes were drawn from the

pair to the man who sat beside him.

The man's voice was low. "Shall I help you with that?" He gestured to the wound that was bleeding freely.

Adam's lips moved, but the only sound that came out was a groan. The man smiled broadly and leaned forward, closing his hand over the wound. For a moment, bright, white-hot fire sparked through Adam's body, followed by a soothing cool calm.

The man patted Adam on the head affectionately and rose, "Now that I've saved you from dying a second time, I believe I have an Avatar to dispose of."

"You're..." Adam's brows shot up as he finally seemed able to catch his breath enough to speak.

The man faintly glowed with a golden light as he brushed the dust from those impossibly white robes. "Uriel. I'm so sorry I was delayed. I had some nasty ends to tie up regarding a rogue Fallen who met her demise last night. She apparently decided to picket the pearly gates, and that's simply not done. It's all taken care of now. Anyway, moving right along ... can you tell me if you've seen a box about yay big?" The man indicated a size just larger than a fist.

Adam nodded and pointed to where Jacob stood just outside the circle, bearing the gold-plated box. Uriel grinned once more and patted Adam on the head once more. "Good boy."

\*

Elizabeth could feel the bones in Ra's neck giving way under the increasing pressure of her grasp. Just a bit more force and she would be able to rip his head from his body.

"If you don't mind, I can take it from here, darling." The silky voice jerked her from her frenzied attempt to forcefully separate her father's head from his body. She maintained her grip and twisted her head to the side.

Uriel stood there, a few feet away. The box Jacob held was open, and the archangel tossed Ra's healthy, beating heart from hand to hand as if it were a child's plaything.

Relief flooded her. She released her grip on Ra, letting him fall to the ground in an unceremonious heap. Uriel stepped closer, beaming at her. "You were doing a fine job on your own, Ma'at. But I do believe this is my responsibility. Fiery sword and all that."

She nodded, retreating to where Adam sat. The blood that had flowed from his wound stained his robe, but he was steadily regaining his color. It would appear that Uriel had done more than simply show up.

\*

Terror, pure terror unlike anything else Ra had ever experienced filled him. Before him the Archangel stood. He tossed Ra's heart between his open hands with a smug grin. "Your daughter is a smart woman, Ra. And you really should have just stayed in your box. You were given a chance, and you were within half a century of coming out of exile ... you idiot. Now I'm afraid there will be no second chance. I'll simply have to smite you."

Ra had only enough time to register the blistering heat that consumed him before his world collapsed around him.

\*

Uriel sighed heavily as he watched the ashes that remained of Ra's heart crumble within his palm, consumed by the ever-useful holy fire he'd called down. He hated smiting people. Just one of the many dubious obligations of his position as an archangel.

He turned to face Elizabeth, visage brightening noticeably. She knelt next to her mate, eyes blazing with some unknown emotion. Poor girl, it must have all have been very disconcerting for her. Decision made, he stepped forward.

“So sorry to have been delayed, Ma’at.”

She gave the smallest nod as she rose to her feet, helping the young man with her to rise. The man swayed precariously for a moment before steadying himself and leaning heavily on her shoulder. Uriel’s smile was broad when he extended his hand to her. “You have proven yourself worthy, Ma’at.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what you mean.” She spoke the words softly. Beside her, her mate’s eyes slid closed, breathing slow and heavy. He needed sustenance and rest. It was a relief to know he’d managed to arrive in time to prevent Ra from doing even more damage to the pair’s collectively frail spirits.

Uriel gave another of his charming smiles. “Because of your mate’s selfless act, as well as your willingness to protect him, I am happy to be able to offer you your redemption.”

“Redemption?” she repeated blankly. She was tired. This much he could tell simply by the exhaustion in her voice.

Uriel nodded for emphasis. “Love such as yours does not come along every day, you know. If you wish to be redeemed, I’d say you earned it. Several times over, in fact.” He chuckled. “So, if you’d prefer to transubstantiate to human form you have only to say the word, and I’ll make it happen. It would make it a lot easier to get married, have 2.3 kids and a house in the suburbs.”

