

Chapter 21

Rose

Casen and Vince fight ferociously before my eyes, their snarls and growls echoing through the park. I understand Casen's anger, but I can't help feeling conflicted. My heart aches for the love I once felt for him, but the fear of losing Vince, who has been there for me after Casen's departure, is overwhelming.

As Zyan and Vince continue their brutal fight, I hear Casey crying in the background. Keeping her existence a secret from Casen weighs heavily on me, and I am overcome with guilt. I know it's wrong, but I'm terrified of what his return might do to our lives. Things were finally getting better between Vince and the pack. He's been good lately and hasn't been drinking, and I wonder if Casen's sudden return will do more harm than good.

Yet for one heartbeat, I see Zyan, Casen's wolf, about to tear into Neev, Vince's wolf's neck, and I panic, moving to intervene. Only I am hit with the force of Vince's wolf's snapping jaws, followed by a stinging pain. Agony shoots through my leg, and I cry out as his teeth slash through my soft skin. My mother rushes to my side, helping me up as Zyan and Vince keep tearing into each other. It hurts like hell, but I know it's nothing fatal. As my mother tends to my wounds, I keep one eye on the fight.

My father tries to break up the fight when Zyan turns on him, and a mix of fear and anger erupts inside me. I scream, and Zyan whimpers, backing up and coming to his senses while everyone stares in horror at what he

did. He attacked my father. He immediately releases my father and shifts back to his human form. I see regret in his eyes as he tries to help him up, but my father refuses his aid, looking furious. I wait with bated breath to see what my father will do. One part of me knows it is safer if Casen leaves, and another doesn't want him to.

To my surprise, my mother sides with Casen, insisting he should be allowed to stay and get to know his daughter. Anger flares up inside of me, followed by confusion. I want Casen to be part of Casey's life, but on the other hand, I fear what his presence might do to Vince. Things have always been tense since Vince returned to us, and I was naïve in believing him over Casen, blinded by the mate bond that I didn't see reason and sometimes I find myself even questioning what Vince has told me. It seems unlike Casen, but even he admitted to trying to kill his brother.

So I was just so happy to find him alive that I didn't care for an explanation. I was hurt over my fight with Casen after I banished him, and I just wanted the pain to stop. Lonely and desperate, I stupidly marked and accepted Vince only to learn the sort of man he could be. I've paid for that mistake ever since.

Vince was a monster I did not see coming. The entire time, I was foolish to believe my barely eighteen-year-old brain could comprehend the complexity of why Casen did what he did. Aunty Kat, although she wanted to give me more, could only give me a glimpse into the goddess realm. But the future changes with the information learned, and she promised it would work out in the end. Yet I don't see anything bright coming to my future. I swore I knew what I saw with absolute clarity. Now, I am trapped in a mate bond I don't want and longing for the one I chased away.

He didn't even stop when Neev tore into me. Then again, it could have very well been Vince that didn't care that I was hurt. Once Casen realized I was injured, he tried to defend me. The bond leading to my stupidity, attempting to break it up in the first place.

However, my father's decision to let Casen stay triggers Vince's anger. Relief washes over me, that they're no longer fighting, but that is short-lived when I catch the look on Vince's face. I know this will only lead to more conflict between me and Vince. As Vince storms over to me, I scoop up Casey, trying to comfort her.

“Is Daddy and Poppy going to fight again, mummy?” she asks, her voice quivering with fear.

“Shh, shh, no, of course not. Let's go inside to make cocoa,” I tell her, doing my best to reassure her, even though I'm far from certain myself.

Watching Casen interact with the others, a strange mix of emotions washes over me. There's the undeniable pull from our past, the lingering anger and betrayal from his actions, and the fear of what his presence could mean for my family and pack. I dread losing Vince, as I once lost Casen. Especially now that Vince is all I have. Casen won't want me now, being used goods and not telling him about Casey. Not that I can blame him; this is my fault.

He knows about Casey and how I kept her from him. Vince growls in protest at my father's choice, and he glances at me to intervene, and when I don't, I can see I will pay for that when he comes home. “Vince!” I call out, not wanting this to become another bloodbath. Casey is terrified enough, and I worry my father will get hurt. With a snarl, he turns on his heel and starts walking toward us.