He could see her wavering for all of a second. Her jaw worked silently. Her mate bent his head and whispered in her ear, something that made her smile. A girlish blush stained her cheeks as she looked to him, her very expression questioning. He nodded his answer once more.

Ma’at smiled shyly and shifted her gaze to Uriel. “Will there be another to take my place? One who can maintain the balance that has been in my care for all these years?”

Uriel’s heart sank within his chest. Slowly, regretfully, he shook his head. “No, Ma’at ... it was your destiny to become as you are. As the incarnation of justice, you are the only one who can serve in such a role. Should you retire there will be no one. I’m sorry. I can perform miracles, but even that is a little out of my reach.”

She did not appear crestfallen as he’d expected, instead she nodded. “I thought as much. In that case, I’ll have to pass on your offer. As tempting as the sunlight sounds, I’ll take my chances with the darkness.”

“Me, too,” the young man echoed, voice strong with the conviction of a man who was choosing the right path.

Uriel grinned. “I wish you both the best of luck. And may I just say, that should you refrain from any unnecessary slaughter and genocide, there might just be a place for you both when your numbers do come up.”

“Thank you.” Ma’at’s voice was soft.

“Now, I best be on my way. Places to go and all that.” Uriel executed his best formal bow and called up the holy fire that made for such a good exit, then let himself fade back into nothingness.

\* \* \* \*

Elizabeth lifted the sponge, wringing it out before touching it gently to the bloodstained area on Adam's stomach. The muscles beneath her touch twitched in reflex. The skin was still sensitive, though the wound was no longer an issue. Adam had been eerily silent since they'd returned to his room in the Abbey. He'd followed her softly spoken orders to strip while she ran a bath, barely looking her in the eye. His uncharacteristic silence was worrying, and she wondered if the experience had been too much for him. The memories of Thoth's more dominant personality, conflicting with Adam's innately gentle nature, had to cause him confusion on many levels. He still remained silent, even as she returned the sponge to the soapy water. She squeezed the water out once more, raising her eyes to study his face. He stared at her in silence, expression shuttered so as to reveal nothing. She washed away the last traces of blood, and dropped the sponge into the water. Her voice was soft, as her hand rose to touch his cheek gently. She'd never handled him so delicately before. "Adam, please... talk to me."

"I'm not him." The brokenness in his voice sent a shot of guilt through her.

"I know," she responded just as softly. "I don't expect you to be him."

He sighed heavily and gently pushed her hand away. "Am I bound to you for the rest of eternity? I mean, can I leave and go back to my old life?"

Fear, unlike any she'd known in centuries, seized her. Adam's eyes widened as he felt the emotion. Damn bond. Her breath caught as she struggled to hold back unwelcome tears. "I won't lie to you. The bond is irreversible unless one of us is destroyed. But that doesn't mean that you have to stay."

Long seconds passed and still he stared. She licked her lips and continued. "I also won't say I'm sorry for any of the things you've gone through since you met me; it's not in me to regret what has to be done for the good of those in my care." His gaze never wavered, and at last she lowered her eyes, unwilling to let him see the true extent that his words hurt her. "But if you want to leave, I won't stop you."

"Do you love me?" His softly voiced question was as straightforward as she'd come to expect him to be.

Elizabeth rose to her feet and turned away, hand rising to clutch the doorknob as if for dear life. "Isn't it enough that I'm giving you your freedom, Adam? Do you have to make it worse by demanding that I humiliate myself for your pleasure?"

"God damn you, Elizabeth." His roar was punctuated with a sudden splash as he rose from the tub.

She remained as she was, even though his rage burst into her chest with the force unlike any she'd ever felt. "He already has. It would seem I've been damned from the moment I was born." She kept her voice level, acutely aware that she was dying inside. She had to wonder, if she'd known that regaining her emotions would hurt so much, would she have still welcomed the change?

His hand closed over her bicep, and he spun her around to face him. She kept her eyes trained on the wall beyond his shoulder, anything to keep from staring into those blazing eyes. If she looked, it would all be lost. She wouldn't be able to keep the truth of her breaking heart to herself. "Adam, if you want to go, then go. Just leave and let me get on with my life, such as it is."