“Daddy is mad, Mommy,” Casey whispers, and I swallow. Vince barges past me as he enters the house, and my stomach drops.

“Go play in your room; I will bring you some milk and cookies,” I whisper into Casey's hair as I set her down. She quickly rushes inside, stopping in the hall.

“Can I watch *Frozen*?” she asks.

I smile at her. “Of course, go put it on, and I will be in soon,” I tell her as she disappears down the hall. My eyes go to Vince in the kitchen, washing the blood off his arms, and I hesitantly enter the kitchen.

Chapter 22

Rose

My heart races as I watch Vince reach above the top of the cupboard and retrieve his bottle. I watch him pour himself a drink. The glass seems to overflow with amber liquid, and I can't help but worry about what will happen when he's had too much. I hate it when he drinks. It's like he becomes a completely different person; someone I don't recognize.

As Vince downs the drink, his eyes meet mine, and I can see the anger brewing behind them. He is furious. He's even more upset that I didn't stick up for him and demanded my father kick Casen out of the pack. I'm not the Alpha anymore, and that decision rests with my father and mother.

In truth, I don't know what to say or do. The situation is so complicated, and the feelings I have for both of them make it even harder to navigate. I wasn't expecting Casen to return, not after I rejected him.

"You just stood there and said nothing, you should have made your father kick him out!" Vince asks as he takes another swig from the bottle.

"I- I didn't know what to say," I reply, my voice barely above a whisper. I know that anything I say might set him off, but I also know that I can't stay silent.

Vince scoffs, his eyes narrowing dangerously. "Of course, you didn't. You always take his side. I make a few small mistakes and you turn on me, all of you turn on me!"

"That's not true," I protest, feeling a surge of anger rising within me. "I just don't want to be in the middle of this mess."

"Mess?" he growls. "You are the reason for this mess!" he yells, making me flinch.

Vince takes a menacing step toward me, and instinctively, I take a step back. “You're in the middle whether you like it or not, Rose,” he growls, his breath reeking of alcohol.

“Mommy?” a small voice calls from behind me, and I glance over to see my daughter standing in the doorway, her eyes wide with fear. My heart clenches, and I immediately move to block her view.

“Go back to your room, sweetie,” I tell her softly, trying to shield her from the tension in the room. She hesitates, but eventually nods and disappears back down the hallway.

“Yelling at me in front of her? Really, Vince?” I hiss, my anger growing stronger.

“I wouldn't have to if you'd just stand up for me for once!” Vince shouts, his face growing red with fury.

I shake my head, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes. “He's her father,” I whisper.

Vince's expression darkens, and I know that I've crossed a line. “I am her father! I fucking raised her!” Vince screams at me. I can't help but think of Casen and the possibility of a different life had I not rejected him all those years ago. A life where I didn't banish him, one where I don't have to live in fear, and where my daughter doesn't have to witness her father's drunken rages.

“Okay... Just keep your voice down,” I whisper, glancing at the hall where Casey ran off back to her room. Vince mutters under his breath, walking toward the living room.

“Get me some pants,” he snarls at me, and I chew my lip but rush to fetch them.

I stand in the living room, my hands trembling as I clutch the edges of my shirt. The air inside the house is thick with tension, like a storm brewing. I can't help but feel overwhelmed by the events that have unfolded.

He's sitting on the couch, a bottle of whiskey in his hand, and I can see the anger in his eyes. When he gets like this, I am the target of his rage. "I want you to go speak with your father, tell him to make Casen leave."

I swallow the lump in my throat, trying to choose my words carefully. "Vince, it's not that simple. Casen isn't going to leave now that he knows about Casey," I tell him.

"Then you order Casen to leave!" Vince snarls.

"You know I can't. I am not Alpha; my father is the Alpha." I feel like a parrot. He knows this, I told him this already.

"Yes, because you refuse to challenge him for the position, your fucking birthright, Rose!" My father refused to hand the pack over to me once we learned Vince had a drinking problem, and I refused to challenge my father and leave the pack in Vince's hands.