He released her arm, grasping her by the chin, forcing her to look at him. "Why can't you ever give me a straight answer? Don't you think I deserve it after the hell this last



week has been? What do you *want* from me?"

"Damn it. Don't you get it yet? What I want doesn't matter. It's never mattered. From the moment I was born, my destiny has been planned out in detail by everyone but myself. I've spent eons trying to change that. I never wanted anything more than what every other person wants, Adam. I wanted a family, and a home. I wanted to grow old with my husband and then die an old woman surrounded by children. It's not enough that I've spent over five thousand years alone, but I also have the responsibility of maintaining the balance around me no matter where I am. There is no rest. Ever. I'm sick of it. I'm sick to death of people expecting me to know all the answers, when I'm running out of answers to give. You know, for a moment out there in that circle, when you had your arms around me, I let myself believe that we actually had a chance. That maybe with you by my side, I could bear it. And now you want answers, too, and no matter what answer I give you, Adam, it will be the wrong one." Her vision blurred with the tears that tracked, unchecked, down her face. "If I say I hate you, you'll leave me alone. But if I tell you I love you, I'll be condemning you as surely as I condemned all the rest."

"What do you mean? The rest?" He took a step forward, hand extended as though to touch her.

Elizabeth pushed him away. "No. Don't touch me. Do you really want to be condemned, Adam? You've already given up your one chance at redemption by refusing Uriel's offer. You can never become mortal again. Ever. You're damned. Like everyone else I've cared for, you've damned yourself because of me."

"Who the hell are you talking about?"

"Jacob, Kai, Duncan. The list goes on. Each one made the mistake of loving me in some way or another, and in the end, it was what condemned them. Redemption is bullshit. Love is for fools. I can't afford to love you, Adam Montrose." She knew her words did not make sense even as she hurled them at him. "Stop. Just stop loving me. It won't be enough. You died once because of my foolish love, and I won't have it happen again, not because of me."

"I'm not Thoth anymore. I'm Adam. And I just want the truth. That's all. It's simple and it's only one word, Elizabeth." His hand shot out, slamming the door shut even as she pulled it open. "The truth. Do you love me?"

"*You stupid fool.* Of course I love you!" She made no effort to contain her anger. When was the last time she'd thrown a screaming fit? She'd forgotten how good purging could feel. The burden of the centuries seemed to lift with those few words. She sagged against the door, the realized that the dread was gone. All she felt was simple relief. "I love you."

"Okay." His simple acceptance was met with a blank stare. He continued in a voice that lacked any venom, she could find no deception or anger in him anymore. "Next question, do you want me to go?"

"Never." She choked out a singular sob, sinking to the floor, burying her face in her knees.

Adam followed her to the ground. "What do you want from me?"

She didn't even bother trying to vocalize the answer to the deceptively simple question. He drew her into the circle of his arms, lifting her from the cold floor. Elizabeth stiffened against him, but found herself held fast. She was settled on her feet once more, barely registering the gentle kisses being brushed over her tear-stained cheeks. "Adam?"

“Silly girl.” He murmured the words against her lips, tone gentle as his hands drifted to deftly untie the belt of sash from her *hakama*.

“Please, don’t make it harder.” She made no move to stop him, confusion setting in as she felt a burgeoning emotion in her chest she couldn’t identify. It was something from him, but it was unlike anything she’d felt before.

His hands rose to cup her face gently as he brushed another of those intoxicating kisses over her lips. She spoke again. “Adam, I don’t have the strength anymore. For any of it. I’m old and I’m tired. So please, just tell me what your decision is and leave me be.”

His hands moved again, pulling the *yukata* free and pushing it off her shoulders. “Silly girl.” He repeated his earlier words, affection obvious. “Do you think I would give up the chance to walk in sunlight without pain to stay by your side if I didn’t want to be with you?”