Vince's face contorts in anger, and I brace myself for his outburst. He jumps up from the couch, the bottle slipping from his grasp and shattering on the floor. "You never cared about me! You always wanted Casen, didn't you?"

"You know that's not true," I tell him. Always the same argument, every time we fight, he always compares himself to Casen.

My heart races as I shake my head, denying his accusation. "Mommy, you forgot my cookies," comes Casey's frightened voice. Vince stops, glancing at her. I can see my daughter, Casey, peeking through the doorway, her eyes wide with fear.

"Casey, go to your room, sweetheart," I urge her, trying to keep my voice calm.

As Casey scurries away, I turn my attention back to Vince, who is now dangerously close to me. I turn to place some distance between us, only for Vince to grab my arm roughly, digging his fingers in painfully, making me whimper.

“Just hurry up and make fucking dinner before you piss me off,” Vince sneers as he pushes me away, causing me to stumble over my feet. I get Casey’s cookies and milk to bring them to her, hoping she doesn’t come out, or I will have to make an excuse to go to my parents just to get her out of here.

When I enter, Casey runs to me, wrapping her arms around my legs tightly. “Mommy, the other man, he is my daddy too?” she asks.

“We can talk about it later, I have to cook dinner.”

“Will he be mean to you like Daddy too?” she asks, and I pause.

“He looks like Daddy,” she says, sounding confused.

“That’s because they’re twins,” I tell her, tucking her back in bed. “Now stay here, we can have a picnic dinner on your bed when I finish cooking.”

Yet, I can’t help but think Casey is right, Casen would keep us safe, but after what I did, would he forgive me? Or would he take Casey from me and leave me to my self-inflicted fate? I deserve it if he did, I made a mess of this, and now Casey is in the crossfire. I get down on my knees to her, as I know Vince is listening.

I kiss the top of her little head and hug her, trying to reassure her. “Mommy has to make dinner, but we can talk about it later.” Nervousness is etched on her face, breaking my heart, she has to even live in a house of uncertainty.

I wipe the stray tear that escapes my eye before entering the kitchen. Before I even step completely in the doorway, my head is ripped backwards painfully by my hair.

Chapter 23

Casen

Malik and I sit by the fire pit, the warmth and flickering light casting shadows on our faces. I want to tell him about the night I tried to kill Vince, but the words get caught in my throat. Even though I miss the good parts of my brother, I would have done the same thing again. Especially now that I know I have a daughter.

My mind drifts to that afternoon.

~Flashback~

“It's getting late, girls. We need to head back,” I tell Alisha, Matilda, and Rose. Lia is Malik's stepdaughter, and Matilda is his. They're like the little sisters I didn't know I wanted, as well as little sisters that damn near drove me nuts, especially Matilda. She and Rose were close, so I usually got stuck babysitting her. “That's fine; I have to head to work anyway,” Lia tells me, climbing out of the water.

“Can you make sure Tilly goes home? She is technically grounded for sneaking off with Rose the other night,” Lia tells me. Lia works at a local pub in a pack near ours. Black Creek pack.

“Seriously, and you let her come?” I ask Alisha, and she shrugs. “It's stinking hot. Mom and Dad won't be back for hours,” she tells me, and I shake my head.

“Don't worry; I will make sure she goes home.” Lia pecks my cheek.

“Thanks, bro....” I watch her leave, only to pause as she reaches the tree line. I roll my eyes, already knowing what she is going to ask.

“Nope!”

“Please, Case! I hate taking the bus,” Lia whines at me, batting her lashes. I grit my teeth. Lia smashed her car last week, when a drunk driver, from the bar she works at, ran her off the road on her way to work.

“Take mother's.”

“She has hers with Dad,” I sigh, knowing Malik banned her from driving his after she sideswiped a bus. The girl should not have her license. She is a liability.

“Fine!” I growl. Digging into my pocket, I grab my keys and toss them to her.

She snatches the keys from the air and blows me a kiss. “Love you.”

“You too,” I tell her, turning my attention back to the water, to find Tilly and Rose sitting on the bank across from me, whispering.

“Girls!” They both lift their heads to look at me.

“Out now!” I tell them, and Tilly rolls her eyes while Rose slips beneath the water. Matilda reluctantly climbs out while Rose, the damn pain in my ass, ignores me.

“Rose!” I growl.

“Oh, scary....” she taunts, and Tilly laughs.

“I will get your mother,” she scrunches up her face. “I...” Rose glares at me, but swims to the edge. She holds out a hand to me, and I grit my teeth, ignoring the sparks that rush up my arm as I grip her hand. Only the moment I do, I am shoved from behind. I fall into the water with a huge splash. The water steals my breath with how cold it is, and I swim up to the surface to find Rose and Matilda gone. Swimming to the edge, I climb out. Zyan laughs in my head, thinking their antics are hilarious. I swear, if I find Rose has snuck off with that little shit of a boyfriend she has, I might actually kill him this time. My thoughts manage to quiet Zyan's voice in my head, his thoughts turning dark.

“She's ours,” he grumbles.

“Not yet,” I tell him. She is too young, and I want her to have all the normal experiences a girl her age has, but that is so fucking hard when I feel him pawing at her. I trudge through the forest, my clothes heavy from being soaking wet. Breaking out of the tree line, I find the park empty, and see Tilly racing up the steps of her home. So where did Rose go? I checked her house first, then Malik's. “Tilly, where is Rose?” She shrugs.

“Matilda!” I snarl at her.

“Gee, what is your fucking obsession with her? It's sickening.”

“I'm her guard, Tilly.”

“Yeah, whatever,” she rolls her eyes, turning her attention to her phone, and I snatch it from her hand. “Casen, give it back!” she snarls as I go through her messages. They were whispering about something, so I knew they were up to no good. I found Rose's message, asking if I had come to Tilly looking for her yet. I grit my teeth when I see the next one, saying she was going to ask Vince to run her into town to meet her boyfriend. Tossing the phone onto her bed, I storm out, heading home to where Vince and I now live. The house was too crowded. His car is still here, so I know she hasn't escaped me yet.

Stomping up the steps, I walk inside and instantly pick up her scent, then her voice comes from the sun room out back. The moment the door closes, the house falls silent as I walk wet footprints through the place. Stepping into the sunroom, I find Rose on the floor with a game controller in her hand. Vince and her are playing Mario Kart. She snickers the moment she looks at me, causing Vince to snap his head in my direction.

“Are you okay, bro?” he asks, leaning down and grabbing his beer bottle from the floor.

“Don't you have patrol duty?” I ask him.

“Not until midnight,” he shrugs, and I eye the bottle in his hand. He can be a nasty drunk.

“Rose, shirt, now,” I tell her when I see his eyes move to her chest. She only has a towel wrapped around her, which has slipped down, revealing her bikini and chest.

Rose looks at me oddly, yet gets to her feet and wanders over to me. “If I go home, mom will make me go to the Luna meeting thing,” she says, pulling a face. I sigh.

“Then grab one of mine, but put a shirt on,” I tell her. She goes to move past me when I grab her arm.

“I read your messages to Tilly,” I say, a warning in my tone.

“Try it, and I will tell your mother you have a boyfriend,” I threaten. She says nothing, but glares at me. Andrei knows she has a boyfriend, and so do I, since I am the one who gets stuck babysitting them. Sage, however, would freak out. It took her years to be comfortable with me being around Rose, given I am her mate. I had my own babysitter when she learned I was her mate. It took me ages to convince her it wasn't like that.

Yes, I feel the mate bond, but it changes as she does. It wasn't like a typical mate bond, just an urge to protect her when she was little. Brotherly.

It remained that way until she hit puberty. Now I can feel it more, but still not in a revolting way. More like I need to covet her away, yet the older she gets, the harder it is to control my temper near her. My possessiveness of her was out of this world. Nothing sexual, it's not like that, but the bond recognizes her now as ours. Rose nods, knowing I will snitch on her. She stomps off, and I turn my attention to Vince to see him looking at her as she wanders off.

“You know I don't like you drinking around her,” I tell him, drawing his attention back to me.

“You must admit, she's got a nice rack...” Vince says.