Elizabeth watched as his eyes shifted to reflect the rising hunger that echoed in her own body. It wasn’t the hunger of a Predator, however. It was the hunger of a man for his mate. Her heart skipped a beat, and she resisted the urge to pull away. He wanted her to bare more than her body, he wanted every piece of her. He wanted to know her, completely. Her voice was soft. “Adam, I can’t promise I’ll be good for you. My duties as a leader must come first.”

“So quit leading.” He growled the words at her, deftly, pushing the *hakama* down, and lifting her by the shoulders to kick them away. His hands rose once more, reaching for the ties on the scant panties she wore. A wolfish grin appeared on his face when he realized they were not what he’d expected. “Did you plan for a seduction, Elizabeth? Or was it wishful thinking?”

A hot blush spread across her face, unbidden. The panties were tossed aside with a sly smile. Before she could formulate a retort, she was pulled against his chest, his arms sliding to lock around her waist in a hug. He pressed a light kiss to her hair. “My Golden One.” The endearment warmed her, and she returned the embrace fiercely, blinking back tears of relief. “It’s okay to be weak, sometimes, my Heart. What is important is that you remember that you are not alone.”

Elizabeth didn’t have time to answer as his lips sought out hers once more, his touch no longer gentle. His tongue dipped into her mouth, tasting and exploring, and she could remember a time when it had felt so right. She was not still either, fingers devouring ever bit of flesh they could. The muscles beneath her fingertips were tense, testifying his desire for her, desire that she’d incited. Her knees hit the back of the bed and she spun, breaking the kiss long enough to watch him fall backward and land with a bounce. His gaze was expectant, no hesitation of confusion as he moved back and beckoned her forward. She knelt and lifted the sash from the floor, not bothering to hide her smirk at his surprise. He arched one brow. “Care to let me in on what you’re planning?”

“I’m going to show you my feelings, honestly and without the distraction of your roving hands.” She spoke the words in all seriousness, grateful that she felt his enthusiastic acceptance in her heart. Words were difficult, but action was something she was good at.

She pounced on him, looping the sash around his arms and securing it to the bed frame with a simple knot. He could break free when he wanted, but the fact that he let her was a thrill in and of itself. She let her eyes drift down the length of his body, making no

effort to curb the need she knew he felt resonating as surely as she felt his own. She knelt beside him dropping kisses over the plane of his chest, tongue darting out to tickle the flesh in the more sensitive places. His sudden intake of breath brought chuckle from her when she gave a light bite to his nipple. Her other hand drifted lower, skimming the surface of his skin without hesitation, taking full advantage of his exposed state to explore to her hearts content. Purposefully, she bypassed the area she knew he'd want touched the most. He gave a grunt of disapproval when her hand veered off course, heading back up his chest to pinch his other nipple lightly. "Elizabeth..."

"No demands, Adam." She gazed at him and wonder filled her. Not even Thoth had ever let his feelings be so plainly written on his face. Adam stared at her with complete trust and faith.

Elizabeth watched him a moment longer, hand tracing random patterns on his skin in an idle caress. His eyes fell shut as he gave a grunt of frustration. "You're going to drive me mad."

She waited until his head hit the pillow to make her move. She withdrew her hand and leaned over him, drawing him into her mouth without hesitation. His surprised shout was punctuated by a sharp upwards thrust. Dimly she heard the ripping of fabric and knew she'd succeeded. She'd broken his control as surely as he'd broken her own. His hands threaded in her hair. "Holy shit." The words accompanied by a guttural moan. She would have grinned had she been able. Her hands tightened on his hips as she swept her tongue over the tip of his cock before drawing him fully into her mouth once more. The sounds he made were as intoxicating as the knowledge that he was hers.

His fingers tightened in her hair painfully, though he didn't hold her down. Instead, she found herself being pulled away. To her astonishment, he caught her lips in a fierce kiss, tongue sweeping into her mouth without shame. He released his hold on her hair, hands settling at her hips. The need to be with him drew her in, desire weaving with anticipation to form a tapestry of two souls becoming as one. She barely registered that he was speaking when her earlobe was drawn into his lips. He guided her to straddle his lap, raining kisses down the line of her neck. She lifted her head as he thrust upwards, filling her abruptly and completely. Her mouth dropped open and the question she'd been intent on asking was lost. He moved within her with gentle, smooth movements. Her hands rose, arms looping around his neck to hold him close.