“Don’t be revolting.” I scoff.

“Says the man who follows her around like a lost puppy.”

“Watch it, Vince,” I warn him. He’s treading dangerously right now, and Zyan wants blood.

“Whatever, get off my fucking back. We weren't doing anything wrong,” he growls.

“What the fuck does that mean?” I ask him.

“I’m just saying she isn't just yours, Casen.”

“You rejected her!” I tell him. I made him a few months back while she was asleep. I had asked Kat if it would work. She wasn't sure, but was able to manipulate her wolf to come forward briefly from the Moon Goddess realm. It exhausted her to do it. Ezra found her passed out in the Moon Goddess realm. She had to force her wolf forward while not forcing the shift. Although we can't say for sure until her wolf comes forward, I've noticed Rose constantly seeks him out without realizing it since that night. Kat agreed only because she saw it, but didn't elaborate.

“Did I?” Vince laughs. I move before I process what I've done; I grab him, slamming him to the ground.

“Don't fuck with me, Vince. We had a deal; you're no good for her,” I snarl at him.

“And you are?” he growls back.

“Is everything OK?” Rose asks while Vince glares at me.

“Everything is fine,” I tell her, letting him go. I fall onto the couch, and Rose nervously steps into the room. Vince hands her a controller, and she falls on the couch beside me. I watch them play games for what feels like hours until I drift off at some point. I wake up, groggy, only to find them both gone.



* * *

Shaking the memory off, Malik is watching me. “I’m shocked Andrei jumped in,” I tell him.

“Things have changed over the years,” Malik says cryptically.

“Yeah, but I didn’t think he would be that easy to knock down,” I admit.

“Yeah, well, he’s getting old. He should have retired by now,” he comments.

“Why hasn’t he?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“Rose refused to challenge him,” Malik replies.

I find it odd that she would have to challenge him when she was trained for the position. “He wouldn’t just hand it down?”

“He did,” Malik says. “Rose refused it.”

Confusion gnaws at me, as I know how much Rose wanted the position. I’m also shocked that Sage wants me to stay after I hurt Andrei. I wonder if it’s just wishful thinking that I felt the tug of the one-sided bond with

Rose and if I should even fight for her, especially since she went to protect Vince.

My mind wanders back to the night with Vince, recalling fragments of what really happened. I try to piece it together; I had been so sure he was dead. And where has he been all this time?

“So, are you going to tell me?” Malik finally asks.

“Where do you want me to start?”

“What was the deal you had with Vince?”

Chapter 24

Casen

I look away, swallowing hard. Vince has always been a closet drinker, and he even dabbled in drugs after we lost our family.

“Remember the issue with the accountant? Just before Jonah came to us?”

“It wasn't the accountant, was it?” Malik asks.

“No, it was Vince. I helped him cover it up, thinking that was the end of it,” I sigh heavily. “Those rogue attacks before Jackson's pack attacked and wiped us out...” I trail off. Malik seems confused for a second.

“What about them?”

“Vince owed money to some rogues. They were supplying him. When Jackson attacked the pack, we thought it was them at first. Vince and mom had a huge fight the week before. Dad found out and was going to tell Anthony and Andrei after mom got some weird calls threatening her. But then Jackson attacked.”

“I don't understand,” Malik admits.

“After the attack, the Reaper Wolves threatened you.”

“Wait, Reaper Wolves?” Malik asks, I nod.

“As in the ones that Sage... those Reaper Wolves, and Rebecca?” I glance away. Malik growls.

“Continue,” he says, shaking his head.

Vince panicked. We couldn't lose you. We should have gone to Andrei, but Vince intercepted one of Andrei's checkbooks when it came into the post office. He forged Andrei's signature to cover his debt. I found the

checkbook under his mattress. I helped him cover it up and pin it on the accountant. He put the last few down as petty cash withdrawals.”

“How does that link to Rose?” he asks.

“When he didn't get clean after learning he was her mate, I threatened to tell Andrei unless he rejected her. He agreed.”

“But he didn't want to?” Malik asks.

“No, he said he rejected her.” Malik's brows furrow, and I hold up a hand. “On the day I...” I grit my teeth, “Don't ask. It'll be explained another time.”

“You found out he didn't reject her,” Malik answers, and I nod. “So then, what happened?” However, I hear a door slam in the distance, making me jump. I peer down the rear of the yard toward Rose's house, to see Casey. Malik stands up, and so do I when I see her climbing out a window, her little legs kicking air, before she drops to the ground and runs up the side of the house out of view. I look at Malik. He swigs from his bottle. “She goes to the park,” Malik tells me. My brows pinch.

“Go check on your daughter, Casen. You can tell me the rest later,” he says, getting to his feet and heading inside. I follow, moving to the front of the house to see Casey race to the swings. I peer over at Rose's house and then at the little park. Seconds later, Sage walks out just as I step off the bottom step. She starts to jog over to the park when she spots me and pauses. She glances at Rose's house, then at Casey, before she nods and turns back for the pack house.

“Something isn't right,” Zyan grumbles, and as I near Casey, I am now realizing there is more going on than anyone will admit, but why? As I near the swing, Casey jumps off it, looking at me, alarmed, and I stop, not wanting to spook her. She sniffs the air, and her brows pinch. “You're Daddy's twin.” She seems confused.

“Can I sit with you?” I ask her, pointing to the other swing. She nods, and I take the other swing. She stares at me for a second.

“Mommy doesn’t like you very much,” she says, and I swallow and nod.

“Don’t worry, she doesn’t like Daddy sometimes either, but she still loves him, she’ll forgive you,” Casey tells me.

“What makes you think that?” I ask her, as she kicks dirt. She stops and looks back up at me.

“Because you’re my real dad, aren’t you?” she shrugs.

“Your mom told you that?”

She points to her ears. “I have ears, you know?” She says with so much sass that she reminds me of Rose when she was little, and I can’t help but chuckle at her. “I heard what you said when you and Poppy were fighting.”

“Does that upset you?” I ask her.

She shakes her. “Emily has two dads. She said she gets two birthdays and two houses!” she says.

“Who is Emily?”

“From pre-school. I go to preschool because I am a big girl!” she declares.

“You are, huh?”

“Yep!” she tells me. I glance at her house, half expecting Rose to come out looking for her.

“So why were you climbing out of your window?” I ask her. When she says nothing, I glance at her to see her swing her legs and start swinging.

“Casey?” I ask her.

“Can you push me?” she asks, ignoring my question. I purse my lips but get to my feet.

“Only if you tell me why you were sneaking out a window?” I tell her, moving behind her. I grip the metal chains.

“Will you tell me?” I ask her.

Her brows pinch together. “I’m not allowed,” she whispers, when I hear a door bang open. Casey jumps, her head turning in the direction of her house.

“Casey!” Vince calls out.

“You don’t have to go,” I tell her when she jumps off the swing.

“But Mommy will get in trouble if I don’t,” she says, rushing off before I can stop her.

“Casen...” Zyan growls.

“He’s still drinking,” I tell Zyan.

Turning my head, I find Andrei standing at the pack house door. His eyes on Rose’s house. Casey rushes inside the house, and Vince shuts the door.

“You wanna explain that?” I call out to Andrei.

“Sage made dinner,” he says, nodding to the door. I peer back at Rose’s house. Gritting my teeth, I move toward Andrei.

As I approach him, he unfolds his arms, and I stop beside him. “You better tell me what the fuck is going on around here.”

“And when I do....” Andrei steps closer to me. “You better do something about it,” he snarls, walking inside.

“I don’t like this,” Zyan tells me, and I have to agree because right now, I want to do nothing more than run back over there and kidnap my daughter.

“Is Casey safe?” I ask him before I step in the door.

“He isn’t that stupid. Casey can’t heal to hide it,” Andrei says, and I stop inside the door.

“Andrei!”

He stops at the kitchen door and looks back at me. “Dinner is done,” I growl as he disappears through the door. I growl but follow him.

Chapter 25

Temperance

I wake up with a start, my heart racing as I try to make sense of my surroundings. For a second, I think I am back in the basement, back in my living nightmare, until I notice the place doesn't have the same damp, pungent smell, and I am not pressed against the bars of a cage that grew far too small over the years. No room has ever smelled this clean. And is that a soft bed beneath me? Blinking, it takes a second for my eyes to adjust to the darkness.