He repeated his question, but she was unable to hear for the blood rushing in her ears. Elizabeth squeezed her eyes tightly shut, flexing her hips into his. Adam withdrew from her, leaving behind a vague sense of loss that was quickly banished when he thrust into her once more. He set a brutal rhythm, taking her higher and higher with each sure stroke. His words registered only on the lowest level of her conscious mind. She didn't understand why he would be questioning her now of all times.

His hands moved, sliding down her sides and lifting her from the bed as he sat back on his haunches, taking her with him. Her eyes snapped open and head dropping back as she felt him deeper inside her now. She screamed out his name when he leaned forward, letting her back rest against the headboard. Her world teetered on the verge of collapse and she understood instinctively what it was he wanted. She shifted her arms until she could meet his thrust, each one seeming to puncture and chip at the walls she'd erected around a very ancient, very fragile heart. The abruptness of his orgasm rolled through her as he drove himself inside her with brutal force. Her own release hovered for a moment,

before the very universe came apart at the seams. She shouted his name, clutching him to her as if afraid he might leave her bereft and take all the joy she'd discovered with him.

Long moments passed before she felt him lifting her gently once more, crushing her to his chest in a tight embrace. He whispered into her ear, sweet words that no longer went unheard. Two in particular however, hauled her from the haze of bliss she'd happily fallen into. She furrowed her brow and stared at him in bewildered amazement. "I'm sorry, could you repeat that?"

"Marry me. I've only been saying it for the last twenty minutes." His smug grin was that of a man who knew what he wanted, and had gotten it.

Elizabeth shook her head vehemently. "Adam, marriage is huge."

"So is eternity." His grin never wavered. "Elizabeth, it's time to start living again."

She frowned at him, and then lowered her eyes. Marriage was huge, but he had a point, eternity was bigger. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely not, that's why I think it's a brilliant idea. We can either spend eternity blissfully happy, or we can spend it thinking of creative ways to drive one another mad. Either way, you're stuck with me. Besides, it would be an excellent start to reclaiming your life as your own." His lips brushed hers in a sweet, chaste kiss. "I'll still love you, even if you say no."

"Just ... give me a while, okay?" Elizabeth drew in a deep breath. "Even if I say no, Adam. I do love you."

\* \* \* \*

A scant couple of hours later, Elizabeth stared at the rising sun. Her mind simply would not stop spinning. Behind her, Adam slept on, exhausted and oblivious to the flood of emotion within her.

All the happenings of the past days, the bad things and the good things that had come to pass were because of Adam. She spared a glance to his sleeping figure and smiled. Her Aureate. Only days before she would have scoffed at the notion that a Predator could be redeemed. She hadn't understood exactly what Dork had been talking about when he'd first met Caroline.

She'd been almost cruel in her dismissal of their relationship. Now, his words made sense. He'd been so serious when he'd looked at her in a rare moment of sanity. "My redemption has nothing to do with being human, and everything to do with my humanity."

He'd been so intent on making her understand. Without Carrie, he'd said, he'd be just another murderer in search of his next meal. With her, he had found an appreciation for the mortals. Elizabeth finally understood.

For centuries, she'd been living among her Prey, never embracing the small lives they led as having real meaning. And now ... it was as if her long-dead memories had come to having meaning again. She would someday take her redemption, along with the 2.3 kids and the house in the suburbs. But along with it, she would also take the eternity she was owed with her Aureate, her Golden One.

**The End**

**About the Author:**

H.E. McVay grew up in Shreveport, LA. As the wife of a Navy submariner, one of the few things she can take with her all over the country is her vivid imagination and her lifelong love of writing. She currently resides in Washington State with her husband, Stephen, and her two beloved cats, Nanashi and Miyoko. Her hobbies include collecting coffee from around the world, traveling, reading, and enjoying life with her husband.

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