The room I find myself in is pristine but haunting, with dark wood paneling and tall, narrow windows draped in heavy velvet curtains. The furniture is antique and ornate, creating an eerie atmosphere that sends a shiver down my spine. Warmth seeps into my back, and I look over my shoulder to find Eziah lying beside me, still asleep, and I can't help but feel a mixture of relief and confusion at this mysterious man's presence.

My heart races as I reach out, feeling for my wolves, but they feel numb, as if they're being suppressed or don't exist within me at all. I can't reach them, and it leaves me feeling vulnerable and frightened. My gaze moves to the window beside the bed, and I know I have to leave this place. I feel it in my bones.

Shadow's last words echo in my head: "I won't go back in the dark; I won't go back to the shadows." Her words confuse me, but the memory of the dark and the voices I heard while trapped in my head remain vivid.

Dominic's voice echoes through my mind, but how can he be here and in my head at the same time? How could he be connected to my brother? It is the only thing that makes sense; I never left the basement, so how do I know the man? How do I know his name? I know he didn't give it to me.

Hesitantly, I climb over Eziah, careful not to wake him. I glance around the room, trying to make sense of how I got in this room, the floorboards are cold beneath my feet, and I fight back a shiver. As I climb out of bed, I realize my clothes have been changed. I'm now wearing purple plaid pajamas, and I can't help but wonder who dressed me. My eyes flick to Eziah, but I shake off the thought.

I walk across the room to the window, feeling the coldness in the air and making goosebumps rise on my arms. "Nova?" I call out, but there's nothing but eerie silence.

The window doesn't budge, so I turn my attention to the door, which seems impossibly far away in the chilling room. I creep towards it, cringing as the floorboards creak beneath my feet. I glance over my shoulder to make sure Eziah is still asleep before quietly opening the door and stepping into the foggy hall, my heart racing in my chest.

The hallway is dimly lit, and I squint through the fog, trying to find my way. Shadowy figures seem to dance at the corners of my vision, and I turn my head, attempting to catch a glimpse of them. My fear grows with each passing second, and a cold draft brushes against my back as I reach the stairs. I jump and spin around, coming face-to-face with a translucent woman.

I gasp, taking a step back and stumbling on the stairs. I feel myself falling. My arms flail, and a scream lodges in my throat.

Just as I'm about to hit the ground, strong hands grip my arm, pulling me back to my feet. I look up to see a man in long silk pajama pants, yet his chest is bare, his face calm but curious. I gasp and take a step back, scanning the hall for an escape. Something chills me to the bone about this man. He screams danger, more so than Eziah. "You're alright," he reassures me, his voice thick and husky. "I won't hurt you." He stares at me with dark, ominous eyes.

“But you should get back to bed. Eziah will worry if you're walking around the house without him.”

I glance back to the hall the way I came when he speaks again. “You shouldn't wander; you may get lost.”

The man reminds me of Dominic, and I can't explain how I know his name. His eyes are pitch black, and when a strange hooded figure appears behind him, his face obscured. I gasp and step away from them both. The man watches me carefully, his head tilting to the side.

“You can see them?” he asks, and I nod, unable to speak. “How is that possible? You aren't of Octavian blood.” He seems confused, but how can I not when the figure is right there? Does it not bother him?

“Because she was in the Shadow Realm,” a deep voice answers, and I turn to see Dominic walking slowly toward me from the stairs that lead toward a third floor. I blink, trying to process his words. My heart races as he moves closer and holds up a hand. “Don't run, Temperance, I won't harm you. Despite what your wolf has told you about me.”

“My wolf?”

“Shadow, I sensed her earlier.”

“She never said anything about you, but I feel like I know you,” I admit, confused about that statement the moment it leaves my lips.

“You know me from the shadow realm. Well, your wolf does, but I recognize you,” he tells me. My brows furrow in confusion.

“But I was never in the shadow realm,” I insist, my voice shaking. “I've never met you before. I lived trapped in a basement.”

Dominic and the man exchange glances, and he moves toward me. Slowly, I back down a step.

“How is that possible? It's reserved for Octavians. That is our prison world.”

“Indeed, that is something I have always wanted to know,” Dominic says, watching me curiously.

“You look exactly like her,” he murmurs.

“Like who,” I stutter, my heart thumping harder at the strange aura emanating from him, black as charcoal and cold as ice. “Your twin.... I knew I recognized you. I just couldn't put my finger on it, but it makes sense to me now how you could come and go. It wasn't you, but Shadow. I always wondered how she could come and go. It's because her other half is in the shadows, your twin, tethered to the place between realms, but what I want to know is how... How did you end up with your twin wolf?”

I struggle to breathe, feeling overwhelmed by the revelations. My eyes dart around the hallway, the fog, the dimly lit chandeliers, and the translucent figures. I feel more trapped than ever.

“I need to go,” I whisper, my voice barely audible even to myself as fear threatens to choke me.

Dominic narrows his eyes. I shake my head, tears brimming in my eyes. “I can't stay here. You are mistaken; I don't know you,” I tell him.

“I am never wrong, and I am afraid I can't let you leave,” Dominic states, and my heart races. He wants to confine me, keep me locked away, just like Satish.

My mind races with questions and fear, but I know I can't stay in this house. The memories of the dark and the voices I heard while trapped in my head haunt me, and I can't shake the feeling that Dominic is connected somehow, yet that is impossible. One cannot be in two places at once.

I glance at the man in silk pajamas, who seems to be studying me intently.

“Her sister is the anchor,” he murmurs.

“Correct, Kyan, but still doesn't answer how she or her sister could be in the shadow realm,” Dominic says, but I've heard enough. This situation

grows weird, and so do the shadows as they move closer, surrounding me, drawn to me like magnets. My breath makes smoke clouds in the air, and I turn to race down the stairs, only to run directly into Eziah's arms.

"Shh, you're fine. They won't hurt you."

"Man, why you gotta appear out of thin air for," comes a sleepy voice, "Gives me the heeby jeebies," comes the same voice.

"It's just Jonah," Eziah whispers as I struggle to get out of his grip.

"Why are you up?" Kyan asks him.

"Thirsty, sorry, Dad, didn't realize I was interrupting your hallway meeting," Jonah snickers, walking down the steps and wandering off. Yet my mind is stuck on the eerie faces growing nearer.

"Calm down," Eziah whispers, but the shadows move closer, haunting faces reaching out for me.

"No..." I gasp.

"Clum spiritibus praeteritis et memoriis repositis, te iterum ad aetherem relego," Dominic murmurs, waving his hand in the air, and suddenly the shadows disappear, and my eyes go to Dominic.

"As I said, you don't need to fear us. Only those with a death wish would take on a house full of Octavians. Not even dead do we leave this realm completely. You have the power of a hundred covens living inside these walls, not to mention a demigod and two Geminis. No one would dare hurt you here," Dominic says before turning and moving toward the stairs. His words confuse me.

"Now bed, it's too early to be wandering around..."

I watch as he climbs the stairs.

“And Jonah, stay out of my cookies,” he snaps, just as I hear footsteps behind Eziah. I peer over Eziah’s shoulder to see Jonah stuff three biscuits in his mouth at once.

“It was Kyan!” he calls back. Kyan shakes his head and wanders down the hall when Jonah stops beside us.

“Cookie?” he says, holding it out to me. I hesitantly take it, and he winks at me before following Kyan when Eziah’s breath sweeps over my neck.

“Don’t ever wander off like that, I nearly had a heart attack when I woke, and you were gone,” he whispers.

He presses his lips to my shoulder, nudging me to walk up the steps. Reluctantly, I do, yet I notice the shadow people are gone, and so is the cold fog that filled the air.

“I don’t like it here,” I whisper.

Eziah sighs. “One night, come back to bed, and tomorrow we can stay at a hotel if you still want to leave, okay?” he tells me, steering me down the hall back to the room. I nod.

“One night,” I whisper.

“Promise, if you want to leave tomorrow, we will,” Eziah whispers.

